Anxiety in the Early Plays of Shepard

Shepard’s plays, especially the early ones, were written when he was passing through difficult times in New York city, and his play 4-H Club deals with the problems of poverty and unemployment of the youth of those days. Icarus’s Mother, Red Cross, and Action express his apocalyptic vision. In The Unseen Hand, he protests strongly against the totalitarianism that was spreading sporadically during and after the Second World War. As Leslie Wade writes, “he has fascinated audiences with an effulgent, often hypnotic drama of American anxiety and ambition” (1). Wade adds: “His plays may be viewed as artefacts (sic) that document contemporary American History” (2).

The plays of Shepard, shorter in comparison with Pinter’s early plays appear to be fragments. Bigsby observes that, Shepard “has the 1960s desire to make fragments cohere and the 1970s belief that truth may ultimately lie in those fragments” (CITAD 3:221). His plays appear to have no satisfying ending. He once said in an interview with Carol Rosen: “I hate endings. You have to end it somehow. I like beginnings. Middles are tough; but endings are just a pain in the ass. It’s very hard to end stuff” (Interview “Silent Tongue” 36). This comes from his conviction that “Everybody’s caught up in a fractured world” (UH 44). In order to present this “fractured world” he sometimes resorts to myths, which according to him are the expression of the mystery around us, and David J. DeRose observes that, “Sam Shepard has created his own myth, but his life and his art seem to be a constant struggle to retain control of that myth” (2).

Richard Gilman remarks that many of Shepard’s plays “are in fact extraordinarily resistant to thematic exegesis” (ix-x), and Gerald Weales seems
to agree with him when he expresses his difficulty from the beginning “that Shepard’s plays resist analysis” (“Transformations . . .”). This difficulty is felt only when his plays are approached for intellectual analysis; but they yield readily when approached for emotional appreciation. Appreciating his plays is like listening to music. As he himself has said, “My work is not written in granite, it is like playing a piece of music” (qtd. in Wetzsteon 255). Edward Albee remarks that Shepard has been “inventing drama as a form each time he writes a play” (15). The audience and readers should try, as Shepard himself has stated about the intention of his plays, “making sense or non-sense out of mysterious impressions” (qtd. in Cohn 722). Sam Shepard is an indispensable playwright of America in its culture of “the disposable.”

Shepard’s plays express his America. The 60s have been a turbulent period in the cultural history of the US. Many had to face a Catch-22 situation as a result of the absurd condition created by the Second World War. Some movements like “Beat Generation” and “Hippie Cult” initiated by the frustrated youth of the 50s continued to exist in the sixties also. It is in this situation that Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 becomes relevant in the country. On a wide canvas, Heller paints a picture of post-war America and her absurd situations. His characters Yossarian and Major Danby yearn to be vegetable in this world of actions. As the Major says “Then there is no hope for us . . .” (555). This phrase “did capture not only the horrors of wartime but the climate of absurdity and estrangement that dominated in the chilly peace” (Bradbury xi). The 60s also saw a new ‘counterculture’ that developed as a major political and cultural force of the decade. These changes had considerable impact on art. Following the
‘new realism’ of the 50s, there emerged experimental art forms, especially in literature. Some of them were revolutionary works that broke through the obscenity laws. American avant-garde literature became popular in world literature. A group of young literary artists in literary field came forward to challenge their elders’ art and its tradition.

The world which Shepard presents is one in which people live in constant fear and anxiety as in the plays of Pinter. Behind and beneath the images that accumulate in the plays of Shepard, we can see philosophical, psychological, and political undercurrents of his time. The 1960s were a period that was greatly influenced by European Philosophy, existentialism. William V. Spanos says: “Certainly for the American writers of the 1950s and 60s, whose work as a whole is justly referred to as the Literature of Revolt—Salinger, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, Styron, Mailer, Ellison, Albee and Bellow, to name the best known—the influence of the existential outlook has become central” (v). Of the European dramatists, the most powerful influence on Shepard was Samuel Beckett. Shepard said:

The stuff that had biggest influence on me was European drama in the sixties. That period brought theatre into completely new territory—Beckett especially who made American Theatre look like it was on crutches. I don’t think Beckett gets enough credit for revolutionising theatre, for turning it upside down. (Interview “The Art of Theater . . .” 224)

These words are clearly suggestive of Shepard’s indebtedness to Beckett, who was one of the channels through which Sartrean existentialism reached him.
Objects and problems of mysterious origin abound in Shepard's early plays. These images come up from his obsession with the mystery of the universe, which is a cardinal point in existential philosophy. Many of the statements and actions in Shepard's early plays are suggestive of existentialist preoccupations. The quest for one's identity is a much discussed problem in Shepard's plays, as seen in Action. "In Action, he emphasises the arbitrariness of actions" (McCarthy 2), and this arbitrariness in human character is really an existential dilemma. The subject of freedom is of prime concern in existentialism, and this is a major theme in Shepard. In The Unseen Hand, the dramatist tries to show the complex nature of human freedom and its implications. Every other character seeks freedom which is controlled and at times held back by an 'unseen hand.'

In the play 4-H Club three young men John, Joe and Bob get together in an apartment. "They invent stories, try to top each other with wilder and more threatening variations on them, stomp around, shout, whisper, and act out the images they create" (Mottram 27). They wage a losing battle against a rat menace. In the meantime, they talk of mandrills and baboons in a place to which John is going. Crunching an apple, John assures that he would send them postcards as soon as he reaches there. The young men's efforts to get rid of the menace are highlighted in the play.

At the beginning of Red Cross Jim and Carol share an apartment in a forest. Carol complains of a head-splitting headache. She describes a skiing accident in which her head is blown off and body torn up. As she goes shopping, their maid comes there to change the beds. Jim starts speaking of an itching on
his body and shows her some crab-lice. He gives her some lessons on swimming making her lie in the bed. When she feels tired, she starts speaking of a fantasy in which she turned into a fish. Carol returns, saying that she too has discovered the crab-louse on her body. As she faces Jim, she sees a stream of blood trickling down his forehead. The fact that Jim and Carol “are afflicted by a mysterious malady that causes a tingling of skin” (DeRose 30) gives one the impression that they too are facing a menace. “Jim’s crabs take on the same status as the offstage plane in Icarus’s Mother or the unseen mice in 4-H Club . . .” (31).

In The Unseen Hand, on a freeway in Azusa, Blue Morphan, a relic of the past, a 120 year old western desperado is discovered in a battered ’51 Chevy. Willie, a space freak, comes into this world. He says that he is coming from ‘Nogoland’ and the people of that country are always under the control of an ‘unseen hand.’ He, as he reports, is from a race of “fierce baboons that were forced into human form by the magic of the Nogo” (Shepard, UH 51). Willie decides to lead a revolution against the unseen hand. He conjures up Blue Morphan’s brothers, Cisco and Sycamore, from the world of the dead. Again Willie is punished by the unseen hand for this conjuring up and he goes into a spasm that makes him unconscious. After a while, he regains consciousness and makes Cisco and Blue young again. Then a cheerleader, The Kid, joins them as he was running away from his rivals. Though he offers Willie his help, he betrays them out of his patriotic sentiments for America, and raises his gun against them. Willie once again goes into a trance. He reverses the words spoken by The Kid, and with this technique he overpowers him. He realises that this is the ancient and secret tongue of the Nogo. Equipped with this, he gets ready to
return home. At last Blue and Cisco accompany him, leaving Sycamore and The Kid behind. The Kid remains mute, paralysed with fear, and Sycamore is seen in the Chevy, old aged, talking to his imaginary driver. The whole play revolves round an unseen hand that is presented as a menacing force. "As in the earlier plays, Shepard is again dealing with an unseen force at work upon the consciousness of his characters . . ." (DeRose 45).

