

Sam Shepard: Cultural and Biographical Contexts

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Abstract

Sam Shepard (1943-) is widely regarded as one of the greatest contemporary American playwrights. The present paper aims at investigating the cultural and the biographical contexts in which Shepard's plays, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, were produced. Noteworthy, these plays are two of Shepard's "family trilogy". The cultural context of the Sixties aims at investigating the socio-economic, political, historical forces that produced these plays. The Cultural Materialist Approach and Psychobiography were employed as critical methodologies. In both plays, Shepard gives a voice to the poor, youth and women, incarnating their psychological disorders and traumas in the postmodern world. As for the biographical context, it plays a vital role in making connections between the playwright and his works; such an approach is so-called "psychobiography". Examining Shepard's infantile experiences has proven to have their fundamental influence in fueling and enriching his dramatic output. Examining the cultural and the biographical contexts has proven useful in shedding light on the intricate relation between the artist and his works.

Key terms: Sam Shepard, Cultural Materialism, Feminist Criticism, Psychobiography.

سام شيبيرد: السياق الثقافي و سيره حياته أحمد محمد الحسيني الملخص

يعد سام شيبيرد (١٩٤٣ -) من أعظم كتاب المسرح الأمريكي المعاصر. يهدف البحث الحالي إلى دراسة السياق الثقافي و سيره حياه شيبيرد في مسرحيتي "لعنة الطبقة الجائعة" و "طفل مدفون". ومما هو جدير بالذكر، فان تلك المسرحيتان من "ثلاثيه العائلة" لشيبيرد. يهدف السياق الثقافي لفترة الستينيات إلى دراسة القوى الاجتماعية و الاقتصادية و السياسية و التاريخية التي أنتجت تلك المسرحيتان. تم تطبيق المدخل الثقافي المادي و السيكيوبيوجرفي (العلاقة بين حياه المؤلف و أعماله) كمناهج لتلك الدراسة. في كلا المسرحيتان، فان شيبيرد يعطى صوتا للفقراء و الشباب و النساء، مجسدا اضطراباتهم و جروحهم النفسية في عالم ما بعد الحداثة. أما فيما يتعلق بسياق حياه الكاتب فانه يلعب دورا حيويا في إجراء علاقات بين الكاتب المسرحي و أعماله، وان مثل هذا المبحث يسو بالسيكيوبيوجرفي. إن التمحيص في خبرات شيبيرد في مرحله الطفولة أثبتت أن لها تأثيرا جوهريا في إنتاج وإثراء نتاجه الدرامي. إن دراسة السياق الثقافي وسيره حياه الكاتب أثبتت فائدتها في إلقاء الضوء على العلاقات الجوهرية بين الفنان و أعماله.

كلمات مفتاحيه: سام شيبيرد، المادية الثقافية، النقد النسائي، السيرة النفسية

Sam Shepard (1943-), one of the towering geniuses in the world of American drama and whose plays have been performed on several stages of Europe, has attracted popular and academic audiences alike. Approximately twenty-seven of his plays have been performed, not only in the US and the UK, "but in Canada and Australia as well. At least twelve plays have been performed in London alone, where he has been living for the past four years" (Bachman 405). Shepard won a dozen Obie awards, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, a Rockefeller Playwriting Grant, the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama in 1979 for his play *Buried Child*, and Edgar Award for Best Mystery Play for his provocative farce or dark comedy *The God of Hell*. After *Cowboys* had been produced in October, 1964 by Theatre Genesis at St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Shepard wrote over fifty plays and won "more Obie awards than any other living playwright" (Innes 218); within just two years (1966-1967), Shepard got three Obie awards for his *Red Cross*, *Chicago* and *Icarus's Mother*. His winning or garnering of these awards and the Pulitzer Prize has brought him publicity and international literary acclaim, affirming his impact on the contemporary theatrical milieu (Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction* 221).

Stanley Kauffmann, in *New Republic*, praises Shepard as being "the most talented of his generation"; Edward Albee and Elizabeth Hardwick acclaim him as "one of the three or four most gifted playwrights alive" (qtd. in Bachman 405). He "might top any serious critics' poll for Best American Playwright" (Hoffman 25). Leslie Wade claims that "No playwright in the recent history of the American theatre has garnered more attention and acclaim than Sam Shepard" who "has fascinated audiences with an effulgent, often hypnotic drama of American anxiety and ambition", achieving "rank and stature accorded such figures as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller" (1). Bigsby hails Shepard as being one of the most idiosyncratic and "powerful voices of the 1970s and 1980s" (*A Critical Introduction* 219).

Shepard entered the theatrical scene as a "renegade" in the Sixties, widely hailed as one of the most critically acclaimed, prolific, protean, controversial and promising contemporary American playwrights, emerging from the Off-Off-Broadway theatrical movement that is frequently regarded as a complete rejection of or a revolt against the commercial Broadway. Shepard, as DeRose describes, became "one of the most talented and important playwrights of his generation" (ix). Off-Off-Broadway, remarks Bottoms, "found its home in cafés, churches, lofts, and basements of New York's Greenwich Village and East Village districts" and was "an intrinsic part of the counter-cultural mood of the

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period" ("Shepard and Off-Off-Broadway ..." 34). Discovering Shepard is "its major achievement to date" (Orzel and Smith 11). "Shepard has admitted his good fortune in arriving in New York just as the Off-Off Broadway movement was in the ascent" (Wade 13). From the commencement of his career, Shepard "was interested in exploring the experimental dramatic forms that emerged in Europe after the Second World War and took root in the off- and off-off Broadway American theatre scene during the 1960s and 1970s" (Saddik 131).

Shepard's technique of dramatic writing is characterized by a kind of improvisation, shifting from surrealism and experimentalism to realism and vice versa. Shepard is contemptuous of mainstream theater, discarding the principles of consistency and attempting to create a theatre in which touching, emotional, or holy states are unswervingly addressed to the spectator. Ross Wetzsteon, in his "Introduction" to Shepard's *Fool for Love and Other Plays* (1984), points out that "Shepard's characters often seem unmotivated, implausible, and inconsistent at first— not because they are untrue to life but because we confuse 'true to life' with the conventions of psychological realism" (4).

Like surrealism, his early plays touches the subconscious of Man while his later plays mixes surrealism with realism. In his early plays, his language is poetical, unconventional and imaginative: it consists of slang, scientific, rock and roll expressions and idioms. The characters are befuddled on music, especially on "rock and roll" type. The early one-act plays, as Shepard himself describes, are "characterized by lyrical monologues, abrupt shifts of focus and tone, and stunningly visualized climaxes" (qtd. in Wetzsteon, Introduction 4). On the other hand, in his later family plays, he adopts the realistic technique by depicting consistent characters and managing coherent plots. Starting with *Curse of the Starving Class*, a group of "similar characters, interiors", visual motifs, "landscapes, symbols, themes", and structural layouts occurs and recurs in various combinations and guises. A play seems to emerge from another (Brookhouse 65). The theme of the fall of the American family dealt with and the realistic style employed by Shepard are continuations of O'Neill's and others. "From O'Neill on, our playwrights have been obsessed with the failure of family harmony and with family disintegration" (Scanlan 49).

Although Shepard followed the traditional realistic technique of his predecessors like Miller, O'Neill and Williams, he has employed new features that cannot be judged as purely realistic in the strict sense. His family plays contain "surreal" or "supra-realistic" elements that cut the surface fixity. His trend is that of "neo-realism" or "hyperrealism". This trend mixes techniques of

traditional realism with postmodernism: tradition with innovation. DeRose describes such a style as the presence of "irrational, discontinuous images" arranged out of context, that exist "for their sake as unqualified material images" (97). Such innovative method helps Shepard communicate what cannot be expressed in everyday language. It can speak to "audiences at a depth of feeling that precedes the dissection of man into social and psychological categories, speaking to a man in his wholeness" (Roose-Evans 103). Demastes makes a distinction between realistic and non-realistic plays, arguing that, "if appearances are realistic, then the play is labeled realistic; and if appearances are altered, then the work is labeled symbolist, expressionist or avant-garde" (Beyond Naturalism 5). In the plays of Shepard, "reality expands to fantasy, dream, and myth" (Kyoung-Jung 8). *Curse*, for instance, is written in "a style that oscillates between realism and savage fantasy", remarks Richard Eder (qtd. in Demastes, "American New Realism" 179). In *Buried Child*, there is a mode akin to surrealism and the "surreal mystery almost erupted and pulverized reality" as "when Tilden is heaping corn husks on Dodge while he is sleeping on the sofa, the surreal should emerge naturally" (Callens 405). Shepard's realism is modified "to challenge the linear or causal expectations that many have come to hold in regards to that form. It is, as Shepard himself notes, "not the kind of realism where husbands and wives squabble and that kind of stuff" (Demastes, "American New Realism", 176-77).

The language of Shepard's later plays is realistic, but it has the features of contradiction and fragmentation. Martin Esslin, in *The Theater of the Absurd*, explains that "in a world that has become meaningless, language also becomes a meaningless buzzing". It has lost its prime importance as a major theatrical vehicle. It has become degenerated from an instrument of communication into "nothing but clichés, empty formulas and slogans" (83). Shepard, due to his being a post-WWII writer and influenced by European dramatists like Beckett and Pinter, has realized the importance of other theatrical devices like lighting, music, sound, gestures, décor, facial expressions, etc.

The neo-realistic technique is employed by Shepard to mirror the predicament and the bitter existence of modern people. Such technique was related to the change of pattern of the world, especially after WWII. The reality of the twentieth-century was radically different from that of the previous century. Shepard, as a post-Second World War writer, has begun to reflect some of the various problems the contemporary society has to face. In other words, for the background of Shepard's later family plays (the seventies of the 20th century), the

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trend of "neo-realism" the playwright employs is molded in accordance with the development of the age. As a dramatist of post-war, Shepard "has been forced to search for a form to accommodate his content" (Demastes, *Beyond Naturalism* 98). Shepard's realism reveals a "1960s desire to make fragments cohere and the 1970s belief that truth may ultimately lie in these fragments" (Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction* 221). Shepard's family plays are postmodern: "Yet even as the subject of family is embraced in an apparent search for a sense of rooted, stable identity, these are distinctly postmodern dramas, characterized by discontinuity, pastiche, and a sense of insoluble tension in both family structure and dramatic form" (Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* 152). According to Bottoms, "Shepard creates a form of realism which refuses to render itself up to neatly rational explanation, by adapting various of his more abrasive formal techniques and blending them with more familiar elements of domestic drama" (153).

Shepard's plays address the contemporary world and convey a social message. In his dramatic works, he "charts the demise of the American Dream, the strengths and tensions of family and the quest for roots in an alien world" (Chambers 687). Salvador Minuchin explains, "One of the main functions of the family is to support its members. When a member is stressed, the other family members feel the need to accommodate his changed circumstances" (61). Regrettably, the families, in *Curse* and *Buried Child*, are detrimental and incapable of either fulfilling this function effectively or keeping the delicate equilibrium necessary to maintain functional and positive family relationships. There is no love or communication between the parents on the one hand, and between them and their siblings on the other. Instead, estrangement, antagonism, violence, indifference and egotism are only the fundamental shared feelings. The relationships between the parents and children in these plays seem to be strained. Shepard's 'trilogy' (*Curse*, *Buried Child* and *True West*) and the other family plays "mourn in groaning creaky loud voice, the disruption in familial relationships, the meaninglessness of discontinuous lives, the alienation that shatters the psyche of the people and the broken language that reflects the broken minds" (Matthew 53). The parents are not able to offer the structure and stability generally associated with their roles in the family. Sociologically, parenting "requires the capacity to nurture, guide and control. The proportions of these elements depend on the children's developmental needs and the parents' capacity. But parenting always requires the use of authority. Parents cannot carry out their executive functions unless they have the power to do so" (Minuchin 58). The family members, in these plays, are living in a wasteland that is void of physical,

emotional and spiritual nutrition. They appear estranged from each other and from the external world. If they were in external contact, they would be victimized by outsiders. They are psychological sufferers whose behaviors are aberrant and whose memories represent traumatic experiences they strive to forget. Both *Curse* and *Buried Child* deal with families whose American Dream is lost and who appear "driven to an extreme of eccentricity hardly distinguishable from madness by the pent-up pressures of violence and guilt" (Uçele and Yüksel 81).

