

“The Postmodernist Rendition of Myth in the Selected Plays of Sam Shepard”

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Abstract

The present essay studies four of the most prominent plays of Sam Shepard, True West, Cowboys#2, Fool for Love, and Buried Child in the light of postmodernist notions of myth, using Lyotard's ideas of postmodernism. Through a postmodernist study of these novels, the study attempts to disclose the differences between the traditional myth and the postmodern myth, to show borders of truth and myth, reality and illusion in the postmodern world, and to reveal the decay of myth in the postmodern cultures. What this study tries to illustrate is important in the way that it is an alarm for the ones who still believe in the traditional notions of myth. Shepard's ideas of postmodern myth and its gradual death help the readers understand that the traditional values of some myths such as myth of the American family do not exist anymore.

Keywords: Myth, postmodernism, postmodernism notions of myth, Lyotard, traditional myth, Sam Shepard.

I. Introduction

Sam Shepard is an American playwright, actor, and director. He is the author of several books of short stories, essays, plays and memoirs. He is one of the most brilliant writers who have ever worked on the American stage. He also ranks as one of America's most celebrated dramatists. He has written nearly 50 plays that most of them have been produced and seen all over the world. His plays consist of three groups of musical, cowboys and family plays. Shepard's family plays deal with the members who try to deny their pasts. The protagonists struggle to escape the patterns of alcoholism, isolation, and abuse by clinging to the myths of a misremembered past.

The present essay aims at depicting different kinds of myth that Shepard uses in his family plays which are the myth of the American West, the myth of old cowboys and lands. The study aims at showing Shepard's deconstructive presentation of several traditional myths, especially the myth of a good American family. Generally speaking, Shepard's plays seek to depict the undeniable effects of postmodernism on the lives of Americans. America as myth or idea supersedes its identity as a geographical reality, whether envisioned as a desert paradise, a purifying wilderness, a theocratic garden of God, or the redemptive West (Bercovitch, 1975, p. 186). The researcher has applied Lyotard's notions of postmodernism to Shepard's works in order to show that the author's viewpoints are in some ways close to those of Lyotard. Shepard's plays show Lyotard's idea of an end to all consoling myths of intellectual mastery and truth.

The most specific concerns of Shepard in his plays consist of the reflection on the traditional meanings of myth and their obliteration in the postmodern societies, and the nostalgic effect that this eradication of myth brings with itself to the present life. Through his plays, Shepard tries to depict the significance of myth in a society where social cohesion has given its place to indeterminacy and doubt, and to demonstrate that identity and meaning lie somewhere in the past. In the postmodern world, the individual either should adapt himself with the social norms or would be destroyed under the rigid pressures of new laws. If the individuals passively follow the postmodern notions of society, which shape their beings, they become violent, depressed, and pessimistic. Postmodern America mostly contains themes of improving the science and the social conditions of life, but the fact is that technology does not bring peace of mind. Shepard's plays depict the concept of myth and its stark contrast with reality. He tries to subvert the idea of myth in his family plays. Various themes are common in most of his plays including violence, disintegration of family, abandonment, and denial of heredity. Shepard does nothing but repetition.

The reason of this repetition is the need of stressing and making the idea prominent. Roundane (2002) noted that the idea of a blurred vision of the past and searching for the truth is the current theme of Shepard's family plays (Harper, 2004). By confusing truth with myth, the characters of the plays try to hide their real identity and deny their roots. Shepard's articulation of the mythic is similar to Lyotard's commercial mythology as anticipated in "The Postmodern Condition". With the help of stories and characters borrowed from every expression of popular culture, Shepard tries to make poignant statements about contemporary man. Shepard tries hard to create a landscape that puts together images of a golden past in the face of contemporary social breakup. Shepard's plays are about the exhaustion of myth and its immediate consequences (Tarancon, 2004, p. 11).

Recognizing the decadence of all traditional myths, Shepard enables us to understand ourselves, our positions in the postmodern world, and to know how we relate to and are affected by the postmodern society. These concerns assert that we must help direct and change our society from a cold, broken to a warm, intimate one.

