



## Existential Subjective Violence in *A Lie of the Mind*

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### Abstract

*A Lie of the Mind* (1985) is the last play of family quintet written by Sam Shepard (1943-2017), a contemporary American playwright. Human beings' existential problem has been revealed through the theme of violence and psychological mechanism of characters' subjective violence in this modern tragedy. Through the representation of subjective violence, which is epitomized by Jake, Mike and Baylor, Shepard points out modern people's existential despair, an impossibility and impotence of self-affirmation, and the futility of finding the meaning of existence. While providing women's paradigm of reasonable means of reaction towards violence in locating one's selfhood, Shepard brings out the possibility of love, courage and freedom as a way of asserting one's existence.

**Key words:** *A Lie of the Mind*; Subjective Violence; Impotence; Existence

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### INTRODUCTION

Sam Shepard (Samuel Shepard Rogers) (1943-2017) is referred as one of the most prominent American playwrights of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Harold Bloom (2005) commented that Shepard is "another Expressionist

dramatist, a very good one" and "there seems no clear American lineage in dramatic tradition for the very American Shepard" (p.281). Shepard was devoted to the creation of American family drama and developed a more realistic theatre. Beginning in the late 1970s, "his central subject is often the American family" (Roudane, p.4). *A Lie of the Mind* is considered as the conclusion of Shepard's Family Quintet. The play is set in the American West between two families, starting with Jake's abuse and depicting violence throughout scenes. In this play, violent acts appear many times and characters fail to realize significant existence as a result of abandonment and violence. As Lynda Hart (1998) once pointed out that "Shepard's interest in violence is not new to these plays. As anyone can readily see who knows even one play or film by Shepard, he is always fascinated by violence" (p.71). This paper aims to explore the thematic representation of violence in *A Lie of the Mind* and explore its tragic meaning.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on Sam Shepard's family plays have gained extensive attention at home and abroad. On the whole, many scholars focus on the biographical-critical study related with the playwright's theatrical style or his plays' theme research. For the thematic studies, most papers focus on masculinity, family, identity and American West by using different research method such as gender study, psychological methodology, cultural study and discourse analysis. The theme of violence is one of the significant thematic studies. Most of research objects mainly focus on Shepherd's family trilogy, while a few of studies stress *A Lie of the Mind*, the last play of his Family Quintet. Asharudeen Nainamohamed (2012) emphasizes the theme of illusion and violence in *A Lie of the Mind* to explore Shepard's depiction of domestic violence but without

detailed analysis. Many researches have mentioned violence appeared in this play but not fully discussed the meaning of violence or considered why Shepard concerns with violence. This paper further analyzes the sources of violence from aspects of individually existential psychology and also provides the reflection of violence within the concept of tragedy. Violence is closely related to power and existence because powerlessness (impotence) breeds violence which is an extreme way to prove existence. Violence discussed in this paper is defined as personally “subjective violence”, a perturbation of non-violent zero level, peaceful state of things (Žižek, p.2). It is the physical force intentionally used against a person resulting in physical injury, death, or psychological harm.

## 2. VICTIMIZER AND VICTIM OF SUBJECTIVE VIOLENCE: JAKE

In *A Lie of the Mind*, the main male character Jake conducted a severe abuse to his wife Beth at the beginning of the play. It is obvious that he is the victimizer of subjective violence for intentional use of physical force. His subjective violence erupts directly from his inability of loving. While at the same time, he is also the victim of haunted anxiety of death including his father’s death, the fear of losing his wife and even himself. All of these threaten his sense of being and generate a feeling of impotence.

It is pathetic when a person gives up the ability of love, which is an essential characteristic for keeping one’s sense of being. The main male character Jake, the victimizer of subjective violence, is such a person who is failed to find the real value of love. He is blamed for hurting his dear wife, simultaneously a tragic character who losses the ability to love. In this sense, Jake is both the victimizer and victim in the process of learning to love. He is too eagerly searching for love as a kind of existential power to employ a gentle way of caring for others. Indifferent situations make him feel so impotent to love that he has to adopt an extremely violent explosion. Jake discerns about Beth’s “inappropriate” behaviors such as not wearing bra and underpants. Furthermore, Jake hallucinates about Beth’s extramarital affair with “someone else”, “some guy” that he gets easily jealousy of, “like she was imaging someone else touching her” (Shepard, p.13). His jealousy comes with the issue of power and love. The degree of controlling Beth is the degree he feels jealous. Such jealousy proves Jake’s yearning for love, fear of loss, and uncertainty of self-affirmation. Derive from such anxiety, Jake steps into despair and powerless. As a husband, Jake feels impotent to realize his power and sense of being. “In such situations jealousy can become a form of violence” (May, p.117) when Jake can’t satisfy his needs of power in normal ways.

