CHAPTER IV

‘FIRE IN THE SNOW’

In the dialectical scenario of the binaries, 'one' exists in 'the other'. The strength of the opposing forces are realized and recognized in the efficacy of 'the other' and this philosophical understanding seems to guide Shepard in his search for harmony and peace for the human community. There is hope in hopelessness, integration in disintegration, construction in destruction and Recognition in rejection. The positive factor is always more powerful and constructive in any kind of debilitating milieu; buoyancy – the essence of every man can find 'a fire in the snow'.

The devitalizing factors like destruct, exclusion and frustration of the Post-American Dream era have sapped men and women of their energy to revive their life even though they had transformed themselves for making amends as retribution which may be personally motivated or providential. Death is not mourned as the end but seen as the fertile ground for rebirth, making 'death' synonymous with 'rebirth'.

Codes associated with genders become topsy turvy and men pass for stability and impotency. The repressed women, even though insignificant chores, project themselves as substitutes for 'fertility' and 'prosperity'. Even in terms of geographical references, 'fecundity' is shown as the offshoot of 'blight' burial. Buried dead invigorates renewal and growth. The patent American Dream has incapacitated the people, mentally and physically and Shepard, through the myths and metaphors attempts to revitalize the 'innocence' of the pre-American Dream.
Shepard's men and women prefer to take an arduous journey through the jungles of psychological wreckage. The Santiagos, diseased and starved of emotional, social, psychological, economical malnourishment, pursue the path of rejection and exploitation but still seem to nourish the dream of emerging victorious in their very pursuit.

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the curse is literally Emma's first menstrual period, and the figurative family inheritance: “We inherit 'the curse' and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us” (CSC 174). The very names announce a hereditary curse: father Weston and son Wesley, mother Ella and daughter Emma – same names, except for a letter or two. Although the family members claim not to belong to the starving class, they do, starve for identity and dignity. Every family member keeps opening and closing the refrigerator door. For middle class Americans, the family is so debt – cursed that their home is prey to predators. Wesley alone understands the magnitude of that curse. “So it means more than losing a house. It means losing a country” (CSC 163). At the end of the play, mother and son recite a parable of the cat and the eagle, clawing at one another high in the air: "And they come crashing down to earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing’ (CSC 201). Greedy America has seized its own killer, a domestic animal driven berserk far from its natural environment.

For each member of the Tate family, the opening of the fridge became a search for the miracle of plenty, expecting someone would have put food into it. None of the family members, managed to connect the act of putting food in the fridge with the act of opening the fridge to find food in it. Nobody knew who had put in what or when.
"Chaos and solipsism produce the illusion of fate. Such fate is Shepard's comic travesty of the American dream in the age of mass consumption" (Orr 135). Though Emma insisted "We're not part of the starving Class!" (CSC 142), the Tate family does belong to the starving class. The empty refrigerator becomes the central image of the play as the sign of the family's deep-rooted starvation. They wanted a comfortable and rich life but they lived a life where they could hardly satisfy their hunger which is represented by the perpetually empty refrigerator. There was always an argument in the family as to whose responsibility it was to replenish the refrigerator.

America, land of opportunity, of free Enterprises of Endless Frontiers, of promise and privilege of progress and regeneration, of democratic ideals and a chicken in every pot – this is the chain that the oppressed help to forge by their worship of the capitalist dream. This faith is underlined by the aspect of middle class propriety to which the Tate's try to adhere (Magil 1763).

Every ‘closing’ of the refrigerator clearly portrays that there is nothing to satiate the burning hunger, but invariably it is ‘opened’ by one or the other to find ‘something’ in it. The ‘absence’ does not make them realize their meaningless repeated action. It is almost like the ‘absence’ subsumes within it the ‘presence’ of eats. This binary of ‘expectations’ in the opposite may be construed as another extension of ‘one’ within ‘the other’.

It was Weston's property that Emma claimed to be hers and was aware of the fact that Weston would kill her if he knew it. Wesley was shocked by his mother's decision to sell the house, the land, the orchard, the tractor and the stock to make them rich.
She believed more her lawyer friend than her husband. But Wesley never gave his consent to Ella's decision because he felt a sense of affinity to the land and a bond towards the house. He was the one who took care of the farm as is clearly revealed in his retort to Ella, who had claimed that it was she who took care of the farm, "I am talking about fixing it up. Making it look like somebody lives here. Do you do that?" (CSC 15). His sense of belonging is evident when he replies to Ella, "Somebody does live here" (CSC 15). Wesley's character conveys a genuine affection for the land and a deep-rooted identification with his country. For him losing a house meant losing a country. Emma wanted to desert her family but she never counted on her mother's decision to go to Europe. Ella's dream of betterment through the real estate business to escape to Europe was useless as Emma believed that a new place would do them no good, since they would still all be the same people.

Ella : Why? What's so awful about that? It could be a vacation.

Emma : It'd be the same as it is here.

Ella : No, it wouldn't! We'd be in Europe. A whole new place.

Emma : But we'd all be the same people (CSC 148).

In Buried Child the lethargy and lassitude of the household prompt Halie to questions: "What's happened to men in this family!" (BC 124) and a conspicuous lack of strong-willed, commanding male figures pervade the play. Insinuations of Halie's infidelity contribute to this impression as does the impaired condition of Dodge's sons: though Tilden was once an All America foot ball player, he has become a transient, burned out and displaced" (BC 69); Bradley the most obvious representative of lost virility, having amputated his own leg with a chain saw, was reduced to a whining mama's
boy when his prothesis is pirated. The debilitation of these characters is contrasted with the manliness of the deceased son Ansel, whom Halie and her friend Father Devis plan to commemorate with memorial statue a "big tall statue with a basket ball in one hand and a rifle in the other" (BC 73).

The backyard itself – site of the child's burial-functions as counter-point to Dodge's desiccated household and contributes heavily to the mythic overtones of the play. The viewers are made to understand that the backyard garden, fallow for decades, has suddenly yielded a bumper crop of vegetables; at various times Tilden brings corn and carrots before his father to verify the yard's mysterious fecundity. The presence of these vegetables on stage brings an inordinate degree of audience fascination, and they assume an uncanny amount of power. The backyard also acts as an agent of providential retribution. This site unleashes the progress of a natural force that threatens to invade and preempt the family household, reasserting a moral equilibrium in face of incest and infanticide.

