

Postmodern Historiography in *Suicide in B-Flat*:

Sam Shepard's Myth of the Artist

Shima Shahbazi¹

Hossein Pirnajmuddin²

Abstract: Sam Shepard is one of the most popular postmodern playwrights. His plays have a mythic quality; they figure characters in search of their identities in their past. "Myth of the artist" is highlighted in many of his plays concerned with art. In *Suicide in B-Flat* --a postmodern play with surrealist techniques-- Shepard focuses on the new forms of art--pop art-- namely jazz music. He demythifies the past myth of the "artist" as "originator" and remythifies it as a confused figure in search of a true identity. Sam Shepard's plays are historiographic in that they deal with the past representations and the ex-centric, marginal figures; they are parodic and have a critical attitude towards the past. Apart from the critical aspects, some of his plays are marked with the nostalgia of the American dream which is a popular theme in contemporary American drama. This article addresses the historiographic quality of Shepard's *Suicide in B-Flat*, with emphasis on Linda Hutcheon's poetics of postmodern historiography and Roland Barth's conception of modern myths in relation to patterns of culture. The aim is to show how the ex-centric pop cultural icons become central in postmodern historiography and how the old myths of hero turn into myths of anti-hero. The parodic aspect of the play, it is argued, poses a critical stance vis-à-vis the past representations of the myths and the elitist approach of modernist art.

Key words: Sam Shepard; *Suicide in B-Flat*; Historiography; Myth of the Artist; The Postmodern

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts a historiographic reading of Sam Shepard's *Suicide in B-Flat*- a play which is concerned about epistemological notions like art and ontological issues such as the notion of the origin.

Linda Hutcheon defines postmodernism as "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political" (231). What makes her definition outstanding is the emphasis on the historical

¹ MA Student of English Literature, University of Isfahan, Iran. E-mail address: shimashahbazi17@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor of English Literature, English Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Iran. E-mail Address: pirnajmuddin@fgn.ui.ac.ir

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aspect of postmodernism; According to her, postmodernism suggests a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present (19). Hutcheon focuses her attention on historiographic metafiction that is "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lays claim to historical events and personages in order to reveal both the limits and the powers of historical knowledge" (5). She celebrates the way metafiction uses irony to subvert but not reject history and the idea of historical objectivity as a means of rethinking and reworking the past (Shirvani 292). In other words, for Hutcheon, postmodernism is a reaction against "modernism's dogmatic reductionism, its inability to deal with ambiguity and irony, and its denial of the validity of the past" (Hutcheon 30).

Hutcheon's postmodernism is ideology-oriented; she has gone against a dominant trend in contemporary criticism that asserts that the postmodern is disqualified from political involvement because of its narcissistic and ironic appropriation of existing images and stories. She champions Barthes's contention: "where politics begins is where imitation ceases" (Barthes 154) and mentions that the ironic and parodic representation of all cultural forms-- literary, visual, aural, in high art or mass media—are ideologically grounded and they do involve social and political relations (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 3). As our reading of Shepard's play extensively draws on cultural studies, Hutcheon's ideas regarding the ideological aspects of postmodernism (historical, social, and cultural) are relevant.

1. POSTMODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Historiography, generally speaking, is the study of the history and methodology of the discipline of history. La Capra has defined it as a "reconceptualization of culture in terms of collective discourses" (qtd. in Hutcheon 15). Hutcheon uses the term historiography in defining postmodern literature and culture. Historiography not only textualizes the past but also constructs it (*A poetics* 93). Postmodern historiography raises questions regarding the nature of identity and subjectivity, reference and representation and the ideological implications of writing about history (117). Every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications (White 69) but the ideology of postmodernism is paradoxical: on the one hand it deals with the representations of the past and on the other hand it parodies them in order to criticize the present culture. All the past cultural events and figures build up their own history; music, theater, cinema etc. are the new cultural events. Postmodern drama or generally speaking postmodern art and literature are self-reflexive and simultaneously historically grounded and they bear a history of themselves within their textuality. As we will discuss, Sam Shepard's postmodernist plays are self-reflexive since they are concerned with art, artists and the history of the formation of art.

