

RETELLING THE MYTH:
SAM SHEPARD'S
TRUE WEST AND THE LATE HENRY MOSS

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Bachelor of Arts/Science in Theatre

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Joplin, Missouri

2004

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 2006

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first would like to thank Dr. Jessica M. Maerz. To her I owe her a great debt because without her guidance and support this document would never have been written. She was always there for me with great advice and words of encouragement.

I would also like to thank Professors Heidi Hoffer and Kevin Otos. I have benefited greatly from their comments and insights.

I also would like to thank Dr. Jeffrey Stephens. He was there at the beginning of this journey and continued to send me words of inspiration and encouragement along the way.

Finally I would like to thank my fiancée Amanda Duckett. She is my heart and my backbone. She kept me going when I thought I would break down and held me together when I thought I would fall apart. Thank you and I love you.

This document is not just the effort of one person but of all the people that helped, pushed, and guided me through it. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

DEBUNKING THE MYTH

Sam Shepard's play, *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), first produced in San Francisco by the Magic Theatre on November 7, 2000, marks the sixth in a cycle of plays in which Shepard explores complicated relationships within the American family. Five earlier plays that also examine this topic are *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Buried Child* (1978), *True West* (1981), *Fool for Love* (1983), and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). *The Late Henry Moss* is the latest version of the same play that Shepard has written five times prior. As Matthew Roudane describes:

The familiar material, of course, negotiates the problematic conditions of the American family and its wayward inhabitants. As seen in so many Shepard plays, questions of heredity, legacy, and legitimacy animate the stage, as do the status of the real and the ways in which the individual subjectivizes his or her own version of reality. (279)

These plays all incorporate the traits that Roudane lists. The question of heredity facing the protagonists in all of the plays is the central theme that Shepard continues to address. This idea is also tied to the legacy that the patriarch will hand down to the protagonist if he continues to deny the truth of his family and his past leading to the idea of legitimacy. This is the truth that the protagonist must confront; all of the protagonists in these plays are living in a state of denial. They struggle to escape the patterns of alcoholism, abuse,

and abandonment that are displayed and handed down by the patriarch. They try to escape these traits by denying them and by clinging to myths of a misremembered past. Shepard's message is: through confronting and then accepting ones self and family will the individual be able to transcend these destructive traits typical of the family history.

The six family plays differ slightly, but essentially tell the same story in which the protagonist struggles, unsuccessfully, to extricate himself from his legacy and the eventual demise that befalls the patriarch. This thesis will investigate the similarities of these plays through direct comparisons of two of the six plays in the areas of the characters, conflict/themes, and the symbols/images that continually appear throughout Shepard's family plays. *The Late Henry Moss* will be the model to compare the other five plays while using *True West* as the main representative of the previous five plays.

The choice to use *The Late Henry Moss* is based on the fact that it is the last play in this cycle and the fact that Shepard has said that after this play he wants to move on from the family plays. *The Late Henry Moss* tells the story of two brothers who have come to their father's house after his death. They have not seen each other or their father in a long time. The play opens with a "Prelude to Act One: (Drunken Rumba)" in which the deceased Henry and his mysterious Indian girlfriend dance to sultry Mexican music lit by a very bright spot light. The play then unfolds with the brothers, Ray the younger and Earl the older, discussing the passing of their father, Henry. We learn that before the play began Earl arrived at their father's house first; a neighbor, Esteban, called him expressing concern about Henry and the fact that a large sum of money had arrived from the government. Earl relays to Ray that Esteban, a reformed alcoholic, informed him he was worried that this amount of money can only lead to danger for a drinker like Henry. Henry's dead body lies in a bed up-stage center for the entire first act and most of the

second. Henry appears alive in flashbacks as others recount what took place during his final days. Earl explains that when he arrived, Henry had already died and he therefore spent his time sitting in the house with the body. Ray, in disbelief, spends the rest of the play trying to put together what really happened to their father on his last days.

In Shepard's play, Henry Moss is pronounced dead by a mysterious Indian woman whom he met in jail, Conchalla. He attempts to convince her and himself that he is not dead. In the final scene, Henry admits to the abuse that he did to his wife many years earlier and with this admission he is able to accept death. As Shepard explains, "The play concerns another predicament between brothers and fathers [. . .] This one in particular deals with the father, who is dead in the play and comes back, who's revisiting the past. He's a ghost- which has always fascinated me" (79). This element of having a father that is represented on stage by a ghost reoccurs in other Shepard plays such as *Fool for Love* and *The Holy Ghostly*.

The original inspiration for *The Late Henry Moss* can be traced to two short stories. The first is the short story "See You In My Dreams," from Shepard's book *Cruising Paradise* (1996) in which Shepard recounts the aftermath of his own father's death. The story contains many similarities to the play: a Mexican neighbor named Esteban, a mysterious Indian woman that accompanies him on a drunken fishing trip and the arrival of a large sum of money from the government. The events of Shepard's father's final days are reproduced in *The Late Henry Moss*.

The second source of inspiration for *The Late Henry Moss* comes from Frank O'Connor's short story "The Late Henry Conran." This short story follows the character Henry Conran who after a long absence from his family then finds out that his son is getting married and that on the invitation the son lists his father as dead. Conran returns

to Ireland to take his place within his family. Both stories contain fathers that have been declared dead while Shepard's version focuses on the alcoholism, abuse, and abandonment that tore the family apart which is prevalent in all the family plays.

Shepard has never been an easy playwright to categorize. Over the course of his career Shepard has never adhered to one genre or style for very long. Shepard began exploring the myth of the American family using a realistic style with the debut of *Curse of the Starving Class* in 1977. Shepard revisits the same issues of the American family that were present in some of his earlier plays, such as *The Rock Garden* (1964) and *The Holy Ghostly* (1970). Shepard's earlier plays were written in a non-realistic style and are considered experimental and avant-garde. Shepard became one of the most successful American playwrights in the nineteen-sixties and seventies with his plays; *Chicago* (1965), *Icarus's Mother* (1965), *The Unseen Hand* (1969), and *Operation Sidewinder* (1970). After making his mark as an experimental, non-realistic playwright Shepard moved into a new direction, one that has its style buried deep in the conventions of nineteenth-century realism. With *Curse of the Starving Class* he uses a more traditional form to present his ideas:

Built around a conventional three-act structure and set in a recognizable domestic location (a farmhouse kitchen), it [*Curse of the Starving Class*] dealt with a family make up of familiar types (absent father, world-weary mother, anguished son, rebellious daughter) enacting a series of personal conflicts. (Bottoms 152)

Influenced by earlier American plays such as Eugene O'Neil's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, this new style is closer to realism than any of Shepard's earlier work. The same

realistic elements that Shepard uses in *Curse of the Starving Class* begin to repeat themselves in all of the family plays.

After *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard's Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Buried Child*, was produced. *Buried Child* furthered this cycle of realistic family plays using a realistic set and characters. The elements of realism appear most prominently in his play *True West*. *True West* was produced in July of 1980, and like *The Late Henry Moss*, was first performed at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco. *True West* tells the story of two brothers who have come together, after a long separation, at their mother's house while she is in Alaska on vacation. The younger brother, Austin, is a screenwriter who has come to his mother's house to work on a screenplay and meet with a producer, Saul, from Los Angeles. Austin's older brother, Lee, drops by unannounced and gets Saul to dump Austin's screenplay for one that Lee says is a "true-to-life Western" (19). Lee forces Austin to write the screenplay as the jealous Austin slowly transforms into a violent drunk and attacks his brother. The brother's father does not appear in this play but he is referred to and his influence is felt:

In the background is the image of the absent father, living in the desert and completely withdrawn from normal social contact, while in the foreground, always present, is a potential for violence that threatens to rip the delicate fabric of social interaction that prevents two brothers with radically different lives from killing each other. (Mottram 144)

In *True West* the father is never represented on stage by an actor but, the brothers argue about the father. The shadow of the father fuels the arguments that continue through all of the family plays. In *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss* the main source of conflict

continues to go back to the often raised topic of the father and the fact that he drank and abused the brother's mother.

