

IN THE NAME OF GOD



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*The Representation of Male Identity in Sam Shepard's
Selected Dramas*

By

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the journey of Shepard's male characters toward their essential and authentic selfhood and reveals how these figures betray a longing to achieve wholeness and certitude as to the essence of their identity as American men. In their ongoing struggle for self-definition, the male characters of the studied plays (*Tooth of Crime*, *True West*, and *Fool for Love*) often return to their national past, especially the Western frontier mythology, where they have been promised to find the root and essence of manhood and fully assert their independent maleness. Building upon the concepts of "hegemonic masculinity" (R.W. Connell) and "identity performance" (Judith Butler), the first three chapters of the study show how obsessive adherence to an essentialist/ hegemonic masculine identity, promoted through the frontier mythologies of the past and/ or the pop-culture images of the present, is too often the cause of gender problems that these characters experience. Secondly, though in his insistent exploration of personal identity, the basis of identity for Shepard has often been *exclusively* male, a closer inspection of his post-1980 plays reveals a development in his treatment of the male issue. The emergence of stronger female characters in his post-1980s plays, points toward a growing appreciation of the need for a more balanced and inclusive masculinity constructed from a range of possible attributes both masculine and feminine. Thus, chapter four examines Shepard's 1983 drama *Fool for Love* as the showcase of this shift. The study reveals that by placing a premium upon a rigidly defined concept of masculinity, and resisting acknowledgment of the problem even at the face of failure, the male characters have locked themselves into an image which is both fracturing and destructive.

Key words: Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Identity Performance, Gender Trouble.

**CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION**

General Background

As a playwright, Sam Shepard has today achieved “the status of a kind of American cultural icon” (Wilson ix). He has devoted more than four decades to a highly eclectic and critically acclaimed career in the performing arts. As a result, he has assured himself a significant status on American dramatic tradition by winning a Pulitzer Prize and various other honors and recognitions, which have endowed him with the fame to be considered “one of the country’s most inventive and prolific playwrights” (King ix). Shepard has also directed plays of his own authorship, played drums and guitar in rock bands and jazz ensembles, and acted in major feature films. Yet, it is mainly through his playwriting that both his international renown and his distinctively valuable role in American cultural arena have manifested themselves.

The acclaim and popularity of Shepard’s plays owe much to the strong sense of ambivalence and irresolution that his works so critically evoke in the audience’s mind. As Bottoms puts forward Shepard’s plays are “alive by contradiction and through complicated layering, require the reader’s critical engagement” (16). This ambivalence might be the primary reason behind the simultaneous attraction and difficulty of reading Shepard’s plays.

Aside from the discussed ambivalence, Shepard's plays contain chaotic sequences that often leave audiences bewildered. His plays resist resolution, often ending in states of suspension and ambiguity (Shepard himself has admitted that "endings are just a pain" (cited in Rosen 6). For all of these reasons, it becomes difficult to create a unified picture of Shepard's work. Richard Gilman is one of the many critics who have commented on the problematic nature of analyzing Shepard's dramatic corpus:

Shepard's work resists division into periods, stages of growth or development. [...] Shepard doesn't move from theme to theme or image to image in the separate plays; he doesn't conquer a dramatic territory and move on, doesn't extend his grasp or refine it. What he does from play to play is lunge forward move sideways, double back, circle round, throw in this or that, adopt a voice then drop it, and pick it up again. (xvii)

As Gilman points out, writing about Shepard can be a challenging endeavor; but even with all of the thematic and dramatic discord that Shepard's works create, certain themes constantly re-emerge throughout the course of his ongoing career. The tensions and contradictions in Shepard's writings find their most revealing expression in his treatment of the question of identity in general and male identity in particular. In fact, one of the key sources of tension and crisis, which his plays so often evoke, is this tendency toward the exploration of identity. Shepard's career-long interest in the issue of identity can be corroborated by his own assertion:

