CHAPTER THREE

The Curse of Narcissism: Alienation and Fragmentation

One of the most disturbing phenomena of Western culture has been man’s sense of estrangement from the world he himself has made or inherited- in a word man’s alienation from himself and others. (Josephson 8)

The tragic sense of alienation experienced by human beings in their contemporary living conditions has been of major concern to sociologists since the Second World War. After David Reisman’s The Lonely Crowd, Christopher Lasch has probed deep into this sense of estrangement in his book; The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations. Lasch has subtly exposed the life in post modern America and has come up with startling observations on its narcissistic culture where in “to live for the moment is the prevailing fashion - to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity” (31). Criticizing the current mood, he remarks that survival has become a “catchword of the seventies” and collective narcissism the dominant disposition. Since the society has no future, it makes sense “to live only for the moment, to fix our eyes on our own private performance, to become connoisseurs of our own decadence and to cultivate transcendental self-
attention" (6). Postmodern American society exhibits a culture that is devoid of historical roots or traditions. It seems to have lost its sense of direction, purpose, and social or moral contract. Only the values proposed by capitalism seem to dominate—money, power and sexuality. It is a demoralized world in which "the culture of competitive individualism . . . has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self" (Lasch XV).

This inculcation of the narcissistic culture has produced in the modern American society a deep sense of alienation, frustration and hopelessness which finally manifests itself through fragmentation of the individual and the society. Frederic Jameson, expressing his concern over the startling transformation that the subject undergoes in the late-stage capitalist society, remarks that in such a society "contrasts such as anxiety and alienation are no longer appropriate . . . (instead, the) shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject" (qtd. in Kelley 383).

Both Sam Shepard and David Mamet started their dramatic career in the 1950's which, as De Rose observes, was a time when the institution of family began to dissolve, when sons turned to ineffectual and absent fathers for strength and love, and found
none: when the society of parents no longer sustained its off-
spings and the myths of Hollywood’s America were found
suddenly wanting by its youth. This was the advent of the
postmodern era in America when media generated myths grew to
such proportion and such speed that they lost all connections to
the reality from which they sprang. They became hollow
simulacra, infiltrating all aspects of American cultural identity, but
no longer capable of sustaining its inhabitants. (2)

Writing with a sense of commitment and social purpose, these
playwrights who have been labeled as “post-absurdists,” chose as their targets
for criticism, the contemporary American situation itself characterized by the
failure to communicate effectively and sincerely and the accompanying feelings
of alienation, disorientation and fragmentation. All these issues are dramatically
conveyed through the themes as well as the synchronized speech movements
and settings of the dramatic spectacle. A well-developed plot, in the
conventional sense has long lost its significance in the plays of Shepard and
Mamet. The major themes that dominate their plays being the sense of loss,
alienation and fragmentation of the individuals the plots quite often lose their
linear structure, and continuity. The absence of effective of communication, or
rather the problems of communication, are communicated by highlighting the alienated and fragmented existence of the characters in the plays.

In the plays of Shepard we perceive the impact of socio-economic charges that breed alienation among the individuals. The sudden destruction of a traditional agrarian way of life through rapid industrialization, the accompanying trauma, the shattering of one's personal and cultural mythology, one's sense of the self and the world, all these lead to alienation. Shepard vividly portrays the degenerating American society, which according to him, seems to be unfixed and illusory. The conflict between America's spiritual and cultural heritage and the empty high-tech simulations of life dominating contemporary culture is seriously worked out in his plays. Shepard himself has commented on the nature of the stories his characters tell:

The stories my characters tell are stories that are always unfinished, always imagistic, having to do with recalling experiences through a certain kind of vision. They are always fractured, fragmented, and broken. (qtd. in Kakutani 20)

The characters experience or undergo intense physical and psychic discomfort, a state in which "bodily illness becomes a catalyst to psychic vulnerability" (Orr. Tragicomedy 112). It deteriorates finally into paranoia, the watchful frenzied mistrust of an alien world. This is evident in La Turista in
which two young American tourists, Kent and his girl friend Salem suffer from debilitating maladies - severe sun burn and amoebic dysentery in the first act and sleeping sickness in the second. In the first act, we find that both of them have taken refuge in a hotel room in Mexico, thus keeping themselves estranged and cut off from the outside world. They browse through Time and Life and while away the time by engaging themselves in casual conversation, using language voraciously to camouflage their inherent fear and insecurity. The two, secure in their own pseudo physiological analysis get busily engaged in discussing their maladies. Kent proposes anthropological theories on the origin of certain races, while Salem talks like a medical expert describing the symptoms of diarrhoea and sunburn. They indulge endlessly in the analysis of various degrees of burns, which also serve to generate a feeling of being in the world. Gradually we find a shift in the tone of their discussion, when Kent, all of a sudden bursts into an abnormal fantasy talk on the nature of third degree burns:

The third begins slowly and creeps along the surface, grabbing hold and easing up. Biting down and relaxing away until the spaces get fewer and the biting gets harder. Everything burns and everything you touch is as hot as the sun. You stand away from everything else. You stand in midair with space all around you. The ground is on fire. The breeze feels like boiling hot water.
moon is just like the sun. You become a flame and dance in mid-air. The bottom is blue. The middle is yellow and changes to green. The top is red and changes to orange. The breeze dances with you. The flame reaches up and then shrinks and bursts into sparks. The ground bursts into flame and circles the breeze. The sparks dart through the breeze and dash back and forth hitting up against the flames and . . . . (Shepard, *La Turista* 260)

Kent's lengthy fantasy speech begins with macabre images of pain and then ends with identifying himself with the elements. This reveals his severe psychic discomfort and paranoia. No longer able to withstand his metaphysical dilemma and his lack of identity, he tries desperately to disappear from the world. This is the first stage where we see traces of personality disorder in Kent. An embodiment of all the superior complexes of being a postmodern American, Kent keeps himself complacently aloof from the mythical as well as the metaphysical roots of his existence. Kent's fragmentation is the outcome of maladjustment to the society. The intrusion of the Mexican boy into their privacy creates a stream of intolerance in Kent's mind. Kent and Salem are extreme narcissists in the sense that their self-absorption "insulates affluent Americans like them, against the horrors around them - poverty, racism, injustice and eases their troubled conscience" (Lasch: 25). The Mexican boy
assumes the role of an interpreter of the Mexican culture and begins to perform violent and uncouth actions like ripping the phone from the wall and spitting on Kent's face. He then takes Kent's place on his bed by the side of Salem and starts asserting his superiority over Kent. This unexpected intrusion of an alien outsider and his usurpation of his private territory aggravate Kent's existential anguish. The boy's actions may be interpreted as manifestations of Kent's own private fears and anxieties, which might have resulted in his self-absorption or rather alienation from his surroundings in Mexico. An ordinarily affluent white American would consider Mexicans to be of an inferior race. Kent, in a sense feels helpless and victimized, a feeling that enhances his transformation into a split or schizoid personality. He goes to the toilet and comes out as an altogether different person "dressed in a straight brimmed Panamanian hat, a linen shirt, hand made boots, underwear and a pistol around his waist" (267). He thus assumes the identity of a matinee idol and proudly struts up and down hitching his pilot on his hips and turning it on his trigger finger. He delivers a lengthy monologue that reveals all his hatred towards his own country, which he considers to be an isolated land of purification. "Nobody can come in and nobody can get out. An isolated land. That's what I call it" (267). "Everything's so clean and pure and immaculate up there that a man doesn't even have a chance to build up his own immunity. They're breeding a
bunch of lily livered weaklings up there simply but not having a little dirty water to toughen people up" (267). Shepard is here lashing out his severe critique against the American high culture that cultivates self-absorption and alienation among its members. As his normal self, Kent is shy and docile and suppresses his hidden fears and feelings. He easily succumbs to the atrocities of the outside world and his body readily gives way to physical ailments. He does not have the courage to criticize or overcome his dilemma. Through his alter personality, he exerts his wish to overcome all barriers of freedom and existence. He unconsciously idolizes the matinee star and identifies himself with him.

