

Hidden Truths: An Analytical Study of Sam Shepherd's Buried Child

**Instructor Dr. Humam Salah Sameen
Ibn Sina University of Medical and pharmaceutical
science
College of Medicine**

**Fahmi Salim Hameed
Imam Alkadhum college
Elec1@alkadhum.col.edu.iq
humam.salah@ibnsina.edu.iq**

م.د. همام صلاح سمين

م.م. فهمي سالم حميد

تستكشف مسرحيات سام شيبارد على نطاق واسع الاحتلال وعدم كفاءة العلاقات الشخصية التي تشكل الهياكل الأسرية أو أي شكل من أشكال الهياكل الاجتماعية التيتقليد الهياكل الأسرية ، مثل الصداقات الوثيقة أو التحالفات المتماسكة للشركات ، الخ. الموضوع الرئيسي لغالبية مسرحيات شيبارد هو الصراع بين الاثنين مكونات ما يمكن اعتباره كيانًا واحدًا بينما يتصارعون من أجل أي منهما السيطرة أو البقاء على قيد الحياة في مواجهة الضغوط الخارجية. أبطاله الرئيسيون هم عادةً ما تكون بعيدة عن محيطهم المحلي بالإضافة إلى توقعهم إلى عزلة ذاتية مدمرة. الدمار الذي خلفه في أعقاب شخصيات غير قادرة لاجتياز الصدوع يشكل الصراع الأساسي في العديد من مسرحيات شيبارد. هذا يهدف البحث إلى كشف الأسرار التي تدور حول المسرحية على مستويات متعددة. يجب على المؤلف تحليل الحكمة ثم فحص مضايقات المسرحية بشكل نقدي في المستويات النفسية والاجتماعية. الكلمات المفتاحية: وأد الأطفال ، أسطورة ، محاكاة ساخرة ، سفاح القربى ، أسرة أمريكية الحقائق المخفية: دراسة تحليلية عن الطفل المدفون للكاتب سام شيبارد

Abstract

Sam Shepard's plays extensively explore the occupation and inefficiency of interpersonal ties that make up family structures or any form of social structures that imitate family structures, such as tight friendships or close-knit corporate alliances, etc. The main theme of the majority of Shepard's plays is the conflict between the two components of what might be considered a single entity as they battle to either dominate or survive in the face of outside pressures. His major protagonists are typically estranged from their local surroundings as well as their yearning for a destructive self-isolation. The destruction left in the wake of characters that are unable to traverse chasms shapes the fundamental conflict in many of Shepard's plays. This paper is aimed to unmask the secrets that the play is about at multiple levels. The author shall analyse the plot and then critically examine the play's nuisances at psycho-social levels.

Keywords: *Infanticide, Myth, Parody, Incest, American family*

1.0 Introduction The plot twists and turns in Shepard's *Buried Child* leave the reader intrigued and wanting more. *Oedipus Rex* and other classic plays with themes of incest are comparable to Shepard's *Buried Child*. Along with the abundant vegetables in the family's backyard, he has also included a number of symbolic items and Native American symbols of renewal. This play features seven major characters, the majority of whom are members of one family. On first glance, it appears that the play's family is a typical middle-class American family. In contrast to appearances, Dodge's one-track alcoholic mind, Halie's annoying demeanour, and Tilden's estranged relationship with his father are not characteristics of an elderly family. Benjamin writes in his article, "Shhhhhhhame: Silencing the Family Secret in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*": Few families in American drama are as dysfunctional as the unnamed family in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*. The play is about is about a family of misfits and outcasts who has tried unsuccessfully for years to cope with the emotional destruction inflicted upon them by the horrible acts of incest... (123) Furthermore, his main characters frequently suffer from their desire for a destructive self-isolation in addition to being alienated from their immediate surroundings. Many of Shepard's plays have a central conflict that is shaped by the devastation left in their wake by characters that are unable to cross the chasms they have drawn.

1.1 Plot The play opens with Dodge, who is in his seventies and might not live for very much longer. He has a bad cough, which makes it seem as though he is very ill. Shepard emphasizes in the play that Dodge is not only mentally ill but also physically ill. His ferocious cough appears to indicate the progression of his illness throughout the play. Tilden, Dodge's son, makes an unusual entrance by dropping an armful of corn in front of his father. As the play progresses, the play's significance will become clear. When Tilden brings the corn inside from the backyard, his father accuses him of stealing it and commands him to return it. Take that damn corn back from wherever you got it, Dodge yells, "I haven't planted corn back there since 1935, so take that damn corn back from where ever you got it." However, Tilden claims that the entire backyard is covered in tall stalks of corn, carrots, and potatoes. Tilden, a young man who ran into trouble in New Mexico, now lives with his parents. The wife of Dodge and mother of Tilden, Halie, is unusually protective of him and forbids him from doing or saying anything without Dodge's or her own consent. The play invites analysis on a variety of levels, whether as American gothic or as a contemporary take on Greek tragedy. While on an adventurous tour of the country with his girlfriend, Vince stops by the family for some reminiscing; neither his father, Tilden, nor his grandparents recognize him. The overarching impression of the awkward, unwelcome meeting is that

