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# "Pretending" as a Functionless Security Blanket in *A Lie of the Mind* and *States of Shock*

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Sam Shepard frequently refers to injured people or their wounds in his plays. In this paper, I would like to verify the meaning of the behavior of these injured people to bundle themselves up in a kind of cloth such as the blanket or the national flag. By doing this, they try to protect themselves from dangerous situation, but the clothes are worn-out and don't work well as a "security blanket". I also point out that the other defensive measures of injured people, telling lies and "pretending", don't function well as a "security blanket", either. This is because the truth about past events is exposed as the play proceeds and, as a result, the characters have to be faced with difficult problems. In this way, Shepard hides the secret of the characters and intrigues the audience till the last scene of his plays. A secret in the past is treated in his three plays, *Buried Child* (BC), *A Lie of the Mind* (LM), and *States of Shock* (SS). The characters in them tell lies or "pretend" something again and again in order to hide their secret somehow. Here I would like to concentrate on Shepard's frequent use of the words, "pretend" or "pretending" in his plays, and expose his characters' reaction to the past.

## Metaphors of Injury and Cloth

There are various diseases and physical injuries in Shepard's plays. For example, in *La Turista* (1968), the husband and the wife traveling to Mexico suffer from the disease with the symptom of diarrhea that is represented in Spanish title of the play.

It is notable that these injuries of the characters are limited to the two regions, the legs and the head. Here, the latter, the injuries to the head, includes the speech defect because of the shock to the brain. The example of the former is Bradley, the second son in *Buried Child* (1978), who uses an artificial leg because he lost a leg by accident when he used the chain saw. Or, Frankie, the second son in *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), cannot walk because he was shot in his leg by mistake by Beth's father, Baylor. That is, some characters cannot "walk" or "talk" in these plays.

The eldest son in *Buried Child*, Tilden, is a plain example of the latter symptom, the speech defect. He suffers from mental disease and cannot speak well, although the cause of it is not explained. In *A Lie of the Mind*, Beth, the wife, is hit on her head by her husband, Jake, and has a speech defect. In the first half of the play, her words don't make sense like "Saah—thah—Jaah—thuh—saah—saah—saah—saah—" (LM 4), or "Who fell me? Iza—Iza name? Iza name to come. Itz—Itz—Inza man. Inza—name. Aall—aall—all—a love. A love" (LM 6). And Jake assumes Beth to be dead by his blow and cannot talk well due to the shock caused by his violent behavior. Stubbs in *States of Shock* (1991), who returns from the battlefield, uses the wheelchair in the first scene of the play and cannot walk. In addition, he is not able to talk well in the first half of the play. That is, he can neither "walk" nor "talk", so he is the plainest example of the two deficiencies. In this context, the speech defect of the characters does not mean that they lose their language ability completely but that they cannot keep their former language ability and cannot talk well due to damage of some kind.

These frequent images of the injuries accompany the violent actions. In *Buried Child*, Shepard makes the causes of Tilden's disease vague and the cause of Bradley's injury is his own

mistake. However, in *A Lie of the Mind*, the causes are the husband's violence to his wife or being shot by the other character. Furthermore, in *States of Shock*, Stubbs was bombed on the battlefield. This shows the cruel result of violence most clearly. In these two plays, we can see Shepard's criticism of the devastation of American society full of violence.

The fact that the victims of these violent actions are all men except Beth is noticeable, although there are few women who are the main character in Shepard's plays. These male victims tend to bundle themselves up in clothes, especially in the blankets, and fight over the ownership of the clothes. The blankets often appear in Shepard's plays and symbolize male weakness. In *Buried Child*, the father, Dodge, his two sons, Tilden and Bradley, and Tilden's son, Vince, eagerly struggle to get the position on the couch covered with the blanket. We can regard this struggle as a battle between men over the position as the patriarch. Though this position is settled by Dodge in the first half of this play, Vince who is admitted to be Dodge's heir occupies this position on the couch at the end of the play. Then the movements of the blanket show men's longings to own something. In addition to this, we can see the male efforts to persist in the traditional patriarchy somehow. The reason of this seems that they feel the relief when they are in the system of the patriarchy, for it sets men at the center and the top of the family hierarchy.