History is one of marked ideological notions discussed in postmodernism for it is considered essential to making meaning of our culture at present. Hutcheon argues that postmodernism is a good way of questioning how and why we think we can know about the past (Shirvani 294). In postmodernism, there is an ironic rethinking of history. She declares that in postmodernism, the past can no more be denied than unproblematically returned to; it is always "placed critically and not nostalgically in relation with the present" (*A Poetics* 45). Therefore, she views the past in postmodernism as a critical revisiting. She maintains:

The postmodern still operates, in other words, in the realm of representation, not of simulation, even if it constantly questions the rules of that realm... Its aims are more limited: to make us look to the past from the acknowledged distance of the present, a distance which inevitably conditions our ability to know that past. The ironies produced by that distancing are what prevent the postmodern from being nostalgic: there is no desire to return to the past as a time of simpler or more worthy values. These ironies also prevent antiquarianism: there is no value to the past in and of itself. It is the conjunction of the present and the past that is intended to make us question—analyze, try to understand—both how we make and make sense of our culture. (*A Poetics* 230)

Hutcheon as mentioned disproves the nostalgic aspect of postmodernism and does not approve of the theory that calls postmodern representations meaningless and centerless simulacra. But Baudrillard on the contrary maintains that by the murder of the real and giving birth to hyperreal, nostalgia reaches its highest point. Baudrillard assumes the “proliferation of myths” to be a result of the nostalgic mode of postmodernism while Hutcheon believes them to be a parodic representation of the past myths:

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and the substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production. This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal, whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence. (Baudrillard, qtd. in Lodge 405)

Then, there are two types of myths here: one born out of nostalgia (Baudrillard), the other generated from the critical view of the past myths and values (Hutcheon). In Sam Shepard's drama, we witness a critical outlook towards the past representation of myths; myths of hero transform into myths of anti-hero. Of course some critics believe that his view of the past is nostalgic too. Shepard is concerned with the notion of reality as opposed to hyperreality. In *True West* Austin says: “There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!”; or in *The Tooth of Crime*, Crow knows that reality is a malleable fiction. Shepard's postmodern characters turn to simulations of reality after admitting the absence of true reality. For them, myths are no more real, but they are simulations of the past myths. To clarify the historiographic and mythical aspects of Shepard's plays, we need to define myths in their modern sense.

When history is dealt with as a cultural sign system, documents become signs of events which the historian transmutes into facts (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 122). Myth is one of the documents used in historiography. Myths are usually associated with classical fables about the exploits of gods and heroes, and popular usage of the term ‘myth’ suggests that it refers to beliefs which are demonstrably false, but the semiotic use of the term does not necessarily suggest this. Like metaphors, cultural myths help us to make sense of our experiences within a culture: they express and serve to organize shared ways of conceptualizing something within a culture (Lakoff and Johnson, qtd. in Chandler 185–6). Myths once have been created according to some events or historical facts but when transmitted to the next generations, there remains only a semiotic sign which could be interpreted in different ways. For instance, “cowboys” were known as mythic figures among early Americans for the sake of their heroism; even now, some writers (such as Sam Shepard) use myth of the cowboy but not necessarily as representative of heroism; for in postmodernism, as mentioned, many of the historical semiotic signs are paradoxically used and interpreted.

Another type of myth apart from Baudrillard's and Hutcheon's theorizations is Roland Barthes's “modern myths”. According to Barthes, myth is a system of communication, a message, a concept or an idea; on the whole, it is a mode of signification (*Mythologies* 107). He emphasizes the historical aspect of the myths and asserts:

Mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things... speech of this kind is a message. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representation; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a subject to mythical speech. (108)

Myths are mostly found in folklore and popular culture, journalism, literature especially popular literature and proverbs. These are the areas of semiotic production par excellence because they are made of language, images, customs and figurations; myths are born, grow and reproduce in these fields (Calefato 75). Even the postmodern iconicity which is a re-presentation of the facts, events and objects turns into myth.

