

## ***THE FALSE CONFESSION OF A MURDERER IN PETER SHAFFER'S AMADEUS***

**Antonia Pâncotan, Assist. Prof., PhD, Partium Christian University of Oradea**

*Abstract: Peter Shaffer's play, Amadeus, is a dramatic meditation upon the condition of Creation as well as that of the Creator. This is the nucleus which generates the main thematic ramifications of the play and the conflict between the two main characters: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Antonio Salieri. In this paper we will be analyzing all the implications of this confrontation, made visible by Salieri, in his final confession.*

**Keywords: diegesis, confession, posterity, conflict, art.**

Peter Shaffer, like most playwrights of his generation, focuses his creative energy on the rebellion against social conformity, which is perceived to be the archenemy of creativity and individuality. Society is perceived, by these writers, as a sterile space filled with lies, falsity and immorality. So the battleground with society and its evils is transferred onto fiction. This is the reason their heroes are often teenagers in conflict with the older generations, as in Peter Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise*, where Clive is in permanent conflict with his father and the pseudo-values he stands for; or in *Billy the Liar* by Willis Hall and Keith Waterhouse, in which Billy, the main character, creates for himself worlds of imagination, rejecting altogether the world of adults. In John Osborne's plays (*Epitaph for George Dillon, Look Back in Anger, Inadmissible Evidence*, etc.) we find the same outline: the conflict between the main characters and the mediocrity of social life, which finally overpowers and defeats them.

In Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* this conflict between man and society does not disappear, but is placed somewhere in the background, leaving room for the artistic confrontation between an inspired, but unsuccessful composer and an uninspired, but very successful one. The mediocrity of social life here transpires in its option for the mediocre, rejecting the genius as unacceptable alterity.

In 1984, the play was transformed into a film by Milos Forman, who loved the stage play and offered to direct it. Despite his reluctance at the beginning, Peter Shaffer accepted to transform his play into a film. The screenplay was written by the author himself. Shaffer and Forman worked together on this project for a few months and the film proves to be worthy of the play which originally inspired it.

### **Shaffer on the Human Condition**

Both the play and the film begin with Salieri admitting to have killed Mozart and loudly begging for forgiveness. The action of the play takes place in Vienna, in November 1823, and, in recall, the decade 1781-1791. *Amadeus* speaks essentially about the human condition: with its high ideals and tragic limitations, with its basic needs and the passion for imaginative construction, with its decaying forms and desperate desire for immortality, with all its misery and longing for the Absolute. All these deeply rooted contrasts of the human

nature are seen through the keen eye of a lucid observer, who does not attempt to idealize it, but present it in all its imperfect and tragic beauty.

In order to create the conflict of his play, Shaffer opposes two characters, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the inspired composer, the genius through whom God's voice can be heard, and Antonio Salieri, his opposite, the Emperor's Court Composer, and later his Kapellmeister. At a superficial glance, the conflict seems to carry itself between a true talent and a hard worker, between immortality through art and immediate success.

The plot of the play is generated by Salieri's secret rivalry with Mozart, after the latter arrives in Vienna, from Salzburg. Mozart, with his genius makes Salieri suddenly aware of his own mediocrity, triggering the character's ever-growing drama, doubled by envy and desire to suppress Mozart's voice.

Salieri had dedicated his entire life to music and to God, promising Him chastity in return for fame, as a little boy. He worked hard and kept his promises to Him and his work paid off. He studied music in Vienna, he met the Emperor Joseph II, who favoured him and brought him to his Court. Salieri's career ascended continually, he obtained the fame he had asked from God, becoming the most famous musician in Europe. He could not enjoy his success for too long, however, because he knew his work to be worthless.

Despite of the fact that Mozart did not enjoy, during his life, the success Salieri did, he knew the true value of his own work, showing generosity to Salieri, a generosity, which only humiliated the latter more.

The mere description of music composition for Mozart is enough to make one realize his genius:

*"That's our job, we composers: to combine the inner minds of him and him and him, and her and her – the thoughts of chambermaids and Court Composers – and turn the audience into God"* (Shaffer 66). Mozart sets out to elevate the audience to God's perspective of the world, through his music: *"A quartet becoming a quintet becoming a sextet. On and on, wider and wider - all sounds multiplying and rising together – and the together making a sound entirely new! I bet you that's how God hears the world. Millions of sounds ascending at once and mixing in His ear to become an unending music, unimaginable to us!"* (Shaffer 66).

