

**THE DISINTEGRATION OF A DREAM:
A STUDY OF SAM SHEPARD'S FAMILY TRILOGY,
CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS, BURIED CHILD AND TRUE WEST.**

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SUMMARY

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Key Terms

Bibliographic profile; American dream and the disintegration thereof; Family and drama; Modern mythology; Betrayal of the land; The frontier; The Rock Garden; Curse of the Starving Class; Buried Child; True West.

INTRODUCTION

Touted by Jack Kroll in 1983 as 'the poet laureate of America's emotional Badlands' (Peterson 1989:1), and by Ellen Oumano as personifying America's 'cultural ambiguity' (1986:1), Sam Shepard is now widely recognised as the greatest American playwright of his generation. His contribution to the theatrical scene in the United States of America (hereafter USA) has been immense, both in terms of sheer volume of writing, and the way in which he has extended the frontiers of realism², most particularly in his recent work. It is his 'unique blend of styles - using mythical American heroes, rock and roll music, poetically unconventional language - and his ability to create vivid dreamlike images [that] set[s] Shepard apart from more traditional American playwrights.' (Engel 1981:232) The recognition extended Sam Shepard is not confined to his work as a dramatist - thirteen Obie awards and the Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for Buried Child - he is also a much acclaimed actor, having been nominated for an Oscar for his role as Chuck Yeager in the 1983 film "The Right Stuff". For the past thirty years Sam Shepard has provided the American theatre with a formidable body of dramatic work - starting in 1964 with

1. See Mazzocco, 1985:27; Wetzsteon, 1982:253; Contemporary Literary Criticism 41:404; Mottram, 1984:vii; Kleb, 1945:387.

2. Realism here being a dramatic approximation of the speech and situation of everyday social and domestic issues and problems, played by actors who speak and move naturally against scenery which reproduces with fidelity the usual and recognisable surroundings of the people they represent.

the one-act plays Cowboys and The Rock Garden - which has investigated his vision of an American consciousness brutally maimed by its betrayal of the American dream of freedom, equality, and justice for all.

Shepard burst upon the American theatrical scene at a time when critic Robert Brustein was writing that 'postwar American drama is stationary America today has no theatrical avante-garde, only two dramatists worthy of note, and no one among the younger writers to ruffle a few feathers with radical and exciting new ideas.' (Meserve 1966:95) Bigsby's response (1989:3) illustrated the way in which, at the time Brustein was writing, the radical intellectual and cultural currents of the 60's combined to change the American theatre; and Off-Broadway, the innovative result of the anti-commercial revolt of the Washington Square Players in 1914, began to expand and enhance this experimental new direction with pioneering young companies and novel ideas.

This revolutionary new theatre advocated the communal style of ensemble work and Antonin Artaud's theories of theatre as transformational magic reacting against language and psychology, and Jerzy Grotowski's 'Poor' theatre, were eagerly appropriated by the American theatrical movement. Both these theorists were concerned with the formulation of the present, the old norms of story-telling and the creation of illusion were not part of their revelation of truth. Artaud desired that the audience make the

most rigorous demands on the theatrical event, requiring that everything performed on the stage 'have the power and immediacy of living experiences, catching the audience up in an emotion of multitude' (Brustein 1970:19), in so doing freeing the repressed unconscious and forcing man to perceive himself as he really is. Fundamentally, Artaud wanted to disturb the spectator, to force him to liberate himself from the restraints of morality and return to a state of primitive intensity. Theatre, for Artaud, was a sensory experience.

Jerzy Grotowski also engaged in the struggle to free the theatre from the restraints of traditional attitudes and expressions, and the stultifying effects of technology. For Grotowski, the actor was paramount, using all his physical and mental powers to achieve a close bond of meaning and movement. Grotowski's productions did not lead to an audience awareness, but were, rather, products of the actor's awareness, creating an actor/audience relationship that was distinctive and appropriate to each production.

The work of these two theatrical pioneers led to the freeing of expectation and of the ability of playwrights and directors to experiment with new forms. The new venues of Off-Off Broadway - Joe Cino's Cafe Cino and the Café La Mama of Ellen Stewart - led to the birth of avante-garde theatre in New York. This radical new theatre championed the communal style of ensemble work -

'unlike the commercial theatres, they [were] not primarily concerned with entertainment as a product to be sold. Instead, they [were] anxious to improve the quality of life for themselves and their audiences.' (Shank 1982:3) The new forms of drama being created in this vibrant atmosphere evolved because of economic necessity (subsidies and other aid not being readily available to these avant-garde groups) and novel acting and directing styles were the result. Explanation was no longer necessary - plays depended on their energy and concentration to make them work. Artists used techniques drawn from Expressionism, Brecht's alienation theories, and Artuad's theatre of cruelty amongst other pioneering ideas, to fashion a rich tapestry of innovation and invention.

Sam Shepard arrived in New York in 1963 and steeped himself in this exciting and creative atmosphere:

I was very lucky to have arrived in New York at that time, though, because the whole off-off Broadway theatre was just starting - like Ellen Stewart with her little cafe, and Joe Cino, and the Judson Poets' Theatre and all these places. It was just a lucky accident really that I arrived at the same time as that was all starting.

(Chubb 1981:192)

Shepard learned the craft of playwriting from the direct experience of writing and having his plays performed. He disclaims any real knowledge of theatrical literature at this time:

I hardly knew anything about the theatre. I remember once in California I went to this guy's house who was called

a beatnik by everybody at school because he had a beard and he wore sandals. And we were listening to some jazz or something and he sort of shuffled over to me and threw this book on my lap, and said, why don't you dig this, you know. I started reading this play he gave me, and it was like nothing I'd ever read before - it was Waiting for Godot. And I thought, what's this guy talking about, what is this? And I read it with a very keen interest, but I didn't know anything about what it was. I didn't really have any references for the theatre, except for the few plays that I'd acted in. ... so the so-called originality of the early work just comes from ignorance.

(Chubb 1981:190-1)

The conclusion that Shepard obviously wishes to be drawn from this story is that there were very few theatrical or dramatic influences on his early work, apart from his interest in jazz, initiated by his father's involvement in music - Sam Shepard Rogers played drums for a semi-professional band - and deepened by his friend, Charles Mingus III, son of the jazz bassist Charlie Mingus.

Sam Shepard was born in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, on 5 November, 1943. His father was in the American Army Air Corps in Italy and never fully recovered from the effects of the war: 'an alcoholic, he wandered off from his family countless times, until his wife, tired of continually looking for him, let him be - a colourful teller of fabulous tales, living alone in the desert.' (Oumano 1986:13) The family moved from base to military base, and after

demobilisation finally settled on an avocado ranch in Duarte, Southern California. Shepard graduated from high school in 1961 and although he was enrolled as an agricultural science major at Mount San Antonio Junior College, studying to become a veterinarian, he became increasingly dissatisfied and restless. Despite his love for his father they fought violently, and theatre became an escape for him. He auditioned, then acted for, a local theatrical company, and after three semesters at college abandoned his studies in favour of the excitement of touring with the company for six months, performing for church communities. Here he began to learn how to create theatre.

The tour took him to New York where he discovered his old friend Charles Mingus working as a waiter at the Village Gate, one of the most important jazz clubs in the city. Shepard found a job at the club, and benefited enormously from exposure to both the jazz musicians, and the stand-up comedians such as Woody Allen, Richard Pryor and Dick Cavett who performed at the club. It was at this time that he changed his name from Samuel Shepard Rogers to Sam Shepard, an act which appears to have been a 'deliberate break with his heredity, an attempt to construct his own identity.' (Oumano 1986:22) In one of the most autobiographical of his plays, The Holy Ghostly, the father accuses the son of trying to hurt him - 'I know ya' set out to hurt me. Right from the start I knowed that. Like the way ya' changed yer name and all. That was rotten That name was handed down for seven generations, boy.' (Shepard 1981:93) As a child Shepard had been called Steve

to distinguish him from his father, and the dropping of his given names seems to have been an effort on his part to erase his past. Yet, as his plays indicate, 'one of the patterns of Sam Shepard's career has been the gradual acknowledgement of and reacquaintance with the social, geographical, and hereditary elements that made up young Steve' (DeRose 1992:2).

At the Gate he met Ralph Cook, founder of the Theatre Genesis, who wished to 'discover authentic theatre voices and develop them toward a kind of subjective realism.' (Oumano 1986:28-29) Shepard, who had been writing poetry, was encouraged by Cook to try writing for the theatre, and his first two one-act plays, Cowboys and The Rock Garden, were staged by the Theatre Genesis in October 1964. Cowboys, now lost, recounted the way in which 'Charles and me [Shepard] used to run around the streets playing cowboys in New York. We'd both had the experience of growing up in California, in that special kind of environment, and between the two of us there was a kind of camaraderie.' (Chubb 1981:190) That Shepard's first play should be centred around cowboys gives an insight, not only into the way he viewed his life at that time, but an indication of a world view. He told Chubb that 'cowboys are really interesting to me - these guys, most of them really young, about 16 or 17, who decided they didn't want to have anything to do with the East Coast, with that way of life, and took on this immense country, and didn't have any real rules.' (Chubb 1981:190) The cowboy in Shepard's work symbolises a romanticised image of the West, an attempt to connect with the mythic

qualities of the American past. Shepard feels that

... the West is much more ancient than the East. ... There are areas ... where you really feel this ancient thing about the land. That it's primordial ... It has to do with the relationship between the land and the people - between the human being and the ground. I think that's typically western and much more attractive than this tight little forest civilisation that happened back East. It's much more physical and emotional to me.

(Lippman in Dugdale 1989:62)

This sense of strong connection with the land, so much part of Shepard's conception of the West and of the men who roamed it, is an inspiration which continues to infuse his work.

The early plays were written very rapidly, Shepard unwilling to spend time rewriting when there were other plays waiting to be drafted. The creative impulse from which these early works arose has been detailed by Shepard as 'the hope of extending the sensation of play (as in "kid") on into adult life.' (Shepard 1981c:214) The Rock Garden, his first play about the American family, dramatised his defiance of his past. As Cohn notes, this example of generational conflict is unusual in Shepard's early work, which tends to involve people of his own age - 'in his first two years as a playwright Shepard dramatises his contemporaries in telling caricatures of American reality. On simple but striking stage sets, young men and women act compulsively, without making conventional sense.' (Cohn 1982:174) This early play indicates the power that the family and its disintegration uncon-

sciously wielded over Shepard's imagination and serves as a prophetic precursor to the later, more demanding, family trilogy plays.

These earliest works were panned by the mainstream critics, and had it not been for the enthusiastic reception afforded him by Michael Smith, theatre critic for the newspaper 'Village Voice', Shepard might have vanished into anonymity. At that time the 'Village Voice' exerted an authority on artistic matters unmatched by any other newspaper in New York. Smith is quoted as saying:

I went to Shepard's plays - I couldn't figure out for a while what it was about, those plays of Sam's seemed so amazing and unlike anything I'd ever seen before. ... something so free and direct about those plays. They seemed to catch the actual movement of the minds of people I knew. ... He [Shepard] seemed to be able to take chances and be very fast and free with his fantasy when he wrote. ... The critics were missing everything at that point. None of them were picking up on the fact that there was a whole wave of new stuff about to happen ... I don't remember what I wrote. I'm sure it was a rave review. I loved the work and I tried to share my enthusiasm. The 'Village Voice' was a key theatre paper at that point, so people just flocked to those plays.

(Oumano 1986:35)

Shepard responded to this encouragement by writing prolifically and successfully. His method of writing was a form of improvisation, 'I used to write very fast, I mean I wrote Chicago in one

day. The stuff would just come out, and I wasn't really trying to shape it or make it into any big thing. ... I would have like a picture, and just start from there.' (Chubb 1981:191) Shepard's early plays were little concerned with theme or plot, expressing rather, a purely theatrical state of personal, subjective, excitement. Shepard's concern with weaving his own experience into the fabric of his plays began with the original Cowboys and has continued throughout the rest of his work. His writing is defined by an interest in the 'inner life of the individual, the suppressed world of desires, images, [and] myths.' (Biggsby 1985:223) This need to transform his experience was clearly understood by the actress Joyce Aaron, with whom Shepard lived from 1965 to 1967. In her essay 'Clues in a Memory,' Aaron wrote:

Perhaps because we were close during that period, I never knew where our life - where my life - was going to turn up on the page, or later on some stage, but inevitably there was always some aspect of our experience together that I would recognize.

(Aaron 1981:173)

Oumano considers Shepard to be 'almost helplessly fascinated with the process of his own character, although not to the point of narcissism. He burrows into its deepest recesses, restructuring and transforming his experience until it defines not just himself, but a world. We see us in him - his vision resonates in us, and ultimately, that is what makes all the difference.' (Oumano 1986:36) Shepard's revelation of himself and his world, his imaginative response to the culture which has shaped him explains in part his success, but the real significance of Shepard's plays

lies in their 'American-ness'. Shepard's work reflects American myths, characters, entertainment, iconography, and uses these images to deride the corruption and destruction of its ideals. Shepard's world is

... at once a "youth culture" America, full of hot-rods and juke boxes, rap sessions and brand names ... and a world always coloured by the evocation of an American past - a highly selective one. For Shepard's is largely the America of Buffalo Bill and Andrew Jackson, but surely not that of Henry Adams or Henry James; the America of medicine shows and covered wagons, revivalist meetings and rodeos In short, a thoroughly demotic, folkloric America, the American past more or less as a Hollywood cliché

(Mazzocco 1985:21)

Shepard himself has acknowledged the power of myth while admitting that 'you've never seen that word in one of my plays. It comes up after the fact.' (Rosen 1993:5) For Shepard, myth 'speaks to everything at once, especially the emotions. By myth I mean a sense of mystery and not necessarily a traditional formula.' (Shepard 1981c:217) The idea of myth and the haunting power of the past are two of the strongest motifs in Shepard's drama, because, as he pointed out in an interview with Carol Rosen,

... the purpose [of myth] had to do with being able to trace ourselves back through time and follow our emotional self. Myth served as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and the future. ... It was so powerful and so strong that it acted as a thread in culture. And that's been destroyed. ...

All we have is fantasies about it. ...
We've lost touch with the essence of
myth.

(Rosen 1993:5)

Many characters in Shepard's plays attempt to connect with the 'essence' that Shepard describes - Wesley, in Curse of the Starving Class (hereafter referred to as Curse), going so far as to create a ritual which he hopes will lead him to salvation. Plays such as La Turista, The Holy Ghostly, and Operation Sidewinder draw heavily on the mythology and legend of the Hopi Indian culture, while The Unseen Hand and Mad Dog Blues rely on the popular myths of Hollywood and the West. These plays implicitly reject the view that the playwright deals solely with ideas, relying on these mythological references to connect his audience with the emotions and mystery of which he has spoken. The myths of his culture become for Shepard both an ideal, and an ironic commentary on his times.

The source of Shepard's imagery results from his status as a product of the post World War II era, a time when 'America was under the sway of a Hollywood dream machine that was busy generating images of a victorious postwar America, a righteous and innocent Audie Murphy ¹ America of heroic proportions and bigger-

1. American war hero and actor who was the most decorated U.S. soldier in World War II. After the war, Murphy achieved some success as a movie actor, starring in "The Red Badge of Courage", "To Hell and Back" - the story of his wartime exploits - "The Quiet American", and a number of low budget Westerns. He was born in 1924 and died in 1971 (Encyclopedia Americana 19, 1992:628).

than-life stars and adventures.' (DeRose 1992:2) Much of Shepard's vision of society was shaped by these Hollywood fantasies, ameliorated by the influence of the Beats and the pop culture of the 60s and 70s. The 1950s was also a time when the family began to disintegrate and the 'myths of Hollywood's America were found sadly wanting by its youth.' (DeRose 1992:3) Simard recognises a sense of isolation and displacement as characteristic of Shepard's work, 'an existential awareness of homelessness and meaninglessness' (Simard 1984:76), arising from the shaping influences of his generational and cultural background.

The movies, so much a part of the cultural life of the 50s, had a profound effect on Shepard. He recounts how he attempted to imitate Burt Lancaster's smile after having seen him in the film 'Vera Cruz'.¹ The movie houses were the places of dreams and fantasies, where Shepard came into contact with much of the popular culture of the time - cowboys, gangsters, rock stars, fast cars, the frontier - images and concepts that are to occur many times in Shepard's writing. The characters are 'America's comic-book version of the gods of Olympus, embodying and performing our individual and collective dreams and nightmares.' (Oumano 1986:8) These heroes pose a threat to the consciousness of the

1. I remember trying to imitate Burt Lanacaster's smile after I saw him ... in Vera Cruz. For days I practiced in the backyard . . . I tried it out on the girls at school. They didn't seem to notice. I broadened my interpretation until I started getting strange reactions from the other kids. They would look straight at my teeth and a fear would creep into their eyes. I'd forgotten how bad my teeth were. (Shepard 1982:14)

everyday man - a belief in the fantastic deeds of these idols, and a hunger for their actions to fill a growing vacuum in the lives of the bereft - confers a status on them far beyond their capabilities and truth. The dream world they establish brings only disillusion to its believers. Shepard acknowledged this danger when he discussed early frontier heroes:

Through bragging, a lot of early-day American heroes sprang up. Paul Bunyon, Pecos Bill, all those mythic guys emerged from fantastic "tall tales." ... The East was intrigued and curious about all these dudes, and the West was more than willing to supply them with all the fancy embroidered "facts" of their heroism. ... their deeds were largely invented to satisfy this growing hunger and intrigue from the opposite coast. That hunger never left us ... there's still emotional space that needs filling.

(Oumano 1986:9)

From the first play Cowboys, rewritten as Cowboys #2 in 1967, in which two young men, Stu and Chet, try to escape a seemingly hostile environment by playing at being cowboys, Shepard transformed his experience into a reflection of the ephemeral expectations of the American Dream. That Stu and Chet are eventually failed by their mythological models is an early indication of Shepard's awareness that myths of the old world will always disappoint because they are without foundation in the modern world, fables of a vanished past.

Shepard's plays of the late 60s and early 70s are often consid-

ered in terms of

... the recurrent [images] of mythical figures - the cowboy, the rock star, the Indian, the enforcer - and of the popular genres - movies, comic books, science fiction - which feed them vocabulary and imagery. Plot and overt satire invade the work, but these plays are more interesting for the view of life that informs their fables, their myths, their images.

(Weales 1981:40-41)

Plays such as Forensic and the Navigators (1967), Operation Sidewinder (1970), and The Tooth of the Crime (1972) 'are peopled with figures from American film and folklore who embody the battle between our spiritual and cultural heritage and the empty, high-tech simulations of life we accept as modern civilisation.' (DeRose 1992:5) But Shepard's writing also embodied American themes full of intensity and mystery - the loss of the land and the fall from grace, the conflict with parental authority, the suffocation of domesticity, the lure of the unknown.

Shepard's career took a dramatic turn in 1968 when he was asked by the Italian film-maker Michelangelo Antonioni to script the film "Zabriskie Point". Other film offers included "Alice's Restaurant", and a suggestion that he help write a movie for the pop group, The Rolling Stones, to be called "Maxagasm". The experiences Shepard underwent as a scriptwriter focused yet another aspect of his personality, the conflict deep within himself between the artist and the star. The challenge is to overcome the seduction of fame, wealth, and most particularly, power, which turn the artist into a celluloid dummy, a creature

without spirit, a hollow man. The commercialism and exploitation of the artist which he discovered during his time as a script-writer resulted in his scathing attack on Hollywood in the 1976 play Angel City. This play did not however, exorcise the influence of the captivating glamour of Hollywood, and his ongoing fascination is revealed in later works, such as True West, which also chronicle the disintegration of the American Dream and its impact on American society.

In 1971 Shepard took his wife and son to England in a bid to escape the pattern of drug-induced destruction he saw devastating fellow artists in New York and which he knew to be threatening himself. Shepard had always had an interest in rock music and hoped to find a new career in music in England. While there Shepard wrote some of his best plays - the distance he put between himself and America allowed him to view his country and his culture with detachment and objectivity. The recognition of the stress placed on the artist by the American ethos and the seductive power of success, later dramatised more fully in Angel City, were probed in such plays as Geography of a Horse Dreamer and The Tooth of the Crime. Bigsby commented that 'Geography of a Horse Dreamer, like The Tooth of the Crime, is a threnody, a lament for a lost dream. Cody's dream of the Midwest is forced to defer to a simple mechanism for making money. For Shepard, much the same process has typified America [and] is offered as simply a modern condition.' (1985:237)

Shepard returned to the United States in 1975, becoming playwright-in-residence to the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, where many of his subsequent plays received their previews. Shepard's major plays of the late 1970s and early 80s are domestic dramas in which self-perpetuated violence, guilt, and fantasy, haunt the families depicted in these plays. As Gilman noted in his Introduction to *Seven Plays*:

In his last three plays [Curse, Buried Child and True West] 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. Physical or economic circumstances play more of a part than before.

(Shepard 1988:xxv)

In these plays Shepard mourns the heroic past where a 'ritualistic and instinctual life have precedence over civilisation's cognitive structures' (Hart 1987:29), and unmasking in himself a desperate desire to salvage the family, rescue the past, restore the credibility of human continuity, and believe in the American Dream. Blau recognises it as a 'persistence of desire ... to overcome the failed promise. ... [part of] how the American drama remembers through every disenchantment the loose and elusive features of the American dream, attached to the endlessly retreating image of a lost innocence.' (1984:521)

While Shepard's earlier plays have little in common with literary tradition, here he connects on a thematic level with playwrights

such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Family misfortunes become symbolic of the country's misplaced values and, as in A Long Day's Journey into Night, a rejection of social order in favour of the entrapped individual leads to the disintegration of the family and the degeneration of the individual, 'family pain [is] inevitable as the individual struggle[s] against confinement and alienation.' (Scanlan 1978:154) The lure of success - the betraying illusion of the Dream - so graphically illustrated in Miller's Death of a Salesman, is also shown in Shepard's family plays to be 'unbalanced, immature, illogical, lying, thieving, self-contradictory, and self-destructive' (Stanton 1989:95).