True west, Cowboys#2, Fool for Love, and Buried Child displays the concept of myth and its straight contradiction with reality. All these four plays retell the story of protagonists who try to escape and deny their heredity. Among them, *True West* is the only play that, as Shepard claims, has no need of revising and is perfect (Harper, 2006, p.6).

II. A Postmodernist Rendition of Myth in *True West* and *Cowboys#2*

The researchers aim to study *True West* and *Cowboys#2* in the light of postmodernism and myth, and to present the death of traditional myths and values, through the characters of Austin, Lee, Chet, and Stu in the postmodernist world of late twentieth century in America. Attempts have also been made to reveal Shepard's notion of how the postmodern conditions affect the values and beliefs of people and gradually illuminate the old myths.

In these plays, Shepard combines myth and a haunting language to present a radical view of American life. The notion of hybridity is common in most of Shepard's plays as he mingles the old images with the postmodern ones. These plays are a combination of realistic and non-realistic settings. Shepard mixes reality and fiction to the extent that it is hard for the readers to distinguish them. The settings are something like a nowhere land on the American plains, and the characters are typically loners and drifters caught between a mythical past and the mechanized present (Columbia Encyclopedia: Sam Shepard).

True West

True West is about two writers writing about the West and it is in itself a Western story. The first writer is Shepard and the next one is Austin. In fact, this play is a story within a story. One story is *True West* itself, written by Shepard, the others are Austin's love story and Lee's cowboy story. If we take *True West* as a story about a story, we can refer to Lyotard's idea of metanarrative. Metanarrative is a story about a story that includes and explains other little stories within a total frame. Jean-François Lyotard defined postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. Ever since, this concept of the "metanarrative" was the focus of discussions on postmodernity in Christian circles. In an article named "metanarrative" taken from the *New World Encyclopedia*, (New World Encyclopedia writers, 2009, p.1) metanarrative is defined as grand narrative or mater narrative term developed by Jean-François Lyotard to mean a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values.

In this context, the narrative is a story that functions to legitimize power, authority, and social customs. A grand narrative or metanarrative is one that claims to explain various events in history, gives meaning by connecting disperse events and phenomena by appealing to some kind of universal knowledge or schema. The term grand narratives can be applied to a wide range of thoughts which includes Marxism, religious doctrines, belief in progress, universal reason, and others. In *True West*, apart from Shepard's story, there are two more stories which are those of Austin's and Lee's. Therefore, we can take *True West* as a metanarrative. What is most evident in Shepard's *True West* is the image of the mythic West. What Shepard is searching for is the real or true West in this play. In her work, *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*, Malkin (1999, p.126) notes that the concept of West in *True West* is signified as both absent and hidden, as both irretrievable and an irrationally erupting source.

She adds that the town image of the real West is being depicted by the images of dust-clogged clothes and double-barreled violence in Shepard's plays. She notes that the characters of *True West* lack the ability of imagining the past and recreating a real world. She concludes that the characters would be either faded or replaced by textual and unmemorialized postmodern images (120).

A. The Archetypal Myth of Cain and Abel

Cain and Abel were sons of Adam and Eve, the ancestors of the human race. Cain killed his brother Abel, becoming the first murderer. The story of Cain and Abel is repeated in many cultures and suggests several symbolic interpretations.

True West digs into the myths of American life. There are several allusions to Biblical stories and ideas in *True West*. The main conflict of the story between the two brothers somehow alludes to the old story of Cain and Abel. The play represents Lee as Cain and Austin as Abel.

Just like Cain and Abel, Austin and Lee are jealous of each other and fight constantly. The final scene where the brothers try to kill each other can explain this myth better. Properly, Matthew Charles Roudane (2002) in his *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, clarifies that early reviewers referred to this play as a Cain and Abel or Jekyll and Hyde story (131). Austin and Lee can also be taken as representatives of the two sides of the American present: one sophisticated, cultured, ambitious, and successful; the other alienated, outcast, raw, wild, and violent. Shepard's emphasis is on the very fact that despite the American belief in starting a completely new life, the past is not over, but continues to intrude into the present.

