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La familia como destino Eugene O'Neill y Sam Shepard

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PRESENTADA POR

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Preface and acknowledgments

This dissertation represents a culmination of work, reading and learning that has taken place over the past few years. I first became interested in the plays of Eugene O'Neill when I was an undergraduate in the United States. I came upon playwright Sam Shepard much later but from the beginning the similarities between the two struck me as uncanny. What moved me particularly was the way each playwright portrayed the time-honored American institution of the Family and how both focused on the idea that I've come to refer to as "family as fate." I began to ask myself, why did these playwrights write such gut-wrenchingly harrowing portrayals of the family? To exorcise their own ghosts? To come to terms with themselves? But even more compelling is the question why are we so attracted to these plays? What do we see in these plays? Ourselves, our nation?

I began my research to see if anyone had devoted a full-scale study to this phenomenon and discovered that others had also noticed the similarities but none had done as in-depth a study as I wished to do. To carry my research out, I decided to take the approach of a comparative analysis with a diachronic focus. I soon realized that this type of approach is not without its difficulties and pitfalls yet felt that the rewards far outweighed the adversities. When attempting to compare two writers it is easy to get trapped by just one of them or to become so enthusiastic about your approach that you see parallels everywhere even where they might not actually be. However, when the study is narrowed down and focused, the gains are immense.

I feel that this type of analysis and that the work put forward in this dissertation will be of great help to those interested in a number of different fields of interest that include not only American drama but the American family, Modernism, Postmodernism, tragedy and tragicomedy as well. In addition, this type of analysis can help to fill in some of the gaps in literary studies in the sense that it provides more complete ideas about the plays studied as literary works and can also shed light on the work and trajectories of both playwrights and lead to a richer and deeper understanding of their dramatic works. Finally, I hope it will inspire others to carry out more analytically comparative studies of other writers.

In writing this dissertation I have had indispensable collaboration from a number of people. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Ana Antón-Pacheco Bravo, who was the first to support my efforts and encourage me, and without whom I may never have discovered the works of Sam Shepard or have found the right footing. I am equally grateful to Dr. Félix Martín Gutiérrez for taking me on and for his wise and valuable suggestions. I feel a special gratitude to Dr. Gustavo Sánchez Canales for his unstinting faith and inestimable help.

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Finally, I take the opportunity to express my gratitude to my wife, Emma and my family for their love, unfailing encouragement and support. I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, who unfortunately are no longer with us.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing or talking about the family rarely produces indifference and many have provided their thoughts on the matter throughout history. Since the Ancient Greeks until the present century much of the greatest literature and art is based on family. Another common topic is that of how family shapes and breeds a person's character. It was Heraclitus (c. 535-c. 475 BCE) who said the "a man's character is his fate" and it was Sophocles (c. 496-c.406 BCE) who showed the ineluctability of trying to avoid one's fate. More recently Mary Renault (1905-1983) wrote that "[g]o with your fate, but not beyond. Beyond leads to dark places." Hence the title of this dissertation, "Family as Fate." For better or worse family is fate and family breeds character because normally a person cannot choose his/her family. Though usually attributed to French Abbot Jacques De Lille (1738-1813), many use the expression "fate chooses our relatives, we choose our friends" to describe this very difference between family and friends. Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) put it into comical nutshell when she wrote that "[w]ith him for a sire and her for a dam,/What should I be but just what I am?"

As explained in the previous paragraph, family has been a constant throughout the history of mankind in general and the history of drama in particular. The plays of Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) and Sam Shepard (1943) are not an exception in this respect and we can safely say that a large amount of their best work is precisely devoted to family. Both playwrights wrote early experimental plays about the family and then later on in their careers turned to a more intimate look through the prism of dramatic realism.

Much has been written about O'Neill and Shepard, the two dramatists under study in this dissertation. Sheila Rabillard (1993), Jim McGhee (1993) and William Demastes (1996, 2002) have devoted attention to realist and fantastic elements, whereas critics like John Orr (1989, 1991) Vanden Heuvel (1991), Stephen Watt (1998), Joel Pfister (1995), Christopher Bigsby (2000, 2002) and Carol Rosen (2004) have studied their work from a modernist and/or postmodernist point of view. In addition, the use of language has been extensively studied by critics like Jean Chothia (1979, 1998), Bonnie Marranca (1981), Michael Manheim (1982), Deborah Geis (1993) and Thomas Adler (2002). Moreover, the use of time has also been explored by Laurin Porter (1988, 1993), Jeannete Malkin (1992,

1999) and John Raleigh (1988). Psychoanalytic studies have also been made by critics like Patrick Nolan (in Di Mauro 1993 [1981]), Luther Luedtke (1989) and William Kleb (1998), as well as studies devoted to the influence of European—e.g. Shakesporean, Chekhovian, Strindbergian, Racinian—drama on (contemporary) American drama like Travis Bogard (1972), Murray Hartman (in Di Mauro 1993 [1961]), Jay Ronald Meyers (in Di Mauro 1993 [1967]), John Patrick Diggins (2007), Doris Alexander (1992, 2005) and the influence of classical Greek drama on American dramatists like Peter Hays (1990), Richard Sewall (1991), Bennet Simon (1993) and Sophus Keith Winther (in Di Mauro 1993 [1960]).

The basic aim of this dissertation is to show how two American playwrights, Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard, wrote about this idea of the family as fate, both artistically and personally. Although as explained below both O'Neill and Shepard approach the issue of family relationships differently, both dramatists eventually reach a similar conclusion: tradition as well as family are inescapable and must be dealt with.

On the one hand, I will approach O'Neill's drama from an autobiographical viewpoint and will attempt to show how he resorts to classical Greek drama like Euripides, among others. In this sense, he was endeavoring to infuse the American family with tragic overtones in order to show that in America the past also shapes what happens in the present. Not only is this present in *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey to Night* but is also present in his earlier works as well. On the other hand, I will analyze Shepard's plays with a similar focus in order to demonstrate that his intention is to break with that tradition so beloved by O'Neill and other American playwrights. Rather than use classical references to tradition, Shepard worked more with a countercultural focus and when resorting to tradition he did so in a more postmodern way using tradition to subvert the portrayal of a more postmodern family in which the past has been reduced to fragments that are impossible to string together in a coherent fashion. Although the settings, themes, and characters of the family plays vary in Shepard and O'Neill, one dramatic element that remains constant in each is the presence of a young man haunted by unresolved ties to family and personal heritage. Though attempts to evade this past are doomed to failure in both playwrights, their approach will be different.

Such a comparative study is not without its pitfalls and inevitably is prone to a certain degree of overlap and several passages and ideas may be repeated in another chapter. For example, how both playwrights deal with memory and the past, or the

relationship between fathers and sons have to do not only with their approach and interpretations of the notions of tragedy/tragicomedy, but point as well as to the nature of just what defines Modernism and Postmodernism, which are treated separately but are also subject to the same overlap.

In the first part of this dissertation, I will attempt to demonstrate that O'Neill's drama is mixed with the more classic traditions of myth, concentrating on the strong influence/presence of classical themes and archetypes as found in the plays of Greek dramatists like Aeschylus and Euripides, among others. This comparative study, which will allow me to show the interconnectedness between past and present, aims at exploring the tension and decay at work beneath the surface of American families and to a certain extent of America itself. Probably, the clearest example of O'Neill's sense of connectedness to something—religion, history, family, tradition—is found in *Desire under the Elms*. There seems to be some sort of presence haunting the Cabot farm in this work and making the family members behave in a certain way. Whether it be Eben's dead mother or something else, what becomes clear by the play's end is that there is a fate compelling the characters forward. On the other hand, his strongest and perhaps best play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, can be read as a lament for a past that has influenced the present yet can no longer be grasped. Each of the characters is driven to confront a past that no longer has any clear referents.

Conversely, Shepard, who also addresses the theme of (the) family, places more emphasis on its purely biological aspect. The key difference between both dramatists is that Shepard, unlike O'Neill, attempts to break away from the family at the beginning of his career. His early plays underscore the wish or the need to show a break with the family and by extension with tradition (*e.g. The Rock Garden and The Holy Ghostly*). Probably for this reason, his earlier plays use many countercultural elements of popular culture and show a much more secular approach than those of O'Neill. A clear example of this is the early play *The Rock Garden*, a one-act play with three scenes written when he was 21 years old. A young man is depicted in a number of minimalistic, disjunctive actions involving a sister, mother, and father. Communication between them is all but impossible as they lean more on clichés than normal conversation. The atmosphere borders on the claustrophobic. In the first scene, a boy and girl and their father sit wordlessly at a table until the girl spills a glass of milk. In the second, the boy brings his mother glasses of water while she talks aimlessly about the weather. In the third, the boy and his father sit around

in their underwear. The father begins to talk about rock gardens and the young man falls out of his chair three times and finally responds with a graphic description of his sexual experiences. After five minutes, the play ends with the father falling out of his chair.¹

Although the issue of family disintegration is a common theme to both dramatists, it is more acute in Shepard than in O'Neill. If one assumes that one of the givens of the postmodern age includes the phenomenon of fragmentation or disintegration and a loss or absence of significant and unifying rules, then one is entitled to claim that Shepard, just as much or even more than O'Neill, uses the family as a symbol of the fragmentation and disintegration of America. Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) and *Buried Child* (1979) are plays that go beyond a mere criticism of the moral and physical disintegration of the American family towards a more earnest investigation of just what it means to be a member of a family and how the crushing force of heredity can motivate personal behavior.

The idea of family as a symbol of fragmentation and disintegration in O'Neill is probably best exemplified in Chapter One, "Family in the American Vein." It is commonly known that, for years, Eugene O'Neill had thought of writing a drama based on one of the Greek tragedies but set in America and embodying present-day concepts and insights. The play was *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Based on the play on *The Oresteian Trilogy* by Aeschylus, he indeed chose to "update" a play which depicts, once again, the struggle at the core of family life. However, this dissertation focuses more on O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, his first foray into the use of classical myth due to its similarities with Shepard's work.

One last aspect to be looked at in depth is a concern with the past and memory, another cornerstone for both playwrights. In his late plays like *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, among others, O'Neill finally managed to embed the principles of Greek tragedy within otherwise naturalistic plays. In this way, he could realize his lifelong goal of dramatizing man and his struggle with the past. One of the changes in his plays is that the action in the late plays, unlike in his early plays, is retrospective and there is a move in them toward an unmasking.

Unlike O'Neill, whose characters seem to follow a more classical structure in terms of time and space, Shepard's characters have a totally different concept or notion of time. As we shall see in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the Tyrone family past has effected the

present of every member of the family. The past for them existed at one time and although their memories of it might differ, it can be conjured up albeit under the effects of alcohol and morphine. Shepard's characters, on the other hand, often seem to be attempting to deny time and to live without it. There is a desire for the past to remain in the present and in the memory as a physical, concrete and lasting entity. As will be shown, in Shepard's *Buried Child*, Dodge attempts to convince Shelley that photographs she has seen of him in his house when he was younger are not the real thing and the past "never happened." The real thing is him, right now sitting in front of her. In the case of *Buried Child*, this inevitably leads to instances of a lack of a common memory in characters like Vince and Shelly. This leads to what some have referred to as "disrecognition" and "todayism" in Shepard's character. (Respectively, Orr 1991 and DeRose 1992)

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. Each chapter begins with a general Introduction or overview of the issue addressed and followed by an analysis of two O'Neill plays and two Shepard plays. For reasons of space, I will only analyze O'Neill's *Long Day's into Night* and *Desire under the Elms* and Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*.

Chapter One, "Family in the American Vein," gives a brief overview of how the family has been treated in American drama and how the notion of family as fate is a continuum in American drama. The reasons for including O'Neill and Shepard are looked into particularly through the four plays mentioned above.

Chapter Two, "Dangling Between Modernism and Postmodernism," explores the very nature of the Modernism/Postmodernism debate and shows that O'Neill can be said to have been working in a modernist idiom and Shepard in a postmodern idiom and overlapping of the two modes occurs, which makes for some of the richest and most exciting plays in the American canon. This chapter also looks at realism and its role in modern drama, particularly American drama and just how it was used by O'Neill and how it is parodied and undercut by the use of pastiche in Shepard's work. This chapter also illustrates the use of language in both playwrights, how O'Neill uses a uniquely American dialogue in *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and how Shepard uses a realistic language as well but where communication between family members has almost totally broken down.

Chapter Three, "Tragedy and Tragicomedy: Breaking Generic Boundaries," explores tragedy and tragicomedy and explains that O'Neill attempted to work within a

more classical mode and write tragedy in an idiom that his contemporaries would understand in America. Shepard, on the other hand, eschews tragedy and adopts a more postmodernist approach to tragedy and works more with the genre of tragicomedy. His plays underwrite notions of tragedy, at times with a more mocking and nihilistic tone than O'Neill. The effects of fate, time and memory are studied in detail in this chapter as they embody notions of tragedy and are major causes of the tragic downfall of the families portrayed in both O'Neill's and Shepard's plays.

Chapter Four, "The Postmodern Moment," explains that O'Neill wrote his plays heavily influenced by the tenets of what is known as Modernism and that Shepard wrote basically the same plays but influenced by what is referred to as Postmodernism. In this sense, O'Neill is much more of a traditionalist and, in spite of profound pessimism and atheism, left room in his plays for what he himself referred to as a "hopeless hope." Like other modernists, O'Neill was more heavily steeped in tradition whether it be classical, mythical or Elizabethan. Shepard, on the other hand, does not seem to adhere to any such tradition and his plays echo more secular notions, many of which come from pop mythology and, like Beckett, his plays leave little room for hope. Perhaps this has to do with the waning of religious effect between the two periods. Shepard is commonly referred to as being more nihilistic yet, like O'Neill, in his family plays, in spite of the gloom that hovers over them, there is room for what that same notion of "hopeless hope" even if it is shrouded by an all pervasive ambiguity.

For this reason, and in order not to try to break the structure of this dissertation, in the "Postmodern moment" part, I will only analyze Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*.

Notes:

¹Henry I. Schvey suggests that there is a remarkable coincidence between this play and *Buried Child*. "[T]his little play has a disturbing vitality born out of its conjunction of realistic setting (dining room, apparently realistic dialogue) and symbolic subtext. It also foreshadows in a remarkable way the mature Shepard with its disconnected monologues and contrasting image patterns of dryness and fertility which are especially reminiscent of *Buried Child*." (1993: 16)

1 FAMILY IN THE AMERICAN VEIN

Throughout history much of drama has focused on families and secrets, families as necessary, families as unhappiness, families as fate and families as theater. Though one might think that the family as dramatic material has run its course, the opposite seems to be the case as a fascination with it still prevails, particularly in America. Perhaps the greatest indication that the family holds the power of attraction is the fact that after a long period of experimentation, playwrights Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard returned to the family and wrote more autobiographical-type plays. Likewise, this return to family was also a return to realism. O'Neill's last family plays would be performed after his death and revived his career. Shepard's return also struck a chord in both American theatergoers and critics and earned him his only Pulitzer prize in 1979. It may not be stretching the imagination to see the American family as a cycle, a way for dramatists to come to grips with the nation and themselves. In a letter to Lawrence Langer, August 12, 1936 writing about a cycle of plays he called *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, which was to be the saga of an American family throughout the history of the United States, O'Neill wrote: "I'm not giving a damn whether the dramatic event of each play has any significance in the growth of the country or not, as long as it is significant in the spiritual and psychological history of the American family in the plays. The Cycle is primarily just that, the history of a family" (Bogard and Bryer 1988: 452). Though Eugene O'Neill was writing about his famous unfinished cycle of plays, we can imagine it to be about Shepard's work as well as Williams's, Miller's, Albee's and Wilson's, among others. In this sense, the cycle becomes the continuing saga of the American family and, by extension, the nation itself, while at the same time an argument can be made that many American plays about the family make up an ongoing cycle about the state of the nation.

It comes as no surprise that few playwrights can escape the urge to portray the trials and tribulations of the family and put them up on the stage for public scrutiny. It is as if they feel a need to exorcise their own personal demons, to cleanse themselves of some unutterable guilt. To a certain extent, this portrayal of family might indicate a revealing point at which social history and literature intersect. Throughout the 20th century the American family has been increasingly maligned as an institution but the family permeates

daily life in America, whether a person has one or not. Many Americans, traditionally bereft of “roots,” are always planning a “family reunion” or a “family picnic.” For many political leaders the family is a *cause célèbre* and incorporated into their campaign speeches with slogans such as “there must be a return to family values” repeated over and over. From churches, bandstands and the media, the decline of the American family is continually being debated as the institution is dissected by clergy, the press and the public at large. Much concern is given to just how a person’s private family life affects his/her social life. In a country notorious for needing to create its own myths and traditions, it is not surprising that the family is of such vital importance. The fact that American families are becoming more and more dysfunctional also seems to be, unfortunately, a rising phenomenon. Were one to peruse the sociology section of the local library, he/she would find a wide array of scholarly books devoted to a study of the phenomenon, many of which focus on private need versus public interest, the ravages of a capitalist system on personal sentiment, the loss of “traditional” religious values, etc., all of which are the subject of many plays written in America.

In *The Minimal Family*, Jan E. Dizard and Howard Gadlin are of the opinion that the American family is under threat and base their argument on the conflict between individualism, economic stability and social welfare. The family is no longer as necessary as in the past because there is more individuality and more opportunities for financial independence. Gadlin argues that “[t]he family is a bulwark of the social order. Were the social order just and humane, then the family might be defensible. But clearly our social order can hardly be described as either just or humane. The family [...] plays a pivotal role in perpetuating inequalities of class, race and gender. In short, [...] the family is both psychologically and socially repressive.” (Dizard and Gadlin 1990: vii-viii)

It is no accident that American drama in the 20th century has been strikingly preoccupied with problems of family life and most often this zealous devotion has been rendered in a realistic style. Many of America’s best playwrights are remembered for their family-centered plays. All one need do is take a look at playwrights like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Thornton Wilder, Clifford Odets, Lillian Helman, Edward Albee, Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson. Apart from this, it should be noted that American dramatists seem to be pushed to dissect their own families on stage in a last-ditch and futile attempt to come to terms with their own pasts, which however one likes it or not, are woven together into the frayed fabric of America’s collective past. The nuclear family

becomes an obsession as do “family” battles. Even the performance artist Karen Finley resorted to the theme in her play about another American dysfunctional family, *The Theory of Total Blame* (1988). The examples that will be explored in depth here are those of Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard, two playwrights engaged in portraying the family from very disparate but somehow remarkably familiar ways: the weak, dependent sons of a father they cannot or will not comprehend, the breakdown in relationships produced by mind-altering substances, the thwarting of any ambition to be independent, and the family as an inescapable fate.

While analysing criticism on O’Neill, it is uncanny how many times his name could be substituted with Shepard’s. Jean Chothia’s “Trying to Write the Family Play”, which is about O’Neill, tells us as much about Shepard as it does about O’Neill: “Patterns of relationships recur, as do perceptions of things hidden, of pressure building and of characters bound together who are, nevertheless, continually drawing away from each other. [...] In play after play, the characters seize an opportunity to tell each other their stories” (Chothia in Manheim 1998: 195). However, as we shall see, the ways of telling the stories differ. In O’Neill, the retelling of the past is an oblique way to avoid and escape from the present. The propensity to cast experience into narrative form and the use of naturalism are also of interest. As Raymond Williams suggested, “[t]he driving force of the great naturalist drama was not the reproduction of rooms or dress or conversation on the stage. It was a passion for truth, in strictly human and contemporary terms” (rpt in Worthen 1995: 1171). Central to notions of dramatic naturalism is the role of environment expressed in the telling interaction of the character and the stage space. In the same essay, Chothia points out what Raymond Williams suggests as one of the tenets of “high Naturalism,” in which the lives of characters have soaked into their environment and whose detailed presentation and production add another dramatic dimension and often a common dimension. In addition, O’Neill was working more as a modernist whereas Shepard’s approach is more as a postmodernist. As James A. Robinson suggests, O’Neill and Shepard “have sharply contrasting attitudes toward the myths they employ, one reverent and the other ironic; and that difference helps illustrate the opposing attitudes toward authority found in the modern and post-modern phases of American drama.” (Robinson in Maufort 1989: 152)

Also of great interest for this study is that fact that both playwrights concentrate more on the relationship between fathers and sons. Undoubtedly, as both playwrights are

exceedingly autobiographical and had a conflictive relationship with their own fathers, it is only natural that as Henry I. Schvey suggests, “[a]t the heart of both playwrights’ obsession with family is the relations between father and son. [...] The plays of O’Neill and Shepard are filled with images of father figures who are both respected and depised” (1991: 51).² In addition, Michael Abbot suggests that this “autobiographical character is portrayed by both playwrights as a reckless, cynical, dissipated man, estranged from society and an alien in his own family. The prominence of this wanton son in both men’s works raises important questions about the influences O’Neill and Shepard share and the nature of autobiographical characterization.” (1994: 193)³

While reading these family plays, one is also reminded of other family plays in the American cannon. To a certain extent, there are other families, although the impact of O’Neill on Shepard and particularly *Long Day’s Journey into Night* cannot be lightly passed over.⁴

1.1 Eugene O’Neill: Family as Burden

Throughout the 20th century most criticism has focused on O’Neill’s personal life in an attempt to shed light on the ultimate meanings of many of his plays. An example of this attitude can be seen in Doris Alexander’s *Eugene O’Neill’s Creative Struggle: The Decisive Decade, 1924-33* (1992), where she states that, for Eugene O’Neill, “[...] a play was an opportunity to confront and solve a pressing life problem, and the order in which he tackled his plays, and the arousal in his mind of a particular configuration of memories and ideas to shape them came from the urgency of the life problem that he was facing in each one” (1992: 2). Or as Travis Bogard suggested at the beginning of his study of O’Neill and his plays *Contour in Time*, “Eugene O’Neill’s work as a playwright was such an effort at self-understanding” (1972: xii). In their second biography of O’Neill, Arthur and Barbara Gelb suggest that throughout his career, “O’Neill continued to portray his mother and father—in many guises—as lovers communicating in code, neither able to find the other’s key [...] he attributed his own profound sense of alienation to the inability of his parents to make sustained, meaningful contact, either with each other or with him” (Gelb 2000: 71; emphasis mine). Throughout this dissertation, I will focus on the family conflicts in O’Neill’s characters in *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day’s Journey*.

Indeed in almost all of O'Neill's plays, some aspect of his own troublesome life, his experiences and his philosophy can be found. It is quite clear that most of his family's personal travails can be found in his posthumous masterpiece *Long Day's Journey into Night*—first published in 1956—where nearly the whole sum of his life and work is poignantly described. At the end of a long monologue, his fictional counterpart Edmund Tyrone confesses to his father that he “will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death.” (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 153-54)

To better understand the two plays under study here, I will briefly give an account of some biographical data which are of the utmost importance in the case of Eugene O'Neill, since throughout most of his work autobiography and writing are so interconnected.⁵

O'Neill's life was full of melancholy, despair and tragedy at every turn and what he himself described so well in many of his works as “ironic fate” and “hopeless hope.” O'Neill's biographers agree that he was undoubtedly an undesired baby. His father, James O'Neill was considered by his wife, Ellen Quinlan to be a rather stingy and insensitive man and his mother is consistently portrayed as an overprotective and overly sensitive woman. The couple should probably never have married and had children. O'Neill always felt unwanted. “Eugene was forced to bear the burden of being the unwelcome child whom James had cajoled Ella into conceiving” (Gelb 2000: 113). As a child, he was not abused and certainly did receive affection but his birth was so painful for his mother that she began to take morphine and her dependence on this drug slowly became an addiction, for which she and her husband would indirectly blame the infant Eugene. The Gelbs suggest that Ella, being in such a distraught condition, considered her use of morphine as a just response to her husband's drinking. In addition, the family never really had a permanent home as his father, James O'Neill, Sr. was a travelling actor who spent much of the year on the road. Therefore, it may be claimed that the early forces that shaped O'Neill's life were his mother's drug addiction as well as the lack of a permanent home, which produced a state of rootlessness in the young Eugene, a feeling that would haunt him all of his life.

Between his birth and his death, he lived in many different houses but it seemed that none could ever be called “home.” This is one of the keys to help us understand why his fictional families are dysfunctionally fragmented. As Frederic Carpenter said, “[n]o physical place could have been home. For he built his mansions of the imagination for the

dwelling place of the soul” (Carpenter 1979: 60). O’Neill’s vision of family as fractured and his sense of rootlessness are at the center of one of his major themes, family as fate, which I address below.

One of O’Neill’s obsessions is the notion of what might be referred to as “predestined workings of Fate” (Gelb 2000: 398). A rough example of this is his first play, *A Wife for a Life* (1913). Fate brings together two men, who are out in the desert. Both men are in love with the same woman, though only one of them is aware of this. In *Fog* (1914), we can see the first foreshadowing of the father-son antagonism that would be so prevalent in many of his later plays. Also apparent in this early work is the notion of being adrift and lost in the fog which would be such a prevalent motif in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. What is also clear from the beginning is his distaste for unrealistic melodramatic playwriting, though for the moment it would still take him quite a while to shake off the melodrama completely as is displayed in various old fashioned contrivances and situations that take place in early dramas. Another early play about family strife is O’Neill’s brilliant experiment in monologue, *Before Breakfast* (1916), a short one-act in which an artist while being berated and belittled by his wife for being a failure and dreaming of becoming an artist, kills himself off-stage. This short play was inspired by August Strindberg’s *The Stronger*.⁶

His first real triumph on Broadway was *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920. O’Neill’s next and perhaps best play from this period (after having written a number of plays of great biographic interest if of little dramatic merit such as *S.O.S.*, *Shell Shock*, *Where the Cross is made*, *The Rope*, *The Dreamy Kid*, *Exorcism* and *The Straw*) is about two brothers in love with the same woman, forced to make a decision as to which one should marry her and stay on the farm. It was also his first play to depict two brothers who are at odds with each other. Like the brothers in Shepard’s *True West* (1980), the Mayo brothers are opposites. Robert is a dreamer and a poet who dreams of going to sea and seeing the world, whereas Andrew is a more practical and down-to-earth man who desires to tend the family farm. Due to “ironic fate” they choose to live out the wrong destiny and Andrew goes to sea and Robert stays at home to marry Ruth and tend the farm with disastrous and tragic results. *Beyond the Horizon*, which has long been considered to be the first American tragedy ever staged, was produced in 1920, debuting on Broadway and winning him his first Pulitzer Prize. Though the play is flawed—the dialogue is sometimes too verbose and awkward, the plot at times seems a contrivance—most critics agree that the play

introduced a new realism into the American theater bringing the sad realities of everyday life onto the stage, and began changing that stage into a more genuine one, one that was more vital, and more sensitive to the human condition.

In this play, we see stage directions which show a more conscious effort toward representing character and milieu in the setting. The notion of “fate” is treated in terms of deterministic forces as the characters make decisions contrary to their natural impulses and yearnings, thus causing the tragedy, translating so to speak fate into the forces of environment and psychology. This idea will be explored in more detail in Chapter Three, “Tragedy and Tragicomedy: Breaking Generic Boundaries,” pp.75 ff.

His biographers agree that by the time *Beyond the Horizon* was performed, most of O’Neill’s themes and obsession were put into place. Travis Bogard says “[a]s his first major play, it properly builds on all his most significant earlier work. His sense of a special relationship between man and his environment had emerged at the outset of his career in his perceptions about the sun and the fog and especially about the power the sea has over men’s lives. To this he added the relatively recent idea, derived in part from Conrad, of the power of hope to sustain men” (Bogard 1972: 126). Then, in depicting the details of Robert’s marriage, he drew upon his understanding of husbands and wives derived from Strindberg. Robert is trapped in a soul destroying marriage which thwarts his poetic sense. Finally, in *Robert and Andrew*, he sketched the poetical self-portrait and its materialistic counterpart with which he had been occupied since *Fog*. What emerged finally was the memorable figure of a man “touched” with poetry, O’Neill’s true tragic protagonist. Robert was a man who was out of harmony with his environment, who could not “belong” and who therefore was condemned to live between hope’s eternal optimism and the inevitability of despair.⁷

Prior to analyzing the idea of family as fate in *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, it is helpful to point out something about another play O’Neill wrote during the 1920s, *All God’s Chillen’ Got Wings* (1924). This is a play which stands out perhaps more for the ruckus it caused in a racially sensitive American society than for its artistic merits. O’Neill stages a couple trapped in a troublesome marriage, made all the more so by the fact that the marriage is an interracial one, which was still taboo and a scandalous subject at the time. Autobiographical elements abound as well, as the main characters are a white girl, who is unstable, rather weak and tearful named Ella, who, in a momentary lapse of reason marries a black man named Jim. The couple at times embodies

some of O'Neill's ideas about his parents' strained relationship and seems to be a rather overt attempt at coming to terms with his parents and their life together.

Desire under the Elms: Family as Hardship

O'Neill's Pulitzer prize winning play *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) received many attacks by conservatives, who labelled the play as "immoral and obscene," while the controversy it raised brought more and more theatergoers to see it. Once again, O'Neill critics and biographers suggest that this was another play with autobiographical elements. Doris Alexander states that the play was inspired by "grief for his mother-that set off *Desire*." (Alexander: 1992: 21)⁸

Desire under the Elms was written while O'Neill was undoubtedly still recovering from the recent deaths of his parents and elder brother, Jamie. In his artistic trajectory, this is probably the play where his obsession with the father-son rivalry and hatred really takes root. Edwin A. Engel suggested that while not being particularly new, the theme of father-son had become quite common since the advent of Freudian notions, particularly that of the Oedipus complex, and the theme had begun to appear "with such grim regularity since about 1910." (Engel in Di Mauro 1993 [1953]: 244)⁹

Philip Weissman claimed that *Desire under the Elms*, like *Long Day's Journey into Night*, was written with "the intensity of a man [...] who was recently in the midst of the most intense mourning for his mother" (Weissman in Di Mauro 1993 [1957]: 245). Was O'Neill necessarily exorcising his own personal ghosts through his play? Weissman suggests that Ephraim Cabot, the terrible, hard Calvinistic patriarch is a reflection of James O'Neill. The older brothers, Simeon and Peter are early portrayals of his older brother, Jamie, and that Eben is a self-portrait albeit at the time the author was not conscious of it. Norman Berlin also points out that the description of Eben is "the spitting image of O'Neill" (Berlin 1982: 67). When Eben first appears he is described in this manner:

EBEN. God! Purty! (*His eyes fall and he stares about him frowningly. He is twenty-five, tall and sinewy. His face is well-formed, good-looking, but its expression is resentful and defensive. His defiant eyes remind one of a wild animal's in captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself trapped but inwardly unsubdued. There is a fierce repressed vitality*)

about him. He has black hair, moustache, a thin curly trace of beard. (Desire under the Elms 137)

That Eben hates his father and is also his rival is shown through the constant banter that goes on between father and son throughout the play. A typical example of their rivalry can be seen at the close of Act I, just before Eben and Abbie fall in love. Ephraim has returned with the beautiful Abbie, who at the age of 35 is 40 years younger than Ephraim. Abbie and Eben have been arguing and Eben suggests that Abbie, by marrying Ephraim, is going to cheat him out of his inheritance of the farm. He storms out of the house after claiming that he hates Abbie. Outside the farmhouse he comes across Cabot, who is returning to the house.

(EBEN appears outside, slamming the door behind him. He comes round the corner, stops on seeing his father, and stands staring at him with hate).

CABOT. *(raising his arms to heaven in the fury he can no longer control)* Lord God 'o Hosts, smite the undutiful sons with thy wust cuss!

EBEN. *(breaking in violently)* Yew 'n' yewr God! Allus cussin' folks—allus naggin' 'em!

CABOT. *(oblivious to him—summoningly)* God o' the old! God o' the lonesome!

EBEN. *(mockingly)* Naggin' his sheep t' sin! T' hell with yewr god! *(CABOT turns. He and EBEN glower at each other).*

CABOT. *(harshly)* So it's yew. I might've knowed it. *(shaking his finger threateningly at him)* Blashphemin' fool! *(then quickly)* Why hain't ye t' wuk?

EBEN. Why hain't yew? They've went. I can't wuk it all alone.

CABOT. *(contemptuously)* Nor noways! I'm wuth ten o' ye yit, old's I be! Ye'll never be more'n half a man! *(then, matter-of-factly)* Waal—let's git t' the barn. *(Desire under the Elms 161-62)*

Undoubtedly, O'Neill was using the Oedipus myth of the son who wants to usurp the father and sleep with the mother.¹⁰ That he wanted to be free of the influence of his father was obvious. By falling in love with the irresistible Abbie, Eben is finally able to liberate himself from a mother complex on the one hand and a tyrannical father on the other. But the reason Ephraim remains alive and kicking at the end of the play is because O'Neill himself was unable to free himself entirely from the influence of his father.¹¹

Regarding the relationship between parents and children, Phillip Weissman suggests that the conflict that Eben feels between his lust for Abbie and the fear that he still feels for his father reflects O'Neill's inability to totally resolve his oedipal strivings. Murray Hartmann suggests even more parallels between O'Neill and his characters. Like Eben, O'Neill always felt that he had been an unwanted child, and if Abbie can be compared to Ella then the psycho-sexual fixation on the mother and hatred of the father that O'Neill's biographers insist upon is borne out through the play. The rivalry between father and son for the mother's love is a recurring theme that would also appear in later plays such as *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, among others. (Hartman in Di Mauro 1993 [1961]: 252-55)

O'Neill's father figures are sometimes absent, dead or not even mentioned, especially from his earliest plays and leading up to *Beyond the Horizon* and *Desire under the Elms*. In many cases, a child's existence is denied by the father, or a child lives on in state of eternal adolescence. James Tyrone, Jr. is the clearest example of this type of character. The sons chafe under the power of the patriarch yet rarely do they escape from it and generally make only verbal attacks on the father's authority. Throughout *Desire under the Elms*, Eben always seems to be as in awe of his father's strength and his puritanical and Calvinist philosophy that "God's hard, not easy!" as he is against it. The prolonged cohabitation between father and son indicates a sign of subjection and a source of conflict. Even in *Desire under the Elms*, it is not only Eben who lives in a state of semi-slavery under Ephraim's yoke but his older brothers Simeon and Peter as well. They live as a sort of Cain and Abel, however the Cabot farm is a far cry from Eden

Although they wish to escape from their tyrannical father, they are incapable both physically and economically of freeing themselves from his influence. A son's personal development is also somehow hindered. It is no small coincidence that like Jamie Tyrone, Simeon and Peter, who are well into their thirties, are unable to go out into the world on their own. Perhaps this is also their "curse," to be helpless and unable to escape and

doomed to live on their father's farm forever. It is of interest to note that it is only when Eben steals his father's money from underneath the kitchen floorboard and offers it to his brothers that they finally get up enough gumption to finally light out on their own and head west to (supposedly) make their fortune in California. In this sense, they are similar to Dodge's sons, Bradley and Tilden, in Shepard's *Buried Child*, who make attempts to usurp Dodge's role as the patriarch, but, who in the end are as weak a progeny as Dodge is a weak patriarch. In this sense, Ephraim carries much more physical and emotional clout than his counterpart Dodge in *Buried Child*.

Throughout O'Neill's works, generational conflicts are continuously waged, many times with a tension between affection and selfishness. The father figure many times treats the son with indifference, disappointment and selfishness. This is perhaps made more manifest in *Long Day's Journey into Night* yet there are a few cases in *Desire under the Elms* as we have already seen. In this way, the family becomes almost a battleground and it is in *Desire under the Elms* where we see the father-son rivalry for the mother the most, even if O'Neill is still hiding it behind a quasi-incestuous relationship between Eben and his step-mother. In many cases, the father's role is to reduce the son to silence and ensure that the son does not develop as an independent man and to keep him in the limbo of existence. Some of O'Neill's sons abhor the father like Eben (even though he is never able to bring himself to physically attack his father) while others seem to tolerate being exploited such as Simeon and Peter. In this sense the sons are seen as victims of destructive oppression and their response to this destructive oppression is a mixture of bitterness together with volleys of verbal violence that reveal truths, which are sordid at best.

Simeon and Peter frivolously sell their birthright for the chimera of "gold in California" and rather than stick it out on the farm and live under Ephraim's tyranny, they decide to "whoop" and leave the "old skinflint" and "old bloodsucker," Cabot (*Desire under the Elms* 158). Unlike Simeon and Peter, Jamie Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night* never abandons the family home of his own free will. Michael Manheim believes that Ephraim's commitment to his farm is analogous to Tyrone's commitment to his play, which is never mentioned but is undoubtedly based on the real James O'Neill, Sr.'s *The Count of Montecristo*. As he writes, "Both men endure and are seemingly forgiven in spite of being usually portrayed as a stubborn tyrant, volatile fraud, abject confessor" (Manheim 1982: 36). Abbie Cabot is Mary Tyrone though Manheim may be overstating his case when equating Abbie's murder of her son with Mary's drug addiction saying that both actions have the same connotations. He suggests that "forgiveness must assume

extraordinary proportions” (36). He is more on the mark when he says that kinship in death is not the same as kinship in life, nor is Eben and Abbie’s union necessarily a positive one because it is a union into withdrawal leading to madness and the gallows rather than to kinship.¹²

Desire under the Elms also shows the tragic idea of a lost ideal or the inability to achieve the ideas strived for, which is also a American constant and appears in works by Melville, Wolfe, Fitzgerald etc. O’Neill wished to define the self and comment upon anxieties inherent in the American psyche, and “more specifically on the American doubt about the nature of the human environment” (Maufort 1990: 36).¹³ Critics have often remarked that American autobiographical tendencies in some ways served to exorcise painful memories, either personal or cultural in essence, but in the case of O’Neill, this was not necessarily the case because in some measure he was writing in a mode that could be loosely defined as “ironic biography” (37). The tendency of O’Neill is to use a land/sea dichotomy, and to use the notion of the voyage as a spiritual quest which fails to provide an eventual sense of enlightenment. “Throughout his career, O’Neill portrayed sailors and ‘land’ characters embarked upon a quest for the absolutes of life.” But like many they “are doomed never to possess the ideal for which they are yearning” (90). When thinking about any of the Cabots this rings true, though it also brings to mind Edmund Tyrone in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*.

Desire under the Elms then is heavily autobiographical but with other interesting points of view. He (Eben) hates his father (Ephraim) because his father is greedy for land as was James O’Neill, who was constantly buying property. He loves his mother, who was abused by her husband, Ephraim. Eben also has an Oedipus complex as also noted. As we shall see in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, O’Neill’s elder dead brother, Edmund is also a presence as he is talk about and remembered especially by Mary Tyrone. In an autobiographical sense, Eben and Abbie’s murdered baby is perhaps this Edmund. Ephraim Cabot is the father rival, tyrannical, greedy and cruel, yet in the end he is finally a sympathetic character as is James Tyrone in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. Normand Berlin suggests that he is perhaps a portrait of O’Neill himself, both legitimate lover of mother and forbidden lover of mother. O’Neill himself once said that “I have always loved Ephraim so much. He’s so autobiographical!” (O’Neill qtd. in Berlin 1993: 67). Ephraim is the most complex character in the play perhaps because he shows O’Neill’s own ambivalence towards his own father, a sort of love-hate relationship.¹⁴

Finally, it is worth noting that violence, murder, adultery and incest have been visited upon many dramatic families throughout history. From the “special houses” of Greek tragedy on through Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy up to (and perhaps to a lesser extent) modern tragedy, it would appear that the “broken family” has always existed and has always been a riveting and easily recognizable subject for audiences.

Long Day’s Journey into Night: Family as Grievance

Robert Brustein writes that “*Long Day’s Journey into Night* contains the finest writing O’Neill ever did and the fourth act is among the most powerful scenes in all dramatic literature. [...] O’Neill has created a personal play which bears on the condition of all mankind: a bourgeois family drama with universal implications.”¹⁵ And family drama is obvious in the sense that O’Neill always presents the family unit as disjointed or alienated. Specifically, in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* the Tyrone family past has been broken up into fragments but these fragments make up a whole that the viewer or reader is able to grasp.

In effect, in O’Neill the audience or reader clearly perceives the ever increasing isolation of the individual family members and the disintegration of the family unit. This disintegration is reflected in the symbolic arrangements O’Neill has prescribed for each family member. The final reunion of the entire family at the end of Act IV becomes a mockery of the closeness suggested by the opening scene and is augmented all that much more by the ever-present bottle of whiskey and the drunkenness of the Tyrone men.

There are many examples of family alienation in this play. For instance, James Tyrone and his eldest son Jamie have an extremely tense relationship and seem to be more like enemies than father and son. The audience gets a clear idea of this early in Act One when Jamie accuses his father of being a miser and not wanting to properly pay for a good doctor for Edmund as he’s suffering from consumption. In turn, James accuses his son of throwing his life away and being a wastrel:

JAMIE: Because you always buy more land instead of paying off mortgages. If Edmund was a lousy acre of land you wanted, the sky would be the limit! (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 31)

Later on he says:

JAMIE: Oh, all right. I'm a fool to argue. You can't change the leopard's spots.

TYRONE: (*with rising anger*) No, you can't. You've taught me that lesson only too well. I've lost all hope you will ever change yours. You dare tell me what I can afford? You've never known the value of a dollar and never will! You've never saved a dollar in your life! At the end of each season you're penniless! You've thrown away your salary every week on whores and whisky. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 31)

Also present in Act One is the suspicion the male Tyrones have that Mary is slipping back into her morphine addiction. When confronted by Edmund she vehemently denies it:

EDMUND: Don't take it that way! Please, Mama! I'm trying to help. Because it's bad for you to forget. The right way is to remember. So you'll always be on your guard. You know what's happened before. (*Miserably*) God, Mama, you know I hate to remind you. I'm doing it because it's been so wonderful having you home the way you've been, and it would be terrible—

MARY: (*Strickenly*) Please, dear. I know you mean it for the best, but— (*A defensive uneasiness comes into her voice again.*) I don't understand why you should suddenly say such things. What put it in your mind this morning?

EDMUND: (*Evasively*) Nothing. Just because I feel rotten and blue, I suppose.

MARY: Tell me the truth. Why are you so suspicious all of a sudden?

EDMUND: I'm not!

MARY: Oh, yes you are. I can feel it. Your father and Jamie, too—particularly Jamie.

EDMUND: Now don't start imagining things, Mama.

MARY: (*Her hands fluttering*) It makes it so much harder, living in this atmosphere of constant suspicion, knowing everyone is spying on me, and none of you believe in me or trust me.

EDMUND: That's crazy, Mama. We do trust you. (*Long Day's Journey into Night 45-46*)

She then accuses Edmund of spying on her the night before.

MARY: Oh, I can't bear it, Edmund, when even you--! (*Her hands flutter up to pat her hair in their aimless, distracted way. Suddenly a strange undercurrent of revengefulness comes into her voice.*) It would serve you all right if it was true! (*Long Day's Journey into Night 45-46*)

She calms down but the pattern is set for the rest of the work: cycles of accusations and blaming everyone else for their present plight.

The troublesome relationship between the father and son is played out between James Tyrone, Sr. and his son, Jamie. James Tyrone, Jr. (Jamie) lives on in state of almost eternal adolescence and is O'Neill's clearest example of the son whose existence has been under-acknowledged and under-appreciated and therefore becomes a sort of thorn in the side of the father. Like the sons in *Desire under the Elms*, he chafes under the power of his father yet does not appear to do much to get out from under his influence or escape it. Like Eben in *Desire under the Elms*, his rebellion against his father's authority consists mostly of verbal attacks. At the age of almost 34 and it seems quite obvious that he will never stop living off his parents. In any case, Tyrone's threats about cutting Jamie off and kicking him out are idle as well.

TYRONE: It's not ancient history that you have to come home every summer to live on me.

JAMIE: I earn my board and lodging working on the grounds. It saves you hiring a man.

TYRONE: Bah! You have to be driven to do even that much! (*His anger ebbs into a weary complaint*). I wouldn't give a damn if you ever displayed the slightest sign of gratitude. The only thanks is to have you sneer at me for a dirty miser, sneer at my profession, sneer at every damned thing in the world—except yourself.

JAMIE: (*Wryly*) That's not true Papa. You can't hear me talking to myself, that's all. (*Long Day's Journey into Night 32*)

1.2 Sam Shepard: Family as Trap

Many are the reasons given for Shepard's foray into family dramas and one of the reasons is undoubtedly autobiographical. Though his plays may not be as autobiographical as O'Neill's, there is nevertheless a strong element of his own life in them. As Susan Abbotson writes, Shepard's plays "are not necessarily autobiographical, they just often seem more accessible through the lens of their creator's life and experience (2002: 293). He seems to have added some of his own thoughts to the character of Vince in *Buried Child*. The prodigal son-cum-grandson returns to Illinois, the heartland of the country, in order to see the family, who does not or will not recognize him at first. His girlfriend Shelly tells Dodge:

SHELLY: [...] I mean Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it's a new thing with him. I kind of find it hard to relate to. But he feels it's important. You know. I mean he feels he wants to get to know you all again. After all this time. (*Buried Child 86*)

Personally it also meant a return to America after living in London for about three years in the early 1970s. Prior to arriving in the US, Shepard and his family moved to their

farm in Nova Scotia, his years in London now behind him for good. As Robert Coe expressed in an interview with Shepard published in the *New York Times* at about the same time, “He learned two things in England: how much work it takes to make good theater, and that it might mean something to be an American” (Coe qtd. in Oumano 1986: 100). Shepard was extremely reluctant to move back to New York City. Perhaps all this nostalgia for the west was having a psychological effect on him as well and while staying in Nova Scotia he began work on the first of the “family plays,” his own version of the traditional genre as previously mined by Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, among others. The plays were to be based upon his real family including grandparents, parents, sisters and himself. The initial play was never completed but did serve as the groundwork for the later plays.

When Shepard returned to the United States the optimism of the 1960s along with the so-called “counterculture” challenge had virtually sputtered out. The early 1970s showed that the Great Society was all but unattainable and had been a chimera and 1960s liberalism had basically run its course. But the decade of the 1970s would continue to bear witness to the contestation and critique of the American identity along with an unprecedented interest in exploring and celebrating one’s individual origins and existence outside of national definition. Shepard was another American who seemed to be intent upon returning to his own roots by moving back to California. This would provide him with more contact with his extended family as well. It also permitted him to reengage with the western sensibility. Rather than move south and back to Los Angeles he and his family settled in Marin County, just north of San Francisco. Shortly after beginning to earn a little more money (for an interim he had had to take a job as a construction worker in order to make ends meet, while some of his London plays were being produced in New York) he leased a small ranch in order to get back to country life. Here he lived with his wife O’Lan, son, Jesse and O’Lan’s mother and her husband. Family became as much an experiment as drugs, theater and rock ‘n’ roll had been when he was younger. He wanted to re-establish his relationship with his own parents (now long-separated). His mother now lived on the outskirts of Los Angeles while his father was slowly fading away in an alcoholic haze somewhere in the deserts of New Mexico. So perhaps it is no wonder that the plays written during this period consequently take on an inward turn, expressing a preoccupation with origins, identity and regional roots. When asked why he had returned to California, he answered that “If I’m at home anywhere it’s in the west. I came out here because of my

family and the weather and because there is very little original theatre being produced out here. New York and London are polluted with theatres and everyone goes to the theatre with ready-made assumptions. Out here, there's a possibility of getting something going." (Shepard qtd. in Shewey 1985: 98)

In Shepard's plays, like in those of many American playwrights, the presence of community is a constant together with notions of national attachment and the idea of America. To a great extent, Shepard's plays were a response to the soul-searching that was taking place in America during the decade of the 1970s and can also be read in this light of taking on an inward turn. One cannot forget President Jimmy Carter's famous speech about the "Crisis of Confidence" in America (1979), which unfortunately became known because he insinuated that America was suffering from a state of "malaise." The Vietnam War had ended in a stalemate at best and among many, there was a general feeling the country might be coming apart at the seams with a loss of a common cultural heritage. Shepard had hinted as much in one of his short prose pieces from *Hawk Moon* called "Back in the 1970s" about a group of young people on a trip into debauchery in Canada just over the border from America: "The Mounties were called in but things had gone too far. Everybody fucking and sucking and smoking and shooting and dancing right out in the open. And far off you could hear the sound of America cracking open and crashing into the sea" (1981: 12). As Leslie Wade wisely notes, "[w]hile social critics like Lasch describe the seventies chiefly in negative terms, the atomization of American consciousness allowed for renegotiation, reformation, and a different understanding of identity. American history itself came under rethinking and revision." (Wade 1997: 89)

The sense of being adrift, of not fitting in, of searching for roots is, of course, nothing new in American literature, a literature that, like the nation itself is always engaged in creating a self, creating an identity out of nothing. As Shepard himself said in "Metaphors, Mad Dogs and Old Time Cowboys," a series of interviews with Kenneth Chubb and the editors of *Theatre Quarterly* in 1974: "One of the weird things about being in America now is that *you don't have any connection with the past, with what history means*: so you can be there celebrating the 4th of July, but all you know is that things are exploding in the sky. And then you've got this emotional thing that goes a long way back, which creates a certain kind of chaos, a kind of terror, you don't know what the fuck is going on. *It's really hard to grab the whole out of the experience.*" (rpt. in Marranca 1981: 196; emphasis mine)

Shepard's main subject matters include loss and betrayal. His engagement with America together with "its myths, its failed utopianism, its spiritual attenuation, an engagement which hints at conservative radicalism" challenges America's rhetoric of innocence and "it is tempting to feel that the real loss, the loss which broke the connection with nature, which divided men and women, which separated language from truth, occurred at the moment of the fall" (Biggsby in Roudané 2002: 8). Betrayal is as basic a theme to Shepard as it is to Arthur Miller but his usage of myth, particularly that of the American dream and of lost innocence is more ambiguous than in Miller's work. As his career developed, it became clear that the America he portrays has lost touch with its own visions, "in which myths have become fantasies, family units have collapsed, language is broken, metaphors pulled apart and national myths dislocated" (9). Implicit in Shepard's work in this sense is a sense of lost unity, of the severing of the connection between individuals once established through shared values and beliefs. His characters live discontinuous lives and some connection has been broken between themselves and the past (mythic and historical), their families, their loves and is also seen in the language they speak. America itself seems deracinated and myths have developed into fantasies.

In 1977, seemingly in the midst of a diverse, experimental period, Shepard took a more radical turn in style. *Curse of the Starving Class* premiered in London in 1977 and was considered to be a radical break away from the avant-garde to a more conventional realistic format. Followed by *Buried Child* (1978), which featured a very similar cast of characters that included an American nuclear family on the verge of deterioration and dysfunction, many viewers and critics began to believe that Shepard was finally moving into the mainstream of "serious" American drama and was finally writing in the same vein of family plays in the tradition of O'Neill, Odets, Williams and Miller, among others. In an interview at the time of publication he stated that "*Curse* is the first time I've ever tried to deal with my family. Not really my family, just the-what-do-you-call-it nuclear family. I've always been kind of scared of that. Because if you could really understand that, understand the chemistry and the reactions that are going on there, I've had the feeling that you would understand a lot" (Shepard qtd. in Shewey 1985: 107). Perhaps it was his father's letters that had been nagging at him because throughout the winter of 1976, Sam Sr. had written a few 'Hi Steve' letters to his son. These were letters full of paternal pride and personal misery, asking for money and then apologizing for not writing sooner to express his gratitude. Drinking too much and eating too little he had hurt his elbow, gotten

an infection and couldn't afford to go to a doctor. He had had company for a while. These things must have been going through Shepard's mind as he wrote his family plays.