To me, one of the strangest and most terrifying things about being human is the need to come up with an identity. It has always bewildered me, and I can say that even now it's still mostly unresolved... "Who am I?" As hackneyed and simplistic as the question might sound to us of the dot-com e-mail computer age, it may still remain the most important one we can ever ask. (cited in Roudané 290)

The urge toward the exploration of a "pure authentic self" (Bottoms 12) which has been freed from the restricting and rationalizing tendencies of the external world, seems to have pervaded Shepard's early writings. The earliest plays, for example, displayed the attempt to arrive at a kind of essential personal identity. Thus, they combined as Bottoms expresses "a liberating sense of playful freedom with the exploration of an acute, underlying self" (13) which would finally appease the character's ongoing struggle for self-definition.

An important issue here is the basic assumption, based on which the whole project of self-exploration has been established; the belief that there actually exists an essential and authentic inner self to be achieved as distinct from the social identity which is shaped and conditioned by social and cultural forces. This is the kind of perception which plagues Shepard's characters. Roudane believes that the character's attempt to arrive at a pure and essential identity has resulted in the adoption of endless series of mask and role-plays:

His characters relentlessly seek to create and re-create their personal appearances. Many of these figures manipulate an ever-shifting series of roles and masks, thereby suggesting the absence of any underlying sense of self, a kind of schizoid instability. (15)

Shepard robs his characters of any pretense at authentic self-expression by constructing their language and behavior out of the B-movies, westerns and comic books (various forms of popular culture), implying the futility of his character's search for roots and essence in the midst of a culture, composed of false and illusory images.

Thus, some of the major controversies which are operative in Shepard's plays revolve around the conflict between an essential perception of the self and a socially-conditioned one; a performing self which is formed and played under social and cultural constraints. The plays repeatedly betray the suspicion that personal identity might consist of no more than "the sums of one's culturally imposed layers" (Hughes 14).

This constant shifting and tension in search for a personal stability might in fact be more illuminated with regard to Shepard's own personal experience. His experience of growing up in a post-war generation amid constant upheavals and change and the family's incessant re-location because of his father's military duties might have, in effect, influenced his sense of dislocation and restlessness. Born at an air force base in Illinois in 1943, Samuel Shepard Rogers was constantly moved from cities to cities in each of which he experienced what he termed itself as a "temporary society ... where nothing is permanent. There is a feeling of impermanence that comes from that- that you doesn't[sic] belong to any particular culture" (cited in Chubb 193).

Most importantly, Shepard's anxiety with regard to the issue of identity is particularly bound up with the question of gender identity, which has continued to haunt his work and in which one could view some of the tensions which later precipitated significant shifts in his approach. In effect, Shepard's constant preoccupation with the question of identity has led him to "an obsessive fascination with the question of what it means to be an American male" (Bottoms 16). In his consistent attachment to the issue of masculine identity, Shepard has portrayed various types of masculinities which range from the "adolescent mischievous" gangster of his early plays to the heroic cowboys and rock stars of the middle and the "fathers, sons and lovers" (McDonough 16) of the post-1980s plays. This range of representations is significant as it carefully reveals a certain pattern of development in both Shepard's conception of male identity and the present study's analysis in the following chapters.

To sum up, through his dramatic outlook, Shepard seems to be offering from one particular angle a masculine vision whose adequacy or accessibility is constantly put under question. As a result, his writings can be viewed as a series of crises, regarding his ambivalence toward personal identity and any critical study of identity would be bound to ask legitimate

questions with respect to gender identity as well.. Given that Shepard's primary focus is on male identity, this project will also frame itself in that context, examining Shepard's ambivalent treatment of masculine identity and the developments and shifts that he might have in this regard

The Argument

The importance and significance of a new study which aims at the representation of *male* identity in the works of an American dramatist, might at first appear dim and slight and thus, it is always followed by a key question about its academic exigency: what is the necessity of such an undertaking in the midst of a dramatic tradition which has all too often attempted to render only and exclusively a certain *maleness* of experience? American literature abounds with male-cast plays who have been mainly concerned with the issues and experience of male characters and, thus, they have represented an extremely masculine version of American identity, as if equating it with *the* American identity. Hence what is there to be further explored?

