

Illusionism and Failed Dreams: An Examination of the 'Family Plays' of Sam Shepard

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ABSTRACT

A recurrent theme in American drama, or modern drama for that matter is the phenomenon of illusion versus reality. This can be traced as far back as the classical drama of Greece, and it continues through the ages in different forms of theatrical expression including the modern realist drama and the epic theatre of Brecht and the theatre of the Absurd. In the dramatic scene of the United States, O'Neill, Miller and Williams explored this theme. In the 'Beat Generation' writers, Sam Shepard was the most noteworthy exponent of the theatre of the Off Broadway. In the case of Miller, Williams and Albee the settings of the plots are mostly urban America. Sam Shepard takes us to the contemporary rural Midwest, which embodies the old world America. Personally attached to this world where he grew up, Shepard uses this setting to explore the decline of the old American family world and the alienation and existential angst experienced by the new generation of the post war decades. Shepard who began as a pop musician and OOB theatre activist in New York, wrote a few plays that are often described as his 'family plays'. The symbolic and metaphoric suggestiveness of his plays have invited the term 'apocalyptic' to describe them. He leaves sufficient room for ambiguity as to what his plays mean. They are generally about the failure of the American Dream. His characters are men and women haunted by failure and disillusionment.

Keywords: Illusion- Reality- Beat Generation- American Dream.

INTRODUCTION:

A recurrent theme in American drama, or modern drama for that matter is the phenomenon of illusion versus reality. This can be traced as far back as the classical drama of Greece, where the tragic protagonist is often the victim of illusion bred of hubris (pride) which leads to *hamartia* (error of judgment). The theme continues through the ages in different forms of theatrical expression including the modern realist drama and the epic theatre of Brecht and the theatre of the Absurd. In the dramatic scene of the United States, O'Neill explored this theme throughout his career, in his major plays. So did Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. With varying degrees of importance and differing social and psychological contexts these dramatists have articulated how the lives of men and women are haunted by their illusions, often alienating them from relating to the world around in a meaningful manner and of course with tragic consequences. Whether it be Brutus Jones or Willy Loman, or Blanche Dubois, the basic mode of experience is the same. They are victims of illusions of past glory real or imagined, unrealisable ambitions or delusions of grandeur leading to alienation, conflict and downfall. One common concern with the American dramatists can be understood in terms of the myth of success which in America is identified with the 'American Dream.' The American Dream is a national myth of American society embodied in a vision of the land as a haven of opportunity, material acquisition and 'good life' within the reach of anyone who has the ambition and the will to strive for them. It also articulates the rugged individualism and

materialism of the modern age.

The national imagination of any country contains a set of ideals, myths, attitudes and dreams that inspire and nurture the aspirations of the people and are expressed in various forms of native art. The ideas embodied in these feed into the collective unconscious of the people and become part of their identity, or definitive character. What we call the American Dream is exactly this. Its evolution can be traced to the Pilgrim Fathers who settled in the New World, which they dreamt of as a promised land free from the fetters of the European society that they had left behind for good. Later this spirit is carried on in through the life of the settlers, the explorers and the leaders of the National Independence. The Frontier spirit informs so much of popular literature and culture of the nineteenth century. With the dawn of the industrial age it gets an urban rebirth. The ambitions of material success, sophistication and personal happiness engenders fierce competition and resultant consequences. It is not necessarily a way of life actually adopted by most Americans, but a pattern to which many tend to conform. Popular literature, movies, and advertisements, and rare examples of ‘men who have made it’ or the so called ‘self-made men’ feed the myth. There is no place for the loser. In the industrial /urban culture this fierce competitiveness, and rat race have created disillusionment and alienation among large segments of the population. Expectation falls short of achievement for most. The American mind has undergone a change and most serious writers focus on the failure of the Dream rather than its realization since that is the reality for most. A D Choudhuri makes this comment: “Frontiersmen, the American mind, in recent times especially, has been conscious of the phenomenon of illusion, the gap between the expected and the actual, much more sharply than the European.... Illusion has many faces, even American illusion...” (Choudhuri, 1979).