Shepard's works have been an arena of dispute among literary critics and the man of the street. "A large majority of the criticism of Shepard's work is impressionistic, rather than analytic" (Hart, "The Frontiers" 1). Whereas some described them as fascinating and daring for their blatant critique of the contemporary sterile American society, others regarded them as being enigmatic, mysterious, daunting, elusive, defying interpretation, indefinite, inconsistent and ambivalent. Sometimes his plays are implausible and absurd, rarely displaying "conventional plot unity, characterization, or clear-cut thematic development" (Siegel 237).

Most of Shepard's work was judged as being "highly individualistic", "difficult to access", "discussed in hyperbolic generalization" (Simard, *Postmodern* 75) and "incompletely resolved" (Hoffman, *Famous* 25). Many of Shepard's plays "are in fact extraordinarily resistant to thematic exegesis" (Gilman xi), having "loose ends and uncertainties" (Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* ix). Anti-closural strategies are central to Shepard's dramatic canon. Shepard "disrupts the audience's attempt at achieving cause-effect configurations of meaning and narrativity. If the reader or spectator's impulse is toward interpretive closure, then the playwright's design, transmitted via the anti-closural strategies, is to rupture and negate that attempt" (Dikhit 2-3). In an interview with Carol Rosen in 1992, Shepard said, "I hate endings. You have to end it somehow. I like beginnings. Middles are tough; but endings are just a pain in the ass. It's very hard to end stuff" (qtd. in Rosen, "Silent Tongues" 36). For Shepard, it is "a cheap trick" in which "everything is tied up at the end with a neat ribbon and you've delivered this package" (qtd. in Shewey 116). However, open-endedness and contradiction are not by necessity shortcomings: "to keep life floating along with the ever-changing tide of cultural world, an individual must learn to be an unfixed, open-ended master adapter/shifter" (Wongchanta 106).

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The contradictory aspect that is replete with Shepard's plays fundamentally emanates from the playwright's own firm belief in the contradictory and the insane nature of life itself. In an interview in 1988, Shepard explained: "life is made up of contradictions. The tricky part is to stay in the middle and not take sides, not walk over to one side in preference to the other. If you can stay right in the middle of a contradiction, that's where life is. Exactly where it is. Right in the middle. It's when you're torn that things start to fall apart. [...] You can't avoid contradictions. You can't avoid paradoxes (qtd. in Weiss 337-38).

The difficulty in appreciating Shepard's plays critically is due to not examining his plays in totality and to the sole focus on their intrinsic formal artistic aesthetics, treating them as products that could be dissected and scrutinized, without taking into consideration an assessment of the cultural context that produced, distributed and consumed them. The real difficulty "is not that Shepard's plays especially resist analysis and interpretation but that the critics lack familiarity with the whole body of Shepard's work and the overall development of his career" (Mottram vii). It is necessary to explore Shepard's dramaturgical development that revolves around his vehement critique of the complacent and delusive American slogans. Shepard upsets conventional ways of life, traditions and morals themselves. The current playwright's personal life, provided in this chapter, is just one segment of the cultural context. Shepard, among other American playwrights like O'Neill, Miller, and Williams, has been capable of welding or incorporating "personal and national consciousness in so startling and intense a manner" (Mottram ii). Through the personal, Shepard succeeded in reflecting the wider cultural sphere. Thus, the socio-economic, political, and cultural dominating forces and conditions of the 1960s that produced Shepard's plays should be evaluated to discover Shepard's artistic canon, and to decipher the abstruse nature of his plays. According to William Kleb, Shepard's work needs to be placed more firmly in both artistic and social contexts ("Sam Shepard" 410). Noteworthy, examining the socio-cultural powers that produced Shepard's plays is central to Lacanian psychoanalysis which, like the Marxist, Deconstructionist and Feminist methodologies, reveals the socio-cultural connections that determine the production of texts. This ultimately breaks the textual or the autonomous frames. It is a revelation of texts as products of a socially determined narratives.

Shepard is frequently called an "encoder of American signs onstage" (Rosen, "Emotional Territory" 1) and "the first playwright to construct his drama out of the materials of the popular arts" (Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000* 172). His plays are described as "the most American of American" (Kyoung-Jung v). Shepard, like Beckett and Brecht, is a social critic or rebel whose primary purpose is to incarnate the "simultaneous alienation" of the individual in American society. Shepard assails the "corrupting values of the society and insists on its violent contradictions" (Mottram ix). Thus, his plays are enriched in the culturally coded signs: "This intensive accumulation of signs" is "at the heart of the very language by which Shepard expresses meaning and communicates his vision of America" (Mottram viii).

It is noteworthy to remark that Shepard was given "the unofficial title of poet laureate of the American West" because of his singular vision of the American heartland, especially of the rural landscapes of the West and Southwest (DeRose ix). Shepard's plays trace the bankruptcy of American culture and seek for exploring "the possibility of new myths for our time, most frequently returning to the roots of so many American myths: the Old West" (Patraka and Siegel 5). In his plays *Curse* and *True West*, for instance, the Old West has lost its feature of freeing the soul of the American Man: the "new West confronts the spiritual crisis by industrialization and materialism which destroy the soul of human being" (Kyoung-Jung vii). Through the family and the American West, Shepard delineates the disintegration of the whole American society: "America confronts crisis by excessive materialism, spiritual starvation and family's disintegration. . . . [Shepard] has nostalgia for the challenge, spiritual freedom of the frontier and finds potential power of revitalization of a destroyed American society in the spiritual values of the old West" (Kyoung-Jung vii).

Before going into an investigation of the culture of the Sixties and its impact on Shepard, it is necessary to make a quick overview of the Cultural Materialist enterprise. At the same time, such an enterprise is one of the features of the cultural context of the Sixties. Broadly speaking, "culture", as a term, is an all-encompassing concept that comprises several products (e.g. all human activities) such as theatre, architecture, music, sculpture, painting, literature, etc. Raymond Williams, laying down the bases of the theoretical tenets and the practical methodology of the Cultural Materialist enterprise, remarks that a proper study of culture should be concerned with the whole process of cultural production, rather than with parts seen in isolation. Any work of art should be examined under its cultural umbrella that includes several dynamic forces (social, political,

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cultural, historical, etc.). Williams associated the term "culture" with four meanings: "an individual habit of mind; the state of intellectual development of a whole society; the arts; and the whole way of life of a group of people" (Milner and Browitt 2). According to Mathew Arnold, culture is, "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (qtd. in Barker 67). Arnold also defines "culture" as "sweetness and light", "the study of perfection", and "the harmony of all the powers that make for the beauty and worth of human nature" (qtd. in Milner and Browitt 26).

Cultural Poetics held that literature, among other cultural products, is not autonomous aesthetic icon. This enterprise can help reveal the multi-faced economic, social, historical, political, cultural constellation. Literature is not a passive emulation of a universal and transcendental history as it attempts to focus on the negative, shortcoming practices of the dominant culture. For cultural critics, literature is a communal event, and in order to provide an adequate interpretation of its various forms, it must be investigated in the light of its cultural background: "Literature, both oral and written, as one of the essential components of culture, is incorporated in poetry, novel, drama and embodies a society's cultural values through the social relations between the characters and exercises a direct impact on people's consciousness" (Abousenna ii). Cultural Poetics disavowed the "Old Historicism" that held that a text could only reflect its historical background. Culture as a whole, not merely its historical aspects, was paid attention to by Cultural Poetics practitioners (Bressler 219).

As Shepard belongs to the post-WWII generation and, more specifically, to the period of the sixties, it is not surprisingly his dramatic corpus reflects the psychological traumas, abrupt transformations, the crisis of identity, violence, crime, and the hidden realities of his American society. Shepard once admitted the influence of the 1960s on his playwritings: "To me the influence of the sixties and off-off Broadway theatre and the Lower East Side was a combination of hallucinogenic drugs, the effect of those drugs on those I came in contact with, the effects of those drugs on my own perceptions, the Vietnam war, and all the rest of it which is gone now. The only thing which still remains and still persists as the single most important idea is the idea of consciousness" (qtd. in Demastes, "American New Realism" 170). It is noteworthy to point out that because Shepard experienced family problems, as will be discussed later on in the present study, it is not surprisingly connections between his dramatic works and infantile experiences have to be taken into consideration. The world Shepard depicts is fractured, unfixed and replete with inconsistency and dissonance. It is, as David DeRose

remarks, a world "in which we have lost or rejected those things that make us whole; a world where sons reject, and must rediscover, their heritage; . . . a world in which we are suddenly strangers, even when we return to the place we once called home" (6). Shepard has thus taken an existential view of the world. Ellen Oumano also argues that "Shepard personifies our cultural ambiguity", by depicting socio-cultural transformations of the American society in which the family has begun to dissolve and the individual has become at odds with his national heritage (1).

The fifties have been described by historians as years of social stability and conformity in America. At that time, Americans held the same beliefs and strove toward the same objectives of material security. Superficially, American society appeared unified and unproblematic. It was not until the mid-1950s that there was a growing criticism of the American way of life: conflicts between one class of society and another were noticeable and evolving, and fissures were beginning to emerge. The angry voices of the 1950s paved the way for the rise of the disturbing, revolting and stormy scene of the 1960s (Cho 1).

The 1960s were years of dissent, antipathy, incredibility, insurgence, ferocity, turmoil, fury, and commotion. They were widely regarded as the notorious decade in the history of Europe because of the rise of several challenging movements that strove for equality and liberation of expression. The traditional - - outworn, idealistic, and false -- values, institutions and moods were violently questioned and challenged. In turn, this leads to the emergence of myriad movements that called for a radical transformation of the society and offered a new constellation of values. There was a restless energy for rebelling against the hypocritical society and its deteriorated conditions. Eventually, this shocked the complacent façade of America: "The sixties form the centerpiece, a hopeful moment between the sterile, conformist fifties and the constricted, lonely, self-absorbed seventies" (Clecak 4).

Shepard was one of those dissenting voices that vehemently criticized the nation's failure to fulfill its American Dream and its authentic and integrated national identity. His works resist grand narratives; they attack the ideas that are universally accepted. For him, America has failed to make its American Dream a reality to be experienced. He comments:

Nobody has actually ever succinctly defined 'the myth of American Dream'. What is the American Dream? Is it what Thomas Jefferson proposed? Was that the American Dream? Was it what George Washington proposed? Was it what Lincoln proposed? Was it what

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Martin Luther King proposed? I don't know what the American Dream is. I know that it doesn't work. Not only doesn't work, the myth of the American Dream has created extraordinary havoc, and it's going to be our demise. (qtd. in Roudané, "Shepard on Shepard" 69-70)

Shepard's works represent a counter-culture that seeks for shedding light on the shortcomings of the American nation. For Shepard, America is a wasteland that fails to nourish its citizens economically and spiritually. The titles and the events of the plays, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, shed light on this fact, as will be explored. Despite being domestic plays that deal with familial agonies, *Curse* and *Buried Child* have political aims; Shepard uses the family unit as a metaphor for the whole American society and its outworn hegemonic values. Describing the countercultural movement, Rodney P. Carlisle and J. Geoffrey Golson point out that "counterculture, often described as 'rebellious against the establishment,' is a term used to describe a movement that swept the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was a phenomenon that challenged the national imagination: the transformation of the promising middle-class youth with many material advantages into what was popularly known as 'the hippie'" (173).

The 1960s were exceptional years as the American society, on its socio-economic, political and cultural levels, underwent radical transformations. **On the economic level**, America witnessed an economic euphoria. The 1960s were sweeping years of post-war unparalleled economic growth. This was radically different from the period of the Great Depression (the 1929th) in the sense that the Sixties witnessed a great affluence -- the Golden Age of Capitalism, youth employment and consumerism. However, economy was embarrassed by the superficial boom and consequently created economic crisis.