Such questions often tend to overlook the fact that such a bias toward the masculine issue, has often resulted in the ignorance of the character's gender particularities as men. In a wide corpus of American dramatic criticism, the male protagonist's quest for identity has been interpreted as representative of the human being's (and not men's) struggle for a stable sense of personal identity (McDonough 3-7). As a result, while women have largely been excluded from the narrative of search for identity, the conflicts and obstacles of such search have been generalized to include both men and women, thus, somehow representing American identity as American *male* identity. Additionally, in this closed framework, not all male community are taken into consideration but only the white, middle-class, heterosexual ones. Such generalizations tend to marginalize and ignore the diverse experience of a diverse nation into a

single concept of what American identity is. McDonough has the similar outlook toward this issue. He says:

Such an approach tends to write over the status of individual men in a desire to empower their voices as universal, thereby both avoiding the lived experiences of the individual man whose life may not fit this universal pattern and fallaciously assuming to speak for different gender, ethnic or economic groups. (1)

Here, McDonough points out another significant result of such generalization. It tends to speak not only for the absent female voice, but it also ignores the diversity of male identities by privileging only a certain group of American males namely white, middle class and heterosexual ones. Consequently, one particular form of identity is set as the “currently accepted norm” (Connell 77) of masculine identity against which all other forms of identities are to be measured and evaluated.

This inattention to particularities of manhood (or gender in general) has somehow acted as a misleading guide in the study and analysis of works of literature, because when a character’s identity is explored outside the specifications of his/her gender, it would result either in marginalization or total erosion of the voice of one particular gender (female) in favor of the other (male). Jane Flax sees this issue as the ignorance of *the history* of one particular gender in favor of the other.

In a wide variety of culture and discourses, men tend to be seen as free from or as not determined by gender relations. Thus, for example, academics do not explicitly study the psychology of men or men’s history ... Only recently have scholars begun to consider the possibility that there may be at least three histories in every culture-his, hers and ours. *His* and *ours* are generally assumed to be equivalents, although in contemporary work there might be some recognition of the existence of that deviant-women. (45)

This tendency to represent the world from a particularly male perspective has resulted in one other major issue; the confusion and conflicts of the male characters in the way of their quest for individual identity are never acknowledged to have originated from their insecure and confusing masculine image, rather, they try to put the blame on other issues such as economy, family and etc.. Thus, male identity is given the privileged position of remaining unaware of its own instabilities, blind to its own games and to the ideological system that keeps it in place.

As discussed earlier, Sam Shepard has fashioned himself “the high priest of an American cult of machismo” (A.Shepard 59). Throughout his expansive career, he has been mainly concerned with depiction of “urban cowboys who are alienated, restless and combative” (A.Shepard 59), while women have been more or less either marginalized or depicted as a “vehicle for exploring the masculine mode of consciousness” (A.Shepard 59). His obsessive involvement with following “masculinized thematic interests” (King 2), has led many feminist-oriented critics of his works to accuse him of confusing “American identity with American *male* identity” (Marranca 23) and, therefore, he seems to have offered only a limited and partial image of personal identity.

Although Shepard has concerned himself mainly with the problems and conflicts among American *males* in his plays, it seems that they have often been read and analyzed with little or no attention to the issue of manhood or masculinity as a significant factor in forming their behavior. Instead, they have been rendered and treated as representatives of American character’s attempt to attain the supposed characteristics of American identity, hence, according to Jane Flax, confusing “His” culture with “our” culture.

