
FUSION OF ILLUSION AND REALITY IN SHEPARD'S *FOOL FOR LOVE*

Dr Nadia Anwar

Professor, Department of English and Literacy Studies

University of Management and Technology, Lahore

Email: nadia.anwar@umt.edu.pk

Abstract

In this paper, Sam Shepard's play Fool for Love is examined to trace how reality and illusion are fused in the lives of his psychologically convoluted characters. Shepard places his characters in an apparently realistic setting of a "low-rent motel room" (19), the presence of which on the edge of the Mojave Desert, heightens the illusion of reality. The bond between Eddie and May, two main characters of the play, is also strengthened by illusions, yet, ironically, it is torn apart by truths. These truths have been concealed in order to protect the characters from the bitter reality of their incestuous relationship. Shepard presents the complicated realities of American lives and emphasizes the multilayered realities, just as there are multidimensional illusions. Drawing from Agata Bielik-Robson's notions regarding delusion, fantasy, and reality, it is argued through textual analysis that fantasy or illusion cannot be regarded as the opposite of reality which is per se a phenomenon suffused with counteracting levels of perspectives. The paper, therefore, looks into the formation of varied illusions and how they affect the reality of particular situations in the play.

Keywords: Illusion and reality; multiple truths; incest; delusion

Introduction

One of Sam Shepard's most acclaimed plays, *Fool for Love* (1983) is an acerbic critique on dysfunctional families and identity crises, especially how these aspects affect the American West. The play revolves around a static plot of two lovers, Eddie and May, who confront each other in a dilapidated motel room long after their break up. As the drama unfolds, the audience becomes a part of the family secret about their incestuous relationship. The complexity of the play is further heightened by combining realism with elements of expressionism which renders the play with a unique blend of reality and illusion.

While our bodies continuously encounter the real world, the mind through its ability to imagine, creates an illusory world. In psychoanalysis, as well as in the general usage of the word, illusion is often conflated with negative connotations. It obstructs senses and understanding of the nature of things by creating a delusional space characterized by deception. Delusion leads to an unconscious or superficially suppressed desire not to see reality as it is. This act of self-deception allows an alternative route to navigate through life without encountering the bitter truth. The characters in the play remain in this self-deluded state and prefer illusion to reality. Yet, their guilty conscious forces them to face the reality of their relationships.

Theoretical Underpinning and Methodology

Agata Bielik-Robson's essay provides a philosophically rich insight into the relationship between fantasy, illusion, desire, and reality. While drawing heavily from the works of Sigmund Freud and Lacan, she regards illusions as errors of perception that alter reality, while fantasies function at a deeper level of psyche. Illusions and fantasies provide a safe mode allowing human beings to construct their own identity and desire. Bielik-Robson's essay argues that fantasy should not be viewed as the opposite of reality. In order for human beings to experience reality they require fantasies helping them how to perceive, experience, and interpret reality. Symbols and imaginative constructs, in this regard, help individuals experience realities.

Using Freud's concept of 'psychical reality', Bielik-Robson explains that our experiences may just be fantasies instead of factual events; however, they may at the same time demonstrate an emotional and psychological force that influences our behavior and identity. The psychical reality constitutes fantasies and unconscious desires that may just be constructs of imagination but they are driven by forces of reality. Bielik-Robson considers fantasy as a creative force that serves as a shield protecting an individual from external pressures and helping them establish a sense of self, or in other words, identity. In the context of the play, this fantasy, which is illusive in nature, may provide a cushion to the vulnerable self, but it fails to offer an option to assert and be creative as Bielik-Robson observes. The essay is adapted to acquire a framework through which reality can be seen interacting between external conditions and illusions which are created to hold on to the self, already damaged and under scrutiny in the play.

This qualitative research uses textual analysis to examine how meanings in the text of the play are produced through narrative techniques, characterization, dialogue, symbolism, and structure of the plot (McKee). It has also allowed the researcher to trace the relationship between text and its context. As an interpretive method, textual analysis un-layers the multiplicity of meanings with the help of theoretical framework employed. Since this research is based on a play, textual analysis will focus not only on dialogue and plot of the play but also on how stage directions and mise en scene add to the meaning of the text.

