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Cultural authorities in transition and Sam Shepard's search for identity

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CULTURAL AUTHORITIES IN TRANSITION

AND

SAM SHEPARD'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

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By

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to locate Sam Shepard's works in terms of the changing cultural context of the nineteen sixties. In chapter I, I have tried to see a common sentiment underlying the various forms of turmoil and disruption that shaped the new theatre and Shepard's imagination. It was a sentiment that questioned the legitimacy of almost all forms of traditional authority. In chapter II, I have tried to show that the reckless escapes and the many transformations in Shepard's early plays hide a yearning for the pursuit of one's true self free from the repression of existing institutions. Chapter III is about the confusion and conflict after the escape. Relating Shepard's apocalyptic imagination to the nature of technological society, I have tried to show that the protagonist's agony in Operation Sidewinder reveals an embryonic longing for a mythic past and the need for 'home.' Chapter IV deals with Curse of the Starving Class. In this play, I have tried to see Shepard's attempt to relocate the sense of self into a community of other selves. Chapter V is about Buried Child. By focusing on the implications of the homeward journey of the protagonist, I have tried to see that all the attempts of escape and rebellion are ultimately an effort to search for one's true self.
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Preface

The objective of this study is to locate Sam Shepard's works in terms of the changing cultural context of the nineteen sixties. The experiments in the theatre during the sixties were not only spurred on by contemporary experiments in other art forms but also by current socio-political events and the countercultural movement. Indeed, the sixties were exceptional years in that the political, social, cultural, and artistic efforts were deeply interrelated.

To study Sam Shepard's works in the immediate cultural context helps to provide an understanding of his plays frequently judged to be intentionally vague, mysterious, difficult, and fragmented. It also makes it possible to see his earlier works and his later family trilogy in a thematically coherent way.

At the same time, Shepard provides an excellent example of an American who grew up in the fifties, enthusiastically jumped into the cultural vortex of the sixties, and moved into the seventies. His importance as a writer has also grown in relation to the degree that he has moved from the extravagant pursuit of freedom under the
spell of the immediate cultural scene to a more serious search for an authentic self.

Chapter I consists of four parts. In the first part, I have tried to see the multifaceted movements and widespread dissent that energized and helped to shape the new theatre and Shepard's dramatic imagination. Underlying the various forms of turmoil and disruption was a sentiment that questioned the legitimacy of almost all forms of traditional authority. And for the enthusiastic participants of the various movements in the sixties, it was a time when dreams of a total transformation of society seemed a real possibility.

The second part is about the critique of language: the challenge that language had been debased by corrupt authority and excessive dependence on rationality, and that language had been distorted by a dominant ideology and consequently had become a tool of repression. Thus, this challenge against language was primarily a form of rebellion and suggested an alternative set of values. In this sense, it was a revolutionary gesture, too. At the same time, I have tried to show that this challenge hid a yearning to see one's true self uncontaminated by existing cultural authorities.

In part three, I have focused on the fusion of revolutionary politics, the counterculture and the theatre. The avant-garde theatre of the sixties provides fertile
ground to see the revolutionary enthusiasm and the yearning for a new order free from the repression of the establishment. The theatre of the sixties not only mirrored but actively influenced the time. This intense interplay of art and politics expressed itself in such artistic innovations as a rejection of the form and practice of the traditional theatre.

The last part in chapter I is about Sam Shepard and his relationship to his times. Shepard was very much a product of the Off Off Broadway Movement. He became a playwright almost by chance. His early works, especially, show a disregard for classical dramatic conventions and a resistance to rational structuring together with other characteristic features of the avant-garde theatre of the sixties. In addition, he shared persistent thematic concerns with many others involved in revolutionary politics and the countercultural movement; the challenge to authority and restless energy for rebellion.

In chapter II, I have chiefly focused on The Rock Garden, and La Turista. In these early plays, the act of escape was an attack on the American family and what was perceived to be a hypocritical society. I have tried to show that the reckless escapes and the many transformations relate not only to the immediate cultural environment but also to a larger American cultural context: the belief in the possibility of inventing a new identity not fixed by
family or class. In this sense, the escape and rebellion in Shepard's early plays hide a yearning for the pursuit of an authentic self which increasingly became a persistent thematic concern in Shepard.

In chapter III, I have tried to show in Operation Sidewinder the connection between Shepard's apocalyptic imagination and his criticism against oppressive technology. The protagonist, Young Man, who agonizes for the loss of innocence and for his alienated self is almost unique in Shepard's works up to that point and signifies a major change in his writing. In Shepard's earlier plays, his characters deserted their family and rebelled against the constraints of society. In relation to these predecessors, I tried to see the protagonist's confusion and conflict originated from his dilemma after the escape. He provides a good example of 'homeless mind.' I have argued that his agony and desperation revealed an embryonic longing for mythic past, and the need for 'home' for a solid sense of identity.

Chapter IV deals with the first of Shepard's family trilogy, Curse of the Starving Class. In this chapter, I have tried to show Shepard's adoption of rather traditional imagery---cloth imagery---can be a way to see his attempt to reconcile with his past, a gesture to relocate the sense of self into a community of other selves.
Chapter V is about *Buried Child*, the second play in his family trilogy. In this chapter I have tried to see the prevalent use of journey imagery in Shepard's works and its changing thematic implications. The fact that the profuse adoption of journey imagery is a characteristic American literary tradition shows that Shepard is a playwright whose sensibility is solidly rooted in the American culture in general as well as a product of the sixties. In *Buried Child*, by focusing on the homeward journey of Vince who once deserted his family as did Shepard himself, I tried to see that all the attempts of escape and rebellion are ultimately an effort to search for an authentic self.
I

Introduction

"Things will never be the same."¹

Cultural Authorities in Transition

The protests of the 1960s were anticipated by a few dissenting voices of the fifties. By the middle fifties there were visible cracks in the prevailing institutions of America, and scholars initiated a systematic critique of American society. From David Riesman, C. Wright Mills to William Whyte, scholars observed the pervasive dissatisfaction, anxieties, fears, distress, feelings of emptiness, and alienation in such works as The Lonely Crowd, White Collar, and The Organization Man. And with the publication of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique, the disappointments of suburban housewives also came into public view. Along with these sociological observations, there were even more caustic attacks against America. The United States was compared to "the Fourth Reich" (James Baldwin), the white race was castigated as "the cancer of history" (Susan Sontag). The family became "the American

fascism" (Paul Goodman). The institutions of gender, capitalism, and Christianity were also viciously condemned on the grounds that they were the hotbeds of evils the fathers had been cultivating.

In his poem *Howl* Allen Ginsberg evoked images of a brutal, avaricious, and repressive America. In his visionary portrayal of America, America, underneath the unprecedented prosperity and stability, became

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose era is a smoking tomb!2

Ginsberg strongly championed the existence of alternative lifestyles and inspired the younger generation simmering with restless energy. As Leslie Fiedler observes, multiplicity of cultural dissidents and rebels began to challenge values, attitudes, moods, sensibilities and structures of power and institutions.3 Indeed, the sixties witnessed outbursts of defiance, self-expression and cultural criticism.

Norman Mailer, too, foresaw black protest, youth rebellion, male/female conflict. Mailer’s America was


suffering from pain and psychic brutality underneath the complacent facade of Eisenhower's America. The rigidities, inconsistencies, and delusions of the fifties' mainstream culture sowed seeds of discontent and rebellion which were destined to bear fruit. Norman Mailer analyzed what happened as follows:

...authority [in the fifties] had presented itself as honorable, and it was corrupt, corrupt as payola on television and scandals concerning...the leasing of aviation contracts....[T]his new generation...hated the authority because the authority lied. It lied through the teeth of corporate executives and cabinet officials and police enforcement officers and newspaper editors and advertising agencies, and in its mass magazines, where the subtlest apologies for the disasters of the authorities...were grafted in the best possible styles onto ever open mind of the walking American lobotomy.4

The dormant suspicion and fear of the absurdities and darker undercurrents of American society were soon to explode into overt challenge, rebellion, and violence. Many feared that the center would not hold amid the floodtide of cries of change and challenge accompanied, frequently, with violence.

Perhaps the initial mood of the sixties can best be characterized by President Kennedy. He announced that the torch had been passed to a new generation of Americans and

urged them to begin anew. He helped to generate a quickened feeling of energy, hope, and idealism which contrasted with the period before. Peter Clecak says as follows:

The sixties form the centerpiece, a hopeful moment between the sterile, conformist fifties and the constricted, lonely, self-absorbed seventies. In this perspective, the sixties are represented as a morally generous, energetic time of political, personal and communal action---or at least a time when concerted action against the ills of civilization seemed to be a live possibility.  

Indeed, the conviction that a new frontier awaited the courageous and dedicated tapped a moral energy of the burgeoning generation.

For a while the New Frontier associated with President John F Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson's program of the Great Society seemed to work. In a speech outlining his vision of the American future, President Johnson said

This nation, this people, this generation, has man's first chance to create a Great Society: a society of success without squalor, beauty without barrenness, works of genius without the wretchedness of poverty. 

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5 Peter Clecak, America’s Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.4.


4
There were significant achievements in the midst of the first flowerings of the Great Society: The War on Poverty, Economic Opportunity Act, expanded aid to education, improved medical service, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It seemed that the liberal view of the American future---genuine liberty and full equality of opportunity to pursue self fulfillment and freedom from want---was soon to be realized. However, as the prospect of abundance faded the vision came to seem problematic.\(^7\)

Even when America enjoyed an unprecedented prosperity, C Wright Mills worried that the continuing corporate concentration strengthened the structures of inequality.\(^8\) Indeed, the rediscovery of poverty in the 1960s marked an important milestone in the evolution of social consciousness in America. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962) demonstrated that within the world’s most affluent nation there existed a "second nation" living in poverty and misery. With passionate moral vision he diagnosed that America is "built upon a peculiary distorted economy," one that often proliferates pseudo-needs rather than satisfying human needs. For some, it has resulted in a sense of spiritual emptiness, of alienation, and breeds a "culture of

\(^7\) Peter Clecak, p.66.

poverty." Therefore, the elimination of deeply entrenched poverty requires the execution of a systematic and comprehensive crusade to bring "the other America" into the Union.

However, attempts to change the status quo of America were met by the structural configuration and ideological tenacity of capitalism. Robert Heilbroner argues that capitalism can achieve change within the boundaries imposed by its market mechanism system of privilege but is unusually resistant to attempts that would require drastic transformation. 9

Some found the system of privilege assumed a variety of appearances to redress the systematic inequalities of wealth and power, but never fully restructured. For example, Elinore Graham showed in her essay "The Politics of Poverty" the rigidity of institutional machinery and raised profound questions as to the motivations of the leaders who launched the war on poverty. According to her, the poverty issue was only to relieve the moral challenge of the liberal and radical thinkers and the political impasse created by racial confrontation. 10


The criticisms pointed against various institutions were accompanied with attempts to reconstruct a flawed America. Under conditions of disproportionate distribution of affluence, cultural turbulence, racial disturbance and political hazards in Viet Nam, a growing number of alternatives entered into the realm of the possible. The repudiation of traditional policies and some of the assumptions of American liberalism became a powerful current in the politics of the sixties.

With the emergence of large-scale protest among Southern blacks, the Civil Rights Movement began to be energized in the middle fifties. By the end of 1950s, however, a new style of political rebellion was beginning to take hold. On February 1, 1960 four black college students sat down at the "whites-only" section of a local lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Refused service, they left peacefully only to return the next day augmented by large numbers of their fellow students. The process of seeking service, the refusal, student mobilization and police counter-attack launched the sit-in movement that swept the South and became the starting point for all other forms of dissent and protests to follow during the decade: marches, sit-ins, strikes, be-ins, boycotts, and local political campaigns. Spread rapidly, the Civil Rights
Movement began to stir up the imperturbability of the previous period, a period dominated by political apathy, social quiescence, and cultural superficiality.

The passion for social and political equality finally saw the legalization of the Voting Rights Act, and, in 1966, the passage of a comprehensive Civil Rights Act. The Civil Rights Movement had a lasting effect on social, cultural and political rebellion throughout the decade.

For those active in the New Left Movement the cure for a world of violated ideals was apparently a simple one, "participatory democracy." The key to the future was to get individuals directly involved in the decisions that affected their lives. They envisioned a society in which individuals share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of their life. The underlying assumption was the pursuit of a fuller democracy through a self-conscious revolt against traditional cultural authorities.

As the Civil Rights Movment and the New Left Movement became more diverse and radical, political consciousness and political activism spread to an even larger constituency. For example, about her joining the Women's Liberation Movement, Cathy Cade notes,

"in the black movement I had been fighting...someone else's oppression and now there was a way that I could fight for my own freedom"
and I was going to be much stronger than I was...\textsuperscript{11}

The women's movement gathered force during the sixties and it too had a far-reaching effect. Groups such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) struggled against traditional attitudes toward women and their roles in society. The political dimensions of women's lives moved on to national agendas.\textsuperscript{12} Arguments and proposals of the women's liberation movement contributed to understanding the institution of the family in a radically different perspective. Within the women's movement the focus on women and the family generated alternative perspectives. Various feminist groups challenged the traditionally taken-for-granted assumptions about women and the family:

...rights, realities, roles, relationships, responsibilities: they were all questioned: they all changed. Perhaps the most visible changes in the decade were those which redefined the nature and limits of male and female, as people tried to understand better the connections between sexuality and personality.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{12} Peter Clecak, p.183.

Aided by the women's liberation movement, the legitimacy of the family was brought into question.

Confronted with the immensity of the task, dissent often took on the appearance of a continuous revolt against authority. As Peter Clecak says,

Dissent, then, had become ubiquitous, diffused throughout all the major social categories of ideology, region, sex, age, class, race, ethnicity, religion, and voluntary interest groups. Everything appeared to be an obstacle to fulfillment as material, social, psychological and spiritual hopes rose: old economic, political, and legal barriers as well as relatively new cultural and psychological ones. 14

Accordingly, talk about revolution and radical change became widespread throughout America in the 1960s. Often, however, the rhetoric used conceals a recognition of how deeply the pace, the pervasiveness, and the lack of overall direction of change affects American society. As a result "the past grows progressively more different from the present and seems more remote and irrelevant psychologically," and the future grows more "remote and uncertain." 15

Indeed, there were rapid changes which sharply separate the 1960s from the previous decades. Although these changes

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14 Peter Clecak, p.158.
had meaning for everyone, they had a particular significance for young people who translated these changes into a conflict between generations. As one participant of the sixties remembers, "The parent-child bond became the intimate battle ground of the two warring paradigms, with each side holding the other personally responsible for the sins of their generation." As Milton Yinger observes,

Countercultures are much more likely to occur under conditions that increase the sense of "my generation" and reduce the sense of belonging to a kin group, a community, a status group, or a nation. Rapid social change, physical and social mobility, disordered cohort flow, major economic, technological, and military events during one's youth---these are among the conditions that increase the feeling that one belongs to a generation. Many such conditions powerfully influenced young people in many parts of the world during the 1960s and 1970s.

The diversity of countercultural values that Milton Yinger calls attention to can be described basically as reverse values against the dominant values. Society was now seen as a rat race, rational behavior as a narrowing of goals, economic behavior as exploitation---all leading to the repression of more vital needs and expressive values. The traditional work ethic was rejected, and the


institutions of marriage and family were criticized as structures of power. Instead, self-expression, individual ecstasy, concern for others, a need for affiliation, and even a mystical insight often derived from Oriental religion and philosophy were cherished and sought.\textsuperscript{18} There were several ways to promote values or to work toward these goals. There were radical activists who attacked the corrupt society and demanded changes, communitarians who pursued their own values with minimum hindrance from an evil society, and mystics who more or less disregarded society and searched for personal enlightenment for themselves.\textsuperscript{19}

Within the broad countercultural boundary, it was generally thought that the key to explain the mysteries of human life was to be found in a new consciousness and moral freedom. Theodore Roszak, for example, criticized the scientific mode of thinking as undercutting the operation of nonintellective powers:

\textit{When we challenge the finality of objective\textsuperscript{(scientific)} consciousness as a basis for culture, what is at issue is the size of man's life. We must insist that a culture which negates or subordinates or degrades visionary experience commits the sin of diminishing one's existence.}\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.45.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p.91.


12
Others tried to realize their revolutionary vision through politics, and some turned to personal salvation. Politics apart, they attacked middle-class values, sexual mores, science and technology. Some became obsessed to return to the traditional order of things even in such trivial matters as hair style and the wearing of bell bottom trousers. Some, such as Norman Mailer, glorified deviant or dangerous behavior as a means to prove personal courage and discover one’s authentic self. All these proposals and attempts seriously challenged social myths and cultural authorities of the previous decades.

The movement of the sixties held out the promise that people could accomplish transformations in the structure of society and the quality of individual life. "The personal is political" expressed the New Left’s perception that the fusion of cultural and political criticism is central to socio-political movements dedicated to such transformation.

Probably no other institution was more severely scrutinized, criticized, and then reconsidered than the family. In the course of the sixties, the family became central to social analysis and radical criticism. The underlying assumption was that changes in the institution of the family were crucial in changing the larger society. It was thought that as the chief agency of "socialization" changes in the institution of the family would bring changes
in character structure which, in turn, would accompany changes in economic and political life.

It was generally assumed that the ideology of the nuclear family was responsible for many problems and strains. And there were proposals and suggestions to ameliorate the problematic condition of the institution. In 1971, Arlene and Jerome Skolnick wrote,

"probably never before in history have people in any one society held such widely differing opinions about the family as in America today."

But more than amelioration, the legitimacy of the family itself was brought into question.

In The Politics of the Family, R. D. Laing condemns the institution of family rather brutally:

"We like food served up elegantly before us; we do not want to know about the animal factories, the slaughterhouses, and what goes on in the kitchen. Our own cities are our animal factories; families, schools, churches are the slaughterhouses of our children; colleges and other places are the kitchens. As adults in marriages and business, we eat the product."

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To Laing the family is an instrument of "violence," and man is unwillingly socialized from babyhood by the institution. For David Cooper, the nuclear family is an ideological device for an exploitative society. By depriving us of our spontaneity and instinctuality, he argues, the family stultifies human possibilities. He advocates the abolition of the "fur-lined bear trap" ---the nuclear family. He calls for a "love and madness revolution" that would precede the paralysis of the state: "a love revolution that reinvents our sexuality" and a "madness revolution that reinvents ourselves."23 Aided by scholarly and critical approaches to the institution of the family, heavy attacks against the family and proposals either for abolition or radical restructuring of the family could find sympathizers during the sixties.

Indeed, the turbulent cultural atmosphere bred apocalyptic yearnings for total transformation. As Annie Gottlieb writes,

"Bring the revolution home---Kill your parents!" Today, that smugly hysterical slogan makes us cringe. But locked in the ordinary adolescent struggle to separate as well as the extraordinary struggle to bring forth a new world, we thought our mothers and fathers were enemy agents, planted in our homes to socialize us in the bad old mold.24


24 Annie Gottlieb, p.235.
Indeed, it's not just that the dreariness of safe habitual family life was rejected, but the very institution of the family was challenged. Some even believed that a taste for family life was something that any sophisticated person should outgrow. In general, however, attacks against the family encouraged more moderate proposals to restructure the family and the larger socio-political context.

Robert Dahl, in *After the Revolution*, worried because "during the course of the last few years, revolution has swiftly become an in-word in the United States."25 Fundamentally, Dahl regards the contemporary crisis as one of authority, and one that is endemic in democratic society. Paradoxically, democracy appears to "encourage demands for new systems of authority."

The old patterns are losing out, paradoxically, because old ideas about authority, particularly democratic authority, encourage demands for new systems of authority. The paradox vanishes if we realize that because democracy has never been fully achieved, it has always been and is now potentially a revolutionary doctrine. For every system purporting to be democratic is vulnerable to the charge that it is not democratic enough, or not "really" or fully democratic. The charge is bound to be correct, since no polity has ever been completely democratized.26


26 Ibid., p.4.
Dialectics of Rebellion

As has been noted, the revolt during the sixties took many forms ranging from a new theology at the most abstract level down to the very mundane. Underlying the various forms of turmoil and disturbance is the mentality which questions the legitimacy of traditional cultural authorities. Peter Marin says of the young:

Their specific grievances are incidental; their real purpose is to make God show his face, to have whatever pervasive and oppressive force makes us perpetual children reveal itself, declare itself, commit itself at last. 27

Nothing could possibly be spared from the questioning eyes of the grand inquisitor when God himself was summoned.

The major social, political, and cultural conflicts in the sixties were dramatically revealed in the use and critique of language. Already in the fifties, as we can see in Allen Ginsberg, war was declared against the existing language: The war is language/ language abused/ for advertisement,/language abused/ like magic for power on the

Denise Levertov’s poem, "An Interim" is about the agony and confusion of a poet over the use of language. It reads:

'It became necessary
to destroy the town to save it,'
A United States major said today.
He was talking about the decision by allied commanders to comb and shell the town regardless of civilian casualties, to rout the Vietcong.
O language, mother of thought,
Are you rejecting us as we reject you?  

The poet criticizes the 'ugly' crimes of her society in which acts of violence and murder are justified with hypocritical language. Levertov emphasizes her anger by making explicit the fact that she responds the very day she hears the major's words. She thinks that the corruption in politics and society at large and the corruption in language is intertwined. And language as 'mother of thought' reflects, controls and ineluctably influences our consciousness and imagination as well as society. Thus, Levertov asserts, we need to "relearn the alphabet."

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28 as quoted in The Making of a Counter Culture, p.144.

Writers may create new language styles in an effort to convey some "new sense of reality, to force readers into new ways of perceiving, or to express criticism of the social order." The following poem by Walter Lowenfels shows a keen consciousness about the relationship between the use of language and revolution.

"The Permanent Revolutionary"

liberates framed-up words
from library death cells
frees grammar
from university tombs
marries verb
to rhythms in the streets
each poem
the death of a definition

Implicit in this poem is a call for rebellion against cultural authority, its academic institution, elitism, and pedantry. Implied, too, is a sense of a revolutionary constituency unified against the authority of the dominant culture. Thus, in The Berkeley Barb, a major underground press during the sixties, Ed Sanders says

Poets will rewrite the bill of rights in precise language, detailing ten thousand areas of freedom

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30 Milton Yinger, p.162.
31 Walter Lowenfels, from Only Humans with Songs to Sing quoted in Literature in Revolution, p.89.
in OUR OWN LANGUAGE, to replace the confusing and vague rhetoric of 200 years ago.  

It was asserted during the sixties that some of the deepest problems of contemporary society originated from an excessive dependence on rationality. As Paul Goodman complains,

At every step we are asked to explain ourselves 'rationally.' That is, we are asked to think in a language---a vocabulary---of rationality that denies feeling---a language eroded and deformed by misuse, and which was formulated by a non-culture that has never undergone our experience.  

The presence of mounting disorder and confusion seemed to justify Goodman's complaint. As Herbert Marcuse argues a new epistemology appeared in response to this predicament.

The advancing one-dimension society alters the relation between the rational and the irrational. Contrasted with the fantastic and insane aspects of its rationality, the realm of the irrational becomes the home of the really rational---of the ideas which may 'promote the art of life.'

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33 quoted in Mitchell Goodman, p.ix.

At times this point of view was deliberately launched just for the sake of disturbing the constrictions of traditional structures of knowledge, methodological scruples, and argumentative restraint---rationality. Abbie Hoffman staged a challenge against rationality, "the language of the fathers, the enemies of instinct." He said about a demonstration he organized:

Once we had a demonstration at the Daily News building. About three hundred people smoked pot, danced, sprayed the reporters with body deodorant, burned money, handed out leaflets to all employees that began:"Dear fellow member of the communist conspiracy...." We called it an 'Alternative Fantasy.' It worked great. "What do you mean, it worked great?" "Nobody understood it....It was pure information, pure imagery, which in the end is truth." 

As can be seen in Hoffman's words a loss of confidence in empirical practices of science, cognitive models of reality led some to declare "fantasy is the only truth." Hoffman's theatrical gesture serves to free oneself from the inevitable entanglement of the dominant reality with dominant language usages. What Abbie Hoffman's calculated exercise of disturbing the complacency in the language

37 Ibid., p.66.
usage aims at is to draw up an indictment of authority by adopting a conspicuously irrational manner.

Abbie Hoffman's bold theatricalization of an anti-rational usage of language was indeed symptomatic of what was happening in the culture at large. It was not long before a host of others followed: "oracles, dervishes, yogis, sibyls, prophets, druids, etc.---The whole heritage of mystagoguery toward which the beat-hip wing of our counter culture now gravitates," as Theodore Roszak observed. The emerging fashion for reductive rationality meant distaste with repressive ideals of disinterestedness and scientific logic. Sooner or later it was thought that some experiential concepts cannot be expressed by words. It also exhibited a disdain for existing cultural authority and a suspicion of formal ideology.

Implied in the appeal to mysticism were yearnings for a new sensibility free from the Western emphasis on objective consciousness and a rigorous moralism. Theodore Roszak was fully aware of these elements sheathed in the sudden upwelling of mysticism when he said what's required from art was "the white-hot experience of authentic vision that might transform our lives and, in so doing, set us at warlike odds with the dominant culture." 

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38 Theodore Roszak, p.247.

39 Milton Yinger, p.257.
If the use of anti-language style, the attraction to fantasy, and an appeal to reductive rationality meant dissatisfaction with the dominant cultural authority, the intentional use of dirty language was an explicit rebellion against it. There was a veritable explosion of 'ugly words' and slang during the American sixties. For example, there were the famous New York liberationist society called SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men), the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH), and hippie poet Ed Sanders's publication of *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*. To use dirty language was a major strategy in defying hypocritical bourgeois culture. Although not all obscenity serves as symbolic protest, it was frequently employed to characterize and expose the absurdity and hypocrisy of the apathetic bourgeois culture. It deliberately mounts an attack on the dominant culture and helps construct a new reality. It was seen as a deliberate assault on the senses so as to reorient the dominant idea of reality toward preanalytic or unconscious ways. In this vein Herbert Marcuse argues that the use of obscenity among radicals is a methodical subversion of the linguistic universe of the establishment.\(^{40}\)

The FSM (Free Speech Movement) at Berkeley helps to reveal the socio-political implication of the intentional

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use of dirty language during the sixties. It has been frequently observed that the FSM was not primarily a concern with free speech although free speech was the immediate reason for its formation. For those who supported FSM, the multiversity of California integrated with business corporations was an embodiment of oppression. The huge educational corporation integrated with other large corporations to consolidate its power was "the faceless monster that produced graduates and professionals." The freedom of speech they were granted seemed an excellent tool to propagate the system. It was suspected that the university granted freedom of speech as long as it did not interfere with its own interests. Thus, the dissenting youth argued that "shouting obscenities was less obscene than pious incantation of traditional Americanisms in the service of war and social paternalism." The Free Speech Movement was carrying symbolism far beyond just free speech. It was an opening salvo for socio-cultural warfare; it was a movement against the American way of life:

The FSM revolt against bureaucracy was a revolt against liberalism, against the rhetoric of freedom and democracy. It was a revolt against the inhumanity of actual American practices the students believed were disguised by eloquent cliches in the speeches of liberal political

leaders and in the writings of noted university professors.42

What is interesting in FSM is not its advocacy of freedom of speech so much as the methods and styles of the participants to redress their complaints. The challenge to the existing social order is expressed by language that is used to oppose, confuse, and offend the dominant society.43 Stephen Spender says "If one reads the SDS publications one sees that they have frequently recommended provocations of the police as a strategy for 'unmasking' the violence of the authorities."44 Thus, to call a person who contributes to the oppression of a people, a police officer, a "racist", "bigot", or a "pig" is "to tear the mask of hypocrisy from the face of enemy, to unmask him and the devious machinations and manipulations....so that the truth may come out."45 For these ends, language is used not to communicate but to hurt, to deliberately violate standards of decency and truth.46 It was a challenge against "ugly things" in America "hypocritically disguised" in

43 Milton Yinger, p.161.
"beautiful words." Thus, the white radical’s militant slogan "Up against the Wall, Motherfucker," a bold declaration such as "Filth will be worshipped," and the profuse adoption of obscenity by some hard rock groups are ways of expressing alienation and challenge against the existing culture. Thus, the use of filthy language was a personal commitment and a refusal to initiate oneself through education into the corrupt cultural institutions.

One incident during the Free Speech Movement—the suspension and expulsion of those students who participated in the so-called "Filthy Speech Movement" succinctly shows the symbolic disruption of the established social order and generational conflict. The students had given support to a young man who had been arrested for holding up a sign on campus, saying "fuck." The reasoning was that society was oppressive to expressions of sexuality. The supporters of the "Filthy Speech Movement" thought that to use obscenity and blasphemous language or to deal in forbidden subjects was a form of protest against the enforced repression of society. Indeed, "if it[the obscene] is not against, it is nothing." For this reason

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the dominant linguistic institution—"that ordered, elegant speech"—was considered "treason against the existential vagaries of genuine emotion." Thus, obscenity was used not as something intrinsically important but as a weapon to expose the hypocrisy of the dominant society and to suggest a contrary set of values. Robert Adams says

Through the obscene one declares one's independence of the rotten genteel tradition, and achieves the instant, universal bona fides of moral authenticity.

By challenging the dominant tradition controlling verbal and physical action, obscenity ultimately acts as a political force by suggesting an alternative set of values to those embodied in polite speech. In this regard obscenity can be a rhetorical device to level and democratize. Certainly Matthew Hodgart’s following words in his discussion of satire reveals the secret fear of the bourgeoisie who put strict regulation on obscenity.

The effect of obscenity in satire is to level all men, and to level them downwards, removing the distinctions of rank and wealth. The satirist’s aim is to strip men bare, and apart from physique one naked man is much like another....By using obscenity, the satirist can go even further, reducing man from nakedness to the condition of an


Robert Adams, p.87.
animal, in which any claim to social or even divine distinction must appear even more ridiculous.52

The aesthetic negative expressed in a self-consciously ugly form grows "from a feeling, too widespread to be an affectation, that the world is ugly, that to show it as anything else is to falsify it intolerably."53 Thus, in some cases, obscenity can be an individual 'art form' helping to express how perversely the world operates.54

Kenneth Tynan says in his foreword to the autobiography of Lenny Bruce "constant, abrasive irritation produces the pearl: it is a disease of the oyster." He further notes that "Lenny Bruce is a disease of America. The very existence of comedy like his is evidence of unease in the body politic....Class chafes against class, puritanism against pleasure, easy hypocrisy against hard sincerity...."55 It was not long before "beautiful words" are considered to be obscenity. Indeed, the participants in the Berkley Free Speech Movement contend that polite language is the true obscenity, because the deceitful

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53 Robert Adams, p.96.

54 Milton Yinger, p.165.

rhetoric of the powerful merely hides or disguises a corrupt society.\textsuperscript{56}

Hippie poet Tuli Kupferberg writes in 1967 "There is a disgust with the cruel abstract, the fake...the rhetoric, the gas and lies of politicians...the bureaucracy....There is a mistrust of the written word...used to mystify and oppress...."\textsuperscript{57} As Kupferberg implies, the general burgeoning of slang and mockery during the sixties can be seen as a subtle form of refusal to take things at their face value. The mistrust and suspicion cast upon the prevalent use of language shadows the authority of traditional institutions, while extending the field of new possibilities.

The most widely used slogan during the Columbia University student strike was "Up against the wall, motherfuckers." It was shouted against what the students considered oppressive, negative authority---police, officials, university administrators, and faculty, etc. And, as in any group feeling the weight of repression, rebels need "fashionable cliches for use as passwords and talisman."\textsuperscript{58} The emergence and wide popularity of the

\textsuperscript{56} Milton Yinger, p.166.