Curse of the Starving Class, presented on March 2, 1978 and directed by Robert Woodruff at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, drew upon memories and characters from his own family and also dealt with more familiar themes of heredity and the increasing fragmentation and alienation of the American family. But Shepard was not just talking about the family itself, but was pointing towards the culture at large as well. *Buried Child*, the second "family play," premiered at the Magic Theatre on June 27, 1979 and had received unanimously favorable reviews when it premiered in NYC in 1978. Unlike O'Neill, he had never had a play produced on Broadway. Though undoubtedly springing from the turmoil happening in his own life, both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* display a more communal aspect with American society at large and a desire to converse more openly. Moreover, Shepard was not unaware that critics and public alike were anxious for more conventional fare. When asked about his new found fame at one point he answered, and in doing so, admitted that he was conscious of what he was doing, yet did not wish to be compared to playwrights of the past. "If the critics are expecting me to be Eugene O'Neill, they may be disappointed." (Shepard qtd. in Wade 1997: 98)

Jeanette R. Malkin also places Shepard squarely in the continuum of American authors writing about the American family and suggests that the family plays are a return "to the rooted bloodline and representational literary terrain within which the past had traditionally been described in America" (Malkin 1999: 131). There is the staging of the inescapability of a shared past and the need to hold onto whatever shreds of a shared past remain no matter how difficult or terrifying. One of Malkin's more curious notions has to do with what she refers to as the historicity of the situation of the family, which in contemporary America she claims has "arisen out of the decline of the family-from immemorial myth to stereotype steeped in oblivion" (131). Surely, if we think about how many American families are portrayed in films and television sitcoms this definitely rings true.

When talking about Shepard's work the idea of myth inevitable pops up yet some, like Stephen J. Bottoms, believe that the term has been overused by critics in discussing Shepard's work. Indeed he writes that the adjective "mythic" is employed by many critics "as a conveniently vague adjective which suggests a certain profundity without actually requiring the writer to explain what he or she means by it. As a result, it often becomes

confused with 'myth' as in *lie* and 'popular mythology,' as in American folklore" (Bottoms 1998: 7-8). I believe he is off the mark here. It is precisely Shepard's toying with myths, whether they are familiar or not to the viewing public, that makes these plays so enjoyable and thought provoking. However, like with O'Neill, it seems there is no end to the interpreting of these plays. As Peter Sloterdijk suggests, "the classic texts are those that survive their interpretations" and this may also indicate why they are constantly reread and reanalyzed.¹⁶ Perhaps in the future Shepard might come in for the similar criticism that Joel Pfister levels at O'Neill, in which he states that O'Neill used "deep" myths and popular psychology in order to create "depth" for his plays (Pfister 1995). Yet Bottoms admits that Shepard himself uses the term "myth" and that his usage of the word "is consistent with the high modernist notion of seeking to create art that can generate the kind of unifying human experience which in the sceptical twentieth century-social conventions and religion are no longer able to provide" (8) making it virtually impossible to discuss his work without resorting to the concept. This is more to the point.

It was also during his sojourn in London that he had begun to manifest a keen fascination with national heritage and with the codes and myths that had influenced him and made him feel he was American. Prior to writing the family plays Shepard had used many popular myths like music, cinema and had even used Native-American myth and folklore.¹⁷ That Shepard may have tired of using popular American culture to get his ideas across seems to be borne out by a return to the use of more universal myths as well as a more canonical style in his later family plays. As George Stambolian suggests, this "might also give us reason for Shepard's turning to more universal myths, more historic and unrelated to popular American culture" (Stambolian in Marranca 1981: 87). Whereas his early plays were explorations of the self in the performance of various roles including artistic creation, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* reveal an observation of self in relation to a specific sense of place and a sense of personal cultural history. *Curse of the Starving Class* has a bearing on his teenage years growing up in California and *Buried Child* relates to his earliest memories of his grandfather's farm in Illinois and a sense of homecoming. Nevertheless, since these later plays are his most objective in their use of a realistic structure, their complex structure is capable of creating a more transformational shift in consciousness. At the same time, Shepard is all too aware that the old frontier myths of America's youth are no longer a valid expression of our modern anxieties even though they continue to influence our thoughts. As shall be shown, this motif appears in *Curse of the Starving Class*.

If fantastic things in the wilderness and the unknown in general are terrifying for Poe and Hawthorne in 19th century America, then 20th century America and the family become just as terrifying in Shepard's work. Young Goodman Brown goes out into the wilderness and leaves Faith, his wife, behind. Is this not similar to what awaits outside the farmhouses in *Buried Child* and *Curse of the Starving Class*? Though the land speculators in *Curse of the Starving Class* are risible, what is at stake is hardly a laughable matter. While the parents quibble about who is going to sell the homestead and make shady deals with criminal land developers, neither of them seem very concerned about what will happen to Emma and Wesley. One way is to see how the speculators are described by Wesley as "zombies." Once again, though we are meant to laugh, Wesley is deadly serious in his description of these rogue speculators who are going to destroy the homestead and all the traditional values that Wesley still believes in.

In Shepard, there are notions of unwanted children as well. For example, in both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, the sons do not seem to have been particularly wanted. In *Buried Child*, one of the sons has been murdered and the family fails to recognize the grandson when he returns. *Buried Child* also contains oedipal overtones when the only thing known for sure is that Halie is the mother of the murdered child and her husband, Dodge is not the father. As we shall see their son, Tilden, is generally thought to be the father although there are also hints that it might have been Ansel, another brother who is also deceased.

This play also has similarities with O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* as we are confronted again with the idea of a "curse" being passed on down in a family. Unlike the failed fathers of Sam Shepard, whose plays will be explored later, the curse borne upon Eben seems to come from a mixture between the father and the mother. On the one hand, Eben feels an incestuous desire for his stepmother and, on the other hand, an incestuous hatred. A curse also seems to have been inherited from Eben's dead mother, who, though never seen, hovers over the action of the play like a ghost. The entire household seems to have been invaded by an evil influence. The description of the "crushing jealous elms" squeezing the house indicates this quite clearly (*Desire under the Elms* 136). The characters are constantly saying that there is "somethin'" out there, however intangible it might be. The same uncertainty of what is out there beyond the farmhouse pervades Shepard's family plays as well.

A central dramatic action common to all the father-son plays is the son's attempt to extricate himself both physically and psychically from his father or father-surrogate.¹⁸ In

addition Shepard's families are prone to violence. Many critics like Carla McDonough suggest that what Shepard is actually doing in his plays is what she refers to as "Staging Masculinity."¹⁹ John M. Clum suggests that it is "the central situation of American domestic melodrama: a powerful but failed father, an ineffectual but sensual mother; and two brothers in conflict. The central issue of these plays is the inheritance the sons receive from a failed patriarchy." (Clum in Roudané 2002: 173)

In Shepard's work, the mother is often a rather weak figure. Both Wesley and Emma in *Curse of the Starving Class* oppose their ineffectual mother. For example, Emma cuts her mother short when she suggests that she and the Emma and Wesley move to Europe:

EMMA: You mean just you, me and Wes are going to Europe? That sounds awful.

ELLA: Why? What's so awful about that? It could be a vacation.

EMMA: It'd be the same as it is here.

ELLA: No, it wouldn't! We'd be in Europe. A whole new place.

EMMA: But we'd be the same people.

ELLA: What's the matter with you? Why do you say things like that?

EMMA: Well, we would be. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 148)

Curiously in *Curse of the Starving Class*, the names (Ella/Emma, Weston/Wesley) are similar, pointing out that there is no real difference between father and son or mother and daughter. Each person is struggling to make a mark and sometimes it is in competition with, or at the expense of, another. In the American tradition, individuality is a way to break with the sense of community that had dominated and also a way of severing ties with the past.²⁰

Marital disintegration and parental ineffectiveness abound as well. Marital relationships are minimally existent and can at best be described as being characterized by

a hostile undermining. The first few lines of *Buried Child* are more than enough explanation to show the sterile relationship that Dodge and Halie have. This lack of communication will have an effect on the whole family. It appears that in both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* the parents (Weston/Ella and Dodge/Halie) have remained together for so many years not out of mutual love and respect but rather because family bonds are not easily broken and emotional distancing is easier or more comfortable than severing the bonds.²¹

The notion that the characters are in search of something that is lacking also conjures up notions of a “mythic search,” the search for a common chord. Many of his plays deal with the impossibility of reaching a desired regression to a lost world of innocence.²² Using these mythic notions, Shepard made this element funny and got away with it, which is why neither *Curse of the Starving Class* nor *Buried Child* can satisfy by being cathartic. Thomas P. Adler argues that “Shepard displays a peculiar power in his highly symbolic family problem plays of allegorizing the American experience, of deflating the myth of America as the New Eden—whether the proverbial “garden” be an orchard in California or a farm in the mid-west and of showing the new American Adam as the cause of a new fall from grace.” (Adler in Roudané 2002: 112)

In both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, Shepard gives major developments to visual imagery of food to symbolize deep longings for some meaning to life. It is interesting to note that alcohol is counter-productive to the food imagery and, in his opinion, expresses the frustration of the dream of lost paradise. The sharing of food and drink are common activities yet these families do not share one or the other. Food sometimes takes on mythic qualities as well. In *Buried Child*, the corn and the carrots that Tilden brings in from the supposedly barren land are not “just expressions of his longing for the farm’s former fecundity” but that they, too, take on a mythic function, “the dream of a lost paradise” (Whiting 1988: 177). Unlike in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, where alcohol is shared (though somewhat begrudgingly on James’s part), it lowers the character’s inhibitions and does help them to communicate, albeit in the temporary *in vino veritas* that Jamie Tyrone talks about, the same thing does not happen in Shepard’s plays. Like Jamie Tyrone, Tilden desires Dodge’s whiskey bottle yet unlike Jamie he makes no attempt to replace it, even if it is with water. What for Jamie is almost game-like, stealing “Old Gaspard’s” precious libation, for Tilden, when he is able to drink Dodge’s whiskey, it is more of a symbolic triumph over the old patriarch. Too weak to usurp his power he is drawn into the same crutches as his father. It is curious to note that the only communal

drinking that takes place in Shepard's plays is that between Ella and Taylor in *Curse of the Starving Class* and Halie and Father Dewis in *Buried Child*. Unlike in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, alcohol in these plays quenches only the desire to forget and avoid and appears to symbolize a lack of communion. Alcohol also has a tendency to blur the boundary between the real and the dream, which is another theme that Shepard portrays especially in *Curse of the Starving Class*.

In many ways, the family serves as a metonymic symbol for American society at large. This notion places the play clearly within Ihab Hassan's postmodern framework, which classifies postmodern works as metonymies of other subjects outside themselves.²³ Not only are the individual and family subject to crisis and an inherited fate but so is America itself. There is nothing as familiar to the average American as the domestic setting of the family home. Turn on the television at any time in America and somewhere there will be one or more channels broadcasting the vicissitudes or the comedy of errors of various American families, be they single parents with children, or young working professionals living together in big cities. In many ways, the very setting can be read as a metaphor for American society and American culture in general. Americans are given to avoidance and escapism and sometimes an even bleaker picture can be made. For example, these plays imply that American culture is as dysfunctional as the family and the individual. Just as the individual is crippled when he/she attempts total self-creation, American society is crippled because it is rootless, incomplete, transient and always hungry. As can be seen from the characters in Shepard's later plays, some have attempted escape and total self-creation but escape proves impossible.

Notions of heredity repeat themselves like generations throughout American drama. In Act III of *Curse of the Starving Class*, Wesley, the teenage son of Weston, owner of the doomed artichoke farm, wanders out of the house naked in search of some sort of salvation or solace and returns wearing the clothes that his father, while wandering about during a momentary lapse in his drunkenness, had discarded under the misconception that he was going to turn over a new leaf and return and save the family that he had abandoned. Weston is sure that he will be reborn but is in for a rude awakening when confronted by his son dressed in his old clothes:

(WESLEY enters from right dressed in WESTON'S baseball cap, overcoat, and tennis shoes. He stands there. WESTON looks at him. ELLA sleeps.)

WESTON: What're you doin' in those clothes anyway?

WESLEY: I found them.

WESTON: I threw them out! What's got into you? You go take a bath and then put on some old bum's clothes that've been thrown-up in, pissed in, and God knows what all in?

WESLEY: They fit me.

WESTON: I can't fathom you, that's for sure. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 191)

Like Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, who finds his father's discarded clothes outside the family farm, puts them on to find that they are a perfect fit, perhaps American playwrights do a similar thing. When Shepard came across O'Neill's old trappings lying by the wayside so to speak, he had been compelled to put them on and rewrite the old family saga once again. Nevertheless, the same old story will be told in a different guise and one that is more clearly leaning towards tragicomedy and nihilism. In spite of an overwhelming pessimism, O'Neill saw signs of hope whereas Shepard works more in a tragicomic vein that borders on absolute nihilism. O'Neill's families feel a connection to the past, to a tradition but Shepard's families lack this solace as any connection to a known past has been totally severed and the cleavage has grown.

Curse of the Starving Class: Family as Downfall

Curse of the Starving Class is a sort of transitional work for Shepard. In *Theme, Image and the Director*, Laura J. Graham writes about "the degeneration of a society and, finally, a nation in search of its identity, or, conversely, attempting escape" (Graham 1995: 58). The play also contains the concept of dispossession as its dramatic frame of reference. Like in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, the farm is coveted not only by immediate family members but by outsiders as well and the easiest way to lose the farm is to have ineffectual progenitors and patriarchs. In her view, the "curse" that the family labors under is none other than that of "the American family and culture hungry for a satisfactory definition and role in a culture becoming temporary and vacuous." (62)

Regarding the notions of uprootedness and family isolation, like the Tyrones (excepting James Sr. perhaps), Shepard's characters do not relate to society; there is no

outside world. They are incapable of seeing beyond their own mental state and generally react instead of interact. If most would agree that families have a system of beliefs or an operating paradigm, those of Shepard's characters seem to be modes of self-delusion. They view themselves as failures, exploited and isolated and controlled by elements outside themselves and destined to live out a "curse" passed on by former generations. Another reflection of the difficulty of family transition can be seen perhaps best in *Curse of the Starving Class* in the voice of Weston. Weston conceives life or transitions as a series of "jumps" but Weston's "jumps" into alcoholic binges and reclusiveness are far from being a ceremonious role-model or a way of life for young Wesley to follow.

WESTON: I just went off for a little while. Now and then. I couldn't stand it here. I couldn't stand the idea that everything would stay the same. That every morning it would be the same. I kept looking for it out there somewhere. I kept trying to piece it together. The jumps. I couldn't figure out the jumps. From being born, to growing up, to droppin' bombs, to having kids, to hittin' bars, to this. It all turned on me somehow. It all turned around on me. I kept looking for it out there somewhere. And all the time it was right inside this house. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 194)

In some ways, this sounds like pure existentialism or nihilism and there is no hope. But, of course, for Weston the realization comes too late and is too hollow because the house has been foreclosed upon. Unfortunately for young Wesley too, there seems to be no escape either. Shepard acknowledges the power of past generations and current family attitudes and behavior. Weston Tate (Weston as Fate?) has been "poisoned" by his father, and Wesley the son feels himself becoming his father in the same way as his father before. Family members feel biologically and psychologically determined. Each family member lives apart although they are right among each other—they need distance or they feel engulfed.

The structure of *Curse of the Starving Class*, like in many of his previous plays, continues to rely to a large extent on images, like the opening one, of Wesley putting back the door that his father had tried to break down the night before. These images will later expand into symbolic expressions of the destructive and disintegrating family bond. The family is a paradoxical union. Life-giving, nurturing and protective, yet at the same time

destructive, inoperative but above all both necessary and inescapable. Benedict Nightingale has said that the family in Shepard's plays is "less a refuge than a trap that seduces [...]" and its roots and traditions are also its curse, an inexorable handing over of loss from one generation to the next." (Nightingale 1980: 57)²⁴

Another curious element in *Curse of the Starving Class* is Ella. Ella the mother is a figure that Shepard will continue to portray in succeeding family plays. Ella represents the ineffectual, almost decorative mother figure. This mother figure will not differ much in character and behavior though she will carry other names. We see her again as Halie in *Buried Child* and simply as Mom in *True West*. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the first of the family plays Shepard shows more reasons for her to surrender to passivity or at least to a kind of sardonic fatalism. In many respects, she is the counter image of O'Neill's mothers, who though weak and ineffectual do have a presence. Abbie Cabot is far from ineffectual and though Mary Tyrone is weak and maybe not the best of mothers, her presence and behavior galvanize the entire play to such an extent that at the end the men are captive audience to her weird morphine-induced behavior.

The four main characters in *Curse of the Starving Class* are all storytellers and their narratives reveal their individual struggles to submit to, or to resist, the law of the patriarch. Wesley's long narrative at the beginning of the play, which is essentially a story that most critics say shows vestiges of Shepard's old aria techniques, is used to distance himself from his father and give himself a narrative role. In the speech, he alternates between referring to his father as "Dad" or "Man" as if attempting to distance himself even more. But Wesley is only successful at distancing himself to a certain point. The speech also betrays the fact that Wesley has connections to his father that even he cannot relinquish. His ability to know and sense all his father's movements prefigures the way in which, as we have seen, he "becomes" his father after donning his old discarded clothes.

Though they are storytellers, they do not seem to communicate with one another very well. Minimal encounters mean minimal communication. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, there is a sense of violated space at the beginning. Literally and metaphorically the house is wide open after Weston's having torn the door down the night before. The title is ironic as is the refrigerator constantly on stage. This family is not going to starve. They are not poor but they certainly do seem to be useless. Though the play is full of melodramatic clichés (the drunken father fleeced by a con man), Shepard subverts these through "modernist enactment, the comic and bizarre ways in which the drama of defiance and lack of defiance is performed" (Orr 1991: 132). By acting out these conventions, the characters

mock them. Their world is totally different from O'Neill's world in this sense. The family is no anchor for convention, there is no solidarity between the males and the females or between the same sex for that matter.

We have seen in O'Neill, particularly *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the idea of the attribution of blame. Mary Tyrone blames all the ills of the family on James Tyrone's stinginess. James, in turn, blames Mary for having spoiled Jamie, who in turn blames Edmund for his failure to never get out of the house. In Shepard's plays, there is no attribution of blame unless we can blame the refrigerator, which at times seems to have a life of its own and is constantly being talked to and is blamed for all kinds of things that have gone wrong. This is another way that Shepard, using Orr's term "defamiliarises" (1991) the audience with a common object and the effect is rather comic. The fridge can also be looked at as metonymy, as a sort of half-way house between the raw and the cooked.

Like O'Neill, Shepard uses repetition as a brilliant tool. Whereas O'Neill used it to familiarize the audience with his characters and to highlight the poignancy of the action, Shepard uses it to a certain extent to defamiliarise the audience. Earlier in the play, in Act I, Emma, angry with her mother for using her chicken, speaks to the refrigerator. Little does she realize that Taylor, the lawyer, who is undoubtedly having an affair with her mother, is standing behind her. This shows Shepard's use of play as well. Emma realizes that Taylor is right behind her only after saying the word "motherfucker."

EMMA: [...] You don't have to be ashamed. I've had it worse. [...] So don't feel bad. You'll get some company before you know it! You'll get some little eggs tucked into your sides and some yellow margarine tucked into your little drawers and some frozen chicken tucked in you—(pauses) You haven't seen my chicken have you. You motherfucker! (*Curse of the Starving Class* 150)

A similar action is repeated later on at the end of the same Act when Weston makes his first appearance. This time he is the one who yells at the fridge unaware that Wesley is behind him. He then begins to talk to the sick lamb that Wesley has brought into the kitchen in the hopes of curing its illness. Wesley listens to his father rant and rave as he

speaks to the lamb. Weston is totally confused because he has come into the house only to find the lamb inside.

WESTON: What in hell are you doin' in here? (*He looks around the space to himself*). Is this the inside or the outside? This is inside, right. This is the inside of the house. Even with the door out it's still the inside. (*To lamb*) So what the hell are you doing if this is the inside? (*Curse of the Starving Class* 156)

Weston does not know where he is and wants the lamb to put him out of his confusion. As Orr explains it, “[t]he lamb makes for total disrecognition” (Orr 1991: 136). In this sense, the family home, like the family itself, has become unfamiliar. Weston, the patriarch, returns almost in the guise of a beggar. The stage directions describe him in this way: “He’s a very big man, middle-aged, wearing a dark overcoat which looks like it’s been slept in, a blue baseball cap, baggy pants, and tennis shoes. He’s unshaven and slightly drunk” (*Curse of the Starving Class* 156). To make matters even worse, he comes home as a nourisher and a provider yet carries only a bag full of artichokes. Shepard seems to be ironising the ritual of the father not bringing home the bacon but useless artichokes. Shepard domesticates the convention of impotence. The breadwinner returns to his own home, does not recognize it at all and has really no impact on what is going on there anyway. In this sense, Shepard undermines the coexistence of entrance and presence which is so crucial for naturalist drama. Weston’s entrance is comic-like and pathetic.

In this play, we can also see Shepard’s interest in the frontier: how is the culture and the individual to survive in an age where we have not only lost our connection with the land but where machines have become almost myth-like? This notion may help explain Wesley’s attitude to the Frontier in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Among the various “curses” in the play is the “curse” of the “zombie invasion” and the loss of the boundary or the frontier. Just as one of the main motifs in O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms* is a desire for land, for ownership, much the same happens to the Tate family and their farm. It seems that everybody desires the avocado farm. Unlike the Cabots, however, it is a foregone conclusion that the farm is going to be lost and taken over by a sinister cartoon-like character named Taylor. Their desires are all coming up curses.

WESLEY: So it means more than losing a house. It means losing a country.

EMMA: You make it sound like an invasion.

WESLEY: It is. It's a zombie invasion. Taylor is the head zombie. He's the scout for the other zombies. He's only a sign that more zombies are on the way. They'll be filing through the door pretty soon.

EMMA: Once you get it built.

WESLEY: There'll be bulldozers crashing through the orchard. There'll be steel balls crashing through the walls. There'll be foremen with their sleeves rolled up and blueprints under their arms. There'll be steel girders spanning acres of land. Cement pilings. Prefab walls. Zombie architecture, owned by invisible zombies, built by zombies for the use and convenience of all other zombies. A zombie city! Right here! Right where we're living now. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 163)

Wesley's "zombie invasion" is an investment in the future for Taylor but for Wesley it is the end of the past and the lost frontier and he dreamily suggests moving to Alaska.

WESLEY: I'm not staying here forever.

EMMA: Where are you going?

WESLEY: I don't know. Alaska, maybe.

EMMA: Alaska?

WESLEY: Sure, why not?

EMMA: What's in Alaska?

WESLEY: The frontier.

EMMA: Are you crazy? It's all frozen and full of rapers.

WESLEY: It's full of possibilities. It's undiscovered.

EMMA: Who wants to discover a bunch of ice? (*Curse of the Starving Class* 163)

It is at precisely this point that their father Weston appears totally drunk and bedraggled. With the family in the process of losing the farm, it would seem that Wesley's notions of the frontier border more on pipe dreams than any shred of reality. "This notion of the frontier 'full of possibilities,' though it is more mythic and poetic than historical, functions in Shepard's play as a powerful image of the unconstrained life" (Mottram 1984: 136). Therefore, the possibility of escape is always present, although escape is a chimera and is proven to be impossible over and over again. Perhaps for Shepard the idea of the frontier provides a metaphor for the contradiction of the civilized and the savage that exists on the personal level within the individual and, on the social level, within the family and the nation, as he shows in *True West*, whose study of is out of the scope of this dissertation.

As a kind of metonymy, society as represented by the family seeks to kill the self of the individual in order to survive as a unit. The inheritance of history and culture must continue through the individual members of that society, which means the inversion of the notion of society and family as support systems. In an attempt to preserve the self, the individual seeks to escape society, community and family. In this sense, the family plays portray the impossibility of both total self-creation and of synthesis, of wholeness. Integration in the family and by extension into society, and by extension the culture, is possible only through the displacement of another family member and subsequent absorption into the family and culture. Or so explains Sheila Graham, who goes on to posit, perhaps a bit confusingly, that this duality of the self and society reflects a specifically American schizophrenia with such post-structural bipolarities as self vs. other, passion vs. reason, private vs. collective, which extrapolates into the basic notion that any attempt at reconciliation or integration between individual and family results in metamorphosis: "a transformation based on cathexis rather than catharsis" (Graham 1995: 19). The self is lost

as it is absorbed by the psychological and biological influences it sought to escape and later to integrate.

This can be clearly seen in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Wesley is trying to explain to this mother that the farm is going to be reposed and she blames it on the “curse.”

ELLA: Do you know what this is? It's a curse. I can feel it. It's invisible but it's there. It comes onto us like nighttime. Every day I can feel it. Every day I can see it coming. And it always comes. Repeats itself. It comes even when you do everything to stop it from coming. Even when you try to change it. And it goes back. Deep. It goes back and back to tiny little cells and genes. To atoms. To tiny little swimming things making up their minds without us. Plotting in the womb. Before that even. In the air. We're surrounded with it. It's bigger than government even. It goes forward too. We spread it. We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 173-74)

Doris Auerbach has her own take on the myth of the west but with a more feminist angle: “Shepard has used as his paradigm for the family crisis the overwhelming cultural myth of the American west” (Auerbach 1988: 53). Though her comments refer basically to *True West*, they are still apropos for *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*. The psychic split and crisis in masculinity that so interests Shepard is the central situation of domestic melodrama: a powerful but failed father: an ineffectual but sensual mother; two brothers in conflict. The sons find themselves compelled to connect with ideals of masculinity for which there are no real role models and with myths of the American land that are no longer relevant. An inkling of this notion can be seen towards the end of *Curse of the Starving Class* when Wesley, dressed in Weston's dirty clothes, finds himself reverting to a past he doesn't understand while Emma makes her futile escape:

WESLEY: How come I'm going backwards?

EMMA: (*moving in toward WESLEY*) Because you don't look ahead. That's why. You don't see the writing on the wall. You gotta learn to read these things, Wes. It's deadly otherwise. You can't believe people when they look you in the eyes. You gotta' look

behind them. See what they're standing in front of. What they're hiding. Everybody's hiding, Wes. Everybody. Nobody looks like what they are. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 197)

Like O'Neill, Shepard is also concerned with the struggle between father and son. The struggle between fathers and sons is the "conflict which dominates a major part of Shepard's work" (Taav 2000: 1). What is clear is that there does exist a central dramatic action common to all the father-son plays. Each work focuses upon the son's attempt to extricate himself both physically and psycho-spiritually from his father or father-surrogate. Taav hits upon a few rather ingenious notions. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, for example, he suggests that Weston and Wesley are antagonistic toward each other but never truly adversaries. In their own confused and idiosyncratic ways, they are allies linked to one another by blood, environment, and mutual concern. Ella is the one who is more antagonistic.²⁵

While Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class* is mostly absent physically, Dodge in *Buried Child* is absent psychologically. As his name suggests, his main goal in life is avoidance and escaping reality. Of course, if what seems to have transpired on the farm is true (incest and infanticide), then perhaps he has reason, if not justification, for doing so. He drinks and watches television in order not to have to communicate with his wife, who he has not slept with for a number of years. He pretends that the past does not exist and seems to cower in an eternal present. Thomas Nash suggests that like T. S. Eliot's Gerontion, Dodge awaits death as a release from the boredom of a hollow life. In this sense, Dodge, like Weston, is an ineffectual patriarch and much weaker than Ephraim Cabot or James Tyrone.²⁶

The characters do not seem to act out of any rational reasoning, at least not which is keen to the sense of the audience. The theme of heredity seems to suggest that there is an inscrutable fate and any intention is severed from human action. At times, it seems as if the randomness of chance is a more reliable tool of interpretation than causality. Fate, like the hostile world existing beyond the stage in both of Shepard's plays, is still an external force as a sense of human mastery is lost. Otherwise, how can we explain Wesley's seeming transformation into Weston after putting his father's old clothes on? It is intriguing to see how he attempts to explain why he did so to his sister, Emma.

WESLEY: (*half to himself*) I tried taking a hot bath. Hot as I could stand it. Then freezing cold. Then walking around naked. But it didn't work. Nothing happened. *I was waiting for something to happen.* I went outside. It was freezing cold out there and I looked for something to put over me. I started digging around in the garbage and I found his clothes. [...] I had the lamb's blood dripping down my arms. I thought it was me for a second. I thought it was me bleeding.

EMMA: You're disgusting. You're even more disgusting than him. And that's pretty disgusting. [...]

WESLEY: I started putting all his clothes on. His baseball cap, his tennis shoes, his overcoat. *And every time I put one thing on it seemed like a part of him was growing on me. I could feel him taking over me.*[...]

WESLEY: I could feel myself retreating. *I could feel him coming in and me going out.* Just like the change of the guards.

EMMA: Well, don't eat your heart out about it. You did the best you could.

WESLEY: *I didn't do a thing.*

EMMA: That's just what I mean.

WESLEY: I just grew up here. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 195-96; emphasis mine.)

Wesley is at a loss to explain what has compelled him to behave as he has. Heredity as fate seems to have literally taken him over and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Buried Child: Family as Ineluctable

In spite of the oblique hints at resurrection at the end, *Buried Child* is an even bleaker work than *Curse of the Starving Class*. *Curse of the Starving Class* achieves a certain narrative liberation at the end when Ella and Wesley are at least able to sustain a dialogue:

“the conclusion of *Buried Child* shows distrust of narrative or of language that contradicts the optimism of the ‘buried child’ resurrection from the backyard and the fertility that surrounds such a resurrection” (Geis 1993: 78). One key to this is that, although the characters appear on stage, they are not well formed and appear to practically not exist. Dodge describes himself as “an invisible man,” Tilden is described as being “profoundly burned out and displaced.” Ansel is indeed “dead,” Vince is not recognized when he arrives and then vanishes for most of the play, Bradley does not speak much and seems devoid of any type of humanity and even Halie, when she speaks, does so much of the time unseen and off stage. In a play so characterized by nonpresence, one would think that dialogue and narrative would take over. It soon becomes clear that the possibilities for narrative to take on that task are consistently thwarted and seemingly vanish as well so that language becomes part of this family’s emptiness or ex-centricity.

It has been noted many times that there is no suitable closure to the play, no tidying up of the secret harbored by this family. The play’s refusal to resolve or confront these implications suggests that its narrative does not fit into the Aristotelian paradigm of exposure, revelation and discovery of the oedipal narrative. To confound the dénouement even more is the fact that the play ends with Halie’s offstage words to Dodge, who she does not realize is dead. Her monologue (?) is delivered with the disturbing counterpoint of the visual action of Tilden climbing the stairs and carrying the corpse of the “buried child” up to her room.

HALIE’S VOICE: Good hard rain. Takes everything straight down deep to the roots. The rest takes care of itself. You can’t force a thing to grow: You can’t interfere with it. It’s all hidden. It’s all unseen. You just gotta wait til it pops up out of the ground. Tiny little shoot. Tiny little white shoot. All hairy and fragile. Strong though. Strong enough to break the earth even. It’s a miracle, Dodge. I’ve never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it’s the sun. Maybe that’s it. Maybe it’s the sun. (*Buried Child* 132)

The irony and the ambiguity of this statement are clear, particularly about the relationship between sun and son. If Halie says that the source of such fertility is the sun, there is always the doubt that what has been fertilizing the long barren soil is the “son” that Tilden has just unearthed and who may or may not be his child. In this sense, Halie’s

discourse is another displaced narrative because the visual action overshadows the spoken text. Geis believes that the “decision to make the unearthing of the buried child into a moment that emphasizes the visual and the physical over the spoken text adds a final twist to the play’s notion of the absent or displaced oedipal narrative, for the very ‘sign’ for that narrative has lost its narrative status and become a reified, nonnarrative entity” (Geis 1993: 81). In this sense, the corpse of the buried child can be considered as the “buried” oedipal narrative, the missing story as it were, which has also been absent throughout the play. If the oedipal narrative is displaced, one result is that the subject embodied in theatrical characters also faces dislocation.

Buried Child is a play grounded in the nuclear family, though this is a family ravaged by amnesia and forgetting. In many ways, Shepard’s return to realism and culturally enforced linearity have as much to do with an attempt at paying attention to structures that have traditionally communicated cultural meaning as to what he might have wanted to say about the state of the contemporary American family. Vince’s girlfriend, Shelly sums it up rather nicely when she does not find that Vince’s grandparents’ homestead has anything to do with the (pop)mythical stereotypes. As can be seen, we are a long way from O’Neill’s more mimetic stagecraft. At the beginning of Act II, she and Vince arrive and upon seeing the farmhouse she immediately starts laughing.

VINCE: This is it.

SHELLY: This is the house?

VINCE: This is the house.

SHELLY: I don’t believe it!

VINCE: How come?

SHELLY: It’s like a Norman Rockwell picture or something.

VINCE: What’s a matter with that? It’s American. (*Buried Child* 83)

One of the most curious aspects of *Buried Child* is the unravelling of the secret to the family's curse. As readers or audience we are likely to attempt to attach meaning wherever we may find it. Yet the play repeatedly warns that whatever signification we might assign to incidents taking place in the play, is not the result of decoding some fixed set of meanings or symbols. The play is so ambiguous because it contains a number of directly contradictory possibilities as to the underlying significance of the baby's death and ultimate disinterment. "*Buried Child*, more so than any other Shepard play, carries with it the suggestion of various overtones borrowed from myth: broadly speaking, the play can be seen to be quoting and manipulating two familiar but incompatible myth schemes, which are laid over the basic narrative presence in a kind of unresolved double exposure." (Bottoms 1998: 175)

If the play's mythic structure has any success, it can perhaps be seen in the uncanny way in which it interweaves a range of mythic resonances in such a manner that will not allow them to be either separated or reconciled. No conclusion is satisfactory. Where did the crops come from? And the corpse? Was it the rain? Was it the sun? Who is the father of the child? Many things are hinted at yet perhaps the only sure thing is that the mysteries and contradictions of *Buried Child* coalesce into an unnerving (if heavily ironic) sense of doom. Together with *Curse of the Starving Class* this play does capture something of the ancient spirit of tragedy for the postmodern world by bombarding its audience with uncertainties. Perhaps one of the most uncertain and disarming uncertainties is the rain, which is constantly falling but constantly referred to in different forms. Is it the source of new life in the fields at the end? Is it a symbol of the catastrophe that plagues this mid-west family or is it just plain old rain?²⁷

Though O'Neill was more actively involved in religious and biblical references, the idea of resurrection is clearly present in *Buried Child*. Father Dewis is, of course, a character who exists as a sort of mockery of religion in the play. He seems to be very far removed from any sort of Christian morality. There are many indications that he and Halie are lovers. When asked to intervene in the family quarrel in Act II, he prefers to remove himself from the situation and leave the family to fend for themselves.

HALIE: (to DEWIS) Father, why are you just standing around here when everything's falling apart? Can't you rectify this situation?

DEWIS: I'm just a guest here, Halie. I don't know what my position is exactly. This is outside my parish anyway. (*Buried Child* 126)

Shepard had also mocked the Christian tradition in *Curse of the Starving Class* when Wesley kills the lamb as a sort of sacrifice but the sacrifice backfires. It is clear that sacrifice is too late for the Tate family. On the one hand, they do not need the food as for the first time in ages; the refrigerator is stuffed with food. And, on the other hand, the carcass of the lamb is discarded and where there was once a sick lamb who was on the mend there is now only a carcass, which is mocked at the end of the play by Emerson and Slater who have come to kill Weston. Just before their arrival, Weston's Packard has been blown up and it seems obvious that Emma has been killed in the blast.

EMERSON: [...] Oh, and if you see your old man, you might pass on the info. We hate to keep repeating ourselves. The first time is great, but after that it gets pretty boring.

SLATER: (*to WESLEY*) Don't forget to give that lamb some milk. He looks pretty bad off. (*They both laugh loudly, then exit. ELLA is facing downstage now, staring at the lamb carcass in the pen. WESLEY has had his back to her upstage. He looks out. Pause.*) (*Curse of the Starving Class* 199)

Not only has the slaughter of the lamb proved ineffectual, but it leads Ella to remember the story of the eagle and the cat attempting to kill each other.

ELLA: Something just went right through me. Just from looking at this lamb.

WESLEY: What?

ELLA: That story your father used to tell about the eagle. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 199)

To "dig-up" any sort of meaning in *Buried Child* means looking into the Modernism-Postmodernism debate and the role of drama in this process. Perhaps it might

not be amiss to once again emphasize what most critics would say is a given in national literatures and the way a country or people encode their past. This may be summed up by the notion that vestiges of the past are always to be found in a nation's literature and theater. It is just that ways of inscribing that past differ. What may be a common chord for some might not be for somebody else.

What does this mean? The Oedipus complex in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* in conception and depiction are informed by a classically and literarily oriented perspective. Shepard, on the other hand, uses the oedipal impulse as a primitivist and mythic imagist. In his early plays, the son finds himself at odds with the father, but is able to extricate himself, if only temporarily. Later on, the son must come face to face with the father and this presents the final and most challenging trial. The son realizes that the two of them cannot exist simultaneously. Socialization or reconciliation brings depersonalization and only one can survive. The son must destroy the father, but how?

One of the most interesting aspects of *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* is their ambiguity. Wesley's behavior on putting on his father's clothes and adapting his personality and Vince's return to his grandfather's farm to usurp it from the hands of his father, uncle and grandfather can hardly be put down to an "entirely deliberate" action or displacement. Neither Wesley nor Vince seems to be conscious or aware of why they are doing what they do and seem compelled to do so by forces beyond their control. Both seem to act more out of instinct than on any premeditation or are we to see that this also a part of the fate of heredity? Nevertheless once they have "returned" in Wesley's case or "come home" in Vince's, they begin to act with violence. Wesley butchers the lamb and Vince gets back into the house by cutting a hole through the screen door. Surely there are forces at work here beyond the ken of rationale and myth. We are filled with awe and perhaps even terror at this fantastic turn of events.

Another indication of the inevitability of coming home and resorting to violence is shown with Vince's return after leaving the house supposedly to get a bottle for Dodge but ostensibly to think about fleeing or returning. Earlier in Act III, Halie has come home after a sojourn of sorts (with sexual overtones) with the Protestant minister Father Dewis only to find the house in total disarray. Dodge is lying on the floor, Bradley is sprawled on the couch without his wooden leg, Tilden cannot be found and Shelly is calmly drinking a cup of bouillon. In the interim, Dodge begins to tell Shelly (and the audience) the horrible family secret of incest and infanticide. Halie has tried to prevent him from doing so but to

no avail, Bradley lies helpless on the floor because Shelly is holding his wooden leg away from him. Halie begins to rail about how useless the men in the family are, conjuring up a story that only the dead son, Ansel would have been able to prevent Dodge from confessing:

HALIE: (to BRADLEY) 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? (*Buried Child* 124)

It is at precisely this point where Vince returns to the house roaring drunk, singing the Marine's Hymn, smashing empty liquor bottles and threatening "to blow ya' from here to Kingdom come!" (*Buried Child* 125)

Dodge immediately recognizes him and so does Halie. Shelly is astonished that they should suddenly finally recognize him. His transformation into the family heir is all but complete and will become so when Dodge wills him most of the farm. The return is violent. The father must be overthrown yet how conscious is Vince of what he is doing? In the first place, he is totally inebriated and seems to be extolling a litany of why he has come back to take over. He tells Shelly: "I've gotta carry on the line. I've gotta see to it that things keep rolling" (*Buried Child* 130). The only explanation given for his behavior is his speech, a kind of epiphany (if we may call it that) that he has while driving away and trying to flee. He explains that while driving he had a good look at his reflection:

VINCE: (*pause, delivers speech front*) [...] 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. *Like a mummy's face.* I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield, I watched him breathe as though he was frozen in time. 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 into 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 the 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. (*Buried Child* 130; emphasis mine)

Buried Child provides a dark vision of agrarian America that has nothing to do with Grant Wood or Norman Rockwell. Perhaps it is because of the supernatural or fantastic elements displayed in these works. Neither Wood nor Rockwell could even have conceived of such a thing. John Clum suggests that when Shelly is brought into a once bucolic (though tainted by a popular American mythology of Norman Rockwell, and turkey dinners) what she is really brought into is a primal American tragedy filled with violence. When pondering why violence abounds, he says that “the violent destruction of domestic space is the visual counterpart of the damage done to basic familial relationships. The men can only bring the violence and anarchy of their ideal wide open spaces inside, a corollary to the barroom brawls of the classic Western. The Western fantasy is not only fiction: it represents a masculine drive that is Shepard’s *idée fixe*” (Clum in Roudané 2002: 187). What Shepard achieves is more like a portrait of myth, of the journey tracing one’s way home, and, in the process of the odyssey, finding one’s port of call in that small plot of territory known as the family house. The destination cannot be reached, however, till all the buried secrets are uprooted.

Myth is at times terrifying and no wonder that Shepard is attracted to the use of it in this play. If Tilden is the father of the child, as Dodge suggests, then he and his mother committed incest. In this sense, his breakdown may then be a metaphor for his punishment, a pulling out of the eyes of his psyche. Since Dodge is responsible for the child’s death, then he has killed his grandson, his stepson and by extension his son and his wife. Of course, Shepard’s narrative is conceived on a mythic plane as evidenced in the mystery surrounding the events in the play and in the lack of specific detail and plausible sequences.

Both Thomas Nash and Rick E. Amidon cite Northrop Frye when talking about the chain of events leading up to the uncovering of the family secret in *Buried Child*. Frye’s concept of the ironic mode “begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it” (Frye qtd. in Amidon 1988: 67). Amidon describes Vince as a dying god at the beginning since 6 years previously he had abandoned his family but has now reappeared and the family must decide when confronting this whether to worship him

or castigate him. Shelly is astounded that they do not remember or recognize him though Tilden does seem to have some sort of a recollection.

SHELLY: (to TILDEN) Are you Vince's' father?

TILDEN: (to SHELLY) Vince?

SHELLY: (*pointing to VINCE*) This is supposed to be your son! Is he your son? Do you recognize him? I'm just along for the ride here. I thought everybody knew each other!

(*TILDEN stares at VINCE. DODGE wraps himself up in the blanket and sits on sofa staring at the floor*) (*Buried Child 92*)

But a few moments later when they really look at each other the following conversation transpires:

TILDEN: I thought I recognized him. I thought I recognized something about him.

SHELLY: You did?

TILDEN: *I thought I saw a face inside his face.*

SHELLY: Well, it was probably that you saw what he used to look like. You haven't seen him for six years.

TILDEN: I haven't?

SHELLY: That's what he says. (*Buried Child 100; emphasis mine*)

What is clear is that Dodge has not decided if it is in his best interest to recognize Vince. Tilden, on the other hand, seems to honestly not recognize him but then again,

throughout the play, Tilden does not seem to be functioning with his full mental capacities and seems to have lapses of memory.

In this sense, Dodge can be compared to a dying god. When Vince returns after his attempted escape looking more than slightly like Dodge, he enters the house violently and suddenly everyone remembers him. After Dodge wills the farm to him, Vince takes up the exact place and position as Dodge, therefore in effect replacing him and becoming another dying god. At the end of the play, when Tilden digs up the corpse of the child shrouded in rags and mud as Frye suggests, “sacrificial rituals and dying gods” have appeared again (Frye qtd. in Amidon 1988: 70). Realism has indeed become myth.

Amidon is also convinced that Tilden is definitely the father of the buried child and he describes Tilden’s homecoming, which had preceded Vince’s as oedipal. Tilden is described as being “profoundly burnt out and displaced” (*Buried Child* 69). His reasons for coming back home are obscure and mysterious yet one of the obvious reasons seems to be the desire to be near his mother. This is what is insinuated in the conversation between Dodge and Tilden in Act I.

DODGE: You’re a grown man. You shouldn’t be needing your parents at your age. It’s unnatural. There’s nothing we can do for you now anyway [...] I never went back to my parents. Never. Never even had the urge. I was independent. Always independent. Always found a way. (*Buried Child* 78)

The “urge” Dodge refers to means Tilden’s sexual “urge” or attraction to his mother Halie, which becomes obvious later on as most of the hints regarding incest point to Halie and Tilden.

When Vince returns in a drunken stupor, he claims to be a murderer which would put him on equal terms with Dodge. If he is to symbolically transform into Dodge, then he must carry the burden of murdering the child with him for the rest of his life, suggesting that one cannot just inherit the physical qualities but one must also be willing to adopt the emotional and spiritual ghost as well. Not only does Vince inherit Dodge’s land, but he also assuages Dodge in his tyrannical and introverted father-figure, so much so that Halie, like Ella in *Curse of the Starving Class*, mistakes him for her husband. Ultimately Vince carries on all of the animosity which Dodge had felt towards his own children. Therefore,

Dodge undergoes three deaths throughout the play. The first is symbolized by Tilden burying him in corn husks. After symbolically burying Dodge in the corn husks, Tilden takes a long swig from Dodge's bottle, symbolizing a feeble attempt at usurping his power. This can also be coupled with the idea that Tilden may have had incest with Halie, and therefore complete the Oedipus myth. "It is at this point in the play when Dodge is exhausted of what spiritual virility he may have had left and when Tilden pays what little respects he is capable of paying to the cuckold who is his father" (Amidon 88: 68). Dodge's second burial takes place when Bradley drops Shelly's rabbit-fur coat over him as he sleeps at the end of Act II. What cannot be denied is that Dodge is well aware that his sons are lurking in the background constantly trying to take over his turf. When Vince suggests he lay down he refuses:

DODGE: I don't wanna lay down for a while! Every time I lay down something happens! (*whips off his cap, points at his head*) Look what happens! That's what happens! (*pulls his cap back on*) You go lie down and see what happens to you! See how you like it! They'll steal your bottle! They'll cut your hair! They'll murder your children! That's what'll happen. (*Buried Child* 93)

To a certain extent this echoes O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, which shows a patriarch all too aware of the interest his sons might have in getting rid of him. Of course, as we have already seen Ephraim is a much stronger patriarch and much better equipped physically and psychologically to keeping his sons away from what is his.

Notes:

² Schvey goes as far as to suggest that "the remarkable parallels which exist between the family plays of O'Neill and Shepard are so strong as to suggest the possibility of direct influence." (1991: 59)

³ Abbot also states that "[a] frequently recurring aspect of the father-son relationship is the father's notion that his offspring is a pale, weak version of himself." (1994: 195)

⁴ As Uma Chauduri suggests "[o]ne family that stands behind all the troubled families of American drama are the Tyrones of *Long Day's Journey into Night*. They survive in *Buried Child* not only as a clamor of disappointment, resentment, and betrayal but also in one specific image: the estranged mother hovering in an upstairs space, lost in her own reality." (1995: 109)

⁵ Most bibliographical information is culled from *O'Neill* (1962) and *O'Neill: Life with Monte Cristo* (2000) by Arthur and Barbara Gelb as well as Louis Scheaffer's *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (1968) and *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (1973).

⁶ O'Neill's lifelong obsession with Strindberg is well-documented. Though some of his attempts at imitating him were paltrier in comparison to Strindberg himself, his attempts to implement unsentimental "truth" were well ahead of most of his contemporaries.

⁷ See Travis Bogard's *Contour in Time* (1972): 115-30.

⁸ The plot of *Desire under the Elms* shows the influence of the old Greek myths and the influence of an Apollonian order represented by the Cabot family and a Dionysian order represented by Abbie Putnam, which will clash and end in destruction where everyone seems to be possessed by a desire to own something and to belong to someone. The play also shows the influence of Freud on O'Neill, as shown in the quasi-incestuous and oedipal relationship between Eben Cabot, and his step-mother, Abbie Putnam. For a detailed analysis of Freudian influences on O'Neill's drama, see, for instance, Bogard (1972) Brown (1991) and Cotsell (2005).

⁹ See the previous endnote.

¹⁰ Edwin Engel suggests that, while obviously being an autobiographical play, O'Neill's use of the oedipal myth is ironic because Eben does not covet his real mother, who is deceased. By "freeing himself from his Oedipus conflict [...] [he] [...] transferred his love to his step-mother." (Engel 1993: 244)

¹¹ Engel also notes that O'Neill was also influenced by the theories of Jung because "Eben Cabot's repeated plaintive appeal to his Maw is the earliest indication that O'Neill was to enlist the services of the Mother in the struggle against the father and against God." He cites Jung's theory of the mother as being "the most immediate primordial image" The mother is "an archetypal experienced: she is known by the more or less unconscious child not as a definite, individual feminine personality, but as the mother, an archetype loaded with significant possibilities." Marrying a woman who resembles the mother is one of the "signs to Jung of the presence of a universal wish to enter the mother's womb a second time and be born again." (Engel 1993: 244)

¹² If the play is read in this autobiographical light, it shows O'Neill once again under the influence of Strindberg with a fixation on the mother figure that ends in a type of morbid reconciliation. Manheim is not the only critic to point out that Abbie's seduction of Eben is both sexual and maternal. Also, he is far from enthusiastic about the play being one of O'Neill's major works because, in his opinion, the play runs out of dramatic action and narrative after the seduction scene and the rest of the play seems contrived. He agrees with Cohn and others that Ephraim is the only true heroic figure in the play. The "rhythm of kinship" in this play is scanty for this is a play where forgiveness and reconciliation (other than that between Eben and Abbie) are denied (Manheim 1982). Ephraim worships a God who is more concerned with hardness, is more a god of withdrawal rather than one of kinship. It would seem that at this stage of his career, O'Neill only saw two possibilities for isolation and alienation: withdrawal or suicide.

¹³ For a comparative study between Herman Melville and Eugene O'Neill, see, among others, Marc Maufort (1990).

¹⁴ Berlin suggests that if O'Neill turned to *Hamlet* in order to portray Eben Cabot, a man with oedipal feelings, who needs to avenge the death of his mother, then he resorted to *King Lear* for the character of Ephraim. The similarities are quite striking. Both plays are dramatizations of the relationships between parents and children. The notion of the tyrannical patriarch who has to put up with the curse of the "thankless child," which is how James Tyrone refers to Jamie at one point in

Long Day's Journey into Night, is perhaps universal as well since it can be seen in so many plays. Berlin suggests that "this is not an unusual feeling for a father [...]. It is precisely because such an attitude is commonplace, pointing to family situations not significantly altered by time or place, that *King Lear* and *Long Day's Journey* and *Hamlet* and *Desire under the Elms* seem so representative, touching the experiences of all of us." (1993: 68)

¹⁵ See <http://www.americanrepertorytheater.org/inside/articles/journeying-past> (Accessed November 2, 2012).

¹⁶ "The classic texts are those that survive their interpretations. The more they are dissected the more elusive they seem. The more persistently they are wooed by the intellect, the more icily they stare past their transcendental suitors. And the deeper the forces of hermeneutical interpretive illumination and philological reconstruction penetrate the fabric woven by the classical text, the more adamantly that text resists the impact of interpretation." See Peter Sloterdijk's *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism* (1989: 3).

¹⁷ Perhaps he has also done so in these family plays or so thinks Luther S. Luedtke (1989), who describes how Shepard might have used Native-American ritual in these plays. He believes that Shepard consciously used it particularly in *A Lie of the Mind*. Those who are familiar with the play will recall that it ends on a note of reconciliation, which up until that point had been a rarity in Shepard's work. There is an image of fire in the snow, which might symbolize hope and reconciliation as old hatreds are purged and old memorabilia are burned. Dodge wills a similar action at the end of *Buried Child* when he states that all of his old tools and equipment "be pushed into a gigantic heap and set ablaze in the very center of my fields. When the blaze is at its highest, preferably on a cold, windless night, my body is to be pitched into the middle of it and burned till nothing remains but ash" (*Buried Child* 129). Luedtke likens the image to a *Busk*, a Creek Indian ritual which was an occasion of amnesty, forgiveness and absolution of crime, injury and hatred, a season, a change of mind and implies a connection between the burning of the past and the renewal of the earth. There are also echoes of this same ritual in *The Holy Ghostly*. Throughout his career, Shepard has had a keen interest in Native American history and rituals. He used Hopi rituals in *Operation Sidewinder* and in his film *Silent Tongue*, which he wrote and directed in 1993.

