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# Ages of a Hawk Moon: The chronology of Sam Shepard's protagonists and the transition from son to father heralded by The Late Henry Moss.

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**AGES OF A HAWK MOON:**

The chronology of Sam Shepard's protagonists and the transition from son to father

heralded by *The Late Henry Moss*.

by

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B.A., West Virginia Wesleyan College, 1999

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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**Signature Page**

This thesis entitled:  
Ages of a Hawk Moon: The chronology of Sam Shepard's protagonists and the transition  
from son to father heralded by *The Late Henry Moss*, written by Joshua Rollins  
has been approved for the Department of Theatre and Dance.

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Date\_\_\_\_\_

*The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.*

**Abstract**

*Rollins, Joshua (MA., Theatre )*

*Ages of a Hawk Moon: The chronology of Sam Shepard's protagonists and the transition from son to father heralded by The Late Henry Moss*

*Thesis directed by Associate Professor and Department Chair Dr. Bud Coleman*

Over Sam Shepard's forty-plus year career as a playwright, his work has closely followed a very specific format. While the work itself varies wildly in subject matter, style, and language, his protagonists continue to age along with the playwright. Since tackling his family and alcoholic father in 1977's *Curse of the Starving Class*, his main characters continually struggled with their father figures through the different stages of their lives: Wesley as the young teenager in *Curse*, Vince as the twenty-something in *Buried Child*, Austin and Lee as 30-somethings in *True West*, Eddie as the late 30's cowboy in *Fool for Love*, and Jake and Frankie in *A Lie of the Mind*. *The Late Henry Moss*, first produced in 2000, signaled a seismic shift in Shepard's work. The father figure dies (in the same manner Shepard's father did) and leaves the two brothers to ponder what happens next. What does happen is that Shepard's latest plays, *God of Hell*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and *Ages of the Moon*, don't focus on the father/ son dynamic at all. The protagonists have continued to age along with Shepard, but their struggles have become more internal, more self-aware, but no less tragic. These latest plays show an artist grappling with his own mistakes, not his father's, his own mortality, not his father's, and his own legacy. These plays are the totality of a life lived and signal a natural progression in Shepard's work that is only possible with his age and experiences.

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“I thought I had done my level best, done everything I possibly could, not to become my father. Gone out of my way in every department: changed my name, first and last, falsified my birth certificate, deliberately walked and swung my arms in exact counterpoint to the way he had; picked out clothing the opposite of what he would have worn, right down to the underwear; spoke without any trace of a Midwestern twang, never kicked a dog in the ribs; never lost my temper over inanimate objects, never again listened to Bing Crosby after Christmas 1959, and never ever hit a woman in the face. I thought I had come a long way in reshaping my total persona. I had absolutely no idea who I was but I knew for sure I wasn't him. Then, in the fall of '75, I discovered a bottle of Hornitos tequila; pure white, green label. I just stumbled across it like you do some women. I was swept off my feet. I became so completely enraptured that the rest of the world fell away and I never heard the pounding on my door until it was too late. As I reached for the knob to see who it was the entire door exploded and came off its hinges. My father crashed in through the splinters, face red, enraged, and threw me up against the wall. He demanded to know why I had forsaken him. Why I had trained myself to walk the way I did, speak the way I spoke, wear the kind of clothes I wore and why in the world I had never gotten married. My mouth was dry. I told him in a whisper that I had no answers to any of it.” – *Sam Shepard, Day Out of Days (172)*

## Chapter I

### Introduction and Methodology

Sam Shepard is the great American multi-hyphenate. That much is clear by simply viewing the first few lines of the countless articles written about him over the years, which all begin similarly to this *Newsweek* piece by Jack Kroll: “Playwright, screenwriter, director, star – no figure in American culture has ever combined those unlikely attributes in one skin” (68). The general public knows him more for his Cowboy persona and his film acting credits than as a Pulitzer Prize winning playwright; the man is difficult to nail down. He eschews Hollywood and its “plastic” women: “I’ve about seen all the nose jobs, capped teeth and silly-cone tits I can handle” (*Motel Chronicles* 102), only to spend years in a long-term relationship with Hollywood actress Jessica Lange (that just recently ended). He’s terrified of flying, yet played one of the most famous pilots in history, Chuck Yeager, in *The Right Stuff* (1983). The persona of Sam Shepard seems to get more airtime than the man. Which is real? Shepard himself answers matter-of-factly in an interview from 2008 with *New York Magazine*, “Look, look, there’s a saying in the cowboy culture that a real cowboy has the horseshit on the outside of his boots” (42). The character Crow in *The Tooth of Crime* (1972) complicates it further by singing, “ I believe in my mask – the man I made up is me” (23).

The most interesting thing about Shepard is not the multi-hyphenate person, but the multi-hyphenate playwright. Perhaps more than any other playwright, Shepard has reinvented himself countless times. Mamet’s rat-a-tat dialogue can be seen in his earliest

plays in Chicago. Albee's four page monologues had their beginning in *The Zoo Story* and continue to this day, yet Shepard is harder to pin down. Kevin Sessums writes of the young "skinny busboy from California, who up to that point had spent his time cultivating a drug-taking renegade reputation with his buddy Mingus, surprised Cook by telling him that he himself had written a couple of one-acts" (49) which were, famously enough, written on the back of Tootsie Roll wrappers. In these plays, Shepard himself says in the introduction to his earlier collected works, "I was learning how to write. I was breaking the ice with myself" (*Unseen Hand*, 1). Characters are from outer-space, literally: space blasters and telepathy (*The Unseen Hand*, 1969), and enormous snakes slithering on stage and eating characters whole (*Operation Sidewinder*, 1970) these weird, frenetic, of-the-moment plays heralded a great new voice in American Theatre.

Then Shepard, burnt out on New York and heavily addicted to drugs, fled to England with his wife and son. Only by escaping his home country could he truly confront it. Upon returning to America in 1975, Shepard morphed again into a playwright less akin to a beat poet and more Eugene O'Neill in scope. Shepard relates the shift in the 2000 documentary, *Sam Shepard: Stalking Himself*: "It suddenly occurred to me that I was avoiding a territory I needed to investigate: the family. There was a danger. I was afraid of it... particularly my old man and that emotional territory. I thought I shouldn't tiptoe into it... then I thought I better." Great, sweeping, three hour family dramas followed that earned him his best reviews, a Pulitzer Prize for *Buried Child* (1978), and an uncomfortable spotlight shining on the monster hiding in Shepard's closet. As Sean Elder writes in a 1998 interview in *San Francisco Magazine*, Shepard "didn't just tiptoe into the family basement to see what he might come up with; he yanked



the cellar door open, pulled out every piece of furniture, every photo and daguerreotype, every canned good, preserved or spoiled, and laid [sic] them into the sun” (50). Shepard admits in the same article that he was surprised by what he found, “I never really considered the family drama as territory that would be so rich. Everything I’d been writing up to that point had been pretty much solo kind of stuff. Then all of a sudden this family thing opened up and became very interesting. For a while” (50).

Shepard commented on this shift in his work in 1988 for *Interview Magazine*:

You know the difference for me is that with acting – especially in front of the camera – it’s very easy to hide. But with writing, you can’t hide anything, not a thing. Look it – you start out as an artist, I started out when I was 19, and you’re full of defenses. You have all of this stuff to prove. You have all of these shields in front of you. All your weapons are out. It’s like you’re going into battle. You can accomplish a certain amount that way. But then you get to a point where you say “But there’s this whole other territory I’m leaving out.” And that territory becomes more important as you grow older. You begin to see that you leave out so much when you go into battle with the shield and all the rest of it. You have to start including that other side or die a horrible death as an artist with your shield stuck on the front of your face forever. You can’t grow that way. (qtd. in Sessums 50)

And how does Shepard grow? Where does his latest transformation come from and what exactly is it? Shepard spent so much of his middle-period writing about his family, the majority of which focused on one particular family member, his alcoholic

father. Shepard didn't just use his father for inspiration, he used him for material. *Curse of the Starving Class*, the first of his family dramas, begins with the son of the family cleaning up a shattered door on stage, caused by his drunken father trying to get inside the house. In the documentary *This So-Called Disaster* (2003), Shepard admits that this actually happened. In *True West* (1980), the character Austin tells a story about his long-gone father living in the desert, getting drunk and leaving his dentures in a doggy bag. This too actually happened. Even Dodge, the patriarch in Shepard's Pulitzer Prize winning play *Buried Child* (1978) is straight out of his father's mold, sporting the old man's military haircut, like a fighter pilot. Sean Elder observes:

Soliloquies were a staple of Shepard's early plays, but they often seemed to come out of nowhere, as abstract and seemingly isolated as an Eric Dolphy solo. But in his family plays, they were drawn directly from events in the playwright's childhood. He was putting himself and – stage center – his father in his plays. (51)

Yet after achieving so much success mining his family's world and displaying them in all their ugliness, he shifts focus in 2000 and his plays become something different. An introspection seeps in, as Shepard writes in *Hawk Moon* (1973): "Everything falls away. And suddenly... something new begins to appear" (27). Was it the death of his father that set him on this path? Spending so much time and energy exploring the monster had certainly worn Shepard down. Shortly after his father's death in 1984, Kevin Sessums asked him in *Interview Magazine* if his death had changed his relationship with him. Shepard replies: "My relationship with him is the same. Exactly the same. It's a relationship of absolute unknowing. I never knew him, although he was

around all the time. There's no point dwelling on it" (75). Yet Shepard did exactly that. Kevin Berger wrote in 2001 for Salon.com:

*The New Yorker's* John Lahr, who has written about Shepard for more than two decades, was alone among critics in pointing out that Shepard's fictionalized father made his first appearance in 1969 in *The Holy Ghostly*, when he was called Stanley Moss. Lahr doesn't state as much, but *The Holy Ghostly* and *The Late Henry Moss* serve as perfect bookends of Shepard's plays. In between lies the evolution of the playwright's art, a search through pain and illusion, memory and history, for transcendence and peace.

While Shepard's style has consistently changed, the one constant has been the reflection in his work of his current relationship with his father. As Harold Bloom states: "The thread which connects the various phrases of Shepard's work, despite their obvious disparity, is the image of the father. Occasionally a figure of strength, virility, or rude wisdom, he is also frequently portrayed as distant, weak, and manipulative" (Bloom 74). Shepard's earlier work was written when he had no relationship to home. Moving to New York and changing his name, he was ready to completely and totally reinvent himself and his father is just as absent from Shepard's stage as he is from Shepard's life. After returning from England, Shepard tried to reestablish a relationship with his father as his writing shifted to the extremely autobiographical. And now, in Shepard's latest transition, the father figure is gone completely. Or is he?

His later work focuses not on the disruption of the family unit, but on the individual need to connect. Says Leslie Wade in 2002's *The Cambridge Companion to*

*Sam Shepard*, “What these instances underscore is Shepard’s increased attention to questions of human relations; in his graying as a dramatist he thus reveals himself as a more meditative writer, one perhaps more concerned with connecting than disrupting” (276). His next plays, *The God of Hell* (2004), *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007), and *Ages of the Moon* (2009) have no father figures. Instead of dealing with characters addressing the external forces that shape them, these plays take a much more introspective angle. These are not characters haunted by their parents’ mistakes, but by their own. This shift has not gone unnoticed by critics, as Wade adds:

From the vantage point of the mid 1980’s when Shepard’s status in the American theatre reached its apogee, the trajectory of his career engendered assumptions that he would continue to produce the challenging, often daunting works expected of the country’s most prominent playwright. In the 1990’s these expectations went unfulfilled. To all but the most loyal of Shepard devotees, it seems the playwright has entered a state of decline, at best a state of transition. (257)

Certainly the transition comment has never been truer— for Shepard’s work is characterized by its inability to be characterized – by his inconsistency being constant, no matter how much critics want to ignore this. And while the absence of the father figure in his latest plays has, in most critics’ minds, limited his work, I argue that Shepard has not abandoned him at all, but has actually become him. In an interview published by *The Observer* online in 2010, Carole Cadwalladr determines:

In *Fool for Love*, written almost three decades ago, the main character is haunted by the chilling possibility that he is turning into his father. Back then it was a fear; now, he says, it has become a fact. Shepard confirms: "You think about it, you talk about it, analyze it, and then all of a sudden you have become the thing that you were most vehement against. It's very Greek. They invented this shit. Or at least gave it a name."

What his later plays share is not the absence of the father figure, but the exploration of the main characters assuming this role. There is no father/son dynamic, but the lead characters deal with a level of introspection and grapple with their own importance and mortality in a way that makes the latest transition, in relation to his father, the most poignant and powerful. Shepard himself has started to resemble the very monster he was running from. He was arrested for drinking and driving in 2010, even though he had been in and out of rehab and AA meetings since the early 2000's. His relationship with his children has become severely strained, and his relationship with Jessica Lange dissolved in 2012. Has Shepard become the monster he spent so much creative real estate writing about? Where did this transition began to take root and how has it affected his work? If Shepard is merely charting his protagonists' progress as they, like he, age, how did this shift occur? Through this lens, it is easy to identify the change in one Shepard piece in particular, *The Late Henry Moss* (2000).

In *The Late Henry Moss*, the last play of Shepard's with an outright father figure, Matthew Roudanè notes that Shepard came to a realization:

Henry, Earl, and Ray can only ponder the inevitability of their biological and spiritual destiny. They remain, at best, vaguely aware that a

replicating process ensures that the heritage propagated by their grandfather to their father has been transferred to the sons through an ungovernable Darwinianism. The threat to future generations, Shepard implies, is a given. (290)

Shepard's protagonists age as he does. In his earliest work, such as *The Holy Ghostly*, Shepard writes young men trying to escape the sphere of their father's influence. As he writes his family dramas, the protagonists age with Shepard, from the teenage Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, to the middle-aged screenwriter and thief in *True West*, to the older brothers in *The Late Henry Moss*, which marks the last appearance of a father figure as an antagonist. What's most fascinating is the shift to their role as protagonist.

Shepard's most recent work – *The God of Hell*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and *Ages of the Moon* – all feature older men coming to grips with themselves and their failures. In *The Observer* (2010), Patti Smith, Shepard's one-time love and confidante notes that in the earlier plays, the protagonist "had to do something, kick a door down or whatever. Now they tend to be more introspective. They're more likely to examine what they're doing and why." This introspection has not gone unnoticed by critics. Richard Zoglin notes in his *Time Magazine* review of *Simpatico* (1994): "This is Sam Shepard Country, all right, a place of blasted American dreams and macho power games... there was a time when that country was an essential stop on any tour of the American theatre. No longer." This wrongly assumes that Sam Shepard Country is a place on the map of American Theatre. I'll argue that it isn't. Shepard's greatness lies not in staking claim to his slice of the American Theatre, but in never planting a flag. This latest transition (beginning with

the literal death of the father in *The Late Henry Moss*) has Shepard ceasing to examine his father's role in his life and work, and beginning to examine his own. This doesn't call into question Shepard's greatness, it solidifies it.

### **Definition of terms**

#### **Early Period: 1967-1974**

This period of time covers the first production of Shepard's plays during the off-off-Broadway movement and continues through his drug addiction and fleeing to England. These plays were seldom re-written. As his roommate, Charles Mingus, Jr., says in the documentary *Sam Shepard: Stalking Himself*, "He'd go into a room with a box full of blank paper, and come out with all the paper used." While the family is seldom visible in these works, many of them, including the play *Chicago*, a play written upon learning his girlfriend was moving, show Shepard's use of the autobiographical to create drama.