Despite such euphoria, the American community became materialistic, if not narcissistic, neglecting the simple agricultural life and spirituality. Faith was haunted by the fallacy of the American Dream and the pursuit of money. The bourgeois values evaporated and anomie was exposed. The American Dream of economic success led many Americans to search for monetary gains, at the cost of enriching their souls and conscience. Moreover, the agricultural scene was threatened by building shopping malls and corporations. The public or the governmental sector was challenged by the private sector that, despite providing moderate materialistic benefits for its employees and laborers, has been in the grip of few greedy rich people who sucked the poor's blood and power, ignoring

their sentiments and dignity. Capitalism invaded the American community, pushing men to compete for securing a position in the business field, neglecting their families. This shift in economy also created more impoverished classes, suffering from disease, material instability, and ignorance.

Describing the postwar American community, the Marxist and the postmodernist critic Fredric Jameson points out that America was transformed from being a prewar productive and rural society to a postwar consuming and urban one; and that postmodernism is a product of postwar capitalism which is generally Western but specifically American:

. . . following World War II a new kind of society began to emerge (variously described as postindustrial society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, media society and so forth). New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an even more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree through society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and the universal standardization ; the growth of the great network of superhighways and the arrival of the automobile culture- these are some of the features which would seem to mark a radical break with that older prewar society. (qtd. in DeRose 3)

In the American postwar capitalist society, the individual, the middle class, along with the nuclear family that once occupied the center, have become decentered. In addition, technology "has taken control; it has eliminated nature in the process of urbanization and industrialization" (Uçele 77).

Criticizing vehemently the economic euphoria that was accompanied by the rise of wide strata of the poor and the false slogans of investment and development propagated by the capitalists, Shepard, in *Curse of the Starving Class*, presents an American middle-class family on the verge of bankruptcy, giving them a voice. The play represents a critique of patriarchy and capitalism or, as Nancee Moes remarks, of "capitalistic patriarchy" (10). The play "is set during the state's postwar boom and a growing consumer economy" (Mathew 54). The middle-class has lost its central position in this new consumptive society. The play's title itself sheds light on the social transformation of the middle-class to the cusp of the proletariat: instead of going upward vertically, the middle-class degenerates economically downward to the status of the starving

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class that has nothing to depend on for survival. The title also refers to "the family's multiple frustrations with identity and it underscores a continual and almost bestial hunger" (Crank 37). The Weston's family mirrors Salvador Minuchin's argument that "when families experience crisis or tragedy the ordinary stresses become even more heightened. If a family responds to stress with rigidity, dysfunctional patterns occur" (65-66). The basic need for food cannot be satisfied: the family members, in this play, are starving physically and, in metaphorical terms, spiritually. Their sole endeavor or outlet is to sell their farm and house in order to escape from the abrupt economic conditions of America and from their impoverished condition. They are confronted with the reality that they have no place among the rich who have accumulated huge amounts of money, filling their stomachs and possessing fashionable cars and swimming pools. Getting money becomes their sole aim to escape from, rather than confront communally, the sweeping American economic transformations. Although they claim that they are not part of the starving class, they are unable to meet their daily demands and fall as preys, due to their starving conditions, to land sharks that compete to take their properties. They become so vulnerable that they prove to be unable to cope up with or bear the new American economic scene in which the poor have no place (having been marginalized). It is noteworthy to point out that food, as an image, is employed by Shepard to refer to the spiritual starvation of the American society.

The patriarch, Weston, is jobless, alcoholic, and unable to feed his family members. This type of a father has contributed in aggravating and worsening the economic dilemma of the family. He is not the type of the self-made man who is capable of achieving success and fulfilling the materialistic demands of his family: in America, it is supposed for the self-made man to "control his own fate, to create his own destiny through his actions" (Madachy 15). Instead of facing the bitter reality of their degenerated situation, the parents Weston and Ella plan to sell the property to capitalists like Slater, Emerson, Ellis and Taylor. Moreover, Ella betrays her husband by planning to sell the property secretly, without informing her husband, and by making illegal relationship with the sleazy attorney Taylor whom she sees as an easy ticket for accomplishing the sale, as her daughter Emma describes: "She's after esteem . . . She sees him as an easy ticket. She doesn't want to be stuck out here in the boonies of her life" (81). Those mean capitalists, exploiting the deleterious and the bitter conditions of the Tate family, aspire to transform the domestic and the agricultural possessions of such family into steakhouses and strip commercial and shopping malls. The farm is

also neglected by the family who has been influenced by the new industrial scene. Shepard persistently sheds light on the fact that America is on the verge of loss and poverty if it is controlled and administrated by foreign capitalists who possess corporations built on the American land.

The private sector of businessmen aims at exploiting people's impoverished conditions to invest their money for achieving their own greedy monetary purposes, no matter how the poor are suffering. The capitalists, believing in utilitarianism or in the pragmatic notions, exploit Weston's miserable conditions by purchasing his land and enforcing him to flee outside America; otherwise, he will be led to the court. They are organized in their procedures to reach their goals. Nowadays, one can notice that credit cards and ATMs (Automated Teller Machines) allow people to borrow and pay off later. The capitalists first lend Weston money to consume it on his alcoholic tendencies and to let him buy a valueless land. Their final goal is to get Weston's land that is full of potentiality if it is taken care of. "He borrowed money from a shady source in order to purchase some land sold by a con artist (another shady source) that turned out to be worthless desert. As moneylenders seek to reclaim the loan, Weston seeks to relocate to Mexico . . . [that] stands ideal to Weston because what it is not: it is not America" (Madachy 79).

Although Weston, in Act III, is transformed into a caring father and husband, he has been too late to redeem or amend anything. He tells his son about the real mask of the capitalists and the false concept of the American Dream of economic growth, saying

I remember now. I was in hock. I was in hock up to my elbows. See, I always figured on the future. I banked on it. I was banking on it getting better. I couldn't get worse, so I figured it'd just get better. . . . So I went along with it. Why not borrow if you know it's coming in . . . Banks, car lots, investors. The whole thing's getting geared to invisible money. You never hear the sound of change anymore. It's all plastic shuffling back and forth. (Curse 111-112)

In the above mentioned quotation, "Weston sums up his mistake in the last scene of the play when he realizes how he has been taken in by 'the system'" (Dolmage 75-76). This also sheds light on the idea that the American dream is a commodified dream: "A commodity, by Karl Marx's definition, has value not in terms of what it can do (use value) but in terms of the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (exchange value) . . . An object becomes a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-change value, and neither form is inherent in any object" (Tyson, Psychological Politics 6).

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However, it is the far-sighted Wesley who possesses the enthusiasm to restore the farm and the house. For him, capitalists are "Zombies" who desire to transform the agricultural scene of America into an industrial one and make benefits from the price of lands they have purchased from the poor. Shepard is like Wesley who was worried about the loss of land to cement (Ansen 118). The price of land is increasing every year; therefore, the capitalists find in purchasing lands various economic benefits. Wesley appears loyal to land and to the stability of his family against the capitalists' egotistic aspirations. He tells Emma that the loss of the farm means more than losing a house and a family: "It means losing a country" (83). He also tells his mother Ella that he has the motivation to save and take care of the farm and the livestock: "I'm gonna' feed the sheep" (68). When his mother asks him, "Who takes care of this place?" (67), he expresses his positive determination "Me" (67).

Although Ella plans to sell the farm and the house, she knows well the deceiving mask of capitalists who desire ordinary people to spend money and pay later. In other words, as people's debts or loans increase, they will be forced to sell their belongings to pay off. Owing much money to capitalistic institutions and representatives, the poor become obligated to lose precious things, like farms and houses, to pay their debts off; otherwise, they will be imprisoned: "Thousands and thousands" of dollars "are being spent every day by ordinary people just on the very thing. Banks are loaning money right and left. Small family loans. People are building. Everyone wants a piece of land ... Land will double its value", Ella says (67).

Due to the sweeping economic conditions, the parents become so egotistic that they look forward to selling the farm and the house, ignoring the destiny of their children. Moreover, Ella boils the chicken her daughter has prepared for her 4-H Club demonstration courses, expressing the economic agony of the family: she tells her daughter that one boils the other's chicken "IF YOU WERE STARVING" (63). Boiling the poor chicken Emma has taken care of from "THE INCUBATOR TO THE GRAVE", is a symbol of the bitter economic condition of Tate's family. Thus, America, in spite of reaching euphoria, still contains a wide strata of poor people who cannot afford or resist the new abrupt economic conditions and who have become vulnerable to the wealthy, especially the capitalistic, people.

Another image employed by Shepard to reflect the poverty of the cursed Tate family is the "refrigerator". This white refrigerator stands for America that has betrayed its citizens by making them still believe in the concept, or rather the myth of the American Dream of bountiful Eden. The characters constantly look at and speak to it, examining if it contains any food. Weston the alleged patriarch, being also a symbol of America, fails to provide substance to his family. The artichokes that were on sale when he was coming home from the desert are the only type of food Weston can bring to his family. Even in the scene of his transformation in Act III, from an irresponsible father to the one who cares for his family, he eats the food he has brought. Wesley's eating of the remains of the food brought by his father in hysterical and savage ways reflects the economic agony of the family that is starving physically.

Shepard succeeds in criticizing the materialist nature of the American society by depicting Curse's family as being negligent towards their land. Land, for Shepard, is not merely an object of a property, a symbol of agriculture, and the American Dream of prosperity, it is also, more importantly, a symbol of national identity. To enforce one to lose his land, as capitalists endeavor to, is to make him lose his identity. What Weston and his wife miss is that the danger of economic prosperity and material affluence they aspire for leads them to lose their land, identity and soul. It seems that Shepard asks, "What's the profit a man gains if he loses his land and, consequently, his national identity and soul?" As Willy Loman and Joe Keller, in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and *All My Sons* respectively, follow the wrong path of material success, the Tate parents also lead self-destructive ways. Their aim is to get money by any means, even at the cost of their souls. Shepard, by focusing on "land" as a theme, has nostalgia for the simple and agricultural life in which everything seemed meaningful and optimal. Through this, he also criticizes the soullessness of the postmodern American society. For Shepard, the agricultural life is a sort of life in which, if severe conditions were found, one could survive by planting land and harvesting it. Having a land is, at least, a way to survive. Land plays an integral component in creating and forming one's personal and national identity: "The land serves several important functions: it is a wild territory to be tamed by the pioneering spirit . . . The ownership of land shows permanency (roots), status, and self-sufficiency. Land is also important because it represents the ability to produce something (with man's own hands) from that land. To make something grow—to make the land produce for you—is more just a means of sustenance; the farmer is at the heart of American identity" (Madachy 21).

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In *Buried Child*, Shepard presents America as a wasteland in which there is no food, but a corpse of an innocent baby that has been buried deep. The American Dream of economic prosperity is depicted, in this play, as an illusion. The family members abandon taking care of their own farm due to Dodge's drowning and murdering of an innocent baby born out of an incest crime committed by Halie and her eldest son Tilden. The land, in the past, was the epitome of the American Dream of bounty and economic growth. Dodge laments this flourishing past, telling Shelly: "See, we were a well-established family once. Well established. All the boys were grown. The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over. Me and Halie here were pointed toward what looked like the middle part of our life. Everything was settled with us. All we had to do is to ride it out. Then Halie got pregnant again . . . In fact we hadn't been sleeping in the same bed for six years" (64).

Attempting to conceal the fact of the innocent baby, the family members become alienated, dysfunctional and spiritually hungry. The family has degenerated economically due to the crimes of incest and murder. Dodge in the past was a farmer who took care of his lands; now, due to these crimes, he finds his solace in drinking whiskey and watching TV, a product Shepard employs to shed light on the transformation of America from being an agricultural community to an industrial one. The once-farmer Dodge is looking at the empty screen of the television, a sign that underscores the senselessness of the new modern life. The corn husks brought by Tilden, as a type of food, is juxtaposed with the uncovering of the deceased baby's corpse to underscore the metaphoric significance of feeding the soul. Auerbach points out that *Buried Child* sheds light on both the danger of narcissism that has inflicted the American personality in the contemporary technological era, and the necessity of confronting the past to revitalize the American Dream(54).

