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# Exploding Bombs: Masculinity and War Trauma in Sam Shepard's Drama

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# Exploding Bombs: Masculinity and War Trauma in Sam Shepard's Drama

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## Exploding Bombs: Masculinity and War Trauma in Sam Shepard's Drama

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*This paper examines violence and masculinity in Sam Shepard's work as a symptom of war trauma, apparent in his characterization of several of his male characters as war veterans and the violent language accompanying his other characters. War becomes a cultural disease infesting and destroying the family on Shepard's stage.*



Beginning in the seventies with *Curse of the Starving Class*, the subject of the family and in particular its dysfunctional, violent male members has dominated Sam Shepard's imagination.<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about Shepard's use of physical and verbal violence within the family dramas. Most of the scholarly work on the subject, including my own earlier work, sees these images as reworkings of ancient myths (Shea 1–9; Weiss 323–38), as manifestations of Darwinism and heredity (Grace 180–95), or as critiques of American machismo (Savran 79–91). While these studies have provided sophisticated investigations into the violence carried out by the men on Shepard's stage, strangely none have examined the discourse of war that accompanies Shepard's violence.

Shepard has been concerned with masculine rage and violence for almost thirty years, and his representation of violence on the stage is nearly always coupled with references to war. This investigation into masculine violence leads to a greater concern about the trauma experienced by war veterans and the legacy of violence they pass onto their sons. Marianna Torgovnick's recent study of war trauma and the collective unconscious offers new insight into Shepard's masculine rage. In *The War Complex: World War II in Our Time*, she argues that Americans share a collective

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memory of the Second World War which informs their ideology about subsequent wars. Collective memory, Torgovnick explains, “begins in the family, moves out into the group, neighborhood, town, or city, and then, sifted and refined still further through public discourse and media” (3). She goes on to show that “we tend to imagine historical catastrophe as it affects loving relationships and families” (9). In very much the same way, Shepard’s plays explore the collective memory of war shared by the family. Yet he goes further, revealing that the family becomes a casualty of a culture of war—the ultimate byproduct of this collective memory. Indeed, the destructive tendencies embodied in Shepard’s male characters are, at least partially, related to an unresolved war trauma. Shepard’s male characters, unable to escape the nightmares of war and disillusioned with the family’s inability to comprehend their trauma, express their frustration through verbal and physical violence. The rage exploding from his other male characters, those who have not fought in any war, share a culture of war brought back by their ancestors and perpetuated through America’s collective memory. Shepard’s men, infested with this poison, as it is characterized in *Curse of the Starving Class*, lash out at their families as they embody what is to Shepard the greatest lie of the mind—the American dream—as it refuses to acknowledge war trauma and its defeated men.

In a recent interview with Sam Shepard, Matthew Roudané asked the playwright to explain why his male characters have such a difficult time functioning outside the Mojave Desert. Shepard responded with this:

I grew up in a condition where the male influences around me were primarily alcoholics and extremely violent and, at the same time, like lost children, not knowing how to deal with it. Instead they were plunked down on the desert not knowing how they got there. And slowly they began receding further and further and further away—receding from the family, receding from society. You see it with some Vietnam vets. It was the same thing, except these guys—my father’s generation—were coming out of World War II. I can’t help but think that these wars had something to do with the psychological state that they came back in. I mean imagine coming back into the Eisenhower fifties. . . . Where everything was wonderful, the front lawns were all being taken care of, there was a refrigerator in everybody’s house. Everybody had a Chevy, and these guys had just been bombing the *shit* out of Germany and Italy and the South Pacific and then they come back; I mean it just must have been unbelievable. (Roudané 71)

Shepard’s explanation for the violence within his plays and within the American family, albeit unintentionally, echoes Walter Benjamin’s peculiarly nostalgic essay “The Storyteller.” Benjamin argues that as a result of

the soldiers' inability to come to terms with their helplessness among the mass destruction of World War I and their inability to reconcile that they took part in this destruction, these soldiers "returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience" (84). Similarly, Shepard's destructive male characters, like those men of his father's generation, have been displaced by war. Leaving their rural farming and ranching communities to play their part in World War II, these men found themselves destroying entire communities, and along the way lost the capacity to communicate this horror and the trauma resulting from it. For nearly three decades, Shepard's plays have featured men who, haunted by the nightmares of war, and disillusioned with post-war America and their families' inability to cope with their trauma, express their frustration through rage. These characters, like mines, are ready to explode destroying the family, and like the bombs that scarred Europe they leave the family in ruin and its sons with a war raging in the mind.