B. The Myth of Identity

Jean-Francois Lyotard, the father of postmodernism, demonstrates that identity is seen as innovation within tradition, of being narrated by others but at the same time contributing to the narrative. He assumes narrative as both positively and negatively constitutive of human identity (Loving, 2008, p. 98).

In order to pursue self-identity, Shepard's characters abandon their homes and families or even apply violence. They fight with numerous problems to establish their identities. Loss of identity is a prominent problem for Shepard's characters, especially males. The most important and perhaps ambiguous fact in *True West* is the changing roles of the two brothers. This is a postmodern feature, showing lack or loss of logic, spatial temperance, borders, and identity. If we take Lee as representative of the old and true West of America, and Austin as the contemporary West, we can conclude that Shepard shows the old West has conquered the new consuming one. This shifting roles and loss of identity is a postmodernist feature, which Shepard depicts in the two characters of Austin and Lee.

C. The Myth of Narcissus

The myth of Narcissus serves as a pattern for describing the kind of subjectivity that critical educational confidence in the "I" may produce. In the original Greek version of the story, Narcissus is condemned by the gods to fall in love with himself for not responding to the desires of the others (Heyting and Winch 56).

Austin and Lee are longing for the things they currently have. They are seduced by the image of themselves. Although each tries to become like the other, they finally find out that only their own images can please them. Therefore, the only true-to-life fact is the loss. Aptly, in *Hollywood on Stage: Playwrights Evaluate the Culture Industry* written by Kimball King (1997), there is a chapter named, "The myth of Narcissus: Shepard's *True West* and Mammet's *Speed-the-Plow*" by Katherine H. Burkman in which she debates the power of Hollywood myth in these two plays. Burkman asserts that the scenario envisioned by Lee in *True West* has some roots in the myth of narcissism. She adds that the dependent Lee in *True West* assures Austin that he can turn his dreams to reality by writing the scenario and becoming a film writer easily: "I could be just like you... Lee informs his brother, sittin' around dreamin' stuff up. Gettin' paid to dream. Riddin' back and forth on the freeway just dreamin' my fool head off" (qtd. from Shepard 25).

The two brothers regret the things they themselves have. Like Narcissus, they are looking for an image of themselves. Nothing like their own way of lives can satisfy them.

D. The Theme of Violence

The American frontier is characterized by corruption and violence. In *True West*, the relationship between the two brothers gradually descends into violence. The existing violence between them is increased by the sounds of crickets and coyotes during the play. Austin and Lee constantly fight and quarrel with each other. The peak is in the final act when Austin grabs Lee with the phone cord and threatens to kill him: During this Austin has picked up the ripped out phone from the floor and wrapped the cord tightly around both his hands, he longes at Lee whose back is still to him, wraps the cord around Lee's neck, plants a foot in Lee's back and pulls back on the cord, tightening it (*True West*,1981,p.52). By representing the severe violence and quarrel between the two brothers, Shepard wants to depict the fact that despite the growth of the city and the suburb, their spirits of the Wild West still exist.

E. The Myth of Wild West

The American old West consists of the history, culture, people, and the way of life in the United States of nineteenth century. Shepard tries to recreate various images and characters of the Wild West in order to debunk them. In Shepard's depiction of the American West, the cowboy is a violent, isolated winner who escapes from civilization and defeats the attempts of the family to create the warm home. Shepard's protagonists connect to the present while the old West is dead according to what Austinsays, "There is no such thing as the West anymore. It's a dead issue!" (*True West*,1981, p.33). What remains is nothing more than futility and ambiguity. For Shepard, myth has no meaning but a fantasy about the past.

F. The Myth of the American Family

Shepard portrays families that are in severe crisis like *True West*. He illustrates an eternal battle between the two brothers of *True West* who can only survive by violence. In this play, the main struggle is between men and there is no trace of a womanlike those found in *Fool for Love* or *Buried Child*. Modern Americansociety is rootless, incomplete and raw in contrast to its past society and culture. Disintegration of American family in the postmodern world is one of the recurrent themes in most of Shepard's plays. The families of his plays are violent, cold, and unkind members who are spiritually apart from each other.

