

## Effect of Power in Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*

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**Abstract:** *Power structure and its origin as one of the pivotal features of the human community has a long history in both sociology and literature. In this paper, the effect of power is analyzed sociologically in Sam Shepard's play, The God of Hell, which is considered a modern black comedy. Shepard hopes to depict Republican Fascism and its power before the 2004 US presidential election in the play. The play is about a childless couple living in a dairy farm in Wisconsin, far from the problems of urban life. Their peaceful life is destroyed by two uninvited guests representing government and its penetration to the inner layers of one's life. The play is analyzed in the conceptual framework of the French philosopher, Michel Foucault's power interpretation to rub out the power mechanism and strategies leading people into slavery. He emphasizes severely on freedom and resistance as two supplementary factors for power without which power is meaningless.*

**Key Words:** *Power, Republican, Michel Foucault, Sam Shepard, Freedom, Resistance*

### Introduction

One of the pivotal concepts of politics and social science is power as the ability to control and influence the others' behaviors. The authorities uses power to subjugate the mass in a way to fulfill their desires. In other words, power is something utilized by the authorities to achieve the determined outcomes or to control and direct others' behavior to achieve them. Sociologists and philosophers have tried to differentiate the various forms of power and present its comprehensive definition. On the whole, much of the recent sociological discussion regarding power question the enabling nature of power i.e. is power a constraining factor of man's behavior or an enabling one in creating man's new behavior. Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, in his book "The History of Sexuality" says that "power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession. It is the name we give to a complex strategic situation in a particular society."(93) That is, power is of both constraining and enabling nature.

Sam Shepard, the American playwright, actor, and director, is very interested in writing about the American families and he takes the responsibility of depicting their life in his works. Therefore, in most of his works, the American families are investigated enthusiastically. In *The God of Hell*, he depicts an American family of two members, a man and his wife, Frank and Emma, living peacefully in a dairy farm, far from the urbanism. Shepard's characterization skill

is an outstanding feature in this play. He extends his story forward based on the conversations of the characters being introduced throughout the play one by one.

*The God of Hell* shows how one's mundane safety of domestic life is ruined by an external element that is always threatening and out of control. Frank and Emma soon find out that they are not so safe with each other. The play was written in hopes of influencing and satirizing the 2004 US presidential election. It also criticizes the war and terror introduced to the world after the September, 11<sup>th</sup> raids by US. A couple living a traditional life peacefully in a dairy farm, lose their peace when the government symbol, Welch, intrudes into their home. Shepard actually shows the role and function of power in revising one's culture and life style. On the whole, *The God of the Hell* is not his best play but it can be considered as a funny, frightening, ridiculous, and relevant one which uses theatrical gestures in a way that sometimes a caricature is created than a character.

### Review of Literature

Paul Michel Foucault was born in October, the 15<sup>th</sup>, in 1926 to an affluent French family. He dropped Paul from his name partly because of his objection to his father who impelled him to follow his own career as a surgeon. A key word influential in all Foucault's works is 'power'. His definition of power differs fundamentally from its traditional and classic one. In its traditional notion, power means a dominating force to monopolize, control or rule, but his definition of power introduces a complex strategic situation in a given society social setting that is a network of relations is made by correct functions of a strategy, tactic, or technique. He believes that power cannot be solely in one's hands and it doesn't belong to a group or a class of the society. He also says that power is not practiced just in a top-down traditional direction, as a matter of fact, it is multidirectional based on a network of relations introduced not just by force, but by a lecture, book, thought, or an article that produces power.

Foucault believes that power produces knowledge and what we know as the right or wrong is formed exactly in the political field. He thinks that power needs resistance to exist. Resistance is a factor blowing meaning into the power corpse. In his "Power/Knowledge" he says:

“there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies” (154).

He also says that every social relation is a power relation, but every power relation does not necessarily lead to domination. Power in the modern society is a system of relations based on

knowledge which encompasses the individual. That is when a person is known under a system of knowledge like medicine, psychology, or pedagogy, he or she gets visible and can live under the power umbrella. Foucault also believes that power can affect the people's bodies thus biopower or biopolitics can be created as two elements functioning on the body, disciplining it, and growing it up according to their desired discipline.

