

THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
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Jay Parini

Editor in Chief

Volume
4

ANNE SEXTON ~ WRITING AS A WOMAN
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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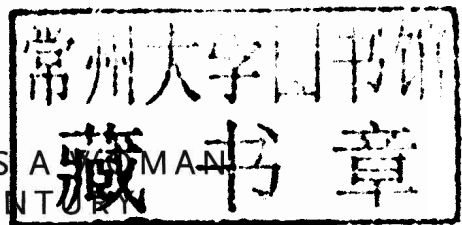
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THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
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ANNE SEXTON

by Ellen McGrath Smith



Anne Sexton is one of the most charged and memorable personalities in American literature. Her image as a taboo-breaking, glamorous New England housewife-turned-poet has made her a cultural icon for two generations in the United States and beyond. Her image has led many conservative critics to dismiss much of her work as extreme and sensationalistic while overlooking Sexton's incomparable flashes of imagery and insight. At the other extreme, her image has drawn many readers who admittedly read little poetry before Sexton's, expanding the audience for American poetry. In between these two extremes fall readers



Anne Sexton.
(Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

who, for many reasons, see Anne Sexton as a key player in the emergence at mid-century of a more personal and direct type of poetry, often referred to as confessional poetry, a term coined in 1959 by the critic M. L. Rosenthal in his review of Robert Lowell's groundbreaking collection of personal poetry, *Life Studies* (1959).

As a student of Lowell's, a major figure in American poetry from mid-century through the 1970s, Sexton initially followed his lead in blending personal subject matter and formal verse patterning. In this, she also followed the lead of another teacher and friend, W. D. Snodgrass, whose 1959 collection, *Heart's Needle*, dealt poignantly with the loss of a child through divorce. But although Sexton was influenced by these male poets' attention to family dynamics, intimate relationships, and individual emotional complexity, she significantly contributed in her own right to the confessional arena, writing from the perspective of an upper-middle-class woman raised to seek fulfillment solely through marriage, family, and home. The frustrations and conflicts experienced in this role are woven through her poetry; in this sense, she had her finger on the pulse of an entire generation of women who would demand more social,

cultural, and civil equality during the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Her work pushed against unwritten boundaries of subject matter, voice, and attitude, a widening of the field also implemented by other women writers of the second wave, including Adrienne Rich, Carolyn Kizer, Kathleen Fraser, Grace Paley, Erica Jong, Marge Piercy, Judy Grahn, Nikki Giovanni, Maxine Kumin, and others.

Anne Gray Harvey was born on 9 November 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts, the youngest of three daughters in an affluent family with a history of prosperity and power in New Eng-

land. Sexton's father, Ralph Churchill Harvey, ran a successful wool business but suffered from alcoholism and later lost most of his interest in the business. Sexton's mother, Mary Gray Staples Harvey, was a well-educated socialite whom Sexton would recall as distant and implacable. Both parents—in their real, distorted, and idealized forms—figure prominently in Sexton's poetry.

Educated in public and private New England schools, Sexton was never an academic standout, although she did write some poetry and was involved in theater during her school years. Following high school and a brief time at a finishing school, Sexton eloped at age nineteen with Alfred Muller Sexton II. This marriage lasted until 1973; they had two daughters together. Early in the marriage Sexton played the role of housewife, moving near her husband's college campus and, when he left college, relocating with him for duty in the naval reserves. With the birth of their first child, Linda, in 1953, the Sextons returned to the Boston suburbs, where both their families lived, and where Alfred Sexton, discharged from the navy, took a job in sales with his father-in-law's wool business.

After the birth of her first child, Sexton entered what would be a lifelong battle with depression. With her

husband traveling frequently as a salesman, Sexton's psychiatric problems intensified when their second child, Joy, was born in 1955. In 1956 Sexton was admitted for the first time to a psychiatric hospital, and during the next three years she was largely unable to care for her children, who stayed for long stretches of time with relatives. At the same time, Sexton began treatment with Dr. Martin Orne, a Boston psychiatrist who encouraged her writing. Sexton continued to write and eventually, in 1957, she joined an adult education poetry workshop led by Tufts University professor John Holmes.

"THE BUSINESS OF WORDS":
SEXTON'S EMERGENCE

Sexton's writing was quickly characterized by technical development, productivity, and success. Within four years of her venturing out to attend Holmes's workshop, her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), was published to numerous positive reviews. In a little over a decade's time, she received the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for her third full-length collection, *Live or Die* (1966). Throughout these years she continued to suffer from mental illness, which was exacerbated by her growing addiction to prescription medications and alcohol. Still, she received numerous awards, providing substantial income for her family, which was together under one roof by 1960. And although she was acutely agoraphobic, she traveled extensively as the demand and fees for readings of her work increased.

