

Sam Shepard and August Wilson: Dramatic Visions of Postmodernism and Ontology

Being instigated and confronted by various challenges, a rapidly changing milieu and the accelerating pulse of everyday life, the postmodern man is forcibly demanded to be skeptical about the authority of any set of laws, theories, and conventions. This vortex of disbelief, the shift from a more coherent and rational system of knowledge to a more irrational one, results in man's incapability of achieving a unified existence. Trapped in this muddle, man can no longer achieve a unified identity, but rather a disjointed one. As a result, such a fragmented self is unable to communicate adequately using adequate language in the postmodern world.

The diminishing individuality has become a prominent consequence in postmodern society. The self is no longer the united whole of the modern era, but rather a fragmented experience that is essentially under the supremacy of mass media images. Postmodernism can therefore be understood as a philosophical response to the fragmentation of modernism in the post-1945 period, and its influence on intellectual debates about the production, interpretation, and valuation of cultural production has been enormous.

Regardless of the historical distinction that signifies the outset of postmodernism decades ago, what is more significant is that, unlike the modern text, the postmodernist text is characterized by indeterminacy of meaning. While the participation of the reader was often thought to be irrelevant to the text in modernism, it has become not only relevant but crucial in postmodernism. The text no longer produces a single stable meaning; instead, it invites multiple interpretations and encourages the reader to participate actively in the production of meaning.

There are notable differences between modernization, modernism, and modernity that may provide a fruitful understanding of postmodernism. If modernization is something that happens to the base of society, and modernism represents the cultural and artistic response to that development, then modernity describes the way modern people feel about themselves. In this sense, modernity becomes the experience of living in a world shaped by rapid change, industrial development, and shifting social structures. Consequently, formulating a comprehensive image of the way postmodern people feel about themselves might more truthfully be called the state of postmodernity. Furthermore, it is important to remain cautious about the historical and cultural notions of postmodernism. The terms "postmodern" and "postmodernist" are often used in different ways. The term postmodern is frequently used to identify a particular historical period

usually thought to have begun after the Second World War. However, in the field of performance and theatre, postmodernism is largely considered a phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, the term postmodernist often refers to cultural works that possess stylistic features associated with postmodernism as a structure of feeling rather than a strictly chronological moment.

Accordingly, it may be more appropriate to restrict the discussion to the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism in terms of art rather than subjecting the two concepts to broader cultural investigations. The artistic distinction between modernism and postmodernism reveals fundamental differences in their aesthetic practices and philosophical assumptions.

Modernists tend to reject the past and strive for individual innovation in their artistic production. They often pursue purity in their chosen medium and attempt to create works that are original, self-contained, and formally unified. In contrast, postmodernists do not merely follow modernists chronologically; they also critique them. Postmodern artists frequently borrow from the past and recontextualize existing cultural materials in order to create new meanings.

Instead of seeking purity and unity, postmodernists embrace eclecticism. They freely gather imagery, techniques, and inspiration from a wide variety of sources. This eclectic approach allows them to combine different styles, genres, and forms within a single work. As a result, postmodern art tends to blur the boundaries between high culture and popular culture, between serious artistic expression and playful experimentation. Another important distinction concerns the attitude toward historical progress and cultural authority. While modernists are often enthusiastic about the times during which they work and believe in the possibility of artistic advancement, postmodernists frequently question such assumptions. They are more inclined to challenge dominant narratives, disrupt established conventions, and expose the instability of meaning.

Within the context of drama, these postmodern tendencies manifest themselves in the works of playwrights such as Sam Shepard and August Wilson. Their dramatic visions reflect the complexities of postmodern existence, particularly the fragmentation of identity, the instability of meaning, and the struggle to construct coherent narratives of self and history.

In many postmodern plays, characters experience a profound sense of dislocation. They struggle to understand their place within a rapidly changing social and cultural environment. Traditional structures of identity—family, history, language, and community—often appear fragile or

unreliable. As a result, dramatic narratives frequently explore themes of alienation, uncertainty, and the search for meaning.

The theatre thus becomes a space where the crisis of identity and the fragmentation of experience can be examined and represented. Through experimentation with language, structure, and characterization, postmodern playwrights challenge conventional dramatic forms and invite audiences to reconsider their assumptions about truth, identity, and representation.

Ultimately, postmodern drama reflects a broader philosophical condition in which certainty is replaced by ambiguity, unity by fragmentation, and stability by continuous transformation. The postmodern subject is no longer a coherent and autonomous individual but rather a complex and shifting constellation of experiences, memories, and cultural influences.

In this context, the works of Sam Shepard and August Wilson offer significant insights into the ontology of postmodern existence. Their plays explore the tensions between past and present, identity and history, individuality and cultural inheritance. By dramatizing the fragmented nature of contemporary life, they reveal how the search for meaning continues even within a world marked by uncertainty and instability.