



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Incest and Infanticide in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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### Abstract

The play *Buried Child* represents a disoriented family. Dodge the head of the family who has lost his position as a patriarch. The family tries to behave like a normal family in order to keep a secret buried which led to its disorientation. Dodge spends his day on the sofa sipping his whiskey from time to time. He represents a nihilistic figure who communicates with his wife Halie from the second floor; hence the play has a bitter ending due to the lack of communication between the characters. The sons Tilden and Bradley are considered to be failures; one banished from Mexico and the other one an amputee. Tilden's son Vince returns with his girlfriend Shelley to his family after a long time, only to discover the dreadful secret that was buried for the past few years. An act of incest was committed between Tilden and his mother Halie which lead to a birth of a baby. Dodge, unable to bear the shame eventually kills the baby by drowning it. Hence an act of infanticide is committed by Dodge. Dodge tries to represent his authority but fails, hence in the end we see his grandson Vince taking his place on the sofa and serving as the next patriarch in the family.

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### Introduction

The title *Buried Child* designates a particularly stressful tragedy, a danger to the harmony of a family. The death and burial of a child usually shakes a family's establishment, and its consequences threaten the ability to return to normal life. Shepard has taken this tragic event to the extreme by presenting shocking information to the readers and the theatergoers: Halie, the matriarch, and her older son Tilden, committed an act of incest that led to the birth of a baby. Dodge, the patriarch, could not tolerate the consequences; he drowned the baby and buried it in the back yard. The text makes it quite apparent that he did it all by himself; but, nothing points to whether this was an impulsive or a planned act, an important fact to help judge the seriousness of crime. However, it is believed that it was the latter, because Dodge had several months to "bake" the act in his distorted mind and wounded soul.

The curtain opens twenty or thirty years after the event, recounting about a cursed family that is trying to cover up the truth from the outside world and at the same time struggling to live with it. It is questionable whether they are able to overcome the tragedy and whether such a sin (or a crime) is atoned for and forgiven. Fate exhibits its answer constantly in this story of a stricken family: it scatters hints, sends omens, and eventually laughs bitterly as Vince, the grandson who returns home, and Dodge plainly asserts: "Just getting rid of the vermin in the house" (131). It is revealed from the text that Dodge was a prosperous farmer in the past and proud of the family and the farm:

See, we were a well established family once . . . The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over . . . Everything was settled with us. All we had to do was ride it out. Then Halie got pregnant again. Outa' the middle a' nowhere, she got pregnant . . . In fact, we hadn't been sleepin' in the same bed

for about six years. (123)

The dreadful act deepened the friction in the family because of Halie's betrayal to Dodge and her incestuous relationship with her son. Apparently Dodge, who could not live with such shame, killed the baby. The members of the family have been hiding the event from the outer world. "Nobody could find it . . . Cops looked for it . . . Finally everybody just gave up" (104). Dodge gave up planting crops in his fields and took over to drinking, slowly killing himself.

The study of infanticide is connected to a visual drama of a family corruption. Tilden, a burnt out has been a failure in life and banned from New Mexico due to some trouble has come home. His incestuous relationship with Halie his mother caused the child to be born and the incident was the catalyst of the crime. Dodge who knew that the child was not his destroyed it. This infanticide though committed by Dodge was a sin shared by the actions of all these three characters. It weighed upon the family as a whole leading to alienation and dissociation.

Although more than five decades have passed between O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, the theme of infanticide recurs with the same dynamism. This three act tragicomedy as mentioned is about a decomposed rural American family who has been bearing the guilty secrets of incest and infanticide. Dodge, the patriarch, in his seventies, whose life does not go beyond the physical space of a corroded living room, and who whiles away time watching television and sipping away his whiskey lying on a descript sofa. Tilden and Bradley are his sons; the first one, unable to make a decent living, returns to his parents house while the latter, an amputee, feels himself unable of leading a life without his parents being around.

In the Unites States as elsewhere, men's lives are structured around the ideas of the masculinity that in some degree are related to the patriarchal beliefs. Historically, man's role has been anchored in the public sphere, or in, Talcott Parson's words, "in the occupational world." (15) According to Parsons, "the status of the twentieth century American family is determined by the level of job the 'husband-father' holds and by the income he earns." (13) Men are expected to be committed to their public role, and preferably, a man's profession should be a source of pride. In addition, the twentieth century male is expected to be devoted to his wife and children, primarily through his function within the family realm as the main provider, but also through the upbringing, or the socialization of children. Taking into consideration that young boys tend to look to their fathers in search of appropriate male behavior one may conclude that fathers are important role models for their sons. In other words, paternal influence is particularly evident in the construction of male identity. The American male of the twentieth century is undoubtedly met with a number of expectations and may be argued to be under a "double pressure"; he is expected to successfully manage his roles in both the public and private arenas. Not surprisingly, the public and the private role are at times in conflict with each other; more importantly, it appears that the private role as husband-father is premised on the role that man holds in the public sphere.

As the actors come on the stage, Dodge is in his late seventies, old and beaten. His spiritual backbone has been trampled and his physical health has been deteriorating terribly, therefore he prefers to disconnect himself from reality. He is skinny, sickly looking, and is wearing torn clothes that are covered by a brown blanket. From time to time he sips from the bottle of whiskey which he hides under his pillow. This domestic setting is a refuge for a nihilist who does not enjoy anything but his bottle. John Clum in *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* asserts that, "Dodge is the embodiment of nihilism, never leaving the ratty sofa to which he seems physically attached." (180) Halie, talks to her husband from the second floor, "Are you going out today?" (67) This simple familial question obtains a nihilistic reply: "I rarely go out in the bright sunshine, why would I go out in this?" (67) Obviously such an answer indicates a bitter ending.