We get on to the detailed analysis of a series of the movements of the blanket in *A Lie of the Mind*. Here, I check them in Jake's parents' home at Act Three in particular. At Scene Two, Frankie whose leg was injured by an accidental shot by Baylor, Beth's father, sleeps in the blanket. Then Baylor robs this blanket from Frankie. We can see that these two men oppose to each other by the fact that Baylor shoots Frankie with

his rifle. When Frankie blames him for this shot, he says, "Don't go gettin' any fancy notions about suing me. I had every right to shoot you [Frankie]. You were on my land" (*LM* 108-9; emphasis added). The sentence with the emphasis, "You were on my land", shows the idea that they don't care about shooting strangers who invade their own land. This also indicates their confidence in the ownership and their awareness of self-defense.

Then, Frankie retakes the blanket from Baylor and bundles himself up when he notices Beth is descending from the second floor. Before this, Beth pushes Frankie, her husband's younger brother, down in a state of delirium because of her husband's violence. When he sees the figure of Beth, he pulls the blanket over himself and tries to hide his body and to escape from the crisis. Here, for the male characters, the blanket seems to be a good security against their fear and anxiety. Furthermore, men who take the blanket shudder from cold in the house again and again in this play. For example, Baylor is frozen at his legs because he goes to hunt deer in snowy day and makes his wife, Meg, care them. On the other hand, women don't express any complaint about the coldness of the house. Like this, only men complain about the cold of the house and show weakness of mind and call for the blanket. This shows that the house isn't a comfortable space for men any longer.

Baylor retakes the blanket again at the end of Scene Two and bundles himself up in it till the beginning of Scene Three. At this moment, he notices that Mike, Beth's brother, wraps his rifle with the national flag. And Baylor rages against this. Men struggle to get possession of this national flag, too. He points out that Mike uses it as if it were "a grease rug" (*LM* 124). Here we see the generation gap between Baylor and Mike in the treatment of the national flag. This is shown in the following quotation.

BAYLOR . . . What're you doin' with that rifle? What's that wrapped around it?

MIKE. It's just a flag. He [Jake] had it on him. He had it all wrapped around him. I wanted Beth to come out so he could —

BAYLOR. (*Pause. Taking a step toward MIKE, kicking blanket away*) It's not just a flag. That's the flag of our nation. Isn't that the flag of our nation wrapped around that rifle? (*LM 123*)

According to this quotation, Baylor's generation shows respect for the national flag, although the younger men do not. Baylor also says, "What do ya [Mike] think yer doin', using the American flag like a grease rug" (*LM 124*). Baylor then says, "It's the same color it always was. They haven't changed it, have they? Maybe added a star or two but otherwise it's exactly the same" (*LM 123*). Here we see the fetishism of Baylor's generation about the national flag. This links to their risky belief in American power.

In this scene, Baylor is crazy about folding the national flag and leaves the blanket. Beth catches him off guard, takes the blanket from him, goes to Frankie with it, and covers Frankie with it. But at the next moment, she clutches the blanket quickly when Mike, her brother, tries to take her outside of the house. So, she goes to the porch outside of the house with the blanket and meets Jake, her husband, there. For Beth, Jake is a dangerous person because he hit her before, and therefore, her automatic response to hold the blanket shows her self-defense instinct. This also means that the characters regard the blanket as a defensive measure.

Then Beth meets Jake, but she doesn't recognize him and returns to the inside of the house. Again Baylor robs the blanket from her as follows. "*BAYLOR snatches the blanket out of*

BETH's hand and heads for the chair. He tosses the blanket on the chair but keeps hold of the flag" (*LM* 126). At this moment, Baylor has two kinds of cloth, the blanket and the national flag, all to himself for the first time in this play. However, after this scene, Baylor concentrates on folding the national flag in a traditional way with his wife Meg and leaves the blanket again. While they try to fold the flag, Jake comes into the house and says to Beth, "These things—in my head—lie to me. Everything lies. Tells me a story. Everything in me lies. But you. You stay. You are true. I know you now. You are true. I love you more than this life. You stay. You stay with him [Frankie]. He's my brother" (*LM* 128-29). Then he leaves the house covering himself with the blanket.

As a result, the owners of the blanket and the flag are exchanged here. The national flag was at first in Jake's house, now Baylor keeps it in Beth's home. And instead Jake carries away the blanket from Beth's house. We can see such a change in the owners of something in *States of Shock*, too. The wheelchair Stubbs uses at the beginning scene of this play is occupied by Colonel after Stubbs suddenly seems to recover from his walking disability. Stubbs's lap is covered with the blanket and there is a mark of the national flag on the wheelchair. In this way, the wheelchair also shows a change in the owners and the alternation of generations like clothes. However, the relationship between Stubbs and Colonel is complicated. At the beginning of this play, Stubbs is said to be the friend of Colonel's son who was killed in the war. According to Colonel's story, Stubbs and Colonel's son were bombarded back to back together on the battlefield and Colonel's son died and Stubbs was badly wounded. But we gradually have doubts about this story and get the impression that it is not his friend but Stubbs himself that is the son of Colonel, in fact.