\textsuperscript{58} Marge Piercy, Dick Lourie, "Tom Eliot Meets the Hulk at Little Big Horn: the Political Economy of Poetry," in Literature in Revolution, p.88.
word, "motherfuckers," seems especially relevant to our discussion here. It is meant to designate a form of extreme transgression. The word deals with the violation of the ultimate taboo---incest. Liberation seems to find its necessary limit only through excess.

Obscenity frees a reality principle within us that has been clamoring to get out. It cuts through layers of social artifice and aspiration reducing us to the gut and groin that we inescapably are and know ourselves to be, despite incessant prodding to be otherwise. 59

The fact that the hotbed of most riots was the university bears an additional importance. The university traditionally has been an object of respect and a commander of authority. And, at the core of authority lies unquestioning recognition of the legitimacy of authority. And respect implies, above all things, the belief that the object to be respected is good and right. However, in one of the most cherished cultural manifestos among the cultural rebels of the sixties, John McDermott's "The Laying on of Culture," the university was accused of intensifying the "hierarchic tendencies implicit in the social and economic system." 60 According to McDermott, one of the chief means

by which the university reinforces the social power structure is the idea of culture. He argues on the ground that culture "includes the Western Heritage, the Western Tradition, the Literary Tradition, the traditions of reason and civility, etc., and that these are most fully embodied in the profession of academe and the written treasures of which academe is priestly custodians and inspired interpreters." 61

To maintain authority requires respect for authority, not persuasion or coercion. When an authority resorts to force, as did Clark Kerr against some of the supporters of FSM, the authority already has, in a sense, lost its legitimacy. Observing the university riots at the University of California (Berkeley), Sheldon Wolin and John Schaar commented that "the rules are being broken because university authorities, administrators and faculty alike, have lost the respect of many of the students." And they conclude "when authority leaves, power enters." 62

The claiming of one's true self untrammeled by social roles and institutions inevitably leads to a rebellion against authority. Observing university unrest, Lewis Feuer comments "one of the functions of the university has unwittingly been to provide the students with surrogate

61 Ibid., p.300.

62 as quoted in On Violence, p.45.
fathers against whom they can rebel." More importantly, the wide use of the word "motherfucker" not only gave the students an enlivening spirit of challenge and rebellion but also expressed, ultimately, their demand---replacement of the corrupt authority. It is illuminating to be reminded that along with the word, the students reportedly shouted at the faculty members "why don’t you go and die." In fact, in one of Sam Shepard’s early plays, the son says to his father "You jive motherfucker! I should blow your head off right here and now," adding a little later "Pop, the oppressor’s cherry!" As Kerr’s punishment of the students who participated in FSM symbolizes, the use of ‘filthy’ talk, in its deeper nature, can be seen as a challenge against power, establishment, and authority.

Rebellion soon came to be connected with revolutionary zeal. "Bring the revolution home---Kill your parents!" was certainly more than a commonplace slogan of ordinary generational conflict. It was a revolutionary catchphrase for a generation defying the world the fathers had made. Keith Lampe has this revolutionary enthusiasm when he describes himself as one of the "emancipated primitives of the coming culture":

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Now, at last, we’re getting past the talk and the analysis and petitions and the protests—past the cunning white logic of the universities—and we’re heading back down into ourselves. The worst trip of all finally coming to an end: "Either A or not-A" and "Men have souls, animals don’t" kept us freaked out for 2500 years. 65

The use of filthy speech is primarily a form of resistance. At the same time, and more importantly, it hides a yearning for a new order, a new world to be free of repression and the regulations of the establishment, a yearning to see one’s true self uncontaminated by ‘civilization.’ Kenneth Keniston writes:

The hippie Utopia of each man ‘doing his thing’ is a Utopia of self-expression regardless of traditional role. And the radical’s effort to help ‘people be people’ by throwing off social stereotypes, stigmas, and self-characterizations that rigidify and routinize his behavior also presupposes a ‘real self’ waiting to be actualized beneath social roles. What is demanded for everyone, then, is self-expression and self-actualization, and ability to transcend or avoid artificial, stereotyped role-playing and a willingness to be one’s self. All conventions, prejudices, institutions, stereotypes, and habits of thought that interfere with ‘people being people’ are strenuously condemned. 66

The antagonism directed against the establishment was an antagonism against the sharp dichotomy of the public and

65 from The Sixties Papers, p.405.

private spheres. In the countercultural utopia the division of life into private and public sectors would be dissolved, and the individual would be equally at ease in all areas of society. It was an effort to make the world home. The notion and practice of 'participatory democracy' which gained wide support during the sixties was also an effort to remove the wall existing between the private and public sectors and make the world more homelike.

The Fusion of Theatre, Revolutionary Politics, and Counterculture

What characterizes the sixties movement is its fusion of revolutionary politics, counterculture and theater. This fusion of socio-cultural event and dramatic performance was a favourite tactic both of the cultural rebels directly involved in challenging and renovating the socio-cultural reality and of the practitioners of theatre whose idea of transformation was more metaphysical than social.

There were numerous examples of this fusion during the sixties. New York hippies invaded the Stock Exchange and scattered dollar bills "like so much confetti." This bold moral statement against capitalism was both flamboyant,
playful, theatrical and peaceful. Against sexual repression and hypocrisy, San Francisco hippies staged 'strip-ins' in Golden Gate Park "with every appearance of thoroughly enjoying the exercise." The Pentagon march in 1967 is another excellent example of theatricalizing politics. The event was an anti-war march populated by a broad coalition of activist people who opposed the war in Viet Nam. It was also made into flamboyant theater with its chief 'director' Jerry Rubin. Abbie Hoffman, hippie poet Tuli Kupferberg, and rock musician Ed Sanders also participated wearing bright colored capes. They looked, according to Norman Mailer, "at once like Hindu gurus, French musketeers, and Southern cavalry captains." The result was, to borrow from Robert Brustein's uneasy criticism, "not revolution but rather theatre---a product of histrionic personalities and staged events." The fact that most of the serious political revolutionaries adopted the modes of dress and speech of the hippies and Yippie helps to show the theatricalization of politics.

...Yippies...have been responsible for some interesting theater....The whole history of the Yippies indicates that their theater and their politics are inseparable---in fact, even

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68 Norman Mailer, Armies of the Night, p.120.
identical. In almost every case, their theater assumes the form of a public event characterized by an air of self-indulgent frolic designed to outrage the sensibilities of the Establishment.\textsuperscript{70}

Indeed, Norman Mailer---an enthusiastic participant of the march---said about the march. "The New Left and the hippies were coming upon a new style of revolution---revolution by theater and without a script,"\textsuperscript{71}

A widely shared rage by the dissenting youth against racism, militarism, and exploitation helped to forge a relationship between politics and theater that was rapidly spreading during the sixties. On the one hand, political activists sought to absorb "the rebellious and potentially political energy" of the counterculture to broaden their base.\textsuperscript{72} On the other hand, the hippies tried to establish "a cultural base for New Left politics."\textsuperscript{73} And for both groups theatricalizing their activities successfully attracted media attention and thereby contributed to their cause. Political activists frequently resorted to countercultural style theatricalization as a primary method of assault for their revolutionary political objectives.


\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Armies of the Night}, pp.223-4.


\textsuperscript{73} Theodore Roszak, p.66.
Indeed, arts and politics interrelated as seldom before in American life. As C. W. E. Bigsby observes,

The public demonstrations, so much a part of life in the 1960s, were a very self-conscious form of theatre designed for the television screen and offering evidence of authenticity. Presence was all. The insertion of the self into the body politic and the body cultural seemed to offer some kind of guarantee of sincerity. In a public march people mingled with one another; social, economic and racial distinctions dissolved, indeed their dissolution was in part the essence of the occasion. It was only logical, therefore, that the theater, which suddenly found itself offered as paradigm of social process, psychoanalytic procedure and communitarian ethos, also sought the dissolution of division.\(^7^4\)

Provoked by counterculture and political activism, American theatre showed a keen interest in exploring the nature of theatre art and the possibility of redefining the relationship between theatre and society. Indeed, the nineteen sixties was a decade when

...art was more self-consciously experimental, more single-mindedly concerned with social and political issues, more committed to seeing in sexuality a liberating force and in the theatre a model of the perfect society.\(^7^5\)


\(^{75}\) Ibid., p.16.
Through the sixties, there arose the new, unconventional, and the experimental theater groups called Off Off Broadway: Cafe Cino (1958), Living Theater (1959), The Open Theater (1963), La Mama (1962), Judson Poet’s Theater (1959), Theater Genesis (1964), to name but a few. As the socio-political atmosphere became more volatile and the counterculture movement and alternative life styles began to take shape in the mid-sixties, another kind of theater movement came into being.

If Off Off Broadway was formed mostly by theater professionals, the other new theater movement was more of a grassroots movement in that some of the participants did not come from the theatrical profession. Some were attracted to the theater feeling that their restless energy and passion could find a home. As playwright Robert Patrick reflects,

Most of us came from places virtually without theatre. Comic books, movies, television, and magazines were our fount. In striving to re-create effects we were familiar with in these media, we came to understand and expand the stage.  

Some were drawn to theater as a means of expression for their social and political commitment.  Together with the

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Off Off Broadway movement this new theater movement produced the distinctive theater scene during the sixties.

The development and proliferation of these theater groups reflects the disenchantment with commercially-oriented Broadway theater, and, more broadly, disenchantment with the culture at large. Cultural upheaval disturbs established institutions. Perhaps nowhere is the cultural upheaval of the sixties reflected more clearly than in the theatre. Tony Stoneburner observes:

The imagination plays a role in relation to the upheaval in its rise and fall. It creates the literature which makes persons conscious of the lack of freedom and justice not as a slogan but as a concrete human experience. It creates the literature of protest and resistance, summoning readers to undermine and replace the intolerable status quo. The imagination creates mutations of literature, like demonstrations and happenings, graffiti and posters, in which life tries to assimilate aesthetic intensity to the public sphere by swallowing up aesthetic distance and tries to enact the metaphors of literature in the public sphere as on a stage or within the frame of a painting. It creates the immediate record of the upheaval. Finally in the aftermath...of the upheaval, the imaginations, recovering aesthetic distance, transmutes the immediate record of participants into a mediate figuration of experience.\textsuperscript{78}

Indeed, Off Off Broadway plays showed keen sensitivity to such contemporary issues as civil rights, peace, women's

liberation, and environmentalism. "The theatre became a necessary tool for the reconstruction of identity and the assertion of moral necessities."\textsuperscript{79}

Off Off Broadway in its essential nature was a 60’s phenomenon, a rebellion against the highly institutionalized Broadway theater, the commercial considerations of Broadway, the tightly controlled play-production mechanism, and the destructive hit-or-miss ethos of commercial theater. As Paul Foster remembers, the virtue of Off Off Broadway was that

>[It] allows you to set your own pace. It does not have to please the audience---you can test out an idea. It gives you chance to fail. And if you choose you can be involved with your work---and that of others; twenty-four hours a day.\textsuperscript{80}

In the late 1970s, Carolee Schneeman reflected upon the relationship between what she regarded as the liberation of the imagination through bold efforts to dissolve the barrier between art and the real and those other social, cultural and political liberations which typified the 1960s:

For most of us certain formal parameters were to be thrown open, and the risk, unpredictability, and incorporation of random factors presaged

\textsuperscript{79} A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.11.

\textsuperscript{80} Stuart Little, Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theatre (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972), p.187.

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burgeoning forms of social protest in our volatile culture.\textsuperscript{81}

In fact, the burst of Off Off Broadway and the emergence of other experimental theater were ultimately related to the world the sixties' generation challenged and rebelled against. Margaret Croyden summarizes the various forces that underlie the burgeoning of Off Off Broadway:

It was no accident that their appearance coincided with a decade that ushered in confrontation politics, participatory democracy, black power, and sexual revolution, hippies, yippies, hell's angels, and women's liberation...The young, in avowed rebellion against a political and economic system that encouraged racism, that betrayed its own commitment to eliminate poverty, and that created a gap between the rhetoric of freedom and a free, emotionally 'valid' life style, also looked upon the conventional theatre as an instrument of oppression, a business supported by the system and by the system's words that turned language into lies, dreams into nightmares, and youthful aspirations into easy spiritual death.\textsuperscript{82}

Apart from its moral energy, Off Off Broadway's rising discontent with the established theater also extended to traditional dramaturgical criteria, the canon of Eugene


O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. The Off Off Broadway theater explored "new aesthetic principles that would be in harmony with their convictions and could be used to express their new theatrical conceptions." 83

The aesthetic principles of the avant-garde theatre of the sixties were influenced by an enormous variety of theories and approaches ranging from Oriental philosophy to radical politics. They were amorphous, at best, and were very much in accordance with many of the countercultural claims. As Bigsby writes:

"The authentic act, the true self, the genuine relationship, the honest gesture, provided an objective---the struggle becoming its own reward. Authority in all its guises was to be distrusted." 84

Implicit in Bigsby's observation is the link between avant-garde theatre and the values of the counterculture. Most of the people engaged in the new theatre movement were committed to the philosophy and aspirations of the counterculture.

Unlike the commercially-oriented Broadway theater, the new theater was primarily concerned with artistic experimentation, while probing the possibility of new

83 Theodore Shank, p.1.
84 A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.33.
awareness. Thus, the new theatre was more interested in the process of creation than the end product, a commodity to be sold. The Off Off Broadway favored collective production where the actor, director, playwright, and producer engaged in various stages of production. It was thought that the lineal and the impersonal chains of production of the technical age alienated man from the joy of creation. Thus, the new mode of production was in part

a reaction against the psychic fragmentation the artists experienced in the technocratic society which believed that human needs could be satisfied by technical means requiring a high degree of specialization. 85

This reaction against the mode of traditional play production was philosophically supported by the new theatre practitioner’s strong affinity with Zen. To those drawn to Zen, Zen seemed to offer an antidote to alienation,

the possibility of reintegrating man and nature, of restoring wholeness to a culture in which the spiritual and the material, the unconscious and the conscious, had been cataclysmically split. 86

The influence of Zen was diffuse. It seems that Zen provided rationales for breaking down of inhibitions in the

85 Theodore Shank, p.3.
86 A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.43.
new theatre, barriers between art and life, public and private spheres, and actors and spectators. For example, the aspiration to remove barriers between private and public spheres is expressed in the abhorrence of privacy. Inhibition and privacy are to be rejected. Behind the 'sensational' scenes on the stage---nakedness, the use of taboo language, public copulation---there is an effort to resist any of the cultural constraints that limit self-perception and the establishment of a pristine self uncorrupted by civilization. As critic John Lahr comments:

Esthetically, the justification for such an approach is to free the actor and the audience from the repressive decorum of the stage. Theatre, then, becomes a liberator.87

In 1964, Susan Sontag raised a value and a principle of criticism that artistic experience, not analysis carries the major importance. She argued that,

The experience should not be tampered with by analysis; interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world---in order to set up a shadow world of meanings.88


It was a perceptive comment relevant to developments in the new theatre movement, too. What the new theatre was primarily interested in was the possibility of discovering new ways to release the mind from the burden of interpretation. It was argued that because each man was caught in a social order, it was impossible to establish genuine human relationships. Thus, by dusting off the roles, preconceived ideas and conditioned responses, one could lay a new foundation of genuine relationships and recover one’s true self. This attitude chimed nicely with the countercultural attraction to Zen. Indeed, Zen’s central philosophy was the pursuit of pure behaviour free from any moral, metaphysical, or sociological context. According to Bigsby, this resistance against meaning was directly opposed to the American dramatic tradition.

Apart from anything else this was a rejection of what, in the American context, had constituted the central dramatic tradition while its emphasis on the primacy of existence over signification seemed to chime with Zen’s emphasis on the immediate, though Zen, in addition, of course, could offer the consolation of a spiritual dimension all too patently missing from contemporary life.  

Another major influence came from drama theoretician, Antonin Artaud. His criticism against the dominant

\[ \text{A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.53.} \]
tradition of Western theatre exerted a considerable influence on the avant-garde theatre of the sixties. He insisted in changing the role of speech in the theatre and urged "to link the theatre to the expressive possibilities of forms, to everything in the domain of gestures, noises, colors, movements, etc." 90

The need to remove barriers between art and life was also emphasized by Artaud. His desire to restore the connection between art and experience, to close the gaps between conscious and unconscious, form and substance, spirit and body led to the conviction that the boundary between audience and performer should be removed:

We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind....A direct communication will be established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of action, is engulfed and physically affected by it. 91

Other aspects of the theatre---the function of the playwright and the director, the structure of the theatre, the place of audience and performer, etc.---are seriously questioned. The changes and continued effort to remove the barriers between life and art and the devaluation of


91 Ibid., p.96.
language in the theatre are all related to the cultural atmosphere of the sixties: rebellion against authority and suspicion of existing institutions. These changes and efforts helped to create a new theatre. As David Madden comments,

This new theatre creates new structures for human experience out of radical combinations of the structures of games, rituals, marches, processions, oratory, prayer, etc. The emphasis shifted from verbal or literary to a physical expression of ideas and emotions—-at least the distinctions between the two are blurred.\(^\text{92}\)

Along with the aesthetic and cultural concerns, the rebellion against the traditional stage was a political commitment to the belief in an alternative cultural vision. The use of churches, coffee houses, laundromats, sidewalks, parking lots, and city lofts as a stage and the meager cost of production were part of a gesture not to allow oneself to be lured into the established theater, and the gesture itself became a theater. The challenge against the traditional proscenium stage was further developed so as to use "all manner of found exteriors" and even the natural environment---mountains, street, meadows, beach, etc.\(^\text{93}\)


This use of unconventional theater space had further implications:

Life...begins to make inroads on the performance. The life of the play begins to vie with the life of life; they overlap, they taint and enrich each other. Life is no longer the distraction that diminishes the purity of the play; instead it sometimes becomes the context in which the play is perceived just as the play sometimes becomes the context in which we perceive one another.\(^9\)

As stated earlier, the spread of quasi-theatrical events on college campuses, street corners, and public parks coincided with the resurgence of many theatre groups whose primary concern was political commitment. There seemed a reciprocal relation between the resurgence and the increasing politicization of American culture during the sixties. Many avant-garde theatre groups were fascinated with the idea that the stage might be an effective agent of social change. There were many avant-garde theatre groups whose primary commitment was to social transformation rather than aesthetic experiment. The San Francisco Mime Troupe, for example, set itself the task of dramatizing social inequity so as to transform American society. The company toured the country giving street-corner and public park performances attacking American imperialism, racism, class inequality, and smug conformity.

\(^9\) Ibid., p.58.
Parallel with the increasingly politicized culture, many avant-garde theatre groups explicitly professed personal and social revolution. 'Theater and revolution' becomes two words for the same thing: an unconditional 'NO' to the society. The Living Theatre provides a good example for this. Since its inception in 1951, the Living Theatre was interested primarily in promoting a non-violent cultural revolution through transforming the sensibilities of individuals. Throughout the sixties, however, the group increasingly emphasized the need for revolution to change a corrupt and dehumanized system. Julian Beck, who had conceived the Living Theatre with his wife Judith Malina, explains the connection between theatre and the socio-political world:

...we were very much under the influence---after the war and in the early fifties---of that critical attitude towards art which said: you can not mix art and activist social thought....This was an attitude very strong in America at that time, which deeply influenced the art of the whole era. It was a form of censorship....I don't think we need a breakthrough in theatre until we became frankly political. And when we insisted on saying politically what we wanted to say politically, we felt free enough to discover breakthrough ways of doing it.95

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While the Living Theatre was touring France, some French students criticized them for being part of the institutional framework of the establishment by accepting contractual arrangements from established organizations and performing in theaters subsidized by the state. As a consequence, the Becks announced in 1970 that they did not want to perform in theater buildings anymore. This departure from the traditional stage symbolizes their departure from a dependence on the established economic system and other institutional supports of the establishment. They now identified with "the underprivileged," in defiance of "the privileged elite" in the belief that 'all privilege is violence to the underprivileged.'

In the course of emerging as major theatrical forces, many avant-garde theatre groups felt that there should be a radical social transformation in the theatre so as to realize a larger transformation in the world beyond the theatre. As Richard Schechner of the Performance Group states,

[Members of the avant-garde theatre groups] wish to construct, either through revolution or radical reformation, a new society [and] they have set up

96 Theodore Shank, pp.24-5.
98 Ibid.
their theatres as model communities....They have not stayed apart from the nastiness of the world. Generally they loathe 'art for art's sake.' And they chose to engage the real politik not by serving, even indirectly, those they feel contempt for, but by doing for themselves and confronting.\textsuperscript{99}

As the equation of revolution and theater suggests, the overt political stance of the avant-garde groups had a far-reaching impact on their sense of theatrical mission. Soon the audience was incorporated into the performance. The political implication is that in order to create a sense of community among the audience it was first necessary to muster a wider range of people for collective action. Within the increasingly politicized theatre groups, the audience was seen as a natural extension of the community to be involved in revolutionary struggle to realize an utopian community. The most publicized case for audience participation was the Living Theater's Paradise Now. The spectators joined the performers by taking their clothes off and engaging in dialogue with the performers. And in Dionysus \textsuperscript{69}, "the spectator had the sense that he could help make the production, he was encouraged to get into the play, to participate in the rituals, to chant, march, touch, strip and be fondled."\textsuperscript{100} In these theatrical events the


\textsuperscript{100} Arthur Sainer, p.27.
boundaries between stage and audience, performer and spectator, ultimately, art and life, were dissolved.

The integration of the audience into the action on the stage inevitably came to mean changes not only in the spatial design of the theater but also in the fundamental assumptions of theater. In accordance with the radical concept of actor-audience relationship, it was reasoned that the traditional proscenium stage divided into stage and auditorium, made it difficult to reach the audience on a spiritual level and to force a confrontation on the deepest level of shared understanding, experience, and truth.\textsuperscript{101}

The traditional theater, by distracting the audience from the real world, absorbs them into illusion like the movie frame which tends toward a visual two-dimensionality.\textsuperscript{102}

It not only alienates the audience from the real world but also makes it impossible to develop a mutual communion because it is one way stream of influence from the performer to the audience. Richard Schechner, in his "Notes While Making Commune," says,

\textbf{\textit{No longer a theater of telling a story---or even doing a story. But doing/showing here and now. The audience as partner-participant. Most impassioned speeches not dialogue but addresses to audience. Ritual vis-a-vis audience. Not to search for story but for themes and gestures, for}}


\textsuperscript{102} Arthur Sainer, p.57.
sounds and dances vis-a-vis audience and with ourselves. To be at once absolutely personal and absolutely collective—communal.103

The Becks of the Living Theatre declared "We wanted to make a play which would no longer be an enactment but would be the act itself."104 The disappearance of the distinction between a political demonstration and a theatrical event become the "guerrilla theater,"---a term coined by the San Francisco Mime Troupe when it shifted its orientation from entertainment to politics.

This close relationship between theater and socio-political agents inevitably influences each other. While the theater wanted to be life itself, not a mimesis of life, real life, at times, became theater. The university protests, for example, revolved around a wide range of specific issues. The motivation of most of the participants, however, was not only commitment to political beliefs but also a desire for a feeling of "esprit de corps." As one of the participants in the Berkeley protest later said:

What enlivened the Free Speech Movement was the exilaration of feeling you were, for once, really acting, that you were dealing directly with the things that affect your life, and each other. You

103 quoted in Arthur Sainer, p.218.

were for once free of the whole sticky cobweb that kept you apart from each other and the roots of your existence, and you knew you were alive and what your life was all about....It was the tactics of direct action, the sense of immediate personal involvement, that made this possible.105

Indeed, the cry of 'participatory democracy' in politics had a responsive echo in the new theater, for some experimental theater groups sought to eliminate hierarchies and organized leadership altogether.

In their zeal for social commitment, the new theater people rigidly followed democratic methods of creation, embracing the idea that everyone should do everything regardless of skill. The 'democratization' of the creative process became the typical means of making new plays.106 Often it meant a group of artists taking charge of the whole production from initial conception to finished performance. In more radical groups there was no distinction between the work of performer, director, designer, and playwright. Typically, there was a long list of people who contributed to a certain piece of work without being identified by individual specialty.

Those who were enthusiastic with collective creation were concerned with something more than the simple process of theatrical collaboration. Like so many others in the

106 Theodore Shank, p.3.
sixties, they also were in search of a model community as an alternative to hierarchical, compartmentalized contemporary society. In the case of the Living Theatre, the members of the group were committed to dramatizing their belief not only on stage, but in life as well. By 1968, the Living Theatre became "a tribe of anarchist commune loosely held together without rules or contracts." As Richard Schechner has said,

The new theater has emphasized its communal nature because these theaters have sought to control their own destinies. Members have been disgusted with the political, social and artistic life of their nations. And, not being nihilists, but the opposite---people who wish to construct, either through revolution or radical reformation, a new society---they have set up their theater as model communities.

This kind of theatrical innovation reflects a genuine sense of cultural crisis, a revolt against authority in all guises, a longing for a lost community, and a search for the possibility of community commensurate with one's spiritual need and political ideology.

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109 Members of the Bread and Puppet Theater, for example, lived together making their living by farming to protest against the dehumanizing effects of modern urban life.
During the sixties, there was a special sympathy between the age and the theatre. The theatre of the sixties enthusiastically responded to a culture in the process of re-examining and experimenting with new visions of society. The avant-garde theatre groups exploded established views of the potential and function of the theatre while exploring the relationship between theatre and revolutionary politics. In their approach to new aesthetic principles, they also explored the limits of rationalism, individualism, and liberalism. The theatre now became a means for both the audience and performers to confront one another. And in the 1960s there were those who treasured the notion that theirs was a special generation, that their work was the culmination of a historic process.\footnote{110 A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.138.}

In addition to the strong political assertion of many avant-garde theatre groups, many of their theatrical innovations derived from a wish to assert a natural innocence, a physical purity, a model of community and aesthetic conviction strongly linked to the countercultural ethos of the sixties. The experiments during the sixties expanded the range of theatricality while seeking to broaden definitions of the real so as to include a sense of spiritual and sexual fulfillment.\footnote{111 Ibid., p.93.}
With the conclusion of this volatile decade there were many changes in the avant-garde theatre. There was a shift from a public to a private art with increasing emphasis on intensely private experience, autobiographical pieces and monologues. However, the closure or the change in the various avant-garde groups and the elevation of the self, considered by some as a narcissistic retreat into the self, is seen by others as another attempt to search for fulfillment and communality, "a Thoreau-like withdrawal to refocus energy and attention."\textsuperscript{112} Indeed, these changes were "not just the exhaustion of a particular line of theatrical enquiry: [but] the end or the deferment of a particular model of social action."\textsuperscript{113} As Spalding Gray suggests,

For me there is nothing larger than the personal when it is communicated well. The very act of communication takes it into a 'larger vein' and brings it back to the community. The personal confessional, stripped of its grand theatrical metaphors, is what matters to me now. I am trying to redefine what is significant for me....This personal exploration has made me more politically aware now I've come to myself as authority I have found that I still feel repressed and because of this feeling of repression I am forced to look further into the outside world for its source.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p.135.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
As lamented by many theatre practitioners and critics, what happened in the 1970s is that Americans turned away from the social and political issues they had addressed in the sixties. And in turning away, they turned inward focusing more on the self. The seventies witnessed a relocation of self in the communal structure. In the preface to The Sense of the Seventies, the editors claims that,

The seventies may well be christened The Paradoxical Decade, a time when America---and the rest of the world along with it---seemed to be going in two directions at once. On the one hand it was a time of retreat to a past that was safer, more secure. Nostalgia covered the land like a maternal blanket. It is as though we had become conscious of time and were engaged in some desperate effort to hold it back. On the other hand we were propelled into the future by the discovery of a new frontier---the frontier within.\textsuperscript{115}

The variety, originality and energy of the avant-garde theatre was no less than that of American society itself. What happened, however, can not be understood simply as a challenge against authority. Most important, the challenge against authority and the various experiments stimulated the quest for self identity.

Sam Shepard is very much a product of the avant-garde theatre movement of this time. And his transformation from a rebellious rural youth to one of America's most successful playwrights shows that he was telling the audience in their own language exactly what they were feeling about their world. His works are a faithful mirror of the times.

Sam Shepard

Born in 1943, Sam Shepard grew up in Southern California:

I grew up on an avocado ranch in Duarte, California. I had 25 head of sheep and was a registered 4H club member. I became a thief at the Los Angeles County Fair where we used to steal goose eggs and goat's milk for breakfast. I was thrown in jail in Big Bear for giving the wife of the Chief of Police the finger. I rolled over four times in a Renault Dauphine while stoned on Benzedrine and landed right side up in a gas station, with nothing but the wind knocked out of me. I stole a car once in Pasadena and got away with it. I used to go to the Rose Parade and watch Leo Carillo and the Lone Ranger and Hoppalong Cassidy riding their horses on Orange Grove Boulevard. I went to the Pasadena Civic Auditorium to see the Beach Boys play and we'd get drunk and act real tough.116

Growing up in the fifties, Shepard was fascinated by the world of movies, rock 'n' roll, and comic books. Indeed, his imagination was shaped by this world and depended on it. Bored with rural life and his father's military-style discipline, Shepard auditioned for a local theatre called Bishop's Company Repertory Players and traveled across the country for eight months playing one night stands in local churches. While on the road Samuel Shepard Rogers Jr. changed his name into Sam Shepard. As Shepard remembers the incident. "There was this big fight with my old man...and at that point I fled. And I thought, well, I'm just going to start over, pretend I don't even have a family." 117 It was a rebellion against his family, a deliberate break with his past, an attempt to make his own identity. In 1963, he and the repertory group went to New York. As a restless nineteen-year old, he landed right in the center of the cultural explosion.

In the earlier sixties, the Off Off Broadway Movement was just getting under way. Later, reflecting on the time of his arrival, he said "I was very lucky to have arrived in New York at that time." 118 While working as a waiter, he was discovered by headwaiter Ralph Cook, a former actor

117 quoted in Jack Kroll, Constance Guthrie, Janet Huck, "Who's That Tall, Dark Stranger?" in Newsweek (November 11, 1985), p.70.

who had been given the use of St. Mark’s Church In-the-Bowery which he converted into the Theatre Genesis. One day Shepard told Cook that he had written a play, _Cowboys_. It opened October, 1964. The actors were two fellow waiters. Ralph Cook directed the play. There was another one-act play on the bill with _Cowboys_, _The Rock Garden_. Thus, Shepard began his career as a playwright. His work was subsequently performed at Caffe Cino, La Mama, the Judson Poet’s Theatre, the Performance Group, and Yale Repertory. He won ten Obie awards and, in 1979, won the Pulitzer Prize for _Buried Child_.

Shepard has said of his earlier plays,

> The strongest impressions I have now of these plays are of the specific times and places where they were written....For me, these plays are inseparable from the experience of the time out of which they came. A series of impulsive chronicles representing a chaotic, subjective world. Basically, without apologizing, I can see now that I was learning how to write. I was breaking the ice with myself.\(^{119}\)

Indeed, he was very much a product of the Off Off Broadway Movement and probably its most successful writer. Understandably his earlier works---_Cowboys_, _The Rock Garden_, _Chicago_, _Icarus’s Mother_, _The Unseen Hand_, _4-H Club_, _Fourteen Hundred Thousand_, etc---share many characteristics

with other avant-garde works staged in small cafes, lofts, church basements, and storefronts. As David Madden comments,

Shepard’s relentless verbiage and sound effects suggest a recent adolescence submerged in rock, and other racket music, a din, appropriate, I suppose, for our urban civilization. We sense with theatrical immediacy that this young man writes out of a milieu of psychedelic coffee house environments, of outlandish costumes, including Soviet schoolboy caps, steel-rimmed glasses, and beat uniforms.120

Indeed, Shepard’s early works show a disregard of the classical unities, a resistance to rational structuring, fragmented actions, substitution of style for substance, heavy use of music, frequent resort to gesture and impressionistic use of light, absence of meaningful dialogue, frequent use of monologue, anonymity of the characters, irrelevant use of language and direct speech to the audience. In addition, Shepard shared with others such thematic concerns as a challenge to authority, a restless energy for rebellion, the yearning for escape, and an apocalyptic imagination. As Bigsby comments,

Clearly these are plays, then, which operate principally on a non-rational, associational level and are not best approached through rational textual analysis. Indeed, as with happenings, they are in a sense designed to resist precisely

120 David Madden, p.719.
such an approach. The characters do not exist in any conventional sense. They are confessedly theatrical figures, fictions. The plot is not of central importance. The language operates obliquely.\textsuperscript{121}

In addition to characteristics of form, two of his earliest plays---\textit{Cowboys, The Rock Garden}---dealt with a theme what was going to recur again and again---the quest for freedom and independence. In \textit{Cowboys}, deliberately emphasizing the mythic qualities of the cowboy, Shepard contrasted their freedom, independence, and wandering life style with that of his rural Californians---"all those people who were going to work and riding the buses."\textsuperscript{122} The two cowboys in \textit{Cowboys} are an expression of his yearning for footloose freedom, a care-free life, and camaraderie with the people Shepard associated with in New York.

