

Torn by War: Fragmented Individuals in Sam Shepard's States of Shock

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Abstract

Sam Shepard is considered as one of the modern American playwrights who combined the individual and the social in his plays to draw an image of a postmodern American society, and American family in particular by focusing on uniquely American aspects of culture. He is concerned with the individual in America rather than the institution. Shepard investigates, in almost all of his plays, the functions and dysfunctions of his characters, as well as the connections of individuals within the context of the family system and other social structures. The majority of his plays center on the struggle and conflict that occurs between father and son, husband and wife, and brother and brother as they strive for supremacy or for survival in a fractured society. This theme can be found at the heart of all of his works. In addition, his protagonists have a propensity to be cut off from the rest of their society and to experience a sense of disintegration as a result of living in a society that is being ravaged by war and the rise of capitalism. His protagonists typically awaken to the realization that this sense of destruction has shaped their lives and become the primary obstacle that prevents them from leading a normal life. This paper discusses Sam Shepard's play States of Shock as an anti-war work in which the playwright portrays American individuals who are traumatized, physically and psychologically, by war that left them fragmented in their own society.

Keywords: War, Shepard, Iraq, Drama, Absurd, Identity, Society.

INTRODUCTION

Sam Shepard is considered as one of America's most prolific and most celebrated playwrights. He wrote exclusively for the Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theater and won Obie Awards for ten of his plays and a Pulitzer Prize for *Buried Child* in 1979 (Biggsby 166). He often depicts the American West in his plays and blends the notion of American national identity with past myths and images of America.

In almost all of his plays, Shepard examines the functions and the dysfunctions of his characters and the relationships among individuals within the family structure and social structures (Roudane 3). The struggle and conflict between father and son, husband and wife, brother and brother as they fight for supremacy or for survival in a fragmented world can be found at the core of most of his plays. Furthermore, his protagonists tend to be isolated from their society and suffer from the sense of fragmentation in a society swept by capitalism and war, and they usually wake up to this sense of devastation that shapes their lives and becomes the central conflict that prevents them from living a normal life. Thus, he focuses on the exploration of American family and conflicting family relationships, along with the shifts in perception of American identity. And to show this fragmentation in his plays, Shepard uses dramatic language, highly metaphoric and figurative speech that points directly to the thematic center of his plays instead of the series of natural exchanges between characters that can be found in other playwrights of his time (Roudane 4).

Moreover, the settings of his plays are usually constructed from places and materials which are commonplace in the American society such as family restaurants or at kitchen tables and living rooms which suggest metaphoric environments for his plays. Shepard further employs icons from his American culture to represent the nature of the American psyche to show how the American identity is constructed from pieces of social aspects that dominate the American society and culture. His plays are full of allusions to American pop culture and mythology such as rock 'n' roll music, cowboys, country music and so on. He uses all of America's cultural

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aspects to draw the American individual who is created out of different fragments from his society, even the negative aspects such as the nature of America's foreign policy towards war against other countries, which plays a significant role in his play *States of Shock*.

States of Shock (1991)

Shepard's plays give an American version of domestic drama that focuses on individuals fragmented by the struggles they faced during the Vietnam War and after. *States of Shock* depicts the mental and psychological dilemmas faced by characters torn between the Vietnam War of the seventies and the Gulf War of the nineties. He uses the particular to suggest the universal in the sense that he focuses on several characters in their struggle to suggest the struggle faced by the entire society. Furthermore, Shepard's characters' identity is fragmented and created under the dominance of the surrounding culture.

Shepard's angry absurdist play is subtitled 'a vaudeville nightmare' and is written in response to the 1991 'Desert Storm' war on Iraq. However, it sheds some light on the concept of an American nightmare and its effect on the individual and the society alike. The play depicts the effect of the war on all aspects of society even when the war was fought outside of the American soil.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that Shepard had negative personal experience with war himself (Crank 3). He spent most of his childhood moving around several American army bases until his father's retirement from the army. But because of Shepard's father's growing alcoholism and lack of responsibility for his family, Shepard's relationship with his father was at odds, admiring his courage and hard-working personality, yet despising him for his irresponsibility and unpredictable moods. This resulted in many quarrels between Shepard and his father and his rebelling against his father's authority.

Moreover, moving around army bases during his childhood created a sense of rootlessness that influenced his idea of home, as he describes it in an interview:

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).

