Shepard’s Language of Images: Anxiety and Menace

Sam Shepard’s plays present a paradigm shift in theatrical methods, effected primarily through his use of images. Sharing several of the major concerns of Pinter and a good deal of their philosophical and psychological background, Shepard, however, employs methods which are closer to expressionism. He uses a greater variety of images than any other American playwright of the twentieth century. The images prove to be powerful artistic expressions of the apprehensions and anxieties of the average American of the sixties. In an interview, Shepard expresses his conception of the possibilities of theatre:

you can see things that don’t appear on the stage, you know. The fantastic thing about the stage is that it can make something be seen that’s invisible, that’s where my interest in theatre is... (Interview “Metaphors, Mad Dogs...” 197).

He avails himself of this insight into theatrical art in his plays, which often portray disconcerting images. His craftsmanship in the use of theatrical images makes his characters express much more than what can be expressed through dialogue.

One of the dominant features of the plays, as in the early plays of Pinter, is the deep anxiety of the characters: “The sense of anxiety which runs so pervasively and deeply through Shepard’s work (and that of most Modernists) is one possible response to the twentieth century institutionalisation of a very real crisis in the social, political, and aesthetic spheres” (Savran 72). Most of the characters of Pinter, appear to be beings possessed by anxiety. Shepard expresses their anxiety by creating images through their paranoiac utterances. Shepard’s dramatic idiom relies on the effective use of ⊗ fantasy ⊗ violence ⊗ monologues ⊗ story telling characters ⊗ repetition ⊗ games ⊗ power-struggle.
Referring to Shepard’s use of fantasy, C. W. E. Bigsby points out that, "Shepard’s early plays do not lend themselves to rational analysis" (MAD 176). Bigsby goes on to comment that the accumulating images in his early plays “grew out of drug induced visions” (MAD 177). These images, which are of the order of fantasy, are used to express his perception of the ‘fractured world.’ The experiences of life in the America of the 60s created certain lasting impressions in his ‘inner library’ and they find expression in his plays, whether intended by the playwright or not. As Shepard says, “we’re continuously taking in images of experience from the outside world through our senses, even when we are not aware of it” (“Language . . .” 215). And these images express in unusual ways the reality around us.

Regarding the fantasies in his plays Ross Wetzsteon comments:

On the surface, Shepard’s monologues seem at first to be nothing but pointless ramblings . . . But Shepard realises that fantasies constitute a great deal of unconscious life, and that they are thus as real as and often more revealing than, our behaviour. Shepard’s arias seek to soar into disembodied freedom, to create emotions beyond rational structures. (256-57)

The dominant image in 4-H Club is that of the rodents; in Red Cross, the crab-louse. In The Unseen Hand each detail of the atmosphere, characters and episodes contributes to evoke the image of a strange “nowhere” land of fantasy. Action presents strange images like those of people who fear their bodies and moths attempting to experience fire. Shepard makes these and a series of similar images effectively convey the world of his characters’ thoughts and preoccupations.

To Shepard, life is a pageantry of images. Most of his characters are daydreamers; their dreams constitute their reality in life. The images used in his plays
mostly express anxiety, which in turn adds to a sense of menace. In 4-H Club, the characters Bob, Joe and John see some rodents as potential threat to their existence. The audience do not see anything on the stage, even when the characters are talking eloquently about them. This is only a fantasy, but it is through this that the dramatist manifests the inner reality of the characters. The inner problems of the boys in the play lead them to a state of anxiety that creates fantasy.

In Red Cross, there is a menace of crab-louse. Jim and Carol do not feel at ease in their room. The physical discomfort they feel at the outset of the play becomes a threat to their existence. Though they speak of the threat very often in the play, the audience do not see any crab-louse on the stage. The training on swimming given to the Maid is another instance of make-believe. This is also a fantasy. The Maid is given every minute detail of the swimming lessons; and she practises it on the imaginary pool on the bed accordingly. The ending of the play is, above all, very shocking, because it is quite unexpectedly that Jim’s head splits and bleeds. Even Carol is surprised to find the split head with blood oozing out of it. This episode is also highly fantastic.

In The Unseen Hand, everything is fantastic in nature. In the strange atmosphere of science fiction, the play takes us to a world of wonders. We see a space freak called, Willie. He meets the three brothers of Morphan family. The Morphan brothers are also not ordinary human beings. Two of them are conjured up from their grave. They are past hundred, as they say, owing to modern medicine. The cheerleader who turns up on the stage, as the play progresses proves to be yet another freak. He remains with his pants at his ankle and at a point shoots at them without hurting anybody. With all these episodes the play becomes a fantasy. Yet another fantasy is Willie’s discovery of the ancient language of Nogoland which is just the
reversal of the speech of The Kid. In *Action*, fantasy lies in the stories told by the characters. Here Shepard presents characters who fear their bodies; moths daring enough to realise what fire is. The characters' actions of breaking chair and breaking aquarium and all announce that they are not ordinary men.

Richard J. Homan comments that the "vivid use of language and flair for fantasy have suggested something less like drama and more like poetry in some unfamiliar oral tradition" (78). Fantasy is, in a sense, an expression of the fear and desire of the author. Reflecting on the uncanny, Rosemary Jackson comments, "Frightening scenes of uncanny literature are produced by hidden anxieties concealed within the subject, who then interprets the world in terms of his or her apprehensions" (64-65). The author tries to escape from the hard reality before him. A schizoid writer always shares his anxiety with his characters. So fantasy at times becomes "the author's attempt to manipulate unconscious anxieties" (Hume 25).

Violence is frequently used as a device for expressing the anxiety of the characters. Shepard once spoke about violence as a 'tangible presence' felt 'everywhere in America.' (qtd. in Wade 118). The sixties in the U. S. were a period that witnessed violence of various kinds. Violence can be taken as the manifestation of anxiety and frustration. About violence, Shepard himself says:

I think there's something about American violence that to me very touching . . . In full force it's very ugly, but there's also something very moving about it, because it's to do with humiliation . . . sense of failure runs very deep . . . (Interview "Myths, Dreams . . ."26)

His characters become violent without sufficient reason. Some of them are violent, just because they want to draw the attention of others, and this explains their splurges and gimmicks. This is why Richard Gilman remarks, "I think of the frantic efforts of
so many of his characters to make themselves felt often by violence . . . ” (xx).

However, the violence shown by his characters often has an undercurrent of fear and anxiety.

In 4-H Club, we see violence in a mild form. The characters smash cups and throw apples at the people in the street.

JOE. We’ll clear it all away. We’ll put it in the can and throw it in the street.

BOB. Throw it out the window.

JOE. We’ll hit somebody in the head. (211)

Their is a kind of neurotic anxiety and their hostility is without any reason. They even trample on mice, though they are not visible to the audience. When John speaks of the mice:

JOHN. They bite. They have sharp little razor teeth and they cut.

(Bob and Joe start kicking the trash and looking for the mice.)

JOE. They’re all skinny and weak, John. They don’t stand a chance.

BOB. One smash of the foot and it’d be all over. (222)

This fuss about killing small mice is indicative of abnormal states of mind.

In Red Cross, violence initially takes a mild form in Jim’s attempt to keep the Maid under control. Carol later feels that her head is going to split open; but Jim’s head really opens. The irritation they feel at the outset of the play gradually becomes a reality in the end. About the explosion of Jim’s head David J. DeRose says that, “his psychic agitation is physically manifest in the oncoming explosion of his head” (31). This ‘psychic agitation’ is the anxiety of this character and the reason for this agitation is not explicit in the play. Here Shepard is trying to express the neurotic anxiety in the modern society of America.
The Unseen Hand presents harmless violence. Most often the people of Nogoland repress their anger. "If anger is repressed, then access to these restricting possibilities is cut off, with the result that the hostile impulses trespass the restrictions from inside and outside, though only in fantasy" (Horney 67). The guns the Morphan brothers use do not hurt anybody. They are all gunfighters and they organise a rebellion against the redoubtable power of the unseen hand. Even the cheerleader, when he betrays them and tries to shoot them, fails in it as the gun does not hurt anybody. Thus The Unseen Hand presents a kind of mock violence. The whole play presents a terrorist organisation's efforts to liberate the people of Nogoland through a violent revolution.

