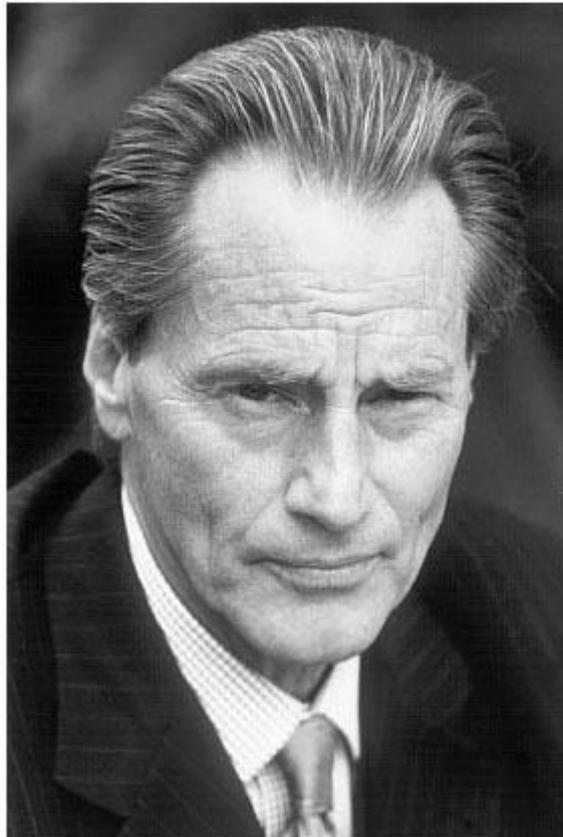


A Psychological Conflict in the Selected Characters in Sam Shepard's One Act Play *Icarus' Mother*

C. Priscilla Lydia Sathya, M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil.



Sam Shepard

Courtesy: <http://www.sam-shepard.com/sambw5x.jpg>

Abstract

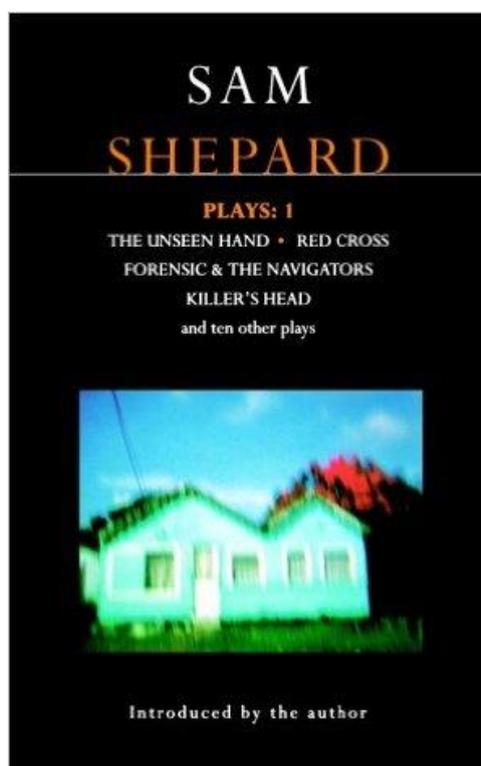
The play *Icarus' Mother* is a one act play by Sam Shepard. This was first produced at the Caffe Cino and directed by Michael Smith on the 16th of November 1965 at New York. The play *Icarus' Mother* is one of Shepard's dramatic reflections upon creativity. In the play, the scene of action is much wider, and the vision of a traumatic existence is elaborated more fully and seriously than in the earlier plays like *4-H Club* and *Chicago*. There is a sense of the outside world in the play and there is also a pervasive fear that transmits a powerful gestalt to the audience.

Key words: Sam Shepard, *Icarus' Mother*, gestalt, Greek mythology, primordial struggle

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Primordial Struggle

According to Albert Wilhelm, *Icarus' Mother* foregrounds the primordial struggle for (the son's, the present) creative expression in the face of opposition (by the father figure, the past) and the accessibility of the inspiring figure (the mother figure). The play *Icarus' Mother* also represents the conflict between genders and generations.

Opening Scene

The play *Icarus' Mother* opens with a portable barbecue in the center of the stage and on one side there is a table cloth with the remnants of a huge meal the picnickers have just finished. Bill, Howard, Frank, Jill and Pat are the five picnickers in the play *Icarus' Mother*. All of these characters are seen lying on their back staring up at the sky watching the gimmick of a plane. They are wondering: "Is it skywriting or just a gas trial?" (IM 32) The picnickers are frightened because the plane has been in the same area for the past one hour. They shout at the pilot and ask him to get away. Only Jill is sensible. She asks them to stop being silly. Quite coolly she tells them that she is the pilot's wife.

