Estrangement and Engagement: Sam Shepard's Dramaturgical Strategies

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Current scholarship reveals an understandable preoccupation with and confusion over Sam Shepard's most prominent characteristics, his language and imagery, both of which are seminal features of his technical innovation. In their attempts to describe or define Shepard's idiosyncratic dramaturgy, critics variously have called it absurdist, surrealistic, mythic, Brechtian, and even Artaudian. Most critics, too, are concerned primarily with his themes: physical violence, erotic dynamism, and psychological dissolution set against the cultural wasteland of modern America (Marranca, ed.). But in focusing on Shepard's imagery, language, and themes, some critics ignore theatrical performance. Beyond observing that many of Shepard's role-playing characters engage in power struggles with each other, few critics have concerned themselves with Shepard's structural strategies or with the ways in which he manipulates his audience. One who has addressed the issue, Bonnie Marranca, writes:

> Characters often engage in, "performance": they create roles for themselves and dialogue, structuring new realities. . . . It might be called an aesthetics of actualism. In other words, the characters *act themselves out*, even *make themselves up*, through the transforming power of their imagination.

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> Because the characters are so free of fixed reality, their imagination plays a key role in the narratives. Not only the characters' but the audiences' too. Shepard puts together the funkiest combinations of characters, in the most unlikely of settings, and lets them react to one another. . . . testing in a sense the audience's capacity to perceive new structures of reality. It is the source of his comedy, too. (Marranca 83)

Ann Wilson, more recently, has approached the same problem from a slightly different perspective, suggesting that Shepard's works are about, above all things else, self-referential performance and that the audience, because it depends more upon the eye than the ear, should really be termed "spectators" (Wilson 47). Privileged with sight, the spectators are empowered to determine what is "real" because "what is 'real' is what is given *image* in the mind" (Wilson 52). Further, Wilson argues that the spectator intersects with the action through characters who serve as spectators within the play, i.e. Shelly in *Buried Child* and the Old Man in *Fool for Love*. She suggests that such characters make the spectators aware of the seductive pleasures of performance: "[Shepard] writes the spectators' role to heighten our consciousness of the tension between our desire to believe what we see and the deceptiveness of appearance" (Wilson 56).

Both Marranca and Wilson focus on the way in which the audience is manipulated by Shepard's dramaturgy to experience autonomously both the action as subject and the action as self-reflexive theatre. Both, too, address themselves to the primacy of Shepard's new reality, a reality that demands a sympathetic, imaginative response, a reality that insists on an acceptance of the relativity of truth. And both suggest ways in which Shepard manipulates his audience: Marranca points to a comic disjunction, Wilson to a metatheatrical consciousness. I wish to join these critics, add another perspective on the problem, and propose a descriptive vocabulary for the critical examination of Shepard's structures.

In particular, I would like to both examine the relationship of audience to Shepard's work and develop the idea that his structures, not just his combinations of characters and settings, are inherently, if not ultimately, comic. Though Shepard relies extensively on a comic rhythm which closely follows the patterning of "felt life" which Susanne Langer posited as the essence of comedy in *Feeling and Form*, he jettisons the final triumph in favor of a paralytic stasis. Shepard uses a three-part structure to reposition the audience: first, he engages his audience in an abnormal situation through the use of humor, second, he estranges it at a transitional moment through the

use of what Wilson calls "characters who serve as spectators," only to, third, reengage it after he has, in Marranca's phrase, structured a new reality, a reality which is essentially tragicomic. Furthermore, this three-part structure is repeated in the thematic development of the play and is one way to understand and appreciate Shepard's use of character as an actor in search of an identity.

While it is not the purpose of this paper to determine whether or not Sam Shepard is a modernist playwright, I begin with a statement from Georg Lukacs' "The Ideology of Modernism," which, though lifted rudely from its context, points to the first issue at hand, the relation of audience to action. Arguing that the ideology of true modernism is the ontological view that man is by nature solitary, asocial, ahistorical, and unable to enter into relationships with other human beings and that the matter and form of modernism must be the disintegration of personality matched by a disintegration of the outer world, Lukacs concludes that "man is reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments; he is as inexplicable to others as to himself" (Lukacs 26).