On the political level, America witnessed the rise of several movements such as the Civil Rights Movement or Black Movement, the New Left Movement, Women Movement, countercultural movements such as Hippie, Sexual Revolution and Free Speech Movement. The most important feature of the American political scene during the Sixties was the distrust in the governmental authority policies and religious institutions. This eventually led to questioning the effectiveness of the American government strategies and the religious principles of charity, soul purity, and mercy. The American authority disappointed its citizens by exercising political strategies that swerved from the idealistic notions of the American Dream such as equality, love, freedom and democracy. Such authority,

instead, bred passive and brutal notions such as oppression, interference into the affairs of other nations, inequality, narcissism and violence. On the external domain, the Cold War led to a more distrust in the American authority. On the internal domain, there was an increasing state of discontent concerning the Vietnam War, the assassinations of both President Kennedy who once announced that "the torch had been passed to a new generation of Americans" (qtd. in Cho 3), and President Johnson who once said, "This nation, this people, this generation, has man's first chance to create a Great Society" (qtd. in Cho 4). There were several protests against the Vietnam War, mainly launched by college campuses: "enormous war protests consisting of thousands of mostly younger people in every major American city effectively united the millions of all the American people against war, and against the war policy that prevailed under five congresses and during two presidential administrations" (Abdel-Aal 95).

Shepard's *Buried Child* deals with the hidden realities the American society attempts to bury and forget. As the Vietnam War is a black event in the history of America, the buried child of the play's title symbolically or metaphorically refers to America's traumatic past crimes of murder and assassination. Dodge's family "represents the disintegration that Shepard's America has experienced as a result of a loss of spiritual unity in its society, as well as the loss of solidarity through a lack of faith in its political and religious leaders" (Dolmage 41). The domestic events of the play reflect the political horrors of America: "By the mid 1970s, the Vietnam War had left a legacy of broken bodies and destroyed dreams. The American dream was tarnished and tattered. Self doubt, despair, poverty and loss of identity had invaded the dream. Vietnam is the dark secret of American society, the rotting corpse festering at the edge of society's conscience. Sam Shepard takes this national crisis and distills it into a family crisis that reverberates with the pain of the shattered American dream" (Bush 2). Dolmage also points out that "In a country turned on its head by the assassination of Kennedy, the war in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal, Shepard represents far more than a personal reaction to his own circumstances" (41).

The traumatic experiences of bearing and burying the child stand for the bitter secrets Americans strive to forget, but they eventually fail. Dodge's family, thus, becomes a microcosm of the whole nation. The past still hovers the present, influencing it: "As the play unfolds, each family member makes comments that become vague insinuations, hints at the revelation of secrets, and suggestions of a much deeper and darker knowledge of the other members. All the conversations inevitably turn to the very issues everyone seeks to avoid"

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(Madachy 101). Dodge's attempts to refuse his paternity to his children and not to tell the full story of the innocent baby are reflections of the nation's endeavor to get rid of the past. Murder and infanticide, as crimes committed in Dodge's family, refer symbolically to the nation's past crimes: "It seems surprising, then, that Dodge would make any mention of the buried child, let alone admit to fathering it, as he does when Halie rebukes him for denigrating their son Bradley, "your own flesh and blood", as Halie significantly describes it . . . Dodge angrily replies "He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's buried in the back yard" . . . His true intention here is to obfuscate the truth rather than reveal it" (Madachy 102).

The paradoxes about the identity of the buried child reflect the ambivalent American identity which is torn. Dodge's saying that the child has been buried several years before Tilden has been born can signify that the incest act happened when Tilden's "subjectivity" has not fully formed, in Lacanian terms. What is most important is that the birth of the child has turned everything down: the family has ceased enjoying prosperity and the family and the farm has become barren. Then, Dodge makes a reference to Tilden, stimulating the audience to think that there is a relationship between Tilden and the buried child. In fact, Tilden is the father of the murdered baby. However, the buried child could be Ansel who was the most perfect and the smartest, compared to his brothers who are physically and mentally crippled. The buried child could be the lost American Dream that is incarnated in Ansel. Regarding the American Dream concept of economic welfare, Ansel has been rich and gained lots of money. Halie says that Ansel, before his death, has established the family's economic stability.

Violence, with its various forms of verbal and non-verbal, is a characteristic of the 1960s. It plays a fundamental role in the dramatic development of Shepard's family trilogy. For Shepard, violence is a "tangible presence" that can be felt "everywhere in America" (qtd. in Wade 118). In an interview by Michiko Kakutani, Shepard said: "I think there's something about American violence that to me very touching . . . In full force it's ugly, but there's something very moving about it, because it's to do with humiliation" (26). Such violence functions as a catalyst for deconstruction that has external as well as internal impulses. The external causes have to do with the socio-economic transformations of America from a simple and rural life into an industrial, urbanized and complicated condition. The increase in violence has reflected the moral degeneration of the Americans. Metonymically, the violence depicted in Shepard's plays reflects the

violence in the whole American society that has degenerated in a state of spreading materialism, hatred, hypocrisy and exploitation. The violence, among the family members, results in their alienation that, consequently, leads to deteriorating and breaking down their interpersonal communication and bonds. The traditional family values of love, care, co-operation, respect and companionship have been replaced by such negative attitudes as isolation, indifference, revenge and abuse.

As for the eruption of violence due to external pressures, the family members in *Curse*, issue violence and "unpredictable actions" as "desperately impoverished responses to pressurized circumstances over which they have no control" (Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* 162). The sudden "invasion of the suburban sprawl of housing developments and superhighways and invasion of uncontrollable socio-economic forces into the family unit" all form external pressures on the family as a social unit (DeRose 92). Due to their impoverished conditions and the capitalist landscape development, the family members, in *Curse*, scheme to flee from America. Weston schemes to sell the rundown family house to pay off his accumulated debts to two gangsters, namely Slater and Emerson, who eventually deceive him. Weston wants his son to keep this plan a secret: "Don't tell your mother though" (80). Being ignorant that her husband has already sold the house to Ellis, the owner of Alibi Club, Ella also schemes to sell the house and the orchard by negotiating a sale with the sleazy attorney Taylor who "has made her sexual seduction part of their business" (DeRose 93). She, similarly, tells her son Wesley, who refuses the idea of selling the property, to keep this plan as a secret: "I shouldn't have told you. So just keep it under your hat" (66). Being external forces of violence, Ellis, Slater, Taylor and Emerson all represent the rapidly industrialized and urbanized threats.

Wesley is the only family member who understands well the threatening forces of violence and the industrial progress to the land and the simple life: "There'll be bulldozers crashing through the orchard. There'll be giant steel balls crashing through the walls . . . Zombie architecture, owned by invisible zombies, built by zombies for the use and convenience of all other zombies" (83). Endeavoring to restore his father's money from Ellis, he has been hurt. Emma, to retaliate for her father, destroyed Alibi Club and was led to jail. She has also led a life of immorality to escape from the prison by alluring the sergeant as her mother has already allured Taylor. Emerson and Slater also exploded the family car in which Emma was killed. Thus, physical violence, launched by exteriors, has led to the disintegration of the family: it has led to the murder of Emma and the physical and the emotional hurt on Wesley's part.

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As for the internal causes of violence, one can conceive that Weston is the primary source. Before the audience see Weston onstage, Shepard presents a negative image of the family patriarch whose alcoholic and violent tendencies have resulted in the disintegration of his family. The play begins with Wesley while collecting pieces of the front door battered by his father who was in an all-night drinking binge. Weston, by battering the door which insulates the family from the external threats and which functions a symbol of safety and protection, appears an intruder or invader. If the capitalists form the external invasion as Wesley describes to his sister: "It's a zombie invasion. Taylor is the head zombie. He is the scout for the other zombies. He's only a sign that more zombies are on their way. They'll be filing through the door pretty soon" (83), Weston stands for the internal threat. His violent temper and verbal abuse toward his children also make the family unstable. In this respect, instead of "providing the protection that the family is supposed to offer to its members, Weston terrorizes his family, becoming more of a threat than a guardian. His menacing attitude forces his family to seek protection outside the nuclear unit" (Madachy 77-78).

Similarly, in *Buried Child*, "violence is the only embedded feeling inside the hearts of the characters. It is this violence that threatens the existence of the family . . . The characters do not feel their familial warmth" (Sallam 241-42). Violence is "the family's long tradition" (Yun-Cheol 120). Dodge, the half-dead patriarch, has committed infanticide since 1935: he killed the baby born of the incestuous union between his wife Halie and her eldest son Tilden. Tilden fled away to New Mexico, and, after years of absence and escape, has returned to his roots. Now Tilden is mentally crippled. Tilden, in a sort of revenge, buries his father symbolically by throwing corn stalks along his father's body: Dodge is threatened by "symbolic burial under a blanket of corn husks", resembling the Corn King, the Old Man of European Harvest, in "the winter of his life" (Nash 206-207).

Bradley, despite being a left leg-amputee, is the most violent family member who launches his aggressive and merciless attitudes towards every member in the family, except his mother. He appears a terrorizing source for his father who fears that his hair be cut savagely by his handicapped son: "My appearance is out of his domain! It's even out of mine", Dodge tells his wife (610). Bradley appears on the stage, enunciating verbal abuses to his sleeping father, and holds a pair of clippers to cut his father's hair. Dodge's scalp is seen bleeding: "The haircut he [Bradley] executes on the sleeping Dodge vividly suggests psychic castration" (Putzel and Westfall 121). Tilden, as the play's text

suggests, has been attacked and victimized by Bradley: "Tilden won't protect me from Bradley" (610), says Dodge while beseeching Halie not to let Bradley cut his hair as "he left me almost bald" the last time (609). Bradley also launches his violence and aggressiveness towards the outsider Shelly, Vince's girlfriend, physically by forcing her to open her mouth and putting his fingers into it. He symbolically rapes her: "Open your mouth . . . Wider . . . Keep it like that. . . Just stay put! [She freezes. He keeps his fingers in her mouth. Stares at her . . . He pulls his hand out. She closes her mouth . . .]" (644). "This act of rape, of possessing SHELLY, also illustrates one of the effects of phallogocentric discourse and the actions it inspires: the possession and subjugation of the woman also involves a loss of voice" and this act of rapping is "coincident with preventing SHELLY from being able to speak" (Burk 419). To restore her power, Shelly attacks Bradley by taking his artificial leg. Vince also comes and issues violence against his uncle Bradley by taking the blanket forcefully and occupying Dodge's place on the sofa. His family acknowledges him as one of its members only when he becomes violent.

In the 1960s, there was a shift from the Old Left to the New Left. The New Left Movement emerged due to the repressive practices of the Communist Party. It also emerged to include the young generation in taking decisions and bearing responsibility. According to David Farber, the New Left believed that "[p]articipating in demonstrations or political protests was the first step . . . on the long road to a genuine participatory democracy where people really controlled and helped produce their government's public policy" (xv- xvi). In *Curse and Buried Child*, Shepard gives the youth a strong voice and a powerful, if not wise, thinking. At the same time, he shows how far the family children are victims to their parents' behaviors. As the parents have authoritarian roles within the family unit, Shepard depicts their dysfunctionality and failure: it is a failure that symbolically stands for the failure of the American authority to nurture its citizens or to make them lead an honorable and authentic life.

In *Curse*, Wesley and Emma, rather than their parents who should have been ideal archetypes, care so much about the prosperity of the family. Wesley is a caring son who, unlike his chaotic father, seeks for reordering the house. He picks the smashed pieces and attempts to build a new door to expel external threats. As the stage directions of Act I describe, Wesley is seen "picking up the pieces of the door" (57); and in Act II, he is acting as a carpenter and is seen "building a new door center stage. Hammers, nails, saw, and wood lying around, sawdust on floor" (80). Ella objects to the reconstruction strategies practically

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contrived by her son Wesley, telling him that his father, being responsible for breaking the door, is the one who should repair it: "You shouldn't be doing that . . . He should be doing it. He's the one who broke it down" (57). Wesley neglects his mother's indifference towards the stability and the welfare of the family, telling her that "we gotta' live in it" (57). To save the lamb, Wesley has made a barn to protect it from germs. However, his father rebukes and insults him for his building the barn: "What the hell's all that this? You building a barn in here or something?" (84).

