

The Grotesque in Sam Shepard's Battle Play "True West"

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the origins of the term "grotesque" and discusses the range and breadth of its applications, a complicating factor in its definition. It will analyze Sam Shepard's grotesque play "True West" (1981). Shepard evidences patterns of healing and communion by moments of shared nourishment, sensory experience, or insight; shared imagination or forms of creation; and even shared conflict. Unlike typical studies of Shepard focusing on themes, techniques, and styles, this study will propose a new reading of Shepard in the light of his broken, psychologically unbalanced, and identity-lost characters. However, it is only a beginning toward exploring new territories in Shepard's drama.

Key Words: American family, Black humor, Grotesque, Samuel Shepard, 'True West' play.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Shepard Rogers VII (Born 1943) is one of the most important dramatists in America. His main concern is America itself: "The America about us, the American dream that has been betrayed, the American hero whose quest has become perverted, the American land which has become unproductive, sterile, and the American family which no longer nurtures its children" (Auerbach, 1981:1). In Shepard's version of the American family, the inhabitants are disconnected from other and far from what one would call a functional family unit. Roudane (2002) thinks that this is what he presents as the reality of the American family in most of his works.

Although Shepard shows, in the some fifty plays he has written to date, a rich variety of performative styles and cultural concerns, his central subject is often the American family. Victims and victimizers, the pursued and the pursuer vie for a metaphorical, psychological, and spiritual space in his plays. Meanwhile, options slowly diminish. There are no real survivors, no remissions of pain. Spaces open up that prove unbridgeable. Necessity rules. Irony is constantly reborn from the frustrated desires of those who obey compulsions they would wish to resist.

Shepard wants the Americans to stop using the traditional notions of what families are thought to be and accept the reality of what family truly is. His aim in his works is to renew the American society, to revive the American dream and to have the best parents for the American children. According to De Rose (1992:4), Shepard's plays are about a world that has come unfixed:

"A world in which reality as we know it proves an illusion and we find ourselves at odds with environment, our beliefs, our heritage, our cultural myths, our sense of personal identity, even our spiritual selves."

Grotesque

Shepard uses a mixture of feeling in his plays, a combination of humor, laughter, joy and fear, violence and horror. Therefore, he is considered to be a grotesque dramatist.

According to Collins Dictionary and when commonly used, 'grotesque' means "strange, fantastic, ugly or bizarre, and thus is often used to describe shapes and distorted forms".

The "grotesque" connotes gargoyles and leering masks, freaks of nature and supernatural monstrosities. It fuses extrinsic elements: the human, plant, and animals; the animate and inanimate; the living and dead; the organic and mechanical. It describes a distorted and

disturbing world that often occasions delight. The grotesque is dark, sometimes gothic and horrific, sometimes humorous and hilarious, sometimes painful and joyous, realistic and fantastic to distrust and please. Strangely, this shadowy genre plays a material role in the literature of America's sunny South and the technologically streamlined postmodern world. As a style that expresses fascination with the irrational, disturb in cosmic order, and frustration at humankind's lot in the universe, the grotesque is especially well-suited to times of ideological, and economic tumult.

The grotesque as a stylistic form presents many difficulties to consider. First, it intersects many other stylistic variations such as comedy, parody, caricature, horror, tragedy and the absurd. Second, it is divided into the grotesque of life affirmation and the grotesque of dark life. The former might be defined as "any literary form, which does not hold to a single form, which affirms or allows the possibility for the affirmation of life and at the same time disjoins the readers from the world he or she is acquainted with personally." (Jeremy Brown 2008:7). The dark grotesque might be defined as "distortion meant to show the corruption or terror of life, the violent assault upon the reader's sensibility, the ripping of the veils of illusion from our eyes, not for a vision of Gods grace, but of the devils' dominion." (ibid).

