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## Research Article

# SAM SHEPARD AS AN UNACKNOWLEDGED LEGISLATOR OF THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE BY DEPICTING EFFECTIVELY "AMERICAN DREAM" AND FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN HIS DRAMATIC WORLD: AN APPRAISAL

S.Chelliah

Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University,  
Madurai – 625 021 Tamil Nadu, India

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### ABSTRACT

This paper projects Sam Shepard as an unacknowledged legislator of the American style of life dealing with the ideology of "American Dream", added to it, he tries to portray the father-son relationship as pictured in his dramatic world, with a focus on family centered plays through the degradation of social values in American family system.

#### Key Words:

American dream, father-son relationship,  
miseries, alienation, conflicts

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## INTRODUCTION

It is commonly understood that man has been an actor on the earthly stage ever since his first appearance, because he is assigned by powers temporal and supernatural, the role of a human being. His main concern, therefore, has been the action of some kind. Through countless centuries, this dramatic role of man has found its manifestation and his joys and agonies, suffering and torture, and in the powerful interplay of his strong passions of love, friendship, hatred, cruelty, jealousy and revenge. If he has been a slave of circumstances, he has always waged a relentless war against them. His action has found expression in his numerous conquests, failures and frustrations. In playing this varied human role, he has acted both with heroic nobility and cowardly meanness.

The tragedy of modern man is seen in the works of such dramatists as Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard. While studying the twentieth-century dramas, or the post-war dramas, for that matter, a strange fact is encountered which is paradoxical in nature: the modern man who has been the hero behind all the wonderful achievements of this age and who has performed such miraculous feats in the field of science and technology seems to have lost his heroic stature. The victories he has had over Nature and the god-like

powers he has acquired have only helped to limit his freedom of action. He is a strangely chained being in an age of individual freedom and democracy. In spite of his seeming greatness, he is oppressed by the weight of his own intellectual victories. Human life today has become so complex that great moments of heroism in modern man's life have become too rare. It is a sad truth that modern man's life is endowed with more ugliness and less beauty. He seems to have diminished in stature.

As a product of his environment and the society he lives in, he has not only lost his moral strength, but has also become a victim of the general human condition prevailing around him. He is oppressed by the weight of his own guilt and debasement, on the one hand, and the false ideals and wrong values upheld by his society, on the other. It is this image of the degraded modern individual that is discovered in the plays of Edward Albee, Miller, O'Neill, and Shepard. It is an image of the suffering human being who is seen more as a victim rather than as a hero.

In the dramatic world of Sam Shepard, family life is like all life, violent and contradictory, Shepard by long-suppressed forces and dark secrets. Although the fields of the family farm maybe

\*Corresponding author: **S.Chelliah**

Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai – 625 021 Tamil Nadu, India

“green lush wet dripping corn bacon and tomatoes the size of your fist, inside the house there are fist fights across the table brother fights father and wife fights father son fights sisters brother fights the priest” (Mottram 133).

The environment is binding and imprisoning, with the characters wrenched between the demands of socialized conduct and the curse of more primitive, natural behavior. In such an environment, the members of the family devour each other in relationships based on exploitation, alienation and lies. The six powerful family-centered plays of Sam Shepard deal mainly with the image of fathers who run away from their families. The fathers do not like to be with their children and wives. The family members especially the children want their fathers to be with them, but the fathers do not mind them at all. There is a yawning gap between the children and fathers. All the fathers pictured in Sam Shepard's plays are painted with the same brush; they are depicted as distant, selfish, weak, gloomy, pessimistic, manipulative, tricky and above all churlish. All of them are invariably alcoholics. They escape to the desert for a solitary life. The sons of such fathers suffer a lot mentally. They feel helpless, and some of them become extremists in one way or the other, even in opposing their fathers. The abandoned sons feel wounded. They cannot even think of filial duties when their fathers are far away from their responsibilities. Sam Shepard portrays this kind of strange fathers in his dramatic world. In each play of his, the father-son relationship is marked by conflict and mystery. Son murdering his father, son attacking his father are pretty casual activities in his plays.

Such family-centered plays as *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *True West*, *Fool for Love*, *The Rock Garden* and *A Lie of the Mind* have autobiographical as well as confessional elements of the playwright, Sam Shepard. The quarrelsome relationship between Shepard and his father began even when Shepard was a child. In his adolescence, he conflict become much more serious. Shepard was haunted by the unresolved ties with his family, personal heritage and especially with his father. Shepard began to feel that there would be no redemption for his eternal problem with his alcoholic and escapist father. It always remains a scar in Shepard that he did not have a father in the real sense. To Shepard, his father was a stranger.

