

THE FALL OF THE GREAT MODERN AMERICAN FAMILY MYTH  
IN SAM SHEPARD'S BURIED CHILD, A LIE OF THE MIND,  
FOOL FOR LOVE, AND TRUE WEST

---

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY  
LYNN WALKER SHIELDS, BA

---

DENTON, TEXAS

MAY 1993

Copyright c Lynn Walker Shields, 1993

All rights reserved



## DEDICATION

It is with great love that I dedicate this work to my parents.

To my mother, Marguerite Meeks Walker: A girl's best friend is her mother, and my best friend has never wavered.

To my father, Vernon Walker: It is from him, I am told, that I inherited my love for learning for its own sake.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I especially would like to thank Dr. Vivian Casper for introducing me to Sam Shepard and the wonderful world of the American theater and for her tutorship and steady encouragement throughout the writing of this thesis.

I would like to offer a special thank you to Dr. Florence Winston and Dr. Joyce Palmer for the guidance they have given me and for graciously accepting positions on my committee.

I would also like to thank Dr. Frank Longoria and the entire English Department faculty and staff at Texas Woman's University for their support and inspiration during my studies there.

And, finally, but most of all, I would like to thank my family without whose support I would never have attained the academic accomplishments of which I am so very proud.

THE FALL OF THE GREAT MODERN AMERICAN FAMILY MYTH  
IN SAM SHEPARD'S BURIED CHILD, A LIE OF THE MIND,  
FOOL FOR LOVE, AND TRUE WEST

Lynn Walker Shields  
May 1993

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine Sam Shepard's pejorative treatment within his plays of the modern American family myth that portrays the existence of a stable, mutually interdependent family unit. This study defines the family myth, both literally and symbolically, and focuses on the myth as it appears in four of Shepard's plays: Buried Child, A Lie of the Mind, Fool for Love, and True West. Within each play, Shepard's uses of theme, characterization, structure, imagery, and symbolism are interpreted as they pertain to the playwright's view of familial relationships. Portions of Shepard's biography are also considered in order to establish his viewpoint concerning the American family. This study suggests that there is a contradiction between the familial themes in Sam Shepard's plays and the idealistic dogma of the modern American family myth as fostered by conventional sociological philosophies. Shepard's plays demonstrate that the Modern American family myth fails to reward its followers.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION . . . . .	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. . . . .	v
ABSTRACT . . . . .	vi
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION: A MAN AND A MYTH. . . . .	1
II. A FUNERAL FOR A MYTH: THE AMERICAN FAMILY IN <u>BURIED CHILD</u> . . . . .	10
III. THE MYTH IN THE MIND: THE AMERICAN FAMILY IN <u>A LIE OF THE MIND</u> . . . . .	29
IV. AFTER THE FALL: THE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND IN <u>FOOL FOR LOVE</u> . . . . .	48
V. <u>TRUE WEST</u> : THE MYTH AND MASCULINITY . . . . .	65
VI. CONCLUSION . . . . .	83
WORKS CITED. . . . .	92

## Chapter One

### Introduction: A Man and a Myth

Sam Shepard has received a considerable share of scholarly criticism as a gutsy, impassioned American playwright who deals in social criticism. The statement that he is "the most important playwright of his generation goes almost unchallenged today" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes vii). 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. He goes "beyond criticizing the moral and physical disintegration of the American family" (Marranca 16) to an outright denial of the existence of a stable (Gordon 12), mutually interdependent family unit. In his plays Buried Child, A Lie of the Mind, Fool for Love, and True West, Shepard attacks the myth of the traditional contemporary American family. This thesis will examine Shepard's use of theme, characterization,

→ Add thesis

structure, imagery, and symbolism as they pertain to the playwright's view of the melange of attritional relationships within the family.

The mythical American family that Shepard assails is the one of the 1950s, more or less defined and made famous by popular television shows of that era, such as Father Knows Best, Ozzie and Harriet, and Leave It to Beaver. According to the sociological philosophies mirrored by these shows, the family serves as a safe haven for its members in an otherwise hostile world. In order for it to be a place of security, however, the family must be structured in a conservative, well-ordered manner. In its inception the American family consists of a man and a woman united by the bonds of marriage which "affirm that their marriage is for as long as they both shall live" (Adams 15). Likewise, it is understood that the marriage is monogamous. In America adultery is considered a serious threat to the stability of the marriage and, subsequently, to the family as a unit as well as a threat to society's "demand for legitimacy of children" (Cavan 408). Such a union "provides companionship, love, sexual satisfaction, children, and security" (Cavan 10). If possible, upon marriage, "the couple moves into a dwelling separate from both sets of parents and begins to plan for the coming of children" (Adams 15). Because the American family is a

unit based on solidarity and because American society expects rigid adherence to the universal incest taboo within its family structure, "sex and mating must be restricted to one pair within the unit, the father and mother" (Adams 31). A secure familial foundation established in this way acts as "the ideal instrument for the early formation of a child's personality and as the intimate group that guides the adolescent on his way toward maturity" (Cavan 11).

Typically, the husband and wife and the children born to or adopted by them live together in one household as a nuclear family. These family members enact social roles prescribed and endorsed to the family by society and "interaction in terms of these roles gives a unity to the family" (Cavan 3). The members of the traditional American nuclear family usually assume roles that conform to some generally recognized system. The husband and wife work out their own roles relative to each other's but with certain areas of freedom. However, a generational hierarchy with male dominance is basic. The husband is usually considered to be the head of the family. His primary role is chief wage-earner; however, he is expected to assume "simultaneously a familial and a vocational role" (Cavan 413). It is generally expected that the husband/father of the American family "is to work as steadily as

possible . . . and give love, kindness, practical care, and material support to his family" (Cavan 413). As a general rule he receives society's condemnation "if he does not work or if he neglects, refuses to support, abuses, or deserts his wife and children" (Cavan 413). The American husband/father is successful in his career as well as successful at "fitting into society's ideals of civilized behavior" (Reimer 43). He is calmly rational and performs in the roles of leader and advisor for the other members of his family. At the same time he exhibits independence, rugged individuality, and physical energy that enable him to be the aggressive protector.

The wife's principal domain is the home (Cavan 9-10). The American wife/mother is contented to be the keeper of the hearth and finds satisfaction in helping her husband and their offspring be successful in the achievement of their goals, both within the family and outside of it. She is responsible for seeing that the children are adequately prepared to assume their places outside the family at the appropriate time of their adulthood. She is self-sacrificing, loyal to her family, and faithful as a helpmate to her husband. In addition, she brings civility and propriety into the home.

Children of American families are nurtured by their parents within the protection of the family until such time



that they are adequately prepared to find partners and leave the nest to form a new, independent nuclear family. The new couple's parents are interested in them and help them when the need arises, but the young couple is generally expected to be independent and self supporting (Adams 15). In this way the American family cycle perpetuates itself, the central issues being "getting married, becoming parents, making a home, getting ahead, and holding families together" (Caplow 275).

Through harmonious interaction among the various members acting out their roles, the family comes to function systematically, usually in harmony with community mores (Cavan 3). Although family members seek to maintain the family as a group by satisfying their personal needs within the family, they keep their individuality without complete submergence in the family (Cavan 3). According to researchers, the general opinion of Americans is that "the family is a deeply rooted institution in the United States; it is by far the most favored group with which adults associate themselves" (Cavan 1).

✱ This image of American family life is the one that probably influenced Sam Shepard as he grew up in a post-war, pre-civil rights America. Shepard was born on November 5, 1943, at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. His father was serving as a bomber pilot in Europe at the time; his

mother, as did many women of that time, faced the challenge of a newborn son alone. When his father came home, the family began a series of moves from army base to army base. During this time, in the absence of his father, Shepard's mother became a guardian figure for her son.

In the mid-fifties, Sam Shepard Rogers, Sr., left the army and took his family to Duarte, California. There he raised avocados and sheep. Sam, Jr., helped on the ranch, attended school, and, from all indications, led an ordinary American family life. However, something made the teenage Sam Shepard become discontented. Perhaps it was the ordinariness itself. For years later he wrote indirectly of Duarte that it was "the kind of place you aspire to get out of the second you discover you've had the misfortune to have been raised there" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 6). Or perhaps it was the failure of his own family to find satisfaction in the pursuit of the great modern American family myth. Shepard's father was, as many fathers in his plays are, a disillusioned alcoholic who deserted his family and drifted to a "final [desert] hideaway in Santa Fe, New Mexico" (Luedtke 155). Shepard's biographers do not say when Sam Rogers left his family. Whatever Shepard's motivation was, he left Duarte while still a teenager. At the age of nineteen he landed in New York at a time when a new brand of off-Broadway theater was

especially receptive to a new-generation playwright like Sam Shepard (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 1-8).

The plays that Shepard wrote for this new theater and for the theaters to come during the next twenty years of his career portray families not in the image of the ideal American tradition characterized by 1950s television but as a metaphor for the human condition itself, riddled with the "poisons of past generations" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 132). According to Shepard's theatrical depictions of the American family, instead of the family's being a haven of protection against a hostile world, family life is like all life, violent and contradictory (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 132). Rather than its members' enjoying satisfaction and security, they experience familial starvation; they lack a sense of belonging and self-worth. In Shepard's plays family members do not interact to form a stable unit functioning systematically as traditional familial philosophies portray. To the contrary, family members do not communicate, nor do they attempt to; instead, "They are all locked into narcissistic conceptions of self and disagree about the literal and metaphoric nature of the home" (Simard 23-24). They hunger to escape the confines of family and home but are ill prepared for the world outside of family. In Shepard's theatrical imagination, family environment is binding and imprisoning. Family

members are wrenched between the demands of socialized conduct and the curse of a more natural behavior. They are neither faithful nor loyal to one another. Its members devour each other in relationships based on exploitation (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 133).

In light of the contradiction between the familial themes in Sam Shepard's plays and the idealistic dogma of the modern American family myth as fostered by conventional sociological philosophies, the remainder of this thesis will examine four of Shepard's plays in order to determine how Shepard manifests this contradiction on the stage. Chapter two will look at Buried Child not only because it won Shepard the Pulitzer Prize but also because in Buried Child Shepard takes his first quasi-realistic look (its setting is essentially realistic) at the American family. This dark drama is permeated with a "contradictory and ambiguous web of relationships and events" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 138) and multiple layers of symbolic meaning that obliterate the tenets of the modern American family myth. This thesis will not examine Shepard's Curse of the Starving Class because themes treated in Curse of the Starving Class are similar to those found in Buried Child and A Lie of the Mind, such as father and son relationships and the family as a "transmitter of the poisons of past generations" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 132). The third

chapter will consider A Lie of the Mind because it is the playwright's most ambitious play and has the earmarks of the last roundup of twenty years of Shepardian nuclear families and fractured characters (Luedtke 160). Chapters four and five will be an examination of Shepard's plays Fool for Love and True West respectively. In these two plays, Shepard gives the audience a look at the effects of family life as portrayed in Buried Child and A Lie of the Mind on the next generation or the heirs of the failed myth. A conclusion concerning Shepard's view of the family as substantiated by his dramatic themes, characters, structure, imagery, and symbols will follow.

## Chapter Two

### A Funeral for a Myth:

#### The American Family in Buried Child

Sam Shepard's Buried Child tells the story of a spiritually and physically depressed Illinois farm family. The lives of its members are stagnated by the mystery and the contradictory emotions they share concerning an unspeakable family secret involving incest and infanticide. Their familial roots are planted in their middle-American farm, which is suggestive of the traditional image of peace, prosperity, and self-reliance. However, the farm of Shepard's Buried Child is marked by "misunderstanding, fear, and violence among family members, by an intense sense of personal and cultural loss, and by a need to establish individual and family identity" (Goist 115).

In Buried Child Sam Shepard denies the validity of one of America's most institutionalized myths, the existence of the traditional, stable, mutually interdependent American family. He does so by dramatizing the meaning of this myth in the individual lives of the play's characters. What is produced is a sense of their misinterpretation of the

underpinnings that support the myth of traditional American family life and the audience's recognition that this misinterpretation continues to haunt each upcoming generation as its members vainly quest for the fruition of the myth.