¹⁸ Prior to his realist plays, Shepard's sons had been more successful in plays like *The Rock Garden*, *The Holy Ghostly* and *The Tooth of Crime* (though somewhat tragically here as many have seen Hoss as a classic tragic figure). In these plays, the "sons" succeed in breaking free via a competition of some sort. In both *The Rock Garden* and *The Tooth of Crime* the son is more dexterous at language and is able to disarm the "father" figure with dazzling displays of linguistic verbosity. In *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, on the other hand, the sons fail at attempts at autonomy and instead fall prey to the same hereditary curses which befall their progenitors.

¹⁹ See McDonough's *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (1997).

²⁰ The Tate family frequently violates traditional or psychological boundaries—marital, parental, sibling, personal or the family group as distinct from the outside world. Generally speaking the greater the family boundary of ambiguity, the greater the individual and family dysfunction. This is perhaps better illustrated in *Buried Child*, where the parameters are clearer. This is a family that is so hell bent on consuming itself that it will go as far as resort to incest and infanticide. In his late 40s, Tilden has come back home after a shattering experience that he has had in New Mexico. It is not clear why but there is a feeling that perhaps he was incapable of handling a situation outside that of his immediate family. He tried to break the boundary of their influence, failed and came back home almost like a dog with its tail between its legs. The fact that he came back shows that his break from the past (his family) proved impossible. Nevertheless a family bond of sorts is still in place. Although Dodge says it is unnatural for Tilden to be back, he allows him to stay. Bradley

also lives at home, an invalid unable to fend for himself outside the house and intent on taking over Dodge's place albeit only in symbolic ways. Violence seems to be one of the few things that keep the family together.

²¹ Lynda Hart talks extensively about Shepard and realism but it is appropriate to point out at this juncture that Shepard's so-called "family plays" or quartet, including *True West* and *A Lie of the Mind*, have in common with the genre (with certain modification, of course) a linear construction, a wedding of language and explicit meaning, an emphasis on the past as a powerful determinant on the present, and a continuity of action, all ingredients of the realistically structured play. "He has given new life to the inherited structure of the past in much the same way that Ibsen injected truth and substance into the lifeless conventions of the well-made play" (1987: 65). Citing Raymond Williams, she says "that the trap of a room, of a street, from which a man looks at the world that at once determines and is beyond him, should go on being experienced, in comparable dramatic actions: that certain illusions hold, and can be replayed but newly experienced" (1987: 66). In other words, in 1981, naturalistic dramaturgy can still work and excite the imagination.

²² Shepard's technique is to work with myth as a substitute for history a "making strange of myth" (Orr 1991: 110). Working in the same continuum as other American writers who share the primal horror of contemporary America, "his plays embody the pain of displacement and the loss of sense of place and being" (1991: 109). Why did Shepard turn to family? The turn to family meant the search for lineage as a stronger guarantee of myth despite the fact that such lineage was problematic, deceptive and self-defeating. Somehow, Shepard repeated the pattern set by O'Neill who turned to write about family because the idea was to move out of a wider social microcosm towards a more intense binding of kinship and the agony of genealogy. But Shepard, by forging a new path away from modern tragedy in its Aristotelian form left O'Neill behind and broke entirely with the form. As Orr suggests, he "attained a modernist rapture making him closer to Kafka than to O'Neill" (130). He goes on to make an even more intriguing comparison, which is certainly debatable though fascinating. He believes that *In Mourning Becomes Electra* O'Neill attempted to update the classical tragic element of curse and doom and failed.

²³ For a more detailed analysis of this issue, see Hassan's *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1982).

²⁴ Lynda Hart (1987) is also of the opinion that *Curse of the Starving Class* is an oedipal play. It is certainly not oedipal to the extent that O'Neill's plays are. Although there is no indication that Wesley desires his mother, the oedipal theme clearly informs the father and son relationship. The curse that Ella describes is handed down from generation to generation in an inescapable pattern that consumes the entire family. Again one is reminded that this echoes what Mary Tyrone says in *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

²⁵ Taav sees more references to Shakespeare than to Sophocles: "Weston's relationship to his son is more analogous to that of the Ghost and Hamlet than that of Laius to Oedipus" (Taav 2000: 33). The oedipal myth is clearer in *Buried Child*, however. If Tilden represents one aspect of the oedipal impulse (the desire to sleep with the mother-seducer) then Bradley represents the other aspect, the father-slayer. Bradley also has Cain-like tendencies. Bradley's oedipal tendencies are shown while cutting Dodge's hair, which also conjures up notions of Samson and Delilah, while his Cain-like tendencies are shown by attacking Shelly, who he believes is Tilden's woman. Also later on in Act III he completes his triumph by usurping his father's couch and blanket (if only momentarily).

²⁶ See Nash (1983).

²⁷ The resolution of *Buried Child* is viewed in a positive light by many. This can be seen by his use of the myth of the Fisher King, represented by Dodge and the myth of the Prodigal son and

inheritance enacted by Vince, which suggest the possibility of renewal and rebirth. Vince is “a third generation errant quester, a prodigal son returned to seek significance, meaning and place in the roots he has abandoned” (Simard 1984: 88). At the mythic level, the play dramatizes the inheritance of the sterility of one generation whose responsibility it is to unearth the past, purify it, and look toward the future. Moreover, Halie, once a fertile woman, sees the rain and vegetables as a miracle. After the death of Dodge both family and farm can begin anew. Nevertheless, this conclusion may lead to some rather questionable assumptions. “Vince’s decision to stay is not based on direct family ties which are inescapable, but in his choice to assume the role. He recreates himself, as does Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, but by choosing to break rather than repeat the pattern of his heritage” (1984: 93). As the final tableaux suggest, nothing has changed or is likely to change. In this sense Vince is an allegory of the “sun/son” motif and as the archetypal questing knight he finds that the grail is in his own backyard. Simard suggests that by substituting the subjective myth of popular culture for literal and literary myth he, like the author himself, is recreating the self in a positive way.

A key to understanding Modernism is the notion of fragmentation leading up to the 20th century feeling of alienation. If the 19th century was witness to the rise of mass urban existence, the 20th century gave way to even a greater degree of fragmentation. If this is the case, then it can be agreed that one of the givens of the postmodern age includes the phenomenon of fragmentation or disintegration as well as a loss or absence of significant and unifying rules. In this sense, then Shepard, just as much or even more than O'Neill, uses the family as a symbol of the fragmentation and disintegration of America. It is a truism that in a multicultural society like that of America, the country can never achieve a sense of wholeness because America is a society without significant and unifying rules as well or, at least, the old significant and unifying rules have slowly been eroding with the rise of multiculturalism and more marginal and ethnic voices questioning many of the American myths. Conversely, O'Neill did not try and make a radical break with tradition but strove to adapt tradition in order to forge a more contemporary American theater that went beyond the blasé melodramatic works so much in vogue in America prior to his arrival on the scene.

Modernism is firmly grounded in notions of aesthetics with an author creator. The immutable essence of humanity found its proper representation in the mythical figure of Dionysus: "To be at one and the same time 'destructively creative' (i.e. to form the temporal world of individualization and becoming, a process destructive of unity) and 'creatively destructive' (i.e. to devour the illusory universe of industrialization, a process involving the reaction of unity)" (Harvey 1991: 16). In other words, if human nature finds itself essentially and eternally fraying and crumbling, then aesthetics must prevail over science, rationality and politics "even if the outcome was bound to be tragic" (16). In the case of Eugene O'Neill, if the "eternal and immutable" could no longer be presupposed, then it was the task of the modern artist to take up a "creative role" and define the essence of humanity in a world gone mad. If the notion of "creative destruction" was an essential condition of modernity, then perhaps the role of the artist as genius and hero is preordained even if the consequences of his or her actions turn tragic. Where O'Neill most worked on

this notion can be seen in his most novel-like plays such as *Lazarus Laughed* or *Marco Millions*.

Perhaps one of the clearest ways of understanding Modernism and Postmodernism in drama can be seen in the use of monologue in each. One of the most extensive studies of monologue in the contemporary theater is Deborah Geis's *Postmodern Theatric(k)s* (1993). Her basic notion is that like the arias in opera "monologue is the quintessential instrument for demonstrating the virtuosity of both the performer and the playwright, the litmus test of an actor's or writer's ability to seize the imagination of the audience" (Geis 1993: 1). Monologue also encapsulates each playwright's dramatic voice. Together with this comes the idea that "monologue, particularly as it has emerged in postmodern American drama, possesses narrative properties that distinguish it from dialogue in its ability to transform stage time and space into narrative time and space" (1). At the same time, monologue is open to replication and not response which is more characteristic of dialogue. If O'Neill represents the Modernist search for grounding and a responsive "other" in the void of modern existence, Shepard then represents the postmodern deconstructive explorations of a resistance to pairing and linearity. Shepard represents the postmodern ambivalence toward popular culture and the limitations of "artistic" discourse and in his hands the monologic voice is used to ironize and parody cultural images. Thanks to monologue a dramatic work can transcend the physical limitations of the playing space, can cause a displacement of the narrator(s) from the author to the actors and thereby cause a redirection of the audience's attention. Geis also believes that monologue "is an essential tool for the dramatist's shaping of the audience's perception of a play and its characters" and "becomes a richly complex device for the storyteller." (15)

That Shepard's ideas on writing plays and aesthetics in general were different to those of O'Neill is clear when we see that, at first, Shepard was more interested in the counter-culture like rock'n'roll. When he took his family to London, one of his ideas was to become a rock and roll star but the competition was too fierce. From the beginning, O'Neill was more interested in the classics. This is one of the most significant differences between the two playwrights. O'Neill was writing in a more classic vein, whereas Shepard was writing in a more informal and postmodern style. Since there seemed to be no room for Shepard in London as an aspiring rock star, he began to assess his own career as a playwright. He also had a family to feed. Like many American expatriate writers, he agreed that the experience of living abroad gives a writer a more objective viewpoint on

the American nation. He began to feel more American. In an interview, he stated that he was American “rhythmically” and in his “talk” and “walk” (Qtd in Oumano 1986: 105). It was also during this sojourn that he began to manifest a keen fascination with national heritage and with the codes and myths that had influenced him and made him feel he was American, although these codes and myths were more popular art like cinema, jazz and rock and roll music rather than a higher form of art. Although he claimed to be familiar with mainstream American playwrights such as O’Neill and Williams, his literary heroes still tended toward the experimental and avant-garde like the “Beat” writers, as well as pop culture. His interest in rock ‘n’ roll went deep, going so far as to say that Buddy Holly and Little Richard had influenced his work as much as Samuel Beckett, though perhaps this had more to do once again with his modest California upbringing and pursuant counterculture experiences and lack of book learning. It is here that one can see another difference in sensibility between Shepard and O’Neill. O’Neill thrived on the literary. His heroes were from the philosophical and literary realm. Nietzsche, Strindberg and Ibsen were considered to be nearly divine. Oddly enough, Shepard considered many rock ‘n’ roll stars to be made of similar stuff.

Realism is also a key element in the debate on the similarities and differences between Modernism and Postmodernism. Nothing shows this better than the fact that it is constantly being revised by American playwrights and O’Neill and Shepard, perhaps because of their returning to it after extended periods of experimentation, are key examples. As mankind develops, conceptions of what really exists continue to evolve. This can easily be seen in the wide range of diverse techniques that have steadily emerged to reproduce those conceptions—each one of them claiming to achieve greater fidelity and verisimilitude. The dominant technique in all of the experimentalism that has taken place in modern drama is realism. “Realism emerges as the dominant mode of modern drama, one which has continued to develop in an unbroken line from Ibsen to the postmodern playwrights, informed, shaped, and embellished by experiment, but essentially unchanged in purpose” (Simard 1985: 1). The debate about the nature of realism has likewise accompanied its existence. And just what is realism? In *Realism and American Drama (1880-1940)*, Brenda Murphy states that the rise of realism was as a reaction against sensational melodramatic effects in the action of a play. What was required on the American stage was a new medium. A play was a way of creating “a bourgeois milieu on stage, the use of ‘common speech’ in the dialogue [...] and a style of stagecraft that aims primarily at reconstructing the real world on the stage.” (Murphy 1987: x)

It has often been contended that realism is not a valid form for depicting the “truth” or describing “reality” in its concrete or abstract sense (the “real” of the “it’s been real”), and the very notion of “truth” or “reality” is merely another construct in itself, like the “great narratives” theorized by Francois Lyotard (1979). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that it is a valid mode, with its own paradigms and formalisms (if at times ambiguous or inscrutable). As to whether it may be considered as such, this is attested to by one of its staunchest defenders, Brian Richardson, who says that “almost every type of formalism denies any connection between the world and the literary text; most varieties of poststructuralism deny the distinction between factual and fictional narratives: every text is for them necessarily fictional. Given such presuppositions, it is only to be expected that realism is disavowed: these paradigms cannot in principle comprehend even the theoretical possibility of realism” (Richardson in Demastes 1996: 1). As he suggests, realism can provide a kind of epistemological catharsis by refuting a variety of dubious or inaccurate worldviews and ideologies. Perhaps the greatest limitation of the mode is that in spite of its ability to expose falsehoods, realism cannot ultimately reveal the truth. This is what Richardson refers to as the “paradox of realism.” However, it might be interesting to note that realism continues to exert a powerful, perhaps somewhat balm-like influence on the theater-going public. This might be suggested by the fact that realism still grapples with everyday existence and can still be considered a “thoroughly contemporary medium that can confront serious issues and engage its audience in something other than escapist or moralistic entertainment” (Demastes 1988: 18). In other words, realism is a medium for any topic. If not, then why do playwrights keep resorting to the style?

The actors who populate these realistic sets also seem familiar to us. No longer are they the romantic heroes of a vanishing world but people who are like us, who dress as we do, speak in a kind of prose or dialogue that we might hear on the street, and reveal motives like those we expect in daily ordinary life. The realistic playwright’s stylistic aim for dialogue became chiefly to maintain the illusion that the audience was overhearing a conversation. Not only did the dialogue have to be appropriate to each character, it also had to be believable within the setting of the conversation and its context. In this sense, dialect and colloquial language were used for increasing the illusion of reality. In the realistic sets we can recognize something that is close to us and therefore better identify with it.

2.1 Eugene O'Neill and Modernism

O'Neill's greatest and most significant work came in his late plays. As Jean Chothia suggests, in them he was able to hew out "art of a very high order," capable of recreating "the private and personal in the public medium," which allows these plays "to speak to the responding imagination of their audiences" (Chothia 1979: 193). The hyperbole surrounding *Long Day's Journey into Night* is undoubtedly well-earned and makes it difficult, if not quite moot, to attempt to add to all the fine criticism of the play that is already existent. All one need do is have a look at most of the criticism. For example, Bryan Thiessen writes that

[I]n *Long Day's Journey into Night*, widely regarded as his last and greatest true masterpiece, Eugene O'Neill gambles with his skill as an objective playwright by drawing potentially explosive material from his own life. Fortunately for both audiences and the author, who knew well the frustration of producing failed experiments, rather than being swallowed in sentimental self-pity and recriminations, the play contains much of O'Neill's finest writing, and it maintains its reputation as a pinnacle in American theatre.²⁸ (1999-2005 at <http://www.eoneill.com/library/essays/thiessen2.htm>)

Sam Shepard has often had interesting thoughts about O'Neill's play.

It's a beautiful little thing. But I remember being struck by the idea that it was a play, so I read the play and I read about O'Neill, and in an odd way, there was something that I connected with there. There was something wrong with the family. There was a demonic thing going on that nobody could put their finger on, but everybody knew the ship was sinking. Everybody was going down, and nobody knew why or how, and they were all taking desperate measures to stay afloat. So I thought there was something about that that felt similar to my own background, and I felt I could maybe write some version of that. (Shepard qtd. in Almeyda 2013 at <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/sam-shepard/#/>)

We must bear in mind that the modernist artist considers himself/herself to be a type of rebel against the received ways of doing the writer's work. If there is any sort of salvation attainable in modern life, it can be reached only through art by, of, and for the self. As Normand Berlin argues in his *O'Neill's Shakespeare*, one of O'Neill's major objectives was to attempt to render the subjective in artistic form. If Walt Whitman's wafting poetry celebrating an inflation of the self and personal vitality had been revolutionary, then the modernists, particularly those writers of prose such as Joyce and Woolf, begin to recoil from externality and to examine the self through a prism of its own inner dynamics. In other words, what makes the self tick? How to portray this self? The modernist writer must take upon himself the enormous ambition not to remake the world (this cannot be done since one of the characteristics of the modernist period is a unique sense of historical impasse and an impending sense of doom) but to reinvent the terms of reality. The past was devoted to answers whereas the modern period confines itself to questions.²⁹

Modernism is really no less historical than realism. Jameson tells us that "rather, its representations of history are merely at times more hidden and unconscious and thus require different interpretive strategies" (Jameson rpt. in Hardt and Weeks 2000: 180). In spite of what O'Neill might have done with the style, we have seen that one of the characteristics of Modernism was a disjointed or alienated perspective on the world and one of its tendencies is to break down processes into fragments. For purposes here, let us understand processes as history and more concretely the history of a family. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the Tyrone family past has been broken up into fragments but these fragments make up a whole that the viewer or reader is able to grasp. By contrast, in *Shepard*, the fragments have shattered and recovering the past is an impossible task.

The formal and literary attributes of Modernism are well known. Tradition must be remade, a new cultural style follows the cross between the inner dynamics of a literature and the large scale pressures of history, shedding the romantic tradition with its faith in self-sufficiency, the necessary irresponsibility, and thereby the ultimate salvation of art. Yet at the same time, the modernist writer presents dilemmas he/she does not wish to resolve necessarily, but offers his/her struggle with them, while thriving for sensations. Most criticism of Modernism centers on the novel and prose in general yet many of the

characteristics traditionally attributed to prose can be applied to drama. In the novel a new sense of character, structure and the role of the protagonist or hero are shown, together with the problematic nature of experience. Life is not knowable and character dissolves into a type of psychic battlefield and insoluble puzzle. The idea of linearity, or the assumption of a sequence of order, in other words, a plot, is called into question. A sense of situation becomes more important than plot, while at the same time, no secure meaning can be found in the action portrayed. Even the fictional hero changes and gone is the belief in a collective destiny and human existence cannot be transformed. A hero is many times a clash between a figure of consciousness embodying the potential of the human and a society moving in an impersonal rhythm that is hostile or indifferent. The modernist "hero" believes in the necessity of action-yet many times he/she is unfit for action, lacking not necessarily bravery, which requires action, but courage, which the mere act of being requires. The modern hero can only be a hero if he/she has an implicit belief in the meaningfulness of the human scheme. Finally, in many cases, the modern hero discovers that he/she cannot be a hero.

Long Day's Journey into Night fits into this pattern quite easily and comfortably. It is a play where character is a psychic battlefield, beliefs in the past are discovered to be sham, human existence cannot be transformed, being a hero is nigh on impossible and borders on the absurd, life is unknowable, becoming more a series of sensations, albeit blunted by mind-altering drugs, than anything linear. This might sound like nihilism, one of the same critiques of many of O'Neill's plays yet we must remember also, that Modernism believed that art in itself is an escape from nihilism. Historically, the modern sensibility struggles with its passion for eternal renewal, even as it keeps searching for ways to secure its own end.

Critics and audiences alike would agree that O'Neill's portrayal of family always concerns a group haunted by secrets and concealment, dysfunctional families isolated from the rest of the world and populated by single men, who are emotionally damaged, deranged or have become alcoholics. The action generally takes place in the living room of the family home and public spaces are inhabited by disparate and desperate people.

Perhaps one of the better ways to begin to decipher modernist techniques at work in *Long Day's Journey into Night* is to consider the notion of time. In many ways, it can be considered a play about the sense of loss produced by the ravages of time. As Edward L.

Shaughnessy notes, “[t]ragedy, whose arch theme is loss, summarizes the terrible cost of human experience. This classic form teaches the message of fate: We will be defeated *in time*. Whatever is precious becomes all the more cherished as we perceive its vulnerability” (Shaughnessy 1996: 152). When Mary Tyrone utters one of the most quoted lines of the play “We can’t help what the past has made us” (*Long Day’s Journey into Night* 87), she is speaking about the tragedy that time, like the past, is irretrievable. Patricia R. Schroeder in *The Presence of the Past in Modern American Drama* (1989), traces the American obsession with the past.³⁰

Most of O’Neill’s best plays contain characters haunted and affected by their pasts and this is because the playwright himself was haunted and obsessed with his own past. Rather than use the past as a series of anterior actions as an appendage to the plot, O’Neill was more interested with how a character struggled or grappled in order to come to terms with the past. But, how to portray a past that is unfixable and unfinished? O’Neill’s methods for doing so varied throughout his career. His own artistic development was essentially accumulative and one of its constant components was an unrelenting insistence of the past’s complex and continuing influence.

The role of the past in his plays is that of theme but it is used more as aesthetic motivation for many of his experimental devices. In the late plays, the past is still a major theme, but becomes more the root of conflict and the source of action. One of the reasons for the success of the late plays might be that, once O’Neill had shed formal experimentation, he had unified the experiments with the characteristic scheme of the power of the remembered past the form of drama itself had now been restructured. Formal plot devices disappear, conflict, climax and resolution are replaced by an ongoing process of exposition and exposition is at the very heart of the dramatic action.

In *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, the playwright finally managed to embed the principles of Greek tragedy within otherwise naturalistic plays and so finally realized his lifelong goal of dramatizing man and his struggle with the past. The action is retrospective and there is a move in all of them toward an unmasking. O’Neill’s real success is his ability to combine the notion of a persistent yet manipulable past with the technical skill necessary to produce the play’s “retrograde movement” in Schroeder’s words. What O’Neill’s late plays all have in common are the unities of time, place and action, a focus on character and the priority of memory. The action, if there is any at all, is largely

retrospective and the plays all contrast a dynamic and continually influential past with a present that is devoid of possibilities. The consumption of alcohol is constant. The three plays all move from dawn till night and then back again, veer from comedy to tragedy and from hope to despair. Differing ways of contending with the past are portrayed. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the Tyrone's deny responsibility for their present state.³¹

In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, only two significant events take place and both of these actions are offstage: Edmund's being told that he has tuberculosis and Mary Tyrone's return to her morphine addiction. What is central to the play is the past, the retroactive chain of events linking these things together. What little action takes place on stage revolves around the struggle with the past. The play is a series of forward and backward thrusts or movements. Confrontation produces revelation produces another confrontation. It is perhaps most revealing to note that within 10 pages of first-act dialogue we learn the history of the Tyrone family, the dynamics of their present relationships, and the extent to which they are currently imprisoned by their constant exploitation of the past. "In the Tyrone's world of repeated accusations and recriminations, the conventional plot sequence of exposition, complication, climax and resolution dissolves." (Schroeder 1989: 50)

Though not the same as in Joyce's *Ulysses* or Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (O'Neill had experimented with a version of stream of consciousness embodied by the "thought asides" used in *Strange Interlude*), in *Long Day's Journey into Night* memory has no order, only the logic of association. O'Neill was influenced by the novel. He was well aware that the modern novel had affected a revolution and was "constantly overreaching the medium" experimenting with a novelistic drama that could reveal character with the greatest possible force, complexity and depth.

The characters in O'Neill's late plays suffer from a conflict between reality and fantasy. "It is no accident that most of the characters in the late plays live in a relatively timeless world of desire and imagination. They are cut off from the world of time by their inability or their unwillingness to fit into the practical materialistic nature of American society" (Porter 1988: 45). Porter's argument revolves around the notion of Taoism and suggests that O'Neill was particularly interested in it because he was keen "to find a source of power which reconciles a man with the Tao, the universal energy which unites the opposites and permits one to escape the earthly limitations of time and environment" (45).

Porter's comments are also apropos for the modernist sentiment, the feeling of irretrievable loss contained in the past, the fact that at one time there was a reality to cling to but that has now vanished leaving a sense of bereavement. It is perhaps in this light that their search for belonging is tinged with materialistic overtones. The major characters in the late plays turn away from the practical demands of time, but they are unable to fit into the timeless world of spiritual values because they are still part of a dissolving western society rooted in the search for material possessions and a self-centred salvation.

The interaction of past, present and future remains a constant concern. O'Neill's late autobiographical plays manifest the concern with time noted earlier in American literature at large. Perhaps Mary Tyrone sums it up best when she says: "the past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie. Only the past when you were happy is real." (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 87)³²

Porter delineates time into different types. The first is linear or chronological time like that of a clock or a calendar. Linear time is often referred to as historical time or reality. Linear time is tied to the universe with a relationship that we like to refer to as reality. In this sense, units of time are constant and the paradigm of linear time can be used as if it were a constant. Memory, on the other hand, functions outside the continuum and the line becomes a circle instead since it allows for a re-entry into the past. Porter describes three types of memory: Internal, which is the function of the imagination; individual, which is personal and subjective; and irrational which defies conventional rules of logic and predictability.

Porter makes a strong case for the evolution of conceptions of time, which can sometimes get a bit confusing, but nevertheless does help to explain what O'Neill was attempting to do in his final plays. According to her scheme, the prehistoric sense of reality differed from contemporary conceptions in that it was basically derived from the re-enactment of archetypes (cosmogonic) that originated outside time. In this sense, time was more circular than linear since it followed more closely such annual (circular) events such as rites of fertility. This can be referred to as "mythic time." In other words, the point of the ritual is outside time in the sense that it is not found on the linear continuum. In this way, memory is the notion of returning to the origins of everything. For archaic peoples, this notion of memory was communal but for modern man it is more individual, and therefore perhaps irrational. For modern man, a return to the past is irrational because it

cannot be relived and this is precisely the dilemma for the Tyrones. Theirs is a “retrograde movement that reflects the impact of memory [...]. Linear time carries them forward, but they react to one another in terms of past events” (Porter 1988: 8). Nietzsche, who was one of O’Neill’s greatest mentors, attempted to break the stranglehold of “it was”—the will must make an attempt to take in all existence in the present, the past and embrace them in an eternal whole in the present. Man has been attempting this since creation but, like Nietzsche’s Superman, has failed.

Archaic man used ritual for shared communal ideas and the present is no different. All rituals assume a pre-existing community with shared ideals and each ritual is an action that embodies and dramatizes the shared beliefs of that community. It is through the use of ritual that members experience, at least briefly, a “mythic” moment outside the linear continuum. According to Porter, O’Neill uses ritual in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* so as to show how the Tyrone’s might overcome their present stasis and sense of entrapment: “As both calendar and memory fail the characters, who see no hope in the future and cannot recover the past, they labor under the tyranny of history; try as they might they cannot escape. Almost instinctively, as their search for peace reaches its climax, they turn to the ritual of confession, baring their souls to priests of their own making in an attempt to transcend the limitations of time and space. *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, particularly Act IV, is structured by the ritual of confession” (Porter 1988: 12). For example, after arguing with Edmund, Tyrone confesses that it was the play that he bought to bring him easy money that ruined his artistic career as an actor and stopped him from realizing his true potential:

TYRONE: [...] Yes, maybe life overdid the lesson for me, and made a dollar worth too much, and the time came when that mistake ruined my career as a fine actor. (*Sadly.*) I’ve never admitted this to anyone before, lad, but tonight I’m so heartsick I feel at the end of everything, and what’s the use of fake pride and pretense. That God-damned play I bought for a song and made such a great success in—a great money success—it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune. I didn’t want to do anything else, and by the time I woke up to the fact I’d become a slave to the damned thing and did try other plays, it was too late. They had identified me with that one part, and didn’t want me in anything else. They were

right, too. I'd lost the great talent I once had through years of easy repetition, never learning a new part, never really working hard. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 149-50)

For Tyrone, this "confession" seems to bring absolution, at least from Edmund, whose reply is: "I'm glad you've told me this, Papa. I know you a lot better now." (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 151)

But the most moving of confessions is Jamie's drunken confession to Edmund toward the end of Act IV and the end of the play. Jamie has come home reeling drunk but not so drunk that he is not aware of what he must tell Edmund before it is too late:

JAMIE: [...] Listen, Kid, you'll be going away. May not get another chance to talk. Or might not be drunk enough to tell you the truth. So got to tell you now. Something I ought to have told you long ago-for your own good. [...] *Not drunken bull, but "in vino veritas" stuff.* You better take it seriously. Want to warn you-against me. Mama and Papa are right. I've been rotten bad influence. And worst of it is, I did it on purpose. [...] Did it on purpose to make a bum of you. Or part of me did. A big part. [...] *Never wanted you to succeed and make me look even worse by comparison. Wanted you to fail.* Always jealous of you. Mama's baby, Papa's pet! (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 165; emphasis mine)

Later on at the end of this monologue he tells Edmund:

JAMIE: [...] and when you come back, look out for me. I'll be waiting to help you with that "my old pal" stuff, and give you the glad hand, and at the first good chance I get stab you in the back. [...] Only don't forget me. Remember I warned you-for your sake. Give me credit. *Greater love hath no man that this, that he saveth his bother from himself.* [...] That's all. Feel better now. *Gone to confession. Know you absolve me, don't you, Kid?* You understand. You're a damned fine kid. Ought to be. I made you. so go and get well. Don't die on me. You're all I've got left. God bless you, Kid. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 166-67; emphasis mine)

All the late plays dramatize a return to origins and the relationship of the past to the present, with a focus on the possibility of either returning to the past or escaping its tyranny. The hope for transcendence and a desire for peace give these plays a circular structure and this search for peace leads to a form of a return to origins. A clear example of this from *Long Day's Journey into Night* is Mary Tyrone's morphine-ridden fantasy journey back to the day she got married to James Tyrone. "Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time" (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 176). Porter concludes: "the rituals, such as they are, do not finally allow the characters to reclaim the past; they merely return to it and derive whatever comfort it affords, which is, by and large, minimal since the present insists on intruding and time flows relentlessly on" (Porter 1988: 14). The quest for peace and forgiveness can only be found through forgiveness and understanding. "As O'Neill searches among the ghosts of his past in these final plays [...] he has been dispossessed. In seeking a way back into the kingdom, the characters and the playwright both are searching for the holy grail, which is available only through mystery and faith." (15)³³

2.2 Sam Shepard and the Urgency of Theatricality

If O'Neill revolutionized the language of the modern American stage, can the same be said about Shepard? Much has been said of Shepard's use of language. As we have seen, Shepard uses characters based on specific models in myth, history and contemporary reality and in many of his plays this is augmented by using music by rock stars, settings and action from the iconography of Hollywood, rural American, middle-class suburbia, the 19th century west and the automobile. All of these combined are perhaps as "more than a field of reference, it is at the heart of the very language by which Shepard expresses meaning and communicates his vision of America" (Mottram 1984: viii). Beginning with Shepard's early plays, there was a progressive domination of language over action. In "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library," Shepard himself said that:

“the power of words for me isn’t so much in the delineation of a character’s social circumstances as it is in the capacity to evoke vision in the eye of the audience [...] Language [...] seems to be the only ingredient that retains the potential of making leaps into the unknown. There is only so much I can do with appearances, change the costume, add a new character, change the light, bring in objects, sift the set, but language is always hovering right there, ready to move faster and more effectively than all the rest put together.” (Shepard rpt. in Marranca 1981: 216-17)

Much more than O’Neill, Shepard was conscious of performance over text. When he wrote *Action*, one of his most obtuse plays while still in London, he says that he “began to see that the living outcome (the production) always demanded a different kind of attention than the written form it sprang from. The spoken word, no matter how you cut it, is different from the written word. It happens in a different space” (Shepard qtd. in Mottram 1984: 113). Shepard always had a flair for verbal facility. Unlike O’Neill, who as we have seen struggled to find a theatrical voice, Shepard was always confident in himself and his abilities. If O’Neill experimented with the crude language of sailors, derelicts and the more standard register of the American middle-class, Shepard has also been adept at capturing the essence of contemporary American voices. This can be seen in the dazzling collection of characters populating his early plays, in which performance and language were more important than plot. As Gerald Weales suggests, Shepard’s language is one of his strongest skills because he is able to manipulate “a wide variety of American voices from the dryly factual to the lyrical, not simply to provide playable dialogue, but to create set monologues, the dramatic power of which depends more on verbal substance than on dramatic context.” (Weales 1986: 39)

Do Shepard’s “leaps into the unknown” place him in an anti-intellectual tradition akin to Whitman? This is quite clear. Like many others (Marranca, Oumano and Earley, among others), Harold Bloom suggests that Shepard is “an American original” (Bloom 2002: 9). He adds that “Walt Whitman, an authentic forerunner of Shepard, denied being influenced by anyone [...] Shepard similarly denies all literary and dramatic indebtedness, insisting he emanates from Jackson Pollock and the Who” (29). For Robert Coe, Shepard’s use of language is more akin to a poetic, fabulist theater that is not naturalistic. His use of language is a “dream revived by Romantic poets surviving into the postmodern era:

language as rhythmic sound, scarcely mediated by the literalness and complexities of linguistic meaning” (Coe in Marranca 1981: 59). In other words, by exploring the use of language in other media such as gothic melodrama, old Hollywood films, Little Richard and, above all, jazz and rock music, there is no need to “think” anymore. Shepard has consciously abandoned a literary formalism for an aesthetic grounded in experiment and the urgency of theatrical performance. At least in the earlier plays, Shepard was seeking a quality of inner listening more generally available in good jazz and only at the highest level of rock forms. Understandably enough, many of the early critics noted this tendency to try out a new language for the theater. Ren Frutkin believed that Shepard’s essential contribution was to reclaim for the imagination certain territories lost in a variety of more recent cultural flooding and bring the “word back into theatre” (Frutkin in Marranca 1981: 108). Joyce Aaron, one of Shepard’s girlfriends and an actress in many of his early plays, pointed out that the search for meaning in Shepard was a fruitless task and that anyone attempting to do so would simply “fall into the trap of actor training.” Shepard provides more of a feeling for an audience rather than an intellectual engagement and as an actress his characters must be played differently from traditional acting: “When you do Sam Shepard’s plays, it’s important to remember and actually you will *feel* it that you are enacting some aspect of a particular person: not in the conventional terms of character but rather as a witness to a moment or condition in American culture: that you are enacting on the stage one experience of one person at a particular moment in a particular state” (Aaron in Marranca 1981: 173). Most critics and fans would agree that Shepard has always excelled at precisely depicting a “particular state.” Aaron finishes off her advice on how to play Shepard by saying that “[o]ften you discover that the particular aspect you are enacting exists within a much larger whole-it is only one reality within a kind of super-reality. But you can’t start from that super-reality as a point of departure. Your enactment of some condition of being-in-the-world is what’s important.” (174)

Shepard himself explains his theory in the “Note to the Actors” in the Preface to his play *Angel City* (1976):

Instead of the idea of a “whole character” with logical motives behind his behaviour which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation. This is not the same thing as one actor playing

many different roles, each one distinct from the other (or “doubling up” as they call it), but more that he’s mixing many different underlying elements and connecting them through his intuition and senses to make a kind of music or painting in space without having to feel the need to completely answer intellectually for the character’s behaviour. If there needs to be a “motivation” for some of the abrupt changes which occur in the play they can be taken as full-blown manifestations of a passing thought or fantasy, having as much significance or “meaning” as they do in our ordinary lives. The only difference is that here the actor makes note of it and brings it to life in three dimensions.” (Shepard rpt. in *Fool for Love and Other Plays* 1988: 61-62)

The fracturing of character is related to the fracturing of language itself, since in Shepard’s plays identity is something constructed in language and discourse, which renders this similar to Lyotard’s notions of the postmodern condition in which language is “dispersed into clouds of linguistic particles-narrative ones, but also denotative, prescriptive, etc. each with its own pragmatic valence. Today each of us lives in the vicinity of these. We do not necessarily form stable linguistic communities, and the properties of those we do form are not necessarily communicable” (Lyotard qtd. in Foster 1983: 64). This describes, to a certain extent, many of Shepard’s idiolects. Wilcox mentions Shepard’s play *Action*, which many conceive of as one of his best works. For Bigsby, it is his work most like O’Neill’s, for others it is the closet play to Becket but as Wilcox puts it, one of the problems with Shepard’s characters is conversing with each other. As Jeep says in *Action*, “[i]t’s hard to have a conversation” (*Action* 174). Lyotard’s idea that there are no more master narratives in the postmodern age can easily be seen in *Action* in which the characters return again and again to a book, as if ritualistically searching for a lost place, for an absent center in the narrative of the play’s action, for some overriding structure in the narrative of their own existence. If master narratives no longer serve for grounding, then language itself becomes an unstable entity and is not recognizable even to itself, which means that words have lost their meaning.

Shepard himself always said that he was more interested in getting an emotional response particularly in his early plays, where he employed music. In “Metaphors, Mad Dogs and Old Time Cowboys,” he stated that he chose theater because the fantastic thing about it is “that it can make something seen that is invisible [...] you can be watching this thing happening with actors and costumes and light and set and language and even plot, and something emerges from beyond that, and that’s the image part that I’m looking for,

that's the sort of added dimension" (rpt. in Marranca 1981: 197). To help to reach this "added dimension," he many times resorted to music because "it adds a whole different kind of perspective; it immediately brings the audience to terms with an emotional reality." (201)³⁴

Although some critics like Bottoms believe that Shepard can sometimes be classified as a "late modernist," the thrust of the argument in this dissertation is that both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* fit more into the mode of what is referred to as Postmodernism. (See "The Postmodern Moment," pp. 155ff)

Notes:

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of this issue, please visit Thiessen at <http://www.eoneill.com/library/essays/thiessen2.htm> (Accessed January 28, 2013)

²⁹ The human lot is inescapably problematic. The turn from the truth of realism and naturalism to sincerity shatters the previous bourgeois order. Fredric Jameson has written extensively on realism. In his view realism is a collective expression of a social group or class. Realist literature can be characterized: "not by its verisimilitude or proximity to reality but rather by its expression of the consciousness of social class." The problem with historical periods is that they are never static and each period must be understood in terms of its movement, internal dynamics and the flux of conflicts and antagonisms among classes and between the past and the future. "Realist narratives attempt to represent the movement of history itself. By suggesting that representation is possible and by encouraging an aesthetic of mimesis or imitation, realism tends to perpetuate a preconceived notion of some external reality." (Rpt in Hardt and Weeks 2000: 179)

³⁰ One of the problems with drama is that the action on stage is always happening "now." According to Peter Szondi, the passage of time in the drama is an absolute succession of "presents." The problem faced by many playwrights has been how to portray past events to an audience. Use simple exposition the way a novelist might? "Lurking beneath the apparently simple technical difficulty of how to explain preceding events to the audience is a host of related aesthetic and philosophical conundrums" (Szondi qtd. in Schroeder 1989: 11). An especially critical problem for twentieth century American playwrights was how to devise methods for infusing the present with appropriate knowledge of the past. Implied in this "conundrum" was a double conflict: on the one hand, an inherited perennial burden in America of a complex, particularly unfixable past, which affected and constituted the present, and, on the other hand, an inherited set of dramatic conventions that inhibited the exploration of the past's invasion of the present, which allowed only for the technique of "exposition."

³¹ In *The Iceman Cometh*, the dregs attempt to reconstruct the past, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* is a confessional of real or imagined sins in the past.

³² We are also reminded of T.S. Eliot and his idea of time so beautifully rendered in the *Burnt Norton* of his *Four Quartets*: "Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future/And time future contained in time past./If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable." In *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943 (1-4).

³³ This pattern was set in O'Neill's cycle plays, the most complete and successful one being *A Touch of the Poet*, where the playwright establishes the two roads of time—linear time, which

represents the various historical stages of America's evolution as a nation and cyclical time, which represents the sins of the family being continuously repeated cyclically. Time is the great catalyst and "remains the enemy. The future holds dubious promises and memories of the past cannot redeem the present" (Porter 1988: 24). The use made by O'Neill is not that of archaic man or the Eternal Return of Nietzsche's superman, "but the paradigm of the classical historian, who perceives history as a series of repetitive cycles" (24.) According to this view, because he is inherently limited, man will repeat the triumph and mistakes of those who have preceded him *ad infinitum*: it is an inescapable extension of the human condition.

³⁴ The influence of Brecht (his "favorite playwright" he says) is evident because Brecht was also aware that music produces a powerful emotional reaction. Though he does not use so much music in either *Curse of the Starving Class* or *Buried Child* if one thinks of the impact of a drunken Vince coming home to inherit his patrimony violently breaking down to the door while singing "the Marine's Hymn" at the top of his lungs one can perhaps better feel or visualize this "emotional reality" through this "added dimension."

3 TRAGEDY AND TRAGICOMEDY: BREAKING GENERIC BOUNDARIES

Whether tragedy as a genre still exists in our age or not has been a subject of debate throughout the contemporary era, particularly in the increasingly secular 20th and 21st centuries. Eugene O’Neill was adamant about tragedy still existing and that America was a very clear case of it. In a letter to Malcolm Mollan in 1921, O’Neill wrote: “Tragedy not native to our soil? Why, we are tragedy, the most appalling yet written or unwritten!” (Bogard and Bryer 1988: 159). In addition, much of his artistic career was focused on attempting to write tragedies in the American vein. Playwright Arthur Miller was of the same mind. When *Death of a Salesman* came in for criticism saying that a lower class or ordinary—character like Willy Loman (low man)—could not be considered tragic, Miller had this to say:

In this age few tragedies are written. It has often been held that the lack is due to a paucity of heroes among us, or else that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science, and the heroic attack on life cannot feed on an attitude of reserve and circumspection. For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy or tragedy above us. The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is most often implied. (Miller 1978: 3)

Not everyone agrees with the fact that some famous American plays, with their “paucity of heroes” (or more likely their anti-heroes), are considered tragedies. George Steiner was one of the first to pronounce the death of tragedy in the contemporary world and to theorize as to why. He claims that without myth there can be no tragedy and this is the major reasoning behind his *The Death of Tragedy*.

The tragedy must be irreversible. The tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence. This is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporary, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama but not tragedy.” (Steiner 1961: 8)

Undoubtedly he would agree with what Brustein says about contemporary drama being more socially oriented: “[...] the social dramatist concentrates on man in society, in conflict with community, government, academy, church, or family” (1964: 22). At the core of O’Neill’s and Shepard’s family plays is just this issue of conflict within a family and/or community, which I will explore below. O’Neill made numerous attempts at creating tragedy and both *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* are often referred to as modern tragedies. On the other hand, Shepard’s case is a bit different and rarely are his plays referred to as tragedies as his work falls more into the characteristics of what can be more accurately referred to as tragicomedy. Although both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* are structured tragically, Shepard is constantly undercutting the tragedy with ironic overtones.

At the same time, both were attempting to create a new tragic theater, a new theory of tragedy cognizant of modern theories of history, sociology and biology. As we shall see, Shepard is less conscious than O’Neill of this attempt. Both the private and the social were to play equal parts, the idea being to create modern social drama which would portray every man’s potentially fatal involvement with the external and internal forces that shape his life. For the American theater of the first half of the 20th century, that playwright was to be Eugene O’Neill, who was the one most actively engaged in revolutionizing the modern family as tragedy. As John Patrick Diggins suggests, “the idea of Tragedy in O’Neill is Hegelian as well as classical, not simply a fatal flaw of character or right against wrong but the conflict of right against right” (2007: 15). Though Shepard is perhaps less academic than O’Neill, I believe that his return to family and realism was also an attempt to update the theater as tragic.

It should be noted that with the rise of a more scientific and secular society, attitudes toward tragedy were bound to change radically. Robert Brustein calls the so-called “modern dramatists” (from Ibsen to Genet) “The Theatre of Revolt,” in opposition to older playwrights referred to as “The Theatre of Communion,” suggesting that the

conflict outlined by Steiner is what makes modern playwrights differ from their predecessors.³⁵ If dramatists like Sophocles, Shakespeare and Racine wrote for a world where traditional myths were enacted before an audience of believers against the background of a shifting but still coherent universe, then “modern” dramatists are creating for a world “where myths of rebellion are enacted before a dwindling number of spectators in a flux of vacancy, bafflement, and accident” (Brustein 1964: 4). As will be explained below, O’Neill makes a more conscious attempt to recreate tragedy in a more modern vein while Shepard’s work is more skeptical of the genre and is an almost perfect example of this idea of “vacancy, bafflement and accident.”

In the absence of avenging gods or some sort of mythical community, modern tragedy requires both a literary and a sociological analysis, looking not only at the immediate connections between drama and society but also at the intermediate ones, the connections between drama and social consciousness, and then in turn between varieties of social consciousness and the wider society. Tragedy throughout the ages implies a continued existence of a particular mode of writing that suggests both a linear development and a cyclical renaissance, which appears to be quite evident in modern American drama, continuously struggling to redefine itself.³⁶

A general formula for tragedy has been suggested by Raymond Williams: “The essential tragic experience is that of irreparable human loss. It is a loss felt and performed by actors on a theatrical stage and witnessed in turn by their audience, and usually infused by at least some Aristotelian elements” (Williams qtd. in Orr 1989: xii). The irreparable loss of tragedy is expressed in a variety of climactic events like murder, suicide, madness, disintegration of either an individual or a group, which occur quite frequently in much of twentieth century American drama in the works of Miller, Williams, Albee, O’Neill and Shepard, among others. For instance, *Desire under the Elms* contains murder and incest, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is about madness and the disintegration of the family group. *Curse of the Starving Class* contains elements of madness, murder and disintegration and *Buried Child* also has incest and infanticide. Perhaps the serious wounding of human sensibility which cannot be healed is enough provided that loss and the failure to heal are conveyed dramatically through the resources of the text and the stage, synchronized speech, movement and setting of the dramatic spectacle. If all these elements are in place then we are in the presence of a theatrical totality which is authentically tragic.

If we are to approach O'Neill and Shepard from a tragic and tragicomic viewpoint, it is inevitable to say something about tragedy from the Greek times to the present. Tragedy is characterized in three major modes: Greek tragedy which is characterized by the divine, Renaissance by the noble, while Modern is fundamentally social. It is also interesting to note what Bennet Simon says regarding these three tragic modes and the family: "What the three modes almost always have in common is some form of historical *discursus*. Both Greek and Elizabethan tragedy are about past epochs. Tragic dramatists of the Greek city-states were equally concerned with reconstituting the history of their forefathers as tragic myth. For example, both Oedipus and Antigone are concerned with a sacrificial struggle for their own collective identity" (Simon 1993: 10). Two other similarities between Greek and Elizabethan tragedy are that they both emerged during a period of imperial expansion which was militarily endangered. In both cases, a new empire-building policy was repulsing threatening outside influences. Historical tragedy in both periods exhibits a fascination for the past and, at the same time, an affirmation of modernity. One might well wonder if the same criteria can be applied to contemporary 20th century American drama. The heroic values of this older drama are often archaic, but its heroes, in temperament and sensibility, are indisputably contemporary. They belong to an age which had a sense of its own high level of civilised living and its equally ruthless political triumph.

In the modern and contemporary age, historical tragedy is still written but is superseded by the tragic drama of contemporary life and, in turn, historical tragedy at its best becomes a drama of recent history, a history whose direct influence on the present is readily apparent. This seems more obvious in the case of O'Neill and his attempts at tragedy. *Desire under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* immediately spring to mind, as do his more intimate semi-autobiographical plays *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943). Sam Shepard's case may be slightly different, although it is interesting to note that *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* are both set in a past a few years removed from when they were actually written. The same occurs with *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), whose action takes place during the 1980s. This creates a flow and a unity that makes the division between the historical and the contemporary seem artificial and unreal. The concern with recent history is the legacy of the changing social consciousness of the modern age, where the work of Marx and classical sociology has presented us with a new perspective on transformations taking place in social life and the genesis of those transformations.

The tragedy of social alienation, as it emerged in Europe, differed sociologically from previous tragedy in one very important aspect. When European tragedy emerged at the end of the 19th century, it presented a new phenomenon of *periphery*, which operated in the life of the writer, the institutional development of the theaters first performing the work, and finally in the themes of the drama itself. The dialectic of centre and periphery, characterized by this centripetal process, is linked to the development of capitalistic industrialization in the major centers of European power. From 1880 onwards, tragic drama originated in Scandinavia, and developed in Russia, Ireland and Spain. Peripheral development presupposes economic and cultural dependence, making this very rare cultural phenomenon a unique expression of the process of “uneven development” rarely evidenced in any other artistic form. Tragic drama could not have sprung from the major epicenters of European capitalism at the time because the tragedy of social alienation demanded at inception this geographical transfer to the periphery even if it later came to claim its audience from the civilized and prosperous urban bourgeoisie. O’Neill’s emergence and his goals of revitalizing American drama through his attempts to stage American tragedy are another example of this phenomenon.

The central theme of tragedy in a social mode is alienation from bourgeois society. This alienation is not a condition of “being” which remains unchanged throughout the course of the drama. It entails a climactic confrontation between the dramatic personae and the cultural values of the bourgeois social order. This climactic outcome can be referred to as tragic strife. Tragic strife is not a summarization of violent struggle although elements of that struggle can be present. It is the more dramatic resolution of social alienation, a movement present in the social fabric of the theme and in the sequential flow of the action itself. The reversal of personal fortune or *peripeteia*, in Aristotelian terms, becomes a key element of the dynamic process of estrangement and the self-recognition of tragic fate is a liberating social consciousness which comes too late to alter the experience of loss. O’Neill and Shepard would use this notion to show the progression from family as “fate” to family as “curse,” which has led me to view their plays in light of tragedy and tragicomedy. *Long Day’s Journey into Night* shows that the family cannot be avoided and *Curse of the Starving Class* shows that any escape from the family is thwarted by biology.

Alienation then is structural. In the case of playwrights like O’Neill and Shepard, it becomes more of an estrangement that is socially located. It occurs within social classes or strata whose material interests differ from those of the dominant ruling interests of the society. It was perhaps George Lukács in *The Sociology of Modern Drama* (1965) who

first defined the new conception of tragedy not only as an aesthetic approach but as an emotional one as well and one that was to serve a social purpose. The tragic hero, whose will is not his own, is driven to defend himself and acts out of desperation and necessity. The struggles of the characters are more internalized and the tragedy lies more in their suffering than in their actions.³⁷

In tragedy in a realist vein, the protagonist finds himself immersed in a particular milieu rather than up against the unchanging natural forces that oppose classical heroes. As Alfred Schwarz explains the new drama beginning with Ibsen and continuing with the modernists “attempts an artistic conquest of external reality, in an effort to understand the natural and social forces, the ineluctable fate, to which the modern individual is exposed” (in Cerrito 1994 [1966]: 193). In this sense, the “dramatist as historian” perceives the social situation “and more narrowly the physical milieu, as the condition of a tragic action” (193). Moreover, the hero of this drama is the representative of a moment in history and a distinct stratum of society (193).³⁸

Of course, drama about the family is probably as old as drama itself. In *Tragic Drama and the Family*, psychoanalyst Bennet Simon offers a brief history of the relationship between tragic drama and the family, beginning with the ancient family sagas that Aristotle found so moving. His basic thesis is that “one of the most important continuities between ancient and modern drama is, in fact, the focus on the family” (1993: 2). In most family tragedy throughout Western history, the family is usually engaged in some sort of inner warfare that may precipitate its own self-destruction, whether this takes the form of destroying one’s own progeny or making propagation impossible through the warring of husbands and wives. The continuum of the family that is actively destroying itself is a dominant motif in the Greek tragedies of playwrights like Sophocles and Aeschylus, in Elizabethan drama, and in modern tragedy, whether the family is the royal house of Agamemnon, The Lear household, the bourgeois houses of Ibsen’s characters, the repressive Andalusian families of Lorca, or the stifling provincial settings of Tennessee Williams. As we shall see, the American families of O’Neill and Shepard also fall into this pattern in the 20th century.

