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IB English Literature SL  
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*Guiding Question: We are fascinated by the play of power and persuasion in relationships: explore and compare the dynamics in relationships, and the dramatic means by which they are established, in at least two of the plays you have studied.*

While relationships are built upon active attention directed between individuals, the interactions between its participants, rather ironically, reveal more about the individual than the pair. These relationships, when viewed through the conventions of drama, convey a certain commonality intrinsic in all interpersonal interactions. In both the plays *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, and *Equus* by Peter Shaffer, the revealing nature of human relationships are explored through the relationships—or the lack thereof—of our main characters, respectively: Blanche DeBouis and Alan Strang, in the jubilantly chaotic streets of Louisiana, as well as the quiet rooms of an English psychiatrist's office. While the two plays explore different societies, cultures, and themes regarding human relations, the impact of past relationships, the desire for sexual and spiritual connection, and the commonality of dysfunctional relationships, that ultimately reveal the innermost emotions of each characters, are ever-present throughout both stories.

The dynamics of relationships are shaped mostly by the past experiences of the individual, and despite their best efforts, the interpretations of the previous relationships inevitably color those of the present. In William's play, our protagonist Blanche DeBois displays her continuing fixation on the past—her character is immediately established through her own reminiscence of the past: "I weigh what I weighed the summer you left Belle Reve. The summer Dad died and you left us..." and the strict attachment to her bygone youth, repeatedly asking, "How do I look?" to others. While her obsession may initially seem to stem from simple nostalgia, a more significant, traumatic experience of her past relationship is surfaced, as she is asked about her previous marriage: "The boy—the boy died. I'm afraid I'm going to be sick!" while the auditory image of the bright, omnipresent polka music over her words instill an image of a traumatic past. The weight of such experience is revealed to the reader as well as Stanley's friend, and her newfound lover Mitch, as she describes the suicide of her homosexual husband, Allan, and their last party in which the Varsouviana polka music was playing.

While Mitch attempts to persuade her: "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?" implying that a recoloration of her memories may be possible and her traumatic relationship overwritten with a new one—the ultimate failure of Blanche's

connection with Mitch suggests the overpowering trauma, the impossibility of simply erasing such a past. The continued intermingling of past and present relationships, as “the rapid feverish polka tune [...] is heard [...] in her mind” even during her intimate conversations with Mitch, suggests the futility of her attempts to remedy her past. Her connection with alcohol that “she drinks to escape [the polka music],” as well as the brief flirtation with a man passing the street as she desperately tries to catch his interest: “Young, young, young man! Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young Prince out of the Arabian Nights?”, only serve as temporary distractions, never truly undoing the past, but only amplifying its emotional severity, shown through the increasing disconnect Blanche feels towards her current reality as she is finally forced into a psychiatric hospital.

Alternatively, the problematic relationships of Alan Strang, our protagonist in *Equus*, is caused by a past record of religious, cultural, and sexual suppression—equally personal and intimate forms of relationships. His father continually prevents any contact Alan attempts to form with the outside world—his obsession of the bedside bible stories from his mother, as well as his photo of the suffering of the christ, was ridiculed by his father Frank: “I had to put a stop to it once [...] Bloody religion—it’s our only real problem in the house”; his habitual viewing of the television is prevented again, by his father’s hatred of its “mindlessness.” While religion or culture often serve as connections to the outside world, to Alan, neither forms of relationship was available, ultimately finding consolation in an alternative form of connection, not with society or other humans, but with horses.

The disconnect he feels with the world around him, compounded by the circumstantial repression of sexuality, leads eventually to his worship of the horse-god, Equus. Recollecting his brief horse-riding at the beach when he was younger, he gracefully and intimately describes the physical connection he feels towards the horse: “There was sweat on my legs from his neck. [...] His sides were all warm, and the smell...,” an alternative to the replacement of his repressed sexuality. The continued capitalization of all horses, describing the animal as “Him,” the replacement of the picture of christ with one of “a horse looking over a gate,” and Shaffer’s stage direction that “any literalism which could suggest the cosy familiarity of a domestic animal [...] should be avoided,” suggests Alan’s worship of horses as a God, an alternative to religion. His emphasis on the freedom and nakedness of horses, “The horse isn’t dressed. It’s the most naked thing you ever saw! [...] I wish I was a cowboy. They’re free,” contrasted by the hollow insincerity of materialism he sees at work at an electronics store, serves as a replacement from false materialistic cultures. Such an intense desire to find alternative relationships through horses, is concentrated and culminated at the elaborate ritual of the worship of Equus—a naked horse-ride at night. The importance he places on the private connection with Nugget, the horse in his stable: “none one could ride, except one boy,” his description of the tools for the ritual as sacred stick: “The Ark of the Manbit,” the humming of the Equus noise reminiscent of the Chorus surrounding the center stage analogous to religious ceremonies, and the sexual climax at the culmination of the ritual, ultimately shows the impact of the lack of past religious, cultural, and sexual relationships, to the present.