Action is packed with actions and incidents involving violence in varying degrees. On the stage, we see Jeep smashing chairs, slapping the water in a bucket and pulling a large dead fish out of it, Shooter instructing him how to clean it and to cut it open starting from "the pee-hole slicing toward the head" (28), Lupe and Liza slicing a turkey having first killed it. These activities of the characters contribute to create an atmosphere of violence in the play and at the same time convince one of the anxiety of the characters.

Searching for a missing page in a book is a preoccupation of the characters, but they fail in their attempt. At one point while Jeep is looking for the page in the book, he gets angry:

JEEP. (Pushing the book away from him) OH THIS IS RIDICULOUS!! I CAN'T FIND THE PLACE!!

(He stands suddenly, picks up the chair and smashes it to the floor.

The chair shatters into tiny pieces . . . .) (14)

He becomes violent here because of the frustration in finding out the page he was
looking for. "The search reflects (and maybe engenders) the characters' anxiety and frustration" (Savran 60). However, the women-characters Lupe and Liza are indifferent to whatever happens around. They are never anxious but care-free and they are engaged in their own preoccupation. About the violent nature of the characters C. W. E. Bigsby says that, "In Shepard's work men are violent, striking out at one another, at the women they love and at immediate objects" (MAD 168).

The early plays of Shepard replete with monologues. Ross Wetzsteon considers the plays to be "structured around monologues and images rather than dialogue and narrative" (256). The dramatic purpose behind the effulgence of these monologues and images is that they become a powerful medium to express the anxieties of the characters. Different from other critics who describe the hypnotic quality of the monologues, Ruby Cohn has the view that the monologues are more pertinent way, Shepard has learned, "to subdue these tirades [monologues] to the dramatic exigencies of the particular play" ("The Word Is . . ."185). Again about the dramatic purpose of the monologue, Richard Gilman says:

More often, the monologue is simply a story, matter of fact or exotic, which may or may not contribute to the plot but which always serves to distinguish the speaker as a voice as someone with something to tell.

(xx)

In 4-H Club, Joe is the most sensitive of the lot. He is chiefly concerned with the cleanliness of their apartment. When Bob and John smash cups on the floor, it is Joe who tries to clean it up. The cleaning is done with a long monologue. Again when this hungry Joe sees apples in the hands of Bob and John, he becomes eloquent about the known varieties of apples. When Bob and Joe are talking of their job of cutting lawns, Joe comes under pressure as he happens to recall his rivalry with a guy in this
JOE. I did some of that too. Trouble was there was this older guy who sort had a monopoly on all the lawns.

BOB. Oh yeah?

JOE. Yeah. He was old enough to drive, see, and he had a car, a station Wagon . . . (216)

This monologue about his rivals extends to three pages but for the occasional interference of Bob on certain points of clarification. This is a clear symptom of modern anxiety. A modern man has to face competition and its concomitant rivalry.

As Karen Horney comments, "The isolated individual has to fight with other individuals of the same group, has to surpass them and, frequently, thrust them aside" (284). It is this situation that engenders anxiety in Joe. So, almost all the long monologues delivered by Joe are the expression of his anxiety.

In Red Cross, the three characters Jim, Carole and the Maid speak at length on different occasions when they are overwhelmed by anxiety. We hear the first monologue of Carole as she speaks of her disastrous skiing. When Jim faces the Maid with sexual overtures, at times, he too speaks in monologues with nervousness. The Maid is also seen to speak in monologues when she understands the sexual innuendo in Jim's swimming lessons. She starts speaking at length about her swimming in a pond long back in her life:

MAID. . . . I can see me in a lake. Can you imagine me in a lake in the middle of the night with nobody around? . . . (85)

She keeps on narrating the swimming and drowning for a long while almost repeating many things very anxiously.
The monologues in *The Unseen Hand*, are all comments on contemporary American life. At the start of the play, Willie speaks at length about the unseen hand that controls even their thoughts. Blue Morphan and Willie are very tense in this play as they know that they are controlled by some force beyond their control. The Kid, a cheerleader in the play, speaks at length occasionally whenever he happens to speak of his rivals. Sometimes he gets even violent against them in his speech. Towards the end of the play, when Sycamore is left in the Chevy, he too becomes eloquent.

Anyway, there is no denial of the fact that these characters become eloquent with their monologues when they are anxious, so the monologues show their anxiety.

Though the long monologues in his plays convey the conflicts and anxieties of the characters, Shepard was conscious of the fact that these excessive monologues posed challenges to the actors. Realising this inconvenience, later in an interview, he confessed that, "originally the monologues were mixed up with the idea of an aria. But then I realized that what I’d written was extremely difficult for actors. I mean, I was writing monologues that were three or four pages long. Now it’s all about elimination" (Interview "The Art of Theater..." 220). In *Action*, we hear monologues less often than in the earlier works, the result of a deliberate attempt to eliminate them, in view of the practical difficulties faced by the actors in delivering them. Still, Shepard hasn’t done away with that technique in the play.

In *Action*, monologues are used when the characters narrate stories and anecdotes. Many of them are related to their life. Towards the end of the play, Jeep tells an anecdote in which he was arrested and imprisoned.

JEFF. Just thick cement...I couldn’t help. My body was shaking...

I knew I was threatened both ways. Inside and out...No escape.

That’s it. No escape. (37-38)
In this monologue he speaks of his claustrophobic anxieties in a neurotic manner.

Shepard here too uses the technique of monologue to express the character's anxiety.

The occasional story-telling of the characters is another symptom of their anxiety. Some characters in the early plays tell stories, in the form of monologues, and the stories are with no conventional beginning, middle and end. Shepard deliberately presents them like that. About the stories C. W. E. Bigsby says:

> There are stories. But more than anything else, they are explorations of emotional states, expressions of anxieties, disturbing journeys into the individual subconscious over the collective psyche of the tribe. (MAD 172-73)

The stories in Shepard's plays look like tales “told by an idiot,” sometimes babbling, and at other times the ravings of demented souls. But occasionally there are some sparkling key-words of philosophical reflection. These loose ends of the threads of these reflections can be made the warp and woof of a vision of a “fractured world.” Lack of correlation and ending for these stories indicates the anxiety in the narrators. Shepard himself has said of it:

> The stories my characters tell are stories that are always unfinished, always imagistic—having to do with recalling experiences through certain kind of vision. They are always fractured fragmented and broken. I'd have to be able to tell a classic story, but it doesn't seem it be part of my nature. (Interview. “Myths, Dreams . . .”26)

His inability to tell a well-made story with a good finishing is a reflection of his sombre vision of this world. It is this vision that makes his characters anxious and tell the so-called idiotic stories.
In 4-H Club, Joe, the most impoverished boy among the club members occasionally falls into monologues. Seeing the apples in the hands of John, he becomes anxious as he is starving for food and starts eloquently describing the available varieties of apples. All on a sudden, he starts telling the story of a rival boy’s sweeping. In the story, he emphasises the vicissitudes of the boy without any logical correlation of episodes.

In Red Cross, the first monologue of Carol sounds like a story, though she narrates it like an autobiographical anecdote. She tells the story of skiing. She mentions that there was a time in her life that she had the apprehension that her head was going to break open. Sometimes she refers to an event of breaking of her arms; and the story ends with a gruesome note:

CAROL... All you’ll see here is the little splotch of blood and a whole blanket of white snow. (75)

When the Maid comes to change his bed, Jim starts talking to her about the crab louse on his body. While he is talking of it, the Maid takes it very seriously and suggests arranging a car to take him to a doctor. Then he fumbles and changes the talk to another incident. He tells a story about his climbing a tree:

JIM. I climbed a tree yesterday and I went away for a couple of hours.

