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No. 69

SAM SHEPARD

by Vivian M. Patraha
and
Mark Siegel



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I. Introduction

Sam Shepard's libretto *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife* mourns not merely the mercy-killing of Slue-Foot Sue but the death in general of the legendary figures of the Old West. The libretto is a somewhat comic juxtaposition of high and low artistic styles that contrasts the often absurdly exaggerated aspects of Western legends with the traditional form and serious functions they fulfill. A continuing major concern of Shepard in nearly all his works is the disappearance of the myths on which American character and spirit are founded.

Certainly cultures change, and the needs of a people for particular types of legends and myths change also. But Shepard observes that, in our essentially material and profane culture, we have desecralized the past and seem unable to replace our old legends with any viable new ones. As Pecos Bill notes, "My legend and time and my myth is forgot," and with it our American dreams of transcending our mortality: "So while you go shopping / And watching T. V. / You can ponder my vanishing shape / You can build your own mountains and tear / Them all down / But from death you can't never escape" (*Sad* 38). In a great deal of his drama, Shepard has taken it upon himself to explore the possibility of new myths for our time, most frequently returning to the roots of so many American myths: the Old West.

Western American drama began with the religious ceremonies of the American Indian whose ritual dances and songs dramatized

myths which often symbolized spiritual and corporeal communion. Sam Shepard, already one of the most critically acclaimed Western playwrights, harkens back to the very roots of Western American drama and waters these roots with some of the most radical dramatic techniques employed in contemporary theater. His plays dramatize characters and events symbolic of the communion of spirit and body, and he attempts to conjure up a myth potent and appropriate enough to guide us out of confusion.

Shepard says he doesn't have any "political theories" but that his plays "come from that particular part of the country . . . from that particular sort of temporary society that you find in southern California . . . where everything could be knocked down and it wouldn't be missed and [from] the feeling of impermanence that comes from that—that you don't belong to any particular culture" ("Metaphors" 198). His attempts to attack contemporary American civilization through magic and incantation seem bizarre and merely satirical to many critics, but it is important to recognize that Shepard is not just analyzing our society or suggesting reforms, but exorcizing our spiritual demons in a manner like that of the Indian shaman in *Angel City* and the Snake Dancers in *Operation Sidewinder*.

Shepard's plays, more than those of any other contemporary playwright, concern our images of the American West and the mythic qualities inherent in them. In his essay on Shepard's rock-and-roll figures, Robert Coe suggests that Shepard's protagonists "only indirectly express an interest in the figures of historical time Shepard's theatre incarnates the Cowboy of the Interior Plains With his deeply ingrained Western sense of psychological rootlessness and space, Shepard's work is nonetheless prodded by a conflicting urge to make a home in the contemporary wilderness" ("Image Shots Are Blown" 57). This apparent paradox

is, of course, at the heart of a great deal of Western American literature.

Shepard's plays rarely display conventional plot unity, characterization, or clear-cut thematic development, but do use Western motifs throughout as a way of creating meaning and coherence. John Cawelti, Jay Gurian, Richard Etulain, Leslie Fiedler, and others have examined Western film and literature as spiritual romance that mythologizes traditional American values, and they have had no difficulty discovering works that either justify, elevate, or even debunk these values. Shepard, however, does all three at once. Values to Shepard seem to imply man's preconscious, emotional, perhaps "spiritual," and certainly metaphysical relationship to the world. Therefore, while these values are "real," they cannot be easily expressed in analytical terms. Rather, they appear embodied in images and actions that penetrate into the realm of myth.

That the heroic cowboy of American popular culture bears little resemblance to the historical cowboy has been demonstrated many times. The cowboy hero is a mythic figure—virtually an archetype in American culture—representing both the values of common, middle-class citizens and the idealized stature which only mythic heroes can attain. In his book *The Cowboy Hero*, William Savage notes that the cowboy represents the particularly American attitudes toward truth, justice, honor, preparedness, righteousness, free enterprise, and common sense, but that "the individual contemplating the cowboy protagonist contemplates only himself and finds therein both explanation of and justification for the epic journeys of all people from the cradle to the grave" (148).

Just as there are frivolous and evil sides to our own natures, there are nonheroic aspects of the mythic cowboy. Philip Rollins divides the fictional cowboy into three types: "The clownish, reckless,

excessively joyful, noisy, and profane; or else wolfish, scheming, sullen, malevolent, prone to ambush and murder; or else dignified, thoughtful, taciturn, idealistic, with conscience and trigger-finger accurate, quick, and in unison" (*The Cowboy* 40). In popular entertainments, once we know which type of cowboy we're dealing with, we can be almost certain of his responses to the expected, stock situations. Shepard, however, does two things that we expect of serious writers dealing with these materials. First, he combines elements from all three character types in individual characters. Second, he places his cowboys in unusual situations for which the stock responses are inadequate. Shepard's drama has at its center the idea that the traditional values embodied in the cowboy are no longer adequate, and that we must move through or beyond them to find new ones. Employing the figure of the cowboy as an American Everyman, Shepard examines the failure of Americans to find comfortable roles, self-images, and modes of action in a traumatic, contemporary world.

Shepard is not only "a Western writer," but one who is able to evaluate all of contemporary American society through the icons and themes of traditional Western American literature. His plays trace the bankruptcy of American culture, in which characters are no longer integrated into their world by adherence to traditional values and norms. Shepard raises the idols of this tradition to send them crashing from a greater height, examines possible but ultimately inadequate strategies for adapting our old culture to our new circumstances, or depicts the apocalyptic end of traditional American culture in which long-held values, particularly those glorified in Western American literature, are ritually exorcized to make room for some new, as yet unimagined America. Shepard's plays do not progress chronologically toward these ends. However, Shepard does pass through phases of interest in particular stages of

this cultural drama, and his plays are most advantageously considered by grouping works concerning: (1) the bankruptcy of American culture, (2) the dis-integration of Americans from their world, (3) the revelation of false cultural heroes, (4) the apocalyptic exorcism of our current, deadening culture and, finally, (5) failed but necessary attempts at reintegration by means of relations with others and the return home.

II. Biographical Information

I plunged into the world head first and, although covered with blood, my attitude was very friendly. I was not a mean person then. (*Motel Chronicles* 52)

I don't want to be a playwright, I want to be a rock and roll star I got into writing plays because I had nothing else to do. So I started writing to keep from going off the deep end. (1971 interview, in Gilman, "Introduction" to *Seven Plays* xi)

Sam Shepard was born on 5 November 1943 at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, while his father, Samuel, was a flyer fighting in Italy. His mother, Elaine, and he moved around the country and then to the Mariana Islands where they lived on Guam. Shepard's strongest memory of this experience is his mother carrying a Luger to fend off hidden Japanese soldiers.

Shepard's family moved to South Pasadena after the war, "one of these white, middle-class, insulated communities, . . . all that small-town-America-type stuff" ("Metaphors" 188). Both parents were school teachers for some portion of Shepard's early life. His father

played drums in a Dixieland band; Shepard would become an accomplished drummer. Shepard describes his father as a strict disciplinarian, who raised him to be Episcopalian, "but that was another kind of prison to get out of" ("Metaphors" 208). The major event Shepard presents from this time occurred when, at age ten, he and two older, tougher boys stole some bicycles and ran away from home. His earliest images of cowboys and the Old West came from Saturday afternoon movies.

When Shepard was eleven or twelve, his family moved to a small avocado farm and sheep ranch in Duarte, east of Los Angeles. Two images of Shepard emerge from this time: the Shepard who tended his own sheep and even won a prize for one at the State Fair, who joined the 4-H Club and wanted to be a veterinarian, and who worked as a stablehand and orange picker; and the Shepard who broke the league's 220 high school track record on Benzedrine, who blew off tension by drag-racing, who stole a sports car with a friend to go joy-riding in Mexico, and who got arrested in Big Bear for making an obscene gesture at the sheriff's wife. What's most evident from his accounts is that southern California, combined with film images of the West, constitutes the psychic terrain in which his plays are set.

