

BEYOND BEDROOMS AND KITCHENS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE MOTHER FIGURES IN SAM SHEPARD'S FAMILY PLAYS

by

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Beyond Bedrooms and Kitchens: A Critical Analysis of the Mother Figures in Sam Shepard's Family Plays

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Male characters are at the forefront of Sam Shepard's plays and this is particularly clear with regard to the father/son dyad. The significant attention placed on male dominated relationships raises the question, what about the mothers? One body of work that may provide an answer to this question is the maternal theory concept of the myths of motherhood, which suggests that the mother figures in these plays are actually quite important. This thesis examines mother characters in three plays and demonstrates that by adhering to a certain myth and concurrently attempting to escape from this same myth, these women exhibit their relevance in respect to two common themes: identity and escape. Further, the present study raises questions concerning current cultural myths and highlights how Shepard's work surprisingly promotes a maternal perspective. This new view provides promising potential for more in-depth productions and a new understanding of the Shepard canon.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
	Family Plays.....	11
	Thematic Elements.....	12
	Review of Literature.....	16
	Summary.....	23
II.	HALIE OF <i>BURIED CHILD</i>	25
	Shepard's Thematic Concerns and Context.....	29
	Friedian Constructs and Escape.....	37
	Summary.....	49
III.	MOM OF <i>TRUE WEST</i>	51
	Shepard's Thematic Concerns and Context.....	54
	Friedian Constructs and Escape.....	61
	Summary.....	75
IV.	LORRAINE AND MEG OF <i>A LIE OF THE MIND</i>	76
	Shepard's Thematic Concerns and Context.....	80
	Friedian Constructs and Escape.....	93
	Summary.....	118
V.	CONCLUSION.....	119
	Dimensionality of Mothers.....	120
	Agency and New Definitions of Family.....	123

Sam Shepard Feminist?.....	126
Broader Themes.....	129
Mother Myths in Society.....	131
Summary.....	133
WORKS CITED.....	134

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BC – Buried Child

TW – True West

LM – A Lie of the Mind

CSC – Curse of the Starving Class

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Men are at the forefront of the plays of Sam Shepard. This is evident not only by the consistent textual presence of the male characters, but also by the abundant scholarship analyzing Shepard's work in terms of these figures. In Shepard's family plays, which include *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind* (Lahr), this fascination with men leads to a focus on the father/son dyad. Fathers and sons seem to "dominate" Shepard's work of this period (Kakutani). But if these plays are commonly referred to as family plays, what purpose do the mother characters serve? Compared to the extant criticism centering on Shepard's fathers and sons, literature mentioning the mothers is scant. If discussed at all, the mothers are typically written off as powerless and weak (Auerbach 62, 63). They are "... the always absent Other" ("Pornographic" 69), as suggested by Shepard scholar Lynda Hart. This study aims to reclaim the mothers in three of Shepard's family plays: *Buried Child* (1979), *True West* (1980), and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). While the mother characters in these works may indeed dramatize passivity or oppression, when probed, these traits are indicative of an adherence to the maternal theory concept of the myths of motherhood. Demonstrating that the mother characters believe in a certain myth can, in turn, shed light on the thematic relevance of these oft ignored and perhaps misunderstood characters.

The works of Sam Shepard are worthy of continual exploration and examination, as he is arguably one of the most important and fascinating playwrights working today. Critics have hailed Shepard “the John Wayne of the American stage” (Keating), “the best practicing American playwright” (Kaufmann 104), and “the most original and vital playwright of our age” (Shepard, “Emotional” 1). He is also one of the most prolific dramatists working today, writing upwards of fifty plays over a career which to date has spanned almost five decades. The relevance of Shepard’s dramatic literature is reinforced by the myriad of awards his plays have garnered. One such honor is the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, which Shepard won in 1979 for *Buried Child* and was a finalist for in 1983 for *True West*. Throughout his career, Shepard has also earned eleven Obie Awards, and in 2009, received the PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award for an accomplished playwright in mid-career, whose past recipients include Tony Kushner, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Richard Greenberg, to name a few. Of course, this is a remarkable feat for any playwright, but it is even more impressive considering Shepard is self-taught as a writer (Shepard, “Rock-and-Roll” 6). Because Shepard holds such a prominent place in the American theater tradition and is currently still building upon his substantial canon of dramatic literature, it is beneficial to continue to enrich the scholarly conversation surrounding his work, and moreover, view the texts from new and innovative angles, such as that of maternal theory.

The question concerning the importance of Shepard’s mother figures contributes to the field of theatre as well as the “explicitly interdisciplinary” (O’Reilly 1) field of motherhood studies, a term created by Andrea O’Reilly in 2006. Even though motherhood studies is now an established area of scholarship, there is still a dearth of literature focusing on the dramatic representations of mothers. Thus, not only is there an existing need for the study of Shepard’s

mother characters, there is also a demand for analyses of literary mothers in general. By providing an in-depth exploration of the mother characters in three plays, this study consequently contributes to two distinct fields.

The maternal theory idea of the myths of motherhood, created and outlined by Shari L. Thurer in her book, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, and included in Andrea O'Reilly's seminal anthology *Maternal Theories: Essential Readings*, proclaims that each era assumes a societal ideal of the mother role:

Motherhood—the way we perform mothering—is culturally derived. Each society has its own mythology, complete with rituals, beliefs, expectations, norms, and symbols. . . .

Our particular idea of what constitutes a good mother is only that, an idea, not an eternal verity. The good mother is reinvented as each age or society defines her anew, in its own terms, according to its own mythology. (xv)

According to Thurer, mothers are continually taciturn when it comes to expressing the realities surrounding the actual experience of motherhood (xiv). This silence by mothers “is the last stronghold of [Betty] Friedan’s ‘problem that has no name’” (Thurer xiv), a phrase coined and introduced in *The Feminine Mystique*, a foundational feminist text first published in 1963. *The Feminine Mystique*, authored by Betty Friedan, thoroughly details an example of a myth of motherhood. It is one that permeated the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Friedan’s literature attempts to unmask the fiction behind a patriarchal notion prevalent in the aforementioned era that fulfillment for women derived from complete commitment to the housewife/mother role. The problem that has no name refers to “a vague undefined wish for ‘something more’” (Friedan 114) experienced by women in and around the 1950s who chose to embody this myth.

This is not to say that the experience of mothering a child creates feelings of discontent among all women in this position. Quite the contrary, as motherhood can induce tremendous joy (Thurer xiii). The ideology surrounding motherhood, on the other hand, can have negative effects. As Shari L. Thurer writes, mother myths are “oblivious of a mother’s desires, limitations, and context” (Thurer xii). This produces a divorce between a fiction of what one expects from the experience and the actual lived reality. For the housewife/mothers of Friedan’s era, the motherhood ideology of the time did indeed have innumerable adverse consequences on those who attempted to fully adhere to it (Friedan 120).

Incidentally, it is this particular myth of motherhood that I argue affects the mother figures in the family plays of Sam Shepard. It is important to note that Thurer uses the ideas articulated in *The Feminine Mystique* in order to delineate a distinct socio-cultural ideal of mother from a precise time in history, but Friedan’s initial intention was slightly broader. The work of Thurer is located in maternal thought, while Friedan’s theories are rooted more in feminism, centering on women who happen to be mothers or are educated by the society in which they live to become mothers (which includes practically all women in the 1950s who belonged to certain demographics). Thurer has a specific interpretation of Friedan’s literature, employing the ideas outlined by Friedan to clarify a cultural myth pertaining particularly to motherhood. This thesis views Shepard’s mother figures in a method inspired by Thurer, but relies more heavily on the specific frame of mother detailed by Friedan.

But what exactly constitutes the feminine mystique, and what qualities illustrate a dedication to this myth? Moreover, what are the consequences or signs of the problem that has no name? Thurer places Friedan’s feminine mystique under the umbrella of the myth of the “Empathic Mom: 1940-1980” (247), which as a broad term dictates that an ideal mother should

“respond to [a child’s] emotional needs, . . . gratify its wants, tolerate its regressions, stimulate its cognitive developments, and above all, . . . feel *personally fulfilled* in carrying this out” (248, emphasis mine). She argues that this particular myth peaked in the 1950s (Thurer 259), the decade in which the feminine mystique flourished. I should reiterate that the mystique itself was not a myth; it existed. Rather, the myth was the belief that, by making life choices in alignment with a socially constructed image of housewife/mother, one will find complete fulfillment. However, as Thurer states in regard to this myth, “There was a poor fit between a woman’s expectations for happiness and her experience” (252).

As outlined by Friedan, the mystique was a pervasive and powerful image of femininity during the 1950s, which influenced the life goals and dreams of many women in this period. It celebrated the image of the suburban housewife, a person who dedicated her entire existence to her husband, children, and home (Friedan 60, 61). Friedan’s read on culture is that the realization of this image became the principle ambition for American women after World War II (Friedan 271). Others concur with Friedan, such as historian Stephanie Coontz, who notes that the feminine mystique “enveloped women’s lives” (164), beginning in the late 1940s. This myth became pervasive because of the heavy distribution of information via books, magazines, and psychological and sociological theories (e.g. Freud and Functionalism) pressuring women to personify a certain image. Societal forces affirmed that fulfillment for women stemmed from choosing “one passion, one occupation, one role for life” (Friedan 267): the housewife-mother. In the middle of the twentieth century, many women believed that becoming a housewife-mother was the *only* option in life (Friedan 71, emphasis in the original). Women, consequently, entered into the institution of motherhood at early ages and with full commitment. According to Friedan, women strived to be “gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen” (Friedan 83), rooms

epitomizing two cultural messages sent to women: one, women are valued for their sexual function, and two, women's work should revolve around the kitchen.

It is noteworthy that the role of mother in this particular myth of motherhood is combined with the role of housewife, as one role cannot be isolated from the other, evidenced from Friedan's consistent use of the term "housewife-mother." Under the mystique, motherhood "is a total way of life" (110), and two foundational elements of this way of life are homemaking and marriage.

The wholehearted acceptance of a seemingly innocuous position in society ineluctably caused certain qualities to emerge in women. Some of these characteristics include strongly identifying with one's sexual function (Friedan 217), embracing the duties of the domestic sphere (Friedan 303), embodying the "popular cliché of the time" (Friedan 404), constructing and believing in mass daydreams (Friedan 426), dedicating oneself to the care and nurturing of children (Friedan 120), being passive or dependent on others (Friedan 416), and acting submissively (Friedan 452). The feminine mystique encouraged women to comply with the myth and incorporate these qualities into their sense of self. This resulted in a tremendous crisis of identity in women, for the culture of the period did not permit women to reach full maturity, or in other words "to choose their human identity" (Friedan 135). Over time, women realized there was a problem – it was "the problem that had no name" (Friedan 18).

The problem that has no name, a term coined by Friedan, alludes to the underlying emptiness stemming from a compliance with the myth of motherhood of the era. It was a "strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States" (Friedan 57). Indications that a problem that has no name exist include a desire for "something more" than family and home (Friedan 78), a lack of

exuberance or energy (Friedan 407), an inability to concentrate (Friedan 354), and apathy towards the children and home (Friedan 470). Choosing to engage in extramarital affairs or opting to have more children can also be considered evidence of the problem that has no name (Friedan 64). These latter two symptoms contain complexities that are worth noting, as they elucidate both the problem that has no name and an adherence to a myth of motherhood. According to Friedan, each reveals an attempt to fill a void within by using familiar and socially accepted means. At the same time, having an affair and/or a child casts a woman in terms of her sexual function, a major factor of the feminine mystique. Contradictions arise in this analysis of Shepard's mothers, as we will see. However, these intricacies only serve to highlight the dynamic nature of these women.

It is important to clarify that this particular myth of motherhood is largely connected with the 1950s, but the time frame in which it was prominent extended beyond this ten-year period. The reign of the feminine mystique began soon after World War II in 1945 and gradually tapered off around 1963, the year marking the first publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. In this thesis, the term "the fifties" refers to this roughly eighteen-year period. My reasoning for using this extended time frame to represent the fifties is due to the overwhelming significance placed on the traditional family unit beginning directly after World War II (May 137), along with the implications of this emphasis. A wider time frame for the 1950s is also substantiated in Thurer's *The Myths of Motherhood* as well as in Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Thurer explains that the empathic mom, the prime example of which is the feminine mystique, cemented itself in society during "the cultural roller coaster of the 'fifties' (shorthand for the period from the late 1940s to the early 1960s)" (249). Likewise, Friedan points out that the postwar years marked the mystique's ascendancy (270): "In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine

fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” (Friedan 61). It is important to clarify why a discrepancy exists between the fifteen-year time frame noted by Friedan to delineate the mystique’s reign and the eighteen-year period outlined above. Friedan began researching and writing her book several years prior to the publication of the manuscript (Simon). At the time of the book’s release in 1963, this particular mother myth continued to pervade society. This is evident by the fact that *The Feminine Mystique* sold two million copies upon its release (Sommers). Given this information, it is clear that the mystique began to pervade society directly after World War II and extended until at least 1963, demarcating an eighteen-year time frame in which this myth burgeoned.

Although Shepard’s plays are not set in the eighteen-year window (1945-1963), the mother characters can still be said to follow this specific mother myth. Once a mother became entangled in this belief system, it was unquestionably challenging for her to move beyond it. As Friedan explains, “It is not easy for a woman who has defined herself wholly as wife and mother for ten or fifteen or twenty years to find new identity at thirty-five or forty or fifty” (Friedan 497). Hence, even though Shepard’s mother figures are older in the plays, it is still likely that the feminine mystique affects their sense of self.

Each of the four mother characters discussed in this thesis exhibits a belief in the feminine mystique, a particular myth of motherhood. Further, the mothers show signs of disenchantment with this ideal as well. Although Shepard’s family plays came about in the late 70s and early 80s, fifteen to twenty years after Friedan’s seminal book, the characters Halie (*Buried Child*), Mom (*True West*), Meg and Lorraine (the latter two from *A Lie of the Mind*) all either had children or raised children (or both) during the time frame in which the feminine mystique was indeed the prevailing myth. This thesis, therefore, looks at Shepard’s family plays

on a textual and contextual level. Certainly, it is a bit unexpected to pair Sam Shepard with Betty Friedan or even motherhood, but a maternal reading of these plays can possibly bear unique and original results. It can elucidate the profound significance and thematic relevance of the mother characters, allowing for the plays to be produced with more nuance and dimensionality, and more broadly, highlight how Shepard's dramaturgy comments on the societal construct of motherhood and the myths surrounding this institution.

Of course, *The Feminine Mystique* has its fair share of critics, most notably feminist scholar bell hooks, who asserts that Friedan's ideas are biased in regard to race and class. According to hooks, the feminine mystique pertains to only married, middle to upper class, white women (1). Feminist thinker Carolyn Johnston agrees, although at the same time she does credit *The Feminine Mystique* as being a landmark feminist text (207). Johnston notes that the work ignores the fact that many "working class and African-American women were totally excluded from the possibility of full-time motherhood . . ." (211). These criticisms are wholly valid. Yet, the demographics that hooks and Johnston establish as prone to being affected by the mystique (i.e. white, middle-class, and married) correlate with Shepard's mother figures. As James A. Crank points out, "The interior world of the white, middle-class American family" (3) is the environment and subject matter of Shepard's family plays. All four of the mothers mentioned in this study are married, and while the race of Shepard's families is never directly stated, it is typically taken as a given that they are Caucasian. This is due in part to the playwright's heavy usage of autobiographical material (King 214). Concerning specifically economic class, the mother character of Ella in *Curse of the Starving Class* notes her family's status: "We're not poor. We're not rich but we're not poor. . . . We're somewhere in the middle" (143). Although *Curse of the Starving Class* is not a focal point of this study, the dialogue here provides crucial

information, especially given the intertextuality of Shepard's plays (Graham 11). It establishes that Shepard's fictional families serve to represent the stereotypical middle-class, American nuclear family, a notion supported by the critical consensus of these works (Hall, *A Kind* 98; Crank 88). The characters are people who "...shop in the Safeway" (Shepard, *TW* 35).

In addition to hooks, Rachel Bowlby, a scholar of literature, evaluates the legitimacy of Friedan's claims, contending that Friedan elucidates the sources perpetuating the mystique (i.e. media and institutions), but fails to analyze "why the mystique appeals" or "why it sticks" (68). This may be partially true. Perhaps Friedan, like Shepard, finds it more interesting to raise questions than answer them (DeRose 47). But Friedan does, in fact, address Bowlby's concerns. These myths "stick" because the patriarchal ideology promotes and perpetuates them. With this in mind, it is clear, then, why the particular myth of the feminine mystique rose to prominence in the fifties. The socio-political context in the United States at this time provided fertile ground for the myth to grow. As Friedan states:

There was, just before the feminine mystique took hold in America, a war, which followed a depression and ended with the explosion of an atom bomb. After the loneliness of war and the unspeakableness of the bomb, against the frightening uncertainty, the cold immensity of the changing world, women as well as men sought the comforting reality of home and children. . . . We were all vulnerable, homesick, lonely, [*sic*] frightened. (268-69)

This passage directly correlates to the texts being used in this study, for not only are the mothers relegated to the domestic sphere, several of the fathers fought in World War II (e.g. in *A Lie of the Mind* and *True West*).

FAMILY PLAYS

To reiterate, this thesis is delimited to an investigation of the mothers in Shepard's family plays, the texts written in the third stage of Shepard's career (Czerepinski 30). There is a discrepancy, however, as to what works constitute the family plays. Often times, these plays are referred to as a trilogy (Westgate 727; Turan 364; Daniel 129), and at other times a quartet (Lahr) or even a quintet (Adler 111; Schvey 13), depending on the source. *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West* comprise the trio. The quartet adds *A Lie of the Mind* into the grouping, and the quintet brings *Fool for Love* into the equation. *Fool for Love* is only occasionally included with the family plays due to the fact that the action of the drama centers primarily on a romantic relationship, not a familial dynamic. Yet, this romantic relationship occurs between a half-brother and half-sister, and further, the play relies on the presence of a father figure, thus explaining why sometimes critics do decide to group it with the family plays. It is also noteworthy that new terms referencing the family plays may be invented shortly, as Shepard is still writing about the family today, more than thirty years after *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978). In this study, I use the notion of a quartet of family plays, and out of these four plays, only three are examined: *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind*.

Because the feminine mystique developed in the late 1940s and lasted into the early 1960s, I am choosing to exclude *Curse of the Starving Class* from this study. The play certainly contains a fascinating characterization of a mother figure (i.e. Ella), but Ella raises her teenage children in the late 70s, and as such, became a mother in the early 60s. This situates the example of motherhood dramatized in the play on the very edge of the timeline delineating the period in which the mystique flourished. A future analysis of Ella may prove insightful, as it could be argued that she is indeed affected by the mystique, despite entering the institution of motherhood

toward the end of the mystique's reign. But because Ella is not firmly rooted as being a mother in the fifties, I have excluded her from this current analysis and delimited this exploration to the mothers of *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind*.

THEMATIC ELEMENTS

Throughout Shepard's prolific career, which to date spans five-decades, the same themes tend to resurface time and time again despite major structural and stylistic changes in his writing (Turan 364). Two of these themes are the construction of personal identity (Bottoms 12; Wetzsteon 258) and escape. This latter element can be interpreted as either a desire for escape (Hart, "Pornographic" 71; Wetzsteon 258) or inability of escape (Shepard, "Shepard" 67; McDonough, "Patriarchal" 154). Issues surrounding identity and escape are prevalent in *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind*. The extant criticism analyzing the family plays tends to note these themes in relation to the fathers and sons of Shepard's plays, and in the rare instances when a female character is indeed noted for her thematic relevance, it is usually a daughter, not a mother. By illustrating how four of Shepard's mother figures express a belief in a certain myth of motherhood, this thesis consequently sheds light on how the mothers (in addition to the male characters) stand to illustrate the recurrent issues of Shepard's work.

With regard to the concept of identity in the plays of Sam Shepard, drama and theatre studies scholar Stephen J. Bottoms states "The creative tensions generated by Shepard's open-ended writing style find a localized focus in the tortured question of personal identity, which is arguably his most insistent thematic thread" (12). Others concur, although each critic tends to articulate the theme in a unique way. For instance, American studies scholar Christopher Bigsby explains that the playwright's most significant theme is the "instability of identity" (30), while

the Pulitzer Prize winning critic for *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani, states that it is the “search for a role” (“Myths”). Even Shepard himself has noted his fascination with identity, stating, “This problem of identity has always interested me. Who in fact are we? Nobody will say we don’t know who we are, because it seems like an adolescent question” (Shepard, “Things” 28). Here, the author seems to take a universal approach to the question of identity. He is not associating the problem to simply something men endure. In his plays, however, this notion is typically discussed in relation to the male characters (McDonough, *Staging* 38, 42). Even in the later family plays (e.g. *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*), which grant the women more stage space, Shepard’s work is still interpreted as placing precedence on the male characters’ efforts to forge an identity (McDonough, *Staging* 57).

While the notion of identity seems to frequently emerge in criticism centering on Shepard’s work, it is unclear exactly what scholars mean when using the term. As defined in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, identity is “Who or what a person or thing is; ... a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others (“Identity”). This is certainly a straightforward approach to the term, but there are still layers of meaning inherent to it, as identity connects and at times equates to the concepts of “self” and “role.” Identity has a wide array of connotations across many different disciplines, and its oft employment almost renders the term meaningless (Sökefeld 527). Like the definition of identity, there are variances amongst separate fields of study regarding how these three words are disparate or similar. The article “Identity and Self: Historical Antecedents and Developmental Precursors” surveys the development of the concept of identity in psychological terms. In the article, psychologist Frank M. Lachmann reveals that the term identity “was more commonly used prior to the elaboration of the sense of self,” concluding that “the concept of identity has been absorbed by sense of self”

(252). In other words, the two terms are synonymous. The work of social scientist Erving Goffman further indicates that identity and self are interchangeable; in his early writings, Goffman preferred the term self, but in his 1963 book *Stigma*, he substituted self with identity (Sökefeld 532). In this thesis, identity equates to self, and can be taken to mean “all the referents to the word ‘I’” (6). It is comprised of three elements: self-beliefs (e.g. characteristics and behavior), self-appraisals, and social roles (Allen 6). Role, therefore, differs from self and identity in that one can have and serve as many roles; it is a unit comprising one’s sense of self. “The search for a role” (Kakutani), a theme noted earlier in conjunction with identity, is still a dominant element of Shepard’s work and corresponds to the playwright’s fascination with the topic, as without a role (or roles), it is impossible to have a strong sense of self.

Friedan’s use of the term identity warrants comment as well. Like most who employ the concept within Shepard scholarship, Friedan never provides a strong clarification as to the connotations behind her use of the word. It is discernable that the feminine mystique inhibited women from achieving *full* identity (Friedan 267). For many of these women, biology assigned identity (Friedan 136). Of course, there is nothing inherently undesirable with the choice of motherhood; mothering a child, in fact, is an integral facet of life and an enriching experience (Rich, *Of Woman* 8). It is the capricious dictates and limitations placed on the role of mother within a patriarchal societal structure that induces detrimental effects (Rich, *Of Woman* 8). In the fifties, the patriarchal ideology of the period inhibited a mother from developing into complete selfhood. Identity for a mother was a “necessary sacrifice” (Friedan 427).

Escape is the second notion frequently dramatized in the plays of Sam Shepard, and it manifests in the family plays in two distinct, yet overlapping ways: the desire for escape and the inability of escape. Theatre critic and scholar Ross Wetzsteon explores the former in his

assessment of Shepard's work, elucidating that the "heroes" of these texts struggle "to escape the confinements of the flesh, the family, [and] the culture..." (258). The heroes that Wetzsteon refers to are male, citing the example of Vince in *Buried Child*, who returns to his family after a long absence. Vince's journey in *Buried Child* epitomizes Shepard's belief that "You can't escape [the family] . . . you can't" (qtd. in Wetzsteon 259), therefore, it can also be representative of the second interpretation of the theme: the inability of escape. Likewise, Carla J. McDonough, a prolific critic of Shepard's plays, contends that this theme is mostly dramatized in terms of the male figures, focusing more specifically on the second realization of it (i.e. the inability of escape). McDonough delineates that the "sons in Shepard's plays never escape the father's legacy, even after the father's death, because they inherit patriarchal ideas of violent masculinity from their fathers" ("Patriarchal" 154). The connotation underlying McDonough's statement is that the two themes of identity and escape are interconnected, for the identity of the father is passed down to the son, and attempting to evade this truth is futile.

Despite the overwhelming amount of commentary articulating Shepard's thematic intentions in terms of his male characters, Gerald Weales (longtime author of "American Theatre Watch") believes that the mother characters are pivotal in regard to the recurrent themes of the family plays ("American" 603). Although Weales boldly makes this claim, the reputable critic refrains from going into any analysis whatsoever and fails to explain how he reaches this conclusion. Weales's instinct may be accurate, though, and this study aims to demonstrate that, by embodying a certain myth of motherhood, the mother characters are consequently linked to two common Shepardian thematic elements: identity and escape. Each mother in her own way assumes the same narrow identity (i.e. housewife-mother). She then attempts to escape this position or demonstrates a desire to eradicate herself from her limited role. As a result, this

thesis illustrates that the mothers are equally as relevant thematically as the male characters, and further, ties the mother figures to the larger socio-cultural phenomena of the myths of motherhood.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to delineate where exactly this study is situated in relation to the current body of Shepard scholarship, it is important to provide a brief survey of the literature. This section will proceed in the following manner: first, it will review a small portion of the vast scholarship centering on the male characters in the family plays in order to substantiate that extant Shepard criticism is predominantly focused on these figures. Secondly, it will provide an overview of the literature exploring Shepard's female characters in general. This provides a context for interpreting the scant scholarship mentioning the mothers. It is important to note that this section is delimited to the secondary sources that include an analysis of the family plays (i.e. the chapter or article must discuss the women in either the entirety of Shepard's canon or just the later family plays); explorations of the characters in the early works are outside the scope of this project. Finally, it will review the present literature that concentrates singularly on the mother figures.