**Action** presents two men and two women in their late twenties and early thirties sharing a remote cabin. They are the survivors of a crisis and they feel lucky to have seen "ahead into the crisis" (Shepard, Action 18). They are at a dining table celebrating a holiday. They cook, eat, drink, and at times make merry; all the while thumping through a book to find out a place in it. Jeep, one of them, is subject to paroxysmal violence. Shooter is a resigned man who often complains that everything goes out of his control. The two women are indifferent to the neurotic behaviour of the men and they are in the world of their domestic chores. "Shooter plays at being a circus bear. Lupe dances a soft shoe shuffle" (Wade 66). Jeep and Shooter tell some tales connected with human identity and existence. Shooter at a point covers himself with his armchair and Jeep recalls his one-time imprisonment when he was taken away by "something bigger" (Action 36). Shooter says that his skin is covering him and Jeep says that he "was threatened both ways inside and out" (Action 38). They can no more enjoy freedom and are condemned to be free. The menace they face is from 'within' and 'without.' David J. DeRose comments: "Action is concerned with states of 'consciousness' . . . of unseen forces at work upon one's life . . ." (DeRose 65).

Keeping in pace with the sense of menace felt by the characters in each
of the plays, the audience also share it in the pattern of a crescendo. When the characters in 4-H Club speak of a rat menace, the audience simply smile it away; but as they see the frantic effort of these characters to do away with it, they too get involved. A sense of menace in the same pattern is felt by the audience when Red Cross is performed. When Jim speaks of the attack of the crab-louse, the audience take it lightly, but they are taken aback when Carol comes back from market with the same complaint. This feeling is doubled when they see blood trickling down Jim’s forehead.

When Willie of The Unseen Hand speaks of a mind-controlling force in Nogoland, the audience take it to be a fantasy. But the moment they see the burn on his head they feel a bit doubtful about it. Again this doubt gets entrenched when they see Willie being punished for conjuring up the dead. The audience get mystified when Sycamore becomes young and old alternately. Shooter’s tales about the moth that becomes one with fire and about a guy who feels afraid of his body create a sense of menace in the audience and it is doubled as Jeep becomes violent and tells the story of his one-time imprisonment.

Shepard’s characters grope in the dark in many of his plays, and this gives the plays an atmosphere of mystery. The characters can be seen sharing the feeling expressed by Shepard himself in one of his interviews: “first of all I don’t know what this world is” (Interview “Metaphors, Mad Dogs . . .” 197). Almost all of his characters in the early plays speak in the tone of agnostics. They very eagerly make attempts to know many things, but fail miserably. The early plays portray the helplessness of young men who yearn to know things. In 4-H Club, Joe tells his friends a story about a hike into a town, and he says that his friends
had to travel through the dark. In the travel through the dark “[they] had to keep [their] eyes closed” (218). After a while, when John is about to drink a cup of coffee, he gets angry and slams the coffee pot down on the hot plate seeing that it is cold. Then in his irritation asks Joe:

JOHN. . . . I thought you were leaving, Joe.

JOE. I am.

JOHN. When?

JOE. When I can.

JOHN. When can you, Joe?

JOE. I’m not sure. (219)

Here it becomes clear that they do not mean what they speak, as they are not sure of anything about themselves or about anything around them.

Red Cross starts with Carol’s questions about the mysterious irritation she feels on her body, especially on her head. She asks Jim to feel her head and pops the question, “You can’t see it here?” Jim’s response is a counter question, “What’s the matter?” (RC 73). As the play ends Carol unexpectedly sees a stream of blood trickling down Jim’s head and asks him: “What happened?” then Jim’s response is “When?” (RC 88).

The dialogue in The Unseen Hand abounds in questions. Blue Morgan who comes up from the back seat of an old ’51 Chevrolet asks an imagined driver in the front seat:

Listen. Did we pass Cucamga? Didn’t we already pass it up? . . .

