

AL-Zahra University
Conference on Postmodernism

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**Postmodern American Drama: A critical study of Sam Shepard and
his postmodern plays**

Introduction

Modern American drama as a serious form of art is a product of twentieth century. American dramatists of the twentieth century, particularly since the years of World War I, have been concerned with interpreting reality both freshly and imaginatively in terms of story, dialogue and character. They have had something topical to say comparable to what has been expressed in other literary forms. American dramatists of the twentieth century have been more realistic than their predecessors, not merely in actual observation and report but in psychology and motivation.

Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and their contemporaries in the earlier postwar years, all estimated their success by Broadway standards. Subsequent decades saw a shift of theatrical energy away from Broadway. The causes were in part economic. By 1960 there were just over thirty Broadway theatres, down by nearly two-thirds from the pre-war period. The financial risks created a cautious theatrical climate, which rewarded the well-tested formula and broad appeal. Experimental works moved to Off-Broadway (One of these experimental playwrights was Edward Albee who appeared at the end of fifties with a series of short plays.) and afterward to Off-Off-Broadway and then to the provinces and the streets, as alternatives to the escalating costs and generally predictable limits of the commercial theatre.

One of the products of Off-Off-Broadway theatre is Sam Shepard. Off-Off-Broadway theatre as Bigsby says, "created a climate" for Shepard in which he could write his plays, and it did not take him long to become one of its greatest products. His renown

continued to ascend as the cafe-house theatre scenes declined. Always prolific and inventive, the playwright found persistent success despite the changing economics, production approaches, and audience tastes of American theatre. Sam Shepard's works have fascinated counter-culture audience with its lyrical outbursts and energy.

Since he first began writing in the mid sixties, Shepard has shown great potential as a dramatist, and has written more than forty plays. In his plays, mostly in his early plays, Sam Shepard uses the "transformational technique" of the Open Theatre. He joined the Open Theatre in 1964, which was established by Joseph Chaikin a year earlier. Chaikin himself was one of the actors of Antonin Artaud's Living Theatre who left the company and began his own group. Although Shepard did not stay long with this group and his direct involvement with the Open Theatre was brief, but his work with them made a powerful impression on the development of his drama. In this technique, according to Richard Gilman the actors switch immediately from one scene "to a new scene and therefore wholly new characters" (xv). This situation creates double and sometimes multiple natures for a character.

The group's interest in the transformation of character as a person separate from his/her role in the play, through his/her experience on the stage, drew attention through reflection to the way in which a person in life creates the self by adopting various roles. Paul Feldman a member of the Open Theatre, says that the task of the Open Theatre is:

To make visible onstage those levels of reality, which usually are not expressed in situations: the elusive, irrational, fragile mysterious, or monstrous lives within our lives: the elements of personality - which lie beyond the roles we assume as our identity - to confront elements of dream, myth, fantasy, and ritual as well as social and moral problems - to express the fragmentation and multiplicity of experience, and the inconsistency of internal and external 'truth' about character of events - to break down the actor's reliance upon rational choices, mundane social realism and water-down Freud, and to release his unconscious through non-rational, spontaneous action celebrating the actor's own perceptions about modern life. (174-75)

Under the influence of the Open Theatre, Shepard's characters appear to be postmodern characters and are obliged to change and refashion themselves. The critic Bonnie Marranca, writes: "The transformation of character has a fluid relationship to

changing realities.” Unlike the characters in “realistic” drama who are “fixed” and “chase the definition,” she suggests that Shepard’s characters play “fragments, gaps, transformations – the breaks in continuity” (14).

Bottoms believes: “Shepard’s work is dominated, and indeed distinguished, by patterns of internal tension and contradiction, by loose ends and uncertainties, which – far from obstructing the plays creation of meaning – operate to generate a plethora of possible meaning” (ix). So, the contradiction becomes an integral part of the meaning of the work. In the same way, Richard Gilman writes:

The reason so many of them seem incomplete is that they lack the clear boundaries as artifact, the internal order, the progress to a denouement (of some kind: a crystallization, a summarizing image, a poise in the mind) and the consistency of tone and procedure that ordinarily characterize good drama, even the most avant – grade drama of the postwar time. (xvii – xviii)

Shepard himself writes about the language, and says: “I feel that language is a veil hiding demons and angels which the characters are always out of touch with. Their quest in the play is the same as ours in life - to find those forces, to meet them face-to-face and end the mystery” (qtd. in Kirkpatrick 481). He has an excellent ear for ordinary language and speech. He also has the ability to use this everyday speech and ordinary language in a poetic and rhythmical pattern, and gives his language a poetic and lyrical power.

Sam Shepard has wonderfully used different rhythms of speech in his works. In the plays that he has written in different phases of his playwriting, we can find different languages and different rhythms. It is in this way that Shepard’s characters are always sharply individualized in their speech patterns and their style of speaking. For Shepard who is a musician, and played drums with the Holy Modal Rounders, speech and writing is equated with musical rhythms. This very idea has been transferred into his plays and they develop from musical and rhythmical structures. In the same way Shepard’s dialogues imitate musical and rhythmical phrasing. The musical rhythms, which are used in most of his plays, also account for the improvisatory style and actual character conception.

Character in Shepard’s plays can be identified by voice, and approached in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of dialogism, multivocality, and heteroglossia, which

means a plurality of voices and impulses embodied simultaneously in discourse; a cultural phenomenon in which outbursts of anarchy, multiplicity and difference, challenge the dominant culture and its legitimate discursive forms. Improvisation - a phenomenon of the multiple self - allows space for unique individual voices and style within a collective performance. As Marvin Carlson suggests, the “creative tension between repetition and innovation” implied by Bakhtin’s dialogic model “is deeply involved in modern view of performance” (58).

