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# The Effect of Rewinding in Sam Shepard's *La Turista* and *The Unseen Hand*

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## Introduction

Sam Shepard's two plays, *La Turista* (1967) and *The Unseen Hand* (1969), have something in common with each other. The most notable point is the structure represented by a strangely twisted repetition. In *La Turista*, two acts which have similar contents are inverted chronologically. And in *The Unseen Hand*, the lines spoken by one character are traced the other way around by another character. Shepard tries to create a kind of new speech by reversing the word order and even the spelling of the words. I would like to call this technique as the 'rewinding,' because it reminds us of rewinding videotape by remote control. We get the impression that Shepard's 'unseen' hand operates the events on the stage by remote control from the external space. That is, we can imagine that he tries to rewind the events on the stage by the remote-control device as if he watches the screen of the television.

This paper distinguishes itself from previous research by focusing specifically on the effect of the rewinding motif in these two plays. We can link this rewinding to the frequent bloodline theme in Shepard's plays. For the interest in the bloodline is inseparable from the concern about the past. In order to support this approach, I will refer to the common aspects to above-mentioned two plays, the influence of the "unseen" things and Shepard's peculiar use of words, especially the reversed word order. By verifying these two things, we can easily make up the

image that Shepard tries to control the events on the stage as the 'unseen' power.

### I. The Power of the "Unseen"

In this section, I take up the frequent appearance of "unseen" things. First, in *La Turista*, the couple, Kent and Salem, gets sick. In Act One, they show the symptoms of diarrhea. The Spanish title of the play, *La Turista*, alludes to the name of the disease that is said to be caught by American people who travel in Mexico. And in Act Two, Kent is troubled by insomnia. We can consider these diseases as the representations of the power of the "unseen" thing. In addition to this, we might take notice of the names of the couple, Kent and Salem. These names remind us of brandname cigarettes. We know that people's health is undermined by smoking without being noticed. From this standpoint, the names of the cigarettes also represent the power of the "unseen" thing.

Then, in *The Unseen Hand*, the word "unseen" in the title of the play is suggestive. After the suggestion of the title, this play deals with people who are influenced by the power of the "unseen" thing. The most peculiar character, Willie, is "the space freak" that has "a black handprint burned into the top of his skull" (*UH* 7). Willie insists that this handprint is burned by High Commission and that there is sharp pain if he tries to take a defiant attitude toward them or escape from them. He is very afraid of the power of this handprint and so comes to Blue in order to ask him for help. When he talks about this handprint, he begins to suffer from pain. He "screams phrases and words as though warding off some unseen terror" (*UH* 12; emphasis added).

And this handprint is taken up by Kid in the process of the play. Here I would like to note the setting of the play.

According to Blue, "[t]his here is Azusa, not New York City. 'A,' 'Z,' 'U,' 'S,' 'A.' 'Everything from "A" to "Z" in the USA.' Azusa." (*UH* 7-8). Although the name of the place is Azusa, it is obvious that the play's setting represents all America. A lot of strange things happen at such a strange place that obviously represents America. For example, strangely dressed Willie states that he comes from "nogoland," the planet in space. And then, a hundred-and-twenty-year-old Blue gets younger, and dead Cisco and Sycamore appear on the stage as the living beings. These things are clear evidence that the space on the stage is different from the natural world. In addition, this peculiar stage setting shows that Shepard takes a critical attitude toward civilized America. We can easily assume that America falls into confusion if American people believe blindly their Almighty. Shepard tries to show the difficult situation of America in the future. The planet's name, "nogoland," seems to mean that America will lose sight of their future and go to ruin the same way as the planet itself.

Sam Shepard shows a strong interest in the power of "unseen" things. We can find the similar reference in his family plays, especially in *Curse of the Starving Class*. In this play, the mother, Ella, talks about the "curse" of her family as follows:

It's a curse. I can feel it. It's invisible but it's there. It's always there. It comes onto us like nighttime. Every day I can feel it. Every day I can see it coming. And it always comes. Repeats itself. . . . In the air. We're surrounded with it. It's bigger than government even. It goes forward too. We spread it. We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us. (*CSC* 173-4; emphasis added)

The word, "invisible," also shows that Shepard is interested in the power of the "unseen" thing. Of course, we can consider this

quotation as a statement that shows the unavoidable threat of the blood relationship. But, when we look at the sentence, "It's bigger than government even," we can consider that "the invisible curse" in connection to American civilization and that Shepard tries to blame it somehow. In addition, the image of the 'unseen' power that is right near to the objects and influences on them is similar to the influence of the author, Shepard, to his works. That is, he plays the role of someone pulling the strings behind the scenes, as the 'unseen' existence. This image is linked with the image that Shepard's 'unseen' hand operates the remote-control device and rewinds the events on the stage.

