

FROM ANTHROPOCENTRISM TO NIHILISM IN PETER SHAFFER'S SHRIVINGS

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Abstract: In Peter Shaffer's play, Shrivings (in the Middle Ages it meant House of Retreat) is a place which was created with the purpose of providing an alternative for leading a better life, free from all the social evils present in the "real world". An opposition is therefore created between Shrivings and the "real world", between an immaculate universe and a venal world, between a purified humanity and a corrupted one. Shrivings offers shelter, protecting the human being, saving it from the aggressiveness of the real world. However, in the play from anthropocentrism to nihilism there is only one step and the characters take it, revealing the true essence of the postmodern dystopia, the underlying emptiness, the deception of a mirage, its frustrating illusion.

Keywords: postmodern dystopia, heterotopia, anthropocentrism, empty transcendence.

Shrivings is a re-written version of another play of the author's *The Battle of Shrivings*, which has never been printed, only presented at the Lyric Theatre in London, in 1970. In *A note on the play*, written by Shaffer in 1974, before publishing *Shrivings* in its brand new form (which at that time had not been produced on stage), the author explains how he perceives this play aesthetically, what message he intended to convey through this play and how it is different from the other plays he had written: "Other plays of mine had relied for their completion on elaborate stretches of physical action: in this one I wanted the electricity to be sparked almost exclusively from the spoken words". (Shaffer, 97) *Shrivings* relies mainly upon its intense dialogues and upon the "battle" between the main characters, Gideon Petrie and Mark Askelon, each representing a different ideology, each trying to prove his own point.

The title of the play is clarified from the very beginning: "in the Middle Ages, Shrivings was a House of Retreat" (Shaffer 103) and also Mark, states that "shriving" means confession and penance, partially revealing the symbolical frame of the play.

Sources of inspiration. Comparing versions

The character of Gideon Petrie is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, as the author himself confesses, after reading a biography of the Indian activist. What triggered Shaffer's imagination was something he had read in that biography: at the age of forty, Gandhi summoned his wife and told her he had decided to give up all sexual activity, as he discovered that it was a source of aggression in himself. The author confesses that he was impressed by this act of renunciation, but also he could not stop thinking about how Gandhi's wife must have reacted. This led to the creation of Enid Petrie in the first version of the play, *The Battle of Shrivings*. Enid was Gideon's unhappy wife. In the 1974 version, *Shrivings*, Enid does no longer appear. The author gave her up, because he reached to the conclusion that she was a "dramatic cliché" and that the play would so much stronger without her in it.

Another source of inspiration for Shaffer was New York City, which he visited during a time of turmoil, in 1968 and 1969, when the streets of the city were filled with protesters

raging against the Vietnam War, the Flower People, the newspapers filled with information about the killings at Kent State University. All these stirred feelings of contradiction in himself, as the public's brutality contrasted strongly with the public's gentleness. He soon became "possessed by the fever of that time" (Shaffer 99) and found himself wanting to "set out on paper the conflicting ideas which sprang up everywhere I looked – often enough taking the form of elaborate interior dialogues". (Shaffer 99)

In the very first scene, one of the characters makes a disquieting observation: "*It's one of the neurotic symptoms of our time, you know, an inability to live in the real world*" (Shaffer 105). Therefore the premises for needing Shrivings, an alternative to the real world, are set.

The action takes place at Shrivings, this alternative micro universe where the characters seek protection from the real world. This place is supposed to be governed by peace, tranquility, love and understanding. Shrivings is intended to offer shelter to anybody who wants it, it is open to everyone. The permanent residents of this place are: Gideon Petrie, a philosopher and the President of the World League of Peace, Lois Neal, his 25 year old secretary and David Askelon, a boy of nineteen. The peace of this little universe is about to be disrupted by the arrival of Mark Askelon, David's father, a former student of Gideon's and also a famous poet. Gideon and Mark are about to be given an award for their cultural activity. So at the beginning of the play Gideon, Lois and David are waiting for Mark to arrive at Shrivings. The action takes place over one weekend, after Mark's arrival.

