Abstract

The article addresses the tensions found in Eugene O’Neill’s and Sam Shepard’s family plays, the autobiographical elements and the affinities between them in dissecting the American family as a burden of past and present, a family which also serves as a metonymy of America itself. By carrying out a comparative study between these two playwrights, the author seeks to illustrate not only their common depiction of a deracinated American dream in their family plays but also the literary traditions and autobiographical elements that have influenced the so-called father of modern American drama, the probing artist, Eugene O’Neill, and his postmodernist pupil, Sam Shepard. Although they differ in their approach to drama, both Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard through their work have attempted to recapture the hopes, promises and dreams not just of the nuclear American family, but also of America itself. The paper aims to portray the burdens of the dysfunctional families found in their most well-known plays and how they thematically interlink the two playwrights whose characters struggle with the ravages of hereditary guilt.

Key words: American dream, disillusion, family, tragedy, myth, father, son

“Why? How can I? The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won’t let us.” - Mary Tyrone, from Long Day’s Journey into Night
“[Family] is what you never really get away from – as much as you might want to try” – Sam Shepard

Introduction

The very notion of thematically linking Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard would seem hilarious to some trying to find a connection between them. There seem no reason at all to suggest a comparison between the haunted father of American drama and the cowboy of the American stage; the former believing in the tragic vision of man derived from Freud, Nietzsche, Strindberg and the Greek theater, whereas the latter owing his work more to ‘60s drug culture, rock music and the experimental and Joseph Chaikin’s experimental and highly influential Open Theatre in New York.

At the heart of both playwrights’ obsession with the family is the relation between father and son, although it must be quickly added that for both O’Neill and Shepard the relation between siblings is at least as significant. The plays of O’Neill and Shepard are filled with images of father figures who are both respected and despised; troubled sons who cannot cope with the present reality; estranged brothers who are trapped in a vicious circle from which they can’t escape. In their family plays, their characters seek oblivion through alcohol, through memory or through narrative, repeating the story of their lives and holding the real at bay. Burdens from the past occupy the same space and time in their present making their life stagnant.

In both O’Neill’s and Shepard’s plays one may find nuances of autobiography and confessional elements. Therefore, it is no accident that the greatest plays of both dramatists have been family plays. In Shepard’s work, the father reappears as an alcoholic who deserted the family to escape and live the life of a loner out in the desert – in O’Neill the mother emerges as the drug addict who welcomes the fog because “it hides you from the world and the world from you” (Journey, p. 98). The family, Shepard says, “is what you never really get away from – as much as you might want to try” (Sessum, 1988, p. 78).

In both O’Neill and Shepard, the Greek drama influenced them by confirming a view of a world in which human destiny is shaped to a considerable extent by forces outside ourselves: As Shepard put it in a note of his fantasy play The Unseen Hand; “Everybody’s caught up in a fractured world they can’t even see. What’s happening to them is unfathomable but they have a suspicion. Something unseen is working on them. Using them. They have no power all the time they believe they’re controlling the situation.” For O’Neill, the “unseen hand” is the past which is the present and future too. The family sagas inhabiting their plays
are cursed, invariably reminding us of Mary's words when she delivers the play's statement in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, “How can I? The past is the present, isn't it? It’s the future too. We all try to live says, we “all try to lie out of that but life won’t let us” (p. 86).

As the father of the American drama, Eugene O’Neill brought to the stage a richness of detail and sensitivity, three-dimensional characters carved out of his own personal life and trying to come to terms with their alcoholism, disappointments, and shortcomings. Both O’Neill and Shepard probe the American Dream, poking it at its most vulnerable point – the family. In O’Neill, we sense a powerful psychological engagement, deeply personal emotional experiences, and authenticity over façade – sloughing off Victorian melodramas with its clichéd notions of morality and climax and focusing more on human and sexual relationships with sincere candor. Being influenced by August Strindberg’s theatre of psychology and dream-like symbolism, O’Neill was at the paramount of forging a new kind of drama with its own myriad of experimentation – the modern American drama.