The critical consensus is that the father/son relationship is at the core of Sam Shepard's family plays. One work supporting this claim is Michael Taav's *A Body Across the Map: The Father-Son Plays of Sam Shepard*, a book-length study delving singularly into this relationship. Taav's choice of title is significant. Instead of referring to the texts as family plays, Taav chooses the label "Father-Son" plays, as though this relationship is the *only* one of importance in these works, or at least the one that takes precedence. In addition to Taav, other critics assert the

centrality of this dyad, such as drama and comparative literature scholar Henry I. Schvey, who states, “The thread which connects the various phases of Shepard’s work, despite their obvious disparity, is the image of the father” (13). In fact, it is arguable that the father figure is actually more significant than the son (or sons) in these plays, even when the father is entirely absent from the action. For instance, in reference to Shepard’s 1980 play *True West*, which revolves around two brothers, Martin Tucker asserts that the father, who never actually appears in the play, is “the apex of the triad” (140).

Shepard himself has acknowledged that his actual father is indeed a major source of inspiration for his playwriting, and this may in part explain the thematic preoccupation with the father:

I had never foreseen that he would be such a source of material. He had such a strong influence on me. I guess it was inevitable. To me he was deeply mysterious, probably far more than I depict him onstage in any of the characters extrapolated from him. There is a mystery about him that still exasperates -- and intrigues -- me. (Gussow “From”)

Indeed, Shepard imbues his fictional fathers with characteristics of this actual father, Samuel Rodgers II. Akin to Rodgers II, the characters are usually alcoholic, violent, World War II veterans. It is not just Shepard who comments on the autobiographical impulses in his work. Many critics point out Shepard’s use of autobiography, such as Shepard scholar David J. DeRose, who writes “...the one dramatic element that remains constant in each [of Shepard’s family plays] is the *autobiographical* presence of a young man haunted by unresolved ties to family, *father*, and personal heritage” (91, emphasis added). While Shepard’s personal history is not integral to this current project, it is important to note, as it indubitably informs the playwright’s dramaturgy.

With this in mind, it is interesting that Shepard rarely mentions his mother, Jane Elaine Shook, and consequently, it is difficult to decipher if Shepard's mother serves as an inspiration for the playwright's maternal characters. Neither Shepard nor critics make a connection between Jane Elaine Shook and the playwright's fictional mothers. The small amount of information known about Shepard's mother is intriguing, however. Jane Elaine Shook was a school teacher for part of Shepard's childhood (Patraka 9), an interesting fact considering that, in the family plays, no references emerge indicating that the mother characters are (or ever have been) employed. It also seems as though Shepard's mother was the opposite of passive and weak, qualities commonly discussed in reference to Shepard's fictional mothers. When Shepard's father fought in World War II, the family lived on a military base in Guam, and as theatre scholar Vivian M. Patraka mentions, "Shepard's strongest memory of [living in Guam] is his mother carrying a Luger to fend off hidden Japanese soldiers" (9). Taken together, it seems as though Shepard's actual mother may have been a woman with fortitude. Considering that Shepard's own life experiences heavily inform his work, the seeming gumption of his mother might be significant.

Regarding the topic of Shepard's dramatic depictions of women in general, scholars have a wide range of opinions: some state that the women are oppressed and weak (Auerbach 53), while others say that they are independent (Erben 37) and powerful (McDonough, "Politics" 69); likewise, some call Shepard a misogynist (Hart, "Spectacle" 217), and others call him a feminist (Rosen, "Feminist" 29).

The most extreme supporter of the assertion that the playwright's texts are misogynistic is scholar Lynda Hart, whose critical evaluation of Shepard's work is one of the most provocative. In "Sam Shepard's Spectacle of Impossible Heterosexuality," she pursues the

argument that “[Shepard’s] recuperation of realism coincides precisely with his rise to critical acclaim and the concomitant, coterminous, full blown expression of his misogyny and gynophobia [*sic*]” (217). Hart’s committed stance on this topic certainly stretches the boundaries of the conversation, demarcating its limits.

The critical scrutiny of Shepard’s women continues with Bonnie Marranca, the first person to anthologize Shepard scholarship with the 1981 book *American Dreams*. Marranca argues that Shepard’s female characters are oppressed, stating that they only “hang out and make themselves useful for chores while the men make the decisions, take risks, face challenges, [*sic*] experience existential crises” (“Alphabetical” 30). Certainly this present study acknowledges that the women do exhibit a preoccupation with chores (as an attempt to play a role). But do the women (specifically the mothers) take risks, face challenges, and experience existential crises as well? It is important to point out that Marranca’s *American Dreams* was published in 1981 – subsequent to *Buried Child* and *True West*, but prior to *A Lie of the Mind*. Hence, this particular comment only corresponds to two of the three plays in this present project. This is not to say that Marranca has changed her opinion in respect to Shepard’s treatment of women. In actuality, Marranca upholds her belief that Shepard’s women are continuously placed in oppressive positions, and has overtly expressed her qualms regarding the spousal abuse directed toward the character of Beth in *A Lie of the Mind* (note: Beth, who is the victim of said abuse by her husband, is a daughter, not a mother). Marranca believes that the violence, which does not even occur *in* the play but prior to the commencement of the action, communicates something about Sam Shepard as a person: “I simply think that whoever people are is their writing. I don’t see a separation anymore between, say, the world of the play and the world of the author” (Marranca, “Controversial” 28). In other words, even after *A Lie of the Mind*, a play in which the women are

permitted equal stage time to that of the male characters, Marranca still firmly upholds her assessment that Shepard's women are repeatedly subordinated. Furthermore, by pulling Shepard (the person, not the playwright) into the conversation, it is clear that Marranca's opinion is parallel to Hart's: Sam Shepard is a misogynist.

Similarly, Florence Falk, a contributor to Marranca's *American Dreams*, also advocates that Shepard's women are oppressed, choosing to emphasize the passivity of the female characters. In her chapter "Men Without Women: the Shepard Landscape," Falk notes that the women of Shepard's plays display a tendency to behave submissively (98). One aim of this current study is to highlight how Shepard's women can at times be submissive (as delineated by Falk). However, the women, specifically the mothers, can also be blatantly defiant in an effort to escape. Falk additionally contends that Shepard's female characters act like "child women" (99), a term invented by sociologist Erving Goffman and presented in his 1979 book, *Gender Advertisements*. According to Goffman, advertisements infantilize women, portraying them as lost, dreamy, bashful, submissive, and ironically, happy. The phenomenon studied by Goffman, and insightfully noted by Falk, intersects with my argument: images of women finding fulfillment and happiness in the role of housewife-mother were ubiquitous in the fifties, and resultantly impacted women's identities. Although Goffman's theories reside more in the sphere of sociology and this study uses a maternal lens, both incorporate ideas concerning the effect of socio-cultural forces and fictions on the construction of identity. It is important to note that Falk's comments from this chapter, like Marranca's insights from *American Dreams*, only pertain to the plays written prior 1981: *True West* and *Buried Child*.

In contrast to the ideas of Hart, Marranca, and Falk, Rudolf Erben casts the women in a more positive light in his article "Women and Other Men in Sam Shepard's Plays." Erben's

stance is equally as provocative as Lynda Hart's, except it is at the complete opposite end of the spectrum. This is apparent from the opening line: "Women in Sam Shepard's plays are modern, independent, and socially active" (29). While Erben's statements are intriguing, they may also be tenuous. For example, one piece of evidence supporting his thesis is that the women of Shepard's plays are seldom at home (37), a dramaturgical choice that, according to Erben, demonstrates their independence. But the women of *A Lie of the Mind* are always home. Finally, although Erben concludes that the female characters are strong and independent, he goes on to say that they are also "cold and emotionless" (30). Thus, he conveys the message that only a cold woman is a strong woman. Without a doubt, the women (including the mothers) exhibit cold behavior at times, but the coldness does not equate to strength per se. Rather, the coldness could potentially illustrate indifference in regard to fulfilling the role of mother.

Another scholar who views Shepard's women in a more positive light is Charles G. Whiting. His assessment is that female characters are ambitious ("Images" 498), independent ("Images" 497), heroic, and memorable ("Images" 500). However, these admirable adjectives are only used in reference to Shepard's *young* women (i.e. the daughters). In fact, Whiting's work provides an ideal entry into the specific subject matter of the mothers in the family plays, as the objective of his article "Images of Women in Shepard's Theatre" is to compare the feisty younger women with the passive and oppressed "older" women. The article claims that the depictions of the mothers (i.e. the older women) are extremely unfavorable, for instead of trying to escape their domestic entrapment, they "surrender to stagnation" (502). Only in *A Lie of the Mind* does Whiting see minor indications that redeeming qualities may exist in Shepard's mother characters (500). However, this thesis argues that the favorable descriptions assigned to the younger women by Whiting may be applicable to the mothers as well.

Carla J. McDonough also provides an analysis of the mother figures within her larger discussion of Shepard's women. Her opinion is directly antithetical to Erben's, as she takes the position that the mothers are indeed strong due to the fact that they are capable and willing to flee the destruction and violence perpetuated by the male characters. Further, the men are unable to escape ("Politics" 69); the women, in contrast, are granted this ability. While McDonough views the women as having the ability to escape, she still places the female characters in a subordinate position. The women's withdrawal is motivated by the male characters' journeys. Thus, the women are still secondary in terms of the underlying issues of the play. When seen as fleeing from a myth of motherhood, however, the mothers are granted strength as well as thematic importance. This interpretation can cast Shepard's mothers as dynamic and integral characters to the family plays.

Additionally, English scholar Leonard Mustazza contributes to the conversation on Shepard's mothers, singularly analyzing the women of *Buried Child*. His insights are invaluable, as he elaborates on the concept of role and role-playing in regard to the character of Halie, the mother in *Buried Child*. In fact, the title of his article is "Women's 'Roles' in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*." Mustazza explains that Shepard initially creates stereotypical characters in order to later subvert them, illustrating that characters are not what one may have originally assumed. Thus, cracks in the characters' personas appear sporadically throughout the action and reveal that the characters are more complex than initially presented. This article supports the claims of this thesis by highlighting that one of Shepard's mother characters contains dimensionality.

Finally, while there are no book-length studies on Shepard's female characters, there is a chapter dedicated to these figures in a manuscript by feminist scholar Ann C. Hall, entitled "A Kind of Alaska": *Women in the Plays of O'Neill, Pinter, and Shepard*. Here, Hall takes a

feminist psychoanalytic approach to analyze the women in *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind*. While Hall's use of a psychoanalytic lens may not align with this present study, her feminist stance does. However, Hall's ideas tend to reconfirm the one-dimensionality of the mother characters. Like Whiting, she interprets the younger women as the more dynamic of the female figures in Shepard's dramatic literature.

Critics are just beginning to scratch the surface of Sam Shepard's representations of the maternal. An aim of this study is to expand this conversation by offering a new direction in which to explore and understand these plays. This thesis is structured to systematically evaluate Shepard's mothers and progresses chronologically from Halie in *Buried Child*, to Mom in *True West*, to finally, Lorraine and Meg in *A Lie of the Mind*. Each subsequent chapter will focus on one play and the mother(s) within that particular work (i.e. Chapter One will center on *Buried Child*, Chapter Two on *True West*, and Chapter Three on *A Lie of the Mind*).

SUMMARY

A systematic evaluation of Shepard's mother characters is long overdue, and the process of this investigation can potentially yield several conclusions. First, by reclaiming the mother characters and viewing them through a unique lens, new discoveries in respect to these figures can surface, and consequently, Shepard's plays can be produced with more nuance and depth. A second potential byproduct could be that, if the mothers are indeed thematically significant, they might also be said to exhibit signs of agency, for they challenge the status quo presented to them. Therefore, this study may highlight subtle feminist tendencies in plays inundated and dominated by images of masculinity. What is more, by demonstrating that the mother characters are germane to the issues of identity and escape within Sam Shepard's dramatic literature, this study

raises the question, are the mothers inadvertently affiliated with other Shepardian themes?

Finally, if the myth of motherhood experienced by Shepard's mothers fails to acknowledge a mother's lived reality and leads to detrimental emotional effects, what impact do mother myths have today? And lastly, is this expressed in our theatre?

CHAPTER II

HALIE OF *BURIED CHILD*

The following chapter centers on Sam Shepard's Pulitzer Prize winning play *Buried Child* and the mother figure of Halie therein. I begin with a brief synopsis of the play, which provides an entry into an analysis of this oft-ignored mother character. *Buried Child* examines the relationships of three generations of family members who either inhabit or visit the home of Dodge (the patriarch) and Halie (the matriarch) during the limited time frame of less than one day. The setting of the entire play is the living room of a somewhat dilapidated house, located on a barren farmland in rural Illinois. In the opening moments, the sickly Dodge is seen bickering with his wife Halie, who intriguingly remains upstairs (offstage) in her bedroom for most of the act. Thus, Halie, at first, is simply a disembodied voice (McDonough, "Politics" 69). As the couple continues to quibble, their eldest son Tilden (who is in his late forties) enters carrying an armful of ears of corn that supposedly came from the farmland outside. As Tilden husks corn in the middle of the living room, Halie finally descends the stairs, dressed as though she were going to a funeral. Through the ranting of these strange yet familiar characters, it becomes clear that Dodge and Halie have another son, the violent Bradley, who is five years younger than Tilden and has an amputated leg due to an accident involving a chainsaw. The couple once had a third child, Ansel, but he died mysteriously in a motel on his honeymoon, making him the first of two buried children.

At the start of Act Two, Tilden's twenty-two year old son, Vince, appears at the house accompanied by his girlfriend, Shelly. It is here where the subject matter of the play emerges, for ultimately *Buried Child* is a homecoming in which the prodigal son, Vince, returns to his roots (Heilman 638), "hoping to find a sense of himself" (Hall, *A Kind* 98). However, Vince and Shelly discover that this home and the people inhabiting it are not necessarily what either of them expect. When Vince and Shelly enter the house, what initially appears to be "like a Norman Rockwell cover" (*BC* 83) quickly turns dark. Nobody recognizes or remembers Vince. Disappointed with the fact that his family has no recollection of him, Vince briefly departs to purchase whiskey for his irascible grandfather, leaving Shelly in the company of the three men of the house. The nightmare continues, as Tilden reveals a family secret regarding Dodge's involvement in an incident of infanticide. Meanwhile, the land surrounding the house is suddenly and mysteriously bountiful, producing not only corn, but potatoes and carrots as well. It is important to point out that Halie is missing from this act. She fled for the night and is on what appears to be a date with Father Dewis, the local minister. Her husband and two sons, in the interim, hold down the fort.

Act Three begins the following day, and in stark contrast to the rain and darkness of the previous night, bright sunshine now floods into the house. Halie finally returns to the homestead, albeit drunk and with Father Dewis, and is now seen dressed in bright yellow and holding yellow roses, matching the morning sun. Upon entering her home, Halie is immediately humiliated in front of the minister, as the state of affairs in her house creates cracks in the image of the picture perfect family that she constantly and consciously attempts to project: Bradley's wooden leg is leaning up against the sofa, Dodge is hiding under a rabbit fur coat (belonging to Shelly), and an unknown female, Shelly, is randomly and rather unobtrusively standing on the

staircase. Shelly attempts to explain to Halie the reason behind her visit: she has come with Vince. While Halie, unlike the men of her family, firmly remembers Vince, she is still uninterested and instead preoccupied with her discovery that Tilden is missing. The chaos escalates with Shelly stealing Bradley's wooden leg, rendering him immobile, and boldly smashing one of Halie's saucers against the wall in an attempt to be heard. Out of this confusion comes Dodge's revelation regarding the truth behind the act of infanticide. Dodge confesses that as Halie approached middle age, she suddenly and mysteriously became pregnant, "outa' the middle a' nowhere" (*BC* 123). Considering the fact that he and his wife did not sleep in the same room, Dodge knew that the child did not belong to him. The father was Tilden. The illegitimacy of the baby in conjunction with the incest that created it inspired Dodge to murder the child, drowning it and then subsequently burying it in the land. Hence, it is the second buried child of the play's title.

After this grim disclosure, Vince, whose errand to purchase alcohol took exponentially longer than expected, returns. He spent the night driving clear to the Iowa border in order to escape from his family, but apparently, this proved futile. Motivated by mysterious forces to return, Vince appears at the house blatantly intoxicated, and reenters in a manner meant to signify rebirth, as eloquently explained by American theatre scholar Bruce J. Mann: "Vince cuts a hole in the porch's screen and dives through it into the living room, a stage emblem of birth, as if he were the buried child itself being reborn in order to take over control from Dodge" (88). Metaphorically, then, there are three buried children: Ansel, the unnamed baby, and Vince. Disconcerted by the intoxicated and wild condition of the once sweet Vince, Halie is escorted upstairs to her bedroom by Father Dewis. Meanwhile, Dodge is on his deathbed, proclaiming his will: the house goes to Vince, his grandson. Despite the inheritance, or perhaps because of it,

Shelly says goodbye to Vince and flees. Vince, conversely, stays to “carry on the line” (*BC* 130). In the final moments of the play, Dodge slips calmly into his final rest, “completely unnoticed” (*BC* 131); Vince assumes Dodge’s position on the sofa, indicating his acceptance of his new role within the home; and Halie is once again a disembodied voice, speaking from upstairs (offstage) in her bedroom. While Halie comments on the copious crops sprouting in the land outside, Tilden quietly enters holding “the corpse of a small child” (*BC* 132). The last image of the play is of Tilden ascending the stairs carrying said object to Halie’s bedroom, over which Halie’s voice is heard. She speculates that the new and miraculous growth on the farm is due to the sun: “Maybe it’s the sun. . . . Maybe it’s the sun” (*BC* 132), she states. It is this line, the mother’s line, which closes the play. The line is also significant due to its use of a pun (sun/son) that serves to elucidate the driving force behind the play’s chain of events (i.e. the buried child; Mottram, *Inner* 144), or perhaps because it presages the bright future of the farm under Vince’s reign (Goist 122).

This chapter progresses in the following manner: the first major section, “Shepard’s Thematic Concerns and Context,” outlines how the issues of identity and escape surface in *Buried Child* predominantly in terms of the male characters. This conversation is divided in two separate units called “Theme of Identity” and “Theme of Escape.” Also under this first major heading is the section titled “Halie as a Product of the Fifties,” which serves to locate Halie as being a mother in this era, or least a woman plausibly affected by the myth of motherhood from this period. The information contained in this unit supports the current analysis as it provides evidence as to how the feminine mystique could have had an influence on Halie’s sense of self. Under the next major heading, “Friedman Constructs and Escape,” the discussion becomes rooted more in maternal theory and feminist ideas. There are three more sub-headings in this section:

“Halie: Alignment with a Myth of Motherhood,” “Halie and the Problem That Has No Name,” and “Escape: Halie.” The first illustrates the qualities inherent to Halie that consequently align her with the image of woman, or mother, as perpetuated by (and perpetuating) the feminine mystique. Then, the section “Halie and the Problem That Has No Name” delineates that Halie may be struggling with the lack of fulfillment and limited sense of self deriving from her belief in this patriarchal illusion of mother. Lastly, this chapter briefly details how Halie expresses a desire to extricate herself from the myth of motherhood; this unit is entitled “Escape: Halie.” As the argument progresses in each ensuing chapter, the format remains parallel to the outline provided here.

SHEPARD’S THEMATIC CONCERNS AND CONTEXT

Theme of Identity. In *Buried Child*, the theme of identity manifests in two ways: the search for origins and the ineluctability of heredity. Like many ideas in this thesis, the two notions are distinct yet intertwined. Of course, the male characters are typically thought of as the figures that either undertake this quest to find one’s roots or are locked in a cycle of identity inheritance. Famous theatre critic Mel Gussow elucidates this fact when he writes, “Each of the strange characters in *Buried Child* is searching for *his* heritage, as if it were something that had been mislaid in the attic or under the derelict sofa” (Gussow, “Prodigal” 15, emphasis added). This raises the question, what about Halie? In order to have a framework to answer this question, the following section elaborates how the theme of identity is usually discussed in relation to the men of *Buried Child*.

Critical scrutiny of *Buried Child* typically views the issue of identity in relation to the protagonist, Vince, who is on a journey to reconnect with his family in order to “justify his

origins” (Hart, *Metaphorical* 79). It is drama about self-discovery within the context of one’s family. While Vince’s attempt to understand his origins leads him to the farmhouse of Dodge and Halie, it is his father, Tilden, whom he actually hopes to find. As Shelly admits to Dodge, “We were going all the way through to New Mexico. To see [Vince’s] father. I guess his father lives out there” (BC 86). It seems as though Vince and Shelly only stop by the farm because it is en route to Tilden; to their surprise, Tilden is at the farmhouse. The issue of uncovering personal identity, then, can be said to initially surface in this play in relation to fathers and sons.

As the play progresses, the grandfather enters the conversation in terms of Vince’s sense of self. When attempting to flee from the less than idyllic home of his grandfather, Vince observes his face in the windshield of his car. This moment ushers in a profound observation for Vince; he comes to the realization that he is inseparable from the long lineage of men who have come before him:

I could see myself in my windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. . . . And then his face changed. His face became his father’s face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father’s face changed to his Grandfather’s face. (BC 130)

Vince’s identity is inherited. His roots come from men. Accordingly, Vince perceives that his sense of self stems from a connection to these roots. Supporting the notion that identity is inherited through a chain of men is the fact that no mention is ever made of Vince’s mother.

The perception that identity is passed on from generation to generation of men is not only a major motif of the family plays and an undeniable undercurrent of *Buried Child*, but it is a subject that emerges in practically all of the playwright’s work, even the non-dramatic pieces. In *Hawk Moon*, a compilation of poems and prose from 1973 that arguably includes memoir (Hall,

“Sam” 248), Shepard writes, “every once and a while I’m just amazed when I catch a glimpse of who I really am. Just a little flash like the gesture of my hand in a conversation and WHAM there’s my old man. Right there, living inside me like a worm in the wood” (17, emphasis in the original). Shepard’s thoughts as expressed here are strikingly similar to those articulated by Vince in *Buried Child*. With this in mind, it is not accidental that identity is linked to the father figure(s) in this Pulitzer Prize winning family play, for the playwright is seemingly reiterating his own issues with self-definition in relation to his father.

In contrast to Shepard’s other family plays, *Buried Child* places the grandfather as a central concern as well. Dodge serves a pivotal function, resolving Vince’s struggle with selfhood almost to the degree that Shepard completely bypasses the father figure (Tilden) and dramatizes the theme more in terms of grandfather/grandson. It is Vince, not Tilden, who inherits the home after Dodge’s passing. At the end of the play, Vince symbolically steps into the role of patriarch of the house by sitting on the central set piece: the sofa, the location that serves as Dodge’s throne for practically the play’s entirety. Thus, Vince not only inherits a house, but a role within that structure. This binds Vince’s identity to that of Dodge.

It is important to point out that Dodge only grants his inheritance to Vince, and moreover, recognizes his grandson after Vince reappears at the home in Act Three. At this point, Vince is in a drunken stupor and behaving violently. The implications of this are that Vince is only acknowledged as being a member of this family once he has embraced his alcoholic, “violent masculinity” (Crank 79). As we will see, traits such as alcoholism, violence, and overt masculinity are used time and time again by Shepard to illustrate the heritage of the father (or in this case, grandfather) being passed down to the son (McDonough, “Patriarchal” 163). Dodge’s effect on Vince’s identity, then, is interwoven with the theme of escape, for Vince is locked in a

cycle of nature, inheriting generational identity patterns (along with land and family secrets) that are impossible to circumvent.

Given this information, the events inside the home can actually be said to parallel the action occurring outside on the farm: life, death, and rebirth. Both the characters and the land are caught in a perpetual cycle of nature (Heilman 638). Due the presence of notions pertaining to nature and fertility, it is somewhat surprising that explorations revolving around Halie are scarce. Underlying the action are concepts associated with the woman side of the man/woman binary, making Halie, who is the sole female in the family, a crucial component to the play at least in terms of imagery and thematic ideas. Although Halie's influence on the identity of others through biology or genetics is outside the scope of this present concern, her attempts to formulate a strong sense of self are not. By adhering to a myth of motherhood and simultaneously struggling against her attachment to the role of housewife-mother, Halie can be said to illustrate the theme of the search for self.

Theme of Escape. Similar to the issue of identity as explained above, the notion of escape within *Buried Child* occurs in two distinct ways: the inability of and the desire for escape. Once again, this mostly appears through the male figures. A dramatization of the first incarnation of this theme (i.e. the inability of escape) is seen in the final moments of the play. It is important to note that there are multiple ways to interpret the ending. On the one hand, the conclusion of *Buried Child* can be said to represent hope for a brighter future, as now the dark secret is unearthed (i.e. the buried child), a new patriarch is in power, and the land is once again fruitful. On the other hand, the end can be said to emblemize the inescapability of nature, with the cycles simply repeating. It is the latter that sheds light on the recurring theme of the inability of

escape. Vince, at the end of the play, is simply the equivalent of Dodge in 1935. In the 1930s, Dodge was in charge of a farm that produced “enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over” (BC 123); now Vince is overseer of the land, and the farm is experiencing a rebirth. The idea of Vince as parallel to Dodge is reinforced by Halie, who at the conclusion of the play is once again a disembodied voice calling out from upstairs. At the end, then, the man and woman of the house are in their designated positions: Vince is situated in his sofa-throne and Halie is in the upstairs bedroom. Correspondingly, the play concludes exactly as it commenced (Hooti 86); only now Vince is the patriarch. Shepard’s placement of Halie and Vince at the conclusion masterfully dramatizes how the cycle is beginning anew. This reading of the final moment allows for the notion of the impossibility of escape to emerge, for Vince, in accepting his role, is unable to avoid what he has and will become: Dodge.