Although his writing is original, an imaginative response to the culture that has shaped him, in the family trilogy plays Shepard shares with other American playwrights a vague sense of longing, an enigmatic melancholy, and a disappointment with something missed or missing. In Shepard's family plays 'you [can] hear the sound of America cracking open and crashing into the sea.' (Shepard 1985:126)

These family plays - Curse, Buried Child, True West - although not written as a trilogy, nor necessarily intended by Shepard to be viewed as such, are increasingly being designated a trilogy

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by literary critics . This appellation is due largely to their common thematic elements such as their realistic nature, concern with the family, exploration of the influence of the father, despair at the apparent disintegration of American mores and values, and the power of the land to offer hope of regeneration to American society. These 'trilogy' plays, as well as the much earlier The Rock Garden - and the way in which they manifest Shepard's vision of his society are the focus of the following study. The plays are similar to his earlier work on a thematic level in that they all probe ideas and perceptions that have preoccupied Shepard since the beginning of his career. However, they are profoundly different stylistically. Where the early works were experimental and chimerical, the family trilogy plays are rooted in realistic plot and character, but, more significantly, it is the family that is at the root of these plays. Interviewed by Jennifer Allen for Esquire in 1988, Shepard questioned:

What doesn't have to do with family?
There isn't anything, you know what I mean?
Even a love story has to do with family.
Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other - everyone is born out of a mother and a father, and you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle.

Shepard has realised that it is impossible to escape the bond that shackles man to his family, and recognises that what happens in, and to the family, reflects on what ensues in the society surrounding it. The family becomes a repository for Shepard's

1. Petersen 1989; Lyons 1993.

hopes and fears for his society, and reveals his perceptions of his times.

This dissertation, conceived in a Liberal Humanist framework, in tackling the subject of the disintegration and betrayal of the American Dream, investigates the way in which Sam Shepard dramatises the loss of that Dream. In focussing on this malaise, Shepard plumbs the depths of the American consciousness and attempts to resuscitate and redefine the myth of the American Dream, while illustrating the way in which the family symbolises both the loss, and the possible regeneration, of that Dream.

The Introduction establishes in Shepard's own background the roots of the themes essential to his plays, and provides a brief overview of the theatrical environment into which Shepard emerged as a playwright in the early Sixties.

Chapter One expands on the American Dream, an issue of central importance to the dissertation, while placing Shepard in an historical and contemporary context.

The importance of The Rock Garden, and the way in which it establishes the roots of Shepard's disillusionment, are central to Chapter Two, exploring as it does the family as symbol for Shep-

ard's views of the disintegration of the American Dream, and providing the basis for the themes investigated in the later plays.

In Chapter Three Shepard dramatises the deterioration of the 'land of plenty', and demonstrates the emptiness of the guarantee of personal success offered by the Dream. Themes of possession, dispossession, and betrayal are explored and Curse of the Starving Class is viewed as a metaphor for America's decay and self-destructive destiny.

The concept that family disintegration represents in Shepard's writing the doomed American society is further developed in Chapter Four, in which the issues of power, domination and violence - new codes for the modern state - are counterbalanced by a belief in the rhythms of nature, and the faith in myth and symbolic imagery are offered as a means of regaining a long forgotten sense of harmony, symbolised by the rain and the unearthing of the buried child in the play of the same name.

The theme, evolving since The Rock Garden, of the soullessness of American culture is amplified in Chapter Five. That suburban encroachment destroys individuality and creativity and reveals the violence at the heart of society, and the barren triumph of a

materialistic culture consuming everything in its path, is made increasingly clear in Shepard's dramatisation of fraternal conflict in True West. The final image becomes a metaphor for Shepard's own ambiguous attitude toward his society.

From his first play, Cowboys, Shepard's dissenting voice has rebelled against the restrictions of 'civilised' urban life, and defiantly asserted the claims of freedom and adventure embodied in the myth of the American West. His drama reflects and comments on American life and the modern betrayal of the ideals of the American Dream, and laments the passing of an illusion. Shepard has answered America's need for a playwright whose drama touches the depths of the nation's unconscious.

CHAPTER ONE THE AMERICAN DREAM

On August 28, 1963 Martin Luther King gave the world access to a myth that the American people had long held dear. His fateful words, 'I have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream' have resounded through the latter part of the twentieth century and introduced hundreds of thousands of people to the great ideal of American democracy - freedom, justice, equality and happiness for all.

The myth of the American Dream evolved with the American Constitution and was voiced as far back as 1789 in the preamble to the Constitution:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The essence of the American ideal of democracy is best expressed in the Declaration of Independence with its assertion that all people are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Many of the early American settlers that were involved in drafting the Constitution came from a background of political and religious suppression, and were consequently

resolute in their desire to preserve freedom in the New World. Their aspirations have been further entrenched by the 26 Amendments to the Constitution, the majority of which are concerned with expanding individual civil or political liberties.

Central interests and concerns of the early settlers were expressed by men such as J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (1735-1813), who in his Letters from an American Farmer (1782) extended Jefferson's notion of America as a special place, and wrote that the 'labours and posterity [of the American man] will one day cause great changes in the world.' (Madden 1970:xviii) This credence in America as unique was further expressed by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), who believed that 'America is a land of wonders, in which everything is in constant motion and every change seems an improvement.' (Madden 1970:xviii) The ideology of these early settlers has passed into the expectations of modern Americans and has aroused for them a false prospect of the American Dream. This vision of the power of the land is unparalleled because the early settlers who fled persecution 'made, in the name of all Western man, a new beginning in a new Garden of Eden' (Madden 1970:xviii), and in so doing invented the notion that America's mission was to create a fresh and perfect world, a heritage that has led to the conviction that as a nation, Americans 'embody, or should embody, a unique and fateful mission, that ... Americans ... are manifestly destined not just to achieve prosperity and power but to represent the best hope of mankind.' (Mogen 1989:22)

The new 'Garden of Eden' - America as Utopia - is an idea that came to America with the Puritans, and with it came the faith that 'in the Virgin Wilderness, where all things seemed possible, the New Adam could recreate his lost paradise by the sweat of his brow.' (Madden 1970:xviii) The earliest Puritans continued the European practice of visualising an opposition between civilisation and wilderness, and consequently, the concept of the frontier, as the margin of the known, opening the possibility of wonders in the unknown, began to loom large in the American mind. 'The frontier as the limit of existing society demarcated the line beyond which beckoned freedom from existing social and political restraints.' (Mogen et al 1989:6) This set up the fallacy that life beyond the frontier was a life which was somehow better - a life sovereign, independent, unrestrained - a way of life superior to that offered by the confined, civilised, restricted life of the populated areas.

Symbolically, the frontier is the transitional area between the "Old World" - the settled, known civilisation, and the "New World" - unexplored wilderness. The frontier defines the border between the expectations and constraints imposed by society, and the individual freedom promised by the wilderness. This frontier was geographically linked with the movement westwards, to the distant and unknown West, and symbolically linked to freedom, innocence, youth, and passion. 'In the American myth people from the Old World journey to the New World in the hope of rejuvenation and the regaining of innocence, trying to return to a time

before the Fall.' (Rabkin in Mogen 1989:27) Gradually the frontier came to signify not only an American way of life but also a philosophy, no longer, therefore a place where the individual could test his sense of self without the demands and compromises of a community, but rather a cluster of images and values, part of American consciousness, or perhaps even more importantly, part of the American unconscious.

The frontier mentality bred a new American icon, a person such as Cooper's Leatherstocking hero,¹ who felt 'captive in civilisation and at home only in the wilderness' (Mogen 1989:16), a man who created a life free from the responsibilities and commitments of society, independent of the burdens of domesticity. 'While every historical account of the actual frontier experience indicates the inherent oppositions in the experiences ... the hero in his mythic shape seems to emerge as monolithic ... espous[ing]: independence, individuality, courage, coldness, acquisitiveness, aggression, violence.' (Ben-Zvi 1989:219) The cowboy became the archetype of the frontier hero, described by John Lenihan as a freedom-loving individualist, bridging the conflicting worlds of civilisation and wilderness, engaging his natural instincts and

1. Natty Bumppo, hero of James Fenimore Cooper's The Pioneers, The Last of the Mohicans, The Prairie, The Pathfinder and The Deerslayer; is representative of the American wilderness, endowed with the forest skills of the Redskin Indians and tolerant of their beliefs - a brave, kindly, illiterate man, doomed, like the wilderness, by the encroachment of civilization. 'The logical extension of Leatherstocking is the cowboy hero: the simple, manly person whose feats are brave and chivalrous, but who ... has no place in society.' (Cunliffe 1986:94)

talents to devise a progressive society (1989:227). That the society under construction was desirable and good was unquestioned: 'western novels, and the more universally popular cowboy movies, affirm the heroic past; the cowboy is our [the USA's] export Dream image ... and the intensity of its acceptance in Europe and Asia reinforces our own submission to the mythic image.' (Madden 1970:xxv) The American had become a dreamer, a dupe chasing the deceptive fantasies of the past.

The concept of the American frontier, and with it the frontier hero, became a mythic preserve, 'an aggregation of fears, wishes, expectations, exaggerations and ultimately frustrations' (Ben-Zvi 1989:217), experienced 'less by maps than by illusions, projective fantasies, wild anticipations, [and] extravagant expectation.' (Slotkin in Ben-Zvi 1989:217) History was transformed into myth and symbol, and the frontier experience became the vehicle bearing the ideals of the American Dream.

The confidence in the essential virtue of the American way of life and the optimistic view of the future, so much a part of American mythology, was finally undermined by the nightmare of the First World War, which had, it seemed, a disproportionate effect on the American psyche when related to the actual cost in lives, money, or spiritual and emotional fatigue. Disgust and revulsion were almost universal reactions to the war, and disillusionment with civilisation and the industrial society began to

spread (Cunliffe 1986:324-327). The progressive society identified by the tradition of the Western, once such a desirable result of the hero's actions, now spelled a 'vacuous middle-class status-quo. ... a commercial, dehumanising social order.' (Lenihan 1989:228,232)

By 1920 it was impossible to ignore the encroachment of the city on the American way of life, nor the realisation that industrialisation demanded co-operation, and that this teamwork implicitly denied the individual right to freedom and self-sufficiency. The firmly held belief in the individual as the foundation of society began to give way to new codes, a loss of certainty was manifest, and the American Dream crashed headlong into reality. This verity was the city, which offered new ethics - 'for many, wealth fill[ed] the vacuum left by less tangible values. Wealth allows one to buy things, people, power, and often dispensation from justice.' (Hamilton 1987:26) The multi-headed hydra of materialism and self-interest raised its head to the applause of all who heard its call, and the god of wealth, status, and possessions took control of the American psyche.

While popular culture continued, and continues, to create the fairy-tale image of the American Dream through journalism, advertising, prime-time television and large-scale Hollywood movies, a growing awareness of the degeneration of the American Dream began to manifest itself, so that today even politicians, those master delusionists, are willing to concede that the American Dream is

under siege. In his State of the Union address at the beginning of February 1995, President Clinton spoke of restoring the American Dream, and of the fact that 'all Americans have not just a right but a solemn responsibility to rise as far as their God-given talents and determination can take them. And to give something back to their communities and their country in return.'

Serious literature began increasingly to question the validity of the Dream mythology. 'If the popular escape novel ... is an indirect affirmation that all is well, it is, simultaneously, an unconscious declaration that conditions exist from which we must escape.' (Madden 1970:xxvi) The rupture between culture and literature was observed and reported by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga as early as the Twenties. The culture he saw represented in the newspapers, films, advertisements, was 'healthy-minded, positive, optimistic', while serious writing spoke of 'aversion, protest, and accusation Aversion to the all-too-cheap optimism, the national self-overestimation, and the Puritan ideal, a protest against vulgarity and the hollowness of society.' (Ford 1988:284) Amongst the first of the dissenting voices was Van Wyck Brooks's America's Coming of Age (1915), a critique of spiritual poverty, what Ford calls 'the malaise of a society blindly divided between ritualistic utterance of "high ideals" and subordination to the "catchpenny realities" of business civilisation' (1988:297), and Sherwood Anderson's Windy

1. Quoted in 'The State of the Nation' p.43, a special report in Time, February 6, 1995.

McPherson's Son (1916) and Winesburg, Ohio (1919). Scott Fitzgerald's This Side of Paradise (1920) was the first of the American novels to express the disillusionment and rebelliousness of post-war American youth, but it was The Great Gatsby (1925) that finally heralded not only the anxieties of the new generation of artists, but of a whole nation. Jay Gatsby symbolises the grand dreams and illusions of the Twenties and exposes the mediocre bargains that were struck in an endeavour to realise them. Fitzgerald presents the American Dream as 'the illusion of eternal strength and health, and of the essential goodness of people ... the illusions of a nation, the lies of a generation of frontier mothers who had to croon falsely that there were no wolves outside the cabin door.' (Ford 1988:332) In novels such as The Sound and the Fury, William Faulkner delineates the tragedy of a national consciousness bearing unexpiated guilt, where past and present, family and nation, carry an inherited curse, a malediction visited upon them by slavery and the abuse of the land.

The Depression of the thirties brought a new wave of disappointment and disenchantment expressed in the works of such novelists as Ernest Hemingway, John Don Passos - whose nameless vagrant in The Big Money (1936) ruminates on the uselessness of the success slogans on which his generation were reared - and John Steinberg, whose novels mirror the essence of the dispossession, bewilderment and anxiety of those years (Cunliffe 1986:404-405). Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead (1948), the celebrated American novel of the Second World War, 'portrays a battle for a Pacific

island as symbolic of the violence endemic to individual and social history. ... conceive[ing] of war as the ultimate weapon of a mechanistic society against which individual resistance is fruitless.' (Ford 1988:343) In the novel Mailer saw an America cancerous, riddled with corruption, suppression and the exploitation of power. Catch-22, Joseph Heller's grotesque comedy written in 1961, continues the assault on the dehumanising bureaucracy of the industrialised society, while members of the Beat movement, noticeably Jack Kerouac, found release in exile, drugs and non-conformity.

Playwrights were also part of this despair, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams agonising about isolation, loss, and the devastation it wrought in the human psyche. O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night (1940) and The Iceman Cometh (1946) express the crises of modern man, no longer supported by traditional values or religious and social bonds, left only with an emptiness that must somehow be filled. 'Taken as a whole, his plays grope for the deeper meanings that underlie "the discordant, broken, faithless rhythm of our time." ' (Cunliffe 1986:440) In The Glass Menagerie (1945) and A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Williams portrays inevitable guilt, loss and sorrow in the pathos of the confrontation between the Dream and reality. Willy Loman becomes the ultimate victim of the modern perversion of the American Dream in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman (1949). The tragic implications of the discrepancy between the ideals of the Dream and the reality of modern life leave Willy, like so many other characters, stranded in a world that he no longer compre-

hends. In The American Dream (1961) Edward Albee 'does not deal with the degradation of a lost ideal ... his play is a devastating comment on the very notion that the American dream is anything but a lifeless image of shoddy materialism produced by the banalities of advertising.' (Ford 1988:340-41)

That popular culture has been a 'multifaceted medium of American sunlit day-dreams. ... often affirm[ing] the validity of American Dreams' (Madden 1970:xxv) is difficult to deny when exposed to the plethora of cowboy and 'private-eye' novels, Hollywood film spectacles such as "Dances with Wolves", and "Forrest Gump", television soap operas, and glossy advertising for luxury consumer products. Madden feels that 'now it is public relations agencies, advertising and TV (with its pseudo and predicted events) that disseminate the Dream seeds, most of them dead; the "American experiment" has failed and the American adventure is confined to the TV and movie screens.' (1970:xxviii) Herbert Blau talks of the domination of American reality by the dream machine of Hollywood as an amendment to the Constitution, if not its natural consequence, and he blames the loss of the true West on the movies, for they generate the deceptive and illusive images that have become the basis for the modern myth of the frontier, and therefore the ideal of the American Dream (1984:521/2).

A considerable number of plays written in the Sixties and Seventies by playwrights such as Ronald Tavel, Megan Terry, Jean-Claude van Itallie and Sam Shepard dramatise the world of contem-

porary America in which the cliches and fantasies of the popular media and the movies permeate the lives of its inhabitants. George Stambolian suggests that this interest is hardly surprising in a

... generation nurtured by movies and comic books, surrounded by advertising, and living in the age of television and

¹
McLuhanism . Contemporary playwrights share ... the knowledge that our own and therefore our country's identity is largely determined by the figures, images and myths of our popular culture. And ... they have in their efforts to modify our consciousness naturally turned to an exploration of those cultural factors that daily alter and mould our consciousness. Through parody, satire, and even cool analysis they held up to America the image of a land in which human presence and truly individual response have been all but crushed and eliminated by the models and structures projected by the media.

(1981:79/80)

Sam Shepard's world, however eccentric, is inescapably American, and presents a unique vista of past, present and future. Shepard holds a view of his country similar to many of the American playwrights of the past in its disillusionment, and yet profoundly

1. The work of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), Canadian educator and writer on mass media, whose observations on the human consequences of technological change made him one of the most celebrated and controversial commentators on popular culture. His major theme was that because electronic technology is the extension of man's central nervous system, and that each medium encourages some styles of communication and rejects others, regardless of what it 'talks about', the 'medium is the message'. Society, therefore, is shaped to a greater extent by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. (Encyclopedia Americana 18, 1991:575)

different in its firm faith in the restorative power of the land, a 'romantic belief in the virtues of isolated, rural America as opposed to ... city deviousness' (Jones 1985:13). Shepard retains a fascination with popular culture and a wholehearted nostalgia for the myths of the frontier, while realising that America is a country of built-in obsolescence, where relationships are transient, and dreams ephemeral. Mazzocco feels that Shepard should be seen as an 'embattled realist, or an elusive one, with a highly picaresque view of the world.' (1985:21) Shepard understands the problems of modern life but never loses sight of the possibilities offered by the past.

Shepard's view of the world, or more accurately his perception of America, is dependent on 'the spirit of the American West, its triumph of individualism, unlimited potential, transcendent beauty, and disdain of regulation' (Marranca 1981:21); and of the betrayal of that spirit by the modern regard for materialism. Marranca sees that 'side by side with [his] glorification of the frontier ethic ... is his sixties-style radical politics with its dread of the "system", its pastoral ideals, and persistent criticism of the American way of life.' (1981:22) Shepard's plays grieve for the heroic past and dramatise the deterioration of the 'land of plenty' demonstrating the emptiness of the guarantee of personal success offered by the Dream. The gaining of a long-forgotten sense of harmony and order is no longer a question of social or rational concepts of justice, but of attuning again to the rhythms of nature. The barren triumph of materialistic cul-

ture consuming everything in its path becomes increasingly menacing, because it has demolished imagination and replaced emotion with material success.

Sam Shepard reveals that America is a crucible for fallen mankind. The American Dream 'was never anything more than a myth, unrealisable from the very beginning because it failed to adapt itself to human nature. If the myth might once have been potentially creative, it has long since become destructive and had best be laid to rest.' (Adler 1987:111) The dream is no longer accessible, and yet the American psyche dare not surrender it. It would seem that the paradox is indestructible - the dream is essential, yet it cannot make an imprint on actual life, the modern American is destined to continue desperately seeking a recalcitrant Dream.

CHAPTER TWO THE ROCK GARDEN

The Rock Garden foreshadows Shepard's awareness of the deterioration of the ideal of family life, the inescapable power of heredity and his obsession with the disintegration of the American Dream. Asked by Carol Rosen whether he was still fond of any of his early plays, Shepard responded:

I like Rock Garden all right. The funny thing about Rock Garden is, if you look at that play - it's surprising to me even because when I look at it, I see the germ right in that little play of a whole lot of different things. The germ [is] in that play of many, many to come, much more so than Cowboys, for instance, or a lot of those other plays.

(Rosen 1993:10)

In his early work Shepard was particularly concerned with the inner life of the individual, with the secret world of emotions, need, images and myths. 'Like so many similar instances in earlier American literature, Shepard's plays examine how specific selves outgrow their environment. Like Huck Finn's escape down the river and disappearance into a newly generated self, Shepard's characters frequently try the same tact. ... The great effort and the great tragedy in American writing has always been the attempt to transform the self into something new; to deny the past.' (Earley 1981:129) In The Rock Garden Shepard shaped his own experience of escape, and the redefinition of his identity, by exploring his retreat from his family. The play solemnises his

independence, but in so doing focuses on displacement and disintegration. It exposes the thread which Schvey believes runs through, as well as connecting, the various phases of Shepard's work, the 'deeply ambiguous and conflicted relationship between father and son' (Schvey 1993:14).

The Rock Garden is a youthful, even immature work¹, but it is a play that manages to transcend the traditional dramatic concern with form and character, and leave in its place 'wild imagination as a form of reality' (Tucker 1992:26). Shepard views drama as an open-ended structure where anything could happen, a point which Marilyn Hechler picks up when she comments on his 'blind revolt against everything restrictive of raw, untempered, unexamined feeling.' (Hechler 1989:57) The plays were Shepard's response to the Sixties, times which he himself describes as 'seething with a radical shift of the American psyche.' The Rock Garden became the mouthpiece of the emotional, rebellious teenager who had escaped from the suffocating restrictions of the family farm, and who saw his predicament as indicative, perhaps even symbolic, of all American life. This biographical quality in The Rock Garden in no way diminishes the validity of its observations about the plight of American existence, and the haunting power of the family that it exposes is a spectre that continues to pursue Shepard into his later work.