Talking is the first step for Sam Shepard’s characters to communicate. Characters that are frank and straightforward in their speeches. They do not speak in an ironic way; they speak in a simple manner, and say what they are really thinking. The critic Bonnie Marranca has pointed out: “Shepard’s characters are accomplished storytellers because they’d rather talk than act” (29). In most of his plays we find the truth about the characters’ inner lives through their speeches and monologues; the truth, which reveals the character’s consciousness.

There are certain difficulties in writing about Shepard and this arises from his plays. Shepard’s plays contain conflicts and contradictions. He often creates destabilized and fragmented characters that undergo numerous transformations and change their personas.

His method of representation operates through a flexible social criticism that explores the alienation of the individual in American society. When Oumano comments: “Shepard personifies our cultural ambiguity” (1), he is pointing out the tensions and contradictions located at the heart of all his plays. Bonnie Marranca also admits that Shepard’s writing is “too renegade” to be explained by “conventional dramatic wisdom” (ii).

The tension between individual and society emerges throughout Shepard’s career as a central element. Bottoms states: “Shepard’s writing can often be seen as representing an unresolved conflict between modernist and postmodernist perspective on such issues as the nature of self-identity, the search for coherence and meaning in late capitalist culture and the creative process self. (ix)”

Discussion

Since Shepard uses theatrical techniques that have been identified with the postmodern theatre, he is spoken and written as a postmodern playwright. When reading his plays, one can clearly understand that his theatrical techniques certainly have much in common with those of the postmodern theatre. His characters are transformational and intersubjective, and his stage reality is layered and fragmented. He juxtaposes borrowings from American popular culture with those of history in an often free form. Shepard often uses sets that call attention to the theatre's existence as theatre, and invites acting techniques that call attention to the actor as a performer and the play as performance. All these points connect Shepard with his postmodern contemporaries and show that he shares with them a great deal.

In 20th century, uncertainty about the validity of the representation (despite having the power of creative imagination and growing belief that drama cannot represent the outside reality) has made literary writing self-conscious. As a result, the issue of illusion and reality has become a major concern of modernism as well as postmodernism. Self-consciousness is a peculiar feature of modernism, and self-reflexivity is the feature of postmodernism.

Modernism was promoted by a sense of crisis, chaos and loss of belief in external, authoritative system and order. It heralded the coming of a new era of high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism in which art turned away from realism and humanistic representation towards style, techniques and spatial form in the pursuit of a deeper penetration of life. As Nietzsche said: "No artist tolerates reality, the task of art is its own self-realization, outside and beyond established orders, in a world of abnormality drawn perspectives" (qtd.in Bradbury 25).

The focus on consciousness and search for structures that lie beyond time, history and character, liberated the writer and gave him/her an opportunity to be himself/herself, and to explore reality in the realm of mind. Wallace Stevens believes that "the artist must be able to construct reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination by giving it the substance or the meaning of fiction" (qtd.in Bradbury 25). This search for reality in the realm of consciousness made modernist writing highly self-conscious. As a result, the writer became conscious of the choice of language, of style of the point of reference. So self-conscious nature of modernist literature emerged as a by-product of its focus on consciousness.

Being self-conscious, modernist text is not self-reflexive. Because it could be said to have a sense of closure in which the crisis of reality was sought to be resolved through the pursuit of meaning with the writer's consciousness being its nodal point. It, being complete in itself, was not a statement about itself, but about some deeper reality. The emergence of various literary movements like Expressionism, Impressionism, Surrealism, etc. in modernism exemplified the centrality of consciousness.

In postmodernism, there came a shift in the focus of attention from "consciousness" to "language" and "writing". For modernists "consciousness" preceded "language," but for postmodernists "language" is given precedence over "consciousness," and that, literary texts are perceived in terms of language, and reality is perceived as linguistically constructed. They regarded mind not as the basis of aesthetic, ordered at a profound level, rather as constructed out of, as well as constructed with language. A substitution of a purely metaphysical system or mythical analogy was untenable to them as final structure of authority and meaning. Among them an awareness both of language and metalanguage, of "consciousness" and "writing" became extremely important as well as problematic. This shift in the focus of attention from "consciousness" to "language" was due to the works of numerous philosophers and the writings of Roland Barthes who gave precedence to "language" over "consciousness."

The philosopher Jacques Derrida is credited with focusing attention on "writing" and on "written or printed text." This focus on writing itself was the result of the postmodernist assumption that the text can never imitate or represent anything outside itself. Hence the text turns inward upon itself, reflecting the very process of writing and becomes self-reflexive. Postmodernism, knocked down the whole notion of "subjective" or "subjectivity" with its verbal overlay of psychological complexes. Instead the subject was as a purely linguistic construct. As a result characters became mere verbal constructions, "words, not being" (Waugh 26), constructing their reality in verbal terms and having their existence only within the text and in the sum total of their speeches.

Language as Derrida says, is perceived in terms of "difference"- a word "whose sense remains suspended between two French verbs – 'to differ' and 'to defer' both of

which contribute to its textual force but neither of which fully captures its meaning” (Norris 32). Derrida claimed that with the shift to focus from “linguistics” to “grammatology” in language, “differ” shades in to “defer.” As a result in language, meaning is always deferred, which means that a text has only regressive layers of meaning and no finality.

