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THE OTHER SIDE OF LOVE: SAM SHEPARD'S GOTHIC FAMILY PLAYS

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
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Eric Andrew Lee
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Esmerelda;, my sons, Caleb Kristopher Lee and Samuel Sheppard Lee; and to my mother, Glenna Sheppard Lee.

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Abstract

From one of his earliest plays—*Rock Garden* (1964)—to one of his most recent works—*The Late Henry Moss* (2000)—Sam Shepard has been fascinated by the American family. Shepard, this dissertation argues, presents a markedly "gothic" portrait of the American family by borrowing dramatic techniques from the "gothic" literary tradition in order to critique traditional American myths about the family—including the belief that a type of social harmony, even utopia, will result if each family member adheres strictly to his or her prescribed role within the family unit. Shepard's critique of the American family is in many ways a critique of modern American culture, though Shepard himself balks at being called a social critic, insisting he is much more interested in highly charged emotional and psychic states of individual characters. Using gothic techniques—including uncanny moments, incest, ghosts, and *doppelgängers*—Shepard engages in subtle cultural critique without seeming programmatic or didactic.

The American gothic family is comprised of identifiable character types: the fallen father, the alienated mother, and the haunted son. These recur in Shepard's gothic family plays, as well as in the gothic family plays of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. In examining Shepard's gothic families, this dissertation employs a psychological methodology, including an examination of how attempts to repress traumatic memories ultimately fail, resulting in a gothic "return" of the repressed past.

The examination of Shepard's "family plays" focuses on five major works—*Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, True West, Fool for Love,* and *A Lie of the*

Mind—as well as two relatively "minor" plays: *The Holy Ghostly*, *States of Shock*. A final chapter examines *The Late Henry Moss*, the latest installment in Shepard's "gothic" project.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in citations throughout the dissertation to indicate texts from which quotations and excerpts have been taken.

Eugene O'Neill:

CP *Eugene O'Neill: The Complete Plays, 1932-1943***.**

SP *Selected Plays of Eugene O'Neill*

Tennessee Williams:

FP *Tennessee Williams: Four Plays*

Two-CP *The Two-Character Play*

Sam Shepard:

3P *Three Plays: The Late Henry Moss, Eyes for Consuela,* and *When the World Was Green*

7P *Seven Plays: True West, Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, The Tooth of Crime, Tongues, Savage Love*

FFL *Fool for Love*

HG *The Holy Ghostly*

LOM *A Lie of the Mind*

EFC *Eyes for Consuela*

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1980's, after writing his "family trilogy" of *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Buried Child* (1978), and *True West* (1980), Sam Shepard asked rhetorically, "What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything. Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family" (qtd. in Dugdale 39). From one of his earliest plays—1964's *Rock Garden*—to one of his most recent works—*The Late Henry Moss* (2000)—Shepard has always been fascinated by the American family, which has proven to be especially fertile ground for his unique brand of theater. Shepard's original "family trilogy" expanded to include such works as *Fool for Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), and other works of the past decade deal to a greater or lesser degree with family relationships, including *States of Shock* (1992), *Eyes for Consuela* (1999), and *The Late Henry Moss* (2000).

My dissertation will argue that Shepard presents a markedly "gothic" portrait of the American family, borrowing dramatic techniques from the "gothic" literary tradition in order to critique the American family and traditional American myths about the family—including the belief that a type of social harmony, even utopia, will result if each family member adheres strictly to his or her prescribed role within the family. Shepard also questions whether such a felicitous state is even possible in modern America, so his critique of the American family is in many ways a critique of modern American culture. The gothic literary tradition provides Shepard with a collection of ready-made devices

with which he can employ his cultural critique. Some of these devices include ghosts, the uncanny, a family curse, grotesque characters, real or implied incest, rebirth or resurrection, and dramatic excess and spectacle. Shepard uses these gothic techniques to portray the modern American family as a dysfunctional social unit whose members are hopelessly alienated, cynical, and still bleeding from psychic and emotional wounds. "Gothic" itself is a somewhat problematic term: it is an expansive, protean label which has been variously applied to a literary genre, a historical literary period (primarily in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Britain), and to various literary devices and motifs. In this study, I will establish the parameters of "gothic" and the extent to which Shepard uses gothic devices in his family plays. My examination of gothic devices will borrow substantially from works such as Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith's *Modern Gothic: A Reader* (1996) and David Punter's *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body, and the Law* (1998). Both of these works are concerned primarily with showing how gothic remains a viable literary language in the late twentieth century.

My examination of Shepard's "family plays" will focus primarily on five major works—*Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Buried Child* (1978), *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1983), and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985)—as well as two relatively "minor" plays from the 1990's, *States of Shock* (1991) and *The Late Henry Moss* (2000). I will also examine an important early play, *The Holy Ghostly* (1969), whose gothic devices and thematic structure make it a useful touchstone for the later family plays. Inherent in my

examination of Shepard's gothic family plays is a close examination of how these plays employ a consistent cast of gothic character types—"gothic" because these character types may be traced to the British and American gothic literary traditions. The cast of gothic family members includes the fallen father, the alienated mother, and the haunted son.

The "Fall of the Father": Beginning with Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, gothic literature has often depicted a patriarchal figure whose moral decline precipitates his social and physical decline. In *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred schemes to divorce his wife and marry his dead son's betrothed in order to propagate the ancestral line, thereby avoiding a prophetic curse. Manfred's moral "fall" sets in motion the novel's various conflicts and dramatic situations, including the dissolution of the family. While Manfred may be the earliest example of the "fallen father" in gothic literature, other important examples appear later in American literature. Charles Brockden Brown's 1798 novel *Wieland* depicts a prideful patriarch whose misguided religious fanaticism leads to his own death and to his son's murderous psychosis. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) depicts Colonel Pyncheon, a patriarch whose avarice results in his own bloody death and a curse on his ancestral line. In twentieth-century American literature, the gothic fallen father appears in such works as Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956), and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). The fallen father also appears in such novels as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Sam Shepard's family plays follow in this gothic

literary tradition, and the fallen father is the focal point around which the rest of Shepard's family portrait revolves.

The fathers in Shepard's family plays have allowed their personal demons (including alcoholism) to run amok, resulting in the fathers' rejection of their appointed role as head of the household with its concomitant responsibilities and duties. Shepard's fathers are always the authors of their own destruction. Usually, the father's abdication of his appointed role has already taken place before the action of the play begins; the audience witnesses the aftermath and wreckage left in the wake of this abdication and of the father's selfish rejection of the paternal role. At the start of *Buried Child*, Dodge is already rooted to his couch staring at the television set with his precious whiskey bottle hidden in the pillows behind him. He has long ago abandoned his paternal (and spousal) role, and the audience may indeed wonder if he had ever truly fulfilled these roles. Bradley shaves Dodge's head while the father is asleep—Dodge has been spiritually and emotionally "asleep" for many years—and this symbolic scene of emasculation serves to confirm the fall of the father.

Sometimes the fall of the father results in his own death, as in *A Lie of the Mind*. Yet even when Shepard's fathers are not physically present onstage, their ghostly presence continues to haunt the other characters who remain wracked by the father's abnegations and betrayals. Jake and Sally in *A Lie of the Mind* continue to struggle to free themselves from the shadow of their dead, drunken father even though he never

appears onstage; and Lee and Austin in *True West* struggle both physically and psychically against the influence of their own drunken, exiled father (who may or may not still be alive). This recurrent theme is highly autobiographical and permeates many of Shepard's writings, prose as well as dramatic. In a section called "The Package Man" from his prose work *Cruising Paradise,* a character named Ray expresses a fear that he will "End up smellin' just like [my] old man. That's the scary part. I hate that. Start feelin' like yer livin' out some doomed past. Some destiny you've got no say in" (138). This fear of following in the fallen father's footsteps, especially the son's fear of this fate, is integral to the plots of Shepard's family plays. For Shepard, the fact that a father has died is no guarantee that he will not appear onstage as a ghostly apparition or fleshy corpse. *The Holy Ghostly*, *Fool for Love,* and *The Late Henry Moss* all include a fallen father who moves and speaks although he is dead. This onstage inclusion of the dead, fallen father is one of Shepard's most important gothic devices.

Alienation of the mother: Another identifiable character type in gothic literature is the alienated mother. In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto,* Hippolyta seeks refuge and counsel from the church once her husband has betrayed her, and she finds herself emotionally alienated. American gothic literature is full of other examples of alienated mothers, including Mary Cavan Tyrone (from O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*), Christine Mannon (from O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*), the dead mother (known only as "Maw") from O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms,* Addie Bundren (from

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*), Ellen Coldfield Compson (from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*) and Alison Langdon (from Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*). All of these women are alienated as a direct result of their husbands' "fall," and these women serve to amplify the moral and social dissipation within the family.

Following this gothic literary tradition, Shepard's family plays are concerned with portraying mothers who are hopelessly alienated, emotionally and physically, from both husbands and children. Halie in *Buried Child*, Ella in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Mom in *True West*, and Lorraine in *A Lie of the Mind* are all examples of alienated mothers. These mothers typically demonstrate little or no affection toward their children, and they exhibit outright hostility toward their husbands (whether the husband is dead or living, absent or present). While the mother's alienation is a result of the Fall of the Father, this does not excuse her. Shepard's portrait of the alienated mother is not usually a sympathetic one: like the fathers, Shepard's mothers are ultimately responsible for their own demise; they have made their choices and must live with them.[1]

In her article "Ties of Blood," Lanelle Daniel suggests that if the fathers in Shepard's family plays are responsible for bringing about a "curse" on the family through their selfishness and abdication of patriarchal duties, then Shepard's mothers likewise renounce their maternal role which might ameliorate the curse brought by the father: "Shepard's mothers seem indifferent, and that lack of interest represents the demise of the

[1]Two notable exceptions are *Fool for Love* and *The Late Henry Moss*. These mothers are sympathetic.

American Dream just as surely as does the inherited curse of the men . . . The alleviation of the curse that should come from the woman doesn't exist, and the audience is left wondering if it ever did" (Daniel 133). Moreover, the mothers in Shepard's family plays are more than passively sullen individuals; on the contrary, they are often engaged in extramarital affairs and deceit in their pursuit of monetary gain. Both Halie in *Buried Child* and Ella in *Curse of the Starving Class* carry on adulterous affairs with little regard for the feelings of their spouses and children. Both women use sex in order to get what they want: Halie wants Father Dewis to sponsor a monument to her dead son Ansel, while Ella wants Taylor to help her sell the family farm behind her husband's back. Only one of Shepard's major family plays, *Fool for Love*, fails to include the mother as an onstage presence, yet even here the mother's role is perverted and pivotal: the audience learns that Eddie's mother killed May's mother in a fit of jealous rage over their mutual lover (the fallen father). *A Lie of the Mind* actually depicts two mothers—Lorraine is the characteristic alienated mother, the wife of the (dead) fallen, drunken father, and she now attempts to manipulate her children and poison them against each other. The other mother, Meg, resembles Halie from *Buried Child* in her perpetual verbal sparring with her husband Baylor, until the two are surprisingly reconciled at the end through Shepard's machinations. The combination of the fallen father and the alienated mother inevitably produces an embattled male offspring.

The haunted, violent son: A third identifiable character type in many gothic literary works is the haunted, violent son. Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* contains one of the most notable examples: the younger Wieland murders his wife and children after being duped by Carwin the ventriloquist, but in reality the son has been haunted for years by the memory of his fanatical father's teachings and has been infected by his father's unshakeable sense of impending doom. In twentieth-century literature, several of Eugene O'Neill's plays include gothic examples of the haunted, violent son, including Eben Cabot (*Desire Under the Elms*), Orin Mannon (*Mourning Becomes Electra*) and Jamie Tyrone (*Long Day's Journey Into Night*). Henry Sutpen from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* could also be included in this category. In nearly every case, the haunted son is the direct, inevitable product of his fallen father and alienated mother. He is a character who is born into a "gothic" world and is full of doubt and despair about his destiny. Violence is his instinctual (and ultimately ineffectual) method of coping with the world around him.

Shepard's family plays also portray the haunted, violent son. While some of his family plays contain more than one son (*Buried Child, True West, A Lie of the Mind, The Late Henry Moss*), each play invariably depicts one particular son who is especially haunted by his father's abdication of the paternal role and by his mother's selfish indifference to the maternal role, resulting in an embittered, aggressive personality whose only outlet is a spontaneous and self-destructive violence. Examples of the haunted,

violent son include Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Bradley (and later, Vince) in *Buried Child*, Lee in *True West*, Eddie in *Fool for Love*, Jake in *A Lie of the Mind*, Stubbs from *States of Shock*, and Earl from *The Late Henry Moss*. Critics such as Michael Abbott have drawn comparisons between the haunted, violent sons in O'Neill's family plays with those in Shepard's family plays. Abbott specifically mentions Jamie Tyrone from O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as a prototype of the son who is doomed to follow his fallen father's drunken, violent pattern of self-destruction. The sons in Shepard's family plays follow a similar pattern—they are as haunted as O'Neill's Jamie Tyrone, Eben Cabot (*Desire Under the Elms*), or Orin Mannon (*Mourning Becomes Electra*), and they are as violent as Tennessee Williams' Stanley Kowalski who, though not a haunted "son," provides a valuable dramatic model of the prototypical American male, seething with machismo, whose only resources for coping with problems are a bellowing voice and brute strength. In a *New York Times* interview from 1982, Shepard spoke of the inextricable link between American maleness and violence saying,

> There's something about American violence that to me is very touching. In full force, it's very ugly, but there's also something very moving about it because it has to do with humiliation. There's some deeply rooted thing in the Anglo male American that has to do with inferiority, that has to do with not being a man, and always continually having to act out some idea of manhood that invariably is violent. (qtd. in Hart 138)

The haunted son in Shepard's family plays is driven to violence by this very "humiliation" and "inferiority" which result from being a product of a fallen father and an indifferent, alienated mother. And though Shepard's haunted sons come closer to being viewed as "victims" than any of the other characters in his family plays, Shepard still does not allow the sons to escape the vortex of the family maelstrom. In a 1975 interview, Shepard told Kenneth Chubb,

> You have this personality, and somehow you feel locked into it, jailed by all of your cultural influences and your psychological ones from your family, and all that. And somehow I feel that isn't the whole of it, you know, that there's another possibility . . . but you can't escape, that's the whole thing, you can't . . . but there is always that impulse toward another kind of world, something that doesn't necessarily confine you in that way. (qtd. in Derose 67)

Try as they might, none of the haunted, violent sons from the family plays is ever able to rise above his circumstances, not even the haunted grandson Vince from *Buried Child*, who merely resumes the fallen (grand)father's place on the couch in front of the flickering television. At the end of *Fool for Love*, Eddie leaves the claustrophobic motel room, moving toward some indeterminate destination, but even then the haunting Old Man's warning echoes after him, declaring, "You'll never escape me." Shepard suggests that the haunted son will follow the path of the fallen father, and the family plays offer little solace

that the cycle will ever be broken. Why? Perhaps the answer lies in the modern American culture from which these families have sprung.

Shepard's family plays undoubtedly include a scathing critique of modern American culture; for in his exhibitionistic display of the American family as a microcosm of deceit, betrayal, and haunting guilt, Shepard implicitly asks us to consider the nature of the cultural macrocosm which produced these families. Yet Shepard himself discourages us from viewing his plays as social and cultural commentary. "Ideas emerge from plays," Shepard says, "not the other way around" (Hart 110). Indeed, Shepard the playwright is much more interested in the emotional and psychic states of individual (and extraordinary) characters than with laying out a social agenda. Shepard has told interviewers,

> People talk about political consciousness as though it were a thing you could decide in your head . . . . But I have found that, especially in America, it comes from the emotional context that you are moving in . . . it's also an emotional response to society. But I don't have any political theories, if that's what you mean. (qtd. in Marranca 195)

Shepard has also insisted, "I'm not interested in the American social scene at all. It totally bores me" (qtd. in Derose 94). These comments, however, seem a bit disingenuous. Despite Shepard's protests, many critics have continued to explore the underlying cultural critique of his work, especially his family plays. Florence Falk asserts, "All Shepard characters . . . are tourists caught in a world that has undergone a cultural landslide,

looking through the debris to find images of themselves" (qtd. in Marranca 91). Shepard's family plays are littered—literally as well as symbolically—with both cultural and personal debris. I am suggesting that Shepard's family plays employ a type of contemporary "gothic ruins" among which the American family moves, volatile and restless.

In her book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988), Elaine Tyler May discusses how a government-approved attitude of "work-to-consume" swept across American society in the years following World War Two. The satisfaction of being surrounded by the latest gadgets was supposed to be America's best defense against the communists. American families were encouraged to buy the latest modern appliances, use them up as quickly as possible, and then discard the items to make room for the next new technological craze. Moreover, this sort of frenzied, postwar hyper-capitalism was woven into the fabric of the ideal American family. As May observes in her book, "The family home would be a place where a man could display his success through the accumulation of consumer goods. Women, in turn, would reap rewards for domesticity by surrounding themselves with commodities" (164). Spending money to acquire material goods thus became every American's patriotic duty, but this type of rapacious materialism opens itself to scrutiny. What happens when the American family becomes more interested in the possessions inside the home than in the lives of the other family members? And how long can families buy and hoard items before they reach

a critical mass? Bonnie Marranca uses the term *kitsch* in referring to the resulting cultural debris:

> [*Kitsch* is] a romanticized attachment to the mass-culture object, turning common imagery into art . . . . In a society which easily discards old products and artifacts in a frantic race to produce new ones, the discarded object as setting quickly attains special status. The outmoded consumer object—in its nostalgic setting—is America's historical ruin. (21)

Growing up as he did in the post-World-War-Two era, Shepard is a direct product of this ideology of consumerism described by Elaine Tyler May, but judging from many of his plays, Shepard seems to reject this ideology. Indeed, many of his plays engage in a subtle cultural critique of materialism. For instance, the play *Angel City* contains a horrifying scene where a greedy movie executive is literally changed into the reptile he is. In the family plays, Shepard's cultural critique is perhaps more subtle than in some of his earlier work from the 1960's and 70's. Often the family members are of a low socio-economic class and thus can afford little or no modern conveniences. But this does not preclude the family members from coveting these modern conveniences, as we see with the scheming Tate family in *Curse of the Starving Class*, or Lee, in *True West*, who is a voracious thief.

Shepard's stage sets are important in depicting the family members' psychological and emotional ills. In Shepard's plays where the family has a physical home, the house

seems to be in the middle of nowhere. *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, True West,* and *A Lie of the Mind* all depict apparently isolated houses behind whose walls the dysfunctional gothic American family exists. These isolated houses are the modern equivalent of the remote castles, monasteries, and abbeys in early British gothic literature. *Fool for Love* and *States of Shock* use a motel room and a diner, respectively, as a type of ersatz home. Although characters from the outside world occasionally enter the family "home," it is as though these visitors have traveled a long way from somewhere "out there"—no mention is ever made of how far the outsiders have come to visit the family. This social and geographical isolation of the family is merely an outward sign of the deeper emotional isolation the family feels from one another. Bitterness and blame, vengeance and vitriol—these are the only real feelings projected by the family members for each other. And yet this pervasive animosity strangely becomes the tie that binds the family. As Bonnie Marranca has noted, in Shepard, "the family that preys together stays together" (16). In Shepard's families, the ties that bind are mired in the family's shared, awful, inescapable past; and this past is resurrected using various gothic devices, including ghosts, the uncanny, grotesque characters, real or implied incest, and dramatic "spectacle" and "excess." These gothic tools are the necessary machinery with which Shepard projects his nightmare vision of the modern American family.

Shepard's attraction to gothic devices is intricately connected to various incidents from his own life. The prose collection *Motel Chronicles* includes a vignette describing

Shepard's childhood habit of sleepwalking. One night, young Sam decided to fake sleepwalking, and when the ruse was discovered, his parents were furious. Shepard explains his motives behind the deception: "It was only for the thrill of having a relationship with them outside the ordinary. A different kind of encounter" (19). Shepard's attraction to and fascination with relationships "outside the ordinary" are what propel his family plays. The gothic literary tradition provides Shepard with the tools needed to pursue and portray these extraordinary relationships. In his book *Gothic Pathologies*, David Punter speaks of how the gothic writer, "working to produce incredulity, mystery, and suspense, sets off one account of events against another . . . whose function is to fail to explain and thereby allow access to subdued or repressed realms of knowledge and experience" (12). It is this failure to explain that makes gothic devices attractive to Shepard. "I think it's a cheap trick to resolve things. It's totally a complete lie to make resolutions," Shepard said in a 1986 interview (qtd. in Dugdale 60). He once complained that his 1974 play *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* was perhaps too much in the "fable genre": "I want people to leave my plays with a sense of questioning, a sense of mystery . . ." (qtd. in Dugdale 31). Gothic would provide the sense of mystery Shepard sought, without demanding resolution.

Gothic also satisfies Shepard's desire to portray something other-worldly, something supernatural or surreal:

> What I'm trying to get at here is that the real quest of the writer is to penetrate into another world. A world behind the form. The contradiction is that as soon as that world opens up, I tend to run the other way. It's scary because I can't answer to it from what I know. (qtd. in Marranca 217)

Even when Shepard himself cannot name the gothic effect he is aiming to conjure (perhaps it is unnamable), he implies that he can recognize it when it happens:

> The fantastic thing about theatre is that it can make something be seen that's invisible . . . you can be watching this thing happening with actors and costumes and light and set and language, and even plot, and something emerges from beyond that, and that's the image part I'm looking for, that's the sort of added dimension. (qtd. in Marranca 197)

To achieve this "added dimension," Shepard uses gothic devices, including **ghosts**. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith observe in their book *Modern Gothic* that gothic is the "perfect anonymous language for the peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away" (3-4). For Sage and Smith, gothic is "not merely a literary convention or a set of motifs; it is a language . . . which provides writers with the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present" (1). Ghosts are inherently connected to the past—their source of origin—and Shepard acknowledges ghosts as markers of the past. But Shepard's ghosts are not remedial in any real sense; they provide neither

resolution nor ultimate reconciliation (though they do provoke confrontation). The spectral Old Man in *Fool for Love* does not achieve any degree of closure with the children whom he has betrayed. The audience has no reason to believe the Old Man's spirit will ever find rest at the play's end. One of Shepard's early plays which uses gothic devices to treat a family-related theme was *The Holy Ghostly* (1969). In this work, the fallen father (Pop) appears as a ghost who refuses to accept that he is dead. Although most of the "major" family plays of the late 70's and early 80's do not contain ghosts as onstage characters, later plays such as *States of Shock* (1992) and *Eyes for Consuela* (1999) employ ghostly characters who seem not to realize they are dead: the occupants of the diner in *States of Shock*—a waitress named Glory Bee and a couple made up in starkly gothic white-face—and the wispy, mysterious ghost of Consuela who pushes her creaky bicycle through the dark Mexican woods in search of blue eyeballs. Usually, Shepard's ghosts are metaphorical rather than literal, manifesting themselves in memory, and the haunted son's fear that he will fall under the malevolent influence of the absent (or dead) fallen father. This is the pattern established in *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*.

Through ghosts, Shepard can indulge his fascination with highly charged emotional states and individual psychic struggles while subtly embedding a cultural critique within the drama. David Savran, in an article entitled "Haunted Houses of Modernity," remarks that ghosts in modern drama are not merely "the product of highly subjective, personalized

memories but also an embodiment of social, political, and economic forces" (588). From the family plays of the early 80's through the 90's, Shepard's ghosts become less personal and more symbolic of these socio-economic forces alluded to by Savran. For instance, while the Old Man in *Fool for Love* might simply be a specter linked to Eddie's and May's consciousness (and conscience), there is ample evidence that the "ghosts" of Stubbs, Glory Bee, and the White Couple from *States of Shock*, as well as the Hispanic ghost-girl Consuela in *Eyes for Consuela*, function as representatives of political, economic, and social forces. The occupants of the diner in *States of Shock* would not be dead if countries did not go to war with each other, and Consuela's ghost might not haunt Amado except that, like many impoverished Mexican men, he decided the only route to financial security was to enter the U.S. illegally and marry an American woman he did not love. Consequently, by using ghosts, Shepard can address such issues as the U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf War, the betrayal of marriage vows, and the sacrifice of family values in pursuit of the Almighty Dollar—all without seeming heavy-handed.

Another important gothic device used by Shepard is the **uncanny**. The uncanny takes various forms in Shepard's family plays. Sometimes it appears as a gothic *doppelgänger* or "double" as in *True West* with brothers Austin and Lee acting as alter egos to each other before finally reversing roles. Other times the uncanny is a moment of eerie familiarity whose origin remains unknown and whose accompanying epiphany leaves the receiver unfulfilled. As described by Freud, this moment is comprised of "the class of

the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" ("The Uncanny," 160). In Shepard's family plays, this moment assumes various guises. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, fallen father Weston experiences an uncanny moment near the end of the play as he wanders around the family homestead, wondering if the property is in fact his own. In *Buried Child*, grandson Vince experiences the uncanny while driving in the rain to buy his grandfather some whiskey, seeing first his own face in the reflection and then other faces that were strangely familiar, "And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized." From the uncanny in *True West* when Lee's screenplay proves to be art imitating life, to the uncanny "misrecognitions" in *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child,* and *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard's family plays use this gothic technique to hold the American family up to scrutiny.

The notion of a family **curse** and the inclusion of **grotesque** characters are also important gothic devices used by Shepard. The gothic familial curse (spoken or implied) was used in such British gothic novels as Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and in such American gothic novels as Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. The family curse appears in twentieth-century American drama in works such as O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Other variations of the cursed gothic family include Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* The cursed family appears

somewhat less explicitly (but no less violent and reverberating with ill omen) in works such as Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Suddenly Last Summer*. Although some of these examples fall outside the regional boundary of "southern" gothic (and Shepard himself, hailing from Illinois and having lived nearly everywhere except the South, falls outside this geographic boundary) the cursed family in twentieth-century American literature is most closely identified with southern gothic works. Shepard's families are all "cursed" to a certain degree, with *Curse of the Starving Class* being the most overt example. The alienated mother, Ella, attempts to articulate the curse to her son Wesley:

> It's a curse. I can feel it. It's invisible but it's there. It's always there. It comes onto us like nighttime . . . And it always comes. Repeats itself. It comes even when you do everything to stop it from coming . . . And it goes back. Deep. It goes back and back to tiny little cells and genes . . . We spread it. We pass it on. (*7P* 174)

In *Buried Child*, the family curse has resulted in a "waste land": nothing has grown on the family farm for decades. Perhaps the outraged earth is revolting because of the baby buried in the backyard, or perhaps the curse is due to the implied incest which produced the baby. For Shepard, the curse begins with the Fall of the Father—it is a result of the father's self-serving, short-sighted decisions (many of which were apparently made before the play begins).

In addition to the family curse, gothic literature—especially "southern" gothic literature—is awash with "**comic grotesque**" characters in works by Faulkner, O'Connor, Welty, Capote, and McCullers. Shepard uses these types of characters-turned-caricatures, but he essentially eschews the "comic" aspect, leaving us with only the "grotesque." David Punter remarks on gothic's relationship to the flesh: "Gothic knows the body well. It knows about physical fragility, about vulnerability. . . and it also knows the value of stretching this confrontation to its limit" (Punter 9). In *Buried Child*, the cable and harness contraption of Bradley's wooden leg creaks eerily whenever he moves, like a warning of the rage and violence seething inside him. *States of Shock*—which can be considered a "family" play with its searing portrayal of father/son dysfunction—depicts a horribly scarred character who repeatedly exposes his deformed flesh and whose character is, in a very real sense, defined by his physical wounds. By exploiting the body's weaknesses, Shepard can intensify his emotional and psychological examination of the family—when and why the family fails to cohere—by presenting both the grotesque's reaction to his or her own physical mutilation and the (unsympathetic) reaction of the other characters to the grotesque. Shepard's grotesque characters can be seen as descendants of the southern gothic literary tradition, following in the line of such characters as Anse Bundren with his obsessive quest for teeth in *As I Lay Dying* (the father in Shepard's *True West* goes to Mexico in search of a set of good teeth), and Joy/ Hulga Hopewell with her wooden leg in O'Connor's "Good Country People." These are physically

deformed characters whose frailties are exploited, often to the point of becoming spectacle. Flannery O'Connor claimed to create grotesque characters in order to "jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance" (qtd. in Muller 10). Shepard appears to share this goal. In Shepard's family plays, the physical deformities of grotesque characters parallel the emotional, psychological, and social ruptures in the family. In the jaded, contemporary world, Shepard must jar his audience with an overload of sensory impressions—often grotesque and gothic—in order to make us hear him.

Rebirth or **resurrection** is another motif that has long fascinated Shepard who has told interviewers, "The idea of dying and being reborn is really an interesting one, you know. It's always there at the back of my head" (qtd. in Dugdale 35). Rebirth or resurrection appears in various works of gothic literature, including Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, and Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*. Throughout his career (not just in the "family" plays), Shepard has created many characters who are fluid and unpredictable, with no stable sense of "self" to anchor them. At the beginning of the script to *Angel City*, Shepard instructs the actors: "instead of a whole character with logical motives he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of the character flying off a central theme." Similarly, Bonnie Marranca notes that "the Shepard character has not simply a self but several selves which are continually changing," and Marranca credits this phenomenon to the "transformational exercises" used by Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater in Shepard's early career from the

1960's (qtd. in Hart 19). In the family plays, Shepard's penchant for character transformations takes on a new, gothic direction. Just as ghosts of gothic literature seem to defy reason in their indefatigable pursuit of their victims, so do Shepard's fallen fathers relentlessly pursue the other family members, especially the haunted son.

Rather than simply having a character become "schizophrenic" by spontaneously exhibiting startling new sides to his or her personality, the family plays depict a sort of ghostly possession whereby the haunted son begins to exhibit traits of the fallen father. This is suggested symbolically in one of the early family plays, *Curse of the Starving Class*, when near the end of the play, haunted son Wesley dons the clothes of fallen father Weston and is mistaken for the father by the other characters. But in subsequent family plays, the "rebirth" or "resurrection" occurs because Shepard's fallen fathers have literally died and are "reborn" when the haunted son (or grandson, as in *Buried Child*) succumbs to the curse and begins to mirror the father—almost as though the father's ghost were possessing the son. This is the pattern at the end of *Buried Child* when Vince assumes the exact posture and mannerisms of dead patriarch Dodge. In *A Lie of the Mind*, there is an eerie scene where haunted son Jake dons his dead father's old flight jacket and blows the cremated ashes of the fallen father into the audience (suggesting a phoenix-like rebirth for the dead father whose violent ways have been resurrected in the haunted son). When Eddie leaves May to follow the siren call of the desert at the end of *Fool for Love*, he is following the pattern of violence and infidelity established by his fallen father. That is

why the spectral Old Man can declare at the play's end, "You'll never escape me"—precisely, because he now lives anew in haunted son Eddie.

Chapter One of this study will examine the gothic influence of Eugene O'Neill's and Tennessee Williams' family plays as important precursors to Shepard's work. While the proliferation of small publishing houses in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain made novels the primary literary vehicle of gothic, in order to satiate a growing community of readers who clamored for sensationalist literature, drama is especially pregnant with possibilities for exploiting gothic devices. Audiences at a play fall under the gothic spell, not only of the written words in the script, but of light and sound effects, the visual presentation of the stage set, costuming, and body movements, as well as the sound of the actors' voices and occasional music. Indeed, the case could be made that drama allows a fuller presentation of gothic devices than poetry or prose. "Gothic is about its surfaces, its acts of representation and positioning, and its affectivity in relation to the reader . . . through such issues as who or what becomes a spectacle, and for whom" (Sage and Smith 9). Certainly Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams were two of the most important twentieth-century American playwrights to realize the full effect of gothic devices in drama, or rather, to dramatize the theatricality latent in gothic literature. By opening with a chapter on how O'Neill and Williams use gothic in some of their "family" plays, I hope to lay the groundwork for how Shepard's work revisits some of the same themes as O'Neill and Williams and uses some of the same gothic devices. However, there are certainly

important differences among these three great dramatists. I will examine gothic elements in four family plays of O'Neill—*Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956), and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1943)—and three plays of Williams—*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and *The Two-Character Play* (1969).

Like Shepard, O'Neill and Williams present the American family in a state of crisis where the members are morally and psychologically (and sometimes physically) diseased. Although the families of O'Neill and Williams do not always contain the entire cast of "gothic" characters, the overall portrait of dysfunction is constant. O'Neill's plays use many of the identifiable gothic family members, and though Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Suddenly Last Summer* do not portray traditional nuclear American families, they explore other facets of the American family (or the family in America, as it were). In *Streetcar*, Stanley Kowalski may not fit the profile of the fallen father, but he is well on his way—drunken, violent, unfaithful, and self-serving. With Blanche DuBois, Williams presents a haunted sister rather than a haunted son, and, like the haunted son, Blanche's attempts to escape her gothic destiny are doomed. She has tried to run away from Belle Reve with its long parade of death and penury, and she has fled from the memory and guilt of her lover's suicide, but her demons have followed her to New Orleans and Elysian Fields. *Suddenly Last Summer* presents itself as a "whodunit" mystery play: we learn the truth about Sebastian Venable's horrific death through the tale spun by his cousin,

Catharine Holly. Sebastian is a plausible haunted son, and his mother Violet is certainly alienated in many ways, though there is no mention of Sebastian's father (he is clearly dead or long absent). While the characters in these plays of O'Neill and Williams are distinct from Shepard's characters, the character *types* used by all three playwrights are very similar.

In keeping with Sage and Smith's view of gothic as providing "the critical means of transferring an idea of the otherness of the past into the present," both O'Neill and Williams (like Shepard) show how the past is never really "past," but continues to impinge upon the present—as Mary Tyrone says in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, "The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too." To achieve this gothic effect of the past impinging on the present, both O'Neill and Williams show a pivotal event as already having happened before the play begins. In *Desire Under the Elms*, Ephraim Cabot has already "killed" Eben's mother and stolen her property. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Christine Mannon and Adam Brant have already begun their affair. In *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Mary Tyrone is already hopelessly enslaved by morphine; her husband James has already spent years neglecting her (in favor of land-grabbing), and her youngest son Edmund has already contracted tuberculosis. In O'Neill's plays, the roots of resentment, deception, and betrayal have already been planted and have blossomed. We see only the bitter harvest as it is reaped. Similarly, in Williams' *Streetcar*, Blanche DuBois has already suffered many of the tragedies from which her demons sprung.

Stanley has already begun his cycle of drunkenness and domestic abuse before the play opens. *Suddenly Last Summer* tells of Sebastian's life and death entirely in retrospect. Like Shepard, all of these plays portray an enormous amount of tragedy already accumulated in the past. Gothic devices—as a means of bringing the past to light—are ideal mechanisms for these family portraits.

Shepard has expressed admiration for his dramatic American forefathers, especially Eugene O'Neill. Of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* Shepard said, "O'Neill moves past his own personal family situation into a much wider dimension . . . I've always thought it was truly the great American play . . . so overwhelmingly honest" (qtd. in Dugdale 60). In his prose work *Hawk Moon*, Shepard even writes a poetic tribute to *Long Day's Journey*, calling the piece "Electric Fog." The piece reads: "O'Neill /Fog /Electric /Light /Jamie /Morphine /Sea /Fog /Electric/ North /East /Coast /Sad /Electric /Night" (179). Despite his admiration for the play, Shepard admits (in a 1975 *Village Voice* interview) that our contemporary culture demands abbreviated plays: "Because of the time we're living in, the attention span of people watching a work has changed. It's no longer possible for an audience to sit alertly through *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, even though it's a great play" (qtd. in Dugdale 57). Shepard takes O'Neill's gothic techniques and concentrates them by exaggerating their effects. Peter Kemp observes, "[Shepard] takes episodes of family fraughtness that could have come from O'Neill and gives them the bouncy artificiality of a cartoon strip" (qtd. in Dugdale 51). Like Flannery

O'Connor, Shepard realizes he must jar his audience from their culturally-induced anesthesia.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Shepard acknowledges his debt to Tennessee Williams in another interview from 1975 when he described one of his early "lost" plays as "a bad play . . . a sort of Tennessee Williams imitation, about some girl who got raped in a barn and her father getting mad at her or something" (qtd. in Marranca 190). It is significant that Shepard admits his failure to match Williams' achievement (at least in his early work), and thus confirms Williams as one of his dramatic role models, a goal for which to aim. Many critics such as Richard Gilman have pointed to Shepard's desire to be thought *sui generis* or a self-creation (qtd. in Hart 15). Shepard has said that any "originality" in his early work came mostly from "ignorance"; in other words, he claims not to have read enough playwrights to know how to model himself after them. Yet he has admitted reading and admiring such dramatists as Beckett, Brecht, and Albee. In this opening chapter I will set O'Neill and Williams among this elite group.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four of this study will examine how Shepard's use of gothic devices evolves throughout the 1960's, 70's, and 80's. Chapter Two examines Shepard's first use of a fallen father (Pop) and supernatural characters (the Chindhi and the White Witch) in *The Holy Ghostly*. This chapter also examines *Curse of the Starving Class* as Shepard's first attempt to present (and distort) a portrait of the nuclear American family, complete with two parents and two children. In this and subsequent

chapters I will explore how the psychological concepts of "repression" (of traumatic memories) and "return" (of traumatic memories when repression fails) relate to traditional gothic devices such as ghosts and the uncanny. Chapter Three focuses solely on *Buried Child* as representing the pinnacle of Shepard's gothic portrait of the American family. Besides providing an in-depth examination of every member of this dysfunctional family, my chapter on *Buried Child* will note important differences between the 1978 Pulitzer Prize-winning text and Shepard's 1996 revision of the play. Chapter Four examines three family plays from the 1980's: *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*. In this chapter I will explore ways in which Shepard's repertory of gothic devices continued to expand and develop, including such devices as the *doppelgänger* and *Geschwisterinzest*.

Chapter Five will examine how Shepard uses gothic in two family plays from the decade 1990-2000, with *States of Shock* and *The Late Henry Moss*. If *The Late Henry Moss* (2000) proves anything, it is that Shepard remains fascinated by the American family and its special gothic guilts. *The Late Henry Moss*, like *True West*, depicts a seething antagonism between two brothers, Earl and Ray Moss. Shepard is clearly recovering familiar ground, critiquing the decline of the American family, especially as that decline results from the fallen father who leaves familial wreckage in his wake. The setting for *The Late Henry Moss* is trademark Shepard: New Mexico—a place bordering the elusive freedom and return to normalcy represented by the Old West, so near and yet

so far from an American Dream that has been lost amid a tumult of billboards, banking firms, whiskey bottles, and mass media.

"Love needs a sacrifice," Shepard writes in *Eyes for Consuela*, "without this sacrifice there is no love" (36). Shepard's families have refused to make these sacrifices required by love, and so their relationships are loveless. This lovelessness begins with the fallen father and permeates the rest of the family; and if the home is bereft of love, then the resulting emotional vacuum must be occupied with something else. Speaking of his own relationship with his father, Shepard tellingly remarked, "Resentment is the other side of love" (qtd. in Bigsby 26). It is this awful "other side of love" that consumes Shepard's families, and gothic provides the vehicle to take us there.

CHAPTER ONE: THE GOTHIC FAMILIES OF EUGENE O'NEILL AND TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

In order fully to appreciate gothic devices in modern American drama, it is important to establish a psychology of gothic. Numerous studies have been done on the psychology of gothic, including works by Michael Gamer, Anne Williams, and Maggie Kilgour. I should like first to establish my own "psychology of gothic" so that I may return to it periodically during my examination of plays by O'Neill, Williams, and Shepard. I will focus especially on gothic's relation to the psychological concepts of trauma and repression. As a prelude to my psychology of gothic, I should like to mention one tenet that is perhaps more sociological or ideological than psychological:

1. Gothic in twentieth-century American drama exposes and critiques many myths about the American family, especially the notion of the home as a "place of peace" (Ellis 219) and the idea of the father as provider and protector. Gothic devices in American literature are often the machinery used to expose what Theresa Goddu in *Gothic America* calls "cultural contradictions that haunt America's self-image" (30). Goddu alludes specifically to the blight of slavery in the "land of the free" which horrified early writers like Crevecoeur in *Letters from An American Farmer*. But slavery is only one of many "cultural contradictions" brought to light through gothic devices. Robert Miles describes American gothic writing as "always already uncanny" because "gloomy wrongs unexpectedly resurface in the midst of commonplace

prosperity" (221). Frequently, these "gloomy wrongs" in American gothic literature involve economic exploitation or treachery used to wrest away land or money from one party in order to enrich the villain. This is seen in such works as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. Not only does the past refuse to stay buried, but past wrongs reappear at a time of "prosperity" when many are living out the American Dream of economic success. Gothic reveals that this "prosperity" was invariably the result of past treachery whereby someone was unwillingly deprived of life, liberty, and land so that malefactors could benefit. In modern American drama, it is inevitably the father (or the patriarchal figure) who is responsible for the wrongdoing—whether theft, deception, assault, or murder. Thus, one of the "cultural contradictions that haunt America's self-image" is that the father, who should be the provider and protector of the family, is actually a scoundrel whose crimes lead to the family's demise. Gothic exposes this hypocrisy and provides the mechanisms through which the wronged party achieves a measure of revenge (though this revenge is often incomplete or unsatisfactory). This is the case with O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

2. The members of the gothic American family are traumatized subjects, especially the alienated mother and the haunted son who have been traumatized by the fallen father. Because gothic inevitably deals with the refusal of the past to stay buried—and here I am using "buried" more in the psychological sense than in the literal sense—gothic has much in common with psychological trauma, as well as with the defense

mechanism of repression whereby the traumatic memory is "buried." A traumatic experience is one that "shatters or disables the individual's cognitive and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system" (Leys 298). Cathy Caruth describes trauma as a "shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 61). The victim of a traumatic experience—whether this experience was physical, psychological, or emotional—will often try to repress the memory of the trauma, sealing it off into the past, but this often proves impossible for the victim. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman observes that psychological trauma involves "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (1). Furthermore, "people who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy" (Herman 1). The alienated mother and the haunted son are internally conflicted as they alternately attempt to vocalize their traumatic memories and to bury them.

The traumatized family members attempt to repress their memories of trauma, but these attempts at repression ultimately prove futile. As a result of the trauma, the family members exhibit various symptoms of Post-Traumatic-Stress Syndrome (PTSS) including "hyperarousal," described by Herman as a state of "permanent alert" whereby "the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly"

(35). Other times the victim may "reenact" the moment of trauma "with a fantasy of changing the outcome of the dangerous encounter" (39). Freud refers to this type of reenactment as "repetition compulsion" (Herman 49). Cathy Caruth similarly has noted how trauma produces in the victim a "kind of hypnotic imitation or identification in which, precisely because the individual cannot recall the original traumatic event, she is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it" (qtd. in Leys 298). Ironically, the victim's attempts to repress the memory of trauma serve only to prolong and intensify the memory. J. P. Chaplin's *Dictionary of Psychology* defines "repression" as

> the forceful ejection from consciousness [of] shameful or painful experiences or impulses which the individual feels are incompatible with his evaluation of himself or which cause anxiety. Any repressed impulse or experience may gain entry [to the consciousness] in a symbolic form through dreams, errors, slips of the tongue, and in the guise of neurotic symptoms. Repression should not be confused with suppression or inhibition, both of which are voluntary.[1] (394-395)

3. When attempts at repression fail, the traumatized memories return, and these memories manifest themselves in various physical and psychic symptoms and maladies, including such gothic devices as ghosts, somnambulism, and

[1] Psychoanalytic theory distinguishes between "repression" (which involves pleasurable wishes such as sexual desire) and "foreclosure" (which involves traumatic events that are not properly repressed). But for the purposes of this study, I am using the term "repression"—rather than "foreclosure"—to refer to repression of traumatic memories and to suggest that this type of repression is ultimately unsuccessful.

"uncanny" moments. In my proposed model of the gothic American family, the alienated mother and the haunted son are typically the characters who try repeatedly to repress their memories of traumatic experiences, and often their futile efforts at repression result in physical reactions:

> The worst fear of any traumatized person is that the moment of horror will recur . . . . Chronically traumatized people are continually hypervigilant, anxious, and agitated . . . they perceive their bodies as having turned against them. They complain, not only of insomnia and agitation, but also of numerous types of somatic symptoms. (Herman 86)

The traumatized family members may also exhibit signs of "paranoia," a condition which is described in the *Dictionary of Psychology* as "a psychotic disorder characterized by highly systematized delusions of persecution or grandeur with little deterioration" (Chaplin 324). These "delusions" are "persistent," "defended strongly by the patient," and are "incapacitating" (Chaplin 324). The return of the trauma, via memories which refuse to stay repressed, results in a situation that is "uncanny." Freud writes, "Every emotional effect . . . is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety," and when "the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs," the result is the *unheimlich* or uncanny (Freud 166). The uncanny involves memories or past secrets which "ought to have been kept concealed but which [have] nevertheless come to light" (Freud 166). In her gothic study *Art of Darkness,* Anne Williams refers to Freud's uncanny as a kind of

"defamiliarized familiar" and "the class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (72). The alienated mother and the haunted son experience uncanny moments as their attempts at repression fail. These uncanny moments are themselves haunting and "gothic."

4. The American gothic family, as depicted in modern American drama, never fully recovers from its trauma, and attempts at resolution—if resolution is attempted at all—are ultimately abortive. Judith Herman lists three important stages in the process of using psychotherapy to help a traumatized victim. Stage one is "establishing safety" which involves creating a safe environment for the victim, an environment where the victim feels safe from the original source of his or her trauma (i.e.—the abuser). The victim should also feel assured that the therapist wants to hear his or her story (the memory of the trauma). Stage two is "remembrance and mourning," and it is here that major challenges are presented to the therapist. Traumatic memory is "repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless" (Herman 175). The recounted story "does not develop or progress in time" as told by the victim; instead, this story is like a "series of still snapshots or a silent movie" to which the therapist hopes to provide the "music and words" (Herman 175). Thus, if the trauma results in a "break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 61), and if "the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system" (Leys 298), then how is it possible for the victim ever to fully recover? The final stage in the recovery process seems to verify this ambiguity: Herman calls this final stage

"reconnection with ordinary life" whereby the victim begins to have "renewed hope" for engaging with daily life at a functional level (155). The broad nature of these goals, while doubtless essential for a trauma victim, suggests how tenuous the recovery actually is. Cathy Caruth seems to suggest that, not only does one never fully recover from a traumatic experience, but the traumatic memories can survive for more than one generation: "The trauma of one individual is understood as capable of haunting later generations—as if the ghost of the past could speak to the living in the present, contagiously contaminating them in turn" (qtd. in Leys 284). For modern American dramatists like O'Neill, Williams, and Shepard, final recovery is shown to be impossible. The traumatized family members are never portrayed as reaching a stage of "reconnection with ordinary life." In fact, the family members' abortive attempts at repression and recovery provide the impetus for dramatic conflict in gothic American family plays.

In twentieth-century American drama, gothic evolved in several important ways. Perhaps the most significant evolution involved a type of geographical and social contraction whereby gothic was brought firmly into the domestic sphere, namely into the home of the American nuclear family. In twentieth-century American literature, gothic tales replete with isolated castles and dark, boundless forests are replaced by family farms, small-town venues, or urban ghettos. Twentieth-century American writers as various as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, and Sam Shepard all brought the gothic sphere much more literally

"home" than had their British gothic predecessors. Furthermore, by tightening the gothic sphere and weaving it inextricably into the fabric of the American family, the sources of traditional gothic—terror and suspense—became much more intensely personal. Whereas eighteenth-century British gothic novels by Walpole and Radcliffe had employed such external devices as giant helmets and mysterious bandits pursuing heroines through mountainous terrain, twentieth-century American writers located the sources of gothic terror within the domestic sphere itself in the form of dark familial secrets which refuse to lie dormant.

Furthermore, because the source of gothic terror was now much more personal and frighteningly familiar, the gothic effect became uncanny—the haunted family members have a vague sense of recognition as the traumatic memories they try to repress rise to the surface against their wishes. Heroes and heroines in British gothic novels might be able to escape from danger by literally fleeing, but in twentieth-century American gothic works, the flight is most often psychic rather than literal, and inevitably the attempt is abortive. The gothic forces that haunt the American family are too near and too deeply embedded in the consciousness to be avoided. Thus the evolution of gothic in twentieth-century American literature—especially the drama of O'Neill, Williams, and Shepard—expresses an ultimate irony and implicit cultural critique: the domestic sphere of the nuclear American family, which should be a haven and a refuge against the terrors of the world, has itself become a source of terror. Several historical and sociological factors facilitated

the shift away from the perception that the American family and home as a refuge to a source of terror. The stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression intensified in the American family an awareness of economic pressures and, when financial needs went unmet, strained family relationships resulted. In addition, industrialization resulted in increased urbanization as families flocked to the cities for jobs. These cities, in turn, with their towering buildings of steel and concrete, "boxed in" the family in a sort of pressure cooker atmosphere where crime, noise, and pollution further stressed familial relationships. Some of Tennessee Williams's plays, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire*, examine the American family under stress in an urban milieu. By examining selected "family plays" of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams as important precursors to Sam Shepard's family plays, we can examine how traditional gothic devices are used and adapted to paint a terrifying portrait of the contemporary American family, and we can likewise examine how myths about the traditional American family have been irrevocably shattered.

Eugene O'Neill:

Harold Bloom has claimed that Eugene O'Neill "tells one story only, and his story turns out to be himself" (4). For the purposes of this chapter—focusing on O'Neill's gothic portrait of the American family—Bloom's claim seems accurate. O'Neill's own family life, chronicled most hauntingly in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, provided the playwright with a highly personal backdrop against which he could paint a gothic familial portrait. O'Neill's family, like Shepard's, provided real-life models for the gothic

character types which would appear in some of his "family" plays, including *Desire Under the Elms*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The haunted sons in O'Neill's family plays are the most important single influence on Sam Shepard's depiction of the gothic American family. Michael Abbott views Shepard as the "most direct descendant" of O'Neill (198). Abbott also believes the wanton son to be the "most complex and directly autobiographical character" in the work of both O'Neill and Shepard (198). O'Neill's portrayal of father-son conflict in plays like *Desire Under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is mirrored in such Shepard plays as *The Holy Ghostly, Curse of the Starving Class,* and *Buried Child*.

O'Neill's father, James O'Neill, was a drunken, violent, "fallen father" in the same mold as Ephraim Cabot from *Desire Under the Elms* or James Tyrone from *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. O'Neill's mother, Ella O'Neill, enslaved by morphine addiction, became a model for a quintessential gothic "alienated mother." O'Neill's older brother Jamie often served as a model for the "haunted son" character in such plays as *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. But it was of course Eugene O'Neill himself who was the true "haunted son," and like Orin Mannon from *Mourning Becomes Electra*, he felt compelled to chronicle his memories, turning them into dramatic art.

During the first six years of his life, Eugene O'Neill was often regaled with ghost stories by his Cornish nurse, and these stories seem to have left a lasting impression on the

playwright (Bogard, *CP* 969). The four family plays of O'Neill which I examine in this chapter contain ghosts or allusions to ghosts. While *Desire Under the Elms* includes only one ghost, *Mourning Becomes Electra* uses three ghosts (either directly or indirectly). Finally, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* eschew literal ghosts in favor of metaphorical ones—another evolution in O'Neill's gothic writing. It is significant that O'Neill's earliest gothic family play, *Desire Under the Elms*, makes the most explicit use of the traditional gothic ghost; not surprisingly, of the plays examined in this chapter, *Desire Under the Elms* provides the clearest example of a fallen father whose patriarchal power is deliberately subverted by a haunted son.

Desire Under the Elms:

O'Neill said of *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), "I wrote it more easily than I have written any other of my works" (Bogard 92). O'Neill wrote *Desire Under the Elms* between January and June 1924. *Desire Under the Elms* is the only family play set before the Civil War—specifically, in 1850. The Cabot house becomes the first in a series of haunted houses which recur in O'Neill's later family plays. O'Neill was reportedly dissatisfied with the stage set for *Desire Under the Elms*, though the set was based on his own sketches (Bogard, *CP* 978). The stage directions describe

> a house in good condition but in need of paint. Its walls are a sickly grayish . . . Two enormous elms . . . bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There

> is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption . . . They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their breasts and hands and hair on its roof . . . ." (*SP* 158)

By choosing to describe the elm trees in terms of a "sinister maternity," O'Neill foreshadows one of the play's major concerns: the alienated mother has been robbed of her estate by her grasping husband, and her place in the home has been usurped by a younger woman. Ephraim Cabot has outlived two wives; one marriage lasted twenty years and the second, to Eben's mother, lasted sixteen years. We do not know how the mother died, but we may infer that her death was brought on, at least inadvertently, by Ephraim Cabot's domineering, ravenous personality. Certainly, haunted son Eben believes his father to be responsible, saying Ephraim "murdered" her with "his hardness" (*SP* 193). Thus the elms' "crushing, jealous absorption" can be seen as a manifestation of the mother's gothic ghost who haunts the family home, seeking revenge.

The alienated mother has lost not only her life and land, but also her name, which symbolizes her individual identity. By referring to her only as "Maw," O'Neill strips the alienated mother of any identity outside of the role of mother. Thus her identity has been defined solely in terms of her relation to males. Furthermore, the mother's ghost seems strangely trapped inside the farmhouse. Gothic novels have traditionally included scenes of women in captivity, and often the captive women are robbed of land by usurping males. In Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Emily St. Aubert's aunt dies in a

dungeon after being forced by her husband, the villainous Montoni, to sign over her estate. Emily herself is later held against her will and also forced to sign away land to Montoni. In a later novel, *The Italian* (1797), Radcliffe's heroine Ellena is held in a convent against her will. In Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1795), the heroine Antonia is held captive in the catacombs beneath a convent where she is raped and murdered. These seminal gothic novels establish a clear pattern of female captivity. In *Desire Under the Elms*, the female's captivity is shown in its aftermath. Just as heroines in gothic novels are often depicted in situations of confinement, the ghostly "Maw" is also confined in some sort of otherworldly limbo. Like the ghost of Hamlet's father, Maw is doomed to stalk the Cabot farm until her wrongful death and stolen land have been avenged. As David Savran has noted, ghosts in modern drama are not merely a "product of highly subjective, personalized memories but also an embodiment of social, political, and economic forces" (588). Ghosts in modern drama thus are vehicles for social criticism as much as they are manifestations of personal guilt. Maw's ghost—a victim of economic exploitation—seeks retribution. Eben, with a sort of strange paranormal intuition, can sense his dead mother's restless spirit:

> She still comes back . . . she can't find it nateral sleepin' and restin' in peace. She can't git used t' bein' free—even in her grave. (*SP* 182)

O'Neill provides a counterpoint to the alienated mother in the person of the seductive Abbie. O'Neill's stage directions describe Abbie as "buxom," and "full of

vitality." As a female outsider, Abbie ultimately betrays both Ephraim and Eben by double-crossing them. She convinces Ephraim that he can rob Eben of his inheritance by impregnating her with a new male heir; at the same time, she entices Eben into committing adultery and, vicariously, incest. Cuckolding his father will be the ultimate revenge, Abbie tells Eben. The most surprising plot twist revolves around the gothic ghost and its role in Abbie's scheme. Rather than preventing the adultery, Maw's ghost actually facilitates the incestuous union in the very parlor where Maw died. The parlor is described as "a grim, repressed room like a tomb in which the family has been interred alive" (*SP* 191). Once inside the parlor, the ghost communicates supernaturally to both Eben and Abbie, orchestrating their lovemaking as an act of vengeance.

> Eben: Maw, what air ye tellin' me?
>
> Abbie: She's tellin' ye t' love me . . .
>
> Eben: I sees why. It's her vengeance on him—so's she kin rest quiet in her grave! (*SP* 193)

The dead mother's ghost is an active agent in a scene which serves the dual purpose of exacting vengeance on the fallen father and consummating a type of surrogate incest with Abbie in the maternal role. By taking such an active role, the ghost in this play seems to exacerbate tensions between the fallen father and the haunted son.

To focus more clearly on the conflict between Ephraim and Eben, O'Neill removes the two elder Cabot sons early in the play by having them run off to California in

search of gold. Before leaving, Peter and Simeon Cabot sell their share of the family farm to younger brother Eben, hoping to use the money to finance their trek to California. Once Peter and Simeon are gone, the audience's attention is drawn to the conflict between Ephraim and Eben—a conflict that is marked by ambiguity and contradiction. For example, father and son compete fiercely in a battle of bravado with each claiming to be physically more powerful and threatening than the other. Early in the play, Eben tells Peter and Simeon that their father is "stronger—inside—than both o' ye put together!" The term "inside" implies a type of mental toughness rather than physical strength. Ephraim is, after all, a seventy-five-year-old patriarch. Later, Eben tells his brothers cryptically, "I'm gittin' stronger. I kin feel it growin' in me . . . " (I. 2). Although Eben implies that the father is stronger than the elder two sons, he remains convinced that he himself is stronger than his father. Spectators may never be sure precisely what Eben means by "it" ("I kin feel it growin' in me"), but a gothic reading might interpret "it" as the mother' ghost. As the dead mother begins to exert her influence over her haunted son, prompting him to act as her instrument of vengeance, Eben claims to experience a physical manifestation—"I'm gittin' stronger"—of the ghost's influence. Ultimately, in their one physical confrontation (III. 2), seventy-five-year-old Ephraim overcomes twenty-five-year-old Eben by brute strength. In the psychological paradigm of the American family, the father (though here he is very old) retains his patriarchal position of dominance over his son. So while it is perhaps unrealistic that Ephraim could be physically stronger than Eben

(at this stage in their lives), it is important to remember that Eben is the traumatized, haunted son. As such, he is struggling physically against his father but also struggling mentally to repress the traumatic memories which haunt him—especially the guilt he must feel after watching Ephraim decimate his mother's life and her fortunes. Since Eben cannot thus devote his entire energies toward winning the physical struggle, his defeat at his father's hands seems more believable. Ephraim, on the other hand, derives a type of extraordinary strength from his own malevolent deeds: by stealing his dead wife's estate and lecherously taking a young vixen for his new bride, Ephraim retains the vitality of a much younger man.

Earlier in the play, Eben had asserted his manhood by making a sexual conquest of the local harlot. All of the Cabot men had engaged in previous liaisons with "Minnie," and the thought of being left out (and thus marginalized as a man) was unbearable to Eben. He tells his brothers, "I tuk her. She may've been his'n—an'your'n, too—but she's mine now!" (*SP* 168). Eben's boast of course becomes strangely prophetic, a sort of rehearsal for his affair with his stepmother Abbie. This affair (which is discussed in more detail below) constitutes not merely adultery and cuckoldry, but incest.

The father/son relationship is contradictory in the sense that Ephraim denies any real resemblance—physical or otherwise—to his last-born, Eben. When Simeon tells Ephraim that Eben is "a chip o' yew—spit 'n' image . . . he'll eat ye yet, old man!" (I. 4), Ephraim denies this, calling Eben "a dumb fool—like his Maw—soft an simple" (I. 4). At

the end of Part One, Ephraim tells Eben, "ye'll never be mor'n half a man!" (I. 4). But Simeon's view of Eben is borne out in the end, as Eben does indeed come closer than anyone to subverting Ephraim through cuckoldry. Ironically, in Part Two, Ephraim tells Abbie that he is reluctant to hand the farm over to her because she "ain't me. A son is me—my blood—mine. Mine ought t' git mine" (*SP* 185). Though Ephraim demonstrates no paternal love toward his offspring, he remains adamant that the tie of blood is the ultimate bond, and that his wealth should pass to a son. Seizing on this opportunity, Abbie suggests that she will provide Ephraim with a new heir.

Ephraim refuses to recognize in Eben any qualities of himself, insisting instead that the youngest boy takes after his mother and is thus "soft and simple." This insistence—a denial, really—prevents Ephraim from viewing Eben as a threat to his patriarchal position. By dismissing Eben as a "mama's boy," Ephraim implies that he will be able to overcome and victimize Eben, just as he had done to Eben's mother. As it turns out, this is a terrible underestimation on Ephraim's part: Eben will use trickery, rather than brute strength, to subvert the patriarchal position, and the gothic ghost is the catalyst which brings about the father's fall.

During the pivotal scene in the parlor, just before Eben and Abbie consummate their lust, Abbie tells Eben that his mother's ghost seems "kind" now, as though tacitly approving the union. In this case, Abbie is a sort of surrogate mother to Eben's Oedipal character. As Abbie reaches for Eben, O'Neill's stage directions describe her gesture as

one marked by "overwhelming desire" and "a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love." Abbie even declares, "I'll kiss ye pure, Eben—same's if I was a Maw t'ye—an' ye can kiss me back's if yew was my son . . ." (*SP* 193). Abbie as surrogate mother makes the incest element more explicit; moreover, the incestuous act serves to appease the ghost. Following their lovemaking, Eben tells Abbie, "Maw's gone back t' her grave. She kin sleep now" (*SP* 195). Maw's ghost is appeased, not from the consummation of any prurient or sensual lusts, but rather because Eben and Abbie's tryst sets in motion the wheel of revenge. Ephraim will be made to suffer humiliation and disgrace after the community learns that he has been cuckolded by his youngest son, and so Maw's ghost will achieve a measure of vicarious revenge against her oppressor. As a ghost, Maw is privy to some supernatural omniscience, so by orchestrating the tryst between Eben and Abbie, she knows that Ephraim will ultimately suffer. But has the gothic ghost really been laid to rest at last?

The play ends with infanticide—a device later used in Shepard's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Buried Child*—and readers may wonder whether this too was part of the ghostly mother's design. The infanticide—both in this play and in Shepard's—may be interpreted as a physical type of repression: here Abbie smothers the baby, and in *Buried Child* Dodge drowns the baby. Both murders may be seen as attempts to smother or repress the traumatic memories from haunting (as suggested by Cathy Caruth) a later generation. Ostensibly, Abbie murders the baby in order to prove her love for Eben, but

on a psychological level, both Abbie and Dodge are attempting to repress the past by committing infanticide, hoping to halt a traumatic cycle. Part Three of the play is set in late spring of the following year, when a two-week–old baby has been born to Eben and Abbie. Ephraim, of course, assumes the child is his, but the townsfolk who are summoned to a party at the Cabot farm know better. They subtly hint that Ephraim has been cuckolded, but the old man is too intent on gloating to Eben that his inheritance has been lost to this new heir. Eben turns his anger on Abbie, who immediately decides that killing the child will make Eben happy. She smothers the child in its cradle. Eben's final moral decision is made offstage, and his decision attests to the strength of the Oedipal bond. He decides to confess complicity in the infanticide (falsely) in order to go to jail with Abbie rather than live as a free man. Abbie's reaction suggests that Maw's ghostly influence continues to hold sway as Abbie "caresses his hair, tenderly" and says softly to Eben, "My boy, hain't ye?" in a maternal gesture (*SP* 213).

