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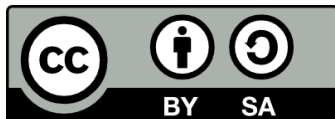
## **Contemporary (American) Drama / Theatre About the postmodern**

Savas Patsalidis

School of English Language and Literature

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## Σκοπός ενότητας

- About the postmodern.

## Key words:

- Modernism.
- Postmodernism.
- Culture.
- Reality.
- Objects.

## Play to study

- Sam Shepard. Tooth of Crime

## Περιεχόμενο ενότητας

- Power games in Shepard's prison-house: A lie of the mind.

Sam Shepard is undoubtedly the most prolific and discussed playwright to appear in the American theatre since Edward Albee. Young as he is, Shepard has proven all these twenty five years that he is a perceptive and investigative mind, capable of translating his "American experience" into effective drama. This is not to say, however, that there is consensus over the quality of his oeuvre. Voices of discontent are also heard. Some critics, for example lament his departure from the style of his earlier, more daring plays, towards the direction of more conservative , mainstream plays with a very narrow focus of interest that lacks in "a strong social reference point" (Marranca 1981: 109).

While it is tempting to see Shepard's progression from the earlier, relatively more open and more experimental plays to the later in terms of a closer and closer approach to realism, it is far from true to argue that Shepard is content by simply reproducing the trite and the banal. Underneath the plays' realistic (American) concerns throbs a rich texture of "inter-national" meanings that invite a plurality of readings. Explaining his turn towards realism, Shepard wrote in the mid-seventies: "[What I want is] 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... it could be called realism, but not the kind of realism where husbands and wives squabble and that kind of stuff" (1974; in Marranca, 1981b: 208). Shepard is obviously in search of another kind of realism for his theatre, different from the theory and restrictions of the well-made play with its emphasis on probability, motivation, background information, conflict and exchange (Zinman 423-430).

Confronted by a society of shaky borderlines and ideological retreat, a society of new discourses and conservative aspirations, Shepard deliberately falls back on the most seemingly inviolable theatrical (mainly naturalist and realist) and national traditions and conventions and scrutinizes them with the hope of carving possible avenues through which to elaborate new systems of meaning and comprehension of the plight of the individual vis-a-vis postmodern culture and its institutions. As viewers of his drama we watch him course the stage of American culture, as if for the first time, looking for the most improbable signs, abstractions, languages, characters, which he renders in fresh associations that strike the eye and haunt the mind (Earley 126-132). The probability of what happens is never at issue in his plays. It is clear from the outset that what Shepard wants to achieve is a delicate balance "between naturalistic detail and the wilder, more secret landscapes of being...between the banal and the strange" (Richardson ii); or, to use Fredrick Jameson's accurate description of the postmodern condition, what Shepard is truly after is a nerve-racking discourse oscillating between "exaltation and terror, between the sublime and the grotesque." (53-93; 72). Each of these plays, without being totally different from one another, portrays in a unique way this particular artistic ambivalence, on the one hand, and the un-resolved mystery of daily life, on the other. Each one has its own consistency and carries its own conviction, irrespective of the demands of any outside world of objective reality. It would be really hard to conceive of actions, in modern "family" terms, which violate so many of our standard routines and morals with so little effort and so little interest in making themselves credible. In works like *The Buried Child*, *Fool for Love*, *True West*, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *A Lie of the Mind*, one may read causes into them, but the causes pale beside the facts. The whole thing has about it a blatant improbability and artifice which depends not so much upon our sympathizing, or understanding its origins, but upon seeing how far it has taken its own possibilities (and dissidence). The reaction to what characters like Dodge, Tilden, Lee, Austin, May and Eddie, Jake, Mike and Frankie do, comes nowhere near Pity and Fear, but is better described as astonishment at the elaboration. Shepard is obviously using reality not to mirror but to "transcend" it, as director and critic Michael Smith noted

some years ago (in Marranca 1981b: 161). Shepard usually begins as a dispassionate observant of little things and moves steadily towards more secret landscapes that add new, unexpected dimensions to the ordinary. So, those spectators who know Shepard's work and have a sense that they have seen it all before, still depend on the writer's next move to see whether their expectations will be confirmed or confuted. (Wilson 46-57; Putzel 147-160).