While the "confessional" label is the one most frequently given to Sexton and her work, it fails to account for the entire body and range of Sexton's poetry. In addition to the poems directly exploring interpersonal relationships, one can also identify poems of technical strength that are conscious of their part in a literary tradition; poems that mine the symbolic potential of the unconscious in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe and the French symbolist poets; and poems that undertake, from a woman's perspective, a more public critique of sociocultural practices and ideals. At times, these tendencies are present together within single volumes, even single poems, with one of the tendencies predominating. That is the case with *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), a book that deals primarily with loved ones and the death in 1959 of both of Sexton's parents. Recognizing these multiple tendencies is a way of seeing the work whole, without being overwhelmed by the poet's image as a confessional poet.

Sexton's fresh confessional voice sounded clearly in her first book of poems, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*,

which centered on the author's experiences as a psychiatric patient. Writing about such experiences had initially, in the mid-1950s, been encouraged by Sexton's psychiatrist as a therapeutic and confidence-building measure, but by the time the book was published, Sexton had become deeply involved in the craft and business of poetry, particularly through a poetry workshop that evolved out of Holmes's adult education class. Also in this workshop was Sexton's neighbor, Maxine Kumin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Up Country* (1972), and the two women established an ongoing working relationship, critiquing one another's poems daily while their children played in the background. Kumin has frequently attested to Sexton's relentless, arduous process of revision. *To Bedlam*, then, is a deeply private book, but tempered by Sexton's painstaking technical work—most of the book consists of poems written in patterned rhyme and meter.

To Bedlam opens with a poem addressed to Sexton's psychiatrist. *You, Doctor Martin*, written in the seven-line stanzas that are common in Sexton's work, sets the scene of "Bedlam," the psychiatric hospital, and celebrates the work of the psychiatrist, "an oracular eye in our nest," who

twist[s] in the pull
of the foxy children who fall
like floods of life in frost.

What is striking about this and other poems in *To Bedlam* is the way in which Sexton credibly renders the patient's perspective while maintaining awareness of the expectations and assumptions of the "sane" world beyond the hospital, ironically referred to as "this summer hotel." This perspectival tension produces the paradox of the patient as a child in an adult's body—a paradox that haunts Sexton's confessional and symbolist poems as she traces the ego's search for parental love and, later, for divine love and mercy. For example, "Ringing the Bells," one of the most famous poems from *To Bedlam*, follows the rhythm of a child's verse while describing a music therapy workshop in the mental hospital. The playful rhythm, reminiscent of the nursery rhyme "The House That Jack Built," works in chilling counterpoint to the helplessness of the hospitalized, broken-down adults. Later in the book, the ambitious seven-part poem "The Double Image" looks at Sexton's relationship with her mother and her youngest daughter, following a seasonal structure and closing on the image of two portraits, one of Sexton and one of her deceased mother, eternally facing each other from opposite walls in the Harvey family home.

Sexton's more public, popular voice briefly materializes in *To Bedlam*. "Her Kind" became Sexton's signature

poem at readings. It also was the name of the chamber rock group, Anne Sexton and Her Kind, that she formed in the late 1960s to provide musical accompaniment to her poetry. "Her Kind" invokes the idea of the woman poet as otherworldly, outside of the pale of social conventions. And in the poem "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," Sexton asserts her reasons for writing about personal matters, even though it makes others uncomfortable:

Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind.

The confessional treatment of family dynamics, begun at the end of *To Bedlam* in poems like "The Double Image" and "The Division of Parts," is given full play in Sexton's second book, *All My Pretty Ones* (1962). Its title an allusion to a speech by MacDuff in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* upon learning that his wife and children have been murdered, this volume mainly examines familial relationships but also extends to relationships with other writers: W. D. Snodgrass in "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph"; the Ohio poet James Wright in "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound"; and "Love Song for K. Owyne." In this collection, Sexton frequently breaks into free verse, which was becoming much more common among American poets. At the same time, she began to delve into the complex associative image-making that give even her most autobiographical poems a more transcendent, mystical, and at times, surreal, aura. In this way, even as she lessened her dependence on patterned form, she employed image as a way of objectifying the private and forming a connection with readers.

"THE EXCITABLE GIFT": THE MIDDLE YEARS

In 1967, Sexton received the Pulitzer Prize for her most directly autobiographical collection to date, *Live or Die* (1966). In a note at the beginning of the book, whose poems are arranged chronologically by date of composition, Sexton acknowledges that the poems "read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy." Poems such as "Wanting to Die" and "Sylvia's Death"—this latter written in response to the 1963 suicide of the American poet Sylvia Plath, with whom Sexton was acquainted while studying with Lowell at Boston University—are personal reflections on mental illness and despair as well as an unflinching acknowledgment of these conditions among an alarming number of American poets. The poem "Flee

on Your Donkey," written in informal free verse with Sexton's characteristic use of unpatterned end and internal rhyme, appears early in the collection where, returning to the psychiatric hospital, the scene of Sexton's first book, the poem's speaker is anxious to get past it:

I have come back
but disorder is not what it was.
I have lost the trick of it!

