

Introducing Sam Shepard

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After the civil war, drama in the United States of America was always incapable of keeping pace with the progress in other branches of literature, because of the crude realities of war and the swift development of industry. Later the puritan prejudice against theatre had completely vanished and great many plays had been produced. Further more, the stage techniques too improved tremendously. Playwrights and stage managers tried their best to make improvements in setting, lightning and other things. The growing interest of the dramatist brought out the realistic and social dramas. But drama and theatre developed fully only in the twentieth century.

The period preceding the end of the nineteenth century was a period of dearth in the history of English drama too. The theatre had become very poor and the standard of drama had fallen. In twentieth century, American drama was developed by the inexplicable impact of Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg. Their experiments were on naturalism and realism. In American theatres, some playwrights were concentrating on expressionism, some on socialism and some on the absurd. These concepts were shaped by the influence of the political theories of Marx and the psychology of Freud.

The characteristics of the realistic plays can be analyzed, as that it is clearly understood, the heroes in realistic plays are ordinary human beings like teacher, businessman, salesman, musicians and so on. It generally deals with the ordinary life; it does not deal with aristocrats like kings and nobles. Hence naturally, the setting is not a lofty palace or a king's court. It is simply an office room or a back-yard, dining hall, drawing room. Nowadays, realism reflects crime or violence in a society in different ways. Realism, acknowledged crime and violence are on the performed stage in a different form. Coming to the style of writing, in a realistic play the language must be simple; it may be ugly or slangish. It depends on the individual characters. For acting does not need any extraordinary skill. Further more realists are usually rebels; they are bold and free to express the absolute truth without any exaggeration. They almost avoid being satirical and portray life as it is.

The realistic plays are sadistic. The spectator sometimes feels uncomfortable or uninvolved, as it becomes obscene. Often, realism limits itself to the petty and ugly and it is immoral in its outlook too. Whatever the charges against realism may be, took hold of the stage long ago. The word realism is not a new coinage, entirely; it had been getting popularity as a name of a particular form of art. It might have been applied to the reality of violent ideas. Schlegel and Schiller seemed to have introduced the word first to literature without expecting a formal school of thought on realism. After well knowing about the realism, one can easily come to the conclusion that realism is nothing, but it deals with the crime and violence in the society, for example, if any body says that it is realistic play, that means it merely deals with violence in the society. To add, the realistic play usually deals with the

violence in society.

According to the **Oxford English Dictionary**, the word violence is taken from Latin word "violentus" meaning 'forcible, vehement, of uncertain origin. Violent physical force means the use of physical force to injure somebody or damage something; showing emotional intensity or strong feeling; showing destructive force; Intense, caused by force rather than natural causes; Distorting or misinterpreting the meaning of something.

When one starts to think about Realism, one automatically has to think about another controversial term Naturalism. Realism is a descriptive term, and it is derived from philosophy. On the other hand, naturalism is derived from Science. Naturalism is initiated by Emile Zola. Its main action is to apply a scientific spirit to literature. It represents a realistic picture of everyday life. It is against the portrayal of romantic, heroic and beautiful art. It insists on objective analysis and inquiry from an artist. It determines to encompass the entire human experience even if it is ugly or bad.

All twentieth century writers would have been influenced by Ibsen, a well known figure in the field of drama. It is a well known fact that Zola advocated the theory of naturalism. It was Ibsen who breathed life into it; it was he who probed into the mind of man and society.

In American drama, the term expressionism, also dominated very much. The term 'expressionism' was imported to America from Europe. It not only played important role only in American literature, but also took part especially in German films and architecture. Likewise it demonstrated the artists' naturalism and it had limited scope and was grossly involved with reality.

Having analyzed the origin of realism, naturalism, expressionism let us turn to the modern playwrights in America. When we chart out some of the playwrights on American stage, we have to include major playwrights like Elmer Rice, Robert E. Sherwood, Philip Barry, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Eugene O' Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, William Inge and Edward Albee.

Among the above mentioned playwrights Eugene O' Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams are notable playwrights in modern American drama.

