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Dramatic Representation of a Culture of Violence in Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*

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Abstract. I propose an intertextual reading of Sam Shepard's 2000 *The Late Henry Moss* focusing on the play's ritual structure and the different interwoven levels and modes of discourse and narrative that grow out of each other and multiply the non-linear tapestry of the dramatic text. The aim of this "repetition compulsion"—to borrow a Freudian term—of the Moss brothers to retell and re-evoke their father's last days and the quarter-of-a-century earlier family fall-out is to render personal and implicitly cultural traumas into a conceivable and coherent narrative of their past, a form of knowledge and understanding that would permit breaking away and turning towards the future. I argue that the liminal sphere created within the play constitutes a flexible and fluid zone of experimentation for its characters where the remembering and/or (re)enactment of past experiences becomes not only possible, but a necessity. The painful and distorted ways in which the brothers attempt to lay the body/ghost of their father—story-telling, role-play, re-enactment in the form of flashbacks—do not result in mourning and working through the past and its traumatic events, but merely in digging it up and re-enacting it in all its violence. Thus the play becomes a "defamiliarizing" representation of family violence and war trauma that in today's multimedia-image dominated culture have become void of significance.

Keywords: Sam Shepard, *The Late Henry Moss*, culture of violence, separation rituals, doubling

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> It's an amazing dilemma when one begins to discover that you are living your life as a somnambulist . . . that you're living your life in a trance, in a dream. When that occurs, there are amazing things that take place. One is despair, and the other is a sudden awakening. There's another way of seeing and Henry Moss realizes that he's in fact dead although he's walking around. But there's nothing you can do about it, there's no alternative, he's a walking deadman, and that's the tragedy.
>
> (Shepard interview in *This So-Called Disaster*)

Trauma and the complex and distorted ways in which the past haunts and defines the present constitute the central issues of Sam Shepard's 2000 *The Late Henry Moss*. By definition, trauma "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). Such a repetitive pattern characterizes Shepard's work: his open-ended and non-linear narratives re-fashion and re-organize central themes, symbols, and archetypes that make up the quintessential landscape of his plays, film-scripts, and short stories: an American West, the frontier—physical, geographical, social, and mental, populated by traumatized males searching for and trying to come to terms with the numbing legacy of their dysfunctional and violent fathers. Shepard's "Indian country," "a foreign and frightening mental and emotional terrain" (deRose 58) seems to have trapped these characters in a Freudian state of "repetition compulsion" (269), unable to assimilate, conceptualize, and lay these "ghosts" of the past.

"That is what great playwrights do," Larry Eilenberg, artistic director of Magic Theatre emphasizes, "they revisit their themes" (Winn E1).[1] Several critics and reviewers perceived *The Late Henry Moss* merely as a less powerful re-write of many of Shepard's earlier and stronger works such as *True West*, but lacking the intensity of the earlier play's imagery and suspense building.[2] Undeniably, Shepard

[1] San Francisco University professor of theater Larry Eilenberg was the artistic director of Magic Theatre at the time of *The Late Henry Moss*'s all-star-cast world premier with James Gammon as Henry, Nick Nolte as Earl, Sean Penn as Ray, Woody Harrelson as Taxi, Cheech Marin as Esteban, Sheila Tousey as Conchalla, and Shepard as director. Scenes from the production and rehearsal process as well as interviews with the author-director and cast are available on DVD, *This So-Called Disaster*.

[2] Nina daVinci argues that in *True West*, and implicitly in *The Late Henry Moss* "the two brothers have become abstracts of themselves," and she links these plays to the end-seventies *Buried Child* and *Curse of the Starving Class* through their use of food metaphors. Shewey in an article about Shepard's silence during the 1990s, "Hidden in Plain Sight" affirms that Shepard "could be and was accused of merely recycling familiar obsessions and autobiographical fragments to the point of self-parody" (79) in his 2000 play. Ben Brantley's review of the play's 2001 New York production argues that *The Late Henry Moss* "is crowded with echoes from stronger Shepard works" ("No-Good Dad" E1) while in "Giving Up the Ghost" John Lahr asserts: "At its best, Shepard's work is a kind of verbal

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revives several hallmarks found in his earlier works, he revisits many of his themes—some autobiographical—and the mythic geography of the American West with its outdated, anachronistic myths of fertile and virile male figures and of fruitful land and its dysfunctional family structures, drunken and violent fathers, and absent mothers.

The Late Henry Moss proves, however, much more than a simple repetition of Shepard's earlier plays. It builds on his 1970 *The Holy Ghostly*'s central character, a ghost named at that time Stanley Moss, and on his short story "See You in My Dreams,"[3] as well as on Frank O'Connor's story "The Late Henry Conran" (1931).[4] Through this rich intertextual and metatextual tapestry and the "subtly ritualistic nature of the play's action" that mingles the "use of grotesque, mythic archetype[s] with that of ritual and of domestic psychological realism" (Kuharski 502), Shepard creates a Turnerian liminoid and ludic sphere among his own plays and stories as well as other literary works, legends, and myths. He experiments with this highly sophisticated material in order to achieve what he hopes will be "the last play about that [his father's death and, more generally, father-son relationships]" (Shepard interview in *This So-Called*).

