

Sam Shepard and Neil Simon: Aesthetic-Moralist Currents in American Drama

...the poet's traditional function on behalf of society... proposed
to make virtue delicious. He compounded a moral effect with
an aesthetic effect.... The name of the moral effect was
goodness; the name of the aesthetic effect was beauty.

— John Crowe Ransom, "Poets Without Laurels"

INTRODUCTION

John Crowe Ransom's quote epitomizes a coalescence of aesthetic and moral stimuli that has motivated American artists and conditioned American arts for decades. A list of artist-moralists in American culture would include in addition to Ransom such names as Sojourner Truth, Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, Edward Arlington Robinson, Allen Tate, F. Scott Fitzgerald, e.e. cummings, James Baldwin, Allen Ginsburg, Edward Albee, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Arthur Miller, Toni Morrison, Woody Allen and many more. The moralism conveyed by artists (and, importantly, the aesthetic designs this moralism is embodied in) may reach a different audience than a preacher's orations – perhaps a more secular, liberal, "worldly" audience – but it has just as important a role in American life. To borrow Wayne C. Booth's diction, such artists, directly by way of persuasive hortatory, and indirectly by way of characterization, camouflaged argument and other narrative techniques, collaborate with audiences in "providing mature moral judgment" (307).

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The artist-moralist current is so pervasive that virtually all authors could be included in this context. Consider Cormac McCarthy's hard-hitting aggressions and recall what McCarthy writes in *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*: "Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void and without warrant and here are the views of the litigants despised"? And Mark Twain, the ultimate practical-and-plain-dealing writer, writes of a great "moral sense" in mankind. Even if we did find a wholly "amoral" and straight-from-the-hip writer, I suspect he would be limited to a remarkably transparent and guileless readership, hardly a readership at all, because the moralism I am discussing is exactly what all readers want and need, it is in essence why we read.

There are many possible moral agendas providing direction through the complex ethical circumstances in life, including: the absolutist, highly structured claims of many world religions; supernatural/mystic/mythic philosophies; lay/scientific outlines; ascetic philosophies and retreats from the material world; fatalistic/pessimistic understandings; secular humanist beliefs in communitarianism and humanitarianism; anarchic world views; animistic/vitalistic interpretations; cognitive/constructive philosophies; agnostic/atheistic views; and a range of others. We might find evidence of any of these moral programs coloring the work of different American artists, but it is my stance that one encompassing covenant most prominently conditions the American aesthetic-moralist impulse: a set of virtue ethics principles in support of a moral life "center[ed] in the heart and personality of the agent – in his or her character" (Pojman 388), or as Aristotle simply said "to do good" (from *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV). I contend that, for Aristotle, "good" and "right" were, in essence, one in the same. Virtues and virtuous behavior were both good in and of themselves, as well as instruments to cultivate a best life. There is a slight differentiation here between modern views on doing the right thing in what are often specific instances versus Aristotle's broader view onto a lifetime. The varied values of this framework, which aims at the rightness and beneficence of acts based on good and decent motives, include (among others) love, honesty, truth, fairness, faith, justice, benevolence, loyalty, temperance, courage and duty. These virtues are "the right things to do," and many accept that they are intuitively understood and practiced by good people.¹

1 Consideration of the difference between the teleological and the deontological, where ethics refers to that which is considered to be good (as a purpose) and morality involves that which is obligatory (needless to say, based on rules), is, I think, unnecessary here. We can examine the moral and ethical implications of works of art simultaneously, and I think this is what average people do on a daily basis. We often view that which is good as obligatory in life, whatever we may think of its innate value (for its own sake). This is why we think of the right thing to do; we must do that which is right in life.

Benjamin Franklin wrote in his autobiography that “[my father] convinc’d me that nothing was useful that was not honest” (7), while Toni Morrison has written that her “single gravest responsibility ... is not to lie” (303). Arthur Miller had John Proctor declaim in *The Crucible*, “Let you look sometimes for the goodness in me, and judge me not.” Kurt Vonnegut Jr. in his *Breakfast of Champions*, inscribes protagonist Kilgore Trout’s tombstone with “We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane,” and Ralph Waldo Emerson said in his “American Scholar” address that “character is higher than intellect.” Walt Whitman, always the passionate moral and spiritual advocate, urged his readers toward best behavior and beliefs in “Song of the Open Road”:

They go! they go! I know that they go, but I know not where
they go,
But I know that they go toward the best – toward something
great.

