

Demonstrations of Fascism and Patriotism in Sam  
Shepard's The God of Hell

مظاهر الفاشية والوطنية في مسرحية "إله الجحيم" للكاتب سام شيبارد

Dr. Randa Abdelfattah Mohamed Misbah

Assistant professor of English language and literature  
Faculty of Engineering, Delta Uni. for Science and Technology

د. رانده عبدالفتاح محمد مصباح

أستاذ اللغة الإنجليزية المساعد بقسم العلوم الأساسية

كلية الهندسة – جامعة الدلتا للعلوم والتكنولوجيا



## Demonstrations of Fascism and Patriotism in Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*

### Abstract:

*The God of Hell* play premiered in New York 2004. Sam Shepard's surrealist black comedy is a satire against republican fascism. As a reflection of society, literature deals with social and political malaise. This paper analyzes Shepard's *The God of Hell* drawing special attention to the concept of fascism as a political philosophy/movement used by political leaders to suppress the public. Definitions of fascism and its practices will be employed to present a reading of the play, which questions the popular image of the United States as the land of free will and democracy. The paper has reached three findings. (1) Democratic regimes can turn into fascist regimes in response to national security issues. (2) People's compliance can foster totalitarian regimes. Therefore, Americans should defend their freedom, otherwise they will lose their rights to privacy and liberty.(3) Patriotism is not proved by owning a flag.

**Key Words:** Fascism, Patriotism, Privacy, Civil rights. Democracy

### مظاهر الفاشية والوطنية في مسرحية "إله الجحيم" للكاتب سام شيبارد

#### ملخص:

عُرِضت المسرحية السريالية "إله الجحيم" لأول مرة عام ٢٠٠٤ في نيويورك، وهي كوميديا سوداء تهاجم السياسة الفاشية للجمهوريين. كانعكاس للمجتمع، يتناول الأدب الاضطرابات السياسية والاجتماعية التي تطرأ على هذا المجتمع. يدرس الباحث أصل "الفاشية" كمذهب فلسفي ومظهره في مسرحية الكاتب سام شيبارد "إله الجحيم". تحلل هذه الدراسة مسرحية "إله الجحيم"، وذلك من خلال إشارة خاصة إلى مفهوم الفاشية كفلسفة /حركة سياسية يستخدمها القادة السياسيون لقمع الشعوب. سيتم الإشارة إلى تعريفات الفاشية وممارساتها لتقديم قراءة للمسرحية التي تشكك في الصورة الشائعة للولايات المتحدة كأرض الإرادة الحرة والديمقراطية. توصلت الدراسة إلى ثلاثة نتائج: (١) يمكن للأنظمة الديمقراطية أن تتحول إلى أنظمة فاشية مستبدة لمجابهة قضايا الأمن القومي. (٢) خضوع الشعوب يدعم الأنظمة الاستبدادية، لذلك يجب على الأمريكيين الدفاع عن حريتهم، وإلا فسوف يفقدون حقوقهم في الخصوصية والحرية. (٣) امتلاك علم ليس دليل على الوطنية.

## **Demonstrations of Fascism and Patriotism in Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell***

### **1- Introduction:**

*The God of Hell* play premiered at the Actors Studio Drama School Theatre in New York 2004. It is a surrealist work which portrays illogical events that go beyond reality or what Andre Breton called “an absolute reality, a super-reality” (qtd. in Chilvers, Ian. 2009). The play is a message to American citizens before presidential elections. Throughout the play, Shepard uses symbols such as characters' names and plants to clarify his ideas. All the symbols are connected to one another. They assert that destruction and oppression are the outcome of recent policy. It shows government autocracy and illegal use of violence after launching American war against terror. The play satirizes the climate of fear which afflicted the American society. It presents “some disturbing images that suggest the American war on terror turned on itself. The hooded specter of the tortures at Abu Gharib, for instance, materializes in Emma's and Frank's living room. And the American flag...becomes a dizzying emblem of aggression” (Brantley, Ben. 2004).

Most of the incidents of the play take place in the kitchen, where the characters' experience critical situations that turn their life upside down. Normally, the kitchen could be a symbol of security and warmth. However, in this play the kitchen witnesses the characters' struggle against governmental intrusion that disrupts their life. Although the characters show minimal opposition, they are faced with ultimate violence and unstoppable aggression. Boróka Prohaszka Rad believes, “kitchens in Shepard's sets become the site of frustration...and the sites of erupting violence. They function as stages upon which characters play out their envisioned, invoked, or wished-for subjectivities and where they witness and suffer the destruction of these illusory identities” (2009).

The study of politics is not an independent domain, as it affects individuals, groups and institutions. Therefore, it is an integral part of the study of social life. As theater reflects social life as a whole, it is understandable that it is connected directly or indirectly to politics. Bertolt Brecht is one of the political playwrights of the twentieth century.