Shepard's "Vaudeville nightmare" *States of Shock* (1991)<sup>2</sup> opens with a Colonel and a wounded and impotent war veteran Stubbs entering a family restaurant to commemorate the death of the Colonel's son. As the play unfolds, doubt is shed on whether his son is actually dead. Several times, Stubbs says that he can remember the moment the Colonel invented his death; in effect, the Colonel creates two sons, one heroic son who died in battle and the other a failure who strived to save his son (161). Similarly, in *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), Lorraine tells her son Jake that his father "was no hero" (46) because rather than die in battle, he was run over by a truck in Mexico. However, his heroism is contested when Jake puts on his father's pilot jacket decorated with medals to become the hero of his own family tragedy. Yet doubt, too, is thrown on Jake's heroism as he becomes Mike's prisoner of war, dragged onto the porch and forced to apologize to the family. Shepard is not concerned with the men who lost their lives in battle. Rather he puts the spotlight on the men who had the good fortune to return alive, but consequently faced the greater battle of trying to fit into the American dream—a battle which left many, like Jake's father, alienated in failure.

For Halie, the primary myth-maker in *Buried Child* (1978),<sup>3</sup> her deceased son Ansel's participation in the Vietnam War offers a dream of restoring dignity to the family in the erection of a "big, tall statue [of Ansel] with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other" (73). Although Halie's heroic dream is undermined by her wounded son Bradley, who claims that Ansel "never played basketball" (116), no one disputes his being a soldier who, as Halie puts it, "could've won a medal" (73). Thomas Adler rightly argues, "Prowess at athletics and war become, then, the two

ways that manliness is measured in America, yet in *Buried Child* both emerge as more hollow than heroic” (121). Despite Halie’s attempt to restore the family’s place in the community by asserting that Ansel was “A genuine hero” (73), his all-American heroism is further undermined when Halie says that she regrets that he died in a motel room on his honeymoon rather than having “die[d] in action” (73).

Like Halie in *Buried Child* who fabricates a story of heroism around her son Ansel to reject his scandalous marriage and death, the Colonel in *States of Shock* invents his son’s heroic death to distance himself from his wounded son Stubbs. Yet, despite the Colonel’s attempts to reject his son by pretending to be “a friend of the family” (182), he reveals his own parental bond when he admits to having “nursed” (161) Stubbs, changing his sheets, cleaning his fingernails and emptying his bladder bag. In addition, when Stubbs disobeys him the Colonel threatens to “spank” him (165). Both the invention of Stubbs’s death and the thrashings that the Colonel gives Stubbs are bound up in a culture of war. What the Colonel neglects to see is that he also is wounded. His own involvement in war has so fully absorbed him that he has become the embodiment of war. His costume, as many critics have pointed out, suggests that he is an amalgamation of all wars (See, for example, Bottoms 246 and Wade 262). Furthermore, each time the Colonel loses his temper and strikes out verbally or physically at Stubbs, his violence is accompanied by “an explosion” heard off-stage, and “the cyclorama [is] lit up with the fireworks of war” (152, 158, 166). Here, Shepard has drawn a parallel between the war outside the diner and the war inside the Colonel.

The Colonel, however, is only one of Shepard’s afflicted men. In *A Lie of the Mind* Jake’s father was in the Air Force, and his father’s trauma is transposed onto him. Revealing both the legacy of war trauma on the family and a culture of war that informs the play, Shepard describes Jake’s room in his mother’s house as being decorated with model “World War II fighters and bombers” (39). Likewise, in *Curse of the Starving Class* Wesley reveals that his room is adorned with World War II model airplanes when narrating his father’s violent intrusion of the previous night. Meditating on his Jap Zero, P-39, Messerschmitt, Wesley imagines them flying overhead:

Taking pictures of the enemy. Me, the enemy. I could feel the space around me like a big, black world. I listened like an animal. My listening was afraid. Afraid of sound. Tense. Like any second something could invade me. Some foreigner. Something undescribable. Then I heard the Packard coming up the hill. (137)

