

Split of the self english literature essay

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CHAPTER III POSTMODERNISTIC CHARACTERIZATION. "Incomplete" characters Postmodernists hold skeptical attitude towards everything which claims the whole and unity. As a representation of a life in which coherence, unity and center seem to have no meaning, Shepard's family trilogy describes those characters that are trapped in the course of postmodern condition. More specifically, characters constantly change roles and functions rather than being dramatized as unified and coherent figures. Just as Bottoms notes, all the characters "seek to create and recreate" their personal appearance and they manipulate an ever-shifting series of "roles and masks", thereby, suggesting the absence of "any underlying sense of the self" (15). For this reason, the characters in Shepard's family plays are not easily definable; they are even "incomplete".

1. Split of the self Compared with his early plays, the characters in Shepard's family trilogy are put in relatively more stable circumstances, participating in mainly normal conversation. In the surface, the family plays are about the people who live in a recognizable world, arousing the expectation of realistic dramas. In such plays, characters tend to be lifelike, even some are extraordinary in one way or another, which still convince, as Styan argues, "because they are consistent within the little world built for them which may be fantastic or disordered, very wide or very narrow" (167). In further argument, Styan proposes: As long as the characters remain convinced of their own existence, and serious about themselves and about their virtues, it is in the nature of the theater for us to accept the substantiality of the make believe, and thus become involved in the tragedy. (20-21) However, Shepard expresses his opposite idea that character is dynamic and fluid. Neither

there is any center around which a person builds his personality and identity nor the lines between self and other, human and object dissolve. Martin Esslin claims, " Characters who remain wholly consistent...reflect the old convention that each human being has a core of immutable, unchanging essence—in fact, an immortal soul" (24). Shepard's dramatization of the splitting of the characters, on the contrary, challenges the conception of a holistic " self". In his family plays, the fractured parts of " self" convey the impossibility of a unified subject. For instance, Weston, in *Curse of the Starving Class*, claims that " I'm the one who works! I'm the one who brings the home food...YOU ALL OWE IT TO ME!" (Shepard 170), he seems to be a responsible man. Ironically, he is the one who worsen the poverty of his family by drinking, even, being involved with gangsters. In Weston's view, " everything was all right" (158) for his family including himself. Even though being drunk and slowly going unconscious, he shouts that " I don't need a bed. I don't need anything from you! I will stay right here. DON'T ANYONE TRY TO MOVE ME! NOBODY! I'm staying right here." (170) However, it is just an illusion which seems fragile to break. The fact is Weston has no capacity to fulfill his function both as a father and as a husband. The " self" of Weston consists of multiple and incompatible fragments and it is impossible to reassemble them into a unified subject. In Act III, Weston's monologues indicate his conflicted self-recognition: I started wondering who this was walking around in the orchard at six-thirty in the morning. It didn't like me. It was some character in a dark overcoat and tennis shoes and a baseball cap and stickers comin' out of his face. It didn't like the owner of a piece a' property as nice as this...Then I started to wonder who the owner was. I

mean if I didn't feel like the owner...Then it struck me that I was actually was the owner...I took all my old clothes off...A whole stranger (Shepard 186). There are two voices in his head at the same time. One voice denies his identity as the owner because he did not like him to be like this; another voice asserts his responsibility for the orchard because he is the owner. When Weston took his old clothes off to match his role, he felt himself a whole stranger. For French philosopher Jacques Derrida, he seeks to "deconstruct" the idea that there is a real or true "self" in western thought; Shepard holds the same attitude with him. In monologues, the tensions there are huge. There's always the battle between who we instinctively feel ourselves to be and what I am inclined to believe through the influence coming from outside. To this point, Shepard once argued, "I think we are split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal" (qtd. in Bottoms 94). Moreover, with the collapse of the hero-villain binary opposition, the characters have also surpassed the confines of stable notions of personality and the division between "self" and "other". An outstanding example is Austin and Lee in True West. In an interview with Kenneth Chubb, Shepard claims: You see somebody, and you have an impression of that person from seeing them—the way they talk and behave—but underneath many, many different possibilities could be going on. It's not as though you started out with a character who suddenly developed into another character ... Everybody's like that. (197)At the beginning of the play, Austin is a screenwriter while Lee is a petty thief. In Austin's eyes, Lee was always optional "on some adventure", in contrast to his "setting himself up for something" (Shepard 49). However, in the course of the play, Lee catches an

opportunity to write a screenplay based on the "true western story", while Austin seems lose the desire to be a screenwriter, and tries to prove himself to Lee by stealing toasters from neighbors. William Kleb argues that Lee and Austin are but warring aspects of a single divided self (124). Shepard insists that "personality is everything that is false in a human being...everything that's been added onto him and contrived" (qtd. in Bottoms 13). It means that there isn't any inner essence or authentic self beneath the fragments and artificial layers of the everyday persona.

2. Toppling Identities

For postmodernists, to a large degree, there isn't any authentic self to be "true to", only roles to cling to. Therefore, in Shepard's family plays, none of the roles can be assumed to be identical with "what we truly are" as "unique" and "whole" individuals, and worse still, different roles can easily run into the opposite of each other. Marc Robinson claims that in Shepard's theater, "the characters are busy with the act of creation of itself, each character the artist of inventing themselves" (64). For the most part Shepard's characters live in a world where nothing is permanent. These characters are just wandering without destination. Identity seems always a problem for them. According to Deborah R. Geis, the characters of Shepard's plays do not have identities and must perform actions merely to become somebody: They try out various roles and bits...searching for clichés which will temporarily create identity. The characters are characterless, who try to try on and discard roles faster than costumes. Since there is no center, no body to dress, these roles must be performed as if the costumes themselves came temporarily to life. (50)

In *Buried Child*, Vince is a sort of prodigal figure who has determined to take his girlfriend, Shelly, on a journey for a reunion with his father, Tilden.