He adopted an antifascist stance as he was aware of economic discrimination and the plight of the working class. He “sought to integrate theatre with politics, entertainment with education, and theory with practice, by developing a new type of theatre—“epic theatre.” (Morgan, Margot. 2013). Political theater is used to inform public opinion about politics. It is a means to criticize political scene, or to raise public awareness. Its characters are the result of social circumstances. The aim of Brecht's theater is not to stimulate audience's empathy; on the contrary, it is meant to raise critical judgment toward characters' behaviors or social interactions in specific settings. His plots were presented in a nonlinear and non-episodic structure. Michael Patterson argues, “The strategy here is again to alert the spectator that the events that are unfolding are not inevitable but there are or were alternative courses of action” (2003). This technique is used to keep the audience focused on the progress of events rather than the ending. It also encourages the audience to interfere and make choices in order to defy reality.

*The God of Hell* is a response to contemporary political turbulence. It adopts an antifascist stance, as it dramatizes the life of American people after 9/11 events. Not only does Shepard concentrate on the social life of Americans, but he also explores political issues of interest. His play is a searching journey that reflects reality and portrays characters' attitude toward it. There are some implicit messages that unmask the current political situation which is the result of public compliance and coercive political milieu before the presidential elections in 2004. The play criticizes governmental use of physical violence and intellectual coercion. It calls for immediate action against a hypocritical regime which presents itself as the only representative of truth. It criticizes government's suffocation of the voice of dissent. As the volume of opposition decreases in reality, theater presents it on stage to support pluralism. It presents a self-conscious critique and deplores government manipulation of a culture of fear in order to justify aggressive expansionism. It presents a direct message and builds on a simple plot that leads to clear conclusions. This paper demonstrates how the playwright questions Americans' complicit present and the country's past.

Shepard's play is considered a political propaganda or agitprop. Agitprop theater is used to raise audience's consciousness of political and social situation. It seeks to change public opinion using persuasion techniques. It is an attempt to "transform the consciousness of the spectators and initiate within them the idea of active struggle using the methods of 'agit prop theatre'" (Pal, Swati. 2010/2012). As agitprop seeks to stimulate action, it makes use of stimuli. Pal argues, "The human mind has a tremendous ability to respond to stimuli and, more than most other form of theatre, agit prop theatre recognizes this strength of the performative arts. It aims to manipulate the mind of the audience through many direct and indirect, simple and sophisticated ways" (2010/2012).

This paper adopts an analytical approach that is used to trace representations of fascism in Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*. Definitions of fascism as a political philosophy/movement will be employed to present a reading of the play, which questions the popular image of the United States as the land of free will and democracy. The study intends to illustrate the theoretical background of 'fascism' and main practices in order to investigate the influence of applying this oppressive ideology on individuals' life. It puts into focus the transformation of democratic regimes into fascist, totalitarian regimes in response to national security issues. It provides a simplified explanation of the concept, which will suffice to explore the origins, practices and forms of fascist policies that affect characters' motivations and conflicts in the aforementioned play.

Shepard's *The God of Hell* has received critical attention of different scholars. Published studies include three scholarly articles. Khosrow Darabi & Mohsen Momen's article, "Effect of Power in Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*" (2015), analyzes the effect of power in Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*. Boroka Prohaszka Rad's article, "Effacing Myths and Mystification of Power: Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*" (2009), tackles mechanisms and strategies of power that enslave individuals. However, Sahar Mokbel's article, "The Loss of National Identity in Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*" (2013), deals with the enforcement of a new national identity on the American citizens by US government.

Given this review, this paper attempts Shepard's *The God of Hell* via a different angle not approached by any of the above-mentioned studies. It intends to answer the following questions: (1) Can democratic regimes turn into fascist systems? (2) Does public compliance lead to coercive political milieu? (3) Can patriotism be imposed? (4) Do national security concerns justify violation of individual's right to privacy and civil rights?

## **2- Theoretical Background:**

According to Peter J. Davies and Derek Lynch, there is no positive or definite interpretation of fascism. They state that the "studies of fascism penned before 1945 are not regarded in a very positive light, with Gregor, for one, arguing that they are 'full of generalizations.' Following the Second World War, not unexpectedly, fascism suffered a period of 'moral condemnation' and 'extra-terrestrial exile'" (2002). Fascism could be a byproduct of different social disciplines, mental disorder or moral collapse. They add, "Payne, for instance, identifies eight main interpretations: fascism as a product of capitalism, moral breakdown, pathological neuroticism, the 'amorphous masses', economic development, totalitarianism, resistance to modernisation, and middle-class radicalism" (2002). Fascism is considered a social and psychological disease that infected the society, since those who are interested in fascist practices such as using violence and authoritarian role suffer from psychological disorders. It is also considered the result of capitalist and totalitarian regimes that depend on fascist practices to suppress the public. Pro-fascist and anti-fascist authors see fascism differently. Pro-fascist authors believe that fascism is

a remedy for 'moral crisis', a spiritual reawakening, an ethical, heroic response to all that was wrong in liberal society. The anti-fascist view, on the other hand, puts the emphasis on despair. According to this interpretation, fascism was an 'aesthetic aberration', a product of perversity and corruption, a return to absolutism, an escape from disillusionment. (2002)