1. Weales 1993; Smith 1964; DeRose 1992; Mottram 1984.

The Rock Garden is a product of Shepard's early, innovative, and spontaneous involvement with theatre, and although it is possible to trace the foundation of his later preoccupations in many of its themes and images, 'addressing issues of domestic life, heredity, the alienation of youth, and the dissolution of the family unit' (DeRose 1992:9), it seems unlikely that Shepard was making a deliberate attempt to question the role played by the family in the disintegration of the American Dream. Shepard claims that the play was about 'leaving my mom and dad' (Chubb 1981:193), but many critics¹ have noted the embryonic themes and images developed in later plays, significantly Curse, Buried Child, and True West. In The Rock Garden he continues the impulsive, experimental approach to theatre displayed in the earlier play Cowboys, while continuing to highlight his representation of plays as expressions of wild emotions.

The Rock Garden is a rebellion against the bonds of the family, a contentious manifestation of his anger and hostility towards his father, which lies at the roots of his disillusionment. The conflict between Shepard and his father is described by his sister Roxanne as 'a kind of facing off between them and it was Sam who got the bad end of that With him [their father] and Sam it was that male thing. You put two virile men in a room and they're going to test each other.'² Shepard described his rela-

1. Lyons 1993; DeRose 1992; Mottram 1984; Weales 1993.

2. Cited in Samuel Freedman's, Sam Shepard's Portrait of the American Family, International Herald Tribune, 6 December 1985:7.

tionship with his father as being one of 'absolute unknowing', and Schvey connects it with a feeling of perpetual abandonment, and proposes that 'unravelling the mystery behind his absent father has been a lifelong preoccupation' (Schvey 1993:15). Shepard is a playwright strongly bound both by, and to, his personal past, and his work is based directly on his own experience. The play is his symbolic disengagement of the family's stranglehold on his masculinity and freedom, an expression of his desire to escape into maturity and independence despite the vision of adulthood presented by both the mother and the father in the play. It is his rite of passage.

It would not be inaccurate to say that the family plays a pivotal role in American drama. Schlatter argues that the family is for American society, more than just 'a repository of national values and cherished traditions; it stands as our [Americans] most representative institution.' (1990:60) Scanlan uncovers a paradoxical impulse within American playwrights, an irresistible impetus towards the incompatible claims of security and freedom, resulting in inevitable conflict and heartache. Critics such as Robert Brustein, Thomas Porter, and John James have identified the conflicting demands of the family in the work of playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and Arthur Miller¹

1. Tom, in Williams's The Glass Menagerie confronts the same dilemma; while O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night explores a similar crisis facing Edmund. Miller's Death of a Salesman and All My Sons depict the results on family relationships of the brutalities of the acquisitive American culture.

and Sam Shepard becomes yet another link in the great tradition of American literature.

The fundamental dilemma exposed by the family in The Rock Garden is discussed by Tom Scanlan in Family, Drama, and American Dreams (1978). Scanlan postulates two models of American family life which he calls the 'family of security' and the 'family of freedom', terms which I will utilise, as best representing 'the urge toward the safety of mutuality along with the contrary urge for independence and selfhood.' (Scanlan 1978:27) These two opposing concepts are responsible for the conflict which manifests itself in the work of American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Langford Wilson, and Preston Jones. From O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night to Shepard's True West 'the strains on the nuclear family system were felt in terms of intensity and isolation. ... [and] The American stage is typically one of family destruction where escape means freedom and failure tragic oppression.' (Scanlan 1978:213-214)

Scanlan's identification of the two types of family ideal is determined by an extended crisis within the family structure which resulted from the difficult transition America faced when moving from an agrarian to an urban capitalist society (Schlatter 1990:61). The Puritan family pattern was one of intensity, withdrawal, and self-sufficiency, concepts bred into it by the conditions of the frontier, which made for a tight family structure.

Scanlan remarks on the debt these concepts owe to the philosophies of Thomas Jefferson, to his assumption that 'political freedom depended on independence and self-reliance - owning property and tilling your own soil made you free.' (Scanlan 1978:29) The 'family of security' relied on the farm, on the protection of the land to achieve a sense of cohesion, shared identity, and freedom. This vision could not, however, withstand the onslaught of rapid urbanisation, and a process of dispersion and disruption began; the ideal of the 'family of security' changed to that of 'a miniature democracy in which each family member would be treated as an equal partner in love and respect.' (Schlatter 1990:61) The 'family of security' provides an image, now being lost to the past, of a stable and disciplined family life, the tradition on which middle-class values are based; while the 'family of freedom' advocates modern concerns with independence and selfhood as attainable goals. These two attitudes inevitably bring into dispute the opposing ideals of liberty and commitment and much of the psyche of the American playwright is bound up in these two conflicting notions - the struggle to leave and the longing to stay (Scanlan 1978:180). These antagonistic imperatives constrain one another to such a degree that plays such as The Glass Menagerie, Long Day's Journey into Night, and Death of a Salesman can be read as an enactment of the paradox. In them the protagonists 'remain torn between a desperate longing for the strong embrace and protection of the family and an equally desperate need to escape its suffocating emotional and moral tyranny.' (Schlatter 1990:62)

The Rock Garden illustrates, in Shepard's struggle to leave his parents, his embryonic endeavour to come to terms with this core myth of the family. As Schlatter is at pains to point out, the myth of the family invokes 'our darkest fears and anxieties about ourselves, as well as our most heartbreaking memories and deepest longings.' (1990:63) The Rock Garden exemplifies Shepard's rebellion, his rejection of the constricting bonds of the family and his thrust into the new world. This repudiation of his past underpinned the theme of adolescent resistance, so much a part of Shepard's early work. Significantly, Shepard's first attempt at playwriting was a precocious celebration of the old hero of youthful revolt - the cowboy of the American West. Schlatter feels that 'we have come to idealise the run-away, a defiant and delinquent youth whose prodigal wandering is also a spiritual quest to recover that lost sense of "belongin' "' (Schlatter 1990:62) Cowboys chronicles Shepard's 'runaway' early days in Greenwich Village - the camaraderie of his boyhood friend Charles Mingus Jr., the playing cowboys in the streets of New York, the delight in his escape, the pleasure he had in the nightclubs of the Village, the great satisfaction of his independence - and celebrates them all in this tale of juvenile drifting and adventure.

The Rock Garden introduces a very different type of escape from the joyous sense of adventure informing Cowboys. It dramatises the self-conscious flight from a stifling and sterile domestic environment. The evasion is not yet physical, in that the boy remains within the home situation - his retreat is a flight of

fantasy - a verbal revolt in which his dreams and identity are sharply and shockingly contrasted with those of his parents, who offer only sterile images of the past, or barren present, as the revelation of their inner worlds. The Rock Garden foreshadows Shepard's family plays 'addressing issues of domestic life, heredity, the alienation of youth, and the dissolution of the family unit.' (DeRose 1992:9) In these early plays Shepard presents an intense vision of contemporary dislocation and disorientation which provides the foundation of his bitter and apocalyptic conception of modern American existence.

Although it is set in a recognisably realistic setting, The Rock Garden does not present a rational, objective vision of reality. Shepard was concerned, not with external authenticity, but with the expression of his character's strange inner truth. His emphasis was on the experience of existence, the conveying of the immediate sensation of reality. Michael Bloom writes of his 'focusing in on the minutiae of behaviour ... record[ing] a picture of a nervous obsessive world where feelings of rootlessness and alienation predominate. ... the actions and images resonate with the experience of contemporary American life.' (1981:76) The focus of attention in this play is not the objective presentation of realistic family behaviour, but the dramatic display of what it feels like to be a member of this American household, a family that Shepard contends is representative of the whole of the American way of life. This delineation is evinced in the stylised naming of the characters as Boy, Woman

and Man. The characters become symbols for all American boys, women and men; they symbolise Shepard's Everyman, acting out the alienation, pain, and anger of the American.

The Rock Garden was viewed by Michael Bloom as 'a kind of triptych portrait [of] a single condition of sensation - the utter tedium and boredom of a typical American family situation.' (1981:73) Shepard dramatises his vision of this ennui and sterility, portraying, in three short scenes, the interactions between a boy and his parents. The play opens with a brief, mimed scene in which a teenage Boy, a Girl and a Man, presumably the father, sit at a dining room table. The Boy and the Girl share a glass of milk, while the Man reads a magazine - the scene ends when the Girl spills the glass of milk. The deceptively beguiling touches of domesticity which Shepard introduces at the beginning of this sketch - the dinner table, the glass of milk, the father reading the magazine - create a false sense of security and pave the way for the destruction of audience complacency by the deliberate spilling of the milk, while the complete lack of response on the part of the Man brings a sense of disquiet and apprehension to the proceedings. This subversion of security is a trademark of Shepard's later work, a technique used in the divertingly simple opening scene of Curse, the 'Norman Rockwell' illusion of the house in Buried Child, and the middle-class normality of True West, all of which dissolve into a domestic situation of nightmare dimensions. The Rock Garden prepares the way for Shepard's determined attack on middle-class complacency.

In the second scene the Woman, apparently the Boy's mother, talks to the Boy who sits at her bedside in his underwear. She lists her own father's eccentricities, while complaining about the Man's bad habits. The Man is presumably her husband, although Shepard supplies no evidence of any relationship between the characters. This, in itself, is a significant comment on the nature of the family. The Woman talks incessantly, discussing a variety of family activities from camping trips to catching cold. She also enumerates the Boy's physical resemblances to both her father and the Man. Each time attention is drawn to the Boy's features he leaves the room, returning wearing an item of clothing that conceals them, finally bundling himself up in an overcoat.

This behaviour foreshadows that of Wesley in Curse, who dresses himself in his father's discarded clothes and by so doing assumes his identity. In The Rock Garden, the Boy attempts to conceal his heritage as he layers himself with clothing. That this haunting theme of inheritance is established in Shepard's work as early as this second play is an indication of the hold it exerts over his imagination and the significance it will have in later plays. The futility of the Boy's attempt to hide himself from the curse of those inherited physical features, and to assert his own identity in the later, shocking revelation of his inner world, is accentuated when the Man enters dressed in an overcoat. The Boy leaves abruptly as the Man strips down to his underwear and assumes the Boy's place in the rocking chair. The theme of identity, and its debilitation and emasculation by

heredity, becomes a major motif in the later plays - its appearance here is testimony to the dominance of the theme of inheritance in Shepard's work.

The third scene presents the father and the son together, although the division between them is soon to become apparent. The Man discusses his desire to create a rock garden, the Boy repeatedly falling off his chair from boredom, or even disbelief, as he speaks. Finally, as the Boy graphically describes his sexual fantasies, the father mirrors the Boy's behaviour by toppling off his seat. The similarity in the reaction of the two characters further underlines the dominance of heredity, but the Boy's monologue reveals the overwhelming force of his desire to present himself and his separate identity to his father. The repeated use of 'You know?' is a strong indication of his desire to win recognition from his father, to gain acknowledgement of his own identity. However, the Man's lack of response, and the shock expressed in his falling off the couch is a clear negation of what the Boy is proffering. Marilyn Hechler sees this assertion of mature sexual identity as directed at the father alone and consequently that it implies a sexual challenge (1989:63). The confrontation is part of the Boy's attempt both to escape the sterility of the family situation, and to identify with, and gain recognition from, the father. The provocation seems an integral part of the Boy's struggle to escape the stultifying atmosphere of his family home and to assert his own identity.

The Rock Garden reveals the complete self-involvement and consequent lack of communication between the characters in the family, perhaps most graphically revealed by the Woman's silence once the Man sits next to her bed. The adults talk at the Boy, while the Boy's responses are virtually monosyllabic; nobody notices, or reacts to, the spilled milk or the Boy falling off the chair. The grandfather's withdrawal to the attic with his cats, the Woman's concern with her own physical comfort, and the repeated use of 'You know?' by all three characters, when they don't appear to care whether the others do know, are indications of the lack of communication in this family's culture. Furthermore, the food imagery used extensively both here, and in later plays, can be viewed as denotative of the failure of communication within the family. Charles Whiting (1988a:181) notes that the usual case with Shepard's theatre is that food imagery is indicative of complete absence of communion, usually, but not exclusively, within the family. The proffering of food substitutes in Shepard's plays for the inability to provide any kind of commitment to another, and the refusal, or lack of acknowledgement, of that food further reinforces the breakdown of obligation within the family.

Here, as in later plays, we see the substitution of food for emotional and spiritual fulfilment. Marranca postulates that 'eating is used as a way to evade emotion: sometimes its a reaction to anxiety or fear' (1981:15). The Woman discusses her father's excessive guzzling of 'angels on horseback' (toasted

marshmallows on salt crackers) as follows, his behaviour confounding all expectation, his withdrawal from normal family and social interaction underscoring the estrangement within this household:

He'd sit there and chew all night on them He just sat there a long time burning marshmallows and eating them. That's why his face was red. Everyone thought he just got out in the sun a lot but actually it was from sitting in front of the fire so long. He hardly ever went in the sun. It was funny. A whole beach and he stayed inside all the time.

(Shepard 1986:36)

Pop, (the grandfather) also ate mushrooms, but the Woman claims 'he was never hungry' (Shepard 1986:36). His compulsive consumption of food is an indication of a hunger much more deep-seated than the physical, a craving which can never be satiated by food. The most derisive comment on the destitution and deprivation of this family is found in the fact that the children drink milk, ironically, perhaps the ultimate symbol of maternal nutrition. This serves to highlight the inadequacy of the nurturing in this family, and the spilling of the milk emphasises how little value is attached to succour in the family.

The sharing of food is also suggestive of companionship. It implies a situation of domestic harmony and security that is often belied by the actual circumstances surrounding the eating. Scene three begins: 'Saturday afternoon - just after lunch, just before the ball game.' (Shepard 1986:40) This cosy domesticity

assumes a state of accord within the family group, a circumstance obviously contradicted by the Boy's evident apathy and monosyllabic response to the Man's monologue. Later in the scene the Man suggests to the Boy that 'we could work on it [the rock garden] together. You know? It wouldn't be hard. We could do it in our spare time.' (Shepard 1986:42) The Boy's half-hearted reply provokes the Man into promising a reward - 'we could have bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches afterwards.' (Shepard 1986:42) The Man confuses the eating of sandwiches together - the appearance of intimacy - with the true closeness inherent in the concept of family. This substitution of food for spiritual and emotional needs is more fully developed in Shepard's later work, most particularly *Curse*, where the basic premise is that the family is not physically deprived, their privation is spiritual and indicative of the more deeply rooted destitution of a whole society.

Marranca suggests that eating is sublimated sex, that it is 'about desire and fulfilment, as sex is.' (1981:16) This premise seems most applicable to the Woman, who mentions food or drink fifteen times in her speeches. Her references to being cold and freezing seem to reflect a lack of care, warmth, and passion in her life, and she has taken to her bed in despair. The Man's retreat into the world of inanimate objects conveys his fear of commitment and obligation. The Boy's monologue clearly expresses his desire to become involved with life, to escape from the 'tedium of uncommunicative relationships' (Mottram 1984:12). The 'desire and fulfilment' that Marranca postulates are very obvi-

ously lacking in this family and the Boy's expression of his sexual nature seems only to accentuate the impotence and sterility of the family.

The importance of the land to the American psyche¹ is another motif raised by Shepard in The Rock Garden. Schlatter suggests that 'the ideal of the family of security is embodied in the farm, where all family members rely on the bounty and protection of the land to achieve a sense of connection and shared identity.' (1990:61) Clearly the Man is aware of this ideal, this link with the mythic past, in that he spends much of his time working on the land. The Woman comments on the physical labour indulged in by the Man 'working in the orchard and things like that.' (Shepard 1986:38) They obviously have different impressions of the value of this toil, for she perceives the effort as pointless, as it apparently achieves nothing and does not even improve his physique. She once again draws attention to the similarity between the Man and the Boy by pointing out that the Boy has the same kind of torso as the Man has without doing any physical labour to obtain it. She contends that the Man should 'just face up to it, that's all. It [his torso] won't get any better. He's not going to develop any more by doing all that work.' (Shepard 1986:38) The Woman shows her complete misunderstanding of the Man's attempted association with the land, but she is aware that his involvement is futile - that it is of no

1. See Scanlan 1978:27+.

benefit to him in any way.

This notion is clarified in scene three when we discover the sort of tasks undertaken by the Man: the installation of irrigation sprinkler heads in the lawn; the painting of the garden fence; and, most significantly, the establishment of a rock garden. The Man is apparently bound to the land, but his commitment only underlines the sterility of his existence, 'all his energy is pent up in the dream-construction of a rock garden that will be his desert island, his refuge from the world of people.' (Tucker 1992:28) There is really no difference between Pop, who spent all his time in the attic with his cats (independent creatures who demand very little other than food from their human owners), and the Man, who expends his labour in pointless and degenerative tasks. The infertility inherent in the concept of the rock garden is symbolic of the wider sterility in the lifestyle of the family.

The incredulity inherent in the Boy's responses to the Man's suggestion that they take another trip and get more rocks to make a bigger garden, underscores his awareness of the futility of the Man's activities, and indicate that the Boy's desperate hope of vitality and growth is not dependent on thoughtless adherence to the dream of a corrupted and fruitless ideal. The way in which Shepard illustrates the tarnished ideal of the healing and securing power of the land here, in the denial of its fertility by the

Man, prepares the ground for the later plays in which the fruitfulness of the land serves as an ambiguous desire for the regeneration of the families in Curse, True West, but most especially in Buried Child.

The Rock Garden ends with what amounts to a sexual orgasm. The Boy's final monologue expresses his complete rejection of his parent's barren and effete existence and discloses his personal attempt to create a world for himself that is full of life and originality. The shocking revelation of his implied sexual activities and prowess is enough to knock the Man off the couch in a reflected image of the Boy's behaviour during his speeches. The Boy attempts to connect with his father with repeated references to 'You know?', but it is fairly evident from the father's reaction that he does not know at all, and that the endless and futile work on the rock garden is a way of escaping this knowledge. The sexuality of the Boy's inner life suggests the possibility of his escaping the 'curse' of his resemblance to his father and grandfather. The life-giving flow of his ejaculation, which appears extremely potent - 'When I come it's like a river. It's all over the bed and the sheets and everything' (Shepard 1986:43), might provide his means of escape from the stultifying and impotent world of the family. The ambiguous nature of this escape, underlined by the Boy's desire to 'go all the way to the womb', is typical of Shepard's technique. The paradox of his desire to return to the womb - which is no longer departure, but regression - is typical of the ambivalence evident in the final

moments of all the family trilogy plays. Shepard seems unable to face the bleakness of the picture he portrays and attempts to alleviate the desolation by providing an alternative that will offer the hope of regeneration and renewal, and a return to a time and place more benevolent to man's needs, despite his obvious mistrust of such illusions.

The Rock Garden is the playwright's first vision of the disintegration of the family, a perspective which is to become one of the dominant themes in his later and more mature work. Shepard is not the only playwright to examine this trend in American society, nor to comment on it. Eugene O'Neill's tormented Long Day's Journey into Night firmly established the American family's place in dramatic literature, while Tennessee Williams probed his own distressed family in The Glass Menagerie, and Arthur Miller exposed the great lie behind the American Dream of prosperity and harmony in Death of a Salesman in 1945. Shepard is part of a long tradition of artists who have attempted an exploration of the deterioration of the ideals of American family life, and have used their own family relationships to investigate not only their own neuroses, but also the disease eating away the structure of American ideals and traditions. For Shepard the family in The Rock Garden symbolises the disintegration, not only of a single institution of the American fabric of life, but the ideals and dreams upon which that way of life is built. The corruption and alienation inherent in the sterility and futility of The Rock Garden family is symbolic of much wider problems infecting the

American nation, dilemmas which Shepard struggles to apprehend and perhaps even to conquer in the later plays Curse, Buried Child, and True West.

In The Rock Garden, Shepard presented his vision of a family trapped by the stultifying bonds of middle-class adherence to ill-defined and misunderstood traditional values, misguidedly following the dictates of the long nurtured Puritan myth of the sanctuary provided by family existence, while essentially subscribing to the new standards of license and greed in twentieth century America.

Curse of the Starving Class expands this vision in a play more realistic and concerned with character than any that preceded it. Shepard re-evaluated his attitude toward character after meeting the English director Peter Brook in 1973. Character became a more meaningful aspect of his approach to drama - 'character is something that can't be helped, it's like destiny. It's something that's essential. ... it can't be ultimately changed. It's like the structure of our bones, the blood that runs through our veins.' (Rosen 1993:8) Shepard uncovered in himself a dawning fascination with family interaction moving beyond 'generational conflict to images of continuity or deeply-felt psychological connections.' (Grant 1991:559) These affiliations are evident in the realism of his depiction of family relationships in Curse and in some of the later plays. In the theatrical world of Sam Shepard 'family life is like all life, violent and contradictory,

shaped by long-suppressed forces and dark secrets.' (Mottram 1984:132) While the house, a 'Southern California homestead - with its lamb, avocado trees, tractor, and irrigation system - promise[s] the peace, prosperity, and self-reliance of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer' (Luedtke 1989:149), the family is plunging into chaos, preyed upon by land developers and threatened by comic-book gangsters. The play dramatises a 'pattern of entrapment [a] capitulation to [a] pattern of violence and spiritual deprivation' (Peterson 1989:50). More than any of the earlier plays Curse uses the condition of the family as a metaphor for the spiritual state of America. The environment is confining and constraining and the characters are 'wrenched between the demands of socialised conduct and the curse of more primitive, natural behaviour' (Mottram 1984:133). The fabric of Shepard's America is ripped apart, its values fractured and its destiny ambiguous. The despair of the family in Curse is the doomed reflection of the anguish of the wider community.