Incidentally, Vince stops to visit his grandparents, Dodge and Halie. He unexpectedly encounters drunken Dodge and a little abnormal Tilden, neither of whom recognizes Vince. Facing identity crisis, Vince feels panicked but ever tactful. He, therefore, tries his best to prove himself to be the member of the family. VINCE: Look. Look at this. Do you remember this? I used to bend my thumb behind my knuckles. You remember? I used to do it at the dinner table.(VINCE bends a thumb behind his knuckles for DODGE and holds it out to him. DODGE watches for a while. TILDEN turns toward the sound. VINCE keeps it up. He sees TILDEN taking notice and crosses to TILDEN as he drums on his teeth. DODGE turns T. V. on. Watches it.)VINCE: You remember this Dad?(VINCE keeps on drumming for TILDEN. TILDEN watches a while fascinated, then turns back to SHELLY.)(Shepard 95)Finally, Vince has to suspect that " Maybe it's me. Maybe I forgot something" (96). Therefore, he is gone for the entire night to buy wine for Dodge as a stalling tactic. He comes crashing through the door, heavily drunk. Dramatically, all members of the family recognize Vince at once. Dodge even claims that Vince will inherit all property. At the end of the play, Vince's role is clearly changed. He reclines on the living room sofa (the symbol of the family throne) to ponder his future as the " new man" of the house. By expelling Bradley and Father Dewis, he gets down to putting his house " in order". In other words, his toppling identity forces him turn into the other " self"—reborn " Dodge". Vince tells Shelly " I've gotta carry on the line. It is in the blood. I've gotta see to it that things keep rolling" (86). Finally, all the loose end together, but careful readers will find that they are trapped into a full circle, just like those characters. Indeed, in order to pursue their identities,

Shepard's characters usually abandon their homes and families, or even apply violence, especially those sons in family trilogy. Tilden and Bradley in *Buried Child*, Austin and Lee in *True West*, Wesley and Emma in *Curse of the Starving Class*, all of those characters are no exception. In one sense, under toppling identities, those characters bear the scars of the past but cannot penetrate its mysteries, feel no link with it. Trapped in postmodern condition, for them, the present seems to bear witness to a secret unacknowledged, a wound acquired in a past to which those characters no longer have full access.

B. Multiplicity of guises

In Shepard's family trilogy, His "incomplete" characters with strong but transient Personalities and toppling Identities, in contrast to the complete characters that realists advocate, manifest an announced mission of postmodernists, while echo the spirit of postmodernism. As a result, multiplicity of guises in characterization is not surprised and easily understood.

1. Disorganized behavior patterns

Compared with Shepard's early characters, the later characters in his family trilogy do not suddenly switch identities or simply vanish. However, it is worth noting that there are, by and large, no rules on behavior in the family plays. According to the playwright himself, "a fractured whole with bits and pieces of characters flying off the central theme, instead of a 'whole character' with logical motives behind his behavior." (Shepard 6). With actions unpredictable, the characters' behavior pattern tends to be inevitably disorganized. The disturbing effect produced through the concurrent realistic context with unrealistic fragments is basically a postmodernist favor. Some realistic playwrights such as Ibsen, also leave their characters and audience with unresolved moral dilemma or puzzling psychological ambiguities, but "

basic questions concerning the motives of their actions and the identity and relationship of characters are revealed through an exchange of information" (Ye 116). Different from the former, Shepard tantalizes the reader to integrate the pieces of information into a logical whole; meanwhile, he intentionally blurs the nature of motivation for character's behaviors. Among Shepard's late family plays, *Buried Child* is the best one to showcase such feature. Neither of the causes of the characters' behaviors in it clarified. Bradley cuts Dodge's hair while he is asleep, and takes perverse pleasure in making his father bald. This action can hardly be explained by Halie's understanding that Bradley feels responsible for Dodge's appearance (68). Furthermore, Tilden successively brings corns, carrots and muddy corpse of the buried baby back to the house, and admits it is a mystery to himself (75). The most outstanding instance should be our puzzlement over the motives of Dodge and Tilden's failure to recognize Vince. As an outsider, Shelly offers us three possible explanations for the failed recognition: firstly, Dodge may be too old and Tilden mentally deranged. This is an assumption that receives some support from the previous behavior of the two men. The second one is Dodge and Tilden may play a crucial joke to refuse Vince deliberately. This idea that occurs to Shelley in Act II, she mentions, when, alone with Dodge, that if they really do know Vince then the game they are playing is unfair (100). Thirdly, Vince may have arrived at the wrong address and mistaken inhabitants for his family members. However, upon close examination, none of these explanations proves satisfactory in view to the realistic conventions. Tilden is portrayed as a half-wit, who returned home from New Mexico because he got " mixed up, couldn't figure anything out" (78). For this