About his first extant play, \textit{The Rock Garden}, Shepard has said: "[The] \textit{Rock Garden} is about leaving my mom and dad."\textsuperscript{123} The work is about his rebellion against his parents and his past. Thus, in these two early plays Shepard took leave of his family and played out a ritual of his imagination, using a childhood fascination with cowboys

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama}, p.226.


\textsuperscript{123} Ellen Oumano, p.32.
as a vehicle to the world of professional theatre.\textsuperscript{124} The two plays were "rite of passage" for Shepard.

Although \textit{The Rock Garden} is about Shepard's personal experience of leaving his parents, the simplified setting, ritualistic action, and generalized characters suggest that the condition he describes is meant to be to others: a sterile human relationship, the breakdown of family, the sharp discontinuity between the older and younger generation. Importantly, the play ends with strong intimations of violent change. In this regard, Doris Auerbach aptly describes the play as, in both form and content, "a play for its time...the mid-1960s, when the first cracks in the complacency of American society were beginning to become very obvious."\textsuperscript{125}

In \textit{The Rock Garden}, the sterile atmosphere and tautological exchanges of dialogue are motivational buildup for the central character to break away from his family. Shepard's subsequent plays are filled with yearnings for escape subtly mixed with fear of entrapment. In the \textit{4-H Club}, the play develops the psychological motivations to escape by polarizing the differences between the present situation and that of an imagined place. The play ends the moment the protagonist realizes in his imagination his


yearning for escape. The act of escape culminates in La Turista when the protagonist escapes through a wall leaving a cut-out silhouette of his body.

In Shepard’s earliest plays, the desire to escape seems to be tantamount to the goal of escape. The boy’s escape in The Rock Garden coincides with his journey toward adulthood, and is a comment on family and society as repressive and hypocritical. In 4-H Club, as well, John wants to escape to a completely harmonious world. Thus, failure to escape means entrapment and regression which leads, as in Fourteen Hundred Thousand, toward ultimate extinction. In his later plays, however, there appears ambivalence toward the earlier themes.

Already in Cowboys #2, there appears a creeping sense of skepticism toward escape. The two cowboys in the play are out in the desert away from decaying civilization. But they discover that the situation in the desert is also harsh and deadening. In La Turista, the protagonist, Kent, has already succeeded in escaping to ‘primitive’ Mexico. But here in Mexico, he suffers from "a fourth degree sunburn," and contracts "la turista." Likewise both Pop in The Holy Ghostly, and Young Man in Operation Sidewinder escape to the desert only to meet their final defeat.

Both the two cowboys in Cowboys #2, and Kent in La Turista show the possibility of endless vagrancy. They failed to make any effort to understand and analyze their
situation in the larger socio-cultural context. A character in *The Unseen Hand* says "Kill Azusa," paraphrasing the phrase "Everything from 'a' to 'z' in the USA." It is, more or less, an attitude Shepard's earlier protagonists share. Their criteria of judgment is sensitivity and feeling. Their rebellion is essentially escapist and has little or no self-awareness. As Shepard has said of his early plays:

> In those days I had a lot of emotional earthquakes that I didn't understand because I was in the grips of them. I didn't even realize even that much...I was just running wild with them and I didn't know where they were taking me.\(^{126}\)

At the same time, Shepard's earlier works are very much colored with the countercultural sense of apocalypse. *Chicago* is mostly an imaginative musing about the world pervaded with sinister force and fantasy about the regressive evolution of man. In *Icarus's Mother*, Shepard's apocalyptic vision expands into the wider world. A group of picnicking people experience anxiety, vague hope, panic and suspicion at the sudden appearance of a mysterious plane writing enigmatically E=MC\(^2\) in the sky. At the play's conclusion, the plane crashes into sea causing a huge explosion. *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* is about building a

bookcase that seems to have a life of its own. It keeps falling apart until the whole set is completely dismantled, leaving the stage a wasteland. And in Red Cross, an insignificant headache is transformed into an apocalyptic disaster killing millions of people. All of these apocalyptic visions are a rendering of contemporary anxiety stemming from the various social, political, racial, and generational conflicts that characterize the sixties.

As Bigsby says about Shepard's originality, "it is...characterized by a willingness to submit to images provoked by drugs or illness, and he resisted reshaping or subordinating these images to a rational structuring." ¹²⁷ As with other artists of the sixties, he shared a belief in "the authenticity and authority of the spontaneous vision." ¹²⁸ Indeed, Shepard's earlier works before Operation Sidewinder tend to be an elaboration of image or image clusters. His works are often fragmented and rarely cohere into a rational whole. Frequently his writing is a 'distinctive ebb and flow' of imagination. And dreams, visions, and reveries frequently dominate the supposed realism of the set and the daily experience his works purport to be dealing with.

¹²⁷ A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.222.
¹²⁸ Ibid.
Frequent criticism of his earlier works—fragmented, intentionally vague, and difficult—are related to the author’s own confusion regarding the complex society against which he was reacting. Shepard himself has said that his earlier works were related to what he called "the emotional context of the sixties":

People in New York are cutting themselves down every day of the week—from the inside out...but the conditions come from the outside. Junk, heroin, and all that stuff is a social condition and it's also an emotional response to the society they're living in.¹²⁹

Operation Sidewinder marks a clear change in his work as the pervasive apocalyptic sense is objectified and "an implicit need to intervene" is proposed. In addition, Shepard now provides a concrete cultural context for the characters, the setting, and the plot. Operation Sidewinder is "a lament for a decade, for an America losing itself."¹³⁰ Another important aspect of the play is that Shepard provides a psychologically identifiable character agonizing for the loss of innocence and for his alienated self. In fact, a considerable part of the play is the protagonist's description of the process which led him to

¹³⁰ A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.229.
his present alienation and agony. Relative to Shepard's subsequent works, *Operation Sidewinder* is the first step in a journey toward a solid identity and a sense of harmony.

Young Man in *Operation Sidewinder*---a flower child, college dropout, draft dodger, drug addict, revolutionary---has deserted his family to follow his dream. Shepard's characters before *Operation Sidewinder* also deserted their family and proclaimed freedom from responsibility by posing as a man on the run, a slightly paranoid fugitive in opposition to society and culture. They met a steady erosion of hopes, and Young Man is no exception. Unlike his predecessors, however, Young Man begins to realize that what he wants to pursue may not be a world with unbound freedom. He becomes aware of deep-hidden yearning for America's mythic past saturated with nostalgia and his need for a solid sense of identity supported by a community of other selves. In his family trilogy, Shepard's characters now set out on a journey for selfhood within a community of other selves. As one of the characters in *Mad Dog Blues* (1971) says, they realize "my spinning brain is a failure with no home." In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the head of the family comes to the realization that "you can't escape." He says "I kept looking for it out there somewhere. And all the time it was right inside this house." In this sense Shepard's later works and the writer's own career can be
described as a "Bildungsroman, picareque accounts of the search for meaning and value."\textsuperscript{131}

Shepard himself is very much aware of his change as a writer. Indeed, in his family plays, the "disappearing act" is now thwarted and greater concern is shown for family and the relationships which bind people. \textit{Buried Child} shows this change. In the play, the protagonist professes "I should know who my own family is!" And once home, the main character begs approval from his father and grandfather. The play ends with the grandfather passing his property on to his grandson.

Shepard's works are frequently criticized, above all, for their intentional vagueness. This vagueness helps to account for the wide range of differing opinions about his works. However, considering that "Sam Shepard is very much a product of the Off Off Broadway Movement" part of the mystery can be solved by situating the writer and his works in the changing cultural context. As Wynn Handman comments:

Sam reflected what was going on at the time, which was a great blossoming of freedom---breaking with tradition and establishment and rules. Sam is able to write from his own experience and his own roots, but it becomes so much more, because it feels like America just flows through him. He's like a conduit that digs down into the American

\textsuperscript{131} A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.230.
soil and what flows out of him is what we’re all about.\textsuperscript{132}

The following is an effort to see Shepard’s works in their larger cultural context.

II

The Rock Garden and La Turista

"What's happened to this family anyway?"

Buried Child

From his earliest days, Shepard has shown a consistent interest in the theme of the breakdown of the American family. Significantly, one of his earliest plays deals with a family, a typical nuclear family. Shepard himself best summarizes his own play:

[The] Rock Garden is about leaving my mom and dad. It happens in two scenes. In the first scene the mother is lying in bed ill while the son is sitting in a chair, and she is talking about this special sort of cookie that she makes, which is marshmallow on salt crackers melted under the oven. It's called Angels on Horseback, and she has a monologue about it. And then the father arrives in the second scene. The boy doesn't say anything, he's just sitting in this chair, and the father starts to talk about painting the fence around the house, and there's a monologue about that in the course of which the boy keeps dropping asleep and falling off his chair. Finally, the boy has a monologue about orgasm that goes on for a couple of pages and ends in him coming all over the place, and then the father falls off the chair. The father also talks about this rock garden, which is his obsession, a garden where he collects all these rocks from different sojourns to the desert.¹

¹ Kenneth Chubb, "Metaphors" p.5.
Importantly the characters in *The Rock Garden* are identified in generationally generic terms as Boy, Man, Woman. By introducing these figures in this manner, Shepard effectively gives the changing image of American culture, condensed in American family.

Outwardly, the family is very much like a nineteen fifties suburban nuclear family. The mother is talking about some sort of special cookie. And the man talks about his exquisite hobby. At first glance, it might seem to be a happy suburban family, but it hides a canker at its core. The short exchange of dialogue between the characters functions only to make them aware of each other’s existence through simple tautological repetitions. In fact, the couple encounters one another only briefly at the end of Scene ii as they exchange these words,

Man: Kind of drafty.
Woman: Yes.
Man: Must be the windows.
Woman: I guess so.(39)²

Furthermore, the three characters never turn to address one another but deliver their words into the air or talk, more or less to the audience. Especially in the case of the

² Sam Shepard, *The Rock Garden* in *Sam Shepard: The Unseen Hand and Other Plays* (Bantam Books, 1986). All subsequent references to Shepard’s work will be cited parenthetically in the text.
couple, they indulge in extensive 'dialogue' with the boy but do not specifically address him. In this way, they avoid direct communication with one another. It is likely that communication between the man and the wife was frequently through the boy, as the woman in her reverie remembers that the man locked himself in the attic "for days and days and never come down."

The boy is caught in an emotional cold war between his parents. Mom and Pop won’t talk to each other. In the woman’s monologue, her husband is only referred to in the third person. In the man’s words, the woman is totally absent. The curiously mundane dialogues, with frequent long pauses are, in effect, solitary monologues interrupted only by the boy’s indifferent interest. Their language is devoid of any emotion. The boy’s mechanical response and indifferent attitude shows his willful rejection of identification with either of his parents.

The woman refers to her husband mostly in the third person, and the man talks about seemingly irrelevant topics, not to his wife but to the boy who nods out of boredom. The boy’s rocking back and forth shows his divided psychic state between the parents. At the same time, it is an appropriate image of a stirring youth, as the boy’s verbal explosion shows at the end of the play.

The disposition of the characters on stage also effectively portrays the emotional distance between them.
The man sits on the couch downstage left, and the boy sits in the rocking chair upstage right with his back to the man. The woman is bedridden upstage throughout the play. The tenuousness of emotional bonding is even more emphasized when contrasted with the play's domestic setting. Gradually domestic symbols such as tables, beds, and rocking chair are stripped of their traditional values and serve to enhance the lack of warmth, affection, and cozyness of a home.

Although the characters in The Rock Garden are not fully individualized, they provide some clues for inner problems underneath their complacent facade. The woman is suffering from a slight ache which seems to be a psychosomatic disease. She suffers from a cold and keeps shivering and complaining about a draft, though it is now, summer. She says, "I really don't know how I caught this cold. It was probably from being out in the rain too much."(37) The woman is constantly complaining about her ailment which she thinks is due to her exposure to rain. Though she is not fully aware of it her chronic illness seems to be related to her dissatisfaction with her husband's habits and eccentricities. At the same time, her illness can be seen as symptoms of the disturbance inside this family. Though she can not clearly articulate what's wrong, her mild complaints hide anger.

The woman, however, begins to be stirred, however vaguely, into acknowledging that things don’t always turn
out the way she might wish. She hasn’t been terribly hurt, or betrayed. Neither is she flamboyantly jealous or coldly cruel. She is not like the more bizarre female characters in Shepard’s later works. The very plot of the play with long and monotonous ‘soliloquys’ only interposed occasionally with short interjections does not suggest anything awful or grand in this family. The play, begun like a still picture, only betrays the emptiness of this family when words are spoken. The atmosphere is that of an empty, paralyzing, and boring marriage, not a tragic unhappiness.

At first the woman’s seemingly casual reference to her husband’s minor eccentricities seems a bit of wistful musing on things past, though a little disconcerting. We begin to sense, however, an undercurrent of apprehension in her interminable narration of his habits, and her long pauses. She sees her husband as oddly detached. He kept himself in the attic. "A whole beach and he stayed inside all the time. He’d look at the beach from the attic but he hardly ever went near it." (36) And "Sometimes he just stayed in the attic. He’d stayed up there for days and days and never come down," and "He didn’t like to eat around people. He ate with the cats in the attic." The woman’s recollection of the past is curiously devoid of emotion, either of intense pain or affection.
The Rock Garden depicts an American family afflicted, so to speak, with "a disease that has no name." Indeed, it's a disease which the members of the family sense but one which they are as yet unable to articulate to themselves or communicate with each other.

The making of delicate "angel cookies," and the meticulous arrangement of the rock garden turn out to be attempts to keep the family together. The family members' engaging in long monologues is an attempt to shy away from their sense of wasted relationships, wasted lives, and an attempt to halt the decaying of this static family. Though she doesn't seem to fully acknowledge it, her casual and mild complaints have an urgent psychological motivation. Frustrated and dejected, she complains with a minimum of emotion.

In the case of the man, he is also afflicted with a pervasive sense of disturbance. For no apparent reason, he obstinately clings to the story of maintaining a rock garden. It is an effort to hold his thoughts from straying into unpleasant aspects of his life. The rock seems to give him the sense of security and order his life lacks. The man in The Rock Garden elaborates about maintaining his rock garden:

They have to be good rocks, though. I mean they can't be any kind of rocks. You know what I mean? I mean they have to be the right size and shape and color and everything. They can't just be
ordinary rocks, otherwise there wouldn't be any point in making a garden at all. You know? That's why we'd have to go somewhere else to find them. Somewhere like Arizona or something.(42)

He continues to talk about putting a fountain and Oriental statues in the garden. And he goes on to talk about repairing the irrigation and painting the garden fence and cutting the grass:

Yes, they need spraying. We could do all that and then go to Arizona. It wouldn't be bad at all once we got into it. This whole place will be looking like a new place. A new place. One of those new places with rock garden all over the fountains. You know? You come up the street and there'd be a nice green lawn with a lot of rock gardens and the irrigation running and the new trees all sort of green. You know? And the fence all painted with a different kind of white paint and the grass cut around the sprinkler heads and all that.(43)

If separated from the context of the play, he sounds like a model middle-class husband and father with his interest in the trappings of culture. His hobby, however, turns out to be a device to detach himself from the family and a way to escape from the much-accused blandness of middle-class life. The man's solitary hour is afflicted with vague apprehensions of one sort or another which he tries to resist as much as possible:

It's a nice garden. It gives me something to do. It keeps me pretty busy. You know? It feels good
to get out in it and work and move the rocks around and stuff. You know? It's a good feeling. I change it everyday. It keeps me busy.

(A long pause. The boy falls off his chair.)

It's not the garden so much as the work it gives me. It's good to work in a garden. (41-2)

The father's fascination with rocks suggests his sterility and emotional incapacity to empathize. It is also a way to avoid a gnawing awareness that his life hasn't been based on reality. 'Keeping on the go' is the way for him to avoid the vacuum he lives.³

The separate appearances of the woman and the man on the stage reveal their emotional distance. It is the externalization of a relationship devoid of intimacy and affection. This couple keeps a safe distance from one another so as to ensure there is no pain or loss. This evasion helps the family to hang together but prevents them from being aware that their family is disintegrating. The extremely limited action on the stage and the complete sedentariness of the couple also suggest their fear of emotional commitment and passion.

³ Maurice Stein, mentioning the problematic nature of American suburbia, points out that "the paradox between busyness and helplessness, between outer bustle and inner chaos, may now become easier to explain: 'keeping on the go' is the prime way for the suburbanite to avoid facing the socio-cultural vacuum in which he lives." Maurice Stein, "Suburbia---A Walk on the Mild Side," in Voices of Dissent (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958), p.188.
In plays where there is little action there is interior action, a movement of the will in its place. In *The Rock Garden*, however, the characters accept their isolation without real struggle. And there is no movement, no action, that breaks out of this isolation or that even seriously attempts to do so. Indeed, the failure of the characters to break out of their isolation and the stasis in which they are immured is itself a primary fact of their existence.

The woman in *The Rock Garden* is virtually bedridden all through the scene and the man never leaves his chair. They are encapsulated in their own dissatisfaction as if trying not to disturb the banality of their existence for fear of discovering some monster crouching beneath the mundane surface of their lives. The beautifully arranged rock garden ironically masks the emotional barrenness of this family. To keep a domestic everyday appearance hides the disappointing reality of their life.

When the play was first performed, Michael Allen of St. Mark’s church defended the propriety of producing such a play in a church;

The play is dominated to the end by the parents whose conversation is filled with subtle sexual imagery, hypocritically disguised. The boy is franker than they are, that’s all, and maybe he thinks sex is not evil. I believe this whole generation of young people is saying to us in effect, ‘Look, you use beautiful words and do ugly
things; we'll take ugly words and make beauty of them!4

By contrasting the insipid language of this couple with their son's verbal outbursts, Shepard emphasizes their emptiness and inability to understand and share genuine communication with one another.

The Rock Garden is primarily about the disintegration of American family. One major symptom of this breakdown, Shepard seems to imply, is the discontinuity between generations. Shepard depicts the conflict and contrast between the generations in graphic images. Indeed, The Rock Garden presents a striking contrast between the older and younger generations. Irrelevant and diffuse use of language, the impressionistic use of light, and the stage disposition of the characters also contribute to this sense of generational conflict.

In the opening scene, a man is seen reading a magazine. And a girl and a boy are drinking milk and exchanging glances. Though they are seated around the same table, no word is spoken. The man is completely involved in reading. The boy and the girl exchange glances as if they furtively agree on something, or share some secrets. After a long period of time during which nothing is said, the girl drops her glass and spills some milk. And there's a blackout.

4 quoted in Doris Auberbach, p.10.
In the second scene, a woman tells the boy about Pop," and how much the boy resembles "Pop." Each time the woman makes the boy bring a glass of water or blanket, the boy, who first appeared the scene in his underwear, puts on articles of clothing one by one, until he is fully clad with an overcoat. When Pop walks by dressed in a hat and overcoat, the boy stands up suddenly and runs offstage. After a while Pop reappears in his underwear and the scene ends.

The third scene begins with Pop and the boy both in underwear. The boy sits with his back to Pop. The boy responds disinterestedly and he frequently nods out of boredom. Eventually he falls off his chair.

In Scene ii, while the woman keeps complaining, the boy brings glasses of water responding only with 'why', 'never', 'oh', 'no'. In Scene iii, too, while the man tediously elaborates about the rock garden, the boy answers, more or less, the same monosyllabic words, from time to time. The man's talk seems to continue interminably. In the middle of a long pause, all of a sudden, the boy graphically elaborates his sexual technique. At the end of the boy's torrential outpouring of his experience of orgasm, the man falls off his couch. Upon his falling to the floor, the play ends.

The girl's dropping the glass and spilling milk and the boy's putting on an overcoat suggest they're in a stage of
spiritual weaning. With the striking contrast of the old and the young, the decorous stillness of the old people, the boy's eruptive speech, the old man's falling off the chair, and the blackouts between the scenes, The Rock Garden effectively presents both a sharp discontinuity between the generations and intimations of violent change.

The Rock Garden is about a young man leaving his family. It is also Shepard's personal experience of dramatic and powerful severance from his own past. As Shepard remembers his father,

'He was very strict, my father, very aware of the need for discipline, so-called, very into studying and all that kind of stuff. I couldn't stand it—the whole thing of writing in notebooks, it was really like being jailed.' He was brought up in the Episcopalian Church, 'but that was another kind of prison to get out of, you know. There's nothing worse than listening to a lot of people mumbling, and outside the sun is shining.'

After one especially violent quarrel with his father Shepard left home. Before leaving, however, he was already travelling with Bishop's Company Repertory Plays for six months. And once he had glimpsed the outside world simmering with rebellious energy, it was impossible to go back to the monotonous life of the sheep ranch and the avocado farm. Thus, at the age of nineteen Shepard left his

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family for New York, more or less for good. As Don Shewe
writes,

It's 1963, Kennedy's in the White House..., the
baby-boom generation is coming of age, the air is
electric with jazz, hope, prosperity, energy,
you're nineteen years old and just off the bus.
Having changed his name on the road from the one
he shared with an all-American comic-book hero to
that of a famous wife murderer, Sam Shepard tucked
his hometown good manners away in his suitcase..., 
free now to act out his wildest fantasies to his
heart's content. 6

And in Shepard's next and first full length play, La
Turista, he does, indeed, act out his "wildest fantasies"
of escape "to his heart's content."

The plot of La Turista concerns an American tourist
couple, Kent and Salem. The first act, or action, of La
Turista is set in a hotel room in Mexico, the second one in
a hotel room in America. When the lights come up Kent and
Salem are sitting on separate beds and talking about
diarrhea and "the fourth degree sunburn." Into this hotel
room, enters a Mexican boy carrying a shoeshine kit. Kent
is inexplicably helpless in chasing away a boy whom he
thinks is a beggar. Kent's response and the boy's absurd
behavior heightens a mysterious tension. The boy not only
won't obey but impudently defies Kent by pulling the phone

6 Ibid., p.35.
out of the wall. Then Kent begs the boy to leave in spite of his impudence. This time the boy spits in Kent’s face. Again Kent is completely helpless and rushes out to take a shower.

The implication of the boy’s behavior is elaborated by Salem. While Kent takes a shower, shouting he has diarrhea and can’t move, Salem talks about an episode that happened in her childhood. In the lengthy story Salem spat in her father’s face when she was young. Without transition, somehow, the disconnected phone rings, and the boy answers the phone. After he talks over the phone with somebody Salem thinks to be the boy’s father, the boy takes off his pants, climbs into the bed, and gets under the sheet.

In the bed, the boy, suddenly, calls Salem ‘Mom’ and talks about ruthless Mexican ranchers and a vain movie star. Near the end of his story, Kent emerges from the bathroom dressed like the movie star the boy has described. Strutting proudly up and down, twirling a pistol, he harangues about American culture. Suddenly he sees the boy in his bed and faints.

The Mexican boy brings a Mayan witchdoctor and his son. While the witchdoctor and his son prepare for a bizarre ritual, the boy explains the patriarchal authority of witchdoctor and the transmission of the profession. In the meantime, Kent lies unconscious and the witchdoctor’s son who looks “exactly like the boy” and is dressed the same
way" takes all of Kent’s clothes off except his underwear.

A little later, Salem gets sick, too. She begs attention and seduces the boy saying "I’m almost naked." Then the boy begins to put on each item of Kent’s costume. Without any appropriate transition, Salem asks the boy to take off Kent’s clothes and leave. Suddenly Salem again changes her attitude. She tries to sell the boy as a chattel slave. Suddenly, the phone rings. While the boy talks over the phone, presumably with his father, about his departure from the family, Scene i ends.

The set of Scene ii is organized the same as Scene i except the impression this time is that of an American hotel. Kent is sick in bed and a doctor is invited into the room. Doc diagnoses Kent as a case of sleeping sickness. Kent somehow recovers from his sleep, and Doc falls asleep. Kent talks about how he and Salem got their names. As Doc wakes suddenly up, Kent rushes to the phone and tries to dial with no success. And then there follows a long chase between Doc and Kent until Kent escapes through the wall leaving a cut-out silhouette of his body. As Kent said that he came just "to disappear," he disappeared.

In La Turista, the confused identity of the characters, the incoherence in the development of the story, the changes without appropriate transition make a coherent thematic
interpretation difficult. After watching the performance of *La Turista*, David Madden comments:

The audience responded to separate theatrical moments, touches, stunts in this action play, though it could not follow the alogic of the play, to use a more appropriate term. It did follow the play’s drift, its strident tone, its attitude of abuse, rebellion and anguished confusion. 7

Although a coherent interpretation is not easy to make, *La Turista* does reveal themes common to Shepard’s work: yearning for escape and the challenge to authority.

In an extended scene, the confrontation between rich tourists and a poor shoeshine boy develops into a psychological conflict. When Kent first became aware of the Mexican boy, he refused to see him by ducking under the sheet. When Salem suggests “Let him shine your shoes,” Kent says:

No! I can’t even look at him. His hands are full of pork grease; his eyes are red; his breath smells. Get him away. (259) 8

His words show contempt and arrogance, while his behavior betrays fear. At first Kent isn’t sure of the nature of his own vague fear and emits an inordinate belittling of the

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7 David Madden, p.718.

8 Sam Shepard, *La Turista* in *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (Bantam Books, 1986)
boy's poverty in a burst of confused energy as if to dismiss his fear. He asks Salem to send him away with some money. When the boy refuses to take the money, Kent pours out a long contemptuous reproach against the boy woven out from arbitrary imagination. His pretentiousness and contempt, however, is an effort to disguise his own fear and vulnerability. His harangue says one thing, but his voice contradicts his words.

While hiding under the sheet, Kent worries that the boy won't leave. He imagines the boy to be a weakling who has grown up in extreme poverty, a helpless animal swayed by the elements of nature. Describing the boy's poverty-stricken childhood, Kent imagines the boy's childhood: "He grew up in a village, in a hut. He nursed his mother's milk until he was four and a half and then almost died from dysentery at the time he was weaned." (260) At the same time, Kent suspects that because of his poverty he has all the more reason not to leave the room. Kent says,

He will never leave no matter how much you give him. He will never ever leave now. He's probably never seen a house like this in his life....The fan to him is like the finest air conditioning. The beds to him are like two Rolls Royces. (260)

His overt contempt for the boy is not tolerated. Without being intimidated, the boy spits in Kent's face.
Kent rushes out of the room to take a shower only to discover that he has diarrhea. He shouts and groans from the bathroom. "Salem! I do have diarrhea after all!" "Salem! I won't be able to move!" Kent's association of diarrhea with death paralyzes him. While Kent can be heard groaning from behind the door, the boy smiles and makes various monster faces at the audience. This contrast of triumph and defeat, the proud smiling boy and the horrified Kent, suggests an important theme—the challenging son and the dejected father—that reverberates throughout Shepard's plays.

The boy changes gradually from a shoeshine boy to an intimidating intruder. And all Kent can do is howling curses and lament as if he were doomed:

Kent: OOOoooh! Oh my God! Aaah! Spit! He spit on me! Oh no! Oh my God! Jesus! He spit on me!
Salem: What's the matter?
Kent: He spit! He spit! He spit all over me. Oh my God!
Salem: What's going on?
Kent: Oh, I can't stand it. The little prick! Oh God! I'll have to take a shower! Aaah! Oh my God! What a rotten thing to do!(261)

He wipes himself frantically with the sheet, while the boy smiles. Confronting the boy, Kent calls him names, "little prick." The word suggests what Kent has feared in dealing with the boy, challenge from the young boy. Instead of taking any measure against the boy, Kent more or less
retreats into the bathroom only to discover that he is attacked by "la turista." He yells "Salem! I do have diarrhea." Indeed, while Kent becomes immobile in the bathroom, the boy takes his place in bed.

When Salem was about ten, she tells the boy, her family returned home from a car trip. When they arrived nobody would get out right away, instead, they all "just sat in the car staring ahead and not speaking for a very long time." Finally, it was she who broke the silence and took the initiative. As she recounts the event, she is full of pride:

I was the first to get out and start walking toward the cement steps that led to the porch and I could hear my family behind me. My father, my mother, my sisters, my brothers. And I could hear all four doors of the car slam one after the other like gun shots from a rifle. And I could hear their feet following me up the stairs to the porch right behind me. Very silent. I was leading them sort of and I was only about ten years old. I got to the top of the stairs and I was standing on the porch. I was the first one there and I turned to see them and they all looked right at me. All staggered because of the steps, and all their eyes staring right at me. I saw them like that just for a second, and then do you know what I did little boy? I spit on the very top just before my father stepped down. And just as he stepped on

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9 On the allegorical level, Estelle Raben notes, it is a revenge against the American reared in an illusory closed system of cleanliness and inconsiderate to other value systems and other people. This allegory can be equally applicable to the relationship between the rich American tourist Kent, the father, and the poor Mexican boy, the son. Estelle Manette Raben, *Major Strategies in Twentieth Century Drama: Apocalyptic Vision, Allegory and Open Form* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989), p.89.
that little spot of spit that had nothing dirtier in it than cotton candy and caramel apple, my whole family burst into noise like you never ever heard. (262)

Salem’s story turns out to be an elaboration on the meaning of spitting in her father’s face. It’s a story about the fear of the "giant-monster-father" and her own challenge and rebellion. Her recollection of the event is full of innocent pride, as if she had challenged an insurmountable figure whom others dared not confront. Indeed, her subsequent description of how her father beat her with his belt, done in great detail, is almost raised to ritual seriousness. At the end of the event, she, indeed, emerges triumphant. After the punishment for spitting, everybody else went into the house. She alone stayed outside, feeling good: "And I stayed there in a ball, all rolled up, with my knees next to my chin and my hands rubbing my ankles. And I felt very good that they’d left me there by myself." (262)

By placing the father figure Kent offstage, Shepard reinforces the Oedipal implication of the spitting incident. As soon as Salem finishes the story, the phone rings. The boy answers the phone and announces "I’m out here on my own. Adios," probably to his father. It seems to be more or less a self-announcement of his successful accomplishment of the rites of passage. As he hangs up the phone, he takes off his pants and climbs into the bed, gets under the
sheets, and calls Salem mom. While the boy usurps the symbolic father's rightful place, Kent is heard saying "Salem! I won't be able to move."