In *Buried Child*, Shepard suppresses the nurturing and transforming abilities of the female characters and presents their abilities to breed in a negative light. He contrasts them to the male characters whose regenerative, nurturing and transforming capacities are emphasized. In order to understand the severity of Shepard's suppression of women's abilities, it is important to observe his dramatization of the manifestation of the feminine and mother archetypes in his characters. Jung in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* theorized that all human beings share a collective unconscious, which is a "conglomerate of intuitive, primal categories and potentialities" (143), that he called archetypes. Thus according to Jung:

These archetypes are the numinous, structural elements of the psyche and possess a certain autonomy and specific energy which enables them to attract, out of the conscious mind, those contents which are best suited to themselves (232)

Jung conceived that archetypes are "the source of typical actions, reasons that characterize human life, and thus they structure behaviour, images, affects and thoughts as they emerge in the typical situations in human lives." (141) The archetype is known only through its "particular manifestations" as they appear in individual lives.

Jung described the mother archetype as follows:

The qualities associated with it [the mother archetype] are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. On the negative side, the archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark, the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, poisons. (64)

In *Buried Child* Shepard creates a mother figure who is unable to manifest the mother archetype positively and who is apt carrier of the projection of what Jung, “termed ‘the terrible mother’ who ‘devours and destroys’, which the male characters place on them. Jung defined projection as an unconscious, that is unperceived and unintentional transfer of subjective psychic elements into an outer object.”(235) The male characters fear of being engulfed by the mother leads them to project negative images onto the mother and the symbols which represent the mother. Since the mother figures are created as being such suitable receivers of these projections, it can be seen that in these plays the mother figure is created to express the male character’s predicaments.

In *Buried Child*, Shepard presents a mother figure who is incapable of nurturing her children. He contrasts her to the Mother Earth, which is presented as producing an abundance of crops to nurture the family, and to the rain, which is a symbol of mother, and which is also, at first presented as nurturing. The male characters are all associated with death, destruction or immobility. As the play progresses, the mother figure, the Mother Earth, and the rain become utilized to express the male character’s predicaments. The male characters express a desire to return to the womb, and a simultaneous fear of being engulfed by the mother figure. As the male character’s fear of engulfment intensify so too does their need to project negative images onto the mother figure and the symbols which represent the mother. The mother figure, and the symbols of earth and water, then come to represent a destructive force associated with death. At this point in the play, the male characters procreative capacities are emphasized.

Halie is by law Dodge’s wife, but in realism she is away from him being the ideal supporting wife, as understood from the American Dream. As previously mentioned she committed incest with her older son, Tilden, and gave birth to their baby, who was later drowned and buried by her husband. Unlike *Curse of the Starving Class* in which males inherit the curse, bear it in their blood and surpass it, Halie in *Buried Child*, initiates the curse. She serves as a catalyst that leads to the murder, though Dodge carries it out. Their fate is interwoven. At present she is in her mid-sixties and struggles emotionally to survive by inhabiting a world of her own. She lives on memories that are sometimes distorted, such as the “heroic” son Ansel who died mysteriously in a motel on his honeymoon. She pretends to conserve a delusion of a normal family, at the same time flirting with a Protestant Minister.

Her province is the upper floor, where according to David DeRose in *Sam Shepard*, she “surrounds herself with pictures of her past and of her family at its prime.”(100) She evidently lives in the past. Her communication with Dodge is not only minimum but also incoherent. She does show some indistinct interest in his health, but is incoherent about her concern. Before she makes her appearance on the stage, it is observed from her dialogue that she is disappointed with her sons. She supports her husband’s opinion by saying, “Bradley can’t look after us . . . I had no idea in the world that Tilden would be so much trouble.” (72) Of course, she cannot describe it because of her own critical role in injuring Tilden’s soul. When she comes down, she is dressed elegantly in black, heading towards the outer world only to find again and reconstruct the past. However, the audience is not aware of the past and whether the dead son Ansel was a hero and the reason behind his mysterious death. It is not apparent why he deserves a statue in the centre of the town. DeRose even suggests that Ansel might be “a product of Halie’s imagination, an acknowledged substitute to her buried child. She beautifies a questionable past in order to create a nice future, and in the same way she tries to hide a very ugly and painful present. Stephen Bottoms contends that, “Halie moves abruptly from romantic dreams of the past to hopeless despair in the present. She shares with the family the terrible secret that Dodge killed and buried her baby therefore she becomes accomplice to the crime.”(160) She acknowledges their sinful family situation, “The most incredible things, roses . . . They almost cover the stench of sin in this house.”(116) But nothing can actually cover the impact of the crime, and all her attempts are in vain. She tries to “make up” to God and to herself by becoming religious person, and at the same time flirts with Father Dewis. Her nagging and endless complaints are annoying: she nags Dodge about the pills and later contradicts herself by saying that they make him crazy. She complains about their worthless sons and about their contemporary ways of behavior she finds anti-Christian. On the other hand, she claims that one has to believe in something or go crazy like her husband. She is hypocritical, promiscuous, inconsistent and uncaring as a mother. When the chaotic situation at home becomes unbearable, she tries to enforce order by shrieking and intimidating. As Halie sees Tilden spontaneously husking corn while paying no attention to the rest of the world, and Dodge coiled up on the sofa talking inarticulately, she is shocked by the absurdity of the scene. Neither of the men dares to

confront her confrontations. Dodge changes the topic and takes protection by hiding under the blanket in the style of "if I don't see, it's not there." Since she cannot understand his mumbling, she concludes that he is insane.