Wesley’s monologue shifts from an imaginary war-like invasion to the “real” invasion of his father, Weston, returning home. And in his descrip-

tion of awaiting his father's return, Wesley becomes a frightened, helpless animal.<sup>4</sup> However, as he continues recalling the violent episode of his father kicking and smashing in the door, his language changes from full sentences to short, fragmented descriptions. His descriptions of "Foot kicking. . . . Bottle crashing. Glass breaking. Fist through door. Man cursing. Man going insane. Feet and hands tearing. Head smashing. Man yelling. Shoulder smashing. Whole body crashing" (138) are like rapid rifle shots penetrating the play to protect himself by mentally combating the father. Although Wesley, like Earl and Ray in *The Late Henry Moss* (2000),<sup>5</sup> was too frightened to defend his mother during the spousal battle, his use of language becomes a defense mechanism to keep from being afflicted by his father's poison. However, the violence in his language reveals that the poison, which keeps these men from communicating their fears, has already infested him. In the final act of the play, Wesley, trying to purify himself using his father's method, literally turns himself into his drunken, violent father. Even his mother, Ella, mistakes him for his old man.

Moreover, in *A Lie of the Mind* Jake's sister Sally reveals that sometimes Jake gets "that creepy thing in [his] voice" just like his father (69). Shepard's afflicted men are terrified of becoming their fathers. In *Sam Shepard: Stalking Himself*, Shepard briefly reveals that he had avoided the subject of the family in his early work because he was afraid of facing his relationship with his own father, and of seeing himself in his father. Interestingly, however, once he begins his journey into this emotional territory, Shepard seems unable to leave it behind. Even his 2000 film credit, *Hamlet*, in which Shepard plays the ghost of King Hamlet, he essentially explores the father-figure as a ghost haunting his son. Both Jake in *A Lie of the Mind* and Earl in *The Late Henry Moss* vehemently refute their legacy. Jake tells Sally: "I don't sound anything like him. I never sounded like him. I've made a point not to" (69). Nevertheless, the audience believes Sally. Jake has inherited more than just that creepy sound in his voice, he has inherited his father's fury. Likewise, Earl in *The Late Henry Moss* angrily tells Esteban, Henry's Mexican neighbor: "I am *nothing* like the old man! Get that into your fry-brain little mind! We're as different as chalk and cheese! I am *nothing* like the old man!" (83). Yet, Earl does resemble his father, particularly when he takes on his father's rage while attacking his younger brother Ray at the end of act 1.

The violence that erupts from these men in part stems from a fear of being usurped by a greater power. They see all situations as a possible struggle for power and survival just as if they were battling an enemy on some foreign shore. In scene 2 of Shepard's most recent play *The God of Hell* (2005),<sup>6</sup> the audience recognizes that Welch, an outsider, has success-

fully invaded the family home after Emma runs out to find her husband, Frank. Still inside the home, Welch begins to staple a “string of tiny American flags . . . to the cupboards above the sink” (67). The sound of the staple gun punctuates the rest of the scene, revealing that after a mental battle this territory has been colonized. Welch is the victor, and his mission—to find the fugitive Haynes who has been hiding in Emma and Frank’s basement—has been completed.

Welch has another mission, one more subversive than tracking down a traitor. Shepard reveals that masculinity is threatened by Welch who ultimately represents US republicanism. Written and performed shortly before the 2004 Presidential election, *The God of Hell* was Shepard’s attempt to sway public opinion. Indeed, Shepard’s work and life has become increasingly political. While during the Vietnam Era Shepard dodged the draft by claiming he was a heroin addict and thereafter moving to London, today he uses his scripts to speak out against American injustice and abuse of power. Utilizing gender stereotypes, Welch attempts to brainwash Emma and Frank. Welch, the government agent, tries to force the mid-Western housewife Emma to buy into America’s new founded patriotism which is represented in the American flag cookies he peddles. Despite Welch’s attempts to sugar-coat the ugly underside of this patriotism, Emma finds it hard to swallow. She is, after all, not your typical housewife. She cooks a breakfast consisting only of bacon and she over-waters the plants. Moreover, she definitely seems to be the head of the household.

Despite his failure to persuade Emma to join his side, Welch is able to convince Frank that his friend Haynes is the enemy. Brainwashed, Frank even refers to Haynes as a “two-faced, camel-loving—“ (91) before being cut off by Welch. Shepard, here, incorporates what is happening in Iraq with what is happening in his drama about a mid-Western couple. Frank, the honest, hardworking dairy farmer—an ideal image of manhood straight out of the Eisenhower fifties—sells his heifers and betrays his friend after being subjected to electro-shocks to his penis.