This revelation prompts Vince's return and informs his status as an avenging angel, the male destined to restore the fallen households – Knifing his way through the back porch screen, he drunkenly enters the living room and in mock messianic fashion asserts his blood claim. At this moment, Shelly who has been showering Dodge with maternal ministrations, gives up on her relationship with Vince and exists. Conversely, for the first time in the play Dodge declares Vince to be his grandson and proceeds to dictate his last will and testament, naming Vince as his heir. Dodge expires, and Vince summarily takes his grandfather's position on the couch. With the conclusion of this generational power cycle, Tilden brings the corpse of the Buried Child into the room and
this incident has in a figurative sense made way for the homecoming of the *Buried Child*, whose mummified corpse indicates the full revelation of familial guilt and corruption. The corn felt context of *Buried Child* and the profusion of vegetables it spills onto the stage thus activate a nostalgic response. Even in the face of the pathology that pervades Dodge's household, the soil of the backyard and its regenerative capacity inspire a sense of awe.

Shepard, to some extent, parodies the conceptualization of America as the land of the fruited plain; yet his depiction of the heart land betrays an undeniable power and depth. It may be that *Buried Child* presents the country's agrarian roots in a tantalizing fashion, as a reminder of what has been ceded. Still for many viewers of the play, the idea of the American countryside retains a potency, a balm-like quality, even if only summoned in recollection. Although *Buried Child* presents a realistic surface, its veneer of normalcy is frequently perforated by surrealistic eruptions and mythic innuendo.

Whatever equilibrium exists is upset when Tilden's twenty year old son, Vince, their grandson enters home with Shelly, his girlfriend. He stops by to see his grandparents on his way to visit his father who he thinks is still in Mexico. He has not been home in six years and now finds none of his family recognizing him; his feelings of exclusion arouse de-resulting frustrations which become the catalyst for the ultimate revelation of secrets. Even though it's hardly a welcoming environment Vince decides to stay. He has had an epiphany of belonging to a family and apparently intends to continue it.

In *Buried Child*, Shepard draws three generations of a family representing the past, present and the future. Like *Curse of the Starving Class*, the disintegration of the family is its main theme and the cause of it lies in the secret of the *Buried Child*. Shepard's metaphorical
presentation of this secret has implications both for the family and for the land outside.
The land of the feminine principle in the western code is associated with love, affection,
intimacy and with their degeneration through sexuality, rape exoticism and incest.

Dodge's emphases that Tilden knew better than any of the male members hold
indirectly Tilden responsible for the child. But Shepard seems to think of this incident
differently. He implies that what dodge considers a 'mistake', a 'weakness' is the only
connecting chord in the broken world of the family. Shepard seems disinterested in the
theme of incest in the play. What he is interested in is the return of the roots; to contact;
communication and emotional attachment. The disintegrated family can be reunited and
the unproductive, barren land can yield corn. Human emotions in the American child are
destroyed by the father. The invisible tie-up among the family members is an umbilical
chord of the baby to the mother.

Shepard's plot in the play concerning lost relationship has a parallel in the history
of the West. Shepard uses ‘fertility images’ which have obvious linkages with the west.
The mysterious appearance of corn at the end of the first act seems to represent the
establishment of the primal bond between man and nature a bond which was lost. Tilden
comments on this mystery:

It's a mystery to me. I was out n back there. And the rain was coming
down. And I didn't feel like coming back inside. I didn't feel the cold so
much. I didn't mind the wet. So I was just walking. I was muddy, but I
didn't mud the mud so much. And I looked up and I saw this stand of corn.
In fact I was standing on it (BC 75).
The mystery of the appearance of corn is connected with the *Buried Child*, lost innocence and the return of the son not yet corrupted by the falsity of the American dream. Tilden's relationship with his mother and with land may be mysterious, but Shepard as remarked by Vivian M Patraka and Mark Siegel, uses fertility images to contrast with those of blight and to create hope.

Halie, the grandmother was pregnant late in life, but the child was illegitimate – may be product of incest with Vince's father, Tilden, but may be an inexplicable gift like the vegetables that grow spontaneously in the backyard. Dodge drowned that baby and buried it in the yard, but corn, an ancient symbol of fecundity, is fertilized even by the mummified corpse. Thus the land itself refuses to conceal the crime. The abundance of the Midwest continues despite the destructive hero worship of a dead (Patraka 41).

“All American” (BC 117) son, despite the lethal strain of American dream this family embraced.

In a decaying disintegrated, sterile and repressive atmosphere of the mid-western American family, Tilden is the only connection between the paradisiacal past and the barren wasteland of the present. Shepard attempts a generation of a lost world through love that has degenerated through violence. Tilden's return to the roots to develop a harmonious relationship with the land and with home is as mysterious as the sudden fecundity of the barren land and fertilization of an aged mother. Doris Auerbach says, "Shepard suggests that possibility of returning to America that was once strong, held promises, and nourished people"(Auerbach 54).
Ironically, Shelly uses conventional female domestic activities to defend herself from her odd surroundings. When Vince turns to her for the existential reassurance his family cannot provide, Shelly deflects his objectifying desire by telling him: "you're the one who wants to stay. So I'll stay. I'll stay and I'll cut carrots. And I'll cook the carrots. And I'll do whatever I have to do survive. Just to make it through this" (CSC 93). These feminine activities provide sustenance to Shelly. However, for Vince they appear trivial.

For reassurance, he turns to the family photo album, framed familial objects from the past. Even though he holds the script, it is not enough, so he takes off for the great outdoors in search of his identity that no one in the home will confirm.

The decision to kill Halie's child illustrates that anything created outside the father's control is nonexistent. Further, since it was a male child, Dodge has again castrated Halie, depriving her of the usual reward for women in patriarchy. By taking the child away, Dodge forces Halie outside of the Phallic economy. This act also explains Halie's obsession with replacement masculine figure. She attaches herself desperately to the cultural trappings of patriarchy – monuments, priests and her remaining sons – in order to fulfill this double castration, this double lack that Dodge has forced upon her.

Soon after this confession, Vince arrives, another half-drowned, half-drunk son who has now decided to remain in the home after Dodge's death. Shelly is shocked by his decision, but during this time in the wilderness, he realized that he was mystically and fatally connected to his family, as he tells Shelly,

I could see myself in the windshield. My face, My eyes, I studied my face.

Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man …
And it went on like that. Changing … Still I recognized the bones underneath.

The eyes, The breath … Then it all dissolved. Everything dissolved (BC 130).

The final image of the play underscores the home's sepulchral atmosphere. Its inhabitants can only see the scene from their windows, while Tilden resurrects the tiny decaying corpse of the buried-child, and returns it to Halie, the ‘keeper of the corpses’. The image of regeneration that surround the house only serve to heighten the decay within: the family's heinous crimes, the violence of the patriarchal system, and the contradictory expectations placed upon women within a patriarchal economy.

Dodge, Shepard's founding father, still recalls the "faith and hope" (BC 52) that urged pioneers like him and “the persistence, fortitude and determination” (BC 42-43) it took to succeed. That conquest also entailed mobility, speed, power and adventure, and all properties that emerge from “Tilden's fascination with car-driving” (BC 46-47).