With these in mind I want to consider *A Lie of the Mind*, the author's last and lengthiest play, on what seems to me its most interesting level: that is, a power game among people so different from us, while in certain obvious respects resembling us, that they are fascinating to watch. My contention is that these characters, for all their initially realistic appearance, acquire such an impact that finally embraces the dilemmas and struggles of our con-fused and con-fusing society.

*A Lie of the Mind* is an intriguing mixture of plain family drama at the naturalistic level and of obsessive fantasy which takes it out of the realm of the probable. In a simply structured two-ring circus, with two separate spheres, eight characters are called to play their roles, theatricalize the lies of their mind, there and there alone. At first sight things look pretty readable and straightforward: linear action with occasional comic interludes, round characters, clear-cut conflicts.

Appearances are deceiving, however. The family unit, the realistic "inside" which operates as the center where the characters return again and again with the hope of filling up the "huge dark space and distance between [them]" (Shepard 1986: 1), is a force whose obvious meaning is gradually extended beyond the particulars of the kind we encounter in O' Neill or Osborne, for example. As the play progresses the well-knit plot, the stable point of reference succumb, giving their place to a complicated simulacrum of images and signs, coming together in a perceptual game of hide-and-show, text and stage, mask and face, reality and illusion. The family, for instance, the sheltering home/center longed for and dreamed of, is slowly transformed into a many-tentacled monster strangling its victims. Its symbolic and philosophical connotations multiply. It does not, after all, surprise us that there is more menace, unpredictability and irrationality in this dramatic material than in any other. The American stage for the last hundred years has been much occupied with the family as a trap-door. Shepard, however, unlike most of his American and European predecessors ( O'Neill, Miller, Williams, Albee, Inge, Osborne, Arden, Shaw, among others), is not concerned with *drame bourgeois*. It is of little consequence whether a family is working-class or professional, employed or unemployed. Clear-cut class distinctions seem to be out of date in Shepard's mind and a kitchen sink is no more enlightening than a dining room nor is

a dining room more enlightening than a highway. What matters most in Shepard's plays is the dramatization of the problem of entrapment and the (im)possibility of escape. In his *Theatre Quarterly* interview Shepard was very explicit when he expanded on this vital theme that dominates most of his plays. There he pointed out, among other things: "But you have this personality, and somehow feel locked into it, failed by all your cultural influences and your psychological ones from your family.... You can't escape, that's the whole thing, you can't. You finally find yourself in a situation where, like, that's the way it is—you can't get out of it. But there is always that impulse towards another kind of world, something that doesn't necessarily confine you in that way" (in Marranca 1981b:208).

This is how Shepard understands the condition of the postmodern wo/man: imprisonment on the one hand and the desire for escape on the other. Two poles that keep wo/man's life (and Shepard's plays) together and at the same time apart, centered and de-centered, familiar and unfamiliar.

In *A Lie of the Mind* each member of the two families is blighted in some way. Jake is violent, dominant, egocentric and in places child-like. His brother Frankie is more sensitive, submissive, conciliatory and selfless. Their sister Sally is caught in-between an oppressive mother and two helpless brothers; she is mostly on her own. Their mother Lorraine is aggressive, dominant, sometimes comic, pathetic and a failure as a parent figure. Their absent Father is described as malicious, brutal and a total failure as a father and husband figure.

In the other family we have Beth who is imaginative and sensitive, her brother Mike, strong-willed, narrow-minded, a cowboy figure who plays at a being a Man, their mother Meg, a passive, submissive, sometimes pathetic *dramatis persona* and her husband Baylor, another failure as a parent figure, isolated, less brutal, than Jake's father, self-sufficient, loveless, who still maintains a touch of the early pioneer spirit through his hunting expedition (Lanier 410-421).