Building upon the concepts of “hegemonic masculinity” (R.W.Connell) and “identity performance” (Judith Butler), the first part of this study examines the selected dramas of Shepard

with the focus on the issue of manhood as a determining factor in male characters behavior in order to expose the confusion and conflicts they face, in attaining and performing the principles associated with the American identity. Such analysis sheds light on how the rigid assumptions about what a man ought to be, shapes the male character's interaction and their pursuit of an integrated and unified identity. In doing so, the researches have demonstrated how the character's obsessive attachment to an essentialist/ normative masculine identity, promoted through the frontier mythologies of the past and/ or the pop-culture images of the present, marks itself as the source of confusion and conflicts they face. In the character's pursuit of an authentic masculinity, the illusive and precarious nature of such an image begins to reveal itself since it seems to fail even those who have been considered its most privileged participants- namely white, middle class American male community.

In fact, the plays that follow reveal, some time unintentionally, the unacknowledged idea that normative construction of masculinity could be too often more disempowering for the men who seek to enact it than empowering.

Secondly, though in his insistent exploration of personal identity, Sam Shepard has often been accused of focusing his attention exclusively on a strictly masculine perception of identity, a closer observation of his later literary career (post-1980s) reveals a development in his treatment of the male issue. The emergence of stronger female characters in his post-1980s plays, (who have been almost totally absent from his previous works), points toward a growing appreciation of the need for a more balanced and inclusive masculinity. Shepard's 1983 drama *Fool for Love* has acted as the showcase of this shift. It tends to depict a woman who no longer acts as the background voice for male identity and serves strong functions in highlighting and correcting the weakness and fractures of a flawed masculine vision. In so doing, the second part

of this study attempts to explore how later in his career, Shepard moderated his exclusive male outlook by exploring the possible effects of female identity on the development of male identity.

In dealing with male issues in the works of a prominent American dramatist, I have tried to explore issues that in their repetition- and not in their open acknowledgment- in so many plays by Shepard, point to a common concern with male identity that is not however treated critically as a central issue for this playwright. By so doing, I have tried to expose how strongly issue of gender and specifically masculinity are intertwined within the very structure of Shepard's theater. The research questions for this study are:

1. How much does Judith Butler's notion of gender performance, contribute to an understanding of Shepard's challenge to an essentialist code of manhood?
2. How does Shepard's representation of masculine identity reveal the flaws and fractures of a hegemonic masculine vision?
3. To what extent does the mythology of the frontier affect the American male pursuit of identity?
4. Has Shepard been able to transcend his limiting masculine vision by incorporating female presence, if yes, to what extent?
5. Does Shepard offer an alternative to the hegemonic implication of what it means to be an American male?

Literature Review

Two primary sources based on which this thesis has been conducted, are Shepard's collections of plays, *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* with an insightful introduction by Richard Gilman and *Sam Shepard: Fool for love and Other Plays* with another helpful introduction, written by Ross Wetzsteon.

Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway by Nick Mansfield concerns itself with a genealogical approach to the theories of the self with observation of identity formation within different fields. The seventh chapter of the book, entitled *Masculinity: saving the post-Oedipal world*, follows specifically the origin and development of the theories of masculinity beyond 1990s and illuminates how much the theories of feminists such as Judith Butler have been influential in providing insight to the ideas of masculinity as a construct. Thus, this book serves as a good critical commentary on the representation of masculine identity from the world view of different theories.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* explores the cultural production of gender identity and examines how the notion of performance enables an understanding of our identity as men and women not as a given, but as a culturally coded concept. Through her analysis of interiorized identity norms, she reveals how men and women assert and perform their masculinity and femininity unaware of their natures as performance not an essence. Written with insight and elegance, the book provides us with effective concepts in studying the issue of identity in Shepard's male characters.

Masculinities by R.W.Connell studies the nature and construction of masculine identity, offering a detailed theoretical exposition of the notion of "hegemonic masculinity" which serves as one of the key concepts operative in this study. Moreover, its discussion of the four different

ways in which masculine identity could be defined, most importantly, the essentialist and normative approach, is of particular interest to this study.