In the late fifties, Shepard was attracted to and influenced by "the whole beat generation . . . just before the time of acid and the big dope freakout" ("Metaphors" 189). In the early sixties after one year at Mount Antonio Junior College, he went to live among jazz musicians, artists, and writers on New York's Lower East Side. Living within an exciting, underground cultural community of people from all over the country, Shepard saw himself as "like a kid in a fun park." Wanting to describe this New York life, he began writing plays.

It was a perfect time to write avant-garde plays: the Off-Off

Broadway experimental theater was just starting to gain momentum and notoriety. He made his playwriting debut at Theatre Genesis in 1964 with *Cowboys* (an earlier version of *Cowboys #2*) and *The Rock Garden*. Shepard became the youngest of a vital group of theater people in a very fertile period for American theater. His plays were put on in the best Off-Off Broadway theaters, then in some of the best non-commercial theaters, and he got Rockefeller and Guggenheim foundation grants along with winning numerous Obie Awards for his plays. In the late sixties, he also played drums and guitar with the Holy Modal Rounders and married O-Lan Johnson, an actress who has performed in many Shepard plays. They have a son, Jesse Mojo.

When New York got “more and more insane” and fragmented in the early seventies, Shepard went to London because he had heard it described as the rock-and-roll center of the world (“Metaphors” 200). There he continued writing plays and gaining notoriety. The more traditional American critics who had earlier scorned Shepard’s work as incomprehensible or incoherent became more appreciative during this period. The avoidance of Shepard by major critics and mass audiences at the beginning of his career was probably due to his unusual—apparently careless—approach to plot and characterization. It took critics and viewers a number of years—and a number of viewings—to come to terms with his work.

Only the avant-garde had taken much notice of Shepard in his early years, and even those who did write about him seemed to promote him without much exegesis. However, by the early 1980s Shepard had been virtually canonized by the critical establishment as the most important and interesting to analyze of contemporary playwrights. Even when such critical powers as deconstructionist David Savran chided Shepard as a purveyor of bourgeois culture, they found his work fascinating and challenging. Elizabeth

Hardwick, Susan Sontag, and Ruby Cohen all championed Shepard against the few conservative figures, such as Walter Kerr and Tennessee Williams, who still found Shepard an anathema. Furthermore, as John Lion has shown, when critical commentary on Shepard increased in both quantity and insight, those negative assessments of Shepard's work almost always appeared to be uninformed, the result of the failure of critical insight. Again and again, Shepard has been perceived by critics as both a truly American playwright and a writer of universal value and distinction, as both "ruthlessly experimental and uncompromising" (John Lahr) and as a playwright who deals with and illuminates traditional American and dramatic concerns. Bonnie Marranca has rightly described the quality of Shepard's that separates him from most of his contemporaries as his capacity for growth, his willingness to examine new areas of dramatic and theatrical potential, and it is this same quality that makes Shepard such a fascinating subject for in-depth critical study.

By the late seventies, works by Shepard were being performed by the Magic Theater in San Francisco as well as by theaters in New York and London. Shepard did a lot of traveling throughout the United States, especially the West, and went on Bob Dylan's 1976 Rolling Thunder tour. By the early eighties, Shepard and his family were living in a suburb of San Francisco, and he was achieving a reputation not only as a playwright but also as an actor in films such as *Days of Heaven*, *Resurrection*, *Raggedy Man*, *The Right Stuff*, and *Country*. His screenwriting activity included *Paris, Texas*, winner of the Cannes Film Festival. This prodigious output and versatility threaten to make Shepard a "superstar of the eighties," as the popular media began to put it.

III. The Bankruptcy of American Culture

Shepard's plays often derive from a sense that the cultural values of America are no longer adequate for emotional survival. Like many of the plays that were to follow, *4-H Club* and *The Rock Garden*, both written in 1964, are set in wastelands. Whether his settings are urban, as in *Cowboy Mouth* and *Angel City*, or rural, as in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Back Bog Beast Bait*, they tend to be dry, dead, and trash-littered. The psychic scenery is equally bleak; the ground-level from which almost all of Shepard's drama grows is the worn-out, poisoned soil of contemporary American culture.

4-H Club (1964) parodies the rural youth organizations that typify agricultural and domestic handicraft in prelapsarian America. Only one of the characters cares about domestic crafts, and he is about to leave the country; the only "farm animals" mentioned in the play are rats and man-eating mandrills. While Joe tries to make coffee out of three artificial powders and pathetically sweeps the floor of their dilapidated, nearly empty flat, Bob and John continuously foil his attempts. They taunt him with apples, this fruit of American knowledge finally suggested to have only the destructive potential of bombs. Joe tells a story about Mike's Gardening Service that parallels the rise and fall of pastoral America: Mike starts out as a kind and enterprising young man who eventually becomes rich off the town he services and then leaves the now-dependent people behind to die.

The Rock Garden parodies the conventional American family structure and its norms for relationships. The interactions among mother, father, and son in this play are sterile and even perverse. The son's silence in the face of his father's verbal abuse at first suggests either his inability to respond or his horror at his father's

profanity, but his own final speech shows him to be at least as violent and profane as his father. While the father may curse the failure of genetic inheritance that he believes resulted in a son incapable of action, the son's last speech implies an inheritance of a certain kind of vitality. However, the son is aware of the fragmentation of his family and the cultivation of only dead things in the Rock Garden, and his vitality can emerge only in a destructive fashion. Shepard does not believe that Americans are always incapable of action, but he thinks that they are unable to solve their problems, to save an already dead society, through constructive but not spiritually reconstructive activity.

Icarus's Mother (1967) displays this pattern even more clearly. Americans are the talented and potent magicians of the age of science who have shown an increasing propensity to fly too close to the sun. In this play, the sky-writing that the picnickers watch seems to spell out nuclear holocaust, although Shepard's concern is not for anything so tangible as arms control. As in many of his early plays, the physical here directly represents the metaphysical, and Shepard's characters, rarely fully realized or logically motivated, are meant to express metaphysical, emotional, or psychological tendencies.

Shepard's situations are not so much "realistic" as they are "real" in the sense that they exist as artifacts of his thought and art. The characters in *Icarus's Mother* are ostensibly on a picnic, but are quick to point out that "picnics [like plays] are organized events," perhaps most important in that they reveal the similar nature of a great many experiences. Events in Shepard's plays are more synchronistic than structured around cause-and-effect, because he generally deals in parallel physical and metaphysical symptoms rather than in acts that have specific repercussions. The plane in the play crashes as Bill and Howard fear it will, but not because of

their fear; rather their fear and the crash are both reflections of the apocalyptic state of American society. Shepard's early plays do not assign blame for or even define the nature of our problems; they merely observe the erosion of values—family unity, love of the land, independence, and know-how—that were once most prized.

In his extended attempt at reflective journalism, *The Rolling Thunder Log Book*, Shepard remarks that “the repercussions of [Bob Dylan’s] art don’t have to be answered by him at all. They fall on us as questions and that’s where they belong” (62). In Shepard’s plays and in Dylan’s songs, these questions create a sense of mystery about what is happening to the individual in his relationship to his society and culture. Furthermore, they create a need in the audience to respond to this mystery, a need that is constructive in itself. In fact, Shepard notes that “if a mystery is solved, the case is dropped” (*Rolling* 73).

In recounting his impressions of the Rolling Thunder Review, Shepard identified the same heroes—rock and country-western musicians—and the same themes that exist in his own plays: “New England is festering with Bicentennial madness, as though separately trying to resurrect the past to reassure ourselves that we sprang from somewhere. A feeling that in the past at least there was some form or structure and that our present state of madness could be healed somehow by ghosts” (*Rolling* 45). Shepard plays, such as *Back Bog Beast Bait*, *Mad Dog Blues*, *The Unseen Hand*, *Seduced*, and *Suicide in B^b*, conjure up these very ghosts from the past in attempts to give meaning to the lives of contemporary characters. Each time, however, the ghosts refuse to play passive parts, frequently turning on the characters to reveal their weaknesses and problems. These are often culminating dramatic moments in his plays. In Shepard’s vision of America, the sense of emptiness and chaos precedes any notion of what is wrong, and

many of his early plays focusing on this problem seem like first acts waiting for resolutions.