#### **Middle Period: 1976-1988**

Although Shepard did write plays between 1974-1976, the period he was living in England, his middle period truly begins when he eschews his previous style (the style that is arguably a lack of style) and begins to truly focus on the family. With his first family play, *Curse of The Starving Class*, Shepard begins to move beyond responding to impulses or current events. He digs into his past with a vengeance. *Curse* carries many autobiographical moments throughout the script, mostly related to his alcoholic father. The son in *Curse* is a young teenager. What we see in Shepard's next work, *Buried Child*, is an older son character, a musician coming home after being away and failing to be recognized by his family. Making the son a musician was no fluke. Shepard himself became a drummer in The Holy Modal Rounders in the early 1970's and went on tour.

Next came *True West*, with a physically absent but extremely present father figure, the two sons are a bit older than those in *Curse* or *Buried Child* but we also see a son who happens to be in the same profession as Shepard. The son characters continue to age along with Shepard: Eddie in *Fool For Love* (1983), Jake in *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). This period, marked by exploration of the father/son dynamic, is by far Shepard's most celebrated.

### **The Moss Transition:**

*The Late Henry Moss* marks a final shift for Shepard, and is itself a remarkable play for showing an artist paying what may be his last respects to his monster, the father-figure. While *The Late Henry Moss* fits into the family mold Shepard had previously crafted, it marks a departure in that the father figure is dead and on stage. Two brothers, Earl and Ray, in their late 40's- early 50's, come back to bury him. What is interesting about this piece is how many times the characters question their own sense of memory and history. Multiple times throughout the script, Earl and Ray make accusations against their father or each other that the other character calls into question. What this play demonstrates is the blueprint for Shepard's latest transition. The older brother, Earl, wants to go visit all of his father's bars, talk to his friends, try to piece everything together. Slowly through the course of the play, Earl begins morphing into his father, "I am nothing like the old man! Get that into your fry-brain little mind! We're as different as chalk and cheese! I am nothing like the old man!" (47). He becomes physically ill. He begins to question who he is. And finally, in the play's final act, he has a scene with the dead man himself. The transition is complete. The son has become the father.



### **Late Period: 2004-2012**

Following this “farewell note,” Shepard leaves behind the father figure completely, focusing less on younger protagonists struggling with their ancestors and more on the aging protagonist coming to terms with his own failings and mortality. The three plays so far from this period, *The God of Hell*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and *Ages of the Moon* focus on characters in an extreme state of transition and questioning. In *The God of Hell*, the main characters, Frank and Emma, are assailed by a government agent that questions their very need to exist. In *Ages of the Moon*, two older men discuss their own mortality and failing memories. In *Kicking a Dead Horse*, perhaps Shepard’s most pointed play, a man specializing in acquiring cheesy western art and reselling it to urbanites rides a horse into the middle of the desert, where it promptly dies. While each of these plays are set in familiar Shepard country, the characters themselves are granted an outlook and introspection that only age can provide.

### **Literature Review**

While I’ll primarily be using Shepard’s own plays and books, as well as the documentaries as my material, there are numerous collections of essays and critiques on Shepard and his work. However, the most recent of these, 2002’s *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* ends with analysis of *The Late Henry Moss*. There are no collections of essays about Shepard’s work post-*Moss*. Additionally, the bulk of material post-*Moss* is simply reviews of individual productions of *The God of Hell*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and *Ages of the Moon*. Critical analysis of these texts has been severely limited, both by the popularity and proliferation of in-depth study of Shepard’s earlier

work (especially his family plays), and the lukewarm critical reception of these texts. While these critiques will be useful for my work, the absence of any longer, in-depth examinations of these beyond individual productions is proof that there is a need for this study.

There are two documentaries that will be invaluable resources to my research. The first is from 1997, *Sam Shepard: Stalking Himself*. This documentary traces Shepard's career from his move to New York to just before the production of *The Late Henry Moss*. Clips of actors reciting his monologues and acting out scenes are interspersed with in-depth personal interviews with Shepard and clips of the author reading from his non-fiction books. Shepard lays out important corollaries between his life and how it manifests in his art. *This So-Called Disaster*, a 2003 documentary, is a truly unique resource available for my project. As rehearsals began for the debut of *The Late Henry Moss* at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, Shepard invited a filmmaker and colleague to come to the theatre and document the process. The crew was given full access to the production, including being backstage during performances, in dressing rooms, and on-stage as rehearsals began. In addition to documenting how Shepard rehearses and cuts his scripts, the film is interspersed with interviews with Shepard and the cast about the play and Shepard's life, primarily his relationship with his father. This documentary captures an openness and candidness from Shepard that has rarely been seen. Since the crux of my argument is the shift that *The Late Henry Moss* heralded, having this kind of access to Shepard's process in writing, rehearsing, and ultimately producing this play will prove invaluable.

For written criticism, there are few collections I will be able to focus on, as most of the literary criticism for Shepard has been limited chronologically to his earlier work and ends with his family plays. An exception is Matthew Roudanè's 2002 collection, *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. As the only collection that examines any of *The Late Henry Moss*, its coverage of this play is extensive and extremely useful considering my focus on *Moss* as an important transition for Shepard and the very last of his "father" plays. This play deals with the death of the father figure and, more importantly, the son assuming the role of the father, as Earl does in the play.

Harold Bloom's 2003 collection, *Bloom's Major Dramatists: Sam Shepard* deals exclusively with Shepard's more famous family plays: *Buried Child* (1978), *True West* (1980) and *Fool For Love* (1983), with multiple informative essays on each play. Along with Roudanè's collection, this will be my main source for literary criticism of Shepard's family plays.

Another source for my research is Michael Taav's *A Body Across the Map: The Father-Son plays of Sam Shepard*, published in 2000. This work focuses specifically on the father-son relationship. However, while it links his plays from the *Rock Garden* (1964) to *A Lie of The Mind* (1985) by the presence of the father, it never examines the aging of the protagonist. Each play is linked by the presence of the father, but that is as far as the link goes. There are useful examinations of the father/son dynamic, especially in the family plays, that help illuminate the relationship dynamic in these plays.

The bulk of my sources will be the highly informative interviews Shepard has granted with some of his closest professional colleagues over the years. While Shepard does have a reputation as a private man, once these interviewers are able to make Shepard

comfortable, the information he divulges is incredibly illuminating. These intimate conversations, as well as the documentaries, will be my main sources.

### **Methodology**

There is a need to focus on Shepard's later work due to the fact that there is such a limited amount of criticism or theoretical work about *The God of Hell*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, or *Ages of the Moon*. While there are critical reviews and newspaper articles that I will utilize, there is no in-depth examination of the work. Critics, by and large, have dismissed these plays as minor or as that of an artist in decline. I will show, by tracing Shepard's career and how his various stages of relationships with his father affected him creatively, that this last stage is, in fact, a culmination of his experiences as a son, father, and artist. I plan on doing this by using Shepard's own non-dramatic work (*Motel Chronicles*, *Cruising Paradise*, *Hawk Moon*, *Great Dream of Heaven*, and *Day Out of Days*) as well as documentary films (*Stalking Himself*, *This So-Called Disaster*) and interviews to trace his relationship with his father and how it manifests throughout his career. Shepard's work comes from his singular experience – he has no use for Liberal Humanism, finding the universal in his characters and message. In the documentary *This So-Called Disaster*, when asked what message he was trying to convey in *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard paused before saying, "I'm not interested in that."

His family dramas stage actual events from his personal experience and explore their effect. Rarely does one have such a wealth of personal material to examine, but with Shepard, his non-dramatic work and documentaries are essential tools in deciphering the autobiographical nature of his plays and their natural progression with his age. While it's impossible to examine Shepard's work as a particular genre (as it shifts so frequently), or

exploring the universal narrative, I'll utilize structuralism to trace his protagonists in relation to Shepard himself.

I plan to trace the evolution of his protagonists throughout his work, particularly the way in which the characters parallel Shepard's age at the time he was writing them. In doing this, and tracing the "Son" characters from Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Vince in *Buried Child*, Austin and Lee in *True West*, Eddie in *Fool for Love*, Jake and Frankie in *A Lie of the Mind*, and, finally, Earl and Ray in *The Late Henry Moss*, I plan to show the logical progression of Shepard's work and how experience and age begin to affect his characters and their stories. In essence, Shepard's age and life experiences will serve as the overlying structure and, more importantly, will help in making the argument that his latest work is by no means minor, but a culmination of his forty-plus year career as a dramatist.

Finally, I plan to use *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard's last work with a father/son dynamic, to demonstrate how the script shows a writer in transition, working within the framework that has made him famous while his characters (and he, himself) begin morphing from the son figure to the father figure. After showing this transition, I'll be able to look at his three latest plays, *The God of Hell*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and *Ages of the Moon*, in a new light. The son has fully morphed. We now see the characters as older, more reflective, more willing to admit past failures. Shepard shifts from incriminating the father to incriminating the self, all while reaching the latest stage of his relationship to his father: the surviving son seeing the worst aspects of his father come home to roost.

## **Chapter 2- First work and Turning to the Family**

The amount of critical analysis and academic work dedicated to Shepard's earliest work off-off Broadway is quite large. While I won't focus extensively on this chapter of Shepard's life, I do want to discuss his upbringing as an Army Brat and his decision to move to New York. I believe it is important to show the familial background as it has such a bearing on his life and work.

This chapter will also briefly cover the off-off Broadway movement and Shepard's initial participation in it. This era shows Shepard struggling with the time period: "For me there was nothing fun about the 60's you know? I mean, I remember the 60s... everyone has different... I felt it was a time for of terrible suffering. The Vietnam War and... it wasn't fun. It was great to be working, but there was a terrible onus with the war and things coming apart at the seams. I had to get out" (*Stalking Himself*). I'll examine his move to England with his family and the shift his work took at the time. I'll primarily focus on his return to the United States and his decision to finally address the family in *Curse of The Starving Class*. While this period of Shepard's life is arguably home to his greatest works, it is the decision Shepard made when returning from England to focus on his family that I want to examine.

Shepard explains in *Stalking Himself*, "I do honor the ones who have come before me. You know its ridiculous to think you were born out of thin air. There are things that there are ancestors and if you don't honor your ancestors in the real sense, you are committing a kind of suicide." Shepard honors them, but also starts to explore the inevitable: the moment everything dissolves and the son becomes the father. This concept is very significant in his next play, a play that marks a landmark transition for Shepard and the son characters in his plays.

### Chapter 3- *The Late Henry Moss's* real funeral

*The Late Henry Moss* is, on the surface, a play about a man who doesn't believe he is dead, even though the people around him are convinced that he is. His two sons come to collect his body and pay their respects. Shepard began writing this play after losing his own father and the effect on the play is apparent. While the brothers are filled with recriminations – to their father, each other, and themselves – they also start to understand the influence he had on them and the men they have become. In the very first scene of the play, Earl and Ray question their own memory and we see the first hints at what is to come: the transition Earl is about to make.

EARL: That was him. Not me. That was him doing that.

RAY: Yeah. Him.

EARL: You're getting me mixed up with him.

RAY: No I'm not. I know it was him.

EARL: Well, don't get me mixed up with him. (8)

As the play progresses, Ray's anger at his father is transferred to Earl, who left one day and never came back. As the anger shifts, a startling transformation begins to happen. Earl slowly starts taking on the characteristics of his father. He leaves and comes back to the house horribly drunk. A neighbor, Esteban, who took such good care of their father, now starts to comfort Earl. We begin to see how easy the transformation from son to father truly is. As the father's corpse remains on the bed, Earl, who left his family long ago to escape abuse, begins to transform into the very person he hates the most. It would

be foolish to not see how this relates to Shepard. The play ends on an interesting note. After spending so much time berating Earl for his abandonment, Ray realizes what has happened, that Earl is finally a broken man, much like their father was. Ray's last line of the play is simply, "Well, you know me Earl- I was never one to live in the past. That never was my deal. You know- you remember how I was" (117). Is Shepard finally ready to let go? Or does this signal something else?

#### **Chapter 4- World at War: A Larger Landscape in *The God of Hell***

Four years pass before Shepard has a new play in production. While *The God of Hell* is overtly political in nature, it also clearly demonstrates the shift Shepard has made. There is no talk of a father figure. The Midwestern couple, Frank and Emma, makes no mention of children at all. The character hiding out in a basement is not a father, but simply a man haunted by his choices, Haynes. Haynes has escaped a diabolical government-testing program and his first impulse for shelter is returning home, to the friend he left behind. Unlike *Buried Child*, where the son character, Vince, returns home and tries to make sense out of the world he left behind, Haynes greets Frank's life wistfully. Haynes is envious of Frank for having no concerns more than "Farming and animal husbandry" (46). This is a story less about a man coming to grips with his past and more about a man trying to figure out where he stands now, in an America he hardly recognizes.

#### **Chapter 5- *Kicking a Dead Horse buries the image***

Boris Kachka, for *New York Magazine* describes this play thusly:

It's impossible to read Shepard's new play—so different from the Western-family dramas he's famous for—without coming to the



conclusion that he is, at 64, mocking his own iconic image. Hobart Struther, a fifty-something city man with vaguely country roots, has made a fortune plundering the honky-tonks of the interior for horse-filled landscape paintings bordering on kitsch, which he's resold for millions thanks to a craze for Americana. (Web)

Again, Shepard is dealing less with the demons in his past and more with those in his head. Hobart, the main character, is weary. Weary of selling a false image, weary of meeting the demands of a ravenous public, desperate for some level of authenticity. While burying his horse, Hobart mumbles, "All I can tell you is that I had become well aware of my inexorable descent into a life in which, daily, I was convinced I was not intended to be living" (14). There is little mention of Hobart's family at all, much less his father. We do know, however, that Hobart himself is a father. The shift from artist protagonists (Austin the writer in *True West*, Vince and Ray, the musicians in *Buried Child* and *The Late Henry Moss*) coming to grips with their families and fathers to a character abandoning his artistic pedigree to hock false Americana while running away from his wife and children is ripe for interpretation.

### **Chapter 6- A life lived in *Ages of the Moon*.**

Two older men sit on a porch and talk the night away, waiting for a glimpse of the elusive moon. It is a simple set-up, but this play is filled with so much introspection and longing from the main characters:

BYRON: How old I've become.

AMES: Well–

BYRON: You too.

AMES: Me?

BYRON: I mean me seeing you in the same light. After all this time.

AMES: Sure. Both of us.

BYRON: The gray. Shoulders stooped. Eyes buried way back inside the sagging fleshly mask. Hard to even recognize you as the same person. (33)

What's most touching about these two characters is the way they discuss their loss. They are both alone. They try to remember their lives but it continues to slip away. Ames speaks of the love he has lost, even as Shepard's long time relationship with Jessica Lange met an end and, thanks to a DUI arrest, his relationship with his children became strained. Much like the father figure in *True West* moving out to the desert because he "didn't fit in with people" (26), Byron sits on the porch and asks, "I never could've imagined I'd be out here like this. Some strange state. How'd you wind up out here anyway? Middle of some night – some moon – where the hell are we supposed to be? Where is this? Doesn't feel like home to me" (39). The character has shifted. Instead of Shepard writing of a son watching his father say these words, we are met with an old, gray, broken man unsure of what his life has become.