### Methodology

Patently this research has been done based on a qualitative approach since numerical analysis has no place in gathering or interpreting the results. The traces of Michel Foucault's interpretation of power is followed in Sam Shepherd's *The God of Hell* inductively, if any, to build the jigsaw puzzle of the notion in question. To perform the research analytically, based on an inductive approach, the samples and symptoms of power orientation desired by Foucault's interpretation of power were collected and then the conclusion was made.

### Findings

A couple, Emma and Frank, are living peacefully and happily on dairy farm in Wisconsin. They are completely engaged in their own business while they are entirely unaware of their fragile situation. Emma has the right quality of plainness and simplicity for a woman living her entire life on a rural dairy farm far from urbanism. Her husband, Frank, also is very sensitive in taking care of his heifers. Their peaceful world ruins by presence of Frank's old friend, Haynes, fleeing from somewhere since he was polluted by plutonium and a man named Welch introducing himself as a salesman selling American flag streamers, a flag-patterned tablecloth, small Statue of Liberty ornaments and a portable neon call-to-patriotism. As it seems he is the government agent symbolizing the authorities penetrating in the inner layers of people's lives. The external threat presented by Welch and Haynes shows the fragility of the peaceful life of the people. Haynes who seems to be researcher stay in the basement of Franks' house. He is on the run from his job in a place called Rocky Buttes. Welch has come after him to get him back painfully by torturing him. At the end of the play, Welch takes both Frank and Haynes to Rocky Buttes and puts Emma alone on the farm.

*The God of Hell* was opened in New York in October 2004 just before US Presidential election. Because of its political theme against the Republicans, it was rejected by many critics. It is considered a dark humor, shedding light on the mechanisms and strategies of a power that subjugates individuals into slavery by the most terrible means of torture. The play also criticizes the United States transformation from a rural into a suburban and urban society by which he somehow reinforces Marxism and its ideology. *The God of Hell* is referred as a satire on Republican fascism since one of its central themes is condemning the Iraq War and its effects on Americans' culture and attitude toward life. Shepard makes *The God of Hell* a genre of the satirical play when he mocks both the advertisement-driven overt patriotism and paranoia

dominating the American mind since 9/11, and the entirely unrealistic image of an innocent and uncorrupted rural America.

*The God of Hell* shows how power is exercised through violent mechanisms and strategies so as to impel its subjects to do the predetermined activities and to be in predetermined places to support its status quo. Therefore, power cannot stand aside and give freedom to its subject to do whatever they like or to be wherever they want. Frank and Emma live in isolation from the rest of the world as if living on a faraway island in the middle of ocean forgotten by time and space. Thus Welch as the symbol of power is sent to accompany Haynes in creating new atmosphere corresponding to the power's desires. The means they carry to replace Frank's heifers and Emma's plants are the patriotic things and paraphernalia. Here a conflict between power and freedom occurs, if it is put in Foucault's terms. The subjects cannot take advantage of their freedom because of power intention. Based on Foucault "power is exercised only over free subjects and only insofar as they are free" (1982, 221). It also can be concluded that various forms of resistance gives force to the power. Emma is the one who resists since from the start of the play, she insists on being informed regarding Haynes' identity, job, origin, and reasons for fleeing so as not to be fooled at the end of the play. When Welch presents himself in Emma's house as a salesman and enters her house against her will, she resists and order him to leave the house. She defends her territory and the Wisconsin's open-door policy as he mocks her custom when he says ironically: a "charming custom" (28) Emma answers: "It's not a custom, it's a trust" (28). Emma does not know that her polite hospitality opens the doors of her peaceful life to the destructive power that cannot bear any resistance. Welch has come to destroy the resisters and will not leave the battle field broken. Foucault believes that "the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence" (1982, 222). And *The God of Hell* is not an exception. Emma proves her freedom by overwatering the flowers and burning the bacon but she confesses that her actions are changed into habits as though they can't reflect her will. She says: "cause behavior like this . . . You get into these habits. These trains of thought. If I - if I didn't water like this, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. There would be a horrible gap. I might fall in" (23). However she suspects Welch's menacing power since it destroyed her life and transformed her husband radically. Therefore she does not swim in the flow created by Welch. She feels the danger but a little bit late. She shows her resistance and freedom when she says we "are closing our doors to the outside world" (36). Her world is now destroyed and he can't do anything to rescue it. At the final scene, Emma rings the bell in distress to alarm and call out her husband not to be captured mentally by power. In other words, Emma defeated power by her resistance while her husband is trapped in Welch's scheme and is physically and mentally transformed based on the power's desires. His new suit and tie makes him different with his normal appearance in harmony with his environment. The following utterances shows Emma's resistance to Frank's naivetés.