It required "independence and forging ahead" (BC 25) to make a claim in this unexplored country. But despite hardship, the rewards were often abundant: Dodge's farm used to produce a "Bumper crop" (BC 22) and milk enough to fill lake Michigan twice over (BC 64). Dodge here summons up a vision of some "Paradise" (BC 72), the lost garden of Eden itself. Dodge, his wife, Halie and their remaining sons, Bradley and Tilden, have shared a monotonous still.

*Buried Child* deals with father – son relationship examining three generations in a single family. Shepard incorporates in this play classical Greek family myths and archetypal themes such as Orestean Home coming, Oedipal incest, the battle between father and son as well as patricide and infanticide. *Buried Child* is compared to Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), a modern family classic in its pursuit of a dark family
secret and in its thematic preoccupation with the revelation of the son's true identity and spiritual inheritance. It can also be compared to Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Pinter's *The Home Coming*, which at its core is a play of reunion.

Dodge showed a fatherly concern towards his child and he wanted to know what had happened and advised Tilden that he should learn to be independent, "Tilden look, you can't stay here forever. You know that, don't you?" (BC 71). Tilden returning to his parents in their old age and himself in trouble recalls Pinter's *The Home coming*. Dull and confused, Tilden had to be watched constantly like a demented child as Halie said, "We have to watch him just like we used to now. Just like we always have. He's still a child" (BC 77). Halie and Dodge did not approve of Tilden going to the backyard as it brought back past memories. Halie told Tilden that he was not supposed to visit it, “I don't want you back there in the rain" (BC 77).

The central dramatic question of the play is whether or not Vince will be remembered and accepted by his relatives and the ambivalence Shepard felt towards his past. This expressed the unexpected reception Vince received when he entered the farm house and went unrecognized by his father and grandfather. He hoped to be recognized by the family but with Halie's absence, no one recognized him. The men had nothing to offer Vince. Dodge denied being anybody's grandfather. Shelly also expected the family to live up to her Norman Rockwell type expectations. According to her, home was the site of sustenance and love. But on entering the house, she realized that none of her expectations would be fulfilled. So immature was Vince that he expected his home to remain exactly as he remembered it simple, comforting and protective. He had fostered a kind of a Norman Rockwell home that was happy and benign. Like Oswald in Ibsen's
**Ghosts,** Vince lived an immoral life of an artist in the big city and he undertook a journey towards what he thought was home to seek out his father and his personal ghost. "I mean this is a tense situation for me! I haven't seen them for over six years. I don't know what to expect … I'm trying to figure out what's going on here" (BC 85).

A view of Vince at this stage suggests that he is a prodigal son, who was in search of his identity. There was no evidence of Vince having wasted his substance in riotous living. In fact, when they failed to recognize him, Vince was astounded, "this is amazing. This is truly amazing. What is this anyway? Am I in a time warp or something? Have I committed an unpardonable offence?" (BC 97) His outraged speech reveals his inner turmoil and suffering, "How could they not recognize me! How in the hell could they not recognize me! I am their son!" (BC 97).

Shelly, who expected "turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kind a stuff" (BC 91) was confronted by a radically different vision which seemed as if "Grant Wood's American Gothic family were perceived while on a bad acid trip" (De Rose 100). Shelly becomes the spectator of the actions that takes place. As an outsider, she watches, observes and objectifies the action of the play. It is through her that the inconsistencies and ambiguities are placed in a logical sequence.

Vince, with no hope left seemed puzzled, frustrated and angry because of Dodge's brutal response, "you're no son of mine. I've had sons in my time and you're not one of them" (BC 97). Vince found his roots cut out from beneath him. Estranged and alienated, he looked at Dodge and Tilden. There should be some solution or turning point in his life. He decided to leave the house.
Vince told Shelly, "I just gotta go out … I gotta put this all together" (BC 97). Vince felt as if he had been expelled from the tribe and his identity was now in question. Trying to piece things together, he embarked on his own journey into the night for freedom. Like Tilden and Ansel before him, he made a desperate attempt to escape his fate; he left the farmhouse to buy liquor for Dodge. After Vince's exit, Tilden seemed to recognize him, "I thought I recognized him … I thought I saw a face inside his face" (BC 100). It was Vince's presence that made Tilden form a picture of the *Buried Child* and to give Vince an identity through the identity of the *Buried Child*.

*Buried Child* is propelled by two mysteries having to do with the family's inability to recognize a returning son and with the identity of an unknown infant corpse that had been buried for over thirty years behind the family farm house. Tilden's reference to the *Buried Child* as his son may be a reference to Vince's position in the family. He had been erased from their memory. The other *Buried Child* was actually a child, born to Halie but killed by Dodge and buried in the field behind the house. In *Buried Child*, Vince seeks because he is a seeker. His girl friend Shelly, “expostulating with him and trying to understand, exists almost solely for the purpose of pointing up his want of comprehensible motive” (Rabillard 64).

At the opening of Act III, Halie returned and found Shelly in control of the family. Halie herself had undergone a miraculous transformation. She seemed lively and out of mourning. She still needed assistance from the patriarchy; father Davis who was impotent too. He rejected Halie's question about the presence of Shelly in the house saying that he could not accommodate experiences that fell beyond his parish. Halie did not approve of Shelly's presence and ignored her. Shelly felt dejected as if her identity
was crushed. "Don't you Wanna know who I'm! Don't you Wanna know what I'm doing here! I'm not dead" (BC 118). Shelly was menaced physically or mentally by each of the men in turns. She was less upset about their assaults than by Halie's refusal to acknowledge her identity: "I don't like being ignored. I don't like being treated like I'm not here. I didn't like it when I was kid and still I don't like it" (BC 120).

With the family members confronting Shelly, Vince returned the next morning drunk. He entered violently just like Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*, smashing bottles on the porch of the house. Ironically, Vince's unbecoming entrance brings recognition. Halie instantly recognized him and Dodge announced his impending death and proclaimed his last will and testament. He finally accepted Vince as his grandson. Dodge acknowledged the young intruder as his own proclaiming, "The house goes to my Grandson, Vince" (BC 129). Vince became his heir. But to the astonishment of the family, Vince did not recognize them. He did not even recognize Shelly. Vince strove to identify himself with the family heritage but now he had undergone a transformation where he in turn did not identify the family members, "Who? What? Who's that in there? … Who are you people?" (BC 126). Dodge left his farm tools to Tilden and all the other possessions to be piled in the desert in a heap to serve as his funeral pyre. Vince decided to accept the responsibility to carry on the family name and tradition as he took command of the family.