Literature Review

Fool for Love (1983) has been examined through various perspectives, including American west and cultural studies, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, performance, and gender studies to name a few. Majority of the critique focuses on the issues of memory, trauma, identity, and the fluid nature of reality. Yu Ho-Jun (2013) associate Eddie and May's checkered relationship with the collapse of American ideals which upheld familial structures. Researchers such as Lee Eun-joo (2018), have also identified the conflict between reality and illusion. This is exemplified in the person of the Old Man who not only bridges the present with the past through memories but also disrupts temporal and spatial planes on which both the world of the characters and the theatre exists.

The unstable nature of reality and identity is discussed by critics such as Leonard Wilcox (1993) who argues that in the absence of any objective truth, Shepard's characters use memories, chiasmic narratives, and repetition to construct their identities. This feature is characteristic of postmodern emphasis on multiplicity of truths. Amani, Pirnajmuddin, and Marandi (2017) reveal the same postulate by using Marie-Laure Ryan's Possible Worlds theory. This is in tandem with Luigi Pirandello's rejection of the idea of absolute truth which does not allow his characters to make their respective realities compatible.

Christopher Bigsby (2002) examines the play from the perspective of American West and its relationship dynamics. According to him, Shepard's characters are "born injured" with fractured identities that do not allow them to create stable relationships. Unknowingly, Eddie and May are caught in a vicious cycle of their family history much in line with Greek fate from which there is no escape.

Several American playwrights deal with issues of unstable identities and traumatic relationships that are similar to Sam Shepard's plays such as he portrays in *Buried Child*, *True West*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, and *A Lie of the Mind*, Eugene. O'Neill in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Desire Under the Elms*, depicts family dynamics by focusing on guilt and unresolved conflicts while playing with the boundaries of illusion and reality. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is structured around illusions which fail to provide any

anchoring to the characters. Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* and Edward Albee in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, focus on how illusions help keep the emotions balanced allowing the characters to keep their marriages intact. The critique on *Fool for Love* goes beyond making the play a romantic obsession. While dealing with the complex issues of shifting identities and traumatic past, the play creates a unique fusion of illusion and reality, where each phenomenon fails to maintain its presence for long.

Discussion and Analysis

Fool for Love acquires its enigmatic quality from the metatheatrical existence of the Old Man who while present on the stage keeps commenting on the events. As the father of both Eddie and May, he acts both as a link and a symbol of their guilty conscience. Shepard makes it clear in the stage directions that the Old Man “exists only in the minds of May and Eddie, even though they might talk to him directly and acknowledge his physical presence” (20). Nevertheless, it seems that his presence is acknowledged by Eddie alone as they both drink and converse together. On the other hand, he is non-existent for Martin, May’s boyfriend, whose life is above all complications that have made the other three characters to find refuge in their respective illusions. For Stephen J. Bottoms “the presence of the Old Man is an overtly non realistic device, who observes the action from a platform outside the proscenium frame” (182). But at the same time, the influence of his past on the lives of his children is felt in such a way that he becomes a living figure, potent enough to reshape the course of events, like a ghost of the past haunting the present through his eerie presence. According to Christopher Bigsby he can be compared to Pinter’s character in the *Old Times*, “who is simultaneously present and absent.....an expression of the tension between the principal characters, in this case... a man and a woman...who trace their roots to this mysterious man” (24). He is a kind of unifying factor as both Eddie and May are connected to him by blood. Eddie while talking to May expresses his sentiments about the same reality in a rather straight forward manner, “you know we’re connected, May. We’ll always be connected” (31). Moreover, he becomes a constant reminder for them of their illegitimate relationship.

