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# Repair and Family Resilience in the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma: Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*

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**Abstract:** Sam Shepard's family plays, such as *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *Fool for Love*, are replete with absent fathers, haunted sons, and marginalized mothers and daughters, all are linked thematically in their examination of familial disintegration in a fractured society. As the conclusion of Shepard's "family quintet," *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) symbolizes a major break in Shepard's career. The play not only addresses the fragmentation that results from domestic violence, gender conflict, and war trauma, but also explores individual repair and family resilience in the transgenerational transmission of trauma. It represents Shepard's first clear move away from cultural determinism towards a genuine belief in the potential for personal transformation and the re-establishment of familial connections that are essential to building post-traumatic resilience. In light of the theories of transgenerational trauma and family resilience, this essay will examine the vulnerability and positive adaptation of some of the play's main characters, who experience traumatic events and then develop effective ways to heal and recover. In the case of the play, Shepard criticizes American cultural heritage that is transmitted through successive generations, especially the Anglo-American cultural ideal of the "rugged individualism" and myths of "invulnerability" and "self-sufficiency," advocating instead a relational view that emphasizes connectedness and interdependence with others.

**Keywords:** Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*, Fragmentation, Transgenerational Trauma, Family Resilience

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## 1. Introduction

Sam Shepard's play *A Lie of the Mind* premiered at the Off-Broadway Promenade Theatre in New York on December 5, 1985. This work belongs to the second phase of Shepard's career, and is often viewed as the conclusion of Shepard's "family quintet," which also consists of *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), *Buried Child* (1979), *True West* (1980) and *Fool for Love* (1983). These plays are linked thematically in their exploration of precarious familial relationships in a fragmented society. *A Lie of the Mind* involves two families who are connected by the marriage of Beth, the daughter of one family, to Jake who is the son of the other. As the play opens, Beth, brain-damaged from a violent beating by her overly jealous husband, is being cared for by her brother Mike and her parents, Baylor and Meg. Meanwhile, Jake, convinced that he has killed his wife, has become distraught and hysterical. He is taken back home and nursed by his possessive mother, Lorraine, and his sister, Sally. Later, Jake slips away from his family and sets out to

regain his wife in Montana. In the end, however, Beth falls in love with Jake's brother, Frankie, and Jake disappears into the night alone.

*A Lie of the Mind* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play and the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Off-Broadway Play. John J. Winters sees it as Shepard's best play as it "represents Shepard's maturation in the areas of structure and dynamics." [33] Critics such as David DeRose and Janet Haedicke probe into this play through the lens of feminist criticism, criticizing that women are traumatized victims, who are vulnerable to male aggression and violence. Others like Gregory Lanier emphasize Shepard's reflections on double nature and gender conflict. However, either view fails to fully capture the complexity and development of Shepard's ideas about gender and familial relationships. Shannon Skelton notices that with *Fool of Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard takes "a conscious effort to excavate the buried voice of the female." [26] On the other hand, Mike Vanden Heuvel notes that Shepard examines "the female side of his male characters" in

this play and “explores the self-damaging ‘lies of the mind’ that males concoct to bind themselves in abusive relationships and offers images of release and atonement not found in the family trilogy.” [14]

In this light, *A Lie of the Mind* in many ways revises the themes Shepard had previously espoused. Correspondingly, a number of new questions need to be addressed: Why did Shepard focus on issues of fragmentation and gender division? How do both males and females become victims in a fragmented society? What kinds of traumatic experiences have they undergone? What causes familial disintegration? To what extent do the main characters transform and eventually become more resilient? In what ways have family members built family resilience during the generational transmission of trauma? Supported by theories of trauma and resilience, this paper argues that Shepard not only addresses the wounds and divisions that result from domestic violence, gender conflict, war trauma, and familial disintegration, but also suggests healing and reconciliation through personal transformation, the rehabilitation of memory, and the reconstruction of familial connections.