The term "grotesque" is derived from the Italian 'La grottesca' which was used during the fifteenth century. The word 'crottesque' occurred in French as early as 1532 and was also used in English before being replaced by 'grotesque' around 1640. In sixteenth century France, 'grotesque' broadened to include literary and non-artistic references, and in eighteenth-century England and Germany the meaning diffused to become associated with caricature (Philip Thomson, 1972:13).

A style of visual arts rediscovered in the middle ages, the grotesque snaked its way through diverse cultures and forms, through the biting satire of Swift and into Milton's seething hell, into the God-fearing Puritan imagination, the phantasms of Coleridge, and the dark romance of Hawthorne. It pervaded grim modern absurdity through the backdoor of naturalism and then incorporated postmodern affirmation while it retained elements dire enough to reflect the time's terrors.

The grotesque has long received mixed responses, causing critics to be disturbed and defensive. Paula Urubura (1987:9) points out; "the grotesque inevitably elicits confusion or disdain from people who are comfortable only with order and reason". Marcus Vitrumvius Pollio rejected the grotesque as an unworthy style saying "all these motifs which are based on reality have now been forsaken for injudicious fashion" (cited in Kaysar, 1957:20). One of the problems in defining the grotesque is that throughout its enduring history it has been manifest in a wide variety of forms and serves widely divergent purposes. From farce to tragedy, from horror tales to mythic elements, the grotesque has altered as human perception, expression, and need have shifted. The grotesque twines through works replying on metaphysical conceit or romance; it transforms regionalism and makes a confounding appearance in realism; it is reborn in determinism and unfolds in surrealism. In fact, Uruburu (1987:1) calls the grotesque "the most democratic of genres because it combines divergent streams to work against our expectations".

The most obvious characterization of the grotesque would specify that its distortion be achieved by exaggerating one primary element or set of elements, a technique that in literature flattens characters and turns them into types.

Jennings (1963:14-15) agreed that the grotesque serves the dual function of creating unease and diffusing it, refers to the genre as the "demonic made trivial", and believes that the grotesque represents one way in which humor conquers anxiety although this playfulness is "constantly on the verge of giving way to concealed horror". Steig (1970:184 & 258) explains the technique in some detail. On the one hand, readers will respond to the inhuman qualities of a character with anxiety because they are strange and alien yet resemble human qualities;

on the other hand, these qualities refute the character's humanity, allowing readers to treat this character as separate from their own reality and thus unthreatening. The balance is delicate. The grotesque is distorted in the direction of harmlessness without entirely achieving it, and this characteristic distinguishes it from the uncanny.

A final characteristic, and perhaps the most unexpected in a distortion-based form, is the sense of enchantment and wonder that pervades the grotesque. George Santayana (1955) in "The Sense of Beauty" believes that the real charm of these distortions is their inward beauty. Eventually perceivers are able to disengage the form from the class into which they try to force it; they forget the expectation, which it was going to disappoint. The true grotesque involves this inkling of unity and character in the midst of strangeness. Ugliness then disappears and enchantment takes its place. In this manner, Santayana defines the grotesque: "Good wit is novel truth, as the good grotesque is novel beauty" (ibid: 256-7).

In summary, then, the grotesque involves exaggeration or distortion of one element or set of elements, flattening characters and turning them into types, or combining contrary types. It is marked by imaginative play, frequently with the forbidden, but it is grounded in reality regardless of how distorted the form may become. This mode of presentation gives the grotesque its unique dual nature: it is realistic enough to be recognizable and so is unsettling, yet its strangeness creates a distance, which is simultaneously unthreatening and freeing. In many instances, the grotesque conveys a sense of enchantment or wonder, and transformation often occurs rendering what was previously disturbing beautiful.

The Play

Uruburu (1987:25) points out, American literature has demonstrated a pattern of escape, which preserves the myth of the self-reliant American hero, but the aim of the American grotesque is to force both the characters and readers into a confrontation with the inescapable. This concept applies to the battling brothers in "True West". Violence becomes the only remaining response, giving vent to frustrated ambitions and thwarted dreams, compelling readers to face the terror of ordinary life by pushing them over the brink of what they consider normal. In this play, Shepard demonstrates that confrontation may be a constructive impulse.