Pro-fascists suggest that fascism is the ultimate cure of modern society diseases such as moral or ethical declination, while anti-fascists consider

it a totalitarian ideology that flourishes in corrupt environments. One of the main features of fascism is that it looks down upon individuals' freedom and detests humans' weakness. In Shepard's play, some characters are attracted to fascism because "certain aspects of fascism had particular appeal - the 'lust for power' and the 'hatred of weakness'. It is also manifest that fascism catered for those who wished for strong charismatic leadership and authority" (Davies & Lynch, 2002).

Fascists use violence to restrict public freedom. The main goal of the fascist individual is to wipe out/ destroy individuals' identity and autonomy. Freedom is considered the core cause of societal turbulence. According to fascists, individuals are not entitled or trusted to use freedom in a manner that goes with the absolute power of the fascist system. As neurotic individuals, fascists stick to rigid beliefs, and use violence against their enemies. They sacrifice individuals' rights for the sake of their principles. Davies and Lynch state:

Adorno likens fascism to 'neurosis' and 'delinquency' and claims that the antidemocrat is "anti-semitic, ethnocentric, an economic conservative, holds rather rigid beliefs, condones violence against opponents, uses stereotypes, distinguishes sharply between 'in-group' and 'out-group' and admires strong men." This is the 'prejudiced personality' that, in Adorno's view, is attracted to fascism. Fromm takes a similar line, arguing that fascism aims at 'the annihilation of the individual self and its utter submission to a higher power.' The underlying contention in his work is that 'modern democratic man' cannot cope with unlimited freedom because it brings wholesale insecurity. (2002)

Merriam Webster dictionary defines Fascism as "a political philosophy, movement, or regime...that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition" (n.d.). However, Robert O. Paxton does not consider fascism a movement or an ideology. He refers to fascism as a political system. He suggests that it is mere political practices that are applied by certain



systems. He contends that there is no definite manifesto for this concept. He defines fascism as “a system of political authority and social order intended to reinforce the unity, energy, and purity of communities in which liberal democracy stands accused of producing division and decline” (Paxton, 1998). Paxton maintains that it is a political process since there is no definite scripture of its principles. He argues, “I was tempted to reduce the role of ideology in fascism to a simple functionalism: fascists propose anything that serves to attract a crowd, solidify a mass following, or reassure their elite accomplices. That would be a gross oversimplification.”

Fascism appears in democratic societies such as the United States and France. Paxton argues, “Since fascisms take their first steps in reaction to claimed failings of democracy, it is not surprising that they should appear first in the most precocious democracies, the United States and France” (1998). Maybe the failure of democracy to achieve security gives birth to fascist rule that builds its empire on the ruins of democratic systems.

As there were different fascist movements, they had some common characteristics. Fascists show deep contempt for human rights. Torture is approved as the only means to achieve nationalist goals. Fascists use patriotic slogans as a cover of totalitarian intentions. They dehumanize the enemy to get people distracted from the threat of the fascist policy. In fascist regimes, the military/government preserves a supreme position. Usually, limitless power is given to government personnel to punish and enforce fascist laws. National security and fear are used to intimidate people, while civil liberties are overlooked (Britt, Lawrence W. 2004). Typically, fascism is a male-dominated regime, because females are ruled out from patriotic missions. Likewise, in *The God of Hell*, the government has that omnipotent grip of the whole country, using fascist practices to annihilate individuals' liberties. Moreover, it uses national threat claims to intimidate opponents and to justify annihilation of civil liberties.

### 3- Discussion and Analysis:

*The God of Hell* was written before American presidential elections in 2004 to ridicule republican policy. It is an attack against federal policies after 9/11 terror attacks. Shepard produces the play before presidential elections to raise public awareness against governmental surveillance policy. The play is named after “Pluto-the god of hell” which indicates destruction and mutation of American public life after governmental invasion of public privacy. It describes autocratic policy that trespasses/annihilates public civil rights.

The play was criticized for its direct and obvious message which renders the play into a kind of agitation propaganda. Sam Shepard states, "I kind of wanted to get it done in New York before the election. I'm not sure it matters, but I figured I'd get it out there" (Sam Shepard Website, 2004). The play is written in haste as a counter propaganda. However, it depicts the characters' submission to the oppressor. The fate of the characters is expected from the beginning of the play.

The play includes violent scenes that are considered a feature of Shepard's plays. In an interview in 2006, Shepard was asked about violence in his plays he replies, “Because life is violent. Violence rules the world. So why not embrace it? We live in extremely violent times, in this world. I'm not all for heads rolling, but this is a violent country, is it not?” (qtd. in Mokbel, 2013). Shepard alludes to the excessive use of violence throughout the world, suggesting that his plays mirror what is going on in the real world.