Jake’s inability to love, to some extent, stems from his childhood. Although he is crazy for love and attention, he is failed to have the experience of love. He needs others to affirm his existence and recognize his efforts of love. His mother gives him a lot of caring and love even when he grows up, “He’s just a big baby”. Compared with loving others, Jake tends to be loved by others. He is used to asking and gaining love from his families rather than giving himself to love families in return.

When he sets up his own family, there is no love but apathy inside Jake. Unlike his mother, Jake’s wife offers him years of neglect. The contrast makes Jake feel helpless and he tends psychologically to freeze up. In such situations, apathy can become a form of force turning inwardly to undermine Jake’s self-affirmation and aggravate his feeling of impotence. The state of apathy accelerates his sense of impotence. He tries to love his wife but receiving apathetic situations. There is no way to find his own identity and the sense of being. He can’t get his own value or existence or development in the marriage. Their marriage becomes the most dangerous place for the occurrence of violence, providing all the ingredients for violent abuse. Finally, he gives up the ability to love and loses his rationality, “I don’t need to think!”. Violence becomes the only way for him to get rid of the feeling of impotence, and love, becomes the cover for violence.

Violence brings Jake nothing rather than meanings and sense of significance, which makes a pathetic and tragic situation. “It is tragic, indeed, when whole peoples are placed in a situation where significance becomes almost impossible to achieve” (May 43). The occurrence of Jake’s violent abuse is tragic that he tries to use violence for love to gain loyalty and build up sense of significance but receives nothing. The inability of love leads him into a way of self-destruction.

“Death is for life, and life is for death” (May, p.92). Death is an essential threat of a person’s existence and a source of existential anxiety. Jake is confronted with the anxiety of death from beginning to end. He struggles for his own existential power and sense of self-affirmation while the problem of death always haunts in his mind. Jake is threatened by the haunted memory of his father’s death, the fear of losing his wife and even himself, finally resulting his own destruction and impotent situation.

The death of Jake’s father is a potential threat to his whole life. As a matter of fact, Jake is greatly responsible for his father’s death, “murder almost. It was murder”. He conceals the truth from his mother that he leads to his father’s death and makes his sister Sally promise to keep the secret. Subtly, Shepard hints that Jake intentionally “murdered” his own biological father. In later period of life, he always lives in the shadow of his father’s death. His father’s death always afflicts him and threatens personal existence. It still unconsciously makes him

feel guilty and anxious. He denies that he is the person responsible for his father's death. "Denial is a powerful weapon when people want to deceive themselves" (Bratić, p.82). This denial further implies Jake's pseudo-innocence and his powerlessness and evasion in face of destructive truth. There is a subconscious anxiety for death because of the influence of Jake's father. He has been haunted for years by the memory of his dead father and has been infected by his father's irresponsible and violent patterns. Just like Sally said, "Only because you remind me of Dad sometimes. ... Sometimes you sound just like him" (Shepard, p.49).

He has "murdered" his father and this fear follows when he abuses Beth "all red and black and blue". Jake's anxiety of death urges Jake subconsciously asserts Beth is dead after he hurt her even without careful examination. Jake scares to death that he projects his fear and anxiety onto his wife. Through "I killed her", Jake once again recollects the memory of his father's death and this traumatic memory provokes his anxiety for death. For Jake, Beth is a scapegoat in the name of love used for escaping from the feeling of impotence. But this violent consequence generates more tremendous fear and anxiety inside himself. He is forced to face with the anxiety of death.

The fear of death finally comes up to Jake himself. Using violent abuse doesn't make any sense for Jake's self-esteem. Violent behavior just exposes his impotence and intensifies his anxiety. Jake explodes with domestic violence, but soon he becomes regretful for losing Beth and extremely guilty. After the severe beating to Beth, Jake's sense of being gets little improved. On the other side, "everything stopped" for him. Compared with transient feeling of power, Jake is overwhelmed with turbulent guilty and fear. His sense of being is then faced with the fear of losing Beth.

