

## ABSTRACT

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COMPLETENESS AND CLOSURE IN THE  
PLAYS OF SAM SHEPARD

Joseph Dennis Couch, Ph.D., 2006

Directed By:                       Professor Brian Richardson and Professor Peter  
Mallios, Department of English

This dissertation analyzes the interpretive dilemmas arising from treatments of completeness and closure in Sam Shepard's plays, an undertaking that raises two key questions about its own academic exigence. Shepard's plays expand the discourse on closure by providing dramatic texts to which the terms “the open work,” “the sense of ending,” “anti-closure,” and the reading of texts in socio-political contexts can apply. More significantly, Shepard's theory of closure as a “cop-out” to resolution complicates the previous discourse on closure with texts that complementarily deny formal and thematic closure in ways that previous critics do not explore. The “unloosened ends,” specifically, that each ending does not resolve not only draw attention to the unresolved status of an American socio-political theme but actually implicate the audience in the larger and false cultural assumption that the theme was closed before the start of the play and now need the audience's help offstage and therefore outside the boundaries of the text to resolve the issue. In terms of categories within the context of closure in drama,

Shepard's endings combine Schmidt's categories of "unmediated" and "ironic" as a reflection of their thematic implication of the collective American audience's "cop-out" regarding the assumed closed discourse on a socio-political issue. Additionally, the endings "frustrate" the audience's expectations for closure thematically and formally even when they provide a moment of "cessation" in Schlueter's terms. The reason lies in the fact that the "consensus" required from the audience, as Schmidt claims, relies on the audience to close the work by closing the discourse on the issue that the endings suggest that the audience should recognize as open and unresolved. The issues of fate, home, family, and memory cannot truly reach a moment of cessation, Shepard's interrogations of closure reveal, until the audience makes the discourse cease by not "copping-out" to the false sense of closure that America's conventional society, both on and offstage, provides.

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PLAYS OF SAM SHEPARD

By

Joseph Dennis Couch

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor Brian Richardson, Chair  
Professor Peter Mallios  
Professor Jackson Bryer  
Professor Don Kleine  
Professor Heather Nathans

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## Preface

This dissertation analyzes the interpretive dilemmas arising from treatments of completeness and closure in Sam Shepard's plays, an undertaking that raises two key questions about its own academic exigence. One question concerns the import of a study of closure, which already has a rich critical discourse, and the closely related term, completeness. In addition, this study raises the question as to why the plays of Sam Shepard, who has drawn significant critical attention, should provide the primary texts in a study of closure. To answer these questions, a review of the discourse on closure, including the emergence of dramatic literature in it, and of the significance of Shepard's plays reveals Shepard to be the ideal author to advance the critical discourse.

Contemporary criticism of closure begins with Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (1962; first published in English in 1989) and Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967), two works with broad theoretical scopes that focus largely on implications for the novel. Eco focuses on what he terms "a work in movement" with an incomplete ending that chance and, more often, the reader must close and complete (12). Centered on the recurring cultural theme of *fin de siècle*, Kermode argues that modern literature shares the sense of the Apocalypse that pervades works from earlier periods but "in terms of crisis rather than temporal ends." Therefore, for Kermode, "the End itself," so often the place where works provide a sense of closure, "in modern literary plotting loses its downbeat, tonic-and-dominant finality, and we think of it, as the theologians think of Apocalypse, as immanent rather than imminent" (30).

In essence, Kermode argues that a sense of closure in modern literature, if any, arises from an “immanent” or subjective reading of a narrative rather than a temporal-reliant progression towards an objective finality. In these two seminal studies, then, Eco and Kermode focus on the reader’s interpretive strategies for works that deny a sense of closure, an approach that lays the groundwork for all future studies of closure, albeit indirectly in relation to closure and Shepard. Without focus on the dramatic text, Eco and Kermode can only provide a starting point in the discourse for this dissertation.

Similarly, Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (1968) begins some key interrogations of closure that lay the foundations of the critical discourse. Herrnstein Smith takes a text-based approach to examine the strategies for closure in lyrical poetry. Two important sets of terms from Herrnstein Smith’s work are paratactic/non-paratactic structures and anti-closure and “the click.” The former refers to a poem whose coherence and sense of closure do not arise from “the sequential arrangement of its major thematic units” (99). By contrast, non-paratactic structure defines a work in which “the dislocation of or omission of any element will tend to make the sequence as a whole incomprehensible, or will radically change its effect” (99).

With this distinction between poetic structures that relies either on formal or thematic elements to achieve a sense of closure, Herrnstein Smith analyzes poems that fail to achieve closure and poems that achieve “anti-closure.” That is, these poems “reflect a general preference for, and deliberate cultivation of, the *expressive* qualities of weak closure” (237; emphasis in original). Thus “even when the poem is firmly closed, it is not entirely slammed shut—the lock may be secure, but the ‘click’ has been muffled”

(237). For Herrnstein Smith, the “click” metaphorically represents an ending that provides a moment of cessation and closes the potential for a poem’s progression.

Particularly found in modern poetry, Herrnstein Smith identifies anti closure as often occurring “where structural features that mark the work as a verbal artifact—rather than a direct transcription of personal utterance—are avoided” (238). Anti-closure occurs in poems that rely on a mimesis of “personal utterance” rather than poetic form so as a not to provide the “click” or formally recognizable ending to a poem because such a device does not exist in non-poetic, personal speech. This emphasis on problematically “open” works continues Eco’s and Kermode’s interrogations of closure. In addition, the work’s focus on lyric poetry that relies on (most often) a single speaker rather than a narrative for form makes the work seminal to the critical discourse on closure but tangential to this study.

In terms of both critical approach and literary genre, Herrnstein Smith’s study contrasts starkly with David H. Richter’s *Fable’s End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction* (1974). Richter analyzes idea- or thesis-driven works with a clear distinction between the terms “completeness” and “closure.” For Richter, “completeness” occurs “in the sense of recounting a completed process of change, either in external circumstances or internal consciousness, taking place in the protagonists” (vii). To define the “mutually related” term closure, Richter paraphrases Kermode and defines closure as a moment when a text signals a sense of an ending after which continuation is either irrelevant or begins a sequel to the text (viii). Due to the clarity and conciseness of Richter’s terms “completeness” and “closure,” they provide the working

terms for this study here, albeit in a text-based approach without entering into reader-response theory and the discourse on the open-work debate.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, “completeness” in this dissertation, as in Richter’s study, means the completion of change either within characters or their circumstances—a distinction between character- or plot-based completeness although the two also remain inextricable. Also as in Richter, “closure” in this study refers to a textual signal that continuation is either irrelevant or begins a new text, albeit two key differences exist here. The first difference involves the prioritizing of the terms completeness and closure. For Richter, closure remains secondary to completeness in his study because his focus is on the novel, rather than Hernstein Smith’s focus on poetry (ix). By contrast, this dissertation complementarily uses both terms because plays rely on the formalities of narrative and speech. Another distinction lies in how a play thematically and formally signals closure differently from a novel, which means that the devices for closure interrogated here often formally differ from Richter’s study. Thus Richter’s terms provide a concise starting point but require this reworking and shifting of focus in order to apply to a study of closure in drama.

Mariana Torgovnick’s *Closure in the Novel* (1981) represents another important work that interrogates the role of endings in a narrative that provide or do not provide a sense of closure. Torgovnick catalogs a whole series of narrative strategies such as circularity, parallelism, incompleteness, and linkage, all of which lead to one of two “viewpoints” at the novel’s end. One such ending provides an overview, often with a

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<sup>1</sup> See Richter’s first chapter, “Open Form and the Fable,” where he interrogates the “‘open form,’ which is typical of much of twentieth-century fiction [...] has as its principal characteristic the ‘open end’” (1). All of the critics that follow who interrogate the issue of closure and the novel also stake out their various critical territory on the privileging of endings that they spell out in their introductions and first chapters.



temporal shift, most commonly found in an epilogue (15). The other basic ending type provides a “close-up,” usually in a final scene that has no temporal distance from the body of the novel (16).

Torgovnick then argues that one of three categories of reader-author relationships emerge from the pairing of a narrative strategy with an ending type or viewpoint. These categories are “complementarity,” when the reader more or less accepts an ending and “whatever meaning (or lack of meaning) the author wishes to convey; “incongruent,” which occurs “when the author must more actively coax his reader into accepting an ending” (17); and “confrontational,” a reader-author relationship that occurs when authors “confront their audience with endings that deliberately thwart reader expectations” (18). Unlike previous discourse on closure, Torgovnick reads the text as a narrative ombudsmen for reader and author, both of whom she admits must remain “implied” in her readings of texts (16).

Ultimately, Torgovnick argues that this reader-author relationship places authors into the “self-aware” category because their endings ultimately show a mastery of subject and narrative, or into the “self-deceiving” category due to a “lack of self-knowledge” or “quirkiness” in their endings (19-20). Thus for Torgovnick, author, ending, and reader complement one another to provide or fail to provide a sense of closure, and by reading all three in an interpersonal relationship, her study adds the critical perspective of a social dimension to the discourse on closure. And although her work exclusively focuses on the novel, this added critical element advances the discourse toward closure in drama.

Also privileging the role of endings in closure is D. A. Miller’s *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (1981) in which Miller

emphasizes the importance of a narrative's ending for providing a sense of closure but stresses that a novel can never provide an absolute sense of closure. To quantify this claim, Miller takes a formulaic approach to analyzing narrative structures to calculate the "positive values" that provide a sense of closure and "negative values" that deny closure to argue that these values illustrate how closure never can fully or finally "govern" the novel. Rather, the positive and negative values provide an "equation" that the novelist creates and that the reader must solve even though the equation may not provide the balance of an objective solution (xiv). Like Torgovnick, Miller interrogates the importance of an ending in a novel's strategy for closure but with an added emphasis on how the reader builds expectations for closure through the "values" that appear in the text that provide or deny closure. Both critics also argue that a novel's ending can never completely satisfy the reader's expectations for closure, a point that this study acknowledges also applies to closure in drama.

Expanding on Miller's approach by stressing the importance of a novel's beginning as well as the ending are Peter Rabinowitz and Russell Reising. In Rabinowitz's *Before Reading: Narrative Connections and the Politics of Interpretation* (1987) and Reising's *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* (1995), both authors examine the influence of cultural and ideological context on the reader's expectations for closure. Rabinowitz focuses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century European novels and privileges beginnings and endings to argue that even if readers' desires for closure exist cross-culturally, the "particular manifestations are always social" (201). That is, a reader often misreads an ending's sense of closure that does not conform to the reader's ideological expectations (201). In essence, Rabinowitz argues that while a

novel from outside the reader's culture can present a different culture's ideology to the reader, the novel cannot separate the reader from his or her socially manifest and ideological expectations for closure.

Focusing on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American novels and readers, Reising further analyzes the problem of closure and cultural ideology. Specifically, Reising interrogates the interpretive dilemma found in many American novels that arises when an ending neither not only fails to provide a sense of closure but actually complicates the cultural issues present in the text from the novel's beginning. The social and cultural issues that problematically linger after the ending, then, make up what Reising defines as the "loose ends" in American culture that its novels mirror but cannot resolve (11-12). Thus both Reising and Rabinowitz privilege both the beginnings and endings of novels as they interrogate the interpretive dilemmas for closure in social contexts.

One social context that the novel lacks, however, is the collective environment of an exhibition or performance, and Richard Neupert's *The End: Narrative and Closure in the Cinema* (1995) advances the discourse on closure to a genre that presumes a collective audience. As the title indicates, the work interrogates closure in film by focusing on close readings of film's endings within an American social context, an approach that echoes Rabinowitz's work with the novel. While Neupert also acknowledges the importance of beginnings for cinematic closure, he stresses that a film's "ending is the final address to the spectator" (32). Neupert's study essentially reworks Richter's terms "completeness" and "closure" into the terms "story" and "discourse," respectively, to interrogate the various combinations that arise from open

and/or closed stories and discourses. Thus Neupert's work represents a pastiche of the various arguments for open versus closed works along with the privileging of beginnings and endings in narratives.

By working exclusively with cinematic texts, Neupert moves the discourse on closure from printed texts such as poems and novels to film narratives, which exist to be "read" by spectators of a theatrical exhibition. This relationship among text, author (the film's director or "auteur" in cinema studies, thanks to the seminal essays in *Cahiers du Cinéma*), and reader/audience in film contains the unique framing of a beginning and ending that the theatrical exhibition of the text creates. Unlike printed texts, contemporary audiences share the viewing of the films, including the all-important beginning, by which time everyone should be seated, and the ending, at which time the audience must leave the theatre. Essentially, a collective dimension is manifestly self-evident in the theatrical experience that is not true of the reader of novels or poems.

Similarly, the demands of a staged performance of a play place unique expectations for closure in the dramatic text as well and will inform this study. Two important works that focus on closure in drama are Henry J. Schmidt's *How Dramas End: Essays on the German Sturm und Drang, Büchner, Hauptmann, and Fleisser* (1992) and June Schlueter's *Dramatic Closure: Reading the End* (1995). Schmidt's argument privileges the endings of plays in providing a sense of closure in a "consensus" between performance and audience and provides both with the conclusion to a social event and a mechanism of release (2-3). With this premise, Schmidt identifies a series of ending types in the drama, such as celebration, moral victory, cyclical, didactic, parodied, and ironic, much like Torgovnick's earlier study labels the endings of novels.

While Schlueter also privileges endings in her readings of dramatic closure, she eschews the performance-audience model found in Schmidt's work for a reader-response model that relies on Wolfgang Iser's theories on the collaborative role of the text and reader (27). From this base in reader-response theory, Schlueter defines closure as a moment of "cessation" at a play's ending, much like Herrnstein Smith and Richter before her, to stress that the ending of a play either "satisfies" or "frustrates" the reader's expectations for closure (47). Therefore, both of these works interrogate dramatic closure from useful critical perspectives, and they do so with readings of handpicked texts that satisfy each critic's labels and terms. As a whole, this shared approach lays important critical groundwork for the general discourse on dramatic closure, yet the need for further interrogation of dramatic closure exists.

The preceding survey of critics' arguments on closure reveals that dramatic closure represents the natural culmination of the established discourse on closure. Plays appear last in the discourse due to the complexity of the dramatic text, which relies on speech, narrative, and performance for closure. Previous studies of closure in other genres, then, all lay the critical groundwork because an interrogation of closure in novels, plays, and films leads the discourse to drama, which provides the most complex text for closure. Presently, the discourse on closure awaits a study of closure that builds on the basic groundwork that Schlueter's and Schmidt's studies initiate. The next question that arises is what body of work provides the opportunity to advance the discourse to a more thorough interrogation of closure in drama than in previous studies?

Shepard's plays represent just such an interpretive dilemma because of their multiplicity of engagements with problems of closure, which represents the master theme

of Shepard's career and lies at the heart of Shepard's career-long mistrust of endings as a source of resolution. Describing endings as a type of cop-out, Shepard has said that he hates the formality of closure, and he admits, "I never know when to end a play" and that "a resolution isn't an ending: it's a strangulation" (qtd. in Bottoms 3). Thus Shepard sternly mistrusts the idea of resolution, noting that he finds it to be "a cheap trick" in which "everything is tied up at the end with a neat little ribbon and you've delivered this package" (qtd. in Shewey 116). This resistance both denies a "sense of recounting a completed process of change, either in external circumstances or internal consciousness, taking place in the protagonists" and fail to signal that provides a sense of an ending after which continuation is either irrelevant or begins a sequel to the text (Richter vii-viii). The plays of course must end to satisfy the needs of a theatrical performance, yet they provide a unique set of primary texts that problematize both completeness and closure in the dramatic text. In doing so, however, the plays provide meditations on closure as each play grapples with the desire to avoid what Shepard terms "copping-out" to the theatrical authority of closure (qtd. in Bottoms 3).

Nonetheless, the demands for an ending that frame a dramatic text and its theatrical performance also apply to Shepard's plays. Despite the playwright's reticence to "cop-out" and end plays, they must end, for theatrical purposes if anything else: The stage lights fade, the curtain falls, the audience (hopefully) applauds the performance, the players take a curtain call, and then all exit the theatre. While some exceptions to this theatrical trope exist, such as the daughter's exit through the theatre without a return for a curtain call in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Shepard's plays do exist within its frame. Thus the interpretive dilemmas that arise from these plays

concern the paradox of how to avoid resolution and the resulting sense of completeness and closure on the one hand but to meet the theatrical demands to provide an ending to a play.

As noted above, Richter's terms for completeness and closure provide the working terms for the following reading and interrogation of completeness and closure in Shepard's plays, providing a set of working terms to analyze the primary texts. Rather than privilege either endings and/or beginnings, both places in the text as well as the middle of plays, if necessary, receive close attention as needed to provide a thorough reading of completeness and closure. Therefore, this study avoids mirroring itself in the debate over where a close reading should privilege a text. Instead, the theatrical demand for an ending provides the textual importance for close readings of each play's ending to examine how Shepard ultimately responds in each work to the dilemma of ending a play without providing what he sees as the submissive cop-out of completeness and closure.

Thus with the works of a playwright whose endings challenge and deny expectations for completeness and closure, I argue for and set out the tropes that compose closure in contemporary drama and how Shepard's plays complicate them. Importantly, this study examines the breadth of a single playwright's oeuvre that from its onset resists providing a sense of completeness and closure to identify and interpret how this body of plays problematizes these terms for the dramatic text. At the conclusion of this reading of completeness and closure in Shepard's plays, an examination of its import and impact on the critical discourse on closure follows to explore where this dissertation moves and complicates that discourse.

## Dedication

For my grandfather Kenneth Snyder, who first envisioned me as a college professor.



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## Chapter 1: Ironic Endings: Resisting the “Cop-Out” of Completeness and Closure in Shepard’s Early Plays

From *The Rock Garden* (1964), Shepard begins his career as a playwright without much authorial comfort with endings, a formal and thematic concern that continues throughout his career. What Shepard finds difficult about endings, as noted earlier, arises from his distrust of a sense of resolution that he finds to be “a cheap trick” in which “everything is tied up at the end with a neat little ribbon and you’ve delivered this package” (qtd. in Shewey 116). But while preferring not to end a play at all, Shepard must end his plays in order for them to be finished and producible. To resist the “cheap trick” of resolution, Shepard’s earliest one-acts and first full-length play, *La Turista* (1967), end ironically for their characters. Whether cyclic in structure like *The Rock Garden*, *Chicago* (1965) and *Red Cross* (1966), linear as in *Icarus’s Mother* (1965) and *Cowboys #2* (1967), or an inverted linear structure as in *La Turista*, Shepard’s early plays resist resolution with an incongruity between expectations for completeness and closure and the plays’ actual endings. The incongruity occurs at the end of each play due to a turn of events that reveals the characters’ desire to resist a “cop-out” to an authoritarian imposition of fate actually confirms fate’s immanence in the characters. Thus fate in these plays functions internally as an orchestrating mechanism and leaves no space on stage for the imposition of “authority.” Following an Emersonian belief in nonconformity to resist the “cop-out” of resolution and deny the “authority” of theatrical convention, each ironic turn serves as an off-off Broadway metaphor for fate that denies

its contemporary counterculture fears of the threat from social institutions on Americans' freedom. Fate, the plays suggest, lies within every American, and any desire to resist a "cop-out" to fate's imposition ironically resists fate's immanent and inescapable place within every American. Yet as the stage lights fade, the irony remains lost on Shepard's characters, and any recognition of fate's immanence regardless of institutional "authority" must emerge from ambiguity to truth within each American offstage.

*The Rock Garden* (1964) provides the nascent pattern for ironically resisting fate's immanence. Shepard's often-quoted comments to Kenneth Chubb that the play "is about leaving my mom and dad" succinctly summarize the thematic focus of the play— isolation in the family unit and the longing to break free from the family (1974; 8). In the three scenes, the son and daughter continually fail to communicate, particularly with the father. A silent first scene that consists of the father buried in his magazine and unaware of the daughter's glass of milk crashing off the table establishes the theme of isolation in the family unit and the desire for the children to escape it.

At the end of the third scene, *The Rock Garden* cycles back to this pattern of a crashing response to the isolation of the family in two competing monologues that express the father's and son's desires to end the family's isolating hold on them. In the first monologue, the father discusses the rock garden that they could build outside the house and how it contrasts with the orchard. Collectively, the two images represent an early version of Shepard's theme of the father with a desire to shirk his family responsibility and wander to find himself. The rock garden, the father explains, "gives me something to do" and requires special rocks and would require a trip to Arizona "like we did before" in order to build a really fine one (41). By contrast, the orchard "needs

more work than the garden probably,” and the father goes into detail with lines that reflect his desire not to remain and nurture his family life, which “needs more work” than a road trip would entail (42).

The father’s fate, though, exists within the father, whether he remains with the family or not. Developing the potentially fertile garden and family life does not hold as much promise for the father as a rootless escape to Arizona to better the lifeless rock garden whose hard, rigid structure keeps things frozen in time, suggesting an entrapping circularity rather than a forward progression. Just as nothing grows on the bed of rocks, the potential for relationships to grow inside the home remains lifeless, and the isolated members themselves prevent the family from “growing” and connecting. Therefore, any sense of responsibility to “family” does not keep the father in isolation and unable to take his road trip—his own passivity does.

In response to the father’s monologue, the son’s reveals on the one hand an unsuccessful attempt at making a connection with the father while the disconnected lines show how the son also allows the pattern of isolation to continue. While the son’s graphic discussion of “really turning a girl on” is a very personal attempt at gaining his father’s attention, it reveals how he shares his father’s inability to communicate and to resolve family issues (43). The lines of the speech on female anatomy contain distinct references to the womb in addition to sexual references that reflect the son’s desire to circle back to the womb and his origins, thereby freezing time through his own assertion and insertion of individuality. The boy talks about how much he enjoys the ability of his thumb “to come almost out and then go all the way to the womb” where he can then “hold it” there (44). If only the son’s desire to “hold” a different fate could extend beyond the

brief monologue where he holds the father's attention and asserts his individuality, the son could see that he is the source of his own isolation. Ironically, he instead follows his father's example by assuming that answers exist not imminently within him but apart from him, in this case literally within another "womb." The desire to re-connect with the womb, however, only keeps the son further connected to his own womb—the seed of his immanent fate.

As if in response to the son's brief moment of independence, the father disconnects from the seat of his own fate by crashing off the couch, which recalls the crashing milk in the opening scene. Complementing the silence of the opening scene, the monologues reveal that the family unit in the opening tableau does not provide the source of the characters' failings. Rather, the characters' words and actions provide the source of dysfunctional isolation. The father's desires for a road trip and the son's desire to "hold it" represent the source of their isolation because each family member desires to escape from the family rather than connect with the other members. Their failings, as Ron Mottram correctly summarizes, are that they are "individuals attempting to survive as individuals within a group that demands, if it is successful, a high degree of cooperation, love and selflessness" (1984; 13). The characters cannot adhere to the family's need for cooperation, and as a result they remain the source rather than the victims of their fates.

And while the stage lights fade, the characters do not realize the irony of the play's events: The family unit in *The Rock Garden* remains dysfunctional at the source because each family member desires separation rather than connection. This desire creates rather than resists the unbreakable cycle of distance that cyclically entraps the

three characters, much like in Sartre's *No Exit*. That is, the cycle of isolation and distance within the family unit that the play implies will only continue without anything to stop it long after this one particular day. Equally as helpless as *La Turista*'s Kent and Salem, the characters in *The Rock Garden* cannot escape from what they see as an imposed state because it exists as an immanent part of their dysfunctional natures. Particularly when characters assert their desires to control the play's ending in the monologues, they only deceive themselves into believing that they resist the dysfunctional order of their family unit. Ironically, these monologues express the source of the dysfunctional order rather than resist it, an irony that perpetuates the family's self-imprisoning environment and leaves it trapped to repeat the pattern of isolation.

In addition to the irony of the sudden, slapstick turn of events in the play's ending, *The Rock Garden* serves as a metaphor for the immanence of fate that has been a part of dramatic tradition since antiquity. From the earliest portrayals on the classical stage, fate exists immanently within the protagonist who resistance to it ironically moves him or her towards its fulfillment. The gods may prophesize the their foreknowledge of a protagonist's tragic reversal, but the protagonist's own flaw produces the resulting horrific reversal of fortune. In a contemporary reading of Oedipus's fate, Aristotle's optimal example in the critical watershed *Poetics*, Charles Seagal's *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* universally widens the scope of Oedipus's tragic reversal as reflecting fate's universal definition as "the ineluctable power of our primal instincts" (273).

More specifically, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's massive study *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* describes how the reversal reveals the ambiguity of

Oedipus's ironic fall from grace. While hunting for the source of the plague, Oedipus falls from "a hunter on the trail" to the realization that he represents "both the one who discovers and is the object of discovery" (122). Thus the quest for truth makes results in the great irony of the play that Oedipus "himself is ambiguous, stamped with the enigmatic character that is mark of the entire tragedy" (123). "Stamped" represents a key interpretation of not only Sophocles's most famous work but for the portrayal of dramatic fate on a larger scale. Fate exists immanently in the tragic hero whose actions only ironically enfold his or her fate while in a search for a truth that cannot be erased from the protagonist's very essence.

In terms of the classical protagonist's relationship to the chorus, fate's portrayal in the classical tradition places the protagonist in threatening opposition to Greek society's fledgling institution of democracy that the audience embodies. Christopher Rocco best illustrates the opposition in his interrogation of classical tragedy and its contemporary Athenian society in *Tragedy and Enlightenment* with the description of the "chorus, a body of trained citizens that expresses the collective achievements of Athenian democracy. Opposite it, there is the protagonist, a legendary hero estranged from, and a stranger to, the collectivity of citizens." This historic separation, Rocco observes, presents the audience with the opportunity "to reflect, not only on the meaning of the action on stage, but on the meaning of their own past and present actions" as a society (59).

Complementing the thematic separation, the staging of Greek tragedies visually underscored the distance between protagonist and audience in amphitheaters that fix the audience as an extension of the Chorus and leave the protagonist literally pinned against



the wall of the stage's *skene*.<sup>1</sup> All of the dramatic and theatrical elements combine to underscore the anachronistic nature of the protagonist like Oedipus whose hubris-driven quest threatens the very Thebes that he previously saves in solving the Sphinx's riddle. In yet another level of irony, the once heralded savior already contains the very seed of the plague that has killed many in the ranks of the Chorus, and by extension the audience, before *Oedipus Rex* even begins. Consequently, the individual in classical drama represents an outside threat whose vanquishing at the play's end represents not only the expulsion of a mythic plague, as in the case of Oedipus, but also a metaphor for the reliance of an individual's fate on contemporary Athenian society's fate as a whole.

Such an anonymous, monolithic vision of democracy, however, contrasts very sharply with American ideals about the institution's relationship to the individual citizen. Within a tradition that stretches from Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" to the civil rights movement's tactics of non-violent direct action contemporary to Shepard's early plays, American thought on democracy sees it properly function only when individuals independently arrive at the same sense of truth before they act. The writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson on the concept and act of self-reliance best express this uniquely American perspective, which George Kateb's *Emerson and Self-Reliance* best summarizes as that which lies at the heart of American democracy, "the steady effort of thinking one's thoughts and thinking them through. It is intellectual independence, reactive and responsive self-possession" (31).

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<sup>1</sup> Illustrations and explanations of the classical Greek stage abound, but Bernhard Zimmerman's work in the compact and informative *Greek Tragedy: An Introduction* (1986; first published in English in 1991) nicely summarizes how the staging of classical tragedies physically allow the audience to participate in the play as a member of the chorus to foster the shared cultural institution of the tragic myths and their lessons for contemporary Athenian society (13).

Unless each individual can possess this independence, Emerson argues, society becomes “a joint stock-company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater.” Emerson provides a solution to society’s imposition on individual liberty—self-reliance. As Emerson emphasizes, “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist,” a sentiment that encapsulates the American vision of not following the lead of others in the “joint stock-company” but following his or her own lead (935). The fate of American democracy, then, exists in each American’s own self-reliance rather than a reliance on fixed, institutional answers as in democracy’s nascent beginnings in ancient Greece.

Equally important to American thought on fate and the individual is the erasing of divisions between the “noble” and the “common man.” In terms of theatrically portraying the uniquely American perspective on fate that gives equal measure to the plights of all citizens, Arthur Miller’s work applies the Emersonian emphasis on the individual to high tragedy. In “Tragedy and the Common Man,” Miller defends *Death of a Salesman*’s place as a tragedy and argues against the traditional view of tragedy from classical Greece where “the character gains ‘size,’ the tragic stature which is spuriously attached to the royal or highborn in our minds.” Miller counters this view of tragedy with a uniquely American definition of “highborn” with the words, “The commonest of man may take on that stature to the extent of his willingness to throw all he has into the contest, the battle to secure his rightful place in the world” (5).

Writing later in “On Social Plays,” Miller points out the equally important distinction of the modern American perspective on fate and the individual that reflects society’s subsuming identity and isolating Americans from one another. Despite the

inequitable structure of Greek society, Miller acknowledges that the design of Greek tragedies allowed for the “tragic victory” whereby “the polis—the whole people—had discovered some aspect of the Grand Design which was also the right way to live *together*” (55; emphasis in original). By contrast, Miller argues that the modern, industrialized America has turned Americans’ self-reliance into an isolated frustration within “the machine” of industry (55). “Specifically,” Miller states, “when men live, as they do under any industrialized system, as integers who have no weight, no *person*, excepting either as customers, draftees, machine tenders, ideologists, or whatever, it is unlikely (and in my opinion quite impossible) that a dramatic picture of them can really overcome the public knowledge of their nature in real life” (58; emphasis in original).

As a result of this conversion of self-reliance into a dehumanized function of industry, characters in the social dramas of O’Neill, Williams, Rice, and Miller himself all reflect an individuality that isolates each American and stifles the rewards of Emersonian nonconformity on which American democracy has always relied. Such feelings of isolation and forced conformity were particularly acute during the period of Shepard’s early plays during the mid-Sixties when a burgeoning counterculture viewed American social institutions as threats to Americans’ rights to secure their self-reliant, non-conforming places in the world. From *The Rock Garden* to *La Turista*, Shepard’s early plays reflect a growing dissatisfaction not only with dramatic conventions, particularly the expectations for endings that provide resolutions, but of a larger cultural dissatisfaction with authority. Stifled in the Fifties, Shepard’s generation saw the Sixties as a chance to change the cultural rules on many levels, and Shepard’s early works reflect this dissatisfaction with the “older generation’s” rules and expectations.

It is not surprising that a young, budding playwright in New York at this time would write plays that contain the theme of a desire to resist the older generation's institutional authority<sup>2</sup>. Resistance to many aspects of culture such as segregation and the war in Vietnam abounded in mid-60s youth culture, and such resistance via the negative portrayal of the social institutions thought responsible began to surface right when Shepard began his career as a playwright. Perhaps most notably, Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* was very popular on college campuses and among young people in general (Shepard was twenty when he wrote *The Rock Garden*) for what David Farber notes in *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* calls its "vision of dehumanizing authorities, trickster resistance, and a world turned upside down" (181).

In the New York of the mid-Sixties, Shepard and other young theatre artists saw themselves resisting the authority that had taken control of the institution of American theatre purely for the purpose of profit, and in response they formed what critics refer to as Off-Off-Broadway. In the two detailed accounts of this movement, Albert Poland and Bruce Mailman's *The Off-Off Broadway Book* and David A. Crespy's *Off-Off Broadway Explosion* describe how Shepard and his contemporaries felt that commercial musicals dominated Broadway while Off-Broadway stages had become venues for revivals of classics or showcases for Absurdist plays for the intelligentsia. Neither of these theatrical institutions offered much opportunity for a new generation of off-off Broadway artists who sought to stage plays "practically fresh out of the typewriter" through improvisation

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<sup>2</sup> Several recent examinations of the Sixties such as *From Camelot to Kent State: The Sixties Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It* (2001), edited by Joan Morrison and Robert K. Morrison; *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now*, edited by Alexander Bloom; and Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin's *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (2000) all chronicle the emergence of what Bloom defines in his introduction as a youth movement in which "groups began to challenge the basic assumptions and institutions, from segregation to campus restrictions to presumptions about personal development and national goals" (5).

and experimentation “rather than by endless readings, rereadings, staged readings, and so on” that stifled a creative process that could allow for artists to tap into the true “magic” (Crespy 15).

At the heart of Off-Off-Broadway, then, was the desire to acknowledge that “truth,” theatrical and thematic, was an ideal for which the artists always strove, even if it meant only pleasing the artists themselves and not commercial standards of success that they thought had usurped the aesthetic of American theatre. Such a freewheeling and experimental process meant abandoning the potential for large commercial rewards available in conventional theatre, but the Off-Off-Broadway movement’s goal was to place art above profit. As Don Shewey succinctly explains the aspirations of Off-Off-Broadway in his biography of Shepard, “They did it for themselves” (38).

The Off-Off-Broadway movement also saw its experimental creative process as aiming for the higher purpose of “truth.” Off-Off-Broadway playwright Michael Smith describes this lofty goal in his introduction to *The Best of Off-Off Broadway*, the third collection of Off-Off-Broadway plays that he edited or co-edited. Aware that the movement’s creative process allowed for artistic freedom that could lead to commercial goals rather than seeking to “create a new aesthetic” that demands sacrificing financial gain if a playwright chose to exploit its “magic” through self-promotion for potential profit, Smith responds to the challenge. “Then there is the higher opportunism,” he argues, that means more than commercial success, “a higher hedonism in which we seek to fulfill and please ourselves in truth. And ambivalence is part of truth: ambiguity, in fact, sometimes seems the only possible truth. I am ambivalent about ambivalence. It is also a cop-out” (18-19).

For Shepard, providing a sense of completeness and closure epitomizes the abandonment of truth for commercial acceptance. Describing endings as “copping-out,” Shepard has said that he hates the formality of closure, and he admits, “I never know when to end a play” and that “a resolution isn’t an ending: it’s a strangulation” (qtd. in Bottoms 1998; 3). Each of Shepard’s early plays in the Off-Off Broadway movement reflect how Shepard sternly mistrusts the idea of resolution and finds resolution to be “a cheap trick” in which “everything is tied up at the end with a neat little ribbon and you’ve delivered this package.” Shepard argues that this “package” has “been handed down as if that is the only way to write plays. If you’re only interested in taking a couple of characters,” he adds, “no matter how many, and having them clash for a while, and then resolve their problems, then why not go to group therapy or something?” (qtd. in Shewey 116-17). Therefore, such a processed approach to theatre with its commercially packaged form provides little in the way of the “magic” that a creative approach to finding the much more difficult and often ambiguous truth as found in Off-Off-Broadway.

Yet each play must end in order to be produced—no matter how unconventionally—and for Shepard or any writer to be a “playwright.” With an aesthetic conceit that mistrusts resolution, Shepard’s early plays employ an ironic turn of events to resist a sense of completeness and closure with an ambiguous frustration of the linear development of theme and plot. Reflecting Shepard’s nonconformist response to the dramatic convention of resolution, the plays portray the inability to see the immanence of fate within the individual, whose best defense against society’s “authority” remains in the Emersonian idea of nonconformity. So strongly desiring a need to break from the imposition of fate, the characters do not see that fate orchestrates each play’s ending

irregardless of the “joint-stock company” of society’s imposition of its “authority” on the characters.

Thus each play ends with a sudden turn that reveals a character’s fate but without the protagonist’s recognition of the irony of the play’s events. In an American nonconformist variation of the classical tradition in which the revelation of fate provides the audience with its role within the Grand Design, Shepard’s early plays reflect the Off-Off-Broadway movement’s portrayal of truth’s ambiguity for each American. In order for the audience to find its role within the Grand Design, the plays suggest, each individual must rely on him/herself for the recognition of any “truth” without conforming to the “joint-stock company” of society of the audience and in the larger society outside the theatre.

Although aesthetically showing the same struggles with authority as Shepard’s contemporaries, the portrayal of fate’s immanence in Shepard’s early plays places the emphasis on the individual’s nonconformity as a way to resist institutional authority, an option of which the characters remain ironically unaware. Rather than share Shepard’s contemporaries’ focus on an “us-versus-them” dichotomy between the “authority” of dehumanizing institutions and the individual’s fate, resistance to completeness and closure in Shepard’s early plays metaphorically portrays the culturally prevalent and ironic lack of an Emersonian focus on the American’s unalienable fate. Sharing Emerson’s mistrust of society, Shepard’s early plays portray society and its institutions as harmful to the individual, and the plays do not allow society to separate Americans from their fates. Rather, the only dehumanizing element in these plays is the orchestrating mechanism of fate. As a result, any desire to resist what a character perceives as a “cop-

out” to an external “authority” ironically brings the character closer to a fate that exists immanently within each American on Shepard’s stage and each American offstage.

*The Rock Garden* represents the first of Shepard’s metaphors that suggest that an individual’s nonconformity provides the best defense from the “dehumanizing institution” of the American family. Rather than represent the family as an imposition on its members’ individuality, the play reduces the family unit to near buffoonery to serve as a metaphor for the institution of family life’s “authority” over the characters. By resisting connections with each other through the monologues that express the desire to resist the stifling and disconnected family environment, the characters only resist their own immanent fates. Resistance to the institution, the play suggests, only plays into fate’s hands, which exists immanently within each character. The family’s “authority” does not provide the members’ fate, as the father’s slapstick pratfall that ends the play shows. Rather, the only thing standing in the way of the characters’ creating a functional family unit arises from their desire to be individuals.

Thus in a portrayal of fate in which the characters do not understand that a family requires the cooperation that Whiting’s earlier quotations mention, they would not stifle their own fates because they would receive the benefits of a functional family. The characters do, though, immanently perpetuate the cycle of isolation that they internalize in the monologues. Ironically, the characters do not see the connection between isolation and the lack of cooperation, which serves as a metaphor for fate: “Family” is only as strong as its individual members, and when they are dysfunctional, the members individually share the blame for its stifling effect.



Ultimately, *The Rock Garden*'s ambiguously slapstick ending suggests that the best way to escape the stifling environs of family lie within each member's nonconformity to it. While the characters only talk about leaving the family and finding a sense of individuality, Shepard's audience remains free to resolve the play's ambiguity and take a nonconformist, individual approach to breaking free of the shackles of family's "authority." As Shepard's earlier quote indicates, the play portrays Shepard leaving his family—but without actually showing any characters exit. Rather, the play metaphorically portrays the specious "authority" of every family on its members. If a member feels stifled by the lifelessness of the family's stifling bonds, the play intimates, then the best solution arises from not conforming to them.