Generally the men on the whole (with the exception of Frankie) cut a rather poor figure while the women, who Shepard usually dramatizes negatively, turn out much better in this play (Falk 90-103; Whiting 494-500). Of course one cannot push character analysis very far. *A Lie of the Mind* does not sort out motivation or lines of action by giving them consistently to one or the other character. Instead of a clear-cut, linear interplay of fixed characters, we have a confusing pastiche made up of pieces of experience: of memories, fears and hatreds, which every now and then get shaken into unpredictable configurations of characters and situation. The significance of all actions involved is that they are being, imaginatively or otherwise,

lived. Shepard has a very strong sense of what his dis-placed people really experience (as against what literary convention says they experience), as well as a sense of mystery contained in the trite and banal. Like the *Buried Child*, this play touches upon hopes and disillusion, departures and homecomings, masks and faces of people who come to embody in the end the polarities and contradictions of our times. In other words, the apparent narrowing of society to the family circle does not exclude, as some critics claim, the need for a larger community. That still lingers on. The fate of the two families, despite their differences, is interlocked. They seem to exist simultaneously within and without, in a kind of no-man's land where order, law, and social restrictions constantly lose and regain their meanings. In their search for some meaningful structure in the story of their life they embark on all sorts of ambiguous activities that promise either to clear the muddied waters or solidify their subject position in space.

Despite their occasionally tough outlook, what these characters fear most is their isolation, that is why they strenuously look for security and cling to what shreds of it they have got. "Look, I need an ally," (62) Jake tells Sally, seeking a reference point to rely upon. At the same time, however, the same characters who seek alliances are sceptical of the presence of the "other," terrified at the intrusion of the "other" into the private world they have created for themselves. That explains why they fight for the possession and/or protection of their house. This is part of their struggle to maintain their hypothetical one-ness and togetherness, their privileged center that would hold things together. Of course this is not the case for all. Some characters sometimes look upon the domestic space with suspicion. Jake, for example, at one point thinks of it as a kind of a "trap" (68). For Baylor, on the other hand, his space has a different connotation. Whenever he is there it becomes part of his personal belongings. "Don't threaten me in my own house," he warns Frankie. "Don't you try and threaten me in my own goddam house" (110). As "soon's the plow comes through, you're out here, pal," he tells him. "This ain't a motel" (101).

Disturbed by the intrusion of the "other," the outside, the more powerful members of each family undertake the task of protecting their territory and community. Weak or strong, most of these characters tend to look at the world beyond their center as a threatening force that bears down upon them. That attitude intensifies their feeling of loneliness as well as self-defence. "I'm not goin' outdoors anymore," Jake tells his sister; "Mom brings me food. I don't need the outside. All I do is get in trouble out there" (61). For the Baylor family Frankie the intruder is a menacing figure who threatens to disrupt the coherence of their center and appropriate their territory. As Attar maintains, in her interesting thesis on the

intrusion motif in Western literature, "the importance of the intruder figure...lies not only in his own inherent qualities as a dramatic character, but also in his function in the framework of relations existing among other characters (10). And indeed, Frankie, albeit unknowingly, serves as a catalyst who brings out the inherent conflict and difference within the dramatic community upon whom he has intruded. That is why they all want, with the exception of Beth, to get rid of him by bringing him into a state of nervous shock and submissiveness. Under constant pressure Frankie finally surrenders to their power game: "Look-look," he says in desperation, "you want me out here, right? Everybody wants me out here? I don't belong, right? I'm not part of your family....Now I'm ready. I'm ready to go now.... I'll do whatever's necessary. I'll pay you. Just set me out here" (81). Mike simply "smiles and stares at Frankie, puts his gloves back on, picks up his rifle" (81). He looks content over his "victory." Frankie, on the other hand, "collapses, exhausted on sofa" (81).

Most Shepard characters are one way or another either virtuosos of power or victims of the excessive use of power. In both cases, however, the victim is the same: human relations. What should be noted here is that space, whether emotional, intellectual or physical, is not conceived exclusively as a male domain, "a territorial imperative," as Marranca says (1981b: 31). It also involves the female in the face of Lorraine. Lorraine wants to take Jake on a permanent basis because that pleases her (more than it pleases her son), and that pleasure implies her crave for power. "I'm not even gonna let him out his room for a solid year. Maybe that'll teach him" (26). Once again the room/inside is juxtaposed with the world/outside. Lorraine projects herself and her premises as a protective shield. against the disintegrating forces of a chaotic and "wild world" (87). Her deep-seated drive toward total control of her grounds and kins makes her think that had Jake stayed there under her protection "no one could've touched him. Now [without her] he's gonna wind up right back in prison where they'll eat him alive" (87).