A distinction is made in this regard between the old world of European culture and the new world of the American Dream. European man, living in a structured and tradition bound society is comparatively limited in his ambitions and dreams. The American man whose ancestors had sought to create a new world order on the new continent imagines himself free from the traditional constraints and takes it for granted that his right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Blum, 1963) is his natural God-given right. The materialist notions of limitless wealth, power and prosperity are his life-goals. These take the place of lasting love and happiness. The ‘rags to riches story’ of many national heroes flame the aspirations but these myths also frustrate the average man who never can succeed despite his best efforts. Ruthless competition, the displacement of traditional moral and social values failure of sustaining relationships create the new Lomans who are the heroes of modern tragedies.

Serious American drama focusses on this aspect of American life since the time of Eugene O’Neill. O’Neill used the realist, expressionist and classical theatrical forms to express this. The alienated individual must of necessity redefine himself and find his place in the universe, relate himself to others around and rid himself of illusions in order to find true happiness. This is often impossible to many of O’Neill’s heroes and heroines. “O’Neill had been preoccupied with illusion ridden characters... In all his plays illusion pertains to the conception of the self, the character’s own identity; and the uphill task of self-recognition describes the curve of action...” (Choudhuri, 1979). In Tennessee Williams we have the theme recurring. In *The Glass Menagerie* for example, illusion is not only a thematic problem related in the realist mode, it is equally a theatrical problem dealt with making use of the devices of expressionism and the epic theatre. Be it Tom Wingfield, or Blanche Dubois, they are haunted by the illusions of an idealised past or future which they seldom come to experience in actuality and makes them outcasts and losers in the world around them. Williams’s characters are escapists unable to face up to the challenges of the harsh demanding modern world. Edward Albee uses the absurd mode and its accompanying devices of irony and satire in plays like *The Zoo Story*, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to deal with the same subject.

In the ‘Beat Generation’ writers, Sam Shepard was the most noteworthy exponent of the theatre of the Off Broadway in the 1960s with his stark examination of cherished American values and presenting a darkly lyrical, bleak and ambiguous social world of the post war decades America. In the case of Miller, Williams and Albee the settings of the plots are mostly urban America. Sam Shepard takes us to the contemporary rural Midwest, which embodies the old world America. Personally attached to this world where he grew up, Shepard uses this setting to explore the decline of the old American family world and the alienation and existential angst experienced by the new generation of the post war decades. Shepard who began as a pop musician and OOB theatre activist in New York, wrote a few plays that are often described as his ‘family plays’ of which *The Buried Child* has gained critical acclaim. These plays cannot exactly fit into the conventional schema of a classical or domestic/ realist theatre. The symbolic and metaphoric suggestiveness of his plays have invited the term ‘apocalyptic’ to describe them. He leaves sufficient room for ambiguity as to what his plays mean. But a close reading reveals how they also fit into the tradition mentioned above. They are generally about the failure of the American Dream. His characters are men and women who are haunted by failure and disillusionment.

They are often presented as psychologically disoriented, and seeking desperately to escape from the illusions that drive them and as clinging to the fragments of their ruins just to hold on to life. He evokes some of the familiar mythology of America only to devalue them with characteristic dramatic irony.

True West is a good example of this. The title evokes the popular image of the Western – the gun toting rugged cowboys who live in the Wild West, according to a code of honour and machismo. Repeated endlessly in fiction and popularised the world over through innumerable Hollywood movies, the myth of the Western cowboy is only slightly grounded in historical facts and is more myth than that. The play's plot revolves around two brothers who are attempting to develop a film script about cowboys. Shepard forces us to look at the endlessly repeated clichés of the cowboy myth here. It also critiques the chief propagator of the myth namely Hollywood cinema. "The tendency to move away from reality is nowhere more prominent than in Hollywood, the most powerful cultural force in America today... almost always it cuts down unpleasant realities and serves popular craze for entertainment and sentimental ending, shaping the stories into fables that attract maximum profit..." (Choudhari, 1979).