Most critics are of the opinion that on the literal level Buried Child is about the disintegration of a traditional American family that symbolically represents the disintegration of a longstanding American institution, the traditional, stable, mutually interdependent family. In the reading of the play, however, there is no evidence that the family that occupies the Illinois farmhouse has ever been the kind of family described by the modern American family myth. Therefore, the downfall of Shepard's characters in Buried Child is not the result of the disintegration of their idealistic traditional family but their failure to measure up to the standards of an unrealistic family myth. The assumption of the critics that the family in Buried Child is an example of the ideal American family on a downward spiral of disintegration rather than a family suffering from the futility of an impossible upward struggle toward the promised land of the modern American family myth is an example of the power of the myth to perpetuate itself in the American mind and in literature.

A case in point is Shepard's description of the play's opening set, that of the neglected interior of a dilapidated farmhouse. There is an "old wooden staircase" (11) covered with pale, frayed carpet. Nearby is an "old, dark green sofa with the stuffing coming out in spots" (11) accompanied by an "old-fashioned brown T.V." (11). These objects are in a state of disintegration, but more significant is the absence of the fact that they were ever in good condition, just as the lives of the owners of the farm, Dodge and Halie, united in matrimony "until death do us part," never were traditionally happy.

The first image of the play is one of separation and incommunicability (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 138). Dodge, a man in his late seventies, thin and consumptive, sits on the sofa wrapped in an old brown blanket, which throughout the play symbolizes his right of family sovereignty. He is staring at the old television set as he sneaks drinks of whiskey from a bottle he keeps hidden under a sofa cushion. His wife, Halie, is upstairs and offstage. They are talking, but often one of them must yell to be heard by the other because of the distance between them. Their physical distance is a sign of a much deeper emotional separation (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 138).

Nevertheless, Halie at first appears to be the traditional matriarch, displaying concern for the welfare



and reputation of her family. She is anxious about her husband's health. She instructs him to take his pills when she hears him coughing, threatens to come down and force him if he does not comply, and warns Dodge that what he is watching on television may be exciting him too much (Mustazza 36):

Dodge! You want a pill, Dodge? . . . It's the rain! . . . No sooner does the rain start then you start. Dodge? . . . Are you having a seizure or something? Dodge? I'm coming down there in about five minutes if you don't answer me! . . . What're you watching? You shouldn't be watching anything that'll get you excited! (12)

She shows the same kind of concern for her childlike son, Tilden. She directs her comments about Tilden to Dodge:

You see to it that he doesn't drink anything! You've gotta watch out for him. It's our responsibility. He can't look out for himself anymore, so we have to do it. . . . (19-20)

Halie even makes an effort to guard the reputation of the couple's son Bradley, who sadistically cuts his sleeping father's hair. She defends Bradley's motives by saying that he is merely showing responsibility for Dodge's appearance (Mustazza 37).

Even more protective, however, are Halie's feelings about the reputation of her idealized son, Ansel, who married an Italian woman with a "Catholic sneer," who led Ansel to his death at the hands of the Mob. Ansel dies on his honeymoon, presumably the happiest time of any marriage. In the Shepardian tradition of marriages that become dysfunctional and lead to spiritual death for their partners, Ansel's death symbolically represents the death of the happiness promised to American families by the family myth. Ironically, the mob that killed him is analogous to the degenerative mob of the dysfunctional family that kills the possibility of a fulfilled myth. In defense of Ansel's fulfilling the American dream, Halie spins heroic myths about his life (Mustazza 38) destroyed by her Waspish idea of anti-American elements:

He [Ansel] was the smartest. He could've earned lots of money. Lots and lots of money. He would've took care of us, too. . . . He was a hero. Don't forget that. A genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And very intelligent. Ansel could've been a great man. One of the greatest. . . . I only regret that he didn't die in action. . . . A soldier. He could've won a medal. . . . I've talked to Father Dewis about putting up a plaque for Ansel. He thinks it's a good idea. . . . He even recommended to the city council that they put up a statue of Ansel. A big, tall statue with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other.  
(20-21)

According to Halie, "Ansel was the best of the three sons" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 140). She sees him as the image of the ideal husband that she does not have. He was smart and brave, a money maker and a caretaker of the family, the inverse of Dodge, the thin and consumptive semi-invalid. Underneath her description of Ansel's leaving home is the jealousy of a rival paramour:

When he gave her the ring I knew he was a dead man. I knew it. . . . I kissed him and he felt like a corpse. All white. Cold. Icy blue lips. He never used to kiss like that. Never before. I knew then that she'd cursed him. Taken his soul. (21)

The basketball and rifle of the statue of Ansel proposed by Father Dewis are phallic symbols that reinforce Halie's larger-than-life view of her son's masculinity.

As the story of the family unfolds, a dramatic contradiction of Halie's initial characterization takes place. She is seen as a dysfunctional wife and mother who admits that she loved the excitement of the horse races before she married Dodge, a sexually frustrated woman who has not slept in the same bed with her husband for twenty years or more, and a woman, who, as a result, committed an incestuous "mistake" with her son Tilden. The product of her mistake is the buried child named in the play's title whom Dodge killed and buried in the backyard. Dodge

explains why he killed the child when he is forced to defend his actions to the entire family whose members have assembled contrary to his desire:

We couldn't let a thing like that continue. We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothin'. Everything was canceled out by this one mistake. This one weakness. (65)

At the beginning of the story, Halie is in her upstairs bedroom preparing herself to meet Father Dewis (a local cleric) for an adulterous luncheon engagement that will last two days. When she returns from her extended luncheon date, she brings Dewis with her; both are slightly drunk. She is transformed from an austere elderly woman into an amorous mistress (Mustazza 40). No longer wearing the black dress, black hat with veil, and black elbow-length gloves she left with, she is now wearing "a bright yellow dress, no hat, white gloves, and her arms [are] full of yellow roses" (56). In truth Halie is not the traditional matriarch depicted in the modern American family myth but a woman who surrounds herself with dreams and misinterpretations in order to cushion her disappointment over a life that has fallen far short of the propagandized traditional family myth.

For some time Dodge, as his charactonym suggests, has dodged the taxing emotional demands of the traditional role as head of the household with whiskey, pills, and the viewing of an imageless television. For him there are no mythical illusions left; the screen is blank. He is "an invisible man," who loudly boasts, "I don't enjoy anything" (16). He clings to his right of familial sovereignty by the threads of his old brown blanket. Dodge is the only character aware of the impending extinction of the family (Simard 28) and of the fallacies of the modern American family myth that the others still pursue. For the inhabitants of this Illinois farmhouse, life has been neither satisfying nor nurturing. Consequently, the sons of Dodge and Halie are either maimed, psychologically or physically, or dead (one mysteriously by Dodge's own hand).

The first of Dodge and Halie's sons to appear in the play is Tilden, the oldest. Tilden is a big, childlike man in his late forties, a former All-American football player whom Shepard describes as "profoundly burned out and displaced" (16). He has recently returned from a twenty-year absence in New Mexico where he had a "little trouble" with the law. Tilden's abrupt return home disconcerts and threatens Dodge:

Dodge: You're a grown man. You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age. It's un-natural. There's nothing we can do for you now anyway. Couldn't you make a living down there? Couldn't you find some way to make a living? Support yourself? What'd 'ya come back here, for? You expect us to feed you forever?

Tilden: I didn't know where to go. (25)

Because of his inability to find a home of his own, Tilden has returned to his ancestral home even though it returns him to a familial environment based on the exploitation of its members.

Tilden is responsible for the two major images in the play, the corn and the buried child. Tilden enters the living room of the house with an armload of fresh corn, which he claims to have harvested from a field in back of the house in which no corn has been planted since 1935. The magical cornfield establishes Tilden's disconnection from the present family and his yearning for the traditional, fruitful family relationships (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 138). He tries to share the corn with his family (food is a symbol of communication in most of Shepard's plays), but they rebuke him. Tilden dumps the corn on Dodge's lap, and, in response, Dodge angrily pushes it off onto the floor. When Tilden's mother comes downstairs, she demands from him, "what's the meaning of this corn, Tilden!" (22). Neither of Tilden's parents are

willing to open new lines of communication with him. The three of them are alienated from one another because of their differing conceptions of the literal and metaphoric nature of the home. The only way Tilden can find to communicate his need for attachment with his family is by gently covering his sleeping father's body with the corn husks. In the closing scene of Buried Child, Tilden makes his final entry carrying the muddy corpse of a small child, the physical evidence of Halie and Tilden's illicit relationship. Metaphorically the unearthed buried child is evidence of the poisons of past generations that resurface within a family to bind its members together in a dysfunctional union.

The sadistic Bradley is Halie and Dodge's second son, who, like Tilden, has been alienated from the family and suffers severely from it. Dodge puts the alienation into words when he yells at Halie, "He [Bradley] was born in a goddamn hog wallow! That's where he was born and that's where he belongs! He doesn't belong in this house! . . . . He's not my flesh and blood!" (23-24). As a result of his estrangement, Bradley is mean, threatening, and resentful, an emotional and physical cripple. Bradley's left leg is wooden, a replacement for the leg that was amputated by a chain saw at some indefinite time in the past. The amputation of his leg is a parallel of his amputation from

the body of the family (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 139).

Bradley is first seen in the play when he comes to the farm house to trim Dodge's hair. As he finds his father asleep on the couch, he violently knocks away Tilden's corn husks and sadistically attacks his father's scalp with electric hair clippers, leaving the old man's scalp cut and bloody and "symbolically stripping Dodge of any lingering potency [familial authority] he might still have" (Goist 121).

Ansel, the couple's youngest son, is long dead, a victim of a Mafia hit in a motel room following an unwise marriage to a woman with connections to the Mob. He is not a threat to Dodge; Dodge never mentions his name. Ansel lives only in his mother's hallucinatory memories of him. Ansel is introduced to the reader only through Halie's long soliloquy, "a comic eulogy to her dead boy" (Goist 116). Therefore, Ansel is yet another example, as are Tilden and Bradley, of the failure of the family to nurture its young and to prepare them for the world away from the family according to the philosophy of the modern American family myth. As a result of witnessing this sad parade of impotent and absurd males, Halie verbalizes her frustration at the "absence of the hierarchical relationship of the God-like father and the heroic son" (Robinson 154) promised



by the family myth when she desperately asks, "What's happened to the men in this family! Where are the men?" (65).

Shepard introduces a potentially optimistic twist of fate into the lives of the characters of this moribund family with the unexpected arrival of Tilden's son, Vince, and his girlfriend, Shelly. Vince and Shelly are liberated; they are "unfettered by commitments to places and people, unrestrained by traditional values and attitudes, free to think what they wish, [and] live as they please" (Mustazza 38). They represent hope for Halie and Dodge's family. They symbolize a family lifestyle free of the stagnation that comes with trying to live up to the modern American family myth.

Vince has stopped to visit his grandparents on his way to New Mexico to see his father, not realizing that he will find Tilden in Illinois. Vince is on a journey to reestablish his roots, to find his past and his place in the life of his family. Shelly gives her interpretation of Vince's heroic quest:

I mean Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it's a new thing with him. I kind of find it hard to relate to. But he feels it's important. You know, I mean he feels he wants to get to know you all again. After all this time. (32)

However, when he arrives at his grandfather's house, contrary to what he expects, no one recognizes him. Symbolically, they are unable to see the potential for revitalization that Vince represents:

Dodge: . . . Who are you supposed to be?

Vince: I'm Vince! Your Grandson! (34)

. . . . .

Vince: Grandpa--

Dodge: Stop calling me Grandpa will ya'! It's sickening. "Grandpa." I'm nobody's Grandpa! (36)

With Vince's arrival, all the performers are in place to enact Shepard's dramatic theme of the usurpation of the father's power. According to the traditional generational male hierarchy of the modern American family myth, the power of the father as head of the family passes to the eldest son with the aegis of the father. However, according to Shepard's interpretation of familial hierarchy in Buried Child, as well as others of his plays, there exists a relentless and oftentimes aggressive battle for the right of sovereignty between the father and his heirs as well as among the heirs themselves.

Most of the remainder of Shepard's drama centers around the power plays made by the characters in an attempt

to dominate each other and thereby insure their inheritance from Dodge, the dying patriarch. In vain Vince continues to argue for recognition from Dodge, then from his father and from Halie. In the midst of things Tilden, still desperate for a fruitful relationship, enters the living room with his arms full of carrots, another harvest from the land out back. This time Tilden finds a taker for his concupiscent bounty. Shelly, from the outside and detached from the family's disaffection, offers to take the carrots and cut them up for cooking. Tilden, "half-witted, but oracular" (Simard 29) symbolically makes an effort to revitalize the family by making a connection with the untarnished Shelly. In the meantime, Dodge, after much complaining, has persuaded Vince, still unrecognized, to leave Shelly behind and go to the store for a bottle of whiskey. At this point the power-hungry Bradley enters the house and challenges Tilden's connection with Shelly, sending Tilden running off stage. Shelly's encounter with Bradley becomes confrontational and threatening as he brashly exerts his domination of her with a symbolic rape as he pushes his fingers into Shelly's mouth (Wilson 49).

