

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF STYLE IN SELECTED
PLAYS OF ARTHUR KOPIT, EDWARD ALBEE, SAM SHEPARD
AND DAVID MAMET

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An Abstract
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Graduate and Research Council of
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
LuEllyn Boyer Wilcox

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ABSTRACT

This study was made to conduct a critical analysis of style in selected plays of Arthur Kopit, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and David Mamet. The plays chosen for research were Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad by Arthur Kopit, The American Dream by Edward Albee, Buried Child by Sam Shepard and Glengarry Glen Ross by David Mamet. An examination of these four significant contributions to American absurdist theatre reveals several important comparisons of elements of drama found in structure, character, theme and language.

Arthur Kopit and Edward Albee share similarities in their styles of writing, both men representing early American absurdist drama from the 1950's and 1960's. Their characters share radical abnormal personalities in a chaotic structure. The language contains many non sequiturs and nonsense conversations which support the playwrights' revolt against traditionally structured plays and stereotypical characters.

Sam Shepard and David Mamet, more recent absurdist, use absurdism in a somewhat similar fashion. Both Shepard and Mamet present a more realistic structure than Kopit and Albee. Their use of absurdity is not as radical as Kopit's or Albee's and is revealed in a more subtle manner. Shepard presents absurdity through narration while Mamet reveals absurdity through the extremity of the situation. Both plays expose absurdity through conversation and archetypes who appear to be normal in the beginning but are shown to be distorted as the exposition unfolds.

Absurdism remains popular in contemporary theatre even as it changes. Its influence will likely remain significant in the American theatre in the future years.

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June 25, 1989

To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by LuEllyn Boyer Wilcox entitled "A Critical Analysis of Style in the Selected Plays of Arthur Kopit, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and David Mamet." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, with a major in Theatre, Speech, Mass Communications.


Major Professor


Second Committee Member


Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Graduate and
Research Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

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Chapter I

Introduction

This study undertakes a critical analysis of style in selected plays of four significant American absurdist playwrights--Arthur Kopit, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and David Mamet--by examining the stylistic patterns of writing and staging developed by each writer. Tracing the evolution of absurdist drama through plays by Kopit, Albee, Shepard and Mamet should yield important comparisons of elements of drama such as may be found in structure, character, theme and language. The four elements of drama selected for this study are the most important of the six elements Aristotle identifies in his treatise, Ars Poetica.¹ The plays which have been selected for study are Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad by Arthur Kopit, The American Dream by Edward Albee, Buried Child by Sam Shepard, and Glengarry Glen Ross by David Mamet.

According to B. Donald Grose and O. Franklin Kenworthy, authors of A Mirror To Life: A History of Western Theatre, the phrase, "theatre of the absurd," was coined by the critic² Martin Esslin for the title of a book he wrote in 1961. Kenworthy and Grose stress that the playwrights who embrace this form have been influenced to a certain extent by existentialism, the common link between existentialism and absurdist theatre being a belief in nonconventional theatre³ and an intrinsic understanding of theatre's roots. The verbal nonsense in an absurdist play helps destroy the primary role language holds in the conventional theatre, and

with the logic of language called into question, the absurdists are free to build a world where the rules are constantly changing, a world of free associations, inverted logic, feigned or real madness, and a world in which we truly exist.⁴

Esslin's book, The Theatre of the Absurd, suggests that "absurd" originally meant "out of harmony," in a musical context, and that its dictionary definition, therefore, alludes to that which is "out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical."⁵ Esslin believes that the theatre of the absurd tends toward a poetry which evolves from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. Although the element of language is still a vital part of this conception, the action or what happens on the stage transcends and often contradicts the actual words spoken by the characters.⁶ Thus, the study of this literature and the examination of the stylistic patterns of writing and staging developed by the playwrights chosen for research shall trace the development of absurdist plays using the works of these authors and perhaps establish their importance within the pattern of contemporary thought. For example, the stylistic patterns of writing developed by the four playwrights under study will be examined from the points of view of structure, character, theme and language.

Many young playwrights emerged in the late 1950's and early 1960's to become identified with the absurdist movement. Why, therefore, were Arthur Kopit, Edward Albee, Sam

Shepard and David Mamet chosen for study? All absurdist playwrights of this era and more recent playwrights inspired by the forerunners of American absurdist drama share significant qualities in their writing styles, qualities such as a lack of stereotypical characterization, purposely distorted archetypes, an abundance of surprises, and no predictable endings to what may seem a predictable series of situations. Their extremes have led to a popular theatrical art form in America which continues to cultivate a strong following.

Arthur Kopit is among the earliest American absurdist playwrights. Kopit has won many significant awards throughout his career. The first play to bring him international attention was Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad (1959) and was presented in London, Paris, and West Germany as well as in New York and at Harvard University. It played on Broadway for forty-seven performances in 1963. Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad was chosen for research not only for its international attention, but for its absurdist predilections in a contemporary American setting. Arthur Kopit was among the first playwrights to exceed the boundaries of conventional theatre and help launch a new era with this controversial play. Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad, hereafter identified as Oh Dad, Poor Dad, was not widely accepted by the public or critics at the time it was written, but now is recognized as

an early form of the theatre of the absurd and respected as a true work of art. Moreover, certain elements of drama such as structure, character, theme, and language are carefully crafted throughout the play.

Edward Albee is one of America's most controversial playwrights, whose artistic vision and talent helped create a new facet of American theatre along with Arthur Kopit and other playwrights involved with the development of the theatre of the absurd. Albee was chosen for research for this reason as well as for the fact that he challenged the perception of theatre audiences and society itself through his persistent experimentation and his unique creativity. His plays are world renowned and his honors include two Tony awards and two Pulitzer Prizes among others. His plays, The American Dream (1960) and The Death of Bessie Smith, were also chosen as best plays of the 1960-1961 season by the Foreign Press Association. The American Dream was chosen for study not only because it has won several eminent awards, but also because it has made important contributions to the theatre of the absurd. Like Oh Dad, Poor Dad, The American Dream abounds with elements of drama associated with absurdist theatre. Unique aspects of characterization, and language in The American Dream will be examined in subsequent chapters. Albee has added his own dimensions to absurdist theatre, and in this study it is a crucial link to the evolution of theatre of the absurd to the present.

Sam Shepard is a star on-screen and off, and has been called a true American hero, a man of action. Shepard has written more than forty plays, three volumes of prose and several screenplays, including Paris, Texas, voted Best Film at Cannes in 1984. He also received a Pulitzer Prize for Buried Child (1978), which has been chosen for research in this study. He won ten Obies (awards given by The Village Voice for distinguished achievement off and off-off Broadway), and he was an Academy Award Nominee for Best Supporting Actor for The Right Stuff. In concert with Kopit and Albee, Shepard continues the expansion of absurdist theatre. Buried Child was included due to the manner in which the playwright uses the selected elements of drama which, like Oh Dad, Poor Dad, and The American Dream, will prove to be of importance to this work.

From a literary standpoint, David Mamet is said to be the only successful playwright of several who emerged as
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"Promising" in the late 1970's. He has joined American and European traditions of twentieth-century absurdist drama in a way that no other playwrights have attempted. He has written several plays, essays and screenplays during his career, not the least of which is his Pulitzer-Prize winning Glengarry Glen Ross (1983), which has been selected for this study. He has captured the interest of large audiences at home and abroad, and has created much talk about his style and use of dichotomies, paradoxes and dialectical tensions, which are central to his work.

Glengarry Glen Ross completes the collection of absurdist drama under study. The emergence of Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad in the late 1950's, Albee's The American Dream in the early 1960's, Shepard's Buried Child in the late 1970's and Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross in the mid 1980's demonstrates the evolution of American absurdist theatre from its earliest controversial and fundamental forms to its most recent world renowned and intricate developments.