In this article I will examine selections from two American dramatists who function within the American artist-moralist tradition described here. My choice of drama is pointed. Some readers may venture that a roomier format, such as the novel, offers a more expansive platform for elaborate “theorizing,” comprehensive analysis, and realistic and/or creative depiction of moral topics. I grant that this may be true, but I believe that the drama form – public as it is, oral, with characters “speaking” to audiences, and audiences having a measure of “interaction” with live figures on stage – provides the most insightful look at our topic. The messages in drama not only become a kind of preaching, with the presentation of living exemplars of moral parables, but the stage also becomes a kind of tribunal, highlighting the importance of “defenders” of best behavior (the dramatist and a play’s characters), and “witnesses” (the audience, and again the characters) who can “testify” in defense of right, or in opposition to wrong behavior, all with the aim of reaching “just” verdicts on a play’s messages and content.

Note that this conception is seen by way of audience reaction, a more extant and operative conception that requires the actual viewing and responding to plays, which of course this paper cannot generate. Like any art form, drama can, of course, be seen and interpreted in varied formats. This is to say that drama may be read silently, and understood by a reader in a private sense, as dicta or in a narrative series. Similarly, drama could be read by a small group, not staged, but analyzed in this way. Drama can of course also make its way onto television and film, which might condition its messages in other ways. These varied formats could potentially open the analysis in this paper onto other interpretations, but I will solely refer to drama as activity staged by living characters in front of live audiences.

This discussion also highlights an interesting point about the ethical concepts I am discussing. The study of ethics can be broadly divided into two pursuits, that of ethics,

proper – the definition and dissemination of prescriptive ethical codes and conduct – and meta-ethics – a more elevated, less directly practicable analysis of the creation and delineation of these codes and conduct, their logical coherence, limits, origins, justification, interpretation, etc. My points about the public and juridical natures of dramaturgy indicate a given focus on pragmatic, prescriptive ethics conveyed to audiences, but there is no reason that we could not find instances of higher-level meta-ethical analysis in drama as well. In this paper, however, I will focus on the former point.

The two dramatists I will examine are Sam Shepard and Neil Simon, who I believe will give us an inclusive picture of modern-day moralizing in American drama (always with the aim of “doing good,” or perhaps I should say “saying good” within a virtue ethics framework). These two artists are at something of opposite ends of the political and cultural spectrum. Shepard, younger than Simon, is a fiery dramatist of contradiction and incongruity, conveying gloomy themes made even more foreboding by infusions of black humor and violence. Simon, of an older generation, is a middle-of-the-road playwright, emerging from a tradition of easygoing American humor and conservative moral values with a soft, humanistic edge. Different as these two dramatists are, we find that they each take up the moralist torch I have described, showing how the American aesthetic-moralist impulse insinuates its way into diverse beliefs and styles. Shepard is the “bad cop” in our scenario, the hard-hitting disciplinarian moralist, shouting from the pulpit, on the verge of flaying reprobate listeners; Simon, meanwhile, is the “good cop,” a friendly counselor, father-figure or trusted cleric warming our hearts with reassuring homilies about family, life and “the right things to do.” In our analysis we will compare and contrast these two artists in varied ways.

THE CONGRUENCE OF MORAL AND AESTHETIC IDEALS

In this section I will explicate an important analytical consideration that underpins my analysis of Shepard, Simon and the American artist-moralist tradition: the congruence of moral and aesthetic ideals. Consider this a look at my analytical methodology.

Moral and aesthetic frameworks, broadly, are both created with the aim of cultivating conceptions of best form and ideal content, substantial coherence, beauty, truth, and ontological and epistemological significance within intersubjective environments of audience and observer, speaker and listener, influencer and influenced. This confluence of the moral and the aesthetic – though admittedly the aesthetic considerations of artists often modify or re-channel moral/virtuous impulses – lends something of a helping hand to artist-moralists, imbuing their messages with fluency, comprehensibility and authenticity. (In an interesting turn in terms of this convergence of actuality, note how both “character” and “action” are basal constituents of both drama and ethics.) I have cited John Ransom, and at the risk of again citing an analyst sometimes considered overly-conservative and obsolete, Ransom also wrote that “the union of beauty with

goodness and truth has been common enough to be regarded as natural. It is the dissociation which is unnatural and painful” (453). To turn to an aesthetic philosopher that Ransom venerated – and who is rarely considered out of date – Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, also examined the linked roles of morality and aesthetics as they are evinced by poets and dramatists:

... the objects of imitation are men in action and these must either of a higher or lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. (Book II, 52)

The above analysis indicates how morals and moralism are at the very heart of aesthetic structure. Such a view has not been overlooked in the past (particularly in literature, but we may apply these concepts to dramatic narrative). For Wayne C. Booth, who has explored this issue in extreme detail, “moral qualities as inferred from characteristic choices or as stated directly by the author, have always been an important basis for literary form” (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* 130)², while Hayden White continues, “Where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or moralizing impulse is present too” (“The Value of Narrativity” 284).

