***Harvey* and the Issue of Normality**

*Harvey* began as a stage play written by Mary Chase and became the hit of the 1944 Broadway season. It ran for five years and won the Pulitzer Prize. After that Chase adapted it for the screen. The film was made by Henry Coster and was released in 1950. The play was given a new stage life in 2012 and now is on on both sides of the Atlantic. So, you perhaps know that it’s main character (of both the play and the film), Elwood P. Dowd, spends his days wandering about, going to bars, meeting people, engaging them in conversation, inviting them home and just generally enjoying the company and diversity of people. Dowd claims to have an unseen friend Harvey, a six-foot, three-and-one-half-inch tall pooka, an anthropomorphic rabbit. Elwood introduces Harvey to everyone he meets, since the rabbit is such a lovely company. Elwood’s social-climbing sister, Veta, increasingly finds his eccentric behavior embarrassing. She decides to have him committed to a sanitarium to spare her and her still unmarried daughter Myrtle Mae from constant embarrassment.

Harvey, the invisible rabbit is a great invention of Mary Chase. This image is a dramatic device employed, as it may seem, to portray ‘mental illness’ of Elwood P. Dowd, on the one hand, and the dubious mental and emotional status of all other characters, on the other. It is Harvey’s ambiguous ontological status that ensures the reader’ and the viewer’s reception of the comedy’s multilayered meaning, in particular its ‘anti-psychiatric’ message. Indeed, is Harvey an individual stable hallucianation, a shared hallucination, Dowd’s ghostly double, or a supernatural trickster (phooka)? We never get a definite answer. What we do know that he has a strange and positive influence on all characters, including the doctors.

Mary Chase while adapting the play for the screen had the idea that film audiences should actually see Harvey at the end of the film because she "**didn't want anybody to go out of the theater thinking Elwood is just a lush. He believes in Harvey... and I think the audience ought to believe in Harvey, too**."

Before *Harvey*, mental illness was stereotyped and stigmatized in film -- it was typically associated with aggression. *Harvey* is an early example of a work of art where the boundaries between the healthy and unhealthy are questioned. The humongous rabbit opened wonderful possibilities for it. The text of the play makes the presence of Harvey very convincing. In most cases we learn about his presence indirectly: Dowd opens doors to his pal, smiles at him fondly, asks the rabbit for a match, brushes smoke away from the rabbit. But there are direct author’s remarks in the play too. This is one of the examples found in the end of one of the Acts:

**Then from door comes the rattle of the doorknob. Door opens and shuts, and we hear locks opening and closing, and see light from hall on stage. The invisible Harvey has come in. There is a count of eight while he crosses the stage, then door of CHUMLEY's office opens and closes with sound of locks clicking. Harvey has gone in and then**

**CURTAIN**

*Harvey* portrays the state of affairs in psychiatric institutions as oppressive. Psychiatry as a medical science is also depicted as lacking solid foundation, i.e adequate theory (or theories). The inadequacy of this branch of medicine allowed Chase to construct a comedy of errors. The doctors commit Veta instead of Elwood. She is locked in a room and put in a hydro-tub , a common treatment used to sedate patients those days.

Her diagnosis, according to Dr. Sanderson is as follows: “**Her condition stems from trauma. Nothing unusual about it. There is the birth trauma. The shock to the act of being born.”** This, undoubtedly, alludes to Otto Rank’s theory only to mock it. Other psychoanalytical axioms are also mocked. Let’s look ar Veta’s account of her experience in the sanatorium she gave to her lawyer:

**VETA. And those doctors came upstairs and asked me a lot of questions-all about sex-urges-and all that filthy stuff. Tell me, Judge. Is that all those doctors do at places like that-think about sex?**

**JUDGE. I don't know.**

**VETA. Because if it is, they ought to be ashamed-of themselves. It's all in their heads anyway. Why don't they get out and go for long walks in the fresh air?**

Even casual remarks made by the sanitarium staff are rich in professional jargon like “hyper-compensation”, “inflated ego”. The doctors tend to see even each other as case stories.

Afterthe truth comes out, Veta is released and the search is on for Elwood and his invisible companion. The sanitarium director, Dr. Chumley, who is sais to be “the psychiatrist of the national reputation”, questions his colleague’s qualification:

**CHUMLEY. <…> You went to medical school-you specialized in the study of psychiatry? You graduated-you went forth. <…>**

**SANDERSON. Dowd seemed reasonable enough this afternoon, Doctor. –**

**CHUMLEY. Doctor, the function of a psychiatrist is to tell the difference between those who are reasonable, and those who merely talk and act reasonably. <…> You have permitted a psychopathic case to walk off these grounds and roam around with an overgrown white rabbit.**

Here is another exchange of remarks – this time the one between Dr. Sanderson and Elwood. This dialogue is meant to make the audience question the reliability of psychiatric diagnoses.