From the bed the boy talks about a movie he once worked in. His role was to follow the hero "while he scored on all the native chicks." Then, he describes the hero who "wore linen shirts and handmade Campeche boots and one of those straight brimmed Panamanian hats and a pistol with abalone plates on the handle." (263-4) This description is subtly connected to Salem's description of her father who wore a "black leather belt with a silver buckle and a picture of a trigger engraved on the front." The belt and the pistol are the symbolic scepters of the American father and symbolize both authority and violence as is evident in the beating by Salem's father with his belt. The image, however, strongly suggests that his authority has already been severely challenged. As Hannah Arendt says:

Its [authority] hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed. (A father can lose his authority either by beating his child or by starting to argue with him, but that, either by behaving to him like a tyrant or by treating him as an equal) To remain in authority requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter.10

10 Hannah Arendt, p.45.
Indeed, the boy’s hero turns out to be more of an image than reality. This challenge to authority is obvious when the boy glorifies the movie star only to debunk him. Initially, the movie star was an unchallengeable hero for the Mexican peon boy. He wore expensive shirts, luxurious boots and hats and fancy pistol. Nobody bugged him because they never knew what he was really like. As long as he was not challenged and his authority was intact, everything about him was taken for granted. The boy says,

He didn’t have to do anything. He just sat around and did his stick and everything was taken care of. No worry about a place to sack out. No worry about food or booze. And when he felt like splitting he just took off. (264)

But authority in all guises was soon to be questioned. The boy’s hero was stripped of his mysterious aura. As the boy says, "something hidden somewhere," something else "you’re not sure about" has disappeared. The boy continues the story saying "The movie was a drag because they forced him to blow his cool at the end." It happened when some villagers made a wise crack about his hat. They told him "his hat made him look like a clown or something like that and the cat fell right into a trap where the villagers tore him up and ate him alive. Like cannibalism or something." (264) The movie star-father figure turns out to be only a "cat" that moves like a "jaguar."
The boy says to Salem he wants to be like the hero but
doesn’t want to suffer his ignominious defeat: "But that’s
what I want to be like, mom. Except I wouldn’t blow my
cool. Not about a hat anyway." And then he insinuates what
he has done to Kent. He goes on to say that "A hat’s just
something you wear to keep off the sun. One hat’s as good
as another. You blow your cool about other shit. Like when
a man spits in your face."(264) This is a strong allusion
to Kent’s behavior earlier in the play when the Mexican boy
spat in his face. Kent lost his temper in a completely
hysterical way. He became almost panicked. 11 The boy’s
making of a hero was only to invite the final demolition of
the hero. By now it becomes clear that the Oedipal
challenge of the boy was done with his full awareness.

No sooner does the boy finish his story than Kent
emerges from the bathroom dressed exactly like the movie
star hero the boy has described. Thus, the Kent-hero-father
identification is established. The identification is more
firmly established by Shepard’s use of cloth imagery, a
recurring element in Shepard’s plays. Ron Mottram says,

The costume links him not only to the hero and,
therefore, to the boy who wants to be like him,
that is it links Kent and the boy in a variation

11 Charles Whiting, "Inverted Chronology in Sam Shepard’s
La Turista," in Modern Drama (Sep, 1986), vol.XXIX no.III,
p.418.
on the father/son relationship, but also to the hero's fate, a fate which the boy as son instigates by his contempt for the father.\textsuperscript{12}

Kent assumes a new identity with his hero's costume. Kent crosses center stage and announces "Well! I feel like a new man after all that. I think I finally flushed that old amoeba right down the old drain."\textsuperscript{265}

Shifting from his former contemptuous attitude toward the boy and his culture, Kent denigrates America for "breeding a bunch of lily livered weaklings...simply by not having a little dirty water around to toughen people up."\textsuperscript{265} He even says, "nothing like a little amoebic dysentery to build up a man's immunity to his environment."

His indictment of America ends on an apocalyptic note:

Before you know it them people ain't going to be able to travel nowhere outside their own country on account of their low resistance. An isolated land of purification. That's what I'd call it....Nobody can come in and nobody can get out. An isolated land....Then the next step is in-breading in a culture like that where there's no one coming in and no one getting out. Incest! Yes sirree! The land will fall apart. Just take your Indians for example. Look what's happened to them through incest. Smaller and smaller! Shorter life span! Rotten teeth! Low resistance! The population shrinks. The people die away. Extinction! Destruction! Rot and ruin! I see it all now clearly before me! The Greatest Society on its way downhill.\textsuperscript{265-6}

\textsuperscript{12} Ron Mottram, p.44.
Kent's sudden sympathy for and identification with the boy is more of an affectation than genuine understanding or new awareness. He attempts to pose as the cool and self-possessed Mexican movie star. He struts proudly up and down, taking out his pistol and twirling it, while speaking about the extinction of American civilization. But the moment he sees the boy in his bed, despite his high-flown words, he falls to the floor like the "lily livered weaklings" he denigrates. As Salem says "he's completely out," and remains unconscious throughout the first act.

As Kent claims that a "purified America" is more deadening than filthy Mexico, he falls into a coma. Watching Kent faint, the boy says "Isn't that what the big daddy bear said when he saw Goldilocks? What's he doing in my bed, mothafucka?" (266) The boy's use of the word "mothafucka," together with Kent's previous use of the word "little prick" suggests, he is challenging Kent's---the father figure---authority. Indeed, Salem addresses the boy as "sonny," and says "thanks, son." After Salem sends the boy to bring a doctor for Kent, a witchdoctor and his assistant son appear at the door. As in The Rock Garden, the boy shows signs of his manhood by his great fluency of language. As the witchdoctor and his son perform various rituals for Kent, the boy talks directly to the audience about various aspects of the witchdoctor's culture.
Among thematically important elements in *La Turista*, Shepard makes it clear that the son of the Mayan witchdoctor "looks exactly like the boy and is dressed in the same way." Thus, when the witchdoctor's son takes all of Kent's clothes off for a sacrificial ritual, except his underwear, it is the boy who symbolically "kills" the father by devesting the father. Thus, when the witchdoctor performs the final ritual of resurrecting Kent, the boy announces that Kent is dead. As the doctor completes the ceremony, Salem enters from the bathroom. Her skin is also pale white now. In fact, she is suffering from la turista herself.

Boy: Why madame, your sunburn is gone.
Salem: I'm sick and pale, and dying from the same thing as Kent. What's happened to Kent? How is my Kent? How is my boy?
Boy: He is dead.
Salem: No he's not dead. I'm not dead and I have the same thing. The same rotten thing.
Boy: You're both dead.(271)

The Oedipal theme is intensified when Salem says that she is not sure about anything, feels helpless, and seductively says "Just look at me. I'm almost naked." With that remark the boy begins to put on each item of Kent's costume. By the time he is fully dressed, Salem says "Look how strong you are. Just look. Now look at me....Come on up here! Come on! Come on! Come up here with me and let's see what you look like now that you've
grown." (274) Then Salem leads him back and forth by the hand downstage and offers him to the audience as though he were a chattel slave.

Salem's treatment of the boy also intensifies the theme of Oedipal conflict. Her selling points about the boy tap the undercurrents of infantile Oedipal imagination and draws the theme of Oedipal conflict once again to the surface. She says:

He has come to me from the hills with his father's clothes and his mother's eyes! Look at his hands! How strong! How brave! His father says he is old enough now to work for himself! To work for one of you! To work hard and long! His father has given him over to me for the price of six hogs! I give him to you now for the price of twelve! (274)

Ron Mottram suggests that "the selling of the boy is presented as being done at the instigation of the father, suggesting that the father is disposing of the son as a potential rival." 13

Salem's attempt to sell the boy is also connected to the boy's previous story of ruthless Mexican ranchers. The Mexican rancher story, whether real or fantasy, is a variation on Salem's story of her stern and merciless father. Thus, Shepard succeeds in keeping the undercurrents of Oedipal conflict underneath the apparent story of two American tourists in Mexico. The boy's story emphasizes the

13 Ron Mottram, p.46.

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divided image of the father: the incompetent, helpless father and the powerful and tyrannical father in the form of the rancher.

In his slumberous talk, Kent also tells a similar version of a father-selling-children story. The father, in Kent's story, was offered by a visitor a business of his own and all the "smokes" he needs. The visitor is an emissary from a huge factory, Corporate America, though nobody knows what it makes. All one can see from the factory is smoke. Meanwhile, in Kent's family "Pa can hardly walk from lack of everything he needs," and is "dying for a smoke." The visitor makes the offer, however, on the condition that the father changes the names of his eight daughters and sons to one of the eight brand names of cigarette. Symbolically, the American father has sold his sons and daughters to Corporate America, seduced by the dream that "Money equals power, equals protection, equals eternal life."\(^{14}\) Ron Mottram rightly observes that this is "the American-consumer-economy version of the Mexican farmer's raid on the boy's village."\(^{15}\) This, together with Salem's remembrance of her father and the boy's Mexican rancher story, evokes the sense of traumatic rupture in the course of psychological development from childhood to adulthood.


\(^{15}\) Ron Mottram, p.47.
As Salem tries to sell the boy, the boy receives a phone call from his father. After the boy hangs up, he says to Salem that his father "says to start walking down the road toward my home and he’ll start walking toward me, and we’ll meet halfway and embrace." (276) Again, the boy talks about leaving from his father and his home, because his father will take a truck heading toward home, and he’ll wait for "another truck going the other way." (276) This reconciliation and smooth departure from home and parents suggests the possibility of a new relationship between father and son. However, the fact that it is a telephone conversation and doesn’t happen on stage weakens the likelihood of that taking place. Indeed, the boy declares that he is bound for a different world from his father’s. He says "We’ll tell about where we’ve been, I’ll sing songs that he’s never heard." (276)

In Act II Kent and Salem are in America. Again Shepard tackles the father/son relationship. Kent is sick in bed, and the nature of his disease is not specified. The only prescription from Doc is to keep Kent in motion and induce him to talk. In his soporific talk, Kent talks about his father who sold his sons and daughters to the American Dream. Like a marionette, Kent is completely controlled by the son figure Sonny and Salem, who hold his arm and make him keep pacing and talking. At one point Kent is even described as a corpse, a living corpse.
As Kent recovers from his stupor, he tries desperately to make contact with the outside world so that he can get out of the claustrophobic situation. He and Salem talk about their plan to go to Mexico. Sonny suggests Canada instead of Mexico where Kent would be "less noticeable." Salem agrees with Sonny saying "In Mexico they're all dark. They'd notice us right off the bat." To this, Doc more pungently adds "Especially with a corpse," and Sonny reiterates "They'd notice a corpse anywhere." Thus, the moment Kent is freed from their hold he is referred to as "a corpse." Kent realizes:

That this doctor is up to no good. That this doctor, in cahoots with his fishy son, is planning to perform some strange experiment on this dying man that he don’t want to leak out to the outside world. So if this experiment fails no one will be the wiser, and the only one to have lost anything will be the dying man who’s dying anyway. (290)

In fact, he ceases to be a human being, more or less of his own accord. Slowly he is transformed into a monster in collaboration with Doc who has sworn to transform "the dying man into a thing of beauty." In their intense collaboration, Kent and Doc merge like one creature. Just as the boy/son took on the role and costume of Kent/father, Kent/father takes on the role and mannerisms of boy/son. Initially Kent tried to chase away the boy, in vain. Now he
is chased after. From this complicated give-and-take of father and son, Kent makes a spectacular escape.

The fact that Kent escapes as a monster does not suggest that he has found freedom. Gerald Weals rightly comments:

Shepard's dramatic response to this feeling of a battered and broken society has been a series of escape images, transformation finishes that are sometimes obviously comfort-of-death endings.\(^{16}\)

In fact, Gerald Weales compares the last transformation scene to a film chase in monster movies, and comments "The alien force has to be captured, destroyed, rendered harmless."\(^{17}\)

The belief in the possibility of transformation is something deeply embedded in American culture. As Michiko Kakutani notes,

This sense that, like Gatsby, one can spring from the "platonic conception of himself," that identity is not something fixed by family or class, that one can grow up to become anything --- the President or a movie star.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\) Gerald Weals, "The Transformation of Sam Shepard," American Dreams, p.41.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

Indeed, in Shepard’s works, there are a wide variety of transformation scenes. In Chicago, Stu keeps changing his identities from a complaining youth to an accusing old lady. In Red Cross, the Maid imagines herself transformed into a fish, lying immobile. At the end of Back Bog Beast Bait, every character in the play is transformed into a beast. And in Angel City—the grotesque and ruthless world of Hollywood—Rabbit the screenwriter, finally corrupted by the movie industry, grows green skin, fangs, long black fingernails, and a long thick mane of black hair. These transformations are not a striving toward a poetic ideal or a courageous refusal against the corrupt world but an unhealthy resistance. These characters show the emptiness of their lives, the conformity and insecurity of their identities.

These transformations, which accentuate the insecurity of one’s moral and social identity, are related to the immediate cultural environment of the sixties. As Elizabeth Hardwick comments about the last breathless transformation scene in La Turista,

These arias have to do with death. It is amazing the number of "deaths" that will fit the text: Vietnam, Santo Domingo, racial violence, drop-outs, colonialism.19

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The presence of the kind of character who assumes many guises and disguises is ultimately related to a world devoid of confidence, stability and certainty. The absence or fluidity of self and the continual change of perspective is "symptomatic of a disjunctive and chaotic world." Mathew Winston comments:

Breaking the demarcations of self is always potentially funny. It is analogous to the middle section of comedy, the realm of confusion. It increases the flexibility of both character and author. And it can free people from a self-concept that imprisons them in their rigid proprieties. At the same time, however, it is threatening, especially in a world like ours whose boundaries are tenuous and changing, because it may penetrate what is acceptable or tolerable, to reveal our fundamental insecurity and to uncover matters we prefer not to look at.

Against the technocratic world view, Theodore Roszak calls for a "visionary imagination." His real culture hero, like the witchdoctor in La Turista, is the shaman of primitive societies. Shepard shares the countercultural enthusiasm with primitive culture and has a deep sympathy with Indian culture and religion. He thinks that the tragedy of modern life is ultimately related to the

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21 Ibid., p.397.
impoverishment of a spiritual life similar to what the Indians once had. He uses the cosmic prophecy of Hopi Indian mythology as the background for one of his plays and creates many characters who escape from civilization.

However, Shepard's attitude toward primitive culture as a viable alternative to corrupt modern society is highly ambivalent. *La Turista* shows an attempt to escape from corrupt America to shamanistic primitive culture. But Kent fails to achieve the heightened awareness Roszak's shamanistic culture promises and flees horrified and even more confused. It turns out, the witchdoctor is really a threatening patriarch who tries to transform Kent into a monster. Kent's failed escape to shamanism suggests Shepard's ambivalence toward the romantic pursuit of an alternative culture.

The structure of *La Turista* also suggests Shepard's ambivalence. In Act I, Kent is already in Mexico and criticizes America. But in Mexico, he contracts diarrhea, suffers from sunburn, and has to escape back to America. In Act II, once again in America, he has another disease and makes another desperate attempt to escape. In fact, it is not clear whether Act II is the continuation of Act I or a reiteration of Act I. Ron Mottram says, Act II provides "a parallel situation in which the ideas of the first act are developed in variation." 22 This two-act plot structure

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22 Ron Mottram, p. 47.
suggests Kent's confused vascillation between two countries. It also strengthens the "loss of control and disorder" which is also a part of the theme.\textsuperscript{23}

The legitimacy of authority in all areas of society was seriously questioned during the sixties. Shepard's characters frequently try to escape from the fixed bonds of identity demarcated by familial, and socio-cultural authorities. At the same time, however, the fluidity of identity breaks boundaries at the risk of falling into an even deeper despair. Shepard may have realized this dangerous possibility, since in his subsequent plays there is a notable decrease in individual transformation. This change is accompanied by Shepard's effort to focus more on society.

Operation Sidewinder

"Kill Azusa" "Everything from 'a' to 'z' in the USA"

from The Unseen Hand

Operation Sidewinder marks 'the official recognition of Shepard's importance' in American theatre. Commissioned by the Vivian Beaumont Theater at New York's Lincoln Center (1970), the play was chosen as an original American play to complete the season. The play also bears an unusual dedication which signifies some of Shepard's personal acknowledgement, major cultural influences, and sources of inspiration. Apart from his personal acquaintances, there are rock groups, the Hopi Indians and their native settlement place, the year 1968, and one of the imaginary characters in the play, Mickey Free. In Operation Sidewinder, Shepard has depicted the American political turbulence and cultural agitations: death of heroes, uprisings, suppressions, the end of dreams, blood in the streets of Chicago, and man's floating around the moon.

Twenty years later, the year 1968 is still vividly remembered:

Nineteen sixty-eight had the vibrations of earthquake about it. America shuddered. History cracked open: bats came flapping out, dark
surprises. American culture and politics ventured into dangerous experiments, some people thought, and quagmires of the id. The year was pivotal and messy. It produced vivid theater.¹

Shepard locates the characters in Operation Sidewinder right into the scene.

Shepard’s early plays are filled with apocalyptic imagination and anxiety stemming from the various social, political, racial and generational conflicts that characterize the turbulent sixties. In The Rock Garden the image of decorous arrangement of lifeless rock evokes a sense of meaninglessness, boredom, and sterility. The sterile image is limited to the American family and is related to, more or less, Shepard’s own experience of deserting his family. His vision in Chicago expands into a larger society and presents a much more dismal picture of the world. The play can be seen as an imaginative musing about the world pervaded with sinister force and fantasy about the regressive evolution of man into a sort of primates with grotesquely developed sexuality and gross instincts. It is intimated that this regression will ultimately end in extinction. In Icarus’s Mother, a skywriting plane crashes and causes a cataclysmic explosion of the magnitude of a nuclear disaster. Shepard’s apocalyptic vision continues in Fourteen Hundred Thousand.

The play is about building a bookcase that has a life of its own. By the end of the play the whole set is completely dismantled, leaving the stage a wasteland. In *Red Cross*, an insignificant headache is transformed into an apocalyptic doom.

Shepard’s early plays up to *Operation Sidewinder* dispense with plot and character, the two main things the traditional play hinges on. With *Operation Sidewinder*, Shepard provides a solid cultural context for the characters and weaves them into a story with a plot. The predominant image we see of society is the one evoked by Robert Kennedy in 1968. "We seem to fulfil the vision of Yeates: 'Things fall apart, the center can not hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."² Twenty years later, Todd Gitlin still remembers those years as "a cyclone in a wind tunnel," as "[a] reality so reckless," that "the space between illusion and plausibility ha[d] shrunk to the vanishing point."³

The title of the play *Operation Sidewinder* refers to a super computer in the shape of a rattlesnake. Created by a maniacal scientist to trace UFOs, it is set loose from an air force base to develop an autonomous intelligence system.


of its own in the open desert. In the form of a snake, technology becomes an object of worship with mysterious and awesome power. Like the rattlesnake with deadly poison, technology, here, threatens humanbeings with evil power. As soon as the sidewinder appears, it strangulates an innocent tourist almost to death.

By and by Young Man appears to meet Mickey Free. They are connected with some revolutionaries plotting to take over the country by putting drug into the military reservoir. Mickey Free, a half-breed Indian, mistakes the sidewinder for the mythic snake in Indian mythology. He severs the head of the sidewinder for the Snake Dance.

Act II is about efforts to retrieve the sidewinder by the military and by the Indians. To the Indians, it is an object of worship through which mankind can find ultimate salvation: to the military, it is another 'god' to help conquer the universe. With the head of the snake Mickey Free goes to the Indian shaman while the CIA are investigating the case and looking for Mickey Free. Young Man and Honey inadvertently bring the other half of the sidewinder to the Indians. The Indians take the computer for their mythic snake and prepare for the Snake Dance. When the troops arrive and reclaim the sidewinder, the Indians along with Honey and Young Man mysteriously disappear amidst gusts of wind and gun smoke.
Operation Sidewinder is sprinkled with casual killings and plans of massacre. Here, America is depicted as a society afflicted with disease, gone out of control, and rampant with warring factions. A man and a woman are on their way to divorce. The people in the play are confused, obsessive and discontented. There are revolutionaries who want total change, the military who try to be in absolute control, and still others who anticipate an apocalyptic solution. Technology doesn’t function very well and becomes oppressive. A huge sidewinder is roaming around the desert and turns out to be a military computer. And a man is trapped by the sidewinder set loose by the establishment.

The apocalyptic atmosphere of the play is enhanced by the stereotyped characters and their absurd behavior. The military officers are introduced in an alcoholic stupor talking about hunting dogs. They are totally oblivious to the reality of the world. While their grotesque invention almost strangles an innocent man, they discuss breeding superior hunting dogs. Technology has outstripped their moral vision, in fact, it has outstripped plain common sense. The inanity and hypocrisy of these people is enhanced by their use of conspicuously 'polite' language. While they talk about dogs in polite and cultured language, they refer to human beings as 'pigs, dogs, creeps, and
freaks.' And this dehumanization makes it easier for them to kill human beings. 4

The establishment people have their own version of apocalypse. Captain Bovine tells Billy that their country is in trouble.

Big trouble. Over the past few years there's been a breakdown of law and order and a complete disrespect for the things we've held sacred since our ancestors founded this country. (238) 5

Bovine is the spokesman of the establishment. Although he talks about observing laws and keeping order, his attitude is completely at odds with the democratic ideals he claims to respect and preserve:

This country needs you, Billy. It needs your help to root out these subversives, underground creeps and wipe the slate clean once and for all. (238)

The incongruity between what he claims to stand for and what he actually does helps us to understand the frustration and protest that occurred in the 1960s.

Those 'subversives', whom Captain Bovine is determined to wipe out, don't seem to pose any substantial threat.


Even in his own words, they are laughably harmless. They are not celebrating holidays the same way many people celebrate. Instead, they make faces, give the finger, shout obscene things, do wild dances. Once it was fun, he said, however,

It's about time we brought this whole thing to an end....If we don't do something soon we'll be overrun with these creepy faggots and leather-jacket types. Things have stayed the same for too long now. (238)

Captain Bovine acknowledges to himself that those flower children were fun and posed no threat. However, his initial attraction to the innocence and the free-spiritedness of flower children make him feel uncomfortable. He feels that he is being exploited. In the words of Rollo May,

These innocents are a thorn in the flesh of the world; they threaten to annihilate 'law and order,' the police and the authority of government. 6

In Captain Bovine's monolithically purist vision of society---"an isolated land of purification"---dissent and deviation are not allowed except for fun or for the illusion of freedom. For the smooth running of society his task is to "mop up the corners and iron out the kinks," as Paul

Goodman observed in *Growing Up Absurd*. He reflects the paranoia and narrow-mindedness of oppressive institutions. Captain Bovine has a puritan zeal for a pure society, a figurative descendant of the early puritans who, in their pursuit of a "City on a Hill" tried to annihilate the Indians. Self-righteousness, and myopic intolerance breeds corruption and hypocrisy, not purity. In *Operation Sidewinder*, "Shepard etches the contours of what is emerging in America: a society more afraid of its dissenters than its corruption."  

The sidewinder is the ultimate symbol of this paranoid desire to keep everything and everyone in control. The military has created the super computer out of a desire to control the universe. However, as is clear in the manic scientist Dr Vector's enthusiastic defense of his own invention, man is under the control of technology:

> At this stage it became apparent to me that all man-made efforts to produce this type of information were useless and that a much more sophisticated form of intelligence was necessary. A form of intelligence which, being triggered from the mind of man, would eventually, if allowed to exist on its own, transcend the barriers of human thought and penetrate an extraterrestrial consciousness.(222)

As advanced technology becomes increasingly oppressive, it threatens man's wellbeing. The first scene Shepard

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introduces is the rape and strangulation of human beings by technology, the sidewinder computer. In Operation Sidewinder, contemporary American society resembles a system bureaucratic and technological machinery gone mad, out of control.

Everybody is obsessive in his own way. Captain Bovine is single-mindedly pressing Billy for the whereabouts of the sidewinder, "a very confidential government-authorized computer," while threatening Billy with legal jargon. When Billy’s free spinning story finally hits the word sidewinder, Dr. Vector lets out a jubilant shout. His manic rapture over his invention shows his inhumanity and complete reversal of human values. He starts buzzing around in his wheelchair and shouts exuberantly. In fact, his description of the sidewinder computer is filled with erotic feelings:

That’s it! My Sidewinder! It’s alive! My Sidewinder is alive! It lives! It lives! It lives! My beautiful Sidewinder lives! Beautiful! Beautiful Sidewinder!(242)

Dr. Vector’s enthusiastic response is a perfect example of psychic compartmentalization. For Captain Bovine, the sidewinder means "two billion dollars." For Dr. Vector, it is the ultimate symbol of his Faustian pursuit. His description of sidewinder is filled with worshipping adoration and affectionate admiration:
Knowing that all around outside, out in the real world was a desert and sky so vast and so free. A captive with more cosmic secrets than a man could learn from the whole of history...It was up to me to either keep this creature in its cage and continue to feed my steady diet of limited knowledge or to set it free and have it discover its true potential. Do you realize the magnitude of this action? It means for the first time ever we can begin to study the effects of the machine's own decisions on its own survival (221).

Dr. Vector's totally alienated pursuit of knowledge and megalomaniac obsession with power has created a god, a Moloch. To him, human beings have shrunk virtually to the point of invisibility while the machine is grotesquely enlarged to gigantic dimensions and takes on a life of its own.

Philip Slater makes a valuable observation regarding this "deferential and submissive" attitude toward technology and the violent rebellion launched against technology during the sixties. Drawing on the study of American films by Wolfenstein and Leites, Slater notes that Americans have the same discrepant images of the father---'a kindly, bumbling, ineffectual father' and an all powerful, sinister and aggressive male authority figure---as they have toward technology. He notes that the primitive Oedipal fantasy about the father "derives some of its continuing force and appeal from the realities of everyday adult experience."

His observation continues:
We treat technology as if it were a fierce patriarchy—we are deferential, submissive, and alert to its demands. We feel spasms of hatred toward it, and continually make fun of it, but do little to change its rule. Technology has inherited the fantasy of the authoritarian father.⁸

The fascination with technology and the idea of colonizing space was popular as a way to escape the imminent catastrophe. For Americans, technological conquest of space seems to be an appealing idea reviving the dream of unlimited expansion. It was like opening a new frontier. Gerard O’Neill, the renowned Princeton physicist, boldly claims that "the human race now stands on the threshold of a new western world of five hundred years ago." With Paolo Soleri, space travel was endowed with spiritual importance. He saw it as a "new momentous step toward the spirit."⁹ It seems that even in the cry against inhuman technology and impersonal bureaucracy the potential danger entailed in this kind of plan was smugly overlooked.

The military people become paranoid because they think they are losing control. For them, 'gyrating dance' and 'negro music' are expressions of disdain for authority and manifestations of impurity in American culture. They are only cogs in a huge bureaucracy. They are not in control.

⁸ Philip Slater, The Pursuit of Loneliness, p.47.

but controlled as can be seen in their frantic search for the sidewinder. Dr. Vector's grotesquely comic wish to "transcend the barriers of human thought" has, in a sense, already been realized. His fetishization of technology has ultimately reversed the relationship of man and technology. Man serves technology, the sidewinder. Dr. Vector's idea is, as Wendall Berry talks about space colonization, a "rebirth of the idea of progress with all its old lust for unrestrained expansion, its totalitarian concentrations of energy and wealth, its obliviousness to the concern of character and community."\textsuperscript{10}

This kind of manic obsession with technological development is a phenomenon grown out society's general obsession with catastrophe. What underlies this faith in technology is a neurotic worry of catastrophe and an intense desire to have the upperhand. Stanley Kubrick satirized this desperate optimism in the subtitle of his film \textit{Dr. Strangelove: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb}. In Dr. Vector, an unmistakable copy of the paraplegic scientist, Dr. Strangelove, Shepard parodied catastrophic obsession and technological solutions to survive.

The military and the scientists are not the only people who worry about doomsday and devise ways to survive. The Indian shaman, Spider Lady, also reveals this doomsday mentality. Spider Lady calls upon Mickey Free to redeem

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p.89.
himself and save the world by uniting the 'Spirit God' and taking the chosen people into the 'Fourth Dimension.' To the shaman, the inevitable demolition of this corrupt world is part of the gods' design:

Then a vision occurred to a small group of chosen ones who today live on high mesas of this desert. A blue star descended to earth in the form of a spirit from the Star Gods and told the people that their Emergence was at hand. It spoke of the severed halves of the ancient spirit snake and that they soon would be joined together again on a night of the great dance. That once the two halves were joined the people would be swept from the earth by a star, for they were to be saved from the destruction at hand. That soon after the spirit snake would again be pulled in half by the evil ones and the Fourth World would come to an end.(234-5)

The Indians believe in the eventual destruction of this world as prophesied in their mythology. For the Indians, the thought of total destruction by some supernatural intervention seems to be a way of dealing with their powerlessness.

In general, however, the grim image of catastrophe pervades every strata of American life. In Operation Sidewinder, everybody interprets reality in line with his or her own delusion and paranoia. The mechanic in the desert also thinks of everyday events in terms of disaster. The Young Man and the Mechanic talk about the seasonal movement of people and suddenly the Mechanic boils down the talk in terms of disaster and riot: "I suppose what with all the
earthquake scares and riots and all ther's gonna' be a lot more folk movin' out here in the desert." (202) His catastrophic outlook is related to his own feelings of injustice and victimization. Right after he mentions disaster he talks about his own situation:

Mechanic: Well, you’re gettin’ paid good for your work so why should you care. How much do you get for a movie anyway?
Young Man: It depends.
Mechanic: At least a thousand, right?
Young Man: At least.
Mechanic: Where’d you go to college?
Young Man: I didn’t.
Mechanic: Me neither. I’m in the wrong racket though. You know how many months I gotta’ work to clear a thousand? Take a guess.
Young Man: A million months....(203)

The individual’s plight broadens into everyone’s plight. The growing technological development and bureaucratization deepen a pervasive sense that one is victimized in one way or another.

The leitmotifs that dominated the turbulent sixties extend far beyond Civil Rights demonstrations, anti-war marches, and student sit-ins. It was also a protest against bureaucratization, the integration of the university with large corporations, the abuse of liberalism in actual policy, and increasingly oppressive technology, and the new technologies of cybernation and automation. Mario Savio’s dramatic speech to the sit-ins that resulted in the arrest
of more than eight hundred people at Berkeley well expresses this:

There is a time when the operations of the machine are so odious, make you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, you can't even tacitly take part. And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free the machine will be prevented from working at all.\footnote{The New Radicals: A Report with Documents, p.61.}

Paul Goodman takes a mechanic as an example for this. If a mechanic learns that cars have a built-in obsolescence, that the manufacturers do not want them to be repaired or repairable, that they have lobbied a law that requires them to provide spare parts for only five years which used to be ten, it is hard for the mechanic \"to maintain his feeling of justification, sociability, and serviceability. It is not surprising that he quickly becomes cynical and time-serving, interested in a fast buck.\"\footnote{Paul Goodman, Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System (New York: Random House, 1960), p.20.} Shepard makes the same point in The Curse of the Starving Class. In the play Emma imagines herself to be a mechanic and indulges in various forms of revenge against the public---taking advantage of the other's ignorance, charging exorbitant

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fees, and taking revenge against vacationers by damaging instead of mending a car.

It was criticized that the integration of technology and bureaucracy obscured the principles of democracy and freedom and rendered American liberalism empty rhetoric. This integration bred its own values and rules and imposed them on the people. Contrary to democratic ideals, individuals had no control over the politics and their own lives were under the manipulation of the bureaucracy. More importantly, technology and bureaucracy created a set of values and a certain mentality as can be seen in Shepard's characterization of the military men.

One of the themes prevalent during the sixties was the malady of growing technology; the power of technological society overwhelms the individual and submits the individual to increasing domination by the technical social apparatus.¹³ In Operation Sidewinder, Shepard weaves contemporary cultural themes into an apocalyptic vision. The play begins with ominous lights and sounds. On a darker stage, the bright flash of yellow and blue lights alternately come on and go out. There are sounds in the distance of a rattlesnake and a coyote together with a loud jet plane in the sky and the sound of a car passing on a highway. Amidst ominous sounds and lights there is a

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mysterious object in the darkness emitting blinking lights which turns out to be a huge rattlesnake. As soon as a couple appears on the stage, the rattlesnake grabs the young woman and strangles her. With the man helplessly deserting his wife, she screams and kicks the sidewinder to no avail.