To examine one key element of this isomorphism of morality (understood in the common sense of doctrines concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad) and aesthetic design, I will explain how one particular moral value inheres in artwork “below the surface” (this is to say that other moral values that I will examine in the work of Sam Shepard and Neil Simon in the remainder of this paper, such as truth, loyalty or love, are often much more visible or urgent in given works, above the surface as it were). This value is, simply, beauty. Emerson, when he wrote in his “Thoughts on Modern Literature” that “[o]ver every true poem lingers a certain wild beauty, immeasurable,” recognized not only the beauty stemming from skilled artistic rendering, but also a more mystic view of aesthetic beauty as something of a spiritual force. Even in those works that contain ostensibly “ugly” elements – and we certainly see these in Sam Shepard’s dark, violent dramatization – we often acknowledge a given aesthetic beauty, emerging from their skilled, accomplished depiction. White writes that the “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (*The Content of the Form* 24). If we interpret White’s “coherence, integrity, fullness” (not to mention the “imaginary”) as potential attributes of beautiful

2 Note that another book by Booth, *The Company We Keep*, though not employed in my analysis, is a very important work in this field.

artistic creation – and I think that we may – then his analysis points toward the actuality of one moral concept – beauty – that is integral to aesthetics, as I have stated. I will examine other moral principles within the context of Neil Simon and Sam Shepard in the following sections.

NEIL SIMON: PLAYING IF SAFE

Neil Simon emerged from the Depression and WWII in America, a time of conservative ethics and a cautious world view that often looked to the past and righteous, absolutist principles for security. Simon's youth and early development were far from the advent of deconstructionist angst and turbulent cultural politics of the late twentieth century, and the aesthetics of his time had only a dash of political and social critique. Simon's drama, in a word, resides comfortably in a world of "family values" – unstinting loyalty, trust, honesty, respect and hard work – which resonated with American audiences in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, but which also finds devotees into the twenty-first century (though admittedly my definition here does not strictly apply to modern-day family values of the Dan Quayle variety, with its somewhat reactionary meaning in support of the nuclear family and strict gender roles). Family values in this sense can no doubt become claustrophobic (or worse, exclusionary), but at best (as in my view here) they can fit into a beneficial virtue ethics framework. Simon's are the moral guidelines radiating outward from the loving family circle, values that have been delivered from pulpits, taught in classrooms, and propounded from soapboxes from the earliest days in America.

I will examine selections from two of Simon's plays, *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *Lost in Yonkers*. I believe these plays, based on Simon's early family life with his parents, siblings, relatives and neighbors, will best illuminate his moral universe.

Brighton Beach Memoirs at first glance looks like a birds-eye view of a fourteen-year-old boy's uncomplicated world – a world of baseball and early adolescence, of big brothers, mothers and fathers, of masturbation and first glances at pretty girls, and dimly emerging adult dreams and responsibilities. But the play is much more than this, and focused through the lives of ordinary people living ordinary lives in their families and neighborhoods – Simon's preferred milieu – *Brighton Beach Memoirs* becomes a sustained examination of a variety of moral precepts, from the personal to the communal, from the local to the universal.

Virtually all of the characters in *Brighton Beach Memoirs* are upstanding types, tested by different ethical challenges, but always falling back on the standard list of virtue ethics and family values I have discussed, when solutions are needed. Kate urges her sister early in the play to "stay on your own side of the street" (10), while Blanche later retorts to Kate in no uncertain terms, "I keep my word" (11). Nora, when she is arguing for her chance to be hired as a dancer, offers charitably to her mother, "Let me do something for you now" (16), while Jack generously offers of his sister-in-law's date that

he will “Make ... him feel comfortable” (90). A larger, threatening world looms in the background of these characters’ lives – Jack is sympathetically “afraid for all of us” with the onset of World War II (124) – but always Simon grounds his ethical framework in the immediate family. “The world doesn’t survive without families” (53) Kate tells Jack, and Stanley and Eugene make every effort to contribute to the family’s well-being, even scraping together a few cents worth of stamps to make up for Stanley’s lost salary. When Jack ponders where their family members who have escaped from the Nazis in Europe will stay, Kate interrupts with a brisk, filial “With us” (130). Any anger or disputes that crop up between family members are definitively settled for the better, with all coming out happier and more well rounded.

