The Sense of Loss: Postmodern Fragmented Identity in Three Plays of Sam Shepard

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Abstract

Sam Shepard is one of the foremost living American Playwrights. He has always been concerned with the problem of identity, specifically the fragmented identity of man living in the postmodern era. Such characterization is evident in his plays: *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*. Thus, the present article is to demonstrate the fragmented identity of Lee and Austin, Eddie and May, and Jake and Beth, in the three plays respectively. Fredric Jameson asserts that the reason for the fragmented identity is lack of any coherent relationship with the past. The mentioned characters are depicted as being lost in the perpetual images, with no clear bond to past.

Keywords: *Postmodern, identity, play, Sam Shepard*

1. Introduction

The characters in Sam Shepards' plays are engaged in the struggle to find out their final image of self as they are entangled in the web of society and family. In over forty plays, Shepard has broken down traditional notions of dramaturgy in combining both modernist notions of the absurd and familiar icons from the American cultural landscape with an energy tinged by anarchy and violence. During his whole career, Sam Shepard has always been involved in the matters of searching for one's identity.

In a postmodern traditional way of thinking, a person's sense of identity is a composite constructed by the forces of the surrounding culture. Individual consciousness, a vague, decentered collection of unconscious and conscious beliefs, knowledge, and intuitions about oneself and the world is malleable

and arrived at through interaction with the surrounding culture. The roots for such fragmented identity of the individuals in the postmodern society is, according to Fredric Jameson, the consequence of the lack of any coherent relation to past or history. Having lost their sense of history, the members of the present postmodern societies can no longer attain a cohesive identity. Thus, Fredric Jameson gives a definition of the postmodern society as the one in which man has lost his roots and is perpetually exposed to a number of images that are also in a way being controlled by what he calls a "late capitalism" system.

The influence of history is evident in the ways the characters in *True West*, *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind* are staged being trapped in the hunting Western history which has exerted a lot of influences upon them, as it is manifested in their split selves. The ways in which such a postmodern society has affected the very shaping of the non-cohesive self in these characters will be studied in present study. Shepard's settings are often a kind of nowhere land on the American Plains and his characters are typically loners and drifters caught between a mythical past and the mechanized present, and his works often concern deeply troubled families. The two brothers in Sam Shepard's *True West* have lost connection with the past. Lee is not concerned with the older values and prefers to escape to nowhere land, where he has come from. There is no sense of place and time here. In the same manner, the half siblings of *Fool for Love* are also lost in nowhere, living in perpetual present, thus shaping a fragmented identity. *A Lie of the Mind* is also basically about the return to the past, which appears to have been lost, and even burned as the symbolic action of Lorrain, Jake's mother in setting fire on the whole home conveys.

During his whole career, Sam Shepard has always been involved in the matters of searching for one's identity. The characters that he puts on the stage are shown as engaged in the struggle to find their final image of self and they are entangled in the web of society and their family.

Many critics have clearly adapted this fact in their interpretations of his later works, which is more clearly seen in his plays after *True West*. Among them, Bottoms (1998) believes that from *True West* onwards, Sam Shepard has gained more clarity and has come to care more for the way the characters are presented. He states that all the elements in his plays, including characters, have come to a more realistic stage. In his later plays, specifically *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), Shepard has withdrawn from his early interest in sounds and language, to a more involving staging of the characters. Such characterization could be put in the category of postmodern characterization. In the three aforementioned

plays, Shepard has staged the fragmented postmodern identity which yields to the following definition of the fragmented identity.

2. Postmodern Fragmented Identify

In addition to a theoretical perspective, the term postmodern is often used to describe the condition of living in contemporary, post-industrialized societies with the stance of questioning truth and authority that such a condition precipitates. Postmodernism, is difficult to define.