There have been many studies written on Arthur Kopit, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and David Mamet. One such work, The Plays of Edward Albee 1959-1980: Experiments in Dramatic Form, undertakes to assess Edward Albee's contribution to the idea of form in the American drama by following the pattern of his experimentation in the stage plays produced between 1959 and 1980.⁸

American Realism and the Plays of Sam Shepard: A Study of Theme and Form examines the complete body of Sam Shepard's published work and analyzes these works in terms of form and theme.⁹

The Evolution of Form in Contemporary Drama analyzes Arthur Kopit's work and compares Kopit's first play, The Questioning of Nick, to Oh Dad, Poor Dad as realistic devices.¹⁰

These are but a few studies which have been written about Kopit, Albee, and Shepard individually. Because it was not included in their purpose, the authors made no attempt to engage in stylistic comparisons of the playwrights. Some studies have involved more than one of these playwrights. One study which has utilized the talents of Kopit, Albee, and

Shepard is Connection and Complicity: Five Playwrights of the Sixties which focuses on five American Playwrights of the 1960's, Arthur Kopit, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Jack Gelber and David Rabe, and examines how their works reflect, react to, and contribute to the intellectual and cultural environment of the period.¹¹

This work and others have involved comparative studies of theatrical language, experiments in dramatic form, and use of theme as their central purpose. Still others have embraced a specific theory, character study, or an historical approach as their primary points of focus. Although there have been several books written about the playwrights under study, there is no other work which has taken the same approach as this one. This study is unique in the fact that it is a critical analysis of style in the aforementioned plays of Kopit, Albee, Shepard and Mamet with special attention to four crucial elements of drama--structure, character, theme, and language. It is fitting to see how a major movement, absurdism, has evolved from 1950 to the present through four of the finest of American contemporary works from this particular perspective.

Having stated the purpose and scope of this study, and having reviewed literature pertinent to the topic, it is necessary to present the elements of drama chosen for research as they pertain to the plays under analysis. Therefore, the following chapter will facilitate the dramatic element of structure as it relates to each of the plays in

the stylistic patterns of writing and staging unique to the playwright.

Chapter II

A New Tradition Of Structure

Every work of art must have some kind of structure. ¹²

In theatre, structure can be defined as the foundation of a play created by the playwright who introduces various stresses and strains in the form of conflicts, establishes boundaries and outer limits to contain the play and calculates the dynamics of the action. ¹³ Dramatic structure can be divided into three specific steps. First, the establishment of a play's structure begins with the opening scene which sets the tone and style of the play and initiates the action. Second, a series of obstacles or complications beset the characters. Obstacles are impediments put in a character's way, and complications are outside forces or new twists in the plot, introduced at an inopportune moment. Finally, as a result of obstacles and complications in a play, characters become involved in a series of crises leading to the final climax, which resolves the issues of the play either

¹⁴
happily or tragically.

Traditional plot structure proceeds in a logical manner from a beginning through the development of the plot to a conclusion. In stark contrast, absurdist plays suggest the idea of absurdity both in what they say--their content--and in the way they say it--their form. Absurdist structure, therefore, is a departure from traditional dramatic structure of the past. ¹⁵

Whereas traditionally structured plays deal primarily with the surface reality of life, the structure of absurdist plays is intended to expose inner realities to life that society may purposely void. Martin Esslin, in his book Reflections: Essays On Modern Theatre, explains:

The absurdist has further demonstrated the theatre's ability to deal not only with external reality in providing a concrete and photographically correct reconstruction of real life but also, and much more interestingly, with the vast field of internal reality--the fantasies, dreams, hallucination, secret longings, and fears of mankind. What the absurdist has done is liberate this kind of internal reality from the necessity of having to emerge from an external plot situation with neat transitions from reality to dream, from nature to
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hallucination.

There is no preoccupation with the past, no solving of riddles, for the structure leads one not to seek solutions, but to confront a view of modern life, a view both
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existential and absurd.

Gaynor F. Bradish of Harvard University in his introductory statements to Arthur Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad, states that its form is the logical fusion of the comic and the serious facets of Kopit's imagination, written in a style that
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is immediately contemporary. Furthermore, Oh Dad, Poor Dad

attempts to destroy the stubborn structure of prose realism and claim the theatre once again as the domain of "imaginary forces," the kingdom of the extraordinary it has always been in its times of ascendance.¹⁹ Kopit has taken a tragic circumstance and turned it into an absurdly humorous subject by giving a comic twist to a man who has hanged himself. The mocking tone of the title suggests absurdism, and it is Kopit's intent from the title's tone and unusual length that we laugh at his subject.²⁰

The opening scene in Oh Dad, Poor Dad validates the belief that the play is absurdist in structure. As bellboys rush to carry the many belongings of Madame Rosepettle to her hotel room, they accidentally drop a casket containing the remains of "Dad." She enters, veiled in black, and berates the bellboys, ordering them around as if she owns them. Jonathan appears with his mother, Madame Rosepettle. He is a boy of seventeen dressed like a boy of nine, with skin so white that it seems he has never seen the light of day. As the play progresses, it is discovered that such is the case. Black velvet curtains are securely nailed over all the windows in their suite by order of Madame Rosepettle. They are accompanied by two venus flytraps, a piranha fish named Rosalinda who prefers siamese kittens for dinner, and Jonathan's worthless but cherished book and stamp collections. The opening scene reveals significant abnormalities. Complications and obstacles surface in the form of the introduction of Rosalie, a promiscuous young girl, who pursues Jonathan,

the hatred Madame Rosepettle has towards Rosalie, the inhuman treatment Madame Rosepettle gives her son, and the stipulations and rules she forces him to adhere to. The action springs into a series of crises. The first crisis is the argumentative encounter between Madame Rosepettle and Rosalie, followed by Jonathan's discovery of his mother's affair with Commodore Roseabove and his overhearing the telling of the story of his father and his subsequent death. The final climax begins with Jonathan's axing of the venus flytraps and the piranha fish, which leads to Rosalie's unsuccessful attempt to seduce Jonathan. Finally, there follows the smothering of Rosalie, an act that is inspired by the corpse of Jonathan's father, which has fallen from the closet onto the bed. The resolution of the play is Jonathan's escape from a world in which he fears his mother into a world where she, in turn, could very well fear him.

Kopit's treatment of structure in Oh Dad, Poor Dad is very similar to Edward Albee's treatment of structure in The American Dream. Both playwrights present absurdism through satire. According to Richard E. Amacher of Auburn University, Edward Albee's The American Dream falls into the genre of satire, notwithstanding Albee's reference to it in his preface as a "comedy."²¹ Albee suggests satire in his statement that "the play is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial values for real values in our society ... a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is Peachy-keen."²²

The opening scene has Mommy and Daddy (the characters' names) sitting and waiting for late visitors whose tardiness disturbs them. Their conversation ranges from complaints about things out of order in the apartment to a long story about a beige-colored hat that Mommy exchanged after the club chairman, Mrs. Barker, insisted it was wheat colored. Daddy informs her that its the same hat they sold her before. Mommy, in dictatorial fashion, exclaims that she knows this and tells Daddy he can't get satisfaction but she can. Complications and obstacles include the entrance of Grandma with her empty boxes, the entrance of Mrs. Barker and the arrival of the unemployed young man who becomes the American Dream. A series of crises spring forth: the misplacement of an entire room; Mommy's threat to put Grandma in a van that will take her to an old folks' home; the discovery that Mrs. Barker is the lady who helped Mommy and Daddy adopt a child many years before; the revelation that Mommy and Daddy had killed the child; the escape of Grandma whose revenge for Mommy was to make her think she had left in a van for an old folks' home; and the final climax in which it is determined that the young man is actually the twin brother to the infant Mommy and Daddy had adopted and killed. The resolution finds Grandma free, but the young man remains a part of his brother, who was dismembered piece by piece by Mommy and Daddy because he did not physically appeal to them. The young man is the essence of physical beauty whose whole inner self and emotions

have been taken from his body. The death of his twin, which represents his inner self and emotions, prevents him from being whole.