As the hollow "authority" of the parents and the loveless bonds between the characters show, Americans need not passively allow "family" to stifle them because fate lies immanently within each character and audience member. Inaction, which the characters in the play take, only ironically results in the lifeless, rock garden of a family bond from which the characters desire an escape. If the characters, and by extension the audience members, seek a release from the cycle of isolation, they must take the action of nonconformity to break themselves free from the family's "authority," which only exists if Americans passively allow its specious hold on them to continue.

Moving from *The Rock Garden*'s focus on the institution of family, Shepard's second play, *Chicago* (1965), adds the speciously authoritarian image of a policeman with a club to *The Rock Garden*'s pattern of monologue-driven circularity. The play's opening moments feature the policeman's silent search as he taps the stage curtains, which suggests an authoritarian imposition on the stage, but the play centers around the

monologues of Stu, who spends most of the play in a bathtub, the only stage property. As Stephen J. Bottoms notes, the dynamics arise from the “gradual intensification in the monolinguist’s mood,” which consists of Stu’s building exhortation to celebrate life with the simple, individual act of breathing (42). As the other characters cast their fishing lines into the audience, symbolizing a connection with the audience and reflecting the characters’ willingness to eschew their individuality for the “joint-stock company” of society, Stu appeals to both groups when he implores, “Month after month of breathing until you can’t stop.” In the last lines of the play, Stu extols the benefits of the breath of life by saying, “What a gas. In your mouth and out your nose. Ladies and gentlemen, it’s fantastic!” (59).

With an ironic confirmation of Stu’s desires, *Chicago* circles back to its opening “threat” from the policeman immediately after Stu’s monologue. The tap of the policeman’s club moves to the door of the auditorium and ends the play, which reveals the threatening “authority” of the policeman to have vacated both the stage and the theatre. The policeman’s presence, so often appearing on American televisions at the time attacking demonstrators and protestors, cannot stifle or stamp out Stu’s desires for life. Stu in fact remains unaware of the policeman’s presence throughout the play as his monologues address the other characters and the audience not to cast their lines outward but to look inside for answers. Implying that such individuality exists within the characters and the audience and controls their fates, the policeman’s vacating the theatre underscores the immanence of fate within Stu and everyone else, not in the hands of “authority.”

Stu's brief exhortation to breathe, much like the son's desire to "hold it" and achieve a sense of individual control over fate in *The Rock Garden*, ironically turns into a confirmation that the play serves as a metaphor for fate's immanence. This confirmation explicitly occurs with the expulsion from the theatre of the heavy hands of the police, the ultimate symbol for the Sixties counterculture of the social and political authority of the "establishment" over the common man. Establish individuality through nonconformity through living life as an individual, the play suggests, and Americans need not worry about the "establishment" because any expectations of the police's "authority" to stifle individuality only exist if Americans remain unaware of fate's immanence and thus conform to that "authority."

Instead, the play metaphorically portrays the real authority of fate as existing inalienably within each American. Although such a simple act, Stu's remaining in bed metaphorically represents nonconformity to society that can and does resist institutional "authority." As in *The Rock Garden*, monologues express the desire to resist a fate that ironically exists within Stu and whose course neither he nor the policeman cannot change, but Stu and the other characters ironically never realize fate's immanent orchestration within each of them. As a result, the stage lights fade as Stu remains optimistic yet unaware of the truth that lies within the ambiguity of the play's ending. Stu's efforts at individuality represents an act of nonconformity that presents a better option than what awaits the other characters who forfeit their individuality to join the joint-stock company of a society that the audience represents in the play. If the audience looks inside themselves as Stu has, the play suggests, they, too, can reveal the only true

authority that lies within each of American, regardless of the prodding of the ultimately powerless “authority” that the policeman symbolizes.

Shepard’s *4-H Club* (1965) continues the frustration of the linear development of theme and plot that serves as a larger metaphor for fate in *The Rock Garden* and *Chicago*. The play portrays the building angst of John, Joe, and Bob in a filthy kitchen on an otherwise empty stage. As in other early Shepard plays, monologues express the desire to resist a fate that the characters mistakenly see as an external imposition, and in *4-H Club* they jump from the modern woes of instant coffee and lawnmowing to the three characters’ mutual hunt for mice. With this unifying purpose in mind, the three cut the stage lights and wait in the dark for their chance to pounce on the vermin. There in the dark, Joe, Bob, and John make a futile attempt to catch the mice in the mistaken belief that the invading vermin hold sway over the characters’ predicament. The mice, however, represent no more of a threat than the previous impositions of family and police on characters’ fates, yet the extermination ironically builds in momentum to a final battle for control of the space.

Following the pattern of the first two plays, the monologues conclude with an exhortation of natural individuality whose resistance to fate ironically serves as a metaphor for it. With the three protagonists’ whispering, banging, and arguing on a dark stage, *4-H Club* ends with John’s sunny monologue whose undermining serves metaphorically to portray the imposition of fate on an individual attempt to achieve closure. John extols the serenity of such an escape by claiming that all you have to do is pick up your ready-made breakfast and “you just sit there and eat and look out over the ocean” (99). The actions of Joe and Bob, however, abrade the serene picture that John’s

words paint. Joe continues beating a coffeepot at a steady rhythm, much to the dismay of Bob, who shouts, “Stop! No noise!” (99). Together, the banging and shouting stifle John’s brief desire to hold his fate in his own mind and words, much like Stu and the son in Shepard’s first two plays. Sounding like John has the perfect, all-American vacation planned to escape the monotony that dominates him and enjoy the individual, open space of the land, he believes that a week in such “a great place” will work wonders. To underscore the desire for individuality, John repeats the line claiming that while swimming “you just float and stare at the sky” four times (100).

Much like the son’s and father’s desires to resist what they view as the imposition of family on their fates in *The Rock Garden*, the monologue reveals how John’s fate ironically exists within him and not in the monotony of the grimness of day-to-day existence. In contrast to this verbal picture of sea and sky, the stage lights dim and Joe’s rhythmic pounding continues, in effect painting over John’s verbal attempts to replace the grim reality of his environment with a serene escape. The fading lights on the remainder of the stage metaphorically dramatize the many factors that need to be blocked and blacked out in order to achieve closure, a task that proves too much for John.

Ultimately, the play portrays closure as an unfulfilled desire for individuality. With theatricality not seen in the first two plays, the stage lights’ repressively erase John’s attempts to fulfill a desire for closure independent of the mice-filled environment that remains at the play’s end without any foreseeable change. Thus in a more subtle formal and thematic statement than in Shepard’s other early plays, *4-H Club* ends with an ironic turn that frustrates an attempt linearly to develop a theme and plot that suggests individual progress towards freedom from an imposed fate. Building on the call to life in

*Chicago* that ironically ends on a circular note of stifled rather than achieved freedom and individuality, *4-H Club*'s linear structure speciously progresses toward a change for the protagonists that ironically stifles any expression of life and freedom by them. Although the three protagonists have conflicting methods of catching the mice, or, in John's case, ignoring the mice while he ruminates, the darkening stage suggests that the hunters ironically become the hunted at the play's end. If the mice do not creep up on the three of them, then the thematic suggestion is that their attempts at a progression toward order within their crummy little world results in only further stifling of their plans as time marches forebodingly along. The invading mice, then, reverse the role of hunter and hunted to suggest that time and fate hunt the protagonists from within them.

The image that ends *4-H Club* may not be as menacing as a prowling policeman with a nightstick in *Chicago* or the fatal crash that ends Shepard's next play, *Icarus's Mother*, but the same frustration of linear development arises to portray fate's ironic immanence. We never see whether the mice-catching plan succeeds or fails and what its true significance, if any, is for the characters. The lack of answers extends the mice-catching metaphor to an ironic contrast between the pedestrian concern for hunting the vermin and the grand desire on the part of John to find paradise and achieve a sense of closure independent of such small concerns. Likewise, the play ends with a slow blackout that ironically defies narratives of sudden transition, such as the transition to paradise that John's monologue desires.

As a whole, *4-H Club* continues the early Shepard theme of ironically reading fate as an authoritarian imposition on the desire for individuality. Revealing the monologues as part of the play's metaphor for fate's immanence, *4-H Club* provides no resolution to

any of these causal elements. In fact, the play's ending metaphorically portrays fate as awaiting the ironically unaware and not at all hapless protagonists, just as Joe's pounding in the dark suggests. Each character ironically tries in some individual way to exert his own individuality and/or vision on the world around him, yet the source of their troubles exists within them and not the invading vermin, and the lack of resolution ironically washes over them in the form of darkness. This first occurs through the ironic action of turning out the kitchen lights that precedes the foreboding symbolism when the entire stage blacks out in a resistance to resolution. Any attempt to view fate as an external imposition by these characters or by any in Shepard's early plays only results in an outcome that is incongruent with their expectations and the play's apparent progression.

Rather, any efforts to escape from fate's external control only result in an ironic fulfillment of the characters' desire, which serves as a larger metaphor for fate's immanence for all Americans. While nothing devastating or relieving—at least for now—happens to Joe, John, and Bob, *4-H Club*'s ending suggests that any such attempts to perceive fate as a malleable product of the protagonists' actions only results in being left in the dark with no answers. In this play, the three protagonists remain in the dark both literally and figuratively, as they ironically attempt to battle an invasion that comes from within them and not from the mice. Therefore, the “authoritarian” imposition of fate on the characters exists within them, and the ambiguous ending suggests that if they and the audience cannot see fate's immanence, then all of them must remain in the dark. As a result, the characters can only cycle back at the play's end to where they began—ironic victims who head towards fate's always-successful hunt. Metaphorically, the ambiguous ending portrays all Americans as existing not as victims of their surroundings

but blinding themselves to the truth that nonconformity rather than submission to society's little quirks and tribulations provides the only escape from their plight.

The speciously linear pattern of ironic endings that portray fate's ironic immanence continues in *Icarus's Mother* (1965). The play follows the early Shepard trademark of monologues whose desire for individuality briefly take the play on a linear progression, only to have an authoritarian society to defeat them with an ironic turn. In *Icarus's Mother*, the characters narrate events that either the audience and the onstage characters cannot see. Wrought with sexual imagery, the descriptions of bold pilots and fireworks displays starkly contrast with the lack of contact and affection among the characters themselves. That is, until the play's ending ironically changes the theme. Frank's very long set of monologues describing the fireworks display that Howard and Bill have missed uses the language of murder and destruction just as he is talking about beauty. He talks about the wonders of a fireworks display in the modern world, and then marvels about how it can happen while one is "thinking about killing your baby boy or your baby girl or your wife or your wife's sister or your pet dog. And to come to a standstill" (78). As in previous monologues, the desire "to come to a standstill" serves as a metaphor for the desire to resist what the characters perceive as an externally imposed fate.

Unfortunately, the pilot's desire to please the crowd in the play's final moments serves as a deadly symbol for sacrificing individuality to society's conformity. The pilot whose daring, Icarus-like stunts produce amazement, engagement and highly flirtatious behavior from Jill and Pat, bursts into flame just like the daring Icarus, ironically at the precise moment when all the characters appear to be their most free and uninhibited.



Frank's words narrate the events for us as he describes the plane "exploding the water for a hundred miles in diameter around itself" (79). The play ends with everyone but Bill and Howard rushing off to see the carnage with Jill's emphatic words, "the plane crashed, Bill! It really did" (80). Thus what starts out as Frank's joke ironically happens, but Howard and Bill refuse to participate in the excitement as they stand together on the stage as "the crowd noise becomes deafening" (80).

As a result, the pilot who could not resist the lure of conformed creativity is now its ironic victim, which formally completes the central thematic elements of the play, and what awaits the other characters who flock to the flames remains unanswered. Howard and Bill's isolation and non-commitment to the deadly attraction on the beach represents two potentials for individuality, and the pair chooses the relative safety of silence to express it. The contrast between the pilot's fatal flight and the two aloof bystanders metaphorically portrays the crowd-pleasing impulse as a seductive one whose completion results in an ironic annihilation of the creator by the sun. Originally the source of life and inspiration dating back to classical times, the sun in *Icarus's Mother* represents the destructive power of society on any individual who sacrifices independence for conformity to it.

And even more significantly, Howard and Bill's refusal to follow the others to see the crash also underscores the ending's message for any other characters who may choose to conform their individuality to please the crowd. By remaining on stage and refusing to verify for themselves, and by extension the audience, the irony of the plane crash, Howard and Bill's presence resists providing a sense of completeness or closure in *Icarus's Mother*. The play metaphorically tells Howard and Bill, and, by extension, the

audience, that any impulse to conform is bound up in an impulse to the self-destruction of artist and artist. At least for the moment, Howard and Bill choose inaction and silence as their only defense. The two characters try to hold out, but the temptation to fly to the heat of social acceptance is hard to defeat.

Employing a linear narrative rather than the circular ones in *The Rock Garden* and *Chicago*, *Icarus's Mother* continues the portrayal of fate's immanence. Like Shepard's other early plays, the monologues in *Icarus's Mother* suggest a buildup toward what in this play should be a jovial, celebratory climax of individual expression. But remaining linear in structure rather than circling back to themes and images from the start of the play, Bill's monologue at the end of the play subverts this progression with his narrating the fiery end to the pilot's Icarus-like flight toward the fireworks. Ironically, Bill's lines become the destructive mother of invention for the Icarus-like pilot here, as they correctly and unexpectedly predict the fiery outcome for the pilot. When the others confirm the crash, they still celebrate the glorious blaze of the flames instead of showing concern for the safety of the pilot. *Icarus's Mother's* ending, then, subverts the linearity of its structure by the twist of fate for the pilot and other characters that portrays fate as existing as an ironic and incomplete outcome rather than a resolution of linear temporality.

Therefore, *Icarus's Mother* has an ending that is on the one hand a comment on the danger of commercialization in our society and on the other continues Shepard's formal exploration of ironic endings that resist completeness and closure by portraying society's demands for conformity as destroying individuality. Any attempt at "success" in the eyes of society only lasts for a brief flash of "brilliance" that ironically destroys the

artist who does not stay true to himself through nonconformity. As a whole, the play metaphorically reflects Shepard's earlier quotes on the aesthetic and commercial demands for resolution as a risk that destroys the quality of both art and artist, leaving both to a fate that conforms to the empty demands of commercialism.

Shepard's next play, *Red Cross* (1966), marks a return to a circular narrative that frustrates the linear development of theme and plot but with a very stripped-down cast of only three members. The play also continues Shepard's early trademark monologues, this time arising from Carol's building concerns for her health. Carol initiates the monologues in the play's beginning with bloody, fearful words that claim that her wearing glasses causes headaches so bad that her head will "just burst and there I'll be lying in the middle of the street or in a car or on a train. With a bursted head" (124). Carol follows this bloody imagery with a long monologue that ends with her claims that "all you'll see is this little red splotch of blood and a whole blanket of white snow" (125). The interspersing of white and red imagery, particularly on the all-white set, recalls the symbol of the red cross on a field of white, but Carol's monologues leave this imagery for what appears to be a building series of catastrophic circumstances for her. After Carol's words describe swimming accidents and the leeching of her blood by bedbugs, the play's final monologue precedes an ironic change in fortunes for the pair.

Expressing the desire to resist what Carol sees as an invasion that threatens her very life, Carol's fear of bedbugs ends the play with a ranting monologue that she combines with a compulsive ripping away of the bed sheets, both of which suggest an impending, climactic confrontation between humans and bugs. Carol acts much like the paranoid characters in *Chicago* when she tears at the beds with another tirade about how

bedbugs pose such a threat to her health, claiming, “Bedbugs are no joke, Jim. I mean they suck your blood and everything” (138). Carol’s words recall the bloody imagery of the first monologue, but the play circles back to its initial imagery with an unexpected and unexplained twist.

Still speciously hinting at a progression toward a resolution to Carol’s worries of an invasion, Carol claims that the pair must leave these cabins by saying, “That’s all there is to it. Either that or back home. I really can’t take it. It’s awful” (138). But after Carol finishes this final monologue, she turns and sees that Jim’s head, not hers, is the one that bloodily bursts. The last lines of the play show a confused pair, as Jim still has no idea of his injury and Carol asks, “What happened” (138)? The stage lights immediately blackout after this exchange, leaving the play’s new questions unresolved. How Jim’s head unexpectedly bursts with blood provides an ironic turn for Carol, who remains unaware that she is the source of this horrible fate for Jim, and cyclically returns the play to its beginning fear of the unknown.

As in all of Shepard’s early works, *Red Cross*’s ending reveals the irony of characters’ immanent fate but ambiguously ends without a resolution. The play completes a significant change for Jim, but this is not the change that Carol’s building monologues anticipate, and just how significant the change is remains unresolved in the sudden blackout of the stage lights. And if Jim’s head can burst with blood, then perhaps Carol’s rants may prove true for her, too, but the blackout prevents us from knowing. What the sudden, bloody turn of events confirms, though, is that Carol represents the source of any threat to the characters’ well being, but she ironically projects such a danger on the invasion of bedbugs that never occurs. By circling back to the opening

imagery that Carol's first dialogue expresses and then abruptly fading to black, the ending violently reveals that the fate Carol so deeply fears exists within her and not from the bedbugs.

The irony of Carol's monologues remains lost on Carol, however, as the stage lights fade, leaving her as in the dark and unaware of the option of nonconformity as Shepard's other protagonists as to the immanent source of fate. When the story of *Red Cross* comes full circle in a frustration of linear development of plot and theme, the ending ultimately portrays fate as an ironic turn that exists within each character, and blaming bedbugs blinds the characters to this fact. Because Jim's health, not Carol's, deteriorates unbeknownst to the two characters—and to the audience as well—*Red Cross* portrays fate as an ironic cycle that ends with Carol's bloody fears actually happening to Jim. This incongruent turn to the linear development of Carol's desire to resist what Carol sees as an imposition of "authority" in the form of bedbugs reveals that if Carol should fear fate, then she should fear its source—herself. Jim's, not Carol's, head bursts due to Jim's immanent and imminent fate and has nothing to do with the invasion of bedbugs.

The ambiguous and ironic ending of *Red Cross* also follows the pattern of Shepard's earlier plays by serving as a larger metaphor for fate's immanence and the need for Americans to embrace nonconformity rather than express their desires to resist "authority." By expressing the desire to resist a fate that Carol ironically projects onto an irrelevant source, she cannot see that her best defense from this outside imposition lies in nonconformity. Taking no action, the ending confirms, only means lying in wait for fate to orchestrate its authority. As Jim's fatal end reveals, fate comes from unforeseen yet

immanent sources, and any attempt to resist the imposition of “authority,” which the bedbugs metaphorically represent, resolves nothing. Fate lies inescapably and ambiguously within each character on stage and each American off stage, a fact that no one can change. By contrast, Americans can change the hold that “authority” places on them. All it takes to resist the imposition of “authority,” the play metaphorically suggests, lies in not conforming to it. As in previous Shepard plays, *Red Cross* presents these ideas as an ambiguous truth for the audience, who can either take action through nonconformity or await their turn for a hapless end like Jim’s.

Shepard’s final one-act play before *La Turista* continues the pattern of frustrating the linear development of theme and plot to avoid the “cop-out” of closure and adds the element of competing dialogues in its ending. *Cowboys #2* (1967) marks a return to an ironic ending to a speciously a linear narrative. Chet and Stu’s words and actions on an empty stage verbally establish the “setting,” which they say is an empty desert, reflecting how the fate from which they wish to escape immanently exists within them and not as an imposition. They talk about mud and water on a stage that is bare except for a sowhorse with a blinking yellow caution light and has a single cricket chirping—the unmistakable sound of desolation. Overhead fly vultures waiting for the two to succumb to the elements. With the intrusion of Man Number One and Man Number Two, the contrast between the open and ambiguous order of fate and the “authority” of modernization becomes clear and deadly for the two protagonists.

The imposition of “authority” recalls the policeman in *Chicago*, but the role of the two men is not to provide a circular structure to the narrative. Instead, the two men provide an ironic turn for Chet and Stu with a competing dialogue that frustrates the

linear development of theme and plot for the two protagonists who seek an escape from their fate in the desert. In *Cowboys #2*'s ending, Man Number One and Number Two provide the ironic turn that denies the apparent progression toward a sense of completeness and closure that Chet and Stu's earlier dialogues suggest. After the two men drive up, the dialogue in the play splits into two separate and competing narratives, making the ending a precursor to *La Turista*. The two outsiders, whom Leslie Wade rightly describes as "villainous extensions of bureaucratic power," discuss the land in terms of a commodity. The rent is now "a buck a month," Man Number One tells us, which would only be cheaper if it were free (152).

In contrast to Man Number One and Two's desire to reshape the landscape to suit their profit-minded scheme, Chet rambles on about a nice yet impossible breakfast. Much more real and natural is the blue cheese of his feet. Together, the competing monologues vie for control of both the setting and the fates of the characters through contrasting desires to resist the imminent fates that the characters ironically confuse with controlling the exterior environment. Just like the desire to resist bedbugs and mice, such desires completely misread fate as an imposition. Trying to reshape the setting by Number One and Two or by Chet and Stu cannot change who the characters are and what fate holds in store for them, a point that the bare stage underscores.

As in Shepard's previous works, the contrast between the two sets of characters doubly exposes how the desire to escape the present setting and to find an oasis of comfort ironically projects what really exists as an immanent struggle on a neutral, external space. The play's ending brings this contrast out even more fully, as the two bureaucratic villains represent the same type of "authority" as the policeman in *Chicago*

with the destructive potential of the plane crash in *Icarus's Mother*. Man Number One and Number Two reveal that despite Chet and Stu's seeming autonomy and isolation from society, they in fact ignore the option of nonconformity and thus ironically head towards an immanent fate.

What the two men's dialogue reveals is that Chet and Stu's apparent independence has been no more real than the play's imaginary setting. While the two see themselves as surviving independent of society's demands, they conform to own their unseen own annihilation. If they could only see that the whimsical, escapist tract in their dialogues changes nothing, which the still-bare stage demonstrates, the pair could at least come to terms with fate's immanence. Such a realization, however, would require taking Chet and Stu's nonconformist posturing to action. Yet as with all of Shepard's other early protagonist, such an option remains ironically lost on Chet and Stu.

With an ironic turn, *Cowboys #2* continues the pattern of revealing fate's immanence rather than portraying it as the imposition of "authority." When Man Number One and Two enter the stage for the last time wearing suits and reading from scripts, "starting," Shepard's stage directions tell us, "from the beginning of the play," their words reveal the ironic linearity that holds Chet and Stu's fate (153). The effects of this reading on the two protagonists render them helpless because their conformity allows it to do so. While looking at the audience, Chet desperately hopes to ward off the sun as the vultures prepare to strike. "Go look fer some cows!" He yells, and the building cacophony of offstage noises stops (154). But this is only the calm before the real storm, as Man Number One and Two continue to read "in monotone" as Chet stares at the



ominous sky and the lights dim. Earlier in the play, the language of Chet and Stu, often under the guise of old men telling yarns, creates happiness in the desert.

As a result, the stark reality of their fate comes through the formality of the establishment and its reshaping of America into a land of profit and bottom lines, a reality that Man Number One and Two embody. And if the annihilation does not come from the urban development that Man Number One and Two scheme, then the ominous vultures that circle overhead appear poised to do so. Chet tries to keep the world of the play open, as his looking at the audience and pleas to the vultures illustrate. He is powerless, though, to stop the Men and the unnatural and destructive forces of modernization they represent from closing off the play as well as the lives of Stu and himself

Recalling *The Rock Garden* and *Icarus's Mother*, *Cowboys #2* ironically ends with only an ambiguous suggestion regarding the truth of fate's immanence. Just as we do not see the plane crash at the end of *Icarus's Mother* or Salem's death in *La Turista*, we do not see the bloody end for Chet and Stu, an end strategy that resists completeness and closure by leaving events unresolved as the stage lights fade. The competing dialogues at the end of the play suggest that Chet and Stu face annihilation either from urbanization or the vultures, yet the play resists completing that fate. The two sets of dialogues instead exist in separate vacuums as the stage lights fade and the vultures circle. The foreboding presence of the birds appears to portend Chet and Stu's future, but Man Number One and Two show no immunity, either, and the play ends by leaving the characters' fates ambiguous and unresolved.

Chet and Stu's attempt at a linear progression toward personal individuality and social autonomy in *Cowboys #2* continues the ironic statement made by the linear

reappearance of the policeman in *Chicago* but with an added level of danger for the protagonists' fate. Despite the best plans of Chet and Stu, they cannot escape a fate that actually begins to take shape from the play's first moments that the dialogue of Man Number One and Two gradually competes with and attempts to theatrically and literally usurp by the ending. And that attempt to create a competing linear temporality for fate remains incomplete as the play closes with no clear answers as to which set of dialogues—or either— can win out. Therefore, by resisting a clear resolution to the fates of either pair, *Cowboys #2* makes a further comment on the futility of any attempt to view fate as a linear and malleable entity. By contrast, fate for the characters in this play continues the pattern in Shepard's early plays as an ironic and unmalleable outcome whose results remain unresolved even as the play ends, thus countering the conventional portrayal of fate as a temporal and permanent resolution. For Shepard's characters, fate provides not a resolution but an ironic and incomplete outcome that is incongruent with the events that precede it.

Nowhere in Shepard's early plays does this formal and thematic statement develop more completely than in Shepard's first full-length play, *La Turista* (1967), which develops the nascent experiments with temporality in Shepard's early one acts into a two-act, full-length format with an inverted chronology. As Charles Whiting points out in his "Inverted Chronology in Sam Shepard's *La Turista*," "Shepard is shooting energized images at the spectators, stirring emotions and provoking resonances to encourage physical realizations in the consciousness." As Shepard puts it, one of his aims is "to penetrate into another world" (417). The battery of images and language that

Shepard produces in the play are certainly “stirring” and may cause “physical realizations,” but the play’s structure inverts more than the chronology of its events.

*La Turista* takes the formal and thematic statement regarding fate’s immanence farther than in past works through the inversion of the settings’ temporality in addition to plot chronology. As the first act, which is set in contemporary Mexico, reaches its conclusion, the Witchdoctor and Boy transform Kent from a self-perceived position of strength to one of obvious deadly weakness. The case of dysentery from which he suffers works on Kent from the inside while the Witchdoctor and Boy work on him from the outside. Thematically, *La Turista*’s chronological ending stresses the thematic elements of Kent’s shift from cultural elitist to a weak and ultimately dead stereotype himself. But at the start of the second act, the play inverts both the chronology of the play’s events as well as the temporality of the setting to resist the first act’s resolution and the sense of completeness and closure that it provides.

*La Turista*’s second act takes place in the Civil War-era South, making its events begin and end before the first act. The temporal inversion of setting and chronology leaves Salem and Kent ironically unaware of the deadly and temporally inexplicable fate that awaits them in Mexico and which has already transpired by the start of the second act. As Ron Mottram rightly reads the two protagonists, their names come from two brands of cigarettes, and thus “this story identifies them as chattel of ‘the Greatest Society,’ as people who have been bartered for things” (48). The couple also represents a cancerous abrasion that infects settings in Shepard’s most poignant portrayal of the internalized orchestration of fate. When the protagonists find themselves at the mercy of

the Doc and his son in the second act, the directions call for these two roles to be doubled by the actors playing the Witch Doctor and Boy in the first act.

The result is an expression through casting and setting of how the external changes do nothing to change Kent and Salem's immanent and imminent fate. In the play's final scene, the formula of transformation and trance, a succinct explanation of the play's movement in both acts by Patrick Fennell, begins to take shape, but Kent resists just as Shepard the playwright resists a deference to closure (7). The Doc and Kent discuss the "experiment" that the Doc says he performs "with his faithful son at his side and transforms the dying man into a thing of beauty" (291). Kent and the Doc's language moves to a battle of wills and visions of reality that takes shape and mirrors the battle of cultures and languages in the first act. The key difference between the two acts is that Kent is not powerless on the floor. Rather, Kent's lines work as a mix of humor and horror in the descriptions of arms "being ripped from the chest" at the same time Salem and Sonny hum "Johnny Comes Marching Home Again" (297).

What happens in the play's final moments is another attempt by Salem to complete the nuclear family at the expense of Kent, while at the same time he avoids the trap they have in store for him in a cartoonish and ironic resistance to the completion of his fate. Expanding on the technique of dual dialogues that begins with *Cowboys #2*, *La Turista*'s ending speciously builds toward a climax that Kent ironically resists with a crashing exit. Under the power of the Doc, Sonny and now Salem work to do his bidding as they pursue Kent as he makes his way down the ramp and offstage. The lines that the Doc and Kent exchange here represent not only a battle of wills but a battle to control the ending. Doc tries to assert confidently that "ya' won't have no trouble at all if ya' go

along with the cure,” while Kent narrates the story of the Doc struggling to avoid the mob and escape with the “beast” (297). In Kent’s words, the Doc is the figure of weakness who “must get” to the other side of the hill and away from the beast, lines that reflect the irony that Kent cannot see that “the beast” lies inside him.

Simultaneously, the Doc promises that “we’ll always be taken care of, you and me” in the hopes that he can sweet talk Kent into going along with the cure. But Kent continues his narrative as he describes the Doc’s struggle to escape “as bullets ring out and torches flare in the sides of his eyes” (297). The simultaneous dialogues produce a jarring effect on the audience, as overlapping dialogue is a very rare event, since even the most “realistic” characters politely await their turns to speak—a very unrealistic convention. The final moments of *La Turista* also represent the dilemma of closure for a playwright who prefers not to end plots altogether yet already has in terms of the play’s chronology in the first act. When Kent leaps through the upstage wall, “leaving a cut-out silhouette of his body in the wall,” *La Turista* ends on a cartoonish exit that ironically resists the fate that awaits Shepard’s protagonist as already portrayed in the first act (297).

The cut-out silhouette borrows from the audience’s recognition of such a humorous and ambiguous exit from the likes of cartoons and comic books, and it resists but ultimately cannot escape the fact that *La Turista*’s plot has already ended. Kent does not die in the Civil War ontology of the second act, which would make for a more radical repetition of the pattern. Rather, Shepard’s ending provides what Charles Whiting rightly calls “not a theatre of resolutions, but of discoveries and new beginnings” (1990; 421). In Shepard’s first full-length play, he explores the possibilities of inverted chronology,

and while this can be read as a “new beginning” and “discovery,” the play resists a “cop-out” to convention by not forcing a resolution on its protagonists and audience. Kent and Salem, the two *turistas* in the play, ironically head to their deadly fate in another time and another place due to an immanent and inescapable existence within them that neither time nor setting can change. This “ending” thus does not send them down the road to “discoveries and new beginnings,” but instead posits the two protagonists right back where they were headed all along.

With an inverted, circular temporality, then, *La Turista* satisfies the formal need for an ending without providing a resolution. Having already shown the end of the play’s narrative, *La Turista* avoids what Shepard views as the “cop-out” of a resolution with an inverted conclusion that ends the play with his most vivid portrayal of the ironic resistance to fate’s immanence. In short, the characters resist the very conclusion that the audience knows already resolves the narrative and could provide a sense of completeness and closure. Kent runs away but can only delay the fate that we know awaits him, and his exit marks an “end” to the play—it ends and everyone can leave the theatre or finish the book—yet the ending does not close the narrative. The first act concludes the narrative, but Shepard circularly resists providing a resolution by ending the play with Kent’s ironic and cartoonish exit. Thus by ending the play with a scene that recalls the conclusion of the narrative, Shepard’s *La Turista* inverts chronology to resist closure by putting the conclusion at the middle rather than the end of the narrative.

Formally and thematically, Kent’s exit continues Shepard’s early portrayals of fate in a much more complex design than in Shepard’s early one-acts. Most significantly in terms of Shepard’s early development as a playwright, Shepard’s first full-length play

places the ironic resistance to completeness and closure in a much more theatrically and dramatically complex play than in previous efforts. For one, the monologues that battle for control of the stifling and often sparse stages of Shepard's early plays become one element in a much more complex stage in *La Turista*. Changes in setting involve more than throwing out fishing lines into the audience from the front of the stage as in *Chicago* with the aid of costuming, props, and doubled roles. In addition, *La Turista*'s competing monologues within this more complex theatrical setting invoke the "shooting energized images" that Charles Whiting's earlier quote summarizes.

In the play's ending, *La Turista* develops the portrayal of fate with an ironic turn that expands Shepard's metaphors for fate. Building on the basic model that begins with *The Rock Garden*, *La Turista* expands the short and specious progression to a climax that the ending undermines into two acts that complement that play's metaphor for fate's immanence. Ironically, Kent and Salem cannot see that in two separate times and places they represent the cancerous source of disease and decay, not the country doctor and his assistant nor the witch doctor and his son. Kent in particular hurls smug insults at both sets of characters and their homes in a reflection of how he smugly sees himself as superior to these two settings and their peoples. As the ending of the narrative and of the play suggest, however, Kent and Salem fail to see that their desire to escape from their surroundings actually represents the impossible desire to escape from themselves.

By contrast, the doctor and witch doctor see Kent and Salem for the self-destructiveness that they represent, and while the attempts to heal the couple appear antagonistic and threatening, those threats arise from Kent and Salem's complacent imposition on each setting. In essence, the *La Turista* summarizes the play's metaphor

for fate. The term refers to a form of chronic dysentery that speciously implicates the potentially dangerous and unsanitary conditions in Mexico. As the play's events show, though, the term really reveals the weakness within the two *turistas* who cannot survive in either "disadvantaged" setting. Therefore, when the pair try to escape from their torments, then, they follow the pattern of Shepard's other early protagonists in that their desire is to escape a fate they see as an imposition of "authority." The irony in the play also follows that of Shepard's early plays: the ironic turn at the play's end reveals *La Turista* to be a metaphor for the inescapability of fate that the characters mistake as an external imposition.

Also following the pattern of Shepard's other early play, *La Turista* represents a larger metaphor for American fate that warns against conforming to an modern American sense of superiority. At the heart of the two protagonists, especially in Kent, lies the smug sense of the superiority of their modern American identity. Kent's comments in particular about the boy only eating beans and rice and other comments reflect how Kent gives into the "joint stock company" (to reuse Emerson's phrase) of the American sentiment of superiority. The conformity to this cancerous attitude exists twofold—both in relation to other countries, especially those south of the border, and in relation to America's past, as in the Civil War-era South setting of the first act. Metaphorically, Kent's ironic blindness to this fact represents a lesson for the audience, which should heed the implied warning of its complex and ambiguous ending: everyone only exists as a *turista* in this world. Before judging the inferiority of other cultures and eras, the play suggests, each American should see his or her own role as an infectious imposition.



Otherwise, Americans conform to prejudice and bigotry, the most negative of American cultural institutions.

As a whole, *La Turista* represents the full realization of Shepard's resistance to completeness and closure and expresses Shepard's mistrust and aesthetic lack of interest in endings and the resolution that they conventionally provide. From *The Rock Garden*, Shepard's endings reflect a mistrust of resolution that affects completeness and closure in all of his work. In the early one-acts that culminate in *La Turista*, Shepard adopts the strategy of outright resistance to completing changes in characters and their fortunes and closing off his plays by showing the results of all pertinent causal elements. This strategy adapts to the basic linear or circular structure of the early one-acts by ending on an ironic note that is incongruent with the apparent progression of the play's story, and the strategy expands in *La Turista* to employ an inverted temporality and setting. At the aesthetic core of this resistance to completeness and closure is the irony of the endings, and while Shepard's approach is not new in drama, these early works recall the iconoclastic approach of past playwrights for whom irony is a strategy of resistance to completeness and closure.

But in the nascent body of work leading up to Shepard's first full-length play, the emphasis for Shepard centers on ironic endings that portray fate as an immanent part of each American, irrespective of society's dehumanizing role in American life. More specifically, the endings in these early works result from a structural and thematic struggle between the Off-Off Broadway aesthetic that demands truth, even if that truth lies in ambiguity, rather than the dramatic conventionality of resolution and its "neat little package." No one ending, no matter how universal or replete with thematic expression,

can ever truly end a subject, a fact at the basis of the young Shepard's quotes that de-emphasize the significance of the sense of resolution in conventional theatrical endings.

In response to this view of endings as, in Shepard's words, a "cop-out," the plays suggest that the American tradition of nonconformity may not resist fate's immanence, but it denies the imposition of external "authority." The endings of the short plays conclude cyclic and linear structures, and the resistance to completeness and closure in *The Rock Garden*, *Cowboys #2*, *Icarus's Mother*, *Chicago* and *Red Cross* denies any external "authority" over fate in a metaphoric and ironic lack of resolution in each ending. And in Shepard's first full-length work, *La Turista*, Shepard inverts a linear structure complete with inversions of time, setting, and doubled roles for a heightened effect of irony and a resistance to completeness and closure.

Even more to the point for the time in which the plays first appeared, during the growth of a budding Sixties counterculture that placed so much mistrust in the older generation's institutionalized answers, the plays' ambiguity provides a potential answer in the search for a new "truth." Shepard's endings metaphorically serve as the key textual moment to portray the ambiguity and irony of truth for their characters, and they then suggest how Americans must not "cop-out" and tackle the quest for truth individually and through nonconformity. That all Americans both great and small do not have the power to resist fate or not remains part of the myth and mystery of our existence, and in these early plays, Shepard's early plays metaphorically portray our existence as an ironic turn.

While nonconformity, the most important turn that Americans can take in their lives, cannot alter fate, the plays' own dramatic nonconformity to the conventions of the

theatre suggest that Americans do remain free from society's dehumanizing institutions. Instead, the only thing from which all Americans cannot escape remains fate's ironic immanence, which represents the one ambiguous "truth" metaphorically portrayed in these plays. Each play ends ambiguously because there are as many fates as there are Americans, and no one resolution can provide a universal truth for us all. Rather than search for external answers or blame fate on the imposition of authority, the plays suggest that no one can resist fate but all Americans can resist the "cop-out" of social conventions if they simply do not conform to them.