G. Traditionalism vs. Postmodernism

Shepard applies traditional themes and myths in a postmodern condition to unmask them. By this means, he tries to make palpable the difference between the traditional culture and the postmodern culture of America. The 1920's were a time of great change in the United States of America. New ideas of how things should work socially, politically, and economically were substituting by the older notions.

True West depicts the old West cowboys in the civilized society of typewriters and golf players. Lee as a fake cowboy cannot adapt himself to the traditional world he wishes to live in. He does not belong to the old West of America. He is a postmodern hero who steals the neighbors to earn a living. He and his father escape to desert in order to enter the world of traditional America. However, his phoniness gradually appears when the difference between traditionalism and postmodernism becomes evident.

H. The Oedipus myth

The Oedipal Complex is a term invented by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud who explained present day neuroses partially on the basis of wish fulfillment. The Oedipal Complex is based on Freud's observation that children often seem to have fallen in love with one parent and grow hatred for the other. Freud believed the Oedipus myth bears witness to the prevalence of this Oedipal Complex, both in that it was a popular topic for Greek tragedy and the fact that modern audiences still relate to the story of Oedipus. He was the one who murdered his father Laius and then married his mother, Jocasta (Gill 1).

The Oedipus complex stands for the idea that a son becomes jealous and afraid of his father. He may take on the father's traits, and strive to be like him in order to receive the mother's attention.

In *True West* when the two brothers are talking about the money Lee can earn out of the script, the discussion focuses on the old man, who is representative of the old West:

LEE. We could get the old man outa` hock then.

AUSTIN. maybe.

LEE. Maybe? Whadya` mean, maybe? (Shepard 24)

It shows that Lee somehow tries to secure the old myth of America by rescuing his father, since the old man is representative of the past.

Like most of Shepard's plays, the characters in *True West* try to reflect their father's traits and identity. Although they pretend to hate their father's fate, they simply become like him. Properly, Carla J. McDonough believes that the conflict is between father and son and reflects their unresolved Oedipal conflict. McDonough adds:

The son wants to overcome the father so as to establish his own identity and dominance, but ultimately he becomes exactly like his father, a reincarnation simply recapitulating his father's personality. In fact, identity and its illusions of autonomous self-creation (the self-made man) are the shared themes of all these plays (68).

COWBOYS#2

What makes Shepard's plays so variable is his power of mythic imagination. He constantly tries to reveal to his audience how the values American West once presented are being shattered in the postmodern world. Shepard depicts this situation by creating protagonists who replay mythic roles in order to revive the mythic values in new ways. Many of Shepard's characters wish to embody the cowboy figure but the situation of the postmodern world does not let them fulfill their aims. Two of them are Chet and Stu in Shepard's early play, *Cowboys#2*.

Cowboys#2 is Shepard's first complete play. It is autobiographical and absurd. It is presented in one act and is produced in off-off Broadway theatres. *Cowboys#2* describes the story of two young boys named Chet and Stu who are on a city street near a construction site. In order to pass the time they play old cowboys roles, fighting with Indians in their imagination, waiting for rain, and wallowing in imaginary mud. They constantly shift their roles from being in the old West to the postmodern world.

A. The Myth of Identity

The characters of *Cowboys#2* constitute a broken group. They cannot affirm or deny one another. The imagining roles that they play are reminiscent of alienation and absurd theatre. In the same line, Mathew Charles Roudane notes that *Cowboys#2* is a fair simile of the lost cowboys who are alone even when together, as the promise of collaboration vanishes. Roudane explains that this mythology of collaboration will come out as they tinker with their partnership. He informs that their private theatre will succeed only if one checks the other's work and collaborates with him in order to continue their improvisations. He asserts that *Cowboys#2* is a work of stops and starts, as one character would change the subject when he moves on after the other. Roudane continues by referring to the very important fact that *Cowboys#2*, at its opening, seems to celebrate imaginative kinship and represents the new inventions, but ends by confirming the protagonists' alienation from an imagined world whose falseness is revealed by the real noise of the cars' horns onto the stage (93).