Although Edward Albee's style and techniques are clearly absurdist, Sam Shepard combines a naturalistic style with absurdism through narration. Sam Shepard's Pulitzer Prize winning Buried Child is essentially a naturalistic framework and yet comes close to mocking the form.²³ Jack Richardson comments on the peculiar blending of forms that Shepard achieves:

Somehow, Shepard manages to strike a balance between naturalistic detail and the wilder, more secret landscapes of being. He has found a way of maintaining a tension between the banal and the strange that gives his plays the quality of lucid dreams.²⁴

Shepard's play carefully sustains a realistic veneer, adhering almost formulaically to the familiar Ibsen/Strindberg brand of realism in theme and structure. The structure of the plot is essentially a puzzle with each character in custody of clues that are part of the total picture, which begins fragmented but coheres as the action unfolds.²⁵ Its contradictory and ambiguous web of relationships and events defies easy explanation and turns its essentially realistic setting into a moral and psychological battleground.²⁶

The opening scene finds Dodge, the father, sitting on the sofa staring at a television, taking an occasional swig

of whiskey from a bottle he keeps hidden under the sofa cushion. He and his wife Halie, who is upstairs for almost the first half of the play, have a halting conversation with one another. Dodge either ignores her most of the time or mimicks her sarcastically. Complications and obstacles begin with the entrance of the oldest son, Tilden, who is mentally disturbed. He is carrying an armful of corn which he claims he picked in the backyard in the rain. The corn cannot exist, according to Dodge, who has not planted anything there since 1935. Bradley, the youngest son, enters. It is discovered that, as a child, his leg was amputated by a chainsaw that Dodge was using. The event has a negative effect on Bradley's attitude toward his father. Vince, Tilden's son, comes home with his girlfriend, Shelly, to visit his relatives and discovers that they do not know him.

Complications and obstacles eventually lead to a series of crises not the least of which is the act of Bradley giving his father a haircut as he sleeps, an aggression against his father, a form of amputation. After awakening, Dodge admits that his flesh and blood is buried in the backyard. This statement is made more pertinent through the disclosure of the death of Ansel, the deceased son whom Halie worships and who killed himself on his wedding night. The complication of the entrance of Vince propels itself to a crisis when he is rejected by his family, a sense of alienation felt earlier by his grandfather, Dodge. Vince discovers Dodge has died and

emblematically takes his grandfather's place. The final climax occurs as Tilden enters carrying the body of a dead child which he has dug out of the earth. The corn and carrots have grown in the backyard because of the nourishment the child provided. The resolution, therefore, suggests that there is hope. Whereas Dodge killed the child, Tilden nurtured it, and the vegetables thus grow for him.

While Shepard's method of structure varies greatly from the structure of Kopit and Albee, his method is applied much like that of David Mamet. Mamet and Shepard share a naturalistic style of writing as opposed to Albee and Kopit's radical absurdist style.

David Mamet has said of Glengarry Glen Ross that it is about a society based on business, a society with only one bottom line: Money is the criterion for success.²⁷ The structure is built around a robbery, and the chain of events that ensues, casually linked, comprises elements of a conventional rising action, with a submerged pattern of interaction²⁸ between the salesmen.

The first act consists of three short scenes all taking place in a Chinese restaurant where the salesmen gather to do business. The opening scene finds fifty-year-old Shelly Levene, a loser in the real estate game, pleading with the office manager Williamson to give him better leads, which are lists of customer prospects. He cajoles and then bribes to no avail. Complications and obstacles become apparent as the action is initiated. Moss is the runner-up to an office

sales competition in which the winner gets a Cadillac, the runner-up receives a set of steak knives, and the loser is to be fired. He proposes that Aaronow, one of the losers, should be a hit man and break into the office to steal the firm's leads and sell them to a rival broker. Roma, the leading salesman, convinces a lonely drinker to buy some undeveloped land in the Glengarry Highlands of Florida. Roma subsequently loses the sale because the drinker's wife says no. Later, the office is ransacked and all the leads are stolen. The crises are found in the investigation, with the audience assuming that Aaronow is guilty. The climax, however, reveals Levene as the criminal when he is questioned over his involvement in the office robbery. This revelation explains why Levene was overly sympathetic with Roma, the number one office man, in his lost sale. Levene wanted to appear successful and offer tips to Roma. Levene posed as the successful old professional, and yet his ego was quickly deflated as the truth of the robbery surfaced. The resolution involves Levene being eternally alienated from the partnership, as well as having his personal and professional life destroyed.

By examining the element of structure in the selected plays of Kopit, Albee, Mamet and Shepard, we see that they all assume the traditional format of the opening scene which initiates the action and sets the tone for the play. Complications and obstacles are then thrown in to create a new twist or obstruction in the character's way. Finally, a ser-

ies of crises occur, the last being the final climax which resolves the action either happily or tragically. In the first three plays, Oh Dad, Poor Dad, The American Dream and Buried Child, the opening scene introduces abnormal characters whose conversations are far from a typical family conversation. The characters in all three plays contain similar personalities. Whereas Madame Rosepettle and Mommy contain dominant character traits, both Daddy and Jonathan are weak and submissive. Oh Dad, Poor Dad and The American Dream are built on a chaotic structure with a totally absurdist style. While Buried Child displays a more naturalistic format than Oh Dad, Poor Dad and The American Dream, Glengarry Glen Ross contains the most naturalistic detail. The opening scene reveals an employee and his boss in what could be a normal conversation. It is the extent to which Levene takes the situation, with his bribery attempts, foul language to his boss, and compromise proposals which suggest absurdism. Though Mamet's subject matter is not structurally absurd on the surface, his robbery based format uses elements of the absurd in a possible but extremely unlikely situation. The complications and obstacles as well as the climaxes and the resolutions vary in each of the plays. The climax in Oh Dad, Poor Dad has Jonathan smothering Rosalie because his father's corpse has fallen on her. The resolution becomes tragicomic, because his killing of Rosalie frees Jonathan to mentally torment his mother as she has tormented him. The climax in The American Dream occurs when it is discovered that the

young man is the twin brother to the baby that Mommy and Daddy had adopted and then murdered many years before. The resolution is tragic, for the young man will always be half of a person, an example of physical beauty without an inner soul. The climax in Buried Child begins after the death of Dodge as Tilden carries in the corpse of the child that Dodge had murdered many years before. The resolution is obscure but hopeful, for Tilden's nurturing of the buried child gives life to the growing plants. Finally, the climax in Glengarry Glen Ross centers on the discovery that Levene is the culprit who broke into the real-estate office and stole all of the leads. The resolution is tragic, for Levene is alienated from the firm and has destroyed both his personal and professional life.

Through examination of structure in the aforementioned plays, both similarities and contrasts are found in the texts. The earlier plays being studied, Oh Dad, Poor Dad and The American Dream, are treated as satire with a radically absurdist framework. Simply reading the first few pages from each of these plays demonstrates the distortion of character, language and theme. However, Buried Child and Glengarry Glen Ross, more recent absurdist plays, provide evidence of a more realistic framework. One must analyze other elements in the scripts for the absurdist aspects of the plays--Buried Child through the narrative segments and Glengarry Glen Ross through the extremity of the situation.

In this chapter, the element of structure has been

applied to the selected plays of Kopit, Albee, Shepard and Mamet. It is seen that dramatic structure serves an important function in that it provides the basic framework for the plays, despite the absurdist elements that permeate each work. The degree to which absurdity is used varies from playwright to playwright. For example, it has been found that Kopit's and Albee's use of structure is more deeply rooted in absurdist tradition, whereas Shepard and Mamet take a more realistic approach. In Chapter Two a second crucial element of drama, character, will be examined within the context of the absurdist plays under study.

Chapter III

Distortion of Character

A significant feature of the structure of absurdist plays lies in the handling of characters.²⁹ Not only is there an element of the ridiculous in their actions, but they frequently exemplify an existential point of view toward human behavior.³⁰ Existentialism, when applied to theatre, suggests that the characters have no personal history before the play begins, no background and, therefore, no specific causes for their actions. With the absence of exposition, one is led not to seek solutions, but to confront a view of modern life, a view both existential and absurd.³¹

Esslin elaborates:

Because the Theatre of the Absurd projects its author's personal world, it lacks objectively valid characters. It cannot show the clash of opposing temperaments or study human passions locked in conflict, and is therefore not dramatic in the accepted sense of the term. Nor is it concerned with telling a story in order to communicate some moral or social lesson. The action in a play of the Theatre of the Absurd is not intended to tell a story but to communicate a pattern of poetic images.³²

It is apparent, therefore, that characters in the theatre of the absurd are not to be viewed in the same manner that one would view a character in a traditionally structured play.

The intention of absurdist playwrights is not to charm an audience with comforting traditions, but rather to shock them into adopting a more critical attitude in place of an emotional one. Furthermore, Esslin contends that

the means by which the dramatists of the absurd express their critique - largely instinctive and unintended - of our disintegrating society are based on suddenly confronting their audiences with a grotesquely heightened and distorted picture of a world that has gone mad. This is a shock therapy that achieves what Brecht's doctrine of the "alienation effect" postulated in theory but failed in practice - the inhibition of the audience's identification with the characters on the stage (which is the age-old and highly effective method of the traditional theatre) and its replacement by a detached, critical attitude.