Explicating this, Derrida says that a sign is difference + deferment. It is incomplete, inadequate and indefinite. It is to be understood as a sign “under erasure”, “sous rature”- a term given by Derrida. It is written and yet crossed out. Every sign carries on it the invisible mark of crossing-out suggesting its inadequacy as well as indefiniteness. I mean that the meaning is indefinitely deferred. It is caught up in an endless chain of relationships and differences in which thought becomes deluded in search of truth, of final meaning. All that a sign can do is to send us in search of what it is lacking and reminds us of what it is not. Interpretive understanding of postmodernist writing, therefore becomes a futile exercise. Writing as Derrida says becomes an “endless displacement, which both governs language and places it for ever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge” (Norris 29). It offers resistance to any settled or definitive meaning.

The paradoxical nature of postmodernist view of writing and the indeterminate nature of language made the problem of representation more acute than it was in modernism. If meaning could attain to a status of self-sufficient intelligibility, language would pose no problem but serve as an obedient vehicle of thought. But “language [...] always fail[s] to achieve expressive self-presence, and [...] always partake[s] of the indicative character, which marks [...] the suspension of meaning” (Norris 46). And since this is considered the defining characteristics of all uses of language - spoken or written -writing, in Derrida’s opinion, “transgresse[s] - or violently oppose[s] - the conventional relation of language and thought” (Norris 30). “Difference” comes into play and meaning eludes the grasp of pure self-present awareness. This elusive nature of language led to the postmodernist assumption that a text cannot represent any outside reality, in fact, anything outside itself. As a result a text turned inward upon itself, writing about its own process of enunciation.

The postmodernist idea of temporal deferring has further complicated the problem of representation. Time is regarded as an endless deferring of presence and present as a

moment compounded of manifold retentions (past) and anticipation (future). Presence never exists in an isolated instant of awareness. It means that there is no privileged or definite ground of reflection from where thought could ever organize or control the flux of temporal experience. In the face of this problematic situation, postmodernist writing instead of being representational, became self-reflexive. Unable to hold a mirror to an outside reality, it held mirror to itself thereby debunking the whole notion of 'mimesis' or representational art.

The speech of a character, which is the verbal aspect of language, is enacted on the stage by an actor, which means that gestures also constitute an important component of language in drama. These gestures as well as "silences" and "pauses" are "absences" in the dramatic text and come into play only when the text is performed. But since in a postmodern play which is self-reflexive, the playwright writes about the self-erasing nature of language through language (to put it differently, the playwright tries to write about "absence" through various language devices), the boundaries between the dramatic text and the performative text collapse and the dramatic text becomes a theatrical space within which the whole range of theatricality embedded in the text plays itself out. In a dramatic text, dialogue is only a spoken word whereas in theatre it is an enacted word - an amalgamation of word, gesture, feeling and tone or speech rhythm. But in a self-reflexive text, the dialogue is both the spoken word and the enacted word.

The problematic nature of language also problematizes the question of the identity of characters. The characters have their identity in the sum total of speeches they make within the text. It means that characters have their identity within the text; but they are also constantly "under erasure" in the manner language is. This is as much to say that though the characters have fixed identities within the text, these fixed identities are constantly threatened with instability within the text. Their condition is one of "being" and "non-being;" of "presence" and "absence."

Apart from their ontological status, the reader/audience is also confronted with the multiplicity of selves that a character acquires within the text. As many manifestations of the character there are perceptions of reality. Having no fixed, definite identity within the text, a character's identity is the product of reader's imagination. This fluid nature of a character's identity implies that a character in a

postmodern play, instead of being a “character” in the traditional sense; a person endowed with certain “moral and dispositional qualities” (Abrahms 21), is merely a role playing self, playing various roles in search of his/her identity.

Role-playing, as a result, becomes an important feature of character. In playing plurality of roles, the characters seem to be their own playwrights trying to create their own fictive identity or reality. They appear as if they are trying to shape themselves as well as other characters into the play or to project their own designs on the surrounding darkness or at least to pass time. These role-playing selves not only refer to but also comment on their search for identity. In other words, they refer to the process of creation of their own fictive identity.

The role-playing self of the character problematizes the actor–character relation. What an actor does is to mask his internal self and perform a role. But this is what a character also does or at least tries to do in a self-reflexive play. It means that a role-playing self is simultaneously both an actor and a character. This dualism inherent in dramatic character results in simultaneous separation and coalescence of illusion and reality and heightened awareness of the fact that the two dimensions, the real and fictive exist in both the theatre and life. The character, whether involved in game-playing, role-playing or in any other manifestation of playing is perceived as professing distinct fictive identities out of which the reader is forced to accept one of the fictive identities as “real” and the other as “fictives.” The character as a result goes beyond the traditional notion of character because while maintaining its pretence of reality it vigorously asserts its own fictive existence through continuous role-playing.

Since a character is a role-playing self, having no definite identity within the text. An actor is confronted with a difficult task of presenting this role-playing self on the stage. As a character in the play, he/she plays the role of an actor playing various roles in the presence of other characters. In this sense the play becomes a metaphor for theatre and highlights the tension/interplay between the performative and dramatic text, which is built up within the play. It also emphasizes the fact that what is being performed is merely an allusion of reality, merely a “play,” a fictive dramatic text.

Sam Shepard’s characters since his early plays were produced at Theatre Genesis in the 1960s, like the playwright himself, have been drifting for about forty years.

During all these years the playwright has been a drifter. From his early years, since he was a child, Shepard moved from one city to another and from one military base to another along with the family. At the age of nineteen, he left his California home and went to New York, then moved from New York to England. Coming back to America he went to Northern California, to Southwest to Virginia and finally to St. Paul, Minnesota.