The most striking example of ethical conduct at work in the play emerges out of the possibility of Stanley losing his job, where he has defended a black co-worker he felt was being abused by the boss after a mishap. In a series of statements and explanations that elevate Stanley to the status of youth-hero, he tells his brother Eugene that his co-worker’s accident “wasn’t his fault” and the boss’s angry reaction “wasn’t fair” (24). Stanley felt no less than that “the dignity of everyone who worked in that store was in my hands” as he defended his co-worker and stood up to his boss (25). In the end, in the classical individual ethical response, Stanley firmly states “you always have to do what you think is right in this world and stand up for your principles” (of course he learned this from his father) (27). When Stanley tells his father that he could be fired for his actions, Eugene reports that he (Stanley) gives a stirring speech “like that movie, Abe Lincoln in Illinois ... defending ... his principles” (70), which leaves his father acknowledging to Stanley, “you did a courageous thing,” which was “something to be proud of. It was what you believed in” (71). The difficulty passes over with nary a black cloud – Simon in his mild-mannered way – and the further difficulty later in the play of Stanley gambling away his salary is also breezed over, with Eugene coming to his brother’s defense, and defusing any possible conflict.

The other important moral examination Simon conducts in *Brighton Beach Memoirs* is his look at bias among the different nationalities in the Brighton Beach neighborhood. This mistrust breaches the surface when Kate nastily tells Blanche about her (Blanche’s) upcoming date with Mr. Murphy, who is Irish, “I warned you the first day about those people” (100). Ostensibly she is referring to the fact that Murphy has injured himself while driving while intoxicated (which Murphy’s mother has generously informed the family about in a letter, in which she also tells them that her son has never failed to exhibit “honesty and sincerity” [99]), but the real source of her bitterness is her mistrust of Irish people. Her resentment prompts the following exchange:

BLANCHE: Stop calling them “those people.” They’re not “those people.” She’s a mother, like you and me.

KATE: And what is he? Tell me what he is.

BLANCHE: He's somebody in trouble. He's somebody that needs help. For God's sake, Kate, you don't even know the man.

KATE: I know the man. I know what they're all like.

BLANCHE: Who are you to talk? Are we any better? Are we something so special? We're all poor around here, the least we can be is charitable. (100)

Simon here not only instructs readers and listeners about the innate value of a charitable attitude toward others, he also slips in a comment on equality in a given society ("we're all poor..."). With such ethics extending beyond insular family values, *Brighton Beach Memoirs* enters a larger moral environment linking individual, family, societal and universal ethics. Such an environment is seen again in *Lost in Yonkers*, to which I now turn. While lacking *Brighton Beach Memoirs'* tight focus on virtue ethics, and with a slightly sharper edge than the previous play, *Lost in Yonkers* in many ways revisits the same moral themes, in the same family surroundings, evincing values from a now-bygone age in America. "Families should sort of stick together," Jay tells his grandmother (44), while Bella tells her mother, "I promise you, you would never worry about being alone 'cause you'd have us" (133). Jay risks his life for his uncle by tricking the gangsters, and then says "I thought someone in this family ought to help somebody else" (135). The homemade card from Jay and Arty to their grandmother in the concluding scene wraps up the conceptions of family love in the play.³

These American family values of the mid-20th century are spiced up by a cross-section of principles from an old-fashioned European system – a classic "strict but fair" moral doctrine also widely practiced in American families. Early in the play we are reminded that the "right thing to do" includes such traditional strictures as youths not playing hooky or smoking, finishing one's dinner, hard work, unreserved respect for elders, and possession of a tough exterior in a demanding world – "moxie," as the characters call it. Grandma Kurnitz herself was "from the old European tradition: 'You will behave, you will not talk back, you will work hard'" (Irene Worth in Simon, *Lost in Yonkers* 139). No doubt Grandma Kurnitz is imperfect – she can be "so mean" (98), and her

3 In one important element of the *Lost in Yonkers'* moral universe, the family unit is a bulwark against bigotry in the outside world, protecting the German Jewish grandmother from discrimination at the hands of her neighbors. Arty retreats from thinking about stealing his grandmother's money (which the boys wanted for the right reasons – to contribute to their family's coffers) when a neighborhood boy calls her a "dirty kraut" (83).

relationship with Bella is deeply strained and hurtful. But even she admits responsibility – “If I’ve done wrong by you [Bella], den it’s for me to take care of” (144), and to Louie she was a “Hell of a teacher” (93). Louie provides something of a moral foil in the play, as an illicit presence. In spite of his apparent lawbreaking and shady company, however, he is at heart constructive and committed to the family. In his rough-edged way he protects and tutors Jay and Artie, he always credits his mother, and he steps in forcefully to protect Bella from the weak Johnny – an apparently worthy contribution to her future.