The problem facing the artist is essentially stylistic; how to reflect the distortion that is, in Lukacs' terms, "as inseparable a part of the portrayal of reality as the recourse to pathology. But," he continues, "literature must have a concept of the normal if it is to 'place' distortion correctly; that is to say, to see it *as* distortion" (Lukacs 33). That Lukacs goes on to assert the impossibility of this 'placing,' given that life under capitalism is itself a distortion and that to present psychopathology as a way of escape is a further distortion, could pose a problem if I were trying to squeeze Sam Shepard into Lukacs' ultimately self-destructive mode. *Angst*-ridden though Shepard's plays are, they stop short of total disintegration and never reach the state of abstract annihilation, either in form or content, which is, for Lukacs, the hallmark of the negative modernist sensibility. In fact, Shepard freezes the action at the moment of greatest tension, disallowing either disintegration or resolution, suspending the struggle at a moment of crisis in a tragicomic stasis.

Distorted though life under capitalism may be, it represents the norm for most members of Shepard's audience. Shepard has little interest in attempting to change the prevailing economic or social structure of American society and is far from being a confrontational playwright. As a consequence, Shepard does not discredit the prevailing norm as much as he reorients or replaces his audience to an alternate perspective, a wider, more inclusive norm that incorporates the abnormal, in what might be called the "sur-Naturalism" of a physio-psychological aesthetic. I am reluctant to join the critics who call Shepard a surrealist because his works lack the essential elements of randomness and dream that characterize the movement; his work

has more in common with the documentary determinism of Naturalism. In three plays, *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *Fool For Love*, Shepard, faced with the problem of getting his audience to accept an abnormal situation as the point of reference, if not a new norm, relies on a three-part structure to reposition the audience. He engages, estranges, and reengages the audience, forcing its perspective to shift from a blind acceptance of the norm to an acute consciousness of the limitations of the norm. He carries it through a long comic exposition to a point of crisis to an ambiguous conclusion. Though Naturalism's "fourth wall" never comes down, Shepard accomplishes his end through an outsider/witness. This outsider/witness character is structurally and thematically central to Shepard's dramaturgical strategy because he disconnects and distances the audience from the action in a direct and intimate way. In so doing, Shepard creates a new reciprocity between stage and audience that is implicit in the structure; in this dramaturgy lies the real "meaning" of the play.

The three-part structure is the same in every instance. In the first stage, the play opens with a situation that the audience, from its initial normal perspective, would judge to be abnormal: the crazed family sparring in *Buried Child*, the Old Man observing Eddie and May in *Fool For Love*, and Austin and Lee exchanging roles in *True West*. Shepard uses black humor and a grim, off-the-wall whimsy in lengthy expositions to establish a new reality, one which is only comic and moderately disconcerting. This non-threatening and intriguing tactic allows the audience no choice but to become engaged in the dramatic action even though it is still judging the new reality to be abnormal.

In the second and most crucial stage of Shepard's dramaturgical strategy, he introduces a normal (or seemingly normal) person, the referential figure and outsider/witness with whom the audience, had the character been on stage from the start of the play, might have identified: Shelly in *Buried Child*, Martin in *Fool For Love*, and Mom in *True West*. Shepard's dramaturgy implies that there are two audiences for the action: the primary audience in the theatre and the secondary audience in the play. Initially, the secondary audience, the outsider/witness character, seems to be acting on behalf of the primary audience; his or her expectations are the same as the audience's were before the play began. His or her response to the abnormal situation is "normal." But Shepard's dramaturgy prevents the primary audience's complete identification with the outsider/witness or secondary audience. He disallows the connection by stressing the differences between the two, differences which have arisen since the primary audience began to watch the play but which never challenge or assault the primary audience's normalcy.