Most of Sam Shepard's plays are too surreal to consider grotesque, but in his most recent works, he has taken a noticeable turn toward the realistic. "True West" is the most balanced of Shepard's works, continuing to draw on mythic elements with an obsessive, dream-like quality yet remaining realistically accessible to readers and audiences. This play demonstrates grotesque characteristics while, amidst the stress of aggression, affirmative elements surface.

Christopher Bigsby (1986:215) has called "True West" "less than cartoon but more than fact", pointing to the odd coexistence of exaggeration and verisimilitude. Bigsby comments that these characters act out a drama no more plausible than the one they are writing. Like their cowboy characters entrenched in an endless chase images of what they long to become. Lee, who lost his fighting dog and source of financial security in the desert, comes to the suburb looking for goods to plunder, and consequently Austin's hard work is sacrificed for a gamble. Both are disenchanted with their worlds and wish to change places. No more is the character reversal which results Lee begins to drink champagne while Austin drinks whiskey, and Lee reacts with exaggerated patience when Austin becomes heated.

For finding another society opposed to modern society, Shepard turns to the West, which symbolizes the history and originality of America. Therefore, he sees that the West with its innocence and lack of technological inventions is a perfect place to live in. He calls for the return to the Western values and traditions. This is reflected in his plays where his heroes are the cowboys and his landscape is the desert. Bonnie Marranca (1981:18-9) comments on Shepard saying:

"Shepard is the only American dramatist writing today to evoke a new sense of space in drama, and he transfers the value of the American West and its ideals into the emotional landscape of his plays"

In a 1974 interview Shepard said, "I'd like to try a whole different way of writing now, which is very stark and not so flashy and not full of a lot of mythic figures and everything, and try to scrape it down to the bone as much as possible" (Orbison, 1984:506). Like the super-realists, Shepard employs the products of popular culture to illustrate his themes: golf and Hollywood screenwriting; Safeway and the freeway; smog and dreams of western desperadoes, televisions, toasters, plates with Idaho decals, sound of crickets at night, and empty beer cans and whisky bottles. The set of the plays is a kitchen, with similar table and chairs. Shepard explains in an interview with Don Shewey (2004:25):

"The kitchen has always been my favorite room in the house. The kitchen is where serious conversations happen, where genuine gathering together with family happens, where devastating things happen. Eating.

So what's the refrigerator?

I just love finding an object that's domestic, so common life, in an uncommon situation, on stage, as character".

The significance of certain props becomes apparent through out his works. The objects that Shepard presents are usually of the everyday and decidedly lower class since the refrigerator is always empty or contain a small amount of food. Shepard's eye goes deeper inside the self since he reveals the dark and painful sides of Austin and Lee, and he demolishes the upper middle-class interior, which is his set. Moreover, the "freeze frame" ending offers a cinematic technique, which, as Kleb (1980:71) describes, leaves the brothers "stuck between an empty dream and an insubstantial reality". The ending of the play offers that the two brothers are from a world without roots and without future; they seem to exist in a vivid present only. Shepard focuses on the blood relationship of the brothers and the exchange of role between them. He splits the character into two sides of the same self. The characters appear as brothers battling each other as well as the heredity of the patriarch figure. Shepard states in an interview with Mel Gussow (2002: E.1) for the New Times, "You feel yourself to be in a dual identity. Rather than making a psychological issue out of that, I've divided it into brothers. You have these two forces that are in fact part of one entity. To externalize this into brothers seems plausible for fiction or theater". Austin is the representative of the order civilized world created by the new west while Lee is the representative of the old desert west with its freedom and the chaos it represents, Lee and Austin are really two different characters but they are one person. Each one takes the bright side of their characters. Lee's character is the opposite of the peaceful Austin who desires to be part of the civilized world and Austin wants to be part of the uncivilized world that Lee lived and wants freedom seeking for living in the desert.