The second act opens with the young couple in an American hotel room. Kent now performs a recurrent pattern of walking, talking, yawning and sleeping which the doctor in civil war uniform diagnoses as sleeping sickness. Kent's somnambulism is in a way an induced state through which he wishes to isolate himself from his surroundings. Salem explains Kent's malady to the doctor:

Salem: We're talking about something. We'll be talking back and forth and we'll be not necessarily deeply involved in what we're saying, but nevertheless talking. And he'll gradually begin to go away.

Doc.: How do you mean?
Salem: You'll see a person like you're seeing me now, and I'm talking to you and you're talking to me and gradually something happens to me, while we're talking until I disappear.

Doc.: He leaves the room?

Salem: No he falls asleep. Like now he's sleeping. But before you came, he was talking to me. Now he's asleep. (251)

Kent's malaise is clearly psychological. His external symptoms are clear signs of inner sickness. "Things that show on the outside what the inside might be up to" (282). Here Kent experiences a breakdown of communication. Sleeping sickness makes him unable to communicate even with Salem. But the doctor's language which draws copiously from science and medicine is actually a sort of disguise that he uses to cover up his inability to understand Kent's malady. Clearly, a failure in proper communication is felt between Kent and the doctor as well as between the young couple. Kent talks in a disoriented manner, trapped in his imaginary world. He is unwilling to undergo any sort of treatment. Salem feels frustrated not knowing how to talk to him and desperately tries to wake him up from his somnambulistic talk. In his half-asleep state Kent weaves another fantasy of a man coming in to their bleak family house offering to set up his father in business. The doctor prescribes Benzedrine to keep Kent walking without falling asleep. When the doctor prepares to take rest for a while, Kent
objects and he begins to suspect the doctor’s intentions. He fears that the doctor
along with his fishy son is planning to perform some strange experiment upon
him in a secretive manner. Kent resorts to physical violence and tries to attack
the doctor, when he reveals his intention of transforming the dying man (Kent)
into a thing of beauty. Kent fantasizes himself being transformed into a
Frankenstein-like monster. In a verbal dual between him and the doctor, Kent
describes himself rising from the stainless steel table, bursting the leather bands
and escaping from captivity. Kent’s transformation into a monster becomes
complete when his gestures and movements become widely extravagant like the
movements in an African dance. The play ends when Kent in his role as a
monster, swings over the heads of Salem, Doc and Sonny, and crashes through
the wall of the set, leaving a cut out of his body.

Kent’s consciousness can be identified with that of a person suffering
from an extreme case of schizophrenia. James Glass’s observation on the
consciousness of a schizophrenic seems relevant here:

. . . it is a lost consciousness, it occupies strange territories. It is
hooked up to machines, it journeys to outer space, it experiences
itself connected to cosmic forces, it is an animal roaming in the
woods, it communicates with bees and flies . . . it sees agents of
massive conspiracies whose sole purpose is to torture, murder,
and dismember. In the truest sense, the schizophrenic lacks place.

Homeless, alienated, consciousness has been cast out of the social
would, left adrift without mooring or constancy. (147)

Kent experiences an extreme state of alienation in the mythic subculture
of Mexico, which makes him plunge into a psychic disorder. He is also
estranged from the empty myths and totems of civilized America. He has lost
touch with the origins of his primitive self in the process of civilization, and has
also outgrown the barren myths of his civilization.

Shepard does not develop a clear plot in LaTurista. Even the
chronological order of the two acts has been deliberately reversed. Actually, in
terms of chronology, it is the second act that has to precede the first. From this,
it is quite evident that his main intention has been to reveal the fragmented
consciousness of Kent, which he has succeeded in working out. Kent’s erratic
effort to escape through transformation is his response to the fear of
confronting the intensity of his alienation. The isolated hotel room, world of the
two tourists as it is represented in the language and staging, becomes itself a
signifying system for a state of alienation and dissociation, a state in which all
correspondence between world and object, self and world has been rendered
incomprehensible.
Arthur Kopit, another significant American playwright and a contemporary of Shepard and Marnet has also used “disease” and “disability” as metaphors in his plays. His Wings is about a stroke victim, whose disability certainly is an effective state for exploring the alienation of the patient. But more than that, “the world of the stroke victim as it is represented in the language and staging becomes itself a signifying system for a state of alienation and dissociation. a system in which all correspondences between word and object, self and world have been rendered incomprehensible” (Kelley 383). Emily, the victim, suffers from aphasia, a condition in which questions about the relationship between language and thought become explicit and difficult to resolve. As Emily awakens, she speaks in an almost Joycean stream of associations which rapidly devolves into jargonaphasia: “still . . . sun moon too or . . . three times happened may be globbidge rubbidged uff ‘and firded- forded me to nothing there try again . . . (Wings 23).

In his family trilogy which includes True West, Buried Child and The Curse of the Starving Class, Shepard probes deeper into the complexities of relationships between the members of a family. that is. between husband and wife, father and sons, brother and brother, to rake up the severe communication problems that lurk in the most private levels of familial relationships.
Set in an old home in Southern California, the action of *True West* focuses on the complexities in the relationship between two estranged brothers, Austin and Lee. About *True West* Shepard has remarked that his intention was to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn’t be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two sided. It’s a real thing: double nature... It’s not so cute. No some little thing we can get over. It’s something we’ve got to live with. (qtd. in Coe, “Saga of Sam Shepard” 112)

C. G. Jung has also acknowledged the double nature inherent in every man. As he states, “somewhere we have a sinister brother, our own flesh and blood counterpart, who holds and maliciously hoardes everything that we would so far willingly hide under the table” (8).

The action in *True West* begins with Austin working by candle light on his screenplay in a neatly ordered kitchen. He is distracted by the unexpected arrival of his estranged brother Lee, who is back, weary and deranged, from a long sojourn on the Mojave Desert. Lee’s words and gestures breed violence and chaos in Austin’s organized world. Lee insidiously breaks through Austin’s defenses and establishes a conflict by exposing his brother’s suppressed desires.
and motives. He forces Austin into communication with him by asking him to lend his car for carrying out his petty thefts. Austin refuses to lend him the car but agrees to give him some money if he so desired. Austin’s coldness infuriates Lee and he lunges at him, grabs him violently by the shirt and threatens him.

Lee: Don’t you say that to me. Don’t you ever say that to me! You may be able to get away with that with the Old Man. Git him tanked up for a week! Buy him off with yer Hollywood blood money, but not me! I can git my own money, my own way Big money. (Shepard, *True West 8*)

The rivalry among the brothers is exaggerated to a great extent as Lee interrupts a meeting between Austin and Saul Kimmer, the Hollywood producer, and soon he lures Kimmer to play a game of golf with him. The game leads to Kimmer’s getting drawn towards Lee’s idea for a modern western, an idea that Saul wants Austin to turn into a screenplay. This story centres on a man’s confrontation with his wife’s lover and involves a bizarre chase in which horses are ridden to the desert at night. A descriptive paragraph from Lee’s film outline indirectly hints at the relationship between the two brothers who are fundamentally opposite selves:

So they take off after each other straight into an endless black, prairie. The sun is just coming down and they can feel the night
on their backs. What they don't know is that each one of them is afraid, see. Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that... And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him... And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's goin. (27)

The second act opens with Lee's proclamation that Saul Kimmer has agreed to make Austin write the script for Lee's story. Austin retorts by saying "I'm already working on a script. I've got my own project. I don't have to write two scripts" (29). Lee admits that Kimmer is going to drop Austin's project in order to do Lee's. It is at this point, that Shepard slowly works out the transformation in Austin. The sense of betrayal, and the feeling of being victimized, torments Austin and causes ripples in his consciousness. He gradually begins to be different from his normal self, that is, his former identity as a sophisticated and reticent man. The state of anxiety induces inner tensions that create a divided self for Austin. Shepard here consciously and deliberately works out the fragmented existence of Austin, through a role reversal, which is a technique or a strategy that he adopts in order to visualize on the stage the mythic conflict of the second self.