Like Eugene O’Neill, Sam Shepard fits into the classic American brand of domestic realism. Shepard examines a son’s attempted succession to a father’s authority; parental divorce, vagrants, failed farmers, rodeo performers – all strangers in a buried family. However, unlike O’Neill, Shepard doesn’t employ a melodramatic nature – the family myths he employs are more ironic and postmodern. His characters are violent and on the edge of insanity as in *True West* or incest in *Buried Child*. Beneath this drama of alienation and tragedy is a unifying repetition of “that’s already been told” (Bigsby, 2000, p. 172). If Eugene O’Neill adapted the Greek drama to modern times imbuing it with an American context, Sam Shepard re-enacts that drama by summoning the ritual of the myth, figures of elusive mystery, fathers and sons who wander off in the desert in search of the holy grail – the *True West* of the fragmented American identity.

Thus said, O’Neill and Shepard are concerned with dysfunctional families, isolated from the rest of the community; characters who are hardly happy in their encounter with the outside world; characters who have been reduced to a former shell of themselves. Such haunted families with a curse by an ‘unseen hand’ are present in *Desire Under the Elms, Mourning Becomes Electra, Long Day's Journey Into Night, True West, Buried Child*.

The relationship between father and son

At the heart of both playwrights’ obsession with the family lies the relationship between father and son. The plays of both O’Neill and Shepard are
filled with images of disfigured fathers living their past burdens in the present. The settings of these burdens are usually played in a living room or kitchen where the family is reunited during the day.

In *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, O’Neill’s vision of the play was tempered with his own father’s death. James Tyrone, the patriarch of the family, has been accused by his wife Mary and his children Jamie and Edmund, as being a parsimonious man addicted to drinking, a man who is the source of their sufferings. Nonetheless, his confession in the play’s final act reveals him as a victim of his own poverty-filled past and not just a two-dimensional tyrant:

Yes, maybe life overdid the lesson for me, and made a dollar worth too much, and the time came when that mistake ruined my career as a fine actor. I’ve never admitted this to anyone before, lad, but tonight I’m so heartsick I feel at the end of everything, and what’s the use of fake pride and pretence. The God-damned play I bought for a song and made such a great success in--a great money success in - it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune. I didn’t want to do anything else, and by the time I woke up to the fact I’d become a slave to the damned thing and did try other plays, it was too late. (*Long Day*, p. 149-150)

If the image of the father figure in O’Neill tends towards the rigid patriarch who is unable to change himself but the audience still shows empathy because of O’Neill confessional element, in Shepard the father figure is a mysterious patriarch, a wanderer who destroys the family and never lets the audience feel any real empathy towards him. Shepard treats it material more ironically, thus, indicating a postmodern sensibility that questions reality. Shepard’s father are failures, cowards because they dream of the west, a frontier which is dead.

As in O’Neill, Shepard uses autobiographical elements too, the way his own father is a recurrent figure in the plays and participates, directly or indirectly, in the downfall of the family. Shepard’s father figure is a loner, unable to immerse himself in society, and as Shepard said of his own father once: “My Dad lives alone in the desert. He says he doesn’t fit in with people” (*Motel Chronicles*, 2001, p. 56). Although the love-hate relations between father and son are certainly vital to several plays of O’Neill and Shepard, it is only in *Desire Under the Elms* and *Buried Child* where the ancient myth of Oedipal pattern of murdering the father and lusting after the mother is most pervasive. In O’Neill’s *Desire Under The Elms* and Shepard’s *Buried Child*, both plays are critically acclaimed for their common contextual and textual features and fit into the classic invoking myths around them.

Set within and outside of the Cabot farmhouse in Puritan New England in
1850, *Desire Under the Elms* scarcely combines the myths of Greek tragedy with Freudian symbolism. The eerie feeling of the house which oozes a sense of being cursed, a sense which is immediately suggested in the two enormous elms which hang down over either side of the house “with a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing jealous absorption” (p. 318). The elms are a living ghost of Ephraim Cabot’s wife and son Eben’s dead mother, a woman whom Ephraim has slaved to death but who haunts the house like a ghost in form of the elms that “brood oppressively over the house

... like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on its shingles” (p. 2).

Out of his love to his dead mother, Eben nurtures a desire to exact revenge on his father - to take his farm. Unlike his two brothers who have fled from their father’s tyranny in California, Eben decides to stay and fulfil his revenge against the old man. When old Ephraim unexpectedly brings home his third wife, the passionate thirty-five-year-old Abbie, Eben is filled with both hate and repressed sexual desire, a Oedipal desire which gradually grows stronger until it culminates in having quasi-incestuous sex with a “horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love” (p. 36).