As a useful theatrical device, it is through the presence of the Old Man on the stage, even though he may be only a figment of imagination, that a constant interplay of illusion and reality becomes possible. The Old Man too believes in illusions, a trait he shares with Eddie and May. When he was young, he thought himself capable enough of managing two lives equally comfortably as for him his both loves were “....the same love. Just got split in two, that’s all (48)”. But instead of getting a sense of fulfillment, he collapsed under the pressure of satisfying two relationships simultaneously. Now he believes that the unattainable woman of his dreams Barbara Mandrell, a picture of his imagination, is his wife. He cannot disentangle himself from this illusion as once illusions are taken away, there is nothing for the individual to hold onto as the reality becomes too bitter to be endured. This state of mind can produce drastic and fateful results. In Miller’s *All My Sons*, when reality dawns upon Joe Keller in the end, his illusions about his non involvement in his son’s air crash shatters. Consequently, the reality becomes unbearable for him and he commits suicide. Similarly, in the *Buried Child* when family’s obloquy is revealed before Shelly, an outsider, Dodge unable to face it, succumbs to death. The Old Man, instead, creates an imaginary world of his own, calling it “realism” (27). For him realism is what he believes in. While incapable of distinguishing between reality and illusion, he takes Barbara Mandrell as reality; on the other hand, he fails to believe the constructions of reality presented to him by others. Such people choose a single person to define reality for them whom they consider to be their second self. In case of the Old Man, he wants Eddie to support his illusions and what he has been

nurturing as reality all along. He wants Eddie to narrate the story of their lives according to his own point of view, refusing to believe in May's version of how Eddie's mother committed suicide, saying, "I wanna 'hear the male side a' this thing. You gotta' represent me now! Stand up!" (54). But when to his disappointment Eddie too corroborates what May says, he starts blaming them of not trying to find him in case the incident ever happened while justifying his relationship with May's mother. According to Graeme Chapman "those (who are) unable to identify the ubiquitous presence of illusion make little effort to penetrate beneath appearance to the unpalatable realities illusions camouflage" (1). The Old Man doesn't want to authenticate May's side of the story because if he does, he has to then realize the consequences of his sin, i.e., the incestuous liaison between his two children. In this way the Old Man's presence not only heightens the impact of "realistic illusion" (Bottoms 182) but also provide us an insight into the relationship of Eddie and May.

Postmodernism argues that human beings are caught in a web of illusions. Since everyone holds their own interpretation of reality, no escape from this illusion of knowing reality is possible (Chapman 1). The characters, therefore, try to construct reality through the use of language. In the beginning of the play, we find Eddie adopting a comforting and soothing tone so that he could impress upon May, "I'm not gonna' leave. Don't worry.....I'm staying right here" (21). But in doing so he is creating an illusion for May as we know that he has come to abandon her again. Eddie is a "fantasist" (27) as his father regards him to be, who imagines for himself a better future but given the circumstances and the way he has been following the cyclical pattern of actions like his father, there can be little hope of any change. Importantly, he believes in his illusions whereas May doesn't. That is why when Eddie insists that his plans are "no fantasy", she replies, "It's all a fantasy" (25). May doesn't want to believe in Eddie's illusion of a perfect and pleasant country life in Wyoming where there would be "chickens, a vegetable garden, and horses". This is reminiscent of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* where in the beginning of Act 2, when Linda says, "Nothing'll grow any more", Willy checks her pessimism by replying, "we're gonna get a little place out in the country and I'll raise some vegetables, a couple of chickens." In both Willy and Eddie's case their desire to live a peaceful life in the West does not become a reality rather it remains a myth because even if they try, they cannot escape the shadows of their past. Eddie believes in the myths of the idyllic American West, the cowboy as a hero who saves the day, and the American Dream of country living. That is why he thinks that Martin can't replace him in his magnanimity. He has trouble distinguishing between reality and fiction, lies and truth, though he would not admit this.