Together with critic Paul Taylor, I also hope that "Shepard will persist in his fertile failure to lay his father's ghost" (12), as his plays continue to reveal and focus on deeper and deeper layers and aspects of archetypal themes. Among these they resurface "the most common of all mythical conflicts" (Vernon 138), the struggle between brothers; the father-son conflict; the question of how past and present fuse into one another in the workings of the human mind. Shepard has always been deeply interested in the ways people construct reality and identity through narratives that seem to have lost any firm and stable foundation except that of the traumas of the past and the tragic violence that results from them—the curse and doom of Shepard's male characters.[5] *The Late Henry Moss* picks up the figure

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and visual jazz which surprises you with its penetrating leaps of associations and its startling voices" (108), but that *The Late Henry Moss* lacks this kind of intensity and novelty both in its images and dialogue. A similar argument appears in Brendan Lemon's 2001 review: "In a great Shepard piece images hit you full on" (13), but this play falls short of expectations.

[3] The short story, originally written in 1989, published in the 1996 collection of stories *Cruising Paradise*, is set in the same small town as *The Late Henry Moss* and operates with a similar cast of characters and narrative structure.

[4] In O'Connor's short story Henry Conran, the protagonist, after having been locked out of his house by his wife because of his drunkenness, leaves for Chicago where he lives for twenty-five years. From the marriage announcement of one of his sons he learns that he has been pronounced dead, so he returns to Ireland ready to charge his wife with a law suit for "[t]he character ye [Nellie, the wife] took from me [Henry]" (13). The O'Connor story ends with the wife overcome by "pure relief" (19) accepting Henry back into her life and thus back among the living.

[5] This fascination with identity-construction is also demonstrated by Shepard's more than five-decade career throughout which he has been re-inventing and re-shaping his image and personality from being the rebellious teenager who ran away to New York City in the early sixties to become a rock-

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of the war-traumatized father incapable of re-integrating into and fitting in the family, re-enacting the violence and brutality he saw and inflicted upon strangers within the home. The non-linear and retrospective plot broken up by flashbacks and doubling continuously shifts focus between the two layers of traumas re-manifested. Earl and Ray Moss try to work through the death of their father and their un-assimilated and un-accounted-for family tragedy twenty-five years earlier. The flashback scenes dramatize the narratives about Henry's last days before his death and his struggle to invalidate Conchalla's declaring him dead and his own more and more conscious realization of having lived his life as a walking dead-man.

The play brings both its characters and audiences/readers face to face with "perceptions only half-acknowledged like death" (Gelb 2) through its ritualistic nature that manifests itself on several levels, prominently focusing on the liminal aspects of the transitory processes represented. Henry Moss's journeys from being a "Living Man to Ghost Man to Dead Man" (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 288), a progression of transfigurations that also encompasses another central phase that I will call "Liminal Man." His sons are subjected to and trapped in an extended liminality facing the difficulty and ultimately their incapacity to understand and master the past, undergoing the frustrating process of a failed rite of separation and passage with the "ritual elder" lying dead on his bed.

The three Moss males inhabit a liminal space set apart from society and from each other. They are drifters, always on the move and at the extremes. The temporal and spatial universe of the play is defined by a haunting past, dramatically cut off from any future dimension, situated at the margin of the human and natural environment. The older son, Earl comes to Bernalillo, New Mexico from New York where he is "in the packaging business" (25). He makes boxes, a product that in itself has no content, no usefulness, its emptiness epitomizing the life Earl is leading—without a family or any other connections. Ray, the younger brother, arrives from California, the other extreme of the country. Whatever is revealed about him appears in the form of negation: he does not have a family, he does not even own a car, and he has given up "working with his hands" (11). Therefore, he does not take their father's old tools that Earl offers him as an inheritance, symbolically refusing to take up the legacy.

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and-roll star to discovering himself as a playwright and actor to becoming a director and later film star and short story writer. Several books have been published on Shepard's "identity dance" (Don Shewey's term) such as Leslie A. Wade's *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre* (1997), Martin Tucker's *Sam Shepard* (1992), and Don Shewey's *Sam Shepard* (1997). The playwright has proven elusive and ambiguous when interviewed as well, trying to sustain an extremely private and secretive existence as a writer and private person, but also being one of the most successful stars of the powerfully image- and publicity-oriented Hollywood film-making industry. In one of the few interviews he has granted, he declared that the idea, the need, and the pressure of coming up with an identity is just as puzzling as it is terrifying (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 290).

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The two brothers arrive at Henry's home on the outskirts of Bernalillo, a trailer at the margin of the desert. They embark "on a symbolic homecoming of sorts" (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 289) that—as usually happens in Shepard's plays—fails to become a joyful reunion.[6] They enter classic Shepard territory, "the wide empty country of the dead father and the absent mother" (daVinci 3). Henry's trailer represents a doubly liminal setting. It is situated at the edge of a little South-Western town, by the desert. It constitutes Henry Moss's self-imposed Turnerian "seclusion camp" where he stopped after having beaten his wife to near-death and having left his family, his "personal exile and asylum" (Kuharski 501). His long drive with the car windows open when he gradually lost connection with everything surrounding him meant his isolation from family, society, and natural environment. As he recalls in the flashback scenes, he drove with the wind in his eyes and face, with "no map," "[n]o destination" (112) till he ran out of gas—an ironic remark as "he ran out on everything" (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 288): on all his human relationships and contacts. He isolated himself in a trailer with "barred windows," "like a jail cell" (5). This kind of spatial seclusion is consistent with Henry's in-between state: dead but not yet buried, within the flashbacks "walking and talking," "yelling and breathing" (77) but having been declared dead by Conchalla, he becomes caught up in a futile struggle to prove his existence.