## 2. Fragmentation and Gender Conflict

In his early work Shepard had been interested in fragmentation, as social fact and aesthetic principle. In an interview with Matthew Roudané, Shepard expressed concerns about the friction and “split” in American culture. “It can be divided in all different kinds of ways: male and female, violent and not so. And I think this ‘split’ is where a lot of the violence comes from in the United States.” [23] The fragmentation represented in Shepard’s works represents an integral part of his growing concern with contemporary cultural conditions. Shepard gloomily believes that fracture and fragmentation are the conditions of being, that estrangement and abandonment are natural impulses of human beings. In the family plays, Shepard shows how fracture and fragmentation form a lens through which some central concerns of the American family can be analyzed in a particularly effective way. Familial disintegration is always accompanied by family wars taking place between generations, between parents and children, and between lovers.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard seems to offer a vision of America that he once described as “split.” Leslie A. Wade has noticed that in this play Shepard utilizes gender division “as a metaphor for national fragmentation,” [29] and the broken family relationships “create the impression that a state of dysfunction exists on a national scale in America.” [2] Shepard himself revealed that his inspiration for the play came from “[t]he incredible schism between a man and a woman, in which something is broken in a way that almost kills the thing that was causing them to be together.” [3]

In the play, Both Jake and Beth fall victims to this fragmentation. The split in their relationship is caused by Jake’s brutal physical attack on Beth which happens prior to the beginning of the play. Jake’s idealized fantasy of Beth is the root cause of the brutal violence which has wrecked their marriage. Beth’s wish to have a career of her own as an actress has proved

incompatible with the male mythologies of Jake. Obsessed with his Western hero myths, Jake is “drawn forward in his quest by his image of woman, which he perceives as an extension or embodiment of that frontier to be conquered.” [20] Jake employs brute force and believes he can tame Beth through sheer exertion of will. He expects Beth to serve him as a symbol of home, domesticity, and romance that anchors him. When Beth refuses to stay in place and escapes Jake’s self-centered fantasies, Jake directs at her various degrees of anger and violence.

Female characters in the play are particularly vulnerable to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization. Beth, for instance, suffers from partial amnesia and from aphasia after a vicious beating by Jake. Leslie Kane contends that the play “is predominantly focused on the swirling vortex of remembering and forgetfulness” and “[m]emory—or the absence of it—is most striking in brain-damaged Beth.” [17] In the beginning, She could not remember her brother and has difficulty remembering her home. Beth’s amnesia is a kind of defensive reaction. She creates a kind of quarantine or immune system protecting her from anything that could be connected with her own traumatic memories. Moreover, traumatic experiences have led to a “psychic aphasia” and destructs the expressive power of language. Beth is unable to communicate, and relentlessly keeps repeating the same, mostly senseless, words. She talks as if she still is in a state of shock because of some traumatic events in the past. Shepard uses Beth’s aphasia as a metaphor for history’s silencing and erasure of women. As Haedicke points out, “Beth parodies the Freudian biological fiction of a female scar of inferiority and the Lacanian linguistic fiction of female lack.” [11] She is afraid that Jake will “wipe” her, or “erase” her.

Shepard also suggests that family history and traumatic experiences have been transmitted across three generations in Beth’s family. Beth claims that her grandmother was forced by her father to undergo a lobotomy: “Like my old Mom. ... They cut her. Out. Disappeared. They don’t say her name now. She’s gone. Vanish. ... My father sent her someplace. Had her gone.” [25] It seems that there is a parallelism between Jake/Beth’s marriage and Baylor/Meg’s marriage. Meg seems almost as broken and lost as Beth. Her memory of her own family history is shaky, and she is often unable to distinguish between her own experiences and that of her mother. “They locked me up once, didn’t they, Dad?” she asks her husband Baylor who, correcting her, responds: “That wasn’t you. That was your mother. That was a long time ago, anyhow.” [25] In this case, Shepard suggests that gender conflict and domestic violence not only take place between Jake and Beth, but also between their parents. These traumatic memories are confused and uncertain, but what emerges is a clear sense of how generation after generation of women has been systematically broken by male violence.

