difficult and draining process that actually goes into creating the authentic work of art.

The rise of Sam Shepard to the forefront of American drama and to the middle ranks of acknowledged world masters is not without its ironies; like love, the course of true drama never runs smooth. He has been the object of adulation of the new criticism (that is, loosely, critical strategies since the introduction of Levi-Strauss' structuralism in the late '50s) and numbers among his defenders Elizabeth Hardwick, Susan Sontag, Ruby Cohn and a host of lesser critical lights. On the other hand, he is the scourge of such luminaries as Walter Kerr ("a mere cult figure"), Tennessee Williams ("I wouldn't cross the street to see a Sam Shepard play"), and more recently and succinctly, Mimi Kramer in the October issue of *The New Criterion*, a leading conservative art journal.

Complicating all this is Shepard's commitment, at least in matters of literary or dramatic debate, to remain completely removed, apparently comfortable in his role as cipher. In his rare interviews he will talk about process, never product, and in such a seemingly offhand way that one leaves the conversation feeling that there's been a sort of fireside chat. About what? The background of a farmboy turned horseman? The people, places and things that make this country such a cornucopia of interesting detail? The nature of existence?

Finally, it is the very span of Shepard's thought that demands our engagement. The fact is that even in so-called casual conversation, he gets across to us on several levels at once. The ground of discourse is ever-changing, ever-provocative, which makes Shepard, at least in terms of personality, the inkblot of the '80s.

Sure, the American myths are "dead," but they are what we cling to.

Of all the objections to Shepard, Kramer's attack demands the most attention. Where Kerr conveniently, and with a characteristic lack of reasoned argument, dismisses Shepard, and Williams' final jibe is predictably emotional, Kramer's attack is sly, swift, and steeped in critical theory. Her strength is that she attacks Shepard by way of some of his more undisciplined and overenthusiastic supporters, principally Bonnie Marranca, editor of *Performing Arts Journal*'s collection of essays on Shepard, *American Dreams* (1981). Marranca is young and energetic and very bright—but her approach, while provocative, is basically collage. In the spirit of identification and enthusiasm, Marranca has written a piece called "Alphabetical Shepard, the Play of Words," a sort of A-to-Z romp through the 40-or-so plays at her disposal, which touches on, but does not begin to encompass, the critical approach of Barthes, Iser, Levi-Strauss, Frye, Lacan, *et al.*

Kramer's strategy is to place the burden of proof on Shepard's supporters, pointing out correctly that "nowhere in the book . . . is there a single word why Shepard merits all this attention." But Kramer is not to be let off the hook so easily. While attacking *True West* as a "sit-com," she displays a total ignorance of the whole of Shepard's middle period (basically, all the plays from 1967 to 1980). She concentrates on the early "excesses" without granting Shepard the courtesy of normal growth as an artist, and in her attack on the book she reveals a critical outlook that places her somewhere in the 19th century. By Mimi Kramer's standards, much of drama since Ibsen would be disqualified as "meaningful" art. Because she is after "meaning" in this inclusionary sense, and demands of art that it conform to Ethics and Morals as they are understood as part of the strivings of a "good life," she has inherent abhorrance for any school of criticism which implies that "taste," as a species of highly evolved intuition, is a starting point for looking at a work of art as an already integrated whole.

Shepard, like Elvis in his early musical material, is writing from a point of view in which the glue of the Judeo-Christian ethic has come undone. He doesn't assume this point of view consciously, of course, nor is it particularly new; the absurdists, among others, were there before him. But he was the first American playwright to find himself in the "cracks" as they appeared in this country's culture; and his response was far more subversive than that of, say, Albee or Kopit, who used the European method of showing us the absurdity, à la Beckett, Ionesco or Pinter.

Shepard presented a world which seems on the surface to make sense in the traditional Western (read "Occidental") way, but on closer examination is seen to use the logic that we associate with realism and naturalism to show us that the world doesn't make sense, can never make sense, will never make sense. Shepard did not "deconstruct" personality as some would claim—he *was* a deconstructed personality. When he finally turns to an approximation of realism in his later writing, he fascinates because we see that the "characters" he writes, while appearing whole, are actually fragmented, a succession of masks, and, omigod, they are us.

Despite this breakdown of Western sensibility, and despite the strain of violence, almost impossibly, Shepard presents his drama with humor and a basic good will. This is because Shepard writes about people we all know, and, as Americans, are comfortable and familiar with. And he writes about what we think, but don't say, what we want to do, but don't do, and what we desire, but don't get.

In the end, Shepard will survive both the new criticism and the traditionalists, for the simple reason that all first-class writing has the continuing ability to exhaust criticism. If references are now made to *Fool for Love* as a modern *Phaedre*, or *Curse of the Starving Class* as "an American *Cherry Orchard*," so be it. But *Fool for Love* is as different from *Phaedre* as *Phaedre* is from *Hippolytus*, and *Curse of the Starving Class* is as different from *The Cherry Orchard* as *The Cherry Orchard* is different from *Oblomov*. The one thing they all have in common is the bedrock of myth.

A culture's relation to its own myths is like the child's relation to the parents; when the parent goes away, as he or she eventually must, the child finds a substitute, and this substitute is endlessly replicated in weaker and weaker proportion. Finally, the memory becomes an empty icon, unable to fulfill the real demands of myth.

But myth is all we have. Even Beckett in his darkest moments is dealing with some dimension of the possibility of Christian redemption. Sure, the American myths are "dead," but they are what we cling to.

So when we send our rockets to the next civilization in space, let's include a few of the genuine artifacts of our age. *Fool for Love. Jailhouse Rock.* And throw in *Howl.* Rock and Roll Jesus with a Cowboy Mouth. □