Jake's anxiety of death is closely responsible for his violent personality. In face of the apathetic marital life, Jake's violent behavior provides a classical dramatic model of "the prototypical American male, seething with machismo, whose only resources for coping with problems are a bellowing voice and brute strength" (Lee, p.9). Jake is victimizer of subjective violence, but at the same time he can also be viewed as a victim of inferior American masculinity, who is never able to rise above his circumstances and troubled with existential problems.

While Jake is trapped in individual impotence, his victim Beth recreates herself and regains her sense of being through the virtue of love, courage and self-affirmation. Self-consciousness becomes the most important virtue when Beth wakes up from severe brain damage. She repeatedly emphasizes and asks "who fell me?". Awareness and the sense of being is the essence of her existence. Beth's struggle for self-consciousness lays a foundation for her later development and important decisions. She needs to be aware of what she needs and

responsible for her own existence and future, which requires great determination and courage.

Beth's courage comes from the need for existence and the sense of being. The first level of her courage is to face death directly. She is clearly aware of that Jake's violence has resulted the break of their relationship. Both of them is "dead" for the destructive power of violence, which is what she said "Hee killed us both". The former existence and status of them has gone away. What she needs is the future existence and a brand-new ego-development. That is the reason why she thinks "I'm not dead" (*ALM*, p.11). The self-awareness is prerequisite to form one's selfhood. Since she has the more self-awareness, the more alive she is. Beth desires to realize self-affirmation and a new state of being, an integrated self.

Beth's later creation is critical to dig out her real being, which is refusing Jake and choosing Frankie. The "power to be" and sense of being can't work without the courage to create. She makes a courageous and creative breakthrough of traditional female role, trying to be a man by wearing her father's shirt. Beth also creates a reversed mode of gender relations. In Beth's world, she is "a man" and Frankie is "beautiful woman", requiring Frankie to be "a woman-man". Her creation transcends sexual definition of gender relations. She expands the way of existence and self-consciousness through the courage rooted in her cry for the sense of being.

Different from Jake's impotence, Beth positively locates her self-affirmation and sense of being. The description of Beth's transformation is an external existence satirizing Jake's violent behavior which is meaningless, arguing Jake's individual impotence through the opposite standpoint. Beth's rebirth in return rebukes Jake's impotence. It seems that Beth has stepped into a new stage for her own existence while Jake still stays impotent predicament and even into ineffective violence.

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### 3. ALIENATED NEW GENERATION: MIKE

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Another male character Mike, is also confronted with a feeling of impotence in the process of dealing with interpersonal relationships. As the oldest son in Baylor's house, Mike undertakes more responsibilities of not only protecting the family but also defending threatening outsiders. Compared with Jake, Mike has to search more self-affirmation from his families. He makes lots of efforts to gain his families' recognition but these endeavors either are ignored or rebuked. His sister Beth resists his protection and his parents ignore his self-assertion. These ineffective efforts make Mike feel impotent, so he violently organizes individual power on the outsider Jake, transforming interpersonal problems into regional conflict. Mike's pseudo-power on Jake, however, brings him a transient ecstasy of violence without meaningful self-affirmation.

Mike's self-affirmation mainly exists in the interpersonal relationship. His selfhood is reflected from the relationship with his families. He needs to be accepted and recognized by his sister and father in order to set up his self-affirmation. This need requires him to take more responsibilities and accomplish obligated duties such as taking care of his sister and satisfying his father. It is these interpersonal requirements that make him feel meaningful and give him a sense of achievement, which is the source of his self-affirmation.

Mike's dominant protection of his sister Beth points to the essential problem that he is in crazy need for self-affirmation and family's recognition. As a brother, he has the responsibility to protect and take care of his younger sister. He endows himself the mission of protecting his family for he is the only son in the house. Mike even forces Beth to accept Jake's apology. This strategy, however, means a way of aggression. This is a stronger level of power to reinforce Mike's sense of significance. But his sister Beth can't understand Mike's dominated protection. She rebels that Mike is "not the guard" and can't recognize his efforts. Mike's self-affirmation is failed to be constructed from his sister.

Besides his sister, Mike's parents could be another important source of his sense of significance. He needs not only self-affirmation but also self-assertion in front of his parents. Mike struggles for his self-affirmation and claims for self-assertion in family but confronted with innocence and rebuke.