In the third stage, the audience, estranged from the outsider/witness and, as a consequence, from a traditional, normal response, is repositioned and reengaged in the action which has now taken a turn toward the tragic. The outsider/witness is the essential link between the initial comic action and the consequent, potentially tragic denouement. If Shepard presented the tragic action without the comic disruption of the outsider/witness, he would risk losing the audience which would neither understand nor accept the distasteful or horrifying revelations. But the audience has been eased into a broader frame of reference, freed from the constraints of its own narrow normalcy to experience the abnormal as contextually normal. It is testament to Shepard's skill and proof of his non-polemical position that, while the audience is laughing at the restrictive and ignorant normalcy of the outsider/witness, it never feels that its own normalcy is being challenged or threatened.

By way of demonstration, I would like to apply this theory of the three-part structure to three of Shepard's plays, *Buried Child*, *Fool for Love*, and *True West*. Act one of *Buried Child* is devoted entirely to the closed circle of the family. A disjunction between the familiar banality of Halie and Dodge's bickering and the extraordinary length of time Halie remains off stage immediately engage a puzzled audience in the comic, domestic peculiarities. The additional later actions, Tilden's appearance with the corn and Bradley's burial of Dodge under the husks, strengthen the overwhelming sense of the disconcertingly grotesque and abnormal. Because the dangerous, destructive implications of these actions are yet to be realized, the audience judges the action to be only bizarre and comic and remains engaged if distanced, complacent in its own normalcy.

In Act Two, Vince and Shelly, the prodigal son and outsider/witness respectively, intrude on a scene that has become menacingly unpleasant; Dodge's head is bleeding from Bradley's cruel haircut. At this moment, Shepard suspends the impending violence by introducing a new dimension to the comedy. Shelly enters laughing because the house appears to be like something from a Norman Rockwell cover. The audience laughs not with her but at her from the start because it is accustomed to the eccentricity and because it is beginning to sense the dark reality lurking behind the illusory image. Throughout most of the second act, Shelly behaves as a normal person would in such strange surroundings; she is shocked, confused, and a little frightened. Because the audience has become acclimatized to the family, however, it knows more than Shelly does and is free to laugh at her even though it understands her to be as normal as it is. However, had the play opened with Shelly's entrance, the audience would have identified with her and clung to her throughout the play. By bringing the

outsider/witness into the action at a late juncture, Shepard insures the necessary estrangement of the audience from the norm, which has been exposed comically as naive and ignorant.

As the action grows increasingly serious, however, Shepard must work to keep the audience from realigning itself with Shelly. This he does by keeping her in the house rather than having her escape the threatening and unpleasant situation as a normal person would; she becomes an acquiescent and passive victim of two symbolic rapes (Tilden's stroking of her coat and Bradley's probing of her mouth) at the end of Act Two. Again, Shepard relies on comic action to serve his turn. If the rapes were graphic and real, the audience might empathize with Shelly. Shepard maintains the distance by making the rapes only suggestive and comically bizarre. In Act three, Shelly works hard but unsuccessfully to become a member of the family; at this point, the character's primary function is to serve as a catalyst for the revelation of the truth. She leaves only when a wholly changed Vince, her only connection to the others, returns to claim his rightful place in the family.

Presumably, by now the audience has a greater understanding of the tragic dimensions of a family that appeared at first to be merely grotesquely comic. Shelly has become extraneous, predictable, and uninteresting; her narrow bourgeois normalcy cannot embrace the horrifying circumstances that yawn before the audience. Shelly, the secondary audience, does not share the same values as the primary audience, now educated and reengaged with a tolerant intensity which would have been foreign to it at the beginning of the play. The audience is capable of forming a sympathetic bond with the characters.

Martin in *Fool for Love* is a less developed character than Shelly but he serves a similar function in repositioning the audience and helping it make the transition from the comic to the tragic. Shepard uses the same pattern of engagement, estrangement and re-engagement as he does in *Buried Child.* The play opens with Eddie and May quarreling and the Old Man observing them from his rocking chair. Gradually it becomes clear that the Old Man exists only in the minds of Eddie and May; a psychological reality is given corporeal form and the primary audience, as spectator, attests to his relative reality.