Dodge feels that his position of authority has passed to others such as his wife, Halie and younger son Bradley. Bradley even reflects his father's change of character when he comments to Shelley that Dodge spoke differently "When he was a whole man" (49). In his own marriage, Dodge no longer fulfills the role of masculine stability or even companion; Halie continually reminds him of the past-and present-love affairs. Commenting on a horse breeder she knew before her marriage to Dodge, she says, "He knew everything there was to know. (9) Dodge is fully aware of his status as a cuckold. Towards the end of the play she takes a rose given to her by Father Dewis and throws at Dodge, causing it to land lifeless, "between his knees." (60) This action symbolizes Dodge's impotence and emasculation. In the same manner she denies him physical comforts such as whiskey, also his manhood. As the story progresses, the audience learns that these instances of emasculation are linked with the secret that Vince is trying to decode. The disrespect for Dodge's position as father does not have to do entirely with his own attitude, but also with his actions of other family members.

Halie repeatedly ignores Dodge's demand for control over his own life. Even minor issues such as the haircut become Dodge's symbol of loss of power. When Halie announces to Dodge about Bradley's arrival to come and cut his hair; Dodge's replies by saying, "My hair? I don't need my hair cut! I haven't hardly got any hair left!" (11) He receives this news as a threat, even connecting it with his identity as a man: "You tell Bradley that if he shows up here with those clippers, I'll separate him from his manhood." (11) Later in the play it is revealed that Bradley cuts Dodge's hair as he sleep, but also cuts his scalp at several places. This incident is one of the first symbols of emasculation and subversion present in the play. At the end of the play, even the simple this claim of ownership is stripped from him as he loses all traces of authority in his house. Bradley further erases his father's role by sleeping on the couch as Dodge sleeps on the floor. Moreover, he also takes Dodge's blanket, in a sense by exposing his father to the trauma present in the family situation. Bradley succeeds in stripping his father of his leadership and authority.

In response to this treatment by his family, Dodge attempts to re-establish himself verbally. He tries to reassure Shelley of his masculinity by referring to his offspring: "You know how many kids I've spawned? Not to mention grandkids and great-grandkids and great-great grandkids after them?" (55) Even to Tilden, Dodge is vocal about his family role as he reminds his son, "I'm still your father." (14) Though his efforts do not seem to change his position in the family, they are evidence of the inner frustration he feels towards his family's mocking and demeaning attitude which they now treat him.

Halie illuminates a strong personality. She knows she has brought the curse into the family and realizes it is her obligation to control and decompose around her. This is probably why she recognizes Vince; he belongs to a better past and might be able to restore the ruins. When Dodge opens up to Shelley, Halie orders him to be silent: "Dodge, if you tell this thing- if you tell this, you'll be dead to me. You'll be just as good as dead." (123) However this threat would not impose a change for him, and thus it does not discourage him from revealing the whole story. Halie's reaction sounds childish: "I am not listening to this! I don't have to listen to this!" (123), as if by going upstairs the truth will not affect her. Yet, she is afraid of Dodge's confession of the murder and pretends that it is a lie, as she begs the weak and incompetent Father Dewis, who is God's messenger on earth, to correct the family's situation. As Halie cannot receive salvation, she retreats to her safe harbor upstairs, crying.

At the end of the play, Halie is reunited with both Tilden and their dead baby, but this reunion does not bring any continuity to the dynasty. In spite of Shepard's opinion that he is not a doomsday person, as he says in the interview with Stephanie Cohen, one can foresee a cursed family and a dying future. Richard Gilman, in the introduction to Shepard's Seven Plays posits: ". . . there is no past to propel the future." (xxvi) It is perceived that the past, in this family, propels a sick present, and this sick present cannot propel a healthy future. Halie plays dearly for bringing into the world a baby who is the result of incest. She suffers terribly for covering up this murder. But a reader would rather feel hatred for her, instead of compassion.

Halie is upstairs, in her province, nagging and complaining and at the same time not expecting any serious response. She reacts to Dodge's bad coughing, intimidating him to take his pills or else she will force him to take them. Dodge does not want to see her, "Don't come down!" (64) Both the characters correspond through "long distance" avoiding eye contact with each other, and thus they lessen any direct contact, an important policy in this distorted family life. Their dialogues are strained; they skip out one or two topics without making any sense, as if they cannot or do not want to understand each other. It is evident that they are scared of the mutual secret, which is not supposed to be revealed. Stephen Bottoms in *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* points out, "they strive to minimize any kind of contact, and the audience actually witnesses their effort all throughout the play. Dodge finds refuge in living in the present only. He refers to himself as 'a corpse' and suppresses any memories that might shake his fragile existence." (67) Dodge cannot identify with his younger self or he would die. As a further means of guard, he cut

offs himself from his family, although he continues to share the same roof with them. This roof offers him physical shelter but does not give him emotional support which he needs desperately. Dodge actually refuses to be a part of the family, "My appearance is out of domain! It's even out of mine! In fact, it's disappeared! I'm an invisible man!"(68) This attitude helps to comfort him in the present, while deceiving himself that everyone else is not aware of the past, "Everybody knows, everybody forgot." (77) Moreover, ". . . it's much better not to know everything."(88) His self refutation goes to the extreme point when he asserts, "This isn't me! That never was me! This is me. Right here . . . The whole shooting match, sittin' right in front of you."(111) It is evident that he hints to the present corpse the audience sees sitting on the sofa, this powerful farmer who has been stripped from his pride due to a terrible act of incest. He does not analyse himself as a murderer, and surprisingly, most critics agree, saying that he 'killed' the baby instead 'murdered' him. As previously stated, killing can be accidental, whereas murder is planned.