Don’t you know that they’ll cut you down when they do ya’ don’t know who done it. Don’t mean to ge ya’ riled though. (45-47)
After a while Blue notices a hard print on Willie’s head and asks:

What’s that you got on your head there? Some new fashion or something? (50)

Then hearing the strange description of a hand making its print on man’s head, Blue gets a shock and asks: “What hand?” (51). The answer once again indicates the enhanced anxiety in Blue as the question expresses a sense of wonder.

WILLIE. It’s been burned in. You can’t see it now, all you can see is the scar. (51)

The questions and answers add to the sense of mystery in the play.

In Action, the characters at times show their anxiety in the mysterious developments of certain phenomena. While Shooter is speaking of a strange episode in his story about a man who was afraid to sleep lest his body should do something without his knowing, Jeep shows his concern about the strangeness of the story:

JEEP. How did it get started?

SHOOTER. What?

JEEP. I mean how did he get into this relationship?

SHOOTER. Who knows. It developed. One day he found himself like that. (27)

As Harold Clurman comments, the play demands us “to agree that our lives mean little...[It] is a ‘mystery’” (542). This kind of mysterious development of things is a cause for the anxiety of the characters. Man’s questions to nature or the universe are always answered in silence. According to Albert Camus, life is an “encounter between human questioning and the silence of the universe” (14).
The nihilism seen in Shepard's plays is, in a way, a ramification of existential philosophy. The nihilistic question "why not nothing rather than something" is seen on many occasions, especially in the endings of his early plays. In his later plays he has proved a strong nihilist. Asly Tekinay comments:

Sam Shepard, one of the most prominent playwrights of the contemporary American theater, has managed, however, to join together both references of nihilism, the intellectual and the emotional, in his political play States of Shock, staged in 1991. (Online. Internet. n. pag.)

Nihilism and absurdism, in a way, inspire people to rebellion. As Albert Camus announces, "The first, and only, datum that is furnished me, within absurdist experience, is rebellion" (16). Most of the characters in Shepard's early plays are rebels. In 4-H Club, Joe and Bob are rebels who revolt against John and the people in the street. Willie in The Unseen Hand is a rebel who is in the attempt of organising even a revolution against the ruling class of Nogoland. These characters show the influence of nihilism and absurdism on Shepard. Modern man who has lost his roots is conscious of the meaninglessness of life that makes his being always at odds with the world. This condition of being out of harmony with the world creates an anxiety in his mind, which, essentially, is existential anxiety. Almost all characters of Shepard's early plays feel this anxiety. "The sense of life being unfixed, a kind of existential anxiety, is the very fabric of Shepard's work as a dramatist from 1964 until nearly 1970" (DeRose 18).

In 4-H Club, the characters John, Joe, and Bob show a kind of excitement
at food first and then turn to a discussion about the threat of some rodents. The
‘much ado’ they make in the play is about nothing. The menace they feel in the
play is caused by a feeling of emptiness. Their words (which are mostly
constituted of monologues) fill the emptiness of their existence in this world.

In Red Cross, while Jim is giving lessons on swimming the Maid
complains that sometimes she feels hurt but wants to "keep a clean home. An
easy home with everyone quiet and happy. It’s not an easy thing, Jim. At my
age, in my condition" (RC 86). Most men want to have a clean home, an easy
home where everybody is happy; but those who possess them understand the
hollowness in it. Even a happy home is not a justifiable reason for keeping
himself alive. Thus in this play the comment made by the maid is a dig at those
who feel complacence in a happy and peaceful life. And seeing life as a
suffocating experience is a way of looking at it from an existentialist angle.
Again in the story told by the Maid, she speaks of crabs like a riddle that sounds
like an existential problem:

   Baby crabs are born and baby crabs grow up like all crabs have
to. And when they’re grown they lay new crabs and it goes on
and on like that indefinitely for years. (RC 78)

This can be considered an analogy of human existence that goes on like a never-
ending process. Thus the plays at a deep level speak of existential puzzles. The
birth cycle she speaks of here applies to human beings also. This becomes
analogous to the pointless cycle of human existence.