Ultimately, fallen father Ephraim is the only character who survives the carnage intact. After Eben and Abbie are taken to jail, Ephraim initially tries to convince himself that a new start is possible—that it might be possible to break out of the gothic curse which he himself set in motion. Declaring that he is now "free," Ephraim sets loose his livestock and plans to take his hidden cache of gold and join Simeon and Peter in California. Once he discovers that Eben has robbed him, however, Ephraim quickly resigns himself to continue farming—the only life he knows. Earlier in the play, Ephraim

revealed how he learned that "God is hard," and that wresting a living from the hard earth was the life best suited for him. Indeed, Ephraim is as obstinate and recalcitrant as the earth beneath him: Eben says it was his father's hardness that drove his mother into an early grave. Ephraim mourns the loss neither of Eben, Abbie, or the baby; nor had Ephraim grieved upon learning that Simeon and Peter had left him. Fallen fathers like Ephraim loom as hard and solitary figures, like the elms which stretch menacingly over the house; and, like the elms, Ephraim casts a dark shadow over all those whom he encounters. Ephraim's situation is static; he ends where he had begun, but there is little doubt he suffers consequences, both of his own choices and of the vengeful ghost's supernatural machinations. Ephraim ends alone, bereft of his sons, his grandson, and his new wife. This early gothic family play established O'Neill's interest in gothic ghosts and family curses, both of which express "the peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away" (Sage and Smith 3). O'Neill would explore these gothic devices more fully in his trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Mourning Becomes Electra:

In October 1931, following the New York opening of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill wrote in his work diary, "Reaction—sunk—worn out—depressed—sad that the Mannons exist no more—for me!" (Bogard, *CP* 982). The trilogy, a culmination of nearly three years' work, was much more expansive in scope and mythic overtones than *Desire Under the Elms* had been. Like *Desire Under the Elms*, the stage set

includes a veritable "haunted house," this time "a large building of the Greek temple type" flanked by "a line of locust and elm trees" (*SP* 459). Throughout the play, various members of the Mannon family use terms such as "ghostly," "dead," "tomb," and "sepulcher" to describe the family home. "Tomb" and "sepulcher" suggest not only a pervading atmosphere of death, but also a confining space from which there is no escape—indeed, at the conclusion of this trilogy, the sole survivor of the Mannon family, Lavinia, disappears into the house, never to return. In addition to the gothic haunted house, O'Neill includes a more complex family curse. Part One of the trilogy, entitled *Homecoming*, opens with the introduction of a Greek chorus-type ensemble made up of a spry seventy-five-year-old singer named Seth Beckwith (readers are reminded perhaps of Ephraim Cabot who was also seventy-five but had the energy of a much younger man), as well as three locals—Amos and Louisa Ames and their cousin Minnie (perhaps a namesake holdover from the town harlot in *Desire Under the Elms*). The chorus serves to provide the audience with ostensibly objective information about the gothic family itself, the reclusive and aristocratic Mannons. The chorus expresses admiration for Ezra Mannon and his father Abe, who made their money in shipping. Ezra's wife Christine is viewed less positively—"she didn't bring no money when Ezra married her" and is "too furrin looking" (*SP* 462).

In true gothic style, the Mannons suffer the consequences of a family curse, which is introduced in Act One during a conversation between Seth Beckwith and Lavinia

Mannon. Lavinia, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of Ezra and Christine, "looks older" and tries not to resemble her younger looking forty-year-old mother (*SP* 463). By referring to daughter and mother this way, O'Neill is suggesting that Lavinia and Christine are a sort of *doppelgänger* for each other—they not only resemble each other physically, but also will bring about the demise of the other. Like Poe's William Wilson, mother and daughter find that the welfare of each is dependent upon the well-being of the other. The daughter will come to realize—too late—that by destroying her mother, she has destroyed herself, psychologically speaking. Lavinia has followed her mother to New York where she has watched her adulterous liaison with a dashing captain named Adam Brant. While the "curse" in *Desire Under the Elms* sprang from the alienated mother's need for revenge, in *Mourning Becomes Electra* the origins of the curse are more complex, based on the Greek Orestes story. Seth reveals to Lavinia that Adam Brant is probably the secret child of David Mannon and a Canuck girl named Marie Brantome. David Mannon was brother to Abe Mannon, making Adam Brant and Ezra Mannon first cousins. Later in Act One, Brant confesses the truth to Lavinia, revealing that Abe Mannon also loved Marie Brantome and was furious when he lost her to his brother David. Abe Mannon treated the Canuck nurse cruelly until the day he committed suicide. Later, his son Ezra refused a loan to Marie Brantome when she was desperately poor and dying. Ezra Mannon is not as completely a "fallen father" as was Ephraim Cabot—he seems a generally decent man whose refusal to act charitably toward Marie Brantome sealed his

fate. Like Eben Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms,* Adam Brant is driven to avenge his mother's death by having an affair with Christine Mannon.

A second important gothic development in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is that incestuous themes are much more intricately woven throughout the plot. Although incest served a central function in *Desire Under the Elms,* in that play the incest was between a stepmother and stepson, rather than between blood relatives. There is no suggestion that Eben was in any way sexually attracted to his birth mother in *Desire Under the Elms,* though it is significant that the dead mother's ghost seems to "possess" the stepmother's body during their tryst in the parlor. *Mourning Becomes Electra,* on the other hand, does suggest at least an incestuous attraction between parents and children. O'Neill incorporates both the Oedipus and Electra complexes in the trilogy, though the latter is examined in greater detail than the former, as the title of the trilogy suggests. In Act Two of *Homecoming* when Christine finally admits to Lavinia her affair with Brant, she blames her daughter for encouraging Orin to go to fight in the Civil War. Christine declares, "I'd never have fallen in love with Adam if I'd had Orin with me," (*SP* 482) implying that she has taken a lover only because she has lost one. Of course there is no evidence in the play that any incestuous act was ever consummated between the Mannon parents and their children, but the desire is implicit. In the most revealing statement of the incest theme, Christine tells Lavinia accusingly, "You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place!" (*SP* 483). Lavinia denies

the accusation, but in Act Three their conversation turns again to the Electra complex. This time Lavinia tells her mother, "I'm not marrying anyone. I've got my duty to father" (*SP* 494), and Christine taunts her daughter about "waiting for her beau," meaning her father (*SP* 495). Finally, when Ezra Mannon returns home, Lavinia tells him,"You're the only man I'll ever love!" (*SP* 498). Though the trilogy employs Freudian theory, O'Neill later remarked, "I find fault with critics [who] read too much damn Freud into stuff that could very well have been written exactly as is before psychoanalysis was ever heard of" (Bogard, "Historical" 83). Perhaps O'Neill's comments are disingenuous. In 1925 O'Neill had read Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the* Ego, and the following year he had participated in psychoanalysis during marital counseling with Dr. G. V. Hamilton (Bogard, "Historical" 83). *Mourning Becomes Electra* blends both Freudian psychology and traditional gothic devices, so O'Neill's denial of Freudian influence seems insincere.

A third important development in O'Neill's gothic family concerns the number of ghosts at work. Whereas *Desire Under the Elms* employed only one ghost, the *Mourning Becomes Electra* trilogy includes, at least implicitly, three ghosts: fallen father Ezra Mannon, alienated mother Christine Mannon, and murdered lover Adam Brant. One could argue that the Mannon children themselves become ghost-like as the curse unfolds. O'Neill's stage directions call for "mask-like" faces for each member of the Mannon family. O'Neill stated in his work diary his intention to create a "modern psychological

approximation of the Greek sense of fate" (Bogard, "Historical" 74). Unsatisfied with the first drafts of the work, O'Neill tried in later drafts to create "the unrealistic truth wearing the mask of lying reality" (Bogard, "Historical" 76). The ghostly "mask-like" faces of the Mannon children suggest this "lying reality." After the death of their parents, the "mask-like" faces of the Mannon children may be interpreted as a type of haunting whereby the ghosts of Ezra and Christine Mannon are "resurrected"—the return of the repressed past—so that now the children resemble their parents more and more.

As the curtain closes on *Homecoming*, Lavinia, echoing Eben Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms,* implores her dead father's ghost for otherworldly advice: "Father! Come back to me! Tell me what to do!" (*SP* 510). Patriarch Ezra Mannon, now literally the gothic "fallen father," is the first ghost invoked in the trilogy. In Part Two, *The Hunted*, both Lavinia and Christine will invoke Ezra's ghost, but for different reasons. Lavinia tries to persuade her brother Orin that their mother poisoned Ezra. She lays her hand on Ezra's corpse and pleads, "Make Orin believe me, Father!" (*SP* 541). Later, as the curtain closes on Act Three, Christine implores Ezra's corpse, "Don't let him [Orin] harm Adam! I am the only guilty one!" (*SP* 544). In each case, the supplicant's pleas go unheeded, but this does not in any way diminish the efficacy of the gothic ghost. Although Orin does not finally believe his mother is a murderer, he does wreak his Orestian vengeance by killing Adam Brant in Act Four of *The Hunted*. And although Ezra Mannon's ghost does not grant Christine's wish for Brant's safety, the ghost somehow

subliminally communicates its refusal: Christine "[had] read some answer in the dead man's face" and "stops in terror" (*SP* 544). Ezra Mannon's ghost continues to mediate the subsequent events of the drama, though the ghost does not always grant the wishes of the living.

The second ghost is that of Adam Brant, and this ghost makes its presence felt immediately after Brant is murdered. After shooting Brant, Orin experiences an uncanny moment, musing that the face of Brant's corpse resembles both Ezra Mannon and Orin himself: "He looks like me too! Maybe I've committed suicide!" (*SP* 556). Here the uncanny involves the "double" which Freud mentioned in his essay on "The Uncanny"—according to Freud, the double "was originally an insurance against destruction to the Ego, an energetic denial of the power of death" but the double becomes, in an uncanny moment, "a ghastly harbinger of death" (qtd. in Rivkin and Ryan 166). By realizing that the dead man resembles Ezra Mannon, Orin perhaps experiences subconscious guilt arising from his repressed Oedipus complex: subconsciously he may in fact have wanted to kill his father and usurp the marital bed, and now he wonders momentarily whether he has in fact committed patricide. More importantly, he wonders whether he has committed suicide, and this uncanny moment proves to be prescient ("a ghastly harbinger of death")—by killing Brant, Orin precipitates his mother's suicide and, later, his own, as well. Uncanny moments such as this one are commonplace in gothic literature, especially American gothic literature of the late-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Two early

examples are Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* and Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson."[2] The second implicit appearance of Brant's ghost occurs at the end of *The Haunted* just before Orin's suicide. Looking at Lavinia, Orin declares, "I'm glad you found love, Mother! You and Adam!" (*SP* 598). Orin actually means Lavinia and Peter Niles, but by this time he is suffering from a complete delusion brought on by his guilt over his mother's suicide. The ghostly presence of Brant surfaces subtly here; Orin knows Brant is dead, yet he speaks as though Brant were still alive.

The third ghost is that of alienated mother Christine, who shoots herself at the end of *The Hunted*. Throughout the final play in the trilogy—*The Haunted*—Christine's ghost haunts both of her children. In Act Two, scene two, Orin emerges from the study where his mother shot herself and tells Lavinia, "I was sure she'd [Mother] be waiting for me in there . . . " (*SP* 578). Like Eben Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms*, the haunted son enters the room where the alienated mother died, believing her spirit to be strongest there. Lavinia, too, falls under the ghostly influence of their dead mother; indeed, she has become an uncanny replica of Christine. According to O'Neill's stage directions, "one would mistake her for her mother . . ." as she "seems a mature woman" with her "hair arranged like her mother" and wearing "a green dress like a copy of her mother's" (*SP* 578). Lavinia has tried to go on with life as normal. The most obvious example of this is her acceptance of Peter Niles' marriage proposal although she clearly does not love him. But

[2] In Brown's novel, Edgar Huntly finds himself mirroring the actions of lunatic Clithero Edny. In Poe's story, Wilson ends by killing his double and thereby murdering himself.

Lavinia quickly renounces marriage, telling Peter in the play's final scene, "The dead are too strong!" (*SP* 612). Nowhere is this statement more true than in the climactic scene when Lavinia taunts Orin about her sexual tryst with the native Avannhi during a visit to the islands. The stage directions here describe Lavinia as virtually possessed with the haughty spirit of her dead mother: she mocks Orin "with a sudden flare of deliberate evil taunting that recalls her mother in the last act of *Homecoming*" (*SP* 592). Afterward, Lavinia attempts to articulate the phenomenon:

> LAVINIA: Something rose up in me—like an evil spirit!
>
> ORIN: Ghosts! You never seemed so much like Mother as you did just then! (*SP* 592)

The idea of generational and family patterns replicating themselves, especially haunted sons repeating the patterns of their fallen fathers, is a virtual hallmark of American gothic writing. Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Wieland* (1798) is one of the earliest and best-known examples: in this novel, the haunted son, Theodore Wieland, eventually falls victim to the same delusions and religious fanaticism which had doomed his father. In Hawthorne's novel *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), each male descendant in the Pyncheon line replicates the greed and corruption of his forefathers, and each dies under the same family curse which was wrought by this corruption. Ostensibly, these family patterns are doomed to be repeated because of a generational "curse." But it is also helpful to recall Cathy Caruth's description of trauma as a "kind of hypnotic imitation or

identification in which, precisely because the individual cannot recall the original traumatic event, she is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it" (qtd. in Leys 298). Orin and Lavinia Mannon, like many other "cursed" children throughout American gothic literature, may be viewed as traumatized subjects who, in their futile attempts to repress traumatic memories, end up replicating their parents.

As in *Desire Under the Elms*, there is only one ultimate survivor at the end of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. But this time it is the haunted daughter rather than the fallen father who survives, and this sole survivor embraces her gothic destiny more fully than did Ephraim Cabot. By choosing to board herself up inside the haunted house, Lavinia is in effect capitulating to the ghosts which she cannot escape. Lavinia's entombment inside the haunted house is prescient, pointing the way toward Mary Tyrone's confinement in O'Neill's gothic masterpiece *Long Day's Journey Into Night.*

Long Day's Journey Into Night:

With *Long Day's Journey Into Night* we have, not a solitary woman confined in a house full of ghosts as we did at the end of *Mourning Becomes Electra,* but rather a house full of living family members whose shared guilts and repressed memories create a different type of haunted house wherein the matriarch shuffles about as a living "ghost." The publishing history of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is well known. O'Neill began drafting the work in late March of 1940, and the following year he showed a draft to his son, Eugene Jr. (Bogard, *CP* 985). In November 1945 O'Neill placed a sealed copy of

the play in a safe at Random House, with instructions that the play not be published until twenty-five years after his death. He never intended the play to be produced (Bogard, *CP* 988). But in 1952 he made his wife Carlotta his sole literary executor, and after O'Neill's death in 1953, she had the play published. This "play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood," is somewhat paradoxical in its gothic quality. Although the gothic devices are more subtle (the play uses metaphorical ghosts rather than literal ones) than in the earlier family plays, the overall gothic mood has never been darker. It is as though O'Neill no longer needed to rely on external gothic props such as ghosts—the truth which lay behind the walls of the Tyrone household was gothic enough. Each member of the Tyrone family contains within himself or herself a Pandora's box of traumatic memories which will, when opened, unleash their own gothic power. The gothic mood is here more internalized, residing within the characters and thus much more concentrated, intense, and personal. Furthermore, this pervasive gothic mood can be attributed to the biographical dimension of the play, for with *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, O'Neill was mining his own personal demons more deeply than in any other of his works.

The central gothic character of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is the alienated mother, Mary Cavan Tyrone, who is clearly based on O'Neill's real mother. Ella O'Neill, like Mary Tyrone, attended convent school where she studied piano. Jamie O'Neill was born to Ella and James O'Neill in 1878, and a second son, Edmund, died at age two after contracting measles from Jamie (Bogard, *CP* 968). Eugene was born in 1888, and his

mother was given morphine during her labor and afterward (969). It was during the summer of 1903, when Eugene O'Neill was fifteen, that he learned the awful truth of his mother's drug addiction when she tried to throw herself into Thames River outside the family cottage while suffering from withdrawal symptoms. O'Neill responded to the shock by renouncing religion and turning to alcohol (970). When his mother returned from a sanatorium in spring of 1906 and "in good spirits," O'Neill dared to hope she might recover (Bogard, "Historical" 95), but it was not until 1914 that Ella O'Neill finally beat her addiction while staying at a convent. During the eleven years that Eugene was aware of his mother's addiction, she must have seemed for him a type of death-in-life gothic ghost shuffling around the house upstairs, trapped in a psychic abyss that pulled her always back to the past, to a happier time in her memory. This is precisely the case with Mary Tyrone. Mary's alienation from her family stems from several insidious habits, including her drug addiction, her denials and deceptions, and her love/hate relationship with her family, especially her husband, James Tyrone.

In his stage directions, O'Neill describes Mary as "thin," with a "pale" face and "no makeup," reminiscent of women like Ligeia or Madeline Usher from Edgar Allan Poe's stories. Mary's hands move frenetically, warped with arthritis. She has been home for only two months, having gone away for treatment for her morphine addiction (36). The resultant guilt over her drug addiction has resulted in characteristic gothic paranoia, "a psychotic disorder characterized by highly systematized delusions of persecution or

grandeur with little deterioration" (Chaplin 324). These "delusions" are "persistent," "defended strongly by the patient," and are "incapacitating" (Chaplin 324). Mary fears being "watched" by her husband and children; she fears they mistrust her and that they expect her at any moment to fall prey to morphine (17). The male gaze, from three pair of eyes—James, Jamie, and Edmund—has become a vigil. Vigils play an important role in various works of gothic literature, including Radcliffe's *The Italian*, Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, and various tales of Edgar Allan Poe. In many cases, the vigil is prompted by the watcher's sense of dread or guilt, waiting for something to happen. Elder son Jamie realizes that his mother "watches us watching her" (38), so the vigil inside the Tyrone's fog-enshrouded haunted house is actually a dual one prompted by mutual fear and dread. Gothic literature often portrays a type of fear whose precise source is vague and thus all the more terrifying since the causes are never known, only sensed or guessed at. Returning to the psychology of gothic which I articulated at the beginning of this chapter, the causes of the gothic fear may be interpreted as repressed, traumatic memories. The trauma itself brought about a "break" in the mind's conception of time, and so the traumatic memory was never fully processed in the first place, nor has it been successfully repressed. So the traumatized family member can never be certain either of what happened, nor of when the haunting memory will rear its head.

Inside the Tyrone house, the family members fear not knowing what each other will do, not knowing what this night holds for them, not knowing which past secrets will be

brought to light through acerbic accusations. The Tyrone men fear Mary's wandering around upstairs; indeed, she may be a supreme metaphor for the wandering, shuffling secrets of the Tyrone family which move about continually upstairs—upstairs might here be interpreted as a metaphor for the brain where memories are housed—threatening to break out or come downstairs at any moment, exposing the psychic gothic ruins of the American family.

During the sixteen hours of this day in August 1912, Mary undergoes a transformation, as her repressed memories of trauma resurface to wreck her attempts to function normally as a member of the family. At the beginning of the play, she appears to be in good spirits, though her paranoia is obvious. By the second scene of Act Two, O'Neill's stage directions describe her as "terribly nervous again . . . yet in contrast to this, her expression shows more of that strange aloofness . . . " (71). Mary's internal conflict—guilt over her drug use and paranoia about being watched and monitored like a criminal—have manifested themselves in her outward appearance, much like the grotesque characters of Faulkner and O'Connor, though more subtly. Most often, Mary's guilt and paranoia are shown in her speech patterns. Jean Chothia notes that Mary's return to drug use is "signaled by the shape of her speech" (115). Once she has relapsed into drug use, her speech becomes "frenetic" with "excited protests and nagging questions": "Why is that glass there? Did you take a drink?" (Chothia 116). In this instance, Mary is interrogating Edmund. She is anxious about his tuberculosis, yet she denies the

seriousness of his condition, insisting it is merely a "cold." For a mother like Mary who is alienated from a genuine relationship of trust and intimacy with her family, denial has become a habit, a way of coping with reality. Just as she denies taking morphine throughout the play, so she denies that her younger son is dying.

O'Neill uses stage effects to enhance the gothic atmosphere in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Specifically, Act Three uses the sound of a foghorn "like a mournful whale in labor" and the "warning ringing of bells on yachts" (97). Both of these sounds occur with more frequency as the plot unfolds; the sounds are ominous harbingers of Mary's descent into madness and the Tyrone men's descent into venomous retaliation against one another. The fog itself is presented as distinct from the foghorn; in fact, the fog serves a different gothic function in the play. Mary is drawn to the fog because as she says, "It hides you from the world and the world from you," but she hates the foghorn because it "keeps reminding you, and warning you, and calling you back" (99). For Mary, the fog is a type of feminine gothic space—"gothic" because it is a space of haunting where the past memories arise and hold reign over present reality—in which she can immerse herself and drift psychically back into the past to a happier time when she was an aspiring pianist and James Tyrone's only true love. Though the memory of her maiden days may have been happier for Mary than her present life, she is no less haunted for all that: the return of the past memories verify the present horror she is attempting to escape.

Edmund Tyrone, the younger haunted son, has several traits in common with his mother. Like his mother, Edmund prefers to be shrouded by fog. Both Edmund and Mary are wracked with physical pain, and for them the fog seems somehow escapist and ameliorative, albeit temporarily so. Edmund tells his father of walking along the beach that night feeling "as if I was a ghost belonging to the fog, and the fog was a ghost of the sea. It felt damned peaceful to be nothing more than a ghost within a ghost" (131). As with Mary, the fog represents for Edmund an escape to a time before tuberculosis held sway over his body. Unlike Mary, however, Edmund longs for death as a permanent solution to his tortured, traumatized psyche. During this same fog-induced reverie, Edmund muses on how a metamorphosis would be preferable to his current gothic death-in-life stasis. He tells his father,

> I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home . . . who must always be a little in love with death. (153)

The allusion to John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" is apt—Keats died of tuberculosis as Edmund seems destined to do. The imminent threat of death seems to have engendered in Edmund a death wish, reminiscent of a pervasive morbidity seen in early American gothic literature. Characters such as Roderick Usher and Theodore Wieland evinced a similar pervasive morbidity—a morbidity which perhaps finds its cultural roots in the high incidence of death due to disease during the early years of America's settlement. But the

threat of fatal disease is not the only reason Edmund might wish for death. The threat of the past being resurrected—the more intensely gothic threat—is an even more compelling reason for him to seek death as a way out. While he was (figuratively) protected by the fog during his walk along the beach, Edmund experienced momentary peace. Without the protective shroud of fog, however, the past becomes unbearable.

Though Mary often denies her own drug addiction and bizarre behavior (like sleeping in the guest room and walking around upstairs during the night), she recognizes that ultimately they are all trapped by the past. Speaking of Jamie, Mary tells Edmund, "He can't help being what the past has made him" (64). Later, she tells her husband that the past is the "present" and the "future too" (87), asserting the ability of the past—especially the past which haunts the family with regret and terror—to impinge on the present and to dictate the future. James Tyrone, as a gothic "fallen father," tries to convince himself that the past can be buried by simply not discussing it. He tells Mary, "Don't dig up what's long forgotten. If you're that far gone in the past already . . . what will you be tonight?" (86). The irony of his statement is evident: if what was dug up were truly "forgotten," then Tyrone would be unable to recall the memory and attempt to repress it. In the American gothic family, to quote Gavin Stevens from William Faulkner's *The Town*, "The past is never dead. It's not even the past." Nor is the past ever forgotten, and to deny the past is merely to postpone its inevitable resurrection. In the same conversation, Tyrone berates Mary for mentioning their dead baby, Eugene: "Can't

you let our dead baby rest in peace?" (87). By naming the dead baby "Eugene," O'Neill has here switched places with his real brother Edmund who died at two years of age. O'Neill himself contracted tuberculosis and had to enter a sanatorium during 1912, the same year this play is set. The switch is significant: O'Neill in effect has murdered himself in the play, thereby freeing himself from the haunted house with its gothic vortex of memories, allowing himself to step outside and write.

Mary's final entrance is also a type of exit as she succumbs fully to the ghost of the past. Cloaked now in her wedding gown—her "mark of Cain," since her marriage to Tyrone was the beginning of her gothic journey—she descends the staircase, both literally and psychically. O'Neill's stage directions testify to Mary's regression into the past. The regression is so completely gothic that even her physical appearance has somehow supernaturally been transformed. The stage directions read:

> The uncanny thing is that her face now appears so youthful. Experience seems ironed out of it. It is a marble mask of girlish innocence, the mouth caught in a sly smile. (102)

The Tyrone men watch in motionless horror, realizing that their worst fears have come true, that their mutual ghost has materialized again. The play's gothic ending is thus regressive and static. No one leaves the haunted house, and Mary's final speech draws them all back to the pre-1903 era before her sorrows began. Mary is the accusing ghost,

especially for her husband who is the only character to remember her during her maidenhood.

In the role of fallen father, James Tyrone's sins are many. As a traveling actor he not only wasted his talent by immersing himself in a single role, but he neglected his wife by leaving her alone in hotel rooms night after night. As a father, he has negatively influenced his sons to follow his heavy-drinking lifestyle, yet he remains hypocritical about alcoholism; throughout the play Tyrone will offer his sons a drink only to berate them for drinking too much in the next moment. As a provider, he contains too much of "Gaspard the miser" to send Edmund to a private sanatorium, yet he squanders enormous sums in buying up worthless property in order to feel land-rich. The gothic fallen father believes himself to be always superior to his sons, whom he views as weak owing to their mother's influence. Tyrone mocks Edmund's reading habits, insisting that the Decadent and Symbolist poets should be eschewed in favor of Shakespeare. But elder son Jamie—his namesake, James Tyrone, Jr.—becomes the especial victim of Tyrone's animosity, making Jamie the play's real "haunted son."

As a haunted son, Jamie is driven by a mixture of guilt and remorse more than anything. Jamie caused baby Eugene to contract the measles which killed him. Perhaps Jamie's guilt over Eugene's death drives him to blame Edmund for their mother's morphine addiction: "It was you being born that drove mama to the dope!" he tells Edmund. Jamie has tried unsuccessfully to emulate his father's prestigious acting career,

choosing instead to drown his failures with booze and prostitutes—deliberate acts of self-destruction, perhaps even self-flagellation. Doris Falk states that Jamie chooses ugly, fat prostitutes because doing so "feeds his self-hatred and his need for a mother substitute" (30). Unable to contend with his father, Jamie finally lashes out at the only other available male in the haunted house, younger brother Edmund.

Jean Chothia has pointed out that Jamie's venomous speech to Edmund near the end of the play is presented as a string of staccato-like fragments, suggesting perhaps Jamie's difficulty in articulating his rage and frustration: "Wanted you to fail. Always jealous of you. Resented your being born" (112). Though the phrases are spit out like bullets, the speech is searingly honest, culminating with the gothic allusion to Mary Shelley's masterpiece: "I made you! You're my Frankenstein!" (164). This reference to an earlier gothic text is significant in deepening (even affirming) the gothic mood in the Tyrone house, much as Edmund's predilection for morbid, "Decadent" poetry suggests that his death is imminent. With the Frankenstein allusion, Jamie casts himself in the role of Victor Frankenstein, with Edmund as the "monster" he created—intentionally and in the hope that Edmund would replicate Jamie's mistakes and sordid lifestyle, perhaps as a type of gothic "double." But neither Victor Frankenstein nor Jamie Tyrone was able to completely control his "monster," and now Jamie is torn by guilt and regret over his admitted negative influence on Edmund. By claiming responsibility for Edmund's travails, Jamie is implicitly shouldering the guilt for Edmund's impending death, just as he was

responsible years earlier for the death of baby Eugene. Significantly, Jamie's being haunted does not end with the play's final lines—he is the only member of the Tyrone family who reappears in a later O'Neill play. Like the title character in Charles Maturin's gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Jamie Tyrone carries his guilt with him wherever he goes, even into O'Neill's final play, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Although a thorough treatment of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* is not possible here, the play is worthy of a brief examination since it stands as O'Neill's last gothic portrait and a final attempt to exorcise his personal demons.

A Moon for the Misbegotten:

Unlike O'Neill's other family plays, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* begins with only one living member of the gothic family—haunted son Jamie Tyrone. As in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the playwright cast himself again in the role of Edmund Tyrone whom we learn (through Jamie) has recovered from his tuberculosis and is alive and well (and absent) from the action of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. In *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Jamie was haunted by past memories and personal guilt. In *A Moon for the Misbegotten* he is haunted in a more traditional way—his alienated mother Mary has now died, and Jamie is haunted by her memory and is driven into the arms of a surrogate mother, Josie Hogan. The alienated mother's ghost is more metaphorical than literal, however, manifesting itself as a tormenting memory in Jamie's psyche. David Savran has described ghosts in modern drama as a "point of intersection between memory and

history" (586). The ghost is "unfulfilled and appears only to those characters who themselves are unfulfilled" (Savran 587). The gothic haunted son, Jamie Tyrone (and Jamie O'Neill), is certainly one of the most "unfulfilled" characters in the gothic family, and is thus highly susceptible to the ghost's influence.

O'Neill began writing *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in 1941, finishing it in 1943 (Bogard, *CP* 977). The play was not staged until February 1947, and O'Neill reportedly was not pleased with the production, which ran for barely five weeks. Though not as thoroughly autobiographical as *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the play does contain some autobiographical elements—revolving around the alienated mother and the haunted son—which are fundamental to the play's gothic aspects. In 1922, Ella O'Neill died in Los Angeles after a series of strokes. Jamie O'Neill brought his mother's body home by train after relapsing into a depressive bout of heavy drinking. Her body arrived in New York on the ninth of March while Eugene O'Neill's Provincetown Players were producing *The Hairy Ape* (Bogard, *CP* 977). O'Neill attended neither his mother's funeral service nor her burial because he himself was recovering from a drinking binge. While Ella's death was traumatic for both her sons, Jamie was irrevocably devastated: one year after his mother's death, Jamie entered a sanatorium where he died on November 8, 1923 (977). In fact, the action of the play begins in September 1923, only two months before Jamie's death; when Jamie Tyrone bids Josie Hogan adieu without looking back, we may assume he is heading toward death. Because he is nearing death—though it is unclear whether he

fully realizes this—Jamie is an especially haunted, gothic figure. My brief examination of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* will concern itself with Jamie and how his haunted state leads him to seek out Josie Hogan as a type of surrogate mother, if only for one night.

Josie Hogan is a type of grotesque figure similar to those employed by writers of gothic like Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and Flannery O'Connor. Josie can be seen as a grotesque because her physical size and strength are intentionally exaggerated. O'Neill's stage directions describe Josie as twenty-eight years old, five feet eleven, "around one hundred eighty" pounds, and "so oversize for a woman that she is almost a freak" (*CP* 857). Though Josie is "more powerful than any but an exceptionally strong man," she has "no mannish quality about her"; she is "all woman" (857). Josie's grotesque features can be traced to her father, Phil Hogan, who is described as having a "thick neck," "barrel-like trunk," "stumpy legs," "little blue eyes," and "eyebrows that remind one of a white pig" (862). Besides his grotesque appearance, Phil Hogan follows in the line of such "fallen fathers" as Ephraim Cabot and James Tyrone, Sr. Like these patriarchal predecessors, Phil Hogan is obsessed with money and land-grabbing, and in his vulgar mannerisms he seems to have much in common with the earthy Ephraim Cabot. After initially insulting his daughter by calling her a "great slut" and "overgrown cow," Hogan devises a scheme to use Josie's promiscuity to seduce Jim Tyrone and then to blackmail him into paying them money to keep the indiscretion quiet. But Josie is resistant to her father's grasping scheme, and her resistance is interwoven within a gothic, pseudo-

Oedipal subtext involving Jim Tyrone, the haunted son. Not only does Josie rebel against carrying out her father's scheme, she becomes a type of surrogate mother for Jim Tyrone, providing him with both physical affection and solace for his tortured psyche.

When Jim appears at the Hogan farm in Act One, he has already had some drinks to steel his nerves against delirium tremors. He tells Josie that he is recovering from "one of those heebie-jeebie nights where the booze keeps you awake" (877). Certainly, it was just such a night that haunted him in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and in this sense *A Moon for the Misbegotten* may be seen as a sort of epilogue or addendum to O'Neill's masterpiece. Now that Mary Tyrone is dead, Jim turns to Josie as a type of surrogate mother in whom he can fulfill his Oedipal urges and attempt a vicarious reconciliation with a mother figure. As Act One closes, Jim comments on Josie's "beautiful breasts," and as she leads him inside to prepare a meal, Jim exclaims with delight, "Mother me, Josie. I love it" (891).

In Act Three, Jim's Oedipus complex has become more pronounced, and as a result he becomes increasingly conflicted emotionally. Though he is sexually attracted to Josie, he warns her repeatedly not to talk "raw" and discourages her from alluding to her own sexual promiscuity. Doris Falk describes Jim as alternating "between the coarse cruelty of a disillusioned lecher and the sweetness and simplicity of a little boy crying for his mother" (33). Jim warns Josie not to trust him too much, just as he had warned younger brother Edmund in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: "If you won't watch your

step, I've got to" (*CP* 919). Despite Jim's initial restraint, when Josie finally kisses him his reaction is similar to that of Eben Cabot after his tryst with Abbie Putnam in the dead mother's parlor. O'Neill describes Josie's kiss as a "tender, protective, maternal passion which he responds to with an instant, grateful yielding" (927). Only after this kiss is Jim able to speak of his guilt regarding his mother's death. Believing that his relapse into drinking hastened his mother's death, Jim tells Josie of cavorting with a fifty-dollar-a-night whore on the train ride home while his mother's corpse lay in the adjacent cabin. Later—like O'Neill himself—he was too drunk to attend his mother's funeral. Harold Bloom observes that in many of O'Neill's plays, confession "becomes another station on the way to death" (7). Because he believes himself to be his mother's "killer"—or at least to be responsible for her death—Jim's guilt is extraordinary and prompts the characteristic gothic reference to ghosts.

Ghosts are alluded to on three occasions in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, and in each case, they function as metaphors for repressed memories or personal guilt. In Act Three, Josie says to Jim, "You look as if you've seen a ghost," and Jim replies, "I have. My own. He's punk company" (*CP* 912). By claiming to have seen his own ghost, Jim is actually confirming that the past—at least for the gothic haunted son—is never laid to rest: "There is no present or future—only the past happening over and over again—now. You can't get away from it" (920). Later in Act Three, Jim tells Josie that it would be futile for them to run away from their problems because "we'd find our own ghosts waiting there to

greet us . . . " (923). His personal guilt, like a scarlet letter, would follow him wherever he fled. The final allusion to ghosts appears in Act Four when Josie tells Jim—much like Abbie told Eben in *Desire Under the Elms*—that she senses the ghostly presence of Mary Tyrone:

> She hears. I feel her in the moonlight, her soul wrapped in it like a silver mantle, and I know she understands and forgives me, too, and her blessing lies on me. (933)

Josie, like Abbie, tries to assure the haunted son that the dead, alienated mother approves of their passion, even implying that this night of tender affection somehow has the power to absolve them both of past guilt. Josie's sexual allure and reassurances, however, are not enough to exorcise Jim Tyrone's demons, nor can she prevent him from wandering down the road toward his destiny. After Jim's departure, Josie finally recognizes the haunted son for what he truly is—a death-in-life representation of torment and guilt: "I didn't know he'd died already—that it was a damned soul coming to me in the moonlight, to confess and be forgiven and find peace for a night—" (937). Josie's epiphany, like many in gothic literature, comes too late to save Jim. Canonical gothic works which include an epiphany-come-too-late include Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (where Ambrosio realizes at the end he has been duped by Lucifer), and Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (where Wieland realizes he has been manipulated by the ventriloquist Carwin).

Although Josie cannot save Jim, she herself achieves some level of redemption when she refuses to acquiesce to her father's scheme to blackmail Jim.

A Moon for the Misbegotten shows O'Neill still unable to free himself fully from the gothic family, especially from the haunted son—the character whom he himself most closely resembled. Here, O'Neill must have identified in some way with Jim Tyrone since, like Jim, O'Neill was burdened by the guilt over his mother's death and his failure to properly pay her his last respects. From O'Neill, Sam Shepard learned the dramatic power which results from portraying the American family struggling under the pressure of its repressed memories and pent-up guilts.

***Tennessee Williams**:*

Tennessee Williams's influence upon Shepard's gothic vision of the American family was perhaps more indirect than was O'Neill's. But Williams is important because he provided for Shepard a model of gothic characterized by dramatic representations of heightened psychic states, often hysterical and rendered surrealistically or symbolically. In a 1978 interview with Cecil Brown, Williams stated his belief that "art is compressed and there has to be exaggeration in art form to catch the outrageousness of reality" (qtd. in Dersnah 31). Moreover, Williams' gothic families are not traditional nuclear families like the Tyrones or Mannons; rather, they are fragmented families suggesting deeper emotional and psychic ruptures. This is due, in part, to sociological factors such as urbanization and its accompanying alienation and weakening of familial ties. Two of the three plays of

Williams which I will examine—*A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Suddenly Last Summer*—have an urban setting, specifically New Orleans. The urban American family of the twentieth century is surrounded by noise, pollution, and crime—all elements which exacerbate family tensions. Finally, Williams' gothic family portraits invariably include at least one character who is so emotionally and psychically scarred by the past as to become a type of caricature or grotesque. It is through the mind and memory of this "misfit" character that Williams brings his audience into the realm of the gothic. Williams uses various dramatic and stage effects to represent the psychic state of the haunted family member, and this psychic state builds to a terrifying crescendo as the character realizes the depth of his or her own guilt. Two plays in particular, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Suddenly Last Summer*, employ the above methods to portray Williams' unique gothic vision of the American family. I will examine both of these plays, as well as Williams' last and most experimental gothic portrait, *The Two-Character Play*.

In the foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), Williams wrote:

> All my life I have been haunted by the obsession that to desire a thing or to love a thing intensely is to place yourself in a vulnerable position . . . but having always to contend with this adversary of fear, which was sometimes terror, gave me a certain tendency toward an atmosphere of hysteria and violence in my writing.
>
> (qtd. in Dersnah 29)

This "hysteria" and "violence" makes Williams' use of the gothic more intensely concentrated and pronounced than O'Neill's. Both *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Suddenly Last Summer* examine a central character who is a member of a family, yet at the same time—due to repressed memories and unnatural, voracious appetites—remains an "outsider." In his study *The Gothic World of Tennessee Williams* (1984), James Dersnah observes that Williams is "obsessed with the social outsider, the character who is unbalanced and extravagant in colorful ways" (22). I would like first to examine Blanche DuBois as an example of this gothic outsider, followed by Sebastian Venable.

A Streetcar Named Desire:

While many of O'Neill's family plays include an isolated haunted house, in *A Streetcar Named Desire* Williams has shrunken the haunted domestic space and located it in an urban setting. Both of these modifications are important to the play's gothic effect on the central character, Blanche DuBois. The traditional ancestral haunted mansion, Belle Reve, is described in the opening act as a "plantation" with "white columns" (19). But Belle Reve—the "beautiful dream"—became a nightmare for Blanche when she was forced to participate again and again in that "long parade to the graveyard" as her family members died off one by one and the estate was lost to creditors. The play begins with Blanche having already fled to the seedy bowels of New Orleans' French Quarter where Stella, her only living relative, resides at Elysian Fields. The name "Elysian Fields" is ironic, for the place is neither spacious (like a field) nor blissful (like the felicitous afterlife in

the mythological realm of Elysium). Instead, Williams's Elysian Fields is a place of confinement, of violence, and of terrifying sounds and images.

The apartment building is described as having "rickety outside stairs and galleries of quaintly ornamented gables," the latter perhaps alluding to a type of sordid façade of the Pyncheon mansion in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, another masterpiece of American gothic. Of course, the Kowalski apartment is not really haunted until Blanche's arrival, since she brings with her the entourage of personal demons—in the guise of traumatic memories—which are clamoring for release. By shrinking the haunted mansion into a low-rent apartment, Williams emphasizes Blanche's claustrophobia and her realization that the past is inescapable and that the walls are—literally and figuratively—closing in upon her. The most striking instance of this sense of psychic entrapment occurs in the play's final scenes when Blanche is inundated with gothic images which throw up "lurid reflections" and "grotesque shadows on the walls" (128). Blanche attempts to escape her demons temporarily by hiding behind the closed door of the bathroom and immersing herself beneath the hot water, but because the domestic space is so confining, her escapes are short-lived. She will always find Stanley Kowalski pounding on the bathroom door, demanding to be admitted. Dersnah notes that images of doors and heroines in flight are gothic trademarks as old as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, with doors representing repressed fear and guilt (88). Doors both hide (when the heroine flees behind them) and disclose (when they are opened). The confining apartment where

Blanche has sought refuge has become for her a mental and physical prison so that, in Scene Ten, there is no place for her to run when Stanley throws open the bathroom door to reveal himself as her "executioner" dressed in "red silk pyjamas."

Blanche's physical appearance and predilections are steeped in gothic illusions. Her name itself suggests someone who is pale and cadaverous like many of Poe's heroines. In fact, it comes as no surprise that Blanche is well-acquainted with the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the only writer whom Blanche feels could do "justice" to Elysian Fields by accurately portraying its gloomy atmosphere (20). In the stage directions, Williams tells us that her "delicate beauty must avoid direct light" and "something about her uncertain manner suggests a moth" (15). One of Blanche's first commands to Stella is to turn down the "merciless glare" of the light bulb (19). Blanche is like a mummy, wrapped in darkness and trumpery, concealed behind closed doors, until the light reveals the truth about her age. Blanche acknowledges as much, saying, "Daylight never exposed so total a ruin" (19). Williams "substitutes the protagonist's body for the architectural ruin of traditional gothic to demonstrate the destructive power of time" (Dersnah 77). Not only does Blanche's aversion to light suggest a mummified cadaver, it also suggests a vampire. When confronted by Mitch about her profligacy, Blanche hysterically confesses that she brought her "victims" to the "Tarantula Arms," implying that she not only seduced the men but also consumed them, figuratively speaking. Like a vampire, Blanche's voracious sexuality focuses itself most typically on younger men like her suicidal husband Allan Grey

or the boy collecting for the *Evening Star*. Blanche seems to believe that "young blood" will prolong her life and slow her physical decay. But just as trauma victims invariably fail to repress completely their traumatic memories, so does Blanche's struggle to retain her youth and vitality fail and give way to a pervasive fatalism.

Fatalistic characters have populated American gothic literature from the eighteenth century onward, including Theodore Wieland from Charles Brockden Brown's novel and Poe's Roderick Usher. Blanche's fatalism stems not only from the horror of "all those deaths" at Belle Reve and her guilt over her husband's suicide, but also from a sort of anticipatory dread over her own impending "death," whether physical or psychic. Blanche describes to Mitch the shock she felt upon discovering her husband in bed with an older male lover: "It was like you turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow . . . " (95). Unable to face the glaring truth, Blanche has ever since preferred shadow, itself a traditional symbol of death: "I like the dark. The dark is comforting to me" (116).

In Scene Six, Blanche's guilt over her husband's death manifests itself as the sound of a locomotive which gives way to a polka tune and finally a pistol shot. The polka tune and sound of a pistol shot recur in Scene Nine as Blanche edges ever closer to her final gothic plunge into madness. Blanche's fatal vision culminates with the appearance of the "blind Mexican woman wrapped in a dark shawl" selling flowers for the dead near the end of Scene Nine: "Flores para los muertos" (120). Whether the woman is real or

imagined, she appears as a type of accusatory Grim Reaper, reminding Blanche that her past is inescapable. Blanche herself had used the term "Grim Reaper" when describing to Stella how she lost Belle Reve: "The Grim Reaper had put up his tent on our doorstep" (27). From Scene One throughout the play, Blanche has been obsessed with death, and Williams has used stage and sound effects as a harbinger of a gothic, haunted psyche.

In the play's final scenes, Williams uses light and sound effects to portray Blanche's own psychological death. In Scene Ten, her terror of Stanley is symbolized by the "lurid reflections" on the walls and "shadows" which are "grotesque and menacing" as "the night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle" (128). Clearly, these sensory phenomena represent Blanche's mental state—guilt over her husband's suicide and her subsequent anxiety which drove her in constant search for companionship: as she tells Stella near the beginning of the play, "I can't be alone! Got to be with somebody!" Blanche's sense of dread turns out to be portentous: only moments after these "lurid reflections" and "inhuman cries" occur, Stanley attacks her. Blanche's heightened intuition (common in gothic literature), seems to have given her a premonition of Stanley's assault—"that man is my executioner" (93). Stanley is Blanche's executioner in the sense that he assassinates her fantasies and forces reality upon her, challenging her alleged telegram from a wealthy admirer and mocking her fake fur-pieces and "Mardi Gras" outfit. Once Stanley, as the voice of reality, has pushed Blanche over the edge into madness, the

play's final scene shows Blanche mentally preparing herself for the final leg of her gothic journey.

Ruby Cohn has described Blanche DuBois as "Williams' masterpiece of contradiction" whose clothes "reflect her divided nature—moth-like white for day and red satin for intimacy" (60). But in this final scene, Blanche has cloaked herself in an outfit of "Della Robbia blue," "the blue of the old Madonna paintings" in a futile, outward gesture of looking backward to a time when she was chaste and worthy of a saint's or martyr's death:

> I shall die of eating an unwashed grape one day out on the ocean . . . And I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard—at noon—in the blaze of summer—and into an ocean as blue as my first lover's eyes. (136)

If we may assume that her "first lover" was Allan Grey, the boy whom she married, then we see Blanche still unable to free herself from the guilty memories surrounding his death. Her fantasy of a worthy death is punctuated by another sound effect, this time the chiming of cathedral bells, suggesting holiness or sanctification. But this moment is short-lived; the chiming cathedral bells quickly give way to the haunting sounds of the "Varsouviana" which is now "filtered into a weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle" (139). The "lurid reflections" on the walls have returned also. Adding to this

psychic overload, the Matron's salutation—"Hello, Blanche"—becomes a menacing echo in Blanche's tortured psyche, "reverberating as through a canyon of rock" (139).

Steven Ryan has observed that gothic "operates by tension, a restricting of forces which allows only vertical motion . . . images piled one upon the other until the weight becomes nearly unbearable, and the only options are transcendence or death" (qtd. in Dersnah 16). The gothic hero or heroine is inundated with terrors (real or imagined) until his or her senses are overwhelmed and, since physical flight is nearly always impossible, he or she must make a final stand—a stand which often results in physical or psychological death. Blanche has reached this level of the "unbearable," but then the voice of the Doctor breaks through with its soothing tone: "Miss DuBois." At the sound of the Doctor's voice, the eerie shadows and noises fade away. Joseph Riddel has described the psychiatrists in Williams' plays as a type of "surrogate artist-priest" who "tempers psychoanalysis with a rather indeterminate mysticism" (21). Certainly there is no obvious reason why the Doctor's voice should, by itself, be remedial for Blanche. But it is a voice from the "outside" world, and it is a voice from the present which perhaps breaks through, at least momentarily, the din of Blanche's demons.

Blanche is led offstage "as if she were blind," suggesting perhaps that she has surrendered fully to the doctor's care—"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"—or else succumbed finally to her gothic past and now exists in a sort of life-in-death state, much like Mary Tyrone's final "exit" in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. As

a relatively early work, *A Streetcar Named Desire* shows Williams allowing his gothic heroine to exit more or less gracefully. Some of his later works were increasingly violent and macabre, providing death as the only escape for the tortured, gothic protagonist. Such is the case with Sebastian Venable from *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Suddenly Last Summer:

Suddenly Last Summer presents, in a classic gothic frame-tale structure, a portrait of Sebastian Venable, a man who is at once "the greatest saint and grossest sinner"(Dersnah 141). The name "Sebastian" recalls the ancient martyr pierced by arrows looking heavenward for his salvation, and Violet Venable tells us, "My son was looking for God." The frame-tale device allows Williams to achieve the gothic effect of deferred horror, a technique whereby a horrifying revelation is hinted at but immediately postponed, only to be revealed gradually and after much suspense. One classic gothic example of this deferred horror is the famous black veil scene in Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (parodied in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*) where readers must wait for dozens of pages before learning whether the veil conceals a corpse or merely a wax figure. In this play, the truth of Sebastian's death is revealed painstakingly through the tale spun by Catharine Holly. This horrific tale—with its graphic, grotesque images—caused Williams to have some misgivings about how the play would be received by audiences and critics.

The play was first performed off-Broadway at the York Playhouse on January 7, 1958, as part of a two-play production entitled *Garden District* (Londres 12). Williams has said of this play, "I thought I would be critically tarred and feathered and ridden on a fence rail out of the New York theatre" (Londres xi). Williams' anxiety was probably well founded since the play deals with such controversial topics as homosexuality, cannibalism and pedophilia. Since gothic involves "the unspeakable" (Sage and Smith 14), it provided Williams with the tools through which he could communicate these disconcerting subjects, just as gothic allowed O'Neill to finally "speak" of his traumatic family memories in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. In 1950, Williams had written the Introduction to the second edition of Carson McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye* wherein he had defended gothic as involving

> a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about . . . the incommunicable something which we shall have to call mystery which is so inspiring of dread . . . .
>
> (qtd. in Dersnah 27)

The play is set in Violet Venable's garden, which is "blended with" the interior of a "mansion of Victorian Gothic style in the Garden District of New Orleans" (*FP* 9). From Williams' stage directions, it is unclear where the garden ends and the house begins. Significantly, Williams uses the term "Gothic" to denote the architectural style. (This is the first and only of the plays in this study to specifically use the term "Gothic" in describing

the stage set). The garden is described as having "a savage nature" with "violent" colors suggesting "organs of a body torn out, still glistening with undried blood." The air is permeated with "harsh cries and sibilant hissings," recalling Blanche DuBois's most terrifying moments. Williams has here taken the stage effects which he used intermittently in *Streetcar* and made them a constant fixture. Thus the gothic effects from *Streetcar* are made much more explicit in *Suddenly Last Summer*.

The plot is a reworking of a Greek myth wherein Pentheus was torn apart by Maenads, the female worshippers of Dionysus. Students of gothic literature will also recall the horrific ending of Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* when Ambrosio is torn apart by birds after being cast from a precipice by Satan. But Sebastian's hideous death is only one of two horrors examined in the play; the other is the precarious mental state of Sebastian's cousin, Catharine Holly. When the play begins, Violet Venable is plotting to have Catharine lobotomized in order to silence her. The audience is never sure whether Catharine is eventually lobotomized—whether Doctor Cukrowicz acquiesces to Violet's final demand that he "cut this hideous story out of her brain!" This indeterminacy adds to the play's gothic effect, for the possibility of Catharine's being lobotomized hangs like the sword of Damocles: even after the final curtain closes, for all we know, Catharine may have been taken away against her will and surgically mutilated.

In 1937, Williams' mother had authorized a lobotomy for his sister Rose, who is perhaps best remembered as the model for Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. In

fact, rose symbols abound in many of Williams' plays, including *Suddenly Last Summer*. Like Rose Williams, Catharine Holly has endured physical and mental tortures inflicted upon her by relatives. She has been incarcerated at St. Mary's sanatorium and appears to be headed for an even more dismal institution called Lion's View. Catharine has suffered numerous painful procedures—"I've been stuck so often that if you connected me with a garden hose I'd make a good sprinkler" (*FP* 67)—and now she exists half in and half out of reality, like Blanche DuBois. Like Blanche (and Mary Tyrone), Catharine is caught in a gothic past which she relives incessantly: early in Scene Two, Catharine cries out, "WHEN CAN I STOP RUNNING DOWN THAT STEEP WHITE STREET IN CABEZA DE LOBO?" (*FP* 39). For her, the day of Sebastian's death is always present, seared into her mind.

Catharine's uncertainty about her own sanity has created a psychic void in which she walks alone, and she pleads for the Doctor to hold her—"It's lonelier than death, if I've gone mad!" (*FP* 71). (Ten years later, in *The Two-Character Play*, Williams would explore more fully the implications of a lonely, psychic space where gothic terrors are allowed to reign unchecked). Catharine's zombie-like mental state is intensified when Doctor "Sugar" injects her with truth-telling serum before he interrogates her. Like Mary Tyrone, drugs ensure that Catharine will become Cassandra-like, a truth-sayer. We learn that Catharine's descent into madness began the previous winter when she was seduced and jilted by a married man during a Mardi Gras ball. As a way of coping with the

trauma, Catharine began to write a journal in third-person: "'*She*'s still living this morning,' meaning that *I* was" (*FP* 66). The past has become a perpetual present as a result of the trauma Catharine suffered.

In this precarious mental and emotional state, Sebastian approached Catharine with the proposal that she accompany him on his summer excursion. His mother, Violet, had suffered a stroke—which Violet's vanity will not allow her to admit—and the stroke disfigured one side of her face, making it impossible for Sebastian to "use" his mother to procure male lovers for himself. Catharine explains to the Doctor, "We all use each other and that's what we think of as love, and not being able to use each other is what's—hate" (63). With his mother transformed into a grotesque, Sebastian turns to cousin Catharine as his new travel companion. Ironically, Catharine's highly-charged gothic state—brought on by last winter's jilting, Sebastian's violent death, and the Doctor's truth-telling serum—makes her the perfectly credible soothsayer who reveals for us the diabolical nature of Sebastian Venable.

In Sebastian Venable, more than any other single character of O'Neill or Williams, we have the gothic monster come down from the castle to terrorize the villagers. The monster has been made "modern" and thus more cunningly disguised, but he is no less a monster for all that. James Dersnah uses the term "anti-hero" to refer to villains in gothic literature, most of whom were "never thoroughly evil" but rather "full of "contradictory impulses" (18). But whereas eighteenth and nineteenth-century gothic villains like

Montoni, Schedoni, and Falkland were at once "beautiful and terrifying, admirable and repellant," Irving Malin notes that modern American gothic villains are "petty narcissists" rather than "Faustian overreachers" (qtd. in Dersnah 19). Gothic villains in British novels are nearly always from the aristocracy, possessing both the titles and financial wherewithal to impose their will upon the lower classes. But in modern American literature, the gothic villain is rarely from the upper class; for, in the democratization of America, gothic villains can be found on any street corner, and in every socio-economic class. Moreover, while British gothic villains set their sights on empire-building, political advancement, or extorting opulent estates from hapless heroines, modern American gothic villains set their sights on more banal matters, such as where their next drink is coming from, or how best to satiate their sexual appetite on any given evening. Certainly, Sebastian Venable is a primary example of this type of petty narcissist. Violet Venable confirms her son's narcissism, describing how he was a "snob" who "insisted upon good looks in people around him . . . he had a perfect little court of people around him always" (*FP* 22). It is important to note that Sebastian's narcissism and rapaciousness toward the village boys of Cabeza de Lobo is linked to his position of economic superiority. His wealth and status abet his disdain of his sexual victims, and thus he follows in a long line of British gothic villains, like Count Dracula, who prey on their socio-economic inferiors.

Judith Wilt has described the gothic villain's rise and fall as an "arc" whereby a "dilation of power leads to decay" (qtd. in Dersnah 142). In Sebastian's case, his

"dilation of power" occurs during his final summer trip with Catharine where he allows free reign to his sexual appetites after enjoying impunity year after year during trips with his mother. Heady with power and self-confidence, Sebastian's final summer excursion involves the "decay" of all self-restraint and moral decency. The arc involves the hero's "attempts to reach an ideal" followed by a "vision of cosmic disorder which mirrors his own internal disorder." This vision undermines him, leading him to "return to society for the purpose of being destroyed" (qtd. in Dersnah 142). The "ideal" which Sebastian aims at is multi-faceted, but it is rooted in his vanity, fastidiousness, and his belief that he should deny himself nothing.

Sebastian's vanity owes much to his mother's influence. Violet is garrulous, impossibly vain, and quick to defend her son's reputation and memory. Though Williams reputedly adored his own mother, Edwina, he said of her in a 1975 *NY Times* interview, "She had the gift of gab . . . that underlying hysteria gave her great eloquence. I still find her totally mystifying—and frightening. It's best we stay away from our mothers" (qtd. in Londres 27). Violet tells the Doctor, "My son, Sebastian, and I constructed our days . . . carved out each day of our lives like a piece of sculpture.—Yes, we left behind us a trail of days like a gallery of sculpture!" (*FP* 26). Yet Violet insists that the lives of most people are like "trails of debris," evincing her supercilious attitude. The Venables' vanity also involves their obsession with staying young: "It takes character to refuse to grow old, Doctor," Violet says proudly (*FP* 23). When Violet and Sebastian vacationed together,

Violet claims proudly that onlookers mistook them for a couple of lovers—"we were a famous couple" (*FP* 25). Violet herself was quite happy to maintain this illusion: thus, implied incest again evinces itself as an ingredient in the American gothic family, just as it had in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Besides his vanity, Sebastian's fastidiousness leads him to disdain other people, especially the plebeians whom he both victimizes and loathes. Catharine describes how she and Sebastian were lunching at a café when a band of local children and youths pressed in close to the café window, crying out for bread ("Pan!") and playing crude, homemade instruments. Sebastian feels revulsion, and he insists that they leave that "filthy place":

> Don't look at those little monsters. Beggars are a social disease in this country. If you look at them, you get sick of the country, it spoils the whole country for you. (*FP* 84)

At this point, in the last minutes of his life, Sebastian has already experienced the "vision of cosmic disorder which mirrors his own internal disorder" and, for all his apparent disgust toward the band of beggars, he now selects these beggars as the instrument of his destruction. As a "clairvoyant," Sebastian had forewarned his mother, "You're going to live longer than me" (*FP* 13). The "vision of cosmic disorder"—a sort of gothic parody of a saint's beatific vision—is uniquely American in that Sebastian wanted to visit the

Galapagos Islands after reading Herman Melville's story, "The Encantadas." Violet describes the sight which Sebastian hungered to see first-hand:

> As the hatched sea-turtles made their dash for the sea, while the birds hovered and swooped to attack . . . They were diving down on the hatched sea-turtles, turning them over to expose their soft undersides, tearing their undersides open and rending and eating their flesh. (*FP* 16)

Williams amplifies the horror of this visual description using sound effects, much as he had done in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. During Violet's speech, the "harsh cries of the birds" come in "rhythmic waves like a savage chant" (*FP* 16). The Encantadas vision is mirrored in Sebastian's hideous death; Catherine's description of his death is punctuated by the "oompa" sound of the villagers' homemade instruments:

> The band of naked children pursued us up the steep white street . . . Sebastian started to run and they all screamed at once and seemed to fly in the air . . . When we got back to where my cousin Sebastian had disappeared in the flock of featherless, little black sparrows . . . he was lying naked . . . They had *devoured* parts of him . . . what was left of him, that looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses had been *torn, thrown, crushed*!—against that blazing white wall. (*FP* 92)

Some critics view Sebastian, in his death, as a type of "Eucharistic sacrificial victim" (Debusscher 129) and assert that through his death Sebastian has "atoned for his guilt

through ritualistic suicide" (Dersnah 206). Consequently, characters such as Blanche DuBois and Sebastian Venable may elicit in many readers—and probably in Williams himself—some measure of sympathy. Arthur Ganz observes, "beneath the skin of the Christ-like martyr . . . lies the transgression that made the author destroy him," so that Williams has a "self-lacerating desire simultaneously to praise and to punish" (100). Williams' conflicting attitude toward his "anti-hero" is reflected in Sebastian's death—as gruesome as it was, the death was nevertheless a deliberate suicide, suggesting that Sebastian finally accepted responsibility for his actions.

The manner of Sebastian's death is gruesome and visceral, an appropriate end for a man whose concupiscence consumed his every desire. During his summer excursion with Catharine, Sebastian had spoken of men as though they were "items on a menu—'That one's delicious-looking, that one is appetizing,' or 'that one is not appetizing" (*FP* 39). Just as Sebastian had refused to reign in his own monstrous sexual appetites, so is he done in by a vengeful "hunger" when his erstwhile victims now cannibalize him. If Sebastian's death is in fact an attempt to atone for his guilt, then Williams' use of white imagery suggests Sebastian's gesture toward atonement. The color white is mentioned more than thirty times in the play's final scene. Like Blanche, Sebastian seems to have sought purification from his sins through his death. Whereas Blanche's death was psychological and metaphorical, *Suddenly Last Summer* shows Williams going even further. Both of

the play's central gothic characters, Catharine and Sebastian, have been destroyed—the former mentally and emotionally, and the latter physically.

Seemingly, Williams had gone has far as he could in depicting a highly-charged gothic state; what more could he do? Williams would answer this question in 1967 with *The Two-Character Play*, a work which Williams called "my most beautiful play since *Streetcar*" (Bigsby, "Valedictory" 135). I would like briefly to examine how more gothic elements in this play place it at the zenith of Williams' gothicism.

The Two-Character Play:

Williams' particular fondness for *The Two-Character Play*, one of his most experimental works, is evinced in the play's lengthy development and revision. The extensive revisions to the play's text, stretching over several years and including changing the play's title to *Out Cry* (and back again), suggests some difficulty with the work on Williams' part. The play was first produced at the Hampstead Theater in London in 1967. On July 8, 1971, a revised version of the play was produced at the Ivanhoe Theater in Chicago under its new title, *Out Cry*. Two years later, a third revision was produced at the Lyceum Theater in New York, and by August 1975 a fourth revision, to which Williams restored the original title, appeared at New York's Quaigh Theater (Londres 16). According to C. W. E. Bigsby, *The Two-Character Play* addresses an "ontological question"—"what is the nature of reality and how was it to be known?" ("Valedictory" 131). In Bigsby's view, the play is "a conversation between the male and

female sides of Williams' sensibility," and it provides a glimpse of Blanche DuBois' world "after she has entered the mental hospital" ("Valedictory" 135). The play's experimentalism involves its metatheatricality: we are watching a play about a play. Occasionally the characters address the audience directly, asking the spectators to "Imagine the curtain is down" (Bigsby, "Valedictory" 133). The characters themselves, Felice and Clare, are brother and sister. Both are former mental patients and thus are not wholly credible—just as Blanche DuBois and Catharine Holly were unreliably "gothic" story-tellers.

Felice and Clare live in a house where both the telephone service and electricity have been disconnected, heightening the sense of isolation. This gothic haunted house is much more macabre than any other examined thus far—we learn that the children's father, an astrologer, murdered their domineering mother and then shot himself. Both killings took place in Clare's bedroom. As witnessed in O'Neill's family plays, this play depicts a conscious, flawed decision by the fallen father as bringing about the family's ruin. Felice and Clare have scarcely left the house since the tragedy because they fear gossip from others, much like Lavinia Mannon boards herself inside the house at the end of *Mourning becomes Electra*. Felice and Clare are trapped, figuratively and literally, by a paralyzing fear and by the locked doors of the theater in which they find themselves.

The most intensely visual gothic device in the play is the stage set. Williams has taken the light and sound effects from *Streetcar*, made them more explicit in *Suddenly*

Last Summer, and now exploited them fully in an attempt to create a visual, corporeal gothic space—one that by its very nature will be "incomprehensible" (Dersnah 177). Williams writes that the stage set "must not only suggest the disordered images of a mind approaching collapse but also . . . the phantasmagoria of the nightmarish world that all of us live in at present, not just the subjective but the true world . . . " (*Two-CP* 1). Clearly, the set is symbolic of a tortured, gothic mind—as though we were looking inside the psyche of Blanche DuBois or Catharine Holly. The physical setting is a sunny interior of a living room in the southern town of New Bethesda, complete with Victorian furnishings and a window through which tall sunflowers can be seen. But Williams' stage directions describe the living room interior as "incomplete." The idyllic scene is merely a counterpoint for that which surrounds it—the backstage clutter of a theatre where debris, ropes, and scattered props are plainly visible to the audience—and this scene suggests the alarming proximity of madness impinging upon a deceptively quaint milieu. In his notes, Williams wrote that it was his intention "to give these outside, impersonal forces a certain 'mythic' quality" (qtd. in Dersnah 188). Thus we find Williams using terms like "labyrinth"—a classic gothic trademark which also suggests a tortured psyche—to describe Mr. Grossman's office tucked away in the Market (*Two-CP* 35). Perhaps the most explicitly gothic component of the stage set is a giant statue which is visible from backstage.