Most interpreters of postmodernism assume that there is a clear cut difference between the modern era and the postmodern era. The modern era is the period that began in the late 17th century and ended sometime in the 1960s; the postmodern is the last 30 years or so. Glass (1995) affirms such definition of postmodernism by stating that: "Postmodernism is a philosophy that has reacted strongly against several assumptions of modernity: those concerning progress, history, causality, system, absolutes, meanings, the unitary self, technological judgment, and conformity" (1).

One main difference between the two eras has to do with the question of unity, wholeness, and totality. In the modern era people wanted some kind of totality: a unified conception of the world, a unified set of values, a unified culture and lifestyle, etc. Some modern people actively searched for such totality. Others no longer expected to find such unity, so they didn't really look for it. But they still missed it and regretted its loss. So modern people had nostalgia for pre-modern times, when unified totality was possible, and they wished that they too could have this wholeness in their lives.

Butler (2002) has summarized the characteristics of the postmodern as described by the critics:

> By the mid-1960s, critics like Susan Sontag and Ihab Hassan had begun to point out some of the characteristics, in Europe and in the United States, of what we now call postmodernism. They argued that the work of the postmodernists was deliberately less unified, less obviously masterful, more playful or anarchic, more concerned with the process of our understanding than with the pleasures of artistic finish or unity, less inclined to hold a narrative together, and certainly more resistant to a certain interpretation. (5)

Furthermore, Butler states that the definition of the self has undergone certain change in the postmodern era; self is what the power defined for you,

". . . our very identity, the notion we have of ourselves, is at issue when we are affected by discourses of power" (50). He also believes that in the postmodern way of thought, ". . . the notion of human identity (is) essentially *constructed* like a fiction…" (53) (My Emphasis). Lucy (2000) believes that the postmodern characterization "advances an attack on the notion of identity, or of an essential Selfhood. . . . In short it leads to the elaboration of characters (if they can still be called such, given their confusing ontological status) whose existence (rather than essence) is characterized by *difference* (rather than identity)" (140).

The concept of identity as well as the definition of the self is of great importance here. Most of the critics unanimously believe that there is no more individuality, in the postmodern society. The self is no more the united whole of the modern era, but rather a constructed fragmented phenomenon which is basically under the dominance of mass media images. In other words, the postmodern self is released from the fixed relationship between nominal identity and social roles. Freedom is found not in the pursuit of authenticity but in the interplay of multiple roles that signify the openness of all meanings. The self is no longer defined as a consistent conglomeration of attitudes and perceptions strung together by the power of reason. Neither is behavior necessarily considered an outcome of clear intentions. Elliott (2007) writes:

> Through immersion in the realm of images and representations, the ego is built upon various narcissistic identifications that defend against the painful and unsettling turbulence of the unconscious. The individual captivated by its mirror image, or the self treating other people as mirrors to its own wants and desires; these are instances of imaginary misrecognition, a distortion through which the ego seeks to fill in the gap of emptiness, loss and longing at the level of unconscious desire. .. . The postmodern self, created upon fleeting narcissistic images, is a transient identity with precious little in the way of deeper affective ties or emotional roots (146).

The postmodern self rejects the policing action of social institutions and pre-existing social scripts. The identity of the postmodern self does not have a center. Sarup (1996) described such an identity as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash…[and] not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each observer in each period"(25-26).

3. Fredric Jameson: Loss of Past

Fredric Jameson is generally considered to be one of the foremost contemporary English language Marxist literary and cultural critics. Helmling (2001) categorized Jameson among the world's foremost literary and social critics of postmodernism, stating that:" American cultural system affords its intellectuals no eminence of prestige and controversy comparable to that of Derrida in France, or Habermas in Germany; but if it did, one of the few Americans who could plausibly be put in their league is Fredric Jameson" (1).

Jameson (1991) described postmodernism as a "break" or as "shifts and irrevocable changes in the representation of things" (xi). Postmodernism is not the "cultural dominant of a new social order" but only the "reflex and concomitant of yet another systematic modification of capitalism itself" (x). This modification, namely, late capitalism, is "a vision of the world capitalist system fundamentally distinct from older imperialism" (x).