## II. The Magician with the Words

Let us consider how skillfully Shepard uses words or phrases in his works. In almost all his career as a dramatist, he thinks out how to use words in his plays. Of course, it is natural that the dramatists work hard to select the words and phrases when they write plays, because the plays are based on lines, or words. Here I would like to show Shepard's unique way to use words by focusing on the act of naming and the frequent use of monologue in *La Turista* and *The Unseen Hand*.

As for the act of naming, as mentioned earlier, the Spanish title, *La Turista*, has two meanings, the tourist and diarrhea. This title has a close link with the contents of the play. The couple, Kent and Salem, go on a trip in Mexico actually, and are taken ill with a diarrhea during the trip. When we take these things into consideration, this naming gives a concise account of what is written in the play. And, as I have mentioned before, the names of the couple, Kent and Salem, are taken from cigarettes. By using the names of the cigarettes, Shepard tries to criticize the whole America. Because the cigarettes are found everywhere in the country, we can easily link the cigarettes to the American

situation. Added to this, in *The Unseen Hand*, the name of the place, Azusa, represents the Almighty of the America. Here we can also see Shepard's criticism of the civilized country, America, influenced by the "unseen" things.

Let us consider the following quotation in order to think of the other characters in *La Turista*:

*She [SALEM] opens it [the door] and DOC, played by the actor who played WITCHDOCTOR, is standing in the doorway with his son, SONNY, played by the actor who played BOY. (LT 277)*

What the passage makes clear at once is that the same actor plays the role of Doc in Act One and Witchdoctor in Act Two, or the role of Sonny in Act One and Boy in Act Two. The name Doc indicates doctor, and it resembles the name Witchdoctor. And these two characters both play an important role in each act and try to help Kent who catches disease. Then, we should pay attention to the strange way of address in which Salem calls to Sonny and Boy in each act. In Act One, she calls to Boy, "Look sonny" (LT 266), and, in Act Two, she calls to Sonny, "Boy! You should be a doctor, Sonny" (LT 279). Here we can notice the reversed structure of the relationship between the names and the callings. Shepard makes Salem call the names of Boy and Sonny inversely and tries to use the names and the callings effectively. And we should reconfirm the fact that Boy appears only in Act One, and Sonny only in Act Two. So this reversed callings support the main point of this paper, the reversed structure of the acts in *La Turista*.

Furthermore, we are thrown into confusion when we notice the existence of another character whose name is Son. He appears in Act One as a pupil of the Witchdoctor. The name Son reminds us of the name Sonny in Act Two. This analysis of naming is

weakened by the fact that Boy and Son who both appear in Act One resemble each other appearance. However, because of this similarity in appearance, I would like to consider Boy and Son as a single character in my essay. In other words, we should think of the similarity between the names Sonny and Son when we take notice of Shepard's device of the characters' naming. But we can also notice his attempts in Salem's callings and the strange relationship between Boy and Sonny that is found in the fact that both are played by the same actor.

Moreover, I think about monologues used by several characters in Shepard's plays. For example, in *Curse of the Starving Class*, the father, Weston, has a monologue about the castration of the lamb in Act Three. Or in *Fool for Love*, Eddie and his sister, May, talk about their father, and their monologues help to work out a kind of collaborated narration about their father's life. Besides, a short play, *Killer's Head*, is a condemned criminal's monologue. He speaks of various things in his head one after another while he waits for the moment of the death penalty.

In *La Turista*, there are several characters that have monologues. Salem makes a long speech when she tries to put Boy up for auction toward the audience in Act One. And both Witchdoctor in Act One and Doc in Act Two try to cure Kent's diseases and speak long lines alone. Or in the last scene, Kent talks alone like a sleepwalker. These monologues include somehow magical elements and give a peculiar impression to the audience.

However, let us look at the most impressive monologue in *The Unseen Hand*. We should see Kid's lines:

Shut up! Shut up! I'll kill you all! I'll kill you! This is my home! Don't make fun of my home. I was born and raised here and I'll die here! I love it! That's something you can't understand! I love Azusa! . . . And you creeps aren't going to

take that away from me. You're not going to take that away from me because I'll kill you first! I'll kill every one of you if it's the last thing I do! (UH 33)

And, we see Willie's lines spoken immediately after these lines.