Austin is a sophisticated product as well as a victim of the new modern west which in Tucker Orbison's words is "a superficially civilized collection of
junk” (508). He admits: “... I drive on the free way every day. I swallow the smog. I watch the news in colour. I shop in the safe way. I’m the one who’z in touch. Not him” (True West 35).

Shepard believes that an ideal west or a true west is the west that America has lost with the adoption of materialism and a parasitical life style. The values of the old west are extinct and Austin desperately shouts at Saul: “There’s no such thing as the West any more! It’s a dead issue. It’s dried up. Saul and so are you” (35). Orbison echoes Shepard’s feelings when he says: “This is the real West– the West of temporary living, freeways, and empty hearts ... this new West is a false demonic West: it has crushed imagination and feelings and substituted material success” (508).

Austin’s fragmentation becomes complete through a change in his behaviour pattern. He takes on his brother’s (Lee’s) identity and sprawls drunkenly on the floor, without sweater or spectacles, shirt out and a bottle in hand. Lee is now on the typewriter busy with his new project. A sort of reversal of roles occurs here. Austins’s rendition of “Red sails in the Sunset” infuriates Lee, who is now trying to concentrate and Austin taunts Lee “Now I’m the intruder” (38). While Lee struggles to write his script, Austin expresses his decision to earn his living by making a little tour of the neighbourhood and stealing some toasters, as Lee had earlier stolen televisions. Both the brothers
are equally incapable of communicating their hidden fears and desires in life, so they weave plots and stories. Austin's suppressed resentment and anger towards his irresponsible father who leads a wasteful life in the desert sprouts up in the form of a story which he narrates in a comical as well as pathetic tone. The story relates to the old man's tortured trek to the border to be fitted with a pair of false teeth by a Mexican dentist. Austin narrates his attempt to do something nice for his father, by taking him out to dinner at a Chinese restaurant. But the old man only wanted to drink and took his false teeth out placing them in the doggie bag with the chopsuey that he left on the bar. The story even though it lacks any sense of the rational in it is enough to evoke the sarcasm hidden in the son's attitude towards the useless father. Lee, unable to cope with the stress of writing a new story smashes the typewriter and burns the manuscript. By this time Austin has completely transformed into his alter self. He displays the loot from his overnight adventures—a dozen shiny toasters lined up in the kitchen counter. He offers Lee a toast and desperately requests him, "What if I come with you to the desert?" (48).

Austin expresses his metaphysical dilemma of living in an estranged and alienated city in America:

There's nothing down here for me. There never was. When we were kids, here it was different. There was a life here then. But
I keep comin’ down here thinkin’ it’s the fifties or somethin’. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. . . . There’s nothing real down here Lee. Least of all me. (49)

Austin even prepares to do slave work for Lee by writing his screenplay, just for the sake of escaping into the desert. Lee’s response is again a blunt refusal and declares that Austin is “not cut out for the desert” (55). Austin feels betrayed and he resorts to violence. His second self emerges with all its courage, and begins to strangle Lee. In his utterly disoriented and fragmented psychic state, Austin is thus driven to the very act of violence that he had earlier thought “he would never commit” (24). Lee falls on the floor as if dead, and Austin in an utter state of despair and confusion tries to escape from the house. Lee suddenly springs upon him ready to fight again. They begin another journey towards self-destruction. The play ends with the figures of the brothers caught clashing eternally in the vast desert-like landscape.

True West has invited a long array of critical remarks on the playwright’s dramaturgy: his treatment of the plot and his powerful mingling of myths and images. Lynda Hart observes that in True West, the West is “both a geographical reality and a psychological frontier and it is on this psychological frontier that the battle between Austin and Lee takes place” (97). William Kleb
has elaborated on the role reversal in *True West* by suggesting that it is a metaphorical representation of “the divided self,” a familiar condition in modern drama. As many psychologists have pointed out, in such a state, the individual lacks a firm central sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity. he doubts the permanence of things, the reliability and substantiality of natural processes and even fails to accept the reality of others. As a result “there is a rent or split in his relation with himself; he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather a split in various ways” (Laing 3).

Austin and Lee can be regarded as psychically related, as in the relationship between a self and its other or second self. C.F. Keppler’s description of the second self sounds interesting:

... the objective second self posses external reality, clearly independent of the first self... The subjective second self does share a basic psychical identity with the first self... It is [the] quality of paradox that makes the second self so difficult a figure to talk about... He is always “there”, a self in his own right, never translatable into a product of mental aberration; yet he is always “there” as well, his psyche intergrown by untraceable shared tendrils with that of his counterpart... (9-10)
The second self thus always suggests some aspect of the first self that has been suppressed or unrealized and it always intrudes into the life of the first and is responsible for the tension that exists between them. This is true in the case of Austin and Lee, if they are taken as the first and second selves respectively. The second self is the self that has been left behind, or overlooked or unrealized or otherwise excluded from the first self's self-conception. He is the self that must be compromised. In this context the play might be read as a confrontation between the first and second selves of a fragmented individual.

In *Buried Child* Shepard intends to examine the adverse effect of incest in the family on its members. The plot develops through the juxtaposition of the different fragmented psyches that are bound together in a fearful union by this dark secret. The story takes an Ibsenian turn through the gradual unraveling of the hidden guilt in the Dodge family. Dodge is the aged patriarch of the midwestern farmhouse whose agrarian culture has come into ruins. He is a crusty, whisky drinking, sickly old man permanently rooted to his sofa facing the television and the blank screen with the blue light flickering on his face. Halie, his wife occupies the room upstairs where all bygone memories are accumulated as pictures. The communication between Dodge and Halie occurs mainly without direct contact, with Halie yelling out at him from her room upstairs, and Dodge remaining silent most of the time refusing to answer her. Halie's
alienation can in a way be an outcome of the failure of her attempts to preserve the illusion of a happy and successful family. Her hopes are nurtured in her memory and in her fantasies, and even her remembrances are distorted. She has almost become a fragmented, borderline personality constantly wavering between the past and the present. Her frequent visits to the local pastor Father Dewis, to persuade him to construct a statue for her dead son Ansel, evoke vague doubts on her morality even in Dodge’s mind. Halie has been compensating her unhappy married life through her sons, thereby creating an unconscious vicious circle around them, which has ultimately turned out to be disastrous to each one of them. Her favorite son Ansel dies mysteriously in a motel room during his honeymoon. Bradley has become an aggressive psychic, who has had his leg amputated with a chain saw and is psychopathologically bent on terrorizing his father as well as others. Tilden is the eldest son, a good for nothing fellow, who has come back to the family in a “profoundly burned out and displaced state of mind” after living in Mexico for twenty years. He behaves in a deranged manner like an idiotic child. His arrival into the household carrying an armload of fresh corn, which he claims to have picked from the back yard that has been lying barren for more than thirty years, evokes a sense of irrationality in his conversation. Throughout the play, Tilden goes on performing actions that seem totally irrational and absurd. At the same time there are
instances when he speaks to Dodge as a truly sane person about his past years in New Mexico, where he had felt a strong sense of alienation. The conversation highlights the estrangement between father and son:

Dodge: Tilden, look you can’t stay here forever. You know that, don’t you?

Tilden: (spits in spittoon) I’m not.

Dodge: I know you’re not. I’m not worried about that. That’s not the reason I brought it up.

Tilden: What’s the reason?

Dodge: The reason is I’m wondering what you’re gonna do.

Tilden: You’re not worried about me, are you?

Dodge: I’m not worried about you.

Tilden: You weren’t worried about me when I wasn’t here. When I was in New Mexico.

Dodge: No. I wasn’t worried about you then, either.

Tilden: You should a worried about me then.

Dodge: Why’s that? You didn’t do anything down there, did you?

Tilden: I didn’t do anything.

Dodge: Then why should I have worried about you?

Tilden: Because I was lonely.
Dodge: Because you were lonely?

Tilden: Yeah. I was more lonely than I've been before

Dodge: Why was that?