Myth is a mode of representation and as it is chosen by history, and its meaning is determined by it; it is a sort of historiography itself. Considering all new cultural events as mythical, Barthes has made a revolution in myth studies and cultural studies.

Myth comprises a “tri-dimensional pattern” described as “the signifier, the signified and the sign” but its semiological chain existed before it (Barthes, *Mythologies* 113). There exists a constant game of hide-and-seek between the form and the meaning of the myth. Barthes emphasizes that myth is not a symbol for its form is present in the context. But this presence is “tamed”, “put at a distance, it recedes a little” (117). He exemplifies this issue arguing about the picture of the Negro soldier saluting the tricolor flag of France and asserts that since the negro has too much presence, he cannot be a *symbol* of French imperialism. The form of the myth cannot be a symbol, it is not historical but the concepts behind the myths are historically- determined. Unlike the form, the concept is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth (117). Myths change meaning due to the signifier’s changing signified throughout the history. Even, myths are sometimes de-mythed and then re-mythed; the form perseveres while the concepts change and this is how new myths are born out of old myths. As Barthes declares, the relation that unifies the concept of the myth to its meaning is essentially a relation of deformation. In myth the meaning is distorted by the concept and this distortion is possible only because the form of the myth is already constituted by the linguistic meaning. The concept deforms but does not abolish the meaning (121). This he also calls the “semioclastic” function of myth which dismantles and at the same time presents itself through traces and fragments (Calefato 72).

In the mythical signifier, the form is empty but present and its meaning is absent but full. Myth is defined by its intention rather than by its literal sense, for its form is empty (122). In general as Barthes clarifies (125), “myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat and ready for a signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc.” In postmodernism, the pastiche caricature-like characters make up the empty signifiers and poor images that Barthes mentions and they constitute the new myths that he analyses.

Myth is a pure ideographic system (126); a non-linguistic, empty signifier that bears concepts and meaning. Barthes conceptualized myth as language robbery (by colonization) (131-2) for wherever myth appeared, it substituted a connoted system of meanings for the denoted system already present. Myth empties phenomena of their literal meaning and adds its own meanings;

Barthes’s *Mythologies* is considered a “classic and germinal textual instantiation of the sixties transition from modernist contempt for mass culture to postmodernist valorization of popular culture” (Dekoven 82) for its reactionary approach to high /elite culture. What he introduced as new myths were the popular Bourgeois culture unmasked and after a while these myths elucidated their cultural and political connotation to the public. He is believed to have aligned himself with the Adornian advocacy of avant-garde as oppositional aesthetic practice capable of resisting (84). When we talk about avant-garde theater for instance, we see how resistant, reactionary and revolutionary the myths and icons are. These images were used to react against the high culture of modernist literature which was specifically written by the elite for the elite. Dekoven states

In the dominant paradigm of modernity, mass culture is seen as the home and enforcer of the reactionary Bourgeois status-que, to be replaced through revolution by a culture based on utopian avant-garde consciousness. In the emergent paradigm of postmodernity, popular culture is seen as the privileged site of resistance to the oppressive enlightenment master narratives, and modernist/avant- garde aesthetic practices are seen as the primary cultural expression of the white , western, imperialist, masculinist, bourgeois hegemony that characterizes modernity. (98)

One of the salient features of postmodern myth is its parodic nature. Parody is often called “ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality” and it is central to postmodernism. For artists, the postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past--a contesting revision-- in such a way as to show the history of the representations (*Politics of Postmodernism* 93). Parody calls our attention to the history of the images and icons or better to say, the representations we

meet in today's culture. The paradoxical nature of postmodernism is generated by "parody" for it "paradoxically incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 6). Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which "allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within it but without being totally recuperated by it" (35). Therefore, parody brings about a critical distance which makes possible a roughly objective reading of the past. It offers a sense of the presence of the past, a past that can be known from its documents (125).