His trailer also becomes a liminal space within which the brothers' rite of passage and their mimetic rivalry unfolds. The desert and Henry's hideaway within it become for them—just like the mother's home forty miles from Los Angeles for Lee and Austin in *True West*—the scene of their final confrontation with their father and with each other. It constitutes the site of their struggle to lay to rest not only the ghost of the parent but also the ghost of the past trauma that haunts them and seems to be shaping their lives and their behavior like a kind of Fatum or Hubris determining the destiny of heroes in ancient Greek tragedy.

For Henry, the desert functions as a seclusion place where he is, at least for a while, spared the pressure of having to validate his existence. The only person he has some kind of relationship with, Esteban, the former drunk perceives the desert with the sound of coyotes and soft music from deep Mexico as the space of peace. Both Henry and Esteban have proven unable to cope with human society and they have chosen to live on the margin only occasionally communicating even with each other. Language has lost its functionality here for the desert "is indifferent and inhuman" (Baudrillard, *America* 6). It is located outside the limits of the human gaze and sound, "outside the sphere and circumference of desire" (Baudrillard, *America* 63).

[6] See, for example, Vince's homecoming in *Buried Child*, both brothers' arrival to the mother's house in LA in *True West*, Eddie's eternal returns in *Fool for Love.*

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Esteban flees the desire to belong and experiences a purification from any sense of humanness and temporality. As the "beautiful women" vanished from his life when he was a drunk more than thirty years earlier, back in his "pueblo," he has now disappeared from society to this place which proves "a natural extension of the inner silence of the body" (Baudrillard, *America* 68) and of time. Esteban represents the materialization of absence: he does not deny his past like Henry Moss does, but his past does not haunt him with a sense of doom that defines Henry's present. He exists in a void and embodies non-presence characterized by imitation, the Baudrillardian "simulacrum": the imitation of drinking, a pretend-drunkenness that he puts on for Henry's sake, the imitation of womanly care and providing of nourishment in the form of the bowls of soup that he keeps balancing across the stage.[7]

The dramatic quality of the desert, however, surfaces exactly within the Mosses' sensation of a failed existence. In their case, this geography of endless nothingness turns into a Turnerian liminal space: cut off from familial and social relations, suspended between past and future, that holds both the possibility and the danger of permanently trapping them in its own schema of absence with its lurking sense of non-existence and of identity turning into something fluid and elusive. Baudrillard asserts that "you always have to bring something into the desert to sacrifice, and offer it to the desert as a victim" (*America* 63). The Mosses are forced to sacrifice their sense of self and the secure illusion of an autonomous and stable subjectivity.

The West and the desert for the Shepardian male characters always represent a utopian place of endless and limitless possibilities for drifting and movement rather than for settling down and creativity. Like the sons in *Buried Child* who run towards some undefined westward destination only to realize that changing geographical locations do not automatically sever them from their biologically and genetically determined fate; or the members of the Tate family in *Curse of the Starving Class* who all fantasize about escaping to some exotic land; the brothers in both *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss* prove to be doomed to "wind up on the same desert" (53) as their fathers, as the mother in *True West*, returning from a seclusion of her own, from Alaska, phrases it with sarcastic resignation.

In *True West*, Austin and Lee struggle with each other in their vicious attempts to appropriate each other's roles, and then against each other for a spot on the endless desert that holds their father and functions as the setting of the "true-to-life Western" of Lee's script. The 1980 play ends with the haunting image of the

[7] Baudrillard asserts that America itself has been a simulacrum from the beginning as it is the "sudden and unprecedented materialization" of the utopian thoughts of Europe (*America* 79), it builds the real out of ideas and materializes concepts as opposed to the European way of thinking that functions vice versa, conceptualizing reality and drawing ideas from the material environment. Thus, according to Baudrillard, America is the paradox of the "realized utopia" (*America* 79).

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two brothers facing each other as if eternally suspended in a postmodern simulacrum of a Western gunfight, clinging to and reciprocally destroying each other like the eagle and cat in the parable concluding *Curse of the Starving Class*. Earl and Ray Moss come to their father's trailer to bury the dead Henry, and thus they enter both the liminal space of their deceased parent and start a rite of passage of their own. By forcing his brother to "[go] back through the whole story [of Henry's last days] . . . one more time" (22), and by making him confront and face the long-ago events that led to both Henry's and Earl's departure from the family home, Ray opens up the process that could lead to either their redemption and final laying of their ghosts or their inescapable damnation.