### **Chapter 7 – Conclusion**

While Sam Shepard's latest plays have been met with widespread critical derision, they are among his most powerful and provocative plays yet. Shepard made a name for himself reinventing drama in the 1970's and exploring his family in the 1980s-90s, but it is with these latest works that all pretense, all artifice is stripped. The early plays of a young man trying to grasp his talent and place in the world have been replaced with an old man writing about old men nearing the end of their lives, wondering if anything they

have done is authentic. These characters don't struggle with their place in world, but with the sum total of their life experiences. While Shepard spent so much of his dramatic real estate questioning why his father acted the way he did, his last act reveals the important truths that only come with age and a life lived.

To truly examine Shepard's protagonists and their progression from son to father, it is necessary to examine the author's childhood and upbringing, specifically, how, at the approximate age of Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard decided to leave his family and travel the country. Shepard's decision coupled with the incredible luck of landing in New York City at the beginning of the off-off Broadway movement gave birth to the artist. To examine Shepard's work near the end of his career, we must first look to the beginning.

## Chapter II

### First work and Turning to the Family

Samuel Shepard Rogers III was born on November 5, 1943, in Fort Sheridan, Illinois. His father made a career of moving the family across the country and they eventually settled in Duarte, California. Shepard's early years are recounted in numerous texts, including the biography by Don Shewey (1997). As a teenager, Shepard, bored and restless, began acting at Mount San Antonio College. He lasted two semesters before seeing a newspaper ad for the Bishop's Players: a travelling troupe of actors. He joined up immediately and, as the bus pulled into New York City for a stop, Shepard jumped off and stayed behind. In John Lahr's 2004 profile for *The New Yorker*, Shepard is quoted admitting, "I just dropped out of nowhere... It was absolute luck that I happened to be there when the whole Off-Off Broadway movement was starting" (Web). As Lahr notes:

He had no connections, no money (he sold his blood to buy a cheeseburger), and nothing to fall back on but his lanky, taciturn Western charisma. He did, however, have renegade credentials and a store of arcane knowledge: he had been a 4-H Club member, a sheepshearer, a racecourse hot walker, a herdsman, an orange picker, and a junior-college student. (Web)

Shepard roomed with an old friend of his from California, Charles Mingus, Jr., son of the famed Jazz musician, who managed to get them both jobs at a local jazz club bussing tables and listening to jazz luminaries perform: Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington,

Coltrane. In the documentary, *Sam Shepard: Stalking Himself*, Shepard tells the story of bringing Nina Simone ice after she sang, “You’d Be So Nice To Come Home To.” Not only was Shepard lucky enough to witness such amazing talent in the music scene, but he also fell in with a group of actors as the Off-Off Broadway movement was being born, and these actors needed a writer. Shepard admitted to Jack Kroll for *Newsweek* in 1985, “I started out as a writer just trying to control some weird demon. Basically, I didn’t have any idea what I was doing. Now something is coming into focus that wasn’t there before” (74). He told John Lahr for his *New Yorker* profile, “I had a sense that a voice existed that needed expression, that there was a voice that wasn’t being voiced,” he said. “There were so many voices that I didn’t know where to start. I felt kind of like a weird stenographer . . . There were definitely things there, and I was just putting them down”(75).

Critics were not kind to Shepard in these early years, either dismissing his work as complete nonsense or accusing him of copying Brecht or Beckett. Shepard refused to be deterred, “They were chants, they were incantations, they were spells, you get on them and you go,” he offered in *Stalking Himself*. Shepard refused to rewrite anything. As his roommate, Charles Mingus, Jr., states in *Stalking Himself*, “He would go into his closet with a ream of paper... I mean a box! And he’d come out with plays. Just like that.” While Shepard refused to change for critics, he knew what they were saying. As the character Lupe says in a monologue from his 1975 play *Action*:

It was like somebody was watching me. Judging me. Sort of making an evaluation. Chalking up points. I mean especially the references to all those stars. You know. I mean I know I’m not as good as Judy Garland.

But so what? I wasn't trying to be as good as Judy Garland. It started off like it was just for fun you know. And then it turned into murder. It was like being murdered. You know what I mean? (56)

He continued to write, finishing plays almost as quickly as they could be produced at Theater Genesis or St. Mark's. While his earlier plays seem to have no connective tissue, Shepard was aware of the outside world and his place in it. As Ross Wetzsteon observes in the introduction to Shepard's 1984 collection, *Fool for Love and Other Plays*:

These plays didn't seem to be "about" anything; that is, unlike most plays, they weren't about their characters (who didn't have that bundle of recognizable traits and tics that we add together and label "personality"), and they weren't about their stories (which seem random, disconnected, even non-existent). But once one realizes that they were actually about their highly charged atmospheres – terrified loneliness, for example, or sexual betrayal, or paranoid despair – their surreal dislocations perfectly conveyed Shepard's sense of the psychic pressures of contemporary life.

(4)

Plays about spacemen or giant snakes or dancing Indians or colored ping-pong balls dropping from the ceiling, as John Lahr adds, "express what Shepard called the 'despair and hope' of the sixties; they act out both the spiritual dislocation and the protean survival instinct of traumatic times." Richard Gilman, in his introduction to Shepard's 1981 collection, *Seven Plays*, offers:

More than any other playwright of the sixties, he broke down the fixed definitions of the dramatic. But doing this brought risks. He has said he

wants to create “total” theater, and this ambition is both the spur to his triumphs and the clue to his delinquencies. For total theater, where everything is present at once, can result in a canceling-out, a murk and confusion (xvi)

Shepard finally began hearing the critics and became more discouraged as his work was compared unfavorably to his European heroes. He was about to leave New York for good when Michael Smith, the theater critic for the *Village Voice* published a review that changed Shepard’s fortune. Don Shewey quotes Smith’s review in his 1997 biography, *Sam Shepard*:

The plays are difficult to categorize, and I’m not sure it would be valuable to try. Shepard is still feeling his way, working with an intuitive approach to language and dramatic structure and moving into an area between ritual and naturalism, where character transcends psychology, fantasy breaks down literalism, and the patterns of ordinariness have their own lives. His is a gestalt theater which evokes the existence behind behavior. Shepard clearly is aware of previous work in this mode, mostly by Europeans, but his voice is distinctly American and his own. (35)

This review caused many to see Shepard in a different light and gave the playwright the little encouragement he needed to continue.

Even Shepard’s earliest work shows hints at his relationship with his family. These plays, were written as Shepard “having liberated himself, for the time being at least, from his family, began to revel in his newfound freedom in New York,” says Stephen J. Bottoms in *States of Crisis* (25). What’s so notable about this period in Shepard’s work is

his relationship with his father at this time, or, more accurately, the lack of one. Shepard left his family behind in California and, while hints of his father appear in *The Unseen Hand* and other plays, none of these works have ever been misconstrued as autobiographical. As Don Shewey mentions in *Sam Shepard*, “As a playwright, Shepard would later plumb his father’s heritage for his mythical investigations into the American family, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, but in his early plays he often served up autobiographical family history with only the thinnest veil of disguise” (14). *The Rock Garden* (1964), which Stephen J. Bottoms notes in *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* that:

Shepard’s need to shake off his family was clearly enunciated in one of those first two plays. *The Rock Garden*, as he has bluntly acknowledged, “is about leaving my mom and dad.” Just as the play’s central meaning is, for Shepard, uncharacteristically obvious, so is its form uncharacteristically restrained. Marked not by excitement but by deliberate tedium, *The Rock Garden* presents a nightmarish vision of life in a dull, repressive middle-American family. (25)

While his later plays reveal more about Shepard’s family and his uneasy relationship with his father, it would be erroneous to say that these earlier works didn’t come from that same world. In fact, “no relationship” is a relationship and the absence of a consistent father figure in these plays mirrors the absence of one in Shepard’s life. Shepard looks back on this time period in his own introduction to his 1986 collection, *The Unseen Hand and Other Plays*:



The strongest impressions I have now of these early plays are the specific times and place where they were written. The plays themselves seem to drift back to me as flimsy ghosts, in the same way a conversation with someone in the distant past is half-remembered. For me, these plays are inseparable from the experience of the time out of which they came. A series of impulsive chronicles representing a chaotic, subjective world.

(xi)

And:

I can see now that I was learning to how to write, I was breaking the ice with myself. Even though some of the work is slightly embarrassing to me now (twenty years later), it's like objecting to a photograph that illuminates an aspect of the "real you" in a moment when you least expect the truth to be recorded. I can remember being dazed with writing, with the discovery of finding I actually had these worlds inside me. These voices. Shapes. Currents of language. Light. All the mysterious elements that cause anyone to make a journey. (xi)

Shepard was already on the path to more autobiographical, family oriented work, but he had to face uncomfortable truths with himself before he could face those in his family.

Just as Shepard became known as the "boy genius off off-off Broadway" (Shewey 12), he abruptly left. He moved his wife and young son to England, staying there for three years. While this may seem drastic and counter productive to building his career in New York, Shepard felt it was quite literally a matter of life and death. As Don Shewey adds in *Sam Shepard*, "like waking up from a dream, Shepard came to his senses. He

realized, among other things, that he was killing himself with drugs and that he had to get out of New York.” (74). In Matthew Roudané’s *Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, Shepard admits, "I wanted to get out of the insanity. Of course I was also running away from myself!" (65). He partnered with the National Theatre, which gave Shepard a space to rehearse and perform upstairs with a stable of young, hungry actors such as Bob Hoskins and Stephen Rea. As Shewey notes, “and like many an expatriate writer before him, he did his best work so far” (79). The artistic pressures had started to mount on Shepard and, in true Shepard tradition, he allows his current status and emotional state to influence his writing. *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974), as Stephen J. Bottoms notes in *States of Crisis*, “focuses on an ‘artistic cowboy’ being held captive by gangsters and forced to create to order” (99).

After three years, Shepard was ready to return home with a renewed sense of purpose and, oddly enough, place. As Shepard words it, “Nothing really makes sense when you’re there (in the United States), but the more distant you are from it, the more the implications of what you grew up with start to emerge” (qtd. in Shewey 79). The implications of what Shepard grew up with, his willingness to finally look at his family and father resulted in one of the most important milestones in Shepard’s career, *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977).

Shepard, returning home from a self-imposed exile to England to face his demons and his family, in many ways, echoes the themes of his family plays. As John Lahr notes in his *New Yorker* profile:

Then, there are Shepard’s great “family plays,” *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* (and to a certain extent *True West*, which

combines the themes of artistic corruption and family disintegration). In these plays, the hero, after his visionary quest, returns home, to the place from which he originally escaped, to confront the desolating paradox at the heart of the family – the fact that it simultaneously defines our being and denies our existence. (Web)

While the family plays are very different in their characters and execution, they share the same DNA – and, as John Lahr notes in the *New Yorker*:

Shepard's dramatic world is peopled with derelict, disappointed somnambulists: Tilden, the "burned out and displaced" son in "Buried Child," who returns to his family after a twenty-year exile in Mexico; Weston, the quixotic drunken father in "Curse of the Starving Class"; Lee, the feral thief, who wanders out of the desert in "True West." Taken together, these unmoored souls form a kind of tribe of the living dead, deracinated men trying to escape a sense of shame that they only vaguely understand. They recede from family, from society, and, through drink, from themselves. (Web)

It is easy to see Shepard's father, an alcoholic, ex-fighter pilot who moved the family across country and ultimately ended up living and dying in the desert, in each of these tortured souls, and Shepard in the role of the son.

*Curse of the Starving Class* opens with Wesley, the teenaged Shepard stand-in, cleaning up the remnants of the front door to the house, battered down and destroyed by his father, Weston, in a drunken rage the previous night. Shepard has admitted in many interviews, including the documentary, *This So-Called Disaster*, that this event actually

occurred in his family. What follows is a devastating examination of the destruction of the family and the perversion of the American Dream. Ella, the matriarch of the family, is trying to sell the family farm to land developers. Weston, the patriarch, has his own plans and the children are ultimately caught in the middle. Their “curse” is not the curse of poverty, but of family:

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

In both *Curse* and *Buried Child*, we see the son character try to assume the father’s role.

As Richard Gilman states in his introduction to *Seven Plays*:

Apart from Wesley the members of the family come to disastrous ends or these impend; only he, the quiet, somewhat deadened, unambitious one, has the right, if uncolorful, idea. He wants to remain on the seedy place, extend such roots as they are. He will settle for that role, that tiniest of bit parts. In *Buried Child*, the family to which the son, Vincent, returns is also

poor, or marginal, but this isn't their dramatic condition. Vincent discovers that they don't know him, that in fact they're locked together in unknowingness, in fixity of objectless rage and spiritual lameness. A struggle ensues between what we might call principles of movement and arrest. After fleeing the maimed scene, Vincent comes back to take over: "I've got to carry on the line. I've got to see to it that things keep rolling."

(xxvi)

These transformations end unsuccessfully in the family plays. Wesley tries to take a steaming hot, then freezing cold bath and walk around the farm naked, as his dad told him "fixed him." But Wesley discovers:

WESLEY: I started pulling all his clothes on. His baseball cap, his tennis shoes, his overcoat. And every time I put one thing on it seemed like a part of him was growing on me. I could feel him taking me over. (196)

When Emma accuses him of not doing anything to help, Wesley shrugs and replies:

WESLEY: I just grew up here. (196)

The progression in the "family plays" is two-fold. First, it is that of the natural progression from Shepard's earlier work, which Gerald Weales states in *Rereading Shepard* (1993), "the images and the monologues – feeding as they do, theme as well as theatricality – are more obviously integral to the plays as whole than was the case in the early plays, but still, it is still an instance of the boy playwright growing into the man, the lineage clearly visible, as in those faces on Vince's windshield" (12). Second, it is the progression of the ages of the protagonists. In *Curse*, Wesley is a young teenager who has never left home and tries to take on responsibility, to become the man of the house.

In *Buried Child*, Vince, in his early twenties, returns from a time in the big city, and tries to reclaim the responsibilities he abandoned when he left. In *True West*, the brothers are older. Austin has a family of his own, yet both brothers flirt with abandoning their responsibilities and leaving everything behind to run off in the desert just like their father. When their mother is apprised of their plans, she asks:

MOM: You gonna go live with your father?

AUSTIN: No. We're going to a different desert Mom.

MOM: I see. Well, you'll probably wind up in the same desert sooner or later. (*Seven Plays* 53)

If *Fool For Love* and *A Lie of the Mind* are included in the "family" plays, as they often are, we continue to see the progression of the protagonist; Eddie in *Fool For Love*, having run off from his true love to take up with the "Countess," returns to claim her back and confront the pain his father left behind. In *A Lie of The Mind*, Jake, seemingly having succumbed to his darker impulses, beats his wife into a coma. Sure enough, Jake retreats home to confront his demons, including the anger he inherited from his father, who has just been killed in an auto accident. While the death of the father in *The Late Henry Moss* signals an important shift for both Shepard and the son characters, the death of the father in *A Lie of the Mind* takes a backseat to Jake's losing his wife. As John Lahr notes in the *New Yorker*:

Shepard's quartet of family plays is an act of both reunion and resolution.

