

Sam Shepard and the Theme of Power

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study the theme of power struggle in Sam Shepard's plays. Power has been a predominant theme in his plays. Another preoccupation of Shepard has been American popular culture. He always attempts use popular culture as a medium to present power struggle in a symbolic manner. It is an attempt to elevate the theme of power to a timeless significance. He uses music, movies, cowboy myth and science fiction as appropriate backdrop to power. The images of popular culture are used dramatically as the tools to present power struggle with universal significance and to maintain a very good rapport with the audience.

Keywords: Portray, Rival, Challenger, Tense, Conflict, Violent, Identity, Integrity, Elevates, Images, Myth, Intimate, Emotional, Appropriate.

Introduction

In the course of this study an attempt has been made to study Sam Shepard's plays in the light of power-struggle. In Shepard's plays power-struggle has been presented in different levels. In some of his plays power-game has been portrayed at the family level. The struggle between the father and son becomes the main pre-occupation of Shepard in these plays. While modelling himself on the father, the son becomes his rival and challenger. In his play *True West* the power-struggle between two brothers has been presented in a different manner. The two brothers, Lee and Austin, are locked in a continuous and tense conflict. In *The Tooth of Crime* power-struggle is presented at a professional level. Two rock 'n' roll artists, one outgoing, the other emerging, are engaged in a violent power-game. Ross, the old veteran, tries to stick to his own place and principles, while Crow tries to drive him out of the turf. In Shepard's plays, power struggle becomes manifest in different individual levels as the individuals fight for their own identity and integrity. The young man in *Operation Sidewinder* seeks to regain his own identity in a damned and demented world.

More importantly, Shepard focuses on the game of power-struggle taking different images from American popular culture. He tries to use popular culture as a medium to give the game of power a universal significance. The symbolic presentation of popular culture in his plays elevates the theme of power to a level of timeless significance.

Shepard employs different popular images in the form of cowboys, gangsters and rock-stars in his plays to give the individual experiences a universal significance. The basic function of these images is to give the spectators an intimate and emotional experience. D.J.Boorstin (1961:243) observes, "A vivid image, well tailored to a spectator, can entice him to lose himself and fit perfectly into it". An image is basically regarded as an appropriate representation of a theme or object leading to some sensory experience. In this case the emphasis is repeatedly laid on the feelings of an individual. "The spectator is offered neither an intellectual argument nor an aesthetic titillation, but a felt experience" (Evans 1973:159). Using these "felt experiences", Shepard expresses many frontiers of power-struggle through myths, symbols and images. He has an uncanny ability to mythicise and universalize any ordinary experience, to transform familiar things of the world into exciting events and high drama. Shepard himself comments:

I'm interested in exploring the writing of plays through attitudes derived from other forms such as music, painting, sculpture, film, etc; all the time keeping in mind that I'm writing for the theatre. I consider theatre and writing to be a home where I bring the adventures of my life and sort them out, making sense or nonsense out of mysterious impressions (Vinson and Patrick 1977:722).

When we examine the plays of Sam Shepard, we note the truthfulness of the above statement. The theme of power-struggle has been presented in a grand manner taking popular images from the world of music, Western myths and science fiction.

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Shepard is interested in the world of music. He picks up the images of American popular music to present the struggle for existence and self-assertion in American life. The urge for power and domination becomes the main motif behind Shepard's characters and their actions. In the plays like *The Tooth of Crime*, *Operation Sidewinder* and *Cowboy Mouth* Shepard uses the magical impact of music to give the realities of power-play a general and popular significance. His treatment of music intensifies the emotional realities of the characters involved in some tense situations. In *The Tooth of Crime*, music plays a very interesting role as Shepard tries to focus on the idea of survival of the fittest. Usually, when a writer with an intensely poetic temperament barges into the arena of drama, he allows himself to be overwhelmed by the music of ideas. In *The Tooth of Crime* he uses the popular images as a mode of making a point, as a way of presenting his ideas. The play is a dramatic representation of an archetypal symbol of dethronement-usurpation-- dethronement syndrome. The theme of the play, though it centres round an ageing veteran who has been dethroned/ replaced by a new rock-star, acquires an archetypal and mythic significance because it is modelled upon the tribal practice of violent transfer of power in societies in general. Hoss is like a tribal chieftain with a record of glorious victories. He is surrounded by his supporters and well-wishers. These supporters have become a part of his personality through years of interdependence. Hoss has been sitting on the throne of power for a long time. It is quite natural that he is unwilling to part with power. His terrified discussion with his supporters justifies his constant terror of encountering some younger, sturdier stalwart in a single fatal combat. All these details strongly resemble *The Golden Bough* myth or the King of the Woods myth described by Sir James Frazer. The power-struggle between Hoss and Crow, the two rock stars, is just a symbolic presentation of the cyclic transfer of power between older and younger generation, "Crow's immediate model", observes Mottram (1984:102),

is the young Western gunslinger out to kill the old timer with the reputation as the fastest on the draw, but as an archetype he is as old as myth itself. He is Cain hating Abel and the aspirant to the office of the Priest-king who kills his predecessor in the darkness of the primeval forest.

Like the Priest-king of Nemi in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1927) Hoss is in danger of being conquered and killed.

The struggle for survival is also presented in *Operation Sidewinder* and *Cowboy Mouth*. In each of these plays there is a struggle for power and domination. Everyone is engaged in some kind of struggle for survival by dominating and displacing others. Shepard's *Operation Sidewinder* is about the struggle between the material and the spiritual forces. The struggle between the Indians and the Military becomes the main focus of the play. The Indians symbolise innocence and the Military represents the mechanical, inhuman society. The sidewinder, a scientific machine, is itself a symbol of power. The young man is ruthless and violent. The theatrical

presentation of the multi-layered power-struggle in the play has been made perfect by the presence of music. The musical commentary at the end of each and every scene makes his play more emotional and touching.

The duels in *Cowboy Mouth* are fought as against a background of music. Slim and Cavale are engaged in some cycles of aggression and conflict. Music has been used deliberately to accompany the actions of the play. Shepard uses music in this play in an insightful exploration of the characters and situations. The outbursts of tension between Slim and Cavale have been properly synchronized with the musical notes. Shepard uses popular music in his plays to give an emotional and universal intensity to his situations. The presence of music illuminates the multi-layered and dynamic situations of his plays.

Conclusion

It is found that Shepard uses the images of old west prominently in some of his plays. The images of the American West are handled properly to stress the inevitability of power-struggle. As per the Western myth, the male figures are generally domineering and violent. They try to escape the nurturing shelter of their home. On the other hand, the mother figures are too powerless to counter or balance the power and violence of the male protagonists. The female figures become silent witness as the power-struggles take place between the father and son, brother and brother. Shepard's plays are loaded with the myths of American West. American West is a part and parcel of his dramatic vision. *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* is the life story of a Wyoming Cowboy, Cody. Cody's fight with the gangsters is suggestive of the tension between the world of innocence and the evil life-style of the gangsters. But innocence wins at the end as Cody is saved from danger by his brothers.

Shepard presents different levels of the struggle for self-assertion and survival in his plays. In order to present different layers of power-struggle within the society and within the individual, Shepard has wisely selected some images of American popular culture. In fact, all his dramatic characters are symbols or representations of some ancient, mythical characters. In the dramatic world of Sam Shepard, some significant feelings about life are presented through some types of popular images which the spectators recognize spontaneously and through which they achieve self-realization.

References

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