## Chapter 2: There's No Place Like "Home": American Identity in Shepard's Rock Plays

After *La Turista*, Shepard's plays introduce a new set of trajectories that explore musical theatre. Known collectively as the rock plays, this period begins with *Melodrama Play* (1967), *Forensic & the Navigators* (1967), *The Unseen Hand* (1969), and *Operation Sidewinder* (1970). These four plays initiate Shepard's exploration of the musical genre and the theme of a home-centered American identity that culminates in *The Mad Dog Blues* (1971), *Cowboy Mouth* (1971), *Back Bog Beast Bait* (1971), *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Angel City* (1976), and *Suicide in Bb* (1976). Until the end of each play, music explains setting changes, characters' feelings, and off-stage events to the audience. The plays' endings, however, do not contain the conventional finale's celebration of the full closure of a happy ending or the lamentation of a sad ending's full closure while adding nothing to advance the plot. To subvert the finale's conventions, Shepard's rock plays continue the action and leave it incomplete when the song ends and the curtain falls, thereby providing a sense of progression rather than of closure. The sense of progression occurs after the characters' realization that only an internal sense of "home" can complete their identities and provide a sense of closure. Thus the characters spend each play journeying for external identities that only weaken the connection between themselves and home, a connection that remains incomplete when the stage lights fade. Ultimately, the rock plays' strategy for completeness and closure employs music, the soundtrack of America's youth to "find themselves," to portray any source of

American identity other than an internal connection to a sense of “home” as a cop-out doomed to failure.

*Melodrama Play* (1967) marks Shepard’s initial foray into musical theatre and, in essence, is a drama about a melody, a tune entitled “Prisoners, Get Up out of Your Homemade Beds” that the protagonist, Duke Durgens, steals from his brother Drake in exchange for a fleeting moment of stardom. In the play’s final moments, Duke’s manager Lloyd appropriates Duke’s identity to further profit from Duke, who is unable to follow up his success with a tune he has written himself. Ironically, the song about prison that brings a brief bit of stardom to Duke ultimately becomes the prison of his identity as Peter steadfastly guards the two brothers and their buddy Cisco. Reflecting how the song subsumes the identities of all the musicians, Duke, Drake, and Cisco exchange names and identities in an effort to compose a new song and continue “Duke’s” career.

When read in terms of identity and the modern recording industry, Duke cops-out his identity for the mass production of a record that demands a new “Duke” even if Duke Durgens never wrote the song and cannot follow up its success. Describing the connections among mass art, mass production, and identity in *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*, Theodore Gracyk notes how “mass art” refers to popular art that “exists within a framework of modern mass industrial production and is aimed at a far-flung audience” (19). As a result, mass art’s production and distribution allow for a technologically created sense of an artistic community, as opposed to a geographically defined community from which popular music arises (20)<sup>1</sup>. Duke’s

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<sup>1</sup> Gracyk explains the difference between popular music and mass art with the example, “A concert by the Rolling Stones is not mass art, while their appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and in their many videos are mass art” because the concert is only an individual performance of popular music and not a mass-

identity, then, becomes part of a produced form of mass art, appearing as the name of the artist on the record “Prisoners, Get Up out of Your Homemade Beds.” Duke’s appearances, such as the one scheduled for that night in Phoenix, to support sales of the single represent performances of popular music. No mention is made in the play of Duke’s appearing in a mass art market like a national television show and the “interview” with Duke is on the radio so that mass audiences still do not know who the “real” Duke is. Therefore, another singer can take the identity of Duke Durgens and sing the song, just as Cisco does earlier in the play.

In the first Shepard “finale,” “Prisoners” blasts from a radio after Lloyd, unbeknownst to the other characters, absconds with Duke’s identity and replaces it with an unseen “Duke.” The song plays after an interview with the very sociologist, Daniel Damon, whose discarded letter to Duke first causes Dana’s fears of stealing Duke’s identity. Further underscoring the irony of Duke’s lost identity, the song’s lyrics now refer to all three “Dukes” who lie either bludgeoned by Peter or in an awake but equally imprisoned state. “Well early one night,” the lyrics narrate the story of anonymous prisoners, “you got so very uptight / And you said this sleepin’ it just ain’t right / But there was nothin’ at all that you could do / ‘Cause your eyes stayed shut with your homemade glue.”

Yet what really is in the dark for the prisoners in the song and on stage is their sense of identity. “But you couldn’t hear your own voice speak,” the song states, “And ya couldn’t walk ‘cause your legs was too weak / So ya lay in bed cryin’ to yourself / And your life just sat there hanging on the shelf” (143). For Duke Durgens, life hangs on

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produced and distributed work. If the concert were to be mass-produced and distributed on album, film, or video, then it would become mass art (23).

the shelves of record stores while he lies on the floor with his identity stolen for the sake of mass art and profits. The final lyrics to the songs particularly underscore the fate of all three “Dukes” who have lost their chance at fame and their very identities. “And you just lay in bed without no game,” Duke’s recorded voice sings ironically to Duke, Drake, and Cisco, “And you just lay there sleepin’ without no fame / But when you do awaken from your deep sleep / The bed will disappear and you won’t even weep, / You’ll walk right outside with no name, / You’ll go right outside from where you came” (144).

Suggesting that Duke, Cisco, Drake, and Peter will remain prisoners and unable even to “walk right outside with no name,” the play’s ending continues the action after the finale to an ominous yet incomplete situation for the four. Duke remains on the floor as Drake paces in anticipation, but all that awaits him is the menacing Peter who slams the door to the room shut and locks all of them inside the “prison” again. With the same club in hand that bludgeoned Duke and Cisco, Peter stands over Drake, his apparent next prey. Just when Peter raises the club to strike, though, a loud knock on the door halts the assault. Perhaps the knock comes from the men whom Lloyd hires to resolve the situation violently, including dealing with the obstinate Peter, making him just as much a prisoner of the play’s events as the others. Precisely when a resolution appears imminent due to the arrival of those outside the room, however, the action remains frozen in this moment of uncertainty when the stage lights go to black and end the play.

A conventional finale, on the other hand, signals the closing moment on a world that has been restored to a happy equilibrium by the story’s end, a thematic and formal trope that *Melodrama Play* does not follow. When discussing the structural and thematic purpose of the finale in the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, which laid the groundwork

for the modern musical, Gayden Wren summarizes the musical finale as the crowning moment of a balanced and complete structure:

In every case, the ending is neatly tied up with a final laugh, bringing the story line in sync with the thematic narrative. Finally, an upbeat and almost content-free finale ends the opera on a joyful note. It celebrates a new equilibrium, similar to the opening scene but clearly more stable. The Act 2 curtain falls on a world that has been put through the wringer but is finally at peace with itself. (116-117)

While *Melodrama Play* only contains one act, the ending still contains a “finale,” albeit one that fails to meet these criteria in both form and theme. Rather than providing a “content-free” exposition of the characters’ celebration of “a new equilibrium,” the finale continues the action of the play until the stage lights fade to black. Far from “being at peace with itself,” the world of the play falls into further chaos after the finale, ending with the characters’ need to escape their prison and reconnect with “where they came from,” to paraphrase the finale. Only there, the ending suggests, can the characters also reconnect with their identities and escape the mass-produced “Duke Durgens.”

The equating of identity with a journey home in *Melodrama Play* places the narrative in a literary tradition that begins with the classics and continues in modern literature. In a study that compares the classics to Hollywood cinema, Susan Mackey-Kallis’s *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film* traces the origins of identity and home to Odysseus’s journeys after the Trojan War. Borrowing from Charles Taylor’s essay, “The Obstacles to Odysseus’s Return Home,” Mackey-Kallis



argues that all of Odysseus's ultimately successful battles with beasts and temptations all arise from the protagonist's desire to preserve his identity (38)<sup>2</sup>. So far from home, Odysseus's only has his words and actions to "preserve his identity," as he is a man without a home that provided his identity, much like, Mackey-Kallis argues, the characters in *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Like Homer's *The Odyssey*, the title of Shepard's play also suggests mobility, and in particular, a mobility that searches for a home that can confirm identity like *Life*'s George Bailey and *Oz*'s Dorothy.

Such a recognition marks a contrast between American texts and texts from the classical tradition in which Odysseus, for example, knows all along that his home's reaffirmation of his identity provides the impetus for his entire journey. The ability to return home upon a character's realization that a connection rather than a separation from home is essential to identity has a long history that Paul Nathanson's *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America* thoroughly examines. In an eclectic study that combines religion, myth, history, and literature for a close reading of *Oz* alongside works such as *Gone with the Wind* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, Nathanson argues that these works all share the portrayal of the land and the sense of home that it provides. American characters, Nathanson observes, journey to forge new identities in new places that they ultimately reject after they realize that home provides rather than stifles identity, and they then return home to reconnect with it and their identities (145).

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<sup>2</sup> For a very informative and condensed literary and cultural history of identity and home, see John Durham Peters's "Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora" in *Home, Exile, Homeland* (1999), edited by Hamid Naficy. Here Durham traces the omnipresent theme of "discontinuous" identity due to the displacement from a physical and internal sense of "home," which he argues is the central theme of Western thought and culture from the classics through postmodernism (22).

Following in this tradition, music throughout *Melodrama Play* thematically underscores the lost connection between Duke Durgens and his home-centered identity, most significantly the untitled opening number and the two Band Songs. Singing a cappella to the audience, Duke opens the play with advice about keeping true to oneself that he ironically does not follow. “You shouldn’t say out loud what we already know,” Duke espouses. “You should say it to yourself / You should play it by yourself / You should keep it in your mouth / You should hold it in your throat / Even if you bloat / Even if you get to the point where you burst” (110). Had Duke only kept Drake’s song to himself, and perhaps if Drake had done the same, then Duke would not be in the play’s predicament where he tries to follow up the hit song as the mass-produced “Duke Durgens.”

Band Song #1 connects the theme of keeping true to oneself to the irony of trying to go too far from one’s roots, making the connection between a separation from home and prison. With lyrics again in the second person to address Duke but sung to the audience to include it in the chronicle of the boy who “walked alone and grew to hate / All the people in your hometown / All the people who brought you down” (121). Eventually, the lyrics reveal, the only one to bring down “you” is yourself, and the only one who can “accompany you,” a dual reference to musical accompaniment and human companionship, is the same neighbor’s kid. “And you know where he’s at,” the lyrics ironically state, referring to the same hometown from which the boy journeys in search of a new identity. As for that new identity, it only leads to a prison of identity, much like it has become for Duke: “Sing Sing or Alcatraz or / The county zoo / It’s no good for you, boy / It’s not good for you” (122).

Even more poignantly directed at Duke's predicament towards the end of the play, Band Song #2 chides Duke for trading his identity for a song that is not even his and that others can equally create. "So now that you're flat on the ground," the song reminds Duke, "All of your friends create the sound" (131). Ending on an even sterner note than Song #1, Song #2 ends by asking Duke, "And who is around who can save you from you, / Who is around who can save you from you?" (132). The answer, the play's ending reveals, is no one now that "Duke Durgens" exists only on the record shelf as a potentially profitable piece of mass art.

Formally and thematically, the songs in the play fulfill the role that David Grote defines in *Staging the Musical* as the primary one for songs in a musical. "As a general rule," Grote notes, "dialogue drives the action and music provides the exposition" (39). And thus because songs provide information about events that occur offstage, background information about settings and characters, or explain characters' feelings, they "stop the action of the play [...] but they do little to 'advance' the show" (40). In order to make the transition from dialogue-driven action to expository singing smooth, songs rarely occur in the middle of a scene.

Rather, as Grote explains, playwrights use the fact that songs rarely require responses from another character, which would drive the action of a scene, to place songs in two places in a scene where they can do the most good at exposition. This is either at the beginning of a scene, where characters establish the mood and perhaps introduce a new setting, or at the end of a scene, where either the fading stage lights or falling curtain stops the scene immediately after a song's exposition (40). While the setting does not change in the one-act *Melodrama Play*, all of the songs follow the musical's convention

of providing information that reveals characters' thoughts and feelings, or they underscore the theme of identity disconnected from a sense of home.

The play's finale, however, marks the first of Shepard's subversion of musical convention that resist completeness and closure to underscore that any other basis for American identity other than an internal sense of "home" is a doomed cop-out. What becomes of the discarded foursome in their "prison" remains incomplete, suggesting that any possibility of closure can only occur with a progression of the play's action after the stage goes dark. None of the characters on stage can escape the mass marketing of Duke's identity and will remain "just hangin' on a shelf." All four of the characters, including Lloyd's enforcer Peter, become prisoners of an identity constructed to achieve mass success in the mass produced and marketed genre of rock 'n' roll.

On a larger thematic level, the subversive finale that suggests a progression of the play's action as a result of copping-out their true identities for mass art also suggests that each American's identity can either be free or imprisoned in the same way. For the sake of the continued mass art of "Duke Durgens," which ultimately can only profit the industry insider Lloyd, all of the other characters can only look to themselves and the "homemade beds." The little room that is now a prison is where the four lie or will soon lie, bereft of identity and even, most likely, escape from the prison. Thus when the audience walks right outside and goes right outside from where it came, to paraphrase the last lines of the finale, the choice remains open for them even as it remains incomplete in the darkness on stage. As Band Song #2 asks, "Who can save you from you?" (132). Every American can save himself or herself, *Melodrama Play* ultimately answers, by not copping-out our identities into Alcatrazes for mass art's promise of fame and fortune.

*Forensic & the Navigators* (1967) adds the connection between identity and a physical sense of a “home” to *Melodrama Play*’s thematic elements. With billowing smoke and a pounding rhythm, *Forensic & the Navigators*’s ending builds towards the apparent enactment of Forensic and Emmet’s plan to bomb a camp after they relocate their own bombs. Standing in the way of the plan, however, are two exterminators who want to gas their hideout. To keep their plans alive, Emmet and Forensic kidnap the 1<sup>st</sup> Exterminator and offer Oolan to him in exchange for information about the camp while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator leaves to call the home office. Thus the narrative builds towards a final confrontation between the two groups, both of which desire the control of what they can only describe as a “dingy” room (175).

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator’s final lines in the play that he delivers immediately after talking to the home office provide an answer as to why this character in particular places so much value on the dingy room—it provides a sense of “home.” He rejects the idea of leaving the room “in my fancy new uniform” and finally admits, “There’s nothing here to exterminate.” Rather, no guns exist in the house at all because it is merely “a bunch of friends not knowing what else to do.” Despite this blandness, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator fiercely rejects the idea of picking up a gun and joining Forensic. “Well, I’m not going to do that, Forensic,” he claims. “I’m not going out there ever again. I’m staying right here!” (175). He has found a sense of self in this “home” and refuses to leave.

In addition, the “dingy” home also provides a sense of identity for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator. Unlike the other characters, the two Exterminators have generic names because their task subsumes their identities and threatens to do the same to the other characters. In a mirroring of the two pairs of partners, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator refers to the

1<sup>st</sup> as Forensic, which is the same name as Emmet's partner, suggesting that all of their identities have become interchangeable, much like Duke, Drake, and Cisco in *Melodrama Play*. Expressing the quest for a sense of identity, the very names of the characters that make up the play's title suggest a quest to find a defensible sense of identity. That is, the name "Forensic" refers to the evidence needed for debate, particularly in reference to identity, as in forensic science, while the name "Navigators" refers to the attempt to steer a course for such an identity. By contrast, only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator's desperate stand to remain in the room, stop the violence, and refuse to put on his uniform and continue his role in the violent movement that subsumes his identity does a character show that he has found an internal sense of identity.

At the time Shepard wrote *Forensic & the Navigators* and the other early rock plays, millions of young Americans took their own journeys from their homes to flock to various centers of counter-cultural revolution. Fueled by media-saturated images touting the Summer of Love in 1967, the youth of America questioned the society their parents and previous generations had created, and young people rejected that world and sought to create a new one in their own, evolving image. Sociologist Wini Breines's "The New Left and the Student Movement" in Alexander Bloom's collection *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now* (2001) glowingly refers to the young people who "created a youth culture that rejected conformity, materialism, war, delayed gratification, and destruction of the earth." "Asking who they were and who they wanted to be," Breines explains, "[young people] embarked on a journey of deprogramming themselves from the mainstream" values and ideals of their parents' roots (34).

The massive numbers of young people making that “journey,” however, also became the targets for exploitation by the mainstream media and the drug world, both of which quickly sought to profit from the youth movement. David Farber wryly points out in his *The Age of Great Dreams* (1994) that such a rejection of conformity was already mainstream in 1967 when *Time* made the hippies a cover story and Levi-Strauss actively and successfully courted San Francisco’s Jefferson Airplane to promote a line of white jeans (185). Equally seeking to capitalize on the naïve runaways and youth in general seeking to “deprogram” themselves far away from home, drug dealers and other swindlers also reaped the profits of the counterculture. As Farber grimly describes San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury District, the cultural Mecca of the Summer of Love, the naïve youth searching for a place to belong transformed the area into a place where a darker world soon took control:

Surrounded by young people extolling the virtue of going “further” and unfettered by any authority, these new arrivals got loaded on anything pushed their way. Hard-hearted, violent men—most infamously Charles Manson—came to prey on the weak and ignorant. Dope selling became a big business and neighborhood dealers began to be muscled out by career criminals and motorcycle clubs like the Hell’s Angels. (186)

While such a media- and criminal-fueled frenzy seized what were once isolated pockets of counterculture truly outside the mainstream, those who already resided and made those pockets very often resented such an unwelcome intrusion of middle-class kids and career criminals. Shepard, who along with the other artists in the Off-Off Broadway

Theatre had made Manhattan's lower East side into a counterculture "home" of their own, felt such resentment. Recalling the period years later in *Rolling Stone*, which eventually evolved from a newspaper peddled on the streets of San Francisco to a slick, big-business magazine in New York, Shepard looks unfondly at the period. "When this influx of essentially white middle-class kids hit the streets," Shepard recalls, all of those who "were really part of the scene" had "a great animosity towards these flip-outs running around the lower East side." The results, much like in San Francisco and elsewhere, was "this upsurge of violence and weirdness, and everyone started carrying guns and knives" (34).

For Shepard, the "flip-outs" invading and in essence ruining organically created "scenes" search for a sense of identity and "home" that can only come from an inner change. Shepard's biographer Don Shewey speculates that the source of these ideas was the writings of the Russian spiritualist G. I. Gurdjieff, who like William Blake before him espoused spiritual growth through inner growth at the expense of the complete illusion that the exterior world represents (67). Regardless of the source, Shewey correctly reads Shepard's plays of this period as a negative portrayal of "changing the world" through involvement in any movement or belief simply for the sake of a sense of belonging. Thus "despite the best efforts of the right or the left," Shewey summarizes the theme of these plays, "the young or the old, the square or the hip," attempting to change the external world remains a pointless struggle. "Change," Shewey concludes, "is only possible from within" (67).

Likewise, Shepard's characters in the rock plays journey in vain in a variation of the American theme of identity and "home." Searching for answers in a cultural



movement or a symbol, they distance themselves from their inner selves on a quest for the external that only represents a cop-out from the maturation needed before they can find the inner connection between self and “home.” And while that “home” may not come from a physical place such as the family farm in Kansas, the rock plays present a pattern of characters’ realizing the connection after a process of maturation, albeit it without a sense of completeness and closure. Specifically, when the characters’ searches for an external sense of identity journey provides an understanding that a distance from “home” represents a distance from identity, making the connection still unfulfilled when each play ends.

Establishing this pattern in the rock plays, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator makes the connection between himself and an inner sense of “home” too late to change the progression of events in *Forensic & the Navigators*. As a result, the play ends with a completely bare stage with no sign of any of the characters, who continue their cop-out to an external search for identity. As for what has become of the characters and the battle to exterminate the place and the plans to relocate the still unknown operation, the play provides no definite answers. Instead, it suggests that the characters’ external roles that subsume their identities and break the connection their identities and a sense of “home” will continue and not allow them to reestablish the connection and achieve closure.

Complementing the ending’s emphasis on progression and incompleteness due to a disconnection from home and the identity it provides, music, the soundtrack of the throngs of youth sought to “deprogram” themselves, speciously underscores all five

characters' last stand as they refuse to leave the stage<sup>3</sup>. Despite the characters' claims about how the smoke can only harm mice, all the characters and even the furnishings vanish with the smoke to the accompaniment of a "mounting rhythm" (175). This final tableau of a bare stage reveals the home space where the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator so desperately wants to remain is now gone without a trace upon the characters' exit because any connection made with the room as a source of home and identity has now been broken and lost. Wherever the characters have fled, the ending suggests, any trace of their identities and very existence is as ephemeral as the smoke floating through the auditorium. They are, the ending suggests, "mice" and not "men" (and "women") after all.

In addition, the turn in the play's ending employs music to subvert the characters' mistakenly looking to flight as salvation throughout the play. The opening number's pair of four-line verses that begin with "We gonna be born again" and "We gonna be saved tonight" serves as an overture that sets a tone and general mood at the opening of the play and suggests a connection between salvation and an outside savior (157). During the action of the play, *Forensic*'s only other song, Ray Stevens's "Ahab the Arab," underscores the connection between happiness and flight that begins in the overture. The song paints a nice picture of the opulence surrounding Ahab, "the sheik of the burning sands, / He had emeralds and rubies just drippin' offa' him and a ring on every finger of his hand," Oolan sings to the audience (161). But despite such comforts, Ahab abandons them and heads "to the Sultan's tent / Where he would secretly make love to Fatima of the seventh veil." Only after Ahab saw Fatima in the last verse, "Layin' on a zebra rug. /

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<sup>3</sup> All of the studies cited in this chapter as well as Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin's *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (2000), invariably confirm Wini Breimes's succinct statement, "The American

With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,” does Ahab achieve happiness with a comedic “Ho-ho” to end the song and suggest the amorous delights that Ahab can only find after journeying away from home across those “burning sands” (162).

The play’s espousal of flight also represents a cop-out to a movement that denies an internal sense of identity, completeness, or closure. While the pounding rhythm complements the theme of a return to an itinerant existence without any internal sense of identity, the characters abandon the promise of “home” that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator realizes and leaves both that “home” and the characters’ identities effaced in drums and smoke. The real threat, however, does not arise from the smoke meant for mice but from the disconnection between the characters and an internal sense of “home” that can truly provide a complete sense of identity. Only the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator learns the real lesson of the connection between home and identity, but he does so too late to make any roots in his new “home.” As a result, that “home” becomes as blank as the silence after the rhythm—but not the play’s action—ends because the journey as an ambiguous member of a futile movement continues.

Ultimately, *Forensic & the Navigators*’s ending musically frames Shepard’s larger critique of coping-out American identity and theatrically extends the conventional lesson learned too late by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator to the American audience. As they leave the auditorium and head “home,” the ending asks, can they learn its value and return to its source of identity? For Shepard’s characters, that progression towards a sense of “home” and identity remains incomplete at the end of *Forensic*, which establishes the pattern of a lack of closure that music underscores. While some characters do realize the inner connection between “home” and identity, as is the case with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator, the

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youth movement was accompanied and constituted by popular music” (34).

play denies the completion of the final return home found in other American works, such as *Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*, the ultimate message, however remains the same. That is, the play rejects any other basis for American identity other than an internal one, and the progression homeward extends to the audience and cannot be complete unless they, too, make the internal connection between “home” and identity.

In the ending of Shepard’s next play, *The Unseen Hand* (1969), Sycamore’s same internal connection as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator’s physically transforms Sycamore to express the connection between him and his newfound “home” of Azusa, Arizona, “Everything from A to Z in the USA.” With the threats from Nogoland and the Kid over, Willie and the Morphan gang, who have time traveled from the old West to take part in the battle outside of Azusa, do not celebrate their victory. Rather, the events provide Willie with the option not left to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator—staying in his newfound “home” and leaving behind his journeys as a member of the gang. As for the Morphan gang, all of them but Blue find themselves marooned in an unknown time and place. Cisco responds to his new setting by sharing Blue’s wanderlust, and the two head out.

Much like the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator’s lines declare at the end of *Forensic & the Navigators*, however, Sycamore desires to “fit right into the scheme of things” by settling down in Azusa, (31). Without the walk off into the sunset after an adventure in a moment of closure that recalls a Western, the gang’s exit continues their adventures after the “invasion” for which the *Unseen Hand* reunites the Morphan gang only to have the reunion fizzle before it really begins. Even the Kid’s frozen body provides no sense of completeness or closure because his fate only represents a stepping stone on which Blue,

Willie, and Cisco progress to the unknown future and Sycamore transforms into his new identity now that he has found a sense of “home” in Azusa.

Accompanied by a lone guitar, Sycamore performs *The Unseen Hand*’s closing music to celebrate his assumption of Blue’s role in the new “home” of Azusa, Arizona. To begin the transformation from long-dead outlaw to roadside squatter, Sycamore stares at the frozen Kid and uses his own brainpower to age the Kid, turning him into an old man. Now apparently “recharged” by the absorption of the Kid’s youth, Sycamore heads for the old Chevy and takes Blue’s place at the start of the play by talking to an imaginary cabby. Now content with assuming Blue’s identity, Sycamore ends the play by telling the imaginary cabby that he has learned not to let the outlaw life of the Morphan gang subsume his identity because it can never change the world, no matter how many laws it breaks and adventures it has. Sycamore declares, “There comes a time to let things by,” while sitting in a taxicab, conventionally the classic symbol of American mobility. Sycamore’s cab, however, sits as immobile in a final resting place as its occupant while Sycamore explains his newfound inner connection and rejection of a transient existence. “Just let ‘em go by. Let the world alone. It’ll take care of itself. Just let it be” (32).

Much more important, the lines suggest, is the internal sense of identity he has found but that Blue rejects, which leaves Blue and the gang searching externally for answers that only Sycamore finds internally. Blue leaves Azusa, where he already “fits in the scheme of things,” but such a move ignores the internal connection between identity and “home.” For all the lines about Azusa’s being “Everything from A to Z in the USA,” Azusa only appears as a roadside sign on the lone highway on which a loop of headlights “travels” throughout the play. “Home” and identity, then, do not exist in the

play as an external place where the characters can find a sense of completeness and closure unless the characters complete a change that connects them with an internal sense of “home” and identity.

In a musical underscoring the ending’s emphasis on finding an internal sense of identity and maintaining the internal connection between self and “home,” the guitar chords that accompany Sycamore’s lines meander with no specific direction. Not following a set “progression,” the term in rock music parlance for the pattern of chords that make up a song’s beginning, middle, and end, the chords reflect the hopeless meandering of the Morphan gang. By contrast, Sycamore remains content “to let things by” just as the traffic on the nearby highway passes by him. Sycamore’s words may meander, but he alone learns to end the progression towards an external sense of “self” because he is now connected to his adopted “home” and identity.

Following the pattern in *Forensic & the Navigator*, the music throughout *The Unseen Hand* complements the play’s specious progression towards resolution. The play’s opening contains a musical teaser in which a tipsy Blue pulls out an old guitar but never plays a note, suggesting that the moment is not right and hinting a connection between music and a moment of significance. The first “music” in the play furthers this connection when Cisco and Blue unknowingly build Sycamore Morphan’s return from the past with a chorus of the old Bill Haley tune “Rock Around the Clock.” The lyrics in the chorus express the joy of dancing and playing on a night that they wish could go on forever, ironically underscoring how the two characters continue their “rocking” at the play’s end when they wander off stage no more “home” than in the play’s beginning. “We’re gonna rock around the clock tonight,” Cisco and Blue sing, unaware of the larger,

impending meaning of the lyrics for them. “We're gonna rock, rock, rock / 'till broad daylight / We're gonna rock around the clock tonight” (Haley).

The “home” that Sycamore finds and the other gang members abandon, however, already has a vociferous and loyal resident in the Kid for whom music also underscores the irony of his external, false connection to a sense of “home.” Gun in hand and prepared to defend Azusa, the Kid rants in his monologue about the Americana of his hometown while “the old ‘C’ ‘A’ ‘F’ ‘G’ rock and-roll chords are played” and he steadfastly declares, “I love Azusa!”(26). Complementing this parody of the morale-building speech that precedes any all-American confrontation like a battle or the big game, the chords underscore the swelling patriotism in the Kid and Willie’s waiting for the right moment to break free from the control of the Unseen Hand. Yet the words ring hollow because the Kid’s inspiration for Azusa is for a “home” in which he is merely the target of cruel jocks, the same jocks for whom he is a cheerleader. Such a false, external sense of “home” only leads to self-destruction, as the progression of chords and the play’s action lead to the Kid’s annihilation in the name of the beloved Azusa.

As a whole, *The Unseen Hand* further develops the elements in *Forensic & the Navigators* that portray American identity as an internal sense of “home” not be found in giving identity to a movement like the Morphan gang or a symbol like Azusa. In *Forensic*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator’s final monologue introduces the theme of an internal connection between a sense of “home” and identity, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator shares the same, vanishing fate as the play’s other characters. *The Unseen Hand*, however, shows the contrast between the benefits of just such a connection, particularly a sense of completeness and closure for Sycamore and the self-destruction that the Kid faces and the

Morphan gang's unending meandering that results from allowing a movement's agenda to subsume identity. Both of these approaches, the play ultimately suggests, can never create a positive, inner change because they make a false connection to an external sense of identity in a world that only changes characters for the worse. As Sycamore's closing lines declare, "Let the world alone," because America cannot change simply because Americans choose to surrender to the "unseen hand" of a collective identity that only uses people to suit its purposes. Instead, the only change that matters in the play comes from the internal "hand" of each American.

Shepard's next play expands the contrast between an external and internal sense of "home" into a full-length musical. In the final scene of *Operation Sidewinder* (1970), events explode into a fiery pitch when Mickey begins chanting Shepard's first "finale": an expanding spectacle of dancing snake priests, Indian and white worshippers, and the invading Troops that ends the play with a suggestion of progression rather than closure. The scene builds toward a confrontation between Mickey and his Indian friends as three Tactical Troops surround them for trespassing on government property. The irony of the Troops' claim is that the military might of the American government took away this very land from the Indians and only seeks to retake the land because of a bureaucratic misreading of the "sidewinder" as the CIA's missing computer.

But the irony remains lost on the Troops, and they continue their strong-arm jargon by threatening Mickey, in a scene that adds the defense of a homeland and its holiest resident to the rock plays' pattern of characters' defending their "homes" and the identities they provide. "You wanna' get run in for resisting arrest, too?" The Third Tactical Troop asks Mickey. "We're not playing games with you here punks!" (253).



Mickey responds to this threat by beginning the chant “Wunti Hayano Diwitia,” with which all the Indians, the Young Man, and Honey join. After one final warning from 3<sup>rd</sup> Desert Tactical Troop, the Troops fire on the Indians and Mickey as the chant continues and the bullets inexplicably do not harm them, symbolizing how eliminating them cannot end the struggle for Indian land and identity.

In addition to this chant-filled confrontation, the sidewinder’s body separates from its head, the stage lights go from pitch black to bright blue while wind blows and smoke comes from upstage and the proscenium arch. This breaking down of the fourth wall with smoke continues with the ever-brighter lighting, which continues fading out and up until everyone but the Desert Tactical Troops occupy the stage. Perhaps the Indians, Mickey, the Young Man, and Honey are offstage as the chanting continues, and perhaps they are in the crowd, or elsewhere. The ending never makes this clear, however, as the play ends with the lights so bright that the Troops shield their eyes from them—the audience might, too—and the chanting somehow grows louder before one final blackout that ends the play.

By musically underscoring the progression of the struggle for the Indians’ land off an abandoned stage, *Operation Sidewinder* expands *Forensic*’s ending with its empty stage into the first of Shepard’s “finales.” After the chanting stops, the lights remain glaring at the audience while the unseen chanting grows until the lights finally fade, which reflects the problems concerning the government’s usurpation of Indian land. While the characters may protest and confound the Troops, apparently resulting in their leaving the land that Mickey and his cohorts refuse to leave, the issues of the land and the fates of the characters remain in doubt when the play ends. With no resolution to the

play's central conflict, the audience hears the chanting from an unknown location while the Troops' disappearance goes unexplained. Perhaps the Troops flee the stage in defeat, or they continue to hunt down Mickey and the Indians, but the audience will never know as the stage lights slowly fade.

Other than in the final scene, songs in *Operation Sidewinder* follow the structural convention in musicals of placing songs either at the beginning or end of a scene and the thematic convention of songs' providing exposition for the audience. Particularly, the songs thematically underscore on the one hand a false, external sense of identity that characters seek through their government-dependent roles. The lyrics of Steve Weber's "Generalonly," for example, repeat the lines "A General am I an a General only / Generally I'm generally lonely" (208). Likewise, the more vulgar lines of Peter Stampfel, Tulli Kupferburg, and Antonia's "CIA Man" repeat the one-line chorus of "Fuckin A Man CIA Man" (243), in a scathingly humorous portrayal of characters who only see themselves in their external, government-dictated roles.

On the other hand, songs in *Operation Sidewinder* express the characters' contrasting senses of identity, an internal identity based on a "home" and an external one based on following the "movement" the government wishes, speciously building toward a resolution of the conflict. The first verse of Robin Remaily's "Euphoria," containing the lines, "Ma's out here switchin' in the kitchen / And dad's in the living room grousin' and a bitchin' / And I'm out here kicking the gong for Euphoria," may not describe the perfect home, but the lines describe the home as the starting point for an internal sense of euphoria (216). Directly stressing the importance of an internal sense of identity and its merits as the only way to unite people, Peter Stampfel and Antonia's chorus to "Synergy"

invites the audience to “Come along, sing with me a song of synergy / Find that peace in your soul / We’re all one and heaven is our goal” (220).

Yet when the play’s finale provides a sense of progression rather than completeness and closure, *Operation Sidewinder* continues the rock plays’ thematic focus on the American need for an internal sense of identity centered on a “home” that contemporary America sorely lacks. The play’s conflict will continue because the government agents will continue to prevent the Indians from a permanent connection to their home and thus their identity. Furthermore, the play suggests that seeing identity only in terms of a movement such as a role within government blinds Americans from the internal connection to their identities and stifles the abilities of other Americans to make it. Therefore, the finale’s conventional, celebratory tone subverts a finale’s conventional function as a content-free signal of closure to suggest that America cannot find a sense of “euphoria” until every American avoids the cop-out to a movement’s stifling external identity and finds an internal one based on a sense of “home.”

*The Mad Dog Blues, A Two-Act Adventure Show* (1971) develops the rock plays’ theme of an American identity based on a sense of “home” into a full-blown rock ‘n’ roll assault on the American star system. As Elizabeth Proctor rightly summarizes the plot, “From beginning to end, the play is about the need to establish a home base and a point of reference,” and the characters only realize this need after their epic journey takes them so far from their individual “home bases” (46). To express the lack of a “home base,” the play’s setting remains a blank stage throughout the play, extending the thematic staging of the first two rock plays and framing the entire narrative in terms of a misguided search for and external sense of “home” and identity.

*The Mad Dog Blues*'s characters end their journey in search of an external identity with the realization that identity begins and ends with a sense of "home." In the last lines of the play, Mae's words reflect the sense of inner emptiness that remains unsearched because the characters have spent all of their time in a pointless quest for a worthless "treasure." Reflecting how the journey has only benefited the characters as an opening of the connections between themselves and a sense of "home," the search around the "world" results in finding not bags of gold but of empty bottle caps. Open up your search to enjoy what is on the inside, the "prize" suggests, just like opening a bottle of soda—that all American beverage of choice. "Just like the old days," Mae claims. "Just like the new days! Just like any old day! Let's do it, Jesse! Let's go on home! Back where we belong!" (300).

With a carefree dismissal of the play's action, Jesse and Mae begin singing "Home," and the other characters quickly join in the finale's celebration of their new journey home, a marked contrast from the content-free conventional finale that celebrates a moment of closure. The finale underscores this important and still progressing journey. Rather than taking place after the completion of the play's action, the song begins after the characters crash the bottle caps on the floor, an act that signals the continuation of their search rather than a moment of closure. The characters still have a journey for a sense of "home" ahead of them, and to get everyone in the spirit, Mae spurs on the group.

Subverting the finale's conventional celebration of inaction, the lyrics of "Home" celebrate movement towards a "home" that only begins after the song ends. Emphasizing the unknown journey that lies ahead, the first two verses begin with "Hitchin' on the Rio Bravo" and "I'll chance every hand that you deal," both of which suggest the progression

of events without looking back on the unimportant adventure for treasure. The last verse in particular underscores this theme of progress rather than signals any moment of closure that the adventure could provide. "Ride me in a silver airplane," the characters sing in celebration of their journey in progress. "Ride me in a passenger train / Move me against the grain / Move me / Home / Home," the finale ends, and the characters do not care how they return home as long as they subvert the "progress" they have made in their adventure with a new one toward home (301).

Throughout the play, music underscores this lost connection to "home" for the journey in search of a "star" a cop-out to an external sense of identity that holds nothing but loss and despair for all who follow it. In "Jungen Mensch," the opening song sung by Marlene Dietrich, the tune combines the themes of searching for an illusory star and the resulting isolation as the search's only reward. Perhaps singing about Kosmo but in words that sound much more universal, Dietrich sings of "Silly boys just young men following a star," which ends with the telling lines, "And loneliness comes like a dart / There's nothing to find till you find your heart" (151-52).

Despite this early warning, all of the characters travel around the world on their elusive search for their "star" of gold, albeit on a blank stage that reflects the emptiness of their journey. The other two songs in the play also underscore the characters' misguided journey, as the very brief "Travelin' Shoes" expresses. "I'm just travelin' along in my shoes," Waco and Kosmo sing, "Payin' my dues, travelin' along / When I get that hold down blues / I get on the move with my travelin' shoes" (268). Ironically, the "hold down blues" that leads to the pair's "travelin'" provides an opportunity for connecting to home and a sense of identity that none of the characters realizes until the

play's end. If the characters seek a connection in their journey, they misdirect their wishes on the images of a "star," such as in Paul's song, "Marlene." "Some say the star up in the skies," Paul sings to Marlene, "Are there just because we got eyes / But I could see your star up on the screen / If I was blind as a bean" (288). What Paul and the other characters are blind to, however, is that journeying for a "star" only results in the fool's gold that the characters find in the sack of bottle caps.

As in Shepard's earlier musical efforts, the songs provide conventional expository information about scenes and characters' feelings, in this case feelings about the search for an elusive star, but they also stretch one convention of musical drama. That is, the "change" of scenes only occurs in the dialogue and words of the characters. Not strictly bound by the conventions of realism, musicals often make liberal, unrealistic changes in scene, a convention that Shepard exaggerates in *The Mad Dog Blues* to thematize the emptiness of "following a star" at the expense of developing inner character. The worldwide adventure on which Shepard's characters embark to find that star in the form of bags of gold exaggerates the changing of scene in a musical, which may contain a dozen different settings in one act, with only minimal staging or only in the words of the characters. As David Grote explains in *Staging the Musical*, this unrealistic convention "simply means that musicals by their very nature reject the conventions of realistic stagecraft," adding that "no matter what the subject matter, the musical is not every confined to three-dimensional solid stagecraft" (33).