Sam Shepard has been able to express his experience of being a young American playwright in the mid-sixties and seventies. His early plays depict the innovation and the experimentation of the sixties in American drama. In this period Shepard was inspired by Beat Generation poets and writers. In his article "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library," he writes about that experience: "I've practiced Jack Kerouac's discovery of jazz-sketching with words. Following the exact same principles as a musician does when he's jamming" (217).

Shepard is clearly suggesting that writing process requires inspiration and has the power to reveal the unknown. In the same article he mentions: "I feel a lot of reluctance in attempting to describe any part of a process which, by its truest nature, holds unending mystery" (214), and when he is asked why he writes; Shepard answers: "I try to go into parts of myself that are unknown. And I think that those parts are related to everybody. They are not unique to me. They're not my personal domain" (Lippman 21). Having such a viewpoint Shepard develops his vision about writing.

Sam Shepard is a playwright who uses words in what seems to be an improvisational manner. Just as the jazz musician uses notes and phrases, Shepard says he uses words "as tools of imagery in motion" ("Inner Library", 216). He then continues: "I have the feeling that the cultural environment one is raised in, predetermines a rhythmical relationship to the words. In this sense, I can't be anything other than an American writer" (216). So, for Sam Shepard the geography and the place where one lives, determines the rhythmical patterns and creativity (Shepard has actually developed the ideas of "jazz improvisation" and "local space," specifically in Angel City and Geography of a Horse Dreamer).

In Cowboys #2, Cowboy Mouth, The Mad Dog Blues, The Tooth of Crime, Geography of a Horse Dreamer, Angel City, Buried Child and Fool for Love,

Shepard's characters come from American popular culture. They are cowboys, musicians, rock-and-roll stars, pop singers, science-fiction images, shamans, farmers, mobsters, gangsters, cinematic figures and movie icons. In these plays Shepard also brings characters from old and modern American myths. In all these different plays, Shepard's characters speak differently and each character has his own voice. Shepard himself is also very sensitive to these different voices.

Shepard's language is filled with word images, slangs, cowboy talk, language of shamans and language from the worlds of rock-and-roll, pop, films and gangsters. Critics believe that Shepard has an excellent ear for language as spoken by range of characters. John Lahr is one of these critics who considers Shepard as a talented one. He believes: "As a writer Shepard fits no mould [...] Abundant in talent and paradox, Shepard's plays flush out the hidden terrors of a society also abundant in escape" ("A Ghost", 61).

About the notion of character, in his article "Letters and Texts," Shepard writes: "The age old idea is that a character evolves along a line, and any deviation from that has to be explained somehow. But I feel there are many voices in a person, many different people in one person, so why shouldn't they have a chance to come out" (27). That is why we see that in his plays, his characters are a collection of fragments, fragmenting memories, disconnected experiences and sometimes simplified sensibilities damaged by a single dominant emotion. They are alienated characters that are separated from their homes.

In the first phase of his playwriting, Shepard used the idea of "transformation of character" under the influence of Open Theatre. Not only he has successfully used the idea of transformation in his early plays, but also used it in his later realistic family plays. In these realistic plays, Shepard extends the Open Theatre's transformational technique beyond its initial self-exploration.

Shepard himself confirms the influence of Open Theatre on his works and says: "I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's something we've got to live with." That is why in his plays the conventional concept of character as an integrated whole, held little appeal for him. In an interview with Pete Hamill he said: "I prefer a character that is constantly unidentifiable, shifting through the actor, so that the actor could play anything, and the audience is never expected to identify with

the character” (98). Bonnie Marranca indicates that Shepard’s characters like Chaikin’s “real” actors possess a double presence – as conscious performers and as the characters they bring to life on the stage. His extension of the Open Theater’s transformation exercises in his early plays becomes a way of exploring the dialectical interplay between the world and the stage. Shepard has used this technique primarily through a revised concept of characterization – from fixed and psychologically associative to multiple, shifting and fluid.

In this way, Shepard seems to have rejected the basic principle of realism: coincidence of actor/character identity and spectator’s identification with characters. He seems to be searching for an alternative to the mimesis of realism. Chaikin comments: “The theatre [...] seems to be looking for a place where it is not a duplication of life. It exists not just to make a mirror of life” (Presence 25). The Open Theatre was actually attacking the realistic theatre’s suppression of the ideological processes at work in representational structures.

By dismissing realism’s aesthetic of unity of character, the transformational strategies could foreground shifting and plural cultural constructions of identity. By denying the spectators, the pleasure of identification, their production could insist on the spectator’s self-perception as active, critical subjects, the effect of such methods might have been a critical foregrounding of the language of representation, an elevation of the signifier over the signified. The principal method for the Open Theatre was “display,” which was intended to disrupt the “logic of domination” by turning from “representation to presentation” (Malapede 26).

In his dramatic career, especially in his early plays, Shepard practices an on-going exploration of the realms of the self, situated in the landscape of consciousness. It reflects his early years of playwriting as an Off-Off-Broadway playwright, experimenting with drugs. Shepard wrote that the main idea, which persists for him from that time, is “the idea of consciousness” (“American Experimental”, 212). Here, Shepard refers to the self-reflexive quality of experimental theatre – plays about theatre, plays about play, plays about performing a role. Critics believe that writing for Shepard is a performance of the self, something he passes on to his characters that create a shifting sense of self, which their potential for transformation is capable of performing.