reason, it seems reasonable for us to admit his inability to recognize his son. But Dodge, though very old and sick, still holds clear-minded thinking. We can get this conclusion from his behavior: he only pretends to be senile and muddled when he wants to irritate his wife. Dodge could treat his wife with such indifferent attitude, which means that it is very possible for him to play a cruel joke on his grandson, Vince, though lack of motivation for such action. The question is Tilden's incapability in such a performance. How the idea of playing joke on Vince did occur to both Dodge and Tilden at the same time considering Vince's arrival is totally unexpected. As for the last explanation, Vince has refuted Shelley directly that he could recognize the yard (Shepard 90). And so far Vince expresses himself in every way a normal young man does. Therefore, the logic of those characters' behaviors is highly ambiguous. When Vince returns home again, well and truly drunk, he is recognized as a member of the family. At this moment, he forgets both his family and who he is: SHELLY: (after silence) Vince?(VINCE turns toward her. Peers through screen.)VINCE: Who? What? Vince who? Who's that in there? (VINCE pushes his face against the screen from the porch and stares in at everyone.)DODGE: Where's my goddamn bottle! VINCE: (looking in at DODGE) What? Who is that? DODGE: It's me! Your Grandfather? Don't play stupid with me! Where's my two bucks! VINCE: Your two bucks?(HALIE moves away from DEWIS, upstage, peers out at VINCE, trying to recognize him.)HALIE: Vincent? Is that you, Vincent?(SHELLY stares at HALIE then looks out at VINCE.)VINCE: (from porch) Vincent who? What is this! Who are you people?(Shepard 125-126)Inexplicably, Vince's drunkenness is replaced by a sober mind in no time after he inherits all the property of the family. At the

same time, he could even enact his power as a new leader of family with no hesitation. Other family plays are also in chaos. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, there are continual opening and slamming of the refrigerator by every member of the Tate family. On the one hand, they claim that they do not belong to the starving class (142). On the other hand, they cram food into their mouths as if they are about to starve to death. Moreover, the role transformation of the two brothers in *True West* is not any more rooted in reality than Mom's belief in the possibility to see Picasso the master in the museum. This multiplicity of guises in characterization does not mean total mental instability. To some extent, it is the only way these characters can be sure they are still living at all (Robinson 70). Shepard explained the fluidity of his characters in an interview: The term "character" could be thought of in a different way...Instead of the idea of a "whole character" with logical motives behind his behavior which the actor submerges himself into, he should be consider a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off a central theme...(qtd. in Sun 108) Given Shepard's understanding of characters, it is not a surprise to see his characters as ambiguous and impossible to define. "Composite of fragments of emotions and sentimentalities, the characters always behave themselves as transporting between different moods" (Ye 120). Just as the images in postmodernist art, they are neither totally dumb and sentimental nor absolutely calm and calculating, they are both. Such description suits the characters in Shepard's family plays well. 2. Continual voice-shift Indeed, the characters in Shepard's family plays are not stable. In Bigsby's view, Shepard's characters are their performances. They come into through the rhythm of their language as

much as through its lexical meaning, or rather, meaning is generated out of tone, rhythm, inflexion, volume, cadence more than through a literal verbal expressiveness (172). Not only have their behaviors a lack of logic causes, follow no rules of the everyday world, but many of them speak in different voices as an individual. In the early plays, characters consciously adopt several voices to find which one is theirs. This technique is suitable for the characterization in Shepard's family plays. Nevertheless, Shepard has to find more natural reasons to have his characters speak in more than one voice in the realistic frame, " though the reasons less credibly rooted in any social and psychological ground than a conscious exposure of the determinants in conventional realism" (Ye 120). Emma, for example, is an adolescent with uncertainty of her own identity. Although adolescent usually have capricious shifts in mood, Emma seems to push such shift to an extreme. At first glimpse, Emma is just like the model of a good American farm girl. She is, however, by turn wise and impetuous, thus speak in the voice of both an adult and a kid in turn. In her adult voice she treats her mother's behavior as a pursuit of self-esteem. In addition, she carries on a mature conversation with her mother about the family's plan to Europe. Ella seems to think that selling the house and moving to a new place will make them free of all their old problems once and for all, but Emma breaks her illusion by pointing out a new place does not mean a new beginning: EMMA: You mean just you, me, and Wes are going to Europe? That sounds awful. ELLA: Why? What's so awful about that? It could be a vacation. EMMA: It'd be the same as it is here. ELLA: No, it wouldn't! We'd be in Europe. A whole new place. EMMA: But we'd all be the same people.(Shepard 148)From another point, her childish

behavior leads her to being insubordinate on her mother's advice. She dares to ride an untamed horse alone and to shoot the Alibi Club with a rifle. Her childish actions are much darker, influenced by forces much greater than her understanding. Just like Emma, in *Curse of the Starving Class*, on the one hand, Wesley is an angry boy who urinates on his little sister's 4-H project and complains about being hungry. On the other hand, he undertakes some responsibilities of his father, and function as a man of the family. Both Wesley and Emma, they do attempt to serve as the protectors and caretakers of their parents, though their actions are still immature and ineffectual. There are other characters who can speak in two voices due to their contradictory nature. Ella, the mother in *Curse of the Starving Class*, is a good example. Sometimes she speaks as a concerned mother taking care of her children; other times she is the selfish woman desperate for all she has missed in life. At one moment she is concerned about the danger to Emma in riding an untamed horse, and less than a minute later she even pays no attention to her daughter's trouble for she does not want to bother herself to go and look. One moment she can speak "professionally" about the arrangements she has made with the lawyer to sell the house without her husband's agreement, and the next moment, facing Wesley's challenge, she has to take up the voice of a real estate broker to defend herself:

WESLEY: You won't even make enough to take a trip to San Diego off this house. It's infested with termites. ELLA: This land is valuable. Everybody wants a good lot these days. WESLEY: A lot? ELLA: This is wonderful property for development. Do you know what land is selling for these days? Have you got any idea? WESLEY: No. ELLA: A lot...Thousands and thousands are being

spent every day by ordinary people just on this very thing...People are building. Everyone wants a piece of land. It's the only sure investment. It can never depreciate like a car or a washing machine...Land is going up every day.(Shepard 146)Halie shares same experience with Ella, which present her conflicted nature. In Act I, when Dodge grumbles about having his hair cut by Bradley, Halie respond: " Tilden will watch out for you...Tilden's the oldest. He will protect you." (68). But Halie, in the following monologue, expresses herself as a mournful mother lamenting over the death of her third son Ansel, which leaves her and Dodge all alone, for the reason that neither Tilden nor Bradley can look after themselves, let alone take care of their parents. Such contradictory statements about Tilden's ability to offer care indicate Halie's inconsistency. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Halie warns Dodge that they must care for Tilden, since he can no longer care for himself. Here she speaks in a tone of a caring mother. Rather ironically, she then complains about the worthlessness of her sons, and spends all night drinking with Father Dewis. Malkin comments thus on Shepard's concerns: His characters constantly transform, perform, and speak in " voices". Parallel actions and generic shifting undermine any possibility of stability, even within a theatrical code. This postmodern rejection of essence and foundation of " metaconcepts" or what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls " master narrativs," supplies the frame of Shepard's imagistic plays (117). In realistic dramas, change of voice within one individual will certainly be provided with a reason. At the same time, the character will take " unnoticed" efforts to mask this change. Consequently, all character featuring contradictory must be presented as a logical result of some social or psychological causes.

Shepard seemingly provides reasons to maintain the realistic aura, but the truth is he has the reasons actually serve as clumsy protrusions out of the naturalistic surface, which make artifice out of realistic conditions in the family plays. To be sure, many modernist plays are also much concerned with the multiplication of voices and perspectives and the concomitant difficulty of orchestrating of voices and perspectives. Shepard's postmodernist narratives make the voice hard to encode either as a way of seeing or as itself something seen. Therefore, whatever we seem to see of the scenes it evokes is an emanation of this voice and liable at any moment to revocation.

CHAPTER IV POSTMODERNIST TECHNIQUES

Postmodernist narrative techniques, such as pastiche, language games, and mixture of genres, allegorical impulses and non-ending denouement, are frequently utilized in Shepard's plays, including his family trilogy. The utilization of those theatrical techniques in his family trilogy highlights the text's postmodernist features.

A. Pastiche

Shepard gives his family trilogy the quality of a pastiche, which is an incongruous combination of materials, forms, motifs, etc., taken from different sources; hodgepodge. With the birth of the first play in Shepard's family trilogy, some critics claim that *Curse of the Starving Class* is clearly a symbolic drama, but it is no allegory. The symbols are used more for their resonance and imagistic power than for any one-to-one correspondence with the theme of the play. However, other critics believe that it is neither a symbolic drama, nor a truly realistic drama. Obviously, the play is fragmented, decentered, and at times incoherent. Parts of it seem lifted from B-grade movies; other parts seem like Greek tragedy barely altered. Such quality of pastiche marks the play with vivid

feature of postmodernism. Through pastiche Shepard makes his play powerful and inspiring. The characters are neither pure symbols nor truly realistic one. On the one hand, as symbols, they may reflect modern society in Shepard's eyes which is clearly not as happy as American people hope it to be. On the other hand, those characters express the playwright's thinking about American society in postmodern condition, which causes the resonance of the audience. This is why the play constantly makes the audience aware that it is watching a play but at the same time succeeds in genuinely emotionally reaching that audience. More important thing is the actions of the characters in the play which is indeed a fight with modern "curse". As one of the family trilogy, parts of *Curse of the Starving Class* seem lifted from B-grade movies, while other parts seem like Greek tragedy barely altered. Popular culture and classical tragedy are mixed together in this pastiche which contains the play's power. In relation to this, the audience will be confused but still be attracted in an intriguingly illusion. As for *Buried Child*, Bottoms (1998) states: More ambivalent still is *Buried Child*, with its exploration of a variety of different myth schemes, from Oedipus to Osiris. As with his use of pop-cultural sources, there is something of self-consciousness of postmodernist pastiche in these instances, the ironic manipulation of the redundant fragments of ancient stories which have lost their power to affect us in their original form (12). Presenting a veritable patch of allusions to well-known family plays, the story of *Buried child* as a whole recalls that of Pinter's *the Homecoming*, with Tilden and Vince coming back home, and Shelly like Pinter's Ruth being included in a variety of family relations. Bradley's assault on Shelly (to open her mouth and put his fingers in) recalls

the assault on Lulu in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. Furthermore, the play's surreal comedy and its weird actions are quite similar with absurdist plays of Ionesco. Another famous dramatist we have to mention, is Ibsen. As critics observed, *Buried Child's* "imagery, characters, and family secrets all resound in Ibsen's style, as in *Ghosts*, secrets from the past enter into the metaphoric language and imaginative style" (Rosen 129). In the course of the play: As Halie speaks from upstairs, she talks as if to Dodge, though she is heard now only by Vince, remarking that what is sown and washed in by the rain will be reaped, and assigning a cause to the growth of the crop: "Maybe it's the sun" (Shepard 132). The pun in the curtain line on "son/sun" alludes directly to Ibsen's *Ghosts*, reminding audiences not only of a source for the realistic modern family drama structured around a secret that is only gradually revealed, but also of the earlier playwright's delineation of the sins of the father being visited upon the children. The remains of the buried son have literally fertilized the earth in a grimly Gothic manner (perhaps appropriately calling to mind the line from T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* asking whether "that corpse you planted in your garden has begun...to sprout") (Adler 119). In his family trilogy, Shepard also demonstrates a postmodern fondness of allegory which allies his work with that of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Tilden's position, a farmer "All-American Fullback" (Hooti and Samaneh 72) who failed in life and ran away to Mexico and then returned home reminds the reader of Biff Loman in Miller's play. Moreover, Halie, frequently reminding her golden past reminds readers the character—Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* a play by Williams. The references to "palm tree" (66) at the beginning of *Buried* echoes O'Neill's *Desire under*