In *The Mad Dog Blues*, however, all changes of scenery solely occur through the words of the characters, an exaggeration that may appear on the surface as an inexpensive way to stage a production. The play's lack of staging, though, also complements the

theme of coping-out and “following a star” at the expense of inner development. As the characters whirl around an imaginary world in their “Adventure Show,” the lack of any perceptible change reflects how the “gold” for which they search only represents an illusory success that in the end does nothing to establish the essential, internal connection between identity and a sense of “home.” In the last “change” of scenery, the play’s ending reveals the emptiness of the adventure with a finale that suggests an unhappy progression rather than a celebratory signal of inaction and closure.

By contrast, *The Mad Dog Blues*’ music ultimately provides a sense of progression and exposes the folly of following the extraordinary image of a Hollywood star. In *The Star System: Hollywood’s Production of Popular Identities*, Paul McDonald builds on Richard Dyer’s influential *Stars* to explain the combination of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” at the core of a star’s constructed image. While stars’ images contain elements that “appear ordinary and like other people in society,” the uniqueness of those images arises from how stars’ wealth, fame, and appearance combine to create what McDonald terms the “extraordinary” elements of a star’s image that sets stars culturally apart from ordinary society (7). It is this extraordinary element that the characters in *The Mad Dog Blues* journey to find and/or reflect in their own characterizations, such as Jesse James (a personage from ordinary life appropriated by Hollywood’s star system to be the ultimate gunslinger role) and Mae West alongside Shepard’s invented “rock star” Kosmo.

In this juxtaposition of figures from the past with Kosmo and Yahoodi, all of whom exist as caricatures more than fleshed-out characterizations, the play portrays the fascination with following a star as an empty journey that denies an inner sense of “home” that the finale expresses. George Stambolian hits on this theme when he writes

in “A Trip through Popular Culture: *The Mad Dog Blues*” that the play “suggests that all America is a society of ghosts, and that modern American civilization in general has taken on the attributes of its popular culture, has become a country where nothing lasts, where people pursue visions that lead nowhere, and where all relationships are transitory” (87). Not to dwell on semantics, but the passive voice in Stambolian’s quotes takes away the agency from contemporary Americans themselves, whom Shepard portrays as most culpable in this transitory and meritless society. In the thematic vision of Shepard’s rock plays, people *choose* the cop-out to “pursue visions that lead nowhere,” underscored by the play’s empty stage.

Inspired by the cynical opinions of the merits of cultural heroes that Patti Smith and Shepard’s other close associates at the time accepted as valid, the portrayal of stardom in *The Mad Dog Blues* reflects Shepard’s horror at a casual acceptance and perpetuation of extraordinary star images as nothing more than transient fabrications. Don Shewey’s biography clearly articulates Shepard’s thoughts and feelings on the clash between Shepard’s staunch belief in the role of a cultural hero based on a merit system and the rejection of such a belief by Shepard’s contemporaries.

For all his love of role-playing, Shepard took the game of stardom seriously. Weaned on the mythology of Western films, he viewed fame as valuable only insofar as it recognized heroism, authenticity, mastery, or accomplishment—traditional American values. Without something crucially important at stake, conquest was meaningless. What he must have found frightening and alien in someone like Patti Smith was the pop notion of



stardom as pure fantasy, the self-hype of Andy Warhol  
superstardom, a game played with nobody keeping score. For Shepard,  
that kind of stardom—based on a nebulous, self-projected image, as easily  
put on or removed as a bit of glittery makeup—is worthless. Yet it’s so  
ingrained in contemporary culture that it’s  
practically irresistible. (84)

During the time Shepard left New York for London in a cop-out, later admitting, “I had  
this fantasy that I’d come over [to England] and somehow fall into a rock ‘n’ roll band,”  
he, too, fell prey to this kind of “self-projected image” (qtd. in Shewey 80).

Ultimately for the characters in *The Mad Dog Blues*, all that matters by the end of  
the play is the abandonment of a journey in search of a “self-projected image” and a  
reconnection to a sense of “home” that the “adventure” only denied. In a final  
underscoring of the finale’s emphasis on progression rather than closure, the characters  
all walk off the stage and head out of the theatre, leaving the curtain to fall on an empty  
stage. Taking the suggestion that the audience find a sense of identity through a sense of  
“home” in *Forensic* and *Hand* even farther, the characters begin their journeys in the  
theatre. Follow our lead, the characters’ actions advise, and reestablish the connection to  
“home” that is essential for every American’s identity because only then can each  
American find a happy equilibrium—to borrow Grote’s definition of the finale.

First performed as an “epilogue” to *The Mad Dog Blues* only one month after its  
first performance, *Back Bog Beast Bait* (1971) not only contains *Blues*’ characters Ghost  
Girl and a gun-toting Slim, but it also contains the longing for a sense of “home.” As  
trances overcome the characters in Maria’s house one by one, *Back Bog Beast Bait*’s

ending speciously builds to a conclusively fatal attack by the back bog, baited by Gris Gris's mushroom bait and the defenseless state of the characters until the finale subverts this narrative course. Even Slim, the most obdurate character who tries in vain to keep everyone focused on the task of hunting the back bog, falls prey to the spells of Cajun country. Although Slim attempts to threaten Gris Gris to stop her act and to help prepare for the back bog, he transforms into a shell of his former cutthroat self. "Everything's broken like glass," Slim claims. "The blood's gone from my hands. I'm frozen like a rock" (331). When Slim's "final," deadly warnings to Gris Girl transform Slim, all of the characters in Maria's house appear to be bait for the back bog.

Yet when the beast enters, it exits just as quickly because, as the stage directions tell us, "Somehow the beast seems helpless and alone in the situation" (332). Supposedly a vicious predatory who steals children in the night, the back bog is ultimately no match for the Gris Gris's magic. Unfortunately, the other characters also remain no match for it because they succumb to their trances and have no chance of escape from the magic although its purpose and final influence never emerge. Rather, the finale begins after the back bog's exit while the trances continue taking over the characters, finally reducing Slim, the most resistant of the group, to howling like a coyote. In the last lines of the play, Slim is reduced to total submission with his offer to the spirit of the coyote that overtakes him: "You've given yourself to the ground and I give myself to you. It's only fair. It's only fair" (333). And with a howl, Slim becomes the coyote while the others continue in their animal trances.

Musically accompanying this out-of-control tableau, the finale in *Back Bog Beast Bait* comes from offstage and rises as the action on stage progresses to an

incomplete conclusion. In a minimalist arrangement that recalls the finale of *Forensic*, Gris Gris's violin provides the lone accompaniment to the spirits' taking over the bodies and minds of the outsiders. With each howl and slither, the stage directions state, the music builds to a feverish pitch, but only a blackout of stage lights follows. Unlike in *Forensic*, then, no lights up adds to the mystery of what happens to the characters. Rather, the characters remain entrapped in the spell while the tune of Gris Gris's violin reaches its peak. Much like Kent and Salem in *La Turista*, the characters represent an unwanted intrusion into Gris Gris's backwater "home." With no apparent conclusion in sight, both literally and theatrically, the finale and its aftermath suggest a progression of the ironic usurpation of the characters' identities that arises from Gris Gris's magical attempts to bait and defeat the bog but is actually a trap to snare the "turistas."

Reflecting the defensive discontent with the youthful invasion of counterculture scenes noted earlier, the other songs in the play build on the theme of searching for a "home" but with a warning about appropriating the "home" of an already established community. In the opening number, "Back Bog Blues," Ghost Girl sounds like a traditionally American character that Nathanson describes in *Over the Rainbow* because the lyrics reflect her understanding that the journey she should now pursue leads back home. Ghost Girl sings about her longing "to get back home to Tennessee," but neither she nor any of the other characters values that connection to home enough to make the journey and find closure (305).

The two other songs in the play drip with sarcasm as they mock a misguided journey for an external answer to the question of identity. The short traditional "Lowlands" with new lyrics by Steve Weber and Antonia uses the imagery of the empty

sea on which Joe seeks his misbegotten fortune. “Hope was just a dream I had,” Joe admits in the last verse, “At a dollar and a dime a day.” That payday, however, is hardly worth the cost, because “If you don’t drown the sea will drive you mad, / At a dollar and a dime a day” (315). Likewise, the morbid lyrics from Lou Reed’s “Wrap Your Trouble in Dreams” uses the image of the sea to express the emptiness of casting one’s fortunes with the tide of a dream, ending with a deadly finality. “Excrement filters through the brain,” the last verse describes, “Hatred bends the spine / Filth covers the body and pores / To be cleansed by dying time” (325). In both songs, then, the speakers of the lyrics express the longing for an imminent death as the welcome end to lives whose journeys for external answers only lead to misery.

As the finale and the following tableau of trances reveal, the characters in *Back Bog Beast Baitlie* lost in their dreams that only lead to their destruction, which underscores the play’s thematic statement that journeys that ignore an internal connection between identity and “home” are doomed cop-outs to self-destruction. Much like the counterculture havens that existed outside the mainstream and did not welcome the current influx of so many in search of “themselves,” the characters who begin searching for a “home” intrude upon one whose inhabitants do not want or need them. As a result, Ghost Girl, Slim, and the others lose not only their identities but do so in a dehumanizing, helpless way, reflecting the ways in which so many like them were making easy prey on America’s streets.

Although the streets outside the setting in *Beast* might not all be paved, the play portrays the invasion of a community for the sake of appropriating a “home” and its identity as potentially successful as the trance-induced animalism that entraps the play’s

characters. When the stage lights go dark with the last notes of the finale, the play portrays with harsher images than in the previous rock plays that such a destructive and dehumanizing fate potentially awaits its American audience. No happy equilibrium awaits anyone, the play suggests, who journeys for a “home” without the necessary, inner connection between it and identity.

Co-written with rocker Patti Smith, Shepard’s next play, *Cowboy Mouth* (1971), continues *The Mad Dog Blues*’ thematic focus on characters who journey in search of an extraordinary “star,” which in this play is a search for “a rock-and-roll savior with a cowboy mouth” who can vicariously save them (157). In the final moments of the one-act, Cavale’s telling of her schoolgirl stint as the title character in *The Ugly Ducking* reveals that Cavale has been searching for external acceptance and identity, though, long before looking toward a rock ‘n’ roll savior to provide hope. As the school powers that be would have it, though, Cavale only performed the “ugly” part of the ducking while “this real pretty blonde-haired girl dressed in a white ballet dress rose up behind (her) as the swan.” Sounding like the Kid’s empty connection to an Azusa that does not want him and like Slim, who appears to have missed his chance to transform from the ordinary into the extraordinary, Cavale laments how “I paid all the dues and up rose ballerina Cathy like the North Star” (158).

In an expression of Cavale’s desire to rise vicariously “like the North Star” through the rise of the rock ‘n’ roll savior, *Cowboy Mouth*’s finale combines the stories of *The Ugly Duckling* and Johnny Ace to eliminate both the Lobster Man and the false, manufactured “stardom” that his transformation symbolizes. The song’s title, “Loose Ends,” sounds like a paean to closure but instead reflects the mockery of it in this finale

and in the entire play. Slim and Cavale alternate the song's lyrical promise of stardom while Lobster Man sheds his shell to reveal that he is actually the rock 'n' roll savior—at least for one brief moment. "*Come right here it's such a simple song,*" Slim and Cavale beckon in the chorus. "*It'll cure all of your misery / It won't move you wrong / So open up your mouth and don't think about a thing / Feel the movement in you and sing*" (164; emphasis in original). Slim and Cavale's shared chorus reflects their shared belief in the power of music as an escape from the misery of the world, but it is only an escape that makes a false, deadly connection to the extraordinary image of a cultural star.

Underscoring that Cavale's escape continues after the finale, which only suggests that the "loose ends" continue rather than resolve, Cavale's lines that end the play express both Cavale's search for external answers and the Lobster Man/rock 'n' roll savior's playing Russian Roulette. Cavale's words return to the story of Nerval, and the monologue ties together the stories of Nerval, Johnny Ace, and the theme of fatal rock 'n' roll stars on the one hand and the Lobster Man's *Ugly Duckling*-like transformation on the other. Cavale tells us of how Nerval, who "carried a crow" and "had a pet lobster with a pink ribbon" and who "hung himself on my birthday." Switching symbolic focus from a star in "Loose Ends," Cavale describes the aftermath of Nerval's suicide for the two pets when "The moon was cold and full and his visions and the crow and the lobster went on *cavale*" (165; emphasis in original). And to make the stories fully intersect, Cavale tells us "That's where I found my name [...] On my birthday. It means escape" (165).

On cue, the Lobster Man follows Cavale's monologue with his own attempt at suicide that can let his two "pets," Cavale and Slim, go free, but when the Lobster Man

pulls the trigger of Slim's gun, the hammer only finds an empty chamber. When the lights fade on this haunting tableau, the play ends on a thematic and formal note of incompleteness and further, unknown progression. Perhaps the new savior will play another round of Russian Roulette and follow the path of Johnny Ace and set his pets free as Nerval did, but regardless he will not receive a "happily ever after" ending that a finale conventionally celebrates.

What awaits Lobster Man instead is the fate of Johnny Ace: a single bullet, and his fate hinges upon only a Russian-Roulette chance that the savior can cheat death. The Lobster Man's luck, like all other ill-fated "saviors" before and after him, remains hitched to his "star" rather than an internal connection between "home" and identity, a misguided journey that Slim and Cavale vicariously share. Thus the rock 'n' roll savior must follow that star until it extinguishes, or, as in the case of Johnny Ace and Nerval, the stars that extinguish themselves. Goaded by Slim's handing of the gun, the new savior becomes the victim with one of the very voices that "created" the savior providing the potential suicidal catalyst for his early demise.

The two songs before the finale express the characters' external search for answers from a rock 'n' roll savior and the theme of transformation rather than an internal connection between Slim and Cavale and their identities. Slim's opening number also underscores the submissiveness of Slim's relationship to Cavale and the pair's submissiveness to the unfulfilled promise of the "savior." "You Cheated, You Lied," Slim reflects. "You cheated, you lied, you said that you loved me," he sings, but he cuts the song short after he sings "Oh what can I do but just keep loving you" (200). While ostensibly directed at Cavale, the lyrics reflect the sense of pent-up frustration and

boredom with the current state of affairs that both characters share, but also reveal that the two do not see themselves as its source. Unlike the 2<sup>nd</sup> Exterminator in *Forensic* or the Indians in *Operation Sidewinder*, the protagonists in *Cowboy Mouth* never see that the real escape from the boredom lies in connecting with who and where they are, even if the surroundings are as dingy as the room in *Forensic*.

The play's second song further expresses the protagonists' shared look outward for what can only be the empty and fleeting emergence of the rock-and-roll savior rather than worrying about saving themselves from their own empty existence. As the kidnapped Slim sings to a "dead" Cavale at the top of his lungs while pounding a set of drums, Slim's opening number establishes the pair's looking for external answers, albeit with a deflated tone of one held against his will. "Every night I sit by my window," the last verse of "Have No Fear," muses. "Watchin' all the dump trucks go by / Have no fear / The worst is here / The worst has come / So don't run / Let it come / Let it go / Let it rock and roll" (152). On the one hand the lines reflect Slim's submission to the current "kidnapping" by Cavale in a failed effort to make him into a "rock-and-roll savior with a cowboy mouth, even though Cavale makes no effort to detain him., and the submission to the cultural "fact" that Slim cannot hope to be the (157). More importantly, the lines express Slim and Cavale's submission to the fact that Slim can never fill those cultural shoes, not if heavyweights like Dylan and Jagger cannot, so he waits for the inevitable coming and sacrifice of the next in line (156).

With the musical complement to the ending's incomplete sacrifice, *Cowboy Mouth* essentially condenses *The Mad Dog Blues'* theme of copping out to the empty journey for a "star" into a feverish one-act set in the dinginess of *Forensic & the*



*Navigators'* room. Answering Cavale and Slim's call to tie up the "loose ends" and provide the savior they seek, the Lobster Man "transforms" into the rock 'n' roll savior just as the song finishes with a repeat of the chorus. Following the pattern of Shepard's earlier musical finales, "Loose Ends" forwards the plays action and ends with an emphasis on progression because the sacrifice remains incomplete, but the play ultimately asks, for how long? The answer is that until Cavale, Slim, and all Americans stop looking for cultural symbols to save them rather than looking to connect with themselves, no end is in sight, literally and theatrically. The action that continues after the finale transforms the ugly duckling—or lobster, in this case—into the savior dressed in black, but that color only briefly reflects the street cool of a rock savior. Rather, the black that the new savior wears becomes his future funeral dress almost immediately in a final, shocking symbol of following what is in this play a deadly "star." The only way to stop the pointless journey, the play ultimately suggests, is to tie together the inner loose ends that make an identity, even in the crude and unglamorous room that Slim and Cavale could call "home."

In *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), Shepard's rock plays fully realize the trajectories that first appear in *Melodrama Play*. At the center of the play lies the battle for supremacy between Hoss, the old gun who desperately wants to stay on top, and Crow, the Keith Richards look-alike and lone wolf who topples the top gun. Part Western showdown, part boxing match, and part rock 'n' roll polemic, the battle builds to the final confrontation between the two killers at the play's end. As in a fight scene in a Hollywood movie, the old pro Hoss scores some early points when he attacks Crow's definition of style as fast flash with little substance or dues-paying honesty underneath

the fast fingerwork. “Fast fingers don’t mean they hold magic,” Hoss argues, and then he accuses Crow of being a poser in black leather. Hoss sums up his adversary with the biting line, “You a blind minstrel with a phony shuffle,” and he appears on track for a knockout (238-239). But the rules no longer follow Hoss’s outdated playbook. The ref grinds the round to a halt and calls it a draw, much to Hoss’s outrage. Taking advantage of the deflated old-timer, Crow verbally pounces for the knockout. “Get the image in line,” which Crow argues is “The fantasy rhyme” (240). With what Hoss declares “backward tactics,” Crow scores a T.K.O. with his image of flashy style with violent imagery.

When read in terms of rock music’s history in Gracyk’s *I Wanna Be Me*, Hoss and Crow’s contest portrays not only a lyrical showdown but also theatrically expresses the mass art’s replacement of rock’s oral/aural tradition. On the one hand, Hoss represents a tradition in rock and begun in jazz and blues by which each successive generation learns by listening to the lyrics and music of the previous, copying by ear in ways that classical musicians who can read musical scores do not (Gracyk 29). Hence Hoss has a connection to the tradition of popular music of rock based in the blues that his lyrics in the battle with Crow reflect.

While also showing some roots of rock’s oral/aural tradition, Crow on the other hand represents a mass art aesthetic that “tends to confuse its own history with the continuing presence of past work” to the point that he rejects Hoss and the oral/aural tradition of rock music (Gracyk 30). Solely concerned with the present yet unaware of its reliance on the past, what Gracyk refers to as an “artistic amnesia,” Crow represents a “conversion” from the oral/aural tradition of popular music. Even though reliant on the

past, Crow's mass art aesthetic "generates a very different form of cultural memory, in which our documentation of a 'frozen' past comes back to haunt us under the guise of authenticity" that includes literally erasing Hoss out of both relevance and existence (Gracyk 29).

In a thematic complement to the rock plays' statement about American identity, Hoss and Crow represent two precarious identities existing on the dangerous path of eschewing an inner connection between self and "home" for an identity based on an external journey as a rock 'n' roll gunslinger. As Bruce W. Powe acutely describes the verbal showdown in *The Tooth of Crime*, the "characters hurtle the words as if they were notes from a sax or a guitar; they project them, perform them. Employed in this way, words are *dangerous*" (22; emphasis in original). More specifically, Crow's words that defeat Hoss express the deathly violent style that Crow ushers in to replace the outdated Hoss.

Yet Crow remains aware that such a fate also awaits him. "Busted and dyin' and cryin' for more" is the violent image of self-destruction that Crow narrates as the image of the new rock 'n' roll icon, not one with a link to the past Blues greats. Only "All bleedin' and wasted and tryin' to score" is how Crow sees his new image, and with that "victory," Crow now stands poised as the new top killer in town, leaving Hoss nothing left but to follow the same fatal path as the Lobster Boy in *Cowboy Mouth* (241). That same fate awaits all who make the mistake of tying their identities to what McDonald defines in *The Star System* as the "external," purely fabricated part of a star's identity.

Before that path closes for Hoss and opens for Crow, however, Becky performs a number of her own that acts out the equally dangerous but often glorified violence that

Crow's style inflicts on women. Performed a cappella, Becky's lines follow the pattern of a boy's taking advantage of a nice girl's naivete, using the same sinister rhythms in Crow's knockout that took advantage of Hoss's outdated ignorance of how the game is now played. Becky's lines begin with a plea just to keep the make-out session in the car—that all American setting, invariably with the radio providing a rock 'n' roll soundtrack—to a kiss and progress to desperation. As a physical complement to Becky's pleas, one of Becky's hands performs the unwanted intrusion on her body, stripping her down to her bra and panties and fondling her for more while her other hand desperately fends off the advances. As the events build to a violent, near-rape situation, Becky screams, "Let go of me! Let me out! Let me out" (246)!

Becky's number also adds a subversive, music-less reworking of the musical's conventional showstopper to *The Tooth of Crime*. Placed moments before the climactic finish of the play and without a tune or melody line, the placing and casting of the violent repercussions of rock 'n' roll's central theme meet the key criteria for a showstopper as Grote summarizes it in *Staging the Musical*. "In most cases there is only one," Grote explains, "which invariably comes in the second act, usually just before the characters are launched into the final sequence of events leading to the climax" (45-46). Traditionally, the showstopper refers to a number whose "immediate audience response is so great as to literally stop the show with extended and thunderous applause" (46). Becky's piece comes exactly at this point in *The Tooth of Crime*, just before the fatal consequences of Hoss and Crow's showdown commence. Having Becky perform the piece also fits the definition of the show stopper, which a star almost never performs (46).

How Becky's piece subverts the showstopper, however, lies not so much in its music-less, spoken performance but in how the piece "stops the show." Becky's "showstopper" strives for an effect of shock, as her acting out of a near-rape scene marks an abrupt segue that expresses what Gracyk notes in *I Wanna Be Me* is another difference between rock's mass art replacement of a blues-based oral tradition. Specifically, songs in the blues tradition that Hoss personifies "are pleas for comfort, for sanctuary in a cruel world," but when "the rock generation" that Crow personifies takes over the tradition, songs "came to be about the domination of women" (Gracyk 16). The effects as Becky enacts them represent not a toe-tapping good time but an icy chill performed at the front of the stage and right next to the audience. *Crimè's* "showstopper," then, steals the stage momentarily to express a darkly subversive reworking of this musical trope that stops the play's action just before its deadly climax.

The consequences of Crow's victory present an even greater loss for Hoss. In a reversal from the despotic loudmouth that Hoss is at the beginning of the play, he helplessly heads for the same manipulated fate as the Lobster Boy, a point that the final expository song underscores. After Becky's showstopper, Hoss now becomes a "clean screen" for Crow's "vision" of the new Hoss that Crow wants him to wear "like a suit a' clothes" (246-247). Hoss still has some fight in him as he screams, "IT AIN'T ME" (247)! The truth, however, is that Crow is now the big "it" and Hoss now must succumb to his role as the vanquished and obsolete big gun who soon becomes discarded like last year's one-hit wonder.

The song "Slips Away," sung by the anonymously named Four Guys underscores Hoss's new state of affairs. "I saw my face in yours—I took you for myself," they sing,

“I took you by mistake—for me” (247). Directly reflecting the rock ‘n’ showdown reveals that Hoss now represents the poseur, unable to walk the walk and talk the talk, the lyrics in “Slips Away” reflect Hoss’s role. “I learned the secrets in your eye” the Four Guys sing, which summarize what Hoss does during the showdown, “But now I find the feelin’ slips away/What’s with me night and day is gone” (247-248). Gone, too, is Hoss’s purpose and importance as the top killer. Now all he can do is fatally make way for the changing of the killing guard with a single round of Russian Roulette.

Ostensibly, Hoss’s suicide after losing the showdown establishes a new equilibrium, albeit it an unhappy one, that the play’s finale can celebrate, and it signals closure for the play’s events. In keeping with the developing rock plays’ pattern, though, just the opposite occurs. Finished with the screaming denial that precedes “Slips Away,” Hoss accepts his fate but still has a glint of pride left as he tells Crow, “I’m a born Marker Crow Bait. That’s more than you’ll ever be.” And in a final attempt to upstage Crow, Hoss tells his victorious rival to “stand back and watch some true style... It’s my life and death in one clean shot.” Hoss follows through with his promise immediately after this one last moment of braggadocio by putting a gun in his mouth and taking his life “in one clean shot.” The stage directions specifically call for the scene to reflect Hoss’s stripped-down style with no “jive theatrical gimmicks.” Only the gripping, silent buildup while Hoss keeps his back to the audience, making for a sudden burst of realism into the very unrealistic musical play to heighten the effect. Even Crow has to admit that the move is “(a) genius mark” (249).

Thus with a reworking of the Lobster Boy’s suicide, the killer’s torch passes from the old Hoss to the young Crow, a shift in roles that appears to provide a sense of

closure from the establishment of a new equilibrium. Following the rock play's pattern, however, Crow's assumption of Hoss's role as top killer represents the completion of a never-ending cycle rather than a sense of closure from the establishment of a happy equilibrium. Rather than provide a moment of closure, we learn from the finale that these events account for only a bump in Crow's road that can only lead to the repetition of the same exchange that he completes with Hoss.

The play's finale, "Rollin' Down," explicitly stresses that the play's action represents the completion of only one in an unending cycle in the struggle to be at the top of the killing heap. "Keep me rollin' down," Crow sings, "If I'm a tool for a bigger game / You better get down—you better get down and pray" (251). Aware that the "victory" Crow achieves only makes him the next target, he accepts his new role and knows that his decision to "[run] it up the middle" and hit the road can only ironically lead him right back to the same confrontation he has just completed. The next time, around, though, Crow will fill Hoss's role in the power shift, "Changing hands like a snake dance to heaven," as he calls it. But until then, Crow decides to keep "rollin' down," as the final line of the play states. When the lights go to black, they do not signal closure but merely the end of a deadly cycle and the beginning of the next one.

On the one hand, the generational shift in power from the old Hoss to the young Crow at the end of *The Tooth of Crime*'s follows a long history in Western literature and mythology, a connection that critics overly emphasize. Gregory W. Lanier's "The Killer's Mask: Unity and Dualism in Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime*" provides an often-cited example. Building on the previous arguments of Doris Auerbach and Ruby Cohn, Lanier interprets the play as "the primal ritual of blood sacrifice—or, to be more precise,

the play's structure closely follows the contours of what René Girard calls the 'sacrificial crisis'" (49). While Lanier briefly traces the theme of a sacrificial changing of roles, or "masks," within Shepard's body of work, the critical tendency to link Shepard's plays to a distant, mytho-poetic source provides an entertaining yet tenuous reading that ignores the contemporary myths Shepard explores in the rock plays. To wit, the songs in *The Tooth of Crime* provide sounding boards for the characters to reveal their inner feelings about their identities as wandering rock 'n' roll gunslingers mired in America's contemporary culture of mass art. Hoss in particular sings to reveal his feelings that often comment on the destructive fate that awaits those who follow the "star" of rock 'n' roll glory, only to be forgotten and recycled in the amnesia of mass art.

The two other songs in the play underscore Hoss and Becky's dangerously naïve beliefs in that the pair's temporary identities provide a sense of security and permanence. When Hoss sings the opening number, "The Way Things Are," the stage directions state that the backing track "should be like 'Heroin' by the Velvet Underground," which musically links predatory and destructive addiction with Hoss's lyrics. "You may think every picture is a true history of the way things used to be or the way things are," Hoss begins the song, but no verification of that image exists, he argues. "You just don't know," he claims, "So here's another illusion to add to your confusion" (203). Hoss, too, suffers from the illusion that he can hold on to power and remain top gun. What Hoss ironically cannot see is that he, too, exists as an illusion to add to his own confusion, which Crow soon replaces, leaving Hoss only a deadly exit.

In addition, "Becky's Song" expresses an even more naïve belief in the security, in this song of an open road and the hum of a V-8 engine. "Listen to the song that the V-



8 sings,” the chorus proclaims. “Watch the rhythm of the line / Isn’t it some magic that the night-time brings / Ain’t the highway fine” (220). As Gracyk’s above observations describe, women in rock become objects of male domination in the lyrics of rock. Only moments later, Becky’s “showstopper” reveals that the road Becky sees as the road to Louisiana and happiness actually leads down a path that views her as a sexual object to be dominated on that dark highway. Like Hoss, Becky’s lyrics express the present without realizing the future of mass art that very shortly discards the two of them in its cyclic amnesia.

Underscored by a finale that signals progression rather than closure, *The Tooth of the Crime* as a whole portrays the ascension and imminent loss of a “rock ‘n’ roll savior with a cowboy mouth” that Slim and Cavale envision in *Cowboy Mouth* as a deadly cultural cop-out. As the lyrics of “Rollin’ Down” express, Crow understands that his role means an itinerant and eventually fatal journey on which he can never reconnect with the identity and home he leaves behind. Crow, then, understands and accepts the costs of following what McDonald calls an “external star” when he accepts the mantle of the new outlaw rock ‘n’ roll gunslinger.

Like the Lobster Man, Crow reflects an American culture that demands stars based on an external image that exists only as a product of mass art, a seemingly endless cycle of reinvention and cultural amnesia. The greater consequences of the process, the play ultimately suggests, lie in Americans’ creation of cultural symbols like Crow and rock ‘n’ roll saviors that severs the important link between “home” and identity for both symbol and fan. Crow may understand that his role means only copping out to an early demise at the hands of the next gunslinger on his itinerant path, but the play questions

whether the American audience understands its own role. Thus Crow's somber mood at the end of the play is not only for himself but for a culture that creates and follow "stars" and that remains in a cyclic and seemingly endless progression of reinvention and, as a result, loss of identity.

The last full-length rock play, *Angel City* (1976) sets the basic theme and structure of *The Tooth of the Crime* in Los Angeles, the star-manufacturing capital of America. After much buildup and debate, Wheeler narrates the synopsis of his latest creation in the play's final moments to Rabbit, who like *Crimès* Crow, intrudes upon the scene in an attempt to seize control. Both characters' names also express the greed of Hollywood, as "Rabbit" suggests a rodent who feeds off the green "sustenance" of Hollywood and "Wheeler" suggests the spinning wheels of a film projector that keeps the artistic amnesia of Hollywood's mass art rolling. Underscored by crashing drums and wailing saxophone, Wheeler's vision for the new blockbuster provides the opportunity for Rabbit's assumption of Wheeler's despotic position as Hollywood mogul—at least temporarily. Narrating a war film that serves as a metaphor for the battle for the city of Angels, Wheeler's synopsis employs actors to play the two chieftains and generals and Miss Scoons and Lanx to add screams to the clash in a loud cacophony with drums and saxophone.

This "soundtrack" to the story underscores its themes of conflict and struggle, but its ultimate effect recalls the opening scene's pompous buildup for a trite rehash of something stale merely posing as something new. It also provides a "finale" that leads to a final showdown between Wheeler and Rabbit, rather than an inactive celebration of closure. When the smoke clears from the "battle," Rabbit belittles the idea and makes his

move to replace Wheeler. “Terrible,” Rabbit proclaims from Wheeler’s chair, the symbol of Wheeler’s “established” position: “Corniest stuff I ever saw” (51).

Recalling Hoss’s quick defeat, Wheeler succumbs to his fate, which allows the newcomer to assume the reins of power—at least temporarily—but with an added cosmetic twist. Rabbit not only assumes his defeated rival’s role but turns into a monster, “slimey (sic) green; he has fangs, long black fingernails, and a long, thick mane of black hair” (51). While Shepard’s stage directions call for only Wheeler to notice the change in Rabbit without any specific explanation, the scene implies that Wheeler has created a monster that only he can see, and Rabbit’s “new look” does resemble a cross between Frankenstein’s monster and Dracula. Missing this point, Carol Rosen does notice the link to the green “seepage” in horror movies and, more to the thematic point, that “the color of American money” could also reflect the choice of green (45). Regardless, Rabbit’s transformation expresses how Rabbit cops out his own identity to profit from Hollywood’s mass art, only to become its manipulated monster of a creation.

Portraying the movie business as mass art that captures and sells with only profits in mind and parades behind the veil of “entertainment,” Miss Scoons and Lanx act out the cultural result of Rabbit and Wheeler’s struggle. Still acting like two teens, Miss Scoons and Lanx argue about leaving the picture before Miss Scoons gets sent back to “Juvie” (54). As in all of the rock plays, the exchange thematically underscores the separation between identity and home. In *Angel City*’s ending, the separation exists between Miss Scoons’s acting like a teenager trying to get home while her boyfriend uses the “movie” as an excuse to continue the date and most likely his physical intentions for later in the

evening. The pair shows no concern for the two green-engulfed protagonists because, as the saying goes, “It’s only a movie.”

Unfortunately for Rabbit and Wheeler, that entertainment comes with a deadly price, or at least the ending hints as much. While Lanx and Miss Scoons watch Rabbit and Wheeler “like two teen-agers watching a movie,” the play’s last lines and fade to black continue the rock play’s pattern of suggesting progression rather than celebrating the inaction of the new equilibrium. Specifically, the ending shows Rabbit and Wheeler as celluloid, permanent products of Hollywood’s mass art. In an exchange that recalls Crow’s smugness after his victory over Hoss, Rabbit confidently proclaims victory over Wheeler by saying, “You’ve been captured in celluloid and you’ll never get out” and counters Wheeler’s assertion, “I’M IMMORTAL!” with its opposite: “You’re dead, Wheeler. Dead and gone” (52). Wheeler’s demise, however, does not come from a round of Russian Roulette, but from a bundle, a symbol of the neat little package. Whether Wheeler believes Rabbit or not, the two of them remain on a fate route because both characters have willingly copped-out their identities to feed off the profits of Hollywood’s mass art.

From the unusual “overture,” *Angel City* music expresses the paradox between the loud, glamorous exterior of Hollywood and its profit-driven mass art. In sound, dialogue, and mis-en-scene, Tympani’s noisy “overture” and Lanx’s lines express Wheeler’s “improvising” to make mass art that only recycles old ideas in to create “new” art. Shabby-looking Tympani’s drumming on a nearly blank stage fills the auditorium with a loud, building rhythm that suggests anticipation for an event worthy of such fanfare, which Tympani’s uncalled-for bow after its completion humorously reflects. Instead, an

unseen Lanx begins a dark dialogue that mimics the narration of a film noir from Hollywood's golden age follows, lines that the stage directions specifically state should be read "as though reading from a script." "From the blackest to the lightest light," Lanx reads. "It's all happening [...] A booming industry." But as Rabbit's entrance in a "tattered detective type suit" with tennis shoes on his feet, all that is "happening" is the cultural amnesia of mass art that combines film noir and casual attire as a "new" product (8).

Throughout the play, *Angel City*'s music underscores the improvised creation of the new, monstrous Rabbit and his progression to power, albeit by virtually eliminating expository numbers that express characters and their feelings with lyrics. Instead, *Angel City*'s music employs the improvisational structure of instrumental jazz. The emphasis in the music, as Shepard's introductory notes explain, reflects how Shepard sees "character" in the play "in terms of collage construction of jazz improvisation" (6). A particularly poignant example of how the "collage construction" in the music expresses the aesthetic amnesia of mass art occurs in a musically underscored exchange between Rabbit and Tympani. Insisting that true profits lie in portraying death and destruction, Rabbit uses Tympani to draw out the answer to a series of questions. With Tympani on the drums and a sax in the background, the two come to the realization that "THE IMAGINATION OF DYING IS MORE SCARY THAN ACTUALLY DYING!" (29). But Rabbit does not stop there, and as Tympani's drumming builds in momentum, the ultimate source of profit becomes clear: "WE ALL WILL DIE AND NOT KNOW HOW OR WHY OR WHERE!" (30). Exploiting this inner fear, Rabbit believes, is the basis of the Hollywood system, one that ironically takes away his identity to create a "new" blockbuster.

By contrast, the lone expository song in the play focuses on the rock plays' central theme of the connection between identity and "home." Appearing in the opening moments of the second act, the lyrics express the feeling of loss after having sacrificed the future to a fruitless journey on the seas. "I could've married a thistledown," Miss Scoons sings, "But, no, I cast meself to sea / And sailed for foreign turf / Whereupon I climbed the highest tree." That journey, the final lines of the brief song admit, only leads her to desire a return home as she looks in vain for her lost home: "And searched for my sweet home / And searched for my sweet home" (35). Miss Scoons sings the song in an Irish voice, and while she wears a nun's outfit in a further expression of her sense of disconnection from her "home" and identity. Having sacrificed the chance for a conventional home and family, Miss Scoons toils away pointlessly for Wheeler in a life of subservience to him and the production of Hollywood's mass art. Like a woman on a deserted island at sea, Miss Scoons can search all she wishes, but her "sweet home" and her identity there are only a distant memory.

In the final scene, *Angel City* ties together the theme in Miss Scoons's song of disconnection between "home" and identity to portray the movie industry as a cop-out of identity. The product of Wheeler and Rabbit's aesthetic amnesia, manufactured images on celluloid, captures and exploits all human cogs in the machine—no matter how powerful or "established." Much like the monster Wheeler creates in Rabbit, the green ooze of the same money-monster color as the two combatants' faces pours out of the green bundle that Wheeler opens. Framing these events in the context of cinema, the mass art at the heart of the conflict, all of this occurs for Lanx and Miss Scoons's entertainment. In another "change" of identity, the pair acts like teenagers, the

Americans whose green money Hollywood most wishes to earn, while Wheeler's power transfers to the monstrous, "new" Rabbit. As in the song, "Miss Scoons" wants to return "home," but she has copped-out her identity to the enfolding creation before her. All of the characters, in fact, have lost their identities in the "creative" process that has led to the play's ending.

