

The role of the gaze in the play equus



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The play *Equus* was written in 1973 by Peter Schaffer. In the play, Alan, a 17-year-old boy with a horse fetish, blinds six horses in a stable, and it is down to Dysart, a psychologist, to understand why he did it. A major theme of the play is “looking”, and the play features the word “stare” 39 times (including variations such as “staring” and “stared”, and the stage notes). *Equus*, Dysart, the horses all stare - but the character who stares the most is Alan. Dysart calls him “this boy, with his stare” (84) and that “[Alan] has the strangest stare I ever met” (44). When characters stare in *Equus*, they are often being stared back at, as though in silent conversation. Characters in *Equus* “stare” and “gaze” to convey and explore a wide spectrum of emotions, including sexual attraction, accusation, hate, reverence, guilt, and shame. In this essay, the meaning of Alan’s stare will be investigated, followed by Alan’s poster of a staring horse, then *Equus* staring at Alan, and finally *Equus* and Dysart’s mutual staring at one another.

Alan often gazes at horses. Alan is “always staring into the yard around lunch-time” (76) and “keeps staring in at the door” of the stables (76). Alan says, “[horses] sort of pulled me. I couldn’t take my eyes off them” (69). Horses transfix Alan because he finds them erotic and “sexy” (68). Jill remarks to Alan that “I saw you staring into Nugget’s eyes yesterday for ages” (113). Perhaps he is staring into the horse’s eyes to see and communicate with *Equus*, his imaginary god. The stare Alan gives to horses is very different to the one he gives to people. These stares are almost like physical attacks, at least for his mother: “[Alan’s] “staring at me, attacking me” (101). Dysart describes Alan’s stare as like being “violently accused”

(44). His aggressive stare is to show his contempt for people he doesn't like.

Dysart believes Alan's stare is accusatory:

DYSART: " That's what his stare has been saying to me all this time. ' At least I galloped! When did you?'..." (105).

In other words, Alan accuses Dysart of not being living life passionately enough. However, the nurse wonders if the stare might actually be because Alan secretly deeply respects Dysart:

HESTHER: That stare of his. Have you thought it might not be accusing you at all?

DYSART: What then?

HESTHER: Claiming you.

DYSART: For what?

HESTHER: (mischievously) A new God. (106)

When Alan stares at Dysart, Dysart silently " returns the stare" (42). Perhaps the reason Dysart does this is that he is trying to establish seniority and become worthy of Alan's respect so that Alan won't undermine him in future sessions. Or perhaps Dysart is trying to show that he's unafraid of him so that Alan will feel less ashamed of himself and will open up to Dysart. Or maybe Dysart is simply too " fascinated" (42) with Alan to stop looking at him. Alan's hateful glare at people and his loving gaze at horses are very different.

Meanwhile, Alan is stared at by a picture next to his bed of a “ horse with [...] huge eyes” (71). The picture “ comes out all eyes” (66). Although the poster is inanimate, the eyes seem to be “ staring straight at you” (66). For Alan, the horse is a representation of Equus, since Equus “ lives in all horses” (88). When Alan kneels in front of the picture to worship Equus, Equus tells him “ I see you” (89). Alan sees Equus as god-like and feels fear and reverence. It is similar to what the 20th-century psychologist Jacques Lacan called “ gaze”. For Lacan, gaze is when an observer realises that he is being looked at, which causes the observer anxiety, shame and pleasure (Krips, 93). The observed object can be inanimate, such as a sardine can (Krips, 92). Here the observed object is the horse poster, and Alan is the observer. Alan indeed finds “ pleasure” in the gaze because the picture consoles him after crying “ for days without stopping” (65). He chants and performs self-flagellation in front of it, believing that Equus is watching him. By being stared back at, Alan feels he is having two-way communication with his god. After all, the eyes are amongst the most expressive body parts, and it is said that “ the eyes are the windows to the soul”. The fact that the horse in the picture is staring at the observer makes the picture more intense. Through the mutual gaze, Alan is able to explore his relationship with horses.

At the end of the play though, the stare Equus gives to Alan is far from pleasurable for him. When Alan is unable to have sex with Jill because his horse fetish distracts him, he can't help but visualise Equus staring at him: “ When I shut my eyes, I saw [Equus] at once” (127). Meanwhile, Equus stares back at him, and says, “ Lie with anyone and [...] you will see ME – and you will FAIL!” (130). Alan is deeply afraid of what Equus sees in him. In other

words, Alan is ashamed of his horse fetish. His unconscious creates the image of Equus, which is the personification of his tormented guilt and anguish. He blinds the horses to stop Equus from staring at him – in other words, to try to assuage his guilt. Alan also stabs “ at his own eyes” (131) with an imaginary pick, so that he will no longer be able to see Equus judging and mocking him for his fetish. Alan’s image of Equus as “ staring” may have come from the horse picture hanging above his bed. Furthermore, Equus’ eyes are “ never closed”. He says, “ I see you. I see you. Always! Everywhere! Forever! (130)”. Equus’ omnipotence is identical to the powers of Jehovah, whom Alan was fascinated with as a child. Alan was told, “ God sees you, Alan. God’s got eyes everywhere” (70). For Alan, Equus is God. Evidently, Alan bases Equus from descriptions from the Bible. Equus has “ white eyes” that are “ like flames”, which is an image that may come from a horse in Revelations which has “ eyes [...] as flames of fire” (69). It is always Equus’ eyes that are emphasised: they can see the part of a person that they are most ashamed about and that they try to keep hidden.

Equus’ stare judges not only Alan but Dysart too.

DYSART: “ Of course I’ve stared at such images [as Equus] before. Or been stared at by them, whichever way you look at it. And weirdly often now with me the feeling is that they are staring at us...” (98)

Dysart “ staring” at images such as Equus is a metaphor for his contemplation of psychological problems and his attempts to solve them. However, Equus also stares back at him. For Dysart, Equus’ accusatory stare represents his many frustrations in his job. Throughout the play, we see that

Dysart seems to be having a midlife crisis because he can't see the purpose of his job anymore. Equus asks Dysart to “account for me” (98), which pains Dysart because he knows it is something he cannot do. For Dysart and Alan, Equus' glare represents the part of their psyche that tortures them for their shortcomings and their inner turmoil.

Looking, staring and gazing serve several purposes in the play. Alan gazes lovingly at horses, but with hatred at the adults who patronise him or whom he judges to be unworthy. Also, Alan's staring horse poster had a profound psychological effect on Alan and was perhaps even the prompt for him to start his own religion. Finally, Alan and Dysart imagine Equus staring at them, mocking them both for their faults – a personification of their own torment and anguish. Alan stares into his troubled psyche and finds himself guilty and ashamed of what he finds there. Dysart stares into human psychology and finds himself troubled by fundamental philosophical problems, and questions the usefulness of the job. Evidently, staring can be dangerous: as Nietzsche said, “When you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you”.

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