In much modern drama, this paradigm is still in place. In the works of O’Neill, Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco, Albee and Shepard, can be found the motifs of the death of children, the wish never to have been born, among other constants. There is a tragic tension between the desire to propagate and bind the generations together. In other words, tragic drama is fueled by the problematic issue of the birth and death of the family. The

only way to gain immortality is to beget children; however, this begetting brings with it other problems, causes rivalries, conflicts and frictions that in many cases give way to violence and destruction that threatens the very foundation of the family. In the words of Bennet Simon, “tragic drama is centered around the dilemma arising from the painful realization that striving for immortality by the creation of a union, a family, by bearing and rearing children, is fraught with enormous and ineluctable difficulties.” (1993: 3)

In the history of modern drama and particularly modern tragedy, the focus seems heavily weighted on the family. If we suppose that the family is the central unit in society and are witness to that family life presented as diseased and corrupt, it can undermine our confidence that there can ever be any coherent order in that society. Like earlier tragedy, modern tragedy explores the painfulness of a world where fictions of a rational social order can no longer be maintained. Early tragedies had a more outward look and asked questions about the position of human beings in the universe. Modern tragedy or tragicomedy centers on the family and has a tendency to look inwards. The emphasis is on the disorder of the mind as much as the disorder present in the wider world. The heroes or heroines are as likely to be confronting the worst elements in themselves as confronting the worst elements in the world. By the time Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard begin writing plays about the same subject, an intriguing question to ask is to what extent have things changed?

3.1 Eugene O’Neill: The Classical Tradition Revisited

O’Neill conceived “classic fate” as “family fate.” In his late plays, there is always the Greek sense of “the fall of a house” with the complicated interplay of loyalties and betrayals that the catastrophic process involves. Ernest Griffin suggests that O’Neill’s late plays are full of emphasis on remembering and forgetting because human fate is to remember and forget and what we remember and forget at a certain time and place decides our real progress through life.³⁹

The modernists were possessed by a dilemma that was philosophical and caused a psychological devastation that O’Neill would attempt to turn into tragedy. The tragedy for modern man is to seek a higher life with the knowledge that it cannot be attained.

Therefore, in the absence of God, if God indeed is really dead, then one can dramatize human fate only in terms of human interactions. This would be O'Neill's major contribution not only to the so-called modernist movement, but also to contemporary American dramatists like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

In a world where older values no longer apply, we find ourselves up against the modernist notion of alienation, which is also a constant in O'Neill's work. Yet, unlike other genres, drama is a more public art and, like other modern dramatists, O'Neill was conscious of this and knew that he had to work through a well established tradition. As Brustein says, "the rebel dramatist continues to observe the requirements of his form. A play proceeds by dialogue, and dialogue implies debate and conflict. Without debate, the drama is propaganda; without conflict, mere fantasizing" (1964: 13). A world that is to be transformed by art (in this case drama) is a world that must be accurately represented. The central dialectic of modern drama is the conflict between idea and action, between conception and execution. The rebel dramatist is one who dreams and puts his dreams to the test.

One way of presenting the conflict or dialectic between illusion and reality was to use myth. Although O'Neill would later discard myth in his late masterpieces, he carried out many experiments in its form throughout his career, most notably in *Desire under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Writing to George Jean Nathan in 1928 about *Dynamo*, he said:

It is really the first play of a trilogy that will dig at the roots of the sickness as I feel it—the death of the old God and the failure of Science and Materialism to give any satisfying new One for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels, or he is simply scribbling around on the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlor entertainer. (O'Neill in Bogard and Byer 1988: 311; emphasis mine)

As O'Neill himself declared in 1925, he felt a great preference for the feeling of tragedy and made an attempt "to see the transforming nobility of tragedy, in as near as one

can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives” (O’Neill in Bogard and Byer 1988: 195). The notions of experimentation, tragedy and use of myth will be the basic springboard in approaching *Desire under the Elms*.

Desire under the Elms: Family as “thin’s pokin’ about in the dark”

Desire under the Elms shows a “pantheistic sympathy” (Engel in Di Mauro 1993 [1953]: 241) for this is a play that celebrates the divinity of nature, the triumph of a pagan naturalism over religion, the victory of the mother and son over the father. In spite of Ephraim’s obsession with a puritanical and Calvinist deity, “God’s hard, not easy” is a recurring idea of his, the play can be considered to show a non-Christian ethic: Ephraim is a “self-centered, loveless man who has projected his own personality into that of his god, a tyrannical, ascetic, restrictive embodiment of Puritanism” (245). Not only is God hard but “God is in the stones as well.” Opposing this puritanical Ephraim and his God is the spirit of Eben’s mother, a gentle sensitive woman that he married not for love, but for land. She died over-starved and over-worked leaving her son Eben to pick up the pieces. This is the source of tragic conflict present in the play.

Determinism can be found in the form of a mysterious force or presence that can be felt on the farm that compels the characters to act the way they do. As we shall see, it is similar to an “unseen hand,” which is the name for a play by Shepard, which alludes to the classical notion of (pre)destination. This “unseen hand” is easily noticed in Part II, Scene II in a key encounter between Eben and Abbie. Prior to that encounter, Ephraim had already mentioned something mysterious to Abbie: “They’s thin’s pokin’ about in the dark—in the corners” (*Desire under the Elms* 174). Later on in Scene III, in which Abbie seduces Eben both of them can feel a force and believe it is the presence of Eben’s dead mother:

EBEN: (*to the presence he feels in the room.*) Maw! Maw! What d’ye want. What air ye tellin’ me?

ABBIE: She’s tellin’ ye t’ love me. She knows I love ye an’ I’ll be good t’ ye. Can’t ye feel it? Don’t you know? She’s tellin’ ye t’ love me, Eben!

EBEN: Ay-eh I feel—mebbe she—but—I can’t figger out—why—when ye’ve stole her place—here in her hum—in the parlor whar she was—

ABBIE: (*fiercely*) She knows I love ye!

EBEN: (*his face suddenly lighting up with a fierce triumphant grin*) I see it! I sees why. It’s her vengeance on him.—so’s she kin rest quiet in her grave!

ABBIE: (*wildly*) Vengeance o’ God on the hull o’ us! What d’we give a durn? I love ye, Eben! God knows I love ye! (*She stretches out her arms for him*)

EBEN: (*throws himself on his knees beside the sofa and grabs her in his arms—releasing his pent-up passion*) An’ I love yew, Abbie!—now I kin say it! I been dyin’ fur want o’ ye—every hour since ye come! I love ye! (*Their lips meet in a fierce, bruising kiss*) (*Desire under the Elms* 179)

While working on *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O’Neill decided as he himself said to forget devices and to stop doing things to these characters and let them reveal themselves. There is a shift in emphasis and exposition is internalized and becomes the work’s central process rather than a set of devices grafted onto the action and the playwright is thus able to dramatize an internally constituted unverifiable past that is inseparable from the present. Lavina and Orin Mannon, clearly influenced by the characters in *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus, are doomed to re-enact the very crimes of their forbearers that they originally set out to avenge. Like Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones*, their seemingly forward progress turns out to be an endless circling back. Therefore, the past comes alive by being re-enacted in the present. As Patricia Schroeder states, “character confrontation leads to revelation of the hidden past, which leads back to character confrontation. The persistent past and the emotional reality of the characters could both emerge in a never-ending cycle of past and present that replaced linear causality” (Schroeder 1989: 46). This also points to the influence of classic plays.

Desire under the Elms along with *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is still considered to be one of O’Neill’s most successful tragedies but does it work as tragedy? Can it be considered so? Sophus Keith Winther presented an intriguing theory of the play as Aristotelian tragedy. According to Aristotle’s notion of *hamartia*, there must be a “flaw” in

a tragic character and the “flaw” must somehow account for the hero’s fall. In this play, O’Neill began to see the problem of tragedy in modern drama as different and opposed to the classical and traditional interpretations of Aristotle. Once again, we should bear in mind that in his own bombastic way, O’Neill once said that “I am interested only in the relationship between Man and God” (O’Neill qtd. in Krutch 1932: xvii). But if God no longer exists, how to go about it? Winther’s argument is fascinating because he posed a question that has stirred controversy about the play for some time. He placed Ephraim as the tragic figure in the play rather than Eben. Winther is not alone as other critics have stated that O’Neill himself was unsure as to who the tragic figure was exactly. Perhaps if looked at as autobiography it becomes clearer that O’Neill still felt himself overshadowed by the influence of his father, whose memory he still had not quite come to terms with. He goes on to suggest that *Desire under the Elms* poses the conception of tragedy as based on a theory of life and art that rests upon an idea or way of life.

Following in the steps of Ibsen and Strindberg, O’Neill discarded the superficial requirements set forth by Aristotle, particularly the notion of *hamartia* since “tragedy is something greater than a Victorian sense of pious acceptance of a divine order” (Winther in Di Mauro 1993 [1960]: 250). In his view, Ephraim is the character closest to tragic grandeur because one of his desires (in a play choc-a-block with desires of all sorts), perhaps his greatest desire is to get near to God. All the other characters seem to pale in comparison. Perhaps in the original production this was made manifest by the riveting portrayal that Walter Huston made of Ephraim Cabot. In his search for identification with his “hard” God and his God “of stone,” he is set apart from other human beings. He has three sons, yet feels that none of them are strong enough to inherit his patrimony; they are all dismissed as weak sniveling creatures. At the age of 75, Ephraim remarries in order to have another son that will hopefully be as strong as him. It’s almost as if the possession of the farm is equal to the knowledge of God. Like his god, Ephraim cannot be possessed by love of any kind. Even after Abbie murders the child and she and Eben are reconciled and reunited, aware and accepting their shared guilt “Ephraim looms over them like the ominous shadows of the elms that cover the house of Cabot” (251). Instead of destroying Cabot, the lovers succeed only in destroying their child and themselves. Their end is ignominious defeat. His wives (he’s had 3) and his sons have all betrayed him because they were weak and unable to understand that Nature has no special concern for their well-being.

The theory is interesting yet perhaps a bit too simplistic. Nevertheless, it does point out that one of the breaks that O'Neill makes with Aristotle is the fact that there is no tragic hero in his play with a traditional flaw, no idea of purification through suffering, which is perhaps debatable point. In addition, there is no sense of divine order based on the punishment of evil and reward for good as conceived by the Greeks and the Elizabethans. Ephraim is aware, however, of ultimate realities of forces that relate man to the physical world: "They's things pokin' about in the dark – in the corners" (*Desire under the Elms* 174). There must be a living force in an otherwise inanimate earth. If he is doomed to defeat in his futile struggle to know God, he is heroic in his determination never to yield. There is no indication that hubris in his case is a flaw. Though he later on frees the animals, which are the only creatures he feels in sync with, particularly the cows, he knows that loneliness is his fate, a type of power divorced from purpose. Just when he thinks of escaping the farm and leaving his God calls him back: "I kin hear His voice warnin' me agin t' be hard and stay on my farm." (*Desire under the Elms* 205)

Murray Hartman has traced the influence of Strindberg on *Desire under the Elms*. The main conflict is not between Ephraim and his sons and new wife but rather the "tragic possibilities" of man's involvement with the "mother-image" represented by Abbie. The seeds of the tragedy revolve around Eben's relationship with Abbie, who is a type of Madonna, mother-god, mother-earth, mother-temptress figure, both nurturer and destroyer. Since the elms in the title of the play connote the pervasive influence of the mother, the play is saturated with what Murray refers to as "a fugal pattern of sinister maternity" (Hartman in Di Mauro 1993 [1961]: 254). First is the ghost of Eben's mother, which haunts the first half of the play, until she is avenged by Eben and Abbie's lovemaking in her old bedroom. All the men in the play have slept with Min the tart, who represents "the prostitute-Earth Mother" (254). Eben even hoards it over his brothers by saying that if she had at one time belonged to Ephraim "she's mine now." (*Desire under the Elms* 148)

This idea of family "curse" is quite interesting. He states that "desire for, and identification with, the mother can cause evil to spread" (Hartmann in Di Mauro 1993 [1961]: 254). By this, he means that Eben identifies with his mother, while at the same time his brother Peter states that he is "dead spit' n' image of his Paw" (*Desire under the Elms* 145) In this sense, the conflict arises "not only from incestuous desire but incestuous hatred." But "the curse emanating from the mother, however, dominates, sifting down from the 'crushing, jealous elms and settling into the bones of the house" (254). It drives Cabot

out to sleep with the cows; it continues to permeate the household even when the family are celebrating the arrival of Abbie's baby. Cabot can sense it while he steps outdoors to get away from the revelries. "Even the music can't drive it out-somethin'. Ye kin feel it droppin' off the elums, climbin' up the roof, sneakin' down the chimney, pokin' n the corners" (*Desire under the Elms* 189). Once again O'Neill was inspired by Strindberg as the portrayal of a household invaded by an evil spirit, a family that is cursed as well as a sense of overhanging doom are staples in many of Strindberg's plays. In this sense, the play can be compared to *The Ghost Sonata*, *The Father* and *Dance of Death*. Another similarity with Strindberg is the theme of the murder of an unwanted child, which takes place more often in Strindberg's novels than in his plays.

He also has a curious theory regarding the use of ritual in the play. If Abbie is the "mother-mistress" who has become "the ambitious strumpet and murderess" then it means that "an anthropoid like Eben can be transfigured into a human being" by the terrible power of her love. "Yet he was almost destroyed in the maternal web" (Hartman in Di Mauro 1993 [1961]: 255). He concludes by saying that with Abbie and Eben the agony of love and birth leads to the agony of death and expiation, but then still greater love. Drama thus returns to its quasi-religious beginnings: the fertility rite mingled with redemption by mortal sacrifice." (255)

Edgar F. Racey traced what he perceived to be the influence of Greek tragedy on O'Neill suggesting that O'Neill was inspired not only by Euripides but by Racine as well. At this point, we should remember the differences between the two versions. In Euripides, the plot follows a pattern of sexual intrigue and betrayal that has parallels in ancient Mediterranean myths, mostly notably, the Biblical account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Phaedra marries Theseus who has a son, Hippolytus, from a previous marriage to Antiope. The young Hippolytus, however, angers Aphrodite by devoting himself entirely to Artemis, who the virgin goddess of the hunt. To punish him, Aphrodite compels Phaedra to want the young man and lust after him. At first, she resists and seeks magic cures for her passions, or at least a noble death. Hippolytus learns of Phaedra's desire for him through Phaedra's nurse and proceeds to denounce all women as evil. Out of shame and guilt Phaedra hangs herself leaving a letter accusing him of trying to rape her. Hippolytus is trapped into silence because he has promised that whatever Phaedra's nurse told him, he would never repeat. Therefore, when confronted by his father he is defenseless. Out of anger Theseus asks Poseidon to punish Hippolytus, which he does. Hippolytus dies as

Poseidon's bull emerges from the sea frightening his horses. Unfortunately it is too late and Artemis reveals the truth to Theseus concerning his son and Phaedra.

The goddess Artemis is questioned as to why she stood by and allowed her devoted follower to be destroyed. She reminds the chorus that there is an agreement among the gods that the favorites of one divinity can be destroyed by another divinity at will. It is scant consolation that she promises that someday she'll similarly destroy a mortal favorite of Aphrodite in revenge. However, in a different version of this story Hippolytus rejects her advances. Out of spite, she slanders Hippolytus and Theseus has the boy killed. Phaedra ends her own life from remorse over the boy's death for this was not what she intended.⁴⁰

O'Neill also uses the influence of the Medea myth. Medea, a barbarian witch, having betrayed her family to help her lover Jason steal the Golden Fleece, now finds him courting another woman, the daughter of King Creon of Corinth and a 'real Greek.' After failing to persuade Jason to return to her, she decides to kill her rival with a gift of poisoned clothing. She also decides to kill her children. King Aegeus of Athens stumbles along in search of a cure for his childlessness. He agrees to grant her asylum should she need it. She escapes from Jason at the end of the play on a dragon-drawn chariot given to her by her grandfather Helios, the sun god.

For many, *Desire under the Elms* includes all the trappings of a classical tragedy. Like *Buried Child*, the action takes place in springtime, traditionally a time for renewal. Unlike the Hippolytus of Euripides, Eben feels bodily lust as his experiences with Min, the prostitute show. It is also a foreshadowing of his desire to usurp his father's place and couple with Abbie, his new mother-in-law. Like Euripides's Phaedra, Abbie conceals her passion for Eben with a mask of scorn and also asks at one point that Eben be banished. To get revenge on Eben she also tells Ephraim that Eben has tried to make love to her. Like Hippolytus, Eben also muses constantly on the arrival of a "foreign" mother. The curse of the son, which was originally uttered by Theseus is transferred to Eben, who is the rightful father of the child. In this sense, the sin that has been committed happened prior to the action of the play—that sin being the wrong and harsh treatment shown Eben's mother by Cabot. The love between Eben and Abbie and the usurpation of the father's power (at least through physical love and childbirth if not his life and property) are the agents of retribution sent to punish Ephraim and condemning him to roam alone on the land that he stole from Eben's mother. Like Theseus, who rashly condemned his son to be murdered, he must atone for his injustice to Eben's mother.

By accepting his part of the guilt for the murder of his son together with Abbie, Eben submits to an ideal of love and justice, while Ephraim's downfall is assured. With his pride destroyed he is doomed to a life of exile and loneliness. In a quasi-religious way, the harsh puritanical ethic does triumph. As Ephraim says, "God is hard! God is in the stones!" (*Desire under the Elms* 204). O'Neill's tragic curses do not end with the death of the sinner; they must be expiated in a long and solitary process. If there is any catharsis in the play, it can be generalized into a kind of cosmic world order. This cosmic moral order can be found in the fact that, despite its bleakness, the farm is surrounded by natural beauty. The word "purty" is constantly repeated throughout the play-literally and ironically, particularly in the last scene. What is clear is that nature will always go on and time is cyclical.

Not only did O'Neill encode the play within the moulds of these playwrights but he also used religious symbology bordering on iconography. Hinted at in the names of the characters are Old Testament biblical names. It is as if O'Neill was attempting to enact a classical tragedy in a modern setting and an ethos, which loosely based on the Bible could support a tragic view of life. The name Ephraim is the same as that of a typical archetypal patriarch. Literally the name means "the fruitful," though it seems that O'Neill's use was rather ironic. The Old Testament God is one of wrath and retribution and, "the god of inevitable vengeance lends sanction to such an ethos" (Racey in Di Mauro 1993 [1964]: 257). In addition, the father-son battle and symbolic incest theme are also uses of myth. "The use of myth, as Eliot has pointed out, affords the artist both the necessary artistic control to explore his subject and the means of generalization. In both plays, we see O'Neill creating characters who, by their very natures, are endowed with the necessary motivation to enact the myth; both plays too, though in different ways, contribute to a unified dramatic vision and testify to the fact that this is the way O'Neill found life." (257)

Jay Ronald Meyers describes Abbie as the main tragic figure in the play rather than Eben or Ephraim. He backs up this notion by positing that Eben, despite the claims made by many for tragic stature due to the loyalty that he professes toward his mother, does not grow, suffer or attain any wisdom or compassion. Abbie is the only figure that grows in this sense during the course of the play. As previously noted, the Euripides version shows man's inability to exercise restraint over his desires as reinforcement for the traditional belief in man's impotence before the gods. Both Hippolytus and Phaedra are punished for

hubris, Hippolytus for his overweening confidence in his pureness and chastity and Phaedra for her uncontrolled passion for Hippolytus, both of which outraged the goddess Aphrodite, who takes vengeance. For the Greeks, man should learn to exercise restraint over his passions impossible though it might sometimes be. Racine's version, on the other hand, was not so concerned with explaining and justifying the ways of the gods but rather to explore the effects of guilt on a noble Christian. In his view, love and passion, when carried to extremes, are poison and Phaedra can only achieve expiation in death. It should also be pointed out that in classic tragedy, the deities or the gods do not approve of certain types of human behavior and, thus, many times characters are punished. As John Patrick Diggins suggests, "as in ancient Greek drama, the slightest incestuous love violates the order of nature, and instead of resolving conflict, drives it to its tragic end" (Diggins 2007: 98). Incest is also responsible for the (seeming) mystery and tragedy in Shepard's *Buried Child*. O'Neill puts a modernist twist on the story. The most notable variation is that of moral viewpoint. Whereas Euripides and Racine condemn incest as horrendous, O'Neill sanctions it. O'Neill owes a greater debt to Euripides in the sense that he is fascinated by "the psychological truth of the overwhelming effect of desire on character." (Meyers in Di Mauro 1993 [1967]: 258)

Cabot's sin is his ruthless devotion to a puritanical deity, the lack of love or compassion that he shows his wives and sons and his obsession with ownership and possession. By falling in love with Eben and committing incest, Abbie consciously gets vengeance on Cabot. It is worthwhile to note that neither Phaedra actually seduces the stepson in the other plays. By killing her son to win back Eben's love and devotion, she severs herself from Cabot's way of life. Therefore, love is redeemed. Unlike Phaedra, Abbie attains tragic nobility in spite of, or maybe thanks to, her illicit love. Through her relationship with Eben, she finds that love is not a means but an end, not merely the desire to own and possess but fulfilment in itself. The infanticide is for her the one action that will demonstrate her love. "By sacrificing the child-her claim to possessing the farm-she severs herself from the Cabot way of life. She redeems her love. The audience is made to sympathize with an action that would normally be repulsive" (Meyers in Di Mauro 1993 [1967]: 259). Somehow, not totally convincingly, Meyers concludes his argument by saying that the end of *Desire under the Elms* is "O'Neill's most profound statement of the perils of materialism" because the play offers a clear and moral vision, first and foremost of the evil of the worship of money, and also of the hardness of heart that afflicts those

who become infatuated. It is O'Neill's most devastating attack on the lust of acquisition" (259). There are echoes of this materialism and the desire to possess the farm in Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* as well.

Travis Bogard has offered the most compelling view of exactly how O'Neill was able to combine myth with dramatic realism and thereby create a modern form of tragedy. He called it "the first important tragedy to be written in America" (Bogard 1972: 200). Not only is it that but he also fulfilled his wish and "accepted the recommendations of the prophets of the Art Theatre movement that a realistic play, to have value, must move toward a more profound realism, revealing the psychological essences and primitive mythic forces working in modern lives and attempting to reach a state of "spiritual abstraction" (199). O'Neill had previously failed in his endeavours due to too much strain being placed upon the demand of the surface narrative and the symbolic underpinnings.

Unlike his previous works, O'Neill was now employing a more economic use of means and avoided startling stage effects and grotesque characterization as his expressionistic phase was now over. Bogard is of the opinion that, in spite of what he placed in his stage directions (in the "theatrical text" or written text) as opposed to the dramatic text (the text in performance), the symbolism of the mother does not come out of the often quoted stage direction that states:

[...] Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles. (*Desire under the Elms* 136)

The symbolism of Eben's dead mother comes out of the action and the novelistic rhetoric that links the elms with her holds no meaning beyond the printed page. In semiotic studies of the theater, this would be referred to as "The Paratextual." In addition, the name

of Eve, the first earth mother is also hinted at in the juxtaposition of the lovers' names Abbie and Eben, which also shows that O'Neill was also using biblical ideas for their names as well.

O'Neill was also experimenting with stage space and setting. The brilliant setting of the split stage with the two bedrooms juxtaposed in the same stage space was one of his most influential motivations. He also followed the classical unities of time employing the fluid unity of the setting (the house and its immediate environs), the cyclic controls of the action and also his use of an actual place in time: "the Cabot farmhouse in New England, in the year 1850" (*Desire under the Elms* 136). It is a real historic setting. The Cabots can only be of their own place and time. In this sense, by mastering the technical and stylistic means, O'Neill eradicated the absurd distinction between "commercial" and "art" theaters. The setting, as it is in all great plays, is finally the creation not of the designer, but of the playwright, who evolves its reality through his action.⁴¹

It is also important to note that the playwright was also interested in the American folk play, which had become quite popular in the years following World War I and employed conventional patterns of action, whose themes concerning the response of the characters to the land on which they lived, together with the use of local dialect and rural coloration, were something that American audiences could relate to. *Desire under the Elms* fit right into this pattern. O'Neill found himself "released from the necessity of devising fiction to embody his meaning" and was able to "explore to the full the philosophical and theological implications of his action" (Bogard 1972: 207). The freedom was complete and the results were profound. The play is so flawless that it can be read at many different levels of complexity and thus offer up more interpretations. At the least complex level, like Joyce's *Dubliners*, it can be read as straightforward realism in the American vein—a convincing realistic account of its characters moving through time and a fixed and recognisable milieu, with a sense of local and particular inevitability as well as a well wrought psychological construct.

Roger Asselineau calls *Desire under the Elms* "a philosophical tragedy about man and God" (Asselineau in Di Mauro 1993 [1980]: 283) claiming that the play owes a higher debt to metaphysics than to psychology. Like other critics, he places O'Neill's obsession with the relationship between man and God at the heart of his work because "he was a passionate pilgrim in quest of a shrine at which to worship" because his religious faith had

been “killed by rationalism and scientific materialism” (283). This might be interpreted as another modernist tenet, the search for a lost faith that was somehow went astray at a past time that cannot quite be pinpointed.

In this critic’s view, man is basically an animal. At the beginning of the play, we find Cabot’s elder sons, Simeon and Peter described as oxen whose only basic interests seem to be drinking, eating and fornicating. The only thing that separates them from the animal is the fact that they feel a desire for ownership. The one redeeming feature they have is a love of beauty and nature. This is family, like man in general, slave to their instincts and plagued by a Calvinist doctrine of predestination.

Eben’s temperament is wholly determined by his heredity seemingly, which is a combination of his mother’s softness and lack of will, combined with his father’s aggressiveness and obstinacy. Abbie is also another character who is trapped and with little choice of a decent home life she marries Cabot, 40 years her senior, so that she can finally have a “home” to inherit once Cabot dies. Ephraim is also caught up in the same web. As a repentant, almost degenerate Puritan, his Puritan compulsions have practically deprived him of any freedom of choice. These three characters cannot be called free under any circumstances. They bear psychological or moral chains. At the beginning of the play, we see that Simeon sets the mood by suggesting that death and all action come from “somethin’.” When Eben suggests that Cabot is responsible for the death of his mother Simeon retorts: “No one never kills nobody. It’s allus somethin’. That’s the murderer” (*Desire under the Elms* 141). The “somethin’” motif will be repeated several times throughout the play. This “somethin’” seems to represent one of the mysteries that impels men on whether they like it or not. Throughout the play, this is witnessed or presented under a guise of Puritan pessimism symbolized by the hardness of the stones, the ground and Cabot’s own grim God. How then is man to save his soul under such circumstances? It seems that O’Neill is suggesting that the soul can be saved through Nietzschean passion, the purity and transfiguring power of love, love as apotheosis. It is through the transforming power of love that “man can thus be redeemed and attain grandeur” (Assileneau in Di Mauro 1993 [1980]: 284). The “somethin’” that the characters notice as a mysterious presence or force is the desire of the play’s title. “The desire which flows through them is God” though the word is never used. This “God” is a “dynamic,

impersonal, pantheistic or panpsychistic deity [...] a pagan god, a Dionysian deity [...] a cosmic sexual urge, spontaneous, beautiful, unselfish and amoral.” (284)

A “God” like this representing the life force is the opposite of Cabot’s Puritan god, who is sterile, hard, harsh and lonely. In this sense, *Desire under the Elms* becomes a cross between Nietzsche and Freud. The final scene, prior to the imprisonment of Abbie and Eben, empowers the old O’Neill idea of “hopeless hope” perfectly. That love will triumph, if only momentarily over the empty sterile dreams of Ephraim, is made manifest. Even Ephraim realizes at the end that what Eben has done has required more courage than he had suspected his son possessed. “Purty good. For yew!” (*Desire under the Elms* 205) he tells Eben. The life force is symbolised by the elms that have been hovering constantly over the action of the play serving as a sort of chorus. Throughout the play, they can be said to be a physical incarnation of the “somethin’” the characters are always talking about. The “somethin’” includes the ghost of Eben’s mother encouraging the love of Abbie and Eben, compelling them to sleep together and produce offspring. Their only other choice is to remain like Ephraim attached to the stones.

Asselineau also agrees that, by writing this play, O’Neill was using his own life and attempting to convey “the secret expression of his poignant nostalgia for a joy of life that he was unable to experience.” He is also of the school of thought that believes that O’Neill became a playwright as a “means to live by proxy a certain number of problems which obsessed him.” He chose the career as a playwright because he had to write in order to “liberate himself and exorcise ghosts” (Assileneau in Di Mauro 1993 [1980]: 283). This notion also fits in well with Modernism.⁴²

Patrick J. Nolan traces the influence of Jung on *Desire under the Elms*, calling the play “a secular equivalent to the force of Gods in Sophoclean tragedy” (Nolan in Di Mauro 1993 [1981]: 286). This is borne out by what he refers to as a “depth psychology” based on the Anima-animus tension in the play, which can be illustrated by such Jungian polarities as conscious-unconscious, reason-instinct, active-passive and masculine-feminine.

The anima is soft and is represented by the elms-the female instinct. The animus is hard, masculine and based on the rocks and stones. According to Jung, these are universal archetypes “and their absolute need to be reconciled, the archetypes constitute the tragic tension between opposites that drives all individuals to their own form of resolution”

(Nolan in Di Mauro 1993 [1981]: 287). The anima-animus oppositions, therefore, constitute the Behind Life force which drives the Cabots on to tragic consequences with a pressure nearly as absolute as that of the gods on Oedipus. “Psychological forces, at the secular level, approximated as closely as possible to the absolute presence that spiritual forces once exercised on man at the religious level.” (287)

As mentioned previously, Joel Pfister would likely argue that what O’Neill was actually doing was substituting “depth psychology” for viable gods in a secular age. Nolan maintains that these forces of “archetypal instinct” combined with the Freudian Pleasure Principle now operate “as universally through mankind as once the gods prevailed” (Nolan in Di Mauro 1993 [1981]: 287). In other words, the psychological forces function at a secular level and in that way they approximate the once existent spiritual forces. Thus, was O’Neill poised to tap Freud and Jung in order to depict the force behind human motivation in the modern age. “An imperative set by Nature must be harmonized to another imperative, generally determined by conscious choice. To yield to the anima is the natural imperative in *Desire under the Elms*: to regulate the animus is the struggle imposed by the anima on Eben’s conscious will.” (287)

However, O’Neill’s vision of the anima-animus polarity differed from Jung’s. Contrary to Jung, O’Neill never saw the polarities working to resolution. In *Desire under the Elms*, the anima represents the feminine quality of love and the animus the masculine quality of greed. Until Eben and Abbie mate, the anima (represented by the elms and the ghost of Eben’s mother) broods over the house, having never been assimilated, literally or figuratively into the Cabot house. Like many others, Nolan speculates that O’Neill was engaged in unconscious autobiography, citing Dr. Philip Weissman, who wrote that “[i]n *Desire under the Elms* as in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, the character of the woman (Abbie and Eben’s dead mother) remains an unconscious enigma to the author in sharp contrast to the realistic portrayal of the father” (Weissman qtd. in Nolan in Di Mauro 1993 [1981]: 288). Regarding Eben’s relationship to the Anima-animus polarity, he is emotionally bound to his mother while at the same time he is also intellectually bound to his father’s possessive greed. His ego has run out of control and he needs the anima to help him control it. That Eben is striving for some sort of reconciliation with the anima can be seen by his constant brooding over his mother’s death and his desire to sleep with Min, the prostitute. Eben’s world is torn asunder by the arrival of Abbie. At this stage, we can see

the stage of “projection” because Abbie fulfils several archetypal notions of the anima, the mother, beloved, and harlot all rolled into one so to speak.

The arrival of Abbie causes havoc and a psychic split in Eben as *anima-animus* tension begins to enter into conflict over his emotions. Up until this point, Nolan’s theory is clear but he seems to be going out over thin ice when referring to the act of infanticide: “In the infant child, the mutual but separate claims of the anima-animus, of love and possession, find incarnation. It is the child of cross-purposes, and because the illusion cannot continue, the child must die” (Nolan in Di Mauro 1993 [1981]: 288). He reasons thus because the child will die in the name of love “as a repudiation of unqualified materialism. The patriarchal values, which to now Eben and Abbie support, must be diminished, consciously, so that the claim of love, of the anima, can be given complete respect and be allowed to become as complete and powerful a force as its psychic energy demands” (288). But isn’t Abbie the one to actually murder the child? Does this mean that Abbie is also possessed by the anima-animus polarity in her relationship with Eben? How does the killing of an innocent destroy these patriarchal values? Because ultimately the child will inherit the farm and continue with Ephraim’s legacy? Isn’t this child the offspring of Eben and Abbie and not of Ephraim? The ending seems much more dark and grim in this sense. If this is indeed the case, then there is no “hopeless hope” and the play goes down to a pure form of nihilism because in O’Neill’s world, “possessiveness must return to dominate the closing” (288). One thinks of the sheriff, who while taking Eben and Abbie off to prison, expresses his desire to own the farm “It’s a jim-dandy farm, no denyin’. Wished I owned it!” (*Desire under the Elms* 206). This interpretation is stark. Possessiveness once again prevails because though the play is unique among his works the play does dramatize “two characters coming into possession of this real unity and spirituality—a tragic victory made possible by O’Neill’s steady application of Jung’s vision of the anima” (289). However the resolution is undercut by a blatant return to desire as materialism. It appears that O’Neill’s gods are those of “masculine greed and possession.” Nolan concludes by suggesting that “Americans will never stop trying to find (the spirituality they need) in and through possession of things” (289). It seems that the only thing that can be shared is guilt and not property.

O’Neill’s most significant contribution to American drama with *Desire under the Elms* was undoubtedly the way he was able to portray a contemporary American tragedy.

With this play, O'Neill managed to create a world where Americans could feel and witness the mysteries that Greek audiences would have understood. In this sense, he succeeded in creating a type of secular tragedy. Like other art forms, theater creates worlds that may be realistic, absurd or fantastic for example but nonetheless engage an active or passive public. Regarding the phenomenology of theater, Bert O. States writes that the activity of the theater is to "make itself out of its essential materials: speech, sound, movement scenery, text [...]" (States 1987: 1). Using the ideas of Heidegger he goes on to say that theater is a work of art and the work of art is never "used up" and "remains beneath all purposes an assertion of a certain power to create, to bring forth" (2). What most theater tries to "bring forth" is the sense of awe, of wonder, what in older notions of tragedy were attempts to explain the relationship between the gods and the human's place in that world and how the universe hung together. According to this scheme, what arrives and is portrayed onstage is "the *truth* of the god" and not necessarily "a real god beyond it existing in some unavailable form" (2). What any art form, and theater is no different, is engaged in has been and is a mode of creating "a different kind of here and now." In the words of Heidegger, this means that "in the vicinity of the work we are suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be" (4). In other words, a work of art is capable of altering our perception of reality.

Desire under the Elms also displays elements of mystery and the supernatural as it attempts to build toward tragedy. Many contemporary critics have attempted to describe tragedy in modern terms. Preston Fambrough quotes the notion of tragedy which "sees man as a questioner, naked, unaccommodated, alone, facing mysterious demonic forces in his own nature and outside" (Fambrough in Di Mauro 1993 [1986]: 294). On the other hand, and according to George Steiner, the task of tragedy is to express "the inexplicable nature of the forces that destroy the protagonist [...] forces which can never be fully controlled or understood" (294). Richard Y. Hathorn suggests that tragedy is "a work of literature which has as its chief emphasis the revelation of a mystery" (Hathorn qtd. in Fambrough 294). The notion of mystery would seem to run counter to the prevailing intellectual current based on the rationalism of the enlightenment and a later modern age, which after the French classical period, chose to place more faith in science and reason.

O'Neill was evidently engaged in expressing the "impelling, inscrutable forces behind life" (O'Neill qtd. in Cargill 1970: 100) together with the relationship between man

and God as previously noted. His quest was that of an artist in search of a modern psychological approximation of the Greek conception of fate, a curious mingling of scientific and metaphysical language mingled with his notion of “ironic fate” as the main controlling element over people’s lives. In this sense, *Desire under the Elms* finds itself in both worlds portraying a mystical view of the forces at work in, and through, human beings as well as forces that manifest themselves in forms recognizable by the science of psychoanalysis. These forces as employed by O’Neill would ultimately transcend both.

In Greek tragedy and according to Aristotle, action appears to proceed naturally from character. Shaped in part by past experience and heredity in ways that reflect universal “laws” of human experience, action appears as the product of supernatural forces, a reaction against some sort of breach of the cosmic order. In this sense, action is both human and divine. Throughout *Desire under the Elms*, the characters are always saying that they can feel “somethin’,” something akin to a force, almost as if an “unseen hand” of control were guiding their actions. The fact that the characters refer to it through the use of indefinite pronoun “somethin’” “established from the outset the essential inscrutability of the fate at work in the play” (Fambrough in Di Mauro 1993 [1986]: 295). As has also been noted, the mysterious influence at work on Eben and his father can be identified, at one level, with the avenging spirit of Eben’s mother.

As previously explained, in Greek and Elizabethan tragedy, there often appear to be at least two levels of superhuman forces at work. In *Desire under the Elms*, on the one hand, we find a type of force represented by Cabot’s Old Testament God and, on the other, we find nature or the universe itself. Steiner maintains that the Greek Pantheon, representing the partly intelligible elements of man’s destiny, serve as a “reassuring mask” between human beings and fate. The tragedies of O’Neill reveal a similar cosmology. The reason for this is that the ubiquitous leitmotif of “thin” or “somethin’” “emerges as the common dominator linking these half-knowable forces and pointing to the ineffable mystery beyond it.” (Fambrough in Di Mauro 1993 [1986]: 296)

O’Neill had to contend with other difficulties while attempting to fuse classical tragedy and early 20th century realism. In 1969, Hugh Dickson wrote *Myth on the Modern Stage* and, in “The Family as Furies,” his chapter devoted to O’Neill, Dickson reminds us that, in spite of the death of the old gods and the failure of science and materialism that characterizes much of modernist literature, realism was still in vogue and was still the

dominant form of drama. He speaks rightly when he says that “playwrights who inveigh against it seem really to be attacking not the style itself so much as a popular preference for little else” (Dickson 1969: 149). Of course, realism implies accurate, if selective observation or physical reality. The usual tenets of realism are: plausibility in speech, manner and psychological portraiture and verisimilitude subservient to imitation. The pitfalls facing drama in the realist vein were due to the fact that it was difficult to give allegiance to the externals of realism while avoiding the implication of determinism through heredity and environment or of materialism. “Clearly this difficulty increases when the playwright derives his materials from classical myths.” (150)

He bases his argument on Northrop Frye who was perhaps the first to describe what he considered to be the two poles of literature: “the mimetic tendency to verisimilitude and accuracy of description” as opposed to “myth.” Frye elaborated further on how to make manifest what others might call the ‘numinous’ suggesting that what takes the spectator away from verisimilitude and toward myth is irony. “Irony descends from the low mimetic: it begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to appear in it” (Frye 1957: 42). Frye also offered interesting theories regarding the nature of tragedy. Though the views are extremely limiting, there are two basic contradictory theories: “Fatalistic” in which all tragedy exhibits the omnipotence of external fate and “Moralistic,” in which the act which sets the tragic process going must be primarily a violation of moral law, whether human or divine. In short, Aristotle’s *hamartia* or “flaw” must have an essential connection with sin or wrongdoing. (42)

Since O’Neill could not rely upon the audiences of his day to share a common history, religion or philosophy, he was forced to find that sense of inevitability or fate that had previously been inscribed to the gods, to man’s own psychology and hence to society. As to why the family takes such a central role in O’Neill’s plays (and we should say Shepard’s work for that matter), it is because we are simultaneously torn by love and hate, for we love the one parent and hate the other as our rival. And so the family, because it is the center of home, is also the center of hate. Regarding O’Neill’s return to realism in his late masterpieces, Dickson states the he “began with a naturalistic premise and hoped to obtain realistic results. Hence the choice of a modern, but not contemporary setting: psychic, not supernatural fate; real not mythical characters [...]” He concluded with a

most fortunate summing up on O'Neill's technique: "In the conception and the writing, realism was the end, not the beginning, of a long process of testing and discarding non-realistic devices of dramaturgy." (1969: 175)⁴³

We have previously talked about O'Neill's use of the idea of "somethin'." What is clear is that this mystery is being used as a way to describe mystery. This "somethin'" inconcrete, almost phantasmal or supernatural places this new technique at the forefront of his experimentation. As Normand Berlin suggests, "[f]or the first time O'Neill is tapping his subjective resources, his own psyche, in a creative way. Using classical underpinnings, he is writing out his own story in a tale of greed and desire set on a farm in New England in 1850" (Berlin 1993: 66). In short, he seems to have discovered a way to be "more able to effectively dramatize those powerful interior "family" feelings that will be tapped again and again in his best plays to come" (66). Berlin might be belaboring the point because O'Neill was still going to experiment a bit and write some not so brilliant plays before writing his last, great masterpieces. Nevertheless, "O'Neill is also bringing a need to his art, and that need, that powerful subjective impulse that remarkably comes through in objective drama, is the hallmark of his art" (67). He makes an interesting, if somewhat spurious, comparison between Shakespeare and O'Neill as well suggesting that O'Neill's plays, like Shakespeare's, "met personal needs in the man who wrote the play" and that both *Hamlet* and *Desire under the Elms* marked turning points in the careers of both playwrights. This is a trifle dubious perhaps not only because biographical information on the great Elizabethan playwright is scanty but, in O'Neill's case, autobiography was an absolute necessity. It is more difficult to find the artist, William Shakespeare in his own work because as Berlin himself notes, "he was so supreme an objective artist" (67). He is perhaps more on the mark when he concludes by saying that "O'Neill in *Desire under the Elms*, like Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, is offering a new kind of tragic experience in his art: in both plays the investment of the dramatist in the family situation is intense, plumbing deep feelings in the playwrights themselves, producing powerful emotions in the audience." (67)

If O'Neill turned to *Hamlet* in order to portray Eben Cabot, a man with oedipal feelings, who needs to avenge the death of his mother, then he resorted to *King Lear* for the character of Ephraim. The similarities are quite striking. Both plays are dramatizations of the relationships between parents and children. The notion of the tyrannical patriarch who has to put up with the curse of the "thankless child", which is how James Tyrone

refers to Jamie at one point in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, is perhaps universal as well since it can be seen in so many plays. Berlin suggests that “this is not an unusual feeling for a father [...] It is precisely because such an attitude is commonplace, pointing to family situations not significantly altered by time or place, that *King Lear* and *Long Day's Journey* and *Hamlet* and *Desire under the Elms* seem so representative, touching the experiences of all of us” (Berlin 1993: 68). Violence, murder, adultery, incest have been visited upon many dramatic families throughout history. It would appear that what is referred to today as the “dysfunctional family” has always existed and has always been a riveting and easily recognizable subject for audiences.

Lear is a king (a god-like one perhaps) yet, at the same time, he is a father. Ephraim Cabot is basically a father but one with king-like (or god-like) overtones. Both are old yet remain remarkably vigorous and active and are able to kick younger ones about. Both men come to symbolize the nature they are part of. Lear is the storm and rain, the weeds and flowers, whereas Ephraim is the stone and the land. Yet Lear is a man with a need for the maternal and if he weren't so self-deluded his daughter, Cordelia could be the person to mother him but, unfortunately, Lear is misguided and easily deceived by Regan and Goneril, and after disowning Cordelia, his reconciliation with her comes too late and she dies. As Berlin states “Lear loses all after realizing his own basic need, the need of a child for a parent, and now recognizing that need in his own child, now fully appreciating the love of the daughter-mother now lost.” (1993: 71)

Ephraim is like Lear. He is detested by his sons and he is the archetypical father against whom a son must revolt. As hard as the stones on his farm he almost becomes the stones. Yet, like Lear, Ephraim the father, this husband-has needs that go beyond his fierce desire to hold on to the farm, to control his sons and wives. He needs warmth and companionship and like Lear, he needs a mother and this is what makes him so complex and interesting a character. Mother is what Ephraim needs. “It seems that Mother lurks in all the rooms, and Mother, we come to realize is what Ephraim needs, without being conscious of it” (Berlin 1993: 72). That is why he goes to the cows, which are a conventional symbol of maternity. Abbie herself is a type of earth mother, always invoking the forces of nature full of natural desire and passion and vitality representing “the Dionysian urges that clash against the Puritan stoniness of the man.” (73)

Yet, nevertheless, the plays are about the destruction of families. Despite the Christian trappings and larger frames of reference in both plays, we come down to the terrible happenings within a family, the dark urges and consequent conflicts of all-too-human fathers and children. Both dramatists, of course, are tapping a common human source that can be discussed in psychological and archetypal terms, but O'Neill, as I'm suggesting throughout, fortunately has behind him the Shakespeare whose art gave these family matters their most effective dramatic representation." (Berlin 1993: 73)⁴⁴

Desire under the Elms is a superb title for the play because it is filled with desires of all kinds and whatever happens in the play happens under the elms, physically under them and symbolically as well as they represent both nature and Mother. Berlin makes a striking point when he equates the title with every character in the play. "What we have in the title [...] is the possibility of multiple protagonists or the family as protagonist—exactly what we have in the last great plays" (Berlin 1993: 75). We are unsure who the main characters in the play are and the plays are at times ambiguous or ambivalent, which is another sometime characteristic of Modernism. Perhaps O'Neill is similar to Faulkner in this regard. Using spliced time and multiple narrators, Faulkner also tried to portray the family as a single protagonist. One need only think of the Compsons of *The Sound and the Fury* or the Bundrens of *As I Lay Dying*. What Berlin says about Shakespeare might easily apply to other modernists like Joyce, Lawrence or Woolf. Both O'Neill and Shakespeare seem to thrive on ambiguities, inconsistencies, shifting perspectives. Ephraim is inconsistent, contradictory and complex. Like so many of O'Neill's (and Shakespeare's and Strindberg's) characters, he repels and attracts, is divided himself and divides us. The dividedness stems from a rich ambiguity throughout the play causing the audience perspective to shift as the play progresses, and not necessarily allowing the audience to come to a satisfyingly conclusive opinion or feeling. Thesis and antithesis but is there a synthesis in this play? Two lovers hand in hand waiting for the gallows. A solitary man, never understood and never understanding others, carries on alone. Should we feel sorry for any of them? For all of them? For none of them? "*Desire under the Elms* offers the same kind of mixed-reaction conclusion that we find in Shakespeare's tragedies." (77)

O'Neill's ending, built upon ambivalence and complementarities may have been influenced by Shakespeare's tragic endings, also offering shifting perspectives. Counterpointing was a technique employed by Shakespeare and implies clear oppositions

in the juxtaposition of visual images or spoken statements. Jean Howard, author of *Shakespeare's Art of Orchestration*, has explained that "Shakespeare deliberately divides the visual and aural attention of his audience forcing what she calls "psychic fragmentation" in an audience which, because of this fragmentation, becomes a participant in the drama" (Howard qtd. in Berlin 1993: 78). This can be seen in Shakespeare's use of asides as a contrapuntal technique to bring two opposing views to the audience. One of the most obvious examples is Hamlet's introduction to the audience, where he states that he is "a little more than kin and less than kind," thus showing his scorn for the word and revealing his innermost thoughts. There are other examples of visual juxtaposition to be found in Shakespeare, such as bringing two tents onto the stage at the end of *Richard III*, with ghosts wishing long life to Henry Tudor in mechanical fashion after the death of Richard III.⁴⁵

O'Neill's stage was more problematic because he was working with the fourth-wall convention and within a realistic acting tradition. But, as we have seen, O'Neill was constantly experimenting and was attempting to create an imaginative theater similar to that of the Greeks and Elizabethans and so he resorted to variations on their techniques: "In the non-expressionistic *Desire under the Elms* we find an effective variation on the Shakespearean ghost because the ghost of Mother is present but not seen, thereby fitting neatly into O'Neill's inherited realistic tradition" (Berlin 1993: 80). We also get to the inner character by means of soliloquy as we have previously seen. That Eben Cabot is a sensitive character can be seen by his various thought asides so to speak, one of the most important being that at the end of Act I, Scene II.

EBEN: Waal-thar's a star, an' somewhar's they's him, an' here's me, an' thar's Min up the road in the same night. What if I does kiss her? She's like t'night, she's soft 'n' wa'm, her eye kin wink like a star, her mouth's wa'am, her arm's wa'm, she smells like a wa'm plowed field, she's purty...Ay-eh! By god A'mighty she's purty, an' I don't give a damn how many sins she's sinned afore mine or who she's sinned 'em with, my sin's as purty as any one on 'em! (*Desire under the Elms* 145)

Eben is going to sleep with the prostitute Min in part to avenge his father, who has also slept with her and this is a foreshadowing of the oedipal urges present in the play as well. Notice that apart from revealing more about Eben's inner nature, the speech, as inarticulate as it might be, also shows O'Neill's use of repetition. The most obvious repetition here is that previously mentioned, the use of the word "purty," which is used by many characters throughout the play to describe the sunrise and the sunset, the farm and Abbie and Eben's son: "In *Desire under the Elms*, Eben's first words and last words-looking at sunset in the beginning and sunrise at the end-contain 'Purty', allowing us to come full circle and forcing us to realize what a long way Eben has come, travelling from sunset to sunrise (which, paradoxically and tragically, is death)" (Berlin 1993: 80). It is also revealing to note that when Ephraim finally begins to show a bit of respect for his son Eben, he uses the word "purty" as an adjective, which brings home the tragedy all the more. "Purty good-fur yew!" he snorts with "grudging admiration." (*Desire under the Elms* 205)

O'Neill was hindered by the fourth-wall convention which "did not allow him to achieve the Shakespearean fluidity and flexibility that the Elizabethan stage made possible" (Berlin 1993: 80). Perhaps it was for this reason that he hit upon the technique of using removable walls in *Desire under the Elms*, which allowed the action to move swiftly from inside to outside. The entire action of the play takes place upon the Cabot's farm. When the action takes place in a particular room, an exterior wall is removed: when the action takes place in more than one room, then more than one wall is removed. The device allows O'Neill to contrast indoor and outdoor scenes, or to contrast two or more indoor scenes. This method of staging remains realistic, but it allows for fluidity of presentation and it produces highly effective juxtapositions, such as the scene just prior to Abbie's seduction of Eben, where they are looking through the "wall" at each other while consumed by lust and desire. His use of removable walls allows him in the counterpointing, in the rhythm of presentation, in the combination of realism and stylisation -to be Shakespearean within the strict confines of the inherited realistic stage.

In *Desire under the Elms*, O'Neill settled into the realistic mode that would be the source of his greatest artistic strength, though for the next few years he was still to experiment with "new ideas" to varying degrees of success. Some of these depended on the momentous probings of Freud and Jung, which was expected to capture what the old Greek

and Elizabethan dramatists already possessed, a spiritual reality, call it an inner reality, that transcended surface reality by going deeper within and by going further beyond or behind. In addition, his usage of classical myths showed that he was more anchored in the classical tradition. As James A. Robinson suggests through his experimentation, “O’Neill repeatedly questioned contemporary theatrical authority [...] On the other hand, he repeatedly sought authority for his version by invoking classical models” (Robinson in Maufort 1989: 153). In this sense, “Ephraim’s power and endurance dramatize O’Neill’s yearning—the yearning of his age, and of modernist writers like Pound and Eliot in particular—for an authority which remains after all challenges have been exhausted; an authority which compels one’s ultimate acquiescence.” (153)

Long Day’s Journey into Night: Family as Tragic Presence/Present

In *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, the Tyrones do not need each other to carry on an argument; each is so consumed by guilt that he/she can play both parts. The present includes pressure from the past where good is something irretrievable and the present is always unsatisfactory. The Tyrones all react in terms of past grudges, betrayals and suspicions always looking for a scapegoat. What is clear by the end of the play is that the journey from day to night will be repeated again and again and neither traveling forward in time nor circling back via memory in the last analysis will make a significant difference.