The brothers "are stuck in boyhood, dysfunctional in the current jargon" (daVinci 3) for they never grew up to become lovers, husbands, or fathers. Earl declares in the opening line of the play that "I was never one to live in the past" (6) calling to mind Cathy Caruth's argument regarding the necessary forgetting of all traumatic events: "it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it [trauma] is experienced at all" (17). This rejection of the past is reproduced verbatim in Ray's closing line: "Well, you know me Earl—I was never one to live in the past. That never was my deal. You know—You remember how I was" (113), continuing the pattern of repetition. The brothers mirror each other—like the twin brothers in Albee's 2008 *Me, Myself, and I*—demonstrating a crisis of memory: what they have experienced and what kind of role model Henry proved to be are too awful to contemplate, or even remember. But they also double their parents, thus enacting the exact opposite of their own words. As Abbott argues, "Shepard's wanton sons transform themselves and their environment in ways that isolate and protect them from the world and, just as important, from their fathers" (198). They are terrified of becoming their father. Still, both Earl's and Ray's violence and drunken stupor are reminiscent of the late Henry Moss's behavior. They seem to be compulsively repeating the brutalities that Henry committed and re-enacting their childhood trauma of family violence that for them comes into existence and is acknowledged in its reproduction. Though Earl repeatedly rejects being equated with Henry, first warning Ray not to confuse him with their father, then cautioning Esteban that he "[is] nothing like the old man" (83), he does behave exactly like Henry both in his drinking and in his violent outbursts.

Earl is also forced into a doubling of his mother: the story of the terrible "blowout" of the night when Henry beat his wife and then fled the scene, is not only recreated verbally in Ray's and Henry's recollections, but also replicated on stage with Earl cast in the role of the victim, thus experiencing the traumatic event not only through appropriating the persona of the victimizer, but also becoming the protagonist of the victimized mother's narrative. For the brothers are forced to come to terms with the memories of their mother's beating by their father that they witnessed, a trauma that in Shoshana Felman's words "[has] not settled into

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understanding or remembrance, [an act] that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, [an event] in excess of [their] frames of reference" (5). They now witness a crisis of representation, since language and story-telling prove inadequate in reporting what has happened. Therefore, they subconsciously are driven to role-playing in order to "testify." Felman differentiates testimony from the mere reporting of events arguing that "what constitutes the specificity of the innovative figure of the witness is . . . not the mere telling, not the mere fact of *reporting* of the accident, but the witness's [sic!] readiness to become himself a *medium of testimony*—and a *medium of the accident*" (emphasis in the orig., 24). Pre-existing categories and forms of narrative fail to convey the emotional charge of the events of that night. Being involved, unable to remain detached and objective, the sons fail in all their attempts to bear witness and thus transform the trauma into something comprehensible. They compulsively re-enact the night inscribing the trauma onto each other's bodies, transforming the narrative of family violence into a shocking dramatization.

Accordingly, once familiarized with the events of Henry's last days, as he becomes aware of the discrepancies among the different versions of the story, Ray decides to appropriate not only the role of the "detective" and storyteller he has been playing so far, but also a role within the story he has been trying to piece together: that of the violent "master" of the house. The role model was Henry Moss himself. He forces Earl onto his hands and knees and makes him clean the floor—like their mother used to scrub the yellow floor of their childhood kitchen—kicking and hitting him until he flees under the sink, just as their mother did trying to escape Henry's blows. Ray verbally and physically bullies Earl in the same vicious and brutal, and at the same time, unmotivated and inexplicable manner as his model, their father treated his wife. He assumes the role of the perpetrator whose "brutalities appear to be partly mitigated by his own trauma, which he is acting out again and again" (Buse 178). He decides to take possession of the trailer symbolically filling the so-far empty refrigerator with groceries.[8] As soon as he declares that he is going to stay, Ray is transformed into a double of his father who needs a victim to brutalize, and finds one in Earl, reduced to the state of the surrogate victim.

The liminal space Ray and Earl enter has a transformative effect upon them in the sense and to the degree that the place itself is transformed: it changes into an earlier version of itself through the flashbacks, a space haunted by the ghost of the still-living Henry and the mysterious powers of giving and taking life emanating from Conchalla, and into a metaphoric representation of the setting of the whole

[8] The refrigerator also fulfills a symbolic function in *Curse of the Starving Class* where it is systematically opened and closed by the Tates and becomes a "member" of the family, functioning as the silent interlocutor and faithful listener to the soliloquies and monologues the characters deliver as failed attempts at communication.

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family's traumatizing night decades earlier. This "fluidity" of the play's liminal space also characterizes the dimension of time. The events comprise two days which the brothers spend trying to reconstruct the story of their father's last days and fighting over the validity of their memories. Their reunion occasioned by such a culturally deeply ritualized event as the death of a parent should be a time of mourning and grief, of saying good-bye as Esteban suggests they should do so that the dead will not come back to haunt them. The departing of the father should involve rituals of separation, but the brothers only ironically refer to such rites. Ray comes up with the idea of burying their father themselves as they would do in the case of a dog (16-17)—echoing Albee's *The Sandbox* with the not-yet-dead Grandma placed in the sand to die. Earl does state that they should feel honored that they "have this small time alone with him [Henry]" (19) and that they should "treasure" that time before the morticians come, but his sarcastic comment of Henry being "processed into the funeral business" (15) undercuts the sincerity of his earlier remarks. He also firmly refutes the accusation of having spoken to his father while he was alone with the corpse for three days (15). Thus, his saying good-bye to the dead has negative connotations since only crazy people would act like that. Neither does he see any point in Esteban's lament when the neighbor complains that they were not present when "Mr. Henry" was finally taken away.

For Earl the time spent with the corpse is defined by Conchalla's instructions that nobody should touch the body for three days, which he obeys. His activity is reduced to retelling the story of Henry's last days, a narrative subverted by Ray's insistent investigations. For Earl's distorted version omits Henry accusing him of non-action in the family crisis. And again, the older son can be blamed for his passivity as in the present he is caught up in a perverse and paralyzing necrophilic voyeurism.