On the one hand, we have Eddie's spurious stories which have lost their authenticity due to their repetitive nature, on the other; May too has got herself entangled in a pattern of belief and disbelief, reality and illusion. She will believe in truth, shown to her by Eddie because "It's less confusing" (24), not because it will enable her to see the actual face of reality. Like the presence of the Old Man, the countess's car is both tangible and intangible for her. It represents May's jealousy and the world of Eddie's secret life as she is just a "picture of her mind". According to Shepard "there's an imaginary partner and an imaginary life that is always superseding the real one." In fact, believing in Countess's car is analogous to believing in her erotic love for Eddie who is her half-brother. Her dilemma is that she seeks a fusion of both her illusion and reality. That is why she wants Eddie to leave and remain with her at the same time. For Stephen J. Bottoms "May's dilemma of being simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by her male partner is all too painfully realistic" (196). In order to avoid this

pain, she creates an illusion for herself where she thinks she has gotten rid of the haunting past that is connected with Eddie.

This situation leads to reality's confused status, which makes Bielik-Robson argue in consonance with Lacan that it is traumatic to say the least. Fantasy or illusion based on desires provide a protective screen that makes the world livable. Therefore, to dismiss reality as delusion may also be unfair as it sustains humans in distressful times.

As far as countess's car is concerned, we don't see it as we see the Old Man, so everything outside the motel room becomes surreal. The life outside is distant and mysterious, as if appearing in one's consciousness alone. The motel room is May's space, where her composure is disrupted by the uninvited return of Eddie, who makes her confront the past that she would rather forget. May's act of changing her clothes and expected date with Martin is an attempt on her part to disengage herself from Eddie's influence. But that too is a futile attempt, an illusion as she can't disassociate herself from her past, no matter how bitter it may be. For May, Martin is like an unfulfilled wish, a wish that Eddie may also adopt the gentle and consistent nature that Martin possesses. If Eddie follows the footsteps of his father, May too follows her mother's behaviour. She too reacts violently when Eddie leaves her just as her mother behaves whenever the Old Man deserts her, "She'd pull herself up into a ball and stare at the floor.....Her eyes looked like a funeral". Perhaps her mother was also cultivating illusions like her daughter which were destined to be shattered in the course of their lives.

The family in *Fool for Love* is structured on particular deceptions which are designed to protect the relationships, at the same time probing into the questions regarding the validity of reality. The play presents the surreal and contradictory realm of dreams in which illusions are being formed by different characters. However, the characters are not bound to act as they do, rather their own actions become the source of their unfulfilled desires. Under the veneer of emotional turmoil, the past and its related memories are idealized and altered to suit the needs of the dreamer. May and Eddie have their own version of the past which serves to satisfy their respective desires. In Eddie's case, it is the jealousy towards May's date which prompts him to tell Martin about their incestuous relationship, which according to Martin is "illegal" (48). He, even intimidates Martin in order to make him believe in what he is saying and to exert his superiority on him. Similarly, when the Old Man says that he is "dying to hear" (52) the story, May is obliged to show the real face of truth which is not acceptable to him. Interestingly, even she attempts to evade the truth by telling Eddie that he has "got (her) confused with somebody else". In this context whose side of the story is authentic is open to question.

In the play illusions held long enough, take the form of stories as they dissolve into the subconscious. Stories like interpretations are explanations of why things are as they are. Through monologues or arias, a characteristic feature of Shepard's plays, storytelling is done in the play. According to Matthew Roudane Shepard's characters struggle, unsuccessfully, to find some authentic force and this becomes their preoccupation (3). Presumably that is why they keep clinging to their stories. What they need is summed up by Lee in *True West*, "What I need is somethin' authentic. Something to keep me in touch" (56). Failing to achieve that something, "lover's delusions hopelessly confuse the reality of their situation, since these condition their very behaviour toward each other" (Bottoms 207). In fact, their illusions become their truths.

Shepard has tried to divert our attention to the artificiality of the theatre, where he moves more readily from the real to the dream, from the realistic props and settings to a symbolic representation (Roudane 4). The realistic details such as the noise produced by the slamming

of doors and walls “heighten the intensity felt by the characters” (Bottoms 8). Similarly, the worn-out effect of the objects on the stage can be contrasted with Eddie’s active presence, at once reflecting their depleted sense of reality and their emotional state. The yellow and orange light contribute in enhancing their depressive and confused states of mind just like O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, where the fog envelops the whole scenario, thus blurring the clarity of vision.