The Plane

As the plane is moving away, they shout to the pilot not to leave. They have been behaving exactly like children. Now the conversation turns to the fireworks, for which they

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have come here to the open place. Pat does not want to lie around waiting; she wants to walk to the beach and she wishes to watch the fireworks while walking. Bill suddenly falls unconscious. The other picnickers go looking for her, for hours. Pat sits down and they stand in a circle around her and talk of possibilities, to send helicopters or even jets to look for her. Pat tells them to shut up and stop scaring her. They say Pat that they are only kidding. Howard grabs Pat's hand and pulls her saying that they wish to go for a walk. Pat struggles to pull her hand away. Jill says Pat's husband the jet pilot will come and kill Howard with a laser beam.

Explanations Why a Jet Pilot Cannot See People on the Beach

Howard gives a scientific explanation why a jet pilot cannot see them on the beach. Then he talks about aeronautics and planes. The pilot can see a wonderful panorama from his cockpit. He can also see things up and down. Jill tells Howard to stop it and leave Pat alone. Jill consoles Pat saying that nobody was going for a walk. But Frank gets up and says he wants to go to the beach because he wants privacy.

Bill suggests that Pat and Jill also should go to the beach to empty their bladders. They cannot afford to miss the fireworks display. He says that the same year the city spent thirty thousand dollar on fireworks which made a little pop and produced a lot of smoke. It was a joke. But Jill says that some of them were beautiful. Pat says that she has been watching the display for ten years and finds that they get better. Even if everything is a washout, except one, she enjoys that. Then Pat and Jill go for a short walk.

Smoke Signals

Howard and Bill send up smoke signals, with the tablecloth over the barbecue. Frank comes back saying that the beach is a fine place to watch the display of fireworks. But Bill and Frank prefer to stay where they are. Frank says that during the ten years of his life there, he didn't know that there was a clean beach. He says it would be nice to spend a week-end hiking along the beach. Howard and Bill leave Frank saying that the girl has an important secret to tell him.

Howard and Bill send up smoke signals once more. Pat and Jill come in giggling violently. As they are staring, the jet plane comes zooming low over them. He keeps flying back and forth above them. Pat blows him some kisses and the pilot goes nuts. He starts doing flips and slides, flying upside down and so on. Then the two girls take off their pants and run

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into the water. The pilot then climbs high up into the sky and writes $E=Mc^2$. Howard then informs them that Frank told him he saw the plane crashing into the ocean, exploding just before it hit the water. The girls run off to find Frank. But Frank enters now to tell Howard and Bill that he saw a wonderful sight.

Fireworks and Jet Plane Going out of Control

While he is describing the scene, sounds of fireworks are heard, while coloured lights light up the area. Frank describes the spectacle of the jet plane going out of control and plunging into the sea. Before touching the water, the plane explodes into a magnificent display. But it is the description of a bizarre scene: people rushing out, sirens screaming, the whole sky lit up. “The beach sinks below the surface. The seagulls drown in flocks of ten thousand. And the pilot bobbing in the very center of a ring of five that’s closing in”. (IM 59) Jill rushes in shouting, “The plane went down, come and look!”(IM 59) Bill tells her to get away from the picnic area. She leaves the place saying that they are missing something.

What Lies Behind the Reality

So far as the production of the play is concerned one need not go beyond reality. The play is about a picnic. But the scholars and critics are concerned more about what lies beyond the reality. They search for the meaning. Michael Smith himself realizes that the smoke signals are ‘the abstract gestures of a formal rite’ and that the plane transforms itself from the familiar everyday object “into an agent of apocalypse behind a veil of fantasy and deception”. Sam Shepard in his *Chicago and Other Plays, Michael Smith’s Notes on Icarus Mother* proves the above quote to be true. Punning, rather irreverently, Smith asks, “and how do you go from real plane to planes of reality?” Quite frankly he answers, “I don’t know”. (p 25)

Icarus and the Pilot

The pilot of the plane soars high and falls into the ocean like Icarus of Greek mythology. But the legend speaks only of Icarus’s father Dedalus and not of a mother. The mother of the play suggests mother-earth who the pilot enters apocalyptically. It suggests an intense relation between mother and son. And death by drowning is a well-known symbol of parturition. There are the two girls Pat and Jill, pulling off their pants, showing the legs and running into the sea. This is enough to drive the pilot crazy. He shows off his aerobatic stunts which has an explosive finale, suggesting a fatal end.

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Traumatic Existence of Modern Man

In this play the central theme is the traumatic existence of modern man, surrounded by fear caused by the constant threat of the struggle for survival. The characters are surrounded by a strange atmosphere symbolized by the plane and the fireworks display. Both are symbols intimately connected with the struggle for survival and succeed in suggesting a pervasive fear which transmits a powerful perception to the audience. All five characters play games connected with the plane, the fireworks display and the idea of taking a walk. Each tries to win the argument, suggesting mysterious conflicts and differing opinions, displaying a lack of understanding of the world of reality.

Words Bring Life to the Imagination of an Audience

Shepard has a tremendous ability to make words bring life to the imagination of an audience. Distance, levels and points of view are important to Shepard's plays. In this play the pilot observing the characters below, and the characters observing him above, both parties are fascinated by each other. The pilot is literally burning up excess energy; he trails it in the sky and writes the formula for it in the air. It can be assumed that he took off from the earth and separated himself from the others. A pilot, however much he tries to maintain control above, is always tempted to look down. What he sees is beautiful to him, but it also makes him dizzy.