Critics including Jameson believe that postmodern irony is empty parody or 'pastiche'-- value-free, decorative, dehistoricized-- since there exists no novel or unique style to parody nowadays. On the contrary, Hutcheon does not call it empty for she is of the opinion that postmodern parody does not disregard the past representations but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that today we are separated from that past (*The Politics* 94). She maintains that postmodernist parody is a value- problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (*The Politics of Postmodern Parody* 225). To clarify this idea, myths can be mentioned: the ironical mode of the myths today is because we are far detached from the past myths and their history; moreover, myths today are in accordance with the very ironic culture of the present time. For instance, cowboys are no more spotted nowadays since the nature of heroism has changed. People remember the history of American heroism and western frontier when they hear about the cowboys or see them in the movies; however, they (mythical cowboys) do not make sense anymore as patterns of heroism for today. Hence, time is also a determining factor in distinguishing the meaning of icons of the present culture.

In postmodernism, the parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing but even re-historicizing; it does not wrest past art from its original historical context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, through ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference (Hutcheon, *The politics* 93).

Parody contests the assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness and the notions of ownership and property. With parody – as with any form of reproduction – the notion of the original as rare, single, and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms) or the myth of the origin and originator is called into question. This does not mean that art has lost its meaning and purpose, but that it will inevitably have a new and different significance. In other words, parody works to foreground the *politics* of representation (*The politics* 93-94).

2. DISCUSSION

Contemporary American drama is considered to cover the theater of 1960s onwards; it is also called postmodernist drama since it is much concerned with form and representation. Postmodernist theater is well-known for its fragmented narrative, deconstructed characters, acknowledgement of popular and mass culture, and self-consciousness of performance (Saddik 129). Generally speaking, American theater as an experimental theatre of inclusion and diversity that questions the nature of reality, presents multiple versions of truth, complicates the notion of an origin or 'essence', and destabilizes the illusion of fixed identity by blurring the boundaries between role-playing and authenticity, or acting and being (Saddik 7).

Questioning the notion of origin, postmodernist drama makes a link between the past and the present and reviews the representations of the past; in other words, postmodernist drama is concerned with historiography. Sam Shepard, the contemporary American dramatist, is one of the figures who have worked on historiographic postmodern drama. According to Bigsby (193) Sam Shepard has "found in performance a symbol of lives which are the enactment of stories with their roots in the distant past of ritual and myth as well as in a present in which role and being have become confused." This confusion of the identity and the eternal search for it makes up the center of many of Shepard's plays. He depicts the visionary quests of his characters for identity in the old West, their attempt to reach to their dream of fame and fortune--the American dream. He applies the old American myths in his plays to show the

change in the nature of American dream and to connect the Americans to their past values. Postmodern myth is the resistant Barthesian myth that stands against the elitism of enlightenment. As Grant explains, "Myth for the modernist writer, like Eliot or Cocteau, is filtered through the wit and cynicism of a sophisticated society. Myth material is made rational and manageable by the conscious intellect. Shepard's creative process, his dramaturgy and his vision of the efficacy of theater, on the other hand, conspire to make myth a pre-rational psychic experience shimmering with the novelty of its emerging form, with the rough edges still showing and the primal energies still intact" (129). Shepard defines myth as:

Myth served as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and the future.... the traditional meaning of myth, the ancient meaning of myth is that it served a purpose in our life. The purpose had to do with being able to trace ourselves back through time and follow our emotional self. (qtd. in Rosen 5)

His view about the past myths is very optimistic but when we come to the postmodern myth he defines it as a fragmented river:

Myth in its truest form has been demolished. It doesn't exist anymore. All we have is fantasies about it. Or ideas that don't speak to our inner self at all, they just speak to some lame notions about the past. But they don't connect with anything. We've lost touch with the essence of myth.... The same with the Native Americans—they were connected to their ancestors through myth, through prayer, through ritual, through dance, music—all of those forms that lead people into a river of myth. And there was a connecting river, not a fragmented river (qtd. in Bottoms 217)