B. Traditionalism vs. Postmodernism

In this play, natural elements such as rain and mud are representatives of the old West. When it rains, they play with mud. They are happy and joyful, as if the distance between them has vanished. They can communicate better. However, as soon as the rain stops, they come back to their normal world. This is the time when the distance between the two characters becomes wider and wider and they cannot communicate with each other well. One asks something and the other answers another thing. They feel melancholy and depressed. This is the feature of postmodern world, where people are alienated from each other and even from themselves. There is a deep lack of communication and everything seems absurd and futile.

Postmodern technology forces the individual to cope with the new American way of life. The individual's quest for identity is a common postmodern feature in these two plays. The problem of identity covers most of Shepard's plays, including *True West* and *Cowboys#2*. In fact, Shepard's plays challenge the idea of a stable, accessible national character that all Americans wish to achieve. Shepard informs Americans that they must look to a new meaning of myth, which connects to their ancestors and past and not to a fake dream.

III. A Postmodernist Rendition of Myth in *Fool for Love* and *Buried Child*

This part studies two of most prominent Shepard's family plays which are *Fool for Love* and *Buried Child*. The researcher deals with the death of American dream and the decay of America's national myths in these two plays. The researcher also tries to depict Shepard's presentation and deconstruction of myths like myth of a good American family, myth of fertility, myth of land, myth of a self-made man, myth of frontier man, myth of quest, myth of identity, myth of masculine autonomy, myth of incest, myth of Oedipus, and myth of rebirth.

These plays deal with depiction of American character in the form of cowboys. Shepard treats ambiguously with this figure. His characters try all their bests to reconnect themselves to the ideal figure of a true cowboy of the old West, but Shepard shows that this dream is just an illusion. This dream brings forth nothing, but the destructive forces for his characters. Their masculine American identity represents no heroic act but violence.

Fool for love

Shepard's *Fool for Love* explores the unreality of American identity. It depicts the characters who search for the truths of the past events that are so crucial to the formation of their individual and national identity. It is a play about the intrusion of the past into the present and characters who have no choice but accepting the truth of history.

Fool for Love explains the story of a man and a woman in love, who are half siblings. This play takes place in a cheap hotel room. May, Eddie and the Old Man are the main characters. The Old Man is a character in May and Eddie's imaginations. May is not able to decide whether she wants Eddie to stay or leave. She cannot forgive Eddie, because he has affairs with a Countess. She gets dressed up to go on a date with Martin, her new boyfriend. At the end of the play, when Eddie leaves her to follow the Countess, May leaves the hotel room with her suitcase.

A. Traditionalism vs. Postmodernism

Fool for Love is a postmodern Western story in which its hit men fight to the finish not with guns and bullets, but with sharp and bitter words. The setting is a motel room on the edge of Mojave Desert. This vast desert is a striking element of the old West.

The myth of Wild West is shattered in this play by representing the postmodern characters and situations. Postmodern characterization is another issue Shepard uses to deconstruct the old myths and illustrate a real postmodern society. When Shepard describes Eddie, he hints at the old cowboys. Eddie is some sort of a rancher with saddle, rifle, and rope. He represents the dark and threatening underside of American identity.

Shepard depicts Eddie as a cowboy who has put on Western clothes. This description of Eddie offers a significant image of American identity that is faded in contemporary society. Shepard gives a pathetic image of an American postmodern hero who has broken down, aged before his time, and held together with duct tape. What is evident is the weakness of this American character.

B. The Myth of Quest

A quest myth is a story where the hero goes on a quest for something like treasure or fights a monster to save a village or a princess. An example is Beowulf and other Greek mythical heroes. The heroes of the traditional myths bear the difficulties of the journey in order to perform a heroic action. In contrast, the heroes of the postmodern culture go on journey to escape realities. The postmodern character lacks something he is always in search for. He does not know who he is or where he comes from. He does not have a fixed identity. Another myth in this play is the myth of quest. Eddie is always on journey for the search of something nobody knows what. What Shepard depicts in his characters is this American escapist quality. Eddie has abandoned May several times, and this makes her distrust him and complain.