The monologue in *Killer's Head* (1972), one such play, is delivered by a man strapped to an electric chair. His pastoral vision of owning a horse farm is, of course, condemned to death from the start. He is either describing his dream to avoid being terrified or is actually so blind to imminent, inescapable disaster that he still believes he may live his dream. If his electrocution in the final seconds of the play shocks the audience, it is because Shepard plays so well on its desire to believe in an impossible dream of oneness with nature. Thus, the audience participates in the delusion of the character that if one ignores a situation it will go away. Not only do the Americans in Shepard's plays avoid confronting the shambles of their lives, but Shepard reminds us again and again that we are these Americans.

Chicago (1967), a broader and more speculative play about what has gone wrong, is no more conclusive even though the protagonist traces his domestic problem back into prehistory. Stu ruminates from his bathtub concerning the failure of his relationship with Joy. His ability to feel love on an imaginative level is disconnected from an ability to do anything to sustain it. Likewise, that Stu envisions his bathtub as a boat on the ocean of life may vent his imagination, but it keeps him a castaway in a tub while his actual domestic environment remains suffocating and self-destructive.

In another limiting use of imagination, two young men in *Cowboys #2* (1967), apparently contemporary farm hands, try to create a sense of structure and history for themselves by pretending to be old-time cowboys. But these second-hand cowboys cannot maintain the illusion of the Old West; their forced dialogue about the harshness of the weather and the danger of Indians is insipid and often interrupted by car horns and other reminders of contemporary life. Furthermore, the play implies not only that contemporary

civilization is "rotten" and squalid, but that Americans have often faced harsh, hostile environments in an uninspired and unheroic fashion.

La Turista (1968) is the most complex of Shepard's early plays and the first one he admits to rewriting ("Visualization" 218). The play delineates the trauma induced in his characters by the bankruptcy of American culture. Americans Kent and Salem live in hotel rooms that cannot isolate them from environments in which they are unable to cope. In Act One, in their Mexican hotel room, first Kent and then Salem fall prey to "La Turista," amoebic dysentery. They've come to Mexico with their suitcases filled with money to "disappear" for a while, and in one sense Kent accomplishes this: in his identity as an Ugly American terrified of the "dirty" natives, he is ravaged by sunburn, dysentery, and, in Act Two, sleeping sickness. Out of this scourging, he is reborn as a dismembered but still vital monster dragging himself toward a new identity. Kent's physical symptoms—"things that show on the outside what the inside might be up to" (282)—all are representative of spiritual ailments. He understands America's sterile, self-destructive isolation, yet refuses to confront this problem in himself. While he believes he has been "poisoned" by the Mexican environment of Act Two, other characters accuse him of suicide both times.

The popular formula Western novel asserts the justice of trial by combat, and its physical realization is in tune with the metaphysical situation it resolves. However, in Shepard's plays, physical ability and metaphysical value have lost that reciprocity. Western characters like Doc, who fails to cure Kent in *La Tourista*, or like Slim in *Back Bog Beast Bait*, having some small awareness of the spiritual nature of their dilemma, seem to represent the most telling failure of American culture because they epitomize the failure of

older values. Like Kent in *La Turista* or Stu in *Chicago*, contemporary Americans can at most try to survive, while coming to an awareness of the nearly total entropy of American society.

IV. The Dis-Integration of the American Way of Life

Shepard's first step beyond documenting and dramatizing the bankruptcy of American culture is to investigate the strategies we cling to so unsuccessfully while the basis for our way of life disintegrates. *Forensic and the Navigators*, *Shaved Splits*, *Holy Ghostly*, *Back Bog Beast Bait*, and *The Curse of the Starving Class* are all probes of this nature.

Forensic and the Navigators (1972), first performed in 1967, looks at first glance to be a counterculture strategy for subverting the establishment, but this impression is first parodied and then demolished. The title of the play suggests that it is about a character who either uses or represents some sort of legal argument or investigative debate as a way to steer a course for others to follow. But the character named Forensic is instead presented as being violently and thoughtlessly action-oriented; and his course, although it may be based on a "whole plan that's been goin' on since we was ten years old" (54), is short-sighted and destructive. While he and his partner Emmet are dressed as counterculture figures in Indian garb—usually a positive sign in Shepard's plays—they are sexist and self-serving, and they eventually change identities with the two California Highway Patrol-type Exterminators who have come to wipe them out. The play begins quite hopefully, with the whole cast singing "We gonna be born again . . . We gonna be saved tonight" (53), but ends with the theater filled with the supposedly deadly

gases of the Exterminators. It may be psychologically gratifying to pretend that one is really different from one's enemies, but Emmet's strategy of assuming the identity of his enemy simply deludes him into believing he is responding to the failure of his society while he is only contributing to that failure.

Shaved Splits (1972), first performed in 1970, also suggests that the counterculture may simply be a self-indulgent mockery of the values for which it presumably stands. Continual insistence on change is a virtual pornography of real social change, resulting only in senseless destruction. Geez's diatribe against the capitalist establishment dominates the play, and it is clear, as Cherry says, that "this is a schizophrenic country. Split right up the middle. It's never gotten together and it never will" (170-71). What is not clear is what each side actually represents or whether Geez has any solution to this split, beyond sloganeering and conceived exchanges of power that effect no real change. In the end he admits "there's nowhere to go. This is it. Dead end city" (195).

In other plays, images of the Old West figure prominently in Shepard's survey of the collapse of American society, since they have traditionally embodied its now-depleted potential for growth and development. In *The Holy Ghostly* (1972), first performed in 1969, a father who lives a mythicized past and a son who lives in an historically isolated and therefore coldly brutal present are locked in struggle. Neither Pop's hell-raising passion nor Ice's emotional frigidity is admirable or healthy, and neither can respond to a world depicted as full of relentless, unfathomable change.

Back Bog Beast Bait (1972) also presents a contemporary wasteland in which characters act out a deluded past. Slim, an old-fashioned gunfighter getting on in years but still capable, and his young side-kick, Shadow, come to the aid of Maria, whose bayou homeland is apparently haunted by a beast that is killing off every

living thing. However, the play portrays the beast not as a cause of the devastation, but as a symptom, emphasizing the way in which the characters act out the un-lived fantasies of their lives unable to relate either to reality or to each other, except on an animal level.

Like the play's two-headed monster, each of the characters in the play presents two faces. Maria is both an incarnation of the rugged Western woman, and a reincarnation of the Virgin Mary. The Preacher, who wanders into the shack spouting prophecies of doom and God's wrath against sinners, also reveals a list of his own juvenile crimes. Most importantly, Slim, who seems to adhere virtuously to the Old West code, reveals that it was based on religious lust for killing. The code is also suicidal, since every successful gunslinger lived in constant peril of being shot down by a younger rival. When Gris Gris tells Slim that "the beast breathes your breath. You are him. He's in you" (142), she is telling the literal truth. The beast that is destroying their land is a manifestation of the deadly contradictions in their own lives. Slim claims that the mushrooms Gris Gris brings into the shack are poison, "beast bait, somethin' that beast put out there to trick us into eatin'" (138), but she responds truthfully, "poison's in the air, Jack. Some people take it, some leave it" (142). The entire situation is beast bait, tricking the characters into engorging and then vomiting up their own drug-enhanced fantasies. The characters cannot understand their predicaments and so cannot conquer their hallucinations. In the end, all Slim can do is recognize that his values are out of place and ask, "What is it a man cries for when nothing fits?" (156). Then he is reduced to animal howling.

While Slim's adherence to Western gallantry and violence are the inadequate best any of the characters is able to offer, his dream of settling down on a ranch holds Shepard's sympathy. Slim's last agonizing cry, "I love the earth! I love the earth!" (159), relates him

to many other characters in Shepard's plays who cling to the land as the source of once valid American values and of hope for new ones. In *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), the first play in Shepard's family trilogy, Wesley's sense of place is debased into an excuse for following in the tradition of his worthless, alcoholic father. The lack of integration in American society and domestic life is clearly demonstrated in the family of Weston and Ella and their children Wesley and Emma.