the Elms. Furthermore, the incest between the son and the wife recalls union of Abbie and Eben in *Desire* and so is the violent murder of the baby in both plays. It is worth noting that the revelation of the play is dependent upon the play though the secret of the play buried child and it recalls Mary's painful revelation at the close of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Rosen insists, "The nature of secret of *Buried Child* is more a device akin to the secret in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*." (130) Critics have understandably devoted much attention to the mythic elements in Shepard's work. Most notably, Tucker Orbison has exposed three levels of mythic response in *True West*. More important, it explores myth through its biblical allusions and parallels. The play's plot harks back to the archetypal story of Cain and Abel—"in the Byronic variant in which Cain, the peaceful tiller of the soil, is a sympathetic figure, while Abel, the smug slaughterer of sheep, is inexplicably favored by a bloodthirsty deity. As in *Genesis*, the action takes place to the east of Eden. (Waugh 76) Shepard sets his play "in a Southern California suburb, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles." Lee describes the suburban homes as being "Like a paradise" and Austin subsequently comments, "This is a Paradise down here... We're livin' in a Paradise." In this respect, *True West* seems a serious drama which discusses serious themes. However, it is possible to discover the richly subtle and irreverently unconventional humor in this play. Much of the humor in *True West* comes from the very serious sense of menace that Lee brings to the action, which is a form of comic relief. Moreover, Saul Kimmer is another source of humor because he is so mundane and shallow who seemingly surrounds us in our daily life. Humorously, even the movie industry itself practices it routinely for

the ridiculous. The appearance of Austin and Lee's mother helps to assure that the play will end in a grotesque rather than a realistic way. From above evidence, all these features together get Shepard's family trilogy close to an interlocking pastiche, which makes the trilogy more prominent in its postmodernist features. B. Language games Shepard's family trilogy demonstrates a degree of language fragmentation that is one of the prominent aspects of postmodernist aesthetic production. To some extent, language game as a tactics manifest itself in those fragmented dialogues. In philosophical Investigations, Ludwig Wittgenstein regularly referred to the concept of language game and insisted on the idea that " language has no a direct connection to reality and concepts do not need to be so clearly defined to be meaningful"(89). The concept is based on the following analogy: The rules of language (grammar) are analogous to the rules of games, and thus saying " something in a language is similar to making a move in a game" (90). The analogy between a language and a game suggests that only in the various and multiform activities of human life do words have meaning. In the plays most of the characters are unwilling to say anything, but at the same time they need to or have to talk, " to avoid falling into vacuum" (165). Indeed, the conversations between the characters are usually aimless and fragmented which suggests talking for the sake of talking. As Tilden tells his father, " I was alone. I thought I was dead" (Shepard 78). Perhaps, Tilden felt lonely and needed a company. " You gotta talk or you'll die" (ibid), for this simple reason, Tilden and other characters just talk to survive themselves. This statement is another variation on Descartes: I talk therefore I am. Moreover, the characters sometimes talk at cross purposes, or as if no one

else was there, or even they did not hear or could not make sense of what others say. It is clearly that language fails to achieve its function as an effective communication method. Instead, the characters use it to cover real matter or trouble, which caused another sense indeterminacy brought by language fragmentation. In *Curse of the Starving Class*: WESLEY: He was drinking that much? ELLA: Not that. His skin. WESLEY: Oh. ELLA: (suddenly cheerful) You want some breakfast? WESLEY: No, thanks. ELLA: (going to refrigerator) Well I'm going to have some. WESLEY: (still cleaning) It's humiliating to have the cops come to your own house. Makes me feel like we're someone else. ELLA: (looking in refrigerator) There are no eggs but there's bacon and bread. WESLEY: Makes me feel lonely. Like we're in trouble or something. (Shepard 148) Here, the conversation between the mother and the son leaps from one topic to another with no transition. Obviously, Ella is trying to shift the topic deliberately while Wesley insists on his original one. It is inevitable to make the communication ineffective. Ella refused to discuss the reality. Therefore, it is impossible for the readers to make sense from the conversation or learn about the truth. Indeed, the conventions of dialogue in the play present the mixture of both realistic and mythic elements. On the one hand, the characters are engaged in simple question-and-answer conversations which serve to introduce detailed information necessary to an understanding of what has happened before the start of the play. On the other hand, all the family members, except for Ella, are given long monologues which are almost soliloquies. The use of language in Shepard's family trilogy calls for special critical attention for the reason that language is always already inflected with power, and can never be a

neutral medium for representation at all. By this means, language is shown to be " a medium that can manipulate and hide the truth as much as it can express and reveal it" (Mudasir 6). Furthermore, Deborah Gei once argued that " perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the decentered subject is the increasing precedence that monologue takes over dialogue in postmodern drama" (35). For her, monologue in postmodern drama " does not necessarily emerge from one coherent ' voice' or ' self'; the monologue texts are similarly fragmented and given multiple voices" (36). For example, Wesley has a long speech in which he restates his sense of life, not simply on this night but also on many other nights. In an unusual way he is speaking neither to his mother nor directly to the audience. However, the audience is allowed to hear his thought processes. When Ella begins a conversation about menstruation, she seems directed at another person, but no one is there. Language game as a technique is often used in *Buried Child*. The conversation between Halie and Dodge contains many ambiguities that are not negligible. DODGE: And he never laid a finger on you I suppose? (long silence) Halie?(No answer. Long pause.)HALIE'S VOICE: Are you going out today? DODGE: (gesturing toward rain) In this? HALIE'S VOICE: I'm just asking a simple question. DODGE: I rarely go out in the bright sunshine, why would I go out in this? HALIE'S VOICE: I'm just asking because I'm not doing any shopping today.(Shepard 65)Dodge seems to suggest something happened in before, but Halie chooses to be silent. As a return, Halie asks an irrelevant question to break silence but doesn't care the answer at all because she is just asking. Language may have no direct connection to the current situation; instead, they are losing their meanings as the characters

deny cooperating with each other. In the following is another example:

DODGE: (yelling off left) Tilden! HALIE'S VOICE: Dodge, what are you trying

to do? DODGE: (yelling off left) Tilden, get in here! HALIE'S VOICE: Why do

you enjoy stirring things up? DODGE: I don't enjoy anything! HALIE'S VOICE:

That's a terrible thing to say. DODGE: Tilden! HALIE'S VOICE: That's kind of

statement that leads people right to the end of their rope. DODGE: Tilden!