According to Jameson, the postmodern is a model, a mediatory concept that would describe the allowance for the articulation of a variety of cultural phenomena that can be placed in the structure of late capitalism. As for him, the concept of postmodernism has certain characteristics. It is first of all, a reaction against "the establishment forms of high modernism. . . . that conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network and foundations" (Jameson, 1998, 1). It is also the effacement of key boundaries or separations, the most notable of which is the distinction between high culture and popular or mass culture. Finally, postmodernism is characterized by Jameson as the connotation of a style that connotes a "periodization" whose function is to "correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order" (2).

In his magisterial work, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson has offered a particularly influential analysis of our current postmodern condition. Like Baudrillard, Jameson is highly critical of our current historical situation; indeed, he paints a rather dystopic picture of the present, which he associates, in particular, with a loss of our connection to history. What we are left with is a fascination with the present. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* begins with these words: "It is safest to grasp the concept 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" (ix).

In other words, to find the real meaning of the postmodern present we should relate it to the past. We should view the present as one chapter in the ongoing story of human civilization. According to Jameson, postmodernity has transformed the historical past into a series of emptied-out stylizations (what Jameson terms pastiche) that can then be commoditized and consumed. The result is the threatened victory of capitalist thinking over all other forms of thought. As Berger (2003) observes, "for Jameson, post modern schizophrenia derives from lack of historicity, or the disappearance of a sense of history due to postmodern recycling of the past" (23).

With the loss of historicity, the present is experienced by the schizophrenic subject "with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect" which can be "described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity"(Jameson:,1991, 28-29). Jameson sees this situation as a "symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way"(Ibid. 21). Booker (2005) states that: "Jameson suggests that this schizophrenic fragmentation in personal identity strongly influences postmodern narratives, in which the characters often experience fragmented, plural and discontinuous identities"(572).

Our images of the past tell us little about the true meaning of the past or the way it has shaped the present. The ever-copied image is itself the original reality. All of this pseudo-reality persuades us that the flow of historical time doesn't have anything important to tell us. So we don't even try to locate ourselves in the context of history. We live as if the flow of time doesn't really affect us. Therefore, we don't think much about how we could change society in any basic way in the future. Indeed, we don't think too deeply about the future at all.

Time, according to Jameson, in the postmodern era, is "a perpetual present; it is 'spatial' as are our theoretical categories" (6). Jameson argues that our theoretical theories tend to be structural analyses leading to be graphs of synchronic multiplicities of spatially related things; even language is spatial, it is organized data like a great block to be chopped up in various ways. Humans in this space have lost perspective;we can no longer "position ourselves in this space and cognitively map it"(7). Our inability to unify the past, present and future of our experiences suggests that:

> The breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all activities and the intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with

> indescribable vividness . . . which effectively dramatizes the power of the material- or better still, the literal Signifier in isolation. This present of the world or material Signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality. (Ibid, 27-28)

Grant (2001) believes that it is the view of Jameson that "Loss of the real, leads to the reduction of the traditional autonomy of the self, since with postmodernism the individual subject is no longer able to define itself reciprocally against a reliable, exterior object... "(918). He further claims that "The 'alienation of the subject', enforced by modernism, is displaced in postmodern culture by 'the fragmentation of the subject'; there is no affect, no depth, because there is 'no longer a self present to do the feeling'"(919).

Jameson grapples with the notion of history and its importance in cultural/literary studies. Jameson posits history as a significant framework to be applied in interpreting the "subtext' of literary/cultural texts. Opening his influential work, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, with the now famous slogan "Always historicize!", Jameson calls for a recognition that "there is nothing that is not social and historical indeed, [. . .] everything is 'in the last analysis' political"(20).