In The Unseen Hand, we hear some comments on the meaninglessness of
human life. At a point, Blue Morphan tells Sisco:
BLUE. I’m goin’ on a hundred and thirty years old now. Thanks to modern medicine. (58)

This can be taken as a comment on modern medicine. What the dramatist means is that man’s medicines are not able to keep him immune from the onslaught of death and decay. Modern medicine promises longevity; but can never save man from the threat of death.

In Action, we see four characters in existential paralysis. The male characters especially try to escape from this paralysis through acting out certain roles, but they miserably fail in their attempt. Many characters share the existential problem in different ways. The male characters Jeep and Shooter are always conscious of the nature of their existence, whereas Lupe and Liza, the female characters, seem to be totally ignorant of their existential problems. They do not bother about themselves, they are always engaged in their household chores. But even their indifference to the existential problems can be seen to be a defence mechanism to protect themselves ‘from existential paralysis’ (Savran 61). Here the dramatist makes a contrast between the reactions of the male characters and female characters to existential problems.

In this play we get some clues to the existential anxiety of the characters. The purposeless world on which they have no control makes them prisoners of a cell that has no walls. Even if they get out of this cell they have little hope of freedom. In the last monologue of Jeep, he laments miserably and hopelessly, “No escape. That’s it. No escape.” (37) and this as Hart points out, “describes the existential anxiety that grips all of the characters in the play” (Hart 59).

In Action, the very first speech by Jeep at the outset of the play: “I’m
looking forward to my life. I'm looking forward to ub-me. The way I picture me” (10) and these words ironically indicate the character's existential anxiety. DeRose comments that another character, “[Shooter] is, in Jean Paul Sartre’s words, “condemned to freedom” (70-71). It can be said that the rest of the play is only an excuse they find for their existence. David J. DeRose comments that Action verbally articulates in a direct and dramatic manner the acute existential/ontological anxiety that Shepard’s early plays expressed only via obscure theatrical imagery and metaphor (64).

Shepard does not remain impervious to the influence of the different schools of psychology in contemporary America. Various factors prompted American writers of the 60s to write with a psycho-analytic insight. Ethnicity in the country has been a complicated problem for the administrators ever since America’s independence. Different communities in the states “identify themselves as both Americans and members of an ethnic group” (Mann 75). Among them are the hybrids, a group that “cannot identify themselves through a single stock” (Mann 75). Such ethnic problems and the problems of counterculture among the youth added to a sense of rootlessness among them. One of the major impacts of the disillusionment felt by the youngsters of that period was that it brought a great majority of university students strongly under the influence of drugs. Shepard was one among them. Most of his plays, written during the '60s and '70s, were hallucinogenic in nature.

The search for identity is a major problem in contemporary America. In an interview with Stephanie Coen, Shepard expresses his 'identity crisis’ very emphatically:
This problem of identity has always interested me. Who in fact are we? Nobody will say we don't know who we are, because that seems like an adolescent question—we've passed beyond existentialism, let's talk about really important things, like the fucking budget! (Laughter.) (Interview Online. Internet. n. pag.)

Here he not only becomes explicit about his attitude, but looks upon others' attitude with cynicism. Besides this, consumerism, promoted by the mass media, has made people confused about the authenticity of many things. People became conscious of the duplicity of appearances. Their search for what is genuine compelled them to make a search for true faces or what is real behind the masks of human beings. Quoting a letter Shepard sent to Chaikin in 1983, Asly Tekinay writes that Shepard had been pondering the idea of "being lost, of one's identity being shattered under severe personal circumstances—in a state of crisis where everything I've previously identified within myself suddenly falls away" (qtd. in Tekinay Online. Internet. n. pag.)

And this search makes man search for his identity and it fills him with anxiety. Most of them act out their roles. John, Joe, and Bob are not sure about what they are and they become characters in the stories they tell. Michiko Kakutani writes "Indeed the search for a role, for a way of acting toward the world, remains one of the central preoccupations of Mr Shepard's characters (Interview "Myths, Dreams..." 26). C. W. E. Bigsby argues that, "As a writer, Shepard has spoken of his desire 'To be fixed' " (MAD 166). Richard Gilman says that "'Identity' and 'roots' merge as themes in Shepard. For if the American Dream means anything more than its purely physical and economic
implications, it means the hope and promise of identity, . . .” (xx).

