| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

The Crisis of Male Identity: A Study on the Masculinity of Sam Sheppard's *Fool for Love*

Meng Ye
College of Foreign Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China
Corresponding Author: Meng Ye, **E-mail**: charlotte7748@sina.cn

| **ABSTRACT**

Sam Sheppard, a contemporary American playwright, is well-versed in the creation of family dramas, and *Fool for Love* is a good example. Sam Shepard focuses on the conflicts between family members in *Fool for Love* and describes a pair of half-brother and sister, Eddie and May, who are caught in an unforgettable incest love without knowing it. The male characters in *Fool for Love* show a series of discourse power relations with women as the mirror center and emphasize the male identity of "the single opposite of women/motherhood". However, male characters who are cheating and violent, such as "absent" father who is free from extramarital affairs and a violent son who is struggling with "incest" relationship, have neither established the positive image of ideal dominant masculinity nor become the "hero son" of mother, and found the "real father". In the social relationship, they also failed to fulfill the authoritative identity of self in the tyrannical behavior and even failed to gain the recognition of male identity in the performance of "non-female" temperament, which ultimately confirmed the lack of self-male identity. Based on the study of masculinity, this paper attempts to explore the causes of the lack of masculinity of father and son in the novel through a close reading of the text of *Fool for Love* and reveal the identity crisis and gender dysphoria faced by mainstream men in the American social background at that time.

| **KEYWORDS**

Paternity; identity; anxiety; masculinity；binary opposition

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

1. Introduction

In his prodigious career, Sam Shepard has written over forty plays. He is the winner of an Obie Award for 'substantial achievement' in the theatre; he received a Pulitzer Prize for Buried Child in 1979 and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for A Lie of the Mind. His work spans more than two decades, from his early one act plays, emerging from the experimental theatre of New York in the sixties, to the more fully developed family plays of the seventies and eighties. Regardless of the period in which they were written, his plays share certain recognisable characteristics: they are startlingly imaginative, bizarrely disjunctive, linguistically creative, and imagistically provocative. In 1982, the marriage between Shepard and his wife, O-Lan Jones, broke down, and *Fool for Love* was written within half a year after the divorce. It was the product of Shepard's emotional agitation period, which inevitably brought Shepard's attitude towards sexual feelings and was highly autobiographical. It can be said that Eddie, the unfaithful lover in *Fool for Love*, is actually a true portrayal of Sheppard at this stage of his life.

The scene of *Fool for Love* is set on the edge of the western United States, but the atmosphere is desolate, and there is not even a family to live in. It is set in a motel with simple facilities and low rent on the edge of the Mojave desert in California, USA, with an evening's conversation as the main body of the drama and the love dispute between a pair of half-brother and sister as the main drama conflict. Eddie comes to the motel to find his former lover, May and asks May to go to live with him on a farm in Wyoming. Because of being abandoned by Eddie again and again, May no longer trusts him, so they quarrel. The old man watched their conflict from another space in the motel. During the quarrel, Eddie's lover, "Countess", came to revenge for Eddie's infidelity. "Countess" only exists in the dialogue between Eddie and May and does not really appear. After a burst of gunfire, May's boy

friend Martin also visited the motel. In order to get rid of May's ambiguous object, Martin, as soon as possible and declare his position, Eddie began to tell the unknown past between them, and the reasons and secrets of their quarrel gradually surfaced.

2. Literature Review

Nearly all Sam Shepard's plays examine the functions (and dysfunctions) of the relationships between individuals that constitute either family structures or social structures that approximate family structures. Because of his exquisite dramatic techniques, his works had attracted wide attention from academic circles.