One of the contradictions in Dodge's behavior is apparent when he almost enters a state of nervousness whenever he is left alone. He repeatedly commands Tilden to stay with him even when he falls asleep. "I can't be left alone for a minute."(79) In the act Three, Dodge pleads Shelley not to leave him when Halie returns home. It seems that he is scared of his own shadow, as well as of his family, scared of disappearing into thin air before a redemption to his worthless existence arrives.

Every time I lay down something happens! Look what happens! (whips off his cap, points at his head) Look what happens! That's what happens! (pulls his cap back on) You go lie down and see what happens to you! See how you like it! They'll steal your bottle! They'll cut your hair! They'll murder your children! That's what'll happen" (93).

Dodge mentions the word 'murder' but lays the blame on others; it is 'they' and not 'I'. He is not prepared to take responsibility.

In spite of the emotional atmosphere on the stage, Dodge creates some instances of comic relief, confirming that his sense of humor is still alive. He is sarcastic, vigilant and sharp. His ironic comments and sarcasm are both funny and sad, "Gimme back that coat! That coat's for live flesh, not dead wood!" (115), he shouts at Bradley, who is trying to hide his wooden leg. In Act three, Dodge is amused as he watches Shelley stealing the wooden leg and disclosing the truth about Bradley's impotence. In spite of being close to eighty and being tired of life, he identifies a pretty woman when he sees one. He is definitely impressed by Shelley's good looks and tries to use her for his own purposes, "She is the type of girl who could get me a bottle. Easy . . . They'd probably give her two bottles for the price of one." (94) He likes her determination, recalling the fact that he used to date women like her once.

Vince, Tilden's son, turned up with his girlfriend Shelly to visit them after a period of six years, but nobody seems to recognize him. Shelly compels them to remember the whole story of their past lives and brings to the surface the fact that an infanticide has been committed. Dodge has drowned his son (who is actually Tilden's). This infanticide has remained a secret within the members of the family for many years as none of the family members seem to remember that the incident has really happened. But slowly references are made to the buried child until, in the end, the whole story of the child murder is revealed.

Before presenting the theme of infanticide in *Buried Child* it is necessary to focus on father-son relationships in this play. In the same way that *The American Dream* showed the breakdown of the ideals of family life, similarly the family relationships are somewhat shattered and this is the possible reason for child murder. It is worthwhile mentioning that from the first act, the parent's relationship with their sons, especially the father's involvement with them.

The first son to appear on the stage is Tilden, the eldest. Dodge's relationship with him is not a normal father-son relationship. The father does not seem to care about the son up to the point that he wishes him to be dead. If this is not actually any kind of child murder, it can otherwise be considered an alternative to it.

TILDEN: Well, you gotta talk or you'll die.

DODGE: Who told you that?

TILDEN: That's what I know. I found that out in New Mexico. I thought I was dying but just lost my voice.

DODGE: Were you with somebody?

TILDEN: I was alone. I thought I was dead.

DODGE: Might as well have been. What'd you come back here for? (25)

Tilden is Dodge's and Halie's eldest son and the father of Vince. As a child his parents had expected great things from him, "I always thought he'd be the one to take responsibility . . . Tilden was All- American . . . Fullback. Or quarterback. I forgot which."(72) But then the act of incest took place, followed by the murder of his

baby, and Tilden left for New Mexico in an attempt to start a new life. It is not clear in the play when he went astray, but somewhere along the way, he got into trouble and spent some time in jail and was forced out of jail. Returning home after twenty years, he is socially detached and mentally unstable. He is in his late forties, as Shepard writes in a key stage direction, and “something about him is profoundly burned out and displaced.”(69) He communicates, but his sentences are singular, simple and detached from reality: “Backyard’s full of carrots. Corn, Potatoes.” (93) And when asked if he is Vince’s father he replies: “All kinds of vegetables. You like vegetables?”(93) His bad experience in New Mexico has taught him the importance of being able to communicate with people, as he declares: “You gotta talk or you’ll die”(78), but he is lonely, scared and disconnected from society. Clum sees him as the only character in the play, “who expresses positive human attributes like love or loyalty”(181) but nobody appreciates them. He keeps on bringing armloads of vegetables that he claims to have harvested from the fields outside, although his parents insist that fields have not been harvested for years. His ability to harvest crops from fallow fields is symbolic that he is still fertile, but this fertility leads nowhere. He is cursed that he cannot recognize his own son, Vince. Like Dodge, who denies any relation with his family, Tilden follows his footsteps and stays disconnected. Although being the eldest son, Tilden makes no real attempt to claim over patriarchy.

Unlike Bradley and Vince, Tilden is submissive, yielding and feels lost in his own cursed world. He desperately tries to avoid contact with others; yet he cannot conceal his obsession with Shelley and the way she moves her hands and arms. Her body language suggests confidence and strength, and he keeps staring intently at her hands as if he were hypnotized. When Shelley holds out her arms, Tilden slowly dumps the carrots into them, like handing over a delicate baby. DeRose observes that, “As do the corn husks in Act one, the carrots assume an unvoiced significance as Shelley cradles them in her arms, like an infant, and refuses to let Vince take them away from her.”(104) It is observed that in this family, body language communicates more than words. Tilden himself is far from loquacious; he cannot express his emotions clearly; he actually cannot verbally express anything coherently. However, his experience of holding his baby is embedded in his memory. Watching Shelley takes him to the past, which has been suppressed for twenty years. Tilden is an accomplice to the crime by keeping it a secret, but he is also the cause of the curse. He becomes both, a victim and a victimizer.