Nonetheless, having gotten one better over his father in the sexual battle over Abbie, Cabot turns on him and informs his son that Abbie’s baby will in fact take over and that Abbie has in fact plotted Eben’s loss of the farm. In the light of this turn of events, Eben, defeated, curses Abbie and the child – an act which forces Abbie to smother her baby in its crib as proof of her abiding love for Eben. Eben informs the sheriff of Abbie’s crime, but after doing so is filled with a sense of remorse for the death of the “child o’ our sin” (266). At the end of the play, Cabot is left with the farm, but his triumph is shallow and empty of meaning.

The paradox of Ephraim Cabot is that in developing the farm, he has cut himself off from all human affection, ironically finding solace not with human beings, but with the cows in the barn: “Down whar it’s restful-when it’s warm down t’ the barn. I kin talk t’ the cows. They know. They know the farm an’ me. They’ll give me peace.” (p. 32) Eben’s final words “Sun’s a-rizin\ Purty, hain’t it?” (p. 205) while pointing to the sky as he and Abbie are led away to the gallows, suggests the end of the curse that has plagued the Cabot farm, namely the possessive materialism, with death drawing near while they embrace life. The play symbolizes the power of redeeming love and unlike the trapped characters within each other by the past in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *Desire Under the Elms* ends with a resolution; the death of the son lifts the curse upon the family and its obsession with material possession. Although the son
wishes to escape from his tyrannical father, he is incapable both physically and economically of freeing himself from his influence. It is no small coincidence that like Jamie Tyrone, Simeon and Peter, whose personal developments had been hindered by the old Cabot, and had to finally flee on their own and head west to escape the shackles of their oppressive father.

The other play where the Oedipus complex is deeply seated is *Buried Child*, set on a farm (like *Elms*) in Midwest, typical of Shepard’s plays. Dodge, the emaciated despot of the farm, has managed to subdue the family and bring blight to it. As Shelly, the young girl who is an outsider to this world says to her boyfriend Vince in Act 2, “I thought it was going to be turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kind stuff” (p. 91). The once prosperous farm has been turned into a sterile wasteland by an act of infanticide:

See, we were a well established family once. Well established. All the boys were grown. The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over. Me and Halie here were pointed toward what looked like the middle part of our life. All we had to do was ride it out. Then Halie got pregnant again. Out’a the middle a’ nowhere, she got pregnant . . . We couldn’t allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we’d accomplished look like it was nothin. Everything was cancelled out by this one mistake. This one weakness. (p. 123-124)

Dodge, the tyrannical despot, is the old patriarch who dominates his sons, rendering them lifeless. Of his three natural sons, one (Ansel) is dead, a second (Bradley) is an amputee, while the third (Tilden), Dodge’s oldest son in his late forties, is described as “Something about him is profoundly burned out and displaced”. (p. 12) Bradley, the amputee, misses a limb and he repeatedly attempts to violently clip Dodge’s hair off while he sleeps, and Tilden himself “buries” Dodge’s body with corn – acts that symbolize the urge to destroy the hated father figure.

The alienation of the family members is very prevalent in *Buried*. Vince, Dodge’s grandson, has come back to the farm for a visit, but has not been recognized by Dodge: “You’re no son of mine. I’ve had sons in my time and you’re not one of ‘em” (p. 97). Having arrived at the farm at the opening of Act 2 as a curious, innocent grandson, he is at first absurdly ignored by all the family members, and only after driving west while being haunted by his family ties, he returns totally transformed:

I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I would see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy’s face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. . . . And then his face changed.
His face became his father’s face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father’s face changed to his Grandfather’s face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I’d never seen before but still recognized. (130)

Echoing The Wasteland of T.S Eliot, the crippled males of Buried Child parallel its infertile land, and Dodge’s wife, Halie, perfectly encapsulates the loss of masculinity when she says: “What’s happened to the men in this family! Where are the men!” (p. 124) Furthermore, the ending is dramatized when Vince enters the house by cutting a hole through the screen porch and crawling through it in a symbolic act of rebirth. Dodge has refused to come to terms with the family’s past, and “dodges” it when he states: “My flesh and blood’s buried in the back yard, there’s not a living soul behind me. Not a one” (p. 112). Like the Fisher King in Eliot’s The Wasteland, he is emaciated, unable to move, completely unlike the more virile Ephraim Cabot in O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms. Like the curse in the form of the elms, in Buried Child the curse upon the family is placed by an old tyrant when he decides to callously drown the child, thus, destroying the family:

Dodge: It lived, see. It lived. It wanted to be a part of us. It wanted to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. . . .