The drama opens as fifteen-year-old Wesley Tate clears up a debris-strewn kitchen, the result of the previous night's drunken attack on the homestead by his father, Weston. His mother, Ella, attempts to dissuade him, claiming that 'you shouldn't be doing that. ... He [the father] should be doing it. He's the one who broke it [the door] down.' (Shepard 1988:135) Wesley wishes to preserve the family dignity, to maintain the image of secure domestic life. He is humiliated by his mother reporting the incident to the police because it disrupts his sense of identity, makes him feel that the family is 'someone else'. The other

members of the family long to escape a flawed and frustrated life, and dreams of flight are shared by all the major characters, with the exception of Wesley. The mother, Ella, hopes to sell the farm to a land development company represented by the lawyer, Taylor (with whom she is having an affair) and travel to Europe. Emma, her daughter, dreams of an escape to Mexico; while Weston, the husband and father, drinks, absconds for days at a time, and, 'susceptible to any bargain or get-rich-quick scheme that comes his way ... squanders the family's meagre financial resources.' (Peterson 1989:54) Finally Weston is pursued by gangsters who intend to make him pay his bad debts. While the parents compete with one another to sell the farm and escape from the constraints of a lifestyle devoid of romance, the children are left to defend the paradigm of family unity. The Puritan ideal of family existence has been betrayed in the twentieth century by land grabbing thugs, and the Tate family are willing, avaricious victims of the treachery. They are prepared to sacrifice their home, and more importantly their land, to what Wesley terms 'a zombie invasion.' The values of peace, prosperity and self-reliance have been sold out to materialism and greed, epitomised by the smooth-talking, 'head zombie', the lawyer Taylor. Wesley is the one character who is attuned to the land, who has tried to save the farm, who understands that the farm exemplifies roots and permanence. Ironically, it is Wesley who is inescapably trapped at the end of the play, unable to flee the consequences of the emotional deprivation and spiritual oblivion of the family.

In Curse Shepard focussed directly on the family and its relationships, something that for years he had denounced as boring and uninteresting. However, once he began exploring Shepard found that:

... the interesting thing about taking real blood relationships is that the more you start to investigate those things as external characters, the more you see they're also internal characters. The mythology has to come out of real life, not the other way round.

(Freedman 1985:20)

Shepard quickly uncovers the 'internal character' of the Tate family by deliberately destroying the traditional and comfortable expectation of theatrical reality, thrusting his audience into a world of aggression, lies, frustration, alienation and violence. The discovery begins with a conversation in an ordinary, middle-class kitchen and ends in the same setting to the echoes of a car-bomb explosion and the gruesome vision of the mutilated carcass of a lamb. As he did in The Rock Garden, Shepard has sensationally overturned conventional expectation, shocking his audience into a new dimension, an unexplored territory where complacency is violated and reality is necessarily confronted.

The key to the 'internal character' of this family lies in the apparent dichotomy between the initial appearance of mundane, middle-class family life, and the emergent and terrifying malignancy of their contempt for, and corruption of, traditional family norms. This devastating revelation is made apparent within minutes of the play's opening, when we are exposed first

to the lies Ella tells her daughter, Emma, about the onset of menstruation; then to Emma's awakening knowledge of dislocation as she finds out that her mother has boiled and eaten her demonstration chicken; and finally to the profanity of Wesley's urinating on her school charts. These acts reveal the betrayal of American ideals in a characteristic perversion of attitudes within the family, and underline the desecration of the values of courtesy, honesty and trust. As Ron Mottram suggests, in an environment where basic tenets of human dignity are abused and debased, 'the members of the family devour each other in relationships based on exploitation, alienation and lies.' (1984:133) The transgression of these values takes place time and again in the play. Parents break trust with one another, a mother lies to her daughter and shifts the burden of responsibility to her son, a father abandons his family, a husband treats his wife as a domestic slave, dreams are trampled underfoot, and the customary 'home and hearth' is bartered and sold for a few dollars. All that has emotional or spiritual value is reduced to commodity, devoid of merit or stature. These are the substance of Shepard's American family.

It is this diminishment of all that is precious, the denigration of the honourable ethics of the past that is the scourge that contaminates Shepard's America. The curse comes from the disavowal of ideals of the past, the abandonment of principles held dear by the founding fathers of the American continent. The deprecation of Puritan values and the substitution of the code of self-gratification is the cancer eating away the fabric of family

life, and rotting the heart of American democracy. The replacement of the old standards by the avaricious selfishness of the new is exemplified in the early plays by the dissension between father and son, brought about by the father's heedless withdrawal from family involvement. This deliberate isolation is graphically illustrated by the father's preoccupation with his rock garden in the play of the same name, while the conflict reaches more mythic proportions in The Holy Ghostly, where the relationship between Pop and Ice 'signifies all those fathers and sons in the history of Western literature who have struggled with the ties that both bind and separate.' (Mottram 1984:69) Similarly, Weston leaves his family and farm for days on end, retreating to the desert on inexplicable drinking sprees. The modern detachment from the connecting bonds of the past leaves the family bereft and vulnerable, open to the invasion of the egocentric parsimony and the narcissism of modern attitudes.

That the violation of the cherished values of the past relates to the nature of the curse invoked upon the Tate family is initially manifest in Wesley's long opening description of the events of the previous night, and his overwhelming horror of the violent invader, the 'Man cursing. Man going insane. Feet and hands tearing. Head smashing. Man yelling. ... Man throwing wood. Man throwing up.' (Shepard 1988:138) The man is Wesley's father - Dad the protector is reduced to Dad the terrifying raider, the carrier of the curse. The perversion of the norm is evident as it is the father who is the aggressor rather than the guardian of family. Wesley verbalises his and our disquiet about conditions

within this family when he tells Ella that 'it's humiliating to have the cops come to your own house. Makes me feel like we're someone else. ... Makes me feel lonely. Like we're in trouble or something' (Shepard 1988:136), and Emma's question 'What kind of family is this?' finds an answering chord in our consciousness. Randall suggests that 'by now a drunken father breaking down the door to get in his own house seems not only understandable behaviour but "normal" compared to the behaviour of these other members of the family.' (1988:128) This family is disturbed and the trouble lies with its loss, its deliberate abandonment, of traditional values.

Weston's behaviour is not the only source of the curse. Ella, in a conversation immediately after Wesley's monologue, discusses the onset of menstruation with her daughter Emma. That 'the curse' is of an hereditary and biological nature is implicit in the juxtaposition of the two ideas - the inherited 'curse' feared by Wesley, the physiological 'curse' natural to Emma. The play on the word implies that the curse is both inborn and hereditary, and the insinuation, hinted at in Wesley's monologue,¹ that the poison is carried in the male line becomes evident as the play progresses. The first indication that the invasion is patriarchal

1. Wesley fear is partly a result of his identification of himself as 'the enemy' shortly to be invaded - 'I could feel myself lying far below them [model aeroplanes] on my bed like I was on the ocean and overhead they were on reconnaissance. ... Taking pictures of the enemy. Me, the enemy. ... My listening was afraid. ... Like any second something could invade me. ... something indescribable.' (Shepard 1988:137)

is revealed in Weston's violation of his home. Wesley's apprehension of himself as the enemy develops the implication and when Emma describes her father's 'terrible temper' to Taylor, and explains it as

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. ... It's the same thing that makes him drink. Something in the blood. Hereditary. ... The fear lies with the ones that carry the stuff in their blood I don't have it in me.

(Shepard 1988:152)

she clarifies the source and the devastation of the curse. Later we learn from Ella that she is 'not self-destructive', and Weston agrees that she 'came from a different class of people'. It is the men who carry the curse, the poison that is contaminating the fabric of the Tate family life, but that it is part of the biological inheritance is indicated in the reference to the 'curse' of womanhood - the ability to procreate and so pass the imprecation on to a new generation - 'blood can be a life-giver as well as the fluid transmitting the poison and curse of heredity.' (Peterson 1989:78)

The curse is directly referred to only once in the play when Ella articulates her pain and frustration, her loneliness and anger in the bitter words that attempt to define the nature of the malediction that has befallen them:

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. ... Every day I can see it coming. And it

always comes. ... even when you do everything to stop it from coming. ... And it goes back. ... 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.
(Shepard 1988:173)

The hereditary nature of the curse is indicated in the echoing names of the characters - mother Ella and daughter Emma, father Weston and son Wesley. 'Shepard is suggesting that father and son, mother and daughter, are carrying on the tradition to which they are subject both as adherents and as victims.' (Tucker 1992:127) The curse manifests itself in many ways, practices that reflect the breakdown of normality, and disclose the devastation of traditional family existence. Each of the characters desires to escape, to flee from the disappointments that life imposes. Each of the characters has a dream that goes unrecognised and unsupported. Each parent tries to sell the house and the land, to dispose of the past, and escape the shackles of responsibility and disillusionment.

The children, initially sober and much wiser than their parents, rapidly fall victim to the power of the curse and their fate gives substance to the intensity of the magnitude of its sterility. Emma chooses a life of crime and materialistic gain, her vision of the future scarred by the lack of nurture and the example set by her mother. Wesley, in his desperate, doomed attempt to save the ranch, hurtles straight into the waiting jaws of the curse, and we witness the nightmare of his metamorphosis into the man who is his father - the malevolent invader.

The influence that the curse has on the family is realised in the particular use of language by the men in the play. Weston's preferred mode of speech is curt, vulgar bawling, and much of his early dialogue is printed in capital letters. After his conversion, however, as Phyllis Randall notices 'his language becomes middle-class standard in both content and style, suitable for broadcast into homes all over America.' (1988:123)

Initially, Wesley's language is full of remembered sensations and emotions, sensitive and descriptive. However, the language that he uses at the end of the play as he and Ella tell the story of the eagle and the cat signals

... that the curse in the family has been handed down intact. The effect of the curse shows in the language. Gone are the vivid images, the piling-on of sensations. Gone is any introspection. ... The shift in the style of story telling signals his destruction, his fate, his inheritance from his father, just as clearly as his shift in clothes.

(Randall 1988:132)

Weston's story is of the strength and power of the eagle as it swoops down to snatch up 'those testes. Those fresh little remnants of manlihood' (Shepard 1988:183), while Wesley's story could be of the catastrophically destructive effect of the new America on the masculinity, and therefore independence and autonomy, of her male citizens. Ella and Wesley tell a story symbolic of the devastating dependence of the two combatants in the family

struggle for survival

- Wesley: And that eagle comes down and picks up the cat in his talons and carries him screaming off into the sky.
- Ella: That's right. And they fight. They fight like crazy in the middle of the sky. The cat's tearing his chest out, and the eagle's trying to drop him, but the cat won't let go because he knows if he falls he'll die.
- Wesley: And the eagle's being torn apart in midair. The eagle's trying to free himself from the cat and the cat won't let go.
- Ella: And they come crashing down to the earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing.

(Shepard 1988:200)

The story is told by Ella and Wesley as straight-forward fact, with no embellishment, no lyrical attention to style and language, just the simple presentation of events. The reduction in their language, as Nightingale indicates, suggests that the curse has taken hold 'in an inexorable handing over of loss from one generation to the next' (Hart 1987:73), and the only hope the family had for the future, Wesley's connection to, and love for the land, has been lost to the brutalising force of the curse. As the story implies, the family is doomed to a struggle of 'mutually destructive dependency' (Hart 1987:73), and the image of the eagle and the cat underscores the savagery of the final battle.

Shepard employs a mythic subtext in his attempt to 'strike a more universal chord; by self-consciously using the term curse, for

instance, and employing images of hereditary violence to suggest a link between his own "starving class" family and such infamous family lines as those dramatised in Aeschylus's Oresteia.¹ (DeRose 1992:94-95) But Shepard is not only imbued with the great myths of the Greeks, but also with the even earlier fertility myths (scrutinised particularly in Buried Child), and the folk and Indian myths explored in plays such as Operation Sidewinder and Back Dog Beast Bait. Shepard's major concern in Curse is the modern myth of prosperity and opportunity for all. The new danger sweeping across the landscape of the family farm is proclaimed by Taylor, the major representative of the new order, the 'salesman' of the new commercialism

You may not realise it, but there's corporations behind me! Executive management! People of influence. People with ambition who realise the importance of investing in the future. ... There's nothing you can do to turn it back. The only thing you can do is cooperate. ... To become part of us. ... Because if you don't, you'll all be left behind. ... And there'll be nothing to save you. Nothing and nobody.

(Shepard 1988:178-179)

The danger that Taylor poses is more than just his access to people of influence, it lies in his attitude to the land. The Tate family are part of an ethos of small-town traditions and

1. The story of the Oresteia is compounded of fact and imagination, reflecting the experience, belief, and aspiration of a society. The parallels with Shepard's trilogy lie in that the Oresteian trilogy deals also with the curse that descends on a family who defied the power of natural order and the suffering resultant upon that insolence.

farm values, where 'owning property and tilling your own soil made you free. The small family farm was the best means for Americans to attain and preserve such freedom.' (Scanlan 1978:29) Taylor perceives the land only in terms of financial gain, which he hides behind a mask of social commitment

The land is full of potential. Of course it's a shame to see agriculture being slowly pushed into the background in deference to low-cost housing, but that's simply a product of the times we live in. ... More people demand more shelter. More shelter demands more land. ... We're lucky to live in a country where that provision is possible.

(Shepard 1988:153)

Taylor and his kind, the night-club owner Ellis and the gangsters Emerson and Slater, are at the root of the changes in modern America. Their money, and the traps it sets for the disillusioned and spiritually hungry, bring about the downfall of the Tate family, and by implication the whole of American society. Ella realises the threat implicit in money when she begs Wesley not to 'touch that money. It's tainted! Don't you touch it!' (Shepard 1988:176). Her fears seem justified shortly afterwards when she perceives a change in Wesley's behaviour - 'Did you hear the way he was talking to me? He was talking to me all different. All different than before. He wasn't nice at all.' (Shepard 1988:180-181) Wesley touches the money, the filthy lucre, brought into the family by the night-club owner Ellis, and his fate is sealed - he can no longer escape the curse which descends on the family, nor can he now offer any hope for a future free from the power of avarice.

The contaminated condition of the family is symbolised by the maggot-infested lamb, which makes its entrance after the appearance of Taylor and his discussion of the land. The lamb is diseased, polluted 'clear up into the small intestine' (Shepard 1988:187), and the infection clearly represents the malignancy lying within the Tate family. Significantly, it is the men who try to save the lamb, while Ella and Emma are determined only to get it out of the kitchen.

Both Weston and Wesley attempt to heal the lamb, these endeavours mirroring their futile efforts to rescue the family from the onslaught of the materialist world. Weston makes his attempt after his rebirth in Act Three, while Wesley brings the lamb into the kitchen, the heart of the home, early in Act One, in a vain attempt to cure it of its infection - an intense visual image of his hopeless gamble to save the farm and the family. His care of the lamb is the most visible act of nurture in the play, yet despite the attention, the animal, like Wesley, remains threatened on all sides. Wesley's innocence, his love of the land, will, like the lamb, be butchered by the devouring hunger of the curse. Peterson notes the symbolic connection between Wesley and the lamb and comments on the 'inseparable connection between the death of the lamb and the "birth" of the new Wesley [being] reinforced when one of the hit-men enters with the skinned carcass of the lamb and remarks that it "Looks like somebody's afterbirth to me!"' (1989:76) Wesley is sacrificed to the insatiable hunger of the curse stalking the family, where 'violence and

greed subvert innocence and goodness.' (Peterson 1989:78)

The impression that the family is being poisoned by unseen forces determined to undermine and finally destroy, is indicated, not only by the presence of Taylor and his henchmen, and the maggot-infested lamb, but by the pervading fear of germs and their devastating power. Germs are linked with money and the concept of the curse very early in the play. In her disingenuous attempt to give her daughter truthful, motherly counsel on the onset of menstruation, Ella advises Emma never to buy sanitary napkins from 'any old machine in any old gas station bathroom' because 'they're filthy [and] You don't know whose quarters go into those machines. Those quarters carry germs. Those innocent looking silver quarters Spewing germs all over those napkins.' (Shepard 1988:139) Germs and money are connected both in Ella's mind and in the audience's early in the progress of the play - it is the quarters that carry the germs, that carry the danger. The disease engendered by the germs carried on money, is not a physical infection, but rather a greed for things - 'buy refrigerators. Buy cars, houses, lots, invest.' (Shepard 1988:194) Grab land for housing development, for suburbs and stores and 'golf courses, shopping centres, banks, sauna baths.' (Shepard 1988:158)

Significantly the contagion begins its overt infiltration of the family after Ella first mentions selling the farm. Following an argument with Wesley she goes to the fridge and for the first

time it is empty - she looks inside and says 'Nothing.' There is no longer anything in the house that can satiate the hunger now attacking the family. The invasive craving to gain financial advantage from the farm, to be rid of the land and consequently the ideals of the past, has begun its siege of the Tates and it does not surrender its grip until the family lies devastated and crushed.

Shepard's families think they believe, however vaguely, in the Puritan values of discipline, sobriety, industry and self-denial. It is the constraints of these values, however, that lead to the confrontations between family members, and in particular, the strife between man and wife. Auerbach comments that Shepard 'portrays an eternal battle between the women gatherers who settle down, grow food and create civilisation, and men, the nomadic hunters, who survive by violence and flee the ties of family and commitment.' (1988:53-54) That the male protagonist should be the one to bridle at the restraints implicit in family life is a reflection of the autobiographical nature of much of Shepard's writing. Shepard's father was a wanderer and an alcoholic who fled regularly into the desert, unable to meet the demands placed on him of family support, temperance and dedicated hard work.

The claims of family life are rejected by all of Shepard's fathers, from the Man in The Rock Garden, through Pop in The Holy Ghostly, to the more realistically depicted fathers in Curse,

Buried Child, Lie of the Mind and Fool for Love. The most common reaction to these familial demands on the husbands and fathers is flight, or more precisely, rootless drifting. But despite its romantic allure, flight only further aggravates the emotional confusion and ambivalence of these men (Schlatter 1990:62).

The desert is the promised land of escape for Shepard's fathers, but it no longer pledges freedom, for 'the frontier has run out; the west is no longer big enough.' (Auerbach 1988:60) The wanderers are trapped in a diminishing circle which finally offers the family as the sole sanctuary, the only retreat, however debased, for the escapee father, and his son, doomed to repeat the obsessive behaviour of the male.

Weston, the errant father in Curse recognised his fate as he

... watched him [his father] move through rooms. ... watched him keeping out of the way of things. Out of the way of my mother. Away from my brothers. ... Everybody was right [there], but nobody saw him but me. He lived apart. Right in the middle of things and he lived apart.
(Shepard 1988:168)

Weston realised that his insight into his father's condition guaranteed his own infection, although he never saw his 'old man's poison' till he was much older than Wesley and recognised it then because he 'saw [himself] infected with it. ... saw [himself] carrying it around. His poison in my body.' (Shepard 1988:167) Vince, the son in Buried Child, becomes aware of the

'endless progression from one violent man to another' (Auerbach 1988:54) as he flees his family home in the dark of the night

I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. ... And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. ... And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognised.

(Shepard 1988:130)

That the men in Shepard's plays fear the invasion of the poison centred in their fathers, expressed in the play by the concept of 'invisible germs mysteriously floating around' (Shepard 1988:154), is vividly demonstrated by the fear Wesley expresses in his opening monologue. It is Weston who carries the curse, Weston who is infected with poison

Look at my outlook. You don't envy it, right? ... That's because it's full of poison. Infected. And you recognise poison, right? You recognise it when you see it? ... My poison scares you.

(Shepard 1988:167)

Wesley fears violation, and is correct to fear his father. It is the contamination deep within his father that is the infiltrator, and it seizes the first opportunity it gets to assume control. Wesley tells Emma, after his attempt at renewal, that

... 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.
(Shepard 1988:196)

The invasion of the son by the father's 'poisons', and the dislocation of fathers and sons is brought about as the family is 'increasingly buffeted by the external pressures of modern life - constant mobility, a chronic sense of isolation, and the loss of connection to the past.' (Schlatter 1990:61) Shepard's men seek refuge from the pressures of modern life in an escape to the idealised notion of the West - a long cherished frontier, the home of the cowboy - where life was straight-forward and problems were solved by the justice of the gun. Erben describes them as still dreaming the old American dream, but unable to live it in modern America. The new West, with its huge multi-national corporations has conquered the old West of the lone ranger, and Shepard's men have sought refuge in their own fragile world of imagination (1987:29).