"I'm not doing this in order to vent demons," he said, "I want to shake hands with them." The subject called out of him an unprecedented degree of urgency and eloquence. A wife brain-damaged by her husband's jealous

violence ("A Lie of the Mind"); the corpse of a murdered child exhumed ("Buried Child"); a mother's home trashed by her sons ("True West"); warring parents trying to sell the family home out from under each other ("Starving Class")--the plays are allegories of mutilated love, bearing superb witness to Shepard's violent memories. (Web)

These memories for Shepard continually break through to the stage. As much as Shepard fights against classifying his plays as autobiographical, they are born out of his life and experiences.

As Shepard ages, his universe continues to shift, if not expand. Like a solar system, the center he continues to spin around is his father, but the orbits he completes these revolutions on shift. From young teenager on his own for the first time, to successful playwright, to husband, to father, adulterer, abandoner, drug addict, alcoholic, the center remains the same. The next logical step for the playwright then, is for the center to dissolve, the orbits to break away, and the planets to slip into the unknown – the world without a father figure. Shepard's next shift is his most interesting. His next major play, *The Late Henry Moss* deals specifically with not just the death of the father figure, but with what happens next.

### Chapter III

#### *The Late Henry Moss' Real Funeral*

In Shepard's latest collection of non-dramatic work, *Day Out of Days*, he writes the following exchange in the story "One Night in the Long-Ago":

- What happened, now? Are you telling me that this whole history of catastrophes is the result of one night in the long-ago?
- That's what I understand.
- The father came home late and smashes every window in the house with a claw hammer? Is that it?
- That's what I heard.
- Ripped the front door off its hinges and then set fire to the backyard?
- So the story goes.
- The son then snuck out one of the broken windows, under cover of dawn, with a few books in a paper sack?
- So they say.
- Stepping over the unconscious, bleeding form of his father he then jumped into a Chevy and never stopped driving the rest of his life?
- That's it in a nutshell.
- You'd think he'd be over it by now, wouldn't you?
- You'd think. (21-22)



On the surface, *The Late Henry Moss* seems to be plowing familiar ground: warring brothers, an alcoholic father, a desert setting, accusations of abandonment and direct challenges to the mercurial nature of memory: all there. Rachel Saltz from *The New York Times*, begins her review declaring as much:

It may not be its author's best, but it could serve as a useful introductory course in the Themes of Sam Shepard. Here are the battling, estranged brothers and their bullying, alcoholic father; the Western setting (Henry's house is in New Mexico); the haunted past; the confusion between history and myth; the blurring of identities within a family (by the end of the play Earl and Ray seem to have swapped personalities). (Web)

While it is easy to see similarities between this play and Shepard's other "family plays," these similarities are merely surface deep. *Moss* does contain many of the elements that made Shepard such a prominent playwright, but to call it a "useful introductory course" misses the point. *Moss* is not an introduction, it is a culmination, not just of the themes Shepard has tirelessly explored, but of the familial ties he cannot escape. The familial relationships he has alluded to and hidden behind metaphors and folktales are placed firmly in the crosshairs in *The Late Henry Moss* and obliterated. In reality, *Moss* heralds the most important dramatic shift in Shepard's large body of work since he took on the family and won a Pulitzer Prize for *Buried Child* in 1979.

Two brothers return to their father's home to face his memory and each other. Even though the play begins and ends with Earl's line, "Well, you know me, Ray – I was never one to live in the past. That never was my deal" (6), these characters spend the next

two hours doing precisely that. Fatherly abuse and neglect, abandonment, and resentment take center stage as they discuss the pivotal moments from their childhood, including a particularly brutal memory of their father beating their mother into a bloody pulp on the kitchen floor. Echoes of *True West* and *Buried Child* are omnipresent. But what is so fascinating about *The Late Henry Moss* is not the sameness of the territory covered, but the destination reached by the end of the play. Shepard himself, in an interview with Matthew Roudane for the *Cambridge Companion* states: “the play concerns another predicament between brothers and fathers and it’s mainly the same material I’ve been working over for thirty years or something, but for me it never gets old” (79). Yet the very same year, as rehearsals began for the play in San Francisco and Shepard invited a crew to film the experience for the documentary *This So-Called Disaster*, it seemed the subject may in fact be wearing on him:

Yeah, I was hoping that this could be the final play about that. I don't really want to return to it anymore. I think one of the reasons it took so long for me to get it done... my dad died in '84. And it took me, like, five years to even begin to structure that. And then I quit on it... I actually quit on this play until Joe (Chaikin) and some other people told me to look at it again. And it took me ten years to finish it.

Already, we began to see that the genesis of this play isn't pulled from the author living with the presence of his father, but the absence of him. This is the first script born not out of trying to live peacefully with his father, but coming to grips with his father's death. In an interview with Edward Guthmann for the *San Francisco Chronicle On-Line*,

Shepard draws an important distinction, stating; “it specifically deals with death. I’ve never directly dealt with that. The other plays have that peripherally, but this is the centerpiece of it.” In a review of *The Late Henry Moss* in *The Nation*, Hal Gelb remarks: “In fact, Shepard tries to be moving into new territory. If *Buried Child* was Shepard’s Ibsen play (and Ibsen parody) and *Fool For Love* his Strindberg, *The Late Henry Moss* may be kind of *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, an attempt at closure with his father and his death.” (Web)

If *Moss* is Shepard’s *Long Day’s*, he makes it just as personal as O’Neill did. This is another important distinction from his earlier work. Yes, the “family plays” mined Shepard’s own life and childhood, but they used these experiences more as an outline than as a transcript. Yet in *The Cambridge Companion*, Matthew Roudane warns against seeing *Moss* as too autobiographical, stating:

*The Late Henry Moss*, for some, may be viewed as autobiography. The parallels between Shepard’s father and Henry Moss – the alcoholism, the shattering of doors and windows, the violence against wives and the attendant emotional injuries exacted upon children, the move from Illinois to New Mexico, the sheer implacable sense of anger that so consumes them, fathers who served in the air force, patriarchs who do not recognize their own children, the ignoble deaths of the fathers, and so on – invite such linkages. Yet despite the allure of interconnecting autobiography with *The Late Henry Moss* and the other “family” plays, Shepard has never been an autobiographical writer in the simple sense of dramatizing

his own experiences. In fact, the most remarkable feature about *The Late Henry Moss* is its compelling presentation of a series of events which suddenly broaden to encompass experiences felt by too many audiences: the never-seen mother, the father, and the sons emerge as bewildered figures, in the specifics of whose confrontations Shepard sets forth the entropic condition of the American family (281-282).

While all this is true, Roudane seems to miss the point. While the universal reveal of the “entropic condition of the American family” is indeed impressive, *Moss* veers much more into the transcript arena than any of Shepard’s previous work and in turn, strikes out in a bold new direction. While we see instances of sons becoming like their fathers in *Curse* (which is more of a case of mistaken identity) and *True West* (as both brothers begin to trade their father’s least desirable attributes and declare that they are moving to the desert as well), *Moss*, in dealing directly with the death of the father, has the protagonists’ struggle shift from the external force of a horrible parent (an impossibly stubborn man who made many mistakes in life and lives with his regret) to an internal awareness of self that is only reached when the parent is gone. While this new internal awareness itself is a tremendous shift for Shepard, the method with which it is achieved, by hewing so closely to Shepard’s actual experience, cannot be minimized.

In the non-fiction collection *Cruising Paradise* (1996), Shepard placed an essay near the end of the book titled “See You In My Dreams.” This essay, written five years after Shepard’s father’s death and ten years before the debut of *The Late Henry Moss*, is the solid foundation the script was later built upon. In the essay, Shepard recounts the

death of his father. An official from the local coroner's office calls Shepard to report the news. As Shepard arrives in Bernalillo, New Mexico, to deal with the body, Esteban, a neighbor and caretaker, accounts for the father's last days: receiving a large government check, getting a haircut and a fishing license, calling a taxi to drive him around, drinking himself into oblivion with a large Indian woman, and ultimately dying in the street.

She told me that she'd just had a phone call from a man called Esteban and that my father had been found dead in the little town of Bernalillo. Not actually found dead, because he'd died in the ambulance on the way to Albuquerque and lived long enough to identify himself; but dead in any case. Run over by a car. (Cruising Paradise, 141)

In *The Late Henry Moss*, Henry also meets his end in Bernalillo, New Mexico, attended by his neighbor, Esteban. As Shepard states in *This So-Called Disaster*:

He was killed on the highway in Bernalillo because he was drunk and staggered out in the highway and got hit by a car. He did everything in the play – got a haircut, got that check, picked up that woman, took a taxi-cab and went fishing, bless his heart. But there's a lot of things that just can't be helped you know. You can't regret it. I don't have any regrets. That's just the way it went down.

In fact, much of the circumstances in *The Late Henry Moss* are precisely how it “went down.” The autobiographical elements aren't restricted to the present either, as we learn more about Shepard's father and Henry Moss. Earl looks at a picture album and sees his

father as a boy, “Here he is with his dog, Gyp. Look at that” (28). In *Cruising Paradise*, Gyp makes an appearance as well:

My aunt and uncle and my two sisters arrived at the house the next day. We sat in front of the fireplace, and my uncle Buzz told stories of him and my dad growing up on the Illinois farm in McHenry, with their five brothers. Stories of how my dad was always wandering off when he was little and getting lost in the acres of tall corn. He’d wind up on some neighboring farm with his dog, Gyp, and have to spend the night there until my grandfather would come get him (146-147).

With the circumstances surrounding his father’s death and many elements from his father’s life represented in the play, why does Shepard hue so closely to the autobiographical in this work? As Roudane observes, “The genesis of Henry’s character in part came from Shepard’s desire to write about his father’s death. He wanted, apparently, to put his felt experiences onto page, and then stage, before too much time intervened” (283). So while Shepard is not an “autobiographical writer in the strictest sense” as Roudane points out, it is a mistake not to see *The Late Henry Moss* as intensely autobiographical. Not only should we recognize this fact, but also examine how this play, filled with personal details about the death of arguably the single greatest influence in Shepard’s work, transforms Shepard from the son writing about his father’s ghost to finally saying goodbye to it and the unavoidable personal reflection that manifests itself in both this work and his subsequent offerings.

One immediate difference between *Moss* and Shepard's previous plays, including the other "brother play," *True West*, is how quickly he gets to the point. *True West* begins with both brothers staring into the night, tentatively stepping around their issues with each other and their father. In *The Late Henry Moss*, the lights rise on Henry's body covered on a cot as Earl flips through a photo album and Ray rifles through his father's toolbox. On the very first full page of text, Ray brings the seminal event from their childhood to the forefront:

RAY: I remember you leaving. That's all I remember.

EARL: What? When?

RAY: When you first left. When the big blowout happened. (7)

We later learn more about the nature of the "big blowout" and what it meant for each brother, but this directness is a strong characteristic of Ray. Later in the play, as he interrogates Taxi, the man who drove his father on his ill-fated fishing trip, Ray explains why directness is so important:

RAY: Your whole family's a pack of liars. They were born liars. They couldn't help themselves. That's why it's important to try to get at the heart of things, don't you think? Somebody, somewhere along the line has to try to get at the heart of things. (68)

The desire to get to the truth, especially before it is warped by the inevitable passage of time, is a strong thread throughout the entire play. While *True West* spends a great deal

of creative real estate debating the “true” and “authentic,” it mostly refers to the external: the land, the West, and experiences shared by fictional characters. If Shepard truly is trying to document what his father’s death meant to him and close the chapter of this book, his desire to “get it right” is understandable.

RAY: I remember it like a war or something. An invasion.

EARL: Yeah, well things get embellished over the years. You were a kid.

RAY: So were you.

EARL: Yeah, but there was a certain – maturity about me. I was coming into my own back then.

RAY: Explosions. Screaming. Smoke. The telephone.

EARL: Explosions? There weren’t any explosions, Ray.

RAY: People running. You were one of them. (9)

As Ray continues to harass Earl with his truth, Earl brushes off the attacks as the flawed memory of a child:

EARL: It’s time you got it straight. It’s no good carrying the wrong pictures around with you the rest of your life. They’re liable to get more and more warped as time goes on. Pretty soon you’ll forget how it really was. (10)



Ray's search for the truth and Shepard's uncharacteristic directness permeates the play, and the effect is chilling. If Moss is the stand-in for Shepard's father, it is easy to see the relationship Shepard himself has with both brothers, Earl and Ray. It is through their eyes that we see perhaps the most brutal and brutally honest father figure in any Shepard play.

HENRY: What's the deal here anyway? You showing up outta the blue like this. What's the big idea?

EARL: Esteban told me it was an emergency.

HENRY: Emergency? He's a Mexican! Everything's an emergency with them.

EARL: He said you'd disappeared.

HENRY: Since when did you ever give two shits whether I disappeared or not? I haven't seen hide nor hair of you for – how long's it been now?

EARL: I forget.

HENRY: Yeah. Me too.

EARL: I wasn't – sure you wanted to see me.

HENRY: Oh, is that right? You weren't sure? Well let's get clear about this then. Let's get this straight once and for all. Far as I'm concerned you

never even existed! You were one big, bad mistake! All right? Does that make any kind of sense to you at all?

EARL: Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. That explains a whole lot. (101-102)

This brutal honesty doesn't just extend to Earl and Ray. If Shepard is "getting to the heart of the matter," this desire extends beyond the brothers and their struggle. For perhaps the first time since Weston's monologue in *Curse*, we see Shepard dig into the psyche of the father with the same urgency he normally reserves for the children (Wesley in *Curse*, Austin and Lee in *True West*, Vince in *Buried Child*, Eddie and May in *Fool for Love*). This is where *The Late Henry Moss* begins to break new ground and signals not only Shepard's willingness to move beyond his father, but perhaps the fact that the aging of the playwright himself has afforded a greater understanding of the father that has haunted his life, both literally and on the stage, since his earliest work. Henry is openly honest with himself about his past transgressions. Conchalla, the woman he had run away with, has declared him officially dead and as he begins to question whether she may be right, he examines his own mistakes and failings:

HENRY: What did I ever do to deserve this? I've led an honorable life for the most part. I've served my country. I've dropped bombs on total strangers! I've worked my ass off for idiots. Paid my taxes. There's never once been any question of my – existence! Never once. It's humiliating! A man my age – to be forced into this kind of position. I'm too old to be having to prove I'm alive! (79)

And although Henry places the blame for the brutal beating of his wife squarely on her shoulders, stating simply, “She locked me out!” (110), the pain he feels from this event quickly turns from recrimination to sorrow:

HENRY: She caused me to leave!! She caused me to pack on outta there! What’d’ya think? You think I wanted to wander around this Christless country for twenty some years like a refugee? Like some miserable fuckin’ exile? Huh? You think I wanted that? She did that to me! She banished me! She turned me out! (110)

On the very next page, Henry begins openly weeping and changes his tone:

HENRY: I remember the floor – was yellow – I can see the floor – and – her blood – her blood was smeared across it. I though I’d killed her – but it was me. It was me I killed. I can see her eyes – peering up at me. Her swollen eyes. She just – stays there, under the sink. Silent. Balled up like an animal. Nothing moving but her eyes. She sees me. She knows. I can tell she knows. She seems my dying! Right there in front of her. She watches me pass away! There’s nothing she can do. And then – there’s this flash of grief – from her. Grief! Why would she grieve for me? I ran out into the yard and I remember – I remember this – death. I remember it now – cut off. Everything – far away. Birds. Trees. Sky. Removed! Everything – out beyond reach. And I ran. I ran to the car and drove. I drove for days with the windows wide open. The wind beating cross my eyes – my face. I had no map. No destination. I just – drove. (111)

The turn here, that a man who has been aggressively declaring that he is alive suddenly admits that he died a long time ago, shows a greater sense of understanding, if not empathy, for a father figure than any of Shepard's previous work. *Curse of the Starving Class* is arguably a play more about the son than the father. In *Buried Child*, Dodge is restrained to the couch for the majority of the play and his protestations are met with nothing short of contempt and annoyance by his family. *Fool For Love* is clearly about how Eddie and May themselves deal with their own feelings and the specter of their father. Yet *The Late Henry Moss*, for all of its focus on the sons and the past, brings the father's struggle with his own past front and center. Why it is clear that this thematic shift was brought about by his father's death and Shepard himself aging, the clearest indicator of this shift comes from a device that Shepard has used in his arsenal since his earliest plays, the identity switch.