Shelly: So you killed him?

Dodge: I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of the litter. Just drowned it. (p.124)

Shepard-self-consciously plays with myths, but unlike O’Neill, the former doesn’t revere them and the classical revolt of the son against authority ends in a post-modern sense of irony. Dodge’s sons, Bradley and Tilden are similar to Simeon and Peter in The Elms in their attempts to usurp Dodge’s role as the patriarch, but whose forays end in dismal failure as they are too feeble to supplant the patriarch. They can either languish under the patriarch’s dominion or flee from him.

The play ends with Tilden exhuming the body of the buried child and bringing it upstairs to Halie; Vince, the grandson, covers the dead Dodge with a blanket and lays down on the sofa staring at the ceiling - the curse has been lifted, a new ruler has taken over the farm and the land awaits to be restored to its former glory and fertility:

Good hard rain. Takes everything straight down deep to the roots. The rest takes care of itself. You can’t interfere with it. It’s all hidden. It’s all unseen. You just gotta wait till it pops up out of the ground. Tiny
little shoot. Tiny white little shoot. All hairy and fragile. Strong though. Strong enough to break the earth even. It’s a miracle, Dodge. I’ve never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it’s the sun. Maybe that’s it. Maybe it’s the sun. (p. 132)

In Halie’s last words, “Maybe it’s the sun,” Henry I. Schvey points out that “the words are profoundly ambiguous and point to the legacy of death in past (the buried child) and future (Vince) despite the surface implications of fertility and renewal” (Schvey, 1991, p. 59). Although it may be possible to understand this speech in terms of symbolic rebirth and renewal, the implications of the speech may be considered also gruesomely ironic as grandson Vince can be seen as a mere replica of his grandfather Dodge, whom he succeeds as the new despot. It is also telling that at the beginning Vince announces to his girlfriend Shelly, “I’ve gotta carry on the line” (p. 9), an announcement where he is not referring to having children with her to keep the line going, but to reconnect with his family’s past, a past so dysfunctional and void of spirituality and virility. The old maimed infertile despot is replaced by a new virile one, the line may carry on.

Both *Desire Under the Elms* and *Buried Child* convey the old epic battle between the God-like father and the courageous son, the rebellion of the son against the patriarch of the house. Nonetheless, while we find the Greek tragedy deeply embedded in O’Neill’s modernist play with the son succumbing to the tyranny of the father, there is still a sense spiritual triumph in the face of death in the end. In Shepard’s play, the struggle has a postmodern sense of irony, both father and son are not virile but rather maimed and devoid of any sense of direction or moral authority - the battle is not epic *per se* but rather meaningless. Nonetheless, in both plays either the despot or the son (or grandson) has to go – the death of one means the survival of the other.

In an interview, Shepard once asked: “How often are you aware that a gesture is coming from your old man?” (Cott, 1987). Clearly, those gestures permeate O’Neill’s and Shepard’s works, with the former adopting myths in the mold of Freudian modernism, whereas the latter utilizing the myths in a Pinteresque post-modernism style, a style likened to Pinter in its power to hint at threats and uncomprehending fear with awkward silences.

**Brothers at odds**

Another aspect which I would like to focus on the course of this paper, is the fragile relationships between brothers in O’Neill’s and Shepard’s plays. Brothers in their plays are not the “old pals” as it seems: hidden within them lurks a deep sense of alienation, anxiety and jealousy. In no other plays is this
deep sense of jealousy and alienation than in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *True West*.

In *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, a partly autobiography of Neill’s own life written in “tears and blood” (foreword), we might agree with Jamie when he tells his father that he and Edmund are “not like the usual brothers” (p. 177), that they stand outside the kind of the conventional relationship of brothers. Edmund is the younger brother, idealistic and rebellious. His illness also makes him the weaker of the two, at least physically. Jamie refers to him as “the Kid,” the brother who must be taught by a more experienced brother. Like Edmund, Jamie has left home in search for adventure too, passed through personal crisis, and has now come back to his father. It is a common theme in both O’Neil and Shepard that the sons embark on an adventure only to return frustrated and devoid of any vitality back to cradle of the family.