The Late Henry Moss is the sixth and final play in the cycle of family plays. *True West* is the third play in this cycle. The choice to use *True West* as the representative of the other five plays comes from the fact that this play, according to Shepard, is the purest and most complete of the family plays (Coen 28). Shepard states that the idea for this play came to him and he wrote it in the shortest amount of time, "just kind of happened" (qtd. in Coen 29). While other plays have garnered more critical acclaim, Shepard has gone back and revised even the most popular of the family plays, *Buried Child*. In an interview conducted in 1996, the year the revised version of *Buried Child* appeared on Broadway, Shepard was asked about having called his *Buried Child* "verbose and overblown" and "unnecessarily complicated" (qtd. in Coen 28). Shepard has stated that *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind* went through many revisions before he finished it. When asked about plays that he would not revisit when it comes to revising them, he stated that *True West* was the one that he felt was the closest to being perfect (29).

The comparisons in this thesis will prove that Shepard reuses many of the same characters, images/symbols, as well as conflict/themes. The next section will show the differences in these two plays. The logic in contrasting the two plays is that; even in their differences Shepard's main theme, or message, is reinforced. I will address in my conclusion that Shepard wrote these six plays with the intention of debunking the myth of the American family. Shepard believes that this myth is a fallacy and a device used to deny the reality of the past. This myth is used to escape the true self and one's place in the family.

One reoccurring element in all six family plays is the patriarch. Shepard admits that this character is based on an amalgamation of his father and grandfather. Whether appearing onstage or discussed in his absence, this character's presence is always felt. Many reoccurring themes in the family plays are taken from Shepard's life experience. The struggle of finding his identity separate from his father and family is one that Shepard felt as a young man strikes at the heart of the family plays.

True West and *The Late Henry Moss* contain many biographical elements that are at the heart of what Shepard presents in all six of the family plays. The struggle of the protagonist to extricate himself from inheriting the destructive patterns of the patriarch is the reoccurring theme in all of his work. This struggle is what Shepard has dealt with in his own life, "his personal history, a history which includes a rootless upbringing, a father whose anger and frustration transmuted into violence and alcoholism; but it is also a sensibility which fears its own fragilities" (Biggsby 24). Although it would be a mistake to think of Shepard as a purely an autobiographical writer, his real life experiences with his father clearly serve as the inspiration for his plays. Shepard takes the events of his life and expands them to fill his art. One of these events that he describes is the anger his father felt when he found out Shepard had changed his name from Samuel Shepard Rogers to Sam Shepard. This event comes to the stage in Shepard's play *The Holy Ghostly*:

POP. 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, Stanley. Give ya' that name 'cause that was my name and my pappy gave me that name and his pappy before him. That name was handed down for seven generations, boy. Now ain't no time to throw it away. (207)

These lines show the way that Shepard mingles real life with fiction recreating his own myth of past events. The plots of all of the family plays Shepard admits come from his real life-but only as a starting point. Shepard adds his own version or myth to confront his past. His characters all debate the truth of the past and how it is twisted and changed by someone and then passed down as myth. The message that Shepard presents is that only by confronting one's legacy or heredity and not trying to deny it, is how one comes to his own identity.

The characters in all of the plays try to discern what is true and what is not about the past:

Shepard's conflating of the real with the imaginary assumes particular resonance through the subtle use of the family photographs throughout the play. They function, in a minor key, like the films in *True West*: through the ostensibly minor stage props of photographs, *The Late Henry Moss* explores a number of epistemological questions about the ways in which the individual apprehends, distorts, and then internalizes that distorted image of the real to such an extent that the distortion - an abstracted replication of actual experience - displaces reality itself. (Roudane 286)

This idea of a blurred vision of the past and the search for truth, as Roudane points out, appears throughout all of the family plays. This image of confusing reality and myth is just a cover for trying to hide one's own identity. Shepard puts forth the idea that the only way to move on in life is to get to accept what is real and reveal what is myth.

Roudane's article comes from *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, for which he serves as editor. The collected articles approach Shepard's work from various paradigms such as Christopher Bigsby's psychoanalytical look at Shepard's career "Born

Injured: the theatre of Sam Shepard.” Bigsby attempts to link Shepard's feeling of disconnectedness to his approach of playwriting. Another article by Thomas P. Adler, “Repetition and regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*,” explores the change in style Shepard took with *Curse of the Starving Class*. This article explores Shepard's change from an experimental form to one that borrows from the conventions of dramatic realism. Two books of collected articles featuring Shepard are *Rereading Shepard* and the theatre journal *Modern Drama*. *Modern Drama* dedicated an entire special issue to Shepard and other modern playwrights in 1993, which also took many different looks at his career and life. Both of these books prove invaluable testaments to the power of Shepard's work. The amount of critical response on various aspects of Shepard's career helps narrow the scope of this thesis to the linking of the family plays.

Several books present an overview of Shepard's career, most notably *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* by Stephens J. Bottoms, *Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages* by Lynda Hart, *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre* by Leslie A. Wade, and *Inner Landscapes: The Theater of Sam Shepard* by Ron Mottram. These books create a portrait of Shepard that follows him from a restless child trying to find a way out of his Northern California home to the nineteen year old moving to New York in 1963 with dreams of being an actor and rock n' roll star. By studying Shepard's life and career, these books present the parallels of Shepard's art and his real life. The biographical information that he uses as inspiration can be directly linked to what he presents in his plays. The relationship with his father, the relationship between his mother and father, and the affect of World War II and alcohol all appear in Shepard's life and in his plays. This aspect of how his life influences his work will be addressed further in chapter four of this argument.

Many interviews have been conducted in which Shepard discusses different projects and aspects of his career. Shepard, always the elusive subject, has not proven very forthcoming when discussing his work. At times he actually seems bothered or distressed at the questions asked. Shepard rarely gives definitive answers, making it seem that what he writes comes about by accident. In an interview conducted by Carol Rosen, "Emotional Territory," as well as one with Stephanie Coen, "Things at Stake Here," he does address the idea of myth and reusing characters and tries to explain some of his methods. Two interviews, one conducted by Don Shewey and the other by Mona Simpson shed some light on the inner thoughts of the playwright and his approach to his craft.

Three authors have analyzed the main conflict in many of Shepard's plays: that of the relationship of father and son. One of the newer documents written is Michael Taav's dissertation, "A Body Across the Map: The Father and Son Plays of Sam Shepard." In his dissertation Taav asserts that the central conflict of all of these plays is the son trying to escape the father or father surrogate.

"A Worm in the Wood: The Father-Son Relationship in the Plays of Sam Shepard," by Henry I. Schvey, also explores this father and son conflict and relationship. Schvey asserts that the main conflict in the work of Shepard comes back to the patriarch and son as they battle each other for dominance. He, like Taav, also ends his analysis with *A Lie of the Mind*. This article influenced much of Taav's work and is one of the most frequently cited articles. It argues the same point of view that Taav does but having been written in 1993 it does not incorporate much of the later works of Shepard. Schvey and Taav both tie the works together by the central conflict and do not explore the aspects of character and imagery that will be discussed in this study.

