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Full Length Research Paper

The Loss of National Identity in Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*

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Abstract

Sam Shepard has written his play *The God of Hell* (2004) in order to satirize The War on Terror that has been launched by the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The play shows how the government, represented by Welsh, is trying to force a new national identity on the American citizens. Frank and Emma, an elderly traditional couple who live a peaceful farm life, are destroyed after their national identity is usurped.

Keywords: Sam Shepard, national identity, war, government

INTRODUCTION

According to John Murphy (2003), the American nation has risen to greatness through wars: "the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Plains Indian wars, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the First Persian Gulf War, the Afghan or Terror War, and the Second Persian Gulf War" (Murphy, 610). The War on Terror is the title of the war that the United States launched after the attacks of September 11, 2001. US President, George Bush, declared that "the enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country" (Murphy, 614); he added that the attacks were launched by terrorists because "they hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government" (Murphy, 615). The words 'freedom' and 'democracy' once again appear as a mask that the United States uses to hide the truth of its actions since all the wars have been launched for the sake of freedom and democracy; however, their results are the total opposite. The War on Terror divides the new world and considers every nation that does not support the United States as a supporter of the 'terrorists'; this is what Bush has claimed by saying: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Woodward, 96).

Sam Shepard's vision of the American policy and the wars launched by America show his opposition to such acts which are cruel and violent. When asked about why he includes violence through his plays, Shepard replies in an interview in 2006 by saying: "Because life is violent. Violence rules the world. So why not embrace it? We live in extremely violent times, in this world. I'm not all for heads rolling, but this is a violent country, is it not?" Shepard considers that the American nation rules the world through violence; he aims at satirizing the policy of the United States in general and George Bush in particular: "if you're on the other side of the fence, you're suddenly anti-American. It's breeding fear of being on the wrong side. Democracy's a very fragile thing. You have to take care of democracy. As soon as you stop being responsible to it and allow it to turn into scare tactics, it's no longer democracy" (Sam Shepard, Sam Website)

Shepard's play *The God of Hell*, which premiered at the Actors Studio Drama School Theatre in New York City in 2004, is a play of political satire through which he reveals his message to the Americans before the elections: "I kind of wanted to get it done in New York before the election. I'm not sure it matters, but I figured I'd get it out there". He adds saying: "It fit perfectly with the

Republican invasion. The whole storm that built up after 9-11" (Sam Shepard, Sam Website). The aim of this play is to show the illegal acts of the United States after President Bush launched The War on Terror.

The God of Hell presents an elderly couple, Frank and Emma, who live in a "very simple Midwestern farmhouse" at Wisconsin. The incidents of the play take place in the kitchen which is a common setting for many of Shepard's plays. Inside the kitchen are "appliances, cupboards, and sink-all dating from the fifties". Emma, wearing a blue terry-cloth bathrobe and slippers, appears watering her plants. The same plants appear at the beginning of *True West*, but turn to be dead at the end. In *The God of Hell*, too, Shepard includes the green plants at the beginning of the play to show the presence of life; however, by the end of the play, the plants die revealing the death of the values in the American nation. Frank has just returned from the field; 'his life is his heifers' says his wife. Frank's connection with his land and the simple and peaceful life he lives with his wife is that of the traditional cowboy; this type of life is rarely found in contemporary America.

Mystery is a common feature in Shepard's plays through which the truth is hidden. The play starts with Frankie and Emma debating about their visitor Haynes who seems to be mysterious:

Frank: He's not a scientist. What made you think that?

Emma: I thought you said he was a scientist.

Frank: Nope.

Emma: Well, what is he then?

Frank: I'm not sure. I mean, I'm not sure about his official title.

Emma: Official? So, he's working for the government or something? (*God of Hell*, 6)

Haynes is an old friend of Frank's, but they have not seen each other for a long time. Whether Haynes is a scientist doing a research or working for the government is not clear, something which makes Emma think that he is "Running away from something, maybe?" (*God of Hell*, 6). Shepard tries to create a mysterious atmosphere at the beginning of his play for behind this mystery lies the truth of the American nation.