Shepard's characters change their personas by changes in their speeches. For him, language is never just words on a page. He creates a special language of discovery, definition and redefinition in an attempt to uncover truth or meaning. Shepard himself believes:

Language can explode from the tiniest impulse. If I'm right inside the character in the moment, I can catch what he smells, sees, feels and touches. In a sudden flash, he opens his eyes and the words follow. In these lightning-like eruptions words are not thought, they're felt. They cut through space and make perfect sense without having to hesitate for the "meaning". ("Inner Library", 217)

In Shepard's plays, when his characters do not understand each other, he plays with language as he searches for meaning. Shepard's language of discovery is spoken by the characters that undergo transformations, fluctuate during the play and adopt several roles to speak several languages which are juxtaposed and superimposed simultaneously; languages, which are a range of borrowings, fragmentary and pieced together. By transformations, language resemblances, and language changes between his characters, Shepard plays with the definition and redefinition of language.

Sam Shepard is of the view that language "has become so corrupt, laundered" and "stripped of meaning" that "we often don't know what we mean any more" (Wren 90). He expresses his wish for a pure language, which does not mediate experience but acts as a transparent medium, which reveals fully the signified. Shepard is actually looking for a language in which in this new language, the signifier does not represent the signified but makes it present. This language seems to be an ideal one for Shepard.

Shepard wants to find the language, which will make the signified fully present by overcoming loss, which attends the separation of the signifier and the signified. Jacques Derrida in his Theatre of Cruelty calls this kind of language "glossopoeia." He says: "Glossopoeia which is neither an imitative language nor a creation of names," it "takes us back to the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, when articulation is no longer a shout but not yet discourse, when repetition is almost impossible" and "along with it language in general: the separations of concept and sound, of the signified from signifier, of the pneumatical and the grammatical, the freedom of translation and tradition, the movement of

interpretation, the difference between the soul and the body, the master and the slave, God and man, author and actor” (240).

Sam Shepard’s concept of character in his early plays - in 1970s and 1980s – is a fragmented and a fractured one. His characters are not “integrated subjects.” They fragment and transform during the play. His characters have no essential self but are sites of continually shifting subjectivity. Because of all this, Shepard’s conception of character is considered to be postmodern. His ability to make use of postmodern techniques in dramatizing his characters has provided the way for the postmodern analysis of his characters.

Shepard’s “Note to the Actor” at the beginning of Angel City, clearly depicts his use of postmodern and transformation techniques. In this “Note” he says: “Instead of the idea of ‘whole character’ with logical motives behind his behaviour which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation.” He then adds that the actor should be “mixing many different underlying elements and connecting them through his intuition and senses to make a kind of music or painting in space.” In the same “Note” he continues:

If there needs to be a ‘motivation’ for some of the abrupt changes, which occur in the play they can be taken as full-blown manifestation of a passing thought or fantasy, having as much significance or ‘meaning’ as they do in ordinary lives the only difference is that here the actor makes note of it and brings it to life in three dimensions. (AC 6)

Critics are of the view that this notion of characterization in Shepard’s plays is a postmodern concept and his characters do not belong to a coherent realism, because one cannot find the notions of coherence, central self and consistency in his works. Worthen for example, believes that “Shepard’s characterization seems to liberate both actor and audience from coherent realistic psychology” (88).

The concept of character as a “collage,” an improvisation, and a constant shifting, is truly an idea which worked in the plays of his first phase of playwriting and naturally moved into his later plays namely, his realistic family plays. Like Shepard’s improvisational notion of character, the language of his characters is also a complete

discontinuity of discourse. His characters' language is a "combination" of different voices, and a complete range of borrowings.

One of Shepard's significant skills as a playwright is his ability to dramatize instability of the characters and discontinuity of their language. From his earliest one-act plays to his realistic family plays, Shepard portrays characters that refashion themselves and improvise their identities within a matrix of constraints whether these constraints are cultural, familial or personal. In Shepard's drama his characters appear to be "unfixed" and "fragmented" as Bigsby says, or as Bottoms indicates are in "state of crisis." They are given opportunity to perform with voice and gesture on the theme of self. The picture and the idea of the self which is projected in Shepard's plays, is that of the self continually subject to fracture and change. His characters' language is also fractured and they inhabit different roles and selves and fragment during the course of the play, and thus damage the continuity of the narrative in the play.

Shepard's plays much like Eugene O'Neill's plays whose expressionistic Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape are radically different from his realistic Long Day's Journey into Night, shift between styles. He has experimented with different dramatic forms. His early plays are transformational, improvisational and have a sense of absurdism and his latest plays are considered as realistic.

As a result, creating a unified picture of Shepard's works becomes a difficult task. Like many other critics who have commented on the problematic nature of analyzing Shepard's plays, Richard Gilman who has clearly seen the point, states: "Shepard's work resists division into periods, stages of growth or development [...] Shepard doesn't move from theme to theme or image to image in the separate plays; he doesn't conquer a dramatic territory and move on, doesn't extend his grasp or refine it." He then adds: "What he does from play to play is lunge forward, move sideways, double back, circle round, throw in this or that, adopt a voice then drop it, pick it up again" (xvii). Although writing about Shepard's plays as Gilman says, is a challenging task, but throughout his career certain themes emerge in his plays: The theme of art and the role of the artist in society, familial relationships, male-female relationships, the individual's connection to his past, identity and the quest for roots, and the theme of violence and menace.

In his plays, Shepard examines the relationship to American culture. His plays are considered as American landscapes, which reflect its iconography, myths and its archetypes. The most dominant subject in his plays is his focus on American culture and its myths. This is the reason why his plays are consistently described as American.