(pause) Could I have some of the whisky you've got. . .

*(Buried Child 7)*

The conversation between father and son revolves around the word "worry" which both of them repeat several times. Dodge, rather cleverly or deliberately tries to be evasive in his talk with Tilden. But Tilden purposefully wants Dodge to realise his feeling of estrangement. Tilden's nature has become so disoriented that he even seems to lose his identity and existence as a grown up individual. When Halie accuses him of stealing corn, he sobs like an overgrown child. This gesture can be looked up on as a hint of his unnatural mother fixation. which might have ultimately resulted in his incestuous alliance with her, bringing out the gradual disintegration of the whole family. When Dodge falls asleep, we again find Tilden performing another strange action, which is quite shocking and absurd. He spreads the corn husks over the whole length of Dodge's body and repeats the procedure until the floor is clean of corn husks and Dodge is completely covered in them except for his head.

Tilden's bizarre action is followed by the entrance of Bradley, another psychotic character. As Shepard's stage descriptions reveal, " his left leg is
wooden, having been amputated above the knee. He moves with unexaggerated almost mechanical limp” (81). His very appearance induces a sense of fear and terror and the action he performs is all the more shocking. He shaves Dodge’s head while he is asleep, leaving bloody wounds on the scalp.

Act Two opens with the arrival of Vince and Shelly into the Dodge family. Vince claims himself to be Tilden’s son, a sort of prodigal son who has returned home after a long period of six years. He is accompanied by his girlfriend Shelly. Here again Shepard deliberately brings out the estrangement between the family members through the family’s non-recognition of Vince. Dodge makes deliberate attempts to convince himself that he does not recognise him and bluntly expresses his irritation and impatience at Vince’s queries:

Dodge: What are you talking about?

Do you know what you are talking about? Are you just talking for the sake of talking. Lubricating the gums?

Vince: I’m trying to figure out what’s going on here!

Dodge: Is that it?

Vince: Yes, I mean. I expected everything to be different.

Dodge: Who are you to expect anything? Who are you supposed to be?

Vince: I’m Vince! Your Grandson!
Dodge: Vince my Grandson!

Vince: Tilden’s son.

Dodge: Tilden’s son, Vince.

Vince: You haven’t seen me for a long time.

Dodge: When was the last time.

Vince: I don’t remember.

Dodge: You don’t remember.

Vince: No.

Dodge: You don’t remember. How am I supposed to remember if you don’t remember?

... 

Vince: Grandpa, Look--

Dodge: Stay where you are! Keep your distance. (89)

Halie and Tilden too express their failure to recognize Vince. When Shelly asks Tilden "Are you Vince’s father?", Tilden just stares at Vince and remarks "I had son once, but we buried him" (92). Throughout their conversation Tilden evades Shelly’s question whether he is really Vince’s father. The loss of recognition can be attributed to Tilden’s extremely fragmented consciousness. But quite unexpectedly Tilden begins to unveil the dark secret in the family by narrating the story of the illegal child and the way Dodge murdered
it. Tilden's statement "I had a son once, but we buried him" suggests that his mother's child is also his own. Dodge immediately dismisses such possibility by retorting: "That happened before you were born! Long before" (92). Earlier, Dodge had claimed the child as his own, stating that his "flesh and blood's buried in the backyard" (77). A few minutes later he changes his story once again:

Then Halie got pregnant again. . . We had enough boys already in fact. We hadn't been sleeping in the same bed for about six years . . . Halie had this kid. This baby boy. She had it . . . It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to pretend I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even when everyone around us knew. Everyone. All our boys knew. Tilden knew . . . Tilden was the one who knew better than any of us. (123-24)

Dodge not only denies that the buried child is his own but also suggests that Tilden is the father: a possibility he had earlier dismissed. The play ends with Tilden cradling the muddied corpse that he had dug up with the same fondness that he had previously shown while cradling corn and carrots. He takes it towards his mother.
Shepard makes a deliberate effort not to solve the mystery of the buried child. It seems that he purposefully wants to leave it unresolved, suggesting the gravity of the communication crisis existing between the members of the Dodge family.

Freud coined the term “narcissistic psychosis” to refer to the self-absorption of psychotics, their engrossment in an artistically isolated fantasy world, and their inability to maintain interpersonal relationships. Throughout the play Halie seems to be absorbed in her self-created fantasy world talking about her gloriously youthful past. At one instance she pours forth a lengthy, nostalgic monologue about her dead son Ansel. Then suddenly her reminiscence takes an unsettling tone and she fantasises the mysterious death of Ansel during his honeymoon:

The wedding was more like a funeral. You remember? All those Italians. All that horrible black greasy hair. The smell of cheap cologne. I think even the priest was wearing a pistol. When he gave her the ring, I knew he was a dead man. I knew it. As soon as he gave her the ring. But then it was the honeymoon that killed him. I knew he’d never come back from the honeymoon. I kissed him and he felt like a corpse. All white. Icy blue lips. He never used to kiss like that. Never before. I knew then that she’d
cursed him. Taken his soul. I saw it in her eyes. She smiled at me with that Catholic sneer of hers. She told me with her eyes that she'd murder him in his bed. Murder my son. (74)

Halie seems to be constantly wavering between the past and the present, which is typical of a fragmented personality. Recovering from her fantasies, she comes back to the present and starts cross-questioning Tilden. She accuses him of stealing the corn that he has brought home. After that she strides restlessly back and forth in the room and again resumes her quarrel with Dodge pouring forth an array of abuses:

Halie: (she stops) I don't know what's come over you, Dodge. I don't know what in the world's come over you. You've become an evil man. You used to be a good man.

Dodge: Six of one, a half dozen of another.

Halie: You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing!

Smelling up the house with your putrid body. Hacking your head off till all hours of the morning! Thinking up mean, evil stupid things to say about your own flesh and blood

(76)

Once highly successful Midwestern farmers, Dodge and Halie, the elderly couple should now be reaping the rewards of their long struggle for comfort and
security; instead they have become victims of frustration and alienation. They have for long been out of harmony in their marital relationship and Halie’s adultery is hinted at when Dodge suggests, “She won’t be back at night. There’s life in the old girl yet” (88). Halie’s conjugal infidelity, the incestuous act that she had committed has in fact been the major reason behind her family’s disintegration. As Lynda Hart remarks “the family in Buried Child suffers from the tyranny of the past. an action performed decades ago, a truth half-told that threatens to explode their slender hold on normality, turning their tedious day-to-day existence into a nightmare” (77).

The only sane character in the play is Shelley, the outsider who becomes an unbiased observer trying to make sense of the irrational actions and strange behaviour patterns of the members in the family. Expecting “turkey dinners and apple pie and all kinda stuff” in Vince’s ancestral home, she finds herself inside a madhouse, and is forced to ask: “what’s happened to this family anyway” (112). Shelly’s experience with each member of the family is tragic and menacing. Bradley, the disabled son is the first to victimize her. He threatens her in a cruel menacing tone and performs a vague sexual rite of domination upon her.

Bradley: Open your mouth.

Shelly: What?

Bradley: (motioning for her to open her mouth) Open up.
(She opens her mouth slightly).

Bradley: Wider. (She opens her mouth wider)

Bradley: Keep it like that.

[She does. Stares at Bradley. With his free hand he puts his fingers into her mouth. She tries to pull away].

Bradley: Just stay put!

[She freezes. He keeps his fingers in her mouth. Stares at her.

Pause. He pulls his hand out. She closes her mouth. Keeps her eyes on him. Bradley smiles]. (107)

Halie too behaves in an odd manner. She totally ignores Shelly and drinks whisky along with Father Dewis. She engages herself in a totally disoriented monologue mixing up roses and basketball in her speech, urging the need for putting up a bronze statue for her dead son. Shelly feels quite dejected and pleads with Halie “Don’t you wanna’ know who I am! Don’t you wanna know what I’m doing here! I’m not dead” (118). Halie still makes no effort to recognize Shelly and insists on calling the police to drive her out.