HALIE'S VOICE: It's no wonder people turn to Christ! DODGE: TILDEN!!

HALIE'S VOICE: It's no wonder the messengers of God's word are shouted

down in public places! DODGE: TILDEN!!!(Shepard 69)Here, we could see the

tension between this couple of Dodge and Halie. In regard to this point,

Dodge never cares for what Halie says, even ignores her by repeating the

same word. Simpler than everyday language, just one word successfully

deliver Dodge's emotional feelings—anger and anxiety. In postmodern world,

such feeling is haunting everyone with no exception. Shepard is likely to

create language with an unusual ear for speech rhythms. Frequently, his

reliance on an apparently characterless dialogue that is made striking by

flatness and repetitiousness, is similar to that of Pinter and Beckett, masters

of language games. C. A mixture of genresShepard's family trilogy is laid in

the framework of realism. However, elements of symbolism and surrealism

are clearly mixed into the realistic framework. For this reason, " while the

events of the play can all be accepted on a realistic level, the eccentric

characters and their repeated refusal to recognize each other or embrace

their own past take the action into surrealist mode" (Patterson 50). At times

Shepard applies a realistic style, and at times a symbolic style. For many

postmodernist dramatists, mixture of genres is usually their best choice to

convey their understanding of the nature of postmodernism. Shepard has the same attitude with them, though it could not be treated as his breakthrough. *Curse of the Starving Class*, a story tells a family of four in a desperate condition, around the house and future, all members of the family are trying to survive from the "curse". Under the realistic framework, the whole play is full of images and symbols, for example, the door, the refrigerator and the lamb, and even the characters seem more like performing actors in stage rather than the living men in real life. Another family play, *Buried Child* has the most prominent feature of mixture of genres: the three-act structure, the immediate time frame and the setting of the play in reality is a general realistic form. But the utilization of symbols such as the corn and the rain in *Buried Child* also give the play a symbolist element while the fragmented characterization and actions like the multiple burials of Dodge, seemingly imaginative Ansel are somewhat surreal or dreamlike. Another distinct feature is the humor, which is an essential element of the style in Shepard's plays, giving the play black, sardonic and at times slapstick elements. All these stylistic elements contribute to the postmodernist features of his play. While *True West* represents a continued movement in Shepard's drama toward realistic characterization, plot, setting, and dialogue, at the same time, the play has touchstones in his experimental days, retains large number of unusual, fantastical elements, including the grotesque violence and the startling transformations of its two main characters. Indeed, Shepard begins with realistic characters and situations but gradually acquire more weird qualities until he finally seem to fuse realism and fantasy. In postmodernism, distinctions between different genres blur; tragedy turns to

be like a farce and the tragic sense is more laughable and farcical than lamentable. This is exactly the case in Shepard's family trilogy. Though the trilogy is shocking and painful usually, it seems more like a savage farce. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Wesley drops his pants and urinates on his sister's 4-H project; car's explosion seems like a unrealistic gang movie without emotional sorrow, but only laughing care for nothing; in *Buried Child* Bottles keep smashing, Bradley crawls helplessly in search of his wooden leg, and Father Dewis who has visited for some tea doesn't know what his position is. In fact, the final optimistic images of fertility and Dodge's death according to Bigsby are still more like a means of threat rather than a sign for hope because they suggest " a potential future which would continue the farce/tragedy of human life" (188). Obviously, different genres are mixed together without a controlled center, which suggest not only a sense of fragmentation and the disorder of the modern society but also the indeterminacy under postmodern condition.

D. Allegorical impulse
Allegorical impulse is also a kind of deconstructive impulse which represents characteristic of postmodernist art in general. It must be distinguished from the self-critical tendency of modernism. When the postmodernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, and its transcendence; rather, it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, and lack of transcendence. Its deconstructive thrust is not only against the contemporary myths that furnish its subject matter, but also against the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art. As Barthes has written: It is no longer the myths which need to be unmarked, it is the sign itself which must be shaken; the problem is not to reveal the

(latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning, is not to change or purify the symbols, but to challenge the symbolic itself (32). As it is discussed before, Shepard's family trilogy is full of contradictions. Usually, fragmentary images of those plays never make sense, and even the language fails to fill in the gaps and brings about more ambiguity. In one sense, all these together make the process of reading the text difficult and almost impossible. This feature, inevitably, has root in another postmodernist technique of writing—"allegorical impulse". In fact, there is a close connection between postmodern aesthetic, the problems of illegibility and the impossibility of readings associated with the allegorical mode. Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* displays an overt symbolism that extends the kind of metaphoric use of scene and objects. First of all, the centrality of the refrigerator to which the family members of this house go again and again, trying to discover nourishment that will abate their "sense of hunger". As an object in repeated use, the refrigerator is an allegorical source of nourishment and the repository for the inadequate nourishment the parents provide for themselves and their children. From another respect, it also suggests the shortage of nourishment of contemporary culture for modern people. The lamb in the play recalls a familiar symbol of Judeo-Christian theology: The Pascal lamb sacrificed in the Passover as a substitute for the firstborn son, which is transformed in the New Testament into the image of the Christ himself, the lamb or son of God, sacrificed to atone for the sins of all human beings. To some extent, the maggot-infested lamb that Wesley nurtures and eventually sacrifices is seemingly described as he acts out his imitation of his