The play despises the fact that security could be built on oppressive measures that restrict public freedom. Moreover, the play suggests that creating an atmosphere of fear stifles democratic practices and suffocates free opinion. For example, before the war on terror Americans who denounce ultra-patriotic governmental practices are labeled terrorists. Shepard maintains, “if you're on the other side of the fence, you're suddenly anti-American. It's breeding fear of being on the wrong side. Democracy's a very fragile thing. You have to take care of democracy. As soon as you stop being responsible to it and allow it to turn into scare tactics, it's no longer democracy” (Sam Shepard Website, 2004).

The play does not include a lot of action, neither does it provide the chance to the characters to define their own fate. It underlines fascist policies such as torture and physical violence that are used to defend democracy as alleged. It denounces ultra-patriotic claims and domestic surveillance that are used to restrict public liberties. Shepard maintains, "We're being sold a brand-new idea of patriotism...It never occurred to me that patriotism had to be advertised. Patriotism is something you deeply felt. You didn't have to wear it on your lapel or show it in your window or on a bumper sticker. That kind of patriotism doesn't appeal to me at all" (qtd. in Shewey, Don. 2004). The play denounces the imposition of certain constructions of patriotism that are built on fear. It condemns federal policies after September 2001. It discusses the resurrection of oppressive practices in democratic societies. Misha Berson suggests that the play "blasts nuclear contamination, Abu Gharib-style torture and crypto-tyranny" (n. Pag.). Meanwhile, Susannah Clapp contends, "This is more like Tom and Jerry in Abu Gharib" (2005).

*The God of Hell* tells the story of Emma and Frank, two American couple, who live a traditional life in a farmhouse in Wisconsin. Emma is a traditional wife who is preparing breakfast for her husband as usual. She is very curious to know about Frank's friend. Frank and Emma do not care about anything in the world except their heifers and green plants. Green plants are used as symbols of life and rebirth. However, the death of the plants at the end of the play indicates death, destruction, despair, and lost ideals. Mokbel believes, "Shepard includes the green plants at the beginning of the play to show the presence of life; however, by the end of the play, the plants die revealing the death of the values in the American nation" (2013). The couple's peaceful life is disturbed after the intrusion of two strangers; Haynes and Welch, into their lives. Welch is a representative of Republican government who enjoys domineering power that shatters the life of the couple. Shepard argues:

I started with three characters, the couple and the stranger who comes to stay with them. The notion of somebody coming from out of nowhere and disturbing the peace. It fit perfectly with the Republican invasion. The whole storm that built up after 9-11.

The Welch character came in last. I wanted him to be like something out of Brecht's clown plays. (qtd. in Shewey, 2004)

Frank is a dairy farmer. He is absentminded and naïve. According to Merriam Webster dictionary, the name "Frank" means free, forthright and sincere. Its origin goes back to West Germanic people who lived long time ago. They were called the Franks. France, the country, got its name from them. Later on, the name refers to free men who are not slaves (n. d.). The use of the name "Frank" here is symbolic. Frank represents every man in the United States. It suggests that American citizens are free, and they should defend their freedom.

Although Frank is warned not to tell his wife about Haynes's job or official title, he is inveigled by his wife to tell the truth. The most interesting part is when she reminds him every time of what he has said before and the usual answer is "nope" or "I'm not sure" or "What made you think that?" Every time Emma asks about Frank's friend, Frank gives her contradictory responses. In the end, it is not difficult for her to reveal the truth by asking some more questions or just making a guess. Frank responds to Emma's investigation as follows:

EMMA: I thought you said he was a scientist.

FRANK: Nope.

EMMA: Well, what is he then?

FRANK: I'm not sure. I mean, I'm not sure about his official title.

EMMA: Official? So, he's working for the government or something? (*The God of Hell*, 2004)

Shepard uses this comic twist to reach the audience and convey the message. He states, "I think comedy actually works better. It allows people a way to breathe together and feel like they are together in a moment with the actors" (qtd. in Mckinleyoct, Jesse. 2004).

Haynes is an old friend of Frank. It seems that they have not seen each other for a long time. Haynes flees from his work at a Plutonium contaminated establishment. As he tries to keep a low profile, he never introduces himself to Emma. At the beginning, Emma welcomes Frank's friend. However, a spontaneous touch to Haynes' hand emanates blue flashes which makes her doubt everything she is told about him. The

audience is not sure whether he is a scientist, a researcher or a government official. Thus, Shepard's use of mystery plays a crucial role in the play. The couple's life is invaded by mysterious intruders, which stimulates the audience to engage in a searching journey for the truth behind accusations of disloyalty to the guiltless couple who represents the American nation.