In *True West*, Austin, the worshipper of the ultimate illusion, cinema, dreams of becoming a successful writer of screenplays and mass wealth and fame. His projected story is modelled after the popular myths of the dream factories of Hollywood- the daring and chivalrous cowboys and the stereotyped antagonists the Red Indians of the mythical west- are built up before our eyes only to be exploded and revealed as illusions. The real west is very different in his eyes, "too much like real life. (Shepard, 1985). There is no longer such a place called the West. It is a dead or already a non- existent dream.

Lee, a petty thief and vagabond in the desert becomes the antagonist to Austin the dreamer. Lee enters to steal the show, undermining Austin's self-assuredness and eventually destroying the writers' cherished ambitions. Austin's developing story is forcefully replaced by Lee's story of the "true west" where cowboys are not daring macho heroes, they are rather felons and cuckolds who don't own horses, only cars that run out of gasoline as they chase each other through the darkening wilderness. The simple and honest life of the mythical west have nothing to do with the contemporary reality which is one that comprises greed, jealousy and hollow ambitions. Lee is reminiscent of Jerry in Albee's *The Zoo Story*, who serves to undermine the complacency, optimism and security of the protagonist, through violent intrusion and cruelty. Just as Jerry contrasts and replaces Peter's narrative with his weird story, so does Lee who destroys Austin's script and replaces it with an ironic one and even violently destroys the typewriter. Lee like Jerry is an outsider who overwhelms his brother and forces him to adopt his stance. He takes up the brother's role in the end. Lee provokes him like Jerry does and into murderous violence.

Both Lee and Austin are artists, creators of illusions and destroyers thereof. Art creates myths. The artist is a conjuror or dreamer who communicates his inner vision through his fictional narratives. There is also the ever present danger that the artist falls victim to his own narratives, thereby becoming an illusionist. The desert setting of the play, serves a symbolic background in this regard. It is an emblem of the barrenness of the enterprise of fiction engaged in by the writer. It symbolises failure. It surrounds them both. C W E Bigsby points out : " It is a play which hints at the irony of creating myths as a means of communicating truth- an irony which leads Shepard in the direction of parody. "(1985)

The final vision of the fratricidal struggle against the darkening desertscape is charged with an ominous apocalyptic tone. It may be read as an attempt to visualise the end of the Great Dream that is America. The coherence of the two characters and their behaviour is sometimes brought to question. But the playwright's intention is not realism of psychology. He is presenting a series of theatrical images focussing on a central motif. The apparent incoherence can therefore be read as an image of fragmentation of the great western myth which has lost its meaning.

In the play *Fool for Love* the playwright uses dream and fantasy motifs with the purpose of showing how people sustain themselves through the illusion of love. It puts together both real and quasi real characters in a series of dream like sequences. There is an old man figure on the stage who, as the dramatist indicates, is existent only in the minds of the other characters May and Eddie. The old man is a figure representing the past. He is presented as one whose love is split between two women, Eddie's mother and May's mother. The old man tells Eddie at one point: "I thought you were supposed to be a fantasist, right? Isn't that basically the deal with you You dream things up." (Shepard, 1983). The old man himself is a fantasist and the Eddie's illusionism is inherited from him. His illusionism is highlighted in the episode where he points to the invisible picture of Barbara Mandrell- his ideal woman comparable to Eddie's ideal of the Countess. The Countess is the rival to Eddie's love for May as he imagines it. The old man speaks of Barbara Mandrell as one whom Eddie is married to in his mind.