Of course Lorraine has more reasons than one to lament the flight of her son. It is not only her feeling of possession that is involved here. There is also something much deeper: the fact that her husband left his family long ago and lived alone in Mexico until he died, makes her feel strongly this abandonment by the members of her family and the tragic loss of love. Therefore, as a reaction to this past history she tries to prevent her son from doing the same thing. It is apparently an act of desperation that detaches her from reality and drives her deeper and deeper into a world of her own where the lie of the mind reigns supreme. "We were self-sufficient, weren't we, Jake? What do we need her [Sally] for?" Like other Shepard characters, Lorraine exists in a mythic time and in syncopated time. Her behavior, gestures and



expressions are dictated by a role that is not there. For her this is an important activity for it gives her a reason for being and also an opportunity to dissolve into the "other-ness" of a long lost motherhood. "He was doin' so well with me lookin' after him," she tells Sally. "Now you've got his mind all driftin' away again" (69). Once again beneath the surface of clichés is the living language of desire and power. The central situation as it forms itself becomes an intriguing interplay of mutual needs and fears, love and hate. "Now quit the shenanigans and sit up," she orders her son hoping to intimidate him (24). Lorraine plays at being the tough mother because she is latently insecure, seeking a form of security by fastening on her son. She tries to hang on to the illusion that everything is still as it was. "Jake, you can stay here as long as you want....I'll bring ya stuff. We can have conversations. Tell each other stories" (39). Lorraine's motherly role constitutes Jake as the object of her desire, the same way Jake's role, as husband/lover/master, constitutes Beth as his own object of desire (Wilson 46-57). Imagination, authority and violence seize upon him and shape his relationship to Beth. Through his frequent confessions to his brother Frankie we learn of his dissatisfaction with the way his wife looks and acts. We also learn of his efforts to change her to match the image (the lie) of her he has in his mind. "Square business," he tells her at one point; "'no more high heels'. No more wearin' them spiky high heels to rehearsals. No more a' that shit" (8). Without any evidence (another lie of the mind) he accuses her of being unfaithful to him and beats her up., betraying the same vicious temper as his father and at the same time foregrounding/highlighting a basic theme of the play: imprisonment can take the form of "hereditary curse."

Whether in reality or the imaginary, the characters, imprisoned as they are, seek grounds and instruments to either manipulate others, and thus avert their discourse, its powers and dangers, or to stay free from the manipulation of others. By talking and/or acting they try to safeguard their subject position. The more aggressive ones are those who usually determine the pace of the action and the performance of the "other." "DON' T THINK ABOUT HIM," Mike screams at his sister (17), hoping to dictate her future behavior. His desire to protect her mingles with his desire for power. Mike acts in compliance with the power game of gender representations, where the brother has the upper hand and the moral right to control. "You're safe here," he tells Beth, in a patronizing tone that echoes Lorraine's advice to Jake. "Long as you stay with us.... Safe, safe from injury. You won't get hurt here" (48). The inside once again is projected, along with male authority, as the safety valve against the forces of disintegration that operate outside. Put differently: Beth's subjectivity is, in the final analysis, the effect of ideologically organized

practices through which she is situated in the world and in terms of which the world and Beth herself are made intelligible (Ebert 22-23).