Throughout, the author looks squarely at her struggle with suicidal impulses, finding uplift in the book's closing poem, "Live," written on the occasion of the birth of puppies in the Sexton household. "Today life opened inside me like an egg," the third stanza opens; the poem rises to a crescendo and a sense of resolve in the closing lines:

So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,
repeating The Black Mass and all of it.
I say *Live, Live* because of the sun,
the dream, the excitable gift.

Although it is predominantly a free-verse journal of inner turmoil, *Live or Die* also contains poems based on motherhood ("Little Girl," "My String Bean," "My Lovely Woman," and "A Little Uncomplicated Hymn").

In 1969 Sexton's *Love Poems* was published. This collection contains many of the Sexton poems that pushed boundaries and spoke frankly about sexuality, the body, and marital infidelity. Poems like "In Celebration of My Uterus" and "Moon Song, Woman Song" were also in step with the liberation of expression associated with the second wave of the women's movement. In *Love Poems*, the dynamics of real and imagined intimate relationships are tied to sociocultural issues of marriage and sexual politics, issues that feminism and the sexual revolution of the late 1960s had begun to scrutinize. Also in 1969, Sexton's play, *Mercy Street*, opened off-Broadway at the American Place Theater. Set in an Episcopal church, the play centers on the protagonist Daisy's efforts to use both psychology and theology as tools for healing the wounds of the past.

Sexton's growing interest in sociocultural critique was given full play in her 1971 book, *Transformations*, which revises in irreverent and updated terms seventeen fairy tales published in the nineteenth century by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. One of the collection's most anthologized pieces, "Cinderella," highlights the absurdity of the tale's details through graphic cause-and-effect statements and deadpan understatement, as with the elder stepsister's gruesome attempt to make her foot fit the gold slipper by slicing off her big toe:

The prince rode away with her until the white dove
told him to look at the blood pouring forth.
That is the way with amputations.

"Cinderella" ironizes the notion of marriage as a happy ending, as do other poems in *Transformations*, which is steeped in dark humor as certain middle-class norms are revealed, often through the piling up of unnerving similes, to be a veneer over insidious drives and desires, some rooted in Freudian psychology, others in American puritanical materialism.

"STILL ROWING": PERSONAL DECLINE AND FINAL WORKS

The 1970s brought a number of honors for Sexton, including a full-time appointment to teach creative writing at Boston University. But it was a short decade for the poet, whose continued depression, prescription drug addiction, and alcohol abuse took their toll; she committed suicide at home, alone, on 4 October 1974, a year after divorcing her husband and one month before her forty-sixth birthday. Her older child was in college at the time, her younger at a boarding school in Maine. Much of Sexton's posthumously published work bears traces of her emotional unraveling: *45 Mercy Street* (1976) includes "The Divorce Papers," a rough documentary of her brief life as a single woman, and *Words for Dr. Y* (1978) is part of a private file of poems Sexton viewed as strictly therapeutic and not to be published until after her death. Nonetheless, in addition to *Transformations*, Sexton published in her few remaining years two volumes of poetry—*The Book of Folly* (1972) and *The Death Notebooks* (1974)—and a third book, *The Awful Rowing toward God*, which, published in 1975, was for the most part finalized before her death.

In these works from the 1970s, Sexton ambitiously took on new subject matter, styles, and scope. *The Book of Folly* contains the multi-section poem "The Death of the Fathers," which marks Sexton's personal efforts to achieve closure with the past at the same time that it registers feminist anger and sadness over patriarchal oppression. The hold of patriarchal traditions is felt not only on the personal and social levels for Sexton in this volume; it also permeates her own investigations into Christianity in "The Jesus Papers," a sequence of nine poems closing *The Book of Folly*. Highly unorthodox, these poems portray Jesus in Freudian terms and highlight the sacrificial role of women, exemplified by Mary, to whom Jesus says, in "Jesus Suckles," "I am a truck. I run everything. / I own you." Born and raised Protestant (Congregational), Sexton did not practice as an adult, but in her last days

she was receiving religious instruction from an Episcopal seminarian. Like many women at this time, Sexton sought creative ways to separate the spiritual sustenance from the sexism in organized religion.