## 3. War Trauma, Escapism, and Familial Disintegration

Like Shepard’s other family plays, *A Lie of the Mind*

reveals that the biological and emotional inheritances from actual or cultural fathers weigh heavily on later generations. Carla McDonough asserts that the play explores “how a son’s relationship with women is profoundly affected by his relationship with his father, from whom the son has derived a precarious and violent concept of identity.” [20] Shepard’s male characters in the play are haunted by their patriarchal legacies, by the mythic histories transgenerationally transmitted to them. Feminist criticism has long explored how women are silenced and traumatized by the patriarchal ideology, but Shepard’s play demonstrates that men are often victimized by this ideology as well. Shepard’s obsession with macho behavior has its roots in his own family life as much as in the culture which in many ways seems to generate it. In an interview, Shepard admitted that his own father had forced upon him a “macho image”: “I know what this thing is about because I was a victim of it, it was part of my life, my old man tried to force on me a notion of what it was to be ‘a man.’ And it destroyed my dad. But you can’t avoid facing it.” [3]

Like Shepard’s father, Jake’s father was a mentally traumatized World War II veteran. Some critics contend that the war veterans faced a crisis of identity after World War II. “The frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection—all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished in short order,” argues Susan Faludi. “The boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it, found himself master of nothing.” [8] Jake’s father is a typical “stiffed” man depicted by Faludi, who suffered in World War II and failed to make a better life after he returned home. These veterans often expressed their frustration through rage, violence, and even escape. These veterans had difficulty abandoning the highly homosocial world of the army for the family-centric suburbs, which led to an unhappy dissonance in their family relationships.

In *A Lie of the Mind*, war trauma is a cultural disease that has infested and even destroyed the family. Katherine Weiss suggests that Shepard’s plays not only present the collective memory of war, but also reveal that “the family becomes a casualty of a culture of war—the ultimate byproduct of this collective memory.” [32] The collective, cultural traumas resulted from war can be transmitted across generations, and children and grandchildren who have not fought in any war may share a culture of war brought back by their ancestors. According to Marianne Hirsch, this kind of experience can be described in terms of “postmemory” which “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events” [15] This concept captures the connections of the postgeneration to the “personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” as well as to “experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.” [16] While victims of trauma like the veterans “live with the scars of memory so to speak—gaps, amnesia, distortion, revision, or even fugue states or intrusive flashbacks,” the inheritors of

transgenerational trauma, Jake for example, “live with a ‘postmemory’ that comes to them secondhand.” [24]

When Jake is taken back home, he attempts to unearth the physical and spiritual inheritances from his father. He not only inherits his father’s ashes, his funeral flag, and his medals, but also inherits his old man’s “macho image” of masculinity and violent patterns of behavior. “In his exploration of the relationship between fathers and sons,” Streufert notes, “Shepard clearly views heredity as a form of ghosting, an inescapable trap which condemns children to become their parents.” [27] Jake’s father acts not only as a ghost haunting his son, but also as an incarnation of the masculinist, militarist cultural complex that continues to haunt American society.

For another thing, Jake has inherited the hereditary curse of escapism and wanderlust from his traumatized father. In Act Three, Jake runs away from his mother to find Beth in Montana. Indeed, Shepard’s plays are flooded with male characters who abandon their responsibilities toward families in favor of a self-absorbed life alone in the desert. Leslie Fiedler argues that Washington Irving’s Rip Van Winkle is a prototype of future American frontier heroes, who are always “on the run” to preserve their threatened bachelor freedom and independence:

the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid “civilization,” which is to say, the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility. One of the factors that determine theme and form in our great books is this strategy of evasion, this retreat to nature and childhood which makes our literature (and life!) so charmingly and infuriatingly “boyish.” [10]

As a prototypal figure, Rip has many literary descendants, including Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, Hawthorne’s Wakefield, Melville’s Captain Ahab, Mark Twain’s Huck Finn, Hemingway’s combatants, Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty, and of course, most of Shepard’s male characters.

