CHAPTER TWO

Towards Experimentation: Form and Technique

The emergence of new and radical tendencies in modern American drama and theatre was the result of a quest for a theatrical form that would express the frustrations and demands of living in the post-Second World War era. Julien Beck's Living Theatre (1948), the Happenings of the fifties, Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre (1963) and Richard Schechner's Performance Group (1967) are prominent among them. These groups have taken their impulses from theorists like Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, and Bertolt Brecht. Jacqueline Martin ascribes the label "postmodern" to these theatre groups and delineates their major characteristics thus:

Form dominates over content; fragmentation seems to be the aim; there is no linear narrative: time and place are indefinite as in a dream; there is an 'irrational' attitude to the series of events: it is a polyphonic theatre; there is a breakdown in stage – audience communication; there is a lack of communication between the characters: heavy use is made of visual images, stylized movements and groupings: many of the characters seem 'action-paralysed': it is an archetypal theatre of myth and ritual rather
than a socio-political one . . . In this theatre, language is not used
to communicate in the normal way, rather words are freed from
the tyranny of the text and give place to sounds, chants and
broken pieces of dialogue . . . ” (119)

Julien Beck’s Living Theatre attained popularity through the production
of Jack Gelber’s play *The Connection* (1960). The play explodes all
conventional notions of playwriting and makes itself distinct through the
intrusion of the “producer” in to the play, who in turn introduces the author of
the play and declares the whole performance to be the fiction of the play. Real
drug addicts are introduced in the role of addicts. Improvisational jazz music
replaces stage dialogue, and body movements, gestures and visual effects convey
an experience of a pure theatrical rite. Thus the play dispenses with the
traditional dramatic art and its essential ingredients like plot and dramatic action,
linear progression, dramatic conflict and resolution.

Joseph Chaikin formulated his concept of the Open Theatre taking
inspiration from the theatrical ethos of the Living Theatre. It was mainly an
attempt, says Paul Feldman

. . . to make visible on stage those levels of reality which usually
are not expressed in situations: the elusive, irrational, fragile,
mysterious or monstrous lives within our lives: the elements of
personality – which lie beyond the roles we assume as our identity – to confront elements of dream, myth, fantasy, ritual as well as social and moral problems – to express the fragmentation and multiplicity of experience, and the inconsistency of internal and external “truth” about character or events – to break down the actor’s reliance upon rational choices, mundane social realism and water-down Freud, and to release his unconscious through non-rational, spontaneous action celebrating the actor’s own perceptions about modern life. (qtd. in Croyden, 174-75)

A play in the Open Theatre production is mainly an actor-centered enterprise where the actor undergoes rigorous training, through what are called transformation exercises. As Chaikin himself explains:

Technique is a means to free the artist – An actor should strive to be alive to all that we can imagine to be possible. Such an actor is generated by an impulse toward an inner unity, as well as by the most intimate contacts he makes outside himself. When we as actors are performing, we as persons are also present and the performance is a testimony of ourselves. Each role, each work, each performance changes us as persons . . . Later, as the actor advances, in the process of work, the person is transformed.
Through the working process, which he himself guides, the actor recreates himself. (4-6)

Sam Shepard has been considerably influenced by the transformation exercises of Joseph Chaikin and Claude Van Itallie. Van Itallie’s *America Hurrah* (1965) is a powerful satire on the dehumanized modern American society. Written in the form of a trilogy the play dramatizes the situation of total communication failure among human beings in the context of their robotization. Through a series of abrupt scenes with the characters and their roles constantly changing the playwright exposes the devastating influence of technology in erasing the basic human capability for thinking and imagination. This ultimately shrinks all possibilities of human communication and mutual understanding.

Another radical theatre movement that influenced Shepard considerably was the “Happening” which also undermined the importance of the narrative, character, plot, and dialogue in favour of a concretized image. In the words of Margaret Croyden:

... the happenings had a decisive influence on the arts and on the theatre of the sixties in particular. Following the line set down by Artaud and the surrealists, happenings set the stage for further development. Disorder and disarray became a standard aesthetic criterion: the non-rational became a virtue; experience of the
moment, a philosophical quest; the non-verbal response, a sign of probable truth . . . Artists rejected classical tradition as a symbol of bourgeois culture, and considered the happening as their own; happenings coincided with a tone, attitude, style and ambience that captured the fragmentation of their lives. A happening apprehended the hallucinogenic experience; it used junk to symbolize a junk society; it adopted technology as material for new art and it amalgamated all art into event. In the theatre, happenings broke the stronghold of narrative and of the proscenium arch and abolished the separation between the audiences and players. (87-88)

The Theatre of Images that emerged in the seventies used painting and sculpture within a proscenium arch to offer the viewers an experience of a meditative dream. The major practitioners included Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson and Lee Brewr. These new theatre groups being more audience-oriented constructed their plays using the language and symbols familiar to the masses. Using impressionism, expressionism surrealism, Brecht’s alienation theories, Artaud’s horror techniques, American jazz music, rock and roll and the like, the practitioners of these groups produced a collage that brought a new strength to the American post-Second World War American theatre. Their
interest in composition and structure in the theatrical event is explicit in the following words of Richard Foreman:

I am interested in creating a totally polyphonic theatre where all the elements work together to fragment each other, so that the audience, free from strong feelings and the need to identify, can enjoy the playfulness in the theatrical elements. (qtd. in Martin 136)

Foreman was chiefly concerned with the realization of fragmented text in his productions. When he came to realise that unfinished sentences and a fragmented language were an indication of the mood of his own times, he began to concentrate more fully on this very breakdown of communication.

Shepard seems to imbibe the radical practices of these new theatre movements which he integrates with the innovations of Artaud, Grotowski and Brecht in moulding his drama. Artaud’s theatrical writings called for radical changes like the abandonment of plot, character and even language, as they have been traditionally understood. Artaud visualized theatre as transformational magic – awakening mysteries and ecstasies. He set up his Theatre of Cruelty backed by the belief that seeing lacerating images of cruelty on stage would make it impossible for an audience to be cruel outside the theatre. Artaud believed that the theatre should inculcate an experience that would serve to
disturb the senses and bring out the repressed consciousness. This according to
him is possible only by creating an experience, which lies beyond spoken
language. This accounts for the large-scale presence of dance, pantomime,
mimicry, intonation, gesticulation and lighting in Artaud’s theatre.

Grotowski’s Poor Theatre also appealed to the new playwrights of the
post-Second World War era. Grotowski’s concept of art and his views on acting
were quite revolutionary. He said:

The actor does not tell a story or create an illusion — he is there in
the present . . . If the act is accomplished, the actor, that is to say
the human being, transcend the phase of incompleteness to which
we are condemned in everyday life. The division between thought
and feeling, body and soul, consciousness and unconscious, seeing
and instinct, sex and brain, then disappears having accomplished
thro’, the actor achieves totality . . . the reaction which he evokes
in us contains a peculiar unity of what is individual of and what is
collective. (qtd. in Bigsby, American Drama 3: 59)

Brecht’s Epic Theatre too has offered the playwrights of Shepard’s
generation an alternative that took into account the presence of the actor as
actor. The Brechtian actor remains conscious of his or her individuality while
simultaneously presenting the character to the audience. Brecht’s revolutionary
ideas demanded a total replacement of the categories of traditional theatre, plot began to be replaced by narrative and the significance of character was lost to the significance of an idea. Moreover the progression of the story through action, character development and a linear sequence to the climax at the end was replaced by a montage of scenes, each independent of the other, and at times counterposed against one another. The alienation effects attempt to destroy all illusions of reality in the theatre, by making the audience feel that they are watching a play and not life and that the play is pure artifice.