Icarus and His Father Daedalus

In Greek mythology, Icarus was offered a pair of wax wings by his father, Daedalus, the master craftsman, to escape from their imprisonment. Daedalus instructed his son to stay away from the sun, but the fascination of flying and the over-ambition of Icarus to fly high had made him to soar too high, nearer to the sun. His wings melted and he plunged to the earth. In psychology, Icarus complex is alleged with over-ambition. In the play *Icarus' Mother*, the pilot is offered a jet plane to fly high, but the pilot's over-ambition to display his talents, performing stunts in the sky ends in destruction.

Result of Extreme States of Individuality

In *Icarus' Mother*, the pilot is attracted by the lusty women as well. In showing off his energy to them, he goes as high as possible, then dives into the sea, returns to his origins, becomes earthbound again. Obviously this parallels the Icarus legend. Man attempts to be like

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a God, but is sent crashing down to human mortality again. The play thus makes a statement about what happens to those who arrogantly reach toward extreme states of individuality – whose over-confidence leads them to grandiose acts of bravado, rather pessimistic. Death seems ultimately to conquer the over-ambitious spirit.

Combining Symbolism and Meaning

Icarus' Mother is very explicit in combining both symbolism and meaning. Frank hates the cluttered beaches, the vulgar sexual dancing and the earthly physical needs, as hunger and thirst are the kinds of dirty bits of humanity that destroy man's attempts to attain spiritual glory. And it is man's own sexuality, gloriously full of energy as it is, which brings him crashing down to the body and the earth again. Indeed, the pilot's position above the earth, his plunge downward, and his death in tremendous explosion of fireworks makes the play into a symbolic act of human passion.

“The play sets up some symbolic geographic areas in the Shepard world. The sea, with connotations of an end to life; the area above sea level where the food and barbecue comforts of civilization exist” (p 432) defines *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. The sea is a satisfactory status-quo area for Howard and Bill – a place for conformity, another kind of death. The superior sky is above the other positions, and it appears to be high esteem to them.

The play begins on a relatively realistic note. Indeed, the opening scene is both comic and familiar to most Americans, five bloated picnickers, having just consumed a large holiday meal, lie on their backs in the grass, burbling at random while the barbecue pit continues to smoke. In one respect the play is about nothing more than walks on the beach, low flying planes and a fireworks exhibit. But every event in it holds the potential for unforeseen terror.

Unapproachable Motives

Icarus Mother is composed of sudden shifts in action and inhabited by characters whose motives remain unapproachable. One of the most disturbing actions of the play is a repeated sequence in which two characters use the barbecue pit to send smoke signals when all other characters have left the stage.

This action of sending smoke signals carried on almost ritually, is one of the most powerful disrupters of the play. The sense of an unspoken conspiracy, enhanced a hundred fold when the two men suddenly drop the tablecloth, creating in Howard and Bill, a surreal quality. Their action takes on an air of danger and threat. However the possibility of a conspiracy between the two men is never confirmed in the play.

Original Impulse Behind the Creation of *Icarus' Mother*

Discussing the original impulse behind the creation of *Icarus' Mother*, Shepard describes a vague experience of terror that inspired him and that he intended to evoke through the presentation of the play. David J De Rose expresses in his *Sam Shepard*, "You've got this emotional thing that goes on long way back, which creates a certain kind of chaos, a kind of terror. There's a vague kind of terror. It's really hard to grab the whole of the experience. There's a vague kind of terror going on, the people not really knowing what is happening". (p 24)

A discussion of air travel leads to a monologue on the sense of disorientation from which pilots occasionally suffer. Once such discomfort arises, the physical disease mounts up as new images and verbal accounts add to the play's equivocal mood. The unexplained intrusion of a low flying jet overhead, the mysterious smoke signals, the conspiratorial undertones, the disruption of cause and effect by Bill and Howard who predict the crash of the plane before it happens, - the events accumulate rapidly, so that the audience's sense of equilibrium, both physical and mental, is finally pushed off its limit.

Thirst for Freedom from Realistic Restraints

David Daiches in his *Critical Approaches to Literature* remarks that psychological conflicts of every person is influenced by the forces of the total unconscious of the scientists, bankers, lawyers or surgeons by reason of the traditions of their professions, practice and conformity. Shepard's plays demonstrate the thirst for freedom from realistic restraints. Shepard is concerned with the way in which private and public myths interact at a pre-conscious level. It is at the pre-conscious or subconscious level the whole world of desires, lusts and images exist. It is the world in which Shepard has a deep rooted interest. In the world of the unconscious, the laws of coherence, of cause and consequence of linear progress of

events and actions do not operate. It is the dramatists attempt to present this irrational world in his plays that makes them universal in appeal.

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