Shepard's treatment of the American society and its culture is fragmented and inconsistent. Critics often talk about contradiction which is found in Shepard's works. Bottom for example, argues that Shepard's entire career can be viewed through his fondness for conflicts and discord. He also comments that Shepard's plays "end not in resolutions but with abrupt anticlimaxes, unexplained images, or the suggestion of tensions continuing indefinitely into the future. They do not restore equilibrium" (3). All these comments reflect Richard Gilman's argument who asserts: "Most of his plays seem like fragments, chunks of various sizes thrown out from some mother lode of urgent and heterogeneous imagination in which he has scabbled with pick, shovel, gunbutt and hands" (xvii). Shepard's plays resist resolution, often ending in states of suspension and ambivalence. In an interview with Carol Rosen, Shepard said that "endings are just a pain" (39).

In most of his plays, especially his early plays, Shepard has concentrated on the American male experience (Cowboys #2, Geography of a Horse Dreamer, The Tooth of Crime and Chicago for example). In these plays, he presents a sort of male bonding relationship, which is actually a dramatic model in these plays.

Bonnie Marranca has clearly noticed to the presentation of male bonding relationship in Shepard's plays and has written that as if Shepard "is unaware of what is happening between men and women". She then adds: "The voice – of consciousness, of he emotions, of reason, of triumph, and of failure, too – and finally of America – is a man's voice" (30).

This kind of playwriting continued until he wrote his realistic family plays. Shepard himself has accepted this, when he said that he believed there is more mystery between men. For many years in his career, Shepard did not create a female character who is as independent as his male characters, until he wrote his family plays: Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child and specifically Fool for Love.

Shepard's early plays depict the playwright's life and its different aspects. His departure and separation from the family and fragmentation are shown in his plays. In these plays, fragmentation is an aesthetic principle no less than a fact of character or social relations. Little by little it becomes an aspect of deeper alienation, a division within the self, which relates to a division between self and its context.

Shepard's early plays and the plays of his second phase of playwriting, represent a search for identity, a quest for roots and permanence; meantime he illustrates the pitfalls of this research. These plays depict a search for home and identity within the contemporary American culture. From his early one-act plays to his realistic family plays, Shepard's characters are looking for their roots and identities. In Cowboys #2, the characters are looking for their identities. In The Mad Dog Blues, the characters in search of their roots and identities travel to different cities, go to a jungle and long to return home. In Cowboy Mouth they wish to return to their families and homes, somewhere, which is their "place." In Geography of Horse Dreamer, the characters long to return to their geography, some place, which is their "space." In Buried Child the characters come back a long way home in search of their identities and inheritance. The characters in Fourteen Hundred Thousand, build structures for home. In Action, the characters try to live in a new home. In Fool for Love, the characters try to start a new life and in True West, the characters return to the current domain of a parent.

All these interests in home and identity depict the wish and desire of the lone individual to enter into relationship with other people. But for the postmodern character, communication and reintegration remains problematic. The inner divisions of characters and the resultant conflicting desires, alienation from the land, the transmission of unhealthy relationships in the past, which is passed on after by father to son, an environment which is emptied of old myths and of popular culture, all of these make the task of reshaping the cultural fragments a difficult one. That is why Shepard has said: "I can hear the sound of America cracking open and crashing into the sea ("Letters and Texts", 35).

Sam Shepard's works and his plays respond to a sense of anxiety that expresses itself in a fragmented world and in fractured and fragmentary images or in a broken and a fractured language full of ambiguity. In a culture in which style becomes both a

necessary act of covering and uncovering truth, Sam Shepard creates plays in which style becomes a primary language and a key to private and public meaning.

In Shepard's works and his plays, we find something, which is in common with the fragmentary and the fractured world that he sees as constituting reality for those who assemble their sense of the real from the fragments of the media or the disassembled fragments of experience. In his plays, Shepard brings characters and people who do not understand and do not recognize forces that operate on them in their lives.

In his plays, Shepard's characters find each other frightening and mysterious; they seem to need the very relationships that distress them. In Shepard's plays, the reality of the characters' relationships escapes them; therefore we see that nothing is quite as it appears. His characters seem trapped in the plot of the story that they do not themselves generate most of the time.

Shepard's early plays are products of his creative energy and his imagination. As he himself has said, these plays depict a sense of "*play*" as in kids. These early plays such as Cowboys #2 are often fantastic world of the characters. These works are mostly short plays, non-realistic works and filled with fantastic twists of narrative and lacking closure. In these early plays, which are actually deviances from the traditional understanding of dramatic form and structure, and are written under the influence of Open Theatre, versions of plot, character, language and linearity have little place, comparing to the same notions in traditional works.

As Shepard is a product of Off-Off-Broadway theatre, in his early works he valued fantasy, spontaneity and the authenticity of feeling. These early plays are often surreal images with fractured and unrevised language, and there is no logical connection between the words, actions and deeds of the characters. There is always a force in these early plays that threatens to deform language, character and imagery. His characters that transform throughout the play are just gestures or sometimes caricatures and players in his works.

In his plays, we see that his characters are mostly the divided parts of one: May and Eddie in Fool for Love, Chet and Stu in Cowboys #2, Kosomo and Yahoodi in The Mad Dog Blues, Cavale and Slim in Cowboy Mouth, Hoss and Crow in The Tooth of Crime perhaps resemble Shepard's split parts of personality and his different sides.

The critic Robert Mazzacco sees Shepard's paired characters as "virtually opposite sides of the same coin" (80).