But underscored with flowing notes from a saxophone, the play continues these events during and after the finale, ultimately portraying the mass art of Hollywood as a cop-out to mass art that threatens to subsume the play's own audience. While the stage lights fade, the green mist and saxophone's notes drift off the stage and into the crowd, which like Lanx and Miss Scoons has also watched the "movie" on stage. While none of the other characters, the stage directions state, notices the monstrous transformation of Rabbit, the audience does, and it occurs for their entertainment, the same purpose for which Rabbit and Wheeler intend their blockbuster. All of the characters allow the process to subsume their identities and leave no opportunity for them to return "home" and to a sense of identity that Miss Scoons's song and final lines suggest. Perhaps the Americans leaving the theatre, the play suggests, will cop-out to mass art's amnesia that *Angel City* portrays. The only way not to continue it, the ending implies, is by not allowing the fantasies like the one Wheeler and Rabbit construct to entrap us like Lanx and Miss Scoons. When the audience leaves, it has the opportunity to achieve what none of the play's characters can—to complete the American journey "home" and reconnect with the sense of identity it provides.

The last of Shepard's rock plays, *Suicide in Bb* (1976) condenses the themes of identity, "home," and art in the artistic and social "suicide" of Niles, an avant-garde jazz

musician, in his own home where a “murder” has occurred while Niles was away. After assuming various identities and firing distracting signals such as gunshots and arrows literally into Pablo and Louis’s murder investigation in Niles’s home, the ending portrays the inescapable aesthetic and social demands of the public. Petrone first breaks Niles’s anonymity on the street by recognizing his jazz idol and then forcing Niles into admitting his identity. Because such an admission of public identity as having the power to erode any distance from the public by the reclusive artist, an assortment of fans who now instantly recognize Niles have invaded Niles’s apartment, joining Pablo and Louis’s search for clues about Niles’s identity. Reflecting how both the previous victim in the apartment literally no longer has the breath of life and how Niles has had his private life as a musician sucked from his control, Petrone’s silent saxophone plays without the breath needed to sound the notes. Lauren joins the “song” with mournful notes on the bass in sympathy for the impending “death.”

As for the subject of the search, Niles reacts to all the attention with an existential crisis and a submissive “suicide” to his new, public identity. “Are you inside me or outside me?” Niles asks the assemblage of fans and investigators. The play never presents a direct answer because the true struggle does exist internally for Niles: Can an artist truly maintain a private identity despite the public nature of his art? The answer to that question comes in the handcuffs with which Pablo and Louis capture their man and lead him off stage. Leslie A. Wade rightly reads this moment as symbolic of Niles’s new and inescapable “commitment” to the public by the contemporary artist, who can no longer exist in isolation from this “social obligation” (84).



Talking about the previous “murder victim” in the room but also referring to the death of the artist, Niles ends the play with an admission that “Someone was killed here for sure” and defers to Pablo and Louis’s claims (229). “You’re nobody’s fool,” Niles tells the pair before recounting their version of events. “He had his whole face torn off,” Niles recounts in lines that reflect his own “suicide” to the demands of his public that cost his identity. “Beyond recognition,” Niles describes the two victims in the room. “Right down to the bone. I think he was alive at the time. Right up to the last” (230). Niles remains alive, too, “up to the last,” but also without a “face,” the physical attribute most closely associated with identification, because of his artistic suicide that occurs immediately after he accepts his social obligation as an artist.

A minimally musical finale follows Niles’s exit and underscores both the end of Niles’s private identity and the continuation of Niles’s public identity that abrades and usurps both artist and home. Pablo and Louis lead the submissive protagonist offstage, but the play’s final moments provide the last of Shepard’s finales that suggest progression rather than a content-free celebration of closure. Piano music adds to Petrone’s silent saxophone and Laureen’s mournful bass notes, and much like the finale’s in *Back Bog Beast Bait* and *Forensic & the Navigators*, the music swells to a feverish pitch before quickly stifling. Laureen, Petrone, and the Piano Player, the three composers of Niles’s public identity, remain on stage as the lights slowly fade. Only a lamp on stage remains lit after the fade before being abruptly turned off, leaving the stage completely dark as the curtain falls. The lights are now off, the ending suggests, but the only people who remain “home” are the public who leads the artist to “suicide.”

*Suicide in Bb*'s finale also continues the play's specious progression towards Niles's following in the fatal path of the previous victim, one which music throughout the play underscores. In a combination of the jazz-inspired music in *Angel City* and the minimal incorporation of music in the early rock plays, all but one brief, telling moment of the play's music underscores characters' monologues that express the deadly nature of a public identity's subsuming the artist's private one. The most poignant example of this combination occur when Pablo's monologue introduces this theme in the first monologue that narrates the first "victim" in Niles's home. Telling the story of a musician who compromised his art for his public and paid the ultimate sacrifice, Pablo's lines narrate the story of what happens when he submitted to his public and "started to tow the line" (204). With the "accompaniment" of the Piano Player and Petrone's silent playing, Pablo tells how the musician thought there was a way to "go off on his own again. But [the public] told him he couldn't. That he was in danger." So much danger, in fact, that "Finally he decided to leave them completely. And that's when they killed him" (204).

As if struck by the force of the monologue, Louis responds to the monologue with a dumb-show "death" of his own, crashing to the floor when the music abruptly stops. When the public "kills" the artist, however, his identity from an internal connection between himself and his sense of "home" dies, not his physical self, a point to which Niles very briefly alludes in the play's only piece of expository singing. Wearing a cowboy suit, Niles sings, "Pecos Bill, Pecos Bill / Never Died / And never will / Pecos Bill" (214). Despite Niles's protests that "killing off" the cowboy guise will be painful and even deadly, Paulette and his killing of each of Niles's inner layers of identity proceeds until only Niles's bare, vulnerable identity of a private artist remains to be

exposed to the public and “killed off.” With Niles’s insistence throughout the play that a literal death may occur, however, while Louis and Pablo investigate the room as a “murder” scene, the distinction between interior and exterior reality remains blurred. That the weapons that “kill off” Niles’s guises physically assault Pablo and Louis also adds to the mystery by suggesting that Paulette and Niles’s actions somehow protect Niles from an actual death.

Additionally, Niles appears to be following the demise of the man whose death he seeks to solve. Underscored with the same minimal music that permeates the play, Laureen’s lines use the second person to place Louis in the mind of the artist and describe how he watches a man on the street publicly usurp his identity. “You look hard at yourself on the street,” Laureen describes to Pablo, “You look for any sign that might give him away to you as an impostor.” Ironically, the man watching from the window does not realize that he is the one whose represents the impostor and the struggle to maintain his identity remains trapped in his head and “home.” “You see for sure that he is you,” Laureen reveals, and the man on the street yells, “YOU’RE IN MY HEAD! YOU’RE ONLY IN MY HEAD!” With an identity now only a memory in the new, public man on the street, Laureen’s monologue ends with the suicide of the private identity of the man who leaps out the window. “And you life goes dancing out the window,” the final lines declare, signaling the end of the man’s identity that he protects in his isolation at home (221).

Nonetheless, Niles’s public life continues “dancing,” even after the demise of the private one to suggest that the artist’s submission of private identity to the public continues indefinitely, irregardless of the artist’s own mortality. All that remains of the

artist's private identity, Laureen's monologue and the play's ending suggest, lies in the artist's head, still internal but no longer significant. Only what the public sees, wants, and believes keeps the artist's identity alive, not his thoughts, concerns, or even his art. The public appropriates all in the submission that Niles's exit symbolizes. Tellingly, Pablo and Louis take Niles away from his home, the one place where he feels in control of his art and identity. Now in submission to the loss of a private identity, Niles cannot complete the pattern of the journeying American protagonist who returns home and reconnects with the sense of identity that it provides. Thus the artist's public identity keeps dancing, but to the silence after the finale underscores how the real music that the artist once created in his home and used to define his identity has "died."

Framing *Suicide in Bb*'s larger thematic comment about American identity, the music in the play complements the theme of the artist's copping out to the production of mass art, which demands the submission of his identity to the demands of the public. Thematically and formally, the play's musical underscoring of Niles's cop-out represents a theatrical echoing of the wholesale appropriation of the counterculture during the period of the rock plays. The youth in search of someone or something to follow choose Niles without any real connection to him or his "scene," in this case the private confines of his apartment. When Niles submits to the public's demands, his music now has public acceptance and the potential for commercial success, but he becomes an object for them to possess and inhabit, no more in control of his image and art than musicians and other contemporary counterculture figures. The paradox, then, lies in the inevitable progression from private to public artist. How can Niles cop-out? The play asks. How can Niles not cop-out? The play ultimately answers.

*Suicide in Bb* also marks a return to the theme of coping out art and identity for the production of mass art that Shepard first introduces in *Melodrama Play*. While Niles represents not a one-hit-wonder but an avant-garde artist who once defined his own art with an identity firmly and literally rooted to his sense of a home, both protagonists submit to the public demands of mass art, Duke before the play begins and Niles in its ending. As such, the two plays frame the rock plays' central theme of American identity and a sense of "home" by portraying the loss of a connection between the two for any artist whose work becomes mass art. The inevitable cop-out exists for any artist who wants to extend his audience beyond an isolated counterculture environment. Ultimately, both plays suggest, any artist who does so can never complete a reconnection to "home" and achieve a sense of closure to a journey in search of public acceptance and success.

In sum, the rock plays explore three issues related to the disconnection between American identity and a sense of "home" resulting from the cop-out to a false sense of identity. One group of plays, *Forensic & the Navigators*, *The Unseen Hand*, *Back Bog Beast Bait*, and *Operation Sidewinder* focuses on the disconnection between characters and a physical "home." In these plays, the disconnection progresses after the finale due to the coping out of identity to the demands of an American cultural movement, symbol, and/or role. A second group of plays, *Melodrama Play*, *Mad Dog Blues*, *Cowboy Mouth*, and *The Tooth of Crime*, portrays the cop-out of identity to a journey that seeks a sense of identity from the images of the American star system, both in Hollywood and the music business. A third group, *Melodrama Play*, *Angel City*, and *Suicide in Bb*, portrays the creative process as an inevitable cop-out of identity when corrupted by the machinations of American mass art. Despite these differences in thematic approach, all three groups of

plays explore the lack of completeness and closure that results when Americans cop-out to an identity that does not arise from a connection to a sense of “home.”

Most importantly, the subversively structured finale at each play’s end frames this larger formal and thematic in the rock plays. While the music throughout each play, whether the minimal accompaniment in *Forensic & the Navigators* or the lyrical songs in *The Tooth of Crime*, follows the conventional place of music as an underscoring of the action or exposition of the characters’ thoughts and feelings, the finales break with tradition. In each ending, the finale does not provide a traditional, content-free celebration of completeness and closure. Rather, each Shepard protagonist either remains permanently or continually disconnected from a sense of “home,” and the finales in these plays underscore the disconnection that will continue after the stage lights fade.

Thus with music, the soundtrack to Shepard’s generation’s search for identity in cultural movements, symbols, and roles, the plays portray such a journey as cop-outs to false senses of identity that only separate Americans from their sense of “home” and the identity it provides. The music in each play complements the portrayal of journeying for an identity only abrades the “home” and identity of others. Instead, the plays suggest, create a sense of “home” and identity that creates rather than copies a counterculture “scene.” Only in that way can Americans be secure in their identities and achieve a sense of completeness and closure. Otherwise, they, too, remain on an incomplete progression to a sense of “home” and identity that they will never find.

## Chapter 3: Cyclic Curse: The Function of “Family” in Shepard’s Plays, 1978-1985

Collectively known as the family plays, *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978), *Buried Child* (1979), *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1983), and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) introduce a new strategy of interrogating completeness and closure to Shepard’s major plays with an exclusively cyclic structure. Generating the cyclic structure are the lies at the root of isolated relationships and selfish convolutions of Emersonian self-reliance, both of which reflect how consanguinity exists only to lock each family in its annihilating curse. Precisely when a family appears to overcome its curse, the ending reveals the apparent “resolution” to be the completion of only one cycle in an unending series. Rather than portraying “family” in the American literary tradition as an institution of consanguinity and love that can find the potential for growth as it overcomes “ruptures” in its stability, then, these plays suggest that the “curse” of consanguinity will cyclically continue and negate any potential for growth. Therefore, the family plays subvert what Shepard argues is the “lie” of dramatic resolution for American families with the deceptions that entrap Shepard’s characters in the cyclic function of the nature of “family” with no potential for completeness or closure.

*Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) establishes the model for Shepard’s next four plays. Ironically, the characters remain unaware that their actions also hurt themselves and continue a pattern of self-destruction, reflected in the dual deals for the farm by Weston and Emma, who both see the chance to sell the farm as an opportunity for

individual advancement. The night after Weston makes his deal, he awakens and proclaims himself to be a new man with no connection to his former self and actions. He claims to start with a clean state, which induces him to declare, “I don’t have to pay for my past now!” (192). Weston’s claim to be a whole new person comes with a costume change as if to signify he has no relation to his past self, but a costume change and some bold statements of self-denial do not change anything.

Weston’s monologue as the “new” Wesley further describes its unwelcome effect on his character and confirms the continuation of the role’s curse within him. Wesley tells Emma after her sarcastic remarks that when “I put one thing on it seemed like a part of him was growing on me. I could feel him taking over,” words that describe a circular pattern about to repeat itself in him rather than any progression of his character (196). Even more circular in its imagery are when Wesley follows these lines by saying, “I could feel myself retreating,” and “I could feel him coming in and me going out. Just like the change of the guards” (196). But the guards change every day, repeating a circular pattern rather than bring about a linear progression toward stasis. The “change” in Wesley after Weston’s abdication of the role of patriarch represents a circularity that subverts linearity for an enforced, circular stasis. Once Weston exits after these lines, it appears that Wesley moves forward with his new role, but the effect is that the family, including him, stays in the same place. Nothing really changes other than Wesley’s clothes.

Unaware of the futility of escaping the family’s curse, Emma’s flight from the family further demonstrates how problems for the family never achieve resolution so much as they reoccur. When they do, the problems only annihilate rather than free the



characters from the lies that entrap the “family.” When Emma tells Wes that he is going backwards because “you don’t look ahead,” her attempt to look ahead shows that she also does not “read the writing on the wall” and that “it’s deadly otherwise” (197). Like Weston, who declares himself a “whole new person,” Emma heads to the car that she hopes can lead to her new life of crime, “the perfect self-employment” (197). What Emma’s flight leads to is instead her entrapment in her own unwillingness to break the cycle of lies that literally blow up in her face and perpetuate the unstable structure of the family. Ella’s shrieks after she learns that Emma has left prove all too justified because Emma never makes it off the property in the car, which the two gangster-like characters, Emerson and Slater, have rigged with explosives.

After Emma’s fatal exit and Weston’s abandonment of the family, *Curse*’s final moments suggest circularity rather than the closing off of the narrative. Emerson and Slater, who mistake Wesley for Weston as another indication that Weston’s role has subsumed Wesley, survey the scene inside the house and snicker about the slaughtered calf and Emma. The two claim that the fire outside will burn itself out harmlessly, which foreshadows the story Wesley and Ella complete to end the play, yet we receive no confirmation of this. Exactly where Weston has gone remains unconfirmed as well, since he left the stage just seconds before Emma’s proclamation of independence and explosive death. Weston may have been in the car, too, as he decides to head to Mexico. While Emma expresses her approval of such a plan, we do not know if Weston walks too far from the house to join her. Emerson and Slater do not spot Weston, who could not have gone far, on their way over, and their mistaking Wesley in Weston’s clothes for his father suggests they did not notice the escaping Weston.

Rather than attempting a resolution of these events with an attempt to call the police or exact their own revenge or even self-destruction, though, Ella and Wesley return to the story of the cat and eagle that the characters bandy about earlier in the play. The effect of the final telling of the story is to extend a circular pattern that has been the controlling dynamic of the family all along, thereby confronting the ending's deadly events with an openness that subverts their specious progression to a resolution. Ella avoids dealing with the issues that confront her and stares at the lamb carcass, telling Wes that "something just went right through me" (199). That something is the story about the eagle and the tomcat that Weston used to tell the family.

Now in Weston's role, Wesley also knows the whole story and refreshes his mother's memory. The two animals lock in midair as "the eagle's trying to free himself from the cat, and the cat won't let go" (200). The story ends when "both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing" (200). But Ella and Wesley do not experience the ultimate finality of "crashing down" as "one whole thing." Rather, the telling of the story just after Weston's abdication and Emma's fatal exit, neither of which resolve anything for them or the family, underscores how the family remains trapped in its cycles of self-destruction. Just as the story ends unresolved with the tomcat and eagle locked together only intimates an eventual finality, so, too, does Ella and Wesley's story end unresolved and locked in an indefinite, circular pattern.

Borrowing the themes from an American literary icon, the image of two animals locked in a struggle, recalls Walt Whitman's "The Dalliance of the Eagles." The short poem also describes a midair battle involving "The clinching interlocking claws" of two eagles in "a swirling mass tight grappling." But the poem ends on a very different note

from Ella and Wesley's story. After "a motionless still balance in the air, the parting," the two eagles break free from one another and then they pursue "their separate diverse flight, She hers, he his, pursuing" (950). The point in Whitman's poem is that the two eagles resume their flight after a locked struggle, but in Ella and Wesley's "poem," the flight stops before any resolution of the conflict, leaving the story unresolved. While Whitman's poem suggests progression after the brief period of struggle, then, *Curse* only hints at a time when "both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing." Symbolic of the family's unwillingness to break from the circular pattern that entraps them, the tomcat and eagle remain locked in their mutually destructive flight, which mirrors Ella and Wesley's continuation of the circular pattern that refuses to release them.

In addition to this circular subversion of a Whitman theme, *Curse*'s ending also subverts the Emersonian theme of self-reliance. The obvious reference to Emerson comes in the character Emerson, who along with Slater brings an explosive death to Emma. What Emerson brings to the play flies in the face of the Emersonian ideal of self-reliance that espouses at its core that one must "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." And "Great men," Emerson claims, must not be "cowards fleeing before a revolution" because "Society is everywhere in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members." To rise above the "conformity" that society requires, one must use "self-reliance as its aversion" (438-39).

In *Curse*, self-reliance cannot subvert the circular function of "family" that makes Weston and Emma "cowards fleeing before a revolution" and entraps the characters in their present and future familial roles. Also in a subversion of Emersonian self-reliance, the "change" in Wesley follows the Emerson's demand that men should "accept the place

the divine Providence has found for you,” but the role of family patriarch accepts Wesley rather than Wesley taking up its challenges (438). Neither Weston nor Wesley wants the role because it confirms that the “family” and its cycle of self-destruction will continue. The fact that Wesley in costume and name becomes the elder “Wes” in the play underscores the inescapable circularity of the role. Likewise, the similarly named Ella and Emma underscores the transference of the role of matriarch from which the “self-reliant” Emma flees and dies, leaving Ella and Wesley to continue the “family” on its unsold and barren farm. Expressing the cycle of death and degeneration that inhabits the farm, it remains fallow and lifeless year after year.

While it may appear that society is in “conspiracy” against the family when Emerson and Slater make their deadly presence felt, these consequences result from the inescapable bonds that entrap the characters in a conspiracy against itself. Essentially, Emerson and Slater are only the ghosts of characters who enforce the cyclic function of the nature of family while they get away with murder. For Ella and Wesley’s part, the pair does nothing to address these at the fading of the stage lights, which conventionally signals closure, but it occurs precisely when the play aggressively questions and defers closure. The stage directions specifically call for a very slow fade to suggest the impossibility and artificiality of closing the story.

The dim circularity that ends *Curse* also subverts the American literary tradition of the relationship between the family as a unit and the individuality of its members. Conventionally, the collective identity of a family challenges the democratic individuality of the family members, but they successfully adapt “family” to meet the challenge. In *Family, Drama, and American Dreams*, Tom Scanlan traces this adaptation to the

writings of Crèvecoeur and Tocqueville, noting the adaptation to two models of “family,” one based on the “security” of the family as an institution and the other on the “freedom” of American individuality. Despite the potential tensions, Scanlan argues, the American family tries to adapt, albeit not without difficulties, in the name of “harmony”:

The atomism of democratic society, with its tendency to reject institutions, left one exposed to life without support. Yet investing oneself in the primary institution of protection, family, meant commitment to a social structure which was what one had fled from initially. A radical, institutional ideology could not easily make peace with the institution one recognized. But the dream was that harmony would prevail. (42)

The source of harmony in the institution of family, the sentimental fiction of the nineteenth century further explores, lies in consanguinity and, quite simply, love. Studies of this genre such as Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* and Ann Douglas’s *The Feminization of American Culture* focus on consanguinity in families whose struggles in an era of slavery and oppression as depicted in works like Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. By contrast, Cindy Weinstein’s more recent *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century Literature* argues that “the substitution of freely given love, rather than blood, [forms] the invincible tie that binds together in a family” and makes “the authority of love” bind the unconventional families that antebellum society creates (9).

Weinstein must also acknowledge in the very next paragraph, however, that the return of the prodigal father that reestablishes a familial bond based on consanguinity is a

standard trope in sentimental fiction. An in-depth study of the American prodigal, Geoffrey S. Proehl's *Coming Home Again: American Family Drama and the Figure of the Prodigal*, examines how the figure of the prodigal becomes central in twentieth-century America when not slavery but alcohol threatens family ties of love and consanguinity. Proehl reads the temperance melodrama in the years just prior to Prohibition as a formal and thematic model for postwar plays that focus on the American family, including works by Williams, O'Neill, Hansberry, and Albee. Central to all of these works and many others, Proehl argues, is "the man with a bottle" whose prodigality and inebriation threaten the family stability (40). Proehl's two key terms in reading prodigal male characters are "rupture," which "suggests brokenness, pain, and violence" (73), and "potential," referring to "the potential for reform, for coming home again" (83). Central to the action and characters of these family plays, as Proehl reads them, is an alcohol-fueled, prodigal rupture on the part of male characters that results in at least the potential for resolution and a sense of closure through the reestablishment of family bonds.

Reading many of the same plays as Proehl, Thaddeus Wakefield argues in *The Family in Twentieth-Century American Drama* that the agency for the conflicts of postwar, American family plays lies in capitalism's commodification of each family member. Working from Baudrillard's definition of the "commodity" in consumer capitalistic society, Wakefield's central thesis correctly asserts that family members in these texts value themselves and each other as commodities, valued not for their use-value but for exchange-value (2-3). That is, unlike the American family literally and economically rooted to the farm or non-traditional families during slavery who build their

own roots, families in twentieth-century dramas feel detached from their labors and thus their familial bonds of consanguinity and love. Characters like O'Neill's James Tyrone, Sr., and Miller's Willy Loman, to name two poignant examples, represent what Wakefield interprets are failed attempts to meet the materialistic standards that a consumer society places on their family roles (43).

While this study is not a biographical reading of Shepard's family plays, the prodigality, alcoholism, and finances of Shepard's upbringing should be noted. During the 1950s and early 1960s when the sober and loving homes in *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* portrayed "family" as harmoniously rooted to successful suburbia, Shepard's family lived a nomadic life as a military family with a father's alcoholism creating a stormy and bleak life. Shewey and Oumano, Shepard's two biographers, both detail the personality of Shepard's father, who would often abandon the family for alcohol-fueled prodigality. When Shepard's father was at home, the constant physical and verbal conflicts between father and son further destabilized the family. As Shepard's sister Roxanne describes the two, they "were like two pit bulls" (qtd. in Shewey 18).

In terms of Shepard's thoughts on resolution in drama as a "cop-out" to a tradition that relies on a "cheap trick," Shepard's statements read like an indictment of the American tradition of portraying families. Rather than ultimately harmonious, as Scanlan argues, with "the potential for reform," in Proehl's words, Shepard firmly believes that such an approach undermines the very essence of drama. "It seems like a lie to me—the resolutions, the denouement and all the rest of it," Shepard claims. "And it's been handed down as if that is the way to write plays. If you're only interested in taking a

couple of characters, however many, and having them clash for a while, and then resolve their problems, then why not go to group therapy or something?" (qtd. in Shewey 117).

In words and actions, the "family" in *Curse of the Starving Class* avoids a cop-out to the "lie" of the traditional portrayal of the American family because consanguinity represents a "curse" that entraps the characters in a cycle of self-destruction. At the root of the curse lie the fragmented family members whose convoluted attempts at self-reliance strive in vain for selfish and deceitful purposes rather than what the critics above define as harmony, love, consanguinity, or potential. As Ron Mottram describes the "family" in *Curse*, "Lies, thoughts, feelings, and words existing in a vacuum; lack of any real contact or understanding: these are the substance of Shepard's American family" (134). While the characters in *Curse* fail at their family roles as Wakefield argues, the source of their failures arises from within the characters, enforced by the ghostly Emerson and Slater, and not from society's demands.

Throughout *Curse*, the buildup to Wesley's new role appears to be linear in that the children of the house will continue and build on the past, but this change actually represents a cyclical pattern. Weston's role as patriarch was merely figurative, and Emma sees that Wesley's will be no different, right down to the change in costume, which represents the only real "change." Things will continue in the same cyclical pattern as before, and no change of clothes can alter it. When Emma sees this pattern repeat in Wesley, she follows the pattern of her father by fleeing, a decision that ironically reinforces the circular nature of the function of the "family."

Death provides a release from the cycle for individual family members, but it does not stop the cycle from repeating. This cyclical function of the nature of family, then,



supposes fragmentation and perpetual digression. It is this sense of “family” that pervades *Curse* and the other family plays and subverts linear progression with an unending cycle of decay, which in turn defers completeness and closure since each “ending” only represents the repetition of yet another cycle. *Curse* never shows everything “come crashing down” because that would provide an apocalyptic finality that the circular function of family so rigorously denies.

Thus the circular function of the nature of “family” in *Curse* resists the cop-out of portraying the family’s harmonious potential for progress. After completing this old story from the family’s past, the final moments subvert the progression of events with a dramatic turn that suggests circularity. Merely able to make a verbal connection that metaphorically confirms Ella and Wesley’s fate in the form of the cat and eagle story, the two stand apart in the last seconds of the play. Wesley looks up stage with his back to Ella while Ella stays down stage and stares at the lifeless lamb, which looks like the eagle and tomcat at the end of the old story that Weston used to tell, an image that suggests the story is incomplete. Weston has fled from solving family problems and gone to Mexico, and the car and Emma continue to smolder offstage in a grim example of the annihilation that awaits anyone who tries to escape the family’s curse.

*Buried Child* (1978) follows quickly on the theatrical heels of *Curse*, and in a sense *Curse* works as a rough draft for *Buried Child*. In the tale of Vince’s homecoming gone awry—at least in some ways, since he ends the play as the new patriarch—the play develops themes and ideas that Shepard introduces in *Curse*. The Ron Mottram quote cited above that refers to the “vacuum of lies” that makes up the family structure in *Curse* also describes the family in *Buried Child*, but this family has one lie that grows and

subverts any attempts to break free from the cycle of self-destruction. The ending confirms a secret whose presence grows larger as the play speciously progresses towards a resolution and new beginning with the secret's revelation: "family" determines the cyclical shape of the characters' fates.

Dodge's story of the buried child reads like Greek tragedy meets a Norman Rockwell painting, of whose work Shelly laughingly says the house reminds her when she first enters. As Dodge explains the birth of the baby, "I let her have this one by herself" (124). The child of course did not have an Immaculate Conception, and Dodge not too subtly hints that "Tilden was the one who knew" that he was the father. The secret that Dodge narrates here reveals two secrets, the first being the importance of family in determining the course of events because of the family's shared lies about the truth, which they bury rather than resolve.

That the baby, to whom Dodge only refers as "it," could not "continue" reveals how in his mind he had to murder the child for the good of the family, an act that ironically destroys the family. "It," Dodge claims, "made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothing" because of "this one weakness" (124). While Dodge tries to take a high and mighty tone about the family "accomplishments," though, the very little we can see that the family has accomplished make his words ring hollow. Dodge ends the story with his admission that he drowned the child, "Like the runt of the litter" (124). Once again, the metaphor here is one of escape. By allowing the baby to escape from its family through death, Dodge also hopes the family can escape the consequences of the baby's birth. All Dodge's actions do, however, is defer any potential for the family to

move on from these events. Instead, they remain trapped in the cycle of lies the buried child creates.

Ironically, Halie finds Dodge's words to be a reminder of her lost hope for the men in the family that rests with the deceased Ansel, the first of the family's continuing series of buried male prodigy. "What's happened to the men in the family!" She shrieks. "Where are the men"! (124). Vince's crashing entrance immediately after these lines provides the answer: nothing has "happened to the men in the family." Rather, the role of family patriarch has subsumed Vince's character so that the next cycle can entrap the family in its lies. Halie's believing in Ansel as the symbol of potential hope serves as a lie, like the buried child, of how death provides the only escape from the family but does nothing to end its curse.

Repeating his father Tilden's prodigal pattern of fleeing only to return in a submission to the family's curse, Vince returns home after only one night on the road and re-enters the Norman Rockwell-type exterior of the house as a conquering hero—or villain. Singing "From the halls of Montezuma" like a drunken Marine, Vince smashes bottle after bottle on the front porch and claims to be "the Midnight Strangler! I devour whole families in a single gulp" (126)! Actually, the family devours individuals "in a single gulp," and Vince's return provides the latest proof. Vince's grandmother Halie, on the other hand, has no problem recognizing one of the men in her family because Vince's "change" that prevents Shelly from even recognizing him is actually an extension of Vince's commonality with the other men in the family. Halie has seen men in the family flee before, and she knows that the only permanent flight from the family comes through death.

In lines that sound much like the role of the family patriarch's assumption of Wesley in *Curse*, Vince explains why he returns home after attempting to flee his family. By trying to escape the horrors Vince finds during his homecoming, he only plays into the familial cycle that determines his self-destructive fate, a realization he makes just as he is about to cross the state border and flee from his family. While looking in the windshield on the lonesome road, Vince could not only see himself. He also saw "another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him" (130). Vince's next lines explain his recognition of this image as his fate:

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 to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that [...] 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. (130)

At first an outsider to the home whose own father and grandfather cannot recognize him, Vince realizes that despite their lack of recognition that he has been, is, and always will be one of them. Vince learns that any attempt to escape does not change his place in the family's self-destructive pattern. And although Vince's attempt at flight does not end in annihilation, it still represents the same failure as Emma's explosive exit in *Curse*. The circular function of the family is so strong that the only way to break free successfully is through self annihilation, an act that does nothing to stop the cyclic prison of family. Not taking such a fatal measure, Vince returns home and assumes his place in

the family line, ensuring the eventual moment described in *Curse* when he “come(s) crashing down.”

Vince’s recognition triggers a realization in Dodge that enables the final effects of Vince’s homecoming and Dodge’s physical decline to complete the current curse’s cycle. With Vince’s transformation complete, Dodge now sees Vince in a new light, too: Dodge now knows that he has a true family heir. Dodge’s final act as family patriarch bestows upon his grandson the house and “all the furnishings, accoutrements and paraphernalia therein” (129). But he leaves nothing else to Vince, since all of his other belongings, from his lathe to his Bennie Goodman records, “are to be pushed into a gigantic heap and set ablaze in the very center of my fields” along with his own body” (129). He wants the blaze to continue “til nothing remains but ash” (129). As if the farm were another member of the family, its annihilation represents its only chance for escape. Much like Emma’s flight in *Curse*, Dodge’s proclamation represents a subverted act of self-reliance that immediately results in Dodge’s “sacrifice” to the family’s curse.

Dodge’s desire for the destruction of all the farm’s equipment and amenities also recalls another play containing a family patriarch who would rather see his beloved farm destroyed than owned by anyone else. Cabot in O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* takes similar steps as Dodge does here, only he literally lets his livestock go and remains the sole farmhand left to re-collect them, an act that he is too old to handle on his own. Both farms also produce and incestuous and murdered offspring that leads to the decline in the families’ fortunes. But Dodge has even less vigor than O’Neill’s Cabot, and with the passing of his farm and the patriarchal role to Vince, Dodge exhausts what remains of his

characters and passes away, unnoticed, in the play's final minutes.<sup>1</sup> The self-proclaimed "invisible man," Dodge completes the story of the buried child and the passing of the land he did so little to fulfill of its potential, just as his own potential remains unfulfilled. He surrenders to his new role of former and deceased man of the family, joining Ansel and all the others in the self-destructive and unfulfilled family cycle.

Ironically, Dodge's wife Halie signals this simultaneous and circular beginning and ending while she chats offstage, praising the newfound harvest yet unaware of the new cycle that has only just begun. As Halie prattles away offstage, the play speciously moves towards the potential for progress in the form of a new, miraculous harvest in the fields that can bring a new harmony to the family and a break from the family's old, cursed past. A silent Vince and Dodge sit on the sofa and try to ignore—the newly deceased Dodge has the freedom to do so by the end of the play—Halie's comments. This image and Halie's words recall the play's opening when a sarcastic Dodge pokes holes in his wife's spurious recollections.

Complementing the death of Dodge and his replacement by Vince, Halie's words also speciously suggest the potential for the family's growth. She claims to see an abundance of crops in the once barren field, which repeats the cyclic pattern of death and rebirth begun by Dodge and Vince. Halie's words foreshadow Tilden's entrance, which destroys any sense of purpose and place Halie's optimism establishes. To explain the "miracle" crop on the farm, Halie exclaims, "Maybe it's the sun. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's the sun" (132). The repetition in the play's final lines reinforce the theme of life and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Abbott's "The Curse of the Misbegotten: The Wanton Son in the Play of Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard" in *Modern Drama* 18 (1994) closely examines this connection between the two playwrights to conclude correctly that on the one hand O'Neill "constructs a complex world of self-deception and

rebirth, using a symbol of life throughout world literature, and they also reinforce the word “sun” so that we see the irony in her words. The sun may indeed explain the abundance of crops that now lies in the field, but the son who no longer lies in the field represents the most significant harvest of the family’s new beginning.

*Buried Child*’s final seconds, however, subvert the potential new start for the family and confirm that the curse’s circularity has begun again. All that seems so possible and positive in Halie’s lines becomes only a brief respite from the family’s past that they can never escape. In the silence that follows Halie’s joyous exclamation, Tilden re-enters the stage with the buried child in his arms, an act that renders Halie and her words hopeless and helpless and confirms Dodge’s incestuous tale. Dodge’s sarcastic wisecracks at Halie’s expense in the play’s opening do little to stop Halie from assuming her correctness and position of authority. The corpse of the buried child, however, represents a past that Halie and her sons try to forget, but they cannot deny it now. The son, not the sun, provides both the proof of Dodge’s story and completes a cycle that locks the family in self-destruction.

Summarizing Tilden’s sudden reentrance and larger role in the play, Bruce Mann rightly notes how Tilden works as an integral part of Shepard’s desire to “achieve an effect on his audience,” and shock best describes Tilden’s effect (1988; 82). Tilden inexplicably harvests corn and carrots earlier in the play, and now his final harvest subsumes any potential for a positive cycle to begin for the family. As he silently makes his way up the stairs, Tilden renders Vince’s role as patriarch even more of a worthless victory than it already is. An abundance of crops awaits Vince in the fields, meaning that

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alienation” for his protagonists while on the other “Shepard’s wanton sons transform themselves and their environment in ways that isolate and protect them from their world, and [...] fathers (198).

the land once again provides for the family without their toiling the soil, yet the buried child represents a confirmation that the family's past faults lock them in an inescapable cycle of their curse.

As moments in the family's story reach conclusions, then, a new chapter opens immediately that confronts a sense of completeness with an opening to further self-destruction. When Tilden enters with the buried child, he confronts Halie's vision of a new beginning for the family symbolized and partly realized by the abundance of crops with a return to the family's inescapable pattern of self-destruction. The fading stage lights prevent us from seeing or hearing Halie's reaction to the appearance of her son that now overshadows any potential for growth and change that the sun miraculously brings to the farm. Whether Halie's heart and mind can take the sight of the corpse and its re-emergence in her life at the moment when she feels the future holds promise remains unseen. Perhaps the shock may drive Halie to continue following the Oedipal course of events and take her own life.

We also never see if the stoic Tilden breaks down, especially if Halie's reaction becomes particularly drastic. Whether Tilden gouges out his eyes, tries to run away again, or takes some other drastic measure remains the audience's choice. Tilden's entrance with the child sets up a shocking effect, but the play ends with the shock value still building on the dark stage. Shown this new horrible twist of fate that completes the thematic cycle of rebirth, the audience must let itself down from that shock on its own. Whatever positive sense of completeness emerges from the new beginning for the family, the play ends with an unending sense of despair and inescapable curse.



As is the case in *Curse*, *Buried Child*'s ending reveals any potential for growth to be the completion of only one cycle of the curse's unending series. Several key questions remain as Tilden plods upstairs, and the play's slow fade of the stage lights provides no answers. The first issue that *Buried Child* leaves unresolved relates to when the family will realize Dodge's death, which the text specially states should go "completely unnoticed" (131). Dodge's death may go unnoticed by an audience, too, since it occurs so subtly, while a reader of the play has the benefit of the stage directions. Only Vince can verify Dodge's wishes for all his personal belongings and his body to become a funeral pyre. Vince clearly sits at the head of the family, but he may inherit more than Dodge would like, and no one in the family has the power to stop the upstart.

At the center of the circular function of the nature of "family" are the same lies and "self-reliance" found in *Curse*. Dodge's name labels him correctly as the head of household who dodges responsibility for the comfort of the sofa and his liquor, his presence being so insignificant that he refers to himself as "the invisible man." Unlike the characters that Wakefield's study identifies as unable to fulfill society's consumer-driven demands placed on the role of father, Dodge makes no attempt to meet them. Halie, by contrast, makes her presence known largely through her words, which begin and end the play's circular structure. Halie truly becomes invisible during the night that divides the two acts and for a good portion of act two as well, taking a temporary flight from the family to stay out all night with Father Dewis. Such a selfish act fits the subverted application of self-reliance in the family plays, acts reflecting how members can only flee the family permanently through death, such as Dodge's and *Curse*'s Emma.