Ray perceives the time in the trailer as the occasion for a possible passage. He wants to see "the whole picture" (42), to understand what really happened to his father on the mysterious fishing trip he took before he died. He also wants to come to terms with his father's passing and with the family's past that led to the patriarch's "abdication" of his role as husband and father. For the past haunts them all, the Moss males seem to be trapped in time capsules where the passage of time has been suspended and the dimension of the future obliterated, a condition that Ray tries to break away from by inquiring into the family history. His mode of engagement with the situation demonstrates his willingness to work through the traumas they have suffered. So he questions Earl and Esteban about Henry's last days and even tracks down Taxi and interrogates him about the events preceding and following the fishing trip. All these reports, however, fail to transform into comprehensible and believable knowledge. The only conclusion Ray can draw from his inquiries is that stories are nothing but "fabrications" (68), family histories constitute the constructs of "a pack of liars" (68), and that he could find nothing to

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confirm the validity of one or the other version of the past. The "reporters" all prove unable to bear witness adequately, paradoxically due to their attempted objectivity and detachment.

Ray makes a conscious and determined effort to "get at the heart of things" for "[s]omebody, somewhere along the line has to try to get at the heart of things" (68). But trauma by its very nature resists being represented directly. So Ray himself becomes a mitigator of "fabrications" as he offers Henry's "irreplaceable" (91) 1931 childhood pictures to Taxi to be used as the base of a new family history that would rely on more than words for its truth value. He realizes that everything—memories, the stories people tell, even identity and origins—are mere constructs fashioned and re-fashioned according to one's state of mind and circumstances, and that neither the photos nor the details he forced out of Taxi about his father's strange trip and even stranger passing brought him any closer to a truthful testimony about their past and present condition.

Through Taxi's recollections the story of Henry's last days comes to life on stage in the form of flashbacks. Shepard ingeniously uses the theatrical convention of changing light-effects to merge present and past, and alternate between different layers of time, so that the father—a corpse in the present of the events, placed on the bed in the alcove—can come to life within the play not only as a verbal but as a physical actuality to testify "in the flesh" to his last days alive.[9] In these flashback scenes the title character is allowed to act out the story different versions of which have been presented by Earl, Esteban, and Taxi. He becomes the protagonist of the dramatized narrative, while Ray turns into an outsider, on the margin, "invisible" to the ones re-enacting past events. During the flashbacks—separated from the linear, chronological unfolding of the story—Ray seems to shift into a trance-like state, a traditional theater convention that fulfills a double function here: It suggests that the scene displayed on stage is a dramatization of memory that Ray later scrutinizes and questions. The seemingly unconscious state in which he slips symbolically also refers to his inability to "see," understand, and master the trauma, while suggesting his liminal separation as well.

The younger son plays the role of the neophyte who, together with his older brother, is forced into the ritual of Henry's death where they both try to cope. Earl attempts to deal with the situation by following the instructions of the self-appointed ritual elder Conchalla, and later by adopting and re-enacting Henry's habitual behavior: he makes Esteban take him to all the bars his father used to visit, gets drunk, and similarly to what Henry himself would do, abuses the helpful neighbor both verbally and physically. He proves to be the type of neophyte who learns, or rather should learn by re-enactment and role-playing.

[9] Shepard also uses the technique of "reviving" the dead father in *Fool for Love* where the father sits in a chair throughout the action of the play and comments on his children's acts and statements, but remains an inactive observer and reviewer of the unfolding story.

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Ray attempts to cope with his father's death by ways that can be interpreted as what Turner calls "ritual instruction." He summons all who possess information—Earl, Esteban, Taxi—to tell him the story of Henry's life and death. And once this type of instruction proves inefficient all stories having been denounced as "fabrications," he changes strategies: he steps into the story himself appropriating Henry's role and re-enacting the traumatizing night that destroyed their family. This way he hopes to gain some control by fashioning the course of the story according to his own understanding of it. He first tries to recreate the past on a narrative level, but by act three he steps onto the level of action and into the center of events that set all of them into the liminal phase they have been unable to transcend and that has suspended time.

Earl still attempts to keep the past invisible, and thus as if nonexistent, and to continue to live in the present that is not destined to progress towards any future goal. He, however, is forced by his brother, and as it is revealed in the final flashback, by his father, to face up to the accusation of having run instead of trying to stop the violent attack on his mother. Henry charges his older son with inaction, making it impossible for him to entirely turn his back on the recollected events. Ray, who has been cast in the role of the victim as the abandoned younger son, decides to fight his brother and take control over not only the present but also the past forcing it into the foreground. And he also fails in this attempt. Although liminality could offer the ludic possibility of rearranging and recreating "reality," Ray—instead of taking control of the present by transforming the past into something onto which a future could be constructed—is overwhelmed by it. The past becomes an alternate reality that invades the present and changes it into a horrifying doubling of a narrative of violence and death. Instead of exorcising "the dead father's toxic grip" (Kuharski 500) and finding Turnerian "communitas" with Earl that could protect them by turning their violence against something or somebody other, their mimetic desire to own control over the past transforms them into enemies. Being unable to turn against their father or find a surrogate victim, a scapegoat, they remain suspended in the liminal state of fighting each other and duplicating their violent role model, the late Henry Moss.