As in the relationship between father and son discussed previously, the brothers in O’Neill’s *Long Journey into Night*, struggle too for supremacy and favoritism in the family. More problematic is the character of Jamie who is craving to be better than his younger brother, resemble his father, and attain the unconditional love from his mother, Mary. Mary still hasn’t forgiven him for accidentally infecting the young Eugene with measles and causing his death even though being having been warned that “it might kill the baby” (87), and Jamie’s undying culpability has made him a former shell of himself. He has become dissolute, wasteful with money, whoring and angering his father as much as possible. Few families have had such a tragedy in their past like the Tyrone family - one cannot identify the root of burdens from the past, the culprit - is it the parsimonious father, the jealous older brother with his debauchery or the drug-addicted mother?

Probably, there is no clear answer to that as the psychological reality and the burden of the past is so intense in the Tyrone house, which they have to find refuge in their own respective worlds.

In spite of family feuds, by the end of the play, each of them, admits, implicitly, or explicitly, that in a way or another, they had contributed to the burden that plagues them. The final act of the play can be seen as an act of redemption and worthy of the Greek dramatic sense of “catharsis” (purification) of the soul. All of them admit their past mistakes and even James Tyrone acknowledges his culpability when saying to Edmund that, “maybe life overdid the lesson for me, and made a dollar worth too much, and the time came when that mistake ruined my career as a fine actor.” (p. 149) James Tyrone is the first one to acknowledge that his impoverished past molded him into a stingy man who would fear the poorhouse all his life.
In Long Day’s Journey into Night, Jamie, who is a menace to his brother, takes pride in the fact that he did more for Edmund’s upbringing that anyone else in the family: “Hell, you’re more than my brother,” Jamie tells him. “I made you! You are my Frankenstein!” (p. 4) Jamie is the scornful brother who resents Edmund’s success as a writer, bearing a certain malevolence cloaked by hypocrisy. The whole play discloses the confession of each member of the family, and Jamie’s confession comes in act 4 when he reveals his hidden malevolence to his brother:

*Jamie*: Made getting drunk romantic. Made whores fascinating vampires instead of poor, stupid, diseased slobs they really are. Made fun of work as sucker’s game. Never wanted you to succeed and make me look even worse by comparison. Wanted you to fail. Always jealous of you. Mama’s baby, Papa’s pet! […….] I know that its not your fault, but all the same, God damn you, I can’t help hating your guts! (p. 165)

Out of jealousy, Jamie lures Edmund to his dissolute life, making it seem like the real path of a man, a sucker’s game as he says. If James Tyrone’s burden was his stinginess, Jamie’s fault lies in his jealousy towards his siblings. His parents never let Edmund forget it: “[b]eware of that brother of yours,” Tyrone tells him, “or he’ll poison life for you with his damned sneering serpent’s tongue!”(p. 109). The metaphor of poisoning implies that Jamie, if unchecked, will infect Edmund with moral decay just as he infected his baby brother with measles and defied the warning to stay away from the child.

Jamie’s jealousy for his siblings is also confirmed when Mary tells her own confessional story. According to her account, “He [Jamie] was jealous of the baby,” and “He hated him” (p. 87). Mary also believes that Jamie bears the same jealousy towards Edmund: “He’s jealous because Edmund has always been the baby--just as he used to be of Eugene” (p. 109). In confessing to Edmund, Jamie can no longer suppress the truth that all his life he has competed for his mother’s affection with his siblings. Nonetheless, he loves Edmund more than he hates him. Somehow Jamie finds the courage and strength to warn Edmund to be wary of his jealousy, it is his duty as a brother to warn him:

*Jamie*: But don’t get wrong idea, Kid. I love you more than I hate you. My saying what I’m telling you now proves it. […] What I wanted to say is, I’d like to see you become the greatest success in the world. But you’d better be on your guard. Because I’ll do my damnedest to make you fail. Can’t help it. I hate myself. Got to take revenge. On everyone else. Especially you. Think it over and you’ll see I’m right. […] And when you come back, look out for me. I’ll be waiting to welcome you with that ‘my old pal” stuff, and give you the glad hand, and at the first
good chance I get stab you in the back. (p. 165)

Jamie’s warning is a self-sacrificial gesture, for by cutting Edmund free he increases the chances that Edmund will slough off his tutelage and achieve his ambitions in life. His warning is an act of exorcism, for Jamie is still trying to atone for the death he caused to the baby and the dissolute life he deliberately imparted to Edmund. This jealousy between brothers is only one-way as Edmund is the only person in the family who holds no grudge against his older brother, and whose love Jamie acknowledges by saying: “Give me credit,” he tells Edmund, “Greater love hath no man than this, that he saveth his brother from himself” (p. 166).