Haynes is secretive. He does not say anything about his secret job, position, or where he works. Whenever Emma tries to touch upon these issues, he shivers as if he is reminded by a nightmare. Likewise, when he hears the name 'Rocky Buttes' or any reference to a nuclear leakage, he seems extremely confused. He does robotic-like gestures as he emanates blue flashes. Welch, a government official, tracked Haynes. He describes him as a monster and a source of contamination. However, "Haynes proves to be everything but the horrible source of contamination and embodiment of evil as Welch describes him. In Emma's down to-earth and logic-dominated perception, Haynes appears basically incapable of wrecking even a sofa, much less a whole country and way of life" (Rad, 2009).

Welch, the intruder, appears at the kitchen. He is dressed in dark suit, white shirt and an American flag pin in his lapel. He is a mysterious character who pretends to sell American flags. Later on, Welch turns out to be a government official in pursuit of Haynes. He is a representative of governmental policy that uses torture and violence to tame the public. Normally, the American flag is a symbol of freedom, liberty and human rights. However, here flags denote oppression. If you do not own one, you are disloyal to your country and you should be punished. Welch argues, "You'd think there would be a flag up or something to that effect. Some sign. Some indication of loyalty and pride" (*The God of Hell*, 2004). Welch reprimands Emma for her negligence to put the American flag in the house. He measures Emma's patriotism and loyalty to the country by its existence. Therefore, he considers Emma a disloyal citizen. He threatens Emma, as he asserts government omnipotence and hegemonic power. He says, "We can do whatever we want."

Domestic surveillance and torture are used to impose a new construction of patriotism that annihilates citizens' privacy. When Emma defends her territory and the Wisconsin's open-door policy, Welch mocks her custom when he says ironically a "charming custom." Emma replies, "It's not a custom, it's a trust" (*The God of Hell*, 2004). The play depicts the prevailing atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty in the American society after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Everyone became a suspect. The terrorists' assault brings upon a new policy that no longer acknowledges old traditions that cherish trust. Welch asks many questions, but he never answers any. His attitude and prying questions make Emma uncomfortable. Earlier, he tries to compel Emma to buy some cookies. Mokbel believes, "The American cookie resembles the American nation that has been transformed through advertisement into a sort of commodity; it can be sold and consumed" (2013). Through Welch, Shepard criticizes the new construction of ultra-patriotism that suppresses the public and uses aggression to achieve democracy. Thus, the flag is used to ridicule ultrapatriotic attitudes. It is not acceptable to force a certain definition of patriotism or ascribe disloyalty to others. Accordingly, America, as a democratic system, should not support authoritarian systems that oppress, punish or wipe out civil rights.

Although the play does not have religious ramifications, it has some ideas in common with Friedrich Nietzsche's book *Antichrist* which is a critique on Christianity and its main ideals of pity, empathy and moralism. Nietzsche begins his book with his own definitions of good, evil, and happiness. He believes that Christianity instills weakness and compliance through its assertion on pity, empathy and appreciation of others' suffering. According to Nietzsche, good is "Whatever augments the feeling of power, the will to power itself, in man" (1895/2018). He adds that evil is "Whatever springs from weakness". Nietzsche claims that Christianity is solely responsible for destroying the strong man and describing him "as the typical reprobate" (1895/2018). During the play, the government adopts a policy that is an emblem of Nietzsche's ideas. For example, kindness, sympathy and compassion are described as the main reasons behind the characters' defeat in front of Welch and his government. Welch denounces the couple's kind nature and punishes

them for their good intentions which bring about defeat. Their kindness is perceived as a sign of weakness that is responsible for their ultimate destruction.

In *Antichrist*, Nietzsche denounces pity. He says, "Pity stands in opposition to all the tonic passions that augment the energy of the feeling of aliveness: it is a depressant. A man loses power when he pities" (1895/2018). He considers pity or charity a weakness that hinders individual's development. He asserts that pity is "the technic of nihilism." Likewise, *The God of Hell* implies that the couple's hospitality and kind gesture to host their friend has caused their demise at the end of the play. It asserts that survival is for the powerful. It indicts the government for weakening and destroying American spirit and will to resist.

Emma tries to reveal the truth behind Welch's visit to their house through a long series of questions. Welch uses mysterious language to answer Emma's questions. He says, "We're on a kind of a survey of sorts" (*The God of Hell*, 2004). He uses the pronoun "we" to signify that he is not alone in this. He is supported by the government which gives him endless power to suppress and formulate Americans' identity. Mokbel, "Welch is trying to attack the house of those traditional citizens; as if Shepard wants to show that the new American nation wants to control all types of citizens through forcing them to follow the government whether convinced by its acts or not" (2013). The government tries to oppress the citizens, imposing a new idea of nationalism that is based on aggression and autocracy. It brainwashes its citizens, using fascist ideals that are employed to retain national pride and greatness as claimed. The play puts into action a new policy that directs public opinion and forces new values that instigate oppression.