O' Neill was the genius behind the change that came over the American theatre in 1920's and 1930's, the greatest period in its history. He wrote things of contemporary interest. The stature of Eugene O' Neill casts a long shadow in the American drama, who was a peerless prolific writer. In 1936, he won the Noble Prize in literature. There were notable playwrights in America before O' Neill's but the drama had got enmeshed in a stereotyped pattern demanded by the commercial theatre. O' Neill, throughout his dramatic career, has been experimenting with new techniques. Faithfulness to the truth of human nature and life, is the fundamental of O' Neill's dramatic art. The setting, characters, theme and form of most of O' Neill's

early plays are realistic. Most of them are about the sea. They are well-built in the realistic vein. The sea life and the sea characters are represented realistically because O' Neill himself was once a sailor. In consequence his beautiful delineation of sailors, obtains drive and reality from his personal experience.

Anna Christi is O'Neill's famous play. In this play the playwright is very much mindful of the evils of society. He always mocks at the Materialistic value of the people. As years go by, he has achieved poetic and deeper realism which may be called psychological realism. There is a probing into the subconscious mind of the characters. For example, the character of Yank in **The Hairy Ape** is drawn realistically in the beginning. But gradually as the play progresses, he ceases to be an individual stocker and becomes a symbol of the entire humanity.

Now, we will see the works of Arthur Miller and his contributions to the American stage. Miller's famous play is **Death of a salesman**. In this play. Miller has abandoned the well made pattern to choose a freer form. The dialogue is very simple and lively. Though most of Miller's plays are social and realistic, he tends to be moralistic in his outlook.

The next important writer in the midst of American playwrights is Tennessee Williams. He has become a legendary figure after the extraordinary reception of the **Glass menagerie**, a memory play of a subdued nostalgic family portrait. The hero is a young poet, haunted by memory of his mother's desperate attempt to keep up the appearance of the old South's graceful formality.

Hitherto, an account of some predominant American playwrights has been given with illustrations. Before entering into the realm of Sam Shepard, a modern American dramatist, one has to know the background of American theatre before and after the period of his first play. This knowledge is essential for one to comprehend the background in which his plays are produced.

As Off-Broadway had tended to become commercial, Off-Off-BroadWay theatre emerged in the early sixties. It seems that a critic, Jerry Tailermer named it so. Joe Cino's cafe cino became an art gallery and it gave room for poetry readings and staging plays. After him, many new plays were staged almost everywhere. Actually this was the first opportunity given to those who were in love with the theatre and in search of a hearing for their new plays, most of actors were unpaid and the cost of production was very low.

Theatre Genesis was one of the youngest and well established theatres of Off-Off-Broadway. Its artistic director was Ralph Cook. It was a workshop for young dramatists. It was housed in the church of St.Marks in the Bowery. Until 1970, Ralph Cook has been running the theatre and a group of playwrights have started working for it, the works he has directed in this theatre have a distinctive style of their own. Walter Hadler, Murray Mednick and Tom Sankey are some of the dramatists who have staged their plays in this theatre. It was

Theatre Genesis which has introduced Sam Shepard to the theatre - goes.

Many writers who have worked with the Off-Off-Broadway theatre have not earned sufficiently. Some have started to move to other media. Some have put an end to their creative talents after writing one or two plays. By 1970, the theatre faced the same problems of those of the Off-Broadways from Actors Equity and other unions. The financial assistance rendered by various sources such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations could not support the playwrights to the satisfaction of the dramatists. Even then, many strong theatre groups and Lama have been producing good plays continuously. Still many talented and successful dramatists like Sam Shepard do manage to rule the stage with their striking dramatic skill and visionary zeal.

Sam Shepard was born in Fort Sheridan, Illinois on November 5, 1943 to Samuel Shepard, a career army man and Jane Schook Rogers. As his Father was a military man, the family was moving from place to place. Then they settled in Duarte, California, in a farm. They raised sheep and grew avocados.

While Shepard was studying in school, he received a copy of a play from his friend, which gave him an altogether new experience.

I started reading the play he gave me, and it was like nothing I'd ever read before - it was **Waiting for Godot**. And I thought, what this guy is talking about. What is this. And I read it with very keen interest, but I did not know anything about what it wasⁱ.