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The result that absurdist playwrights seek, therefore, is an individual audience member's point of view gathered from the critical analysis of the characters, yet unfettered by the character's point of view or emotional feedback. The characters they present are one dimensional, and the audience, consequently, is not weighted down with the task of comparing their own physical reality to that of a character with three dimensions. As a result, Esslin suggests that in the Theatre of the Absurd, the audience is

confronted with characters whose motives and actions remain largely incomprehensible. With such characters it is almost impossible to identify; the more mysterious their action and their nature, the less human the characters become, the more difficult it is to be carried away into seeing the world from their point of view.

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It is when characters on stage portray individuals to whom we cannot relate that audience members may find comic elements. If a character of travesty loses his pants the audience will probably reflect emotions of discomfort and reproach, and yet the actuality of the character's grotesque situation causes one to laugh at his predicament. In the theatre of the absurd, the chaotic order of motives and mysterious nature of the characters' actions effectively prevent identification, thereby eliciting comedy despite the fact that the material may be somber, violent and acrid. Absurdist theatre transcends the genre of comedy or tragedy and combines laughter with horror, creating unique and intriguing drama where characters break tradition and become irresist-

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ably ludicrous.

With a better understanding of the purpose of characterization as the absurdist uses it, it is possible to observe the treatment of selected characters on the stage in the plays under study. In Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Arthur Kopit creates a satire which mimics the conventions of the theatre of the

absurd. Kopit's characters are placed in a capricious situation, and the dialogue is composed of non sequiturs--props and characters romp madly through a burlesque that resembles a perverse nightmare.³⁶ Oh Dad, Poor Dad is reminiscent of Tennessee Williams' characters in The Rose Tattoo (1950), and the characters' names are appropriate to the rose motif. Dad (though dead, he remains a character in the play), his widow and son are the Rosepettles. The widow's suitor is Commodore Roseabove, her son's temptress is Rosalie, and there is a piranha fish named Rosalinda.

Madame Rosepettle is a dominant archetype who shields herself from the reality of her existence. The widow is a man hater, crusading against sex and love, luring eligible bachelors into flirtations fearsome in their consequences. Her virulent campaign almost smothers the Commodore, who succumbs to an asthmatic attack under stress. She is also an example of perverted mothering as a result of a life without love. By preventing her son from achieving normal maturation, she believes she has saved him from a hypocritical society--she has kept Jonathan pure: "His skin is the color of fresh snow, his voice is like music of angels, and his mind is pure."³⁷

Jonathan Rosepettle is the victim of his mother's abuse, his whole development stunted by a possessive mother. Naive and clumsy, he behaves as a child but is actually seventeen years old. Jonathan obeys his mother's commands. He also almost succumbs to the manipulations of Rosalie, who

mirrors his mother's domineering and selfish ways. However, a twist in the action brings Jonathan to a completely different level of communication, and he eventually rejects the female manipulation of Rosalie by simply killing her.

Rosalie, the neighbor upon whom Jonathan spies through his telescope, though appealing to the eye, turns out to be a very young Madame Rosepettle. Rosalie attempts to draw Jonathan into her power, but she fails as Jonathan finally sees through her manipulative ways after discovering the reality of his past through exposition.

Jonathan, Dad and Commodore Roseabove are all examples of the "weaker sex." They allow themselves to be controlled by women, thus reinforcing the submissive male archetype. On the other hand, Madame Rosepettle, and Rosalie are examples of the dominant female archetype much like Rosalinda the piranha fish. The play is a grotesquerie, focusing on women who devour men, who are noticeably the weaker sex. By extension, the females' counterparts in the natural world are
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carnivorous plants and fish.

Edward Albee, like Arthur Kopit, presents his characters as individuals without conscious control over their situation. According to Matthew C. Roudane, Edward Albee's characters are physical, psychological, and spiritual forces which often
39
converge. Roudane explains:

Albee's heroes suffer, dwell in an absurd world,
but realize the opportunity for growth and change.
They often experience a coming to consciousness

that draws them toward the essence, the core of their relationships. Stripped of illusion, Albee's protagonists stand naked. And once naked, they begin rekindling those forces which may profoundly alter their stance towards human encounters. Of course, Albee offers no guarantee of order, comprehension, survival, or love. Whether each character takes advantage of powers of consciousness varies from play to play, but the point remains fixed: Albee's theatre consistently stages the possibility that his heroes, and perhaps the audience, through the process of engagement can become more honest with both their
 40
 inner and outer worlds.

If applied to Albee's The American Dream, Roudanes' theory would suggest, therefore, that Mommy and Daddy do not take advantage of their power of consciousness, for they are one dimensional characters. The young man dwells in the world of the absurd not by choice, but as a result of unfortunate circumstances which form both the climax and the denouement of the story.

Characters in the plays of Albee often show domestic hostilities dramatized with the ferocious and the comic. Parents kill their children and often molest them, children dream of killing their parents, parents compete with the children in matters of sexual preference or at other times do not have a relationship with each other at all. Domineering

mothers, devouring wives, submissive husbands, dead children, and a myriad of similar absurd archetypes abound in his plays.
41

In The American Dream, Mommy is the chief wrongdoer and boss. She wants to get rid of Grandma and intimidate her husband, treating him like an imbecile child. With Daddy's assistance, she has already helped dismember her only child.

Daddy is doomed from the start, the prime example of husband-abuse. Daddy carries the consequences of years of mental anguish. He is the typical submissive male archetype, afraid of his own shadow as well as Mommy's.

Grandma escapes the grip of Mommy because she is sharp-tongued, ironic, and hard--qualities necessary for survival. She sees much more clearly than the other characters. She knows the real from the artificial. Often speaking directly to the audience, Grandma is the sardonic mistress of ceremonies.

Mrs. Barker is a crucial character to further the plot of the story. She is a clubwoman who, earlier in her life, served as the head of the adoption agency where Mommy and Daddy bought a baby many years before. These two identities of Mrs. Barker serve as a major factor as the action of the play moves toward the climax.

The young man is the American Dream, a perfectly formed young man in a bikini. He is the twin to the baby Mommy and Daddy bought many years before and then killed. He is guaranteed to give Mommy and Daddy satisfaction because his out-

ward physical appearance is perfect. He has no capacity, however, to feel love or any emotions. This vital part of him died with his brother.

Albee notes that

the play is an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; The American Dream is a picture of our time--as I see it of course. Every honest work is a personal, private yowl, a statement of one individual's pleasure or pain, but I hope that The American Dream ... transcends the personal and the private, and has something to do with the anguish of us all.⁴²

Albee's purpose in writing The American Dream is perhaps to transcend what is unrealistic and taught and to view reality from another angle--from an absurdist point of view.

Whereas Edward Albee's characters are fixed into one personality which remain constant, Sam Shepard's characters are in a constant state of change. Bonnie Marranca, editor of American Dreams: The Imagination Of Sam Shepard, brings out four major points about Sam Shepard's use of characterization.⁴³ First, what usually happens in the theatre is that and actor is given the opportunity to be a character. Shepard reverses the practice by giving the characters the chance to be performers. Second, characters in his plays tell us

about themselves rather than having other characters or the author tell us about them. They exist prior to the dramatic action, not because of it. When a character does not have to explain a play, the play can tell itself. Third, whereas the "realistic" character is created by an actor who must develop an "inner life" for himself or herself in order to play his or her character in full dimension, Shepard's principal characters already have an inner life. Shepard, an actor himself, incorporates what the actor prepares into his composition of character. The actor is then free to play the moment, not the whole play; free to express the quality of being rather than having been. Finally, character chases the illusory ideal of definition. If during a play one analyzes the character's emotional and physical life, his center of self will be revealed. The Shepard character has not simply one self but several selves which are in a constant state of change.

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In Buried Child, Shepard created several characters whose reality helped win him a Pulitzer Prize in 1979. Dodge, the family patriarch, is an old man in his seventies, sitting--awaiting death as a release from the boredom of a hollow life. He has fathered three sons. Tilden, the eldest, once an all-American football player, is now a half-wit, reduced to the mentality of a child. Bradley, the second son, has designs on his father's property, but he also has been reduced to a grotesque figure, having lost a leg in a chain-saw accident some years earlier. The youngest son,

Ansel, is dead, having been killed in his motel room on the night of his honeymoon.⁴⁵ Despite his death, or perhaps because it, he has become the hero among the sons.