The inheritance depicted here does not only exist on the external level of the house and one’s role within it, but on a deeper, biological plane as well. Stephen J. Bottoms elucidates this idea in his work on Shepard when he writes that the play underlines “the bleak suggestion that disaster is inherited with one’s genes” (181). Therefore, according to Shepard’s dramaturgy, a person cannot escape who or what he (or she?) will become, as genetics renders this unavoidable. This, of course, overlaps with Shepard’s articulation of the theme of identity as it appears in *Buried Child*, but it is worth repeating: Vince becomes Dodge, as he does not have an option.

The futility of escape is further suggested in a quite literal manner as well through Vince’s unsuccessful attempt to flee in Act Two. It is an incident that can additionally be said to highlight the *desire* to escape. After agreeing to leave the house in order to purchase whiskey for Dodge, Vince fails to return. The young protagonist originally has no intention of ever coming

back, and he selfishly leaves Shelly to fend for herself in a house full of violent men. Driving Vince's effort to escape is his disappointment that the house and people therein are not consistent with the idealistic Norman Rockwell image of family that he had in his mind (Putzel 113). During his sojourn, Vince comes to comprehend that escape from the legacy in which he is forced to inherit is futile. Vince experiences, as English scholar Steven D. Putzel points out, "a moment of epiphanic insight when he recognizes his *inescapable* identification with all the progenitors who have preceded him" (101, emphasis added). It is this pivotal realization that induces Vince's acceptance of his fate and motivates his return to the homestead.

Considering that Shepard's work is preoccupied with maintaining a male point of view (Marranca, "Alphabetical" 30), it is intriguing that the one character that does fully and undeniably escape in this play is Shelly. Certainly, Shelly is oppressed at times, most vividly when she is symbolically raped by Bradley, who inserts his fingers into her mouth at the conclusion of Act Two (Kabatchnik 89). Yet, Shelly displays strength and courage. She leaves the homestead, and ultimately, rejects her role as Vince's girlfriend. Because of this behavior, Shelly can be interpreted as a self-determined woman (McDonough, "Politics" 71), who displays a considerable amount of agency. Moreover, she can be viewed as a thematically relevant female character, for she expresses a desire to escape and eventually accomplishes that mission. By pushing aside certain aspects of a myth of motherhood, Halie can be said to escape as well. The escape may not be fully successful, however. Because her concluding position is parallel to her starting point, she is clearly locked in the same cycle as the men, and as such, continues to define herself as the housewife-mother in relation to a family comprised completely of males.

Halie as a Product of the Fifties. It is appropriate that Halie is the first mother character examined in this thesis. Out of the four mother figures analyzed, she is the figure most loosely associated with the myth of motherhood from the fifties. Nevertheless, Halie can still be situated as a woman likely influenced by the specific ideology of motherhood from this era, a vital component for the actualization of this study.

The ages of the adult children in this play prove enlightening in respect to building a connection between Halie (their mother) and a myth of motherhood from the fifties. Given that the play is set in 1978, the year in which Shepard wrote it, Halie's oldest son, Tilden, could not have been born any earlier than 1930. A birth year in the early 1930s places Tilden in his late forties (*BC* 69) for the duration of *Buried Child*. Bradley is five years younger than Tilden (*BC* 82), placing his birth in the mid to late 1930s. No reference is made regarding whether Ansel was the middle or youngest of the trio. One may argue that the myth of motherhood during the depression era may have had a stronger effect on Halie's sense of self. Yet while Halie may not have *had* her children, she certainly did *raise* them in the lengthy time frame in which the mystique thrived: 1945 – 1963. Directly after World War II, Tilden would have been no older than sixteen, and Bradley no older than eleven. Ansel might have been even younger yet. Based on this information, all three of Halie's older sons would have been in their childhood or adolescence when the mystique emerged as a major socio-cultural force. What it is more, given that Halie is roughly sixty-five years of age in the play, at the start of the fifties, she would have been approximately thirty-three years of age. This is still young enough to absorb and take on the "new ideal" (Friedan 112) of mother. More importantly, Friedan specifies that women "in their forties and fifties who once had other dreams gave them up and threw themselves joyously

into life as housewives” (72). Halie, then, certainly could have adjusted to this culturally prescribed role as the times and ideology therein shifted.

It is interesting that Shepard does not give any reference at the beginning of *Buried Child* as to the year in which the action is set. This is a common trend with his texts. It could be reasonable to conclude that without a firm placement of the time period it is impossible to pinpoint Halie as being a mother during the window when the feminine mystique prospered. However, there are other textual indications that clearly highlight that the play takes place in the year in which Shepard wrote it: 1978. For instance at the end of Act One, Dodge reminisces about baseball history with his son Tilden, weaving the names of former baseball stars into the conversation, such as Pee Wee Reese and Stan Musial. Reese’s career peaked in the late 40s, early 50s (Johnson 52) and Musial was the batting champion for the St. Louis Cardinals from 1943 (the year that Sam Shepard was born) to 1957 (Rains 279), placing both players as in their prime at the same time in history when the feminine mystique permeated society. Of course, this example does not firmly situate the play in the exact year of 1978, but this fact when combined with other evidence culminates in a conclusion that the play should be set in the aforementioned year.

There is another crucial concern that establishes Halie as a mother in the fifties, and that is the fact that she had a forth child from an incestuous relationship with her son, Tilden. Considering that Dodge reveals that the child came as he and wife were “pointed toward . . . the middle part of [their] life” (BC 123), Halie must have been at least in her late thirties when this forth pregnancy occurred. This places the birth of the forth child sometime during the time frame of 1950-53. Of course, this is just an educated speculation. Shepard never clarifies for certain the ages of Tilden or Halie at the time of the birth of the illegitimate child. But

undoubtedly, it must have occurred within the wide window of time in which the feminine mystique permeated society.

FRIEDMAN CONSTRUCTS AND ESCAPE

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that *Buried Child* is a text brimming with contradictions (Goist 115; Hooti 85; DeRose 107; Bottoms 180; Woodruff 153) and inconsistencies (Mann 89; Whiting, “Digging” 548). Examples include action that is contrary to the dialogue (Woodruff 153), the characters’ expressions of differing accounts of the past (Bottoms 177-78), and an ambiguity surrounding the identity of the buried child (Goist 115). This exploration as to how Halie identifies with a myth of motherhood similarly contains contradictions, but it is exactly these incongruities that affirm that Halie may be trying to adhere to the fictional image of mother while simultaneously resenting the limitations imposed upon her by this role. Demonstrating how certain qualities arise in Halie results in the elucidation as to how the mother figure connects to two of Shepard’s most common thematic concerns: identity and escape.

Halie: Alignment with a Myth of Motherhood. Textual evidence suggests that Halie may be affected by the myth of motherhood of the fifties. As a result, she has constructed her sense of self around an illusion of mother: “In the feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no way she can even dream about herself, except as her children’s mother, her husband’s wife” (Friedan 115). Aspects found in Halie that can be said to prove that this myth has indeed shaped her identity include the centrality of the bedroom in her life (Friedan 83), her concomitant attachment to her sexual function (Friedan 217), her choice to dominate the domestic sphere (Friedan 224), and her embodiment of “the popular

cliché of the time” (Friedan 404). Halie additionally invents daydreams in regard to her family members (Friedan 426), which could be seen as revealing her need to be perceived by others as the cultural ideal of mother.

Firstly, Halie shows that she is swayed by and accepts the role advocated by the mystique through her ostensibly self-inflicted relegation to the bedroom. It is a room emblematic of feminine fulfillment for it highlights a housewife-mother’s sexual role (Friedan 366) both in her position as housewife (sexual object) and mother (sexual function). Halie is intriguingly confined to the bedroom (which is offstage) for a notable amount of time - “more than half first act [*sic*]” (Mustazza 36). Further, it is the location in which Shepard places Halie for both the beginning and the end of the play, a choice that emphasizes the character’s entrapment in the room, and thus, in the role of housewife-mother. Even when Halie is absent from the action in Act Two, it is to be assumed that she is in a bedroom, for she is engaging in an extramarital affair with Father Dewis.

In conjunction with this idea, Halie also displays evidence that she has based her entire sense of self off of her sexual function. Due to the guiding principles of the mystique, women in the fifties were “seen only in terms of [their] sexual role” (Friedan 114). Halie is no exception, as evidenced through the nature of her relationships with the men in the drama. Shepard makes it quite evident that Halie is having an extramarital affair with the minister, as noted above; she leaves the house in the afternoon at the end of Act One, only to return the following morning. Moreover, her appearance in Act One is in complete opposition to how she appears in Act Three when she returns from her rendezvous. At the beginning of the play, she descends the stairs dressed in black from head to toe, as though she is in mourning. Her choice of attire could be said to demonstrate that she is unappreciated for her sexual function in this home. This idea is

especially clear when comparing this first outfit with her clothing after her affair. In Act Three, she reenters giggling, slightly drunk, and clothed in bright yellow, as though she spent a fulfilling night with the Father. Her opening funereal wardrobe evokes a sense of bereavement, while the latter apparel brings to mind a sense of joy. Taken together, it seems as though Halie considers her sexual function as a central part of her identity, without which she is somehow incomplete, or lifeless. Further, when Halie returns home in Act Three, she is carrying a bouquet of yellow roses, “clearly a sexual implication” (Erben 38). This drive in Halie to involve herself sexually with men is advocated by the mystique, and while the affair does not fit the image *per se*, the attempt to find fulfillment via one’s sexual role does. Shepard’s use of the color yellow in association with Halie is also worth mentioning. The color is said to symbolize “vibrant sexuality” and fertility (Varicon 61), and therefore, emphasizes Halie’s identification of her sexual function. What is most fascinating is that corn, a dominant image of the play, is also emblematic of fertility (Cirlot 93, 152). Even though Halie may not be at the forefront of this drama, the text is littered with suggestions hinting at the fact that she is a woman who identifies with a myth of motherhood.

Regarding this idea, Halie’s relationship with Tilden also proves enlightening. A fundamental element of this plot is the incestual act between the mother and son, which apparently occurred many years prior and resulted in the birth of a child. The implications of incest may be too expansive for this current investigation; surely, there are deeper, perhaps psychological factors causing this incident. However, what can be extracted from this event in terms of this current study is that Halie undoubtedly identifies with her sexual role and is willing to cross parent/child boundaries in order to embody the qualities advocated by a myth. Given that Tilden is “weak, submissive and dependent” (189) according to Nibras Jawad Kadhém, it

can be interpreted that Halie is the aggressor in regard to the act of incest. Glorification of one's sexual function (Friedan 217) is a major facet of the mystique, and Halie, through engaging in a sexual relationship with her son, illustrates this quality.

As recommended by a myth of motherhood, Halie is clearly a woman who "bases her whole identity on her sexual role" (Friedan 371). She additionally can be interpreted as a woman concerned with the domestic realm, another important facet of the feminine mystique (Friedan 224-25). With Halie, the domestic sphere does not seem to hold quite the same level of significance as it does for some of Shepard's other mother characters. It seems more likely that Halie only wants to appear as though she is interested in domestic duties and the care of her home in order to impress others and prove that she is a personification of the ideal image of mother to outsiders. This justifies why Halie only cares about Dodge's appearance when other people come to visit. As Dodge discloses to Halie, "You had some fancy, stupid meeting planned! Time to dress up the corpse! Put up a little front! . . . Maybe a copy of the Wall Street Journal [*sic*] casually placed on my lap!" (BC 68). Dodge is being self-referential in this comment; he is the corpse. Yet, even if Halie is not fully successful at executing the chores and duties associated with the role of mother in the domestic realm, her need to be thought of as this type of woman is clearly established.

The manner in which this need emerges is intriguing, for Halie only reveals this interest in the domestic sphere once she discovers another woman, Shelly, in her home. It appears as though Halie considers Shelly a threat in fact (Daniel 132), as seen in this exchange between the two women in the third act:

Halie: What're you doing with my cup and saucer?

Shelly: I made some bouillon for Dodge.

Halie: For Dodge?

Shelly: Yeah.

Halie: Well, did he drink it?

Shelly: No. (BC 115-16)

Following this dialogue, Shepard dictates that Halie stares at Shelly, and then “turns abruptly away” (BC 116). Both the accusations and the brusque dismissal suggest that Halie is uncomfortable with the notion of another woman executing the domestic routine of housewife-mother. “Halie equates Shelly’s desire to know family and feminine community with an attempt to usurp her own matriarchal role” (132), as English scholar Lenelle Daniel notes. Though Halie never shows interest in playing the role of housewife-mother by dutifully accomplishing tasks such as cooking and feeding her family, she clearly does not appreciate another woman waltzing into her domain and stepping into that role either. The brief conversation between the two women combined with Halie’s physical disregard of Shelly, illustrates that Halie does indeed identify with the housewife-mother role. Otherwise, she would not feel threatened by Shelly. More specifically, this sense of being challenged would not stem from the fact that Shelly is holding a cup and saucer, an item belonging in the mother’s world of the kitchen, or is attempting to feed Dodge, a duty designated to Halie, the housewife-mother.

The degree of Halie’s aggression toward the intruder Shelly is somewhat shocking and further serves to reinforce this point. Shepard states that at one point Halie “turns toward Shelly *viciously*” (BC 116, emphasis added). Later, Halie pointedly describes to Shelly the physical attacks inherent to the game of basketball, perhaps using the game and the violence therein as a metaphor for the aggression she feels toward Shelly: “Of course, nowadays they play a different brand of basketball. More vicious. . . . Much, much more vicious. They smash into each other.

They knock each other's teeth out. There's blood all over the court. Savages" (*BC* 117).

Granted, this hostility is completely out of line with the image of housewife-mother as advertised by the feminine mystique, but it does demonstrate a desire in Halie to grasp tightly on to the position. Halie may not necessarily want this role, but at the same time she holds on to it; without it, her identity would be completely ambiguous.

The final example concerning Halie's attempt to build an identity off of a myth is through her embodiment of "the popular cliché of the time" (Friedan 404). Evidence of this appears when Vince and Shelly first arrive at the farmhouse, and Shelly exclaims, "It's like a Norman Rockwell cover or something" (*BC* 83). Shelly continues to tease Vince over the conventional image of family put forth by the home, comparing it to the picture of home and family presented in the classic *Dick and Jane* children's books from the mid-twentieth century (Genovese): "Where's the milkman and the little dog? What's the little dog's name? Spot. Spot and Jane. Dick and Jane and Spot. . . . Dick and Jane and Spot and Mom and Dad and Junior and Sissy!" (*BC* 83). In these books, Mom is depicted as a white, middle-class woman, and more specifically, "a model mother, wife and homemaker" (Genovese). She is the epitome of a woman living according to the feminine mystique from the fifties. This makes sense considering that the popularity of the children's series peaked in the 1950s (Genovese), making them propaganda for this particular myth of motherhood. While Shelly has yet to meet Halie at this point, her first impression of the home and the people living within its walls are in terms of these cliché images. Of course, Shelly is not commenting directly on Halie's demeanor; she is simply making assumptions. There is truth behind these judgments, however. Leonard Mustazza purports that the façade of the idyllic family initially exists in *Buried Child*, particularly in the case of Halie, whose "pronouncements evoke the sense that this is a conservative and orderly

household under [her] direction” (36-37). Halie oversees the domestic sphere, and it appears that she attempts to project that this realm is in alignment with the ideal home as prescribed by the mother myth of the fifties.

The final way in which Halie shows a dedication to a myth of motherhood is through her belief in “mass daydreams” (426). This refers to a choice to live through others or an invented fiction. Halie’s faith in daydreams provides a smooth segue into the next section, which provides an exploration as to how Halie suffers from the problem that has no name. To clarify, Halie imagines histories for her family. These fictions, in turn, reflect on Halie as a successful housewife-mother. At the same time, these fabrications indicate that the reality of the situation is unsatisfying for Halie, pointing toward the conclusion that the problem that has no name may exist within this mother figure.

In Halie, this quality is perceptible through the manner in which she talks about her deceased son, Ansel. For instance, the mother recalls that Ansel was the smartest of her sons and predicts that, had he lived, he would have made “lots of money. Lots and lots of money” (*BC* 73). Halie even expresses her belief that a plaque in honor of her son Ansel should be displayed in the center of town. Several lines later, this plaque evolves into a statue – “A big, tall statue” of Ansel, “with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other” (*BC* 73). Shepard makes any proof supporting the fact that Ansel is worthy of a statue flimsy. While there is evidence that Ansel did indeed play basketball, as Father Dewis admits attending the games, it is ambiguous as to whether or not he displayed any true talent for the sport. Regarding the rifle, Shepard fails to confirm if Ansel fought in a war. It comes across as though Halie simply enjoys imagining her son as a star athlete and celebrated war hero, and it seems as though Father Dewis simply humors Halie by agreeing and supporting her fantasies (Bloom 36).

The second half of Halie's monologue in Act One strengthens the conclusion that Halie enjoys creating falsehoods pertaining to her son, Ansel. Her loquacious speech morphs from a heightened, yet perhaps somewhat valid portrayal of events, into a disturbing, cryptic rant. As Bruce J. Mann explains, Halie's monologue makes sense at first, but slowly segues into the irrational (84). Ansel is not the hero that Halie introduced, but a man mysteriously murdered in his bed while on his honeymoon. The final portion of Halie's speech, therefore, calls all of her prior statements into question.

By inventing a past and a theoretical future for her dead son, Halie reveals an intention to project an image of herself as the ideal fifties mother. Simultaneously, however, this suggests that the reality of the present moment as well as the truth behind Ansel's actual life circumstances may not usher in happiness. Halie may be experiencing the problem that has no name. Therefore, contradictions and complexities are present in Halie's demeanor that uncover that the mother character is much more complicated than simply being the epitome of a woman believing in a myth of motherhood.

Halie and the Problem That Has No Name. Symptoms of the problem that has no name also appear in Shepard's dramatization of Halie. These signs surface in addition to and simultaneously with the indications that she adheres to a myth of motherhood. The implications of this are that Halie is not a mother who feels fully complete in the limited role prescribed to her by the mystique. Resultantly, she experiences an underlying emptiness. In the case of Halie, suggestions of the problem that has no name include her engagement in extramarital affairs and choice to have another child late in life (Friedan 64). Additionally, Halie expresses evidence of her discontentment with her family of men (Friedan 469). All of these signs potentially point to

a crisis of identity in Halie, for she is not fully committed to her role as a housewife-mother but yet she is unaware of any other option.

While Halie never admits outright that she feels an underlying emptiness, her actions could be interpreted as signifying that this emptiness internally exists. For example, she engages in extramarital affairs and opts to have another child when approaching middle age. The latter was an uncommon choice for females in the fifties; during this era, most women had their last child by the age of thirty (Coontz 161-62). Both actions can be interpreted as tactics used by Halie to fill an underlying void. As Friedan claims, many women believed that both alternatives were thought of as solutions to the problem that has no name (Friedan 64). One may argue that partaking in extramarital affairs and having a child serve to illustrate Halie's identification with her sexual function, and therefore, are telling in regard to how Halie *defines* herself by a myth, not how she is *disillusioned* by the belief. However, it is important to keep in mind that contradictions are highly prevalent in this text, so much so that director Robert Woodruff listed the contradictions in *Buried Child* as his main concern and challenge when bringing the first production of this play to the stage (153). The contradictions of this text must be embraced. Thus, Halie's choices can have conflicting connotations. Qualities that illuminate her identification with the position of housewife-mother can also serve to show the lack of satisfaction deriving from the role.

In regard to the problem that has no name, Friedan reports that women began to feel "strangely discontented with their husbands [and] continually irritated with their children, when they saw marriage and motherhood as the final fulfillment of their lives" (Friedan 469). These emotions can certainly be said to surface in Halie. It is important to note that even though this current examination is a study of maternal behavior and not spousal relationships, Halie's

interactions with Dodge are still relevant, as this incarnation of the myth of motherhood combines wife and mother into one singular role. With this in mind, Halie's treatment of her husband could be said to reveal the mother figure's frustration stemming from her narrow role in life. Ann C. Hall states that Halie is "clearly dissatisfied with her relationship with Dodge" (Hall, *A Kind* 98), which is made apparent by the firm boundaries erected between the married couple. For most of the play, Halie separates herself from Dodge either by remaining on the upstairs level of the house (offstage) or by leaving the house completely. Furthermore, she delineates her aversion to her husband in Act One, complaining about his tendency to lounge in his sofa, "day and night, festering away! Decomposing! Smelling up the house with [his] putrid body!" (BC 76). The early placement of these lines makes it immediately obvious that Halie is in a marriage that does not result in fulfillment.

Dodge is not the only member of her family from which Halie withdraws. She similarly avoids her sons (Hooti 81). This estrangement, moreover, can be said to be motivated predominantly by Halie, for the other members of her family have limitations, either physical or mental, that hinder them from making contact, especially if Halie remains upstairs: Dodge is sick and feeble, relegated to the sofa; Bradley is an amputee; and Tilden, while physically able, is emotionally and mentally slow (Opipary 124). Halie is the one member of the family capable of moving up and down the stairs with ease and mature enough to reach out and connect. Yet, she chooses not to. This is not to affirm the critical relegation of Halie as a "terrible" mother (Graham 307; Kleb 122). Instead, Halie can rather be read as a woman conflicted with the role of mother as fed to her by societal and cultural forces.

This strange discontent and irritation that Friedan delineates as being evident of the problem that has no name can also be perceived in Halie through her treatment of the cornhusks

that litter the floor upon her first entrance. Given that corn is emblematic of fertility, her reaction is striking. After seeing the husks, she “stops abruptly,” and screams “What’s this in my house! What’s all this!” (BC 74). Halie then proceeds to kick the cornhusks. She physically assaults the symbol of fertility. The implications here are that Halie is not a mother finding complete satisfaction from her ability to give birth. What is more, as Friedan posits, “no matter how often [a woman] tries to tell herself that this giving up of personal identity is a necessary sacrifice for her children and husband, it serves no real purpose. So the *aggressive energy* she should be using in the world becomes instead the terrible anger that she dare not turn against her husband, is ashamed of turning against her children. . .” (Friedan 427, emphasis added). Since it is inappropriate to overtly take out one’s frustration on the children, perhaps Halie is using the meaning-laden cornhusks as a substitute for said figures.

Escape: Halie. As mentioned in the section earlier, the theme of escape develops in two distinct, yet interwoven manners in *Buried Child*: the inability of escape and the desire to escape. When Halie is viewed through a lens of the myth of motherhood, she can be said to dramatize both manifestations. Regarding the first, the inability of escape, it is problematic to claim that Halie achieves complete liberation from the role of housewife-mother. The character concludes the play in the exact same position in which she began the action: upstairs, in her bedroom, represented only through voice. She cannot escape, for she is locked in the same cycle as the male characters on account of the fact that she is defined in terms of these men: she is a housewife-mother. As such, she is associated with their struggles. However, Halie does manage to elude the grip of her family for brief periods of time intermittently within this perpetual cycle. She spends the entirety of Act Two, which takes place over the course of a night, outside of the

home, gallivanting about with Father Dewis. Granted, this relationship only casts Halie in the role of mistress, another role defined in terms of a man, but at the same time, it provides her with a role outside of the home. This is something that is unique to Halie when compared with Shepard's other mother characters. One could also mention the use of "Father" in the name of the man with whom Halie has an affair; perhaps this figuratively places Halie in the position of daughter engaging in an inversion of the earlier act of incest between mother and son. Nevertheless, this affair involves an individual disconnected from the family and the home. Halie's behavior, then, can also be said to illustrate the second Shepardian incarnation of escape: the desire for escape. Through engaging in an extramarital affair that removes one from the home for substantial intervals of time, Halie, like Shelly, ostensibly achieves the objective of escape.

Taken together, the ramifications of escape in terms of Halie are twofold: Halie is impeded by patriarchal ideology (Hall, *A Kind* 98) and is locked in a cycle alongside the men of the house, but contrarily, she is simultaneously outside of patriarchal control (McDonough, *Staging* 53), fleeing for the night to partake in a romantic liaison with Father Dewis. In terms of the myth of motherhood, Halie exhibits an understanding that she is supposed to be the ideal image of mother as projected by the mystique, while she also models behavior rejecting that identity. Halie may not completely escape from her role as handed down to her by the feminine mystique, but she has some agency, for she unquestionably challenges the myth by escaping from it for a short while.

SUMMARY

While Halie is referred to in Shepard criticism more often than some of the other mother characters that we will look at in subsequent chapters, she is usually discussed on a surface level or in relation to the male characters. Her thematic significance, particularly in terms of identity and escape, is overlooked. Viewing Halie as a mother struggling with a myth of motherhood brings her search and struggles with identity to the forefront. This allows the character to have more depth and resonance, not to mention relevance thematically. Moreover, Halie suffers from a problem that has no name and takes action to solve her issues. This, in turn, illustrates that this mother character exhibits some agency. She may be locked in a fictional construction of motherhood that permeates society, but she still ventures to escape from the home (and her position of housewife-mother) for brief periods of time.

It is noteworthy that *Buried Child* is a play rife with symbolism, despite being a text typically considered more in the vein of realism. Throughout this chapter, I only mentioned the symbols present in *Buried Child* in order to highlight the thematic aspects (e.g. sun/son) or to connect Halie to a myth of motherhood (e.g. corn). An analysis of the symbolism in the family plays is outside the scope of this thesis, but undoubtedly it could be a strong future direction. In the following chapters, the significance of Shepard's use of symbolism is not a central facet of my argument.

Out of all of the mother characters explored in this study, Halie is the figure most tenuously connected to the myth of motherhood from the fifties. However, she serves as the foundation for the analyses to come in following chapters. Like Halie, the other mother characters demonstrate a great deal of contradiction, stemming from their belief in a myth. Each displays evidence of their adherence to the feminine mystique, symptoms of the problem that has

no name, and efforts to escape. The women's journeys are not identical though. While all four mother characters fit into the same frame, as we will see, each has a very distinct path.