As the play starts, Wesley is trying to hold together and repair the home that has been devastated by his father's alcoholism. While Wesley is able to make some headway in fixing the physical damage done by his father, he can do nothing about the psychological state of the family, which has been shattered beyond repair. Later in the play, when Weston briefly rallies and reassumes leadership, his rebirth is futile, since he is being pursued literally by his past (gangsters hunting him for overdue debts) and has passed on his genetic and behavioral "poison" to his children: Wesley dresses in his father's wino clothing, and Emma, who bragged earlier about inheriting her father's explosive temperament, is blown up by the gangsters. During the course of the play, both parents sell their home out from under each other, an act of rejection of the land that they have accomplished psychologically long before this.

The family represents the remnants of the American dream, cursed and disintegrating. Both Weston and Wesley, who dreams of reestablishing the little farm on a sound basis and who feels "this country close, like it was part of my bones" (137), take seriously the promise of the land's providing nourishment. Emma is first seen wearing a 4-H uniform and preparing to give a talk about how to fry chicken. However, they all seem to be "cursed" members of the starving class, forever hungry for cultural and spiritual sustenance.

The "curse" is, as Ella says, organic and inevitable. The sickly

lamb, which both Wesley and Weston try to save, becomes a baited, poisoned trap: the starving class succumbs to its own hope for an impossible future. Weston's faith in rebirth is obliterated by Emma's death and the slaughter of the symbol of that faith, the lamb. The land to which the family is tied in *Curse of the Starving Class* is doomed as a source of values. "The land is full of potential," says Taylor, the con-artist lawyer. "Of course it's a shame to see agriculture being slowly pushed into the background in deference to low-cost housing, but that's simply a product of the times we live in" (153). But to Wesley, the Taylors of America and their "zombie" ways mean "more than losing a house. It means losing a country" (163).

Shepard's vision of American society as having lost its promise, independence, opportunity, and close ties to the land, resembles that of much of the Western American literature of the 1960s and 1970s, from Jack Schaefer's *The Mavericks* through Sam Peckinpah's film *The Wild Bunch*. While this Western art generally accepts these changes as inevitable because of the forces of history and technological advancement, Shepard's drama describes an American culture that is disintegrating for intrinsic, almost biological, reasons. Its "curse," cancerlike, is carried in its genes.

V. False Idols and Heroes

In *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, Shepard says of America "everywhere there seems to be a great starvation for tradition and true culture" (144). Hence we are all of the "starving class." In response to this condition, Shepard explores the construction of heroes of mythic stature in contemporary settings, including rock stars in *Melodrama Play*, *Tooth of Crime*, and *Cowboy Mouth* and billionaire

inventors in *Seduced*. These potential role models or idols must partake of myth because “myth speaks to everything at once, especially the emotions. By myth I mean a sense of mystery and not necessarily a traditional formula” (“Visualization” 217). Shepard’s law- and convention-defying, self-invented, consciously performing characters are particularly apt at creating this mystery. The danger is that “some myths are poisonous to believe in” (*Rolling* 62), and all four of these plays chart the failure of the characters to create mythic selves that sustain and transform both themselves and others. They also examine the tremendous cost of the attempt.

In the image of the rock-and-roll star, Shepard finds the most fertile ground for establishing a contemporary counterpart to the renegade cowboy hero. In *Hawk Moon* (1973), Shepard’s faith in rock is nearly unlimited: “Rock and Roll made movies theatre books painting and art go out the window Rock and Roll is violence manifest without hurting no one Rock and Roll is more revolutionary than revolution” (55). The ability of the “true” rock star to move us, to explode the cultural debris in our heads and fill us with new images is best exemplified by Shepard’s depiction of Dylan: “He’s infused the room with a high feeling of life-giving excitement. It’s not the kind of energy that drives people off the deep end but the kind that brings courage and hope and above all . . . life” (*Rolling* 28). Like ancient ritual, music is incantatory, releasing spiritual powers. However, just as events in Dylan’s life undermined his status as self-inventing renegade, none of the rock heroes Shepard depicts lives up to this spiritual promise, thereby negating the possibility that sixties counterculture could be the healing link to a past Western American mythos.

Melodrama Play (1967) is the first of Shepard’s portrayals of the performing, self-improvising artist. Duke Durgens has had a hit with his first song: “Prisoners, won’t you get up out a’ your

homemade beds," a kind of pop existential song that depicts self-confinement and paralysis. In fact, the song was actually written by Duke's brother Drake. Floyd, Duke's manager, doesn't care who wrote the song as long as he makes money. He brings in the sinister, emotionless Peter to stand guard until another hit is written. The rock star, especially the image stealer rather than the maker, becomes the self-made prisoner about which he sings. Images of sightlessness abound in this play—eyeless posters of other stars, "eyes stayed shut with your homemade glue" (169)—to suggest a lack of vision on the part of the performer, entrepreneur, and public alike that issues in fruitless melodrama.

Cowboy Mouth (1976), co-written with rock poet Patti Smith and first performed in 1971, clarifies the precarious mission of the rock hero and welds this figure more closely to both cowboy and saint. The play uses a loose structure of verbal arias and duets to convey the struggle of Cavale to transform Slim, whom she has kidnapped, into her vision of the rock redeemer. She believes people need "a saint . . . with a cowboy mouth" (207)—a kind of counterculture god communicating in explosive, spiritual terms by means of an outlaw street language.

Traditional Christianity is defunct. "The old God," according to Cavale, "don't represent our pain no more." What's required instead is a totally unselfish, wholly public performer who will "reach out and grab all the little broken, busted-up pieces of people's frustration," take them into himself and "pour it back out . . . bigger than life" (208). Thus what's to be performed is not only a construction of the self but a heightened construction of the lives, dreams, and possible future of the alienated. However, this attempt at liberation from institutional and bourgeois coercion weighs too heavily on Slim, who is tied to the past by his memory of the wife and baby he's deserted. Moreover, to be a cowboy mouth requires

such emotional attunedness, such intense vulnerability, and so violent a leap into a blank future, that it's like playing Russian roulette. Early on Cavale tells Slim that black rock-and-roll star Jonny Ace literally killed himself this way, and this image repeats at the end of the play when the Lobster Man, suggestively a food "deliverer," turns into the rock messiah but this time gets an empty chamber when he squeezes the trigger. The result of Cavale's transforming vision may be a monstrous creation, rather than a bringer of new coherence—no escape from the "ratpile heap a' dogshit situation" (199) Slim earlier describes.

The Tooth of Crime (1974) traces the fate of a rock/cowboy messiah similar to the one who emerged at the end of the earlier *Cowboy Mouth*. The context for *Tooth* includes Shepard's own identification with a particular generation of music makers, many of them now dead, plus his sense of fiercely competitive trends in the now established rock-and-roll industry. The play depicts the corrupting pressure on stars to maintain their "constellations" of power and success, and the danger of electric rock-and-roll becoming a mere "faddist phenomenon" (*Rolling* 136).

The Tooth of Crime is set in a kind of science fiction future that is also a metaphor for the frontierless present: farmers, ranchers, and cowboys are gone and everything is "zoned." Shepard conflates the language of cosmic warriors, rockstars, gunfighters, gangsters, hotrodders, street gangs, and businessmen to explore what happens to the renegade artist once inside "the power of the machine" (80). The play is a parable of a generation of outsiders turned insiders: their revolution has itself been institutionalized, reduced to an "old time shuffle" (73). Control is in the hands of the power brokers, the "Keepers" of "the game." Only "Gypsy Markers" exist out on the fringes. Hoss, the aging, enthroned celebrity, is locked within this closed system designed simultaneously to protect and prey on him.