Beth’s father, Baylor, is undoubtedly a direct descendant of those cultural fathers like Rip, Natty Bumppo, Ahab, and Huck Finn. A Hemingwayesque hunter, Baylor takes hunting as an art, a way of life, even though he detests the cold and has no taste for venison. To Meg, the deeper reason for Baylor’s hunting is his strong desire to escape. “Maybe it’s got nothing to do with hunting. You just don’t want to be part of us anymore.” [25] Meg is right as Baylor is afraid of being “chained” to women forever. “I could be up in the wild country huntin’ antelope,” he tells Meg. “But no, I gotta play nursemaid to a bunch a’ feeble-minded women down here in civilization who can’t take care a’ themselves.” [25] Baylor is a personification of the frontier mindset, who evinces the frontiersman’s fear of domestication, of subjection to the home and hearth. Unwilling to form enduring familial relations, Baylor escapes to the wilderness in search of freedom and independence. He will never be able to settle anywhere, and neither does he know what a real home might be. As McDonough remarks, Shepard’s male characters are

unwilling “to let go of the frontier myth of rugged individualism and of the western hero that they have inherited from their fathers.” As a result, they “looked to the masculine myth of the frontier, to the open spaces of the West, for the touchstone of their identity.” [19]

Overall, both war trauma and the frontier myth of escape lead to gender division and familial disintegration. Meg's oft-quoted lines echo Shepard's “incredible schism” between the sexes: “The female—the female one needs—the other. ... But the male one—doesn't really need the other. Not the same way.” She further explains as follows: “The male one goes off by himself. Leaves. He needs something else. But he doesn't know what it is. He doesn't really know what he needs. So he ends up dead. By himself.” [25] It seems that men and women are like two “opposite animals” that will “never be able to get certain things across to each other.” [25] For some critics, this is a disturbing feature of Shepard's plays, since it conveys a deterministic understanding of gender division, granting it status of a “natural law,” beyond any social shaping. Lanier, for instance, argues that while the female characters in the play seek union and harmony, the males “consistently seek means of escape, preferring the isolation that is the end point of tragedy to the socialization that is the end point of comedy.” [18] In order to gain freedom or independence, Jake, Jake's father, Baylor, Mike, and at times even Frankie are all too ready to just get up and just disappear into the darkness.

#### 4. Repair and Family Resilience

Nevertheless, it should be noted that too much emphasis on the “incredible schism” between men and women fails to capture the dynamics of gender relations that Shepard newly explores in *A Lie of the Mind*. Shepard believes that truth may ultimately lie in those fragments while simultaneously having the desire to make fragments cohere. According to Bigsby, “he has seemingly set himself both to expose those fragments as the components of a potential apocalypse and to close the gaps which breed alienation.” [1] The divisions are presented less brutally here than in his previous plays with many of the characters actively involved in trying to bridge and heal the yawning gaps between the family members. Compared with other family plays, *A Lie of the Mind* not merely presents gender division and familial disintegration, but also attempts to repair estranged family relationships and build resilience to trauma.

In recent years, “resilience” has become an important concept in the humanities and social sciences. It is used to address traumatic events ranging from the death of a child or parent, domestic violence, sexual abuse, to large-scale disasters, war-related trauma, mass killings, terrorism and refugee experience. Froma Walsh observes that the term was originated in the physical sciences and “referred to the capacity of an object, when stretched, to return to its original form, like a spring or an elastic band.” [30] The words “bounce-back,” “rebound,” and “recoil” are frequently used to describe how resilient people respond to trauma and setbacks in their lives.

Influenced by the Anglo-American cultural ideal of the “rugged individual,” most studies on resilience have emphasized the strengths of exceptional individuals who are supposed to be competitive, self-reliant, and independent, but certainly not emotionally vulnerable. It has also led many to confuse invulnerability with resilience and equate human vulnerability with weakness. First, it is hard for people to bounce right back when they are faced with trauma and obstacles; resilience requires a developmental perspective concerned with how people deal with trauma and loss over time. Second, the myths of “invulnerability” and “self-sufficiency” in Western culture have been criticized by scholars. As Onega and Ganteau state, “vulnerability appears as the condition that makes autonomy impossible, the situation in which the self manifests itself in relation to some constrictive other.” [21] Resilience research has thus witnessed a paradigm shift from rugged individualism to a relational view in recent years. Given that one's own trauma is related to the trauma of another, resilience is always nurtured in the network of relationships. Scholars notice that rebuilding community and enhancing social connectedness help to build resilience to trauma. Judith Herman, for example, argues in *Trauma and Recovery* (2015) that “[r]ecovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation.” [13]