Welch questions Emma about the number of the rooms in her house. For some reasons, Emma is terrified of Welch. As she insists that she lives alone with her husband in the house, Welch asks repeatedly about the basement where Haynes is hiding. Welch's repetitive questions about the basement motivate Emma to hide the truth. She recites what happened with Welch to Frank and Haynes. Meanwhile, Haynes believes that they are facing a real crisis. Frank asks, "Are we talking about a

world situation or something personal, Graig? Haynes replies, “What’s the difference?” (*The God of Hell*, 2004). Frank is not sure whether the crisis is on the personal level or the public level. However, both levels are deeply interconnected as governmental interventionist policy trespasses all the boundaries on its war on terror. The play fuses the political sphere with the personal sphere. Rad suggests, “Frank and Haynes’ discussion takes on an atmosphere of universal threat and crisis where personal and world issues become undistinguishable” (2009).

While Frank is talking about the peaceful life he enjoys in the farm, Emma touches Haynes and a bizarre blue flash comes from him which encourages more doubt and raises a lot of questions. The couple’s peaceful life starts to witness mysterious twists after Haynes’s visit which signals the end of life as it used to be. They face terrible consequences for helping their friend against the government. The play reveals the consequences of supporting a totalitarian government which runs nuclear institutions without applying safety precautions. Mokbel states, “the new American nation is paying money for destruction rather than peace through the search for plutonium and other radioactive elements which lead to mutation and total destruction. Shepard calls plutonium ‘The God of Hell’ because it will be the main cause of destruction” (2013).

As Haynes works in a nuclear establishment, he knows the effect of radioactive materials. When Haynes lectures Frank about the destructive effect of plutonium, Frank is mainly concerned about his heifers. Haynes asks:

HAYNES: Do you know what plutonium is named after?

FRANK: No-What?

HAYNES: Pluto-the god of hell.

FRANK: Oh- I thought he was a cartoon.

HAYNES: It is the most carcinogenic substance known to man. It causes mutations in the genes of the reproductive cells...Major mutations.

FRANK: That would probably affect my heifers then, wouldn’t it?

HAYNES Yes, it would, Frank. (*The God of Hell*, 2004)



Haynes's lecture on the effects of plutonium presents an interpretation of the title of the play. Rad suggests, "the Latin mythological god of hell, Pluto represents the mysterious power whose workings are meant to achieve not the redemption but the destruction of mankind" (2009). While Haynes talks about the debilitating effect of the carcinogenic radioactive substance on human being, Frank asks about its influence on his heifers. He does not care about himself, his wife or other people. Although his fear about his heifers appears cynical, they are the only living creatures that matter to him.

In the second scene, Emma's life revolves around watering her plants. Emma says, "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" (*The God of Hell*, 2004). Emma's care for the plants suggests that she is a caring and responsible person. She cannot live without being responsible for someone or something. She has the ability to give and nurture other people. Another interesting detail which is declared by Emma is that she is born and raised in the same house. This refers to her inability to change or cope with recent changes in the American society as a traditional person. Emma and Frank choose to live in this old-fashioned house with its old appliances. However, their privacy is invaded by a government official, Welch, who reprograms Frank's mind. Frank sells his precious replacement heifers to adopt an obscure future. Nonetheless, Emma resists government totalitarian regime and patriotic paranoia that destroy others' life. Welch threatens Emma that she will pay the price of freedom. He says, "what have you done to deserve such rampant freedom? Such total lack of responsibility.... Sooner or later the price has to be paid." The play suggests that the citizens should defend their right to privacy and liberty. It implies that democracy is not defended by oppressed people.

Frank and Emma's ignorance, isolation and naivety make them a prey to inhuman invaders whose agenda revolves around subjugating other people. Emma tries to resist Welch's intrusive plans by taking down the strings of American flags he staples in her kitchen. Furthermore, she pushes her husband to resist and get his heifers back. She changes "open

door” policy, a tradition in Midwest America, and adopts a “closed door” policy to resist invaders’ interfering plans but in vain.

Later on, Haynes regrets putting the couple into trouble as he perceives their simplistic attitude toward life and the world. Emma and Frank live in isolation as they are less likely to interact with their neighbors who stopped farming after governmental orders. Emma argues, “Nobody farms anymore. Government pays them not to. We’re the only ones left” (*The God of Hell*, 2004). It seems that the couple likes to farm although they are offered government subsidies. They have responsibility towards their heifers and green plants. Mokbel maintains, “Emma and Frank, then, belong to a dying species that the government is trying to get rid of” (2013). Welch’s mission is to brainwash the couple and gain more supporters of the fascist regime. He claims that he is doing them a favor because they are simple minded. Welch states, “We’re not interested in punishing them, Haynes. On the contrary, we’re offering them a leg up” (*The God of Hell*, 2004). Welch destroys the lives of his victims, Emma and Frank, who stand against American fascist policy. Mokbel believes, “Haynes’ mutation is caused by his government; this shows that America has destroyed itself by the terror it uses against other countries” (2013).