By the next morning, Vince has not returned, and a change has obviously taken place in the family hierarchy. Bradley has taken his father's sleeping position on the sofa; he has possession of Dodge's blanket. Dodge, down

and out, and his position in the family definitely compromised, is sitting on the floor propped up against his television. The sound of Halie's laughter is heard in the background. With her is Father Dewis. Halie is appalled at the upheaval she senses has taken place among the men during her absence. She whips the old brown blanket off of Bradley and throws it on Dodge in an attempt to restore some of the previous order to the scene. Bradley is incensed that he has lost the blanket. A few minutes later when no one is watching, he grabs Dodge's blanket and covers himself with it again. The tug of war with the blanket is Shepard's way of symbolically expressing the inevitable power struggle between father and son and the son's eventual usurpation of the father's role (Hart, Metaphorical 67). The power struggle that has been going on among all the characters continues. Shelly grabs Bradley's wooden leg, leaving him pathetically helpless and powerless. Halie threatens and bullies them all in an effort to cling to the nonexistent past, which to her is symbolic of her family's measuring up to the modern American family myth.

Suddenly Vince comes crashing through the screen door, falling on his stomach in a drunken stupor. He sings the masculine Marine Hymn while he smashes empty liquor bottles all over the porch, signaling that he has discovered his

place within a family to which virility is synonymous with violence. Ironically, this act of violence earns Vince the family's recognition (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 142):

Vince: What? Who is that?

Dodge: It's me! Your Grandfather! Don't play stupid with me! . . . .

Halie: Vincent? Is that you, Vincent?

Shelly: You mean you know who he is?

Halie: Of course I know who he is! (66-67)

The cycle of rejection comes full circle as Vince takes on the characteristics of alienation that were first seen in Dodge (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 14). Vince peers through the screen at his pitiful family in the living room and asks them, "Who are you people?" (67).

Vince takes a knife from his pocket and cuts a hole in the porch screen. He dives through it into the living room, emblematic of his rebirth into the family (Mann 88). Vince's show of aggressiveness prompts Dodge to make an oral will naming Vince as his heir. During Dodge's verbal cataloging of his possessions, Vince tortures Bradley by continually moving his wooden leg just beyond the reach of his whimpering, crawling uncle. In final triumph, he pulls the old blanket off Bradley and throws it over his shoulder

just as Bradley had taken the blanket from Dodge. Vince's action suggests an endless progression of authority from one violent man to another (Auerbach 57).

Vince has undergone a dramatic metamorphosis. The night before, in a failed attempt to run away from his heritage, Vince drove westward all the way to the Iowa border. He was stopped, however, by the image of himself in the windshield. He delivers a long soliloquy to his family about the epiphany that brought him recognition of his place in his heritage:

I could see myself in the windshield. . . . As though I was looking at another man. . . . And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. . . . And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized. . . . I followed my family clear into Iowa. (70-71)

Vince has sacrificed himself, giving up his old identity, in order to make Dodge's act of succession complete (Shea 7). As Vince begins to assert his claim to his heredity, Shelly flees, underscoring the closed society of the family. In the meantime Dodge has died. His death is completely unnoticed by the others. Vince is now the leader of the family, the inheritor of the power. He takes Dodge's place on the sofa and literally and metaphorically

assumes the corrupt tradition of his family rather than create a new one. He accepts his responsibility to "carry on the line . . . to see to it that things keep on rolling" (70). However, Vince inherits what amounts to a sterile leadership because, by his own admission, no one is left to be led. He says to Dewis, who pleads for Vince's compassion toward Halie, "My Grandmother? There's no one else in this house" (71).

The final image of the play is Tilden's carrying the muddy corpse of the buried child up the stairs to join Halie in her bedroom. The dead child is a symbol of this family's lack of vitality and its inversion to itself (Simard 31). Tilden has unearthed not only the product of the only connection he has been able to make with his family, but also the symbol of the poisonous expectations had by families for the fulfillment of the modern American family myth. Those expectations drain family members of their individuality and bind them together in a twisted sense of loyalty. With his final action in the play, Tilden has unwittingly assured the continuance of his family's corrupt stagnation as enacted by the other family members.

All of the sons of this corrupt and dysfunctional family are dramatically impaired and disfigured and antithetical to the modern American family myth. Tilden is

mentally devastated because of his inability to connect with the members of his family in a way that will revitalize his impoverished spirit. Bradley is mean and sadistic and suffers from the amputation of a leg, which symbolically represents his emotional amputation from the family. Ansel's position in the family is not clear. He obviously was not embraced by the entire family because he is never mentioned by any of its members except Halie, whose memories are colored by her fantasies. The implication is that he did not have the skills to survive away from the family because his departure from it led to his death. The buried child is evidence of the family's ultimate failure. It is symbolically opposed to the modern American family myth in that it is a result of an incestuous relationship within the family. It suffered the most extreme alienation from the family, death at the hands of Dodge, the patriarchal leader. The buried child symbolically represents the corruptions of the family that are secretly buried during the struggle to achieve the familial perfection promised by the modern American family myth and symbolically represents the failure of the family to produce thriving offspring. However, these corruptions continue to resurface, as the buried child in Shepard's play does, binding family members together in dysfunctional relationships.



## Chapter Three

### The Myth in the Mind:

#### The American Family in A Lie of the Mind

Shepard's play A Lie of the Mind lends itself to a more literal interpretation than its metaphorical predecessor Buried Child; however, its theme is the same, the denial of the existence of the traditional, stable, mutually interdependent modern American family. Although A Lie of the Mind has not previously been considered one of Shepard's family plays, its theme demands that it be considered for study in regard to the modern American family myth. The lie in the mind that Shepard refers to in the title of this play is the lie that the family myth tells its followers. The myth promises an ideal family life to those who are faithful to its principles. However, a familial utopia can exist only in fantasies of the mind because the myth fails to take into account the undeniable primal nature of man which prevents the idealistic human behavior on which the myth is based.

A Lie of the Mind is a story of two families with rejecting and brutal fathers, ineffectual mothers, and

their dysfunctional offspring. In keeping with Shepard's familial philosophy, these two families represent all families that are caught up in the lies of the great myth of the traditional modern American family. Ron Mottram in his essay "Exhaustion of the American Soul: Sam Shepard's A Lie of the Mind" says that Shepard's play

. . . is a play of disturbing contradictions. Its characters leave home despite their desperate need for home; they forget the past even though the present is controlled by it; they are most alone when in the company of those they love; they look for truth in self-constructed lies. . . . The stunning paradox of their lives is that they are inextricably bound together but seem inevitably destined for separation. Ironically, the common denominator between Shepard's characters is their essential estrangement from each other. (95)

The set design of the play allows the simultaneous existence of two locations, Beth's family home in Montana and Jake's mother's home in California. Shepard's parallel sets allow "an intricate web of interlocking actions, stage directions, and language" (Mottram, Exhaustion 101) in order to identify the families' commonalities while they remain separated in their own spaces. As the action of the story shifts from California to Montana and back again, the stage lights go up and down, alternately lighting the set at stage right (Jake's home in California) and the set at stage left (Beth's Montana home). According to

Shepard's stage directions, center stage is wide open and bare, and the "impression should be of infinite space going off to nowhere" (Set Description). Integral to this alternating stage structure are the paralleling and contrasting of "sets, characters, dialogue, and even whole scenes" (Mottram, Exhaustion 101).

The lives of the members of both families are tied together by a violent act of jealousy. Jake becomes jealous when his actress wife, Beth, is in rehearsal for a play. The seductive role Beth has been memorizing begins to seem real to him. As a result, in an uncontrollable rage, Jake beats his wife almost to death. Later, the story reveals that he has beaten his wife before. In fact, he is subject to uncontrollable rages throughout the play. Jake is a time bomb "suspended between an unreachable father and the woman he obsessively wants to possess" (Auerbach 61). He tries to explain to his brother, Frankie, the rage that caused him to beat Beth: "I never even saw it comin', Frankie. I never did. How come that is? How come?" (5). All other actions of the play focus on the significance of this event (Mottram, Exhaustion 96). As the play begins, the beating has already occurred. Jake, sick with remorse and unable to function on his own, has returned to his mother's California home. Here, between Jake and his mother, Lorraine, occurs one of

Shepard's distinctive food passages which symbolically represent attempts of communication between characters. Jake's mother tries to restore her son's strength and confidence in her judgment by offering her convalescing son a bowl of his favorite cream of broccoli soup:

Here now, come on. Just try a sip. That's all I'm askin'. Just a little tiny old sip for now. Jake? Sit up here and drink this soup! I'm sick of babyin' you. This is your favorite. Cream of broccoli. I made it special in the blender. (31)

Jake refuses any solidarity with her and rejects the bowl of soup. According to Shepard's stage direction,

(Jake suddenly knocks the spoon out of her hand and sends it flying. He rips the blanket and sheet off himself, grabs the bowl out of her hand, stands on the bed, holds the bowl high above his head and sends it crashing down on the mattress. Then he begins to stomp on the soup, jumping all over the bed, exhaling loudly and grunting like a buffalo. . . .) (32)

In the context of Shepard's theme of barren family relationships, Jake's actions signify that things that should nourish family members and bring them together, simply fail to do so (Whiting, "Food and Drink" 183).

Lorraine, "Jake's dippy mother" (Auerbach 61), is unable to effectively mother any of her children. She transfers her devotion from the husband that deserted her

to her oldest son, Jake. She coddles Jake from whom she receives contempt and anger. There is no love left in her for Frankie, the "good" son, or Sally, the daughter (Auerbach 61). Lorraine denies having heard of Beth, Jake's wife. She excuses her ignorance by telling Sally that she does not keep track of Jake's "bimbos." Sally and Frankie appeal to her to see Jake's situation realistically, but she rebukes them and persists in viewing Jake's beating of Beth as just another youthful temper tantrum:

Frankie: He's in big trouble, Mom.

Lorraine: So what's new? Name a day he wasn't in trouble. He was trouble from day one. Fell on his damn head the second he was born. Slipped right through the doctor's fingers. That's where it all started. Back there. Had nothin' to do with his upbringing.

Sally: Mom, just listen to Frankie a second. He's trying to tell you somethin'.

Lorraine: I am listenin' but I'm not hearin' no revelations! What's the story here? My boy's sick. I'll make him some soup. We'll take him out to the Drive-in. Everything's gonna be fine. What's the big deal here?

Sally: Mom! Jake might've killed Beth! That's what's goin' on. All right?