While under Welch’s spell, Frank facing the audience in scene 3 reminisces that he misses the Cold War (91). For Frank the Cold War represented a time when the enemy was far away rather than in his home or country. Now the enemy—be it Haynes as Frank has been programmed to believe, Welch, an agent of the republican government, who administer an unspeakable form of torture to America’s men, or the US government which will possibly annihilate the entire US with their plutonium experiments—has penetrated the safety of the domestic sphere.

In *States of Shock*, likewise, there is the real threat of a greater military power. The war being waged outside the diner results in the death of the



restaurant manager (160), and the delay of the food is attributed to the cook's wounds (163). Moreover, at the end of the play, all the characters, except for the Colonel, have put on gasmasks protecting themselves from the next attack. However, the enemy, Shepard suggests in this play, is not some "other" foreign power. The Colonel, who takes Stubbs out for a meal, does so in order to understand his son's death. He wants an answer to who killed him. Attempting to get Stubbs to join him in his search for an answer, he maneuvers toy soldiers on the table. Yet during the Colonel's reconstruction of the battle,<sup>7</sup> Stubbs reveals that "It was friendly fire that took us out" (169), and later accuses the Colonel of being the enemy. He remembers the Colonel's face "lying. Smiling and lying. Your bald face of denial. Peering down from a distance. Bombing me" (181).

In *Buried Child* and *A Lie of the Mind* this fear has been transformed into a domestic setting. After Dodge confesses to murdering and burying the child because it proved Halie's infidelity, Halie protests: "Ansel would've stopped him! Ansel would've stopped him from telling these lies! He was a hero! A man! A whole man! What's happened to the men in this family! Where are the men!" (124). Her call for heroic men is ironically followed by the return of her grandson Vince. Now drunk, Vince "hurls bottles" at the opposite end of the porch whilst either making a "high whistling sound of a bomb" or singing a Marine hymn (125). Vince, "looking across to a battlefield" as designated by the stage directions (125), imagines the family as the enemy whose territory he must usurp: "Have you had enough over there! 'Cause there's a lot more here where that came from! (*pointing to paper bag full of bottles*) A helluva lot more! We got enough over here to blow ya' from here to Kingdomcome!" (125). Vince's return suggest that he will become the hero of this sordid tale, and indeed, he does usurp his grandfather Dodge and inherits the house. However, Shepard bitterly critiques Vince's "heroism." Instead of bringing about change, Vince qualifies as Dodge's heir when he takes on his violent and festering legacy.

In *A Lie of the Mind* Jake's fear of being usurped by an imaginary love affair he believes Beth is having results in his near fatal beating of her. As the play opens, Jake tells his brother Frankie on the phone that "she's dead" (9). As it turns out, she survives Jake's beating but as a consequence is brain-damaged. Throughout the play there is a fear of the "outsider" that echoes the Colonel's toasts to the enemy in *States of Shock*. While the Colonel willfully shapes his identity on the enemy, "WITHOUT THE ENEMY WE'RE NOTHING" (153), frequently the perceived "enemy," who is always a part of the family or community at large, in Shepard poses a threat to masculinity.

Both in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *The God of Hell* the enemy is someone outside of the family unit, but a member of the community or nation. In *The God of Hell* Welch has taken both Frank and Haynes by the balls, threatening their masculinity by administering electric shocks to their privates. Electricity has been used since the late nineteenth century to wipe out the undesirable pathological nerves of the mentally ill and to kill off individuals who threaten a society's social order. One of the consequences of electro-therapy is memory loss. These traits of electricity are seen in Shepard's play. Welch utilizes electricity to rid the US of its citizens who in any way defy the government's agenda. Haynes is silenced and Frank no longer resists the dark future. Only Emma manages to escape.