As early as the late 1960's, with *The Unseen Hand* and *Tooth of Crime* being prominent examples, Shepard has explored the mercurial nature of identity. One of his most produced plays, *True West* deals so extensively and successfully with an identity switch that famous actors have lined up to alternate the role of Austin and Lee every other night, including, most recently, John C. Reilly and Philip Seymour Hoffman on Broadway in 2000. What's so noticeable about the identity crisis in *The Late Henry Moss* is that it is shared so completely not between two brothers, but between father and son. From the very first few pages of the play, Earl is mistaken for his father:

RAY: Whose age?

Earl: Mine.

RAY: Oh. I thought you meant his.

EARL: No – me. Getting’ older. You know. I mean at eighteen, nineteen, my mind was going in a whole different direction. You remember how I was. [*he suddenly sings*] “Gonna tie my pecker to a tree, to a tree. Gonna tie my pecker to a tree.” You remember that? [*Pause. Ray just stares at him.*]

EARL: Well, do ya?

RAY: I thought that was him. I remember him singing that.

EARL: That was me! (pages 6-7)

Followed closely by this exchange:

RAY: That’s still very vivid with me. Like it happened yesterday.

EARL: You shouldn’t let that stuff haunt you, Ray.

RAY: I remember the windows exploding.

EARL: Exploding?

RAY: Blown out. Glass everywhere.

EARL: ooh – yeah. That was *him*. Not me. That was him doing that.

RAY: Yeah. Him.

EARL: You're getting me mixed up with him.

RAY: No I'm not. I know it was him.

EARL: Well, don't get me mixed up with him.

RAY: I'm not. I know it was him.

EARL: Good. *He* was the one breaking windows. Not me. (8, original emphasis)

In the beginning of Act Three, after Earl and Esteban have gone to town to call the corner to collect Henry's body, they arrive back to the house with Earl severely inebriated. The stage directions state: "*Earl has a raging hangover. He lies on his back in Henry's bed, holding his head with both hands and writhing in pain*" (82). Esteban comments that Earl is "Just like your father" (83) to which Earl responds, "I am *nothing* like the old man! Get that into your fry-brain little mind! We're as different as chalk and cheese! I am *nothing* like the old man!" (83, original emphasis) Yet Earl is lying in Henry's bed recovering from a massive hangover. Esteban is making him soup and helping him take off his shoes. Henry's body has been gone less than a few hours (the coroner workers recently left) and already Earl has taken his place.

Yet the identity transfer is not complete. No matter how much Earl drinks or how desperate he feels, Shepard draws an important distinction between the two as the play draws to a close. While Henry's first instinct is violence and retaliation, while he reacts with absolute aggression to any challenge, Earl refuses to act:

HENRY: You saw! I looked straight at you! You looked straight back.  
Your mother was screaming the whole time!

EARL: No!! I was never there. I was never there for that!!

HENRY: You coulda stopped me but you didn't.

EARL: I couldn't. I-I-I was scared. I was – just – too – scared.

HENRY: You were scared! A what? A me? You were scared of a dead  
man?

*Henry takes a last giant pull on the bottle, then lies back and dies quietly.*

(113)

During a quiet interview in *This So-Called Disaster*, Shepard recounts the last time he saw his father:

He was absolutely smashed and I should have known better over the years to try to sit down with him when he was in that state, because he was a madman. He was crazy. He was totally crazy. I made the mistake of sitting down with him and trying to have a normal conversation with him. I remember the last thought I had was, "Don't retaliate. Whatever you do in this moment, don't retaliate or you'll regret it for the rest of your life... I was in this little screen door... and I thought if I retaliated in any way, verbally or any kind of way it would be a bad deal. So I just walked away

from him. And that was the last time I ever saw him. About three weeks later he was found dead.

Shepard is careful of the last image we see of Henry as well, as he's lowered to the dining room table by Conchalla, she explains:

CONCHALLA: I will show you your father. You see him now? You see how he looks to me. Helpless. Hoping. Dreaming. Wishing for death. Wishing for some way out. (123)

While *The Late Henry Moss* could have very easily fit within Shepard's "family play" genre, it instead breaks new ground by saying goodbye to the father while also trying to understand the world through his eyes. As Shepard ages, and as we see in his plays post-*Henry Moss*, his point of view has shifted from a son under assault from a father, to a man under assault from the world. For Shepard to move beyond his father's sphere and begin writing plays from the perspective of a man responsible for his own actions, Henry Moss has to be buried, much like Shepard's own father. Shepard recounts his father's funeral in *Cruising Paradise*:

Me and my younger sister took turns reading some Lorca poems (my dad's favorite poet), and I even attempted a passage from the Bible but choked on the words "All is vanity," because I suddenly saw my own in reading this as though I understood its true meaning. I couldn't speak at all for awhile. Nothing came out. My whole face quivered, and I could sense the embarrassment from the gathering. I felt no embarrassment myself,



only a terrible knotted grief that couldn't find expression... I picked up the pine box, surprised by how much it weighed. Just ashes from a dead man.

(149-150)

With the weight of that pine box in the ground, we begin to see men coming face-to-face with the repercussions of their actions. *The God of Hell*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and *Ages of the Moon* show that Shepard has again made a monumental shift in his dramatic style. From the space cowboys and giant anacondas to the family collapsing on to itself like a failing star, we now begin to see The Self-Made Man come into his own – blaming no one for his actions, holding no one accountable but himself. The title of the essay from *Cruising Paradise* that *The Late Henry Moss* is based on is “See You In My Dreams.” It is taken from a note Shepard's father left him and eloquently sums up this change:

You may think this great calamity that happened, way back when – this so-called disaster between me and your mother – you might actually think it had something to do with you, but you're dead wrong. Whatever took place between me and her was strictly personal. See you in my dreams.

(146)

With this, Shepard's father takes some level of accountability for his own actions. With his death, Shepard is left to contemplate what comes next. The narrative shifts from a man dealing with his father's actions to looking at his own.

## CHAPTER IV

### **A Larger Landscape in *The God Of Hell***

If *The Late Henry Moss* closed the book on Shepard's family dramas with the death of his father, what would Shepard write about next? If the monster had been buried six feet below, what would take his place? Shepard's first play after *Moss*, 2004's *The God Of Hell* features no father figure, no absent parent at all. The main characters, Frank and Emma, seem, at least on the surface, a typical Midwestern farming couple. Emma busies herself watering plants and cooking breakfast as Frank feeds his dairy cows and oils his boots. There are no pictures of children hanging on the walls, no hint of a family. Emma and Frank are alone on the farm, save Frank's replacement heifers, his "babies" (40). There is no hint of a past or history with Emma and Frank, just the present. As Ben Brantley stated in his 2004 *New York Times* on-line review, "We begin in the same kitchen set: Even before the show begins, its well-scrubbed farmhouse set, designed by David Korins, immediately signals that you're in Shepard country. It's as cozy as auntie's patchwork quilt, but certain details seem slightly askew – like the jungle of house plants and that constant dripping sound." There is no sign of alcohol abuse, no secrets buried in the back yard, no smashed windows or doors, no empty refrigerators or maggot-infested goats. The only thing remarkable about this couple is how truly unremarkable they are. Their needs, wants, and desires are simple. As Emma tells the mysterious visitor camped out in their basement when he asks if Frank ever thought of leaving the Midwest:

EMMA: I mean Frank never had any aspirations like that. He's always been very content in the country. Farming. Animal husbandry, hybrid vigor. Stuff like that. (12)

Unlike Shepard's previous work, there is no mention of children living on the coasts or monologues from young people trying to escape. The typical Shepard stand-in is absent. While dairy farmers trying to eek out a living may sound similar to the Weston family in *Curse* or the family in *Buried Child*, what is so remarkable about *The God of Hell* is that the family's struggle is not caused by internal factors or the father's alcoholism. As in Shepard's earlier work, this family's peaceful world is suddenly and completely upended. But unlike Shepard's earlier work, their undoing occurs from the outside. They aren't visited by a rogue family member, but by an old friend of Frank's named Haynes. Haynes is on the run after escaping a government facility where he was subjected to heinous experiments. A government agent, Welch, appears at their doorstep, searching for him. What follows is a wide-ranging examination and indictment of the American Dream through the lens of the presidency of George W. Bush.

For the first time since Shepard tackled the farmer family, he expands his worldview. The graying of the playwright has convinced him that there are bigger forces at play in the plight of the American family. Not only does he overtly attack American imperialism and torture, he also finds a more sinister force than an alcoholic father responsible for the degradation of the family: in this instance, the agri-industrial complex. While the hard world of *Curse* was a given, accepted by the characters as the way things

are, the characters in *God* have a greater understanding of how the world outside the farm works:

WELCH: The Mighty Mississippi! You can tell as soon as you cross it that you're in a different domain, a new realm. The Heartland – isn't that what you call it up here? The "Heartland"?

EMMA: Dairyland, actually. "America's Dairyland." It's on the license plates.

WELCH: I noticed that.

EMMA: But it's all moved away.

WELCH: What has?

EMMA: The milk. The cows.

WELCH: But you've got cows down there.

EMMA: There's just a few of us left.

WELCH: Who?

EMMA: Dairy – dairy people.

WELCH: Well, where'd they go? Where'd they move away to?

EMMA: Out west. Agribusiness. Big corporations. (14-15)

Later in the play, Emma explains their dilemma to the government agent, Haynes:

HAYNES: Don't you have some neighbors?

EMMA: They never come out. It's too cold.

HAYNES: How 'bout summer?

EMMA: Summer they stay in the air-conditioning.

HAYNES: Don't they farm too?

EMMA: Nobody farms anymore. Government pays them not to. We're the only ones left. (55).

This is the first time Shepard has delved into the bigger picture. This is less about the slow burn of a family consuming itself from within, less about the family's inability to achieve the American Dream due to their own shortcomings, and more about the ways the American Dream has betrayed the farming family. While Shepard has clearly shown external factors before, they have never seemed to be the root cause of the struggle. For example, while the land-hungry developers in *Curse* are a constant threat to that family's way of life, the true cause of misery is clearly Weston's inability to stay sober. In *God*, Frank and Emma are living a hard, but perfectly acceptable existence until the sinister government operative intercedes. As John Lahr states in his *New Yorker* on-line review, "Although *The God of Hell* begins ordinarily, with the faux naturalism of a wood-beamed house in which a farmer, Frank (Randy Quaid), is oiling his boots, and his wife, Emma (J. Smith-Cameron), is watering her plants, the style and content of the story turn by degrees

into the grotesque— a fierce distortion that is a measure of the author's fear and loathing.”

This political landscape is relatively new to Shepard. Although he dealt with the first Iraqi war in 1991's *States of Shock*, *The God of Hell* is different in its directness. As Shepard told Don Shewey in *American Theatre Magazine*:

Well, yeah. I've always found plays that are overtly political to be extremely boring. *Waiting for Lefty*? Incredibly boring. And yet at the same time, you have to deal with what's going on in the world. It's difficult now to find material that you feel is pertinent to a whole bunch of people. I'm not quite sure who goes to the theatre anymore. (Web)

The immediacy of *The God of Hell* sets it apart from Shepard's other work. While his most famous work is, in some ways, of its time, *The God Of Hell* is so firmly of the moment in which it was written, one would be hard-pressed to extricate it. *True West* has its talk of color televisions and *Lonely are the Brave*, of telephone operators and typewriters, but the world is contained. Nothing that happens outside the kitchen walls is of consequence to the characters. *The God of Hell* turns this on its head, forcing the farming couple to not only acknowledge the outside world, but defend themselves against it and, ultimately, try to find their place in it. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the atrocities of Abu Ghraib, the rise of the tea-party and McCarthy-era strength venom launched against anyone who is “other” will not be ignored, no matter how much this typical Midwestern couple hopes to do so. Shepard continued in his interview with Don Shewey:

I'm interested in characters who have a certain profound sense of helplessness. I think it's a lot closer to the truth than the illusion that people are on top of things, which is the impression you get every day from television, that we're all on top of it, we're exquisite performers in our life. Get the SUV and we're goin' to town. The whole nation's on a winning streak. Which couldn't be further from the truth. We're on the biggest losing streak we've ever had. How many people a month come home from Iraq with limbs missing? Yet we're supposed to be victorious in this thing. It's a fucking nightmare. Every day it's brainwashing, that this is a heroic thing we're involved in. It's unbelievable bullshit.