Simon colors his central family values with brush strokes of universal moralizing principles, such as beneficence (which I maintain is indeed of universal significance) when Bella stands up for Jay and Arty, and subverts her mother’s will by announcing “No momma. They’re not going. They’re staying. Because if you make them go, I’ll go too” (47), and later when Jay gamely launches the conversation after dinner allowing Bella to bring up the topic of her new love interest; honesty, such as when Bella says of the boys’ father, “He never takes anything from anybody” (35), and grandmother Kurnitz tells Jay “You’re not afraid to say the truth. Dot’s goot” (147); moral courage and loyalty, when Jay confronts his uncle and tells him “Maybe you don’t rob banks or grocery stores or little old ladies. You’re worse than that...And I’ll tell you something about my father. At least he’s doing something in this war. He’s sick and he’s tired but he’s out there selling iron to make ships and tanks and cannons. And I’m proud of him” (103); and the straightforward dictum to do the right thing when Jay asks his uncle Louie, when he (Louie) is moving the boys into position to protect him from the gangsters, “We wouldn’t be doing anything wrong, would we?” (81).

As I have noted, a key moral dynamic that I am examining is a juridical element, which frames, advocates and explicates moral factors. This feature is essential to the structure of drama – with the “defenders,” “witnesses,” “accused” and “verdicts” conditioning stage action and audience participation. In *Lost in Yonkers*, Jay directly engages the audience, sharing his eyewitness view of the drama, which enables deeper retrospective deliberation and informed conclusions about action, behavior, and character motivation and decisions. (In *Brighton Beach Memoirs* Eugene similarly advertised to the audience, “You’re all witnesses...” [30].)

All in all, Neil Simon takes a somewhat circuitous route in his moralizing, or perhaps I should say that he simply wears kid gloves. Simon does not hit his audiences over the head with his beliefs and principles. He packages his moralism in a user-friendly wrapper that mostly accords with the values of the older generation of our parents and grandparents. Simon’s is an “old fashioned” morality, and in some ways he may be preaching to the choir of his devotees. Simon’s is not so conspicuous a moral stance as Sam Shepard’s, but it is no less important in American aesthetics and culture. His is an easier ride, a necessary, centrist complement to the fiery preaching of “true believers,” angry sermonizers (with both edifying and didactic aims, and always with the aim of

expounding a virtuous reality) and gloomy fatalists. We find Sam Shepard in various respects resides in these groups, and to his work I now turn.

SAM SHEPARD: THE ANGRY AMERICAN

Sam Shepard's plays cut to the heart of anxious existence and broken relationships, lacerated life in a mediated world, and personal dreams on the bier of hard-won experience. Always just outside the door of his ramshackle motel on the edge of nowhere is the threat of corporal violence and metaphysical havoc. Few would disagree that Shepard's dramatic worlds are peopled with characters in environments that are eerily "wiped out," "screwed up," and "un-communal, cut off from [their] own past" (Bigsby 12). Such a dramaturgy hardly seems fit for constructive moral examination, but Shepard nevertheless hews to this path. His aim is a view onto the dark side of moral and/or ethical behavior in human life, though with a simultaneous examination of many good qualities (not least family values), which in the end twins the good and bad, enabling us to see that which is first and that which is last in a Biblically concurrent sense (see Matthew 20:16).

Shepard, in contrast to Neil Simon, emerged out of the late 1950s and into the 60s in America, a time when morals were contested sharply across yawning gaps of experience separating generations. During this era something like an entirely new moral understanding arose in the United States, an understanding that was on the one hand accommodating and humanitarian – an "Age of Aquarius" world of peace and love – while on the other bitterly angry, reproachful and dismissive of the "over 30" generation (Neil Simon's generation) which Shepard and his peers saw as nothing less than a rot at the core of American culture. This rot was first and foremost a political and cultural disease of exploitation and imperialism, bigotry and racism, individualism gone mad at the expense of community, and a realpolitik existence that sought only zero-sum gains at the expense of others. The more personal and familial sides of these problems were the resulting dysfunctional relationships that seemed to be rending American culture apart – with husbands and wives, parents and offspring, brothers and sisters, and extended family members lost in storms of divorce, heartbreak, hurt, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, abandonment and adultery. The critical reception of Shepard's treatment of these problems has long celebrated the playwright as a postmodern dramatist and hell-bent-for-leather hanging judge of modern American culture. Such views, while in part true, are faulty for two reasons. First, to hurl Shepard into a postmodern maelstrom would be to strip him of agency, placing him at the mercy of a de-centered reality lacking any substantial referentiality – and this is surely not true of his work, which cuts to the heart of lived experience. Second, although Shepard is to be sure harshly critical in his laying bare of disquieting trends in American society, he is anything but wholly denunciatory, nor, in another possible postmodern take, simply in it for the fun, reveling in the chaotic, acidly humorous existence portrayed in his artwork. I venture to say that for Shepard the

sickness in American society is not only harmful to individuals, families and communities, but also to the very metaphysical and ethical heart of American (and, for that matter, any) culture and existence. Shepard's aim is nothing less than to make a beneficent contribution toward healing this diseased moral life at large, and his moralizing – though a bitter pill to swallow – ultimately has constructive objectives.