The dramatic effect of passages like this is mainly due to the complete contradiction between the words that are spoken and the emotional and psychological action that underlies them. Here the language of Mike has almost totally lost its rhetorical, informative element and has fully emerged into dramatic/ideological action. Like the characters in Pinters *Caretaker*, Shepard's *dramatis personae* try to feel important; to be "in" on things by providing the "grand narratives" Lyotard talked about in his treatise on postmodernism, that would secure their position of power. To this end, they play with various roles that legitimate themselves with reference to a grand metadiscourse. "Don't swear in the house," Meg warns her son Mike, reminding him, from her position of the mother figure, of his proper behavior. "I've told you that since you were a little boy..." (44). And following the family's hierarchic structure, Mike applies in turn his power on Beth. "I'm just trying to keep you out of trouble. Can't you get that in your head. I'm tired of going through this with you" (45); and seconds later: "I've about had it with you. I've been out there all night...trying to protect you" (45). And when he "gets" Jake (112), he feels that he has accomplished his brotherly role (as the protector of the weak). He is proud of what he has done. "He was crawlin," he tells his family. "I just kept him on his kness.... He gave himself up to me. He's my prisoner now.... He'll do anything I say now. I've got him trained" (113). Like a Foucaultian "executioner," Mike is ready to subject Jake's body to his personal machinery of power; he wants to invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies (Foucault 25). "I've got him totally convinced that he was wrong. He wants to confess to all of us" (121).

Mike's objective is to stabilize the "threatening" referent, to arrange it according to a recognizable point of view which will endow it with a recognizable meaning (Lyotard 74). To this end confession is vital, for the powerful figures expect to have a better control over the body and mind of the other (Foucault). By forcing Jake to confess, Mike is placing him in a network of relations of power with those who can claim to be able to extract the truth to these confessions, through their possession of the keys to interpretation (Foucault ). After all, Mike feels that he has the right on his side: "I'm the one who's loyal to this family," he proudly announces; "I'm the only one" (125). This self-righteous logic makes him the guardian angel of the family unit—its morals and codes—as well as its prosecutor. In his mind the "other" is simply a "traitor," the incomprehensible "outside" who "married into this family and ... deceived us all" (125). For Mike the whole thing is in a way a "crime

and punishment" story,. Only this time justice is no longer allotted by God, but by man. He has set his mind on unearthing the truth and to this end he is ready to turn the interior space into a stage where punishment would become an entertaining and above all persuasive spectacle: "Get up on your feet," he orders/directs Jake, "and tell her what you're gonna say. Tell her everything we talked about in the shed" (126). Like the Prompters in Peter Handke's *Kaspar*, Mike's powerful subject position has an immediate hold upon the body and mind of Jake, the same way his parents' and his own subject position shape Beth's personality.

Whether it is Meg, Baylor or Mike who "fuss with her," the picture we get in the end is the same: Beth's time and territory are treated as expendable (Falk: 99). As part of a "disadvantaged minority," Beth is compelled to adapt herself as best as she can and secure her subject position in an oppressive environment. After all, survival is the name of the game and staying on top or out of the crossfire is necessary (Falk: 99). Yet we should not think of Beth as a passive, defeatist female. Almost from the very first moment we see her on stage she tries to resist male domination in the form of Mike. She is also the only one who criticizes her father Baylor. "This—this is my father. He's given up love. Love is dead for him. My mother is dead for him. Things live for him to be killed" (57). Unlike her father, Beth wants to love and be loved. So, in that same scene, she moves slowly toward Frankie and says: "This is me now. The way I am. Now. This. All. Different. I—I live inside this. Remember. Remembering. You. You—were me. I know you. I know—love. I know what love is" (57). Surrounded by loveless people Beth turns to her creative imagination for inspiration. There she finds all the liberating possibilities she asks for. She feels free to contemplate the most impossible plans, even marrying Jake's brother. "Pretend," she tells him at one point; "Because it fills me. Not empty. Other. Ordinary. Is no good. Empty. Ordinary is empty. Now, I'm like the man.... Just feel like the man. Shirt brings me a man. I'm a shirt man. Can you see? Like father. You see me? Like brother" (75). Beside the direct allusions to the family's "hereditary curse," Beth's speech shows something even more fascinating: the perfect con/fusion of the mask and the face, the same and the other, a "slippage of signification," as Wilcox calls it, that cannibalizes the self and leads to its "monstrous transformation and displacement" (1987: 563). Without claiming that Shepard is here dramatizing Derridian ideas one cannot help noticing the similarities.