By the time, late in the play, that Martin, the outsider/witness character, crashes into the darkened room just as the vengeful Countess is about to attack, the audience is far beyond connecting with his startled, ignorant confusion. Martin is a simple man who believes in absolute truths and cannot see the Old Man; the audience has learned that truths are relative and can see the Old Man. Like Shelly, Martin serves as a catalyst for revelations about the past and he, too, becomes extraneous once he has fulfilled his role as secondary audience,

blind to all but a fixed, and therefore inapplicable, norm. At the end of the play, Eddie and May have left the room and Martin remains, staring out a window, his back to the primary audience which has no need of him.

The pattern repeats itself in *True West*. In this instance, Mom is the outsider/witness character who does not appear until the play is nearly over in scene nine of Act Two. By the time she enters the devastated kitchen, the audience has followed Austin and Lee through their comic and pathetic struggle to the moment of impending, murderous violence. Just as Shelly and Martin entered uncomprehendingly into a fantastic domestic tangle at a potentially dangerous moment, so, too, Mom serves as a focal point that pushes the audience to a reappraisal of the norm. Distanced from the norm because of its own understanding and because of Mom's comic dislocation, the primary audience cannot connect with the secondary audience.

Shepard takes pains to insure the disengagement. Mom's response to the mess she surveys is implausibly calm; she believes that Picasso is in town, and she does little to avert the near-murder of Lee by Austin. Just as Shelly left the house when she no longer recognized Vince in *Buried Child*, so Mom, no longer recognizing her own home, departs, leaving the primary audience alone with the two brothers who are now locked in a deadly serious struggle for survival. Like Shelly and Martin, Mom is a true outsider incapable of comprehending, as the audience does, the circumstance, causes, and consequences of what it sees. The audience's own normalcy has not been challenged in the process of engagement, estrangement, and re-engagement, but its parameters have been widened. Shepard has shifted the action from the comic to the potentially tragic within an abnormal realm without losing his audience. Now it is prepared to accept this bizarre behavior as normal within the context of this particular family.

Such an acceptance is essential, moreover, if the audience is to focus on another aspect of the plays, the protagonist's quest for identity, for the engagement-estrangement-re-engagement rhythm of the audience parallels a similar movement in the plays. If the structure of the plays is "about" audience and actor, so too is the content and, though Shepard never overtly links the two, the reciprocity is implicit and necessary. Thematically, the protagonist's quest for identity manifests itself in two complementary modes: the actor seeks affirmation of his credibility in his role, the child seeks acceptance as an adult in his family. Both struggles are inherently comic.

Susanne Langer in "The Comic Rhythm" has observed that too many critics treat drama as "a device for conveying a social and moral content" at the expense of the organic form itself (Langer 326). The sense of "felt life" which is for her the essence of drama manifests

itself in what she terms the organic rhythms: "self-preservation, self-restoration, functional tendency, purpose" (Langer 328). "The impulse to survive," she writes, "is not spent only in defense and accommodation; it appears also in the varying power of organisms to seize on opportunities" (Langer 328). If Shepard's plays must be fixed by genre, arguably they are comedies in Langer's sense because they present through form and content a fundamental element of self-preservation, the last stage in her hierarchy, what she calls "self-realization" (Langer 333). Despite the appearance of savagery in Shepard's plays, such as the bloody haircuts in *Buried Child* or the ineffectual strangling in *True West*, such action is only amoral folly, a blackly comic testament to a precarious world fraught with disaster, not a permanent disruption of the vital rhythm. And finally, as Langer argues, "even the element of aggressiveness in comic action serves to develop a fundamental trait of the comic rhythm--the deep cruelty of it, as all life feeds on life" (Langer 349).

It would appear that Shepard's plays, then, can be considered as comedies in Langer's terms because his protagonists are fighting to maintain or restore their equilibrium. Shepard has compared the problem to a myth of a man inhabited by both a wolf and a sheep, an uneasy cohabitation that produces a constant need for balance: "There's definitely a struggle going on. . . . The difficulty is trying to accept this condition you're living with, the condition of these two parts banging up against each other, and the constant threat of being overthrown by one" (Freedman 22).