The Death Notebooks was originally intended by Sexton to be published after her death but appeared in February 1974. Continuing the probing of theology begun in *The Book of Folly*, *The Death Notebooks* consists of poems that approximate prayer or chant, as the speaker builds through language a universe in which death and God are understood and accepted. It is, of course, a highly subjective—and at times, surrealistic—universe, full of anachronism, iconoclasm, doubt, and affirmation. For example, in "O Ye Tongues," Sexton finds soulmates in the Hebrew Psalmist and the eighteenth-century British poet Christopher Smart. In eight long-lined psalms, the speaker—at times playfully, at times in deadly earnest—moves through prayer, praise, rejoicing, lament, prophesy, and transcendence. Much in "O Ye Tongues" aligns Sexton with Walt Whitman and with Allen Ginsberg, the Beat poet who was Sexton's contemporary. That particular Beat blend of the sacred and the profane is seen in "The Furies," a sequence of fifteen poems in *The Death Notebooks* that vary in form and theme, from the sexual explicitness of "The Fury of Cocks" to the ontological reflectiveness of "The Fury of God's Good-bye."

This more public, incantatory voice is equally present in *The Awful Rowing toward God*, completed by Sexton before her death and published in 1975. "The Sermon of the Twelve Acknowledgments" is a prophetic guide to the months of the year, weaving idiosyncratic snippets of folk wisdom on a makeshift loom of Christian theology. The outcome of the "rowing" that frames the collection is a foregone conclusion; in the book's first poem, the speaker announces that "I know that that island [of God] will not be perfect" and that "this story ends with me still rowing." The rowing is also a metaphor for an isolated yearning for meaning that preoccupied Sexton's, especially during her last years.

[See also *Confessional Poetry*; Lowell, Robert; and Plath, Sylvia.]

SELECTED WORKS

To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960)
All My Pretty Ones (1962)
Eggs of Things (1963)
More Eggs of Things (1964)
Live or Die (1966)
Love Poems (1969)

Joey and the Birthday Present (1971)
Transformations (1971)
The Book of Folly (1972)
The Death Notebooks (1974)
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The Wizard's Tears (1975)
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Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters (1977)
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The Complete Poems (1981)
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SAM SHEPARD

by Philip Parry



Sam Shepard is the best known, and has proved the most enduring, of those American dramatists who began their careers in the radical and alternative theater movements of the 1960s. Although his plays have become thoroughly mainstream, something of the aura of those early years still clings to his work.

Between 1964 and the mid-1970s, Shepard composed more than thirty short plays and sketches that take their chosen form to its practical limits. *The Tooth of Crime* (1972) brought this phase to an end; *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), a very different kind of play, initiated a replacement phase. Curiously, both plays were given their world premieres in London, where Shepard lived for part of each year between 1971 and 1974. Despite a keen British following, however, he remains a distinctly American writer.

LIFE AND ART

Shepard was born Samuel Shepard Rogers in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, on 5 November 1943. A service child, he lived on army bases until he was eight, when his family moved

to Duarte, California. He dropped out of formal education early, joined a group of repertory players in 1962, and the following year made his way to New York City at a time when off-off-Broadway theater was emerging. Shepard spent most of the next thirteen years serving his dramatic apprenticeship in radical and alternative theaters in New York City and San Francisco. This period of his life, when he could be certain of getting even his most experimental and least developed works performed by one makeshift company or another, was a playwright's heaven. These short plays contributed themes, images, and elements of stagecraft to the longer, less willfully experimental and more intricately plotted plays that were to develop out of them in the 1970s and 1980s.

Although there are powerful continuities between the work of Shepard's maturity and of his earlier apprenticeship, only one late play can be described as a throwback. *States of Shock* (1991), a "vaudeville nightmare" designed, as the pun in its title suggests, to show the disunity of the United States, both reads and—with its mad colonel,



Sam Shepard on a movie set, 1991. (© Yves Forestier/Corbis Sygma)

crippled veteran, shaky waitress, and masturbating white-suited white man—performs like a deliberate revival of the recklessly proliferating absurdism of his early work. This exception apart, Shepard has since 1977 emerged as a serious and weighty playwright who, in the tradition of Eugene O'Neill, chronicles dark family misfortunes. In *Buried Child* (1978), for example, beyond the door that leads “from the porch to the outside” are “the shapes of dark elm trees” that summon up *Desire under the Elms*, O'Neill's tragic tale of sexual passion and taboo that, like Shepard's play, is set on an isolated farmstead.

This second phase of Shepard's writing—unless *Sympatico* (first produced in 1994), a piece somewhat in the manner of David Mamet, proves an exception—has shown no sign of yielding to a third. Perhaps Shepard's growing involvement with filmmaking signals a shift in his interests and the end of his career as a productive dramatist. However, since he is just reaching his sixtieth birthday, there is time for further development. Nonetheless, it is likely that he will be principally remembered for four or five major plays of his second phase.