For Shepard, Frank and Emma represent the American ideal. But to Welch, the government operative, The American Dream is quite a bit different. This self-subsistence and simple life is anathema to progress, which is the true American Dream:

WELCH: The future Haynes! The bright, golden American future. You can just imagine what an enormous leap that is for a simple country people like this – so out of touch. Living completely in the long ago. Stuck in some quaint pioneer morality. (71)

Welch invites himself into the farmhouse, initially to find Haynes, but his goals quickly change to berating Emma for the lack of patriotic paraphernalia the couple owns and then stapling paper flags all over the house. As Shepard told Don Shewey in the *Village Voice*, “We're being sold a brand-new idea of patriotism. It never occurred to me that patriotism had to be advertised. Patriotism is something you deeply felt. You didn't have to wear it

on your lapel or show it in your window or on a bumper sticker. That kind of patriotism doesn't appeal to me at all" (Web). Shepard doesn't mince words when attacking the government or the government's surrogate, Welch:

WELCH: We can do whatever we want, buddy-boy. That should be clear by now. We're in the driver's seat. Haven't you noticed? There's no more of that nonsense of checks and balances. All that red tape. All that hanging around in limbo, waiting for decisions from committees and tired-out lobbies. We're in absolute command now. We don't have to answer to a soul, least of all a couple of Wisconsin dairy farmers. (70)

The Government now sees Frank and Emma as the enemy simply because they remember a life that was better, a life that was different:

FRANK: It's times like this you remember the world was perfect once. Absolutely perfect. Powder blue skies. Hawks circling over the bottom fields. The rich smell of fresh-cut alfalfa laying in lazy wind rows. The gentle bawling of spring calves calling to their mothers. I miss the Cold War so much. (91)

As Welch buys up Frank's prize heifers to use them in scientific experiments, as he dresses Frank up in a dark suit, commits genital-torture on Haynes, and crushes Emma for questioning his purpose and tactics, it becomes clear that Shepard believes the only goal of the government is assimilation:



WELCH: Things have already been set in motion. There's no more thinking to do. It's time for action. Look at your friend, Haynes. How committed he is. You don't want to be left behind do you, Frank? Out here in the hinter-lands. Get in step! Get in step! Things are going to start moving very, very fast now Everything's been building to this. You'll see. The wonderful part is that the machinery is in place! (95)

It is this machinery, already working, already in place, that frightens Shepard the most. This spurs Shepard on into a new direction, as Robert Brustein described in his *New Yorker On-line* review:

[He is] galvanized by current events to write his most overtly political play since *States of Shock* (1991). Like *States of Shock*, an implicit attack on the first Bush administration during the Persian Gulf War, *The God of Hell* is a metaphor for a whole nation on the cusp of cultural implosion. Shepard seems to be taking our temperature at the very hour that we are developing a fever. Indeed, *The God of Hell* is not only of the moment, it is the moment. It seems to have been written, in a white heat, the day before yesterday. (Web)

As Brustein mentions, Shepard did tackle the political in his 1991 play, *States of Shock*, but the main characters in that play are purely stock. "The Colonel," played by John Malkovich in the original production, is "dressed in a strange ensemble of military uniforms and paraphernalia that have no apparent rhyme or reason" (5). "The White Man" and "The White Woman" are dressed completely in white, very expensive outfits. The setting is a surreal diner with a huge cyclorama covering the back wall. Much like

Shepard's earliest work, *States of Shock* features characters who are representational, metaphorical even. The dialogue is exaggerated. The setting seems post-apocalyptic. The Colonel and Stubbs argue over toy soldiers that are appropriately colored white or red, based on their allegiance. When the play debuted in New York, it was met with extremely mixed critical reaction. Frank Rich, in his *New York Times* review began:

Sam Shepard has been away from the New York theater for only six years – since the epic "Lie of the Mind" – but "States of Shock," his new play at the American Place, could lead you to believe he has been hibernating since his East Village emergence in the Vietnam era. "States of Shock" is in its own elliptical way an antiwar play, written with the earnest – one might even say quaint – conviction that the stage is still an effective platform for political dissent and mobilizing public opinion. Whether or not one agrees with Mr. Shepard's contrary views about recent history, his ingenuous faith in the theater is uplifting. "States of Shock" is less so.

Shepard himself admitted in an *Interview Magazine* piece by with Michael Almereyda, "I think *States of Shock* we never resolved, although I loved working with John Malkovich" (Web).

*The God of Hell* fared quite a bit better critically. Most critics saw it as a transition for the writer. As William Stevenson noted for Broadway.com:

One doesn't think of Sam Shepard as a political playwright, even though he began his career in the 1960s. But the Bush-Cheney regime has apparently made him one. Shepard's new play 'The God of Hell' makes an

impassioned, though not entirely coherent, argument that the administration's unchecked militarism threatens our democratic way of life. Though far from his best work, it marks a provocative change of pace for the writer.

This is where the important distinction lies. The change of pace was not just as simple as a writer becoming more politically aware. After *Moss*, Shepard's worldview has expanded. With his age, Shepard has become more interested in not just the Who and the When, but the How and Why as well. Unlike *States of Shock*, which was a purely reactionary piece ungrounded by realism or structure, *The God of Hell* doesn't just blindly poke holes in easy targets. Shepard told Don Shewey in the *Village Voice*:

What is that show-your-colors mentality about? Fear. The sides are being divided now. It's very obvious. So if you're on the other side of the fence, you're suddenly anti-American. It's breeding fear of being on the wrong side. Democracy's a very fragile thing. You have to take care of democracy. As soon as you stop being responsible to it and allow it to turn into scare tactics, it's no longer democracy, is it? It's something else. It may be an inch away from totalitarianism. (Web)

Shepard's text has changed from monologues about long-lost fathers and distant mothers to a lost country and distant leaders. His family sickness has been replaced by a national sickness. As Elysa Gardner of *USA Today* puts it:

*The God of Hell*, which opened off-Broadway Tuesday at the Actors Studio Drama School Theatre, is on its surface lean, mean and masterfully acerbic. But beneath its darkly comic exterior lies a tender, yearning heart,

and it's the tension between these two elements – what Shepard sees happening in his country and what he wants for it – that makes God at once pungent and poignant. (Web)

It is this change that the passing of Shepard's father has allowed – not only what he sees, but what he wants. With Shepard's father gone, he has begun relating to the world and his place in it as a man, not as a son; on his terms, not his father's. Shepard has grown as both an artist and a man. As Leslie Wade states in 2002's *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, "What these instances underscore is Shepard's increased attention to questions of human relations; in his graying as a dramatist he thus reveals himself as a more meditative writer, one perhaps more concerned with connecting than disrupting" (276). It is no longer just personal or, more accurately, it all becomes more personal.

FRANK: We lead a very peaceful life here. We're in the country. We're dairy farmers.

HAYNES: I'm sorry. I just can't take any chances. Maybe after this thing blows over –

FRANK: What thing?

HAYNES: This whole – crisis.

FRANK: Are we talking about a world situation or something personal, Graig?

HAYNES: What's the difference? (39)

The difference is in a playwright that no longer tries to find reasons or excuses for his father's behavior, but looks to his own. In his fifties, Shepard is finally able to look at himself. This manifests first by examining what it means to be an American in a George W. Bush-era nation and, in his latest work, what it means to be a failed husband and father himself. If *The Late Henry Moss* buried the father and *The God of Hell* examines the state of the nation, *Kicking a Dead Horse* takes the well-worn image Shepard and a hungry media have created over the last forty years and completely obliterates it. After examining what ails the nation, Shepard is finally ready to examine what ails himself.

## Chapter V

### *Kicking a Dead Horse buries the image*

If *The God of Hell* took a hard, honest look at the state of the nation, expanding on Shepard's earlier themes by exploring the larger world outside of the family, *Kicking a Dead Horse* takes a similarly merciless view of a character so closely reminiscent of Shepard that, despite his best attempts, it is impossible to not see how the author and the character are, at the very least, kindred spirits. As the lights rise on the stage, the audience is met with a dead horse, and as Shepard specifies, "The dead horse should be as realistic as possible with no attempt to stylize or cartoon it in any way. In fact, it should actually be a dead horse" (8). As Hobart Struther emerges from a hole in the ground he has been digging, Shepard offers this in the stage directions:

Hobart Struther: mid-sixties, rumpled white shirt, no tie, sleeves rolled up, no hat, baggy dark slacks, plain boots for riding but not cowboy boots, dark vest. There should be no attempt in his costume to make him look like a "cowboy." In fact, he should look more like an urban businessman who has suddenly decided to rough it. (8-9)

Before the first line of dialogue is uttered, the author has implored twice for authenticity, which is telling for a play with the search for authenticity at its very core. Having abandoned his family and ridden off into the desert to find himself, Hobart becomes stranded when his horse inhales a small amount of grain that travels directly to his lungs. This being a Shepard play, Hobart stays behind to bury the animal. What follows is an

intimate look, both in monologue and dialogue with himself, of a man who, after witnessing the death of his horse, begins to examine his entire life.

HOBART: You try tracking it back in your raggedy mind to the original notion – the “Eureka” of it. You remember the moment very clearly – how it came to you. Surprising – “AUTHENTICITY.” That’s what you come up with – the quest for “AUTHENTICITY.” As though that were some kind of holy mission in itself. How could that be? A haunted, ghostly idea to me anymore. At least nowadays – days with age hanging off me like dry moss. Maybe always, I don’t know. Far back as I can remember. Some idea – weighing the true against the false. Measuring, calculating – as though you were ever rock-solid certain – as though you ever had the faintest clue. (11-12)

The main impetus behind Hobart’s quest for authenticity originates with how he has made his living and sizable fortune. Hobart travelled across the country, “raided every damn saloon, barn, and attic west of the Missouri – north and south, took truckloads of booty out of that country before anyone began to take notice” (20-21). He bought old paintings – cows and cowboys, the American West at its most commercial, and resold it to urbanites for major profits. It seems that wealthy urbanites have an overwhelming thirst for the West, no matter how prepackaged or preposterous it is. For Shepard, a man who made a name for himself as both playwright and actor wearing cowboy boots and hats, refusing to fly, and spinning tale after tale of people trying to escape to the West (tales that wealthy urbanites in theatre centers around the world have continued to produce and worship), the similarities have not gone unnoticed. The fact

that a writer spinning a new myth of the American West while making a living as a movie star, writing about pick-ups and thoroughbreds while being shuttled to sets in private cars, is a dichotomy rich for dramatization and interpretation. As Alexis Soloski remarks in his 2008 *Village Voice* interview with Shepard:

When Shepard discusses Hobart's character, the parallels to his own life sound positively eerie. In conversation, Shepard introduces Hobart as a man who "had a past in which there was some semblance of a connection with the land, which he abandoned for this art-world thing. And now he's trying to retrace it, get back to it, but it's impossible." Shepard had an upbringing in California agricultural towns, and like Hobart, worked with horses in his youth. After his years in New York, and a brief stint in London, he's made his home in more rural environs, often on ranches. Similarly, after beginning his career in downtown New York, he spent many years working in films (though always continuing to write), and now he's come back to New York to open a play below 14th Street. (Web)

Or, as Boris Kachka states more succinctly in *New York Magazine*, "Still, it's impossible to read Shepard's new play – so different from the Western-family dramas he's famous for – without coming to the conclusion that he is, at 64, mocking his own iconic image" (Web).

With every critical analysis pointing to the duality of character in Shepard's work, the two sides of the author in *True West*, *Simpatico*, and *The Late Henry Moss*, what happens when a man is left alone in the desert? As Hobart tells himself, "And who is it exactly you're supposed to be appealing to now? Huh? Who? THERE'S NOBODY OUT



THERE! Nobody.” (12 Original emphasis)

If he is truly alone, as Shepard himself seems to be at this juncture of his life, what else does one do but look inward, at one’s own life and choices? His father is dead. His relationship with his wife and long-time partner, Jessica Lange, has ended. He has strained relationships with his children. As Public Theater head Oskar Eustis remarked to Boris Kuchko for *New York Magazine*, “It’s the most personal play that Sam’s ever written: simultaneously really personal and existential, about the specific dilemmas of Sam’s age and experience, and also about America” (Web). And this is where we begin to see, yet again, the aging of the playwright affecting his work. There is one main character in *Kicking*, and he happens to be Shepard’s current age: mid-sixties. What Shepard began with Wesley in *Curse* continues in *Kicking*, the protagonists continue to age with the playwright. Hobart has reached a point in his life and career that is deeply intimate and personal. While it is certainly possible for playwrights of Shepard’s caliber to effectively dramatize the struggles of characters completely unlike them, Hobart is so fully realized, so fully fleshed out because Shepard is writing from a familiar place. Shepard has reached the pinnacle of success, as has Hobart, but the price of success is the never-ending struggle to repeat it. As Leslie Wade comments in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*:

From the vantage point of the mid 1980’s when Shepard’s status in the American theatre reached its apogee, the trajectory of his career engendered assumptions that he would continue to produce the challenging, often daunting works expected of the country’s most prominent playwright. In the 1990’s these expectations went unfulfilled.

To all but the most loyal of Shepard devotees, it seems the playwright has entered a state of decline, at best a state of transition. (257)

Shepard hints at this assumption in *Kicking*. As Hobart tries with every ounce of strength to push the dead horse into the grave he dug for it (an image filled with such rich material for interpretation), Hobart reveals:

HOBART: What I couldn't see though, was how those old masterpieces would become like demons, glaring down at me, nostrils flaring, Colt revolvers blazing away. Couldn't see that back then for hell or high water. Things come back to haunt you, that's for sure. (19)

Shepard is haunted not only by his earlier work, particularly the family plays that made him a rock-star playwright and Pulitzer Prize winner to boot, but also by the image he created to sell this work. As he ages, Shepard's narrative HAS to change. As we've seen with his protagonists, Shepard insists on exploring plays of his particular moment. To continue writing family dramas because that is what people expect and demand would be anathema to Shepard's growth as an artist.

HOBART: Oh yes, I had become quite the big-ass success, no less. No question about that. Quite the big shot on the block. But somewhere along the trail the thrill of the kill had eluded me. The ecstasy of power – and now there was a kind of constant hankering for actuality. Hankering? How else can you put it? The sense of being inside my own skin. That's what I missed. That's what I missed more than anything else in this world. (14)

Not recognizing himself, feeling completely outside of his own skin is something Shepard continually addresses in his work, including this first person account of staying in a Los Angeles hotel waiting for production on a film to start up in *Homage to Céline* from the 1996 collection of stories *Cruising Paradise*. In the story, Shepard finds himself putting on a hotel bathrobe and wandering aimlessly around his room, staring at himself in the mirror, trying to figure out who he is and, more importantly, what he is doing here. He has never been comfortable with “those pesky assistants” (211) who trip over themselves trying to meet his every need. Near the end of the story, Shepard comes to a dead stop in the lobby of the hotel, unable to move:

I cross the lobby through a squadron of fruitcake interior decorator types all dressed in black with ponytails, arranging exotic flowers and puffing up pillows. Very chic people are sinking into tiny paisley overstuffed sofas, reaching for silver trays full of cashews and almonds; some of them flailing about like the furniture’s trying to swallow them whole. I come to a dead stop again. Right in the middle of all of this. All this luxury. All this murder. I think of Céline. For some reason Céline comes into my mind. The very last question of the very last interview before he died. He was sitting on a park bench in the shade of a hickory tree, wrapped in a raggedy overcoat. He was old and battered. Mutilated by war, he could barely see through the scar tissue piled up around his eyes. The interviewer’s last question was: what did he really want in this life? Céline turned to him slowly and said: “I just want to be left alone.” (213)

Hobart reiterates this feeling of being in someone else's skin, saying "Long story short, it must have been some other poor fool's destiny I had been assigned to because I couldn't recognize it in any way, shape, or form as my own" (15). With Shepard, after a shiftless youth trying to figure out "who you are," after the mid-life crisis in which one realizes the wrong choices that have been made, comes the late-life crisis, where one realizes they have been living someone else's life all together. With the late-life crisis comes the immediacy sometimes lacking with the previous crises – as mortality comes into play:

HOBART: I was running out of time. Birthdays fling by – I could see it coming. I sat down with the wife, face-to-face. Told her – look now, here it is; right here in front of me. I've turned the corner. I can feel it creaking in my bones, my teeth – the eyes are all cloudy in the mornings now. It's coming to get me, I swear. Maybe ten good physical years left and that's it – tits up; roll over, Beethoven. Ten years left to still throw a leg over a horse, like I used to; still fish waist-deep in a western river; still sleep out in the open on flat ground under the starry canopy – like I used to. (17)

What Shepard shows with both his aging and the aging of his protagonists is a writer who has never been afraid to explore his own personal struggles on the stage continue to do so, but in a deeper, more personal, more introspective way. With his father's death, Shepard's own mortality finally comes into focus, and what follows is some of the most personal, most exigent work of Shepard's career. In short, the quest for authenticity becomes more urgent with time and age, not less.