When Ella has been absent for a long time from the house, Emma takes the initiative to wash her father's dirty clothes. However, her father objects, telling her that her mother is the one who is supposed to do that, and that she is still a student: "No, you won't do it! You let her [Ella] do it! It's her job! What does she do around here anyway? Do you know? What does she do all day long? What does a woman do?" (86). Wesley and Emma, to save the house, resist outsiders like Taylor and Ellis. When Taylor comes to visit the house, having an appointment with their mother, he is unwelcomed by Emma and Wesley: "TAYLOR stands, smiling broadly at WESLEY and extends his hand. WESLEY doesn't shake but just looks at him", stage directions indicate (74). Taylor appears threatened: "I feel like I'm on enemy territory"; such an anxious feeling is confirmed by Wesley, "You are" (74). The following quoted conversation illustrates to what extent the children are loyal to their father and how far they attempt to save what could be saved. It is a confrontation between the capitalist who attempts to devour the poor's property and the children who attempt to defy him. On the other hand, their parents are indulged in their own egotistic desires. Emma is shocked by the news that her mother has already negotiated the sale of the house, defends her father and realizes the forthcoming danger of losing the house:

WESLEY: Are you the one who's trying to sell the house?

TAYLOR: We're negotiating, yes.

EMMA: (standing) What? Trying to sell what house? This house?

TAYLOR: (to EMMA) Didn't she tell you?

WESLEY: She told me.

EMMA: Where are we going to live!

.....
TAYLOR: . . . According to your mother he owes a great deal of money.

EMMA: To who? Who does he owe money to?

TAYLOR: To everyone. He's in hock to his ears.

EMMA: He doesn't owe a cent! Everything's paid for! (Curse 75-76)

In *Buried Child*, it is the young Shelly who succeeds in making the alienated family of Dodge face its suppressed past and buried secrets. Laboriously, Shelly, like a detective, attempts to collect the contradictory pieces of information given by the family members, whether they are uttered explicitly or implicitly. She also attempts to introduce their grandson Vince to them, making a relation between the past and the present. She also represents a surrogate mother figure for the mentally disturbed Tilden. In order to communicate with the family, she cuts the carrots and potatoes brought by Tilden. Vince thinks that Shelly takes the carrots from Tilden to make fun of him, but she replies, "I'd rather be anywhere but here. You're the one who wants to stay. So I'll stay. I'll stay and I'll cut the carrots. And I'll cook the carrots. And I'll do whatever I have to do to survive" (633). Shelly, in contrast to Vince who initially thinks of escaping from the nightmarish atmosphere of his grandparents' house, determines to adapt to the new odd environment and to deal with this deteriorated family situation as best as she can. Shelly expresses her kindness towards Tilden; she, rather than the alienated Halie, cares so much for him.

On the social level, gender equality in the Sixties was a matter that both sexes took upon themselves in order to reach a resolution. The roles and perceptions of women were radically changed by Women's Movement that called for women's equality. Women, till the 1960s, were thought of as merely housewives, as simple servants to their male counter parts, obeying their husbands without independence of thought, not sharing ideas or taking decisions, as bed partners, and as being confined to the private sphere (the family) rather than the public one (business place). Women's Movement reshaped the vision towards women by permitting them to go outside the borders of the house sphere, to vote, to participate in the work force, to be active agents in the society, and even to compete man. In Shepard's early plays, women are given peripheral roles, being depicted as passive survivors. In his family trilogy, Shepard does not escape male violence and female subjugation. Shepard pushes his female characters off stage, "denying them presence or voice in his plays". This "has promoted many critics to detect misogyny in his treatment of women" (McDonough, "The Politics" 65). In deconstructionist terms, Shepard makes 'men' the centre, engaging in a play of opposites (male-female); giving a privileged position to men, then converting the hierarchy by depicting rebellious women and dysfunctional men. Although his females appear rebellious, Shepard deconstructs the hierarchy once again by depicting their failure to attain a position over or equal to men.

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In Shepard's phallogocentric works, women are treated as the Other, the Object, the second sex, the scapegoat and the supernumerary bone of Man in the paternal-masculine imagination. There is a "zero gravity of women" in his plays (Marranca 31). His depiction of submissive women acquires psychoanalytic and feminist dimensions. Ruth Foley points out that there appeared several approaches of feminist criticism that examine and analyze the psychology and the socio-economic position of women as represented in literature: "Some of the specialized feminist approaches to studying literature are socio-historical feminism, which examines literature as it represents women and culture; Marxist feminism, which studies female economic oppression; psychoanalytical feminism, which uncovers the unconscious and the repression of women's thoughts; post-colonial feminism, which relates to the psych-political "other"; and the linguistic approach that discerns gender differences ..." (6).

The shared goal of feminist criticism, remarks Weedon, "is to demonstrate how texts constitute gender for the reader in class- and race-specific ways and how these modes of femininity and masculinity relate to the broader network of discourses on gender both in the past and in the present" (168). Shepard follows both the patriarchal notions of his society that privilege men over women and the literary gothic tradition that portrays women as corpses. Ann Hall remarks that "The fascination with the frozen, female form persists throughout many literary genres and historical periods. The texts of the Americans Henry James, Edgar Allen Poe, William Faulkner, and Edith Wharton, for example, are littered with females corpses" (1). Florence Falk, in "Men Without Women: The Shepard Landscape", points out that in Shepard's dramas females are given a marginalized position and obligated to live vicariously through the men to whom they are attached. "Survival is the name of the game, and women traversing the male frontier learn stratagems to stay out of the crossfire and endure quietly" (98). Shepard's female characters are "compelled to adapt themselves as best they can to the exigencies of the male world to survive" (99). Generally, women are a "group of camp followers, and the men treat these 'bitches,' 'broads,' and 'stupid fucking cunts' as recalcitrant and dangerous possessions" (102).

Lynda Hart, in her reproachful feminist critical essay "Sam Shepard's Pornographic Visions" (1988), remarks that Shepard's female characters inhabit identities that exist outside men's attachments. Women are subjugated to the role of the Other while men act as "the 'true' spokesman for America" (69). Shepard, whose works ought to exemplify the culture of the Sixties when women sought for liberty, offers "a dangerous reinstatement of the very values he seeks to

undermine" (71). Hart goes on remarking that "literary representations condone violence against women" and Shepard follows such representations by his interest in machismo (81). Shepard, remarks Catherine A. Schuler, "rationalizes male violence and softens its consequences to appeal to the sentimentality of American audiences" (qtd. in Cuenca-Aguilar 339). Leonard Mustazza argues that at least in *Buried Child*, Shepard centers the play around male characters while the female ones "receive far less attention" as their "behavior is obviously less eccentric" (36).

Feminist studies have paid much attention to the issue of the marginalized woman depicted in canonical literature or male-authored texts. Such studies hold that in patriarchal societies and in male-authored texts that have produced certain sexist ideologies, women have always been subordinated to men and used as tools upon which men project their wrong doings. Female victimization or derogation has been noticed across such texts. Moreover, violence was a privilege for men to exercise in patriarchal societies. Sexist ideology and discrimination, having been widespread during the Fifties, prohibited any enterprise for a women's liberation movement: "social conditions conspired to destroy the independence women had begun to discover during the war. Mass media messages inundated women with propaganda that encouraged them to believe that their fulfillment was in homemaking, child rearing, and being subservient to men. Psychoanalysis was used to condition women" (Carney 43). The main objectives of the sexist ideology were to maintain the image of the typical housewife who is supposed to depend on her husband's economic resources, to look after her children, and to be confined to the household sphere. Shepard's dramas, among them are *Curse* and *Buried Child*, that include "dominant men and subjugated women" represent in some ways "a throwback to the culture of the 1950s. Imitating the culture of the time, Shepard seems to ignore female characterization in his early plays. He marginalizes the female characters and denies them the right to resist the men's tyranny or to speak their own minds" (Abou El-Leil 24). Negatively portrayed, Shepard's female characters are "much less important and intelligent" while the voice- of consciousness, of the emotions, of reason, of triumph, and of failure, too- and finally America- is a man's voice" : Shepard "is not simply traditional in his view of women, but downright oppressive" (Marranca 28-31). Wilson calls Shepard's work "masculine ideology" ("*Fool of Desire: The Spectator ...*" 54).

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One of the branches of feminist criticism, widely known as "images of women", is concerned with examining how women characters are portrayed in literature. One of the leading exponents of such an approach is Josephine Donovan. In her article, "Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as a Moral Criticism", reprinted in K. M. Newton's *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader* (1989), Donovan examines the sexist ideology that promotes the concept of woman as the Object and the Other, referring to such works as Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Goethe's *Faust* that neither faithfully nor fairly present the inside of women's experience, and believing in the inseparability between the aesthetic and the moral aspects of works of art. For Donovan, women in literature written by men are seen as objects that lack in authentic identity: Women "are for the most part seen as Other, as Objects, of interest only insofar as they serve or detract from the goals of the male protagonist" (264). This male-authored literature is "alien from a female point of view because it denies her essential selfhood" (264). One of the major premises of "images of women" branch of feminist criticism is the attempt to assess the authenticity (the self-evaluation) of the female figures. Authenticity functions as being opposed to stereotypical images: the French philosopher Sartre "defined the latter [stereotypical images] as the en-soi, the in-self or the object-self, as opposed to the authentic pour-soi or for-itself, which is the critical or reflective consciousness capable of forming projects" (Donovan 264). Donovan goes on pointing out that Western culture has been dominated by patriarchal ideology for several centuries; it still offers extremely negative images of women. The ideology contained within the male-authored texts upholds patriarchal values wherein women are derogated and treated as scapegoats: "one of the central problems of Western literature is that in much of it women are not human beings, seats of consciousness. They are objects, who are used to facilitate, explain away, or redeem the projects of men . . . women are the objects, the scapegoats, of much cruelty and evil" (267).

There are indications that underline Shepard's depiction of women during the 1950s era. In *Buried Child*, the time of the play's action and the characters' ages are important elements in this respect. The play resolves around incest and infanticide committed in 1935. Dodge is in his seventies; Halie in her mid-sixties; their oldest son in his early forties; Bradley younger than Tilden by about five years. In this respect, Audra Blaser points out that

The ages of the adult children in this play prove enlightening in respect to

building a connection between Halie (their mother) and a myth of motherhood from the fifties. Given that the play is set in 1978, the year in which Shepard wrote it, Halie's oldest son, Tilden, could not have been born any earlier than 1930. A birth year in the early 1930s places Tilden in his late forties . . . Bradley is five years younger than Tilden . . . , placing his birth in the mid to late 1930s. . . One may argue that the myth of motherhood during the depression era may have had a stronger effect on Halie's sense of self. Yet while Halie may not have had her children, she certainly did raise them in the lengthy time frame in which the mystique thrived: 1945 – 1963. Directly after World War II, Tilden would have been no older than sixteen, and Bradley no older than eleven. Ansel might have been even younger yet. Based on this information, all three of Halie's older sons would have been in their childhood or adolescence when the mystique emerged as a major socio-cultural force. (36)

Freud founds his analysis of man-woman relations on the biological (physical) difference between the two sexes. For Freud, the divergence in the sex organs refers to the essential difference between a man and a woman. This fundamental distinction or lack results in all the other divergences on the psychological level. Freud embraces the belief that woman is a pale emulation of the male: she is sexually passive. The male is seen as the prototype, or the model, and the female is seen as an aberration from the norm (Motzer 45). As the female is deprived of a penis, she comes to believe she has lost hers, and ultimately, endeavors to have male children in an attempt to regain what is lost: "a girl develops penis envy, a counterpart to a boy's castration anxiety. She believes she has lost her penis . . . Freud wrote that an adult woman's love for a man is always tinged with penis envy, for which she can partially compensate by having a male child " (Schultz and Schultz 60).