I climbed all over the tree. Through the branches and clear up to the top. ... (79)

This story of climbing the tree sounds extraneous in the context but expresses his anxiety in facing the Maid and the sexual innuendo in it. When the swimming lesson comes to an end, the Maid too speaks of her experiences in swimming virtually in a tone of a story woven in her imagination. This story is rooted in her anxiety which is aroused when she is approached by Jim with sexual overtures.
In *The Unseen Hand*, Willie’s narration of his experiences of travelling through space has the tone of a story. The audience hear it with the telling effect of science fiction.

WILLIE. I’ve travelled through two galaxies to see you. At least you could hear me out. (51)

Again he continues the narration about the Hand in Nogoland:

WILLIE. Living death. Sometimes when one of us tries to fight the Hand (sic) or escape its control, like me, we are punished by excruciating muscle spasms and nightmare visions. Blood pours past my eyes and smoke fills up my brain. (52)

It is because of his anxiety in facing these strangers with this strange story of a strange land that he appears to be tense and anxious. This is reflected in his description of Nogoland, and this too has the touch of a story:

The Sorcerers and the Silent Ones of the High Commission have lost all touch with human emotion. They exist in almost a purely telepathic intellectual state . . . . (52-53)

The story-like narration in this play reveals that the characters are inclined to tell stories to tide over a situation of anxiety.

**Action** abounds in stories. Jeep and Shooter at times become highly imaginative and tell imagistic stories. All the time when they tell stories, they appear to be tense. When Jeep asks him whether he is afraid of taking a bath, he becomes all the more tense and narrates a story about a boy who was afraid to take a bath:

Something about the water. Stank to high heaven. ‘High Heaven’.

That’s a good one. He stank boy. Boy how he stank. Boy did he ever stink? (26)
Here the story is unfolded without any logical correlation. This lacuna is a symptom of his anxiety.

The second story is about a moth, which wanted to know what light is. In its attempt to know this, it becomes one with it:

This moth approached the house and saw the candle flickering inside the window. He became filled with love for this candle. He crashed against the glass and finally found a way inside. He threw himself on the flame. With his forelegs he took hold of the flame and united himself joyously with her. He embraced her completely and his whole body became red as fire. (30)

This story is told directly to the audience. The moth in the story was seeking his identity in being one with the light. This story is about identity crisis, apparently reflecting the character's own identity crisis. The search for identity is an expression of one's anxiety, and here it is manifested through the narration of the story which reveals his anxiety.

The last speech of Jeep is a story. He tells it as if it were his lived experience. He speaks of a prison in which he was put up once. The anxiety in the story is very obvious:

Just thick cement. Smoothed over so there was nothing scratch yourself on . . . I wouldn’t make a move. I’d just be standing there very still but inside something would leap like it was trying to escape . . . I’d just smash my head in or something. I had to relax. For a second I could accept it. That was there. In jail. That I wasn’t getting out. No escape . . . FOREVER! And the whole thing would start up again . . . I knew I was in a dangerous situation. I knew I was threatened both
ways. Inside and out... I knew that even if I got out it would be like this. No escape. That's it. No escape. (37-38)

Here, Jeep is speaking of his predicament in the form of a story in which he himself is a character. Most of the words in this narration are indicative of his anxiety.

Most of Shepard's characters seem to be schizophrenics. They are socially withdrawn, and, to an extent, afraid of society. Some of them are afraid of themselves. Gerald C. Davison and John M. Neale speak of people in a neurotic state, who "believe they are incompetent and inferior to others and typically exaggerate the risks, dangers or difficulties in doing something outside their usual routine" (347). Such people are known as avoidant personalities. This alienation from society is a symptom of their anxiety.

In 4-H Club, Bob, John, and Joe are seen in their kitchen. The other characters in the play are only the creation of the fantasy of these characters. Their aversion to society is reflected in their rebellion against the people in the street. They throw stones at them. Even when they trample on the mice, they are in their fantasy.

In Red Cross, Jim, Carol, and the Maid are seen far from being normal. They do not seem to belong to this world. They are in a bedroom cabin, somewhere, perhaps in a forest or a village or at a motel, the stage directions not specifying the place:

The bedroom of a cabin. There is a screen door up centre leading out to a small porch. A window stage left and stage right... The tops of trees can be seen through the screen door and each of the windows to give the effect of a second storey. (73)
Even the relationship between Jim and Carol is not given clearly. This kind of portrayal of nowhere land with rootless men is an expression of the isolation of the characters from the society.

In a note for *The Unseen Hand*, Shepard emphasises that, “The Unseen Hand isn’t about Azusa but about the air around it: The play collects its characters in the same way as Azusa collects its citizens” (44). This play takes us to an unworldly atmosphere of science fiction. Three of the characters are gangsters, one a cheerleader and another a space freak. With these strange characters we see a wonder land of fantasy. Willie, the space freak always complains that the people of his country are controlled by a Hand that is unseen. But they want freedom from their predicament. Unfortunately, their lot is that they should confine themselves to the rule of Nogoland. Thus the play becomes a fantasy representing the strange life in a strange world. The characters in the play are cut off from ordinary human society.

In *Action*, the characters fear outside as well as inside. Though the female characters Lupe and Liza are indifferent to what happens around them, they are also unsociable. They fail to reach out to the other characters in the play. They can’t find any relationship with the male characters in the play. At times they become very inactive. Even the very title of the play seems to be ironic, as no considerable action takes place in it.

Another feature of Shepard’s early plays, as in Pinter, is that many of his characters repeat words and phrases when they are under stress. Marshall P. Duke and Stephen Nowicki, Jr. say that man may strut when he is afraid of the outside (423). So strutting is a symptom of anxiety and the characters in Shepard’s early plays are not free from it.
As the play 4-H Club opens, Joe stands perplexed as his friends have spoiled the cleanliness of the kitchen. When others smash the tea-cups, he becomes very anxious. He wants to sweep it but others continue to smash cups:

JOE. Cut it out! Stop! . . .

Cut it out! Stop it! (204)

Here Joe is angry with them and his anxiety makes him repeat his words.

In The Unseen Hand, the technique of repetition to show the character's anxiety is employed only in The Kid. In his first encounter with the Morphan brothers, he appears to be frightened and at the end of his first monologue repeats “come on, come on! Try me. You think I’m funny looking. Come on!” (61). When the Morphan brothers ask him to pull up his pants which he keeps pulled down to his ankles all through the while he is on the stage, his reaction is a bit violent and he repeats some words unwittingly:

KID. I’m never going to lead another cheer! Never! Not for them or anybody else! Never! Never! Never! Never! Never! Never! Never! Never! Never! Never! Never!(62)

Again in the play, The Kid is found repeating words when he is totally under stress. The moment when he kicks Sycamore in the ball and grabs his gun, he becomes all the more tense and says:

KID. . . . Shut up! Shut up! I’ll kill you all! I’ll kill you . . . .” (79)

Action was written when Shepard was in a transition period, and the technique of repetition is applied in it very sparingly. The play starts with the repetitive statement of Jeep:

JEEP (leaning back in his chair and rocking gently). I’m looking forward to my life. I’m looking forward to uh- me . . . . (10)
After a while the repetition is heard as Shooter answers indifferently when he is asked whether he wants water. He says he can’t leave his chair:

SHOOTER. Nope. This is it for me. I’m never leaving this chair.

SHOOTER. I’m never leaving this chair. (23)

When their discussion comes to the definition of community, they all make an attempt to define “community.” Here the characters become anxious once again. Jeep feels helpless in giving a satisfactory definition. Then he struts like this:

JEEP. I know what you mean.