The Open Theatre movement that Shepard was associated with also practiced Brechtian techniques along with other theatrical techniques. It demanded the process of transformation of the actor as a person separate from the role through his or her experience on the stage. It stressed the way in which a person in life creates the self by adopting various roles. Linda Hart observes that, the acting techniques of this theatre movement were designed in such a manner as to

\[ \ldots \text{demonstrate the freedom of the individual to escape from the past and create himself or herself anew in the present by transforming fixed forms, social and psychological that limit the possibilities for action.} \] (18)
The fact of Shepard's association with this theatre is important, as it would throw light on a significant aspect of his characterization. As Bonnie Marranca has pointed out,

"... the Shepard character has not simply a self but several selves which are continually changing, closer in composition to the transformational character developed by the Open Theatre, than the typical dramatic character. The transformational character has a fluid relationship to changing "realities" whereas a character in realistic drama is fixed in his relationship to reality which is itself fixed. ("Alphabetical Shepard" 14)"

The characters that Shepard creates exist, as many critics observe, in a heightened or critical state of consciousness. They suddenly act out the invisible "inner truth" of their experiences that is masked by social forms and subterfuges. Gerald Weales characterizes Shepard's transformations as "dramatic responses to a feeling of a battered and broken society" ("Transformations " 38). Shepard formulates his own concept of character as follows:

Instead of the idea of a whole character with logical motives, behind his behaviour which the actor submerges himself into, he
should consider instead a fractured whole, with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. (Angel City 6)

Shepard’s aim is to get to the core of the contemporary American experience that has developed a highly amorphous, fragmentary and non-rational character. Hence his use of the technique of fragmentation in a majority of his plays cannot be overlooked. Shepard deliberately fragments the plot of his plays by combining both the realistic and the non-realistic worlds. He juxtaposes them in various dramatic actions in a series of images or scenes. In plays like Buried Child, Angel City, La Turista, True West, Curse of the Starving Class and Rock Garden Shepard works out sudden and puzzling transformations of the various sides of a character. What the playwright effects by this is a conscious distortion of a conventional reading or viewing of his plays.

On this Shepard concurs with Ionesco, who said:

A particular way of saying things is worn out and a new way must be sought; so that the old exhausted idioms, the old forms must be exploded, because they have grown incapable of containing the new things that have to be said. (Notes and Counter notes 64)

The text of a majority of plays by Shepard have a fragmented nature; sentences are broken up by syntactical ungrammaticality or by semantic incongruity or by a break in the usual typographical arrangement or by a
combination of all these devices. In most of Shepard's plays the causal and
temporal reality of the scenes are unfixed, and the sequence of events resemble
a description of schizophrenic reality. To quote Jameson, it creates "an
experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous, material signifiers which fail
to link into a coherent sequence" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 119).
This, again, is related to the device of transformations. Richard Schechner
has pointed out how the influence of transformations has affected the very
construction of a Shepard play:

Transformations introduce an entirely different kind of
collection. The play is no longer a consistent set of interrelated
units. In transformation each scene is considered separately,
no necessary attempt to relate one scene to the next, through
organic development, one scene follows another but does not
logically grow out of it. The relationship between beats or
scenes is paralogical or prelogical ("Introduction" 13-14)

In order to give theatrical life to a heightened sense of consciousness,
Shepard develops a form that discards all conventional notions of dramatic
action. This new form is similar to the one conceived by Ionesco in which action
"progressed not through a pre determined subject and plot, but through an
increasingly intense and prevailing series of emotional states” (Corrigan, “Introduction” 95).

The new ideas borrowed from the Epic Theatre and the Open Theatre might have inspired Shepard to create a sort of self-referential drama, that is a drama that calls attention to its own status as theatre or performance. It highlights the self-consciousness of the artist and destroys the illusion of reality. The stage no longer mirrors the world, but begins to reflect its own image. This is “metatheatre” as conceived by Lionel Abel, of which Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author would be an early example. Metatheatrical elements can also be seen in the plays of Samuel Beckett, who too exercised influence over Shepard. See for example his Endgame (1958) where at one point, Hamm, the blind master sitting paralysed in his chair, asks his servant Clov “what’s happening?”, to which Clov replies, “Something is taking its course” (107). Most probably Beckett here might be hinting at “the preordained course of the action of the play, which once started, must relentlessly run through its fixed and repeatable structure in time” (Esslin, The Field of Drama 154). The metadramatical aspects are further stressed in the following conversation between Hamm and Clov that occurs later in the play:

Hamm: We’re not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?

Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something! (Brief laugh)
Ah that's good one!

Hamm: I wonder (Pause). Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough. (Voice of rational being) Ah good, now I see what it is. Yes, now I understand what they're at! (108)

Here Beckett purposefully mocks the audience who will invariably be asking themselves, what the play they are seeing means and who will go on thinking about that meaning later on, perhaps for a long time.

Though many plays by Shepard can be said to share aspects of metatheatre, his *Action* is one play that closely follows the pattern of this kind of theatre. The play opens on four characters, Lupe, Liza, Jeep and Shooter occupying a space barely furnished, with a plain board table set with a pot of coffee in the centre and a clothes line attached to the side of the stage by a pulley. They appear to be survivors of some crisis or disaster, which remains unmentioned. The plot resembles a rehearsal, somewhat like observing a dramatic piece in progress. The four characters constantly try to find out their part in a book, which they read taking turns. Shepard tries to highlight the presence of the actors behind their characters by creating moments in which the illusion of rationally motivated characterization is disrupted. The separation between the self and experience, between actor and action, is theatrically
reinforced on several occasions in the play. The characters at times bring attention to themselves as performers. At one point in the play Jeep observes that Shooter who is supposedly looking for his place in a book, may be just thumbing through the book. "Not even seeing the pages. Just turning them. Acting it out. Just pretending" (Action 17).

The book the characters read is itself a self-reflexive allusion within the play that draws attention to them as role players. The book’s plot also suggests a situation similar to the setting of the play. It is about a group of people who survive an interplanetary crisis, and return to a post-apocalyptic earth. As the plot progresses, Shooter enacts various roles suggesting the schism between the image of the self and the character that performs various actions. He pretends to be a dancing bear relating what it feels like to be "performing." The bear senses, but is not conscious of the act of performance. "He just finds himself doing something unusual for him Awkward" (12). Having thus drawn attention to himself as performer, Shooter suddenly halts his performance and "looks blankly at the audience, then strolls back to his seat and sits" (13).

Further evidence of the play’s metatheatrical nature is provided by the character’s awareness of an omnipresent but detached eye that constantly watches them. When Jeep criticizes Lupe’s way of dancing, she feels disappointed and says:
When you are in a position of doing something like that it’s hard to talk about it. You know what I mean? I mean while I was doing it—while I was in the middle of actually doing it I didn’t particularly feel like talking about it. I mean it made me feel funny. You know what I mean. It was like somebody was watching me. Judging me.

Sort of making an evaluation. Chalking up points. (15)

Again when Shooter tops over the armchair in which he was sitting, concealing himself under it from the audience. Jeep asks him, “If you were alone, would you have done that?” (33), to which Shooter replies “I’m at my wit’s end. The whole world would disappear” (33). In a “metatheatrical” sense, observes Dieckman, “the theatrical form itself serves as a metaphor for imprisonment. The actors are trapped with in the fabricated ‘masks’ of their characters and exposed to the critical gaze of an audience of ‘watchers’ who peer at him through the ‘window’ of the proscenium arch” (195). De Rose states that “the self-conscious performances and the self-reflexive narratives of the characters, along with the seemingly post-apocalyptic setting of the play are especially reminiscent of Beckett’s Endgame” (63). The play resembles the works of Pinter, Beckett and Handke in theme and dramatic style. On a closer examination a few of Marnet’s plays also reveal a passionate concern with the
boundaries of the theatrical situation and with the awareness that they are performed before an audience. Deborah Geis observes:

Mamet’s theatre owes a great deal to the metadramatic “tricks” or strategies inherited from ancient tragedy and comedy and from Renaissance drama, including choral figures, soliloquy, storytelling, stock characters and manipulation of the audience. (50).