Eddie and May live in an unreal world, unable to fulfil their passion on account of mutual jealousy which frustrates love. "The only reality that their lives possess derives from the feelings they hold for one another, feelings which alternately attract and repel. The word 'reality' however is a problematic one, for, despite the apparent realism of the set, the realism is under pressure" (Bigsby, 1985). The stage devices serve to highlight the unreality of the situation. The stage direction insists that the doors boom when they are closed. When the headlights of a car sweep across the stage from outside the playwright indicates that it should not appear to be realistic. The element of unreality is further emphasised by the presence of the father figure who is installed on the side of the stage serving to highlight the guilt ridden memory and persistent anxiety shared by Eddie and May. It is also noteworthy that the uncomprehending simpleton Martin is not at all aware of the old man's presence. "Emotions and actions are as amplified as the sound, as the characters beat their fists against the wall as though that were the unyielding substance of their feelings." (1985)

Eddie is the chief illusionist, the teller of stories, like the father. May, the disillusioned and vengeful lover undercuts Eddie, even physically brings him down. Her periodic foray in to the bathroom where she keeps her things and glasses is symbolic of her momentary escapes into a sense of security from the insecure world of changing passions. She says: "I keep everything in the bathroom. It's safer." (Shepard, 1983). The Old man, Eddie and May together patch up the story of their family from the bits and pieces of their individual memories. Martin the innocent outsider has only the role of a listener and is a victim caught up between fantasy and reality, just like the spectators.

The Buried Child presents a somewhat coherent story line with built in ambiguities. The central image is that of a buried child who is supposedly a product of incest, and a victim of murder. The plot centres around the family of the dying old man Dodge, who in some ways is reminiscent of the old man in *Fool for Love*. The figure of the dead child is a complex theatrical image that serves to bring together the unpleasant if not tragic history of Dodge's family. Dodge, like Miller's Willy Loman is a failed father who is guilty of moral lapses on his part. He had dreams and cherished ambitions centred on his sons, but each one proves to be a miserable failure. It cuts him off from everyone. He lives in a state of hopelessness and partial awareness of the reality that surrounds him. To the other members of the family he is only as good as the plucked corn that his demented son spreads over him while he sleeps. Dodge's mode of escape is alcohol and television. When Shelley speaks reassuringly to him of the possibility of his grandson Vince's return home he has this to say: "You are all alike you hopers, 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, 1985). This reveals the depth of his despair. He only hopes for death.

Halie his wife stands in contrast to the old man by her attitude. She too is aware of the failure of the family, but she seeks substitute in fantasy to maintain hope. She appears as a fantasiser, a believer in certain things: "Certain basic things .We can't shake certain basic things, We might end up crazy. Like my husband. You can see it in his eyes. You can see how mad he is." (1985) Halie weaves her hope around the dead son Ansel who as is hinted, is the representation of the American Dream. Halie describes him as her "All American " boy (1985). She too is revealed as of loose morals when she flirts with Father Dewis, the representation of an ineffectual faith. Her purpose is to get his help in erecting a statue of the dead boy. She describes to Dodge the details of the statue to be erected: "Ansel's getting a statue, Dodge. Did you know that? Not a plaque but a real live statue. A full bronze. Tip to toe. A basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other." (1985). Here Ansel becomes an icon of a lost world and at the same time an image of wish fulfilment. The notion that we get in the beginning of the play is that Ansel was murdered and buried in infancy. But Halie's first monologue contradicts this when she says that after the failure of the other son Tilden, she had pinned her hopes on Ansel, and goes on to describe the dead child as a Basketball champion and a soldier who later married a Catholic and died on his honeymoon. (The name Catholic' is evoked here to highlight the popular hatred and prejudice nourished by the average Central American Protestant to which this family belongs). For Halie, Ansel is the cure for all the ills haunting the family; "he would take care of us, too. He would have seen to it that we were repaid. He was like that. He was a hero. Don't forget that. A genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And very intelligent. Ansel could've been a great man. One of the greatest" (1985).

Halie is a failed mother estranged from her family and unable to provide a place of warmth and security to her family. She seeks refuge in the outer world. Her obsessive fantasies about the dead son and her flirting with the priest are indicators of her essential loneliness and alienation from reality. She reminds us of Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Mary in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. All these three mothers live among the ruins of their dreams still clutching to them for comfort. Bradley and Tilden, the Dodge sons live out their illusions in their own different ways. Tilden who once was a hero has now returned a mental cripple living

as a parasite under his father's roof. We are not provided with details of how he came to be like this. Bradley the younger one is an amputee, the result of a chainsaw accident, Bradley in his attempt to cover up the family guilt over the murder, takes up its responsibility from Dodge before the inquisitive Shelley who is trying to dig out the family secret.