The actions of all four of the family's sons also reflect the play's portrayal of "family" as a cyclic and inescapable curse of self-serving lies and convoluted self-reliance. The two sons who still live at home, Tilden and Bradley, are not only members of the fragmented family but embody only fragments of their former selves. The bullying Bradley who forces Dodge into a bloody haircut at the end of the first act only overcompensates for his lack of a leg, the result of his own ineptitude that now makes him entirely reliant on his family. The family also wholly determines the character of the prodigal Tilden, who once fled for the desert of New Mexico but returned some time as only a detached ghost of his former self who also relies on his family for support and what is left of his character. Dodge and Halie's two other sons who escape the family's determinism through death do not escape the effects of it. Ansel, the all-American who dies young, forever represents the deferred potential for success and progress for the family, while the unnamed buried child in the field embodies the family's curse. "It," as Dodge refers to him, is the secret that drives the recursive cycle of lies and entraps the family.

Thus *Buried Child*'s ending builds on *Curse of the Starving Class*'s model of circularity that resists completeness and closure. In *Curse*, the shock value lies offstage, as the audience never sees the exploded car containing Emma, whereas the appearance of the buried child brings the horror from the family's past on stage to heighten its shocking effect. Both plays contain the abdication and assumption of the role of family patriarch, and Wesley's switch with Weston represents a cyclic and symbolic "change of the guard" rather than any real changes in the two characters.

Although not such a one-to-one change in characters, Vince's invasion of the home after a fruitless night of escape from his role reveals a character who not only accepts his fate but relishes it as well. Vince's lines that describe his recognition of his place within the family line further develop Wesley's brief discussion of his submission to his new role. Any effort to escape the family only receives confirmation of its curse and how such acts transparently reflect the lies at the core of such "self-reliant" actions, such as Tilden's prodigality and Emma's flight. Both Emma's death and the entrance of the buried child shatter the potential for growth and confirm the curse's permanent hold on the family reflected in *Curse*'s ending tale of the eagle and the tomcat.

Even more poignantly than *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child* resists the cop-out of portraying "family" as a harmonious unit whose ruptures result in the potential for growth by portraying the circular function of the nature of "family." The entire progression to a brand-new day in which the family can actually live a happy and bountiful life, free from the shackles of its past, exists only in Halie's words but makes the ending's subversion of it all the more powerful. Tilden's entrance with the buried child confronts Halie's happiness and Vince's ascension to the head of household with the ultimate reminder that the family shall always lie fallow, just as the field had until the inexplicable growth of crops during the play. The family resembles the Norman Rockwell exterior—at least as Halie's paints the picture for us—for only an instant before the lies beneath the façade "grow" the curse's next cycle.

Consequently, any sense of completeness and closure from the family as a resting-place for its members only comes in the form of a tomb for its victims. The survivors live on, unsure of exactly what fate awaits them, but they know that it is only a

matter of time before their seeds of self-destruction will send them “crashing down.”

Likewise, any attempt to escape the cycle that clutches all of the family members remains fruitless, for they can never shed the curse. Ultimately, the circular function of the nature of family in *Buried Child* subverts and entraps its initial Norman Rockwell representation of “Home, sweet home” in a home, sick home.

*True West* (1980) follows the family plays’ model of resisting the cop-out of portraying a traditional American family’s harmonious potential for growth with a much smaller family unit than in *Curse* and *Buried Child*. What the play’s final scene reveals is that the “collaboration” between the brothers is actually a lie that the two perpetuate in collusion. Lee and Austin’s work on the screenplay and plans to head out to the desert act out a pattern of denial rather than actually deal with their issues. Once they exhaust the pattern, they only have each other and their building conflict to face. Lee’s itchy feet and disillusionment with Los Angeles create the break from the brothers’ denial that sets the stage for another inevitable confrontation between the two. The feeling out of each other’s character with the golf games with Hollywood agents and the kitchen full of stolen toasters ends with Lee’s desire to drop the whole project and head to the desert. Austin, who has much more personally invested in both the script and making it as a writer, insists that Lee must go because “We’ve got it all planned” (55). But Lee discards the plan because it solves nothing, and all their attempts at collaboration are merely a childish game that reduces the home and the two of them to disheveled and lost children.

The return of Lee and Austin’s mother just as the brothers begin to turn on one another underscores this cyclic return to their childhood, primal conflicts. The brief appearance and exit of Lee and Austin’s mother confirms that the boys have both

cyclically returned to the same-old struggles from their childhood, a pattern that also reflects their assumption of the abandoning role of the Old Man. Mom's lines are devoid of any real authority, just like the lines of all authority figures in the family plays; ironically Mom say to Lee what she said years ago to his father: "Well, you can't leave. You have a family" (55). Mom's words ring hollow, since she cannot control her sons either now or in the past anymore than she could control her husband, thus following the characters' pattern of lies, this time with her two sons who struggle for the assumption of the Old Man's role.

With the conclusion of Mom's recent, "self-reliant" flight from the family and the sons' role-reversals and false collaboration, Austin returns the relationship to its confrontational roots. Lee's abandonment of the project means that Austin now feels free to complete his projection of the conflict with the old man on Lee. While Lee borrows some antiques from Mom to provide his utensils for his prolonged stay in the desert because "Plastic's not the same at all," Austin plans to finish off his brother once and for all (56). With the father out on his own patch of desert, neither brother can actually have the final confrontation they truly desire that can release some of the demons from their past.

Instead, all Austin and Lee have is one another for projecting their Oedipal drives. Not that *True West*'s plot recreates the Classical myth, but the play shares with *Buried Child* a thematic streak relating to the oldest of themes in Western literature. *True West* ties a much newer, American theme of the West to the ancient theme of the rivalry between father and son. In Shepard, neither son can have a conflict with the father; they can only run, both physically in a trek into the desert, and inwardly as they struggle to

complete a lost part of themselves. Both brothers seek this connection, and if Lee refuses to follow the deal and keep things level with Austin, then the younger brother projects the conflict on Lee.

The violent explosion of the brothers' actions suggests a resolution to the conflict that contains elements of the cinematic Western showdown. After a brief truce that Lee betrays, Austin returns to the unfinished conflict that builds from the opening scene into an apparent final clash between the brothers. Wielding a utility cord with which he hopes to choke the life out of Lee, Austin lashes out at Lee in a final, lethal confrontation. Austin's words when he attacks sound like an ultimatum when he screams, "You're not taking anything! You're stayin' right here!" (57). The building confrontation between the two brothers reaches a feverish pitch that contains the earmarks of the final showdown, a plot device that represents a hallmark of the Western genre that both brothers wish to recapture. Like the two gunfighters who find themselves at odds and trapped in a town "that's not big enough for the both of us," Austin and Lee follow this same narrative course to a showdown in the play's final moments wherein the good guy defeats the bad guy with his six-shooter.

Conventionally, the showdown's finality provides a strong sense of completeness and closure for a linear plot that structurally and thematically builds toward a positive resolution of a Western's central conflict.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, *True West's* "showdown" confirms the circular function of the nature of family and denies any resolution because *True West's* "showdown" represents only one confrontation in an unending cycle. The

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of the Western's structure, see the chapter "The Western Formula," p. 10-24 in John H. Lenihan's *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* in which he notes that despite "whatever questions and ambiguities about the finality of the frontier epoch were raised" in Westerns, they "ended on a positive note that gross injustices and perils had been successfully overcome" (15).

final confrontation between good guy and bad guy in a Western showdown re-establishes a sense of order for the town that the good guy defends even though he remains an outsider to its cozy, domestic home. Lee and Austin, on the other hand, both wish to flee Los Angeles for the open spaces of the desert rather than stay and tough it out, which reverses the thematic conventions of the showdown.

The brothers' fleeing for the desert follows the script as their blueprint to finding the true West and the lost connection to their father rather than the conventional showdown, which like both the West and their father no longer exists. The agent Saul accepts the premise for the script as the Real McCoy, and so do Austin and Lee. Neither brother wants to be the pursuer; however, each desires to be the lone wolf who eludes capture. But before the chase can begin and the roles determined, each brother once again faces the task of eliminating the other, the recurring familial obstacle to Lee's and Austin's breaking free.

One other recurring obstacle remains in their way—Mom. Much like Lee and Austin's circular conflict that avoids and perpetuates rather than resolves the conflict with their father, Mom's final lines and flight also complete one repetition of an unending circular pattern. Mom's demand that "You'll have to stop fighting in the house" sounds like something she would have said over twenty years before (57). Now as probably then, Mom's advice to her two desperately savage sons, "Well you can't kill him" and "That's a savage thing to do" falls on deaf ears (58). She vacates the stage and leaves Lee and Austin alone to resolve the sibling confrontation that has been on course since even before the play's action begins. Following the family plays' pattern, Mom represents yet another family member who flees rather than stays and resolves problems.

Mom's flight, just like all other flights in these plays, solves nothing and instead perpetuates the cyclic nature of her "family" that locks itself in an unending pattern of conflict.

Immediately after Mom's flight, *True West* ends without completing the showdown, which also follows the family plays' model of cyclically deferring completeness and closure. Rather than finish off Lee, Austin actually negotiates. "Gimme a little headstart," Austin offers, "and I'll turn you loose" (59). Austin's lines do no more to stop Lee than his mother's. The two face each other in silence, neither making a move toward the door, both of them wishing they can be the first to mimic their script and head for the desert. As has been the case since childhood, the brothers are in the way of each other's progression toward resolving his conflicts, and escape appears to be a difficult and potentially deadly option. Lee and Austin remain in a standoff, unable to escape to the desert yet unable to finish off their sibling rivalry in a showdown. Having a gun would help, but they lack this quintessential element, which in turn makes their "showdown" a cyclic subversion of the linear finality of a "true" showdown.

The lethal resolution that a gun brings to the Western genre provides the key source for closure, and is an element that Lee and Austin lack. As James Lenihan explains in *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film*, "No Western, aside from perhaps a wild horse story, was complete without the six-gun and carbine to resolve physical conflicts and bring order to the frontier" (13). If Lee and Austin had a couple of wild horses in a direct copy of their screenplay, they would be acting out "a wild horse story" that Lenihan notes is the one possible exception to the six-gun's resolution of Western conflicts.



Thematically and formally, the pattern that Lee and Austin act out works on two levels. On the one hand, what Lee and Austin seek in a mutual feeling out of the other's personality are any missed connections to their father. Lee's character contains more of the gruffness of the father, while the younger Austin has spent more of his past with the father, providing a contrast that makes both brothers more than a little envious and curious. On the other hand, the brothers' attempts to collaborate on a Western screenplay only fuel this mutual feeling out of each other's character, particularly benefiting Lee. Lee's more authentic—at least in the mind of Saul, the Hollywood agent—connections to the desert and wilderness make him the real source for the screenplay to the point that Lee dictates the script for Austin.

The role-shifting and screenwriting cycles to a head in the play's ending when both Lee and Austin seek to mimic the script's final desert quest, if only each could eliminate the other from the story. Ironically, neither can eliminate the other from the story. Just when the brothers' relationship appears to gain a new sense of collaboration on both the screenplay and the agreement that Lee take Austin out to the desert, the collaborative truce between the two breaks down. Just as in the other family plays, the apparent progression toward solving problems and building a positive future is not a progression at all.

By contrast, the brothers only repeat a self-destructive pattern that has entrapped them since childhood. Without a gun or wild horses, Lee and Austin face each other in a Western no-man's land. They are near the plastic city of Los Angeles, not the desert, and they have no horses to take them away. All Austin has is the cord that symbolizes their unbreakable family connection with each other and their mother who has flown the scene

rather than stay and resolve it. He lets that lone weapon slowly drop to the floor, leaving the two to face each other *mano a mano*. The expression means hand to hand (not man to man, as non-Spanish speakers often assume), and the two must take matters into their own hands if either hopes to escape to the desert and whatever answers they can find to reconnect with the lost true West and their father. With this dual realization by the brothers, both understand the need to eliminate the other to have any chance of being the lone wolf in the desert who can “find himself” by confronting the old man.

Following the family plays’ model, *True West* leaves its final confrontation unresolved and draped in the darkness of the slowly fading stage lights, thus again subverting a signal for closure to suggest that the circularity of the narrative continues after the lights fade. The cry of the wolf in the distance calls to Lee and Austin’s physical and psychological quest to achieve closure, but darkness shields us from seeing the close to their standoff. Like the mythic and lost sense of a true West that eludes the brothers, the close to their conflict remains lost in the darkness. Charles R. Lyons is one of the few critics who recognizes that the mythic images in Shepard create what he calls “an avoidance of confronting the relationship between father and son as much as a revelation of an authentic confrontation” (32).

More significantly, *True West*’s stalemated “showdown” expresses how the confrontation between father and son is not only avoided but an impossibility altogether. The old man becomes a source of debate between the two brothers because each longs to connect with their missing “old man,” and each longs for the missing and unattainable familial connection the old man represents. And when the brothers’ conflict comes to a head is the point where Lee and Austin remain trapped when the stage lights fade. The

inability of the two to achieve closure ever whether or not one brother kills the other, they kill each other, or they both escape takes precedence over a resolution of the conflict. What happens after the stage lights fade cannot alter this fate, and the audience's imaginations must close the onstage conflict, and the real conflict can never achieve closure.

Therefore, *True West* appears to be a linear narrative that will resolve its sibling conflict and complete the pattern of competition and conflict between the brothers. The now-abandoned Western script that becomes the blueprint for the brothers' actions briefly leads them astray from this central conflict, but now it returns full cycle. Again, Shepard provides an ending that defers rather than completes the conflict between Austin and Lee. By finally attacking one another, *True West* completes the tension that builds between the two throughout the play, and that is precisely why Lee and Austin never complete the showdown. Instead, the two brothers remained locked in silence as the stage lights dim and a lone wolf cries in the distance.

Additionally, the play explores the family plays' theme of resisting the "cop-out" of portraying the potential for family growth, *True West* ends without resolving a final confrontation and adds a variation to the family plays' circularity. Infused with the theme of the lost West, the void that the missing father leaves remains unfulfilled, which follows the previous plays. While lacking a symbolic sacrifice to family's circular curse, such as by Emma or Dodge, Mom's flight reflects the prodigality of characters such as Tilden, Hallie, Vince, and Weston whose convoluted self-reliance makes them believe the lie that merely fleeing the family can enable them to escape its curse. Confirming the futility of flight is the completion of the cyclic pattern in which Lee and Austin explore

each other's character for any complementary connections to the true West and the old man.

Thus we do not learn who wins the struggle because both of them can only lose, just as they have always lost to the old man's lies and prodigality for their entire lives before, during, and after the events in *True West*. The brothers have already lost any connection to their father, and their mother has deserted them, two escapes that leave unresolved conflict in their wake. All Lee and Austin have now is each other. If either of them loses the other, then the "victor" leaves himself with nothing. The protagonists trap themselves in a gamble that ensures their chances of being the elusive lone wolf who connects to the true West. Neither can afford to lose the struggle, but neither can either actually win. All that remains is for them to remain locked in the standoff that also defers any resolution and keeps the brothers entrapped in the cyclic function of the nature of their "family."

*Fool for Love* (1983) condenses the family plays' elements into one frenetic act whose events occur on a single night when Eddie ends his prodigality and treks nearly three thousand miles to reunite with May, his half-sister and former high school sweetheart. Eddie and May divulge their secret in the play's ending, much like Dodge in *Buried Child*, a revelation that speciously appears to make way for a resolution of and growth past the lies in their relationship. Eddie discusses the relationship with May's boyfriend, Martin, who like Shelly in *Buried Child* has the misfortune of being the outsider who has to share in the experience. Eddie reveals the first of two family secrets: he and May are not married, which Martin guesses, but are instead half-brother and sister who "fooled around" before they found out in high school (47). The admission of incest

recalls Dodge's telling about the buried child, and Eddie then tells a story about his old man's "two completely separate lives" that recalls Lee and Austin's old man in *True West* (48). And just as Dodge's lines tell secret truth, Eddie's lines reveal a shocking truth about the family that sets up false expectations for completeness. In *Buried Child*, Dodge's story appears to conclude and confirm the family truth, but it only sets the stage for Tilden's shocking entrance with the buried child. The shocking story about Eddie and May's incestuous relationship, too, appears to be the completion and confirmation of their secret.

An even more shocking truth, however, is the shocking truth that comes from May and the fact that the one person whom she and Eddie need to hear the story, the Old Man, will never hear it is what entraps the two in the circular curse of their "family." May re-enters from the bathroom where she has listened to Eddie's version of the story all along and takes over the story of the old man's separate lives and provides the deadly conclusion to Eddie and May's high school romance. After the two half-siblings learn the truth about themselves, she explains, that still does not stop their affection for one another. In fact, May claims, "We couldn't eat if we weren't together. We couldn't sleep" (54). At first, May's mother begs her daughter to stop, while Eddie's mother "had no idea what was wrong with him" (54).

Recounting a further harrowing example of the curse's sacrificial nature, May details how her mother desperately tried to explain to Eddie's mother that the relationship must stop. Rather than enlist Eddie's mother to help end the incestuous infatuation, however, the results of learning the truth are fatal for her. "Eddie's mother," May reveals, "blew her brains out" (54). As is the case for all family members, death provides

the only true escape for Eddie's mother, but it does not end the curse. Additionally, Eddie and May's need to retell the tale to Martin, an outsider like *Curse's* Shelley, reflects how "family" continues to entrap the siblings in its self-destructive pattern.

The story may be shocking, yet the truth can have no effect on the one character from the past who only learns of this ending in the minds of Eddie and May and could, if he were present, face his past and break its hold on his children. In fact, Eddie and May's story does not break them free from its hold on their fates because its intended audience, the Old Man, never hears it, while the real audience, Martin, is only a stranger who fills the physical space that the Old Man should but will never occupy. Retelling the story, this most recent version being the worst ever in the Old Man's opinion, reveals how its "truth" remains a malleable and elusive element and reflects the circularity of lies that entraps the siblings.

Confirming the completion of another cycle of the curse, Eddie uses the destruction of the truck and horse trailer by the Countess, whose off-stage presence makes her an even more ghostly enforcer of annihilation than Emerson and Slater, as a pretext for walking out on May. In a doubling of Emerson and Slater's explosive violence, the Countess's first revenge against Eddie is a shotgun blast through his windshield, and her second attack really leaves him in the lurch. With the empty promise that "I'll just take a look at it and come right back," Eddie heads out the door with no intention of coming back (54). Eddie's exit represents yet another example of fleeing from family problems rather than resolving them, which actually leads him to "represent" his father by following his pattern of abandonment and keeping the self-destructive cycle going.

Immediately after Eddie's exit, May follows him, showing that she, too, remains trapped in the family's pattern as a "fool for love." In a variation of male abandonment in the family plays, Eddie's exit works in the opposite way from the pattern that begins with *Curse*. In *Fool for Love*, the son assumes the role of the father and walks out on the family, leaving the father behind. Like Weston, Eddie heads out on foot with little sense of a real purpose other than to flee, which also recalls Lee and Austin's wishes in *True West*. The sibling who stands in Eddie's way, however, does little to stand in his way. May sadly states the obvious in her final lines when she laments that "He's gone." Martin tries to reassure May by saying, "He said he'd be back in a second," but May repeats "He's gone" after a slight pause and heads out the door with her suitcase (56). Martin stands in silence and watches May leave with a pre-packed suitcase in hand, meaning that she has planned all along to follow Eddie and let their relationship shape her fate. Martin fills Eddie and May's need to tell their story to a man, but Martin is truly the invisible man, a blank slate onto which the couple paints its curse.

May vacates the stage to the flames offstage in a way that recalls Emma's leaving the home in *Curse*, but no explosion provides such a quick escape for May from the family's hold on her. Instead, May leaves the stage like a little lap dog, desperate to follow Eddie to who knows where. Ironically, the siblings' exorcising of their demons for the audience of Martin and imagined audience of the old man does not free them from their past. Therefore, once again the start of a new cycle in a never-ending series defers any sense of completeness or closure that could arise from the completion of the last cycle.

With Eddie and May's exits, *Fool for Love's* confrontations between Eddie, the Countess, and May remain unresolved and determined by a new cycle for the family that has only just begun. Whether the Countess has more revenge in store for Eddie as he either heads on foot to wander off or to recollect his horses could be a possibility. Eddie also could not have gone very far by the time May follows him, which leaves the possibility for reconciliation or further conflict between the two half-siblings. Without any real clue as to where the road will take them, Eddie and May represent a cross between Weston and Ella in their wandering to a supposed new start and Lee and Austin's mutual entrapment. May and Eddie begin their unrealized desire to leave the room that traps them and search inwardly and outwardly in the desert, but how far they go in either search remains speculation.

*Fool for Love's* final moments play out the circular function of the nature of "family" with the exit of Eddie and May with a sense that these events will progress without resolution long after the stage lights fade. As Martin stares helplessly out the window, the Old Man ends *Fool for Love* with a few cryptic final lines. Intimating that it is better to be a fool for an impossible dream of love than for an attained yet cursed love, the Old Man remains on the stage even though he exists only in the minds of the now off stage Eddie and May. The issues he creates for his children, the play's closing images and words suggest, fester and continue even after the two divulge and act out their past again. Pointing to an empty space on stage and proclaiming, "That's the woman of my dreams," "She's all mine," and ending with "Forever," the Old Man sits comfortably in his rocker as Merle Haggard's "I'm the One Who Loves You" plays (57). The song's chorus complements that of the opening's Haggard song to underscore the play's central



theme: “Wake up. Remember me? I’m the one who loves you” (Haggard). The Old Man appears content that the “woman of his dreams” remains nothing more than an impossible dream, one more dodging of his parental responsibility to care what happens to the pair, even while “invisible.”

When the music blares and the lights fade, Martin watches Eddie and May walk out of his life to a future of repeating the cycle of lies from which they can only escape through annihilations that bring no end to it. The music blares for the audience to hear, but we must assume that the only other character on stage, Martin, does not hear the music. He helplessly peers out the window for a glimpse of what the audience can never see, an image that reinforces the sense of a progression rather than resolution. Unlike the conventional fade with music, the combination in *Fool for Love* suggests that the play’s events are ongoing and can only end if the Countess or another ghostly influence exacts fatal punishment on Eddie or May. That is the only escape from the circular function of the nature of “family.”

The final image on the stage, the “invisible” Old Man, expresses the play’s blatantly artificial staging to resist the “cop-out” to the traditional portrayal of “family.” The intended audience for May and Eddie’s retelling their story, the Old Man represents a cross between “the invisible man,” Dodge, and Lee and Austin’s missing father. Eddie and May’s father, as the stage directions explain, only occupies a space in their minds, “even though they might talk to him directly and acknowledge his presence” (20). Only occupying a space on stage with plastic yellow furniture and “headlights” that shine with blatant artificiality, the Old Man serves as a constant physical and verbal reminder that Eddie and May will never experience the harmonious potential for growth that can

resolve their issues. Having dodged responsibilities to Eddie and May long ago, the Old Man's prodigality exacerbates the effects of the family curse, and the "invisible" presence of the Old Man reflects his palpable rupture in their characters. He may even be dead for all Eddie and May know, but he nonetheless takes on a physical presence in the lives and minds of Eddie and May.

As a whole, the play's structure employs the three unities to subvert the traditional portrayal of the American family's potential for harmonious growth. In a structure that recalls the unified plots of Greek tragedy, *Fool for Love's* events begin *in media res*, years after the high school affair and apparently when Eddie's speciously begins a progression towards resolution. The "unified" plot "ends," though, with Eddie and May still locked in a cycle of lies that they perpetuate despite any lying or flight. The two fools for love head blindly toward the never-to-be time when the two of them "come crashing down. Like one whole thing." Yet unlike in the traditional observations of unity in family tragedies, one that begins most notably in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Sophocles's *Oedipus* trilogies, *Fool for Love* denies completing the families' fates in cathartic endings that provide a sense of closure through the resolution of their unified actions.<sup>3</sup>

Rather, that "whole thing" in *Fool for Love* represents the family's curse as an unending cycle of lies. Only the Old Man in the imaginations of Eddie and May relishes this pattern, and, much like the missing old man in *True West*, he provides the source for

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<sup>3</sup> As Aristotle defines the unities of action and time in tragedy, which as a genre "must deal with an action and the whole of it; and the different parts of the action must be so related to each other that if any part is changed or taken away the whole will be altered and disturbed" (18). The third unity of place arises from the "rules" of the neoclassicists, such as François Hédelin's argument that Aristotle omits this unity because it was self-evident in his day that "it is highly improbable that the same space and the same floor, which receives no change at all, should represent two different places" (244).

his children's actions but exists only as a twisted conjecture, and therefore, a lie. Even though Eddie and May's "love" is an incestuous curse, the siblings entrap themselves in its circularity once again. All the two can continue to do, the play ultimately suggests, is to lie to themselves that they are fools for love and follow Archbishop Anthony Bloom's epigram at the very start of the play: "The proper response to love is to accept it. There is nothing to *do*" (17; emphasis in original).

The title of *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) reflects the play's exploration of the chief element of the cyclic curse of "family." The final scene of the last act portrays Lorraine and Sally's final moments before they head back to Ireland, the land of their ancestors. This cyclic return to one's roots represents both a circular pattern for the two as well as another flight from resolving issues and problems that characterize a Shepard family play. In a naïve assumption about what awaits the return to Ireland, Lorraine acts as if all the two of them need to do is find her relatives, the Kelligs, whom her grandmother talked about so much year before. Like the moments that the other family plays reveal, Lorraine's and Sally's rummaging through old photos and mementos reveals part of the family's past, and their actions have bearing on the present as well.

Specifically, Lorraine and Sally's fiery flight with visions of a connection with the past contrasts with Meg and Beth's plight that occurs later in the scene. All ready to head to Ireland to seek out and live off relatives, Lorraine appears content to leave as much of her past behind while she and Sally pack for their trip. When Sally asks how the two of them can take all of the things lying around, Lorraine replies, "We're gonna burn it" (119). By "it," Lorraine means more than the belongings inside the house; she intends to "light one a' them Blue Diamond stick matches and toss it in there and run" (120).

Lorraine's intentions do Dodge's one better, for she plans to destroy everything that she cannot take with her rather than leave it up to her those whom she leaves behind. Like all of the characters in the family plays, Sally and Lorraine's flight represents another escape from problems that only avoids resolving them. The belongings may not be there for long, but these actions only defer any potential for growth because the characters' issues remain unresolved after the flames die out. The two of them start the fire, and although we do not see them again, the flames underscore the actions of the other characters after the play shifts its focus to the circular patterns of abandonment by the male characters.

The confrontation between Jake and Mike after Sally and Lorraine's flight confirms that the pattern will continue. Jake's provides the potential for the family to grow beyond the ruptures it has experienced, but the remaining and divided family members unknowingly continue the relentless pattern that only pauses but does not end, always deferring the finality when one or more of them "come(s) crashing down." Despite Mike's best violent intentions, Jake loses the battle with Mike but wins the war of abandonment. Exiting the stage and completing the pattern, Jake leaves two dependent and childlike family members behind, since the now "marooned" Beth and Frankie must rely on her parents for support (127). Beth's parents, however, particularly her father Baylor, appear hardly perceptive or caring regarding the mess Jake leaves behind. The forced position of authority that Mike creates for Beth disappears because the two of them might as well be invisible to Baylor and Meg. In fact, Baylor's nostalgic and symbolic repetition of the folding of the flag and negligence toward his children

represent a variation of the pattern of abandonment in the family plays that combines the patterns of the Old Men from *True West* and *Fool for Love*.

In the play's final moments, Baylor's isolation from Mike and Beth recalls the missing father figure in *True West* because Baylor might as well not be there. And the detached Baylor's actions have unseen consequences on the minds and actions of Mike and Beth, much like the expressionistic influence of the Old Man in *Fool for Love*. Occurring right after Jake's abandonment of Beth, Baylor and Meg's apparent reconciliation after folding and burning the flag underscores Beth's isolation and begins an apparent change in Baylor. Making a big fuss over folding the flag as if the couple were soldiers at boot camp, Meg and Baylor pay so much attention to the procedure that they do not even notice Beth or even her screams. The abandonment of Beth thus becomes twofold when neither her husband nor her parents accepts any responsibility toward her. When Meg, the only person to whom Baylor pays any attention, asks why the flag must be folded a certain way, Baylor's words ring with irony. "I don't know," he admits. "Just tradition I guess [...] Funny how things come back to ya' after all those years" (130). But Baylor ignores Jake's and his circular pattern of abuse and abandonment, and his words trigger a sense of nostalgia in Baylor.

The play's last lines, spoken by Baylor, speciously express his love for Meg, yet he actually reveals how separate and unequal their lives remain while locked in the circular function of the nature of family as well as the emptiness of the American symbolism the scene evokes. Thematically and formally, Baylor's ensuing exit expresses *A Lie of the Mind*'s resistance to completeness and closure by not resolving two lingering conflicts in the play. The flag somehow burns in the snow as Baylor and Beth watch it

glow and wonder how that could be. On the one hand, the burning flag and Baylor's talk of dreams do represent what Ron Mottram describes as "a culture that has run out of places to go and must now dig deep into itself to find a cure for its discontents" (1988; 106). But the other message that Baylor misses regarding a "cure" lies right inside his home. He kisses Meg for what she claims is "the first time in twenty years," but the reconciliation ends there. Although Baylor does not abandon Meg as Jake does, Baylor leaves his wife and prefers the isolation of his dreams to her company. "And don't dawdle," he tells her. "I don't wanna get woke up in the middle of a good dream" (130).

Despite all that happens to Beth, Baylor continues the cycle of lies by refusing to acknowledge her troubles and thinking his kiss shows that the fire still burns within him. Like the folding of the flag, however, Baylor's actions represent a superficial symbol that cannot hide his dodging of his responsibilities and feelings. Both exist as formalities that complete Baylor's "coming back after all these years," and that return exists as a reminder of how little things have changed for the characters. The potential for a better future for Baylor and Meg might exist, but *A Lie of the Mind* only hints at that potential. For now and the foreseeable future, the family can only remain locked in a circular pattern of denying the truth and the responsibilities of family.

While Baylor and Meg's relationship shows a fleeting moment of reconciliation—as long as Meg follows the formalities of folding and not dawdling—the play ends with another symbol that does not provide closure to its lingering and central questions. With Baylor now gone, Meg still pays no attention to Beth or Frankie, which inexplicably leaves their relationships stuck in the same pattern of neglect. Questions also remain for the characters who exit the stage. The abusive Jake abandons Beth just as Eddie

abandons May in *Fool for Love*, but Beth does not follow him. And Mike, who forces Jake into the apology that resolves nothing other than his desertion of Beth, “exits into the darkness upstage,” providing no answers as to where his future lies (127). Perhaps Mike and Jake will cross paths again, but nothing can be certain with Mike’s disappearance, which provides Shepard’s oddest exit since *La Turista*. The two characters who remain, Beth and Meg, end the play with more questions as they watch the burning flag in the snow, beginning a new cycle that defers any sense of completeness and closure.

Circling back to the theme of burning that begins the scene, Beth and Meg’s final lines underscore the lack of certainty for them; *Lie* follows the family plays’ pattern of fading to black without closing pressing conflicts and issues for the characters. Still not acknowledging Beth or Frankie or the fact that Baylor’s flight upstairs represents his version of abandonment despite the rare kiss, Meg’s final lines summarize the events in her last lines. With hand still to cheek, Meg looks at the fire in the snow and asks, “How could that be?” (131). The fire recalls the fire at the beginning of the scene, yet Meg’s fortunes could not be more different from those of Sally and Lorraine. Meg remains isolated from not only her husband but from her “invisible” children as well, while Sally and Lorraine choose to erase their past in the flames they set and make what they hope to be a new start in Ireland.

Yet the play’s events return Meg to the same predicament she faces at the play’s beginning, just as Baylor’s lines suggest. As Mottram’s above interpretation suggests, Meg has run out of places to search for answers, and like so many of the family plays’ characters, she remains trapped in a cycle of isolation and abandonment. The smoldering

flag she watches symbolizes a culture that must search for new answers with no clear source. Before the answer may come from fleeing altogether as Sally and Lorraine do, the play subverts the fade of the stage lights, conventionally a device that signals completeness and closure, into a signal of resistance to a “cop-out” to them.

The pair may not know the source of their fire, and its existence reflects the smoldering hope of their subverted sense of self-reliance. How the source can continue remains unresolved, which is the case for all the family plays’ endings, but the irony is that the characters have what they symbolically see as a glimpse of a potential victory over the curse through their flight. In fact, however, their actions can only perpetuate the family’s curse through a pattern of lies. The glimmer of hope they see, then, represents merely the “lie of the mind” that locks them in the circular function of the nature of family within a larger thematic frame that portrays symbols like the flag as an empty lie, devoid of answers.

On a larger thematic and formal scale, *A Lie of the Mind*’s series of balanced and structured scenes eschews the condensed structure of *Fool for Love* but maintains its unrealistic staging. The neatly divided scenes take place on a set that Shepard’s description describes as “infinite space, going off to nowhere” (xvii). In discussing *Lie*’s structure, Ron Mottram’s highly detailed outline in his “Exhaustion of the American Soul” illustrates how the play shows this exhaustion “produced by an internecine battle among those who should love each other most, and yet, for almost inexplicable reasons, seem least capable of doing so” (105-06). Back and forth the scenes go, paralleling the plights of Jake and Beth and Baylor and Meg, headed toward a resolution that is actually only the end of one cyclic pattern.



Most significantly, *A Lie of the Mind*'s structure complements its thematic subversion of the conventional portrayal of the American "family." To borrow Proehl's terms again, the balance of the scenes that chronicle the ruptures speciously head towards a potential for growth for these families. The only balance that the scenes ultimately maintain, however, is the curse that keeps all of the characters locked in a cycle of lies and flight. With only the flag burning in the snow piercing the darkness, *A Lie of the Mind* ends with a slow fade that suggests the beginning of a new cycle in the family's curse, as its ending provides no potential for harmony and growth. The lies that dominate and destroy so many of Shepard's characters may delude them into believing that resolution is possible, but that only represents another "lie of the mind." Just as the flag symbolically and inexplicably burns in the snow, the characters, too, must somehow keep the fire burning within them while the curse of "family" never smolders out.

In relation to Shepard's earlier treatments of completeness and closure, the plays from this period represent a continuation of several key themes of endings without resolution for the playwright with a new thematic twist. The theme of the distanced and unattached father, for example, exists in Shepard's very first play, *The Rock Garden*, as does some often heavy-handed symbolism. Shepard's predilection for unresolved endings also remains a constant from his earlier short works, his first full-length effort, *La Turista*, and throughout his musical pieces like *Cowboy Mouth*. Whereas a play like *Cowboy Mouth* reflects the longing for a cultural Rock 'n' Roll savior to deliver us, and *La Turista* seeks deliverance from a cycle of cultural usury, plays like *Curse of the Starving Class* return the search to the primal issue of a father's abandonment.

Not that a Freudian reading of the family plays provides the best answers here, but the Shepard constant of endings without resolution in these plays translates to flights by parental, and potential parental, figures that receive lethal retribution. Unlike in *The Rock Garden*, which first deals with the theme of family and portrays a distanced and frozen domestic pattern, the plays from *Curse* to *A Lie of the Mind* literally expand on the distance between patriarchs and their families. Characters such as Weston, Eddie, and Dodge (through his death) abdicate their responsibilities by fleeing the “family,” as do Emma in *Curse* and Sally and Lorraine in *Lie*. Each ending confirms that neither flight nor annihilation can end the curse of consanguinity.

In addition to the “dodging” of patriarchal authority, the plays’ circularity also reflects the curse of the role of parental authority, whose subverted sense of self-reliance perpetuates the lies that keep the family trapped in its curse. Weston and Wesley’s switching roles alongside Emma’s newfound criminal personality provide the first example of flights of character that actually change nothing for the characters or the family’s fortunes. Variations on this character assumption and fruitless attempts to escape it abound in the family plays, most notably in Vince in *Buried Child* and Lee and Austin in *True West*. Vince tries to make a run for the state border only to have an internal change that signals his acceptance of his family role and fate circle him back to the family. In another variation on this theme, Lee and Austin would both like to escape their mother’s house and head to the desert, but each brother stands in the way of the other. Neither Austin nor Lee wants to the role of pursuer from Lee’s Western story, and Austin wants the two to travel together.

The play ends, though, with the two of them locked in a stalemate that cannot provide the answers they really seek. Only their father can, and his abandonment years ago and life in the desert provide the model of character and action that his sons wish to mimic as they project their confrontations with him on each other. And rather than confront issues at home, the changes in Lorraine and Sally result in their ignoring their present and seeking in their Irish roots, making them a combination of these two patterns. All of the “changes” in characters, in fact, represent their pointless struggle to break free from the pattern of lies about and flight from the family’s past. When read as a whole, the themes and structures in the family plays’ endings and their effects on their characters do not represent a break from Shepard’s earlier work, but they add a new element to his treatments of completeness and closure.

Past Shepard plays also deal with conflicts over positions of authority, such as Hoss and Crow in *The Tooth of Crime* and Rabbit and Wheeler in *Angel City*, but those conflicts arise from the Hollywood and Rock ‘N Roll star systems. Devoid of any true cultural merit, the star systems function as the determining and destructive force for the characters. In the family plays, the circular function of the nature of family determines the fates of the characters and perpetually continues long after the fade of the stage lights. *True West* examines the theme of the Hollywood system, yet its focus remains much more on the domestic issues surrounding Lee, Austin, and the missing old man rather than on the star system. The destructive forces in the family plays do not lie in a corrupt star system, but instead on the unbroken patterns of abandonment and isolation that arise from within the family’s own lies that reflect the curse of consanguinity.

In relation to Shepard's dramatic oeuvre, the family plays avoid resolution through exclusively circular narratives rather than the ironic and musical ones in his previous plays. Shepard's earliest works up to *La Turista* invert the temporality of their narratives so that the endings do not build a linear pattern that resolves the fates of their characters. Rather, Shepard's earliest plays portray fate as irrespective of temporality, and as a result, the fates of the characters arise before the plays' endings. Thus the endings in these plays provide neither completeness nor closure because the plays invert the place of resolution and deny the conventional linear pattern of fate. In Shepard's rock plays, linearity again provides the source for endings without resolution through Shepard's the subversion of the musical finale. Each play ends with a song, which follows the convention of the musical to sing and dance its way to completeness and closure, but Shepard's closing numbers do not resolve the plays' events and instead expose the lack of resolution within them. In the family plays, however, Shepard eschews linearity altogether for circularity.