Dodge’s relationship with Bradley, his other son, is uncomfortable. Dodge rejects him and this feeling of rejection moves on until the father denies that Bradley could even be his son. This refutation can also be considered a “metaphorical” murder because there is an implied wish that the son does not exist in his life, and hence does not belong to him. In the same way an infanticide separates all the attachments between parents and children, the denial of a son also destroys the spiritual bonds between father and son.

DODGE: He was born in a goddamn hog wallow! That's where he was born and that's where he belongs! He doesn't belong in this house!

HALIE: (she stops) I don't know what's come over you, Dodge. You've become an evil man. You used to be a good man.

DODGE: Six of one, a half dozen of another.

HALIE: You sit there day and night, festering away! Decomposing! Smelling up

the house with your putrid body! Hacking your head off til all yours of the morning! Thinking up mean, evil, stupid things to say about your own flesh and blood!

DODGE: He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's buried in the back yard! (23)

But, if in Dodge’s feelings towards his son an implicit desire for committing a murder is present, this wish for destroying his children becomes much more explicit when Dodge himself says, “You tell Bradley if he shows up here with those clippers, I’ll kill him.”(15) Therefore he states that if it becomes necessary he will take over a much more practical task. Murdering his own son is also in his plans and he admits it.

Besides the two actual sons, there are two more being mentioned in the play. Ansel and the other son who is always referred to as being the “buried child”. All through the play the name of the dead son, the buried child, is never mentioned. The custom of refraining from mentioning the names of the dead comes from antiquity as J.G Frazer comments in his book *The Golden Bough*:

the custom of abstaining from all mention of the names of the dead was observed in antiquity by the Albanians of the Caucasus, and at the present day it is in full force among many savage tribes. Thus we are told that one of the customs most rigidly observed and enforced amongst the Australian aborigines is never to mention the names of a deceased, whether male or female; to name aloud one who has departed this life would be a gross violation of their most sacred prejudices, and they carefully abstain from it. The chief motive for abstinence appears to be a fear

of evoking the ghost, although the natural unwillingness to revive past sorrows undoubtedly operates also to draw the veil of oblivion over the names of the dead. (331)

Ansel, as it also ironically happens in Albee's plays, is also shown as a prototype of the American hero. He is physically powerful, clever, and regarded as a hero, as his mother says. The buried child, in turn, is paradoxically referred by Dodge in the first act, "my flesh and blood's buried in the backyard." (24). It is ironic as Dodge rejects his two real sons whereas the son who is not in reality his, and whom he has killed, is being worshipped as his own flesh and blood. As in the play the buried child has been buried in the backyard where the crops grow, as J. G. Frazer states that, "in Modern Europe the figure of death is sometimes torn into pieces, and the fragments are then buried in the ground to make the crops grow well, and in other parts of the world human victims are treated in the same way." (498)

The second act launches Vince, Tilden's son, who comes to his grandparent's house after a long period of absence; however no one seems to identify him. So, all his expectations of finding his family in the same way as when he last left home frustrated. Some kind of hidden curse seems to envelop all the members of the family preventing them to recognize Vince as either their son or grandson. Therefore, he feels a total stranger in his own environment. According to T. Hoffmann in *Famous Plays of the 1970's*, "Shepard's dramatic mode is the All American nightmare. His characters also laboriously try to consume the world, get lost in the mysteries, and discover you can't go home again because the mutant cells of the image you left behind have multiplied into cancerous growths." (25)

Dodge, the grandfather, is the first person Vince meets, but no matter how hard the boy tries to show he is his grandson, Dodge does not recognize Vince as being related to him.

VINCE: Grandpa?

DODGE looks up at him, not recognizing him.

DODGE: Did you bring the whiskey?

VINCE looks back at SHELLY then back to DODGE.

VINCE: Grandpa, it's Vince. I'm Vince. Tilden's son. You remember?

DODGE stares at him.

DODGE: You didn't do what you told me. You didn't stay here with me.

VINCE: Grandpa, I haven't been here until just now. I just got here. (33)

Vince attempts to encourage Dodge about their grandfather-grandson relationship but it does not seem simple for Vince to attain such a connection. Vince wants to come closer to his "grandpa" Dodge, who in return, wants to keep his distance. Even when Vince addresses him as "grandpa, it displeases him.

VINCE: Grandpa-

DODGE: Stop calling me Grandpa will ya. It's sickening. "Grandpa". I'm Nobody's Grandpa! (36)

The situation is reiterated when Vince meets his father. Again there is a son who wants his father's recognition and a father who just gapes without saying anything, without accepting him as a son.

VINCE: (to TILDEN) Dad?

TILDEN just stares at VINCE.

VINCE:(to TILDEN) It's Vince. I'm Vince.

SHELLY:(to VINCE) This is your father?

VINCE:(to TILDEN) Dad, what're you doing here?

TILDEN just stares at VINCE. (37)

This lack of recognition is also there in the play, whenever the topic of the "buried child" comes to the surface. If the characters in the house refuse to acknowledge Vince as a member of the family, they also refuse to accept the buried child's existence in the family, pretending they all have forgotten him. So, the same position in regard to both Vince and the "buried child" is repeated. Neither of them have been recognized or else remembered by any of the members of the family.

