

Dissolution of the Family in Sam Shepard's Buried Child

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Abstract:

This piece of writing aims to evaluate the several crisis-related factors that cause family disintegration. It also emphasizes issues of identity and masculinity, a sense of not belonging, a yearning for one's roots, ties to the past, and a skewed relationship between fathers and sons. It also examines how infanticide and incest contribute to the gradual breakdown of families. The purpose of the article is to assess the various crisis-related elements that lead to family breakdown. It also highlights concerns of masculinity and identity, a feeling of alienation, a longing for one's heritage, connections to the past, and an imbalanced bond between father and sons. It also looks at the roles that incestuous relations and infanticide play in the slow disintegration of families. The paper illustrates the characters' suffering and how their escape from reality and past transgressions force their lives to become ridiculous and pointless. Apart from this, Sam Shepard's work concentrates on the powerful, sinister, and horrifying legacy that is inherited by succeeding generations. Buried Child explores family betrayal and guilt in great detail, using a sophisticated symbol system to do it. It revealed a horrifying family secret involving infanticide and incest.

Keywords: morality, crisis, identity, alienation, infanticide, incest, family, and destruction

Introduction:

The three-act play *Buried Child* has a captivating story. It centers on a physically and spiritually broken Midwestern farming family. It was the 1979 Pulitzer Prize winner and the second play in Sam Shepard's trilogy about the family. A turning point in Sam Shepard's career, *Buried Child* embodies all that is most admirable in his fusion of greater mythic motifs with realistic family drama. Sam Shepard's play explores the oppressive, sinister, and horrifying legacy that is passed down from one generation to the next. As mentioned by Susan Abboston, "The play is also a mythic exploration of family guilt and betrayal, conveyed by a complex web of symbols" (Thematic Guide to Modern Drama 50). Dodge, the family's head, is shown in the play's opening scene half-drunk and asleep on the couch. He is a sedentary cougher who only finds solace from whisky and television. Halie, Dodge's wife, is an old flirt who is having an extramarital affair with Father Dewis, the parish priest. Tilden, the eldest son, is middle-aged and

severely disabled. He recently returned from prison to the property. Bradley, the other son, is strong, deviant in his sexual behavior, and has one arm amputated. Though he doesn't live with them, he does occasionally visit. After spending six years apart from his lover Shelley, Vince, Tilden's son, is followed in the drama as he makes his way back to his family. Although Halie greets them warmly at home, nobody else seems to know Vince. Both his father Tilden and his grandfather Dodge forbid him from having any relationship. But soon after they get there, a terrible and strange truth from the family's past comes to light. Due to the incestuous relationship between Halie and her older son Tilden, Halie gives birth to a newborn boy. Dodge drowns the infant and buries in the garden behind their farmhouse. The entire family is destroyed by this incestuous and infantile conduct. Dodge no longer works in his trade and spends his time smoking and drinking. Following the revelation of the dark past held by the family, Vince leaves the house to buy his grandfather Dodge some whisky. However, when he returns intoxicated, he breaks through the front door and throws the empty whisky bottles. At the conclusion of the play,

Tilden returns home to show his mother Halie the deceased child's corpse that he dug up from their field. Dodge is dead on the floor. Vince covers Dodge's corpse, places roses on his chest, and then, donning Dodge's cap, collapses onto the sofa in the same manner that Dodge did, giving the impression that he inherited the family home. The play concludes with Halie witnessing the corn outside, the veggies growing miraculously, as if in heaven. Three generations of a dysfunctional American family are revealed in *Buried Child*. It depicts abnormal behavior and flaws that represent psychological flaws within and conventional difficulties in the lives of the people. They portray the hole in their modern culture as well as the emptiness of their own lives as as Stephen Bottoms remarks, "Seek to create and recreate their personal appearances. Many of them manipulate an ever-shifting series of roles and masks, thereby, suggesting the absence of any underlying sense of the self" (*The Theatre of Shepard: States of Crisis* 15). On the surface, it's a tale about a family legacy that is passed down through eras of regeneration and deterioration. It portrays a family story of incest and infanticide at the mythic level, which compels the elder generations to abandon their duty and leaves a legacy of emotional emptiness that the next generation must recognize, understand, and overcome. It explores themes of human misery like incest, murder, deception, and rebirth; it has similarities to Greek tragedy. David J. DeRose points out:

Shepard again appropriates the traditional Greek family mythology, adding archetypal tales like the Orestean reunion, oedipal incest, father-son conflicts, and infanticide and patricide. In addition, *Buried Child* bears a strong resemblance to Henrik Ibsen's contemporary family classic, *Ghosts* (1881), in that it centers on the theme of the son's spiritual inheritance and true identity, as well as pursuing a sinister family mystery. (*Sam Shepard* 99)

In *Buried Child*, Sam Shepard takes advantage of the ancient incest myth. In his portrayal, the family members are shown to be incestuous. The entire family has been wrecked by this tragic act of incest, which pushes each character towards a crisis on both an individual and family level. In the drama, incest destroys the American ideal of a harmonious family.

Due to character and familial self-perpetuating crises, the American dream has collapsed.

Sam Shepard stated on the concept of family, according to Henry Schvey, saying:

"What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean? Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other – everyone is born out of a mother and a father, and you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle. (The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard 111)"

Sam Sheppard depicts the breakdown of the American family in modern American society and claims that American culture has become just dehumanising and morally and spiritually regressive. He portrays America as a conceited, savage, and hypocritical country where people enjoy dominating over others and physical pleasures at the expense of interpersonal relationships. Sam Shepard illustrates the disintegration of family ties in terms of their structure and worth in *Buried Child*.

Regarding the family in the 1960s, Sam Shepard states:

"The family had somehow lost its viability and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. All of these newly created terms, including "nuclear family," abruptly lost their significance. We were all independent, free of that, and we were all sort of circling the planet with no connections at all, you know. Which is absurd?"

In American families, the male is regarded as the breadwinner, the primary earner, and parental figure, while the female or wife, is viewed as the family's pillar and is in charge of housekeeping. However, spiritual immorality has put them in opposition to it in this play. They are unsuccessful in what they do. James Wilson on the dissolution of families Says, "The American people believe that this nation is on the wrong track, not because it is constitutionally ill-founded or economically backward, but because its family life is deteriorating" (*Posterity Lost: Progress, Ideology, and the Decline of the American Family xi*).

In *Buried Child*, every character goes through a variety of struggles, including a crisis of masculinity, a crisis of identity, a lack of a sense of belonging, a craving for roots, a connection to the past, and a distorted father-son relationship brought

on by incest and infanticide. Every character, with the exception of Vince's girlfriend Shelly, is going through an identity crisis, which has resulted in both internal and external conflicts. In this connection, Annette J. Saddik writes, "Deal with the fragile boundaries of identity and the impossibility of locating an authentic self-outside of the roles, masks, images and performances that mark human action" (*Contemporary American Drama* 131).

Buried Child delves deeply into identity dilemma. As Esther Harriot quotes, "*Buried Child* continues Shepard's obsession with identity" (*American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and Interviews* 12). The conflict between creativity and destruction is the main focus of the play. Shepard is delving into the investigation of the self in connection to others while addressing the issues of environment, family, home, and heredity. The persona of Dodge's grandson Vince embodies the idea of an identity crisis. At home, he experiences an identity problem. Six years prior, Vince leaves his family and establishes a new life for himself in New York. When he gets back home, no one knows who he is. His father Tilden and grandfather Dodge both deny that he is related by blood relation. Vince makes an unsuccessful attempt to persuade his grandfather. Rather than acquiring a new identity at home, he loses the identity that he had made for himself in New York. Vince is determined to reclaim the persona he once had. He feels the need to prove his origins in order to satisfy his need for identification, but he is not allowed to have a biological relationship with his grandpa Dodge or father Tilden. He denies any attachments, which leaves him perplexed and frustrated and then he sobs. "How could they not recognize me! How in the hell could they not recognize me! I'm their son" (Sam Shepard: *Seven Plays* 97). Shelly starts to notice Vince's rejection intermittently after being confused by the manners and atmosphere of the Dodge family. She asks Tilden questions about Vince in an effort to learn who he is. Tilden doesn't even acknowledge Vince, leaving his identity a mystery. Vince pleads with Shelly to stay and spend more time getting to know his family before she gives up and orders him to leave. In despair, he starts doubting and blaming himself of any horrible actions. He considers himself to be not part of the family. According to him, "I have been

known to plunge into sinful infatuation with the Alto Saxophone. Sucking on number 5 reeds deep into the wee, wee hours"(97). He begins acting out his childhood antics in an attempt to establish his identity, thinking that this may aid in their memory retrieval. As Dodge urges them to buy him a bottle of whiskey, Shelly makes sarcastic comments regarding the identities of the family.

