

A Study of Family Relations in Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*: Family as a Falling Myth

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Abstract: Family relations form one of the main themes of Sam Shepard's plays. However, these interactions are not like what is noticed in a traditional family. *Fool for Love* is a play by Shepard which narrates the story of a sister and brother who used to be in love but now the situation has changed and both are alienated and hurt. The problems that they encounter are the result of their parents' mistakes. By writing such a play, Shepard meant to show how the myth of a good American family can be devastated easily. In other words, it is going to be stated that there is a conflict between the familial themes and the committed doctrine of the modern American family myth in *Fool for Love*. Hence, this study seeks to analyze this play through Lyotard's notion of the fall of myths in order to conclude how postmodernism has destroyed the notions of life, happiness, and identity. The themes of a cohesive American family, faithfulness, and love have changed into the fragmented and alienated families. It will also be stated that for Shepard, the most noticeable features of a postmodern society include viciousness, disloyalty, desperateness, and separation.

Key Words: *Fool for Love*, Lyotard, Sam Shepard, Myth, Postmodernism, Grand Narratives.

1. Introduction

Samuel Shepard Rogers III (1943–2017) was a well-known American actor, dramatist, writer, and director. His plays are mainly reputed due to their desolate, surrealist features, black comedy, and drifting characters (Shewey, 1997, p. 13). Vesna Bratic (2015) has remarked that Shepard's works obviously demonstrate some of the main postmodernist characteristics. For example, she referred to the "fragmented narrative" and themes in some of his plays, or in "his crossing the line between the high and popular", or sometimes known by its conflicting expression as "low" culture (p. 25).

Family plays an important role in Shepard's plays. *Fool for Love* (1983) is one of these plays and revolves around May and Eddie, who were previously in love and are spending time in a motel in the desert. The story starts while May is at the motel and runs into Eddie. Eddie attempts hard to persuade May to start everything again and join him in a farm that Eddie has always desired to purchase. However, May does not accept his offer, and says that she is not eager to live with Eddie because she is sick of his "fantasies":

"May: How many times have you done this to me?"

Eddie: What?

May: Suckered me into some dumb little fantasy and then dropped me like a hot rock. How many times has that happened?" (Shepard, 1983, p. 18)

She also says she has been working a new job and knows that she will not have any happiness with Eddie. During the whole play the character of the Old Man, who is seemingly the father of both lovers, has sat somewhere and talks to May and Eddie and comments on each character and also himself. Then, the audience will realize that the Old Man had two families, both of which he left during each child's life. May and Eddie fell in love in high school and as soon as their parents understood this issue, Eddie's mother committed suicide. Finally, Eddie leaves May just like his

father, and May packs her stuff to go somewhere indefinite. As noticed, the notion of family is shattered in this play and this refers to Lyotard's fall of myth. By analyzing the state of the families in such postmodern plays as *Fool for Love*, it can be concluded how this myth is decaying.

Moreover, it should be stated that this myth is portrayed in four of Shepard's plays, including *Buried Child*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *Fool for Love*, and *True West*. In fact, almost all this American playwright's plays revolve around the associations between characters that establish a family. The tension between brother and brother, father and son, husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend that is mainly due to power can be found as the focal theme of Shepard's plays. Additionally, his major characters are seen as being estranged.

One reason why the current study is going to analyze *Fool for Love* is that Shepard has consistently been a playwright who captures a sense of nostalgia of the fading rural America. Actually, "finding and dramatizing the fantastic in farming families' lives and mourning the tragic decay of the myth of the self-sustaining, nature-bound, truly manly American" have all caused him to be an apt subject of this research (Prohászka-Rád, 2009, p. 63).

2. Statement of the Problem

Lyotard's skepticism towards postmodernism and death of metanarratives forms the basis of many literary works. *Fool for Love* is regarded as one of the plays in which this skepticism is noticed vividly. In fact, Shepard's pessimism regarding one of the postmodern myths and its slow but sure expiration will help the audiences to realize that the old standards and morals of the myth of the American family are not real anymore. This research mainly investigates the death of America's myth of a happy family in *Fool for Love*.