Most poignantly, the family plays do not suggest that the search for a "home" that ends each of the rock plays finds its thematic and formal answer in a connection to "family." By contrast, the plays from *Curse of the Starving Class* through *A Lie of the Mind* all portray a circular function of the nature of "family" that entraps the characters in their lies about their pasts and flights from it. The pattern repeats itself indefinitely and replaces ending with resolution with only temporary endings that resists the "cop-out" of portraying "family" as a harmonious unit that ultimately shows the potential for growth after overcoming the "ruptures" of internal and external conflicts.

Thus as the stage lights fade on each cycle's new beginning, the characters remain helpless, locked in a pattern that the plays' events already reveal. Each play ends at a new beginning because there is no end to the cycle. No harmony, self-reliance, or potential exists for these "families," only the cyclic function of the nature of "family" that supposes instability and resists any potential for growth other than the growth of the curse of consanguinity. Any such belief in these traditional bonds by the characters in these plays represents nothing more than a subverted sense of self-reliance that a character can escape the curse of "family." The only "successful" flight from the curse comes in death, which does nothing to end the pattern that keeps the family cyclically locked in its hold, never reaching a conclusion when everything "comes crashing down."

## Chapter 4: Suppression of Things Past: American Memory in Shepard's Recent Plays

After *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard's plays begin a new set of trajectories that explore the failure to suppress the truth contained in the memory of the past. Specifically, the characters in *States of Shock* (1991), *Simpatico* (1994), *When the World Was Green* (1996), *Eyes for Consuela* (1998), *The Late Henry Moss* (2001), and *The God of Hell* (2004) create versions of past events that suppress their painful truths and then conflict with events that expose the forced amnesia of those suppressions. In each play, the suppression of the past faces its immutable truth, yet the characters resist what they see as a "cop-out" to any admission of guilt or loss and continue to suppress the past, which only perpetuates the resulting conflicts. On a larger thematic level, the plays reflect an American culture that suppresses the past and chooses amnesia over truth. Ironically, completing connections with the very associations of past memories that Americans resist as a "cop-out" can provide the sense of closure that would allow a positive progression into the future. Without such a connection, the plays ultimately suggest, Americans' amnesia ironically entraps them in the past whose immutable truth irresolvably conflicts with its failed suppression in the present.

The one-act *States of Shock* (1991) begins this new set of trajectories in Shepard's drama. The play's "celebration" of how Stubbs, who literally is all stubs and confined to a wheelchair, is the lone survivor of the army unit that included the Colonel's son, ends with another physical attack on Stubbs that expresses the Colonel's desire to suppress the

past that Stubbs represents. Standing over a fallen Stubbs who has been sent reeling from his chair triggers a “flashback” for the Colonel, moving backward from the time Stubbs spent in the hospital after the attack. “Your face, lying.” Stubbs recalls. “Smiling and lying. Your bald face of denial. Peering down from a distance. Bombing me,” Stubbs accuses the Colonel (43). Part of that denial, Stubbs claims comes from Stubbs’s change of name, which he claims is the Colonel’s doing, but the Colonel claims it is only “some computer scramble.” The Colonel tries to put the emphasis on how he doted on the wounded Stubbs, who wants no more denial from “A friend of a friend of my father’s friend” (44).

The Colonel’s response, though, suppresses the facts, including that Stubbs actually is the Colonel’s son. Rather than confirm the true past link with Stubbs, the Colonel sits in Stubbs’s wheelchair and tells his version of that fateful day. While the Colonel speaks, the café and its characters also “return” to this moment from the past in an expressionistic staging of how its suppression subsumes the Colonel. The generic names of its other inhabitants, Glory Bee, White Man, and White Woman, underscore how the present for the Colonel represents an open space upon which he can project his glorified version of the past and suppress its inglorious truth. The Colonel’s masturbatory act during the play’s ending also complements how the Colonel’s suppression merely exists to pleasure himself with no concern for its effect on Stubbs or anyone else. Seizing Stubbs’s wheelchair, the Colonel tries to act out the moment when the shell went through Stubbs and his son, trying to recreate the moment by having Stubbs lean against him back-to-back.

Stubbs, however, turns on the Colonel with a chokehold in an attempt to suppress not only the Colonel's lies but the Colonel himself. Desperate to continue retelling the story as the Colonel wishes to remember it—and keep on living in the present as well as suppress the past—he pleads with Stubbs, who exchanges his grip on the Colonel for a grip on his sword. Prepared to unleash a death blow, Stubbs suddenly freezes in his position and yells through his gas mask, “GOD BLESS THE ENEMY!!!!!!” (46). The “treasonous” line expresses the irony of the moment that crippled Stubbs: The official “enemy” on that day, the Vietcong, did not bomb the unit. Rather, American bombers’ “friendly fire” were the “enemy,” making the lines a harrowing pun on “God bless America.”

Yet the play's final tableau does not confirm an end to the Colonel's life nor a resolution of the issues that haunt the pair. Rather, *States of Shock* speciously progresses to a final confrontation between the Colonel and Stubbs, only to have it frozen for the White Man, White Woman, and Glory Bee's singing of “Good Night, Irene.” The suicidal depression that bursts to the surface of the “love” song in lines such as “Sometimes I have a great notion / To jump in the river and drown.” Much like the expressionistic role of the trio throughout the play, the last verse that they sing expresses the Colonel's and Stubbs's failed suppression of their feelings about the past. “And if Irene turns her back on me / I'm gonna take morphine and die,” the lyrics state before one final refrain, “I'll see you in my dreams,” and the stage lights fade with the Colonel and Stubbs still frozen in their positions, leaving the action incomplete (46-47). Death, the scene and song suggest, provides no release from the pain that the protagonists feel and the lyrics express. Even if Stubbs does murder the Colonel, Stubbs cannot change the



past's crippling of him, no more than the Colonel's charade of a birthday celebration can heal the past's psychological wounds on the two.

Read within the context of literary depictions of Vietnam War veterans, Stubbs and the Colonel complementarily exhibit the physical and psychological scarring that conventionally entraps veterans in their memories. In *Acts and Shadows: The Vietnam War in American Literary Culture*, Philip K. Jason's fourth chapter deftly explores the thematic importance of war wounds in works such as Stewart O'Nan's *The Names of the Dead*, Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, and H. Bruce Franklin's *The Forever War*. A character such as *Dead*'s Larry Markham, to name a poignant example, has a wounded foot whose prosthetic replacement attempts both to heal the physical wound and suppress the memory of the battlefield failure that caused the wound. Such efforts, however, "cannot cover his emotional impotence" (Jason 53). Likewise, *War*'s William Mandella has a partially missing leg that modern medicine can aid in effacing the physical wound but cannot aid Mandella's unsuccessful suppression of the internal wounds caused by battlefield failure (Jason 59). Works in this genre portray wounds from the Vietnam War, Jason points out, as leaving both physical and psychological scars that provide their victims with inescapable memories of the War and freeze a character's sense of identity in the past.

Certainly, literary interrogations of the connections between memory and identity hardly begin with portrayals of Vietnam veterans, and perhaps the most limpid phrase for the theme lies in the poet John Eccles's phrase "the continuity of the self." Quoted in Rebecca Rupp's *Committed to Memory: How We Remember and Why We Forget*, Eccles adds, "we are hollow persons, not only empty of a past, but lacking a foundation upon

which to build the future. We are what we remember” (9-10). In terms of sheer magnitude, Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* represents the ultimate literary exploration of “the continuity of the self” that memory can provide. For three thousand pages, the novel explores what Christie McDonald’s study *The Proustian Fabric* correctly identifies as associations of memory between past and present to form the continuity self. “Associations give meaning (often, it seems, in the semblance of causal relations),” McDonald argues, “to change.” Translating and paraphrasing a Proust letter on the subject, McDonald adds that “the beauty” of associations of memory “is not so much the ideas but a *feeling of form*” that illuminates changes in both past and present, allowing one’s identity to be a continuous whole (16; emphasis in original).

In modern drama, however, associations of memory often exist as malleable “forms” with which characters manipulate their identities. Luigi Pirandello’s plays, written not long after Proust’s *Remembrance*, poignantly explore the ambiguity that distinguishes reality from illusion and past from present. Describing reality as “the deceit of mutual understanding irremediably founded on the empty abstraction of words,” Pirandello argues that the “multiple personality of everyone” must engage in “the inherent tragic conflict between life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it, immutable)” (qtd. in Bentley xxxvi). Central to the conflicts in Pirandello’s plays, the characters exploit the “empty distraction of words” to create their “naked masks” of verbal deception, to borrow the title from Pirandello’s best-known collection of plays in English, that resist the “immutable form.” Most significantly, even when characters apparently lose the “tragic conflict,” the plays’ endings, such as with the Step-Daughter’s sudden flight in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Signora

Ponza's dual identities in *It Is So! If You Think So*, ambiguously suggest that the characters' identities will remain mutable, not immutable, forms.

By contrast, the absurdist tradition that has dominated post-War drama often portrays the past as unverifiable to the point that associations of memory to it are tenuous at best, yet the past immutably renders characters psychologically and/or physically wounded. Samuel Beckett's plays provide the most iconic of these characters, as Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, and Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape* all struggle with wounds that represent the only palpable associations with the past in these works. Unlike in Pirandello's plays, the "empty distraction of words" cannot mask the past and instead represents a repetitious and ambivalent means to an ineffable and unresolved end for the characters who remain locked in the past's immutable grip. To wit, a phrase from Beckett's study of *Remembrance* best summarizes both the dark rôle of the past in Proust and on Beckett's stages: "There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us" (2).

In the plays of Beckett's absurdist heir, Harold Pinter, "the empty distraction of words" masks the past, more like in Pirandello's works than Beckett's, and characters do so as a weapon to deepen its psychological wounds on each other, as is often the case with Beckett's characters. Over a decade before Shepard's thematic focus on memory in *States of Shock*, Pinter wrote a series of plays grouped by critics as "the memory plays," most notably *The Caretaker*, *Old Times*, *No Man's Land*, and his most recent play *Remembrance of Things Past*. Associations with the past in these works are as malleable as the words that express them but also immutably scarring for the characters. Therefore, the "changes" in the characters at each play's end arise from the verbal manipulations of

the past that ultimately reveal their identities to be equally malleable and vulnerable. In an interview with Mel Gussow, Pinter explains his unique perspective on “memory” and “truth” in these plays by claiming the impossibility of proving that a past meeting between Deeley and Kate in *Old Times* happened because “it’s terribly difficult to define what happened yesterday. So much is imagined and that imagining is as true as real.” Even if the meeting did not take place, Pinter reckons, “The fact that they discuss something that he says took place—even if it did not take place—actually seems to me to recreate the time and the moments vividly in the present, so that it is actually taking place before your very eyes—by the words he is using” (17).

Given Shepard’s theory of closure as a “cop-out” to the “strangulation” of resolution, the suppression of memory provides a new thematic context in which to interrogate and ultimately deny closure (qtd. in Bottoms 1998; 3). Rather than complete a “Proustian fabric” that allows characters to adapt to changes, the ever-changing form of life in Pirandello’s words, the past’s suppression provides not a Pinteresque weapon for characters to use against one another but a failed confrontation that widens the past’s crippling wounds, as in Beckett. As in Shepard’s entire dramatic oeuvre, characters’ connections to the past that allow them to complete change and achieve a sense of closure represent the a cop-out to providing a “neat little package” of resolution that Shepard has avoided since *The Rock Garden* (qtd. in Shewey 116). The “clash” in the plays from *States of Shock* to *The God of Hell* does often pit characters against one another, but their attempts to forget the past by consciously suppressing its truth present the plays’ larger “problems” that achieve no resolution.

The failed suppression of the past also makes a larger thematic comment about American amnesia about the past, which prevents the country and its people from achieving closure from it and then having the ability to progress positively into the future. In Stephen Bertman's *Cultural Amnesia: America's Future and the Crisis of Memory*, the very anxious author contrasts the fictional dictatorship of George Orwell's *1984* in which the past is a mutable instrument of Big Brother with current American society that consciously suppresses the past. America's "cultural memory tape is self-erasing," Bertman argues, "But memory is not just a defense against totalitarianism, imaginary or real. It can also be the active means to our further liberation, a reservoir of energy from which we can draw a renewed sense of direction and purpose." Without a cultural memory of the past, Bertman asks, "How will we remain civilized if memory is the price? And what will our civilization be like if we no longer remember?" (17). The danger of such a possibility for Americans, Bertman warns, is that "Like an individual, a nation can rearrange the pieces of the past in order to create a version of the truth that is more psychologically satisfying. And if certain pieces do not fit, a political regime or even a whole people can dispense with them altogether, choosing sweet oblivion over the pain of remembrance" (63).

The characters in Shepard's memory plays individually exhibit American amnesia in the ironic entrapment of suppressing memory, the characters' attempts at "self-erasing," that leaves the characters with no ability to "draw a renewed sense of direction and purpose." Despite losing the conflict to suppress the past and facing further suffering and even death, the characters refuse what they view as a "cop-out" to admission of the disparaging truth that the past contains. Like the larger American culture that chooses to

forget the past, the characters subvert the ability of associations of memories of the past to aid the progression of what Eccles terms their “continuities of self,” no matter how deeply wounding the consequences may be. Ironically, completing connections with the very associations of past memories that Americans resist as a “cop-out” to admitting failure can provide the sense of closure that results in a “renewed sense of direction and purpose.” Without such a connection, the plays ultimately suggest, Americans entrap their identities in the past whose immutable truth irresolvably conflicts with its suppression in the present.

In *States of Shock*, the theme of the failed suppression of the past focuses on the suppression of the truth about friendly fire during the Vietnam War, a particularly painful part of the American past. In a detailed discussion of the play, Susanne Willadt correctly reads it in terms of male identity, but reading the play as “to continue the ancient male competitiveness, machismo, and violence which finally leads to war” fails to observe the connection between identity and the memory of war in the play (148). The Vietnam War ends twenty years before the play’s time, yet the struggle between the two protagonists remains frozen in the final tableau because Stubbs’s killing the Colonel does nothing to break Stubbs’s or the Colonel’s identities from the past.

Additionally, the “finale,” much like in Shepard’s rock plays, also underscores this lack of closure for Stubbs rather than follows its conventional pattern of inactive celebration because Stubbs has no chance of completing the break from his past. Regardless of whether or not Stubbs kills the Colonel, Stubbs always sees and will always see his past in his dreams—both waking and sleeping—as the finale’s lyrics suggest. Any chance to achieve closure ended long ago on the battlefield when Stubbs

and his fellow troops tried in vain to stop the friendly fire that wiped them out. Now Stubbs only has that moment to relive even if he kills the Colonel, a memory that cycles its way into Stubbs's life forever, whether in his thoughts or from the Colonel, and entraps him.

In *Cultural Amnesia*, Bertman asks a poignant question about the American "memory" of war: "How can the very subject of war be understood if the basic facts of past wars have been forgotten—the names, the dates, the battles, the causes, and the consequences?" (16). *States of Shock* answers this question by suggesting that any American suppression of the inglorious memories of Vietnam battlefields with the "glory be" of hollow, and in particular self-serving, patriotism irresolvably entraps American identity in a conflict with the immutable truth of the War. The Colonel's suppression of the past with a glorious retelling of the friendly fire incident, which includes suppressing the fact that Stubbs is the Colonel's son, ironically entraps the Colonel in that past. While the Colonel sees his present as an empty space onto which he can project his suppression of his memories, the present ironically exists to conflict with the Colonel's self-serving suppression of the War. Even if Stubbs does murder the Colonel, Stubbs remains entrapped in the past because of the horrible physical and psychological wounds he still carries, much like the characterizations of wounded Vietnam veterans discussed above.

Reflecting American culture's amnesia regarding its suppression of the horrible consequences of the War, its immutable truth will always ironically haunt Americans as in the song's line, "See you in my dreams" (47). America's involvement in the wars since Vietnam, such as in Central America at the time of *States of Shock*, arises from the

minds of Americans like the Colonel, who drape its atrocities in a red, white, and blue veil of suppressive patriotism. The play posits that the real reasons for war arise from self-serving patriotism with little concern for the consequences of war's actions. Death, the "ultimate sacrifice" of war, exists as a "dream" for Stubbs, whose wounds make his life a daily hell, and an easy exit for the Colonel whose potential murder at the play's end does nothing to resolve the conflicts that the two protagonists share with the past. How easily America tries to suppress the truth about war and especially Vietnam, but the cost of that suppression is to misunderstand the consequences of war whose "ultimate sacrifice" for Americans is the truth about its horrors that we refuse to accept in our irresolvable conflict to suppress it.

With *Simpatico* (1994), Shepard the failed suppression of the past involves not two but six characters. Continuing the trajectories that *States of Shock* introduces, *Simpatico*'s ending confirms the grip that the now retold past holds on the two protagonists. The ending also contains a reversal of power between Carter and Vinnie, much like the reversal of fortunes for *True West*'s Austin and Lee. As a result, Carter now lies defenseless and even weaker than Vinnie at the beginning of the play when he returns to his room in Cucamonga. Vinnie takes full advantage of his position, too, beating his former partner, who tries to negotiate a "another deal," much like Austin (132). Vinnie refuses any negotiation, however, given what he thinks Cecilia has negotiated with Simms, and he threatens to kick out Carter if he is not gone after Vinnie goes for a walk.

Yet precisely when Vinnie might successfully suppress the past and gain the upper hand over Carter, Cecilia reenters and the past reconfirms its hold and denies any



sense of closure. While Vinnie claims to have broken with his past by taking on a “new case” in “surveillance,” ironically, Vinnie fails to realize that this is no different from his spying on Cecilia and his habit of capturing the private moments of others, such as the photographs of Simms (134). The self-proclaimed “new man,” Vinnie exits and leaves Carter in Vinnie’s old place, both literally and figuratively. Shepard characters have walked out on their friends, family, and obligations many times before, however, and the play’s final moments portray just how the past remains only a phone call away from Vinnie’s tenuous break from it.

When Cecilia returns, her actions and mere presence confirm that Vinnie and especially Carter and Simms cannot suppress the past, but all the characters refuse to “cop-out,” leaving them entrapped in it. The purse Cecilia carries that remains stuffed with the money confirms Carter’s failed attempt to bribe Simms and be done with the pictures. Even though Vinnie remains nowhere to be seen, Cecilia calmly sets out Vinnie’s clean laundry, as she quietly yet confidently expects his return. Even if Vinnie does make it on his own, something that he has never been able to do, Carter assumes Vinnie’s weak and dependent role. Seemingly in a different world but very much in the one Carter has created, Cecilia lightly chastises him for not telling her that the Derby is in May although that does not stop her from remaining in the Derby dress. In a final illustration of how all of the characters, Cecilia now included, remain entrapped by that same event long ago, the phone rings. Presumably a call from Simms, the ringing goes unanswered as the lights fade and Carter stares at the phone while his shivers continue. The phone stops ringing in the darkness, but the resulting silence signals the progression of and not a sense of closure.

Complementing these elements, *Simpatico*'s narrative borrows from and modifies the sub-genre of film noir labeled "paranoid noir." The play progresses towards an ending in which a revelation from the past resolves the plot's mystery. Identified by Michael Walker in *The Book of Film Noir*, paranoid noir evolves from the novels of Cornell Woolrich that portray "a man who becomes a victim of a violent and hostile world who lives in fear." Often the novels and the films made in this style have "a psychologically unstable or disturbed hero," and *Simpatico* provides a pair of such characters, Carter and Vinnie, who follow the Shepard pattern of a male role reversal within the basic noir structure (15). A third character, Simms, adds to the basic noir plot as another victim of the manipulation of his past by the underworld. A femme fatale complements the unstable hero in the paranoid noir, but rather than represent a mysterious insider to a dangerous world, she instead "seeks to help the victimized hero," even at times providing "help with the detective work to save him" (16). As with the expanded central male characters, Shepard provides two such femme fatales: Rose, who helps Carter and Vinnie with the photos, and Cecilia, the wide-eyed country girl who tries to save Vinnie.

In a combination of these noir elements in the play and the pattern established by *States of Shock*, *Simpatico* portrays the failed suppression of the past that keeps the characters in conflict with the past because the characters ironically refuse to accept its truth. Rather, the characters see completing and accepting an association of the past memory as a "cop-out" rather than an opportunity to achieve a sense of closure with the past. After the play reveals the events of that moment, the ending suggests stagnation with little hope of completing a break from the past and achieving closure. Even when

characters like Vinnie, Simms, and Rosie flee, they only receive a brief respite from the past before its memory again comes in conflict with their attempts to suppress it. In each case, the past only lies a phone call or a plane ride away to disrupt the fragile worlds of the present in which the three of them live. While Vinnie appears to make a break, leaving Carter to fill the role of the dependent has-been, Carter may only keep Vinnie's clothes warm as Cecilia and Carter await his return.

Conversely, Simms's break halts in Kentucky, ironically once the center of his considerable influence in the horse-racing world, yet Simms desperately tries and for now fails to make the connection via an unanswered telephone call now that the past maintains its control on his life. In fact, Simms's current situation, despite its distance from those events long ago, exists directly because of them. Perhaps the attempt to reach Cecilia represents what Leslie A. Wade reads as "a gesture that is uncommon in Shepard's world—he leaves open the possibility for connection, for involvement that admits no coercion or domination," in reference to the offer to take Cecilia to the next Kentucky Derby (2002; 268). Yet Simms's true possibility for a "connection" remains with his past, the truth of which he ironically believes that he can merely suppress by paying the blackmail fee. Rather, attempting to progress beyond the past before he achieves closure with its truth more significantly "rings" of a defeated man who ironically pays to suppress the truth of the photographs and then feels the need to keep a connection to the very woman in them. Read in this context, the call represents a telling "gesture" about Simms's failure to suppress the past rather than achieve closure and complete a new connection to the future.

As a whole, the focus on memory throughout the play reveals that the noir-ish delving into the pornographic pictures and executing blackmail with them conforms all of the characters to the “immutable form” of the truth, despite their continuing efforts to suppress it. The very title intimates this direction from the beginning, as the Spanish word *simpático* translates best not as “sympathetic” but as “agreeable” or “in consent” and also implies one’s malleability to an idea or action. What the solving of the noir-ish “mystery” reveals is that Simms, Vinnie, Cecilia, and Carter now lie in “sympathy” with the truth that the past contains, as it now locks them even more tightly in its grasp than at the start of the play. Vinnie and Carter’s relationship does undergo a reversal of power in the play’s course of events, but the past holds ultimate power over all them that will continue long after the stage lights fade.

Within the formal and thematic framework of the uniquely American genre of film noir, *Simpático*’s ending does not provide a clear, black-and-white, always the cinematic medium of noir, sense of closure from the past it reveals. Rather, the blackmail plot and resulting power shifts for all four characters reveal that the characters refuse what they view as a “cop-out” to the admission of the disparaging truth that the past contains. Attempting to progress in what Eccles terms the “continuity of self,” the characters in the play believe that they can manipulate the past for profit, or maintain a hold on future profits, as is the case with Simms (9). Like the larger American culture that chooses to forget the past once its relevance no longer appears significant in a stark, black-and-white rejection of its own past, the ending of *Simpático* suggests that such an approach cannot allow what Bertman identifies as a “renewed sense of direction and purpose” (17). Memory, the play suggests, cannot benefit American culture when falsely

suppressed and forgotten in this way, and leaves its future not in unambiguous black and white but in unresolved shades of gray from which no clear purpose can emerge

Written in collaboration with Joseph Chaikin, *When the World Was Green (A Chef's Fable)* (1996) continues this pattern of characters who attempt to suppress the past and ironically come in conflict with it. Structured in a series of scenes without act breaks, the play retells the past of the Old Man, a former chef who dedicates his life to exacting revenge for an insult directed at his great-great-great-grandfather two hundred years earlier. Like *Simpatico*, the play's plot involves a quest to "solve" a mystery from the past, in this case the Interviewer's question and answer sessions with the Old Man, that she hopes can yield a journalistic coup in place of the blackmail ransom in *Simpatico*. The play's last scene depicts the Interviewer's bringing cooking supplies into the cell in order to recreate the Old Man's specialty, which also happens to be the meal that killed her father. In exchange for this meal, the Interviewer promises never to ask questions because she feels that she can finish her work as a journalist and achieve some closure with her issues regarding her father, the Old Man's unintended victim. Ironically, the work entraps the Interviewer in the "dark cell" of her past. The Old Man tellingly does not stipulate that the Interviewer can never return to the cell at all, saying, "You must come back," which implies both his wishes and awareness that the Interviewer herself cannot resist leaving the cell (228).

The Interviewer cannot resist because her attempts to resolve the Old Man's life-long quest for revenge ironically entrap her in what Latin American authors and critics identify as "mythological time." Octavio Paz, whose short story Shepard adapted for his next play, defines this concept of time as unique to Latin American thought and literature

and one in which “Life and time coalesce to form a single whole, an indivisible unity.” Unlike the Western concept of time, which Paz defines as chronometric time, mythological time does not measure a linear progression of seconds to centuries, a concept that colonization introduced to Latin America. Rather, mythological time exists from when “There was a time when time was not succession and transitions, but rather the perpetual source of a fixed present in which all times, past and future, were contained” (209). As a result, Paz explains, “subjective life becomes identical with exterior time, because this has ceased to be a spatial measurement and has changed into a source, a spring, in the absolute present, endlessly re-creating itself” (211). Hence the play’s “cell” has no spatial measurements because it exists, as does the *Chef’s Fable*, within mythological time. Ironically, the Interviewer’s attempt to place the Old Man’s past within the linearity of chronometric time places her into a place “in which all times, past and future” exist in an “indivisible unity.”

While the play’s Eighth Visit ostensibly offers the opportunity to achieve a sense of closure, it instead confirms the cultural divide between the Interviewer, who believes she has completed a chronological narrative, and the Old Man, who chooses the perpetuity of mythological time. After the Interviewer’s compliments about the dinner, the Old Man proclaims, “Now, finally, I am only a cook” (230). As the play’s retelling of the past reveals, however, the Old Man can never be “only a cook” because he has failed at his lifelong quest for revenge, killing the Interviewer’s father in the botched scheme. This perpetually locks the two in mythological time where past and present are unified, as the Old Man refuses to “cop-out” to the truth about his failed, imprisoning life,

as does the Interviewer, who vicariously attempts and fails to achieve closure through the Old Man's story.

The Old Man's ending solo underscores the protagonists' shared and perpetual suppression of the past. Resembling the pattern of the "finale" in *States of Shock*, the Old Man's monologue tells of a time "when the world was new" and "the killings began" (230). Most significantly, the monologue concludes with the confession that the killings "have never stopped. This is the story they told me. What else could I believe" (230-31). Making no mention of any freedom from the killings, the Old Man accepts his place within the story as the empty stage expresses his "cell" of darkness that subsumes his past, present, and future. The Old Man sings "Go down, you bloodred roses," but the words are as ironic as the lyrics to "Goodnight, Irene" (231). The blood-red roses can never go down because the past can never "go down" for the Old Man who remains in "the indivisible unity" of mythological time. To complement the ending's focus on unity, the last stage direction that ends the play states that the Interviewer "removes a scarf from her head and waves it in the air as Old Man did in First Visit" (231). With a gesture that returns the play right back to the beginning, the surrender to the past becomes complete rather than the break from it. Throughout the scenes and solos, the only "change" that the reenactment of the past creates is a perpetual suppression of the past, which like the noir unraveling of the mystery in *Simpatico* provides no sense of closure from its memory.

Marc Robinson poignantly summarizes *Green*'s ending when he argues that "Its answers solve nothing. Its pattern is full of lucanae shaped to the things which memory continues to withhold" (102), ultimately suggesting that "Any single memory is less significant than its pursuit" (103). The play as a whole ostensibly confirms Robinson's

conclusions, albeit only when read from a Western perspective that expects associations of memory to create a linear pattern of what Paz terms chronometric time. The two protagonists both search for a lost connection as the scenes unfold, the Old Man for the cousin who escaped revenge and the Interviewer for the father who escaped having a place in her life. Underscoring this parallel search, individual monologues by the two characters mirror their sense of loss, including moments when each one claims to have come into contact with the missing person, if only for one fleeting moment.

*When the World Was Green*, then, contains the basic paranoid noir elements of a man entrapped by a world and a fate that he did not create and a woman who tries to help him, but with a key difference from *Simpatico*. That is, the Interviewer is not a variation of a femme fatale but of the entrapped and psychologically unstable protagonist. As a result, the Interviewer seeks her own closure with a fate entrapped in the past, but as the final scene demonstrates, both characters submit to the mythological, nonlinear perspective of time. As a result, the two protagonists ironically continue their suppression of the past by redefining their memories of it within the context of mythological time, an option not available to or taken by the characters in *Simpatico* and *States of Shock*.

Therefore, the play's larger thematic statement questions the ability to control identity by completing associations of things past in a chronometric concept of identity. Rather, the Old Man's Latin American concept of mythological time that the Interviewer shares by the end of the play does not see the individual as a continuous and independent identity from others but as one small part of what Paz terms "the indivisible unity" of past, present, and future. The unending vendetta places the Old Man and the Interviewer



in the “prison” of rôles that choose them rather than arise from the characters’ choices, making them part of a continuous “fable” from which no amount of suppression of the past can free them.

*When the World Was Green* also proposes that the American belief in achieving closure by completing associations of past memories is unlikely to be successful. While the Interviewer’s approach fails to provide a sense of closure by revealing the “truth,” its failings as pointed out by Robinson’s reading of the play expose the faultiness of the thinking behind the method rather than its results. Attempting to piece together the past in the chronometric method of a journalist, the Interviewer’s quest to understand the past proves nothing because the Interviewer tries to associate the vendetta with the Western concept of time. Only when she sees things from the Old Man’s mythological perspective does she realize that the quest for answers can only be a fruitless one, a realization that the ending attempts to posit on its American audience. Rather than suppressing the past by what Bertman argues above as “choosing sweet oblivion over the pain of remembrance” or thinking that the past can be “solved” like a mystery, the play illustrates how Americans would benefit from seeing the past as part of a mythological and unknowable whole (63). Such a change, *When the World Was Green* suggests, represents not a “cop-out” but a way to achieve closure from the past and successfully move beyond it as individuals and a nation as a whole.

*Eyes for Consuela* (1998), which Shepard adapts from Paz’s short story “The Blue Bouquet,” further explores the theme of mythological time’s potential to achieve closure from the past. Henry is *la turista* whose self-imposed exile from his estranged wife takes him deeply into the jungles of Mexico but does nothing to suppress his past

because he believes that simply fleeing can free his memory and his identity from the past. Rather, Henry's night of terror at the mercy of the bandit Amado (literally, "beloved") only further entraps Henry, Amado, and the hotel owner, Viejo (literally, "old man") in their pasts. Late in the second act, Consuela, the ghost who receives blue eyes for her "bouquet," reappears and fulfills Henry's desperate wish to meet her and confirm that his eyes are in fact brown, which would spare Henry from Amado's blade. Henry warbles between Spanish and English to get Consuela's attention and find answers as to why she sends Amado on such a fiendish quest. Henry would also like to borrow Consuela's bicycle to speed away, but Consuela does not oblige him. Instead, she points out that Henry stands on the very road that can take him to town but does not let him follow her.

Although only a brief moment in the play, Consuela's visitation to Henry answers his questions about the indivisible unity that bands Consuela, Amado, and Viejo in mythological time. In a revision of the story Amado tells Henry the night before, Viejo's words complete the truth as to the mysterious Consuela's hold over Amado but also show how he and Viejo have little hope of achieving a sense of closure. The fact that Consuela visits Henry impresses Viejo, who informs the tourist that Consuela was his daughter who "was shot through the heart by the man who swings in your hammock. The same bullet," Viejo continues, "passed through my eye and left me with half a world." Amado version, by contrast, never mentions that Viejo is Consuela's father, only that the bullet killed Consuela's father (171-72). That is the reason for Amado's quest for blue eyes for Consuela, but as Viejo describes Amado, "Now he is a man caught between two stools. He can never rest." Nor can Viejo rest because the "half a world" with which

this explosive moment from the past provides a constant and irreversible reminder to him (172).

Viejo's retelling of the past provides Henry with some answers as to why his blue eyes represent a gift to Consuela, but Henry still sees his future in terms of a linear, chronometric path of escape from the Mexican jungle to Michigan. Despite the irony that he has not learned to see with the "new eyes" of mythological time that Viejo, Amado, and Consuela provide for Henry, he still believes that he can rejoin and reconcile with his wife while continuing to suppress the truth of the past that has estranged them. One last confrontation with Amado, however, remains in order for Henry to earn, possibly fight, for his freedom. In that struggle in the play's final moments, the play follows the pattern that *States of Shock* introduces by providing a flashback to the past in the form of Consuela's ghost, who saves Henry from the present but further traps him in his past.

With another visit from the woman whose desires threaten to kill the play's protagonist yet ironically spare him, *Eyes for Consuela* heads to an apparent final confrontation whose building tension a lone guitar musically underscores. Consuela returns at the moment when Viejo holds Henry "with a strength beyond his years" because he is not bound by the decline in faculties that the chronometric concept of time assumes. Amado approaches with his knife, ready to strike, and eerily promises Henry that "You will be able to step across the border. Into the light" (178-79). In a desperate and helpless retort while the guitar music builds, Henry's screams, "I WILL BE BLIND FOREVER!!" (179). What Henry does not yet understand, however, is that his suppression of the past is what currently blinds him and that the trio of captures actually hopes to free him from that blindness.

Henry's ironic "blindness" finds an answer from Consueala, who confirms that Henry can now "step across the border" and "into the light": Henry's eyes are in fact brown, not blue. As a result of Consuela's confirmation, Amado and Viejo end their conflict peacefully—at least with one another. The visit from a ghost from Amado and Viejo's past, however, does not free them from it. Rather, the quest for blue eyes continues, keeping the in-laws trapped in the retold tale of that fateful day long ago. Likewise, this turn of events exacerbates Henry's own ironic lack of closure, because to this point he only sees the emphasis on eyes as a literal one on color rather than understanding the importance of seeing his past, present, and future in terms of mythological time. If Henry could only use the brown eyes that he has had all along, which are a metaphor for being able to see as Amado, Viejo, and Consuela "see," rather than the blue eyes of Western, white "seeing."

Employing a minimal finale that recalls Shepard's earliest rock plays, *Eyes for Consuela* ends with Henry's newfound "freedom." He may now leave—but he does so with "nothing" because the play's events remove the boundaries he has placed between himself and his past. Ever the bandit, Amado accepts Henry's earlier offer of his valuables, leaving Henry with only his clothes and passport. For Viejo's part, the old man returns to his chair and rocks during the play's final moments, a point that the stage directions underline for emphasis, not only here but every time Viejo continues rocking. Throughout the play and especially in its ending, the image of Viejo's rocking represents the temporally unified concept of mythological time that does not see the past and present as a linear progression into the future. For although Henry may "see the snow with new

eyes” when he returns to Michigan, as Amado promises, what he sees upon his return remains unknown (182).

As Leslie A. Wade reads the effects of the ending’s turn of events, “The play leaves the audience with pregnant expectation, of emotional fruition never before imagined in a Shepard play” (2002; 273). Perhaps Henry can reconcile with his wife, but the potential for happiness for Henry does not overshadow the play’s emphasis on stagnant circularity. While Henry’s return may represent the first example of the potential for “emotional fruition,” it still shares with the family plays and Shepard’s recent works the lack of closure arising from a failed attempt to suppress the past. Like so many other Shepard characters, Henry initially flees so far away from his family to complete his separation from the past and independently achieve some closure of it. Despite all that happens and Henry’s “new eyes,” Henry may continue to suppress his past full of heartbreak and struggle, refusing to “cop-out” in his mind to the fact that he has failed as a husband.

Additionally, *Eyes for Consuela*’s confrontation between Henry and the Latin world around him reflects the contrast between chronometric and mythological time that the play explicitly portrays as a cultural contrast. While the Interviewer in *Green* employs the methods of a Western journalist, Henry represents a Western outsider to the Latin American world of *Eyes*, one which he hopes can aid his suppression of his failed marriage. Shepard’s male characters often flee rather than confront their conflicts, Henry’s flight from the Mexican jungle to Michigan adds a new thematic element to this pattern. In past plays, the flights of male characters such as those in *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind* involve their running from not only their families and

responsibilities, but especially from female characters. “Left with nothing,” as Amado describes Henry at the end of the play, actually means that its events have stripped away all of Henry’s attempts to suppress his past that ironically have further entrapped him within it. Like the protagonists in *Green*, Henry now has the potential to see things with the “new eyes” of mythological time, just as Amado, Viejo, and Consuela do.

The ending’s suggestion of the future potential for closure for Henry also illustrates how memory represents a way for its American audience to complete an end to its cultural suppression of the past. Borrowing from the family plays’ portrayal of flight as a futile attempt to break from the past, *Eyes for Consuela* posits that Henry’s flight represents another attempt at what Bertman terms American “self-erasing” that leaves our culture with no ability to “draw a renewed sense of direction and purpose” (17). What Henry’s “new eyes” can allow the audience to see is that its cultural amnesia that deliberately attempts to suppress the past and fails exists on a larger, cultural level because it exists so pervasively at the personal level for each American.

No person can control how personal relationships affect those involved, as the relationships among Amado, Viejo, and Consuela painfully exemplify, but the perspective of mythological time allows them to understand these limitations. The three’s “renewed sense of purpose” lies not in moving forward into the future and leaving the past behind, but in understanding the indivisible unity that binds all of them with the past and coexists with their shared future. Attempting to suppress the past by fleeing from those closest to memories of it as Henry attempts, the play intimates, provides only a temporary amnesia. The “sweet oblivion” of such suppression, as Bertman terms it, only lasts briefly until “the pain of remembrance” reclaims its grasp on Americans’

memories (63). Accepting the individual's limited role in the larger scheme of life, as mythological time allows, could permit Americans to accept how the pain of remembrance is an imminent and inescapable part of our identities, a lesson not only for Henry but for the American culture he symbolizes as well.