In Shepard's plays the frontier is 'those open spaces where law, order, and social restrictions have never invaded and primitive longings for individual power gain prompt release' (Falk 1981:91), and where men are free from dreary domestic commitments. However, Kakutani adds that the promised freedom has become 'crisscrossed by highways and pock-marked by suburbs' (1984:25), and therefore no longer offers the sanctuary and independence it once did. This leaves Shepard's men alienated and bewildered, shorn of their dreams, and as the world closes in on them 'male prowess is not enough to insulate them against the dry

rot of corruption that has invaded the land.' (Falk 1981:93)

Without the cohesive strength of the father's presence, the family, open to attack on all sides, begins a steady spiral of degeneration, resulting in security, so vital to the Puritan definition of self, being eroded and finally extinguished. These debilitating losses - the breakdown of family, the forfeit of security and the degradation of the ideal of the frontier - generate a hunger, a psychic starvation within the Tate family, a pain so insistent that they confuse it with real, physical hunger. As a result, the characters are constantly eating, preparing food or searching the refrigerator for sustenance. Early in the play Ella accuses Wesley of always 'being in the refrigerator.' His response that he is hungry elicits the following comment from her - 'How can you be hungry all the time? We're not poor. We're not rich but we're not poor.' (Shepard 1988:143) The hunger felt by this family is confused with economic deprivation and Emma's claim that 'no one's starving! We don't belong to the starving class!' (Shepard 1988:142) emphasises the family's bewilderment - there can be no acknowledgeable starvation in modern America that cannot be explained in terms of money. As observed earlier in The Rock Garden, we again see, in this family, the confusion and substitution of food for emotional and spiritual fulfilment. Charles Whiting notes that it is in Curse that Shepard's use of food imagery as an indication of spiritual deprivation is most strikingly evident, and that 'the repeated insistence on the refrigerator in the first act gives a mythic dimension to the hunger of the four family members' (Whiting 1988a:176). The sym-

bolic value of the fridge is enhanced by the way in which all four characters constantly investigate, and hold conversations with, the refrigerator.

This metaphorical conception of the family's need is increased by the cooking and eating of breakfast, the loads of artichokes and groceries that are stuffed into the fridge, and Wesley's frenetic guzzling of its contents in Act Three. Even the food they have is boiled till it loses all nourishment. That the family is unfulfilled is graphically illustrated by the spectacle of Wesley 'ravenously gorging himself, groaning, and throwing half-eaten food aside' (Whiting 1988a:176). The spiritual craving of the characters in Curse remains unsatiated by the food they eat, their emptiness revealed by the compulsiveness of their behaviour. Shepard's use of food imagery to indicate the secret lives of his characters can be traced back to his earliest plays¹ while the use of food as an image of frustration is visible in the chocolates devoured by Miss Cherry in the opening scene of Shaved Splits as 'substitutes for the sexual attentions she does not have' (Whiting 1988a:180). Attitudes toward food rapidly become the way in which Shepard expresses his character's deepest and most significant longings.

However, Shepard does not confine his imagery of spiritual obliv-

1. Pop's angels-on-horseback in The Rock Garden, and Chet's breakfast monologue in Cowboys #2.

ion to food. Alcohol becomes the means by which many of the characters attempt to escape and find regeneration. Alcohol, as dissimulation, first appeared in The Unseen Hand, and is finally personified in Curse in the person of Weston, the crude, drunken father of the family. Whiting suggests that alcohol is the counterpart of the food imagery in the family plays because it expresses the frustrations and dread felt by characters bereft of hope, and devoid of dreams. In Curse only Weston drinks, but in the later Buried Child, not only does the patriarch Dodge find consolation in alcohol, but Halie, Tilden and even Vince, the young 'hope-for-the-future', drown their disappointments in drink (Whiting 1988a:180). It is the disenchanting dreamers who drink, those who have discovered that their frontiers are limited and that their dreams have become nightmares of frustrated fantasy. Alcohol provides forgetfulness and assuagement, a means of escape when flight is blocked.

Although women are not the direct focus of the pain of disaffection, they also suffer the disappointments and frustrations felt by the male protagonists. The women try desperately to escape the life of sterility and abandonment thrust upon them by their tormented and irresponsible men, but their plans go awry, and they too seem doomed to failure by the curse which infects their husbands and sons. Ella is determined to escape the noose that being a wife and mother has placed around her neck by fleeing to Europe, and Emma, her daughter, dreams of heading for Baja California and learning

... how to be a short-order cook and write novels on the side. ... Kitchen novels. Then I'd get published and disappear into the heart of Mexico. Just like that guy. ... who wrote *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. ... he disappeared. ... He escaped.
(Shepard 1988:149)

The women use innovative methods to escape the stranglehold of violence and sterility on their lives. Erben sees Shepard's women as 'participat[ing] in the corporate and communal life of modern America, which has replaced the male frontier individualism of the past' (Erben 1987:29), and identifies them with what he calls 'other' men - men who prefer suits to jeans and cowboy boots - who are the brokers behind the major changes in American life. The women identify with these 'other' men as a means of escaping the frustration of their disappointed expectations. Ella consorts with Taylor, the most transparent of the proponents of the new American Dream, in her desire to break away from the stultification of her existence; Halie in Buried Child desires financial prosperity in her relationships, and despises her unsuccessful sons Tilden and Bradley. In True West, Austin and Mom are part of the 'community built on conformity and commercial success. They "shop in the Safeway" and sell their imagination' (Erben 1987:38).

The older women in the plays have, as Whiting suggests, 'been disappointed in love and live in a state of separation. ... [and] It is this abandonment and the tragic loss of married love which is at the root of the very negative image of older women in

Shepard's theatre.' (Whiting 1990:500) These women swallow the financial and sexual promises made them by the 'other' men in a desperate and pathetic attempt to escape the stagnation of their domestic lives. Emma goes a different route from the older women as she chooses to become a direct part of the greed and avarice of twentieth century living, to use her body when it becomes necessary, to go into crime because

It's the only thing that pays these days. ... It's the perfect self employment. Crime. No credentials. No diplomas. No overhead. No upkeep. Just straight profit.

(Shepard 1988:196)

Emma chooses a very masculine version of escape, a trend we have seen before in her fantasies 'which tend towards traditionally masculine pursuits and have as their objective the power and freedom she believes would accompany their realisation.' (Hart 1987:69) Shepard does not invariably create courageous and resourceful women, but Emma, with Cavale in Cowboy Mouth, Shelly in Buried Child, May in Fool for Love and Beth in A Lie of the Mind, is one of a group who make heroic efforts 'to escape from an imprisoning and unacceptable situation.' (Whiting 1990:497) Emma's ambitions are ultimately a realistic assessment of what succeeds in a modern, materialistic America.

As is becoming apparent, Curse explores the devastating consequences of the loss of the American Dream and the consequent disintegration of the American way of life. The spiritual and emotional hunger of the family is only one indication of the

ramifications of this degeneration. The plight of the Tate family represents the predicament of American society, a culture which has lost touch with its roots, which is floundering in a quagmire of dead hopes and dreams. Shepard sees this condition as a consequence of the debasement of the land and of the abandoning of the past, of the attempt to shrug it and its values off, in the way that Weston sheds his old clothes. Weston's rebirth is as illusionary as is Ella's vain belief that it is possible to ignore the past and its implications in present convictions and values, and to embrace, in the form of Taylor, new codes and convictions.

Wesley seems to be the only one to understand the implications of the new attitudes and values. When discussing the sale of the house with Emma he says

You don't understand what's happening yet, do you? ... You think it's Mr. and Mrs. America who're gonna buy this place, but it's not. It's Taylor. ... Land development. ... So it means more than losing a house. It means losing a country.

(Shepard 1988:162)

Wesley's awareness of the value of the land is consistent with his appreciation of old values and traditions evinced first in his desire to escape to Alaska, 'The frontier. ... It's full of possibilities. It's undiscovered' (Shepard 1988:163); and secondly to keep the farm, to fix the place up and by joining the California Avocado Association learn how to make a living out of the ranch. Wesley is strongly associated with the romance of the

past, and is described as wearing sweatshirt, jeans and cowboy boots. Shepard's fascination with the cowboy and his role in the traditional American psyche is well documented, Florence Falk (1981) and Michiko Kakutani (1984) making particularly relevant contributions. Falk describes Shepard as 'fascinated (and partly seduced?) by the cowboy's pre-eminent position in American myths and legends' (1981:91), and consequently finds that a 'late-twentieth century manifestation of the renegade cowboy, guided by a pastoral vision of a distinctly masculine sort, reappears in play after play.' (1981:92) Kakutani discusses the way in which, as a boy, Shepard played at being a cowboy¹, later trading his 'beat' clothes for those more traditionally associated with the cowboy. Kakutani recognises that in the extreme masculinity of his art, Shepard is 'acting' out the myth of the cowboy, the frontier hero.

In his opening monologue, Wesley, the fledgling cowboy, the would-be hero, displays his close connection and identification with the land, advancing what is ultimately Shepard's own view of the importance of land to the fading American Dream.

I was lying there on my back. I could smell the avocado blossoms. I could hear the coyotes. ... I could feel myself in my bed in my room in this house in this town in this state in this country. I could feel this country close like it was part of my bones.

(Shepard 1988:137)

1. See footnote on page 13 of the Introduction for a description of his early attempt to imitate Burt Lancaster in the film "Vera Cruz".

Wesley understands the value of land but any hope he has of returning the family to a state of grace has been tainted by the poison he carries deep within him. The Tate family farm is unproductive and almost derelict, although the tractor still works and the irrigation system's 'water's blastin' right through those pipes!' (Shepard 1988:187) The present barrenness of the farm is yet a further indication of the sterility inherent in the Tate's way of life, and the tragedy is enhanced by the wasted potential. This desolation echoes the aridity of the land in The Rock Garden, and looks forward to Buried Child, where the family farm has not been productive 'since about nineteen thirty-five. That's the last time I [Dodge] planted corn out there!' (Shepard 1988:69)

The land in Curse is either barren, a desert, or to be used for housing development. At no time does the family, with the possible exception of Wesley, expect nourishment or security from it. Their sense of the value of land has been perverted by their greed for material gain. 'They have sold their inheritance for a line of credit and a passel of get rich quick schemes. ... they have fallen into the great American pastime of the 1970s - speculation, a parasitic means of making profits without any relation to productivity.' (Collins 1988:194)

Weston has bought into this new version of the American Dream

and has been peddled a 'real piece of shit. Just a bunch of strings on sticks, with lizards blowing across it. ... Just desert' (Shepard 1988:158), the bitter dust of deceitful promises. He has also sold his birthright for a few dollars, and he eventually has to pay the price. Collins explains that Weston 'was only doing what the rest of America was doing. If he lost his birthright as a consequence America is in equal danger of losing its.' (1988:201) Weston's 'rebirth' comes about as a result of his realisation that the farm is his last stronghold, as he has nowhere else to go, no further frontier to which he can escape

I just went off for a little while. Now and then. I couldn't stand it here. ... I kept looking for it out there somewhere. ... It all turned around on me. I kept looking for it out there somewhere. And all the time it was right inside this house.

(Shepard 1988:194)

Renewal is expressed in the baptismal quality of Weston's bathing, which serves as an almost religious encounter with his part in the fabric of family life. His realisation of the significance of family life comes about as a result of understanding that the family is not 'just a social thing', that it is under the same roof, not because it had to be, but because it was supposed to be. Weston is hopeful of the future but as soon as we see the result of Wesley's attempt at resurrection, the nightmarish assumption of his father's identity, we understand that there will be no renaissance for the Tate family. Weston's gestures of

reform come too late for the others. Ella has lost her faith in his ability to rehabilitate, and Wesley, in his desperate effort to save something of the family's inheritance, has 'step[ped] into the father's clothes; the son become[s] the man.' (Tucker 1992:128) This transformation is achieved after his final contamination by the brawl with Ellis. He appears with blood on his face and hands and his behaviour convinces Weston that he is drunk. His dazed and defeated condition is emphasised by his vapid repetition of his father's words, and his numb investigation of the refrigerator. His response to his father's description of his rebirth, of his being 'full of hope', is the bone-chilling 'I'm starving', which at this crucial moment of the play, makes it clear that there is no way out for the Tate family. They are irretrievably trapped in an abyss of failure. Shepard's family in Curse mirrors for its audience the apprehension and dread felt by mankind when faced with the enormity of its moral responsibilities, and unnervingly reveals its desperate tactics to avoid confrontation with the reality of existence.

Curse is a play about lost dreams and hopes, about the decay of the relationships within a family, about nostalgia for a golden past. 'The myth of America being the land of plenty and the guarantor of personal success for all has deteriorated, and Shepard is working to dramatise this fact' (Demastes 1988:104). Shepard does more than dramatise this fact, he mourns the loss of the American Dream, and grieves for something substantial and deep-rooted which would save human communities (Demastes 1988:103), for Shepard sees the farm as the only place where

family life has a chance of survival. Shepard's loyalty lies with the small farming family, and their connection with the land gives at least the illusion of a laudable dream, but as his allegory Curse of the Starving Class shows, 'his rational sights tell him of the inevitability of the failure of such an American dream.' (Tucker 1992:128)

In Buried Child, the second play in the trilogy, Shepard again yields to the urge to write about the family in what Mazzocco identifies as an 'ineluctable pull toward "home," the last stop on the journey from which all journeys began' (1985:24). Buried Child is Shepard's capitulation to the lure of what could be called mainstream American drama. Critics¹ have commented on the echoes of other plays and other playwrights found in Buried Child. The strongest influences seem to be those of Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night and Desire Under the Elms, and Ibsen's Ghosts; less important are classical Greek family myths; Eliot's plays and poems, most noticeably 'The Wasteland'; and threads of Pinter and Albee. With Buried Child Shepard becomes part of the family of American literature.

The major theme that links Shepard with all these playwrights, and others like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, is the dominating power, the irresistible fascination of the past. The theme is not a new one for Shepard. The Holy Ghostly prefigures shadows of the past found active in Curse and True West, and The Unseen Hand is his most graphic illustration of the presence

1. Schvey (1991:55-57, 1993:25); Crum (1988:74,77); DeRose (1992:106-109); Robinson (1989:151-157); Simard (1984:87), and Luedtke (1989:153).

of the past and its hold over the present and the future. It is the way in which this 'unseen hand' manipulates the family which becomes the focus of Buried Child. By acknowledging his interest in the family, Shepard has 'moved toward a new realism which owes much to the family drama of O'Neill' (Schvey 1993:18).

As has been established in earlier chapters, Shepard has always been concerned with the family, but it is his recognition of that interest that has changed in Buried Child. Shepard has consciously attempted a family chronicle, a saga imbued with the horrors of a Gothic melodrama while at the same time managing to make a searing assault on the values of his twentieth century society. The design of the family structure used by Shepard to illustrate his despairing vision of the disintegration of American society, began with a family with no specific names, no individual identity - the Man, Woman, Boy and Girl in The Rock Garden. Curse presented a more developed and enigmatic family structure, the complexity a projection of his involvement in the intricate rituals of family behaviour, as well as his more intense commitment to the investigation of the disease attacking the fabric of his society.

In Curse, Shepard illustrated a family deprived of warmth, care and compassion, bereft of expectation, faith and dreams, dispossessed of their only hope of survival, the family farm, the heritage they easily barter for corrupt fantasies and momentary

satisfaction, their perception of the value of the land perverted by the craving for material gain. It is this careless attitude towards the land, together with the rejection of the past that precipitates the malignity of the curse, and with it the family, never a stable unit in Shepard's world, begins its downward spiral into violence and disintegration. The malaise of the American family, and by extension American society, is their selling off of the American Dream, their repudiation of traditional Puritan values, and in this rejection, a corruption of the ideals that held the fabric of society together.

Shepard pursues this nightmare vision in Buried Child, aligning himself with the American tradition of family drama. Here the modern mythology of twentieth-century literature - the concerns of his early plays such as Operation Sidewinder, The Unseen Hand,¹ Mad Dog Blues, - become the direct focus of his attention. In these plays Shepard centres on the loss of codes in modern American society, and the creed of individuality, selfishness and violence that has taken their place. The significance given to the disciplined and wholesome family as being of vital importance has frequently been commented on in previous chapters, yet as Shea notes, 'in the modern period, this vision of health gives way to more specular and often spectacular visions of familial

1. In these plays Shepard investigates the contrasts between 'the ruling forces of contemporary technological society' (Marranca 1981:92) and the unfettered and spiritual world of the natural past. In each of these plays there is confrontation between the materialism and emptiness of present American society, and the vibrant and spiritual world of the past, or, of the old West.

disease' (Shea 1984:29). Violence becomes internalised in these families causing them to disintegrate as the destructiveness implodes the traditional family structure, now shaky from the repeated forays of materialism, greed and dishonesty. Shea recognises that

... the nature of the violence ... is intensified to the most excruciating levels because none of it is random or impersonal: everyone is related by the blood in their veins as well as the blood they spill. The violent impulses of these characters find no release beyond the boundaries of the family, but instead rebound inwardly, the frustration of the thwarted exterior release redoubling the savagery of internal warfare. The stage reflects not familial caring but chaos, not vitality but violence, with the image of the ideal family turning into a receding vision, if not an outright illusion, all done with mirrors, to amaze and confound us.
(1984:31)

What the family in Buried Child, and other plays such as Albee's The American Dream and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? have done is essentially to have 'tried and failed to be a family according to natural law' (Shea 1984:95), and their suffering comes about as a result of this self-imposed moral deviation. Violence is at the core of the disease infecting these families, and they only recognise one of their own when the facade of old-fashioned courtesy and morality breaks down, and they turn into terrifying beasts, bent not only on the destruction of property, but in the words of Vince, on 'the devour[ing of] whole families in a single gulp.' (Shepard 1988:126) The family as imaged by Shepard reflects a society obsessed by violence, the mirror image of a culture of manipulated passivity, devoid of fruitfulness and

satisfaction, bereft of human feeling (Auerbach 1982:6).

Buried Child dramatises the unheralded return of a young man to his ancestral home - the story of a prodigal son with a savage twist. The play is 'propelled by two mysteries having to do with the family's inability to recognise a returning son, Vince, and with the identity of an unacknowledged infant corpse that has been buried for over 30 years behind the family's farmhouse.' (DeRose 1992:99) The play begins in a relatively realistic manner, and, as was the case with both The Rock Garden and Curse, Shepard situates the drama within the naturalistic framework of a family home - the kitchen of the two previous plays being replaced by the living room of the family homestead in Buried Child - the sense of realism enhanced by the solid walls and screened porch that supplant the suggested walls in Curse. Once again, Shepard undermines expectation when 'the warmth and hominess generally associated with a living room are belied by the reality of the sparse and drab decor [the] setting emanates an atmosphere of decrepitude and sickness.' (Peterson 1989:86)

The play opens on the seated figure of an old man, Dodge, staring at a flickering television set, the silence punctuated by the noise of rain and his whisky-soaked coughing. Dodge has isolated himself from the world outside, hiding from his family and his past. In what Peterson calls a 'daring dramaturgical choice' (1989:91) Shepard introduces Dodge's wife, Halie, as a 'disem-

bodied voice emanating from the second floor. ... expound[ing] on her favourite topic (what is and is not "Christian") and introduc[ing] the family situation.' (Peterson 1989:91) Everything about the family is reflected in the dilapidated, decaying and malodorous atmosphere of the living room and is summed up in Dodge's first word 'catastrophic!'. Buried Child is a play about 'a Midwest full of pain, violence and insanity - the rotten underside of the farm family that used to be celebrated on The Saturday Evening Post covers.' (Weales 1979:571)

Dodge and Halie have produced three sons. Tilden, the eldest, has returned to the family farm after failing to fit into conventional society, something about him 'profoundly burned out and displaced.' (Shepard 1988:69) Tilden has found corn 'out back', despite Dodge's claim that there 'hasn't been corn out there since about nineteen thirty five!' (Shepard 1988:69), thirty years earlier. Halie leaves her husband and son alone in the house while she goes to lunch with the degenerate priest, Father Dewis. One-legged Bradley, crippled in a chain-saw accident, arrives to find his father asleep on the couch and uses the opportunity to viciously cut Dodge's hair in an act of symbolic castration and dominance. Bradley is surrounded by an air of foreboding, the harbinger of violence and disaster. The couple's third son, Ansel, 'the smart one', died in some mysterious way which Halie attributes to the 'Mob'. Ansel is idealised by his mother, she remembers him as 'a genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And very intelligent.' (Shepard 1988:73) Ansel provides the quintes-

sential version of the All-American hero against which the other men in the play are compared and found wanting. But Ansel, like the American Dream, 'can be nothing but wishful dreams, reflecting Halie's desperate need for a son who could make her proud.' (Whiting 1988b:550)

Tilden's son, Vince, on his way to New Mexico with his girlfriend Shelly, to find his father, arrives at the farm to visit his grandparents. Vince and Shelly bring laughter and youth to the moribund environment of the house, introducing a sense of hope and regeneration to the play. Vince is in search of his roots, desiring acceptance and understanding from his estranged family. Shelly's delight in the 'Norman Rockwell cover' house rapidly turns to apprehension as the homecoming becomes a nightmare of indifference and rejection. No-one recognises Vince, and he flees the house in confusion, ostensibly to purchase whisky for his grandfather, genuinely to escape the humiliation, leaving Shelly to the violent ministrations of Bradley.