Staging Masculinity in Contemporary American Drama by Carla J. McDonough explores the problematics of masculinity in a critical reading of four important American male playwrights, one of whom is Sam Shepard. In her book, she argues for a gendered representation and study of Sam Shepard's characters against the attempt by many critics to render them as offering universal human experience. Taking a postmodern theoretical perspective, the book discusses three famous Shepard's plays (*Buried Child*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, and *State of Shock*) in the light of its advocated premises concerning the issues of manhood. Through the overview of popular masculine images in American culture, McDonough identifies the values and codes of traditional masculinity, revealing how it has been structured based on the significant dichotomy of masculine and feminine. Therefore, in incorporating theories with practice in actual reading of Shepard's plays, the book advances itself as one of the major sources of this study.

"Forging a Self: an Examination of Gender Identity in Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*, *Paris, Texas*, and *Simpatico*" by Lonetta Wilson tries to rescue Shepard from the accusation of misogyny made by many of his critics by offering a more inclusive view toward his depiction of male characters and by explicating certain textual clues which serve to undermine the anti-feminine trends of his work. Though Wilson's consideration of Shepard's career includes his cinematic domain of activity as well (*Paris, Texas*) which is beyond the central focus of this thesis, his examination of the gender shift in Shepard's plays marks its crucial significance and importance for the sake of this study.

The Theater of Sam Shepard: State of Crisis by Bottoms traces the development of Shepard's playwriting in a traditional approach, mapping out the various shifts in his concern with the nature of self-identity. Although the central task of the book is the focus on the formal qualities of the play, it shows how the playwright complicates gender roles in *Fool for Love* and how his attitude toward women indicates an ambivalence. Aside from the critical discussions, the book's chatty style makes it an accessible introduction to the totality of Shepard's career as a playwright.

Along with her useful study, "Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit and Off-Broadway", Doris Auerbach follows her argument regarding the gender power struggle in Shepard's plays in another essay entitled "Who Was Icarus's Mother? The Powerless Mother Figure in the Plays of Sam Shepard". Here, she traces the pattern of violence and Shepard's portrayal of women, and interestingly relates the roots of these problems to ineffectual male figures.

Rereading Shepard: Contemporary Critical Essays on the Plays of Sam Shepard by Leonard Wilcox offers a collection of original essays which deal with Shepard's plays from a Feminist-oriented perspective. Its discussion of *Fool for love* and *True West* in the light of the Myth of masculine and the role of women acted as an insightful guide in the exploration of male identity in Shepard's works.

A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition by Joe Dubbert follows the development of American masculinity studies and traces the pattern of confusion and insecurity surrounding them. Perhaps, the most significant contribution of this book for the present research is its focus on the conflict between the traditional hegemonic concepts of manhood and the newer demands and requirements of a more flexible masculinity (as reflected in *Tooth of Crime*).

Finally, aside from the actual theoretical textbooks written by two main theorists of this study, various books and journal articles have acted as the complementary sources of understanding regarding the discussed theories. Journal articles such as “Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies” by Bryce Traister, and books like Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America* provide insightful commentaries on both the theories discussed, and their implication in an American context.

Thesis Outline

This thesis includes five chapters all of which support the main task of the study as introduced in the title. In the first chapter, a very brief outline of the body of the thesis is presented. The influential concepts regarding the issue of identity has been touched upon and further investigated in chapter two. The argumentative part, the research questions and methodology and approach are also presented in the first chapter.

Before approaching the plays themselves, chapter two positions this discussion within recent studies of gender identity that appear in masculinity and feminist studies, particularly gender theories of Judith Butler and R.W.Connell. It initially tries to identify the “currently accepted” (Connell 77) norm of masculinity in American society, showing how this accepted norm has been built upon certain frontier attributes of the American west. Afterwards, through Butler’s concept of gender performance, the idea of personal identity as an essential and authentic essence is challenged. Ultimately, by incorporating these two theories with a history of American masculinity studies, the failure of a rigid and unchanging masculine vision based upon the flawed mythology of the past has been established.