Halie, Dodge's wife, talks to her husband from upstairs (offstage), for most of the first act. They often must shout to hear each other. Their awkward means of communication perhaps represents the great distance between them in their lives. She takes on the role of domineering mother and wife. Dodge, merely mocks her or ignores her altogether.⁴⁶

Act Two begins with the arrival of Vince, Tilden's son. He has brought his girlfriend, Shelly, and they have come to visit his family to reestablish his roots and to find his past and his place in their lives. He combines the image of the cowboy and the musician and suggests the persona of Shepard himself.⁴⁷

Shelly serves as an objective presence, an outsider with no familiar ties whose point of view provides audience members with a perspective from which they can judge the reality of this family's life. This is a technique utilized by Shepard, who usually denies his audience the ability to identify with a character who sees the disordered action of the play from the outside.

The blood ties of family were overrated in Tilden's suggested incest with Halie; they were underrated in the infanticide that became the family secret. In the end, Vince's rebirth reconciles these antitheses.⁴⁸ Thus, the buried child's death becomes a hope for life, the vegetation spring-

ing forth from the earth, the child born again through nature.

Just as Shepard's characters in Buried Child tend to repress their emotions, so too do the characters in David Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross. Because most of David Mamet's characters have little sense of emotion, they have no way of making real contact with each other. Mamet distrusts assumptions that characters have a life outside a play. He contends that characterizing encourages the audience to approach the play as critics rather than as participants. To characterize the people, therefore, is to take time from the story and thus to weaken it.

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In Glengarry Glen Ross, Mamet's use of characterization earned him the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1984. Shelly Levene is an insurance salesman, a loser in his fifties who pleads with his manager to give him bigger and better leads. It is Levene who, after a thorough investigation, proves to be the culprit who broke into the insurance office and stole the leads. A character of desperation, Levene makes one wrong move and, as a result, destroys his life, both socially and professionally.

Williamson, the office manager is a younger man in his forties, unwilling to submit to Levene's requests. Although he makes some shaky compromises with Levene as "incentive," he knows that the chances of Levene proving to be successful are minimal. He is the concerned business manager, taught to save the best leads for the best men--like Roma. Roma is

the office star who is able to compel customers into his pitch and sell it. Although he does lose a sale to a man at the end of the play, it is this loss that reveals Levene as the thief, and Roma, without even realizing it, is on top once again.

Moss is the runner-up in the office. Cunning and manipulative, the typical salesman longs for the Cadillac grand prize the office has offered as incentive for the number one sale of the month. He tries to con Aaronow, another loser in the office, to break in and steal the leads, whereupon they could sell them to a rival broker. Aaronow, weak and cowardly, refuses to do it.

Mamet notes that

there's really no difference between
the lumpenproletariat and stockbrokers
and corporate lawyers who are the lac-
keys of business ... Part of the Ameri-
can myth is that a difference exists,
that at a certain point viciousness be-
comes laudable.

The character's thralldom to the imperatives of business at any cost has stunted them and prevents them from knowing either themselves or others, which is precisely the point Mamet is suggesting.

In Oh Dad, Poor Dad, The American Dream and Buried Child, Madame Rosepettle, Mommy and Halie all represent the domineering female. Both Madame Rosepettle and Mommy go even

further to "devour" the weaker sex,--to be all powerful and in control. Though Halie tries to be "in charge" in Buried Child, we realize that Dodge allows this. He simply ignores her or mimics her. He is not, however, representative of the "henpecked" submissive male counterparts such as Jonathan in Oh Dad, Poor Dad or Daddy in The American Dream because he is not intimidated by Halie. After all, he killed and buried her child with no regrets. Rosalie in Oh Dad, Poor Dad has all the traits that Madame Rosepettle has, and would have grown up to be just like her, had she lived. Just as Rosalie and Madame Rosepettle share likenesses in Oh Dad, Poor Dad, such as domineering and devouring personalities, Vince and Dodge also share a likeness in Buried Child. Indeed, Vince literally takes Dodge's place after he dies. Vince, thus, becomes a younger image of Dodge himself and is left to carry on his complacent attitude.

The characters in Glengarry Glen Ross are treated differently from the aforementioned plays. These characters represent domineering businessmen out to make money. It is Mamet's treatment of the lengths to which certain people will or will not go that makes it work. A detective/investigative structure provides the proper channels for the characters to work, some characters being quite close to reality in a comparable realistic situation.

After studying the dramatic elements of structure and character, it is necessary to examine the element of theme as it relates to this study. It is the purpose of Chapter

Four, therefore, to define theme and to analyze its use in the plays selected for research.

Chapter IV

Revelation Through Theme

Theme can be defined as the central thought of a play, and the idea or ideas with which the play deals and which it expounds.⁵¹

Although a play may have one central theme, it is not uncommon for a play to initiate several themes, such as is the case with Oh Dad, Poor Dad, The American Dream, Buried Child and Glengarry Glen Ross.

Oh Dad, Poor Dad is a dead-serious satire--a perverse comic nightmare on the old theme of man-eating mother and un-⁵²fortunate son.

The play is a grotesquerie focusing on women who devour men, noticeably the weaker sex. These females' counterparts in the natural world are carnivorous plants and fish The widow is a man hater, crusading against sex and love Perverted mothering is also a result of a life without love. Because Mrs. Rosepettle views the outside world as a threatening environment in which rejection is supreme, she assures herself that preventing her son from achieving normal maturation has saved him from a hypocritical society He will never have⁵³ to face the loathsome state of manhood.

While the central theme may be the domineering mother and submissive son, one also may draw other themes from this play. The theme of perverted mothering from a life without

love is apparent as well as the rejection of reality as a means of existence. Madame Rosepettle must shield reality from Jonathan to keep him pure and chaste, and she herself must shun reality to forget her horrible past. Kopit is also exposing the psychological danger in a society which blindly adheres to a belief in stereotyped roles, such as husband, mother, or child, and to platitudes about the blessings of the sweet American life style.⁵⁴ He uses macabre humor to show females as devourers whose methods are masked by visual extravaganza and elaborate paradox, provoking both horror and laughter through its absurdity.

According to Suzanne Burgoyne Dieckman and Richard Broyshaw in their article "Imprisonment in the Plays of Arthur Kopit," imprisonment is a significant thematic device in Kopit's plays.⁵⁵ In Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Kopit examines the roots of psychosexual imprisonment--the family. For example, Madame Rosepettle perpetuates the pattern of imprisonment by locking her son Jonathan in the hotel room, ostensibly to protect him from the outside world, but in actuality to keep him as her possession. Kopit dramatizes the imprisoning dynamic of the family.

The mother's fear of sexuality is carefully inculcated in the son through a system of external controls which the son has gradually internalized. Thus the son is frozen at an emotionally immature level, imprisoned within the "character," or iden-

tity, fabricated by the mother and, like her, isolated and incapable of achieving intimacy.⁵⁶

Thus Madame Rosepettle escapes reality through the imprisonment of her son's mind and body as well as her own. Therefore, the theme of imprisonment serves the play strongly.

Like Oh Dad, Poor Dad, The American Dream also has several themes. Albee, like Kopit, provides a social satire of American life in The American Dream.⁵⁷ Exploding the myth that Albee believes society considers everything in life to be perfect, Albee's main theme is to show life as it may be without facades.⁵⁸ Albee controls and shapes his difficult theme, destroying the world of common sense and logic. Concerned with the human condition, Albee's plays serve as reminders that there are many points of view in a given situation.⁵⁹ He urges people to live and not just to exist.

Another idea stems from a rich married couple that buys a baby and then fails to love him as they would if he were their own.⁶⁰ Out of this situation come the themes of childlessness, and the inability of love. Childlessness as a thematic device is rich throughout the play.⁶¹ Twenty years before the action of the play, Mommy and Daddy contacted Mrs. Barker, who was working for the Bye-Bye Adoption Society. They bought a child but were unsatisfied with it, primarily because it only had eyes for Daddy. They, therefore, dismembered the baby piece by piece until it

died, and then asked for their money back. As a result, they remain childless for the rest of their lives until the young man appears at the end of the play.