Mamet’s metadramatic play *A Life in the Theatre* involves two actors playing the role of actors and is concerned with the nature of performance. The stage is arranged with two curtains, so as to provide the audience with a view from the front when the two actors perform the backstage sequences and from the back, during their play-within-the-play sequences. Robert, the older actor instructs the younger one that theatrical tradition needs to be passed from one generation to the next. He feels that theatre is a “closed society” which allows virtually no life outside itself (*A Life in the Theatre* 66). He also tells John that “life on stage” is nothing but “attitudes” (67). The metadramatic range of Mamet’s play gets an additional dimension through his use of soliloquy. A soliloquy usually verbalizes the speaker’s inner thoughts and is enacted for the benefit of the audience. This technique becomes metatheatrical because “it calls for the vocalization of thoughts and because the implicit or explicit
acknowledgement of the audience as auditors may also work as a reminder that the speaker is a character in a play” (Geis 53).

Besides using soliloquy as a dramatic technique, Mamet also uses it to reflect the existential loneliness experienced by his characters due to the lack of proper communication between them. Robert, the older actor occasionally turns to soliloquizing whenever he feels lonely and dejected. In the final scene he speaks to an empty house, as John the younger actor eavesdrops:

Robert: You been so kind . . . Thank you, You’ve really been so kind. You know, and I speak, I am sure, not for myself alone, but on behalf of all of us . . . (composes himself) . . . all of us here, when I say that these . . . these moments make it all . . . they make it all worthwhile. (94-95).

Here, even though Robert addresses the empty house in the play, in reality the listeners to his speech include John as well as the actual theatre in which the actor who plays Robert is performing. According to Geis “this moment embodies the paradoxical nature of soliloquy: the presence of the audience is both ignored in the intimacy of the moment and acknowledged in the vocalization of the speaker’s thoughts” (54). In Mamet’s Sexual Perversity in Chicago, each of the four characters delivers at least one soliloquy at some point in the play. Bernie’s soliloquy to his imaginary buddies at the health club
exposes the intensity of his loneliness and his desperate yearning for 
communication.

Bernie: So the kid asks me, "Bernie, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, 
blah, blah, blah, blah, The broad this, the broad that 
blah, blah, blah, blah, Right? So I tell him, "Dan, do you think I 
don't know what you're feeling, I don't know what you're 
going through? You think about the broad, you this, you 
that, you think I don't know that?" So he tells me, "Bernie" 
he says, "I think I love her". (Pause) Twenty eight years 
old... But mark my words, one-two more weeks, he'll do 
the right thing by the broad (Pause). And drop her like a 
fucking hot potato. (46)

In another context, Danny speaks out his fantasies to an imaginary co- worker.

Danny is so desperate to talk to some one, and being unable to do so he 
soliloquizes:

Danny: ... no, wait a second. Wait a second. I want to tell you 
this: I know what you're saying, and I'm telling you I don't 
like you badmouthing the guy, who happens to be a friend 
of mine. So just let me tell my story okay? So the other day 
we're up on six and it's past five and I'm late and I'm
having some troubles with my chick (this chick I’ve been seeing) and I push the button. And the elevator doesn’t come and it doesn’t come, and it doesn’t come. So I lean back and I kick the shit out of it three or four times (I was really hot). And he puts his arm around my shoulder and he calms me down and he says, “Dan. Dan... don’t go looking for affection from inanimate objects” (pause) Huh? (Pause) so I don’t want to hear you badmouthing Bernie Litko. (53)

Joan, another lonely female also indulges in speaking to herself. She reads a story to her imaginary toddlers:

Joan: ... and when the Prince came home that night, she had changed into an old Hag (so of course he was very surprised) “where is my beautiful wife?” he asked the Hag. “And what have you done with her?” And she said: “I am your wife” (That’s right) “I can be beautiful during the daylight hours so that you and your friends can admire me, or I can be beautiful at night, so that you can enjoy me by the fire side, and so on. But for one half of the day I must be this old Hag you see before you”. 
A "hag" is an ugly old lady.

Well, how do you think it's spelled?

Well, how does it sound?

That's right. And so she told him . . . . (61)

Soliloquizing thus becomes a significant sign of the inability of the characters to engage in actual communication with one another. Beckett, whose influence Shepard has quite often acknowledged has written his *Krapp's Last Tape* as a monodrama. Here the primary text, as has been pointed out, consists solely of the soliloquy of a single figure named Krapp. The soliloquy in this case is not just a formal element required by the dramatic medium, but also serves to express themes such as the disruption of communication and the isolation and alienation of the individual.

Shepard's indebtedness to the Theatre of Images has already been referred to. He has remarked about the infinite scope of using images in his plays particularly as a means of expressing the inner life of an individual, his private fears and tensions of living in an incommunicable world. Furthermore,
he has effectively made use of images to project the alienation his characters experience in certain situations. Shepard’s plays flourish like a string of images, and they present the extremes of psychic and emotive action. His own concept of images seems interesting:

When you talk about images, an image can be seen without looking at anything – you can see something on stage, you can see things that don’t appear on stage, you know. The fantastic thing about theatre is that it can make something be seen, that’s invisible and that’s where my interest in theatre is – that you can be watching this happening with actors and costumes, and light and set and language and plot, and something emerges from beyond that and that’s the image part I’m looking for, that’s the sort of added dimension. (Marranca, ed, Animations 190)

With his fascination for comic books, television movies and pop music, Shepard copiously derives images from the world of music and movies. His plays become the products of images drawn from his own conscious as well as unconscious experiences. Shepard reconstitutes an inner world by deploying gestures, images and dramatic forms. Single images as well as image clusters are abundant in most of his plays. Shepard’s collaboration with Joseph Chaikin in the production of The Tongues inspired him to discover the possibilities of working
out the food imagery that becomes a significant part of his plays. Shepard shared with Chalkin the belief that a person’s profound sense of emptiness and isolation in life is answered or compensated by eating in many ways:

When you eat, food fills some kind of void, that’s not only physical but emotional. And I think there’s something to that. People who have a hunger for anything—the hunger for drugs, the hunger for sex—this hunger is a direct response to a profound sense of emptiness and aloneness, maybe, or disconnectedness. And I think that there’s some truth to that. (Rosen 4)

In his play Rock Garden, Shepard develops a series of images related to food in an opening scene itself. The scene is played in total silence, the setting focusing on a father and two children seated at a table. The father is fully absorbed in reading. The only action is that of the boy and the girl sipping milk. The scene ends with the girl dropping her glass and spilling the milk on the floor, thus breaking the long, uncomfortable silence. This is a stark visual image that expresses the intensity of the communication crisis between the members of the family. Holy Ghostly also builds up a similar visual image of communication crisis. It centers upon a father who has escaped from the responsibilities of family life and is living alone in the desert. He has called his son from New York to stay with him. When the play begins the son is toasting marshmallows over a
campfire for the father, who is asleep in a sleeping bag. There is certainly no
sign of communion or communication even at this stage, and the play ends
when the son shoots his father in the stomach—the last act of violence to break
the silence. Action also abounds in imagery of food. Four persons sit around a
table, sipping coffee but it becomes evident that each one is selfabsorbed in his/
her own thoughts. Jeep begins to talk about his future and Shooter responds
with “who’re you talking to” (10), indicating the lack of interest in
communication. At another point, Lupe discloses her hunger by licking her lips
and gnawing ravenously on her own arm. Surprisingly other characters pay no
attention to her and later when Liza enters with “a huge golden turkey on a
silver platter with steam rising off it,” Lupe carries it and serves it to the others.
After a while, Shooter sits back in the armchair, holds his stomach and
complains, “I’m starving. Did we eat already... I mean you ate without me?”
(29).