2.1 Studies Abroad

The rapid rise of Sheppard's research abroad began in the 1980s, especially since Sheppard won the pulitzer prize for drama in 1978. His fame as a famous dramatist rose sharply. In the 1980s, there was a climax of research, and a large number of drama reviews, periodical papers, dissertations and monographs emerged in American drama and academic circles. The research contents mainly included drama text research, stage art research, Sheppard's research and theme research：

The initial response of the critics was mostly positive. Frank Rich of the New York Times suggested that despite an apparent connection to the previous works by the author, its capacity for self-reflection and the question it brings up help weave it into the meta-narrative created by his other plays. Michael Feingold characterized the play as exciting and rich in narrative and suggested that the performance was remarkable in particular because Shepard was able to stage it himself. John Beaufort pointed out an abundance of minor details that add to the perception of tensions between the characters and create a setting where the viewer remains a passive observer despite witnessing the emotional outbursts of the characters. He also emphasized the role of harsh and bitter humor, occasionally resorted to by Eddie and May, as a way to invigorate the most desperate situation. Interestingly, Beaufort also suggested an interpretation according to which the play depicts a betrayal and deterioration of the American Dream. The recent revival of the play was met with equal enthusiasm from the critics, who cited rich detail, a compelling setting, convincing dialogue, and realistic behavior of the characters. However, it is worth mentioning that some of the reviewers were dissatisfied with the performance of certain actors, toned down the conflict, and the lack of "chemistry" that would be helpful in fleshing out the characters. However, the majority of reviews refer to the motifs of isolation, violence, family dysfunction and betrayal as forming the core of the play.

2.2 Studies at Home

The research on Sam Shepard in China is not mature, and the research scope is considerably narrow. At present, the literature research collected by the author mainly focuses on dramatic artistic techniques, traumatic narration and gender relations:

Artistic techniques: The earliest is Jiang Mengmeng's "Illusion and Reality, Truth and Falsehood —— Comment on the Postmodernity of Sam Sheppard's Family Plays". She mainly studies Curse of the Starving Hungry Class, Buried Child and True West in the family trilogy, plus five works, *Fool for Love* and A Lie of the Mind, and points out that Sheppard's drama creation is integrated with modernism.(Jiang Mnengmeng,165). Du Xinyu's doctoral thesis, "The Neo-Realistic Tendency in Sam Sheppard's Drama Creation", points out the novel creative features of Sheppard's family drama text in ideology, characterization, plot and dramatic techniques, which embodies the neo-realistic tendency. In addition, Sundong's "Anxious self-gaze-the meta-drama of Sam Sheppard's drama" holds that the uncertain features such as "blank", "fracture", "ambiguity", and "contradiction" in Sheppard's drama make its style, narrative and theme open and interpretable. (Sundong, 110).

Trauma Narration: Chen Jiaxin's "A Study on the Trauma Perspective of Sam Sheppard's Family Trilogy" and Li Qunqun's "An Analysis of the Intergenerational Trauma in Sam Sheppard's Family Trilogy and its Psychological Influence on the characters" further expand Sheppard's drama research horizons from the perspective of war trauma and family trauma.

3. Self-Construction: the Crisis of Masculinity

Fool for Love is the product of Sheppard's emotional agitation period, and it is also his reflection on the disadvantages of the American hippie cultural movement. The old man's tossing and turning in two relationships, Eddie's indulging in incest, and his constant return and betrayal are the best interpretations of the view that "masculinity is a practice and a construction in practice"(Connnell,111). For a long time, gender relations have been an important topic for sociologists, especially for women. Because the traditional patriarchal society gave men privileges, it was not until the oppressed groups rose up and challenged the authority of men that male studies attracted the attention of sociologists. The research of Western modern sociologists and feminist theorists has fully shown that the gender norms and gender relations upheld by traditional society are not natural but artificial products. Connell believes that gender is a social practice which intersects or interacts with social structures such as race, class and country. Masculinity is not immutable; it is formed in a specific time and place, and it is also diachronic.

3.1 Social Examination of Masculinity

Sheppard set the story *Fool for Love* in the era of the hippie cultural movement, and the fate of the characters in the novel was a true portrayal of American society at that time. In the United States in the 1960s, some young people despised the traditional values of the middle class, consciously stayed away from mainstream society, and expressed their rebellion against the real society with a unique lifestyle that could not be seen in mainstream society. In Fool for Love, Shepard incorporated his reflection on the family disintegration caused by the pursuit of sexual freedom under the influence of the American hippie cultural movement, and exploring true masculinity is also his creative purpose.