Shaffer’s choice of stage directions, most notably regarding Alan’s sessions with Dysart, also signify the importance of past experiences. The presentation of Alan’s memories playing out in the

center square, as as Dysart occasionally ask questions from the side, not only increases the engagement of the audience, but also shows how real Alan's recollections feel to himself, ultimately showing the extent to which his past memories affect current behavior. The limitation's of Shaffer's center stage, in which all the actions of the drama play out, increases the sense of limitation and suppression of passion imposed on Alan as well as Dysart.

Not only are relationships shaped by experience, they are, arguably more significantly, shaped by the excess or lack of passion and desire. Surrounding Blanche's life in her sister's house is the dysfunctional relationships of the Kowalskis, signified by the violence and dominance of the Stanley. Stella's excessive sexual desire: "I can hardly stand it when he is away for a night..." and Blanche's confusion of it with love: "I guess that is what is meant by being in love..." signifies the overwhelming desires that Stella's relationship centers around. Such desires blind significant problems in their relationships, most notably when Stanley beats Stella, only for her to return to him after his bestial, mating cry "Stell-lahhhhh!"—even Blanche, in this case, appears to be the saner sister: "When I found out you'd been insane enough to come back in here after what happened [...] What were you thinking of?", while Stella suggests plainly "Why, on our wedding night—soon as we came in here—he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light-bulbs with it [...] I was—sort of—thrilled by it," indicating her intense reliance and desire for a romantic connection with Stanley. Stanley's desire, however, turns out to be more violent and sexual than romantic, as he simultaneously violates any dignity for his basest desires—anger and sex—to rape Blanche. Williams's choice to show such violent parts of the storyline—Stella's beating and the rape of Blanche—off-stage, through auditory imagery and context, additionally dramatizes the destructive consequences of uncontrolled passion. Through the omnipresence of dysfunctional relationships signify the excess of desire, Williams describes the imperfection of all relationships, but whose flaws are intensified and magnified due to uncontrolled desires.

Surrounding Alan, however, are relationships that—alternatively—lack passion and desire, reflecting his own suppression of worship and sexuality. Alan's parents, Dora and Frank, leads a marriage devoid of passion or desire, as they lack any display of affection or understanding of each other's views; Frank suggesting Dora's worship of God as "Mind you, that's her business. [...] Bloody religion—it's our only real problem in this house," while Dora angrily suggests "And what has that got to do with Alan?" Shaffer's stage directions during Frank and Dora's conversations, both "serious," "tight," "glaring," or more often "in a fury," and "shrieking." On the other hand, Dysart, Alan's psychiatrist, describes an indifferent relationship with her wife, Margaret: "We were brisk in our wooing, brisk in our wedding, brisk in our disappointment. We turned from each other briskly into our separate surgeries; and now there's damn all." His desire for passion and understanding of his own hobbies by his wife: "I wish there was [...] one instinctive, absolutely unbrisk person I could take to Greece, and stand in front of certain shrines and sacred streams," exemplifies the lack of passion in his marriage, the disconnect he feels due to her indifference: "Do you know what it's like for two people to live in the same house as if they were in different parts of the world?" Dysart attributes the

problem in their professions, indirectly suggested as he states “She’s turned into a Shrink. [...] Margaret Dysart: the Shrink’s Shrink.” and more directly shown as he talks facing the audience: “Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor.” Such sentiment is expressed also during his monologues, regarding his jealousy of Alan’s intense worship: “that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it.” The contrast formed by the “calm” and “encouraging” tone of him as a professional, and the act of “storming at the audience” and “crying out” in his monologues, intensify the cognitive dissonance he feels between the passion he desires in his relationships, and his profession that seems to destroy such feelings.

The relationships portrayed in *Equus* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* encapsulates the complexity and intensity of emotions regarding our most intimate connections. The interpersonal problems these characters face are more often the result of lingering personal issues—the daunting and traumatic past, and the excess or lack of passion—that further reveal the innermost parts of these characters that we, on some level, can sympathize with. It is the intension of the playwrights to reveal such feelings through the conversational lens of drama, and through the interaction between the individuals, the common dynamics of all human relationships.