CHAPTER III

MOM OF *TRUE WEST*

True West, written in 1980, centers on two adult brothers: Austin (who is in his early thirties) and Lee (who is in his early forties). Ivy League educated Austin, a modestly successful screenwriter, is staying at his mother's house in California (while she is vacationing in Alaska) in an attempt to finish his latest film project in solitude. Directly before the first scene of the play, Austin's older brother Lee, a disheveled drifter, appears at the house unannounced and uninvited. The two brothers have not seen each other in over five years. As the action progresses, Lee deliberately interferes with Austin's business meeting with Saul Kimmer, a producer interested in Austin's work, and over time, convinces Saul to drop Austin's screenplay and produce his own idea instead. This leads to an escalation of conflict and tension, through which the initially disparate brothers begin to appear increasingly more alike. At the end of the play, the mother of the two brothers finally returns home from Alaska. She enters to find her once tidy kitchen (the setting of the entire play) in complete disarray. The play culminates with the brothers squaring off, as if they are a mirror-reflection of one another, and ultimately, the heightened conflict between them is left unresolved. While *True West* has four characters, it is largely a two-person play. With the exception of a small section at the top of scene three (eight lines), Austin and Lee are onstage for the duration of the action. Consequently, the themes of this text primarily emerge

via the respective journeys of the two brothers. Both exemplify the common Shepard motifs of the construction of personal identity and the need for escape.

The presence of Austin and Lee dominates *True West*. Yet, many consider the father figure, who is nameless and absent, as a third central figure in this drama (Tucker 140; Clum 181). To clarify, the father is not occasionally absent (like Halie in *Buried Child*), but rather he never appears once in this play; he is only referenced. Despite being an offstage presence, the father exerts a powerful effect on his two sons, and his influence is unquestionably felt through the behavior of both brothers. In contrast to the father, the mother figure, only named “Mom,” actually appears in this play. Considering the amount of scholarship centering on the missing father, the present mother deserves a thorough investigation. Most critics tend to simplify the character of Mom, such as David J. DeRose, who writes her off as “an anemic and emotionless little woman” (112). Others downplay the sense of truthfulness in the dramatization, and instead comment on the comedic (Crank 89) or “cartoonish” (Graham 307) nature of the character. What is most striking is that some scholars ignore Mom completely. Carol Rosen, for instance, fails to even mention the character in her extensive analysis of the play, except to say that the action takes place in Mom’s kitchen (*Poetic* 137-44). But does Mom actually lack emotion or honesty? Moreover, does she deserve to be neglected in scholarship, even if the role is comparatively minor? When viewed through a lens of a myth of motherhood, Mom’s behavior can be said to reveal a profound and complex emotional state. Also, although Mom’s dialogue can be considered humorous at times, her presence in the play has, to borrow a line from Saul Kimmer in *True West*, a “ring of truth” to it (35). An analysis of this character additionally demonstrates that Mom emphasizes the same thematic ideas as that of Austin and Lee despite her limited stage time.

This chapter will proceed in a manner similar to that of Chapter Two. Before delving into an exploration of the character of Mom, it will provide a brief context for the discussion. The first section, “Shepard’s Thematic Concerns and Context,” establishes the prevalent thematic ideas of identity and escape within *True West*, and elucidates how these issues arise in the play namely in correlation with the two brothers. The character of Mom as an individual is typically ignored in this respect. Second, this chapter explicates that Mom is unquestionably from the generation in which the feminine mystique flourished. Consistent with the structure of the previous chapter, this discussion falls under the subheading of “Mom as a Product of the Fifties.” After clarifying the factors imperative for an understanding of this discussion, this chapter begins an in-depth analysis of the character of Mom. This analysis constitutes the final three divisions of this chapter, which are entitled “Mom: Alignment with a Myth of Motherhood,” “Mom and the Problem That Has No Name,” and “Mom: Escape”; all three fall under the umbrella heading of “Friedan Constructs and Escape.” In the first, “Mom: Alignment with a Myth of Motherhood,” this chapter examines how this mother figure believes in an identity advocated by a myth of motherhood, as represented by the feminine mystique. Mom strives to be the perfect suburban housewife-mother, choosing “one passion, one occupation, one role for life” (Friedan 267). Next, the section “Mom and the Problem That Has No Name” explores how Mom exhibits certain symptoms as a result of her attempt to identify with a myth. Like many mothers of the fifties, Mom’s behavior in this play indicates that she is not fully fulfilled and happy with her sole identity as mother. She displays two symptoms that suggest this fact: first, she exhibits a need for “something more” in life (Friedan 121), and second, she exudes qualities such as dullness and apathy in response to her children (356). Lastly, the section “Escape: Mom” illustrates that Mom tries to break away from her single, limited role,

arguably in a hope of finally finding a stronger sense of self. These last three sections demonstrate that Mom is far from “emotionless” (DeRose 112). She can be viewed, instead, as a woman with conflicting feelings stemming from her simultaneous needs to hold on to her role as housewife-mother and run from it. Like Halie, Mom exudes behavior that can be interpreted as contradictory, which proves that there is depth to this character and challenges any surface level descriptions of her.

SHEPARD’S THEMATIC CONCERNS AND CONTEXT

Theme of Identity. It is imperative to specify how the particular themes of identity and escape emerge in this text as this provides a framework for analyzing the character of Mom. Regarding identity, this issue is readily apparent in the characters of Austin and Lee, though there are three unique ways to interpret how the two characters elucidate this idea. At the start of the play, it is clear that the brothers have chosen identities directly antithetical to one another. Austin and Lee are an “unashamedly stereotypical pair of opposites” (191), according to Stephen J. Bottoms. The younger brother, Austin, is an educated professional with a wife and children of his own. Lee, on the other hand, is a criminal, who prefers to live by himself in the middle of the desert. Shepard illustrates this disparity through the characters’ clothing. Prior to the commencement of the play, the playwright indicates that Austin is wearing a “light blue sports shirt, light tan cardigan sweater, clean blue jeans, white tennis shoes” (TW 2); Lee, on the other hand, is wearing a “filthy white t-shirt, tattered brown overcoat covered with dust, dark blue baggy suit pants from the Salvation Army, pink suede belt, pointed black forties dress shoes scuffed up, holes in the soles, no socks,” and is described as being unshaven (TW 2). Just like the costumes of the two men serve to establish their contrasting identities at the start of the play, the clothing

(or lack thereof) is also used to illuminate the seeming sameness of the brothers' natures later in the play. At the top of scene nine, for instance, both men are ostensibly shirtless, as Austin has his shirt completely open and Lee is now sans shirt (*TW* 50). Likewise, both are drenched in sweat (*TW* 50). Through the attire of the two men, it becomes clear that the calculated identities of Austin and Lee come crashing down as the play progresses, resulting in the brothers becoming "one and the same" (*TW* 37).

A second way to understand how the search for identity manifests in this play is to view the brothers' conflict as resulting not in the men becoming the same person, but rather with Austin becoming Lee and vice versa (Turan 369; Coe 2). Both brothers are ultimately searching for a role, and the role in which each man hopes to inhabit is the position represented by the other brother (e.g. Lee wants to be a Hollywood screenwriter and Austin desires to be a drifter). As many critics suggest, the action of *True West* brings about a "role-reversal" (Bottoms 185; Tucker 138), ushering in an *exchange* of identities between the two brothers.

Thirdly, this issue can be viewed through the lens of the playwright's life. It is widely believed that *True West* dramatizes two separate sides of Sam Shepard himself. Austin can be interpreted as being "the legitimate artist" aspect of the playwright, while Lee can be seen as representing Shepard's rebel side (Wade 103). John Malkovich, who famously played the role of Lee in the 1982 production of this play, which Mel Gussow referred to as "the true 'True West' [*sic*]" (Gussow "Shepard's"), agrees with this stance. He explains that the character of Lee is "the side of Shepard that's always been strangled but never quite killed" (qtd. in Wade 103). The playwright, therefore, could be said to be using his own issues with identity as the source material and inspiration for *True West*. This is congruent with William Kleb's take on this theme. Given that strong autobiographical impulses are embedded in Shepard's plays, it is

interesting that Shepard wrote a play revolving around two brothers; as Kleb points out, “Shepard has *no* brother” (124, emphasis in the original). Hence, the playwright can be said to be working out parts of his own self with this play. This parallels Shepard’s own perspective on the play. In regard to *True West*, Shepard once stated, “I wanted to write a play about double nature. . . . I just wanted to give a taste of what it felt like to be two-sided. It’s a real thing, double nature. I think we’re split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal” (qtd. in Shewey 133). Whether it is through an exchange of identities, a reversal of identities, or an exploration of internal duality, *True West* undoubtedly raises questions about identity through the characters of Austin and Lee.

Theme of Escape. This issue of identity ushers in the theme of escape. The struggle with identity that plagues the two brothers can simultaneously be interpreted as a need to escape, as both men strive to flee from their own selves (self being synonymous with identity). In order to highlight the drive for escape in the two characters, Shepard contains the characters on the stage for the play’s entirety. Austin and Lee are always present, as noted by James A. Crank, a scholar of literature (82). Crank compares the brothers to “caged animals” (82), who are simply unable to get away. What is more, the attempt to escape one’s actual self (or constructed self) is illustrated through the incessant imbibing of alcohol that occurs by Lee, and eventually by Austin as well. According to Charles G. Whiting, the alcohol serves as evidence of “man’s need to escape himself and find rebirth” (Whiting, “Food” 177). The final image of the play, with the two brothers facing off in an eternal confrontation, signifies that Austin and Lee never truly escape. They are stuck with each other, and with their own selves. Confined by the four walls of Mom’s kitchen, the characters remain onstage until the lights finally go to black.

It is important to note that it is not simply the idea of escaping from one's self that arises in this text. The desire to escape from one's family also emerges. This is firstly evident through Austin, who leaves his wife and children, albeit temporarily, in order to retreat to his mother's house, which is located five-hundred-miles away from his permanent residence (*TW* 39). Lee, likewise, chooses to live in the middle of the Mojave Desert, a decision that indicates his renunciation of family, or even people in general for that matter. This notion is further illustrated at the conclusion of the play when both brothers scramble to flee from the confines of the remnants of their mother's kitchen. It is another example of escaping from the family, for both men are trying to break out of the literal structure of the home. For Austin, this final escape is twofold. He is not only fleeing from Mom's house, which is emblematic of his original nuclear family, but from his new nuclear family as well, giving hints that he has no intention of ever returning to his wife and children. This becomes clear when Mom informs Austin that he is unable to live in the desert due to his familial responsibilities, to which Austin simply retorts, "I'm leaving. I'm getting out of here" (*TW* 55), hoping instead to survive on the Mojave Desert with Lee indefinitely.

The tableau at the end of *True West* sheds light on an even deeper meaning of the need to escape from the family. At the conclusion of the play, Austin is strangling Lee with the telephone cord, and for a brief moment, Austin believes that his older brother may in fact be dead. Unsure of what to do, Austin attempts to run from the scene of the crime. In that very instant, Lee leaps to his feet, "blocking Austin's *escape*" (*TW* 59, emphasis added). On a surface level, this action may simply appear to be an attempt to escape from the four walls of the home and the scene of a potential homicide, but the moment is actually more profound. Shepard's stage directions indicate that, the brothers "square off to each other, keeping a distance between

them. . . . [A] single coyote is heard in distance, lights fade softly into moonlight, the figures of the brothers *now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape...*" (59, emphasis added).

While Austin and Lee are still literally in the kitchen, figuratively they are in the desert. On one level, the brothers cannot and have not escaped from Mom's kitchen; they end the play in the same location in which they began it. On a deeper level, the brothers are metaphorically in the middle of the desert, the home of their father. Mom's prediction in scene nine, then, comes to fruition: "Well, you'll probably wind up on the same desert [as your father] sooner or later" (*TW* 53), she remarks. No matter how much of an effort Austin and Lee make to run away from their family, in the end, neither can escape. It is intriguing that the brothers conclude the play in a setting that can be interpreted as either the realm of the mother (the kitchen) or that of the father (the desert), both of which highlight that escape is futile.

Like the other works in Shepard's quartet of family plays, *True West* poignantly illustrates the impossibility of escaping from one's heredity and/or the influence of one's family, particularly the effect of the father (Hart, *Metaphorical* 100). The themes of escape and identity are interwoven, for the one idea does not manifest in Shepard's work without the other. In an interview with American drama scholar Matthew Roudané, Shepard makes it clear that these ideas are interwoven:

There is no escape from the family. . . . It's ridiculous to intellectually think that you can sever yourself, I mean even if you didn't know who your mother and father were, if you never met them, you are still intimately, inevitably, and entirely connected to who brought you into the world. . . . I'm interested in the family's biological connections and how those patterns of behavior are passed on. ("Shepard" 68)

Through Shepard's comments, it can be understood that the playwright hopes to capture in his work how the complete escape from genetic and environmental influences forced upon one via the family is simply impossible. The family has a powerful effect on one's behavior, or identity, according to Shepard. What is interesting about this quotation is that it mentions a mother's position in regard to these ideas as well as that of the father. This is contrary to most of the criticism centering on *True West*, where identity and escape are only commented upon in relation to the father and two sons.

In *True West*, the character of Mom, despite the fact that she makes her first entrance in the final scene of the play, appears to be concerned with reclaiming or building an identity separate from her role within the family. While her identity is unquestionably linked to her relationship to the family unit, it is not just the nuclear family that manipulates Mom's sense of self. Pervasive socio-cultural forces are also at play. The following analysis shows how the feminine mystique affected Mom's identity, and moreover, reveals that Mom endeavors to escape from the limited role recommended to her by a myth of motherhood. By demonstrating that Mom commits to and rejects a myth of motherhood, she too can be said to illustrate the thematic aspects of identity and escape in *True West*.

Mom as a Product of the Fifties. Before delving into an analysis as to how Mom attempts to embody and escape a certain identity, it is imperative to delineate that Mom is indeed a product of the fifties. If it is understood that the play is set in 1980, the year in which it was written, then the adult children, Lee (early forties) and Austin (early thirties) would have been born somewhere between 1938-1940 and 1948-1950, respectively. This allows for both characters to

be raised by a mother during the era in which the feminine mystique was the culturally prevalent myth of motherhood.

Throughout the play Austin and Lee often reflect on their childhood and share memories of their past. Both frequently mention people and items associated with the late 40s through early 60s, the exact time frame in which the feminine mystique was the reigning ideology of motherhood. Examples of these references include Al Jolson, a hugely popular entertainer in the years proceeding and following World War II (“Al Jolson”), and *Lonely Are the Brave*, a film produced in 1963. Shepard also dictates that Lee should have a “‘Gene Vincent’ hairdo” (TW 2), Vincent being a well-known and prolific recording artist of the fifties (Inglis 224). The play, then, must be set in a year in which Austin and Lee would have likely gained a familiarity with said items and pop culture icons. Likewise, these references indicate that the post-World War II era had a powerful effect on the lives of the two brothers, and as a result, on Mom. The strongest piece of evidence tying Austin and Lee’s childhood, and thus Mom’s motherhood, to this particular era comes from Austin’s dialogue in scene eight, where he admits, “There’s nothin’ down here for me. There never was. *When we were kids here it was different.* There was a life here then. But now—I keep comin’ down here thinkin’ *it’s the fifties* or somethin’” (TW 49, emphasis added). This dialogue directly connects all three characters to the fifties.

It is also important to reiterate that the lapse in time between 1980, when this play is set, and the fifties, when Mom had and/or raised her children would not necessarily alter a mother’s demeanor or behavior towards her children. Once one chooses a life path based off of a myth, it is extremely challenging to reinvent oneself or change the way one acts toward their children. The Introduction chapter noted this point, but it is worth repeating: “It is not easy for a woman who has defined herself wholly as wife and mother for ten or fifteen or twenty years to find new

identity at thirty-five or forty or fifty” (Friedan 497). Hence, Mom, in addition to Shepard’s other mother characters who have adult children that suddenly and surprisingly re-enter the household, reverts, or rather has failed to ever actually grow out of, the familiar maternal behavior induced by the mystique.

FRIEDAN CONSTRUCTS AND ESCAPE

Mom: Alignment With a Myth of Motherhood. Despite Mom’s very limited stage time, she displays particular personality traits that parallel those of the housewife-mothers of the fifties. By detailing textual evidence situating Mom as a woman influenced by the feminine mystique, this section consequently connects Mom to the theme of identity. This section discusses the character’s name (or lack thereof) and the setting of the piece as support for the fact that Mom may have constructed her sense of self off of a myth. Further, it notes how Mom aims attention at two specific duties associated with the feminine mystique: homemaking and nurturing. Finally, it delineates a subtle, yet relevant, connection between *True West* and the feminine mystique as outlined by Friedan: the embodiment of cliché.

The idea of Mom as a woman living in accordance with a myth of motherhood is firstly evident through the title Shepard assigns to her: Mom, “nothing more” (Hoeper 77). The playwright could have easily assigned a name to Mom. His choice to leave the character nameless is quite telling. Seeking feminine fulfillment through this myth of motherhood caused mothers to live vicariously through others (Friedan 417), leading to an evasion of one’s own growth (Friedan 88). The mother in *True West* is clearly not a complete individual with a name of her own; rather, she is a woman who identifies herself via her relationship to her children. Mom, like the mothers who lived according to the mystique in the fifties, is nameless (428), or as

Friedan clarifies “depersonalized” (428). Without Austin and Lee, Mom simply does not have a strong identity of her own.

The location in which the play is set further establishes the relevance of the mother figure, and it reveals how the mystique may indeed have had a major influence on this character. *True West* takes place in the suburbs, forty miles east of Los Angeles. Subsequent to World War II, the suburbs became the prime location in which the feminine mystique thrived. In fact, a mother’s decision to relinquish any sense of identity outside of the home and become a full-time housewife-mother directly correlated with one’s choice to move to the suburbs (Friedan 345-46). Mom’s “suburban middle-class world” (Crank 88), then, indicates that the feminine mystique likely impacted Mom’s sense of self. More specifically, *True West* is set in Mom’s kitchen, a room illustrating complete faith in the mystique (Friedan 60). Shepard could have set the play in any room. An office or a living room, for example, could certainly be appropriate locations for the action of *True West*. Shepard instead places the entire play in an arena associated with the mother figure. The kitchen is a room that highlights the lack of full identity in Mom; it is representative of her adherence to the feminine mystique. Thus, both brothers wrestle to find an authentic sense of self in a room emblematic of their mother’s constricted identity.

An emphasis on, or almost an obsession with, homemaking and nurturing, is also found in the character of Mom. In regard to the first, women under the mystique devoted a large percentage of their day to the completion of household tasks, for good mothering equated to good housekeeping. Friedan comments on this in *The Feminine Mystique*:

The new mystique makes the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women; . . . Beneath the sophisticated trappings, it simply makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence - as it was lived by

women whose lives were confined by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children – into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity. (92)

Textual evidence from Shepard's script demonstrates that Mom is indeed a woman preoccupied with domestic duties. This is clear in the first moments of the play when Lee begins to bombard his younger brother with questions regarding the upkeep of Mom's home:

Lee: You keepin' the plants watered?

Austin: Yeah.

Lee: Keepin' the sink clean? She don't like even a single tea leaf in the sink ya' know.

Austin: Yeah. I know. (*TW 5*)

These few lines immediately establish that Mom is a woman whose life revolves around the home and its tidiness. Once Mom finally enters into the action in scene nine, her need for cleanliness, which is the result of her fixation on the home, is reasserted. By this time, her floor is littered with golf clubs, papers, beer cans, dead plants, a plethora of toasters, and all of the contents of her kitchen drawers, as at an earlier point, Lee desperately ransacked the kitchen in search of a writing utensil. According to Shepard, the kitchen should look "like a desert junkyard at high noon" (*TW 50*). While Mom is known for being emotionally disengaged, she does manage to express interest in the mess cluttering her "once gleaming" kitchen (Rosen, *Poetic* 141). She does not completely ignore the chaos, but rather points out that "it's one hell of a mess in here" (*TW 54*), a statement that provokes Austin to quickly offer to clean up the wreckage. If Mom is unemotional in regard to the state of her kitchen, why does Austin immediately promise to restore the space to its usual, pristine condition?

In addition to her preoccupation with keeping the house spotless, Mom expresses concern over items associated with the domestic sphere, such as valuable china. For example, when Lee boldly asks his mother if he can take her authentic plates and silverware into the desert with him, Mom, instead of passively acquiescing to her son's request as perhaps expected (for passivity is a characteristic stemming from a belief in the feminine mystique), puts forth resistance to Lee's plan. She interrogates Lee: "You don't have any utensils on the desert?," she asks. She then tries to negotiate with him: "Couldn't you borrow the plastic ones instead? I have plenty of plastic ones" (TW 56). Mom's sense of self derives from her ability to nurture (i.e. feed) her family and maintain a home, explaining why she takes a stand on items revolving around homemaking. If the kitchen and the items therein serve as the "center of women's lives" (Friedan 60) according to this myth, then losing items associated with the kitchen leads to a loss of self. Friedan elaborates on this idea in *The Feminine Mystique* where she states ". . . when a woman defines herself as a housewife, the house and the things in it are, in a sense, her identity" (379). Grasping on to the china and silverware can serve to suggest that Mom is still attempting to hold on to her sole role of the ideal fifties mother.

There is a particularly poignant line in scene nine that is quite telling in regard to Mom's identity as housewife-mother. Immediately before she deserts her sons, who at this point are violently struggling with one another amidst the debris of the kitchen, Mom admits that remaining in her house in its current condition is "worse than being homeless" (TW 58). It is a statement that reveals the significance of the home for this character. To Mom, being "homeless" is a frightening and almost unimaginable prospect. Of course, shelter is a fundamental necessity, but for Mom, there is almost no situation that can be considered worse than being without a home. Her whole life revolves around the domestic realm, and as a result,

being homeless leads to a lack of identity. Without a home, Mom could not be a housewife-mother.

Like Halie, the nurturing nature inherent to the character of Mom is not overt. A commitment to nurturing is an important facet of the mystique that we will see in more detail in Shepard's subsequent depictions of mothers. Yet, unlike Halie, subtle hints of a desire to nurture do surface in Mom. It is important to clarify that all mothering (mythical or real) should include a nurturing aspect, but for those who submitted to this particular incarnation of a myth of motherhood, nurturing had a unique implication: a mother following the mystique puts "*all* of [her] energies into the children" (Friedan 464, emphasis added). It is through the singular role of housewife-mother in which one finds a sense of self. Due to the fact that housewife-mothers believed that fulfillment could be found through complete dedication to their children, finding satisfaction once one's children reached adulthood and left home was nearly impossible. Without something to nurture or take care of, these women "slept late" and "looked forward only to death" (Friedan 498). Friedan's analysis may be somewhat extreme, but her theories can be witnessed through the character of Mom.

In *True West*, Mom's need to nurture as a central aspect of her identity is seen through her obsession with her plants, which can be said to serve as a substitute for her children; Austin and Lee are, of course, adults and now live outside of Mom's domestic realm. Shepard describes the extent to Mom's obsession with her plants at the top of the play. He outlines that "the alcove is filled with all sorts of house plants in various pots, . . . hanging in planters at different levels" (TW 3). Then, as mentioned earlier, the fifth line of the play directly references this menagerie of plants. The early placement of this line by Shepard immediately announces the value placed on the greenery by Mom. This idea is further elucidated when Mom finally returns from her

Alaskan vacation. She reveals to her sons that she cut her trip short due to the fact that she “started missing all of [her] plants” (TW 54); by this point in the play, the plants are all dead. It seems as though Mom could not function in Alaska, partly because she was without any caretaking and nurturing duties.

It is also noteworthy that even though Austin and Lee are grown men, Mom still displays a tendency to treat them like children, displaying that the housewife-mother role is her only identity. She is only equipped to interact with her sons as if they are children. As Austin and Lee brawl in her kitchen, Mom does not engage with them as adults violently attempting to murder each other. Rather, she calmly and instinctively tells them to, “Go outside and fight. . . . There’s plenty of room outside to fight. You’ve got the whole outdoors to fight in” (TW 56-57). It is as though Mom is speaking on autopilot, echoing her maternal demands from the fifties.

There is also a subtle connection between *True West* and the qualities associated with this mother myth that additionally highlight the fact that Mom is indeed a prime example of a woman building her identity off of one role, and that is the use of cliché. This particular facet of Mom parallels Halie in *Buried Child*, who similarly attempts to personify a cliché example of mother. In *True West*, the word cliché emerges repeatedly. For example, in scene nine, as the two brothers struggle to complete a screenplay together, Lee begins to criticize Austin’s choice of dialogue: “Cliché. That’s what that is,” he says. “A cliché. ‘The back of my hand.’ That’s stupid” (TW 51). This line occurs, perhaps inadvertently, directly prior to Mom’s first appearance. Shepard’s use of cliché in this text is commonly pointed out by scholars, such as Carol Rosen, who states that, “*True West* is about taking clichés seriously. It asserts the *truth* behind clichés” (*Poetic* 140, emphasis added). One such cliché may be the depiction of Mom. This cliché should certainly be taken seriously, as it has profound implications in regard to

motherhood. Interestingly, this idea intersects with Friedan's notion of the fifties housewife-mother as an example of a cliché – a *true* cliché. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan argues that mothers of the fifties denied their true personality in an effort to exemplify an “unrealistic standard” or “the popular cliché of the time” (404). It is likely that Mom, by representing a myth of motherhood, is simultaneously a cliché of a fifties mom and an example of a truthful cliché within Shepard's text. Mom endeavors to be the conventional mother as advertised by society. However, while much of Mom's demeanor demonstrates her belief in fulfillment via the embodiment of a cliché image (or a myth), other aspects of her behavior completely contradict this identity.

Mom and the Problem That Has No Name. As we have seen, there are textual indications elucidating that Mom has constructed her sense of self around a specific myth of motherhood and is putting forth an attempt to maintain this identity. Simultaneously, Mom displays signs that she is disenchanted with the single role that she has chosen in life. In other words, she demonstrates somewhat negative symptoms stemming from an adherence to the mystique – she experiences the problem that has no name. In the case of Mom, these signs include a desire for “something more” (78), such as a sense of adventure or a creative life, and a sense of apathy towards her family (470).