In Cowboy Mouth and The Tooth of Crime Shepard has used a combination of speeches from the counter/culture worlds of rock-and-roll, astrology, cowboys, sports, gangsters, big business and crime. The music and the songs in each play, act as prelude for the entire play and it affects the characters. In these two plays, Shepard's characters are, rock-and-roll stars, disk jockies, characters from science-fiction films, gangsters, astrologists, lone heroes and characters from the world of modern American myths. The characters of these plays throw words at each other like weapons and wound each other with the destructive power of language. A language which is a combination of American slangs, rock talk, cowboy and gangster talk, language of movies and punk talk. This kind of language is a codified energetic one, which the characters throw at each other.

Shepard's characters in these plays are fighting for power, because the plays are about the power, the source of the play and the style that the characters use in their speeches is about the power. They "usurp" each other's territory and steal each other's "turf." The language of the characters, which is actually a combination and a hybrid language of picture shows and secret codes, becomes a signal of power and danger having incantatory and mysterious energy. These plays have the quality of dreams and are a mix of reality and fantasy. The heroes are old and out of their time and existing only as pure performance, gestures and styles.

In these early plays, Shepard's characters and their languages are all representing Shepard himself and the characters are actually projecting the lines of Shepard's own desires. Something is missing in these characters that could keep their destiny of experience and their personalities. The threat is both from within and without. There is an air of temporariness about his characters. These characters are derived from a rootless world, a world without a history and without future; and if there is a past for these characters, it is always problematic. Images hold the only coherence in these plays but these images are dominated by the possibility of annihilation.

In Cowboys #2 and Geography of Horse Dreamer, Shepard's characters are either cowboys or transform themselves into cowboys. In Cowboys #2, Shepard brings characters with no substance whose persistent optimism becomes the root of irony. In

both plays, the characters jump in and out of cowboy characterizations a little too fast. Like Cowboy Mouth and The Tooth of Crime, in these two plays, Shepard also uses a mixed language. In Cowboys #2 and Geography of a Horse Dreamer, Shepard brings cowboys, gangsters, artists and characters from big industries on the stage and uses a combination of cowboy talk, language of artists, shamans, gangsters, dog trainers and Irish dialect. His characters in these two plays are fragmented characters in search of their identity, characters that use a fractured and broken language, a language which is actually a range of borrowings. They all fluctuate between self and the other and fracture into opposites.

As compared to the other plays, Shepard's language in these two plays is prose and like his other plays, he does not use songs in them. Shepard's prose language in these two plays, is full of dreams, visions and visuals. Later in his playwriting, this becomes the main element of his drama. In The Mad Dog Blues and Angel City, where his characters have visions, visuals and their monologues are full of pictures and images; we see that Shepard has used this technique at its best. Shepard's characters in these early plays frequently walk at the edge of insanity. They are drifters and seekers after truth in which they can no longer believe.

In Shepard's early plays the characters is not conceived as dense with social experience and language not as exposing truth or clarifying relationships. This was actually the kind of theatre and playwriting that was in accordance with the Off-Off-Broadway theatre. Shepard and the other writers were working in an age in which the unconscious was to be liberated and consciousness to become the subject. In an Interview with Kenneth Chubb, Shepard said:

On the Lower East Side there was special sort of culture developing. You were so close to the people who were going to the plays, there was really no difference between you and them – your own experience was their experience, so that you began to develop that consciousness of what was happening. (193)

These early plays do not lend themselves to rational analysis and for Shepard's characters in these plays, style becomes subject, and experience is presented as fragmentary.

Sam Shepard's drama and his theatre, is the theatre of images. In his plays, language remains a subtle instrument and a means of implying a world behind the word. His settings in the plays have metaphorical force and his characters seem to live allegorically. It may be true that as he says: "Language is a veil hiding demons and angels" and he is undoubtedly one of the American dramatists who uses language impressively particularly in terms of his sense of the rhythms of rural and urban America.

Those images in his plays, however, are not the isolated symbols forced to carry the burden of his meaning. They are the essence of his plays as characters, styles, and the rhythms of speech cohere to create powerful and disturbing metaphors for an alienation that connects to social, the psychological, and the metaphysical.

Searching an analogy for his approach in language, Shepard found it in music. He is a playwright and a musician who uses music and songs in his plays. In the structure, rhythms and the coexisting freedoms of music, he sees some kind of image of his characters' difficulties. For Shepard, the process of constructing and performing a play is very much similar to that of music.

Shepard has always described his approach to playwriting like music. In an interview with Lippman, he says: "I think of [playwriting] more like music. If you play an instrument and you meet somebody else who plays an instrument, and the two of you sit down and start to play music, it's really interesting to see where that music goes [...] It might not go anywhere you thought it would go" (11).

About his early plays, in the same interview, Shepard explained: "You take two characters and you set them in motion. It's very interesting to follow this thing that they're on [...] it's like getting on a wild horse" (11). His early plays are not heavily plotted and as he puts it in the metaphor of "wild horse," it is clear that he is speaking of spontaneity and freedom in his plays.

These early plays, come out of Shepard's playfulness under the influence of music, especially jazz music. This quality of his playwriting, later become his trademark. The quality which he extended in his later plays, The Mad Dog Blues and Angel City. In an interview, Shepard said:

Jazz could move in surprising territories, without qualifying itself. You could follow a traditional melody and then break away, and then come back, or drop into

polyrhythms. You could have three, four things going on simultaneously. But, more important, it was an emotional thing. You could move in all these emotional territories and you could do it with passion. (Hamill 90)

Shepard's characters in The Mad Dog Blues and Angel City these two plays are related to musical harmonies and travel through the domains of consciousness. In his plays, Shepard presents expressive examples of this conception of character.