Shepard portrays the families that are having a serious crisis. One example is *True West* (1980) which shows an unending clash and violence between two brothers. In order to achieve his goal in showing the condition of an American family, Shepard tried to make the best use of dramatic figures. In fact, through the analysis of how the myth of a happy family has been shattered in this play, it will be noticed how some other meta-narratives or myths like the American dream, American identity, and the notion of manhood are disrupted.

3. Literature Review

As previously mentioned, family plays a significant role in Sam Shepard's plays. This is the reason why many critics have analyzed this role through different approaches in his dramatic pieces. For instance, Creedon's "Surrealism and Sam Shepard's Family Plays: Representing Gender" (2015) is about the way Shepard has employed the feature of "violence" as a tool in reinforcing the male characters' "ego". He has also probed into the fact how maleness is portrayed as a hazardous, but appealing quality, as well as the long-lasting repetition of the hostile father role, and the nonattendance of females from this examination (pp. 43-78).

In another article as "Sam Shepard and the Dysfunctional American Family: Therapeutic Perspectives" (1990), Sparr, Erstling, and Boehnlein have discussed the fact that Shepard's plays represent general family tensions, because of the forces that endanger domestic harmony. They have also stated that whereas Shepard's families show inefficiency, they also signify the situations that are familiar to all family therapists (pp. 563-576). "Negotiating the American West in Sam Shepard's Family Plays" (2005) is an article by Westgate in which he has remarked that Shepard aimed to revive the remainders of the American West and also to be restored by the power related to the West (pp. 726-743).

Kadhem's "Fathers and Sons: Family Relationships in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and *True West*" (2008) discusses how the notion of a happy family is devastated by Shepard by illustrating a distressing picture of the modern American family that contains three character types: the father, the mother and the son. Kadhem has sought to analyze these character types and their unhappy dealings in Shepard's *Buried Child* and *True West* (pp. 185-201).

Amani, Pirnajmuddin, and Marandi (2017) wrote an article as "Sam Shepard and the Familial Maze": Possible Worlds Theory in Buried Child (pp. 69-83). They tried to analyze Shepard's *Buried Child* from a philosophical viewpoint. Thus, they applied the theory of possible worlds by Marie-Laure Ryan through which they investigated the modality of world structure in the play.

Shields (1993) has also written a dissertation as *The fall of the great modern American family myth in Sam Shepard's "Buried Child", "A Lie of the Mind", "Fool for Love", and "True West"* which inspects Shepard's judgmental handling his plays of the modern American family myth that depicts the presence of a steady, reciprocally inter-reliant family institution.

Lee (2003) in the thesis titled *The Other Side of Love: Sam Shepard's Gothic Family Plays*, proclaims that Shepard shows "gothic" portrait of the American family by borrowing dramatic techniques from the "gothic" literary tradition in order to play with ideals of traditional American 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. Lee believes that Shepard by criticizing of the American family is actually critiquing modern American society.

4. Methodology

Postmodernism plays an important role in literature and its main features, including fragmentation, alienation and identity conflict form the main themes of many literary works. After the Second World War, every aspect of human beings' life underwent a sudden change. This change caused the world to lose the constancy of modernism and witness a new age of uncertainty and fragmentation known as postmodernism.

James M. Glass (1993) has defined postmodernism as a viewpoint which "celebrates difference, change, transformation, and flux" (p. 256). Therefore, postmodernism signifies a drastic change in almost all facets of western culture. Postmodernism involves the problem of identity. In this period, identity is fragmented and human beings are alienated.

To investigate the issue of family relations in *Fool for Love*, this study has selected Lyotard's postmodern theory of fall of myth in American families. Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) is a French philosopher and literary critic. This scholar is mainly known for his opinions regarding the influence of postmodernity on human beings' life. In other words, his theory of metanarratives as narratives "about narratives of historical meaning, experience, or knowledge" (Lyotard, 1992, p. 29) plays an important role in the realm of postmodern literature. Likewise, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard has discussed the growing cynicism of the "postmodern condition" towards the many grand narratives which are regarded as "transcendent and universal truth" (p. xxv); he has stated that,

"Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. ... The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language ... Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?" (Lyotard, 1979, pp. xxiv-xxv)

Likewise, Lyotard believes that identity has become dispersed in the postmodern era. He states that identity is seen as an novelty within tradition of being narrated by others. Lyotard shows that a narrative as positively and negatively creates the human identity.