Od I gniht tsal eht sti fi uoy foe no yreve llik lli. Tsrif ouy llik lli esuaceb em morf yawa that ekat ot gniog ton eruoy. Em morf yawa tahtekat ot gniog tnera speerc uoy dna. . . . Asuza evol i. Dnatsrednu tnac uoy gnihtemos staht. Ti evol i. Ereh desiar dna nrob saw i. Emoh ym fo nuf ekam tnod. Emoh ym si siht. Uoy llik lli. Lla uoy llik lli. Pu thus! Pu thus! Free! Free! Free! Free! Free! Free! (UH, 34-35)

When we compare these two quotations, we can notice that Willie's lines have the reversed structure of Kid's lines. The word order and even the spellings of the words are reversed. Besides, immediately after these conversations, there is the replacement of the positions between Kid and Willie. Before this scene, Willie, who has a burned handprint on his head, suffers from the pain that he says is caused by the "unseen" power. But, at the same time as the lines are reversed, the handprint on Willie's head vanishes, and it appears on Kid's head. And then Kid begins to suffer from the pain of unknown origin. Kid's reversed lines play the similar role as Witchdoctor's monologue that includes magical elements in Act One of *La Turista*. Furthermore, the repetition of "Free!" in the above quotation represents Willie's situation. He is released from the pain by the "unseen" power and is in fact set free. In this respect, we see that Shepard sticks to the use of the words effectively.

As we see up to this point, Sam Shepard extraordinarily sticks to how effectively he uses words as if he is a magician with words. He uses lines that have a reversed structure, or he frequently uses monologues in his plays. That is, when Shepard



writes his plays, he sticks to the words and succeeds in giving an impact on the audience.

### III. The Effect of Rewinding

As for the structure of the plays, there are two important aspects to *La Turista* and *The Unseen Hand*. They are the repetition that is strangely twisted on purpose and chronologically reversed structure. These ways give us the impression that Shepard, as a 'unseen' power, tries to rewind the passage of time on the stage by a remote-control device.

At the beginning of *The Unseen Hand*, Blue "is slightly drunk and talks to an imaginary driver in the front seat. . . . He slowly climbs out of the back seat onto the stage, then reaches into the back and pulls out a battered guitar with broken strings" (*UH* 5). At the last scene, Sycamore, Blue's little brother, "stares at KID's face and slowly becomes physically older and older. He turns to the Chevy and talks to an imaginary driver as BLUE did in the beginning. . . . He opens the door of Chevy and slowly climbs in the back seat" (*UH* 38). In this scene, Sycamore does the same action as Blue does at the opening scene. However, the sequence of the action is reversed. That is to say, Blue appears from the car talking to the imaginary driver at the opening scene, and Sycamore vanishes into the car talking to an imaginary driver at the last scene. Although these actions include the elements of repetition, Shepard does not describe these scenes as simple repeat. We should pay attention to the fact that the sequence of the action is reversed. These two reversed actions remind us of the image of rewinding the videotape. When we see Sycamore's movement, we gain the impression we watch a rewinding picture of Blue's movement at the opening scene.

Here again, I treat the above-mentioned quotations of Kid's and Willie's lines in *The Unseen Hand*. In this scene, there is

replacement of positions between these two persons. It seems clear that there is the similar replacement of positions like this between Blue and Sycamore. So, according to these things, this play has a closed structure at first glance. However, the name of the place that Willie who seems to be released from pain says to go back to is "nogoland." This name reminds us of a situation that leads nowhere. This naming of the place shows the uncertainty of the future and the fact that Shepard specially sticks to the past. In addition to this, Kid who gains the handprint of Willie seems to come to suffer from pain after this. And so, the existence of Sycamore who takes the same position as Blue at the opening scene implies that the similar suffering should be repeated in various ways forever. That is, the ending of the play returns to its beginning with little change, and the situation this play describes continues as if it is an endless cycle.

Furthermore, in *The Unseen Hand*, we should notice another point about Shepard's treatment of the past. As I have mentioned before, Blue is supposed to be 120 years old and his brothers, Sycamore and Cisco, are described as dead persons. Then, Blue gets younger at the same time as the appearance of the strange existence, Willie, and Sycamore and Cisco rise from the dead. And then, they long for their past evil things and talk about them. According to what they say, they once became famous as the blackguards. They suddenly experience a yearning for their powerful past as the real thing in the strange space on the stage. Here, we can also see evidence that Shepard sticks to a description of the past. However, as the quotation shows, Sycamore gets older rapidly in the end. This reference shows the direction to the future in the chronological meaning. On the other hand, Sycamore's actions trace Blue's actions in a reversed way, and this directs for the past. All of this amounts to saying that here we see the confusion of the two directly-opposed vectors, one is

for the past and the other is for the future. This device has a strong impact on the audience.