Paul Rosefeldt's *The Absent Father in Modern Drama* loosely uses the term modern since he goes back to Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers* to explore the role of the absent father. Rosefeldt takes a look at *True West* in a chapter entitled "Escape of the Father and the Son's Hopeless Quest- II." Rosefeldt's main assertion is that, "Both lost sons are longing for the paradise world of their youth, a world connected with a suburban wilderness associated with the father" (52). This assertion is only partially true. The brothers are searching for a lost childhood that does not exist as well as a freedom that they cannot seem to attain. I assert that this paradise world is the myth of their past. Trying to deny the truth of their childhood is another example of the brothers lying to themselves and not accepting reality.

Several books have been published that focus on American drama and modern drama that devote entire chapters to Shepard. *American Playwrights: A Critical Survey* by Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta, *The Other American Drama* by Marc Robinson, *A Reader's Guide to Modern American Drama, Shepard, Kopit, and the Off Broadway Theater* by Doris Auerbach, and *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* by Jeanette R. Malkin all give Shepard his place as one of the most influential and successful American playwrights in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Over the course of Shepard's career a great amount of critical response has been written about his work. No one critic has presented the reasons why Shepard wrote these six plays that are only different versions of the same play. I contend that Shepard attempts to debunk the myth of the American family with these plays. This myth is propagated by happy tales of a misremembered past. This myth is perpetuated in Norman Rockwell's paintings and in happy faces in family photo albums that belie the unhappiness that really exists. The family histories that he presents in these plays are full

of abuse, abandonment, and alcoholism. The brother's in both *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss* continue to debate what the truth is and what myth is. They try to escape and deny their heredity but the attempt to escape from one's heredity is futile. Only by confronting the past and dealing with it are we able to break the destructive cycle that Shepard presents as the reality of the American family.

CHAPTER II

SIMILARITIES:

FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT

By comparing *The Late Henry Moss* and *True West* it becomes evident that Shepard is working the same ground of inspiration that he has throughout the writing all of the family plays. Shepard is in fact recycling many elements in his quest to make his point about the myth of the American family. By using inspiration from his own life Shepard tells the same story. This is the struggle of the protagonist to escape his heredity. This struggle is done by denying who he truly is and where he comes from thereby creating this myth of the past. In both plays this struggle is played out by the two sets of brothers. By focusing on specific aspects of both plays one begins to see the patterns of similarities. The areas of focus that bring about the most similarities are; the characters, the conflict/themes, and the symbols/images that are present in both.

The Characters

In *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard reuses the same basic archetypes for the characters that inhabit them. The character types are recycled and pitted against each other regardless of the minor variances that may be present within the play. The similarities of the basic model can be seen in what the characters want, fight for and fight against. The dominate traits of these characters are the building blocks from which Shepard works. From the protagonist/son, who always struggles against the antagonist/patriarch to gain freedom, to the antagonist/patriarch who displays the drunken

violence of a not too distant past, these characters appear in all the plays whether portrayed on the stage by an actor or they are represented through the dialogue of the other characters.

The central character in all six of the family plays, the son, fights the losing battle to extricate himself from the legacy of violence and alcoholism of the patriarch. This character, portrayed as the new guard, tries to find himself as an individual, separate from the family. He has seen the destruction and decay of the family through the absence, neglect, and violence of the patriarch. He desperately wants to heal the family and the family home. In all six plays he will fail and will begin to display traits of the patriarch. This is portrayed as either losing control in a violent display or literally taking the physical space of the patriarch.

In *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard uses a unique device when presenting the protagonist/son character. Shepard splits the character into two sides of the same self. The character(s) appear as brothers battling each other as well as the heredity of the patriarch figure. Shepard states in an interview with Mel Gussow for the New York Times, “You feel yourself to be in a dual identity. Rather than making a psychological issue out of that, I've divided it into brothers. You have these two forces that are in fact part of one entity. To externalize this into brothers seems plausible for fiction or theater” (E. 1). One of the brothers, always the younger of the two, represents the more civilized of the brothers and the one that has distanced himself the most from the grips of the patriarch. This younger brother character is the protagonist of these plays. This character is represented by Austin in *True West* and Ray in *The Late Henry Moss*. These characters are much like Vince in *Buried Child*, having been away from the family/patriarch only to get pulled back into the vortex of the family due to outside

circumstances. These characters come back as calm and non-violent persons whose initial want, to take care of the family and return back to civilized life, transforms them into acting out the violence and alcoholism of the patriarch. The other side of this character, the older brother, is already following in the path of the patriarch and drags his brother down with him thus being destroyed by the younger brother or replaced by him. This character is represented by Lee in *True West* and Earl in *The Late Henry Moss*. By splitting this character Shepard allows the audience to see the inner struggle of the character to break the patterns of alcoholism, abuse, and abandonment that have been laid down by the older males in the family. Shepard also uses this device in *A Lie of the Mind* with the brother characters Frankie and Jake. Frankie the older brother beats his wife until he thinks she is dead, much like Henry does in *The Late Henry Moss*, and Jake the younger brother is sent to find the truth of what really happened to Frankie's wife. Even though these characters are different the similarities of what they want and how they fail to escape their fate is exactly the same. As Henry Schvey describes the two brothers in *True West*:

Lee, although presented as Austin's brother in the play, is in fact his alter-ego, the part of Shepard's divided self that is rough and crude, lives outside the law, and is drawn toward the elusive image of his father. The play, then, is not so much a bout between two brothers as it is an externalized metaphor of the dialectic between the dual aspects of Shepard's psyche. (20)

This splitting the character into two is used by Shepard to show how the protagonist is torn between; mother and father, reality and myth, feminine and masculine. This battle is the externalization of the battle to find ones own identity. The characters battle each

other only to lose site of what they represent. The characters transform into their opposites through the course of the play.

The transformation that takes place in *True West* is presented as the brothers adopt each others roles. At the beginning of *True West*, Austin is a screenwriter trying to work on his screen play while his petty thief brother wants to go out and rob his mother's neighbors. By the end of the play Lee has a deal with Hollywood producer Saul while Austin goes about stealing all the toasters in the neighborhood. The same transformation takes place in *The Late Henry Moss*. Shepard bookends this play in a way that makes the transformation of the characters undeniable. The play begins with the lines:

EARL. Well, you know me, Ray-I was never one to live in the past. That never was my deal. You know-You remember how I was.

RAY. Yeah. Yeah, right. I remember. (6)

The play then ends with the same lines only reversed:

RAY. Well, you know me, Earl-I was never one to live in the past. That never was my deal. You know-You remember how I was.

EARL. Yeah. Yeah, right. I remember. (113)

By making a point to end the play as a reversal of character illustrates how the characters have transformed into the other. The transformation of one character into the other illustrates how the battle to free oneself from whom one truly is, is futile. As the characters do battle with themselves they just switch to the other side of themselves instead of into a new identity.

The two sides of these characters are not only representative of the embattled sides of the same self but also the representatives of their parents. The past domestic violence that these characters have witnessed between their mother and father has caused

each character to become allied with one of the parents. The younger brothers become aligned with the mothers and the older brothers aligned with the fathers. As William Kleb explains about the brothers in *True West*:

[. . .] they are simply stand-ins for Mom and the Old Man. The Old Man (and Lee) are [. . .] characterized by images of manliness, vigor, mobility, unpredictability, rootless, humor, and violence. It is a world in direct opposition to the world of Mom (and Austin). [. . .] Freeways; toasters and color T.V.s; Cocker Spaniels and house plants; Safeway. (70)

The sons collide as representatives battling for the wrongs that the parents perpetrated on each other in the past. The character of Ray in *The Late Henry Moss* continually confronts Earl about the night their father beat their mother until she had to hide under the sink in a bloody ball. Ray seems to blame Earl for the beating as if he was the one that did it. Ray eventually exacts the same beating on Earl. Ray forces Earl to scrub the floor as he recounts the beating Henry gave to their mother years prior, until Earl is curled up under the sink in terror.