Mike both inherits his father's masculinity and develops independent western frontier spirit in modern world. On one hand, Mike admires his father's hunting lifestyle. On the other hand, he emphasizes family responsibilities included in renewing western frontier spirit which conflicts with his father's traditional cowboy spirit. As a son, he needs to be responsible for the family and tries to earn his father's recognition through hunting. He thinks that a perfect hunting is a way of manifesting his masculinity like his father, which is also inherited in western culture as a symbol of cowboy. At the same time, however, Mike's modern western frontier spirit requires his completion of family responsibilities. Differ from Baylor's traditional cowboy spirit, Mike often unconsciously challenges his father's authority for family issues. In this way, the relationship between Mike and his father is often stressful. It is obvious that Mike often asserts his opinions and argues with his father Baylor. Mike's affirming of himself is confronted with difficulties in the face of his father's pattern of "go outside and make yerself useful". His father Baylor always ignores his efforts to prove his value in this family, even treats him as a competitor for the owner of this house: "You forget whose house this is". Mike's self-assertion can't be recognized through challenging his father's authority. His self-assertion and arguments usually end with reproaches

from his father. His mother Meg mistakes his assertion as a kind of rudeness and asks him to be polite. Different from father's rebuke at Mike, his mother doesn't pay much attention to Mike's self-assertion. Both Mike and his mother concern about the family. The difference between them is that Mike fails to achieve the sense of significance while his mother gains feminine strength with love and generosity. At the end of the play, his mother gains a kiss from his father which indicates her success of self-affirmation. It is not only a kiss but implies a promising future of gender relationship and a new state of female existence. Without generous love and self-affirmation, Mike gains nothing but indifference.

Families' carefree attitude and apathy irritate Mike's feeling of powerlessness. There is no other way except violence for him to let off this sense of impotence. Mike stands for new western spirit who needs to protect his own family and his own territory. The appearance of Jake and Frankie are outside threatening force which has to be chased away. Then he transfers the sense of impotence into violence on Jake, blaming Jake "married into this family and he deceived us all" (Shepard, p.91). Only in the experience of violence can he make the family notice him and claim his sense of significance. In the experience of beating and controlling Jake, Mike gains a form of pseudo-power, which temporarily compensates his feeling of impotence. From transcending himself into the whole family, Mike gains the experience of personal ecstasy. Although Mike adopts violence to strive for recognition and self-affirmation, impotence can't be changed. Violence comes from impotence but still ends with meaninglessness and powerlessness.

Mike is pathetic for his impotent struggles for the sense of significance but without families' recognition. When he tries to "make any difference", what his parents "care about is a flag". At the end of the play, Mike is spiritually absent on the stage because "nobody cares". Desperately Mike goes "into darkness" without any triumph of existence.

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#### 4. HUNTER AS AN ILLUSIONED MYTH: BAYLOR

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Baylor, another male character, meets with greater impotence referring to his pursue of national myth. He has a whole family to support but inwardly expects to fulfill his myth of American cowboy. His existential anxiety originated from the conflict between traditional values and modern development. He tries to leave the family and hunt outside to realize personal sense of being but ends up with failure, while another head of a family, Lorraine, achieves possible freedom and individual existence through positive struggles and self-affirmation. Through the contrast between Baylor's non-free hunting and Lorraine's successful freedom, the national myth of

American cowboy is just an illusion for modern people trying to escape from existential anxiety.

In Beth's family, Baylor is used to aggression and violent expressions. There is a distinctive usage of language as a form of aggression. Baylor talks to Meg always in a commanding tone. He treats Meg more like an obedient servant rather than his beloved wife. Baylor's aggression is not only imposed to Meg, but also his children Beth and Mike. In the family, Baylor emphasizes his authority and personal interests over any family member. In Baylor's world, everyone in the family should listen to him and obey his orders. Baylor is living in a modern world but still remains obsession with traditional western frontier spirit. Even though Baylor demonstrates the power over his family through aggressive languages, he still feels meaningless and confused for his life. He yearned for freedom, but faced the limitation of family responsibility. On one hand, he has a whole family to support and manage. He has duties for his family and needs becoming an authority to running through the family. On the other hand, in the inner world, he desires freedom and existence as an uncontrolled western cowboy. For Baylor, the sense of significance exists in the myth of the western frontier. There is a conflict between interpersonal relationship and inner world. The gap between ideal and reality creates a sense of powerlessness, which makes Baylor feels confused and impotent. Baylor turns the feeling of impotence to the natural world. He tries to escape from his family responsibility, and is infatuated with hunting in the wild to satisfy his dream of a cowboy. Violent hunting becomes a substitute for Baylor to experience the ideal life.