To obtain the results he is after, Shepard employs a sophisticated, two-pronged strategy, which comprises an incendiary mixture of utopian (moral) and dystopian (amoral, immoral) messages. We can see this twofold approach in that although Shepard has long crafted a hard-hitting “critique of the ‘real world’ [and the] superficiality of contemporary life,” he also peoples his drama with more positive “‘hero’ figures...who actively battle against forces of oppression” (Bottoms 59-60). To probe deeper, on the dystopian side, Shepard's work incorporates nihilist portrayals crafted of emotionally intense and neurotically split contrasts, fractured communication, rejection of tradition, grotesque and violent imagery, and intense graphic effects. This approach should not surprise us, for many angry moralists and preachers in American culture have painted uncomfortable fire and brimstone pictures of failed moral lives, in contrast with the promise of glorious righteousness and ultimate reward. However, on the utopian side, Shepard grew up in a generation seeking a positive rebirth of human consciousness into an improved state of virtuous behavior and belief – the Age of Aquarius, as noted. Such an ideal world can be seen in Shepard's work, providing a necessary positive foil to his negative dynamic. The combination of these dark and light sides, Shepard's heat and light, yield volatile but salubrious outcomes.

A primary way in which Simon effects his dualistic marriage of opposites is to douse his drama in intense emotion: “HEEZ MY HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAART!!!” shrieks Beth in *A Lie of the Mind* (20), expressing both devout love and searing pain. Some critics have evaluated the emotional outbursts in Shepard's plays as showy fireworks, explosions of bottled-up, intensely caustic feelings. While this is no doubt in part true, a more complete understanding is to view them as the “lively and sympathetic representation” (very lively and sympathetic representation) of individual and communal dilemmas (Frankena 455), and the demonstrative (very demonstrative) psychological milieu characters are immersed in during their ultimate search for a better moral life (Shepard's path to redemption won't be easy). In a word, Shepard plunges his characters into these personal and communal quandaries and conflicts so they can sort through the damage, craft adequate responses, and learn better behavior, with the ultimate aim of effecting a better, changed world: “It's all right. Once we're together, the whole world will change. You'll see. We'll be in a whole new world,” Beth tells Frankie in *A Lie of the Mind* (114).

The instances of moral indignation and endorsement in Shepard's work are so numerous that it is peculiar they have not been analyzed in depth before. Stephen J. Bottoms

hints at such an appraisal when he writes that Shepard's work at times exhibits "traces of a search for some unifying vision, a source of hope beyond the deadly, all-pervading hollowness" (59). John Blackburn, further, writes that Shepard's characters "endeavor to defend themselves against the weight of the past and the anxiety of the present by searching out a deeper, more essential origin" (Blackburn). Bottoms and Blackburn are on the right track, but they do not query deeply enough. If, following Wayne C. Booth, "The author's voice is [...] dominant in a dialogue that is at the heart of all experience with fiction" (272), then Shepard's voice is loud and clear in his drama, and moral indignation and sanction are integral to his "dialogue." One most important element of morality in Shepard's work, for example, is his celebration of love, an emotion ("the emotions are essential and central in our effort to gain understanding on any important ethical matter" after all [Nussbaum 21]). that girds the virtue ethics framework I have discussed. The love among Shepard's characters is a tested love, a bruised and often broken love, a misplaced love, a lost love – but love it is, deep and often wistfully present, as in *Fool for Love*:

EDDIE: We've got a pact.... You know we're connected May. We'll always be connected. That was decided a long time ago."⁴

– or *A Lie of the Mind* –

JAKE: (Softly) I – I – I – I love you more than this earth. (126)

– or heartbreakingly absent, as in *Buried Child* –

DODGE: Tilden was the one who knew. Better than any of us. He'd walk for miles with that kid in his arms. Halie let him take it. All night sometimes. He'd walk all night out there in the pasture with it. Talkin' to it. Singin' to it. Used to hear him singing to it. He'd make up stories. He'd tell that kid all kinds a' stories. Even when he knew it couldn't understand him. Couldn't understand a word he was sayin'... (65)

Sometimes Shepard's love is secure, strong, and deeply filial –

JAKE: No! Don't leave.

FRANKIE: All right. You okay?

JAKE: Yeah. Just sit with me for a while, stay here.

FRANKIE: Okay.

4 I have combined two quotes by Eddie here, from neighboring locations on page 31 of *Fool for Love*.

JAKE: Don't leave.