Now, this paper is going to apply the postmodernist theory of myth and in particular Lyotard's notion of postmodernism in order to unveil how the conventional myth has changed into the postmodern myth, and how the perception of myth is rotting in postmodern families.

Lyotard says that Postmodernism is a method to discourse that disrupts the traditional, linear view of reality as something shaped by human perception, and, as a result, challenges the idea of narrative as a straightforward process of conscious thought. Postmodern narrative challenges resulting in works of fiction through which causality is revealed to be a false construction used to give meaning to events.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Fall of Grand Narrative of an American Family in *Fool for Love*

As mentioned already, *Fool for Love* revolves around the story of a sister and brother who have fallen in love. This play happens in an inexpensive hotel, and the main characters include May, Eddie and the Old Man who is in fact in May and Eddie's thoughts. At the beginning of the story, we see him while sitting quietly on a chair, but later in the play he starts talking and revising Eddie and May's statements. May is stuck in a dilemma because she does not know whether to stay with Eddie or not. She cannot forgive and forget Eddie because of his affairs. Then, she decides to go on a date with Martin as her new boyfriend. At the end of the play, we see that Eddie leaves May to go back to his girlfriend and May leaves the hotel with her suitcase.

The theme of fall of the grand narrative of an American family is manifest just from the very early parts, because the play shows its members in an alienated situation. Shepard attempted to put an end to the widespread prototypes of an American happy family life through the themes of mistrust. The nonexistence of a man who is capable of supporting his family is also denoted by the Old Man's infidelity and fear.

Shepard has used diverse means to show the family's destruction like desertion, drunkenness, and having affairs with various people. It can be claimed that Shepard's characterization of the Old Man and Eddie plays an important role in showing the role of men in a family's devastation. For example, the Old Man had two completely distinct lives. He would recurrently leave them, which led to not only the breakdown of his own family but also the fragmentation of his own children's destiny. This issue is really bothering Eddie especially when he says,

"Our Daddy fell in love twice. That's basically how it happened. Once with my mother and once with her mother. He had two separate lives. Two completely separate lives. He's lived with me and my mother for a while and then he'd disappear and go live with her and her mother for a while." (p.63)

One of the main points about this play is that unlike Shepard's other female characters, May openly expresses her feelings and is not oppressed. Thus, she has got a self-determining identity. Moreover, when she leaves Eddie due to his affairs, she shows her objection and independent nature.

Fredric Jamson (1984) has declared that for Lyotard "myths or narrative archetypes (recites)" are examples of metanarratives (p. ix). Hooti (2011) has also stated that Shepard in his plays, especially *Fool for Love* seeks to show that "contemporary culture has come to the end of what Lyotard called as grand narratives" (p. 87). According to Putzel (1989), the American family is a myth, and its degeneration signifies the "subversion of the myth of the family" (p. 114). Concerning the collapse of American family, Noorbakhsh Hotti (2011) has noted that:

"The family's relational disintegration is fed by both distrustfulness and loneliness and the mood of detached, brutal and emotionless interaction between the characters is maintained from the beginning toward the end of the play." (p. 87)

Such issues as neglect and poor relationships between children and parents are of high significance in Shepard's plays. The reason is that Shepard's own father left his family and continued living alone while drinking lots of alcohol. About his relationship with his father, Shepard has noted that:

"It's a relationship of absolute unknowing. I never knew him, although he was around all the time. There's no point in dwelling on it. I mean, my relationship with him now is exactly the same as when he was alive. It's just as mysterious." (As cited in Schvey, 1993, p. 15)

The setting which is a cheap hotel has also helped Shepard in showing the disintegration of family even better because a happy family gather at home with the parents and children while laughing; but *Fool for Love* is a tragic play and filled with misery. The father who is often in charge of a family on whom the members of the family can rely is absent; instead, we see an old and weak man who is not even real in order to tell his story. Besides, the infertility of the desert where the hotel is located

signifies the emptiness of May's life that is as the result of her immoral relationship with Eddie and their father.

Regarding a traditional American family, Adams (1971) has remarked that a happy American family includes a man and a woman who have been united by marriage, meaning that "their marriage is for as long as they both shall live" (p. 15). Likewise, Cavan (1969) has stated that the marriage in a traditional sense is committed, because in America adultery is assumed as a serious menace to the permanency of the marriage, family and society's "demand for legitimacy of children" (p. 408). Such a union "provides companionship, love, sexual satisfaction, children, and security" (Cavan, 1969, p. 10).