Then we turn our eyes to the structure of *La Turista*. At the beginning of Act Two, Shepard shows the detail explanation of the stage setting. It will be clear that there are some evident differences between the settings of Act One and Act Two. Examples of this are the change of the places as the stage setting from America to Mexico, and the change of the tones of the color used from bright to dark. However, in terms of the structure, the two acts have a similar setting. In these two acts, the couple, Kent and Salem, appear, and are taken ill while they are traveling. Then, the Witchdoctor or the Doc (doctor) comes and tries to cure the couple's diseases. Furthermore, there is evidence to show this. One is the fact that there is a similarity between the names of the characters such as Witchdoctor and Doc (doctor) or Son and Sonny. And the other is the fact that these characters are played by the same actors in the two acts. So we can notice that these two acts are a strangely twisted repetition. Here, I will focus on the fact that Act One and Act Two are repeated but are inverted chronologically in *La Turista*.

The evidence for the reversed structure of this play is Salem's statements. In Act Two, Salem repeats the similar statements that imply a trip to Mexico again and again, as can be seen in the following quotation:

SALEM. Kent. We can take off tomorrow if you want.

SONNY. Why Mexico? Why not Canada, where you'd be less noticeable?

SALEM. That's right, Kent. In Mexico they're all dark. They'd notice us right off the bat.

DOC. Epecially with a corpse.

SONNY. They'd notice a corpse anywhere.

SALEM. What do you mean? (*LT 287; emphasis added*)

It is noticeable that Salem makes the above statement in Act Two. Because the audience has already seen Act One, which is set in the hotel in Mexico, they cannot help being reminded of Act One when they hear Salem's lines on their traveling to Mexico. That is, by Salem's statements, the audience guesses that the sequence of the two acts is reversed chronologically. This also reminds us of the image of rewinding the passage of time on the stage.

#### IV. The Inclination to the Past

In order to consider the meaning of the last scene of *La Turista*, we should pay attention to the Doc's line in the above-mentioned quotation. His line "Especially with a corpse" seems to mean that what Salem takes with her is "the corpse." Bearing in mind that she is going on a trip to Mexico with her husband, Kent, it seems natural to judge that Doc tries to imply that Kent is a dead person. When the audiences hear this line, they cannot understand what it means at once. But, if we believe Doc's line, the structure of the play can be interpreted in a quite different way. If it is true that Kent is dead, we are suspicious of the existence of the others on the stage. When we see the whole career of Shepard as a dramatist, we can note a similar situation. In his plays, characters often appear as vague existences, and it is difficult to distinguish the real from the fiction.

In *La Turista* too, it is difficult to point out what is real on the stage. We should discuss the moments that characters break the borderline between the stage and the audience seats. In Act Two, Salem tries to put Boy up for auction, or Salem and Sonny run after Kent who tries to escape from them in the audience. Judged from the above, the borderline between the stage and the audience is not clear. Besides this, the most remarkable example of the breaking of borderlines is seen in the final scene of *La*

*Turista*.

SALEM and SONNY make a lunge for KENT, who grabs onto a rope and swings over their head. He lands on the ramp behind DOC and runs straight toward the upstage wall of the set and leaps right through it, leaving a cut-off silhouette of his body in the wall. The lights dim out as the other three stare at the wall. (LT 298; emphasis added)

At this scene, Kent runs around the stage and breaks through the upstage wall at last. He vanishes from the stage and leaves his cut-off silhouette of his body. This fact shows that the borderline of the space on the stage is broken in a plain way. Here, Shepard makes Kent break the wall that is considered not to be broken through on the stage. So the audience is confused when they see this final scene.