FRANKIE: I won't. (A Lie of the Mind 14-15)

– and sometimes loose-limbed, pushed to the breaking point, where it becomes neurotic or compulsive –

THE OLD MAN: It was the same love. Just got split in two, that's all. (*Fool for Love* 48)

Intense love, out of control love, angry love, love neurotic to the point of being unrecognizable – but Shepard's love remains. We can perhaps understand that critics have viewed the love that infuses Shepard's work in a jaundiced sense. We would all agree that Shepard's dramatic virtues have a gritty edge, and more than a modicum of attached pain and loss. But to lose sight of Shepard's portrayals of love as love in all its potential and realized glory, is a serious mistake, and can lead to diagnostic distortions.

Other key virtues that tint Shepard's plays are honesty, truth, loyalty and righteousness. Such values again may stem from Shepard's youth in the 1960s. The Vietnam War and Watergate impacted his entire generation, eliciting much cynicism and anger at the decrepit values that seemed to infest establishment life and politics. Bob Dylan, himself a visionary moralist artist who Shepard idolized, sang in 1964's "The Times They Are A-Changin'":

Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
...
There's a battle outside
And it is ragin'.
It'll soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'.

Loyalty often combines with truth and love in Shepard's work. In *Fool for Love*, a play that is something of a sustained meditation on truth, love and loyalty, Eddie and May demand in their own lives mutual truth and supportive love, a pact which has given them direction and stability through the deceitful tumult of their lives. Yes, they still retain traces of disquieting doubt and they are often unsure about what exactly to believe, but the siblings stick together, and at the end of the play, as their father equivocates about the "truth" of their past, Eddie – who himself "got it all turned around" (52) in his mind – rejects the old man's attempts to re-inscribe the past, and simply announces the truth that "It was your shotgun. Same one we used to duck-hunt with" (54) that Eddie's mother used to kill herself. With the truth in the open air, Eddie dismisses the confused, lying

old man with a simple “You were gone” (55), and does not say another word to him. We then see Eddie and May embracing, kissing tenderly, with gestures of affection that the stage directions tell us “never stop” during the last moments of the play (56). For Jake in *A Lie of the Mind*, the faithful impulse is equally simple – when Lorraine asks him of Sally “What do we need her for?”, Jake answers plainly, “I can trust her” (67-68).

Other instances of moralizing about truth, loyalty and trust pepper Shepard’s plays – with his approach allowing him to adhere to his moralizing impulse while embedding his evangelizing in an indefinite postmodern world where the very validity of these values can be questioned. In spite of this, Shepard evinces an appealingly straightforward commitment to truth for truth’s sake. Jake, in *A Lie of the Mind*, tells Beth, “Everything in me lies. But you. You stay. You are true.” (129). Cecilia at the conclusion of *Simpatico* modestly tells Carter, “Your money’s all here. You can count it if you want to. I only used a little bit for sandwiches and tea. I’ll pay you back, I promise” (135). In *Fool for Love*, May announces to Eddie early in the play in no uncertain terms: “I’ll believe the truth! It’s less confusing” (24), while later, Eddie, in a delightfully playful, but seriously moralizing, mood, challenges Martin by saying, “She suggests it’s a lie to you and all of a sudden you change your mind? Is that it? You go from true to false like that, in a second?” (51). In *Simpatico*, Carter and Vinnie expound at length on truth, “right motives,” and not a few other virtuous traits:

CARTER: (laughing): Scared and guilty?

VINNIE: One or the other. Or both.

CARTER: Scared and guilty!

VINNIE: Neither one is the right motive.

CARTER: Oh, well, I apologize for that!

VINNIE: Neither one has to do with kinship or brotherhood or any sense of another man’s suffering at the hands of a woman.

CARTER: Oh, so now we’re suffering! We’re suffering now!

VINNIE: One of us might be suffering!

CARTER: But the other has no conception of it! Is that the idea!

VINNIE: That’s the idea but the idea is a long way from the truth!

CARTER: Aah! The Truth! The Truth! And only one of us is able to have a

handle on that I suppose!

VINNIE: One of us is a helluva lot closer to it than the other one! (17)

Interestingly in Shepard, as with Simon, we find a strong commitment to family, with this the primary compass of Shepard's moral universe allowing characters to find their bearings in harsh worlds. Needless to say, this very harshness sometimes stems from broken and hurtful family relationships, some of which retain their toxic residue – Vince's announcement in *Buried Child* that "I've gotta carry on the line. I've gotta see to it that things keep rolling" is clearly not an unblemished commitment to unsullied fealty (70). In spite of grim examples like this, however, a more beneficial family love can be seen in Shepard's work. *A Lie of the Mind*, with its varied family connections, contains many of Shepard's most penetrating examinations of family relationships, and the brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers all remain close in their various ways (though again, their closeness sometimes has a gritty or injurious edge). Lorraine says of her son Jake, "He's not gonna hurt us. We're related. [...] Outsiders he'll hurt. That's guaranteed. But not us. He knows us." (27). Late in the play Mike shouts to Jake, "He's the traitor, not me! I'm the one who's loyal to the family! I'm the only one." (125), and earlier he had reassured his damaged sister Beth:

MIKE: You're safe here. Long as you stay with us.