Lorraine: Who's Beth? (21)

In this play, as well as in Buried Child, Shepard's characters live with a dark family secret that holds them together yet at the same time alienates them from one another. The secret that Jake and his sister, Sally, share is the role that Jake played in the death of his own father. Jake's father is an absent father (typical of many of the fathers in Shepard's plays and imitative of Shepard's own father). He deserted the family many years ago and died a hopeless drunk in a little town in Mexico. The morbid secret about their father's death holds Jake and Sally together in a twisted sort of love-hate alliance. As Jake reminisces with Sally, his dialogue gives a sense of the covert bondage they share:

We were gonna be tied together. (Laughs.) You remember when I tied you to me. That one night. You tried sneakin' off on me. In my sleep. Couldn't do it, could ya? Couldn't. Had you tied. (23)

When Sally finally tells her mother the whole story about her father's death, she reveals the hostile rivalry that existed between Jake and his father and which ultimately led to mortal violence. Sally describes to the embittered Lorraine the events that took place when she and Jake made a special trip to Mexico to visit their father. Her retelling of the account emphasizes the primal,

animalistic relationship between Jake and his father and the brutish and violent nature of each man. One evening when Jake was feeling restless, he challenged his father to a drinking match, which at first was "like this brotherhood they'd just remembered. But then it started to shift. After about the fourth double shot [of tequila] it started to go in a whole different direction" (87). Their attitude toward each other became one of animal-like meanness "that started to come outa both of them like these hidden snakes" (87). The use of the snakes as a phallic symbol emphasizes the primal maleness of the two men. As their drinking increased, so did their hostile rivalry. They started stabbing at each other's weaknesses "like the way an animal looks for the weakness in another animal" (87). Sally compares the two men to a rooster that the family had "that went around looking for the tiniest speck of blood on a hen or a chick and then he'd start pecking at it. And the more he pecked at it the more excited he got until finally he just killed it" (87). Finally, the two men decided to prove their toughness to each other with a drinking race. Jake suggested a mile-long foot race to the American border which included a drinking stop at every bar along the way. Both men took off. Jake "ran like a wild colt" (88) and never looked back, but his father took a few steps and fell on his face in the street. Sally tried to help her father,

but he turned on her and snarled at her "just exactly like a crazy dog" (88). He crawled up the street after Jake. Sally followed, but her father kept snarling at her to keep her back. In the end Sally saw him "splattered all over the road like some lost piece of livestock" (89). Upon hearing Sally's account of the incident, the prejudiced Lorraine dismisses Jake's responsibility and places the blame on Sally:

Lorraine: . . . You stood there and watched your own father get run over by a truck in the middle of a Mexican highway and you're tryin' to tell me that Jake murdered him? . . . You're the one who killed him, not Jake! You're the one. If he was that drunk, you could've taken care of him. You coulda got him off the road. You coulda dragged him. You coulda done somethin' other than just stand there and watch. It was you. Wasn't it? It was you that wanted him dead. (87-90)

In light of the father/son relationships in Shepard's previous plays, Lorraine's accusation has no foundation other than to give false support to Jake. The usurpation of the father's hierarchical powers in Shepard's plays is always attempted by a male heir, never a female one. Lynda Hart in her article "Sam Shepard's Spectacle of Impossible Heterosexuality" says that women in Shepard's plays "are



powerless spectators to the enduring, eternal, and inevitable battle between father and son" (214).

Jake and Sally's family secret is symbolic of the secret curses that continually resurface in families, keeping their members estranged from one another, yet bonded in corruption, and keeping the modern American family myth of loving cohesion only a dream. Under Jake's bed the American flag that draped his father's coffin lies folded and stored alongside the box that contains his father's ashes. According to Lynda Hart in her book Metaphorical Stages, the flag and the ashes represent Jake's "successful accomplishment that Shepard's other dramatic American sons only dream of--killing their fathers" (107). The contradictory emotions of love, hate, loyalty, rejection, trust, and fear that are shared by Jake, Sally, Lorraine, and their absent husband/father are representative of the realistic ones shared by the members of the modern American family and are antithetical to the benevolent sentiments associated with family members of the modern American family myth.

While Jake's family has been trying to revive him with soup and placation, the brain-damaged Beth has been brought back to her family home in Montana by her brother, Mike, to recuperate. She finds her father, Baylor, entrenched in his annual hunting ritual. Every year during hunting

season Baylor virtually moves out of the house and into the woods for a short time in pursuit of the perfect kill. On a symbolic level this temporary abandonment of his family is his wish to disconnect from them permanently and to be absolved of his duty as head of the family, a duty expected of men by the modern American family myth. Baylor reveals his feeling of entrapment when he complains to his wife, Meg, and fantasizes about his desire for a permanent separation from his family:

I could be up in the wild country huntin' Antelope. I could be raising a string a' pack mules back up in there. Doin' somethin' useful. But no, I gotta play a nursemaid to a bunch a' feeble-minded women down here in civilization. (99-100)

When Baylor can no longer endure the hardship of the brief cold weather hunt and begrudgingly returns to the house, his son, Mike, takes his place in the woods. Mike triumphantly bags the deer that his father has coveted all season and plops the carcass in the middle of the living room floor. The father-and-son game of endurance and displacement is representative of one of Shepard's most common themes, the usurpation of the authoritative father by his son. Baylor refuses to prepare the meat for his family's consumption; he is interested only in the rack, the symbol of maleness. Baylor and his son hunt only for

the enjoyment of the violence and the kill. The violence and the rivalry that is part of the lives of the men of both families in A Lie of the Mind gives double emphasis to Shepard's theory that the men of the modern American family are not the providers and protectors as the myth depicts them but violent and overbearing authority figures.

Beth's mother, Meg, acts out the role of the wife/mother of the modern American family myth, but she knows that her life falls short of the prophecy of the myth. As she rubs mink oil on her husband's frostbitten feet, she gets uncomfortably close to the truth of what keeps the men and women in families apart:

Meg: The female--the female one needs--the other . . . . But the male one--doesn't really need the other. Not the same way . . . . The male one goes off by himself. Leaves. He needs something else. But he doesn't know what it is. He doesn't really know what he needs. (98)

Baylor responds by pulling his feet away from her and ordering her upstairs in order to stop her "senseless" talk. She is "completely worn down by the emotional brutality of her husband, Baylor" (Auerbach 63).

In the course of the action of the hunt, Baylor mistakenly shoots Jake's brother, Frankie, who has come to Beth's Montana home to determine her condition for himself.

Frankie spends the rest of the play on the family's couch. As his wound turns gangrenous, he becomes emotionally and physically crippled amidst the men of Beth's family who are more aggressive than he. Mike demands that Frankie be thrown out of the house because, "Far as I'm concerned [he] and [his] brother are the same person" (51). Baylor assumes the authority and puts Mike in his place: "Hey! You just cool yourself down, buster" (50). Baylor wants Frankie left on the family's couch, and he makes no effort to get help for Frankie. It is as though Baylor wishes to gloat over Frankie as if he were his prize take of the hunting season. Frankie's wound makes him a symbolically impotent surrogate son and, as a result, defenseless in the power struggles that inevitably go on among Shepard's fathers and sons and, in reality, among the members of the modern American family.

In Buried Child it is half-witted Tilden who attempts to revitalize the family by attempting a connection with the outsider, Shelly. In A Lie of the Mind it is the brain-damaged Beth who plays the role of the innocent oracle, unconsciously attempting to establish a new kind of family by seducing her brother-in-law, Frankie. In his weakened state, Frankie represents a new kind of man to Beth, a nonviolent, dependent one--"Gentle. Like a woman-man" (72). Beth approaches Frankie with male

aggressiveness, but he pushes her away. In the broken dialogue caused by her injuries, Beth continues to make her plea for a union between them:

Beth: You could be better. Better man. Maybe. Without hate. You could be my sweet man. You could. Pretend to be. Try. My sweetest man. . . . You could pretend so much that you start thinking this is me. You could really fall in love with me. How would that be? In a love we never knew. (72)

But Frankie is appalled by Beth's new vision. He is stern in his reply to her, "You're Jake's wife. We've got no business messing around like this! Now it's time for me to go. I have to go now" (73). Ironically, Jake's abuse causes Beth to fulfill her husband's fear of her infidelity as, with a muddled sense of justification, she attempts to seduce Jake's brother.

Beth is not only a victim of her husband but also a victim of her rejecting father as well. The description of her father seems simplistic, but in it is a commentary on her own frustrated inability to find the kind of paternal love promised by the modern American family myth:

Beth: This--this is my father. He's given up love. Love is dead for him. My mother is dead for him. Things live for him to be killed. Only death counts for him. Nothing else. This--this--this is me. This is me now. The way I

am. Now. This. All. Different. I--I live inside this. Remember. Remembering. You. You--were one. I know you. I know--love. I know what love is. I can never forget. That. Never. (54-55)

The only characters in Shepard's plays that are able to envision a new type of family based on the nurturing of its members are the ones who are mentally disabled. Because of their wounds, they unwittingly seek a family in which the members are free of the curse of unfulfilled traditional expectations. However, because of their reduced capacities they are not taken seriously by the other characters. This trend in Shepard's plays offers evidence that the playwright does not have much hope for the revitalization of the spiritually impoverished modern American family.

As the play continues, Jake, with his family in "a state of emergency" (63) and convinced that his family is conspiring against him, leaves his mother's home to find his wife. Hiding from his doting mother, he departs during the night with the flag from his father's coffin draped around his neck and over his shoulders. The next morning despondent over the loss of her son Jake, Lorraine and her daughter, Sally, sift through "cardboard boxes full of odd papers and paraphernalia from the men [Jake and his

father]" (108). When they finish their reminiscing, they set fire to the memorabilia and burn down the family home as a symbolic manifestation of their conclusion that all men are hopeless (Hart 108) or that the family as an entity is destroyed (Hart, Metaphorical 108).

It is toward the end of the play that two of the most dynamic symbols, Baylor's blanket and the American flag that Jake kept under his bed next to his father's ashes, take on increased meaning. Both of them are associated with the theme of hierarchical power struggles which are often seen in Shepard's work. In Buried Child, the power struggle among Dodge and his sons and grandson is punctuated by a struggle over an old blanket, a symbol of secure power. Likewise, in A Lie of the Mind a battle of the wills, signified by the possession of a "dark blanket," occurs between the wounded Frankie, the intruder who threatens the status quo of the Montana clan, and the clan's leader, Baylor. As the struggle begins, Frankie is on the couch wrapped in the blanket. He and Baylor argue about Frankie's right to get help for his wound, and Baylor tries to pull the blanket off Frankie. Frankie manages to grab a corner of it, and "they have a tug of war" (101). The stronger Baylor wins out, and he wraps the blanket around his feet. Later, however, while Baylor is annoyed

and thus distracted from the contest by Meg and Beth (he believes that they also divert him from fulfilling his dream of a virile life in the wilderness), Frankie jerks the blanket off Baylor's feet and wraps it around himself. Frankie manages to hold on to the blanket for a time, pulling it up tightly around him and using it as a shield against Baylor's insults and Beth's seduction, until Mike runs onto the set proudly proclaiming his capture and subjugation of Jake, who has come to Montana to retrieve his wife. He brandishes Jake's flag which he has captured and wrapped around his deer rifle as a sign of his masculine superiority. At that time Baylor takes advantage of the shocked and unguarded Frankie and rips the blanket off him. Amidst the ensuing turmoil, however, Baylor drops the blanket, and Beth, unnoticed, gathers it up and takes it back to Frankie. With this act she attempts to give Frankie the power he will need to help her fulfill her fantasy of forming a new kind of male/female union. Frankie has become too weak from his wound to hold on to the blanket, and Baylor claims it once again. In the meantime, however, Baylor has noticed the American flag. He admonishes Mike for his poor use of the flag and takes it away from him.

The mayhem subsides as Frankie becomes progressively weaker, the beaten Jake bequeaths his wife to his brother,



and Mike, disgusted at the weakness he perceives in his family's reaction to Jake, a wife-beater and betrayer of the family, hands over Jake for adoption by his absurd family. As he leaves he tells Jake,

You could use a family, couldn't ya? You look like you could use a family. Well, that's good see. That's good. Because, they could use a son. A son like you. Go ahead. (119)

Baylor becomes absorbed with his possession of the American flag, and he casts aside the blanket. He has no need for it; his command is no longer being threatened by the sons. Frankie is mortally weakened by his wounds. Mike has given up claim to the family and left. And the rejected Jake, with the discarded blanket wrapped around his shoulders instead of his flag, also has left for an unknown destination. He has become, just as his father was, another of Shepard's deserting males. The power struggle that the blanket represents has dissipated. The protection that it afforded is no longer needed. Baylor has exchanged the blanket of security for something more substantial in meaning, Jake's American flag, the symbol of conquest. It is an ironic twist that in Jake's possession the flag

signifies the conquering of a father's power by his son, but in Baylor's Montana home it promulgates the power of the father.

The last image of the play belongs to Baylor and Meg, who have become fixated on the proper folding of Jake's American flag. According to Shepard's stage direction, Baylor hands one end of the flag to Meg, and they stretch the flag out between them (120). Baylor cautions Meg, "Now there's a right and a wrong way to do this, Meg. I want you to pay attention. . . . Now if everything works out right we should have all the stars on the outside and all the stripes tucked in" (120-21). Their obsession with observing traditional propriety in the folding of the American flag is synonymous with the obsession of Americans with the family myth. If the myth works out right, prosperity will shine on the family and obstacles to happiness will be neatly tucked away. Baylor, oblivious to commotion going on around him, proudly completes the folding of the flag and boasts that life is as it is meant to be. By folding the flag, Baylor has myopically adapted the family myth to fit his dysfunctional family. The flag represents the lie in his mind that he has compiled with the tenets of the modern American family myth. He attributes his success to heritage when he says to Meg,

"[It's] just tradition I guess. That's the way I was taught. Funny how things come back to ya' after all those years" (122). Baylor is giving testimony to the ritual by which American families pass down the distortions of the myth to one generation after another.