> Of the unassembled set pieces which clutter the backstage area, the most prominent is a (papier-mâché) statue of a giant, pedestaled, which has a sinister look. (*Two-CP* 1)

This prop looms, not only as a silent, threatening sentinel, but also as an example of gothic spectacle and excess, much like the giant helmet which crushes Manfred's son in the opening of Horace Walpole's gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto.*

The stage set is augmented by sound effects which reinforce the threatening nature of the environment surrounding Felice and Clare. Rather than primitive jungle cries and hissing noises which permeated *Streetcar* and *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams employs hollow, metallic sounds suggesting modernization rather than primitivism (54). In this play, the music (Villa-Lobos' "Brasilianas") comes from a visible tape recorder rather than from a mysterious source as it did in *Streetcar*. Other haunting sounds, this time resembling human laughter, suggest that the parents' ghosts continue to stalk the house—early in Act One, the children hear "a hoarse male laugh and the shrill laugh of a woman" somewhere overhead (18). Their parents will always be "with" them, in the gothic sense of the tortured psyche.

Williams' characters exhibit terror toward their situation, and the source of their terror is rooted in "real" events—which are recognizable and ingrained in memory—from which they cannot escape. The windowless theater reminds Felice and Clare of various enclosed spaces, including a "prison" (*Two-CP* 55); Clare also uses the term "death

chamber" to refer to the bedroom where their parents' murder-suicide occurred (*Two-CP* 19). When Clare first appears onstage, she does so in the "Gothic door" of the backstage area, shrouded in a "ghostly spill of light," and she has an "apparitional look about her" (*Two-CP* 3). It is as though Clare is already dead when the play begins. The perceived threat of the external environment is heightened by the characters' extraordinary sensibility and acute consciousness. Felice claims to feel the house breathing on his neck as though saying to him, "You can't go away. Give up. Come in and stay" (*Two-CP* 46). As in *Streetcar*, door imagery is used to suggest a portal beyond which lie dreadful secrets. Clare recalls the horrifying moment when her mother opened the bedroom door:

> No sign of recognizing me at the door, no greeting, a look of surprise, till she opened her mouth on a soundless fountain of blood . . . . (*Two-CP* 20)

Upon being confronted by this horrific memory, Felice yells at his sister to "LET IT REST!" (20). But that is precisely the point—gothic literature does not allow the past to "rest." Instead, the past impinges on the present, often resulting in subconscious behavior such as somnambulism. Felice tells Clare, "Last night, you wandered about the house, upstairs and down, as if you were looking for something" (20). Beginning with Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, sleepwalking has been used in American gothic literature to suggest a restless consciousness, often repressed guilt, which haunts the victim who perhaps hopes to change the past traumatic experience. Judith Herman describes

victims of post-traumatic stress syndrome as suffering from "hyperarousal," and this state of "permanent alert" is one in which "the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly" (Herman 35). Other times the victim may "reenact" the moment of trauma "with a fantasy of changing the outcome of the dangerous encounter" (Herman 39). Clare's somnambulism seems to be an attempt to change the horror that has transpired, but of course her efforts are futile. The past cannot be escaped.

Not only is the house itself haunted by the murder-suicide of the children's parents, but the outside world is a malevolent amalgam of threatening forces which has left Felice and Clare suffering acutely from paranoia. Somewhere, "out there," Grossman's Market has cancelled their credit; the Acme Insurance Company refuses to pay them their father's life insurance benefits; and the utility companies have cut off service to the house. All of these outside forces are economic entities whose "attack" on the children involves withholding money, goods, or services. Gothic, as a type of psychological spotlight which unmasks and intensifies man's darkest motives and desires, has always proven an apt tool for critiquing economics. From Manfred scheming to keep his wealth in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* to the Pyncheons stealing Matthew Maule's land in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, gothic has revealed economic exploitation of the lower classes by the upper classes and has attempted to use supernatural means to combat this exploitation. But for Felice and Clare, there will be no saving epiphany or reversal of

fortune. They are safe neither inside nor outside. They consider leaving the house to visit Grossman's Market, but Clare is afraid of vicious neighborhood boys who once scrawled an obscene word on their fence. Dangers abound inside the house, too. Felice has hidden their father's revolver—a reminder of the horrific past and a symbol of impending death—which lurks as a constant threat. Felice becomes exasperated by their confinement and insists that they must go outside or give up "all but one possible thing" (*Two-CP* 40). Critics have variously interpreted this cryptic statement to mean either incest or, more likely, death.

A death wish permeates the entire play. James Dersnah believes that Felice and Clare "attempt to cope with their fear of death by consciously choosing it as a playwright might make an artistic decision to end his play with a death scene" (194). At the end of Act One, Felice tries to suffocate Clare with a pillow, but his attempt fails and they declare an intermission (Dersnah 188). In the play's closing moments, Felice has loaded their father's revolver and walked away from the gun to stare out the window. Clare takes the gun and points it at Felice's back. Felice, under the spell of a death wish, commands his sister, "Do it while you still can!" (*Two-CP* 62). Death would be a welcome escape from this incomprehensible gothic space and its awful memories. But there is no escape, no saintly suicide like that with which Sebastian Venable escaped his demons. Clare drops the gun, exclaiming, "I can't!" Brother and sister embrace as the lights fade out, imprisoned in a gothic world which is "static," a type of "cul-de-sac" (Dersnah 13).

Perhaps the final embrace between Felice and Clare is Williams' own symbolic gesture toward atonement, a "lovingly haunting tribute" to his sister Rose (Londres 29). Wracked with guilt over his sister's lobotomy (which Williams believed he somehow might have prevented), Williams later took financial responsibility for her care. Just as O'Neill's late plays were highly personal attempts to quiet his own inner demons, perhaps *The Two-Character Play* served a similar purpose for Williams.

Both Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams were important dramatic ancestors for Sam Shepard. While Shepard's earliest plays are experimental, as his work matured Shepard gravitated toward gothic portraits of the American family, following in the footsteps of O'Neill and Williams. Shepard's shift away from experimental drama also mirrored the larger shift in American culture, as the political radicalism and aesthetic experimentation of the 1960's gave way to the more sedate 1970's and 80's. O'Neill provided Shepard with recognizable character types which mirrored Shepard's own life experience—the fallen father, the alienated mother, and the haunted son. Williams provided Shepard with models of phantasmagoria and violence representing extreme psychic states. As Shepard created his own gothic families—from *The Holy Ghostly* to *The Late Henry Moss*—he relied, either consciously or subconsciously, on these two dramatic predecessors, emulating and adapting their techniques and themes.

CHAPTER TWO: SHEPARD'S EARLY GOTHIC FAMILY PLAYS—*THE HOLY GHOSTLY* AND *CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS*

Some of the stories from Sam Shepard's life are as fascinating and bizarre as scenes from his plays. There is the tale of how Shepard once won a race at a high school track meet while he was pumped up on Benzedrine; and, according to former girlfriend Patty Smith, Shepard wrote his first play, *Cowboys*, on the backs of Tootsie Roll wrappers. More than a few fine biographies have been written on Sam Shepard, and it is not my intention to provide a lengthy biography in this study. I would, however, like to highlight some aspects of Shepard's early life which I feel are relevant to a study of his gothic families, especially as these biographical details relate to the following important questions: why was Shepard so intrigued with the American family as the subject for many of his plays, and why are Shepard's gothic families inevitably portraits of failure and dysfunction? The answers to these questions, I believe, may be found in Shepard's own family, especially in the person of Shepard's own "fallen" father, Samuel Shepard Rogers VI.

Shepard's family history provides several connections to his plays. His paternal grandfather, Sam Shepard Rogers V, married a woman named Helen Dodge who was the granddaughter of Civil War hero Lemuel P. Dodge (Tucker 13). In his 1996 prose collection *Cruising Paradise,* Shepard describes a man whose "great-great-great grandfather" was named Lemuel P. Dodge who "lost an ear fighting for the North, an arm

fighting for the South, and was finally hanged for 'womanizing' in Ojinaga[1] and dragged through the dusty streets until his head separated from his torso" (3). This real-life relative was most likely the source (at least the namesake) for the patriarchal character of Dodge from *Buried Child*, and it is worth noting that both men are literally "fallen" patriarchs who ultimately face disgrace and death. But Shepard's own father seems to be the prototype for the fallen father in Shepard's gothic family plays.

Shepard was born November 5, 1943 at an army base in Fort Sheridan, Illinois. The firstborn child of Jane Elaine Schook and Samuel Shepard Rogers VI, he would have two younger sisters but never a brother (Tucker 9). This fact is intriguing since many of Shepard's later family plays involve brothers, including *True West, A Lie of the Mind*, and *The Late Henry Moss*. Shepard's father was not present at his birth; Rogers VI was on duty as a bomber pilot in Italy at the time, and he would return from the war with shrapnel in his neck as a permanent souvenir (Tucker 19). The elder man seemed to wear his war wound like a badge of honor, and he chose to remain in the Air Force even after World War II ended. During the last year of the war, the family lived in Guam where Shepard's mother used an army-issue Luger to defend her clothesline from Japanese soldiers who sneaked down from the mountains to steal clothing from American clotheslines (Hart 127).

[1] A town in northern Mexico, perhaps best-known as the site of a battle where Pancho Villa's rebel army defeated *federales* troops in 1913.

The Illinois farm on which Shepard's father had grown up, a farm owned by the family for six generations, had been sold by relatives to cover debts incurred during the Great Depression. The forced sale of the farm suggests a biographical link to plays such as *Curse of the Starving Class* (where the family farm is lost due to the family's indebtedness and mutual betrayal) and *Buried Child* (where the farm has become a barren waste land). Shepard commented on the loss of the Rogers farm and its effect on his father, saying "He [Dad] had a really rough life—had to support his mother and brothers at a very young age when his dad's farm collapsed" (qtd. in Shewey 18). In 1955, Shepard's father left the Air Force and moved his family to Duarte, California (a suburb of Los Angeles) when Sam was eleven years old. This new home was an avocado ranch, complete with cows and horses, and Shepard spent all of his teenage years through high school in Duarte. During these years, Shepard joined the 4-H Club and raised a prize ram which won first place in the L.A. County Fair (Hart 128). Though the move to Duarte provided Shepard with his first stable home (geographically speaking), it also signaled the beginning of an erratic life for Shepard's father, a downward spiral marked by drinking binges during which the elder Rogers would "disappear for weeks at a stretch" into the desert like so many of the fathers in Shepard's family plays (Tucker 23). Lynda Hart claims that all of the fathers in Shepard's family plays are "consistently cruel, violent, manipulative, and demented" (107). While Hart's opinion might be overstated (I disagree with the term "consistently," since some of the fathers in Shepard's plays make attempts

toward reformation), there is ample evidence that Shepard's own father was a strong influence on how Shepard would later portray the American father onstage.

Shepard's relationship with his father was characterized by conflict. Shepard's sister Roxanne has said of father and son, "You put two virile men in a room and they're going to test each other. It's like two pit bulls" (qtd. in Shewey 18). With family plays like *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard would use this very scenario of putting "two virile men in a room" for them to "test each other." In fact, Shepard's gift for turning personal horrors into dramatic art—a gift he shares with O'Neill and Williams—underpins his gothic family plays. Some of Shepard's most insightful comments on his father appear in his prose writing and in remarks he has made while being interviewed. In a prose piece called "The Package Man" from his 1996 collection *Cruising Paradise*, Shepard uses a character named Ray to articulate one of his deepest fears—a fear shared by the haunted sons who inhabit his plays—that he would "end up smellin' just like [the] old man. That's the scary part. I hate that. Start feelin' like yer livin' out some doomed past. Some destiny you've got no say in" (138). In the same prose collection, Shepard tells of childhood experiences when he would intentionally come home late, waiting for his drunken father to leave the kitchen so that he (Shepard) could enter the house. Shepard referred to the gnawing anxiety that accompanied these vigils as "this old familiar fear" (33).

The source of the son's fear apparently lay in the elder Rogers' violent temper. In a 1984 *Playboy* interview with Robert Goldberg, Shepard said, "My father had a real short fuse. He had a really rough life . . . [he] was full of terrifying anger" (qtd. in Hart 124). Perhaps part of the father's anger was his attempt to teach his only son that the way of the mythic American male was one of fierce independence and violence. Shepard told Jonathan Cott in a 1986 *Rolling Stone* interview, "My old man tried to force on me a notion of what it is to be a 'man'" (qtd. in Dugdale 62). Shepard's remarks imply that he was more than a little resistant to his father's notion of "manliness." For the elder Rogers, the "man's way" involved unrepentant hard drinking. When Shepard visited his father in Santa Fe in 1979, he later wrote how his father "spent all the food money I gave him on bourbon. Filled the ice box with bottles" (qtd. in Shewey 124). All of the fathers in Shepard's family plays are shown (or reported to have been) drinking whiskey, craving a drink, or on a drunken, violent rampage. It was perhaps Shepard's desire to escape his father's drunken, violent rages that drove him to theater, a place where the haunted young man could invent his own reality.

In 1962, after one year at Mount Antonio Junior College, Shepard joined the Bishop's Repertory Company, a traveling acting troupe which played one-night church stops. Night after night the players would hastily set up stage, act a play, then tear down the set and load into cars headed for a new town. For Shepard, joining the Company made him realize that "anybody can make theater," and he began to think seriously about

making his living by writing plays (qtd. in Hart 128). In 1963, nineteen-year-old Shepard took a job as a busboy at the Village Gate in Greenwich Village. There he met Ralph Cook, the headwaiter, who encouraged Shepard to write one-act plays (Hart 129). The following year, Cook rented space at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bouwerie, and on October 10, 1964 the Theatre Genesis (as Cook dubbed his little troupe of actors and writers) produced Shepard's first two plays, *Cowboys* and *Rock Garden*, under Cook's direction (Hart 129). Shepard did not act in either play. Shepard later lost the entire text to *Cowboys*, and in 1967 he wrote a play called *Cowboys #2* which is a very close approximation of the original wherein two young men, Chet and Stu, use different voices and engage in imaginary battles with Indians. Earlier in 1964 the budding playwright had legally changed his name to Sam Shepard, breaking the cycle of namesakes which had carried on for seven generations. This, too, may be seen as another attempt to break free from his father, as so many of the "haunted sons" in Shepard's family plays attempt to do.[2]

By changing his name, Shepard was, in a sense, attempting his own rebirth, as well as a new start. One facet of the mythic American male which Shepard wanted to foster in himself was that of the self-made man. Richard Gilman believes Shepard wanted to be thought of as *sui generis* or a "self-creation" (qtd. in Hart 15).[3] Shepard can even sound

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[2] Yet, in 1987 he chose Samuel as the name for his second child with Jessica Lange, unwilling apparently to let the name die out altogether (Tucker 13).

[3] R.W.B. Lewis has explored the myth of the self-made man in his 1955 work, *The American Adam*, a man "standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his unique and inherent resources." Many of the fallen fathers in Shepard's family plays (Pop,

self-deprecating while reinforcing the *sui generis* myth, as when he told an interviewer with *Theatre Quarterly*, "The so-called originality of the early work just comes from ignorance. I just didn't know" (qtd. in Dugdale 55). Yet before his first plays were produced in 1964, Shepard admits to having read *Waiting for Godot* (though he claimed not to "get" it) and, as the first chapter points out, he was familiar with the works of O'Neill and Williams from his high school days. Shepard also was familiar early on with Edward Albee's work. One of Shepard's early plays (now lost) was called *Dog* and was produced by Theatre Genesis on February 10, 1965. Years later, Shepard described this play as being about "a black guy on a park bench, a sort of *Zoo Story* type play" (qtd. in Dugdale 12). There are obviously holes in Shepard's "self-made" pose, but one important early influence which Shepard has never denied is that of Joseph Chaikin and the Open Theater.

Chaikin founded the Open Theater in 1963, and Shepard joined the troupe in 1964 (Hart 16). Though Shepard was officially a member of the Open Theater for less than a year, he was strongly influenced by Chaikin's dramatic theories: the two men remain close friends even today after collaborating on such works as *Tongues* and *Savage/Love* (1978), *The War in Heaven* (1985), and *When the World was Green* (1996). According to Martin Tucker, the Open Theater taught an actor that "by opening himself to emotion as brought into being by the demands of a situation, without warning or

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Weston Tate, the Colonel, and Henry Moss) profess to be this type of "American Adam," but in the end, their independence fails them and they topple from their patriarchal perch.

time for preparation . . . it would be a discovery, not a revision of the playwright's words" (25). This idea of an actor "opening himself to emotion" seems consonant with Laura Graham's opinion that Shepard's writing encourages actors to "feel first, think later" (178). In 1971, Shepard likened his writing process to composing music: "You find all the rhythms and the melody and the harmonies and take them as they come" (qtd. in Shewey 41). Shepard himself was a musician, having been taught to play drums by his father, and many of his plays involve music, including family plays like *Fool for Love*, A *Lie of the Mind*, and *The Late Henry Moss*. For Shepard, music seems evocative of an emotional state, and these emotional states are central to understanding the members of Shepard's gothic families. For example, *The Holy Ghostly* opens with a song about a rambling man, suggesting the rootless, bohemian character of the fallen father Pop; *Fool for Love* closes with the Merle Haggard song "I'm the One Who Loves You"—an ironic and poignant commentary on Eddie and May's doomed romance.

There seems to be a common misconception that in the late 1970's Shepard was seized with a sudden, new interest in the American family, and this new interest resulted in the "family trilogy" of *Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child,* and *True West*. Actually, Shepard had written a family play as early as 1965 with a one-act play entitled *Rock Garden*. Although *Rock Garden* does not present a "gothic" family, the play establishes some family themes and motifs that are borne out in Shepard's later family plays, including the father-son conflict.

Rock Garden:

The opening scene of *Rock Garden* reveals a dinner table with a father, identified simply as Man, seated in his traditional place at the head of the table. But the dinner table here is not the warm, intimate place where the family members meet to share each other's lives and to take refuge from the workday world. Instead, the Man is engrossed in a magazine, seemingly oblivious to the teenage Boy and Girl who sit on opposite sides of the table drinking milk and silently exchanging glances. Suddenly the Girl drops her glass and spills her milk as the lights fade out (*UH* 41). The generic quality of the characters (who are given titles rather than names) suggests that this impersonal, silent dinnertime gathering is symptomatic of every American family. The family members are anonymous to one another, just as their anonymous names imply.

Scene Two depicts a Woman lying in bed covered with blankets. To her left is the teenage Boy seated in a rocking chair wearing only his underwear, perhaps suggesting an Oedipal urge to usurp the father's rightful place in the marital bedroom. During their conversation, the mother ridicules both husband and son by telling the boy, "Your legs are a lot like Pop's . . . bony and kind of skinny" (*UH* 43). Stephen Bottoms calls the mother a "monstrous castrating figure who mercilessly keeps both son and husband in positions of impotent, underwear-clad subservience" (47). The mother continually asks her son to bring her a glass of water; and each time he returns, the son is wearing more clothing until by the end of the scene he is completely dressed. At this point the Man is heard outside,

and the Boy runs offstage before the Man can see him, as though he knows his presence in the mother's bedroom is taboo. The Man crosses the stage and reappears moments later dressed only in underwear. He assumes the Boy's former position in the rocking chair as the lights fade (*UH* 46).

Scene Three, the final scene, opens with the Man sitting on the couch and the Boy in a chair facing upstage with his back to the Man. The staging of father and son suggests an unbridgeable gulf between the two, or perhaps their oppositional goals. As in the previous scene, both father and son are clad only in underwear. If the males' near nudity in Scene Two suggested their symbolic castration by the domineering mother, here their appearance might suggest a stripping away of all the pretensions that sustain America's myths about the idyllic family where each member listens attentively to each in a symbiotic relationship of mutual encouragement, love, and respect. Shepard's stage directions describe how "at different moments the Boy nods off from boredom and falls off his chair" (*UH* 46). Their banal conversation includes the father lauding the rock garden he has made, primarily because it "keeps me busy," implying that he is shiftless and lacks any clear sense of direction. Laura Graham observes that, by its very nature, a rock garden is arid and barren, symbolizing the nature of the family's dysfunctional relationships (22). The play ends with the Boy spontaneously launching into a graphic chronicle of his sexual exploits, starting with the revelation, "When I come it's like a river" (*UH* 50). Significantly, the boy interrupts while his father is listing all he hopes the two can do

together—work on the orchard, the rock garden, and the trees. This invitation for father-son bonding is clearly too little, too late, and the Boy ignores it entirely, choosing instead to revel in his own sexual conquests. The boy's rambling, explicit monologue ends with a rhetorical question that has become almost an American dialogic cliché, "You know what I mean?" As if in response to this question, the Man falls off the couch as the lights fade. Shepard seems to be suggesting that the son has usurped the father, or at least temporarily unseated him, by virtue of his sexual prowess.

Many critics refer to this play (like most of Shepard's early work of the mid-1960's) as "absurdist." In fact, after the play was first performed in October 1964, Jerry Talmer of the *New York Post* criticized the play as being "derivative of Beckett" (qtd. in Hart 130). Edward Albee, after watching a 1965 production of *Icarus's Mother*, wrote a review which included these observations:

> What Shepard's plays are about is a great deal less interesting than how they are about it . . . if Shepard is beginning to superimpose message, or symbol, or story . . . he must start taking into account the very different artistic responsibilities these usually very normal elements impose on him. (qtd. in Dugdale 13)

Albee's comments are applicable to the gothic elements in Shepard's family plays. Gothic devices, by their very nature, are highly visual, visceral, aural, and shocking; and gothic literature is more concerned with creating a sensory effect than in communicating a

message or conveying a credo. Albee points out that Shepard shares this same concern. In short, gothic effects in Shepard's family plays bear out Albee's claim that the "how" or method of his plays is more important than the "what." This is not to suggest that Shepard's gothic family plays have no message to communicate, for indeed, I believe they do; moreover, Shepard's "message" in his gothic family plays is inherent in his portrayal of the dysfunctional family members themselves. But Albee is correct in surmising that, for Shepard, the effect is primary while the underlying message is secondary.

For the purposes of this study, I would like to point out that Shepard's first foray into the American family produced a dysfunctional, loveless portrait culminating in a confrontation between father and son. The father in *Rock Garden*, like all of Shepard's subsequent fathers, has failed at the roles of provider and protector. He commands neither the respect nor even the attentiveness of his children, and the father is much more interested in mundane, ritualistic chores than in strengthening his relationships with his family—probably because he finds himself more comfortable in the busy-ness of his hobbies which serve both to isolate him and to distract him from his family. In the end, his last-ditch attempt to bond with his son is rejected out-of-hand. Five years after *Rock Garden*, Shepard chose to use gothic devices in his portrait of the dysfunctional modern American family in a play entitled *The Holy Ghostly*. This would be Shepard's first play to include a supernatural character, though others would follow.

The Holy Ghostly:

Whether he meant the title to be overtly blasphemous or mildly irreverent, Shepard quickly undermines any expectation that this play will involve a religious theme. The play might have been more aptly titled *The Unholy Ghostly* since the father-son relationship depicted is anything but serene. David Derose speculates that *The Holy Ghostly* (1969) is based on Shepard's 1968 trip to visit his estranged father, who was living alone in a desert in Arizona. During the first leg of this trip, Shepard traveled to Illinois to visit his grandparents, just like Vince in *Buried Child*. Shepard had not seen his father since 1963, and after this visit it would be several more years before they saw each other again, suggesting that their visit may have been unpleasant or without reconciliation (Derose 90).

Certainly there are specific biographical elements in the play. Like Shepard, the son in *The Holy Ghostly* was given a seventh generation name—Stanley Hewitt Moss VII—and like Shepard he had rebelled against his father by changing his name; the son now calls himself Ice, perhaps to suggest the coldness of his relationship with his father. In the prose collection *Motel Chronicles*, Shepard wrote:

> My name came down through seven generations of men with the same name each naming the first son the same name as the father then the mothers nicknaming the sons so as not to confuse them with the fathers . . . the sons came to believe their names were the nicknames. . . and

> answered to these names building ideas of who they were around the sound never dreaming their real legal name was lying in wait for them . . . and that name would be the name they'd die with. (qtd. in Graham 15)

The way Shepard describes the father's imposed legacy as "lying in wait" for the son suggests that the father's impact on the son is insidious and ultimately fatal ("the name they'd die with"). Shepard himself had been given the nickname "Steve" in order to distinguish him from his father, and at the first opportunity he discarded his inherited birth name. But as *The Holy Ghostly* reveals, freeing oneself from the influence of the fallen father is not so simple as merely discarding the father's name.

The Holy Ghostly was first produced in Europe in 1969 but did not appear in the United States until the New Troupe Company brought the play to McCarter Theater in Princeton, New Jersey, in January 1974 (Tucker 65). The play is set in the Badlands of Arizona, and Shepard crafted the play especially for a circular theater that would allow the audience to sit around an ersatz campfire which becomes crucial in the play's climactic scene. Shepard's stage directions for the opening scene describe the father, in his 50's, lying in a sleeping bag with a hat over face. Although the audience learns that the father's legal name is Stanley Hewitt Moss VI, Shepard achieves an air of universality by calling the father "Pop," just as he had struck a universal note in *Rock Garden* by calling the father "Man." The son, "Ice," is in his 20's (as Shepard was when he wrote the play), and he sits roasting marshmallows by the campfire as the play begins. Utensils and

camping gear are scattered around the set, suggesting that father and son have "been living there for a while" (*UH* 201).

Ice is singing as the play opens: "Oh didn't he ramble. Rambled all around" (*UH* 201). If one applies this song to the fallen father, the son might be alluding to the father's abnegation of his paternal role in favor of wandering, in which case the song might be an accusation or lamentation rather than a mere diddy. At the end of Ice's song, Pop sits up suddenly and pulls a gun from under his pillow, aiming it at Ice. The abrupt and unexpected action immediately startles the audience by introducing a mysterious sense of dread which is central to gothic. This dread is magnified seconds later when Pop asks Ice, "You seen the Chindi?" (*UH* 202). Certainly the Chindi is the most overtly gothic character Shepard had created up to this point. The Chindi is described by Pop as a "sneaky devil" with "more faces and more arms and legs than the two of us put together" (*UH* 203). Pop describes the Chindi as a shape-shifter who can sometimes appear in the guise of Pop himself, "just to trick me into believin' it's all a figment a' my imagination" (203). For his part, Ice refers to the Chindi as a "ghost." Ice suggests they take the offensive and search for the Chindi in the desert night rather than wait helplessly in dread. "[Let's] lean on him a little. Ghosts don't count on that. They count on fear. We might scare the shit out of him if we went after his ass" (*UH* 203). When the shriek of the Chindi is heard offstage, Ice leaps to his feet and runs off, ostensibly to attack the spectral figure. As soon as Ice leaves, the Chindi appears, and during the play Ice and the Chindi

never appear onstage at the same time. This fact may suggest that the Chindi and Ice are somehow connected—although this connection may be unconscious or otherworldly—in their antagonism of the fallen father. If Shepard is suggesting a link between Ice and the Chindi, then the Chindi's stalking of Pop is likely some type of consequence for the fallen father's abnegation and betrayal of his paternal role—a day of reckoning, as it were, whereby the son demands vengeance against the father. Pop seems to intuit this much as soon as Ice runs offstage: Pop yells into the darkness at the Chindi, saying, "I figure that somewhere in yer mind you got this idea that I done somethin' to deserve yer comin' after me and torturin' me and maybe killin' me or somethin' . . . " (*UH* 205). At this point the Chindi appears, startling both Pop and the audience with a double-barreled revelation, the least important of which is Pop's legal name: "You're already dead, Mr. Moss" (*UH* 205). Later in the play, Pop will wrestle with the more "gothic" revelation—whether or not he is indeed "dead."

The Chindi is a "tall figure dressed in black blankets with bells around his ankles" and "eagle feathers around the wrists and neck and coming out of his head." His face is "all white," but the rest of his body is "jet black" (*UH* 205). By having the Chindi's face painted white, Shepard is able to provide a sharp contrast to the black body, making the Chindi's face look more cadaverous and ghostly. The Chindi does not immediately pursue his original declaration that Pop is "already dead" but rather darts around the stage, taunting Pop with cryptic statements like "I'm not after nobody, Mr. Moss," and "The

Lord knows nothin', Stanley" (*UH* 205). Inexplicably, Pop suddenly believes that the Chindi is actually Ice trying to play a joke on him. He yells at the Chindi, "I don't know what you think you're trying to prove, Ice, but I ain't fallin' for it . . . with yer old man outa' the way you could step right in and take over the ranch, lock, stock, and barrel" (*UH* 206). Pop's delusion smacks of paranoia; he fears that his son will usurp his authority and his land—the traditional symbol of the wealth and potency of the American male, like Ephraim Cabot in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms.* The Chindi responds to these accusations by saying, "You're a fool, Mr. Moss" (*UH* 206). This assessment, coming as it does from a gothic specter, carries with it a supernatural air of truth. Pop, or Stanley Hewitt Moss VI, is indeed a fool; but he has been a fool long before now, and this nightmarish encounter with the Chindi may be seen as symptomatic of Pop's failure as a father. Laura Graham goes so far as to interpret the Chindi as "that part of Ice which is totally hostile" to Pop's influence (40). But if Ice is hostile to Pop, Shepard also shows that the reverse is equally true.

When the Chindi darts offstage, Pop pulls a bazooka from underneath a sleeping bag, ranting that his son has "asked for it" (*UH* 206). The bazooka, clearly "overkill," adds an element of absurdism to the play; but beneath the superficial absurdity, Shepard presents a contradiction. Contradictions, in fact, are essential to absurdism, for they demonstrate the futility of the characters' actions. Here, Shepard points to the contradiction between what Pop's role *should* be (in the ideal American family) and what

his life is really like. As father, Pop should ideally be his son's protector. Instead, he has become his son's intended killer. At this point, the sound of an Indian drum is heard "steadily beating" offstage. Scholars of twentieth-century American drama will remember the ominous, maddening drumbeat in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920). In this play, as well as O'Neill's, the drumbeat grows steadily more audible as the play progresses, building to a crescendo which may symbolize the protagonist's anxiety and guilt. Jones dies at the end of O'Neill's play, but in *The Holy Ghostly* we are told that Pop is "already dead," though at this point the audience has little reason to believe this is true. But Shepard uses the Chindi and, later, the White Witch, to convince us that Pop is, in several ways, indeed already dead.

One way in which Pop is "already dead" (metaphorically) is in his paternal role. While he is still holding the bazooka, Pop speaks to the darkness, hoping that Ice is listening. He tells Ice, "I always liked to think of the two of us as blood brothers . . . Not father and son but brothers" (*UH* 207). Pop muses on the "rich days" they had together, and his fondest memories are when they would use rifles to blast "jackrabbits all up against the cactus" (*UH* 207). For Pop, father-son bonding is best accomplished through gun violence. Hunting is a traditional American male rite of passage and has been chronicled by such twentieth-century American writers as Faulkner and Hemingway. But Pop's description of "blasting jackrabbits" reeks of sadistic overkill, just like the bazooka with which he now intends to blow up his son. The bazooka is the latest weapon in Pop's

arsenal. Early in the play, Ice had mocked Pop's worldly possessions, which consisted of, among other things, a "fishing knife, a Colt forty-five, and a Browning over and under" (*UH* 203). Armed with these weapons, the fallen father has isolated himself in the desert, paranoid with a fatalistic sense of doom—a doom which has manifested itself in the Chindi. In terms of the psychology of gothic, which was outlined in Chapter One, the Chindi can be seen as an embodiment of Pop's guilt as a failed and fallen father. Pop has attempted to repress the memories of his "fall" as father and of his failure as breadwinner, protector, and supporter of his son. But the Chindi appears to remind him of his horrible past and to indicate that there are consequences for the way he has lived—consequences both in this life and in the afterlife. Pop has been dreading the arrival of the Chindi since the curtain opened. In this way, *The Holy Ghostly* is similar to a later Shepard play, *Back Bog Beast Bait* (1971). In this play, the characters dread the arrival of the mysterious Tarpin, a two-headed "pig beast." As Slim tells Shadow in that play, "It [the beast] is somethin' bigger and spookier than you or me can reckon to" (*UH* 350). In the same manner, Pop dreads the arrival of the Chindi—and the Chindi may be viewed as the embodiment of Pop's repressed memories.

The father-son relationship is portrayed as dysfunctional from the opening curtain, even before the Chindi appears. Ice, in filial obedience to Pop's call for help, has abruptly left his life in New York City to come to the Badlands. By turning to his son for help, Pop makes his patriarchal position susceptible to usurpation. In Shepard's families, the father-

son bond is often "predicated on the son's respect for the father's superiority and the father's acknowledgement of that superiority" (Graham 21). By asking for Ice's help, the father "loses the key to his son's respect—his independent and disaffected status" (Graham 31). But this irony seems lost on Pop: he tries to maintain his position as paternal bully by belittling Ice's dream of becoming a rock star (this was Shepard's dream, too). Much as Shepard's own father may have mocked his son's dream, Pop tells Ice, "You were just another bug in the rug, boy" (*UH* 202). Pop is also insulted that Stanley Hewitt Moss VII changed his name to Ice, and one cannot help but suppose that Shepard's father may have been similarly piqued at his son's name change. "Yer no son a' mine," Pop tells Ice; "No son a' mine woulda' gone and changed his name . . . " (*UH* 203). Starting with *The Holy Ghostly*, Shepard has long been interested with the idea of a seventh generation son finally breaking free of his father's name and influence, or at least trying to break free. In 1996's *When the World Was Green* Shepard has the Old Man explain, "It takes seven generations or one hundred years for an insult to come to an end. Whichever comes first" (*3P* 190). As their conversation proceeds, Pop is unable to shake his indignation at this abandonment of the paternal name. He asks Ice,

> What's gonna happen when you have yerself a son? What's gonna happen to him with a name like Ice? He'll get laughed right outa' school. How's he gonna play football with a name like that?" (*UH* 207)

Tellingly, Pop takes for granted that, first, he will have a future grandson to propagate the male bloodline and, secondly, that the grandson will play football—the quintessential (and probably most violent) rite of young American males. As Pop recounts a brief family history, Ice's reasons for wanting to distance himself from his father's name become more apparent.

We learn that Pop's father was a dairy farmer who "started hittin' the bottle and lost the whole farm" (*UH* 207). Then one night the father fell asleep with a lit cigar and burned down the hotel where the family had been living, so Pop was forced to support the family while still a young boy. Pop reveals that his brother Jaimie [sic] (Shepard here may be tipping his cap to O'Neill's Jamie Tyrone) had a leg amputated as a result of polio and later became a one-legged truck driver. Pop was drafted in WWII where he learned to fly B-24s and B-17s, dropping bombs in Italy, just as Shepard's real father had done (*UH* 208). Shepard perhaps gives us insight into his own father's ambivalent attitude about his military service. Though Sam Shepard Rogers VI took pride in his military service with its concomitant medals and war wounds, he was also apparently disillusioned by the experience. In this speech, Pop tells Ice of his own experience in WWII: "I come back with nothin' to show for it but some Jap rifles and Kraut helmets and little red bombs cut on my leather jacket" (*UH* 208). Certainly Pop's cynicism does much to explode the myth that fighting for one's country is its own reward, full of glory and honor. Since the military was emotionally and psychologically unfulfilling for Pop, he turned with special

needs to the family he had recently begun, telling himself during those long embattled nights overseas, "I got myself something to look forward to Stateside . . . a son with my name and my eyes and my nose and my mouth. My own flesh and blood" (*UH* 208). This emphasis on corporeality—"flesh and blood"—seems to be almost an obsession with the fallen father in twentieth-century American drama. Nearly a decade later in *Buried Child*, Shepard has Dodge denying his son Bradley by exclaiming, "He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's buried out in the back yard!" In O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, Ephraim declares his belief that "A son is me—my blood—mine. Mine ought t' git mine" (*SP* 185). In the case of Pop, a flesh and blood son would be his only compensation for the years he gave to his country in the war.

Just after Pop's flesh and blood allusion, Ice appears with "white war paint stripes on his face and an Indian drum in his hand which he beats in a slow steady rhythm" (*UH* 209). Immediately, the audience may infer that Pop's delusion was really no delusion at all. Though Ice does not quite look identical to the Chindi, Ice does resemble him enough to make the audience think that perhaps the two are the same person, or at least are in league together in their psychological assault on Pop. Pop certainly suspects this to be the case, for when Ice says, "I saw the Chindi," Pop retorts, "I'll bet you could tell me exactly what he looks like . . . what he has for breakfast and which side of his crotch he hangs his dick on" (*UH* 209). Ice ignores Pop's remarks and says, "He [the Chindi] told me that you were dead and you didn't even know it" (*UH* 209). This statement presents another

mystery for the audience, but with Shepard, mysteries never reach complete resolution.[4] Pop rejects this news as nonsense, insisting that Ice has "carried this damn fiasco far enough" (*UH* 209). The ensuing shift in tone marks a pattern followed by Shepard in several subsequent gothic family plays—a sort of psychic liberation (however brief) of the haunted son once he believes his father to be dead. After learning from the Chindi that Pop is dead, Ice is finally able to vent his pent-up resentment toward Pop: "For eighteen years I was your slave. I worked for you hand and foot. Shearing the sheep, irrigating the trees, listening to your bullshit . . . " (*UH* 210). Pop attempts to defend himself from these accusations, but in doing so he repeatedly calls Ice "Stanley" infuriating the son until he challenges the father to a draw—a kind of pastiche from a cowboy western movie.

While Ice, as haunted son, has been traumatized for years by the fallen father, Pop is portrayed as a traumatized victim himself. Consequently, the Chindi may be viewed as the gothic embodiment of Pop's repressed memories, fears, and guilts. Pop's trauma seems to derive from at least two sources—his combat experiences in World War Two and his wife's death. Pop describes himself as showing symptoms of what today we would refer to as Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Pop explains to Ice, "Ever since your mother passed on, I've had the most terrible nightmares. Visions of demons and goblins chasing me and taunting me" (*UH* 211). Pop's revelation implies that the nightmares and

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[4] In his latest gothic family play, *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), Shepard explores more fully the idea of a fallen father who is "dead" but does not realize it. The main difference, however, is that Henry Moss spends much of the play obsessing over whether he is dead or alive (since he believes the morbid pronouncement of a mysterious *femme fatale* named Conchalla). In *The Holy Ghostly*, Pop

"visions of demons and goblins" are manifestations of guilt he feels over his wife's death, as though he hastened her death by abusing her. Shepard explores male guilt over betraying or abusing a wife more fully in some of the later family plays, including *Fool for Love, A Lie of the Mind,* and *The Late Henry Moss*. Of his post-war trauma, Pop says, "I keep seeing slanty-eyed faces of faces I never saw" (*UH* 211). By using the phrase "faces I never saw," Pop seems to realize that these images—when they appear—are hallucinations and not reality. So it is significant that Pop does not consider the Chindi to be just another hallucination but rather accepts the Chindi as real. In the psychology of the gothic, Pop's acknowledgement of the Chindhi implies that the Chindhi somehow represents Pop's repressed memories, perhaps memories of his crimes against his family which he has tried to deny or forget. Try as he might, Pop cannot rid himself completely of these memories, so when the Chindhi appears, Pop must acknowledge its presence. Likewise, Pop tacitly accepts as real the appearance of a second gothic character—the White Witch—midway through the play.

The White Witch comes onstage during Pop's rancorous exchange with Ice—almost as though their acerbic dialogue has summoned her. She wears white robes, but her face is painted black, making her a sort of converse image of the Chindi. Like the Chindi, she wears black feathers on her wrists and neck. By adorning his gothic specters with feathers which recall native American cultures—and by including the Indian drum

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shrugs off the idea that he may be dead, never giving it a moment's thought until later in the play when the White Witch appears carrying his corpse.

which Ice is playing—Shepard establishes a uniquely American gothic tone. Whereas British gothic literature often employs specters which appear in castles or dungeons, here Shepard employs a western wilderness backdrop reminiscent of the early days in America's history when Native Americans ruled the land. It is as though the Chindi and the White Witch are primal creatures conjured from the American past. Perhaps these specters have been agitated by Pop's presence as interloper in the Badlands, and so they may serve a dual purpose as accusers of the fallen father and defenders of the American frontier. The White Witch is carrying Pop's corpse "piggyback style," and Shepard reinforces the corpse's authenticity by instructing that it should be dressed "exactly the same as Pop" and should have a "chalk-white face" (*UH* 211). In her initial, derisive salutation, the White Witch calls Pop "Bozo the Clown," and when she cackles at Pop, she sounds (according to Shepard's stage directions) "like the Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*." Both of these references to twentieth-century American media iconography illustrate one way in which Shepard uses gothic devices (the White Witch, in this case) to facilitate a veiled cultural critique. As Laura Graham has noted:

> Using the family and the domestic setting as a metaphor for American society . . . Shepard suggests we are a people given to avoidance and escapism . . . He depicts a society which ignores its own history and heritage in favor of a constructed mythology which is largely derived from the cinema . . . . Just as the individual is crippled when he attempts total

> self-creation, American society . . . is crippled because it is rootless, incomplete, vacuous and always hungry. (47)

Certainly, Pop as fallen father is "given to avoidance and escapism" vis-à-vis his relationships with his family. He has, in a sense, become a clown.

Immediately, the White Witch and Ice ally themselves against Pop, insisting that he is indeed dead. Ice seems to derive special satisfaction from the situation, telling Pop, "You got no choice, Pop. Finally you've got no choice" (*UH* 212). The implication is that the tables have been turned and that the fallen father—until now the source of torment for his family—has finally been cornered and is on the receiving end of the doom he had dispensed for so many years. We learn that the Witch is the Chindi's "old lady" who has been carrying Pop's body until rigor mortis sets in, but after that, Pop must go with the Chindi to a place "he'll never come back from" (*UH* 213). The White Witch explains to Pop that a ghost is "one who has died without finishing what he had to do on the earth. Sometimes because they were cut short, like baby ghosts. Sometimes because they never found out what they were here for, like you, Mr. Moss" (*UH* 212). The Witch's words testify to Pop's failures, personally and paternally. Not only did he fail to understand his roles as father and husband, but he was also unwilling or unable to fulfill these roles ("finishing what he had to do"). As a result, Pop is now stuck in an earth-bound limbo, blinded by self-delusion and failing to recognize his true condition—that he is "dead already," emotionally and spiritually speaking. One of Pop's crimes against his family has

been (as with Shepard's own father) a furious violence against his loved ones. When Pop insists, "I'm not a man of violence. I never have been," Ice asks incredulously, "Never?" Pop's reply is both an admission and a self-justification: "Well, not when I could help it. I was only doing my job. You can't hold that against me" (*UH* 212). Pop's "job" as father involved, to his way of thinking, occasional violence in order to procure submission and obedience from his wife and children. Yet Pop's initial denial of this violence suggests that, at least subconsciously, he acknowledges the wrongness of his actions and has been trying to repress those memories. Shepard uses various devices to provide Pop with ample opportunities to admit his mistakes, including a gothic *doppelgänger*.

Upon seeing his own corpse, Pop's reaction is subdued, marked by nonchalance and apathy rather than horror. A face-to-face encounter with his *doppelgänger* ought to produce an uncanny moment because, as Freud says, the double becomes a "ghastly harbinger of death" (qtd. in Rivkin and Ryan 166). Whereas a character like Poe's William Wilson recognizes, in a moment of uncanny horror, that the death of his *doppelgänger* means he has murdered himself, Pop achieves no such recognition. The corpse undergoes a visible, physical transformation once the Witch leaves father and son alone onstage. Shepard's stage directions describe the corpse as stiffening out "from a sitting position to lying straight out on the ground on his back. Something like a slow-motion self-immolation" (*UH* 213). The corpse's transformation mirrors several accompanying transformations in Pop, the first of which is his sudden shift from

antagonizing Ice to placating him. Pop now refers to himself and Ice as "we" who are united against the Chindi. For his part, Ice reverts to a "little boy's voice" and we hear him asking about practicing his drums: "You're the one who taught me, Daddy. You said practice, practice, practice" (*UH* 214). Their ensuing dialogue, however, reveals only their different tastes in music and their inability to establish any kind of rapport. Then, without warning, Shepard generates an abrupt role reversal whereby Pop "becomes like a little boy" and Ice "becomes like his father" (*UH* 215). This role reversal is highlighted when Pop curls up in Ice's lap and asks, "Could you tell me a story? I feel lonely" (215). At the end of Ice's rambling "big bang" narrative, Pop suddenly transforms to his old self, saying he will blow up the Chindi and the White Witch with his bazooka (217).

The brief role reversal has left Pop apparently unchanged. He now mocks what he perceives to be his son's effeminate traits (and students of modern American drama may perhaps remember how Tennessee Williams' father similarly mocked his son as "Miss Nancy"): Pop says, "Why don't you go down by the crick and wash that damn makeup off yer face? If ya' weren't my own son I'd say you was a sissy" (*UH* 218). Pop attempts to bully his son into accepting the father's idea of maleness, just as Shepard's own father had done. But Ice resists Pop's bullying and finally draws his own gun and shoots Pop in the stomach before walking offstage. As Pop staggers around the stage, he hastily recites his last will and testament:

> Stanley! You can have the ranch! The sheep! The station wagon! The Dodge half-ton! The spring tooth harrow! The barbeque pit! The house! You can take it all! (218)

This spontaneous bequest by the fallen father (who makes the bequest only when death is moments away) foreshadows the closing scene of *Buried Child* when Dodge makes a bequest to his grandson Vince. In Dodge's case, the bequest is final and irrevocable since he dies moments later. But Pop seems quickly to forget his bequest once he realizes he isn't bleeding from the gunshot wound to the stomach. Instead, he speaks to the corpse for the first time, saying, "You're a dead man, Stanley" (220). This declaration—really a distancing and projection of his own mortal fears onto the corpse—marks the first sign that Pop has reached some measure of resignation to his fate. Now Pop sings the same lyrics Ice had sung at the play's opening, only this time the song seems more one of celebration than one of accusation: "Oh didn't he ramble. Rambled all around" (*UH* 220). Pop dances in the middle of the fire while he sings, laughing to discover that the flames cannot hurt him since he is dead already. In an ecstatic frenzy, Pop tosses all of his belongings into the fire, watching the flames spread out of control. Shepard's stage directions suggest that "This could be done with a projector and film loop above the audience" (220). The spreading fire and Pop's euphoric dance in this final scene invite various interpretations. Perhaps the scene is meant to suggest the phoenix's rebirth, as though Pop has finally had a genuine epiphany, albeit too late, and realizes the error of his

ways. Consequently, Pop is trying to obliterate the trappings of his past life by burning them up in the flames. In one of his later family plays, *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), Shepard would again use fire in the closing scene as psychically-scarred members of a gothic family attempt to burn away the remnants of their traumatic memories as a step toward rebirth and reconciliation.

Pop's closing speech may present the play's most difficult mystery. Pop speaks here as though Ice had never actually come to the desert but is still in New York City, oblivious to his father's plight:

> If my boy Stanley were here to see me now! . . . Boy, don't you know if there was a phone booth out here I'd sure make a collect call to that boy and have him hightail it out here to see his old man now! . . . Wonder what he's lookin' like now. A grown man . . . . (*UH* 220)

If Ice never visited the desert, then are we to interpret the entire play as a trauma-induced delusion thrust upon the fallen father? Laura Graham thinks so; she sees the play as "the dream of the son as he attempts and fails to exorcise the demon that is his father's influence" (31). At the end of his mysterious speech, Pop addresses his corpse again, asking, "What're you doin'?" The corpse's reply of "nothin'" sends Pop into a final frenzy, and he holds the corpse over his head and throws it into the fire, chanting BURN BURN BURN BURN as the lights fade out at the final curtain (*UH* 221). Earlier, the stage directions had used the term "slow self-immolation" to describe the gradual stiffening

of the corpse during rigor mortis. Pop's burning of the corpse may likewise be seen as self-immolation, but as usual Shepard leaves us in doubt regarding Pop's ultimate motives or whether he has been genuinely transformed. The earlier role reversal between father and son, as well as Pop's sudden mood swings in viewing Ice as both enemy and ally, leave the audience wondering what was "real" and what was imagined. Pop's protean character is consonant with remarks Shepard himself has made: "A character for me is a composite of different mysteries. He's an unknown quantity. If he wasn't, it would be like coloring in numbered spaces" (qtd. in King 92). As Bonnie Marranca has noted, in Shepard's work a character "has not simply a self but several selves which are continually changing" (14). The fluidity of Shepard's characters allows the playwright to

> open up the emotional terrain of a character so he can project his feelings OUT THERE. The emotions of the character are the projections of his personal imagery, beginning usually with a single perception and building into a long string of images (verbal, visual, aural) that embroider the initial perception . . . beyond the immediate situation of the character . . . . (Marranca 19)

The final image of the fire burning wildly out of control leaves the audience with more questions than answers. If the fire symbolizes rebirth or purgation, then what evidence do we have that Pop has changed? He himself claims to have changed in the play's closing moments, but then again, earlier in the play he claimed never to have been a "man of

violence" even as he was clutching a bazooka and threatening his son's life. With this early family play, Shepard seems content to leave the audience wondering whether such a change in the fallen American father is possible; and, if not for the gothic specters who accost and enlighten Pop, that hint of possibility would not exist. In his next family play—often called his "first" family play—Shepard would include other family members through whose eyes the audience could again wrestle with the question of whether or not the fallen father can be redeemed.

Curse of the Starving Class:

Curse of the Starving Class had its world premiere in April 1977 in London. As a testament to the play's powerful language and searing visual props, *The Village Voice's* Obie committee had honored it as the Best New Play of 1977 based on the written text alone, before the committee had even seen the play onstage (Shewey 111). Like *The Holy Ghostly, Curse of the Starving Class* demonstrates links to Shepard's own life. After his father moved the family to Duarte, California, young Sam Shepard Rogers VII, like Emma Tate in *Curse of the Starving Class*, joined a 4-H Club at school. The diseased lamb found and nurtured—first by Wesley Tate and then by Weston—recalls young Shepard's ram which won a prize at the L.A. County Fair (Hart 128). The play appears to be set in the mid to late 1970's, approximating the time period in which the text was written. But the American family dynamic which Shepard critiques, and for which the Tate family stands as proxy, has its origins in the socio-political climate which prevailed

immediately following World War Two. Before discussing the text of *Curse of the Starving Class*, I believe it is helpful to examine briefly the dynamic of the American family which prevailed during the Cold War era—a dynamic which, I believe, informs Shepard's portrait of the Tate family in *Curse of the Starving Class*.

Elaine Tyler May's book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988) provides valuable insights into this family dynamic. May argues that one of the most important principles governing the American family dynamic in this era was the "containment" theory. Ideology after World War Two expressed a belief that the destructive force of the atomic bomb "would not be a threat if it could be contained"—that is, if control of the bomb remained in American hands. This theory was then extrapolated onto American society more generally in hopes that the home would provide a fortress of "containment" where un-American or dangerous ideologies could be stifled.

> In the domestic version of containment, the "sphere of influence" was the home. Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed . . . in secure postwar homes with plenty of children, American men and women might be able to ward off their nightmares and live out their dreams. The family seemed to be the one place where people could control their destinies and perhaps even shape the future. (May 14-24)

An important underpinning of the home-as-sanctuary ideal was a push for insatiable consumerism. During a 1959 trip to the USSR, Richard Nixon sparred verbally with Nikita Khrushchev, insisting that suburban homes replete with modern appliances were the best defense against communism (May 17). In the five years after World War Two, consumer spending on household appliances rose 240% (May 165). "The family home would be a place where a man could display his success through the accumulation of consumer goods. Women, in turn, would reap rewards for domesticity by surrounding themselves with commodities" (May 164). May notes that "the gender roles associated with domestic consumerism—homemaker and breadwinner—were central to the identity of many men and women" (181). When these roles were neglected, emotional and social chaos was believed to result. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, fallen father Weston Tate has failed miserably in his role as breadwinner, a failure represented by the empty refrigerator and by Weston's pathetic attempts to provide his family with sustenance by bringing them artichokes.

Containment theory also sought to restrict family members to programmatic gender roles, and the wife/mother was particularly the focus of this containment. First and foremost, American wives in the Cold War era were supposed to be submissive to their husbands in every way, especially sexually: "Unlike Victorian mothers . . . wives in the postwar era were recognized as sexual enthusiasts whose insistence on conjugal satisfaction would contribute to erotically charged marriages" (May 102). Wives'

submissiveness was ensured by their role as homemakers since "outside the home . . . women would become a dangerous, destructive force" (May 109). Since the ideal wife should be sexually appealing to her husband only—and her own sexual appetites should be directed only at her husband—women's fashions immediately following World War Two focused on repressing or subduing female sexuality. During the 1940's and 50's,

> quasi-Victorian long wide skirts and frills were back, along with exaggerated bust lines and curves that created the aura of untouchable eroticism. Female sexuality was, once again, contained in stays and girdles that pinched waists and padded brassieres that made women appear to have large breasts. But the body itself was protected in a fortress of undergarments. (May 112)

Since promiscuous women posed dangers to the sanctuary of American homes, women's sexuality was often used as a metaphor for other social and political maladies. As late as 1972, civil defense pamphlets used sketches of seductive women in swimsuits to depict dangerous radiation rays of alpha, beta, gamma (May 110). Likewise, the slang term "bombshell" became commonplace American jargon for a sexy woman outside of the monogamous marital relationship (May 110). Submissive home-making housewives, by definition, could not be bombshells because they posed no danger to American society. Though critics like Lynda Hart have often complained that Shepard's work is too male-centered and portrays women as shallow and submissive, Shepard seems to balk at the

idea of women's sexual repression: many of his plays show women either disrobing or naked, including some of the later family plays such as *A Lie of the Mind* and *The Late Henry Moss*. In neither of these plays is female nudity innocent: both Beth and Conchalla, respectively, strip naked in order to display a sexuality which simultaneously threatens and seduces the male, committing precisely the sort of transgression which Cold War-era women were supposed to avoid. *Curse of the Starving Class* was the first of Shepard's family plays to portray a traditional nuclear family which repudiates the stereotypical, Cold War-era mold.

The play begins in silence; the visual scene communicates in one moment more than dialogue could hope to achieve. The opening stage directions call for a breakfast table with "mismatched" chairs, suggesting the alienation and estrangement which exists among the family members. A kitchen window is suggested by a pair of "red-checked curtains" which are "suspended in midair," perhaps symbolizing the rootlessness of the Tate family whose existence as a social unit hangs precariously by a thread. As the play begins, the audience sees another symbolic device—a pile of debris where the front door should be. We learn that the father, Weston Tate, has destroyed the door during a drunken rage the previous night. Thus the traditional protector of the home has smashed the barrier that should protect the family from the threatening outside world. This is the first sign that the father, in the American gothic paradigm, is fallen. Wesley Tate, the haunted son, is left to clean up the father's mess: he gathers the broken pieces of the

busted door and tosses them into a wheelbarrow. He does not complain, and this fact might suggest that he is accustomed to sweeping up the wreckage—both physical and emotional—left by his father's rages.

Throughout the play, Shepard provides graphic examples of how members of the Tate family wound and even kill what they claim to love. When Emma, the teenaged daughter, learns that her mother has boiled the chicken pieces she was planning to use for her 4-H Club demonstration, she is furious. Yet Emma describes how she herself raised the chicken from the incubator, fed it crushed corn for a year, and then killed it with an ax and "spilled its guts out" (*7P* 141). Later in the play, Emma's brother Wesley follows a similar pattern after bringing a diseased lamb into the house. When Wesley first brings the lamb into the kitchen and sets up a pen for it, Ella asks, "What's that lamb doing here?" Wesley's response—"It's got maggots"—implies that the diseased animal belongs inside the diseased home alongside the rest of the emotionally sick family members (*7P* 155). Wesley ends up butchering the lamb, though his father insists near the end of the play that the lamb was recovering. This pattern of hurting and killing loved ones (literally or emotionally) is a pattern which the fallen father himself has established, and now the other family members are doomed to follow his example.

The matriarch, Ella Tate, enters from the left. She is wearing a bathrobe and pink fuzzy slippers, with her hair in curlers. She yawns sleepily as she winds an alarm clock, and Shepard describes her as "just waking up"(*7P* 135). The opening line of dialogue has

Ella telling her son, "You shouldn't be doing that. He should be doing it." Wesley replies, "He's not here" (*7P* 135). The fallen father's absence is but a symptom of his abnegation of the paternal duties. Rather than provide for his family, he has left them (albeit temporarily) to fend for themselves. Wesley questions why his mother called the police the previous night when Weston was kicking in the front door. In spite of the father's violent rage, Wesley insists there was no need to involve the police, that this was a private family matter. We must assume the son learned this from his father, for if local authorities are never called to the home, then the father can reign supreme and terrorize his family at will. As the gothic haunted son, Wesley has doubtless suffered trauma as a result of his father's emotional (and possibly physical) abuse; as frequently happens, Wesley finds himself invariably coming to the defense of his abuser. As Judith Herman describes in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), for someone like Wesley who has survived a trauma, "the need to preserve safety must be balanced constantly against the need to face the past" (176). At the start of the play, Wesley is more concerned with "preserving safety" than with facing the past, and this involves denial—he tells his mother, "He [Weston] wasn't threatening you" (*7P* 136). Wesley also implicitly defends his father's violence by telling his mother she provoked his father: "You locked the door" (*7P* 136).

At this point, Ella attempts to quell the conversation by assuming her traditional role of homemaker. She moves to the refrigerator and looks for something to cook for breakfast. The refrigerator contains bacon and bread but nothing else, as though holding

just enough for the family's last meal before an execution. While Ella makes breakfast, Wesley delivers a staccato-like monologue which provides the audience with a glimpse of how deeply traumatized he is by his father's behavior:

> I was lying there on my back . . . I was looking straight up at the ceiling at all my model airplanes hanging by all their thin metal wires . . . My listening was afraid. Afraid of sound. Tense . . . Foot kicking door. Man's voice. Dad's voice. Bottle crashing. Glass breaking. Fist through door. Man cursing. Man going insane. (*7P* 138)

Wesley's monologue moves from longer sentences to short, fragmented phrases. It is as though his speech contracts like a rubber band as his consciousness contracts or retreats in response to the trauma which the memory has inflicted upon his psyche. Jack Gelber has noted, "One effect of the volcanic monologue, which is one of Shepard's favorite forms of address, is the near hypnotic state it promotes" (qtd. in Marranca 47). Just as a psychotherapist might induce hypnosis in order to encourage a traumatized victim to relate his story, so do Shepard's monologues induce a kind of self-hypnosis for the traumatized family member. The myth of the happy, functional nuclear American family where each member willingly plays his or her role is shattered in Shepard's drama. I would like to examine how Shepard uses gothic techniques to shatter this myth in *Curse of the Starving Class*; these gothic techniques include a "curse," the uncanny, and implied incest.

The first "curse" introduced in the play is the daughter's menstruation—the first menstruation of her young life. Ella uses the term "curse" in referring to her daughter's menstruation when she tells Wesley to "keep an eye out" for his sister because "she's got the curse" (*7P* 155). When Ella attempts to counsel her daughter, the mother's dubious advice suggests her failure as a mother: Ella says, "Now the first thing you'll think is that you've hurt yourself . . . you should never go swimming when that happens. It can cause you to bleed to death. The water draws it out of you" (*7P* 139). By using an "old wives tale" to explain the menstruation to her daughter, Ella eschews a meaningful, intimate dialogue with her daughter and leaves Emma bewildered. This is illustrated later in the play when Taylor the lawyer arrives at the house—Emma questions Taylor about her mother, asking "Does she bleed? Does she have blood coming out of her?" (*7P* 152). Canonical gothic literature is replete with bloody scenes to elicit horror. Among these are the bleeding statue of Alfonso in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the Bleeding Nun from Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1797), the bloody footprints in Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), and the bloody, choking deaths of the Pyncheon clan in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). In these works, blood is used as a sign of ill omen, suggesting an impending horror. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard takes the trademark gothic blood and internalizes it as part of normal life (one might say the menstruation is a type of ritualistic blood). In subsequent scenes, Shepard uses blood visually to shock the audience: in Act Three, Wesley appears

with his "face and hands bloody," explaining that he "ran into a brick wall" while trying to get Weston's money back from loan sharks (*7P* 184). Later, Wesley appears with lamb's blood "dripping" down his arms (*7P* 196). Finally, in perhaps the play's most visceral and visually arresting scene, a bloody, skinned lamb carcass is dumped onto the kitchen floor looking like "somebody's afterbirth" (198).

The more significant and overarching "curse" which plagues the Tates and makes them a modern gothic family is the curse of the fallen father—that is, the curse brought about due to Weston Tate's abnegation of his paternal role and his utter failure as the family's protector and provider. Midway through the play, Ella attempts to explain the curse to Wesley. Her explanation recalls gothic curses in American literature from Charles Brockden Brown to Hawthorne to O'Neill—hinting at something dark, oppressive, and perhaps supernatural:

> It's a curse. I can feel it. It's invisible but it's there. It's always there. It comes onto us like nighttime . . . And it always comes. Repeats itself. It comes even when you do everything to stop it from coming . . . And it goes back. Deep. It goes back and back to tiny little cells and genes . . . We spread it. We pass it on. (*7P* 174)

Ella's description of the curse suggests that the family members are helpless and have no real power with which to resist their fate. Yet Shepard—in typical paradoxical fashion which makes his plays so inscrutable—gives ample evidence that the curse is in fact at

least as much a consequence of the fallen father's choices and actions as it is a cause of those choices and actions. One prevalent trait of the fallen father in Shepard—as in O'Neill—is drunkenness. As a follow-up to his previous night's drunken rage, Weston Tate comes onstage near the end of Act One, "unshaven and slightly drunk," cursing and knocking over garbage cans (*7P* 156). As soon as he hears his father, haunted son Wesley "bolts off stage left" as though terrified. Weston is a "very big man, middle-aged" who wears a rumpled overcoat, blue baseball cap, baggy pants, and tennis shoes (*7P* 156). Nowhere in Shepard's family plays do we find a fallen father who is neatly dressed: the outward disheveled appearance always mirrors the father's inner wreckage. Though Weston does not use the term "curse," he admits to Wesley that he is "infected" with undesirable and despicable traits; moreover, Weston claims to have inherited these traits from his own father:

> I never saw my old man's poison till I was much older than you. Much older. And then you know how I recognized it? Because I saw myself infected with it . . . I watched my old man move around. I watched him move through rooms . . . watched him keeping out of the way of things. Out of the way of my mother. Away from my brothers . . . Nobody saw him but me . . . He lived apart. Right in the midst of things and he lived apart. Nobody saw that. (7P 167-168)

Daughter Emma verifies the similarities between her father and her grandfather, and she tells Wesley that he, too, has inherited these traits: all the Tate males have a "short fuse" like "liquid dynamite," "something in the blood. Hereditary. Highly explosive" (*7P* 152). It is the paternal influence, passed down through the generations, which is the real "curse" that afflicts the son especially, but also the other family members who suffer under its malevolence. The daughter, Emma, also suffers from negative traits inherited from her father: following Emma's arrest for shooting up the Alibi Club, Weston says of his daughter, "She always was a fireball . . . direct descendant" (*7P* 188). Charles Lyons believes that not only this play but also *Buried Child* and *True West* are "theatrical attempts to articulate the processes of exorcising the presence of the father" (129). Throughout *Curse of the Starving Class*, the family members, especially haunted son Wesley, attempt to escape this curse of patriarchal influence.