There is a sudden recognition between Vince, Halie and Dodge and this becomes clear as Vince narrates the happenings of the night. Before returning home, he had thought his roots were to be found in the places of his childhood. Then he learnt that his identity was partially bestowed upon by the history of the family.
By the time Vince reached Iowa, "the vision has done its work … the shadow like characteristics that he met in Dodge that he began to feel in himself when he was rejected are bred in the bone" (Orbison 516). Ironically, Vince's attempt to run away from his family in order to discover his identity made him realize that he was connected to the family. He came to realize that his identity was intricately bound to the family bones. He described himself in almost identical terms on looking at his reflection in the rain-washed wind shields. Vince usurped the place of Dodge after his death. He buried his grand father's corpse with an old wooden blanket and positioned himself on the sofa in Dodge's place. There was no difference in the condition or atmosphere of the family. Halie as usual spoke from the upstairs, announcing that she saw the corn growing and that Tilden was right.

Immediately Tilden appeared in the house covered with mud from the backyard. He carried the skeletal remains of the *Buried Child* to Halie's room. This horror filled symbol suggests a different meaning evident in Halie's monologue. For Halie, the new corn and *Buried Child* suggest renewal and growth, "You can't force anything to grow. You can't interfere with it … It's all unseen … Tiny little shoot. Strong enough to break the earth even. It's a miracle" (BC 132).

The house acquires different characteristics. It is a parental home for Tilden; it is a house of horror for Bradley and has childhood memories for Vince. Shelly first feels a stranger, then taking charge of the happenings, begins to feel one with her surroundings. The home becomes a grave for Dodge. Towards the end of the play, Vince considers it to be a fortress which has to be attacked and a citadel to be invaded. For Halie it is a place of memories, some of which she wants to run away from. The characters are anchored in
a world of rootlessness. Park Dixon Goist states "Buried Child taps into an American sense of confusion … an uneasy feeling that somewhere in the past we made a tragic mistake which continues to haunt us" (Wade 102). Buried Child thus offers a powerful dramatic metaphor for both the corruption of the American spirit and the hope for its salvation.

In one way Austin is right; the west of myth and legacy is dead. Whether it ever existed is questionable but it is evident that the West of today does not measure up to it, that is, up to the myth. If the True West still exists, it probably has to do within the land, as Saul so inarticulately suggested. When Austin talks to Lee about how the area in which they were raised has been built up, it has been "wiped out". Austin has learned to live in this wiped-out landscape, with its freeways, Safeway's, and smog, but Lee has not. Interested, he has been spending his time in the Mojave Desert, and to that extent his wanderings have been a search for the True West. He clearly links himself to this search when he recommends that Saul see the film Lonely Are the Brave, in which Kirk Douglas plays a westerner out of his time, a man who tries to maintain an independent life in the open country, but who, ironically, gets run down by a trailer truck while crossing a highway on his horse.

Taking the next step, Austin asked Lee, "what if I come with you out to the desert?" (TW 48) To Lee, who lives in the desert out of something more akin to necessity than to choice, Austin's query is crazy: "here, you are down here, rollin' in bucks. Floatin' up and down in elevators. And you wanna' learn how to live on the desert!" (TW 49) Rational as Lee's line of argument is, it no longer applies to Austin in the way it once might have. His contact with Lee and his confrontation with a power strain of alteration
and violence in his family has weakened his ties to normal social behaviour and called into question the ambitions that have been motivating him. "there's nothing' down here for me", he insists. "There never was … There's nothing' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!" (TW 49).

This “squaring off” is suggestive of the brothers being united as the two part of a whole. One may comment on this situation as, Austin and Lee, civilization and savagery, suburban and desert, east and west, all remain locked in the unceasing, ever deepening conflict that defame an American character on the frontier but now without a frontier. The two brothers playing two sides of the same coin are torn between civilization and savagery. Shepard's vision of the west without a frontier and a state of mind is a divided psyche. Linda Hart rightly points out, "From Cowboys to True West, Shepard's dissenting voice has rebelled against the restriction of urban life and defiantly, often nostalgically, asserted the claims of freedom and adventures in the myth of the American West"(Hart 88).

In the Americanized mythology of True West, however, the biblical story of Cain and Abel undergoes ironic and comic revision that undermines both the patriarchal values of Lee and the matriarchal values of Austin. The true American deity is Success, and Austin is initially that deity's favoured child. The deity’s agent is a Hollywood producer named Saul Kimmer, who has promised Austin a lucrative movie contract for the love story he is writing.

Brutal and insensitive by nature, Lee is incapable of writing a screen play for the same season that he is incapable of treating women with tenderness or concern.
Claiming that he needs a woman, he fumbles through his collection of scribbled telephone numbers, desperately dials the operator, and rips the telephone from the wall when even she hangs up on him. Clearly, Austin has not got the hang of male machismo. Having lost the faith in the power of romance; Austin assures Lee that "A woman isn't the answer. Never was" (TW 44), but Austin is too wrapped up in his conscience and too concerned about his victims to be self satisfied liberator of small appliance. Nor can he treat women as casual sex objective: when Lee asked if he knows any women, Austin can only answer, "I'm a married man" (TW 44).

As this penultimate scene unfolds Austin's strangely devotional attitude towards toast becomes the primary force of dramatic concern. Lee finally demands angrily, "what is this bull shit with the toast anyway! You make it sound like salvation sort of". Lee then concludes, "so go to church why don't ya" (TW 48) in a comic and incongruous fashion, the scene presents a veiled allusion both to the ritual offering of grain in matriarchal religion and to the breaking of bread in Christianity.

The contrast between the two brothers, as well as the matriarchal and patriarchal system of beliefs, is summarized by their own synopses: Austin loves beginning, birth, creativity; Lee counters that he has ‘always been Kinda’ partial to endings, death, conclusions, conquest. The conflict between the brothers reaches a new level of intensity as Lee knocks away Austin's neatly stacked plate of bread and then methodically crushes each piece of toast. Finally, their temporary alliance in creating a script about mortal battle in the desert is ratified in a parody of communion when Lee "takes a huge crushing bite" (TW 50) of toast while staring raptly into his brother's eyes.
The brothers of *True West* are either hustlers, or modern day cowboys who have lost their ranch. Lee and Austin, reunite in their mother's ticky-tacky suburban Los Angeles home. By the evening, they have stolen each other's identities and destroyed the house, and yet they can never completely sever the ties that bind. In the beginning they are polar opposites, but by the end of the play, however, Lee and his movie idea have won Kimmer's favour and Lee is attempting to be industrious while Austin has assumed Lee's habits of heavy drinking and petty crime. Austin who feels he is left a hollow shell tries out Lee's identity to see how it suits him.

Shepard asserted his belief that “we're split in much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal” (Coe 122). This concern with division informs the dramatic action of *True West*, which may be viewed as a sibling rivalry, a contest between Austin, a screen writer who is house sitting for his mother, and his brother Lee, a drifter and thief who intrudes upon Austin's attempt to land a movie deal.