Separating the past from remembrance is another major theme of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. How do memories clash, reshape or infuse the past? John Henry Raleigh has provided several valuable insights into O’Neill’s portrayal of memory stating that human memory, on many levels, manifests itself in three different overlapping categories: The “historical and communal” which refers to the notion of “what we are” and includes collective memories, forged by “one’s socio-economic class, ethnic background, education, religion and the historical period of one’s life, the autobiographical and personal, which includes the “who am I” and personal memories and the familial and social. Whereas social-familiar memories “have a tendency to pertain to both categories of the private and social, autobiographical memories are individual in that no one else, past,

present or future could possibly know” (Raleigh 1988: 63). He focuses heavily on the historical-communal memory of the Irish immigrant in American, claiming that the American experience for many Irish immigrants “engendered a self-indulgent communal morbidity” (63), which can be seen throughout *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. This “communal morbidity” has a tendency to focus on loneliness and fatalism, which triggered a rather morbid fixation on some sort of glorious past that may well have never existed and in which you lose your true self.

Family memories are powerfully fixed, indelibly described and never forgotten. We are what we remember as a collective group. On the other hand, individual or personal memory can be deceiving. One of the keys to *Long Day’s Journey into Night* can be found in the fact that no two people, be they man and wife, father and son, brother and brother ever remember all the same things and “when they do remember in common, as they often do, they do not remember those things in the same way” (Raleigh 1988: 67). Memory is often self-serving, operating to enhance one’s own self-esteem rather than to tear it down. There is a certain type of memory which does not simply remember the past, but is self-perpetuating. Such is the case of Mary Tyrone. She is the character who memorializes the most, coming to dominate the play at the end. O’Neill seems to have believed in a sort of physical or bodily memory, in which the person you had been years before never absolutely goes out of existence and can suddenly reappear at any time.⁴⁶

Memories are used as weapons in order to make the family suffer. Mary’s memory is abnormal in that it is “extended, complex, on occasion contradictory, problematical, obsessive, regressive” (Raleigh 1988: 68) and that she has a tendency to have more unpleasant memories than an average person. Her memories reveal an evolution over the play as a whole that embodies a dialectical movement: thesis, antithesis and synthesis, “a schizophrenic tug-of-war between the remote past and the past-to-present continuum of her post-marital existence, with finally one event of the remote past at last winning out” (69). This is, of course, meeting, falling in love with and marrying James Tyrone. In this sense, the thesis is the past-to-present continuum: her unhappy marriage, being on the road in cheap hotels with James Tyrone and the loss of her second son, Eugene. The antithesis, revealed in Act III, are her memories of childhood, in which she imagines herself to have been a pious girl, who could have easily become a nun and/or accomplished concert pianist. This is a memory that for James Tyrone borders more on a lie because according to

his memory (another difference between what each character remembers) she was not such a good pianist, or such a pious young girl.⁴⁷ As Tyrone tells Edmund in Act IV,

TYRONE: As I was saying, you must take her tales of the past with a grain of salt. The piano playing and her dream of becoming a concert pianist. That was put in her head by the nuns flattering her. She was their pet. They loved her for being so devout. They're innocent women, anyway, when it comes to the world. They don't know that not one in a million who shows promise ever rises to concert playing. Not that your mother didn't play well for a schoolgirl, but that's no reason to take it for granted she could have—(*Long Day's Journey into Night* 138)

The trunk may well be the best metaphor for the workings of memory portrayed in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. There are no photos to remind them of the past as there are upstairs in Shepard's *Buried Child*. Like the photos, it is interesting to note that the trunk is never seen since it is upstairs at the cottage, yet at points throughout the play, Mary can be heard walking back and forth upstairs and also “rummaging about in the attic looking for the wedding dress.” As Raleigh sums up,

“the potent symbol of a person alone in the dark ransacking the concrete memorabilia of the past, accumulated willy-nilly in a completely haphazard way over a long period of time and yet containing somewhere, somehow, a completely meaningful constituent, reverberating with life-long consequences. Her quest represents each person's search for the meaning of one's life, of which only memory has the secret, which it sometimes reveals and sometimes does not, sometimes happily, sometimes unhappily [...] so do we all alone and in the dark rummage around in the attics of our memories, looking for the secret of the meaning of our existence.” (Raleigh 1988: 72)⁴⁸

For each character, the past embodies an ideal, the moment when all was lost so to speak. Linearly speaking, there has been a progression from past to present. “This insistence upon linear time—seen variously in the steadily encroaching fog, Mary's

regression into the past and physical deterioration, the breakdown of the family unit, and the pattern of cultural assimilation that emphasizes the passing of successive generations—makes sense when we understand that each of the Tyrones locates either some ideal or lost ideal in the past” (Porter 1988: 84). Thus, time, like in the case of classical Greek drama, becomes the avenger and their arch enemy as it distances each of them from their lost ideal.

But, how to portray a past that is unfixable and unfinished? O’Neill’s methods for doing so varied throughout his career. His own artistic development was essentially accumulative and one of its constant components was an unrelenting insistence of the past’s complex and continuing influence. In *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, he finally succeeded. The fusion of the present and the past and the influence of the past on the present pervade the work from the beginning to the end. Even such innocuous comments as those relating to Ireland help to show that the past is ineluctable. When Jamie accuses Tyrone of being too cheap to pay for a decent sanatorium for Edmund because of his old-fashioned “Irish bogtrotter idea that consumption is fatal,” Tyrone retorts (and not for the first time): “I have every hope Edmund will be cured! And keep your dirty tongue off Ireland! You’re a fine one to sneer, with the map of it on your face!” (*Long Day’s Journey into Night* 80). Jamie answers that that will not be the case “after I wash my face” but what is clear by now is that everything that has happened to this family, even their Irish birthright has influenced their present in ways that they will never comprehend. We know, as does Jamie, that he will never be able to wash it off his face.

Unlike *Desire under the Elms*, which seems to have an “unseen hand” in the form of the ghost of spirit of Eben’s mother, or Cabot’s thinking that his God is in the stones telling him how to behave, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* is less fantastical. Determinism is based on past behavior, which in turn is used to blame everyone else for their shortcomings and the tragedy that their lives have become. In Act I, Jamie accuses Tyrone of being guilty of Edmund’s sickness and Tyrone accuses him as well:

TYRONE: It’s the truth. You’ve been the worst influence for him. He grew up admiring you as a hero! A fine example you set him! If you ever gave him advice except in the ways of rottenness, I’ve never heard of it! You made him old before his time, pumping him full of what you consider worldly wisdom, when he was too young to see that your mind was so

poisoned by your own failure in life, you wanted to believe every man was a knave with his soul for sale, and every woman who wasn't a whore was a fool! (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 34)

Later in Act II, Scene I, Mary attempts to explain to Edmund why Jamie is “always sneering at someone else, always looking for the worst weakness in everyone.”

MARY: But I suppose life has made him like that, and he can't help it. None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be and you've lost your true self forever. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 61)

If O'Neill was able to transform classical myth into modern secular tragedy with *Desire under the Elms*, he was to achieve even more success with *Long Day's Journey into Night*. In “O'Neill and the Tragedy of Culture,” Ernest G. Griffin talks about the late plays as being dramas of inwardness, what O'Neill himself described as conveying “psychological fate [...] psychic fate from the past [...] fate springing out of the family,” in a drama that “takes place on a plane where outer reality is a mask of true fated reality-unreal realism.” O'Neill also jocularly referred to the notion as “a hell of a problem” (O'Neill qtd. in Griffin 1988: 3). One of the reasons for the success of these later plays is due, to a great extent, on the uses of the devices by which he tried to restore the mythical “otherness” of “classic fate” combining it with a believably modern “psychological fate.” (3)⁴⁹

An obvious tool is the use of nature to reflect inner states of mind. One thinks of the ever encroaching and thickening fog that enshrouds the Tyrone's summer cottage, cutting them off from the rest of the world. This fog has uncanny similarities to the rain that falls persistently through the action of Shepard's *Buried Child*, cutting off another American family from the outside world. Another way of expressing the “otherness” of fate is expressed through verbal repetition. Again, in *Long Day's Journey into Night* the word “home” is repeated and becomes much more portentous as it slips away from its usual,

physical meaning and “home” begins to reflect a state of mind. The usage of mind-altering substances also permeates *Long Day’s Journey into Night* as alcohol and morphine cause the characters to lose control of themselves and perhaps speak too much. The use of monologue allows the main characters to express their “inner agon,” while other characters “become for a time the spectators of a chorus.” (Griffin 1988: 4)

In what Griffin refers to as “the tightrope between modern psychology” and “classic fate” (1988), O’Neill had to confront a basic question: What is the nature of the catastrophe in modern tragedy, what is the meaning of the death that is usually associated with catastrophe?” Griffin’s theory is that death becomes psychological before being physical. Indeed, in his late plays, with all the protagonists, “it is not the man who dies in a physical sense but the culture in which he has his being.” (Griffin 1988: 6) O’Neill’s late plays are full of emphasis on remembering and forgetting because human fate is to remember and forget and what we remember and forget at a certain time and place decides our real progress through life and helps in facing hardships.

Since predeterminism is of such importance in O’Neill’s work, in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* time becomes a crucial theme. The title itself is the first indication of the importance of time in the play. In linear fashion it traces an inexorable descent into darkness. Linear elements in the play include the day itself, with the various shades of sunlight together with the fog, which is described throughout the play. The sunshine in Act II turns into a “faint haziness,” is “dense” by early afternoon and thick fog by evening described as a “white curtain” and by midnight it is “denser than ever.” Another linear element has to do with the unfolding of the action, where it quickly becomes obvious that something has happened in the past that haunts the Tyrones and has shaped both their individual experiences of life and their relationships to one another. The play seems to start off in a happy morning mood but it soon becomes obvious that insignificant pleasantries bring a paranoid reaction. As we will see in Shepard’s *Buried Child*, the play is loosely based on mystery. What is this family hiding? Catastrophe in the past. Upon first reading or viewing the play we concentrate more on unravelling the mystery as clues are gradually revealed. There is a definite linear movement from a.m. to p.m., which also reflects the breakdown in Mary Tyrone as her past cannot be escaped. It haunts her relentlessly until she finally breaks down and succumbs to the morphine again. Mary’s regression, changes in physical appearance and the fragmentation of the family that results from her

withdrawal through morphine also show linear actions. Mary retreats in memory from an unhappy and frustrating present to the history of her unhappy married life, to Edmund's painful birth and her introduction to drugs, to Eugene's tragic death, to her courtship with James Tyrone and then on to her pious convent days. Mary's increasingly dishevelled appearance parallels this disintegration.

The third chronology is represented by the ever increasing isolation of the individual family members and the disintegration of the family unit. This disintegration is reflected in the symbolic arrangements O'Neill has prescribed for each family member. It is basically the same arrangement at the beginning of the play, with the family seated after breakfast with sun shining. Now it is midnight, the house is enshrouded by fog and everyone is in a mind-numbing state due to alcohol intake by the men and Mary's use of morphine. In this sense, the reunion at the end of Act IV becomes a mockery and a distorted mirror image of the closeness suggested by the opening scene.

Many would agree that the ritual used by O'Neill is the ritual of confession. Confession used as an escape from time. What becomes clear throughout the play is that the cycles of guilt become ever more expanding and all efforts to escape by retreating into the past are doomed to failure unless perhaps they are brought upon by mind-enhancing drugs like in the case of Mary Tyrone. Acts I-III are hopeless but Act IV opens up an element of hope as finally, thanks to the huge intake of alcohol, the family are finally able to speak to each other with some sort of coherence, at least regarding the male Tyrones. James explains his regrets about squandering his talents for easy money, Edmund reveals that the only time he was happy was when he was at sea, Jamie reveals his ambivalence towards his brother, Edmund. It is almost as if each were searching for a priest to absolve them of their sins. If the ritual is the confession of guilt and search for absolution then with Mary's arrival we see that the confessional ritual has failed and the Tyrones remain locked in time and nothing has changed.

These lost moments are all revealed in Act IV, the confessional act. For James Tyrone, it was the moment when Edmund Booth, the greatest actor of his generation praised him as a better actor than he was. "That young man is playing Othello better than I ever did" (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 150). James is a gifted artist, who married the beautiful Mary and seemed to have a wonderful life in front of him. For a while he was able to live the best of both worlds, the public and the private, but unfortunately this state

of affairs did last long. He blundered by letting the buying of “that play” (*The Count of Monte Cristo* in the case of James O’Neill) corrupt him with easy money and his career as a great Shakespearean actor was thereby foiled. He has also made serious errors in investing his money: “What the hell was it I wanted to buy?” (*Long Day’s Journey into Night* 150), he confesses to Edmund. Regrets and memories are all that are left him. Mary’s ideal moment in the past was her wedding day. Dreams were within reach. Unfortunately, it is an experience that can never be repeated. Her attempts to recreate this past can only be accomplished by totally divorcing herself from reality and disappearing into a morphine fog, at disastrous cost to her family.⁵⁰

Jamie’s despair is not that of an ideal not realized but more that of the shattering of an ideal. The day he discovered that his mother was hooked on morphine. Shocked that she was not the perfect being he had always imagined her to be he slowly sinks into alcoholism. He tells Edmund that “Christ, I’d never dreamed before any women but whores took dope!” (*Long Day’s Journey into Night* 163). Edmund’s ideal is different from the others in that it is not so family-oriented and has to do with transcendence yet it is also an experience that he attempts to recapture. His moment of “belonging” takes place when he is alone with the sea. As Porter observes, unlike the other members of his family, “the familial component, then, is clearly missing in his ideal [...] unable to experience unity with his family, Edmund seeks union with the cosmos.” (1988: 85-86)⁵¹

Memory lures these characters back into the past in an effort to return to their beginnings and as they do so “time turns on itself and becomes cyclic, and their constant awareness of the past takes another shape” (Porter 1988: 86). This shape consists of an endless round of “guilt-accusation-remorse-forgiveness-and-counterattack,” which she refers to as “accusational cycles” pointing out the similarity in terms with Manheim’s idea of the “language of kinship” (1982). One of the reasons this play speaks so movingly to American audiences is that, like the Tyrone’s, we experience a vague, nameless guilt associated with a lost ideal. Another continuum shown by O’Neill in this sense, then, is that the play is another tale of lost innocence so characteristic of American literature.

O’Neill did create a new equation between duration and memory, stage time and temporality. Through the use of monologue it was now possible for a character to be in the past and present. In the Tyrone’s case, the present includes pressure from the past where good is something irretrievable and the present is always unsatisfactory. The Tyrone’s all

react in terms of past grudges, betrayals and suspicions always looking for a scapegoat. What is clear by the end of the play is that the journey from day to night will be repeated again while neither travelling forward in time nor circling back via memory in the last analysis will make a significant difference. We can see a clear example of this in Act III when Tyrone, Mary and Edmund are talking about where Jamie went wrong. Why is he such a failure? Why does he drink so much? Mary blames Tyrone:

MARY: [...] You brought him up to be a boozier. Since he first opened his eyes, he's seen you drinking. Always a bottle on the bureau in the cheap hotel rooms! And if he had a nightmare when he was little, or a stomach-ache, your remedy was to give him a teaspoonful of whiskey to quiet him.

TYRONE: (*Stung*) So I'm to blame because that lazy hulk has made a drunken loafer of himself? Is that what I came home to listen to? I might have known! When you have the poison in you, you want to blame everyone but yourself! (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 110-11)

Another example can be seen in Act IV when Edmund and Tyrone are talking about Mary's morphine addiction. Edmund blames it on James:

EDMUND: Because you've never given her anything that would help her want to stay off it! No home except this summer dump in a place she hates and you've refused even to spend money to make this look decent, while you keep buying more property, and playing sucker for every con man with a gold mine, or a silver mine, or any kind of get-rich-quick swindle! You've dragged her around on the road, season after season, on one-night stands, with no one she could talk to, waiting night after night in dirty hotel rooms for you to come back with a bun on after the bars closed! Christ, is it any wonder she didn't want to be cured. Jesus, when I think of it I hate your guts. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 141)

What are the reasons given for the failure of the ritual? On the one hand, they are not so much confessing sins as revealing lost hopes and ideals. They do not really see their lost ideals as potentially destructive. Mary's regression into the past is "not the ritual return which regenerates, but its exact opposite: a return that destroys" (Porter 1988: 91). The Tyrones are a family that remains trapped in time. As Porter says, "the family, though physically united around the table, is tragically shattered. Their sacramental wine is a bottle of whiskey that fails to get them drunk; though they are together, there is no real communion" (91). On the other hand, she also suggests that the ritual fails because the Tyrones do not regard what they have done as requiring absolution. This is a debatable point at least in the case of Jamie. His confession to Edmund is the one that is most similar to the ritual. Even though he is drunk his contrition does seem sincere if not in the religious sense. He knows that his brother "absolves" him of his desire to want to see him fail and of turning him into a "Frankenstein."

The ultimate failure of the ritual, in her view, is that the Tyrones do not constitute a believing community. Neither individuals nor families can generate their own rituals. As *Long Day's Journey into Night* so movingly demonstrates, the family cannot successfully generate its own ritual if the appropriate cultural context is not available. In this sense, the play shows the dilemma of the American experience in that Americans are drawn onward in hope of the grail and borne back by our own ideals into the past, searching for peace but desiring possession. For O'Neill's characters though eternally out of reach, the past did at one time exist and could almost have a name and a time fixed to it. The same cannot be said of Shepard's characters for whom the past has become a series of disconnected fragments adding up to mystery shrouded in oblivion.

What is clear is that in O'Neill, the revelation of character through dialogue is of the first importance. For Aristotle, plot was the first essential for tragedy and character was the second. But for "bourgeois" theater as Georg Lukács describes it: "Character becomes everything [...] the conflict is entirely for the sake of character's vital centre [...] because the force disposed of by this vital centre alone determines the dialectic, that is, the dramatic, quality of drama" (Lukács qtd. in Fleche 1997: 26). So, in other words, in dramatic theater, dialogue "determines" character and character is the ground that determines "dialectic," the dramatic or dialogic in drama: "Dialogue and character depend on each other, and as character gains in importance on the modern stage, dialogue becomes

more and more heavily freighted. At the same time, the not-human world, the world of material objects, gets squeezed out by this dialogic form”. (26)

According to Andrew Kennedy, the confessional dialogue has remained a central structural element in many forms of naturalistic drama for many years. In order to write his late plays, O’Neill returned to this technique, especially in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *Hughie*. His reasons for this seem to be because he was in search not only for verbal but for existential authenticity as well. Some critics have considered this late return to a type of naturalism, a dialogue of speech-in-character, a step backwards. This became manifest in the decade of the 1950’s when theatergoers could see the late plays of O’Neill’s, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and Brecht’s *Mother Courage* (1939) and the “parable plays.” This juxtaposition heightened awareness about three different avenues of innovation in the modern theater. Kennedy states that “One of the more lasting critical insights of that direct experience in comparative drama was the acceptance of ‘the line from Ibsen’—in O’Neill and other dramatists—as a continuing dramatic form and language. The ‘conversational’ mode of dialogue had retained its own validity, alongside the epic and the absurd theater; all three modes offered immense potentialities—generative styles—for the future of drama” (Kennedy 1983: 181). In this sense, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and the obsessive intimacies of family life in a densely structured dramatic situation are the cause of an archetypal dialogue of confessions.

The play includes a number of images of water, the source of life and death, particularly by drowning. The fog is a symbol of isolation, the clock is run down but what is clear by the end of the play is that time is implacable and runs its course inexorably. Whiskey is also known for “drowning sorrows” and morphine is also known for drowning. Edmund’s being a little in love with death and also wishing to merge with the sea carries connotations of drowning. The juxtaposition of all these images may explain their need to escape the present. Whether the protective isolation of the fog, the forgetfulness of alcohol or drugs, or the mystical merging with the sea, the alternatives associated with water images are not viable ones.

In Act III while talking to Cathleen Mary tells her:

MARY: It wasn't the fog that I minded, Cathleen: I really like fog. [...] It hides you from the world and the world from you. You feel that everything has changed, and nothing is what it seemed to be. No one can find or touch you any more. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 98)

And in Act IV, Edmund tells his father a similar thing:

EDMUND: The fog is where I wanted to be. Halfway down the path and you can't see this house. You'd never know it was here. Or any of the other places down the avenue. I couldn't see but a few feet ahead. I didn't meet a soul. Everything looked and sounded unreal. Nothing was what it is. That's what I wanted—to be alone with myself in another world, where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself. Out beyond the harbour where the road runs along the beach, I even lost the feeling of being on land. The fog and the sea seemed part of each other. It was like walking on the bottom of the sea. As if I had drowned long ago. As if I was a ghost belonging to the fog, and the fog was the ghost of the sea. It felt damned peaceful to be nothing more than the ghost within a ghost. [...] Who wants to see life as it is, if they can help it? It's the three Gorgons in one. You look in their faces and turn to stone. Or it's Pan. You see him and you die—that is inside you—and have got to go on living as a ghost. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 131)

In this sense, O'Neill's play is clearly part of the continuum of the theme of lost American innocence. Their dilemma and that of the culture at large stems from being in time and longing for an ideal which is not. It is akin to "the American Adam searching for the Promised Land of realized hopes and dreams come true" (Porter 1988: 105). American culture is carried forward on the linear continuum while simultaneously it appears doomed to repeat the patterns of the past. This is what O'Neill was attempting to do with the Cycle plays, but then decided to repeat the same theme on a more intimate level by focusing on the individual within a smaller unit and a single generation, and this has become the family of course. With the later plays, the individual stands face to face with the fact that sooner or later time stops for all.

The continuum of endlessly repeating the past will be seen later in the works of Sam Shepard. Porter perhaps over stresses the religious imagery when she states that in chronological time “the hoped-for Messiah does not arrive, in whatever form” (1988: 106). Perhaps this is because most of the characters locate a golden age in the past and therefore the future holds forth no hope of any kind but rather an increased distance from what was once good. Memory, which should offer solace and comfort, is more like an accomplice of the enemy. It is the human faculty that forms linear movement into cyclical movement. Memories of the past trigger “accusational cycles” that shatter any hope for familial unity. Because they dwell so much on the past, to the point of practically reliving the past, they cannot forget past failures and recriminations. They locate personal ideals or their loss in a sort of history (the past) and for this reason it is impossible for them to live in the present or move forward into the future.

Another modernist belief was in the possibility of transcendence, or redemption of time. For virtually all of the characters, the ultimate result of memory, the lure of the past as it confronts the disappointments of the present, “precipitates the return-to-origins structure” (1988: 110) that make up O’Neill’s last plays. The pattern itself is identical as each drama explores a means of transcending the limitations of time. A strong chronological movement is countered by the psychological regression of the character and “their encounter with the past negates the present and turns time back on itself” (110). Porter claims that the quest to transcend time is “fundamentally spiritual” and that is why O’Neill uses so many references to ritual. The return to memory does repeat the past but the past can never be restored.

Between Mary’s “happy” childhood and the “unhappy” marriage lies the courtship and wedding, whose tangible memento is the wedding gown. One is reminded of what Marcel Proust once said about paradise: “the true paradises are the paradises we have lost.” But as Michael Wood suggests in his review of Proust’s work, this is also charged with ambiguity: “What was it Proust said about paradise? That all paradises are lost paradises? That the only true paradise is a lost paradise? That it isn’t paradise until it’s lost? That paradise is a name for a favourite form of loss?”⁵²

That memory is slippery and can be deceptive is illustrated throughout the play and the content of Mary’s memory gradually changes over the play as a whole so that by the end, we are in a totally different part or compartment than at the beginning. For this reason,

its form changes as well. During the first two acts, memory is brief, insistent, hostile, obsessive and atemporal and jumping about through time. By Act III, it has begun to settle into the far past and to take on more of a leisurely narrative reminiscent quality until, emboldened and dazed by the effect of morphine, she is able to go back into the past and relive her wedding day. As Raleigh says: “In a wild, weird, crazy O’Neillian way one could almost say that for her anyway the play has a “happy ending” (Raleigh 1988: 80). She has recovered the “lost paradise.”

One of the key lines in the play, which is said by both James and Mary is “where is it now, I wonder?” Both James and Mary had a high point in their lives, the ideal that was previously mentioned. For Mary, it was the day that she married James Tyrone and “was so happy for a time.” (*Long Day’s Journey into Night* 176)

MARY: [...] Oh, how I loved that gown! It was so beautiful! Where is it now, I wonder? I used to take it out from time to time when I was lonely, but it always made me cry, so finally a long while ago-(*She wrinkles her forehead again.*) I wonder where I hid it? Probably in one of the old trunks in the attic. Some day I’ll have to look. (*Long Day’s Journey into Night* 115)

As previously mentioned, the wedding gown is the tangible link to the past, the link she desperately seeks which, in one of her morphine-induced moods, she thinks she might have left in a trunk in the attic. For James, it was when he appeared in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*, sharing the stage with the great Edwin Booth, who raved about his performance, stating, according to James that “that young man is playing Othello better than I did” (*Long Day’s Journey into Night* 150). Years before, James had written down what Edwin Booth had said about him and, throughout his career, he had consistently carried it around with him, looked at it and cherished it as the high point of his professional career. Now, in his old age, he has misplaced it and almost forgotten about it, except when overcome by whiskey-induced melancholy while talking to Edmund, he thinks it must be somewhere but can’t recall exactly where and Edmund answers him ironically:

TYRONE: (*Sadly.*) Where is it now, I wonder? Somewhere in this house. I remember I put it away carefully.

EDMUND: (*With a wry, ironical sadness.*) It might be in an old trunk in the attic, along with Mama's wedding dress. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 152)

O'Neill's characters reflect his own despair in failing to reach the liberation that comes of having willed their present. Influenced by Nietzsche and Strindberg, he had already experimented with circularity in earlier plays, the most obvious ones being *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillen' got Wings*. Ella and Mary Tyrone return to the past whereas Yank and Brutus Jones go full circle. *Long Day's Journey into Night* uses a structural pattern, perhaps somewhat similar to Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, or Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The end becomes the beginning as a tale about one man's family becomes every family in which an overpowering love unleashes its own destructive seed. As Mary Tyrone says, "The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future too." (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 87)

In 1983, Reinhold Grimm wrote that if Ibsen and Nietzsche around 1870, together mark the beginnings of western drama at large, then *Long Day's Journey into Night*, written in 1940 "constitutes a most remarkable, in fact, a unique acceptance and combination as well as rejection and revaluation of those two determining forces and their overpowering heritage" (Grimm 1983: 131). But how is this so?

Ibsen championed Naturalism, endowing it with a sense of "tragic dignity" whereas Nietzsche, the most important modern philosopher, propounded a concept of tragedy "in as near the Greek sense as one can get" (Grimm 1983: 331), Ibsen perfected the well-made play and any comparison between *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Ghosts* shows O'Neill's debt to it. (Shepard was likely influenced by *Ghosts* as well for the ending of *Buried Child*). The play contains the classic unities of action, place and time. It is a typical analytical drama, a play where everything has already happened and is now either evoked and repeated or re-enacted, or gradually, yet inescapably brought to the fore. It follows the pattern already noted. It is a "family play" that takes place in a naturalistic "living room." The symbols are also strangely reminiscent of *Ghosts* as well. The "fog" enshrouding the Tyrone is reminiscent of the mist and rain of the fiord in Ibsen's play. Nevertheless, there

are crucial differences. The naturalists were convinced that human failure stems from the influence of heredity and milieu and can even be avoided or remedied (at times they were optimistic). O'Neill, on the other hand "can no longer share the Naturalist's optimism" (Grimm 1983: 332) because what has made the Tyrones what they are, what might account for their guilt and grief and misery, will probably never be fully understood, explained, cured or remedied "in either biological or sociological, or even psychoanalytical terms" (332). Grimm writes that "this insight into life as utterly cruel and merciless and terrible leads directly to the tragic world view of Nietzsche." In Edmund's "confession" to Tyrone in Act IV, he gives the dual Dionysian philosophy, albeit with an O'Neillian twist:

EDMUND: [...] Who wants to see life as it is, if they can help it? It's the three Gorgons in one. You look into their faces and turn to stone. Or it's Pan. You see him and you die-that is, inside you-and have to go on living like a ghost. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 131)

Later on, he adds the opposite view. There are times when you have a different vision.

EDMUND: [...] I belonged without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, of the life of Man, to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way. [...] It was like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand. For a second you see-and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason! (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 153)

Grimm concurs that "Edmund's contradictory vision of the immense horror as well as bliss, indeed beatitude of life is genuinely and thoroughly Nietzschean, for it is none other than Nietzsche's paradox of a Dionysian, i.e., tragic, world-view. O'Neill's indebtedness to the philosopher cannot be denied" (Grimm 1983: 333). Grimm would probably agree with Kalson and Schwertz⁵³ when he affirms that O'Neill emphasizes the negative aspects of the philosopher too much. There is a crucial difference between

Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and O'Neill's conception of it. According to *The Birth of Tragedy*, both "the eternal joy" and "the terrors of existence" are to be perceived at one and the same time [...] ultimately, what we derive-or ought to derive-from "every tragedy," Nietzsche insists, is the "metaphysical comfort" that "life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable." (333)

For Edmund, this paradoxical unity of tragic vision has disintegrated into brief moments of ecstasy and peace without pain, which seems to be irretrievably lost, and into an all-pervasive, everlasting spell of pain and doom without any joy, which solely, at least in the Tyrone cottage, morphine or alcohol can soothe. What has prevailed and will prevail is "the infinite sorrow of life" as Jamie puts it, or resignation and the final denial of life as such, of the very will to live.

3.2 Sam Shepard: The Classical Tradition Challenged

Tragedy as a genre begins to weaken after O'Neill. Either it borders on a mixture of guilt and capitulation—i.e. Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, (1955) Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956)—or turns into sentimental melodrama. The "hero-victims" of these plays attempt to resist injustice by blaming others who, in turn, become the victims of the victim. (Here Willy Loman is a case in point.) With the arrival of Genet and Becket, their new type of drama seems to provide a way out. John Orr suggests that "they release us from the suffocations of the flayed conscience" (1991: 35). The tragicomic persona is no longer a knowing person immersed in the dilemmas of conscience, but finds himself/herself beneath that level of knowledge. These "ludic heroes" are so baffled by the nature of the world in which they live that the ontological conditions for justice do not even exist. In realism, justice is signposted in order that it may be evaded. But in tragicomedy the capacity to distinguish right and wrong barely seem to exist. A clear indication of the inability to distinguish between right and wrong can be seen in the character of Bradley in *Buried Child*. All he seems capable of doing are feeble attempts at usurping Dodge's role through violent acts such as cutting his father's hair while he is sleeping. In another scene he forces his finger into Shelly's mouth in a type of symbolic rape.

Tragicomedy can also be referred to as “a complex transformation in [...] structures of feeling [...] it is a movement away from a sense of social experience anchored in tangible issues of moral right, of the good and the just and of their betrayal” (Orr 1991: 1). A great deal of this can, of course, be explained by the bleakness of events throughout the 20th century, two major world wars, revolutions and economic catastrophe. Whereas Modernism “fractures experience” and makes it uncertain, tragicomedy (Postmodernism?) refracts it and renders it even more bewildering. Orr calls these structures of feeling “play and disremembering—or disrecognition” and argues that they are “responses to major uncertainties on all planes of knowledge” (12). If to a certain extent modern tragedy was a liberal formulation, where the dilemmas of the heroes, as agonizing and resolutionless as they might be, were more readily discerned, and feelings of entrapment by unjust practices ended in tragic reversals, modern tragicomedy has no such pretenses. Rather, it denotes a movement away from a sense of social experience that is anchored in tangible issues of moral right and wrong, of the good and the just and its betrayal.

Modern tragicomedy poses a number of challenges to modern(ist) drama. One of the greatest is perhaps its abandonment of Ibsen’s and many other modern dramatists’ belief in the dramatic illusion of reality. Pirandello turned the theatricality of the stage into a type of nightmare from which there is no escape. On the one hand, his characters need to perform in order to communicate who they are and what they feel. The problem is that when they perform they no longer know who they are; they only know that they are not themselves. Their nature and their personae part company. The only possible reconciliation of the two is for them to believe in the illusion they have created. The sense of what human nature is, and how the theatrical persona ‘represent’ it, is called brutally into question.

This posits one of the main differences regarding modern dramatists. There are few (if any) referents to hold onto. Gone are the sureties of time, place and identity of the older dramatists. There appears to be little past and the future portends little more. One is reminded of many of the plays written by Sam Shepard. In *Buried Child*, we see a contrast with what is believed to be outside (supposedly a barren field) with what has actually been growing there (the corn and carrots that Tilden brings into the farmhouse). When Vince shows up and declares Dodge to be his grandfather and Tilden his father, neither one of them appears to recognize him. It is in this sense that tragicomedy seems to have robbed dramatic realism of individuality in opposition to social constraints, which, as mentioned before, were discernible by the spectator. Formerly, the spectator used to be able to grasp the exact notion of the moral dilemma. Even in O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms*, it is clear

that everyone desires something whether what is desired is attainable or not. By contrast, there is no assumption in tragicomedy that there is an objective reality which can finally be judged wanting or lacking, even going so far as to doubt that it can even be dramatically constructed. It thus becomes almost impossible for an audience to deliver any kind of verdict. Although many modern dramatists (particularly Shaw) could be said to provide enough details to make a judgment, in these works there is no vantage point from which any kind of special judgment can be made. Dramatic tension is brought forth by the uncertainties of everyone including the author, the audience and the actors, all of whom are caught up in a net of doubt.

Consequently, we are forced to question the nature of self at the same time that the certainty of knowledge itself is brought into question. Traditional ideals of individuality have eroded and from many differing points of view (scientific, philosophic) the demise of the rational person is prophesied. Even so, the tragicomic vision of the postmodern world does not foster this elimination of the individual subject. It suggests more a contradiction than an elision. Through the dark helplessness of its characters, tragicomedy poses a challenge to what Orr refers to as the “facile conceptions of postmodernism and of its deliberate embrace of the commodity process, of the fun of pastiche and of the delight seen to exist in the limitless horizons of consumer promiscuity.” (1991: 5)

Tragicomedy is also a theater that employs shock tactics in the sense that it uses effects which resist rational psychology or sociological continuity, and defy the ordinary so as to provoke the spectator into questioning established concepts of the normal. In spite of the horrors and suffering contemporary humanity has undergone, humanity has not remained passive and part of the modernist or postmodernist outrage is to show that such horror cannot abolish laughter, pathetic as that laughter may be. And, while the heroes of tragicomedy are indeed sometimes rather pitiable creatures, through yearnings and aspirations that will not die they still achieve genuine dramatic pathos. Whether or not we identify with them as we might with a Willy Loman is perhaps more a matter of personal temperament. I believe that O’Neill’s Cabot and Tyrone families can be identified with but it is certainly difficult to identify with the Tates in *Curse of the Starving Class* or Dodge’s dysfunctional family in *Buried Child*, though we do recognize them.

For example, we have seen some of the cycles of accusations and recriminations in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. Though many might not sympathize with the substance abuse that takes place, family quarrels as well as love/hate dichotomies are quite a common experience. In Act II, Scene ii we see a scene between James Tyrone and Mary.

James is worried about Mary's slipping back into her morphine habit and getting too high to be able to communicate coherently and suggests she take a ride in the car that he bought for her. Once again, Mary is offended by the accusation and retaliates by accusing her husband of stinginess:

MARY: You mustn't be offended, dear. I wasn't offended when you gave me the automobile. I knew you didn't mean to humiliate me. I knew that was the way you had to do everything. I was grateful and touched. I knew buying the car was a hard thing for you to do, and it proved how much you loved me, in your way, especially when you couldn't really believe it would do me any good.

TYRONE: Mary! (*He suddenly hugs her to him—brokenly.*) Dear Mary! For the love of God, for my sake and the boys' sake and your own, won't you stop now?

MARY: (*Stammers in guilty confusion for a second*) I – James! Please! (*Her strange, stubborn defense comes back instantly*). Stop what? What are you talking about? (*He lets his arm fall to his side brokenly. She impulsively puts her arm around him.*) James! We've loved each other! We always will! Let's remember only that, and not try to understand what we cannot understand, or help things that cannot be helped—the things that life has done to us we cannot excuse or explain. (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 85)

The conversation, together with the gestures make for a moment most can identify with. On the other hand, in Act III of *Curse of the Starving Class*, we find a sober Weston making breakfast for his family. While attempting to renew his life, he advises his wife to sleep on the table, which he has done all night so that she also may be restored to a new life so to speak:

ELLA: Are we waxing philosophical over our eggs now? Is that the idea? Sobered up overnight, have we? Awoken to a brand new morning? What is this crap! I've been down there all night trying to pull Emma back together again and I come back to Mr. Hyde! Mr. "Goody Two-Shoes"! Mr. Mia Capa himself! Well you can kiss off with that crap because I'm not buying it!

WESTON: Would you like some coffee?

ELLA: NO, I DON'T WANT ANY GODDAMN COFFEE! AND GET THAT SON-OF-A-BITCHING SHEEP OUT OF MY KITCHEN!!!

WESTON: (*staying cool*) You've picked up on the language okay, but your inflection's off.

ELLA: There's nothing wrong with my inflection!

WESTON: Something doesn't ring true about it. Something deep in the voice. At the heart of things.

ELLA: Oh, you are really something. How can you accuse me of not measuring up to your standards! You're a complete washout!

WESTON: It's got nothing to do with standards. It's more like fate.

ELLA: Oh, knock it off would you? I'm exhausted.

WESTON: Try the table. Nice and hard. It'll do wonders for you.

ELLA: (suddenly soft) The table?

WESTON: Yeah, Just stretch yourself out. You'll be amazed. Better than any bed.

(*ELLA looks at the table for a second, then starts pushing all the clean laundry off it onto the floor. She pulls herself up onto it and stretches out on it. WESTON goes on cooking with his back to her. She watches him as she lies there.*) (*Curse of the Starving Class 188-89*)

Hardly behavior, conversations and gestures that the average person might identify with. This is also made manifest a few seconds later when Wesley enters completely naked, picks up the lamb and takes it off stage without saying anything.

Tragicomedy has also been described as a poor theater. Unlike the lavish sets used by some of their modernist counterparts, these work with minimal props and little surplus. Tragicomic characters perform with no cues or prompting and with no real apparent motive. Orr suggests that this is because, while “they are bracketed out of the natural world, performance has no cushion of meaning, no safety net. Environment is no longer clear, tangible or rationally accessible” (1991: 6). What is perhaps more important is that the environment is “replaced by an inscrutable fate in which intention seems severed from human action, in which causality has been replaced by the randomness of chance” (7). If an inscrutable fate hovers over all of tragedy, then tragicomedy is no different. There is still an external force, an external “something” that determines human action, but it has no public face, no visible manifestation. One has only to think about Sam Shepard’s plays that are driven forward by an inscrutable fate, an “unseen hand,” so to speak, that is nowhere to be found but is palpable nevertheless. Fate becomes a random encounter with unseen traces which seem just out of reach. The traces are unknown, yet can be felt. They seem to belong to the past, to myth, to wealth. They are everywhere but never tangible or determinate. The game as fate becomes a mixture of chance and necessity whose respective ratios can never be fixed. The ultimate cause of anything can never be established. In the age of reason, the sense of human mastery is lost, which is one of the characteristics of the postmodern moment.

A key element to refer to the “super-real” or the “fantastic” can be regarded in light of tragicomedy. John Orr theorizes that tragicomedy provided a true rupture with Modernism. In this sense, Pirandello was the playwright who first broke the modernist frame in such a radical way. His plays “entail a decisive break between role and persona, and between truth and illusion” (Orr 1991: 15). In this scheme, absolute claims about truth and illusion are impossible where the ontological status of characters can never be fully established. Throughout the 20th century there was a growing uncertainty about the nature of self and its relationship to others. Dominant structures of feeling begin to stress two kinds of experience, playfulness and the breakdown in perception. Orr refers to these as “*play* and *disrecognition*” (17). An example of this can be found in *Buried Child* when Dodge and Tilden do not recognize Vince. Either they are playing with him (Dodge anyway as Tilden’s puzzlement is totally sincere) or “disrecognition” is taking place.

In Act II of *Buried Child*, Vince and his girlfriend stop to visit his grandparents Dodge and Halie on their way to New Mexico to visit his father, Tilden. Unbeknownst to Vince, Tilden is living there though neither he nor Dodge seem to recognize him:

VINCE: I'm Vince! Your grandson!

DODGE: Vince. My grandson.

VINCE: Tilden's son.

DODGE: Tilden's son, Vince.

VINCE: You haven't seen me for a long time.

DODGE: When was the last time?

VINCE: I don't remember.

DODGE: You don't remember?

VINCE: No.

DODGE: You don't remember. How am I supposed to remember if you don't remember?

(Buried Child 89)

When Vince insists Dodge denies it:

DODGE: Stop calling me Grandpa, will ya'! It's sickening. "Grandpa." I'm nobody's Grandpa! *(Buried Child 90)*

A moment later Tilden comes in but does not recognize Vince, either and just stares at him:

SHELLY: (*to TILDEN*) Are you Vince's father?

TILDEN: (*to SHELLY*) Vince?

SHELLY: (*pointing to VINCE*) This is supposed to be your son! Is he your son? Do you recognize him? I'm just along for the ride here. I thought everybody knew each other!

(*TILDEN stares at VINCE. DODGE wraps himself up in the blanket and sits on the sofa staring at the floor.*)

TILDEN: I had a son once but we buried him. (*Buried Child* 92)

Like O'Neill, Shepard turned to the family as a topic for his plays. When Shepard turned to family, it was to search for "something bigger" as he himself said and he chose the family as his theme as he wanted to "start with something personal and see how it follows out and opens into something bigger" (Shepard qtd. in Lippman 1984: 4). DeRose suggests that the "something bigger" that Shepard was pursuing was "the archetypal 'mythic emotions' that classic tales of the family had evoked in ancient Greek tragedy" (DeRose 1992: 93). As he said in an interview:

The one thing that keeps drawing me back to it is this thing that there is no escape from the family [...] It's absolutely ridiculous to intellectually think that you can sever yourself, I mean even if you didn't know who your mother and father were, if you never met them, you are still intimately, inevitably, and entirely connected to who brought you into the world – through a long, long chain, regardless of whether you knew them face to face or no. You could be the most outcast orphan and yet you are still inevitably connected to this chain. I'm interested in the family's biological connection and how those patterns of behavior are passed on. In a way it's endless, there's no real bottom to it. (Shepard in Roudané 2002: 67-68)

By consciously using the term "curse" and the imagery of heredity violence in the family, he suggests a link between his "starving class" Tates and such infamous family

lines as those dramatized in Aeschylus's *Orestia* "in an attempt to raise his domestic melodrama to the level of modern myth and to tap the collective contents of our repressed mythic consciousness" (DeRose 1992: 95). One wonders if Shepard was as conscious about doing this as many critics believe. I believe that, unlike O'Neill, he was unconsciously placing such specific myths in his plays.

Like O'Neill, Shepard was branching out to write family drama in order to move out of a wider social microcosm towards more intense bindings of kinship and the agony of genealogy. The steady movement away from modern tragedy in its Aristotelian form is now complete. As Orr suggests, "[t]he turn to family meant the search for lineage as a stronger guarantor of myth, even if that lineage was problematic, even if it was deceptive and self-defeating" (1991: 129). The family home, like the family itself, has become unfamiliar and there is a tragic inevitability in the collapse of the family. The Cabots and the Tyrones are much more easily recognized, once more undoubtedly because O'Neill was working more within the traditions. Undoubtedly Orr is on the mark, yet I believe that audiences today would not find Shepard's families as unfamiliar as he suggests.

Though Shepard's turn to family was similar to O'Neill's, what is probably just as important is that the movement away from tragedy in its Aristotelian form has become total by now. Though Shepard appeared to embrace a more naturalistic frame of meaning because "he affirmed what Pirandello and Beckett had achieved before him, a modernist rapture which made him closer to Kafka than to O'Neill, a sense of how the horrifying and the barbaric can inhere in the ordinary" (Orr 1991: 130). Unlike O'Neill's families (or Miller's or Williams's), Shepard's families seem to lack any sort of preordained unity, they are never really established as realities that can be logically explained. Neither the structure nor the status seems to have any grounding. As Orr says, unlike the previous realists and modernists, his family dramas are not based on conscience and its betrayal but rather on "comic and unwitting victims (who) conspire actively in their own damnation" (130). In the audience this produces a reaction of puzzlement to their plight rather than one of pity. The technique most employed by Shepard is his usage of "the shock of the normal" (131). Unlike the Tyrones or Cabots, the Tates and Dodge's family live together where the only given that is guaranteed is their proximity, which is usually in a single, enclosed space with minimal encounters and communication. What is significant about Shepard's family characters is that they may perturb the audience but that moralizing about their behavior becomes pointless. These plays by Shepard are similar to other American plays in the same genre by their usage of more conventional plotting and the use of melodrama. In the case

of *Curse of the Starving Class*, one can comprehend the typical family beset by hoodwinkers, thugs and heartless land grabbers trying to steal the farm from beneath their feet. The plot becomes a typical one; will the family be able to outwit these predators? “But Shepard subverts melodramatic cliché through modernist enactment, the comic and bizarre ways in which the drama of defiance, and lack of defiance, is performed. By acting out conventions, Shepard’s characters make a mockery of them” (132). There is no solidarity between his family members, either. Once again, unlike the Tyrones, one cannot imagine these family members closing together as a unit against a common enemy.

If the family has become unrecognizable so has the family home. The main indication of this is that there is no clear distinction between the outside and inside of the house. Weston himself has kicked down the door the night before the action of the play. Toward the end of Act II Weston arrives on stage, walks through the broken down door and finds himself face to face with the lamb in a pen in the kitchen and the breakdown between the outside and inside becomes even more confusing.

WESTON: *(to lamb)* What in the hell are you doin’ in here? *(he looks around the space, to himself)* Is this the inside or the outside? This is inside, right? This is the inside of the house. Even with the door out it’s still the inside. *(to lamb)* Right? *(to himself)* Right. *(to lamb)* So what the hell are you doing in here if this is the inside? *(He chuckles to himself)* That’s not funny. *(Curse of the Starving Class 156)*

The lack of recognition is an irony of a central convention of the naturalist stage. The three-walled room assumes an inside and an outside. It also assumes that one can be distinguished from the others. This scene of disrecognition plays not only on the stage convention of doors separating the inside and outside world onstage but upon the domestic convention of entering one’s own home as the most familiar of places: “The family home, like the family itself, has become unfamiliar” (Orr 1991: 136). The family patriarch is also unrecognisable as he looks more like the tramps of Beckett’s work or a homeless person.

One of Shepard’s greatest contributions to a new American mythology may well be his elaboration of a new myth of the modern artist. But, doesn’t this sound like what Eugene O’Neill was engaged in as well? Can it be that both playwrights were as intent on creating their own vision of America as well as their own vision of themselves as a type of

savior or critic? “I want to be an artist, or nothing” as O’Neill once wrote advertising himself (O’Neill in Bogard and Bryer 1988: 26). Shepard’s greatest contribution in this regard is his skill at mixing classical myth with popular myth and making a truly new American drama.

For reasons of space, below I will analyze only *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*. *Curse of the Starving Class* addresses fate, determinism and nihilism in a very clever fashion and so our focus will be primarily on these elements. *Buried Child* also deals with these elements but the past and memories will be included as well.

Curse of the Starving Class: Fate as Tragicomedy

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard’s characters are defined by their place and circumstance rather than by creating their own set and theme. In general, the characters can only enter the past or future through their own perceptions. The box-set appropriately confines the action in a claustrophobic environment. It seems that Shepard here is beginning to explore the way in which outside forces determine character, the character’s reactions to this constrictive environment and the way in which their actions are controlled by the abstractions of society, class, income, profession etc.

The “curse” or the “nitroglycerine in the blood” that the family gets is hereditary and its legacy is violent and nihilistic as Ella tells her son Wesley in Act II:

ELLA: Do you know what this is? It’s a curse. I can feel it. It’s invisible but it’s there. It’s always there. It comes onto us like nighttime. Every day I can feel it. Every day I can see it coming. And it always comes. Repeats itself. It comes even when you do everything to stop it coming. Even when you try to change it. And it goes back. Deep. It goes back to tiny little cells and genes. To atoms. To tiny little swimming things making up their minds without us. Plotting in the womb. Before that even. In the air. We’re surrounded with it. It’s bigger than government even. It goes forward too. We spread it. We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 173-74)

Later on when Emma gets arrested Ella tells Weston why:

ELLA: Possession of firearms. Malicious vandalism. Breaking and entering. Assault. Violation of equestrian regulations. You name it.

WESTON: Well, she always was a fireball.

ELLA: Part of the inheritance, right?

WESTON: Right. Direct descendant. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 188)

Throughout Acts I and II, we are given to understand that Weston is a violent man, yet what is clear is that, apart from the effects of heredity, there is also a political angle as Weston also fought during World War II when he was a pilot with the US air force. In a conversation with Wesley in Act II about Taylor, the man buying the farm from Ella and undoubtedly having an affair with her as well, he threatens to kill them. After all, it is what he was taught to do during the war:

WESTON: I'll find him. Then I'll find that punk who sold me that phony desert island. I'll track them all down. Every last one of them. Your mother too. I'll track her down and shoot them in their bed. In their hotel bed. I'll splatter their brains all over the vibrating bed. I'll drag him into the hotel lobby and slit his throat. 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. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 170)

A moment later, he explains to Wesley that he is different from Taylor:

WESTON: We don't belong to the same class. He doesn't realize that. He's not counting on that. He's counting on me to use my reason. To talk things out. [...] He's not counting on murder. Murder's the farthest thing from his mind.

Why is Weston so sure of this?

WESTON: I flew giant machines in the air. Giants! Bombers. What a sight. Over Italy. The Pacific. Islands. Oceans. Blue Oceans. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 171)

What is clear is that a lot of Weston's disconnect with his family, himself and his country stems not only from an inherited curse, but a societal and deterministic curse that he seems unable to avoid as well.

Later in Act III after Weston's rebirth so to speak, which comes way to late when Wesley informs him that the farm is no longer his and they are coming to kill him, we see another reason why he slipped into such carelessness:

WESTON: I remember now. I was in hock. I was in hock up to my elbows. See, I always figured on the future. I banked on it. I was banking on it getting better. It couldn't get worse, so I figured it'd just get better. I figured that's why everyone wants you to buy things. Buy refrigerators. Buy cars, houses, lots, invest. They wouldn't be so generous if they didn't figure you had it comin' in. At some point it had to be comin' in. So I went along with it. Why not borrow if you know it's coming in. Why not make a touch here and there. They all want you to borrow anyway. Banks, car lots, investors. The whole thing's geared to invisible money. You never hear the sound of change any more. It's all plastic shuffling back and forth. [...] So I just went along with it, that's all. I just played ball. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 193-94)

This a clear indication that Weston was also pushed into it by a society based on false promises and illusions, which also point to this idea of class, society and profession.