For his part, Weston Tate exhibits hostility and exasperation toward his family, treating them more as nuisances than as loved ones. When Wesley questions his father about selling the farm, Weston demands, "What're you doing around here?" (*7P* 168). Wesley replies, "I'm part of your offspring," as though needing to remind his father of the fact. Weston also exhibits paranoia toward his family, calling them a "den of vipers" and accusing them of being "spies" (*7P* 169). His rage culminates with a self-deluding assertion that he is fulfilling his paternal role as provider: "I'M BEING TAKEN FOR A RIDE BY EVERY ONE OF YOU! I'm the one who works! I'm the one who brings

home food!" (*7P* 169). This last statement is particularly ironic because in Act One, Weston had brought home only a bag of artichokes for his family; Shepard reminds the audience of Weston's pathetic failure as provider by having a real pot of artichokes boiling on the stove as Act Two begins.

The most prevalent and visual reminder of Weston's failure as a father is the empty refrigerator which is repetitively (even obsessively) opened and closed by every family member throughout the play. In Act One, Ella scolds Wesley, telling him, "Get out of that refrigerator! You're always in the refrigerator!" (*7P* 143). Wes replies that he is "hungry," and there is ample evidence that this hunger is more than merely physical. According to Bonnie Marranca, in Shepard's work "physical hunger is a metaphor for spiritual hunger," and family members often use eating as a "way to evade emotion" (15). This would explain why the Tates obsessively open and close the refrigerator, especially during conversations with another family member: the action of opening and closing the refrigerator door distracts the family members from having to converse with one another.

For Emma, the empty refrigerator not only symbolizes lack of provisions but is also a mocking reminder of her family's low social status. Emma's monologue in Act One demonstrates this link between the lack of food and her own sense of self-esteem. While gazing into the refrigerator, Emma asks:

> Hello? Anything in here? We're not broke, you know, so you don't have to hide. I don't know where the money goes to but we're not broke.

> We're not part of the starving class . . . Nothing? It's all right. You don't have to be ashamed. I've had worse. I've had to take my lunch to school wrapped up in a Weber's bread wrapper. (*7P* 150)

Emma's monologue ends by her cursing the refrigerator as a "motherfucker": since she cannot muster the courage to curse her father who is really responsible for the family's dire straits, she chooses instead to curse the vacuous appliance. Later in Act One, Wesley opens the refrigerator and says, " . . . out of luck. Santa Claus hasn't come yet" (*7P* 156). By referring to Weston as Santa Claus, Wesley emphasizes his father's fictional status (as a reliable provider) as well as how infrequently his father lays in provisions for the family. When Weston himself looks into the refrigerator, his reaction is one of anger at his family for daring to consume the food that he believes he has provided for them. Weston's paranoia creeps up again as he views himself as a persecuted martyr who suffers at the hands of his ungrateful family:

> Perfect! ZERO! . . . WE'VE DONE IT AGAIN! WE'VE GONE AND LEFT EVERYTHING UP TO THE OLD MAN AGAIN! ALL THE UPKEEP! THE MAINTENANCE! PERFECT! . . . IS EVERYBODY HOPING FOR A MIRACLE? . . . MR. SLAVE LABOR HIMSELF COME HOME TO REPLENISH THE EMPTY LARDER!" (*7P* 157)

Cathy Caruth has noted that "because the individual cannot recall the original traumatic event, she is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it" (qtd. in Leys 298). The Tates' opening and closing of the refrigerator throughout the play demonstrate one example of how "compulsive, repetitive superficially meaningless behavior addresses a deeper rift in the psyche" (Miles 2). Of course, the key word in Miles' statement is *superficially* since the behavior is not really "meaningless," though it may appear so at first glance. The opening and closing of the refrigerator door serves to distract the family from the various traumas which they have inflicted upon each other—traumas which they are now striving to repress.

By Act Two, Weston's position as provider has been fully usurped by his wife. Ella enters while Weston is asleep on the kitchen table. This is appropriate since he has been emotionally unconscious toward his family for many years, and the kitchen table which should be a place for conversation and commiseration has instead become a symbol of the emotionally comatose state which paralyzes the family's relationships. Ella brings a sack of groceries into the kitchen and fills the refrigerator; she succeeds in the provider role after Weston, with his half-priced artichokes, had failed (*7P* 172). But a well-stocked refrigerator will not ultimately solve the Tates' problems because the family members crave sustenance beyond merely physical nourishment. In the final important scene involving the symbolic refrigerator, Wesley pulls food from the refrigerator as though in a frenzy, groaning as he eats it "ravenously" while "throwing half-eaten food to one side and

then digging into more" (*7P* 192). Since Wesley discards the half-eaten food, his hunger is clearly something other than physical. Weston reacts to this spectacle with characteristic anger and denial, yelling to his son, "You couldn't be all that starving! We're not that bad off!" (*7P* 192). Shepard had been intrigued for many years with the idea of having enough provisions to meet one's needs. In a 1964 prose piece entitled "Running Out of Trouble" (from his *Hawk Moon* collection), Shepard writes,

I'd start thinking about wood and digging the wood supply and calculating how long it would last . . . Then I'd start thinking about food and being fed and eating . . . I began to see that running-out trouble was real trouble and it was the kind of trouble I was running up against all the time . . . ." (178). In theory, once one has accumulated an adequate supply of provisions, the "need" should be met and the dilemma resolved. But Shepard uses excess to show that the real "need" is for something other than material goods. Other family plays follow this same pattern. In *Buried Child*, Tilden carries an excess of carrots and corn into the house, suggesting that the curse on the barren farm has been lifted and the farm is once again producing crops. Yet no real resolutions have been reached; the barren land was not the ultimate problem, after all. In *True West*, Austin becomes a petty burglar and stocks his mother's kitchen with an excess of toasters and toast, yet the brothers' problems involved neither lack of food nor material goods. By using excess and spectacle to visually inundate the audience, Shepard seems to suggest that hoarding or storing up is not the ultimate answer to the family's problems. The real demons in

Shepard's families can only be exorcized through gothic devices, including uncanny moments followed by character transformations. In Shepard's family plays, these uncanny moments are most often dramatized through dialogue whereby a character reports the uncanny moment after the fact. Weston Tate describes his uncanny moment to Wesley, though the audience does not actually witness this moment onstage (this is the same pattern used to convey Vince's uncanny moment in *Buried Child*).

Uncanny moments occur when repression fails and traumatic memories which "ought to have been kept concealed [have] nevertheless come to light" (Freud 166). The resulting epiphany reveals a kind of "defamiliarized familiar"; the traumatized victim has a moment when he or she is made aware of "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Williams 72). These moments are not merely scary, though they do involve terror, as Williams' quotation makes clear. Rather, they are moments in which terror opens up an epiphany for the recipient—an epiphany which leads a character to make a monumental decision to change his or her life in a profound way (though this change is not always successful or, if successful, not always a change for the better). In *The Holy Ghostly* Pop experienced an uncanny moment when, in the presence of his *doppelgänger* (the corpse), he realized that he was not bleeding from his gunshot wound—he realized that he was, in fact, already dead. The uncanny moment is short-lived, and *The Holy Ghostly* ends with Pop's frenzied fire dance. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, however, Shepard allows fallen father Weston a more

substantial experience with the uncanny, followed by a type of character transformation. The audience does not actually witness an epiphanic moment—this moment has apparently occurred sometime between the close of Act Two (which ended with Weston staring dumbly into the refrigerator) and the start of Act Three. Act Three apparently takes place the following morning, though Shepard is never precise on this point: we know only that coffee is brewing on the stove, and Weston has had ample time to change clothes and do all of the laundry. Weston describes his uncanny experience later in the act, but the audience sees evidence of his transformation immediately as the curtain rises on Act Three. The first sign of Weston's transformation is his change of clothes: gone are the overcoat, ball cap and tennis shoes. Weston now wears "a fresh clean shirt, new pants, shined shoes, and has had a shave" (*7P* 182). More important than his outward appearance, Weston "seems sober now and in higher spirits compared to before" (182). Weston has washed a load of laundry and is folding and stacking it; he is clearly no longer reluctant to do traditional "woman's work." What has happened to Weston? True to his elusive style, Shepard never answers this question definitively, but Weston's opening monologue provides some clues. In the monologue, where Weston speaks to the lamb penned inside the kitchen, he describes castrating a dozen spring ram lambs, tossing their testes on top of a tin roof, and watching the testes being snatched and devoured by a swooping eagle. Weston tells the lamb that he was "cheerin' for that eagle," and describes the experience as similar to "the first day I went up in a B-49" (*7P* 183). The

monologue seems significant for two reasons. First, it is a clear sign that Weston is remembering the past (rather than repressing and denying it)—this remembrance is a step toward psychological healing. Secondly, the castration of the lambs parallels Weston's metaphorical castration—that is, by doing housework such as folding laundry and making coffee, Weston appears to have "castrated" his old self and attempted to start anew. He admits as much when he explains his transformation to Wesley, beginning with an uncanny moment during which Weston questioned what was real and what was unreal:

> I started wondering who this was walking around in the orchard at six-thirty in the morning. It didn't feel like me . . . Then I started to wonder who the owner was . . . Then it struck me that I actually was the owner . . . . (*7P* 185)

After this uncanny moment, Weston tells of returning to the house, stripping off his clothes and walking around the house naked: "It was like peeling off a whole person. A whole stranger" (*7P* 185). As the next step in his transformation, Weston filled the bathtub and submerged himself—first in scalding water and then in ice-cold water. The baths were followed by a breakfast of ham, eggs, and coffee which Weston prepared himself. Weston says, "I found myself doing all this stuff I used to do. Like I was coming back to my life after a long time a' being away" (*7P* 186). While doing the laundry, Weston claims to have had an epiphany about family:

> Every time I bent down to pick up somebody's clothes I could feel that person like they were right there in the room. Like the clothes were still attached to the person . . . It was good to be connected by blood like that. That a family wasn't just a social thing. It was an animal thing. (*7P* 186)

As part of his uncanny experience, Weston claims to experience a heightened sense of intimacy with his family members. Though he was alone when he had this experience, he realizes the possibility for a closer, more intimate relationship with them—and he implies that he desires a more intimate relationship with his family.

Shepard has compared his own writing to an uncanny moment he himself experienced while playing drums for the Holy Modal Rounders in the 1960's: "I began to get the haunting sense that something in me writes but not necessarily me . . . [it] happened to me once when I was playing drums . . . and it scared the shit out of me" (qtd. in Derose 81). To get a better sense of precisely what happened to Shepard while he was playing drums on this occasion, we can compare his description (above) with the words of Tympani who describes a similar experience in Shepard's play *Angel City*: "I looked straight down at my hands and I saw somebody else playing the pattern. It wasn't me. It was a different body. Then I got scared" (qtd. in Derose 81). Both of these descriptions are similar to Weston's uncanny experience while walking around the Tate family farm—something surreal or supernatural has enabled a character to have an epiphany. I am

referring to these instances as uncanny because they involve the "defamiliarized familiar," something that at first seemed strange and threatening (a repressed memory) but turned out to be familiar.

Weston's uncanny experience is followed by a transformation in his character, beginning with the changes (which I noted above) in his slovenly appearance. By sobering up and cleaning up (through the cleansing purgation of the hot and cold baths), Weston convinces himself that he has been reborn. When he walks naked through the house, he does so "in a deliberate celebration of his reconstituted identity" (Lyons 126). The validity of Weston's rebirth seems dubious, however, because he expects his transformation to lead to an accompanying transformation of his situation, which it does not. Wesley reminds his father that he is still in debt to loan sharks and has still been swindled out of the farm by Ella's scheming with a lawyer named Taylor. But Weston cannot accept that his own personal reforms will not alter his external circumstances. Near the end of the play, he cries out in exasperation, "IT'S ALL OVER WITH NOW BECAUSE I'VE BEEN REBORN! I'M A WHOLE NEW PERSON NOW!" (*7P* 192). After witnessing his father's transformation and hearing about his uncanny moment, haunted son Wesley attempts to replicate his father's experience, but this attempt is abortive. After taking the hot and cold baths and walking around the house naked, Wesley tells Emma, "I tried his remedy, but it didn't work" and "I was waiting for something to happen" (*7P* 196). When he fails to achieve self-fulfillment using his father's remedy, Wesley instead becomes a kind

of gothic *doppelgänger* for Weston. He comes onstage wearing Weston's old ball cap, tennis shoes and overcoat. Weston scolds his son for wearing them, saying the clothes were "thrown up in" and "pissed in" (*7P* 191). Shepard's stage directions say nothing about the appearance of the clothes that Wesley is wearing, but the clothes must be visually alarming and repulsive, as Weston's words suggest. Only after seeing his clothes on his son can the fallen father truly recognize his own faults. Wesley's reply is telling: he says, "They [the clothes] fit me." Indeed, they "fit" him not only in the literal but also in the psychological and gothic sense—that is, the haunted son is doomed to "fit" into the role abnegated by the fallen father and thus is destined to succumb to the "curse" which plagues the family. This is made clear when Wesley describes his own uncanny transformation—a transformation which is really a fulfillment of his cursed destiny. As Wesley describes putting on his father's clothes, he tells Emma "It seemed like a part of him was growing on me. I could feel him taking over me . . . I could feel myself retreating. I could feel him coming in and me going out. Just like the change of the guards" (*7P* 196). Even Ella, when she sees her son in Weston's clothes, mistakes the son for the father and does not realize her mistake for several minutes.

Wesley's outward morphing into the fallen father is a symbolic confirmation that his efforts toward redemption will be futile—he is doomed to remain on the farm. By the play's final curtain, Weston has fled the farm; Emma has been blown up by a car bomb, and only mother and son remain. Like the two-faced Roman god Janus, Ella and Wesley

stand back to back at the final curtain, simultaneously facing the sordid past and the terrifying future. Perhaps most importantly, these two trauma survivors complete the story begun by the fallen father—the story of the eagle feasting on the testes of the castrated lamb:

> ELLA: A big tomcat comes . . .
>
> WESLEY: And that eagle comes down and picks up the cat in his talons and carries him screaming off into the sky.
>
> ELLA: That cat's tearing his chest out, and that eagle's trying to drop him . . .
>
> WESLEY: And the eagle's being torn apart in midair . . .
>
> ELLA: And they come crashing down to earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing. (*7P* 200)

This story may be read as a metaphor for the trauma inflicted upon the family by the fallen father—this trauma is the real "curse." As the voracious eagle (the fallen father) attacks the cat (the family members), the cat fights back desperately, and both are doomed in the end. By standing back-to-back and staring off into space as they recite this story, Shepard seems to suggest that mother and son are in a trance or similar hypnotic state common among trauma victims who are recalling a repressed memory. Furthermore, this back-to-back posture may imply that Ella and Wesley are themselves hiding or repressing

another type of trauma, one which they refuse to allow themselves to "see" and a trauma which is also common in gothic literature—incest.

Throughout the play, there is a subtext of implied incest between mother and son. Early in the play, Wesley "unzips his fly, takes out his pecker, and starts pissing all over" the charts which his sister had made for her 4-H Club demonstration on how to cut up a chicken (*7P* 142). While Wesley is urinating on the kitchen floor, Ella sits just a few feet away but seems either not to notice or not to mind what Wesley is doing. This is the first of several scenes where the son will appear naked (or nearly so) in his mother's presence.

Moments after Wesley exposes himself and urinates, Ella remarks how Wesley is circumcised, just like his Grandfather (referring to her own father). Her son's penis is "almost identical in fact" to her father's, and when Wes asks how she knows what Grandfather's penis looked like, she replies coyly, "We lived in a small house" (*7P* 144). Later in the play, Wesley enters the kitchen naked and "dazed" while Ella is stretched out on the kitchen table. Ella stares at her son's nakedness but "doesn't react" (*7P* 189). One cannot miss the Oedipal situation which Shepard has orchestrated here, with the mother stretched out prostrate, looking up at her naked son. Furthermore, we learn that Ella has been unfaithful to Weston before, at least once: Emma tells the lawyer Taylor that her father "almost killed one guy he caught her [Ella] with" (*7P* 152). In the gothic family paradigm, incest between mother and son is one possible consequence—or perhaps one possible cause—of the fallen father's betrayal of his prescribed roles. The alienated

mother—alienated from her husband's affections and from her ability to respect him anymore—focuses her affections instead on her son. Thus one family trauma—the fallen father's physical and emotional abuse of his family—often leads to another family trauma—incest between mother and son. This is the pattern is played out in two later Shepard family plays, *Buried Child* and *A Lie of the Mind*. In the former, incest is strongly suggested (if not stated outright) while in the latter, there is a subtle subtext of implied incest between mother and son, as there was in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Using gothic devices of a family curse, uncanny transformations, and implied incest, Shepard mentally and emotionally unsettles his audience so that his accompanying cultural critique can be communicated without seeming didactic.

The socio-economic facet of the Tates' "curse" involves the loss of the family farm and, indeed, the loss of an entire way of life. As haunted son Wesley puts it, "It means more than losing a house. It means losing a country" (*7P* 163). Shepard uses external characters such as the lawyer Taylor, the bar owner Ellis, and the loan sharks Emerson and Slater to portray the threat posed by the outside world—the rapacious "others" who seek to devour the family's way of life. These "others" were granted access when the family and home were made vulnerable by the misdeeds of the fallen father, as I have attempted to outline above. The smashed front door at the opening curtain is the starkest example of how outsiders were literally granted access to the family home through the father's violence and fury.

Central to Shepard's cultural critique—at least in the gothic family plays examined in this study—is the idea that the working-class family is threatened and exploited by "outsiders" who are often of higher socio-economic status or educational level. According to Jim McGhee, the "hero" in Shepard's plays is nearly always "lower-middle class" and "struggling to get out of the situation he's in" (158). The hero's roots are rural, and "his power is in his language, in his ability to create fantastic verbal image sequences that take him out of his confining present by transcending time and space" (McGhee 158). Weston's lengthy monologue on the eagle devouring the lamb testes provides one example of these "fantastic verbal image sequences" mentioned by McGhee. The monologue occurs only after Weston's uncanny moment and transformation; and for this reason, the verbal image sequence suggests a transcendence, albeit a temporary one. As I have stated in the Introduction, attempts at transcendence by the members of Shepard's gothic families are abortive: transcendence, if it occurs, is short-lived. In Weston's case, his monologue about the eagle and the lambs symbolizes transcendence through its flight imagery. But, as Ella and Wesley remind us in the closing lines of the play, the eagle ends by becoming entangled with a cat, and both "come crashing down to earth" (*7P* 200). Because the father's transcendence is achieved through language (specifically, monologues delivered in a sort of reverie) this transcendence is merely metaphorical; the father remains earthbound and never physically escapes his sordid environs. But through the power of language (those "fantastic verbal image sequences" mentioned by McGhee), the father can

momentarily rise above his calamity. The power of language does not finally rescue or redeem the father, however; following his monologue, Weston Tate is still forced to flee the home he has built because the dangers which surround him are still very much present.

But Shepard muddles the question of blame by introducing outsiders who threaten the family's way of life just as surely as the fallen father himself threatens this way of life. As McGhee notes, the "bad guy" is usually a businessman or gangster who wears a suit and tie (in contrast to the family's plainer clothing). In family plays such as *Buried Child*, the threatening outsider may even wear a clergyman's collar. The threatening outsider is a loner, "never associated with a wife or family," and is "greedy" and "destructive" (McGhee 158). Examples of the isolated, threatening outsider can also be traced to works by Henrik Ibsen, such as *A Doll's House*, where both Krogstad and Dr. Rank are dangerous to the family structure; in *Hedda Gabler*, Judge Brack fills this role; and in *Ghosts*, Manders and Engstrand are threatening to the family. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the first outsider who appears is Taylor, the lawyer. Taylor has taken Ella as his ally, with hopes of converting the Tate farm into low-cost housing units, making himself a huge profit in the process. Taylor uses a lawyerly doublespeak when he tells Emma, "Of course it's a shame to see agriculture being slowly pushed into the background in deference to low-cost housing, but that's simply a product of the times we live in. There's simply more people on the planet these days" (153). Emma and Wesley also suspect their mother is having an affair with Taylor—just as alienated mother Halie carries on an affair

with Father Dewis in *Buried Child*, Shepard's next family play. In the eyes of haunted son Wesley, Taylor is a "zombie" who is leading an "invasion" of their farm. Wesley tells his sister, "Taylor is the head zombie. He's the scout for the other zombies. He's only a sign that more zombies are on their way. They'll be filing through the door pretty soon" (*7P* 163). Taylor the lawyer, Ellis the bar owner, and the loan sharks Emerson and Slater are all "zombies" in the sense that they are dead to rural, traditional American values—the link between the family's land and the family's survival as a social unit—yet they continue to speak and move about in a sort of death-in-life state. In this play, Shepard is content to have Wesley make the zombie comparison and leave the audience with the resonating symbolism, but in earlier plays like *Angel City*, Shepard reinforced his metaphorical comparisons with the visual shock of actually showing the greedy, reptilian Hollywood producers literally metamorphosing into the "snakes" they really are.

Taylor's treachery, we later learn, goes beyond his conspiracy with Ella to snatch the family farm. Sometime earlier (we are never sure), Taylor had conned Weston into buying a worthless piece of desert property: "Just a bunch of strings on sticks, with the lizards blowing across it," as Weston later admits (7P 158). Weston himself had not bothered to inspect the lot before he bought it, so he is at least as guilty as Taylor for this fiasco. Weston tries to defend his financial failures, and one cannot help thinking of James Tyrone from O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* who was constantly squandering money on worthless property in hopes of quick wealth. Weston tells Wesley,

> I always figured on the future. I banked on it . . . I figured that's why everyone wants you to buy things. Buy refrigerators. Buy cars, houses, lots, invest. They wouldn't be so generous if they didn't figure you had it comin' in. They all want you to borrow anyhow . . . The whole thing's geared to invisible money. You never hear the sound of change anymore. It's all the sound of plastic shuffling back and forth. It's all in everybody's heads. So I figured if that's the case, why not take advantage of it? (*7P* 194)

The lure of easy credit was too strong a temptation for Weston, and now the family must face the consequences of his profligacy. After his uncanny epiphany and transformation, Weston seems to feel that he finally owes some sort of explanation to his son. He tells Wesley,

> I couldn't stand the idea that everything would stay the same . . . I kept looking for it out there somewhere. . . I couldn't figure out the jumps. From bein' born, to growing up, to droppin' bombs, to having kids, to hittin' bars, to this . . . I kept looking for it out there somewhere. And all the time it was right inside this house. (*7P* 194)

Characteristically, Shepard never allows Weston to articulate for us precisely what "it" is that was "right inside this house" all the time. But the context of Weston's speech implies that "it" is synonymous with success, peace, and emotional fulfillment—all the things

Weston was searching for "out there" and could have found at home. Ironically—yet typical for Shepard's fallen fathers—at the same time Weston realizes this truth, he also realizes that he must leave home to escape the loan sharks who seek to kill him. In order to "start a whole new life," Weston realizes he must "disappear," so he resolves to go to Mexico (*7P* 195). In fact, "disappear" is a verb Shepard enjoys using to describe the fallen fathers in his gothic families: in *Buried Child*, Dodge claims to have "disappeared" and calls himself "an invisible man" (*7P* 68). Since the fallen father cannot ultimately atone for his sins against his family, he must finally obliterate himself (since he was the true cause of the family's demise) through either exile or death.

Should the onus for the family's social disintegration finally fall upon the shoulders of the father or upon the rapacious outsiders? In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the answer to this question is elusive. We have seen how Taylor exploited Weston through deceit and outright fraud, and we have seen how Ellis allies himself with Ella (even their names suggest a connection) in an attempt to thwart Weston's plans. One could argue that Weston's financial failings are borne out of a duty instilled in him by American culture—a duty as a father and an American male to get rich as quickly as possible in order to enjoy the good life of materialism and consumerism. Furthermore, one could argue that lawyers like Taylor and business proprietors like Ellis are both the authors and purveyors of these cultural imperatives. In this respect, Weston Tate may be seen as a victim who is simply trying to fulfill a role which has been culturally constructed: if the ideal

American family consists of a home-making, child-rearing wife and submissive, dutiful children, then the father and husband is under enormous pressure to provide financially for his family; and the surest sign that the father has succeeded, according to American advertising, is for him to surround the family with conspicuous icons of materialism and consumerism, such as appliances, marketable securities, precious metals, and real estate. Weston Tate has clearly been manipulated, to a certain extent, by these cultural constructions of male success. But I have maintained that Shepard does not excuse the father entirely for his own personal failures and abnegations which have directly contributed (if not entirely caused) the disintegration of the family; it is worth noting that, in the family plays which followed *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard mitigates the role of the threatening outsiders. In *Buried Child*, *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind* (as well as the family plays of the 1990's), there are no blatantly rapacious outsiders like Taylor and Ellis whose sole purpose is to bring economic ruin to the family. Consequently, Shepard's later family plays hold the father more and more accountable for the family's collapse.

Like the fallen father who flees for Mexico at the end of the play, the other members of the Tate family express a desire to flee to a foreign land. But none of them make it off the farm by the play's closing curtain. Emma wants to move to Mexico like her father, but she is blown up by a car bomb planted by the loan sharks in Weston's Packard (apparently Shepard wants us to think Weston has fled on foot). Ella wants to

move to Europe: "They have everything in Europe. High art. Paintings. Castles" (*7P* 143).[5] Wesley wants to escape to Alaska, an "undiscovered" place that to his mind is "full of possibilities." Yet as the play ends, mother and son seem doomed to their "curse," frozen in that Janus-like posture as they finish the tale begun by the fallen father. Shepard's final cultural commentary seems to be that—because of the threat posed by amoral, opportunistic outsiders like Taylor, Ellis, Emerson, and Slater—gothic fathers like Weston Tate can never experience a true rebirth; the rotten fruit borne by the fathers' transgressions will remain in spite of all attempts at self-reformation.

With his next family play, *Buried Child*, Shepard would use these same gothic devices—a family curse, incest, and the uncanny—but to a much greater extent. The result would be the most terrifying (and acclaimed) play in the Shepard canon.

[5] Lorraine, the alienated mother in *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), also wants to flee to Europe, specifically to Ireland where they have distant relatives.

CHAPTER THREE: SHEPARD'S GOTHIC APEX—*BURIED CHILD*

Laura Graham has described *Buried Child* as a play which combines the "return of the prodigal son" myth with a "murder mystery formula" (59). While Graham's assessment may be accurate, the play is much more than simply a structural combination of a myth and a formula. One actor (Robert Coe) recalls the challenge of defining precisely what effect should be aimed for when producing *Buried Child*: "You want a darkness. I remember we had a difficulty in figuring out what kind of play this was. A mystery, a comedy, gothic horror, or what?" (qtd. in Marranca 154). The play had its premiere on June 27, 1978, at the Magic Theater in San Francisco. But even Shepard himself, years later, hinted at some of the play's difficulties in explaining why he decided to rewrite some parts of the text in 1996:

> I was never real happy with the play. It was somewhat raggedy, areas of it were sloppy . . . you can't possibly do this thing as a Eugene O'Neill play. I've seen it done over and over again in a macabre, stone-faced, methodical, quasi-tragic form, and it's deadly. (qtd. in Shewey 238-239)

Shepard's cryptic remark that the play was "deadly" is symptomatic of the problems inherent in critiquing the play and responding to it (and, in Shepard's case, deciding how to write the text itself). Since the play is, at least tangentially, about infanticide, why would Shepard be troubled if the play is "deadly"? In other words, shouldn't a play about a buried child and about the death of a fallen father be "deadly"? Or by "deadly," does

Shepard mean that the audience was not fully responding to the play in the way he intended—that the play was "deadly" in failing to provoke the desired emotional and psychological response from its viewers? For that matter, what might be the desired emotional and psychological response sought after by Shepard?

As usual, Shepard's work—especially this, his *chef d'oeuvre*—conjures more questions than answers. For the purposes of this study, I am suggesting that much of the play's elusiveness and challenges result from its gothic devices. *Buried Child* is Shepard's most explicitly "gothic" family play in several important ways. First, the play plumbs the psychic and emotional depths of the American family much more deeply than Shepard had previously done in either *The Holy Ghostly* or *Curse of the Starving Class*. Each of the family members is damaged in some way, and this damage usually manifests itself physically as well as psychologically. The family members in *Buried Child* each suffer from a collective repressed memory of a trauma that is (for most of the play) unspeakable. The repression of this trauma is ultimately unsuccessful, and the return of the repressed memory culminates with the father's final fall and the (grand)son's final haunting. Second, the play gives the most comprehensive portrait of the entire gothic family, including father, mother, sons (both living and dead), and grandson. Furthermore, the play includes an "outsider" character (Shelly) through whose eyes the audience can approach the mystery of the buried child as she attempts to play detective. Whereas the "outsiders" in *Curse of the Starving Class* served as antagonists who attempt to exploit the family economically,

Shelly in *Buried Child* begins as an innocent of sorts who is transformed when her own long-held beliefs about rural American family life are irrevocably shattered inside the Illinois farmhouse. By examining some of the most gothic features in *Buried Child*—including the uncanny, incest, and infanticide—we can observe how Shepard continued to adapt these elements to portray the American family as even more violent and insidious than it was in his previous family plays.

In a sense, the play's entire milieu is itself uncanny as Shepard "presents the familiar and proceeds to distort the image and action" (Graham 73). The setting should be idyllic, a sort of safe haven for the American family—a mid-western farm. But Shepard violates the audience's expectations, and, in doing so, accomplishes the same sort of defamiliarization of the American farm as Grant Wood achieved in his seminal portrait from the 1930's entitled *American Gothic*. As a native of Iowa, Wood knew the mid-western farm culture intimately. Yet, in *American Gothic* Wood eschews a realistic or romanticized portrait of a farmhouse and family, choosing instead a depiction that is ominous and aberrant. As Jonathan Jones observes:

> They [the figures in the painting] are keeping us out of their world rather than showing it off. The close-packed bodies of the 19th-century farmer and his spinster daughter . . . form a wall between us and the white wooden house. The house itself is a second closing of space, its front wall impenetrably neat, with blinds pulled down over the windows . . . That

> pitchfork [the farmer] holds is extremely phallic and sharp . . . Wood denied that it [the painting] was satirical. He proclaimed his sincere belief in the values of hearth and home. And yet it is impossible to deny the strangeness of this American masterpiece in which nothing is quite as stable as a first glance might suggest . . . Even the title is ambiguous. American Gothic refers to the architecture of the house, but also unavoidably has associations with Edgar Allan Poe and big-city prejudices about in-marrying, psychopathic country folk . . . There is something odd about that window and the concealed upstairs room behind it. Anything could go on up there. (Jones 2)

The overall effect of Wood's famous painting is similar to the gothic effect achieved by Shepard in *Buried Child*. Here, I am using the term "gothic" in a much broader sense than merely architecturally; "gothic" suggests the dark secrets which the family members in both Wood's painting and in Shepard's play are hiding, or at least appear to be hiding. In each case, the family farm which *should* be a place of openness, freedom, and communion between man and nature has instead become a place of hidden guilt and secretiveness. In this way, Shepard and Wood can be said to present an uncanny setting—a defamiliarized familiar which violates our expectations.

Shepard has called *Buried Child*, "sort of a typical Pulitzer Prize-winning play; it wasn't written for that purpose. It was kind of a test. I wanted to write a play about a

family" (qtd. in Dugdale 39). Of course, Shepard had already written several family plays in the first fourteen years of his playwriting career. But *Buried Child* is Shepard's best-known and most acclaimed work. *Buried Child* has its immediate roots in *The Last American Gas Station*, an unpublished three-act family play which Shepard wrote in August 1974. *The Last American Gas Station* depicts a family on a road trip: they lounge about at a rural gas station (they are bloated from eating too many Hershey bars) en route to somewhere. Some of the family members in this play share the same names as family members in *Buried Child*: the father in *The Last American Gas Station* is named Dodge, the mother named Halie, and the sons named Tate and Eamon (Shewey 98). Since *The Last American Gas Station* precedes *Curse of the Starving Class*, it is perhaps worth noting that one of the children in the earlier play is named Tate, and this became the surname for the troubled family in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Furthermore, the younger son Eamon is an amputee with a wooden leg, foreshadowing not only the character of Bradley from *Buried Child*, but also recalling the story told by Pop in *The Holy Ghostly* about his one-legged truck-driving brother, Jaimie.

As is often the case with Shepard's family plays, the author's own life seems to have inspired the characters of *Buried Child*. In 1996 Shepard mused, "The problem of identity has always interested me. Who in fact are we? . . . it becomes important to me to understand the way my stuff is interconnected, the way it's a result of the past. I'm beginning to understand that I'm the direct product of something that's wild and woolly"

(Coen 28). In *Motel Chronicles*, Shepard writes of visiting his paternal grandparents who lived near Chicago:

> My grandfather sits as he's always sat—in a hole of his sofa wrapped in crocheted blankets facing the T.V. He's like a skeleton . . . He smokes and drinks continuously and spits blood into a stand-up brass ashtray . . . Sometimes he coughs so violently his whole body doubles over . . . the T.V. is only on for the baseball. When the game ends, my Grandmother comes in and turns it off . . . When everyone's asleep I wander around in the room upstairs staring at all the photographs of my Uncles. The Uncle who dies in a motel room on his wedding night. His wife who died with him. The Uncle who lost a leg at the age of ten. The Uncle who married into the Chicago Mafia . . . all the Uncles who carry the bones of my Grandpa's face. (qtd. in Wilson 109)

This excerpt has much in common with *Buried Child*: both depict a grandfather sitting on a couch watching baseball while coughing violently and drinking whiskey; in both, there is a room upstairs with family photographs; both mention a relative who died in a motel room on his wedding night; both mention a Mafia connection; both include a relative who lost a leg; and both mention how the sons' faces resemble the father. Although Shepard claims that *Motel Chronicles* is "fiction," some critics doubt this claim, pointing out that the book contains photographs of Shepard and his family which add an air of authenticity (Wilson

110). It is reasonable to conclude that Shepard's own grandfather may very well have resembled Dodge from *Buried Child*.

Other prose works by Shepard are linked to *Buried Child*, including some biographically based writings which precede Shepard's composition of the play. *Hawk Moon*, for instance, published in 1973, includes a piece entitled "Illinois" which reads, "Illinois green lush wet dripping corn . . Grandpa dies in his slippers and Grandpa dies in his baseball cap and Grandpa dies sitting up" (167). Just as some of Shepard's prose works evince important links to *Buried Child*, Shepard's composition of the play's text itself was an arduous, protean process out of which the final script eventually evolved.

In an article entitled "Digging Up *Buried Child*," Charles Whiting notes that, sometime between 1977-78, Shepard wrote three distinct versions of *Buried Child* before settling on a final (fourth) version for the published text. In each version, the text experienced some important evolutions, including a softening of social and cultural critique between the first draft and the final draft. A first draft of the play contained several passages which may be viewed as cultural critiques: in Act Two, Shelly told Dodge, "There must've been a time in America when everything seemed like it was o.k. There must've been sometime when everything seemed perfect" (qtd. in Whiting 549). Shelly's comments imply that the horror inside the farmhouse is somehow a microcosm of a larger malady which has overtaken the entire nation—and this was not always the case. In the same "first" version of the play, Halie makes a similar statement to Father Dewis: "You

can't deny we had a peaceful home! The whole country was at peace! One nation under God! Indivisible! It's as though the whole country went to Hell and we went with it!" (qtd. in Whiting 551). These remarks move the play's thematic concerns onto a much larger canvass of political and social commentary. Halie implies that since the "country went to Hell," there was little their family could do but follow suit; they were just dragged into the quagmire with the rest of America.

Precisely when and why the country "went to Hell" is something that Shepard does not explain, nor can we be certain that Shepard himself believes there was actually an idyllic time in America's history when the family existed in a state of serenity. But the fallen fathers in Shepard's gothic family plays make statements indicating that they themselves believed that a happier time was possible (or used to be possible). Near the conclusion of *Buried Child*, Dodge tells Shelly that there was a time when life was peaceful, perhaps even happy, and their farm was "producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over" (*7P* 123). In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston Tate explains his conviction that his dreams might have been realized if only he could have "figured out the jumps." But apart from these cryptic phrases, Shepard's audience has little evidence that felicity (even something approaching normalcy) is or was ever possible for the American family. In his seminal work, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler expresses his belief that American literature has always depicted men fleeing from traditional roles: "bewilderingly and embarrassingly [American literature is] a gothic

fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic" (Fiedler xxiv). Shepard's depictions of the American family, especially the fallen father, are consonant with Fiedler's thesis.

Before examining the gothic family members in *Buried Child*, I would first like to explore how Shepard's staging effects are important in reinforcing and communicating the sense of gothic mystery which permeates the house and its inhabitants. Indeed, in Shepard's family plays, staging effects are an important component of the overall gothic effect. Perhaps the most eerie staging device is the old-fashioned television which Dodge watches from his seat on the couch as the play opens: "A flickering blue light comes from the screen, but no image, no sound" (*7P* 63). The blue light provides an element of the surreal, providing a visual distortion for the audience—a subtle suggestion that, in this house, things are not always as they appear. Furthermore, the color blue may symbolize Dodge's emotional or psychic condition—a condition which is affected by the relentless rain outside.

The opening stage directions describe the "sound of light rain"; Shepard gives no indication whether it is day or night (*7P* 63). Many who are familiar with *Buried Child* have doubtless interpreted the rain pouring down in "blue sheets" as a harbinger of rejuvenation or renewal; after all, during the rainstorm Tilden appears with vegetables which have ostensibly sprung from the long-barren ground. But I would like to offer a different interpretation of the rainstorm by pointing out that storms are often used in gothic

literature as signs of ill omen or portents of imminent dread and horror. In gothic literature, storms serve as a catalyst by which repressed memories burst forth into consciousness under the external pressure of wind and rain. Poe's story "The Fall of the House of Usher" contains one of the best-known examples of a storm presaging the revelation of a dark secret; the gothic motifs of burial and resurrection make Poe's story a useful comparison for Shepard's play. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" a storm rages during that fateful night when Roderick Usher is forced to acknowledge that he has buried his sister alive. Similarly, I am suggesting that in *Buried Child* the rainfall—besides providing an ostensible explanation for the sudden return of crops—foreshadows the turmoil which unfolds inside the house as family members assault each other emotionally and psychologically. Michael Clifton believes that even the color of the rain—described as Halie as "blue sheets"—suggests repressed memories being stirred back to life by the storm. Clifton quotes novelist William Gass as saying, "Blue is . . most suitable as the color of interior life"; Clifton also points out that Dodge is surrounded by blue, both by the flickering blue light of the television set and the rain outside. Following Clifton's premise, Dodge's inundation by blue-as-unconsciousness seems a harbinger of the repressed memory of the buried child which resurfaces during the play. That is, the appearance of the blue light and blue rain might signal the eruption of the buried secret into the family's consciousness—and Dodge's consciousness in particular—verifying what Shakespeare

wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*: "Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long" (2.2.86).

The stairs are also a key element in Shepard's staging because they intensify the sense of mystery which permeates the house and the family. Shepard's stage directions describe stairs which "lead off stage left up into the wings with no landing" (*7P* 63). Like the kitchen curtains suspended in midair in *Curse of the Starving Class*, the fact that the stairs seem to lead off to nowhere with no visible landing at the top gives the upstairs area an other-worldly feel. The upstairs of Shepard's stage is like the mysterious upstairs room in Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*: "Anything could go on up there" (Jones 2). Halie (when she is home) spends most of her time upstairs, coming down only when necessity forces her to interact with her husband and sons. During most of the play's opening scene, Halie is hidden upstairs, and the audience hears only her voice. Using this technique, Shepard is able to communicate to the audience the sense of alienation and estrangement which has created a gulf between Halie and Dodge. Because Halie is upstairs, Dodge is able to lie to her and deny that he is drinking from a whiskey bottle hidden behind the couch cushions. Halie knows Dodge is drinking, of course, but the physical distance between them allows both to maintain their domestic charade and hide behind a fog of self-deception. The upstairs area is itself the scene of other deceptions: the audience learns through Shelly that there are family photos upstairs, including a photo of a mysterious baby in Halie's arms. The baby, we later learn, is the product of incest

between mother and son. The incest itself most likely occurred in one of the bedrooms upstairs. Tilden carries the bones of the buried child upstairs—where Halie awaits unwittingly but appropriately—in the play's final scene. But because we never actually see the upstairs area, we are left wondering about what else is up there and what terrible events have transpired there.

In addition to the mysterious upstairs area, Shepard skillfully uses a porch as part of the staging to reinforce the demarcation and contrast between the inside of the house—where secrets remain hidden—and the outside world. Shepard's stage directions describe a "screen door up left, leading from the porch to the outside. Beyond that are the shapes of dark elm trees" (*7P* 63). Shepard's elm trees may seem reminiscent of O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* where the tree branches stretched like arms of sentinels looming over the house and seemingly intensifying the sense of cloaked secretiveness inside the home. *Desire Under the Elms*, like *Buried Child*, ends with a revelation of infanticide. In *Buried Child*, the porch "becomes a passageway linking the ghostly happenings of the household, which has escaped the passage of time for thirty years, with a frightening and unpredictable world outside" (Lyons 142). In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston Tate mused, "Is this the inside or the outside?" (*7P* 156), and, in *Buried Child*, this distinction between inside and outside becomes much more significant. Dodge is the only character who never enters or leaves the house during the play, creating a sense

that he is somehow trapped—by his crimes against his family and his failure in his paternal role.

When the other family members do leave the house, Dodge is the one who suffers when they return. Tilden leaves and comes back carrying first corn, then carrots, and finally the muddy bones of the buried child. The vegetables astound Dodge, and the child's bones seem to accuse and indict him, albeit Dodge dies moments before Tilden carries the bones inside. When Halie leaves the house, she returns with an outsider—Father Dewis—who appears to be her lover, and together they ridicule Dodge and implicitly cuckold him. When Bradley returns to the house at the end of Act One (though we never his initial departure), he returns to mutilate Dodge's scalp with a pair of electric hair clippers. The next time Bradley leaves the house (sometime between Acts One and Two), he returns to mock Dodge and threaten him: "We could shoot him. We could drown him! What about drowning him?" (*7P* 106). When grandson Vince arrives and later leaves the house, he returns as a violent aggressor who claims not to remember Dodge. Dodge, meanwhile, is a permanent fixture of the house—unable or unwilling to go anywhere.

Furthermore, the demarcation between inside and outside becomes important in other contexts throughout the play, with the porch serving as the symbolic gateway between the two worlds. For instance, when Vince returns to the house in Act Three, he warns Shelly, "Don't come out here! I'm warning you! You'll disintegrate!" (*7P* 128).

Though Vince's warning is directed at Shelly, his words seem particularly appropriate for Dodge. Only inside the house can Dodge continue to delude himself into thinking his betrayals, crimes, and secrets will have no repercussions. Inside the house, safely enthroned on his couch, with his whiskey bottle nearby and with his frail body cloaked in a symbolic blanket (which I will examine later), Dodge believes that the repressed traumatic memories are buried forever. Just after shouting his warning, Vince uses a knife to cut a hole in the porch screen; then Vince crawls through the hole, breaching the gateway between the family's world and the outside world. As Vince had prophesied, once this screen is cut and the gateway is breached, Dodge's microcosm quickly disintegrates, and Dodge dies mere minutes later.

Many works in the gothic literary canon demonstrate how the secrets of the gothic household are threatened and eventually exposed through contact with the outside world. Indeed, contact with the outside world nearly always leads to the fall of the gothic villain, and, quite often, this gothic villain is the father or patriarch. In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred's evil scheme (to divorce his wife and take his son's former fiancée for himself) begins to unravel when the Knights of the Gigantic Sabre enter Manfred's castle with their entourage. In Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*, the villain Ambrosio is undone by an angry mob which storms the convent and arrests him. One of the best-known examples of a gothic villain threatened by the outside world occurs in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* when Van Helsing storms Dracula's castle and breaches the inner

sanctum. In *Buried Child*, Dodge takes the role of gothic villain: he has, by his own admission, committed infanticide. But though Dodge's crime is the most heinous, he is not the only malefactor in this family. As I will examine below, the other family members are equally guilty, though they are guilty of different transgressions. Consequently, contact with the outside world will weaken not only Dodge but other family members as well. Dodge recognizes how the outside world weakens the family by exposing their sins and frailties: he tells Shelly that all she has to do to overcome Bradley is to "throw it [Bradley's wooden leg] out the back door" and Bradley will become "totally helpless" (*7P* 110). Early in the play, Dodge tells Tilden, "Don't go outside. There's nothing out there . . . Everything's in here. Everything you need" (*7P* 80). For Dodge, the walls of the farmhouse serve to protect his comfortable ignorance, his belief that what he doesn't know (or what he won't admit to himself) cannot hurt him: he tells Tilden, "I don't even know who the neighbors are! And I don't wanna know!" (*7P* 70). Significantly, the arrival of one of these dreaded "outsiders"—Vince's girlfriend Shelly—is an omen that Dodge's secretive world is about to be shaken and, ultimately, irrevocably shattered. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Wesley had described the entrance of outsiders into the family home as an "invasion." In *Buried Child*, a similar "invasion" occurs, with deadly results for Dodge and for the family's previous life of repressed memories and denial. In order to fully understand the "gothic" family dynamic which is shattered at the end of the

play, I would like to examine individually each member of the gothic family in *Buried Child*, beginning with the play's central character: Dodge.

As the play begins, Dodge is described as being "in his late seventies," "very thin and sickly looking" as he reclines on "an old dark green sofa with the stuffing coming out in spots" (*7P* 63). A whiskey bottle hidden behind the sofa cushions provides him with a crutch with which he can medicate his emotional and psychological pain. The whiskey also serves to emphasize the estrangement and deception that exists between Dodge and his wife, Halie—he denies having a bottle, though she is sure he is lying, and both seem comfortable with this well-worn charade as the play begins. Dodge wears a "well-worn T-shirt, suspenders, khaki work pants, and brown slippers" (*7P* 63). Dodge's attire suggests that he has no intention of going outside, nor is it likely he has faced the outside world for quite some time. Dodge's physical frailty is suggested by his persistent cough which intensifies as the opening dialogue begins. Clearly, this is a man at death's doorstep; but within the gothic family dynamic, the question remains as to precisely who or what will finally bring about the father's demise.

Dodge is most clearly a "fallen" gothic father in that he is characterized by traits which violate the audience's expectations of the ideal (even perhaps "mythological") American father and husband. One of these traits is Dodge's isolation. Whereas the ideal American father would prefer to be surrounded by his wife and children when he is home, Dodge seems most comfortable when he is alone. In the opening scene, he tells Halie,

"Don't come down! [the stairs]" (*7P* 64). Later, he claims neither to know nor care who his neighbors are, and he antagonizes Shelly in Act Two, resenting her as an "outsider" who has violated the isolation which he seems to cherish. Yet Dodge's isolation is paradoxical, for he fears being left utterly alone. In Act One, Dodge scolds Tilden by saying, "You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age. It's unnatural . . . I never went back to my parents . . . Never even had the urge. I was independent" (*7P* 78). Yet, just moments later, Dodge tells Tilden, "You're supposed to watch out for me . . . I can't be left alone for a minute" (78). Tilden—already in a perpetual state of confusion or mental insufficiency—must be exasperated by his father's contradictory admonitions. Tilden is not the only one whom Dodge implores to stay with him. In Act Three, as Halie returns to the house with Father Dewis, Dodge begs Shelly to stay with him: "Don't leave me! Promise!" (*7P* 113). In the first Act, Dodge seems to fear that some evil fate will befall him—he might doze on the couch with a lighted cigarette and be burned up, or he might be seized with a coughing fit so violent it finally kills him. But when he implores Shelly in Act Three to stay with him, Dodge seems to fear having to confront his wife and her lover—as though he needs Shelly to run interference for him. In both cases, Dodge's apparent preference for isolation is undercut by his fear of being left alone. As the play progresses, the audience may conclude that this fear of being alone stems from Dodge's repressed guilt over the infanticide which slowly comes to light.

Another way in which Dodge is a fallen gothic father involves the allusions to death which surround him throughout the play. These allusions bear witness to the fact that Dodge is emotionally "dead" as far as his family is concerned, and he is emotionally dead vis-à-vis the father's traditional roles. The first allusion to death comes from Dodge himself: in Act One, Dodge complains to Halie about his last haircut which Bradley gave him, saying, "You had some fancy, stupid meeting planned! Time to dress up the corpse for company! Lower the ears a little! Put up a little front! . . . A pipe? Maybe a bowler hat! Maybe a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* placed casually on my lap!" (*7P* 67-68). Dodge's complaint here is remarkable for several reasons, starting with his reference to himself as a "corpse," as though he is dead already—and he is, emotionally and relationally. Secondly, his complaint critiques the timeless ritual of families "putting on a front" for company by repressing or hiding the conflicts and animosities which are tearing the family structure asunder. Families can strike a variety of poses using superficial props (like a bowler hat and a newspaper) in order to create an illusion of harmony. In Act Three, some of the family members—namely Bradley and Halie—make a final, futile attempt to appear "normal," with Bradley declaring, "Nothing's wrong here! . . . Nothing ever happened that's bad! Everything is all right here! We're all good people!" (*7P* 122). But even as Bradley makes his pitiful protest, the gothic family's inner sanctum has been breached and their way of life has come to an end. Lastly, Dodge's complaint about posing with a copy of *The Wall Street Journal* hints at his class-consciousness and

concomitant resentment of his own lower-class station. As the father and, traditionally, the provider of the family, Dodge should be financially astute, but this is clearly not the case. So, for Dodge, *The Wall Street Journal* is a mocking reminder of his failures as provider.

As the play progresses, Dodge is linked to more allusions and symbols of death, only now the other family members link Dodge with death. In Act One, Halie yells at Dodge, "You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing! Smelling up the house with your putrid body!" (*7P* 76). In Shepard's first gothic "family" play—*The Holy Ghostly*— the father was "already dead," and the family members treat Dodge as though the same is true. Nowhere is Dodge's metaphorical "death" made more obvious than in the closing moments of Acts One and Two. As Act One closes, Tilden symbolically buries his father under a makeshift shroud of cornhusks. Similarly, as Act Two closes, Bradley drops a coat over Dodge as the father lies prone on the floor; the coat serves as another type of shroud or burial sheet, so that Dodge has been symbolically buried by both of his living sons during the course of the play. Not to be outdone, in Act Three Halie takes a turn at "burying" Dodge, first by covering him with a coat, and then by tossing him a yellow rose which lands between his knees and stays there like an impotent phallic symbol. As she does this, Halie explains to Father Dewis how we "end up dead" if we stop believing in things (*7P* 118). The final allusion to death occurs when Dodge begins his tale about the buried child. Halie tells him, "If you tell this, you'll be dead to me. You'll be just as good as dead" (*7P* 123). Dodge replies, "That won't be such a big

change, Halie." Dodge realizes that, as a gothic fallen father, he has been living a death-in-life experience for many years now.

Another sign of Dodge's status as fallen father involves his negative speech patterns. Dodge's speech is characterized by prohibitions: the *nom du pere* has truly become the *non du pere*, as Jacques Lacan suggests. According to Lacan, the "Name of the Father" (*nom du pere*), which the son carries as a surname, is a reminder of the Law of the Father; and the primary Law of the Father is the prohibition against the son committing incest with the mother. Lacan puns with the French language, showing that the *nom du pere* (Name of the Father) in essence becomes a *non du pere* ("no" of the Father, whereby the Father tells the son "no" and thus prohibits incest with the mother). The 1978 text of *Buried Child* is vague and indeterminate about whether Tilden actually violated the incest taboo, thereby rejecting Dodge's *non du pere*. Dodge provides strong hints that Tilden may have violated the incest taboo and fathered the buried child (and I will explore this issue in greater detail later in this chapter). But ultimately, the question of whether or not incest actually occurred is left unclear, and this indeterminacy makes the play's overall effect more gothic.

In the initial dialogue between Dodge and Tilden, the father imposes several prohibitions on the son, telling Tilden what *not* to do: "Don't answer her," he tells Tilden when Halie calls downstairs to the two men (*7P* 72). It is unclear whether Dodge's command here is connected to the later revelation of mother-son incest between Tilden

and Halie, but it is possible that Dodge has discouraged communication between his wife and son as one long-standing consequence of their forbidden union. But Dodge's prohibitive commands have to do with more than just Halie. Later in Act One, Dodge says to Tilden, "Don't call it [a milking stool] a chair," and "Don't take my cap off!" (*7P* 80). In each case, Tilden acquiesces by assuring Dodge, "I won't" (80). The father has apparently trained his eldest son to adopt an attitude of outward submission, and both men have grown accustomed to these roles—yet later in the play the audience learns that Tilden has not always obeyed his father's commands, as in the case of the incest and the final exhumation of the buried child. Tilden is not the only target of Dodge's prohibitions—this type of negative communication is an ingrained part of Dodge's character, and he exhibits it toward even those who are not members of his immediate family. In Act Two of the play, Dodge directs his prohibitions to Vince, telling him, "Don't go out the back!" and in Act Three Dodge tells Shelly, "Don't leave me!" In both instances, Vince and Shelly reply, "I won't," mimicking Tilden's dialogue from the opening act. It is as though Dodge demands acquiescence from others, and when he does not get this acquiescence—as in the case of Halie and Bradley—he suffers as a result. Halie and Bradley have both refused to submit to Dodge, apparently years before the play begins. They both ridicule and humiliate Dodge, especially Bradley, who intimidates his father into cowed silence.

Like many of Shepard's fallen fathers, Dodge prefers not to remember the past. Moreover, he deliberately chooses not to discuss the past: "I don't want to talk about troubles or what happened fifty years ago," he tells Tilden (*7P* 78). Dodge would prefer never to have known the past at all, as he explains to Vince in Act Two: "It's much better not to know anything" (*7P* 88). But though he refuses to discuss the past, Dodge does have a memory which he indulges intermittently. One example of this occurs in Act One when he recalls one of his beloved baseball heroes, Stan Musial. But even here Dodge's memory is imperfect—he claims that Musial's home run occurred with "bases loaded," yet he claims there were "runners on first and third" (*7P* 81). Dodge's erroneous recollection may be one example of how his habitual repression of memories has affected his ability to recall an event accurately. Moreover, Dodge's difficulty in accurate recall may lead the audience to question his reliability when the secret of the buried child comes to light in Act Three. Shelly, the outsider, is the catalyst who finally wrests the secret from Dodge.

Dodge's attitude toward Shelly is one of ambivalence. Initially, he distrusts her as an outsider and a "smartass" from L. A. Yet his antipathy quickly subsides, and he begins to fantasize about Shelly. In Dodge's fantasy, Shelly would do his bidding—first by going to get him a new bottle of whiskey: "She'd go down there. Slink up to the counter. They'd probably give her two bottles for the price of one . . . She's a beautiful girl. Exceptional" (*7P* 94-95). In Act Three, Dodge attempts a sexual overture, asking Shelly for "a little massage" and "a little contact," which Shelly laughs off (109). Smarting from

this snub, Dodge ridicules her, calling her a "funny chicken" who is "full of faith and hope": "Now you think everything's gonna be different. Just 'cause the sun comes out" (109-110). Dodge implies that, for Shelly, the sunlight represents hope and the promise of a new day—a promise that today will be different from yesterday. Yet early in Act One, Dodge had remarked sarcastically to Halie that he believed it was raining "only in Illinois. This is the only place it's raining. All over the rest of the world it's bright golden sunshine" (*7P* 75). This statement, when read in conjunction with Dodge's belittling remark to Shelly in Act Three, shows that Dodge believes the family's cursed situation (and especially his own cursed situation) is unaffected by the outward weather because the rain—the real gothic storm—is psychological and inward, haunting Dodge's psyche regardless of the circumstances outside the house. Dodge realizes this, and that is why he is so harsh in his criticism of Shelly's newfound optimism—because hers is an optimism he cannot share. When Dodge finally makes an attempt to exorcize his repressed traumatic memories by speaking them aloud during a scene of spontaneous confession, his own death follows soon thereafter.

In Act Three, Dodge makes Shelly his confessor. He begins by boasting to her—"There's nothing a man can't do" (*7P* 110)—before beginning verbally to exhume the mystery of the buried child for her (and for the audience, for whom Shelly stands as proxy). The first step in Dodge's verbal exhumation of the secret is to destroy another myth of the American family: the belief that all parents love and protect their children.

Dodge asks Shelly, "You think just because people propagate they have to love their offspring? You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?" (112). Just as Dodge seems on the verge of revealing the secret of the buried child he makes another claim which seems to contradict the implied infanticide: Dodge asks Shelly, "You know how many kids I've spawned? Not to mention Grand Kids and Great Grand Kids and Great Great Grand Kids after them?" (112). Logically and factually—that is, from the "facts" that are available to the audience with the visible cast of characters—Dodge's claim of numerous descendants does not make sense. Again, the audience must remember that Dodge's credibility is suspect and his memory is often repressed or imperfect. In fact, earlier in Act Two, Dodge had even denied being Vince's grandfather: "I'm nobody's Grandpa!" (*7P* 90).

On the other hand, Dodge's claim to have spawned "Great Grand Kids and Great Great Grand Kids" may be read in conjunction with Vince's gothic uncanny moment which is reported to the audience later in Act Three. Vince's experience (which I will examine later in this chapter) is surreal rather than "real," and the long line of ancestors whose faces he claims to see in the rain-blurred windshield are a gothic manifestation of the uncanny—uncanny because Vince claims to have never "seen" the faces before but still somehow "recognized" these faces. Vince's windshield epiphany is uncanny precisely because it is a moment of defamiliarized familiarity, a moment when Vince glimpses "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar"

(Williams 72). If Dodge's claim of "Great Great Grand Kids" is read in this gothic light—and I am suggesting that it should be—then the claim becomes more than a bald lie or a false claim of bravado. If Dodge *did* have some sort of uncanny gothic epiphany which enabled him to "see" into the future and glimpse his imminent progeny, then his claim may be legitimate in a surreal, gothic sense. Yet, in the same breath, Dodge claims no ancestors or predecessors: "There's not a living soul behind me. Not a one" (*7P* 112). Here Dodge seems to be stressing his independence, as when he told Tilden that he [Dodge] never went back home to live with his parents. Finally, Dodge punctuates his speech by asking Shelly, "Who gives a damn about bones in the ground?" (112). This question is Dodge's attempt to justify his repression and denial of the infanticide. What's past is past, he says, and the memory of the buried child should stay buried (both literally and psychologically) in the past. But with gothic, the past is never buried, and the return of the repressed memory will erupt in the play's climactic scene.

As further proof of Dodge's "fallen" status, we may observe how Dodge's tenuous hold on patriarchal power continues to weaken throughout the play. Like King Lear, Dodge is suffering the consequences of his past decisions, and, like Lear, Dodge invariably suffers at the hands of his own family in a sort of transference of power. Though the play began with Dodge mocking Halie and berating Tilden, his coughing fits become more violent as his physical strength continues to deteriorate rapidly throughout the play. More importantly, Dodge is symbolically castrated when his hair is shorn by Bradley at the

end of Act One. As the curtain opens on Act Two, Dodge's scalp is "cut and bleeding" (*7P* 83), and when Bradley reappears in the final scene of Act Two the metaphorically "castrated" father remains helpless on the floor, too cowed to confront Bradley. Instead, "Dodge starts moving his lips silently as though talking to someone invisible on the floor" (*7P* 106). Shepard's stage directions seem significant here: we are not told that Dodge appears to be talking to *himself* as he lies on the floor; rather, Dodge appears to talk to *someone invisible*, perhaps even to a ghost—maybe the ghost of the buried child, or the ghost of Ansel (if, indeed, these characters are separate entities).

Shepard mentions the terms "invisible" or "disappear" several times throughout the play, and each time the terms seem to suggest death—either a literal death or a metaphorical one—and this would strengthen the impression that Dodge may be talking to a ghost as he lies on the floor at the end of Act Two. The first reference to "invisible" occurs in Act One when Dodge describes his resentment toward and relationship with Bradley: "My appearance is out of his [Bradley's] domain! It's even out of mine! In fact, it's disappeared! I'm an invisible man!" (*7P* 68). Dodge is indeed "invisible" in that he is "dead" as a father figure to Bradley. Later in Act One, Halie uses the term "disappear" when describing the last time she saw their youngest son, Ansel, alive as his car drove away following his marriage to a Catholic girl with mafia ties: "I watched his [Ansel's] face disappear behind the glass" (*7P* 74). Finally, Tilden describes the buried child to Shelly in Act Two, saying, "Nobody could find it. Just disappeared . . . Finally everybody

just gave up. Just stopped looking . . . It's so small. Almost invisible" (*7P* 104). So Shepard's stage directions about Dodge speaking to "someone invisible on the floor"—coming, as these directions do, after all of the references above—carry with them at least a hint of a gothic or ghostly connotation. The weaker Dodge becomes (both in his physical strength and in his psychological ability to repress traumatic memories), the stronger the ghostly presence of the buried child becomes—culminating with Dodge's final confession and the buried child's physical exhumation. This physical exhumation is carried out, appropriately, by the play's most mysterious character: the haunted son, Tilden.

One of the most important ways in which Tilden functions as a gothic character is that his credibility is highly suspect: because of Tilden's obvious mental deficiency, the audience can never be sure that what he says is true. Gothic literature often raises issues of truth and verifiability, questions about what is true and what is not. In Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), the Chateau-le-Blanc is thought to be haunted by ghosts, but readers later learn that the mysterious sights and sounds were caused by smugglers intent on scaring away any visitors. In Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1795), the Prioress tells Lorenzo that Agnes died in childbirth, but Lorenzo later discovers Agnes half-starved in the catacombs within the convent. In each of these cases, the gothic writer leaves the reader in doubt, mystery, and suspense—the reader is never sure what to believe, and "truth" is shown to be temporary or subject to change. In the same manner, Shepard uses Tilden—and his dubious testimony—to create a gothic sense

of mystery and suspense as the audience attempts to unravel the secrets of the family. Tilden is in his "late forties," and he comes onstage wearing "dark green work pants, a plaid shirt" and "heavy construction boots covered with mud" (*7P* 69). (In retrospect, the audience may wonder whether Tilden has been digging out back already at this point). Probably Shepard's most important detail about Tilden is that "something about him is profoundly burned out and displaced" (69). We are never sure the exact nature of Tilden's mental disability—whether he was born this way or whether his psyche was shattered by one or more traumatic experiences—but clearly, Tilden is mentally unstable. Perhaps the most memorable confirmation of Tilden's mental instability occurs in Act Two when he walks around the stage wearing Shelly's fur coat, stroking it softly and smiling at it as though it were a living creature. Tilden shows the same affection and paternal care toward Shelly's fur coat that, we learn later, he showed toward the baby that was murdered: Dodge says that Tilden used to carry the baby in his arms for miles and miles, talking and "singin' to it" (*7P* 124). It is as though Tilden is projecting onto the fur coat a paternal, nurturing instinct which was thwarted when Dodge murdered the baby. The tenderness which Tilden evinces in scenes like this one, however, is merely another symptom of his deficient mental state—a state which makes his credibility suspect. When Tilden tells Shelly about the buried child in Act Two, the audience is never sure it can fully trust Tilden's tale. Yet, ironically, it is precisely Tilden's mental handicap that gives his words the semblance of truth. Like an idiot savant, Tilden seems to be the one member of

this gothic family who can relate the truth without guile or sophistry, nor does he seem to evince any guilt over his own role in the infanticide. Moreover, Tilden's words are supported by tangible, visual evidence, starting with the mysterious vegetables which he brings into the house.