Taking to imaginative flight, and an obsession with dreams are symptoms of man’s instinctive search for self. He tries to break into the mysteries of life and universe and self through the medium of the images that he creates. Shepard in his life and art has been concerned with a quest for identity. Especially, in many of his early plays, some characters make this search clear in their words. Miss Scoons of Angel City, at a point cries out:

I look at the screen and I am the screen. I’m not me. I don’t know who I am. I look at the movie and I am the movie. I’m the star. I am the star in the movie. For days I am the star and I’m not me. I’m me being the star. (AC 77)

In Red Cross, we see the acting out of characters, who assume some roles. The Maid in the play acts as if she were swimming according to the instructions given by Jim. This acting out is a recurring theme in Shepard’s early plays. In The Unseen Hand, the characters are old time outlaws. They are strangers to this world. In Action, Jeep, Lupe, and Shooter are afraid of themselves. Shooter at a point comments: “I don’t recognise myself” (14). Gerry McCarthy says that this confusion is caused by the frustration he feels at that moment and he feels that he has lost his identity (9). Moreover, these characters are presented like orphans. Two young men and two young women discuss something. We do not know for certain who they are as the characters are presented without any exposition. One of the characters in his monologue reflects:

SHOOTER . . . Just because we’re surrounded by four walls and
a roof doesn’t mean any thing. . . . You hunt for a way of
being with every one. A way of finding how to behave. You
find what’s expected of you. You act yourself out. (2)

The characters in these plays are seen in a search for identity, making attempts to
define themselves. As Michiko Kakutani says “Deprived of the past and any sort
of familial definition . . . they try to manufacture new identities” (Interview.
“Myths, Dreams . . .” 26). Action is considered a turning point in Shepard’s
dramatic career because, as David J. DeRose says, “[it] is not simply a glance
backward for Shepard; the play also serves as a prelude to the issues of identity
in Shepard’s jazz-inspired plays of the late 1970s . . .” (71).

Many of the characters of Shepard make themselves known by their loud
monologues and mock violence. These meaningless splurges they perform are
part of their effort to assert their identity. The problem of identity has become
more prominent in his later works. About his Paris, Texas, a screen play, Donald
L. Carveth writes, “Perhaps of all Shepard’s works, Paris, Texas most explicitly
and dramatically represents the problem of identity (Online. Internet. n. pag.).”

Schizophrenics occupy a prominent place in contemporary literature.
They are part of our society. Bonnie Marranca comments:

The Shepard character has not simply a self but several selves
which are continually changing closer in composition to the
transformational character developed by The Open Theatre. (14)

The anxiety of the Shepard characters makes them split personalities. They are
not easily identifiable and to a certain extent, schizoid. “Fragmented identities
are disoriented, confused, often schizoid or schizophrenics” (Glass 7). In a way
we see them as schizophrenics. The Greek words "schizo" and "phrenum" mean 'split' and 'mind' respectively. The mounting pace of life, the ever-growing sophistication of technological culture, and the resulting conflicts and tensions in the individual, make more and more people victims of schizophrenia. Karen Horney argues that in the economically based modern culture, every individual has to face a tough competition to get an upper hand. He has to thrust others aside for his advantage. This competitiveness and hostility pervert and impair good and meaningful relationships; on the other hand, pushes him into endless conflicts (284). An average of two million people become schizophrenics every year in the country.

The major symptoms of schizophrenia are super-sensitivity, withdrawal and fantasy. Schizophrenics are subject to hallucinations and at times they see things and hear voices. Almost all of Shepard's characters in the early plays appear to suffer from schizophrenia. They are mostly failures in practical life, and generally tend to withdraw from life.