The play is energized by the stark opposition of the two. Austin appears in a sports shirt and cardigan sweater; Ivy league educated, he has a wife, family and career – as Lee describes it, "the whole slam Lee conversely wears Salvation army apparel: he is virtually illiterate and lives on the desert for months at a time. To some extent the dialectic between the brothers issues from the discordant impulses of the playwrights' own sensibility. Austin represents Shepard, the legitimate artist; Lee embodies the playwright's social, renegade tendencies. John Malkovich who played Lee in a successful off-Broadway production of *True West*, described the character as "the side of Shepard that's always been strangled but never quite killed" (Shewey 115).
The play's dramatic action is initiated when Lee pitches his idea for a ‘contemporary Western’ to Saul, the Hollywood producer, who decides to forgo the project he has been developing with Austin. Saul's negotiations with Lee reverse the brother's societal positions. Now the screen writer Lee can garner huge earnings if he can complete his screenplay; Austin conversely piles Lee's trade and proves his talent in burglary by stealing toasters from neighbouring homes.

It was Shepard's ultimate work of psychological realism, with subtly drawn, complex characterizations, as well as a continuation of his exploration of the American family, of the secrets that bind it together and of the poisons that pass from parent to child. But at the same time, *Fool For Love* represents an apparent return to the self-consciously theatrical and dreamlike stage imagery of Shepard's early work with its juxtaposed stage realities and expressionistic use of space and sound. Central to the dreamlike and disturbing quality of *Fool For Love* is the presence of ‘the old man’, a father figure who seems to exist simultaneous to, but in a dimension removed from, the action of the play. He is both a surreal specter and a reinforcement of Shepard's continuing obsession with his own personal heritage and his father.

In *Fool For Love*, many a Shepardian symbol is used - horses, in particular, and the walls. The walls symbolize confinement and the way Eddie and May constantly bang against them perfectly conveys their claustrophobic sense of entrapment, the futility of their desire to escape. Both of them slam all the doors repeatedly, and they take turns moving around the edges of the room, hugging the walls as if testing the power of the physical boundaries to hold them in. Quiet, controlled emotions are not within their repertoire.
In his fifty odd plays, Shepard for the first time has focused on sexual connection. In dealing with love he has once again depicted passionately divided emotions. Eddie cannot live with May, but he cannot live without her either, and May simultaneously throws Eddie out and begs him not to leave – they are trapped in ‘can't stay together – can't stay – apart – obsession’.

The achievement of *Fool For Love* is the introduction of the old man, who Shepard introduced after his sixteen drafts. Until that draft, the play had been a conventional romantic confrontation between the long-separated lovers, Eddie and May. That Shepard would write well over a dozen drafts of a realistic play, and then finally complete a satisfactory draft only after the inspired addition of the old man, suggests the power of Shepard's intuitive theatricality over his conscious attempts to write within the self-imposed restrains of psychological realism. The solution to Shepard's writing problem was not a psychological or dramatic one but a theatrical one, involving the presence of a character who suspends the play between fantasy and reality.

The fact that Eddie, May, and the Old Man are immediate family adds an unusual, volatile twist to the situation in the play. Over the course of the drama, Shepard drops hints that May and Eddie are related. It is not until the end that Shepard reveals that they are half-siblings and the Old Man is their father. In the light of this revelation, Eddie and May's relationship is all the more disturbing. Yet while this is not a normal family, there are the same kind of misunderstandings and personal dynamics that exist in normal family relationships. For example, the Old Man led a double life with two women, resulting in May and Eddie. This Old Man is supposed to be a figment of Eddie and May’s conscious, yet he disappeared while Eddie and May were still in high school.
He did not know about the consequences of his disappearance. Eddie's mother killed herself, and May's mother essentially shut down emotionally. This kind of pain could be found in any kind of family, let alone the unusual one found in *Fool For Love*.

There is a tentative promise of compromise and acceptance as the lovers slowly join in an embrace that blocks the father from their consciousness. When the old man leaves his rocking chair and encircles the embracing couple, demanding that they play the scene according to his idea of truth, the young couple no longer acknowledges his dictates or even his presence. The illusion created by the father seems to vanish as the lovers unite, seizing their lives from the scenario authored by the past. Eddie momentarily ignores his father's ruthless call to join forces with him against their common enemy, the woman. But the son's triumph is transient; for although he refuses to acknowledge his father's presence, he cannot silence the promptings of an inner voice, an unconscious pull, that leads him away from the reality of May's love and out into the desert, that illusory, eminently male landscape that summons Shepard's heroes with a siren more seductive than Circe - like the other plays in the domestic quartet. *Fool For Love* ends with an action that emphasizes the ineluctable power of inherited mental structures. None of Shepard's heroes transcend the destructive influence of the father. Together, these four plays *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, True West* and *A Lie of the Mind* are a succession of tones on a tragic scale.

The playwright in these years attempted to draw closer to his family; this resulted in greater contact with his two sisters. A softening in Shepard's posture can also be attributed to a partial reconciliation with his father. Long estranged, the two had maintained their enmity for many years. Some critics have speculated that the
playwright's machismo theatrics stem in some part from his filial insecurity. At this time Shepard renewed efforts to communicate with his father, and in Motel chronicles he tells of visiting his parent's trailer in the desert and confronting his father's alcoholism and solitude. Rather than condemn, Shepard tried to understand his parent's pain and isolation; in the process he would learn much about himself and his own tendencies toward social withdrawal and alienation. It was at this time that his 14 years of marriage came to an end.

While the greater part of *Fool For Love* dramatizes Eddie's attempts to caress May, the play's final moments are given over to recitation. Eddie, May and the Old Man engage each other in a contest of performance competency. Eddie and May each recount their own story about the Old Man and his treatment of his respective wives. When May discloses that Eddie's mother killed herself due to the Old Man's infidelity, Eddie takes the side of his lover adding that his mother shot herself with the Old Man's shotgun. The convergence of stories is accompanied by May and Eddie's embrace. The two lock together in a passionate kiss, evoking a sense of inseparability that is ironically undercut when an explosion occurs offstage. Eddie leaves the room to survey the damage that the countess has inflicted upon his truck; May begins packing her suitcase, aware that Eddie has again left her, and the piece's ending thus attests to the cyclical pattern of the drama, a feature that suggests male – female relations follow an inevitable oscillation of intimacy and alienation. The possibility of change is muted in *Fool For Love*, and the work leaves the impression that in some wayside motel May and Eddie will one day again enact their battle of irreconcilable passion. For some critics, this is a disturbing feature of the drama, since it conveys a deterministic understanding of gender conflict, granting it the status of a ‘natural law’, beyond any social shaping.
One learns that over the past fifteen years Eddie and May have been separated and reunited many times, each time playing out this same scene of violence and confusion. Their lives and their love have been patterned as a circle of cruelty and deceit. In the play, for the first time, the characters painfully recall the details of their past as they honestly remember them. As they search for the truth that will end this cycle of treachery, the father must be banished from intrusion into his children's lives. Shepard's play does not suggest that an absolute truth can be discovered, for Eddie and May can never agree upon a definitive version of their past.