Halie returns from the previous day's lunch with Father Dewis and in the struggle for control of the situation the family's secret is revealed - a child was murdered and buried in the backyard. It would seem that the child was the result of an incestuous relationship between Tilden and Halie, and that Dodge murdered it because he 'couldn't let a thing like that continue.' The truth of the story remains in doubt, part of the mystery that surrounds the family. A metamorphosed Vince returns, having discovered that

he cannot escape his heritage, bursting violently into the room and wresting leadership from Bradley, accepting his inescapable destiny. Before he dies, Dodge bequeaths the farm to his grandson, and the play ends as Vince assumes his grandfather's position on the settee - a frightening image of the continuity of unremitting sterility - while his father, Tilden, carries the exhumed corpse of the buried child upstairs to Halie's bedroom, in an image which suggests rebirth, but as DeRose hypothesizes 'is set astride the grave, for Halie's child ... has long ago been sacrificed to the crippling disease of heredity that dictates the family's fate.' (1992:108) Buried Child is a play which 'on its mythic level ... dramatises the inheritance of the sterility of one generation by a wounded ... generation, whose responsibility it is to unearth the past, purify it, and look toward the future.' (Simard 1984:88)

The spiritual destitution and emotional sterility of this family is established immediately. The estrangement and lack of communication between husband and wife, evident in their positioning on the stage in the opening scene - Dodge downstairs on the sofa watching an imageless, flickering television screen, Halie, offstage and upstairs - is accentuated by Halie's cold-blooded suggestion that her husband take a pill and 'be done with it once and for all. Put a stop to it.' (Shepard 1988:65) The callousness implicit in her ambiguous invitation to suicide prefigures the violence inherent within this family and underlies their patent desire to wound. Their eldest son, Tilden, is the one character who escapes this urge, and in so doing creates for himself the

role of fool, seen by the family as a pitiable simpleton, incapable of managing in an apparently hostile world. Tilden left home to go 'out West'. Unable to contend with the loneliness, he returned to the barrenness and sterility of his family home. There he is told that it is unnatural to need his parents, especially at his age, and that his father has never worried about him. There is no compassion, no love in the world of Buried Child - father rejects son, son disclaims father. Children are born into the barren world, and perpetuate the sterility. Bradley, the most grotesque and threatening son, can only function by performing sadistic acts of cruelty. Mutilated in a self-inflicted chain-saw accident, Bradley exerts his distorted masculinity in the symbolic castration of his father, regularly savaging Dodge's hair in a perverted craving for dominance. This lust manifests itself later in his lascivious response to Shelly, Vince's girlfriend. The figurative rape of Shelly, the character most responsible for introducing hope to this blighted family, indicates quite clearly that Bradley is incapable of even the recognition of any value other than those by which he judges the world - brutality and obscenity.

Bradley, however, is only expressing ethics he learned on his father's knee. Dodge himself is incapable of warmth or generosity, and love seems a commodity entirely foreign to his nature. It is Dodge who is responsible for the impotence within the family. Dodge rejects his sons as he renounced his wife many years before when he left his marriage bed. Dodge has ignored his farm for over thirty years and he fails to recognise his grandson Vince.

But his worst act of repudiation was the murder of the child. Hays refers to infanticide as 'a gruesome and painful symbol of the sacrifice of an extension of the self, of perverted values and thwarted development in self and in others' (1990:435). He makes the point that characters 'sacrifice their children, their future, in an attempt to preserve their present.' (Hays 1990:434) Dodge disclaims all knowledge of the past when he says to Shelly 'this is me. Right here. This is it. The whole shootin' match, sittin' right in front of you.' (Shepard 1988:111) Dodge lives only in the present, distrusting the future as much as he fears the past, because contained within the future is his own demise and the accession of his sons. Dodge dominates his sons in an abortive effort to protect himself, to avoid the vicious struggle for leadership between himself and his offspring, just as his son Bradley attempts the symbolic emasculation and displacement of his father in his repeated brutal haircuts. Even the gentle Tilden tries to symbolically bury his father with corn husks, but Tilden's efforts at usurpation were interred with the murdered child.

More illuminating than his denial of the past is Dodge's justification for murdering the child:

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.

(Shepard 1988:124)

Dodge murdered the child because it was visible proof that the family was living a lie, that the veneer of traditional family existence they hid behind was a facade. The child forced Dodge to confront everything he believed of himself and his family, compelled him to see the dishonesty of his marriage, his family, his life. It forced him to acknowledge the aridity of his existence, the bitterness of his marriage bed, and made him see that his sexuality, like that of Weston in Curse, was connected with procreation, not affection. Dodge talks only of the 'kids' he's 'spawned' and accuses Shelly of having 'some damn funny ideas' because she thinks that 'just because people propagate they have to love their offspring' (Shepard 1988:111-112). For Dodge, heritage is merely a 'long line of corpses! ... bones in the grave' (Shepard 1988:112), ashes and shades not worth considering. Dodge has always been completely self centred, utterly independent. He left his parents and 'never went back Never. Never even had the urge. [He] was independent. Always independent (Shepard 1988:78), and as a result has no understanding of his sons, no compassion, and no means by which to recognise Vince as part of his family.

Dodge has passed this indifference on to his sons and they too fail to acknowledge Vince, although Tilden thinks he recognises something about him. Halie immediately knows who Vince is because Halie cares about the past, and, as was the case with the women in Curse, is largely untouched by the contamination of the malevolence. That the only kind of love illustrated in the play is

that of adultery, rape or incest makes a scathing comment on the state of the American nation and is Shepard's way of expressing his belief that it is selfish values that are destroying his society. Hays postulates that 'the combination of infanticide and incest is an attempt to show the perversion of [American] values, the immediate gratification at the cost of long-range, social development.' (1990:446)

The picture of masculinity that Shepard presents to his audience is a bleak one. The male sex is wounded and maimed, vicious, savage and drunken, capable only of expressing itself through brutal acts of dominance such as castration, rape, and infanticide. Halie, corrupted as she may be by their malignity, is still able to smell 'the stench of sin in this house' (Shepard 1988:116) and to demand of fate 'what's happened to the men in this family! Where are the men!' (Shepard 1988:124) This call is the cue for Vince, the grandson, to come crashing through the screen porch-door in a drunken frenzy, smashing empty liquor bottles as he approaches. It is typical of Shepard's bitter and ironic commentary that he should be singing a battle song as he advances. It underlines the hollowness of men's traditionally heroic activities such as sport - to which Halie has just referred as being more vicious now than it was in the past - and war (Adler 1987:108). It has not benefited either Dodge or Tilden to have been former All-Americans, and the 'glory' of war is now revealed as spoiled and perverted, a drunken assault on a defenceless homestead. The expected rejuvenation of the family evidenced early in the play by Tilden's loads of vegetables turns

sour, and 'after the rain of corn and carrots, comes the hailstorm of smashing bottles.' (Simon 1979:87) Vince proves himself to be one of Dodge's own, unrecognised in his guise of prodigal son, but acknowledged by all in his new identity of 'Midnight Strangler', the savage intruder. With his dying breath Dodge wills him the house and Vince acquiesces to his role in the family: 'I've gotta carry on the line. I've gotta see to it that things keep rolling' (Shepard 1988:130), despite the fact that his girlfriend Shelly is determined to leave. Once again a man turns his back on love, and in so doing, on any hope of redemption and regeneration.

The violence with which Shepard imbues the men in Buried Child is indicative of his belief that it is the lack of love, the want of respect for family ideals, which has brought about the decline of the American family and the resultant debasement of American society (Adler 1987:108). Vince more clearly than any other character renounces the possibility of affection when, at the end of the play, he rejects Shelly as he earlier tried to subjugate her - first by preventing her from leaving, and then by knocking the carrots out of her arms. He negates kinship by denying the existence of his grandmother, thereby depriving the family of any hope of rehabilitation. Vince 'much more clearly than even Wesley in Curse of the Starving Class, ... inherits the patriarchal tendency toward power, domination, and violence best represented through his grandfather Dodge and uncle Bradley.' (Hart 1987:87)

As in Curse, the malediction of heredity is potently active in Buried Child and malevolently visible in Vince's transformation near the end of Act Three. The contrast between the Vince of the past and the drunken, destructive Vince of the present is expressed in Halie's complete incomprehension of Vince's wild and shocking behaviour. Halie knows Vince as 'the sweetest little boy. ... an angel. A guardian angel.' (Shepard 1988:128) The symbolic rebirth that Vince experiences as he cuts a hole in the screen, echoes Wesley's hopeless attempt to shake off the scourge of heredity in Curse. As Vince climbs through the screen he inescapably becomes part of the custom of destructiveness that is at the heart of his family. Instead of bringing regeneration, Vince is reborn into a world of degeneration and decay. Ironically, Vince's violent return to the family brings immediate recognition and Dodge, whose refusal to remember him earlier is connected to a more profound failure to acknowledge another member of the family, names him heir to the house and 'all furnishings, accoutrements and paraphernalia therein.' (Shepard 1988:129) Vince's transformation is complete when he describes himself in terms reminiscent of those used by Dodge to explain to Shelly his lack of interest in the past. Dodge spoke of Halie tracing their heritage 'all the way back to the grave' and of there not being 'a living soul behind me' merely a 'long line of corpses' (Shepard 1988:112). Vince describes his experience of seeing his face in the windshield, using images almost exactly the same as those used by Dodge:

I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his

whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. ... And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. ... And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognised. ... I followed my family Straight back as far as they'd take me.

(Shepard 1988:130)

At the centre of this speech and of Dodge's words is the 'curse passed on from father to son that makes them both similar to and profoundly alienated from each other. Dodge refuses to be father to his sons. ... while Vince, the grandson, is doomed to continue a line of corpses, the image of a creator who has denied him.' (Mottram 1984:143) The final vision the audience has of Vince is a mirror image of the dead patriarch as he assumes the leadership of the decayed family. Vince has been entombed by the curse of his heritage as his dead brother was destroyed and buried to protect the lineage.

The identity of the men of the family is intrinsically bound up with violence, and Dodge, Bradley and finally Vince, define themselves in terms of this perverted sense of masculinity. Bradley is the most crippled of these men, not only in terms of actual physical disablement, but because he is the most grotesquely impotent of them all. Shepard has determined his character in terms of his personification of the male castration fear (Auerbach 1982:55) and Bradley symbolises impotence, both sexual and personal. His desire for domination is portrayed in his repeated attacks on his father's hair, the way in which he covers Dodge's

head with Shelly's rabbit-fur coat, and his final usurpation of the blanket and patriarchal position on the sofa. But Bradley is easily vanquished by Vince who takes possession of his wooden leg, paradoxically torturing Bradley while talking of renewing the farm. Bradley is finally powerless, his brutality useless against the real heir to Dodge's sterility. Vince, not Bradley or Tilden, is the 'spiritual and biological inheritor of what Ibsen called "ghosts": the decaying doctrines and diseased genetic traits, unavoidably handed down from parent to child, that predetermine one's life.' (DeRose 1992:107)

That Tilden has somehow been overlooked by the curse of heredity is apparent as Tilden lacks the hunger to dominate, and from the beginning is linked with growth and fertility. Tilden is connected with the land, the tiller of the soil, the creator and nurturer of the family values. Tilden went out West, like many of Shepard's men, but the experience was profoundly demoralising and debilitating, and he retreated to the farm defeated and abject. Tilden returned to his kin because he, like Weston, came to understand the importance of traditional family values, and to feel the lure of the past. He is the one character connected most directly to the past through the corn that he brings into the house from the 'fields of the past' (Mottram 1984:139). Tilden was called home by the buried child. He recognises that the family needs to acknowledge the child, needs to regenerate itself, return again to life, no longer to venerate death. Tilden 'senses that the answers lie in the past, in traditions that were once viable but have been debased and perverted, traditions that

have now turned the land and its inhabitants toward death not life.' (Auerbach 1982:60) He instinctively understands the futility of pretence, and learnt from his troubles in New Mexico that suppression and silence lead to death:

Dodge: I don't want to talk about it!
Tilden: What do you want to talk about?
Dodge: I don't want to talk about anything! I don't want to talk about troubles or what happened fifty years ago or thirty years ago ... I don't want to talk!
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 that out in New Mexico. I thought I was dying but I just lost my voice. ... I thought I was dead.
(Shepard 1988:78)

Tilden is the man who attempted to restore the land's fertility by creating a son who would be strong enough to turn his back on the world of the fathers, who would create 'a new world order which would ... end patriarchy's violent hegemony.' (Auerbach 1982:61) But Tilden was not potent enough to save either the buried child, or his living son Vince, from being offered up to the mutilating curse of heredity that directs the family's life. His role is always that of nurturer, not defender, and as DeRose points out, there is a 'strong suggestion that it is Tilden's digging behind the house - that is, his decision to accept the role of father and nurturer that Dodge has denied - that is responsible for Vince's sudden appearance. Tilden has, in a sense, called forth the presence of the son that might have been' (1992:106), in the same way that he seems to have evoked the corn, mysteriously, while walking out back. The rain is part of

the enigma, washing away the deceit to expose the secrets of the past. Tilden is the one who finally carries the corpse of the buried child upstairs in a theatrical image of intense power. Halie's words suggest a hope of regeneration, the potential for renewal as the tiny shoot breaks the ground like a miracle. The play on the word 'sun' harks back to the end of Ibsen's play Ghosts, and focuses the doubt presented by the immobile figure of Vince lying on the sofa - which son will be victorious, the resurrected child so closely connected with the recent fertility of the farm, or the destructive, impotent, newly named heir? Shepard seems deliberately vague at this point and perhaps this is at the heart of the paradox: his earnest desire that America should renew itself, while essentially expressing his fear that it will not.

All Shepard's fears for his country appear to be summed up in his characterisation of Dodge, the patriarchal figure of sterility and impotence. As is so often the case with Shepard's characters, Dodge is significantly named. There is the obvious association with the 'dodging' of responsibility - Dodge has never paid attention to his sons, and his only concern for Tilden, the son who is now 'just like a child', seems to be to make sure that he leaves the farm. Dodge feels that it is unnatural for Tilden to have come home, and this stresses how trivial the family bond is to Dodge, and makes it clear from the beginning that he renounced the commitments and obligations of parenthood. Dodge is also the

name of a car¹, indicative of Shepard's partiality for modern references. Dodge, the former All-American, becomes the symbol of all America. Dodge, like America, is hiding from the past, fearful of leaving the house in case he is forced to face the reality of what he has done to his farm and his family. He prefers to be an invisible man. In rejecting the past, Dodge has denounced hope, and in discarding hope has renounced the future. Dodge has no faith in anything and is scornful of 'you hoppers. If it's not God then it's a man. If it's not a man then it's a woman. If it's not a woman then it's the land or the future of some kind. Some kind of future.' (Shepard 1988:109) For Dodge, Vince is both the future and the past, and he cannot recognise him until Vince proves himself the rightful heir to the family's isolation and indifference. Dodge epitomises what has happened to American society since it betrayed the American Dream - it is now diseased, selfish, alienated and frigid, dead to everything but its own fierce desire to survive at all costs.

The picture is indeed a bleak one and the remaining characters do little to relieve the desolation of Shepard's vision. Father Dewis depicts with dreadful clarity the hollowness of conventional Christianity. His spiritual bankruptcy is revealed by his cynicism, his cunning, and his sly lechery (Auerbach 1982:58), and, like Pastor Manders in Ibsen's Ghosts, he stands for a

1. The fact that Shepard's men so often make use of a car to escape the stranglehold of domesticity is noted particularly in Chapter Five, ps 134/135. This throws additional light on Dodge's name and the link with the evasion of responsibility.

'withered, ineffective moral code' (Collins 1988:208). Halie, like Ella in Curse, and Mom in True West, has retreated into her own world, a realm of fantasy where her dead son Ansel becomes the hero her living sons have failed to be. Halie has surrendered to the stagnation which surrounds her and has taken refuge in dreams, refusing to face reality. In her determined denial of the situation around her she is further confirmation of Shepard's fear of non-renewal so graphically illustrated by the final image of Vince on the sofa.

Shelly is the only character in this grim play who offers any hope of escape from the imprisoning bonds of sterility, impotence and violence. Shelly is a true outsider who finds it difficult to relate to Vince's 'thing about his family', perhaps because she comes from L.A. - 'the place where everything starts from scratch or all over again, as if it had never happened.' (Blau 1984:527) This makes Shelly innocent of the taint of heredity, and it is her image of America as a 'Norman Rockwell cover' that provides the everpresent backdrop of the expectation of normality to the unfolding drama of Dodge and his family. Shelly, unlike the other characters, is vital and alive. This is obvious from her initial sense of fun when she describes the house in terms of the characters of a child's early reader, finding her analogy intensely amusing, and her rapid recognition that all is not as it should be in Vince's family home. Dodge too, realises that she is an outsider, and that she and Vince are incompatible. Tilden is drawn to her, and she quite naturally suggests that she take the carrots from him. Shelly, like Tilden, is associated with fertil-

ity, and the other characters seem to recognise and covet her warmth - all the men are attracted to her and her fur coat. They respond, as Shepard knows the audience will, to her sympathetic character and she becomes 'a "window" of normality through which the spectators [can] observe and judge this dead family.' (Whiting 1988b:555) Shelly, like her counterparts Emma in Curse, and Cavale in Cowboy Mouth, is a strong and self-assertive woman, determined to 'do whatever I have to do to survive.' (Shepard 1988:94) It is her humanity that prompts her to leave the house, uninhibited and uncontaminated by the spiritual exhaustion infecting everyone else in the play.

The possibility of regeneration implied by Shelly and supported by the intimations of fertility offered by Tilden's carrots and corn, indicate the playwright's real hope for the future of his society. Shepard is not ultimately a pessimistic playwright, and his writing, although often ironic, illustrates his yearning for a return to a happier time, when humanity had a 'sense of place in the world. Whether it [had] to do with people or roots or land ... a belief in a certain spiritual order which rules the earth.' (Marranca & Dasgupta 1981:111) Blau recognises Shepard's hankering to 'rescue ... the family, the past, the discredited signs of human continuity.' (1984:527) Shepard, like other American playwrights, is beguiled by the promises of the American Dream, wants to believe in them, and his work 'remembers through every disenchantment the loose and elusive features of the American dream, attached to the endlessly retreating image of a lost innocence.' (Blau 1984:521)

Buried Child is not the first play in which Shepard has expressed a longing to return to a more fruitful time. Operation Sidewinder, written in 1970, marks a change in his work and introduces a need to intervene, a call to find a solution, an alternative to the disintegration he sees around himself. Operation Sidewinder is 'an aria, a lament for a decade, for an America losing itself.' (Bigsby 1985:229) The importance of Operation Sidewinder to this study lies in the fact that as Bigsby notes 'the play is the story of the regeneration of the Young Man and of his country - the principle agent of that regeneration apparently being a renewed sense of mystery' (1985:230). In Buried Child Shepard considers the disease in modern America a spiritual one requiring a remedy which needs to extend far beyond the traditional where 'the depth reaches down into essence itself, necessitating a sort of mythic reclamation of an American identity.' (Demastes 1987:236-237) Buried Child hints at the need to return to the rhythms of nature to restore harmony and order to society, and Shepard calls on regenerative myths which lie at the heart of western culture in an attempt to pursue that essence, to connect people back to the past.

Nash is concerned that Buried Child be considered a serious, modern investigation of the 'central theme of Western mythology, the death and rebirth of the Corn King.' (1983:486) This ritual is a kind of summation of many other regenerative myths in which a monarch was put to death as soon as he began to show signs of

decline; although in Dodge's case he has long past this point and is now only a diseased bundle of bones, kept alive by whisky and malice. Tradition demands that the leader be slain before he weakens in order to ensure that his powers, which were essential for the rebirth of vegetation, be transferred, unabated, to his successor. Dodge's heir is also questionable, as his sons are obviously too debased to continue the lineage. The king had to be sacrificed in order to ensure the fertility of the land. There are many instances in the play which lend credence to Nash's thesis. The incessant rain which has been falling 'washes the marrow from the bones of the buried child, fertilising the long neglected cornfields, [and] prepar[es] the land for a miraculous rebirth.' (Nash 1983:487) The magical appearance of the carrots and corn are a symbol of hope and regeneration, a metaphor for the rebirth of the land, a physical reality as well as a metaphysical symbol (Collins 1988:211). Early in Act One, Tilden covers Dodge's sleeping body with corn husks, in what can only be seen as a symbolic burial, 'suggesting Dodge's symbolic role as the Corn King in the winter of his life.' (Nash 1983:489) The final link in the chain of events which connects the old man to the ritual of the Corn Spirit is his desire to have all his possessions 'pushed into a gigantic heap and set ablaze in the very centre of [his] fields. When the blaze is at its highest ... [his] body is to be pitched into the middle of it and burned til nothing remains but ash.' (Shepard 1988:129) The ceremonial funeral pyre is the final rite in the cycle of birth and death of fertility, and as Dodge dies and Vince takes his place on the sofa, Tilden enters carrying the muddy body of the child.

Myth therefore becomes a vital issue in Buried Child. In an interview with Carol Rosen, Shepard spoke about myth in this way:

The ancient meaning of myth is that it served a purpose in our life. The purpose had to do with being able to trace ourselves back through time and follow our emotional self.

Myth served as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and the future. ... It was so powerful and so strong that it acted as a thread in culture. And that's been destroyed.

(1993:5)

Buried Child considers the past and the future from the vantage point of the present, through the eyes of a family 'so mutilated, diseased, and antisocial that their story can only be told as it "moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to appear in it." ' (Herman 1987:47-48) The mythological aspects of Buried Child have been discussed¹ by numerous critics and always suggest the ultimate hope of regeneration in the world of the buried child, a confidence which seems denied by the final moments of the play. The buried child, which seemed to hold out the promise of a new order, is symbolically the prodigal son Vince, who demonstrates 'the spiritual as well as the material continuation between present and past. ... and Vince, by replicating exactly his dead grandfather's posture at the end of the play, emphasises the unlikelihood of any renew-

1. Most noticeably Shea (1989:1-8), and Hechler (1989:118-140). Nash (1983:486-491) has an extended investigation of the mythological in Buried Child when he discusses the plot as a contemporary version of the death and rebirth of the Corn King.

al for this family' (Adler 1986:3), as fervently as the playwright may wish for it to occur. This is the paradox that stretches through many of Shepard's plays, the earnest desire for transformation, the knowledge of the need for rejuvenation, but the nightmare of the doubt that it will come about.

The tracing of the old fertility myths of the Corn King connect not only with the need for reconstruction, but with more modern American myths of the American Dream, and are revealed in the characterisation of the protagonists. Conceptions such as drive and independence, central to the notion of the American Dream are still visible in Dodge despite his age and decrepitude. 'Halie's obsession with family, Tilden's affinity with the land, and Bradley's violence also mark out American mythological territory.' (Mann 1988:91) Vince finally unifies all these qualities and comes to represent America as it has become, squalid, obsessive and brutal.