Shepard's father was a pilot in the Army Air Corps in Italy. During the Great Depression, his father lost the family. He was terribly wounded and emotionally disturbed. As a result, Shepard's father took to drinks. He abruptly left the family and chose to live in the desert since life there was detached. Shepard now and then would go to the desert to meet his father. On many occasions, Shepard's father did not recognize him at all, even when Shepard could, he would remain totally indifferent. Shepard's father continued to be the same through Shepard had become famous writing plays. Once Shepard's father was watching the play *Buried Child*. So drunk was he that he stood up and began talking to the characters, while the play was being performed. Shepard was extremely ashamed that his father was like that. Incident such as this would have strongly instigated Shepard against his father. Shepard was full of bitterness and disgust towards his father. The relationship between Shepard and his father was still estranged even after

the death of his father. Asked whether Shepard felt sorry over the fatal accident of his father, he said:

“My relationship with him is the same. Exactly the same it's a relationship of Absolute unknowing. I never knew him, Although he was around all the time. There's no point in dwelling on it. I mean my relationship with him now is exactly the same as when he was alive” (Henry 14)

Whether Shepard's father was alive or not, did not make any difference to him. His father was a myth in a negative sense to him. He longed for his father's love. Shepard always wished his father to be around, but he was not available. This wishing and longing soon resulted in Shepard's casting off his original name from Steve Rogers to Sam Shepard. Shepard did not even want his father's name with his. So much aversion he got for his father. His ill-will for his irresponsible father never diminished, only increased. Shepard's father miserably failed to shower his fatherhood on his son. So, Shepard throughout his life led a fatherless life, through he had a father around him all the time. That Shepard's father was like that is only a specimen sample in American families. That is why Shepard skillfully depicts father-son relationship in his plays rather effectively. In most of the American families, a father is not a father, he is mere a shadow of a father. What is obvious is that in America, the fatherhood in American families is slowly but terribly sinking away. This is true of the twentieth century fatherhood which is really pathetic. The American father, according to his grown up children, is silent, moody, angry and closed. This is the initial result of the modern changes in American fatherhood. What the adolescent children say about their father is:

“Well, I love him, of course. After all, he is my father. But I never really got to know him”(Reynolds 13)

The twentieth century American father is stern and humourless. The children do not have accessibility about him. The father seldom reveals himself to the children. He does not have any concern for them. The father is always television-watching, sleeping and newspaper-reading. Literally, the father is not there in the family especially with his children. The indirect result of the Industrial Revolution is the painful suffering of working-class fathers. Many fathers lose their jobs. Most of them have to necessarily overwork to meet their family requirements. The fathers spend most of their time at the factory, office and store. Owing to this, the fathers are not able to find time to be with their children. As a result, the children of such fathers feel separated and they become mentally disturbed. The fathers too feel the same way. A big gap is formed between them. Soon this gap becomes a crack in the relationship between the fathers and children. Lilian Rubin points out that such withdrawals of the fathers from their children remain a stigma in their relationship. A son recalls to Rubin about his father's attitude because of overwork at his factory:

“My father was a quiet man. He almost never talked, even when you asked him a question. Held sit there life he didn't hear you. Sometimes, An hour later (it was like he'd come out of a spell),

He'd look at you and say, ‘Did you want something?’ Most of the time, he just didn't know you were there” (PP 2-3)

The son even becomes mentally ill when his father is like this. There is no happiness in the family at all. Unable to stand this, the fathers become despondent. They feel like running away from their families. Many run away to lonely places unmindful of their wives and children. In essence, the first-generation fathers confront a pathetic dilemma. There are Poles or Italians live in America but their children become Polish-Americans or Italian-Americans. These immigrant children know more of Washington and Lincoln than of Pilsudski or Garibaldi. These immigrant children try to know about their traditional figures by the force of their fathers, but really the children are not able to. Walter Weyl, a Polish miner miserably puts it this way:

"America is a wonderful land but it is a land of forgetfulness. My children are not my children, for my children have forgotten that they are Poles" (Robert 87)

The second - generation fathers become very tolerant towards ethnic intermarriage. They even, with a very heavy heart, of course, identify themselves as Americans. Twentieth Century American drama pictures fatherhood rather obviously. The axiomatic term 'American Drama' is one of the main reasons why the fathers remain cut off from their families especially from their children. The fathers are inevitably and pathetically caught in the business web. The father's sole aim is to earn money and to be successful in his business circle. Obviously, the mothers become winners in the families, leading to family politics between the father and the mother to the effect that only the children get hurt. As a result, there is lack of spiritual sustenance in the families.