The old man and the pair of lovers exist on two different planes of reality: one exists only as a figment of the other's imagination. The underlying question of the play is “Whose imagination?” (Kramer 56). The result is a state of juxtaposed realities in which the spectator becomes uncertain of the seemingly metaphysical relationship between the motel room and the alcove. She negates the possibility of an objective reality in the play or even of a raisonneur whose viewpoint the spectator might take as ‘truth’.

This humorous lesson verbally reinforces the strange, irresolvable relationship between fact and illusion that has been suggested from the beginning by the old man's inexplicable presence on stage. It also introduces the importance of belief and acknowledgement in discerning reality from simple self-delusion. In the twisted logic of *Fool For Love*, to acknowledge illusion as such and to control it is to make that illusion a reality. Eddie later tells May's boy friend, Martin that, “Lying's when you believe its true. If you already know it's a lie, then it's not lying” (FFL 58).
The strange paradox cuts not only to the theatrical heart of Shepard's stage metaphor but to the philosophical heart of human existence as perceived by the playwright. ‘Reality’ as we know it is a constructed lie that has been repressed to the level of an unconscious assumption about life. To face life openly, one must be able to recognize and acknowledge the illusion of reality, yet show the strength to control and to live in the face of such knowledge.

_Fool For Love_, functions primarily as a metaphor, it is not the narrated story of Eddie and May that the play is about, but their dramatized passion and by extension any passion. The image of the motel at the edge of the desert, the pitifully small and fragile enclosure in the vastness with people bouncing off its inner walls, stands for the inevitably doomed attempt to keep infinite human emotion within the finite human frame. To be human, says the play, is to be made of forces so large they cannot be controlled, so essential they cannot be escaped, so extreme and contradictory that tenderness cannot be separated from violence or love from hate, so inherent in the fact of being human that their story can have no real beginning or end.

Attempting to create a normal life, May has acquired a job and a new boyfriend, although there is an undercurrent of restlessness in her that will not allow her to stay in this ordinary place. There is a primal connection between Eddie and May, which becomes evident as Eddie shows off his rodeo skills in order to impress her, and as she claws the walls with grief when he leaves. The theme of connectedness in spite of trial runs through this play; for the two main characters, each of them is the only link the other has to the past.
The Old Man, has a monologue near the beginning of the play. He describes an incident from May's childhood when he was living with her and her mother. May was a child upset during a long car ride. The Old Man stopped near a field and walked her around in it. The cows they came across had a calming effect on the child, and May was quiet the rest of the time. The Old Man's story is the first time he acknowledges that he is May's father. It makes him seem human and compassionate, not the kind of unfeeling womanizer who would lead a dual life with two separate families.

This is a psychological drama in any traditional sense. Shepard's hopefulness is constrained by his unfulfilled search for a viable cultural, artistic, and personal identity, and by his paradoxical sense of transience and imprisonment in relationship to his own past. These concerns and this optimism are combined in Shepard's *Fool For Love*. In this Shepard's depiction of passion between a man and a woman who probably share the same father links the lure of blood ties in Shepard's earlier plays with the newer subject of romantic love, here depicted as obsessional.

Lee and Austin's absent father was mentioned sporadically in *True West*, serving as one of the many sources of conflict between the brothers. In that play, Lee has stayed in contact with his derelict father who, like himself, spends most of his time living alone in the desert. Austin, who has little in common with his father, has seen him only on rare occasions and out of a seeming sense of guilt and remorse. Austin's strange tale of how his father lost his false teeth while drinking in bars in Mexico is the only real piece of storytelling in *True West*, and as such it carries much of the weight of the old man's unspoken presence in Lee and Austin's lives.
Like so many of Shepard's Western men – especially Lee in *True West* – Eddie possesses the undaunted desire and uncanny ability to make everyone else in the room uncomfortable in his presence. With *Fool For Love* Shepard fulfills the intention of ‘doing something’ to his audience; he reaches the audience on a visceral level with the play's ambiguous dreamlike setting and with its fierce expressionistic staging. It successfully blends form and content creating a theatrical spectacle of juxtaposed realities that embodies the play's thematic preoccupation with illusion and the subjectivity of reality.

Women characters – particularly mother figures – carry heavy thematic weight in Shepard plays (*Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, even True West*), usually in contrast to a male/father figure, but the roles tend to be peripheral. Not since *Cowboy Mouth* (1971) has a woman character shared the central conflict, but *Fool For Love* has more to do with a play like *True West* than it does with Shepard's work from the early 1970s. As usual with Shepard, *Fool For Love* is at once ambiguous and concrete, marvelously effective in some of its bits, a blending of the theatrical and the ideational, but occasionally, despite the intensity of the performers and the production, it seems suddenly to go languid, to trap itself in reiteration which is not the same as repetition in the best dramatic sense.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, there is always, hope as the closing metaphor has it, for a miraculous "fire in the snow". The play echoes through the recent work of Shepard *Fool For Love*, Jake and Beth could be Eddie and May, the combustible fools for love; their parents and siblings are amalgams of those in the family trilogy of *Curse of the starving Class, Buried Child* and *True West*. It shares Neill's vision of mirror-image fathers and sons locked in mutually destructive combat. It also contains flaky William’s mothers,
Lorraine and Meg and when the play shifts from darkness to light there is a Pop-Art
reminiscent of Albee's *American dream*. Shepard's inheritance from Mark Twain remains
apparent too; Men are forever running off to the lonely road, hoping as one Huck –
sounding character explains, to escape the 'feeble minded women in civilization’. Only
now the frontier has run out. Even in *A Lie of the Mind* Jake's mother Lorraine ruefully
accepts that the West is not big enough to accommodate every loner to start a new town
of his own.

The play is sprinkled with moments in which a character displays love, affection,
protectiveness toward another, but the effect of the play as a whole is to suggest the
impossibility of a happy relationship between a man and a woman or a healthy closeness
within a family. At the end of the play Jake’s mother, on one side of the stage, is burning
her house down and getting ready to go to Ireland with her daughter to visit probably
non-existent relatives; on the other side, Frankie and Beth embrace in an ending that
would be a more comforting final clinch if her parents were not laboriously folding an
American flag into the triangle that suggests a funeral; and the mutilated Jake and his
mutilator are somewhere in between, each self-exiled from the uncongenial family circle.
In the final moment Beth’s mother looks across the stage and comments on the fire,
which are presumably burning hundreds of miles away, thus providing the connection-
disconnection image, which indicates that the lie of the mind is not simply the false
promise of love, but the geography of shared loss.