Hobart is completely alone in the desert. Like Shepard, no longer with his wife, no strong relationships with his children, his father absent from his life, Hobart has no

one left to examine but himself. While Hobart is certainly a man conflicted with his life, we at least see hints at a catharsis, even if it has yet to be reached. The opportunity for both Hobart and Shepard to look directly at their lives head-on, without the influences of father or family, shows a Shepard that, through examining the choices that led him down his present path, is allowed the opportunity to begin to reconcile them:

HOBART: It didn't terrify me anymore. Complete aloneness. Not like when you're little and – in the dark, listening – screams – distant – broken glass. Not like that – anymore. You learn to make do. Make toast. Little fires, sing a song to yourself. Hum a little. (30)

Yet as personal as Shepard becomes in *Kicking*, it would be reductive to view this work as purely autobiographical, or about one man (whether that be Hobart or Shepard himself) coming to grips with his own mortality. As *The God of Hell* proved, Shepard is more aware of the sickness that destroyed his families in *Curse* and *True West*, more attuned to the lack of authenticity not just in his world, but in the world at large. As Stephen Rea, the actor who portrayed Hobart Struther in the world premiere, writes in the introduction to the script:

In *Kicking a Dead Horse*, we watch with some shock as Shepard dismantles the imagery that distinguishes the previous body of his work. As Hobart Struther realizes the futility of his quest for AUTHENTICITY (original emphasis) and divests himself of the mythology that has sustained him hitherto, we experience the urgency of the wider American crisis: the collapse of a sense of history and maybe of America itself. (xii)

In the 2006 film, *Don't Come Knockin'*, both written by and starring Mr. Shepard, he portrays Howard Spence, an aging Western movie star relegated to supporting roles with the slow decline of the genre that made him famous. After another night of hard drinking and partying in his trailer, Howard dresses in his cowboy costume, jumps on the horse that he rides in the movie, and rides off into the desert. As the director, Wim Wenders, states on his personal website, "Howard is fleeing, from the film and his life." Clearly, both Hobart and Howard are cut from the same cloth. As Stephen Holden notes in his *New York Times* review of the film:

As impassive and craggy as a granite monument, Mr. Shepard has physically aged into a symbol of the stubborn, cranky individualist who has been a constant presence in his plays and films. Nowadays, he merely has to squint into the camera to suggest a tired, suspicious cowboy who has spent decades riding the range, roping steers and peering into the horizon for signs of trouble.

One memorable exchange from the movie shows Howard Spence riding up to a shack in the middle of the desert. James Gammon, one of Shepard's go-to actors, plays the drunk inhabitant. Spence proceeds to peel off his false cowboy layers – rose emblazoned shirt and new boots – exchanging them for Gammon's authentic, stained and ripped clothes. This scene is telling for a number of reasons, mainly Mr. Gammon is famous for being Shepard's stage embodiment of his father. As the *LA Times* noted upon Mr. Gammon's death in 2010:

As a playwright and a director, Shepard didn't do badly betting on Gammon to inhabit an array of rough-hewn, hard-drinking, haunted father

figures swept up in or responsible for storms of family chaos. “We had a kind of built-in affinity for the life we were trying to represent, the background,” Shepard said of Gammon’s ability to play tough, scarred men. “We just had a built-in knowing of what that thing was. We didn’t have to do a lot of research into ourselves. We just had it, which helps a lot. You don’t want to have endless dialogues with an actor about the meaning of things. You just want them to know. And Jim was one of those guys.” (Web)

To see Shepard trade in his Hollywood cowboy costume for the authentic clothes of a man who, for over thirty years, was the on-stage embodiment of Shepard’s father solidifies the transition begun in *The Late Henry Moss*. Shepard, while trying so desperately to not become *his* father, has nonetheless become *a* father. The struggles of Frank and Emma in *God of Hell* and Hobart in *Kicking a Dead Horse* are those of a writer with a life lived, with the experience and memories necessary to fully examine one’s trajectory through life. Much like Howard Spence in *Don’t Come Knockin’*, Hobart ends the play by slowly stripping off the false identity he has created for himself:

Get rid of it.

Like what?

The saddle for instance. Toss it down the hole.

The saddle? Bury the saddle?

The horse is dead.

True, but –

Toss it. Just toss it, you’ll get over it.

*Hobart throws the saddle down into the pit, a resounding thud; looks after it, fondly.*

Good. Now, the bridle.

Toss it.

Good. Now the spurs.

Homemade garcias. You can't find them anymore.

What're you going to do? Hang them on your blank wall?

*He carries the spurs to the pit, throws them in, sound echoes.*

Good. Now, hat.

No!

Toss it.

Not the hat!

Don't be a baby.

No. It won't get in the way.

Make a clean break.

Not the hat!

You're breaking my heart. Toss it.

What about the sun?

It's setting.

What about rain and wind?

You can't predict it.

What about the whole idea?

Which one's that?



The west? The “Wild Wild West.”

Sentimental claptrap. (33-36)

The graying of the playwright has not marked a decline in his work, but a seismic shift in it. Ready to abandon the image he has created, ready to explore his own failings as a father and husband and, as we see in *Ages of The Moon*, ready to finally face his own mortality and life choices, Shepard’s career as a dramatist documents a voice growing and changing for forty-plus years. While this in itself is a groundbreaking accomplishment, Shepard’s willingness to write personally “of the moment” has provided not a decline in his work, but an honest and incomplete trajectory of it. Only when Shepard decides to put away his pen will we fully be able to appreciate the life of the man and his work.

**Chapter VI**  
**A Life Lived in *Ages of The Moon***

If *Kicking a Dead Horse* concerns a man realizing he is living the wrong life and setting off in search of authenticity, *Ages of the Moon* (2009) is essentially set ten years later. Instead of crawling and clawing his way out of the desert back to civilization, he stayed in the middle of nowhere, built a cabin, and stocked up on alcohol and regret. The play opens with Ames and Byron, men in their mid-sixties sitting on the porch of an “early 1800’s whitewashed brick county house (Kentucky style), a story and a half high” (5). Ames has been banished from his home and wife due to a transgression that may or may not have occurred:

AMES: Okay, okay, okay. (Sips from glass and sets it down) Here we go – here’s the really sour part of the whole deal. She discovers this note – this note from this girl, which to this day I cannot for the life of me remember. I mean – all right, maybe vaguely – very dimly – somewhere in the long ago. Some parking lot – middle of some rainy night. Bozeman or Billings, could’ve been. Fishing. I don’t know. I truly – but I swear, some girl I would never in a million years have ever returned to for even a minor blowjob. (6)

Byron, his old friend, boarded the first bus to this small town to comfort Ames and replies to this monologue with the simple phrase:

BYRON: Minor? (6)

This begins a short (70 minute), intimate examination of two men confronting mortality on a number of fronts. Byron has come to comfort Ames, but in true Shepard fashion, Byron carries a secret that slowly rises to the surface in an agonizingly honest manner.

*Ages of the Moon* marks a natural progression from not only *Kicking a Dead Horse*, but Shepard's entire canon. As Ben Brantley states in his *New York Times* review, "It is a poignant and honest continuation of themes that have always been present in the work of one of this country's most important dramatists, here reconsidered in the light and shadow of time passed" (Web). Yet again, Shepard uses the time and experience that a life lived has granted him to continue to write plays of his particular moment in time, with protagonists of his age. What is so fascinating about *Ages of the Moon* is how it is influenced not only by Shepard's mindset, but by the plays that have come before, particularly *Kicking a Dead Horse*. As John Lahr notes in his *New Yorker* review:

In recent years, Shepard has had some rocky moments with the actress Jessica Lange, his partner since 1983 (they met while co-starring in the 1982 movie "Frances"), with whom he has two children. In "Fool for Love," Shepard examined the turmoil of his exit from his fifteen-year marriage to Johnson. In his last play, "Kicking a Dead Horse" (2007), a Beckett-influenced monologue, the narrator, Hobart Struther, standing in the desert beside his dead horse, delivers a litany of his losses: his horse, his youth, his authenticity, and, perhaps imminently, his wife... In "Ages of the Moon," that loss has been accomplished. (Web)

In fact, Shepard seems to directly address his last play within the first few pages of *Ages*.

Much of the critical analysis of *Kicking a Dead Horse* focused on what the horse

“represents.” Shepard dismisses this way of thinking almost immediately:

BYRON: “Made in the shade if the tree don’t fall.”

AMES: What?

BYRON: The tree.

AMES: What tree?

BYRON: Not these trees, it’s metaphorical. Sort of. Just –

AMES: Oh –

BYRON: You know – the tree. Providing the shade. If it falls, then –

AMES: Well, it’s not the tree that’s metaphorical, then. It’s the shade.

Isn’t it.

BYRON: Whatever.

AMES: I’m not used to that.

BYRON: What?

AMES: Something meaning something else.

BYRON: Well, it’s not really –

AMES: Maybe I’ve been out here on my own too much.

BYRON: That’s quite possible.

AMES: Out of touch.

BYRON: Could be.

AMES: It’s not good.

BYRON: What?

AMES: Being so... remote, like this.

BYRON: No –

AMES: I'm used to things being what they are. You know –

BYRON: Right.

AMES: I mean a tree is a tree. (8)

Shepard has no time for metaphors. He uses Hobart's journey into the desert as a launching pad for *Ages of the Moon*, deepening the struggle of the characters in the face of their own mortality. Like Hobart's monologue in *Kicking* regarding having only a few good years left, Ames and Byron share Hobart's sense of urgency:

BYRON: You were making it sound like it was centuries or something.

Eons ago.

AMES: How much time have you got left?

BYRON: Me?

AMES: Yeah.

BYRON: On earth, you mean?

AMES: Where else are you going to go?

BYRON: Well, no – I wasn't – It's not about my demise for Christ's sake.

AMES: No, but what I'm trying to say is, we haven't got all that much time left. Here. The two of us. That's all I'm saying. It's not so complicated. (13)

What is complicated is Ames' sense of the truth. He continually dodges Byron's attempts to clear up what exactly happened:

AMES: I don't know where it came from, I swear.

BYRON: What?

AMES: The note.

BYRON: Just appeared outta nowhere, huh? I bet that went over big.

AMES: Never saw her write it. (7)

Ames and Byron, on the surface, can join a long list of drunk men avoiding uncomfortable truths in Shepard's plays. Yet unlike Weston in *Curse* or Henry in *The Late Henry Moss*, Byron and Ames are alone on stage. While we hear about their respective wives, we never see them, and there is no mention whatsoever of children. In fact, of the last three plays, *Kicking a Dead Horse* is the only play that even mentions children, and only in passing, as Hobart mentions that his have all "flown the coop" (16). Our only way into this world is through the eyes of these two men. Much like Shepard, they are alone with their alcohol and bad decisions. The year *Ages of the Moon* was first produced, Shepard was arrested and charged with DUI. In a 2010 interview with Patrick Healy for the *New York Times*, we learn:

Mr. Shepard said he got sober in late January 2009, a few weeks after he was stopped in central Illinois and charged with speeding and driving under the influence of alcohol. He pleaded guilty a month later and was ordered to pay a fine, finish an alcohol treatment program and perform community service.

Shepard offered this to Mr. Healy: "I continue to struggle with it. You sometimes use the excuse, 'I'm a writer, dammit, I can do anything I want,' but that doesn't work. In my later plays, especially, alcohol is there — not as a moral issue, but as a disaster. And in my case, it's a real disaster." (Web)

This disaster is shown in *Ages of the Moon* not with shattering windows, broken doors, or battered women, but with two men, completely alone, watching the sky. Ames mentions an eclipse of the moon, an event that should hold significance for them, but Byron dismisses it, saying, “They happen all the time. At ungodly hours. That’s why we never see them” (11). Byron reduces an extraordinary event into something commonplace, much like both men have been guilty of doing with their marriages. What originally seems to be an attempt to evade the questions Byron is asking suddenly turns into something much more poignant as Ames offers:

AMES: Supposed to be a total eclipse of the full moon at five a.m.

BYRON: Is that right?

AMES: According to the book.

BYRON: I didn’t realize you’d become a moon-gazer.

AMES: I’ve been studying it.

BYRON: You’ve always been full of boundless curiosity.

AMES: I’ll get the book.

BYRON: Book?

AMES: *Field Guide to the Night Sky*. Fascinating stuff. Standing out here in the hay fields at night with a flashlight, you know – trying to figure out where everything is. Where we are in relation – constellations, you know.

Makes my neck ache. (10)

Shepard’s protagonists have always tried to figure out where they are in relation to everything else, where they fit. This challenge doesn’t become any easier with age. For Ames, who left his home under less than ideal circumstances to hide out in this cabin, this

includes taking stock of the very truths he tries to avoid, including the undeniable truth of his own mortality.

BYRON: That's right. I remember. I remember the look of shock on your face when you saw me get off the bus.

AMES: Shock?

BYRON: How old I was.

AMES: Oh.

BYRON: How old I've become.

AMES: Well –

BYRON: You, too.

AMES: Me?

BYRON: I mean me seeing you in the same light. After all this time.

AMES: Sure. Both of us.

BYRON: The gray. Shoulders stooped. Eyes buried way back inside the sagging flesh mask. Hard to even recognize you as the same person.

As the night wears on, and both men continue to drink and wait for an eclipse of the moon promised to be a “once-in-a-lifetime deal”(11), Ames' façade begins to fade – the lies he convinces himself of dissipate:

AMES: I was never so much in love.

BYRON: I remember. I remember you were head over heels.

AMES: I was. I thought it would never end.

BYRON: Miserable, though – weren't you?

AMES: Miserable? No. Not that I remember.



BYRON: You were miserable. Always pining away.

AMES: Why would I pine? She was right there with me.

BYRON: Maybe you were always miserable.

AMES: What's that supposed to mean?

BYRON: I mean maybe that's just your nature. Misery. Has nothing to do with women at all. (23)

And:

AMES: You'd think – you'd think love would change all that, wouldn't you?

BYRON: All what?

AMES: All that... wondering. Desolation. Motels. Love.

BYRON: Well, maybe it does. For a time. For just a little spell.

AMES: But – you'd think – it might be more permanent than that.

Wouldn't you? (25)

There is a slight pause before Byron offers his answer to this question, simply replying “You hope” (25). Hope is all these men have left. Both Ames and Byron have reached an impasse in their lives and, with crystal clarity, can trace the decisions they have made that led them to this porch on this night. This realization is called out by Byron as simply being too little, too late:

AMES: I can't ever go back now.

BYRON: You don't know that for sure.

AMES: I know. I can see it. The writing's on the wall.

BYRON: You can't predict something like that. The heart.

AMES: I can feel it.