So we see that the older generation of Baylor and Colonel loses its prestige. Baylor declares the authority of the national flag and sticks to the traditional way of folding it, but this idea is now old-fashioned. Colonel who apparently has no physical problem suddenly sits down on the wheelchair instead of Stubbs. This represents his aging and weakness. The inescapable doom of the alternation of the generations is indicated by the changes of the owners of the national flag and the wheelchair. This links with the abasement of the patriarch, for the blankets that seem to be the symbols of the patriarch and are scrambled among men are all worn-out. Although the traditional support, the patriarch, is the only way for men to self- assert, it doesn't work well. Despite this, they stick to the system and desperately struggle to grab the blanket or the wheelchair.

### **Telling Lies and "Pretending"**

In this section, I would like to consider the frequent uses of the lies and "pretending" in *A Lie of the Mind* and *States of Shock*. First of all, I check the lies in *A Lie of the Mind*, for we can easily find that this play's theme is telling lies, according to the word, "lie", in its title. Jake says to his mother, "Why do you think men lie to woman?" (*LM* 37), and blame his father for telling a lie to his mother. Or when Mike takes Jake along with him to Beth's parents' home to meet Beth, he instructs Jake to say the same phrases as their training, but Jake says quite different things though he once accepts the offer and, as a result, makes Mike angry. Moreover, Mike himself tells lies many times. For example, when Frankie comes to their house in order to meet Beth, he hides this visit to Beth at first. At the last scene, he tells Jake that his wife, Beth, and his brother, Frankie, sleep together. As a result, this lie leads to the end of the relationship of the couple, Jake and Beth.

The motif of telling lies and that of "pretending" have something in common in this play. The words "pretend" or "pretending" are frequently used and have a strong effect on the audience about the performance. The frequent uses of these words are shown in the following quotation.

FRANKIE. Well, it was just a play, wasn't it?

JAKE. Yeah, a play. That's right. Just a play. "Pretend." That's what she [Beth] said. "Just pretend." I know what they were doing! ... I know what that acting shit is all about. They try to "believe" they're the person. Right? Try to believe so hard they're the person that they actually think they become the person. So you know what that means don't ya?

FRANKIE. What?

JAKE. They start doin' all the same stuff the person does! ... They start acting that way in real life. Just like the character.... (LM 9-10; emphasis added)

In this scene, as the husband, Jake, looks at the situation of Beth, the actress, who is ready to go to the rehearsal and dresses up, he comes to believe that she cheats on him with her stage partner. He confuses the fictional world on the stage and the real world, and considers the love affair on the stage to be the real one. As a result of this, he hits her and injures her badly in a fit of jealousy. This is the suitable example to show the influence of the performance represented by the word, "pretend", in Beth's lines to the real world. The performance, the "pretending", is the gesture that connects the real world with the fictional world. These phrases are used frequently in this play.

Pretend. Because it fills me. Pretending fills. Not empty. Other. Ordinary. Is no good. Empty. Ordinary is empty. Now, I'm like the man. (*Pumps her chest up, closes her*

*fists, sticks her chin out and struts in the shirt*) Just feel like the man. Shirt brings me a man. I am a shirt man. Can you [Frankie] see? Like Father. You can see? Like brother.... Pretend to be. Like you. Between us we can make a life. You could be the woman. You be.... You could pretend to be in love with me. With my shirt. You love my shirt. This shirt is a man to you. You are my beautiful woman. You lie down. (LM 75)

These are Beth's lines about "pretending". Here she insists on the influence of costumes to the person who wears them. That is, the things covering people's body, such as clothes, telling lies, and pretending, operate upon them strongly.

Then, we move on to check the lies in *States of Shock*.

STUBBS. You had my name changed! YOU INVENTED MY DEATH!

COLONEL. That simply isn't true, Stubbs. There was some mix-up. Some computer scramble. I don't know where you get these ideas.

STUBBS. No "next of kin." No "next of kin." A "friend of the family," they told me. That's what they told me!

COLONEL. It was simpler all the way around.