*The Late Henry Moss* (2001) eschews the thematic exploration of mythological and chronometric time but retains the focus on personal relationships for essentially a retelling of *True West*'s story of unending sibling rivalry with a dead old man's story enfolded in flashback. In the play's final scene, the elements of a retelling and reacting of the past that the Colonel attempts in *States of Shock* and that receives a noir retelling in *Simpatico* literally fill the stage with a full reenactment of the key, entrapping moment. A flashback with Earl, Conchalla, and Henry retells Henry's last moments alive while it also retells two other moments from the past. This involves the reenactment of the return from the "mysterious" fishing trip that previous flashbacks and guarded comments from Earl only intimate. At first, the scene merely recounts the promiscuity of Conchalla until talk turns to Earl's mother. Full of confidence and brimming with sexuality, Conchalla chases away the shy Esteban accompanies Henry without Earl so that she can set her sights on teasing Earl with dirty talk about herself and his father. In a desperate plea that Earl makes throughout the play when characters discuss sensitive moments, he provides the source of his attempts to close off the past—a time when he could have helped his mother from his ruthless father but instead did nothing.

With Henry's retelling of the story, however, the absence of Earl in that crucial moment when Henry left his family confirms, as best the words can, the cowardly incompleteness of Earl's inaction and Earl and Henry's suppression of the past. When

Henry retells the story of his failed marriage, his ex-wife “banished” Henry from his own house, causing him “to wander around this Christless country for twenty some years,” he also provides the impetus for Conchalla to tell the story of his death (110). All of that wandering already brings Henry an unavoidable date with a self-induced death, which Conchalla mockingly points out while she strokes Henry’s hair and feeds the already horribly drunk man more tequila while she calls Henry “helpless” but also claims, “He remembers now” (111).

What Henry “remembers,” though, is his suppressed version of events that express his refusal to “cop-out” to an admission of his abusive failings as a husband and father. As if entranced by Conchalla’s charms and the liquor, Henry recants his story, beginning with the image, “She was on the floor,” without mentioning how his assault placed her there (111). That “she” was Earl’s mother who quietly looks at Henry, “Balled up like an animal,” and Henry claims that his wife “watches me pass away!” Continuing the story, much to Earl’s dismay, Henry asks the same question he has asked himself since that fateful day: “Why would she grieve for me?” Finally, Henry provides the last piece of the past that Earl denies throughout the play when he describes his leaving the house one final time, noting that Earl “could’ve stopped me then but you didn’t” (112). Henry could have also stopped himself then but did not, and after the two men return to that moment of flight and inaction, the retelling completes no break from the past. Instead, with a musical “finale” from Conchalla, we see Henry escape through death but without his or Earl’s achieving any closure from the past.

Instead, Henry regresses to a childlike helplessness that reflects how Henry suppresses the truth of the past by seeing himself as the innocent victim when his wife



and sons represent the victims of life with him. A “lullaby” soothes Henry’s final sleep while the final moments of the flashback portray Henry as still entrapped by his past. More than an inescapable moment for the father, the retelling of the day Henry first “dies” reveals how something dies inside Earl, too, from his inaction, and he stands by helplessly once again as his father literally dies. The combination of past and present continues the previous memory plays’ pattern of unrealistic staging that expresses the irresolvable hold that the past has on the characters’ memories and identities. That is, the play builds the verbal retelling of a key moment in the past that first appears in the Colonel’s failed reenactment of the ambush into a series of long flashbacks in which the audience sees and Ray hears exactly what happens on the day his father dies.

Conchalla accompanies Henry’s final moments with a lullaby that she hums, a minimal musical finale that recalls Shepard’s nascent rock plays like *Back Bog Beast Bait* and *Forensic & the Navigators* in that it underscores the play’s specious progression to a resolution. *The Late Henry Moss*’s retelling of the fateful day of Henry’s original “death” and Earl’s inaction speciously provides a sense of closure because Henry’s death completes no break from the past for either father or son. Instead, Henry’s “sleep” at the end of the lullaby only allows him to escape the past’s further entrapment of him while he lies helpless, reduced to a “victim” of Conchalla’s sexual and drunken abuse, ironically much like Earl’s mother was a lying and helpless victim years ago.

Thus in a combination of elements from Shepard’s family and rock plays, the flashback of Henry Moss’s final moments retells the suppressed truth about Henry and reveals that even death cannot allow him to achieve a sense of closure from the past that he cannot suppress. In addition, the retelling continues rather than settles the incomplete

conflict between the two brothers. Rather, the retelling of the late Henry Moss's final moments leaves the brothers irresolvably entrapped in their incomplete and unending conflict that makes up the brief return to the present in the play's final seconds, which recalls *Fool for Love's* structure and staging. Much like Austin and Lee in *True West*, Ray and Earl now face each other in what appears to be a final confrontation that may clear the air between them—or send them at each other's throats. Neither conclusive event happens, however, when the flashback ends and the two brothers face each other with the truth now told and lingering between them. Instead, the retelling of the last moments of the old man's life only puts Ray and Earl right back into the same relationship they have had all along, one of distance and unease. The final exchange that ends the play reveals this lack of a newfound connection and a sense of closure in the relationship both with Henry and each other. "I was never one to live in the past," Ray claims after Earl concludes the story, ending his remark by saying, "You remember how I was" (113).

Given the play's events, however, Ray's remarks only continue the suppression of the past to avoid what the two see as a "cop-out" to admitting their own failings, in particular Earl's unwillingness to confront Henry and defend the boys' mother. Acknowledging this refusal to accept the past's truths, Earl responds with his admission, "I remember," an admission of not only three acts' but nearly a lifetime's suppression of his memory (113). Despite the revelations that the play's ending provides, the brothers agree to remember only not to remember, continuing the suppression of the past that leaves the two irresolvably entrapped in a conflict with the past. Even after the truth

about Henry Moss's death and Earl's inaction during Henry's first "death," the three's shared, suppressed past continues to entrap them in conflict with it.

The failed suppression of memory functions as a whole in *The Late Henry Moss*, then, to reveal that Ray, Earl, and Henry will refuse to "cop-out" to their past failings even if it were possible for the three to confront the past's truths. All three reenact and confront Henry's final moments in the Moss household and in Henry's final "home," yet no characters complete any associations of memory with these events, instead choosing the amnesia of suppression. Combining *States of Shock*'s unrealistic staging of past and present with *True West*'s thematic focus on two siblings' vicarious conflict with their Old Man, *Moss* suggests that the characters prefer what Bertman terms the "sweet oblivion" of amnesia by suppression to the "pain of remembrance" (63). In particular, the characters do not wish to remember the truth, the one key that can allow them to achieve closure from the past and progress beyond it, freeing their identities from the conflict with the past. Ray and especially Henry and Earl can complete this connection and end the ironically entrapping belief that the pain of remembrance can only be a "cop-out" to their failings, yet they all deny themselves the ability to achieve closure with the past even when the possibility "exists."

In stark contrast to the possibilities that the non-Western concept of mythological time offers to characters in Shepard's previous two plays, the characters in *The Late Henry Moss* represent American culture's false belief in the mutability of the past. All three protagonists believe that they can suppress the past and progress beyond it, even when its unresolved truths confront them. In a dim portrayal of American amnesia, the play posits that Americans would rather resist the "cop-out" to admitting past failings,

which can allow them to achieve a sense of closure from them and also repair damaged familial relationships, to the grave. Additionally, *Moss* reflects how the American emphasis on resolving family issues ironically results in Americans' choosing to deny themselves the ability to complete associations of remembrances of things past and allow the continuity of self to progress confidently and positively in the future. Like Earl, Ray, and Henry, Americans do not want to confront the pain of remembrance that arises from and familial conflicts. Sadly, the play suggests, Americans create a culture that chooses the harmful suppression of the family members' past failings that subverts the possibility of closure with the irresolvability of amnesia through suppression.

Shepard's most recent play, *The God of Hell* (2004), revisits *States of Shock*'s exploration of the failed suppression of the past in the context of war the war on terror to create Shepard's most overtly political play. The setting's generic Midwestern farm metaphorically represents the replacement of the traditional American value of freedom with the new post-September eleventh "freedom" in which torture and imprisonment of American citizens has become official yet secret policy. *The God of Hell*'s brief third and final scene confirms that Sam, as a result of Welch's torture, now agrees to suppress the truth of what has happened and will happen at the secret military site of Rocky Buttes. Now "guilty" of harboring Haynes in the desolate Wisconsin farmland, Sam makes the landscape even more desolate by Sam's selling of the heifers, once the source of Wisconsin's dairyland pride. Sadly, Sam and Emma reflect the doomed plight of the few family dairy farmers left, as corporate and government greed collude to seize the present and future profits of the industry with little regard for the farmers and their important contributions to America's growth.

Particularly in this final scene, the farm poignantly symbolizes America's complacent vulnerability to the suppression of the Americans' past freedoms, now forgotten in the name of the War on Terror. Ironically, Sam's name refers to Uncle Sam, the symbol of American freedom and might, the former of which Welch attempts to suppress with his might draped in the red, white, and blue of the American flag. Welch's name, on the other hand, is an almost Dickensian in its blatant labeling of him as one who welches on his initial promise of being merely a salesman of American souvenirs. Adorn any action with the flag, no matter how oppressive and tortuous the action may be, and it still represents American freedom in continuum with its past freedoms, according to the government's new definitions of "torture" and "freedom"

In lines that contrast with the Old Man's mythological reading of the past in *Green*, Frank laments his newfound truth regarding American policy and reminisces about a time when America was not the world's only—and unchecked—superpower. "It's times like this you remember that the world was perfect once," Frank muses. "Absolutely perfect. Powder blue skies. Hawks circling over the bottom fields [...] I miss the Cold War so much" (91). The imagery of the hawk makes a reference to the military policy term denoting eagerness for war, particularly in reference to Cold War battles in faraway places like Vietnam, Korea, and Grenada where the two superpowers indirectly confronted one another. To demonstrate the new type of "hawk," one who is willing to focus his combative zeal on those under America's blue skies, Welch stops Haynes's attempts to silence Frank with a remote control that makes Haynes sit and obey "like a trained dog." "We're all guilty of a little backsliding from time to time," Welch admits, "A little left leaning," which Welch views as a "cop-out" to the immutable truth

of America's democratic past that he tortuously suppresses with the lie's of America's present (91).

To suppress that "cop-out" to the left in Frank and Haynes, Welch literally keeps the pair in line as they march out the door to be driven away to Rocky Buttes while Welch spells out American "democracy" to Emma. American amnesia about the past glory of American democracy that Welch only remembers as an antiquated notion of the term, is central to the new, profit and war-driven America that views a man like Frank as a "useless lumberjack of a husband, scraping the cream off the countryside." "You didn't think you were going to get a free ride on the back of democracy forever, did you?" Welch asks (97). "Sooner or later," Welch rationalizes, "the price has to be paid" (97-98).

The "price" to which Welch refers, unfortunately, is American liberty and justice, and all that remains he contends, is to "Get in step, Emma," just as Frank and Haynes have done (98). Welch promises to return the following Tuesday to see how much "in step" Emma has become. Emma can only helplessly call out to her husband as she remains on an empty stage while a bell tolls in the distance, once the call to heifers but now a bell that symbolically summons Emma to be as bovine as the now-sold heifers. She knows the truth of what has happened, but she has two choices: "Get in step" and suppress the truth of the violations of civil right she has witnessed or "cop-out" to what Welch and those like him define as the now discarded American concept of democratic freedom.

The blue light that previously emanates from Haynes's and now Frank's body complements the tolling bell as an ironic symbol of the forced suppression of America's

past liberty and justice in the play's ending. The light that reflects the taint of torture on the pair and now the home where it has occurred sadly contrasts with the blue in the many flags that adorn the home in Welch's attempt to suppress the un-American truth of torture. The official reason for the blue field in the flag, according to the United States Flag Act of 1777, was to symbolize "the union of thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation" of democracy and freedom in the world. Within the Great Seal of the United States that adorns so many government buildings as well as the president's podium blue has an even more poignant symbolism for *The God of Hell*. *Our Flag*, published by Congress in 1989, quotes Charles Thompson, the Secretary to the Continental Congress, who states that "Blue, the color of the Chief (the broad band above the stripes) signifies vigilance, perseverance and justice" (22). Welch's actions, however, reflect a new America in which vigilance and perseverance apply to torture and suppression rather than justice, making the Chief a suppressive autocrat and the God in the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag the God in a Hell of lies.

Thus *The God of Hell*'s ending underscores the play's dark theme of the potentially successful suppression of the past in present-day America. Reflecting the current unchecked powers of government that threaten a permanent usurpation of American liberties, Welch's actions on the Wisconsin farm systematically suppress the torturous truth behind the red-white-and-blue façade of the "new" America that no longer needs democratic ideals. With the Cold War over, Welch and the government forces he represents now have a new prey—the American public—whose historic rights they can suppress in the name of the War on Terror and the profit of corporations. Tellingly, Welch enters the home under the guise of a souvenir salesman, a reflection of how his

ulterior motive to “sell” the new, suppressive “America” and the farm that represents the now antiquated notion of where America’s self-reliance and profits lie.

Even more significant for the play as a whole, the ease with which Welch removes the farm’s heifers and owner, literally erasing the farm from the map, reflects how “getting in step” represents a new American amnesia that can permanently erase past freedoms with the help of American isolationism. Not only does Frank and Emma’s farm symbolize the rapidly disappearing heartland of traditional America, but it also presents a warning about Americans’ isolating themselves from the threats Welch represents. What makes the work of Welch and his cohorts so seamless, the play suggests, is the fact that Frank and Emma do not see themselves as part of a larger society, both nationally and globally. Purposefully locked in the daily, isolated routine, the couple symbolizes a sleepy citizenship that needs to involve itself in the political and economic changes that are taking place. Without such involvement, the play ultimately reveals, Americans become meekly complicit in the suppression of their rights that many are working to erase from America’s cultural memory.

More poignantly than any of Shepard’s recent plays, *The God of War* depicts America’s past as like that in George Orwell’s *1984* where the government manipulates and suppresses the past as an instrument of subjugation. Do not view the memory of America’s past liberties as a “cop-out” to an antiquated view of America, the play warns. Only by remembering and fighting for these freedoms can America maintain, as Bertman states in *Cultural Amnesia*, its “reservoir of energy from which we can draw a renewed sense of direction and purpose” without fear of totalitarianism. Bertman asks, “How will we remain civilized if memory is the price? And what will our civilization be like if we



no longer remember?” (17). The answer this play provides is that the truth of past freedoms can only be immutable and part of our “direction and purpose” if Americans continue to associate them with the present and future. Only in this way can the nation’s identity, *The God of War* suggests, remain a “continuous self” (to adapt Eccles’s term) that indefinitely and inalienably extends its freedoms to all Americans.

Thus this latest period in Shepard’s dramatic oeuvre begins and ends with the theme of American amnesia as it pertains to the suppression of the immutable and inglorious truth of war. *States of Shock* begins the thematic exploration with the most controversial and divisive war in America’s past in its interrogation of closure. The retelling of the version that the Colonel creates to suppress the truth introduces the key theatrical element of unrealistic, and in this play expressionistic, staging that externalizes the inner conflict within the Colonel. Ultimately, the Colonel’s efforts to suppress the past and not “cop-out” in his mind to an admission of guilt ironically entrap his present in it and prevent a sense of closure from the past. The play’s events as a whole reflect the larger American cultural amnesia about the Vietnam War that suppresses the wounds and divisions it has created in America under the guise of patriotism.

Shepard’s next two plays look outside of US culture to the Latin American concept of mythological time to provide an alternative to American amnesia. While not focusing on the memory of war, the thematic link to *Shock* lies in the violent, vendetta-based pasts that dominate family members’ lives in the present. When *the World Was Green* and *Eyes for Consuela* both provide the possible yet incomplete lesson for the protagonists the potentially healing message that the individual must accept his or her rôle within the indivisible unity of past, present, and future. The actions of the

Interviewer at the end of *Green*, who like the Old Man is Latin American, intimate an acceptance of her “prison” that the death of her father at the hand of the Old Man creates.

The play stops short of confirming closure for her, though, and instead focuses on the Old Man’s refusal to “cop-out” to what he sees is an admission of a failed and pointless life. Mythological time, however, provides the opportunities for both characters not to “cop-out” because moving forward, which Paz calls chronometric time, is not how time, memory, and identity function. Henry faces the same possibility at the end of *Consuela* after Amado strips Henry of all but the most basic possession that proves his identity, his passport, and frees Henry from both the “prison” in the jungle and the prison of his past. The play provides no confirmation that Henry will successfully reconcile with his wife, but Henry does learn that flight from the past ironically entraps him in it. Understanding the indivisibility rather than the linearity of time and one’s place in it, Amado and Viejo try to teach Henry and the play’s American audience, is the only way to free oneself from the past and not a “cop-out.”

*The Late Henry Moss* eschews the focus on mythological time and revisits the familiar Shepard thematic terrain of the American family. Like *Shock*, the play’s staging combines past and present but with Henry and Conchalla on stage and not projected on other characters like Glory Bee, White Man, and White Woman. The demise of Henry may actually exist expressionistically, though, as Ray and Earl inexplicably talk and react to Henry’s version of events. Without the option of seeing the indivisibility of past, present, and future like the characters in the previous two plays, *Moss* suggests that Americans lack the potential to complete associations of past truths—no matter how painful—and achieve a sense of closure from them. As a result, when all three

protagonists tell their suppressive versions of the fateful day when Henry left the family, though, the family members refuse to “cop-out” to an admission of past faults and choose what Bertman terms the “sweet oblivion” of amnesia.

The American family remains the focus on Shepard’s latest play, but *The God of Hell* suggests that the current political trends in America threaten the continuation of American freedom and that complicit, isolationist American amnesia aids the threat. Most disturbingly, the “cop-out” is the new definition of “America” that usurps not only freedom but the farm that symbolizes the fading rôle of the traditional American family. Shepard’s portrayal of Welch’s “welching” on his initial promise of selling red, white, and blue souvenirs, though, also implicates Frank and Emma, whose weak and ineffective efforts to protect Haynes and themselves suggests that the lack of proactive efforts on Americans’ parts aids the suppression that Welch “sells.” Only through direct resistance, *The God of War*’s ending argues, can Americans end the hell in their midst that threatens to abolish their history of freedom.

Collectively, *States of Shock*, *Sympatico*, *Eyes for Consuela*, *When the World Was Green*, *The Late Henry Moss*, and *The God of War* all interrogate completeness and closure to underscore variations on this same theme. While the very familiar Shepard elements represent for some, as in celebrated Shepard critic Leslie A. Wade’s summarization of this period, evidence “that Shepard has lost his nerve, lost his edge,” the plays portray a cultural amnesia of a people who have lost their “edge” (2002; 276). *States of Shock*, *Sympatico*, *Eyes for Consuela*, *When the World Was Green*, *The Late Henry Moss*, and *The God of War* reflect an America whose cultural amnesia has made its people “lose their edge.” From the Vietnam War, once such a controversial and

heated issue in American culture, to the current War on Terror, which has sparked little debate outside of Democratic strongholds in the East and West, Shepard's recent plays all ask the same questions as Bertman does. "How can the very subject of war be understood," Bertman and Shepard ask, "if the basic facts of past wars have been forgotten—the names, the dates, the battles, the causes, and the consequences?" (16). Additionally, both authors question why Americans view the admission of past faults, be they in their political or personal lives, as "cop-outs" rather than ways to move forward productively.

Instead, Shepard's recent plays all provide examples of Americans who choose "sweet oblivion over the pain of remembrance," a strategy of suppression that ironically locks Americans in irresolvable conflicts with their pasts (Bertman 63). That Americans must continually confront their pasts in the present shows that they fail to suppress the past, which the ironic events for all of Shepard's protagonists in these plays reflect. While the characters in *When the World Was Green* and *Eyes for Consuela* have the potential to achieve closure from the past, the opportunity only arises from a perspective from Latin America, not the United States of America. If any positive message exists in this period in Shepard's work it lies in the concept of mythological time. Only by accepting both the truth of the past but also its indivisible and immutable unity with the present and future, these two plays suggest, can Americans have the possibility of completing rather than suppressing the remembrance of things past. Although the potential for this success is very slim for Shepard's characters, they represent a way for Americans to achieve closure from the past and positively embrace it as part of "the continuity of self" (Eccles 9).

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

While critics beginning with Ecco and Kermode focus on closure in the novel, the preceding study demonstrates that Shepard's drama further interrogates the "open form" that Richter identifies as "typical of much of twentieth-century fiction, [and] has as its principal characteristic the 'open end'" (Richter 1). As Richter argues for the novel, a play can also include many moments of closure, both within and at the end of scenes and acts as well as when the fade of the stage lights provides a moment of cessation for a collective audience. Shepard's theory of closure based on the contention that "a resolution isn't an ending: it's a strangulation," however, results in the denial of completeness and closure that Richter defines in *Fables End* (qtd. in Bottoms 3). As a result of Shepard's aesthetic and theatrical mistrust of closure, which Shepard regards as "a cheap trick" in which "everything is tied up at the end with a neat little ribbon and you've delivered this package" (qtd. in Shewey 116), Shepard's plays deny both a "sense of recounting a completed process of change, either in external circumstances or internal consciousness, taking place in the protagonists" and fail to signal that provides a sense of an ending after which continuation is either irrelevant or begins a sequel to the text (Richter vii-viii). As a result, Shepard's plays resist the "copping-out" to the theatrical authority of resolution with strategies that employ irony, genre, and/or circularity to deny a sense of completeness and closure and to "unloosen the ends" of the discourse on the cultural issues of fate, home, family, and memory for a collective American audience (qtd. in Bottoms 3).

Within the broad theoretical scope that Eco's *The Open Work* and Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967) establish, each Shepard play also portrays what Eco refers to as "a work in movement" with an incomplete ending that chance and, more often, the reader must close and complete (12). For Shepard's plays to provide a sense of closure, though, the audience must close and complete the ending outside the text in the broader theatre of American culture to provide a sense of cultural closure to one of the above four cultural issues, depending on which period in Shepard's oeuvre. While not centered on the recurring cultural theme of an Apocalyptic *fin de siècle*, a Shepard ending follows what Kermode identifies as "modern literary" plotting in that it "loses its downbeat, tonic-and-dominant finality, and we think of it, as the theologians think of Apocalypse, as immanent rather than imminent" (30). The immanence of fate in Shepard's early plays, the sense of home in the rock plays, the circularity in the family plays, and the amnesia in the memory plays portray the lack of closure for the characters as immanent rather than imminent. Complementing the immanence for the characters, the plays also rely on what Kermode calls an "immanent" or subjective reading of a narrative rather than a temporal-reliant progression towards an objective finality because the audience must close the narratives in the America off stage in order to achieve a sense of closure.

These strategies also further illuminate Herrnstein Smith *Poetic Closure* by exemplifying that her terms are not mutually exclusive in a text nor exclusive to the genre of poetry. As in a poem with what Herrnstein Smith calls paratactic structure, Shepard's plays do not achieve coherence and a sense of closure from "the sequential arrangement of its major thematic units" because the plays with a linear temporality deny closure

rather than achieve it. Paradoxically, however, as in a non-paratactic structure, “the dislocation of or omission of any element will tend to make the sequence as a whole incomprehensible, or will radically change its effect,” whether the plays are linear or circular (Herrnstein Smith 99). The reason for the combining of these structures lies in how the plays rely on the audience to complete “the click” offstage rather than within the text so that “even when the [play] is firmly closed, it is not entirely slammed shut—the lock may be secure, but the ‘click’ has been muffled” (Herrnstein Smith 237). For Herrnstein Smith, the “click” metaphorically represents an ending that provides a moment of cessation and closes the potential for a poem’s progression. Much like poems that provide “anti-closure,” Shepard’s texts subvert conventional form to deny closure, but in ways that reflect a larger thematic concern with American cultural issues whose “clicks” the plays suggest should be, just as the structures of the texts, open rather than closed.

The plays also reveal that the arguments that D. A. Miller makes in *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (1981) can apply to drama with irresolvably negative “equations” in their structures (xiv). While neither genre can never completely satisfy the reader’s or audience’s expectations for closure, Shepard’s plays refuse to allow the convention of resolution to “govern” drama. Whether the convention applies to fate, home, family, or memory, the works leave the audience with equations that it must solve, not only in terms of the world of the play, but more importantly, in the American world outside each play.

Shepard’s most important advance on the discourse on closure, though, informs Rabinowitz’s *Before Reading: Narrative Connections and the Politics of Interpretation*

and Reising's *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* to show how Shepard's endings "unloosen the ends" of American socio-political issues. Rabinowitz argues that while a novel from outside the reader's culture can present a different culture's ideology to the reader, the novel cannot separate the reader from his or her socially manifest and ideological expectations for closure because "particular manifestations are always social" (201). That is, a reader often misreads an ending's sense of closure that does not conform to the reader's ideological expectations, and Reising focuses on the vastly diversified ideological expectations within the vast United States.

The social and cultural issues that problematically linger after the ending, then, make up what Reising defines as the "loose ends" in American culture that its novels mirror but cannot resolve (11-12). Shepard's plays, however, deny closure because the social and cultural issues they raise represent not "loose ends" but issues that the broad American cultural ideology assumes to be closed, an ideology that the dramatic expectations for closure reflect. By denying a sense of completeness and closure to the American issues of fate, home, family, and memory in each play's ending, the work "unloosens the ends" of hitherto closed discourse on American social and cultural issues. Ultimately, each play suggests that to resolve its conflict thereby accepts the larger cultural resolution of the issue and represents a "cop-out" to a false cultural discourse on the issue.

The "unloosened end" that Shepard's early plays explore is that the American tradition of nonconformity may not resist fate's immanence, but it denies the imposition of external "authority." The endings of the short plays conclude cyclic and linear



structures, and the resistance to completeness and closure in *The Rock Garden*, *Cowboys #2*, *Icarus's Mother*, *Chicago* and *Red Cross* denies any external “authority” over fate in a metaphoric and ironic lack of resolution in each ending. And in Shepard’s first full-length work, *La Turista*, Shepard inverts a linear structure complete with inversions of time, setting, and doubled roles for a heightened effect of irony and a resistance to completeness and closure.

Even more to the point for the time in which the plays first appear, during the growth of a budding Sixties counterculture that placed so much mistrust in the older generation’s institutionalized answers, the plays’ ambiguity provides a potential answer in the search for a new “truth.” Shepard’s endings metaphorically serve as the key textual moment to portray the ambiguity and irony of truth for their characters, and they then suggest how Americans must not “cop-out” and tackle the quest for truth individually and through nonconformity. That all Americans both great and small do not have the power to resist fate or not remains part of the myth and mystery of our existence, and in these early plays, Shepard’s early plays metaphorically portray our existence as an ironic turn.

While nonconformity, the most important turn that Americans can take in their lives, cannot alter fate, the plays’ own dramatic nonconformity to the conventions of the theatre suggest that Americans do remain free from society’s dehumanizing institutions. Instead, the only thing from which all Americans cannot escape remains fate’s ironic immanence, which represents the one ambiguous “truth” metaphorically portrayed in these plays. Each play ends ambiguously because there are as many fates as there are Americans, and no one resolution can provide a universal truth for us all. Rather than

search for external answers or blame fate on the imposition of authority, the plays suggest that no one can resist fate but all Americans can resist the “cop-out” of social conventions if they simply do not conform to them.

In the rock plays, the exploration of three connected issues related to the disconnection between American identity and a sense of “home” resulting from the cop-out to a false sense of identity represents the “unloosed end” posited with the audience. One group of plays, *Forensic & the Navigators*, *The Unseen Hand*, *Back Bog Beast Bait*, and *Operation Sidewinder* focuses on the disconnection between characters and a physical “home.” In these plays, the disconnection progresses after the finale due to the copping out of identity to the demands of an American cultural movement, symbol, and/or role. A second group of plays, *Melodrama Play*, *Mad Dog Blues*, *Cowboy Mouth*, and *The Tooth of Crime*, portrays the cop-out of identity to a journey that seeks a sense of identity from the images of the American star system, both in Hollywood and the music business. A third group, *Melodrama Play*, *Angel City*, and *Suicide in Bb*, portrays the creative process as an inevitable cop-out of identity when corrupted by the machinations of American mass art. Despite these differences in thematic approach, all three groups of plays explore the lack of completeness and closure that results when Americans cop-out to an identity that does not arise from a connection to a sense of “home.”

Most importantly, the subversively structured finale at each play’s end, whether the minimal accompaniment in *Forensic & the Navigators* or the lyrical songs in *The Tooth of Crime*, breaks the conventional place of music as an underscoring of the action or exposition of the characters’ thoughts and feelings. In each ending, the finale does not provide a traditional, content-free celebration of completeness and closure and instead

frames the larger cultural statement that each protagonist either remains permanently or continually disconnected from a sense of “home.”

Thus with music, the soundtrack to Shepard’s generation’s search for identity in cultural movements, symbols, and roles, the plays portray such a journey as cop-outs to false senses of identity that only separate Americans from their sense of “home” and the identity it provides. The music in each play complements the portrayal of journeying for an identity and only abrades the “home” and identity of others. Instead, the plays suggest, create a sense of “home” and identity that creates rather than copies a counterculture “scene.” Only in that way, can Americans be secure in their identities and achieve a sense of completeness and closure. Otherwise, they, too, remain on an incomplete progression to a sense of “home” and identity that they will never find.

Poignantly and often violently, however, the family plays do not suggest that the search for a “home” that ends each of the rock plays finds its thematic and formal answer in a connection to “family.” By contrast, the lies that reflect the curse of consanguinity in *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *Fool for Love*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind* all portray a circular function of the nature of “family” that entraps the characters in their lies about their pasts and flights from it. The pattern, which represents the “unloosened end” in American cultural discourse, repeats itself indefinitely and replaces ending with resolution with only temporary endings that resists the “cop-out” of portraying “family” as a harmonious unit that ultimately shows the potential for growth after overcoming the “ruptures” of internal and external conflicts.

As the stage lights fade on each cycle’s new beginning, the characters remain helpless, locked in a pattern that the plays’ events already reveal. Each play ends at a

new beginning because there is no end to the cycle. No harmony, self-reliance, or potential exists for these “families,” only the cyclic function of the nature of “family” that supposes instability and resists any potential for growth other than the growth of the curse of consanguinity. Any such belief in these traditional bonds by the characters in these plays represents nothing more than a subverted sense of self-reliance that a character can escape the curse of “family.” The only “successful” flight from the curse comes in death, which does nothing to perpetuate the pattern that keeps the family cyclically locked in its pattern, never reaching a conclusion when everything “comes crashing down.”

Collectively, *States of Shock*, *Sympatico*, *Eyes for Consuela*, *When the World Was Green*, *The Late Henry Moss*, and *The God of War* all interrogate completeness and closure to underscore variations on the “unloosened end” of American cultural amnesia. These plays all ask the same questions Bertman does: “How can the very subject of war be understood,” Bertman and Shepard ask, “if the basic facts of past wars have been forgotten—the names, the dates, the battles, the causes, and the consequences?” (16). Additionally, both authors question why Americans view the admission of past faults, be they in their political or personal lives, as “cop-outs” rather than ways to move forward productively.

Instead, Shepard’s recent plays all provide examples of Americans who choose “sweet oblivion over the pain of remembrance,” a strategy of suppression that ironically locks Americans in irresolvable conflicts with their pasts (Bertman 63). That Americans must continually confront their pasts in the present shows that they fail to suppress the past, which the ironic events for all of Shepard’s protagonists in these plays reflect. While the characters in *When the World Was Green* and *Eyes for Consuela* have the

potential to achieve closure from the past, the opportunity only arises from a perspective from Latin America, not the United States of America. If any positive message exists in this period in Shepard's work it lies in the concept of mythological time. Only by accepting both the truth of the past but also its indivisible and immutable unity with the present and future, these two plays suggest, can Americans have the possibility of completing rather than suppressing the remembrance of things past. Although the potential for this success is very slim for Shepard's characters, they represent a way for Americans to achieve closure from the past and positively embrace it as part of "the continuity of self" (Eccles 9).

Even more relevant to advancing the current critical discourse on closure, Shepard's dramatic oeuvre also informs more recent studies that focus on texts with a collective audience, such as Neupert's *The End: Narrative and Closure in the Cinema*. Like film texts, Shepard's plays assume a collective, American audience, and their endings represent "the final address to the spectator" (32). Specifically, the plays in all four periods of Shepard's career presume that a collective dimension is manifestly self-evident in the theatrical experience. The "final address" in each play seeks to open the "discourse," Neupert's term for closure, in an area that the plays assume is closed for the audience and therefore a "cop-out" to a false resolution of the issue. The areas of "discourse" that the endings open for the collective audience are fate, the homeplace, family, and memory. By opening the discourse on these issues in the dramatic context of each play, Shepard's endings suggest on a larger thematic scale that the collective audience, and more importantly Americans collectively, must provide a sense of completeness and closure to the discourse.

Likewise, Shepard's works subvert the readings of a collective audience and a play's ending in Schmidt's *How Dramas End*, which argues that endings rely on a "consensus" between performance and audience that provides both the conclusion to a social event and a mechanism of release. By contrast, Shepard's endings rely at best on an incomplete "consensus" (2-3). That is, the only "consensus" achieved arises from the audience's awareness of the interrogation of a hitherto closed American issue remains open and its resolution requires a problematic opening of the discourse the audience and the American public at large. Until then, the plays suggest, no resolution on or off the stage exists.

Furthermore, Shepard's endings often combine Schmidt's categories of "unmediated," but arising from a very different source, and "ironic," exposing the speciousness of Schmidt's mutually exclusive categories of endings with a possibility that Schmidt does not consider. For Schmidt, an unmediated ending creates a "shock effect" by the "the sudden reversal of fortune (occurring as the result of chance rather than through the influence of a higher power) may occur nearly simultaneously with recognition, followed by little or no denouement" (21). Nearly all of Shepard's plays, most notably *Icarus's Mother*, *La Turista*, *The Tooth of the Crime*, *Angel City*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *Fool for Love*, *States of Shock*, and *The God of Hell*, shockingly end with "the sudden reversal of fortune," albeit not as the result of chance. Rather, the source of the reversal of fortune lies ironically within the characters themselves, yet they either refuse to acknowledge their culpability or the quest to resolve their predicaments begins anew at each play's end.

In *How Dramas End*, however, “Irony restores perspective to the moment of celebration; it implies continuation after finality by drawing in the spectator as judge. It can render a conclusion more profound when it appeals to an audience’s historical knowledge” (25). Any such “celebration” in Shepard’s plays, particularly in the rock plays’ subverted musical finales, involves the realization that the home has ironically been the source of closure, which makes any conclusion a “cop-out” and not “more profound.” The real quest, the rock plays’ endings suggest, has only begun, as the exit by the characters with the stage lights still up at the end of *The Mad Dog Blues* most poignantly exemplifies.

In conjunction with an unmediated turn of events, the ironic “celebrations” at the end of other Shepard plays imply continuation with the spectator as judge to reevaluate its own “cop-out” in light of the disturbing discourse that the ending posits with the audience. The entrance of the buried child followed by the fade of the stage lights before we learn of Halie’s reaction, which subverts any positive finality for this American family, represents the most harrowing example of the “unmediated irony” of a Shepard ending. Kent’s ironically hopeless and cartoonish exit at the end of *La Turista*, Stubbs’s unfinished murder of the Colonel in *States of Shock*, and the empty chamber in the Lobster Man’s gun in *Cowboy Mouth* also complementarily employ both categories to reveal their fluidity rather than exclusivity.

Shepard’s endings also problematize the reader-response model of Schlueter’s *Dramatic Closure: Reading the End* with examples of moments of “cessation” that deny rather than provide a sense of completeness and closure. While Schlueter, much like Herrnstein Smith and Richter before her, argues that an ending either “satisfies” or

“frustrates” the reader’s expectations for closure by providing or not providing “cessation,” the ending of *True West* in particular provides a moment of cessation that suggests the entrapping circularity of the family’s curse (47). Additionally, other moments of cessation that deny closure in Shepard’s endings include *A Lie of the Mind*, *Cowboy Mouth*, *Fool for Love*, *States of Shock*, and *Eyes for Consuela*. In each ending, the play’s action ceases, but only to suggest the start of a new cycle in the family plays, the imminent sacrifice of rock ‘n’ roll saviors in *Cowboy Mouth*, and the hopelessness of denying the past in the memory plays. These Shepard endings illustrate how cessation does not provide closure if a play or a literary text suggests that the cessation provides only a brief respite for the characters and that a work’s conflicts remain unresolved.

Shepard’s plays, then, expand the discourse on closure by providing dramatic texts to which the terms “the open work,” “the sense of ending,” “anti-closure,” and the reading of texts in socio-political contexts can apply. More significantly, Shepard’s theory of closure as a “cop-out” to resolution complicates the previous discourse on closure with texts that complementarily deny formal and thematic closure in ways that previous critics do not explore. The “unloosened ends,” specifically, that each ending does not resolve not only draws attention to the unresolved status of an American socio-political theme but actually implicates the audience in the larger and false cultural assumption that the theme was closed before the start of the play and now needs the audience’s help offstage and therefore outside the boundaries of the text to resolve the issue. The plays thereby create a new category of “open work” whose “sense of ending” contains both elements of “anti-closure,” and the implication of the audience within the



“cop-out” regarding socio-political problems that deny a text a sense of completeness and closure.

In terms of categories within the context of closure in drama, Shepard’s endings combine Schmidt’s categories of “unmediated” and “ironic” as a reflection of their thematic implication of the collective American audience’s “cop-out” regarding the assumed closed discourse on a socio-political. Additionally, the endings “frustrate” the audience’s expectations for closure thematically and formally even when they provide a moment of “cessation” in Schlueter’s terms. The reason lies in the fact that the “consensus” required from the audience, as Schmidt claims, relies on the audience to close the work by closing the discourse on the issue that the endings suggest that the audience should recognize as open and unresolved. The issues of fate, home, family, and memory cannot truly reach a moment of cessation, Shepard’s interrogations of closure reveal, until the audience makes the discourse cease by not “copping-out” to the false sense of closure that America’s conventional society, both on and offstage, provides.

Thus a playwright who began his career writing and performing in coffee houses and church basements, so far from the mainstream Broadway stages where a Shepard play has yet to be produced and even the canonical Off-Broadway stages remains an outsider to both mainstream American culture and theater. From *The Rock Garden* to *The God of Hell*, Shepard’s drama refuses to compromise a vision of the stage and a country that rejects a set of theatrical conventions intertwined with social norms and assumptions, a relationship that Shepard views as a “cop-out” that his works must expose. Without further discourse on these open issues in American society, Shepard’s

works have always and will always refuse to resolve themselves in “a neat little package.” That package, Shepard’s oeuvre tells the audience, remains open for us to wrap and seal.

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