*Equus*

Peter Shaffer, [Equus](http://www.amazon.com/Equus-Peter-Shaffer-ebook/dp/B004DI7TO0/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1412179193&sr=1-1&keywords=equus) (New York: Scribner, 2005).

Summary:

*Equus* is a Broadway play written in 1973 by Peter Shaffer, who also wrote *Amadeus.* (Both plays won the Tony Award for Best Play.) In 2008, there was a Broadway revival of *Equus* with *Harry Potter*’s Daniel Radcliffe. The story begins after a 17-year-old boy named Alan commits a gruesome crime for which he is treated by the child psychiatrist Martin Dysart. We slowly learn about Alan’s life, his fixation on and worship of horses, his Christian mother and atheist father, and his obsession with his personal godhead Equus. The play presents a series of interviews between Dysart and Alan as well as flashbacks to scenes explaining Alan’s physical and psychological context leading up to his nighttime crime.

Themes:

* Worship. Society has expectations regarding “normal” worship. Alan violates these with his fixation on and deification of horses.
* Passion. Alan has a passion for horses, and Dysart envies that. Dysart is conflicted because the very cure that would “save” Alan would remove the object of Alan’s greatest passion.
* Enslavement. Horses, once broken, respond to a rider’s control through a bit, placed in the mouth. Each character in the play is enslaved, and we wonder if Alan and Dysart are any freer at the end than when Alan’s psychiatric treatment began.
* Sacrifice. Alan has to sacrifice his passion on the altar of social normalcy, while Dysart feels he has never had a passion great enough for which he was willing to sacrifice much.
* Seeing. Alan believes he “sees” the world most fully through his worship of Equus. Dysart worries he himself does not “see” anything. Alan also worries that the horses “see” into the deepest parts of him.
* What is God? The play presents multiple godheads: Equus the horse god, psychiatry/rationalism, the God of Christianity, and social conventions.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are ways individuals in our culture are enslaved? If the enslaved are not aware of their state, why?
2. How would you define normal? Is that a helpful concept when discussing things such as physical and intellectual disabilities or mental illness?
3. Compare and contrast the scene where Alan rides Nugget, with its violent and sexual overtones, to Jack and the boys’ slaying of the pig in *Lord of the Flies*.
4. In the play, the character of Alan appears nude on stage during the scene portraying the crime. Is this an instance of necessary nudity, or is it gratuitous?
5. What would be a biblical response to Dysart’s dilemma in the final scene?