STUBBS. Some mysterious "friend of the family." A friend of a friend of my father's friend. (SS 44; emphasis added)

We have to notice the first sentence with the emphasis if we admit Stubbs's story is true. Colonel's story before this comes to be a fiction, that is, he tells a lie about Stubbs's death. As has been mentioned, we should have doubts about the relationship between Stubbs and Colonel. According to Stubbs's statements in the quotation, their relationship shows different aspects. Considering Shepard's career, we can accept that they are actually father and son. So, the person who died at the battlefield

is not Colonel's son but his friend, and so, the real son of Colonel is Stubbs. Shepard describes Stubbs as a person who has memory defects and tries to mislead the audience. He shows the relationship between two men in a complicated way. Furthermore, also in this play, there are some references to the performance, or the "pretending". Colonel tries to make Stubbs catch the situation at the moment of the bombing, the moment of his son's death according to Colonel's story, and force Stubbs to perform the behavior over and over. He isn't satisfied with Stubbs's performance and repeats the instruction many times. As has been mentioned, we can see that Colonel's story is doubtful, so the behavior of Colonel takes the role as a stage direction to implant a wrong memory in Stubbs and, as a result, mislead the audience in the first half of the play.

Then, we put these "pretending" and the above-mentioned physical disability and diseases together. First of all, we pick on Stubbs who embodies the two symptoms, the disability in "walking" and "talking" at the same time. He is a soldier who returns from the battlefield and appears in a wheelchair at the beginning of the play, and doesn't talk very much with Colonel who pushes the wheelchair. Then what is the meaning of the fact that Stubbs who seems to have difficulty in walking suddenly stands up in the middle of the play? Here I would like to notice that he seems to recover the two symptoms. This is the first time in Shepard's plays that the character that cannot walk appears to recover in the middle of the play. In *Buried Child*, Bradley who loses his one leg doesn't recover, and in *A Lie of the Mind*, Frankie who was shot in his leg doesn't recover and cannot resist Beth's behavior to push him down. So, we can consider that the fact that Stubbs stands up in the play has some particular meaning. My suggestion is that Stubbs only "pretends" to be unable to walk from the beginning of the plot. The reason for this is

that the evidence of his disability to walk is the fact that he sits on the wheelchair. When the audience sees the situation of Stubbs in the wheelchair, they regard him as a person who cannot walk, and they are misled in the first half of the play. This is Shepard's device to make the play more interesting.

Here, I would like to expose the fundamental lie or "pretending" in *A Lie of the Mind*. I explore the possibility that the speech defects of Beth and Jake are just their "pretending". As has been mentioned, we have doubts about Stubbs's ability to walk. In the same way, we should check his speech defect. The speech defects include the chance for the patients to "pretend". For we cannot judge whether the symptoms of them are true or not except for the patient himself. Furthermore, in *A Lie of the Mind*, Beth says to Frankie, who cannot walk as a result of being shot his leg, "I would rather walk than talk" (LM 73). According to this sentence, we should think that "walk" and "talk" link closely in this play. Then, we are in doubt about the speech defects of Beth and Jake. There is some evidence about this doubt. First of all, we hear Lorraine, Jake's mother, say as follows:

He's [Jake] just playacting. Used to do this all the time when he didn't get his own way. . . . It's all pretend. He just wants some attention, that's all. (LM 24; emphasis added)

Lorraine says the above statements to Jake when she sees what he looks like when he reckons he killed his wife. According to Lorraine, Jake "pretends" when he is in the trouble. In fact, at this moment, he is at a loss thinking of himself as his wife's killer. Then, Beth finds that her head is covered with the bandage and insists that her head injury is the result of the brain operation that her brother, Mike, forced her to have. In addition, she maintains again and again that she has no brain. The audiences

think that the cause of her injury is her husband's violence. So they have no conception of what she means and are confused. Besides, when she takes off the bandages, there is no injury to her head. This is described in the stage direction like this, "*She [Beth] bends her head forward and pulls the hair up on the back of her neck to show FRANKIE a nonexistent scar*" (LM 73; emphasis added)." Because of this incoherence, we have doubts about whether Jake really hit Beth and injured her or not. In this way, the stories of the characters in the play have no credibility.

### Functionless "Security Blanket"

Then, I would like to verify the root of the characters' fear. It seems to be the anxiety of their unstable existence. They cannot cope with their surrounding situation such as the transition of the times. These anxieties are embodied in their wounds. That is, their physical wounds in the head and in the leg indicate that they have mental wounds or trauma in their mind. The influence of these invisible things is treated in the plays such as *Curse of the Starving Class* and *The Unseen Hand*. Especially, in the former play, Ella says that they are surrounded by the invisible curse.