When Tilden makes his initial entrance, he has both arms full of corn, freshly picked. Dodge insists that Tilden must have stolen the corn since their farm has yielded no corn since nineteen thirty-five, claiming, "That's the last time I planted corn out there!" (69). But Dodge does not seem to consider the possibility that someone else may have planted in his fields, just as we later learn that Tilden (apparently) has "planted" his seed in Halie's field, resulting in conception and the birth of a baby. Even with his simple mind, Tilden can recognize the irrevocable nature of his actions. He tells Dodge, "Once it's picked you can't put it [the corn] back" (*7P* 70). Nor can Tilden reverse the incest committed with his mother which resulted in the baby's birth and led to infanticide and to the curse on the farmland which bore no crops for many years. In Act Two, Tilden enters with his arms full of carrots. The vegetables—if we can suspend our disbelief and view them as a result of the heavy rainfall outside—may be a harbinger that the "curse" on the land is soon to be exorcized by the revelation of the buried child. None of Tilden's explanations for the vegetables is finally convincing, however, as far as Dodge and Halie are concerned: through their eyes the audience wrestles with the question of Tilden's credibility.

When speaking to Halie, Dodge defends Tilden, telling her, "Tilden wouldn't lie. If he says there's corn, there's corn" (*7P* 75). Yet, only moments earlier Dodge had yelled at Tilden—"Now go put that corn back where it came from!"—because Dodge believes the corn to be stolen from a neighbor's fields (70). Dodge's affirmation that "Tilden wouldn't lie" is an about-face and seems motivated solely by Dodge's desire to antagonize Halie. Halie also assumes Tilden has stolen the corn, and she threatens to kick Tilden out of the house if he doesn't tell her the truth about where he got it. Tilden "starts crying softly to himself," and this angers Dodge who takes another opportunity to argue with Halie (76). In Act Two, Shepard provides further proof that Dodge neither trusts Tilden nor has any confidence in him. Dodge tells Vince that Tilden has "lost his marbles" and is "around the bend": "Who do you think is more trustworthy? Him or me? Can you trust a man who keeps bringing in vegetables from out of nowhere?" (*7P* 98). This is precisely the same question with which the audience has been wrestling.

None of the family members claims to believe Tilden since he is mentally deficient, and Dodge's words to Halie may be read as a pun by Shepard: "If Tilden says there's corn, there's *scorn*." But, as I hinted above, Tilden's mental handicap—a disability which should logically impair his credibility—becomes a positive attribute inside the gothic family dynamic. Tilden becomes a type of truth-sayer, and his mental incapacity helps to render him immune to falsehood. If Dodge is like King Lear, then Tilden resembles Lear's Fool who will speak the truth regardless of the consequences, however unpleasant those truths

may be. One of the truths Tilden speaks—and which the other family members deny—is that of the buried child's existence. Tilden tells Shelly and Vince, "I had a son once but we buried him" (*7P* 92). Another truth Tilden reveals is the name of the baby's killer: "Dodge killed it" (*7P* 103). In a later family play, *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), Shepard creates another mentally damaged truth-sayer character: in that play, Beth has suffered aphasia as a result of a brain injury, and as a result she speaks profound truths which are inaccessible to the other "normal" characters.

I have suggested in my introduction that gothic literature subverts traditional notions about the American family. Certainly Tilden stands as an ironic example of this subversion; Tilden subverts the idea of primogeniture, universally practiced, whereby the firstborn son received (and ostensibly deserved to receive) the lion's share of the family's wealth. O'Neill's gothic family plays likewise challenge the idea of primogeniture: in *Desire Under the Elms*, firstborn son Simeon Cabot deserts the family farm early in the play in search of gold in California, effectively renouncing his birthright; in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Jamie O'Neill is an embarrassment and disappointment to his father instead of the model of excellence and achievement which, as firstborn, he should have become. Because of his diminished mental capacity, as well as his role in implied mother-son incest, Tilden violates the stereotype of the firstborn son. Several references are made in the play to primogeniture, and each time it is Halie who calls attention to Tilden's privileged position as firstborn son. In Act One, when Dodge complains about Bradley

cutting his hair while he slept, Halie tells Dodge that Tilden will "protect" him from Bradley because "Tilden's the oldest" (68). But Dodge knows that Bradley is the more powerful man, and he retorts, "Tilden can't even protect himself!" (*7P* 68). Later in the opening act, Halie's tone has changed to one of disappointment as she tells Dodge, "Tilden's the oldest. I always thought he'd be the one to take responsibility" (72).

There is reason to believe that, at some point in the past, Tilden was able to take responsibility. We learn from Halie, and other family members confirm this elsewhere in the play, that "Tilden was an All-American . . . Fullback. Or quarterback. I forget which" (*7P* 72). Tilden overhears his mother and clarifies that he was a fullback. Assuming this is true, Tilden must have been "normal," or nearly so, for the first eighteen or more years of his life in order to attend school and to garner such a high level of national acclaim in football—a team sport requiring coordination and a high level of social interaction. The implication might be that the mother-son incest occurred (or was found out) sometime after Tilden's football playing days had ended—and this may have been the trauma that resulted in his "burned out and displaced" psychological condition. Following the revelation of Tilden's former gridiron glory, Halie makes one other reference to Tilden as firstborn. As she is leaving the house to meet Father Dewis, Halie tells Dodge, "If you need anything, ask Tilden. He's the oldest" (*7P* 77). Halie's words continue to imply that she has confidence in Tilden's sense of responsibility, yet moments later she does an about-face by saying, "We have to watch him . . . he's still a child" (77). In her affirming

statements about Tilden, Halie sounds as though she is simply parroting empty rhetoric that is part of some mythic American family mantra. Her sophistry is yet another example of the family's pattern of denial and deception.

In my examination of the gothic family dynamic, I have suggested that for the haunted son, all attempts to escape fully the influence of the fallen father are ultimately futile. The same is true of Tilden and Dodge. Although the audience is led to believe that Tilden accomplished the consummate subversion of his father by violating the incest taboo and taking Dodge's place—at least temporarily—in Halie's bed, Tilden cannot help being similar to Dodge in several respects. One of these similarities involves both men's predilection for denial when confronted with an unpleasant truth. Early in the play, we see that for both men, denial is a way of life. When Dodge asks Tilden about his "trouble back in New Mexico," Tilden initially denies this: "I never had any trouble" (*7P* 70). When Dodge presses him about it, Tilden admits that he did indeed have some trouble in New Mexico: "I was lonely" (71). Ultimately, however, Tilden cannot sustain Dodge's strategies of denial. As I have shown above, Tilden inevitably and haplessly reveals secrets—and he reveals them both verbally and through silent, physical action, as when he exhumes the buried child at the end of the play and carries the corpse into the house. Dodge, on the other hand, remains resolutely and consistently in denial until the play's final scene when he consciously decides to reveal all. Tilden thus exists in a perpetual state of seeming contradiction: unlike the other family members, he is a speaker of intuitive truths

who has been unable to repress his own memories of the buried child; but like the other family members, Tilden sometimes tells lies and denies the past. This contradiction is best understood by noting that Tilden's intuitive truth-saying always involves conveying information about the buried child. If Tilden is, after all, the natural father of the dead baby, his trauma involves a compulsion to speak about and for his dead child whose own voice has been forever silenced. At the same time, Tilden is not impervious the family's pact of secrecy and penchant for lying and denying, so it is no wonder that Tilden denies certain events, such as having gotten into trouble in New Mexico.

Another way in which Tilden resembles Dodge is his fear of abandonment and his dependence on others. In Act Two, after Vince and Shelly arrive at the house, Tilden prepares to get a pail and knife from the kitchen so that Shelly can cut the carrots. Before going offstage, Tilden turns to Shelly and says, "I'll be right back. Don't go" (93). In this family of loveless, selfish, and perverted relationships, it is little wonder that Dodge and Tilden both crave the company of others. It is as though both men's emotional deficiencies demand that they siphon from others whatever emotional gratification they can. However, there is one character whose company is sought by neither Dodge nor Tilden—this is a character who intimidates and terrifies both men: Bradley.

If Tilden's gothic aura is connected to his simple-minded, guileless nature, then with Bradley we have just the opposite. Bradley is gothic in a drastically different way than Tilden. Bradley is aggressive, predatory, and violent. He is the raging monster in

pursuit, eager to wreak havoc. In *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, Sage and Smith observe that gothic often involves a "sudden and grotesque violence" (13). In *Buried Child*, Bradley's character is the best representative of gothic violence. Bradley, as far as the audience can tell, is the second-born, and his personality is a foil to Tilden's: whereas Tilden is meek and (usually) submissive toward Dodge, Bradley dominates his father with his substantial physical strength and aggressive—even predatory—demeanor. Bradley's arms and shoulders are "extremely powerful and muscular," and physically he is a "big man" (*7P* 81). Because of Bradley's aggressiveness and refusal to submit to his father, Dodge both fears and hates Bradley. Early in Act One, Dodge yells to Halie, "He's [Bradley] not getting in this house! He was born in a hog wallow, and that's where he belongs!"(*7P* 76). When Bradley finally enters in the closing scene of Act One, the audience has been dreading his arrival for quite some time already, and Bradley does not disappoint. His first words are vitriolic and indicative of the violence raging within him: "Sonuvabitch! Sonuvagoddamnbitch!" (81). Bradley wears a "gray sweat shirt," suspenders, and "black janitor's shoes," clothing which, like Tilden's and Dodge's attire, attests to his lower-class status. But Bradley's physical deformity defines him most accurately. His "left leg is wooden, having been amputated above the knee," so he moves with an "exaggerated, almost mechanical limp. The squeaking sounds of metal and leather accompany his walk coming from the harness and hinges of the false leg" (*7P* 82). Bradley's physical deformity is merely an outer manifestation of his psychological and

emotional deformity. Bradley seems angry at the world, ready to explode at any moment. Once inside the house Bradley "violently knocks away some of the corn husks" and then "jerks" the cap from Dodge's head and "throws" it downstage (82). After thus symbolically usurping his father's crown, Bradley completes the usurpation by using a pair of electric clippers to shave his sleeping father's head. During this scene, while Bradley mutilates his father, Shepard accentuates the sense of horror by skillfully manipulating sound effects in a kind of gothic orchestration: we hear the buzz of the electric clippers, the squeaking of Bradley's leg and harness, and the relentless rain outside as the lights dim and the curtain closes on Act One.

In addition to serving as a visible symbol of Bradley's psychological deformity, his wooden leg is also a castration symbol. The wooden leg is Bradley's Achilles heel, his one weakness which can be exploited. Dodge understands this, and though he cowers helplessly beneath Bradley in Act Two, Dodge reveals to Shelly that the secret to overcoming Bradley's physical strength is to "take his leg and throw it out the back door" and Bradley will become "totally helpless" (110). Dodge claims not to have the strength to snatch the leg himself, but Shelly follows Dodge's instructions and gains the upper hand over Bradley in the play's final scene (and Vince, the prodigal grandson, does the same, following Shelly's lead). Bradley assumes the posture and tone of a whimpering child once his leg is taken by Shelly: he whines to Halie, "Mom! Get my leg back! That's my leg! I can't do anything without my leg!" (*7P* 120). Most importantly, once Shelly takes

Bradley's leg, Dodge is free to reveal the secret of the buried child without fear that Bradley will harm him. As Dodge begins to unravel the mystery for Shelly, Bradley grouses, "If I had my leg you wouldn't be saying this. You'd never get away with it if I had my leg" (*7P* 123).

Bradley is powerless without his leg, just as Dodge had prophesied. In terms of literary models for Bradley's one-legged character, Shepard may have had in mind Captain Ahab from Melville's *Moby Dick*. Both men are megalomaniacs—while Ahab holds imperious reign on the *Pequod* against the vast canvass of the Atlantic, Bradley rules only his little kingdom of the isolated farmhouse, with profanity and threats of physical violence as his weapons. Consequently, Bradley exhibits the very "pettiness" of villainy described by Irving Malin. Bradley and Captain Ahab are also similar in that their intimidating vitriol and threats of violence are more about symbolic mastery than actual physical domination. As physically maimed characters, both men are ultimately disadvantaged in physical combat, but by the sheer force of their irascible personalities, they command submission and obedience from others. As the younger son, Bradley is traditionally at the bottom of the pecking order of males in the family; consequently, he is particularly obsessed with asserting his control and instilling fear in Dodge and Tilden.

In creating Bradley's character, Shepard may also have been influenced by the literary tradition of "southern gothic" which is replete with examples of mutilated or grotesque characters. Two characters from the southern gothic literary tradition which are

reminiscent of Bradley's helpless state are Joy Hopewell from Flannery O'Connor's story "Good Country People" and Cash Bundren from William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*. In O'Connor's story, Joy Hopewell is rendered helpless when a corrupt Bible salesman by the name of Manley Pointer runs away with her false leg. Joy's loss is as much psychological as it is physical, for immediately after her leg is taken she begins to question the belief system (really it is "unbelief") which had thus far sustained her. In Faulkner's novel, Cash Bundren is similarly bereft of all physical and social power when he breaks his leg and allows it to be set in concrete. For Cash, the loss of his leg (its usefulness) is accompanied by a loss of influence which had been his birthright as the firstborn son. These three well-known literary examples may have influenced Shepard's portrait of Bradley, as all three characters suffer a psychological loss after the loss of a leg. Of these characters, Bradley's wound was the only one that was self-inflicted: we are told he accidentally cut off his own leg with a chain saw. The idea of being mutilated with a chain saw appears in another Shepard work, the prose collection *Motel Chronicles*: in this book, Shepard wrote about being haunted by "certain thoughts I'm afraid might actually come true . . . Like, for instance, I might think that I accidentally cut my head off with a chain saw" (69). The psychological motives underlying this self-mutilation may include either masochism, self-loathing, or a desire for self-punishment as a result of consuming guilt. Gothic literature contains many instances of characters either intentionally or unwittingly inflicting serious or fatal injuries upon themselves. In Walpole's *The Castle*

of Otranto and in Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Wieland*, both gothic villains (Manfred and Wieland) try to stab themselves out of remorse over murdering their loved ones. Since Bradley inflicted his injury upon himself, rather than suffering at Dodge's hands like the buried child did, Bradley is not afraid of his father. On the contrary, Bradley evinces pure hatred and disrespect toward the fallen father.

Shepard tells us that Bradley is "about five years younger than Tilden" (82). Bradley seems acutely aware of Tilden's privileged status as firstborn son, and this has caused Bradley to resent Tilden. In Act Two, Bradley says of Tilden, "Yeah. He used to be a big deal. Wore lettermen's sweaters. Had medals hanging all around his neck" (*7P* 105). Tilden flees when Bradley shouts at him, and Bradley enjoys this power to intimidate his older brother, laughing as he tells Shelly, "Scared to death! He was always scared!" (106). With Tilden gone, Bradley next turns his sadistic tendencies toward Dodge, who lies helpless on the floor as though Bradley's entrance into the house has somehow supernaturally sapped his power even further. When Shelly asks if something can be done to help Dodge, Bradley laughs, "We could shoot him. We could drown him. What about drowning him?" (106). Significantly, Bradley suggests for Dodge the same gruesome method that (we later learn) Dodge used to murder the buried child. When Shelly retorts, "Shut up!" Bradley is furious. He tells her, "There was a time when I had to take that tone a' voice from pretty near everyone. Him for one! [motions to Dodge] . . . Everything's turned around now. Full circle. Isn't that funny?" (106). As the fallen

father, Dodge has lost his patriarchal power as a result of his own crimes and transgressions against his family, and Bradley has gained or otherwise usurped most of the power which Dodge has lost.

Bradley's power is demonstrated again in his symbolic "rape" or molestation of Shelly. He commands her to open her mouth and to "keep it like that" (106). Then he proceeds to invade her orifice by sticking his fingers into her mouth while she complies in terrified silence. Immediately following this "rape," Act Two ends with Bradley standing over his prostrate father and symbolically "burying" him under Shelly's fur coat, smiling all the while in sadistic glee, reveling in his power. Yet, despite the power Bradley displays in the final scenes of Acts One and Two, Halie seems to have little confidence in him. Bradley may perhaps be viewed as a kind of gothic monster—like Frankenstein's monster—full of sound and furious strength, but ultimately Bradley is unreliable and untrustworthy, and his parents realize this. Early in Act One, Halie tells Dodge, "Bradley can't look after us. Bradley can hardly look after himself" (*7P* 72). Furthermore, Bradley is a liar who cannot be trusted. Halie is perhaps aware of Bradley's penchant for lying and denial—traits he doubtless acquired from his parents. One example of Bradley's denials occurs when Halie questions him about putting his fingers into Shelly's mouth. Bradley insists, "I never did anything, mom! I never touched her! She propositioned me! And I turned her down" (*7P* 120). Bradley's response goes beyond merely denying Shelly's charge against him. In an apparent attempt to ingratiate himself with his mother,

Bradley claims that he was the victim of Shelly's advances. Halie, however, gives no indication that she believes Bradley's account, and with good reason: later in the play, Bradley makes his most egregious denial of the truth when he tells Shelly, "Nothing's wrong here! . . . Nothing ever happened that's bad! Everything is all right here! We're all good people!" (122). Moments later, Dodge confesses fully to infanticide, so Bradley's outburst here seems a sort of last-ditch attempt to preserve the façade of self-delusion which the family has cultivated for countless years.

Bradley stands as the most physically stalwart antagonist in the play. As I have suggested above, in the gothic literary tradition Bradley seems a type of Frankenstein's monster. He is an abhorrent creation (perhaps the inevitable result) of his parents' deceptive, combative marriage. Furthermore, Bradley is, in a sense, also a "creation" of Tilden's idiosyncrasies. In O'Neill's gothic family play *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Jamie Tyrone used the term "my Frankenstein" to refer to his younger brother Edmund. Through this allusion to Mary Shelley's gothic novel, Jamie indicts himself for encouraging Edmund to follow his (Jamie's) destructive path rather than to choose a more conservative lifestyle. In *Buried Child*, Tilden lacks the self-awareness to manipulate and deliberately corrupt his younger brother Bradley. But Bradley nevertheless has also become a type of "Frankenstein" (the monster) due to Tilden's peculiar inability to shoulder the traditional (and perhaps mythical) mantle of the American firstborn son. Whereas Jamie O'Neill is rendered unfit as firstborn son due to his drunkenness and self-destructive, wanton

lifestyle, Tilden's mental deficiencies likewise render him unfit to shoulder the responsibilities and to reap the benefits of primogeniture. Bradley senses his older brother's weaknesses—indeed, he has probably sensed them long ago—and, as a result, Bradley terrorizes and intimidates both Tilden and Dodge by his brute strength and predatory persona. Bradley is an enemy of Dodge, of Shelly, and of truth itself. The other family member who stands resolutely and consistently against Dodge—and is a constant threat to his patriarchal power—is Halie.

I have suggested that the mother in the American gothic family paradigm is emotionally alienated from her family, and in *Buried Child*, Shepard demonstrates this alienation by physically distancing Halie from her husband and children as evidence of the estrangement she feels from them. In the opening scene, Halie remains upstairs, away from a husband she neither loves nor respects. In fact, for the first nine pages of the printed script, Shepard refers to her only as HALIE'S VOICE. When she finally makes her dramatic descent down the staircase—reminiscent of Mary Tyrone's final descent into madness at the end of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*—Halie's appearance reinforces her alienated status. She is dressed "completely in black, as though in mourning" including a "hat with a veil" and "elbow length black gloves." She is "about sixty-five with pure white hair" (*7P* 73). Halie claims to be mourning for Ansel, who is ostensibly the third son born to Dodge and Halie. Her claim may or may not be true—this is, after all, a gothic household where "truths" may be fabricated and secrets abound.

Even if her claim is credible and Ansel did die in the way she relates, this fact alone may not adequately explain her mourning clothes. On a metaphorical level, Halie's black mourning clothes suggest the "death" of her marriage to Dodge and a death of the love that they once had for each other and for their children. Perhaps the clothes symbolize the death of their American Dream: late in the play, Dodge tells Shelly, "We were a well-established family once . . . The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over" (*7P* 123). Now, however, the farm is cursed and barren; the Dream has died. Finally, Halie's mourning clothes may suggest the "death" of her traditional role as mother, which would have occurred if she has, in fact, become Tilden's lover. Since Halie is the only family member clad in mourning clothes, her outfit is an outward manifestation of her alienation from the rest of the family. As further evidence of Halie's alienation, she leaves the house in Act One and does not return to the house until the final Act. Her physical absence represents her deeper emotional absence from her family and her home.

When she finally returns home, Halie brings Father Dewis—a hypocritical clergyman in the literary tradition of Arthur Dimmesdale from *The Scarlet Letter* and Reverend Whitfield from Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Whitfield is an especially apt comparison for Father Dewis: Faulkner's wayward minister commits adultery with Addie Bundren, yet Addie maintains her outward Christian stance and moral façade. Similarly, for much of Act One, Halie preaches to Dodge about how they "shouldn't race on Sundays" and how "the messengers of God's word are shouted down in public places"

(*7P* 65-69). Yet, in Act Three, Halie returns laughing and tipsy, and she gropes in Father Dewis's pants pockets for a flask of whiskey (*7P* 117). Moreover, Halie has exchanged her black mourning clothes for a bright yellow dress, and now her arms are full of bright yellow roses. She has clearly been out all night with Father Dewis and has had reason to change clothes while with him, perhaps following a sexual tryst with him. Since Halie has no qualms about groping the clergyman's crotch in plain view of her husband and children (as well as in front of Shelly, a total stranger), the audience may infer that she is having or has had an affair with Father Dewis (indeed, the name "Dewis" may be another pun by Shepard). Within the gothic literary tradition, Halie follows in the line of sexually voracious women like Matilda from Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*: in Lewis's novel, Matilda's unrestrained sexual appetite ultimately results in death, and not just her own. In Halie's case, if the suggestion of mother-son incest can be believed, then her own outwardly repressed but ultimately voracious sexual appetites have turned themselves upon her own son, Tilden; as with Matilda, the result has been death—the death of the buried child.

For his part, Dodge seems to accept tacitly his status as cuckold—another sure sign of his status as fallen father. During their opening dialogue in Act One, Dodge remarks playfully about Halie's profligacy. When Halie mentions a suitor who took her to the horse races years earlier, Dodge remarks, "[He] Gave you a good turn around the old stable . . . And he never laid a finger on you I suppose?" (*7P* 66). In Act Two, Dodge

implies that Halie's promiscuity was not confined to her maiden days, but it continues even now: he chuckles and tells Shelly, "She [Halie] won't be back for days . . . There's life in the old girl yet!" (88). Clearly, Halie is no Cold War-era submissive wife, adhering to "containment" theory by keeping her sexuality under wraps. In the gothic family dynamic, moral restraints are cast aside; secretive and forbidden appetites are indulged.

Though twentieth-century American gothic family plays are often male-centered, the mother's role is often a central one. In Tennessee Williams' play *Suddenly Last Summer*, for instance, Violet Venable served as a vengeful mother (and surrogate lover) who was willing to butcher Catharine Holly in order to protect the memory and legacy of her dead son. In *Buried Child*, Halie is likewise willing to go to almost any extreme in order to protect and preserve the family's secrets and to maintain a respectable façade to the outside world. O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is perhaps the best example of the gothic mother playing a central role, and Halie may be usefully compared, in several regards, to Mary Tyrone in O'Neill's masterpiece. Both Mary Tyrone and Halie walk about their haunted houses with rose-colored glasses, deliberately cloaking themselves with self-deceit about their sons' true shortcomings. Mary refuses to admit that Edmund has a fatal disease, while Halie futilely attempts to assure herself that "Tilden's the oldest," implying that Tilden is well-adjusted and independent—all the while, both mothers know that the truth about their sons is quite different. Both women use escapist techniques in order to temporarily flee their gothic worlds—Mary Tyrone takes

morphine while Halie leaves the house to indulge in an adulterous affair with Father Dewis. Finally, both Mary and Halie remain as steadfast inhabitants of the gothic household by the end of their respective plays, and at the end of both plays the mothers have plunged themselves even deeper into self-delusion. Mary Tyrone makes her final descent down the staircase, high on morphine and fully delusional. Halie, though sober, is no less delusional as the curtain closes on *Buried Child*: she has "left" her family as surely as Mary Tyrone, becoming merely a voice which rambles on full of false optimism, sounding as though she has utterly forgotten the horrific secret which was revealed only moments earlier. Both Mary Tyrone and Halie have the last word in these gothic family plays. The irony is unmistakable: traditionally, the American mother is the crucial link which binds the family together. Yet both Mary Tyrone's family and Halie's family are a shambles, due in large part to the mother's own failures and weaknesses (in Mary's case, the weakness is drug abuse, while in Halie's case, the weakness appears to be an uncontrollable sexual appetite).

Halie's role in possible incestuous relations with Tilden also make her a useful comparison to other mothers in American gothic drama. Like Christine Mannon in O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Halie has an adulterous affair, and while O'Neill's play alludes indirectly to an incestuous attraction between Christine and her son, Orin, *Buried Child* contains a stronger suggestion that the mother-son incest may have actually occurred between Halie and Tilden. Elaine Tyler May explains how the domestic

implementation of "containment" theory would, among other things, help to thwart the possibility of incest:

> Presumably, these sexually fulfilled and appropriately submissive wives would lavish care on their children and sexual affection on their husbands. Sexually frustrated mothers whose husbands were not in command might turn their perverted desires toward their sons . . . . (May 97)

Dodge is clearly not "in command" of his household, which May says is essential in discouraging the possibility of mother-son incest; rather, he has "dodged" his roles as husband and father, and now exists in a semi-comatose state on his couch, ensconced between his whiskey bottle and his television set. The subtle suggestion of incest between Halie and Tilden does not appear until the play's climax in Act Three, but as early as Act One Shepard provides veiled hints which foreshadow the gothic subtext of incest. These hints are included in Halie's memories of her dead son, Ansel.

Halie first mentions Ansel by holding him up as the favorite son, the scion upon whom all her dreams had rested: "I put all my hopes in Ansel . . . He was the smartest probably . . . He could have earned lots of money. Lots and lots of money" (*7P* 73). To Halie's way of thinking, intelligence is valuable only as a means of making more money, and Ansel was to have been the family's economic savior. Moments later, Halie reveals that Ansel is dead, and the audience must infer it is Ansel's death that she is mourning—as her black clothes indicate. Halie does not reveal how much time has passed since Ansel's

death, nor does she reveal precisely how Ansel died. But she does say that Ansel died on his wedding night: "It's not fitting for a man like that to die in a motel room . . . If he hadn't married into the Catholics. The Mob . . . Catholic women are the devil incarnate" (*7P* 73-74). Halie evinces an anti-Catholic sentiment, and it is worth remembering that some major works in the gothic literary tradition were explicitly anti-Catholic, and were intended to be. Father Dewis echoes Halie's sentiments when he tells her in Act Three, "In our heart of hearts we know we're every bit as wicked as the Catholics" (114). In *Horror Fiction in the Protestant Tradition* (1988), Victor Sage observes that Matthew Gregory Lewis's 1795 gothic novel *The Monk* employed "the ritual element of anti-Catholic pamphleteering" in order to gain popularity with the British reading public (Sage xiv). Other gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) contain similar anti-Catholic elements. Shepard portrays Halie as a narrow-minded bigot who, in her idealistic bombast regarding her son Ansel, unfairly indicts an entire religion, as well an ethnic group: "All those Italians. All that black, greasy hair" (*7P* 74). But the anti-Catholic tone in this scene is consonant with early British gothic novels. More importantly, Halie's anti-Catholic remarks function as a blatantly racist, ethnocentric attack on Italian Americans. Catholicism is not Halie's specific target here; rather, her remarks link Italian Americans with both Catholicism and with organized crime, a stereotype straight out of Hollywood. Halie's remarks belie her own racist attitudes, but on a larger scale, her

remarks indicate the entire family's inward-looking, myopic view of the outside world—a world which cannot be trusted due to the family's dark secrets.

As Halie recalls the last time she saw her beloved Ansel alive, she makes statements that may allude to incest: "I kissed him and he felt like a corpse . . . He never used to kiss like that . . . Hating me and loving her!" (74). Halie sounds more like a jealous lover than a grieving mother. In light of Halie's apparent incestuous relationship with Tilden, one cannot help speculating about whether she may have also committed incest with Ansel. Halie seems obsessed with preserving Ansel's memory: she goes to visit Father Dewis, ostensibly to persuade him to help erect a bronze statue for Ansel—a statue of Ansel holding a rifle in one hand (commemorating his time as a soldier) and a basketball in the other hand to commemorate his athletic prowess (116). But in a telling scene in Act Three, Shepard causes us to question how much of the myth surrounding Ansel is true—indeed, if any of it is true at all. Halie insists that Ansel was an "All American" in basketball, but Bradley insists, "He never played basketball!" (116). Moments later, Bradley denies putting his fingers into Shelly's mouth, so the audience knows that Bradley is a liar: should we, then, believe Bradley and dismiss Halie's claim as incredulous? After all, what are the odds that this family produced, not only one, but two "All American" athletes? Halie tries to get Father Dewis to confirm that Ansel was a basketball star, but Father Dewis replies cryptically, "I remember Ansel" (117). Father Dewis may only be affirming that he "remembers" Halie's fantasies about Ansel, not that

these fantasies were ever true. Ansel's exploits may very well be fictive. His "life" may be a fabrication, much like George and Martha's game of "Bringing up Baby" from Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Shepard surely knew Albee's play and may have been influenced by it. In this case, Ansel may, in fact, be the murdered baby whose invented "life" serves to further bury and repress the traumatic memory of infanticide.

But if the audience were to believe that Ansel and the buried child are actually two different offspring—both of whom really existed—if the audience were to believe that Ansel really was a soldier and a basketball All-American who died a violent death in a motel room on his wedding night—then the audience is presented now with not only one, but two deaths of children which have traumatized this family. I am not suggesting that Halie is necessarily telling the truth, for Shepard deliberately leaves the matter muddled and unresolved, and this indeterminacy augments the play's gothic qualities. Halie's dialogue throughout the play seems to support the argument that Ansel and the buried child are different people. Whereas she is loquacious about Ansel's achievement and poor judgment in choosing a wife, Halie is reticent about the buried child. She threatens Dodge with metaphorical "death" in Act Three if he reveals the infanticide. Shepard leaves the question unresolved—one dead child or two? Regardless of the truth, the family remains emotionally and psychologically shattered and estranged. In Act Three, Halie's estrangement from Dodge is demonstrated when she clings to Father Dewis and

ridicules her husband: she tells Father Dewis that Dodge is "crazy" and "mad," and this is even before Dodge begins his confession about the incest and infanticide (*7P* 118).

In Act Three, when Dodge finally reveals to Shelly the secrets of incest and infanticide, he does so indirectly: "See, we were a well established family once . . . Then Halie got pregnant again. Outa' the middle a' nowhere . . . In fact, we hadn't been sleepin' in the same bed for about six years" (*7P* 124). We are not told whether the decision to have separate beds was mutual, or whether Halie abandoned Dodge's bed in favor of one (or more) of her son's beds. But when Halie became pregnant by someone else, Dodge became sadistic and refused to call a doctor:

> This one I let her have by herself. This one hurt real bad. Almost killed her, but she had it anyway . . . It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even when everyone around us knew . . . Tilden knew. (124)

Dodge refers to the baby as "it," though he must have known the baby's gender. By using the term "it," Dodge dehumanizes the baby and, implicitly, ameliorates the heinous nature of crime, as though interpreting his killing of the baby more like euthanizing an animal than murdering a human being. Furthermore, Dodge claims somehow to have known, intuitively or supernaturally, the infant's desires: "It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to pretend that I was its father." These statements indicate that Dodge is projecting onto the infant his own feelings of anger and betrayal over being cuckolded.

Ultimately, of course, Dodge tried to satiate these feelings by killing the baby. When Dodge says, "She [Halie] wanted me to believe in it," we cannot be sure whether "it" refers to the lie that Dodge had fathered the baby, or if "it" refers to the baby itself—as though saying Halie wanted Dodge to allow the child to live and to be allowed to grow up.

As Dodge continues his tale, his narrative focuses more specifically on Tilden, though Shepard is characteristically evasive about whether or not the incest taboo was ultimately violated: "Tilden was the one who knew. Better than any of us. He'd walk for miles with that kid in his arms . . . Talkin' to it. Singin' to it . . . " (124). As Dodge reveals this long-repressed secret, Halie yells for Bradley to make Dodge "shut up." But Bradley, stripped of his phallic power now that his leg has been snatched by Shelly, replies weakly, "I can't" (124). With Bradley powerless, Halie desperately conjures the memory of her beloved Ansel again: "Ansel would've stopped him! Ansel would've stopped him from telling these lies! He was a hero!" (124). Halie's words suggest that Ansel—if he truly existed—might not have been able to have prevented the infanticide, only that he could have stopped Dodge from confessing to the killing and revealing the family's dark secret. In exasperation, Halie shouts, "What's happened to the men in this family! Where are the men!" At this moment, right on cue, Vince—the haunted grandson and heir—makes his return to the house by "crashing through the screen porch door up left, tearing it off its hinges" (124).

Vince functions as the play's most central version of the gothic haunted son. In fact, Vince may be seen as being "doubly haunted" since he struggles under the weight of both his father's guilt (Tilden) and his grandfather's (Dodge). Vince is the only grandson to appear in Shepard's family plays, and as such, he occupies a unique position within Shepard's gothic family paradigm. Whereas the usual haunted son has only one generation of paternal guilt with which to wrestle, Vince struggles under the weight of both his father's and grandfather's transgressions. And if, as I have suggested, the haunted son in Shepard's family plays is ultimately cursed to repeat his father's destructive patterns, then Vince is doubly cursed to repeat this pattern.

The version of Vince who crashes through the screen door in Act Three, drunk and bellowing the lyrics to "The Marine's Hymn," is not the same Vince whom Shepard introduced to the audience at the start of Act Two—a young man holding a raincoat over his girlfriend's head, eager to reunite with relatives whom he calls "my heritage" (*7P* 84). Vince is Tilden's son, around twenty-two years of age, dressed in a plaid shirt, jeans, cowboy boots, and dark glasses. He carries a saxophone case—like Ice in *The Holy Ghostly*, this "prodigal son" is a musician; though neither Ice nor Vince makes music with his instrument during the play, both sing briefly near the end of their respective plays, as though momentarily transcending (or trying to) their trapped, gothic condition as a "haunted" son who is doomed to repeat the father's mistakes. Vince's descent into the gothic family vortex (which finally claims him irrevocably) begins almost immediately, and it

starts with a gothic device which is very similar to the uncanny: misrecognitions, or the failure to recognize something which should be familiar.

When Vince first arrives at the house, he has a difficult time making his girlfriend Shelly—the one true "outsider" or "witness" character—believe that he is serious about wanting to renew his family ties. Shelly is laughing uncontrollably as they enter the house at the start of Act Two, and Vince scolds her repeatedly, telling her to "Knock it off . . . Have some respect . . . Pull yourself together" (*7P* 83-84). He first tells her that the farmhouse and all its accoutrements are his "heritage," and this statement becomes a prophecy when, at the end of the play, Dodge leaves it all to Vince in his last will and testament. Vince's prophetic remark about the farm being his "heritage" follows in the gothic literary tradition of prophecies. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), widely regarded as the "first" gothic novel, includes a prophecy that Alfonso's heir will usurp Manfred's kingdom, and the plot of the novel is driven by Manfred's frantic attempts to thwart this prophecy. In Walpole's novel, Theodore eventually inherits the kingdom after he is finally recognized as the "true heir of Alfonso," just as Vince will eventually inherit the farm after he is finally recognized as the true heir in the final act.

Vince has not seen his family for over six years, and he quickly admits to Shelly that the reunion is a "tense situation" for him (*7P* 85). Once inside the house, Vince searches upstairs while Shelly stumbles upon Dodge who is asleep on the couch. Shelly explains to Dodge that "Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it's a new thing

with him . . . he feels he wants to get to know you all again. After all this time" (86). As I mentioned in Chapter Two of this study, Shepard himself made a similar trip to an Illinois farm in 1968 to visit his own grandparents, and then traveled west to reunite with his estranged father in the desert. We know little about Shepard's trip to Illinois, but for Vince, the initial encounter with his grandfather is uncanny because it involves a misrecognition: something (or someone) which should be familiar has instead become defamiliarized.

Dodge seems to believe that Vince is actually Tilden: he asks Vince, "Did you bring the whiskey? . . . You went outside like we told you not to do" (87). When Vince tries to explain who he is, Dodge responds with paranoia which indicates his status as a gothic fallen father who mistrusts strangers: "Stay where you are! Keep your distance!" (89). Surprised by this confrontation with outsiders, Dodge attempts to escape reality by drowning it in alcohol. He searches frantically for his whiskey bottle, ripping the stuffing out of the sofa cushions. At this moment, we see the first glimmer of an innate and psychic connection between grandson and grandfather, for as Dodge becomes more violent by tearing up the couch, Vince suddenly exhibits the first sign of violence against Shelly. He "grabs her" to prevent her from leaving, and "they struggle" as Dodge continues his tirade (89). This violent behavior does not appear to be typical of Vince because Shelly does not seem accustomed to seeing violence from him: she yells, "Let go of me you sonuvabitch! I'm not your property!" (89). At this moment, Tilden enters with his arms

full of carrots, much to the surprise of Vince and Shelly. They assumed Tilden was in New Mexico, and they were planning to go west to visit him after leaving Illinois. The second "misrecognition" occurs when Tilden does not recognize Vince as his son. Instead, Tilden digs up the memory of the buried child in the first of many revelations: when Shelly asks Tilden if he recognizes Vince as his son, Tilden replies, "I had a son once but we buried him" (*7P* 92). Dodge immediately stifles Tilden from continuing the revelation, yet Dodge's rebuke adds to the mystery surrounding the buried child: Dodge exclaims cryptically (to Tilden), "You don't know anything about that! That happened before you were born! Long before!" (92). Clearly, Dodge is lying here, as we later learn. But his words do serve to defer the revelation and to increase the mystery and subterfuge surrounding the truth. In *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, Maggie Kilgour observes, "While gothic narratives move toward revelation of the mystery, they also defer it," and this deferral is achieved by "digressions, interruptions, and infolded tales" (32). Dodge's interruption of Tilden here serves the same gothic purpose as canonical gothic novels such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto,* Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*.

Stung by his family's failure to recognize him, Vince becomes a type of performing monkey by doing childhood tricks which he hopes will jog their memory:

> Vince bends his knuckles backwards, talks through his belly-button like a ventriloquist, and plays his teeth like piano keys (*7P* 95).

This regression to a child-like state is another early harbinger of Vince's final descent into (and embrace of) his true gothic heritage by the end of the play. Regression into child-like states is characteristic of American gothic drama, and Shepard had used a similar technique, as we have already examined, in his early gothic family play *The Holy Ghostly*, when both Ice and Pop regressed temporarily into child-like voices. Other examples of regression appeared in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* when Mary Tyrone makes her final descent down the staircase, reliving her past as a virgin schoolgirl; in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois regresses psychically to a virginal state by reminiscing about her "first lover's eyes." Furthermore, by regressing into these childhood performances, Vince is emulating the child-like state of his own father, Tilden—a state which prepares Vince to fully inherit, at play's end, the farm and all of its gothic baggage.

Vince finally agrees to make a liquor run for Dodge, and his acquiescence seems motivated solely by his exasperation at his family's failure to recognize him. As he prepares to leave the house near the end of Act Two, Vince serves as the voice of the audience by wondering aloud, "What is this anyway? Am I in a time warp or something?" (*7P* 97). The term "time warp," though often seen in works of science fiction, may also be read in a gothic light since it evokes a collapsing of past and present, or an ability to merge past and present. As Mary Tyrone remarked in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, "The past is the present isn't it? It's the future, too." Vince's rhetorical

question about being in a time warp indicates his frustration at his family's failure to recognize him. He wonders if he has somehow been transported into the past to a time before he was born—a time when his family would have been unable to recognize him. The gothic world—both in Shepard's work and in gothic literature generally—is not governed by the same rules as the rational world, and Vince does not yet understand that. He does, however, seem to arrive at this understanding by the time he makes his dramatic and violent return to the house in Act Three.

The traditional "hero" in gothic literature triumphs and enjoys a prosperous, contented existence once his true identity is revealed and acknowledged by others. In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto,* Theodore (formerly a peasant) is recognized as Alfonso's heir and wins the girl, the castle, and the riches. In Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Holgrave is revealed to be the last descendant of Matthew Maule, and he marries his true love Phoebe and appears destined for a happy and fruitful life. But in *Buried Child*, Vince is markedly different from the traditional gothic hero. In the play's closing scenes, when Vince finally achieves the recognition and acknowledgement he has sought, his future appears to be anything but felicitous. Instead, Vince seems destined to fall under the same gothic curse which has overshadowed the rest of the family. The closer Vince comes to his family's finally recognizing and acknowledging kinship with him, the closer he comes to falling under the family curse himself.

Almost immediately after Vince leaves the house, Tilden seems to have a flicker of recognition for his son: Tilden tells Shelley, "I thought I recognized something about him [Vince] . . . I thought I saw a face inside his face" (*7P* 100). Tilden's words are important for several reasons. First, his reference to seeing a "face inside his face" recalls a manifestation of the uncanny which is a gothic device: Tilden "thought" he recognized Vince, or at least "something about him." In the context of the uncanny, Tilden may here be experiencing what Anne Williams calls "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (72). Tilden, like the other members of this gothic family, has practiced repression of memories for so long that his memory returns slowly, like a flicker of recognition. This gradual return of repressed memories signals the eventual revelation of the buried child mystery in Act Three. Finally, Tilden's words to Shelly foreshadow Vince's description of his own uncanny moment which he describes in Act Three after returning to the house. Vince says,

> I was gonna run last night . . . Clear to the Iowa border. The old man's two bucks sitting right on the seat beside me. It never stopped raining the whole time . . . I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face . . . As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him . . . And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father's face changed into his Grandfather's face.

> And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized . . . I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Clear into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me. Then it all dissolved. Everything dissolved. (*7P* 130)

As Tilden had done earlier, Vince describes an uncanny moment where he had a gothic epiphany—seeing faces which changed into other faces—and his entire ancestral line appeared to remind Vince that he was part of something bigger than he could ever imagine. Once Vince experiences his uncanny moment, he is prepared to make his final, violent return to the house and claim his inheritance—and this claim is really a surrender by the haunted (grand)son to the irresistible power of the gothic.

Vince's return to the house is marked by drunkenness and violence: he tears the screen door from its hinges and pulls empty liquor bottles from a paper bag, smashing them one by one. Shepard has remarked to interviewers,

> There's something about American violence that to me is very touching. In full force, it's very ugly, but there's also something very moving about it because it has to do with humiliation. There's some deeply rooted thing in the Anglo male American that has to do with inferiority, that has to do with not being a man, and always continually having to act out some idea of manhood that invariably is violent. (qtd. in Hart 138)

In his return to the house, Vince may be seen as "acting out some idea of manhood" as he smashes the liquor bottles and threatens further violence. Vince is, after all, merely repeating behavior patterns long practiced by Dodge. Now that Vince is drunk and violent, he is easily recognizable to his family. Dodge calls outside to Vince, "It's me! Your Grandfather! Don't play stupid with me!" (*7P* 125). The tables are now turned, and Vince exhibits the same malady of "misrecognition" which had plagued Dodge and Tilden in Act Two. When Halie calls him by name, Vince replies, "Vincent who? What is this! Who are you people?" (*7P* 126). Vince's transformation has occurred offstage, sometime between his uncanny epiphany in the rain-spattered windshield and his return to the house. Now Vince has discarded his old self and assumed (or been taken over by) a new identity—an identity which seems a monstrous embodiment of all the dark secrets which had been repressed within the farmhouse walls for untold years. As though now a living specter of the deadly spirit of infanticide, Vince declares to them all: "I am a murderer! . . . I'm the Midnight Strangler! I devour whole families in a single gulp!" (*7P* 126). Vince may here be alluding to the much-publicized case of Albert DeSalvo who was convicted during the 1960's of the infamous Boston Strangler murders (DeSalvo died in prison in 1973, and his death would have been much-publicized during the time Shepard was beginning to write drafts for *The Last American Gas Station* and, eventually, *Buried Child*). But on a more important level, Vince is claiming, vicariously,

his own role in the infanticide which has haunted this family for years—guilt by association or by ancestry—"I devour whole families in a single gulp!"

In my examination of the gothic family paradigm, I have suggested that the "haunted son" eventually usurps or otherwise supplants the "fallen father" by succumbing to the father's legacy of destructive behavior and repeating the father's mistakes. Vince makes an overt reference to this pattern when he declares, apparently to no one in particular but to the entire family, "Maybe I should come in there and usurp your territory!" (*7P* 126). Bradley attempts to grab at Vince through the wire screen, but Vince fends him off with an empty whiskey bottle, forcing Bradley to retreat (after all, Bradley's leg has been taken hostage by Shelly). Not only does Vince seem not to recognize his family, but now he does not recognize Shelly: he asks her, "Have they got you prisoner in there, dear? Such a sweet young thing too" (*7P* 127). At this point, Vince "pulls out a big folding hunting knife," cuts a hole in the door, and crawls through the hole (*7P* 127). Jane Ann Crum describes Vince's cutting of the screen door as a "Caesarian section of sliced metal" by which he reclaims his heritage (qtd. in King 76). In a sense, Crum's metaphor of a C-section is apt, for Vince has been reborn now.

As soon as Vince enters the house, Dodge—as though he had been merely awaiting his cue—suddenly surrenders his possessions to Vince, much as Pop spontaneously bequeathed his goods to Ice in *The Holy Ghostly*. Dodge says to Vince, "Go ahead! Take over the house! . . . It's yours . . . I'm gonna die any second now. Any

second. You won't even notice. So I'll settle my affairs once and for all" (*7P* 128). Upon hearing this, Vince "strides slowly around the space, inspecting his inheritance" with the knife clenched between his teeth (128). Vince's adversarial, menacing demeanor also indicates his reborn state—it is a rebirth into the gothic family cycle, and Vince's demeanor now matches the loveless, hateful atmosphere which infected the family members before Vince's arrival. The implications of being reborn into the gothic cycle are that Vince becomes trapped in the vortex created by the family curse, unable to escape. Though Vince described himself as able to "devour whole families in a single gulp," he himself has been devoured by the curse which plagues this gothic family. As Vince moves about the house, he sadistically moves Bradley's leg just out of reach so that Bradley remains powerless (130). Eventually, Vince tosses Bradley's leg outside, and he explains to Father Dewis that he is "getting rid of some of the vermin" (131). Our last image of Bradley shows him "whimpering" as he crawls offstage in pursuit of his wooden leg (131). Shepard's stage directions at this moment are important because Bradley is cloaked in the old brown blanket which he had earlier snatched from Dodge in a sort of mini-usurpation of patriarchal power. Now, however, "As Bradley exits Vince pulls the blanket off him and throws it over his own shoulder. He crosses toward Dewis with the blanket and smells the roses" (*7P* 131). Here, the brown blanket may serve as a mantle of power or familial legacy; Vince's taking of the blanket is comparable to a "passing of the torch" from one generation to another, assuring that the gothic family tradition will continue.

In Chapter Two of this study, I quoted Jim McGhee's opinion that, for the father in Shepard's family plays, there is "power is in his language, in his ability to create fantastic verbal image sequences that take him out of his confining present by transcending time and space" (McGhee 158). In *The Holy Ghostly*, Pop attempted to reach a moment of transcendence during his speech bequeathing his goods to Ice; in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston attempted to reach a moment of transcendence in his speech about the eagle devouring the lamb testes. In *Buried Child*, Dodge comes closest to creating a "fantastic verbal image" and reaching a similar transcendent moment when he makes his last will and testament just moments before his death:

> The house goes to my Grandson, Vincent. All the furnishings, accoutrements, and paraphernalia therein . . . My tools . . . all go to my eldest son, Tilden . . . all related materials are to be pushed into a gigantic heap and set ablaze in the very center of my fields. When the blaze is at its highest, preferably on a cold, windless night, my body is to be pitched into the middle of it and burned til nothing remains but ash. (*7P* 129)

These are Dodge's final words; he dies unnoticed moments later. At the end of *The Holy Ghostly*, Pop—already dead—had danced ecstatically in the flames of a growing conflagration, chanting "BURN BURN BURN BURN." Here, Dodge requests cremation "in the very center" of his fields, apparently because he believes the fields to be (still) cursed and barren, so burning the ground would not make a difference. Dodge may here

be said to be at his "most gothic" state: he is seconds away from crossing that otherworldly threshold into death; moreover, he has just finished revealing the entire secret of the buried child and of the incest which set the awful events in motion. Consequently, in his heightened gothic state, Dodge may be privy to a deeper, supernatural awareness—an extraordinary intuition—of what his cremation portends. Perhaps Dodge intends his cremation to be symbolic of a phoenix-like rebirth whereby grandson Vince is imbued with Dodge's spirit—not literally, perhaps, but in a more general sense, a spirit of selfishness, drunkenness, violence, and isolation. In a sense, Dodge may come closest of all Shepard's gothic fathers to finally achieving McGhee's idea of transcendence through language, for Dodge dies immediately after pronouncing his last will and testament; thus, he does transcend his sordid situation—the hidden whiskey, the secret buried in the backyard, his cuckoldry, and the violent coughing which wracked his frail body.

Vince's most significant decision in the play is his decision to stay at the farm. Shelly asks Vince to leave with her, but he tells her, "I just inherited a house . . . I've gotta carry on the line. I've gotta see to it that things keep rolling" (*7P* 130). Vince does not seem to consider that he could leave with Shelly and sell the house he has just inherited. His desire to "carry on the line" implies that he will propagate and have more male children to carry both the family surname (whatever it may be—we are never told) as well as to carry on the gothic curse which has ruined them all. Significantly, however, Halie is the only female who remains to inhabit Vince's house. How, we may wonder, will Vince

"carry on the line" when his grandmother is the only female for him to couple with? If we are to believe that Bradley has been forever banished or exorcized from the house, then that leaves only Tilden to share the house with Vince and Halie. If Tilden in fact committed incest with Halie, and if Vince is cursed or doomed to follow in his father's footsteps, then one must shudder at the prospect of what life in the future might be like inside this gothic household.

Vince's cryptic statement that he must "see to it that things keep rolling" may be read as his final surrender to his gothic fate. Dysfunctional relationships will continue to be the pattern in this family; secrets will be kept—no one, not even Shelly, shows any inclination to call the police to report the infanticide. With Vince in charge now, things will, indeed, "keep rolling" as they always have been. Despite the unexplained appearance of crops, the curse on the family has never actually been lifted. By choosing to present a barren farm and an invalid patriarch, Shepard inevitably evokes comparisons to the Fisher King myth (and, tangentially, perhaps T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*). Like the Fisher King, Dodge inhabited a barren, cursed land and suffered from physical weakness and symbolic castration (since he has not enjoyed sexual relations with Halie for many years and may have been usurped in the marital bed by Tilden). But unlike the Fisher King myth, there is no Holy Grail by which ultimate redemption may be secured. Rather than being restored to his full strength, Dodge dies in the end; and though the crops return, little else has changed, as evidenced by Vince's final posture at the end of the play.

Immediately after Father Dewis leaves the house, Vince (and the audience) notices for the first time that Dodge is dead. Shepard's stage directions are significant here:

> His death should have come completely unnoticed. Vince lifts the blanket, then covers his head. He sits on the sofa, smelling roses and staring at Dodge's body. Long pause. Vince places the roses on Dodge's chest then lays down on the sofa, arms folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling. His body is in the same relationship to Dodge's. (*7P* 131)

Whereas gothic literature often uses spectacular, graphic scenes of violent deaths, here Dodge's death is "unnoticed": he goes out not with a bang, but a whimper. This apparent deviation from traditional gothic literature once again illustrates the peculiar nature of twentieth-century American gothic literature: an unremarkable death is best suited for the "petty" villain than for the "Faustian overreacher" as Malin noted. Moreover, this type of sedate death is appropriate for a man who has spent the latter part of his life "dodging" responsibility and disengaging from life. Dodge's death is a fitting end for a man who has spent much of his later life planted on a couch in front of a television set, using alcohol to insulate himself against both the outside world and members of his own family.

Dodge is now "buried" for the fourth and final time in the play—Tilden buried him in corn husks at the end of Act One, and Bradley buried him beneath Shelly's rabbit coat

at the end of Act Two. After burying Dodge, Vince literally assumes the position formerly occupied by grandfather. Shepard's staging technique—specifically his instructions for positioning of the actors—serves to emphasize that Vince is truly assuming the mantle formerly carried by Dodge. Significantly, however, there is one crucial scene in the play where Vince was conspicuously absent: Vince was not present to hear Dodge confess to infanticide. This privilege—of unwitting confessor—is reserved for Shelly.

Laura Graham describes Shelly as a "witness" who is "realistically drawn and assumes the perspective of the audience member" (101). As an "innocent thrown into an absurd universe," Shelly can "motivate exposition but cannot affect the outcome of the action" (Graham 101). Graham's assessment seems accurate, for though Shelly is the outside stranger to whom Dodge finally feels compelled to confess the infanticide—"I'd sooner tell it to a stranger than to anybody else" (*7P* 123)—she cannot finally persuade Vince to leave with her, nor does she finally abscond with Bradley's wooden leg (this role of exorcizing Bradley has been taken over by Vince). Shelly leaves the house much as the audience leaves the theater—shaken, psychologically exhilarated and drained, still puzzled about exactly what went on and what remains unresolved. This lack of resolution—and the subsequent sense of indeterminacy—is the driving force behind the play's gothic power, and the focal point for much of the indeterminacy is the mystery of the buried child.

Another brief examination of the play's manuscript history is helpful in showing how Shepard's thinking evolved regarding the mystery of the buried child. In the first two

versions of the original play, Dodge is the killer of the buried child, but in a third version, Bradley is the killer: he crushed Ansel's head when Ansel was at least four or five years old (making the corpse truly a buried "child" rather than an infant). In this version, Bradley confesses to Shelly: "I smashed his head in and I loved him. I told him. He knew I didn't hate him . . . I was his brother and he thanked me" (qtd. in Whiting 554). In this third version of the text, Dodge covers up for Bradley by claiming to have drowned Ansel: "Never even knew what he was doin'. Just squashed him to the ground. Too little to know what he was doin' . . . We had to cover up for him somehow. Can't report a thing like that to the police. Had to hide it. Had to keep it hid" (554). Tilden's character also evolved during the three versions of the original text. In the first version, Tilden fled to New Mexico because he "killed a child"; in the second version, Tilden is said to have "molested a child," and in the third version of the text, Tilden simply "got mixed up" (qtd. in Whiting 555). Shepard chose to use "mixed up" as Tilden's dilemma in the final 1978 published text. Obviously, the final version of the play makes Tilden's situation much more ambiguous and sympathetic to the audience, whereas the first versions make a monster of Tilden. Tilden's more sympathetic portrait in the 1978 version is important, for now Bradley becomes the play's most monstrous grotesque. Moreover, Tilden's child-like, diminished mental capacity allows the gothic mantle to fall squarely upon Vince, the haunted grandson, rather than upon Tilden's shoulders at the end of the play.

The first allusion to the buried child occurs in Act One when Dodge expresses his hatred for Bradley by yelling to Halie, "He's [Bradley] not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's buried out in the back yard!" (*7P* 77). Shepard's stage directions emphasize the tension of this crucial moment—Dodge's words are the first thrust of the metaphorical shovel into the burial ground of the dead baby: "They freeze. Long pause. The men stare at her [Halie]" (77). Halie leaves the house moments later, and the ensuing dialogue skirts the issue with maddening elusiveness. As Laurin Porter notes, Shepard "invites us to play detective, then frustrates our efforts" (114):

> TILDEN: You shouldn't a told her that.
>
> DODGE: What?
>
> TILDEN: What you told her. You know.
>
> DODGE: What do you know about it?
>
> TILDEN: I know. I know all about it. We all know.
>
> DODGE: So what difference does it make? Everybody knows, everybody's forgot. (*7P* 77)

Shepard continues to "frustrate" the audience's sleuthing when, later in Act Two, Dodge tells Vince, "You go lie down and see what happens to you! . . . They'll steal your bottle! They'll cut your hair! They'll murder your children!" (*7P* 93). This last statement is mystifying—Dodge seems to imply that someone else committed the infanticide, yet later he confesses to killing the baby himself. Perhaps Dodge is referring to Ansel (assuming

Halie's tale about Ansel is true), in which case "they" would be the mysterious Mafia who allegedly killed Ansel (for reasons unknown) on his wedding night.

Tilden's revelation to Shelly in Act Two does only a little to clarify the mystery of the buried child. For one thing, Tilden begins his tale with at least two details which seem inconsistent with what we eventually learn to be the "truth" ("truth" must always be qualified with quotation marks when it is mentioned in Shepard's work): Tilden tells Shelly, "We had a baby. He did. Dodge did. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other. Little baby. Dodge killed it . . . Dodge drowned it . . . Never told anybody. Just drowned it" (*7P* 103). By saying "Dodge did," Tilden implies that the baby was Dodge's, yet we later learn this is not true. Tilden seems unable to admit that he committed incest with his mother and impregnated her. In *Modern Gothic*, Sage and Smith observe that gothic literature involves "the unspeakable" (14), and Tilden's inability to "speak" of the incest further clouds the mystery and defers its final resolution. Secondly, Tilden states (above) that Dodge "never told anybody"; but if that is true, then how would Tilden have known *how* the baby died? Obviously, Tilden may have witnessed the baby's drowning—either with Dodge's knowledge or while hidden from Dodge's sight. Or perhaps the implication is that, as the baby's natural father, Tilden is granted some sort of supernatural or preternatural knowledge about the murder. This extraordinary "gothic" knowledge must also guide Tilden to the baby's body in the final scene of the play, for Tilden tells Shelly that Dodge is "the only one who knows where it's

buried" (*7P* 104). Even Bradley, the violent son who usurped and intimidated Dodge, was unable to wrest from his father the location of the baby's body: Tilden says, "Bradley tried to force it out of him but he wouldn't tell. Wouldn't even tell why he did it" (*7P* 104). Yet, in the play's final scene,

> *Tilden appears from stage left, dripping with mud from the knees down . . . In his hands he carries the corpse of a small child at chest level, staring down at it. The corpse mainly consists of bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth. He moves slowly downstage toward the staircase, ignoring Vince on the sofa. Vince keeps staring at the ceiling as though Tilden wasn't there. As Halie's voice continues, Tilden slowly makes his way up the stairs. His eyes never leave the corpse of the child. The lights keep fading.* (*7P* 132)

Even Shepard's stage directions here seem to mystify rather than to clarify. Shepard refers to the corpse of a "small child" rather than a baby. The term "child" is used twice here, in fact, and of course "child" is used in the play's title. A child is not a baby, and if we are to read Shepard's final directions literally, then the incestuous offspring was not drowned while still in infancy (as Tilden tells us). Rather, the implication is that the "child" may have been a toddler when it was murdered. The mystery, rather than being resolved, continues to grow even as the final curtain falls.

Tilden's final ascent up the staircase suggests that he is taking the buried child to its mother, Halie. One critic, Sherrill Grace, interprets this final image as "not an image of resurrection, but of regression to the primordial state, a grotesque enactment of the desire to return to the womb" (186). It is unclear whether Grace believes that the "desire to return to the womb" is Tilden's desire or the buried child's desire. But since Tilden has perhaps "returned to the womb" before by committing incest with his mother, Grace's interpretation seems most applicable to Tilden rather than to the buried child. By the end of the play, Halie has become merely a voice somewhere upstairs, just as she was at the opening curtain. She still does not realize Dodge is now dead, and her words are directed to him:

> Tilden was right about the corn you know . . . It's like a paradise out there . . . A miracle . . . Good hard rain. Takes everything straight down deep to the roots. . . You can't force a thing to grow . . . It's all hidden. It's all unseen. You just gotta wait til it pops up out of the ground . . . All hairy and fragile. Strong though . . . Maybe it's the sun. (*7P* 131-132)

It is tempting to interpret Shepard's pun on "sun" and "son" as suggesting that Vince (as the "son") has somehow broken the family curse by deciding to take over the farm. After all, the "sun" is now out and the crops have miraculously burst forth, fully grown and ready for harvesting. But some critics believe it is erroneous to view *Buried Child* as a "miracle play" or to view Vince as "buried child incarnate" (Porter 113). Shepard's lighting effect

during the final scene seems to be consonant with Porter's more pessimistic interpretation of the play's ending: "The lights start to dim almost imperceptibly" and they "continue fading" during Halie's monologue as Tilden mounts the stairs with the muddy bones in his arms (*7P* 131-132). If the sun/son truly symbolizes redemption, then why is darkness creeping in again (after all, this is morning)? The fading light may be seen as a type of coda or postscript to the play, suggesting a dimming of hope and a return to the old gothic cycle of darkness and despair.

It is interesting to compare the final scene of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* with this scene from Shepard: both plays end with the same phrase—"the sun"—and both plays end by focusing on mother and son (or grandmother and grandson, in the case of *Buried Child*). In Ibsen's play, Oswald Alving weeps as the sun comes up, his mind failing rapidly under the genetic curse of venereal disease inherited from his profligate father. In *Ghosts*, the sunrise coincides with the son's descent into madness and malaise, proving that, although the fallen father is dead, his curse will continue. The sunrise, traditionally a symbol of resurrection and new beginnings, is instead an ironic harbinger of disaster. In *Buried Child*, Shepard conveys the same idea as Vince succumbs to Dodge's curse and chooses to remain inside the haunted house.

Though the play won the Pulitzer Prize for 1978, Shepard remained dissatisfied with it. In a 1983 interview, Shepard called *Buried Child* "verbose and overblown" as well as "unnecessarily complicated" (qtd. in Coen 28). In 1996, the Steppenwolf Theater

Company, led by actor Gary Sinise, wanted to produce *Buried Child* on Broadway, and this seems to have been the impetus which led Shepard to revise the play: Shepard told Stephanie Coen in a 1996 interview for *American Theatre*, "It was due to this production being able to cast a new light on it" (28). Among his reasons for revising the text, Shepard said, "Vince hadn't been fully explored. For one thing, the old man was a lot more fun. I could really go with him . . . " (Coen 28). Shepard felt his "revised text makes it clear from very early on that Tilden is the father of the buried child . . . certain questions that were ignited in the play . . . shouldn't be resolved, but they should at least be followed through" (Coen 28). In the section that follows, I will point out what I believe to be the most significant parts of Shepard's 1996 revision. Shepard's 1996 revision makes the play much more a "detective story"—with deliberate clues for the audience to follow and many earlier ambiguities deliberately clarified—than the 1978 gothic portrait which exploited myriad possibilities and multiple interpretations of "truth." In short, the 1996 version is weaker than the original version in its gothic elements. (All quotations from the revised text come from the September 1996 issue of *American Theatre*).

Some of the first important revisions to the 1996 text involve references to incest, especially clarifications in the revised text that Tilden really did commit incest with Halie and, as a result, fathered the buried child. In Act One of the 1996 revision, when Halie calls downstairs to Tilden, Dodge prohibits Tilden more vehemently than he did in the original draft: instead of saying, "Don't answer her," Dodge now says, "Don't answer.