Derrida, commenting on the idea of the authentic self grants that its presence is always shot through and tarnished with traces of absence, of that which is somewhere else. Derrida writes: "Through the sequence of supplement there emerges a law: that of an endless linked series, ineluctably multiplying the

supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing that they defer: the impression of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception. Immediacy is derived. Everything begins with the intermediary" (1976: 226).

Shepard, like other contemporaries, Stoppard, Handke, Strauss, Muller, to name a few, is fascinated by this game of mediation. Again and again he brings on his stage the idea that there is no such thing as a pure being of the kind phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl talked about. What's there, he seems to argue, is the "already-there-ness" of things. "Pretend," Beth encourages Frankie; "Maybe. Just him. Just like him. But soft. With me. Gentle. Like a woman-man" (76). Beth wants to disentangle herself from an imprisoning and oppressive situation and fly towards a borderless *topos* that would exist only within her own "unmediated" discourse. Produced within a scene of representation which is overdetermined by the masculine, Beth feels the need to create an unmediated image, a lie of the mind she can desire and form freely. After all, she is an actress, she knows the secrets of pretense/lying, as Jake acknowledges when he recalls her response after telling her not to wear high heels. "She laughs," he tells his brother disapprovingly. "Right to my face. She laughs. Kept puttin' em on.... She says it's right for the part. Made her feel like the character.... They try to 'believe' they're the person. Right? Try to believe so hard they're the person that they actually think they become the person.... You shoulda seen the way she started to walk and talk. I couldn't believe it. Changed her hair and everything. Put a wig on. Changed her clothes. Everything changed. She was unrecognizable. I didn't know who I was with anymore. I told her. I told her, look—I don't know who you think you are now but I'd just as soon you come on back to the real world here.' And you know what she tells me.... She tells me this is the real world. This acting shit is more real than the real world to her" (8-10). Faces within faces and mediations within mediations, that's the world of Beth: a reality of simulacra which Jake fails to grasp at the beginning and only later, when it is too late, does he comprehend the logic of this game and comes to accept the imaginary as Beth's only way of breaking out of the orbit of hate/attraction that characterizes her relationship with him and her family. By opting for the image, the otherness of the double, Beth proves that she can finally free herself from these relationships which apparently give her identity while at the same time destroying it.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, like elsewhere in Shepard, society, family, even language itself, are no longer the unambiguous safety valves of the individual. They are rather traps that affect the making of the self and its relationship with the world. One way or another all members involved, both victims and victimizers, are affected by this reality. Nowhere do we find the authentic to provide grounding for social or

individual identity. The characters are paste-ups, bits and pieces from the media and gender ideologies. They are "liars" who enter this densely crowded (with images) *topos* to solidify their subject position in it through a series of performance rituals. Expressions, gestures, actions, and reactions are all borrowed material that enables them to tell us about themselves: to dramatize their inner life, play fragments of it or act out prefabricated roles like "mom," "dad," "brother," "husband," "wife," etc. In this sense, they exist prior to the dramatic action, not because of it, as Marranca argues (1981b: 14-15). And that fact they know very well; they are not naive impersonators in their own house of illusions and in their power games. "These things in my head lie to me," Jake tells us. "Everything lies. Tells me a story. Everything in me lies" (128-129). Yet this "lying discourse," no matter how misleading or painful it turns out to be, creates a sense of individual space, with its own logic, limits and coherence. There, within its limits and possibilities, Shepard's questing heroes can belong, they can have the power they long for. This feeling helps them outgrow their all-embracing environment or, if nothing else, shape it the way they want. I think the lover in *Savage/Love* makes this point very clearly when he says: "Now we're acting the partners of love, now we're acting the estrangement, now we're acting that the reconciliation was a success." Like Genet's *dramatis personae*, Shepard's characters play at being some-thing other than what they really are; they play at being Wo/Men; they act out not what wo/men are but how they imagine Wo/Men behave or how they are taught Wo/Men behave. The end of this all is that the truth is always lost in a hall full of mirrors; just like the clients in Irma's bordello, Shepard's heroes constantly jockey for a position of power, safety or pleasure in a world whose rules baffle them and disorient them.