C. The Theme of Violence

Another postmodern quality in most Shepard's characters is violence. With their false notions about manliness, they try to impose their powers by force. Eddie is not in a stable mood; he is coming and going several times in the play. He stabs the door behind him. It is a symbol of his violence, which is not a heroic act when he is in front of a woman:

“He exits stage-left door, slamming it behind him; the door booms” (Shepard 22).

“Eddie enters stage-left door, banging it behind him” (Ibid).

Eddie’s inherent violence shows one of the most prominent weaknesses of American character. Using the violence to be superior to the female character is not an ideal act for the old West hero. Aptly, Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig cite that the love between Eddie and May is both creative and destructive. However, they believe that this love “amounts to a brutal game of violence and intimidation, dominance and survival, fueled by a need beyond reason (167).

D. The American Dream

Traditionally, Americans have sought to realize the American dream of success, fame, and wealth through patience and hard work. However, the industrialization of the 19th and 20th centuries began to erode the dream, replacing it with a philosophy of reaching quick success. For this means, varieties of seductive but elusive strategies have evolved (Warshauer 1). May’s reference to the country dream refers back to the same American dream that Eddie and most of the Americans possess. The American dream that no one can define correctly has no other consequence for Shepard’s characters than destruction. Likewise, Ian Ousby demonstrates that *Fool for Love* deals with myth of the West and the death and betrayal of the American dream (863).

E. The Myth of the Masculine Autonomy

Autonomy is the most important trait that a tough male has to possess. In Shepard’s characters, this trait appears as an illusion, although they do everything to support it by their actions. When the characters feel their masculine autonomies are threatened, they become violent and isolated.

Shepard’s male characters have a collection of special meanings for manliness. Power, violence, irresponsibility, and alcohol are some of them. Eddie is a fantasist just like his father. He has inherited his father’s ideas of male-oriented values, such as belief rather than truth. These values are hollow and destructive for an American male character. Along the same lines, Carla J. McDonough declares that Shepard shows how ideas of men destroy his characters. She claims what they believe as masculinity is just an illusion, lie, and fantasy. She submits that “the masculinity which they embrace is always (self-) destructive” (68).

F. Reality vs. Illusion

The characters of *Fool for Love* and especially Eddie try to escape the realities of their pasts into the world of illusion. They change the old images with their newly forged ones. Eddie tries to deny the faults his father did in order to escape his fate. He sees himself as an image of the Old Man and he tries to tell lies and lives in dreams like his father.

May indicates that she only believes the truth in order to show that Eddie is a liar. Eddie is not in search of truth. He is always confused between reality and myth. He prefers to stay in a dream of lies to make himself a happy world of illusion. This dreamlike quality shows itself in the story he makes about their pasts in the final scene. Eddie is representative of an American figure who does not want to accept the reality of his life. Therefore, he will never have a stable and fixed identity. When he makes a myth out of his past, he himself cannot determine its reality. The only way to impose his words is using hostility.

G. The Myth of Incest

Another existing myth in this play is the myth of incest. By the play’s end, we know that the protagonists Eddie and May are siblings, and they both have the same father. We also know that they had sexual affairs. There are several kinds of myths about incest. In a similar manner, one website states that some of these myths are: incest mainly takes place in dysfunctional, working-class families, sibling incest is not harmful, incest only happens in lower classes or rural homes, incest is only a problem of the family, sexual abuse is nonviolent and therefore non-damaging (“Myths and Facts about Incest”).

Buried Child

Buried Child won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1979. It is the second in a series of family plays. *Buried Child* is about a dysfunctional American family that lives in a farmhouse in the country.

The setting is in Illinois, in the Corn Belt, the heart of America. It centers on a family secret about murder. Like most of Shepard's plays, *Buried Child* is a play full of old West myths. Common myths in this play help the reader communicate and understand the process of Shepard's deconstruction better.