In classical Freudian psychoanalysis, women's devaluation accounts for their genital deficiency and that femininity is a natural outcome of penis-envy: "The girl's castration complex and penis envy are the cause of her switch in object, from mother to father : mother is resented for having failed to provide the girl with the valued penis , and devalued, as she now appears castrated; phallic activity is renounced in favor of passivity ; the wish for a penis, remarks Carol Moore, is replaced with a wish for a child from the father (10). In Sam Shepard's dramas, violence is inseparable part of the male characterization. In this universe, men are socialized in aggressiveness, as happens in the world real. Feminist criticism has observed this recurring feature in the texts of Shepard, who

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recognizes the fundamental role that grants them to violence as a way to define self. The woman is seen as non-man, and everything feminized is conceived as inferior

Simone de Beauvoir's most often cited work *The Second Sex* (1949/ 1976) argues that across history women have been reduced to objects for their male counterpart. Beauvoir, as a feminist theorist and critic, provides in her book challenging feminist insights against the several forms of oppression enacted against women by patriarchy, the male-dominated society and the masculine discourse. Undoubtedly, Beauvoir was the first to give insight into the notions that a woman is the Other for men, masculinity is associated with elevation, positivity, intelligibility, culture, civilization, and reason, whereas womanhood is degraded to the level of passivity, corporality, sensitivity, dependence and nature. Women are seen as "imperfect" men and "incidental" beings. Women have been socially dominated, sexually objectified, and personally deprived of autonomy. Beauvoir notes that "man represents the positive and the neutral . . . ; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria" (xxi). The relationship between a man and a woman sounds like that of between a master and a slave. For Beauvoir, man was viewed as the Subject, the Absolute, and the One whereas woman is the Object and something that is incidental whose identity is specified by the One: "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (xvi). Quoting Benda's words, Beauvoir writes "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man" (xvi). Whereas man is linked with transcendence, reason, and freedom, woman is associated with immanence and flesh (xxix).

Although Shepard, in *Curse*, portrays Emma as an independent 4-H Club student, Wesley's violence towards her reaffirms the patriarchal notions of male violence and female subjugation. Feeling abused at the hands of her brother, Emma dreams of occupying male jobs and tries to ride the family's horse. However, her trials are doomed to failure. She falls on ground and is led to jail due to her firing of Ellis's bar. In other words, her attempts to be like males are in vain. This stresses the patriarchal notion that women cannot arise above their domestic functions and any trial is doomed to failure, if not punishment. Wesley's urinating on his sister's charts is an illustration of the male violence directed against women. Wesley rationalizes his violence by pointing out that his sister will remember the day her brother opens her mind. Shepard, remarks Catherine Schuler, "reveals himself to be an essentially romantic writer who

rationalizes male violence and softens its consequence to appeal to the sentimentality of American audiences" (qtd. in Volks 6). Earlier, Weston's breaking of the front door, his abusing of his wife, and Ella's yelling all confirm the subjugation of women. "The abundance of violence in Shepard's plays raises to explore the roots and causes of stereotypical male behavior in our society" (Volks 5).

Luce Irigaray, among other feminists who believe that the major reason for sexual inequality is that female sexuality is pronounced as "lack" in Freudian psychoanalytic concepts, advocates that our claims to equality can better be grounded in a certain frame so that "women might be equal with men as women—not the same as men, but different, yet equal nevertheless" (VanderBerg 12). Irigaray argues that in order for women to enjoy equality, they should not claim their right to be the same as men. Rather, they must claim difference: "This does not mean that we should not fight for equality, but only that this fight does not need to be reduced to claims of similarity or commonality" (VanderBerg 12-13). Irigaray, in *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, writes: "To demand equality as women is, it seems to me, a mistaken expression of a real objective. The demand to be equal presupposes a point of comparison. To whom or to what do women want to be equalized? To men? To a salary? To a public office? To what standard? Why not to themselves?" (qtd. in VanderBerg 13).

Irigaray condemns the patriarchal society that always looks at women as commodities that could be exchanged among men or groups of men: "woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men" (qtd. in Yan 24). Irigaray believes that woman, in the patriarchal communities, is perceived as a mirror and an object of desire. "She is silenced, unable to express her own desires" (qtd. in Yan 25). She also believes that in the male imagination, a woman's value lies in her ability to bear children. This reproduction or fertility ability is the one that gives a woman a value: "Mothers are essential to its (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [reproductive of children and of the labor force ...]. Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it" (qtd. in Yan 24). Moreover, in the male-oriented society, explains Irigaray, women were looked at as whores, bitches, clumsy fucking cunts, and virginals: "The virginal woman. . . is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. . . .The prostitute remains to be considered. . . .However, these qualities have "value" only because they have already been appropriated by a man, and because they serve as the locus of relations—hidden ones—between men" (qtd. in Yan 101).

In *Shepard's Curse*, Ella is seen as a commodity that can be exchanged between the legal husband Weston and the illegal lover

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Taylor. Ella put her hopes for selling the house on the attorney Taylor who finally deceives her and her husband. Depicting Ella and Halie, in *Curse and Buried Child*, as whore-wife-mothers stresses the patriarchal notions that man is the Logos while woman is the Eros, that women are objects to be exchanged and that they are prostitutes. Even Emma, the virgin daughter of Weston and Ella, succeeds in escaping from jail by making sensual love with the sergeant.

Betty Friedan, another famous feminist theorist, a reformer in Women's Liberation Movement and usually regarded as the founder of the modern women's movement in America, in her influential book *The Feminine Mystique* defies American women to discard their imprisonment to the private sphere (home) and take lively role in the public or the business sphere. The time in which Friedan wrote this book was in the early Sixties when the Civil Rights Movement was at its heights: "The time frame in which Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, the early 1960s, was the height of the Civil Rights Movement in this country. Friedan could have tied her analogy of slavery to civil rights-related headlines published daily in every newspaper in the nation to help her explain and define a fight against "oppression." (Carney 26). For Friedan, "[t]he feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" and "[t]he mistake, says the mystique, the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (Friedan 43). The feminine mystique made "certain concrete finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence—as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children—into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity" (43).

Shepard took it upon himself to display, in *Curse and Buried Child*, the changing role of women and their impact on family relationships (DeRose ix). However, as Shepard upholds the patriarchal notions of his male-oriented society, he depicts the failure of women to rise above their marginalized position. This does not mean that Shepard's female characters are totally passive or victimized. He just shows their desire and failure to be independent. Although Shepard, in *Curse and Buried Child*, demythologizes the stereotypical feminine behavior of both Ella and Halie as they do not function as homemakers, helpmates and nurturers for their children, they fail to gain anything from

revolting against this non-traditional matrix. Moreover, by abdicating such socially held functions, they are portrayed negatively.

Both women search for gratifying their libidinal desires and economic goals at the expense of their children. Ella fails to perform the role of protector as she is motivated by her infidelity in her night rendezvous with Taylor and by her scheme to sell the family farm. She only cares for her egotistic needs, ignoring her familial and marital commitments. Likewise, Halie spends her day hours by meeting Father Dewis whom she asks to build a statue for commemorating her dead son Ansel. She lives in the past, ignoring the bitter presence of her family. She leaves her dying husband and crippled sons without care. The rebellious and the negligent behaviors of Ella and Halie proving to be useless reinforce "patriarchal attitudes that women who don't look after their children are not performing their "jobs" correctly, and that women are unable to survive when they do not have a male protector catering to, caring for, and dominating them" (Volks 50). In other words, without the dominating role of their men, such women can achieve nothing, even in their revolting attitudes. They betrayed their men and contrived devices to fulfill their own desires behind the backs of their men; therefore, they deserve failure and curse. In *Curse*, Taylor leaves Ella alone at the arrival of Ellis and the policeman. Likewise, in *Buried Child*, Father Dewis cannot erase the chaos spreading in Dodge's house at the end of the play. Taylor and Father Dewis are portrayed as illusions both Ella and Halie cling to for illustrating that wives, without their own legal husbands, are nothingness; they are doomed to failure and suffering. In "Women and Other Men in Sam Shepard's Plays", Rudolf Berben remarks that according to Marranca's views, Shepard's women are always subjugated to men, "absorbed in simple activities and simplistic thoughts. They are wives, girlfriends, and mothers who are always connected to someone or something" (29).

Both Ella and Halie appear as ambivalent mothers and wives; they are of a dual nature. The dual nature is manifested in the fact that sometimes they appear to be concerned mothers, other times they are careless and egotistic. In *Curse*, Ella attempts to replenish the refrigerator with food; however, her forthcoming actions disprove that concern. When Ella knows that her daughter Emma is going to ride the made horse, she just tells her son Wesley that his sister appears reckless and exposes her life to danger. She appears passive towards her daughter's adolescent actions. Phyllis Randall points out that "Sometimes she is the concerned mother looking out for her children; other times she is the selfish woman embittered by all she has missed in life. At one moment she is concerned

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about the danger to Emma in taking a wild horse, and the next she is complacent about it since she does not want to bother herself to go look" (qtd. in Volks 5-51). Ella tells Wesley that she has locked the door against her husband as she has been afraid of him. However, she blames Wesley for picking up the pieces of the door and throwing them in the wheelbarrow, telling him that his father is the one who should do this as he has been the intruder. Ella also calls the police to save her life from the drunken Weston; however she claims that she attempts to keep her family in a good condition. Ella's action of boiling her daughter's chicken is another instance of her negligence towards Emma's aspiration. She also appears passive towards her son Wesley's pissing on Emma's 4-H Club demonstration charts. At other times, she appears a concerned mother; as Emma is experiencing her first menstruation, she gives her pieces of advice. However, such pieces of advice appear to be lies. She warns her daughter not to go swimming when that happens.

The institution of the family was questioned in the 1960s. The generational struggle (Old vs. Young) increased noticeably in the Sixties, each generation held its own values. The nuclear family was criticized for breeding passive, machine-like, narrow-minded, and psychologically repressed young generations. One of the most outstanding myths that Shepard assails in *Curse* and *Buried Child*, among other dramas, is the idealistic dogma of a stable, traditional and mutually interdependent family institution. He succeeds in denying this myth by presenting a gothic portrait of families who suffer from insufficient love, physical and psychic disharmony. Shepard is included in social criticism by delineating multiple gothic images of dysfunctional American family whose members are estranged from each other and abandon their traditionally prescribed roles. A unique label attached to Shepard's name is the playwright's continuing criticism of the myth of the cohesive family institution in which its members are suffering from physical, emotional and psychic wounds. Shepard accomplishes this through thematization, characterization, imagery and symbolism (Shields 1). Shepard attacks the long-held beliefs about the American family of the fifties when it was portrayed, through various media means, as a kind of social harmony: "With his plays Shepard sends out distress signals about the degenerative state of American society. The images that he creates in the imagination of his audience come together as a metaphoric model of the American experience. The part of that experience that Shepard portrays with an especially acerbic brand of cynicism is modern American family life . . ." (Shields 1-2).

On the theatrical, level, the 1960s were eventful in theatrical productions. The centres of attraction were Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off-

Broadway. The former dominated from 1826 till the mid-twentieth century and introduced dramatists like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Genet, Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Pirandello, Ibsen and Chekov to the American spectacles. However, such an imitation was expensive and there were fewer performances compared to those given on Broadway: "Productions that used to cost between five and seven thousand dollars began to cost seventeen, twenty-seven . . . One cannot survive off-Broadway under those circumstances . . . The number of productions has substantially diminished . . . the number of new playwrights presented also has gone way down . . ." (Barr 117).

Off-Off-Broadway gained reputation by being free and its plays were performed in well-known areas as cafes and churches. The aim of establishing Off-Off-Broadway was not materialistic in the first place: "The free admission policy maintained by all the key venues until the turn of the decade meant that playwrights and directors were relieved of commercial pressures and conventions" (Bottoms, "Sam Shepard and Off-Off-Broadway" 34). In this respect, Barr also remarks that "Off-off-Broadway is really the coffeehouses and, believe it or not, the churches; there are four key areas where it occurs. Off-off-Broadway is any place, not actually a theatre where performances are given, and in almost all cases there is no charge made. People come and drink coffee and pay for that but the show is free, or they go to the church and may make a donation but the performance is free and the actors and the director are not paid (117).

Shepard's emergence as a playwright coincided with the emergence of Off-Off-Broadway. As young writer, he could not cope with Broadway and its apolitical concerns. In small basements and lofts, a new generation of young writers became able to disseminate their political activist attitudes: "In Broadway's razzamatazz land of chorus lines and big-name stars . . . there was no space for fledgling playwrights writing bare stage one-acts, filled with profanity, absurdity, and political activism. But at the lower end of Manhattan Island and in Greenwich Village, people were experimenting; young writers were trying new things (Stucky 69).