Utopia or heterotopia?

According to Michel Foucault the utopias have no real place, but they flourish in lovely spaces even though the access to them is chimerical. They make fables and discourses possible. Heterotopias, however are "*disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences, but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (...) to come together*" (Foucault XVIII). Utopias provide ideas of a perfect society, but they only have a conceptual reality, whereas heterotopias are physical spaces. Brian McHale accentuates the physical reality of heterotopias, resuming in his book, *Postmodernist Fiction*, the concept of *zone*, used by some postmodernist writers, associated with the one of heterotopia.

So Shrivings is such a heterotopia, a construct *interpolated* in the real world, it is the home of Gideon Petrie, it has fifteen rooms which are put at the disposal of their guests, it is a place with a real geography, just like "*the place of Ha-Ha*" is in *Equus*. But Shrivings is also the creation of Gideon, this postmodern prophet, the ontological projection of his ideas, his own concept, his own utopian world.

Gideon's main thesis is that of the Improvability of man. He resumes Rousseau's idea that men are born pure and he pushes it further by stating that they could stay that way, that they have the power to do so within themselves, all they have to do is stop aggression: "*The Drug Children of today cry: Unite with nature! I say: Resist her! Spit out the anger in your daddy's sperm! The bile in your mother's milk! The more you starve out aggression, the more you will begin yourselves!*" (Shaffer 130). Gideon offers himself as an example: he claims to have managed to remove from himself the roots of hate and violence, he militates for peace, he fasts, he has given up sex and he is against weapons of all sorts.

But all the things that Gideon says and does work only inside Shrivings. The young Mark had taken Gideon's theories out into the real world and discovered they had no practical value. This discovery had turned him from an enthusiastic believer into a cynical and bitter non-believer: "*Do you know how long it took me to fall finally from your faith? The time it takes vomit to slide down a wall. Now I know - and have to make others know. (...) That the Gospel*

According to Saint Gideon is a lie. That we as men cannot alter for the better in any particular that matters. That we are totally and forever unimprovable. (...) We will kill forever. We will persecute forever. We will break our lust forever on enemies we invent for the purpose". (Shaffer 138)

The moment Mark arrives at Shrivings, he disrupts the harmony of this micro universe. The author places Gideon and Mark in an ideological arena to fight each other. Mark does not believe that Gideon had managed to “wither out of himself the roots of hate” (Shaffer 138), he does not believe that to be possible. He believes only in human nature, with its imperfections. He does not believe in sanctity, moreover he does not believe in Gideon’s. So Mark challenges Gideon, proposing a Battle. Of course the battle is a battle of concepts, placed solely on philosophic and literary grounds. The stake is the integrity of Shrivings itself. The whole idea of Shrivings is that everyone is welcome to stay as long as they want, no one is thrown out. Mark says he can make Gideon throw him out that very weekend. If he wins then Gideon will stop preaching Improvability, if he loses he will join Gideon again as his Disciple. Gideon falls into Mark’s trap and accepts not realizing that by doing so he had already lost, the idea of a “battle”, even if only conceptual, is also against all Shrivings stands for.

Mark wants to lose, but he knows that this last frontier of innocence and purity Shrivings represents does not in fact exist, as it is a lie, a construct based on deception, an illusion. Mark brings the truth inside the walls of Shrivings like a Trojan horse and they come crumbling down in the end. But the truth does not set anyone free here; it is a tool of deconstruction.

When utopias turn into dystopias

Mark, this former student of Gideon’s plays here the role of the outside agent, who comes into this world and destroys it. Shrivings’ openness proves to be its Achilles’ heel, its weak spot leading to its defeat.

Mark provokes Gideon and his followers, pushes them to the limit of acceptance, trying to get himself thrown out. First Mark pulls apart all their theories, one by one starting with the one of non-violence because, as they say “The evil you fight, you enlarge” (Shaffer 121):

“MARK: If a ruffian with a pistol entered this room, and was definitely going to kill Miss Neal – assuming you had a pistol too, would you us it on him?