In The Mad Dog Blues and Angel City Shepard brings his characters from the world of modern and old American mythology; Hollywood movies and American Indian tribes. In myth, Shepard sees "a sense of mystery" and in language, especially in the rhythms of language of these plays he sees a necessary means to provoke what amounts almost to a mystical sense of being. In The Mad Dog Blues and Angel City, Shepard has found a powerful sense behind the words, a sense that amounts to a description equally of his style and his objective.

The characters in these two plays like the characters in his other plays, are alone and alienated from the society they are living in. This loneliness that features his characters is the product of the social alienation in American society. They are also a lament, a lament which we can identify in his plays. In a very interesting way, Shepard presents it through Miss Scoons language in Angel City: "The ambition to transform valleys into cities. To transform the unknown into the known without really knowing. To make things safe. To beat death. To be victorious in the face of absolute devastation" (AC 32).

Although Shepard had proved as a great Off-Off-Broadway playwright, but he was not fully considered as a major contributor in the mainstream of American drama until he wrote his family realistic plays. When his Buried Child won the Pulitzer Prize, he was truly considered as one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century.

Though in his early plays Shepard considered his characters as "a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme," in his later realistic family plays, his jazz-style characterization remained upto some extent. His characters in this kind of drama also fluctuate, erupt, fracture and undergo transformation.

In Buried Child and Fool for Love, which we have also had a thematic approach, Shepard depicts the impossibility of escaping the heritage and the reality of the characters' past. In these family plays, his characters begin to understand their inability to escape their past, and sins of fathers are to be visited upon their sons. When the characters confront their heritage, they acknowledge its fragmentary and its fractured world.

Shepard's sense of society in Fool for Love and Buried Child is fractured and fragmented. It is a society, which is destroying itself from within as without. Like his other plays, these two plays are works in which mood and tones are a primary concern. In these plays, parents, brothers, lovers and friends are at odds. These characters do not have sense of sharing anything but fear. For the characters of both Fool for Love and Buried Child, past is as problematic as present, the only certainty lies in feelings of the characters, which are denied even as they are articulated.

In Fool for Love all the constituent parts of the past are problematic. Different texts compete in the play. Versions of the real coexist with no privilege granted to any one of them. What does appear to be granted is some authority to feeling, though this is in constant, characterized by fluctuating pressure, pulses of attraction and repulsion that suggests an uncertain sense of the real or at the very least a real that shifts disturbingly at the level of language image and relationship.

In Buried Child also the past is as problematic as present. Shepard's characters in this play are also problematic, in the way that they are not "complete" and their inconsistencies prove that they are not the characters when they are realistically concerned. Because Shepard's realism is "unfixed" his characters are also "unfixed" and lack the inner force, which resides in the characters of psychologically realistic drama.

Conclusion

Sam Shepard not only rejects the notion of plot and character in his plays, but also rejects the notion of psychological coherence. This kind of stability in his plays has always been a sense of danger and a threat. His characters are potentially the victims of a particular kind of plot, a plot that ultimately threatens their existence. In Fool for Love they do battle over the authority of the very fictions that they parade with such assurance. In The Tooth of Crime and Cowboy Mouth the characters employ style as

weapons, in The Mad Dog Blues, Angel City, Cowboys #2 and Geography of a Horse Dreamer, his characters engage one another with images or with a language deformed by social pressure.

In Shepard's different plays, his characters do address the audience directly, thereby appealing to experiences that take them beyond the page and the stage. Meaning is not to be wholly circumscribed by the play that needs to preserve its mysteries. The fear, indeed, is of a world in which all meaning surrender itself too completely, a world in which the surface becomes the only reality.

In Shepard's plays, what his characters observe is a fragmentation of thought, emotion and social context, but they lack any means to gain a purchase on it. All of them are offered myths generated by the media, myths that unlike those rooted more securely in the sensibility, are, finally evidence of their fragmentation rather than gestures of resistance. And the sense if not the knowledge of that fact leaves a residue of anxiety and alarm, and a nameless horror.

Shepard's characters are wanderers who never sink their roots securely into one time or place. They are quite literally delocated. They have no history they care to embrace, no destination better than another. They are victims not of a disregarding social world, on whose margins they seem content to live, or of cosmic ironies, which leave them looking for order in disordered universe, but of the feelings which sweep through them. They register a sense of loss, of emptiness, abandonment, even betrayal, and seek to feel that space with violence or love, each infiltrating the other until it seems virtually impossible to separate them. They inhabited discarded world in which everything seems disposable, including relationships. Such transformations as they undergo, are the alternative possibilities already contained within themselves rather than gifted to them by a culture in which nothing finally seems permanent or even lasting.

Since he began working Off-Off-Broadway, Shepard has shown great potential as a dramatist. From the early years of his career, he proved to be an energetic playwright who sometimes has not been able to control his creative energies.

The critics may have different opinions on some of the specifics of Shepard's depiction of the tension in American identity. All agree on Shepard's preoccupation

with the notion of an inherent American ideology. And uniformly they identify Shepard as one of the greatest American playwrights. Don Shewey calls Shepard “a true American artist” (5).

For four decades since his plays produced at Theater Genesis, Shepard has been a phenomenon of American literature. He is now considered as a canonical author and an iconic figure that as Carol Rosen says is “after all the most original and vital playwright of our age” (34). Although Shepard could not become a rock-and-roll star, but for sure, he is the rock star of American drama.

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