One could argue that Jamie and Edmund are fallen angels, but the latter has still a chance to turn his life around and start anew. Both of them lead a dissolute life, Jamie acts as the mentor of his “kid” brother Edmund, infecting him with his debauchery and condescending attitude. Jamie’s jealousy towards Edmund is one of the reasons that causes the fall of the house of Tyrone and acts as a direct representation of the falling apart of the nucleus American family.

Another play that perfectly mirrors the rivalry between brothers is Sam Shepard’s True West. Austin has left his wife and children to write a love story for a Hollywood producer at his mother’s house. He is the ambitious brother of the family, well-educated and hoping to make a breakthrough in his pursuit of Hollywood. On the other side, stands his vagrant brother, Lee, who has just emerged from the desert where he was looking for his father. Though the setting is the mother’s suburban house, the father wanders drunkenly through desert and border towns, acting as a symbol of a rotten wild west with his teeth lost in a bag of Chinese food. Nonetheless, this absent father is still an object of sibling rivalry for brothers Austin and Lee who struggle both to be acknowledged by him. None of this means anything to Austin who seems, in his own way, as disconnected as his sociopath brother, Lee. Both feel remote from the landscape they now inhabit. Lee sees the country as “wiped out” and can only see the domestic behavior of the inhabitants from the outside, looking in the window at the “Blonde people movin’ in and outa’ the rooms, talkin’ to each other. Kinda place you wish you sorta grew up in, ya’ know” (p. 12).

Austin and Lee represent two halves of a divided personality, jealous of each other and trying to usurp each other’s life. Lee starts first usurping Austin’s life by forcing him to help with his screenplay, “Contemporary Western. Based on a true story” (p. 18). Austin counters: “There’s no such thing as the West anymore! It’s a dead issue!” (p. 35). Lee’s Western is a typical masculine myth in which two men chase each other through the panhand for sake of the same
woman they love: “And the one who’s chasin’ doesn’t know where the other one is taking him. And the one who’s being chased doesn’t know where he’s going” (p. 27). The chase is a perfect mirror of the conflict between the brothers, the endless chase of each one’s life and the futility of their struggle. Later on, the brothers switch places as Lee tries to write without the aid of Austin, and Austin lies drunk on the floor and even states that Saul Kimmer, the Hollywood producer, “thinks we’re the same person ... he’s lost his mind” (p. 37). In a well-known statement about the play, Shepard has laid out its general intention when he wrote *True West*:

I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn’t be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It’s a real thing, double nature. I think we’re split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It’s not so cute.

Not some little thing we can get over. It’s something we’ve got to live with. (Coe, 1980, p. 122)

Both brothers are heavily influenced by the Old Man, who plays a pivotal role in the play, although he never appears in it. Both Lee and Austin are motivated by the same fears of insecurities and they have shaped their current life in reaction to their father. Austin, a man of the city and letters, seeks to live a life in opposition to that of his father. Lee has almost become his father, a replica of him, living in the desert and drinking like his father. Just like James Tyrone in *Long Journey*, the Old Man has influenced and shaped the life of his children by providing them an image of a “true West,” a rotten mirage in which the brothers dream to participate. In the beginning of the play, each brother tries to show the superiority of his life, mocking the other of not being “in touch” with reality. Nonetheless, each brother longs the life of the other: Lee longs the secure life and money that the East and Hollywood provide to Austin while the Austin himself longs the independence and the wild life that his brother and father inhabit. Like a split persona, they are also antinomies to each other and unlike in *Long Journey* where jealousy runs only one-way because of Jamie, in *True West* that jealousy is both ways, each trying to usurp the other’s life. Austin wants Lee to teach him to live on the desert because he has come to see that “there is nothin’ down here for me. There never was . . . there’s nothin’ real down here, Lee! Least of all me!” (49). For his part, Lee says that he can’t “save” Austin: “Ya’ think it’s some kinda’ philosophical decision I took or somethin’? I’m livin’ out there ’cause I can’t make it here! And yer bitchin’ to me about all yer success!” (p. 49).