GIDEON: No

MARK: You would let him kill her?

GIDEON: I have no choice, unless I want to become him.

MARK (to LOIS): Same situation. Would you let him kill Giddy?

LOIS: Yes

MARK: Touching loyalty you have for each other here at Shrivings!” (Shaffer 121)

Mark returns to this example when he proposes the battle and says:

MARK: Don’t you know who I am?

GIDEON: Who?

MARK: The Ruffian with the pistol. Shoot me and you’re dead” (Shaffer 140)

We could continue the idea: don’t shoot me, and you’re also dead. Not even now is Gideon able to see that there is no way out left for him now that he has accepted the battle. Further, Mark tries to show him just that:

“GIDEON: Peace, my friend.

MARK: Impossible. Battle has begun.” (Shaffer 140).

From this moment on, Mark tempts them continuously: he tries to break Gideon’s fast, he shows them that men are violent by nature by means of a game he had designed, he divides

them and turns them against one another, he provokes them by means of insults and lies and towards the end he seduces Lois, both ideologically and sexually and he makes David see through Gideon's false teachings:

"DAVID (dead): The voice goes on and on – and all you've got against it is words. Lovely words. And theories – lovely theories. And fasts! (...)

Theories and hopes and vigils and fasts! And nothing! Lovely nothing!" (Shaffer 185).

The tension of the battle is mounting, and this becomes visible in the characters' discourses, which erupt with increased violence. The pulverization of the idea of Shrivings is complete when Lois, this postmodern Daisy Miller, shouts at Gideon provoking him and he strikes her, breaking his pact of non-violence, after 20 years. David proves to be the most loyal towards Gideon, out of the two. Be he, as well, hears the voice of reason, the truth, in spite of his and Gideon's efforts to reduce it to silence. Gideon remains alone, but still he does not banish Mark, although realizing that he had lost everything.

Shrivings becomes Nothing. It ceases to be a heterotopia when the concrete character of this space dissolves. This is the moment when this world turns into a grim postmodern dystopia, a broken concept swallowed by the *ontology of nothingness*:

"LOIS (quietly): I'm no place, David. No place at all.

DAVID: Shrivings is a place.

LOIS: No

DAVID: It has to be.

LOIS: It's nowhere.

DAVID: It has to be! IT HAS TO BE!

(...)

MARK: Have you no word for me? No word at all?

GIDEON: Dust." (Shaffer 196).

The entire play is a deconstruction of a fictional universe based on the idea of sacrality. And the tool of deconstruction is the truth. This revelation reveals the rotten foundation of all the principles this fictional universe is based upon. Mark crusades against lies and deception, revealing that behind every principle, there is an anti-principle, behind every utopia there is a dystopia, behind every beautiful fantasy there is the truth. The little perfect world that Gideon, this skillful magician, had made them see is gone, it was merely an illusion, and nothing remained.

From anthropocentrism to nihilism

The very last scene, where Mark feeds Gideon reminds us of the Last Supper of Jesus, mentioned in the play, parallels between Jesus and Gideon are drawn in the text with great subtlety by the author. This scene is deeply symbolical as it clearly reveals Gideon's status of a decayed God, crucified on the altar of his own good intentions.

Gideon makes one fatal mistake, he establishes the Church of Man, placing himself in the center, and ignoring the fact that human nature is feeble and wavering. This is what Mark knows and Gideon discovers. Gideon refuses to accept his humanity, by trying to achieve the unachievable. At this point the roles of the teacher and of the disciple are reversed. Mark is the one teaching Gideon about his true nature. There is no Church of Man because no man can be a God, his limited nature will not allow it.

Although man wants to usurp the place of the inconsistent Divinity and take all the matters into his hands, he discovers he cannot. Transcendence must remain empty. This is one of the dramatic threads of the play.