JEEP. Yeah. I know what you mean. (24)

Again, in a story told by Shooter, he speaks of a friend who has been killed by his own body:

SHOOTER. His body killed him. One day it just had enough and killed him. (26)

And adds that the body is still walking around:

SHOOTER. It’s still walking around I guess . . . . (27)

This strange story fills them with anxiety. Jeep asks him if the body was vacant. Expecting an answer, he says:

JEEP. You’d know. I’d know. I mean with us. We know. We know. (28)

In many of his plays Shepard presents games of various kinds. Eric Barne says: “Many games are played most intensely by disturbed people, generally speaking, the more disturbed they are the harder they play” (173). And the element of games is a prominent feature of Shepard’s plays. The games the characters play can
be taken as the expression of their anxiety. Even when they are in different crises in their lives, Shepard characters in most of his plays remain playful. In the early plays almost all characters are seen engaged in one game or another.

In *4-H Club*, though all the characters seem to be very playful, they are very anxious at heart. At the start of the play, Bob and Joe are seen laughing hysterically. They fall down, roll on the floor, jump up and down. Joe is seen tapping a spoon on a pot. This jovial atmosphere creates the impression that they are in a jovial mood. But, actually they are in poverty and unemployment; their games are ways of hiding their anxiety. The characters run after one another as if they were in a game of hide and seek. Even in smashing coffee pots and cups, there is a kind of wantonness. They challenge the mice and the other rodents in a playful manner. Their comments on apples, rats, and mice have a tinge of humour in them.

In *Red Cross*, Carol speaks of her experience in skiing. Though, she describes it like a disastrous incident, we cannot ignore her active interest in it. She narrates it, “acting out the rest as though she were skiing on a mountain slope” (74). Her acting it out comes to the level of a mimicry which is a way of evading the memory of that experience.

When Jim meets the Maid, her approach to her is very playful. He gives her training in swimming that gives the audience the impression of a mock-lesson. At times it comes to the point of being sexual games. The anecdotes Jim and Carol narrate, have a touch of humour and they serve the purpose of a game. When the Maid suggests consulting a doctor about the itching on his body he does not pay heed to her; on the contrary, he tells her a story of his climbing tree. He says that he climbed up to the top and “sat up there for a couple of hours smoking cigarettes” (79). After a while the Maid tells him very light-heartedly:
One day I’ll be able to do this room in no time at all and just go straight home. What a day that will be.

JIM. You go straight from here?

MAID. That’s right.

JIM. You don’t hang around at all?

MAID. Nope.

JIM. You don’t hang around to climb a tree or run around the lake or nothing? You should come at night, maidy. You’d like it better at night. We could go swimming. (81-82)

Given the context and consequence of this kind of small talk, it can be found that it comes out of their anxiety. Even when they talk these things, both of them are in extreme anxiety. Here their small talk becomes a game.

The dramatist himself highlights the game-like nature of the scene through the words of the Maid. At a point the Maid asks Jim, “I can’t just become a swimmer in one lesson like that. I mean what is that? There is no water or anything and you expect me to swim! How can I swim on a bed! How can I do it!” (85).

While the play The Unseen Hand, has the spirit of science fiction, its half-farcical episodes give it the look of a game. Blue, the first character who appears on the stage, describes his car in detail and he describes the operations of the switches of the car in a mock style.

BLUE. . . . Say, you oughta’ get yer tyres checked before ya go too much further. That left rear one looks a little spongey. Can’t be too careful when yer goin’ a distance. A car’s like a good horse. You take care a’ it and it takes care a’ you. (48)
The other character who joins Blue in the car is Willie, a space freak. He makes friends with Blue. Willie gives him a vivid description of Nogoland, the country from where he hails. Sometimes the description is given in the tone of a cock and bull story. The dramatic start in itself is quite strange:

WILLIE. You Blue Morphan?

(A pause as BLUE slowly rises, his head coming into view.)

BLUE. What’d you call me?

WILLIE. Is your name Blue Morphan? (49)

The strangeness of the story starts from here. A stranger from another planet comes to this world and addresses man by his name! The quaint description of the “Nogo” and his own origin creates the atmosphere of a magic world, which in turn, gives the play a farcical air. After a while he gives Blue some instructions and he obeys him like a slave with a view to becoming young again:

WILLIE. . . . You feel an interior shrinkage as your organs rearrange themselves and grow stronger, but don’t panic. Just push your feet and grip my hands firmly.

BLUE. O. K. (68)

Again when he is given the instruction he follows it:

(Shakes violently, then goes limp and unconscious as before. CISCO lowers his head to the ground as BLUE releases his grip, BLUE is much younger than before. He stands.)

The stage is indicative of the comic intention behind the scene. Blue’s subservient attitude and its effect of a mimicry arouse laughter in the audience.

Another character who joins them is The Kid. This cheerleader with his trousers pulled round to his ankles, his clownish grudges for his rivals and the light-
hearted abuses on the Arcadian girls give the impression that he plays the part of a clown:

KID. . . . They’re fucking dogs! I wouldn’t fuck an Arcadia girl if she bled out her ass hole. (60)

Willie’s discovery of the strange language—the reversal of The Kid’s speech—has the semblance of the reversal technique of a beetle-song. This too strikes the audience as a game.

In *Action*, several episodes appear so light that the characters seem engaged in some game. As the play starts they all are in a search for a missing page of a book. This search makes them anxious. Acting many of the actions out is yet another kind of game in the play. Shooter’s attempt to become a dancing bear is an example of ‘acting out’:

(Shooter pulls his overcoat up over his head and holds his hands up in front of him like bear paws. Slowly he pushes his chair back and rises. He takes short staggering steps like a bear on his hind legs) (12)

This kind of game is the result of their anxiety of being alienated from their society. The characters in this play are in anxiety from the beginning to the end of the play. Their very existence is under certain threat which they themselves do not know.

Shepard joins the other apocalyptic writers of America in his vision and no serious writer can avoid it as,

The maelstroms of the twentieth century have given contemporary urgency to new apocalyptic literature. The pounding hoof-beats of the Four Horsemen thunder not only across Africa, India, and the nations of the Middle East but into our bedrooms, ‘between the desire and the spasm!’ (James and Coolman 2)
American apocalypses are as popular as "American Dreams." Douglas Robinson observes, "American apocalypses, to the extent that they are American, are American dreams—and dream becomes the characteristic American revision of the apocalypse" (62). The vision of the end and the millennialism are all dreams. But the fact remains that at the pinnacle of glory of the American materialism, some writers of the post-war period began to write with a prophetic note. "Shepard shares [Nathanael] West’s apocalypticism" (Bigsby, CITAD 1:223). In his early plays there is a flirtation with the apocalyptic. They show us a vision of the end. Michael Bloom says:

Faced with a society that suppressed the awareness of danger, Shepard, like many other writers, turned to apocalypse as the only way to describe the turmoil of American life in the 1960s. (77)

His apocalyptic vision is expressed through the method of presenting characters who speak in riddles. Bloom continues that "The apocalyptic proceeds by dreams, visions and hallucinations" (78). The characters on the stage seem to be rapt in a hallucination or dream.

Shepard’s presentation of dreams and fantasies indicates his conviction of life’s boredom. The life of the 60s engendered boredom, to which was added outrage when the country got into the Vietnam War. This involvement caused a series of protests from university students. Violence broke out in many parts of the country. Writers began to see the end of the world. And this vision took its manifestation in fantasies and dreams of the literature of those days. The modern writer, through the presentation of fantasy "pours forth a passionate protest and invites us to join in his fervor . . . [his] literature of vision aims to disturb us by dislodging us from our settled sense of reality, and tries to engage our emotions on behalf of this new version of the real" (Hume 56). In Kafka's The Burrow, fantasy engulfs the reader in the burrower’s
fears and anxieties (Hume 190) and the rodents in 4-H Club trigger off our anxiety as well as the characters’. According to Michael Bloom Red Cross “. . . is a far more subtle evocation of apocalyptic anxiety” (77). Ron Mottram agrees to the view that “the play as being apocalyptic, a rendering of contemporary anxiety stemming from the various political, racial, and generational conflicts that surfaced in the 1960s” (qtd. in Mottram 40).