Through mirroring Ray brings about this doubling. In the third act flashback Henry himself retells the story of the night he left his family, a recollection that leads to his understanding of his liminality, rather than to an absolution. He finally recognizes and admits, first of all to himself, that on the night he beat his wife he "killed himself" (112) emotionally and spiritually, a recognition that sets him free from suspended time and makes his physical death possible that "twenty-five years later is a mere formality" (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 282). He acknowledges that both the grief he saw in his beaten wife's eyes and Conchalla's pronouncing him dead were accurate assessments of his state. His "deaths"—the physical one as well as the emotional and spiritual ones a quarter of a century earlier—were only stages

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in his liminality launched by some trauma in the past that is untraceable and impossible to pinpoint in time, the "curse" that so often befalls Shepard's characters.

Henry Moss exemplifies those father figures in Shepard's body of work who have been afflicted by their participation in the Second World War. Henry, irritated by both the fact that Conchalla pronounced him dead in front of the whole jail community and thus everybody now thinks he is, and by Taxi's obvious inability to understand him, bursts out in a soliloquy of fragmented and elliptical sentences rapidly thrown one after the other concomitantly revealing and concealing information about his past:

> What did I ever do to deserve this [Conchalla repeatedly emphasizing that he was dead]? I've led an honorable life for the most part. I've served my country. I've dropped bombs on total strangers! I've worked my ass off for idiots. Paid my taxes. There's never once been any question of my—existence! Never once. It's humiliating! A man my age—to be forced into this kind of position. I'm too old to having [sic!] to prove I'm alive! (79)

It is not revealed what or for whom Henry worked, it can only be deduced from such outbursts that he served in the armed forces and fought in the Second World War. Similarly to Weston Tate in *Curse of the Starving Class*, for Henry Moss the war represents that traumatizing event in the past that displaced him and made him unable to communicate or make contact with his family and the world around him. He "is crippled emotionally" (Weiss 7); the only thing that still connects him to his family is the fact that they are the ones whom he uses to externalize his rage and violence. After the war he is unable to fit into a culture and society that expects from him so radically different behavior than the destruction he witnessed and inflicted upon others. He is marginalized, the outsider, forever longing to belong and wishing for a central position. His wife's decision to lock him out of the house becomes the physical materialization of his emotional and spiritual state, thus it leads to such a devastating outburst of rage and violence on Henry's part.[10]

The language describing that night of crisis as the "big blowout" with "explosions" and "windows breaking" (8) creates an imagery reminiscent of war-zone descriptions suggestive of the fact that Henry did not only "drop bombs on total strangers" (79) but also on his family. For him—caught up in the liminality

[10] The same act of locking the war-traumatized father out of the house and the destructive consequences constitute the opening scene of *Curse of the Starving Class:* Wesley, the teenage son of the family is gathering the debris scattered on stage and he is trying to fix the door that Weston, the father broke the previous night, describing, in one of the most poetic soliloquies in Shepard's oeuvre, the event as an invasion not merely of the house but also of his spirit and mind.

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inflicted upon him by the war—the family members were just as different and strange as the "Japs" (79) he had killed. In conformity with the pattern of doubling that characterizes the whole play, that tragic night is also presented in two versions and two different time-frames, by two characters and from their different points of view: First, by Ray, he himself being already a "copy" of his father, and by Henry in the last flashback. Ray is in control of the "present" time on stage, but Henry dominates the flashbacks. The play thus turns into a dialectic of the two narrative levels, a fight to determine who owns the past based on the delusive hope that whoever wins, that will control the present.

With his physical death, Henry's suspended time is terminated but not transcended. His liminality has been extended to incorporate his sons: time has stopped still for them and they have been propelled into the permanent "state of shock" (Shepard's term) to which Henry's death does not bring any closure. The illusion of the end, that Baudrillard defines as part of the fantasy of a linear history now moving in reverse and wiping out all the traces of the twentieth century (*Illusion* 5), deconstructing the illusion of well-defined and stable identities as possible "end products," is annihilated by doubling: Earl and Ray have become mirror images of their parents, alternatively taking on the role of the victimizer and that of the victim. They are "doomed" (Henry's favorite word to describe his own state, a term he wants to monopolize—33) to live within a perpetuated liminality they have inherited, without the guidance of a "ritual elder."

The ritualistic structure of the play is made even more complex by the characters who function as the "mysterious Other," who participate in the recreation of the past and alternately fulfill the role of "ritual elders." Esteban, the friendly and caring neighbor functions as a surrogate wife to both "Mr. Henry" and his sons: balancing bowls of soup from his trailer to Henry's and cooking menudo to heal the hangover of the Moss males. He also takes on the role of the story-teller revealing different aspects of Henry's life. Their conversations seem to have been made up of the stories Esteban told about his former life, as Henry denied having had a past. Besides being a surrogate caretaker, Esteban also possesses certain knowledge and skills that make him an appropriate guide in the process the Moss sons are undergoing with the death of their father. He cautions them to say good-bye to the dead appropriately. He also seems to be in possession of the accurate data about Henry's life in Bernalillo and his death for he is the only one whose vision and perception is not blurred and corrupted by alcohol. He says he always just pretended to drink together with Henry, never actually drank, a confession that for Ray makes Esteban a "pretender" and a fake, invalidating him as a source of information or guidance.