## Chapter Four

### After the Fall: The Children Left Behind in Fool for Love

Sam Shepard's plays Buried Child and A Lie of the Mind are concerned with families attempting to live up to the expectations of the modern American family myth. In these plays all of the family members are seen together. The audience sees Shepard's dysfunctional characters, his domineering fathers, ineffective mothers, and debilitated adult children, interacting and playing out their parasitic roles in relationship to each other. In his play Fool for Love Shepard postdates the action of the family as a unit and gives his audience a sampling of the results of the family that cannot nurture its children, who subsequently have become "fruitless and sterile" (Auerbach 54). His characters in this play personify the residual effects of the unreality of the modern American family myth. Fool for Love deals with the next generation--the children of the 1950s, the inheritors of the legacy passed down by the failure of the myth.

Fool for Love is the story of Eddie and May, who are half-brother and sister, the products of their father's two polygamous marriages. According to Martin Tucker in Sam Shepard, the theme of Fool for Love is as "romantic as possible, at least for Shepard, for it is a tale of two young lovers, Romeo and Juliet escapees from warring families with the same father" (122). Eddie and May's family heritage is contradictory to the family myth's principle of marital monogamy as a foundation for the upbringing of well-adjusted children. Their memories of their father are those of a pervasive and controlling paternal influence that was characterized by a series of appearances and disappearances (Hart, "Sam Shepard's Spectacle" 219) made necessary by the nature of his dual lives. Eddie and May are also incestuous lovers. They are two fools for a love not permissible by the modern American family myth. They become lovers in high school before they were aware of their common father. Although Eddie and May now fully recognize their mutual father, the taboo of incest does not prevent their union but rather establishes its inevitability (Hart, "Sam Shepard's Spectacle" 222). Their lives are locked in a patterned circle of cruelty and deceit. Eddie has inherited his father's propensity for abandonment and over a fifteen-year period has repeatedly left May for varying periods of time. A frustrated May

says to Eddie, "You do nothing but repeat yourself. That's all you do. You just go in a big circle" (48). May is referring not only to Eddie's recurring arrivals and departures, but also on a deeper level she is expressing the frustration felt by all of Shepard's female characters who experience the recurring nonfulfillment of the modern American family myth.

The action of the play is set in a dilapidated, low-rent motel on the edge of the Mojave Desert where May has fled in an effort to escape her obsessive and debilitating relationship with Eddie. The barrenness of the desert symbolizes the barrenness of May's life caused by her corrupt relationships with Eddie and their father. In this place she found herself a job as a cook and even began going out with a new man. According to Shepard's stage directions, an old man sits in a rocking chair on a platform situated away from the action of the play. He is Eddie and May's father. He sits silently at first, but as the play progresses, he begins to speak, commenting on the action first as a spectator and then editing and correcting Eddie and May's words as if he were the author (Hart, Metaphorical 102). Shepard directs that the old man exists only as an image in the minds of May and Eddie, even though they might talk directly to him and at times acknowledge his physical presence.

The scene opens in May's motel room. The room has a worn appearance and has been reduced to its basic elements just as Eddie and May's long and relentless relationship has been reduced to its dregs (Wilson 52). A large picture window in the center wall reveals only a suffused light from the outside, suggesting a world beyond the room, but in such a transmuted way that it exists only suggestively (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 153-54). May sits on her bed, legs apart, elbows on her knees, hands hanging limp and crossed between her knees, head hanging forward, face staring at the floor, the image of weary vulnerable desolation. She is another example of Shepard's women who are victims of elusive and cold fathers and of mothers who are powerless to stop the progression of the physical and emotional abandonment of the women and children by their men. She is the daughter of parents who attempted in vain to live up to the roles of the dominant, dependable father and the submissive, loyal mother of the family myth.

Eddie is dressed in well-worn cowboy attire and is the classic caricature of a broken-down cowboy worn out before his time. He is Shepard's reincarnation of the son who traditionally exhibits the characteristics of his father (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 154). Eddie has also been unable to end the repetition of male abandonment. He, like many of Shepard's sons, is doomed to repeat the obsessive

behavior of his father, a rootless wanderer in search of a home (Auerbach 55). Ironically, Eddie's incestuous relationship with May is one that should demand permanent abandonment. However, Eddie can leave May only temporarily.

The Old Man, unable to make a commitment to one woman, shuffled back and forth between his two wives, taking pains to keep them sufficiently close enough for his convenience but far apart enough to preclude their discovery of each other. As it became progressively harder for him to keep his two lives separated, "he just vanished" (31). At one point in the play the Old Man attempts in vain to rationalize the abandonment of his two families by disavowing his fatherhood:

Amazing thing is, neither one a' you look a bit familiar to me. Can't figure that one out. I don't recognize myself in either one of you. Never did. 'Course your mothers both put their stamp on ya'. That's plain to see. But my whole side a' the issue is absent, in my opinion. Totally unrecognizable. You could be anybody's. Probably are. I can't even remember the original circumstances. Been so long. Probably a lot a' things I forgot. Good thing I got out when I did though. Best thing I ever did. (35)

As the story begins, Eddie has just driven 2,480 miles to see May. He once again wants May to go away with him, this time to a ranch he says he has in Wyoming. May is fed



up with Eddie and no longer believes that he loves her. She is also jealous of a European countess whom she thinks Eddie has been seeing. Eddie finds May despondent over his return from his latest fling. In a gesture of atonement, Eddie offers May potato chips, tea with lemon, and Ovaltine to lift her spirits (another example of food as a symbol of communion in Shepard's plays). However, she dramatically rejects his offers. As Eddie and May argue about Eddie's infidelities, they move around the room and bang themselves noisily against the walls and doors, symbolizing their confinement in a hopeless situation. Their hitting of the walls conveys their sense of entrapment in a tragic, unresolved relationship and the futility of their desire to escape (Wetzsteon 9). May is sick of Eddie's wanderings and his fantasies, even though she cannot totally free herself from him (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 155).

May: . . . . How many times have you done this to me?

Eddie: What.

May: Suckered me into some dumb little fantasy and then dropped me like a hot rock. How many times has that happened? (18)

Eddie's "dumb little fantasy? of taking May to a homey Wyoming ranch is a symbol of the fantasy held by the

believers of the modern American family myth about the way family life must be.

May repeatedly tells Eddie that she does not need him anymore while at the same time she prevents him from leaving. Eddie "will never entirely abandon May because he does love her, and although she fights to rid herself of torment, she cannot stop loving him" (Whiting, "Images of Women in Shepard's Theater" 499). As a result of being snared in the lies of the modern American family myth which promises that within the family are the relationships that satisfy the personal needs of its members, Shepard's characters experience the bond between blood relatives, a powerful "primal connecting force, which is ultimately deviant and self-destructive" (Amidon 143). Eddie and May's relationship is symbolic of this blood bond. The bond between Eddie and May is "mutual, lasting, and rendered even more intense by incest" (Whiting, "Images of Women in Shepard's Theater" 499). Eddie reminds May of the inevitability of the bond when he says to her, "You know we're connected, May. We'll always be connected. That was decided a long time ago" (25). Eddie and May are "two parts of a divided sensibility" (Bigsby 199). The family that Eddie and May cannot establish because of their

divided sibling/lover relationship is the mirror image of their father's divided families, Eddie and May's familial origins.

Even after family members have gone their separate ways, the power struggle between them, as seen in Buried Child and A Lie of the Mind, continues to exist. In Fool for Love there is a power struggle going on among Eddie, May, and the Old Man. May uses her sex appeal as a weapon of power, and Eddie brandishes the symbols of the power of his masculinity, his cowboy paraphernalia. However, because Shepard has restricted the Old Man to an existence mostly in fantasy and only slightly in reality, the Old Man can wield only the powers of fantasy and memories. The Old Man first enters the power play when after a period of quietly watching the goings on in May's motel room, he challenges Eddie's power to turn fantasy into reality. According to May, Eddie is an expert at it. The Old Man tests Eddie's philosophy of reality:

The Old Man: I thought you were supposed to be a fantasist, right? Isn't that basically the deal with you? You dream things up. Isn't that true?

Eddie: I don't know.

The Old Man: You don't know. Well, if you don't know I don't know who the hell else does. I wanna' show you somethin'. Somethin' real, okay? Somethin' actual.

Eddie: Sure.

The Old Man: Take a look at that picture on the wall there. (He points at the wall stage right. There is no picture but Eddie stares at the wall.) Ya' see that? Take a good look at that. Ya' see it?

Eddie: (staring at wall) Yeah.

The Old Man: Ya' know who that is?

Eddie: I'm not sure.

The Old Man: Barbara Mandrell [the country/western singer]. That's who that is. Barbara Mandrell. You heard a' her?

Eddie: Sure.

The Old Man: Well, would you believe me if I told ya' I was married to her?

Eddie: No.

The Old Man: Well, see, now that's the difference right there. That's realism. I am actually married to Barbara Mandrell in my mind. Can you understand that?  
(19-20)

The Old Man's power is in recognizing the famous philosophy that reality is nothing other than the total of one's concepts (Solomon 198) (a concept beyond the comprehension of the earthy Eddie).

The degree of power that the Old Man has over Eddie and May is demonstrated by the degree of their responses. Eddie and the Old Man acknowledge each other's presence with actions that signify the Old Man's ongoing influence

on Eddie. They speak to each other, and Eddie even pours a drink into the Old Man's cup. May is aware of the Old Man only subconsciously. Even though he is not powerful enough in May's life to affect her audible response, his address to May causes her to become inert "as if she were recalling his voice in a reverie" (Ramsey 10). May is subtly reminded of the influence the Old Man has over her life as he reminisces:

Ya' know one thing I'll never forget . . . we were drivin' through Southern Utah once . . . Me, you and your mother--in that old Plymouth we had . . . Pitch black. I picked you up outa' the back seat there and carried you into this field. Thought the cold air might quiet you down a little bit. But you just kept on howling away. Then, all of a sudden, I saw somethin' move out there. Somethin' bigger than both of us put together. And it started to move toward us kinda' slow . . . And then it started to get joined up by some other things just like it . . . [T]hese things started to kinda' move in on us from all directions in a big circle. And I stopped dead still and turned back to the car to see if your mother was all right . . . And just then these things started to "moo." They all started "mooing" away . . . And it turns out, there we were, standin' smack in the middle of a goddam herd of cattle. Well, you never heard a baby pipe down so fast in your life. You never made a peep after that. The whole rest of the trip. (26-27)

The Old Man chooses this story to tell May because it promotes his resemblance to the ideal husband and father heralded by the modern American family myth. In his tale the Old man and his family are on a traditionally American

cross-country vacation. He is protective of his wife and daughter, and he is the wise patriarch who, by his benevolent actions and uncanny ability to resolve familial dilemmas, has a resounding influence on his children.

As the action of the play and power struggles among the characters progress, on stage, May dresses in a sleek red dress and high heels and gradually transforms from her former drabness into the image of the powerful passion that brought her and Eddie together. Not only is May's sensibility divided, but her motives are also. Not only is May using the power of passion to control Eddie, but she is also using the same power in an effort to keep her individuality and the independence from Eddie that she desires, for she is preparing for a date with Martin, the new man in her life. In response, Eddie makes symbolic attempts to hold onto May and his own masculinity as well as maintain control of the situation by bringing his shotgun (a phallic symbol of his masculinity) in from his truck for cleaning and by circling May's bed, steer roping each bed post as he goes. When he learns of Martin's imminent arrival, Eddie puts his spurs on his boots. In this way he empowers himself for a western battle of courtly love. However, Shepard's directions make clear the fact that Eddie's spurs "look old and used" and have "small rowels" (31). In other words, Eddie's machismo is

diminished with use. Eddie takes his shotgun back to his truck in pieces. He has difficulty fitting together the elements of masculinity as the family myth prescribes.

In Shepard's plays all the sons have difficulty measuring up to the masculine image portrayed by the modern American family myth. Tilden and Bradley in Buried Child are so damaged as a result of their dysfunctional familial relationships that parts of their masculinity (Tilden's intellectual independence and Bradley's leg) are missing altogether. Frankie, Jake, and Mike in A Lie of the Mind are unable to command the respect from their families as promised to men by the family myth. Frankie is left impotent and ineffectual by his wounds suffered as a result of male aggressiveness, a characteristic applauded by the myth. Jake is vanquished by his own anger and frustration at not being in control of the women in his family. And Mike, who even though he exhibits his masculinity with traditionally male acts of revenge, is constantly rebuked by his family and eventually completely disregarded by them. Austin and Lee, the brothers in True West are so unsure of the meaning of masculinity that their efforts to consolidate its characteristics in themselves result in mortal violence between them.