Gideon offers Mark his hand, confident that: "*Man has a Destiny: to be a loving creator, or a dead duck!*" (Shaffer 131). He believes that his hand can do better, as opposed to

the hand of God: “*Two thousand years ago, when it chained men all their lives to galley ships – one thousand, when it blinded an entire Byzantine army – five hundred, when it pushed men on to fires, and gutted whole towns to impose True Religion – it was the Gods’ hand: plural and singular! Its crimes were accepted. They were God’s will – God’s scourge – God’s anything, so long as they kept its owners from shame. Since we started to abolish Independent God, we have become measurably less callous.*” (Shaffer 153-154).

Mark responds with irony: “*Isn’t it amusing how the fashions in Inquisition stay the same! They all have one thing in common. A passion for invisible Gods. First we had vengeful Daddy, wrapped in clouds. Then Mobile Mary, whizzing up to Heaven. Now it’s Self-Raising Man, jumping himself out of Nature: what an astonishing sight (...) But perhaps I’m being unfair. No one ever saw Airborne Intacta on her jet flight to Jehovah – but with the God of Shrivings we may be luckier. Anytime now we might see something. Maybe today. Who knows? In a few hours the birds up there on Lyssop Ridge will be pipping up a new morning. And the hands of perfectible Man will flutter out of sleep to begin again his wonderful work of self-creation.*” (Shaffer 152-153)

Despite his bitter discourse, Mark wants to believe in the Church of Man. Although playing the Devil’s advocate, Mark is praying constantly to his goddess Giulia, his deceased wife, for this world to hold. He also asks Gideon to save him several times throughout the play:

“*MARK: I begged him! You heard. I begged him over and over. Let me go. No questions. He wouldn’t believe me. Like you. You never saw me either. I was literally invisible to you. (Piteously). The two of you. You can’t see! (Pause) And when it happens, you look at me with a stare of unbelievable pain. He will, too. Soon now. (...)And now it’s here. The knife’s in. Suddenly there’s blood dripping in the house. Surprised blood... No return...*

(Darkly, to the shrine) I begged you too. Proteggimi – remember? Look after me. What does that mean? Look after? What language do you speak then, Saint? (Bitterly) Saint... Saint... SAINTS! (He throws the brandy in the face of the statue) (Shaffer 162-163).

His attitude reveals a man at the end of his rope, who turns to this Church as a last resort, but finds only an empty transcendence. No one is listening. The author concentrates in this character the tragic double nature of man, who is bound to do wrong, but who also desperately seeks salvation. Even when he proposes the battle, Mark confesses: “*I want to lose! Because, if you lose, it will be an end for both of us...*” (Shaffer 139)

When Gideon turns to violence, being unable to control himself, he symbolically faints. Mark rushes towards him, but calls “Giulia!” Both his “Gods” collapsed, as he knew they would. But, for him, there may be another way of salvation, as he reveals towards the end of the play another symbolical facet by saying that he is the one watching it all turn into literature. We can easily guess that he is the projection of the author inside his text, assuming the condition of a poet. Shrivings becomes therefore a metaphor of creation and destruction. Now we realize that he is the one pulverizing this fictional universe, because he is the only one who can. This act is meant to reveal the real essence of fiction: both creation and illusion, the latter being destroyed by truth. This is the entire cycle of fiction, its bare mechanisms. Behind Mark’s gesture we can read a statement made by the author: I created this world out of nothing, but bear in mind that nothing lays beyond it. In Shaffer’s play from anthropocentrism to nihilism there is only one step and the characters take it, revealing the true essence of the postmodern dystopia, the underlying emptiness, the deception of a mirage, its frustrating illusion.

The play explores the human nature with its ideals and limitations, “man squeezed like a nut between an ideal choice and a practical one” (Shaffer 100). The conflicted human, attempting to overcome his own boundaries: that is Shaffer’s focal point in this play as well as

in other plays like: *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *Amadeus*. This play is a meditation upon human nature, like most of Shaffer's plays.

Gideon, just like Francisco Pizarro, the main character in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, tries to overcome his condition as a human being, but in the end he finds he cannot do that. Is the human being able to become completely non-aggressive? The answer is no. The non-aggressive position is unattainable for humans. Also, the perfect world does not exist, no utopia will ever last.

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