A. The myth of fertility

The myth of fertility is known by Demeter in Greek mythology. As the goddess of grain and fertility, Demeter played an important role in ancient Greek society. The Greeks, like most ancient cultures, relied upon agriculture for their sustenance. Demeter's association with grain also translated into a close relationship with human fertility, as this was another crucial part in our continuing survival. There are many myths dealing with Demeter in her capacity as a fertility goddess. In ancient legends, the god or the king has to give his life because his business is fertility (Coupe 20).

In *Buried Child*, the family land is deprived of fertility because of a ruthless murder. The play shows the effect of murder on the dysfunctional family in the American Middle West.

Corn is another symbol of fertility. In Act One, Tilden comes with a bunch of sweet corn. He says that he has picked them from their own farm. Halie and Dodge do not believe him. According to them, the farm is barren from 1935. Corn is the evidence of myth of fertility. It indicates that in the past, the farm was fertile but now it is barren. Therefore, this myth has faded away, and the reason can be the curse of the old murder.

B. The Myth of the American Family

From the play's beginning, theme of disintegration of American family is evident. The family members are far apart from each other, physically or spiritually, and they even do not understand each other.

Postmodernity brings gap and disconnection between families. The myth of a good American family exists no more. Dodge's family is not a warm and affectionate one, in contrast to what the old myths of America depict. Instead, it shows distance, disgust, and lack of communication. When Halie describes what had happened between her and the strange man in her past, Dodge becomes jealous and shows his hatred.

C. The Myth of Religion

Postmodernism offers another definition of religion in the new world. Myth of religion is an important myth in *Buried Child* which Shepard tries to subvert by depicting the characters of Halie and Father Dewis. Halie seems to be a religious person. She treats and speaks like a true Christian in the first act. Gradually, we notice that her faith is just a fake and she does not act what she speaks.

Religion is a game for both Halie and Father Dewis. Halie seeks refuge to religion in order to escape all her miseries and thoughts. She does not fulfill her duties as a mother. She is like a guest in her home. Properly, in "The Back Side of Myth: Sam Shepard's Subversion of Mythic Codes in *Buried Child*", Steven D. Putzel and Suzanne R. Westfall posit that Halie, the mother archetype, sells out to conventional religion, to the very system that killed her Ansel, in the person of Father Dewis. They note that the religion is just an excuse for Halie to escape, into her relationship with the prodigal preacher. They add that she does not seek spiritual regeneration through another mythic system, but rather a drunken good time with a useless image of masculine spiritual leadership (6). Shepard parodies and manipulates the current religious system of America.

D. The Myth of the Nurturing Mother

Shepard shatters the image of a good mother by presenting Halie. It is hard to accept her as a mother figure. It is evident that Halie does not obey any of these rules. She is not like a real mother at all. She is another myth that is shattered by Shepard in this play. The myth of a good, affectionate mother has long been dead in the history of America. It does not mean that in the postmodern society, there is no admirable mother; rather it means that meta-narratives of American dream about the matriarch or the mother character do not exist anymore.

E. Reality vs. Illusion

Buried Child is a play about confrontation. The characters are placed in a severe battle in which they must face with the truth behind life in America. This battle would reveal the realities hidden in their lives.

Dodge knows the truth but deliberately tries to hide it. This escapism from truth manifests itself in the secret of buried child. By referring to the bones in the ground, he somehow reveals the secret of murdering the little child and burying him in the farm. In fact, the baby is the reality of the past that they try to escape it, except Tilden who tries to reveal it and makes other face the past and its realities.

F. The Theme of Alienation

The theory of alienation is developed by Marx to reveal the human activity that lies behind the seemingly impersonal forces dominating society. He develops a materialist theory of how human beings are shaped by the society they live in, but also how they can act to change that society, how people are both 'world determined' and 'world producing'. For Marx, alienation is not rooted in the mind or in religion. Instead, Marx defines alienation as something rooted in the material world. Alienation means loss of control, specifically the loss of control over labor (Cox 1).