He is perceived and used both by Henry and then by Earl and Ray not only as a substitute wife in the sense that he feeds them and cares for them when they are drunk, but also as a testing ground and object of their erupting violence. They

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abuse him verbally with their ironic remarks and vicious attacks as well as physically, trying to cast him in the role of a scapegoat. Esteban, however, defies these attempts by being aware of the position he is cast in as the object of the Mosses' violence and objectifying gaze, and thus nullifying their efficiency. Henry and implicitly his sons need him: he relates the story of how Henry used to stand by the window and wait for him to come. Esteban also creates the most ironic image of that type of male whose existence depends on whether the object of his gaze accepts being caught in this position and thus sustains the observer or rejects it thus depriving the observer of his "food":

> EARL What satisfaction could you possibly get outta serving a man who was so damn ungrateful!
> ESTEBAN It is like—feeding lifestock—. . . Birds. . . . They do nothing. They—live, that is all. They are just there. But they need you. They look to you. They wait for you by the fence. They know you bring them something. Every day they are there at the same time—waiting. They know the hour you will appear. Mr. Henry, he use [sic!] to wait for me like that. (85)

He consciously accepts and subjects himself to the Mosses' abuses, therefore becoming an "inefficient" victim.

Taxi, the other strange male in the Mosses' story, appears in both the present of the narrative on stage and the recollective flashback scenes. He is a clown-like carnivalesque figure summoned by Ray to tell the story of the fishing trip; act two is dedicated exclusively to Taxi's interrogation by Ray. But any story he tells or recalls is finally dismissed as a lie or a "fabrication," as Taxi is weak and empty. He does not even have a name, he is only identified by his job as a taxi driver; the Mosses occasionally refer to him sarcastically and ironically as "Taxi-man." He possesses neither the intelligence nor the understanding to make him able to sustain the validity of his stories—whether they are about Henry or Taxi himself. He is terrified of Ray and ready to deny anything, even his origins, once Ray questions them. He even moves according to Ray's commands, who seems to be playing upon Taxi as a playwright or a director would play upon the actors playing different roles on stage. Taxi is a true clown; a puppet moving and talking according to the wishes of the Mosses who become the puppet-masters using Taxi as a "substitute speaker" (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 286). And when he fails to convince them of the truth of the words they themselves force him to utter, they turn him into a punching bag and he becomes the victim of their vicious mockery.

"Henry, immobilized because of his ghost-status" needs Taxi "to take up the question of his essence" (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 286) and argue the case of his being alive with Conchalla. But Taxi fails because he does not understand the

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essence and point of Henry's request. For him, being alive means walking and talking, yelling and breathing; his only ambition is to leave the taxi-driving business and become a pizza delivery man so that he can take pineapple combos to girls' dormitories at night. He also fails as a veritable storyteller: when Ray questions his identity, he tries to prove himself as a Texan through the fact that, according to their family history, Comanches slaughtered his great-great-grandmother. Shepard himself ironically remarks in *This So-Called Disaster* that Comanches did not slaughter anybody, just as Ray reacts to the story of the murdered ancestor: "Sounds like a story to me. . . . A fabrication, passed down from one generation to another . . . there's really no way to verify this little story of yours, is there? This little history?" (67-68). Instead of providing Ray with a narrative to which he could relate, Taxi's stories are transformed into a platform and example for the development of a thesis of narratology: stories are fabrications and even our reality is created through the constructs we build without practically any factual basis. Taxi, the displaced Texan, who cannot fit in even though his aspirations are less than down-to-earth they are so instinctual and basic, becomes the showcase of what Roudané calls "the rupture between the signifier and the signified" ("Sam Shepard" 281) where the authority and validity of texts becomes negotiable. This questionable quality of Taxi's stories spreads and problematizes the entire narrative presented on stage, functioning as a metatextual comment emphasizing the all-defining importance of interpretation and point of view.

Conchalla Lupina, the one female character in the play, only appears in recollected time, in the flashback scenes as if she were not entirely real, not even in the constructed universe on stage, but rather a "fabrication" of Henry's imagination, endowed with supernatural powers and superhuman insight into matters of life and death. She is doubly the mysterious and dangerous Other: she is the epitomized female with mythic powers of both giving and taking life and, at the same time, her ethnicity (Native American) sets her apart from the other characters as somebody different, with a closer and still authentic relation to nature, to life, and to death, a "knower," "doer," and "revealer." If Henry Moss goes through the transition of Living Man to Ghost Man to Dead Man, as Roudané argues, the second two phases being aspects of his Liminal Man state, Conchalla functions as the "ritual elder" in this process of passage.

Conchalla becomes the enhanced representation of how the Moss males perceive women: as sexual objects, strong opponents, mysterious and teasing, therefore desired and feared at the same time. In her presence, all the men are overcome by primitive fears and "a postmodern discomfort" due to "a sense of profound isolation from one's past, one's environment, and one's spiritual self" (deRose 67) that she has the power to make them conscious of. She pronounces Henry dead and forces him into a deeply troubling existential crisis of either fighting her to prove he is alive or accepting her authority and surrendering to her

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powers. And Henry, having fought this kind of battle with his wife twenty-five years earlier, finally recognizes his defeat and subjects himself to the mysterious Native female.