Shepard makes his play all the more complex without offering any solutions for the crisis in the Dodge family. The situation in the family complicates further with the sudden crashing in of Vince through the screen porch tearing off its hinges. The sane and rational young man has now
transformed into a deranged drunkard who inevitably fails to recognize the members of the family, and even Shelly. Vince’s actions become totally unpredictable. Singing loudly he hurls bottles and smashes them on the floor. He terrorizes his family members and takes over the position as head of the household. In a deranged manner he speaks to an imagined Army totally out of the context:

Vince: (Singing loudly as hurls bottles) “From the Halls of Motezuma to the Shores of Tripoli. We will fight our country’s battles on the land and on the sea.” (He punctuates the words “Montezuma,” “Tripoli,” “battles” and “sea” with smashed bottle each . . . .” (To imagined Army men) Have you had enough over there. ‘Cause there’s a lot more here where that came from! (Pointing to paper bag full of bottles). A Helluva lot more! We got enough over here to blow ya’ from here to kingdom come!

(125)

Strangely enough, both Halie and Dodge recognize Vince this time when Vince himself fails to recognize them after his transformation. “Who are you people?” (126) he asks. The cycle of rejection comes full circle and Vince takes on the characteristics of alienation that were initially seen in Dodge. Dodge
proclaims his last will and testament. He leaves the house in Vince’s name and
dies quite unnoticeably. All except Vince are unaware of his death. Meanwhile
Vince in another fit of fantasy talk expresses his strange desire to stay back in
the family.

Vince: I was gonna run last night. I was gonna run and keep right
on running. I drove all night... I could see myself in the
windshield... My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied
every thing about it. As tho’ I was looking at another man
... And every breath marked him. Marked him forever
without his knowing. And then his face changed. His face
became his father’s face. Same bones. Same nose. Same
breath. And his father’s face changed to his grand father’s
face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to
faces I’d never seen before but still recognized. Still
recognized the bones underneath. The eyes. The breath.
The mouth... (130)

Vince plainly ignores Shelly and her pleas to come along with her. She is
forced to leave the house, abandoned and dejected. Vince becomes the
“biological inheritor of the decaying doctrines and deceased genetic traits,
unavoidably handed down from parent to child, that predetermines one’s life”
(De Rose 108). Here the family becomes a vicious circle that holds its offspring in a deadly grip to continue its tradition of alienation and non-communicability. Shepard, as Lynda Hart observes depicts the family as a paradoxical union- "life giving, nurturing, protective, destructive, inoperative but above all necessary, inescapable" (69).

Shepard himself has remarked that although the fields of the family farm may be "green lush wet dripping corn bacon and tomatoes the size of your fist", inside the house there are fist fights across the tables, brother fights father and wife fights father, son fights sister, brother fights the priest" (Shepard. Hawkmoon 68). The family is neither integral nor intense, neither binding nor nuclear. Minimal encounters take place with minimal scope for communication. 

Curse of the Starving Class is one such play which powerfully portrays the repulsive force that acts within the family estranging the members from each other. This might be due to their inculcation of certain narcissistic traits that make them withdrawn and secluded from the rest of their kin. The creative energies of the members have gone astray due to lack of proper direction and purpose. Severe communication problems linger in the Tates family that has only four members: Weston the father, his wife Ella, Wesley the teenaged son and Emma the daughter. Each member is self-absorbed in his or her own private world. Weston has degenerated into a total drunkard creating havoc in the
house with his repeated drunken forays and irresponsible ways of spending. Ella is almost alienated from her husband and proceeds with her own plans of selling the farmhouse, and of indulging in an illegal affair with Taylor the local lawyer.

The play opens to Wesley cleaning up the pieces of the broken front door. His drunkard father had arrived home the previous night to find that the door had been locked against him by his wife. In an intoxicated rage, Weston had battered down the door and disappeared. Wesley is deeply disturbed by his father's reckless and irresponsible ways of life. He is a sensitive young man who is upset about the "space around me like a big black world" and aware that "any second something could invade me, some foreign, something indescribable" (*Curse of the Starving Class* 137). His monologue reflects his hidden apprehensions, a sense of physical and emotional invasion of his being by his father's violence:


Then no sound. Then softly crying . . . . (138)

Weston's violent attack upon his own house and his terrorizing of his wife and family are both literal and symbolic destruction of the protective circle of the family. He "not only violates their safety but by virtue of his absence as father and protector leaves them open to attack and invasion from others" (De Rose 92). Ella believes that a curse has befallen her family that condemns it to witness repeated acts of violence and self-destruction.

Ella: Do you know what this is? It's a curse. I can feel it. It's invisible, but it's there. It's always there. It comes onto us like nightmare. Every day I can feel it. Everyday I can see it coming. And it always comes. Repeats itself. It comes even when you do everything to stop it from coming. Even when you try to change it. And it goes back. Deep. It goes back and back to tiny little cells and genes. To atoms. To tiny little swimming things; making up their minds without us.
Plotting in the womb. Before that even. In the air. We’re surrounded with it. It’s bigger than the government even. It goes forward too. We spread it. We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down. and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us. (174-75)

The discordant notes in the marital life of the parents have created serious reverberations in the behaviour pattern of the teenaged children too. Both of them fail to behave in a normal manner. Years of suppressed feelings of fear and insecurity have considerably altered Wesley’s nature. Occasionally we find him behaving as an eccentric and his actions are quite unpredictable. At one instance, we find him pissing on the 4-H club demonstration charts prepared by his sister, with a malicious pleasure. He even has justifications for his action: “I’m opening up new possibilities for her. Now she’ll have to do some thing else. It could change her whole direction in life. She’ll look back and remember the day her brother pissed all over her charts and see that day as a turning point in her life” (143).

A few minutes later Wesley appears carrying a small live lamb and keeps it inside the fence that he has built in the kitchen. He ignores Ella’s and Emma’s repeated pleas to take the infested lamb away from the kitchen, but jokingly...
retorts that the house has no food to get contaminated through the germs spread by the sick lamb. Wesley even talks to the lamb as if to a human being:

"You're lucky. I'm not really starving. You're lucky this is a civilized household. You're lucky it's not Korea and the rains are pouring through the cardboard walls and you're tied to a log in the mud and you're drenched to the bone and you're skinny and starving, but it makes no difference because some one's starving more than you. Some one's hungry. And his hunger takes him outside with a knife and slits your throat and eats you raw. His hunger eats you and you're starving. (156—57)

Wesley's predisposition towards violence is evident in his speech and actions. Emma, his sister observes this as a characteristic of their family: "A short fuse they call it. Runs in the family. His father was just like him. And his father before him. Wesley is just like Pop too. Like liquid dynamite" (152). Being the youngest member of the family Emma is a spoiled brat in the eyes of her brother as well as her mother. "She's got the curse" is Ella's justification for her daughter's mercurial shifts in mood and her wild swings between being adult and child. She constantly expresses her desire to escape from her family. "How am I ever going to get out of here?" (148). She ponders and proclaims her intention of leaving the house someday. "I can't stay here for ever" (148). Like a
borderline personality Emma finds delight in weaving fantasies about her mother's affairs with Taylor. In fact she unconsciously tries to inflict upon her mother, her own feelings of isolation, helplessness and abandonment. Her dislikes for her mother's illegal affair finds outlet through her lengthy fantasy talk where she uses crazy automobile language to express her strong resentment:

Emma: ... They have to hike five miles to town. They come to a small beat up gas station with one pump and a dog with three legs. There's only one mechanic in the whole town and that's me. They don't recognize me though. They ask if I can fix their 'carro' and I speak only Spanish. I've lost the knack for English by now. I understand them though and give them a lift back up the road in my rebuilt four wheel-drive International. I jump out and look inside the hood. I see that it's only the motor inside the distributor that's broken. but I tell them that it needs an entire new generator a new coil, points and plugs and some slight adjustments to the carburetor. It's an overnight job and I'll have to charge them for labor. So I set a cot up for them in the garage and after they've fallen asleep. I take out the entire engine and put in a rebuilt volks wagen block. In the
morning. I charge them double for labor. see them on their way and then resell their engine for a small mint. (162-63) Self-absorbed in her own plans, Emma plainly wishes that her mother and Taylor never come back. “Maybe they’ll never come back, and we’ll have the whole place to ourselves. We could do a lot with this place” (164), she tells her brother Weston.