The fascinating thing with the characters of *A Lie of the Mind* is that watching their power games and performance rituals one gets the feeling that behind this mood of terror and mystery, of playfulness and purposefulness, lies the awareness of another world of meanings where the reasons for events are suppressed and the trivial affairs of life give rise to the most passionate actions and revelations. Sally's statement, for example, regarding her father's mysterious death is telling. "Like animals," she informs her mother about Jake's confrontation with his father. "Like the way an animal looks for the weakness in another animal. They started poking at each other's weakness. Stabbing" (93). And later: "he was trying to beat his own son to the border" (95). Note the laying bare of the "family secret." Through the proliferation of images Shepard brings forward the resemblance that links father and son (the hereditary curse). As Lanier points out, "the father's savage temper and destructive predisposition live on in the actions of the son; the father himself lives on in the violent memories of the daughter" (413). At the same time, the gradual

unfolding of the secret gives Shepard the opportunity to foreground another world of meanings, a place on which defeats are being acknowledged and a plea for forgiveness of what is known to be unforgivable and irremediable makes its presence felt. It is at intense, confessional moments like this that characters find the courage to admit things or openly criticize powerful figures like the absent father, who, although long dead, still hovers above the remnants of his family. Lorraine, for example, has her own sad story to tell regarding her relationship with her husband: “He shaped my whole life,” she confesses. “He put stuff in me that’ll never go away.... Vengeance is the only thing that keeps me going” (91). In her mind, his image is “still alive” and manipulating (91). To get rid of his power she feels that she has to destroy whatever is related to him. And that fact Sally understands and warns her against. She says: “Look, you can’t keep blaming me forever. He’s gone” (86). Lorraine, however, is still imprisoned in this past narrative. She cannot help it.

What is most difficult for the characters to overcome is their personal history (their grand narrative) that weighs them down. For Baylor the whole thing is “Just tradition I guess. That’s the way I was taught. Funny how things come back to ya’ after all those years” (130). Tradition or otherwise, the characters are all trapped in and by a codified reality that preceded and animated them pretty much the same way the authorial script precedes and animates performance. Every act of theirs is doomed to emerge as inter-act, caught up in a dependence on prior acts, texts, codes and languages. “Why am I missing her now,” Jake asks his brother Frankie? “Why am I afraid I’m gonna lose when she’s already gone? And this fear—this fear swarms through me—floods my whole body till there’s nothing left. Nothing left of me. And then it turns—it turns to a fear for my whole life. Like my whole life is lost from losing her. Gone. That I’ll die like this. Lost. Just lost” (14). Beth is portrayed here as Jake’s double that speaks his being, the same way the flag (that he wraps around him) or his father’s leather jacket he wears come to give a visual image of his imprisonment.

All characters seem to long for something or try to get away from something. Sally is afraid of Jake whenever his behavior reminds her of their father (63). Beth can’t get rid of Jake because “HEEZ [HER] HAAAAAAAAAART” (20). Another “fool for love.” He is her personal history whose boundaries deaden her vitality. Whatever she does will proceed to and from this earlier text. To think and to act for her is to confront her grand narrative: her history with Jake.

For all there is an origin, an absolute *archia* where they seek legitimation for their past/present, even future actions. This referential point, however complicated or distorted it seems to be, gives a false but much needed

sense of balance, as noted earlier, stability and organization in a most unstable fragmented and disorganized world. Its presence ensures the certainties of traditional binarisms and thus limits the disintegrating play of opposing elements, regulates space and determines action. Sensing his loss, Mike ironically offers Jake to join the family (the stable referent point) on the grounds that: "You could use a family, couldn't ya. You look like you could use a family. Well, that's good see. That's good. Because, they could use a son. A son like you" (127). There are no genuine feelings here. One is using the other with the pretext of mutual protection, and while they use each other they are simultaneously produced by what they do. No one can stand outside it. All characters share the actor's involvement—unless they abandon their act altogether. As long as they "act" they will share the actor's problematic position vis-à-vis the text (the center).