Mozart rises through his music to the Divine perspective, he invests in the spiritual, dedicating his work to the immortal part in people with his music, that is how his art conquers immortality itself; whereas Salieri's music is just empty effort, which is enough to conquer immediate glory, but not immortality. His music will not grant him immortality. He knows this as he watches it become extinct. Only when he lives to see that happening before his own eyes, he remembers what he had asked for, in the church, from God, and finally he is able to understand also the implications on the long term of what he had asked for:

*"SALIERI: (...) What had I begged for in that church as a boy? Was it not fame?... Fame for excellence? ... Well now I had fame! I was to become – quite simply – the most famous musician in Europe! (...) I was to be bricked up in fame! Embalmed in fame! Buried in fame – but for work I knew to be absolutely worthless! ... This was my sentence: - I must endure thirty years of being called «distinguished» by people incapable of distinguishing! ... And finally – his Masterstroke! When my nose had been rubbed in fame to vomiting – it would all be taken away from me. Every scrap. (...) I must survive to see myself become extinct."* (Shaffer 101)

This shocking realisation made him want to cling to his dream of immortality even more so, as a desperate resort, Salieri confesses that he would rather be remembered as Mozart's killer and survive with his name forever, than have his name buried by Time. But nobody believes him, so his plan to conquer immortality through a false confession fails, just like his other plan to conquer immortality through art.

The fatal scene for Salieri was the one at the end of Act I, in which Constanze, Mozart's wife, brings him a portfolio with some of Mozart's manuscripts in it, in order for her husband to be considered for a Royal appointment. She mentions that they are all originals and she must have them back. Salieri looks at them in disbelief, acknowledging the "*Absolute Beauty*" of Mozart's creation (Shaffer 54). But the discovery that crushes him is that there were no corrections of any kind, Mozart "*was simply transcribing music*" (Shaffer 54). After becoming completely aware of his rival's way of working and his Divine music, Salieri drops the portfolio of manuscripts and collapses. The author creates a striking counterpoint to better mark this scene, which signifies Salieri's death as an artist: Mozart's music pierces through the manuscripts and "*explodes into a long echoing, distorted boom, signifying some dreadful annihilation*" (Shaffer 55).

### Man Against God

In "*the dreadful Night of the Manuscripts*" (Shaffer 58), as he later refers to it, Salieri is stricken by the importance of the true gift of inspiration, which had been granted to Mozart, but denied to himself. He experiences the full pain of his human limitations. His testimony is ravishing: "*Capisco! I know my fate. Now for the first time I feel my emptiness as Adam felt his nakedness... (...) Grazie, Signore! You gave me the desire to praise you (...) Then made me mute. Grazie tante! You put into me perception of the Incomparable (...) then ensured that I would know myself forever mediocre.*" (Shaffer 55). And this is not Salieri's only curse, aside from acknowledging his own mediocrity, he is the only one who sees Mozart's gift and who can appreciate his work at its real value, unlike all the others around, who considered him to be superior to Mozart:

*"My only reward – my sublime privilege – is to be the sole man alive in this time who shall recognize your Incarnation [savagely] Gratie e gratie ancora!"* (Shaffer 56).

Salieri believes he had been wronged by God, he feels betrayed and this betrayal hurts him more as God helped a man he believes to be less virtuous than him. Salieri feels mocked at by God and seeks revenge: "*The Creature's dreadful giggle was the laughter of God. I had to end it. But how? There was only one way. Starvation. Reduce the man to destitution. Starve out the God*" (Shaffer 78). Man and God will become enemies, as Salieri's vanity burst out:

*"From this time we are enemies, You and I! I'll not accept it from You! – Do you hear?... They say God is not mocked. I tell you, Man is not mocked! I am not mocked!... They say the spirit bloweth where it listeth: I tell you NO! It must list to virtue or not blow at all! [Yelling] Dio Ingiusto! – You are the Enemy! I name Thee now Nemico Eterno! And this I swear. To my last breath I shall block you on Earth, as far as I am able! (...) What use, after all, is Man, if not to teach God His lessons?"* (Shaffer 56)

The Man-God conflict is not a new one, ever since Modernism this conflict has gained body, as Man started to dispute God for the position of archetypal creator, reversing the equation, placing the self-sufficient Man in the position of the Creator.