The protagonist in each play--Eddie in *Fool For Love*, Austin in *True West*, and Vince in *Buried Child*--conceives of himself as an actor before two audiences: his adversarial opposite or complementary other half (May, Lee, and Dodge) and the outsider/witness (Martin, Mom, and Shelly). For the protagonist, his adversary is his primary audience, the outsider/witness is his secondary audience. The protagonist, struggling for an identity, tries to string together, to use Lukacs' term, "the sequence of unrelated experiential fragments," or, to put it another way, to write a script that both his audiences will authenticate by accepting. He reaches his primary audience, in part, by convincing his secondary audience. The pattern of action between the protagonist and the adversary is the same as that between the primary audience and the play; it is one of estrangement-disengagement-re-engagement. Here, too, the secondary audience, the referential figure for the primary audience and the outsider/witness for the protagonist, plays a pivotal but limited part in the process; he or she is necessary but ultimately expendable.

It is axiomatic to a number of disciplines that the mere appropriation of characteristics or attitudes is insufficient to create an

identity. This is only half of the equation. To paraphrase the Hegelian paradox as examined in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, I am a function of my recognition of myself, but this is a function of my recognition of others' recognition of me. Realization of a self is impossible without audience affirmation. Two critics have dealt with this issue in terms of Shepard's concern with performance.

In an early examination of Shepard's work, Ren Frutkin focuses on performance, "not as style, but as subject . . . his characters construct scenarios out of an urge towards power" (Frutkin 110). Noting that Shepard frequently uses pairs in conflict, Frutkin observes that "paired existence offers the possibility of self-knowledge in the form of reflections from the other" (Frutkin 111).

In a more recent study of performance ritual and modeling after fixed types in Shepard's plays, Florence Falk suggests that for Shepard "the unalloyed self can be reached only through the trial and error--and artifice--of performance" (Falk 185). Like Frutkin, Falk argues that "performance rituals between the self and other(s) are undertaken to affirm, sustain, or amplify the image of the self, and to protect the self by exerting control over others" (Falk 195).

Social scientists, most notably Erving Goffman, have been using the role-playing metaphor for decades. Goffman interprets the self as a theatrical construct:

> The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (Goffman 252-253)

The metaphor is particularly apt when applied to children. Sociologist George Herbert Mead, describing the process for the ego development of a child, stresses the necessity of a responsive context: "the self arises in conduct, when the individual becomes a social object in experience to himself" (Mead 203). This is only possible through the reaction of a social group, the audience, or what Mead calls "the generalized other" (Mead 218). The child learns how to be an adult and gains an identity, first by playing at the part, second, by accepting the rules of the game (Mead 224). In short, in Mead's terms, a child is an actor practicing the role of adult. All the protagonists in the three plays under consideration are such children-cum-actors in two respects: they are struggling for parental recognition as they struggle simultaneously for a separate identity as an adult. Unable to free themselves of their pasts, they fight to be

incorporated into the present and to find their place in the closed family group.

Shepard's dramaturgy argues with Lukacs' contention that modern man is essentially solitary. For Shepard, man is not wholly isolatable, in fact he is both comically and tragically incapable of being so because he is still a child needing to become a "social object." Shepard's modern man is helplessly bound to his family and his past, and his only possible identity, if, indeed, autonomous identity is possible, lies within these suffocating parameters. He must compete as much for his place as for his person. For this reason, Shepard stresses the physical as well as the psychological dimensions of identity, hence his physio-psychological aesthetic. The assertion of the self is a matter of enactment, for the body is the citadel of the self in the mental act of experiencing. Becoming a person, gaining an identity, happens in front of, in response to, and, ultimately, is a triumph over an audience. This process can involve four modes--remembering, resisting, imitating, and assuming.

Shepard draws on all of these modes of becoming a self in the three plays. In *Fool For Love*, the most complex of the three plays under consideration, Eddie seeks his identity in shared memory and sexuality. As Eddie and May recall particulars about their previous relationship, they vie with each other for a single truth on which they cannot agree, testing memory against memory. At stake is Eddie's identity. Eddie and May are actor and audience for each other but they are not alone. Using a Strindbergian, solipsistic device, Shepard insists that their father, the Old Man, exists only in the minds of Eddie and May. That the primary audience can see him as well authenticates his existence on two levels, within and without the frame of the play. As I have shown, Shepard uses the device to manipulate the audience into an acceptance of the "sur-Naturalistic" perspective on normalcy.