Shepard's version of the ancient rejuvenation myths is sketched with bold strokes, giving a glancing impression rather than laboured detail. The world of Buried Child is a secretive place that admits few outsiders, fearful of the possible effects that even 'going out back' will have on the personalities who live within its introverted confines. The psychological divide between the characters, especially that between Dodge and Halie suggested at the beginning of the play by their physical separation, is emphasised by Halie's inquiry about the weather 'down there.' The

images of detachment and indifference are further enhanced by Halie's conversation about her time with a 'wonderful man. A breeder.' The obvious irony cannot be lost as the aged and sickly figure of Dodge coughs away his life in front of the flickering television screen. The sterility of the inhabitants of the farm is reflected in the infertility of the land and thus the miraculous appearance of the corn and vegetables, while bewildering, must suggest the death of the old order and the possible appearance of the new. The mysterious references to flesh and blood buried in the back yard, and to the dead, but heroic Ansel, enhance the sense of anticipation, and increase the promise of change. The expectation is realised in the Second Act with the appearance of Vince, the archetypal Shepard hero, dressed in jeans, plaid shirt and cowboy boots, carrying a saxophone case. The possibilities brought to the farm by the musician and his girl are strengthened by her perception of the farm as 'like a Norman Rockwell cover or something.' The earlier apocalyptic vision of the family seems about to be discredited by the newcomers.

The sense of regeneration evoked by the liveliness of Shelly's personality and the creativity implied in Vince's musical abilities, is strong, but immediately overcome by the deadly inertia of Dodge. Dodge abruptly confuses Vince with Tilden and echoes of the old accidie begin to play around the characters. Vince is on a quest, an odyssey to find his way home, a mythic journey to discover his roots, his place in the world. Vince and the buried child are quickly linked by Tilden's acknowledgment that he once

had a son , but that they buried him. The refusal of the men to recognise the boy, as they once rejected the child, develops this impression, and with this denial of the prodigal, the family turns its back on regeneration. The heir becomes a reflection of the old and corrupt predecessor. What transpires is that Shepard's treatment of the mythical content of the play is profoundly ironic, and that the myth of regeneration and rebirth, like Gatsby's dream, has little relation to reality. The hope that is suggested by the unearthing of the buried child, that is bolstered by Halie's words at the end of the play

Its like a paradise out there,
Dodge. ... A miracle. ... Maybe the rain
did something. Maybe it was the
rain. ... You can't force a thing to
grow. ... You just gotta wait til it pops
up out of the ground. Tiny little
shoot. ... Strong though. ... It's a
miracle, Dodge. ... Maybe it's the sun.
Maybe that's it. Maybe it's the sun.

(Shepard 1988:131-132)

is repudiated by what has gone before. The reverberations of Ibsen's Ghosts¹ conjured up by those words, and the echoes of the sins of the father's being visited on the sons militate against the revitalisation suggested by Tilden's presence. The images of sterility suggested by the corpse of Dodge and the motionless figure of Vince, are a more potent augur of the shadows that will continue to haunt the family. The suggestions of the Corn King

1. At the end of the play Oswald Alving, suffering from an inherited disease and unaware of the sunrise, begs his mother for morphia to ease the pain, exclaiming 'The sun ... the sun'. Both plays end with identical ironic puns on sun/son. The prodigal sons in both works establish the spiritual and material continuation between past and present and in both plays the 'son returns and the sun comes out, yet neither homecoming nor sunrise can augur regeneration' (Adler 1986:3).

ritual evident in the death and displacement of Dodge, in his request for a funeral pyre that will destroy the past and rejuvenate the present, are poor shades compared with the nightmare reality of Vince's accession.

Shepard, like Tilden, wants 'the continuity of a myth which offers the possibility of a rebirth' (Blau 1984:528). But despite himself it seems, Shepard attempts to integrate two opposing views in Buried Child. One condemns the degeneration of the American family while the other desperately intimates renaissance. In many ways the play defies complete and logical analysis. Buried Child relies to a great extent on emotional impact, as Weales concedes 'Shepard, since his early, startling Red Cross (1966) has worked in fragments that have great dramatic vitality, the whisper of deep significance, and a stubborn resistance to paraphrasable meaning.' (1979:570) But always Buried Child suggests a dirge, an anguished cry from a society full of pain, violence and aberration, desperately seeking a way back to values and virtues now withered and dying, poisoned by the corruption of greed and inertia.

In the last play of the trilogy, True West, Shepard's characters have developed from the questing adolescents of The Rock Garden, Curse and Buried Child, to middle-aged adults; and the decaying and impoverished rural communities of the Mid-West have given way to the ideal milieu of the American Dream - suburban Los Angeles. The resonance of autobiography is intense in this play, developing themes and images from earlier works, and thereby shading the conflicts between the characters with provocative and electric recognition.

Ostensibly this play is very different from the other two dramas in the family trilogy. Whereas Curse probed the nuclear family, and Buried Child plumbed the secrets of three generations of Dodge's family, True West narrows the conflict down to two characters, the diametrically opposed brothers, Austin and Lee. Austin, a writer of screenplays for the movie industry, has gained recognition and material prosperity, and has all the apparent accoutrements of the American Dream - home, family, security, personal success and the acknowledgement of his peers. His brother Lee is the quintessential drifter, unkempt and grubby, a rootless vagabond who lives in the desert and survives on his wits, not averse to theft, and contemptuous of 'civilised'

norms. The family home is no longer a derelict farmhouse, but a comfortable suburban home. The conflict in the play arises not from a father/son antagonism, but from the rivalry of two brothers. The parents, who played such dominant roles in *Curse*, have faded to the bewildered presence of the mother in the final scene, and the complete absence of the father, who has been relegated to a shadowy influence on the behaviour of his two sons. Despite these anomalies, True West, like the other plays in the trilogy, is an investigation of the debilitating effects on the psyche of the betrayal of the American Dream, and an anguished cry for a return to values upheld in a different time.

True West explores the relationship between the two brothers, harking back to the archetypal, though hackneyed, story of Cain and Abel. Austin has retreated to his mother's house in a Southern Californian suburb, forty miles east of Los Angeles, to write a screenplay for Saul Kimmer, a Hollywood producer. The biblical imagery Shepard uses in this play is evidenced in the reference to the house as situated east of Los Angeles, easily read, as in *Genesis*, as east of Eden (Hoepfer 1993:76). This interpretation is supported by the fact that Los Angeles and Hollywood are considered by many Americans as Paradise, the home of all that the American Dream can offer. Even Lee, the outcast, scornful of civilised life, acknowledges the neighbourhood as a kind of paradise. His response to Austin's question about the kind of houses he saw on his midnight reconnoitre of the suburb is that they were:

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 magazines. Blonde people movin' in and out of rooms, talkin' to each other. (pause) Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya know.

(Shepard 1988:12)

Lee, however, is also conscious of the deadly effect of this paradise, and through this recognition, introduces early in the play the recurring theme of the numbing power of the betrayed American Dream.

Lee's return is clearly not a welcome homecoming for his brother. Austin's disquiet is apparent in his instinctive fear that Lee's petty theft will sully his own and his mother's standing in the community, and his misgivings are verbalised in his anxious questioning of Lee's intended plans for the future: 'You going to be down here very long, Lee?' and 'So you don't know how long you'll be staying then?' (Shepard 1988:7) Austin does not want Lee embarrassing him, particularly in the presence of the Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer. Austin is engaged in some 'business' with Kimmer, an attempt to close a deal on the screenplay he is writing, which Lee, probably accurately, realises is Austin's attempt to 'bullshit [his] way into a million bucks.' (Shepard 1988:13) Austin vehemently denies trying to hustle Kimmer, and in desperation promises Lee the keys to his car if he remains out of sight during Kimmer's visit. Peterson observes that Lee's insistent desire for the car keys is indicative of his craving for

material possessions (1989:131), which is strangely at odds with the persona he chooses to present to his brother. As becomes increasingly apparent, Lee has an overwhelming need for the attributes of Austin's lifestyle¹, a demand that has brought him back to the 'civilised' world of his mother and brother.

Lee returns to the house before the departure of Kimmer, and quickly illustrates that his skills as a hustler are much more developed than those of his brother. Lee realises that the 'law of the jungle' applies even more readily in this environment of executive 'dog-eat-dog' than it does in the desert. He easily 'persuades' Kimmer to drop Austin's story in favour of his own 'real-life' Western by challenging him to a game of golf and then gambling his script on the outcome of the match.

Austin: 'Course there's no contract yet.
Nothing's final until it's on paper.

Lee: It's final, all right. There's no way he's gonna' back out of it now. We gambled for it.

Austin: Saul, gambled?

Lee: Yeah, sure. I mean he liked the outline already so he wasn't risking that much. I just guaranteed it with my short game.

(Shepard 1988:29)

The tension that has been simmering between the two men erupts as

1. Lee introduces this longing early in the play when he talks of the glamorous homes he has seen on his evening expedition, and how he wishes he'd grown up in a place like that (Shepard 1988:12). Lee also dares Austin to wager his house (Shepard 1988:38) - he has already won Austin's car. When he finally decides to leave, Lee takes some of his mother's bone china plates because he needs something 'authentic' out in the desert (Shepard 1988:56).

Austin accuses Lee of threatening Kimmer, and Lee lunges at Austin, brandishing a golf club, inherent antagonism bubbling to the surface in near confrontation. Austin's disappointment and anger manifest themselves in a drunken spree of electric toaster theft from neighbouring houses, while Lee settles down to his new character of screenwriter. The two brothers have swapped roles, realising as they do so, that they have always wanted to be the other.

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

Austin: You did?

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

Austin: Blondes? That's funny.

Lee: What's funny about it?

Austin: Because I always used to picture you somewhere.

Lee: Where'd you picture me?

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

(Shepard 1988:26)

However, while Austin manages fairly successfully to complete his task of petty theft, apparently stealing all the toasters in the neighbourhood, Lee is incapable of writing the screenplay, finally destroying the typewriter with a golf club in his frustration and rage. Ultimately Lee bribes Austin into writing his script by promising to take him into the desert, because Austin has recognised that 'there's nothin' down here [Southern California/Hollywood] for me. There never was.' (Shepard 1988:49) But Lee abandons the plan as soon as Mom returns home early from her vacation in Alaska, realising, as she does, that Austin does not have what

it takes to survive in the desert. Austin, in desperation, attempts to strangle Lee with the cord from the telephone, ripped out in an earlier crisis. The play ends with the two brothers 'square[d] off to each other, keeping a distance between them.' (Shepard 1988:59) The action has come full circle and the play ends as it began with the two brothers isolated in a world of their own.

What becomes apparent in the plotline of True West, is that despite the superficial differences in character structure, and storyline, Shepard is once again concerned with the devastation wrought on the American psyche by the betrayal of the ideals of the American Dream. That he chooses in this play to investigate the effects of this violation on individual personality, rather than on the family structure as a whole, in no way trivialises the impact of the transgression against the Dream, nor diminishes the power of his dramatic ability.

As with the other plays in the trilogy, the autobiographical content of this play is dynamic and cannot be ignored, apparently pertaining most strongly to Shepard's perception of himself, both as a man and as an artist. On a journey home to California after the completion of the movie "Resurrection" in 1979, Shepard visited his father in New Mexico. A successful playwright (he had just won the Pulitzer Prize for Buried Child) and an up-and-coming movie star, Shepard faced many aspects of himself in that meeting with his father which were to make an appearance later in

True West. Peterson describes how Austin's success in the film industry, 'based on values as thin as the celluloid which sustains it' (1989:127), reflects Shepard's own achievements in the film and theatre industry and illustrates his ambivalent response to his own success. His 'pride in the self-reliance and freedom of his father's choice to live alone in the desert is inherent in ... [the] depiction of Lee.' (Peterson 1989:127) Shepard wrote about this encounter with his father in Motel Chronicles:

My Dad keeps a record collection in cardboard boxes lined up along his bedroom wall collecting New Mexican dust. His prize is an original Al Jolson 78 with the jacket taped and even the tape is ripped. Last time I saw him he tried to bribe me into taking it back to L.A. and selling it for a bundle. He's convinced its worth at least a grand. Maybe more, depending on the market. He says he's lost touch with the market these days. ... He spent all the food money I gave him on Bourbon. Filled the ice box with bottles. ... My Dad lives alone on the desert. He says he doesn't fit with people.

(Shepard 1982:55)

Shepard also spent time in his mother's house in Pasadena while she holidayed in Alaska, and out of this conglomeration of events and perceptions the seeds of True West were germinated. Shepard's recognition within himself of the conflicting responses to life and art reflected by Austin and Lee's attitudes and lifestyles is objectified in the contest between the two brothers.

Although the question of art and the artist is broached in the earlier part of the trilogy by the presence of Vince, the saxo-

phonist, neither Curse nor Buried Child investigates the complicated issue of the nature and role of the artist. This question is new to the trilogy, although Shepard had explored this idea in early plays such as Fourteen Hundred Thousand - where his chief focus seemed to suggest the pleasure inherent in the action of creation; Melodrama Play, which explored the hunger for power and its connection with the creative urge through the rivalry of two brothers; Cowboy Mouth, a collaboration with the singer Patti Smith, in which he investigated his own personal and artistic confusion, satirising his desire to be a rock star. The use of music in these plays paved the way for The Tooth of the Crime, described by Ron Mottram as the 'culmination of everything Shepard had been working toward since 1964. ... his most sophisticated and penetrating statement on the role of the artist and the condition of art in contemporary American society' (1984:107); and for Geography of a Horse Dreamer which concerned itself with the dilemma of the artist held hostage to commercial demands. But it was with Angel City, 'a biting satire on Hollywood and the writer who goes there with disdain on his lips but lust for power in his heart' (Mottram 1984:116), that Shepard made his strongest statement about the artist and his role within the structure of his society. In these plays Shepard both reveals, and acknowledges, the artist's connivance in his own seduction by the wealth and power of the Hollywood dream machine.

The theme of the corruption of the artist by commerce is introduced once again in True West. The discussions that take place between Austin and Lee in Scene Two, and between Austin and Saul

Kimmer in Scene Three, furnish an effective picture of Hollywood and what it means to the artist. In Hollywood, art is 'a project' to be 'got off the ground', peddled to television, made 'bankable'. Austin has sold out to this vision, never referring to his writing as art; it is always a 'project', a 'period piece', a 'love story', 'material'; he has accepted that in the Hollywood world of domination and consumerism, wealth and power are more important than creativity or imagination. That Austin has bought into this notion is part of Shepard's scathing attack on the nature of the artist in contemporary society, and of his own vulnerability to the enticements of that glittering world. The artist is at risk of corruption from without and within, and Shepard recognises that the risk is a dilemma he personally faces, and dramatises in his characterisation of Austin.

The discussion between Lee and Saul Kimmer in Scene Three introduces a debate about art which in essence mirrors the personalities of Austin and Lee. Each brother reflects a different attitude towards life which is revealed in their convictions about art:

Lee: I got a Western that'd knock yer lights out.

Saul: Oh really?

Lee: Yeah. Contemporary Western. Based on a true story. 'Course I'm not a writer like my brother here. I'm not a man of the pen.

Saul: Well-

Lee: I mean I can tell ya' a story off the tongue but I can't put it down on paper. That don't make any difference though does it?

Saul: No, not really.

Lee: I mean plenty a' guys have stories
don't they? True-life stories.
Musta' been a lotta' movies made
from real life.

(Shepard 1988:18)

Collins suggests that what Lee and Kimmer are really discussing is 'the nature of art itself. Which is more important: the inspiration behind the story, or the shaping of the story? Is the germ of a story idea most important? Or is it the process by which the germ is brought to fruition?' (1988:240) The reference to the film "Lonely are the Brave"¹ exposes Lee's vision of the world and reinforces his belief that only art which is true to life can be considered worthy of the name.

That truth is essential to art is something that Austin also understands. He accuses Lee's story about two men chasing one another across a Texas panhandle, of not being 'like real life! It's not enough like real life. Things don't happen like that.' (Shepard 1988:21) In Austin's view, the story must seem true to the audience, and he believes that this simulation is the exclusive province of the artist with talent and expertise. That there is difficulty in distinguishing truth is underlined by the only authentic story in the play, the saga of their father's

1. A contemporary Western in which a cowboy, portrayed by Kirk Douglas, plays out the age-old contest between nature and the forces of civilisation.

¹
teeth . The events are so bizarre that they are difficult to accept as either credible or accurate, and ironically, are recounted by Austin despite his stance of verisimilitude. The final comment on the difficulty of distinguishing life from art comes from Mom, who on her return journey from Alaska, reads that Picasso is visiting the local museum. Mom has, of course, confused the artist with his art. Hart sees this confusion as illustrating an ongoing dialectic in the play which has been a continuing basis for conflict and discussion, and underlines the mystery of the artist (1987:95).

As is frequently the case with Shepard, he is, however, unwilling to commit himself too entirely to any single viewpoint, and as Rabillard indicates, it is not accidental that it is Mom who introduces Picasso into the dialogue. Rabillard considers it fairly typical of Shepard 'to associate the female with the standard views, even the cliches of the culture ... Halie in Buried Child and her reliance on the priest; Shelly ... with her Norman Rockwell expectations; Emma's devotion to her 4H club project ... Meg's concern with domestic order and etiquette even in the midst of A Lie of the Mind's almost ludicrous violence and disarray' (1993:79). Rabillard's assumption is that Shepard is 'confronting us with a challenge to received ideas' (1993:79),

1. The story that Austin tells about his father's teeth (Shepard 1988:41/2) is the most fantastic and grotesque story in the play, yet, if Austin is to be believed, it is also the only true story in the play, underlining for the audience the difficulty of differentiating between truth and fiction.

and that with a 'typically ironic deflation, this disorienting moment [Mom's belief in the reality of Picasso's visit]' (1993:79), highlights a central concern of the playwright. As the movement of the play seems to illustrate, and the final moments objectify, the artist needs both imagination and craftsmanship, a balance must be struck, for, without it, the artist is condemned either to inadequacy or to subservience.

The conflict between these two attitudes toward art informs another, more dramatic aspect of True West. Shepard's consideration of identity has been an issue in his plays from the earliest Cowboys and The Rock Garden, through La Turista, to Mad Dog Blues. In these plays he 'demonstrates his mastery of the dramatic collage and treats many of the same themes found in his other plays - the search for innocence, the loss of identity, the tensions and fragility of human relations, and the obsessive presence of death.' (Stambolian 1981:80) These concerns return to the stage in the conflict between the brothers in True West.

The question of identity and its hereditary nature was raised in the trilogy by Wesley's transformation in Curse and by Vince's assumption of his Grandfather's spirit in Buried Child. In True West the dependence on heredity is not as graphically illustrated as it is in the other plays - the father of the brothers is never presented on stage - but this in no way diminishes the menacing power of his presence. He is mentioned within the first sixty

lines of dialogue, shortly after Lee has alluded to the 'The Forefathers'. Its significance lies in the fact that Austin and Lee's 'old man' is an archetypal Shepard father - an alcoholic, derelict drifter, camping out in the desert, refusing responsibility, and connecting with the inherent violence of the American male - the essential picture of the frontiersman of the past. Lee has already been infected with the old man's poison, and functions as an adjunct of the father within the structure of the play. Kane views Lee not only as an extension of the old man, but as his surrogate (1991:41). In the same way as Weston appropriated Wesley's role of nurturer in the third act of Curse, so Lee 'crash[es] into Austin's successful, independent and carefully controlled world ... obliterates Austin's autonomy, destroys his pride, and steals his identity and mobility.' (Kane 1991:41)

Lee, like his father, is a renegade, an escapee from the world of social responsibility, drifting the panhandles of the American desert, unable, by his own admission, to fit into Austin's world:

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 somethin'? I'm livin' out there 'cause I can't make it here! And yer bitchin' to me about all yer success!

(Shepard 1988:49)

Lee is a mirror image of his father - the ghost of heredity also stalks the characters in this play, an unseen spirit that infects their lives and determines their decisions.

Austin, the Ivy-League graduate, is the civilised, modern alternative of the American male. Austin is connected with his mother's world of suburbia, pot plants, freeways and Safeway supermarkets. A successful, urbane, family man, Austin seems to epitomise all that the American Dream can offer. Yet Lee recognises that Austin does not quite fit into the world of suburban Los Angeles. When Austin warns him that he will be picked up if he wanders around the neighbourhood at night, Lee replies: 'Me? I'm gonna' git picked up? What about you? You stick out like a sore thumb.' (Shepard 1988:8) This is the first indication that the external appearance of character does not entirely reveal the inner being. This concept was initially introduced to the trilogy in the transformation of Weston in Curse, but has been a dramatic tool of Shepard's from the beginning. Despite the apparent change in his nature after his 'rebirth', essentially Weston retains the careless, unreliable, escapee mentality of his former existence, which reasserts itself as soon as responsibility appears in the guise of the two thugs. Lee, too, returns to his old ways as soon as any demands are made on him, and even Austin is prepared to abandon his home and family without a backward glance, and retreat to the desert with all its false promises of freedom.