The patriarch represents the antagonist, or antagonistic force, in all six of the family plays. This character is always portrayed as an alcoholic, often absent, and violent figure that destroys the family and himself through his actions. In many of Shepard's plays this character does not have a name. This character's abusive action casts a long shadow over the brothers, as in both plays they attempt avoid the topic. In the first scene of *The Late Henry Moss* Ray tries to force Earl to talk about the night his father beat their mother and Earl ran off:

RAY. I remember you leaving. That's all I remember.

EARL. What? When?

RAY. When you first left. When the big blowout happened.

EARL. Big blowout?

RAY. You know what I'm talkin' about. (7-8)

In this exchange, Ray cannot get Earl to admit that anything happened. The event that tore the family apart has become a bad memory that Earl pretends did not happen. In final scene Henry tells the story of the night he beat their mother. He describes the floor of the kitchen, “I remember the floor– was yellow– I can see the floor- and- her blood- her blood was smeared across it” (112). After Henry finally admits to the beating he dies and is covered in a yellow and red Mexican blanket, mimicking the floor smeared with his wife's blood. Shepard shows the patriarch finally admitting to his past and confronting what he has been denying all these years and this is the action that finally sets him free.

The patriarch character is not always presented by an actor on the stage. In *True West* this character is seen as an absent force that has had such a profound influence on the protagonist that even in his absence he still controls the outcome of the play. As Kleb states, “the Old Man, after all, doesn't even appear on stage – he is a rumor, a ghost, a memory” (71). This is a device that Shepard has used not only in the family plays (*Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*) but earlier in his play *Holy Ghostly* (1970). The father figure has been pronounced already dead and the character of Pop actually enters carrying his own dead body at one point in the play. The idea of a character appearing on stage that is already dead is the basis for *The Late Henry Moss*. As Shepard states when discussing the play, “This one in particular deals with the father, who is dead in the play and comes back, who's revisiting the past. He's a ghost-which has always fascinated me” (79).

As this absent or deceased character possesses the stage, his spirit eventually takes control of the protagonist. The plays all end with the protagonist's failure to escape his legacy and the pull of the family. He becomes trapped by the very transformation that he fought to avoid. By denying their legacy and battling with themselves rather than accepting who they are and where they came from they are destined to fail.

Conflict/Theme

In Shepard's six family plays the central conflict is the struggle of the protagonist/son to extricate himself from the destructive patterns of alcoholism, abuse, and abandonment that are displayed by the antagonist/patriarch. In all of these plays the protagonist will fight to break the cycle of violence, abandonment, abuse, and alcoholism at the hands of the patriarch that have brought down the family. In all cases the protagonist will fail in this battle. He will either transform into the patriarch or become trapped in a situation that was brought about by the traits of the patriarch. This leaves us with the underlying theme that we cannot break from who we are and where we come from. In an interview, with Carol Rosen, Shepard states his belief that one cannot deny their own family:

So many people get screwed up because they try to deny them, try to say I'm not like my father, I'm not like my mother. I'm not going to be this way. I'm not going to be that way. When, in fact, there's nothing you can do about it.

I think that there is no escape, that the wholehearted acceptance of it leads to another possibility. But the possibility of somehow miraculously making myself into a different person is a hoax, a futile game. (8)

Even in the plays where the patriarch does not appear on stage his destructive influence is shown in the characters that discuss the past abuse and abandonment. This unseen hand of heredity will transform the protagonist into the very thing that he is trying to escape.

The battles that are presented in *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss* mirror each other in many ways. Shepard has externalized the inner struggle of the protagonist characters, Austin and Ray, as they try to deny the part of them that is already following in the patterns of the father. Through the course of the battle the protagonist starts to transform into the patriarch by displaying his traits (stealing, drinking) until he explodes in an act of violence upon the other brother which is the last step in his transformation into the patriarch. At the end of *True West* Austin begs Lee to let him get to his car so he can run off to the desert to live like their father. Austin holds Lee around the neck with a telephone cord as Schvey describes the image “Trapped by the umbilical cord of their connectedness, neither brother can escape, and they are doomed to continue their struggle indefinitely” (21). The final battle between the brothers in *The Late Henry Moss* is virtually the same, with the protagonist, Ray, beating his brother, Earl, until he cannot walk and forcing him to clean the floor because he is going to stay and live in their dead father's house:

RAY. Get up off the floor!! [*Ray kicks Earl hard in the ribs. Earl struggles to the downstage chair and drags himself up into it . . .*] You know what I think? I think it's time we straightened up in here, don't you? Get a little order. I mean if I'm gonna be living here I'd like to have a little order. Scrub the floors maybe. [. . .] (95)

In each case the protagonist has transformed into the patriarch or is trapped by the past acts that the patriarch has done and in some cases both. By battling with the other is trying to runaway from or deny your true self. This self-denial is a never-ending cycle of lies that they cannot get free of until they accept who they are.

Shepard makes it clear that his belief that one cannot escape heredity and their own fate is the underlying theme in the six family plays. In Vince's monologue, from *Buried Child*, Shepard illustrates this inescapable legacy:

VINCE. I was going to run last night. I was gonna run and keep right on running.

[. . .]

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 every breath marked him. Marked him forever without him knowing. And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. 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 recognized. Still recognized to bones underneath. The eyes. The breath. The mouth. I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me. Then it all dissolved. Everything dissolved. (130)

This illustrates how Vince tries to run away from whom he is but is haunted by the truth of who he is. In this monologue it is clear that the protagonists in all of the plays can never outrun who they are or where they come from. The ghosts of their pasts will always be there and they have no choice but to take their rightful place at the head of the family. Vince comes back and inherits the land from Dodge, his grandfather. Once Dodge dies and Vince has taken his place on the couch Tilden comes in with the buried child that brought the decay on to the family.

Along with the struggle of the protagonist against the patriarch lies another battle fought within these plays. That battle is between what is true about the past and what a myth of a misremembered family history is. Closer analysis of what is being argued in these plays makes it evident that a war over who is telling the truth and who is lying about what actually occurred in the past. Particularly in *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss*, these debates come to be the central conflict between the characters.

The basic plot of *True West* centers around the two brothers as they argue about which one knows what is real about the story that Lee says in “A true-to-life Western” (19). This script is supposed to be the antithesis of what Shepard sees as what Hollywood presents as the truth: “What is most compelling in Shepard's drama is his projection of the myth of Hollywood as the other side of the bankrupt coin of the 'true' Hollywood in turn tries to romanticize in its Westerns” (Burkman 26). This debate runs through the play as the brothers attempt to write the story:

AUSTIN. Come on, Lee.

LEE. Whadya' mean, “come on”? That's what it is. Write it down! He's
runnin' outa' gas.

AUSTIN. It's too--

LEE. What? It's too much like real life!

AUSTIN. It's not like real life! It's not enough like real life. Things don't happen like that. (21)

The confusion of how things actually were and how we remember them is what Shepard continues to present in the play. Not only does Hollywood romanticize the West, but Austin says he cannot recognize the area where his mother now lives:

AUSTIN. When we were kids here it was different. There was a life here then. But now-- I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. On the way to appointments. Wandering down streets I thought I recognized that turn out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I misremember. Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard. Fields that don't even exist anymore. (49)

This loss of what one thought they knew is an example of a misremembered past. By denying the truth of the past the characters are left with a myth that never existed. They continually try to find this place in their past that felt like home only to realize that this place only exists in their minds. The continual denial of the truth will send them on an unending search of a lie.