THE SHORT PLAYS

Viewed with hindsight—a privileged vision in Shepard's past-fixated world—his early playlets are his later plays in embryo. In each of the three scenes that compose *The Rock Garden* (1964), there is the imagistic germ of a much larger play. A man sits at the head of a table but does not speak to, or acknowledge the presence of, a teenage boy and girl who drink milk and exchange glances. The only action is the lifting up and setting down of their tumblers. Then, whether by accident or design (the text does not tell us which), the girl drops her glass, the milk spills, and there is blackout. Here, in silent symbolism, is an entire play. In the next scene the mother of the teenage boy lies in bed and talks to him. He is in his underwear. Step-by-step she compares him physically with his father: they share legs, feet, a torso. (In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Ella tells her son that his penis and his grandfather's are “almost identical in fact.”) The boy responds by covering each bodily part as soon as it is mentioned; by the end of the scene he is fully dressed and is replaced by the man from scene 1, who now wears underwear. Through this pattern of dressing and undressing, father and son are mapped each upon the other (as are Wesley and his father in *Curse of the Starving Class*, where Wesley strips, washes, and puts on his father's soiled clothing). In the final scene man and boy, both in their underwear, do not look at one another but speak of their principal

interests. As the man tells of his gardening and domestic chores, the boy repeatedly falls off his chair. “It's always wet about the sprinkler heads,” the man complains. (Martin's reply, when Eddie asks him in *Fool for Love* [first produced in 1983] what lawn maintenance involves, is “weeding around the sprinkler heads. Stuff like that.” The repressed sexuality of the early play is reconstituted as sexual antagonism in the later.) But when, in his turn, the boy describes with extraordinary explicitness how he arouses women—“Actually girls really like fingers almost as well as a penis”—it is the man who falls over just as “the lights black out.” The milk spilt in the first scene and the semen spilt in the third (“When I come it's like a river”) are the play's symbolic offerings. Speaking without conversing, the grip of the past, family secrets, spilt seed and what grows from it: these are Shepard's ingredients, taken down from the shelf but not yet put together.

Cowboys #2 (1967) is another example of a recipe waiting to go in the oven. In it young actors in a piece of alternative theater (Gary Hanes and Philip Austin in the original production) impersonate Stu and Chet, young actors in a piece of alternative theater. Wielding “imaginary rifles” against “imaginary indians,” they merely pretend to be cowboys. But their game is framed by intruders (members of the audience or rival players), who begin to replicate their speeches monotonously, and by the noises of modern, urban life. Playing at being cowboys, Stu and Chet are—with only a few adjustments here and there—Austin and Lee, the principal characters in *True West* (1980). Both pairs of men are self-conscious in their role-playing, and the connection between them is emphasized by a perhaps accidental, but still meaningful, coincidence: Philip Austin was an actor in the first play; Austin is a character in the second.

Role-playing is a common feature of Shepard's plays throughout both phases. One example is both more explicit and more mysterious than most. In *A Lie of the Mind* (first produced in 1985), Beth is a professional actress who reads her scripts to her pathologically jealous husband. His inability to recognize that acting is the job that actors do—“A job is where you don't have fun. You don't dick around tryin' to pretend you're somebody else” is his view—leads him to doubt her fidelity when she reads out love scenes in front of him and provokes him to a violent attack. Brain damaged from his blows, Beth near the end of the play dresses up “in a bizarre combination of clothing” in order to woo his brother. In short, by becoming once again an actress, she confirms the accuracy of his primitive suspicion: “That's why she

wanted to become an actress in the first place. So she could get away from me.” Perhaps the oddest feature of *A Lie of the Mind*, and further evidence of continuity between Shepard’s two phases, is the way in which the play ends. After all the traumas that its characters have suffered, none of which has been explicitly cleared up, the play emblemizes the discovery of inner peace and restoration of harmony through the way in which Beth’s parents fold up the American flag with military precision: “Now if everything works out right we should have all the stars on the outside and all the stripes tucked in.” Short plays can perhaps afford to substitute images for arguments, but *A Lie of the Mind* is a very long play indeed, whose ending—like the flag—is too neat. Perhaps an effective dramatic resolution requires real neatness (whatever that might be) rather than a neat symbol; or perhaps neatness cannot adequately represent resolution, so that both the ending of the play and the flag might have been better if both had been allowed to flap around a bit more.