3.1.1 Social Background

The hippie cultural movement advocates individual freedom and opposes material worship and traditional values, but this pursuit of absolute freedom also leads to the disintegration of traditional family structure. The hippie cultural movement regards open sexual relations as a means to resist traditional society and seek personal freedom, but it not only fails to realize the friendship and peace pursued by hippies but also makes social problems more complicated and serious. When people pursue themselves excessively and neglect their responsibilities as family members, the family loses its most basic connecting role, which leads to the breakdown of the relationship between family members, even in a state of opposition and hatred.

In this social background, Shepard traced back to his family of origin and created a series of corrosive families according to his own experience, showing the complex emotional and contradictory relations among family members. Lack of identity, alcoholic father, broken husband-wife relationship, incestuous brother and sister, these families are in endless emotional crisis, which leads to the disintegration of traditional morality. It is precisely because of the influence of the social environment that men are willing to abandon the traditional dominant masculinity, pursue spiritual "freedom", and be content with the lack and degeneration of moral beliefs.

In addition, in *Fool for Love*, Shepard shows the disintegration of urban civilization to rural civilization, and shows the panic and anxiety of modern people who lose their traditional spiritual home. The migration of rural populations to cities has significantly increased the number of floating populations in cities. However, most people have a poor life in cities and have no sense of belonging. Therefore, a large number of country music has emerged, which shows that they miss their families and their love and simple life. Shepard's use of country music in his plays also reflects his nostalgia and regret for the disintegrating rural civilization. Faced with the survival dilemma, men's bodies no longer have any advantages, nor can they provide basic living security for their families. This shows that the "provider" and "protector" of the family are alienated as the criteria for judging male values, which leads to the marginalization of men-when they succeed in the outside world. He is respected within the family; When he fails in the outside world, he is also a failure at home. This makes the male characters in *Fool for Love* feel anxious and fearful about their male identity and eventually leads to their inner imbalance and distorted personality, thus performing their masculinity with extreme violence.

3.1.2 Masculinity Configuration

The famous sociologist R. W. Connell believes that masculinity is not solidified and static but historical and changing. The interaction and influence between masculinity and gender practice at the individual level and social gender construction have formed a dynamic, pluralistic and constructivist gender relationship structure. History shows that men have always dominated women in the structure of gender relations, patriarchy has become a universal and fundamental social phenomenon, and men have become "an interest group that dominates and oppresses women" (Zhan Junfeng,110), at least feminists have already reached this consensus. However, Connell believes that men are not actually a harmonious whole with common interests. Men form different configurations of masculinity through different gender practices, which leads to internal differentiation of men and different types of masculinity. Connell divides it into four types: hegemony, complicity, subordination and marginalization. Among them, hegemonic masculinity is dominant, while the other three masculinities are in the gender power relationship of domination, utilization and marginalization. As the name implies, at the top of the pyramid of gender order is "hegemonic masculinity", which is dominant in personal life, state, social institutions, discourse, international relations and other fields by means of ideological tools, institutional power and even violence (Connell, 111). On the contrary, subordination masculinity is at the bottom of the gender order, which is a temperament type constructed by gay men and feminine heterosexual men (including the lower class, the sick, the poor, etc.) and is at a dominant disadvantage in all dimensions of gender relations. In fact, only a few people can truly possess hegemonic masculinity, and most men are between hegemonic and subordinate masculinity. They "not only participate in sharing the patriarchal dividend brought by hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 112) but also do not have to bear the risks and anxiety brought by the implementation of patriarchy. This kind of masculinity is called "complicity masculinity". When the gendered class relationship or race/ethnicity relationship further divides masculinity, Connell also puts forward the external gender relationship of marginalization masculinity (for example, rich black male stars are to white supremacy men with "correct" sexual morality).