In his more recent book *The Seeds of Time*, Jameson still appears to hold the same view about the concepts of time and history:

> It is the next instant of time that falls out; we are like people only able to remember their distant pasts, who have lost the whole dimension of the recent and the most familiar. . . It is a situation that endows the waiting with a kind of breathlessness, as we listen for the missing next tick of the clock, the absent first step of renewed praxis (234).

4. Sam Shepard and Fragmented Identity

Most of the plays of the American playwright Sam Shepard are basically concerned with the problem of identity. From his early experimental plays like *Suicide in B Flat,* or *Mad Dog Blues* up to his later more realistic plays, the prominent themes of his plays are identity crisis as well as the regeneration of American Western myths. However, his later plays known as family plays mostly deal with the realistic depiction of the situation of normal American family life, and the effect of family in the formation of one's identity.

Bottoms (1998) writes that what is evident in his plays belonging to the 1980s, specifically *True West* and *Fool For Love* is his tendency towards

realism and "recognizable real-world environments" (182). He also claims that the way of characterization in his plays has changed and Shepard has turned out to be more concerned with". . . the portrayal of individual characters who initially appear consistent and complete, but who on closer examination prove to be fragile figures reliant for self definition on their assumed difference from each other" (183).

Moreover, Shepard's characters are fractured, divided, doubled until the same play can contain, as independent beings, what are in effect facets of a single self. Even male and female elements of individual identity are flung off as separate elements which then fight to reunite, a struggle which underlines Shepard's desire to reach back beyond the social to the archetypal Sam Shepard appears to be attempting to stage the fragmentation of identity in the present situation of man, as living in a postmodern era.(Bigsby, 2000, p.168). Such characterization can be surveyed in his *True West*, *Fool For Love,* and *A Lie of the Mind.*

5. True West, Fake West

Lee in the *True West* is a desert resident. He has lived in the desert for five years and he is now back, but still he is yearning for the times he has spent in the desert. As such, he is a sort of outcast, who has lost any sense of what the old values could mean. This is evident in his comment on the antiques that their mother keeps at home in Scene 2. While Austin believes that "They have personal value to her," Lee is against the idea: "Lee: Personal Value. Yeah. Just a lota' Junk. Most of it's phony anyway. Idaho decals. Now who in the hell wants to eat offa' plate with the state of Idaho starin' ya' in the face. Every time ya' take a bite ya' get to see a little bit more" (10).

Jameson argues that our theoretical theories tend to be structural analyses tend to be graphs of synchronic multiplicities of spatially related things; even language is spatial, it is organized data like a great block to be chopped up in various ways. Humans in this space have lost perspective. We can no longer "position ourselves in this space and cognitively map it"(1991, p. 7).

In Shepard's *True West*, time "stands still when you're havin' fun" (44). These words are uttered by Austin after he is rejected by Saul in a state of drunkenness. He does not answer Lee's question with regard to time. Meanwhile, he does not care for the passage of time in the first scene, since his perception of time and place has not been shattered. Moreover, Lee also appears to have lost a sense of place when he asks, "well, what County are we in?" (46). Mom is excited about Picasso whom she believes is coming to visit the town. The brothers are lost from any referent to the past and they

live in a perpetual present, being unable to "cognitively map" their place and the time they live in, as Jameson theorizes.

Austin has some remarks about the past and how he feels nostalgic for it:

> When we were kids here it was different. There was a life here then. But now-I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar... Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard…Fields that don't exist anymore. (p.49)

Kane (2002) believes that Shepard's late plays do concern with the past and memory. In these plays, "the characters are as likely to seize upon scraps of personal and national history as they are to attempt to elude what Lawrence Langer terms 'the burden of a vexatious past'"(p.140). This play of Shepard conveys that there is no essential way we can get to know the past, and the general picture of American West: "Thus, Shepard's time-driven picture of the history of this family – and America – conveys an enduring' truth,' namely, that we are largely unsuccessful in affixing meaning to the past, in understanding its connection to the present, in breaking free of its vise-like grip" (146).