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, a good deal of cooking and eating goes
on, but no one in the Weston family is eager to eat or drink together or even
accept the food offered by another member of the family. The refrigerator,
considered as the main storage place for food in the family, is quite often
opened and slammed shut mercilessly by each and every member in the
household. Sometimes it is overstuffed with food and sometimes emptied. But
still the members experience a strange sensation of starving which is more a psychological rather than biological. Whiting has this to say on the fate of the Weston family:

This family's hunger remains unsated: they are trapped and doomed by hereditary demons and an exploitative society. The spectacle of Wesley ravenously gorging himself groaning and throwing half-eaten food aside, the last and most spectacular of the play’s exaggerated food images, signifies that there will be no liberation for the spiritually starved. (176-77)

In *True West* the lack of proper communication between the two brothers Austin and Lee is suggested through the outright refusal of food. When Austin offers food or suggests breakfast Lee repeatedly refuses. Again when Austin steals some bread toasters and presents Lee with a stack of roast, Lee sends it flying and even stamps on it. The imagery of food thus becomes a recurring motif in Shepard’s theatre. “signifying that things to eat and drink, which should nourish people and bring them together, simply fail to do so” (Whiting 183). “Alcohol”, suggests Whiting, “is the counterpart to the food imagery” in most of Shepard’s plays “because it expresses frustration of the dreams” (180). Weston, the father in *Curse of the Starving Class* is a heavy drunkard. In *Buried Child*, Dodge the old man, Halie his wife, and even Tilden
their son find solace and forgetfulness in drink. At one instance in the play, Vince, the young son gets wildly intoxicated because his dream of finding his roots has been disappointed. Lee in *True West* takes to heavy drinking and destructive activities when he fails in his efforts to write a movie script. The old man in *Fool for Love* drinks in order to escape from the bitter memories of a disastrous family life.

Shepard's plays express grave concern and fear for the world going astray, with the human beings constantly engrossed in a sense of fear, helplessness and entrapment. This is manifested through his subtle use of apocalyptic imagery in the hallucinatory speeches of the characters. Shepard's early plays like *Red Cross, Chicago, Icarus' Mother and 4-H Club* forebode a landscape of apocalypse and destruction. They reveal the author's acute aversion and unease with the urban surroundings. The dialogue spoken by the characters as well as the staging share the common goal of creating an overwhelming sense of mental and physical disorientation. For example, in *Red Cross*, the action centres upon Jim and his girl friend Carol living in a rented room of a woodland's cabin. Both are afflicted by a mysterious malady that causes a tingling of the skin under Carol's eyes and severe physical discomfort on Jim's part as he is infested by pubic crabs. The staging has been set in such a way that the beds, the floor, the walls, the lighting and the even the
clothes worn by the characters are white. The drop of blood that trickles down Jim's forehead in the final moment of the play suggests an oncoming apocalypse. Shepard has hinted at final apocalyptic image in a long speech of Carol spoken in the early part of the play. She talks about snow skiing, which gradually increases in intensity as she imagines herself moving speedily down a snow covered hill. Reaching peak speed her head starts to throb as if it will “break clear open”.

Then it’ll come. It’ll start: like a twitch in my left ear. Then I’ll start to feel a throb in the bridge of my nose. Then a thump in the base of my neck. Then a crash right through my skull. Then I’ll be down. Rolling! Yelling! All these people will see it . . . Then my head will blow up. The top will come right off. My hair will blow down the hill full of guts and blood . . . my nose will come off and my whole face will peel away. Then it will snap. My whole head will snap off and roll down the hill and become a huge snow ball and roll into the city and hill a million people. (Red Cross 21)

*La Turista* depicts the destruction of Kent, the protagonist; the victim of a hostile and polluted society, by means of apocalyptic images of plague, fire and blood. As a critic points out, dysentery and encephalitis, the diseases that Kent succumbs to are “plagues that literally consume Kent on the physical level
and the intellectual. Recalling apocalyptic imagery, his diarrhoea parodies warnings of flood while his encephalitic fever repeats fire imagery. Each illness is an emblem of both literal and figurative sickness, illness itself is the central metaphor” (Manette 66). *La Turista* ends with the final image of Kent jumping through the hotel wall, leaving the print of the outline of his body on the wall. The play is a “pastiche,” comments De Rose, “of visual, verbal and theatrical images that suggest a heightened, perhaps shattered, state of consciousness” (33). Ross Wetzsteon has this to say on the tremendous sensational effect this final image of *La Turista* created on the viewers:

I can still recall the first moment I was stunned by Shepard’s stagecraft – the final image of *La Turista*, the American Place Theatre 1967... Just as when we awaken we try to reduce our dreams to their meanings, so in the theatre we instinctively ask, “what is the playwright trying to say?” and in spite of my increasing enchantment, I didn’t have the vaguest idea what it was. Then, at the end of the play, at the very moment that Shepard’s fragmentary glimpses seemed about to come into focus, providing some sort of illumination at last, the flash of lightning came instead—the hero, in a panicked flight for freedom, turned his back to the audience, reached full speed toward the rear of the
stage, and crashed through the wall, leaving only the outline of his body before our straddled eyes. And staring at that image, that dramatized the themes of the play more precisely than could any words, an image that communicated the emotional texture of the characters lives far more vividly than could any speech. At that instant I realized that Sam Shepard was more than just another promising young playwright, he was the most instinctive, the most purely theatrical playwright of his generation. (qtd. in De Rose 35)

The apocalyptic imagery of Shepard abounds in descriptions of fire and destruction. The description of the plane crash in *Icarus’ Mother* is striking:

... blowing itself up six inches above sea level... lighting up the air with a gold tint and a yellow tint and smacking the water so that waves go up to five hundred feet... Exploding the water for a hundred miles in diameter around itself. Sending a wake to Japan. An eruption of froth and smoke and flame blowing itself up over and over again... the community comes out to see for itself.

Till the houses open because of the light they can’t sleep... and the tide breaks open and waves go up! (“Icarus’ Mother” 46)

The fratricidal situation that Shepard displays in the final scene of *True West* is another image that hints at an apocalypse. The two brothers, Austin
and Lee in this play, after having wrecked their mother's house, fight one another as the lights fade. They appear to be caught in a vast desert like landscape quite similar to the one that Lee had described as the conclusion of his planned film:

So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie. The sun is just coming down and they can feel the night air on their backs. What they don’t know is that each of ’em is afraid. see. Each one separately thinks that he’s the only one that’s afraid. And they keep ridin’ like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who’s chasing doesn’t know where the other is taking him. And the one who’s being chased doesn’t know where he’s going. (True West 36)

The image of nuclear destruction dominates the action in the play Icarus’ Mother. Separate images come together to create a sense of fear, threat and destruction. The description of the firework display that takes place in connection with the Fourth of July celebrations also develops into an apocalyptic image:

And the whole sky is lit . . . The sirens come and the screaming starts . . . And the tide breaks open and the waves go up! . . . The water goes up to fifteen hundred feet and smashes the trees and
the firemen come. The beach sinks below the surface. The sea
gulls drown in flocks of ten thousand . . . And the pilot bobbing in
the very centre of a ring of fire that’s closing in . . . His hand
reaching for his other hand and the fire moves in and covers him
up and the line of two hundred bow their heads and moan
together with the light in the faces. (Icarus’ Mother 46)

Shepard himself has explained on the origin of images in his plays:

. . . the images come from all kinds of things, they come from the
country, they come from that particular sort of temporary society
that you find in Southern California, where nothing is permanent,
where everything could be knocked down and it wouldn’t be
missed, and the feel of impermanence that comes from that – that
you don’t belong to any particular culture. (Marranca, ed.,
Animations 190)

Bigsby feels that Shepard’s images “begin beyond words, but words
prove the primary refracting device through which they can be perceived”
(Bigsby. American Drama 3: 221). Operation Sidewinder highlights the
cultural collapse by presenting an apocalyptic scenario through the image of the
Sidewinder, an enormous computer rattle snake constructed by the military to
track down UFOs. Both machine and nature symbolized by the Sidewinder are
out of man’s control and they work towards some preordained end. The play ends with the suggestion of the apocalypse, indicated by the stage directions:

The Desert- Tactical Troops open fire on the INDIANS with their machine guns. The INDIANS keep coming. They form a circle... sway back and forth to the rhythm of the chant. The sidewinder lights up, the sky lights up... The 3rd DESERT TACTICAL TROOP reaches up and grabs the sidewinder and yanks it from MICKEY’S hands. The body separates from the head again. Bright bolt of blue light from the sky. The D.T.T.s scream as though being blinded. The lights go to black after the blue light, then back to bright blue. Each interval of light and dark lasts about five or six seconds. From pitch black to bright blue. Huge gusts of wind blow from upstage directly out into the audience, changing from hot to cold. Wind also blows across stage. Streams of smoke come from all around the proscenium arch and upstage. The chanting increases. A high frequency whine. The charting becomes amplified. The bright blue light flashes on, the INDIANS are in ecstasy as they chant. The D.T.T.’s are cringing on their knees center stage. The lights go to black. The blue light again and this time all the INDIANS plus the YOUNGMAN and HONEY
ARE JOINED BY THE DESERT TACTICAL TROOPS, holding their ears and shielding their eyes. The lights stay up and become bright. The whine and chanting get louder, then everything goes black. (Operation Sidewinder 217-18)

Music performs a variety of vital roles in the signifying system of a dramatic performance. “It can provide an important structural element with inserted songs breaking the flow of action and punctuating moments of deep feeling,” remarks Martin Esslin (The Field of Drama 89). In Shepard’s theatre music forms an inevitable part, and the kind of music that he often employs are jazz rhythms and rock and roll, which express, though unconsciously, the cultural attitudes and the individual longings of the dramatist. Jazz music, in its very structure is improvisational, particularly in its spontaneity and dynamism. The separation of jazz from the mainstream of American culture means that jazz makers were themselves disaffiliated. To a large extent, jazz was created by and for a separatist and fundamentally alienated subculture that included both the whites and the blacks. Shepard has filled his plays with examples of alienated, disaffected rock-n-rollers for whom music is emotionally fulfilling. His characters perform rock-n-roll because they suffer from a profound sense of displacement, loneliness and an intense longing for communication. Shepard looked upon rock-n-roll as the extreme embodiment of his fascination with new theatrical
forms. In his rock theatre he has, as Robert Coe observes “attempted a special kind of violence: rhythmic verbal assault” (“Image Shots are Blown” 61).

In *Cowboy Mouth*, a character named Cavale expresses her intense agony and disbelief in God. For her rock-n-roll is a better source of inspiration than God:

... Well, in the old days people had Jesus and those guys to embrace. . . . they created a god with all their belief energies . . . the Old god is just too far away. He don’t represent our pain no more. His words don’t shake through us no more. Any great motherfucker rock-n-roll song can raise me higher than all of *Revelations*. We created rock-n-roll from our own image. It’s our child. (*Cowboy Mouth* 207-208).

Plays like *The Tooth of the Crime*, *Operation Sidewinder*, and *Cowboy Mouth* demonstrate all the clear colloquial cadences, and the compressed ironies of the rock lyric. Shepard exploits all these qualities of *Jazz* to “depict mystery, to create images of emotional conditions, to investigate vanishing values, and sometimes to explode in ritualistic violence” (Powe 25).

Music has multiple effects in Shepard’s theatre. It becomes a device for providing a sort of commentary on the progress of the play. At times it suggests the multiplicity and depth of individual feeling, thus enabling Shepard to create a
sensational and immediate effect on the audience. Shepard himself has this to say on the effect of music:

I think music's really important especially in plays and theatre, it adds a whole different kind of perspective, it immediately brings the audience into terms with an emotional reality. Because nothing communicates emotion better than music not even the greatest play in the world. ("Metaphors. Mad Dogs" 12)

In *The Tooth of Crime* music sets the mood and tone of the play. Here Shepard combines language with music that functions as a mood-evoking backdrop to the spoken word. It communicates the inner emotional perspective of a character or a situation, or the thematic centre of the work. "Poison," the song sung by Crow in *The Tooth of Crime*, highlights his inclination towards violence and his desire for exerting power over his rival, Hoss.

Ever since I was good
I wanted to be– evil
Ever since I was bad
I wanted to be – badder
Ever since I was dead
I wanted to be – born like a maniac
And now that I got all that I wished
I don’t see me ever goin’ back.(234)
Music, especially rock-n-roll, is played loud and fast, on gleaming electric instruments under intense spotlights, emphasizing the physical intensity of the music. This provides a shocking and mesmerising visual effect for mounting up the dramatic tension.

Music also aggravates the apocalyptic nature of most of Shepard’s plays. The effect of music along with the images of apocalypse serves to heighten the sense of agony and meaninglessness that contemporary man confronts in his life. *Operation Sidewinder* ends with a combination of Hopi Indian chants, the electronic rhythms of the snake and the unseen flying saucer and the staccato chatter of machine guns in a fantastic display that integrates the traditional and the contemporary. Rock-n-roll music often makes use of jargons and colloquialisms. Characters spit out words savagely at times. The stage directions that precede the verbal duel between Hoss and Crow in *The Tooth of Crime* is noteworthy in this context. Here music serves as a rhythmic emotional amplifier:

They (Hoss and Crow) begin their assaults just talking the words in rhythmic patterns sometimes going with the music; sometimes counter pointing it. As the round progresses, the music builds with drums and piano coming in, may be a rhythm guitar too. Their voices build so that sometimes they sing the words or shout. The words remain, as intelligible as possible, like a sort of talking opera. (234)
Shepard wanted music to work as an emotional commentary upon the stage action in this play. Here are his own words: "I wanted the music in *The Tooth of Crime* so that you could step out of the play for a minute, every time a song comes, and be brought to an emotional comment on what's been taking place in the play. . . . I wanted the music to be used as a kind of sounding-board for the play" (qtd. in Chubb. "Fruitful Difficulties" 12).

Critics have pointed out that Shepard's collaboration with the rock poet Patti Smith, has had a tremendous influence on his ideas regarding the combination of language and music to create extraordinary effects on the stage. Smith exhibits a rare talent in reciting poems to the accompaniment of harsh electric rock-n-roll rhythms, often in complete dissonance to the spoken rhythm of her poetry. Her lyrics are often screamed and chanted in an apparently drug-induced, spellbinding frenzy. Her work "exhibits a keen understanding of what Antonin Artaud called languages' ability to produce 'physical shock' to be distributed concretely in space and to 'shatter as well as really manifest' a rational reality" (De Rose 74).

*Angel City* and *Suicide in B-Flat* also demonstrate the influence of jazz music on Shepard. *In Angel City*, saxophone music interrupts the long incantatory monologues, rhythm-induced trances and orgiastic dancing. The play also shocks through sudden disruptions of the stage action, taking the form
of abrupt transformations of character and situation. *Suicide in B - Flat* is a play which attempts to explore the mystery behind the death of Niles, an improvisational jazz pianist. The pianist, a character in the play, uses the piano to comment musically upon the text of the play underlining the moods and nuances of individual speeches and passages.

In *Icarus’ Mother*, Shepard derives music from nature, which is followed by total silence, and then by noises of all the people on stage "belching at random." Such belches may be looked upon as rudimentary attempts to communicate. The play also makes use of "melted music," a kind of music that starts off ordered and melodic, but deteriorates into distorted patterns and nightmarish wailing. This, Shepard recognized, could evoke emotional territories or states of mind, with tremendous quickness, much quicker than language or dramatic action.