Signs indicating that Mom has a need for “something more” ultimately illustrate the character's lack of fulfillment in the role of housewife-mother as advocated by the mystique. A need for “something more” is parallel to the notion of an underlying emptiness consistently found in the housewife-mothers of this era. This undercurrent of emptiness led women to gradually realize that the feminine mystique was in actuality a fiction. Finding a way to

overcome this emptiness was not easy under the mystique, essentially because this myth of motherhood was omnipresent; “no other road to fulfillment was offered to American women in the middle of the twentieth century” (70-71). In contrast to the myth, Mom’s behavior in *True West* signifies that she is indeed interested in finding new paths to fulfillment. The mystique tells women that they should not be concerned with art or adventure (100, emphasis added). Mom, however, shows interest in both. Perhaps for the first time, she is experimenting with life choices outside of the frame of reference forced upon her by the feminine mystique and is attempting to find “something more” in life.

The first example of this is evident through Mom’s fascination with the artist Pablo Picasso. In the middle of scene nine, she insists that her two sons accompany her to the museum to meet Picasso. Mom adamantly declares that Picasso the person, not simply an exposition of the artist’s work, is presently at the museum. “Picasso’s in town. Isn’t that incredible? Right now” (*TW* 54), she announces. This moment of the play clearly demonstrates Mom’s passion for art, a quality going against an embodiment of this particular myth of motherhood. Mothers under the mystique were not expected to have a yearning for a creative life, and if they did, those urges were directed into housekeeping and child rearing (Friedan 319). Moreover, many mothers of the fifties experienced an emptiness stemming from an unfilled desire “to do creative work” (Friedan 305). Mom’s exuberance regarding Picasso, then, could be indicative of her internal need to nurture stifled creative impulses. For Mom, seeing Picasso even takes precedence over the well being of her children. This is mentioned by Lenelle Daniel, who notes that Mom “exhibits more emotion over the seeming opportunity to see an artist in a museum than she does over the lethal physical battle between her sons” (132).

Daniel's statement helps to explain the conflicting impulses present in Shepard's characterization of Mom. She goes to Alaska, alone, only to return prematurely because she misses her plants. The first choice, as we will discuss later, shows a need to escape from the confines of the home, and hence, her limited identity within this structure, while the latter decision is illustrative of her need to hold on to her prescribed societal position. Similarly, after returning home from what must have been a long journey, Mom displays a desire to quickly leave the home again, wanting to hurry to the museum to see Picasso. This suggests that she is more concerned with fostering creativity in her life and expanding her notion of self than with the state of her unruly children and role of housewife-mother.

Mom's dissatisfaction in a myth of motherhood is also noticeable through her adventurous journey to Alaska, as briefly mentioned above. Under the mystique, women were discouraged to undertake anything adventurous. Friedan elaborates on this point, arguing that women's magazines throughout the fifties, such as *McCall's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Redbook*, only published stories in which the heroine was a housewife, or at least "permitted a purely feminine identification" (102). Editors of magazines believed that women could identify with this image (and only this image). In turn, this image served to propagate and perpetuate a myth of motherhood. An editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*, in fact, disclosed to Friedan that, "If we get an article about a woman who does anything adventurous, out of the way, something by herself, . . . we figure she must be terribly neurotic" (102). In other words, a mother who goes on a vacation by herself to a distant and arguably obscure destination, such as Alaska, would be considered unfeminine and perhaps somewhat insane in the fifties. Ultimately, Mom's choice to leave California for a jaunt to Alaska, then, provides evidence that the character has a need for something other than her home and children.

It is not only this need to fill a persistent emptiness that can be seen in this mother figure, but also an apathy towards life or “a lack of vitality” (Friedan 356). Friedan explores the emergence of these qualities in women in a chapter entitled “Progressive Dehumanization.” Here Friedan compares the characteristics of mothers who believed in a myth of motherhood with the qualities that psychologists and social scientists in the early 60s were beginning to notice in adolescents (i.e. children raised by mothers who believed in the feminine mystique). These young adults were increasingly apathetic about their future and seemingly indifferent in regard to achieving success in life (395). Friedan additionally found that there was “a new vacant sleepwalking” amongst high school and college students, many of whom appeared to be “off in a daze” (394). The behavior of these young citizens, who were full of potential, was “strangely reminiscent of the familiar ‘feminine’ personality as defined by the mystique” (Friedan 399). Friedan’s argument is that only when these qualities surfaced in young men did society as a whole begin take notice and realize that perhaps there was indeed a problem – a problem with *men*, not with young women or mothers (398-99).

Apathy towards life surfaces in the character of Mom. This quality is perhaps most evident in regard to how Mom reacts to her children, who as previously mentioned, are eventually entangled in an aggressive struggle that nearly culminates in murder. Throughout the entirety of scene nine, Mom continually acts disinterested in her sons, showing very little concern for the violence occurring directly in front of her. For instance, “Mom watches *numbly*” as “Lee . . . pushes Austin in the chest knocking him backwards into the alcove” (TW 56, emphasis added). Mom later is completely apathetic when Austin begins to strangle Lee with a telephone cord. She “calmly” (TW 57) asks Austin what he is doing: “You’re not killing him are you?” (TW 57) she says. It is almost as if she could care less if Austin ends up murdering his

brother. Her lack of response here must be what critics are detecting when they label Mom as unemotional or anemic (DeRose 112). It is important to clarify that emotion occurs along a continuum, and exhibition of apparent apathy is a profound affective expression. It is also a symptom of the problem that has no name. Mom's disinterest in the behavior of her sons can be interpreted as a sign that she is tired of executing her role in this household as dictated to her by a myth. It seems as though Mom returns to the homestead only because housewife-mother is the only role she knows.

Mom does not only behave indifferently and vapidly toward her actual children, but also toward her substitute children: her plants. After realizing that the plants are all dead due to Austin's failure to care for them properly, Mom stares at the drooping greenery and utters, "Oh well, one less thing to take care of I guess" (*TW* 54). Her apathy is striking considering that the plants were a driving force instigating her early return home from Alaska. To reiterate, she tells Austin that she decided to abbreviate her journey because she wished to return to her plants (*TW* 54). Mom's behavior is certainly confusing. She is committed to the care of her plants, but is indifferent when they die. Only when Mom is taken to be a woman struggling with and against a myth of motherhood do her contradictory actions seem surprisingly compatible.

Out of all of Shepard's mother figures, Mom in *True West* is probably the least analyzed in the work of scholars and critics. That being said, many do point out the characteristics that are arguably symptoms of the problem that has no name. For example, Doris Auerbach asserts that Mom wanders through the kitchen "like a zombie" (Auerbach 59), which parallels the notion that some housewife-mothers in the fifties lifelessly meandered through their daily routines (Friedan 356). Likewise, both William Kleb and Ann C. Hall comment on how Mom saunters around in a "dazed" manner (Hall, *A Kind* 105; Kleb 119). Kleb continues by describing Mom as "flat,

remote, [and] lifeless” (123), ultimately interpreting her behavior as quite peculiar. These descriptions provided by Kleb may be accurate, for they parallel the qualities exuded by women who suffered from the problem that has no name. However, they also simplify the nature of the character of Mom.

Discordant qualities are found in the character of Mom. She grasps on to some of the aspects inherent to the feminine mystique, and yet this myth seems to instigate internal discontent. She comes across as entrapped in the fiction of a particular identity, similar to her sons in a way. To clarify, the feminine mystique in the fifties “trapped [women] in a squirrel cage” (Friedan 73), inhibiting them from pursuing aims other than becoming a mother. This corresponds to Austin and Lee, who are likened to “caged animals” (Crank 82), fighting against one another to find their true selves. Based off of these two comments, it seems as though Mom and her sons may have the same end goal: escape.

Escape: Mom. In *True West*, Austin and Lee constantly drink (as a means of escaping from one’s self), fight over cars keys (a symbol of escape), and almost kill each other in an attempt to disappear into the desert. The brothers blatantly and constantly try to escape. With Mom, a desire for escape is slightly subtler. Nevertheless, hints surface suggesting that escaping from the confines of a myth is a goal that Mom hopes to achieve.

The location of Alaska is quite telling in regard to Mom and the theme of escape. Mom does not just go on a day trip, but rather ventures to far-off Alaska for what seems like self-fulfilling purposes. It is as though she wants to get as far away from her home (and role within it) as possible. The implications of Alaska are deeper than simply distance. Alaska carries connotations directly antithetical to those of “mother.” Alaska is cold; mothers are expected to

be warm. Alaska could be thought of as sterile; mothers are supposed to be fertile. Alaska is unforgiving and isolated; mothers are generally considered to be gentle and interested in togetherness. If one desires to break away from the constructs of a myth of motherhood, Alaska seems like an appropriate destination.

True West is not the first family play to mention Alaska. The state of Alaska surfaces in *Curse of the Starving Class*, written in 1978, two years prior to *True West*. The young son and protagonist of this text, Wesley, mentions the idea of going to Alaska in a conversation with his little sister:

Emma: Where you going?

Wesley: I don't know. Alaska maybe.

Emma: Alaska?

Wesley: Sure. Why not?

Emma: What's in Alaska?

Wesley: The frontier. . . . It's full of possibilities. It's undiscovered. (CSC 163)

This segment of *Curse of the Starving Class* connects to this current analysis in that it reveals that Shepard associates Alaska with possibilities. With this in mind, Mom may be traveling to the distant locale in order to find her potential, or the “undiscovered” aspects of herself. If it is not definitively clear that Mom endeavors to expand the boundaries of her identity, than at the very least, the fact that she went on a vacation by herself provides a strong suggestion that the character desires something outside of the confines of her home. That in and of itself is indicative of an urge to escape from a myth of motherhood. What is striking, is that Mom has the agency and courage to actually embark on this independent journey.

Additionally, Mom demonstrates her need to escape by distancing herself from children, an act in opposition to the embodiment of the housewife-mother role. This is evidenced early in the play when Austin states, “[Mom] knew I was coming down here so she offered me the place” (*TW* 5). Mom did not change her plans, and stay at home with Austin upon hearing that he was coming down to Los Angeles - a choice that a housewife-mother would have most likely made. One would imagine that a woman attempting to personify a myth of motherhood would take advantage of having her son back in her home, with both mother and son in their appropriate roles. Instead, Mom leaves. Another way to interpret this is that Mom was already in Alaska when Austin informed her that he was coming to town, upon which she dropped everything and rushed back to California to be the “Mom” again, an interpretation that shows her continual adherence to the myth. However, there is other evidence reinforcing the interpretation that Mom desires to escape.

In a way, Mom is constantly trying to escape. She does not seem fully satisfied anywhere. It is as though she is stuck in a perpetual cycle of escape and return. For example, when she is in her home, she expresses a desire to leave, and when she was in Alaska, she apparently wanted to come home: “It was the worst feeling being up there. In Alaska. . . . I never felt so desperate before” (*TW* 59), she admits. What is more, once Mom returns from Alaska, she only stays home for a brief amount of time before deciding to flee once again. Mom declares to her sons, “Well, I’m going to go check into a motel. I can’t stand this anymore” (*TW* 58). Granted, her house and children are in a state of disarray upon her arrival home from her Alaskan venture, but this series of escapes is profound. It shows that Mom is conflicted, wanting to hold on to her role as prescribed by a mother myth as well as simultaneously desiring to escape from it. Mom appears to be locked in an endless dilemma.

SUMMARY

The character of Mom in *True West* is largely ignored in relation to two recurrent themes of Sam Shepard's dramatic literature: identity and escape. In fact, Mom is rarely discussed at all in critical scrutiny of Shepard's work. When she is mentioned, she is seldom the focus. By understanding that Mom attempts to live according to a myth of motherhood and also endeavors to escape from this fiction, she can be seen as linked to the thematic threads of Shepard's work. Mom shows evidence of attempting to personify a mother myth from the fifties through her need to care for the home and the items associated with this domain. Concurrently, Mom communicates that she suffers from the problem that has no name; it is a feeling of dissatisfaction and an underlying emptiness stemming from complete commitment to this societal ideal of mother. Mom's symptoms are parallel to those experienced by women who believed in and were left unfulfilled by the mystique, such as a need for "something more," a diminished life force, and an indifference towards her children. Lastly, Mom endeavors to escape. This latter idea is filled with complexities, however, for while Mom continually flees from the homestead she also seems to constantly return again. Consequently, viewing Mom as a woman struggling with her identity and attempting to escape allows for complexities of character to emerge. She is a woman with complicated emotions. Although Mom is not at the forefront of *True West*, her presence in the play allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of Shepard's recurrent ideas of identity and escape. An analysis of the two mother figures in *A Lie of the Mind* in the next chapter will help to broaden and deepen this exploration.

CHAPTER IV

LORRAINE AND MEG OF *A LIE OF THE MIND*

A Lie of the Mind, written in 1985, is arguably Sam Shepard's most complex play, for it intertwines the drama of two family units rather than just one. Accordingly, it involves two mother figures: Lorraine and Meg. The text is also Shepard's longest play to date, with a production running time of almost four hours (Rich "A Lie"), and it is the final installment of what have become known as the family plays. Due to the intricate and lengthy nature of this piece, a more thorough plot summary will help to contextualize a discussion centering on the two mother characters in this play.

Initially, *A Lie of the Mind* appears to focus primarily on the male characters, as the play opens in a typical Shepard fashion with a scene between two men. One of these men, the character of Jake, shares distinct similarities to Shepard's past male protagonists in that he is violent, alcoholic, and retreats from the world into his mother's home. However, even though Jake's journey seems to be at the center of the play at first, as the story progresses, other characters come to the forefront.

Carol Rosen states that *A Lie of the Mind* "begins as an aftermath" (*Poetic* 155). It commences with a desperate phone conversation between Jake and his younger brother, Frankie, in which it is revealed that Jake has just violently beaten his wife, Beth, presumably to death. Unbeknownst to Jake, Beth survives the incident of abuse, but is hospitalized and suffering from

brain damage and aphasia. Due to the incident of domestic violence and the results thereof, the respective families of the married Jake and Beth intervene. Jake, who continues to believe that his wife is dead, retreats to his childhood home, which is currently inhabited by his sister, Sally, and mother, Lorraine. Once Beth is released from the hospital, she too returns to her childhood home, where she recuperates from her injuries. The inhabitants of this second home include Beth's older, protective brother (Mike), her father (Baylor), and mother (Meg). The subsequent scenes alternate between each home, revealing the familial dynamics that molded and influenced the respective identities of Jake and Beth.

In the second act, Frankie leaves Jake in the care of his mother, and ventures to Montana with the aim of discovering whether Beth is indeed still alive. While meandering through the woods outside of Beth's Montana residence, Frankie is shot in the leg by Beth's father. This event forces Frankie to stay with Beth's family for a while, as he is severely injured and begins to show signs of gangrene. Meanwhile, Jake, who continues to hide at his mother's house, wants to discover for himself if Beth is alive. This endeavor proves difficult, as Jake's mother, Lorraine, is constantly caring for and checking up on her son, and insists that Jake remain in his room for an entire year. In order to escape from the confines of his mother's home, Jake concocts a plan: Sally will sleep in Jake's bed, making it appear as though Jake is sound asleep in the event that Lorraine decides to check in on him in the middle of the night (which is typical of Lorraine). Sally and her brother have a somewhat contentious relationship, yet the sister agrees to the plan, allowing Jake to flee to Montana.

Act Three opens with a rare situation in regard to Shepard's plays: a scene between two women, a mother and daughter. After attempting to execute Jake's sophomoric escape plan, Sally is discovered in Jake's bed by Lorraine. As Sally explain Jake's whereabouts, the

conversation evolves into an elucidation of the truth behind the circumstances leading up to the tragic death of the father figure of the family (i.e. Sally's father and Lorraine's husband). Sally relates that she and Jake traveled to Mexico years ago in order to visit their estranged, alcoholic father. At the time, their father was living south of the border in a trailer that "smelled like dirty laundry and cigarettes and something else" (*LM* 67). Upon seeing that his father lacked sufficient money to buy alcohol, Jake decided to take his father bar hopping along a highway in Mexico. As Sally reveals, "There was a terrible meanness that started to come outa' both of them like hidden snakes. A terrible meanness that was like – murder almost. It *was* murder" (*LM* 69, emphasis in the original). The night culminated with the father, who was running along the highway in a drunken stupor, getting hit and killed by a truck. Based on Sally's interpretation of events, the father's death was not an accident but a premeditated murder by Jake. Concurrently in Montana, Beth continues to heal, and is beginning to fall in love with her brother-in-law, Frankie, ultimately, announcing to her family that she would like to marry him.

As mentioned earlier, the setting of each scene continuously switches back and forth between the two houses. The final scene, however, includes moments from the inside of both of the households. In the first home, Lorraine decides to burn down her house and escape to Ireland with her daughter in tow. A new beginning is taking place in Montana as well, where Jake finally arrives at Beth's house. Intriguingly, Jake professes his love to Beth and kisses her goodbye, encouraging the budding relationship between Beth and Frankie. However, the play does not conclude calmly per se. The final moments of *A Lie of the Mind* are quite chaotic actually, with each character (or pair of characters) functioning in a separate sphere. When Jake shows up unannounced, Baylor and Meg are giving an unwarranted amount of attention to the task of folding an American flag, which Jake was wearing as a cape of sorts, and ignoring the

events occurring within their home; Mike, meanwhile, is angrily ranting about his parents' choice to disregard the presence of Jake ("the enemy"; *LM* 92); Frankie is screaming after his brother, who has now left, begging him to return and take Beth off of his hands; and finally, Meg sees a "fire in the snow," asking "How could that be?" (*LM* 95). It is Meg's line that closes the play.

In-depth analyses focusing singularly on Lorraine and/or Meg do not exist. What is more, if and when these mother figures are mentioned, scholars tend to heedlessly use one-word adjectives to fully delineate the extent of the complexity inherent to each. These simple words and phrases are not altogether accurate, and more importantly go largely unexamined. The process of this exploration culminates in an elucidation as to how both women can be considered integral thematically to the play.

The configuration of this chapter is similar to the previous two. However, because *A Lie of the Mind* is the longest of Shepard's family plays and contains two distinct dramatizations of mother, it is more extensive, and also, utilizes additional sub-divisions. The first major section, "Shepard's Thematic Concerns and Context," contains three sub-divisions, identical to the previous two chapters: "Theme of Identity," "Theme of Escape" and "Lorraine and Meg as Products of the Fifties." The initial parts delineate how issues such as identity and escape arise in this play, as noted by the rich criticism pertaining to this topic. Then, the final division firmly locates the mothers as being products of the fifties, an essential factor for this study. While the information contained under "Shepard's Thematic Concerns and Context" predominantly uses Shepard scholarship and terminology, the second major section of this chapter, entitled "Friedman Constructs and Escape," is rooted more in Friedman thought. It also contains three sub-sections: "Conforming to a Myth," "Signs of the Problem That Has No Name," and "Escape." The

division entitled “Conforming to a Myth” demonstrates how both Meg and Lorraine live in harmony with a myth of motherhood. The next part, “Signs of the Problem That Has No Name,” explains that both women exhibit signals indicating that there is indeed discord with this myth. Finally, “Escape” illustrates how both Lorraine and Meg attempt to escape from the myth of motherhood, or at least express a desire for said objective. Under each of these sub-divisions, there are sections devoted to an analysis of each mother individually.

SHEPARD’S THEMATIC CONCERNS AND CONTEXT

The following section discusses how the themes of identity and escape emerge in *A Lie of the Mind*. It additionally contextualizes the mother figures as being connected to the fifties and thus the ideology therein. As mentioned in the Introduction, the themes of Shepard’s plays are predominantly noted in association with fathers and sons. With *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard does introduce a thematically significant female character: Beth, a daughter. In order to understand how the mother characters potentially correlate to these ideas as well, it is necessary to review all of the characters with regard to these themes.

Theme of Identity. Matthew Roudané states that, in *A Lie of the Mind*, “Familiar (some would say outworn) Shepardian patterns and motifs resurface” (227). Like *Buried Child* and *True West*, *A Lie of the Mind* emphasizes the recurrent thematic thread of identity, which can also be referred to as the creation of self (Weales, “Transformations” 38) or, as Ann Wilson elucidates, the “yearning for an authentic self” (Wilson 140). While the themes themselves are routine for Shepard, the manner in which they manifest in this text is somewhat unique. This section outlines the four disparate manners in which the issue of identity emerges within *A Lie of the*

Mind. These include the deconstruction of the man/woman binary, demarcation of self as separate from others, role-playing, and finally, the notion of inherited identity.

In this final family play, identity becomes more closely aligned with gender. It can certainly be argued that the previous noted plays dealt with one's identification with masculinity, but this idea only surfaced via a character's attempt to construct a sense of self in the likeness of one's father. Thus, masculinity as it appears in the family plays, falls under the umbrella of inherited behavior of the father. It should also be noted that this current examination has steadily and consistently made it clear that each of Shepard's fictional mothers aligns herself with certain qualities associated with the societal construct of femininity. Mothers, or "good" mothers," under the myth of motherhood of the fifties, display qualities typically considered feminine, such as passivity. But the theme of identity as elucidated in Shepard scholarship has, up until *A Lie of the Mind*, less to do with the social construct of gender and more to do with the influence of the father, brotherly bonds, or internal duality. While some of these other methods of identity formation continue to appear in this last family play, the construct of gender as a major component of one's identity seems to be the most prominent.

With this in mind, how exactly does the invention of self in association with gender arise in the text of *A Lie of the Mind*? Shepard's own words prove enlightening. He explained to Carol Rosen in an interview that with *A Lie of the Mind* he was interested in exploring "the female side of things" (Shepard, "Emotional" 6). He goes on to admit the following:

You know, in yourself, that the female part of oneself as a man is, for the most part, battered and beaten up and kicked to shit just like some women in relationships. That men batter their own female part to their own detriment. And it became interesting from

that angle: as a man what is it like to embrace the female part of yourself that you historically damaged for one reason or another? (Shepard, "Interview" 6-7)

The notion of embracing the opposite side of oneself appears in other Shepard plays, such as *True West*, where Austin and Lee both accept the qualities of the other brother that reside within. In *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard creates characters that assume both masculine and feminine characteristics simultaneously, dramatizing the deconstruction of the man/woman binary (Crank 110). This idea surfaces through Frankie and Beth, who ironically, or perhaps not so ironically, end up together.

The deconstruction of the man/woman binary is firstly found in the character of Frankie, Jake's younger brother. As a result, he is a unique figure in Shepard's canon. Commonly, Shepard's male characters undergo "crises of identity" and "struggle to prove themselves to be men, but are limited, even entrapped, by the images of masculine identity passed on to them by their . . . fathers" (McDonough, "Politics" 65). Frankie, in contrast, is a prime example of Shepard's stated desire to accept the female side. This is evident in Act Two, scene three, where Beth points out Frankie's gentle nature, calling him a "woman-man" (*LM* 58). Beth's acknowledgment of the culturally feminine qualities in Frankie goes as step further: "You are my beautiful woman" (*LM* 58), she states.

Regarding Beth, textual evidence delineates that prior to her injuries she identified purely with the "woman" element in the man/woman binary. According to Jake, Beth wore "spikey high heels" and oiled herself regularly with "Coconut or Butterscotch or some goddamn thing" (*LM* 13), both of which are conventionally considered feminine choices. Subsequent to her brain damaging injury, however, Beth begins to incorporate more stereotypically masculine qualities into her identity. As her mother Meg reports late in the play, "Beth's got male in her" (*LM* 77).

This is part of what theatre historian Felicia Londré means when she states, Beth in *A Lie of the Mind* has a “newly-developing identity” (25). Once Beth is in Montana at the top of Act Two, she no longer prefers to dress “skimpy” (*LM* 12), a choice suggesting that she is objectified and valued for her sexual function as a female (Gurung 99). Rather, Beth is clothed in “one of Baylor’s faded red plaid shirts” and her hair is cut short (*LM* 35). What is more, the high heels are gone. Now Beth prefers to go about barefoot, telling her mother, “my feet are fine. . . . Naked. They can move” (*LM* 35). The connotations of this are that without her mind intervening, Beth is liberated and can behave more authentically. Her sense of self is no longer attached to or influenced by the societal construct of “woman.” In other words, the lies of the mind have dissipated.

Conversely, Frankie and Beth’s respective parental units are the paradigmatic example of the man/woman binary. This is true even in the case of Lorraine and her deceased husband, for Shepard makes it clear that the father/husband figure in this family epitomized masculinity. Stephen J. Bottoms insightfully touches on the subject of binary opposition within *A Lie of the Mind* in his book-length study on Shepard, entitled *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*. He suggests that Meg and Baylor (Beth’s parents) “represent the binary-opposite extremes of traditionally conceived ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ qualities . . .” (232). Viewing the issue of identity in *A Lie of the Mind* in this manner automatically allows for the mother characters to be connected to the major themes of the play. Because Meg and Lorraine are illustrative of the “woman” unit of the man/woman binary, some critics have indeed noted their importance in respect to the issue of identity. This angle on the issue of identity still limits the relevance of the mothers, however. It only casts the mothers as a point of reference for Beth and Frankie’s

significance, as these adult children are the ones who have escaped from the binary, and thus, rigid gender identities.

In order to fully grasp the extent to which identity emerges in this play (and additionally, the theme of escape), the discussion must briefly return to Beth. Not only does Beth reject the fixed man/woman binary, which at one point served as the foundation for her strictly feminine identity, she expresses a firm desire for self-definition. Concerning this intention, American drama scholar Rosemarie Bank acknowledges that, with the character of Beth, Shepard captures the “individuation process at work” (233). Textual evidence of this occurs in scene four of the play. Beth is forced to relearn how to walk after her injury, and in the process, rejects any assistance from her custodial older brother, Mike. She wants to “stand on her own” (*LM* 19). Furthermore, Beth continually demarcates the limits between where her self ends and others begin. This is evident later in the play when she instructs and educates Mike, telling him, “You have a feeling I’m you. I’m not you! This! . . . This thought. You don’t know this thought” (*LM* 37). Clearly, Beth is on a journey for self-actualization, and a key factor in making this goal a reality is the delineation and definition of her self.