Whatever you do, don't answer her." Dodge's rebuke here sounds more desperate, a bit panicked, and much more prohibitive. The incest years earlier was perhaps a result of Tilden's "answering" to Halie's siren call, so Dodge's prohibition carries with it the tone of a Lacanian *non du pere*. As further clarification of the incest issue, Halie's monologue about Ansel has been revised considerably in the 1996 text. Shepard deleted Halie's references to kissing Ansel, as well as to her jealousy of Ansel's bride: the 1978 text included the line, "Hating me and loving her!" Now, Halie says only, "I knew he'd never come back from the honeymoon." The revision contains no hints of possible incest between Halie and Ansel, so the incest now remains solely between Halie and Tilden. Perhaps Shepard here intended to clear up any confusion or to streamline the various subplots, but the revision here weakens the gothic tone of the play, precisely because the revised text is less mysterious, less pregnant with possibility which the audience may have let its imagination explore. Another important change in the text involves Dodge's first, crucial allusion to the buried child. Originally, Dodge exclaimed, "My flesh and blood's buried out there in the back yard!" But now Dodge exclaims, "My flesh and blood's out there in the back yard!" As it reads now, Dodge may simply be saying that one of his other children is outside in the yard, perhaps mowing the lawn. Moments later, the revised text provides Tilden with a new of dialogue: "Why'd you tell her it was your flesh and blood?" This addition is important— the audience can probably hear Tilden's emphasis on the word "your," implying that the "flesh and blood" in the backyard is not Dodge's,

but belongs instead to Tilden. In Act Two, the revised text includes more (and more explicit) references to Tilden as the father of the buried child. When Vince introduces himself to Dodge as "Tilden's son," the revised text has Dodge replying, "He [Tilden] had two [sons], I guess." Dodge's remark here is flippant, and this flippancy undercuts the gothic tone of mystery, and dread of the unknown, which Shepard had achieved in the original version.

A second important aspect of the 1996 revision involves the presentation of the gothic alienated mother. The 1996 revision removes much of the mystery surrounding Halie's relationship with Father Dewis. In doing so, Shepard presents Halie's adulterous relationship with the hypocritical clergyman as more comical whereas the original version—due to its subtlety and ambiguity regarding their relationship—portrayed Halie as a darker, more insidious (and thereby more "gothic") alienated mother. In Act Two, after Vince and Shelly arrive at the house, the revised text shows Dodge explaining Halie's absence to Vince: "Halie is out with her boyfriend. The Right Reverend Dewis. He's not a breeder-man but a man of God. Next best thing I suppose." The original text omitted any direct reference to Dewis as Halie's "boyfriend," so this addition makes their adulterous relationship more explicit. Dodge's remark that Dewis is "not a breeder-man" lends itself to at least two possible interpretations. First, the remark recalls the opening conversation between Dodge and Halie in Act One when Halie told Dodge she had been to the horse races with a wonderful man who was a "breeder" (of horses, we assume,

though this is an intentionally loaded term). So Dodge may be saying simply that Father Dewis is a minister rather than a horse breeder. In addition, Dodge may be alluding to the fact that Dewis did not impregnate Halie (in contrast to Tilden), so he was not a "breeder" in that sense either. Again, the 1996 revision makes Dodge nonchalant about the horrors and betrayals which have torn this family apart, thereby weakening the gothic tone of the original version.

Another noteworthy aspect of the 1996 revision is Shelly's presentation as a stronger, even assertive, character. By presenting Shelly as less frightened and unsure of herself, Shepard has actually weakened the gothic tone of the play, for Shelly stands as proxy for the audience, and her fear is our fear. In the revised text, Shelly's emboldened stance consequently diminishes the audience's fear and dread. In the revised text, after Bradley tells Halie that Shelly "propositioned" him, Shelly asks Bradley indignantly, "What kind of a weird fucked-up yo-yo are you?" By calling Bradley a "fucked-up yo-yo," Shelly reduces him, figuratively speaking, to a child's plaything and a joke rather than allowing Bradley to remain as the grotesque, Frankenstein's monster which he plays in the original version.

The final important revision that I find noteworthy involves the passing of the gothic mantle from fallen father Dodge to haunted grandson Vince. After Vince "buries" Dodge by covering him with the blanket, Shepard's 1996 revision now has Vince put "Dodge's cap on his own head" while smelling the roses and staring at Dodge's body. In

the revised text, Shepard seems to have gone to great pains to make sure the audience realizes that Vince is irrevocably assuming Dodge's role—Vince is irredeemably swallowed by the curse which had claimed the family and, ultimately, there is no progress or miracle to save them. Though this revision is minor, Shepard doubtless intended to emphasize a psychic connection between Dodge and Vince, and to suggest, as he does in many of his plays, that the ending is static rather than moving toward resolution. The audience might recall at this point how, early in Act One, Dodge referred to himself as "an invisible man." It almost seems as though, immediately after his death, Dodge's ghost somehow possesses or otherwise compels Vince to stay and assume the fallen father's former posture and demeanor. We might also recall how, in *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill had used a ghost to manipulate the actions of the living characters—specifically, Maw's ghost orchestrated the tryst in the parlor between Eben Cabot and Abbie. Perhaps Shepard's scene hints at the same type of ghostly intervention used by O'Neill. But Vince donning his dead grandfather's cap in the 1996 revision seems to smack of overkill. The original version of the play made clear that Vince assumes the same posture as Dodge in the final scene—the two men even seem to be literally parallel to each other. So Shepard's revision imposes a theme upon the audience rather than allowing subtle themes to emerge evocatively as the original version had done. The original version seems much more consonant with the suggestive, elusive nuances of the gothic.

The 1996 revival of *Buried Child* on Broadway by the Steppenwolf Theater Company closed after only two months. Perhaps this fact itself is a commentary on our changing culture and the protean aesthetic tastes of theatre-goers.[1] But perhaps the public's tepid response was due, at least in part, to dissatisfaction about Shepard's tampering with what was, after all, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play. In the 1996 revision, Shepard achieved, to a great extent, exactly what he set out to do by clearing up many of the ambiguities which made the 1978 play so rich, complex, and mystifying. One can only speculate about the reasons why Shepard felt the play needed revision, but obviously he came to be dissatisfied with the 1978 text. Certainly, by 1996 Shepard had guaranteed for himself a place among the most important American playwrights of the twentieth century, and he had won (and continues to win) fame and fortune as a popular movie star. So perhaps Shepard felt that he could tinker with the indeterminacies of *Buried Child* without mitigating the play's original power. For whatever reason he may have followed, the 1978 text remains the stronger version, both gothically and dramatically.

Though the 1978 and 1996 versions of *Buried Child* are markedly different, the play deserves a spot at the forefront of twentieth-century American gothic drama. Shepard achieved onstage the same eerie phenomenon that Grant Wood created in his

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[1] In 1996-97, some of the most popular productions along the "Great White Way" were musicals aimed at mass audiences, including *Riverdance, Cats, Grease,* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway productions have traditionally been an avenue for more experimental works (as well as works judged to be of social and literary value). I am simply suggesting that perhaps Broadway was the wrong venue for a revival of *Buried Child*, judging by the play's brief run in 1996.

seminal painting *American Gothic* by taking a cultural cliché—a rural farmhouse with harmless, decent inhabitants—and turning it on its head, creating a "defamiliarized familiar" using gothic devices of incest, the uncanny, a curse motif, and a ghost story. Many critics feel that Shepard's later work has never matched the dark apex he reached with *Buried Child*—and in terms of Shepard's gothic dramatic power, this verdict may be accurate. None of Shepard's later family plays aspire to present such a breadth and range of gothic family members (*A Lie of the Mind* comes closest to presenting a wide array of family members, but many critics have excoriated the play for its perceived weaknesses). However, as I hope to demonstrate in the following two chapters of this study, Shepard continued to be drawn to the gothic as a vehicle for portraying the American family, and he continued to stretch and mold his gothic devices in new ways in his later family plays.

CHAPTER FOUR: GOTHIC EVOLUTIONS—*TRUE WEST, FOOL FOR LOVE,* AND *A LIE OF THE MIND*

As we've seen, with *Buried Child* Shepard reached a zenith in several respects (or it might more appropriate to say that *Buried Child* reaches the nadir of Shepard's gothic darkness). None of Shepard's plays has garnered a Pulitzer Prize for drama since *Buried Child*, though in many ways the playwright and his work remain popular, due in large part to the fame Shepard has achieved as a film actor and public personality. More importantly, however, no other family play of Shepard's since *Buried Child* has presented such an extensively gothic portrait of the American family. None employs as many different gothic motifs or probes as many unresolved mysteries as *Buried Child.* Nor does any other family play (with the exception of *A Lie of the Mind*) present such a vast array of family members (and even in *A Lie of the Mind,* as I will examine later in this chapter, only two of the family members seem to fall squarely into the gothic paradigm). Nevertheless, Shepard's family plays from the 1980's deserve examination in their own right, for each of these plays—*True West*, *Fool for Love,* and *A Lie of the Mind*—in some way continues to develop Shepard's gothic portrait of the American family.

One overarching gothic theme shared by each of these three plays is how the fallen father continues to "haunt" the son (or "sons" in the case of *True West*). In two of these plays—*True West* and *A Lie of the Mind*—the father never appears on the stage: in *A Lie of the Mind* the father has died, and in *True West* the father is ostensibly alive,

yet the audience can never be certain. In *Fool for Love*, the father appears as an onstage presence, yet he exists as a kind of specter or ghost who lurks hauntingly in the minds of his son and daughter. In all three of these plays, I will argue that the fallen father exists as a kind of metaphorical "ghost," and the haunted sons' attempts to repress traumatic memories of the fathers' malevolence are ultimately futile. Following the same gothic formula established in the earlier family plays, the haunted son is doomed to remember and to repeat the mistakes of his father. In this way, the past is never past, and repressed memories return to find a new life of their own.

True West:

True West is often seen by critics as the third play in Shepard's "family trilogy," but the trilogy label (applied to *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West)* was wielded by Shepard scholars and critics who wrote circa 1981-1983. Few critics today seem to use the term because the trilogy label no longer seems accurate (if, indeed, it ever was). For one thing, the three plays mentioned above are not linked by any continuity of storyline, though they do share common thematic elements (as I have attempted to demonstrate already with *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*). Furthermore, Shepard's *oeuvre* now includes other "family" plays such as *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) and *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), so it seems inaccurate to view the three works from 1977-1980 as comprising a true "trilogy." Consequently, my examination of *True West* does not view the play as the final piece of a trilogy; instead, I will focus almost

exclusively on the play's most gothic element, the *doppelgänger*, in order to suggest that, with this play, Shepard was probing his gothic paradigm in a fresh (albeit much more limited) way than he had hitherto attempted.

In a 1984 interview with Tucker Orbison—four years after *True West* premiered—Shepard said of the play, "I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff . . . I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal . . . " (qtd. in Harksoon 83). To illustrate this sense of doubleness, Shepard decided to use two brothers, Austin and Lee, who are virtual antitheses to each other; yet, during the play, the brothers seem to reverse roles briefly before finally "freezing" in a sort of violent, tension-filled stasis (Shepard's stage directions refer to this stasis as an "after-image"). Shepard's remark to Orbison about being "split in a much more devastating way" recalls the Nietzschean notion (from *The Birth of Tragedy*) of the Apollo/Dionysus dichotomy. When the play begins, Austin—parked securely behind his typewriter, writing diligently—seems representative of an Apollonian seeker of wisdom while Lee—drinking heavily and plotting his next crime—seems representative of a Dionysian devoted to pleasure and drunkenness. While the Nietzschean model is perhaps one profitable approach to *True West*, I would like to examine the relationship between Austin and Lee in the context of the classic gothic device of the *doppelgänger*.

For the purposes of this study, I will use the terms *doppelgänger* and "double" interchangeably and in the broadest sense, with all of the nuances which make it such a complex and rich device in gothic literature, including the idea of the double as a "second self" or "alter ego" (Herdman 14). In his essay from *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, Ros Ballaster has noted, "The double is a significant feature of the masculine paranoid gothic narrative, functioning as a dangerous projection of the masculine psyche" (qtd. in Sage and Smith 66). Indeed, paranoia seems inseparable from the *doppelgänger* in gothic novels. Novels from both the British and American gothic traditions often include a *doppelganger* that pursues the protagonist relentlessly; sometimes this pursuit is physical, while other times the pursuit takes the form of psychological torment or pervasive anxiety as the protagonist fears that the *doppelgänger* may overtake or annihilate him at any moment. In William Godwin's 1794 gothic novel *Caleb Williams*, the protagonist is in a perpetual state of apprehension as he flees before a criminal named Gines who dogs Caleb's every move. It is as though the *doppelgänger* embodies a lurid, frightening side of the protagonist's own personality—a facet of the personality which has been repressed and now seeks to resurface in an outward form.

Another facet of the *doppelgänger*, more often seen in American gothic literature, is that the double shares a profound psychic—even perhaps preternatural—connection with the protagonist. Often this connection has fatal (or potentially fatal) consequences for the double or the protagonist, or both. In Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*

(1798), the protagonist begins by attempting to prove that Clithero Edny is a guilt-wracked murderer who wanders the night in a state of somnambulism. But as the novel progresses, Edgar Huntly himself begins to evince some of the same behavior patterns as Clithero, including sleepwalking. It is as though the two men are somehow psychically connected, yet Clithero—as the novel's villain—fills Huntly with terror and dread. Clithero is presumed dead several times during the novel, yet he revives again and again to work his evil schemes. Consequently, Huntly can achieve some measure of peace and closure only after learning of Clithero's death at the end of the novel. In his seminal study *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler uses the term "alter ego" to refer to the relationship between Edgar Huntly and Clithero Edny, suggesting the strange attraction/repulsion that seems to define their relationship. Furthermore, Fiedler observes that often "the final horrors . . . are neither gods nor demons but intimate aspects of our own minds" (xxxiv). The protagonist does not always fully realize this epiphany, however: Huntly eventually understands that he is sleepwalking, but he never truly seems to grasp the depths of his profound gothic connection to his *doppelgänger*, Clithero, nor the extent to which his own behavior is subconsciously mirroring Clithero's actions. Two short stories by Edgar Allan Poe—"William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"—show the protagonist experiencing an epiphany (albeit a belated one) about his psychic connection to his *doppelgänger*.

In Poe's story "William Wilson," the connection between the protagonist and *doppelgänger* is emphasized in several ways: the protagonist and *doppelgänger* share the same birthdate, and they resemble each other physically. Moreover, William Wilson—the *doppelgänger*—mirrors the protagonist's mannerisms in a sort of "habitual practice of this sarcastic imitation" (Poe 36). All of these eerie similarities between the two men produce a pervasive anxiety and dread in the protagonist, who says of Wilson, "I secretly felt that I feared him" (Poe 30). Though he flees across Europe, the protagonist cannot escape his *doppelgänger*: "I fled in vain. My evil destiny pursued me" (Poe 42). In the climactic final scene, the protagonist realizes after stabbing William Wilson that his own fate was strangely dependent upon the fate of his *doppelgänger*, and he is horrified to learn that he has "murdered" himself by killing his double. Poe ends the story with the *doppelgänger* uttering this horrifying truth—"thou hast murdered thyself," implying that the protagonist's death follows immediately thereafter. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator observes a "striking similitude between the brother and sister . . . I learned that the deceased [sister] and himself had been twins and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them" (Poe 1470). These "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature" might infer incest, though this is never clear in Poe's story. Roderick Usher's destiny is intimately connected to his sister Madeline's, and indeed, both die at the same moment, literally intertwined in a deadly embrace.

Where do Austin and Lee, Shepard's brothers from *True West*, fit into this tradition of literary *doppelgängers*? First, since Austin and Lee are brothers, unlike most of the gothic forerunners mentioned above, their "doubleness" can be linked to bloodlines and genetics. More importantly, Austin and Lee share the hereditary "curse" of their absent, fallen father. Although the term "curse" is never used in this play, Austin and Lee are influenced by the destructive behavior patterns which have plagued their father, including drunkenness, violence, and abandonment of family due to wanderlust (or perhaps a selfish refusal to accept paternal and spousal responsibilities). Specifically, the brothers struggle—and achieve limited and temporary success—against repeating their father's destructive behavior patterns as they try to pursue their own vision of the American Dream, with the hallmarks of this "Dream" being financial security, popularity, and personal acclaim. For Austin, the younger brother, this struggle to avoid his father's fate has been a lifelong one, but he eventually succumbs. For Lee, the older brother (and the true "haunted son" in my gothic family paradigm) the struggle is very different: Lee, apparently, has lived his entire life repeating the father's behavior patterns, but midway through the play he makes an attempt to reform his ways, only to fail in the end, slipping back into his previous destructive, antisocial lifestyle.

In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes that "any dire knowledge that is shared but cannot be acknowledged to be shared . . . has the effect of rendering the people, whom it ought to bind together, into an

irrevocable doubleness" (18). Here, Sedgwick uses "doubleness" in a broader sense than that of a classic *doppelgänger* who stalks the protagonist or otherwise mirrors the protagonist's behavior. Instead, Sedgwick implies that "doubleness" involves a type of alienation (and her comments seem to me to be especially indicative of gothic family members) that results when two or more persons are unable to speak the unspeakable, perhaps because they have repressed traumatic memories. The Tyrone family struggles with this type of doubleness in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*: none of the family members wants to admit that Mary is slipping back into morphine addiction, so they engage in a type of charade by which they pretend not to notice anything is wrong. When the charade is isolated—as when Jamie refers to his mother as a "hop-head"—the other family members (Edmund and James Tyrone, Sr.) react with vitriol, and even violence. The family members in *Buried Child* demonstrate this same type of doubleness by repressing the secret of the infanticide and refusing until the very end to admit that it occurred. Like the Tyrones, the family in *Buried Child* engages in a charade (even a fecund fantasy life), so that each family member plays a "double" role—the fabricated role of normalcy which represses and denies the traumatic memory, and the true role of trauma victim who cannot fully and finally repress the traumatic memory. This type of gothic doubleness will play an even more central role in the next two Shepard plays examined in this chapter, *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*. In both of these plays, shared

knowledge about the fallen father has been repressed, especially by the children, and the return of the repressed produces a gothic "haunting."

Between Austin and Lee, the doubleness encompasses both Sedgwick's definition as well as other gothic nuances of the *doppelgänger*. Austin and Lee's "shared knowledge" involves their dysfunctional father, and while they do not entirely avoid talking about their father, they do so reluctantly and in snippets of half-truths and gradual revelation (in keeping with gothic narrative traditions). One example of this is when, early in the play, Lee tells Austin that he has recently visited their father in the desert:

> AUSTIN: I was down there too, you know.
>
> LEE: What d'ya want, an award? You want some kinda' medal? You were down there. He told me all about you.
>
> AUSTIN: What'd he say?
>
> LEE: He told me. Don't worry. (*7P* 7)

Lee's words imply that their father said something derogatory about Austin, but the audience never learns precisely what was said or why. "Doubleness," as defined by Sedgwick, results because the brothers, despite their best efforts to avoid discussing their father, end up giving both a voice and a new life to the fallen father's "ghost" which they have failed to exorcize.

Other facets of the classic gothic *doppelgänger* seem applicable to the brothers in *True West*, including a marked antagonism that exists between the protagonist and his

double. For the purposes of this chapter, Austin seems to be the play's protagonist and Lee the antagonist and *doppelgänger*. Austin is the younger brother, in his early thirties, Ivy-league educated with a passive demeanor and a yuppie costume consisting of a "light blue sports shirt, light tan cardigan, jeans, [and] white tennis shoes" (*7P* 2). Lee, on the other hand, is in his early forties, wearing a "filthy white t-shirt, tattered brown overcoat covered with dust," pants from the Salvation Army, and "two days' growth of beard" (*7P* 2). Like his father (and like Shepard himself), Lee has "bad teeth," a detail which becomes important in the brothers' final narrative about their father (*7P* 2). *True West*—like *The Holy Ghostly*, *Buried Child*, and *The Late Henry Moss*, presents a reunion that is a kind of homecoming, for the brothers have not seen each other for five years. It may be inaccurate to view Lee as "stalking" or pursuing Austin to their mother's house—at least in the same way that Poe's William Wilson pursues his protagonist, or Gines pursues Caleb Williams. However, as *True West* begins, it is clear that Austin arrived first at Mom's house (at her request), and he has been there long enough to buy groceries and to work on his screenplay when his brother Lee shows up. Lee's antagonism toward Austin begins almost immediately, starting with Lee's cryptic remark about what their father may have said about Austin. As the play progresses, this antagonism grows increasingly more intense and menacing, culminating with the threat of violence. At the same time, Mom's kitchen becomes more and more "hermetic" (a term used by C. W. E. Bigsby to describe

Shepard's family dramas) as Lee refuses to return Austin's car keys, effectively trapping him within the house.

The more trapped Austin becomes, and the more his plans to sell a screenplay are derailed by Lee's provocations, the closer the two brothers come to a full "switch" or role reversal until, by the start of scene seven, a role reversal seems to have taken place—with Lee at the typewriter trying to cobble together a screenplay and Austin drunk and mocking his brother's efforts. I have already mentioned some gothic precedents for role reversals between protagonists and *doppelgängers*, such as when William Wilson turns on his double and kills him, or when Edgar Huntly begins emulating the somnambulism of the lunatic Clithero Edny. In *True West*, the role reversal between Austin and Lee is short-lived, and by the end of the play they seem to be stuck in a sort of psychic limbo, with neither brother quite the same person as when the play began.

Shepard's staging in *True West* serves to focus our attention squarely on the brothers and their doubleness. Shepard's stage directions are meticulous, including his note that the set should be "*constructed realistically with no attempt to distort . . .* " (*7P* 3). All nine scenes take place on the same kitchen set, and it is instructive to compare this set to Shepard's earlier kitchen set from *Curse of the Starving Class*. Whereas the Tate kitchen had checkered curtains which appeared to be suspended in mid-air, this set shows a kitchen window with "neat yellow curtains" (*7P* 3). Furthermore, this kitchen set includes a "wall telephone" whereas the Tates had no phone for contact with the outside

world. Mom's kitchen in *True West* has a "small round glass breakfast table" ill-suited for supporting spontaneous naps like the Tate's hulking table in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Indeed, whereas the Tate family stumbled around the kitchen in states of semi-consciousness (mirroring their alienation from each other), the brothers in *True West* seem in a state of hyper-arousal for most of the play, as evidenced by Lee's (and later Austin's) somnambulism and concomitant nocturnal burglaries. Finally, while the Tates' alienation from each other was symbolized by four mismatched kitchen chairs, Mom's table in *True West* has "two matching white iron chairs" which are perfect for the tête-à-tête confrontations between the two brothers. The set is decorated with lots of plants, "mostly Boston ferns," and "citrus trees" are visible through the kitchen window. This kitchen is much more "homey" than the Tates' kitchen was, yet the abundance of houseplants seems a contrived attempt to create an atmosphere of intimacy: by the end of the play the plants are dead and drooping, and the temperature inside the house seems to have risen dramatically as both brothers are covered in sweat.

This realistic set gives no clue of the violence and bizarre behavior to come, for though the set is "realistic," by the time the curtain closes the stage has become a waste land littered with toasters and crushed toast, as well as burning pages of typescript and a smashed telephone. As Jane Ann Crum observes, Shepard possesses a unique "ability to balance on the edge of the irrational while remaining within the parameters of realism" (qtd. in King 75). Besides the physical appearance of the set, Shepard's sound effects at

the start of the play are important, especially the sound of coyotes: here Shepard informs us,

> The Coyote of Southern California has a distinct yapping, dog-like bark, similar to a Hyena. This yapping grows more intense and maniacal as the pack grows in numbers . . . The sense of growing frenzy in the pack should be felt in the background, especially in scenes 7 and 8. In any case, these Coyotes never make the long, mournful, solitary howl of the Hollywood stereotype. (*7P* 4)

The sound of the coyotes is clearly linked to the aggressive behavior of Austin and Lee—as the coyotes' barking grows more frenzied, so does the violence and antagonism between the two, culminating in the brothers' final physical confrontation and standoff as the curtain closes. The growing crescendo of the coyotes seems comparable to the ominous drumbeat in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, or the foghorn in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. In addition, the crescendo recalls the drum and bells of the Chindhi which haunted Pop in *The Holy Ghostly*. In the play's climactic scene, just before the lights fade to black and the curtain closes, the barking of the coyotes has changed to a "single coyote heard in distance" (*7P* 59). Later in this chapter, I will examine the implications of the play's final "after-image," but perhaps the single coyote's howl at the end of the play suggests that the brothers, however antithetical they may be, are yet bound

by at least one common thread—the memory and influence of their father who "haunts" them to the very end.

The play begins with Austin writing by candlelight at the kitchen table. Austin seems to prefer candlelight (he calls it "soothing"), the traditional gothic luminary source. Lee is leaning against the sink, already "mildly drunk," and he has a six-pack of beer beside him—a signal that, as eldest son, he has long ago fallen into the destructive pattern of alcoholism established by their father. Early in the play, Lee fires the first verbal salvo by becoming defensive and evincing an inferiority complex toward his younger brother: he says of Austin's writing, "You probably think that I'm not fully able to comprehend somethin' like that, huh? I did a little art myself once" (*7P* 6). Though he does not realize it, Lee's words become prophetic because, by the end of the play, Lee will be seated behind the typewriter trying to write a screenplay of his own.

Early in the play, the brothers mention their father. As noted above, the initial reference to the father is cryptic and ominous: Lee implies that their father criticized Austin during a recent conversation with Lee. Moments later, Lee accuses Austin of getting their father "tanked up for a week" during his (Austin's) most recent visit with their father (*7P* 8). Lee implies that Austin visited their father out of a sense of obligation or to assuage his own conscience rather than out of a real desire for intimacy or reconciliation. This initial mention of their father, however brief, is important since it serves as a prelude to the brothers' later, more lengthy and heated argument about their father. As scene one comes

to a close, Lee tells Austin, "I don't sleep": Lee plans to use the nighttime as cover while he cases the neighborhood for houses to rob (*7P* 10). By saying he doesn't sleep, Lee may be seen as following in a long line of sleepwalkers and night stalkers from gothic literature, including such characters as Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, Edgar Huntly and Clithero Edny, or even Mary Tyrone.

The gothic device of the uncanny is used more subtly in *True West* than in Shepard's previous family plays. In *True West*, the uncanny surfaces when Lee tries to write a screenplay of his own, and the plot Lee describes is later enacted (subconsciously or unconsciously) by the brothers themselves. The audience recognizes the strange-yet-familiar quality as the action unfolds, resulting in an uncanny effect. Lee's plot idea involves a man who chases his wife's lover across the American West, first by automobile and then, when the cars run out of gas, on horseback. At first, Lee claims to have altruistic motives for wanting to sell a screenplay. He tells Austin they could "get the old man outa' hock" if his script made money, but Austin says, "it might take more than money" (*7P* 25). Lee's reply seems both an acknowledgement of the truth spoken by Austin and also an ominous threat typical of a gothic *doppelgänger*: "He's not gonna' change but I will. I'll just turn myself right inside out. I could be just like you then" (25). Lee continues by telling Austin, "I always wondered what'd be like to be you" (*7P* 26), and indeed Lee appears to be imitating his younger brother by writing a screenplay. Scene four ends with Lee describing the two men in his screenplay:

> 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. (*7P* 27)

Since Shepard is a master of double meanings and innuendoes, a line from Lee's dialogue above might just as easily read, "And they keep *writin*' like that straight into the night," so that the speech becomes a metaphor for this very scene. Indeed, as Lee describes his screenplay to Austin, the action he is describing becomes an uncanny instance of "art imitating life": the two men described in the screenplay, "neither one knowing what the other will do," seems analogous to the two brothers as the tension and antagonism between them increase steadily during the play.

In the end, neither brother seems satisfied with the glitzy, modern life symbolized by Saul Kimmer's Hollywood connections or Mom's suburban kitchen. Near the end of the play, Austin describes to Lee his dissatisfaction during his visits to their childhood home, "There's nothin' down here for me. . . I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin' . . . Streets I misremember . . . There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!" (*7P* 49). In a desperate attempt to fill the void in his life, Austin decides to try living in the desert like his father and brother. In fact, shortly after learning that Lee

intends to write a screenplay, Austin says he might "drive out to the desert for a while" (*7P* 32). But Lee responds angrily to Austin's suggestion:

> Hey, so you actually think I chose to live out in the middle a' nowhere? Do ya'? Ya' think it's some kinda' philosophical decision I took or somethin'? I'm livin' out there 'cause I can't make it here! And yer bitchin' to me about all yer success! (*7P* 49)

Lee refutes Austin's illusion that a life of solitude in the desert is idyllic. Lee seems to acknowledge that he lacks the social skills and economic wherewithal to survive in the city, and that a self-imposed desert exile is the only life he is suited for.

As a *doppelgänger*, Lee exudes a latent violence, and he revels in his lawlessness. In scene four, the audience learns that Lee has refused to return Austin's car keys. Austin is clearly intimidated by his older brother, and does not seem to consider taking his keys back by physical force. When Lee antagonizes Austin by telling him that brothers "kill each other" all the time, Austin replies, "We're not driven to acts of violence like that" (*7P* 24). Austin's words are ironic because, by the end of the play, Austin himself is strangling Lee with a telephone cord, having been utterly transformed—by virtue of being thrown into such close quarters with his *doppelgänger*—from the mild-mannered Ivy-League graduate into a sweating, bloodthirsty barbarian. Lee's lawlessness seems a natural result of his drunken, violent lifestyle. After revealing his plans to burglarize Mom's neighborhood, Lee brags to Austin, "They can't touch me anyway. They can't put a

finger on me. I'm gone. I can come in through the window and go out through the door. They never knew what hit 'em. You, yer stuck" (*7P* 31). Unlike Austin, Lee has no roots which tie him to a certain place—no family, no career to speak of—and he delights that his solitude allows him the mobility to escape detection for his crimes.

In scene six, the memory of the fallen father again comes to the forefront when Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer returns to the house to discuss screenplay ideas. Austin learns from Saul that the producer has not actually decided to scrap Austin's screenplay; rather, he intends to produce both brothers' scripts. Saul tries to encourage Austin by suggesting that the brothers can provide financial support for their destitute father with their earnings from their screenplays. Austin replies that he gave their father money during his last visit to the desert, but their father "drank it all up" (7P 33). Saul offers three hundred thousand dollars for a first draft of Lee's western screenplay, and suggests putting the money in a trust so their father would have to use it for groceries rather than liquor. As this scene ends, Shepard's stage directions describe the "lights [go] to black as brothers look at each other from a distance" (*7P* 36). By having the brothers staring silently at each other from across the kitchen, Shepard effectively sets up a visual parallel to the two men in Lee's screenplay. This parallel creates an "uncanny" effect because the situation described in Lee's script seems strangely familiar—almost prescient—with the action unfolding between the two brothers onstage. Furthermore, this

visual scene foreshadows the final "after-image" in the play's closing moments where the brothers are frozen in a type of stasis, neither sure of his—or his brother's—next move.

By scene seven, the brothers have completely switched roles: now Lee is seated at the kitchen table, typing with two fingers, while Austin leans against the sink, laughing and drunk with whiskey, mirroring (inversely) the play's opening scene (*7P* 36). Austin seems delirious with incredulity that his uneducated, uncouth older brother is actually writing a movie script (and has been offered more money already than Austin has probably ever dreamed of). Trying to make sense of all this, Austin laughs and tells Lee, "He [Saul Kimmer] thinks we're the same person" (*7P* 37). Austin seems to imply that he and Lee are two sides of the same self, and perhaps Kimmer somehow senses this. Secondly, Austin's words suggest a full role reversal between the *doppelgänger* and the protagonist: in other words, Austin acknowledges that he and Lee have switched to the point where Saul has confused the two brothers. This role reversal becomes even more apparent when, moments later, Austin demonstrates the same lawlessness and bravado which had characterized Lee at the beginning of the play. Austin tells Lee, "How much you wanna' bet I can't steal a toaster!" (*7P* 38). Lee had secured the screenplay development deal from Saul by winning a bet on a golf shot. Now Austin wants to make a wager of his own—a wager based on his ability to burglarize the neighborhood as Lee had done earlier in scene three (when he carried in a stolen TV set). Austin's ramblings are breaking Lee's concentration, and Lee threatens to kick Austin out of the house.

Austin replies by saying, "So now you're gonna kick me out! Now I'm the intruder . . . I might even commit bigger crimes. Bigger than you ever dreamed of. Crimes beyond the imagination!" (*7P* 39). Austin's words are reminiscent of Vince's from *Buried Child* when, after experiencing a kind of uncanny (offstage) transformation, Vince returns to the house claiming to be the "Midnight Strangler." Like Vince, Austin began the play as a stereotypical dutiful son, somewhat passive; but by the end of the play, both Vince and Austin have transformed into violent aggressors, and their transformation has been marked by drunkenness and an imitation of the behavior patterns of the "fallen" father.

As the play nears its conclusion, Austin falls more fully under the spell of his father's "haunting"—that is, Austin becomes more like his father and, coincidentally, more like Lee. When Austin remarks to Lee, "We're livin' in a Paradise," Lee replies, "You sound just like the old man now" (*7P* 39). Austin acknowledges this truth, saying, "We all sound alike when we're sloshed." The crucial difference between Austin's adopting their father's behavior patterns and Lee's adoption of the same is that Lee has been following in their father's footsteps for many years, but for Austin this is a new and sudden transformation. Consequently, Lee finds it perfectly natural to suggest that they bring their father here to live with them once they receive their money from their respective screenplays. For Austin, this suggestion is horrific, and it prompts him to take a drunken swing at Lee (*7P* 39). Austin's violent outburst seems surprising since he has been metamorphosing into his father throughout the play—why would he resent having the old

man around now? But Austin reveals that the source of his bitterness stems from their father ridiculing him during their last visit together: "I gave him money and all he did was play Al Jolson records and spit at me!" (39). This is Austin's final dilemma—the more he becomes like his father, succumbing to his father's legacy of drunkenness and violence, the more forcefully he resents his own transformation and tries to resist succumbing to it. I refer to this dilemma as "gothic" because it constitutes a return of the repressed for Austin: he has tried to "bury" his father's memory and to repudiate his father's legacy—and though he voluntarily visited his father in the desert and tried to help him financially, the derisive reception his father gave him only strengthens Austin's resolve to be different from his old man. But now that Austin finds himself (metaphorically) trapped in close proximity to his *doppelgänger*, he seems doomed to fall under the "curse" of the fallen father. Austin tells Lee, "Nobody can disappear. The old man tried that. Look where it got him" (*7P* 41). Austin implies that their father's attempt to "disappear" involved abandoning his paternal role and responsibilities as father and provider, like all of the fathers in Shepard's family plays. Yet ironically, Austin is no better than their father in this regard: as the play begins, he admits to having abandoned (at least temporarily) his own wife and child in order to come on this voluntary exile to Mom's house, ostensibly to water her plants and to house-sit for her while she is away on an Alaskan cruise, but in reality Austin seems to have looked forward to the opportunity for solitude so he could write his screenplay.

Thus, Austin is in some ways already beginning to follow his father's pattern of behavior, at least partially, even as the play begins.

Another way in which the father's presence insinuates itself into the closing scenes of the play involves the brothers' competitive dialogue over which of them was more of a confidante to their father. This dispute—really a type of bravado whereby each brother wants to view himself as sharing in some of their father's closely-held secrets—involves the story about their father's losing his false teeth during a trip to Mexico. Austin fires the first volley in this verbal duel by telling Lee, "He [Dad] never confided in you" (*7P* 41). Austin relates how their father needed new teeth, a detail which recalls several precedents from the sub-genre of "southern gothic" literature, including Anse Bundren from William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Lucynell Crater (the mother) from Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," and Captain Penderton from Carson McCullers' *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. In each case, the decaying or missing teeth are symbolic of a deficient or warped moral sense. Like Anse Bundren, the father in *True West* acquires false teeth in order to improve his outward appearance, without any accompanying inward change in his sensibility or his integrity. The father in *True West*, like many of Shepard's father characters, is a military veteran. Austin reveals that their father decided to "beg the government. G.I. Bill or some damn thing" for money to have his teeth pulled (*7P* 41). But the government money was not enough to pay for dental work, so the father was forced to travel to Mexico for the procedure. On his return trip, their father lost his new

dentures after placing them in a doggy bag with some Chinese food while bar-hopping and drinking heavily (*7P* 42). Austin's tale shows the father suffering due to his own vices (drunkenness), and, by extension, the sons will likewise suffer (financially, socially, and emotionally) if they follow the father's pattern.

Scene eight begins in the early morning, and both brothers are drunk. Lee has abandoned his short-lived attempt to reform himself and to make a new start. Instead, he reverts to his formerly violent self by smashing the typewriter with a 9-iron and burning pages of his script. Austin has fulfilled his pledge to become a burglar, and he has lined up an array of stolen toasters along the kitchen countertop. Austin has now become the gothic somnambulist—out all night robbing the neighborhood houses—just as Lee had been earlier in the play. Mom's plants are dead and drooping, confirming that Austin has fallen from his former position of dutiful son and is now a drunken home-wrecker (literally, since the kitchen is a wreck by the end of the play) like his father and older brother.

Physical and emotional isolation is a gothic motif which appears in many works of gothic literature, especially twentieth-century American drama. The Tyrone family in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* was isolated in a coastal home as the night and fog closed in upon them. The Tate family in *Curse of the Starving Class* and the family in *Buried Child* were both physically and geographically isolated, and when their isolation was violated by "outsiders," the tenuous ties which had hitherto held the family together quickly unraveled and the family finally collapsed. In *True West*, Saul Kimmer—and, later,

Mom—are the only two characters who interrupt the brothers' intense solitude, and even then these interruptions are brief and uneventful. Austin has been confined onstage inside the kitchen since the play began. The only time he has left the kitchen—at night to steal the toasters—the audience is not allowed to witness. Lee's refusal to return Austin's car keys has further isolated Austin, and this isolation is exacerbated when Lee rips the telephone from the wall after getting into an argument with a switchboard operator. Like Felice and Clare in Tennessee Williams' *The Two-Character Play*, Austin and Lee seem cut off from the outside world. The brothers' isolation fuels their eccentric behavior, so that by scene eight Austin loads bread into all of the stolen toasters and butters the toast as it pops up (*7P* 48). As a counterpoint to Austin's behavior, Lee grows more and more violent: when Austin offers him toast, Lee "suddenly explodes and knocks the plate out of Austin's hand," and there is a "long frozen moment where it appears Lee might go all the way this time" (*7P* 49). This latter statement—"go all the way this time"—implies that Lee might actually murder Austin in a fit of rage. Earlier in the play, Lee had suggested that brothers "kill each other" all the time (*7P* 24).

In scene nine, the final scene, Shepard's stage directions describe the kitchen as a "desert junkyard" with bits of crushed toast, burned typescript, and empty beer cans strewn across the stage (*7P* 53). The physical disaster seems to symbolize Austin's psychological decline; now he claims only to want to go to the desert with Lee, finally fulfilling his gothic destiny by submitting completely to the fallen father's legacy and

following in his footsteps, much as Vince had assumed Dodge's posture and position at the end of *Buried Child*. At this point, Mom returns home unexpectedly and, upon finding her house a wreck and her plants dead, reacts with incredible calm. Mom claims to have cut her trip short because she missed her plants, yet upon seeing that her plants have died, she remarks, "Oh, well, one less thing to take care of I guess" (*7P* 54). Mom's nonchalance and emotional aridity characterize her as a gothic "alienated" mother: certainly her lack of maternal love and emotional bonding with her sons has contributed to their own estrangement from her and from each other. Besides evincing a lack of affection toward her sons, Mom is clearly out of touch with reality: she tells the boys that Picasso is coming to town on a Greyhound bus, and she seems undeterred in her belief even after Austin tells her that Picasso is dead. Perhaps most significantly, Mom (her generic title suggests a generic, emotionless woman) seems not the least surprised to find her sons wallowing in their father's drunken, destructive footsteps. On the contrary, rather than showing surprise, Mom seems almost prescient as she asks both Lee and Austin if they are going to the desert to "live with their father" (*7P* 53). Lee replies that they're going to a "different desert," and Mom counters, "Well, you'll probably wind up on the same desert sooner or later." Mom's reply suggests that the sons' emulation of their father's behavior will eventually end with all three men living together and (metaphorically) fulfilling their gothic destiny as haunted sons.

In the play's most visually dramatic scene, Austin begins choking Lee with the telephone cord after Lee refuses to take Austin with him to live in the desert. This scene is the human embodiment of the eagle and cat scene described by Ella Tate in the closing lines of *Curse of the Starving Class* where the eagle and cat were locked in deadly combat, each knowing it will die if it stops struggling. Austin provides the most explicit commentary on the hermetic, claustrophobic mood which has smothered the entire play when he tells Mom, "He's [Lee] not gonna' let me get outa' here" (58). Austin implies that his violence is spawned by a desperate survival instinct—he must defeat Lee or be defeated himself. The fear he demonstrated toward Lee in the early scenes of the play has given way to desperation, frustration, and anger.

In the play's final lines, Shepard returns to the uncanny resemblance of "life imitating art" by having the brothers act out the scenario which Lee had described in his screenplay idea. Austin tells Lee, "Just let me get to my car. All right, Lee? Gimme a little headstart and I'll turn you loose" (*7P* 59). Austin is clearly anticipating a lengthy chase scene, just like the two men in Lee's screenplay. Austin continues choking Lee until Lee is motionless, but as he tries to leave the house, Lee jumps up, blocking Austin's escape. Remarkably, the scene is transformed from Mom's kitchen to a "vast desertlike landscape," reinforcing the idea that the brothers have succumbed to their father's influence—like the father, the sons now find themselves in (a vision of) the desert, isolated and alienated.

As the curtain closes, neither brother has succeeded in killing the other, nor has either succeeded in escaping the house and leaving the other behind. As Austin and Lee stare at each other in the play's final "after-image," they seem psychically joined together, each anticipating the other's imminent physical assault. The audience can never know whether the brothers will eventually leave Mom's house and make it to the desert, either alone or together. The traditional, mythic lure of the American West as a place of freedom and refuge from the world's busyness remains a type of mirage or pipe dream, not a final reality for either Austin or Lee. "Shepard's true West . . . is neither Mom's devastated kitchen nor the desert nor the prairie; it is a mythic map of the perpetual confrontation of two opposing persons, fundamental forces, or incompatible ideas (Harksoon 84). *True West* is thus typical of Shepard's work in that it avoids a final resolution, choosing instead to leave open a myriad of possibilities.

In the end, the audience can never be sure if the brothers' father is still alive. Certainly Mom believes him to be alive, but she also believes Picasso to be alive. We know the father must have been alive when the brothers last saw him. It doesn't really matter, after all, for the father's influence over the sons continues to haunt them both, just as surely as if he had died and his ghost returned. This "haunting" by the absent father, coupled with the gothic device of the *doppelgänger* and the uncanny resemblance between the brothers and the two men in Lee's screenplay, show how Shepard's gothic writing continued to evolve in his family plays after *Buried Child*. It is perhaps worth

noting that Shepard did not have a brother (he had two younger sisters), so his fascination with brothers—starting with *Buried Child* and including other family plays such as *A Lie of the Mind* and *The Late Henry Moss*—is in some ways a type of experimentation itself. For Shepard, the brothers seem in some respects to be two halves of the same self: neither brother is a complete self without the other half. If Lee is the drunken "man's man" full of wanderlust and a fierce independence, then Austin is the dedicated artist, serious-minded and (usually) responsible. Once these "halves" come into close proximity for an extended time, the result is sure to be dynamic and volatile. Certainly, by using brothers (and the omnipresent fallen father) Shepard is able to concern his plays with more male-centered issues—a major reason why many feminists find fault with Shepard's work. With his next play, *Fool for Love*, Shepard would try something different by portraying an emotionally charged couple who, it turns out, are half-siblings. This would be the first play to include a sister character since *Curse of the Starving Class* and, as usual, the common element linking *Fool for Love* to the other family plays is the pervasive, haunting presence of the fallen father who, in *Fool for Love*, really does seem to be, in a very real sense, a "ghost."

Fool for Love:

Fool for Love was first produced on February 8, 1983, at the Magic Theater in San Francisco. Shepard says of this play, "I was determined to write some kind of confrontation between a man and a woman . . . this one is really more about a woman

than any play I've ever written . . . " (qtd. in Dugdale 46). Shepard introduces a new type of gothic incest motif, *Geschwisterinzest*—incest between brother and sister. Eddie and May are really half-siblings, both children of the spectral Old Man who sits just offstage in a rocking chair, taunting the lovers. The Old Man as fallen father is the most important gothic device in the play, and it is the first time since *The Holy Ghostly* that Shepard has put a veritable talking "ghost" onstage in a family play. According to David Derose, Shepard wrote sixteen drafts of *Fool for Love*, but he did not create the character of the Old Man until the last draft, and only then did he feel the play was complete. Derose says, "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" (122). Critics such as Lynda Hart go so far as to view the Old Man as the incarnation of the absent father from *True West* (101). While this assertion may or may not be accurate, Shepard has clearly brought the fallen father back onstage from his brief exile in *True West*. For the purposes of this study, I will focus primarily on the gothic devices of incest and the "ghost" of the fallen father who haunts, not only the son this time, but also the daughter.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler notes several examples of *Geschwisterinzest* from American gothic literature, including William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* and *The Sound and the Fury*, as well as Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Fiedler remarks that "brother-sister incest in particular comes to

stand in Romantic symbology for the rebellion against paternal authority, for the spirit of revolution itself" (398-99). If we apply Fiedler's edict to Eddie and May from *Fool for Love*, then the father's ghost, the Old Man, may perhaps be viewed as an accusing spirit come to chastise his offspring for their illicit love and for their "rebellion against paternal authority." This view seems valid: the Old Man's presence seems motivated, at least in part, by his undying urge—like all of Shepard's dramatic fathers—to exercise his authority to the very end, and even in the afterlife. Both Eddie and May interact with the Old Man during the play, and their interaction reveals resentment and distrust of the father and a marked lack of affection and respect. Eddie and May demonstrate a kind of simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from each other: May demands that Eddie stop stalking her, yet when he leaves the motel room she collapses into hysterics. For his part, Eddie has followed May relentlessly for many miles and for many years, yet he cannot seem to remain faithful to her and ends by leaving her yet again in pursuit of the mysterious Countess, the proverbial "other woman."

As usual, Shepard's staging, lighting, and sound effects serve to emphasize the dramatic power of his gothic devices. Especially important in this play are the claustrophobic motel room (even more "hermetic" than Mom's kitchen in *True West*) where the lovers wreak emotional and psychological havoc on one another, the booming sound whenever doors are slammed, and the isolated black platform where the Old Man sits in an intermittent spotlight.

Shepard's first important stage direction is as follows: "This play is to be performed relentlessly without a break" (*FFL* 13). By having no breaks or intermissions, the emotional and psychological crisis inflicted upon Eddie and May is intensified and maintained consistently from start to finish. The setting is a "stark, low-rent motel room on the edge of the Mojave Desert," very near the mysterious domain of the absent father from *True West* (*FFL* 13). Onstage we see a "cast iron four-poster single bed," perhaps symbolizing the couple's recalcitrant and unyielding relationship which has become hardened against any form of compromise or real affection. The single bed might suggest several possibilities: perhaps Eddie and May are sleeping in it so close that they are nearly intertwined; or perhaps the single bed suggests that Eddie and May ultimately do not belong together since the bed is only big enough to sleep one comfortably; or perhaps it suggests that May did not expect Eddie to join her when she checked into the motel room. The stage is bathed in eerie yellow—the doors are painted yellow; the seats are made of yellow plastic, and the bathroom door is ajar allowing a "yellow light to bleed onto stage" (*FFL* 13). The predominance of yellow seems to suggest a starkness, like a peeling away of artifice or an exposing to light of the secrets which the lovers have repressed for so long. Whereas a red light might suggest seduction or erotic role-play, the glaring yellow which surrounds Eddie and May suggests that the mysteries of seduction are long past and that on this night, their charade will be laid bare, as under the bare light bulb of an interrogator.

Shepard takes great pains to describe the platform where the Old Man sits ensconced:

> Extreme down left . . . is a small extended platform . . . the floor is black and it's framed by black curtains. The only object on the platform is an old maple rocking chair facing upstage right . . . An old horse blanket with holes is laced to the back of the rocker. The color of the blanket should be subdued—grays and blacks. (*FFL* 14)

By using the word "subdued" to describe the colors of the horse blanket, Shepard appears to be using the colors to create and symbolize a mood or to represent an emotional state. Consequently, it is significant that Shepard surrounds and frames the Old Man in the color black—the most "gothic" color suggesting evil, dread, and ill omen. Of course black also suggests death; perhaps the Old Man is dead and this is his ghost we are seeing and hearing. The audience will learn the extent of the Old Man's treachery as the play progresses, and Eddie and May will appear increasingly as victims of the Old Man's legacy of betrayal and deception. Shepard emphasizes the centrality of the Old Man's character by listing him first in the written script. The Old Man's rocking chair faces upstage right so that he is "just slightly profile to the audience" and, characteristically, a bottle of whiskey sits on the floor beside him (*FFL* 15). The Old Man's costume consists of a Stetson hat, western boots and an old vest: he is (was) apparently a cowboy

like Eddie, and both men possess the free spirit of the wanderer, making them unsuitable for family life or even monogamy, as the audience learns later.

Shepard's most important and problematic direction regarding the Old Man's character is that "He exists only in the minds of May and Eddie, even though they might talk to him directly and acknowledge his physical presence. The Old Man treats them as though they all existed in the same time and place" (*FFL* 15). If the Old Man now "exists only in the minds of Eddie and May," then he is no longer alive. But, as their natural father, he must have once been alive—this is why I am referring to the Old Man as a ghost. The Old Man's existence is uncanny in its duality, existing as he does at once both in reality and in the imagination. We are presented with the "real" Old Man who fathered both Eddie and May, yet at the same time we are presented with Eddie and May's imagined version of him now that he is physically dead—and this imagined version is perhaps more antagonistic and terrifying than the "real" version was. As I suggested above, the Old Man may function as more than a ghost; since his presence serves to torment Eddie and May and to remind them that their torrid love affair is really incestuous, he also serves as an embodiment of their own guilty consciences and the return of their repressed traumatic memories. In order to perpetuate their torrid romance, Eddie and May must have tried to forget that they are half siblings, but now the Old Man's taunting, haunting presence will not allow them to forget or to repress this knowledge. Shepard's direction that the Old Man "exists only in the minds of May and Eddie," is problematic

because, as Charles Lyons points out, the way the Old Man's character is perceived by the audience differs between the written text and the performed play. Lyons notes that "in point of fact, when [the play] is performed live, there is no suggestion in the play itself that the Old Man is being imagined or dreamed by either Eddie or May" (Lyons 144). To the audience, the Old Man does not seem to be "imagined," but neither is the Old Man consistently acknowledged by Eddie and May throughout the play—only at certain times and for specific reasons, such as when he provides insight about their shared past. Moreover, the Old Man is not acknowledged at all by the one "outsider," a man named Martin who has come to take May out on a date. Consequently, the audience must conclude that the Old Man is a ghost who has come to influence the present and to alter its outcome.

In the opening stage directions, May's description is anything but seductive: she is in her "early thirties," sitting on the edge of the bed, elbows on her knees, "head hanging forward, staring at the floor" (*FFL* 15). She is dressed in a denim full skirt" and a "baggy white t-shirt." Her feet are bare (*FFL* 15). May's posture suggests that she has already suffered some sort of trauma even before the curtain opens. She appears to be dejected or bereft, emotionally and psychology drained. Eddie is a bit older than May, in his "later thirties." He wears the typical macho cowboy garb: muddy boots, jeans which reek of horse sweat, a "brown western shirt with snaps" (*FFL* 16), and spurs dangling from his belt. More importantly, Eddie "limps slightly" and "there's a certain broken-down quality

about his body in general, as though he's aged long before his time" (16). The limp, though easily explained perhaps as a result of a rodeo accident or arthritic joints which result in the "broken-down quality," may nevertheless connote a type of malevolence or diabolism (at least mischief) residing in Eddie's character, following in the same literary tradition as the Devil with his mythical cleft foot, Lord Byron with his club foot, Captain Ahab with his wooden leg, and Ab Snopes with his wounded heel. Certainly Eddie is capable of violent rages, as he demonstrates later upon hearing that May is waiting for her date to arrive.

The curtain rises, and the lights slowly come up to the sound of Merle Haggard singing "Wake Up." The import of the song may be two-fold, suggesting not only the sunlight exposing the lovers' taboo and flawed relationship which has been kept in the dark for so long, but also an emotional and psychological "waking up" as repressed memories are brought to light. The play will end with another Haggard song, "I'm the One Who Loves You." Shepard may have intended to be ironic with the latter song, since it plays just after Eddie has abandoned May once more, perhaps for the last time. The most important sound effect in the play is a "booming" resulting from bass drums being miked behind the bathroom door and stage door. Shepard instructs that the booming sound should grow increasingly louder, whenever a door is slammed, as the play progresses (*FFL* 26). The booming of the doors parallels the lovers' anger, despair, and uncontrollable passions. Eddie and May's emotions become more frantic and erratic as

the play progresses, and the booming sound grows likewise stronger until it reaches deafening proportions. Moreover, this emotional and aural crescendo seems almost the inevitable result of the deliberate, insidious manipulations of the Old Man as he interacts with his children. It is as though both Eddie and May reach an emotional and psychological breaking point which explodes, literally, in the play's closing scenes. In the psychology of gothic, the Old Man serves to bring about the return of the repressed traumatic memories for both Eddie and May, and the ensuing psychological pressure from this "return" is symbolized by the booming sounds of the doors slamming. Furthermore, the doors which are slammed are never closed for good: Eddie keeps re-entering the motel room moments after he leaves, and May keeps re-emerging from the bathroom, so these types of "returns" parallel the return of memories and the recovery of truth.

To fully understand the import of the "curse" which the Old Man has laid upon his children—by virtue of the Old Man's infidelity, his love which got "split in two"—it is necessary to examine the dysfunctional relationship between Eddie and May. Eddie speaks the opening lines of the play, and immediately the audience realizes that the lovers' relationship is marked by fear of abandonment: "I'm not goin' anywhere. See? I'm right here," Eddie tells May (*FFL* 17). Eddie's words imply that May needs this reassurance, and her dependent state is further emphasized when, moments later, she "suddenly grabs his closest leg with both hands and holds tight, burying her head between his knees" (17). In this posture, May appears willingly submissive, but as is often the case with Shepard,

appearances are deceiving: when Eddie tries to push her back "gently" onto the bed, May "erupts furiously, leaping off the bed and lashing out at him with her fists" (17). Besides resenting Eddie for his past desertions—and fearing another abandonment in the near future—May's violent anger at Eddie is fueled by his infidelities. May tells Eddie his fingers smell like "rich pussy" (18). Just as their father the Old Man was unable to be faithful to one woman, so Eddie has left May for other women, most notably the mysterious "Countess" who drives a long black Mercedes and reappears to wreak havoc at the end of the play.

Eddie and May's relationship is "gothic" in several ways. First, as half-siblings, it is an incestuous relationship, following in the gothic tradition of the aforementioned examples cited by Leslie Fiedler. Secondly, their incest is a secret which is revealed gradually to the audience (and to the "outsider" character, Martin), much like the infanticide in *Buried Child*. Finally, their relationship is characterized by violence, including the imminent threat of death at one another's hands. Violence, especially the threat of imminent violence which lingers for an extended time before finally exploding in a sudden, inevitable climax, has long characterized gothic literature in both the British and American traditions. In Poe's short stories, for example, the protagonist is often consumed with dread that violence will befall him and, by the end of the story, it usually does. In *Fool for Love*, the threat of violence appears in the play's opening moments. Early in the play, May articulates her paranoid fear of Eddie by telling him, "You're either

gonna' erase me or have me erased" (*FFL* 19). May says she fears this will happen because she's "in the way" of Eddie's relationship with the Countess. Yet May herself talks of inflicting physical violence upon Eddie, even murdering him: she tells Eddie she will kill him and the Countess "with two separate knives. So the blood doesn't mix. I'm gonna' torture her first though. Not you. I'm just gonna' let you have it. Probably in the midst of a kiss" (*FFL* 20). During this dialogue, Shepard's stage directions describe how Eddie and May "press the walls as they move" and talk (20). Throughout the play, both lovers are constantly making contact with the walls—clawing at the walls, pressing the walls, moving against walls, and Eddie even throws Martin up against a wall later in the play. By manipulating space in this way, Shepard makes the motel room seem even more claustrophobic and hermetic than Mom's kitchen in *True West*. By pressing up against the walls and calling attention to the confinement of the motel room, Eddie and May symbolize their entrapment within a taboo relationship which neither is able to escape, a relationship characterized by a paradoxical combination of coupling and abandonment, desire and repulsion. May demonstrates this dichotomy when she makes good on her threat by kneeing Eddie in the groin while they are in the middle of a kiss and then storming into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her (*FFL* 26). At this point, the Old Man speaks for the first time.

A separate spotlight rises each time the Old Man speaks, for he remains shrouded in near darkness for most of the play, perhaps symbolizing the "darkness" which his

destructive drinking and philandering brought into the lives of Eddie and May and their respective mothers. Furthermore, the solitary spotlight on the Old Man further serves both to isolate him from his children (like a lighted sphere or ring which contains or imprisons him) and to expose him to the light of truth and revelation as he is finally forced to confront his crimes and their aftermath. When the Old Man speaks for the first time, he asks Eddie, "I thought you were supposed to be a fantasist, right? . . . You dream things up?" (*FFL* 26). To illustrate his point, the Old Man points to a nonexistent picture on the wall and asks Eddie if he sees it. Eddie says he *does* see the picture—either he is simply playing along or else he is as adept at fantasizing as the Old Man is. The Old Man tells Eddie that the picture is Barbra Mandrell and that he (the Old Man) is "married to Barbra Mandrell in my mind" (27). "I'm glad we have an understanding," he tells Eddie as the spotlight fades on him and the stage lights come up again. The Old Man's tone is condescending, as though he has just taught a child a valuable lesson. This conversation, albeit brief, is important because it presages the thematic structure of the rest of the play. Eddie has indeed become a "fantasist" who is adept at seeing things that aren't there (like the possibility of a life with May and his ability to reform his wandering ways and to be faithful to her). Eddie is also adept (like the Old Man) at denying the truth when this truth is unpleasant, like the fact that his relationship with May is an incestuous one. Eddie is not alone in his fantasist ways: May is his accomplice, and the rest of the play's conflict results from her threats to expose their mutual secrets. The traditional climax in gothic literature

involves the revelation of a secret sin or hidden guilt, and the threat of such exposure thrusts Eddie into the violent, raving vortex which typically consumes the haunted son in Shepard's family plays.

As if to symbolize her imminent betrayal of their mutual secret, May comes out of bathroom and changes "almost unnoticeably" into a "sexy woman" by donning a red dress and black heels (*FFL* 28). Then she taunts Eddie by telling him she's been seeing someone, provoking Eddie into a jealous rage. After storming out of the room, Eddie returns with two traditional tools of Shepard's men, a weapon and some alcohol—specifically a shotgun and a bottle of tequila (*FFL* 30). "We made a pact," Eddie tells May—reminiscent of the unspoken "pact" made by the family in *Buried Child*—and this "pact" is another "connection" between the two lovers. Their cryptic dialogue enhances the play's gothic mood because, as in *Buried Child*, the audience is left in suspense and doubt about precisely what they are referring to. The audience learns later that the "pact" is the lovers' agreement never to tell an outsider that they are half-siblings who share the same father. Furthermore, the audience learns later that their "pact" may include a promise never to mention a murder that both Eddie and May witnessed. At this point in the play, however, these secrets (both of which are revealed by the end of the play) are hidden beneath insinuations and inferences:

> EDDIE: You know we're connected, May. We'll always be connected. That was decided a long time ago.

MAY: Nothing was decided. You made all that up.

EDDIE: You know what happened.

MAY: You promised me that was finished. You can't start that up all over again. You promised me.

EDDIE: A promise can't stop something like that. It happened.

(*FFL* 34)

Eddie storms out of the room for the third time after calling May a "traitor." Again, Eddie's departure leaves May nearly prostrate with grief, though she must have known that her refusal to capitulate to Eddie's demands would result in this outburst. With Eddie gone, May "weeps" while moving slowly upstage along the walls of the motel room, "embracing" and "hugging" the walls as she goes, finally sinking to her knees (*FFL* 36). May can be viewed as a type of gothic heroine who is trapped both literally by the walls of a claustrophobic room and also metaphorically by a situation from which she cannot escape, following in the same line as gothic heroines like Emily St. Aubert from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Ellena Bianchi from *The Italian* (1797), both of whom were imprisoned by male villains before finally escaping. Shepard calls our attention to the confining motel room even more so than he did with Austin's sense of confinement in *True West*. May's sense of confinement is enigmatic: she checked into the motel room of her own volition, and certainly she seems able to leave the motel room and to follow Eddie outside if she chooses, yet she does not. It is as though,

after fifteen years of secrecy, this motel room has been prescribed by invisible forces as the destined scene where truth will be revealed and where a reckoning for hidden guilt will finally occur.

The second time we hear the Old Man, he speaks to May as though he were speaking to a "child," according to Shepard's stage directions (*FFL* 36). He talks as if he were May's father—though at this point the audience cannot be sure—and he tells a story about her infancy when she was cried one night and he carried her through a field and into a herd of cattle. As the Old Man talks, May "remains involved in her emotion of loss and keeps moving clear around the room," eventually crawling to the bed where she rocks back and forth, embracing the pillows (37). The Old Man's speech seems to make May's grief more intense, as if his words were exacerbating the frustration she feels over Eddie's leaving. When May hears Eddie return, she drinks from the tequila bottle, bracing herself for another confrontation with him. When Eddie threatens to kill the mystery man whom May is awaiting, May snatches her purse and runs out the door, but Eddie catches her and carries her back into the room "screaming and kicking" (41-42). In this instance, we see that May might in fact be confined in a literal sense: she can leave only at Eddie's pleasure. She is a trapped gothic heroine, characteristically suffering at the hands of a male captor, albeit her captor is both her lover and her half-brother. This latter relationship has not yet been fully exposed to the audience, but Shepard allows the lovers to hint at the secret without fully revealing it yet, just as he had done in *Buried Child*.

Eddie tells May he wants to meet her date, and he suggests that she introduce him as her brother. But immediately he catches himself and says, "Well—maybe not your brother," and May replies, "Maybe not" (42). They are not yet able to admit the truth to themselves, and certainly not to an outsider.

The Old Man speaks for the third time after a mysterious woman called the "Countess" has come and gone in a long, black Mercedes (apparently she and Eddie are lovers and she has tracked him to the motel). As the Old Man speaks, Shepard's directions tell us that Eddie and May "are not 'frozen,' they just stare at each other in a suspended moment of recognition" (*FFL* 49). Though Shepard never tells us what precisely the lovers "recognize," it is significant that this "moment of recognition" is prompted by the Old Man's words which, apparently, somehow succeed in breaking through the lovers' repressed memories. Ironically, however, the Old Man claims in his speech not to "recognize" either of his children:

> Amazing thing is, neither one a' you look a bit familiar to me . . . I don't recognize myself in either one a' you. Never did. 'Course your mothers both put their stamps on ya' . . . You could be anybody's. Probably are. I can't even remember the original circumstances . . . Good thing I got out when I did though. Best thing I ever did. (49)

As I have shown in the previous chapters, nearly all of Shepard's gothic family plays include at least one marked instance of "misrecognition"—either a failure to recognize

something which should be familiar, or a failure to remember altogether, usually due to the memory being repressed following a traumatic experience. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston Tate couldn't remember owning his farm as he surveyed it. In *Buried Child*, the family members do not recognize Vince, and at the end of the play, Vince recognizes neither his family nor Shelly. In *True West*, Lee claims to "forgit" why he went to live in the desert. Here, the Old Man's speech gives the first clear indication that he is the father of both Eddie and May, and that they had different mothers. The Old Man says he "can't even remember the original circumstances," and, as the audience learns later, this is because the circumstances were traumatic (even murderous). So even as the Old Man denies "recognizing" himself in his children, his words lead to a silent "moment of recognition" between Eddie and May.