“Untethered” speech is the feature of Shepard’s early plays that survives most memorably and most strangely into his later ones. (Speech-act theorists say that an utterance is “tethered at both ends” when it is directed by someone to someone as part of a fully contextualized speech-act exchange.) “In my experience [in writing plays],” Shepard has said, “the character . . . appears out of nowhere . . . and speaks. He doesn’t speak to me because I’m not in the play. I’m watching it. He speaks to something or someone else, or even to himself, or even to no one” (Marranca, 1981, p. 214). Thus, Kent, the male lead in *La Turista* (1967), retreats from an active engagement with reality into “a world unrelated to anything on stage,” and speaks from this world “even when he talks to the other actors.” Since, in a play considered as an imaginative imitation of an external reality, characters speak to other characters, this stage direction is oddly phrased, as though Kent (like Stu and Chet) is an actor addressing other actors. Shepard thus anticipates the strange, occluded monologues with which characters throughout *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child* punctuate—while seeming to ignore—the plays in which they appear.

The Tooth of Crime is the last and longest of the first-phase plays. Once again its characters are performers: Hoss, an aging rock star, and Crow, the flashy young upstart destined to replace him. When they fight to the death, their chosen weapons are impersonation and improvisation, tools of the experimental actor’s trade. Essentially, he will survive who shows the greatest mastery

of style. “Choose an argot,” Crow insists, and speak in it: “Singles or LPs, 45, 78, 33 1/3.” However, as this list of dated options suggests, *The Tooth of Crime* is itself severely dated. In a 1996 interview that prefaces a revised text of *Buried Child*, Shepard indicated both his affection for this play and a degree of dissatisfaction with it: “There’s a strength to the play, [but] it doesn’t go where I hoped it would go.” The plays of his second phase are ones that go where he wants them to go.

THE LATER PLAYS

Three plays from Shepard’s second phase contain moments so obviously connected that they map out for us the emotional territory that he has chosen to explore. In *Simpatico*, Simms tells Cecilia, an unwitting agent of blackmailers, that she is the innocent product of a past for which she is not responsible: “Not your fault. It’s genetics. All in the genes. We’ve got nothing to do with it. It was all decided generations ago. Faceless ancestors.” These words echo what Eddie tells May, his half sister and onetime lover, in *Fool for Love*: “You know we’re connected, May. We’ll always be connected. That was decided a long time ago.” And, digging back a further five years, we encounter the speech in *Buried Child* where Vince describes seeing his face in a car’s windscreen, and behind that face the faces of all of his ancestors, “clear on back to faces I’d never seen before but still recognized. Still recognized the bones underneath.” (Behind this speech is glimpsed, however dimly, Macbeth’s vision of eight kings: “What will the line stretch out to th’ crack of doom? / Another yet? A seventh? I’ll see no more. / And yet the eighth appears who bears a glass / Which shows me many more.”)

Images of digging down and bringing up into the light abound; *Buried Child* is merely the most obvious and most fully worked out example. When Vince (whose name tells us he will win) returns to his grandparents’ house in search of his roots, his father brings on stage an armful of carrots and a long-dead infant’s corpse. If we halt the synopsis here and concentrate on these incidents (widely separated in performance time) we can see that Shepard has linked them through a deliberately bad joke. But behind the joke there is an image and a message: perfect carrots grow in perfect soil; carrots grown in stony soil develop roots that are crooked and branched; Vince and his rotted sibling are those branches. At the heart of this play, if we strip away its outer layers (Vince’s father also brings on corn for husking), there is a little kernel playlet, working itself out through suggestive symbolism of the kind that Shepard

was employing in the 1960s. What we need to add to this synopsis (explanation, context, and plot) to make it an accurate summation of *Buried Child* is what Shepard added to his dramatist's tool kit in the mid-1970s, when his mature plays began to emerge from their own burial ground and birthplace.

The set of *Curse of the Starving Class* provides an equally pure and even simpler example of how Shepard's plays represent the unfolding of a basic image or group of basic images. The curse of the play's title is, among many other things, the onset of Emma's menstrual bleeding. ("Never go swimming when that happens. It can cause you to bleed to death. The water draws it out of you.") This blood, by tradition both heavily tabooed and dangerously defiling, cannot—in even the most liberal modern theaters—be displayed directly but must be imaged. It is done by elements of the set ("a very plain breakfast table with a red oil-cloth covering it . . . two ruffled, red-checked curtains") and by displacement-substitution (when Wesley pisses over Emma's charts on the kitchen floor). This action—acceptable in one room, unacceptable in another—is itself displaced and, because it is so, exemplifies the family's more general habit of violating the limits of acceptable behavior by ignoring moral thresholds. Both their dysfunction and their breaching of boundaries are also imaged in the set by "four mismatched metal chairs . . . a working refrigerator and a small gas stove, set right up next to each other . . . a pile of wooden debris, torn screen, etc., which are the remains of a broken door."