Adams (1971) has also said that American society expects strong faithfulness to the worldwide "incest taboo" within its family, and "sex and mating must be restricted to one pair within the unit, the father and mother" (p. 31). In such a family, all the members conform to their roles in order for the family to survive. The father has the most responsibility in this regard because he will be socially blamed "if he does not work or if he neglects, refuses to support, abuses, or deserts his wife and children" (Cavan, 1969, p. 413). However, what is noticed in *Fool for Love* is in complete contrast with the statements of Adams and Cavan.

Joan Didion (2006) had an essay in which he described Shepard through the following lines, he possessed a powerful sexual presence that was obvious even to a child. We grew up in a world we rapidly recognized as marked by corruption, uncertainty, and overwhelming ambiguities, he proposed an alternate world, one that might never have truly existed or, if it had, was now lost: a place where a man could live liberally, create his own rules, and follow them; a world where, by fulfilling his responsibilities, he could ultimately earn the girl, ride off through the valley, and reach a sense of freedom and belonging." (p. 31). However, it seems that such an explanation is not valid in this play because the main male characters are weak and unable to take the responsibility in their relationships.

There are some points in the play where The Old Man tries to influence his family through some stories in order to prove himself as a reliable father. For instance, once he begins telling a story about a trip during which he protected his family:

"Ya' know one thing I'll never forget... we were drivin' through Southern Utah once. Me, you and your mother--in that old Plymouth we had ... Pitch black. I picked you up outa' the back seat there and carried you into this field. Thought the cold air might quiet you down a little bit. But you just kept on howling away. Then, all of a sudden, I saw somethin' move out there. Somethin' bigger than both of us put together. And it started to move toward us kinda' slow ... And then it started to get joined up by some other things just like it ... [T]hese things started to kinda' move in on us from all directions in a big circle. And I stopped dead still and turned back to the car to see if your mother was all right ... And just then these things started to "moo." They all started "mooing" away ... And it turns out, there we were, standin' smack in the middle of a goddam herd of cattle. Well, you never heard a baby pipe down so fast in your life. You never made a peep after that. The whole rest of the trip". (Shepard, 1983, pp. 26-27)

According to Martin Tucker (1992), the theme of *Fool for Love* is as "romantic as possible, at least for Shepard, for it is a tale of two young lovers, Romeo and Juliet escapees from warring families with the same father" (p. 122). Shields (1993) has stated that May and Eddie are two fools for a love not acceptable by the modern American family myth (p. 49). What made them fall in love was to take refuge in each other, but finally this love devastates them even more than their warring families. Eventually, it can be indicated that Eddie and May are representatives of the disappointed lost generation that is in search of a real home. Conversely, their lives are traumatized by their parents' powerlessness to fulfill the myth of a happy American family.

5.2 Crisis of Identity in *Fool for Love*

The theme of fragmented identities which is typical of postmodern plays can be seen clearly in *Fool for Love*. In fact, it is proved that Shepard's characters' identity is fragmented due to what is

happening in their surrounding environment like the family and society. Regarding the analysis of *True West* and *Fool for Love* it is stated that,

"There's a definite crisis of identity going on in both these plays... And it's as if both sets of [main characters] are doomed to be together... Both plays are about family and genealogy and being connected to your genetic brood,... And they also share the iconic Sam Shepard father character—that disconnected, alcoholic father who can't communicate, who's trying so hard to make it work". (Herbert, 2014)

DeRose (2002) has also indicated that in Shepard's plays "there is no central self, no core, only a fragmented collage of selves" (p. 239). In *Fool for Love* the main characters are two lovers who are also siblings. They are actually suffering a crisis in their identity. Their father appears in the play with no specific identity and throughout the whole play he is called as the Old Man. Their meeting each other in a motel which signifies their belonging to nowhere can be claimed to be Shepard's technique in order to accentuate this crisis. Also, the reason why the Old Man left both his families can be claimed to be due to this crisis. It was very hard for him to manage two distinct identities; thus, he preferred his identity to be fragmented.