It is in Act I where we get the first clue that all the men in the Tate family are prone to violence and determined that way by heredity. The lawyer Taylor, who wants to own the

farm and is undoubtedly having an affair with Ella, Emmas' mother comes looking for Ella. Emma warns him her father might kill him.

EMMA: He's got a terrible temper. He almost killed one guy he caught her with.

TAYLOR: *(sitting in stage right chair)* You misunderstand me. I'm here on business.

EMMA: A short fuse they call it. Runs in the family. His father was just like him too. And his father before him. Wesley is just like Pop, too. Like liquid dynamite.

TAYLOR: *(setting attaché case on table)* Liquid dynamite?

EMMA: Yeah, What's that stuff called?

TAYLOR: I don't know.

EMMA: It's chemical. It's the same thing that makes him drink. Something in the blood. Hereditary. Highly explosive.

TAYLOR: Sounds dangerous.

EMMA: Yeah.

TAYLOR: Don't you get afraid living in an environment like this?

EMMA: No. The fear lies with the ones who carry the stuff in their blood, not the ones who don't. I don't have it in me.

TAYLOR: I see.

EMMA: Nitroglycerine. That's what it's called. Nitroglycerine.

TAYLOR: What do you mean?

EMMA: In the blood. Nitroglycerine. *(Curse of the Starving Class 152)*

Later in Act II, Weston explains to Wesley that soon he will have the same “poison” in his blood that he inherited from this father:

WESTON: Good. You’re growing up. I never saw my old man’s poison until I was much older than you. Much older. And then you know how I recognized it?

WESLEY: How?

WESTON: Because I saw myself infected with it. That’s how. I saw me carrying it around. His poison in my body. You think that’s fair?

WESLEY: I don’t know.

WESTON: Well, what do you think? You think I asked for it?

WESLEY: No.

WESTON: So it’s unfair, right?

WESLEY: It’s just the way it happened.

WESTON: I didn’t ask for it, but I got it. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 167)

Previously it has been suggested that Shepard, like O’Neill, was using autobiographical elements in his family plays. Another of Shepard’s autobiographical elements that can be seen in this play and its imagery is the working out of his own father’s anger when the family farm was sold by his grandfather to cover debts. Both Weston and Ella are constantly in the process of selling the farm. Ironically, it cannot be sold as it is going to be repossessed in any case as Weston, as we have seen, is severely in debt.

Once again, what is sometimes expressed about Shepard could also apply to O’Neill but perhaps with different nuances. Martin Tucker, for example, defines those who suffer from the “curse of the starving class” as: “those Americans whose spiritual needs—based on traditional, small-town and farm values and on the myths of the American west and its frontier—cannot be satisfied because the world in which they place their faith has

eroded” (Tucker 1992: 128). Nevertheless there are also differences as can be seen in *Desire under the Elms*. If we think of Ephraim Cabot once again we see that in O’Neill there is more grounding than in Shepard. Ephraim is still in possession of his farm and has survived three wives by the end of the play. As previously noted in O’Neill, there is always room for hope and even in Ephraim’s case he has reason to hope, maybe because of his religious faith as deluded and puritanical as it is. Shepard’s characters seem to lack any type of faith in anything. As a patriarch Weston is defeated, as is Dodge in *Buried Child*, but Ephraim is still in power so to speak even if his power is significantly diminished.

Indeed Weston does not even seem to be aware of what a family means since as he himself admits, he missed the “jumps.” His recognition of the fact also has echoes for American society at large. He tries to explain to Wesley why he has acted he did:

WESTON: I just went off for a little while. Now and then. I couldn’t stand it here. I couldn’t stand the idea that everything would stay the same. That every morning it would be the same. I kept looking for it out there somewhere. I kept trying to piece it together. The jumps. I couldn’t figure out the jumps. From being born, to growing up, to droppin’ bombs, to having kids, to hittin’ bars, to this. It all turned on me somehow. It all turned around on me. I kept looking for it out there somewhere. And all the time it was right inside this house. (*Curse of the Starving Class* 194)

To succumb to the “curse” of ineffectuality is this family’s only destiny. It appears that, like Wesley, Weston once tried to escape the “curse,” the “poison” of his own father but inevitably was drawn in and had to surrender. This can be seen in Act II when Weston is trying to convince Wesley that fixing the door to the house is a noble endeavor but a waste of time. At this point, Wesley has not yet succumbed to the “curse” and still has a philosophy of life or “outlook” as Weston calls it.

WESLEY: Why don’t you go to bed or something, so I can finish this door.

WESTON: What for? I told ya’ I’m selling the joint. Why build a new door? No point in putting money into it.

WESLEY: I'm still living here. I'm living right up to the point when I leave.

WESTON: Very brave. Very courageous *outlook*. I envy it in fact.

WESLEY: You do?

WESTON: Sure! Of course! *What else is there to envy but an outlook?* Look at mine! Look at my outlook. You don't envy it, right?

WESLEY: No.

WESTON: *That's because it is full of poison. Infected.* And you recognize poison, right? You recognize it when you see it?

WESLEY: Yes.

WESTON: Yes, you do, I can see that you do. My poison scares you.

WESLEY: Doesn't scare me.

WESTON: No?

WESLEY: No.

WESTON: Good. You're growing up. I never saw my old man's poison until I was much older than you. Much older. And then you know how I recognized it?

WESLEY: How?

WESTON: Because *I saw myself infected with it.* That's how. *I saw me carrying it around. His poison in my body.* You think that's fair?

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WESTON: Well, what do you think? You think I asked for it?

WESLEY: No.

WESTON: So it's unfair, right?

WESLEY: It's just the way it happened.

WESTON: *I didn't ask for it, but I got it.*

WESLEY: What is it anyway?

WESTON: What do you mean, what is it? You can see it for yourself.

WESLEY: I know it's there but I don't know what it is.

WESTON: *You'll find out. (Curse of the Starving Class 167-68; emphasis mine)*

Wesley finds an identity in his father's curse and therefore no longer feels the need to be ambiguous about what role he is to play. Shortly after this conversation with his father, he slaughters the lamb and later wanders out, finding Weston's discarded clothes and comes back into the house wearing them. All he really needs to do is to be true to the "curse" and to abide by it and obey it and not attempt a diversion from it or to flee from it. To do so would be to alter fate and completely escape. Escape in Shepard's three family plays is no longer an option.⁵⁴

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, it is not just the father's ghost who refuses to die but also a family curse, an inherited predisposition to violence. Like the "unseen forces" controlling Willie (the "Space Freak") in Shepard's *The Unseen Hand*, in *Curse of the Starving Class* we find that this "nitroglycerine in the blood" is a powerful yet invisible force, wreaking havoc on family members and turning them against each other in a downward spiral battle, symbolized by the story of the eagle and the cat, cursed to hold onto each other knowing that whether they go on or kill each other the result will be the same, total oblivion. As can be seen, some of these images border on the fantastic.⁵⁵

Curse of the Starving Class can clearly be placed on the American continuum of family plays like *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Albee's *American Dream* (1961) but there is a clear difference. Rick E. Amidon suggests that it differs because, unlike the aforementioned plays which investigate only to criticize

the moral and spiritual decay of the American family, *Curse of the Starving Class* “transcends that level and makes its way toward another sphere of understanding [...] it can be seen jointly as an exploration of what it means to be a member of an American family, and what it means to be a sensible son trapped in an eccentric, pathetic family and unprepared to escape its listlessness” (Amidon 1988: 33). One can only speculate as to what might have been the family’s reaction to crises had the parents provided a more emotionally and spiritually balanced environment for Wesley and Emma to live in, a sound environment where roles were well-defined and enhanced by love. As a result of their incorrigible, chaotic and rather disreputable existence, Wesley and Emma are casualties without values. They seem incapable of recognizing either their roles as family members or their roles as individuals outside the family unit. As the family falls apart, Wesley becomes Weston and Emma turns to a life of crime.

In Shepard, nihilism holds sway. There is nothing to inherit in his families nor can the fate of inheriting it be escaped is what Shepard seems to say. In a way, this might also point to the Modernism/Postmodernism debate spoken about previously. Modernism has grounding, in this case, the father as an authoritative figure. With Shepard’s postmodern grounding the patriarch’s authority (or lack of it) is not an issue because it is hardly even tested. The father-figures, like the son(s) in rebellion, seem to be merely going through the motions indicating the death of traditional values as well.

It would seem that heredity functions in *Curse of the Starving Class* in much the same way as the spiritual world of the Chindi in *The Holy Ghostly* and the emerging strength and zeal personified by Crow in *The Tooth of Crime*. By this, it is now a great, inexorable force which the protagonist cannot fully acknowledge until it has destroyed him. Heredity has become all-consuming. This break with tradition, (the father as a figure of authority) has led from respect (if not necessarily love) to a state of almost total nihilism. As Taav says,

It is the sacrifice (Wesley’s slaughtering of the lamb) which demonstrates, once and for all, heredity’s utter omnipotence. Despite the family’s attempts at circumvention, despite their recognitions and forewarnings, the “curse” has proven inescapable. We now see the Tates as having existed all along in a hopelessly deterministic universe where action is without effect, where love has lost its power to transform, and where a family’s fate is irrevocably decided at the moment of its inception. (Taav 2000: 43)

As Taav suggests, “[i]mplicit in Emma’s opposition is the belief that it is heredity, or more precisely, the socio-physical environment of the world at large, which determines one’s identity and fate” (Taav 2000: 35-36). Also implicit is the idea that there is no hope and Emma is espousing concepts that are rather nihilistic for a teenage youngster. In a world void of tradition even life in the family is akin to the “zombie invasion” that Wesley speaks about.

Buried Child: Family as Fate Parodied.

Built into *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* are extensive and highly visual patterns of ritual action and both plays end on a similar note. Ella identifies Wesley with Weston at the end of *Curse of the Starving Class* and Halie believes that Vince is Dodge. These rituals border on the “religious” in that they center on death and rebirth. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston has an epiphany after taking a bath, a ritual sign of cleansing. Weston decides that he is going to reform and lead a new life and put the farm and family back together. Alas it is too late. Shepard apparently rejects Weston’s brand of public atonement as too easy and escape from the ramifications of one’s actions. It is interesting to note that in imitating his father, Wesley does not experience the type of epiphany that Weston has. He dons his father’s old clothes and then states that “Nothing happened.” He proceeds to slaughter the lamb and eat it mocking the ritual sacrifice of the lamb. “The sacrifice was not efficacious: and what should have been a sacrament of communion became instead a grotesque gorging that did not satisfy his spiritual hunger” (Adler in Roudané 2002: 117).

Buried Child also alludes to myths yet uses them in more of the ironic mode, which at times borders parody. Dodge is classified throughout the play as dying and various symbolic inactions of his impending death take place through the gestures on stage. Shepard goes from realism to ritual and weaves them together into a stunning and puzzling combination. Various are the attempts to rob Dodge of his potency and “bury” him. If Dodge is conceived of as the Corn King (as the ritual “burying” of him in corn husks might suggest), then his replacement, Vince, is just as ineffectual as he is. This is the most basic

irony of all. As Vince takes his place in the final tableaux on the couch under Dodge's blanket, "the new god is as impotent and as unable to bring renewal as the old" (Adler in Roudané 2002: 118). Several burial rituals fill the play. There is Tilden covering Dodge in cornhusks, Bradley covering himself with Shelley's rabbit coat, and Vince covering Dodge's dead boy with red roses which is described like this:

VINCE [...] *(smells roses, looks up the staircase then smells roses again. He turns and looks upstage at DODGE. He crosses up to him and bends over looking at DODGE's open eyes. DODGE is dead. His death should have come completely unnoticed. VINCE lifts the blanket, then covers his head. He sits on the sofa, smelling roses and staring at DODGE's body. Long pause. VINCE places the roses on DODGE'S chest then lays down on the sofa, arms folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His body is in the same relationship to DODGE's. After a while HALIE'S voice is heard coming from above the staircase. The lights start to dim almost imperceptibly as HALIE speaks. VINCE keeps staring at the ceiling.)* (*Buried Child* 131)

Other scenes and actions are similar like Bradley's symbolic emasculation of Dodge by cutting his hair at the end of Act I. Like Weston, Dodge refuses to see any moral connection between past actions and present consequences. When he finally describes to Shelley how he killed the child that was born through an incestuous relationship he does so without any sort of remorse. This is sheer nihilism:

DODGE: [...] It lived, see. It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be a part of us. It wanted to pretend I was its father. [...] We couldn't let a thing like that continue. We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothin'. Everything was cancelled out by this one mistake. This one weakness.

SHELLY: So you killed him?

DODGE: I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of the litter. Just drowned it. (*Buried Child* 124)

Northrop Frye in his *The Anatomy of Criticism* describes what he refers to as the ironic mode. The ironic mode applies to lesser genres in his scheme of things and comedy

in particular. The most ironic phase of comedy is what he refers to as the “point of ritual death” (Frye 1957: 179). It might seem odd to some to say that *Buried Child* is a comedy yet it would be absurd not to admit that, like O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*, the play has very humorous moments although they may be characterized by black humor. The play clearly does follow a comic pattern. According to Frye, the “point of ritual death” features a plot in which the fear of death hangs over the central character until the end and is then “dispelled so quickly that one has almost the sense of awakening from a nightmare” (179). This also seems to be what happens to Dodge. Throughout the play, he is described as being weak, near death and it seems that most members of his family can’t wait for his removal. The ironic thing is that when he dies nobody seems to notice and even Halie, speaking to Vince, who has occupied Dodge’s place on the couch, does not realize she is not speaking to him. But as we have seen before, Shepard does not follow the ironic phase of comedy. Dodge is not “dispelled” from death and, despite the fact that his death is a form of spiritual rebirth, in Vince there is no “happy ending.” Shepard mixes various genres from melodramatic to comic to American gothic and tragedy. In this sense, the play may be viewed as a mixture of these genres and the family reunion in the play may just as easily be seen as a false sign of hope and redemption.⁵⁶ We have seen that in Shepard’s early work the son attempts to escape from his family/father. In many of these early works the characters try to transcend their physical and spatial limitations by attempting to create another different self.⁵⁷

Both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* have strongly deterministic auras. *Buried Child*, of course, plays with the mythos of the prodigal son, yet reverses it because the fathers in these plays are no longer able to provide a fruitful, life-giving legacy. When grandson Vincent shows up at the family homestead in Illinois, he brings his girlfriend Shelly with him. She expects to see the nuclear family as a “Norman Rockwell” cover and a home filled with “turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kinda stuff” (*Buried Child* 83-84) but “Shepard steadily undercuts such a mythos of the American family as it appears in popular culture by showing the disparity between the real and imagined” (Adler 2002: 114). As we have seen, Shelly’s attempts at understanding Vince’s family are constantly thwarted and as she is the onstage link to the audience, so are the audience’s as well. It is partly because Shepard’s plays refuse to provide the definitive sense of closure that audiences traditionally experience from dramatic realism; they invite multi-layered readings as allegorizations of experience, symbolic structures or mythic constructs.

Yet Shepard, like O'Neill is also writing socially and politically oriented plays, which places him clearly in the continuum of playwrights that rail against the United States with plays of social concerns. The social and political orientation is not overt, however. Shepard, of course, denies this. "The American scene totally bores me" (Shepard qtd. in Lippman 1984: 3), he once said, yet *Curse of the Starving Class* with its notion of the greed of speculators, and the loss of its agrarian dream would seem to fit right into this tradition. "This decidedly anti-capitalist strain with its implied criticism of a warped myth of masculinity that puts the attainment of money and power over providing emotional sustenance for one's family, links up in *Curse of the Starving Class* with an exposure of a myth of nationhood that pits the militarily strong against the weak and prides itself on dominance and conquest and oftentimes false heroics" (Adler in Roudané 2002: 119). Regarding his commentary on heroics, there certainly does seem to be an ironic twist to the myth of the American military when, towards the end of Act III, Vince comes back to the house roaring drunk and forces his way into the house while singing "The Marine's Hymn."

Notes:

³⁵ See Robert Brustein's *Theatre of Revolt* (1964): 4-44.

³⁶ Formal aesthetic rules regarding mimesis and tragedy were first laid down by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, dating from 350 B.C. For Aristotle, different art forms use mimesis with different means of representation, different manners of communicating that representation to an audience, and with different levels of ethical behavior represented. He maintained that mimesis comes from a fundamental "desire to know." Human learning itself is inherently mimetic and a certain pleasure is derived from learning through a process of "learning and inference." Literary mimesis represents a complete and unified action with a beginning, middle and end that are linked by necessary and probable causes. The art form should also be small enough in scope for the audience to clearly remember it. Art succeeds when the beginning, middle and end of an action are clearly and persuasively motivated (i.e. are sufficiently mimetic for learning and inference). According to this scheme, good plots should include *peripeteia* (a reversal of fortune), and *anagnorisis* (recognition of some unknown person or fact). Overly simple plots fail when there is no *peripeteia*; episodic plots fail when there is no *anagnorisis* and both should arise naturally from the plot. At the same time tragic mimesis should evoke pity and fear, pity towards someone who has suffered undeserved misfortune and fear when we realize it is someone like ourselves. Though pity and fear are painful in real life, in tragedy they are integrated into a structure whose goal is the intellectual pleasure produced by mimesis. *Hamartia* or the tragic flaw or mistake in a person's character was traditionally held to be a moral flaw. Now many argue that it is an intellectual mistake that cannot subvert the dignity of someone "like us" (i.e. for whom we feel pity and fear).

³⁷ See, for instance, George Lukács's "The Sociology of Modern Drama," *The Tulane Drama Review* 9: 4 (Summer 1965): 146-170 available at <http://es.scribd.com/doc/49885362/Lukacs-The-Sociology-of-Modern-Drama>. (Accessed October 25, 2009)

³⁸ Schwarz also believes that another difference between classical tragedy and modern is the fact that the end of modern social drama is not to render “Everyman’s disruption of the moral law and his consequent destruction, but everyman’s fatal involvement with the external and internal forces that shape his life; the end is to explore and, as Otto Mann has said, to *interpret* reality. But the pattern of such an analytic and mimetic rendering of life need not be logical, nor is it prefigured in myth or any known symbolic action.” (1994: 197)

³⁹ Griffin’s argument gets a bit complicated perhaps when taking the notions of “martyrdom” and “betrayal” in reference to O’Neill’s world. He equates sin with Eve and states that women are responsible for the undoing of the men, the most tragic and obvious being that of Mary Tyrone, who takes her family on a journey “from the dream of purity as a nun to [...] almost the mythical “night lay,” the Biblical reference to Lilith, the legendary first wife of Adam, the “terrible mother” hostile to childbirth and the newborn.” (Griffin 1988: 7)

⁴⁰ In Racine’s version, Phaedra incarnates a terrifying vision of human nature. Phaedra, wife of Theseus, King of Athens and Troezen, confesses to her nurse, Enone, that she loves her stepson, Hippolytus. Phaedra is hopeless with despair. When word arrives that her long-absent husband has died, Phaedra reveals her love to Hippolytus but Hippolytus is horrified and spurns her. Fearing that Hippolytus will reveal Phaedra’s transgression, Enone urges her mistress to accuse Hippolytus of rape. Theseus returns to his home (the news of his death was false) and finds his wife in despair. Confronted by his father, Hippolytus denies the charges against him and admits his own transgression that he is in love with the Athenian princess, Aricia. Theseus banishes Hippolytus and calls on Neptune to punish his son. Phaedra wants to clear Hippolytus's name, but news of his love for Aricia sends her into a jealous rage. Neptune intervenes and Hippolytus dies. Overcome with guilt, Phaedra poisons herself, but before she dies she confesses her guilt. Phaedra has a sense of purity and high moral awareness, but she also suffers from violent passion. Driven by a forbidden lust, Phaedra is constantly conscious of the horror of her emotions. Unable to control the events her passion has caused, she is tortured by guilt and a horrifying level of self-awareness.

⁴¹ See Bogard (1972: 199-225).

⁴² It has been noted that O’Neill was not only influenced by Freud but by Carl Jung as well. One remembers the influence of Jung on *The Emperor Jones* when Brutus Jones, alone on stage and in a tremendous monologue, takes a trip through the back roads of his mind into the entire subconscious of his race (at least according to O’Neill) straight back to the archetypal crocodile god. Polarities lie at the heart of all O’Neill drama, polarities which are heavily burdened at times with spiritual and psychic tensions.

⁴³ Like other modernists and writers in English in general, O’Neill was also influenced by Shakespeare and the most extensive study is Normand Berlin’s *O’Neill’s Shakespeare* (1993), which traces possible influences of the great Elizabethan playwright on his plays. Much has been written about Shakespeare’s impact on *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, but, according to Berlin, the family drama of *Desire under the Elms* bears more than just a casual relationship with *Hamlet*. In the first place, *Desire under the Elms*, as we have seen, is to a certain extent a dramatization of O’Neill’s own oedipal feelings. Berlin says that much the same thing was at stake when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* because it is “the play one feels Shakespeare had to write, the play written right after the death of Shakespeare’s father, when Shakespeare was probably the age of O’Neill when he wrote *Elms*, thirty-six—an age when, according to Ernest Jones, “a highly significant change [...] took place in Shakespeare’s personality.” (1993: 58)

⁴⁴ Shakespeare is also an important part of “O’Neill’s inner biography” for Berlin. O’Neill might even have had *Macbeth* in mind when writing *Desire under the Elms* for *Macbeth* is also about a couple, who due to love and desire for more materialism are led into the evils of murder.

⁴⁵ According to Berlin, “the fluidity and flexibility of the Elizabethan platform stage gave Shakespeare the opportunity to control naturally the rhythm of his plays, and the soliloquy and aside are conventions that allowed him to display the inner person.” (1993: 79)

⁴⁶ To a certain extent, Mary’s memory may represent what many have come to understand as what Raleigh refers to as the “malaise of twentieth century culture” (here I believe we could read “Modernism”) and that the memory exhibits “the tortures of being unable to escape past guilt,” a theme which can also be seen in the works of many modernists such as Joyce, Proust, Strindberg and Eliot. (Raleigh 1988: 67)

⁴⁷ That memory is slippery and can be deceptive is illustrated throughout the play and the content of Mary’s memory gradually changes over the play as a whole so that by the end, we are in a totally different part or compartment than at the beginning. For this reason its form changes as well. During the first two acts memory is brief, insistent, hostile, obsessive and atemporal and jumping about through time. By Act III, it has begun to settle into the far past and to take on more of a leisurely narrative reminiscent quality until, emboldened and dazed by the effect of morphine, she is able to go back into the past and relive her wedding day.

⁴⁸ In “Eternal Recurrence and the Shaping of O’Neill’s Dramatic Structures,” Albert E. Kalson and Lisa M. Schwerdt suggest that apart from being heavily influenced by Strindberg, O’Neill was also deeply influenced by the Nietzschean concept of “the circularity of eternal recurrence” which also provided a form for their drama (Kalson & Schwerdt 1990: 134). Laurin Porter would surely agree that he uses the notion in his late plays. “It seems clear that on some level, as he reaches a critical junction in the action of these late plays, he entertains the possibility of an eternal return, which breaks through the limitations of now and then of present and past” (Porter 1988: 10). The concept of eternal recurrence, however, contains within itself a negative component. Both Strindberg and O’Neill turned from the joy and triumph inherent in Nietzsche’s philosophy and dramatized its “negative aspect of man in the void.” O’Neill’s characters reflect his own despair in failing to reach the liberation that comes of having willed their present. O’Neill, a sometime Taoist but ever the reluctant Roman Catholic, as Shaughessey points out, for whom the ultimate movement is a linear one toward heaven or hell, was drawn to Nietzsche, “who, like his creation Zarathustra, was “advocate of the circle” (Shaughessey 1990: 146). O’Neill’s content owes much to what was personally meaningful to him in Nietzsche’s philosophy, but it was Strindberg who eventually looked beyond Nietzsche, who offered him the cyclical form that both dramatists found necessary for an exploration of an expression of that philosophy in dramatic terms.

⁴⁹ See also Chirico, Miriam M. “Moving Fate into the Family: Tragedy Redefined in O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*.” *The Eugene O’Neill Review* 24: 1-2 (Spring/Fall 2000).

⁵⁰ For a look at Tyrone and Edmund’s confessional dialogue from a Foucauldian point of view, see Geoffrey S. Proehl’s “Foucault on Discourse: O’Neill as Discourse: *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (4: 125-154) Tyrone and Edmund.” (1990)

⁵¹ In a recent study, *Eugene O’Neill’s Last Plays: Separating Art from Autobiography* (2005), Doris Alexander warns us not to take *Long Day’s Journey into Night* as straightforward autobiography: “*Long Day’s Journey into Night* is profoundly true, but never as a literal record of the family of Eugene O’Neill. Its truth lies in the universality of the human inability to achieve fully all the ideals and dreams of youth, in the picture it gives of the way a family’s past may determine its present and future, in its analysis of the intrinsic innocence of much guilt, and in its compassionate view of the inevitable human regret and loss. Had O’Neill written a perfectly accurate account of his youth and family, he would never have created the immensely moving and revealing tragedy that *Long Day’s Journey into Night* ultimately became” (2005: 147-48).

⁵² For a more detailed study on this issue, please visit Wood at <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n01/michael-wood/the-thing> (Accessed October 25, 2009)

⁵³ See note 48.

⁵⁴ The Chindi in *The Holy Ghostly* is a supernatural or fantastic element as is the image of the cat and the eagle just about ready to tumble to earth. Nitroglycerin is impossible to mix into the human body yet the image is fantastic.

⁵⁵ Peter L. Hays places *Buried Child* along with *Desire under the Elms* in an intriguing continuum of plays beginning with the ancient Greeks dealing with infanticide and incest. It should come as no surprise that these two famous Pulitzer Prize winning plays have at their heart notions of incest and infanticide. (Hays 1990: 434-48)

⁵⁶ His early plays such as *Rock Garden* or *La Turista* are stylistic vehicles for the examination of the subjective reality of the individual attempting to throw off the smothering influence of family and culture. One of Shepard's main themes is the difficulty inherent in determining the self, in other words how to affect the synthesis of the private self, the unique "me" and the public self which Laura Graham rightly defines as "a collective creation defined and limited by cultural influence and the psychological and biological influence determined by the family, the inherited 'Me'" (Graham 1995: 18). Shepard's family plays all deal with the need to escape and the impossibility of doing so.

⁵⁷ As mentioned earlier, the myth of the "curse" on the house runs through Western literature and American versions of it as well. The houses of Thebes and Mycenae are visited by it just as the House of Usher in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," The House of Cabot in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* and that of the Tyrones in *Long Day's Journey into Night* up to *Buried Child* as well. We can only assume that far from going away into exile it will continue to visit on the most inopportune occasions. We can also assume that Shepard is influenced by Beckett and the idea that nothing can be done to stop it. Though Shepard infuses his work with popular references, Americana and myths, the nihilism is evident. Like the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, the sons in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* will neither get what they want nor what they expect.

In an interview with Mona Simpson and Jeanne McCullough in 1997, Sam Shepard offered some of his ideas on the use of dialogue in his plays. Attempting to explain the best way to keep the audience's mind on what is happening on the stage and without going into other theories as to why or why not an audience may have a short attention span, he said: "You put something in motion and it has to have momentum. If you don't do that right away, there isn't any attention" (1997: 344). When asked to elaborate he added:

"You begin to learn an underlying rhythmic sense in which things are shifting all the time. These shifts create the possibility for the audience to attach their attention. That sounds like a mechanical process, but in a way it is inherent in dialogue. There is a kind of dialogue that is continually shifting and moving, and each time it moves it creates something new. There's also a kind of dialogue that puts you to sleep." (2000: 344)

Making sense of the contemporary age is no easy task as it seems that many artists do just what Shepard suggests and question the notion of control. Without coming to grips with past ages, it is nearly impossible to comprehend our present/contemporary age. When did it begin? How do we know? What signposts do we have for thinking this? To attempt to sum up the very notion of the postmodern as being a state with things "shifting all the time" may seem somewhat simplistic, but it may help to clarify some of the basic tenets of the postmodern debates that have been raging for the past few decades.

The concept of Postmodernism has existed since the nineteenth century but became more widely used starting in the 1950s and 1960s. If there is one continuum that characterizes the debate on this topic, it can probably be summed up by affirming there is something about Postmodernism that is always attempting to (re)define the notion of the new. As we shall see, the postmodern characterizes the work of Sam Shepard and discussions about it in this dissertation will focus mainly on his work. In much the same way, O'Neill's work is classified as modernist although his work may also overlap such

boundaries. Though his last works like *The Iceman Cometh* and *Hughie* may bring him into the domain of a more postmodern aesthetic, the focus of this argument is outside the scope of this dissertation.⁵⁸

The postmodern is a handy umbrella phrase to describe a whole series of notions about art and sensibility that have been taking place since roughly the 1960s. Perhaps Andreas Huyssen best describes the term when he states that whether we like it not, the term and notion of Postmodernism is well-ingrained and an established fact. He also talks about the notion of shift and transformation: “[...] in an important sector of our culture there is a noticeable *shift* in sensibility, practices, and discourse formations which distinguished a postmodern set of assumptions, experiences, and propositions from that of a preceding period.” (Huyssen 1986: 181; emphasis mine)

The “preceding period” he is referring to is another umbrella phrase for what is referred to as Modernism and most critics agree that without a proper understanding of Modernism the whole debate on Postmodernism becomes a cul-de-sac. According to one’s point of view, the two are mutually dependent or independent of each other. However, without a proper understanding of late romanticism, classicism, humanism, and so forth Modernism is similarly difficult to grasp.⁵⁹

There is a significant difference between the aesthetics of Modernism and Postmodernism regarding at least one point: the effacement of the boundaries between art and everyday life together with the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass or popular culture. As Huyssen says, “one thing seems clear: the great divide that separated high modernism from mass culture and that was codified in the various classical accounts of modernism no longer seems relevant to postmodern artistic or critical sensibilities” (Huyssen 1986:196). In other words, art as an elitist concern performed by solitary geniuses and encoded as a model of perfection has now become a thing of the past. The gap between elite culture and mass culture is blurred. Perhaps part of this distinction can be found in the approaches of O’Neill and Shepard to the playwriting process, which is the main focus of this dissertation.

Another point on which most critics agree is that, despite many apparent similarities between Modernism and Postmodernism, there is a difference in attitude towards their different trends. One of the most significant has to do with how the past is conceived. If the presence of the past is prevalent in both movements, Postmodernism seems to prefer reworking the past rather than looking upon it with nostalgia; as something

that, however perfect or imperfect it may have been, will never return. Many examples can be seen in many of the so-called historiographic, metafiction novels, which are self-reflective and yet paradoxically lay claim to actual historical events and personages. Such now classic novels as Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), or E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) immediately spring to mind. Of course, due to its public nature, American drama differs somewhat because of the structure of a play but some of this can be seen in many postmodern plays such as Arthur Kopit's *Indians* (1969), David Rabe's *Streamers* (1976) and Suzan Lori Parks's *The American Play* (1994).⁶⁰

In spite of the shaky nature of pigeonholing and before launching into a more comprehensive take on Shepard's *Buried Child*, especially from a seemingly postmodern viewpoint, it might be wise to consider what other critics have said about the debate. Stephen Watt speaks of the dangers of categorizing and speculation as to just when Modernism was superseded by Postmodernism: "It doesn't take long to be convinced, as I am, of the failure of the term postmodern drama as a roughly approximate term of periodization" (1998: 25). As we have already seen, if the debate is difficult for fiction, which most postmodern criticism concentrates on, it becomes even more clouded regarding drama. Needless to say the jury is not in.

In this sense, Postmodernism poses a number of challenges to the notion of liberal humanism and the seeking of truth by interrogating the very notion of consensus. If the modernists (or humanists) sustain that there is a separation between art and life or that human imagination and order are continually at war against chaos and disorder, the postmodernist questions this state of affairs. Since it appears to be virtually impossible to change things from without, change must be produced from within. The problem with the liberal humanist tendency or philosophy is that it contains a potentially elitist class bias. And as Antonin Artaud said, "[t]he author who uses written words only has nothing to do with the theatre." (Artaud 1958: 73)

Expressionism was also a drama of protest, a rebellion against the rigid lines of social order, the industrialization of society and the mechanization of life. The horrors of World War I and its senseless slaughter weighed heavy in the minds of many artists during the 1920s, when Expressionism reached its apex. It was also during the decade of the 1920s that the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung and the notion of the unconscious were being explored. O'Neill, of course, was heavily influenced by these new theories and

his plays of the time show it. Similarly, in the 1960s Shepard was influenced by Theater of the Absurd, the performance theories in vogue like those of The Open Theater or Wooster Group etc. and would also experiment with various anti-realist styles.

The emergence of modern drama as both a form and a movement was in direct response to a need to dramatically confront and represent a new human existence. As people began to view themselves as moderns, rather than simply being modern in the generic sense, their need for tools to interpret their confrontation with a distinctly modern reality began to assert themselves in all the arts. O'Neill experimented with Freudianism, Jung etc., whereas Shepard, being the child of the 1960s as he was, experimented with rock music, performance theories, and pop mythology in an attempt to explain contemporary America. Both of them seemingly to play with realism almost like children but with a respect and awe for its power: "Inherent in the dramatic form is the dialectic between illusion and reality, the attempt to explore the illusions that cloak an essential reality and to arrive at a distinction between what is true and false." (Simard, 1986: 10)⁶¹

Pinning down the how and why of Shepard's use of realism is no easy task. As we shall see, not all critics agree as just where to fit Shepard into the canon of contemporary criticism. Is he a modernist, a postmodernist, a high modernist, a romantic modernist, a reluctant modernist? Much of this can be put down to the fact that, while he is engaged with stretching the medium through avant-garde techniques, interested not in plot necessarily but in expressing an "emotion" or a state of "consciousness," he can also be almost moralizing and melodramatic. Within Shepard's family plays, there is a mixture of surface realism and a heightened sense of theatrical presence. Critics have used different terminology to describe it. In 1981, John Glore referred to Shepard's work in the family plays as "nova-realism" (1981), whereas Tony Silverman Zinman refers to it as "super realism" (1986). David DeRose calls the technique that he uses in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* the "superreal" (1992). Many avant-garde works are not interested in presenting a dramatic action, but in dramatizing a condition and Shepard himself has always been interested in states of consciousness. As we have seen, a lack of temporal continuity, a past that constantly slips away from view places him in what can be referred to as "the schizophrenic qualities of the postmodern condition" hinting at what Jameson refers to as a "series of perpetual presents" (1983). DeRose argues that Shepard repeatedly addresses the disorientation of the self in an environment which does not sustain the self's created vision of reality. Reality therefore fragments into a sequence of "unlinked events and images (signifiers)" which are experienced with heightened intensity. This he refers to

as “superpresence” (DeRose 1992: 135). By this, he is referring to the immediate presence of actors, objects and discontinuous action. This might be better summed up as “the fantastic” as described by Todorov:

The fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work -- in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. (Todorov 1975: 33)

Rather than representations of reality, Shepard seems to be more interested in transforming it or such is the thesis of Jim McGhee, who believes that the “undoubted appeal of Shepard’s plays and their possibly permanent importance are to be found in their transformations, rather than representations of reality” (McGhee 1993: 2). Shepard does seem to operate more in the realm of the fantastic than O’Neill, who in spite of using experiments like Expressionism, masks, thought-asides and grandiose staging worked within a four wall mimetic world. The challenge for Shepard when resorting to realism for his family plays was how to use some of his earlier experimental techniques in this transformation of reality. Undoubtedly, it would be through the fantastic, which can be summed up as an anti-expected event constituting a diametric reconfiguration or a 180-degree reversal of the ground rules. The fantastic may appear through the characters who express their astonishment at the anti-expected: by the implied author who structures the anti-expected events and by the narrator whose speaking “voice” has linguistic characteristics that mark it as coming from a particular time, place, and social group. The fantastic is a technique quite common to gothic novels, fairy tales, detective stories, science fiction, satires, and utopias. In Todorov’s conception of the fantastic, the text (or drama in this case) must oblige the reader/spectator to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described, the reader’s/spectator’s hesitations may also be experienced by a character. Thus, the reader’s role is entrusted to a character so to speak,

and at the same time hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work. The “reader” will reject both allegorical and poetic interpretations of the text and will maintain a state of ambiguity by suspending both belief and disbelief.

Shepard’s writing process is an open system of transfer and exchange of energy between the audience and the images being shown onstage, “communicating the Einsteinium perception that reality will not be still, and cannot be taken apart. Each element in his open system interacts with other elements so thoroughly that cause and effect cannot be separated” (Grant 1993: 124). Whereas Shepard’s early plays were explorations of the self in the performance of various roles including artistic creation, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* reveal an observation of self in relation to a specific sense of place and a sense of personal cultural history. *Curse of the Starving Class* has a bearing on his teenage years growing up in California and *Buried Child* relates to his earliest memories of his grandfather’s farm in Illinois and a sense of homecoming. Nevertheless, since these later plays are his most objective in their use of a realistic structure, their complex structure is capable of creating a more transformational shift in consciousness, “because the more coherent structure of symbolism and realistic dramatic devices is easily perturbed, for example, by the long monologues and excessive language and highly theatrical images of sound and light. By more coherently organizing recognizable signals in a realistic dramatic structure, Shepard encourages the audience to arrange the juxtapositions, the disruptions of the realistic mode, in a pattern explainable on both personal and more universal levels” (125). Unfortunately, this is not always possible for an audience that is being bombarded by such juxtapositions to grasp.

Like Shepard, many American playwrights of the 1970s began to experiment with form and performance. As Jeannete Saddick suggests, what many of these works have in common is “fragmented narrative as opposed to seamless narrative plot, the deconstruction of character, an acknowledgement of popular and mass culture, and a self-consciousness of performance” (Saddick 2007: 129). Reality is presented as a subjective construct rather than as an objective truth which is perceived by the artist. Experimentation with theatrical conventions and the subjective representations of the artist’s personal vision replaces mimesis in their works, as these artists are interested in redefining what constitutes meaning and experience and testing the limits of drama as performance. What they tend to have in common, however, is a sense of drama as “play” within a postmodern sensibility that blurs boundaries between role-playing and authenticity, for appearance and being, in

order to question the reliability of “truth” in dealing with salient issues affecting the instabilities of social identity. (130)

From the very beginning of his career as a playwright, Shepard has attempted to break with tradition, perhaps because, as we have noted, he was not even aware of it. In his early play *The Rock Garden*, Shepard relates in somewhat cryptic form a boy leaving his family. Shepard himself said that *The Rock Garden* is “about leaving my mom and dad” (rpt. in Dugdale 1989: 11) and is essentially a personal declaration of independence.⁶² It premiered along with his short play *Cowboys* and both plays might have gone completely unnoticed if it had not been for a critic from *The Village Voice* who saw the production and sang their praises. Michael Smith was aware of the rawness at work, the excitement that was being created in the Off-Off Broadway theaters. His review said that Shepard’s was “a gestalt theater which evokes the existence behind behaviour.” (rpt. in Marranca 1981: 72)

Yet darkness was also present from the beginning. A key term in Postmodernism present in Shepard’s plays and, to a lesser extent in O’Neill’s plays, is the theme of nihilism. It is common knowledge that “Nihilism” comes from the Latin *nihil*, or “nothing,” which means not anything, that which does not exist. It appears in the verb “annihilate,” meaning to bring to nothing, to destroy completely.⁶³

Postmodernism has an ambiguous relationship with Modernism. To recapitulate, it is safe to say that most would agree that Postmodernism displays a loss of faith in the “unfinished product” of modernity as well as a cultural longing for and an inability to return to and have done with the past. Modernist techniques to “make it new” through aesthetic revelations in form, style and content are mocked by the postmodern through the techniques of pastiche and repetition. The modernist notion of “progress,” that understanding can be reached “implies linear and causal increase through time, development, improvement, teleological faith” (Malkin 1999: 10). This is also rejected by the postmodern, which prioritizes concepts such as synchronicity, the simultaneous, the repetitive, the plural and the interactive.

The most classic distinction is also a truism—Modernism privileges time whereas the postmodern privileges space. The temporality in Modernism unites a historical thing of progress, sometimes allowing for the development of utopias. In Modernism, there is a belief in origins and hierarchy, in process, development and causality. There is a reason for the way things are, however difficult it may be to unearth this meaning. On the other hand, in Postmodernism there are only remains and traces. There is no progress, no moving

forward, nor was there ever. Perhaps the clearest and most relevant point to be made here is that the indeterminacy of an art object is based on each viewer's own memories rather than on any collective memory. As Malkin suggests, "[e]valuation is problematized by the lack of didacticism, fixed perspective and determinate meaning available" (1999: 13). Instead, what it does is mingle kitsch and irony along with humor and mourning, adding the simultaneous deconstruction of the quoted object and in that way, disabling an unambiguous response.⁶⁴

4.1 Sam Shepard: (Post?)Modernism

Shepard is generally classified as a postmodernist, yet there are many arguments regarding Shepard and the postmodern that overlap that it is sometimes difficult to precisely define why: "His is the first totally postmodern voice in American drama" (Simard 1984: 75). Others are not so sure and there are some who do not believe that Shepard is really postmodern. In trying to interpret Shepard's oeuvre, Stephen Bottoms suggests that because there are many different tensions at work that can generate differing meanings, Shepard's work "can often be seen as representing an unresolved conflict between modernist and postmodernist perspectives on such issues as the nature of self-identity, the search for coherence and meaning in late capitalist culture, and the creative process itself" (Bottoms 1998: ix). Grant and others, like Shewey, consider Shepard to be a modernist or even a "late modernist" because of his approach to dramatizing this fragmentation. David J. DeRose places him squarely within the realm of the postmodern aesthetic, particularly in his usage of the realist mode because within Shepard's family plays, the mixture of surface realism and a heightened sense of a theatrical presence lurking beyond that realism is palpable.⁶⁵

However, Shepard can be clearly considered a postmodernist playwright. For instance, if one resorts to Shepard's postmodernist idea of play, one will realize that since he was a child, the idea of "experimenting"—i.e. breaking with everything—has been a constant in his life. If Shepard's realist plays are somewhat more confusing and difficult to grasp, the end result is almost identical to that of O'Neill. The audience somehow

recognizes the characters. Using a psychoanalytical approach to O'Neill, Walter A. Davis suggests that "the individual psyche is an intrafamilial construct that can be understood only when one grasps the interactions that constitute and drive the psychology of the whole. Drama is an attempt to discover the structures that shape this process" (Davis 1994: 147). By the time Shepard writes *Buried Child*, the family and the nation as well have become so uncertain that the paradigms of realism have indeed collapsed and there is very little to hang onto anymore. Gone are the imperfect but strong father figures like Ephraim (a biblical archetype in *Desire under the Elms*) and James Tyrone (poor Irish immigrant who has made a decent life for himself in spite of the odds) and enter a much weaker father figure like Weston Tate (*Curse of the Starving Class*) and Dodge (*Buried Child*), both drunk, ineffectual and indolent. To further illustrate this, Dodge is not even given a last name in the play. The characters are just known by their first names.

A play like *Buried Child* may well be subversive as well. "If, on the level of familial guilt *Buried Child* exposes the way in which the patriarchy tries to impose order by silencing transgressive sexuality (incest and infanticide), on the level of national guilt the play may well be suggestive of a kind of historical amnesia, through which an unresolved historical event has been repressed" (Adler 2002: 12). Through plays such as *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, Shepard might ultimately be signaling the way in which contemporary American drama itself refuses to be bounded any longer in either content or style. It is a project in which he has helped lead the way, by wedding radical ambitions to traditional form.

Since Shepard grew up in small town America, his works are also tinged with this phenomenon. The town of Duarte, California, was also where he was first exposed to the different social and economic strata that define the U.S.A. The town had wealthy people, middle-class families and those who were downright poor: "It was the first place where I understood what it meant to be born on the wrong side of the tracks, because the railroad tracks cut right down through the middle of the place: and below the tracks were the blacks and the Mexicans" (Shepard qtd. in Wade 1997: 18-19). For those familiar with Shepard's work, the farm used in the setting for *Curse of the Starving Class* and the town in *The Unseen Hand* are clearly discernible. Once again, Shepard's comments about change, development, and growing up in the area are illuminating and help explain his philosophy: "These towns are obsessions of mine because of their accidentalness. [...] They grew out of nothing and nowhere." And just who populated these towns growing on the outskirts of

Los Angeles? “People who couldn’t make it in the big city just drove away from it. They got so far and just quit the road. Maybe some just ran out of gas. They began to nest in these little valleys. Lots of them lived in trailer camps. Weird government industries began to sprout up. People had work. It was a temporary society that became permanent” (19). Another dichotomy or another duality of American life is apparent here as well: the tension between the transient and the permanent, separation and integration. This might also illustrate another notion found in the work of Shepard: fragmentation. Shepard and his plays are also a reflection of separation and integration which is so inherent in contemporary American society and culture. “As the products of a fragmented society, one that at best has lost its sense of community, we, along with Sam Shepard, can never achieve a sense of wholeness” (Mottram: 1984: 2). However, this fragmentation has become a part, or a tic of the American character as well, something most Americans are aware of. Perhaps the American expression “it’s been real” is a way of countering this state of affairs.

It is clear then that Shepard’s earlier plays are more nihilistic than were O’Neill’s, once again, because of O’Neill’s notion of “hopeless hope” as well as his tendency to use melodrama. Shepard’s early works show a growing interest in mythical states and the depiction of wonder if, at times, there is a bit of paranoia in several of them. A notable example is *Icarus’s Mother*, a play loosely based on a July 4th celebration but that plays on anxieties latent in the audience. According to Bigsby, what Shepard was more interested in at this point of his career was that the images were “less those which are presented on stage (as Tennessee Williams make the glass menagerie a central prop and symbol or Arthur Miller the clutter of old furniture in *The Price*) than those which cohere in the mind” (Bigsby 2000: 177). *Icarus’s Mother* takes place on the 4th of July. The surface action of the play involves a group of friends on a 4th of July picnic, who are lying on the ground after eating and observing a plane flying overhead and the trail it leaves. After a series of silly loops and blunders, the plane climbs into the sky and writes a message across the sky “E equals MC squared” and then nosedives into the sea. The idea implies total destruction, nihilism in a nutshell. The images are not just placed there haphazardly, but are rather there to give the audience a referent and perhaps to suggest in the audience the silliness or inappropriateness of the referent in an attempt to debunk some of the more common American myths. Having grown up in the conservative 1950s, the decade of consumerism, the son of an ex-serviceman turned wayward and distant alcoholic may be another

explanation for why so many of his works show an antipathy or a tendency to parody the regimentation of American society. In some of these early plays, as previously mentioned, there is a brooding sense of imminent danger, almost of apocalypse. Perhaps his usage of apocalyptic endings may in part come from the nuclear anxieties of the 1950s—the appearance of H-bombs, fallout shelters and mutant creature horror films, all of which fostered a nihilistic edge.

This may be true in part, but there were likely darker and more personal forces at work on the young and upcoming playwright though perhaps not as severe as those that worked on O’Neill. There is an overriding tension in this play and this tension carries a sense of threat and terror and the surface reality begins to crack under pressure. This may not be merely societal pressures but also pressures and tensions building up within the playwright himself. Shepard’s family situation was still basically on the skids and he was spending a number of his working hours under the influence of various different chemical substances. It might have seemed true to many at the time that American society itself seemed to be coming apart at the seams and there is an underlying sense of emotional disturbance, which is perhaps mirrored in the structural instability of the play or perhaps it is vice-versa. This may be a debt or a salute to Samuel Beckett, the playwright who brought to the forefront the sense of nothingness behind everything and the attempts made by mankind to paste over this gaping void. Bottoms suggests that the early plays are darker in meaning and tone than originally considered to be. These early plays are “set in hermetically sealed worlds of individual, psychic terror [...] stage nightmares which foreground the *threat* to the individual self of a world which makes no sense” (Bottoms 1998: 41). Bottoms is at great pains to show that, at this point, Shepard was still working in “the American modernist tradition” because he was using an “enclosed, solipsistic writing style, foregrounding the expression of the intense emotional state in which any source of personal anxiety—from the collapse of relationships to the specter of nuclear war—tends to be viewed from the same perspective of individual survival” (41). Whether this is a characteristic only of the “American modernist tradition” is rather a moot point because it is probably safe to say that the fact that the world makes no sense is a continuum in American letters and to a certain extent has served as a sort of rallying cry for many American playwrights following O’Neill and for many writers of fiction as well.

Shepard’s *Action* (1975) expresses the need for some sort of shared belief and the effects of the lack of it. In many ways, the stasis of the characters, combined with the

minimal props onstage, hint at the need for landmarks, for contexts, for connection to something. As Wade suggests, “*Action* portrays a world without teleology, a world where Aristotelian action is basically non-existent” (1997: 66). The characters, who cannot seem to find a common language, resort to performative gestures alternately as acts of personal assertion in efforts to make contact. The characters seem to be groping towards some kind of illusory (lost) community. Shepard seems to suggest that the problematic status of a lack of a common community issues in large measure from the characters’ loss of a shared culture, especially an American culture. There are no identifiable obstacles or standards and the tenets of masculinity on the part of Jeep and Shooter seem to demand that Lupe and Liza conform to a rigid sex-role performance like hanging up laundry and preparing the turkey dinner.⁶⁶

In *Action*, Shepard is not attempting to capture something of the human essence of the art work but seems to be exploring more the postmodernist sense of pure fragmentation a play that borders those of the absurd and their exploration of the void at the heart of existence. This was a new tendency for Shepard, the use of theater as a means of emphasizing the consciousness of perception uncluttered by the urge for rationalization. Although there may be a total absence of meta-narratives, the play is not necessarily a rejection of them. And if postmodernism has done next to nothing to support its defiance of past pretence with a new practical antidote for old poison, then as Bottoms suggests, “men and women have been “left alone with their fears.” and “The Cartesain *cogito* has been redefined as ‘I am seen, therefore I exist’.” (1998: 123)

In 1977, Shepard wrote about his own work up until that point in a unique essay called “Language, Visualization and the Inner Library.” It is basically an article about the mysteries of experimental creation. In it, is the often quoted idea about his take on the notion of “play” in both senses of the word: “The reason I began writing plays was the hope of extending the idea of play (as in ‘kid’) on into adult life. If ‘play’ becomes ‘labor’, why play?” (Shepard rpt. in Marranca 1981: 214). In other words, the playwright does not want to be tied down by convention. For this reason, then, I believe that, like O’Neill, Shepard has always been experimenting with theatrical effect, with the theater as a vehicle for expressing his own concept of himself and his country at the time of his life. Experimentation is the basis of all art and any artist who wishes to make a mark must, of course, test the boundaries of their medium.