In The Unseen Hand, with the very atmosphere suggestive of science fiction, the Morgan brothers are all past 100 and one of the characters, Blue, says that he comes from another planet Nogoland. The bullets they shoot off do not hurt anybody. About the play’s apocalyptic nature, Clive Barnes says:

Mr. Shepard takes an apocalyptic view of our civilization, and yet, disconcertingly, instead of moralizing at us, he tells us anecdotal jokes, shaggy dog stories, shaggily and doggedly stretch-stretching out to an infinite they cannot possibly quite reach. (43:1)

Apart from the specific plays selected for this study, there are plays like Icarus’s Mother, which are more explicit about Shepard’s vision of the end. C. W. E. Bigsby argues that “The apocalyptic imagery of Icarus’s Mother, only works because it activates an anxiety already deep in the sensibility of its audience” (MAD 175).

The apocalyptic vision in Action is explicit. Frank Kermode finds our age as “the age of crisis—technological, military, cultural” (94). The characters in Action, all survivors of a crisis, have faced all these crises and they are afraid of the outside. They want to confine themselves to their room and they do not have confidence in the safety provided by the four walls of their room.

Another major preoccupation in Shepard’s plays is the struggle for power manifesting itself in various forms. People try to protect themselves from anxiety by
trying to achieve a sense of security through power—by dominating others. And this leads to power struggles. In Shepard’s plays power struggle does not appear to be a prominent feature; but those who look into the sub-text of the plays can hear the undertone of power struggle in them. In 4-H Club, John is a character who dominates over his friends Joe and Bob. When he turns up on the stage with an apple in his hand, Joe and Bob try to get it. He does not give it to them, but tantalises them with it:

JOHN. Look, stay away from my apple, Joe.

JOE. Apple juice! We could make a lot of apple juice.

JOHN. I’m eating it!

(He takes big bites out of the apple as JOE continues backing him up).

JOE. Take it easy! You’re eating it all up.

JOHN. It’s mine, stupid! Of course I’m eating it. (208)

This kind of tantalising others with something is an indirect manifestation of the awareness of power and dominance.

In the course of their talk on cleanliness and sweeping, they refer to a rival boy who had a monopoly on all the lawns. They talk of him as a prosperous businessman who has made a fortune out of his business. In a tone of jealousy, they discuss his monopolistic nature:

JOE. . . . He quit school after a while because got so big. And the town was growing. A whole town of old ladies with green lawns . . . He got bigger and bigger and richer and richer until one day he left the town. (217)

This businessman becomes his rival because he has power over the town-folk and he monopolises the cleaning and sweeping business of the town. And this monopoly
evokes a kind of reaction in the other characters which eventually takes the form of a power struggle. John’s dominating nature again becomes explicit when he asks his friends to kill the mice that turn to be a menace to their peaceful existence in their kitchen. John insists that they should look for the mice, and laughs at them laughing away what they say: “The mice are all gone!” John is sure that “There is some around. I’ve seen them” (221). He compels them to make a search for the mice, though they reiterate that there are none:

JOHN. They’re there!

(JOE looks in the garbage can, then searches around the floor.

BOB does the same)

BOB. They couldn’t just hide, John. It’s impossible. (221)

The play represents, among other things, man’s tendency to dominate others for covering up his inferiority and anxiety.

The Unseen Hand depicts power struggle at a higher level of politics; but this struggle applies to individuals also. The unseen hand described by Willie as existing in Nogoland becomes a symbol of dictatorial force. He has come to the earth from another galaxy to organise a rebellion against the ‘sorcerers of the High Commission in Nogoland.’ He feels utterly helpless before this force and grumbles:

WILLIE. Whenever I think beyond a certain circumference of a certain circle there’s a hand that squeezes my brain.

BLUE. What hand?

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

While organising a gang for a rebellion with the help of the Morphan brothers on earth, Willie happens to meet the cheerleader, The Kid, quite casually. He too
offers them help; but in the long run, he proves to be a betrayer to them and he
snatches away their pistol and holds it against them. Here too can be seen an instance
of power struggle. The Kid's description and explanation of the guerrilla warfare are
part of the power struggle in the play.

Willie speaks of a game in Nogoland:

WILLIE. . . . each year a Great Game is played with the people of
Zenon and a competition of some kind. The winner is allowed to
extend the boundaries of his domain into the loser's territory and
rule the people within that new area. (72)

Shepard makes use of his powerful imagination to create a nowhere land called
Nogoland to make his audience conscious of man's innate drives like the will to
power.

In Action, he does not present a live power struggle; but presents characters
who are tired of this tussle for power. They admit they are failures. So they do not
appear to be militant fighters. They confine themselves to their weaknesses and try to
conform to their life of solitude, in which they feel that they are sandwiched between
the love of freedom and the ineluctable and irresistible force of oppression. This kind
of struggle often results from man's yearning for supremacy. Sometimes it originates
from his feeling of being inferior to others. Alfred Adler speaks about the
psychological aspect of this struggle:

Every neurosis can be understood as an attempt to free oneself from a
feeling of inferiority in order to gain a feeling of security. (23)

Though Shepard does not give us any principles of psychology, as a playwright he
delves deep into the mysteries of human psyche.
The idea of menace in Sam Shepard has not attracted any of his major critics. The term ‘menace’ in dramatic criticism reminds one of the popular term ‘comedy of menace.’ This label certainly does not suit the plays of Shepard in general. Nevertheless, the early plays of Shepard do contain the element of menace at a deeper level, though perhaps not as was felt by Irving Wardle in the plays of David Campton and Harold Pinter. Shepard creates the atmosphere of menace by making his characters appear anxious and tense about some unknown cause. Thus the feeling of menace in his plays is linked with neurosis. His treatment of menace is such that at times even the audience themselves feel a sense of menace as they watch the play.

Almost all the characters in his early plays are under pressure as their sense of security is threatened by a sense of menace. Sometimes they feel that they are harassed, at other times, they feel that they are totally under the control of an invincible force. However, Shepard does not attempt to convince us whether the menace is real or unreal, or to specify its real nature. As Robert Passoli says, “Those are some of the possibilities which Mr Shepard hints at but does not confirm. Rather, he leaves them in suspension, as ambiguities which resonate against one another and against the stage action that produced them” (224).

In the four plays 4-H Club, Red Cross, The Unseen Hand, and Action, the element of menace is present in varying degrees. Shepard himself speaks of it as a “certain kind of chaos, a kind of terror, you don’t know what the fuck is going on. It’s really hard to grab the whole out of the experience” (Interview “Metaphors, Mad Dogs…” 196). The root of menace is seen primarily in the neurotic anxiety of the characters, because the characters manifest their anxiety through their imaginative flight. Several of his characters are visionaries and the menace exist in their imagination or dream, which is suggestive of neurosis.
Most of the characters of Shepard appear to be very ill-at-ease. The dramatist hides from us the reason why they are so. The reasons can be metaphysical or physical. As the play progresses they start speaking of a threat that has become a nightmare for them. Rarely are they real. The characters feel they are invaded by some force. Even a rodent turns out to be a menace to them. The audience are sometimes mystified by the nature of menace in Shepard. The menace that the characters feel is their own creation, engendered by the sordid experiences they suffer in their life.