The effect of Shepard's plays does not lie in the appeal to our intellect. They present certain images, and the accumulating images convey the feelings of the characters faced with certain absurd realities in their lives. "4-H Club, Icarus's Mother, Chicago, and Red Cross are all characterised by a palpable sense of paranoia (sometimes seemingly drug-induced) and a hypersensitivity to the fragmentary quality of contemporary existence" (DeRose 19). This kind of paranoiac characters may be the product of his addiction to drugs during the early period of Shepard's career as a dramatist (Oumano 46).

In 4-H Club Joe and Bob express their anxiety about many things. They
are anxious about their food and security. They have to face rivals in their profession. John is their friend as well as master. At times they become anxious about nothing in particular. Jim in Red Cross, is mentally disturbed; but he is not sure why he is so. In The Unseen Hand, all the characters are anxious beings; but they cannot give us any satisfying reason for their anxiety. In Action, the four characters have nothing to speak but of their anxiety, but they are not sure about the cause of their anxiety. One of them shows a tendency to withdraw from society. Towards the end of the play, we see Shooter going under an armchair, and thereafter, the audience can hear his voice only. He starts moving like a tortoise. He refrains himself from the active life around him. As R. D. Laing comments:

this withdrawal is in part an effort to preserve its being, since relationship of any kind with others is experienced as a threat to the self's identity. The self feels safe only in hiding, and isolated. Such a self can, of course be isolated at any time whether other people are present or not. (79)

This and similar behavioural peculiarities identified by contemporary psychology form a dominant concern in Shepard's plays. In Action, Shooter tells a story in which one man is afraid to sleep for the fear that his body would harm him without his knowledge. And towards the end of the play, Jeep asks him:

JEEP. How did it get started?

SHOOTER. What?

JEEP. How did he get into this relationship?

SHOOTER. Who knows? It developed. One day he found himself
like that.

... 

JEFF. Did he suspect his body of treason...? Was that it?

SHOOTER. I'm not sure. It was a touchy situation.

(Action 26-27)

Seeing one's body and self as separate entities is a symptom of schizophrenia. This schizoid condition can occur in normal people also. According to R. D. Laing, "It is a response that appears to be available to most people who find themselves enclosed within a threatening experience from which there is no physical escape" (82).

Fulton J. Sheen observes, "One of the favorite psychological descriptions of modern man is to say that he has an anxiety complex.... Anxiety may take on new forms in our disordered civilization, but anxiety itself has always been rooted in the nature of man" (16-17). But the anxiety that Shepard presents in the early plays is primarily neurotic.

Neurotic anxiety is a commonplace phenomenon in modern American society. Every individual suffers from anxiety of one kind or another. Horney comments:

It seems that the person who is likely to become neurotic is one who has experienced the culturally determined difficulties in an accentuated form, mostly through the medium of childhood experiences, and who has consequently been unable to solve them, or has solved them only at great cost to his personality.

We might call him a step child of our culture. (290)
The characters of Shepard’s early plays are prone to considerable anxiety. In 4-H Club, Bob, John, and Joe are anxious and uneasy about many things; neither the audience nor they themselves know what makes them so. Their loud cries and protests are caused by a kind of neurotic anxiety. The mice menace in the play is actually a product of their neurotic imagination. In Red Cross, the crab louse of which Jim and Carole complain is not seen on their body or dress. The characters search for it everywhere. Their itching and scratching are indications of their neurotic anxiety. The Unseen Hand presents the anxiety of some men about an ‘unseen hand’ that controls them without letting them know why or by whom they are controlled. In the atmosphere of science-fiction, Shepard presents man’s neurotic anxiety about a force that always keeps him a slave of it.

In Action, the characters’ anxiety becomes conspicuous. As the play progresses, the characters, one after another, make a search for a lost page in a book, but we are not told why they are particular about finding the page. The characters Lupe, Liza, Jeep, and Shooter are in their own world, shut off from the outside. Jeep and Shooter confine themselves to their world, living in their own world of memories and stories. They fear their own body and hide away from this world.