Additionally, Shepard makes a dramaturgical choice that proves impactful. He writes Beth as actress, choosing for her a profession that calls for the taking on and discarding of different identities – different “roles.” As Jake explains in scene two, “[Actors] try to ‘believe’ they’re the person. Right? They try to believe so hard they’re the person that they actually think they become the person” (*LM* 14). Shepard’s decision to make Beth an actress allows for the theme of identity to underlie the action from the very first moments of the play. In fact, as elucidated by Beth, the process of acting ties back to and connects with the idea of gender performativity. This is explained in Act Two, scene three, where Beth describes masculine

clothing as a costume. In reference to her father's flannel shirt, Beth says, "Look how big a man is. So big. He scares himself. His shirt scares him. He puts his scary shirt on so it won't scare himself. . . . This is like a custom" (*LM* 57), "custom" being how Beth now pronounces "costume" due to her aphasia. In this moment, Beth is cognizant of the fact that enacting a particular gender is akin to playing a role. Thus, by acting like a man, Beth illustrates that gender is a socially constructed form of identity (Wade 125). Beth can then be interpreted as reflecting Judith Butler's theories of gender identity. As Butler delineates in *Gender Trouble*, "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 179). Beth "acts" like a man, highlighting the instability of gender.

Furthermore, *A Lie of the Mind* contains a familiar Sheperdian incarnation of the theme of identity. It shows the influence of heredity on one's sense of self. As expected, this notion arises in respect to the character of Jake, a man who bears striking similarities to his deceased father. Jake's dad can be described as the prototypical Sheperd father: "drunken, self-centered, worthless, violent, [and] abusive" (McDonough, "Patriarchal" 163). Although Jake's father is no longer alive, his qualities live on through Jake. These characteristics that comprise Jake's identity are evident in the opening moment of the play when Jake is seen throwing a fit on a payphone, violently smashing the receiver. He is explosively angry and upset due to the fact that he purportedly just beat his wife to death. Jake's sister, Sally, also helps to validate the parallels between Jake and his deceased father. For example, in Act Two, scene two, Sally clearly and candidly notes that the father and son are alike:

Jake: You're afraid of me, aren't ya? . . .

Sally: I'm not afraid of you.

Jake: Yeah, you are.

Sally: Only because you remind me of Dad sometimes. . . . Sometimes you sound just like him. (*LM* 49)

Just like Austin and Lee in *True West*, who by becoming “one and the same” (*TW* 37) concurrently end up identical to their desert-dwelling father, Jake has become the living image his father. Even though *A Lie of the Mind* is noted for being the first play in which there are an equal number of male characters and female characters (four men, four women; Graham 308), many believe that the crux of the play still lies with a father and son. One such scholar is Lynda Hart, who argues that because the entire epic drama unwinds due to an incident of spousal abuse, an act directly stemming from Jake's inheritance of his father's identity, the play is still ultimately about fathers and sons (*Metaphorical* 107). While there is no clear-cut evidence indicating that domestic violence occurred at the hands of the father who has since passed, hints in the dialogue, such as the exchange between Sally and Jake quoted above, suggest that the father was an aggressive, terrifying man. Sally even elaborates on this later in the play, describing the violence inherent to both Jake and the father figure. In reference to the two men, Sally relates the following:

Their eyes changed. Something in their eyes. Like animals. Like the way an animal looks for the weakness in another animal. They just started poking at each other's weakness. Stabbing. . . . Like the way that rooster used to do. That rooster we had that went around looking for the tiniest speck of blood on a hen or a chick and then he'd start pecking away at it. And the more he pecked at it the more excited he got until finally he just killed it. (*LM* 69)

Jake and his father share violent tendencies. Shepard's use of the word "chick" in this vivid monologue may be an allusion to the domestic violence present in this play, paralleling the spousal abuse occurring between Jake and Beth. Considering that Jake is a doppelganger of his father, it is likely that Lorraine was a victim of domestic violence as well.

Given this information, it is clear that the struggle with selfhood arises in various ways in *A Lie of the Mind*. Scholars have noted that the mothers are loosely tied to this notion through their association with the woman element of the man/woman binary; however, this chapter explores how their relevance may in fact be more profound than this. Both Lorraine and Meg can be said to wrestle with what Carol Rosen calls "the question of man destroying . . . his own myths of consistent verifiable personality" (*Poetic* 157).

Theme of Escape. Accompanying this search for a sense of self is the desire to escape. Primarily, escape in *A Lie of the Mind* manifests in three manners: breaking free from the man/woman binary, fleeing from the confines of literal structures (e.g. the home), and circumventing biological determinism (Bottoms 15-16). Concerning the first, Beth certainly accomplishes this incarnation of escape, albeit inadvertently (i.e. through an incident of domestic violence). Despite the negative methods used to reach liberation from pure identification with the "woman" aspect of a binary, Beth ultimately dramatizes the fluidity of gender. It becomes a question, then, of whether the oppressive means justify the progressive, arguably feminist end.

In the case of Frankie, the theme of escape does not necessarily manifest in the exact same manner in which it does for Beth, as there is no evidence indicating Frankie's prior entrapment within the binary. Given the detrimental aspects of his father's character, perhaps Frankie has a legacy to resolve. He still does show a need for escape, however. This desire

emerges once Frankie becomes what Robert B. Heilman calls “a permanent patient-inmate” (640) within the Montana residence of Baylor and Meg. Frankie continually expresses his desire to remove himself from the awkward and perhaps inappropriate interactions he has with his brother’s wife, Beth, and moreover, desires to break free from the actual home itself. Frankie complains to Beth about his current position: “I’m in a situation here that I didn’t expect to be in. You understand me? I didn’t expect to be stuck here” (*LM* 59). Therefore, while Frankie may not suffer from lies of the mind, he still desires escape. It seems as though he wants to escape from being in the company of those who are still struggling with the lies of the mind. While Beth no longer struggles with this issue, she is still officially married to Frankie’s brother. Hence, Frankie feels obligated to extricate himself from the situation at hand.

Likewise, Jake is constantly motivated by a deep desire to escape. As the protagonist, he can be said to highlight all three examples of the manifestation of escape in *A Lie of the Mind*: fleeing from the confines of literal structures (e.g. the home), circumventing biological determinism (Bottoms 15-16), and breaking free from the man/woman binary. In regard to the first, Jake aims to flee from the confines of his mother’s home in an attempt to reunite with his wife. Jake tells his sister “You gotta’ help me escape, Sally” (*LM* 54), and then later, while promoting his plan to her, he states, “I know how to escape. Don’t worry” (*LM* 63). Jake is also a perpetrator of a crime. As a result, he is still under pressure to escape once free from his mother’s home, as he is likely in trouble with authorities. He could potentially end up in prison for assaulting his wife, or more specifically, Jake will end up “*back* in prison” (*LM* 65, emphasis added). The text indicates that Jake has spent time behind bars prior to this most recent violent attack of his wife. Prison can be said to be emblematic of the impossibility of escape, and thus can symbolize the other perhaps more abstract ways in which Jake attempts to escape. These

include the escape from his father's influence (i.e. biological determinism) and breaking free from a wholly masculine identification (i.e. the man/woman binary).

In *A Lie of the Mind*, Jake struggles with overcoming the qualities he inherited from his father. This struggle is futile, however. Eventually, Jake gains the self-awareness to understand this fact. As a result, he relinquishes his need to be with Beth out of love for her; renouncing the violent, abusive qualities embedded in his identity is impossible. Intuitively, Jake knows that Frankie, the “woman-man,” would be a more fitting, healthier match for Beth. This is revealed through Jake's final words to Beth at the conclusion of the play: “These things – in my head – lie to me. Everything lies. . . . Everything in me lies. But you. You stay. You are true. . . . You are true. . . . I love you more than this life. You stay. You stay with him. He's my brother” (LM 93). Jake leaves immediately after expressing these thoughts to Beth. Unlike his wife, Jake is unable to escape from the lies of the mind. The influence of the father is embedded in Jake's psyche, and therefore, the gentler Frankie is a more acceptable match for Beth.

This point correlates to the final mode of escape in respect to Jake: the need to transcend his gender specific conflict with Beth. It is an example that correlates to the rigid man/woman binary. Once Jake succeeds in his escape plan from his mother's home, he journeys to Montana to find Beth with what appears to be a hope of resuming their volatile relationship. Jake is unable to untangle himself from the deep need he has for his wife. Literary scholar James A. Crank elucidates this idea in his analysis of the play, where he writes “While [men and women] might be forced apart for a while, they cannot escape their addictive need for each other” (109). Unlike the androgynous Beth, who chooses to be with the woman-man Frankie, Jake is ultimately locked in the man/woman binary, and therefore, needs the formerly feminine Beth. While Jake ultimately surrenders his need to be with Beth, his desire for her persists. Jake is

unable to be “true” (*LM* 93), like Beth, so he musters up the strength to let her go despite his perpetual addiction to her.

Criticism centering on escape as it pertains to Shepard’s mothers is rare. One piece of scholarship that does actually introduce this idea comes from Shepard scholar Laura J. Graham, who observes “Lorraine believes that the solution to her and the family’s problems is escape, this time to Ireland in a search for the roots which will bring identity” (308). With this one phrase, Graham sheds light on the fact that Lorraine (but not Meg) is part of the thematic conversation. Unfortunately, this one sentence is the extent to which Graham elaborates. After delineating how both Lorraine and Meg, identify with a certain role – a myth of motherhood - this chapter demonstrates the mothers’ innate desire to escape from such an identity.

Lorraine and Meg as Products of the Fifties. In order to prove that Lorraine and Meg believe in a myth of motherhood and have formed their limited idea of self on this fiction, it is imperative to establish both women as mothers during the fifties. This is seemingly more challenging than it was for Shepard’s previous family plays. The playwright conspicuously leaves the exact ages of his characters unknown in *A Lie of the Mind*. However, there is a plethora of textual evidence supporting the fact that both Lorraine and Meg entered into the institution of motherhood in the fifties. Linking both mother figures to the era in which the feminine mystique thrived, then, is ostensibly straightforward, especially since the time frame in which this myth pervaded the culture spans an eighteen-year period (not ten-year), beginning with the end of World War II and dissipating roughly around 1963, the year marking the first publication of *The Feminine Mystique*.

References to World War II permeate *A Lie of the Mind*, setting a rough time frame in which the mothers had and raised their children. The allusions to World War II particularly

occur in the scenes set in Lorraine's home. For instance, Shepard clarifies that hanging from the ceiling of Jake's bedroom are model airplanes of "World War II fighters and bombers" (*LM* 29). Correspondingly, hidden underneath Jake's bed is his father's leather flying jacket and Air Force medals, signifying that Jake's dad fought in the war. This places the father figure as being a young man in the early 1940s, and he likely parallels the men described by Friedan: "After the loneliness of war . . ." (268), Friedan writes, GI's desired to retreat into the warmth of "marriage, home, and children" (269). Evidence further supporting the claim that Lorraine was indeed a mother at the height of the feminine mystique comes from the fact that Lorraine's husband is overtly analogous to Shepard's own father. Akin to Lorraine's husband, Shepard's dad served in World War II as an Army Air Corps pilot, and upon returning home to the United States, withdrew into the desert, isolating himself with his war memorabilia (Schvey 14). Hence, if Jake's father is directly comparable to Shepard's father, then Jake must consequently be parallel to Shepard, or at least be largely based on the playwright. Sam Shepard was born in 1943, placing him in very early childhood when the feminine mystique began to be in vogue. Given this information, Lorraine is likely a woman greatly affected by the mystique, the prevailing and pervasive myth of motherhood beginning directly after World War II.

Additionally, Shepard makes it clear that Lorraine and her late husband were together during the late 40s. While disclosing information involving the memories of her relationship with her deceased husband, Lorraine ostensibly recapitulates the progression of events in her life to her daughter Sally: "You know a man your whole life. You grow up with him. You go to school on the same bus together. You go through tornados together in the same basement. *You go through a world war together. You have babies together.* And then one day he just up and disappears into thin air" (*LM* 68, emphasis added). The placement of childbirth directly after

World War II in this line situates Lorraine as entering into the institution of motherhood exactly as the feminine mystique rose to prominence. Likewise, in the final scene of the play, Sally and Lorraine are looking through old pictures, one of which is of Lorraine in “forty-five, forty-six. Right around the end of the War” (LM 85). Apparently, Lorraine and her husband “lived pretty high” (LM 86) in those years, seemingly before they had children. A reference to the fifties also arises while Jake and Sally are reminiscing about their childhood, and Jake remarks that their father used to play Lefty Frizell music and twirl Sally around in circles until she felt sick. Frizell, a popular honky-tonk artist in the fifties (Scherman), incontrovertibly places Jake and Sally as children of said decade. Consequently, Lorraine is a mother of this time period, and thus likely to have been greatly influenced by the feminine mystique.

Placing Meg in this era is not as straightforward. However, because Meg’s daughter Beth is romantically involved with both of Lorraine’s sons, it makes sense that the children would have been born roughly around the same time, or at least within the same eighteen-year time frame demarcating the mystique’s prominence. To reiterate, “In the *fifteen years after World War II*, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” (Friedan 61, emphasis added); because Friedan spent five years researching and writing *The Feminine Mystique* (Simon), the duration of this myth of motherhood is expanded even further to roughly 1963, the year marking the publication of Friedan’s work. The most discernable indication that Meg, like Lorraine, had and/or raised her children in the fifties comes toward the conclusion of the play when Beth descends the stairs into the living room wearing a bizarre and colorful ensemble; she is clothed in “black high heels with short woolen bobby socks, a tight pink skirt – below the knee, straight out of *the fifties*. . .” (LM 81, emphasis added). It should be noted that at this moment of the play, Beth is consciously

performing the female gender or playing the role of woman. Nevertheless, it seems likely that if clothing from the fifties is stored away in the closets of this home, Meg may have become a mother or at least raised her children in this era. Placing both Meg and Lorraine as mothers of the fifties is central to this analysis, for it serves as the context from which their behavior can be interpreted.

FRIEDMAN CONSTRUCTS AND ESCAPE

Conforming to a Myth. The discussion in this chapter thus far has briefly mentioned that the mother figures in *A Lie of the Mind* are indeed related to the theme of identity. To reiterate, they serve to illustrate the “woman” side of the man/woman binary, and as such, assume qualities typically considered “feminine.” This is, to a large degree, the extent to which critics note the thematic significance of Lorraine and Meg. However, both women strongly identify with a myth of motherhood along with their classification as “woman.” An analysis of the mother figures in terms of a maternal theory idea uncovers the deeper relevance of these two women.

Additionally, like Halie and Mom in Shepard’s *Buried Child* and *True West* respectively, Lorraine and Meg exhibit dissatisfaction with the limitations of their single role, and aspire to escape.

This section explores how Lorraine and Meg exude evidence that they have built an identity off of a myth. The two mothers illustrate their adherence to the myth advocated by the feminine mystique in similar and dissimilar ways. Examples that Lorraine identifies with the mystique include the following: 1) she has a strong desire to take “care of the physical needs of . . . [her] children” (Friedan 120); 2) she displays dedication towards domestic chores (Friedan 303); 3) she communicates her belief that fulfillment can be found through her sexual function

(Friedan 365); 4) lastly, she shows evidence of dependence (Friedan 391). Meg, meanwhile, exhibits similar and dissimilar traits: 1) she is concerned with the “taking care of the physical needs of [her] husband and children” (like Lorraine; Friedan 120); 2) she acts submissively (Friedan 452); 3) she demonstrates a “passive dependence” (Friedan 416); 4) she reveals her belief that motherhood is a “total way of life” (Friedan 109); 5) and finally, Meg exudes excitement over the possibility of a wedding, an event commencing a life in accordance to the tenets of the mystique. The result of this section is that both mothers, in their own unique manner, highlight the issue of personal identity, a theme frequently found in the family plays of Sam Shepard (Bottoms 12).

Lorraine: Alignment with a Myth of Motherhood

Lorraine (the mother of Jake, Frankie, and Sally) shows clear indications that she identifies with the image of mother as projected by the feminine mystique. Her adherence to the myth is initially noticeable through her complete dedication to the “taking care of the physical needs of . . . [her] children” (Friedan 120). Directly upon appearing at the motel in which Jake and Frankie are temporarily hiding away, Lorraine launches into caretaking mode, bombarding Frankie with questions concerning Jake’s health and state of mind: “What’s a’ matter with him?” (*LM* 21); “Whad’ya’ been feedin’ him?” (*LM* 21); What’s the story here?” (*LM* 22). This interrogation reveals that Lorraine considers herself a caretaker, a full time mother first and foremost. This committed caretaking continues, as Lorraine embarks on a physical examination of her son as though he were still a little child: “Sit up, boy. Sit up and lemme take a look at your tongue” (*LM* 22), she orders. It is important to note that Jake is roughly forty years of age, a fact emphasizing the degree to which Lorraine identifies with her role as mother. It seems as though

Lorraine can only relate to her son as if he were still a little boy. This suggests that she is trapped in the role of housewife-mother.

Another example as to how Lorraine commits completely to the care of her children surfaces once Jake has returned to his childhood home. Back in Lorraine's domestic domain, it becomes evident that Lorraine's initial treatment of Jake as though he were a little boy is not an immediate, visceral reaction upon seeing him, but rather it is her *modus operandi*. As the despondent Jake lays in his childhood bed, which is now too small for his adult frame, Lorraine holds spoonfuls of broccoli soup up to his face, urging her son to "Just try a sip. . . . Just a simple sip" (*LM* 29). Then, Lorraine resorts to playing helicopter with the spoonful of broccoli soup, a tactic to get her adult son to eat. Shepard dictates that Lorraine "raises the spoon of soup over [Jake's] head and starts making helicopter sounds as Jake watches the spoon from below" (*LM* 29). This type of mother-son interaction would be more appropriate if said son were a baby. When directed toward a grown man the implications are that Lorraine is locked into a very specific image of mother; it is an image that proclaims that it is the mother's responsibility to extensively and entirely care for her children's needs (Friedan 120).

Fixation on one's children is only one indication that a woman is living in alignment with the feminine mystique. A diligence towards domestic duties is another. According to mystique, "The art of good homemaking should be the goal of every normal woman" (Friedan 303). Friedan uses the word "woman" here, but "woman" can be taken to mean "mother" as well, for under the mystique, the one equates to the other. Throughout the fifties, belief in the feminine mystique inhibited women's opportunities outside of the home, and instead induced a celebration of "housework, mother-work, wife-work" (Friedan 341), all three of which were intertwined. Further, there were no images of women to emulate other than that of housewife-mother. In

Shepard's text, Lorraine is unmistakably concerned with the completion of domestic duties demonstrating her devotion to a myth. With reference to the broccoli soup that she spoon-fed to the puerile Jake, Lorraine divulges that she "spent hours makin' that stuff." She "slaved over a blender tryin' to get it creamy and smooth" (*LM* 30). It is not just her wholeheartedness in regard to the chore of cooking, but also the total commitment toward other domestic obligations as well. For example, after Lorraine relinquishes any attempt to feed Jake, she immediately begins to gather up the sheets, saying "I gotta' go do this laundry" (*LM* 34). Lorraine spends her days alternating between household tasks, implying that she is living in accordance with a myth of motherhood.

These first two examples showing how Lorraine may have built her sense of self off of the mystique (i.e. tending to a child's needs and dedicating her day to housework) can be combined. Lorraine obsessively cares for her children and concomitantly fixates on domestic duties. To elaborate, with Jake back under her care, Lorraine's chores revolve around his presence and needs. She is constantly seen serving and cleaning up after Jake. For instance, after Lorraine exits with the bundle of sheets, she reenters later wearing an apron and carrying a tray holding Jake's next meal. Lorraine then proceeds to clear away Jake's breakfast dishes and replaces them with his lunch. Ostensibly, Lorraine is waiting on her son hand and foot, a fact that she blatantly admits later in the scene: "I fixed up your room, just like it used to be. I've been cookin' all your meals" (*LM* 53). This textual evidence illustrates that Lorraine is quite clearly a woman with an identity in alignment with the mystique. Her behavior suggests that her only role is that of housewife-mother, and consequently, she is incapable of treating Jake as if he were an adult for she lacks any other frame of reference.

Thirdly, Lorraine shows evidence that she is a woman who understands, on some level, that her societal value lies in her sexual function. Friedan asserts that the feminine mystique advocated a “glorification of the female sexual function that has indeed been tested, in every culture, but seldom, in civilized cultures, valued as highly as the unlimited potential of human creativity. . .” (217). Shepard’s dramaturgical choice of setting rather than written dialogue is a key to understanding how this characteristic of Lorraine surfaces. As mentioned in previous chapters, under the mystique, mothers’ lives were expected to revolve around the kitchen and bedroom. In *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard confines Lorraine to the bedroom; out of the five scenes in which Lorraine appears, four take place in said location.

This point actually contains interesting implications, and serves to further establish how Lorraine recognizes her sexual function and considers it a leading aspect of her identity. First, with her husband now gone, Lorraine retreats to the bedroom with the one man that stands in his likeness: Jake. This setting, then, establishes Lorraine as a housewife believing her value lies in her sexual role in relation to her husband. As Doris Auerbach comments, Lorraine “has transferred her devotion for the father who deserted her to the oldest son” (61). (There is also something somewhat incestuous about the placement of mother and son in the bedroom, paralleling the relationship between Halie and Tilden in *Buried Child*). Another angle to view this situation from is with Lorraine acting overly motherly towards Jake, staying with him in his bedroom while he is sick. Again, her sexual function is highlighted here. Viewing the mother and son in the bedroom from this perspective illustrates Lorraine’s awareness that her value lies in her biological ability to reproduce, and subsequently care for her offspring. Taken together, the bedroom is illustrative of Lorraine’s identification with her sexual role, and consequently, her belief in a mother myth.

There is one final way in which Lorraine illustrates her adherence to a myth; she displays a deep dependence on others. According to the mystique, women were expected to marry and raise a family, which subsequently induced what Friedan calls a “grasping dependence” (Friedan 391), specifically in relation to one’s husband. Because Lorraine’s husband has passed away, this quality in Lorraine is apparent only through her interactions with her son, Jake (the substitute for the father/husband). It becomes clear that Lorraine needs Jake, in a way parallel to how she once needed (or still does need) her husband. For example, following the incident of domestic violence between Jake and Beth, Lorraine boldly insists that Jake remain with her in her home. Lorraine declares that she is “gonna’ take [Jake] on a permanent basis” (*LM* 25). (The fact that she is keeping Jake in the bedroom simultaneously sheds light on Lorraine’s preoccupation with her sexual role as discussed in the previous paragraph.) Lorraine’s dependence on Jake for a sense of self is further clarified in her reaction to his escape. She is crushed, and seen “in Jake’s bed bundled up in blankets to her neck. She shakes with the cold chills and her face is pale and sweating” (*LM* 64). Shepard’s effective description unquestionably illustrates how Jake’s abrupt departure may have instigated an identity crisis in Lorraine.

The notion of dependence in regard to Lorraine is completely overlooked in scholarship. In contrast to Meg (who is widely considered to be dependent on her husband), Lorraine is described as “domineering” (Hart, *Metaphorical* 107; Kane 149) and “aggressive” – “a cross between Ethel Merman and Medea” (Lanier 411). There is no doubt that Lorraine is aggressive, but her aggressiveness when viewed in relation to a myth of motherhood only serves to elucidate her dependence. To explain, once Lorraine has succeeded in getting Jake right where she wants and arguably needs him, she does everything she can to ensure that he stays with her, even to the extent of taking his pants:

Jake: Where's my pants?

Lorraine: You're not goin' anywhere. You're sick.

Jake: Where's my goddamn pants! . . .

Lorraine: You can't go outside in your condition. You wouldn't last a day.

Jake: I need my pants now! I NEED MY PANTS! (*LM* 31, emphasis in the original)

This situation could potentially be viewed as an example of Lorraine's domineering attitude; however, when this character is understood as being a woman living in an image of the feminine mystique, this exchange can be seen in a new light. Lorraine urgently needs to stop Jake from leaving as she depends on him. He is a fundamental element in the maintenance of her sense of self as housewife-mother. Although she failed at stopping her husband from leaving, she will succeed at stopping Jake, the equivalent of her husband. The fact that it is a pair of pants that the mother and son are fighting over, combined with Shepard's choice to set this quarrel in the bedroom, only adds to the complexity of the situation - it once again calls to mind Lorraine's definition of self in regard to her sexual function.

Meg: Alignment with a Myth of Motherhood

Akin to Lorraine, the character of Meg submits to a myth of motherhood as perpetuated by the feminine mystique. Thus, her identity is also constructed on an illusion of mother. An analysis as to how exactly a myth affects Meg's identity consequently ties this mother to the thematic threads of identity and escape in Shepard's work. Furthermore, illustrating that a myth of motherhood is at play in Meg's situation explains how this second mother figure of *A Lie of the Mind* is more than just representative of "woman" in the man/woman binary - a paradigm of woman against which her daughter, Beth, in her wounded condition can be compared.

But what textual evidence does Shepard provide indicating that Meg is living in adherence to a fictional image of mother? Firstly, like Lorraine, Meg shows a preoccupation with the task of “taking care of the physical needs of [her] husband and children” (Friedan 120). Once Meg’s family members (i.e. Baylor, Mike, and Beth) are all contained under one roof in Montana, Meg appears wandering through the house carrying “a pair of fuzzy slippers in one hand” (belonging to Beth) and “a pair of heavy work boots in the other” (belonging to her husband, Baylor; *LM* 35). The role that Meg executes within the home is established with this one action: she is a housewife-mother. Then, Meg repeatedly attempts to convince Beth to put the fuzzy slippers on her feet, an action that demonstrates Meg’s preoccupation with the care of daughter. In Meg’s defense, it *is* Montana in what appears to be the dead of winter. When viewed through the lens of a myth of motherhood, though, this compulsion in regard to the slippers has a more profound connotation; Meg is simply trying execute her motherly duties as assigned by a myth to the best of her abilities.