In *Curse of the Starving Class* when Taylor, the sleazy land developer arrives to pick up Ella for their luncheon appointment, he says he feels like he's "on enemy territory" (153) after the hostile reception he receives from Emma and Wesley. Here, Wesley changes places with Taylor. While Taylor is the enemy surveying the land, Wesley, by ignoring Taylor, becomes the stronger military force. Emma, likewise, attempts to fight back this new enemy when she tells him that "Wesley is just like Pop, too. Like liquid dynamite. . . . Highly explosive" (152). Emma is indeed correct. Although we see Wesley trying to fix the door in the opening of the play, throughout we witness his destructive character and in the final act he has physically transformed into his father. Additionally, Emma fights off Ellis, another enemy attempting to invade their territory, by shooting up the Alibi Club with her father's Jap gun. Interestingly, in *Curse of the Starving Class* violence is not solely a characteristic of the male characters, and yet, Shepard remains true to his investigation of masculinity in that his portrayal of Weston's daughter Emma is that of the tomboy. Emma imagines herself in stereotypically masculine roles. She daydreams about being a mechanic in Mexico and becomes a cowboy outlaw when she takes her father's gun and rides her horse into the Alibi Club.

*Curse of the Starving Class*, as Thomas Adler points out, is "decidedly anti-capitalistic" (119) which "pits the military strong against the weak and prides itself on dominance and conquest and oftentimes false heroics" (120). This, too, can be said about *The God of Hell*. Welch, the deceptive, lying government official, goes to war with Frank, an honest dairy farmer. The battle ends, the family home is taken over and the men are overpowered. Only the women can hold on, albeit at times feebly. Emma in *The God of Hell* gathers her strength to ring the bell—a warning reminiscent of the sirens announcing air-raids during World War II. She recognizes that her home and husband have been invaded; however, she refuses to give up.

Despite the fact that Taylor and Weston are both war veterans, they, as Weston puts it, “don’t belong to the same class” (171). Taylor, for the most part, is calm, and even when he discovers that Weston has sold the land before his own legal contract was finalized he, though upset, reasons that “it’s a simple matter of going to the courts” (178). Unlike Taylor, when Weston discovers Ella’s plan to sell the land to Taylor, he tells Wesley that he will “track them down” and “shoot them in their bed” (170), and goes on to prove his capability to commit murder by explaining: “I was in the war. I know how to kill. I was over there. I know how to do it. I’ve done it before. It’s no big deal. You just make an adjustment. You convince yourself it’s all right. That’s all. It’s easy. You just slaughter them. Easy” (170). Yet Shepard reveals that this adjustment is anything but easy. Moreover, the readjustment into the family is equally difficult. Weston, after all, only attacks when drunk; when sober he runs.

When sobered up in act 3, Weston begins to tell the lamb infested with maggots “a true story” (182). Weston’s narrative about the eagle swooping down to devour the “fresh little remnants of manlihood” (183) is bombarded with images of war and particularly of fighter planes. Weston describes the sound of the eagle hitting the roof as a “thunder clap. Blam!” (183), and says that as he watched the eagle’s suicidal aeronautics, he cheered him on; he had not felt like that “since the first day [he] went up in a B-49” (183). Hence the first half of the narrative, which is interrupted by Wesley’s entrance, brings to mind images of heroism and victory—the eagle being an obvious symbol of American patriotism and glory. The latter half of this story narrated by Wesley and Ella after Emma’s death and Weston’s flight suggests a much darker reality of war trauma.

Moreover, while Weston’s “Jap” gun, his description of the eagle’s aeronautics and his reference to learning how to kill in the war clearly point to the trauma he experienced from serving as a bomber in World War II, Weston’s reference to B-49 is curious. The B-49 bomber was not implemented in the Second World War or in any war since. Its test flights in 1948 revealed stability problems and ultimately resulted in the deaths of its crew members. In 1949 the Air Force canceled the B-49 project.<sup>8</sup> Weston’s reference to the B-49, thus, suggests that the trauma and destruction the pilots faced was not caused by the foreign enemy. Rather the enemy is one’s own nation, subjecting the men to dangerous test flights.

The big tom cat—perhaps a metaphor for the men who lost their lives in the hopeless B-49 test flights, for the family or the Eisenhower age that required the mentally wounded men to take charge of an America that they no longer recognized or related to—also desires to devour the remnants of manhood. But as the cat is about to steal the ram testicles, the eagle “comes