Buried Child: The Past Sure is Tense

A significant element of *Buried Child* that places it in more of a postmodern mode is that, while it seems to follow the conventions of classical drama and the well-made play, it shuns and even seems to sneer at the rational closure of such plays. Once again, we should point out the difference with O'Neill, who follows a more classic staging in his plays. But the classic staging does not add up to a nice, neat closure. In fact, it is everything but and narrative resolution is elusive. Just when resolution seems to be in reach, it slips away into contradiction. The action of *Buried Child* begins in a relatively realistic manner that gradually becomes unfixed. One of the directors of the play, Michael Smith, said that the play "needs reality in order to transcend reality" (Smith qtd. in DeRose 1992: 101). Shepard has claimed that it is simpler to unfix traditional dramatic reality if at first you begin with a surface realism that most spectators are comfortable with. This is also a trait of the postmodern. Set up a false sense of ease before subverting the action. As he told Amy Lippman, "I like to set it up at the beginning so that everybody's happy, so that nobody's trying to figure anything out. Everything's okay to begin with. To begin with something that is unrecognizable and too immediately mysterious is confusing, because no one knows where to go. But if everybody starts out thinking they know where they are going, then you can go in a different direction." (Shepard qtd. in DeRose 1992: 101)⁶⁷

One of these different directions has to do with character and another reason for this lack of rational resolution or closure has to do with a character's behavior, especially in traditional realist drama. But in Shepard's work, the character's behavior defies rational analysis. In O'Neill's plays, character motivation can be understood but in Shepard this is not so clear. In Shepard's plays, a character's behavior has been at the center and the characters in *Buried Child* are no different. They have rather large personalities with rather simplistic identity-projects. What is missing is a more rounded character because they only possess fragments of character. The locus for this flexibility is the element of character. The important aspect for the playwright is a character's flexibility. He must have flexibility so that he can move characters from one type of behavior to another in order to underscore the irrational code. In *Buried Child*, the demands of the fantastic mode create the conditions of character and the characters themselves lack the inner motors which reside in the characters of realistic dramatic features.

It is generally agreed that Shepard revitalized the form of American domestic realism. Lynda Hart goes so far as to say that he “has given new life to the inherited structures of the past in much the same way that Ibsen injected truth and substance into the lifeless conventions of the well-made play” (Hart 1987: 66). In the later Family plays, parts of the realistic framework are obvious. The names of characters are more recognizable: Emma, Wesley, and Vince are people we might know compared to such characters as Shooter, Jeep and Crow, for example. They are defined by their place and circumstance rather than by creating their own set and scene. Time and place are also fixed and the characters cannot control the outside world through their own perceptions.

In this way, Shepard begins to explore the way in which outside forces determine character, the characters’ reactions to their restrictive environment, “and the way in which their actions are controlled by the abstractions of society-classes, income, profession” (Hart 1987: 68). Nevertheless, he meshes these realistic techniques with elements of the fantastic as we have seen. The rain that is falling down outside the house in *Buried Child* is described as falling in “blue sheets” and the garden itself takes on supernatural or fantastic qualities as Tilden keeps bringing in crops from that land that we are told has been barren for years.

Another element of the postmodern is the troublesome relationship of the present with the past. In O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, we have seen that “the past is the present, it’s the future too.” *Buried Child* tells a similar tale but without the modernist notion of nostalgia for the past. Unlike O’Neill, whose characters seem to follow a more classical structure as we have seen, Shepard’s characters seem to fit right in with this notion. At times they seem to be attempting to deny time and to live without it. There is a desire for the past to remain in the present and in the memory as a physical, concrete and lasting entity. If we combine this notion with the whole movement in modern drama away from the belief in logical causality and the capacity for objectivity, then it comes as no surprise that Dodge, in *Buried Child*, suggests that the past never really happened. This is another technique of the postmodern and blends in well with the idea of “play” previously mentioned.

Shepard is also playing with melodrama. We have seen how O’Neill managed to transcend melodrama in his last plays but how is Shepard going to handle the same problem? That this family is plagued by a horrible secret symbolized by the infanticide that is hinted at throughout the play makes the audience uneasy since it seems as if the secret is

never going to be resolved. We have seen how in *Long Day's Journey into Night* the characters are aware that, unhappy as it may be, they do have a past behind them. In Shepard, this is far from clear. Dodge claims that the past "never happened" yet keeps on insisting that something did indeed happen in the end. In Act III the family (mainly Dodge) explains to Shelley what happened in the past and the audience begins to wonder if the child may still be there on the farm. Dodge hints but never directly says that the infant was Tilden's son and Tilden is the one who took the child to heart as if it were his own. It is while they are recreating the short life and death of the forgotten infant son that Vince, Tilden's real son, suddenly appears now grown up, completely drunk and smashing bottles against the wall. There is a feeling of melodrama here yet the play is about a homecoming and so it would seem inevitable that Vince should come back to the house towards the end of the play.

In *Buried Child*, the ironies about heroes and what just what "men" are supposed to be come home to roost as well. At the culminating point of Dodge's "confession," just when he finally admits that he killed the baby child Vince appears but not before Halie has a chance to speak about Ansel, the one son who never appears and who we do not know even existed and who, according to Halie was goodness, morality, perfection, and heroic all rolled into one.

SHELLY: So you killed him?

DODGE: I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it.

(HALIE moves toward BRADLEY)

HALIE: *(to Bradley)* 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!

(Suddenly VINCE comes crashing through the screen porch door up left, tearing it off its hinges. Everyone but DODGE and BRADLEY back away from the porch and stare at VINCE who has landed on his stomach in a drunken stupor. He is singing loudly to himself and hauls himself slowly to his feet. He has a paper shopping bag full of empty booze bottles as he sings and smashes them at the opposite end of the porch, behind the solid interior door, stage right. SHELLY moves slowly toward stage right, holding wooden leg and watching VINCE.) (Buried Child 124-25)

In *Buried Child* and other plays, Shepard shows the past as problematic. The past, which in traditional realistic drama might be expected to supply the spectator with clues and meanings or the action taking place on stage, becomes a subject in dispute. Dodge's family cannot come to grips with the fact that a child has been murdered and buried in the back yard. In this sense, the past becomes something shifting and multiple, a fiction created by the characters in contact with one another. The fact that the past is undecidable "not only disturbs conventions of realism, but reminds the spectator of the functioning of language in the theatre: though the present can be represented in part by objectives [...] which the audience perceives-décor, actors, gestures and so forth-the past must be represented exclusively through the character's dialogue" (Rabillard 1995: 367). Shepard does not let the spectator explore motivations, cause and past influences to any degree of satisfaction. If we look at the characters in *Buried Child*, there is no rational explanation for their behavior. Dodge seems to have given up on everything except drinking whiskey and watching a blank TV screen. Tilden and Bradley seem like conventionalized characters engaged in an oedipal fight. Halie's flights of fancy and relationship with Father Dewis cannot be explained by her situation at home either. Into this madhouse of a family comes Vince, whose motivation seems legitimate enough at the beginning, but as the play progresses his behavior lacks any sort of motivation at all. He decides to usurp the territory so to speak just because it seems to be the thing to do.

A clear example of this can be found in Act III of *Buried Child*. Dodge has been left alone with Shelley, Vince's girlfriend. While trying to unravel the mysteries that surround the incongruence among the characters of her boyfriend's family she goes upstairs and looks at photos on the wall, which to her are photos of the family's past. She has the following conversation with Dodge.

SHELLY: Last night I went to sleep up there, in that room.

DODGE: What room?

SHELLY: That room up there with all the pictures. All the crosses on the wall.

DODGE: Halie's room?

SHELLY: Yeah. Whoever “Halie” is.

DODGE: She’s my wife.

SHELLY: So you remember her?

DODGE: Whad’ya mean! *‘Course I remember her! She’s only been gone for a day—half a day. However long it’s been.*

SHELLY: Do you remember her when her hair was bright red? Standing in front of an apple tree?

DODGE: What is this, the third degree or something! Who’re you to be askin’ me personal questions about my wife!

SHELLY: You never look at those pictures up there?

DODGE: What pictures!

Shelly: Your whole life’s up there hanging on that wall. Somebody who looks just like you used to look.

DODGE: *That isn’t me! That never was me! This is me. Right here. This is it. The whole shootin’ match, sittin’ right in front of you.*

SHELLY: *So the past never happened as far as you’re concerned?*

DODGE: The past? Jesus Christ. The past. *What do you know about the past?*

SHELLY: Not much. I know there was a farm. (*Buried Child* 110-11; italics mine)

Dodge seems to have a perfect short length memory but has blocked out any memories of an older one claiming that the past never happened. This demonstrates another aspect of the postmodern, which is the tendency to display a radical skepticism towards and a transgression of that which is known. Whereas Modernism focuses on discourse, for the postmodern there is a struggle between narratives, or systems of knowledge. As Nick Kaye suggests the writing of history is a struggle between narratives, and the past “is not out there and available but must be read as an effect of the very narratives that it would seek to describe.” (Kaye 1994: 20)

Buried Child is loaded with ambiguity about the past. Incest and murder were committed at some point on the farm but who, when and why are never revealed. One of the first instances of a lack of a common memory is when Vince and Shelly arrive at the farmhouse and the family does not recognize him as their own. While Shelly's (and our) notion of "normal nuclear family" begin to vanish Vince tries to convince Dodge that he is, indeed his grandson. Either Dodge is playing a game or has lost his mind.

VINCE: I'm trying to figure out what's going on here!

DODGE: Is that it?

VINCE: Yes. I mean I expected everything to be different.

DODGE: Who are you to expect anything? Who are you supposed to be?

VINCE: I'm Vince! Your Grandson!

DODGE: Vince. My Grandson.

VINCE: Tilden's son.

DODGE: Tilden's son, Vince.

VINCE: You haven't seen me for a long time.

DODGE: When was the last time?

VINCE: I don't remember.

DODGE: You don't remember?

VINCE: No.

DODGE: You don't remember. How am I supposed to remember if you don't remember?

(Buried Child 89)

With the arrival of Tilden a few moments later the past becomes even more distorted. Tilden does not seem to recognize Vince, either.

SHELLY: Are you Vince's father?

TILDEN: Vince.

SHELLY: This is supposed to be your son! Is he your son? Do you recognize him? I'm just along for the ride here. I thought everybody knew each other!

(Tilden stares at Vince. Dodge wraps himself up in the blanket and sits on a sofa staring at the floor.)

TILDEN: I had a son once but we buried him.

(Dodge quickly looks at Tilden. Shelly looks to Vince.)

DODGE: You shut up about that. You don't know anything about that... You don't know anything about that! That happened before you were born! Long before! *(Buried Child 92)*

Later on Tilden explains to Shelly that they ("we") had a baby but that Dodge killed it and would never tell anyone why he did it. After a series of numerous clues that would seem to dispel the mystery as to who, when and why it is never discovered. We can see that Malkin's theory (1999) fits in well here. The subject cannot be a source of memory because memory works through them, but never originates in them. It is as if memory was banished from individual control and has now become sourceless and bereft of a coherent psychological domain. Plays written in a postmodern style forge a dialogue more with the memory of the audience and force the task of remembrance upon it, while at the same time the chaotic form and thematic conflagrations deny the possibility of reconstruction or recuperation.

In *Buried Child*, for example, it becomes clear that Shelly is our consciousness while watching the play. As the outsider who understands nothing and attempts to put the story together she seems to be the only sane one onstage and asks the question any one of us would ask. For the family, the past is itself the subject of dispute and becomes shifting and multiple with no one agreeing on any one version of it. In this sense, Shepard's characters seem to exist in a vivid present only with no allowance for the audience to explore motivations, imagination, cause and past influences. Character behavior becomes inexplicable or obsessive. A clear example of this is the fierce competition between

Bradley and Tilden in *Buried Child*. There is no real explanation for their animosity. It just seems to be a given state of affairs.

Another idea of the postmodern is that of parody or pastiche. It is commonly thought that Shepard is satirizing the famous “homecoming” by Norman Rockwell which supposedly portrays “the sacrosanct American family of the rural hinterland which tearfully recognises the return of its own” (Orr 1991: 139). This places him squarely with those who believe that the playwright is challenging the cherished national myth of the family, which has already been taking quite a beating. The Illinois farming family is both caricature and tragic presence. But in this play, the characters are all travesties of “real” people of the land, “real” farmers, of their historical ancestors with their sturdy frontier spirit.

What distinguishes this work from other realistic or naturalistic plays is the sudden and unexpected act: “The gestic act defines a moment, a character, a relationship in a way that is powerfully uncanny” (Orr 1991:139). It is a sudden gesture which lies at the borders of reason, but is not necessarily irrational. A single and complete gesture (for example, Bradley sticking his finger into Shelly’s mouth) provides an uncanny combination of emotion and reason, of feeling and intention and also passes into what can be referred to as “superreal”. A few of these “superreal” constructs are leftovers from Shepard’s early plays. Not only are they present in *Buried Child* but in *Curse of the Starving Class* as well. The clearest case is the actor who plays Wesley. At one point, he is required to get totally naked and pick up the live lamb and carry it off the stage. As DeRose suggests, “[t]he image of the naked actor scooping the live lamb into his arms and carrying it offstage transcends the realm of scripted reality in favour of the superreal” (1992: 141). In *Buried Child*, on the other hand, the superreal elements will give way to a more controlled use but techniques of the “superpresence” (fresh vegetables, threatening physically grotesque characters) and unsettling uses of codes will continue. Unlike in *Curse of the Starving Class*, the stage realism of the set design is more akin to traditional realist plays. This was made manifest in different productions of the play. Walter Kerr found it unnerving: “In *Buried Child* it is the abrupt staircase that seems to vanish into nothingness and the further curious nothingness of a useless corridor (the porch) at the end of the stage [...] Anyone entering or leaving must pass through a void [...] Provocative.” (Kerr qtd. in DeRose 1992: 142)

Together with other perturbing and jarring aspects of the dramatic frame (such as the when the actor playing Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class* appears naked), one might think that these irrational, discontinuous images are lacking a context yet Shepard seems to be dramatizing a condition, and that condition is the thematically anchored state of invasion in which the characters find themselves. The fantastic mode or superreality referred to as Shepard's style serves perhaps merely to intensify an already existent physical and psychic discomfort pervading the atmosphere of the play. Or perhaps Shepard was merely using the techniques of a stage aesthetic that he had previously used and could not find the exact way to fuse this aesthetic with the realistic dramatic tradition. His later plays would prove this approach to be wrong. That *Buried Child* is more of a success in this regard is undeniable though, as we have seen, inconsistencies and ambiguities abound. The play seems to follow the conventions of realist drama yet scorns the rational closure of such drama. When reading this play, one is reminded of what Carlos Fuentes once said about the novel: "la novela hace visible la parte invisible de la realidad [...] no sólo refleja realidad, sino que crea un realidad nueva, una realidad que antes no estaba allí [...] pero sin la cual ya no podríamos concebir la realidad misma. Así, la novela crea un nuevo tiempo para los lectores." (Fuentes 2002: 198; emphasis mine)

One of the early directors of Shepard's plays, Michael Smith, noted that sometimes Shepard used reality because a play "needs reality in order to transcend reality!" (qtd in DeRose 1992: 101). The beginning of *Buried Child* is, like many a realistic play, a traditional domestic situation of a farmhouse in the mid-west. Even the stage directions do not belie anything abnormal from the beginning. What Shepard had learned prior to this play was that it is easier to unfix stage reality more effectively by starting a dramatic action with a surface realism that places the audience falsely at ease. Already mentioned is Shepard's quote about how you can go out into territory unknown after you build up a false sense of security in the audience by using traditional forms of realist stagecraft.

Prior to the point where *Buried Child* can be said to slide into surrealism and ambiguity, the audience begins to feel that things are not all they should be. The fact that Dodge is having a conversation with Halie, who does not even appear on the stage, suggests that there is another theatrical space beyond that of the realistic setting of the stage and set themselves. Besides the dark, upstairs room there is also a porch through which characters leave and enter the house and soon it becomes quite clear that strange things happen outside that porch. Like in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, outside the house lies a reality of some sort, and to a certain extent the character's contingency depends upon

their engagement with this reality. But just like in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the characters cannot seem to survive outside and prefer to return to the family. The screened-in porch that Vince breaks open upon his drunken return is a sort of symbol of the passageway between the two worlds, showing that the world outside, is both frightening and unpredictable. Vince's deranged tirade at the end helps to support this view. As we have seen, he returns to the house roaring drunk and singing "The Marine's Hymn" while smashing "empty booze bottles" on the porch. The stage directions say that he is "yells across the space of the porch to an imaginary army. The others watch in terror and expectation." (*Buried Child* 125)

VINCE: (*to imagined Army*) 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 here to blow ya' from here to Kingdomcome. (*Buried Child* 125)

This whole scene, while being "real" enough also borders the fantastic. Vince is being cast as a sort of Dark Lord, which is another element of the fantastic. Shepard is undoubtedly playing with the idea and using it as parody yet as his stage directions indicate the others "watch in terror and expectation," Vince is seemingly surrounded with ammunition (the empty booze bottles) and backed up by an "Army." Couching his onslaught with his singing of the Marine's Hymn does not make his entrance any less threatening. When Bradley makes an attempt to stop him by sticking his fist through the screening of the porch, Vince takes it as an attack and counters it.

VINCE: Aaaa! Our lines have been penetrated! Tentacled animals! Beasts from the deep!
(*Vince strikes out at BRADLEY'S hand with a bottle. BRADLEY pulls his hand back inside*) (*Buried Child* 127)

When Shelly tries to convince him to leave with her he tells her not to come out onto the porch.

SHELLY: How come?

VINCE: Off limits! Verboten! This is taboo territory. No man or woman has ever crossed this line and lived to tell the tale!

SHELLY: I'll take my chances. (*Buried Child* 127)

The next stage direction is crucial. We can see that what Vince is saying is applicable only to his family and that Shelly, as an outsider will not be affected. Vince proceeds to cut a hole through the screen so that he can climb through it while Bradley cowers in terror. He tells them that if they come out on the porch, they will “disintegrate.” It is at precisely this point that Vince is recognized by Halie and Dodge. Halie remembers when he was a little boy

HALIE: He used to sing in his sleep. He'd sing. In the middle of the night. The sweetest voice. Like an angel. (*she stops for a moment*) I used to lie awake listening to it. I used to lie awake thinking it was all right if I died. Because Vincent was an angel. A guardian angel. He'd watch over us. He'd watch over all of us. (*Buried Child* 128)

Robert Heilman considers *Buried Child* as a fine example of what he refers to as the American “malaise,” which is characterized by “noncommunication, isolation and alienation” (Heilman 1992: 632). The language used to convey the action in the play is characterless, flat and repetitive and much of the dialogue is used to talk about non-rational events. Tilden's harvest of the corn is probably the first example of this. Though Shepard resorts to realism in this play, he also resorts to symbolic actions and events that seem to have their source anywhere else than in the normal probabilities of character and situation. In this respect, what Shepard said about the writing process should be borne in mind especially regarding character. In “Language, Visualization and the Inner Library,” Shepard wrote that a play “is an open-ended structure where anything could happen as opposed to a carefully planned and regulated event, which, for me, has always been as painful as pissing nickels.” The basic gist is that the writing process is an “unending mystery” based not necessarily on “ideas” but an “inner visualizing.” (Shepard rpt. in Marranca 1981: 214)

That *Buried Child* uses paradigms of drama is undeniable yet it makes leaps into the mode of myth as well. Often we cannot make literal interpretations but have to let the symbols soak into our imagination and work as best they may. There is a drift in this play that can only be sensed in this way. We have already noted a few of the myths that are toyed with in *Buried Child*, the myth of decline and death, of recovery and survival. The playwright is always prepared to ring out the old and ring in the new even he does so with a sometimes exasperating touch of ambiguity. As in the case of O'Neill, the myth of the Curse on the house and the Greek myth of Thebes hover over this play as well. Yet, like the sons in his plays Shepard usurps these myths to his own mysterious ends.⁶⁸

There are other manuscripts of *Buried Child* other than the published version and indeed Shepard himself rewrote another version of the play for its performance in 1996, though that version is not under study in this dissertation. Like *Desire under the Elms*, *Buried Child* is also about infanticide. Charles G. Whiting explains that infanticide is the center of the mythic structure of the play. Comparing the different versions of the play, he also adds that Shepard always gave more importance to “performance” as an alternative to “realistic dialogue” (Whiting 1988: 548). This is borne out by sundry readings of the play. As we have seen many times, gesture is of utmost importance in these plays. Since actions are sometimes more pathetic than speech, *Buried Child* can be said to be about a family whose members are “dead” for each other. The buried child of the title is not specifically identified as a symbol of the death of any one member of the family but of the entire family. Speculating on the mentally confused Tilden, who goes from being an All-American and great athletic hope to an utter failure makes one wonder if Shepard is toying with an American archetype. It would appear so as practically every American knows the type and nearly every American high school has had its all-stars that later on in life amounted to nothing, or almost nothing or, at least that was their only claim to fame. There is a certain tradition of portraying this character in American literature as well. John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom and Arthur Miller's Biff Loman come to mind though there are also others.

When Vince proceeds to enter the house through the hole he has made in the screen and moves toward the sofa, Dodge also acknowledges who he is and proceeds to bequeath him the house. If there are any doubts as to what Shelly will do, they are soon dispelled as it is clear that she does not pertain to this family and will be free to go with Vince's indifference. When she asks him why he wishes to stay here, he says that he has just

inherited a house and he is under some sort of spell that pushes him ever on: "I've gotta' carry on the line. I've gotta see to it that things keep rolling." (*Buried Child* 130)

In addition to the "superreal" vegetables that Tilden finds in the back yard where nothing has seemingly been planted for years, there are other images and gestures in the play which also show no narrative or psychological precedent and can be considered more fantastic-like. A clear example of this is when Bradley assaults Shelly at the end of Act II after threatening to kill Dodge.

BRADLEY: Open your mouth.

SHELLY: What?

BRADLEY: (*motioning for her to open her mouth*) Open up.
(*She opens her mouth slightly*)

BRADLEY: Wider.
(*She opens he mouth wider*)

BRADLEY: Keep it like that.
(*She does. Stares at BRADLEY. With his free hand he puts his fingers into her mouth. She tries to pull away.*)

BRADLEY: Just stay put!
(*She freezes. He keeps his fingers in her mouth. Stares at her. Pause. He pulls his hand out. She closes her mouth, keeps her Eyes on him. BRADLEY smiles.*) (*Buried Child* 106-07)

For all intents and purposes, it is an akin to rape while at the same time being an image, intrinsic to itself, that does not have to be compared to an act of sexual domination in order to affect the audience. Like many other episodes and images in the play, it is never explained and hardly mentioned again until later on in Act III, where it is mentioned only in passing. We are reminded of what Artaud referred to as an image that is both charged with meaning and entirely invented, corresponding to nothing, yet disquieting by nature.

Bradley's actions in the play correspond to this technique. For example, at the end of Act I, he finds Dodge alone sleeping on the couch. Previously Tilden had buried him so to speak in corn husks. But Bradley, who is usually seen as a threatening figure throughout the play, finds easy purchase to hurt Dodge in his own way by cutting his hair. The image of a grown man cutting his father's hair rests uneasy and most audiences or readers know the significance of cutting someone's hair and can equate it with emasculation. The stage directions explain the eerie scene:

BRADLEY: What in the hell is this?

(He looks at DODGE'S sleeping face and shakes his head in disgust. He pulls out a pair of black electric hair clippers from his pocket. Unwinds the cord and crosses to the lamp. He jabs his wooden leg behind the knee, causing it to bend at the joint and awkwardly kneels to plug the cord into the phone outlet. He pulls himself to his feet again by using the sofa as leverage. He moves to DODGE'S head and again jabs his false leg. Goes down on one knee. He violently knocks away some of the corn husks and then jerks off DODGE'S baseball cap and throws it down center stage. DODGE stays asleep. BRADLEY switches on the clippers. Lights start dimming. BRADLEY cuts DODGE'S hair while he sleeps. Lights dim slowly to black with the sound of clippers and rain.) (Buried Child 82)

Many of these actions and/or images, including the final image of the infant corpse covered in mud are perhaps not there just to disrupt the action of the play but to also intensify the sense of foreboding that has been introduced through the action. Act I ends with the scene we have just seen, Act II with Bradley putting his finger into Shelly's mouth and Act III and the play itself end with the disinterment of the buried child. We also need to see that it is merely an image similar to the other two yet it is charged with meaning. Ambiguous as it may be, it is nevertheless chilling although this time we do have a human voice as Halie speaks off stage:

(As HALIE keeps talking off stage, TILDEN appears from stage left, dripping with mud from the knees down. His arms and hands are covered with mud. In his hands he carries the corpse of a small child at chest level, staring down at it. The corpse mainly consists of bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth. He moves slowly downstage toward the staircase,

ignoring VINCE on the sofa. VINCE keeps staring at the ceiling as though TILDEN wasn't there. As HALIE'S voice continues, TILDEN slowly makes his way up the stairs. His eyes never leave the corpse of the child. The lights keep fading.)

HALIE'S VOICE: Good hard rain. Takes everything straight down to the roots. The rest can take care of itself. You can't force a thing to grow. You can't interfere with it. It's all hidden. It's all unseen. You just gotta wait til it pops out of the ground. Tiny little shoot. Tiny little white shoot. All hairy and fragile. Strong enough. Strong enough to break the earth even. It's a miracle, Dodge. I've never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it's the sun. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's the sun. (*Buried Child* 132)

Whatever is outside does not seem to be as seemingly real as what transpires onstage as has previously been noted. In fact, there is a sense of unease right from the beginning as Dodge stares at a TV (is he really watching something or is it just colorful flickering images?), while conversing with Halie, who cannot yet be seen but whose voice comes from the darkness. Tilden makes three different forays out in back of the house and each time brings in something totally unrealistic, corn and carrots that allegedly have never been planted and in the final scene a baby's corpse wrapped in muddy rags. Halie, who also leaves the house accompanied by Father Dewis, comes back dressed in yellow rather than the black she went out in and is rather drunk. Each time Bradley enters from outside he wrecks havoc of some sort. But the one who is the most affected by sallying forth is Vince, who returns totally drunk, smashing liquor bottles and generally threatening everybody, particularly Shelley. He yells at her from the porch: "VINCE: Don't come out here! I'm warning you! You'll disintegrate!" (*Buried Child* 128)

Another attempt at explaining Shepard's technique in this play is to point out the similarities it has with what is known as Super-Realism. According to Toby Silverman, what links Shepard with this school of art is "the California connection [...] the concern with 'cool' (as in sustained control), with pop culture and its material artefacts, the mythology of the west and "the pervasive maleness, American-ness and a certain odd nostalgia for the recent past" (Zinman 1986: 423). This does certainly seem to describe the play. The super-real has an obsession with "the importance of surface" but not so much in subject matter as in "the high-gloss of the surface itself" (423). Since immediacy is the most important element in super-realist paintings and photos (he cites such artists as Ralph

Goings, Richard Estes, Robert Bechtle and Ron Kleeman) full of such objects as shiny pick-up trucks, diners and racing-cars, Shepard may have been influenced by this because the staging of Shepard's plays uses "both an aggressive frontality, arising from the shallowness of the imaginative distance between downstage and up stage, between foreground and background. This gives way to a "dynamic on stage which is essentially one of performance rather than of fourth-wall realism" (424). As Jacques Levy, who directed *Red Cross* wrote, "Sam is far more interested in doing something to audiences than in saying something to them, and what he wants to do has no relationship to the purging of emotions through identification or total involvement." (Levy qtd. in Zinman 1986: 424)

One motif of these artists is to render a sense of layers, of something underneath, obscured yet crucial. He describes a photograph by Richard Estes of storefront windows. Instead of seeing what is inside the window as shoppers generally do, Estes emphasizes what is reflected in the window, what is behind the viewer. He correlates the philosophy behind these images with Vince's epiphany in *Buried Child*, where he sees not only his own face reflected in the windshield but all those of his ancestors "clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized" (*Buried Child* 130). This is undoubtedly stretching things yet in one sense, Shepard does employ a new type of "super-realist" acting project as well. For years on the American stage and in the cinema, the acting style we think of as realist is the equivalent of "studio realism" and was started by the Method style as a way of making the "real" more real though in itself it was also an artifice.

Another element in common with these photographers is nostalgia for the recent past and this is definitely an element of Shepard's work, but it's different from modernist nostalgia and is more akin to missing something that only existed in the mind and was never really concrete and is a sort of "nostalgia for an age that never existed" as Jello Biafra and Mojo Nixon once sang (1994). Shepard himself writes in *Motel Chronicles* that "I'm surprised at my own nostalgia for times I barely remember living" (1982: 68). It is really not clear as to what effect Silverman's theory has on actual performances of Shepard's play but where he is on sturdier ground is when he writes about sets because, being more visual in the theater, super-realist treatment is most likely to manifest itself in design. He speculates on the beginning of Act II when Vince and Shelly show up at the farmhouse and Shelly begins laughing hysterically comparing it to Norman Rockwell. Since we know the set does not look anything like a Rockwell painting but may have more in common with the super-real, we respond with Shelly and give credence to her reaction

and are therefore more likely to rely on her. As Zinman suggests, “this sympathy for Shelly is crucial to the play. Thus the nostalgic elements in the set should be both funny and unnerving, conveying the super-realist hype that increases the tension between the truth of memory and the fraudulence of sentimentality.” (1986: 427)

The tension in Shepard’s plays, and especially here, is designed to form coherent structures of images and language which are at the same time jolted by contradictions. This is another possible way of explaining the dichotomies between the different versions of the past provided by Dodge’s family in *Buried Child*. Shepard’s plays contain a system that is always in flux combining contradictions that include “collage-like juxtaposition of images. These in turn are bound to one another by the demands of stage representation as well as by the demands of the plot. At the same time, this is “perturbed” by a concentration on the sensory ‘surface’ of objects. This is referred to as a wide-ranging iconography, and its collage method” (Grant 1993: 123). The juxtaposition of such a complex nature is designed to present an experience of the discontinuous in nature. He does so for three reasons: “to actualize the paradigm shift in the experience of a new way of seeing that reorganizes continuity and discontinuity into a new whole; to locate an emotional response within the dynamics of this flow; to explore the transformation of consciousness, that is, the process of consciously articulating this paradigm shift and the emotional response to it.” (123)

Jane Ann Crum, who directed the play in Baltimore in 1986, the first play by Shepard ever performed there, realized that for a Shepard play to be successful what was needed was “to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange” (Crum in King 1988: 74). Since the play has obvious connections with the dramatic realism of plays like Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, what was of paramount importance was to investigate its departures from these forbearers. She refers to several of Shepard’s primary departures as similar to “tears in the fabric of reality” (75) such as the incongruities of Halie leaving the house dressed in black and returning dressed in yellow, the harvest of corn and carrots from an apparently barren field that Tilden brings in as well as the questionable origins of the buried child. The final meaning of these phenomena is unknown or ambiguous.

Into this idea of ambiguity she brings in the notion of text and subtext. In discussing the notion of text and subtext, Terry Eagleton suggests that the subtext, which is “visible at certain ‘symptomatic’ points of ambiguity, evasion or overemphasis” is the point where readers (audience) are able to construct or ‘write’ the text even if the novelist (playwright) does not” (Eagleton qtd. in Crum 1988: 75). As we have seen, like in *Long*

Day's Journey into Night, we have four distinctive unconnected subjective realities in *Buried Child*; Halie's, Tilden's, Bradley's and Dodge's. By applying Eagleton's theory, the audience may be able to gain the central clue to the play's "meaning." As ambiguities multiply, reality continually slips from view and what is conjured up is that the reality onstage itself is probably unfixed. This might be the explanation for Dodge's saying that it is not him in the photographs. The relationship between content (the incongruous) and form (domestic realism) suggests both the frustration of the audience in not being able to perceive the "truth" and the playwright's refusal to verify its existence. Crum suggests that "[t]o approach *Buried Child* as a mystery that must be unravelled would only serve to reduce and domesticate the scope of Shepard's inquiry" (76).

Seen in this light, the division of the play into three acts becomes much more related to the content of the play. Though some of the action might seem odd or incongruous, a pattern is established with the setting and the characters that incongruities are the norm. When Shelly arrives in Act II, expectations are reversed. Before Shelly's entrance, the audience must "write" the play in isolation but after her appearances she becomes the mediator and like the audience feels frustrated because meaning is continuously denied. In Act I, the appearance of the corn is incongruous but nobody in the family seems too upset about it. This is established as a pattern. The pattern gets broken when the family does not or will not recognize Vince as their son and grandson. Once Tilden dons Shelly's fur coat and begins walking around her and telling her the story of the dead child, "Shepard has made the rational world recede, only to replace it with an irrational and terrifying landscape that takes us beyond sense and knowledge." (Clum 1988: 76)

A similar phenomenon happens with the set. There is a tension between what is outside and what is inside but the background actually invades the foreground. The farm is not a passive constant, but functions as a bringer of news, of messages from a primordial past when humanity was so attuned to the earth and its cycles that there was a psychological urgency for the shift of seasons. Crum suggests that the progressions of the earth's produce that Tilden brings in reflect a downward movement in the search for the child's identity. The progression moves from tall corn, to buried tuber, to the corpse that Tilden digs up out of the ground. Tilden is a type of messenger bringing in tangible proof that the world outside the farm is attuned to the events unfolding inside. Her production highlighted these events. For example, when Halie returns to the house in Act III, she does so just as Shepard's stage directions say "*wearing a bright yellow dress, no hat, and white*

gloves" (*Buried Child* 113). This is in stark contrast to her description when first appearing in Act I: "[...] *dressed completely in black, as though in mourning. Black handbag, hat with a veil, and pulling on elbow length gloves. She is about sixty-five with pure white hair*" (*Buried Child* 73). But in the Baltimore production, she is also wearing a red wig and is a reference to Shelly's description of the "woman with red hair" holding a baby in the photos hanging on the wall upstairs, which becomes an even stronger statement of the rejuvenation powers of the world outside.

The staging was such that the effect of a double wall of screens running along the entire upstage wall had the effect of bringing the out-of-doors into the interior of the house. In other words, characters (i.e. Bradley) appear as diffused shadows that become clearly outlined on the porch but "don't attain sharp focus until they enter the room through the "solid interior door." This transition Crum refers to as "from shadow to light, from diffusion to focus" (Crum 1988: 77) and goes together with the theme of "dissolve" and "disappear" used to describe the processes of death and change throughout the play. It is interesting to note that when Vince returns to "usurp" his territory he cannot enter the room through the realistic door but must cut through the screen. Already noted is his comment warning Shelly not to go onto the porch because she will "disintegrate" in its "taboo territory."

The last part of her "Staging Ambiguity" refers to endings and Shepard is a master at precisely this, the art of staging ambiguity. He is as well known by many critics for unsatisfactory endings as he is for doing just that. Well noted is his dislike for easy endings: "I think it's a cheap trick to resolve things. It's a complete lie to make resolutions" (Shepard qtd. in Lippman 1984: 11). The consensus among those who worked with Crum was that regardless of the ambiguity of the ending of the play, the term that quite best sums up all the possible interpretations "is quite simply, change. What has existed in stasis has been re-energized" (Clum 1988: 79). That the change will be beneficial or not is perhaps a moot point, yet Crum offers a curious yet astute opinion: "I believe that a perception that most changes are beneficial is a particularly American perspective, and Shepard claims this perspective when he asks his audience to enter into an unfixed reality, then frustrates their attempts to find meaning. What he offers instead is the possibility of change" (79). If you wish to stage ambiguity, then there must be the juxtaposition of all possibilities of meaning, with opposite but equal solutions. Her production made the point a little too obvious and heightened the hope perhaps by changing Vince's position in the final tableaux of the play. Rather than place the roses on

Dodge's chest and lie down in his place on the sofa, "our Vince wandered upstage to the screened wall, and with his back to the audience, looked upstage toward the fields envisioned by Halie in her disembodied monologue" (79-80). This is, of course, a personal interpretation on the part of the director and is not evident in a reading of the play.

What seems clear and what most observers agree on is that Shepard uses some kind of a "fantastic mode" when animating the characters in *Buried Child* rather than their own psychological motivations. As we have seen, his use of the fantastic fits in well with ideas of the "superreal." Rather than having an interest in creating a family like Arthur Miller's Lomans, Shepard wants to "achieve an effect on his audience." (Mann 1988: 81)⁶⁹

Buried Child does conform to the mode. The sets, the characters and props are all realistic enough but at the same time there seems to be a "supernatural world," which makes them more postmodern and some viewers or readers begin to wonder if the child Dodge killed and buried in the yard is exerting these supernatural powers over the farm. How else can these things be explained? Sometimes the conjecture can even go so far as to ask oneself the irrational possibility that Vince may have been drawn back to the farmhouse because in some way he is connected with the buried child. As Mann suggests, "[t]he playwright's need to maintain antimony between the two levels of reality motivates all of the character's utterances and actions" (1988: 82). By this, he means that if it is necessary to call attention to a real object in order to reinforce the audience's belief in the reality and rules of the everyday world, than the character does so. If, however, the real of "the uncanny, the inexplicable and disturbing" needs to be reinforced than a character says something bizarre or acts in an irrational way. The play is true to the rules of the fantastic because the antimony between the play's every day and supernatural worlds is not resolved and an illogical situation remains.

Is Shepard mocking the naturalistic dramatic mode in *Buried Child*? I do believe so. Perhaps mocking is not the precise term and we should say that he is playing with it and stretching its possibilities. On the surface, the play appears to adhere to the tenets of dramatic realism but Shepard's play carefully sustains a realistic veneer, adhering almost formulaically to the familiar Ibsen/Strindberg brand of realism in theme and structure, including the use of a fatal secret deeply hidden beneath the surface of a mundane domestic scene that is gradually revealed through dialogue and action. The revelation results in a "profound conflict that threatens permanent disruption of the normality and tranquility of the domestic life of the family" (Hart 1987: 75-76). The problem is that

Shepard continually undercuts audience expectations and makes it virtually impossible to resolve the action of the play realistically, allegorically, or symbolically.⁷⁰

In another sense, different ways of interpreting are also part of the postmodern and simultaneously portraying two ways of interpreting and presenting a work is not uncommon. Shepard seems to do both in *Buried Child* and this is made evident by the fact that critics fall on the either/ or side, either the ending is positive or negative, that is hope and rebirth are possible or hope and rebirth are impossible. This can be explained by what Linda Hutcheon refers to as Postmodernism's "both/and" rather than "either/or" (Hutcheon in Goulimari 2007: 17). Rather than taking upon the shackles of saying that a work must mean either one thing or another, the idea is that it can signify two things at the same time.⁷¹

Buried Child does have an ambiguous ending. Is Shepard also mocking the ending of realist plays? It would seem so according to Orr who suggests that "[i]n typical fashion Shepard mixes modernist ambiguity and dramatic mayhem" (Orr 1991: 141). The true story of the child will never be known and seems to fall by the wayside with chaotic events at the end of the play. "Dodge's last will and testament, his sudden unnoticed death and Vince's unlikely assumption of his inheritance as Shelley flees, mock the denouement of popular melodrama but cannot escape it" (142). Something else must come into play here to break up a play that is bordering on total disorder and this is where Shepard brings in the final dramatic gesture that throws everything off kilter. Tilden enters, cradling the dead infant as if it were his own son and as if it were the corn and carrots he had previously brought in from the back as well. Is the corpse Tilden's son? Is it the long deceased brother/uncle? Is the corpse "Vince's alter ego"? Does it symbolize the death in life of Vince? Isn't this child as alive for Tilden as Vince is dead to him? Is the play merely an exercise in disrecognition?

The elements of the fantastic and an increasing feeling of the uncanny that has steadily been sustained throughout the action are the cause of this state of affairs. The play's subtext, whose sense of the uncanny dissolves most of the overwrought melodrama, reverberates with unanswered questions. What breeds incest? The play, of course, fixes no easy resolution and the dialogue at many points contradicts any fixation the audience might be able to make. The flux of disrecognising encourages the deconstruction of relationships. The truth is ever allusive and never final. The urge to detect a truth that the play sets in motion is constantly thwarted. A dead child is discovered but its secret is never found out.

“The family as the most familiar of entities is also a repository of secrets it does not wish to reveal, even to its own kind” (Orr 1991: 143). Where the family might serve as an anchor in a hostile world, it turns out to be even more uncertain than the world beyond it, the hostile and impersonal world hovering outdoors. Only Shelly (and the audience) have been able to escape it.

The case of *Buried Child* is not so clear due to the ambiguities cited previously. Shepard is playing with various mythic themes in the play: “those of fertility, especially the myths of fertility kings and the link between bodily health and the health of the land, and various American myths of sports, freedom, and the heartland” (Hays 1990: 442). Regarding the apparently happy ending and the return of fertility to the farm he asks: “Obviously, fertility has returned, but at what cost?” The play also includes “ancillary rituals of pruning” (Hays 1990: 443). Bradley shears Dodge and prunes his own leg, both images of emasculation. Both Tilden and Ansel are described as All-Americans, sports heroes almost demigods. Illinois is also the rich, fertile heartland of America so whatever myth Shepard is spinning has to do with America, its values and its fertility. Like in *Curse of the Starving Class* food abounds in the play but is not appreciated or shared in any meaningful way. Once again we see how emotionally starved these people, these All-Americans living in the heartland really are. America may be a rich nation but the riches are material, not emotional or spiritual. We are also reminded of O’Neill and his Cycle plays. A clear example is seen in Dodge’s speech just prior to his death in which he wills almost everything to his grandson, Vince.

DODGE. My tools namely my band saw, my skill saw, my drill press, my chain saw, my lathe, my electric sander all to me eldest son, Tilden. My shed and my gasoline powered equipment, namely my tractor, my dozer, my hand tiller plus all attachments and rigging for the above mentioned machinery, namely my spring tooth harrow, my deep plows, my disk plows, my automatic fertilizing equipment, my reaper, my swathe, my seeded, my John Deere Harvester, my post hole digger, my jackhammer [...] my Bennie Goodman records, my harnesses, my bits, my halters, my brace, my rough rasp, my forge, my welding equipment, my shoeing nails [...] etc. are to be pushed into a gigantic heap and set ablaze in the very center of my field. (*Buried Child* 129)

The combination of infanticide and incest in Shepard is an attempt to show the perversion of American values and is not a plot device like in O'Neill and includes immediate gratification at the cost of long-range, social development. Future generations are destroyed. Not the future of a single family present in a play but rather Shepard and other playwrights are saying that selfish values are destroying the country and the lives of the people in it. When Vince inherits the farm, rejects Shelly and banishes her it seems that his last link to a peaceful and generous existence is shattered. Cronus-like he proclaims:

VINCE: I am a murderer! Don't underestimate me for a minute! I'm the Midnight Strangler! I devour whole families in a single gulp!" (VINCE *grabs another bottle and smashes it on the porch.*) (*Buried Child* 126)

Vince now only recognizes his violent side and has left behind his innocent side. Tucker Orbison has an interesting theory as to how this happens. We have seen how Vince returns from his attempted escape and becomes the virtual double of Dodge and how Dodge wills him everything and lets him take his place. But Vince does not consider himself as a revitalizer of the family but rather as a destroyer. Orbison asserts, and rightly so, that Vince has also inherited not only from Dodge, but part of Halie as well, who he describes as "Jung and Neumann's concept of the Terrible Mother" (Orbison 1994: 514) According to Neumann as this character is "she who dismembers, devours and destroys." (514). Since the Terrible Mother draws its images from the 'inside', the Feminine "expresses itself in fantastic and chimerical images that do not originate in the outside world." In this sense the "Terrible Female" is a symbol for the unconscious and her dark side takes the form of monsters" (514) and this is what makes Vince threaten the family with being devoured by "beasts from the deep". He has returned to a primitive, fantastic state.

One of these expectations is just who the buried child is. Is there a connection between Vince and the buried child? From a fantastic point of view, the answer would be a resounding yes. Another clue supporting this question is that fact that no mention is ever made of Vince's mother. The only thing known is that Tilden went to New Mexico, got in trouble and came back to the homestead. This might mean that Tilden fathered the child, went to New Mexico to hide or escape the fact and that Vince, the "buried" child, has returned to stir up the repressed fears and hostilities provoked by his incestuous birth. In *Buried Child*, another suspicion is that the secret murder is a fabrication and accepted by

the whole family as a way of coping with the unbearable truth of Vince's incestuous generation. In other words, Vince is not recognized because the family has buried him in their memories. This is another way of interpreting the work. Even Halie confuses Vince with Ansel, who we do not know if he is a fabrication or a real son that they had.⁷²

When Vince takes over Dodge's place at the end, as the father-figure (figuratively and literally), the play has come full circle and goes back to square one with Halie upstairs talking to Vince as if he were Dodge. The buried child has emerged to replace the father who killed him. Or, has he? How does this explain the final tableaux with Tilden climbing up the stairs carrying the rotting corpse of a buried child? As much as Hart tries to explain it, she cannot and this is the flaw in her argument. We have seen that Tilden has constantly been bringing vegetables from the back yard insisting that there is a bountiful crop of corn in spite of the field being barren for years. Now, from her upstairs window, Halie sees the corn growing. "It's like a paradise out there [...] A miracle" (*Buried Child* 132), she tells Dodge / Vince. Hart suggests that Halie begins to "rhapsodize about the paradise beneath her window in words that metaphorically allude to the resurrected child" (Hart 1987: 86). Or maybe not.

Along with the bountiful crop, the family's treasure has also broken ground. This is the heinous crime of incest (Hart doesn't believe there has been infanticide.) What is wrapped up in the torn clothes is "the hideous crime fearfully imaged in the decayed corpse" (Hart 1987: 86). Halie's tiny shoot that never had a chance to grow now emerges strong "but in the person of Vince who returns radically altered." The final interpretation borders then on a positive one. Doris Auerbach sees the play "like a miracle play with the symbol of resurrection" that leaves the audience "with hope for a revitalized America, for one that nourishes its children and holds the promise of the American dream once again" (Auerbach 1988: 60). Interestingly enough, Hart herself is not totally convinced and wonders if a healthy exorcism has taken place or if a loathsome existence is doomed to repeat itself through the new patriarch Vince. One is forced to wonder if both have/have not taken place.

In Shepard's work and most notably in these family plays, fragmentation is absolute. Not only is closure impossible and indeed mocked but one can also see what Jameson refers to as "the disappearance of a sense of history" (Jameson rpt. in Worthen 1995: 1138). Whereas O'Neil's Cabots and Tyrones have a sense of history, the family in *Buried Child* does not. As Megan Williams suggests, in modern American culture "man has lost the ability to locate himself in time and in space. Any sense of his national and

individual origins, of his place within a clear and understandable linear history, have been erased” (Williams 1997: 58). The attempt to erase the past by trying to bury it in the back yard have resulted in a total disconnect in the present. Jameson also suggests that “our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.” (Jameson rpt in Worthen 1995: 1138)

This fragmentation can also be seen with the way Shepard plays with notions of the American Dream. Some, like Herbert Blau, have compared it to a parody of Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*.

[T]here seems to be in Shepard a desire to make some last-chance rescue of the family, the past, the discredited signs of human continuity. At the same time there is a desire to resurrect the buried child that, in the play, is actually out in the cornfield, mysteriously killed, it appears, for being the spawn of incest, and thus the end of the family, that lives on the incest taboo. We can feel in the drama that Shepard wants to undo the double bind, wanting to have it both ways: breaking the law on which the family depends and keeping the institution intact. (Blau 1984: 527)

Perhaps but Shepard is also undoubtedly playing with Norman Rockwell’s *The Homecoming*. The fact that closure is thwarted and sneered at makes for irreconcilable interpretations and therefore the perfect example of this notion of fragmentation. Even the notions of the corn growing out in the back enhance this eerie feeling of fragmentation. When Tilden is seen bringing in the corn, we do not know where it comes from.

HALIE: What’s the meaning of this corn Tilden!

TILDEN: It’s a mystery to me. I was out in back there. And the rain was coming down. And I didn’t feel like coming back inside. I didn’t feel the cold so much. I didn’t mind the wet. So I was just walking. I was muddy but I didn’t mind the mud so much. And I looked up. And I saw this stand of corn. In fact, I was standing in it. So, I was standing in it. (*Buried Child* 75)⁷³

Shepard's use of realism also shows this fragmentation. The return to the realist family tradition was also from a more postmodernist standpoint. If the American obsession with the disintegration of the American family is present once again, it is looked at ironically as we have seen. If Dodge's family is unable to find a causal threat for their present state of fragmentation, then this is due to how Shepard tells the tale. As William Demastes suggests, "[t]he search for a causal thread has been abandoned in an attempt to uncover other types of coherence acceptable to a late twentieth-century frame of mind" (1987: 231).⁷⁴

Disconnection, fragmentation of character, the contingency of uncertainty and a past that doesn't quite add up are all characteristics of what has come to be known as Postmodernism. Clearly this is what Shepard has been working with throughout his career and *Buried Child* is the best example. Leaning on the tradition of realism, the play branches out into other realms, realms that remind us of what is outside the family house, something that is known yet at the same time totally unknown and terrifying. Like a merry-go-round, American playwrights keep returning to the family and to a nation that seems to be doomed and fated to repeating the same mistakes over and over again. This is perhaps the best way to sum up the late 20th century in America.

Notes:

⁵⁸ C. W. E. Bigsby suggests that O'Neill's late works do indicate this: "in a curious way these plays also looked forward in that this was an O'Neill who seemed natural kin to Samul Beckett, a man aware of the vortex of absurdity" (1992: 23). See also Linda Ben-Zvi (1990: 33-55).

⁵⁹ The summary of the two concepts here owes a great debt to the work of Nigel Wheale (1995), Andreas Huyssen (1988), Steven Connor (1991), Mike Featherstone (1995), Dino Fellega (2002) and Linda Hutcheon (1988), whose pioneering works in the field of the postmodern as an aesthetic have been most illuminating.

⁶⁰ Most discussions of Postmodernism as an aesthetic center on fiction, although increasingly more studies on Postmodernism in drama have appeared. Raymond Federman talks about the relationship between imagination, reality and the notion of "experimental" or "New Fiction." By this he is referring to postmodern fiction. He says that "New Fiction" should avoid "knowledge that is received, approved, determined by conventions." In other to accomplish this it "invents its own reality, cutting itself off from referential points with the external world." In this way, it "affirms its own autonomy by exposing its own lies: it tells stories that openly claim to be invented, to be false, inauthentic: it dismisses absolute knowledge and what passes for reality: it even states, defiantly, that reality as such does not exist, that the idea of reality is an imposture" (Federman, 1993: 9-10). Once again, we are back to the crux of the problem, which is the nature of representation. To what extent literature can be judged to represent the external world has been a matter of debate for centuries. The problem of representation also must take into account the relationship of fiction to reality and life or mimesis.

⁶¹ For more information on this issue, see also Geis (1993), Watt (1998), Malkin (1999) and Saddick (2007), among others.

⁶² It is also his first play about an American family and its lack of communication and sense of isolation onstage. In a monologue about orgasms given at the end of the play, which causes his father to fall off his chair, the boy makes a claim for sexual independence and virility. The monologue would later be used in a production of *Oh, Calcutta*, which also gave the young artist desperately needed spare cash.

⁶³ The earliest philosophical positions associated with what could be characterized as a nihilistic outlook are those of the Skeptics. Denying possibility of certainty, Skeptics could denounce traditional truths as unjustifiable opinions. Nihilism can be understood in several different ways. Political Nihilism believes that the destruction of all existing political, social, and religious order is a prerequisite for any future improvement. Ethical nihilism or moral nihilism rejects the possibility of absolute moral or ethical values. Instead, good and evil are nebulous, and values addressing such are the product of nothing more than social and emotive pressures. Existential nihilism is the notion that life has no intrinsic meaning or value, and it is, no doubt, the most commonly used and understood sense of the word today. By the late 20th century, “nihilism” had assumed two different castes. In one form, “nihilist” is used to characterize the postmodern person, a dehumanized conformist, alienated, indifferent, and baffled, directing psychological energy into hedonistic narcissism or into a deep resentment that often explodes in violence. This perspective is derived from the existentialists’ reflections on nihilism stripped of any hopeful expectations, leaving only the experience of sickness, decay, and disintegration.

⁶⁴ For an interesting comparison of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *Buried Child* with a focus on the Modernist/Postmodernist dichotomy, see Porter (1993: 106-119).

⁶⁵ Jeremy Green suggests that a more instructive comparison is with Frederic Jameson’s description of the postmodern as “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. It is inevitable that, perhaps, the adjective “late” should suggest decadence and decline” (2005: 22). For more information, see Green (1-44).