Myths have changed because "they have lost power to affect us in their original form" (Bottoms 220) and because the American dream has not been fulfilled. Shepard's postmodernist drama has a revisionist, critical look to the past myths and values; that is what Hutcheon believes to be the most important aspect of postmodern historiography. Moreover, through pastiche and intertextuality, he has created a parodic language which has turned heroes to anti-heroes. As we explained, Barthes' modern mythology focuses on myths that arise from pop culture. Shepard's myths are also created from the most ordinary aspects of life and the commonest people. As he says: "I'm pulled toward images that shine in the middle of junk" (qtd. in Cohn 38). His theater is anti-elitist and appreciative of low culture. His heroes are those "marginalized" or "ex-centric" (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 12) members of the society who have been pushed to the margins by the dominant ideology of high/elite culture of modernism: Rock n roll stars, musicians, drug and alcohol addicts, thieves, etc. Shepard's historiographic drama tries to centralize the ex-centric and re-mythologize the de-mythed and parody is its remarkable means of fulfilling the job.

Artists comprising musicians, Rock stars, authors and screenplaywrights, composers and producers are some of the recurrent heroes of Shepardesque drama who make up "the myth of the artist". The "myth of the artist" emphasizes the American dream of civilization sought in art namely, music and movies. Rock music and Western movies as the standard fares of Romanticism merge into the American Folklore and turn into myths. The artists we witness in the postmodern drama are not the elite artists of the modern literature. They are the products of mass/pop culture. Fredric Jameson has suggested that, as the position of the author becomes jeopardized, mass culture and especially popular music respond to this crisis with a glorification of the artist, producing the mythicized figure of the balladeer like Dylan or the martyr/Christ figure (Rabillard 87). Some of Shepard's plays are either specifically about art and artists or include artistic themes such as *Tooth of Crime*, *Angel City*, *Cowboy Mouth*, *Melodrama Play*, *Suicide in B-Flat*, *Mad Dog Blues* and *True West*. In this paper, the attempt is to focus on the myth of the artist in *Suicide in B-Flat* and its postmodern historiographic characteristics.

Suicide in B-Flat has seven characters including the Pianist, Pablo and Louis (two detectives), Petrone, Laureen (two jazz musicians), Niles (a jazz pianist-the main character) and Paulette (Niles' girlfriend). The play is a mixture of a parodic detective story and a parodic artistic improvisation and it includes many pop cultural icons such as Raymond Chandler-- the detective story writer--, dick Tracy--

the intelligent comic strip police detective--, Tommy Dorsey-- the trumpeter--, Gabby Hayes-- the American radio and western film actor--, The Mills Brothers--the jazz quartet--, Benny Goodman-- jazz musician and bandleader--, the Mindbenders-- the beat group-- and etc. the existence of these names in the play depicts the importance of art and artist in American pop culture. The reader must be familiar with pop culture to be able to recognize these characters and the purpose of the playwright in naming them.

In the beginning of the play and before the entrance of the musicians, we hear the two detectives' dialogue as follows:

PABLO: (catching his breath) Trying to reconstruct the imagination of it.

LOUIS: (still on his back) What?

PABLO: The imagination. (between breaths) The imagination of it. How we suppose it might have been. It's useless. All we come up with is "supposes."

.....

LOUIS: These positions remind me of hieroglyphs.

PABLO: It's lucky the whole thing wasn't ripped off.... (194)