Parallel to the attempts to unravel the mystery of the buried child runs Vince's attempts to inherit his dream-family. Vince is an artist who returns to his ancestral home after a six year exile, accompanied by his girlfriend Shelley. Nostalgia brings him there. But from the moment of their arrival, the young couple are stripped of all rosy illusions about the home. This grows on Shelley as the action progresses. In the beginning of Act 2, Shelley remarks that the household looked like a Norman Rockwell painting and starts to build the story of "Mr Marshall's pussy cat and the Children" (1985). Soon she senses something wrong. The couple are too naïve arriving unexpectedly "out of the middle of nowhere completely deranged." (1985) The utter lack of friendliness and recognition disturbs her deeply. Dodge mistakes Vince for Tilden who had gone out in the rain without his permission. He also insults Shelley. In an attempt to make them recall him, Vince executes some of his childish tricks he used to display long ago before the elders. But it is to no avail. The past is dead. Innocence is dead, all possible means of communication are dead, and relationships cannot be revived between the three generations.

The arrival of the cynical Bradley makes things worse. He calls Shelley a whore whom Tilden has brought into the house. The frustrated youth goes out and returns drunk and violent. In Shelley's exchanges with Halie she brings to focus Vince's obsession with his ancestral house and the scenes from his childhood that had drawn them there. "We had to stop off at every tiny little meatball town that he remembered from boyhood! Every stupid little donut shop he ever kissed a girl in, every drive-in. Every Drag Strip. Every football field he ever broke a bone on." (1985). Shelley's visions about the family are inspired by Vince of course. She says: "I had an image. Every time he'd tell me a name, I'd see a person, In fact, each of you was so clear in my mind that I actually believed it was you. I really believed when I walked through that door that the people who lived here would turn out to be the same people in my imagination." (1985). Father Dewis tells her that it is only a "hallucination" in her mind.

However, Shelley realizes the situation in the family clearly and is determined to get into the heart of the matter. She becomes aggressive, pursuing the secret which the Dodge family members desperately want to hide from outsiders. The force of their denial of the murder is such that they themselves have come to believe in its veracity. This brings Shelley into confrontation with Bradley, Dodge is forced into speaking out the truth at this point. Vince's violent behaviour towards the end results from his failure to connect with his lost family and belong there. Halie recognises Vince as her grandson and transfers her admiration to the young man perhaps in hope of his replacing the dead Ansel. She reminisces: "There wasn't a mean bone in his body. Everyone loved Vincent. Everyone. He was the perfect baby" (1985).

Dodge's final confession of guilt is confirmed when Tilden enters with what appears to be the mud covered remains of the buried corpse. The death of Dodge, followed by the exposition of the dead body of his child and Halie's vision of the field full of corn (which had been lying fallow for long) and vegetables vaguely suggest a kind of purgation of guilt and resultant redemption. Life appears to be renewed through the youthful and manly Vince who has asserted his power. Like the mythical child 'killed' ritually by George at the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Halie's mythical son is finally laid to rest by Tilden when he brings in the remains of the buried child onstage. But Halie is not shattered by this, perhaps because she now has a living (grand) son in the house. In any case Vince has now inherited the house as Dodge has bequeathed it on him. There is a long speech that she delivers as Tilden brings the remains of the buried child onstage and Dodge is dead on the sofa. It reflects her substitution of Ansel by the sprouting corn in the backyard. She speaks as one in a dream; "You can't force a thing to grow. You can't interfere with it... You just gotta wait till it pops out of the ground. Tiny little shoot. Tiny little white shoot... Strong though. Strong enough to break the earth even... I've never seen a crop like this in my whole life..." (1985). It is a moot question whether there actually is corn growing in the backyard because Dodge has stated earlier that the land has not been cultivated since the days of the Dust Bowl when Tilden brought corn inside. There appears to be a tantalising suggestion of a rebirth through the grandson implied in the exhumation of the buried child, the death of the worthless patriarch of the house, the desertion of Shelley, the suggestion of rain and sun outside making corn grow.