In Peter Shaffer's play, this conflict is integrated in the action of the play. God is a part of Salieri's system of reference, an embodiment of virtue and perfection, in which he ceases to believe, after realising that this system of reference is flawed, as God had favoured Mozart, who isn't by far the model of virtue he was supposed to be, in Salieri's vision. The voice of God, according to Salieri, should have only been heard through a virtuous human being, which Mozart is not. So Salieri's entire system of reference collapses and so does his belief in God as the embodiment of perfection. Even more so, he declares war to this unjust God, who favours men randomly, contesting His authority, and proclaims the dominance of Man.

### **Salieri and the Cain Complex**

Starting from this point, Salieri will renounce helping poor musicians, will give up his chastity and will do his best to destroy God through his preferred "Creature", following the pattern of the biblical conflict between Cain and Abel. This is also the moment Salieri, just like Cain, abandons his dreams of elevation and embraces human nature, with its lowest of impulses. He turns his back to God calling Him his eternal enemy, opposing Man to God. This opposition will define in the end the manner in which Mozart and Salieri will ultimately gain immortality.

Determined to destroy God through His Creature, in order to proclaim the power and dominance of Man, Salieri takes advantage of Mozart's illness, in which he sees a possibility to put his wicked plan into practice. After his father's death, Mozart is left with a very vivid repetitive nightmare: a man cloaked in grey and wearing a mask, a dark messenger from God, as he perceives this dark figure, comes to him to commission a *Requiem Mass*. He says it must be ready until his return. Mozart becomes both obsessed and terrified of this dream to such an extent that he becomes unable to make a distinction between his dream world and the real world. He tells about this nightmare to Salieri, who will use this to shatter every last ounce of sanity in Mozart, by impersonating the character in the dream, for seven nights in a row. The symbolism of the seven nights is obvious. He wants to destroy God's creation and his Creature and what he does is reverse Creation. In the seventh night Mozart invites the ghost (i.e. Salieri) inside. Mozart shows the masked Salieri the parts of the *Requiem Mass* which were finished.

A brilliant touch of the author is Salieri's gesture when he sees Mozart's work. He tears off a piece from it, and he places it on his tongue, as if he were attending the Holy Communion and says, in pain: "*I eat what God gives me. Dose after dose. For all of life. His poison. We are both poisoned, Amadeus. I with you: you with me (...) Ten years of my hate have poisoned you to death*" (Shaffer 96). Mozart then takes off his mask and sees Salieri, he invokes God as Salieri begs him to die. Then Mozart invokes the protective image of his Father, takes a leap back into childhood and starts singing nursery tunes, as he completely loses his mind. The very same night, Mozart dies and Salieri gets to see his vow fulfilled: "*Reduce the man: reduce the God*" (Shaffer 97).

The brilliant final scene of the play and of the film portrays Salieri, the self-entitled “Patron Saint of the mediocre”, blessing and absolving all the mediocre of the world, with a Divine understanding and forgiveness. This scene is very powerful, and even more so in the film, where Salieri, from his wheelchair, blesses and absolves all the lunatics in the insane asylum he had been confined in, the most flawed of all human creatures.

### **Amadeus – A Memory play**

Just like in *Equus*, the technique the author uses here is not *mimesis*, but *diegesis*. The role of *diegesis* in the drama is highly significant, continuing the very rich tradition of narration in drama, which had exploded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this kind of play, *diegesis* mingles with *mimesis*, there is a narrator whom, at regular intervals throughout the play resumes his diegetic function, offering explanations, passing judgements, addressing the audience.<sup>1</sup> This is exactly the case in *Amadeus*. The account of the events belongs to Salieri, a *homodiegetic narrator*, whose objective is to confess his actions in front of the audience, but not out of remorse, like Humbert Humbert, Nabokov’s character, but because he wants to legitimize both his deeply human attitude and also himself as an artist. His confession has a double stake: to be understood by the people in the audience, appealing to their humanity and also to have a last attempt at immortality, not through music, this time, but through a shattering testimony on human nature. This is his last chance at immortality, before his attempted suicide, his swan song. That is the element which gives the confession its transcendent depth:

“SALIERI [*calling to audience*]: Vi saluto! Ombri del Futuro! Antonio Salieri – a vostro servizio!