Actually it was in New York that Shepard's earnest thirst for writing developed. He was a busboy at the Village Gate, the Greenwich Village Cabaret. Here in this village, Shepard was excited and thrilled to be amidst artistic, poetic and musical surrounding. He was encouraged to write plays for the Off-Off-Broadway by Ralph Cook, the founder of Theatre Genesis. Even before that time, Shepard was writing poetry in the Deaf style. Then Shepard started writing a series of one-act plays with full speed in 1964 in Theatre Genesis, his **Cowboys** and **The Rock Garden** were staged and directed by Cook. Sam Shepard comments as follows:

"I'm interested in exploring the writing of plays through attitudes derived from other forms. Such as music, painting, sculpture, film, etc, all the time keeping in mind that I'm writing for... Shining on a deer's eyesⁱⁱⁱ".

Following his first venture, Shepard became part and parcel of the Off-Off Broadway theatre. Then he started experimenting with the techniques of writing. Cafe La Mama experimental theatre club produced Shepard's **Upto Thursday, Dog and The Rocking Chair**. These early works were merely play writing exercises and they gave him theatrical experience.

In 1965, Shepard began to display a more systematic and technical

excellence with a slant towards the path of the absurdist. He was slowly gaining critical appreciation. He won three Obies for **Icarus's Mother**, **Chicago** and **Red Cross**. In these plays, Shepard portrays very ordinary day-to-day incidents. They seem to be very normal situations. All of a sudden, they are found to be transformed by their flight of imagination. There is a sort of comic vision piercing through these plays. This comic vision is going to be fully developed in his later plays. Of all these plays, Chicago became the most popular. The play deals with an angry young man who stands in a both tube and delivers a monologue. This crazy creator's comic vision of the world is applauded by many critics.

Then Shepard began paying much attention to plot in his plays such as La Turista and Melodrama plays. He received a Rockefeller foundation grant in 1967 and a Guggenheim grant in 1968. La Turista, this play gave him a very important position in his writing career. Shepard's style of writing began to attract the people. His characteristic features are different one because he mixed the magic, wonder and mystery in his dramas. Shepard got his fifth Obie award for his play Forensic and The Navigator, which elevated him to higher level and made him familiar with London audiences too.

Shepard had left for Italy, the moment he had decided to write a play on America which resulted later as **Operation Side Winder**. Shepard wrote **The Holy Ghostly** in the year 1969, which was mainly based on western allusion. A warm welcome was given to **The unseen Hand**. In this play, the dramatist has comically portrayed the good forces which fight against the evil.

In the year 1970, Shepard wanted to attack Contemporary American Society. He achieved his aim through his well known play Operation Side Winder, which received both appreciation and condemnation from the public. Shepard carried on with his experimentation with horror, fantasy and folklore with his Shaved Sphts, Back Bog Beast Bait and The **Mad Dog Blues** between 1970 and 1971, with rock singer created **Cow Boy Mouth**.

Then Shepard went to England and lived there for four years. He **became a very** famous person in America and England as well, where Shepard not only concentrated a staging plays, but he showed his interest in learning **British** rock music, after this we can see that Shepard's plays are full of music in **almost** every play of Shepard.

After **Operation Side-Winder**, Shepard's **Tooth of the Crime** is considered to be the next best play of Sam Shepard. Actually Shepard wrote this play when he was in England. In this play, we can see that rock music is fused into dramatic form. Shepard himself directed his first public performance of the play. **Geography of a Horse Dreamer** in the year 1974 at the Royal court's theatre in London. It deals with British and American gangster and an American cow boy. This play is filled with mysterious and magical elements. Then another play **Blue British**, deals with Shepard's love for dog racing.

Shepard's **Action** takes place in the Christmas season. Really speaking there is no action in this play in the strict sense of the word. But the characters are the figures of a society radiating a sense of aloofness and loss. Shepard got his sixth Obie award, when the action play was staged in New York in the year 1975. After this play Shepard produced a short play, **Killer's Head**. It explains how man plans for his future in which he will not live to experience.

In 1974, Shepard returned from England to States and settled in California, where he produced the play **Rolling Thunder Log Book**, It tells about how the script writers are struggling to get money through their profession. Then Shepard had written one autobiographical play, **Angel city**. The play deals how young writers are tempted by the bewitching charm of Hollywood. **Suicide in B Flat** is a mysterious play. This play too stresses Shepard's familiar theme of loss of identity of confused identity. Another famous play of Shepard is **Seduced**. To make it philosophical, Shepard used elements of symbolism, allegory and comedy.