The inability to love is also a theme in The American Dream.⁶² Mommy and Daddy show no overt signs of love for each other or Grandma, and they demonstrate no love for the baby that they kill. The young man who represents the American dream explains that he never knew either of his parents. He had an identical twin from whom he was separated, a separation which caused him to feel as though he was losing a part of himself. Through the denouement, we discover that the young man is the twin brother of the baby that Mommy and Daddy killed. The young man has no capacity to love, for he was robbed of that emotional part at birth.

Edward Albee through his distorted image of the American dream suggests that a utopian America has never existed, and Sam Shepard agrees with this conception. According to Dr. Robert Collins, thematically, Shepard is among the most American of playwrights for his plays are suffused with a nostalgia for an idealized America that may never have existed.⁶³ Collins believes that Shepard's openness to experimentation is perhaps his greatest strength. A fine example of this strength is Buried Child, whose central theme suggests the rebirth of America and the American dream.⁶⁴ After forty years of lying dormant in a barren field, a crop planted by Dodge suddenly bursts forth from the ground. Buried in the ground is Halie's baby, her tiny shoot that was trampled

underground by Dodge before it had a chance to grow. Doris Auerbach points out that Buried Child ends "like a miracle play with the symbol of the resurrection," and thus "leaves the audience with hope for a revitalized America, for one that nourishes its children and holds the promise of the American dream once again."⁶⁵

Another theme suggested throughout the play is that of father and son relationships.⁶⁶ Dodge does not represent the ideal father for his sons Tilden and Bradley, nor did he for his deceased son, Ansel. No love is apparent in his treatment of these relationships. Tilden does not even recognize his son, Vince, much less love him, nor does he represent the stereotypical American father figure. Dodge denies being the father to the baby he destroys, while Tilden, who may be the father, nurtures the buried child by tending to the earth around him. Oddly, this implication of incest demonstrates a father's love for his son that is genuine and representative.

While Shepard works within an essentially naturalistic framework,⁶⁷ Buried Child comes close to mocking the form. The fatal secret deeply hidden beneath the domestic surface is eventually revealed, the revelation resulting in a profound conflict that threatens permanent disruption of the normal and tranquil life of the family.

The themes to which David Mamet explores are inextricably entwined with his subject matter, one of which is the machinations of real estate salesmen in Glengarry Glen Ross.⁶⁸ The aphasic speech patterns that typify the vocabulary of

many of his characters reflect Stanislavsky's theory that words create behavior.⁶⁹ The characters' use of language combined with Mamet's understanding of human nature serves as the groundwork to such themes as collusion with a faulty social system and masochism in the personal psyche. In the former, the characters' human nature leads them to adhere to deception to get ahead. In the case of Levene, he resorts to stealing company leads, conspiring with Moss in order to become rich. What provokes Levene to initiate such criminal behavior is the latter theme--a masochism in the personal psyche.⁷⁰ Levene has allowed greed to dominate moral concerns in order to obtain what he wants. He destroys his mind in this respect, with greed blocking good and becoming the power by which he lives.

The theme of aggressive selling becomes a defense and an attack on life itself throughout the play.⁷¹ The men become machines, competing to see who can produce the greatest profit. The power of selling becomes the breath of life which keeps them alive. To be number one is to be alive, otherwise, one only exists. Mamet's realistic framework sets out to expose the human condition, to reveal the difference between merely existing and truly living. He discloses the mechanical characteristics of today's society and reminds society to seek the human condition and to revive it.

In all four plays, the inability to love serves as a strong theme. Neither Madame Rosepettle nor Jonathan were ever taught to love in Oh Dad, Poor Dad. Mommy and Daddy in

The American Dream are incapable of loving. They even kill their baby, and the young man, as a result, cannot love. In Buried Child, Dodge demonstrates no love whatsoever. Tilden shows an odd sort of love for the buried child, yet there is none for his son, Vince. In Glengarry Glen Ross, the salesmen, like machines, do not have the capacity to love. Love is a lost element in all of the plays.

The American Dream, Buried Child, and Glengarry Glen Ross allude to the American dream or revitalization of America as a theme. Strangely, the only play which presents this dream in a positive sense is Buried Child. The American Dream, unlike the hope in it's title, presents a distortion of America's dream, a society destroying its existence. Glengarry Glen Ross exposes the dream as being nothing more than a means of getting rich. Buried Child, however, brings hope of the revitalization of America as the plants grow from barren soil in which the child was buried. The child lives on through nature and represents freedom and hope.

Having presented in the preceding chapters the crucial dramatic elements of structure, character and theme for analysis in the aforementioned plays, it is now necessary to examine the final element, language. To complete the purpose of this study, the following chapter will address language and its significance in the selected plays under study.

Chapter V

The Devaluation of Language

Just as structure, character, and theme in the theatre of the absurd are often illogical, so too is the use of language. For example, there is frequent use of non sequiturs throughout the body of absurdist dramatic literature.⁷² Sentences do not follow in sequence, and words do not mean what we expect them to mean. As Martin Esslin notes, there is a tendency "toward a radical devaluation of language."⁷³

The literature of verbal nonsense expresses more than mere amusement. In trying to break down the walls of logic and language, it stands strong against enclosing walls on the human condition itself. The absurdist views verbal nonsense as a transcendental endeavor, a striving to enlarge and to exceed the limits of the material universe and its logic.

Like to the mowing tones of unspoke speeches
 or like two lobsters clad in logick breeches;
 or like the gray fleece of a crimson catt,
 or like the moone-calf in a slipshod hatt;
 or like the shadow when the sun is gone,
 or like the thought that nev'r was thought
 upon; Even such a man who never was begot-
 ten until his children were both dead and
⁷⁴
 rotten

Thus sang Richard Corbet, Bishop of Oxford, and Ben Jonson's friend. And it is precisely the desire to grasp the shadow when the sun is gone, or to hear the tones of the unspoken

speeches of mankind, that lies behind the impulse to speak
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 nonsense.

Antonin Artaud directed Roger Vitrac's surrealist plays and is the author of one or two remarkable dramatic sketches, but his greatest contributions to the theatre of the absurd lie in his theoretical writings and in his practical experiments as a producer. He believes that theatre should aim at expressing what language is incapable of putting into words:

It is not a matter of suppressing speech in the theatre but of changing its role, and especially of reducing its position. Behind the poetry of the texts, there is the actual poetry, without form and without text For I make it my principle that words do not mean everything, and that by their nature and defining character, fixed once and for all, they arrest and paralyze thought instead of permitting it and fostering its development I am adding another language to the spoken language, and I am trying to restore to the language of speech its old magic, its essential spell-binding power."
 76

It is evident in all four of the plays under study that the playwrights have changed the role of speech and reduced its position to fulfill the absurdist structure. As Artaud has indicated, absurdist language is poetry without form and text.

In keeping with Artaud's theories, Arthur Kopit uses language in an extraordinary manner. In Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad, for example, the language he has created for his characters not only develops the plot, but it violates propriety and shocks the senses, which makes the audience see life from a totally different angle. To elude "tradition" one must first understand it, according to Kopit, who explicates:

Tradition: the past preserved; the framework within which every writer works, and to which every work must, at some time or another, be replaced Style--the way one writes--is related to tradition to the extent that it is representative of a cultural or social characteristic of its creative environment, and is itself characteristic to the extent that it has evolved
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from, or rebelled against, any of these.

In Kopit's view, the rebellion is against tradition, and his absurdist style, therefore, creates new tradition.

In what Arthur Kopit calls "the bastard French tradition," Oh Dad, Poor Dad represents a new assault upon the theatre as a laboratory for case histories or as a loudspeaker for transient propaganda.
78 This new tradition is evident through the first bits of dialogue between Madame Rosepettle and Jonathan, for we immediately detect two archetypes--the domineering and insulting mother and the desecrated and submissive son:

MADAME ROSEPETTLE: Your fabulous coin collection, Edward. Where should they put it?

JONATHAN: Uh . . . uh . . . I . . . I . . .
Itha . . . tha . . . tha-think --

MADAME ROSEPETTLE: What is wrong with your tongue? Can't you talk like a normal human being without showering this room with your inarticulate spit!?

JONATHAN: I-I-I-I-I-I . . . I . . . da . . .
da . . . don't . . .