In *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard primarily affirms the female potential for self-repair and recovery from trauma and suffering. Bottoms notes that “for the first time, Shepard offers a clear and positive alternative to masculine failure in the shape of the more resilient, and more genuinely rooted, female characters.” [2] Falk also notes that although Shepard's female characters are passive and often fall victims to male violence, they are more likely to have “inner resourcefulness and resilience of more positive merit.” [7] Perhaps in response to criticism about the women in his plays, Shepard creates a fully autonomous female character, who would remain absolutely true to herself. Beth is the best example of the vulnerable, finally resilient female. She embarks on a journey to recreate her gender identity, to rebuild connections with others, and finally to rehabilitate memory.

Beth's recovery is more correctly a re-creation as she challenges conventional male/female behavior. Shepard examines how the transgression of gender borders symbolizes wider changes taking place throughout the family as old, established, patriarchal regimes begin to fragment. Beth's re-creation—and thus her recovery—depends on her ability to re-imagine herself by crossing the conventional gender borders. Beth calls her father's hunting shirt “a custom ... For play. Acting,” [25] thereby highlighting the constructed nature of gender. Her confusion of “costume” and “custom” ingeniously suggests that “masculinity is a guise, a vestimentary shroud that fool the wearer into believing they are the uniform they don” [5]. Shepard extends this idea to imply that all the stereotypically “masculine” behavior in the play—be it in the role of jealous lover (Jake), Hemingwayesque hunter (Baylor), defender of the family

honor (Mike), or wandering loner (Jake's father)—might simply represent the mindless reiteration of an established norm or set of norms.

While Meg and Baylor, as the older generation, appear to represent the polar oppositions of gender division, Beth “blend [s] different degree of masculinity and femininity, thereby suggesting not polarization but a certain fluidity in gender roles.” [2] If Meg, for example, is “pure female,” it is also the case that “Beth's got male in her.” [25] Beth has wiped clean the slate of the past, having forged an entirely new identity for herself. Having watched Beth's new self-creation, her mother, Meg, comments to Baylor that their daughter has changed: “All I recognize anymore is her body. And even that's beginning to change.” [25] DeRose contends that “[Beth's] partial loss of speech and memory become an opportunity for perceptual rebirth as she recreates herself, ... without the enforced preconceptions of experience and education.” [6] In contrast to the male characters who seek physical mobility through escape and wandering, Beth seeks existential mobility through shape-shifting, transformation, and cross-dressing performance.

Beth's recovery also entails an active process of remembrance and mourning. Beth actually undergoes an arduous process of remembering as a step toward recovery and healing throughout the play. When Jake arrives in Montana, Beth tells him: “I remember now. The first time I saw you.” [25] Beth's words suggest a culmination of her gradual recovery—a recovery both from her brain injury and a recovery of her memories of Jake. However, Beth does not take Jake back but transfers her affection ambiguously to Jake's brother, Frankie. “Once we're together, the whole world will change. You'll see. We'll be in a whole new world.” [25] Marriage is a symbol of connection and an important way to build individual resilience throughout the family network of relationships.

On the other hand, Shepard suggests that both families try to build resilience and re-establish family bonds. The term “family resilience,” according to Walsh, “refers to the family as a functional system, impacted by highly stressful events and social contexts, and in turn, facilitating the positive adaptation of all members and strengthening the family unit.” [31] Walsh interrogates the myths of autonomy and self-sufficiency in Western societies and argues for a relational view that “recognizes our essential interdependence for mutual support in troubled times and the power of collaborative efforts in overcoming life's adversities.” [30] The ideas of interdependence and interconnectedness are embodied in the flag-folding ritual executed by Baylor and Meg, for the enactment is an expression of interdependence and collaboration. In this collective healing ritual that brings Baylor and Meg together, the amnesiac family finally remembers how to fold the flag properly. When this collaboration is complete, Baylor bestows a kiss upon Meg, something he has not done for twenty years. Michael Taav comments that the cold-blooded Darwinian world view represented in Shepard's earlier plays such as *The Tooth of Crime* “has been supplanted by a new and decidedly more