Charles R. Bachman points out that there is a pattern in the presentation of menace in the plays of Shepard. He says, “Menacing, potentially violent characters or forces are introduced, only to have the terror they create defused either by an avoidance of the threatened violence, or vitiation of its effect through audience alienation devices” (406). Though it is difficult to fully agree with this argument, it can be easily seen that the menace in his early plays originates from the neurotic anxiety of the characters and it is because of this that the menace is defused at the end of the plays. Bachman’s long list of Shepard’s menacing plays cannot be considered here for a detailed analysis. Still, the element of menace is seen in many of his later plays also, if not in the same manner as it is presented in the earlier ones. In Icarus’s Mother menace looms in the sky as a jet. While the five characters Bill, Pat, Howard, Jill, and Frank are lying on a beach they face the menace of a low flying plane overhead for an hour. The plane produces anxiety in the characters, and Howard yells to the pilot to get away from there. The plane climbs to a high altitude and the pilot shows some ‘airborne maneuvers.’ Pat and Jill are amused at the sight but in no time the report reaches them that the jet has crashed over the sea. Here the menace is presented with a difference. It appears before them as a third party and not as an
illusion. In *The Tooth of Crime*, menace is not presented as a third party interference. Here Hoss, a famous rock star, faces a threat from another rock singer Crow, a gypsy challenger who wants to take over him. At last, Hoss kills himself by shooting in his mouth. Here menace attains another dimension; but the study of menace in his early plays shows that it is stimulated by neurotic anxiety.

John, Joe and Bob are the three characters of *4-H Club*, and they face two kinds of menace. One is their own society, and the other is the mice in their kitchen. The playwright does not say why they are afraid of them. What we see on the stage is that they throw stones at the gentlemen and ladies in the street and they trample on the head of the mice in the kitchen. Curiously enough, the audience can see neither the people in the street nor the mice in the kitchen. This invisibility of the source of menace gives it a kind of vagueness. Thus, Shepard leaves its source mysterious. Here the audience are left to assume that the menace in these plays exist only in the imagination of the characters.

Here, the attitude of these characters to their society is hostile in reaction to the injustice meted out to them. Their society has impoverished them and they are starving for food and this feeling of hostility creates a feeling of menace in them. And they start fearing everything around them. Out of this fear, the menacing mice take their origin and in no time they proliferate the kitchen and it is a device employed by the dramatist to present the neurotic anxiety of the characters. They are in a world of hallucination, inasmuch as the reality before them is unpleasant and, to a certain extent, strangling. Before them, they see only poverty, ill health and unemployment; and they try to make up for all these in their imagination. That is why when John tantalises Joe with the apple in his hand, he resigns to his lot of penury by looking down at the apple. Joe asks for the apple and he runs after him for it with his
comments on different varieties of apples:


(He starts kicking trash violently and yelling.)

“New Jersey Cottage Cheese!” “Nebraska Mayonnaise!”


His kicking, violent movements, and the monologous comments are indicative of his anxiety. But John does not give it to him. Then it becomes a sour-grape and he comes to terms with his poverty and he realises his helplessness in it. Such a helplessness in Shepard’s characters engenders their anxiety, which, in turn, produces a sense of menace. Then, he again looks down upon John and his apples and comments in a supercilious manner:

JOE. . . Fuck your apple, John! Apples grow on trees! Green and red ones, John! . . . (208-09)

He has lost all his defence before the cruel fate of poverty and this realisation makes him helpless before an invincible power. As far as he is concerned, poverty is a threat to his secure life and “the experience of helplessness toward the threat” gives rise to anxiety (May 162). Here this sense of helplessness creates anxiety that leads to a sense of menace in him.

In Red Cross, menace comes in the form of the crab-louse. Jim and Carol face this threat at different points. Jim is conscious of it from the start of the play, and he thinks of getting rid of it with the help of his Maid. The Maid is not capable of it and
she shows her helplessness in it. This helplessness of the characters is the source of their anxiety. So the anxiety presented in this play is similar to that in 4-H Club, and is repeated as a leit-motif in these plays.

Jim feels irritated at the bite of the lice. He grumbles:

JIM (he crosses right). It's long time to go on itching like this. To have an itchy skin. I mean. And they're moving up, too. They've gotten to my navel and yesterday I found one in my armpit. Six is a long way off when this is happening to me. (78)

He cannot bear the itching till six, and to him it represents a power before which he is helpless. Here too the itching is a mysterious thing, perhaps, a product of the anxiety he felt in facing the Maid.

In The Unseen Hand, the menace is that of an ‘unseen hand’ that never allows the people of Nogoland to think “beyond a certain circumference of certain circle” (51). In this play the ‘unseen hand’ of the Nogoland is a terror for them. Willie says that “It’s not a fella. It’s a body. Nobody ever sees it. Just the Sorcerers” (51). Here he expresses his helplessness before an invisible and invincible force which becomes a threat to their peaceful existence. This helplessness before a formidable force serves as yet another source of anxiety that eventually results in a sense of menace. This can be taken as the menace of a conspiracy of the elite and ‘high-brows’ in the country before which many Americans feel helpless. The American bureaucracy is keeping some secrets from the people and it makes them believe that it is the bureaucracy that works for their betterment. This is a humbug, an ordinary citizen is always exploited and cannot reach to the truth of the affairs as everything is controlled by the bureaucracy. Here the playwright portrays the helplessness of his fellow-beings before such a dominant force. This is what is meant when Vivian Patraka and Mark
legal interpret the hand to be an image suggestive of the “silent, secret forces in contemporary America which police consciousness while allowing people to think they have the power to control their situation” (37).

In Action, menace comes from one’s self. Jeep and Shooter feel that they are prisoners of the world. Shooter grumbles:

SHOOTER (to himself). That’s what I do. I get this feeling I can’t control the situation. Something’s getting out of control . . . . (14)

This feeling makes him helpless and whenever he feels so he says, “I don’t recognise him” (14). After a while, when Jeep pulls a large dead fish out of a bucket, he too becomes nervous:

SHOOTER. I’m not standing up here because I’m afraid of fish. I tell you that much. I was standing here before the fish ever arrived.

(31)

Shooter has been standing there for a long time and he says it is not because of his fear of the fish; but because of his other anxiety. His anxiety at last leads him to the pathetic plight of concealing himself under a chair to defend himself from the sense of menace he feels then. As a living human he cannot face his fellow-beings. Not only others but he is afraid to face his own body which, as far as he is concerned, is a prison cell that entraps him. Now Jeep speaks of his fears and says that “one thing really got [him]” (36) and again comments on his entrapment in this world. He says he is up in a prison of cement:

JEEP. Cement. Cement walls. No windows. The density of cement. I always pictured jail would have a window . . . (36)

Again he says, “I’d just be standing there very still but inside something would leap like it was trying to escape . . . .” (37). And after a few seconds he emphasises the point
that he is ineluctably bound within himself. He continues: "I knew I was threatened both ways. Inside and out" (38). This threat is their making. The audience do not get any clue regarding the authenticity of the menace in these plays.

The element of fantasy is present in almost all of Shepard’s early plays. His characters find it impossible to face reality. As Martin Tucker says, "The truth of concrete reality is too hard for them to bear, so the mind creates another kind of reality, a ‘lie,’ which becomes their sustaining life force" (150). The use of fantasy is one of the methods used by Shepard to create an atmosphere of menace.

The rodents in 4-H Club exist in the imagination of the characters. The apples they speak of make up for their frustration of not getting them. They want to wreak vengeance upon the so-called gentlemen and ladies; and it is done by throwing apples at them in their imagination. The mice and the mandrills they speak of are the externalisation of their fear of their rivals. At a point John expresses his utter helplessness in defending himself against the mice.

JOHN. I used pistols and swords and everything, and they kept coming back. I sat very still until they showed their heads. Then I did fire. I emptied a whole chamber into this one mouse and he just limped away. (228)

Shepard creates a sense of menace from the fantasy created by the neurotic anxiety of the characters.

In Red Cross, Shepard creates crab-louse in the imagination of Jim and Carol. Towards the end of the play, when Carol comes back having done her shopping, complaining about the lice, Jim turns to her with blood trickling down his forehead. This is the culmination of the menace in the play. But the ending cannot be taken for
granted as an episode that happens really on the stage. Carol expresses her surprise at

the louse-menace:

CAROL . . . I really can't take it. It's awful Jim! (Jim turns to her
slowly, there is a stream of blood running down his forehead.)