Like *Fool For Love, A Lie of the Mind* explores the anxious condition of the
modern American male when Lorraine asks, in Act III, "Is there any good reason in this
Christless world why men leave women?" (LOM 64). Shepard acknowledges a malignant
urge in the male sensibility. It is in Jake's abuse of his wife that Shepard dramatizes the graphic consequences of an overbearing masculinity. From his childhood Jake has responded to personal crises with violence. His attack on Beth stems from his own sexual insecurities and his fear that Beth had been having an affair with some 'actor jerk'. He in fact voices a rationalization common to spousal abuse, that his wife provoked the beating herself.

Beth's character has been noted as the 'most compelling' figure in the play, representing a "new kind of voice in Shepard's work" (Londre 20). After her injury Beth rediscovers her powers of speech and to a degree fashions her own language. Her recovery is more correctly a recreation as she traduces conventional male/female behaviour. Beth highlights the constructed nature of gender when she calls her father's hunting shirt a 'costume' and engages in a reversal of role play with Frankie, Jake's brother, who has travelled to Montana to check on Beth's health. Beth states: "Pretending fills. Not empty. Other … Now, I'm the man … Shirt brings me a man" (LOM 57). She in turn invites Frankie, who has exhibited a usual male gentleness 'to be the woman' in calling Frankie a "woman – man" (LOM 58). Beth invites the consideration of a new relation, one that eludes the polar oppositions of gender distinctions.

Beth's character represents an innovation in Shepard's writing, for unlike May in *Fool For Love*, Beth embodies sexuality in flux and thus indicates the playwright's effort to rethink gender categories. Nevertheless, the fact that Beth's alternative consciousness has resulted from sexual assault – that she has paid for her 'hint of seduction' should not be trivialized. A number of critics argue that Jake, depicted as the tortured soul whose violence is misunderstood, should gain no audience tolerance whatsoever.
As *A Lie of the Mind*, winds one to the conclusion, Lorraine and Jake's sister Sally determine to have a clean break; they turn their collection of family mementoes and look to life in the future. Having travelled across the country, Jake comes before Beth on his knees and asks for atonement, confessing:

> Everything in me lies but you.
> You stay. You are true.
> I know you now. You are true.
> I love you more than this life" (LOM 93).

He renounces all claims to his wife and enjoins her to ‘stay’ with his brother, Frankie. Beth extends a token of propitiation and allows Jake to kiss her gently on the forehead. The most striking feature of the play's conclusion, however, involves a flag-folding ritual that brings Baylor and his wife Meg together in a moment of rediscovered intimacy. After solemnizing upon the American flag, Baylor draws close to his wife, who has helped him wrap the flag in the traditional triangle; the two kiss, for the first time, they reveal, in twenty years. Shepard here offers a moment of uncharacteristic tenderness, an impression of togetherness capped by Meg's final line. Beth's mother looks across the stage towards the burning mementoes Lorraine and Sally ignited in the prior scene and remarks, "Looks like a fire in the snow, How can that be?" (LOM 95). Her comment on another level links the divergent home sites of the drama. The snow of Montana and the fire of southern California are mysteriously wedded and the play thus leaves one with a note of reconciliation despite the violence and division that has preceded.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard reaches for the grand scale, what one critic called a "Homeric passion" (Rogoff 117) and the effort brought a mixed reaction. Frank Rich, of
the New York Times described the work as the "best" of the playwright's "40 odd plays" (Henry 83). *A Lie of the Mind* would indeed mark the peak of Shepard's renown as an American dramatist. *A Lie of the Mind* has been termed a ‘sardonic comedy’, and despite the work's predominance of estrangement the play ends with a surprising optimism. In essence, Shepard deploys sexual division, what he calls the ‘incredible schism between a man and a woman’ as a metaphor for national fragmentation. *A Lie of the Mind* reveals an expression of reconciliation and redemption not found in his earlier works; the play also evinces a softening of the strident male outlook. The flag folding ritual executed by Baylor and Meg perhaps best exemplifies this movement, for the enactment is both an expression of intimacy and nationalistic allegiance. The ending of the work has been “likened to a homecoming scene in a John Ford Western” (Rich 3). This play more than any other of Shepard's work, evokes a sweeping view of the American landscape and a hopeful expression of American cohesion. The implicit patriotism of *A Lie of the Mind* speaks to the renewal of civic optimism evident in the eighties. This play may arguably be regarded as a 'great' American play, a work about the nation that acknowledges tension and rupture while simultaneously promoting understanding and unity – the folded flag, the fire in the snow.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, once again Shepard builds the play on a metaphor. Beth's brain damage which stands for the dissociation from self and distortion of relationships that is everyone's condition: Jake and Mike both see Beth only as an extension of themselves. Lorraine, Sally and Meg all impose fictional identities on others and then relate to them. Baylor withdraws. "This is my father. He's given up love" (LOM 45). Thus, just as Beth must fight her way back to the use of language and coherent thought,
everyone else in the play must find some means of defining self and surroundings; and for virtually all of them the process paradoxically involves a fantasy or escape from reality. By imagining Frankie to be kind and loving Jake, Beth can find peace; by withdrawing into madness, Jake escapes his jealousy. Mike takes comfort in the role of the protective and avenging brother; Sally and Lorraine run away to an imagined Utopia; and Meg and Baylor find serenity in the rituals and habits of a long marriage. Only Frankie, the one character trying to deal with the problems rationally and realistically, is left confused and alone, unable to take Beth's counsel. “Pretend …. Ordinary is empty” (LOM 57).

The stage images in *A Lie of the Mind* come close to the absurdist tableaux of an Ionesco play. The action of Shepard's play exaggerates the existence of his characters in situations that approach the dark comedy of absurdism or post-absurdism. There is a call for psychological resolution in a realistic vein.

Violence as a necessary ingredient for passionate love on the part of American men is portrayed as a lamentable truth. One is meant to see some hope for emotional and sexual love between men and women in Frankie and Beth's final embrace. But Beth does not even know who Frankie is; she accepts him as a desperate replacement for Jake. And Frankie seems to accept Beth as a gift from his brother, who sanctions their union. At the play's end Beth and her mother Meg are lost in romantic ideology. In this, the longest of Shepard's family plays, there is a longing for a resolution to some of the questions it engenders, but that resolution never comes. *A Lie of the Mind* may also be seen as a gesture of bereavement.
The final moments of *A Lie of the Mind* come closest, of all his plays, to
depicting a conclusion that resolves and coheres. If one views the play as the dramatist's
would be masterwork on the American family, one sees that Shepard intends a here to
fore unseen degree of finality. As a result, the play leaves the audience with a novel sense
of closure, resolution and for many, optimism.