He's "insulated," "respectable and safe" (76), far from the people whose lives he was to record and revitalize. He has become an industry in himself, whose "killings" suggest the underworld and the stock market more than the devastating power of the poet. He is still admirable in that he acknowledges his musical and mythical roots. By contrast, Crow, the "new gun" in town, represents the descent into pure image divorced from past roots of human obligation, ruthless and amoral. Shepard describes him as a "totally lethal human with no way or reason for tracing how he got that way" ("Visualization" 217). He has no code, no history, and no sense of mission to impede his virtuosity. If Hoss is stuck in an image to which he has commitments, Crow has the complete flexibility of no commitments at all.

He challenges Hoss to a "style match" in which words become weapons. The two confront each other "in a fusillade of metaphors" (Marranca, "Alphabetical Shepard" 25), the "flash" of Crow's image-making overcoming the "heart" of Hoss's in a contest based on gesture rather than content. Hoss, the performer who has "earned his style," commits one final act of integrity by shooting off a gun in his mouth.

If *The Tooth of Crime* is partly about the inevitable instability of success and its corrupting effects, as well as about the archetypal challenge to and replacement of one aging generation by a younger one, Shepard's play is designed to persuade us of Hoss's point of view that what's coming is worse. What Shepard has used to confront his own Western faith in the regenerative power of violence is an image of wildly seductive noise whose "power to change our chemistry" ("Visualization" 216) conveys mutation but not transformation. If there is no room for genius within the machine of civilization, there is also no genius coming from without, and Shepard ends his exploration of the rock star hero with Crow.

In 1978, Shepard turned his exploration of false idols to the billionaire figure in *Seduced*. Situated somewhere in Mexico in a bare interior space, the reclusive Henry Hackamore is ministered to by Raul, his caretaker and bodyguard. Thin, emaciated, and immobile, Hackamore, who is visited by doctors in his sleep and travels by "night . . . wrapped in a gray stretcher" (78), resembles images of Howard Hughes in his last years. Like Hughes, he has been a plane designer who owns "Hotels! Movies! Airplanes! Oil!" (115), and who has been in "jams of international stature." His paranoia about the dangers of microscopic life also evokes Hughes. Like him, Hackamore is a mysterious figure of legendary proportions and wealth, and Shepard uses him to examine the self-made man, the inventor whose primary invention is a mythic image of himself.

Hackamore has summoned two women, Luna and Miami, dressed like Hollywood starlets of the 1930s, who may be conjurings from his own past or strangers to him. But his efforts to touch daily life, his past, and himself through them are doomed. His will to power ("Nothing's harmless til it's squashed" [88]), his isolation from all which would undermine the mystery on which his stature is dependent, and his penchant to perceive power in sexual terms such as rape render him unable to feel anything. If the United States has become the "land of lust," he has reduced himself to a monetary symbol of this.

Multiple images in the play convey the nature of mythic stature in America and its consequences. The term "hackamore" denotes a rope device designed to break horses, suggesting a crushing use of power. Hackamore's use of the language of interior terrain (a crucial region for Shepard in frontierless America) depicts an inner self which is ravaged or calcified. After getting Hackamore to sign over his money, Raul repeatedly shoots him. But Hackamore is

immune, having become pure myth: "I disappeared . . . dreamed myself into another shape . . . made myself up" (114). Just as his image of powerfulness seduced others, so he has been seduced by his own mythic image into personal obliteration. He finally sees that he is really a product of his culture, an American nightmare consisting of "everything they ever aspired to" (116). He is simultaneously invisible, enshrined, and meaningless. Thus if Sam Shepard unreservedly celebrates Dylan's self-creation in *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, he points out the deadlier elements of this process in *Seduced*, where its motivation is selfish.

The context in which Hackamore "sold it all down the river" (114) is a vision of the land more alienating than that which animated earlier plays. As a boy in Texas, he saw a land which was "Flat, barren. Wasted . . . Enormous country. Primitive. Screaming with hostility toward men . . . As though men didn't belong there. As though men were a joke in the face of it." No sense of beauty or potential freedom, often associated with the frontier, animates this vision. In response to this hostile land, "invisible little men were huddled . . . in cities. In tiny towns. In organizations. Protected. I saw the whole world of men as pathetic. Sad, demented little morons moving in circles . . . Always away from the truth. Getting smaller and smaller until they finally disappeared" (111).

Although this image of civilization is in part a product of Hackamore's arrogance, it also conveys Shepard's own distrust, Western in origin, for human community. It will appear in Shepard's later plays as well, where cities and even homes themselves are places of conflict, denial, and diminishment. But if Shepard places his faith in the individual acting alone, he clarifies the enormity of the task in light of the indifference and vastness of the land. Hackamore's mythic persona, based on his fear and alienation, cannot bridge the gap between the natural world and humans.

VI. Exorcism of Evil

Red Cross, *Operation Sidewinder*, *Hawk Moon*, *Suicide in B^b*, *Angel City*, and the filmscript *Zabriskie Point* reflect Shepard's belief that, for any regeneration to occur in American life, the old culture first must be exorcised. However, this approach is soundly in the American tradition of apocalyptic literature—the “jeremiad”—a pessimistic prophecy of the holocaust that does not project its vision beyond the deserved doom to any rebirth. This group of plays emphasizes the social corruption that leads to the holocaust and the ritualistic purging of that corruption, but does not look beyond to suggest what should replace it.

There is a hesitant progress toward the apocalyptic moment in Shepard's writing. Very early plays depict the destructive breakdown of social order and individual personality, without including the exorcism that would give meaning to their violence. For instance, in *Red Cross* (1967), the two characters both confess their deep-seated fears of death—Carol from internal sources (blowing up) and Jim from external ones (a breeding infection that sucks everyone's blood). Both eventually succumb to catastrophe, but there is no sense that anything creative will come of these deaths.

Operation Sidewinder (1970) was perhaps the most ambitious of Shepard's early plays and the most graphic in its portrayal of an apocalyptic scenario. It bears a number of similarities to the screenplay for *Zabriskie Point* (1969), which Shepard co-authored with director Michelangelo Antonioni and others. Not the least of these similarities is its obsession with the politics of the cultural revolution of the sixties. However, *Operation Sidewinder* describes cultural collapse, not political struggle. Dr. Vector, a character reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, is responsible for inventing the computer rattlesnake that is supposed to be the

military's new secret weapon. But even the Sidewinder has a life of its own and wants nothing to do with contemporary politics. Instead, it spends the play trying to contact life from another planet.

From its opening, *Operation Sidewinder* paradoxically announces the death of both traditional and counter cultures. A moviemaking character named Dukie is killed off by a "revolutionary." A counter-culture hero, the Mexican-Irish-Apache Mickey Free, is involved in an insane attempt to take over Fort George (a title linking American militarism back to George Washington), an unworthy deed. His black allies violent and greedy, Mickey is both metaphorically and literally half-blind to the real forces at play in this world, forces that are drawing together all the disparate powers that exist to bring about the apocalypse. The song "Synergy," emphasizing these forces, describes the synthesizing of energies that will create a power greater than the sum of its parts. In this play, both machine and nature, especially as they are jointly symbolized in the Sidewinder, are out of man's control and apparently working toward some preordained end outside the scope of human politics.

Because of its failure to adapt to new conditions that are a consequence of what it has itself created, American culture is beyond salvation, and when Shepard stages an elaborate rendition of the Hopi Snake Dance at the play's end, the irrelevance of American culture is clear. Shepard conceives of the Hopi Snake Dance in alchemical terms: "The snake dance of the Hopi . . . had, at the heart of it, the idea that the dancers were messengers from this world sending for help to the spirits of another world If the message was heard, the prayer was answered, usually in the form of a rainstorm" (*Rolling* 74). At the end of *Operation Sidewinder*, the sky rains paratroopers from the fort, but their guns are useless in the face of the upheaval that is already taking place, called up by some of the play's characters joining in a dance of unity

with the beings from outer space who have been contacted by Sidewinder. The political implications of the play—that violence and oppression breed frustration, further violence, and finally disaster—are secondary in importance to Shepard's description of an apocalypse brought on by the synergistic combination of people and forces trying to counter the outmoded values of American culture.