⁶⁶ Critics differ in their interpretations. For Bonnie Marranca, it is “Shepard’s most moving portrait of the American experience” and expresses the “loss of displacement and community of character.” Nevertheless, the play is a positive one rather than negative: “The triumph is that it defines Nixonian America in a jagged, constrained structure that mirrors the very difficulty of finding a language of social communication and a means to express feeling. On a very basic level *Action* is about loss of language” (1981: 17). For Don Shewey, it is Shepard’s “most Beckett-like play.” He suggests that it is more an expression of pure action without motivation: “In Shepard’s work [...] there’s no motivation and often no consequence: these actions become characterization, the bits of information that would normally be slipped into dialogue or serve as character development. Shepard wants to bypass the thinking part of the brain that guards against new thoughts and go straight for the senses” (1997: 92-93). Be that as it may he also goes on to suggest that the play transcends any personal interpretation (Shepard’s own yearning to return to American after his London hiatus) or political.

⁶⁷ O’Neill said a similar thing. In 1946 in a rare interview given during the rehearsals for *The Iceman Cometh*, O’Neill said something which not only sums up the play, but his whole life as well. He talked about how the play conveyed a “feeling of negative fate and how something funny, even farcical, can suddenly break up into something gloomy and tragic, a big kind of comedy that doesn’t stay funny for long. The first act is hilarious comedy, I think; but then some people might not even laugh. At any rate, the comedy breaks up and the tragedy comes on.” (Clark 1949: 153)

⁶⁸ A case in point is the lamb in *Curse of the Starving Class*. The lamb is traditionally sacrificed for salvation, yet when Wesley becomes Weston, his first action is to slaughter the lamb. The lamb also signifies innocence and the fact that it has maggots might also point to the disease that this family is suffering from. The slaughter signifies his submission to the Curse and no redemptive value is placed on his submission, on his “sacrifice” as it were. The spiritual hunger beleaguering the Tate family will not be satisfied by this sacrifice. The redemptive value is thwarted. *Buried Child* also displays the use of a number of myths at the same time and many of them have to do with the myth of regeneration. These include the Prodigal Son, the Corn King and the Fisher King. Perhaps Shepard’s most revolutionary contribution to the American continuum of family tragedies can be seen that both the Tates and Dodge’s family are archetypes without being stereotypes. The clearest example is probably Dodge, who though he may be a weak, poor and fatally flawed Patriarch of traditional drama, is still a patriarch. He is a sort of down on his luck Ephraim Cabot, the farmer, possessor of land, who faces opposition from a league of misbegotten sons, who if not the canonical type of sons of classic and Renaissance drama, are nonetheless sons in the same mould and possible usurpers of the throne. Regional materials are agencies of a vision of realities that are not necessarily bound by geography. Shepard goes beyond the regional, beyond the national by making opaque references to the mythos of Icarus, Oedipus, the “House” and war between brothers (the Cain and Abel, which is manifest in *True West*.)

⁶⁹ Some have noted the similarities between Dodge’s family and the figures in the famous American Gothic painting by Grant Wood. Yet their behavior has also earned them the qualification of being similar to those out of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. This is because of their eccentric behavior. They are constantly saying or doing something disturbing, unexpected or inexplicable.

⁷⁰ Katherine Weiss suggests that up until the mid-1990s, most critics read Shepard’s family trilogy “as reaffirming and ultimately optimistic” (2002: 323). However, though at moments Shepard’s family plays may “appear to be offering a renewal of life [...] restoration consistently fails in providing security and meaning, revealing, without ordering, the paradoxes within the American cultural identity and the uncertainty of being” (2002: 323). In this sense, the farm in both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* also represents the state of decline and fragmentation of both families. More recently, Johan Callens sees positive aspects in *Buried Child*: It “reminds us of this original, mythical state of One-ness, a feminine and organic bond between man and nature through water and fertility symbols. The play also illustrates the ideal’s deterioration in the course of colonization, through incest, infanticide, and regression of the male characters into irresponsible, childish behaviour, all connected through the underlying water symbolism. Nevertheless, incest also represents an attempt, however misguided, to make the holistic Dream come true, by re-establishing the union between mother and child. Moreover, the ritualistic revelations of the family’s crimes functions as exorcism and guarantees survival and continuity. Commentators have so far neglected this mythic-symbolic dimension of *Buried Child*, thus also overlooking the positive part of Shepard’s female characters in it.” (2007: 46)

⁷¹ Hutcheon’s argument defends the necessity and persistence of postmodernist notions even in the 21st century, in which Postmodernism sometimes falls into discredit, especially among those who see it as a dead end and a justification for political inaction. Taking up the notions of Ajay Heble, she says that “the postmodern’s suspicion of truth-claims and its denaturalizing and demystifying impulses” have made it untrustworthy and “it can be hard to achieve activist ends (with firm moral values) in a postmodern world.” (Hutcheon in Goulimari 2007: 17)

⁷² Benjamin Oipari approaches the play from a FST (“Family Systems Theory”) point of view and claims that the family is unhealthy because of the ugly secret they are harbouring and their refusal to come to terms with it: True to Family Systems Theory (FST), it is not the inciting event itself, such as a secret or traumatic stressor, that determines the family’s inability to function. Rather, it is

the family's reaction to an event, or their ability to cope in an emotionally stable manner. Open families who talk about the precipitating event are likely to see the event in less shameful terms because they are able to express their emotions in an open forum. On the other hand, individuals in closed systems who shut themselves off both from the outside and from other members in the system, who refuse to acknowledge that anything bad even happened, are doomed to dysfunction because their silence only reinforces their shame. Closed systems are prone to disorder because they are resistant to change in spite of the dysfunction surrounding them. (See Opiari (2010): 123-138.)

⁷³ Blau wryly suggests that Tilden “hypostatizes the corn, grounding himself in it, because he wants what it represents, the continuity of a myth which offers the possibility of a rebirth of the child he might have fathered, the buried child in the missing person, the life we haven’t lived. (1984: 528) He then goes on to suggest that the thwarting is made all the more complete by the possibility that Shepard is using the corn as a pun. “There is the corn of myth and there is plain corn. Corniness.” (1984: 528)

⁷⁴ Demastes also suggest that Shepard’s “central concern involves codes and their loss in modern American society. His works decry the loss of old values as well as the fact that new codes can no longer be simply and prescriptively substituted” (1987: 232). His thesis is that the new or “reclaimed code” as he calls it can no longer be rationally conveyed and for this reason the playwright “directly challenges the embalming surfaces and linear and causal expectations of the old realism (233). Also see Demastes’s study on chaos theory and modern drama *Staging Consciousness: Theater and the Materialization of Mind*. He describes how Shepard’s plays are an assault upon “bivalent consciousness,” the notion that “text is equated with linear, serial, rational processes we’ve generally associated with consciousness, [...] while performance attempts to capture the nonlinear, parallel, and sensory processes operating along the preconscious neural network” (2002: 143). He suggests that with Shepard “text itself often operates in a fuzzy fashion to undermine serial coherence even as performance frequently contribute in a fuzzy manner to that urge for coherence” (2002: 144). In this way conclusions or closure are often undermined or altered. He theorizes that it is for this reason Shepard turned to a more traditional linear-based mode of realism. “[S]trict linear consciousness is the force that Shepard tries to move beyond, though he realizes that he (and we) can never fully escape its clutches. Nor do we really want full freedom from its influences, only less tyrannical control.” (2002: 145)

CONCLUSION

I.

Dysfunctional families and a portrayal of the workings of fate are a particular in the works of many American dramatists and a continuum in American dramatic literature. Perhaps more than any other American playwrights, the work of Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) and Sam Shepard (1943) provide excellent examples of this notion. In this dissertation, I have focused on two major works by each playwright to show just how they worked out this major theme with a view to point out similarities and differences. *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* by O'Neill and *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* by Sam Shepard.

American drama is one of the many pieces in the puzzling "American Century," as many have called the 20th century, and an extremely important one. Indeed, the American stage has often become a mirror of the nation's own obsessions and pitfalls. Perhaps more than other dramatic traditions, America is invariably in search of itself, seeking new ways to express old notions, grappling with new upheavals in society, struggling to change with times that are constantly shifting and moving ever more quickly. On the other hand, American theater seems to show three styles or defences against radical change, or rather, three continuums throughout the 20th century: 1) The predominance of the realist mode; 2) The middle-class family (melo)drama; and 3) The fusion of the two into tragedy/tragicomedy. The first two perhaps are merely attempts to make sense of a seeming chaos and disorder, to explain the nation to itself in a familiar and comfortable manner for all. The curious thing is that there seems to be an overwhelming tendency to terminate in the latter. This might be a way of skirting an all too pervading ambiguity in American society.

Many are the explanations of the nature of the creative process and its relationship with reality. For dramatists, the task is especially daunting. What every dramatist must solve for himself is, as Robert Brustein has suggested, "how to find, without spurning

reality altogether, that necessary link between the natural and imaginative worlds” (Brustein 1999: 15). In a so-called post-humanist and post-modern age, it might seem a bit adventurous to bring back the figure of the author and his work and place them on center stage for public scrutiny and to talk about the notions of “authenticity” and “originality”. It is becoming increasingly more difficult and, at times, daring to attempt to defend both of these concepts when writing or speaking about 20th century writers. Nevertheless, when considering American playwrights Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard, it is safe to say that these two characteristics, authenticity and originality, lie at the heart of their best works. Harold Bloom defines originality in a literary work as “a strangeness that we can either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies” (Bloom 1994: 4). Both O’Neill and Shepard share this originality, constantly worked to experiment with the medium of theater, resorted to the use of realism in their major works, used autobiography as a kind of purgation and both expressed the mystery and anguish of the American family and finally of America itself.

It is unknown and would be presumptuous perhaps to say that O’Neill was a direct influence on Sam Shepard yet Harold Bloom’s ideas on influence are apropos for the purposes of our debate. “Influence is simply a transference of personality, a mode of giving away what is most precious to one’s self, and its exercise produces a sense, and, it may be, a reality of loss “Every disciple takes away something from his master” (Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* qtd. in Bloom 1973: 6). A closer look shows that this is not surprising since a more detailed reading of both reveals many interesting parallels between the two playwrights. For many readers, theater-goers and critics, the differences seemingly outweigh the similarities. On the one hand, the serious, pessimistic and tormented Eugene O’Neill presents quite a different figure from the handsome, Hollywood movie actor-cum-playwright Sam Shepard. Yet, upon closer scrutiny, the similarities are quite striking. Both are profoundly autobiographical writers weaving their own lives and obsessions into the framework of their plays. Both are profoundly, if not peculiarly, American dramatists. Both suffered from troubled upbringings, dysfunctional families and disturbing father-son relationships, which would form the groundwork of a type of continuum in their works. Both are concerned with tracing the loss and decay of American values, sometimes obsessively so. Both have been accused of misogyny, though Shepard less so in the more recent past. Both saw the theater and art itself as a sort of redemption. Both created dazzling theatrical experiments using avant-garde techniques in style, language and structure. Both incorporate the much maligned “eternals” such as myth, memory and the

effect of the past on the present into the fabric of their plays. Both have a firm belief in the artist's role in society. Both occupy distinguished places in the American canon of dramatic literature. When writing their "family plays," both rely on the continuum of the realist mode.

This dissertation has attempted to show that, although they worked at different periods of the 20th century (generally speaking O'Neill dominated the American stage during the 1920s, 1930s and was revived again in the 1950s, while Shepard's importance presence was mostly felt from the late 1960s up until the late 1980s), their artistic styles and goals must, of necessity, be different. On the surface, it may safely be stated that O'Neill wrote his plays heavily influenced by the tenets of what is known as Modernism and that Shepard wrote plays with similar themes but influenced by what is referred to as Postmodernism. In this sense, O'Neill is much more of a traditionalist and, in spite of his profound pessimism and atheism left room in his plays for what he himself referred to as a "hopeless hope." Like other modernists, O'Neill was more heavily steeped in tradition whether it be classical, mythical or Elizabethan. Shepard, on the other hand, does not seem to adhere to any such tradition and his plays echo more secular notions, many of which come from pop mythology and, like Beckett, his plays leave little room for hope and are more nihilistic. Any hope there might be in Shepard's work is shrouded by an all pervasive ambiguity that makes resolution impossible.

Many readers will say that their usage of realism is for radically different purposes. That their usage of the mode differs greatly is obvious. However, the fact remains that when writing about the family, there seems to be an urge to use this mode. Is it because it is the "Great American Tradition" or is there something more at stake here? It is convenient, comfortable and almost a facile trick to refer to O'Neill as a modernist (Biggsby 1982, 2000; Bogard, 1972; Carpenter 1979 and Manheim 1982, 1998; among others) and Shepard as a postmodernist (Bottoms 1998; Callens 2007; Rosen 2007; Simard 1984 and Shewey 1997, among others). Needless to say, although neither of them would rest easily in the Procrustean bed of simplicity, the temptation is still there and this dissertation has been focused with this in mind.

O'Neill was the most active American playwright of the first half of the 20th century, actively involved in the febrile changes taking place in the arts and sciences and challenging previous notions of human understanding. After many years of experimenting with Expressionism, masks and Freudianism, he returned to an intimate and haunting realist mode in an attempt to exorcise the ghosts of his family's past. Shepard's story is

similar if not exactly the same. Arriving in New York City at the age of 19, he plunged immediately into a fervid avant-garde scene and began spinning out a kaleidoscope of experimental works. Yet, when settling down to write his own more intimate “family plays,” he too returned to a more realist mode. While their respective means for using the realist mode may differ, their “attempts to fathom the depths can be—and are—prompted by the same ghosts.” (Demastes 1996: 247)

That Americans, at large, are obsessed with the idea of the nature of reality and how to depict it, experience it and describe it can be summed up in the colloquial expression that friends sometimes use at parting. It is still not uncommon to hear the old adage “it’s been real.” Whether it is being used in earnest or ironically does not diminish its power or the speaker’s intention, and the listener will instantly understand the meaning. Americans are notorious for being laconic and wanting to define an experience in as short a time as possible. What is it that has been “real”? Has whatever it is been “really” exciting? Really moving? Really touching? Really sentimental? What exactly is meant by this expression? I would argue that what is “real” is embodied in the familiar and comfortable notion of home and family, the code by which America depicts itself.

Dealing with realism in the postmodern age is like walking a tightrope. Does realism indeed even exist? On the one hand, are those who say that the contemporary world is dominated by simulacra, as Baudrillard suggests in *America* (1989) where the individual subject no longer exists, where reality, referentiality and difference “have been rendered impotent,” where language has been emptied of any meaning and replaced by “a spiral of images and simulation” (Baudrillard qtd. in Watt, 1998: 123). On the other hand, it may be as Frederic Jameson has suggested in his “Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” that in a world of commodity capitalism, where language itself has suffered “a linguistic fragmentation” and where the “unavailability of the older national language itself,” America, like other advanced capitalist countries, today uses “a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” (rpt. Hardt and Weeks 2000: 201). In this view, speakers resort to the use of “dead styles” or clichés, as the old notions of the “high-modernist ideology of style” have collapsed and the individual can no longer cling to what was once “unique and unmistakable as your own fingerprints, as incomparable as your own body” (202). Jameson states that, indeed, “in this new social world which is ours today, we can go so far as to say that the very object of realism itself—secular reality, objective reality—no longer exists either.” (178)

If describing the nature of reality is of crucial importance to the “man in the street,” it is even more so for the writer, be it of fiction, drama or poetry. Philip Roth perhaps captured this dilemma when he remarked that “the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make *credible* much of the American reality” (qtd in Bradbury & Rutland 1991: 314). How to make sense of a seemingly senseless world? Indeed, one might consider the whole history of American literature to be founded on this continuum and conundrum. Though undoubtedly Roth was referring to fiction writers, the comment would apply to American playwrights as well. Gerald M. Berkowitz has suggested that throughout the 20th century domestic drama and realism, as the core of American drama, have been in place and are constantly being redefined by successive generations of playwrights (Berkovitz 1992: 2-3). Realism continues to exert a powerful, perhaps somewhat balm-like influence on the theater-going public and grapples with everyday issues and is almost always engaging. If not, then why do playwrights keep resorting to the style?

II.

This dissertation has been organized into different sections as follows: “Family in the American Vein” points out how Eugene O’Neill integrated elements of his own life into his plays and how, to a certain extent, *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* can be read as autobiographical. I point out that from his early works on, O’Neill was concerned with portraying how fate influences character. Throughout O’Neill’s works, generational conflicts are continuously waged, many times with a tension between affection and selfishness. The father figure usually treats the son with indifference, disappointment and selfishness. In this sense, the sons are seen as victims of destructive oppression and their response to this destructive oppression is a mixture of bitterness together with volleys of verbal violence that reveal truths, which are sordid at best. We also see how in *Desire under the Elms*, the Cabot family is beset by family dysfunction, covetousness and how the sons of Eben Cabot are terrorized by a puritanical father and how his son Eben gets his revenge upon his father through a quasi-incestuous relationship with Cabot’s last wife. *Long Day’s Journey into Night* shows sons who also chafe under the influence of the father but this time O’Neill was able to show precisely this notion by using his own family and autobiography.

Shepard's plays, on the other hand, are perhaps a bit less autobiographical but nevertheless they are also engaged with the family in America and more with emphasizing that the family also serves as a metonymy of America itself. Implicit in Shepard's work in this sense is a sense of lost unity, of the severing of the connection between individuals once established through shared values and beliefs. His characters live discontinuous lives and some connection has been broken between themselves and the past (mythic and historical), themselves and their families, their loves and it can be seen even in the language they speak. America itself seems deracinated and myths have developed into fantasies.

Curse of the Starving Class draws upon memories and characters from his own family and also deals with more familiar themes of heredity and the increasing fragmentation and alienation of the American family. But Shepard is not just talking about the family itself, but pointing towards the culture at large as well. We can point out that in Shepard there are notions of unwanted children. For example, in both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, the sons do not seem to have been particularly wanted. In *Buried Child*, one of the sons has been murdered and the family fails to recognize the grandson when he returns. *Buried Child* also contains oedipal overtones. This play also has similarities to O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* as we are confronted again with the idea of a "curse" being passed on down in a family. Offspring view themselves as failures, exploited and isolated and controlled by elements outside themselves and destined to live out a "curse" passed on by former generations. Shepard is especially concerned with the struggle between father and son and the plays under study here focus upon the son's attempt to extricate himself both physically and psycho-spiritually from his father or father-surrogate.

If the Oedipus complex in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* in conception and depiction are informed by a classically and literarily oriented perspective, Shepard, on the other hand, uses the oedipal impulse as a primitivist and mythic imagist. In his early plays, the son finds himself at odds with the father, but is able to extricate himself, if only temporarily. Later on, the son must come face to face with the father and this presents the final and most challenging trial. The son realizes that the two of them cannot exist simultaneously. Socialization or reconciliation brings depersonalization and only one will survive.

In "Tragedy and Tragicomedy: Breaking Generic Boundaries," I have attempted to show that both playwrights are attempting to portray the modern American tragedy. If

O'Neill was perhaps more consciously working in a more traditionalist mode and was more influenced by the classics than Shepard, this does not diminish the impact of Shepard's work. O'Neill made numerous attempts at creating tragedy and both *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* are often referred to as modern tragedies. On the other hand, rarely are Shepard's plays referred to as tragedies as his work falls more into the characteristics of what can be more accurately referred to as tragicomedy. Though both *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* are structured tragically, Shepard is constantly undercutting the tragedy with ironic overtones. Both the private and the social play equal parts in their work, which portray every person's potentially fatal involvement with the external and internal forces that shape his/her life. Once again, we see that though Shepard is perhaps less academic than O'Neill, who worked in a more classical vein, I believe that his return to family and realism was also an attempt to update the theater as tragic.

Desire under the Elms, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* are all concerned with heredity and (pre)determination. O'Neill and Shepard use these notions to show the progression from family as "fate" to family as "curse." *Long Day's Journey into Night* shows that the family cannot be avoided for affective and historical reasons whereas *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* show that any escape from the family is thwarted by biology. In addition, the dominant motif of the family that is actively destroying itself has been present in tragedy since the Ancient Greeks and reappears as a major theme of the American families of O'Neill and Shepard in the 20th century. Moreover, in the history of modern drama and particularly modern tragedy, the focus seems heavily weighted on the family. If we suppose that the family is the central unit in society and are witness to that family life presented as diseased and corrupt, it can undermine our confidence that there can ever be any coherent order in that society.

Like earlier tragedy, modern tragedy explores the painfulness of a world where fictions of a rational social order can no longer be maintained. Early tragedies had a more outward look and asked questions about the position of human beings in the universe. Modern tragedy or tragicomedy centers on the family and has a tendency to look inwards. The emphasis is on the disorder of the mind as much as the disorder present in the wider world. The heroes or heroines are as likely to be confronting the worst elements in themselves as confronting the worst elements in the world.

O'Neill's approach to tragedy was as a modernist. The modernists were possessed by a dilemma that was philosophical and caused a psychological devastation that O'Neill would attempt to turn into tragedy. The tragedy for modern man is to seek a higher life with the knowledge that it cannot be attained. Therefore, in the absence of God, if God indeed is really dead, then one can dramatize human fate only in terms of human interactions. Not only did O'Neill add this notion to the so-called modernist movement, but also to contemporary American dramatists like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, among others.

Perhaps O'Neill's primary contribution to American drama with *Desire under the Elms* was undoubtedly the way he was able to portray a contemporary American tragedy. With this play O'Neill managed to create a world where Americans could feel and witness the mysteries that Greek audiences would have understood. In this sense, he has succeeded in creating a type of secular tragedy. Like other art forms, theater creates worlds that may be realistic, absurd or fantastic for example, but nonetheless engage an active or passive public. O'Neill was evidently engaged in expressing the "impelling, inscrutable forces behind life" together with the relationship between man and God as previously noted.

O'Neill was forced to find that sense of inevitability or fate that had previously been inscribed to the gods, to man's own psychology and hence to society. As to why the family takes such a central role in O'Neill's plays (and we should say Shepard's work for that matter), it is because we are simultaneously torn by love and hate, for we love the one parent and hate the other as our rival. And so the family, because it is the center of home, is also the center of hate.

In a world where older values no longer apply, we find ourselves up against the modernist notion of alienation, which is also a constant in O'Neill's work. One way of presenting the conflict or dialectic between illusion and reality was to use myth. *Desire under the Elms* includes all the trappings of a classical tragedy. Like *Buried Child*, the action takes place in springtime, traditionally a time for renewal. Determinism is shown through a "curse" that seems to possess the Cabot farm. Determinism can be found in the form of a mysterious force or presence that can be felt on the farm that compels the characters to act the way they do.

Separating the past from remembrance is a major theme of *Long Day's Journey into Night*. How do memories clash, reshape or infuse the past? The present includes pressure from the past where good is something irretrievable and the present is always

unsatisfactory. The Tyrones all react in terms of past grudges, betrayals and suspicions always looking for a scapegoat. What is clear by the end of the play is that the journey from day to night will be repeated again and again and neither traveling forward in time nor circling back via memory in the last analysis will make a significant difference.

In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, O'Neill fuses the present and the past and the influence of the past on the present pervades the work from the beginning to the end. If O'Neill was able to transform classical myth into modern secular tragedy with *Desire Under the Elms*, he was to achieve even more success with *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Through tools like the fog in *Long Day's Journey*, which represents inner states of mind, he was able to substitute some of the mythical "otherness" of "fate" found in classical tragedy. This fog has uncanny similarities to the rain that falls persistently through the action of Shepard's *Buried Child*, cutting off another American family from the outside world. Another way of expressing the "otherness" of fate is expressed through verbal repetition. The usage of mind-altering substances also permeates *Long Day's Journey* as alcohol and morphine cause the characters to lose control of themselves and perhaps speak too much.

O'Neill conceived "classic fate" as "family fate." In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, time becomes a crucial theme. The title itself is the first indication of the importance of time in the play as it traces an inexorable descent into darkness. In this sense, O'Neill's play is clearly part of the continuum of the theme of lost American innocence. Their dilemma and that of the culture at large stems from being in time and longing for an ideal which is not. In *Long Day's Journey to Night*, he decided to repeat the same theme on a more intimate level by focusing on the individual within a smaller unit and a single generation, and this, of course, has become the family.

Modern tragedy as a genre begins to weaken after O'Neill. If to a certain extent modern tragedy was a liberal formulation, where the dilemmas of the heroes, as agonizing and resolutionless as they might be, were more readily discerned, and feelings of entrapment by unjust practices ended in tragic reversals, modern tragicomedy has no such pretences. Rather, it denotes a movement away from a sense of social experience that is anchored in tangible issues of moral right and wrong, of the good and the just and its betrayal.

Modern tragicomedy poses a number of challenges to modern(ist) drama. The belief in the dramatic illusion of reality and the sense of what human nature is, and how the theatrical persona "represent" it, are called brutally into question. This posits one of the

main differences regarding how this drama differs from that written by modern dramatists. There are few (if any) referents to hold onto. Gone are the sureties of time, place and identity of the older dramatists. There appears to be little past and the future portends little more. Tragicomedy seems to have robbed dramatic realism of individuality in opposition to social constraints, which, as mentioned before, were discernable by the spectator. Formerly, the spectator used to be able to grasp the exact notion of the moral dilemma. Even in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, it is clear that everyone desires something whether what is desired is attainable or not.

Fate is still very present in these plays as well. If fate of one sort or another hovers over all of tragedy, then tragicomedy is no different. There is still an external force, an external "something" that determines human action, but it has no public face, no visible manifestation. One has only to think about Sam Shepard's plays that are driven forward by an inscrutable fate, an "unseen hand" so to speak, that is nowhere to be found but is palpable nevertheless. Fate becomes a random encounter with unseen traces which seem just out of reach. The traces are unknown, yet can be felt. They seem to belong to the past, to myth, to wealth. They are everywhere but never tangible or determinate. The ultimate cause of anything can never be established. In the age of reason, the sense of human mastery is lost, which is one of the characteristics of the postmodern moment.

Although Shepard's turn to family was similar to O'Neill's, what is probably just as important is that the movement away from tragedy in its Aristotelian form has become total by now. Unlike O'Neill's families, Shepard's families seem to lack any sort of preordained unity, they are never really established as realities that can be logically explained. Neither the structure nor the status seems to have any grounding. What is significant about Shepard's family characters is that they may perturb the audience but that moralizing about their behavior becomes pointless.

In this sense, one may claim that in Shepard nihilism holds sway. There is nothing to inherit in his families nor can the fate of inheriting it be escaped is what Shepard seems to say. This might also point to one of the main differences between Modernism and Postmodernism. Modernism has grounding, in this case the father as an authoritative figure. With Shepard's postmodern grounding, the patriarch's authority (or lack of it) is not an issue because it is hardly even tested. The father-figures, like the son(s) in rebellion, seem to be merely going through the motions indicating the death of traditional values as well. By this, it is now a great, inexorable force which the protagonists cannot fully acknowledge until it has destroyed him. Heredity has become omnipotent. This break with

tradition—the father as a figure of authority—has led from respect (if not necessarily love) to a state of almost total nihilism.

Finally in the chapters “Dangling between Modernism and Postmodernism” and “The Postmodern Moment,” I describe how O’Neill and Shepard were engaged on staging similar anxieties but from a different aesthetic and critical perspective. Whereas most of the scholarly work on O’Neill focuses on modernist tendencies, most approaches to Shepard are as a postmodernist. Both Modernism and Postmodernism deal with notions of fragmentation and, as we have seen, both playwrights use the family to display this idea. A key to understanding Modernism is the notion of fragmentation leading up to the 20th century feeling of alienation. If the 19th century was witness to the rise of mass urban existence, the 20th century gave way to even a greater degree of fragmentation.

Modernism is firmly grounded in notions of aesthetics with an author creator. The immutable essence of humanity found its proper representation in the mythical figure of Dionysus. Eugene O’Neill particularly regarding the notion that if the “eternal and immutable” could no longer be presupposed, then it was the task of the modern artist to take up a creative role and define the essence of humanity in a world gone mad. If the notion of creative destruction was an essential condition of modernity, then perhaps the role of the artist as genius and hero is preordained even if the consequences of his/her actions turn tragic.

That Shepard’s ideas on playwright and aesthetics in general were different to those of O’Neill is clear when we see that at first Shepard was more interested in the counter-culture like rock’n’roll. Though constantly experimenting, O’Neill wrote in a more classic vein, whereas Shepard was writing in a more informal and postmodern style. O’Neill thrived on the literary, whereas Shepard was more influenced by jazz and pop music.

To my mind, O’Neill will be remembered for his late plays in which he was able to recreate the private and the personal while portraying the ravages of hereditary guilt. In *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, the Tyrone family past has been broken up into fragments but these fragments make up a whole that the viewer or reader is able to grasp. By contrast, in Shepard the fragments have shattered and recovering the past is an impossible task.

The formal and literary attributes of Modernism are well known. Tradition must be remade, a new cultural style follows the cross between the inner dynamics of a literature and the large scale pressures of history, shedding the romantic tradition with faith in self-

sufficiency, the necessary irresponsibility, and thereby the ultimate salvation of art. Yet at the same time, the modernist writer presents dilemmas he/she does not wish to resolve necessarily, but offers his/her struggle with them, while thriving for sensations. Life is no longer knowable and character dissolves into a type of psychic battlefield and insoluble puzzle. *Long Day's Journey into Night* fits into this pattern quite easily and comfortably. It is a play where character is a psychic battlefield, beliefs in the past are discovered to be sham, human existence cannot be transformed, being a hero is nigh on impossible and borders on the absurd, life is unknowable, becoming more a series of sensations, albeit blunted by mind-altering drugs, than anything linear.

Perhaps one of the better ways to begin to divulge modernist techniques at work in *Long Day's Journey into Night* is to consider the notion of time. In many ways, it can be considered a play about the sense of loss produced by the ravages of time. When Mary Tyrone utters one of the most quoted lines of the play—"We can't help what the past has made us" (*Long Day's Journey into Night* 87)—she is speaking about the tragedy that time, like the past, is irretrievable.

It is usually argued that Shepard was working more in a postmodernist vein than O'Neill as Shepard's characters along with his dialogues are more fragmented. The past is also portrayed as fragments that fail to coalesce. Shepard himself has declared that things are shifting all the time. But Postmodernism and Modernism often overlap and Postmodernism has an ambiguous relationship with Modernism. To recapitulate, it is safe to say that most would agree that Postmodernism displays a loss of faith in the "unfinished product" of modernity as well as a cultural longing for and an inability to return to and have done with the past.

The most classic distinction is also a truism—Modernism privileges time whereas the postmodern privileges space. The temporality in Modernism unites a historical thing of progress, sometimes allowing for the development of utopias. In Modernism, there is a belief in origins and hierarchy, in process, development and causality. There is a reason for the way things are, however difficult it may be to unearth this meaning. On the other hand, in Postmodernism, there are only remains and traces. There is no progress, no moving forward, nor was there ever.

However, Shepard can be clearly considered a postmodernist playwright as can be seen in *Buried Child*. For instance, if one resorts to Shepard's postmodernist idea of play, we realize that the idea of "experimenting"—i.e. breaking with everything—has been a

constant in his life. If Shepard's realist plays are somewhat more confusing and difficult to grasp, the end result is almost identical to that of O'Neill. The audience somehow recognizes the characters. By the time Shepard writes *Buried Child*, the family as well as the nation has become so uncertain that the paradigms of realism have indeed collapsed and there is very little to hang onto anymore. Gone are the imperfect but strong father figures like Ephraim (a biblical archetype in *Desire under the Elms*) and James Tyrone (poor Irish immigrant who has made a decent life for himself in spite of the odds) and enter a much weaker father figure like Weston Tate (*Curse of the Starving Class*) and Dodge (*Buried Child*), both drunk, ineffectual and indolent.

A significant element of *Buried Child* that places it in more of a postmodern mode is that, while it seems to follow the conventions of classical drama and the well-made play, it shuns and even seems to sneer at the rational closure of such plays. Once again, we should point out the difference with O'Neill, who follows a more classic staging in his plays. The action of *Buried Child* begins in a relatively realistic manner that gradually becomes unfixed. Dodge and his family are defined by their place and circumstance rather than by creating their own set and scene. Time and place are also fixed and the characters cannot control the outside world through their own perceptions.

Shepard begins to explore the way in which outside forces determine character and the characters' reactions to their restrictive environment and their fate. The language used to convey the action in the play is flat, characterless, and repetitive and much of the dialogue is used to talk about non-rational events. Though Shepard resorts to realism in this play he also resorts to symbolic actions and events that seem to have their source anywhere else than in the normal probabilities of character and situation. That *Buried Child* uses paradigms of drama is undeniable yet it makes leaps of the mode into myth as well.

The tension in Shepard's plays and especially here, is designed to form coherent structures of images and language which are at the same time jolted by contradictions. This is another possible way of explaining the dichotomies between the different versions of the past provided by Dodge's family in *Buried Child*. The juxtaposition of such a complex nature is designed to present an experience of the discontinuous in nature. In addition, what seems clear and what most observers agree on is that Shepard uses some kind of a fantastic mode when animating the characters in *Buried Child* rather than their own psychological motivations. Some commentators refer to this as the "superreal." Rather than having an interest in creating a family like Arthur Miller's Lomans that one can empathize with,

Shepard is more engaged with achieving an effect upon the audience. The fact that the effect is disconcerting is precisely what he wants.

Buried Child does conform to the mode. The sets, the characters and props are all realistic enough but at the same time there seems to be a supernatural world, which makes them more postmodern, and some viewers or readers begin to wonder if the child Dodge killed and buried in the yard is exerting these supernatural powers over the farm. How else can these things be explained?

III.

The realist tradition and the American family play have nearly always combined the tension between the public and the private and the so often recurring tragedy or tragicomedy. Even playwrights who previously rejected the realist tradition return to it. My work underway includes studies of classic American family dramas like Tennessee Williams (*The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*), to more established and classic postmodern dramatists like Edward Albee (*The American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *A Delicate Balance*, *Sylvia or the Goat*) as well as African-American playwrights like August Wilson (*Fence*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*) and Suzan Lori-Parks (*Topdog/Underdog*). Can we include these playwrights and their works on the continuum of this idea of Family as Fate? If so, do these plays also point to the nation itself at large as well? How do these playwrights fuse the idea of family and nation? Can they be classified as political?

Additional work will attempt to study other works and playwrights as well such as Mac Wellman (*Crowtet*), Paula Vogel (*How I Learned to Drive*), Tony Kushner (*The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism and Capitalism with a Key to the Scriptures*) Nancy Silver (*Raised in Captivity*), Lanford Wilson (*Fifth of July*), Christopher Durang (*The Marriage of Bette and Boo*), John Guare (*The House of Blue Leaves*), Tracy Letts (*August: Osage County*), and Horton Foote (*The Orphans' Home Cycle*).

Additional work underway also focuses on O'Neill and the absurd or O'Neill as a precursor to postmodern American drama, particularly in his late works, the monumental *The Iceman Cometh* and the short play *Hughie*, both of which are often cited by critics as

links between a modernist sensibility and a more postmodernist one. The main thrust of the work focuses, and elaborates on, some of the themes of this dissertation like tragicomedy, theatrical artifice, language and characterization. Just what makes these plays different from his previous works? What do they have in common with works that are considered to be more postmodern? This idea could also be expanded to include Shepard and try and shed more light on the differing views as to whether his work should be considered modernist or postmodernist. Here we might focus on his plays concerning the role of the artist such as *Angel City* or *The Tooth of Crime*.

Finally, I would like to encourage others to carry out comparative studies between two or more authors. The study of two authors from various points of view, whether it be biographical, thematic, stylistic, monographic etc. is a challenging and rewarding experience that not only enhances understanding of the works of the authors, but may help to better understand the nation as well. At the same time, it may open up new approaches to these authors and their works as well. For instance, an earlier draft of this dissertation contained a brief study on the different approaches taken by O'Neill's biographers Shaeffer (1968, 1973); Gelb (1962, 2000); and Shepard's biographers Oumano, (1986; Wade, 1997; and Shewey, 1997). These add a curious notion not only to the differences between Modernism and Postmodernism but to the Americas that both authors inhabited while engaged, as I have attempted to show throughout this dissertation, in (re)telling the classic story of "Family as Fate."

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UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID

Departamento de Filología Inglesa II



TESIS DOCTORAL

**FAMILY AS FATE
IN EUGENE O'NEILL AND SAM SHEPARD
(LA FAMILIA COMO DESTINO
EN EUGENE O'NEILL Y SAM SHEPARD)**

James William Flath

Madrid, 2013

Directores:

**Dr. Félix Martín Gutiérrez
Dr. Gustavo Sánchez Canales**

Resumen de la Tesis doctoral *La Familia como destino en Eugene O’Neill y Sam Shepard (Family as Fate)* dirigida por el Dr. Félix Martín Gutiérrez (**Universidad Complutense de Madrid**) y el Dr. Gustavo Sánchez Canales (**Universidad Autónoma de Madrid**), y defendida por el doctorando James William Flath Massad. Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2013.

Resumen

La familia ha sido un tema recurrente en toda la historia de la humanidad en general y en la historia del teatro en particular. En este sentido, las obras de Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953) y Sam Shepard (1943) no son una excepción y podemos afirmar, sin ningún género de duda, que una gran parte de sus obras más importantes está precisamente dedicada a la familia.

Se ha escrito mucho sobre O’Neill y Shepard, los dos dramaturgos cuyas obras abordo en esta tesis. Por ejemplo, Sheila Rabillard (1993), Jim McGhee (1993) y William Demastes (1996, 2002) se han centrado en los elementos realistas y fantásticos, mientras que otros críticos como John Orr (1989, 1991) Vanden Heuvel (1991), Stephen Watt (1998), Joel Pfister (1995), Christopher Bigsby (2000, 2002) y Carol Rosen (2004) han estudiado su obra desde una perspectiva modernista y/o postmodernista. Además, otros especialistas como Jean Chothia (1979, 1998), Bonnie Marranta (1981), Michael Manheim (1982), Deborah Geis (1993) y Thomas Adler (2002) han analizado de manera exhaustiva cómo se utiliza el lenguaje. Otros como Laurin Porter (1988, 1993), Jeannete Malkin (1992, 1999) y John Raleigh (1988) se han centrado en cómo se retrata el tiempo y la memoria en las obras de estos autores. Desde un punto de vista psicoanalítico, también se han llevado a cabo análisis entre los que destacan los trabajos de Patrick Nolan (en Di Mauro 1993 [1981]), Luther Luedtke (1989) y William Kleb (1998). Otros estudios se han centrado en la influencia del teatro europeo —sirvan a modo de ejemplo, el teatro de Shakespeare, Chejov, Strindberg y Racine— en la influencia del teatro estadounidense (contemporáneo), como los trabajos de Travis Bogard (1972), Murray Hartman (en Di Mauro 1993 [1961]), Jay Ronald Meyers (en Di Mauro 1993 [1967]), John Patrick Diggins (2007) y Doris Alexander (1992, 2005), o en la influencia del teatro griego clásico en los dramaturgos estadounidenses como los estudios de Peter Hays (1990), Richard Sewall (1991), Bennet Simon (1993) y Sophus Keith Winther (en Di Mauro 1993 [1960]).

La presente tesis doctoral pretende, por un lado, acercarse al teatro de O'Neill desde una perspectiva autobiográfica tratando de mostrar que su obra se inspira en el teatro griego clásico (Eurípides, entre otros). En este sentido, trata de infundir en la familia americana cierto tono trágico para mostrar en qué medida el pasado también condiciona lo que ocurre en el presente. Este es uno de los *leitmotifs* presente no solo en *Long Day's Journey to Night* sino también en sus obras anteriores. Por otro lado, analizo las obras de Shepard desde una perspectiva parecida con el fin de demostrar que su intención es romper con esa tradición tan querida por O'Neill y por otros dramaturgos norteamericanos. En lugar de utilizar referencias clásicas a la tradición, Shepard enfoca sus obras más desde una perspectiva contracultural y aborda las tradiciones de manera posmoderna, es decir, recurre a la tradición para dar la vuelta al retrato de una familia norteamericana donde el pasado ha sido reducido a fragmentos que son imposibles de recomponer de manera coherente. Aunque los escenarios, los temas y los personajes de las obras de temática familiar son diferentes en Shepard y en O'Neill, hay un elemento dramático que permanece constante en ambos autores, a saber, la presencia de un joven atormentado por conflictos irresueltos relacionados con su pasado familiar y personal. Aunque los intentos por huir de ese pasado están condenados al fracaso en ambos autores, varía el modo en cómo se plantea dicho conflicto.

En cambio, Shepard, que también aborda el tema de la familia, hace mayor hincapié en su aspecto biológico y hereditario. La diferencia fundamental entre ambos dramaturgos es que, ya en sus primeras obras los personajes creados por Shepard, a diferencia de los de O'Neill, tratan de huir de la familia. En estas obras está latente el deseo o la necesidad de mostrar una ruptura con la familia y, por extensión, con la tradición.

En cuanto a la estructura de la presente tesis, cabe decir que consta de cuatro capítulos. Cada capítulo empieza con una introducción sobre el tema estudiado en cuestión y le sigue un análisis de dos obras de teatro de O'Neill y dos de Shepard. Por razones de espacio, solo analizo *Long Day's into Night* y *Desire under the Elms* de O'Neill y *Curse of the Starving Class* y *Buried Child* de Shepard.

El primer capítulo, "La familia al estilo norteamericano," ofrece una breve panorámica sobre cómo se ha tratado la familia en el teatro norteamericano y cómo la noción de familia como destino es una constante en dicho teatro. En este primer capítulo,

trato de argumentar las razones por las que se incluye O'Neill y Shepard en las cuatro obras mencionadas anteriormente.

En el segundo capítulo, "A caballo entre modernismo y postmodernismo," se estudia la naturaleza misma del debate modernista/postmodernista y se muestra que, mientras que O'Neill ha utilizado un lenguaje modernista, Shepard ha empleado uno postmodernista, aunque a veces las dos formas de expresión coinciden en ambos autores, lo que produce algunas de las escenas más ricas e intensas de la historia del teatro de Estados Unidos. En este capítulo, abordo, por un lado, el realismo y su función en el teatro moderno, particularmente en el teatro norteamericano y, por otro, cotejo el realismo tradicional de O'Neill con el realismo paródico de Shepard. En el caso de este dramaturgo, lo que se consigue es socavar la tradición mediante la utilización del pastiche. Este capítulo ilustra igualmente la utilización del lenguaje en ambas obras. Por un lado, cómo O'Neill crea unos personajes y unos diálogos que constituyen la quintaesencia del ser norteamericano en sus obras *Desire under the Elms* y *Long Day's Journey into Night*, y, por otro, cómo Shepard también emplea un lenguaje parecido en el que la comunicación entre los miembros de la familia está casi totalmente rota.

El capítulo tres, "Tragedia y tragicomedia: la ruptura de los límites entre géneros," es un análisis sobre la importancia de la tragedia y la tragicomedia en ambos dramaturgos, en el que se explica que O'Neill trata de trabajar de un modo más clásico para presentar la tragedia en una lengua que sus contemporáneos entienden en Estados Unidos. Shepard, en cambio, esboza la tragedia y adopta un enfoque más postmodernista en sus obras, es decir, se inclina más por el género de la tragicomedia. En sus obras está latente la noción de tragedia, a veces con un tono más irónico y nihilista que en el caso de O'Neill. Los efectos del destino, el tiempo y la memoria se estudian detalladamente en este capítulo ya que encarnan la noción de tragedia y son la principal causa del trágico declive y decadencia de las familias retratadas tanto en las obras de O'Neill como en las de Shepard.

En el capítulo cuatro, "El momento postmodernista," planteo que O'Neill escribió sus obras bajo la influencia decisiva de los principios de lo que se conoce como modernismo y que Shepard aborda la misma temática pero influido por lo que se denomina postmodernismo. En este sentido, O'Neill es más bien un tradicionalista y, a pesar de su profundo pesimismo y ateísmo, deja un espacio abierto en sus obras para lo que él mismo denomina como "esperanza desesperada." Al igual que otros modernistas, O'Neill estaba mucho más anclado en la tradición, ya fuera clásica, mítica o isabelina. Por el contrario, Shepard no parece estar vinculado a ninguna de esas tradiciones y de sus obras se

desprenden nociones más seculares, muchas de las cuales proceden de la mitología popular norteamericana y, de la misma manera que Beckett, sus obras dejan poco lugar a la esperanza. Aunque se considera que la obra de Shepard tiene un carácter más nihilista que la de O'Neill, y a pesar del destino oscuro que se cierne sobre sus personajes, hay lugar para la noción de “esperanza desesperada” debido a la ambigüedad que todo lo permea y que no permite extraer interpretaciones contundentes.

Por esta razón, y a fin de no romper la estructura de esta tesis, el capítulo titulado “momento postmodernista” aborda solo *Curse of the Starving Class* y *Buried Child* de Shepard. Naturalmente, cabe esperar que un estudio comparativo de estas características no esté exento de determinadas dificultades y contenga inevitablemente cierto grado de solapamiento de ideas ya que algunas nociones o pasajes pueden repetirse en otro capítulo. Por ejemplo, el modo en que ambos dramaturgos abordan la memoria y el pasado, o la relación entre padres e hijos, no solo está relacionado con su enfoque e interpretación de las nociones de tragedia/tragicomedia, sino que guarda relación con la naturaleza de lo que se define como modernismo y postmodernismo.

Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation *La Familia como destino en Eugene O'Neill y Sam Shepard (Family as Fate)* supervised by Dr. Félix Martín Gutiérrez (Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Dr. Gustavo Sánchez Canales (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.) and submitted by James William Flath Massad. Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2013.

Summary

Family has been a constant throughout the history of mankind in general and the history of drama in particular. The plays of Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) and Sam Shepard (1943) are not an exception in this respect and we can safely say that a large amount of their best work is precisely devoted to family.

Much has been written about O'Neill and Shepard, the two dramatists under study in this dissertation. Sheila Rabillard (1993), Jim McGhee (1993) and William Demastes (1996, 2002) have devoted attention to realist and fantastic elements, whereas critics like John Orr (1989, 1991) Vanden Heuvel (1991), Stephen Watt (1998), Joel Pfister (1995),

Christopher Bigsby (2000, 2002) and Carol Rosen (2004) have studied their work from a modernist and/or postmodernist point of view. In addition, the use of language has been extensively studied by critics like Jean Chothia (1979, 1998), Bonnie Marranca (1981), Michael Manheim (1982), Deborah Geis (1993) and Thomas Adler (2002). Moreover, the use of time has also been explored by Laurin Porter (1988, 1993), Jeannete Malkin (1992, 1999) and John Raleigh (1988). Psychoanalytic studies have also been made by critics like Patrick Nolan (in Di Mauro 1993 [1981]), Luther Luedtke (1989) and William Kleb (1998), as well as studies devoted to the influence of European—e.g. Shakesperean, Chekhovian, Strindbergian, Racinian—drama on (contemporary) American drama like Travis Bogard (1972), Murray Hartman (in Di Mauro 1993 [1961]), Jay Ronald Meyers (in Di Mauro 1993 [1967]), John Patrick Diggins (2007), Doris Alexander (1992, 2005) and the influence of classical Greek drama on American dramatists like Peter Hays (1990), Richard Sewall (1991), Bennet Simon (1993) and Sophus Keith Winther (in Di Mauro 1993 [1960]).

On the one hand, I will approach O'Neill's drama from an autobiographical viewpoint and will attempt to show how he resorts to classical Greek drama (Euripides, among others). In this sense, he was endeavoring to infuse the American family with tragic overtones in order to show that in America the past also shapes what happens in the present. This is a common motif in *Long Day's Journey to Night* but is also present in his earlier works as well. On the other hand, I will analyze Shepard's plays with a similar focus in order to demonstrate that his intention is to break with that tradition so beloved by O'Neill and other American playwrights. Rather than use classical references to tradition, Shepard worked more with a countercultural focus and when resorting to the traditions he did so in a more postmodern way using tradition to subvert the portrayal of an American family, in which the past has been reduced to fragments that are impossible to string together in a coherent fashion. Although the settings, themes, and characters of the family plays vary in Shepard and O'Neill, one dramatic element that remains constant in each is the presence of a young man haunted by unresolved ties to family and personal heritage. Though attempts to evade this past are doomed to failure in both playwrights, their approach will be different.

Conversely, Shepard, who also addresses the theme of (the) family, places more emphasis on its biological and hereditary aspects. The key difference between both

dramatists is that Shepard's characters, unlike O'Neill's, attempt to break away from their family in his early works. Some of his early plays underscore the wish or the need to show a break with the family and by extension with tradition.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. Each chapter begins with a general Introduction or overview of the issue addressed and followed by an analysis of two O'Neill plays and two Shepard plays. For reasons of space, I will only analyze O'Neill's *Long Day's into Night* and *Desire under the Elms* and Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*.

Chapter One, "Family in the American Vein," gives a brief overview of how the family has been treated in American drama and how the notion of family as fate is a continuum in American drama. The reasons for including O'Neill and Shepard are looked into particularly through the four plays mentioned above.

Chapter Two, "Dangling Between Modernism and Postmodernism," explores the very nature of the Modernism/Postmodernism debate and shows that O'Neill can be said to have been working in a modernist idiom and Shepard in a postmodern idiom and at times an overlapping of the two modes occurs making for some of the richest and most exciting plays in the American canon. This chapter also looks at realism and its role in modern drama, particularly American drama and just how it was used by O'Neill and how it is parodied and undercut by the use of pastiche in Shepard's work. This chapter also illustrates the use of language in both playwrights, how O'Neill uses a uniquely American dialogue in *Desire under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and how Shepard uses a realistic language as well but where communication between family members has almost totally broken down.

Chapter Three, "Tragedy and Tragicomedy: Breaking Generic Boundaries," explores tragedy and tragicomedy and explains that O'Neill attempted to work within a more classical mode and write tragedy in an idiom that his contemporaries would understand in America. Shepard, on the other hand, eschews tragedy and adopts a more postmodernist approach to tragedy and works more with the genre of tragicomedy. His plays underwrite notions of tragedy, at times with a more mocking and nihilistic tone than O'Neill. The effects of fate, time and memory are studied in detail in this chapter as they embody notions of tragedy and are major causes of the tragic downfall of the families portrayed in both O'Neill's and Shepard's plays.

Chapter Four, “The Postmodern Moment,” explains that O’Neill wrote his plays heavily influenced by the tenets of what is known as modernism and that Shepard wrote basically the same type of plays but influenced by what is referred to as the postmodern. In this sense, O’Neill is much more of a traditionalist and, in spite of profound pessimism and atheism, left room in his plays for what he himself referred to as a “hopeless hope.” Like other modernists, O’Neill was more heavily steeped in tradition whether it be classical, mythical or Elizabethan. Shepard, on the other hand, does not seem to adhere to any such tradition and his plays echo more secular notions, many of which come from pop mythology and, like Beckett, his plays leave little room for hope. Shepard is commonly referred to as being more nihilistic yet, like O’Neill, in his family plays, in spite of the gloom hovering over them, there is room for that same notion of “hopeless hope” even if it is shrouded by an all pervasive ambiguity.

For this reason, and in order not to try to break the structure of this dissertation, “The Postmodern Moment” deals only with Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*. This of course suggests that such a comparative study is not without its pitfalls and inevitably is prone to a certain degree of overlap and several passages and ideas may be repeated in another chapter. For example, how both playwrights deal with memory and the past, or the relationship between fathers and sons have to do not only with their approach and interpretations of the notions of tragedy/tragicomedy, but point as well as to the nature of just what defines Modernism and Postmodernism.