The Old Man, too, has memories that conflict with each other; at one point he no longer recalls a long car trip with May and her mother but a few minutes later claims to have no memory of the child. The one fact that he does hold claim to, by virtue of a picture that doesn't exist (that is, the audience does not see it), is his marriage to Barbara Mandrell. Because Eddie agrees that he can see it, he authenticates the Old Man's version of himself. Thus the Old Man is as much simultaneously actor and audience as are Eddie and May.

The action is further complicated by the arrival of Martin, the outsider/witness who does not see the Old Man but who is enlisted as an audience for Eddie and May. Eddie recalls the night he went with his father to May's mother, the night he fell in love with his half-sister May. Though the Old Man quibbles with one detail, his silence

suggests confirmation. Though at first May denies it, she finishes the story. Not only does she attest to the truth of Eddie's version, but she also upsets the Old Man's version by revealing that Eddie's mother committed suicide. Thus Eddie's truth, his memory, and, finally, his sense of self are affirmed by three audiences: his father, May, and Martin.

Eddie's identity, that he is his half-sister's lover, is not just a matter of affirmation, of recalled memory, it is also a matter of enactment. For Shepard, the psychological affirmation of identity is equally bound up in the physical assertion of the self. Both Eddie and May, mad with jealousy because of a sexual intruder (Martin in the case of May and the woman in the car in the case of Eddie), act out their passion for each other: May transforms herself from a tough drab into a sexy woman, Eddie hurls himself around the room in a manic display of macho skills. They enact their identities for each other, for the Old Man, and for the primary audience which affirms their existence by accepting, as Martin cannot, their abnormal relationship as "normal" within the parameters of the family.

In *True West*, Shepard again pits sibling against sibling, stressing not only the physical but also the psychological nature of the struggle. Austin, the fabricator of film scripts, and Lee, the unimaginative drifter who lives in the rough reality his domesticated brother can only imagine, battle for a whole identity only one of them can have. Eddie and May, by virtue of sexual union, temporarily and sporadically can become one; the brothers can only be locked in a perpetual struggle. What begins as a simple role-reversing game, a ludicrous anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better tussle, turns into a grim war for one persona. Lee proves himself to be a better writer than Austin; his script is not only inherently more authentic because it is based on real experience but because it is authenticated by his audience, Austin's producer. Austin retaliates by assuming Lee's role as a thief; he rises to what he takes to be Lee's challenge and robs the neighborhood of its toasters. In short, each man is actor and audience for the other. Reluctant to concede that Lee has won, Austin tries to keep him or kill him. Like *Fool For Love*, *True West* ends in an unresolved battle between the two main characters; they can't separate because each is an actor who needs the other for an audience.

Vince in *Buried Child*, like Eddie, Austin, and Lee, is also a child trying to be accepted by his family and to find his own identity. Initially puzzled by Dodge's refusal to recognize him, he argues that physically he is still the same. But he has spent the last few years resisting his identity as a member of the family. Drawn home by images of the dead race behind him, Vince yields to his destiny and yearns to rejoin his family. In his desperation to be authenticated as

the grandson, he reverts to his old role as young child and reenacts the part he once played to get attention. Lifting his shirt, he makes a mouth of his belly button and speaks in a cartoon voice to synchronize with the movement. Dodge remains unresponsive.

It is not until Vince imitates the behavior of the men that the family acknowledges Vince as a member of the family. Drunk, dangerous, the devourer of families, he returns from an errand a changed person. He goes out a child with no identity and only a few unaffirmed memories and returns a demented man, the rightful inheritor of his grandfather's line. Shelly, the outsider/witness, no longer has a point of connection with him and she leaves. Vince literally becomes Dodge; he assumes his position on the sofa vacated by the dead, defeated old man and initiates the cycle again by continuing the relationship with Halie. Vince has attained his true identity not only in the eyes of the outsider/witness but also in the eyes of his family, and, of course, the audience. His psychological transformation is commensurate with his physical change.