The photographs are connections to the past, tangible objects, however inadequate
or illegitimate they might be. ‘The camera's twin capacities’ enable the photograph to
‘subjectivize reality and to objectify it’, the pictures Ray and Earl gaze upon become
outer manifestations of the inner distortions of the eye that perceives them. The family
pictures that Ray gives away to a stranger are, for him, sentimental reprints of the original
imprint.

Despite differences in narrative complexity and closure, *The Late Henry Moss*
and *The Late Henry Conran* share important qualities. Both O'Connor and Shepard
present voracious protagonists who cannibalize themselves and family by a willful
relinquishment of moral nerve. Seeking spiritual fulfillment, or at least understanding,
they instead fill themselves with spirits. They are, to use Shepard's phrase ‘professional
drunk(s)’. These are men tormented by a dimly perceived inability to maintain contact
with those with whom they could, or should, be intimate. In effect, they transform
psychologically and spiritually to ghosts, suspended between a kind of heaven and hell, at
least until a secular or cosmic reckoning may brook purgation, a cleansing of the soul so
that soul may find its rightful place in the universe.
On the surface, the drama’s past events seems simple, if horrific, enough.

One fateful evening a quarter of a century ago, Henry assaulted his wife, kicking her into a bloody husk. Clearly the family never recovered from this defining moment. Stunned by his own savagery, Henry abrogates claims to familial duty and Emersonian self-reliance. Despite his howling that reaches a metaphysical poignancy by the third act, the fact remains that Henry Moss never apologizes for nearly murdering his wife.

She remains

"that little shit" who "caused me to leave! She caused me to pack on outa' there! Whatdya' think? You think I wanted to wander around this godforsaken country for twenty some years like a refugee? Like some miserable fuckin' exile? That's what she did to me! She banished me! She turned me out! … SHE LOCKED ME OUT!!!!" (LHM 69).

Only at the final curtain will Henry gain perspective regarding his exiled condition and the depth of his idiocy. Henry fathoms only seconds before lapsing into his final death that, at the precise moment he assaulted his wife, he transformed himself from ‘the present’ Henry Moss to The Late Henry Moss. Within the imaginative logic of Shepard's play, physical death twenty-five years later is a mere formality.

The Mosses emerge as characters whose very identities are under assault. For the blood-soaked mother nearly beaten to death, ‘identity’ has been rendered invisible by a wayward husband whose anger gains its demented energy from drink and insecurity. In text and performance, she never appears in a flashback scene. Nor does she speak for herself in the present. She remains nameless. All the audience learns is that Henry used
and abused here. We learn nothing else about her. For Earl, the elder son who lacked the
courage to protect his mother, who ran in terror that fateful evening, and whose actions
eerily replicate his father's throughout the play, 'identity' is submerged by guilt over his
mother's demise and, now, by alcohol that keeps at bay his shame. With their mother
lying near death, Earl sped off in his 1951 Chevy, never to be heard from for years.
Shepard provides few other details about his past. In the present, the hulking and besorted
Earl exudes a sad world-weariness. He seems content to ignore his own fallibility and to
forgive and accept his father – and his passing – at face value.

In the end, Henry Moss is coming to terms with his plight – and his death – as a
son covers him with the Mexican blanket while the lights and music fade. Now he can
leave a home Shepard described as 'a jail cell’. The play has been, for a baffled Henry
Moss, a valediction encouraging mourning. It is a play filled, as Patti Smith once
reflected, with "all those special dialogues of the heart" (LHM 70). To allude to the
epigraph Shepard invokes, “Henry learns that since living, for him, has been a crime, "…
'tis no crime to be dead" (LHM 70). In Shepard's latest incarnation of the depleted
American family, the "real" finds its authenticity in death. Henry soon dies after
Conchalla, in a paradoxically cajoling and comforting gesture, pours liquor down his
throat. Henry slips into the familiar stupor that has been his life. But he also slips, finally
and incontrovertibly, Shepard implies, to another and possibly more hospitable world.

HENRY : (on his knees) I remember – The day I died – she was on the
floor.

CONCHALLA : (stroking Henry's head) Now he, sees
HENRY: I remember the floor – was yellow – and – her blood – was smeared across it like – orange butterflies. She was surrounded – by butterflies and – I thought I'd killed her – but it was me. It was me I killed … She kept – peering out at me through her swollen eyes. She just stayed there – under the sink. Silent. Balled up like an animal. Nothing moving but her eyes. She must have seen me. She must have seen me – dying – right there. She knew! I ran out into the yard and I remember – I remember feeling – this – death. Cut off. Everything – far away. Birds. Trees. Sky. Everything. Removed! Removed from me! I ran. I ran to the car and I drove. I drove for days with the windows wide open. The wind blowing across my eyes. I couldn't stop. I had no map. No destination. I just drove. drove until the money ran out … That's how I got here, wasn't it? I just – ran out. Ran out of gas. (LHM 70)

These are Henry Moss's last words, heartbreakingly bellowed by Gammon. Shepard of course ironizes those last lines: Henry just – and the pause is telling – "ran out" of much more than fuel for his car, for this is a man who ‘ran out’ of his marriage, relationship, home, fatherhood, and any meaningful connection with a larger community. Henry lies near death, a blanket shrouding him. Shepard's stage directions here are significant, for Henry's body is covered in “a yellow, orange, and red Mexican blanket” (LHM 5), colours precisely matching those used to describe his wife lying on the kitchen floor, blood pouring from her beaten body.
Invariably, there is a sense of ambiguity which prominently hangs over Shepard's work. He seems to acknowledge the betrayals, the disturbing relationships in experience, the pressures that work to annihilate the characters, who he chooses to locate on the margins of a society which has lost touch with its own animating principles. Their existence in a dark desert terrain drives them back on a self too weak and insecure to offer meaning. The necessities that compel them, and consequently that appear to make them pure victims, seem to destroy the very consolations they desperately seek, negate the relationships which are the primary focus of their lives. Yet, against this bleak scenario, Shepard balances moments of consonance, glimpses of harmony. The comforting possibility of redemption is not excluded.

Shepard intensely portrays that beyond the realistic rotten surface, there is latent regenerative capacity and his strong belief in the possibilities of perforating to unearth and to germinate it for the purpose of making the past America is brought to light in succinct expressions. Shepard's purposeful attempts at this kind of transformation are a positive and hopeful light at the end of the tunnel. Shepard is adept at using metaphors for the purpose of the binaries. As Lee and Austin are shown as the two sides of the same coin, the fertile images of land and people are shown as the sprouts from the barren land. The juxtaposition of the 'breaks' in relationship with the emotional invisible futuristic tie-ups creates an aura of worldly-wise exhibited by Shepard. He ensures the possibility of returning to America of the past which held promises through the argument that the America which has 'wiped out' values and relationships has been the same America which has 'built up' the men and the country in the past. The polar opposites of annihilation and resurrection can be deconstructed when people start becoming prodigal son.