father. The text of *Buried Child* also suggests postmodernism's preoccupation with reading and its concern with the failure to decode the signs. In the course of the play, many images seem to be significant and illusive. It means that the audience keeps them in mind and fit them together so as to achieve a total understanding. Yet, some of them remain no link to the other parts of the play. Take the image of the rain as an example, in the first two acts, the sense of strangers and uncertainty in the play never make sense, whether the rain represents the power to promote growth or a miserable background to stand out tragedy atmosphere. Furthermore, the reason of Bradley's assault on Shelly by putting his fingers in her mouth is not answered in the play as either. Besides, Tilden's milking stool "with its inherent material overtones" (Wade 56), the fertility of the land and the burial of Dodge under the product of the crop, all together come "to be explained away as simply a message to the eyes, rather than one to the mind" (58). In regard to Vince, through taking Dodge's place on the sofa at the end of the play, he raises difficulty in the reading of the play to a higher level. Another scene in *Buried Child*—birdsong and sunshine—appears in the final act and Halie in bright yellow seems to stop mourning. Dodge's talking may be regarded as the connotation of "new beginning" and "hope": Dodge: (looks toward porch then back to her) That's what I mean. See, you're glad it stopped raining. Now you think everything's gonna be different. Just 'cause the sun comes out (Shepard 131). Alder insists on that "yet the play repeatedly seem to warn that whatever significance they choose to assign to these incidents in their own reading, not the result of decoding some fixed set of meanings or symbols." (175) In general, the

elements of the play can neither be interpreted nor separated, which means that no crucial cause or explanation can be accepted for what happened during the play, " Maybe it was the rain", " Maybe it was the sun" (Shepard 132). Here it is clear that the experience of reading play for critics and readers is rather subjective and ambiguous. If they try to find the answer and arrive at a definite conclusion, as does Shelly, that " I can't find a reason for anything" (89), facing the result, such response is a more legitimate than any other. This is exactly the place where Shepard chooses to leave his family plays with indeterminacy. Nevertheless, just because of lacking a certain sense of relief about the happenings, which suggests its postmodernist fluidity to cover itself, Dodge ended by his death as the circle is possible to continue through Vince, although nothing is certain about anything in *Buried Child*. E. Non-ending denouement

The endings of all the Victorian works are " closed" but the endings of modernist works are " open". Relatively, the endings of postmodernist works are a hybrid of these two (Hooti and Shooshtarian 22). In postmodern plays endings are both " open and closed" because they are " either multiple or circular". As Newman states: Endings constitute a special case of self-erasing sequences, since they occupy one of the most salient positions in any text's structure. Conventionally, one distinguishes between endings that are closed, as in Victorian novels with their compulsory tying-up of loose ends in death and marriage, and those that are open, as in many modernist novels. But what are we to say about texts that seem both open and closed, somehow poised between the two, because they are either multiple or circular.

(109)Regarding Shepard's family trilogy, the elements of the trilogy can

neither be interpreted nor separated, and no conclusive explanations can be assured to what happened during the play. Usually, the play ends as it was started, seemingly nothing changed but everything subtly different. As Shepard said, " I'm talking now about an open-ended structure where anything could happen as opposed to a carefully planned and regurgitated event which, for me, has always been as painful as pissing nickels" (qtd. In Cohn 89). In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the story ends with the conversation between Ella and Wesley. The mother and son rarely communicate with each other calmly and peacefully. ELLA: Something just went right through me. Just from looking at this lamb. WESLEY: What? ELLA: The story your father used to tell about that eagle. You remember that? WESLEY: Yeah. ELLA: You remember the whole thing? WESLEY: Yeah. ELLA: I don't. I remember something about it. But it just went through me. (Shepard 185) Here, the conversation brings us to the past, ended with a story about eagle and cat fighting. On the one hand, the end of the story seems to suggest the end of the family. Just like the eagle and the cat " they come crashing down to the earth" and " Like one whole thing", all of the family members come crashing down to the circle of doomed life. However, from another point, it might be a beginning of new life, claiming a tale of rebirth that the family finally face their fate and accept it. The future could be possibly survived from the chaos since they have recognized what they are facing although at this moment there is no chance to make things better. But it is still uncertain for what is the end of the family. In *Buried Child*, the play ends with Halie and Dodge talking with each other while Vince has taken Dodge's place. And through this effect, Shepard once again defers any kind of closure or resolutions in his play. Bottoms

notes: Buried Child by dripping into the viewer's consciousness with the relentless of the rain that continues throughout the first two acts and which may be the source of new life in the fields, or "catastrophic", or just "plain old rain" (180). Nevertheless, it is not an age in which the sense of ending contains within itself the promise of revelation. It is an age of doubtfulness and uncertainty, in which everything always keeps open-ended or unfathomed. In *Spirituality and Society: Postmodern Visions*, Griffin said, "What strikes the ear and eye is comic, occasionally hilarious behavior and speech" at which one laughs with "slightly puzzled and dismayed", even indefinably "saddened" (77). Shepard's family trilogy is just like this: something is coming to an end, yet on the other side of disaster there is hope. From the bottom there is nowhere to go but up. According to Alder states, partly because Shepard's plays "refuse provide the definitive sense of closure" (23) that audience traditionally experience from "dramatic realism" (24), they invite "multilayered reading—as allegorizations of experience, as symbolic structures, as mythic constructs" (33). To some extent, Dodge's death at the end of the play does not bring about salvation. Vince seems to become another Dodge, by taking Dodge's place on the sofa, which suggests the possibility of the past pattern may continue. The sofa is a place of life in the course of the play; instead, it signifies death. Shelly, whom Dodge refers to as a "hoper" (Jin 19) and a life-affirming person, can no longer bear staying in the house of the dead, so she leaves. Vince finally chooses to stay; his choice means the hope of finding an identity on the frontier or just a doomed life in an infinite circle, is still worth discussing. In a word, the possibility of an apocalypse brings about a postmodern sense of