It was stated that the past is here associated with the picture that is given from the West. This is what cannot be seen or recognized thoroughly in *True West*. In fact, the irony of the title is right in here; there is no 'true' west. As Westgate (2005) states, "the West is continually associated with decay, trauma, loss, and regret; it is generally more of a purgatory than a paradise" (p.728). The image of the West is conveyed as something that might have existed only as a myth constructed through pop images of Western movies, the sample being Lee's story, that proves to be not the "'true story" to quote Austin. This is justifiable according to the discussion of the images of the past by Jameson who believes that the past is only a constructed image via media effect. As Megan Williams (1997) states:" Like Lee who turns to Kirk Douglas's *Lonely Are the Brave* for his model of a 'true-to-life Western,' the only pasts the twentieth-century viewer can find are those we create through pop images and mass media stereotypes" (p.58). She also affirms that the characters can be exchanged only by changing their costumes; it could be mentioned that the brothers are "A collection of surface and roles, Austin and Lee are parts if a whole that cannot be pieced back together again; they perform the choices and possibilities that postmodern man faces in his attempt to make daily life livable"(p.61).

Moreover, if we take the plant imagery into consideration, the plants which are there to be watered by Austin could be viewed as a metaphor for

the kind of the past or the west the family desires to get back to. However, in the end of the play, we witness Austin's and Lee's failure in this task. The past is metaphorically "dead," suggesting no hope for reunification with the past.

Demastes (1988) believes that in *True West* "Shepard dramatizes these 'identities' by illustrating the disjunctive nature of human personalities subjected to a soul-less culture"(108). In other words, Shepard matches this fragmented identity staged in this play to the society in which the characters live. The 'real, new west' as he calls it, is depicted in this play as "the West of temporary living, full freeways, and empty hearts. It is the West. . . where because the present and the future are everything, the past means nothing"(p.111).This is the same social reason expressed by Fredric Jameson. Furthermore, he confirms this idea that the play is not merely about the sibling rivalry for power, but rather, it is more accurately a play "about the struggle between two halves of oneself"(p.110). He also confirms that in this play the struggle is non- ending, leading to nowhere:" The play does not advocate victory of one side over the other, but neither does it totally advocate a peaceful co-existence, sensing that such an event is impossible. Rather, the true West is one that occupies a psychological frontier within each self where the struggle should exist continually and by existing guarantees life itself"(p.114).

Shepard's settings are often a kind of nowhere land on the American Plains and his characters are typically loners and drifters caught between a mythical past and the mechanized present, and his works often concern deeply troubled families. As Patraka and Siegel (1985) observe" Shepard observes that, in our essentially material and profane culture, we have desacralized the past and seem unable to replace our old legends with any viable new ones" (p.5).

6. *Fool for Love:* Lost Together

In Shepard's *Fool for Love* there is no place as home. The two are living in a "low rent motel room on the edge of the Mojave Desert" (Scene Direction, 19). Thus, like the way Jameson describes postmodern schizophrenia, they belong to nowhere. Furthermore, May appears to be totally unaware and not involved with the past memories. Even when the Old Man is retelling the story of her childhood, she does not make any responses. However, this is her other half, Eddie who always remembers the stories of the past as he retells them to Martin.

Cutting with the past is present all throughout the story as a cause for the formation fragmented identity of the half brother and half sister. The story

that Eddie tells about the way he and his father step into the whole darkness and then he comes to recognize May's house and the fact that she is his half sister is of great importance. The father and the son step into darkness, the city and the whole image of the past are just fabricated darkness here.

Brater (1994) believes that the past for the two lovers of *Fool for Love* is always remembered through the presence of the Old Man whom only the lovers can see:" it is true that the Old Man's platform set is 'there' to remind us that the past is always present for May and Eddie. . . 'It's future too'. . . the platform also reminds us that these characters are equally implicated in reinventing it" (p.608). More generally, he states that there is also this perpetual present on stage in this play, since it is to be staged without any break. The characters seem to be entangled in the web of present and they cannot avoid it by any means. The two lovers and half siblings are also entangled in the perpetual web of present. The connection to any national or familial past is totally lost. What results is a fragmented identity, as it was stated according to the theories of the postmodern thinker: Fredric Jameson.