Actually, the whole play hinges on "trying to reconstruct the imagination of something" and the failure in doing it. The two detectives are talking about a suicide and its reasons and they are trying to guess why a musician should ever kill himself. On the other hand, we see Niles who is trying to reconstruct his imagination to create new music. Then, Niles is the mythic artist hero of the play. He is a jazz musician-- a pop cultural icon—who is considered as ex-centric or marginal according to the norms of the society but Shepard has turned him into the central figure of the play. Niles feels a great identity loss due to his loss of imagination. He has made an attempt to commit suicide in order to reconstruct his imagination in accordance with a new self. Louis, the detective, thinks that Niles has blown his brains out for nobody bought his music anymore (195). Thus, we have the parody of the past artists, i.e. -- a musician, author, composer, etc.—who used to be a source of origination and imagination while there is no original, originary creator here but a borrower and arranger of familiar material (Rabillard 82). The artist has become a consumer of cultural signs created by others and this surely constitutes a demystification of the modernist myth of authorship. The artist like the spectator has become the consumer of cultural products and not the producer (86). Niles is stuck in confusion. As Pablo hypothesizes, "he [Niles] has become a victim of circumstances beyond his control...his music was driving him mad... He began to feel that he was possessed. Not as if by magic but by his own gift. His own voracious hunger for sound became like a demon. Another body within him that lashed out without warning" (203). Niles has lost his artistic powers and his melodies have turned into boring tunes. Hence, we see an artist who has become estranged from his original art and this has led to his attempts at killing the demonic selves he feels inside. Niles has turned into a schizophrenic artist; he imagines things and is scared of being killed by them, therefore, he starts to kill them and play dead in order not to be recognized.

As mentioned, in postmodern drama the myth of the artist as originator has been questioned. Art is no more the spontaneous overflow of the true artist's feelings but a repetition of what others have created. When Niles was an artist-originator himself, he invented music that would "fill him up" (216) but after borrowing music from the others, he is now in a condition that as Paullette explains, "[he] can't get to anything new...[he] is repeating himself" (216) or worse than that "[he] is repeating them" (216). He has to kill the voices inside or his public persona to find his original art back. Once he is dressed up as a cowboy and Paullette shoots him in this outfit. This is the death of a mythic hero and artist: "He sang songs to the Milky Way"; "He discovered a whole way of life" (217). He is a true originator or as Niles admits, "He is a myth" (217) but Paullette states: "So are you!" (217); for her "[the cowboy]'s no hero... He's a punk psychopath..." (217). Paullette has a revisionist historiographic view to the past myths and heroes. Ironically, she considers the mythic cowboy to be an anti -hero and Niles as a hero, whereas Niles seems to be a parody of the mythic artist or the Barthesian modern anti-hero. Paullette kills the old myth to create a new one, one that fits the new conditions of art. She goes on killing the myths ritualistically as if she is fulfilling a certain mission.

Not only is Niles obsessed with his music but also are his two jazz musicians. When we first meet them in the play, they are unable to play tunes. For instance, there is a scene in which Petrone puts the saxophone to his mouth and starts to finger the keys but no sound comes out of the instrument except for the rhythmic tapping of the keys (202). A bit later, Pablo asks Petrone (204):

PABLO: What do you know about improvisation?

PETRONE: You talkin to me?

...

PABLO: Yes. You claim to be one of Niles' musicians. I haven't heard a sound come out of your horn yet.

PETRONE: You haven't?

PABLO: No, I haven't.

PETRONE: Well, it takes a while to attune your ears to the frequency we're playing in. It's extremely high. Dogs can't even hear it. That's why Niles has trouble selling it. (204)

The kind of music these musicians play is different from what people have accepted as music; that is why they are not popular in their society. In the depth of pop culture, we witness some kind of elitism: not everyone can attune his/her ears with the music they play; this is the juxtaposition of high and low culture which is one of the characteristics of postmodernism. Jazz music though originated from the pop culture, was not appreciated widely in the beginning and the musicians believed that their music was not understandable for the public audience. Towards the ending of the play, when Petrone encounters Niles again, he recognizes him while Niles confesses that he does not recognize himself (226) since Niles has been alienated from his art and the artists' identity is entangled with their art. In a reverie-like monologue Petrone explains about the influence of Niles' music on him.

PETRONE: ... I watched his every move as though some magic would escape his gestures and plunge into me. As though his music would start playing from his skin and jump back to my skin, transforming me, changing me, filling me up. Taking away everything deadly. Taking all this awful, empty loneliness and making me whole again. Making me feel alive. (226)

Petrone has found hope in Niles' music, a "slim chance" (226) which could save him from this meaningless life but Niles denies the chance his music had provided for people since he knows his art is no more creative.