ELLA.... 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 173-74)

These invisible things influence the male characters in Shepard's

plays. In *The Unseen Hand*, the characters feel that they are commanded by the power of the "unseen" hand in the title of the play. The characters that have an anxiety about invisible or unseen things are described as injured existences in Shepard's plays. And they like to bundle themselves up in the blankets, and by doing so, they try to escape from the influence of the run-down society.

The core of their anxiety is their interest in the past, because their fear links to that of their self-existence. We can see this as the anxiety of their identity or their roots. In *Buried Child*, Vince, Dodge's grandson, indulges himself in an imagination that he sees the faces of his ancestors on the windshield of his car.

VINCE. . . . I could see myself in the windshield. My face.

My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it.

As though I was looking at another man. . . . And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized. (BC 130)

Here, he is conscious of his roots and has a full realization of the influence of the past things, or the blood relationship with himself. In *A Lie of the Mind*, we have a doubt that Jake killed his father and since then sticks to this secret of the past. He explains the cause of his father's death as a traffic accident; his father was deeply drunk and rushed into the street and was run over by a car. However, according to his sister, Jake was drunk with his father just before this accident and provoked his father over something. We can consider that his provocation resulted in his father's death, so this is Jake's indirect killing of his father.

Moreover, in *States of Shock*, Colonel seems to tell a lie about

the truth of the events in the battlefield. In fact, he tried to kill his own son, Stubbs, during the confusion surrounding the bombing. Here, the secret of the past is the killing of son by his father. As the similar example of murder, in *Buried Child*, Dodge seems to kill the baby born as the incestuous relationship between his wife, Halie, and his son, Tilden, and buried the baby in the backyard of his house. Here, too, the secret of the past is the killing which happened in the family. According to these things, we can see the strong interest of Sam Shepard in the blood relationship, especially in the relation between father and son.

In order to escape from this anxiety, male characters adopt two ways of security, as has been mentioned before. These are their movement to bundle themselves up in the blanket and their effort to hide their secret of the past by telling lies or "pretending". However, these two ways don't function completely. The blankets are all worn-out and don't warm people who are bundled in them. This also means that they don't work well as a "security blanket". They cannot avoid the dangerous situation even if they bundle themselves up in the blanket. Besides, we can regard these blankets as a symbol of the patriarch system, because men struggle to get these blankets as if they thought that to get the blankets meant to be the head of the family. But the fact that they are worn-out indicates that the patriarch system itself is also worn-out. So, the male characters lose the foundation of their existence and fall into a worse situation as a result.

The "pretending" doesn't work well as the characters' "security blanket", either. As was mentioned, when Beth in *A Lie of the Mind* takes off the bandage, there is no injury to her head. The important thing is that she completely believes in its existence and doesn't hesitate to show her head. Unconsciously, she falls into a situation to "pretend" to be a patient. This thing applies

to the situation of Stubbs in *States of Shock*. On the stage, he unconsciously appears to "pretend" to have trouble in walking. The role of these characters is to mislead the audiences to the confused situation and disturb their thoughtless interpretation of the play. This behavior, "pretending," functions not as the "security blanket" for the characters but as a device to confuse the audience.

In conclusion, it is natural that we think that the characters' wounds or injuries in Shepard's plays are the metaphors for their mental traumas. They live under the strong influence of the trauma caused by their past behavior. As a result of this, they come to "pretend" unconsciously that the symptoms differ from the real ones. However, their "security blanket", telling lies or "pretending," doesn't work as the play proceeds and the secret of the past is exposed.

As we see, male characters in Shepard's plays try to show their consciousness of self-defense somehow because they have some anxiety about their own existence or their identity. They stick to the traditional patriarch system, but it doesn't work well and becomes functionless thing because of the change of the times. The worn-out clothes that men choose as their "security blanket" represent this thing effectively in Shepard's plays. The worn-out clothes don't save men from the dangerous situation and don't accomplish their role as security. Besides, the lies and the "pretending" in the plays also don't work well. The male characters use these ways in order to hide their real self and try to show their consciousness of self-defense. Or, they unconsciously use them as a means to hide their trauma from the past. That is, neither the "security blanket" nor the "pretending" works well as a self-defense for the male characters in Shepard's plays, although they repeat the behavior to bundle themselves up in the blanket

or to tell lies or to "pretend" something. By doing this, Shepard shows that it is impossible for us to escape from the power of the past or the bloodline. This links to the agony of Shepard himself about his relation to his own father and makes the relationship between father and son the main theme of his plays again and again.

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