However, he ends up lost in the pursuit of his sense of being. He leaves away from his family which simultaneously gives up his family and the capacity of love, the essential core for the sense of being. "He's given up love. Love is dead for him...things live for him to be killed. Only death counts for him. Nothing else" (Shepard, p.45). His children express no love for their father; His wife shows rebel. The truth is Baylor himself is the "invalid" one, who cannot take care of himself without families' help. Baylor's life is surrounded with the feeling of impotence, nowhere to find significance, just leaving tragic nothingness.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, the male character Baylor is fascinated with the myth of the western frontier, hunting and escaping to the wild. In traditional western frontier, "There's a town for everybody. Always has been. If there's no town, then start one of your own" (Shepard, p.52). He pursues his sense of being with the belief of the myth of west, while getting lost in the journey. The reality is that the west is just an illusion deceiving modern Americans, where people can't identify personal being, but stuck in an existential anxiety. Baylor's myth of western cowboy is also a reflection of American culture. The image of

cowboy can only represent the American past. He has no notion of future, of where he is going, or sense of being.

Baylor's desertion is reasoned for his impotence when balancing inner pursuit and outer reality. He needs the spirit of cowboy and leaves, but what he really needs is freedom and the power to be himself. When Baylor's leaving ends up with failure, another female character Lorraine's leaving turns into an essential transcendence. In the end of the play, Lorraine decides to take her daughter and leave the male world to seek their spiritual home. Going through the abandonment of men, she finally comes to realize "that was just a dream of theirs. It never meant a thing to them. They dreamed it up just to keep me on the hook" (Shepard, p.72). From the moment, self-consciousness is awakened inside this female character. She needs the existential freedom or the freedom of doing what she really wants.

Being freedom means to change and become something different from the past, to choose one's self. Lorraine and her daughter decide to get rid of the past history, throwing the items and burning them together with the house. The burning of house is a celebration of burying the past. Freedom is the possibility of future development, of enhancement of personal value and existence. Lorraine's future is to seek the place fondly talked by her grandma, a place where people will remember Lorraine just by the mention of her maiden name and will provide a safe harbor. Lorraine holds strong belief and expectation in making this journey out. It is a new beginning for the female character, a new community to fully realize the sense of being, being a free existence, full of possibilities, where she can choose her own life, she can feel self-esteem. Lorraine's rebellion and freedom brings a sharp contrast to Baylor's futile hunting and disillusion.

It is argued that Shepard deconstructs violence-oriented manhood in postwar American west. Through descriptions of violent Baylor, Shepard suggests that the violent men will follow the path of the fallen American manhood. The family play ends with little solace with the American men which can be traced from the modern American culture. Shepard's family play employs a type of violent patterns among which the American family operates futile and restless. In the destruction of American families and men, the sixties after "around the end of the War" has seen American society in a critical transition and existential problems.

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## CONCLUSION

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Violence pervades Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*. "Shepard's characters are somehow all impotent in family matters" (Bratić, p.82). Viewed from this perspective, these characters' subjective violence stems from impotence. The impotence can be further related with the

subjects of human existence such as love, freedom and anxiety. In this play, male characters' subjective violence can be represented as the result of absence of love, self-affirmation and the sense of being. For their personal existence, impotence dominates their mindset. Shepard brings their violence as the only way to release the feeling of impotence and get a sense of significance. Different from male characters' impotent violence, the rebel of female characters proving their being accelerates male deterioration. Even though these female characters have suffered male characters' affliction, they stand out to find means of their own existence and ignore violent behaviors with generous love, creative courage and freedom.

It is true that violence is not merely devised for its own sake, there must be something more. *A Lie of the Mind* is not only a realistic family drama, telling the story of two families, but also conveys the existential anxiety of modern people and national culture through a collage of various violent behaviors. Through violence, Shepard can indulge his fascination with individual psychological explorations while subtly embedding a cultural critique within the drama.

The whole play produces a tragic experience for the readers including existential anxiety, a pitiful feeling for individual even whole nation's impotence and its value. By the depiction of violence, readers can experience

characters' impotence, introspect of existential crisis, experience a feeling of pity in modern tragedy, and generate the morals and values for civilization. Through the theme of violence, Shepard demonstrates the crisis and impotence of human existence.

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