Shepard (1981:59) ends the play "True West" with an image that dramatizes his idea of the human double self-saying:

"They square off to each other... the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert like landscape, they are still but watchful for the next move, lights go slowly to black as the after-image of the brothers pulses in the dark coyote fades".

The situation that Lee and Austin are left frozen in a fighting position is a portrayal of the modern man's inner conflict between the bright and dark side inside him. Therefore, Shepard ends the play with drawing the attention to the fact that in order for modern man to discover man's identity, he must make a balance between the Austin part (bright side) and the Lee part (dark side) inside him.

Austin and Lee are locked in a battle, which builds until the melodramatic becomes nearly metaphorical. Even Lee's narration takes on a violence resonance that seems to pertain to the brothers:

"Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And the keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. 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". (ibid: 27)

This strange mix of realism and symbol, along with its unsettling qualities of violence, demolition, and disregard for middle-class standards, gives this play its grotesque bent.

Although communication between brothers is often a failure, there are signs of affirmation in this play. By discussing the past, the brothers wish for things that they no longer have, as evident when Lee comes back after a night of casing his mother's neighborhood for places to burglarize:

Austin: What kind of place was it?

Lee: Like a paradise. Kinda'place that sorta'kills ya'inside. Warm yellow lights. Mexican tile all round. Copper pots hang' over the stove. Ya'know like they got in the magazines. Blonde people movin' in and outa'the rooms, talkin' to each other. Kinda'place you wish you sorta'grew up in, ya'know (ibid: 12).

There is, despite hostility and aggression, a sense of family to which Lee seeks to return. Relationships are the central idea in the works of Shepard. In Shepard's nourishment usually fails to bring people together, and Lee does refuse Austin's initial offer of coffee and food. However, Lee partakes of Austin's toast to steal their agreement that Lee will take Austin to the desert after Austin has helped Lee in writing his script. The brothers also drink together. Although language has failed, Austin and Lee only communication is through these means: "Austin offers a bottle to Lee, Lee takes it, sits down on kitchen floor with Austin, they share the bottle" (ibid:41).

Imagination is perhaps the most vital means of affirmation in "True West". Both brothers are storytellers, yet Shepard implies that a script by both would be better than a script by either. Lee naturally taps the mythic vein, however, he needs Austin's formal training to refine his prose, as when Austin changes Lee's "I know this prairie like the back o' my hand" to "I'm on imitate terms with this prairie" (ibid:51-52). Further, readers have reason to suspect from the following exchange that Lee's story is not planned but improvised:

Lee: Then this first guy suddenly realizes two things.

Austin: The guy in front?

Lee: Right. The guy in front realizes two things almost at the same time. Simultaneous.

Austin: What were the two things?

Lee: Number one, he realizes that the guy behind him is the husband of the woman he's been----.

Austin: ---- oh. Yeah.

Lee: And number two, he realizes he's in the middle of Tornado country (ibid: 21).

As long as they have imagination, they have the will to survive. In his disillusionment with desert life, Lee imagines himself a Hollywood scriptwriter, and Austin, in his disillusionment with Hollywood scriptwriter imagines life on the desert.

The foremost characteristic of this play is a violence and aggression so intense that it affronts the audience. At first, the brothers are distant, suggesting latent hostility, but minutes later, they clash over Lee's wanting to borrow Austin's car, presumably to steal the neighbors. The first physical violence occurs when Austin offers Lee money to deter him "Lee, look- I don't want any trouble, all right? ----. I can give you some money if you need money" ("ibid":8). The reaction of Lee is physically violent as he grabs Austin angrily by the shirt and shakes him: "Lee suddenly lungs at Austin, grabs him violently by the shirt and shakes him

with tremendous power" (ibid). This violence increases throughout the play, though there are intermittent smoldering moments when the brothers tolerate each other. Lee throws beer cans at windows, knocks a plate out of Austin's hand and gestures angrily behind his back, threatening to crown Austin with a golf club. In each instance, Lee's anger seems uncontrolled that the audience fears for Austin's safety. Finally, Austin gains his first physical advantage by sneaking behind Lee and choking him with the telephone cord, coming assumably close to killing him.