The second scene also begins with blinking lights, this time from a car. The car has mysteriously broken down and there is Young Man’s desperate cry over the car.

In Shepard’s plays, cars function symbolically and thematically. Shepard remembers the California of his youth:

> It was a car culture for the young....[T]hese Southern California towns have stuck with me not so much as a fond memory but as a jumping off place. They hold a kind of junk magic.\(^{14}\)

The images of the car in American culture stretch from endless motion, nervous restlessness, aimless wandering, rootlessness, footloose freedom, the substitution of motion for direction, to a cozy moving home insulated from the dangerous outside world. These images are also related to images of a society that carries people away from all sense of purpose or direction in their lives. The car seems to provide the opportunity "to escape the trap of a dead end

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\(^{14}\) Sam Shepard, "Azusa is a real place: Sam Shepard writes a special preface to The Unseen Hand," in *Plays and Players* (May, 1973), 20, I centerfold.
in a temporary nonculture devoid of meaning or significance." At the same time, it leads nowhere. Shepard himself was fully aware of this when he wrote an introduction to The Unseen Hand, a play that takes place in a town called Azusa:

Azusa is a real place. A real town. About forty miles outside Los Angeles just off the San Bernardino Freeway. Its real slogan is "Everything from A to Z in the USA" and just like that. A collection of junk. Mostly people. It's the neighboring town of Duarte where I grew up, more less[sic]. These towns are obsessions of mine because of their accidentalness.... They grew out of nothing and nowhere. Originally the valley was covered with citrus groves.... Eventually Los Angeles had a population kick back. People who couldn't make it in the big city just drove away from it. They got so far and just quit the road. Lots of them lived in trailer camps.... It was a temporary society that became permanent. Everybody had the itch to get on to something better for themselves but found themselves stuck.\textsuperscript{16}

Indeed, the car litters the landscape of Shepard's plays. However, the opportunity of escape the car seems to provide frequently turns out to be false.

In the whole canon of Shepard's works, Operation Sidewinder most directly touches contemporary issues. By contrasting two different worlds---the world of Hopi Indians vs. the world that created Young Man and Sidewinder---

\textsuperscript{15} Tucker Orbinson, "Mythic Levels in Shepard's True West" in Modern Drama (Dec, 1984), vol.XXVII no.IV, p.507.

\textsuperscript{16} Plays and Players, I centerfold.
Shepard seems to imply that the agony of his society is fundamentally related to the nature of technological society. The bureaucratization of major institutions and pervasive technologization have affected almost every sector of an individual's life. All the major public institutions have become incomprehensible and abstract. People experience these institutions as "formal and remote entities with little or no meaning that can be concretized in the living experience of the individual." 17

Another important aspect of the car in Operation Sidewinder is related to the image of the family. Phillipe Aries, discussing the relationship between family history and urban history, made a distinction between the world before and after the automobiles. With the advent of the automobile, suburbanization began to accelerate. Although this trend occurred in all Western industrialized societies, it was in America, Ariès observes, that "it developed most fully and reached its most extreme proportions." 18 Easy access to automobiles helped to contribute to the segregation of society by social class and function. And the easy mobility and the ubiquitous presence of TV precipitate the isolation of the family with no interstitial

Thus, especially in America, the car and the television have come to occupy a special place. Ariès compared the car to "a mobile extension of the house," and added,

...as the ark permitted Noah to survive the Flood, so the car permits its owners to pass through the hostile and dangerous world outside the front door.\(^\text{20}\)

Operation Sidewinder is filled with cars, carhops, TV, and a fast-food restaurant---things Aries associated with the general undermining of family life. In the original version of the play, there are black revolutionaries sitting in an orange Cadillac watching TV.\(^\text{21}\) The fancy Cadillac is virtually a self-contained house. More importantly, the car in Operation Sidewinder mysteriously breaks down and the mechanic doesn't understand and can't fix it. Indeed, in Shepard's plays, the car doesn't function very well.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p.38.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p.39.

\(^{21}\) A committee of black students at the Yale Drama School sent a statement to Robert Brustein. The document charged that the Drama School had "failed to live up to its obligation or responsibility as a learning, growing, pioneering venture in American theatre through ignorance and refusal to acknowledge the Black contribution that has been made...." This was followed by demands one of being "either no reference to Blacks in the Sam Shepard play...or no production of that play." Shepard withdrew the version. Robert Brustein, Making Scenes: A Personal History of the Turbulent Years at Yale 1966-1979 (New York: Random House, 1981), pp.73-79.
car, as in The Unseen Hand, is bashed and dented with no tires and no top. And in Curse of the Starving Class, the family car is blown up. This breakdown of the symbolic home bears an important thematic implication.

In some of the representative studies, scholars have frequently attempted to explain the rebels in the context of their family. Jules Henry writes:

> There is a constant interplay between each family and the culture at large, one reinforcing the other: each unique family upbringing gives rise to needs in the child that are satisfied by one or another aspect of the adolescent-and-school-culture. 

Inevitably, to study the youth is ultimately connected with the study of contemporary society. As many scholars have observed, the family has been endowed with special meaning as the outside world increasingly becomes hostile and dangerous. It is expected to serve as a counter institution providing meaning and compensation for the discontent brought about by the larger institutions of modern technological and bureaucratized society. The family was supposed to be a "utopian retreat" or a "haven in a heartless world." But these images of inviolability of the family against the pressures of society at large have been steadily on the wane with the rise of modern technological

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society. Though the change has brought comfort and security, it is not without cost. "Comfortable as many of us are," observes John Demos;

We have a sense of flatness, even of emptiness, about large sectors of our experience. Increasingly we feel that we are not masters of our own fate, that our individual goals and deeds count for nothing when weighed in such a large aggregate.... 'Apathy' is the currently fashionable word to describe our social climate. 

Peter Berger discussed technological society and its discontents under the subsuming metaphor of "homelessness." By homelessness, he refers to the pervasive uncertainty about most aspects of private and social life, the loss of roots and identity, doubts about life's purpose, and "the collective and individual loss of integrative meanings."

Though it is difficult to analyze the Young Man psychologically, or any of the Shepard characters for that matter, we can locate him in America's most volatile cultural period---the year 1968---in recent years and explain some aspect of the young rebels' psychology. The Young Man is presented as a typical hippie "with long blonde hair down to his shoulders, a bright purple T-shirt, tight leather pants and bare feet." He represents the rebel during the sixties. In a world of suits and ties, leather


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pants and bare feet are symbols of alienation and rebellion. We also learn that the Young Man has dropped out of college and resisted the draft; he has resisted what he considers to be a corrupt authority. Dropping out of college is a moral equivalent to rebellion against one’s parents. And the world into which the Young Man wanders is divided into warring factions filled with images of imminent collapse. 

The Young Man appears on the desert from nowhere with his broken-down car. As soon as he appears, he casually kills two people, one who desperately asks for help and the other, a mechanic, who might have repaired his car. Afterwards, he tries to fix the car by himself. He yanks the car to the right and left and kicks the lever. Nothing happens. And he howls and curses.


The Young Man’s pleading against the car suggests an important clue about the deeper cause of his anger and despair. His immense frustration reveals that he feels betrayed and victimized, as is evident in the coda song:

I came here with my guidebook
With my license in hand
But the landing field keeps slipping out of line
And this ain’t what they told me I’d find.(205)
In the song, he comes into the world only to find out it's not the world he was told about. All his education and license have become useless, and he doesn’t know what to do. He shows a deepened sense of homelessness: the pervasive uncertainty about most aspects of private and public life, the loss of roots and identity, and doubts about the meaning of life. Thus, stripped of certainty and purpose, the Young Man agonizes that "The old concentric circles are spinning me out. Everything I do goes down in doubt." (205)

Even this self-doubt is ironically treated.

Though the immediate image we get from Operation Sidewinder is of warring people divided into factions, nowhere is it clear what the Young Man is fighting for. All we know is that he is single-mindedly devoted to killing whoever lies in his path. The song has a persona similar to the Young Man, but it is not the Young Man who doubts and reflects. In fact, he doesn’t seem to care about the meaning of his ‘mission.’ This becomes obvious when Shepard makes the Young Man a pawn of the Black Panthers. Doubtful about the ultimate meaning of his mission, he seeks meaning in action and involvement itself.

Operation Sidewinder is about the dilemma faced after "patricide." Though the Young Man views the world his father has made to be irredeemably corrupt, he has no moral alternative to replace what he rejects. This lack or absence of meaning for the mission is poignantly suggested
by the fact that all the men involved in the operation are pawns for the Black Panthers while the Panthers themselves idly sit at a drive-in restaurant. The Young Man hired by the Panthers in turn hires Billy who feels lonely and needs company.

Captain Bovine: Mickey Free was obviously a go-between, just like Billy here. How does that make you feel, Billy?
Billy: No different. I knew it all along. Me and him was pals. I coulda’ cared less about what his real aims were. We just struck it off real fine and let me tell ya’, that’s a rarity on the desert. Yessir.(p.239)

Billy is asked to deliver the drug to Mickey Free who’s going to put it in the army reservoir. And the final executioner of the plan, Mickey Free, was going to do it for a gun. Ironically, however, he turns out to be a double apostate. He doesn’t have the slightest idea what kind of work he has agreed to do. As a ‘half-breed’ he is alienated both from White and Indian societies. And this alienation completes his own psychic-alienation. His situation reflects his psychic alienation. He completely dissociates himself from the cause and meaning of what he is doing. In fact, he agrees to do it even before he is told what he is supposed to do.

And the Panthers, who are at the top of the chain, also lack seriousness for their mission. Their plan is to make the military men stoned on drugs and let them do "some
mighty funny things." In their hallucinatory vision of the revolution, as they say, "There ain't much of a choice between balling all day and getting high or becoming a responsible revolutionary." (p.230) During the sixties, making revolution by drugs did not seem to be considered a preposterous idea. In fact, the drug poisoning of the military reservoir is reminiscent of the Yippies' actual strategy. The fuel for this extreme behavior among the young rebels of the sixties is partly their personal anger and anxiety:

To embrace the extreme position, then, can actually be an ego defensive action. It succeeds because the discharge of rage and violence drains off the aggression that would otherwise destroy whatever paranoid defences remained working. Typical of such persons is the quasi or openly delusional quality of their beliefs, their inaccessibility to reason while loudly complaining that nobody listens to them, the oversimplification of issues, and the preoccupation with violence and destruction.

Richard Hofstadter criticizes the abuse of the word revolution, and the practice of violence as a justifiable

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24 The Yippies threatened the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago with putting LSD into the city water supply while virile male members seduced delegates' wives and daughters, and ten thousand naked bodies floated on Lake Michigan in protest. Cf. American dreams, p.52.

means to achieve a revolution among the rebels of the sixties. He says,

The word 'revolution' has been distended to apply to any situation in which there is rapid change or widespread discontent. Hence acts of forcible or violent adventurism can be given a superficial legitimacy by defining any situation one pleases as a 'revolutionary situation.'

Indeed, it is frequently criticized that "the New Left has always trafficked primarily in symbolism." Frederick Crews observed that those who have worked alongside the Movement for concrete ends, have always hoped in vain that activists would learn to keep their hostility focused on the larger issues.

Young Man needs revolutionaries because he can not live in perpetual doubt, wandering in a void. One of the songs makes it clear why he so desperately tries to hold on to that fabulous plan:

And everything I do goes down in doubt/ So won't you show me which way is out/ I guess this is the moment/ When I might need a friend/ Backwater waiting for my mind to break/ Guess you're the only chance that's left to take(205)

The riots and violence during the sixties seemed to feed on, in part at least, this pervasive loneliness of individuals loosened from the gluing function of traditional institutions. It seems that the rebels and revolutionaries in Operation Sidewinder are motivated more by feeling and sensitivity than political commitment. They don't really care about the purpose of the mission they are involved in. In addition, confronted by the tight web of bureaucracy and technology, they know the near impossibility of their dream. As the Young Man despairs, they were "all set to watch 'Mission: Impossible,'" What mattered was to act, to commit oneself to anything. The action itself gives the actor, in this case the perpetrators of violence, a semblance of meaning and a feeling of brotherhood. Simultaneously, however, they betray the futility of their quest precisely because of their desperate acts.

Through Carhop, Shepard most clearly shows the empty nature of the political commitment of many participants in the sixties. Ironically, it's the Carhop, not the revolutionaries, who best articulates the necessity for revolution and her willingness to participate. Thinking the blacks to be Black Panthers, she talks about "armed struggle," the "whole unity thing," and the Panther's "groovy thing." She tries to identify with the oppression and suffering of Black people and talks about the necessity of armed revolution. However, it turns out that her speech
is pathetically naive and ludicrously banal. Even though
she is mocked and ignored by the Panthers, she keeps talking
until her own words betray the empty nature of her sympathy
with the movement.

Carhop's facile and fickle identification with blacks
may lead her into a politics of sporadic protest. But
politics is not her game. That her superficial
understanding barely hides her personal dissatisfaction is
revealed when she says to the Black revolutionaries, "I
mean you people have such a groovy thing going." Her
volubility about the causes of revolution turns out to be a
disguise for her own grudge when she says "And I'm not just
doing a rap to make myself feel good either. Because I got
nothing to lose. Least of all this shitty job." The aim of
political action seems to have become little more than the
venting of a sense of personal outrage. She is, at best,
interested in undoing her complicity in the existing
capitalist culture.

The song following the fast food restaurant scene
satirizes Carhop's and Black Panthers' ludicrous idea about
revolution, "the flower child mentality of revolution."²⁸
In the song there is less hope that any particular foray
will yield visible results or affect public policy, and more

²⁸ Ron Mottram, p.79.
desire to get a sense of emotional satisfaction out of a mass happening.²⁹

Come along, sing with me a song of synergy
Find that peace in your soul
We’re all one and heaven is our goal
Synergy will get us all and it’s going to be a ball
Kick that gong, ring that bell, synergy will save us all from the hell...
Get undressed, plant a tree, make love to machinery
Throw away all the locks, open up the jails and stop the clocks
We can have paradise right now at a bargain price.(220)

At this point it is helpful to mention Shepard’s incorporation of Brechtian techniques into several of his plays. Notable among these techniques is his frequent adaptation of songs. As in the earlier piece Melodrama Play, Shepard uses songs to comment on the action, to give direct commentary, and to give alternative points of view. In fact, Operation Sidewinder achieves a Brechtian effect through more complicated dramatic movements, and through dramatic design rather than the design of action. Operation Sidewinder consists of twelve episodic scenes. At the end of each scene, with the exception of Scene iv in Act II, a song follows. This episodic structure is “a dreamlike correlative to the Young Man’s sense of

The songs usually heard in the blackout keep a distance from the action of the previous scene and serve, more or less, as a separate comment on the scene.

After the Young Man and Billy part in Act I Scene ii, the stage lights fade to blackout. In the darkness, a song "Generaloney" is heard. Though it is a light verse, the repetition of such words as 'general,' 'generally,' 'lonely,' and 'only,' gives the feeling of a pervasive loneliness underlying the human relationships. What Young Man seeks in the movement may not be so much the realization of justice and democracy as salvation for his loneliness. He yearns for the freedom of the streets, the odd union of anarchy and community he can feel there. He talks to Honey about the magical feeling of togetherness:

Honey: Do you believe in magic?
Young Man: I used to. I walked through the crowd. I saw my best friends there. Real friends. I felt such a warm bond between us. Like we were all in the same place at the same time for the same reason.
Honey: What are you talking about?
Young Man: And suddenly I felt free, my mind was lifting up, up, up in flight. Not like that thirteen-year-old, wild, crazy, out-of-the-house-on-Friday-night

30 John Lahr, American Dreams, p.53.

31 For this reason Christopher Lasch observes that people seek for "the feeling, the momentary illusion of personal well-being, health, and psychic security." And he pungently adds "Even the radicalism of the sixties served, for many of those who embraced it for personal rather than political reasons, not as a substitute for religion but as a form of therapy." from Culture of Narcissism, p.33.
His appetite for action hides a yearning for a sense of belonging. He seems to believe that the fraternal sentiment that collective violence can muster is going to lead to a new society based on universal brotherhood. But his naive hope is more likely to turn out to be an illusion because of the evanescent nature of the kind of fraternity engendered under shared violence.

It is perfectly true that in military as well as revolutionary action "individualism is the first [value] to disappear"; in its stead, we find a kind of group coherence which is more intensely felt and proves to be a much stronger, though less lasting, bond than all the varieties of friendship, civic or private."\(^{32}\)

Having witnessed the violent eruption of the sixties, Rollo May diagnosed "the wide spread loss of the sense of individual significance, a loss which is sensed inwardly as impotence" as the root cause of the turbulence.\(^{33}\)

A situation in our day more tragic than the violence about us is that so many people feel that they do not and can not have power that even self-

\(^{32}\) Hannah Arendt, p.67.

\(^{33}\) Rollo May, p.36.
affirmation is denied them, that they have nothing left to assert, and hence that there is no solution short of a violent explosion."

This sense of betrayal, and loss of direction is evident in the song "Float me down your pipeline." His revolt has been an attempt to repair his sense of impotence by blurring political, cultural, and personal cause of his predicament. In the song, the protagonist comes with his guidebook and license, but he can not find what he wants. His "guidebook" and "licence" become useless since "the landing field keeps slipping out of line."

This sense of loss fills almost everyone except, perhaps, the military men. The carhop talks in a vulgar Marxist fashion about oppression, armed revolution, and 'the American pie,' while complaining she has nothing to lose except her "shitty job." And for Honey the experience of America is loss and disillusionment. She once had the dream of being famous and rich:

...my mama said that sometime...someday I’d make my living from my hair. That’s what she told me. That I should come to Hollywood and the very next day, just from walking around the streets and everything, that someone would see my hair and ask me to come and get a screen test. And that before very long I’d be famous and rich and everything. I’d never have to worry about a man supporting me or anything because I’d have enough to support myself. And then I met Dukie and....(224)

\[34 \text{Ibid.}\]
She has believed that the American Dream is going to be realized like a magic. Now her innocent dream is ripped away and she is utterly confused. She is on her way to divorce, deserted on the desert, and almost strangled to death.

Young Man is most articulate about the betrayal of the American Dream. He says "I am the prisoner to all your oppression." He has witnessed political hypocrisy, inhumanity, and oppression. He feels that he has inherited "the father's burden" on his back. 35 Young Man pours out the sense of betrayal and despair:

The election oppression: Nixon, Wallace, Humphrey. The headline oppression every morning with one of their names on it. The radio news broadcast, TV oppression. And every other advertisement with their names and faces and voices and haircuts and suits and collars and ties and lies. And I was all set to watch "Mission: Impossible" when Humphrey's flabby face shows up for another hour's alienation session.(225)

Desperate to have something he can believe in, the Young Man craves for ideas and values that will give order and meaning to the world. He says "Oh please say something kind to us, something soft, something human, something different, something real, something---so we can believe again."(225) But he was grimly answered "you can't always

35 John Lahr says "Those bludgeoned and jailed for legally protesting the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention are the Young Man's ghosts." American Dreams, p.54.

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have everything your own way." Responding intensely to fleeting moments of innocence, he can not accept the mixed condition of life in which such moments are immersed in daily tragedy. His knowledge of the government's brutality and hypocrisy doesn't include effective outlets to redress them.

Young Man's vehement criticism of political oppression is derived less from his own engagement in political activity than from his exposure to elaborate systems of mass communication; newspaper headlines, TV screen, and radio news. Swamped with mass-provided ideas and values, surrounded by messy facts and information, he must cope with his own confusion. The advanced technology of modern mass communication blurs the distinction between reality and illusion, making it increasingly difficult to have any strong assurance in reality. Indeed, the political world doesn't seem to bear much reality to him, figuring as a projection of his own rage and unease, "a dream of anxiety and violence." 36

In fact, Young Man's sense of victimization is too strong to allow him to do anything. Now that the attempt at revolution has been aborted, he plunges into deeper despair. As Richard Hofstadter asserts, "The unsuccessful use of violence, ending in defeat and fresh humiliations, may in

36 Culture of Narcissism, p.59.
fact intensify the original malaise."37 Now the only thing Young Man can do is to excuse himself with self-serving consolation and grand self-pity:

Let’s wait till four years from now when we can take over the Democratic party. Teddy Kennedy is still alive. Let’s not do anything at all. It can only get worse. Let’s give up. And then I walked through the crowd of smiling people. They were loving and happy, alive and free. You can’t win all the time. You can’t always have everything your own way. You’ll be beaten, arrested, accosted, molested, tested and retested. You’ll be beaten, you’ll be jailed, you’ll be thrown out of school. You’ll be spanked, you’ll be whipped and chained. But I am whipped. I am chained. I am prisoner to all your oppression. I am depressed, deranged, decapitated, dehumanized, defoliated, demented and damned! I can’t get out.(226)

Intimately bound up with his sense of victimization is his profound inner sense of absurdity. The time is out of joint. He feels that he is cursed to set it right. But he also has strong doubts whether he can do anything. Out of despair and powerlessness, he joins the movement in the hope that it will give his life focus and purpose. But his self-doubt won’t stop tormenting him. When Honey asks who he is and where he is from, his answer shows his predicament. He has lost his ‘home.’ Confronted by insurmountable forces beyond his comprehension and ability, he lapses into a disordered evasion of reality. Young Man’s mood tends

37 American Violence, p.34.

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toward a militancy that only superficially covers his underlying sense of panic. At times, in eruptions of frustrated aggression, the militancy becomes hysterical. His overwrought mental state is expressed in such chaotic verbal jumbles as:

I am from the planet Crypton. No. I am from the Hollywood Hills. No. I am from Freak City. That's where I was raised anyway. A small town. A town like any other town. A town like Mama used to make with lace doilies and apple pie and incest and graft. No it’s not true....(228)

The world he finds himself in and wants to "devour" is totally alien to him. As his long monologue and the following "Alien Song," shows, he is an alien to his people and to his land. He can not find his old neighbors, instead he sees "black flies." Nothing is identifiable anymore. "There's no wooden shack/ And the turnips I grew are all gone." He wonders whether he's in the wrong place: "Maybe, I took the wrong highway/ Maybe I made a mistake." But he can't go back 'home' anymore: There is no way to retrieve betrayed innocence and spent decency:

I couldn't go back where I came 'Cause that would just bring me back here And this is the place I was born, bred and raised And it doesn't seem like I was ever here. It looks like your forehead's on fire But maybe I'm losing my grip It sounds like your voice is a choir And now both my feet seem to slip.(229)
This "fading of durable, common, public world" both intensifies the fear of separation and weakens the psychological resources that make it possible to confront this fear realistically.  

Now Young Man finds himself stranded by the creek, far beyond where he can control himself, and all he sees is a desert which mirrors his spiritual aridity:

Now I can see my whole body  
Stranded way down by the creek  
It looks so alone while it looks for its home  
And it doesn't hear me while I shriek (229)

The agony of Shepard's Young Man, however, doesn't seem to lead to any insight which can sustain him. C. W. E. Bigsby's general comments are instructive:

...where Williams' characters can often reach down into themselves, tap into some reservoir of lyricism that can sustain them if never quite overcome the power and the prosaic literalness of the world, Shepard's figures have no such resources....What they observe is a fragmentation of thought, emotion, and social context but they lack any means to gain a purchase on it. All they are offered is myths generated by the media, myths that, unlike those rooted more securely in the sensibility, are, finally, evidence of that fragmentation rather than gestures of resistance.  

38 Minimal Self, p.193.  
Even though the young men in Shepard's plays desert the family, the father and the world of the father, their hearts lie in America's mythic past and not in a new world they are about to create. What has been acutely expressed in the "Alien Song," is the fear and agony resulting from the disappearance of the familiar reality of the external world, the world of shared experiences and collective memories. Though profoundly attracted to the idea of making all things totally anew, Young Man is primarily drawn to an image of a mythical past.

Though Young Man criticizes the society he is born into, he suffers considerably from a strong sense of guilt almost to the point of self-condemnation as he castigates himself as an earth-eater, gold-digger, and deer-shooter. This is the guilt of social breakdown which includes various forms of historical and racial guilt bequeathed to his own generation. His anger, at least partly, stems from this guilt. He feels that he has no outlet for his loyalties. The world his fathers have made doesn't deserve his loyalty, and he can not identify himself with the father. Thus, his anger is as diffuse as his guilt is extensive and persistent. The song, "Everything I do goes down in doubt," is an expression of his own predicament. Though he tries to separate himself from 'the father,' he feels uncares for and abandoned. He tries to resist 'the father'
in himself, but he ends up finding himself caught in a vicious cycle.

What Shepard vaguely mentioned in his first play was soon to be an unwitting prophecy. In The Rock Garden, the Woman uneasily told the Boy about his physical similarity to his father; that he has "the same build" and "the same torso" as the father. It seems that the Woman's worry has become symbolically realized in the Young Man in Operation Sidewinder. Despite his participation in the revolutionary movement to correct the wrongs of 'the father' the Young Man finds himself committing the same wrongs he sets out to change. As the persona of the "Alien Song" laments "it[my whole body] doesn't hear me while I shriek." He cannot but be the son of his father he denies. He is violent, insensitive, and detached. He says to Honey;

I devour the planet. I am an earth eater. No I'm a lover of peace. A peace maker. A flower child, burned by the times. Burnt out. A speed freak. A Tootsie Roll. An Abazaba. I came to infect the continent. To spread my disease. To make my mark, to make myself known. To cut down the trees, to dig out the gold, to shoot down the deer, to capture the wind. (228)

The fundamental predicament of the Young Man lies in his inescapable recognition of his being an American despite his disillusionment and contempt. Even though he wants to
overcome the father in himself, he has extreme difficulty in separating himself from the image of the father he despises.

I am an American though. Despite what they say. In spite of the scandal. I am truly an American. I was made in America. Born, bred, and raised. I have American blood. I dream American dreams. I fuck American girls. (228)

In Arthur Miller's All My Sons (1947), Chris tells Joe, "I know you're no worse than most men...but I thought you were better...I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father." By the 1960s Chris's image of his father and Joe Keller's demand for the unquestioning loyalty of his son Chris became rapidly dated. Mentioning All My Sons, in 1987, one critic writes,

That Joe fails seems to us almost a matter of course. Could any man fulfill so god like a role? And could anyone among the living have once held so unrealistic a conception of fatherhood?40

These hyperbolic responses to the image of the father only two decades ago suggest the degree of change in the institutions of fatherhood and family in American society. Both Joe Keller in All My Sons and Willy Loman in The Death of a Salesman committed suicide. Their death foreshadows much of the generational conflict endemic to the 1960s.

By the middle of the 1960s, more than half of the population in America was under the age of thirty, and "many had a keen sense of belonging to their own subculture." It was called "an era of age segregation." The upsurge in generational conflicts was not limited within the boundary of family and between fathers and sons. It was bound to spread into the larger society. The younger generation questioned authority and challenged power in almost every institution and personage. Lewis Feuer observing student unrest notes,

A psychological parricide had taken place on a massive social scale; the fathers were in debacle, defeat, de-authorized, floundering; but only under the physical compulsion of the sons.

Freud imagined the origins of civilization in the primal struggle between father and son. The sons who overthrow the father's authority become afraid of their own aggression and lawlessness and regret the loss of his wonderful power; and so they try to reinstate law and authority. Indeed, in his later plays, Shepard's own father and the patronymic chain which he so consciously deserted

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41 A Troubled Feast, p.183.
42 Ibid.
become a haunting memory and a source of the playwright's imagination:

   His father has haunted Shepard's life—and work—like a lost key to a connection that was snapped and that must be restored. 44

Shepard's family trilogy may well be said to be an effort to retrieve the lost key to the source of his self-identity.

IV

Curse of the Starving Class

"I kept looking for it out there somewhere. And all the time it was right inside this house."

Curse of the Starving Class

Curse of the Starving Class is the first of Shepard's 'family' trilogy. But before he began to write this he had moved to England. And it was here in England that he came to realize that he had "American scars." Away from the immediate American scene, Shepard found out what it really meant to be an American:

The more distant you are from it, the more implications of what you grew up with start to emerge. You can't escape, that's the whole thing, you can't. You find yourself in a situation where, like that's the way it is---you can't get out of it. But there's always that impulse toward another kind of world."

With Curse of the Starving Class, Shepard sets out to explore the contradictory desire of freedom and involvement and the paradoxical nature of human bonds. In his earlier plays it was not easy for Shepard to explore the nature of human connections with real depth and complexity. But now, Shepard departs from his previous plays to confront the

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psychic tension between the integrity of the self and the compromises of community. The result was a series of family plays written in the style of the great American realists, Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. In fact, Ross Wetzsteon praises Curse of the Starving Class as "the greatest 'family play' since Long Day's Journey into Night."²

After his three-year sojourn in London, Shepard returned to his boyhood home in California. He moved into a house where he, his son, his wife O-Lan, and O-Lan's mother and her husband formed a sort of extended family. Settling down in California also meant to re-establish "close (but not too close) contact" with his long-estranged parents.³ Don Shewey says Shepard's return to California was definitely a return to the family.⁴

Curse of the Starving Class is as much about a curse as a sense of claustrophobia and a desperate desire to escape. The head of the family, Weston, has been planning to sell the family property so that he can hide from his ruthless creditors. In desperation he only thinks of his need to escape his creditors.

Meanwhile, Ella, Weston's wife, also secretly plots to sell the family property. She repeats to her son Wesley

² Ibid.
³ Don Shewey, p.103.
⁴ Ibid.
what she heard from her lawyer friend, Taylor, who is operating for his own self interest. She has been dreaming of escape from the dilapidated farm house to Europe, "a whole new place" for "high art, paintings, castles, buildings, fancy fooi."(143) She is excited by the idea of "a little adventure," "a vacation," but is blind to any possible danger concerning her plan or the significance of her action. After the deal, she tries to persuade Wesley to go with her but fails.

Though Wesley disapproves of Ella's plan, he, too, harbors a secret yearning to escape. He tells his sister Emma that he wants to go to Alaska and has no interest in living on the farm. His dream is flatly disparaged by Emma. In this family there is little support offered by one person to another. Each individual is primarily concerned with his or her own dream.

Emma also has a fabulous plan for escape. She plans to work on a deep sea fishing boat and then work along the coast. She says she wants to be a mechanic. She also wants to write novels while working as a short-order cook and eventually "disappear into the heart of Mexico." As she rebuffed Weston's idea of going to a new frontier, her plan is also neatly scoffed at by Wesley. Ironically, their yearning for escape is less a pursuit of freedom than a desire to disappear and get lost.
Emma's plan is especially preposterous mixed with a fantasy of escape and a wistful dream of revenge. She imagines herself to be the only mechanic in town who can repair the car carrying her mother and Taylor who, she thinks, are running away together. She savors the imaginary revenge of charging them an exorbitant fee for nothing. Though Emma makes the most desperate attempts to escape, she also has strong doubts as to whether her attempts can ever be successful.

All the dreams of escape of the Tate family are doomed to fail. Even when they succeed in escaping physically, as in the case of Emma, it is highly dubious and incomplete. Emma is fetched back by the police when she first makes an unsuccessful attempt to escape. With her preposterous plan and headstrong behavior, she is bound to repeat, it is implied, the same futile attempts again and again. Physical separation from one's family never contributes very much to one's liberation. Even when they devise ways to get away from the family, they always seem to know that a mere change of place is not going to ensure any real changes. When Ella discloses her plan, Emma instantly discourages her mother. Though Ella wonders at Emma's rejection of her plan, Ella discourages Emma, too. She flatly says "You're not going to get out of here," to Emma's cry "How am I ever going to get out of here?"
Though they keep devising ways to escape, they have an inescapable sense of entrapment. It is their sense of being entrapped that has driven these family members to make desperate attempts to escape. The almost uncontrollable desire to escape in spite of their sense of inevitable entrapment is related to the "curse" of this family.