In order to evade reality different postures, actions and sounds contribute a great deal in the play, even if they are as minor as Eddie’s playing with the bucking strap or May’s sitting position in the beginning of the play who doesn’t want to see what is happening around. Though the explosion, flames and the sound of the horses at the end of the play are presented realistically, at the same time Shepard states explicitly in the stage directions that the headlights of the Countess’s car “should be two intense beams of piercing white light and not ‘realistic’ headlights” (36). Knowing this, we can challenge the existence of the car and even the explosion which is the result of Countess’s jealous fury. The stage illusions create a ghostly environment which complements the mysterious quality of the play. If the Countess is May’s fantasy rival, the source of Martin’s jealousy is Martin. But Martin does not achieve a symbolic significance as he is physically active on the stage whereas Countess’s existence is not substantiated by her presence.

Conclusion

It is noticeable that the illusions these characters have so long been nurturing do not help them in finding an appropriate solution of their problems. In fact, illusions become weak, defensive compromises and their weakness lies in their attempt to compete with the principle of reality. In the play, whether it is right or wrong to maintain illusions is not as significant as the question of who has the right to determine what is real and what is true for others. Shepard doesn’t seem interested in giving this right to anybody as for him reality is a relative term and can have many faces. In order to prove this, he has blurred the boundaries of illusion and reality by depicting the emotional and psychological landscape of Eddie and May’s mind, symbolized by the presence of the Old Man whose past life is intertwined with their present and which they try to avoid by creating illusions.

Works Cited:

- Albee, E. (1962). *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?: A play*. Atheneum
- Bigsby, C. W. E. (2002). Born injured: The theatre of Sam Shepard. In M. Roudané (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Sam Shepard* (pp. 7–33). Cambridge University Press.
- Bielik-Robson, A. (n.d.). *Fantasy and reality*. International Writing Program, University of Iowa.
- Bottoms, S. J. (1998). The real thing. In *The theatre of Sam Shepard: States of crisis* (pp. xx–xx). Cambridge University Press.
- Chapman, G. (2002). *The play of illusion*. In *Reality or illusion?* <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/gchapman/roi/RO103.HTM>
- Eun-joo, Lee. (이은주). (2018). Time and space in *Fool for Love*. *Studies in English Language & Literature*, 44(2), 167–186.
- McKee, A. (2003). *Textual analysis: A beginner's guide*. SAGE Publications
- Miller, A. (1949). *Death of a salesman*. Yale University Press.
- Omid, A., Pirnamuddin, H., & Marandi, S. M. (2017). Possible worlds in Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* and its cinematic adaptation. *Anafora*, 4(1), 59–72. <https://doi.org/10.29162/ANAFORA.v4i1.4>



- O'Neill, E. (1956). *Long day's journey into night*. Yale University Press
- Pinter, H. (1971). *Old times*. Methuen.
- Pirandello, L. (1974). *On humor* (A. Illiano & D. P. Testa, Trans.). The University of North Carolina Press. (Original work published 1908).
- Roudané, M. (Ed.). (2002). Introduction. In *The Cambridge companion to Sam Shepard* (pp. 1–13). Cambridge University Press.
- Shepard, S. (1981). *True West*. In *Sam Shepard: Seven plays*. Bantam Books.
- Shepard, S. (1984). *Fool for love and other plays* (R. Wetzsteon, Intro.). Bantam Books.
- Wilcox, L. (1993). *Raving and repeating: Essays on the theatre and drama of Sam Shepard*. Bucknell University Press.
- Williams, T. (1945). *The glass menagerie: A play*. New Directions
- Ye, M. (2023). The crisis of male identity: A study on the masculinity of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 6(10), 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.10.2>
- Yu, H.-J. (2013). A study on violence, illusion, and love in *Fool for Love*. *Journal of Modern English Drama*, 26(1), 51–80.