The old man and Eddie in *Fool for Love* belong to "subordination", and Shepard depicts a decadent image of a cowboy in the West. When the "true west" has long since disappeared in the expansion of modern civilization, the myth of the West is only the glory of fantasy. When the romantic color of fantasy gradually fades away, facing the loss of pursuit, these cowboys can only indulge in fragments of memory and virtual situations and console themselves with "lies of the mind". They abandon reality, abandon their wives and children, and realize men's self-identity with decadent and extreme lifestyles such as vagrancy, seclusion, violence and alcoholism, which makes them, unfortunately, fall into a lonely, closed, illusory and paranoid spiritual world after fleeing. Such a morbid spiritual world is full of narcissism, indifference and violence, and the women who live with them day and night in the family bear the brunt of the male power consciousness. But the difference is that, in the face of the oppression of male hegemony, they changed the passivity, pandering, or silence shown by female characters in their early works and gained more sobriety and reason for self-protection, which dealt a heavy blow to the self-righteous male characters.

3.2 The Decline of Masculinity

The main male characters in *Fool for Love* are in a crisis of identity and masculinity. As a father, the old man has been wavering in two marriages for a long time, abandoning his family, and his paternal identity is in jeopardy. Eddie, the protagonist, is deeply involved in incest and shows his authority by abandoning and implementing violence, but he is finally at a disadvantage. In the process of establishing a "male center", they constantly paralyze themselves through illusions and even extreme behaviors, which means the anxiety hidden behind their masculinity.

3.2.1 Absent Father-Paternal Regression

As an important cultural proposition, fatherhood has a long tradition of writing and a history of representation. If motherhood can be compared to embrace, then fatherhood can be compared to shoulder. In fact, paternalism, like motherhood, not only exists in simple reproductive behavior but also in what makes a person become a father, which is closely related to whether or not he assumes a lasting accompanying role in the growth of children. In other words, the acquisition of fatherhood is not only reflected in the physiological level but also in the process of building the relationship between father and child. More importantly, the paternity system appeared in an infinitely backward period in the process of human history, which implied an initial ability to reflection. (Zhao Jia 27).

Looking at all Sheppard's plays, it is difficult for us to find a positive and positive father image, and the drama "*Fool for Love*" is no exception. It can be said that the absence of his father is a prominent cultural symbol in Sheppard's plays.

The image of the father in *Fool for Love* also reflects certain historical and cultural significance. The root of the tragedy is Eddie and May's father, the old man, who wavered between the two lovers and argued for himself that "it was the same love, but it was divided into two halves" While the explosive emotions between Eddie and May dominate the stage, the past, represented in the character of the Old Man, is thematically at the center of the play. He not only sets the trap that leads to the incest between Eddie and May but also the pattern that dominates both their lives. On the most superficial level, the old man is typical of the American masculine ego that cannot allow its autonomy and mobility to be compromised by a woman and the confinements of domestic responsibility. His situation is complicated but not changed by his infidelity. He fell in love twice, once with Eddie's mother and once with May's mother, but "it was the same love. Just got split in two, that's all."((48) He tells May's mother that he would "never come across for her." (55)Yet she was "a force,"(55) drawing him in. Like Eddie's incestuous connection to May, the old Man's adulterous love is irresistibly and irrevocably fated. If May's mother was a force for him, he was no less a force for her. By searching him out, she had crossed "a forbidden zone, but she couldn't help herself."(53). She forces a crisis, and the old Man, unable to resolve the conflict between his licit and illicit love, reverts to that which he knows best, escape and rationalization: "Good thing I got out when I did. Best thing I ever did."

By describing the image of a father who is constantly running away and cheating and unable to perform his duties, Sam Shepard echoes, "Who is afraid of Virginia wolf?": the anxiety of American masculinity after World War II. Especially considering the fact that Sam Sheppard's family drama is set in the midwest of the United States, the lack of fatherhood not only shows that patriarchy has faded in the family but also implies that the image of brave pioneers in the West has become a myth in memory.