down and picks up the cat in his talons and carries him screaming off into the sky” (200). The play closes with the disturbing image of the eagle “being torn apart in midair” before they both “come crashing down to the earth” (200). This concluding image echoes the opening in which we learn of Weston’s crashing against the door to either destroy the “family” which is tearing him apart or escape into the safety of his home—away from the Taylors, Ellises and the thugs who have come to collect Weston’s debt.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, family wars continually erupt out of a fear of invasion. “Disturbed by the intrusion of the ‘other,’ the outside,” Savas Patsalidis points out, “the more powerful members of each family undertake the task of protecting their territory and community” (247). When Mike encounters Frankie at his family home in act 2, scene 1 of *A Lie of the Mind*, Mike becomes the over-protective brother, shadowing Jake’s behavior as the over-protective husband. Despite Mike’s suspicions, Frankie’s motives are simple. He merely wants to see how Beth is doing. Beth, fully aware of her brother’s rage, accuses him of making a war: “You make a war. You make an enemy. In me. In me! An enemy. You. You. You think me. You think you know. You think. You have a big idea” (51). Beth goes on to reveal that the wars men wage are out of “pride” (52). It is interesting to note that Beth’s speech, these short fragments, echoes Wesley’s opening monologue in *Curse of the Starving Class* as he recalls being afraid of his father’s “invasion.” The technique is suggestive of short bullets keeping the enemy, in this case Mike, at bay. Being attacked by her brother who transforms her into an enemy by his pride, his big lie, she protects herself by fighting back with words of “truth.”

In *The Late Henry Moss*, Ray and Earl must confront the family’s violent past after their father has mysteriously died. Ray, the younger brother, is the first to recall the violent explosion that left the family shattered. He says: “I remember it was like a war or something. An invasion” (9). Throughout the play, Earl, the elder brother, denies running after witnessing their father lash out at their mother. Nonetheless, he and Ray have clearly taken on their father’s wrath. At the end of act 1, as I have already pointed out, Earl attacks Ray. This act of violence is repeated in act 3; however, this time Ray is the abuser who “turns himself into [the] drunken Henry” (98) and who accompanies the abuse with a story of their father’s last attack before he left their mother. Ray’s reconstruction of his mother being beaten reveals that despite being so “full of terror” (99) he has inherited his father’s anger—a rage that possibly stemmed from Henry’s involvement in the Second World War.

Henry, in the taxi driver’s flashback, reveals that he has received “World War II blood money! Guess how many dead Japs that cost? Take

a guess" (60). Later Henry, trying to combat Conchalla's death pronouncement, says: "I've led an honorable life for the most part. I've served my country. I've dropped bombs on total strangers!" (79). Along with having worked his ass off and paid his taxes (79), he includes his service record as part of an honorable life. While in itself there is nothing strange about this, his formulation of dropping bombs on strangers reveals that he is tormented by his part in World War II and tortured by the bombs he has dropped on his family.

Although Lee and Austin's father in *True West* never appears on-stage, he, like Henry, is a ghost that haunts the battling sons. Austin's "True to life" (42) story of their father losing first his real teeth and then his fake teeth reveals the father's involvement in the Second World War, his displacement on returning as well as his current isolation. Austin tells Lee that their father "begs the government [for the money to have his teeth extracted]. G.I. Bill or some damn thing" (41). Although it is not clear whether their father lives out in the "Middle of Arizona with no money and no insurance and every morning another tooth is lying on the mattress" (41) because of trauma related to his activities during the war, the reference to the GI Bill and the second half of the story in which their father loses his dentures points to the displacement and isolation Shepard believes World War II veterans experienced. Having returned from battle to the superficial prosperity and peace of white America in the 1950s, these veterans often withdrew if not physically at least emotionally (often through alcohol) from their families.

For Shepard America's collective memory of war goes back as far as the frontier days. In *States of Shock* the Colonel, justifying the loss of his son, claims that the American people are the

bravest stock. The Pioneer. The Mountain Man. The Plainsman. The Texas Ranger. The Lone Ranger. My son. These have not died in vain. These ones have not left us to wallow in various states of insanity and self-abuse. We have a legacy to continue Stubbs. It's up to us. No one else is going to do it for us. Here's to them and to my son! A soldier for his nation! (162)

Similarly, thirteen years later in *The God of Hell* Welch claims that the problem with America is that there is no memory of Pearl Harbor, the Alamo, or the Baatan Death March anymore (72). Shepard does much more in both these plays than criticize America's involvement in Iraq. He draws a direct line from the frontier to the soldier of modern warfare, and thereby reveals that the minimal resistance to the Gulf War and Iraq War is related to a culture of war which transforms expansion through violence into an act of heroism.