The critic, Charles G. Whiting, refers to the last scene of *La Turista* as follows:

[I]t [*La Turista*] announces so many of the great Shepard themes, all linked to the integrity of the self: the family as roots and the family as the prison; the value of real experience versus the sterility of order and neatness . . . ; victimization by others; and above all the failed escape, failed because man is finally limited by what he is already or what he has become. . . . (Whiting 416; emphasis added)

What the passage makes clear at once is that Shepard tries to describe a man who fails to escape from something in *La Turista*. The image of the good-for-nothing men is often seen in Shepard's family plays. In addition to this, in *La Turista*, the chronologically inverted structure of the two acts is a matter of importance. Though the audiences view Act One first as a matter of course, the events in Act One actually occur after the events

in Act Two. So when they finish watching the whole play, they can guess where Kent goes after he breaks through the wall. In chronological sequence, he should go to Mexico with Salem the next day, as we have seen. That is to say, Kent does well to escape from the present situation at first glance, but he returns to the opening scene of this play and cannot escape from the present situation. In this play, the image of a man who cannot escape from his present situation is most ironically described. So, by using the structure repeated in the strangely twisted account, Shepard represents the difficulty of escaping from one's own present situation, and people should be overwhelmed by the power of the cycle repeated in human lives. Here, Shepard uses the description of the past effectively. By treating the past as the 'false' terminal point of the man who tries to escape from the present situation, Shepard makes a success of describing the difficulty to escape from the cycle of human life.

In his later family plays, he shows his interest in the past as a frequent description of the blood relationship. For example, in *Buried Child*, the main character, Vince, sees his ancestors' faces at the front glass of the car. This scene can also be seen as a video-tape rewinding technique. We can consider the front glass of the car as the screen of the film or television. And the faces of Vince's ancestors appear on the screen in a chronologically reversed sequence, as though we see the rewinding image of the videotape. Like this, Vince tries to trace his own bloodline toward the past. This movement shows the similar structure as the inverted acts and rewinding image in above-mentioned two plays, *La Turista* and *The Unseen Hand*.

The critic, Martin Tucker, analyzes *La Turista* as follows:

As the doctor says in the second act, he [Shepard] is not interested in how the facts stack up, but in how he can get

out of this situation and move into another story. . . . His [the doctor's] remark . . . is a plea to leave the past behind him, to go beyond details that may assess past responsibility but do not pay any address to present alternatives. At this point, in the play and in Shepard's evolving view of life, Shepard seems to want to transcend the past by fleeing it. Later, in his family plays, he will realize that only by journeying through it, in the immediately on recollection, will he be able to move forward. (Tucker 55; emphasis added)

Here, Tucker points out that through the description of the character, Doc, Shepard shows only his idea of the man who tries to escape from the present situation and avoids thinking about the past at the time of his writing of *La Turista*. That is, Tucker insists that Shepard's interest was only in how to break the present situation.

However, also in *La Turista* and *The Unseen Hand*, Shepard shows his interest in the past in his own way. As I have mentioned before, Shepard tries to treat the past in a peculiar way in these two plays. In *The Unseen Hand*, the word order of Willie's lines are reversed, in contrast to Kid's lines that are done immediately before Willie's lines. Furthermore, the movement of Sycamore at the last scene has the reversed vector in contrast to Blue's movement at the opening scene. These examples are explained effectively by using an image of rewinding the videotape. Moreover, in *La Turista*, Act One and Act Two are presented in a chronologically reversed sequence. All these things make it clear that Shepard had already stuck to the description of the past at the time of writing these two plays. In both plays, there are some characters who cannot escape from the present situation. For example, Kent in *La Turista* tries to escape and breaks through the upstage wall, but, as we know, he will return to the

opening scene on the next day when he is scheduled to go to Mexico with his wife, Salem. Or, Blue and Sycamore in *The Unseen Hand* cannot answer Willie's plea for help and they themselves experience the strangely repeated situation at the opening scene and in the final scene. At the end, Sycamore does the same movement as Blue at the opening scene in a reversed way.

### Conclusion

The most remarkable feature in the two plays, *La Turista* and *The Unseen Hand*, is that both plays use the twisted repetition and the inverted acts and scenes or the rewinding image effectively. When we notice these devices, we can see that Shepard is interested in how to describe the past or, moreover, the bloodline theme. He evidently sticks to his own past. This appears clearly in his plays, especially in the family plays. In them, he often describes people who cannot make progress and are bound by the past. So we must consider these descriptions as the clear evidence of Shepard's most remarkable interest in the past.

It should be concluded, from what has been said above, that Shepard's interest in the past has already been seen in the two plays, *La Turista* and *The Unseen Hand*. These plays come before his family plays that are clearly about the inclination to the past because they treat the bloodline theme. To trace one's bloodline indicates the interest in his own past. And so, it is useful to consider how the past is described in these two plays, *La Turista* and *The Unseen Hand*, when we discuss the meaning of Shepard's plays as a whole. He shows his interest in the past in the various ways consistently in his career as a dramatist.



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