BETH: What's "safe"?

MIKE: Safe. Safe from injury. You won't get hurt here. (48)

Often these family values and an array of universal virtues are combined and brought into sharp relief at the conclusions of Shepard's plays (a standard technique of the evangelizer that all "get their due in the end" and that a better world awaits those who persevere and do the right things⁵). Here we are led into moral worlds that feel completed, almost optimistic (if still colored with doubt and pain), and the characters who had been feeling such confusion and instability during the course of the plays are often given a

5 Recall that Aristotle "set... himself the task of giving an account of the good which is at once local and particular – located in and partially defined by the characteristics of the polis – and yet also cosmic and universal" (Macintyre 148). In short, all of the principles I am examining are of both particular and universal significance, and this is true whether they are couched in didactic and/or edifying terms, whether they are "for their own sake," or aimed at the cultivation of individual character, or components of "moral agendas" as I have discussed, or part of a larger socio-moral landscape in a culture.

taste of virtue and glimpses of futures that maybe, just maybe, will not be as bleak as they had been led to believe. Eddie appears to leave May at the end of *Fool for Love*, but their separation feels more like a necessary severing of their unfortunate past than an abandonment – something like the pruning of a diseased limb that may lead to regeneration (and I have already noted their tender attachment at this point in the play). In *A Lie of the Mind*, Jake kisses Beth softly before he exits, while Baylor, flush with the triumph of folding the American flag with his wife, kisses her on the cheek and, though unsure and awkward, tells her with some affection “Let’s go on up to bed now” (130). In the conclusion of *Simpatico* Vinnie turns to an endeavor he truly appreciates – meting out justice, which “fills [him] with purpose” (134). Even in *Buried Child* – no doubt the most baleful of the plays examined here, and anything but truly “optimistic” – Vince is seen in the end making plans to “[get] rid of some of the vermin in the house” and start “brand new” (71). Meanwhile, Tilden exposes to the light of day the murder that has tormented the family for years, while Halie revels in the “paradise out there” in the back yard. She is last heard making a plea for a “good hard rain” that will scrub the “stench of sin” from their lives, “[take] everything down to the roots,” and make way for “a miracle” and “the sun” in their dark existence.⁶ We see in the denouements of Sam Shepard’s plays at least hints of new, constructive moral orders, which perhaps should not surprise us, for as Hayden White asks, “What else could narrative closure consist of than the *passage from one moral order to another?*” (“The Value of Narrativity” 283, emphasis in original).

CONCLUSION

Neil Simon and Sam Shepard: moralist playwrights inscribing ethical frameworks for their American (and global) audiences. One, a fire-breathing sermonizer, a radical preacher and teller of horror tales, ready to denounce amoral listeners for illicit behavior; the other a friendly family advisor looking to the best sides of life for examples of best behavior. Vastly different they may be, but both emerge from an American artist-moralist tradition, a tradition that has existed side-by-side (if often uncomfortably) with more traditional methods of moralizing and preaching in the nation. For like it or not, America is a moral nation, a nation that from its founding professed to individuals and communities the necessity of “doing the right thing.” Edward Winslow, Mayflower pilgrim and first governor of the Plymouth colony, wrote for those who were beginning their new lives in Massachusetts –

...if there be any too desirous of gain, to entreat them to moderate their affections, and consider that no man expecteth fruit before the tree be grown; advising all men, that as they tender their own welfare, so to make choice of such to

6 The preceding text is from page 72, except for “stench of sin,” which is from page 58.

manage and govern their affairs, as are approved not to be seekers of themselves, but the common good of all for whom they are employed... (Winslow)

– while across time George Bush orated in his 2005 inauguration –

That edifice of character is built in families, supported by communities with standards.... Americans move forward in every generation by reaffirming all that is good and true that came before – ideals of justice and conduct that are the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Bush)

Beliefs like these have infused American society across the social and political spectrum for hundreds of years, moving outward from individuals and families to larger communities; from the local, to the national, to the universal. Such an environment has in turn influenced American aesthetics and arts, nurturing the artist-moralist impulse. Neil Simon and Sam Shepard, if influenced by a variety of other (and often conflicting) aesthetic, social, and political motivations, follow in this long line, and they pick up and transmit these aesthetic-moral traditions to their audiences. For Simon and Shepard, it's the right thing to do, for as Halie says in Shepard's *Buried Child*, "We can't not believe in something. We can't stop believing" (60).

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