Alfred Adler argues:

Thus estranged from reality, the neurotic man lives a life of imagination and phantasy and employs a number of devices for enabling him to side-step the demands of reality and for reaching out toward an ideal situation which would free him from any service for the community and absolve him from responsibility.
This principle of psychology applies to Shepard’s characters in the early plays.

All these characters suffer from anxiety, which is baseless and without any rationale. This kind of neurotic anxiety, according to Freud, is a result of ‘the higher cultural development of our time.’—Karen Horney observes:

Since the capacity for sublimation is limited and since the intensive suppression of primitive drives without sublimation may lead to neurosis, the growth of civilization must inevitably imply a growth of neurosis. Neuroses are the price humanity has to pay for cultural development. (283)

Another source of anxiety can be found in the problems in political life. Scarcely can a writer remain totally untouched by the politics of his time. Anxiety due to political problems are also seen in Shepard’s works. When Shepard stepped on Off-Off-Broadway as a dramatist in the sixties, America was in a state of political turbulence. Though these problems do not find direct expression in his plays, the images that fill his plays give a subtle expression to these problems. Richard Gilman says, “There are indeed themes in his work—sociological, political, etc.—but the plays aren’t demonstrations or enactments of them; they exist as dispositions, pressures, points of inquiry” (xvi).

Among other things, the rise of communism in some parts of Europe and especially the communist propaganda of the USSR posed a threat to the capitalist system and the American dream. America’s interference in Vietnam was conceived as an anti-Communist movement. But it evoked a strong reaction from the youth of those days. Some “Angry Young Men” came forward to
protest against the arbitrary movements of the country. About this time a large number of youngsters in the US took to drugs and a group of them began to call themselves the beat generation. Unrest, terrorism, and murders became common experiences of this generation. The two notorious murders of this period, those of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, were shocks not only to the US but to the whole world.

The repercussion of the Great Depression of the thirties was still not far away in the sixties. Kennedy’s presidency aroused an excitement; but the period ended in with turmoil and despair, and “Lyndon Johnson took the country by storm” (Skidmore 40). John Orr comments that “In [Shepard’s] work and the best American fiction of the period, we find an inversion of that bland invocation of ‘the good society’ by Lyndon Johnson so quickly drowned in racial insurrection, counterculture revolt, and the trauma of Vietnam, and soon to be followed by Watergate ...” (110). The excessive use of drugs and the hippie cult complicated the problems of the society.

The characters in Shepard’s plays reflect several of these political and social problems. In 4-H Club, the characters John, Joe and Bob are ironically sufferers of poverty and ill-health. Their struggle for possessing apples shows the intensity of their plight. Their hallucinatory violence of throwing apples at the people in the street is an expression of the anxiety and protest they have repressed meekly. Red Cross, again, presents man’s alienation in his society. Jim stands alienated amongst his friends and relations (one may be his maid and the other may be his wife). His attempts to make friends with the Maid also fail. His rapport with Carol seems to break when his head splits and bleeds. Action
presents some young people who shelter in their room away from the society. They speak of their prison cells from where they find no escape. To them the society is a prison. They are afraid of some force which keeps them always under control. The play may indirectly point to the iron handed bureaucrats who keep people under control in such way as to make them feel that it is for their protection that they are kept in a cell.

*The Unseen Hand* is in a way a political satire. The ‘unseen hand’ the play speaks of may be the high level political conspiracy that controls the ethnic, political and economic thinking of the people. Willie coming to this planet from an imaginary planet called Nogoland can be seen as a representative of the suppressed class, and the ‘unseen hand’ in the play may be the irresistible force of the ruler on the ruled. Ron Mottram says that “*The Unseen Hand* is a science fantasy western parable about freedom, partly intended as a response to the constrictions of the political environment in the late 1960s” (69). This play shows how the contemporary politics creeps into his plays and how it finds its expression through the medium.
Works Cited


Tekinay, Asly. “Sam Shepard’s States of Shock: Nihilism in Political Drama.”