the youth of the house—its promise, its reputation, and its future—has been interred alongside a real corpse, the interred child, and the secret in the corn. Despite being far from explicit, the plot seems to imply that the child who was buried was the product of an incestuous relationship between the mother and one of the sons. DeRose writes in his book *Sam Shepard: Shepard borrows from the classical Greek family myths, incorporating such archetypal narratives as the Orestean homecoming, oedipal incest, the battles of fathers and sons, as well as patricide and infanticide. Buried Child also exhibits a particular indebtedness to Henrik Ibsen's modern family classic, Ghosts (1881), both in its narrative pursuit of a dark family secret and in its thematic preoccupation with the revelation of the son's true identity and spiritual inheritance. (99)*

1.2 Analysis of the Play The most significant of symbolic details is the titular "buried child," a playwright Edward Albee's 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf's* absent child who is tragically reintroduced after being dug up from the cornfields. In order for the family to finally find peace in the present, the child is the family's long-buried secret that needs to be addressed. The play's details, like Tilden pouring corn husks over Dodge and having the husks stick in his hair and hat, Bradley, the older brother, using his prosthetic leg as a prop to dominate the action and stick his finger in Vince's girlfriend's mouth, and the implication that Halie spent the night with the minister (she returns home wearing a different dress than when she left) all combine to create a very bleak family portrait. A shadow of the family's former obsession with lust can be seen in the mother's affair with the elderly man. Bradley's prosthetic leg might make you think of the crippled king from the *Holy Grail and Arthurian Legends*. The final scene of the play only tells a portion of the story, possibly indicating that Shepard will revisit this destructive family in future works Shepard draws from a wide range of sources in the physical setting as well as the dialogue to create his mythic landscapes because his main goal is to depict figurative conflicts and actions. Because of this, Shepard's plays are replete with references to and borrowings from what he believes to be the central elements of American mythology, including Hollywood and Westerns in particular, rock and roll and country-western music, middle-class suburban life, the physical geography of the West (particularly the desert), science fiction, and the generational conflict that tore apart American society and culture during the Vietnam era. Mir writes in his article, "Familial disintegration: A Study of Sam Shepard's Buried Child": Shepard profusely portrays the images of violence in Buried Child. Almost, all the male characters are indulged in acts of violence because of hiding past secret. In Act One, Bradley behaves in a violent manner while giving Dodge a hair-cut. The act of sprinkling corn husks on Dodge and the brutal haircut are very annoying, violent images. In Act two, the violent image of father is displayed when Tilden narrates the story of an infant murder to Shelly. (614)

1.3 Hidden Secrets in Buried Child The family is portrayed even more sinisterly in Shepard's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel Buried Child, where the genetic curse is formed up of long-buried family secrets. The leader of the household, Dodge, spends his days wrapped in an old blanket on the couch watching television. Halie, the local priest's wife, speaks at her husband (not to him) about inconsequential subjects when she isn't busy pursuing Father Dewis. Halie constantly brings up her second son Ansel, who she and she alone claims was a hero and star basketball player, which only serves to muddle matters further. The son of Tilden, Vince, and Shelly, Vince's girlfriend, come to this broken home in an effort to mend family bonds. Tilden, though, rejects Vince's invitation and claims that the son he once had The incestuously conceived child of Halie and Tilden that Dodge killed and buried in the field behind the house is the "dead child" in the literal sense. In a metaphor, the deceased child stands in for the entire family, all of whom are deceased in the eyes of both their parents and one another. Vince leaves one night and goes on an alcohol binge after being rejected by all of his ancestors. Bradley then threatens Shelly sexually while Shelly is left at Bradley's mercy. When Vince returns the following morning after a night of heavy drinking and engages in open violence, giving Halie and Dodge a clue as to who he is. The moment Tilden walks in with the exhumed body of the buried child, Vince declares himself the new patriarch of the family after Dodge passes away. The play's highly ambiguous conclusion contrasts the hopeful images of a new generation's birth with despondent depictions of denial, illness, and death. Halie tells Dodge to get a haircut before the play even starts. Dodge turns down. The Hebrew Bible's Book of Judges contains the tale of Samson and Delilah, in which Samson's uncut hair served as his source of power. Samson's strength diminished after having his hair cut when he told Delilah this secret. By having Bradley, a representative of the younger generation, cut Dodge's hair, he avoids losing his strength. By