"Doubly other and doubly desirable" and feared, just like the female characters in Shepard's *Silent Tongue* "by virtue of their gender and their exotic race" (deRose 69), Conchalla possesses powers that make the men around her confess to their being active agents of their own destinies and acknowledge their denial and ignorance. She is able to link their past to their present. In the case of the Moss males, however, she does not project a future even though she has proven capable of giving life: she has brought the fish back to life, but only to gulp it down immediately afterwards, displaying a somewhat clichéd image of the enchanting female cannibalizing the male who falls into her trap.

The two mysterious Others, Esteban and Conchalla also "handle" the liminal symbols of the play. Esteban is in charge of feeding the patriarch and his sons, while Conchalla proves to be the grand master of movement, of cleansing ceremonies, and of death. The food offerings that Esteban makes and Henry as well as his sons refuse over and over again—similarly to Dodge who in *Buried Child* refuses to eat the bouillon prepared by the "surrogate" wife Shelly—are unable to re-empower and fortify the fallen patriarch exactly because of their source. Esteban is himself a simulacrum, a substitute, not the veritable "giver of life."

Conchalla controls Henry's life and death, and also the narratives referring to Henry's last days: she remains the only one whom Ray does not interrogate, her version is never heard, thus a mystery impossible to verify or to refute. She empowers Henry to be able to recall the events of the traumatizing night when he "died," and she offers him the opportunity to take a new perspective upon his life. And she appears to put the play itself into motion: the first two acts start with Henry and Conchalla dancing across the stage to the sounds of a "very sultry Mexican rumba" (5) and then "a more spirited mariachi piece" (47). She also controls movement in the flashback scenes: she bounces Esteban and hums Henry to death. She remains outside Henry's "toxic grip." She is the master of ceremonies of Henry's process of dying but she is protected from its contaminating field: she performs the ritual cleansing necessary to separate herself from the dead by submerging in the hot water of the bathtub, the female and life-giving element that empowers her.

Cleansing the trailer that "stinks" and providing food appear to be Ray's preoccupations as well. But once again, he is doomed to failure. In his case the scrubbing of the floor does not lead to purification but to a reproduction of the family's tragic night, just as the colors of the blanket covering Henry's corpse—red and yellow—reproduce the colors associated with that traumatizing event: the yellow scrubbed floor tiles with the mother's red blood smeared all over them.

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The liminal symbols used within this shifting and multi-layered narrative involve all the senses. The smell of the menudo cooked by Esteban on stage fills the auditorium.[11] Ray refers several times to the fact that the corpse stinks—just like Halie sarcastically notices in *Buried Child* that Dodge "is smelling up the house with [his] putrid body" (32), and that the whole place should be cleaned, or better yet, torn down, symbolically alluding to the fact that the legacy of the father cannot be mastered, and neither can the traumas that he inflicted upon his sons, therefore they should be wiped out of memory without a trace.

Sight and the eyes play a central role in setting apart the dead from those alive—a symbol that also constitutes the focal point of *Eyes for Consuella.* Henry's asking Taxi to look into his eyes and check whether he can discover any traces of life parallel the scene when Ray checks Earl's eyes at the end of act two, the only time he steps out of the trance-like state he is placed in during the flashbacks, stating: "I see you Earl. I see you now!" (81). Sight here also means understanding: by experiencing the flashback, Ray learns that—contrary to what his brother told him earlier—Earl arrived to the trailer before their father's death. In this context, however, "I see you" suggesting insight turns into an ironic statement, proving that eyes can be deceiving and the picture one perceives is conditioned by one's mental, emotional, and spiritual state. Touching appears with a negative connotation as well: there exists a severe interdiction in relation to the corpse. Even the funeral attendants dealing with Henry's body, struggle with the task, dropping the corpse on the floor before they are able to take it out of the trailer. Henry's body seems to be clinging to his surroundings just like his violence clings to and is resurrected in the next generation.

The ritualistic structure of the play with its juxtaposed and intermingled multiple layers of narrative mixing present and past, shifting the focal point from one generation's rite of passage to the older generation's ritual death and back again, functions as a mirror for Shepard's own attempts to exorcise the ghost of his own life, the memory of his father. At the same time, it also sheds new light—in the true sense of T.S. Eliot's thesis that every new work of art re-interprets each previous one—on the large variety of intertextually evoked texts from ancient Greek tragedies to King Lear's lament: "O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!," tragically and ironically contradicted by the Mosses' story; to the corpse on stage reminiscent of the final image of *Buried Child:* the dead patriarch lying on stage and the corpse of the baby in Tilden's arms. It lures audiences into a liminoid sphere and forces them to take a new look at the rearranged and "de-familiarized" image of the American family disrupted by implosion and trauma, and feeding on itself in a cannibalistic and self-destructive manner; and the old myths upon which American culture has been constructed. The Mosses' life story is turned into

[11] Shepard specifies in the stage directions that the cooking should be real.

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information to be gathered and subjected to endless speculations, the site of total uncertainty. Shepard discloses a liminal culture where this ritual phase is only perceived as marginality and alienation rather than as a possibility for reconstruction and the achieving of a new perspective. It draws us into the ludic and ironic sphere of Shepard's works that have the power—like Conchalla's gift of breathing life into the dead—to reshape the whole literary universe, a heredity Shepard—unlike the Mosses theirs—accepts and reinterprets.

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