JIM. What?

CAROL. What happened?

JIM. When? (BLACK OUT.) (88)

Here Jim's answer to the question "what happened?" is another question "when?"

This ending of the play dissolves the boundary between reality and fantasy. This
unexpected and disconcerting ending gives the play the quality of a fantasy; while at
the same time this kind of ending creates a sense of menace.

In _The Unseen Hand_, Willie, a space freak, comes to earth with a complaint
that an unseen hand always subjugates him. According to him this hand keeps the
people of Nogoland totally under its control. He has come to this world to organise
people to revolt against it by breaking the spell of the unseen hand. Actually, the
audience do not get any conclusive evidence for the existence of this hand except the
mark of a handprint burned on the top of Willies's head. When Blue asks him more
about the hand Willie falters:

BLUE. What hand?

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

The unseen hand they speak of can represent a totalitarian form of government which
was a strong menace to the freedom loving citizens of the post-war western world or a
high level conspiracy of American bureaucrats, who try to exploit the common man
by keeping something away from them and controlling their thinking.
In *Action*, the characters Shooter and Jeep are presented as the slaves of hallucination. In their imagination they feel that their body is a prison for them. They are, as it were, ineluctably trapped in the confines of the four walls of a prison. In the monologues of these characters, there are occasional references to their imprisonment and arrest. Maybe, they are recalling the bitter experiences of the Prisoners of War during the Second World War. However, the morbid thinking of these characters has its root in their anxiety. When Shooter goes under a chair, Jeep in a monologue recalls:

JEFF...That I was there. In jail. That I wasn’t getting out. No escape.

For a second these thoughts would come. (37)

It is their anxiety that pushes them into fantasy, and it is through this fantasy that the playwright presents menace on the stage. During anxiety, observes Wilhelm Reich, “one anticipates somatically the danger situation by imagining it.” (qtd. in Becker 30).

“Therefore,” Carol Becker comments, “without imagination one would not be able to experience anxiety” (Becker 30). The early plays of Shepard illustrate this statement.

Anxiety often manifests itself as violence and creates an atmosphere of menace, and this menace intensifies violence when it acts on it as a catalyst. In the plays selected for this study, the anxiety of characters originates from an ambiguous source. Once they become anxious they start seeing things which are menacing to their peaceful existence.

In *4-H Club*, the characters feel like throwing apples at their foes not only because they are anxious but their anxiety is doubled by the menace it has given rise to in them. Joe and Bob trample on the head of the imaginary mice at the instance of John who is very much frightened by the supposed menace posed by them. In *Red Cross*, the lice seen by Jim in his imagination makes him deeply upset, and he
expresses it through his violently dominating way of giving her lessons of swimming. Here, he conceals his anger in the pretext of an instructor. “This private tutorial is to a great extent an act of domination” (DeRose 31). With sexual overtures, he insists that she must swim according to his instructions. He treats her as a master treats his slave. “Anger,” according to J. A. C. Brown, “has the temporary effect of neutralizing anxiety” (171). As the play ends the audience are again exposed to a virtual violence: Jim standing with blood trickling down his forehead. The episode of the cracking of Jim’s forehead may be taken to be an extreme manifestation of his anxiety resulting from the crab-lice menace as he sees that Carol too has got the infection.

The Unseen Hand presents a magic world of wonders. In this play with “science fiction trimmings” (Oliver, “Fractured Tooth” 92), Blue Morphan, aged one hundred and twenty, comes to AZUSA in his ’51 Chevy, and meets Willie, the space freak, who hails from Nogoland, an imaginary planet. Willie can be taken as the alter ego of Blue who yearns for freedom. Willie complains that his freedom is always curtailed by the unnecessary intervention of an unseen hand that never allows the people of Nogoland “to think beyond a certain circumference of a certain circle” (UH 51). Blue here represents an American who has long suffered the dent of urbanisation and culture. He is anxious as he wants a way out; the authority that controls him becomes the unseen hand of Nogoland and he himself becomes Blue, a man with a will to freedom. His anxiety makes him violent, at least thinking of organising a rebellion. Then the authority turns out to be a menace of dictatorial power, which makes him much more tense and, it tries a hand at wielding violence as his weapon against this power.

Action presents this world as a prison. The four characters Jeep, Shooter, Lupe and Liza sit at a table and chat about something as if they were the survivors of a
crisis. Jeep and Shooter are more tense and anxious than the two women-characters. They are afraid of everything around them; they are entrapped in this world as their selves are entrapped by their bodies. They do not suffer from any physical problems; poverty and unemployment never trouble them. As DeRose says:

The devastation from which the characters suffer appears to be personal or psychological rather than physical: they are the survivors of a personal crisis of ontological consciousness. (62)

They are worried about their ontological trappings and they speak as if they were in a prison which has no outside; even their skin is a covering that imprisons them within their body. They cannot control anything of their own. At a point Shooter expresses his fear:

SHOOTER. . . . Everything is so shocking inside. When I look at my hand I get terrified. The sight of my feet in the tub. The skin covering me. That’s all that’s covering me. (13)

This kind of fear is neurotic and this anxiety triggers his imagination, in which he imagines that even his skin is menacing to him and its covering his body creates a sense of menace. The whole universe seems to them menacing. They are irredeemable exiles somewhere. The menace outside makes them violent by reinforcing their original anxiety.

When Jeep realises that he cannot concentrate on his reading as Shooter does, he gets angry and smashes the chair in front of him:

JEPP (standing suddenly and yelling). I KNOW IT’S O. K. ! THAT’S NOT WHAT I’M SAYING!

(Ile picks up the new chair and smashes it to the ground just like the other one. . . ) (17)
This violence is a recurring theme in Shepard's early plays. Here “Jeep smashes furniture with the same unforeseen violence and frustration with which the boys of 4-H Club dashed their coffee cups to the floor” (DeRose 63-64). The characters feel the sense of menace when they are in a state of anxiety. Anger in certain cases leads to violence. John Fraser says that violence testifies “to [our] having embodied anxieties which most of us have felt from time to time about our own psychic stability” (90). This sort of violence expressed by most of his characters at certain unexpected moments without sufficient reason is an expression of their anxiety that is propelled by a sense of menace. The playwright does not reveal anything about the characters’ problems or worries. In 4-H Club, it is only when they are about to drink water that they become violent and smash the cups. Maybe, the cause for their anger is their poverty, unemployment or a sense of failure in their life. But nothing is made clear in the play, so their anger can be taken as the result of a sense of menace they feel. This sense of menace is actually caused by their anxiety about many things and the violence they manifest on the stage becomes a medium to express their sense of menace.

Victimisation of innocent individuals is a major theme in post-war literature and Shepard highlights it in his early plays. In his plays the victimising force is most often presented as an unknown one; but sometimes the victims also try to victimise others. Shepard does not say anything affirmatively about the victimiser, nor is he interested in finding out causes for it. He just exposes this problem and readers/viewers are forced to explore the who and why of it. The playwright’s stress would appear to be on the unjustifiable ways of god to man. The inhuman atrocities and the growing terrorism after the Second World War are the immediate inspiration for this kind of writing. Here the writing is suggestive of the influence of Franz
Kafka.

In 4-H Club, the three characters are presented as the victims of injustice meted out to them by their society. They are not able to fight against the challenges before them. They wage a losing battle against it by throwing apples at the crowd in the street. At last the apprehension about it in their mind takes the form of some menacing rodents. The techniques used by Shepard here are essentially expressionistic. In expressionism, the artist is a troubled man who cannot conform to his surroundings. He tries to express his troubles through images. Thus "The precariousness of Being is a thematic constant in a whole range of Expressionist writings, prefiguring subsequent developments in the literature of existentialism" (Cardinal 36). An Expressionist writer "makes use of a secondary mode of expression ... by way of external forms ..." (Cardinal 38). Shepard gives expression to the feeling of threat in the form of rodents. His characters in this play speak as if they were the victims of mice and mandrills. What surprises them is that the mice and mandrills attack them without any provocation. John at a point states that the mandrills "are extremely temperamental and will charge a human without any provocation" (232).