In *The Late Henry Moss*, this argument is illustrated by what Earl reports has happened and what is shown in flashback as Ray investigates the last few days of their father's life. Earl declares that he has been sitting with the dead body of their father, Henry, and that when he arrived Henry was already dead. Ray, a very paranoid character, is doubtful of the story Earl tells and seems obsessed with truth. Not only is he

doubtful of the truth of the events of the father's death, but Earl seems to deny the truth of what Henry did to their mother years earlier. This obsession can be seen in the scene with the cab driver, Taxi, who drove Henry around on his last days. Ray goes to the trouble to track him down and pays him to come back out to the father's house so that he may uncover the reality of what happened. Even in his interaction with Taxi, a man he has just met, he displays an obsessive disbelief. When Taxi tries to prove he is from Texas because his great-great-grandmother was slaughtered by Comanches, Ray sets him straight:

RAY. Thing about that kind of a story, Taxi man, is the very first fabricator-- the original liar who started this little rumor about your slaughtered great-great-grandma- he's dead and gone now, right? Vanished from this earth!

[. . .]

So there's really no way to verify this little story of yours, is there? This little history.

TAXI. You're not calling me a liar, are you?

RAY. Your whole family's a pack of liars. They were born liars. They couldn't help themselves. That's why it's important to try to get at the heart of things, don't you think? Somebody, somewhere along the line has to try to get at the heart of things. (68)

Ray sees it as his job to “get at the heart of things” throughout the play. He questions everyone involved with his father and continues to push his brother into remembering the night that his father beat his mother. That night is the major event in the family's history because not only does it signify the night Henry and Lee abandoned Ray and his mother

but it is also the night that Henry says he died. This same night is when the father and the brothers ran away and tried to deny what happened. It is not until Henry admits what he did and Ray gets to the truth when a type of order is restored.

Symbols/Images

Several of the symbols and images that appear in *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss* also appear in all of the family plays. Even the settings in which the plays take place become symbols for the transformation of the brothers. Both plays take place in one of the parent's home in their absence or after their death. In *True West* the brothers come together in the mother's house while she is on a vacation in Alaska. In *The Late Henry Moss* the brothers have come to their father's house after he has died. The choice in the setting becomes important as the plays progress. Throughout *True West* Lee continues to complain about his mother's house. He steals objects from the neighbor's houses and brings them back. Both of the brothers transform the house into the father's home by completely tearing up what the mother has so carefully put there. They change the house so drastically that upon the mother's return she does not recognize her own home and must leave, "I can't stay here. This is worse than being homeless" (58). This transformation is mainly done by the destructive actions of Lee, the character that is more closely aligned with the father. The same transformation happens in *The Late Henry Moss* as Ray, the character that is more closely aligned with the mother, forces Earl to scrub the floor transforming the father's house into the mother's house. Even in the different settings Shepard does not stray from the family home. These differences only further illustrate the struggle of the protagonists to escape the family.

The set of all of the family plays is usually a kitchen or dining room just off the kitchen, all with similar table and chairs. Shepard explains in an interview with Don Shewey:

The kitchen has always been my favorite room in the house. The kitchen is where serious conversations happen, where genuine gathering together with family happens, where devastating things happen. Eating.

So what's the refrigerator?

I just love finding an object that's so domestic, so common in life, in an uncommon situation, on stage, as a character. (25)

The significance of certain props becomes apparent through out these plays. The objects that Shepard presents are usually of the everyday and are decidedly lower class. These props are used to establish the class and situation of the family. Shepard's families in the plays are lower class or destitute. The refrigerators in many of the plays are always empty or only contain a small amount of food.

The use of food and drink in all of Shepard's plays is very specific in its intended effect. Alcohol is consumed in all of the family plays. In *True West* Lee drinks non-stop throughout the play and toward the end pours beer all over his body to cool off: "Lee, who never seems to eat, guzzles beer from one end of the play to the other, powerfully reinforcing for the audience the impression of a primitive, uncivilized bum" (Whiting 179). When Austin begins to drink, which happens to the protagonist in almost all of the family plays, this is the beginning of the protagonists becoming aligned with the patriarch. Alcohol is used as the catalyst that not only brings the protagonist closer to the patriarch but also brings the brothers together before the last explosion of violence seals the protagonist's fate:

LEE. You sound just like the old man now.

AUSTIN. Yeah, well we all sound alike when we're sloshed. We just sorta' echo each other. (39)

These lines illustrate how the consumption of alcohol is used to symbolize the transformation of the protagonist. This use of alcohol is not unique to Shepard: “There are striking similarities in the ways O'Neill and Shepard use alcohol to both bind and isolate brothers such as Jamie and Edmund in *Long Day's Journey* and Austin and Lee in *True West*” (Abbott 197). While alcohol is used as the symbolic beginning of the downfall of the protagonist the denial of food seems to be portrayed as another step in this downfall.

The way Shepard uses food as the symbol for the spiritual nourishment that is missing from all of the characters is very effective. In most of the six plays, the smell of real cooking occurs so that the audience's sense of smell is as affected as the other senses. In *True West*, Austin cooks several pieces of toast at the same time with the toasters he has stolen. Austin makes a large amount of toast and offers it to Lee, but he will not eat it. Earl knocks the toast to the ground. Austin rushes around picking up the toast as Lee circles him. Lee tells Austin that if he helps him with the screenplay he will take him to the desert. Austin agrees and to seal the deal Lee takes a large crunching bite of Austin's toast.

In all of the plays the patriarch is offered food to heal him and get him to stop drinking. He refuses the food and continues to drink. The food is symbolic of the salvation that could help him avoid his downfall but he will not accept it. The protagonist all are offered food and refuse it to illustrate the transformation into the patriarch.

Empty refrigerators as the lack of nourishment are another image that continues throughout the six plays. In *The Late Henry Moss* the brothers look into the refrigerator but Henry has left it empty except for a jar of jalapeño peppers. In the scene where Ray is interrogating Taxi, Ray shoves a pepper into his mouth and makes him eat it. At the end of the play Ray comes in with groceries to fill the refrigerator as he plans on staying in his father's house for awhile. The neighbor, Esteban, comes over with soup, as he did when Henry was alive, but the brothers do not want any.

After Henry's death, in *The Late Henry Moss*, the only objects left in the house are an old photo album and an old red tool chest. Both brothers look at the photos. Earl sees them as pictures of nice memories, Ray sees the photos as false depictions of the past or a lie of what truly took place. He ends up giving the photo album and the tool chest to Taxi. He explains to Earl:

EARL. You're goddamn right that's a long time ago! Those photographs are irreplaceable. Now some total stranger's got a hold of them. An outsider!

RAY. Well, he can always make up some kind of a story about them.

EARL. What's that supposed to mean?

RAY. He can tell people they're pictures of *his* family. *His* ancestors. He can make up a whole tall tale.

EARL. Why would he wanna do that?

RAY. Maybe he's got no family. Maybe he needs to make one up.

EARL. If he's got no family he can't make one up! That's not something you make up outta thin air! You can't make that stuff up. It's too complicated!

RAY. People will believe anything, Earl. You know that. Look at all the stuff you've told me.

EARL. What stuff?

RAY. Over the years. All the bullshit you've told me. I believed every word. (91-92)

Ray's view of the photographs presents Shepard's stance on the past and how easy it is to twist it and misrepresent the truth. The photographs only show happiness and smiles. They do not show the abuse and alcoholism that were present in the lives of the family when the pictures were taken:

Shepard's conflating of the real with the imaginary assumes particular resonance through the subtle use of the family photographs throughout the play. They function, in a minor key, like the films in *True West*: through the ostensibly minor stage props of photographs, *The Late Henry Moss* explores a number of epistemological questions about the ways in which the individual apprehends, distorts, and then internalizes that distorted image of the real to such an extent that the distortion-- an abstracted replication of actual experience-- displaces reality itself. The photographs are connections to the past, tangible objects, however inadequate of illegitimate they might be. (Roudane 286)

The brothers as well as Henry try "to picture" things about the past continually throughout the play which has the sense of falsity. Roudane also states of Ray that, "Ray senses that the photographs are substitutes for a current reality, a recalling and framing of a time past" (286). Shepard uses film (*True West*) and photographs (*The Late Henry*

Moss) to depict how the past can be misrepresented, manipulated , and made into a myth of the past as opposed to what really happened.