Shepard here portrays a family whose members are aware of each other’s plans to a certain extent but who do not confront each other direly with their emotional reactions to the threatened abandonment. Like Emma, Wesley too has hopes of escaping to Alaska, which according to him is undiscovered and full of possibilities. Each member of the Tate family wants to leave the household and go in search of greener pastures.

Both the mother and the father act as rivals craving to sell their property. Weston confronts the children with his decision of selling the house, to which both of them strongly disagree. Wesley protests “I’m still living here. I’m living here right up to the point when I leave” (168). Weston in a threatening tone speaks about the poison that has been passed on to the family from generation to generation:

Weston: ... Look at my outlook. You don’t envy it, right?

Wesley: No.
Weston: That’s because it is full of poison. Infected. And you recognize poison, right? You recognize it when you see it?

Wesley: Yes.

Weston: yes, you do. I can see that you do. My poison scares you.

Wesley: Doesn’t scare me.

Weston: No?

Wesley: No.

Weston: Good. You’re growing up. I never saw my old man’s poison until I was much older than you. Much older and then you know I recognized it?

Wesley: How?

Weston: Because. I saw myself infected with it. That’s how. I saw me carrying it around. His poison in my body. (168)

When Wesley informs Weston of his mother’s dealings with Taylor and of her efforts to sell off their house, Weston feels enraged and bursts out:

Weston: I’ll kill her. I’ll kill both of them! Where’s my gun? I had a gun here! A captured gun!

Wesley: Take it easy.

Weston: No. you take it easy! This whole thing has gone far enough! It’s like living in a den of vipers! Spies!
Conspiracies behind my back! I'm being taken for a RIDE BY EVERYONE OF YOU! I'm the one who works! I'm the one who brings home food. THIS IS MY HOUSE! I BOUGHT THIS HOUSE! AND I'M SELLING THIS HOUSE! AND I'M TAKING ALL THE MONEY. Because it's owed me! You all owe it to me! Every last one of you! She can't sell this house away from me! It's mine. (170)

The poison in his veins gush speedily with all its intensity and he roars insanely:

... I'll track them all down. Every last one of them, your mother too. I'll track her down and shoot them in their bed.

In their hotel bed. I'll splatter their brains all over the vibrating bed. I'll drag him to the hotel lobby and slit this throat.... (171)

Finally the inevitable happens. The curse in the family overtakes the son Wesley. In the Third Act we see a sudden transformation in Wesley. He walks around the house, stark naked, in a dazed and deranged manner. He has butchered the sick lamb for food, while the refrigerator is stuffed with food. He moves towards the refrigerator, opens it, pulls out all kind of food and eats ravenously. He then dresses himself in the filthy baseball cap, overcoat and
tennis shoes discarded by his father. Like a schizoid he speaks in a self-absorbed manner:

I tried taking a hot bath. Hot as I could stand it. Then freezing cold. Then walking around naked. But it didn’t work. Nothing happened. I was waiting for something to happen. I went outside. I was freezing cold out there and I looked for something to put over me. I started digging around in the garbage and I found his clothes... I started putting all his clothes on. His baseball cap, his tennis shoes, his over coat. And every time I put one thing on it seemed like a part of him was growing on me. I could feel him taking over me. (196)

Wesley inherits the curse of his father. The play concludes with Weston leaving for Mexico to elude the crooks Slater and Emerson, to whom he owed money. Emma plans to break away from the family to make easy bucks, through antisocial activities but gets killed inside the car that Slater and Emerson had blown up as a warning to Weston.

Living in a world that has become unfixed, unreal and incomprehensible, modern man finds himself at odds with his environment, and his culture. He even doubts his own sense of personal identity, his wholeness as a human being. Gradually changes occur in his mode of perception of the universe as well as his
fellow beings. His vision becomes blurred and disoriented. He begins to experience a painful sensation of estrangement and alienation — a feeling that makes him more and more claustrophobic and withdrawn. He cocoons in his own private world of fantasies and hallucinations. This is the state of mind that psychiatry labels as fragmented or schizoid. This type of personality disorder affects the normal self of a person. He acquires or seems to exhibit at times a behaviour pattern of a totally different self, in a totally different, surrounding or environment. The language that one speaks is a mark of one's character and personality. The person afflicted with multiple personality disorder, which is a fragmented state of mind, exhibits an astonishing change in his use of language too. He quickly and easily seems to adopt or acquire the tone and language style, gestures and movements particular to his newly acquired identity. Kent in La Turista, and Wesley in Curse of the Starving Class are clear examples. This transformation may occur gradually or all of a sudden.

The sense of loss and alienation experienced by the protagonist, again becomes the theme of David Mamet's play Edmond. Written in the background of the "me-decade" Mamet makes his protagonist enact the agony and panic of life in a bustling metropolis. Like any other common man, Edmond too feels alienated and cut off from his traditions. He feels alienated even from his sexuality. He has almost reached the verge of a fragmented or schizoid state,
split as he is into a series of sexual, social and economic functions. Edmond's situation corresponds neatly with the account that Erich Fromm has given on the nature of the postmodern man:

Post modern man is more profoundly perplexed about the nature of man than his ancestors were. He is now on the verge of spiritual and moral insanity. He does not know who he is and having lost the sense of who and what he is, he fails to grasp the meaning of his fellowmen, of his vocation and of the nature and purpose of knowledge. (XI - XII)

Mamet has stated elsewhere on Edmond:

Edmond precipitates himself into an individual period of destruction—into a downward slide, so that he can find rest. Which is what is going to happen in society... it is inevitable. If you take an overall view you can see that any place you care to look, whether it is destruction of the environment by economics or destruction of the earth by nuclear weapons, we are like a child spilling its milk... we are trying to solve something by destruction (in the hope of finding) a phase of rest. (qtd. in Dean 151)

Edmond is a man in his mid-thirties who fits well into the category of Lasch's narcissist:
Acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits he does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future but demands immediate gratification, and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire. (XVII)

The very fact that the play opens with the protagonist’s visit to the fortune-teller suggests that all is not well with his life. He is tormented by a certain problem which the fortune-teller diagnoses as:

You are not where you belong. It is perhaps true none of us are, but in your case this is more true than in most. The world seems to be crumbling around us. You look and you wonder if what you perceive is accurate. And you are unaware what your place is. To what extent you are cause and to what effect . . . . (Mamet, Edmond 16)

Edmond’s sense of rootlessness and disorientation manifests itself in his relationship with his wife too. This is why he can choose to leave his home and his wife for the silliest of reasons.

Edmond: Yes. Alright – I’m going. (Pause. He gets up and starts out of the room)

Wife: Will you bring me back some cigarettes?

Edmond: I’m not coming back.
Wife: what?

Edmond: I'm not coming back (Pause)

Wife: What do you mean?

Edmond: I'm going and I'm not going to come back (Pause)

Wife: You're not ever coming back?

Edmond: No.

Wife: Why not? (Pause)

Edmond: I don't want to live this kind of life.

Wife: What does that mean?

Edmond: That I can't live this life.

Wife: "you can't live this life" so you're leaving me.

Edmond: yes.

Wife: Ah. Ah. Ah. And what about ME? Don't you love me any more?

Edmond: No.

Wife: You don't.

Edmond: No.

Wife: And why is that?

Edmond: I don't know.

Wife: And when did you find this out?
Edmond: A long time ago.

Wife: You did.

Edmond: Yes.

Wife: How long ago?

Edmond: Years ago.

Wife: You've known for years that you don't love me.

Edmond: Yes (Pause).

Wife: Oh (Pause) Then why did you decide you've leaving now?

Edmond: I've had enough.

Wife: But why now?