After the Old Man finishes speaking, Eddie reveals the extent of his obsession with his sister-lover. He tells her, "You'll never escape me . . . I'll track you down no matter where you go" (49). In an untitled 1979 prose piece from Shepard's *Motel Chronicles* collection, Shepard writes (of an anonymous male character), "He could feel the demonic attachment of a man for his only woman" (42). Eddie's threat to "track" May down wherever she goes certainly implies this type of "demonic attachment." Eddie's threat also sounds reminiscent of the gothic *doppelgänger* which relentlessly stalks its victim, and, like many *doppelgängers* already mentioned earlier in this chapter, Eddie and May seem to experience a "role reversal" here. Whereas May was prostrate

with grief only moments earlier when Eddie walked out the door, now May acknowledges Eddie's professed desperation to possess May completely: she tells him, "Now, you desperately need me. Now you can't live without me . . . Why should I believe it this time?" (*FFL* 50). Another instance of role reversal occurs moments later when May sees the return of a car's headlights and, believing it to be the Countess's Mercedes, yells to Eddie that she will "wipe her out" and "eat [her] alive," just as Eddie had earlier threatened to harm or kill May's suitor (*FFL* 51). Jealousy prompts both lovers to threaten violence, even murder, against any perceived rival. Indeed, Eddie's first confrontation with May's suitor is a violent one, but Martin (the suitor) gets the best of Eddie, by charging into the room and tackling him. Once May separates the two men, Martin assumes the role of outsider—much as Shelly did in *Buried Child*. As the outsider, Martin will stand as proxy for the audience while the gothic secret is revealed—specifically, the secret of Eddie and May's kinship and forbidden love.

May introduces Eddie as her cousin, but Eddie grins at Martin and says, "She's lying" (*FFL* 52). With an outsider now present, Shepard allows Eddie to build up the mystery and suspense by toying with Martin (and the audience). Eddie says he can tell Martin is "tense" because "You already know I'm not her cousin" (59). Upon hearing this, Martin is spooked, not sure he wants to hear anymore. He makes a sudden move to leave the motel room, but Eddie beats him to the door, slams him against the wall, and drags him to the floor before the two men finally settle down to a drink together. *True*

West ended after a similar scene in which neither Lee or Austin would allow the other to leave the room, and the result was a hermetic, claustrophobic gothic space where Mom's kitchen was surreally transformed into a "desertlike landscape" where the brothers were locked in a static "after-image." In *Fool for Love*, this hermetic scene does not signal the closing curtain because the gothic secret still must be brought to light. Instead, Martin seems destined (perhaps even doomed) to be the witness as the truth is revealed.

In Shepard's gothic family plays, an alcoholic libation typically precedes the final revelation of truth, and this play is no exception. In this instance, however, the ritual of male drinking serves as the only scene in the play where Eddie interacts physically with the Old Man. As Eddie steers Martin to a chair and invites him to drink, the solitary spotlight comes up on the Old Man; he holds out his Styrofoam cup for a drink, which Eddie pours for him. Martin "does not acknowledge" the Old Man's presence during all of this (61). Now that all three men have had alcohol, the truth can come out. When Martin asks Eddie if he is May's husband, Eddie replies, "No. She's my sister" (61). The Old Man stares at Eddie, prompting Eddie to amend his answer by saying, "My half-sister." Eddie and the Old Man take a drink together as though confirming this is the truth (61).

As Eddie continues talking, he reveals that their incestuous relationship was born out of ignorance: "I never even knew I had a sister until it was too late . . . by the time I found out we'd already—you know—fooled around" (*FFL* 62). Eddie and May never knew of their kinship until high school because "Our daddy fell in love twice . . . . Once

with my mother and once with her mother." At this point, the Old Man interjects, as though to justify his actions, "It was the same love. Just got split in two, that's all" (63). The Old Man tries to excuse his infidelity by portraying himself as the pawn of some controlling passion which "split" love between two women. The Old Man's betrayal extended far beyond a one-time indiscretion, however—it became a lifestyle. The Old Man became himself a type of gothic somnambulist creature of the night as he moved nocturnally between his two lives. Eddie explains to Martin:

> He'd live with me and my mother for a while and then he'd disappear and go live with her and her mother for a while . . . . He'd disappear for months at a time and she never once asked him where he went. She was always glad to see him when he came back . . . . Then he started going on these long walks . . . In the dark. I used to watch him from my bedroom window. He'd disappear in the dark with his overcoat on. (64)

One fateful night Eddie asked his father if he could accompany him on one of his night walks, and on this night Eddie met May for the first time. Upon arriving at the other woman's house, Eddie describes how "through the doorway . . . I see this girl" (66). As Eddie says this, the bathroom door slowly opens to reveal May "standing in the door frame back-lit with yellow light in her red dress. She just watches Eddie as he keeps telling [the] story" (67). "I'm staring back at her and we can't take our eyes off each other," Eddie says. "It was like we knew each other from somewhere but we couldn't

place where . . . we knew we'd never stop being in love" (67). Here Eddie describes a gothic uncanny moment, a moment of strange familiarity—"we knew each other from somewhere but we couldn't place where." In gothic literature, the uncanny moment typically foreshadows horror and violence. That is the case here, but first Eddie's story will be challenged, just as Dodge's story was challenged in *Buried Child*.

When May comes out of the bathroom, she initially denies the whole story, calling Eddie "weird and sick": she tells Martin, "He's told me that story a thousand times and it always changes" (*FFL* 67). As the "outsider," Martin can never be sure which of the two—Eddie or May—is telling the truth. He is left in doubt about the true nature of their relationship. For their part, both Eddie and May seem to enjoy toying with Martin, psychologically speaking. Eddie intimidates Martin both verbally and physically, and does not allow him to leave the room; and May makes no attempt to come to Martin's aid, not even dissuading Eddie from bullying him. Eddie and May are united in their determination, both to confound Martin and to force the Old Man to confront the truth about the past.

Almost immediately, May shifts the focus of conversation from her relationship with Eddie to the truth about what happened between her mother and the Old Man. She describes her mother as "obsessed" with the Old Man—"She kept hunting for him from town to town," eventually finding him at Eddie's house during dinner. The Old Man tells Eddie, "Boy is she ever off the wall with this one. You gotta' do somethin' about this" (*FFL* 72). Just as Halie tried to get Bradley to stop Dodge from revealing the family's

secret in *Buried Child*, so here the Old Man tries to get Eddie to prevent May from telling her story, or at least to challenge the veracity of her words.

As May describes the night she and her mother discovered the Old Man's secret life of infidelity, she reveals that her father disappeared "almost as soon as we'd found him . . . I kept watching her grieve, as though somebody'd died. She'd pull herself up into a ball and just stare at the floor" (72). May's description of her mother mirrors May's own emotional devastation when Eddie left the room earlier in the play. May describes how she and Eddie began sneaking around to see each other until, one fateful night, her mother went to beg Eddie's mother to put an end to their affair and "Eddie's mother blew her brains out" (73). The suddenness with which this final horror is revealed startles the audience, Martin, and the Old Man. The Old Man stands to his feet for the first time in the play and "moves from platform onto the stage, between Eddie and May": "Now wait a second! . . . That's the dumbest version I ever heard in my whole life. She never blew her brains out" (73). Again the Old Man tries to get Eddie to defend him from May's accusations: "Get on yer feet now goddamn it! I wanna' hear the male side a' this thing. You gotta' represent me now. Speak on my behalf . . . Tell her the way it happened. We've got a pact. Don't forget that" (73). For the second time in the play, "pact" becomes code for a shared secret which the conspirators have agreed to keep hidden.

Eddie turns to his father and "calmly" tells him, "It was your shotgun . . . She never fired a gun before in her life. That was her first time" (*FFL* 73). The Old Man's reply

sounds accusatory and bitter, as though he himself were the victim of a conspiracy to which he was oblivious: "Nobody ever told me any a' that. I was left completely in the dark" (73). Eddie reminds him calmly, "You were gone," indicting his father for deserting all of them once his double life had been discovered. The Old Man becomes panicked after learning of the murder that followed his abandonment, and he becomes more frantic as he notices that May and Eddie have locked their eyes on one another as though in a trance, perhaps symbolizing the "tunnel vision" which has characterized their relationship by blocking out the incest taboo and allowing them to see only each other in an intensely passionate light. The Old Man yells at Eddie,

> Bring her around to our side. You gotta' make her see this thing in a clear light . . . You two can't come together! . . . You can't betray me! You gotta' represent me now! You're my son! (75)

In the eyes of the gothic fallen father, the duty of the haunted son is to defend and excuse the father's transgressions, even for the son to repeat the father's destructive behavior patterns himself—the ultimate "chip off the old block." But the lovers do not heed their father's words. They embrace as the Old Man rambles on, even as a car's headlights appear once again in the window of the motel room. We hear a "loud collision, shattering glass, and an explosion," followed by the "sound of horses screaming wildly, hooves galloping" (75). Martin, the play's one essential witness, looks out the window and reports to Eddie that his horse trailer is on fire and the horses have escaped. Eddie

knows immediately who is responsible—the Countess in her sinister black Mercedes: "I can't just let her get away with that," Eddie tells May, and he dashes outside after promising May he'll be "right back" (76). But May knows better, and she packs her suitcase and exits the motel room, leaving Martin bewildered in the middle of the room. He has been unable to leave this hermetic, gothic space from the moment he first entered the room. May appears to leave in search of a better life—a life without Eddie's betrayals, deceptions, drunkenness, and violence. Yet, as usual in Shepard's work, the audience can never be certain that May is not packing her suitcase in order to follow Eddie. She may still be bound to him by some supernatural or psychic connection. But this seems unlikely to me. This night in the motel room, as I stated earlier, seems to be a day of reckoning for both the Old Man and his troubled children, and their lives—like the family in *Buried Child*—will be forever altered now that all of the secrets have been revealed.

Martin remains in the room to hear the Old Man's final lines as the curtain closes. The play's closing lines belong to the Old Man. He is as near to a gothic specter as Shepard has ever created in his family plays, and by having the Old Man (a ghost) speak the last lines, Shepard again avoids any tidy resolution. Perhaps Eddie and May are not finally "through" after all. Perhaps there are forces which drive us, in spite of our best efforts to avoid them or to reform our ways. Perhaps ghosts and ghostly influences—especially those influences which "curse" children to repeat their parents' destructive

behavior patterns—are the only things that finally endure. The Old Man has been standing up from the moment he first heard about Eddie's mother murdering May's mother. Now he moves slowly back to his isolated platform while he points at the wall to the same non-existent picture which he had earlier discussed with Eddie. The Old Man says, "That's the woman of my dreams. That's who that is. And she's mine. She's all mine. Forever" (77). Perhaps his words are intended for Martin, but Martin still does not acknowledge the Old Man's presence, staring instead out the window at the flames rising in the parking lot from Eddie's burned horse trailer. This is the third of Shepard's gothic family plays to include, in some way, a conflagration at the end. *The Holy Ghostly* ended with Pop's frenzied dance in the flames, and *Buried Child* ended with Dodge giving instructions for his funeral pyre where his body would be immolated. This fire is different in several respects. For the first time, the fire does not involve the fallen father. Secondly, the fire is not deliberately selected by the male character; rather, the mysterious Countess has burned Eddie's trailer in an act of a scorned lover's revenge. Finally, as such, this fire does not seem to be redemptive in any way, least of all to Eddie, the haunted son. But the fire is significant since it serves as the impetus for Eddie to pursue the Countess, thereby abandoning May once again, perhaps for the final time.

The biographical details surrounding *Fool for Love* suggest that the play was inspired, at least in part, by a personal crisis in Shepard's own romantic life. Shepard had married O-Lan Johnson in November of 1969, and together they had a son whom they

named Jesse Mojo. Yet by 1982 when Shepard was writing the play, he was already involved with Jessica Lange, and he eventually divorced O-Lan and married Lange. In fact, shortly after *Fool for Love* was first produced in February 1983, Shepard moved with Lange to Sante Fe, New Mexico (Daniels 110). Consequently, many critics interpret Eddie's relationship with the Countess in *Fool for Love* to be symbolic of Shepard's own affair with Lange. For example, one of Shepard's most important biographers, Don Shewey, has posed the question, "Who else could the Countess be but Jessica Lange?" (qtd. in Wilson 99). Even the duration of Eddie and May's love affair—fifteen years—corresponds almost exactly to the length of time Shepard had known O-Lan. The biographical connection is relevant to a gothic reading of *Fool for Love* because, for Shepard, the gothic family plays are always born out of personal tragedy and trauma which is nearly always centered around the playwright's own indomitable, monstrous "fallen" father—a composite of Sam Shepard Rogers VI. That pattern holds true in *Fool for Love*, where the spectral Old Man ends up stealing the spotlight (almost literally) and represents the return of repressed memories and the continuation of the curse as Eddie copies the behavior patterns of the fallen father. But because of Shepard's split with his own wife during the play's composition, *Fool for Love* also includes a deeply traumatized female character—May is in some ways the "ghost" of O-Lan Johnson Shepard, who haunts the playwright into giving her voice and presence onstage, perhaps in the playwright's attempt to exorcize her memory so that he can leave, like Eddie, in pursuit of

a new life. Ironically, Shepard's life with O-Lan continued to influence his next family play, *A Lie of the Mind*: his mother-in-law's stroke and subsequent aphasia inspired Shepard's portrait of a brain-damaged woman—a gothic death-in-life character like Mary Tyrone from *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. This real-life inspiration, coupled with the death of Shepard's father, contribute significantly to the gothic tone of *A Lie of the Mind*.

A Lie of the Mind:

In an article entitled "The Curse of the Misbegotten," Michael Abbott examines similarities in the fathers and sons portrayed in family plays by Shepard and Eugene O'Neill. One important biographical detail which Abbott mentions is that both O'Neill's father and Shepard's father were killed when they were hit by cars (195). Shepard's father died in early 1985, and *A Lie of the Mind* was first produced in December of the same year. In the play, we eventually learn that the father was killed when he was hit by a truck while running, drunk, down the middle of a road somewhere near the U.S.-Mexican border. During the play, the ghost of the dead father—for here we are sure he is dead, unlike *True West* and *Fool for Love*, where we can never be sure—hovers over all. Though the dead father never appears onstage, even in a flashback, his presence is felt throughout the play—first as his abusive, violent legacy is carried on by his son Jake, and later in the play as the father is symbolically reborn, phoenix-like, through the scattering of his ashes onstage. The truth about how the father died is the play's central gothic mystery on which I will focus my examination. This truth is kept hidden until late in the play.

Shepard tantalizes the audience throughout much of the play by hinting at how the father died, creating an atmosphere of suspense. This central gothic mystery is paralleled in two important ways which also fall squarely into the gothic literary tradition: an "undead" character and implied mother-son incest. Beth's brain damage has left her, like many other characters in gothic literature, as a kind of undead character who exists in a death-in-life state—a state which defies rationality and focuses instead on intuition and extreme emotional states. A list of gothic characters who exhibit a similar death-in-life state might include Mary Tyrone, Blanche DuBois, Catharine Holly, and even Tilden from *Buried Child***.** In the section that follows, I will examine some ways in which Beth is a gothic character. I will also briefly examine the implied mother-son incest between Lorraine and Jake; finally, the remainder of this section will examine the gothic mystery about how the fallen father died, as well as how the son is haunted by his own guilt over his father's death.

Beth, an aspiring actress, has suffered brain damage after being viciously beaten by her husband, Jake. The inspiration for Beth's character can be traced to Shepard's former mother-in-law, Scarlett Johnson Dark, mother of O-Lan. Scarlett suffered a severe stroke in September 1979, leaving her with aphasia—the inability to use language effectively and coherently as the result of brain damage. Barry Daniels edited a collection of letters (1972-1984) written between Shepard and Joseph Chaikin. These letters are useful in tracing the genesis of *A Lie of the Mind*, both the ideas underlying the play and,

specifically, the character of Beth as a brain-damaged woman suffering from aphasia. On November 20, 1979, Shepard wrote to Chaikin:

> Scarlett is doing very well, considering the trauma she's undergone. She's having to relearn everything from the ground up . . . what they call 'aphasia' . . . her emotions are like a little child, and she goes in and out of a wide range of feelings in a very short time.
>
> (qtd. in Daniels 70)

From Shepard's comments in the letter about Scarlett's emotions being "like a little child" and how she experienced "a wide range of feelings in a very short time," one may notice similarities to May's character in *Fool for Love.* Each time Eddie storms out of the motel room, May weeps hysterically, crawls around the room, and hugs the pillows like a child devastated over the loss of a playmate or favorite toy. Yet, upon hearing Eddie's footsteps returning, May can shut off her hysteria in a moment and pretend that nothing is wrong. With *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard went a step further, moving from May's emotional outbursts to Beth's aphasia which, as the play progresses, transforms into an almost mystical sixth sense of psychic vision. As it turned out, Shepard had another experience which allowed him to witness first-hand the debilitating physical effects of brain damage: in 1984, Joseph Chaikin suffered a severe stroke, and Shepard was able to work with him doing speech exercises which he had learned while working with Scarlett Johnson Dark during her rehabilitation (qtd. in Daniels 153).

Besides the 1979 letter foreshadowing Beth's character, Shepard's letters to Chaikin in 1983 chronicle the first inspirations for the plot of *A Lie of the Mind*. On Oct. 29, 1983, Shepard wrote:

> Something's been coming to me lately about this whole idea of being *lost*. It only makes sense to me in relation to an idea of one's identity being shattered under severe personal circumstances—in a state of crisis . . . a shock state, I guess you might call it . . . the resulting emptiness or aloneness is what interests me. Particularly to do with questions like *home? Family?* . . . a haunted state but not from the dead. A living ghost hunting now in the present for a life that is always escaping. (qtd. in Daniels 129)

In another letter from February 1984, Shepard wrote to Chaikin,

> I think this idea about lying is great. I would like to explore the whole area—it's slightly spooky but very interesting . . . especially how the lie grows. How the part that originally knew the lie was a lie begins to forget and becomes a conspirator in the lie. (qtd. in Daniels 114)

The latter statement about "the part that originally knew the lie . . . begins to forget . . . " seems analogous to the repression of traumatic memories. In *A Lie of the Mind*, the "lie" or repressed traumatic memory involves the haunted son's (Jake) struggle finally to admit the truth about his father's death, including his role in helping to "kill" his father. Beth's

brain-damaged, aphasiac speech patterns throughout the play serve as a parallel to Jake's muddled, repressed psyche; in fact, as Jake comes closer to admitting to himself the truth about his father's death, Beth's speech likewise becomes more and more lucid. Jake and Beth undergo parallel processes of psychic healing during the play, and Shepard illustrates this parallelism by using a unique stage set.

The set involves a type of split-stage, one side of the stage for each family story. Shepard's stage directions call for "a four-foot wide ramp suspended twelve feet above the floor, stretching from stage left to stage right. Center stage should be wide open . . . giving an impression of infinite space, going off to nowhere" (*LOM* iii). "In the first act there are no walls to define locations—only furniture and props and light in the bare space. In the second and third acts, walls are brought in to delineate the rooms . . . " (iii). The gradual "filling in" of the stage by walls and boundaries mirrors the gradual revelation of truth as, once again, the gothic family secret is brought to light and repressed memories are allowed to surface and to be confronted. Likewise, the lighting effects grow increasingly brighter as the play progresses, so that the "perimeters of the area [are] more fully lit" by the end of the play (qtd. in Derose 132). As if to punctuate the revelation of secrets and the collapse of psychological barriers which has occurred by the end of the play, the invisible wall separating the split-stage suddenly collapses in the play's final scene: one family is allowed to glimpse a moment from the other family's life—specifically Meg sees a "fire in the snow" as Lorraine and Sally (thousands of miles away) attempt to immolate

remnants of their former life and start anew. These dramaturgical techniques are all new to Shepard's family plays, though Shepard had laid the groundwork for this type of staging effect by having the isolated black platform for the Old Man in *Fool for Love.* In *A Lie of the Mind*, the split-stage set allows us to witness how Beth's gradual (and partial) recovery from a brain-damaged state parallels the gradual revelation of truth surrounding the death of Jake's father.

When the play begins, Beth has already been violently transformed into a gothic creature, brain-damaged and aphasiac after a vicious beating by her husband, Jake. Beth first appears in scene two, lying in a hospital bed with a bandage around her head. She talks groggily to her brother Mike, and her opening line of dialogue shows the effects of her aphasia: "Saah—thah—Jaah—thuh—saah—saah—saah—saah" (*LOM* 4). But after a few lines of similarly jumbled dialogue, Beth's speech becomes suddenly and inexplicably lucid. She alludes to her "undead" condition by using a common horror movie prop, asking her brother, "Am I a mummy now?" (*LOM* 4). In some ways, Beth resembles other gothic women from American drama, including Catharine Holly from Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* and Mary Tyrone from O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Like Catharine Holly, Beth exists in a death-in-life state as a result of a traumatic experience. Beth has suffered actual physical trauma to her brain, while Catharine Holly suffered a psychic trauma after seeing her cousin Sebastian literally devoured by the street children in Cabeza de Lobo. Catharine Holly is threatened with

lobotomy at the end of *Suddenly Last Summer*, whereas Beth has already suffered an actual brain injury when the play begins. In some ways, Beth may also resemble a drugged Mary Tyrone: when drugged, Mary wanders the house in a trance, regressing (mentally) and speaking truths which had been long concealed, like her lonely existence as a new bride following James Tyrone from hotel to hotel during his acting days. Likewise, Beth becomes increasingly a truth-sayer as the play progresses, and she falls more and more into a trance-like state.

By the start of Act Two, Beth's family has brought her back home to Billings, Montana. At this point, Beth's aphasia—which had been intermittent and had given way to mostly lucid speech—has evolved into a type of sixth sense, a deep intuition which allows her to speak truths which are inaccessible to others. She speaks these truths to Jake's brother Frankie, who has come to Montana to see for himself whether or not Beth is alive. Once she has Frankie's rapt attention—he has been accidentally shot in the leg by Beth's father and is laid up on the family couch—Beth reveals insights about her family which, paradoxically, seem accessible to her precisely because of her brain injury. She tells Frankie (of Baylor): "This is my father. He's given up love. Love is dead for him. My mother is dead for him. Things live for him to be killed . . . This is me now . . . I—I live inside this . . . I know what love is. I can never forget. That. Never" (*LOM* 57). It is as though her brain injury has made some of her senses more acute, somehow sharpening her sensibility. Here Beth sounds a bit like another traumatized gothic female—Blanche

DuBois from Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* who, at the end of the play, recalled nostalgically her own memories of love and the blue of her first lover's eyes. With both Beth and Blanche, the trauma which leaves them in a torturous, death-in-life state also makes them truth-sayers who are able to "see" more deeply than those around them.

As if to confirm that her truth-saying power is a direct result of her brain injury, Beth points to a "nonexistent" scar on her scalp and tells Jake's brother, Frankie, "No brain. Cut me out. Cut. Brain. Cut" (*LOM* 73). Beth implies that the brain injury has lobotomized her in some way, or else she suffers from a delusion that the doctors actually performed a lobotomy on her during her hospital stay. Again, Catharine Holly from *Suddenly Last Summer* seems an apt parallel: Catharine is apparently on her way to be lobotomized when Williams' play ends, and here Beth believes herself to be already lobotomized. Both women speak truth—truth which others would rather silence. Beth speaks more of these truths to Frankie: "You could pretend to be in love with me," and "You are my beautiful woman" (*LOM* 75). From these apparently incoherent ramblings, Beth makes a more profound connection. She asks Frankie to pretend to be Jake, "But soft. With me. Gentle. Like a woman-man . . .You could be better. Better man. Maybe. Without hate" (*LOM* 75-76). Beth implies that a man must shrug off the machismo stereotype and all its violent, selfish baggage. In order to truly love a woman, he must become like a "woman-man," more sensitive to her needs and more attuned to her sensibilities. In the final scene, Beth has come to believe that Frankie is this type of

"gentle" man, and she becomes obsessed with the idea of marrying him. When Jake arrives in Montana, Beth tells him (in her final line of dialogue), "I remember now. The first time I saw you" (*LOM* 129). Beth's words suggest a culmination of her gradual recovery—a recovery both from her brain injury and a recovery of her memories of Jake, memories which she had repressed due to the trauma he inflicted upon her. As soon as Beth makes this claim—her claim to "remember"—she falls silent, perhaps suggesting that her psychic demons have at last been laid to rest.

Jake undergoes a similar, arduous process of remembering as a step toward psychic and emotional healing throughout the play. Whereas Beth's brain-damaged, gothic death-in-life state was dramatized mainly through her aphasiac speech, Jake's gothic nature as a "haunted" son is dramatized most often through visual effects. In Act One, scene five, Jake is lying on a couch in a cheap hotel room. As he rolls over to face the audience, his face has a cadaverous quality: "pale white, eyes sunken and dark, radically changed from the last time he was seen" (*LOM* 23). Jake has had "chills and shakes for three days now," as though his psychological turmoil and guilt over beating his wife (whom he believes to be dead at this point) is manifesting itself through physical symptoms. During this scene, Lorraine warns Frankie not to buy Jake a bottle of alcohol, and through her warning we get the first glimpse of what Jake's father was like. Lorraine says of Jake, "Every time he gets near liquor he thinks it's his God-given duty to keep pace with his old man" (*LOM* 25). There is no hint in her remark that Jake's father is

dead, but soon the audience discovers that to be the case. Lorraine, as the alienated mother in the gothic family paradigm, has repressed her own share of memories, including her claim not to remember Beth or her marriage to Jake. There is some evidence that Lorraine has repressed her memories of Beth because she viewed Beth as a rival for her (Lorraine's) affections for Jake—affections which may have been incestuous. By hinting at the possibility of mother-son incest, Shepard provides us with another possible motive behind Jake's role in his father's death.

The subtle hint of mother-son incest appears in scene seven after Lorraine has taken Jake back to her house. Jake's face is "even whiter than before," and he lies on his old childhood bed with his legs dangling off the edge. He is dressed in a t-shirt and boxer underwear, reminiscent of the Boy in Shepard's first family play, *Rock Garden*, who was silently forced by his mother to appear in his underwear as though displaying himself for her voyeuristic pleasure. Lorraine treats Jake as though he were still a little boy: she feeds him soup by making a "helicopter" motion with the spoon. For his part, Jake reacts as a brat would by knocking the spoon away, pouring out the soup onto his bed, and jumping up and down in the mess (*LOM* 34). Lorraine makes remarks that might hint of incest: "This is my boy here" (27); "You're a strong strappin' man" (33), and later she tells Jake, "You don't ever have to go outa this room again if you don't want to" (39). Furthermore, Lorraine repeatedly tries to expel Sally, Jake's sister, so that she can be alone with Jake and he will be completely dependent upon her. After Jake sneaks away to Montana in

pursuit of Beth, Lorraine lies in Jake's bed, ostensibly sick with grief now that her son has "abandoned" her (*LOM* 87). All of these scenes suggest that Lorraine may have an incestuous attraction for Jake. Shepard has not hinted of mother-son incest since *Buried Child*, and in that play the implication was much stronger than it is here. Nevertheless, Lorraine attitude toward Jake seems to imply an underlying incestuous desire. Though there is little evidence that Jake is receptive to his mother's attraction for him, he can hardly ignore the signals she is sending. Jake's awareness of his mother's attraction for him might manifest itself subconsciously as an Oedipus complex, exacerbating his antipathy toward his father. When the audience finally learns that Jake played a central role in bringing about his father's death, this implied mother-son incest becomes even more important as a possible motive behind Jake's actions on the night his father died. Moreover, the incestuous attraction may serve as another source of guilt for Jake (that is, in addition to the guilt he feels over his father's death and the part he played in it).

Jake's feelings of guilt have led him to repress his memories of the night his father died. The audience gets an early glimpse into the idiosyncrasies of Jake's repression when he asks his mother to show him the leather box containing his dead father's ashes. Lorraine asks, "How can you remember somethin' like that and not remember this room?" Jake's reply— "Some things stick in your mind" (*LOM* 38)—suggests that he has been successful repressing some memories, while others have remained firmly entrenched in his memory. As Lorraine brings out the leather box and the American flag which covered the

father's casket, she reminds Jake about the father's funeral. Her description is nearly identical to Shepard's description of his own father's funeral from a prose piece (written later in 1989 from *Cruising Paradise*) called "See You in My Dreams": Lorraine tells Jake, "Some government guy in dark glasses said a prayer over him and then he gave you that flag" (*LOM* 38). When Jake dons his father's leather flight jacket, he seems to assume symbolically the mantle of the fallen father. Shepard had used similar techniques in *Curse of the Starving Class* (when Wesley donned Weston's clothes) and in the first drafts of *Buried Child*, when Vince donned Dodge's baseball cap in the final scene. Once Jake is dressed in his dead father's clothes, he is strangely ready to begin exhuming some of his long-repressed memories about his father. He asks his mother to tell him how his father died; at first Lorraine balks, insisting, "You remember all that" (40). But when Jake presses her, she reveals that he died when he was hit by a truck while he was drunk in the middle of a highway (40). Jakes claims never to have heard this story and becomes exasperated when Lorraine claims otherwise: "HOW COULD I KNOW SOMETHIN' THAT I DON'T KNOW?" (40). But Lorraine's reply is the first clear indication that Jake *did* know the circumstances surrounding his father's death, and that he has repressed the memory: "You were right there with him when it happened," Lorraine says (*LOM* 40). Once Lorraine reveals this, Jake seems intent on abetting the return of his repressed memories, and he takes drastic steps to accomplish this return.

The most important (and visually provocative) step that Jake takes to stimulate the return of his repressed memories is to release his father's ashes. This particular scene seems especially gothic since it involves an exhumation, in a sense, of a dead body. The stage lights fade until there is only a "tight spotlight" on the leather box containing the dead father's ashes. Jake takes the box from the bed, opens it, and "blows lightly into the box, sending a soft puff of ashes up into the beam of the spotlight" which then fades to black (*LOM* 41). Is this a symbolic gesture whereby Jake at last attempts to heal himself, psychologically and emotionally, by ridding himself of his father's ghostly influence? If so, by blowing the ashes into the air, Jake may be trying to cast off once and for all his father's destructive legacy, and it is worth noting that Jake *has* changed noticeably by the end of the play. Jake eventually becomes docile, after being overcome and ridiculed by Beth's brother Mike—perhaps he even allowed Mike to subdue him, though his knuckles are scarred as though the two had fought—before finally bidding Beth a tender farewell.

On the other hand, Jake's change is gradual, and he seems to get worse before getting any better; that is, in the scenes which follow, Jake begins even more to emulate his dead father, and he experiences "uncanny" moments where he believes himself to be another person, or not to recognize himself. In this sense, Jake's blowing of his father's ashes may be seen as a kind of rebirth whereby the ghost of the fallen father—if not a literal ghost onstage, then at least a ghostly, haunting presence or malevolent influence—rises phoenix-like from the ashes to influence the haunted son once more.

Following the release of his father's ashes, Jake seems to fall more deeply under his dead father's influence. In scene two of Act Two (the next scene in which Jake appears), Jake is shaving while wearing his father's leather WWII flight jacket. The jacket is now covered with all of the father's medals, which Jake has carefully removed from under the bed and pinned onto the jacket. Furthermore, Jake has draped the American flag, used at his father's funeral, around his neck as he shaves (*LOM* 58). When his sister Sally enters, Jake describes to her an uncanny moment—a moment of experiencing the "defamiliarized familiar"—much like the other uncanny moments in Shepard's gothic family plays:

> Just now I caught myself shaving. I was right over there. Shaving my face. I didn't know I was doing that until just now. It's kinda scary, ya know . . . There's a possibility that you could do something that you didn't even know about. You could be somewhere that you couldn't remember being. (*LOM* 59)

Jake's words allude to repressed memories—"you could be somewhere that you couldn't remember being"—and this uncanny moment foreshadows the imminent revelation of truth when Sally will reveal to the audience what really happened on the night their father died. In Shepard's gothic family plays, the uncanny moment is always a harbinger of a dynamic character transformation. In *Curse of the Starving Class* Weston Tate changes from a violent drunk to a clean and sober citizen (albeit one who flees to Mexico) after

experiencing an uncanny moment while walking around his farm; in *Buried Child* Vince changes from a dutiful, nostalgic son/grandson into a violent drunk after his uncanny epiphany of seeing faces in a rain-spattered windshield. In this play, Jake's transformation is gradual, but this uncanny moment signals that a change will come. For now, however, Jake is still squarely under his father's influence, and Sally notices. She says Jake reminds her of their father, "the way you get that creepy thing in your voice . . . like you're gonna turn into an animal or something" (*LOM* 63). By comparing Jake (and their father) to animals, Sally emphasizes the monstrous, werewolf-like aspects of the men's personalities. Her words serve as a kind of warning to Jake *not* to succumb to their father's destructive legacy—assuming he has a choice in the matter. In Act Two, scene four, Jake experiences another uncanny moment: he tells Sally,

> There's this thing—this thing in my head . . . A scream from a voice I don't know. Or a voice I knew once but now it's changed . . . I've scared it into something else. Another form. A whole other person who doesn't see me anymore. Who doesn't even remember that we knew each other once. (85)

Again, Jake mentions not remembering something, but here his words have a weightier import. If, by the terms "voice," "form" and "other person," Jake is referring to himself, then he implies that his past traumatic experiences have resulted in a split personality. It is as though the side of Jake's personality which had repressed the memories of his father's

death has encountered another "self" which has emerged, psychically, as a "scream" or a "voice." Jake's encounter with this other "self" is a signal that his repressed memories have nearly completely returned. On the other hand, Shepard is, as always, elusive, and Jake's words might every well be interpreted to mean that the "scream," "voice," and "other person" refers to the ghost of his dead father whose presence has returned, eerily, after Jake blew the ashes into the audience. These uncanny moments are like a tapping on the door of Jake's psyche, slowly awakening him to recognize finally the trauma he has repressed.

Ironically, the truth about his father's death is finally revealed only after Jake has left Sally and Lorraine to go to Montana. Jake, the haunted son, is not present when the truth is finally exhumed, though when he next appears (at Beth's home in Montana) his drunken, raging character has changed drastically. The truth about the father's death is revealed by Sally and Lorraine, the women who suffered under the father's abuse for so long. In Act Three, scene one, Sally and Lorraine talk alone, remembering how Jake went all the way to Mexico to find their father in his trailer. According to Sally, their father was "stone cold sober" when they found him, and he "looked real weak and vulnerable. The opposite of how he was when he was drinking" (*LOM* 90). Since Lorraine was not present at her husband's death, Sally tells the story of how, that fateful night, Jake and their father went bar-hopping, challenging and testing each other with barbs about who was better at sports, and sizing each other up "like the way an animal looks for a

weakness in another animal" (93). Finally, she tells her mother, "Jake had decided to kill him" by challenging their father to a foot race along the last mile of road to the U.S. border. Short of hand-to-hand combat, the foot race represents a singular contest of male strength and endurance (and, symbolically, a contest of virility and phallic power). The race was apparently a mismatch, with Jake easily outdistancing his father, who was too drunk to avoid a truck which was barreling down the dark highway toward him. Sally reveals the gruesome sight when the truck hit her father: "I saw him splattered all over the road like some piece of livestock." Meanwhile, Jake was "already sitting in some bar down the road ordering the next round of drinks. He never even got up when he heard the sirens" (95). At first, Lorraine insists that Sally is lying; she cannot believe that her "baby boy" would have deliberately plotted to kill his own father, no matter how evil that father was. But their quarrel ends quickly after Sally berates her mother for "hiding" in their old house, afraid to face the future. Lorraine resolves to wipe out the remnants of their past life and start over. She intends to make a huge bonfire and burn up anything that reminds them of the awful past; Lorraine's decision recalls how Pop in *The Holy Ghostly* and Dodge in *Buried Child* both attempt to use fire to purge the past and all its psychological baggage.

Although the audience now knows the truth about the fallen father's death, Shepard is not quite finished mining the gothic resources of the father's ghostly presence. The flag which covered the dead father's coffin appears conspicuously during the play's

closing moments: Beth's parents, Baylor and Meg, fold the flag together in a type of spontaneous ceremony. I would like to offer a gothic interpretation of this scene by focusing less on *what* is being folded and more on *whose* it was. This interpretation seems more faithful to Shepard's intentions**,** since he once remarked of his work:

> My plays have rarely been seen by critics for what they are but mostly for what they 'represent.' If they speak to Americans it's only because I happen to be American. I don't want to rid myself of my Americanism but to purge it through my writing. To go all the way through it and into a world which is totally alien and unrecognizable. It's that world that pulls me every time I write and it's in that world that writing holds its magic. (qtd. in King 19)

The gothic subtext behind the flag-folding becomes evident by observing Jake's actions while the flag is being folded. Jake creeps up onto the porch, apparently unseen by anyone except Beth, and he speaks to her for the last time. This moment is one of the most suspenseful in the play, for the audience has every reason to believe that Jake might explode again into violence, perhaps even try to kill Beth. Instead, Jake speaks to her quietly, saying, "These things—in my head—lie to me . . . You are true. I love you more than this life. You stay. You stay with him. He's my brother" (*LOM* 129). After kissing Beth on the forehead (significantly, perhaps, as a sign of atonement for the brain damage he inflicted), Jake moves offstage in silence. What accounts for Jake's abrupt reformation

here? Even as Jake exits, Baylor and Meg are still folding the flag. Just as Jake had briefly and symbolically "resurrected" the dead father earlier by blowing his ashes out of the box and donning his father's flight jacket, medals, and flag, so now perhaps the flag-folding is a supernatural signal that the fallen father's ghost is at last truly being laid to rest. This may partly explain Jake's (otherwise inexplicable) *volte face*: perhaps Jake has some preternatural sense that his father's ghost is finally exorcized, so he can finally begin to heal himself and stop following in his father's footsteps.

Shepard's remarks (in the passage quoted above) are helpful in attempting to grasp the political and nationalistic implications of the American flag as it is used in *A Lie of the Mind*. Jake is not merely donning his dead father's mantle when he drapes the flag around his shoulders; rather, he is cloaking himself in his country's most widely recognized symbol. Thus, Jake is wrapping himself, symbolically speaking, in the ideals and traditions of America itself, as though suggesting that Jake's adoption of these ideals and traditions directly contributed to the violent, angry alcoholic he became. Some of these American traditions and ideals (at least in the minds of characters like Jake and his father) might include male domination of women, male independence even at the expense of family cohesion, and male promiscuity and violence as rites of manhood and signs of manliness. These are the tenets to which Jake pledges allegiance when he dons the American flag, for they are the tenets which his father held dear. By portraying characters like Jake in such a negative light, Shepard critiques these ideals (although Shepard himself was certainly

exposed to these same ideals). We might recall Shepard's 1986 interview in *Rolling Stone* (one year after *A Lie of the Mind* premiered) where he told Jonathan Cott, "My old man tried to force on me a notion of what it is to be a 'man'" (qtd. in Dugdale 62). These issues of national identity are explored and critiqued more fully in Shepard's next family play from 1991, *States of Shock*. In that play, Shepard literally inundates the audience with American flags as they flap wildly from the back of a paraplegic's wheelchair—the paraplegic is a man who, like Jake, pledged allegiance to those same notions of America and American maleness and who winds up as "Stubbs" as a result.

Some critics have excoriated *A Lie of the Mind* as abandoning Shepard's earlier avant-garde risk-taking. David Derose calls the play "sadly conventional and tamely self-imitative," and complains that "no unseen force ripples beneath the surface of this play" (132). Derose's evaluation may refer to a general reading of the play (rather than to the play's dramaturgy), but I disagree with Derose. Jake's resurrection of the fallen father—or his attempted exorcism of the father's ghost, take your pick—seems to me a sure sign that an "unseen force ripples beneath the surface of this play." Certainly, even gothic literature can become trite, "sadly conventional and tamely self-imitative" when its devices are thrown about carelessly or with too much melodrama. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) parodied precisely this problem. But Shepard does not, in my opinion, fall prey to these pitfalls in *A Lie of the Mind*. In fact, only one of Shepard's family plays—*The Holy Ghostly*—is guilty of deliberate gothic melodrama, and that work, like Austen's

novel, appears to be intentionally exaggerated for effect (it was, after all, the 60's when experimental plays were commonplace). In *A Lie of the Mind*, the ghostly presence of Jake's father is conjured subtly, never obtrusively or extraneously. The ending of the play is problematic, to be sure—with Jake's spontaneous reformation and Beth's marriage proposal to Frankie stretching the limits of incredulity, even for a Shepard play. But the play contains at least two important innovations—Beth's aphasiac character and the split-stage set—which distinguish it from any other play in the Shepard canon and, to my mind, repudiate critiques like those leveled by Derose.

Other critics, like Lynda Hart, find fault with the play for other reasons. Hart criticizes Shepard for creating female characters who are dependent and weak: according to Hart, Beth is "without a sense of self outside of her relationship with a man," and the play's other female characters—Meg, Lorraine, and Sally—exist mainly to "clean up the debris" left by the men (Hart 107). Certainly it would be difficult to challenge the notion that Shepard's work is predominately male, but it is for another study to explore that issue in detail. I would like to note, however, that in *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard begins to allow women to speak of their exploitation and victimization by selfish, violent men. Both May and Beth proclaim, through their words and their personal devastation, the wrongs inflicted upon them by their men. Other women, like Lorraine, Sally, and Meg, testify to the same wrongs, albeit in more subdued voices. Shepard's next "family" play, *States of Shock* (1991), eschewed having women characters speak of

male wrongs—in favor of addressing a specific political event, namely the Persian Gulf War. But his most recent family play, *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), perhaps allows the female voice to reach its loudest note of protest yet. With Shepard, however, the protest is never didactic or programmatic; it is always hidden beneath the gothic machinery—the ghosts, the transformations, the buried secrets, and the uncanny moments.

CHAPTER FIVE: STRANGELY FAMILIAR—*STATES OF SHOCK* AND *THE LATE HENRY MOSS*

The 1970's and 80's saw the production of most of Shepard's best-known family plays, and we have seen that many of the themes and characters in these works bear a striking resemblance to one another. In the decade spanning 1990-2000, however, Shepard explored a wide variety of topics and themes in his work. While the family plays examined in the previous chapter comprise the bulk of Shepard's dramatic writing of the 1980's, this is not necessarily the case with Shepard's dramatic writing of the 1990's. The two "family" plays which I will examine in this final chapter, *States of Shock* and *The Late Henry Moss*, are perhaps the best-known of Shepard's work from 1990-2000, but Shepard's other plays from this decade demonstrate the breadth and range of his dramatic concerns. These plays include *Simpatico* (1993), *When the World Was Green* (1996), and *Eyes for Consuela* (1999). *Simpatico* in some ways recalls Shepard's early work *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* since the plots of both plays revolve around horse racing. *When the World Was Green*, co-written with Joseph Chaikin and commissioned for the 1996 Olympic Games Cultural Olympiad, presents the confession of a vengeful chef who accidentally poisoned the wrong man. *Eyes for Consuela*, set in Mexico and based on Octavio Paz's story "The Blue Bouquet," shows an obsessed lover hunting blue eyes as a gift for the ghost of his beloved.

Though these three plays cannot be labeled "family plays" (at least in the sense that I am using this label), each of these plays includes, at least tangentially, some type of familial relationship. *Simpatico* involves a husband and his ex-wife; *When the World Was Green* and *Eyes for Consuela* involve father-daughter relationships. *States of Shock* and *The Late Henry Moss*, however, remain rooted in Shepard's obsession with father-son relationships. *States of Shock* uses the gothic father and son in a fresh way to provide a scathing criticism of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. My examination of *States of Shock* will focus on the father-son relationship and on the gothic secret that is revealed about the son's "death." Shepard's most recent family play, *The Late Henry Moss*, in many ways seems an amalgam of the previous gothic family plays: it includes bickering brothers who are thrust together in close conflict, a dead father, a woman who disrobes onstage, and a plentiful supply of alcohol.

Both *States of Shock* and *The Late Henry Moss* evince how Shepard's gothic portrayal of the American family continued to evolve in the 1990's. Both of these plays portray fragmented families comprised exclusively of male relatives. In *States of Shock*, the family consists of only a father and son, with no mention of a mother at all. In *The Late Henry Moss*, the family consists of two brothers and a father, though the brothers allude to their mother throughout the play, especially during a crucial memory scene at the end. Both of these plays use gothic techniques to portray the American family in innovative ways, yet as always, it is a portrait of dysfunction. *States of Shock* is unique

among Shepard's family plays because its gothic mystery involves not the death of the father but the "death" of the son. Moreover, the audience comes to realize that the other characters in Danny's café—besides the father and son—are all, apparently, dead (though perhaps it is more accurate to say "undead"). In *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard again presents a mystery surrounding the fallen father's death, as he had done in *The Holy Ghostly* and *A Lie of the Mind*. This time, however, the father is portrayed as having "died" twice, first emotionally and, later, physically. Both of Henry's "deaths" occur as a result of his interaction with women, and his final, physical death is actually precipitated and orchestrated by a mysterious *femme fatale* named Conchalla. Conchalla seems finally to speak for all of Shepard's marginalized female characters, as she both ridicules the fallen father and actively participates in his death. Moreover, *The Late Henry Moss* is the only one of Shepard's family plays to have a corpse physically revive—albeit briefly and in flashback sequences—during the play.[1] Both *States of Shock* and *The Late Henry Moss* employ "death" in a dual sense: physical death and psychological death, the latter involving repression of traumatic memories. The resurrection of the dead man—the son in *States of Shock* and the father in *The Late Henry Moss*—presents a gothic treatment of this psychological repression and return. Though *States of Shock* has not received the critical and popular acclaim of some of Shepard's earlier work, and though it is perhaps too soon to determine where *The Late Henry Moss* will ultimately fall in the

[1] Though Pop in *The Holy Ghostly* is also a dead man who moves and speaks throughout the play, Pop's status as a dead man is not revealed to the audience until the closing moments of the play,

hierarchy of Shepard's drama, both plays are valuable examples of Shepard's gothic writing.

States of Shock:

In a 1979 interview, Shepard commented on his transient childhood, which required his family to move frequently to wherever his father was stationed in the military. This type of rootlessness undoubtedly influenced Shepard's idea of "home":

> I feel like I've never had a home . . . I feel related to this country, and yet at the same time I don't know exactly where I fit in . . . now I've found that what's most valuable . . . is not the place itself but the other people; that through other people you can find a recognition of each other. I think that's where the real home is. (qtd. in Shewey 97)

In *States of Shock*, Shepard portrays the idea expressed above on stage. The play includes no place which might be deemed a "home"—no Illinois farmhouse, no mom's kitchen, no childhood bedroom, not even a claustrophobic motel room. Instead of a home, the play presents a commercial diner situated "somewhere," and Shepard shows that family dynamics and dysfunction can rear its head in any setting and at any time.

States of Shock is clearly a political play, expressing Shepard's dismay over the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Of the Gulf War, Shepard has said, "I can't believe that, having come out of the 60's and the incredible reaction to Vietnam, that voice has all but

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whereas in *The Late Henry Moss*, the play opens by showing us Henry's stiffening corpse.

disappeared . . . This is supposed to be what America's about?" (qtd. in Shewey 217).[2] Obviously, this remark suggests an about-face from Shepard's earlier statements in the 1970's and 1980's where he claimed not to "have any political theories" (qtd. in Marranca 195) and also claimed that he was "not interested in the American social scene at all" (qtd. in Derose 94). Apparently it took a specific military (and political) event like the 1991 Persian Gulf War to spur Shepard to create a more explicit social and political critique than he had ever before attempted in his family plays.

The play premiered on April 30, 1991 in New York, under the direction of Bill Hart (*SOS* 3). It is worth remembering that Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and the Gulf War officially began on January 17, 1991, so this play seems to have been written hastily, if not frantically. In this play, Shepard seems at least as concerned with continuing his gothic family project as he does with protesting American military action in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, I am suggesting that we should not try to separate these two goals, for the gothic family portrait is the vehicle which the playwright uses to communicate his social commentary. Sometime after *States of Shock* had been produced, Shepard remarked, "I think the audience, and obviously everybody else, had a hard time realizing that this was indeed about a father and son relationship" (qtd. in Shewey 219). We may infer from Shepard's remarks that many theatergoers and critics either did not fully understand or else did not fully believe the revelation near the end of the

[2] More recently, Shepard's wife, Jessica Lange, was one of the more vocal Hollywood stars opposing the U.S.-led war on Iraq, dubbed by the media "Operation Iraqi Freedom" (March-April 2003). But

play that Stubbs is indeed the Colonel's son. Herein lies one risk inherent in using gothic conventions in an attempt to unravel a mystery onstage: what if the audience simply does not "get it"? This is similar to the problem that prompted Shepard to revise *Buried Child* in 1996 and remove or clarify many of the play's ambiguities. Thus far, Shepard has expressed no desire nor intention to revise *States of Shock*. Any attempt to clarify or explain away the ambiguities in *States of Shock* would weaken the play's gothic power, just as the 1996 revision weakened the gothic power of *Buried Child*.

Since Shepard is simultaneously protesting the U.S.-led Persian Gulf War and exploring the mystery of the father-son gothic relationship, the costumes of the Colonel and Stubbs are especially significant. The pair make their initial entrance following the shrill sound of a referee's whistle that dangles by a red string from Stubbs's neck. The Colonel is pushing Stubbs's wheelchair, and the Colonel is "dressed in a strange ensemble of military uniforms and paraphernalia that have no apparent rhyme or reason" (*SOS* 5). His costume includes an Air Force Captain's hat from World War Two, a Marine Sergeant's coat "with various medals and pins," and a Civil War-era saber which hangs from a belt at his side (5). The Colonel's costume suggests a composite of military might throughout recent American history, as if to suggest that all of these wars have been, in some sense, the same war—justified by the same political excuses and resulting in the same destruction and death. On a gothic level, the Colonel's costume is a visual amalgam of the past and all of the horrors associated with past wars. The Colonel, of course, does

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Shepard himself has been rather reticent on this particular military conflict.

not see it this way: for him, the uniforms and medals are trophies to be worn proudly. But in the tortured psyche of the haunted son (more haunted in this play perhaps than the son has ever been in Shepard's work) the Colonel's uniform is a constant reminder of horrors that the son would prefer to repress, but these horrors nevertheless return during the play.

Stubbs (who, we later learn, is truly the "haunted" son in this play) sits in a wheelchair which is decked out with "small American flags, raccoon tails and various talismans and good luck charms flapping and dangling from the back of the seat and arm rests" (SOS 6). These props are ironic on several levels. First, the good luck charms have clearly failed to prevent Stubbs from being seriously injured in battle, so their conspicuous appearance now seems a mocking reminder of their futility and inefficacy. Secondly, the only "good luck" which these charms and talismans seem to have brought Stubbs—when the 90 mm shell passed through his body and killed the Colonel's son instead—proves to be a lie once the audience learns that Stubbs is in fact the Colonel's son. Finally, since Stubbs's injury has paralyzed him from the waist down (at least until his miraculous recovery in the play's closing moments) he probably would have been unable to fasten these flags and talismans onto the back of his wheelchair himself. Indeed, most likely the Colonel decorated the wheelchair since it is he (the Colonel) who still pledges loyalty to the American flag and what it represents. Stubbs, as a result of his traumatized "state of shock," has ceased making such empty plaudits. Stubbs is dressed in a long-sleeved black shirt and black jeans, literally draped in the gothic color of death and ill

omen (much as the Old Man had been in *Fool for Love*) (6). Stubbs's clothing provides a sharp contrast both to the White Couple in the café who, besides being dressed all in white, also have white skin "like cadavers" (SOS 5).

Shepard's stage directions are important in establishing the play's gothic elements, and certainly one of the most important gothic elements is the gradual revelation that the customers and staff inside Danny's Café are dead, casualties of war. The White Couple's cadaverous pallor is suggested by their expensive white outfits, "reminiscent of West Palm Beach," and by their hands and faces, which are covered in white makeup to make them look like corpses. The White Man sits "slumped in his chair with his chin on his chest, not asleep but in a deep state of catharsis" (5). The White Woman seems similarly catatonic when the play begins: she stares off into space, but we never see her eyes which are hidden behind "elaborate jeweled dark glasses" (5). With their expensive outfits, and the woman's straw hat and sunglasses, the White Couple might pass for snobbish, glitzy tourists. They berate the waitress, Glory Bee, for taking so long with their clam chowder. Yet Shepard makes clear by the end of the play that the couple we are looking at has died at some time before the action of the play begins, and that their deaths were brought about by the war which rages outside—and very near—the café.

Shepard represents the horrors of war using a cyclorama which covers the "entire wall and ceiling" of the upstage area (*SOS* 5). "Two live percussionists" are seated out of

sight behind the cyclorama, and their drumming intensifies the visual effects displayed on the cyclorama.

> As the curtain opens, the sound of the drumming builds in intensity as the cyclorama takes on an ominous tone. The cyclorama is lit up with tracer fire, rockets, explosions in the night. A cross-fade takes place in which the war panorama and drumming are exchanged for the stage light and silence of the white couple who just sit there very still but not with the sense that they're frozen in time. (5)

As the play progresses, the cyclorama is "lit up" repeatedly with scenes of war, and the audience comes to realize by the end of the play that these are not only scenes of a past war (like the one which killed the people in the café) but also of some present battle that is raging all around the café. Midway through the play, during an argument between the Colonel and Stubbs, the "cyclorama explodes with bombs, missiles, and blown up planes" while the "percussionists and war sounds join in full swing" (*SOS* 18). Here, the images and sounds of war clearly mirror the Colonel's anger at Stubbs, almost as though the explosions on the cyclorama were instigated by the Colonel's violent outbursts. In fact, each time the Colonel smashes a fist or a sword on the tabletop, the audience hears an "explosion" offstage. But these war sounds and images are more than mere representations of or metaphors for the Colonel's rage; rather, the war on the cyclorama shows a "real" war that inflicts real casualties throughout the play.

When the White Couple demands to see the café manager, the waitress, Glory Bee, replies, "The Manager is dead" (*SOS* 19). Moments later, when she finally brings out the clam chowder, Glory Bee tells the couple, "Sorry for the delay but the cook has been wounded" (22). The waitress's words suggest that a battle is raging near enough to the café that the staff has been killed and wounded by collateral fire. Glory Bee's testimony is corroborated by the other characters, including the Colonel, who tells Stubbs they must hurry back to the hospital or they will be "wide open to attack": "If we're caught in the open they'll cut us to pieces!" (27). Finally, in the closing moments of the play, Glory Bee reveals that she never thought "Danny's could be invaded" and how "When the first wave of missiles hit us I kept studying the menu. I thought the menu would save me somehow" (*SOS* 34). This is the first indication that Glory Bee, like the unseen cook and café manager, is also dead—a walking, talking ghost. Whereas the White Couple's cadaverous appearance provides some clue that they may be ghosts, Glory Bee seems very much alive, even sensual, as when she rolls around on the floor with Stubbs, stimulating him to his first erection since his wounding. Almost immediately after Glory Bee alludes to the missile attack that killed them all, a bus boy's cart rolls onstage "all by itself," stopping center stage (*SOS* 34). The cart is loaded with gas masks, and in the play's final moments, most of the characters don a gas mask, except for the Colonel and the White Man. The appearance of the gas masks reinforces the idea that the café is situated in the middle of a battlefield; the suddenness with which the busboy's cart mysteriously wheels

itself onstage perhaps suggests the suddenness with which death befell the inhabitants of the café.

By the end of the play, the audience may wonder where, geographically speaking, the café might be located since it is obviously situated on or near a battlefield. Because the play represents Shepard's protest against the Persian Gulf War, one might expect the battlefield to be somewhere in the Middle East, perhaps Kuwait or Iraq. But, as usual, Shepard is elusive. The setting certainly does not seem to be Middle Eastern, but rather vintage Americana: the café appears to be a 50's-style soda shop, complete with vinyl booths and banana splits. In *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Una Chaudhuri observes that "Shepard's dramaturgy acknowledges the extent to which the modern environment is an ideological and semiotic construct, combining at least as much man-made imagery as natural material" (119). Shepard's family plays are nearly always set indoors: the living room in *Buried Child*, the kitchen in *True West* and *Curse of the Starving Class*, the motel room in *Fool for Love*, and here, a café. These man-made indoor settings enclose the characters in a suffocating, inescapable atmosphere (indicative of their stifling, dysfunctional familial relationships, as well as of the futility of their efforts to escape from these relationships). Moreover, Shepard surrounds his characters with consumer goods which provide no real comfort nor peace: the stolen toasters in *True West*, the flickering television set in *Buried Child*, and the empty refrigerator in *Curse of the Starving Class*. In *States of Shock*, Danny's diner should be, presumably, a haven

of sorts where mundane worries may be temporarily forgotten amid an abundance of sugary sodas, greasy burgers, and gooey ice cream sundaes. Places like Danny's cater especially to families (the White Couple call it a "family" restaurant) who are trying to escape their petty differences by getting out of the house for a meal, as though hoping somehow that the tasty food and shiny décor will rub off on them when they return home. Yet ironically, Shepard shows this, too, to be a culturally constructed myth; for in this play, the diner is the scene for a horrifying family apocalypse.

Besides the reference to "West Palm Beach" in the stage directions describing the White Couple's attire, the only other mention of geographic place is the Colonel's cryptic remark that he "didn't think we were that far South for key lime pie" (*SOS* 8). Both of these vague references imply that the diner is set somewhere in America. Yet Stubbs was wounded during the Persian Gulf War on a battlefield in either Iraq or Kuwait, as he makes clear when he describes wanting to be transported "back across the green sea" and taken "safely back home" (*SOS* 32). If the war raging around Danny's café is occurring somewhere in America, then Shepard seems to be suggesting that America's military involvement in foreign affairs has eventually brought war to U. S. shores—that our chickens have come home to roost, as it were. The result is the death of the customers and staff of this generic café. This is one of the play's two gothic mysteries—we have been watching and listening to dead people throughout the play. The other gothic mystery concerns Stubbs's true identity and the circumstances surrounding his "death."

In order to unravel the mystery of Stubbs's identity, his repressed traumatic memories must be exhumed and finally given voice—and all of this must occur despite the Colonel's best efforts to cover the truth with a fabricated falsehood. By first examining the Colonel's fantasy about his son's "death" and then by examining Stubbs's revelation of the truth, we can see how, once again, Shepard's cultural and political commentary take a back seat to his fascination with portraying family relationships in a gothic light.

Stubbs possesses several traits which make him a gothic character. First, he is a traumatized character who now exists in a death-in-life state similar to other gothic characters from American drama, including Beth in *A Lie of the Mind*, Catharine Holly in *Suddenly Last Summer*, and Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The Colonel attempts to explain Stubbs's condition to Glory Bee, the waitress, telling her that Stubbs has "suffered a uh—kind of disruption. Temporary kind of thing, they say. Takes some time to unscramble" (*SOS* 6). In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys explains, "from the beginning trauma was understood as an experience that immersed the victim in the traumatic scene so profoundly that it precluded the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what had happened" (9). Stubbs is "immersed" in his own traumatic scene to such an extent that his physical wounds have resulted in a psychological rupture as well. In fact, as we see later in the play, Stubbs's psychological wound is more damaging than his physical one. Stubbs tells the Colonel, "When you left me it went straight through me and out the other side. It left a hole I can never fill" (*SOS* 20). The

physical hole in Stubbs's chest is mirrored by the hole in his psyche, the trauma of his abandonment by the Colonel (his father).

Another trait which makes Stubbs a gothic character is his physical deformity and impotency. Early in the play, the Colonel, true to his rank and role, gives Stubbs an order to lift his shirt, exposing a "massive red scar in the center of his chest" as though Stubbs is some sort of sideshow freak (*SOS* 7). The visual spectacle of Stubbs's scar, exposed so conspicuously more than once during the play, makes Stubbs himself a grotesque character (though not an unsympathetic one). Furthermore, we learn that Stubbs's wound has left him a paraplegic; as a result, he is impotent with the accompanying loss of phallic power. In conjunction with his physical deformity, loss of power links Stubbs to other gothic grotesques like Cash Bundren from Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* or Bradley from *Buried Child* (though Stubbs's docility during much of the play is a marked contrast to Bradley's predatory aggressiveness). Just as Cash Bundren and Bradley suffered a loss of social power within the family as a result of losing the use of a leg, Stubbs also suffers physical and verbal abuse from the Colonel throughout much of the play.

In *States of Shock*, Shepard is just as concerned with who and what caused Stubbs's physical and psychological wounds as he is with the wounds themselves—and this concern marks a new development in Shepard's gothic family plays. With *Buried Child*, Shepard spends no more than a moment telling us that Bradley cut off his leg with a chainsaw; we never learn the details about precisely when and where the mutilation

occurred. Bradley's wound is a symbolic castration: he becomes helpless and vulnerable whenever his false leg (a substitute phallic symbol) is removed. His wound defines him throughout the play and, in the end, prevents him from fully exercising his masculine power. Likewise, Stubbs's wound has resulted in castration and, therefore, impotence; both Stubbs and the Colonel acknowledge how the wound has weakened his masculinity—that is, the American myth of masculinity which is characterized by virility, machismo, and sexual conquests. With *States of Shock*, Shepard intertwines all of the gothic mysteries, showing that the reasons behind Stubbs's wounding are directly linked to his true identity and to why the Colonel "killed" him, metaphorically, by denying him as his son.

Stubbs is silent for the first several minutes of the play, while the Colonel rambles on to the waitress. In fact, in this play more than any other, one character (the Colonel) monopolizes a majority of the dialogue through lengthy speeches and diatribes. Because the play is a one-act, the disparity between the Colonel's volubility and Stubbs's relative reticence becomes all the more egregious. Much of the Colonel's dialogue revolves around his attempts to deny Stubbs as his son. *Buried Child* used a similar device where both Dodge and Tilden denied Vince's existence, effectively "burying" their memory of Vince through repression. In this way, Vince is as much a "buried child" as the baby whose corpse is exhumed at the end of the play. Stubbs is similarly a "buried child" for,

as we come to discover, the Colonel committed infanticide, figuratively speaking, by inventing his son's death.

The Colonel explains to Glory Bee that today is the anniversary of his son's death, and he is treating Stubbs to a dessert to commemorate this event. Stubbs finally breaks his silence by blowing the silver whistle hanging around his neck. Blowing the whistle seems to signal a return of the repressed traumatic memories, for immediately after blowing it, Stubbs speaks to the White Couple (indeed, perhaps he is able to speak only after blowing it and breaking through some type of psychic barrier). Once Stubbs finds a voice, we discover that his traumatized memory is fragmented; the memory begins at the very moment when he experienced his physical trauma: "When I was hit—it went straight through me. Out the other side. Someone was killed . . . I'm the lucky one" (*SOS* 8).[3] Stubbs cannot seem to remember who was killed ("someone"), but by referring to himself as the "lucky one," Stubbs seems to confirm the Colonel's account that the "son" was killed while Stubbs survived. Here, Shepard is using misdirection and false clues to confound the audience, just as he had done in the original (1978 Pulitzer Prize-winning) version of *Buried Child*. This confounding of the mystery made *Buried Child* an especially gothic play, and in *States of Shock*, Shepard aims for (and achieves, though to a lesser degree) a similar gothic effect which leaves the audience in suspense and doubt about Stubbs's true identity until the closing moments of the play.