The climax of the play comes when Eddie and May tell two different versions of the same story to Martin

(Mottram, Inner Landscapes 155). May tells Martin that Eddie is her cousin, but while she is out of the room, Eddie reveals that he is actually her brother and lover. He tells Martin about falling in love with May in high school, having no idea that she was his sister. He gives Martin a detailed account of his father's two separate lives and two families, neither of which knew about the other; the Old Man lived with Eddie and his mother for a while, then with May and her mother for a while. Eddie's mother, a fool for love, never once asked the Old Man about his disappearances. Upon each of his returns Eddie and his mother "used to go running out of the house to meet him as soon as [they] saw the Studebaker coming across the field" (46). The Old Man repeated this behavior for years; then one day he stopped and just "sat in his chair" (46), staring. After a time, he began taking long walks, all day, then all night. One night Eddie went with him, across the fields to town. Finally, they reached a "little white house with a red awning, on the far side of town" (46). Eddie and his father rang the bell:

And then this woman comes to the door. This real pretty woman with red hair. And she throws herself into his [Old Man's] arms. And he starts crying. He just breaks down right there in front of me. And she's kissing him all over the face and holding him real tight and he's just crying like a baby. (47)



Through the doorway Eddie saw May for the first time.

Eddie tells Martin,

It was like we knew each other from somewhere but we couldn't place where. But the second we saw each other, that very second, we knew we'd never stop being in love. (48)

Eddie and May's first meeting is symbolic of the force of the blood bond that binds family members together but that can also be crippling.

At this point in Eddie's version of the story to Martin, May bolts from the bathroom, where she has been listening, and says that Eddie's story is a lie. She then tells her own longer version of the story: May's mother, "the pretty red-haired woman in the little white house with the red awning" (50), another fool for love, desperately loved the Old Man. She could not stand being without him. May's mother hunted for the Old Man from town to town. The closer the two families got to each other, the more nervous the Old Man got. Eventually she caught up with him, "following little clues that he left behind" (50). May tells Eddie and Martin,

I remember the day we discovered the town. She was on fire. "This is it!" she kept saying; "This is the place!" (50-51)

May and her mother walked through the town all day, "peering through every open window, looking at every dumb family, until finally we found him" (50). However, the Old Man stayed with May's mother only a short time. He disappeared in fear that the coming together of his two separate lives would "devour him whole" (50). May's mother grieved "herself inside out" (51). May, on the other hand, was feeling the exact opposite. She came home from school each day after being with Eddie "filled with joy" (51). She was in love with Eddie. May's mother begged Eddie and May not to see each other, but neither of them would listen. Then May's mother went to Eddie's mother and begged her to keep Eddie and May apart. The whole thing became too much for Eddie's mother, and she "blew her brains out. . . . Blew her brains right out" (52) with the Old Man's shotgun. The Old Man's search for the ideal family according to the fallacious modern American family myth brought disastrous consequences, Eddie and May's incest and the suicide of Eddie's mother. Both Eddie and May's versions show the chaotic results of a foolish and unconditional belief in the modern American family myth, a permanent amalgam of supportive relationships.

Upon hearing May's story, the Old Man leaps up from his rocker and declares,

That's the dumbest version I ever heard in my whole life. She never blew her brains out. Nobody ever told me that. Where the hell did that come from? . . . I wanna' hear the male side a' this thing. You gotta' represent me now. Speak on my behalf. There's no one to speak for me now! (52)

With that the Old Man makes a final attempt to regain control of the situation for the sake of his masculinity. He expects Eddie to help him out by defending his past behavior. But instead, Eddie confirms May's version. Momentarily, Eddie connects with May and a vague hope exists that this time Eddie and May's on-again, off-again relationship will become permanent. However, Eddie cannot escape being his father's son and the image of all of Shepard's deserting men. Eddie tells May that he is going outside to check on his truck. "I'm only gonna' be a second. I'll just take a look . . . and I'll come right back. Okay?" (54) he says, but he disappears again. May packs her bags not to leave with Eddie, nor to follow after him, but to move once again to a place of hiding from her half-brother/half lover (Amidon 151) and the dark secret of incest that, as do the family secrets in Shepard's other plays, keeps resurfacing, binding the members of May's deviant family together and yet alienating them from each other.

In addition to Shepard's theme of a family suffering from its failure to achieve the fulfillment of the modern American family myth, there runs throughout Fool for Love the motif of the hopelessly fractured whole as it pertains to the unity of the family. Eddie and May's father had two completely separate lives. The Old Man claims, "It was the same love. Just got split in two, that's all" (45). According to the Old Man, he was living one life that was fractured into two halves, just as Eddie and May's relationship is hopelessly fractured by the two conflicting forces of the bond of fraternal blood and sexual passion. In Fool for Love Eddie and May represent the disillusioned lost generation. They are castaways in search of some place to call home and the promises of a new, undefined myth. Their lives are crippled by the failure of their parents' myth.

## Chapter Five

### True West: The Myth and Masculinity

Sam Shepard's play True West, as does Fool for Love, deals with the inheritors of the legacy passed down by the failure of the modern American family myth. True West has a realistic setting and a more conventional linear narrative than Shepard's other plays (Tucker 136). In his stage direction Shepard insists that the set be constructed realistically, containing nothing to suggest distortion. Nothing in the set design should "confuse the evolution of the characters' situation, which is the most important focus of the play" (3-4). However, under its realistic surface there exists Shepard's traditional abstract theme of the impossibility of the American family to successfully attain its goal of the perfect life as established by the modern American family myth.

True West is a story of the relationship between Austin and Lee, two brothers who are polar opposites of one another. True West is characterized as "a 'civil war' of family life, a showdown between brothers" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 144). Austin attended an Ivy League school to

become a Hollywood screenwriter. He is intellectual and articulate. His speech is proper, clear, and restrained. Austin is fastidious in his appearance; he is neat and clean shaven. His hair is combed, and he wears a white dress shirt. Austin comes from the cold, "calm," and civilized northern United States where he has a wife and children. He loves to be around people; he admits to his brother that he hates to be alone. As the story progresses, Austin "frequently performs traditionally female tasks" (Smith 329), such as doing the dishes, making toast, or watering his mother's plants. Austin's older brother, Lee, on the other hand, is minimally educated. His speech is foul and drunkenly slurred and sometimes furiously uncontrolled. He is a hustler and a thief by trade. In his appearance Lee is messy and dirty. He has a day's growth of beard, his hair is tousled, and he wears an old T-shirt. Lee has been living in the hot and wild Southern California desert because he likes the loneliness of the desert. Lee is stereotypically masculine. As a result he rejects any mannerisms that have a feminine connotation. The disparity between the two brothers that Shepard so carefully constructs prepares the audience for the theme of the conflict over fraternal supremacy that emerges as the play progresses.

Most literary critics agree that Shepard's characters, Austin and Lee, represent the two halves of one psyche. Taking this concept one step further, James D. Reimer in his article "Integrating the Psyche of the American Male: Conflicting Ideals of Manhood in Sam Shepard's True West" sees Austin and Lee as "two contradictory American ideals of masculinity" (41). Therefore, within the context of the modern American family myth, Austin and Lee embody the two conflicting ideals of masculinity which the modern American family myth requires of its men. Austin fulfills the ideal of masculine success achieved through education, intelligence, and creativity whereas Lee's traits are based on the ideals of rugged individualist living and the rejection of intellectualism "in favor of physical and instinctual action" (Reimer 41). Because the ideals are contradictory and largely incompatible by nature, the male heirs of the legacy of the myth are unable to bring the ideals together in the form of one persona. As a result they flounder in their efforts to find personal fulfillment as well as society's acceptance. They experience inward conflicts just as the incongruent brothers clash in True West. And inevitably, as the men in many of Shepard's plays do, helpless to find an alternative to the old myth, they continue to pass its legacy on to future generations.

Reimer says,

Unfortunately, neither of the two masculine ideals seems capable of providing a sense of fulfillment or contentment for the brothers. In fact, the intense antagonism which underlies their relationship arises from the dissatisfaction of each with the particular manly ideal he is trying to fulfill, as much as it does from the contradictory qualities that each idea fosters and values. (42)

Austin and Lee first reveal their hidden desires to be like each other (and thus become the ideal complete male) in the following dialogue:

Lee: . . . I always wondered what'd be like to be you.

Austin: You did?

Lee: Yeah, sure. I used to picture you walkin' around some campus with yer arms fulla' books. Blondes chasin' after ya'.

Austin: Blondes? That's funny.

Lee: What's funny about it?

Austin: Because I always used to picture you somewhere.

Lee: Where'd you picture me?

Austin: Oh, I don't know. Different places. Adventures. You were always on some adventure.

Lee: Yeah.

Austin: And I used to say to myself, Lee's got the right idea. He's out there in the world and here I am. What am I doing?



Lee: Well you were settin' yourself up for somethin'.

Austin: I guess. (26)

As young men, each brother longed to be part of the life that he imagined the other to be enjoying. Lee longed for the beautiful women and campus life that he envisioned made Austin's life exciting and rewarding while Austin envied Lee's adventurous freedom. The two lives are not simultaneously compatible even though the myth leads its followers to believe the contrary.

The title of this play, True West, suggests the existence of two Wests, one true and one false. Lee comes from the desert West that is synonymous with the myth of the frontier American West. Austin's life, on the other hand, is centered in the twentieth-century West of Southern California skyscrapers. Which one is the true West is a question without a definitive answer. Symbolically, these two different western locales represent the conflicting ideals of masculinity that the family myth expects American men to consolidate. As a result of their effort to balance the conflicting ideals, men of the twentieth century more often than not end up in a psychological state that Shepard describes as "a desert junkyard at high noon" (50).

The entire action of the play takes place in the kitchen of the home of Austin and Lee's mother in a Southern California suburb of Los Angeles. Austin is housesitting as well as using his mother's home as a workplace while she is on vacation in Alaska. Lee unexpectedly shows up and tells his dismayed brother that he intends to stay awhile, at least long enough to case the neighborhood for houses to rob. Austin and Lee grew up in this Southern California house. It afforded them warmth and safety during their youth (part of the promise of the modern American family myth). The nearby desert gave Lee a place to test his rugged masculinity by catching snakes. It gave Austin a stage for his imagination, or, as Lee says, it gave Austin a place where he could pretend to be "Geronimo or some damn thing" (12). The brothers consider the house to be an "apparent paradise" (Orbison 508). On the surface the house they grew up in resembles the paradisiacal environment recommended by the modern American family myth. Everything there is in order, and nothing in the scene is obtrusive. It is the manifestation of the conventionality and orderliness that are required for the fulfillment of the modern American family myth. Lee admonishes Austin when he asks him, "keepin' the sink clean? She [mother] don't like even a single tea leaf in the sink ya' know" (5). Their mother's home is also evidence of her own

obsession to hold onto the belief in the modern American family myth. After looking around the house, Lee remarks to Austin that he did not know that his mother was so "security minded" (10). He says, "She's got locks in everything. Locks and double-locks and chain locks" (10). The mother in True West is protecting the myth, keeping out the truth that actually it is empty and ineffectual. She is keeping order in the only world she knows, the world of the modern American family myth. Of the family members, Lee is the only one able to see through the propaganda of the myth and the facade of his mother's home. He views the home as the "kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside" (12). "The death that enters this paradise is not the physical but spiritual" (Orbison 507); it is the suffocating spiritual death suffered from believing in and trying to live up to the modern American family myth. However, as the paradisiacal scene is transformed by the conflict and violence between two brothers, "it becomes the literal image of chaos" (Orbison 509).

In True West, as is typical of his other plays, Shepard constructs his plot around the relentless hierarchical power struggle that rages between the characters of Austin and Lee. In fact, in this play the conflict over power and the violence that ensues form the core of the action. Beginning with the first lines of this

play, Austin and Lee, jousting for the power position, engage in a running verbal battle. Upon his arrival, Lee feebly makes an apology for interrupting his brother's work. At the same time he acknowledges that Austin's work is art, he then defensively challenges both the importance of it and Austin's exclusive ability to create it. He tells Austin, "You may not know it but I did a little art myself once. . . . Yeah! I did some a' that. I fooled around with it. No future in it" (6).