Edmond: Because you don't interest me spiritually or sexually.

(Pause). (18-20)

The wife feels crushed, devastated and insulted. In a cry of despair she closes the door, symbolizing the severance of all ties between them.

Wife: ... Good-bye. Thank you. Good-bye (Pause). Good-bye (Pause). Get out. Get out of here. And don't you ever come back. Do you hear me? (exits closing the door on him). (21)

The forthcoming scenes gradually unfold the lonely, schizoid nature of Edmond drifting towards self-destruction. He sets out to prove his existence through bizarre sexuality and through violence and murder. He begins his
unclerworld journey visiting a bar, a peep show and a whorehouse. He wades through the various stages of the process towards “liberation” which he identifies as “pussy . . . power . . . money . . . adventure . . . self destruction . . . religion . . . release . . . ratification” (24). Everywhere he feels cheated and after each adventure he finds his alienation mounting up. He is abused, deceived and beaten up, and fails to find any community feeling, compassion or fulfillment. He even pawns his wedding ring to buy a “survival knife”.

In his plunge into the darkness of New York’s underworld, he visits in addition to bars, peep shows and whorehouses, massage parlours, card sharks, sordid hotels, pawn shops and pimps. At each stage he undergoes a gradual loss of innocence and a corresponding brutalization. He also becomes more and more alienated and fragmented. He loses his individuality as well as dignity in his cheap dealings with women. He hopes to receive love and intimacy from Glenna, a young acting student whom he has met in the underworld. When he finds communication impossible even with her, he stabs her to death which leads to his arrest. Only towards the end, when everything has gone out of hand and his relationship with his wife has reached the brink of divorce, does Edmond painfully realize:

I know at certain times we wished we could be . . . Closer to each other. I can say that now. I’m sure this is the way you feel when
someone near you dies. You never said the things you wanted desperately to say. It would have been so simple to say them.

(Pause) But you never did. (88)

Both in his dealings with women at the peep show and at the health club, Edmond encounters cold, bored and disinterested responses. The language of sex has been drained of all its emotional content; all that remains is the vulgar physical act. Edmond’s naivety and gentleness are of little interest for the prostitute. For her it is just another deal with a man: “for a straight fuck, that would be a hundred and fifty” (42). But Edmond yearns for something more in their relationship than a simple sexual and fiscal exchange, which he never gets. As the play progresses we find Edmond becoming increasingly frustrated and lonely. He gradually loses his normal self and slowly gets fragmented. The earlier politeness and reticence of his speech and actions give way to a raw violent, almost primal scream. Years of anger and frustration begin to rise to the surface in a poisonous surge. The transformation occurs when he finds himself cheated and beaten by some card players. He takes refuge in a hotel where he again realizes that his wallet has been stolen. The hotel clerk refuses to get involved in his problem or help him in any manner. At this point Edmond plainly bursts out:

Edmond: Do those phones require a dime?

Clerk: (Pause) I’m sure. I don’t know.
Edmond: You know if they need a dime or not. To get a dial tone
... you know if they need a dime for chrissake. Do you
want to live in a world like that? I've been hurt! Are you
blind? Would you appreciate if I acted this way to you?
(Pause) I asked you one simple thing: Do they need a
dime?. (51)

After being turned out from the hotel Edmond finds himself on the
subway where again he tries to engage in a friendly conversation with a woman.
“My mother had a hat like that (Pause) I . . . I'm not making conversation. She
wore it for years. She had it when I was a child” (58). The woman however tries
to move away from him without responding. This becomes too much for
Edmond who has already become frustrated and disoriented and all of a sudden
he grabs her and bursts out in a shocking maniacal manner:

I wasn't just making it up. It happened . . . who the fuck do you
think you are? . . . I'm talking to you . . . what am I? A
stone. . . Did. I say “I want to lick your pussy? . . . I said “My
mother had that same hat” . . . you cunt . . . what am I? A dog?
I'd like to slash your fucking face . . . I'd like to slash your mother
fucking face . . . (58)
For Edmond, the evasion by the woman is intolerable. Despite his efforts to make innocent conversation, she has misinterpreted his words as a veiled sexual advance. Edmond spits his venom on the woman, as a sort of cruel revenge for her indifference towards him. He literally disfigures her total personality using the sort of sexual jibes she fears.

Edmond’s transformation from a mild and reticent man into a dangerous criminal is gradual. His quarrel with a pimp ends up in physical violence. Like a hysteric he pours out a torrent of abuses and insults to assuage his anger. He denounces his victim by spitting on him. Edmond’s acquired boldness and masculinity are dominant in his dealings with Glenna. He impresses her through his macho image in the beginning. He even dares to shred off his overpoliteness to come straight to the point:

Edmond: ... I want to go home with you tonight.

Glenna: Why?

Edmond: Why do you think? I want to fuck you (Pause) It’s as simple as that. What’s your name?

Glenna: Glenna. (pause). What’s yours?

Edmond: Edmond. (67)
In spite of all his efforts, Edmond fails to impress Glenna and break the barrier of non-communication. His authoritarian manner of talking and insistence on knowing the truth about Glenna's profession irritates her and even scares her:

Glenna: I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Edmond: Oh, by the Lord, yes, you do. Say it with me.

(She takes out a vial of pills) What are those?

Glenna: Pills.

Edmond: For what? Don’t take them.

Glenna: I have this tendency to get anxious.

Edmond: (knocks them from her hand) Don’t take them. Go through it. Go through with me.

Glenna: You are scaring me.

Edmond: I know I am not. I know when I’m scaring you. Believe me (76).

Throughout their conversation, Edmond dominates over her and tries to impose himself upon her:

Glenna: GET OUT GET OUT! GET OUT! LEAVE ME THE F**K ALONE!!!

WHAT DID I DO, PLEDGE MY LIFE TO YOU? I LET YOU F**K ME.

GO AWAY.

Edmond: Listen to me. You know what madness is?
Glenna: I told you to go away. (Goes to phone. Dials).

Edmond: I’m lonely too. I know what it is too. Believe me. Do you know what madness is? . . . It’s self-indulgence. (77)

Fed up with his pestering, Glenna hysterically calls out for help several times and cries out in panic: “Will somebody help you are the get away from me! You are the devil. I know who you are. I know what you want me to do. Get away from me. I curse you, you cant kill me. get away from me I’m good” (78).

Realizing that Glenna would never satisfy his wants, Edmond violently makes contact with her by stabbing her. Colin Stinton comments on the reason behind Edmond’s action. “To have some one graphically identify his sense of achievement with evil makes him white with rage and in a moment of impetuosity and turmoil he stabs her” (qtd. in Dean 169).

Mamet’s Edmond is a narcissist of a certain order, in the sense that he yearns for self-fulfillment, in a world of competitive individualism. His narcissism is of a pathological kind in the sense in which psychoanalysts understand it. Pathological narcissism, as Lasch has pointed out, is characterized by “a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings” (33). Edmond seems to exhibit all these personality disorders in his dealings with others. As Lasch remarks, “Every society reproduces its culture – its norms, its
underlying assumptions, its modes of organizing experience in the individual in
the form of personality . . . Psychosis . . . is the final outcome of all that is
wrong with a culture" (34).

The borderline personality that Edmond has become has to depend on
others for constant infusions of approval and admiration. He must attach himself
to someone, living an almost parasitic existence. At the same time his fear of
emotional dependence, together with his manipulative, exploitative approach to
personal relations, makes these relations bland, superficial and deeply
unsatisfying as in the case of his relationship with Glenna. Edmond lacks the
knack to communicate properly with his fellow beings, especially with the
weaker sex. His dealings always evoke suspicion and hatred. This makes him
desperate, and when the girl in the subway runs away from him, he shouts:

Edmond: You don’t know who I am . . . Is everybody in this town
insane? . . . Fuck you . . . fuck you . . . fuck you . . . fuck
the lot of you . . . fuck you all . . . I don’t need you . . . I
worked all my life. (59)

The repeated use of obscene words clearly reveals his sense of frustration and
helplessness.