Lyotard studied the theme of alienation too. While his chief target is the Marxist tradition, he rejects social theory in entirety. For example, he has come to believe that any concept of alienation, the idea that an original unity, wholeness, or innocence is fractured by the fragmentation and indifference of capitalism, ends up as a totalitarian attempt to unify society coercively. According to Lyotard, the postmodern era indicates that all comforting myths of intellectual mastery and truth are at an end, replaced by a plurality of language-games, the Wittgensteinian notion of 'truth' as provisionally shared and circulating without any kind of epistemological warrant or philosophical foundation (Zerzan 10).

Shepard presents hopeless portraits of American alienation. In *Buried Child*, alienation brings doubt. The characters do not trust each other or even deny the identity of their fellows. Shepard deliberately alienates the characters from their roots, their goals, and even their families. The outstanding alienation effect is between fathers and sons in *Buried Child*. The inherited alienation is between Dodge, Tilden, and Vince.

G. The Myth of Rebirth

Another myth is the absence of rebirth. The absence shows postmodernity. In *Buried Child*, this myth is two folded. One side refers to the myth of rebirth and fertility of the land and the other deals with the rebirth of the Corn king.

In order to revive the land, the king should sacrifice himself. If we take Dodge as the king of the land, he never accepts to play the role of a victim. He does not sacrifice himself, although he knows that the land is in danger. He thinks if he kills the little child and bestows it to the soil, everything will be okay; but nothing like that happens.

Shepard's plays convey a deep feeling in the audience. He is a master in creating effective images. America has created a farfetched image, which is quite inaccessible for its people. This image is the American dream. The American dream is just a fantasy that most people try to reach, but they cannot. Encouraging and pushing people to follow this false myth is a harmful mistake. Shepard's plays challenge the validity of this dream in so many ways. He warns if people follow this false myth, they would lose their own stable identity.

IV. Conclusion

Like many other writers, Shepard should be studied within the context of his time by depicting how much he was influenced by the culture and major events of his lifetime. The sharpest and broadest analysis of Shepard reflects his tendency toward postmodernism.

With the intention of attacking the false notion of the American dream, Shepard writes several plays. He depicts poor characters in a society that has lost its precious myths. American life and American people are so important for Shepard that makes him write several outstanding family plays about their states of lives in the postmodern America. Shepard's cynicism is not only for the postmodern society but also for the postmodern people who are the volunteer agents in the destruction process they are living in.

Postmodern society has killed the beauty, life, and nature with its rough laws. The themes of an integrated American family, loyalty, love, and greatness have given their places to the disjointed families that corrupt nature with their fake dreams of success and wealth.

Shepard's plays and his method reveal the pathetic quality of American life. *True West*, *Cowboys#2*, *Fool for Love* and *Buried Child* present dysfunctional families, dumb mothers pretending they are keeping the house but are unaware of their families' needs, drunken and absent fathers, and the wandering sons searching for their true identities. In these plays, Shepard depicts the prominent characteristics of postmodern America which are violence, betrayal, hopelessness, alienation, and filth.

Shepard's style describes his efforts to find new forms that would take the writer to another world. This world is behind the forms; it is a world occupied with different ideas. These ideas speak directly to the audiences' emotions. That is why he chooses myth, because myth deals with the feelings. Nearly all his plays depict an endless quest to enter into another world.

In these four plays, Shepard tries to fix the lost values by combining the old and the new. His depiction of the old myths represents his nostalgic wish for the return of all that have been lost. Shepard enlightens the social and cultural states of America, while he shows his own emotional response to them.

Much of the conflicts and tensions created in Shepard's plays come from the relationships between family members. Shepard's families come to reflect the postmodern society. Shepard sees the typical American family as facing many difficulties: they work against each other rather than in unity, they do not show enough trust in or love for one another. The failing of the family also shows the collapse of the American society.

Shepard's world and ours is changing. He does not look at it from a distance, nor is he alienated from the social, cultural, and domestic changes taking place. It is worthy to mention that at the heart of Shepard's dissatisfaction with the postmodern society; always there has been a notion of rebirth of life that is fundamentally humanist in its emphasis.

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