*I can almost see you in your ranks – waiting your turn to live. Ghosts of the Future! Be visible! I beg you. Be visible. Come to this dusty old room – this time, the smallest hours of dark November, eighteen hundred and twenty-three – and be my Confessors! Will you not enter this place and stay with me till dawn? Just till dawn – till six o’clock!”* (Shaffer 13-14).

It is not at random that Salieri is given another chance at immortality from the playwright, who gives him the scene and the chance to tell his story, giving him his audience also:

*“And now – Gracious Ladies! Obliging Gentlemen! I present to you – for one performance only – my last composition, entitled The Death of Mozart, or Did I do It?... dedicated to Posterity on this – the last night of my life!”* (Shaffer 17)

It is this final work of Salieri’s that will grant him his much desired immortality. It is not at random that the character succeeds in having this chance only after he assumes human condition, with all its imperfections and wickedness. Shaffer chooses him to tell the story, not Mozart, because he, Salieri is the human archetype. Mozart is an exception. That is why he is sometimes referred to, during the play, as The Creature.

Eventually both Mozart and Salieri become immortal. God gives Mozart immortality through music, Shaffer gives Salieri the chance to testify about the limitations of the human

<sup>1</sup> Brian Richardson (1988): *Point of View in Drama: Diegetic Monologue, Unreliable Narrators and The Author’s Voice on Stage in Comparative Drama*, Vol. 22, No. 3. p.194.

condition. In order to do that, he makes an *Invocation*, like in an opera, to be able to make his confession:

“Let me try to conjure you now – Ghosts of the distant Future – so that I can see you. (...)  
*Ghosts of the Future!*  
*Shades of Time to come!*  
*So much more unavoidable than those of Time gone by!*  
*Appear with what sympathy Incarnation may endow you!*  
*Appear You –*  
*The yet-to-be-born!*  
*The yet-to-hate!*  
*The yet-to-kill!*  
*Appear – Posterity!” (Shaffer 14-15)*

The message is quite clear. Salieri, the flawed human, will survive as an archetype as long as human nature will exist, and he will always be able to testify to it and he will always have an audience. This testimony about the shortcomings and limitations of human condition is monumental. Nobody does it better than Shaffer, through this character.

Amadeus is a *memory play*, in Brian Richardson’s terminology. A memory play is, according to the theorist, a “partially enacted homodiegetic narrative in which the narrator is also a participant in the events he or she recounts and enacts”<sup>2</sup>

Just like in *The Glass Menagerie*, the narrator of the play is also a character in it. *Memory plays* are very frequent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to Brian Richardson<sup>3</sup>, and in their postmodern variations many conventions are challenged or contested. Just like in Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties*, the narrator in Amadeus is an *unreliable narrator*, who possibly caricatures Mozart out of an already confessed hatred and envy. Mozart may be portrayed as a ridiculous character, but he may not have been one. We are dealing with the exact situation in *Travesties*. Henry Carr, Stoppard’s character, deforms James Joyce’s portrait, according to his declining memory.

## Conclusion

This play does not focus on the drama of the genius, but on the one of the mediocre, reversing the Romantic perspective. It has been stated before that Postmodernism is a reversed Romanticism, so the shift in perspective can be thus explained. So, the conflict of this play is not just between a genius and a hard worker, but it goes so much deeper. The conflict is about the forms immortality takes for Mozart and Salieri, it is about their options in art and in life, it is about the condition of the inspired creator and about the way he relates to God, the archetypal Creator, and it is about the uninspired creator, who turns man’s resources into art, about the independent Man, challenging God and finally ejecting Him, by providing an alternative form of art.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Richardson (2001): *Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama in New Literary History* Vol. 32, No3., pp. 681-694.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

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