5.3 Alienation in *Fool for Love*

Alienation and loneliness are amongst the most remarkable features of the postmodern man and are also of high significance in Shepard's plays. May and Eddie used to love each other so much but they are now shown as two people who are emotionally alienated. When the play starts, May is sitting silently while thinking to Eddie's affairs. This alienation involves the Old Man as well who left his families. From the very beginning, he seems to be an outsider and far from his two children.

This alienation and isolation is so much that he denies his familiarity with both May and Eddie. The Old Man deserts his family because it gets hard for him to manage his two families, thus "he just vanished" (Shepard, 1983, p. 31). At one point in the play the Old Man tries to justify the relinquishment of his families by denying his role as a father:

"Amazing thing is, neither one a' you look a bit familiar to me. Can't figure that one out. I don't recognize myself in either one of you. Never did. 'Course your mothers both put their stamp on ya'. That's plain to see. But my whole side a' the issue is absent, in my opinion. Totally unrecognizable. You could be anybody's. Probably are. I can't even remember the original circumstances. Been so long. Probably a lot a' things I forgot. Good thing I got out when I did though. Best thing I ever did". (Shepard, 1983, p. 35)

Shepard highlighted the theme of alienation even more through setting his play in a desert. Eddie tries to convince May to go back with him. However, May feels so lonely that she does not accept his offer. Additionally, Shepard has used such words as "you," "look," "me" and "here" in order to get help from a restricted range of words in portraying the alienated and emotionally disturbed character of Eddie.

5.4 Representation of Reality in *Fool for Love*

Postmodernism as a reaction to modernism signifies the viewpoint that "reality cannot be known nor can it be described objectively" (Nath, 2014, p. 26). In other words, postmodernist critics think of reality as a new concept. They do not believe in any certain explanation about anything and discard modernism. Thus, postmodernists doubt any grand narratives, and based on their idea that there is no objective reality, the postmodernists disagree with the application of any realistic scientific method.

Shepard has introduced his characters in a way that reflects how each of them has a particular reality for himself. This is one of the most important characteristics of a postmodern play like *Fool for Love*. Lyotard (1979) argues that the reality cannot be captured into one discourse. He also illustrates that the reality does not embody in fix meaning because the reality itself is defined as complex of possible meanings (p. 15).

For instance when May tells the story of the Old Man through her own perspective, the old man seems not to be satisfied with her version and tells Eddie, "This story doesn't hold water. You're not gonna' let her off the hook with that one are ya'? That's the dumbest version I ever heard in my whole life. I wanna' hear the male side a' this thing" (Shepard, 1983, p.73).

This statement by the Old Man has made some critics like Linda (1988) Hart declare that May is just like Shepard's other female characters and not an exception, because by saying so, the Old Man is making Eddie continue to behave May in exactly the same way as he behaved May and Eddie's mothers. There are several cases where May's standpoint and her opinion about the truth is sporadically defied by Eddie and the Old Man,

'Of all the family plays, *Fool for Love* most successfully problematizes the paternal Law of the Father and seeks to subvert his authoritarian control by placing the Old Man outside the proscenium frame. But that project is doubly undermined through the metaphors of performance space when Shepard cannot resist the desire to allow the father to penetrate the interiority of the couple by coming onstage to interrupt and control their reunion. The movement reinforces and physicalizes the psychological intrusion that the father has already accomplished. Eddie has accepted May's version of their history when the father intercedes and demands that Eddie validate him. May's reality and her version of the truth is abandoned". (Hart, 1988, pp. 74-75)

The reason is that in the postmodern era there is no single reality. It is relative and each person tries to constitute his/her version of reality. As well, Lyotard argued that reality does not present a fixed meaning and involves a range of possible meanings.

6. Conclusion

The current research analyzed Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* (1983) in the light of Jean François Lyotard's theory of fall of myths or grand narratives in order to emphasize the theme of breakdown of a happy American family. To summarize what has been done in the research, it can be concluded that postmodernism has led to the devastation of many myths, including the myth of a happy American family. Shepard has actually shown his notion of postmodernism by presenting infidelity, bleakness, and hostility as the most widespread qualities of postmodernism. It was also found that what influenced Shepard in his depiction of such a fragmented family was the fact that his own father was a disenchanted alcoholic man who abandoned his family. Furthermore, the researcher declared that Shepard's plays depict families not like the ideal American tradition but as an allegory of the postmodern human ailment.

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