

## Use of Myths in Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime*

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### ABSTRACT

Ronald Hayman (1979:163) declared in 1979: "Shepard, in fact, has the best claim of any writer since Beckett and Genet -both his seniors by about thirty five years -to being a poet of the theatre." 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 and tropes which interpenetrate each other, gather swiftness, raciness and volume as they flow, and carry the poet playwright along. That was the case with Strindberg and Lorca, with Beckett and Genet; and now that is the case with Sam Shepard who, for better or for worse, may be called the stormy petrel of contemporary American drama. This essay discusses one of the significant plays of Shepard, *The Tooth of Crime*, in terms of his handling myths as a mode of making a point. His uses of myth, sometimes flamboyantly playful, sometimes broodingly sincere but always controlled by an intention, generate a problematic which does not yield to any pat assessment of that intention. Reviewing *The Tooth of Crime*, Harold Clurman (1973:411) does not find any "specific ideology" or any "philosophic identification tags" in it and admits that the message of the author "must of necessity remain somewhat vague or ambiguous" because the voice that expresses the message is that of a poet who speaks from the "underworld."

**KEYWORDS:** Sam Shepard, Myths, contemporary American drama, Ideology.

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Tooth of Crime*, a play in two acts, seems to be a dramatic representation of an archetypal symbol of dethronement-usurpation-dethronement syndrome. Hoss, the aging Elvis Presley style star, is fast losing his grip on situations and people around him due, perhaps, to his antiquated Rock-world standards, but he refuses to peter into junk, to fade into oblivion, to acknowledge the genuineness of the upcoming Mojo Root Force represented by Crow, a Gypsy soloist driving a "58 Black Impala." He tries to fight the feeling of isolation which is coming over him or being forced upon him in a sense by the indifference of his old-time pals. That feeling of isolation is intensified by his apprehension of a "solo" showdown with Crow, a grotesquely millenaristic representative of hostile, irreverent gangsters. The action and conversations in the first act of the play center round this impending confrontation in which the victory of one would inevitably mean the obliteration of the other. The dramatic action builds up slowly to a crescendo of trepidation propelled, as it were, by two unpredictable factors -Hoss's dependence on charts, stars and other people plus his practicing sessions with a dummy and, on the other hand, the general speculation about his adversary's desperate confidence and slight regard for "the code" as expected of those "hot shot young dudes" and hired killers, and particularly the utter vagueness of the threat. The "Act-two" is a prolonged verbal encounter in which the old veteran is outmaneuvered sometimes by the fresh vigor of his adversary, sometimes by the Referee's impropriety and Crow's mean emulation and prompt adaptability. Hoss kills the Referee in a fit of "wronged" indignation (the real violence), and is momentarily unnerved by his rash, code-defying crime, by his sudden awareness of the "keepers." As a final gesture, he yields to the bargain and surrenders his hegemony, his "turf" to Crow with an appeal that Crow would teach him "how to be a man" to face his altered state and cope with his loneliness. However, he fails to learn and prefers to put a bullet in his mouth. Hoss yields to a necessity which is powerful. The Greeks called it "moira;" Shepard describes it as "the way things are."

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This is the story of the play on the surface. This basket of ordinary-looking vegetables might well have been cooked into a neatly-flavored cuisine of a one-actor by Anton Chekhov (for that matter any good playwright whose dramatic skill controls his ideas and poetic imagination), keeping its potential symbolism intact. But thanks to his wild flights of imagination and to his obsession to explore all the mythic possibilities of this familiar fact of existence, Sam Shepard churns out a full-length play with a desultory beginning, a captivating middle and a scintillating end. Sustained as it is by poetry, the play has to count on an endless confluence of words which are sometimes banal and outrageously vague so typical of the stylized Rock-jargon and gang-war vernacular. The endless permutations and combinations of words which are daringly repetitive and neologistic produce an incantatory effect and seem to make up for the lack of movement both in time and place. The idea of place is caught up in a room with a chair signifying the throne of power and the idea of time is trapped in the transition. Instead of abridging the world per se into a room he enlarges the room into the world, the chair into the principle of power; instead of squeezing eternity into a moment, he extends the moment to eternity.

A contemporary act of surrender and acquisition of power becomes an allegory which impales itself on life at large. As the play proceeds, the microscopic room of Hoss expands into a realm of which he is the reigning maestro, and the past, the present and the future emerge out of the highly charged, vibrating womb of the moment. As a result, the place seems to change although action is confined to a room and time seems to move forward and backward although it is actually static.

The theme of the play, though it centres round managing 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 could be a tribal chieftain with many glorious victories who is surrounded by his old-time funkies, friends and a woman, Becky Lou. These people have become a part of his personality through years of interdependence. Hoss's aging is the case in point; it creates a situation for an inexorable ferment and rearrangement of order. Hoss's condition, his aging, his holding the sceptre of power too long, his anxious unwillingness to part with power, his being the usurper-turned-chieftain or king which necessitates/justifies his constant terror of encountering some younger, sturdier stalwart in a single fatal combat, and finally his ritualistic death -all strongly resemble the morphology of the Golden Bough myth or the King of the Woods myth described by Sir James Frazer. This myth is sometimes referred to as the Priest-king of Nemi. "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 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.