Shepard's family background has had a tremendous impact on many of the themes explicated in his dramaturgical work. Many critics have pointed out that Shepard's work is so semi-autobiographical that some knowledge of his life is fundamental for a deeper understanding of his drama. Shepard's own emotional experiences of repression played a significant role in shaping his dramatic vision of America and of the contemporary world at large. Susan Abbotson points out

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that although a few biographies of Shepard have been published, many critics "find it difficult to explain Shepard's plays without referencing to the man who created them" ("Sam Shepard" 293). Shepard's characters "focus their lives to a single point", says Bigsby, "theirs is not a stable world. Violence is a constant possibility, love the source of an anarchic energy. Passion destabilizes identity and distorts perception" (1945-1990 172). In an interview by Kevin Sessums in Sept., 1988, Shepard held the view that the sense of family was the fuelling force for his work: "It's a thing that people can relate to. You can't escape this thing of being related by blood. And everybody somehow or other knows what those relationships are. Even though people are very different, those relationships are so similar they form a field for people to relate in" (78). Michiko Kakutani is of the view that Shepard's plays are mirror reflections of the playwright's life: such reflections are abstracted and mythologized in the early plays but appear concrete and direct in his family trilogy:

Whereas autobiographical material in the early plays was either abstracted—as in "The Rock Garden"—or mythologized—as, in "Cowboy Mouth"—the later plays, tend to deal more directly with details from Mr. Shepard's own life. "Starving Class" and "Buried Child"—which both depict families victimized by fantasies and guilts—mirror the "violent, chaotic family structure" that the playwright knew as a boy; and "True West" touches upon his ambivalence toward success and his own complicated relationship with his father, who now "lives alone on the desert". (26)

Shepard was born on November 5, 1943 in Fort Sheridan, an army base located in Illinois, near Chicago and Lake Michigan. He was christened as Samuel Shepard Rogers VII and was the seventh in his family to have this name. He was called Steve by his family and friends to avoid confusion between the father and his son (Samuel, Sr. and Samuel, Jr.). He was given the same name his ancestors had used: "My name came down through seven generations of men with the same name each naming the first son the same name as the father then the mothers nicknaming the sons so as not to confuse them with the fathers when hearing their names called in the open air . . ." (qtd. in Shewey 13).

His father, Samuel Shepard Rogers, Sr., was an Army aviator in Italy who served in WWII, leaving his young son Shepard, his wife Elaine, and his two younger daughters Roxanne and Sandy alone for a long time and was absent at his son's birth. Elaine, as did many women of that time, confronted the challenge of a newborn son alone. The family moved from one army base to another due to Samuel's job as a bomber pilot in the Air Forces Corps. Fort Sheridan was "a

real fort, where army mothers had their babies' while the men were stationed abroad" (qtd. in Crank 2). The family, remarks Philip Greasley, experienced instability as they lived in "Illinois, South Dakota, Utah, Florida, and Guam" (462). The sense of home, with its connotations of stability and safety, has been lost for Shepard since boyhood. He resembles O'Neill who, between his life and death, "lived in many houses . . . it seemed that none could ever be called 'home'. This is one of the keys to help us understand why" O'Neill's and Shepard's "fictional families are dysfunctionally fragmented" (Flath 14).

The family then landed on Guam, a place to which Shepard returns frequently in his writing: "One place that Shepard has returned to a number of times in his writing is Guam, the image of which is dominated by several elements: rain, driving in a jeep (cars of one kind or another are a constant in Shepard's work), his mother shooting a Japanese soldier. . . ." (Mottram 3-4). Rogers VI retired from Army and his family settled in California, first in Pasadena and then on a small avocado farm and sheep ranch near Duarte, east of Los Angeles: "I grew up on an avocado ranch in Duarte, California. I had 25 head of sheep and was a registered 4H club member. I became a thief at the Los Angeles Country Fair where we used to steal eggs and goat's milk . . . I stole a car once in Pasadena and got away with it", recalls Shepard (qtd. in Cho 59). In Duarte, he "really like being in contact with animals and the whole agricultural thing" (qtd. in Crank 3). His strong connection and loyalty to land and animals echo Wesley's in *Curse*. Wesley is the only family member who urges his parents not to sell the house and the farm, in desperate attempts to keep the unity of the family. He also attempts to stop the capitalist project that pretends to contribute in developing America. Moreover, the characters such as farmers and cowboys in Shepard's plays may be influenced by his life in this rural ranch.

Shepard, at the age of twelve, had a deep love for animals and considered becoming a veterinarian. He was a member of the 4H club (these reminiscences could be traced in his plays, for example, in *Curse*, there is a lamb and Emma is a 4-H club member). Shepard's name has its own significance especially at his age of twelve: "the Shepard who tended his own sheep and even won a prize for one at the State Fair . . . and the Shepard who broke the league's 220 high school track record on Benzedrine" (Patraka and Siegel 10). He liked the atmosphere of the ranch and enjoyed working with horses and other animals, around livestock.

Duarte, besides being a rural and simple community away from the destructive imprints of industrialization, was Shepard's first contact with modern

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literature: "He read the beat writers Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and, as Shepard has described it, had a copy of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* thrust on him by a guy 'who was called a beatnik by everyone in the school because he had a beard and he wore sandals' " (Mottram 7). Shepard shows his indebtedness to the European dramatists, especially to Beckett, saying: "The stuff that had biggest influence on me was European drama in the Sixties. That period brought theatre into completely new territory – Beckett especially who made American Theatre look like it was on crutches" ("The Art of Theatre XII" 224).

Even after Rogers VI had retired from the army, the whole family was at insurmountable distances separating father and son. Shepard's father was an alcoholic who frequently abandoned his family and lived in the desert of New Mexico. He was a cruel, violent and indifferent patriarch (Hart, *Metaphorical Stages* 107). Shepard called his relationship with his father as being awkward: "It's a relationship of absolute unknowing. I never knew him, although he was around all the time. There's no point in dwelling on it. I mean, my relationship with him now is exactly the same as when he was alive. It's just as mysterious" (Schvey 15). He developed a stormy and intense relation with his father. Their relation was so violent that both "constantly butted heads in power struggles in front of the whole family" (Crank 3). Shepard's sister Roxanne recalled such a relation as being "hit and miss, always hit and miss" and as being the struggle of powers: "There was a kind of facing off between them, and it was Sam who got the bad end of that. Dad was a tricky character . . . With him and Sam it was that male thing. You put two virile men in a room and they're going to test each other. It's like two pit bulls" (qtd. in Shewey 18).

The conflict between Shepard and his father was so intense that the latter was around all the time in Shepard's inner world and the conflict remained unresolved. The father-son relationship that is characterized by hatred, violence, alienation and disharmony is echoed throughout Shepard's career as a dramatist, especially in *Curse* and *Buried Child*. The Oedipus Complex tendency has two dimensions in Shepard's dramaturgy: the hatred towards the male parent and the love for the mother: it is less explicit in *Curse* than in *Buried Child*. Along his dramatic career, Shepard has a "bad" eye for the father figure (Spart, *Erstling*, and *Boehnlein* 573). He experienced bitter estrangement of his father; this affected his attitude towards contemporary life at large. He did not enjoy warm family life; therefore, in his plays there is little affection that could be detected among family members. Most of them tend to estrange themselves from other

ones. In 1988 interview, he said "What's most frightening to me right now is this estrangement from life. People and things are becoming more and more removed from the actual. We are becoming more and more removed from the Earth to the point that people just don't know themselves or each other or anything. We're this incredible global race of strangers . . . That's terrifying . . . People live together for a while . . . then they split, and they never see each other again. Then they get together with somebody else-split" (qtd. in Bigsby, 1945-1990 170).

Shepard's family circumstances were violent and dysfunctional. His life is described as one with an alcoholic and absent father. His father's abandonment and abusive attitude toward the family --womanizing, drinking, violence-- and the failure of the family members to communicate are recurrent themes in Shepard's works. Due to his father's alcoholism and the disastrous consequences of addicting to it, the playwright Shepard portrayed the patriarchs of his family plays, as in *Curse* and *Buried Child*, as being "drunken, self-centered, worthless, violent, abusive", escapist and dysfunctional (McDonough, in Roudané 163). Not only does Shepard present the common problem of alcoholism but he also investigates the tendency to fall into those bad habits when dealing with the people who share the same problem. Shepard's own father died drunk when a driver hit him on a road. Shepard's father was, as many fathers in his dramas are, a disillusioned alcoholic who deserted his family and drifted to a "final hideaway in Santa Fe, New Mexico" (Luedtke 155).

Shepard left his family while he was a youngster, at the age of nineteen, because the home was filled with violence, alcoholism and discord. He felt the need to escape as he and his father were not getting along (Fay 213). In 1963, he got a job in a jazz club in Greenwich Village where the Off-Off- Broadway began to emerge. He landed in New York and "dropped his patronym 'Rogers'" (Wade 11). He changed his name from Samuel Shepard Rogers to Sam Shepard, the name of the "Midwestern doctor who murdered his wife in the early sixties" (Schvey 15). The new name also "prompted further confusions with the astronaut Allan Shepard" (Wynands, 1). This is due to his hatred towards his dysfunctional father and his desire of being unknown in this new community: "I just dropped the Rogers part of it" (qtd. in Oumano 22). This can underscore Shepard's rebellion against his father, family and society (against his past and origins). In other words, he changed his identity and wished to be reborn. Shepard, upon settling in New York, had had nostalgia to Duarte; however, he attempted to accommodate himself to this new community which

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is, unlike Duarte, cosmopolitan and industrial:

For the most part, it was a kind of survival act. I wouldn't go through it again if I had a choice. When I came here I was 18 and I didn't know anything about New York. I had no idea what it was like except it was some kind of cultural center. At the time I didn't realize I was a kid. I thought . . . well, I don't know what I thought. And now, looking back, I see I was pretty much of a kid, running around in an overcoat. But there is a mixture of feelings. There's a sense of this is where it all started, where I started writing, in this town. So there's a nostalgia. But I don't miss the city, I'll tell you that ("Sam Shepard's Mystic Vision of the Family" 1435).

Shepard escaped to join the Bishop's Repertory Players, a company of wandering actors based in the city of New York. His break and dissatisfaction with his family was signaled by the change of his name from Steve Rogers, California to Sam Shepard, busboy in New York and urban cowboy. The head waiter at Village Gate, Ralph Cook, was looking for plays to be staged at the newly founded Genesis Theatre. Shepard wrote to him two one-act plays in 1964: *Cowboys*, a play motivated by Mingus and Shepard while playing cowboys in New York and *The Rock Garden* which is about Shepard's leaving his parents. In spite of knowing Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Shepard's familiarity with the work of other playwrights started after the beginning of his career like Brecht and Eugene O'Neill (Sessums 78).

During the prolific period (1964-1969), Shepard wrote hastily without any attempt for revision; he did not care about mistakes. He celebrated the spontaneity of writing, proving to be "an energetic new playwright, one sometimes unable to control his creative energies" (Roudané 3). His early plays are "almost spontaneous outpourings, rarely edited or rewritten after the first burst of inspiration. Almost inevitably, they are uneven and inconsistent with radical shifts of character, tone and even dramatic mode" (Berkowitz, *American Drama* 130). In his later realistic plays, Shepard paid attention to rewriting or revising process (Roudané 3). In 1977, he remembers that in his early plays, he "used to be dead set against rewriting on any level. My attitude was that if the play had faults, those faults were part and parcel of the entire process, and that any attempt to correct them was cheating (qtd. in Brockett and Pape 588).

The major themes of Shepard's work reveal Shepard as a mythmaker and a shaman of the **American culture** and **its idioms**. His plays celebrate myths,

enchanted with the American West and are "characteristic of the avant-garde" (Innes 218). They are hardly revised by Shepard: they are "almost spontaneous outpourings, rarely edited or rewritten after the first burst of inspiration . . . they are uneven and inconsistent with radical shifts of character, tone and even dramatic mode" (Berkowitz , American Drama 130). In these early plays, fragmentation (lack of developing plots) is "an aesthetic principle no less than a fact of character or social relations" (Bigsby, 1945-2000 169). They "have been called 'abstractions' because they are not fully developed . . . and they do not seem to have a story line" in order to reflect the fragmentation and the absurdity of the contemporary society (Perry xviii). They "resist resolution with an incongruity between expectations for completeness and closure and the plays' actual endings" (Couch 1). Their most common characteristics lie in the facts that they are short (one-act plays), unrealistic or anti-realistic (their reality expands to dream and their logic is discontinuous), full of monologues and including few characters. They are "surreal fragments, brittle images" (Bigsby, "Born Injured" 8), abrupt collages of different elements or "patchworks of colors, sound, and confrontations" (Bottoms, *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* 3) that resist intellectual analysis.