Shepard portrays the same idea of home in his play *States of Shock* as the play contains no place that can be described at home. The entire setting of the play is presented inside a family restaurant situated somewhere in America with several characters that make up a small replica of the American society. The restaurant itself does not denote any personal or homey feelings which reflects the sense of fragmentation and alienation that the characters suffer from as they have nowhere to belong to. Eric Andrew Lee asserts that "*States of Shock* is clearly a political play, expressing Shepard's dismay over the 1991 Persian Gulf War" (325) through familial and individual atmosphere.

In the decades spanning 1990-2000, Shepard explored a wide variety of topics and themes in his work (Crank 8). *States of Shock* is rooted in Shepard's obsession with father-son relationships, a trauma which he personally suffered from as a result of his conflicted relationship with his father. However, *States of Shock* uses the gothic father and son in a fresh way to provide a scornful criticism of the 1991 Gulf War on Iraq. Shepard's gothic portrayal of the American family focuses on fragmented families which are 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.

Shepard uses gothic techniques to show the American family in a portrait of dysfunction and fragmentation, with the death of the son at the center of the conflict. He further employs the theme of death in a dual sense: as a physical death as a result of being involved in the war firsthand, and a psychological death due to the traumatic memories of the war. Thus, Shepard shows that participants in wars cannot escape death, whether it was physical or psychological. The resurrection of the dead son in *States of Shock* presents a gothic treatment of this psychological repression and return (Lee 324).

States of Shock is full of high symbolism of antiwar sentiment that depicts the relationship between two characters: a frenzied, saber-waving colonel and Stubbs, a wheelchair-bound armedservices veteran who has

multiple deep scars on his body that he gained from war. They both seem to indulge themselves in a battle over the symbols and myths that pervade and define wars. *States of Shock* is set in a thoroughly American family restaurant as it exposes all the contradictions that surround the concept of war in post-Vietnam America without offering any more than the violence of the inevitable collisions (Nordmann and Wickert 42). It portrays the shadows of a war fought on foreign lands yet leaves darkness and destruction at home all the same.

The costumes of the Colonel and Stubbs are significant as they enter the scene at the beginning of the play following the sound of a whistle dangling from Stubbs' neck. The Colonel enters while pushing Stubbs on a wheelchair and wearing "a strange ensemble of military uniforms and paraphernalia that have no apparent rhyme or reason" (Shepard 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 (Shepard 5). His costume comprises different divisions from the American Army throughout recent American history, as if to imply that all the recent wars that America issued against other countries, or fought on its land, have been nothing more than a continuation of the same horrible war. And what unites these wars together throughout time is that they all result in the same destruction and death, causing fragmented and dysfunctional people whether it was inside American or outside.

In other words, the Colonel's costume is a constant reminder of all the horrors associated with past wars, adding more sense to the gothic elements in the play even when the Colonel himself sees his costume and medals as trophies of his victory.

As for Stubbs, who is later revealed to be the resurrected son of the Colonel, is dressed in black and sits in a wheelchair which is decorated 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" (Shepard 6). Ironically, none of these good luck charms and talismans help Stubbs in his trauma as they clearly fail to prevent him from being seriously injured and decapitated during war. Shepard describes Stubbs as a man with a hollow body as a 90 mm shell passed through his body during battle and killed the Colonel's son instead. However, it is revealed that he is in fact the Colonel's son and the mystery around his character adds more to the gothic nature of the play, and also serves in further portraying his fragmented identity.

Thus, both the Colonel and Stubbs live in a state of shock as a result of the trauma they suffer because of the war. On one hand, the Colonel assumes that he lost his son in battle and his state of shock blinds him from seeing Stubbs as his real son. Or perhaps Stubb's decapitation leaves him less of a real son for the Colonel. On the other hand, Stubbs' shock lies in his forgetting his true identity as the Colonel's son. Both continue their relationship with each other despite their loss of their true identities. Further, the little American flags hung on Stubb's wheelchair ironically indicate Stubb's dead sense of patriotism as he stopped pledging loyalty to his flag, but it is rather the Colonel who keeps such hope in patriotism.