The Priest-king of Nemi is wedded to the Golden Bough and Diana. He has to protect the tree. He is the priest, the king, the murderer and the guard who keeps vigil under the tree, always apprehending an enemy who would attack him, kill him and assume the priesthood one day or other. His old age and weakness are signs of his certain death and consequent transfer of power. "This rule of succession by the sword," writes James Frazer (1927:3) in *The Golden Bough*, "was observed down to imperial times: for amongst his other freaks, Caligula, thinking that the priest of Nemi had held his office too long, hired a more stalwart ruffian to slay him." Hoss rules over a realm which he himself has conquered by killing the previous ruler and is now in danger of being conquered and killed. It is not of great consequence here to prove whether Sam Shepard has deliberately modeled his play upon this multilayered myth of this cyclic transfer of power, upon closer reading, the play responds to the general structure of such a power-game and the violence inherent in it.

A few twentieth century plays like Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending* and Shepard's *Operation Sidewinder* and *The Tooth of Crime* privilege myths and yield to a reasonably mythic interpretation. The basic structures at myths implied or employed in those plays determine the synchronic arrangement of the plot of these plays on the horizontal level. In other words, myth and drama operate on two distinct levels (myth on the conceptual level and drama on the level of action) and when these levels interact they generate multiple possibilities of "meaning." "Meaning" is not construed here as something palpable, such as the golden apple which a reader or critic is assured of getting at the end of his toil; rather, as Roland Barthes has pointed out, critical inquiry should aim at reconstituting rules which govern the production of meaning. "The structuralist mode of thought," observes Barthes (1972:18) in *Critical Essays*, "seeks less to assign completed meanings to the objects it discovers than to know how meaning is possible, at what cost and by what means." Now it becomes imperative to discover the structure of the dethronement-usurpation-dethronement syndrome operative in *The Tooth of Crime* as well as in other models dealing with the concept of power and violence. It is supposed here that the principles of the power-game manifest themselves in various guises but, like natural elements, they follow certain fundamental courses.

Claude Levi-Strauss makes this point when he attempts a structural study of myth by taking his models from Saussure's principles on language: *Lingue*, in Levi-Strauss's hand, belongs to a reversible time and expresses the structural side of language whereas *parole* belongs to non-reversible time and expressed the statistical aspect of language. And myth, though it is linguistic by nature and contains the properties of *langue* and *parole*, yet uses language differently (the "third referent") on a high level "where meaning succeeds practically at taking off from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling" (Levi-Strauss 1977:210). The above table shows the Saussurean *langue*, the structural side of language/myth operating on the vertical level/diachronic level and it is temporally reversible. It also shows the Saussurean *parole*, that statistical aspect of language/myth operating on the horizontal levels/synchronic levels which generally obey the structural side or the diachronic levels. The textual model corresponds with the tribal, mythic and political models and, though their horizontal manifestations would accommodate various permutations, they follow certain structures and exhibit similar traits.

It ought to be stressed here that any incident involving the violent transfer of power cannot be an allegory for the general syndrome unless it relates to the principle of structure. The text through its "model" supplies hints, innuendos and subtle or direct provocations for the reader/ critic to trace the vestiges of its connections with other models. In the process, the textual model becomes the part of a structure which contains political, mythic and tribal models as well. The textual model of *The Tooth of Crime* has to be discussed in some detail at this stage.

The first song of Hoss stresses the three stages of human acceptance of things inevitable: "the way things are," "the-way things seem" and "the way things seems to be to me." Reality is supposed to be independent of both the objective and subjective speculations and operates as a viable paradox to them. Their interaction reveals the provisional nature of things. The "little light" he sees in "the blackest night" may be an illusion, a will-o-the-wisp, or the diabolical enemy/usurper prowling toward him with a drawn sword in one hand and a blow-torch in the other. Terror of succession/usurpation is the terror of repetition. It is a built-in complex in the mind, difficult to cope with and more difficult to fight it out. It is not exactly a sense of sin which torments such characters because they somehow realize that they are only links in the great chain of necessity and violence, and that their desire to escape is an existential urge. Kronos after emasculating and dethroning Uranus, his father, cannot get rid of the terror of being "treated likewise by his son, Zeus. Hoss is in the grip of such an uncertainty trying to muster up courage to meet his adversary, Crow Bait, and seeks to be surrounded by soothsayers, astrologers, a doctor with "mounts of cocaine" and the voluptuous wench, Becky Lou. Becky reminds him: "You were always suicidal like that. Right from the start . . . When we first landed you, you were a complete beast of nature. A sideways killer . . . A killer's killer." And Hoss says prophetically: "The next genius is gonna be a Gypsy Killer" (Shepard 1981:209).