The subtle use of the techniques of expressionism, and surrealism identify the feeling of entrapment and alienation that Shepard intends to reveal through his plays. Shepard himself has remarked that he wanted to try "a whole different way of writing now, which is very stark and not so flashy ... well it could be called realism, but not the kind of realism where husbands and wives squabble and that kind of stuff" ("Metaphors" 208).
Shepard's realism cuts the surface fixity, objectivity and rationality of human experience and reaches out to the fluctuating surreal imagination that lurks behind the human experience. This prompts him to distort the realistic base of his plays, and allow an expressionistic release of the emotions at the substratum of human experience. David J. De Rose coins the term “suprarealism” to describe Shepard’s style, which he explains as marked by the presence of “irrational, discontinuous images” deployed out of context, which seem “to exist for their own sake as unqualified material images” (97). In Shepard’s stage directions the character Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class* is made to walk naked on to the stage at one instance, unzip his pants and urinate on his sister’s 4-H club charts in another situation. Such a display of physical nudity, according to De Rose, creates a heightened stage reality. When the actor sheds his clothing, he sheds the illusion of character, of acting, and brings “a new level of physical immediacy or ‘suprapresence’ to the stage” (97). So also the presence of a live lamb, its immediate physical presence without the created pretense of character or performance is “suprareal”. In *Buried Child*, the armload of fresh corn and vegetables that Tilden brings from the back yard render a suprareal touch to the play. Later in the final scene when Tilden appears cradling a muddied infant corpse in his arms this suprarealism intensifies the sense of foreboding and menace. Shepard thus creates disquieting
stage pictures through certain observed actions performed by Tilden and Bradly, which serve to intensify the communication crisis among the members of the family. *Fool for Love* enacts the theme of passionate entrapment of two young lovers May and Eddie, with its expressionistic use of space and sound. Central to the surreal and dream-like quality of the play is the presence of the old man, who seems to exist simultaneous to, but in a dimension removed from the action of the play. His onstage presence takes the play out of the realm of realism.

Sitting in his rocking chair with his bottle of sourmash close at hand, he watches the action from a small alcove in the downstage left corner of the playing area. The old man’s presence itself is ambiguous. He is present and watches the quarrel between the lovers, but is not really a part of the action. Or, he is part of the action, but not present. He eventually leaves his rocking chair and intrudes on the action, thus breaking the naturalistic frame. The alienation effect is worked out through his breaking of the frame, as well as through his interventions or recollections. Florence Falk, one of Shepard’s critics observes that “performance in Shepard’s plays is essentially a matter of ‘role playing’, ‘story telling’ and music making” (188). Dennis Carroll has pointed out another significant stylistic device characteristic to Shepard, which he explains as the “cut,” a device more properly organic to film – a sudden transition from one stand of action or frame of reference to another. Carroll identifies character-
centered cuts, which take several forms. These cuts serve in one way to intensify the communication crisis among the characters in the plays. According to him these cuts "introduce material that is an involuntary eruption from the psyche of a character and takes the form of a speech 'aria' with the other characters on stage either not relating directly to him or locked into their own private thoughts or activities" (126).

In *Buried Child*, this technique is practiced in a long speech by Halie, the mother figure while Tilden the son and Dodge the father just sit without active participation in the communicative act. So also in *Action Jeep* delivers a long climatic speech while his companions are involved in their own activities. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Wesley, the young son, delivers a monologue through which he recalls the experience of his father's drunken return the previous night while his mother cooks bacon on the stove totally ignoring his talk. In *Rock Garden*, the bored and frustrated teenaged boy symbolically slays his indifferent, but dominant father with an aggressive revelation in a long monologue of a potent and fully developed sexual identity. Shepard's cuts are shocking and deliberate.

Juxtaposed with Shepard's theatre Mamet's is a minimal theatre with reduced settings and dramatic techniques. His plays lack the flashy, bizarre, pop bricolage world visualized in Shepard's pieces. Though both playwrights write on
or less similar themes, such as, for example, the failure of the success dream, the tumultuous nature of relationships, a sense of loss, and the communication crisis in the present day world, they treat such issues in their own distinctive and independent ways.

In Mamet's dramatic world, the community has already collapsed, the family as a social institution, has disintegrated and relationships are broken. It is a society where friends, colleagues and even members of the same family are estranged from one another. Mamet believes that the moral imperative of the playwright is "to attempt to bring to stage, as Stanislavsky puts it, the life of the human soul" (Writing in Restaurants 115). However, as a critic has observed, what the audience often sees in a Mamet play is the "death" of "the human soul" on the stage, and usually it is the set, its spatial impact, that not only provides the initial encoded signals that we see but also contextualizes such signals in the form of spiritual "death." The language that soon fills the stage intensifies the sense of spiritual "death" by suggesting that we must be on the brink of living in a dysteleological universe.

(Roudane 22)

Mamet's theatre is a theatre of "language." In his plays "form is content, content is form" (qtd. in Dean 15). The very structure of the plays indicates what
they intended to communicate. Most of Mamet's plays deal with the themes of fragmentation, alienation and the problems of communication. These are conveyed through the dramatic structure and linguistic techniques employed by the playwright. The disjointed and fragmented language in *Edmond* is reflected in its form. The discontinuity of experience felt by the protagonist is revealed in the short black-out scenes. *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is structured in swift short scenes that reflect the characters' inability to sustain an interest in anything which demands sincerity either in mutual relationships or in the act of communication. The sentences spoken by the characters are often short and clumsy, and so too are the scenes Mamet create to accommodate them.

Though lacking in visual extravaganza, Mamet's theatre gains its characteristic strength through the linguistic techniques at the playwright's disposal. One significant technique that Mamet excels in is story telling. Shepard also has splendidly made use of this technique in most of his plays. Stories become a substitute for what is absent in the lives of the characters they depict, that is, a sense of coherence, meaning and communication. They often serve to fill the silence or void that would otherwise frequently engulf them. The characters in Mamet's as well as Shepard's plays resort to narrating stories, which they think would offer some sort of relaxation or escape from the stark
boredom and monotony of existence. They vividly elaborate fantasies, create plots, and scenarios or exchange rumours or speculations.

In Mamet's plays like *Lakeboat, The Woods, Dark Pony, Duck Variations, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Speed the Plow* and so on the characters engage themselves in fiction-making. "It becomes a fundamental strategy and consolation to characters who could scarcely survive the knowledge of their own marginality" (qtd. in Bigsby, *David Mamet* 24) *Lakeboat* portrays life in a lake boat which is the "floating home of forty-five men... a small world" (24). The men who inhabit the small boat are condemned to lead a life that instills in them a sense of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life. The people inside the lakeboat experience stark monotony and indulge in funny and habitual actions to while away the time. One man watches a set of gauges for four hours at a stretch, another makes sandwiches. The men inside the boat are lonely and ignorant spending their time talking about encounters that have probably never taken place. Mamet's characters are terribly lonely. Without exception they seek affection, but are unable to sustain relationships. *Lakeboat* begins with the tone of telling a story with the Pierman asking, "Did you hear about Skipping and the new kid" (17). The question itself provides scope for more elaborate fiction-making, and the explanation goes on:
... I heard it. I don’t actually know it... Collin tells me... I heard the Cook has two Cadillacs... I heard that... I read it... I heard they might have drugged him... that’s what probably what happened... what’d you hear?... The way I hear it... It’s just that I heard it... (17)

A spicy story is thus plotted around the disappearance the ship’s night Cook Guiglialli. The play takes its shape by tying together the fragments of conversation: the brief moments of apparent intimacy, and the lies, delusions and self-deceits of the pitiable human beings inside the lake boat. The allowable topics of conversation are restricted to sex, drinking, eating, fighting shooting, mutilation, suicide, gambling and the like. The men are their liveliest while telling stories, or tall tales or spreading rumour. Bigsby laments on their helpless situation:

Their only freedom is to choose how they will pass the time, or debate—like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, no less than Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon—whether death might not be preferable. Absurdity attaches itself to both solutions. The only resource they can deploy lies in their fiction—making skills (in fact, largely non-existent, since they adapt events to the models they have absorbed
from the movies) a degree of protective wit and the fact of their shared fate. (David Mamet 23)