Pictures, however, are always ambiguous, which is why one of them speaks a thousand words. Shepard, a dramatist who works through images rather than arguments, evades easy interpretation. *Curse of the Starving Class* begins with a heap of visual symbols and ends with the symbolic story of an eagle and a tomcat that are locked together in a mutually destructive embrace. The play's initial and terminal symbols, however, are simply alternative images for an unchanging reality. Shepard's plays are static because, the present being gripped by the past, all that can be managed is the illusion of movement. *True West* ends with Austin (a scriptwriter, a seller and teller of stories) and Lee (who sells a story that he can scarcely tell and will never be able to write down) frozen in an endless moment of mutual apprehension: "caught in a vast desertlike landscape, they are very still but watchful for the next, [as] lights go slowly to black." *Fool for Love*, arguably Shepard's finest play, perfectly illustrates—through its image of an old man sitting in

a rocking chair—the paradox of ceaseless movement that leaves one standing still. *Fool for Love* is, a stage direction tells us, "to be performed relentlessly without a break." Yet despite being packed with incident, its relentless activity merely revolves around itself. "I'm only gonna' be a second," Eddie says when the play's final version of his secret is told, "I'll come right back." But in that suspended and indefinitely extended second, the play ends. And when it begins again, at the next performance, we are back at the start. Of course, every play begins again at each performance, but most do not bite their tails in order to form a perfect circle. (Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* of 1955 is the most famous of those that do, and Beckett is an obvious influence on Shepard here and elsewhere.)

The unavoidable ambiguity of imagery can be both strength and weakness. *A Lie of the Mind* may end weakly with an enforced and merely symbolic closing, but *Buried Child* comes to a magnificently appropriate—and still open—ending. Halie exits up a spiral staircase, as though ascending to heaven, followed by her son, Tilden, who carries in his arms the bones of her murdered son-grandson-brother. What Halie's voice reports from above (when she is no longer visible) is a paradise of fertile crops, coaxed into abundance by the sun: "Maybe it's the sun. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's the sun." But, as Tilden, her "son," joins her in the "sun" with their "son," there is silence, the stage darkens, and the play ends. Here, Shepard deliberately pitches a play's conventional ending ("lights go to black") against Halie's final word ("sun"), so as to leave his audience with opposed and incompatible resolutions of the play's dark themes. When does a play end? When the words run out? Or when the lights dim? Plays are verbal occurrences that are also physical events, and this is a truth that Shepard has always recognized. "Sometimes theatre seems stuck in language and the physical body of the actor," he wrote to Joseph Chaikin, his friend and collaborator, in 1983. But then he immediately added that "it's those very limitations which also excite me about theatre."

[See also *Theater in America*.]

SELECTED WORKS

- The Rock Garden* (1964)
- 4-H Club* (1965)
- La Turista* (1967)
- Cowboys #2* (1967)
- Me and My Brother* (1968)
- The Unseen Hand and Other Plays* (1971)
- The Mad Dog Blues and Other Plays* (1971)

Geography of a Horse Dreamer (1974)
The Tooth of Crime (1972)
Action (1975)
Killer's Head (1975)
Angel City (1976)
Angel City, Curse of the Starving Class, and Other Plays (1977)
Buried Child (1978)
Hawk Moon (1981)
True West (1980)
Motel Chronicles (1982)
Fool for Love (1983)
The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife (1983)
The War in Heaven (1986)
A Lie of the Mind (1985)
States of Shock; Far North; Silent Tongue (1991)
Simpatico (1995)
Buried Child (1995)
Cruising Paradise (1996)
When the World Was Green: A Chef's Fable (1996)
Eyes for Consuela (1999)
The Late Henry Moss; Eyes for Consuela; When the World Was Green (2002)

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THE SHORT STORY IN AMERICA

by Laurie Champion



Many critics agree with Frank O'Connor's 1963 assessment that "Americans have handled the short story so wonderfully that one can say that it is a national art form." Although the short story has received little critical attention compared with other genres such as poems or novels, it has flourished over the last century and a half to become an integral aspect of American letters. Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) frequently is cited as the first American short story, or "tale," but the genre remained undistinguished until Edgar Allan Poe's well-known 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-told Tales*. Since Poe's review, in which he distinguished short fiction from other genres, the American short story has evolved both in form and in content.

THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

During the romantic period of American literature in the mid-nineteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel

Hawthorne, and Herman Melville contributed significantly to the development of the American short story. In form, style, and subject matter, their short fiction departed from early American sketches such as Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," tales generally made up of summarized narratives, episodic plots, and portraits of magical events. American romantic short fiction moved from a tale to a story with a unified plot, a protagonist, and a single effect.