DODGE: My flesh and blood's buried in the back yard!

TILDEN: You shouldn't a told her that.

DODGE: What?

TILDEN: What you told her. You know.

DODGE: What do you know about it?

TILDEN: I know. I know all about it. We all know.

DODGE: So what difference does it make? Everybody knows, everybody's forgot. (24)

Therefore, in a way, since the moment he has arrived at his grandparent's house, Vince has been treated as a surrogate buried child. As the buried child had been deprived of belonging to the family, now Vince receives the same treatment; his rights of being a son are also being denied. He has lost his identity in the presence of this family but he thinks it is his task to unravel the mystery that has been inexplicably transferred to the house and its members. So, in order to disentangle the enigma that hovers over the house, Vince feels the necessity of leaving it to clear matters up.

VINCE: Shelly, I gotta go out for a while. I just gotta go out. I'll get a bottle and I'll come right back. You'll be O.K here. Really!

SHELLY: I don't know if I can handle this Vince.

VINCE: I just gotta think or something. I don't know. I gotta put this altogether.

SHELLY: Can't we just go?

VINCE: No! I gotta find out what's going on. (42)

Vince's girlfriend, Shelley also tries to shed the light on the chaotic situation by asking Tilden questions about his supposed son.

SHELLY: (pointing to VINCE) This is supposed to be your son! Is he your son? Do you recognize him? I'm just along for the ride here. I thought everybody knew each other! (37)

At first, Tilden remains passive, just gazing at Vince, later on he takes a more positive stance and confesses the truth of having a son, "I had a son once, but we buried him." (37) Therefore it is Tilden who first reveals the existence of a child, admittedly his, who was buried. Dodge's only reaction is to hide the situation. He does not want Tilden to reveal its existence, so he uses an imaginary argumentation to convince Tilden to remain silent.

DODGE: You shut up about that! You don't know anything about that! That happened before you were born! Long before! (37)

Language is an essential component in the life of a family, but not in this one. Roudane in *American Drama* since 1960 states that unlike an articulate family, ". . . their body language communicates more than the words that prove inadequate substitutes for their experiences."(210) Furthermore, he maintains that the playwright's language is singular and distinctive because it attempts to depict chaotic order in which the characters live. The characters in *Buried Child* talk, they exchange words, but they do not really communicate. Each one lives in his (or her) own world and there is no rationality in it. It seems that Shepard compensates for the lack of verbal language by drawing our attention to the body language, especially when it comes to Tilden watching Shelley in a strange manner.

As the play develops further, the situation becomes more intricate as another event in the play emerges. The topic of the buried child which was hidden comes to the surface. Something from the past starts to gain importance as the play develops. But, present and past situations can be related and parallels can be established between the two sons, since both of them have been deprived of something. On one hand there is Vince, whose right of being a son is being denied, similarly there is the "buried child" whose right to live was once destroyed. It appears that both of them have been apparently forgotten and therefore are not recognized as sons.

Tilden is the first character who talks about the infanticide committed in this family. Dodge's role in drowning the baby is reluctantly conveyed by Tilden to Shelley .

TILDEN: I just told you. You don't understand anything. If I told you something you wouldn't understand it.

SHELLY: Told me what?

TILDEN: Told you something that's true.

SHELLY: Like what?

TILDEN: Like a baby. Like a little tiny baby.

SHELLY: Like when you were little?

TILDEN: If I told you you'd make me give your coat back.

SHELLY: I won't. I promise. Tell me.

TILDEN: We had a baby. (motioning to DODGE) He did. Dodge did. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other. Little baby. Dodge killed it. SHELLY stands.

TILDEN: Don't stand up. Don't stand up!

SHELLY sits again. DODGE sits up on sofa and looks at them.

TILDEN: Dodge drowned it.

SHELLY: Don't tell me anymore! Okay?

TILDEN moves closer to her. DODGE takes more interest.

DODGE: Tilden? You leave that girl alone!

TILDEN: (pays no attention) Never told Halie. Never told anybody. Just drowned it.

DODGE (shuts off T.V): Tilden!

TILDEN: Nobody could find it. Just disappeared. Cops looked for it. Neighbors. Nobody could find it.

DODGE struggles to get up from sofa.

DODGE: Tilden, what're you telling her! Tilden!

DODGE keeps struggling until he's standing.

TILDEN: Finally everybody just gave up. Just stopped looking. Everybody had a different answer. Kidnap. Murder. Accident. Some kind of accident.

DODGE: Tilden! Don't tell her anything! Don't tell her!

TILDEN: He's the only one who knows where it's buried. The only one. Like a secret buried treasure. Won't tell any of us. Won't tell me or mother or even Bradley. Especially Bradley. Bradley tried to force it out of him but he wouldn't tell. Wouldn't even tell why he did it. One night he just did it. (47)

As a result, Tilden is the first character who starts unburying the truth about the baby despite Dodge's frequent reactions against it. He gradually begins to unravel the mystery that has been hidden in the house for many years. Now, two opposing forces can be noticed: Tilden's and Dodge's. The former feels compelled to relate the whole event of the killing of the child whereas the latter fights to keep it a secret or else to pretend that nothing ever happened in the past. Dodge even admits the idea of a non-existing past in his own life.

SHELLY: You're whole life's there hanging on the wall. Somebody who looks just like you. Somebody who looks just like you used to look.

DODGE: That isn't me! That never was me! This is me. Right here. This is it. The whole shootin' match, sittin' right in front of you.

SHELLY: So the past never happened as far as you're concerned?