MADAME ROSEPETTLE: Oh, all right, stick out your paw and point. [He thrusts out his trembling hand and points again to the bureau.]

JONATHAN: If . . . if . . . if . . . if they . . .
if they would . . . be so . . . kind.

Through the dialogue, one may conclude that Madame Rosepettle is a devouring mother, while Jonathan is her prey. The manner in which she attacks Jonathan with her insulting speech and the defeated reaction he returns through stuttering exemplifies the absurdist language written in the bastard French tradition which Kopit clearly imitates. As one critic observes, "He writes like an angel or, to be more precise, like a mischievous cherub who has just had a highly diverting season in hell and is dying to tell all about it."

Through the untraditional structure of action and language, Kopit is among the first playwrights to create absurdist

material. By denouncing the use of prose realism and bombarding most of the plays written in the late 1950's, Kopit transcended the norm and helped begin the absurdist movement in theatre which has expanded through the years, becoming a popular art form of contemporary theatre. The quest for meaning which motivates many of his characters, such as Jonathan, often ends in disappointment and frustration.

Like Kopit, Edward Albee has captured the essence of non sequitur language in his writings. According to Anne Paolucci, Edward Albee has proven himself a master of dialogue. His dramatic language traces a pattern and a purpose which change with each play but which can be summed up generally as a commitment to expose and condemn everything that has been taken for granted so long. ⁸¹ Albee attacks the great "American dream" that everything is "peachy-keen," and he stages his attack through language.

In 1962, in an interview with Newsweek, Albee explained why he revolted against realist language:

I had been determined since I was a kid to be a writer. I wanted to do something before I was 30. Maybe I decided that playwrighting was the only thing left It's not the purpose of any art form to be just like life. Reality on stage is highly selective reality, chosen to give form. Real dialogue on stage is impossible. Make a tape recording of people

and try to put that on stage.⁸²

Thus, Albee attacks realism through the use of absurdist language. Receptive to such influential European absurdist as Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, and Pinter, Albee experimented with the absurdist technique of devaluing language, his often illogical, cliché-ridden repartee signifying the characters' banality.⁸³

For example, in one section of The American Dream, Albee exaggerates social awkwardness moments before Mrs. Barker's entrance, first by having Daddy announce the unexpected--"Now that you're here, I don't suppose you could go away and maybe come back some other time."⁸⁴ Later, Mommy has Mrs. Barker make herself too much at home:

MOMMY: . . . Are you sure you're comfortable?

Won't you take off your dress?

MRS. BARKER: I don't mind if I do. (She removes her dress).

MOMMY: There. You must feel a great deal more comfortable.

MRS. BARKER: Well, I certainly look a great deal more comfortable.

DADDY: I'm going to blush and giggle.

MOMMY: Daddy's going to blush and giggle.

MRS. BARKER: (Pulling the hem of her slip above her knees): You're lucky to have such a man for a husband.⁸⁵

MOMMY: Oh, don't I know it!

Throughout The American Dream, Albee employs this kind of di-

alogue, the overstated or unexpected outbursts underscoring the pettiness of the characters' lives, the smallness of vision, a glance at a ludicrous world filled with empty platitudes.⁸⁶ The result is poetry without form or text as Artaud explained previously. The language uses non sequiturs to create this new poetry and tradition.

Although Albee and Kopit rely on non sequiturs to emphasize their absurdist structures, Shepard uses ordinary language to reveal the absurdity of life. According to Sam Shepard, language itself, a primary though not sole medium for the playwright, is often an obstacle in his search. He sees language as a thin boundary behind which lie demons and angels that live in one's subconscious.⁸⁷ Shepard thus reaches into the dark regions of the audience's minds and calls up images from the dialogue that speak to viewers in the safety of their own auditorium seat.⁸⁸

In his essay, "Language, Visualization And The Inner Library," Shepard says:

The structure of any form immediately implies limitation. I'm narrowing down my field of vision. I'm agreeing to work within certain boundaries Language, then, seems to be the only ingredient in this plan that retains the potential of making leaps into the unknown. There's only so much I can do with appearances. Change the costume, add a new character, change the

light, bring in objects, shift the set, but language is always hovering right there, ready to move faster and more effectively than all the rest of it put together. It's like pulling out a .38 when someone faces you with a knife Language can explode from the tiniest impulse. If I'm right inside the character in the moment, I can catch what he smells, sees, feels and touches. In a sudden flash he opens his eyes, and the words follow. In these lightning-like eruptions words are not thought, they're felt. They cut through space and make perfect sense without having to hesitate for the "meaning."

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Through virtuosic characterization, Shepard propagates absurdist language to complete the image he has intended. This language exceeds the limitation of traditional structure, thereby allowing the characters to explode with heart felt words that one can promptly recognize.

In Buried Child, Shepard's characters shift to a narrative, presentational mode of acting rather than a motivational, representational mode. Much of the background of the play is narrated, and the absurdity often lies in the solo itself rather than the dialogue. In this cutting, Dodge explains the origins of the buried child to the one character who has the least right to know--Shelly, a stranger:

Halie had this kid. This baby boy. She had

it. I let her have it on her own. All the other boys I had had the best doctors, best nurses, everything. This one I let her have by herself. This one hurt real bad. Almost killed her, but she had it anyway. It lived, see. It lived. It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be a part of us. It wanted to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even when everyone around us knew. Everyone. All our boys knew. Tilden knew Tilden was the one who knew. Better than any of us. He'd walk for miles with that kid in his arms. Halie let him take it. All night sometimes. He'd walk all night out there in the pasture with it. Talkin' to it. Singin' to it. Used to hear him singing to it. He'd make up stories. He'd tell that kid all kinds of stories. Even when he knew it couldn't understand him We couldn't let a thing like that continue. We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothing. Everything was cancelled out by
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this one mistake. This one weakness.

Thus, the initial scene of conflict suggests Tilden's incest and the subsequent birth of an unwanted child. The language

shepard designs for us to hear reveals its connotations through narration.

Like Kopit, Albee and Shepard before him, David Mamet's use of language is unique and original. Critics have said that what separates David Mamet from his peers, what gives him his signature style and individuality, is his dialogue.⁹¹ The dialogue is indeed individual and unmistakable and can hardly be confused with that of any other playwright.

Dennis Carroll, author of David Mamet, emphasizes the significance of dialogue in Mamet's plays:

The dialogue is the chief vehicle of the dialectical principle in Mamet: the disjunctions between the overt meanings of the words and the implied meanings of their rhythms; between the ebullience of the speaker and his words and the silences he wants to cover and deny. These silences at times embody threat, at other times⁹² the possibility of contact.

Therefore, it is evident that Mamet's language holds considerable importance in the presentation of his ideas. Mamet's flashiest and most colloquially grounded dialogue is demonstrated in Glengarry Glen Ross where the characters often use their language as an aggressive mask to hide behind or to⁹³ dominate or manipulate others. The dialogue between Moss and Aaronow, two real estate agents, demonstrates this manipulation as Moss tries to persuade Aaronow to assist him in breaking into another office to steal "leads," or prospective

AARONOW: Why would I do it?

MOSS: You wouldn't, George, that's why I'm talking to you. Answer me. They come to you. You going to turn me in?

AARONOW: No.

MOSS: Are you sure?

AARONOW: Yes, I'm sure.

MOSS: Then listen to this: I have to get those leads tonight. That's something I have to do. If I'm not at the movies . . . if I'm not eating over at the inn . . . If you don't do this, then I have to come in here . . .

AARONOW: . . . you don't have to come in ...

MOSS: . . . and rob the place ...

AARONOW: . . . I thought we were only talking . . .

MOSS: . . . they take me, then. They're going to ask me who were my accomplices.

AARONOW: Me?

MOSS: Absolutely.

AARONOW: That's ridiculous.

MOSS: Well, to the law, you're an accessory. Before the fact.

AARONOW: I didn't ask to be.

MOSS: Then tough luck, George, because you are.

AARONOW: Why? Why, because you only told me about it?

MOSS: That's right. ⁹⁴

Although Moss approaches Aaronow and eventually convinces him that he must break in and steal the leads, the denouement of the story reveals otherwise. Moss finally persuades Levene, another agent, to break in for the leads. Levene, therefore, becomes the victim of Moss's manipulation. Through the dialogue we see that the language is a major means by which the characters prime themselves for action. Stanley Kauffman stresses that for the characters, aggressive selling has become a means of defense and attack, of self-identification

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and of being. It is seen that the characters not only use language for the purpose of initiating action, but they also use language as a major means of survival, because the technique of selling is their entire life.