The Colonel perpetuates his own fabrication of Stubbs's identity at every turn, and he has adopted denial as his mantra. As he tells Glory Bee, the secret to carrying a steady tray of coffee is to "pretend the cups don't exist" (*SOS* 10). The Colonel has taken his own advice by pretending that his son does not exist, that he has died a warrior's death in battle. The Colonel tells Glory Bee of Stubbs, "This is the man who attempted to save my son's life by placing his body in the way of in-coming artillery fire" (11). The Colonel's words imply that Stubbs is a hero who deliberately placed himself in harm's way in order to save his fellow soldier. But the Colonel undercuts this claim when, later in the play, he beats Stubbs with a belt and slaps him—not the way a grateful father would treat the hero who tried to save his son's life. Before this outburst of violence, however, the Colonel seems obsessed with solving a mystery for himself by finding out everything he can about the precise moment of his "son's" death. The Colonel's attempt to reconstruct the moment of his son's death—the revelation of a gothic mystery—is reminiscent of Violet Venable's attempt to learn the truth of her son Sebastian's death in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*. Similar gothic mysteries are revealed when Shelly learns of the infanticide in *Buried Child*, or when Martin learns about *Geschwisterinzest* in *Fool for Love*. In each case, the gothic mystery involves a return of repressed memories and a shattering of a shared lie. As the Colonel and Stubbs reconstruct the fateful battle, the audience comes to realize that, up to this point, Stubbs has shared in the Colonel's lie

[3] Stubbs's fragmented memory here is reminiscent of Randall Jarrell's poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" ; in the final line, the speaker's memory skips to the moment immediately following the

through his silent acquiescence. But following the reconstruction of the battle, Stubbs's repressed memories rise to the surface and he refuses to participate in the charade any longer.

The Colonel has brought a bag full of toy soldiers, tanks, airplanes, and ships which he lays out carefully onto the tabletop in hopes of reconstructing the battle in which his son was killed and Stubbs was wounded (12). The Colonel uses a red toy soldier to represent Stubbs—red perhaps suggesting his bloody wound or the symbolic scarlet letter of shame and disgrace which Stubbs's impotence and paralysis have brought upon the Colonel—while a white soldier represents the Colonel's "son" (white perhaps representing the "white-washing" of the truth). Stubbs is of little help to the Colonel's sleuthing, however, because all of Stubbs's attempts to reconstruct the memory inevitably jump to the traumatic moment: "When I was hit—" (12). Stubbs tries to explain the phenomenon of his repressed memories by equating repression with loss: "The part of me that goes on living has no memory of the parts that are all dead" (13). Stubbs's memory of these "parts that are all dead" has been lost. For Stubbs, as for many trauma victims, repression of traumatic memories is an instinctual, subconscious tactic for psychological survival. As Ruth Leys points out,

> [Freud] posited the existence of a protective shield or 'stimulus barrier' designed to defend the organism against the upsurge of large quantities of stimuli from the external world that threatened to destroy the psychic

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explosion: "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose."

> organization. Trauma was thus defined as a widespread rupture or breach in the ego's protective shield, one that set in motion every possible attempt at defense. (23)

By forcing the toy props upon Stubbs, the Colonel is forcefully and deliberately rupturing Stubbs's psychic defense mechanisms, though obviously the Colonel does not anticipate the extreme and irrevocable consequences of such a rupture. Stubbs's defense mechanisms have been in place for approximately one year now, since the Colonel says today is the "anniversary" of his son's death.

Stubbs's repressed memories return suddenly and without warning when he tells the Colonel, "I remember the moment you forsake me. The moment you gave me up," culminating with a startling accusation which becomes, by the end of the play, a gothic revelation: "The moment you invented my death" (20). This is a "gothic" revelation in at least two ways. First, this revelation shows the return of the repressed memory which is a gothic phenomenon, especially in twentieth-century American drama, as the previous chapters of this study have shown. Secondly, this revelation transforms the Colonel's son (Stubbs) from "dead" to "undead." Though Stubbs is alive, physically, he has existed for the past year in a state of death-in-life, psychologically shattered, in a "state of shock." As an emotionally sterile fallen father, the Colonel responds to Stubbs's revelation with flippancy and callousness: "That dog won't hunt, Stubbs."

When Stubbs finally gets round to describing the moment when they were hit with the artillery shell, he describes himself and the Colonel's son as two different people who were standing "back to back" with "his spine trembling on my spine" (*SOS* 26). Here Stubbs seems to contradict what he said about the Colonel "inventing" his (Stubbs's) death, for how could Stubbs and the Colonel's son be one person if they were standing "back to back?" Stubbs's comments must be read in a gothic light to be fully understood. "Back to back" suggests a gothic *doppelgänger*, in this case a split personality, perhaps similar to Jekyll and Hyde—one personality (or persona) which existed prior to the traumatic moment and another which has emerged as a result of the trauma. Stubbs's remark about "his spine trembling on my spine" perhaps alludes to the moment when the two personalities began to split from the same person. On a mythological level, the back-to-back image also might allude to Janus, the two-faced Roman god who looks at once to the future and the past: certainly Stubbs's present, as well as any future he will have, is circumscribed by his past trauma. Even his new name, "Stubbs," suggests his useless legs and sexual impotence, and we are never told what his real name was before he was wounded. But Shepard is not content in this play with revealing the gothic secrets about the play's dead characters (Glory Bee, the White Couple, and the café Manager) and its "undead" character (Stubbs). In *States of Shock*, Shepard goes a step further by indicting the political and military machine which left this motley crew of gothic creatures in its wake.

While the Colonel worries about getting back to the hospital by curfew, Stubbs announces suddenly, "It was friendly fire that took us out . . . I could see its teeth when it hit us. I could see its tongue . . ." (*SOS* 27). As he speaks, Stubbs turns to face the audience, perhaps symbolizing its own culpability in his trauma as he reveals, "There was a face on the nose of the missile. They'd painted a face. You could see it coming. A lizard with smiling teeth. We couldn't resist its embrace" (27). Stubbs describes a U.S. missile which American troops, trying to be clever, had painted with a comic-grotesque design. This same shell, misguided, wounded Stubbs and, apparently, killed or wounded other American soldiers who were with him. Shepard's indictment of the U.S. military action in the Persian Gulf, then, involves not a memory of atrocities committed against the Iraqi soldiers or civilians (though Shepard certainly might have used this technique), but rather involves a memory of a "friendly fire" accident, the kind which was all too common during this particular war. The very country Stubbs was fighting for (in patriotic parlance) is the very country that wounded him physically and "killed" him metaphorically. Likewise, the same father for whom Stubbs ostensibly went to war (to make his father proud and to wrest from him some grudging respect) is the same father who "killed" him by denying him. The concept of "friendly fire" could be read as analogous to the violence and betrayal which characterize the American gothic family: the family members, which ought to evince mutual trust and emotional support, instead attack one another (either physically or emotionally). Because the Colonel has denied him, Stubbs's psyche has become

ruptured, as we see when he refers to himself in the third person and when he attempts to reconcile his previously mythical ideals about country and family with the harsh truths that he has learned in the war.

Stubbs refers to himself in the third person, reinforcing the idea that this trauma has split his personality in two, making one personality a type of *doppelgänger* for the other. He tells the Colonel:

> Your son. I remember him running. Crazy. Running toward the beach. Throwing his rifle in the green sea. Throwing his arms to the sky . . . Screaming. I remember his eyes . . . Carrying him on my back . . . He kept speaking your name in my ear. Whispering it. Chanting your name like a prayer. Calling to you as though you might appear out of nowhere [and] sweep him up in your arms and take him safely back home. (*SOS* 32)

Just as when Stubbs described standing back to back with the Colonel's son, here he describes carrying the son on his back. Stubbs's words serve to further misdirect or confound the gothic mystery by referring to himself and the Colonel's son as two separate people. The audience must remember that Stubbs is a victim of trauma and, as such, he speaks in riddles, using defense mechanisms (namely the notion of a split personality or *doppelgänger*) which he has created in order to cope with his trauma. Furthermore, Stubbs's trauma is two-fold: because he suffers both a physical wound and his

psychological wound as a result of his father's denial of him, perhaps Stubbs's split personality is a response to this dual trauma. The Colonel's denial of him has clearly traumatized Stubbs at least as much as the physical wound itself. Stubbs tells the Colonel, "The moment you invented my death. That moment has lasted all my life" (*SOS* 33). In response to this, the Colonel replies with an emotional frigidity that rivals even that of Dodge in *Buried Child*: "If you think you're breaking my heart, you're sadly mistaken. I can easily do without. It's a question of training. Repetition and practice" (33). The Colonel's allusion to "training" implies that his lack of compassion and paternal care was the necessary result of his military service, and we must remember that in Shepard's gothic family plays, the fallen father is nearly always a military veteran (with the exception of Dodge, and the Old Man in *Fool for Love*). During this exchange, Stubbs's repressed memories rise to the surface of his consciousness, culminating with his most passionate accusation against his father:

> I remember—the part that's coming back—is this. Your face. Your face leaning over my face . . . Your bald face of denial. Peering down from a distance. Bombing me . . . You had my name changed! YOU INVENTED MY DEATH! (*SOS* 37)

This return of Stubbs's repressed memories is accompanied by (and symbolized through) Stubbs physically rising, first to his knees and finally to his feet. Moreover, his phallic power returns as he regains an erection following a tryst of rolling about on the floor with

Glory Bee. The return of Stubbs's phallic power is an important symbol of his recovered identity, his refusal to allow himself to be killed and buried by the Colonel's denials and fabrications. In *Buried Child* Vince's forceful entry into the farmhouse is a similar example of a haunted son regaining his phallic power by reclaiming his identity and refusing to allow his family to deny his existence. Early in the play Stubbs had announced his impotency in a pitiful cry of shame and anguish: "MY THING HANGS LIKE DEAD MEAT!" (*SOS* 11). At one point, the Colonel replies to this declaration by telling Stubbs, "No son of mine has a 'thing' like that. It's not possible" (29). The play contains many references to phallic power, and not all of these references involve dialogue. At one point late in the play, the White Man masturbates himself to orgasm while the Colonel viciously beats Stubbs with a belt. In this scene, the White Man's phallic pleasure contrasts to Stubbs's impotency, an impotency which allows the Colonel to dominate him. As the play nears its conclusion, Shepard (characteristically) presents a role reversal whereby the Colonel's phallic power begins to wane. This is symbolized when the Colonel removes his saber from his belt (in order to whip Stubbs) and, later, forgets where he put the sword. This realization (that he has lost his phallic symbol) signals the onset of the Colonel's panic about getting back to the hospital before the curfew, and this realization also signals the onset of role reversal and power exchange between the fallen father and haunted son.

This reversal and exchange are swiftly concluded during the play's closing moments. This reversal is a visible and physical manifestation of the gothic return of the

repressed—indeed, the reversal is possible only because Stubbs's traumatic memories have broken through the Colonel's fabrication, and Stubbs is strengthened and resurrected (metaphorically speaking) through this return of the repressed. I have suggested that the role reversal and power exchange begins with the Colonel misplacing his sword/phallus, and this process continues when Stubbs comes out of his wheelchair and crashes to the floor. The Colonel seats himself in Stubbs's vacant wheelchair and quips, perhaps in a subconscious pun, "Looks like we've finally hit our crossroads here" (*SOS* 33). Indeed, from this moment the Colonel and Stubbs have crossed roles. As the Colonel wheels himself around the stage, Stubbs rolls on the floor with Glory Bee and announces that his phallic potency has returned: "My thing is arising! I can feel it!" (36). Following this announcement, Stubbs rises to his feet and stands behind the Colonel, who is still seated in the wheelchair. As Stubbs approaches the back of the wheelchair, the Colonel faces the audience and speaks in rambling, fragmented speech: "Put your back against me, Stubbs, so I can feel you. Press your spine into my spine. Give me the impression that you're with me to the bitter end . . . I'll take you back. I promise you" (38). As the Colonel senses danger now (ostensibly from the offstage explosions and war scenes depicted on the cyclorama), he panics. Now he seems to need Stubbs, much as Dodge feared being left alone in *Buried Child*. For all his talk about being a strong, independent man who needs no one, the Colonel is finally frightened, much as Stubbs must have been frightened

during and after his wounding in battle. This shows that the role reversal is nearly complete. All that is left is the final power exchange.

When Stubbs, now standing, grabs the Colonel from behind and begins choking him, he has obviously subverted or usurped his father's power. The Colonel seems oblivious to this throttling, however: he offers to buy Stubbs "two desserts" if Stubbs is "very good" (39). In choking the Colonel, Stubbs seems intent more on getting his father to acknowledge him than on killing him. But when the choking fails to prompt the Colonel to acknowledge him as his son, Stubbs snatches the Colonel's sword (phallic power) and readies himself to decapitate his father. But the death blow never comes: Stubbs "freezes in that posture" and declares, "GOD BLESS THE ENEMY!" while the White Man and Glory Bee break into a chorus of "Goodnight Irene" as the curtain closes (*SOS* 39). The ending of *States of Shock* thus resembles the static ending of *True West*: both plays have one character suddenly choking the other, and both plays show a violent act that is "frozen" in time but never completed. The significance of the song "Goodnight Irene" perhaps lies in the song's chorus which says, "I'll see you in my dreams." The Colonel has certainly "dreamed" up an explanation for his son's mutilation and impotence by pretending that his son was killed in the war. It is also worth mentioning that one of the prose sections from *Cruising Paradise* (which, with its 1989 publication, precedes *States of Shock*) is entitled "See You In My Dreams"; this particular section of the book describes the funeral of Shepard's own father, so the chorus seems to have been

personally significant to Shepard, perhaps alluding to a haunted son finally escaping (temporarily at least) from his fallen father.

In *States of Shock*, however, we have the reverse: the fallen father has tried to escape the truth about his son by inventing a lie of the mind. But the truth, as usual, returns to shatter the lie. Midway through the play, Stubbs tells the Colonel, "You'll never erase me completely" (*SOS* 30), echoing Eddie's words to May in *Fool for Love*: "You'll never escape me" (*FFL* 49). These statements allude to the essence of gothic in Shepard's family plays—the past can never be erased or escaped completely. But Stubbs is a different "haunted son" than we have seen thus far in Shepard's family plays. No other son in Shepard's work is more completely disavowed by the father; no other son in Shepard's work suffers so much physical abuse and humiliation at the father's hands; and, unlike the other gothic family plays, Stubbs does not seem to be destined to follow in the Colonel's destructive behavior patterns. Indeed, the final image of Stubbs preparing to decapitate the Colonel seems to suggest an attempt to sever completely all ties between father and son. Significantly, however, we are not shown the final stroke of the sword. At this moment, Stubbs shouts a refrain which both he and the Colonel have declared at various times throughout the play: "GOD BLESS THE ENEMY!" This declaration suggests that these soldiers' government-prescribed and culturally-reinforced roles would be meaningless (or perhaps even impossible) without a real or imagined "enemy" to fight, maim, and kill. Indeed, without a foreign enemy, men like Stubbs and

the Colonel might be forced to look closer to home ("home" being both America and the family itself) to find an enemy with which to fight. That is, of course, precisely what has happened inside the café.

Ultimately, as we have seen in Shepard's other family plays, the ties between father and son may be impossible to sever, and the sword suspended in mid-air over the Colonel's neck suggests as much. Although Stubbs falls outside the usual portrait of Shepard's haunted sons, and although *States of Shock* differs in many ways from Shepard's other family plays, with *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard would return to his usual character types and abandon his explicit socio-political critique for a more familiar portrait of family dysfunction.

Before examining *The Late Henry Moss*, I would like briefly to mention two plays which were written and produced in the interim between *States of Shock* and *The Late Henry Moss*: *When the World Was Green* (1996) and *Eyes for Consuela* (1999). Though neither of these may properly be called a "family" play (at least not in the sense I have been using the term), both plays contain elements of the gothic which serve as a kind of prelude to *The Late Henry Moss*, a more ambitious three-act play. Shepard co-wrote *When the World Was Green* with Joseph Chaikin, and the play was commissioned for the 1996 Olympic Festival in Atlanta. The play's subtitle was *A Chef's Fable*, alluding to the play's protagonist, a murderous chef who has accidentally poisoned the wrong man in an attempt to settle a long-standing family feud. The play contains only two characters:

the murderous chef, who is called the "Old Man" (reminiscent of *Fool for Love*), and the young lady who comes to the prison to visit him, the "Interviewer." Shepard presents another type of gothic mystery in this play, although— due to the play's brevity—the mystery is not as complex nor as deferred as it is in Shepard's other gothic family plays. The mystery concerns the true identity of the Interviewer, and during the play the Old Man discovers that the Interviewer is actually the daughter of the man whom he mistakenly poisoned. But at the end of the play, the Interviewer chooses reconciliation instead of revenge for her father's death. In doing so, she ends the feud, seven generations long, which had been characterized by murder and violence. By choosing peace rather than violence, she also fulfills the Old Man's prophetic words at the start of the play when he explained to her, "It takes seven generations or one hundred years for an insult to come to an end. Whichever comes first. And then only a woman can end it" (*3P* 190). In *The Late Henry Moss*, a woman (Conchalla) does, in fact, "end" the fallen father's cycle of violence and drunkenness by forcefully bringing the father to a reckoning for his years of destructive behavior. In this way, parts of *When the World Was Green* foreshadow thematic elements which appear in *The Late Henry Moss*.

Eyes for Consuela also contains thematic elements that foreshadow *The Late Henry Moss*, including the ideas that real love comes with a price and that the betrayal of love exacts an awful price as well. In *Eyes for Consuela*, an obsessed Mexican named Amado asks Henry (an American tourist), "You believe that love comes cheaply? That it

costs nothing at all?" (*EFC* 21-22). Later, Amado tells Henry, "Love needs a sacrifice. Without this sacrifice there is no love" (36). It is worth noting that the American tourist in *Eyes for Consuela* is named "Henry," for in *The Late Henry Moss*, the title character learns a gothic lesson—that, indeed, love demands enormous sacrifice. When the fallen father selfishly refuses to make this sacrifice (as all of Shepard's fallen fathers refuse to do), the consequences are terrifying and irrevocable.

The Late Henry Moss:

I have referred to this play as being, in some ways, an amalgam or composite of Shepard's earlier gothic family plays, and one can enumerate several similarities in plot details and dramatic techniques in *The Late Henry Moss* and the earlier plays. Like *True West*, this play begins with two brothers who have been brought together in close quarters after many years apart. Like *True West*, the Moss brothers' mutual antipathy eventually explodes into several violent confrontations, and the play employs a static and hermetic ending with both brothers apparently trapped inside their father's trailer. Like *Curse of the Starving Class*, the stage set for *The Late Henry Moss* includes a barren refrigerator whose only contents are a jar of jalapeno peppers. As in *Buried Child*, where Bradley had forcefully pushed his fingers into the mouth of an "outsider" (Shelly), this play includes a scene where Ray, the younger Moss brother, forcefully shoves a jalapeno pepper into the mouth of another "outsider" (Taxi, the cab driver). *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind* included scenes of naked or half-naked women on display, and this play has a

similar scene where Conchalla strips and bathes onstage. She even oils herself up like Beth in *A Lie of the Mind*. Besides these specific similarities, *The Late Henry Moss* presents the usual fallen father who is alcoholic, abusive, and a military veteran. Yet, for all these similarities, this play does show continued innovation and evolution in Shepard's portrait of the gothic American family, and I will attempt to highlight some of these innovations during my examination of the play.

Shepard directed the play's first production run, which premiered on November 7, 2000 at the Magic Theater in San Francisco (*3P* 3). The Signature Theater Company produced the play one year later in New York under the direction of Joseph Chaikin (*3P* 4). Unlike other Shepard family plays, this one begins with a "Prelude" subtitled "Drunken Rumba." As the curtain opens, "sultry Mexican rumba music comes up" and Henry Moss and his mistress, a half-Mexican, half-American Indian woman named Conchalla Lupina, "careen" across the stage. They are "wrapped in a tight embrace, cheek to cheek" in a dance which Shepard's directions describe as "somewhat shocking" (*3P* 5). All three acts are played out on the same set whose locale is the outskirts of Bernalillo, New Mexico. The stage shows the interior of a tiny trailer which includes a sink, gas stove, and a small refrigerator, as well as a "formica table and two metal S-shaped chairs." An "old style bathtub with claw feet" sits nearby (*3P* 6). Center stage, a cot is set horizontally into a small alcove, with a "small barred window directly above it, like a jail cell," perhaps symbolizing Henry's isolation and self-imposed exile from his family. A blue curtain hangs

in front of the bed, but the curtain is pulled back as the play begins, allowing the audience to see the corpse of Henry Moss who, like nearly all of Shepard's gothic fathers, is described as being in his "late sixties." The corpse is covered with a yellow and red Mexican blanket, with a white sheet covering the blanket, so that the audience can see only the top of Henry's head and his bare feet (*3P* 5).

This is not the first time Shepard had displayed a corpse onstage in one of his works. In *Buried Child*, Dodge lays dead on the floor in the play's closing moments, and in an earlier play from the 1970's called *Suicide in B Flat*, the dead man (Niles) appears onstage, revived, later in the play during a flashback. But *The Late Henry Moss* marks the first time that Shepard displays a corpse so conspicuously in the opening Act. Furthermore, Henry's corpse revives several times throughout the play in flashbacks which show us the final moments of his life. Finally, Henry dies again before our eyes at the end of the play. *The Late Henry Moss* thus exploits the gothic device of an "undead" character more explicitly than any of Shepard's other gothic family plays. My examination of this play will focus primarily on two gothic elements: the gradual revelation of the gothic mystery surrounding Henry Moss's death, and a role reversal between the Moss brothers, Earl and Ray. Both of these gothic elements are intertwined, and the role reversal between the brothers is dependent upon, even a consequence of, the revelation of the circumstances surrounding their father's death. The sons themselves are the sleuths in this play. The play contains three "outsider" characters—Esteban, the friendly neighbor;

Conchalla, the *femme fatale*; and Taxi, the cab driver. But as the play progresses, younger brother Ray becomes the real detective, and the audience eventually learns that older brother Earl did not, in fact, arrive to find their father dead, as he had claimed. Rather, Henry Moss was alive when Earl arrived in New Mexico, and Earl witnessed his death. In turn, Ray "witnesses" everything that transpired through a series of supernaturally-inspired flashbacks. Ray undergoes a transformation much like Austin in *True West*. Like Austin, Ray begins the play as the younger brother who has been intimidated and cowed for years by his violent older brother. But, as with Austin, Ray's fear gives way to violent anger by the end of the play.

Following the "Prelude" with its brief "Drunken Rumba," the play begins with the Moss brothers examining their dead father's meager possessions, namely a scrapbook and a toolbox (*3P* 6). Shepard gives no hint about the Moss brothers' ages, but we learn that their father moved into this trailer thirty years ago. Based on the brothers' memory of that fateful, violent night when their father abandoned them and their mother, Earl would seem to be in his forties, and Ray in his late thirties. Earl, as eldest son, fits squarely into the mold of haunted son in the gothic family paradigm, much as Lee had done in *True West*. Like Lee, he appears to be most fully under the curse of the fallen father's drunken, violent ways when the play begins; but, as in *True West*, by the end of the play younger son Ray, like Austin, has succumbed to the same destructive behavior patterns in a type of role reversal with his older brother. There are important differences, however, between

the two sets of brothers. *True West* presented Lee and Austin as alter egos—nemeses who often appeared to be two halves of one whole. Earl and Ray, on the other hand, have much more in common with each other than had Lee and Austin. Both of the Moss brothers are loners, neither having married nor fathered children. Both seem to be drifters with no ties to anyone or to any particular place. Furthermore, while Lee in *True West* briefly emulated Austin's dutiful pursuit of commercial success and financial security, neither of the Moss brothers seems concerned with these matters. They do, however, seem very concerned with finding out anything they can about their father's final days and hours—not necessarily out of any love for him, but rather because their resentment of their father demands a reckoning for his death. Ray, in particular, seems slighted and angry that he was not present when Henry died. The entire gothic mystery of what happened to Henry Moss—and to this family, thirty years ago on that fateful, explosive night—is at the forefront from the play's opening line.

At the start of the play, Earl tells Ray, "Well, you know me, Ray—I was never one to live in the past. That never was my deal. You know—you remember how I was" (*3P* 6). Ray replies, "Yeah. Yeah, right. I remember." Earl's remark is disingenuous, for he certainly is both haunted by and shaped by the past, including his repression of (and denial of) traumatic memories. Ray's remark is also disingenuous, for his memory is incomplete. The whole point behind the flashbacks and the resurrection of Henry's corpse during the play is to allow Ray to witness the final moments of Henry Moss's life

and to understand its connection to the day that Henry abandoned the family thirty years earlier. By the end of the play, after Earl has been forced to confront the truth about the past—and the repressed memories which have returned—and after Ray has "seen" and heard what transpired during his father's final moments, the role reversal between the brothers is complete. Shepard suggests this completion at the end of the play by reversing the brothers' lines: this time, Ray tells Earl, "I was never one to live in the past," and Earl replies, "Yeah. I remember" (*3P* 113).

Before using flashbacks to reveal the mystery of Henry's death, Shepard first casts doubt on Earl's credibility. In *Buried Child*, the audience was never sure whether to trust Tilden, due to his diminished mental capacity. In this play, Earl's trustworthiness is suspect due to the memories he has repressed and the mental defenses he has constructed in order to repel Ray's questions and accusations. Ray's accusations concern the night thirty years earlier when Earl ran away instead of defending his mother and younger brother from their father's assault. When Earl tries to paint a nostalgic portrait of the past—"Those were high times, Ray"—Ray counters by jumping to the horrific memory of that fateful night of the "big blowout": "I remember you leaving. That's all I remember" (*3P* 7). Earl immediately attempts to slough off Ray's accusation by telling him, "You shouldn't let that stuff haunt you, Ray." But with the American gothic family, the past is always and forever haunting. Earl believes that he has somehow escaped this "haunting" by repressing or misremembering what happened. Earl even sounds like he is justifying

their father's violence on that night when he reminds Ray that their father smashed windows only after their mother locked him out of the house during one of Henry's "Wild Turkey storms" (*3P* 9). At the start of *Curse of the Starving Class*, a nearly identical situation had occurred, except Weston Tate smashed in the door rather than the windows during a drunken rampage. Indeed, Ray sounds much like Wesley Tate when he uses staccato-like dialogue (perhaps suggesting a traumatized, fragmented memory) to describe that night: "Explosions. Screaming. Smoke. The telephone" (*3P* 9). Ray accuses Earl of "running" that night, of jumping in his '51 Chevy and disappearing for seven years, but Earl denies this: "It's time you got it straight. It's no good carrying the wrong pictures around with you the rest of your life . . . I'm not a runner. Never have been" (*3P* 10). The male in Shepard's plays (both fathers and sons) are bound by the American code of machismo—a code which demands that the male stay and fight rather than flee. But Earl violated this code by running, and now he is forced to deny what Ray already knows to be true (since Ray was there to witness it). But during the opening moments of the play, the audience must wonder about what really happened on that night and which of the two brothers is more credible. Shepard answers these questions by the end of the play using flashbacks.

As the eldest, haunted son, Earl feels a strange attachment to Henry's corpse. We do not know how long Earl had been inside the trailer with the body when Ray arrived, but the brothers have not yet notified anyone that their father has died. Even now,

Earl wants to delay contacting the authorities: he tells Ray, "I'd like to spend a little time with him, if you don't mind," before the mortician comes to dress Henry's body in his "Air Force khakis" (*3P* 15). Like all of the fallen fathers in Shepard's gothic family plays, Henry Moss is a military veteran (and a pilot, like Sam Shepard Rogers VI). Ray claims to know the reason behind Earl's strange attachment to their father's corpse: "You can tell him all kinds of things that you couldn't tell him before because now he's dead and you're imagining him to be alive and there's nothing he can do about it but listen" (*3P* 16). Ray's barb suggests that Earl was too frightened of their father to confront him while Henry was alive, but now that he is dead, Ray believes that Earl may want to vent years of pent-up frustration and anger. Ray's own resentment toward their father remains strong, as shown when Ray suggests digging a hole and burying Henry like a dog (17). Apparently, Earl still fears their father even after death: when Ray tries to touch the corpse, Earl nearly panics, saying he doesn't think it's a "good idea" to touch the body (18). Ray derides this idea, asking Earl, "Afraid he might come back to life?" Ray's question is the quintessential gothic one, for "coming back to life" alludes both to the return of repressed memories and the supernatural machinations of ghosts or specters who return from the dead to haunt the family members in more ethereal (and literal) ways. Of course, Ray's teasing also becomes ironic foreshadowing, for the corpse does indeed come back to life more than once during the play.

The first flashback occurs early in Act Two as a cab driver (aptly named "Taxi") tells Ray about taking Henry fishing several days ago. Shepard uses lighting effects to signal the flashback and the accompanying resurrection of the dead man: "Lights slowly shift. A glowing amber light comes up on the curtain in front of Henry's bed. At the same time the lights on the rest of the stage dim to a pale moonlit glow" (*3P* 55). As Taxi speaks, Ray seems to fall into a type of trance: he "turns slowly in his chair until he's directly facing the audience" (56). Ray remains motionless and silent during this and subsequent flashbacks, as though the flashbacks are intended for Ray's enlightenment, allowing his consciousness full access to the recent past. In addition to the eerie lighting effects, Shepard augments the supernatural, spooky mood of the flashback by allowing the blue curtain (in front of Henry's cot) to open "slowly on its own, revealing the living Henry, lying on his belly, softly weeping" (56). The silent implication is that the curtain may have been opened by an unseen, ghostly hand. Though Henry is "undead" in this scene (in the sense that he began the scene as a corpse but now weeps, moves, and speaks), it is clear that the audience is watching a flashback of something which transpired within the past week. Henry explains to Taxi that he is crying because his mistress, Conchalla,

> pronounced me dead . . . We were both incarcerated and she made that pronouncement. Publicly! Standing right over my semiconscious body . . . 'Señor Moss is dead!' Now it's all over town. All over this territory. Everyone thinks I'm dead. (*3P* 61)

Shepard here presents us with a conundrum: a dead man who has been resurrected during a flashback complains about being "pronounced dead," though at the time he makes his complaint he has not yet died (physically, at least). Conchalla "pronouncing" him dead implies that she has laid upon him some fatal curse akin to the evil eye or perhaps voodoo (though, by the end of the play, we realize that her pronouncement was really an acknowledgement or verification of his earlier, emotional death). Furthermore, as we saw in *Buried Child* and *States of Shock*, being declared dead or having one's existence denied is analogous to the psychic process of repression, itself a type of denial. According to Henry, Conchalla has even printed his obituary in the local newspaper: "Henry Jamison Moss; Dead. Deceased. Causes unknown." (62). Conchalla's pronouncement has filled Henry with a pervading sense of doom, and he asks Taxi for reassurance: "Do I look like a dead man or what? . . . . Look around the eyes" (63). Henry asks Taxi if he thinks there might be "a little ember of hope" in his eyes, and Taxi exclaims, "You're not dead, all right!" (64). Henry's panic seems, at best, bizarre, for how can he truly believe himself to be "dead" in the physical sense? By the end of the play, we learn that Henry is consumed with guilt over the violence he inflicted upon his wife some thirty years ago on a night when he claims to have "died," so his "death" all those years ago must be an emotional or metaphorical death. It took Conchalla, however, to make the pronouncement, and this pronouncement seems to have triggered the return of Henry's own repressed memories of that night. Now that the memories have returned, Henry is

panicked, and he solicits Taxi as his ally: "You can argue my case for me. I've got no one else. Couple a lame-brain sons who couldn't find their peckers in a pickle jar" (65). Here, Henry sounds like the Old Man in *Fool for Love* who tries to get Eddie to take his part and argue his case to May. Furthermore, this is the first time that Henry mentions his sons, and he immediately emasculates them (verbally): "couldn't find their peckers in a pickle jar." The gothic fallen father typically engages in the sort of phallic contest or bravado verbal sparring with his son(s) that we witnessed with Ephraim Cabot in O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and the Colonel in *States of Shock*. The fallen father ridicules his son(s) and sees them as threats to his position of power rather than as heirs whom he loves and respects. As this first flashback comes to a close, "Henry staggers out through door" and the "lights return to previous setup" (65). Ray recovers from his trance and resumes conversing with Taxi. Now, though, Ray is armed with the knowledge of what he has just witnessed, including the knowledge that Conchalla has laid a kind of "curse" upon Henry.

Conchalla Lupina is the play's *femme fatale*—literally—and she is perhaps the most powerful (or empowered) female character in all of Shepard's plays. Indeed, female characters assume much more empowered roles in Shepard's work from the latter 1990's. In *When the World Was Green*, the young lady Interviewer holds the power to end the feud/curse by sparing the Old Man's life at the end. In *Eyes for Consuela*, the ghost-girl Consuela, by virtue of her hold over Amado, can decide on a whim whether a

man is mutilated or killed. In *The Late Henry Moss*, Conchalla intimidates or seduces any man she encounters, exerting her will over them almost effortlessly. In the gothic context, Conchalla seems to act as a representation or embodiment of Henry's past sins, especially his crimes against his wife—physical abuse, drunkenness, infidelity, and abandonment. She is a sort of avenging angel, the instrument through which Henry's past catches up to him and demands a reckoning for his failures and transgressions. As such, Conchalla seems to speak for not only Henry Moss's long-suffering wife (who never actually appears in the play) but for all of Shepard's marginalized women. Conchalla is Henry Moss's version of Madeline Usher, returned from the dead (the buried or repressed past) to drag him to the floor, a corpse. Indeed, this is precisely (and literally) what she does in the play's final moments. Shepard uses flashbacks to reveal the gothic mystery of Henry's death, but Conchalla is the character through whom his death is brought about.

Conchalla is first alluded to in the opening dialogue between Ray and Earl; they are obviously aware of her cavorting with their father because they refer to her as the "crazy Indian chick," though neither brother has seen her before (24). Esteban, an obsequious neighbor who brings soup for Henry, provides more details about Conchalla, calling her a "very strong woman" who probably "wore him [Henry] out" through her insatiable sexual appetite. According to Esteban, Conchalla has "done men in" by sexing them to death—she is, apparently, a veritable *vagina dentate* (*3P* 37). Conchalla bursts onstage, dancing with Henry, during the Drunken Rumba preludes to Acts One and Two.

But Shepard gives no instructions regarding her age or appearance. In Act Two, Conchalla appears during the play's second flashback, stripping and bathing in the old-fashioned tub, all the while singing drunkenly. Henry, meanwhile, brags about a tiny fish he has caught during his latest excursion, but Conchalla ridicules him saying, "I remember he bragged the same way about his penis" (72). Immediately after comparing the fish to Henry's phallus, Conchalla symbolically emasculates Henry by tossing the fish into the scalding water with her, killing it and then reviving it by squeezing it between her legs. Finally, in an ultimate gesture of symbolic castration, she puts the fish in her mouth and "her jaws close as she grinds the fish between her teeth" (78). Even Esteban is not immune to Conchalla's seductive charms: he "keeps heading toward Conchalla, completely enraptured with her presence" (79).

Conchalla has now overpowered Henry for the second time—first by publicly pronouncing him "dead" and now by metaphorically castrating him. Her machinations have worn on Henry, and he seems close to capitulation when he says wearily, "Maybe it's true—maybe I am on the dark side of the moon now . . . Maybe I am just—just completely—gone" (80). At this moment, however, Earl enters. In the context of the flashback, this entrance marks Earl's first arrival at the trailer several days ago after learning that his father was not well. Shepard's stage directions clearly explain the dynamic at this crucial moment:

> Suddenly Earl appears in the doorway, extremely drunk. Henry freezes and stares at him. Ray immediately reacts to Earl's presence, but still remains outside the action . . . Conchalla becomes alarmed at Earl's presence. She stands in the tub and yells at Esteban, who immediately reacts. (80)

During this second flashback, as before, Ray has stepped aside and fallen into a trance, becoming a witness once again. Ray is neither seen nor heard by any of the characters during the flashbacks, for he was never "there" in real time when these events unfolded. Earl, however, is "there" in real-time, having just arrived in New Mexico after receiving Esteban's anxious telephone call. Instead of expressing joy at seeing his long-lost son, Henry expresses irritation, even anger: "Who're you supposed to be?" he demands, and Earl responds, "I'm supposed to be your oldest son" (*3P* 80). Again, as in *Buried Child* and *States of Shock*, the fallen father refuses to recognize his son. Upon learning that Esteban summoned Earl, Henry explodes into a paranoid rage: "Treachery from every angle! Sons! Neighbors! Women! Family!" (81). Henry's outburst evinces the same sort of paranoia which Esteban claims plagued Henry when he first moved into the trailer thirty years ago: it was a "bad time" when "he think the world was trying to eat him" and "he think he was doomed" (33). The audience learns later that this fatalism which drove Henry into isolation in New Mexico had its roots in the violent night when Henry deserted his family.

Just after Henry's outburst, Taxi leaves the trailer, closing the door behind him. As the door slams shut, "Everyone freezes except Ray who slowly crosses over to Earl" and "opens Earl's eyes very wide with his fingers and thumbs." Ray says, "I see you Earl. I see you now" (*3P* 81). By "freezing" the other characters, Shepard is obviously using anti-realistic techniques in order to emphasize the supernatural or preternatural quality of this moment, which has been artificially reconstructed, like the previous flashback, for the sole purpose of illuminating Ray about recent events which he did not witness in real time. Ray's assertion—"I see you Earl. I see you now"—is a two-fold acknowledgement. Ray now realizes that his older brother lied when he said their father was already dead when he (Earl) arrived at the trailer. Furthermore, Ray is now reminded of how much Earl is cowed and intimidated by their father, just as Earl had been on that night thirty years ago when he "ran" instead of defending his mother and younger brother. This second flashback has caused the return of Ray's repressed memories of that fateful night. Now Ray is psychologically prepared to dominate Earl—a character transformation or role reversal reminiscent of Austin and Lee in *True West*—for whom he has lost all respect and fear from this moment forward.

The extent of the brothers' role reversal cannot be overstated. Early in the play, Earl had violently attacked Ray, punching and kicking him and leaving him curled on the floor (45). Ray made little or no attempt to defend himself; he has clearly lived in fear of his older brother for many years. By Act Three, however, following the two flashbacks,

Ray has acquired a newfound sense of confidence and purpose. He enters the trailer carrying a bag of groceries, much as Weston had done after his uncanny epiphany and subsequent character transformation in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Ray tells Earl he is "stockin' up the larder" because "I made kind of a big decision last night. It just came on me" (88). Ray's sudden resolution is also reminiscent of Vince's decision to stay at the ancestral home at the end of *Buried Child*. Again, we see the haunted son making a decision to follow in the footsteps of the fallen father, including taking up residence in the father's home. As Act Three progresses, Ray's attitude toward Earl becomes increasingly antagonistic. First, Ray hints to Earl that he knows their father was alive when Earl arrived: he asks if Earl is "thinking maybe you got away with something" (93). Ray finally goads Earl into a violent confrontation, but this time the results are markedly different than they had been in Act One: Earl "charges Ray but Ray dodges him quickly and is out of the chair in a flash. Earl crashes into the table and crumples on top of it, exhausted. Ray slowly circles him" (94). Earl begins to panic, yelling to Ray that he can't feel his legs. In *Buried Child* and *States of Shock*, Bradley and Stubbs had lost much of their masculinity (phallic power) as a result of losing the use of their legs. Earl appears to share the same fate here, for immediately after mentioning the numbness in his legs, he is attacked viciously by Ray who begins kicking him in the ass. At this point, Ray's assault on Earl takes on a deeper, symbolic meaning—one which we discover is linked directly to the brothers' repressed memories of that pivotal night thirty years earlier.

After forcing Earl to soak an apron and scrub the floor, Ray asks, "You remember how Mom used to work at it, don't ya?" (97). Shepard's stage directions read, "Throughout this sequence the tempo of Earl's scrubbing increases with the force of Ray's pursuit" (98). Ray's anger builds steadily as he recalls how their mother worked tirelessly to please their father, only to suffer abuse for all her efforts:

I used to think she was doing all that for us [the cleaning] . . . it was for him. It was for Henry. Everything . . . and then, here he'd come! Bustin' in the door. (98)

As he speaks, Ray "rushes to the door, opens and slams it, then turns himself into drunken Henry, staggering into the room. Earl keeps scrubbing" (98). In Shepard's earlier gothic family plays, the haunted son inevitably followed the path of the fallen father, but usually he did so subconsciously—as when Wesley puts on Weston's clothes and is mistaken for his father, or when Vince assumes Dodge's place on the couch. Here, for the first time, Shepard shows a son deliberately pretending to become (if only momentarily) his father. Ray uses his charade to remind Earl how their father used to command the family to "eat" at suppertime, coercing them into a sort of forced portrait of an idyllic American family spending quality time together. Ray says, "You remember how we'd all just sit there staring down into our napkins while he went on ranting and raving" (99). During these times, Ray looked to his older brother to protect the family by confronting Henry and forcing him to relent. Here Shepard again takes myths about family—the idea of the father as protector and of home as a place of peace—and holds these myths up for scrutiny.

The myth of primogeniture—whereby the eldest son is deserving of the family's respect due to his exemplary courage and virtue—is also shattered. Ray believed this myth and hoped that it would bear itself out in his brother Earl, but Earl betrayed this ideal, leaving Earl emotionally devastated:

> I remember thinking, 'He must be just as scared as me to be breathing like that . . . But then I thought, 'No, that's not possible. He's bigger than me. He's my big brother. How could he be scared?' And when she started screaming, I thought Earl's gonna stand up for her . . . Earl's gonna stop him somehow! (99)

In response, Earl continues his denials, claiming "I wasn't there for that!" or "I don't remember" (99). The former statement is, of course, a lie; but the latter is true in the sense that Earl has likely repressed or otherwise altered these traumatic memories. Ray, too, has likely repressed these same memories, but after witnessing the flashbacks, he has been reminded both of his father's rapacious anger and of his brother's cowardice. As Ray's repressed memories rise to the surface, he begins to react violently, just as he had wanted to react violently on that terrible night, especially when Henry began physically to abuse their mother: "I barely came up to his waist. All I could do is watch! And there she was—on the floor! Just like you, Earl . . . Backed up under the sink! Crushed. He was kicking her, Earl! He was kicking her just like this!" (99). As he speaks, Ray reenacts the scene by "kicking Earl all over the stage."

> And every time he kicked her, his rage grew a little bit and his face changed! . . . And her blood was flying all over the kitchen, Earl! And just then—I looked out the kitchen window and I see your car—your little white Chevy. Kicking up dust the whole length of the hay field. And that's the last time I saw you, Earl. (100)

Earl shouts one more denial—"I never ran!"—and then, as though the father's ghost has been summoned by Earl's incessant lies, Henry Moss "suddenly blasts through the door with Conchalla close behind" (100). Ray moves downstage and falls into his usual trance-like state, and this time Shepard actually refers to Ray as a "witness" in his stage directions.

This third flashback is the final one, for it reveals the last moments of Henry's life. The ensuing dialogue and action seems to be a continuation of the previous flashback, shortly after Earl arrived at the trailer. After berating Earl ("You were one big bad mistake!"), Henry describes how he met Conchalla when he woke up in the local jail's drunk tank to find her straddling him. Conchalla confirms her role as *femme fatale*, laughing, "He couldn't resist me! I was too much woman!" (108). As she speaks, she closes the door behind her, creating the typical Shepardian hermetic room where characters are forced finally to confront their repressed memories. Conchalla clearly relishes her role as *vagina dentate* whose voracious sexuality is fatal to her male partner, as she tells Earl, "When I dismounted him, his heart stopped. His breath. Nothing was

moving" (109). Here Shepard appears to be confounding the mystery, revealing it by misdirection and contradiction rather than revealing it outright, as he had done in the original version of *Buried Child*. After all, if we are to take seriously Conchalla's claim that her "bouncing" on Henry's lap caused him to "die" of a heart attack in the jail's holding cell, then we must assume that this physical death was only momentary, for Henry was still alive when Earl arrived at his trailer, as Ray has witnessed during the flashbacks. Female sexuality proves fatal (either physically or emotionally) to the male in other Shepard gothic family plays, including *Buried Child* and *Fool for Love*, where the women (Halie and May, respectively) are unable to control their sexual appetites and choose instead to violate the incest taboo, leaving emotional and psychologically devastated males in their wake. We slowly come to realize that Henry has fallen victim to two different types of "death," emotional and physical. His emotional death preceded his physical one by thirty years, and this is revealed once Earl mentions his mother, Henry's long-suffering wife.

Earl remembers his mother as the ideal Cold War-era American housewife, a stay-at-home mom who gladly chose housework and child-rearing over any hopes and dreams of her own: Earl tells Henry, "She was always faithful. No matter what. I remember her now. I remember her on her hands and knees" (109). At the first mention of his wife Henry reacts with characteristic viciousness: "That little shit. Another traitor. Locked me out of my own house" (109). Earl tries to defend his mother's actions by

countering, "You broke the place up. You smashed all the windows!" but Henry retorts in an attempt to justify his violence, "SHE LOCKED ME OUT!!!" (110). Almost immediately after uttering these words Henry "collapses, grabs onto the upstage chair and crashes to his knees. Earl moves toward him, but Conchalla stops him" (110). It is as though Henry's vehement excuses and justifications have weakened him physically (just as Earl had collapsed earlier after he made similar denials to Ray), bringing him ever closer to his final physical death. By being forced to verbalize this memory, Henry's psychological defenses of repression are ruptured, and the resultant psychic weight seems to be too much for his body to bear. As she watches Henry collapse to his knees, Conchalla tells Earl, "Now he will start to crumble—to whimper. The same. Always the same" (110). Conchalla's remark ("Always the same") may be read two ways: either she means that this is not the first time that Henry has collapsed under the strain of his denials and self-justifications, or she means that she has seen many men like Henry who have had a similar experience. It is worth remembering that *Eyes for Consuela* preceded this play, and Consuela (similar to Conchalla both in name and ethnicity) was an "undead" ghost-girl whose mission seemed to be making men (including one named Henry) face hard truths about their own natures and motives. Perhaps Conchalla is some sort of supernatural or immortal symbol of female vengeance who has enacted this ritual with many men before.

I have noted that Conchalla functions in various but related ways in this play—as a *femme fatale*, *vagina dentate*, and an avenging angel. To these roles we must now also

add Grim Reaper or Angel of Death, for in the play's closing moments she facilitates Henry's final physical death. Moreover, Conchalla grows stronger as the play hastens to its conclusion, as though she is drawing some sort of supernatural power from the return of repressed memories and the truth which is being revealed. Conchalla demonstrates her physical strength when she "grabs Henry by the chest with tremendous force and lifts him to the table" and lays him on his back, much as Madeline Usher collars her brother Roderick at the end of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (111). Then she pours tequila down Henry's throat while he gurgles and sputters helplessly. Henry's alcoholism—a vice which no doubt contributed to his abusive behavior toward his wife and children—is thus forced upon him at the end, inundating him completely. In another demonstration of her seemingly supernatural power, Conchalla "lets out a blood-curdling scream and freezes Earl in his tracks" when he tries to stop her from drowning Henry in tequila (111). Conchalla is fully aware that her actions toward Henry will, paradoxically, serve to help him to confront the truth about the past. She explains to Earl,

I will show you your father. You see him now? You see how he looks to me. Helpless. Hoping. Dreaming. Wishing for death . . . Now he begins to go back home. Now—he begins to return. You will see. He remembers now. (*3P* 111)

Conchalla's declaration serves as a prelude to the final piece of the gothic puzzle—Henry's realization that his violence thirty years ago has cost him everything, including his emotional and familial "life," the only life that had the slightest semblance of normalcy.

Henry tells Earl, "I remember—the day I died—she was on the floor" (111). Clearly, this "death" is metaphorical or emotional, and now that Henry has admitted its reality, the other memories of that night come flooding back with vivid, even visceral, starkness: "I remember the floor—was yellow . . . her blood was smeared across it. I thought I'd killed her—but it was me. It was me I killed"[4] (112). Conchalla "kisses Henry lightly on the forehead and helps him off the table," as though she has been waiting for this confession (and epiphany) from him.

Now that Henry has come to grips with the gravity of his abusive actions, he can fully explore his own guilt which he has repressed or denied for so long:

> She sees me dying! Right there in front of her. She watches me pass away! There's nothing she can do. And then—there's this flash of grief—from her. Grief! Why would she grieve for me . . . I ran out into the yard and I remember—I remember this—death . . . Cut off. Everything—far away . . . I ran to the car and I drove. I drove for days with the windows wide open . . . I had no map. No destination. (112)

As Henry speaks, Earl tries to leave, but Conchalla steps in front of him, and she insists, "You watch" (112). Conchalla "begins humming a death song and sways from side to side." Earl now finds himself caught in the hermetic, gothic room—like the motel room in

[4] Yellow was the sickly color which inundated the motel room in *Fool for Love*, and here, as in that play, yellow seems to represent a type of repressed mystery or secret which is laid bare to the light of truth. In *Fool for Love*, the spectral Old Man helped to bring the incestuous secret to light, whereas here Conchalla helps to facilitate the revelation of truth.

Fool for Love, or Mom's kitchen in *True West*, or even the living room in *Buried Child* in which Dodge seemed confined. Earl's reason for wanting to leave quickly becomes apparent when Henry makes the same accusation against Earl that Ray had made earlier: "You could've stopped me then but you didn't . . . You were there. You saw the whole thing" (112). Defiant to the last, Earl's rebuttal weakens from his earlier replies of "I don't remember" and "I was never there" to now, "I don't know what you're talking about!" (113). Finally, Earl admits, "I was—just—too—scared" (113). Henry expresses surprise, and his final words are a question—"You were scared of a dead man?" Then he "takes a last giant pull on the bottle, then lies back and dies quietly" (113). Henry's question is the gothic paradox: the dead can no longer harm us, yet we fear their return more than we do the enmity of the living. Of course, Henry's question employs the word "dead" in the metaphorical/emotional sense. But even after Henry's physical death, Earl is still afraid to touch the corpse, as Ray had noticed earlier in the play. Perhaps Earl's fear of touching the corpse is due to Conchalla's warning: "For three whole days no one must touch him . . . You are the keeper. You watch now" (113). Conchalla gives no hint about what might happen if someone *did* touch the corpse during the three-day period, but clearly Earl heeded her warning, and continues to do so even after Ray arrives at the trailer several days later.

The play ends abruptly after Conchalla assigns Earl the role of watcher or keeper of Henry's body. Without any lighting effect to signal the end of the flashback, Conchalla

exits, Earl moves to sit by Henry's corpse, and Ray turns slowly to face his brother. Then he repeats the play's opening lines, which had been spoken by Earl the first time:

RAY: Well, you know me, Earl—I was never one to live in the past. That was never my deal. You know—You remember how I was.

EARL: Yeah. Yeah, right. I remember. (113)

How should the audience interpret this "static" or "cyclical" ending? We have no indication that either brother will eventually leave the trailer; indeed, Ray has expressed his intention to live there indefinitely. Furthermore, Ray now insists that he "was never one to live in the past." Perhaps Ray can make this statement since he has witnessed the flashbacks and exacted some measure of revenge upon his cowardly brother. Ray's assault upon Earl was interrupted by Henry bursting through the door in the final flashback, so are we now to believe that the brothers have suddenly reconciled and are now sitting and talking civilly as though nothing had ever happened? Clearly, Shepard expects the audience to suspend its disbelief. The reversal of dialogue in the play's closing lines suggests that Ray's assault on Earl did, in fact, occur. But there is no indication of how much time has passed between that assault and this final scene of civil conversation. The flashbacks themselves were gothic moments and therefore outside the realm of ordinary "real" time. Shepard cannot make all the pieces fit or try to force these events into some rational design—to do so would be to counteract and dilute gothic's irrational spell. The play's bewildering closing lines reflect the same sort of ambivalence and

incongruity which permeates the entire play. A brief examination of the brothers' protean attitudes about their father illustrates some of this ambivalence.

I have taken as the title for this study, "the other side of love," alluding to Shepard's remark (made in an interview) that "Resentment is the other side of love." Shepard's comment highlights the ambivalence he felt toward his own father—resenting his father's failings and transgressions while at the same time loving his father and needing love in return. In *The Late Henry Moss*, both Earl and Ray exhibit similar ambivalence toward Henry. Though neither brother would admit it, they are emotionally famished and still in need of their father's approval and affection. But at the same time they bitterly resent Henry and have long ago abandoned hope that he will ever give them this approval and affection. Ray exhibits this ambivalence when he scolds the funeral attendants for dropping Henry's corpse as they are removing it from the house: "That's my father you just dropped. That's not a piece of luggage or a sack of feed" (*3P* 50). In anger, Ray drives them out of the house. Yet earlier, Ray had wanted to bury Henry in the backyard like a dog. For his part, Earl repudiates his father's influence, shouting at Esteban, "I am *nothing* like the old man!" (83). Yet, shortly afterward, Earl scolds Ray for giving Taxi their father's photo album: "Those photographs are irreplaceable. Now some total stranger's got ahold of them" (91). By the end of the play, it would seem that the brothers' ambivalence toward Henry might be resolved, one way or another. But Shepard provides only the final two bits of cryptic dialogue, so we are never sure whether

the flashbacks have either ameliorated or exacerbated the brothers' antipathy toward either their father or each other. There is no final tearful reconciliation between Earl and Ray. The emotional gulf which characterized their relationship at the start of the play seems to have remained intact.

Though *The Late Henry Moss* contains many of the same elements and thematic concerns as the earlier family plays, I have attempted to highlight some of the play's innovations as well. Ultimately, Shepard uses a few new twists or devices in order to communicate the same message: the American family is in dire straits, and the father's destructive behavior and betrayals are inevitably the cause of the family's perilous situation. It is frustrating to say that Shepard provides us with no remedy or cure; he does not even seem to prescribe any preventative measures for avoiding the fate of his gothic families. But paradoxically, if his drama were "prescriptive" or didactic, it would lose its gothic power—a power which exists precisely in its ambiguities and richness of interpretation, a power which concerns itself more with achieving an emotional and sensual effect rather than with preaching a dogma. In this regard, Shepard's gothic family plays are always successful, and, quite often, maddeningly inscrutable.

AFTERWORD

This study has examined eight of Shepard's family plays; and while I have attempted to highlight ways in which all of these plays use similar gothic devices and borrow from the same gothic literary tradition, one may wonder whether there is some overarching design in Shepard's gothic family *oeuvre*. Although Shepard's family plays span four decades (1969-2000), certain patterns or trends are too conspicuous to be coincidental. For instance, Pop in *The Holy Ghostly* is named Stanley Hewitt Moss VI, and Shepard has chosen Henry Moss as the title character's name for his latest gothic family play. In the context in which I have examined these plays, *The Holy Ghostly* is Shepard's first gothic family play, so we might be tempted to view *The Late Henry Moss* as completing a cycle of sorts: whereas Stanley Moss (Pop) never admitted his guilt and failures as father and husband—and, consequently, never finds rest, even after death—Henry Moss finally admits his guilt and lies back quietly in death. While this observation may not, by itself, validate a claim for an overarching design in Shepard's gothic family *oeuvre*, it does point toward another question which I raised at the end of Chapter Five: how does Shepard continue to mine the gothic nature of the American family without being redundant?

When *A Lie of the Mind* was first produced in December 1985, Shepard called it the result of "twenty-one years work" (qtd. in Dugdale 49). This remark might serve to justify (partially, at least) my belief that all of Shepard's family plays are concerned with

depicting the same types of characters, relationships, and themes. Shepard reveals that he discarded two acts of a first draft of *A Lie of the Mind,* and when he started over "It began to tell itself. Like a story you've heard a long time ago that's now come back" (qtd. in Dugdale 49). Shepard's remark about a "story heard long ago that's now come back" bears a striking resemblance to a gothic uncanny moment, and the remark suggests that Shepard was aware, at least subconsciously, that the play was recovering well-traveled theatrical territory. As far back as 1981, Shepard expressed anxiety about "repeating" himself in his work. He told an interviewer,

> You accumulate the experience of having written all those other plays, so they're all in you somewhere. But sometimes it gets in the way—you sit down and you find yourself writing the same play, which is a drag. Terrible feeling when you suddenly find yourself doing the same thing over and over again. (qtd. in Marranca 199)

Obviously, this professed anxiety about "doing the same thing over and over again" has not dissuaded Shepard from creating in *The Late Henry Moss* yet another "gothic" critique of the American family and, through it, the American Dream.

In "Repeat," the first piece from the prose collection *Cruising Paradise,* Shepard writes, "I am a man bewildered and incapable of remembering my many personal disasters. And therefore I am doomed to repeat them forever and ever into eternity." This haunting realization is essentially the same realization under whose crushing weight all

of the fallen fathers in Shepard's family plays are struggling. Throughout this study, I have attempted to approach the question of where Shepard places the blame for the American family's demise, and I find myself concluding that Shepard ultimately places the blame on the father. In the excerpt above, for instance, Shepard calls them "personal" disasters, implying (to my mind) that the father created those disasters himself through his actions and choices. I have tried to be fair in reaching this verdict, pointing out how, in some of the family plays, predatory "outsiders" contribute significantly to the family's woes. We see this in *Curse of the Starving Class* with Taylor, Emerson, Slater, and Ellis; in *Buried Child* with Father Dewis and Shelly; and to a lesser degree in plays like *True West* and *Fool for Love* where outsiders like Saul Kimmer, Martin, and the Countess all introduce (either deliberately or unintentionally) some degree of antagonism into the family structure. *States of Shock* is a peculiar case, for though the Colonel is the sole reason for Stubbs's mental and emotional agony, one could argue that the larger sociological machinery of military training and jingoism are ultimately responsible for creating men like the Colonel (and, by extension, for creating wounded veterans like Stubbs).

But even if we go to those lengths in trying to excuse Shepard's fallen fathers, we are still left trying to reconcile our magnanimity with Shepard's most recent family play, *The Late Henry Moss*. In this play, it would be difficult to label characters like Taxi and Esteban as antagonistic, predatory outsiders (Taxi takes the family photo album, to be sure, but only after Ray Moss gives it to him). Conchalla is certainly antagonistic, but I

have attempted to portray her as more of an avenging angel than a scheming exploiter. In no way was she responsible for Henry's abusive, drunken rages thirty years before; indeed, her existence strikes me as similar to those spectral characters from Shepard's earliest gothic family play, *The Holy Ghostly*: just as the Chindhi and the White Witch appear in the Badlands to torment Pop and to force him to face the truth about his past transgressions and failings, so does Conchalla force Henry to do the same. If Pop and Henry Moss had never been abusive toward their families and ended by deserting them, perhaps the Chindhi and Conchalla would have never appeared at all. As Shepard's most recent theatrical portrait of the fallen father, *The Late Henry Moss* points the finger of blame directly at the father. Yet we would do well to remind ourselves that the roles in the family (American family or otherwise) are long-established roles and deeply rooted in human history. Nearly all families are and always have been based on a patriarchal structure, and nearly all families have included some form of primogeniture. So Shepard's fathers and sons are, in a very real sense, playing out roles which were pre-scripted for them from the dawn of human civilization. This being the case, we may ultimately find ourselves wrestling with the question of whether or not Shepard gives the fallen father a free will to make his own decisions. I believe he does.

It is perhaps appropriate that I first encountered Shepard's work in England; Shepard lived there for a time, and one of his most famous plays, *The Tooth of Crime,* premiered in London in 1972. Shepard's plays are not provincial; for in his writing,

Shepard seeks to move beyond national and cultural boundaries. By doing so, he probes deeply into the human psyche in order to illuminate universal truths and torments. To return to a quotation from Shepard that I have used elsewhere in this study:

> If they [my plays] speak to Americans it's only because I happen to be American. I don't want to rid myself of my Americanism but to purge it through my writing. To go all the way through it and into a world which is totally alien and unrecognizable. (qtd. in King 19)

Shepard's stated goal of taking audiences "into a world which is totally alien and unrecognizable" comes with a *caveat*: how would we be able to make any sense of this "world" once Shepard takes us there? We could go only so far into the "alien" before it became incomprehensible and meaningless. In Wallace Stevens's famous poem, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the audience pleads for the musician to play "a tune beyond us, yet ourselves." Shepard faces a similar challenge—to take us far enough out of our comfort zones that we will come back with a more profound understanding of ourselves and of those around us, yet not so far that we lose our bearings completely. The gothic literary tradition provides Shepard with the tools needed to access this realm of the "alien and unrecognizable." In fact, the place where Shepard takes us in his family plays is not really "unrecognizable"; rather, it is uncanny, a "defamiliarized familiar" milieu which we gradually come to realize—with a sense of anxiety which often approaches horror—resembles our own families, and our own homes. Though Shepard's gothic family plays

address, indirectly, some cultural and social problems that are distinctly "American," the plays have "universal" appeal precisely because Shepard uses gothic devices which aim to produce and to portray highly-charged emotional and psychological effects, just as gothic literature has always done.

Because gothic devices, by their very nature, are designed to produce emotional and psychological reactions in the reader (or audience member), these devices are used to create scenes that are meant for spectacle rather than for exposition. Creating a spectacle requires patience, both on the part of the playwright and the audience, in order for the intended effect to be gradually and fully realized. To put it another way, gothic writing is akin to driving at a slower pace, rather than flying. In *Cruising Paradise*, in a piece entitled "Gary Cooper or the Landscape," Shepard confesses to a reporter that he is afraid of flying and, as a result, he insists on driving everywhere, even cross-country—always has and always will, he says. In the same piece, Shepard explains to the reporter that driving allows him to take everything in—the ugliness of the landscape as well as the beauty. While a flight may be smoother and certainly faster, there's not a lot to see. Shepard's theater is much the same way. He drives us through his plays, allowing us, sometimes even forcing us, to "see" human behavior in all its nuances and idiosyncrasies. In his family plays, the drive on which we embark with Shepard appears to originate in a territory which, at first, we assume will be familiar: the idyllic farmhouse, the cozy kitchen, and the nostalgic diner. But Shepard changes the roadmap and the itinerary, taking us

through scenery which—though perhaps familiar for some—nevertheless is difficult to reconcile with our mythical ideals of the American family. With Shepard driving, however, we will end the journey with a deeper understanding of the especial social, psychological, and emotional challenges facing the modern American family and, by extension, modern America. And the drive will never be boring.

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VITA

Eric Andrew Lee was born on September 4, 1968 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He was raised in Cleveland, Tennessee and attended public schools there, including Arnold Elementary and Cleveland High School, where he graduated in 1986. He was awarded a Presidential Scholarship to Lee College (located in his hometown of Cleveland) and graduated as Valedictorian in 1990 with a Bachelor of Arts in English. Andrew earned his Master of Arts in English in 1991 from Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In 1992, he began teaching as an adjunct Instructor in English at Chattanooga State Technical Community College. Andrew's duties at Chattanooga State included teaching college-level English courses to twelfth graders at Ooltewah High School, which he did from 1992-1996. In 1996 he joined the faculty at Lee College (later Lee University) where he teaches a variety of English composition and literature courses. He entered the PhD in English program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in fall of 2000. Andrew was awarded a Mellon Fellowship from the Appalachian College Association, and consequently took a sabbatical from Lee University during the 2000-01 school year to pursue doctoral studies full-time. He resumed full-time teaching duties at Lee University during the 2001-02 academic year.