Indicative of the title of one of Poe's collections of short fiction, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840), his short stories are grotesque, blending elements of Gothic horror with cryptic settings filled with castles, tombs, labyrinth paths, and dark and gloomy rooms. The characters sometimes cross boundaries between the living and the dead and the situations question whether ghosts are more real than humans. Among Poe's most well-known gothic/grotesque stories are "The Premature



Charlotte Perkins Gilman (center). (© Bettmann/Corbis)

Burial,” in which a man believes he is buried alive; “The Black Cat,” in which the howling of a trapped cat leads to the discovery of a dead body; and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” in which the dying M. Valdemar agrees to be hypnotized and remains rigid yet semiconscious for seven months, until physicians attempting to awaken him transform him into a liquid mass. Perhaps Poe’s most familiar story is “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The story portrays Roderick Usher, who experiences mysterious feelings of dreariness, gloom, and terror that haunt him while he resides at the House of Usher. Roderick buries his twin sister, Madeline, and stores the coffin in a vault. At the end of the story, Madeline crashes through the walls and Roderick exclaims to his visitor that she has been buried alive. As Madeline, whose bloody body shows signs of physical struggle, stands in the doorway, the ensuing storm intensifies and the mansion crumbles and fades. Typical of Poe’s themes and style, “The Fall of the House of Usher” is filled with cryptic descriptions of the Usher mansion and demonstrates psychological fear and terror.

Poe also wrote detective short fiction and is credited with inspiring the detective fiction genre that gave rise to later writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the Sherlock Holmes character. Poe’s series of detective short stories, which include “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” and “The Purloined Letter,” depict Auguste Dupin as a shrewd detective able to unravel mysteries with his self-proclaimed ability to think like the perpetrator and examine evidence from his opponent’s point of view.

Hawthorne’s short stories also blur distinctions between reality and fiction, but with less grotesqueness than in Poe’s short fiction. Hawthorne’s best-known short story collection, *Twice-told Tales*, includes sketches and tales, most of which are allegories with moral messages. Many of Hawthorne’s stories reveal early New England history and blend historical events with the supernatural. As in his longer works, Hawthorne’s shorter fiction explores themes relevant to the Puritan conscience. “Young Goodman Brown,” one of Hawthorne’s most frequently anthologized short stories, illustrates techniques and themes found throughout his works. Typical of an allegory, the names of the characters reveal their traits. Goodman Brown sets out on a spiritual journey, in which he meets in the forest the devil and becomes distressed because his faith is gone. While running deeper into the forest, his wife, Faith, appears among both respected and disrespected members of the community. As he warns

Faith to resist, the vision disappears, and he awakens. The story criticizes Puritan doctrine that considers humans depraved beings who must constantly question whether they and members of their communities are worthy of salvation. Goodman Brown loses his faith, his wife, and respect for his community because he holds unattainable spiritual expectations for himself and others.

Three of Hawthorne’s best-known stories reveal that science and intellect often conflict with concerns of the heart or soul. In “The Birthmark,” the scientist Aylmer’s wife dies during his attempt to remove a birthmark from her cheek. “Rappaccini’s Daughter” concerns the plight of Beatrice, whose death is the result of an antidote her lover urges her to consume to counteract the poison her father has fed her as an experiment. “Ethan Brand” shows the downfall of Ethan, who spends eighteen years investigating humans in an attempt to find an unpardonable sin, only to discover that his own search has led him to commit the very unpardonable sin for which he has searched. These stories demonstrate the ironic dangers of searching for perfection, either physical or spiritual.

Compared with Hawthorne and Poe, Melville wrote a small body of short fiction, mostly essaylike stories. However, “Benito Cereno” and “Bartleby the Scrivener” remain among the finest pieces of short fiction written during this time period. “Benito Cereno” tells of Captain Delano, who joins a vessel inhabited by slaves, passengers, and crew, dwelling amidst hunger and disease. The twist in the story comes when the captain learns that the seemingly oppressed are really the empowered amongst the inhabitants of the vessel, which becomes a microcosm of society. “Bartleby the Scrivener” reveals the plight of Bartleby, who after three days of working as scrivener for a lawyer, begins to announce that he prefers not to perform his duties. The lawyer feels both angry and confused at Bartleby’s behavior, and eventually invites him to live with him, an invitation Bartleby declines. When the lawyer moves his office and withholds from Bartleby the address, Bartleby becomes a vagrant and is consequently imprisoned. Further isolated and trapped within walls, Bartleby refuses to eat and eventually dies. Readers learn very little about Bartleby’s history, but the story ultimately uses his plight to criticize ways intolerant societies treat nonconformists. Melville’s short fiction moves closer to realism than does Hawthorne’s or Poe’s and provides a bridge between the romantic and the realist short story.

Among Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, Poe contributed most significantly to the development of the American short story partly because of the body of stories he