Emma is the first person to reveal the family curse in a specific manner. Suspecting that Taylor is having an affair with Ella, Emma talks about the violent hereditary character of her family:

Emma: A short fuse they call it. Runs in the family. His father was just like him. And his father before him. Wesley is just like Pop, too. Like liquid dynamite.
Taylor: Liquid dynamite?
Emma: Yeah. What's that stuff called?
Taylor: I don't know.
Emma: It's chemical. It's the same thing that makes him drink. Something in the blood. Hereditary. Highly explosive. (152)^5

This 'liquid dynamite' in the blood of the Tate family means more than just the bits of personality that Weston happens to share with his father. Here 'nitroglycerin' volatility in Weston and Wesley is more of a violent personality Emma devised to dissuade Taylor from using Ella. Emma even alludes to a possible attempt on his life if he keeps having an affair with her mother. She says "He's got

a terrible temper. He almost killed one guy he caught her
with." (152) Emma's attitude is an effort to protect her
mother, as Ella later tried to protect Emma. Thus, the
curse also means an inescapable emotional bond existing deep
in their psyche. In fact, the plight the Tate family
suffers from serves to bring whatever ambiguous feelings
they have toward each other to the surface. They find germs
of love mired in hate.

Later, the father and the son also talk about the
hereitary curse. Triggered by Wesley's determination to
build a new door, Weston talks about the poison he thinks he
has inherited from his father. He says to his son "What
else is there to envy but an outlook? Look at me! Look at
my outlook. You don't envy it right?" When Wesley says he
doesn't envy his outlook, Weston says:

That's because it's full of poison. Infected.
And you recognize poison, right? You recognize
when you see it? (162)

And then he goes on to say that he recognized his father's
poison only when he found out that he too became infected
with the poison. Weston says, "I didn't ask for it, but I
got it."

The curse Weston describes to Wesley has a parallel
manifestation. Emma has just experienced the onset of her
first menstruation. Immediately Ella describes it as a
curse. Later, when Ella realizes that she can not escape, she talks about a curse:

Do you know what this is? It's a curse. I can feel it. It's invisible but it's there. It's always there. It comes onto us like nighttime. Everyday I can feel it. Everyday I can see it coming. And it always comes. Repeats itself. It comes even when you do everything to stop it from coming. Even when you try to change it. And it goes back. Deep. It goes back and back to tiny little cells and genes. To atoms. To tiny little swimming things making up their minds without us. Plotting in the womb. Before that even. In the air. We're surrounded with it. It's bigger than government even. It goes forward too. We spread it. We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us.(173-4)

The curse Ella expands on means menstruation. It is generally overlooked that menstruation is also a symbol of life. Doris Auerbach seems to be the only critic who has paid attention to this when she says, "this female 'curse' is indeed a misnomer." She says, Shepard being caught in his pessimistic view of world he couldn't pay due recognition to the fact that menstruation is "not a symbol of death, but one of life, one of fertility and procreation." It seems that this is pessimism more on the part of critics than of Shepard for Emma says to Ella "I'm

6 Doris Auerbach, p.49.
7 Ibid.

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not too young to have babies, right?... That's what bleeding is, right? That's what bleeding's for."(147-8)

_Curse of the Starving Class_ deals with a terrible conflict at the core of Shepard's consciousness and the tight tension ever present in American culture: the 'curse' of entangling bonds and the quest for the fulfillment of one's self in a community of other selves. Though inescapable, the curse doesn't make an unrelievedly somber picture. The characters in _Curse of the Starving Class_ begin to be awakened to a new insight that fatalism can be good in the sense that it means acceptance, hopefully an embracing, mature acceptance of life with all its conflicts.

In earlier plays Shepard dealt with characters who have come out of nowhere and whose relationships are never explicitly defined or sustained. And despite whatever tenuous relationships they have, they strive to break the burden of human bondage and the pressures of family and culture. Gradually, however, Shepard's characters begin to restrain their desire to escape. Moments of evanescent success in the pursuit of escape become increasingly infrequent and the meaning of escape becomes increasingly ironic. These changes are related to Shepard's awakening to the paradoxes at the core of his consciousness---the contradictory desire for self and community, for separateness and connection, for escape and family.8

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8 Ross Wetzsteon, p.258.
Now in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston, advised by his son to flee from the creditors to somewhere in Mexico, says, more or less to himself,

Mexico? Yeah. That's where everyone escapes to, right? It's full of escape artists down there. I could go down there and get lost. I could disappear. (194)

Unlike Shepard's earlier characters Weston has come to the painful realization that to escape is more likely to result in getting lost. Ross Wetzsteon comments:

...the poignancy and power of the play come from Shepard's recognition that the trip forward ultimately becomes a trip backward, that his hero's quest for spiritual liberation must circle back to its beginnings. He has no choice but to confront his past, to accept his blood and strive to transcend it---he has no choice, yet paradoxically his freedom lies in this very recognition. 9

Thus, as Wesley obstinately urges him to run away, Weston declares his reason not to flee:

*CAUSE THIS IS WHERE I SETTLED DOWN! THIS IS WHERE THE LINE ENDED! RIGHT HERE! I MIGRATED TO THIS SPOT! I GOT NOWHERE TO GO TO! THIS IS IT!* (193)

Indeed, he has circled back and has no choice.

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9 Ibid., p.259.
Significantly, the play opens to reveal, in full view, the broken door of the Tate household. It has been smashed by the drunken father as he invaded through the kitchen. And now the son is trying to fix it. "The change in direction here is significant," Toby Silverman Zinman aptly notices, "instead of crashing his way out," "he crashes his way in." 10

In an interview, Shepard was asked whether his "family trilogy" is a chronicle of the break-up of the American family. The following answer is worthy of a lengthy quotation:

I'm not interested in the American social scene at all. It totally bores me. I'm not interested in the social predicament. It's stupid. And the thing you bring up about the break-up of the family isn't particularly American; it's all over the world. Because I was born in America, it comes out as the American family. But I'm not interested in writing a treatise on the American family. That's ridiculous, I mean, that's not fair or unfair to read that into my plays. It just seems as incomplete, a partial way of looking at the play. People get off on tripping out on these social implications of the play and how that matches up to contemporary America. And that's okay. But that's not why I'm writing plays. 11


Indeed, his works are rich enough to have several layers of meaning simultaneously. *Curse of the Starving Class* is a good example of a play that has deep layers of myth underneath its apparent realism.

The rich imagery in *Curse of the Starving Class* can be a way to read the play beyond the constraints of its apparent realism. From his first play, Shepard uses costume imagery in a very effective way. In *The Rock Garden*, the boy dresses himself with his father's clothes until the man is stripped to his underwear and topples down. It is a powerful image of a sudden self-declaration of manhood. In *La Turista*, Kent, in his new clothes, announces "Well, I feel like a new man after all that." In *Operation Sidewinder*, by wearing a T-shirt and tight leather pants, Young Man expresses his rejection of American culture. And in *The Holy Ghostly*, the son dresses himself precisely the way his father wouldn't approve.

In *Suicide in B♭*, the identification of one's identity with costume is most clearly presented. In the play the protagonist, Niles, dresses in costumes symbolizing his earlier selves "who have been vital to his art but who also are luring him to fall into mannerism,"\(^{12}\) then kills them off. Niles begins with the mythic hero of the Western, the cowboy. For this ritual killing, he is dressed in the cowboy outfit. But he grows hesitant and fearful at the

\(^{12}\) Ron Mottram, p.125.
moment of killing himself off. Nevertheless, he finally resolves to convince himself of the inescapable necessity of killing his old identity, and to do so takes off the cowboy costume and puts on black tails for his other identity.

It is in *Curse of the Starving Class*, that Shepard fully expands on the imagery of cloth in a thematically coherent way. After Weston seals the deal to sell his farmhouse and plans to run away to Mexico, he returns home dead drunk and falls into a deep sleep. Just before he falls asleep, he curses his family when he hears that Ella, too, has sold the house:

> It's like living in a den of vipers! Spies! Conspiracies behind my back! I'M BEING TAKEN FOR A RIDE BY EVERYONE OF YOU! I'm the one who works! I'm the one who brings home food!(169)

The next morning he wakes up and says to Wesley that "a funny thing started happening to him."(185) He said that he started wondering,

> ...who this was walking around in the orchard at six-thirty in the morning. It didn't feel like me. It was some character in a dark overcoat and tennis shoes and a baseball cap and stickers comin' out of his face.(185)

Weston experiences being caught in his own world. In severing his relationships from his family he experienced a loss of his own self. He comes to realize that his identity
has been defined in the context of human relationships. Thus, when he sold the family for his own salvation he also experienced his own self melting away and wasn't sure who he was. Thus, wandering around the orchard, he was hit by a sudden recognition. He says:

Then it struck me that I actually was the owner. That somehow it was me and I was actually the one walking on my own piece of land. And that gave me a great feeling.(185)

After this insight, he ritualizes his new enlightenment by administering a kind of self-baptism:

So I came in here, and the first thing I did was I took all my old clothes off and walked around here naked. Just walked through the whole damn house in my birthday suit. Tried to get the feel of it really being me in my own house. It was like peeling off a whole person. A whole stranger.(185)

Then he takes hot and cold baths, shaves, and changes into "some clean clothes." Indeed, there's a total transformation of Weston, "a whole stranger," as he strips off his old clothes and changes into new ones. After the change of clothes, he makes,

a big old breakfast...just like Christmas. Just like somebody knew I was gonna' reborn this morning or something.(185)
Significantly, after he thinks he is re-born, he not only changes into another set of clothes but cleans up for all of his family members:

Then I started doing the laundry. All the laundry. I went around the house and found all the piles of dirty clothes I could get my hands on. Emma's. Ella's. Even some a' yours. Some a' your socks. (186)

Considering Shepard's emphasis on the imagery of costume in his various plays, to change into new clothes and do laundry is to clean off the sin of his family members mired in false dreams, greed, and poverty. He says that every time he bends down to pick up clothes he has the feeling that he knows the person "through the flesh and blood." He goes on confiding to Wesley his new insight into what a family means:

Like our bodies were connected and we could never escape that. But I didn't feel like escaping. I felt like it was a good thing. It was good to be connected by blood like that. That a family wasn't just a social thing. It was an animal thing. It was a reason of nature that we were all together under the same roof. Not that we had to be but that we were supposed to be. And I started feeling glad about it. I started feeling full of hope. (186)

Now he has a renascent sense of "weness." He has been awakened to the insight that he has no choice but to confront and to accept his blood. The feeling of family is
animal, tied together by an urgency of nature. Since he comes to know that they are bound by blood, there can be no severance or escape. This sense of being bound together paradoxically frees him. As he says, "I didn't feel like escaping." He realizes that there can only be acceptance and transcendence.

Blood is another powerful motif in *Curse of the Starving Class* and appears in Emma's menstrual blood, Wesley's bloody face and hands after fighting with Ellis, his bloodied body after his sacrificing the lamb, the bloody carcass of the lamb, Weston's castration of lambs, the bloody fight between the eagle and the cat, and the eagle's carrying off the bloody testicles of the lamb. Esther Harriot perceptively comments, "if blood destroys, it also unites." Indeed, Weston's new realization that "it was good to be connected by blood like that" shows that he is now aware of the nature of this paradox.

The paradox can also be seen in Wesley's donning of his father's clothes. Wesley also goes through a ritual of rebirth. After bathing, he dresses himself in Weston's baseball cap, overcoat and tennis shoes. Some critics have explained this transformation as a reproduction of the father in the son, the inevitable repetition of the curse in the Tate family. It is true that Shepard's early plays are

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predominantly pessimistic; however, in this play Shepard doesn't return to the family only to kill it off. Despite the tension and irony, *Curse of the Starving Class* offers a cautious suggestion of the possibility of reconciliation.

It is true that Weston's transformation is somewhat dubious because it still contains Weston's self-conciliatory evasion of the painful reality for which he is mainly responsible. Watching Wesley, who has donned his discarded clothes, Weston says "If this is supposed to make me feel guilty, it's not working!....IT'S ALL OVER WITH BECAUSE I'VE BEEN REBORN! I'M A WHOLE NEW PERSON NOW! I'm a whole new person."(192) But Wesley "coldly" reminds him that Weston still has to pay his creditors.

Wesley: (coldly) They're going to kill you.
Weston: (pause) Who's going to kill me? What're you talking about! Nobody's going to kill me!
Wesley: I couldn't get the money.
Weston: What money?
Wesley: Ellis.
Weston: So what?
Wesley: You owe it to them.
Weston: Owe it to who? I don't remember anything.
All that's over with now.
Wesley: No, it's not. It's still there. Maybe you've changed, but you still owe them.(192)

It may well be for this reason that Wesley dressed himself in exactly the same clothes his father had just sloughed off. He knows that even though Weston declares his transformation, it is important for him to acknowledge his
responsibility for what he has done. He has to clear his poisoned past. Otherwise, his "transformation" might just be another self-deception. Through Wesley's persistent efforts, Weston finally acknowledges what he has been doing. But his story is not just a remembrance of things past.

As Weston relates his past, he becomes self-reflective and even shows new insight into the nature of the economic system. Weston says "I remember now. I was in hock. I was in hock up to my elbows." (193) And he goes on to say how he has been deluded by the American Dream of a better future, how everything sounded so easy:

> The whole thing's geared to invisible money. You never have the sound of change anymore. It's all plastic shuffling back and forth. It's all in everybody's heads. So I figured if that's the case, why not take advantage of it? Why not go in debt for a few grand if all it is is numbers? If it's all an idea and nothing's really there, why not take advantage? So I just went along with it, that's all. I just played ball. (194)

Thus, Wesley's assuming of his father's clothes is a symbolic determination to assume responsibility and square off the debt. In a sense, he becomes "the father" and purges the sin of this cursed family.

Wesley's effort to save Weston from imminent physical danger is not enough to make Weston's transformation complete. He has to 'kill' the old father. This seems to be the reason why he has to wear the exact same old clothes.
his father has discarded. Seeing Wesley in his old clothes, Weston says,

I threw them out! What's got into you? You go take a bath and then put on some old bum's clothes that've been thrown-up in, pissed in, and God knows what all in? (191)

Weston implies that his old self has been magically transferred to his old clothes. For this reason, it seems, Weston suffers temporary amnesia about his past deeds.

As Wesley tells Emma, his father's old self seems to have been transferred to him. He says, as if half mesmerized;

I started putting all his clothes on. His baseball cap, his tennis shoes, his overcoat. And everytime I put one thing on it seems like a part of him was growing on me. I could feel him taking over me. I could feel myself retreating. I could feel him coming in and me going out. Just like the change of the guards. (196)

Indeed, his assumption of Weston's old self is made complete when Emma satirizes Wesley in Weston's clothes saying "Are you supposed to be the head of the family now or something? The Big Cheese? Daddy Bear?" (195) Ella doesn't even recognize him. As Emma exits, telling Wesley that she will be gone and will never return, Ella wakes up as if from a bad dream. Then Ella calls Wesley Weston.

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Ella: (to Wesley) Weston! Was that Emma?
Wesley: It's me, Mom.
Ella: EMMA!! We've got to catch her! She can't run off like that! That horse will kill her! Where is my coat? WHERE'S MY COAT?
Wesley: You weren't wearing one.
Ella: (to Wesley) Go catch her, Weston! She's your daughter! She is trying to run away!(197)

Right after Ella wakes up, there is a huge explosion offstage. The family car has been destroyed by hit men as a warning. Even after the explosion, Ella keeps calling Wesley Weston.

Many critics have stopped at the moment Wesley assumed Weston's old self and have interpreted this transformation as a repetition of the curse. But the temporary worsening is to bring the 'curse' to the surface and Wesley's assumption of his father's old identity is only to be rid of it.

Wesley's killing of a lamb is explained as a reproduction of the father's violent character in the son. But it is both a ritual of atonement and a form of symbolic patricide. Wesley says that he tries his father's method of rebirth. After taking hot and cold baths, and walking around stark naked, he is "waiting for something to happen." But nothing happens. Then he goes outside in freezing cold weather, this time with a lamb, and digs out Weston's old clothes from the garbage. And then he performs a sacrificial killing of his father. The reason Shepard makes Wesley go through all these stages is that Wesley has
to be reborn into the family. This is implied in the fact that Wesley is the only person who consciously makes the choice to remain, as "the only son," and "the oldest son" of the Tate family.

From the beginning it is Wesley who takes special care of the baby lamb and brings the maggot-inflicted lamb inside the house in spite of strong objections from everybody. Already he sees the possibility of the lamb's being the redeemer of his family from their curse.

Emma: (to Wesley) What's the matter with him?  
Wesley: (watching lamb) Maggots.  
Emma: Can't you keep him outside? He'll spread germs in here.  
Wesley: (watching lamb) You picked that up from Mom.  
Emma: Picked what up?  
Wesley: Germs. The idea of germs. Invisible germs mysteriously floating around in the air. Anything's a potential carrier.(154)

It is obvious that Wesley has a special purpose for the lamb. Later Wesley becomes really hungry and there's nothing in the refrigerator, as Weston shouts, "Perfect! ZERO! ABSOLUTELY ZERO! NADA! GOOSE EGGS!" Instead of butchering the lamb, he says to the lamb "You're lucky I'm not really starving. You're lucky this is a civilized household."(156) But then he soon admits that

It makes no difference because someone's starving more than you. Someone's hungry. And his hunger takes him outside with a knife and slits your
throat and eats you raw. His hunger eats you, and you're starving. (156)

But this happens only in his hungry imagination. Wesley assures the lamb that he is not going to be killed just to allay their hunger.

The ritual killing of the lamb was carefully prepared for earlier in the killing of Emma's chicken. Shepard has two killings, one at the beginning of the play and the other almost at the end of the play. The two killings contrast sharply with each other, effectively delineating Shepard's theme.

Amid the debris of the broken door and right after Wesley's long rumination concerning the violence his father did the night before, Emma finds out that her chicken is no longer in the refrigerator. She was going to give a demonstration at the 4-H club fair about "how to cut up a frying chicken." The chicken was going to be used for a very specific purpose. Though Ella denies it, Emma senses that Ella ate the chicken. There is an ugly scene of denial and suspect, and questioning and accusation between mother and daughter over the dead chicken. After Emma storms off stage, Wesley directly questions Ella;

Wesley: What's all the screaming?
Ella: Somebody stole her chicken.
Wesley: Stole it?
Ella: Boiled it.
Wesley: You boiled it.
Ella: I didn't know it was hers.
Wesley: Did it have her name on it?
Ella: No, of course not.
Wesley: Then she's got nothing to scream about. (141)

Thus, Ella is finally forced to confess. The more they talk about the killing of Emma's chicken, the more they reveal uglier aspects of themselves. The chicken was intended for a specific use and eaten up out of sheer hunger. All this questioning, denial and the forced acknowledgement over a chicken contribute to enhance the banality surrounding the killing of the chicken. The killing of a chicken creates an effective contrast to the ritualistic killing of the lamb. The killing of the chicken reveals the family's mundane reality: hunger, the lack of affection, brutal inconsideration, gross selfishness, and a sheer animal-like instinct to survive. In other words, the killing of the chicken is tightly shrouded in realistic facts, there is hardly a possibility for a larger meaning. This point is made even clearer when Emma shouts about the violence done to the chicken in great detail.

That was my chicken and you fucking boiled it!
YOU BOILED MY CHICKEN! I RAISED THAT CHICKEN FROM THE INCUBATOR TO THE GRAVE AND YOU BOILED IT LIKE IT WAS ANY OLD FROZEN HUNK OF FLESH! YOU USED IT WITH NO CONSIDERATION FOR THE LABOR INVOLVED! I HAD TO FEED THAT CHICKEN CRUSHED CORN EVERY MORNING FOR A YEAR! I HAD TO CHANGE ITS WATER! I HAD TO KILL IT WITH AN AX! I HAD TO SPILL ITS GUTS
Considering that any physical violence involved in the killing of the lamb is completely spared, we can say that the contrast is intended to emphasize the ritualistic aspect and to leave space for symbolic meaning of the killing of the lamb.

In fact, the lamb is invited into the house earlier in the play to witness the Tate family mired in debt, alcohol, violence, and animosity. The image of the lamb as a possibility of vicarious atonement is again suggested in the dialogue between Weston and Wesley. Talking about the poison he thinks he inherits from his father Weston asks Wesley how to kill coyotes.

Weston: How do you poison coyotes?
Wesley: Strychnine.
Weston: How! Not what!
Wesley: You put it in the belly of a dead lamb.
Weston: Right. Now do you see?(168)

To kill coyotes which kill lambs, it is required to kill the lamb first. As a preparation for a ritual the lamb has to be gotten rid of its maggots and properly attended. The lamb is invited into the house in spite of strong objections from his family members. Weston says to the lamb:
No lamb ever had it better. It's warm. It's free of draft, now that I got the new door up. There's no varmints. No coyotes. No eagles. (182)

But still at the beginning of his monologue, he makes the mysterious remark to the lamb that "There's worse things than maggots ya' know. Much worse." (182)

What Weston means by "much worse" things soon turn out to be the sacrifice of the lamb. A lamb is a symbol of Christ who gave his life in expiation. Likewise it was sacrificed in expiation of the curse in Tate's family. This is made even more pertinent by the implication of the lamb's identification with the father, the source of the curse, in the person of Wesley. Wesley, fully clad in his father's clothes, says:

I had the lamb's blood dripping down my arms. I thought it was me for a second. I thought it was me bleeding. (195)

Wesley's killing of the lamb serves not only to expiate the curse but also, as a symbol of patricide, to stage Wesley's initiation into adulthood and responsibility.

The violence involved in the killing of the lamb serves to protect the family from its own violence. The family is always dangerously on the verge of violence, like the "nitroglycerin" Emma speaks of. In fact, the play begins with the violent image of a broken door, and ends with the
ultimate violence, the killing of a lamb. And there are profuse verbal commitments of violence. Weston hearing that Ella has sold the house shouts "I'LL KILL HER! I'LL KILL BOTH OF THEM! Where's my gun? I had a gun here! A captured gun!" (169) Or Ella says "He can't hurt me now! I've got protection! If he lays a hand on me, I'll have him cut to ribbons! He's finished!" (173)

All their anger and hostility toward one another heats to a flash point and is finally absorbed and consummated in the killing of the lamb. As Rene Girard says, the lamb "intervenes at the crucial moment to prevent violence from attaining its designated victim." Deflection of violence onto other objects is also evident when the hit men blow up Weston's car, or in Emma's shooting of Ellis's "Alibi Club." Rene Girard writes about the function of violence.

The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence....The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice.  

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15 Ibid., p. 8.

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Rene Girard emphasizes two important factors for a sacrifice to be successful: it must be "violence without fear of vengeance,"\(^{16}\) and "the celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act,"\(^{17}\) partly because the function of sacrifice is often obscured by "the awesome machinery of ritual."\(^{18}\) That Wesley was playing an unwitting celebrant in the enactment of the ritual is evident when he says that he killed the lamb because they needed some food.

Wesley has unconsciously orchestrated the sacrifice-redemption ritual. Wesley kills the lamb precisely when the refrigerator is full of food. Thus, Shepard emphasizes that the lamb wasn't butchered just out of hunger, even though Wesley says "we need some food."

Weston: I swear to God. What'd ya' butcher the dumb thing for!
Wesley: We need some food.
Weston: The ice box is crammed fulll a' food!
WHAT'S YA' GO AND BUTCHER IT FOR? HE WAS GETTING BETTER! What's a' matter with you, boy? I made ya' a big breakfast. Why didn't ya' eat that? What's the matter with you?\(^{(191)}\)

Together with this image of the lamb as the redeemer, the Christ, there is another potent image of atonement. It

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p.13.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.7.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p.19.
is the image of a cross. The morning Weston awoke to a 'whole new person' he saw Ella whom he was almost determined to kill the night before. Ella has been to jail to visit Emma. Exhausted and angry she sounds harsh. Surprised and confused by Weston's gentle manner, Ella finally stops attacking Weston verbally with the words "Oh, knock it off, would you? I'm exhausted." To this Weston says:

Weston: Try the table. Nice and hard. It'll do wonders for you.
Ella: (suddenly soft) The table?
Weston: Yeah. Just stretch yourself out. You'll be amazed. Better than any bed. (189)

Without any hesitation Ella pushes the clean laundry off the table and, as if on a cross, stretches herself out. And Weston now details the significance of Ella's act: the bed "makes you forget where you came from. Makes you lose touch." He further implies that to lie on the table is like dying on a cross. He describes the sleep Ella is going to experience on the table.

You're going into a trance that you'll never come back from. You're being hypnotized. Your body's being mesmerized. You go into a coma. That's why you need a hard table once in a while to bring you back. A good hard table to bring you back to life. (190)

In fact, when Weston encourages Ella to sleep on the table, he regains the right as the head of the family. He
says to Ella that he is going to prepare the feast for her new birth:

And when you wake up I'll have a great big breakfast of ham and eggs, ready and waiting. You'll feel like a million bucks. You'll wonder why you spent all those years in bed, once you feel that table. That table will deliver you. (189)

And Ella, in a very conscious crucifixion image, stretches herself on the table and falls into a death-like sleep.

_Curse of the Starving Class_ shows a process of realizing the truth about oneself, about the meaning and nature of the family, about what it means to be tied by blood, however painful and terrible the truth may be.

Even among Shepard's "realistic" plays, _Curse of the Starving Class_ is exceptionally convincing in its realistic and psychological depiction of characters. For, in this play Shepard carefully delineates the development of the characters and relates this development in a thematically coherent way. Especially in the case of Wesley, his development from a terrified kid, helplessly hiding himself in bed, to a mature adult who confronts challenge and accepts responsibility is an almost unique quality in Shepard's plays.

_Curse of the Starving Class_ begins with an image of the "bogey" father. Weston, the father, broke the front door in a drunken rage the night before. And now Wesley, clearing
up the mess, ruminates on the unnameable fear and tension he felt during the night. His long monologue, detailing the experience in utter minutiae, enhances the ever present tension in the household and, more importantly, betrays his utter helplessness amid the surrounding disturbance and confusion:


He was lying in his bed straining his ears to hear the brawl. He was so attentive, especially to his father's every movement, that he felt as if he was watching him on a secret screen. He even thought that he was hearing the heartpounding of his father and feeling the headlights of his father's car closing in. His accusation of Ella for having called the cops for a family brawl, however, strangely conflicts with his utter noninvolvement and helplessness.

What makes him utterly helpless is that he feels that the whole world was hemming him in.
I could feel the space around me like a big, black world. I listened like an animal. My listening was afraid. Afraid of sound. Tense. Like any second something could invade me. Some foreigner. Something undescrivable.(137)

Wesley even begins to imagine that his toy airplanes are trying to attack him:

My P-39, my Messerschmitt. My Jap Zero. I could feel myself lying far below them on my bed like I was on the ocean and overhead they were on reconnaissnance. Scouting me. Floating pictures of the enemy. Me, the enemy.(137)

Considering the fact that Shepard's father was a bomber pilot, Wesley's fear of being scouted betrays unresolved childhood fears for his father. And, more importantly, he feels that the threatening world is "part of [his] bone." Overwhelmed by the inescapable and terrifying identification with the father, he is almost paralysed in his bed.

In the beginning Wesley is seen blaming Ella for what she did the night before when the drunken Weston was trying to get in. Ella locked the door and called the police. Wesley didn't do anything during the brawl until his father was controlled by the police. But his criticisms of her reveal that he couldn't stand up and take charge of the situation even if he wanted to. He said to Ella, "You didn't have to call the cops," "It's humiliating to have the cops come to your own house. Makes me feel like we're
someone else." He was terrified and confused. But in his throwing the blame on Ella we can also sense his infantile selfishness. His infantile and irresponsible behaviour in the early part of the play is again seen in his urinating over Emma's chart and his constant craving for food as Ella says to him "You're always in the refrigerator!"

But now, Wesley is not the terrified and helpless kid any more. We can see germs of this kind of possibility in the dialogue between Weston and Wesley. Weston, in a self-reproachful mood, talks about his devastated outlook, probably by alcoholism.

Weston: That's because it's full of poison. Infected. And you recognize poison, right? You recognize it when you see it?
Wesley: Yes.
Weston: Yes, you do. I can see that you do. My poison scares you.
Wesley: Doesn't scare me.
Weston: No?
Wesley: No.
Weston: Good. You're growing up. I never saw my old man's poison until I was much older than you. Much older.(167)

Even though Wesley recognizes the poison, he is not scared. He is not a terrified kid anymore. Weston also acknowledges that Wesley is growing up. In fact, Wesley is the person to whom both his parents confided their secret dealings. To see his father in a deep financial plight, he tries to be helpful. He offers Weston something to eat and tries to soothe him by suggesting several possibilities. He also
prepares Weston for the worst, that Ella has already sold the house.

Now Wesley takes charge of the situation. This is obvious when he is dealing with Ellis who purchased the house from Weston. As it becomes clear that Weston was indeed going to take off with the cash from Ellis, Wesley succeeds in persuading Ellis to give the money to him. Wesley wants to deliver the money to the hit men who he thinks are going to kill Weston if they fail to get money. Wesley says to Ellis "You've got the deed. I'm his oldest son." He now accepts his responsibility and right as the oldest son in the Tate family.

Previously, Wesley wanted to escape from his family and had a desire to go to a new frontier. He now rejects Ella's proposal to leave in a resolute manner saying "I'm not leaving." Wesley's choice is supported by his keen awareness of the implication of deserting his farmhouse.

Wesley: You don't understand what's happening, do you?
Emma: With what?
Wesley: The house. You think it's Mr. and Mrs. America who's gonna' buy this place, but it's not. It's Taylor.
Emma: He's a lawyer.
Wesley: He works for an agency. Land development.
Emma: So what?
Wesley: So it means more than losing a house. It means losing a country.
Emma: You make it sound like an invasion.
Wesley: It is. It's a zombie invasion. Taylor is the head zombie. He's the scout for other zombies. He's only a sign that more zombies
are on their way. They'll be filing through the door pretty soon.(162-3)

Besides Wesley's newly acquired critical perspective and mature understanding for what is happening to his family, there is another sign that he has grown up. When the play begins, the door of this family is already broken by the heartless corporation wheels. The family is no longer a safe haven. At one point Weston even asks "Is this inside or outside?" In fact, Taylor's smug compromise betrays how corporate games endanger human space. He says,

You may not realize it, but there's corporations behind me! Executive management! People of influence. People with ambition who realize the importance of investing in the future....You people carry on as though the whole world revolved around your petty little existence. As though everything was holding its breath, waiting for your next move. Well, it's not like that! Nobody's waiting! Everything's going forward! Everything's going ahead without you! The wheels are in motion. There's nothing you can do to turn it back. The only thing you can do is cooperate. To play ball. To become part of us.(179)

To this challenge Wesley is adamant in making a new door in spite of objections from all the other family members. Weston and Ella tell him not to bother because the house has already been sold. Emma tries to dissuade him from installing a new door because it'll make the house look like a "chicken shack," and turn away a possible purchaser. Despite the opposition, he finally succeeds in making a new
door, which is a symbol of resurrecting the family. It is also a symbolic gesture to stand up against the corporate "zombies." He is a solitary hero fighting against the odds.