It is not just her child that she is preoccupied with caring for, but her husband as well. To clarify, this still serves to prove that Meg is a woman with an identity revolving around a myth of motherhood. Women who adhered to the feminine mystique were equally as attentive to the needs of their husband as they were to their children, for the myth combined wife and mother into one role: housewife-mother. However, Meg’s extreme assiduity surrounding the administration of wifely duties tends to illustrate a characteristic above and beyond that of committed care. It shows her submissiveness, an attribute of many women affected by the ideal image of housewife-mother (Friedan 452). Demonstrations of Meg’s submissiveness consistently emerge in this text. For instance, as Baylor enters the house with the wounded Frankie, he orders Meg to help him remove his hunting gear: “You help me off with this gear

now” (*LM* 42), he barks. In response to this, Meg drops what she is doing “kneels . . . in front of Baylor, finishes with his boots and starts pulling off his orange outer pants . . .” (*LM* 42). Then again, in Act Three, Baylor demands Meg to help in the removal of his socks. As anticipated, Meg “kneels and pulls Baylor’s socks off. . .” (*LM* 75), and then proceeds to oil her husband’s feet. In fact, it occurs to such a great extent that the dedication Meg exhibits towards the caring of her family undoubtedly borders on servitude. Meg’s submissiveness does not go unnoticed by critics. In fact, whenever Meg is mentioned in Shepard scholarship, which is almost never, the adjective submissive tends to follow (Lanier 411). By understanding that Meg is simply living in accordance with her one role, her behavior becomes completely motivated. What is more, it becomes clear that Shepard is shedding light on cultural myths, not advocating misogynistic ideology, as some critics purport (Roof 49).

Additionally, and in association with the submissiveness, Meg exhibits “passive dependence” (Friedan 416), which is synonymous with “childlike dependence” (Friedan 93). Both wordings are used by Friedan to define women shaped by the mystique. This particular feature tends to overlap with that of submissiveness, and surfaces early in the play. The first moment that elucidates this quality in Meg occurs when Baylor and Mike discuss whether or not Meg should stay at the hospital, where the injured Beth is temporarily residing. The two men discuss what Meg will do, directly in front of her, acting as though she is not even there, and more importantly, that her opinion is of no importance. Neither man asks Meg to weigh in on the matter, revealing that Meg’s life choices are not of Meg’s own choosing, but rather the result of Baylor and Mike’s preferences. Although Meg finally does voice her preference and admit that she would indeed prefer to stay with her injured daughter, evidence of her passive dependence continues to surface. For instance, in her interaction with Baylor at the conclusion

of this same scene, Baylor mentions that if Meg is in fact staying at the hospital for a few days, she should retrieve her coat from the truck:

Meg: I won't need it.

Baylor: (*As he exits.*) You'll need it. You always need it. (*Baylor exits. Meg turns and smiles at Mike.*)

Meg: He's right. (*LM 28*)

Meg is quick to renege her opinion. She tends to defer and acquiesce to Baylor, and moreover, utterly depend on him. In fact, later in the play, Meg even bluntly admits her dependence, unconfidently expressing that “the female – the female one needs – the other. . . . The male. . . . But the male one – doesn't really need the other. Not the same way” (*LM 77*). Meg's words at this moment are actually quite insightful. She does need the male. Without the male, Meg has no role to play: she is not a housewife; she is not a mother. Of course, Meg is not to blame for being in this position. Her dependence, as well as the passivity and immaturity accompanying that dependence, is culturally prescribed by the feminine mystique.

As mentioned earlier, the passivity inherent to Meg is widely noted by scholars (Tucker 142; Kane 149; Lanier 411), and it should be acknowledged that this description of the character is fully accurate. But this quality is not a sign of weakness or lack of will, as Doris Auerbach proclaims in her article, “Who Was Icarus's Mother? The Powerless Mother Figures in the Plays of Sam Shepard.” According to Auerbach, “Meg . . . has been completely worn down by the emotional brutality of her husband, Baylor” (62). Contrary to Auerbach's assertion, Meg is only enacting the single role upholding her sense of self. Her behavior is an expression of her conscious choice to build an identity within the confines of a myth. By following her husband's

orders without expressing any reluctance whatsoever, Meg is simply adhering to her role for it is the only one she knows.

Furthermore, Meg expresses evidence of her belief that motherhood is a “total way of life” (Friedan 109). Similar to Lorraine in her interactions with Jake, Meg immediately begins treating her adult daughter, Beth, as though she were a little girl. This is most perceptible in a conversation between Meg and her husband in Act Three, scene two when Meg declares, “Beth’s still a baby,” to which Baylor retorts, “She’s not a baby” (*LM* 74). Surely, Baylor’s correct; Beth is far from being a baby. Meg’s dialogue, though, demonstrates that she is locked in a rigid image of herself as mother, and in order to uphold that image, her children must remain just that: children. If her children cease being children, Meg’s identity, in turn, is non-existent.

Additionally, when Baylor accuses Meg of smothering Beth, Meg replies, “I’m afraid to leave her alone though” (*LM* 74); this raises the question, is Meg scared to leave her daughter alone due to Beth’s brain damage or because Meg needs Beth in order to support her identity?

Arguably, it is the latter.

The last manner in which Meg shows her adherence to a myth of motherhood is through her excitement over the possibility of a wedding between Beth (who is already married) and Frankie. Under the mystique, a woman’s greatest ambition was to get married and have children (Friedan 72). Of course, marriage and children are indeed reasons for celebration in life, but this took on a new level of obsession for women in the fifties. Getting married and becoming a mother was purportedly and literally a woman’s only chance at achieving a place in society. “In the feminine mystique, there is no other way for a woman to dream of creation or of the future. There is no way she can even dream of herself, except as her children’s mother, her husband’s wife” (Friedan 115). This fiction became fact. The topic of a wedding arises in *A Lie of the*

Mind in Act Three, scene two, when Beth declares her intentions of marrying Frankie to her father. Both Baylor and Frankie are completely surprised and dumbfounded by this announcement. Meg, in contrast, is exuberant. Theatre scholar Gregory W. Lanier explains that Meg “is caught up in festive fervor” (Lanier 417): “Maybe we could have the wedding here, Baylor. That would be nice, wouldn’t it? Soon as the weather thaws. We could have it up on the high meadow. That would be beautiful. Just like old times” (*LM* 82). While this train of thought ceases for a bit, Meg, nevertheless picks up her rambling stream of consciousness in regard to the wedding again at the end of the scene: “I think it would be wonderful up on the high meadow. We could invite the whole family. We could even have a picnic up there. Cake and lemonade. We could have music. We haven’t had a real wedding in so long” (*LM* 84). The commonplace description of Meg as “dotty” (Londré 25) certainly makes sense in this context. But this dottiness is justifiable and incredibly telling. It is evidence that Meg is locked in a myth, and projecting the enthusiasm she once had for her own wedding onto Beth and this potential marriage to Frankie. Considering the circumstances stemming from Beth’s first marriage to Jake combined with the fact that Beth barely knows Frankie, Meg’s encouragement of these new nuptials is undoubtedly a bit misguided, or a sign of her own self-interest in that a wedding sounds like a fun diversion from an arguably otherwise dull life. Ironically, it also demonstrates her love towards her daughter. Meg wants the best for Beth, and in Meg’s mind, marriage is the ideal path to happiness as it culminates in one becoming a housewife-mother. Embodying this role, as proclaimed by societal forces, is an integral ingredient for fulfillment. This is the message Meg has received from the culture in which she lives.

Signs of the Problem That Has No Name. The concept of identity as it appears through the separate journeys of Lorraine and Meg is not as straightforward as portrayed in Shepard scholarship. Because Lorraine and Meg both conform to a “rigid preconception of woman’s role” (i.e. they become a housewife-mothers; Friedan 244), they experience signs of a problem that has no name. The following section clarifies exactly how indications of this problem surface in the dramatizations these two mothers. In the case of Lorraine, she exhibits signs such finding herself strangely discontented . . . [and] continually irritated with [her] children” (Friedan 469). She also begins to question the validity of the myth, and lastly, shows that she is interested in finding “something more” in life (Friedan 78). Signs suggesting the existence of the problem that has no name in Meg include the inability to concentrate and an awareness that the problem does indeed exist. Hence, Meg does not just exude signs that she is undergoing a conflict with her identity, but she courageously acknowledges the situation in which she is entangled. This section consequently allows for both women (i.e. Meg and Lorraine) to be seen as more dynamic and dimensional, for they not only try to live in accordance with an illusion of what motherhood should be, but they tolerate certain symptoms that in turn express their disenchantment with this fiction.

Lorraine and the Problem That Has No Name

Signs that the problem that has no name exists within Lorraine firstly appear through the annoyance and distress she expresses towards her adult children. These rather negative feelings seem to be consistently attached to one person: her daughter, Sally. With this in mind, Lorraine represents the image of ideal mother according to a myth in connection to Jake, and simultaneously, shows her dissatisfaction with the role when relating to Sally. This is evidenced through Lorraine’s constant aim of ridding her daughter from her house. For instance, when

Lorraine decides to hide Jake away in her home early in the play, Sally, who lives with her mother, objects to the choice, threatening to leave if Lorraine goes through with it. Lorraine's response is blunt: "Then leave, girl" (*LM* 25). While Sally does leave for a bit, she eventually returns, and Lorraine's antagonism towards her daughter continues. Lorraine orders her daughter to leave again, telling Sally "Looks like you're just gonna' have to stay away for a spell" (*LM* 51). Sally's presence, according to Lorraine, only agitates Jake. In reality, however, Sally's presence seems to bother Lorraine. Lorraine's relationship with Sally, in contrast to her relationship with Jake, seems to reveal some sort of underlying dissatisfaction with her role of housewife-mother.

This raises the question, could Sally's gender and life choices have anything to do with Lorraine's attitude toward her daughter? It is noteworthy that Sally is unmarried and childless. She is also, according to Laura J. Graham, "a version of the modern, self-sufficient woman who possesses both strength and compassion; she is able like the prophet figure to see the truth - in her relationships and in the consequences of action - and to live with that truth" (309). These qualities inherent to Sally provide another layer of complexity to the mother-daughter relationship. Lorraine may be projecting her internal discontent, her problem that has no name, onto her daughter, who is a woman with an ability to see through myths and displays a strong sense of self. Sally, in her mother's mind, may be emblematic of the type of woman Lorraine wishes she had the opportunity to become.

Lorraine additionally displays signs that she is beginning to question the validity behind the myth upon which her identity is based. Women deluded by the mystique eventually asked the question, "Is this all?" regarding the housewife-mother role (Friedan 57). Interrogation of the mystique is a sure sign that one may not have blossomed into the fullest version of oneself. In

the fifties, women began to ponder, “Where am I . . . what am I doing here?” (Friedan 136). At the conclusion of the first scene of Act Three, Sally asks just this to her mother: “What’re we doin’ in here?” (*LM* 72). Though Sally includes herself in the question, using the pronoun “we,” she is actually serving as the voice of reason for her mother. She is helping her mother “cope” (Graham 309) with the lies of the mind, one of which is that Lorraine’s sense of self is based off of a myth. In response to Sally’s inquiry, Lorraine proclaims that she is getting rid of all of the “junk” that men have stored in her house for many years, such as the model airplanes dangling from the ceiling. Lorraine finally realizes that the men are never coming back and her role as housewife-mother is futile: “They dreamed it up just to keep me on the hook. Can’t believe I fell for it all those years” (*LM* 72), she says. This realization may in fact be the turning point when Lorraine decides to escape. She finally sees the myth for the patriarchal construct that it is and desires to endeavor on a journey to find her true self.

Lastly, just like Mom in *True West*, Lorraine shows that she is interested in finding “something more” in life (Friedan 78), a condition that illuminates one’s discontentment with the mystique. This is evident at the conclusion of Act Three, scene one when Lorraine discusses the wish to begin again, to start over. She discloses to her daughter how she craves the wind, an element that can usher in a clean slate:

You know what I miss more than anything now? . . . The wind. One ‘a them fierce, hot, dry winds that come from deep out in the desert and rip the trees apart. You know, those winds that *wipe everything clean* and leave the sky without a cloud. Pure blue. Pure, pure, blue.

Wouldn’t that be nice? (*LM* 72, emphasis added)

Life lived within the confines of the mystique proves unfulfilling for Lorraine, hence, she hopes for a wind to sweep through and provide her with the opportunity for fresh start.

Meg and the Problem That Has No Name

The question of identity in conjunction with Meg is not as straightforward as her simply being the epitome of woman in a man/woman binary. Nor is she simply an apotheosis of mother as advocated by a myth. She is also a woman experiencing conflict with her role as mother, a patriarchal prerogative that she eventually realizes she can no longer live up to. To reiterate, signs of the problem that has no name in Meg include the inability to concentrate and an increasing consciousness that a problem does indeed exist.

An article in a 1959 edition of *Redbook Magazine*, which is cited at length by Friedan in her book, provides insight into this first symptom: the inability to concentrate. For the purposes of this study, the inability to concentrate equates to the notion of “mental grey-out” (Friedan 354), a unique term capturing the mindlessness that ensued from devoting one’s self to a myth of motherhood. Both qualities are associated with the lethargy of one’s cognition and mentioned in the *Redbook* article, “Why Young Mothers Are Always Tired.” As the article reports, many wives/mothers felt that “mental grey-out is what bothers them most in caring for home and children” (Friedan 354), in addition to the concomitant inability to concentrate (Friedan 354). The interlinked characteristics are evident in Meg almost immediately upon her first entrance. For example, early in the play as Mike provides the details concerning Beth’s injuries, Meg displays a considerable amount of confusion:

Mike: Jake beat her up. He beat the shit out of her. . . .

Meg: Who’s Jake?

Mike: Her husband, Mom. Jake.

Meg: Oh. (*LM* 25-26)

Based off of this exchange, it is clear that Meg is experiencing a mental grey-out of sorts. Meg has no recollection of her daughter's husband. Then, directly following this statement, Meg is unable to remember Beth and Jake's wedding ceremony, questioning Mike when he corroborates her presence at her daughter's nuptials. Perhaps more strikingly, this dialogue completely contradicts Meg's later enthusiasm towards the possibility of a future wedding for Beth. Taken together, it seems as though Meg has conflicting reactions in respect to weddings. On the one hand, her later enthusiasm reveals her glorification of the mystique, but on the other, her expunging of Beth's first wedding from her mind reveals something entirely different. For one, it is an indication of mental grey-out, a sign of a problem that has no name, and additionally, it shows that perhaps marriage is not a hope Meg has for her daughter after all.

Meg's inability to concentrate and tendency to mentally "grey-out" emerges in other moments of the play as well. For instance, later in play, Baylor berates Meg for her lack of focus, commenting, "I've never seen anybody get so easily distracted" (*LM* 42). Then, towards the conclusion of Act Two, Meg mindlessly mistakes the daytime for nighttime. Meg begins to prepare for bed in the middle of the afternoon, causing her son Mike to scream, "It's not night! It's daytime! Jesus Christ, can't you see it's daytime out there" (*LM* 62). This incident is just another example of Meg's tendency to "grey-out." Arguably, the moments are the result of the problem that has no name.

Scholars have perceived this characteristic in Meg, often times describing her as "vague" (Tucker 142; McDonough, "Politics" 78). In the context of both Tucker's and McDonough's criticism, the usage of vague can be taken to mean "unable to think with clearness or precision" ("Vague"), hence, supporting this current claim that Meg shows signs of the problem that has no name. Vague, however, can have another connotation, revealing an inadvertent double meaning

at play here. It can be defined as “to be vague or indefinite” (“Vague”). Meg, as a woman affected by the feminine mystique, is vague according to this latter definition as well for she has never defined herself according to her own terms. She is somewhat indefinite as a person, allowing a myth to serve as the foundation for her sense of self.

In addition to this symptom of “mental grey-out,” Meg displays the strongest evidence of all signifying the presence of the problem that has no name: awareness that there is in fact a problem. The clarity that this mother figure occasionally displays is striking, especially when taking into account the previous point about her frequent mindlessness. Despite any inability to concentrate or moments of “mental grey-out,” Meg, at certain times, can see through the myths that have both altered and limited her sense of self. Meg, for instance, realizes that she is “chained” (Friedan 436) to her role as housewife-mother due to the myth of motherhood, and moreover, she has the courage to acknowledge and admit this. She is “chained” to or dependent on her husband (and children), for she lacks options for fulfillment outside of the home. Baylor, accordingly, may be “chained” as well for he has the responsibility of completely supporting his wife as though she were a child or an object. Meg becomes cognizant of this fact. She states to her husband, “You think it’s me, don’t you? . . . You think your whole life went sour because of me. . . . You’re chained to us forever. Isn’t that the way it is?” (*LM* 78). In return, Baylor indicates his resentment of Meg’s dependence, stating, “Yeah! Yeah! . . . I gotta’ waste my days away makin’ sure [women] eat and have roof over their heads and a nice warm place to go crazy in” (*LM* 78). What is implied in this dialogue is that Meg is actually the one who is completely and utterly chained, for she lacks options in life. She is dependent on Baylor, and has no role outside of the home. Yet, in this moment of clarity, it seems as though Meg sees through

the feminine mystique. Her candidness in reference to her position allows for a new interpretation of Meg as a woman of quiet strength.

Escape. As mentioned in the Introduction, Charles G. Whiting's assessment of Shepard's older women (i.e. the mothers) is that they "surrender to stagnation" ("Images" 502). Perhaps if Meg and Lorraine simply adhered to the myth of motherhood assigned to them or suffered silently from the symptoms stemming from a belief in the myth, Whiting's statement may be accurate. However, rather than surrendering, both women strive to find a way out.

Escape: Lorraine

Once Lorraine understands that her entire sense of self is constructed off of a myth, she attempts to escape. Out of all of Shepard's mother figures, Lorraine's escape is arguably the most overt and extreme. It mainly occurs in the final scene of the play. As the concluding scene commences, Lorraine is perusing travel brochures, a clue hinting at her budding desire to dodge her immediate circumstances. Shepard's stage directions also state that there are two suitcases in the process of being packed and a third (Sally's) is "ready to go" (*LM* 84). One may argue that Shepard places Sally as the woman more prepared to escape, and thus, the daughter may be enabling her mother's flight from the home front. As the scene develops, however, it becomes quite transparent that Lorraine is the driving force behind the abandonment of her limited identity within the home.

The dialogue in this final scene eventually begins to convey Lorraine's innate desire for escape. The mother gives rather blunt responses to her daughter's inquiries concerning whether or not to hold on to old family photos, always advising Sally to discard the pictures that contain memories of the past; "Naw, toss it" (*LM* 85) or "Naw, burn it" (*LM* 86), she repeatedly states.

Clearly, Lorraine is already escaping her identity via the erasure of history. The past for Lorraine, including her identity as housewife-mother, is “dead and gone” (*LM* 86).

Following these brief exchanges, it becomes evident that Lorraine plans to journey to Ireland. The location of Ireland, like the choice of Alaska in *True West*, is packed with information concerning Lorraine and her need to flee from a myth of motherhood. On the surface level, it shows that she is a woman needing liberation from the confinements of the home, and subsequently, her role as housewife-mother. There are deeper significances as well. Unlike Mom’s choice of Alaska in *True West*, Ireland is outside of the boundaries of the United States. Consequently, it is separate from the realm permeated by the feminine mystique. Thurer’s work presented in *The Myths of Motherhood* examines myths more in respect to epochs rather than geographical locations. *The Feminine Mystique*, however, briefly discusses the pervasiveness of this particular myth within the United States compared to other Western countries. In the United States, the mystique caused a mother to be constantly present for her children, as it forcefully and powerfully communicated that a mother “is *supposed* to be there” (Friedan 287, emphasis in the original). Friedan continues to elaborate as to how the United States differs from other nations in respect to motherhood, stating that “. . . in the modern cultures of the civilized world, not many educate their strongest, ablest women to make a career of their own children” (287). Given this information, it is understandable why Lorraine would want to flee the culture that deluded her into becoming the personification of a myth. The culture propagated images and information championing the notion of housewife-mother as the ideal (Friedan 112). In order for a woman to have a place, role, or even an identity within society at this time, she needed to curb her ambitions and enact an image put forth by the

mystique. By escaping from the United States, then, one can be said to be breaking free from the myth of motherhood associated with this country as well.

While it is unclear what myths of motherhood permeate Ireland, it is certain that, in Shephardian terms, Ireland serves to represent a matriarchal society versus patriarchal. With this in mind, Lorraine is not simply escaping the confines in which the mystique is prevalent, but fleeing from a land emblematic of patriarchal control. Ireland is the home of *her* ancestors and where *her* distant relatives still reside. Lorraine admits, “I’ve still got some people back there . . .” (*LM* 86). This idea is further delineated through Lorraine’s explanation as to who these relatives are exactly. She explains that their name is Skellig: “Mary Skellig and there was a Shem or Sham or somethin’ like that. Shem Skellig, I think it was. Probably her husband” (*LM* 86). The hierarchy contained in this line is telling. Mary Skellig, a woman, is the relative Lorraine is primarily interested in contacting and finding. “Shem or Sham or something,” her husband, is of a lower status than his wife as revealed by his placement after the wife’s name and also by Lorraine’s inability to even recall his name. This casts Ireland as a place where Lorraine will be liberated from patriarchal constructs as well as a location conducive to finding an authentic identity.

It is clear that Lorraine hopes to escape the socio-cultural myths associated with motherhood and expand her sense of self by returning to her roots. But could she also be escaping from the man/woman binary established in this text as well? Her return to Ireland does not subvert this binary, but rather inverts it, as it places the woman, the matriarch, in a more dominant position. Therefore, by fleeing to Ireland, Lorraine may not escape from the binary *per se*, but she does indeed escape from her role as woman in Shephard’s initial terms (i.e. feminine, passive).

Ann C. Hall argues that Shepard's choice of Ireland actually serves to reinforce the suppression of women, the case being that Ireland, with its heavily Catholic ideology, "maintains oppressive attitudes towards women" (*A Kind* 115). Thus, according to Hall, Lorraine does not escape *or* invert the binary, but remains locked within it despite her efforts. Even if this were the case, and there is strong evidence suggesting that it is not, Hall is forced to note that Shepard does create a "surprisingly liberating mother-daughter relationship" (*A Kind* 115) with Lorraine and Sally. The women become "equal adventurers in a world *without their male counterparts*" (*A Kind* 115, emphasis added). If focusing specifically on Lorraine, Hall's comments elucidate that Lorraine has indeed escaped from the housewife-mother identity, which can only exist in relation to male figures. Without men, Lorraine is free to cultivate a richer identity.

Finally, this attempt to escape is illustrated through the extent to which Lorraine destroys any remnants of her past self. In her final moment in the play, Lorraine strikes a match with the intention of burning down the house and destroying everything contained within it. Lorraine does not simply want to escape the role of housewife-mother; she wants to obliterate the myth from existence. Without the house, the place upon which her identity revolved, Lorraine's past is wiped away and she is unable to execute the role of housewife-mother. It is clear that this is immensely freeing and empowering for Lorraine:

Sally: You mean we're just gonna' run away and let it burn?

Lorraine: Nah – Maybe we won't run. Maybe we'll just stand out here on the front lawn, the two of us, and watch it burn for a while. Sing a song maybe. Do a little jig. Then we'll just turn and walk away. Just walk.

Sally: Well, we're not gonna' have any place to come back to, Mom.

Lorraine: Who's comin' back? (*LM* 88)

These are the last words that Lorraine speaks in the play. Earlier in the text, Lorraine yearns for winds to blow through and deliver a clean state; finally, through actions of her own, a fresh start comes to fruition.

Some critics are preoccupied with the notion that Shepard's depictions of women are misogynistic, and his creation of Lorraine is not without its fair share of critics. For instance, Doris Auerbach believes that Lorraine illustrates "the powerlessness of dominated women" (61). Perhaps Auerbach's observations are accurate when analyzing the moments that Lorraine demonstrates her adherence to a myth of motherhood. But when her behavior is discussed in conjunction with the final scene of the play, it is clear that Lorraine does not "lack will" (Auerbach 53); instead, she is actually quite willful and escapes a long held identity.

Escape: Meg

Meg goes through a journey similar to that of Lorraine, although Meg, in contrast to Lorraine, does not physically escape from the home or her role within this structure by employing dramatic methods such as igniting her house in flames. That being said, the complexity and significance of her choices are still striking. With Meg, the desire for escape seems to potentially yield the healthiest, most optimistic outcome yet in regard to the mother characters in Shepard's canon.

Interestingly, Meg never leaves her home at any point in the play, other than to visit Beth in the hospital in the very beginning. Her desire for escape is still undeniable. This hope is initially expressed when Meg conspicuously and antagonistically rejects the responsibilities associated with her identity as housewife-mother in what seems to be a moment of empowerment. In Act Three of the play, Meg purposefully leaves Baylor stranded in his sitting chair in dire need of his socks. Meg is fully cognizant of the fact that Baylor is unwilling to stand up and retrieve the socks on his own, and moreover, unable to put the socks on by himself

due to his lack of flexibility. Instead of helping Baylor, as would be expected of Meg based off of her actions up until this point, Shepard states that Meg “looks at the socks, then to Baylor.” She then “crosses slowly over to his socks, picks them up off the floor, holds them up in the air” (LM 78-79). Finally, she lets the socks fall into Baylor’s lap and calmly walks away, letting Baylor struggle comically to put his socks back on sans her assistance. Meg is clearly the antithesis of dotty in this moment. Rather, she is keenly aware, and boldly deviating from her identity as housewife-mother.

Meg additionally shows her desire for escape in a moment of quiet contemplation. While looking out the window into the Montana winter, Meg states, “I never get tired of looking at the snow. Isn’t that funny?” (LM 62). While it may not be funny per se, it is insightful. It is also reminiscent of Mom in *True West*, who escapes to Alaska. Surely, it is not coincidental that Shepard repeatedly places these frustrated mother figures in locations displaying qualities contrary to the ideal characteristics of mother. Montana, where Meg’s home is located, is covered with snow for the duration of *A Lie of the Mind*. Consequently, it is representative of the characteristics opposite to those of “mother”: it is cold, barren, and harsh. This idea is compounded by the fact that Meg admits that she actually enjoys and gains pleasure from the snow. Hence, this moment can be interpreted as signifying Meg’s innate desire to escape from her the limited version of herself as a mother.