While Emma is alone cooking bacon in the kitchen, the sound of a stranger named Welsh is heard; he appears with a "dark suit with American flag pin in his lapel, short cropped hair, crisp white shirt, red tie" (*God of Hell*, 6). Welsh is the symbol of the American government; he tries to force Emma to buy American-made cookies. In his review, Ben Brantley (2004) suggests that the "American ideal has shrunk into a more material form: a small, rectangular cookie frosted in stars and stripes of red, white and blue." The American cookie resembles the American nation that has been transformed through advertisement into a sort of commodity; it can be sold and consumed. Shepard wants

to ridicule this new form of patriotism which the American government is trying to force on the American citizens:

"We're being sold a brand-new idea of patriotism. It never occurred to me that patriotism had to be advertised. Patriotism is something you deeply felt. You didn't have to wear it on your lapel or show it in your window or on a bumper sticker. That kind of patriotism doesn't appeal to me at all" (Shepard, *Sam Website*). Welsh, then, resembles an America that has built its patriotism through deceit, for not all what appears on advertisements is true; in the play, Welsh pretends that his flag is an indication of loyalty and pride: "You'd think there would be a flag up or something to that effect. Some sign. Some indication of loyalty and pride", but Shepard wants to mock the American flag that is used to hide the sins of his nation.

Welsh informs Emma that he is traveling "from west to east" (*God of Hell*, 9) to sell American cookies; his journey represents the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. Shepard wants to mock these invasions which are launched in the name of spreading peace and democracy into these countries while facts, such as the incidents of Abu Graib, show the irony embedded in these invasions.

Welsh's journey to Wisconsin can also be considered as a portrait "of an old-time America invaded by a cruel new America" (Brantley, review). Emma tries to uncover the mystery of Welsh's mission in this rural area where foreigners rarely pass by:

Emma: What exactly do you want? What are you doing here?

Welsh: We're on a kind of a survey of sorts.

Emma: Who's "we"?

Welsh: Well, I'm not really allowed to reveal my affiliations exactly. Let's just say we're on a kind of a talent search for solid citizens who own their own land outright. Are you sure you're not interested in a cookie? (*God of Hell*, 10)

Welsh uses the pronoun 'we', for he speaks in the name of his government that is searching for citizens who live the old traditional American life. Emma states that she and her husband are 'dairy people' who carry out "simple traditional farm chores" (*God of Hell*, 10). Welsh is trying to attack the house of those traditional citizens; as if Shepard wants to show that the new American nation wants to control all types of citizens through forcing them to follow the government whether convinced by its acts or not. Indeed, the new American nation wants to force a new American identity on all the citizens.

Welsh disturbs Emma by his questions about her house; he asks about the number of the rooms. He is searching for Haynes who is hiding in the basement. As Welsh leaves, Emma informs her husband and Haynes about Welsh and his terrifying questions; however, Frank is sure that there is nothing to fear from in their country:

Frank: We lead a very peaceful life here. We're in the country. We're dairy farmers.

Haynes: I'm sorry. I just can't take any chances. Maybe after this thing blows over-

Frank: What thing?

Haynes: This whole- crisis.

Frank: Are we talking about a world situation or something personal, Graig? (*God of Hell*, 19)

While Frank is still convinced of the peaceful life he lives, Haynes seems aware of the consequences that will follow Welsh's visit. Haynes himself is infected, for when his hand touches Emma, a blue flash of light emanates causing Emma to be further terrified. Haynes' situation is that of his country since the new American nation is contaminated. In Shepard's opinion, the new American nation is paying money for destruction rather than peace through the search for plutonium and other radioactive elements which lead to mutation and total destruction. Shepard calls plutonium "The God of Hell" because it will be the main cause of destruction not only of America but also the whole world. Haynes' mutation, then, comes from being infected by plutonium:

Haynes: Do you know what plutonium is named after?

Frank: No-What?

Haynes: Pluto-the god of hell.

Frank: Oh- I thought he was a cartoon.

Haynes: It is the most carcinogenic substance known to man. It causes mutations in the genes of the reproductive cells...Major mutations.