Although they attempt to become each other and join forces together in order to finish the script, the collaboration results a total fiasco in the end.
Unable to complement each other’s abilities, they negate each other in a mutual exclusiveness and a final showdown ensues with the brothers squaring off. The final scene mirrors Lee’s screenplay of two men chasing each other with Austin strangling Lee, a clear symbol that one brother has to go in order to affirm the existence of the other: “I can’t stop choking him! He’ll kill me if I stop choking him!” (58). This tragic scene, although with a deep sense of irony, is foreshadowed earlier in the play when Lee states that the only people that kill each other most are family people: “You go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda people kill each other the most. What do you think they’d say? . . . Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in-law. Cousins. Real American-type people” (p. 23).

Unlike in *Long Day’s*, in *True West* the brothers’ struggle is not just verbal but tends to escalate to violence too. Because the central conflict of the play focuses on the relationship between the brothers, *True West* evokes the above quote from Lee that the largest bulk of hate and jealousy lies within the household, family itself. The brothers’ feud is further accentuated by the non-screen omnipresence of an alcoholic father, an absent mother, who have contributed in blurring the identities of the brothers. At the end the brothers square off, and Shepard evokes “the melodrama of a duel in a western movie” (Crank, 2012, p. 119). By the end the brothers are childish contest becomes serious when they find themselves engaged in an epic clash with consequences they had not imagined. They are interlocked in an epic battle against each other, the kitchen becomes their battlefield, their cage with the brothers trapped in it.

**Conclusion - Dismembering the American Family**

After delving into their most family plays, we might come to the final question - Why did these playwrights write such gut-wrenchingly harrowing portrayals of the family? To exorcise their own ghosts? To redeem themselves? It is as if they feel a need to exorcise their own personal demons, to cleanse themselves of some unutterable guilt and redeem themselves. The family plays of Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard belong to the modern domestic realism in America and are strongly accentuated with elements of autobiography. In this sense, their plays mirror the continuing saga of the American family and, by extension, the nation itself. Both Shepard and O’Neill portray the trials and tribulations of the family and put them up on the stage for public scrutiny.

Furthermore, both O’Neill and Shepard were becoming increasingly disillusioned in a country that is always creating its own myths and demons, an America that many would like to ignore, a place of seething resentments,
aching desires, with the family at the core of this maelstrom of emotions. The fact that American families were and still are becoming, more and more dysfunctional couldn’t escape the vigilant eyes of O’Neill and Shepard and even other playwrights of the 20th century of American drama like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee. The nuclear family has long been part of the American dream, a dream which is slowly decaying inside its nucleus: the road to the American Dream being detoured by dysfunctional family battles.

Thus said, Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard, two of the most renowned playwrights, engaged in portraying the family, dissecting it from very disparate but somehow remarkably familiar ways: the weak, dependent sons of a father they cannot or will not comprehend; brothers at odds who are interlocked in a struggle to gain recognition from their parents; siblings doomed to live on their parents’ house forever. All this drama ends with the thwarting of any ambition to be independent, and the family as an inescapable fate, an endless loop of past and present burdens.

Nonetheless, even the drama they try to portray is accentuated differently according to their own sense of tragedy and tragicomedy: Greek tragedy deeply embedded in O’Neill’s modernist play and the postmodern sense of irony in Shepard’s. As James A. Robinson suggests, “O’Neill and Shepard have sharply contrasting attitudes toward the myths they employ, one reverent and the other ironic; and that difference helps illustrate the opposing attitudes toward authority found in the modern and post-modern phases of American drama.” (Maufort, 1989, p. 152) It is usually argued that Shepard was working more in a postmodernist vein than O’Neill as Shepard’s characters along with his dialogues are more fragmented.

Although they differ in their approach to drama, both Eugene O’Neill and Sam Shepard through their work have attempted to recapture the hopes, promises and dreams not just of the nuclear American family, but also of America itself. By exhuming their own buried families, they have portrayed the burdens of the dysfunctional families and the ravages of hereditary guilt. Disillusion follows and the shattered family is a metonymy of a deracinated American Dream itself.
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