7. *A Lie of the Mind*: A Return to Memories

Amnesia is present in *A Lie of Mind* by Sam Shepard. Nobody appears to remember the past in a good way. For instance the parents do not remember whether their children have been married or not. Also Meg does not remember properly if she has been hospitalized or not, and makes the mistake of calling her husband Dad (30, Act I, Scene 6).

The memories of the past or the golden days are always present throughout the play, like when Lorrain is talking about the past days with the half conscious Jake in Act I, scene seven. She believes that in those days there was no reason to tell lies: "That was back before things went to pieces" (p.37).

Jake is all eager to know about the past, about the way his father died. This is why he wants Sally, his sister, whom he appears to trust more than his mother, to stay along and tell him all about the past. There is no sense of time or any definite reference to the place. At Beth's house, Beth once tells her mother good night while Mark shouts "It's not night! It's daytime! Jesus Christ, can't you see it's daytime out there" (82, Act II, Scene 3).

After the recognition of the fact that the real person responsible for her husband's death has been her son, Lorraine narrates a metaphorical nostalgia for the past:

> . . . You know what I miss more than anything now?" Sally; What? Lorraine: The wind. One a' them fierce, hot, dry winds that come from deep out in the desert and rip the trees apart.

> You know, those winds that wipe everything clean and leave the sky without a cloud. Pure blue. Pure, pure blue. Wouldn't that be nice? (97, Act II, Scene I)

But at the same time, she does not desire to hold the photo related to her past, which is "Dead and gone" (117, Act II scene 3). Kane (2002) believes that in Shepards' plays, specifically this one, the past does not obliterate itself, but it rather "remembers itself," mostly through photographs (p.140). He states that in *True West* and *A Lie of the Mind* images of the past are not always tangible, or especially welcome, they are no less discernible, providing a critical dramatic and cinematic framework in family-themed plays that share the locus of the home" (p.141). We see Lorraine, faced with the truth of his son's violence towards his father, attempting to erase the past totally so that she can begin all a new life, as Kane (2004) suggests: "Lorraine, typically American in upping stakes and starting anew, resolves to make a clean sweep, ironically hoping she will find release from the past and from the reality of her son's brutality by retracing her ancestral roots in Ireland"(p.148). The two lovers, who shape the two halves of one doubled fragmented self, are taken back to their families in this play. However, no proper connection to the past is finally found; what they achieve is only a series of memories.

8. Conclusion

Shepard's success in writing plays which are deeply concerned with the American as well as the universal crisis of identity of man, along with the disappearance of the myths and the roots that link us to the past, is clearly unavoidable. The particular human condition with which Shepard is most familiar, his own, seems to be the model for his characters' arc of enactment, assessment, and disillusionment fueled by an anxiety that the exercise might prove fruitless and false as well as the hope that it might somehow ring true.

Put into a social context, the characters appear as the postmodern men entangled in perpetual web of present. It was noted that what Jameson sees as the reason for this kind of identity is the fact that we have lost our connection to the past, thus living in a perpetual present, without any hope for the future or any ability to cognitively map our present situation.

The two brothers in Sam Shepard's *True West* have lost connection with the past. Lee is not concerned with the older values and prefers to escape to nowhere land, where he has come from. Moreover, there is no sense of place and time here, as the Fake West is depicted. In the same manner, the half siblings of *Fool for Love* are also lost in nowhere, living in perpetual present, thus shaping a fragmented identity. *A Lie of the Mind* is also basically about

the return to the past, which appears to have been lost, and even burned as the symbolic action of Lorrain, Jake's mother in setting fire on the whole home conveys.

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