**SANDERSON. And I will say that for a layman you show an unusually acute perception into psychiatric problems.**

**ELWOOD. Is that a fact? I never thought I knew anything about it. Nobody does, do you think?**

**SANDERSON. Well- the good psychiatrist is not found under every bush.**

**ELWOOD. You have to pick the right bush.**

After being introduce to Harvey, the chief psychiatrist Chumley develops a deep affection to the rabbit. His professional skills did not prevent such delusion.

Judge Gaffney seems to be the most reasonable of characters. That was before he arrived at Chumley’s mental institution to ask the doctor the following provocative question: “**Now, Chumley, has it ever occurred to you that possibly there might be something like this rabbit Harvey? <…>**

**Now, then, my client, the plaintiff, Mrs. Veta Louise Simmons, under oath, swears that on the morning of November 2nd while standing in the kitchen of her home, hearing her name called, she turned and saw this great white rabbit, Harvey. He was staring at her. Resenting the intrusion, the plaintiff made certain remarks and drove the creature from the room. He went. <…> The point is -- is it perjury or is it something we can cope with? I ask for your opinion.”**

Chumley doesn’t give any answer. And, regrettably, this important scene is missing in the film! But in the play it functions as ironic commentary on the legal issues connected to mental health care. The psychiatrist is charmed by Harvey the Rabbit, no wonder – the animal evokes happy feelings which, however, makes Chumley jealous of Dowd.

**CHUMLEY. (To himself.) To hell with decency! I've got to have that rabbit!**

It is only because Chumley wants Harvey for himself alone, he agrees to Sanderson’s verdict:

**SANDERSON. It's my opinion that Elwood P. Dowd is suffering from a third-degree hallucination and the-- (*Pointing at Veta's back*.) other party concerned is the victim of autosuggestion. I recommend shock formula number 977 for him and bedrest at home for -- (*Points again*.)**

It is worth recalling that the typical remedy for any mental disorders -- be they major or minor – was Promethazine. Much later, the term pharmacracy was used to define the use of medicine, especially psychiatry, as a method of social control. Thomas Szasz, Robert Laing and Michel Foucault would claim that by identifying a person as mentally sick the psychiatrists functioned as social controllers that had the right to treat the patient coercively believing that it was for his or her own benefit.

The play and the film question whether mental illnesses are actually illnesses at all. For this reason, these works can be viewed as early statements in favor of new approach to ‘normality’. In this respect, Chase and Coster are to be seen as precursors of anti-psychiatry, the movement that claimed that institutional psychiatric treatment was mostly coercive and harmful. It was only five years after the release of the Coster’s movie that Erich Fromm published his famous book *The Sane Society* (1955) discussing similar issues -- the imposition of values and its repercussions for the psyche.

The success of *Harvey* shows that the audience was ready to change their attitude to mental health issues. Indeed, who would not envy Dowd? Especially after hearing his confession: **I always have a wonderful time just where I am, whomever I'm with.** Compared to him, all other characters are unstable, neurotic and unhappy. Perhaps, Elwood P. Dowd was the first 20th century fictional character who can be viewed as self-actualized person.

The play and the film have a happy ending: the patient is able to refuse the treatment, his relatives come to believe that the suggested psychopharmacological remedy will worsen his condition, the doctors do not insist on coercive treatment and release the patient. Such a picture can be qualified as **eupsychia**, however comical. **Eupsychia** is a term coined by Abraham Maslow to define a psychologically happy society. Even Veta realizes that she can live with her brother and his pal, the rabbit, happily ever after. So, the oversized rabbit (real or imaginary) plays the role similar to the one later played by the existential psychologists Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, who advocated a holistic approach to mental health and client-centered therapy.

The message of the last scene is clear, especially after we learn about the side-effects of the proposed pharmacological treatment: Dowd will see Harvey never again. This is a minor disaster. The major is explained by the cab-driver warns Veta: **Lady, after this, he'll be a perfectly normal human being and you know what bastards they are!**

To sum up, from a standard psychiatric and legal point of view, Dowd’s consciousness produced a hallucination. However, Harvey, the rabbit, can also be assessed as Dowd’s liberated *alter ego* which successfully “**wrestled with [unhealthy] reality and won out over it**.” Dowd’s ‘abnormality’ is depicted as eccentricity that does good to himself and others.

Elwood P. Dowd and his enigmatic pal are pictures very attractively. Dowd’s non-stop potluck practice (giving out food and invitations) is so efficient that it liberates him from the “filthy reality of everyday life.” (G. Bataille). Potluck turns out to be a truly efficient therapy unlike the one practiced at a conventional mental health institution.