Shepard condemns the American policy that uses violent means to achieve alleged security and glory of the American nation. He ridicules the new policy that is built on mutating facts. Welch violates all privacy rules and uses every possible way to achieve governmental goals. He successfully finishes Frank’s programming. This is indicated by Frank entering the house dressed exactly like Welch “in suit and tie exactly like Welch’s and carrying an attaché case exactly like Welch’s” (*The God of Hell*, 2004). The transformations that happen to Frank’s behavior and appearance prove that Welch succeeds in his task. Frank sells his heifers and joins Welch’s league. Hopelessly, Emma tries to warn her husband against Welch, but he asserts that he is working for the government. She replies, “I don’t know what our government is anymore.” The government instills in the masses the love and fear of death at the same time. It manipulates people’s love to sacrifice their life for their country. Meanwhile, it also instigates public fear of death and feelings of

insecurity. It convinces the public opinion that national security could be attained through this definite fascist strategy.

Welch imposes oppressive ideals and values that negate characters' identity and autonomy. National security needs are used as an excuse that necessitates intrusion and limitation of personal privacy. The fascist regime succeeds in transforming Frank and Haynes into robot like subjects who are unable to think or choose. They fulfill orders blindly as a result of inhumane physical torture. The government representative usurped the couple's house by force. Regardless of Emma's resistance, the operation is achieved successfully. Emma loses her husband and is left behind in the farm. Felix Guattari believes, "what fascism set in motion yesterday continues to proliferate in other forms, within the complex of contemporary social space. A whole totalitarian chemistry manipulates the structures of state, political and union structures, institutional and family structures, and even individual structures" (1977).

Frank does not believe that their government could be a threat to his private life. However, Emma feels that menace when she meets Welch for the first time. Therefore, she doubts the intentions of the American government which is elected to protect its citizens not endanger their lives through invasive activities. She rejects the idea that her husband is talking about their government. She says, "What does that mean 'our government.'" Emma feels estranged after the aggressive practices that are exercised against her husband. Ironically, Frank is convinced that Welch acts for national needs and he knows more. Frank asserts, "He knows who the Enemy is." Therefore, they should obey his orders. National security threats are used as a cover to impose domestic surveillance policy. Welch is depicted as an invincible power, as he controls other people's lives. Nobody can stand against his desires or revolt against his dominance. Moreover, he has the power of knowledge. He knows the enemies of the state. He recurrently mentions the enemy during his conversation with Frank which refers to government manipulation of public paranoia in order to suppress public resistance to totalitarian practices. As a devilish character, he brings a curse on Frank's house. He turns its inhabitants into ghosts who are seen but not permitted

to be touched. The play asserts the fact that Bush government instigates a culture of fear that increases Americans' uncertainty and insecurity.

Shepard gives Welch's character hegemonic power in one of its fearful images. He threatens Haynes that he could use various means of torture to tame him. He alludes to torture means that rhyme with Haynes's name. He says, "'Haynes'—rhymes with 'pains,' or is it 'shames'? Possibly. Could even be 'blames.' The choices are endless.... 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?" (*The God of Hell*, 2004). Welch warns Haynes that he will undergo the same physical torture he endured before as a punishment for fleeing from the nuclear establishment. After that, the audience hears screams of Haynes who is tortured in the basement. Later, Welch comes on stage holding an electrical cord with a button that enables him to send electrical shocks to Haynes. Then, Haynes appears heavily breathing with an electrical cord attached to his pants. Shepard brings about this scene of torture as offensive as it may be to arouse audience's protest against a shameless totalitarian regime that uses patriotism and fear as its driving forces to manipulate and control public opinion. This scene urges the audience to revolt against the existing policy that trespasses all the laws. The playwright criticizes Americans' submissiveness and compliance through Welch's words. Welch says, "Sooner or later the price has to be paid" (*The God of Hell*, 2004). The play foresees future problematic situations in which citizens will be obliged to act and stand for liberty and freedom. Otherwise, they will pay the price of submissiveness.

*The God of Hell* puts into focus the life of a simple couple which is crushed by Welch's tyrannical power. His power to reprogram Haynes and Frank shows how helpless they are in front of this malignant traitor who terrorizes the populace. Moreover, he assumes no responsibility for the effects of his actions. He says, "We can do whatever we want, bobby-boy.... We don't have to answer to a soul" (*The God of Hell*, 2004). This means that people cannot stand against this omnipotent power. Guattari maintains, "By pretending that the individual has a negligible role in history, they would like to make us think that we can do nothing but stand

with hands tied in the face of the hysterical gesticulations or paranoiac manipulations of local tyrants and bureaucrats of every color” (1977).