Within the frame of each play, once the protagonist has connected with his adversary, no matter how uneasy the union, once the actor and primary audience are one, the secondary audience, the outsider/witness, becomes extraneous. Since what the protagonist has been seeking is acknowledgement of his identity from his adversary in a kind of "coupling," he no longer needs the intermediary link, the external verification. Vince has "become" Dodge; Austin and Lee are suspended in their struggle; Eddie has won May to his truth. What is true within the frame is also true without; once the primary audience has accepted, albeit reluctantly or unwittingly, the abnormal situation as the dramatic norm and dominant construct, the secondary audience, the outsider/witness and referential character, is no longer instrumental or pertinent. Ironically, then, the secondary audience is both the most important and the most expendable character for the primary audience; after it serves not only to estrange the primary audience but also to reengage it, but from an altered perspective, it is wholly expendable. The primary audience has been repositioned and, as a consequence, has been led to a broader understanding and authentication, if not acceptance of, the abnormal circumstance.

Clearly Shepard is not a modernist playwright by Lukacs' definition because he *does* dramatize man's ability to relate and integrate, however tenuously, his "experiential fragments." The device, Lukacs would probably argue, is psychopathological and therefore distorted. But the Shepardian balancing act seems to be less a case of annihilation than of affirmation than Lukacs finds true modernist works to be. In fact, in Lukacs' terms, Shepard would be a bourgeois ideologist whose reification of authentic selfhood simply ignores the importance

of class, power, and economics. Perhaps because the plays are concerned with the enactment of self-preservation, they can be better understood as simply comic in Langer's terms: the protagonists struggle to the point of "self-realization," seizing opportunities and accommodating themselves to a hostile environment.

However, Shepard doesn't fulfill all of Langer's criteria for comedy. In Langer's definition, a sense of life, the essence of comedy, depends upon not only survival but replication through reproduction. Without the promise of sexual reproduction, there is no comic resolution, no inherent vitality. The individual organism survives, but the species has no future. The self-assertion that comprises the comic action must continue to look forward to fruition. While most of the action is comic in all three plays under discussion, there is certainly neither resolution nor promise of future life. The child becomes an adult and the actor is authenticated in his role, but Shepard demonstrates that these are dead ends without promise of regeneration. Vince's assumption of Dodge's position is a sterile one as the exhumation of the dead child suggests; May and Eddie's incestuous liaison has produced no child; Lee and Austin are no more than mirror images of each other. Shepard's landscape, at the end of his plays, is as unresolved, ambiguous, and sterile as any of Samuel Beckett's; the comic energy to endure is caught in a tragic frame of perpetual frustration. Ultimately, therefore, Shepard's plays are tragicomic.

Shepard doesn't resolve completely the struggle in any of the plays; the final scene is one of precarious ambiguity, an unending struggle in an uneasy moment of suspension. In *True West*, Austin and Lee are paralyzed in a moonlit desert, each as much a predator as prey. In *Buried Child*, Vince has buried himself under the dead Dodge's blanket and assumed the role of passive paterfamilias to the crazed family. In *Fool for Love*, Eddie and May leave separately; no doubt they will meet again, but no doubt their childless coupling will simply be a replay of what the audience has just witnessed. In none of the three plays is there any sense of comedy's requisite forward movement, only circular motion or paralysis.

Finally, the indeterminacy of closure is part of a larger issue. Shepard's dramaturgy, echoing in his structure and echoed in his themes, suggests the uneasy but inescapable and necessary reciprocity between actor and audience, the rhythmic pattern of engagement-estrangement-re-engagement that binds audience and action. Together audience and actors create a new reality, in Shepard's case a "sur-Naturalistic," tragicomic reality, the very existence of which depends upon audience affirmation and acceptance. All Shepard's plays implicitly address the primary audience as Eddie addresses May in their final embrace: "You know we're connected. We'll always be connected. That was decided long ago."

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