It is important to note that the significance of this moment is twofold, as it also presages the final line of the play, where once again, Meg is looking out over the snow. In this last part of the drama, she states, “Looks like a fire in the snow. How could that be?” (LM 95). It is here where Meg reinforces this desire to escape from the confining role of housewife-mother, for the fire in the snow that Meg is referring to is clearly the burning of Lorraine’s house. When

watching what Ann C. Hall calls the “home that imprisoned [Lorraine]” (*A Kind* 116) burn down in the distance, Meg contemplates her own escape. It is an instant that unquestionably breaks the realism of the play for clearly Meg, who is in Montana, would not ever be able to see Lorraine’s house in California. Ann C. Hall points out the ramifications of Meg’s acknowledgement of the burning down of Lorraine’s homestead: “Through this image, Shepard implies that the solution to both the problematic heterosexual relationships in the play and the mistreatment of women in particular is to begin anew, to destroy old forms and start again” (*A Kind* 116). Certainly, Hall’s analysis sheds light on the significance of this moment. Yet when it is understood that Meg is struggling with her role as mother, not simply that of women, the moment has an added meaning. It is not just the man/woman binary that Meg hopes to destroy; it is also a myth of motherhood.

The concluding scene of this play garners a wide array of responses, particularly concerning Shepard’s treatment of women. Doris Auerbach, for instance, feels that the play provides a “bleak vision” (62), while others conversely consider the ending full of hope (Hall, *A Kind* 116). This latter description seems more apt. Meg observes a fire in the snow, a sight symbolizing new possibilities. She does not renounce her family, however. Perhaps with Meg, Shepard is showing how escape does not have to equate to desertion. Like Friedan points out, breaking out of the mystique “does not mean, of course, that [a woman] must divorce her husband, abandon her children, give up her home” (468). There are other potentialities to explore. With Meg, Shepard has created a woman that expresses a desire to escape in order find her true identity, without feeling the need to abdicate her role as mother. It is the myth of motherhood from which she wants to escape, and she can accomplish this aim while still remaining with her family. Meg hopes to find a broader sense of self, which includes, but is not limited to the very important role of mother.

SUMMARY

Sam Shepard once again delves into the issues of identity and escape with his 1985 play, *A Lie of the Mind*. For the first time, these thematic elements are noted in correlation to women, particularly with respect to the character of Beth, who is one of Shepard's most dynamic female characters to date. The mother characters, however, are still largely ignored in critical discourse. While the mother figures of *A Lie of the Mind* are indeed granted more stage time than usual for Shepard's plays, criticism mentioning these two women still tends to simplify their significance. Lorraine and Meg are more than representations of the woman side of the man/woman binary. They demonstrate a belief in a myth of motherhood, which consequently connects them to the Shepardian theme of the construction of personal identity. Moreover, Lorraine and Meg communicate signs that they are conflicted with their chosen role; they endure the problem that has no name. The one path granted to them in life ultimately did not prove completely fulfilling. As a result, Lorraine and Meg take action and escape, albeit in separate ways. Lorraine flees the country and obliterates her home, a structure emblematic of her limited sense of self. Meg, in contrast, acknowledges the problem that has no name and chooses to stay with her family. Her escape occurs within the home, for it is the myth and not the family that she must break away from. Meg, like her daughter, sees through the lies of the mind, one of which is a myth of motherhood.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Sam Shepard: Seven Plays, a compilation of the playwright's work that includes *Buried Child* and *True West*, opens with the phrase, "For my father, Sam." The playwright chooses an appropriate dedication considering that the effect of the father resonates through many of the texts that follow. The question as to whether or not the father figure impacts the action in Shepard's dramatic literature is not up for debate. Even if the father is deceased or never makes an actual physical appearance in a particular play, he is considered a character of paramount importance. It is from this figure that the themes of identity and escape find their roots. As accurately stated by drama critic John Lahr, "For Shepard and his characters, there is no escaping the father" ("Pathfinder"). *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind* all illustrate the journey of a son (or grandson) becoming the father (or grandfather), emphasizing the notion that identity is inherited and escape, while desired, is futile.

This fact places the female characters in the background, particularly the women that happen to be mothers. Much of the critical investigations centering on the family plays interpret the mothers as weak or inessential due to either their lack of presence or ineffectuality when they actually do appear. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it is apparent that there are major implications contained in Shepard's representations of the maternal. Viewing the mothers in terms of the concept of the myths of motherhood confirms the thematic significance of these

women and elucidates their importance in regard to broader concerns. In order to delineate the findings yielded by this exploration, I return to the questions posited in the Introduction. Can new discoveries with respect to the mother characters allow for Shepard's plays to be produced with more depth and dimensionality? By and large, do the mothers in the family plays exhibit signs of agency, and if so, what are the ramifications of this? Could Sam Shepard, through his representations of mothers, be considered a feminist? Does understanding the mother characters within the context of the myths of motherhood connect the mothers to broader common themes of Shepard's work? Finally, by enacting myths associated with the institution of motherhood, are these mothers warning us about the potential damaging effects of mother myths in society today?

DIMENSIONALITY OF MOTHERS

Perceiving the mothers of Shepard's plays as women affected by a societal mother myth allows for an enriched understanding of these characters, which may ultimately lead to more in-depth productions of these works in the future. The wide array of critical responses (and lack thereof) concerning the mothers is striking. However, most ignore any dimensionality present in these women. Critics instead pigeonhole the mother characters with simplistic one-word labels.

While some say that the mothers are boldly defiant (more seldom), others claim that they are wholeheartedly submissive (more common), but it is typically one or the other and never both. For example, Florence Falk asserts that the character of Halie is a parody of the "whore-wife-mother" (100) and as such is oppressed. William Kleb, likewise, views Mom in *True West* as an extremely passive woman, lacking in determination and power (121). In complete contrast, others posit that Mom is a woman of will, for she places precedence on and pursues her own

interests outside of the home (Erben 30). Ann C. Hall even suggests that Mom's choices in scene nine are in alignment with feminist ideals, a bold claim. Although, it should be noted that Hall's interpretation of Mom's behavior contains contradictions. According to Hall, Mom, at the end of the play, takes no action whatsoever: "Doing nothing is a feminist strategy for change" (*A Kind* 106). "Doing nothing," according to Hall, is a defiant choice. Yet, on the other hand, "doing nothing" can also be viewed as a strong indication of weakness or passivity. The discrepancy of opinions continues concerning the mothers of *A Lie of the Mind*. Ron Mottram suggests that both Lorraine and Meg are women dominated by men ("Exhaustion" 100). This description places both women in a passive and oppressed position. Other critics see Lorraine and Meg as polar opposites: Lorraine exudes more of an "aggressive, dominant personality," while Meg conversely has a "passive, submissive personality" (Lanier 411). All of these somewhat simplistic portrayals are problematic. As we have seen, each of the four mother characters are, in certain instances, completely passive, and at other times, highly willful. The mother characters contain complexities that are impossible to illustrate through one-word modifiers or superficial categorizations.

To clarify, because each mother character lives according to the dictates of a myth of motherhood, she is automatically relegated to a position that encourages passivity and submissiveness. In her own unique way, each mother demonstrates her compliance to this myth, through factors such as identifying with her sexual function, displaying her dependence on others, or by committing completely to the caretaking of home, husband, and children. Yet these female characters exhibit strength as well, for they each attempt to escape from the feminine mystique, a choice that automatically contradicts any designation of these mothers as weak. Illuminating the conflicting impulses in these mothers consequently allows for these figures to be

portrayed as nuanced individuals. Though they may not be at the center of the action, the mothers in Shepard's plays are indeed complex. They undoubtedly struggle to maintain their role as dictated to them by society, but they also strive to move beyond this narrow position. Shedding light on the complexities of the mothers ultimately encourages new colors pertaining to these characters to be brought forth in future productions of Shepard's works.

While the actresses that approach these maternal roles most likely try to uncover the motivations behind the actions of these so-called "weird" characters (Kleb 122), any sense of nuance rarely reads in production. This is evidenced by the reviews of past productions of Shepard's family plays. Similar to Shepard scholars, theater critics tend use obvious adjectives when describing the mothers or ignore them completely. An example of the latter appears in Charles Isherwood's review of the latest Broadway revival of *True West*, where there is no mention of the character of Mom (or the actress in the role). Based off of the review, it appears as though the play includes three characters, all men ("True"). Regarding *Buried Child*, reviews typically contain simple and perhaps heedless descriptions of the mother role. For instance, Jeremy Gerard's review of the 1996 Broadway premiere, which transferred to New York from Steppenwolf, notes that Lois Smith's work in the role of Halie was the highlight of the production; he continues, however, by calling the character a "mother-whore" ("Buried"), a cliché description for a dynamic character. Reviews of The New Group's relatively recent production of *A Lie of the Mind* do actually mention the mothers (and the actresses playing these parts), but the comments indicate that the characterizations remain primarily on the surface level. David Rooney of *Variety*, for example, assesses that Lorraine comes across as "an unsympathetic caricature" and Meg as a "mollifying woman" (26). While both may be true, there are certainly deeper layers to explore, especially with the mothers of *A Lie of the Mind*. Incorporating a belief

in the feminine mystique as well as the desire to break away from that myth into the creation of a character may dissipate the invisibility or one-dimensionality seen time and time again in productions (as well as in readings) of these plays. When creating and building a theatrical portrayal of any of these four mothers, a strong sense of the character's history as well as need for an identity may engender a more compelling characterization. This, in turn, can lead to intriguing and nuanced productions of Shepard's family plays.

AGENCY AND NEW DEFINITIONS OF FAMILY

As we have seen, evidence of oppression and agency are present in Sam Shepard's representations of mothers. While the former fosters negative effects in terms of feminism, the latter has positive ramifications in regard to both Shepard's work and broader societal issues. A few critics have noted the agency displayed by the mothers in the family plays. For instance, Carla J. McDonough, as mentioned in the Introduction, suggests that the mother characters flee from the homestead with the aim of distancing themselves from the violence of the male characters; the women (including the mothers) are "the ones *able* to leave the destruction that engulfs Shepard's stage" (McDonough, "Politics" 69, emphasis in the original). The mothers want to avoid the conflicts enveloping the men, thus they leave, a choice that they are free to make. McDonough's theory, however, still places the mothers in a position of irrelevance in regard to the profound issues addressed in the plays. Interpreting the mothers as struggling with a myth of motherhood, conversely, affirms that the mothers have agency, and additionally, shows that they are entangled in the thematic elements brought forth through the action. This reading of Shepard's texts, as revealed through this study, situates the mothers as both women of strength and determination, as well as characters entangled in the deeper concerns of the drama.

Although escaping from the homestead illustrates volition on the part of the mother figures and dramatizes the recurrent issues of the nature of identity and the desire to escape, is it an action considered ideal in terms of motherhood? What is Shepard's message in respect to the notion of family and the role of mother? At first, these plays may seem more representative of the tenets of radical feminism, whose rhetoric upholds the belief that "the nuclear family must be abolished if women's full humanity is to be achieved because the institution of the family is oppressive for women," as explained by Carolyn Johnston (261). Two of Shepard's mothers, Mom of *True West* and Lorraine of *A Lie of the Mind*, could be interpreted as abandoning the family, similar to the absent (or deceased) fathers. This would not be an action supported by liberal feminist Betty Friedan, who never championed the eradication of family altogether. Rather, Friedan desired new manifestations of family, where the woman/mother was not automatically relegated to one role that could potentially stifle her growth as a person. "Motherhood as the primary vehicle for personal fulfillment" (Johnston 261) is what Friedan repudiated, not family and the role of mother altogether. In fact, motherhood, according to maternal theorist Daphne De Marneffe, can be an experience of "extraordinary pleasure" with "enormous gratifications" (672), but women should be able to have the option regarding whether or not to undertake this role, and moreover, the power to make decisions that shape their selfhood. Thurer agrees, calling for a society in which both men and women are permitted to partake in career endeavors as well as parenting (301). Based off of the analysis of these four mother figures in Shepard's family plays, it seems as though the texts and the characters therein are actually moving in a direction that leans more toward liberal feminist ideals. Although two of the mothers (Mom and Lorraine) completely eschew relationships with their sons, it does not seem as though Shepard is advocating for a subversion of the nuclear family. When the four

plays are taken together and viewed chronologically from *Buried Child* through *A Lie of the Mind*, it is clear that the mothers gradually gain more strength in each consecutive play, working out a viable solution to the problem that has no name. This solution still includes family.

While the texts of *Buried Child* and *True West* do indeed highlight how the family unit can be destructive to its members, it is actually quite challenging to make any definitive claim as to what Shepard's statement on family might be. The two mothers from these works exhibit agency and attempt to forge an identity outside of the home, but whether the playwright is advocating for the dissolution of the family (a radical approach) or a redefinition (a liberal approach) is ultimately unclear. When *Buried Child* and *True West* are viewed in conjunction with *A Lie of the Mind*, however, new conclusions arise. The two mothers of this final play are significant both thematically and in respect to the narrative; due to the increased centrality of women in this piece, it is not surprising that it is here where suggestions of agency as well as new definitions of family and mother begin to emerge. With Lorraine, Shepard creates a mother, who in her final moments strikes a match and sets her house ablaze. She is not destroying the idea of family or that of mother, however. With this act, she is instead redefining the implications of those two terms according to her own constitution. Lorraine's next destination is Ireland, and she is traveling armed with the goal of reconnecting with her roots, much like Vince in *Buried Child*. Although in contrast to Vince, Lorraine's roots are maternal, not paternal. This suggests a new incarnation of family in which the father is no longer the dominant figure. Similarly, the characterization of Meg in this same text illustrates evidence of female agency, and moreover, ushers in a new formulation of family. Considering that Meg is the one mother analyzed that never once leaves her family and continues to reside in her home at the conclusion of the piece, it is intriguing that she is the mother most illustrative of maternal and liberal

feminist principles. By viewing the symbolic fire in the snow, emblematic of the destruction of the housewife-mother role, Meg begins to grasp her options. She comes to terms with her narrow identity (though perhaps not fully) caused by her limited position, and yet this discovery does not instigate a rash escape (an action perhaps swinging into the radical feminist line of thought). Instead, Meg engenders subtle escapes. Encouraging her daughter to enter into a marriage with a “woman-man,” working with her husband (instead of for him) on the task of folding an American flag, and using her voice to assert her astute observations all indicate that Meg is evolving into an individual more complex than the role advocated by the feminine mystique. The fact that she is undergoing this growth within the four walls of her home is additionally meaningful. It suggests that it is not family or motherhood that limits a woman’s potential, but the myths surrounding both institutions that can have adverse effects. In conclusion, Meg exhibits evidence of agency, like all of Shepard’s mother characters, and furthermore, begins to voice her personal beliefs. Intriguingly, she does all of this while consciously and willingly remaining with her family, a choice corresponding to liberal feminist views.

Shepard’s maternal figures make choices in opposition to the myth of motherhood, some more confidently than others, and by *A Lie of the Mind*, the actions of the mother characters result in progress toward a new understanding of the nuclear family and the roles assigned to those within these units. It seems as though the possibilities in terms of family will only continue to expand in the future, for after all, Beth is hoping to marry a “woman-man.”

SAM SHEPARD FEMINIST?

When viewed consecutively, Shepard’s texts gradually incorporate feminist stances. Is

calling Sam Shepard a feminist too far-reaching? Of course, Shepard and feminism are two terms unlikely to go hand and hand. Concerning this conceit, Carol Rosen once asked the playwright subsequent to the publication of *A Lie of the Mind* if he considers himself a feminist:

Shepard: What does that mean? What is a feminist piece? Following the feminist cause or something?

Rosen: That they perceive the world from the point of view of women as opposed to superimposing a male view on history.

Shepard: To a certain extent, yes. (Shepard, "Emotional" 6)

Many people have and will argue against the claim that Sam Shepard is a feminist playwright, but when taking into account the results of this investigation, there is a kernel of truth to this assertion. This contention is accentuated by the unquestionable agency granted to the mother characters as outlined in the previous section.

A female perspective is indeed present in these works and, in fact, it gets increasingly stronger as the family plays develop. In *Buried Child* and *True West*, a maternal point of view is limited, as Halie and Mom of the aforementioned texts seem to be engrossed in too much confusion to articulate their perspective with certainty and strength. That being said, their bewilderment is telling in regard to their sense of self and the level of satisfaction stemming from their role of housewife-mother. Later, in *A Lie of the Mind*, Meg and Lorraine (as well as Beth) firmly express their perception of their environment and as well as their position in relation to others, arguably more so than the male characters. Lorraine suddenly decides to discard all of the men's belongings (and eventually the house itself), refusing to be the woman guarding the hearth while the male characters get to venture out into the world. Similarly, Meg is strikingly aware, particularly in regard to her marriage. Toward the end of the play, she enlightens her

unreflective husband, Baylor, on the nature of their relationship. McDonough comments on this idea in her work on images of masculinity in dramatic literature, explaining that Meg “calmly asserts the folly of the logic upon which Baylor has structured his self-image. She gets him to admit that he blames the females in his life for his sense of entrapment . . .” (*Staging* 64). In sum, a woman’s point of view is presented and stated with clarity and confidence by both Lorraine and Meg.

This exploration of Sam Shepard’s mothers has elucidated the agency as well as the increasing voice of these female figures. Despite growing evidence pointing toward the conclusion that Shepard could be considered a feminist, it seems as though many scholars do and will always disagree with this claim. For instance, even after *A Lie of the Mind*, Stephen J. Bottoms finds the label of Shepard as a feminist problematic (242). Bottoms acknowledges that, with *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard “succeeds in blowing wide-open the question of gender roles, gender identity, sexual power, and the possibility of positive change” (242), but he criticizes Shepard for failing to expand on these ideas in subsequent work. Shepard continues to write, though, and considering Bottoms’ book-length study of Shepard’s plays is from 1998, the accuracy of his assessment is up for debate. In fact, Shepard’s latest play, *Heartless*, which premiered in August of 2012 at the Signature Theatre Company and has yet to be released in publication, centers on a mother and daughter. As *The New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley comments, this play “offers a fascinating focus on a figure that this restlessly imaginative author . . . usually doesn’t pay much attention to: good ole long-suffering, child-shaping, hearth keeping Mom” (“All”). It is a play that fundamentally revolves around women, containing four female characters to one male role. What is more, it incorporates the insistent Shepardian idea of identity (Brantley). Over thirty years ago in reference to Shepard, actress

Joyce Aaron stated, “I wish he’d write a play for women!” (Aaron 174). Seemingly, her desire has come to fruition. But perhaps Shepard has been writing complicated roles for women since the 70s, even if his plays are predominantly about men.

BROADER THEMES

Future analyses may be able to build off of this current investigation by exploring if Shepard’s mothers highlight broader themes of Shepard’s work. Through analyzing the respective journeys of each of these four mother characters and the qualities exhibited by each, it is apparent that they are all associated with the thematic threads of identity and escape routinely found in Shepard’s plays. By complying with a certain identity and then rejecting the connotations attached to it, do these mothers offer an illumination of other themes, such as the dysfunction inherent to the traditional American nuclear family or the myth of the American Dream?

As we have seen, Shepard’s thematic intentions regarding the issues of identity and escape revolve around the family. It is also clear that Shepard’s fictional families, while recognizable, are highly dysfunctional. With this in mind, one larger idea embedded in these works, then, is what Bottoms calls “the tortured question of why the family is a family at all?” (153). The mother characters must correlate to this concept, as they are an essential unit of the family regardless of whether or not they are dominant or weak, strong or oppressed; yet interrogations of Shepard’s mothers as fundamental aspects of these dysfunctional nuclear families are typically not far-reaching. The results of viewing the mothers as women affected by a myth of motherhood can certainly begin to answer the larger questions, such as the one Bottoms poses pertaining to the family as a whole. In association with this idea, future studies can inquire as to how the mother characters may or may not be involved with this dysfunction.

Does living in accordance with a myth of motherhood induce this dysfunction? Or, contrarily, could it be the rejection of the role of housewife-mother that leads to this dysfunction? This latter question is not to place the mothers in a negative light, claiming like so many have before that the root of all family issues lie with the mother, but rather to potentially place the mothers in a position of power. The rejection of the narrow role of housewife-mother affects the nature of the other relationships within the family, and even if chaos ensues, it may ultimately be for the best for it permits the mother an opportunity to expand upon her sense of self.

Future analyses might additionally elucidate the significance of the mother characters in terms of the omnipresent ideology of the myth of the American Dream. According to American drama scholar Matthew Roudané, “The myth of the American Dream permeates both America’s literary texts and its larger cultural contexts.” Sam Shepard’s plays are not exempt. Perhaps more than any other theme, scholars have acknowledged the concept of the myth of the American Dream within Shepard’s work (Adler 112; Daniel 129; Akilli 47; Gilman xi). A major anthology of Shepard criticism even carries the title *American Dreams*. With this in mind, it is interesting to note Sam Shepard’s own comments concerning this thematic aspect. When asked if it informs his work, he states, “Nobody has actually even succinctly defined ‘the myth of the American Dream.’ What is the American Dream? . . . I don’t know what the American Dream is. I do know that it doesn’t work. Not only doesn’t it work, the myth of the American Dream has created havoc, and it’s going to be our demise” (Shepard, “Shepard” 70). While Shepard may not be able to define the American Dream, many scholars have commented on its persistent presence in his plays.

The American Dream is a deeply embedded ideology in the United States, a concept with “manifold implications” (Cullen 6). As historian Jim Cullen outlines in his book on this topic,

The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation, there are numerous incarnations of the American Dream. These include, but are not limited to, the following: “The Dream of Upward Mobility,” “The Dream of Equality,” “The Dream of the Good Life,” and “The Dream of Home Ownership.” Future explorations into Shepard’s mothers should examine if, by rejecting a myth of motherhood, these four women inadvertently begin a domino effect that breaks down a specific incarnation of the American Dream. Myths of motherhood may uphold the ideology of the American Dream. Perhaps the mothers serve as the crux to this nationwide dream in that they sacrifice their individuality for the sake of the preservation of the domestic sphere, which in turn, enables the men to go into the world, pursue their personal ambitions, and reach their highest potentialities. In other words, the American Dream is a man’s dream, and the women are the support upholding it; however, if there is no support, the flaws and fictions inherent to the Dream are readily apparent.

MOTHER MYTHS IN SOCIETY

Shepard’s plays elucidate the identity struggles and effects ensuing from an adherence to a myth of motherhood from the fifties. This raises curiosity concerning mother myths in today’s society. For Shepard’s mother characters, societal forces of the era acted upon each woman, limiting her possibilities in life and constricting her sense of self. The mothers of the family plays were relegated to a secondary position in society, for their whole identity (not to mention their value) stemmed primarily from their biological function.

With this in mind, Shepard’s placement of the mothers in the background or offstage could be interpreted as a dramatization of the mothers’ socio-cultural position in the era in which each of these mothers had and/or raised their children. The depictions are not misogynistic but

realistic, especially since the playwright grants each of the mothers the agency to flee from the confines created by this fiction. Shepard, then, is not reinforcing or celebrating negative socio-cultural messages pertaining to mother, but unmasking the problems surrounding motherhood myths.

By dramatizing the effects of a commitment to the feminine mystique, does Shepard's work raise concerns regarding what damage is being done through mother myths today? Cultural forces still influence the notion of mother and the institution of motherhood. For instance, today's prevailing myth engenders in a woman a desire to pursue a demanding career and motherhood simultaneously, but concurrently undermines her ability to do so by stressing an ideology that the working mother is what Shari L. Thurer calls a "necessary evil" (xviii). Another belief permeating society today that correlates to the previous thought is the notion that women can "have it all" – motherhood and thriving high-power careers outside of the home – if they so choose (Baldwin). This message, according to Anne-Marie Slaughter, makes "millions of women feel that they are to blame if they cannot manage to rise up the ladder as fast as men and also have a family and an active home life (and be thin and beautiful to boot)" (Slaughter 86). While women are now permitted, expected even, to forge an identity for themselves outside of the home (and it is not unusual to see men stepping into the role of full-time caregiver), there are still fundamental flaws in how culture views the "good" mother. Today's ideology understandably generates feelings of inadequacy and anxiety (Thurer xxiv) in mothers, not to mention doubt (Thurer xiii). Shepard's work uncovers the problems stemming from an earlier incarnation of a motherhood myth: the feminine mystique. Another future direction might be to explore if current myths of motherhood are captured in the theater and dramatic literature emerging out of our present day environment.

SUMMARY

By and large, Shepard's mother characters are misunderstood in the wide breadth of literature focusing on this Pulitzer Prize winning playwright's work. These are not simple women. The mothers are oppressed, yet exhibit agency; they are passive, yet strong. Critically, there is a tendency to ignore or brush over the mothers, which may be the fault of socio-cultural myths of motherhood. Perhaps mothers are still considered secondary to fathers (or men in general) due to the fictions pervading society, which in turn influences the content, focus, and subject of dramatic criticism. What is more, there is clear evidence of agency being displayed by each of the four women discussed in this project. This analysis, therefore, contests the claim that Shepard is a misogynist, but acknowledges that the situation is nuanced. What feminist scholars may be detecting in Shepard's work is the incorporation of the negative aspects of mother myths revealed in the author's representations of the maternal. To conclude, Shepard is subtly advocating for the mothers he pens, placing the women in a more positive light than the violent, alcoholic, and at times murderous male characters. He creates mothers who are dynamic, which parallels his honest appraisal of the women of the post-World War II era: "I think there was a kind of heroism in those women. They were tough and selfless in a way" (Shepard, "Art"). Shepard's words perfectly capture the complexities found in his dramatic depictions of the mother figure. Toughness is required if one expects to escape from an identity inspired by a myth; selflessness results from a devotion to this myth. Because Shepard's mother characters attempt to both adhere to a myth and escape from it, they are thematically important facets of the family plays.

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