When Austin questions Lee about how long he intends to stay, Lee responds defiantly in an effort to protect his rights in the family hierarchy. He hostilely reminds Austin that he can stay as long as he wishes because the owner of the house is his mother, too. Animosity builds between the brothers as Austin offers Lee money to keep him from stealing "electric devices" and "stuff like that" (7) from their mother's neighbors. The animosity between the brothers turns into physical violence. Lee grabs and shakes Austin and yells, "Don't you ever say that to me! . . . I can git my own money my own way. Big money!" (8).

Austin's producer, Saul Kimmer, arrives at the house to discuss Austin's latest movie project, and the power struggle between the two brothers becomes complex. Lee interrupts the conference between Saul and Austin when he

makes an untimely return to the house with a stolen television set. Lee shrewdly competes with Austin for Saul's attention and soon has Saul agreeing to play golf with him. Lee toys with the idea of preparing a screenplay of his own to offer Saul. Unable to put his ideas into written words by himself, Lee coerces Austin (by making threats to steal Austin's car) into translating his ideas into an outline to show Saul. The brothers bicker about each other's sincerity about the project, and once again the verbal conflict becomes physical as Lee turns violently toward the windows in the kitchen and throws a beer can at them. Saul is attracted to Lee's project because it has "the ring of truth" (35), and Austin finds that he must continue to help Lee turn his idea into a screenplay if he wants to keep his job and his Hollywood connection with Saul.

At this point in the play, the brothers switch roles in the power game, and each man is allowed to experience the other side of the duplicitous masculinity as defined by the family myth. Lee takes Austin's place sitting at the table typing his newly conceived script while Austin is sprawled drunkenly on the floor slurring the words to "Red Sails in the Sunset." Therefore, Lee has taken on Austin's role as screenwriter, and Austin has become the "shiftless ne'er-do-well" (Orbison 514). However, their reversal of

fortunes also depicts the brothers' symbolic attempt to bring together the two contradictory American ideals of masculinity which are part of the prophecy of the modern American family myth.

Shepard gives his audience a hint of the futility of trying to unify the myth's two ideals of masculinity (succeeded later in the play by episodes of mortal violence) when Austin speculates on the condition of Saul Kimmer's mind:

Austin: Here's a thought. Saul Kimmer--

Lee: Shut up will ya'!

Austin: He thinks we're the same person.

Lee: Don't get cute.

Austin: He does! He's lost his mind. Poor Old Saul.  
(giggles) thinks we're one and the same.  
(36-37)

Another suggestion of the theme of the unification of masculine ideals can be found in the dialogue as Lee accuses the drunken Austin of sounding "just like the old man [father]," and Austin replies, "Yea, well we all sound alike when we're sloshed. We just sorta' echo each other" (39).

The attempt to unify the brothers' divergent and incompatible personas results in chaos and violence. As

Scene Eight opens, it is "very early in the morning, between night and day" (42). Both Austin and Lee are drunk, and "empty whiskey bottles and beer cans litter [the] floor of [the] kitchen" (43). All the house plants are drooping and dead. Lee is taking "deliberate ax-chops" (43) with a golf club at Austin's typewriter. He periodically stops to drop pages of his script into a burning bowl placed on the kitchen floor. Lee has found that he can hear his story in his head, but he "can't get it down on paper" (40). After a night of pilfering the neighbors' kitchen appliances, Austin has lined up a "whole bunch of stolen toasters" (42) on the kitchen counter, and he walks up and down "breathing on them and polishing them with a dish towel" (43). Austin has returned from a night of burglary with only a bunch of toasters. Austin falls short in his effort to assume the gutsy aggressiveness that is part of his brother's brand of masculinity. Lee chastises Austin about his booty:

Lee: . . . What're you gonna' do with all those toasters? That's the dumbest thing I ever saw in my life.

Austin: I've got hundreds of dollars worth of household appliances here. You may not realize that.

Lee: Yeah, and how many hundreds of dollars did you walk right past?

The brothers begin to merge into each other (Simard 33), but instead of becoming one uniform psyche, each becomes his brother's shadow. Each falls short of living up to the other's reputation, just as it is inevitable that the male heirs of the modern American family myth fall short of living up to the ideal of manhood created by the consolidation of the two ideals of masculinity championed in the provisions of the myth.

The frustration of each brother over his failure to assume the coveted qualities of the other is obvious in their behaviors. Lee becomes frantic for the company of a woman, any woman. He hysterically rants on about misplaced telephone numbers, enough gas to get to Bakersfield, the crassness of the telephone operator's voice, and the inaccessibility of a pencil. He crashes through the kitchen drawers dumping them on the floor and throwing their contents around the kitchen. When the telephone operator hangs up on him, he "rips the phone off the wall and throws it down" (47). In the meantime Austin has rejected the memory of his family back East and attempts to convince Lee to take him to the desert. Lee rejects his brother's proposition as he tells him, "You wouldn't last a day out there pal" (48). Austin temporarily retreats into the comforting world of domesticity. He becomes obsessive about making toast; he "goes to the cupboard, pulls out [a]



loaf of bread and starts dropping slices into every toaster" (44). Austin butters the toast as he tries to comfort his distraught brother:

Austin: Well, you're probably better off staying here with me anyway. I'll take care of you.

Lee: I don't need takin' care of! Not by you anyway.

Austin: Toast is almost ready. (47)

But Lee rejects Austin's attempt at consolation:

Austin: Let's just have some toast and--

Lee: What is this bullshit with the toast anyway! You make it sound like salvation or something. I don't want any goddam toast! How many times I gotta' tell ya'! (48)

The toast and its fresh, comforting smell make Austin "feel like anything's possible" (48), even the consolidation of the divergent American ideals of masculinity. Austin offers the plate of "neatly stacked toast" to Lee, but Lee "suddenly explodes and knocks the plate out of Austin's hand" (49). Austin proceeds to kneel and begin to gather the scattered toast while Lee "begins to circle Austin in a slow, predatory way, crushing pieces of toast in his wake"

(49). According to Charles G. Whiting in his article "Food and Drink in Shepard's Theater":

. . . in True West, the quantity of alcohol consumed is not just evidence of the inner lives of Lee and Austin but an expression of man's need to escape himself and find rebirth. The same enlarged significance emerges from the huge quantity of toast made by Austin and scattered over the floor by Lee. It becomes a part of the general shambles, reflecting the frustrations of man trying to create himself anew. (177)

Just at the point of all-out war between the brothers, they strike a compromise. Lee agrees to take Austin to the desert with him if Austin will write Lee's screenplay exactly as directed. Austin replies, "it's a deal" (50). As the day progresses, the brothers frantically work on Lee's screenplay and bicker with every word. As the play continues to depict the smoldering war between the brothers, Austin and Lee, "contemporary man is shown to be hopelessly divided, continually at war with conflicting images of self" (Simard 34). To Lee the desert is a refuge. He tells Austin, "Out there it's clean. Cools off at night. There's a nice little breeze" (11). The heat in the desert "is tolerable because it is 'clean'" (Orbison 508). Austin, tired of the polluted heat associated with the life of a Hollywood screenwriter, longs for the solace of the desert. It is the desert to which many of Shepard's

male characters run in the attempt to escape the pressures of living up to the expectations of the family myth. Once there, however, they find barrenness and waste. They are doomed to die in desolation.

The brothers' plans are interrupted, however, by their mother's unexpected return from Alaska. After surveying the wreckage of her kitchen, she casually asks, "what happened in here?" (53). She notices her dead plants, the ones she missed enough to cut short her trip, but only absently utters a laconic "Well it's one hell of a mess in here isn't it?" (54). She swiftly shifts gears and insists that "they all rush to the museum to see Picasso" despite "Austin's telling her that Picasso is dead" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes (149)). Her spacey reaction to the chaotic scene is "apparently characteristic of her relationship with her sons" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 149).

At this point something in both Lee and Austin snaps. Lee reneges on his promise to take Austin to the desert and prepares for his own escape by confiscating his mother's antiques. In response Austin attacks Lee, wrapping the phone cord around his neck. The brothers thrash around the scene while their mother gently admonishes them for fighting in the house. As Austin tightens his stranglehold on Lee, she calmly asks Austin, "you're not killing him are you?" (57). This mother is

another example of Shepard's ineffectual women who are unable to bring to a stop the violence that, according to Shepard, characterizes the American male and discredits the idealism of the modern American family myth. The struggle between the brothers goes on as the mother looks around the stage. Finally, she says, "I don't recognize it [the house] at all" (59). Her house, which is the symbol to her of the modern American family myth, has become unrecognizable to her. Unable to deal with the failure of the scene, she declares her intentions to check into a motel. Austin, still violently subduing Lee, begs her to stay. He assures her that he will fix everything up for her, but she deserts the stage anyway. Lee appears to be dead, and Austin releases his hold. According to Shepard's stage direction, "Instantly Lee is on his feet and moves toward the exit, blocking Austin's escape. They square off with each other, keeping a distance between them," and "the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape" (60).

The stage lights fade with the brothers having reached no compromise, no reconciliation. According to Reimer:

If neither brother is able to find satisfaction in the masculine ideal he originally pursues and neither is particularly successful when he relinquishes that ideal in favor of its alternative, the outlook for success and satisfaction based on adherence to one of

the two different ideals of American masculinity is a rather bleak one. (44)

Therefore, a unification of the contradictory and incompatible ideals of masculinity contained in the modern American family myth is impossible and, consequently, this impossibility discredits the credibility of the myth. True West depicts an example of betrayal and revenge, which are two emotions inherent in all of Sam Shepard's family plays and also inherent in the American family.

Shepard reinforces the betrayal/revenge theme in True West with a dramatic motif based on the Biblical myth of the first family. The dilemma between Austin and Lee is suggestive of the conflict between Cain and Abel. When Lee and Austin meet at their mother's house, the family has fallen from the modern Eden, the modern American family myth. The father has gone to the desert; the mother has gone to Alaska. The two brothers are attempting to return to "paradise" (12), the place where their dreams might be fulfilled. Austin has come to watch over it and write a story that will make him famous, and Lee has come to ravage it. As the myth goes, however, man can never return to paradise. As a result paradise turns into chaos for the brothers. The brothers feud, and the paradise of their mother's house is reduced to shambles. Throughout the

play, Lee exclaims cynically (and tongue-in-cheek) that all incidents are "for Christ's sake" (47). Austin, feeling "like anything's possible" (48) in paradise, makes toast for a communion to share with his brother so they might win "salvation sort of" (48)--sort of a last attempt to find the rewards promised by the modern American family myth. Lee, the sinner and non-believer, yells, "I don't need toast. I need a woman" (44) and knocks the toast out of Austin's hands, crushing the pieces with his feet. "Slowly lowering himself to his knees" (49) as if to pray over the scattered toast, the hopeful Austin begins to gather it up again. In the Biblical myth, Cain kills his brother Abel. In True West Shepard spares his audience this final action. However, as the lights go out on the last scene of the play, Lee and Austin, having betrayed each other over a promised screenplay and a trip to the desert, square off with each other in a near-ritual mortal combat.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

It is not enough to say that in his plays Sam Shepard is warning twentieth-century America about the impending moral and physical disintegration of its families. Instead, his message is that the familial ideal to which modern American families aspire is only a myth; its doctrines cannot be abided by because they are contrary to basic human nature. As a result, family members who strive to live up to the modern American family myth fail and, in doing so, bring misery to themselves and the other members of their families. Shepard sends his message to his reader/audience through distorted portrayals of families whose members "devour each other in relationships based on exploitation, alienation, and lies" (Mottram, Inner Landscapes 133). His reader/audience receives the message not through sophisticated dialogue but through the impact of Shepard's own brand of stark imagery staged with his own unique commingling of the dramaturgical elements of theme, characterization, structure, and symbolism. In his plays Shepard piles these images to great heights, and what is

squeezed out under the weight is a cathartic potion that is served up to the reader/audience.

Many of Shepard's themes about destructive relationships within the family are recurrent in his plays. Their frequent repetitions evidence the powerfulness of the playwright's message that the existence of a stable, mutually interdependent family unit is a myth. Shepard's themes of the usurpation of the father's authority by his offspring, power struggles among family members, the destructive yet inescapable bonds of blood relatives, the alienation among family members, and the corruption of family ties that result from shared secrets make repeated appearances in Buried Child, A Lie of the Mind, Fool for Love, and True West.