ending in the play. Besides, in True West the brothers don't fight it out for any actual piece of territory, since there is no real family heritage, no Dodge position, no True West to fight over. What the brothers finally duel for is a mythic terrain, the terrain of their father, of the desert, of Westerns: the "West" of the imagination. But Shepard refuses to tell us the result, even hardly to imagine the result. Indeed, the image of the brothers circling in the kitchen provides a provocative but inconclusive ending. This disturbing final scene, as some critics have claimed, reflects Sam Shepard's view of life as an endless struggle between illusion and reality, certainly, indeterminacy manifests itself in such devastated war. The end of the play is just a beginning of the following war which seems never to come to an end.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSIONS Sam Shepard is regarded as a postmodern playwright for the reason of his narrative techniques that have been identified with postmodern theatre. More important, he is subtly adept at fusing popular culture with high culture. In his family trilogy: The Curse of Starving Class, Buried Child, True West, not only his theatrical techniques have much in common with those of the postmodernist drama, but also his themes and characterization are echoing the spirit of postmodernism. On the one hand, his characters sometimes are intersubjective and transformational. On the other hand, Shepard juxtaposes borrowing from allusions to popular culture with those of history and high culture in an often free-form, playful way. Shepard's intention is to create a narrative which reflects the frustration and dilemma of those ordinary people living in American society, as well as expresses his observation about postmodern world and its nature. One of central concern in his plays is to explore the

American psyche at a time of failed dreams and lost visions. Looking back twenty years later, his early plays were not "the best" in his own mind. As he has said, "You end up with a kind of cavorting...But it doesn't satisfy you...I wouldn't stand by them" (Rosen 56). Therefore, Shepard at this time embraced the most traditional American dramatic form, family play. In explaining the evolution of his art, Shepard acknowledged how he had been writing for ten years in an experimental maze—poking around, fishing in the dark. Indeed, through learning from the formers like Eugene O'Neill, Arther Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, to name a few who have worked that most fertile and hallowed field, Shepard's work did not limit its appeal to a coterie of hipsters, intellectuals, or iconoclasts. He took on the strictures of the form, expanded them, and created a dramatic universe both feral and familiar. For this reason, mainstream audiences experienced a recognizable world in his family trilogy, despite their often perplexing events. Thus, these family plays, though still intensely personal and seemingly full of autobiographical detail, are formed by a communal aspect. However, if critics or readers are expecting Shepard to be Eugene O'Neill or someone else, they may be disappointed. Although Shepard's family plays take up many of the themes or motifs found in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and other works, Shepard has approached his American family play with originality, imprinting with his signature avant-garde devices: the trance monologue, arbitrary character transformations, and postmodernist stage images. In his family trilogy, the influence of postmodernism manifests itself in themes, in characterization, also in techniques. This paper analyzes Shepard's family trilogy based on postmodern condition, from the

perspective of postmodernism, linked with relevant postmodernist theories. In Chapter II, it probes into postmodernist deconstructive themes from two aspects: one is deconstruction of American family and society; another is deconstruction of grand narrative. Obviously, Shepard sets his plays in a context which is more recognizable, the American farming family. Moreover, his family trilogy which is discussed here, focused on issues which are universal, the disillusionment with the American dream and the traditional myths under postmodern condition. It is affirmed that the perspectives of postmodernism help Shepard a lot. This platform allows him to incorporate surrealism and symbolism in the realistic framework. As for its characterization, on the one hand, they are the images created by Shepard in the imaginations of people to evoke the experiences of his audience or readers. On the other hand, their postmodernist nature will keep the readers more comfortable when they are trapped in the realism. Postmodernity in characters manifests itself in the process of those characters shifting their roles as well as struggling from postmodern condition. As a concluding remark, the characters of Shepard's family trilogy inhabit a world that is unable to face the fact of contemporary culture and denies the language games of political discourse. Objectively, the play's irresolute endings, to some extent, are the result of the family's denial of postmodern conditions. Media-generated myths and fantasies are, in certain respect, an important accelerant for current condition. Postmodernist narrative techniques are connected closely with the style of postmodernism in Shepard's family trilogy. The utilization of those theatrical techniques with postmodern elements including pastiche, language game, mixing of genres, allegorical

impulse and non-ending dénouement highlights postmodernist features of the family plays. In conclusion, Shepard's family trilogy conveys its subtle observation on American society in a postmodernist approach. It is obvious that the incapability to accept decenteredness, heterogeneity, and multiplicity as the facts of 21st century, leads to disintegration of meaning, identity and purpose in his family trilogy. Unlike the unified and coherent figures of modern drama, Shepard is trying to portray his characters as "depthlessness" through describing their "incompleteness" and multiplicity of guises. Shepard, as a postmodern thinker, offers no solution. Even, he does not suggest ways to salvation for world's entanglement. Indeed, Shepard is just a reflector that puts before us the world which is in catch. But it does not mean his family trilogy has a lack of timely significance. At least, Shepard through his plays suggests that we should recognize the fact that we are all trapped in the hands of postmodern condition. For this reason any singular solution is impossible.