wearing a hat, he makes an effort to avoid this. Bradley sneaks in, however, and still cuts his hair. Using excessive force, he hurts people. Bradley therefore makes an effort to sap Dodge's meagre strength. In Acts 1 and 2, Tilden brings in vegetables from his relatives' farms: corn. He does not appear until the very end of Act 3. When he is, he brings in an infant's skeleton. The corn has a variety of meanings, as Halie queries Tilden about. The vegetables represent the family's long-buried secrets coming to light—even blossoming—in this case. Tilden symbolizes Dodge's passing by burying him in corn husks. Tilden responds, "Once it's picked you can't put it back," to Dodge's request for him to return the corn, which he suspects has been stolen. This serves as a metaphor for the family's sins, which are unforgivable. According to Dodge, the field hasn't been used to grow crops since the 1930s. Since then, he hasn't sown seeds in the fields. In Act III, the description of the family's archival photos by Shelly. There is a photograph of a large farming dot. The children are all standing outside in the corn. The crops are plentiful when the family was prosperous. Even then, there were indications of unhappiness, and no crops were produced the following year. The crops can begin to bloom once Vince shows up, Dodge confesses to his crime, and then passes away. The play opens with Halie saying, "You know what it is, don't you? It's the rain." Apparently, Dodge's health was impacted by the rain. However, it also alludes to the rain's purifying effect on the characters as a whole. A quotation about rain appears at the play's conclusion. "Nice, heavy rain. At the play's conclusion, Halie says, "Takes everything straight down, deep to the roots." Throughout the play, it has been raining. In that rain, secrets, vegetables, and a baby were all revealed. The rain stands for purification, washing away the family's secrets and guilt. The family's misfortune has been brought on by a terrible secret that has plagued them. In the play, rain allows the crops to grow while washing the secret away. The family finds renewal with the arrival of rain. The American dream, according to Sam Shepard, is a myth. For various people, the American dream means different things. The myth of the American dream, as Shepard himself described it, has many different definitions. Some people might think that it has something to do with having money, owning a home, or succeeding in life than their parents. A good family life and freedom are two things that other people have said it means. The family in *Buried Child* has fallen short by either metric. For over forty years, Dodge hasn't grown any crops on his property. He is drinking and watching television while sitting on the couch in his dilapidated, neglected home. His sons have a bad attitude toward him. His wife has been unfaithful to him. His grandchild has been interred outside. He is a failure in every way, and he has turned his loved ones into complicity in both his failure and his crime. Americans, according to Sam Shepard, prefer fantasy to reality. Dodge's defense of killing Halie's child centers on the triumph of fantasy over reality. The fact that he cannot give his family the ideal life makes him dejected. The newborn "made everything [the family] had done look like it was nothing," he claims. That one error would invalidate everything. This is due to the fact that the family held itself to an impossible standard of perfection—rich family, lovely home, successful farm, and ideal children. The photographs Shelly saw upstairs depict this family. Nevertheless, nothing can ever be perfect all the time. The terrible family secret that Halie and Dodge have been concealing may result from covering the small cracks to prevent them from showing up. Even in the photo, Shelly observes, Halie didn't appear to be smiling.

Dodge fears passing away as a failure because he is aware that he has failed to live the American dream. He works to keep his sons, who are also failures, from assuming control of the farm and his position there. In the fields, unseeded corn is growing, and he forbids Tilden from picking it. As a display of the younger generation's dominance over the older, he tries to stop Bradley from giving him a haircut. Finally, he hands over the property to Vince, who then forcibly drives Bradley out. Then, Dodge is capable of passing away. Even if he hasn't realized the American dream of success, he can still leave the farm to the following generation. In order to take Dodge's seat on the sofa, Vince is forgoing his own American dream, his chance at success, his music, his plans to travel, and his relationship with his girlfriend. Dodge is oblivious to this fact, though. The American dream, according to many, is that Dodge will pass his farm on to the next generation. Vince's unhappiness with his new life is evidence that Shepard is right that the American dream is a myth.

1.4 Unravelling the Hidden Secrets in Buried Child Throughout the play, a lot of things are buried and hidden. Of course, the corpse of the child, buried somewhere in a field, stands at the center of the drama. It is the title's buried child. Both Dodge, who reveals the secret, and Tilden, who actually finds the child at the conclusion of the play, will bring it up and demonstrate it throughout the drama. But the play contains a ton of other allusions to graves and secrets. When Tilden enters the scene in Act I carrying the corn, he begins to husk it right away,