BYRON: Well, maybe you should've considered the consequences. (27)

We now see the small bit of personal growth Shepard allows his characters. They aren't quite ready to consider the consequences of their actions as they commit them, but they at least admit that they should have. In Shepard's world, this is a monumental step that only becomes possible with his shift to older characters. Unlike Austin and Lee in *True West*, scrambling for some level of success and personal validation, unlike Vince in *Buried Child*, hoping to be welcomed back into his family and still maintain a separate existence, unlike Wesley in *Curse*, who so desperately wants to prove that he can be a better man than his father, Ames and Byron can simply reflect on the decisions they have made and try to stave off the loneliness until the moon is blotted out in the night sky. In Patrick Healey's *New York Times* interview, he quotes Neil Pepe, the artistic director of the Atlantic Theater Company:

He said he wanted to produce "Ages of the Moon"— the Atlantic's first Shepard work— because he was drawn to its two characters as shades of the archetypal Shepard men who have dominated his plays for the last 45 years. "It was so exciting to me that Sam was getting into this new territory of older male characters dealing with regrets and whether they went the right way," Mr. Pepe said. "There's a wonderful stillness and simplicity in these reflections, such as a speech that Sean (Byron) has at the end about the play — it's classic, beautifully executed Shepard."

(Web)

In the speech that Mr. Pepe references, Byron discloses that he is finally and completely alone. Unlike Ames, who has simply been banished to the wilderness for his crimes, Byron has recently buried his wife. His speech is uncharacteristic of a Shepard end monologue. While most of his long end monologues strive for some level of catharsis, or at least have the characters come to an important realization about themselves, Byron simply, elegantly, and wonderfully lays out his last moments with his wife:

BYRON: I bundled her all up. There was some snow left – patches of ice on the roads. I bundled her all up in sweaters and her blue terry cloth robe. Knit cap pulled down over her ears. I closed her eyelids and wrapped her arms around me so it looked like she was just riding on my back. Hugging me. Piggyback. Like this. Like when we were kids – you know. When we were – I stuffed her icy hands in my pockets and held them there and we walked all over town like that. I took her to all the places we walked to every day. Every day for months and months. Years. All the time we lived together. Out there. (44)

In John Lahr's *New Yorker* review, he observes that, "The play is slight; the weight of its sorrow is not. Shepard leaves his characters gazing poignantly into the gloaming... The falling darkness plays as the declivity of Shepard's life and love" (Web).

As the moon slowly starts to fade out, as Ames and Byron are left holding each other on stage, sharing a blanket, Ames remarks simply:

AMES: We gotta do something, Byron. We cant just – we gotta do something. What are we gonna do, Byron? (43)

Byron, having chest pains throughout the play that only worsen at the end, sighs and replies:

BYRON: There's nothing to do. (43)

These characters have shared a lifetime of mistakes and regrets, yet come to the realization at the end that they are powerless in their own mortality. Whatever mistakes they have made, whatever anger or fear or frustration they have means next to nothing as the moon continues to disappear. Shepard hasn't mellowed with age, he has come to a certain level of acceptance, not just with his past, but with himself. While *Kicking a Dead Horse* and *Ages of the Moon* lack the stunning family fireworks that made Shepard famous, the latest stage of his career is the most poignant, the most fascinating. In the end, no amount of regret will comfort one as much as a simple warm blanket and the realization that, no matter how hard one may struggle, there are simply some things beyond one's control, like an eclipse of the moon.

AMES: Almost there, isn't it?

BYRON: Yep. Won't be long now. (45)

With that, the lights slowly fade to black, and Ernest Tubb's "Waltz Across Texas" begins to softly play.

*Ages of the Moon* continues the shift brought about with *The Late Henry Moss*. While Shepard's early work explored his place in the world and his family plays showed predominantly male characters trying to make sense of the family and their place in it, his later work seems to focus more on the need for connection – to the land and to other people. Ames and Byron open their gaze wider than their place in their marriages or families, to their place in the heavens. The eclipse of the moon has become their Godot –

waiting for catharsis, connection, understanding, and perhaps, even death. The question becomes less “Where do I fit?” and more “What will I leave behind?” Where the family plays focus on the children facing the aftermath of decisions made by their parents, Shepard’s later work puts the onus squarely on the shoulders of the protagonists. Living with their own regret is much more difficult than making sense of their father’s. Unlike the power struggle in *True West* or sexual battle in *Fool for Love* or struggle to survive in *Curse* that all take place on the stage, the fight in Shepard’s later work has already been decided. This is less about the struggle that begins on stage when the lights go up and much more about the struggle that was fought and lost before the play even begins.

## Chapter VII

### Conclusion

Over his forty-plus years as a dramatist, Sam Shepard has been a constantly moving target. While his earliest works heralded a great new voice in the American Theater, they defied description and were met with mixed responses. His family plays solidified him as a great American dramatist while exposing the hidden underbelly of Shepard's childhood and relationship with his father. His latest work has been met with either critical derision, or critical indifference. Gone are the three hour, eight character plays that slow-burned on the stage. Gone are the family dynamics and fireworks that ignited audiences. Gone are the three page monologues that became his calling card. These shifts have left many critics and audience members shaking their heads. As John Lahr states in his 1994 review of *Simpatico*, "It gives me no pleasure to report this. For almost thirty years, Shepard's plays... have been a defining part of American Theatre. So what's happened?" (258).

What has happened is that Shepard has continued to define his work and career by constantly and consistently writing of his moment, exploiting his own memories and life to bring truth to the characters that inhabit his stage. What has happened is that over a forty-plus year career that is exceedingly rare in this industry, both in longevity and relevancy, Shepard has consistently challenged his audiences and himself by cutting to the heart of the matter. What has happened is that audiences, critics, and scholars have been given an incredible gift through observing an artistic career that changes and ages as the creator does, protagonists that age as their creator does, and, naturally, goals, fears,

loves, and regrets changing as well. Few other playwrights have consistently reinvented themselves. Few other playwrights have consistently and painfully mined their own experiences and regrets to offer a truth on the stage. And no other playwright has done it for so long.

As Richard Gilman offers in the introduction to *Seven Plays*:

We have to see Shepard's work as existing in an especially intricate and disorderly relationship with life outside the theater. Such a relationship obviously is true of any drama, but in Shepard's case it shows itself as a rambunctious reciprocity in which the theatrical, as a mode of behavior, takes a special wayward urgency from life, while the living—spontaneous, unorganized and unpredictable—keeps breaking into the artificial, composed world of the stage. (xviii)

This relationship Shepard has built and maintained between his life and experiences and those of his characters is what makes his body of work so impressive. His earliest work shifted and changed as often as the playwright himself, a young man trying to find himself on the streets of New York City during the 1960's. His return from self-imposed exile in England brought some of his most popular, rich, and enduring work with the family dramas. His latest turn, as a man coming to grips with his own failures and mistakes as he faces his mortality, brings its own richness and immediacy. While few playwrights have sustained a forty-plus year career with Shepard's level of relevancy, none have done so by constantly and consistently exploiting their own life and personal demons as Shepard has. As he told John Lahr for a *New Yorker* profile, "I'm not doing this in order to vent demons, I want to shake hands with them" (Web). Conor McPherson

compares Shepard to his peers in the introduction to Shepard's latest collection, 2012's *Fifteen One-Act Plays*:

His sinners are real in this striking regard: they have no concept of sin – only failure. Thus Shepard is set apart from Eugene O'Neill whose characters' hyperawareness of their sins means they pick at them like running sores; set apart from Arthur Miller whose John Milton-esque organ blasts of moral outrage shake the theater to the ground; set apart from Tennessee Williams whose characters enter beaten from the wings, their battles for principle already fought and lost; set apart from David Mamet who peels back the bare surface of human veneer to reveal the meaningless roar of the jungle. And Mr. Shepard stands apart mainly because he is as much a poet as a playwright. By this I mean that his logic is not the logic of academic wrangling or emotional equilibrium. His is the logic of music. It chimes precisely with human emotion immeasurably more than language ever could. It is instant and undeniable. Likewise the singular experience of many of Mr. Shepard's plays is as indescribable as music, and often just as potent, pleasing, and unsettling. (2)

The comparison to music is not new, as Shepard himself explained to Kevin Sessums in *Interview Magazine*:

The whole thing about issues is that they're ephemeral. If you start writing about them, then tomorrow they'll change. Hell, in five minutes they'll change. Issues are not the important questions. There's something deeper than issues – there's things to do with... ancient stuff. And that stuff



hasn't changed. It'll always be the same. It's the same thing we're always confronted with. And that is what cuts through the issues. And that's what has to be addressed. I don't mean to be evasive about it. But it is mysterious. At the same time it is something you can address. And the only way to address it is by poetic stance – in the truest sense. You go after it through feelings in the same way a musician does. A musician doesn't address issues; he addresses something deeper. (75)

This “something deeper” is what has made Shepard such an enduring figure in American Theatre. While Shepard is writing from the singular experience, while he is not interested in the “universal,” his plays speak to all of us – the lost son or daughter, the failed pioneer, those who escaped their small towns and those who never left. Conor McPherson again:

Beneath his plays, I always feel history waiting to roll us all into its silent tomb. There is no echo in there. You can shout as much as you like. Nothing comes back. His plays haunt you because these are the death songs of the American pioneers who went into a wilderness and built a world and destroyed a world and nobody stopped them and now they're left scrambling for meaning. (4)

While his plays are typically American, they continue to be produced and performed across the world not because Shepard tries to write the universal, but because his struggles inherently are. Long after the West became an outdated genre in entertainment, Shepard wrote a two-page monologue about the movie *Lonely are The Brave* in *True West*. The monologue resonates not because it is about a cowboy and his

horse, but because it is about a man dealing with the incredible loss of his companion and friend. While Shepard writes of the mythical West, what resonates with audiences isn't the land itself, the horses and cowboys, but the struggle to reclaim something that is lost. Because his work is so autobiographical, because his demons are on display for the audiences to see, we cannot only relate to them, but on some level, to him as well. While telephone operators and color televisions may seem dated, the struggle to find oneself, the desire to break free from the restraints of bills and jobs and life, the struggle to leave one's parents while simultaneously fearing one is becoming just like them, will continue to be explored by Shepard and the artists who take on his plays in the future.

During the process of writing this thesis, Shepard's newest play, *Heartless*, debuted with the Signature Theatre Company in late 2012. The reviews are favorable, with Ben Brantley writing that:

It's refreshing to find Mr. Shepard's usual gender ratio reversed in "Heartless." Of its five cast members, only one is male. That's Roscoe (played by Gary Cole), a 65-year-old academic who has recently split with his wife of many years and is trying to make his way through an unmapped new world. These days, apparently, 65 is not too late for a midlife crisis. (Mr. Shepard, for the record, is 68.) (Web)

The play was written as Shepard's relationship with Jessica Lange was dissolving and, although the text of the play is still currently unavailable, it is clear that Shepard continues to utilize his current condition to create on the stage. It continues the search for connection, as Wilborn Hampton writes in his Huffington Post review:

The heart has always been a vital organ in the plays of Sam Shepard, and never more so than in *Heartless*, a poetic, enigmatic and often humorous exploration of the human failure to connect with one another that is the playwright's most inspired and imaginative work in years. (Web)

It is noteworthy that this is the first time Shepard's women have outnumbered the men on stage, especially considering that the women seem to have a reckoning with the lone male character, (a man of Shepard's age), who was a drug addict in New York in his youth and has just left his wife and Kentucky home to be with a younger woman, Sally. There are, of course, dark secrets revealed in the play, mostly revolving around the large scar running down Sally's chest from a heart transplant (hence the title), and the matriarch's mute caregiver, but most reviews are careful not to reveal too much.

What is clear is that Shepard's characters will continue to explore their own mistakes and misdeeds, as Shepard himself continues to do both on the stage and with his non-dramatic work. Soon after his 2009 arrest for drunk-driving in Normal, Illinois, he wrote a piece that is included in *Day Out of Days* titled, "Normal, Illinois":

Under the blaring neon of the drunk-tank lockup he studied the cinder-block walls.

So

fact is

they ask me

who can you get

to wire you a hundred and fifty bucks

you need a hundred and fifty more

to complete your bond

I was at a loss

I said no one

No one. (210)

Shepard is providing a first hand account of his greatest struggles and has not slowed down with age or success. As he told Carole Cadwalladr for *The Observer* in 2010:

The funny thing about having all this so-called success is that behind it is a certain horrible emptiness. All this stuff is happening. And yet it is not what you are after as a writer. Even though they are relatively successful. *Ages of the Moon* has sold out, the book is doing well, and yet it's not The Thing. And then you're left... there's this feeling... what is it, then? And, I guess, it's the writing itself which is important. (Web)

When she asks him if his writing has changed at all with his age, if death plays a factor in his newest work, he explains:

Yeah. There's not a day goes by. But that has always been the case. We're all haunted by it in one way or another. And it's the easiest thing in the world to push it away, you just get a cappuccino. But, yes, you're haunted by it in a different way (as you get older). I feel its presence. I feel it in sleep, in dreams, in waking. Particularly in the morning... The great thing for me, now, is that writing has become more and more interesting. Not just as a craft but as a way into things that are not described. It's a thing of

discovering. That's when writing is really working. You're on the trail of something and you don't quite know what it is. (Web)

The shift in his latest work, besides the obvious additional emphasis on mortality and time drawing to a close, is a self-awareness for his protagonists lacking in his family dramas that mirrors Shepard's own self-reflection. In the piece, "Things you learn from others" in *Day Out of Days*, he begins the piece with a litany of manners and good behaviors one is taught, tucking in shirts and folding napkins, for instance. But as the piece continues, we see this shift; "What you don't learn, though, is how to protect others from your own manifestations of cruelty and malice which you've learned so insidiously through skin and blood and find impossible to shake free from no matter how much you'd like to be thought of as a decent, wholesome person" (250).

Shepard's life is something few can relate to – from small-town delinquent to New York wunderkind, Academy-Award nominated actor to Pulitzer Prize winning playwright – yet Shepard's struggle, to express himself and escape his own personal demons and familial curses, is a struggle that is relatable. Another piece in *Day Out of Days* titled "High Noon Mexico," shows Shepard calling his wife from the road. She informs him there is a flood in the basement and his thoughts immediately turn to his family memorabilia:

Why I would suddenly feel this strange attachment toward these ancient crumbling brown photos of my great-grandmother sitting on a buckboard wagon behind two dark plow horses, struggling through deep mud somewhere in rural Illinois; my father as a little boy, no shirt, smiling brightly with a string of perch; my mother feeding pigeons from an army

Jeep? But then I pull myself together and drop all these pictures in my head and see exactly what's right in front of me: our white feet on the green synthetic carpet, our empty hands, and our fatherless faces. (171)

It is this "pulling himself together" that makes Shepard's newest work so poignant, focusing not on his family and the dead, but himself, sitting along in a motel room, left with his fatherless face. As Shepard continues to age and write, the urgency of his work only grows. Whenever Shepard does retire, or pass away, scholars will be left with the unique opportunity to look at his enormous body of work. Not only will they be able to dissect his dramatic work, but, counter-intuitive to the intensely private person Shepard claims to be, they'll also have the roadmap created by his volumes of personal essays and autobiographical stories that offer fascinating glimpses of the author's condition and mindset while creating this important work. Shepard is not an artist in decline, but an artist rapidly running out of time to document the fears and regrets of a life lived, and offer not a catharsis or answer, but simply a record. Shepard's strength lies not in his ability to write of the universal experience, but to write of his own singular experience in the structure of his life in such a way that it resonates with so many. While his work continues to shift and grow, the one constant is the brutal openness and honesty that Shepard documents the human condition through his own lens. This makes the question of "what next?" both completely unknowable and utterly exciting in the same breath.

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