This is what puzzles Shepard. This makes him doubtful of the ways of God. God is not just people and he does not try to justify His ways. Man always stands helpless before such a victimisation. At times, as a worm would feel tempted to turn against its oppressor, he turns against his victimiser and wages a losing battle. In this play, as a reaction to this victimisation, one of the characters among these four, tries to show his protest. When John orders the others to clean their kitchen, they show their unwillingness and say that they do not see any mice around there. Seeing this he gets angry and orders in a curt manner:
JOHN. They're there if you look.

BOB. I don't see them, John.

JOHN. They're there! (221)

He seems to be sure about their presence and he treats them as a master treats his slaves. John has been a bit overbearing in his attitude to his colleagues all through the play. Without giving them apple when they ask for, he just gives them orders. He stands in the kitchen like a master supervising his slaves. As Joe sweeps, he tries to encourage his work without participating in it.

JOHN. That's very nice, Joe.

JOE. Thanks.

JOHN. It's neat the way you're sweeping that all up nice and neat.

JOE. Thanks. (204)

Here Shepard hints at man's victimisation of man. Thus the victim also turns victimiser victimising others.

In *The Unseen Hand*, victimisation is a major theme. The 'unseen hand' in Willie's country, Nogoland, victimises every citizen of that country. This makes him anxious and he comes to AZUSA, in the hope of organising a rebellion against this force. But while organising the rebellion, he faces another kind of victimisation: The Kid, a cheerleader, offers him his service and proves to be a betrayer to him. The Kid tries to dominate him by violently snatching his gun and holding it against him.

(The KID holds the gun on all of them.)

KID. All right! Now up, all of you! Get your hands up! Don't try anything or I'll shoot. Honest I will. (78)

In *Action*, the four characters presented on the stage are survivors of a crisis of which they do not give any specific detail. They are always haunted by the sordid and
bitter experiences of it. They become afraid of even their bodies. In the world of their imagination they feel they are shut up in a prison. Shooter, in the story he tells them, makes a reference to a man who "began to fear his own body . . . . Afraid to sleep for fear this body might do something without him knowing" (26). This is a symptom of menace and after a while we see Jeep and Shooter going a bit violent. Jeep "slaps the water in the bucket with his free hand and pulls a large dead fish out of the bucket and throws it on the floor" (31). Again we see Shooter going under an armchair as he "pushes with his feet so that the armchair tips over backwards with him in it. The bottom of the chair conceals SHOOTER from the audience" (33). Now he feels better as he remains hidden by the chair and he can eschew this cruel world. Jim’s comment again corroborates his feeling of safety:

JEED. I’m getting better now. Even in the middle of all this violence.

(34)

'This terror of being’ makes them more and more anxious. Here, ‘the terror of being’ is the cause of their anxiety which makes even their body a menace, and seeing it they become violent, smashing chair and killing fish. The victimised characters again victimise others.

In a letter to Patrick J. Fennel, Shepard wrote about his attitude to plays. Shepard writes, “I'm interested in states of mind, in mystery, in psychotic behaviour, in possession, in trance states, in magic, in language, in movement, in the flesh and blood of the theatre . . . .” (qtd. in Fennel 3145A). All these can be seen in almost all of his early plays. A sense of mystery pervades in the early plays of Shepard. For this he owes much to the tradition of Existentialist writers. The menace in his plays has its seed in the mystery of nature. The world he presents is a mysterious one and the episodes that take place within themselves and “nowhere and nowhen (sic).” (Oliver
“Action” 81). What is mysterious is threatening also. Many of his characters do not
know for certain why they are afraid of this. The characters are in the habit of always
imagining things or seeing things.

In 4-H Club, the characters do not show their identity and their relationship
with one another. Even the actions of these characters do not give one any clear idea
about what they are actually doing. Somewhere they meet, something they eat,
something they grumble about. Everything that they do is under the threat of a
menace. The audience or the readers get only clues and this giving of clues is a
dramatic technique of the playwright to portray the mysterious nature of this world
and what is in it. The menace in this play remains as such even after the play is over.
This type of mystification can be seen as a characteristic in its nascent stage in the
early plays of Shepard and it is this that mainly creates an atmosphere of menace in
these plays.

This kind of mystification is continued in Red Cross. Jim, Carol and, to an
extent, the Maid are victims of mystery. The ‘tingling thing’ under Carol’s eye at the
start of the play is mysterious. Jim too feels an itching on his body, and he is not sure
that it is caused by the crab-louse on his body, though he shows his Maid one from his
body. Even if it is taken for granted that it is caused by it, its attack is yet another
mystery. Jim speaks about the crab-louse in a mystified manner:

JIM. Do you know anything about crabs?
MAID. About what?
JIM. Crabs. Bugs that get in your pubic hair and eat your skin and suck
your blood and make you itch.
MAID. Like nits or something?
JIM. What is a nit?
This embarrassment is again felt in the play when Carol comes back from the market grumbling about her crab-louse attack. The mystification is doubled when she happens to see the face of Jim, with blood oozing and trickling down his forehead. The whole play is shot through mystery, which can be the visual presentation of the mysteries nature poses before man. Thus the menace in this play is engendered by the inherent mystery of nature.

In *The Unseen Hand*, the ‘unseen hand’ that does not allow him to think ‘beyond a certain circumference,’ may also represent the mysterious forces behind this universe, which are overwhelmingly more powerful than human beings. The unseen hand in this play is a mystifying force and the audience are at a loss when they see the burn on Willie’s head. Though he aspires to fight against this force, he cannot do it all by himself. He seeks the help of others in this attempt, yet he is not sure about his success. About himself, he does not know anything for certain. He says:

WILLIE. I am descended from a race of mandrills . . . forced into human body form by the magic of the Nogo . . . (51)

Here he seems to agree with the theory of evolution; still he remains doubtful about it and this is revealed as he immediately adds it was done ‘by the magic of Nogo.’ Thus, the ‘unseen hand’ becomes a symbol for the cruel and mysterious authoritarian force (a God figure) that imposes a kind of servility on human beings. This is not the only play of Shepard in which the main characters are threatened by unseen hands. As Ruby Cohn says, “In the six plays of *Unseen Hand* (sic) almost all the main characters are threatened by unseen hands” (“Sam Shepard . . .” 723). All these are indications of an obsession with the mystery of creation in his early stage.

*Action* presents an inescapable trapping of human beings. The four characters
in the play, Jeep, Shooter, Lupe and Liza are all confined somewhere in a cabin as if they were imprisoned. The female characters Lupe and Liza are involved only in their household chores, whereas the male characters are obsessed by the mystery of this universe:

JEEP. . . . I found out my true position.

SHOOTER’S VOICE. What was that?

JEEP. I was in the world. I was up for grabs. I was being taken away by something bigger. (36)

This ‘something bigger’ is the mysterious world and its threatening forces. When he fears everything, he starts fearing his own body also. As Edith Oliver says, “The mystery, never solved or demonstrated, is what is going on in those bald heads” (“Action” 81). The inexplicable fear the characters express from the very start of the play indicates the sense of menace that haunts them. And, it is caused, to a certain extent, by the mystery of the world in which they are placed. Thus John Lahr sees it and comments that “Action belongs to the early body of Shepard’s plays of mystification” (90).

This technique of mystification comes from his sense of mystery which, as he says, assumes the form of a myth in his early works:

Myth speaks to everything at once, especially the emotions. By myth I mean a sense of mystery and not necessarily a traditional formula.

(“Language . . .” 217)

And this sense of mystery or myth creates the sense of menace in the characters.
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