Shepard has experimented with Joseph Chaikin, because of that experiment, he produced **Tonnes and Salvages Love**. He has written this play merely for theatre purposes. Then he wrote **Hawk Moon**, a book of short stories, poems and monologues, which were published by Performing Arts Journal Publication. Then he completed writing **Motel Chronicles**. Shepard's various activities as a bus boy, actor, waiter, dramatist and musician are clearly presented in this work.

Shepard has acted in movies like Days of Heaven, Resurrection, Raggedy man, Frances and Country. He has won the Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival in the year 1984, for his Screen Play Paris Texas. Shepard's **A Lie of the mind** was produced in Broadway recently.

So for we have analyzed Shepard's prolific talents. Let us see some critical remarks on Shepard. Most of the critics concentrated mainly on Shepard's form of writing, themes of Shepard's play, simplicity of Language, his passion for rock music, his handling of magic and myth, then how he brought out about America's cultural milieu, social behavior, political and cultural disintegration.

In Shepard's writing, we can see that he mainly concentrated on human beings emotions. So Tennessee Williams praised Shepard's use of emotions as follows.

"In fact, it would be difficult to find a contemporary playwright with as much emotional texture in this plays as Shepard. That quality links him with another poetic realistic who deals with the emotionalⁱⁱⁱ". If we hear or listen to a music that will definitely affect us very much, like wise Shepard's play affect one's emotions. It is very difficult to find out pattern of meaning in Shepard's play; at the same time we cannot say that there is no meaning at all in Shepard's plays. "More interested in doing something to audience than in saying something to them"^{iv}. Michael Smith, who observes Sam Shepard's

play as follows "It's always hard to tell what, if anything Sam's plays are about"^v.

So far we have discussed Shepard's early play in order to comprehend the later plays of Shepard's. Now we will see the later plays of Sam Shepard. What we are going to see or discuss are not only Shepard's later play, but also the "family" plays of Shepard-**Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, True west, Fool for love** and **A Lie of the mind**. In these plays Shepard had shown how violence takes place, besides in these plays we can see that it gets full fledged play because of the violence created by the brutal fathers.

As violence is evident in Shepard's play it is rightly pointed out "After **Angel City**, Shepard takes a new dramatic turn with **Curse of the Starving Class** and **Buried Child** namely in the area of genre, he moves now into domestic tragedy in an approach to realism closer to **Action** than any other previous plays, not only statistically but also thematically"^{vi}

Shepard's plays cannot be classified into different periods or stages of growth. But his later plays, beginning with the **Tooth of the Crime** followed by "Family trilogy" consisting of **Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child** and **True West**, seems to constitute a definite group. These plays, unlike the earlier ones are more realistic in settings, and are characterized by their linear plots. Based on the line of tradition drama, these plays are easier to comprehend, Ruby Cohn, sees the "family trilogy as Shepard's attempt at Greek tragedy"^{vii}. Though Shepard began his career by dealing with a family in **The Rock Garden**, he did not dramatize the family for one whole decade as he dramatized in the family trilogy.

All these three plays "portray families weighted down by their guilts and fed by their fantasies"^{viii} Each of these plays deals with a single family in which discordance makes the family life a chaotic affair.

Sam Shepard has portrayed violence in his plays very much in order to penetrate into man's inner feelings and to suit the modern audience. The playwright has given some more importance for violence in his plays. Because of his creative genius Sam Shepard has created violence in his plays.

Shepard has created a new kind of violence in his plays by saying frankly about the worst social background and family life in America. These kind of violence, we can see in the play **Buried Child**, Halie, who has sexual relation with her son Tilden, because of that she has one child, that was also buried, due to this cause violence arises, though having sex with son is considered as a universal taboo. Shepard brought out this kind of universal taboo frankly. Barnes who rightly pointed out about this play, "Shepard makes a searing indictment of the American family, seeing it as a destructive unit rather than a supportive one"^{ix}. Having comprehended Shepard's plays very much one can come to the conclusion that how violence takes place in the plays of Sam Shepard, we will see it in detail in the coming chapters, besides we see that how violence had been neglected by many critics especially in

the plays of Sam Shepard.

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