DODGE: The past? Jesus Christ. The past. What do you know about the past? (54)

The recurring theme of the existence of a buried child appears again, now in the last scene. Shelley is adamant upon knowing what is actually being hidden by Dodge. First, she reports back to the past; she has seen a picture of a baby who does not seem to belong to its mother. When she becomes insistent to know more about the truth about the story of the buried child (learned from Tilden the night before) from Dodge

SHELLY: Was Tilden telling the truth?

DODGE stops short. Stares at SHELLY. Shakes his head. He looks off stage left.

SHELLEY: Was he?

DODGE's tone changes drastically.

DODGE: Tilden? (turns to SHELLY, calmly) Where is Tilden?

SHELLY: Last night. Was he telling the truth about the baby? Pause.

DODGE: (turns toward stage left) What's happened to Tilden? Why isn't Tilden here? (55)

But as it has always been happening when the subject is brought out, Dodge does not want to share his private and hidden matters with the girl and he makes her by changes the topic.

In spite of Dodge's requests, Shelley attempts, to explicate the hidden truth about the child. It has remained covered for so many years that perhaps even the members of the family do not believe in its existence. There has been an unwanted child, whose life has been abruptly ended. Now the family behaves as if nothing has ever happened. By denying the crime they also deny the existence of the child itself.

SHELLY: I know you've got a secret. You've all got a secret. It's so secret in fact, you're all convinced it never happened. (63)

But Dodge goes through a transforming process. At first he does not want to tell Shelly anything about the past, later he wants to share with her all the things that happened before, and starts disclosing to her the complete story about the child, this time paying no attention to the appeals of the others.

DODGE: She wants to get to the bottom of it. (to SHELLY). That's it, isn't it? You'd like to get right down the bedrock? You want me to tell ya'? You want me to tell ya' what happened? I'll tell ya'. I might as well.

BRADLEY: No! Don't listen to him. He doesn't remember anything!

DODGE: I remember the whole thing from start to finish. I remember the day  
he was born

BRADLEY: (To Dodge) We made a pact! We made a pact between us! You  
can't break that now!

DODGE: I don't remember any pact.

BRADLEY: (to SHELLY) See, he doesn't remember anything. I'm the only one  
in the family who remembers. The only one. And I'll never tell you!  
(64)

From the first act there are some signs and elements about a dead child in the play and, as the scenes advance, this mysterious act is uncovered. It is at this moment, when Dodge feels the requirement for revealing the whole story, that the theme of child murder reaches its peak and the whole truth is entirely disclosed. It also becomes evident that the main cause for Dodge killing the child lies in the fact that there has been incest much more deeply buried than the infanticide itself, which everyone pretends to hide. It is a similar situation as presented in *Desire Under the Elms*, the child was born out of his wife and son's incestuous relationship. But here, unlike in O'Neill's play Dodge is incapable to bear the stigma of the situation and resolves to kill the child who is the cause of disharmony in the family. He eventually realizes harmony is not possible to achieve, and so he feels bound to reveal everything to Shelly.

DODGE: See, we were a well established family once. Well established. All the  
boys were grown. The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake  
Michigan twice over. Me and Halie here were pointed toward what  
looked like the middle part of our life. Everything was settled with us.  
All we had to do was ride it out. Then Halie got pregnant again. Outa'  
the middle a 'nowhere she got pregnant. We weren't planning on havin'  
any more boys. We had enough boys already. In fact, we hadn't been  
sleepin' in the same bed for about six hears.

HALIE: (moving toward stairs) I'm not listening to this! I don't have to listen to  
this!

DODGE: (stops HALIE) Where are you going! Upstairs! You'll just be listenin'  
to it upstairs! You go outside, you'll be listenin to it out side; Might as  
well stay here and listen to it.

DODGE: Halie had this kid. This baby boy. She had it. I let her have it on her  
own. All the other boys I had had the best doctors, best nurses,  
everything. This one I let her have by herself. This one hurt real  
bad. Almost killed her, but she had it anyway. It lived, see. It lived. It  
wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted  
to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even  
when everyone around us knew. Everyone. All our boys knew. Tilden  
knew.

HALIE: You shut up! Bradley, make him shut up!

BRADLEY: I can't.

DODGE: Tilden was the one who knew. Better than any of us. He'd walk for  
miles with that kid in his arms. Halie let him take it. All night  
sometimes. He'd walk all night out there in the pasture with it.  
He'd make up stories. Even when he knew it couldn't understand  
him. We couldn't let a thing like that continue. We couldn't allow  
that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything  
we'd accomplished look like it was nothin'. Everything was  
cancelled out by this one mistake. This one weakness.

SHELLY: So you killed him?

DODGE: I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it. (64)

While all the metaphorical unburying process of the "buried child" has taken place inside the house, Vince, outside the house, has also gone through a transformation process. Now, a contradictory situation takes place as Vince enters the house; at the beginning of the play he arrived as the grandson begging for recognition. Now, he comes back different. Everybody recognizes him bit now it is his turn to play the same game with them.

DODGE: Where's my goddamn bottle!

VINCE: (looking in a DODGE) What? Who is that?

DODGE: It's me! Your Grandfather! Don't play stupid with me! Where's my two bucks!  
 VINCE: Your two bucks?  
 HALIE: Vincent? Is that you Vincent?  
 SHELLY stares at HALIE then looks out at VINCE.  
 VINCE: (from porch) Vincent who? What is this! Who are you people?  
 HALIE: (moving closer to porch screen) We thought you were a murderer or something. Barging in through the door like that.  
 VINCE: I am a murderer! Don't underestimate me for a minute! I'm the Midnight Strangler! I devour whole families in a single gulp! (66)

As a result, as Dodge has unburied the whole past of "buried child" now it is Vince who has also gone through this unearthing process by going back in the family's past. The discovering process of this family, transformed him and acquire a new individuality which he seems now to incorporate and at the same time to be incorporated in the house.