Each member contributes imaginatively his own notion regarding the disappearance of Guiglialli. In the first of the many versions of the story given in the play the Pierman reports that Guiglialli was “rolled” by a prostitute while drunk and then fired for insubordination when he reported to the ship. Collins gives his version in a slightly different manner. For him the night man is mugged and has been hospitalised. The Fireman invents a divorced woman as a substitute for the prostitute in his own version of the story. Fred the more imaginative one fantasizes that the Mafia attacked Guiglialli for welshing on gambling debts, and even goes on to give a description of the wounds: “Ribs, back, The back. Hit him in the back. Left him for dead” (31). Again, the Fireman is convinced that the night cook was shot and killed by the cops or by the ‘G’ men because “he knew too much about Politics” (51). Mamet’s technique fulfills his intention to dramatize the need of these men to imbue their monotonous and frustrated lives with adventure and melodrama. The contradictions in the incomplete accounts with pauses in between that the characters speak are deliberate linguistic techniques that Mamet utilizes to underline the incoherence and immaturity of their experience. The rhythm of the play with brief scenes matches the rhythm of their lives, their incapability to
sustain deep, permanent relationships - their inability to communicate in a deep and sincere manner. Bigsby points out that the very dramatic structure of *Lakeboat* implies

a discontinuity which becomes a basic characteristic of the figures he creates, a fragmentation which is presented as social fact (a sense of alienation bred out of American myths of competitive capitalism) psychological reality, (men and women divorced equally from one another and their own sexuality) and historical truth (they are cut off from a sense of the past). The gap between language and experience suggests a discrepancy which is the source of their pain, and this they attempt to bridge by theatricalizing their world, by redirecting their energy into pure invention. (Bigsby, *David Mamet* 26)

For George and Emil the two old men in *Duck Variations*, fiction-making becomes an attempt to maintain a constant and meaningless chatter to avoid the silence they fear. The devices and techniques used by Mamet here are thoroughly linguistic. The play is organised around fourteen variations on the theme of loss, decline and death. The musical analogy is deliberate with a concern for tone, pitch and rhythm and a fascination with the harmonies of speech. George and Emil weave stories out of the familiar sights that they see in
the park. The sight of a duck stirs their imagination and stories are invented relating to the various stages of the life cycle of ducks.

George: He is born. He learns his trade to fly. He flies. He eats. He finds a mate. He has young. He flies some more. He dies. A simple, straightforward easy-to-handle life. ("Duck Variations" 95)

The fiction-making which initially begins with a casual, narrative tone, gradually attains a tragic dimension when George and Emil unconsciously try to draw parallels between the duck's life and human life in general.


Emil: It's not an easy life.

George: Only the beginning. The duck is at the mercy of any elements in the vicinity. Sunspots. Miscarriage. Inappropriate changes in the weather.

Emil: Yes.

Emil: Small vicious children.

George: Chain stories. And, of course, the Blue Heron.

... 

... 

George: We do not know. But this much we do know. As long as the duck exists, he will battle day and night, sick and well with the Heron, for so is it is writ. And as long as the sky is made dark with the wing of the Monster Bird, the Heron will feast on duck. (83)

The fabulous story centered around the duck continues uninterruptedly with George and Emil taking turns to speak more and more about its life and adventures and finally speak out the inevitable that happens to the duck—"death".

George: ... A DUCK ... and on he comes. You quietly raise from the ground. One knee ... two knees. You lift the gun, you put the gun on your shoulder and point it at the duck. It's you and him. You and the duck on the marsh. He wants to go home and you want to kill him for it. So you fire the gun. Once, again. Again. Again your ears are ringing. Your eyes are covered in spots. You cannot see. You are
quiver and you gotta sit down. Your heart is going fast...

Emil: Where's the duck?

George: slowly, Slowly you lower yourself to the Earth. Your joints creak...

Emil: Where's the duck?

George: with the weight of your body. Your shoulder aches from pounding, and your...

Emil: WHERE'S THE DUCK?

George: The duck is dying.

Emil: Out in the marsh.

George: Out in the marsh.

Emil: Oh no.

George: In a flock of feathers and blood. Full of bullets. Quiet, so as not to make a sound. Dying.

Emil: Living his last.

George: Dying.

Emil: Leaving on the ground.

George: Dying.

Emil: Lying on the ground.
George: Dying.

Emil: Fluttering.

George: Dying.

Emil: Sobbing.

George: Dying.

Emil: Quietly bleeding.

George: Thinking.

Emil: Dying.

George: Dying, dying.(121-122)

For these two aged men, life has nothing more to offer but fears and anxieties of the inevitable “death.” It is amazing to note that their observations contain no information about themselves, no accounts of personal losses, regrets or unrealized hopes. Instead they just perform, each relying on the other, to keep the pattern going, to avoid the dangerous silences.

_Dark Pony_ too exposes the psychological sensation behind story telling.

A father, returning home in a car with his young daughter, narrates to her the mysterious story about a young Indian called Rain boy, who is rescued by a wild horse named Dark Pony, whenever he is in difficulty. All he has to do is to cry out, “Dark Pony, Rain boy calls you.” The daughter anticipates a reassuring ending like the one in a fairy tale or a bedtime story. On a deeper level the play
seems to convey the fact that the reassurance and comfort one gets by hearing or telling stories are only momentary and transient. “Every story has lost its power to console beyond the moment of its completion, while those who create the fictions do so out of needs of incompletions of their own” (Bigsby, David Mamet 36).

*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* deals with the corruptive nature of urban sexuality, in which personal relationships are often vitiated by commercial values. Bernie Litko, the friend and associate of Dan Shapiro, poses himself as an experienced macho protagonist in pornographic tales. He finds pleasure in weaving elaborate sexual fantasies, and the more frustrated he is in reality, the more fantastic his stories become.

Danny: So tell me.

Bernie: So okay, so where am I?

Danny: When?

Bernie: Last night, two thirty.

Danny: So two thirty, you’re probably over at Yak-Zies.

Bernie: Left Yak-Zies at one.

Danny: So you’re probably over at Grunts.

Bernie: they only got a two O’clock license.

...
Bernie: ... and I'm reading the paper, and I'm reading, and I'm casing the pancake house, and the usual short, am I right?

Danny: Right

Bernie: So who walks in over to the cash register but this chick

Danny: Right

Bernie: Nineteen, twenty-year-old chick ... 

Danny: Who we're talking about.

Bernie: ... and she wants a pack of viceroy's.

Danny: I can believe that ... was she a pro? (Sexual Perversity in Chicago 8-9).

Bernie elongates his narrative fantasy packing it with elements of suspense and titillation to make it spicier. Bernie's story progresses widely to the extent to which the girl dons a World War II flack suit before allowing him to make love to her.

Bernie: ... From under the bed she pulls this suitcase, and from out of the suitcase comes this World War 2 Flak suit.

Danny: They're hard to find.

Bernie: Zip, Zip, Zip and she gets into the flak suit and we get down on the bed.
Danny: What are you doing?

Bernie: Fucking.

Danny: She's in the Flak suit?

Bernie: Right. (11-12)

Bernie is all absorbed in his story telling. His wild fantasies centre around the girl and their process of love making. He even recollects how the girl telephoned her friend during their love making asking her to make "airplane noises" over the telephone and then set fire to the hotel room.