In *A Lie of the Mind* there are two significant references to the frontier—both are closely aligned with Lorraine, Jake's mother. First siding with Jake, whose beating has left Beth brain-damaged, and attempting to get rid of her unsympathetic daughter Sally, Lorraine tells her daughter to make a new beginning like their heroic "granddaddy [who] started a town on a mesquite stump. He just hung his hat on it and a whole town sprang up" (73).

Believing in the frontier lie that new beginnings are possible, Lorraine later makes her own break from her son and the legacy left behind by the men in the family. She has reconciled with Sally and has decided to go to Ireland, a country divided by colonialism and war, after burning down the house. Sally, sorting through some photographs, finds one of her mother in a "big 'Frontier Days' blowout" which took place "Right around the end of the war" (122). Again, Shepard brings together the frontier and war, this time the Second World War, which as we discover throughout the play has left Jake scarred. Whereas Lorraine is prepared to burn the photograph along with all the other junk in the house, Sally, still believing in the American dream and family, asks: "Okay if I keep it?" (123). By keeping the photograph, Sally robs her mother of a new beginning. On the one hand, Shepard hints at a happy ending in Lorraine's dream of Ireland; on the other he taints this new beginning by suggesting that the past cannot be burned out of the mind like a house on fire. In essence, Shepard reveals that no matter how often he attempts to come to terms with the war trauma afflicting his father's generation and their sons, he cannot put out the fires burning in these men.

Unlike Lorraine or the Colonel, Stubbs uses the memory of the frontier to survive the brutality of war. The way to pull through war is to "Fix a picture in your mind" (176). The picture that Stubbs paints for us, however, is not one of "glorious unending expansion." Embedded in his simple memories of home are references to the frontier and the Second World War. For Shepard, war plays a crucial part in the making of America and in the process the American male has been sacrificed. The image on-stage of the impotent war veteran, Stubbs, who says while "staggering badly," that the soldier must "Lock onto an image or you'll be blown to KINGDOM COME!!" (176) reveals a man who has been shattered by this legacy of war.

Shepard often teases his audiences with possible happy endings. Despite Stubbs in *States of Shock* regaining his manhood—"My thing is coming back" (180)—and with it his memory when rolling across the floor with the waitress, Glory Bee, he is unable to become a hero. Instead, he has taken on the Colonel's violence when he takes up his sword. The final image in

the play of Stubbs raising “the sword in one quick and decisive movement, as though to decapitate the COLONEL” (184) is itself an image of violence. In attempting to end this war with his father, he perpetuates it within himself. It is, after all, the Colonel in a moment of elucidation who speaks the plays most crucial line: “How could we be so victorious and still suffer this terrible loss?” (167). Moreover, in this final tableau it is his face that looks out to us, helpless, unguarded by the gasmask and sitting in Stubbs’s wheelchair. Shepard has transformed another victory, Stubbs’s victory over his father, into a terrible loss. As Susanne Willadt rightly points out, Stubbs is “caught up in an ‘endless cycle’ of male family relations which forces him to repeat the old patters of typically male behavior” (1993, 161). He, like Oedipus, will not be liberated by his father’s death.

Likewise, both *A Lie of the Mind* and *The Late Henry Moss* end in a perpetual cycle. In *A Lie of the Mind* Jake is victorious in that he makes it cross-country in his boxer shorts, an American flag and his father’s pilot jacket in winter. However, like Travis in *Paris, Texas* he is unable to reunite with his wife. Instead, he unites two couples—Meg and Baylor and Beth and Frankie. Jake’s flag, symbolizing his father’s war efforts, becomes the vehicle to bring together Beth’s parents but their marriage is anything but ideal, and thus we are left to ponder whether it is right to keep this marital union alive.

When Jake finally addresses Beth, he has adopted her speech pattern. By using this technique, Shepard suggests that now he is the speaker of “truth.” However, when he says “You stay with him. He’s my brother” (135), he hands Beth over like a piece of property. And when Frankie reminds him that she “belongs to you!” (135), he perpetuates the lie that positions women as a territory to be fought over and defended. Consequently, the union between Beth and Frankie is doomed. Frankie is not pleased with the suggestion that he has betrayed his brother. Moreover, he is injured—shot in the thigh—an obvious symbol of impotence. In short, Beth is condemned to live out her new life with Frankie, the physically rather than mentally wounded man. The final miraculous image of the “fire in the snow” (137), too, does not offer hope as some critics have suggested (Patsalidis 252; Bottoms 241); rather it reflects the impossible desires that keep these characters isolated. Each is burning with love and rage in their own unapproachable territory.