CHAPTER III

DIFFERENCES:

REARRANGING THE BATTLEGROUND

Shepard admits in interviews that some of his plays are similar, but he believes that each play has a unique focus. When confronted by Don Shewey with the question about *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss* being so similar he states, “A lot of people knocked it [*The Late Henry Moss*] because it was interpreted to be a rehash of *True West*, which it wasn't. It was just that there were brothers again. There's no law against bringing brothers into the plays several times” (24). With this statement we can conclude that although these plays are very similar Shepard varies certain aspects. Shepard presents different approaches leading to the same message. Even with the changes of location and basic outward plot points, the same underlying theme prevails; you cannot escape who or where you come from and trying to use myth or deception only traps you in the cycle of heredity.

When attempting to pin point the individual focus of each play one can say that *True West* is a debate between what Hollywood presents as the truth of the West and actual truth is. Lee's script is the reality and Austin's is the representative of myth. *The Late Henry Moss* focus is on Ray's finding out the truth of what really happened to his father during his final days.

One of the differences between the two scripts is which parent is present in the play and which is absent. In their absence, the parents are represented by one of the brothers. The younger brothers become the representative for the mothers and the older

brothers are the representative for the fathers, in that they protect the absent character. In *True West* the father does not appear on stage; Lee becomes the representative for him. Throughout the play Lee continues to speak up for the absent father, as is evident in the first scene when Austin offers him money:

(Lee suddenly lunges at Austin, grabs him violently by the shirt and shakes him with tremendous power)

LEE. Don't you say that to me! Don't you ever say that to me!

(just as suddenly he turns him loose, pushes him away and backs off)

You may be able to git away with that with the Old Man. Git him tanked up for a week! Buy him off with yer Hollywood blood money, but not me! I can git my own money my own way. Big money! (8)

We can see that Lee is standing up for his father by letting Austin know that he cannot do what he did to the father, and that the implication of buying him off offends him.

However, later in the play Lee states that with the money he and Austin could earn from their script, they could help their father. During the course of the play it is clear that Lee has a closer relationship with the father; Austin begs Lee to take him out to the desert like their father:

LEE. We could get the old man out'a hock then.

AUSTIN. Maybe.

LEE. Whatdya' mean, maybe?

AUSTIN. I mean it might take more than money.

LEE. You were just tellin' me it'd change my whole life around. Why wouldn't it change him?

AUSTIN. He's different.

LEE. Oh, he's a different ilk, huh?

AUSTIN. He's not gonna change. Let's leave the old man out of it.

LEE. That's right. He's not gonna change but I will. I'll just turn myself right inside out. I could be just like you then, huh? (25)

As Michael Taav states about this exchange, “Clearly, he [Lee] views himself and his father as being, in essence, identical—and therefore equally susceptible to change—and is insulted that Austin would view them otherwise” (124). As the representative for the father Lee wishes to help his father; but, just as the father would, Lee begins to think only of himself and turns his back on others. This action mirrors what Shepard’s father did to him and his family by deserting them and living in the desert.

In *The Late Henry Moss*, it is the mother who is absent and as her representative, Ray continually mentions her and reminds Earl of the violent acts their father, visited on her. Ray also begins to take out his feelings of anger toward Earl. The fact that Earl is the on-stage representative for their father begins to blur the lines, in Ray's mind, as to who was responsible for what happened to their mother. This confusion of character is another example of misremembering events of the past:

RAY. That's still very vivid with me. Like it happened yesterday.

EARL. You shouldn't let that stuff haunt you, Ray.

[. . .]

RAY. Blown out. Glass everywhere.

EARL. Ooh—yeah. That was *him* [*Gestures to Henry*], not me. That was him doing that.

RAY. Yeah. Him.

EARL. You're getting me mixed up with him. (8)

In this exchange Earl resents the linking of him to his father where as Austin seems insistent on it. As Lee in *True West* wants to help the father, Ray in *The Late Henry Moss*, lashes out against Earl, the father's representative. Ray does so in the final scenes to repay him for the abuse that the mother endured at the hands of the father many years earlier. When Ray kicks Earl in the final scenes, he makes Earl scrub the floor of the father's kitchen as if to wipe away the decay that the father has left and transform it into a clean setting that he, as well as his mother, would appreciate.

The settings Shepard creates are battlegrounds in very familiar locations. All but one (*Fool for Love*) takes place in the family home or the post-separation home of an absent parent. The family homes and the land on which they reside in the first two family plays (*Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*) are symbolic of the decay of the family. In both plays the land has gone neglected and abandoned, as has the family. In both cases the patriarch wishes to abandon the land as he will eventually do to his family.

Unlike those plays, the settings in *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss* represent one of the parents. *True West* is set in the mother's house and *The Late Henry Moss* is set in the father's house. In both cases the brothers transform the owner's home into that of the parent that does not appear in the play (i.e. the mother's home into the father's and vice versa).

In *True West* the play is set in the mother's house. The character Mom appears only briefly in the last scene. Her house is discussed as being very neat and clean:

LEE. Keepin' the sink clean? She don't like even a single tea leaf in the sink ya' know.

AUSTIN. Yeah, I know. (5)

Austin, the younger brother, has come to his mother's house to write a screenplay while she is in Alaska. He tells Lee that she offered him the house, whereas Lee seems to have just shown up. Austin, being the representative for the mother in this battle, defends not only the mother but her house as well when Lee insults it:

LEE. Antiques? Brought everything with her from the old place, huh.

Just the same crap we always had around. Plates and spoons.

AUSTIN. I guess they have personal value to her.

LEE. Personal value. Yeah. Just a lotta' junk. Most of it's phony anyway.

Idaho decals. Now who in the hell wants to eat offa' plate with the State of Idaho starin' ya' in the face. Every time ya' take a bite ya' get to see a little bit more.

AUSTIN. Well it must mean something to her or she wouldn't save it.

(10)

Lee (father's representative) finds his mother's house and possessions distasteful while Austin defends them. Through the course of the play Lee begins to bring stolen property into the mother's house and as Austin begins his transformation into the father both of the brothers tear up the house. This physical change of the mother's house is symbolic of the brothers transforming the mother's house into the father's house.

By contrast, *The Late Henry Moss* is set in the father's house after his death. Earl, the older brother, was the first of the brothers to arrive, and he contacted Ray and asked him to come. The brothers get into a violent altercation toward the end of the play. In one of the final scenes the two brothers fight and Austin, representing the mother, forces Earl to transform the father's house into the mother's by making him scrub the floor:

RAY. Keep scrubbing, Earl! Just keep yer nose to the grindstone.

There's a lotta territory to cover here. Lots of square footage. You remember how Mom used to work at it, don't ya?

EARL. [*Scrubbing.*] Mom?

RAY. Yeah. You remember how she used to scrub, day in and day out.