Bernie: . . . Humping and bumping and she's screaming. "Red dog. One to Red dog squadron . . ." all of a sudden she screams "wait". She wriggles out, leans under the bed and she pulls out this five-gallon jerry can. . . she splashes the mother all over the walls, whips a fuckin' Zippo out f the flak suit and WHOOSH, the whole room is in flames. So the whole fuckin' joint is going up in smoke. the telephone is going "Rat Tat Tat", the broad jumps back on the bed and yells. "Now, give it to me now for the love of Christ" (Pause) So I look at the broad . . . and I figure . . . fuck this nonsense. I grab my clothes, I peel a saw back off my wad I make the door I fling it at her " For carfare", I yell . . . whole
fucking hall is full of smoke. above the flames I just make out my broad (She’s singing. “Off we go into the wild Blue Yonder”) (12-13)

Mamet’s play The Woods explores the relationship between Nick and Ruth the young couple who have come to spend a few days together in a summer house in the woods. They discuss their relationships and indulge in telling stories, which, as in the earlier plays, are self-reflexive. Ruth recounts a story in which two children, a brother and a sister, were lost in the woods. But Ruth’s narration is interrupted by Nick and he too tells another story, about a man trapped in a mine, along with his father. Both the stories are pointless and incomplete and are narrated to while away the time. It seems as if, both Nick and Ruth strive to make uncertain gestures towards contact, but those gestures are never achieved or fulfilled. Conscious of the absence of love between them, they fill the void with fantasies, and stories which start as stories and end nowhere. Richard Eder observes:

... in plays where there is little overt action, there must be an interior action, a movement of the will in its place. In these plays, the characters accept their isolation from each other without real struggle. And there is no movement, no action that breaks out of this isolation, or that even seriously attempts to. The language and
the emotion move, and they illustrate a situation but the situation remains static. (cited in Bigsby, *David Mamet* 60)

Sam Shepard also develops story telling as a significant technique in his plays. In most of his plays like *Curse of Starving Class, Buried Child, TrueWest, Fool for Love* and so on, the stories are integrated neatly to the plays' action. What is significant about the stories that Shepard's characters narrate is that they often carry a pessimistic tone, and are deeply involved with the characters' inner experiences or feelings or their past. In *True West* Lee narrates a story that he has written parodying a Western. It deals with two men involved in a sexual rivalry. As Lee's story goes:

Lee: So both these guys have got their horses. Right along with 'em. see.

Austin: I understand.

Lee: Then this first guy realizes two things.

Austin: The guy in front?

Lee: Right. The guy in front realizes two things almost at the same time simultaneous.

Austin: What were the two things?

Lee: Number one. he realizes, that the guy behind him is the husband of the woman he's been---
(Lee makes gesture of screwing by pumping his arm)

(True West 21)

The story goes on with Austin disinterestedly interrupting in between till Lee finally concludes:

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

Lee's story unconsciously reveals his attitude towards his elder brother Austin, and the lack of communication experienced by the two brothers. Halie's stories in Buried Child narrated in long monologues centre around her dead son Ansel, who was her favorite. But unfortunately for Halie, no one in the family seems to be interested in their stories of the past. Dodge and Tilden remain indifferent, which aggravates the communication problem in the family. In the plays of Shepard and Mamet quite often the art of fiction-making by the characters reveals their sincere attempts to communicate. This indeed is a
characteristic shared by many contemporary dramatists, as is indicated by Jerry’s story of his relationship with his landlady’s dog in Albee’s *The Zoo Story*.

In Shepard’s *Action*, the character named Shooter narrates two stories that reveal his intense sense of alienation from life. The first story is that of a man (probably Shooter himself) who was afraid to take a bath — “something about how it distorted his body when he looked down to it” (*Action* 137). The man becomes completely alienated from his body and begins to fear it. He is afraid to sleep “for fear his body might do something without him knowing” (137). Eventually, the body kills the man but continues to exist without him. “It’s still walking around” (137). The surreal element in his story reveals his fragmented nature and his vague effort to communicate his present state of being. Shooter’s second story is narrated with a philosophic strain and represents the union of the self with experience. He tells a fable in which a group of moths are attracted to a candle near the window. “They long to be with this candle but none of them understood it or knew what it was” (140). The leader of moths sends three separate scouts to investigate the flame. The first reports that he sees but cannot understand the flame. The second touches the flame with the tip of its wings, finally the third moth finds his way to the candle and throws himself upon the flame. Seeing that the moth and the flame appear
to be one, the leader turns to others and says “he’s learned what he wanted to know, but he’s the only one who understands it” (141). The self is united with experience, action and actor become one but it is risky since it demands self-immolation. Fearful of such a fatal loss of self, the characters in *Action* shrink from contact with life.

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Ella the mother gives her own version of a story, which she had heard her husband narrate quite often. Weston’s story centres on a giant eagle that came diving close to the ground, when he was castrating lambs. The giant bird came naturally in pursuit of “those fresh little remnants of manlihood” (184) which were thrown on the floor. Weston narrates the bird’s movements with a tone of awe, stressing the wild strength of the bird:

> . . . when all of sudden he comes. Just like a thunderclap. Blam!
>
> He’s down on that shed roof with his talons taking half of the tarpaper with him, wings whippin’ the air, screaming like a bred mare then climbing straight back up into the sky again. I had to stand up on that one. Somethin’ brought me straight up off the ground and I started yellin’ my head off. I don’t know why it was coming outa’ me but I was standing there with this icy feeling up my backbone and just yelling my fool head off. Cheerin’ for that
eagle.... And every time he'd come down like the Cannonball
Express on that roof. And every time I got that feeling. (184)

Ella gives her own version of the story at the end of the play. Wesley too
joins his mother and with their backs turned they alternate lines to complete the
story:

Ella: (after pause) I remember he keeps coming back and
swooping down on the shed roof and then flying off.

Wesley: Yeah

Ella: What else?

Wesley: I don't know.

Ella: You remember what happens next?

Wesley: A cat comes.

Ella: That's right. A big tom cat comes. Right out in the fields.
And he jumps up on top of that roof to sniff around in all
the entrails or what ever it was.

Wesley: (Still back to her) And that eagle comes down and picks
up the cat in his talons and carries him screaming off into
the sky.

Ella: (Staring at lamb) That's right. And they fight. They fight
like crazy in the middle of the sky. That cat's tearing his
chest out, and the eagle's trying to drop him, but the cat won't let go because he knows if he falls he'll die.

Wesley: And the eagle's being torn apart in midair. The eagle's trying to free himself from the cat, and the cat won't let go.

Ella: And they come crashing down to the earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing. (201)

The verbal image revealed through the narration of the mother and the son indirectly throws light on the fearful bond existing in their own family. The wife and children depend on the drunken father, whose irresponsibility carries the family into a state of disintegration. As Hart observes, "they must cling to him in their helplessness. But their clutching destroys him and finally all of them tumble down together fatally bound to each other by biological chance, their destinies determined by their inter-dependence in a bond that cannot be broken" (74).

The new generation of playwrights has felt the urgency of bringing about a radical alteration in the conventional form and structure of drama, in its plot, characterization and language. Shepard and Mamet have expressed their discontent with the conventional closed form of a dramatic piece. Instead they uphold an open-ended form that challenges the conventions of a well-made play. A closed form generally provides the viewers with a sense of an ending.
The open form operates effectively in those plays without a fixed frame. In a structurally closed literary work says David Richter, 'the desired goal is usually reached. If the quest is abandoned, unfulfilled or the search goes on for ever the work then reflects degrees of openness” (qtd. in Manette 11). The “open form.” says Robert Martin Adams, is a structure of meanings that includes a major unresolved conflict with the intent of displaying its unresolvedness . . . On the left plank it is divided by an indefinite, quantitative line from perverse or general formlessness and indeterminacy; on right, by an equally indefinite, quantitative line from a form which impresses us as pre-eminently closed even though it has open elements. (13,16)

The distinction between the open and closed forms is, according to Robert Adams, again . . . Simply that between a work which by resolving its given problems leaves the audience in a state of psychological repose, emptied of passion and one which by failing or refusing to resolve its given problems leaves the audience in a state of unresolved anguish. (13)

As contemporary American playwrights both Mamet and Shepard have successfully portrayed the traumas, fears and apprehension inherent in the
postmodern American society. The use of a highly physical and disturbing theatrical vocabulary, theatrical images and physical staging have enabled them to communicate the strangeness of their characters’ worlds, not just in spoken language and dramatic events, but through a judicious mingling of time, space, sound and spectacle on the stage.