By connecting this Rock-world phenomenon with the tribal Red Indian power-game and the political structure in general, by stretching its links to the Titanic and the Golden Bough myths of usurpation, the emerging structure tries to validate an individual, isolated episode in terms of its universality. The hero who is not much different from the victim has to maintain his heroism by confronting his destiny/enemy alone, by living constantly under an endlessly deferred threat, by remaining eternally vigilant and powerful, because "The crown sticks where it tits" (ibidem:213). Carried to its logical limit, this observation of Galactic Jack reveals its inherent truism. The question of fitment is the question of inexorable necessity and the personality and principles of the character offer weak resistance to such a necessity.

It is important to note that Shepard intends to highlight this aspect of the power-game by endowing Hoss with a distinct personality. Hoss is not any chieftain or any priest of Nemi awaiting his turn to be overthrown and killed by another sturdier adversary. He stands for certain values whose quality is deemed to be superior to those of his upstartish Gypsy successor. His final dethronement and suicide acquire a tragic significance because he ends up as a hero after suffering and fighting and, as a result, exhibiting a distinct identity, not as an amorphous victim condemned to an equally amorphous fate. "I'm surrounded by assholes," says Hoss indignantly.

We're punk chumps cowering under the Keepers and the Refs and the critics and the public eye. We ain't free no more! Goddamnit! We ain't flyin' in the eye of contempt. We've become respectable and safe. Soft, mushy chewable ass lickers What's happened to our blind fucking courage! We were warriors once (ibidem:217).

His is an indictment on the general dilution of norms, degeneration of "the code" and disappearance of *Colirage* to give a fight-back. His vehemence, like Timon's, is supported by his tragic excess and is redeemed by the consistency of his character. He is a fighter who wants to retain his pride and place by fighting according to the code, but his adversary Crow seems to have no regard for the rules of the game. He is chewed up by "the tooth of crime. A sense of justice seems to have been introjected in Hoss's mental repertory and he kills the Referee when the latter gives "wrong" decisions. By that action he defines the code and, in a sense, splits his self, and such splitting of the self caused by his Hamlet-like impulse to set the disjointed time right is well in the tradition of tragic hamartia. If Hoss has a split personality, a splintered self, it may be remembered that it is busted into splinters by Time. The play

begins when Hoss is beginning to lose control over his faculties and is in search of an altered personality that could sustain the trepidation of intransigence, disruption, downfall and loneliness.

The aim of this essay, it should be stressed at this point, is not simply to decode the myths in this' text and fit the intentional structure of these myths in the general structure and broader frames of reference, but to attempt to locate the "meaning" of the text, It is assumed here that the meaning of the text, *The Tooth of Crime*, does not reside in the various models we have identified inside and outside the text in the way of approximating the structure. At their best these different levels of signification and structuration impart an obvious message and contain a rule which is empirically formulated; that the power acquired through violence would be transferred through violence; that the power reified, sustained and exercised by a particular set of rules would ultimately succumb to these rules. Such structural analysis usually points at "the meaning" which would validate the very act of analysis.

In this play, the meaning concerns Hoss who suffers, struggles and falls from grace and his ability to train his faculties to cope with his altered state; his realization and acceptance of the power of necessity operational within the rules of the game. Hoss is willing to be a Gypsy. Crow Bait agrees to the bargain: "I give you my style and I take your turf" (ibidem:244). Crow's answer to Hess's request to show him "how to be a man" is significant: "A man's too hard, leathers. Too many doors to that room. A Gypsy's easy" (ibidem:245). It is Shepard's way of saying what Shakespeare (1968:220) says in *Hamlet*: "the readiness is all." This readiness to realize and accept is the result of innocence that comes after experience, of the second stage of integration that comes after disintegration. Hoss's tranced speech at the end of the book is not the result of psychopathological regression but that of a mnemonic glimpse of his own prelapsarian integration. He recognizes his former self, his ideal self: "It is me. Just like I always wanted to be" (Shepard 1981 :249). The ideal, attainable but not yet attained self confronts the actual, seeking self. Contrasting statements of Hoss "It is me" and "It ain't me" -indicate that it is not possible to journey back in time physically, though the realization of his personality involves an amount of ontological insight and psychological maturation and such recognition of the past perfection seems to be self-substantive: If we could signify from far away just close enough to get the touch, you'd find your face in mine and all my faces trying to bring you back to me. (ibidem:250).

The self thus reconstructed from its own splinters recognizes itself in its diverse manifestations. Structures of power operating in the life of Hoss, in myths, in political and tribal system do not rule out defeat or dethronement as an avoidable evil, but treat it as a necessary adjunct to a tough selfhood which could not be wounded by "the tooth of crime." Such structures of the power-game in *The Tooth of Crime* rule out chance-elements in the contextual transfer of power by formulating a set of rules. Once those rules are formulated and accepted, the battle for power and the consequences of this battle are no more guided by fortuitous, erratic turns of events but by an inexorable law of necessity, and the Hoss-Crow battle over the "turf" could rise to a level of tragic grandeur of which the Attic tragedians might have approved.

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