encasing his father in the husks. The corn has since emerged from buried seeds. Dodge instructs Tilden to return the corn because he believes it was taken. Once it's picked, you can't put it back, Tilden counters. The corn serves as a metaphor for both hiding things and for Dodge's ultimate demise. He therefore requests that Tilden return it in order to prevent death. In Act II, the climax depicts Dodge being metaphorically buried in the rabbit fur coat. In Act III, Dodge makes another attempt to hide from his wife by donning the rabbit fur coat. In many scenes of the play, Halie is physically concealed from the audience. She is first heard from upstairs for a considerable amount of time at the beginning of the play. Even as she finally descends the stairs, she does so very slowly, allowing only her shoes to be visible for a considerable amount of time. Halie's voice can be heard from below again at the conclusion of the play, eventually in total darkness. Act III's Halie declares that the roses' fragrance will "almost cover the stench of sin in this house" as she enters carrying them. She tries to hide Bradley's prosthetic leg so Father Dewis won't see it because she is embarrassed about it as well. The likelihood that she is having an affair with Father Dewis and had sex with her own son Tilden, however, is high. She consequently has just as much to hide as the rest of the family, if not more. The family makes an effort to portray the ideal family even though it is severely dysfunctional. Halie clings to her memories of her son Ansel, who she believes to be flawless. She is organizing a memorial for him when the play opens, and it appears that he just passed away. But as the play goes on, it becomes obvious that he passed away a long time ago. Her recollections of Ansel are also in doubt. Dodge claims he didn't play any sports, but she recalls him as being very athletic. He is regarded by her as a hero, similar to a combat fatality. She says there will be a memorial for him, holding a basketball in one hand and a gun in the other. In actuality, he passed away in a hotel room. The same is true of Vince, whom Halie only met as an adult, who she recalls as a perfect baby. Most likely, she is thinking back on the dead baby she had. Because the deceased cannot, like Halie's two living sons, refute the story, it is simple to remember them as flawless. Dodge similarly murdered the child to hide the sin it was born from and prevent the family from being embarrassed. The baby, along with the show that was Tilden carrying it around, according to him, "made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothing." Dodge murders a baby and buries it in the yard in order to maintain the appearance of a perfect family, which is a greater sin. The concealment is more crucial than the child's life. Feiyue Zhang writes in "What the Buried Child Stands for: A Thematic Study of Sam Shepard's Buried Child": The origin of the evil, Dodge, cannot be purified; alongside his family member, he also becomes a substitute of the buried child. The extreme dissociation not only results in their incapability to recognize their own younger generation, Vince, but involves him into the family curse. Shepard finished the exploration of the secret in the American family by showing that the corruption and dissolution of the family is from the inside, rather than the external forces. This is Shepard's first step towards introducing an opportunity to rescue the American family. (78)

1.5 Conclusion Simone Leisentritt writes in *The Hollowness of American Myths in Sam Shepard's "Buried Child"*:

According to Wade, the American culture is based on certain myths, on complex systems of attitudes, beliefs, and values that are characteristic for a specific society or group... The history of the nation and the experience of westward expansion resulted in certain myths that are still present in the American imagination. (2) Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* reveals as well as analyzes a family system which sheds light on the fact that this family of outcasts is engaged in a cycle of self-destruction. Incest and infanticide are two terrible events that are looming over them, and they are unable to deal with them. In an effort to maintain homeostasis and a sense of normalcy, the family—which is already dysfunctional—tries to suppress any memory of these events, but their suppression only makes their dysfunction worse. Simone Leisentritt writes: U.S. playwright Sam Shepard is known for his interest in national myths, which he defines as mysteries that speak to the emotions and feelings of people, and in the prominence of such myths in modern society (cf. Graham 112). Thus, Shepard sees his plays as tools for cultural conversation by which he questions American myths (cf. Companion Drama 291). One of Shepard's most popular plays is the family drama *Buried Child*, which unfolds the dark secret of a family living in a farm house in Midwestern Illinois. (2) The destruction of the family is not caused by infanticide and incest. Instead, it is their response: instead of coming to terms with the events through open communication, their sense of shame silences them. This silence has an impact on all interactions among the family members, regardless of whether they are related to the incest and infanticide.

Works Cited

- DeRose, David J. *Sam Shepard*. New York: Twayne Pub., 1992.
- Simone Leisentritt. *The Hollowness of American Myths in Sam Shepard's "Buried Child"*. GRIN Verlag, 2011.
- Mir, Danish Ahmad, Dr. R Vijaya. "Familial Disintegration: A Study of Sam Shepard's Buried Child." *International Journal of Academic Research and Development*; Vol.2(6), November 2017; Page No. 612-615.
- Opipari, Benjamin. "Shhhhhame: Silencing the Family Secret in Sam Shepard's Buried Child." *Style*, vol. 44, no. 1-2, 2010, pp. 123-38. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.44.1-2.123>. Accessed 15 Jan. 2023.
- Zhang, Feiyue. "What the Buried Child Stands for: A Thematic Study of Sam Shepard's Buried Child." *English Language and Literature Studies*; Vol. 10, No. 2; 2020