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| |  | | --- | | Dysart, The Common Tragic Figure? Peter Shaffer's play "Equus" reads like a true tragedy blending religion and adolescence while questioning society's "civilized norms". Although Alan Strang seemingly suffers the most throughout the story, the true tragic figure in the play is Dysart, Alan's psychiatrist. Dysart is forced to question everything that he previously accepted and his whole life is thrown out the window upon meeting Alan. Both Arthur Miller's definition of a tragic figure and the traditional definition provided by Aristotle apply to Dysart.  Dysart by all outward appearances should be perfectly content with his life as a well appreciated psychiatrist who has done his job well and has become successful for it but Dysart is not happy but instead describes himself as "desperate" and doubtful of his whole life and career. As Miller writes about a tragic figure who is "ready to lay down his life, to secure one thing- his sense of personal dignity"; Dysart is shown in the same light, no longer wishing to be tied down with "educated ideas" or "average thought". These ideas had existed in Dysart's mind before meeting Alan but came to a climax once Dysart realized that Alan was not in fact "the usual unusual" or one more "adolescent freak" that he appeared to be.  Alan's warped psyche disturbs Dysart from the first meeting and that night Dysart has a peculiar dream in which he is dissecting children and ripping out their insides. "It's the unique talent of carving that has got me to where I am" states Dysart but at the same time the celebrated "carving" of children makes him "nauseous". When the others see that he is becoming sick, they strip him of his high status, and remove his "mask". This dream reveals the inner workings of Dysart's own psyche and how truly irritated he has become with his own life of getting inside the minds of children and trying to help them, or "carve them open", he wishes that someone would take away his "knife". Miller writes the quality of a tragic figure can be seen in the "fear of being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world". It is seen through Dysart's dream that he is fearful of what he is to do with his life. Also, Aristotles description of a "complex character" who has "great potential" can be seen in Dysart's dream as well. Dysart was in a position to do a great amount of good, and he had for the majority of his life. The potential was there for him to be completely content with his work and life but he wasn't. For Dysart, his chosen life was not meeting his expectations, and he began to question whether he was really doing any good at all.  Upon meeting Alan's parents Dysart finds much that would somewhat explain Alan's actions of blinding the six horses. Dora, Alan's mother explained how the fist horses and riders were seen as one entity, or as a "god" of some sort. Dora uses many bible passages when describing the early relationship that Alan attributed with horses; "The glory of his nostrils" and "Hast thou given the horse strength" show that from an early age Alan attributed horses with religion. Even a picture of Jesus that Alan had purchased was replaced by a picture of a horse, strengthening the connection. Alan's father, Frank is an atheist, while his mother is devoutly religious. When Dysart and Frank are speaking, Frank states that he believes "the bible that's responsible for all this". "Bloody religion-it's our only real problem in this house" shows how against religion Frank is, even though he admits his son was "fascinated" by it. Frank describes to Dysart how attached his son was to the horse image. "Behold-I give you Equus, my only begotten son". It became evident to Dysart that Alan was holding the image of the horse in a god-like state. Everything he did was to please the horse, Nugget.  Back at the hospital, with this outside knowledge, Dysart continues his quest to "cure" Alan but Alan turns the questioning around on Dysart, informing him that he has found out information on his personal life. Alan hits hard at what Dysart was apparently thinking about himself; "Do you have girls behind her back", "Do you \*censored\* her"? Dysart ignores these at first but looses his professional cool when Alan begins yelling "I bet you don't touch her, you have no kids". When Alan leaves Dysart places another scientific label on Alan calling him an "advanced neurotic", "wicked and perceptive". Talking to himself, Dysart continues "he knew exactly what questions to try" and "Ever since I made that crack about carving up children, he's been aware of me in an absolutely specific way". Instead of Dysart getting into Alan's head, Alan is getting into Dysart's head and doing a good job at "carving" things up on his own.  Dysart describes his wife to Hesther, the social worker in the following scene obviously disturbed by his meeting with Alan. "My wife doesn't understand me", "She got exactly the same from me, Antiseptic proficiency" shows how there exists no intimate relationship between Dysart and his wife. He comments that he has no children and if he did "he would come out exactly like his mother, utterly worship less". Dysart speaking of Alan asks "What am I to do with him?" and Hesther replies "Restore him to a normal way of life" to whom Dysart questions what exactly is normal. Dysart's attitude towards Alan goes from one of irritation to one of envy during these scenes of self-examination on the part of Dysart. "The normal is the good smile in a child's eyes-all right. It is also the dead stare in a million adults. It both sustains and kills-like a God." Dysart describes his life as giving people a normal life, normal thoughts and a total "normal" being. By spreading the awe of normalcy, Dysart begins to realize that he is instead doing a great injustice to humankind. "I have cut from them (his patients) parts of individuality repugnant to this God, in both his aspects. Sacrifices to Zeus, took sixty seconds, sacrifices to the Normal can take as long as sixty months." "The discovery of moral law, which is what the enlightenment of tragedy consists of, is not the discovery of some abstract or metaphysical quantity" states Miller. Dysart has begun to realize the moral law of his profession and his life, questioning the morality of doing God's work, creating or stripping individuality. This "Internal Struggle" as Aristotle would describe, is leading Dysart in many different paths mentally, forcing him to suffer, another characteristic of the classic tragedy.  Dysart continues to "treat" Alan and discoveries the true sanctity that Alan held for the horse, how great Alan "worshiped" Nugget. Riding, mounting, and mastering Nugget became a true existence for Alan and the "temple" was the stables. Alan described to Dysart how he prepared Nugget, gave him "his last supper" giving him a sugar cube, stating "eat it for my sake..." worshiping him like many worship Jesus Christ. Dysart conferring with Hesther states "I only know it's (Nugget) the core of his life", "With my body I thee worship!...Many men have less vital with their wives" shows that Dysart understands how attached Alan is to Nugget and shows that he does not necessarily believe it to be a bad thing that he hold the horse in such a high regard. "What else has he got, he can hardly read, has no friends" and " He is a modern citizen for which society no longer exists" reveals that Dysart believes Alan's way of life is much better than his own. Alan created his own life, where he worships something, is able to hold an entity in a high regard and be completely happy within his existence. Dysart has an increasingly hard time looking at Alan and his own life in a "psychiatric view" instead a moral view overtakes Dysart's existence. Straight from Miller's essay, Dysart begins to question everything and begins to see nothing as "everlasting, immutable or inevitable" and begins to "realize himself".  Dysart realizes that he cannot help Alan at all but instead can only cause him harm, speaking to Alan while sleeping "If you knew anything, you'd get up this minute and run from me fast as you could." "My achievement is more likely to make a ghost" states Dysart, realizing that for Alan a "normal" life would not be acceptable. "Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created" and "You won't gallop any more, Alan. Horses will be quite safe", "You will however be without pain" showing that for Dysart to help Alan he must completely change his psyche or "carve" him a new existence, a "normal" life. The last lines in the play exhibit Dysart's "indestructible will of man to achieve his humanity" (Miller) "I need-more desperately than my chidlren need me-a way of seeing in the dark" "There is in my mouth, this sharp chain. And it never comes out." This reveals that Dysart has the chance to become something more, something of moral virtue but also has the possiblilty to remain where he is in the world, full of pity and self-hatred for the existence that he chose.  Throughout "Equus", it is obvious that Dysart is the true tragic character. Following the true tragic formula along with Miller's description of the tragic commoner, Shaffer is able to develop a modern play that reveals itself as a true tragedy. Religion, science and adolesense all play an important role throughout the story portraying a true tragic figure. | |