Edmond portrays the haunting picture of a man who becomes totally
divided and fragmented. He ultimately ends up in prison where his whole
individuality is put at stake. The play ends with a scene inside the prison where Edmond, totally shattered and deranged, performs fellatio with his fellow black prisoner. The collapse of his sensibility is reflected in the breakdown of his language:

I . . . (Pause) I . . . (Pause) I don't . . . I . . . I don't . . . (Pause)
I . . . (pause) I don't . . . (pause) I don't . . . (pause) I don't think . . . (Pause) I . . . (pause). (97)

Edmond's idea of himself has thus dissolved leaving behind only “an impotent stuttering, heart breaking in its desperation” (Dean 186).

Mamet's *Duck Variations*, which closely resembles Albee's *The Zoo Story* also raises questions of alienation in modern society. Preoccupied as Mamet is with the problematic of personal relations and the failure in communication, his *Duck Variations* too enacts the existential dilemma of man, symbolized here by the plight of two elderly men, George and Emil. Their talk about the ducks in the river, and the duck's life, in fact, becomes a parody of their own life.

The two men, George and Emil are regular visitors at the park near the lake. Their conversation, wherein each struggles for verbal supremacy over the other in a continuing debate about ducks, is really concerned with the fear of change and the terrors of the modern world. Their real anxieties and fears are
revealed less by what they say than by what they studiously avoid saying. Mamet readily exposes the evasive strategies of Emil and George when they strive to communicate their anxieties about life's, bleakness, monotony and its inevitable end. Both are drifting towards old age and are in a way afraid of death. They indulge in a constant and apparently meaningless chatter, in order to avoid the silence they fear. As Bigsby remarks. "The two old men are on the edge of more than a city and a lake; they are faced with their own irrelevance and their potential end. Their only resource lies in conversation, in the world as they recreate it"  

David Mamet 28).

The sight of a duck precipitates a discussion of its life cycle, an innocent distraction. until the simple logic of their own invention leads them to the very fact of death that they had always wanted to avoid. Mamet is here expressing, though unconsciously, through the mouth of his characters, the principle of Social Darwinism or the survival of the fittest that operates in the life of the ducks. This is equally relevant to the life of human beings:

Emil  He dies.

George: One day, yes - He dies. He gets lost . . .

Emil: And our duck moves up.

George: He is now the leader. It is he who guides them from one home to the next. They all know the way. Each of them
has it in him to know when the time is to move... But he

... He will be in charge until...

Emil: Yes.

George: Just like the other one...

Emil: There's no shame in that.

George: Just like the previous duck...

Emil: It happened to him, it's got to happen to him.

George: The time comes to step down.

Emil: He dies.

George: He dies, he leaves... something. And another duck...

moves on up. (Duck Variations 80-81)

George and Emil are painfully aware that the time has come for them to step down since their lives have already become mellow. This constant dread of old age and its accompanying mental as well as physical agonies are rightly the by products of the narcissistic culture. The conversation of the old men amounts to an elaborate series of attempts to make sense out of the apparent pointlessness of their own existence - to place themselves inside a plot that guarantees them status, significance and relief from their fear of death. They try hard to reassure themselves that each life has got a purpose and a reason. Emil insists:
Nothing is for Nothing . . . Everything has got a purpose... Every blessed thing . . . that lives has got a purpose . . . Sweat glands . . . We don’t sweat for nothing . . . you know . . . It’s all got a rhyme and a reason. Even these we, at this time do not clearly understand. There’s nothing you could possibly name that doesn’t have a purpose. Don’t even bother to try. Don’t waste your time . . . It’s all got a purpose. The very fact that you are sitting here right now on this bench has got a purpose. (82)

For both George and Emil, the park is the only place that provides a retreat from their monotonous and lonely life inside their concrete apartments. “Joyless . . . Cold concrete . . . Stuff . . . Linoleum . . . Imitation”(87). Their alienation is clearly reflected in their lives. “I sit at Home. I can come to the park. At the park, the only place I have to go is here” (87).

The estrangement that they feel is even more severe towards the end of the play when they casually talk about the routine of ancient Greeks:

Old. Old men. Incapable of working. Of no use to their society. Just used to watch the birds all day. First Light to Last Light. First Light. Go watch birds-Last light. Stop watching birds . . . Go home . . . Watching each other . . . (94)
George and Emil try hard to keep their patter going to avoid the dangerous silences that remind them both of their inevitable death.

*Reunion* is another Mamet play that enacts the theme of estrangement between the members of a family, this time between the father and the daughter. The young daughter, divorced and remarried, comes to visit her ex-alcoholic father after a separation of many years. The reunion as the title implies occurs only at the superficial level, i.e. they re-encounter one another. Long years of separation, non-communication and alienation have irrecoverably destroyed the intimacy between the parent and offspring; still they have come together out of a simple need. They both still feel abandoned, lonely or distraught. “Time has opened a gulf between them which seems unbridgeable. They are strangers trying to recreate a relationship they fear; for it tells them their own decline” (Bigsby, *David Mamet* 36).

Mamet poignantly brings out the pathetic fate of the family as a social institution in contemporary America, through his treatment of the plot. The daughter Carol herself speaks out the enormity of the situation “… Everyone’s divorced. Every kid on the block’s got three set of parents … I come from a Broken Home. The most important institution in America” (*Reunion* 29). Bernie, Carol’s father speaks out the necessity of the narcissistic need for survival strategies. He advises his daughter. “It’s a fucking jungle out there. And
you got to learn the rules because nobody's going to learn them for you... pay the price. Always the price. Whatever it is" (23-24). Bernie has been following the true path of the "narcissist": "To live for the moment . . . to live for yourself not for your predecessors or posterity" (Lasch 5). Lasch elaborates the idea:

Narcissism appears realistically to represent the best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions therefore tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present in varying degrees in every one. These conditions have also transformed the family, which in turn shapes the underlying structure of personality: A society that fears it has no future is not likely to give much attention to the needs of the next generation, and the ever present sense of historical discontinuity – the blight on our society – falls with particularly devastating effect on the family. (50)

Bernie is twice divorced, so is the woman whom he intends to marry again at present. He has been estranged not only from Carol but also from his son. No stability exists in human relationships, and marriage has done basically nothing to minimize the loneliness that it breeds in his case. When asked by his daughter why he is thinking of marrying again, he replies "Companionship" – a word which compresses all the needs, pains and ironies of personal and social
experience. Bernie thus embraces the very pragmatism and materialism that confirms his narcissistic existence.

Married.

Living well . . . .

The rest is not very important.

It's for the weaklings . . . .

Take a chance.

You got to take your chance for happiness.

You got to grab it.

You got to know it and you got to want it.

And you got to take it.

Because all the possessions was in the world.

can't take it from you. (Reunion 23-24)

The daughter longs for contact even if it is with an ex-alcoholic father whom she had not seen for twenty years. But the father has taken a different stand. His conviction that "I am what I am and that's what happiness comes from . . . ." (26), does nothing to solve her problem or to meet her sense of need. The play ends with nothing resolved. No sincere union has taken place between the father and the daughter.
The works of David Mamet and Sam Shepard are conscious attempts to dramatize the contemporary American sensibility. Mamet has remarked, "In the theatre today, we're beginning to recognize ourselves as Americans. In the sixties, we rejected pride in being an American. In the seventies, the theater is saying that being American is nothing to be ashamed of. But we have to learn how to deal with it. We need to take a look at certain taboo aspects in ourselves" (qtd. Bigsby American Drama 3. 274).

Shepard likewise, has painted an inner, imaginative landscape that forms his own response to the personal and social conflicts engendered by the American culture. His characters cherish the old American dream but find it hard to realize or fulfil it in contemporary America. The new West with its huge corporations and bureaucracies has crushed the old West and its traditions. Shepard's characters seek refuge in their own fragile world of imagination in order to survive in a hostile environment. They struggle to choose between isolation and attachment— a situation with which the theatre world has become familiar through the plays of Beckett and Pinter.