The dominance of the paternal line is evidenced by Austin's rapid degeneration into the sort of hard-drinking, hard-living character that his brother portrays, a macho-man capable of theft and

1

apparently, even murder. Both Austin and Lee concede this connection with their father, Lee when he remarks that 'you sound just like the old man now' and Austin when he acknowledges: 'Yeah, well we all sound alike when we're sloshed. We just sorta' echo each other.' (Shepard 1988:39) Austin's language register changes and he talks the kind of cowboy slang associated with Lee. Nevertheless, Austin is ultimately too ensnared by the new West, the home of the movies, highways, supermarkets, and suburbia to be able to adapt to the demands of the world of the father and of Lee. His mother also recognises that Austin is too bound to the social world of appearances and responsibility to escape:

Austin: We're both leaving. We've got it all planned.

Mom: Well you can't leave. You have a family.

Austin: I'm leaving. I'm getting out of here.

Lee: I don't really think Austin's cut out for the desert do you?

Mom: No. He's not.

Austin: I'm going with you, Lee !

Mom: He's too thin.

Lee: Yeah, he'd just burn up out there.

(Shepard 1988:55)

The final repudiation of the call of the old West, comes from his inability to commit fratricide at the end of the play. Austin's lack of violence and aggression, his fear, condemn him to remain forever caught between the two worlds of the new and the old West, as he is caught in the dilemmas of the artist.

1. Austin obviously contemplates the murder of his brother after Lee's decision to leave (Shepard 1988:57-58) and even his mother believes he may do it (Shepard 1988:58).

This confrontation between the old and new West, and the crisis facing the artist, is revealed in the delineation of identity in the play. The characters in True West are not rational and homogeneous conceptions, rather, as Bigsby reveals: 'in the case of the two brothers [Shepard] creates what are less clearly differentiated figures than shifting attitudes and assumptions.'¹ (1985:245) Shepard acknowledged to Robert Coe that in writing True West he 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're 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.

There is a sense in which the two brothers are in effect the same person, two sides of the same coin. They comment directly on their desire to be one another and during the course of the action reverse roles, Austin assuming the role of 'natural man', dreaming of his return to the desert; Lee trying to become a writer, yielding to his craving for the material possessions of the 'civilised man'. As Kleb has noted: 'personality transference becomes explicit; the spirit of each brother actually seems to possess the other' (1981:118). At heart, the brother's share the American ideal of the West, the dream of the frontiersman living a free, solitary and uncomplicated existence, the fantasy of all Shepard's males. Mom acknowledges this when she suggests

1. In "Saga of Sam Shepard" New York Times Magazine, 23 November 1980, p56+, quoted in Demastes, Beyond Naturalism (1988:110).

that despite going separate ways, Austin, Lee and their father will 'probably wind up on the same desert sooner or later' (Shepard 1988:53), because they all share the fantasy of a freer, independent life. But they, like their father, have been contaminated by the devastating power of the Dream, which has, in effect, emasculated them. Austin is finally incapable of murdering Lee to escape, and Lee takes his mother's antique china and silverware with him into the desert, because he's 'tired of eatin' outa' [his] bare hands [because] It's not civilised.' (Shepard 1988:56) Lee is desperately searching for 'somethin' authentic. Somethin' to keep [him] in touch' because it's 'easy to get outa' touch out there.' (Shepard 1988:56)

Both Austin and Lee feel dissatisfied and frustrated, sure that there is more to life than what they have. Neither, however, can be the other without assistance. For them the exchange of identity is not a painless transition, it is, rather, a spasm of violence and devastation. The conflict between the brothers is reflected in the separate, though joint, impulses toward creativity and destruction, and the violence builds toward the final frozen moment of fratricidal desire. 'One may seem to be gunning for the other, but he is really taking aim at himself. Emotional violence animates this physical contact: fascinated but at the same time contemptuous of each other, they are finally contemptuous of themselves.' (Shea 1984:160) Austin and Lee are, in essence, the same person, perceived so by Mom and Saul Kimmer, portrayed so in the final suspended moment of the play, two

aspects of one personality held in balance, 'what appears to be a play about sibling rivalry is more accurately a play about a struggle between two halves of one self.' (Demastes 1988:110)

Demastes goes on to note that 'given the title and various events in the play ... True West returns to symbolically presenting the theme of the vanishing West and the consequences that loss has on individual identity.' (1988:111) In suggesting that the brothers are symbols of the West, Demastes highlights the issue that has dogged both the questions of identity and of art - truth and reality. Lee and Austin struggle to identify the 'true' West, its reality having been destroyed by the encroachment of the debased ideals of the American Dream. Austin's West is the place he is in touch with - freeways, smog, colour TV, supermarkets - the land that has been 'built-up' into a suburban nightmare of artificial grass and Mexican tiles. Austin's West is an inferno of sterility, where people are strangers, devoid of human feelings. As Orbison observes, Saul Kimmer is the ideal denizen of this 'new' West. He is concerned only with succeeding in a materialistic society and is little troubled by other's feelings, callously abandoning Austin's script and then crudely offering him the role of ghost-writer. (Orbison 1987:190) Hoeper makes an interesting comparison between Saul Kimmer and the Biblical Saul, king of the Hebrews, incapable of controlling the Philistines. Saul Kimmer's rejection of Austin's script is symbolic of the loss of control to 'Philistines in American culture, whose indifference to refinement and art is well illustrated by their taste in movies' (Hoeper 1993:79), a biting criticism of the aesthetic taste of

the American nation.

Austin has not escaped the numbing effects of this brave new world. He has ignored his family, abandoned his imagination, and prostituted his art to marketable formula. Austin no longer believes in the old, mythical West, as he did when a child imagining himself to be Geronimo. Austin believes that 'there's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue! It's dried up.' (Shepard 1988:35) In a way Austin is right, the West of Lee's story, the West of myth and legend is dead. The West as it is today is the West of suburban Los Angeles, and the Hollywood ideal. Lee recognises what it has done to Austin, that it drives a man insane, makes him sell himself down the river, lose touch with truth, and finally deprives him of contact with reality.

None-the-less Lee's version of the West is no more real than the West Austin believes in. Lee's vision is the illusion of the Hollywood dream-machine - men and horses chasing endlessly across the prairie. Lee's wanderings have been a quest for the true West, his story expressing his own desire to be free. Although Orbison sees him as possessing some of the qualities described by D.H. Lawrence as belonging to 'the essential American soul ... hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer' (1987:191), the reality of Lee's desert existence is very different from the mythical image. Lee lives on the fringes of society, scraping a living from burglary and dog-fighting. He is far removed from Fennimore

Cooper's noble frontiersman¹, much rather a seedy, surly, ill-tempered Natty Bumppo, an outcast in conventional society, and largely unable to cope with the encroachment of civilisation. Lee is covetous of the material comforts of the consumer society, yet contemptuous of the responsibilities it demands. He is not as connected with nature as would seem necessary in a man of the desert - he feels uneasy when he hears the coyotes, explaining that: 'they don't yap like that on the desert. They howl. These are city coyotes here.' (Shepard 1988:10) This unease symbolises both his disconnection from city life, and dislocation from the image of the frontiersman he would like to project. The noise of the crickets also irritates him intensely. Lee is a displaced person, no longer in touch with the purity of the natural world of the frontier existence, corrupted by the false expectations raised by the American Dream.

Both men are searching, as the title implies, for the True West, and it appears that the True West and the Real West are not the same place. The Real West for Austin is the place he lives in, the 'commercialised, childlike existence' of suburban Los Angeles, where 'one is warm and safe' (Orbison 1987:189) but spiritually dead. The Real West for Lee is the Texas panhandle of his story, where men are free to roam, plunder, and pursue one another across the plains. Lee certainly believes that he is in touch with the True West; and after his metamorphosis, Austin's desperate desire to join Lee in the desert indicates his faith in

1. See footnote on Natty Bumppo on p 26 of this dissertation.

Lee's West. And yet, both appear to be seeking the glamourised vision of the West nurtured by Hollywood epics. Austin believes he will manage in the desert because he can cook, is able to make fires, and 'know[s] how to get fresh water from condensation' (Shepard 1988:48), but as Lee angrily informs him, life in the desert is not something you can learn from a Boy Scout handbook.

If Austin's True West is conned from a survival manual, Lee's vision is no less illusionary. His True West is captured in movies such as "Lonely are the Brave", and his own story incorporates all the cliches of the Hollywood western. Both men are 'trapped within myths, are, indeed, the products of myths which draw them towards apocalypse and which lead them to destroy the world they inhabit.' (Bigsby 1985:245) Perhaps, as Orbison claims, what is left of the True West is to be found in life in the desert, 'elemental, crude, and rough ... but ... also clean, sane, and free.' (1987:192) What Shepard seems to be suggesting is that the True West is no longer a geographical location, that

... as the deserts into which one can flee give way to suburban development, the old frontier, Turner's "hither edge of free land" is more and more transformed into a myth of freedom that can no longer be realised, with the result that "the meeting point between savagery and civilisation" is internalised and defines the contours of a purely inner true West.

(Mottram 1984:147)

The struggle between Austin and Lee dramatises this meeting point, and lifts the veil off surface reality revealing the fear, pain and isolation underneath. Much as he longs for the old

ideals and values of the West, the reality Shepard perceives is the sterility and desecration of the 'built up, wiped out' suburban landscape, and the vision he offers in the play is 'an accurate account of an America slipping into a chaos of which the fratricidal final scene is an image.' (Bigsby 1985:244)

The search for the True West implies an escape from the vision of the inauthentic, a retreat from the false, a flight from the life of the unendurable present. Shepard's men desire this evasion, from the youngest - the Boy in The Rock Garden, through Wesley and Vince, to Lee and Austin; even the fathers, the old men, desire escape from the delusion to which they fled - the deserts that promised freedom and provided the imprisonment of disappointed illusion. The characters all choose their own reasons for escape, but they use the same methods, have two major routes to the freedom they seek. The car, the 'ubiquitous symbol of modern technology and civilisation' (Peterson 1989:145) is the essential agent of physical flight in Shepard's world. Spiritual elusion is the province of alcohol and food.

The car is used throughout the trilogy to symbolise men's flight from the stultifying bonds of domesticity, and to assist them in their escape. In True West there is a ongoing struggle between the brothers for possession of the car keys; in Curse, Weston, at Wesley's insistence, takes the Packard and bolts to Mexico; Vince, in Buried Child, takes off in his car in a vain attempt to escape his destiny, and Tilden talks of the white car that he

once had, a car in which he went everywhere. Here driving is synonymous with adventure. The car provides the vehicle with which the men make good their escape from the smothering grip of domesticity, and gives them the freedom to pursue their dreams of masculinity into the sunset. An escape vehicle is an important part of Lee's story; the men begin the chase across 'Tornado Country' in their trucks, but significantly, they have their horses in trailers attached to the trucks, their final resort when the pressure becomes too intense. Motor vehicles have become the modern extension of the horse, and Shepard's men feel the same affection for their cars as the cowboy felt for his horse. The sense of connection between man and vehicle is particularly strong in Curse. Weston's car, the Packard, is referred to within the first forty lines, and plays a prominent part in Wesley's monologue. Austin's car is especially important to him, as an extension of his masculinity, and access to the car keys seems always to spark confrontation between the brothers. In the final moments of the play it is possession of the keys that is Austin's chief focus of attention. His final words are 'you let me get outa' here. Just let me get to my car. ... Gimme a little head-start... . All right?' (Shepard 1988:59) Without a vehicle, modern man cannot make good his escape, and he remains imprisoned in the synthetic life offered by the betrayed ideals of the American Dream.

In recognising his dependence, Austin acknowledges his servitude. Lee, though 'freer' than Austin in many ways, is blinded by the misleading glitter of the Dream:

Lee: What're you, crazy or somethin'? You went to college. Here, you are down here, rollin' in bucks. Floatin' up and down in elevators. And you wanna' learn how to live on the desert!

Austin: I do, Lee. I really do. There's nothin' down here for me. There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was a life down here then. ... I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. ... Wandering down streets I thought I recognised that turn out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I misremember. ... Fields that don't even exist anymore.

Lee: There's no point cryin' about that now.

Austin: There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!

(Shepard 1988:48-49)

Lee is fascinated by the money, the commodities, the trappings of civilised life, while recognising the numbing power they wield. He seems incapable however, of retreating from this enchantment, stealing a TV - the ultimate embodiment of the dangers of the new West - and doing his best to snatch a part of this 'paradise' by turning himself into a scriptwriter; though when the time comes, he too, needs the car to make his physical escape.

Alcohol is the other means by which Shepard's men find oblivion from pain and freedom from responsibility. Alcohol features prominently in many of Shepard's plays, providing an illusionary panacea for the spiritual hunger they feel in their lives. As Kane suggests 'alcohol is part and parcel of the stereotypical male image of hard drinking, hard living, and hard loving. But as

an extended metaphor it suggests unconsciousness, an insidious, inherited disease "locking families in unknowingness" (Simard 85).' (1991:37) Alcohol is used by many male characters to escape their situations, to avoid the frustrations of their lives, to disguise the failure of the dream. Austin's flight to alcohol comes hard on the heels of his disappointment over the abandonment of his screenplay, his realisation of the flawed foundations of his life and the illusionary nature of his ideals. Austin also drinks in an effort to become more like the brother he despises but whose life he envies. Lee drinks incessantly throughout the play, even pouring beer over himself to cool himself down. Alcohol here, once again, indicates the extent of Lee's frustration, the intensity of his sense of betrayal. The recourse to alcohol by the brothers underlines their connection with their father, a connection dramatised previously by the literal attempts of the sons to transform themselves into their fathers. When Lee tells the drunken Austin that he sounds like their old man, Austin responds that they all sound the same when they're drunk - all Shepard's men are the same in the unconsciousness brought about by drink. Kane feels that a 'strong argument can be made that in Shepard's dramatic world the father's addiction to booze is the son's inheritance.' (1991:36) As the brothers continue to drink, the disorientation, chaos and destruction that alcohol draws in its wake is evident in the ruin of their mother's kitchen, symbolising the devastation wrought on their psyche, and the unconscious of their countrymen, by the betrayal of the Dream.

That the loss of the West has diminished the American male, and

made him the inheritor of 'betrayal and unconsciousness and a permanent mental state of dislocation' (Kane 1991:44), is illustrated clearly in the three men of this family. The 'old man', despite the menacing aura of his presence, is a decrepit, shabby, drunken wreck, who tried to disappear into the desert. He is not much more than a shadow, a presence felt only by his sons who have inherited his poison. Lee, the surrogate, has all the qualities of the hero of the cowboy story, the favourite of the American Dream, whose characteristics were strength, boldness, stoicism, and independence. However Lee, too, is a phantom, 'prowling the outskirts of civilisation for easy burglaries, a human equivalent of coyotes raiding the garbage dumps' (Demastes 1988:112), stealing and lying, desperate for 'the good life', but like his father, incapable of accepting the responsibility it brings with it. Austin, the golden boy, successful, creative, educated, the image of the modern civilised man, has been emasculated by the promises of the American Dream. He is finally incapable of throwing off the restraints of the new West and returning to a longed for, but unattainable, illusion of freedom.

As a corollary to this diminishment of the idealised model of the heroic American male, the images of impotency are trenchant in this play. Just as the withholding of Bradley's leg in Curse was an act of castration, so Lee's demand for the keys of Austin's car is a symbolic emasculation, an assault not forgotten by Austin at the end of the play when he is desperate for the return of his keys. Everything that has happened to him underlines his loss of virility, his wasted masculinity, his triviality; and his

despair is revealed in his determination to retrieve at least part of the loss, and prove his manhood by the murder of his brother. The old man also undergoes a form of emasculation as his teeth fall out one by one. Finally, Lee's seduction by the Hollywood dream machine is the final act of destruction of the True West's ideal of freedom and independence - Lee is prepared to sell his soul for the success offered by Saul, modern king of the Philistines. The emasculation of the three men is part of a wider series of images of sterility, destruction and loss which Shepard uses to convey his shocking vision of his society.

The betrayal of the dream of the West and its effect on the brothers in True West has been illuminated in their physical battle for the supremacy of their personal vision. The ominous result of faith in the new West is given graphic delineation in the characterisation of Mom. Like Ella in Curse, and Halie in Buried Child, Mom is isolated from the land, terrified when she is brought face to face with it: 'It was the worst feeling being up there. In Alaska. Staring out a window. I never felt so desperate before.' (Shepard 1988:59) Mom stayed indoors, unable to face the reality of the last frontier. She epitomises the dazed zombie of the suburban landscape, remote and unreal, withdrawn from her sons and incapable of reacting to the desolation they have made of her kitchen, or responding to their conflict. Mom, like most of Shepard's female figures, simply accepts the world that her son's have made, assents to the destruction of her home and the annihilation of her plants, and retreats to a motel, realising that the situation imposed by the men is 'worse than

being homeless.' (Shepard 1988:58) Tucker attributes her withdrawal to the inability to cope with the power of the dream that warps her men. As in the other family plays, the mother 'surrenders to a fatalism in which she acts out a traditional role of the West, just as the male characters act out theirs. The mother's traditional role is a passive one: she is the handmaiden to the man's need, desires, and dreams.' (Tucker 1992:139) Mom's apathy and her acquiescence have been her defence mechanisms. She has survived by withdrawing from the lives of her men and creating an artificial world of fertility and comfort within her kitchen. The fragility of that hideaway has been demonstrated by the devastation wrought by her sons, and symbolises the frailty of female accidie when faced with the unharnessed violence of the male world.

The ultimate condemnation of the loss of the family in modern America is Austin's willingness to commit fratricide at the end of the play. The sanctity of the familial bond has been usurped by the desire for personal fulfilment and material success. In Lee's words:

... go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. What do you think they'd say? ... Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in law. Cousins. Real American-type people.

(Shepard 1988:23)

Paradoxically, it is these 'real American-type people' who have betrayed the American dream and brought their families, and by

extension, their country to a point of depravity. The increasing spiral of violence and betrayal in the family trilogy reaches its culmination in the murderous desire in the heart of Austin to kill his brother, and by so doing to snatch freedom for himself. True West offers no glimpse of growth, of warmth, of hope. Mom's ordered world is wrecked, Austin's stability and rationality is trivialised; and the brave new world is revealed as hollow and corrupt. The promise offered at the end of Buried Child by the 'tiny little shoot. Tiny little white shoot. All hairy and fragile. Strong though' (Shepard 1988:132) has been totally destroyed by the self-centredness of modern man who is prepared to murder his own brother to achieve his desired goal of (illusionary) freedom.

The spiritual death of the American family has been brought about not only by the loss of the land, but also by the destruction of the wilderness and its promise of freedom. What is left is violence, and as Shea points out 'violence serves to define the family as a group' and that

... domestic violence in these plays [the family trilogy] is necessary, and ironically enough, desirable, for it does for the family what the family no longer seems able to do for itself in supplying a common cause and singular effect, a tie that binds in painful but permanent ways.

(1984:167)

The obligations that bind the modern family together are the shackles of violence, fear and betrayal. Like the coyotes constantly on the prowl, alert to any opportunity to attack their

prey, so the members of Shepard's families are ready to savage their own, and this wariness, this distrust of one another binds them together, and holds them in bondage to one another.

True West, the final play in Shepard's family trilogy, presents a grim picture of grasping avariciousness, of hunger heedless of all but its own careless and selfish desires, creating a country spiralling downward into chaos and anarchy, and a people, hollow, disorientated and spiritually empty.

CONCLUSION

While the rain of your fingertips falls,
while the rain of your bones falls,
and your laughter and marrow fall down,
you come flying.

Shepard prefaced his 1979 Pulitzer prize winning play Buried Child with this poem by Pablo Neruda. It illustrates much of the ambiguity of Shepard's work, in that, while it presents images of decay and mortality, it concludes with a whimsical impression of assurance and hope. The images of dissolution and degeneration in Shepard's plays, as illustrated in the preceding study, are almost always connected with his despair at the debasement of the ideals of the past, the disintegration of the bonds of family life and the demise of the American Dream. But there exists also, however ambiguously, the faint hope of regeneration and reconstruction. As Grant has recognised, 'although Shepard frequently develops images of death and decay, spectacles of disintegration peopled by the fragmented psyches of split-personality characters, the experience of a Shepard play can leave an audience with a distinctly different feeling.' (1993:122) The plays undeniably hint at apocalypse and chaos, and present a very real sense of anguish, but at the same time do not abandon the possibility of hope.

The family trilogy marked a new departure for Shepard, a paradigm

shift in his perception of the family and its place in his personal mythology. In 1988 he told Jennifer Allen that he

... always did feel a part of that tradition but hated it. I couldn't stand those plays that were all about the 'turmoil' of the family. And then all of a sudden I realised, well that was very much a part of my life, and maybe that has to do with being a playwright, that you're somehow snared beyond yourself.

(Dugdale 1989:59)

Shepard never completely conforms to the tradition of American family drama, in a sense his plays subvert the genre by debunking the traditional family in order to make a statement about the present. His concern is with his characters in the intense present only, the past becomes 'shifting and multiple' (Rabillard 1987:64), and, as has been pointed out, the aura of myth compelling.

In the family trilogy of Curse, Buried Child and True West, Shepard uses 'American myths to explain the world about him and to explore the causes of the current American malaise, ... proceed[ing] not like a modern scientist but like a witch doctor who relates illness to the world of myths.' (Auerbach 1982:4) Shepard returns repeatedly to the betrayal of the American Dream, in mythical visions whose centres are violent, which are devoid of fertility and fulfilment, and which reach a crescendo of menace exploding in brutal conflict. The plays decry the loss of the old codes and insist on the importance of discovering a new set of tenets to supplant the sterile ethics of modern America.

The mythical world of Curse, Buried Child and True West dramatise Shepard's strong bond with his culture and his people, illustrate an intense connection with the land, and reveal a deep longing for the traditions of the past, all of which have been corrupted by modern opinion and abandoned by contemporary dogma. The Dream has disintegrated and the plays are Shepard's requiem for betrayed and forgotten ideals.

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