Hawk Moon (1973), Shepard's first non-dramatic publication, a collection of poems and short prose pieces, is filled with references that suggest the need for miracle or disaster. "Sleeping at the Wheel," for instance, describes a conversation about the meaning of life between two young men driving in a car: "Let's face it, we know very little about the total picture" (17). The car crashes; while being awake to reality is "too hard," the results of falling asleep are disastrous. The driver miraculously escapes injury, but he is still subject to the uncertainty and confusion of anyone who metaphorically nods at the wheel: "Where have we been all the time? What happens between the past and the future?" (18). Like so many of the characters in Shepard's early plays, the speaker cannot understand how to create a meaningful present. The rider, who seems to represent Shepard himself, is merely anxious throughout all this to keep moving, since that act in itself will answer his friend's ponderings, at least in some crude sense. He merely settles back, "pretending to be asleep."

This pretense of sleep seems to represent Shepard's admission, typical of the early plays, that he has no "plan" to get through the present difficulties, except perhaps to help precipitate the crash. His answers to contemporary problems, such as they are, are mystical, without even the conventional structure of ritual to fulfill audience expectations. Although more recent plays suggest resolutions and so are more obviously structured, in his early works,

including *Operation Sidewinder*, the only hints of resolution that occur are mysterious and untranslatable, something to be experienced rather than expressed overtly.

Geography of a Horse Dreamer (1974) is an early step in the direction of increased structure and resolution. Cody, “Mr. Artistic Cowboy” from Wyoming, is held prisoner by gamblers who are trying to exploit his ability to dream the winners of horse races before they are run. However, Cody’s ability has begun to fade because of his lack of inspiration: “At first it’s all instinct. Now it’s work” (127). Since he has been held prisoner without any sense of his relationship to the world outside of his hotel room walls and has been made to dream about dog instead of horse races, his dreaming is disoriented and he’s on a losing streak. The tension between Cody and the gangsters is complex; his “genius” and their “power” need each other to operate effectively, but they seem too antithetical to each other for this to happen. Since the dreaming is “a kind of an art form” (124), Shepard is once again emphasizing the tension between artistic creation and the commercial means by which it is proliferated and sustained.

The resolution which the play at first suggests turns out to be destructive. “The Doctor,” actually the boss’s paid killer, is a witch-doctor with a magical bag of bones that diagnoses death for everyone, including the boss. Cody himself is incapable of action, and his salvation at the play’s end seems arbitrary: his two gigantic brothers, dressed in Western attire, burst in and blow everyone else away to save the sacred “White Buffalo” of their family. Cody’s inner geography remains essentially a mystery. What is clearest in this play are the intense greed and fear that drive his captors and the idea that a man separated from the geography of his own world can operate effectively only by transcending to some other realm of consciousness. If Cody is saved at the end by his Western roots, by

his magical, primal relationship with the distant land, the real means of this salvation are barely suggested. While the exorcism of his persecutors through violence is quite dramatic, the role or destiny of the artist remains ambiguous in this play.

Angel City (1976) locates the corruption of modern society in its myths, particularly in the myth of the Old West as it has been portrayed in Hollywood films. The play is staged as a “jazz” film about the making of a film. An old Western shaman named Rabbit is called in to “cure” Hollywood’s latest disaster movie, but the film is actually a reflection of disaster-that-is-Hollywood-that-is-America. Ironically, successful films of the past are also presented as disasters for America, poisoning Americans with lies and propaganda. Usually in Shepard works, the myths of the Old West are at least seen to have been of value in the past, though they may currently be outmoded. However, by *Angel City* it has become clear to Shepard that the old ways must be exorcised to make room for the new.

Angel City emphasizes Hollywood’s perpetuation of these myths on celluloid long after they should have expired. When Rabbit, the Old West shaman, recognizes that the moribund myths have created a race of spiritual zombies, he loses his sense of mission, realizing that a return to the best of the frontier past can be achieved only through apocalypse. While Rabbit is told his job is to save the film by creating “a meaningful” central character, that character is not one of his own devising, representative of Old West values, but is the filmmaker himself, who turns into a horrible monster, epitomizing the corrupt, polluted dream-city outside his window, full of the “imagination of dying.” While Hollywood has locked everyone into “the narrowest part of our dream machine” (40), preventing the evolution of any vital dreams or myths, the filmmaker’s disaster film inevitably reflects his own repressed nightmares of death and

chaos, and they emerge into being during the apocalypse at the end of the play. Hollywood is exorcized by its own angel; Rabbit, as shaman, merely allows this creature to come forth.

The inability of new, meaningful values to emerge because of their repression by our older models and stereotypes of behavior is the main subject of *Suicide in B^b*. Like *Angel City*, *Suicide in B^b* employs the idea of jazz composition as a regenerative force in creating a new culture. The characters in *Angel City* attempt to "heal" their movie through the creative innovations of improvisational music. *Suicide in B^b* asserts the power of jazz even more explicitly. As a police officer, dedicated to upholding the American establishment when it can no longer be upheld, screams about jazz improvisation: "How does it relate to breaking with tradition! To throwing the diligent efforts of our fore-fathers and their fore-fathers before them to the winds! . . . To distorting the very foundations of our cherished values! . . . To changing the shape of American morality!" (130-31).

The two cops of *Suicide in B^b* are investigating the apparent suicide of a jazz musician named Niles. However, Niles has continued to exist in some sense and reappears in a continued attempt to shed his former cultural identities, including that of the cowboy, through ritual killings. Niles is reluctant to kill off his cowboy identity because of its historic importance: "He's a hero, Paulette! He discovered a whole way of life. He ate rattlesnakes for breakfast. Chicago wouldn't exist if it wasn't for him. He drove cattle right up to Chicago's front door. Towns sprang up wherever he stopped to wet his whistle. Crime flourished all around him. The law was a joke to him. State lines. He sang songs to the Milky Way." Paulette responds that Niles's nostalgia for an outmoded element of his cultural identity is preventing his growth, and that the cowboy's image is a historical fallacy: "He's no hero! He's a weasel! He's a

punk psychopath built into a big deal by crummy New England rags” (143). Whatever is true about the historical validity of the cowboy, his continued cultural existence is shown to be harmful.

Despite Nile’s attempt at breaking through America’s cultural petrification, his experiments go for naught because he is unable to imagine anything new to take the place of the old. Yet one of the detectives notes that the positions of birth and death are very similar. The murder to which the artist Niles confesses parallels Shepard’s confession that he has murdered the old culture and may lead us to hope that at least the old, putrified culture has been stripped away so that something new can take its place. If our old identities can be exorcized, perhaps then we will be able to bear new ones.

VII. Failed Reintegrations into Home and Family

In his plays depicting the search for home within contemporary American culture, Shepard is no more optimistic about what this culture has to offer. Nevertheless, these plays assert that retracing roots is necessary no matter what the cost or outcome. Kosmo of *Mad Dog Blues* asks: “But which way is home? I don’t know where to start” (180), and these Shepard plays represent a number of different beginnings in the quest for roots and permanence. Characters build structures for the home in *Fourteen Hundred Thousand*, long to return home in *Mad Dog Blues*, try to live in a new home in *Action*, and return to their original home in *Buried Child* or to the current domain of a parent in *True West*. Even the wrecked ’51 Chevy convertible in *The Unseen Hand* has been home for Blue Morphan for a long time. Setting much of the action within the tight, self-protective enclaves Henry Hackamore so despised,

Shepard explores the potential for creating new values within the geography of fixed environments.

Concurrent with this interest in home—someplace to be as opposed to the transient landscape of the rock star—is a shift from the lone individual to people in relationships as a way of exploring possible reintegrations and the forging of community. The task of reshaping the cultural debris is a difficult one, hampered by many forces: by the inner divisions of the characters and the resultant conflicting desires; by what is unhealthy or bankrupt in the past which is passed on, often by father to son; by the controllers of the “inside” who manage power, wealth, and even consciousness; by what Benedict Nightingale labels the “obsessional behavior” of characters whose uses of compulsions to create identity are “foredoomed” (5); by alienation from the land; by the seeming void once an environment is stripped of the old myths and of popular and high culture; and by the claustrophobic, undermining nature of American family life as depicted by Shepard.