Scrub, scrub, scrub. (97)

As Ray forces Earl to clean the house, he goes on to tell how Henry would come in and “[. . .] stomp the shit off his boots and throw his coat on the floor” (99), and then the father would beat the mother. The act of forcing Earl to clean the house is not only Ray enacting revenge on the father's representative but it is also the transformation of Ray into the father. As Michael Abbott states, “Shepard's wanton sons transform themselves and their environment in ways that isolate and protect them from the world and, just as important, from their fathers” (198). Ray has become violent and is planning on living in Henry's house now that he is dead. As the beating is going on, Henry actually comes in the door, in flashback, and then acts out the final minutes of his life as he tells the story of how he beat his wife. These differences of transformation reinforce the message that Shepard believes that the characters are trying, in one way or another, to deny their parentage. His belief that we are both mother and father and the battles that are waged occur within the protagonist in his search for his true identity.

Many of Shepard's early works used a non-realistic style and with the move into the family plays he uses a realistic approach. In *The Late Henry Moss* Shepard uses flashbacks, which varies from normal realism, whereas in *True West* he uses a strict realistic approach. In the opening stage directions Shepard states in a note to the set designer:

The set should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects, or colors. No objects should be introduced which might draw special attention to themselves other than the props demanded by the scrip. If a stylistic “concept” is grafted onto the set design it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters' situation, which is the most important focus of the play. (3)

This insistence on realism is something that critics have noticed as something new to Shepard's approach that audiences needed to be aware of:

True West can be viewed, incompletely, as a competent naturalist drama, which is very likely the reason it has achieved recent popular success and has been called by many the most accessible of Shepard's plays. But on this count Shepard could respond that though such viewers have seen a “real” play, they have missed the “true” play. (Demastes 242)

Demastes is presenting the idea that while *True West* is Shepard's most realistic play to date that it is more of, what he calls, and a psychological realism as opposed to physical realism. This is why the play is called *True West* and not *Real West*.

The way Shepard blends realistic scenes with non-realistic scenes, or flashbacks, in *The Late Henry Moss* is very similar to the way Shepard presents Old Man character in *Fool for Love*. He is seen as a ghostly presence that exists on the edge of their world. At specific moments in both plays the lights change and certain characters go into a trance-like state and are not part of the scene while others interact with the character or characters that are now there. While this device is not used in *True West*, Shepard uses it throughout *The Late Henry Moss*. The first two acts open with preludes that are titled Drunken Rumba. In both of these scenes the dead Henry dances with the Conchalla

character in a very drunken way. The stage directions call for the only light to be a bright spotlight. This use of the lighting that is specifically called for in the script contributes to the non-realistic style of the flashbacks. In each of the three acts a flashback occurs; each illustrates what Ray learns to be the truth of his father's last days.

Shepard uses the three act structure in *The Late Henry Moss*, a structure that he also uses in *Buried Child* and *Curse of the Starving Class*. This traditional style that he returns to for the last of the family plays is something of a return to the conventions of the theatre where Shepard began. With *True West*, a play about Hollywood and the movies, he uses two acts that are divided into nine scenes. This use of shorter scenes is a nod to the movies that Shepard uses as the backdrop of the play. In an interview with Carol Rosen, Shepard explains that he was trying to use more cinematic approach to the structure:

One thing that's great about film, I think, if you actually are lucky enough to get to make one, is the ting of parallel time, which is very difficult on stage. I tried it in *A Lie of the Mind* to a certain extent, but it's very cumbersome. It works, but with film it's immediate. You go; here's a story, and then you cut and here's another story. (2)

Although he is talking about *Lie of the Mind* this device of cutting from one scene to another is something that he used with *True West* prior to *A Lie of the Mind*. In this same interview Shepard also discusses his use of flashbacks:

On Stage, flashbacks have to emerge from language.

Or from some sort of standard shadow of the character in the background.

Back lighting, whatever.

You know all the tricks, right?

Well, I've been doing it for twenty-five years. (3)

In these statements one can conclude that Shepard uses the more cinematic nine-scene structure in *True West* as an experiment with a film convention as applied to the stage. With *The Late Henry Moss* Shepard returns to more theatrical stage conventions with flashbacks and a three-act structure. Although these differences appear in these plays the same message is prevalent. The two brothers are searching trying to escape the hold of their legacy and the only way to do so is through acceptance, and not through denial, of their past and who they are.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION:

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

As I have shown in the previous chapters, it is clear that in these plays Shepard recycles many of the same devices. The question then becomes why does this talented playwright, actor, and director linger on the same subjects? I contend that Shepard is setting the record straight by debunking the myth of the American Family. The traditional myth of family, specifically in the United States, is that of mom, pop, apple pie, manicured lawns and white picket fences: the myth that all families are happy and functional. This myth is just another way of denying who we are and where we come from. This false ideal of the American family has been passed down from generation to generation and has been portrayed in the paintings of Norman Rockwell and such popular television shows such as *Ozzie and Harriet*. In *Buried Child*, Vince's girlfriend, Shelly, teases him as they approach his grandparent's home:

VINCE. This is the house.

SHELLY. I don't believe it!

VINCE. How come?

SHELLY. It's like a Norman Rockwell cover of something.

VINCE. What's a' matter with that? It's American.

SHELLY. Where's the milkman and the little dog? What's the little dog's name? Spot. Spot and Jane. Dick and Jane and Spot.

VINCE. Knock it off.

SHELLY. Dick and Jane and Spot and Mom and Dad and Junior and
Sissy!

VINCE. Come on! It's my heritage. What dya' expect? (83-84)

Here Shepard is presenting his audience with the stereotypical perception of family life in the rural and suburban parts of the United States. When the couple does enter into the house they discover that the family that dwells within is anything but ideal. Alcoholism, incest, infanticide, physical and verbal abuse reside within all of Shepard's families. This is what Shepard presents as the reality of the American family. As Roudane describes Shepard's body of work:

Although he shows, in the some fifty plays he has written to date, a rich variety of performative styles and cultural concerns, his central subject is often the American family. Victims and victimizers, the pursued and the pursuer vie for a metaphorical, psychological, and spiritual space in his plays. Meanwhile, options slowly diminish. There are no real survivors, no remissions of pain. Spaces open up which prove unbridgeable.

Necessity rules. Irony is constantly reborn from the frustrated desires of those who obey compulsions they would wish to resist. (5)

In Shepard's version of the American family, the inhabitants are disconnected from each other and far from what one would call a functional family unit. By retelling these stories and establishing these new myths, as he sees them, not only is he debunking the common myths, but he is sending the message for us as Americans to accept who we are and where we really come from. He wants us to stop using the traditional notions of what families are thought to be and accept the reality of what family truly is. For these

traditional myths of family are perpetuated by the misconstruing of the past and the denial of the truth.

At the heart of *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss*, as well as all of the six plays, is the debate about what is fact and what is myth. Shepard said in an interview with Carol Rosen that “a myth is a lie of the mind” (5). These lies that one tells others and themselves about how things used to be are really the versions of how we would like to remember the past:

The obsession with the “memoried world,” to use Malkin's phrase, is evident from the opening beat of *True West*. Shepard's predominantly two-character play about two brothers [. . .] chronicles their recollections of family and childhood and reveals the resentments and frustrations each harbors. (Kane 141)

In *True West* the brothers fight over what is reality, Hollywood's version of the West or Lee's version of it. By using Hollywood as the fantasy maker that perpetuates the myth of the West the brothers can only speculate and debate about what is real and what is fantasy:

Austin cannot believe the producer has rejected his literate script for the amateur, hackneyed version of the West his brother Lee is presenting. Yet Lee's West may be truer than Austin's conception of the place, for Lee believes in the credo of the illusionary, traditional West—that is, he recognizes it as the real thing whether it is out of date or not. Austin has never believed in such a West; for him, it has always been a fiction, one he is willing to exploit for social and artistic advancement. (Tucker 138)

As willing as Austin is to exploit the fiction of the West Shepard is exploiting and deconstructing the myth of what is true and what is real about the American family. As the brothers discuss their pasts, they wish for things that they can no longer have, as evident when Lee comes back after a night of casing his mother's neighborhood for places to burglarize:

AUSTIN. What kind of a place was it?