3.2.2 Violent Son-Phalic Deficiency

Sam Shepard is a contemporary American playwright with the image of a cowboy in the West. The critic Florence Falk once pointed out: "In Shepard's plays, cowboys are the dominant men; Therefore, any woman must be marginalized ... There are no other characters. The violence bred by cowboys can be so successfully retained, reused and tolerated by [Shepard] "(Florence, 91). The male characters in Sheppard's plays are always eager to construct the self-identity of a "real man" through "the other", and this mirror of "the other" is what Simone de Beauvoir called "woman"-"I am a man, and the other is a woman" (Florence, 26). Thus, women are defined by male discourse, always in the gaze perspective, and exist as the opposite of masculine negation, becoming the self-identity reference for men to gain independence, affirmation and dominance.

In *Fool for Love*, Eddie drove thousands of miles and finally found his lover May in a motel in the desert, but the violence between the two lovers escalates due to disagreement and mutual suspicion. At first, they quarreled fiercely, accused each other of betrayal and ridiculed each other's absurd behavior. The violent elements made the characters' language, which should be used for communication, full of aggression and harm. Eddie beats the wall angrily, slammed the door and left, and the banging of the door against the wall strengthened their contradiction and confrontation. Finally, it is even physical violence, punching, kicking and hurting each other. At the end of the play, Eddie violently treats his lover May and leaves her in a motel, which is precisely the violent and disloyal behavior pattern inherited from his fallen father.

In fact, the violence of men against women in family dramas further shows the application of the concept of "defending men's rights". A man's ability to earn money "endows" him with paternal power as a husband/father, while for a man who lacks control in the social field, his dominant position in the private sphere of the family becomes the only way for them to establish themselves and control others. Men in family dramas have always been troubled by the lack of self-masculinity, so it is more necessary to realize their self-identity through physical and mental rape and possession of women. Michel Foucault thought that only when the body is controlled by some conquest mechanism can it form a kind of labor force. Only when the body is both productive and tamed can it become a useful force (Foucault,25). As a result, women's bodies become the objects manipulated, shaped and disciplined by power, and tame bodies eventually become useful labor in the patriarchal center system. Sheppard once explained the violent tendency in his works in an interview: "For me, something in American violence is shocking. On the whole, it is ugly, but there are some touching things in it because they are related to human nature. These things are hidden and rooted in the hearts of Anglo-American men, and they are related to the idea of inferiority and not being a man. Usually, they always show a kind of masculinity in a violent way "(Kakutani, 26). Men are afraid that the feminine side of themselves will be discerned because, in their own view, it is a sign of unmanness and inferiority. When they realized this, they tried to cover it up, and violent attacks became one of the worst extreme manifestations of men's ability, power and desire for women's obedience. Sheppard realized that men's violent tendencies originated from men themselves rather than women (Hall 95).In Fool for Love, Eddie is reluctant to part with May after the violence: in fact, when women are absent, men also lose their mirror image reference and fall into the confusion of "phalic" missing.

4. Conclusion

Based on the theory of contemporary male studies, this paper explores the construction process of male identity in *Fool for Love* and analyzes the diversified masculinity configuration and the transformation of masculinity mode under the influence of gender structure and power relationships. By analyzing the images of "father" and "son" in the text, we can easily find that the male characters in the drama show a series of discourse power relations with women as the mirror center and emphasize the male identity of "the single opposite of women/motherhood". They are absent, violent, and performing, for which they have neither become their mother's "heroic sons" nor found a "real father", nor have they fulfilled their authoritative identity in their tyrannical behavior, nor have they gained the recognition of male identity in their performance of "non-female" temperament. What they finally confirm is the lack of self-male identity. This drama not only reveals the power relationship between masculinity and femininity but also reveals the power relationship within masculinity, which provides an important theoretical tool for the study of the diversity of masculinity and the process of social construction of masculinity. However, there are still some limitations: the details and angles of the power transformation between men and women contained in the drama are still not fully explored. For future research, I think more attention should be focused on analyzing the psychology of characters so that later researchers can analyze the construction of masculinity more comprehensively.

