**The Dystopian World of the Innocent in Peter Shaffer’s *Shrivings***

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**Abstract**: I have chosen to interpret yet another play written by Peter Shaffer, entitled Shrivings, dealing with the same thematic concerns visible in most of the author’s plays: individual self vs. society and its evils. My paper aims at unraveling the way in which Shrivings (in Middle Ages meant House of Retreat), a protective and carefully constructed universe upon such principles as: peace, love and purity attempts to become the better alternative of the corrupted and neurotic real world, some sort of a parallel universe, only purified of all social evils, especially of aggressiveness. But in collision with the truth, this place becomes merely a simulacrum of the world.

**Keywords**: utopia, heterotopia, postmodern dystopia.

The stifling modern society with its falsity, immorality and irrationality seems to be the main point of focus for the playwrights of Shaffer’s generation. This arch theme becomes in fact an obsession which is purged in a different manner by each of them. However, this explains some common fictional concerns such as: the conflict between generations, the conflict between the characters and the mediocrity of social life, which they are always faced with etc. If in John Osborne’s plays the main characters are swallowed by society, defeated, in most of Shaffer’s plays reality appears weakened, and it looses its power of absorption, failing to corrupt the characters. In fact, it prompts the characters to seek shelter in original worlds of imagination, thus pointing the fictional interest towards ontological perspectives. But this does not happen all of a sudden, the ontological solution shows itself, but it takes a while before the newly created world inside the other, corrupted world, becomes solid enough. This shift also marks the transition from modernist to postmodernist solutions. The former are visible for example in *Five Finger Exercise* and the latter in *Equus*, *Shrivings* etc.

Shrivings is the 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. The author explains, when establishing the setting that “in the Middle Ages, Shrivings was a House of Retreat” (Shaffer 103) and then Mark, one of the characters, states that “shriving” means confession and penance, partially revealing the symbolical frame of the play.

**Why Shrivings?**

“*It’s one of the neurotic symptoms of our time, you know, an inability to live in the real world”* (*Shrivings*, I, i, 105) a character states right at the beginning of the play, thus creating the premises for needing a different, better world and Shrivings appears to be the solution.

The action of the play is set 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 seeks it; it is open and rejects no one. The inhabitants 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. Gideon Petrie and Mark Askelon, David’s father, a former student of Gideon’s and also a famous poet 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.

**Shrivings – a utopia or a heterotopia?**

First we need to clarify these concepts. 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!*”* (*Shrivings*, I, ii, 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(*Shrivings*, I, ii, 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”* (*Shrivings*, I, ii, 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.

**Shrivings – from a real place to a shattered concept**

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” (*Shrivings*, I, i, 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! (*Shrivings,* I, ii, 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 (*Shrivings,* I, ii, 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.” (*Shrivings*, I, ii, 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! (*Shrivings*, III, 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. (*Shrivings*, III, 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, 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!” (*Shrivings*, I, ii, 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 God’s 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 stared to abolish Independent God, we have become measurably less callous. (*Shrivings*, II, i, 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. (*Shrivings*, II, i, 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 knike’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) (*Shrivings*, II, ii, 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…” (*Shrivings*, I, ii, 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.

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