Frank: That would probably affect my heifers then, wouldn't it? (*God of Hell*, 20)

Plutonium is the symbol of the destruction and the violence unleashed by the United States which will turn upon itself and destroy its own. Not only Frank's heifers will be affected but also everything around him; in this way, the old American identity represented by Frank will disappear.

The second scene in the play starts with Emma watering her plants once again in the presence of Haynes. The plants, to Emma, are her life, for she has nothing else to do: "If I didn't water like this, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. There would be a horrible gap. I might fall in" (*God of Hell*, 20). When Haynes asks about Frank, she informs him that he is, as usual, with his heifers. Haynes is aware that his presence with this family will bring to them troubles "I never should have come here", but Emma assures him that in Wisconsin "nothing ever happens". (*God of Hell*, 22) Emma herself is a native who has been "born and raised in the same house, still living in the same place. Same spot" (*God of Hell*, 23). Wisconsin, then, is a peaceful place; however, the government is trying to destroy it by preventing its people from living their traditional life:

Haynes: Don't you have some neighbors?

Emma: They never come out. It's too cold.

Haynes: How 'bout summer?

Emma: Summer they stay in the air conditioning.

Haynes: Don't they farm too?

Emma: Nobody farms anymore. Government pays them not to. We're the only one's left.

Haynes: How come you and Frank do it?

Emma: Frank loves his heifers. (*God of Hell*, 25)

The American identity has transformed into a new one; traditional people, such as Frank and his wife, are rare because the government is forcing a new American identity on its citizens. Emma and Frank, then, belong to a dying species that the government is trying to get rid of.

Welsh's mission is to brainwash 'solid citizens' such as Emma and Frank; he, once again, attacks the couple's house forcing Emma to declare the presence of Haynes. Welsh informs Haynes that his presence with the couple will threaten their lives: "You're contaminated. You're a carrier...You've already endangered the lives of your friends here" (*God of Hell*, 30), but Haynes refuses to go back since "the whole state's going to explode". Haynes' mutation is caused by his government; this shows that America has destroyed itself by the terror it uses against other countries. Welsh is the mean of destruction while Haynes is the victim; therefore, Welsh wants to force his ideas on Frank and Emma because they do not belong to contemporary America:

Welsh: The future. Haynes! The bright, golden American future. You can just imagine what an enormous leap that is for a simple country people like this- so out of touch. Living completely in the long ago. Stuck in some quaint pioneer morality.

Haynes: They were just doing me a favor by letting me stay here. They're completely innocent!

Welsh: We're not interested in punishing them, Haynes. On the contrary, we're offering them a leg up. (*God of Hell*, 32)

Welsh speaks of the golden American future which is based on the American dream; Shepard is trying mock this dream which has died with the vanishing of the old American life. In addition, Shepard harshly satirizes the new American policy which pretends to be peaceful and democratic; Welsh pretends to be a messenger of peace who wants to transform the lives of simple people into a completely different one. He wants to usurp their identity through mocking their values and traditions: "Some things do manage to penetrate all the false heroics, all the flimsy ideology. We're suddenly stung by our duty to a higher purpose. Our natural loyalties fall in line and we're amazed how simple it is to honor our one true heritage" (*God of Hell*, 33). The traditional American values, as well as the traditional American identity, have become flimsy and incapable of surviving in a world where power

dominates and rules everything: "I'll do everything in my power...Everything humanly possible" says Welsh. Shepard wants to ridicule the American power through which torture and cruelty dominate while, at the same time, America pretends to be acting humanely.

The third scene of the play presents how the quiet life of Frank and Emma comes to explode, for they have lost their true American identity and are forced to accept a new one. Frank enters the house as a totally different character, dressed "*in suit and tie exactly like Welsh's and carrying an attaché case exactly like Welsh's*" (*God of Hell*, 34); not only his outer appearance has changed but also his behavior:

Emma: What's happened to you? What's the matter?

Frank: I've sold the heifers.

Emma: What?

Frank: I've sold the heifers. Money's in here.

Emma: Why'd you do that, Frank? Those were your replacement heifers.

Frank: Got a good price.

Emma: What're you doing in that ridiculous suit?