References

[1]   Beaufort, J. (1983). *Magic Theatre; Sam Shepard Drama Assaults Audience, Actors – and Scenery; Fool for Love Drama by Sam Shepard.* Directed by Mr. Shepard. The Christian Science Monitor,https://www.csmonitor.com/1983/0609/060901.html.
[2]   Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. M. Chevallier, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.
[3]   Bollen, C. (2015). *Has US Literature Woken from the American Dream?* The Guardian, from https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/apr/20/us-literature-the-american-dream.
[4]   Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
[5]   Demast, W. W. (1987). *Understanding Sam Shepard's Realism.* Comparative Drama, 3, 229-248.
[6]   Falk, F. (1981). *Men without Women: The Shepard Landscape.* In American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard (pp. 90-103). New York: Performing Arts Journal Publication.
[7]   Hall, A. C. (1993). *A Kind of Alaska. In Women in the Plays of O' Neill, Pinter, and Shepard.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.
[8]   Hart, L. (1988). *Sam Shepard's Pornographic Visions.* Studies in the Literary Imagination, 21(2), 69-82.

[9] Hearn, J. (1998). *Definition and Explanations of Men's Violence.* In The Violence of Men: How Men Talk about and How Agencies Respond to Men's Violence to Women (pp. 14-39). London: Sage.

[10] Kakutani, M. (1984). *Myths, Dreams, Realities—Sam Shepard's America.* New York Times, 29 January, sec. 2, 1.

[11] Lacan, J. (2001). *Écrits: A Selection* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). London: Routledge.

[12] Roudané, M. (Ed.). (2002). *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Cambridge University Press.

[13] Shepard, S. (1984). *Fool for Love and Other Plays.* Bantam.

[14] Wilcox, L. (Ed.). (1993). *Rereading Shepard: Contemporary Critical Essays on the Plays of Sam Shepard.* Springer.

[15] 福柯, M. (1999). 规训与惩罚：监狱的诞生 (刘北成 & 杨远婴, 译). 北京：三联书店.

[16] 隋红升. (2020). 男性气质. 北京：外语教学与研究出版社.

[17] 金新杰. (2019). 山姆·谢泼德家庭剧《情痴》主题辨析. 艺苑, 06, 35-37.

[18] 詹俊峰. (2015). 性别之路：瑞文•康奈尔的男性气质理论探索. 桂林：广西师范大学出版社.

[19] 肇嘉, 鲁格. (2015). 父性. 世界图书出版公司北京公司.

[20] 姜萌萌. (2021). 镜中幻影: 山姆·谢泼德家庭剧中的"阳具"缺失. 英美文学研究论丛, 01, 160-172.

[21] 姜萌萌. (2006). 幻象与现实·真实与虚假. 上海戏剧学院.

[22] 杜新宇. (2010). 山姆·谢泼德戏剧创作中的新现实主义倾向 (硕士学位论文). 山东大学.

[23] 孔瑞. (2020). 山姆·谢泼德戏剧的创伤叙事研究 (硕士学位论文). 山西师范大学.

[24] 何雁 & 赵国峰. (2014). 从家庭剧解析山姆·谢泼德两性关系的立场. 戏剧艺术, 02, 85-90.

[25] 孙冬 & M. W. Luke Chan. (2011). 焦虑的"自我凝视"——山姆·谢泼德戏剧的元戏剧性. 文艺研究, 07, 106-114.

[26] 李群群. (2018). 对山姆·谢泼德"家庭三部曲"中代际间创伤及其人物心理影响的解析. 大连外国语大学.

[27] 陈佳鑫. (2017). 山姆·谢泼德"家庭三部曲"的创伤视角研究. 西安外国语大学.

[28] 吴素芬. (2020). 从二元对立到融合：《情痴》之空间研究. 名作欣赏, 36, 137-139.