Welch uses physical torture to tame and punish disobedient individuals. Beside his mysterious visit to the farm and his intrusive interrogation, he acts like a ghost. For example, Frank does not meet him although he entered the house and spoke to his wife. When Frank meets him, he is unable to detect the threat behind this strange guest. During the play, Shepard ridicules fascist practices that violate human rights laws. When Emma asks Welch if he is torturing Haynes. Welch replies, “Torturing! We’re not in a Third World nation here, Emma” (*The God of Hell*, 2004). Welch denies the fact that he tortures Haynes, although he uses electric shocks to punish him for escaping from the nuclear institution. He denies using physical violence like the Third World governments to discipline/ tame the citizens. Through this comparison between Bush’s government and the Third World government, Bush’s government seems crueler. Welch tries to convince Emma that these practices are not torture since they are used in the US. Emma replies, “This is absolute torture! I don’t care what country we’re in.” Whether torture is practiced in the US or in the Third World, it is still torture.

Finally, Frank is sent to Rocky Buttes. Emma is left alone in the house. She loses her husband and her life altogether. Welch describes Rocky Buttes as a resort with relaxing environment. He maintains, “You’re going to like Rocky Buttes, Frank.... Just like the Wild, Wild West. Not a tree in sight. Endlessly flat and lifeless” (*The God of Hell*, 2004). Welch turns the couple’s life into hell to atone for their desire to live a peaceful life in their farm. The play ends by achieving governmental plans to subdue the Midwestern American couple and end for good their peaceful life which is considered a kind of irresponsibility.

As the country is seized by this fascist rule, Frank yearns for the Cold War. He laments his serene life and seems nostalgic to old times when he enjoys that natural beauty during the Cold War. He says, “It’s times like this you remember the world was perfect once. Absolutely perfect. Powder blue skies. Hawks circling over the bottom fields. The rich smell of fresh-cut alfalfa laying in lazy wind rows. The gentle

bawling of spring calves calling to their mothers. I miss the cold War so much” (*The God of Hell*, 2004). The play laments Americans’ failure to stand for their liberty in front of a totalitarian regime. It warns American people against the workings of the hegemonic power that suppresses and negates citizens’ liberty.

*The God of Hell* puts into focus rural people naivety that makes them an easy prey of political power that renders them into mere submissive subjects. It deals with government intervention to abolish rural areas by state-grants. Rad believes:

Shepard has always been the nostalgic dramatist of the disappearing rural America, finding and dramatizing the fantastic in farming families’ lives.... *The God of Hell* laments the decay of old myths and traditional life-style; but, at the same time, it mocks the ignorance of those who fall prey to manipulative subjection into non-existent stereotypical positions as that of the old time farmer, the cowboy, the Patriot. (2009)

The play suggests that governmental plans for rural environment may turn it into a contaminated atmosphere that transforms the blessings of this place into a curse. This is quite clear at the end of the play as Emma’s green plants die and emanate blue flashes. Furthermore, the farm is abandoned, and Frank is deported to another place like a prisoner. Rad suggests, “The familiar archetypes of rural life are destroyed by the new myths and new perceptions of a culture of fear and paranoia, looking for an enemy that here is elusive and obscure” (2009).

The play uses symbols to assure the issues discussed in the play. For example, the character of Frank refers to the American citizen. The meaning of the name, which means free man, is used to affirm American citizens’ freedom to decide for themselves. Flags are used to indicate oppression rather than freedom. Moreover, the death of the plants at the end of the play signifies destruction and despair. These symbols altogether imply that Americans should defend their freedom, otherwise they will lose their rights to privacy and liberty.

*The God of Hell* criticizes patriotic paranoia and intimidating culture of fear. Nonetheless, it presents an incoherent argument. David Rooney believes that the play is "A tart slice of American absurdism.... the play trades knowingly in the current climate of fear. While its political satire is blunted by unsound plot logic" (2004). The play criticizes Americans' complacency, as they conform to Bush's administration ideology that annihilates public civil rights. Paul Hodgins believes, "It's filled with the urgency of a public plea against complacency in the face of perceived threats to the very roots of American democracy" (2006). However, *The God of Hell* is not of Shepard's best plays for its vague criticism of Bush administration.

#### **4- Conclusion:**

In brief, *The God of Hell* questions the definition of patriotism. Shepard uses the play as a means to undermine recent policy. It ridicules the attitude of Bush's administration toward nuclear accidents and contamination and its influence on American people. It satirizes ultra-patriotic claims that undermine personal privacy. Moreover, it highlights Abu-Gharib style of torture stories that trespasses human rights laws. Shepard criticizes American government intrusive plans that violate civil liberties. His play stimulates Americans' feelings of anger and rage against the autocratic policy of the administration. It motivates the audience to defend their rights and stand against oppressive measures that are based on fake national security claims. It urges American citizens to bear their responsibility toward democracy.

In *The God of Hell*, Shepard condemns the American policy that uses violence to achieve alleged security and glory of the American nation. He ridicules the new policy that is built on mutating facts. He satirizes domestic surveillance procedures that are used to impose a new construction of patriotism that violates privacy rules. It puts into focus a fascist policy that forces new values that instigate oppression. It presents American flag as a symbol of aggression. The play warns American people against the workings of the hegemonic power that suppresses citizens' liberty. It foresees future problematic situations in which citizens will be obliged to act and stand for freedom and civil rights.

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