Wesley also embraces his mother. When Weston comes home in the morning dead drunk and finds out that Ella has been out all night, he presses Wesley to disclose something about Ella. Sensing that Wesley is trying to cover up for her, Weston shouts "Don't try protecting her! There's no protection! Understand! None! She's had it!" Though Wesley keeps pretending innocence, Weston manages to find out from Emma that Ella went out with Taylor. Still, Wesley tries to protect her by suggesting that she may have had an accident. Weston becomes angry and swears that he will kill both Ella and Taylor. As Ella comes in soon after, Wesley warns her about Weston's anger. One measure of maturity can be the acceptance of others with compassion, and Wesley shows this possibility. Though the Tate family is mired in violence, debt, indifference, and animosity, we can see in Wesley a possibility of growth from an infantile egocentricity to a compassionate acceptance of his family. He shows the possibility exactly when his family is in the abyss of despair. The following statement is especially pertinent to Curse of the Starving Class:

[Shepard's plays] reflect a great nostalgia for the challenge of the frontier, a strong attachment to the land and the pastoral ideals of America's recent past, and deep mistrust of the notion of
Shepard is a romantic, a sentimentalist when it comes to America. His plays embody a struggle between the clear ideals of the Old West and the hidden terror of the technological present...the sense of community amidst the disintegration of American society...disillusionment and displacement in an age of alienation...More importantly, Shepard typifies the laid-back West Coast sensibility which guides the individual toward examining his own spiritual powers of renewal, emphasizing the exploration of alternative states of consciousness. This stress on spiritual transcendence places Shepard in the American tradition of Emersonian transcendentalism, with the overriding theme of his work the triumph of the human spirit.19

The change from the desire to escape to the resolution to stay in *Curse of the Starving Class* provides a subtle shift of direction towards the family. At one point Wesley encourages his father not to sell the joint saying "It's just here. And we're on it. And we wouldn't be if it got sold."(166) To this Weston sarcastically retorts, "Very sound reasoning. Very sound," saying to Emma "Your brother never was much in the brain department, was he?"

Ironically, however, it hits the deeper nature of family bonding, something beyond the realm of "brain" and "reasoning." And Weston unwittingly has a sense of this when he says "That a family wasn't just a social thing---It was an animal thing." In his later work, *Motel Chronicles*, Shepard cautiously suggests this possibility of embracing

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one's contradictory/complementary nature, merging one's ego, and alterego into a 'we':

Maybe I should just take a walk with no destination.
Maybe I should stay in one place and stay put and stop making up reasons to move.
Maybe we could both have a conversation.
Would you like to have a conversation?  

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard has already started this conversation.

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Buried Child

"They're my family for Christ's sake! I should know who my own family is!"

Buried Child

One way to characterize the American literary tradition is to call attention to the use of images of journey. From the beginning, the journey motif hides elements of flight and escape. But, with the receding frontier, the kind of positive values typically associated with the westward journey gradually tilted to negative ones.¹

Indeed, many of Shepard's plays deal with themes of escape, adventure, yearnings about escape or fear of entrapment. Shepard's early plays, especially, are filled with yearnings for escape, bursting of pent-up energy, and panicked flights for freedom. And the desire of escape is almost equivalent to the goal of escape. But until Buried Child, none of Shepard's protagonists succeed in finding freedom and, gradually, there appears a creeping sense of uncertainty, and skepticism about the possibility of escape.

After **Operation Sidewinder** Shepard himself escaped from New York. Don Shewey describes the incident in the fashion of Shepard’s Young Man:

He realized, among other things, that he was killing himself with drugs and that he had to get out of New York. New York is a bastard. New York is a bitch. New York is poison. New York values competition over community. New York is about making money, not making friends. In New York everybody lives in an unreal world where you are a star and no one exists. New York, Shepard concluded, is no place to live.2

Shepard began to see that both his protagonists and himself were too far out of the mainstream for there to be a heroic triumph within it.

Shepard went to England and stayed there for about three years. Toward the end of his stay there Shepard wrote a play called **Action**. **Action** takes place inside a dining room. Two men and two women are having a holiday dinner with a Christmas tree blinking in the background. However, the meager action of the play in terms of plot doesn’t carry much of a festive atmosphere. The characters, half by choice and half by force, seem to be in a segregated situation for some unspecified reason.

However, beginning with **Action**, written near the end of Shepard’s stay in England, the unreserved choice of escape, so obvious in his earlier plays, is mixed with strong doubt.

2 Don Shewey, p.81.
The two male characters, Jeep and Shooter, are very much like Lee and Austin in True West. Shooter and Jeep show similar warring desires: a desire for unbound freedom and a yearning for bonds. This conflict deters them from taking any decisive action. Jeep says "I kept thinking of other things. I kept drifting. I kept thinking of the sun. The Gulf of Mexico. Barracuda."(175) But his memory about what actually happened to him out in the world wasn't a happy experience, at all. He said he went everywhere. "Cop car, court, jail, cop car, jail, court, cop car, home, cop car, jail." His journey of escape was more a journey of aimlessness and wandering than a journey of exploration and liberation. He talks about his claustrophobia and impulsive restlessness:

Jeep: I used to have this dream that would come to me while I was on my feet. I’d be on my feet just standing there in these walls, and I’d have this dream come to me that the walls were moving in. It was like a sweeping kind of terror that struck me. Then something in me would panic. I wouldn’t make a move. I’d just be standing there very still, but inside something would leap like it was trying to escape. And then the leap would come up against something. It was like an absolutely helpless leap. There was no possible way of getting out. I couldn’t believe it. It was like nothing in the whole world could get me out of there. I’d relax for a second. I’d be forced to relax because if I didn’t, if I followed through with this inward leap, if I let my body do it I’d just crash against the wall. I’d just smash my head in or something.(189)³

In *La Turista*, Kent escaped through the wall. But here Jeep refrains from following his almost uncontrollable impulse for escape, for he knows the price of such an escape. That the price of such a reckless and impulsive escape is a form of death is suggested in Shooter’s fable of a warring body and mind:

[The man] began to feel like a foreign spy. Spying on his body. He’d lie awake. Afraid to sleep for fear his body might do something without him knowing. He’d keep watch on it. (182)

And one day "his body killed him." Shooter’s fable suggests the danger of passion unswayed by reason.

Shooter, however, is less restless than Jeep. This can be seen especially in Shooter’s ambivalent attitude toward ‘outside’ and ‘inside.’ From outside, ‘inside’ may look cosier, friendlier and warmer, but, he adds,

You see into the house. You see the candles. You watch the people. You can see what it’s like inside. The candles draw you. You get a cold feeling being outside. Separated. You have an idea that being inside it’s cosier. Friendlier. Warmth. People. Conversation. Everyone using a language. Then you go inside. It’s a shock. It’s not like how you expected. You lose what you had outside. (178)

A little later Shooter’s vague disillusionment deepens into conviction. He continues to talk to himself "Now I’m beginning to regret my decision.... It was shortsighted. I’d
give everything just to travel around this space. Just to lick the corners. To get my nose in the dust. To feel my body moving." (184)

Again his disillusionment and regret is balanced against a moth’s attraction toward a candle. A bunch of moths saw a candle inside a big house. In the story, the moths were fascinated by the candle inside the house. "They longed to be with this candle but none of them understood it or knew what it was." (185) Attempts were made to find out the nature of the candle for which they have such an inexplicable fascination. Finally, one moth approached the house and saw the flickering candle.

He became filled with love for this candle. He crashed against the glass and finally found a way inside. He threw himself on the flame. With his forelegs he took hold of the flame and united himself joyously with her. He embraced her completely, and his whole body became red as fire. (185)

Shooter can not wholly identify himself with the moth who is consumed in his love for the flame. He goes on to say that the moths outside the house can not know the candle, for as the chief moth puts it, "He’s learned what he wanted to know, but he’s the only one who understands it." (185)

Action hasn’t resolved the warring yearnings and conflicting loyalties of personal freedom and familial bonds. However, it is an important turning point in that
Shepard's 'escape artists' have checked their reckless desire for escape. Though there is still talk of escape and strong fear of entrapment, no actual attempt to escape is made. Shepard's earlier plays, in contrast, frequently end with escape or escape is used as a frame to justify the central story. Escape also serves as a moral judgment on authoritative parents, repressive family, hypocritical society and corrupt civilization. In Action, however, thoughts of escape are significantly diminished and disillusionment as to the possibility of change is expressed. Jeep's repeated arrests and imprisonments, for example, add cautious skepticism against a headlong escape attempt. Furthermore, and more importantly, Jeep expresses a vague yearning for community.

Lupe: ...I once was very active in the community.
Jeep: What's a community?
Lupe: (looking up) A sense of---a sense um---
    What's a community, Shooter?
Shooter: Oh uh---You know. You were on the right track.
Lupe: Something uh---
Jeep: I know.
Lupe: Yeah. You know. It doesn't need words.
Jeep: I know what you mean.
Lupe: Just a kind a feeling.
Jeep: Yeah, I know what you mean.(183)

Action ends with Jeep standing still onstage while the lights fade. Jeep may still want to follow Kent, but he doesn't make the actual attempt.

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The embryonic yearning for community in *Action* would soon be more fully developed in his family plays written after his return to America. Shepard once said that during his sojourn in England he found out "what it really means to be an American." He says,

> The more distant you are from it, the more the implications of what you grew up with start to emerge. You can't escape, that's the whole thing, you can't. You finally find yourself in a situation where...that's the way it is---you can't get out of it."

As Shepard's heroes begin to embark on a homeward journey, their destination is beginning to be specified. In earlier plays the locations for the action were either open space or not indicated at all. And even when the play takes place, as in the case of *The Rock Garden* and *4-H Club*, in a specific room these locations are rendered in an ironic way---a bedroom barren of intimacy or a disordered kitchen with boys stomping around. Gradually outward movement to unspecified space is changed to movement toward specifically designated place as Shepard's protagonists embark on a homeward journey.

In *True West*, the locus is a "kitchen and adjoining alcove of an older home in a Southern California suburb, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles." This place belongs to

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Mom. When the play begins two sons have an unexpected reunion during her absence. Austin is an Ivy league graduate, family man, and screen writer. The older brother, Lee, is a drifter and pilferer. Austin is working on a film outline while housesitting for his mother when Lee shows up quite unexpectedly. Annoyed and dismayed, Austin asks Lee to stay out for a while so that he can have a talk with producer Saul Kimmer.

To Austin's great embarrassment, Lee returns to the house with a stolen TV while Austin's meeting with Saul Kimmer is still going on. Saul is maneuvered into buying Lee's tale and eventually drops Austin's idea in favor of Lee's. Lee's story is about a man chasing another across Texas. Although Lee thinks he has an authentic story to tell, he doesn't know how to write it down. As a consequence, Lee and Austin switch roles. Lee tries to concentrate on outlining his story and Austin accepts Lee's challenge and steals all the toasters in the neighborhood. By this time the place is in a shambles.

Finally, they agree that Lee will take Austin with him to the desert while Austin will ghostwrite for Lee. At this point Mom returns from Alaska earlier than expected and makes a totally irrelevant suggestion that they all rush to the local museum and meet Picasso. She refuses to listen when Austin says that Picasso is dead. Finally, Austin shifts to another topic and announces that he is going to
the desert with Lee. When Lee suddenly backs out of their agreement, Austin attacks Lee with a telephone cord tightening the cord around his neck. Witnessing her two sons' vicious confrontation, Mom announces that she is leaving and going to check into a motel. With Mom gone, the two brothers resume the battle anew.

Lee's homecoming is filled with feelings of regret and exhaustion. What motivates his homecoming is the need for a sense of belonging, and this need is articulated by no other person than Lee himself, one of the typical cowboy figures in Shepard's plays. He describes looking in the window of a home in the neighborhood, while he was casing houses to pilfer:

Like a paradise. Kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside. Warm yellow lights. Mexican tile all around. Copper pots hangin' over the stove. Ya' know like they got in the magazines. Blonde people movin' in and outa' the rooms, talkin' to each other. (pause) Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know. (12)⁵

Along with his yearning for family, is the recognition that his initial escape was of bitter necessity, not one of choice. As Austin insistently asks Lee to take him to the desert, Lee's impatience explodes into an angry confession of the true reason for his escape. Lee says,

⁵ Sam Shepard, True West in Seven Plays (New York: Bantam Books, 1986).
Hey, do you actually think I chose to live out in the middle a' nowhere? Do ya'? Ya' think it's some kinda' philosophical decision I took or something? I'm livin' out there 'cause I can't make it here! And yer bitchin' to me about all yer success!(49)

Dejected and defeated by his experiences out in the world, Lee yearns for home. Lee's yearning is delicately balanced by Austin's leaning toward freedom. Austin, suddenly awakened to a new possibility, wants to escape when he becomes confused and challenged by Lee's sudden appearance. Even though Shepard's characters refrain from headlong attempts at escape, they still have a longing for freedom.

The car in True West is a dominant symbol, as the car horn is a constant aural image evoking the character's trapped situation and suggesting the possibility of escape. Austin desperately wants his car keys back which he lent to Lee on condition that he be out of sight during Austin's talk with Saul. Austin says

Austin: Just give me my keys! I gotta' take a drive. I gotta' get out of here for a while.
Lee: Where you gonna' go, Austin?
Austin: (pause) I might just drive out to the desert for a while. I gotta' think.(32)

A little later Lee also wants just to get out of his situation:
This is the last time I try to live with people, boy! I can’t believe it. Here I am! Here I am again in a desperate situation! This would never happen out on the desert. I would never be in this kinda’ situation out on the desert. (46-47)

However, it is constantly implied that to be forever on a journey is the “fantasies of a long lost boyhood,” as Austin puts it, suppressing his own desire for unbound freedom. As Lee tries to persuade Austin into helping him to write his idea down, he promises Austin that he won’t ever bother him again.

Lee: You could save this thing for me, Austin.
I’d give ya’ half the money. I would. I only need half anyway. With this kinda’ money I could be a long time down the road. I’d never bother ya’ again. I promise. You’d never even see me again.

Austin: You’d disappear?
Lee: I would for sure.

Austin: Where would you disappear to?
Lee: That don’t matter. I got plenty a’ places.
Austin: Nobody can disappear. The old man tried that. Look where it got him. He lost his teeth. (41)

The howlings of coyotes and the sound of crickets have a thematic importance in True West. Throughout the play, there are yappings and howlings of Southern coyotes which have “a distinct yapping, dog-like bark, similar to a hyena.” In scenes 7 and 8, as the tension and conflict between the two brothers heightens, the yapping grows

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intense and maniacal as the wild "lure and kill" the domestic. This distinctive sound of coyotes and the "equally strong" sound of "tons of crickets" carry a powerful thematic implication: the conflict of the spirit between the longing of unbound freedom vs. domesticity.

*True West* consists of nine scenes and has no act division. The plot of the play is an uninterrupted build up of tension between two antagonistic desires of equal intensity: the yearning for freedom and the need for domesticity. Once we have reached scenes 7 and 8, the identities of Lee and Austin have changed completely. Earlier Lee said "I'll just turn myself right inside out. I could be just like you then, huh?" (25) Now, it is Austin who feels like Lee.

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. (37)

Austin, at one point, betrays the split in himself between the call of the wild and his attraction to domesticity. His sneering comment on Lee’s attempt at screen writing, "’Between me, the coyotes and the crickets.’ What a great title." is, ironically, a comment about his own psyche torn between two equally powerful temptations. Shepard makes it clear in his stage direction that "the sense of growing
frenzy in the pack should be felt in the background, particularly in scenes 7 and 8," when the two brothers confront one another.

Shepard's protagonists don't make headlong attempts at escape, though the temptation is still strong. Shepard has said about *True West*:

I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with.  

In *Buried Child*, Shepard tackles the possibility of resolving the warring conflicts. Indeed, he deals with something "we've got to live with," and that something is his new insight into the nature of the family.

As the play begins, the form of Dodge slowly emerges out of dim lights. He is a very thin and sickly looking old man in his late seventies. His wife, Halie, talks to him from upstairs. A little later, Tilden, the couple's oldest son, appears on the stage carrying an armload of corn. Both Dodge and Halie don't believe him when he says that he has picked the corn from their backyard. The backyard of this

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farm house has been left barren for more than forty years. Still not visible, Halie tells Dodge that Bradley is coming over to give him a haircut. Hearing this Dodge becomes upset saying that Bradley made him almost bald last time.

The sons in this family are either in trouble or dead. Tilden was once an All-American football player, but now he is a profoundly disoriented person. Bradley is a dim-witted amputee. There is another son in this family, Ansel, who was killed on his honeymoon. Halie is trying to erect a statue of him with the help of the local minister, Dewis.

Act II begins with the arrival of Vince, Tilden's son, with his girlfriend Shelly. He is on a journey to re-establish his familial roots after years of wandering. However, Vince initially fails to get recognition from any of his family members. Dodge denies that he is anybody's grandfather, and Vince's own father, Tilden, refuses to recognize him saying that "I had a son once but we buried him." Confused and dejected, Vince leaves partly to get a bottle for Dodge and partly to cool himself down a little bit.

During Vince's absence, the story of the buried child is brought out and deepens into a dark mystery the more it is talked about. That a child was born to Halie but killed and buried by Dodge somewhere in the backyard is more or less agreed upon. Further details, however, are never made clear. Stories provided by Dodge and Tilden contradict one
another, while Halie and Bradley try to deny the existence of the baby altogether.

After a whole night's wandering, Vince returns the next morning. This time he succeed in gaining recognition instantly. Dodge names Vince as his heir. As the play nears the end, Dodge dies completely unnoticed. Vince lays roses on Dodge's chest, the roses which, Halie said earlier, would "cover the stench of sin in this house." As Tilden carries the body of the exhumed baby, Halie's voice is heard saying that their barren backyard is miraculously prospering with all sorts of vegetables.

Buried Child is the story of Vince's homecoming who has been absent six years. He is Shepard's typical cowboy figure. Although the reason why he abandoned his family is not provided, he returns to search out his father, Tilden and, ultimately, to find himself. He has come to visit his grandparents in Illinois en route to New Mexico where he thinks his father Tilden is. And Tilden has indeed come back to his own father's house after more than twenty year's absence.

In Buried Child, escape from the family was more of a disoriented wandering than a purposeful journey toward a certain goal. Now back home, aroused by the inquisitive Shelley, Tilden ruminates about his experience:

Tilden: (as he walks around) I had a car once! I had a white car! I drove. I went everywhere.
I went to the mountains. I drove in the snow.

Shelly: That must've been fun
Tilden: (still moving, feeling coat) I drove all day long sometimes. Across the desert. Way out across the desert. I drove past towns. Anywhere. Past palm trees. Lightening. Anything. I would drive through it. I would drive through it and I would stop and I would look around and I would drive on. I would get back in and drive. There was nothing I loved more. Nothing I dreamed of was better than driving.(102)

Tilden's description shows no other special emotion or significance attached to his twenty-year journey except the sheer fascination with driving on and on. This fascination with movement and speed is not without ambiguity. Tilden says that he is not as attracted to driving as he used to be because he is no longer a kid. Here, in this play, pure fascination with movement itself is now associated with puerility and irresponsibility.

Apart from this new insight, Tilden's experience in the world was not enriching. He was alone and lonely and got lost:

Tilden: You don't wanna die do you?
Dodge: No, I don't wanna die either.
Tilden: Well, you gotta talk or you'll die.
Dodge: Who told you that?
Tilden: That's what I know. I found out that in New Mexico. I thought I was dying but I just lost my voice.
Dodge: Were you with somebody?
Tilden: I was alone. I thought I was dead.
Dodge: Might as well have been.(78)

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When Dodge asks him "What’d you come back here for?"
Tilden answers him "I didn’t know where to go." As Dodge
presses him further, Tilden repeats the answer three times.
"I didn’t know where else to go," and "I didn’t know what
to do." This shows his profound disorientation.
Ironically, his basic problem is his sense of loss and this
sense of loss forces him to return home.

In his own youth, Tilden was a dependable son. And as
the oldest son, Tilden was thought by Halie to be the one
who would take care of his parents and his amputee brother,
Bradley. Halie remembers:

[I] was always hoping that Tilden would look out
for Bradley when they got older. After Bradley
lost his leg. Tilden’s the oldest. I always
thought he’d be the one to take
responsibility.(72)

Tilden used to be a popular hero,  "an All American.
Quarterback or Fullback or somethin’" Bradley says to
Shelly:

Yeah, he used to be a big deal. Wore lettermen’s
sweaters. Had medals hanging all around his neck.
Real purty. Big deal.(105)

But now "something about him is profoundly burnt out
and displaced." And Halie laments "I had no idea in the
world that Tilden would be so much trouble. Who would’ve
dreamed." (72) The contrast between his present situation and his past implies that he is being punished for his desertion of his family.

It is also implied that misfortune fell on Ansel when he tried to detach himself from his family. He is, at least in Halie's memory, "a genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And very intelligent." But he broke family tradition and left home to marry an Italian Catholic whom Halie calls "the Devil incarnate." And Halie claims that she murdered Ansel on their honeymoon. The promising sons of this family were all destroyed in one sense or another. This prepares a kind of "heroic vacuum" which has to be filled. 8

Although all the sons of Dodge have come home, their homecomings are not welcomed. Bradley's visit is met with resentment and disgust especially from Dodge. Tilden's homecoming is, for Halie, a big problem. For Dodge, it is shameful for a grownup son to come home and live off his parents. He says to Tilden,

You're a grown man. You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age. It's unnatural. There's nothing we can do for you 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? (78)

Bradley, the youngest son, is also in trouble. He is immovable without his artificial leg. He is impotent and shows a psychopathological attachment to Halie and terrorizes his father at Halie's instigation. He shows symptoms of infantilism. When he is deprived of his blanket, he panicks. Tilden is all burnt out and unable to prevent Bradley's molestation of his father Dodge.

The mother of these troubled sons, Halie, lives in her private refuge, immersed in the memory of happier times. Her emotional detachment from the family is suggested by her physical distance. She alone lives upstairs and is absent from the action of the play except for short appearances in the beginning and the end.

The patriarch of this family, Dodge, is a cynical, irascible alcoholic. He is an invalid, half paralyzed in a living room sofa, doing nothing except sipping whiskey and gazing at a flickering TV. Indeed, the Dodge household is ominously shaded by elm trees, a potent reminder of Desire Under the Elms, Eugene O'Neill's tragic family drama of incest and greed.

What holds these family members together is, ironically, the dark secret of the buried child. The exact story of the child is never made clear. It is strongly implied that the child is the outcome of incest between Halie and Tilden. It is more or less agreed that Dodge
killed the baby and buried it, though this is refuted by Halie.

It is an extremely nebulous situation to verify the two central conflicts of this family, the sin of incest and the crime of infanticide. At one point Dodge clearly says that the child is not his:

Dodge: Then Halie got pregnant again. Outa' the middle a' nowhere, she got pregnant. We weren't planning on havin' any more boys. We had enough boys already. In fact, we hadn't been sleepin' in the same bed for about six years....Halie had this kid. This baby boy. She had it. I let her have it on her own. All the other boys I had had the best doctors, best nurses, everything. This one I let her have by herself. This one hurt real bad. Almost killed her, but she had it anyway. It lived, see. It lived. It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be a part of us. It wanted to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even when everyone around us knew. Everyone. All our boys knew. Tilden knew. (123-124)

But this contradicts his earlier assertion that his flesh and blood is buried in the backyard and that the burial took place before his son Tilden was born.

Dodge deliberately obscures the reality to save whatever remnant of dignity he retains as the patriarch of his family and to shield himself from pain and shame. In fact, he says "It's better not to know anything." To shield himself from wounded pride and shame, he arms himself with cynicism and equivocation. He says "So what
difference does it make? Everybody knows, everybody forgot."(77)

There is a strong implication of an incestual relationship between Tilden and Halie. Strangely enough, however, Dodge has no particular hatred for Tilden. His harshest feeling is directed against Bradley. Dodge describes how Tilden would sing and make up stories for the baby. His words emphasizes Tilden's tenderness and caring for the baby than his grudge against Tilden. And it is Tilden, not Halie, who waits on Dodge. In fact, Dodge asks Tilden to be with him against the terrorizing Bradley:

Tilden: You all right now?

(DODGE nods. Drinks more water. TILDEN moves in closer to him. DODGE sets glass of water on the night table. His coughing is almost gone)

Tilden: Why don't you lay down for a while? Just rest a little.

(TILDEN helps DODGE lay down on the sofa. Covers him with blanket.)

Dodge: You're not going outside are you?
Tilden: No.
Dodge: I don't want to wake up and find you not here.
Tilden: I'll be here.(79)

And it is with Tilden that Dodge ruminates about pleasant memories of his past and confides his fear of Bradley. He asks "Are you having any trouble, here, Tilden! Are you in
some kind of trouble?...You can tell me if you are. I’m still your father." (70)

Even though Dodge suggests the possibility of incest between Tilden and Halie, his harshest feeling is directed against Bradley. Toward him, Dodge reacts violently. And Halie, in turn, threatens Tilden and complains that "He never listens to me Dodge. He’s never listened to me in the past." (77) When she notices the corn Tilden brought, she wouldn’t believe Tilden even though Dodge supports Tilden saying "Tilden wouldn’t lie. If he says there’s corn, there’s corn" (75) As the brawl develops, Dodge shows his hatred for Bradley, while Halie tries to defend him.

Halie: (to Tilden) So you stole it!
Tilden: I didn’t steal it. I don’t want to get kicked out of Illinois. I was kicked out of New Mexico and I don’t want to get kicked out of Illinois.
Halie: You’re going to get kicked out of this house, Tilden, if you don’t tell me where you got that corn!
Dodge: (to HALIE) Why’d you have to tell him that?
Who cares where he got the corn? Why’d you have to go and tell him that?
Halie: (to DODGE) It’s your fault you know!
You’re the one that’s behind all this! I suppose you thought it’d be funny! Some joke! Cover the house with corn husks. You better get this cleaned up before Bradley sees it.
Dodge: Bradley’s not getting in the front door!
Halie: (kicking husks, striding back and forth) Bradley’s going to be very upset when he sees this. He doesn’t like to see the house in disarray. He can’t stand it when one thing is out of place. The slightest thing.
You know how he gets.
Dodge: Bradley doesn’t even live here!
Halie: It’s his home as much as ours. He was born in this house!
Dodge: He was born in a hog wallow.
Halie: Don’t you say that! Don’t you ever say that!
Dodge: He 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!(76)

In addition, Dodge excludes Bradley from his inheritance, not Tilden.

Another point which resists a realistic interpretation of the secret of the buried child is Halie’s attitude. She is curiously aloof from the conflict with which her family is afflicted. She is simply absent when the secret of the buried child is being brought out. Even when she is finally forced to confront the secret, she denies any guilt or remorse associated with the sin of incest.

The attitudes of Dodge and Halie toward their sons and Halie’s behavior not only weaken the possibility of incest but, ultimately, blur the essentially realistic framework of this play. Jack Richardson mentions Shepard’s free concoction of forms:

Somehow, Shepard manages to strike a balance between naturalistic detail and the wilder, more secret landscape of being. He has found a way of maintaining a tension between the banal and the strange that gives his plays the quality of lucid dreams.⁹

Indeed, *Buried Child* begins in realism. But as the play develops, it moves imperceptively towards symbolism. The haunting secret of the buried child "signifies a set of familial attitudes and relationships more than it does an individual or particular event from the past."¹⁰ For this reason, Thomas Nash may justly call Shepard's mode "ironic."

Among the familial attitudes which permeate the play, Oedipal conflict is most obvious. The buried child, a possible outcome of mother-son incest, symbolizes the challenge against patriarchal authority. Indeed, Dodge, the patriarch of this family, is a sickly old man shrivelled to a dim bundle of shape. The gradual revelation of a shapeless figure wrapped in an old brown blanket out of dim light effectively serves to underscore the diminished status of the father. Shattered by Oedipal challenges, Dodge shouts "My appearance is out of his domain! It's even out of mine! In fact, it’s disappeared! I’m an invisible man!"(68) Even his name, Dodge, implies a breach of patriarchal duty. As the familial order is disrupted, the family farm and the whole household is drenched with a putrefying smell. Dodge's situation is more grossly put in Halie's words:

¹⁰ Ron Mottram, p.140.
Halie: You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing! Smelling up the house with your putrid body! Hacking your head off till all hours of the morning! Thinking up mean, evil, stupid things to say about your own flesh and blood!(76)

Like Oedipus’s Thebes, the Dodge family was once prosperous, and he was a well established patriarch. As he says,

See, we were a well established family once. Well established. All the boys were grown. The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over. Me and Halie were pointed toward what looked like the middle part of our life. Everything were settled with us. All we had to do was ride it out.(123)

The prosperity of the Dodge family reflects their stable and orderly relationships. But now the once-prospering farm is as sterile as the farm in The Rock Garden.

The birth of an illegitimate child poses a potent threat to patriarchal authority. The violation of the incest taboo means disruption of the old values and order. It is possible that Dodge tried to redress the situation by eliminating the visible outcome of the sin.

Dodge: 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 cancelled out by this one mistake. This one weakness.(124)
Furthermore, as Tilden later brings in armfuls of corn from the barren field, it is implied that he is responsible for Halie’s fertility. And Dodge himself strongly insinuates this possibility, a possibility tenaciously repeated even when the factual evidence is constantly refuted even by Dodge himself. Though the fact can not be verified, symbolic breaches of patriarchal order and Oedipal desires are profuse.

Though Tilden is never articulate about anything, his behavior betrays clues as to the possibility of sin. After Vince leaves for a while, Tilden becomes drawn to Shelly’s fur coat. He first asks to touch it, then to hold it and finally to put it on. He feels and strokes the fur gently. While caressing the fur, perhaps aroused by an old desire, Tilden is moved to tell Shelly the story of the buried child.

The attraction of the coat is its soft fur; such images are often associated, according to Freud, with sexual desire for the mother, as the economy of phallocentric dream images animal fur can represent a displacement of pubic hair. The tactile stimulation of the fur, recalling the desire of/for the mother, serves to prompt Tilden’s uncovering one of the veils of the play’s mystery.11

That Tilden's behavior is, possibly, an expression of his Oedipal desire is supported by Dodge's reaction. Dodge strongly protests against Tilden's telling the story, until Dodge collapses utterly exhausted. Even though Shelly, who wanted to know the secret, is now reluctant to learn the truth, Tilden proceeds to tell the whole story. But just before Tilden begins, he wants to make sure that Shelly won't want her coat back. As Tilden finishes the story and Dodge lies collapsed on the floor Tilden hands her the coat saying "You probably want your coat back now."

There are other clues as to Tilden's transgression. According to Freud, a small child in a dream frequently signifies male sexual organs, and staircases are representations of desire for sexual consummation. As the play nears the end, Halie retreats to her room upstairs, and only her voice is heard coming from above the staircase. While Halie chants about the paradisiacal transformation of the family farm, Tilden slowly ascends the staircase carrying the exhumed body of the buried child. This can be seen as a manifestation of the Oedipal desire for the mother.

What undermines the apparent realism of the play and enhances the possibility of a symbolic reading is the existence of Bradley. With him, the manifestation of

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12 Ibid., p.407.

13 Ibid.
Oedipal desire and mother-fixation is even more conspicuous than in the case of Tilden. Bradley comes to his father’s place specifically to give him a haircut, something Dodge abhors. Bradley removes the cap from Dodge’s head and gives him a very short hair cut, leaving his scalp bleeding.14 Looking down at Dodge lying helplessly on the floor Bradley even says to Shelly “We could shoot him. (laughs) We could drown him! What about drowning him.”(106)

Robert Burk has observed a vicarious commission of Oedipal desire in Bradley’s ‘rape’ of Shelly.15 Shelly’s sudden changes in her behavior supports this interpretation. When she first came to the place, she was indifferent and asked Vince to leave. Gradually, however, she is involved in the situation and finally assumes a housewife’s role. Indeed, there are similarities between Shelly and Halie such as their names and hair color. Dodge also considers both of them to be “flirtatious,” and “fireballs.” In addition, Shelly sleeps in Halie’s bed and says “I don’t know what it is. It’s the house or something. Something familiar. Like I know my way around here.”(110) She even demands to be

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14 Hair cutting is a symbolic act of castration. And throughout Shepard’s plays, a baseball cap is associated with the father.