In an interview with Carol Rosen, Sam Shepard recounts the genesis of *States of Shock* as being influenced by his anger towards the Gulf War:

When that war started [in Iraq]—I was in Kentucky when the war opened. I was in a bar that I go to a lot down there because it's a horsemen's bar. Normally that bar is just a din of conversation and people having a great time and talking about horses and this, that, and the other. And I walked in the bar and it was stone silence. The TV was on, and these planes were coming in, and suddenly... It just seemed like doomsday to me. I could not believe the systematic kind of insensitivity of it. That there was this punitive attitude' were just going to knock these people off the face of the earth. And then it's devastating. Not only that, but they've convinced the American public that this was a good deed, that this was in fact a heroic [...] war, and welcome the heroes back. [...] I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe it. I can't believe that having come out of the '60s and the incredible reaction to Vietnam, that voice has all but disappeared. Vanished. There is no voice anymore. This is supposed to be what America's about? [...] I just got so outraged by the whole hoax of it, and the way everything is choked down and censored in the media. [...] I wanted to create a character of such outrageous, repulsive, military, fascist demonism that the audience would recognize it and say, "Oh, this is the essence of this thing" (Rosen 39).

Thus, with his remarks Shepard suspends his “vaudeville nightmare” *States of Shock* between two wars. The experience of Vietnam and countless plays and movies about the Vietnam experience appear to lie behind the two protagonists Colonel and Stubbs. The Colonel provokes Stubbs to produce vivid impressions of the war which had left Stubbs weakened as he says “The middle of me is all dead. The core. I’m eighty percent mutilated. The part of me that goes on living has no memory of the parts that are all dead” (Shepard 14).

Alfred Nordmann and Hartmut Wickert state in their essay that Shepard’s “vaudeville nightmare” *States of Shock* “turns a family restaurant into a battlefield as the Colonel and Stubbs rehearse memories and anticipations of war. [...] In its final moments all customers and the waitress of the restaurant stand united in an act of aggression: Stubb’s virility is restored as are communal bonds” (39). Thus, the play focuses on the individual identity and its place within a society that tries to pick its fragmented pieces up in a world driven by war and negative foreign policies that affect not only foreign countries, but the American people inside America as well. The customers and the waitress in the restaurant represent a small American community that stands in solidarity at the end of the play and seems to be fighting the shadows of the war.

Further, Nordmann and Wickert argue that “The process of healing thus becomes highly ambivalent in Shepard’s play. It follows a shaman dramaturgy by presenting the Colonel as a shaman healer who draws evil, pain, and violence upon himself in order to reconstitute fragmented society as a real community” (39).

Similarly, Johan Cullens states that “*States of Shock* is more concerned with the conditions, (re)production and effects of the media-fed war hysteria” (291). He further adds that “The highly indeterminate temporal and physical setting forms the dangerously unstable, hyperreal site where the integrated spectacle’s flat, perceptual present is blown up so as to be re-situated, re-embodied, and re-historicized” (291).

Throughout the play, the characters are gradually revealed to be all dead, they are casualties of the war as shown in the White Couple’s description as having white skin “like cadavers” (Shepard 5). The White Man is further described as “Slumped in his chair with his chin on his chest, not asleep but in a deep state of catharsis” (Shepard 5). Although they seem like normal characters, Shepard gradually reveals that the White Couple have died sometime before the events of the play take place, and that their death is a result of the war breaking out near the restaurant.

Even the setting itself, although nothing more than a regular family restaurant, is made to look like a battle ground as Shepard gives a full description of the setting:

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)

The cyclorama is mentioned several times throughout the play as it is lit up with scenes of war to give the sense of the horrors caused by it. And as time progresses it becomes clear that these war scenes in the cyclorama are not just scenes of past wars, but they are also scenes of present wars raging around the restaurant as the cyclorama “explodes with bombs, missiles, and blown up planes” (Shepard 18). Thus, Shepard transforms the wars that were/are fought on foreign lands into the domestic American life in order to show its horror and ugliness and to amplify its effect on the fragmentation and identity crisis. The war on the cyclorama displays a “real” war that causes real casualties throughout the play.

Shepard combines settings and employs them in a way to add to the sense of their fragmentation and loss in a postmodern world torn by war. through the use of the cyclorama, he implies that there is war outside the restaurant that forces everyone to stay inside. However, the restaurant itself, a confining place, does not provide shelter nor comfort for them. This man-made indoor setting surrounds the characters with a suffocating, inexorable atmosphere that reflects their dysfunctional and fragmented identities and their relationships with each other. Ironically, the restaurant, which is an image of an American heaven full of sodas, burgers, and other American consumer goods, turns to a nightmare, or an American nightmare that shows the sense of loss in the characters and their spiritual and psychological death.

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