James D. Riemer (1986:44-6) points to violence in the play as an affirmative act. He asserts that the process of writing allows the brothers to perceive their psychic opposite as desirable. He reminds us that Austin is not strangling Lee to 'kill him but to prevent him from leaving, so the final image of the brothers' quarrel is one of hope in that they have rejected the pattern of chase and escape for one of confrontation through which progress toward psychic wholeness may begin. Thus, Lee and Austin's battle is a ritual of purification and regeneration not only for the characters but for the audience as well. Shepard is not so much interested in what he can say to the audience but in what he can do to them, therefore he combines horror and violence with distancing devices, of which humor is a particularly potent one.

Humor acts as a counterattack to this violence and serves a crucial role in the grotesque by both offering an avenue for affirmation and by sustaining its dual nature. Although humor decreases in works dealing with horror and violence but it remains important to the genre as a whole. It is associated with black humor. Perhaps the most insightful discussion of black humor, Ihab Hassan (1964:676) in his article "Laughter in the Dark: The New Voice in American Fiction" addressed humor's anarchist tendencies. He describes dark humor as:

The birth of a new sense of reality, a new knowledge of error and incongruity, an affirmation of life under the aspect of comedy. For comedy, broadly conceived, may be understood as a way of making life possible in this world, despite evil or death. Comedy recognizes human limitations, neither in broken pride nor yet in saintly humility but in spirit of ironic acceptance. It is, therefore the antic child of realism.

In reaction to the incoherence of life and its openness, black humorists have acquired a tolerance, even a taste, for the mixed, causeless quality of experience. Hassan (ibid: 636-9) calls this form the new conic realism where chance defies predictability and restores some individual freedom.

Humor is inherently affirmative, and black humor seems only a more universal form of what was already familiar, facing us against a world now perceived as chaotic. Existing in the realm of concept, humor is an abstraction the purpose of which ranges from making a point to entertainment and release of tension. It may not always be amiable, but it is always joyful. It may be conceptual, physical, or both. Further, it has a confounding tendency to combine forms.

Humor always involves some form of upset, whether the overturned is our own insecurities, some idea or standard, or our sense of reality. It is not so much derision as deposition, not so much rejection as release. The laughter is largely one of joy at some consequent newfound freedom. It is a reflection of the soul. Ronald Knox (1971:52) describes humor as "nothing less than a fresh window of the soul". It is apparent that humor is not only enriching, but at times life-sustaining. It is this happy upset that affirms life and its more restorative means. Humor may function as a major affirmative aspect of postmodern grotesques. However, in literature humor must act in concert with other affirmative themes and techniques in order to transform a work from cynical to restorative grotesque.

Shepard's "True West" presents a clear example of humor, which is affirmative only insofar as we are able to laugh at the characters' selves and actions even if they are terrified.

In this case, the play is being a creative and thus positive work of art. Shepard humorously literalizes when Lee tells Austin he could not steal a toaster "You couldn't steal a toaster without losin' yer lunch" (ibid:37) and in the next scene, the early morning light reveals a kitchen full of toasters: "Very early morning, between night and day..., Austin has a whole bunch of stolen toasters lined up on the sink counter along with Lee's stolen T.V." (ibid:42). Austin comments on that saying: "There's gonna'be a general lack of toast in the neighborhood this morning. Many, many unhappy bewildered breakfast faces" (ibid: 43). Also when Lee expresses his frustration by periodically but deliberately taking "ax-chops" at Austin's typewriter with a golf club, accouterments of the profession and class he is trying to join: "---Lee keeps periodically taking deliberate ax-chops at the typewriter using a nine-iron as Austin speaks, all of their mother house plants are dead and drooping." (ibid: 43). Most of the humor in "True West" derives from Lee's displacement and our sympathy with his struggles in a suburban environment as when he fights with the operator, trying to get the numbers of all ten Melanie Fergusons in Bakersfield, or when he goes to the kitchen looking for a pencil:

Lee: (to phone)----what? I can't hear ya' so good. Sounds like yer under the ocean. (pause) You got ten Malaine Fergusons? How could that be? Ten Melanine Fergusons in Bakerfield? Well give me all of'em then. (pause) what d'ya'mean? Give me all ten Melanie Fergusons! That's right. Just a second. (to Austin) give me a pen.

Austin: I don't have a pen.

Lee: Give me a pencil then.

Austin: I don't have a pencil.

Lee: (to phone) just a second, operator. (to Austin) yer a writer and Ya' don't have a pencil!

Austin: I'm not a writer. You're a writer. (ibid: 46).

(Lee starts pulling all the drawers in the kitchen out on the floor searching for a pencil and Austin watches him casually). (ibid: 46)

Lee seems a menace to an entire way of life, but the humor of his frustrated displacement periodically counteracts the threat. Humor is only one of the distancing techniques a grotesque may employ to assure that it is not read as representative of literal reality. Such technique acts to counter the darker cast of Shepard and to remind readers that they can laugh at what they fear.

The grotesque depicts a distorted world peopled with exaggerated types or outlandish freaks, in which extraordinary but not impossible events take place. The characters twisted by these events are sometimes also transformed by them so that what was ugly, loathsome, and fearful becomes dignified, graceful, and sublime. Shepard recognizes the unsound world of which he is a part yet merit respects for the contortions by which they strive to sustain some human dignity.

Merely the possibility of such worlds creates unease in the reader, but their improbability, rendered by the various distancing techniques, makes them remote enough so that the form may effectively explore our worst fears---absurdity, chance, and disorientation; social deformity or dislocation; and uncontrollable forces including our own violent tendencies and those we wrongly perceive as friendly. The heroes' often baffling responses are intended to preserve the individual's right to be in a chaotic universe (Nelson, 1982).

The affirmative grotesque seeks primarily to liberate individuality and to fortify endurance with valued moments of shared imagination or forms of creation; even shared conflict. The affirmative grotesque gives shapes to our fears.

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البشاعة والخوف كما يؤكد سام شيبيرد في مسرحيته القنالية "الغرب الحقيقي"

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الملخص

من الصعب تعريف كلمة البشاعة أو غرابة الشكل تعريفاً دقيقاً، ولكن عند استخدامها بوجه عام ربما تعني القبح أو الخيال أو الغرابة. إن "البشاعة" كلمة غامضة ومخيفة في بعض الأحيان، ولكنها في أحيان أخرى تعني البهجة والمتعة، ومن ثم تكون سبباً للإحساس بالاضطراب والمرح. يؤدي هذا المصطلح دوراً مهماً في الأدب، وبخاصة في أدب ما بعد الحداثة، ولذلك فإن الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد معنى وأصل هذا المصطلح "البشاعة" ومناقشة كيفية توظيفه وتطبيقه في الأدب، كما تتضح من خلال عمل المسرحي الأمريكي سام شيبيرد في مسرحيته التي كتبها عام 1981 بعنوان: الغرب الحقيقي. وقد كشفت هذه الدراسة عن الكوميديا السوداء في هذه المسرحية والتي من خلالها تتم محاولة مقارنة عالم اللامعقول الذي يطبع الحياة الحديثة، وقد فرضت تلك المقارنة على الكاتب وشخصياته المسرحية أسلوباً يجعل من اللغة مرآة ضبابية تعكس واقعاً ضبابياً يكتنفه الغموض المشبع بالخوف والإحساس بعدم الأمان. الكلمات المفتاحية: البشاعة، سام شيبيرد، العائلة الأمريكية، الكوميديا السوداء، مسرحية الغرب الحقيقي.