VINCE: I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield, I watched him breathe as though he was frozen in time. And every breath marked him. Marked him forever without him knowing. 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. (70)

Nothing seems to be important to him except for the house that he has inherited and in which nobody shall stay. All the unconscious creatures that lived in the house do not seem to remain in there anymore as a new order of things can be established by its new inhabitant.

VINCE: This my house now, ya' know? All mine. Everything. Except for the power tools and stuff. . . My Grandmother? There's nobody else in this house. Except for you. And you're leaving aren't you? (71)

Not even the "buried child" who was responsible for the family's curse will continue to be there, for Tilden actually unburies the child or what has been left of child and carries it inside.

TILDEN appears from stage left, dripping with mud from the knees down. His arms and hands are covered with mud. In his hands he carries the corpse of a small child at chest level, staring down at it. The corpse mainly consists of bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth. (72)

So, all the guilty secrets disappear and life is brought back when the buried child is unearthed. In the same way, the whole atmosphere of death that had penetrated in the house all the years has disappeared. In the only Vince remains.

Alvin Klein in his work *Tackling Shepard's Ominous 'Buried Child'* states that, "Buried Child is a myth-shattering family necrology. Moral and religious values have rotted completely having been pretty rotten in the first place, and anarchy is the answer." (1) The annihilation of the ideal family which is present in *The American Dream* seems to pursue all the plays being analyzed; in a scale which varies from *Desire Under the Elms* to *Buried Child*, the same topic appears. The idyllic family life seems to be threatened little by little, reaching its peak in *Buried Child*. Here, the breakdown of the family reaches such a level that nobody is able to identify each other. Ultimately, there seems to be no sense of family alive. However, in spite of his stating that the response to this play is anarchy, the audience believes that there is an opening inside anarchy in the sense that a new order of things is to be established. For considering that Halie says to Dodge,

HALIE'S VOICE: Dodge? Is that you Dodge? Tilden was right about the corn you know. I've never seen such corn. Have you taken a look at it lately? Tall as a man already . . . This, early in the year. Carrots too. Potatoes. You oughta' take a look. A miracle. I've never seen it like this. Maybe the rain did something. Maybe it was the rain. (72)

One perceives that a cathartic like ending is observed in the play, but with a cyclical movement towards life again, once the whole strange atmosphere seems to fade away when Vince reaches a new stage in his life away from death and the revulsion his heritage has provided him. He seems to be all set to cultivate the fertility surrounding him.

Ann C. Hall in *A Kind of Alaska: Women in the plays of O'Neill, Pinter and Shepard* observed that Shepard has been accused in his earlier plays of "presenting the action from the male perspective while ignoring female characterization." (92) She further comments that, "In these plays women are props for male performances; mothers merely highlight the complicated oedipal relationships between father and sons; and men frequently must escape the clutches of a spoiled, sexually demanding female." (92) She further notes that, following a stay in England, Shepard's work took a "noticeably "domestic" turn. The focus became family and the female characters became fully developed in his past work. Hall expresses views which she believes is contrary to feminist critics; she believes that, "in his later plays Shepard depicts the quest for masculine power as deplorable and ridiculous, while he represents as the calm amidst macho storms, frequently offering flexibility in the face of deconstructive male rigidity." (95) *Buried Child* can be seen as a prime example of this "Shepard reformed" genre. Hall sees the home as the "house of the dead", epitomized by Dodge, the "corpse" on the sofa who attempts to rule the house and its occupants despite the state of decay and impotence. This monarch of the "male wasteland, its form and laws" (98) even makes the attempt to continue his reign beyond the grave, choking out his instructions for the dispersal and disposal of the farm and its contents just before his death onstage. One is reminded of Ephraim Cabot and his own compulsive efforts to retain complete control and possession of the farm, after death if possible via a male heir. In this instance, however Dodge chooses to bequeath his goods to the child whom he knows to be not his own, rather than his own sons.

Sam Shepard is criticized for sabotaging the American myth of the Norman Rockwell (a famous twentieth century American Painter) rural family. He probably wants to point out that rural life has changed and these myths are moth eaten and worn. Norman Rockwell stereo-type of American life through his paintings presented the clean living hard working farmer, his traditional home loving wife, his American sport loving children and the Church providing spiritual guidance a myth which took a beating due to materialism and consumerism of the later part of the twentieth century. It is a play where infanticide took place due to a family of misfits and disassociated members who end up together and the roles of the family elders especially Halie and eventually Dodge are irresponsible and thoughtless. This eventually kills not only the baby but the guilt paralyzes the whole family into decay.

**Conclusion:** The family disorder does not end with one generation, but passes on to the next. Apparently the only member of his family that refuses to live in a delusion is Vince. Demanding to be recognized, he returns to the family in Act three in a drunken state. Halie is the first to link him to his grandfather as she tells him, "We thought you were a murderer or something. Barging in through the door like that." (68) He no longer wishes to continue his journey with Shelley, but says, "I've gotta carry on the line. It's in the blood." (71)

In this play, the pattern of scapegoat is again present in the figure of the buried child who has been killed to atone for the faults of the whole family. He has been drowned to cleanse the evil atmosphere out of which he had been conceived, and thus to enable the members of the family to restore their place and its members to fruitfulness

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