In the middle of the play, Pablo keeps asking about the meaning of improvisation and as his questions remain unanswered he suggests his own definition:

PABLO: How does it relate to breaking with the tradition! To breaking off with the past! To throwing the diligent efforts of our forefathers and their forefathers before them to the winds! To turning the classics to garbage before our very eyes! To distorting the very foundations of our cherished values!... To making mincemeat out of brilliance! To rubbing up against the very grain of sanity and driving us all to complete and utter destruction! To changing the shape of American morality! That's where it's at! (205)

For Pablo, the new form of music is subversive for it is distorting their old values and changing the American morality. The improvisation of music, he believes, is the first fatal step toward the improvisation of reality (DeRose 85) and when the reality fades away, it is replaced by hyperreality; this is exactly what was explained in the introduction about Baudrillard's ideas regarding nostalgia and the myths of origin. Later, Louis confesses that this free form music is disturbing him to his inner depths (213). He is used to real jazz music like Tommy Dorsey, Mills Brothers or Benny Goodman--the classic icons of Jazz—but the new free form seems to be surreal, playing on his unconscious and causing hallucinations as if he has been on drugs.

In the ending dialogues of the play, Niles expresses his obsession with the hallucinations that have been bothering him so long. His mind is preoccupied with the real, the surreal or the hyperreal and he cannot distinguish between them:

NILES: are you inside me or outside me? Am I inside you?... Destroying your ancient patterns? Or am I just like you? Just exactly like you? So exactly like you that we're exactly the same... not even separate. (229)

The above monologue is the apex of the play's surrealistic technique. Now everything seems dreamlike but we cannot make sure who is dreaming who. We do not know whether the two detectives were real or they were Niles' hallucinations. We do not realize the nature of the two mythic characters shot by Paulette. We are not even sure if Niles is a real character or a dream. He is the myth of artist or originator rising from the world of hyperreality (as Baudrillard states) and his very existence is a critical reading of the past myths. His outline on the floor in the beginning of the play is representative of an absent artist like a hidden author. Marranca (9) suggests that in the relationship of artist and audience, the artist uses strategies to evade the public eye. Like Niles who commits suicide, Shepard wants to disappear into the text and to leave behind for the critic/detectives only his outline. Behind this emotional gesture is the radical ideal of the author-less work and the denial of Author as myth.

CONCLUSION

Suicide in B-Flat focuses on an artist who is estranged from his own art and has lost his sense of imagination and improvisation. The central character of the play is a marginal member of the society who has lost his centrality through the dominant ideology of the society. He fakes a suicide to kill the mask the society has made him wear as an artist. His art is considered immoral by some people and innovative by some others and he is lost between the tradition and individual talent. Shepard emphasizes the pop/low culture and shows that myths still exist in the western culture but not in their original form. He inserts the postmodern parodic language into his work in order to show the confusion and anxiety of the contemporary era. The ironic aspect of postmodernist literature makes a detached view to the past, a distance that allows us see the past representations more critically rather than nostalgically.

As Hutcheon states, postmodern historiography is political since it deals with ideologically-grounded issues. The ideology of postmodernism is paradoxical for on the one hand it deals with the representations of the past and on the other hand it parodies them in order to criticize the present culture. Sam Shepard's historiography is indeed what La Capra has called "a reconceptualization of culture in terms of collective discourses." He juxtaposes high and low, marginal and central, modern and traditional in order to introduce a new pattern of culture. His myth of the artist is a parody of the artist as originator; he deforms the western culture's traditional heroes into anti-heroes, artists into anti-artists to demonstrate that the past myths are no more able to fulfill the American dream of fame and fortune. Sam Shepard's postmodern parody is not an empty pastiche; it is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history. With parody, the myth of the origin, originator or artist is called into question and the mythic grand narratives are deconstructed. *Suicide in B-Flat* questions the elitist view of the artist as originator and deals with the confusions of the postmodernist artist as one who desires to produce but is not able to.

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