15 cf. Burk, p.414. Robert Burk observes several occurrences of transference of desire in Shepard’s plays. He says “within the classical Oedipal situation, affection for the mother can often be displaced onto the sister, a situation which will be realized in Fool for Love.”
recognized and does household work---making bouillon, paring carrots, taking care of Dodge.

The subtle equation of Shelly with Halie suggests that Bradley's 'rape' of Shelly is tantamount to Oedipal incest. Certainly the following scene invites such a possibility.

Bradley: Hey! Missus. Don't talk to me like that. Don't talk to me in that tone a' voice. There was a time when I had to take that tone a' voice from pretty near everyone. (motioning to DODGE) Him, for one! Him and that half brain that just ran outa' here. They don't talk to me like that now. Not any more. Everything's turned around now. Full circle. Isn't that funny?

Shelly: I'm sorry.

Bradley: Open your mouth.

Shelly: What?

Bradley: (motioning for her to open her mouth)

     Open up.

(She opens her mouth slightly.)

Bradley: Wider.

(She opens her mouth wider.)

Bradley: Keep it like that.

(She does. Stares at Bradley. With his free hand he puts his fingers into her mouth. She tries to pull away.) (106-7)

Meanwhile, Dodge lies unconscious. As an usurper, Bradley has taken Dodge's blanket and seat while Dodge has been dethroned from his rightful seat down to the floor.

In fact, Bradley is described as a person who ceases to grow beyond the Oedipal stage. Significantly, upon entering the Dodge household for the first time, he calls "Mom." At
the instigation of Halie, he bullies his father. He shows a pathological attachment to a blanket, as if it were a security blanket for a baby. Bradley terrorizes everybody except Halie. Tilden suddenly bolts and runs off at the sight of him, and Shelly is scared and violated by him. Dodge, too, is scared of him and wants Tilden beside him to keep Bradley away. But Tilden is also scared and fails to protect his father. Bradley is listened to only by Halie. For all his violent temperament, he only whines and whimpers at her commands. In fact, he is fluctuating between two identities, a violent terrorizer and a whining whimperer. Later, Father Dewis and Halie face the chaotic scene and meet Shelly for the first time. All of a sudden, Bradley accuses Shelly of being a prostitute. As Shelly protests "You stuck your hand in my mouth and you call me a prostitute," Bradley desperately denies it and begs Halie to believe his version of the story: "I never did anything, Mom! I never touched her! She propositioned me! And I turned her down. I turned her down flat." (120)

Ross Wetzsteon has observed an important change in Shepard's plays:

In the last few years, the Shepard hero has begun to realize that his adventure, his trip, his quest eventually and inevitably leads him back to the family---to the place from which he originally
escaped. The Odyssey, as we’ve known since the Greek, is a circle.¹⁶

Indeed, Buried Child is Shepard’s ‘Odyssey.’ The protagonist, Vince, has made the homecoming journey with firm determination after years of wandering. His determination grows out of a deep longing and yearning for a sense of belonging.

Shepard himself doesn’t seem to be entirely comfortable with his own deep yearning for America, which he described as his "American scar." Thus, in Buried Child, Shepard balances Vince’s yearning with Shelly’s skepticism and frivolity. When they arrive at Dodge’s place, Shelly can’t suppress her giggling over Vince’s determination and seriousness. Shelly even says to the nervous Vince "What’s wrong with you is that you take the situation too seriously."(85) It turns out that Shelly tried to discourage Vince from pursuing the quest. Later she talks to Halie:

Shelly: I told him it was stupid to come back here. To try to pick up from where he left off.
Halie: Where was that?
Shelly: Wherever he was when he left here! Six years ago! Ten years ago! Whenever it was. I told him nobody cares.(118)

¹⁶ Ross Wetzsteon, p.259.
Vince's firm determination distinguishes him from the hesitation, doubt, and split feelings of Shepard's earlier figures. Shelly's bantering and dissuasion only emphasize that Vince has set a strong goal for his journey home. Shepard lets Shelly explain Vince's purpose of coming to his grandparents's place. Shelly tells Dodge about their journey:

We were going all the way through to New Mexico. To see his father. I guess his father lives out there. We thought we'd stop by and see you on the way. Kill two birds with one stone, you know? (She laughs, Dodge stares, she stops laughing) I mean Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it's 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.(86)

However, nobody recognizes Vince. Despite all his effort to prove his identity to Dodge and Shelly's supporting explanation, Vince fails to be recognized by Dodge. Dodge mistakes Vince for Tilden, Vince's father, and asserts that he is "nobody's grandpa."(90) Vince fails to get recognition not only from his grandfather but also from his own father. Vince desperately asserts in front of his father that "It's Vince. I'm Vince." In reply, his father irrelevantly remarks "I picked these carrots." Again Shelly intervenes,
This is supposed to be your son! Is he your son? Do you recognize him? I'm just along for the ride here. I thought everybody knew each other. (92)

This time Tilden remembers something about his son, but the buried one, not Vince. Exasperated, Shelly tries to dissuade Vince from continuing the seemingly futile quest to reclaim his familial roots.

Vince is now even more desperate to be recognized, and this leads him deeper into his past. Indeed, his homeward journey is a tracking back into the past toward his roots. As Shelly notes,

[He] had to stop off at every tiny little meatball town that he remembered from his boyhood! Every stupid little donut shop he ever kissed a girl in. Every drive-in. Every Drag Strip. Every football field he ever broke a bone on. (119)

Though discouraged and confused, Vince is adamant to pursue his quest:

Vince: I just gotta think or something. I don’t know. I gotta put this all together.
Shelly: Can’t we just go?
Vince: No! I gotta find out what’s going on.
Shelly: Look, you think you’re bad off, what about me? Not only don’t they recognize me but I’ve never seen them before in my life. I don’t know who these guys are. They could be anybody.
Vince: They’re not anybody.
Shelly: That’s what you say.
Vince: They’re my family for Christ’s sake! I should know who my own family is! (97)
With these words, Vince leaves again for a long night’s journey into dawn. It seems to be a strategic retreat to gain a better perspective. Furthermore, Vince’s momentary absence has thematic importance in that Vince is saved from the ugly family secret. While he is out, all the family members except Vince are forced to confront the Gorgon face of the sin. For his new birth, Vince should not be exposed to the sin which paralyzes his family morally. Indeed, he returns after the sin has been absolved by minister Father Dewis.

Vince’s earlier journey hasn’t been a failure in that his initial arrival has disturbed the perilously balanced facade of equilibrium in this family. This is evident when Dodge mistakes his grandson Vince for his son Tilden who, in turn, mistakes Vince for his buried son. Vince’s girlfriend Shelly is mistaken for either a prostitute or Tilden’s woman. This confusion of identities symbolically reflects the affliction this family suffers from and, at the same time, arouses curiosity and provides clues toward the long-hushed up secret. While Vince is effectively saved from being exposed to the sin, Shelly, an innocent outsider who expected a Norman Rockwell family, pursues the secret of the buried child.

Indeed, Shelly is a catalyst in the ritual revelation of the sin. She sounds like a public prosecutor and Dodge
feels he is in a court of justice. Understandably, the family members would rather be left alone. Father Dewis tries to mitigate the situation by saying to Shelly, "Can't you see that these people want to be left in peace? Don't you have any mercy? They haven't done anything to you."
Bradley violently denies anything wrong in his family. Fearful that Shelly's curiosity will reveal the truth, Bradley strongly protests:

Bradley: You stay out of our lives! You have no business interfering!
Shelly: I don't have any business period. I got nothing to lose.

(She moves around, staring at each of them.)

Bradley: You don't know what we've been through. You don't know anything!
Shelly: I know you've got a secret. You've all got a secret. It's so secret in fact, you're all convinced it never happened.(122)

Earlier, when Vince insisted that Shelly remain while he was away, she struggled to get away from his grip shouting "let go of me you sonuvabitch!. I'm not your property."(91) All of a sudden, Shelly changes her mind and decides to stay. Indeed, once she decides to remain, She steadily pursues the secret. She even calls Dodge "Grandpa," offering Dodge hot bouillon. Even though the irascible Dodge discourages

and rebuffs her, she tries tenaciously to soften Dodge’s ill feeling for his own family. She continues to talk about the family pictures hanging on the walls in Halie’s room; a younger Halie with bright red hair, a younger Dodge, their farm, all the kids standing out in the corn, and finally a baby. Shelly says, "There’s a baby. A baby in a woman’s arms. The same woman with the red hair." (111) At the mention of the baby Dodge suddenly becomes defensive and tries to suppress her shouting "That’s about enough outa’ you! You got some funny ideas. Some damn funny ideas."

Undaunted Shelly further pursues the matter:

Shelly: What’s happened to this family anyway?
Dodge: You’re in no position to ask! What do you care? You some kinda’ Social Worker?
Shelly: I’m Vince’s friend.
Dodge: Vince’s friend! That’s rich. That’s really rich. "Vince"! "Mr. Vince"! "Mr. Thief" is more like it! His name doesn’t mean a hoot in hell to me. Not a tinkle in the well. You know how many kids I’ve spawned? Not to mention Grand kids and Great Grand kids and Great Great Grand kids after them?
Shelly: And you don’t remember any of them?
Dodge: What’s to remember?....(112)

Dodge is aggravated to acknowledge, though indirectly, the existence of Vince within his family line.

A little later, Shelly again confronts Halie who returns with Father Dewis, both slightly drunk. Then Shelly is doing what Vince would do. She says to them "Don’t you
wanna' know who I am! Don't you wanna know what I'm doing here! I'm not dead!" She also says:

I don't like being ignored. I don't like being treated like I'm not here. I didn't like it when I was a kid and I still don't like it. (119-20)

Then she goes on to describe how vividly Vince talked about each of the family members. When she is accused of having a hallucination, she says "It was no hallucination! It was more like a prophecy. You believe in prophecy, don't you?" (122) Indeed, the prophecy would soon be realized.

The meaning of Vince'S journey can be illuminated in Shelly's transformation and her participation in disclosing the family's secret. When Dodge hears Halie entering, he hides himself under his coat pulling it back over his head. Now Dodge, perhaps encouraged by Shelly, is moved to take the secret out into the light. He says to the family members present,

She wants to get to the bottom of it. (to Shelly) That's it, isn't it? You'd like to get right down to bedrock? You want me to tell ya' what happened? I'll tell ya'. I might as well. (122)

It's more like a part of a verbal will which he is going to do in a moment. Halie threatens Dodge into not disclosing but he is not intimidated anymore.
Halie: Dodge, if you tell this thing---if you tell this, you'll be dead to me. You'll be just as good as dead.

Dodge: That won't be such a big change, Halie. See this girl, this girl here, she wants to know. She wants to know something more. And I got this feeling that it doesn't make a bit a' difference. I'd sooner tell it to a stranger than anybody else. (123)

Dodge goes on to tell "the whole thing from start to finish" in front of Father Dewis. He tells from the day the baby was born to the day he killed it. No sooner does Dodge finish his confession than Vince appears.

Dodge: I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it.

(Halie moves toward Bradley)

Halie: (to Bradley) Ansel would've stopped him! Ansel would've stopped him from telling these lies! He was a hero! A man! A whole man! What's happened to the men in this family! Where are the men! (124)

It was Vince who answers Halie's cry. On cue, Vince returns from his night journey. He is, indeed, "a hero, a man, a whole man." While his family was going through the painful confrontation of the terrible truth about their family, he, too, was having an enlightening journey as can be suggested by his new approach. Before, he made every effort to convince the family of his identity. Vince demonstrated tricks from his past in a vain effort to make
himself recognizable. When he comes back from his night journey, however, he enters violently crashing through the screen porch door tearing it off its hinges. Now he gets an instant recognition.

Vince's violence is to induce attention. When he returns again from the haunting night journey, Vince is not begging for recognition. He seems to think that he has reached the limit of his capacity and begins to form a desperate plan. Before, he was cautious and careful to make a good impression on his family members. This time he is claiming his due right like a triumphant soldier. He is singing, yelling and smashing empty beer bottles against the wall. Everybody watches him in "terror and expectation." After a long silence, Shelly tries to approach him. However, the situation has been completely reversed. Vince says "Who? What? Vince who? Who's that in there?" Vince's counter attack brings Dodge to utter "It's me! Your Grandfather! Don't play stupid with me!"(125) The smug forgetfulness and indifference are shattered by Vince's act of violence. Indeed, it's the moment of Vince's rebirth, and the violence is a sort of birth trauma. Thomas Nash says:

Clearly, Shepard has used this dramatic moment as a symbolic rebirth, calculated to correspond to the exact moment when Tilden, alone in the rain,
must be pulling the decayed corpse of the buried child from the mud of the cornfields. 18

Vince's rebirth is appropriately celebrated by Halie. When she first appears Halie was in complete black "as in mourning." She even has a black handbag, a hat with a veil and elbow length black gloves. Indeed, she says, at one point, ever since Ansel's death she feels "as if they'd all die." At this moment of Vince's rebirth, however, Halie is wearing a bright yellow dress, and white gloves and her arms are full of yellow roses.

Almost simultaneously with Dodge, Halie also recognizes Vince. Unsatisfied, however, Vince is determined to press the matter once and for all. As Halie says "Vincent? Is that you, Vince?", Vince asks back "Vincent who? What is this! Who are you people?" Confused, Shelly declares that she is leaving despite Vince's threat "Off limits! Verboten! This is taboo territory. No man or woman has ever crossed the line and lived to tell the tale!"(127) Indeed, the family, inside the porch, will be the sanctuary where his journey ends.

Watching Vince's terrible transformation Halie remembers the angelic Vince:

He was the sweetest little boy!....There wasn't a mean bone in his body. Everyone loved Vincent.

18 Thomas Nash, p.489.
Everyone. He was the perfect baby....He used to sing in his sleep. He’d sing. In the middle of the night. The sweetest voice. Like an angel. I used to lie awake listening to it. I used to lie awake thinking it was all right if I died. Because Vincent was an angel. A guardian angel. He’d watch over us. He’d watch over all of us.(128)

It turns out that his terrible transformation is to induce transformation in his family members locked in their dark secrets.

The meaning of his all night journey can be illustrated in his own explanation. Being asked by Shelly "What’s happened to you Vince? You just disappeared," Vince "delivers speech" about his experience. While he drives in the rain, he sees the faces of every member of his family tree in the windshield back to the faces he’d never seen before but still recognized. Like a prophecy, as Shelly said earlier, he followed to the root of his family line. In the merging and breaking up of the faces, he recognizes the root of his identity and decides to return to reclaim his patrimony. Toby Silverman Zinman comments:

The infinite reflection and refraction, the depth of the surface, the layers of surface, tease Vince with meaning. Just as the reflection in the windshield shows Vince his link to what is behind him, beneath him, before him, his link to the American past, so the play teases us with its mythic underlayer.19

Vince said it never stopped raining the whole time. The rain adds mythic layers of meaning to Vince's night journey. As Johan Callens notices "The rain proves to be instrumental in the resurrection of the buried child (in Vince's person) and in securing a miracle crop."\textsuperscript{20}

Indeed, Dodge is the dying Corn King and Vince is the successor. At the beginning of the play, Tilden spreads corn husks over the body of his father. It portends Dodge's symbolic role as the "Corn King in the winter of his life."\textsuperscript{21} As the play nears the end, Dodge prepares for his impending death. He proclaims his last will and asks for a burial suitable for the dying Corn King. He names Vince as his successor and bequeathes to him:

\begin{quote}
This house goes to my Grandson, Vincent. All the furnishings, accoutrements and paraphernalia therein. Everything tacked to the walls or otherwise resting under this roof. (129)
\end{quote}

Vince accepts what he has come to retrieve: the identity his family provides, his heritage.

Dodge's dignified and completely natural death contributes to establish a positive meaning for Vince's journey home. Indeed, Thomas Nash calls \textit{Buried Child} a


\textsuperscript{21} Thomas Nash, p.489.
"modern version of the central theme of Western mythology, the death and rebirth of the Corn King." Indeed, Vince's return is appropriately signalled by the sudden and startling growth of corn in the fields. Watching the field magically transformed into a paradisiacal garden, Halie says

Good hard rain. Takes everything straight down deep to the roots. The rest takes care of itself. You can't force a thing grow. You can't interfere with it. It's all hidden. It's all unseen. You just gotta wait till it pops up out of the ground. Tiny little shoot. Tiny little white shoot. All hairy and fragile. Strong though. Strong enough to break the earth even. It's a miracle, Dodge. I've never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it's the sun. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's the sun. (132)

Indeed, it's the 'son.' Earlier, Bradley said "Everything turned around now. Full circle." With Buried Child, Shepard has circled back to the family.

22 Ibid., p.486.
VI

Conclusion

The political, social, and cultural movements of the sixties ranged from a concern with particular injustices to a general condemnation of Western civilization. According to Peter Clecak, the various forms of protest and dissent can be classified into two groups according to their fundamental logic: (1) "the logic of maximal cultural inclusion," and (2) "the logic of minimal social inclusion."

What the dissenters in the former category claimed was, Clecak explains, liberation from traditional cultural assumptions and responsibilities and equality on grounds of feeling and sensibility. "In its extreme forms," Clecak notes, "the dissenting logic of maximal inclusion frequently entails an alienated assault on culture and society, an attempt (often only rhetorical) to flatten and conflate the notions of privilege, power, excellence, and domination."¹ The logic of minimal inclusion is the dissent of those who often feel marginal or powerless. It can be best illustrated in the black movement which challenged discrimination and racial prejudice. The people in this category asked for public action to ameliorate the

¹ Peter Clecak, p.164.
accumulated consequences of structural discrimination and
liberation from racial, ethnic, and sexual prejudice.

However, despite the diverse social and cultural
movements, Cleckak finds a shared logic of dissent: expanded
claims on behalf of the self. The fundamental goal was to
pursue maximal social justice and cultural freedom for the
fulfillment of the claims of self²:

A quest for personal fulfillment within a small
community (or several communities) of significant
others: this strikes me as the dominant thrust of
American civilization during the sixties and
seventies....The metaphor of a quest thus
permeated American culture so thoroughly that it
could not be construed as the property of any
single ideological faction or group, whether its
members fancied themselves arbiters of the future
or guardians of the past.³

At the same time, the movement of the sixties had a
clear impact on the American theater: the redefinition of
the audience/performer relationship, the attempt to
redefine the traditional theater space, the resistance to
language and the use of scatological language, the challenge
to the authority of the director, the search for mystical
communion, and the objection to linear time and logical
processes. The radical theater also made a systematic
attempt to unite theater and revolution, the performance and

² Ibid., pp.160-1.
³ Ibid., p.9.
the living, the play and the battle, physical and spiritual liberation, and the individual and social change.

As the sixties moved into the seventies the exuberance for the explosion of raw energy and rebellion was carefully reconsidered. The relevance of agitprop theater and guerrilla theater, for example, was now questioned by the practitioners themselves. R. G. Davis of the San Francisco Mime Troupe now claimed that agitational propaganda was not revolutionary art. Critic Stanley Kauffman agrees. Asked about the differences between the experimental theater of the sixties and the seventies, he mentions the sharp dwindling of the political theater in the seventies. The major reason he offers for this change is the end of the Vietnam war. He adds, however, that

Most anti-Vietnam war action by young people in this country was not political. It was self-preservative....If all the groups who were doing anti-War pieces had been motivated by political conviction rather than by immediate political disgust or the wish to preserve self and/or friends, political theater would not have dwindled.¹

On similar grounds C. W. E. Bigsby criticized the new theater movement during the sixties. He observed a

fundamental basis common to all sixties' theater movements, the pursuit of a spontaneous and erotic style of self:

...before it is conditioned by social institutions and of man before he subordinates those instincts to the constraints of rationality. It looked for and affected to find authenticity in feelings liberated from the constraining power for rationality, language and moral structure.⁵

In the theater and the culture in general, there was a turning inward, a focusing less on society and more on self, "an open ended quest for distinctive synthesis of personal salvation and shares of social justice."⁶ This turning inward led in two directions. The first was the attempt to develop an autonomous inner self. The second was the mystic desire to lose the self, to merge one's individual identity with a communal one.

In the case of the former, the pursuit of the authentic self resulted in a brooding selfishness and declining regard for various modes of authority. Nevertheless, this pursuit hides, for all its selfishness, a communitarian impulse. Daniel Yankelovitch identified twenty normative changes that occurred during the sixties and seventies. Among them were a growing distrust of politics, a greater tolerance for the

⁵ A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, pp.69-70.

⁶ Peter Clecak, p.229.

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liberty of persons, and above all, a heightened desire for community. Peter Clecak summarizes what happened:

In fact...selfishness and a partial decline of authority constitute signs of the quest....The negative side effects were overshadowed by rather more hopeful signs. There was a rise in concern with the self, a development that constitutes one expression of the quest and suggests the increasing disposition of individuals from all social categories to assert themselves, to feel entitled to seek fulfillment. And there was a largely salutary evolution of authority, a decline of certain modes that interfered with the quest and precluded progress in the democratization of personhood, and a simultaneous rise of other, more internal modes of authority that facilitated the search.

Shepard’s plays provide fertile ground to observe the fundamental impulses common to the cultural ferment during the nineteen sixties, the questioning and challenge of the legitimacy of authority in every sphere---political, social, cultural, moral, religious, parental, institutional, and ideological.

In Shepard’s works, rebellion against the family stands for rebellion against an oppressive system and this rebellion represents a heroic act directly equated with social and political revolution. The father figures in Shepard’s plays are frequently "in debacle, defeat, de-

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8 Peter Clecak, p.232.
authorized, [and] floundering." They were accused because they allowed themselves to be seduced by the "bitch goddess success," the American Dream. In *Seduced*, the American father, having been tainted by the Dream, remembers:

I see how I disappeared. It happened a long time ago....I disappeared in a dream. I dreamed myself into another shape. Another body. I made myself up....I was taken by the dream and all the time I thought I was taking it. It was a sudden seduction. Abrupt. Almost like rape. You could call it rape. I gave myself up. Sold it all down the river.⁹

In short, with Shepard, the American father became "the demon they invented! Everything they can aspire to. The nightmare of the nation!" (275) Ron Mottram describes Henry Hackamore, the seduced:

The man who had turned himself into a legend of hidden power and manipulation, originally raped by a dream but now himself become a rapist, a user and exploiter of the nation, had finally been transformed into the nightmare of the national consciousness, the end product of an aspiration for power and success, the ultimate American.¹⁰

In Shepard, as elsewhere in society, "a psychological parricide" takes place.¹¹ In *The Rock Garden*, the father

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¹⁰ Ron Mottram, p.130.

¹¹ Lewis Feuer, p.480.
is simply dismissed until, all of a sudden, he is deposed from his rightful throne. In The Holy Ghostly, the father is even more virulently denounced and eventually dumped into a pyre. The younger generation sentenced their fathers to death for being tempted by the Mephistophelian deal.

The untainted American Dream was made possible through "persistence, fortitude and determination." But the dream is in the remote past. The younger generation refused not only the corrupt dream but the Protestant work ethic as well. Thus, in Buried Child, with old Dodge dying, Dodge’s farm lies untilled, barren. His three sons who were expected to "take responsibility" not only betrayed their parents but demanded the "total end" of the work ethic as well.12

Shepard’s young men were determined not to make the mistake of their fathers, whose fatal attraction to the American Dream left them with no authority, without the excuse or power of self-justification. The young boy in The Rock Garden rejected his family and Ice in The Holy Ghostly rebelled against his father and what he stood for. They set out to search for values which would be consistent with their own inner stirrings.

But their search frequently led Shepard’s young men to break with all relationships. Often it was a flight from familial intimacies and responsibilities. More often than

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12 Troubled Feast, p.182.
not, they simply attempted to withdraw from reality. What they longed for was a post-revolutionary utopia, not a revolution, an undiscovered frontier which lay beyond the limits of the established social order and which could be attained by a change of consciousness. Thus, Young Man in Operation Sidewinder lapsed into disordered evasion of reality confronted by the reality beyond his comprehension. As Bonnie Marranca perceptively points out,

Shepard's characters do not relate to society, there is no world outside, they often can not see beyond their own mental states. They react, they do not interact.¹³

Sooner or later, the younger generation found that their own "discipline" turned into "murderous combativeness," aggressiveness, and insensitivity. In short, they repeated, ironically, the same qualities they hated in their fathers.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the struggle to escape and to rebel against authority was more than a vulgar gesture of protest or senseless violence. It was also an outburst of energy of protest and optimism. Shepard's use of hyperbolic images and transformation is also an attempt to achieve new hopes and the yearning for the realization of greater human

¹⁴ Herbert Hendin, Age of Sensation, p.157.
potential. Toby Silverman Zinman observes the changing relationship between transformation and escape in Shepard’s later plays. He says,

[T]he disappering act is permanently stymied as Shepard’s plays become more concerned with families and the relationships which bind people, not only to each other, but, more importantly, to other people’s ideas of who they are. 15

Indeed, in Shepard’s later plays, especially in his family trilogy, there are transformations: brothers changing identities, son’s assuming the father’s identity, and a return of “the prodigal son.” But these transformations are no longer evasions of an oppressive and corrupt situation. Shepard’s characters began to understand the double nature of family and human bonds, and recognize that “you can’t get out of it.” 16 The attempts to embrace the other, to transcend the warring desires and paradoxical nature of human relationship and family are, as Shepard states, “something we’ve got to live with.” 17 And this new awareness is realized as the characters in his family plays trace back to their roots. Indeed, in Buried Child,

15 Toby Silverman Zinman, Theater Journal, p.517.

16 Ross Wetzsteon, p.6.

Vince has a visionary experience which gives him a new insight: "you can't escape, that's the whole thing, you can't." Johan Callens explains Vince's transformation:

Vince, the artist-visionary who appears so often in Shepard's plays, feels at first estranged, a separate person. Gradually, however, he merges with his ancestors. The merging of identities effects a merging of past and present into a mythical, eternal present in which Vince can be at the same time the buried child, Tilden and Dodge.

As Shepard's characters are drawn to the source of their identity, they begin to perceive themselves in relation to other people's perception of who they are. Shepard's earlier protagonists are almost always homeless: the pack of boys in 4-H Club, a group of loosely related people picnicking at the beach in Icarus's Mother, Carol and Jim staying at a motel in Red Cross, cowboy buddies in Cowboy #2, wandering tourists in La Turista. At the same time, the relationships of these characters are loosely related and never specifically defined or sustained. They are, as Edward Shorter notes, "the free-floating couple, a marital dyad subject to dramatic fissions and fusions, and

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without the orbiting satellites of pubertal children."\textsuperscript{19}

Even when they appear as a couple, "paired existence is not shared existence." Ren Frutkin observes:

\begin{quote}
[T]he main dynamism in Shepard's versions of social configurations is not that of union---the dynamism of love---but of displacement---the dynamism of power...\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Shepard's characters, especially in his early plays, often speak for themselves and for the audience since others on the stage rarely listen. The use of monologue is evidence of their inability to establish meaningful relationships. They use "the other as a witness, an audience" for their own performance. Shepard's characters are primarily interested in "self-knowledge in the form of reflections from the other" and "greater truth about the subjectively fascinating question of one's identity."\textsuperscript{21} As Bonnie Marranca rightly comments:

\begin{quote}
[T]he breakdown of dialogue reflects in its dramatic form the overly analytic exploration of \textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{20} Ren Frutkin, "Paired Existence Meets the Monster," in \textit{American Dreams}, p.111.
\bibitem{21} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}

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the self and the inability to sustain relationships that characterize behavior today.\textsuperscript{22}

As "the new raw unstable anguish and wit" of his early plays diminishes, Shepard's characters begin to grow out of their narcissistic phase. And Shepard's later plays, notably his family trilogy, begin to be structured around dialogue. This change "signals an emphatic shift in the pattern of discourse---away from characters who are obsessive and self-absorbed, and toward the development of relationships between characters."\textsuperscript{23} Shepard himself felt the necessity for such a shift. In an interview, he notes "I'd like to try a whole different way of writing now, which is very stark and not so flashy and not full of a lot of mythic figures and everything and try to scrape it down to the bone as much as possible."\textsuperscript{24} Again, Bonnie Marranca says,

\begin{quote}
The fact that dialogue is becoming a strong, integrated force in the plays indicates a new strain in Shepard's work, a shift in subject matter from displacement to roots, and an interest in the continuity of relationships rather than
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textit{American Dreams}, p.24.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p.16.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Kenneth Chubb, "Interview with Sam Shepard," in \textit{American Dreams}, p.208.
\end{itemize}
their disintegration, and finally, an emotional broadening of character.25

Shepard's early plays—*Icarus's Mother*, *Fourteen Hundred Thousand*, and *Operation Sidewinder*—are filled with apocalyptic images and death wishes. Michael Bloom observed the flourishing of the apocalyptic imagination in the playwrights of the sixties.

As with much of the writing of this time, Shepard's work is itself an attack on the objective, rational apprehension of knowledge. The apocalyptic proceeds by dreams, visions, and hallucinations. Given the anti-rationalist method of the apocalyptic vision, it is clear why realism, with its rational, objective vision of reality, held no interest for Shepard in the early part of his career.26

However, as the turbulent sixties came to an end, Shepard's fascination with apocalypse began to change. In *Mad Dog Blues* (1971), Kosmo declares "I'm getting fucking tired of apocalypse." Then he adds "I'm struggling with something that wants to live." Kosmo finds an answer for his struggle: "my spinning brain is a failure with no home." He chooses to return home. George Stambolian observes:


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In Mad Dog Blues... home is opposed to the vain pursuits, contrivances, and plots of the modern world. "Home is any place you feel like home," sing the characters. "Home got no rules, it's in the heart of a fool." Home, like the heart, is seen as something permanent and real inside us, and that is why the voice each character hears at the end seems like his own voice, "calling me back, back where I belong." The rediscovery of home puts a stop to the proliferation of the self and joins all the characters together. It also ends the confusion between past and present, the dead and the living.27

Hoss in The Tooth of Crime says "Ya' know, you'd be O.K., Becky, if you had a self. So would I. Something to fall back on in a moment of doubt or terror or even surprise."(225) But the notion of self is no longer the extravagant, highly flexible one of Shepard's early plays. Thus, when Hoss was about to meet his challenger, and became utterly nervous he heard "Yer old Dad" for reassurance and courage.

As Shepard turned away from apocalypse and toward family, the theme, dramatic form, and characterization of his plays began to change. Richard Gilman comments about this change:

In his last three plays [the family trilogy] Shepard has withdrawn noticeably from the extravagant situations, the complex wild voices and general unruliness of the earlier work. His

themes, so elusive before, seem clearer now, if not pellucidly so, his vision dwells more on actual society.28

In Buried Child, for example, the Dodge family has solidly structured its life around the adult sons who are expected to be everything to them---provider, protector, and contact with the world. Indeed, in Shepard's later plays, especially his family trilogy, he now employs a traditional form, a solid realistic structure, and fully individuated characters.

The changes in Shepard's work reflect, more broadly, changes in American culture itself, a new emphasis on one's heritage and an upsurge of nostalgia in the wake of the cultural turbulence of the sixties.29 And in his own life Shepard reveals a new awareness of the interrelatedness of past and present:

My name came down through seven generations of men with the same name each naming the first son the same name as the father then the mothers nick-naming the sons so as not to confuse them with the fathers when hearing their names called in the open air while working side by side in the waist-high heat. The sons came to believe their names were the nicknames they heard floating across these fields and answering to these names building ideas of who they were around the sound never dreaming their legal name was lying in wait for

28 Richard Gilman, "Introduction" to Seven Plays, p.XXV.

29 Clecak, p.224.
Nevertheless, throughout Shepard's dramatic vision, there remains a tension between self and society. Shepard's family trilogy, while it shows a new interest in the family, also reveals an equally strong yearning for personal freedom. Shepard's ambivalence between "dissidence and communality" is an expression of the endless search for an American identity.

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