FRANK: He's [Welch] from the government!

EMMA: What government?

FRANK: Our government.

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

The other character of the play is Haynes, the terrified victim of power. He is running away from power since it tortures him and has dominated his body and mind. He reacts terrified whenever the name Rocky Buttes is mentioned since it is the site of a "minor nuclear leakage" that has hired Haynes to mend it. It is clear that power is running secret nuclear activities that are the reason of Haynes phobia as he fearfully speaks about a "tasteless, odorless, and invisible" (20) fatal substance. Meanwhile Welch also shows himself as the agent of power or government especially when he says:

We can do whatever we want, bobby-boy. That should be clear by now. We're in the driver's seat. Haven't you noticed? There's no more of that nonsense of checks and balances. All that red tape. All that hanging around in limbo, waiting for decisions from committees and tired-out lobbies. We're in absolute command now. We don't have to answer to a soul, least of all a couple of Wisconsin dairy farmers. (31)

Later on when he pulls Haynes legs verbally to find some words in rhyme with his name such as pains, shames, and blames, he shows some other of notions that power can create like slavery, torture, threat, prison, and injustice.

Well, well, well—Mr. 'Haynes,' is that it? Mr. Haynes? Very inventive. Deceptively simple.

Almost poetic. 'Haynes'—rhymes with 'pains,' or is it 'shames'? Possibly. Could even be

'blames.' The choices are endless. Well, not exactly endless. Everything has its limits, I suppose. Everything runs into a brick wall sooner or later. Even the most heroic ideas. .

sooner or later it would come down to just a finite number of possibilities, wouldn't it, Haynes?

Brains, maims, flames, chains. Which is it? What's it going to be? (29-30)

In act three, Welch verbal mocking changes into threat and later on, he tortures Haynes with electric cord being attached to his penis. This can convey the harsh side of power to impel others to obey its orders. Welch also points to the ignorance with which people accept the status quo and fall captive to serve a power that denies their right to freedom and which ultimately destroys them when he criticized the American Dream with: "to get a free ride on the back of

Democracy” (42). Then he continues: “what have you done to deserve such rampant freedom? Such total lack of responsibility . . . Sooner or later the price has to be paid” (42) Welch is the power representative and Shepard intentionally puts such utterances in his part to reveal the power’s devil intentions as clearly as possible. Welch has accomplished his task partly successful in transforming Frank to a brainwashed slave but he couldn’t gain victory over Emma’s resistance in the final scene.

“EMMA: You’re not torturing him, are you? What’re you doing?

WELCH: Torturing? Torturing! We’re not in a Third World nation here, Emma. This isn’t some dark corner of the Congo.

EMMA: . . . This is absolute torture! I don’t care what country we’re in” (38-39).

## Conclusion

In *The God of Hell*, Sam Shepard criticizes any regime that can be considered as totalitarian and any activity that can be regarded as torture. For this purpose he questions the policies being held by Republicans toward the Americans and outside world in its confrontation with terrorism, in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Shepard words, power utilizes all its means to subjugate the subjects to fulfill its desires, legally or illegally. Influenced by Michel Foucault’s mentality, he finds out that freedom and resistance as two opposing factors of power in the society, are two complementary elements for power. In other words, power cannot survive without freedom and resistance. Shepard is in the same path with Foucault in theorizing power in a systematic phenomenon in which power does not belongs to the governors and the authorities, but to all individuals who have enough knowledge to use the new technologies. Here it can be concluded that power is not a unidirectional flow or movement but an omnidirectional or multidirectional one which can be the source of changes not for the benefit of a party or an individual, but for all members of society who have enough knowledge to follow the events of the society.

## Suggestions and Recommendations

Both power and resistance have positive meanings as long as you are not involved in their quarrel. As an outsider, you can easily judge that power gives a high dignity to its owner and it is a valuable commodity in one’s hand. On the other hand, resistance can have the same value in your judgment depending on your background history in life. But when you are located at one side of this relation, you only value your own side and condemn the other. Therefore it is recommended to bear in mind that both power and resistance can be complementary notions having positive values if they are interpreted neutrally.

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