In *The Late Henry Moss* as Conchalla pours tequila down Henry’s throat, he remembers “The day [he] died” (111). Henry’s confession of beating his wife with a viciousness unknown to many of us is hard to forgive. What is intriguing, however, is that Shepard has taken the position of the battering spouse in an attempt to comprehend the violence and flight

of Henry and men like him. Shepard, by constructing this memory in the present tense, reveals that Henry *lives the past*; he is haunted by his wife's love and the violence he has acted out towards her. What Henry sees and cannot face, despite his attempt to destroy it, is his wife's love. She may not have understood her husband's trauma, but she did grieve for him.

The legacy Henry passes on to Earl is guilt—a guilt that rages a war inside him. “You coulda stopped me but you didn’t” (113), says Henry. After hearing Henry's account of the kitchen war waged against the mother, one sympathizes with the petrified sons. However, Shepard, here, is critical of non-action as he is in *States of Shock*. Surprised at the lack of protest against the Gulf War, Shepard told one critic that he “could not believe the systematic kind of insensitivity of it . . . the notion of this being a heroic event” (Wade 263). For Shepard, Earl is partly to blame because he did nothing. Like the silent viewers witnessing the attacks on Iraq, by merely witnessing the attack Earl becomes complicit in it. As such this play, too, ends without resolution. Although Henry is finally laid to rest, Earl and Ray fall into the same pattern of denial and violence. The play ends with the beginning lines, only this time the brothers have switched roles. Shepard as of yet has not laid his *forefathers* to rest.

Shepard is the product of an American tradition of playwriting that reflects how the social and political climate has shaped the family. In *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, Tennessee Williams' references to World War I, the Stock Market crash, and the war raging in Spain allow his audience to go beyond sympathizing with Tom's struggle to escape his crippled sister, Laura, and oppressive mother, Amanda. Rather, Williams asks us to reflect on how the political and social climate has created many families like the Wingfields. Likewise, Arthur Miller's Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman*) and Sylvia Gellburg (*Broken Glass*) are to be viewed as regular individuals struggling to survive modernization and the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Like Miller and Williams, whose works delve into the way in which social and political unrest affects the family, Shepard creates male centered dramas in the hope of understanding masculine rage. Indeed, his almost obsessive reference to his past in interviews, and his continual return to this topic in his plays and short stories suggest that he has not come to terms with explosive masculinity. As the narrator in “Days of Blackouts” says: “I’m born/Without a clue” (*Cruising Paradise* 20) and although Shepard is a little less clueless now he still has not put all the pieces together (Kane 151).<sup>9</sup> Shepard's latest play, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, which premiered last March at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin,<sup>10</sup> reportedly features an artist, very much like Shepard, who continually returns to the same themes of the old



West. On an outing to discover authenticity, Struther's horse dies on him and he feels compelled to bury the animal. Although Struther's manages to bury his old theme of the West, the question of when Shepard will stop kicking his own "dead horse" remains open. □

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My exploration of Shepard's violence includes male aggression. While not all of Shepard's men strike out physically, each one manifests hostile behavior and attitudes as a consequence of a culture war.

<sup>2</sup> In *Plays: 3*. All citations from *States of Shock* and *A Lie of the Mind* will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>3</sup> In *Seven Plays*. All citations from *Buried Child*, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *True West* will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>4</sup> As Adler writes, Wesley "connects the automobile with foreign reconnaissance planes ready to invade" (120).

<sup>5</sup> In *Three Plays*. All citations from this play will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>6</sup> All citations from this play will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>7</sup> The Colonel's reconstruction of the battle in which soldiers on the shore are fighting to find cover from the "enemy" resembles descriptions of D-Day. Hence, Shepard merges America's collective memory of World War II with that of the Persian Gulf War.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Matthew Roudané for the research he did on the B-49.

<sup>9</sup> Kane recalls that in 1985, Shepard told Samuel G. Freedman of the *New York Times*: "You spend a lot of time trying to piece these things together and it still doesn't make sense."

<sup>10</sup> Scripts for this play are not available yet, and I have not been to Dublin to see the work. My understanding of this play is based on the reviews by Cox and Clancy.

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