Frank: Mr. Welsh gave it to me. (*God of Hell*, 34)

Welsh, then, was able to transform Frank from a traditional cowboy wearing boots and working on the ranch into a new American man with a suit and a tie; by selling his heifers, Frank had accepted to change his national identity. Emma, who knew from the beginning that Welsh was going to threaten their peaceful life, rejected such changes and warned her husband not only from Welsh but also from the whole government:

Emma: This guy is taking over our house! He's taking over our whole life! Stringing up flags! Forcing cookies on me! Who is this guy? We don't know him from Adam!

Frank: He's from the government, Emma.

Emma: What government?

Frank: Our government.

Emma: I don't know what our government is anymore. Do you? What does that mean "our government"? (*God of Hell*, 35)

Emma wants to resist the power of Welsh for she does not want to embrace the new national identity that is forced by the government. Welsh's secret military activities are mysterious, but Emma uncovers the mystery when she states that he is going to take everything out of them; their whole life. The government itself has become mysterious, thus Shepard, through Emma's words, states that the meaning of "government" is not clear anymore.

Innocent people, such as Frank, are misguided by the new American identity, for Welsh is able to convince him that the government is more knowledgeable than they are.

Frank: That means he knows more than us. He's smarter than us. He knows the big picture, Emma. He's got a plan.

Emma: What big picture is that?

Frank: The Enemy. He knows who the Enemy is. (*God of Hell*, 35)

Shepard is launching a fierce attack on Bush's War on Terror through which the government is trying to convince people that they are fighting the enemy. Shepard mocks the presence of an enemy and considers this war as a reason for the destruction of the American nation itself. This becomes clear when Welsh, in the name of democracy, starts to torture Haynes:

Emma: You're not torturing him, are you? What are you doing?

Welsh: Torturing? Torturing! We're not in a Third World nation here, Emma. This isn't some dark corner of the Congo. Frank, haven't you told her about our new platform? Our design for the new century? (*God of Hell*, 38)

Haynes is tortured by electric shocks; his state resembles that of the prisoners in Abu Graib in Iraq. Advertisements play a crucial role in presenting America as an ideal nation that is superior to the countries of the Third World; Shepard wants to show the truth of the new American identity that denies the terror it launches upon others. Emma cannot believe any of Welsh's words and considers his acts as inhuman: "This is absolute torture! I don't care what country we're in." (*God of Hell*, 39) The peaceful life that she and her husband used to live vanished and became a dream that would never be attained again. Frank reveals that he has lost the old times "It's times like this you remember the world was perfect once. Absolutely perfect" (*God of Hell*, 39); moreover, he has lost the most important thing in his life, his heifers:

Frank: You told me my heifers were going to be glorified. Heroic!

Welsh: You've got to drop all that for now, Frank. Leave the simple past behind. (*God of Hell*, 41)

Frank's heifers are a part of his identity, and losing them means losing his relation with his land. In the past, Frank's life was rich with happiness, but Welsh transformed it into a horrible one through depriving him of his true American identity.

The play ends with Welsh threatening Frank who has become contaminated same as Haynes; blue flashes emanate not only from Frank and Haynes but even from Emma's plants revealing that everything in Wisconsin has been transformed. Welsh forces Frank to leave his country: "You're going to like Rocky Buttes, Frank. Whole different landscape. Wide open. Just like the Wild Wild

West. Not a tree in sight. Endlessly flat and lifeless" (*God of Hell*, 42). With the loss of his heifers and his home, Frank's life turns to be disastrous. Welsh threatens Emma saying "You didn't think you were going to get a free ride on the back of Democracy forever, did you? What have you done to deserve such rampant freedom?...Sooner or later, the price has to be paid. Do you think? Our day has come" (*God of Hell*, 42). Democracy and freedom turn to be a tool in the hand of the new government that chooses who deserves them and who does not; banning free countries from freedom becomes the new democracy of the United States. Hence, Shepard is fierce in his attack of the new government who transforms freedom into slavery and democracy into dictatorship. Through such selfish policy, the postmodern American man is forced to change his national identity leading him to be totally lost and tortured in a new alien nation.

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