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

Lee describes another mythical take on what the family and family home is thought to be, but Shepard presents it as something out of his reach. Much like the home he describes in these lines is how Hollywood presents the myth of the West, a reality that is not real and is viewable but unattainable.

This debate about the reality of past events, or misremembered pasts, or outright lies of the past, is the basis for *The Late Henry Moss*. The older brother, Earl, has relayed to Ray what happened to their father before he arrived. Earl also denies that he abandoned Ray and their mother on the day that Henry beat her and left. Ray then spends the rest of the play proving that Earl has misconstrued the events of their father's last days until, in the last scene, the truth is finally revealed. The lies of the family go deeper than just what has been presented since Henry's death: "The buried truths of the past, repressed through years of denial and subterfuge, are sources of disconnection in the family" (Roudane 289). This debate about who remembers and who is responsible is also

called into question. This is the debate that Shepard is trying to draw to our attention. Shepard sets truth and fiction at opposing sides of the debate with memories and myths that have been handed down from generation to generation as the clues that are also misrepresented as the truth.

In act two Ray interrogates the cab driver, Taxi. Ray calls him and his whole family liars for handing down a myth of Indians killing his grandmother. This scene shows the way that legend and myth are handed down from generation to generation. Ray also gives Taxi the photo album that Henry left behind after his death. Photographs are something that Shepard uses often to show that even the smiling faces in the photos lie about what is really happening. The brothers in *The Late Henry Moss* discuss their father as they look through the photo album: “Look at that. There he is. No idea what's in store for him. Just a kid standing in a wheat field with his dog (29).” Shepard presents the audience with the fact that the subjects in photographs do not tell the whole story and as a result perpetuate the myth.

Shepard continues to present the reality of the American Family as one that does not have a clean and clear cut history. His characters all have things in their pasts to be fixed or set straight. The protagonists, the younger brothers, in *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss*, are the characters that have tried to escape their past and their heredity only to find themselves pulled back into the family and eventually transformed into the nightmarish patriarch that they sought to avoid. By not dealing with who they are and only denying their true self they are lying to themselves; this will only lead to disaster. Escaping one's own heredity or legacy is, to use Shepard's words, just another lie of the mind. Shepard is saying that you cannot escape who you are or where you come from no matter how far you run. When commenting on the character's attempts to deny their

pasts in the family plays Bigsby states, “[. . .] it also carries the risk of contaminating inheritance, that son will become father, a curse be handed on” (20). Shepard knows the folly of trying to run away from the truth of who he is. These lessons of not accepting who he is and where he came from comes from Shepard's own life experiences.

When Shepard was nineteen he left home eventually landing in New York and changing his name. He tried to sever his connections to the past and who he was but he, like his protagonists, was continually pulled back into the fold of the family. Many of his family plays are based on his own experiences and the patriarchs are clearly based on his father and grandfather. The battles that take place in many of his plays are between the patriarch and the son, but the struggle is within the son to find his place in the world, a world where he is his father's heir. Only by accepting that fact will he be able to move forward. As Shepard states:

I think, yes, there is a character, characteristics, if you want to call them that, that run through families that are undeniable. So many people get screwed up because they try to say I'm not like my father, I'm not like my mother. I'm not going to be this way. I'm not going to be that way.

When, in fact, there's nothing you can do about it. (8)

This theme of inescapability is the theme of all six of the family plays. Only by confronting the past, the true past, will you be able to escape repeating and following in the footsteps of your ancestors.

Shepard tells a story, in the documentary *This So Called Disaster*, of the only time his father saw one of his plays. It was a production of *Buried Child* in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Shepard was not there, but he was told that the production team had to kick his father out during the first act of the play, they kicked him because he was drunk and was

yelling at the actors. After he convinced them who he was they allowed him to come back in. During the rest of the play he continued to yell at the actors on stage. He was reported to yell, "That's not how it was!" This story illustrates how Shepard's real life may serve as inspiration for his art it is not the reality of what happened. It can be viewed as more him confronting his past. This confrontation may be seen as what helped Shepard break the destructive cycle of his heredity.

As discussed previously Shepard splits the protagonist into two characters in *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss*. This is to show the internal battle that the protagonist fights. The protagonist is part mother, part father, and the two sides fight to dominate the other. The sons in both plays try to deny or destroy the other. This battle is not only violent but psychological as well. Shepard states that instead of fighting oneself or one's legacy there is only one solution: "I think that there is no escape, that the wholehearted acceptance of it leads to another possibility. But the possibility of somehow miraculously making myself into a different person is a hoax, a futile game and leads to insanity, actually" (9). This denial of his heredity is what Shepard did by leaving home and changing his name. Prior to the 1977 Shepard presented some of the same family issues in an absurd and nonrealistic way, but with the family plays he confronts his past head on. No longer will he try to hide the ghosts of his past; he now parades them in his plays. Shepard's message is clear in the final scene of *The Late Henry Moss*. In this scene Henry finally confronts his past and accepts what he truly did; only by this acceptance is he is finally able to free himself and die.

In essence, Shepard has written the same play six times. All of these plays deal with the same central issue: the struggle of the son/protagonist to escape or deny the legacy of the patriarch. Shepard always portrays this struggle as futile. The protagonists

are always sucked back into the family, always destined to repeat the mistakes of the past, and be transformed into the patriarch. This denial of one's past is represented by the myth of the American family and the misconstruing of the past, or, as in *True West*, the debate between reality and Hollywood's version of it. This debunking of the myth is Shepard forcing his audience to confront and accept the reality of the past, no matter how messy it is. In the concluding play in the cycle, *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard presents the patriarch actually dying onstage in the last scene. Henry dies only after accepting his past, truthfully accounting for what happened. Shepard is saying that if we accept our past, family, and heredity only then can we move on to live free from repeating the past and falling victim to it. When asked about the family plays in the documentary *This So Called Disaster*, the continued use of the patriarch/son conflict Shepard states, "I was hoping that this could be the final play about that." It would seem that Shepard is using this play to put to rest the cycle of family plays.

In *The Late Henry Moss*, we see Shepard's characters accepting their pasts. The characters also argue over needing to reconcile with the other characters. Just as Shepard has discussed his father's death and how he did not get to say a lot of things to him that he wanted, Ray too is upset that Henry has died before he arrived:

EARL. You thought he'd live forever? Is that it?

RAY. No. I just thought-

EARL. What?

RAY. Maybe I'd see him one more time. Alive.

EARL. Yeah. You thought maybe you'd get to the bottom of something-clear things up? Make some big reconciliation.

RAY. I don't need any reconciliation! I don't need it with you either!

(44)

Shepard is presenting his own acceptance and reconciliation with his dead father so that he may move on artistically and spiritually. His message for us is to do the same.

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Scope and Method of Study: Sam Shepard's six family plays have so many striking similarities that one must ask "Is he rewriting the same plays over and over? If so why?" By comparing and contrasting the last play that appears in the cycle, *The Late Henry Moss*, with one representative of the previous five, *True West*, I will not only point out that he is indeed writing the same play but I will explain why.

Findings and Conclusions: Shepard writes the same play six times with the main goal of debunking the myth of the American Family. By retelling his own account, or his own myth, he does away with the lie of a misremembered past that many hold on to and perpetuate by continually telling. When one compares and contrasts the plays many elements continue to appear in all, but the one truth that Shepard clings to is that we must be honest with our past, good or bad. If one comes from a bad childhood or family, trying to escape or deny one's identity or legacy is to fall into madness.

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