Dodge, the sickly father in Buried Child, is under constant threat of assault by his resentful and power-hungry son Bradley and is finally dethroned from the hierarchical living room sofa by his grandson, Vince. Vince, the prodigal son who at first appears to have escaped the morbidity of the Illinois farmhouse, in the end is brought back by an overpowering compulsion to rediscover his roots or, in other words, by his inescapable bond with his blood relatives. Most of the action in Buried Child centers around the power plays made by its characters in an attempt to dominate each other. During this game of



control, the alienation that exists among the family members is exposed. Upon his return, Vince, to his amazement, is not recognized by his grandparents. During the play, Dodge and his wife, Halie, communicate only with terse dictums, and Halie reveals that she and her husband have not slept together in over twenty years. Tilden, the couple's "burned out and displaced" son, tries repeatedly to make a connection of communion with his family, but each time is alienated by them. Tilden's final attempt at connection to his family is made by his digging up the family's secret past, the buried child that binds them together yet estranges them. Likewise, in A Lie of the Mind Baylor and his son, Mike, turn deer hunting in the snow-covered woods of Montana into a competition based on one man's displacement of the other.

Jake has already succeeded in his hierarchical takeover; his father's ashes lie in a box under his bed in his mother's California home. The secret concerning the questionable circumstances surrounding their father's death keeps Jake and his sister, Sally, bonded in a corrupt loyalty. In Fool for Love two family secrets, the polygamous marriages of their common father and their own incestuous passion, keep Eddie and May yoked to each other in a fitful relationship.

Shepard also repeats character types among his plays, creating an emphasis similar to that created by his recurring themes. All of his characters have failed either intentionally or haplessly in the pursuit of the ideals of the family myth. Shepard's male characters are not the benevolent protectors promised by the myth; they are angry and violent men. In Buried Child there is the suggestion of infanticide, Dodge's killing of Halie and Tilden's incestuous progeny. In A Lie of the Mind the lives of the members of the two families are tied together by a violent act of jealousy, the near mortal beating of Beth by her husband, Jake. Nor are Beth's father and brother passive men. They are obsessed with hunting and relish the violence of the kill. In True West the violence between the feuding brothers, Lee and Austin, escalates throughout the play. They make a shambles of their mother's home as they take out their frustrations by destroying their surroundings. And as the play ends, Lee and Austin are squared off like animals, ready to kill one another.

Contrary to the myth, the men in Shepard's plays do not give love and kindness to their families. Instead they alienate themselves from their families. They either desert their families completely, seeking refuge in some desert, or they estrange themselves with emotional and physical abusiveness. Dodge in Buried Child, although he

occupies his place within his Illinois farmhouse, prefers not to acknowledge his paternal role in the family. Baylor in A Lie of the Mind laments his entrapment as "nursemaid to a bunch a' feeble-minded women" (100) and emotionally abuses his wife and offspring. The absent fathers, Jake's in A Lie of the Mind and Lee and Austin's in True West, became disillusioned drunks and left for the isolation of the desert. In Fool for Love Eddie and May's father hangs on the edge of association with his children. According to the stage direction, his image drifts in and out of the action for the purpose of making a point of his fatherly influence, but years ago he abandoned his two families for fear of being consumed by them.

Shepard shortchanges the female characters in his plays. He prefers to write about men. He has been quoted as saying, "The real mystery in American life lies between men, not between men and women" (Erben 29). Shepard's women in his family plays may be witless and flat, but they are excellent examples of what women who live their lives in search of the modern American family myth become. In Buried Child Halie appears to be the caring and decorous wife/mother that is depicted in the myth. However, as Halie's story unfolds, her sarcastic criticisms directed at her husband and sons, her failure to recognize her grandson, the possibility of an adulterous luncheon

engagement with the local cleric, and, finally, her incestuous relationship with her son Tilden reveal that the character of Halie is directly opposed to the mythical ideal wife/mother. The mothers in A Lie of the Mind are no closer to the ideal. Lorraine alienates two of her children for the sake of her worthless and violent son, Jake. Beth's mother, Meg, acts out the role of the wife/mother of the modern American family myth, but her husband's brutal behavior toward her has reduced her to a mere shell of the myth's ideal. She is vaguely aware that life is not as it should be. Of the unnamed mothers in Fool for Love, one is so obsessed with the myth that she chases her elusive husband across country, and the other blows "her brains out" (52) when she realizes that attainment of the myth is impossible. Lee and Austin's mother in True West is so fixated in her image of the myth and so detached from her sons that she flees the scene of their destruction in order to preserve her own civility. The only female family members in the four plays to show any hopeful promise of surviving the destructive legacy of the myth are Beth in A Lie of the Mind and May in Fool for Love. They are able to see just a glimmer of a new life, unencumbered by the erroneous principles of the myth. They show a feeble spark of the independence necessary to be free of the myth, but they are so damaged by the violent

men in their lives that a positive outcome for them is doubtful. All of Shepard's women are ineffectual in curtailing the violent behaviors of their men.

The structures that Shepard uses in staging his plays emphasize his theme and the traits of his characters. In Buried Child the husband and wife are physically alienated from each other. Halie is off stage and presumably upstairs in the Illinois farmhouse; Dodge is on stage and in the living room. They are shouting at each other over the great distance between them. Often one misunderstands what the other is saying; occasionally, Dodge mutters his true thoughts where Halie cannot hear them and shouts the counterfeit ones for her benefit. For A Lie of the Mind Shepard divides the stage into two simultaneous sets representing the two families' homes. In this way the audience is allowed to witness the similarities of two different families in different locales as they struggle with their failures to be the ideal American family. In addition, Shepard's stage direction "might be a description of the psychological and spiritual situation of many of his characters: 'Impression of huge space and distance between the two characters with each one isolated in his own pool of light'" (Bigsby 189). In Fool for Love Shepard's stage direction calls for the character image of May and Eddie's father to be sitting in a rocking chair on a platform

situated away from the action of the play, alienated from his children. He drifts in and out of the action only as he finds it necessary to defend his own self-esteem. The action in all of the plays is limited to interior settings with only the suggestion of the world outside. In this way Shepard emphasizes the isolation and closed association of the family members.

Literary scholars say that Sam Shepard exhibits a skill in the use of symbolism in his plays unrivaled by any American playwright since Eugene O'Neill. Shepard's most dramatic symbol is the use of food and drink by the characters in his plays. Shepard's theatrical culinary taste is usually ordinary; however, his comestible symbols are never used "merely to achieve an effect of realism or naturalism, nor are they ever presented to the spectator in an unremarkable or banal manner" (Whiting, "Food and Drink in Shepard's Theater" 175). They are always noticeable and significant. In Shepard's family plays food and drink most often represent communication, or the lack of it, among family members. In Buried Child Tilden offers his family vegetables that he picks from a nonexistent garden in an effort to establish a fruitful family relationship, but his family rebukes him by shunning his offerings. In A Lie of the Mind Lorraine attempts to use broccoli soup to revitalize her relationship with her violent son, but he

rejects it and sends it flying across the room. Eddie in Fool for Love in a gesture of atonement offers May potato chips, tea with lemon, and Ovaltine. She, as do all the rest, dramatically rejects his offers. The huge quantity of toast made by Austin in True West, which he insists be eaten by Lee, is a symbol of a possible unification of two hostile brothers and of the two antithetical ideals of masculinity propagandized by the modern American family myth. Lee scatters and crushes the toast, making it impossible for Austin to collect and reorder it. Shepard uses food and drink "to express a character's deepest and most significant longings" (Whiting, "Food and Drink in Shepard's Theater" 180). In his family plays those longings are most often for the familial communion promised by the modern American family myth.

Shepard's dramatic imagery is his theatrical trademark. His plays are made up of a long succession of verbal, visual, and auditory images. They accumulate in such density throughout the play that at the end they explode, leaving Shepard's reader/audience without an emotionally satisfying or logical resolution to his dramatic dilemma. What Shepard does leave them, however, is a kind of catharsis--a gut feeling about the familiarity of it all, a recognition that the modern American family myth fails to reward its followers.

## WORKS CITED

- Adams, Bert. The American Family: A Sociological Interpretation. Chicago: Markham Publishing, 1971.
- Auerbach, Doris. "Who Was Icarus's Mother?: The Powerless Mother Figures in the Plays of Sam Shepard." Sam Shepard: A Casebook. Ed. Kimball King. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988. 53-64.
- Amidon, Rick E. An American Odyssey: Kinship And Cowboys in Sam Shepard's Drama. Diss. (University of Michigan), 1986.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. Modern American Drama: 1945-1990. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Caplow, Theodore, et al. Middletown Families: Five Years of Change and Continuity. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- Cavan, Ruth Shorle. The American Family. New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1969.
- Erben, Rudolf. "Women and Other Men in Sam Shepard's Plays." Studies in American Drama. 1945-Present. Vol. 2 (1987): 29-42.
- Goist, Park Dixon. "Sam Shepard's Child Is Buried Somewhere in Illinois." Midamerica. 14 (1987): 113-25.
- Gordon, Michael. The American Family. New York: Random House, 1978.
- Hart, Lynda. Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987.
- . . . "Sam Shepard's Spectacle of Impossible Heterosexuality." Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama. Ed. June Schlueter. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1989. 213-26.
- Luedtke, Luther S. "From Fission to Fusion: Sam Shepard's Nuclear Families." New Essays on American Drama. Ed. Gilbert Debusscher and Henry I. Schvey. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989. 143-66.



- Mann, Bruce J. "Character Behavior and the Fantastic in Sam Shepard's Buried Child." Sam Shepard: A Casebook. Ed. Kimball King. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988. 81-94.
- Marranca, Bonnie, ed. American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981.
- Mottram, Ron. "Exhaustion of the American Soul: Sam Shepard's A Lie of the Mind." Sam Shepard: A Casebook. Ed. Kimball King. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988. 95-106.
- . . . Inner Landscapes: The Theater of Sam Shepard. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984.
- Mustazza, Leonard. "Women's 'Roles' in Sam Shepard's Buried Child." Literature in Performance 5 (1985): 36-41.
- Orbison, Tucker. "Mythic Levels in Shepard's True West." Modern Drama 27 (1984): 506-19.
- Ramsey, Allen. "The Boundaries of Illusion in Fool for Love." Notes on Contemporary Literature 19 (1989): 9-11.
- Reimer, James D. "Integrating the Psyche of the American Male: Conflicting Ideals of Manhood in Sam Shepard's True West." University of Dayton Review 18 (1986-87): 41-47.
- Robinson, James A. "Buried Children: Fathers and Sons in O'Neill and Shepard." Eugene O'Neill and the Emergence of American Drama. ed. Marc Maufort. Amsterdam: Rodopi (1989) 151-57.
- Shea, Laura. "The Sacrificial Crisis in Sam Shepard's Buried Child." The Theatre Annual 44 (1989-90): 1-9.
- Shepard, Sam. Buried Child. "Buried Child" and "Seduced" and "Suicide in B." New York: Urizen Books, 1979. 9-72.
- . . . Fool for Love. "Fool for Love" and "The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife." San Francisco: City Lights Press, 1983. 9-55.

- . . . A Lie of the Mind. "A Lie of the Mind" and "The War in Heaven." New York: New American Library, 1987. 1-122.
- . . . True West. Seven Plays. New York: Bantam Books, 1981. 1-60.
- Simard, Rodney. "American Gothic: Sam Shepard's Family Trilogy." The Theatre Annual. 41 (1986): 21-36.
- Smith, Molly. "Beckettian Symbolic Structure in Sam Shepard's True West: A Jungian Reading." Journal of Evolutionary Psychology. 10 (1989): 328-34.
- Soloman, Robert C. Introducing Philosophy Problems and Perspectives. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.
- Tucker, Martin. Sam Shepard. Introduction. New York: Continuum Publishing, 1992.
- Wetzsteon, Ross. Introduction. "Fool for Love" and Other Plays. By Sam Shepard. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1984.
- Whiting, Charles G. "Food and Drink in Shepard's Theater." Modern Drama 31 (1988): 175-83.
- . . . "Images of Women in Shepard's Theatre." Modern Drama 33 (1990): 494-506.
- Wilson, Ann. "Fool of Desire: the Spectator to the Plays of Sam Shepard." Modern Drama 30 (1987): 46-57.