Like many early Shepard plays, *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* (1967) is loosely structured and episodic, a collection of visual images resulting from narratives or from fragments of action on stage. Books, as conveyors of ideas, art, information, and culture, should inhabit a framework that is conceptually as well as physically sound and coherent, and at first the play’s focus on building bookcases is a hopeful one. But the “frame of mind” of urban life breaks down into rage or immobility, while rural life is associated with being lost rather than escaping. The giant bookcase serves to satirize urban, rural, and even utopian attempts to “house” American culture.

The imagined eden of *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* is nowhere to be seen in *The Unseen Hand* (1972), which uses science fiction to explore institutional coercion and mind control. Shepard includes

figures from the past (the Western outlaw), the present (the All-American kid), and the future (the Other-World rebel) to create a broad parody of socio-cultural oppression. "Nogoland" is both America and the place in a distant galaxy from which Willie comes. He arrives in Azusa, California, and enlists the aid of a 120-year-old gunfighter, Blue Morphan, and his long-dead brothers in freeing his people from the "Sorcerers of the High Commission." Willie's people are implanted with an unseen hand that creates an excruciating spasm whenever their thoughts transcend those of the magicians. This image suggests silent, secret forces in contemporary America which police consciousness while allowing people to think they have the power to control their situation. If we do attempt to investigate the interior spaces of the mind to recreate a home for ourselves, we are defeated by unseen social and political pressures. Though Shepard both admires and criticizes them, the Old West traditions of rugged individualism, spontaneity, and violence embodied in the Morphans turn out to be irrelevant to the complexities of a technological society.

The real struggle in *The Unseen Hand* is between Willie and the Kid, an incarnation of the most banal, self-righteous, flag-waving elements in small-town middle-class America. He refers to the others as "hippie creep" and "commie faggot." Earlier, Blue had described a time (presumably the sixties), when there was a revolution but things stayed the same. The Kid is a champion of the stasis and of the narrow conventions that helped make this so. In response to him, Willie begins a ritual incantation that is actually the Kid's speech backward, and this act of magic frees Willie and his people from the unseen hand. The solution is fairytale-like in its simplicity, but it also suggests the deconstruction of authority by reversing its language so that it explodes itself. Thus for Shepard, the best weapons are still language and the imagination.

Mad Dog Blues (1972), like *The Unseen Hand*, contains fantastic figures in an open structure, but in this play Shepard focuses on figures from popular culture. Film, represented by Marlene Dietrich and Mae West; pirate lore, represented by Captain Kidd; tall tales, represented by Paul Bunyan; popular music, symbolized by Waco (in whom lives the heart of Hank Williams); and Western outlaws in the person of Jesse James—all of them are included in this “two-act adventure.” The play has been seen variously as a nostalgic tour through sixties popular culture and media images, and as a piercing analysis of the way popular culture determines, overwhelms, and fragments American identity (see Stambolian, “A Trip Through Popular Culture” 86).

The two journeyers in *Mad Dog Blues*—Kosmo, a rock star, and Yahoo, a drug pusher—“support each other’s inability to function” (188). They reduce the attempt at reshaping the jumble of popular images to a “Treasure of the Sierra Madre” gold hunt that leads to greed, strife, paranoia, and death. Their vision becomes a frantic replay of popular film images rather than a crusade for values or an odyssey of growth. The “gold” they finally acquire turns out to be thousands of bottle caps, the refuse from compulsive consumption. Beneath the sense of fun in this play is one of exhaustion, and opposed to the quest for false gold is a search for home, buttressed by the idea that everyone is “lonely and hungry for love” (176). Both the two men and their creations lapse into talk of farms and cattle ranches, of raising families, refinding roots, and rejoining the wife and kids. Thus even their dreams become sentimental re-runs of grade B Westerns. At the end of the play, Shepard modifies this clichéd version of home: the lines “Home got no rules, / it’s in the heart of a fool” (176) link belonging not to property but to a place of feeling, connection, and vulnerability. Since none of the characters actually inhabits this space, home remains at best a gesture of hope

and innocence.

If the characters in *Mad Dog Blues* are awash in cultural images, those in *Action* (1976) must perform themselves without the scripted identities that mass culture, popular entertainment, and myth provide. Whether some kind of holocaust has created their isolation and minimal resources or, as Marranta perceives it, that this landscape reflects the “confinement, disillusionment, and disorientation that defined the country under Nixon” (*American Playwrights* 102), Jeep, Shooter, Lupe, and Liza have only the bare beginnings of community or personal identity. Although one of them remembers the “great expectation” Walt Whitman had for America, they all believe that the possibilities for unity in diversity, for expansion of individual talent and freedom, and for heroic deeds are over. What’s left is the difficult task of redefinition within a domestic space, of relearning how to act. The two men respond with fears of suffocation and madness, with violence such as smashing chairs, with obsessive behavior such as acting like dancing bears, and with immobility such as Shooter’s refusal to leave his armchair. The two women, described by the men as “more generous,” are very passive and careful. They sweep, cook, wash and hang laundry. These basic, human activities along with the stories the men tell form the fragile structure of their lives.

Tentatively, haltingly, the four characters in *Action* begin to define what it means to be human: “We hear each other . . . We recognize each other . . . We respond” (139). And despite the lapses of memory inevitable in the void, there is some promise that the material self-sufficiency they’ve achieved from raising turkeys and digging wells might be matched by a self-sufficiency in creating individual identities that mesh into a collective existence. Even such minimal optimism marks a new development for Shepard.

Begun with *Action*, the subject of reintegration into the home is

depicted by more complex, detailed situations in *Buried Child*, 1979 winner of the Pulitzer Prize. This play, the earlier *Curse of the Starving Class*, and the later *True West*, together constitute Shepard's family trilogy. The tight structures and the increased dialogue in proportion to "solos" in these plays reflect Shepard's emphasis on biological relationships in fixed locales and the necessity of defining oneself in terms of connections to others. At the same time, a patina of domestic realism actually heightens the grotesque images and bizarre, discordant events of the plays. These do not evoke a sense of the absurd, with its emphasis on permanent meaninglessness, but instead a sense that meaning, harmony, and communication are possible, if painfully absent.

The raw material of *Buried Child* is more autobiographical than any play preceding it, suggesting that Shepard is exploring his own cultural and psychological inheritance. In *Motel Chronicles* (1982), it is Shepard, not his character Vince, who is visiting his Illinois grandparents after more than six years of silence. The farm looks abandoned as does the one in the play. Grandpa, like Dodge, is a skeleton sitting "in a hole of his sofa wrapped in crocheted blankets facing the T.V." (45), coughing violently and nearly immobile. To this autobiographical material, Shepard adds in *Buried Child* the archetypal image of the sick king presiding over a cursed, blighted land. As Vince moves toward his ancestral home, the land begins to redeem itself.

When Vince and his girlfriend Shelly arrive, his comatose, hostile grandfather, his bigoted, philandering grandmother, his burned-out, displaced father, and his sadistic, one-legged uncle refuse to recognize him. *Buried Child* is a play about coming back to what one left behind—even though it is hypocritical, violent, and shameful—and getting sucked into it. It is about giving up everything in the present—in Vince's case, his girl and his music—in order to

make contact with the past.

Shelly, the outsider, expected “Norman Rockwell,” “Dick and Jane” (83), “turkey dinners and apple pie” (91). Instead, she walks into a frightening battleground where women are violated or ignored, turned vengeful or banished. While this familial disintegration suggests the deterioration of the American family in general, this is not the point of *Buried Child*. Rather, it is the context for Shepard’s assertion that community and belonging must be linked to family and biological roots no matter how entrapping or destructive, since what’s “outside” is worse. Those who’ve escaped inevitably will be drawn back, even if reintegration is reduced to a patriarchal struggle for dominance that maims, even if the inheritance is one of loss and poison passed on from father to son. The question is what can be salvaged.