The motifs presented in *The Buried Child* continue in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Here also the conflicts within the family, failed ambitions and dreams come into play. The members of the Tate family group in *Curse of the Starving Class* are defeated in their materialist ambitions which they try to achieve at the cost of the breakdown in relationships. The opening scene displays the broken front door of the house, a fitting symbol of the family security and closeness intruded upon by the world outside, as well as a suggestion of violence. For the Weston's

family, felicity is a deferred dream. Attempts to restore it meets with failure. The violent alcoholic Mr Weston chases after wealth engaging in real estate business. In reality he is a victim of financial cheats and crooks. His dreams explode along with him as he meets his violent death.

Ella, the mother of the house lives in dreams of Europe where she plans to settle with the money she can earn from selling their house. Her illusionism comes to the fore when she waxes eloquent about the promised land of Europe: "They have everything in Europe. High Art. Paintings. Castles. Buildings. Fancy food." (1985). Even at the end, despite her son Wesley's efforts, she fails to come to terms with reality. Her dreams are frustrated. Ella's daughter Emma is arriving at puberty and is rebellious. She fails to find acceptance in her family and dreams of escaping to Mexico in the hope of setting up as a mechanic. Her first attempt to escape from home after a quarrel, ends in her falling off the horse and return home all muddy and bruised. She fantasises about becoming a gangster and thinks of catching her mother with her lover and cheat Taylor. None of these ever happen. Wesley the son is comparatively more balanced and connected to reality. But his attempts to redeem the situation in the family does not quite succeed.

Each of the characters are members of the 'starving class'. The food imagery- the frequent visits to the refrigerator on the stage, the lamb etc. serve to highlight this- is emblematic of the family starved for love understanding and security, which they do not know where to seek. The craving for food is not a matter of physical hunger. "No one's starving! We don't belong to the starving class," (1985) says Emma. Each one is extremely individualistic. Ella the mother is a domineering, greedy flighty 'mommy' the kind of whom we can see in Albee's *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*. In her megalomaniacal destructivity, she negates the values of the family seeking after wealth and individual freedom. The members of the family maintain a rugged individualism and unforgiving defensive hostility towards one another. They are each haunted by a prevailing sense of inadequacy and inferiority. It is admittedly part of their 'curse,' which they desperately want to cover up. The violence of their language is indicative of their frustration. Emma is the most vociferous of them all. She refers to her father's temper as "liquid dynamite" and "nitro-glycerine."

The members of the Tate family fail to persevere cohesion or coherence. They pursue different ends in vain hope of self-realisation. They become preyed upon by criminals and swindlers. Emma is allegedly killed by hoodlums after she leaves with her mother's car to enter a career of crime. Weston leaves to escape his pursuers and Wesley undergoes an identity change into his father's persona and is mistaken for Weston both by his mother and other people. The final sequence is a powerful image called up by Wesley and Ella when they complete the story of the eagle and the lambs which was begun by Weston earlier. It tells of the eagle as caught by a cat and the two fighting desperately in mid-air neither of them letting go. The issues at stake are unresolved and if at all resolved, it does not have a hopeful prognostication.

Writing his theatre pieces in the 1960s and 70s, Sam Shepard is very much in the tradition of O'Neill Williams, Miller and Albee, taking a serious look at the American social scene and laying bare the tragic side of it. The family which is at the centre of American concerns, the demons of the modern world that tears it asunder, the unpalatable truths covered up by sentimental images and popular mythology are critiqued in them in much the way his predecessors did. Images of sterility, violence, death, failed ambitions soured dreams are the recurrent images in Shepard's plays. He was giving voice to the disillusionment and anger that the beat generation of the after decades of the World War America experienced.

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