Gilman comments that Shepard is interested in portraying "the death (or betrayal) of the American dream; the decay of our national myths; the growing mechanization of our lives; the search for roots; the travail of the family" (xi). In *American Myth, American Reality*, James Oliver Robertson defines myths as "models people refer to when they try to understand their world and its behavior" (xv). They are "the patterns —of behavior, of belief, and of perception — which people have in common" (xv). Robertson believes that they are "passed on from one generation to another by an unconscious, non-rational process somewhat similar to the process by which language is transmitted. As language is changeable and adaptable, so are a society's myths," but both are also "slow to change" (xv). Several myths which Shepard assails in his plays are predominant in both American and other cultures, such as the rebirth myth, the myth of the nuclear harmonious family, and the incest taboo.

He has profound and complex identification with America, similar in some ways to the American romantic poet Walt Whitman. He represents, par excellence, the most active and strongest voices in depicting America in its postmodern and dull condition when the state lost many of its deeply rooted traditions and values. He is a "recorder of the authentic American voice" , remarks the actor Joyce Aaron (in Marranca , *American Dreams* 171). For Shepard, America became like a skeleton: " Shepard's vision was one of vacuity,

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of an America that sustains the forms of its myths but not essence. The Cowboy became his symbol for the death of American West, which has surrendered to freeways and shopping malls . . . The Gangster, the Rock Star, the Millionaire . . . weave freely in and out of Shepard's plays, creating a sense of surface without substance "(Schlueter 12) [my italics].

Similarly, Auerbach (1982) points out that "Sam Shepard's subject is simply this – America. The American about us, **the American Dream** that has been betrayed, **the American hero** whose quest has become perverted, **the American land** which has become unproductive, sterile, and **the American family** which no longer nurtures its children – these are Shepard's themes" (1) [My bold italics]. The terms – "betrayed", "perverted", "unproductive", "sterile", "no longer nurtures" – all reveal Shepard's manipulation of the negative, rather than the positive, aspects of the American culture. His tendency is to overemphasize what is lost and has gone wrong in an attempt, like the psychoanalyst, to investigate the causes of the contemporary American malaise, and to link the symptoms to the buried American myths. The most important myth Shepard has investigated is the American family as it will be revealed considerably in this chapter and in depth in the following chapters. For Shepard, the American myths constitute a fundamental portion of the American intellect and imagination. Although these myths are neglected momentarily and deeply buried in the American unconscious, they are alive and influence behavior and perception. Shepard also makes use of the American past in portraying such archetypal characters as cowboys, gangsters, detectives and the pop singers. Noteworthy, the phase of writing from 1967 till 1976 is known as the pop culture period in which Shepard turned to the nostalgic idealized American past. Shepard's use of legendary figures was employed to shed light on and criticize our contemporary materialism, rootlessness, and loss of spirituality.

Shepard's dramatic corpus can be divided chronologically into three phases. **The first phase** "stems from 1964 to the early 1970's" (Perry xviii). Shepard's early plays, during the prolific period, are *Cowboys* (1964, its text was lost), *4-H Club* (1964), *The Rock Garden* (1964), *Up to Thursday* (1965), *Mad Dog Blues* (1965), *Rocking Chair* (1965), *Chicago* (1965), *Icarus's Mother* (1965), *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* (1966), *Red Cross* (1966), *La Turista* (1967), *Melodrama Play* (1967), *Forensic and the Navigators* (1967), *The Holy Ghostly* (1969), *The Unseen hand* (1969).

These plays are expressionistic or experimental, showing indebtedness to Samuel Beckett and other European writers. However, like Albee, Shepard cannot

be judged as an absurd dramatist: he merely borrows some of the themes and the techniques of Absurd Theatre like silence, fragmentation, non-communication, alienation, identity crisis, etc. "Like Beckett's characters", Shepard's "are drawn equally to silence and to a neurotic volubility" (Bigsby, 1945-2000 170). In an interview with Matthew Roudané, Shepard frankly expressed his attitude towards life: "I think hope and hopelessness are intimately connected, and I don't believe in one or the other. In a way I prefer hopelessness to hope. I think there's more hope in hopelessness " (Roudané, "Shepard on Shepard" 75). Such a bleak attitude approximates him, to a great extent, to absurd dramatists. Shepard's vision, like Albee's, is pessimistic with regard to the spiritual malaise of the contemporary American society: "The earliest 'experimental plays' reveal that Shepard was influenced by existential philosophy and the absurdist drama However, Shepard was no existentialist. Instead, he sought to express a transcendental viewpoint, and he quickly became interested in experimental theater techniques in order to transform convention and hopefully to discover and present something unique" (Kennedy 3).

The images and icons imbued within Shepard's early plays come from the culture that includes popular American film, television, and music. He "draws much of his material from popular culture sources such as B-grade westerns, sci-fi and horror films, popular folklore, country and rock music and murder-mysteries" (Bachman 405). He "was the first playwright to construct his drama out of the materials of the popular arts, to infiltrate the sounds and images of popular culture into work which rendered up its meaning less to those who approached it with an analytic mind than to those who chose to inhabit its images and respond to its rhythms on an emotional or visceral level" (Bigsby, 1945-2000 171).

The early plays are thematically unified by a common and frantic search for identity which is intensified by the slight opinion of the world created by the plays. In these early plays, Shepard juxtaposes two worlds: realistic world that is grounded on "conventions and reasonable behaviors and a supernatural one which defies logic and excludes mystery" (King xiv). They depict the social and cultural malaise of contemporary America. They incarnate the 1960s culture: the struggle between fathers and sons, the conflict between the youth and authority, the patriarchal culture, freedom vs. commitment, the cultural and spiritual myths vs. modernization and industrialization, the use of taboo language, the challenge to authority, the rebellion against parents and the past, and the hollowness of the conservative ideals of America and its myths.

The early plays are also populated by young men, rather than women. This also partially reflects Shepard's obsession with the patriarchal notions of his

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society. Male figures often attempt to discover authentic identities and to play roles that represent their possible selves. Instead of seeking identity through introspection or reviewing their stories, the characters experience possible personalities. They are "failed farmers" who "seldom have a job", and "live by instinct" (Biggsby, 1945-2000 168). Phyllis R. Randall mentions that in the early plays of Shepard, the characters often adopt various voices to find their own, to find that they look like an actor performing their role (in King 122). These plays are "heavily populated by cowboys, rock stars, space aliens", gangsters, and "other figures of the American myth and pop culture" (Han-Bin, 1). Such characters are depicted as being anxious, unfixed, and lost. The characters "are liable to set fire, literally or symbolically, to their few possessions and walk out into the desert land, away from the pain of relationship and being" (Biggsby, 1945-2000 168).

Shepard values the American cowboy and American folk heroes like Pecos Bill, the Coyote Cowboy, while lamenting the abuses made upon Native Americans and the destruction of their culture. He is very critical of today's cultural transience. Frank Rich of the New York Times regards Shepard's plays as important for showing that "The true American West is gone forever. . . [his works] display a nostalgia for a pioneer ethos . . . with modern cowboys, drifters, farmers . . . as they jostle for power and quarrel with family members in the neurotic present" (Matthews 3229).

Rock Garden, Shepard's semi-autobiographical play, represents Shepard's first variation on the fall of the myth of the American harmonious family. He deconstructs the cultural notion of the nuclear family; this questioning of the family institution is a feature of the violent 60's culture. Rock Garden, as the title suggests, implies sterility and parodies the conventional American family and its criteria for harmonious and effective relationships among its subsystems. "Lacking any narrative at all", writes Michael Bloom, "the play describes in a kind of triptych portrait a single condition of sensation—the utter tedium and boredom of a typical American family situation" (73). It depicts Shepard's abandonment of his family in Duarte. It is the young Shepard's rebellion against his family and his identity. Shepard is "quintessentially American," an artist whose protagonists "explore the paradoxes at the core of the American experience; the contradictory desires for self and community, for freedom and roots, for escape and family" (Wetzsteon, Introduction 5). Shepard himself says

Rock Garden is about leaving my mom and dad. It happens in two scenes. In the first scene the mother is lying in bed ill while

the son is sitting on a chair, and she is talking about the special kind of cookie that she makes, which is marshmallow on salt cracker melt under the oven. It is called "angels on horseback," and she has a monologue about it. And then the father arrives in the second scene. The boy doesn't say anything . . . and the father starts to talk about painting the fence around the house, and there is a monologue about that Finally the boy has a monologue (qtd. in Auerbach 9)

In addition, as the previous quotation reveals, the frequent use of monologue is a feature of the stormy culture of the 1960s in the sense that monologues uncover the pure self against the constraints of civilization and the establishment. Free expression runs against the constraint of privacy-publicity dichotomy. The privacy of the three characters (father, mother, and son) is expressed publicly and straightforwardly towards each other and to the spectacles. Shepard was aware of the fact that a challenge to actors is the excessive use of monologue that can exceed three or four pages. Therefore, Shepard attempted to eliminate the length of monologues without abandoning them, even in his later realistic plays (in *Curse*, for instance, Wesley's monologue is articulated in about two pages). Shepard once said, "originally the monologues were mixed up with the idea of an aria. But then I realized that what I'd written was extremely difficult for actors. I mean, I was writing monologues that were three or four pages long. Now it's all about elimination" (Shepard, "The Art of Theatre XII" 220).

The second phase of Shepard's dramatic career is manifested in plays such as *Cowboy Mouth* (1971), *The Tooth of Crime* (1973), *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1975), *Action* (1975), *Angel City* (1976), and *Suicide in B-Flat* (1976). In these plays, even though he "continued to write residual collages", Shepard "gives more attention to plot and even elementary character development" (Elliott 1119). These plays revolve around one central theme: the artist as a prisoner. Such a phase is concerned with "the ways the artist must pursue his emotional identity and spiritual freedom even if it results in isolation and betrayal, the ways the poet-visionary is simultaneously essential and intolerable to his society" (Wetzsteon, "Sam Shepard" 254). These plays also show Shepard's indebtedness to the European Existentialist Philosophy. In *Action*, for instance, "the arbitrariness of actions" and the quest for one's identity are much discussed problems (McCarthy 2). Such plays also portray "the various facets of the artist as savior, dreamer, hero, rock and roll star and victim",

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and are concerned with " the artist's relation to his public and to his powers of creation and provides a sardonic commentary on how American society renders its artists as products for mass consumption" (Mahmoud 6) . In *Cowboy Mouth*, "two musicians yearn for a rock- and- roll savior but look in the wrong places, ignoring the magical transformation of a lobsterman" (Berkowitz, *New Broadways* 129).

Before returning to California, Shepard stopped at his farm in Nova Scotia to begin work on his "family plays" –*Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), *Buried Child* (1978), and *True West* (1980) –that are widely described as semi-autobiographical, documenting the playwright's being at odds with his family, especially his weird relation with his father. These plays constitute Shepard's family trilogy and **represent the third phase of Shepard's writing**: "Whereas his early plays were explorations of the self in the performance of various roles including artistic creations, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* reveal an observation of self in relation to a specific sense of personal cultural history" (Flath 30). They share the same dramatization of the conflict between fathers and their sons, and the fall of the myth of the harmonious family. Shepard's style, in these plays, moves consciously from experimentalism (anti-realistic tendencies) to realism. From the second half of the seventies when he returned to California till today, Shepard revisits the traditional realistic style. The plots, characterizations, and language of "Shepard's quartet of domestic dramas" – *Curse*, *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *Fool For Love*, follow the realistic trend of performance

From the previous discussion, it becomes clear that both the cultural conditions of the 1960s and the biographical background of Shepard played their fundamental role in fueling the playwright's vision of the contemporary American society. In *Curse* and *Buried Child*, he vehemently criticizes the myths of the American Dream and the nuclear family unit; such a critique functions as an alarm to the consequences that ought to affect the contemporary Man.

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