As Artaud realized, the actor's speech and action, his very inspiration, is always, already stolen from him. The voice and the character he expresses is not his own but, rather that which dispossesses him of his self. His breath is stolen away by that of the character "inside" him and the text "outside" him.

This position of the actor both inside and outside his act reflects, I think, the position of Shepard's characters. Each pair seems to embody "two opposite animals" (103), "busy punishing each other" (Shepard 1979: 56). "We're so different," Meg contends, "that we'll never be able to get certain things across to each other" (103). That difference provides the force that allows Shepard to talk about power games and human relations that touch upon everything, including gender, the primordial sign of differentiation and conflict. As Meg maintains: "The female—the female one needs—the other.... The male. The male one.... But the male one—doesn't really need the other" (105). Yet this is half of the story; for the situation between opposites is far more complicated than this; it is based, as we already mentioned, on mutual needs. Nothing is necessarily true or false, black and white. It can be both true and false, the same way the actor is both a mask and a face, a presence and an absence at the same time. Because of this ambiguity, it is often difficult to evaluate characters and their actions. It is difficult to pass judgment on Jake, for example, when he tells Beth: "Everything in me lies. But you. .... You are true. I know you now. You are true. I love you more than this life. You stay. You stay with him. He's my brother" (129). True or false? Frankie has his own reply ready: "It's not true, Jake. She belongs to you. I never betrayed you. I was true to you" (129).

The business of verification, of finding out the truth, is an elaborate manoeuvre, a highly serious game like something in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. They all want to find the true person behind the image. Whether knowing the facts will take

them any nearer to a solution is irrelevant. After all, we cannot know for sure whether the game can be played through to a decisive conclusion, or whether it is doomed to end in deadlock. The pace of all these is smooth, for Shepard's manner of continuous exposition more neatly adapts to the movement of events. There is no midway climax followed by a final act of posterior character study. *A Lie of the Mind* is a "fractured whole," like the world and the characters themselves.

It is only at the very end of the play that Shepard tries to resolve the ambiguities (by transcending them). Sally is the most outspoken of all, the first to undo the limits of her performance and ideological space. "I'm sick to death of covering everything up," she tells her mother. "I'm sick of being locked up in this room. In our own house. Look at this room. What're we doin' in here? This was Jake's room when he was a kid. What're we doin' in this room now" (98). Sally shows that she has a profound understanding of the workings of power, performance and human relationships. She also sees and comprehends the fragmentation of the family unit: "This family. How everything's kinda shattered now" (61). For all these, she wants "out" of the imprisoning "family album." And she is not the only one.

Lorraine, another disillusioned character, opens up to the world at the end of the play and decides to destroy her *liaisons* with her past narrative. She wants to get rid of the cherished model planes that decorate Jake's room ("It's all goin'. We'll make us a big bonfire" (96)) and her picture in the parade: "What do I wanna save it for? It's all in the past. Dead and gone. Just a picture" (117). Lorraine is sick and tired of the false promises of the "inside." She sees that her center was nothing more than just another alibi to cover up her feeling of alienation and fear. Now it is time to de-center things: "All the junk in this house that they left behind for me to save. It's all goin'," she says with determination (96). The burning of the house comes to complete the act of the center's dis-placement, the un-doing of the false nucleus whose very subject is the entrapment of the subject.

Yet, what about the outside? It seems that there is no sense of a genuinely alternative text/exit. The play is situated in the conceptual space defined on the one hand by the appropriation of the inside and, on the other, by the attempt to destroy it. In this way it has no "origin," as Derrida would say. The burning of the house is a hint of something positive. It is an act of desemiotization, a refusal of closure and formal frames. All the activities and exertions, games and exchanges between the characters, Shepard seems to argue, can no longer be subordinated to a stable referent. New spaces, relationships and identities should be created which would allow the characters to engage difference and otherness, male and female, inside and outside, past and future as part of a discourse of justice and equality. Shepard



apparently moves with this play towards a more postmodernist stand where a tyrannical past is about to be transformed into a different future and paralytic guilt to productive action.

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