In retrospect, we see that both Arthur Kopit's and Edward Albee's styles of writing are similar, representing the early remnants of absurdist plays from the 1950's and 1960's. Oh Dad, Poor Dad and The American Dream depict a different angle of absurdity through language than do more recent absurdist plays such as Buried Child and Glengarry Glen Ross. Whereas Oh Dad, Poor Dad and The American Dream use non sequiturs throughout the dialogue, Buried Child demonstrates its absurdity through narration and Glengarry Glen Ross through the situation itself, the maddening struggle for total power and success. In Oh Dad, Poor Dad and The American

Dream, both Mommy and Madame Rosepettle have domineering personalities and say whatever they think without hesitation or regard for the consequence. The nonrealistic elements of drama merely add to the absurdist mood that Kopit and Albee suggest. The absurdity presented through chaotic conversations and nonsense situations represent reality and life as it truly is without the facades and limitations society places on it.

While Kopit and Albee are similar in their representation of language in the 1950's and 1960's, so too are Sam Shepard's and David Mamet's style of language similar in the 1970's and 1980's. Like Mamet, Shepard uses words that are not greatly related to the non sequitur style. The absurdity they suggest, however, lies more in the situation than in the language. An interesting distinction between the two is that the absurdity which Shepard creates is told through narration--the incident of the buried child is revealed simply through a monologue--while the absurdity which Mamet intends is resolved during the time span of the play itself, when Levene admits to the crime. Mamet also suggests the absurdity of priorities, men living only by the power of selling. In this case, to succeed is to live, to fail is to die. Speaking of the narrative passages in Buried Child, Dennis Carroll suggests:

Shepard differs from Mamet, in that, even when extended speeches incorporate elements of defensiveness and social mask, they are

also windows onto the imaginative landscape of characters' minds. They are not stories told to others; they are reproductions of thought-processes. Since the dialogue of such passages is mostly interiorised, it is not constructed on rhythms of spoken language as used in 'reality'. And the dialogue of Shepard's plays tends to be more lyrical and imaginistic than Mamet's. Thus, though both playwrights place much emphasis on language in the dramaturgical hierarchy, purpose and effect are different.

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Shepard thus presents through narration vivid stories which come from the character's experience, while Mamet uses language to quickly reveal a chaotic reality of life in the present through a more matter-of-fact pattern of dialogue.

The dramatic elements of structure, character, theme and language have been examined in the preceding chapters and have been applied, through similarity and contrast, to the selected absurdist plays under study. The author will devote the final chapter to conclusions based on findings presented earlier in the study.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

After conducting a critical analysis of style in the selected plays of Arthur Kopit, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard and David Mamet, several conclusions have been drawn. By examining four significant contributions to American absurdism from 1950 to the present, the thesis has produced several important comparisons of elements of drama found in structure, character, theme and language.

Structure, the foundation for every work of art, was divided into three specific steps. First, structure was established through the opening scene, followed by a series of obstacles and complications, and concluded with a series of crises, the final crisis serving as the play's climax. By examining the element of structure in Oh Dad, Poor Dad, The American Dream, Buried Child and Glengarry Glen Ross, one may assume that one is seeing the traditional family with the opening scene. Complications and obstacles, however, are introduced in ways which twist the plot and erases tradition. These complications and obstacles initiate a series of crises, the last crisis being the climax which resolves the action either happily or tragically.

Oh Dad, Poor Dad and The American Dream, two of the earliest absurdist plays, are treated as satire with a radical absurdist point of view. Both Kopit and Albee have distorted traditional characters, theme and language. On the other hand, Buried Child and Glengarry Glen Ross, which are more

recent absurdist plays, have introduced a more realistic framework. The absurdity in these plays is apparent within the narrative sequences in Buried Child and the extreme situation in Glengarry Glen Ross.

Characters, like structure in the theatre of the absurd, are developed not to support tradition, but to create chaos. The intention of absurdist playwrights is not to satisfy an audience with a comfortable, traditional play, but to shock them with absurdist themes and abnormal characters.

The first three plays, Oh Dad, Poor Dad, The American Dream and Buried Child, introduce abnormal characters which share similar personality traits. Madame Rosepettle and Mommy contain extremely dominant character traits while Halie likes to think that she does. Jonathan and Daddy represent the submissive male archetypes, while Dodge only pretends to be submissive, mocking and ignoring his wife behind her back.

While Rosalie assumes the dominant personality of Madame Rosepettle in Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Vince also develops the image of his grandfather, Dodge, in Buried Child. Rosalie's subsequent death displays hope, for her devouring presence is gone. Jonathan has only his mother to deal with now. Vince, however, leaves no hope in his existence, for although Dodge has died, Vince has now emblematically taken his place.

The characters in Glengarry Glen Ross are treated differently from the aforementioned plays. Mamet's characters are businessmen whose primary goal is to make money and be

successful. It is the extremity to which Mamet takes their desire that creates absurdity in the characters. Mamet has molded these characters into human moneymaking machines who live for nothing but success. Levene is the primary example of how living for nothing but being the number one man on the job can ultimately destroy you. Through such characterization, Mamet urges society to slow down and to enjoy life.

The themes within the four plays were numerous and similar to some extent. In all four plays the inability to love serves as a primary theme. In Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Madame Rosepettle was deprived of love as a child; therefore, she deprives Jonathan of love as well. This deprivation seems to stem from her inability to learn how to love. The same holds true for Mommy and Daddy in The American Dream. They have never experienced genuine love for each other or for Grandma. They did not love their adopted baby, for they killed it. The young man, as a result, cannot love. In Buried Child, Dodge shows absolutely no love for his wife and sons. Tilden does not even recognize Vince and shows no love for him. Tilden, however, does show an odd love toward the buried child, the only source of hope in the play. In Glengarry Glen Ross, the salesmen, like machines, do not have the capacity to love. Love is not recognized in any of the four plays, except briefly in Buried Child, a type of ritualistic love between Tilden and the corpse.

Concerning language within the plays, Oh Dad, Poor Dad and The American Dream use non sequiturs throughout the dia-

logue. The language is as abnormal and chaotic as the characters and structures are. In Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Madame Rosepettle says whatever she thinks without hesitation or regard for the consequence. The same holds true for Mommy in The American Dream, with both women sharing the devouring, domineering personality trait. Kopit and Albee plan for the absurdity to surface through non sequitur conversations and nonsense situations to show how life truly is under all of society's built in limitations and facades.

Buried Child and Glengarry Glen Ross do not share the non sequitur format of the aforementioned plays. Buried Child reveals its absurdity through narrative passages, when the characters expose the death and burial of a child many years before. Glengarry Glen Ross reveals absurdity through conversation which complicates the situation. Mamet's use of language quickly exposes the chaotic reality of life, a society which has forgotten the true meaning of the American dream.

By examining the elements of structure, character, theme and language in Oh Dad, Poor Dad, The American Dream, Buried Child and Glengarry Glen Ross, several characteristics have been observed in each author's style of writing. Arthur Kopit and Edward Albee share similarities in their styles of writing as early American absurdist playwrights. Their characters share similar abnormal personalities in a completely chaotic atmosphere. The non sequitur language through nonsense conversations depict the playwrights' revolt against

traditionally structured plays and stereotypical archetypes.

While Kopit and Albee share some similar traits in their representation of early American absurdism, so too are Sam Shepard's and David Mamet's later use of absurdism somewhat similar. Although Shepard and Mamet present a more realistic framework than earlier absurdists, they reveal absurdity through other elements,--Buried Child through narrative sections and Glengarry Glen Ross through the extremity of the situation. Both plays expose absurdity through conversation and characters who appear to be normal at the beginning but are truly distorted as the exposition of the story takes place.

Although each of the playwrights embodies unique characteristics of his own, all of them share some similar traits with one another. Just as Kopit and Albee have incorporated ideas from European existentialists into their writings, Shepard and Mamet have incorporated ideas from Kopit and Albee in their writing as well.

American absurdism began as a major theatrical movement in the 1950's, and it remains quite popular in contemporary theatre even as the form changes. It appears that American absurdism will continue to be a significant force in American theatre in future years as it has been from 1950 to the present.

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