Sam Shepard started writing powerful family - centered plays of an autobiographical nature more akin to Tennessee Williams and William Inge. *Curse of the Starving Class* is about an impoverished Southern California ranching family on the verge of losing their home, their land and their way of life. *Buried Child* is a home coming mystery about the violent and incestuous family secrets of three generations of Illinois farmers. *The Rock Garden* is about Shepard's feuding family. *The Holy Ghostly* is a quarrelsome father-son play. It appears to have been based on a visit Shepard made to his estranged father. This visit may have been the genesis of the renewed obsession with family and heritage that has led Shepard to write *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, *The Long-lost son in Buried Child*. Shepard stopped in Illinois to visit his grandparents. He then continued to the Southwest, where he found his father living alone in the desert. As do the son and the father in *The Holy Ghostly* and his father must have fought bitterly. They had not seen each other since Shepard left his parents' home in 1963: after this brief encounter, they did not see each other again for several years. In the play, *The Holy Ghostly*, Ice has abandoned a successful artistic career in New York city to come to the aid of his father, Pop. Pop has been camping alone in the desert and is haunted by the figure of the Chindi, an Indian demon who Pop believes is trying to kill him. His life has ended with his relationship to his son unreconciled, and so he is struck between life and death. The Chindi is a manifestation of Pop's inability to accept his own end and come to terms with his failure to be a proper father to his son. Ice as well feels that he has somehow failed in this relationship. Obsessed with Pop, he has travelled, as Shepard must have, to make one last attempt at patching things up. At the play's

climax, Ice suddenly shoots Pop in the stomach and leaves him sprawled in the campfire to die. Sam Shepard must have written the play with a kind of personal exorcism. As Ice shoots Pop, Shepard also attempts to kill off the memory of his father; he wants to expel his father from his consciousness. But Pop refuses to die. At the end of the play, he dances in the flames of the campfire, continuing to haunt Ice's consciousness as Shepard's father does. While the tone, settings, themes and characters of the family-centered plays vary, one dramatic element that remains unchanged in each is :

the autobiographical presence of a young man haunted by unresolved ties to family, father and personal heritage" (David 91)

*Curse of the Starving Class* starts in the wake of an act of domestic violence. The play opens to the family's teenage son, Wesley, cleaning up the pieces of a broken door. The previous night, his father, Weston, had arrived home drunk to find that the door to the house had been locked against him by his wife, Ella. In an intoxicated rage, Weston battered down the door with his body, then disappeared. The next morning, as Ella enters the kitchen to make herself some breakfast, Wesley starts describing the events of the previous night as he experienced them from his bed. Weston's violent attack upon his own home and his terrorizing of his wife and family are both literal and symbolic destructive of the protective circle of the family. He not only violates their safety, but by virtue of his absence as father and protector, he leaves them open to attack and invasion from others. Wesley is particularly sensitive to this sense of defenselessness, for he clearly wants to open himself to his father, but in doing so, he risks devastating emotional violence. When the father, Weston, eventually returns midway through the play, he finds a live lamb in his kitchen. He ponders over this lack of differentiation between the interior and the exterior. The home has been left exposed by the dissolution of the family and the estrangement of the mother and the father. It cannot be repaired.

Lee and Austin's absent father is mentioned sporadically in *True West*, serving as one of the many sources of conflict between the brothers. In that play, Lee has stayed in contact with his derelict father who, like Lee himself, spends most of his time living alone in the desert. Austin, who has little in common with his father, has seen him only on rare occasions and out of a seeming sense of guilt and remorse. Austin's strange tale of how his father lost his false teeth while drinking in bars up and down the highway in Mexico is :

"the only real piece of story-telling in *True West*, and as such, it carried much of the weight of the old man's unspoken presence in Lee and Austin's lives" (P 115)

*Fool for Love* has more complex characterization and the play explores the American families which are declining. In the play, the presence of the old man is felt now and then. He is both a spectator and a reinforcement of Shepard's continuing obsession with his own personal heritage and his father. In *Fool For Love*, the absent father appears like some eccentric visiting dignitary to his own two incestuous siblings. Here Eddie and May are the off springs of the old man's divided love, living with their separate mothers. However, having created the passion between Eddie and May, the father

typically refuses to accept any responsibility for their incest. As his children starve at one another in a suspended moment of recognition, the father again abandons his children.

The characters in the play *A Lie of the Mind* are closely linked by the lies that they tell each other. The most potent are the secrets of the past, especially the darkest of them all, the role that Jake played in the death of his own father. Although Sally has sworn to Jake never to reveal what happened, she finally tells Lorraine the whole story. In clearly oedipal terms, she insists that Jake set up the condition that led to his father's death on the road. Although Lorraine tries to dismiss the death as an accident, Shepard has clearly established that it is, as much fated to happen as was Oedipus' killing of his father.

To conclude, Sam Shepard, an unacknowledged legislator of the American way of life, seems to have indicated the degradation of social values in American family system. Unless genuine relationships are established between man and man, life will continue to be miserable, this is what Shepard tries to convey through his family centered plays.

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