Shepard uses fertility images to contrast with those of blight and to create hope. Halie, the grandmother, was pregnant late in life, but the child was illegitimate—maybe a product of incest with Vince’s father, Tilden, but maybe an inexplicable gift like the vegetables that grow spontaneously in the backyard. Dodge drowned that baby and buried it in the yard, but corn, an ancient symbol of fecundity, is fertilized even by the mummified corpse. Thus the land itself refuses to conceal the crime. The abundance of the Midwest continues despite destructive hero worship of a dead “All-American” son, despite the lethal strain of American dream this family embraced.

Tilden, the emotional and maternal center of *Buried Child*, loves the carrots and the corn, festoons the house with them, and covers Dodge symbolically with husks. Dodge’s name is metaphorical in that he has been dodging the reality of natural processes ever since his act of murder. Finally, he wills what’s left of the once great farm to Vince and dies. Vince loses Shelly, “full of hope and faith” (110),

as he becomes as violent, possessive, and remote as his grandfather. The men in Shepard plays literally become their male progenitors against their wills: "WHAM there's my old man," Shepard writes in *Hawk Moon*, "right there, living inside me like a worm in the wood" (17). Maybe no personal issue will result from Vince: what will continue is the land itself, perhaps diminished but still bountiful, and Shepard implies the necessity of being connected to it at any cost.

In his next play, *True West* (1981), Shepard continues to explore struggles within the family and to search for the meaning of home. This time there is no farm, and the mother and father have separated—she to a suburb west of Los Angeles and he to the desert—so the women and men are even more polarized than in *Buried Child*. Her urban alienation from the land parallels his alienation from people. Alone within the kitchen of her house, the two sons—Austin, a scriptwriter, married and prosperous, and Lee, a vagrant on the desert, seedy and belligerent—participate in an intense, territorial battle that replicates the division between the two parents. Like Vince's, each brother's escape was only temporary, but what they return to is even emptier.

The image of competition and hostility between family members is unrelenting and murderous. "You go down to the L.A. Police Department and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most," Lee tells Austin. "Family people. Brothers Real American-type people" (25-26). While Austin protests "we're not insane. We're not driven to acts of violence like that," he ends up trying to strangle Lee with a telephone cord near the end of *True West*. His self-control and reasonableness are as illusory as the neat set of the suburban kitchen.

Each brother has diminished himself and been limited by his environment: Austin's writing is reduced to commercialized

“research” and “projects,” while Lee’s adventure in the desert means living hand to mouth off the pit-fights of a small dog. Both brothers want to destroy or steal a part of the other that each alternately idealizes and disparages. Lee wants to capture Austin’s ability to fit into urban society and get “paid for dreaming”; Austin wants the wildness and unpredictable violence of his brother. Neither understands the losses that come with either of these unsatisfying choices. Needing each other, they remain frozen in irreconcilable difference. *True West* arrives at no resolution between the extremes the brothers connote: contemporary, civilized West and old, frontier West; the spurious reality of “built-up” urban life and the questionable applicability of the Old West cowboy myths; the family man and the renegade; social acceptability and marginality; the order and discipline required of art-making and the flexibility and chaos needed for creative thought.

True West parodies the explicit realism of the popular Western magazine of the same title. Lee thinks his clichéd stories of men dying for love of horses and his stereotyped yarns about cowboys forever chasing each other on the desert are the “real” West. In fact they suggest boys’ fantasies. Austin thinks the “true” West is freeways, smog, and shopping centers, and proclaims that the heritage of the Old West is a “dead issue.” But the fight between the two men shows that the most destructive aspects of Old West myths have been incorporated into contemporary culture: Lee’s story of the endless, vengeful chase by one frightened man after another one is exactly what the two brothers reproduce at the play’s end. Neither has managed to learn to live with the contradictions American society produces within him and neither can help the other repair his one-sidedness.

True West continues the trend begun by earlier plays of emphasizing the need for belonging, for roots, and for cooperation, and

Shepard calls attention to this need by depicting the failure to meet it. Especially with *Buried Child* and *True West*, Shepard, in his own unique fashion, continues the discussion of American dreams and American family, subjects which have been the terrain of American playwrights for so long.

VIII. New Beginnings

While conclusive remarks about the plays of a living, productive writer are difficult to make, one can discuss new directions. Although Shepard depicted the antagonisms and futilities of artistic collaboration in *Mad Dog Blues* and *True West* and male artists as competitors in *The Tooth of Crime* and as devourers in *Angel City*, his own collaboration with Joseph Chaikin, actor, director, and founder of the Open Theater, has been fruitful. For the two performance pieces *Tongues* (1981) and *Savage/Love* (1981), Chaikin, the Easterner, acted the many voices "shifting and sliding into each other" (*Tongues* 302), while Shepard, the Westerner, composed and originally played the percussive music.

Shepard's continuing interest in the voice as incantatory and his wish to pierce beyond the form of intellect and convention to get at powerful feelings such as hunger, wonder, passion, and agony are both represented in *Tongues*. The piece is a series of poem-like sections, beginning with one that locates its speaker in a larger community than is usual for Shepard: "In the middle of a people he stays. All his fights. All his suffering. All his hope. Are with the people" (303). The piece discovers hope for community beyond the blood lines Shepard stressed in his family trilogy through learning to hear the tongues or hidden language of others: "Today the people talked without speaking. Tonight I can hear what they're saying" (320).

Savage/Love continues Shepard's fascination with how people perform invented identities, but in this work the emphasis is on how people act themselves out for the sake of being loved, rather than for power or dominance: "Which presentation of myself / Would make you want to touch" (328). There is a tremendous sense of vulnerability and painful self-consciousness in Shepard's and Chaikin's tracing of the possible stages in romantic relationships from adoration to boredom. The depiction is "savage" because it never omits the strong emotions Shepard and Chaikin both perceive as underlying human relations. A segment about "killing" one's lover in the moment of a stare reveals the intensity and violence present in even the most delicate psychological interactions. Yet the potential for love presented in this work is clearly a more affirmative trend in Shepard's work.

The same trend is apparent in the love poems and prose of *Motel Chronicles* (1982): "I can't breathe without you / But this circle of ribs / Keeps working on its own" (98). More obviously autobiographical than the earlier *Hawk Moon*, *Motel Chronicles* conveys a picture of this writer as early rebel, permanent outsider, and distruster of liberal politics—but also as a human being concerned about the relations between the self and others on a personal, and not just a socio-cultural, level.

Still, Shepard's hopefulness is constrained by his unfulfilled search for a viable cultural, artistic, and personal identity, and by his paradoxical sense of transience and imprisonment in relationship to his own past. These concerns and this optimism are combined in Shepard's most recent long play, *Fool for Love* (1982). May is a short-order cook, and Eddie is a rodeo stuntman (a version of contemporary cowboy) who tracks her down for another go-round in their tumultuous, fifteen-year relationship. In a seedy, stripped-down motel room on the edge of the Mojave Desert, they battle

through “the demonic attachment of a man for his only woman” (*Motel* 48), each of them constructing competing versions of their relationship. Shepard physicalizes their emotions by punctuating the play with the sounds of howling, thrown objects, slammed doors, and people literally careening off the walls in frustration. May’s and Ed’s deep mutual attraction and revulsion and the deadlock that ensues are reminiscent of *True West*. Indeed, in *Fool for Love* Shepard’s depiction of passion between a man and a woman who probably share the same father links the lure of blood ties in Shepard’s earlier plays with the newer subject of romantic love, here depicted as obsessional.

In many ways Shepard observes what it means to be a human being and an American from a perspective common to many Western American writers. His concern with the human relationship to the land and with people’s paradoxical alienation from and need for community are traditional concerns of the Western writer, while his reevaluation of the Westerner’s violent individualism is common among the work of his contemporaries. Finally, through his inventive stage technique, he has revitalized Western landscape for the modern theater, making it a major terrain for American imagination in theatrical forms. It is little wonder that Sam Shepard is already considered a major force in American letters and the preeminent contemporary Western American playwright. That his career may be just beginning is a staggering thought, but one which is consistent with his own sense of continual growth and movement: “My work is not written in granite. It’s like playing a piece of music. It goes out in the air and dissolves for ever” (“Image Shots” 59).

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