hopeful one in which ‘fitness’ is measured not by amoral self-interest or violent triumph but by one's capacity for cooperation, contribution, selfless love, and spiritual generosity.” [28] Thereafter, Meg sees—across time and space—the burning mementos Lorraine and Sally ignited in the prior scene. The snow of Montana and the fire of Southern California are mysteriously wedded, working to bridge the symbolic gap that divides the stage space. “In many ways *A Lie of the Mind* is a satisfying conclusion to the exploration of dual nature in general as the relationship between opposites compels not because of difference but because of similarity.” [4] In spite of various opposites and splits, the play finally leaves the audience with an impression of repair and reconciliation.

To some degree, *A Lie of the Mind* represents a major break in Shepard's career. With this play, Shepard sought to evince a softening of the strident male outlook and embrace the female side of things. For Wade, Shepard's plays in the 1980s “express a concern for interconnectedness that is new to his writing, one that militates against individualism and ego assertion. These plays expose the deleterious effects of self-absorption, of masculinist power-grabs, and reveal a yearning for mutuality.” [29] It does not feel like the misogyny and male chauvinism Shepard has been accused of. Rather, the play serves as a critical reflection on the machismo-saturated American past, especially the frontier spirit and Emersonian self-reliant individualism. Male characters and their fetishes, including their guns, their medals, their trophies, their prey, their domestic tyrannies, their games of war, have been mocked and demythologized. Carol Rosen remarks that “*A Lie of the Mind* could, in fact, be staged as a gender journey, on the road to gentleness and hope.” [22] Favorini further points out that “the journey of the play is from a male consciousness idealizing rugged individualism to a manifold, interconnected, female one.” [9] Such a “gendered” representation of the consciousness may be slightly problematic, but their perspectives are essential to our understanding of recovery and resilience. “As there has always been an ‘incomplete’ rebirth, resilience cannot be achieved once and for all. Rather, it is an event that allows for continuous adaptations.” [12] As repair and trauma recovery are gradual processes, family resilience is also a journey that allows the family and its members to constantly heal themselves.

The coda of the play is one of Shepard's most tender pieces of writing, and certainly one of his most finished ones, both in thematic resolution and in polished style. A hopeful expression of cohesion at the end of the play is an accurate reflection of the public mood in 1980s America. If the decade of the 1970s was a time clouded by paranoia and a sense of imminent catastrophe, then Regan's America of the 1980s, for many, witnessed “the renewal of civic optimism.” [29] If Shepard deploys gender division as a metaphor for national fragmentation, then the final reconciliation between the sexes “evokes a sweeping view of the American landscape and a hopeful expression of American cohesion.” [29] The conclusion of the play captures something of the spirit of

contemporary America, that despite their situations of breakdown, Americans continue to pursue hopes and dreams which, however naïve, nevertheless create a resistant energy that provides the faint possibility of changing things for the better. This spirit echoes many of the myths of America, including “the myth of innocence” and “the myth of new beginnings,” which emphasize the ability of individuals to escape the burden of history and make a new start in America.

## 5. Conclusion

In the 1980s, with plays such as *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard offers a glimmer of redemption and resilience for the guilt-ridden conditions of the 1970s. Moving toward a more positive, more productive image of America means admitting to the hidden guilt of the past. In *A Lie of the Mind*, the world is not as negatively deterministic a construct as it had been in Shepard's earlier family plays. Children succeed, though partially and temporarily, in escaping the cultural influences from their families and developing new identities and new relations. Whereas the characters of Shepard's earlier family plays are trapped and even “poisoned” by their biological, emotional, and cultural inheritance, the characters in *A Lie of the Mind* try to build repair and resilience in the transgenerational transmission of trauma and violence. What Shepard presents is a group of people trying to move on from division and disintegration, to search for reconciliation and connections, to heal the wounds of history and scars of memory.

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