Shelly asks Vince, "SHELLY: Why don't you get him a bottle. Vince? Maybe it would help everybody identify each other" (94). Vince only succeeds in defining himself at the play's conclusion when he uses violence. After spending the night out, he becomes intoxicated and goes home, whereupon he erupts into rage, bashing empty whiskey bottles against the wall and yelling.

In this play, almost every character is having identity issues. At certain points in time, they have distinct identities. Dodge appears to have a solid identity, but Halie suggests that he was once someone else. He goes from being a responsible man to a couch potato drinker. Although she is Dodge's wife, Halie and Dodge are not very close. She had an affair with Father Dewis while also becoming more religious. Tilden claims that his sense of self has been shattered, but that it once existed. Vince calls Tilden as soon as he gets home:

"VINCE: (reentering, to TILDEN.) you want anything, Dad?

TILDEN: (looks up at VINCE.) Me?

VINCE: Yeah, you. Dad. That's you. (98)"

It indicates how Tilden is having difficulty defining his paternity. The only character with a sense of reason and a complete identity is Shelly. But the family's attitude also has an impact on her, and she starts to lose her sense of self because she can no longer identify with herself and "I don't even know what I'm doing here" (121). The identity of an incestuous child is the most muddled of all. Because he is Tilden's son and Halie is Tilden's mother, the infant is born into the family as Tilden's brother and Halie's granddaughter. In addition, he was born as Vince's brother, Dodge's stepson, his uncle, and so forth. The basic pattern of the customary rules of masculine mannerisms has broken down, leading to a crisis of masculinity. Dodge continues to be the play's central character despite his lack of development as a character and his physical frailty,

which reduces him to a mere mouthpiece and dependant on others. His frequent use of self-serving language is indicative of his declining standing in the family "an invisible man" (63).

Halie's adultery causes him to be physically destroyed. He was formerly a prosperous dairy farmer, but his son's incestuous relationship with his wife has permanently altered and damaged him. Sam Shepard himself has also expressed this perspective on masculinity. Regarding American violence, which he categorizes as male, he has stated:

"...There's something about American violence that to me is very touching. In full force, it's very ugly, but there's also something moving about it, because it has to do with humiliation. There's some hidden, deeply-rooted thing in the Anglo male American that has to do with inferiority, that has to do with not being a man, and always, continually, having to act out some idea of manhood that invariably is violent. (New York Times B26)"

Dodge observes that his younger son Bradley and wife Halie are now the objects of his authority. Halie reminds him of her past and present relationship with Father Dewis and disavows his manhood. It reveals Dodge's macho inconsistency and weakness. Nevertheless, Halie throws a rose that Father Dewis gave to Halie at the play's conclusion, symbolizing Dodge's emasculation and powerlessness. Dodge shows disrespect not just with his demeanor but also by the actions of other family members. Not only has he lost his manhood in front of women, but also in front of men. Dodge threatens Bradley, saying, "You tell Bradley that if he shows up here with those clippers, I'll kill him," after learning through Halie that Bradley is intending to shave his hair. (67). When he is unable to resist, it is also clear that he is helpless.

Besides all this, Dodge's "hair is cut extremely short and in places the scalp is cut and bleeding" (83). It stands for the dehumanization of Dodge's commanding position in family matters. Bradley also takes his father's blanket and couch, undermining his father's authority and manhood in the home. When Dodge believes that something bad will happen to him if he falls asleep, his effeminacy is made clear. Dodge is merely a voice in his household, reminding his son that he is still his father. Tilden finds it difficult to hold his position. He

is not conscious of his role as a father on the one hand, and he is bullied by his younger brother Bradley on the other, leading him to follow his wishes. As a result, it demonstrates that neither of the fathers is a masculine figure. The play *Buried Child* is about conflict. The characters are forced to confront the harsh realities of American society in a dire conflict. The buried truths of their life are exposed by this conflict. Shepard depicts violent scenes in *Buried Child* in graphic detail. Nearly every male character indulges in violent deeds in order to keep a secret from their past. Bradley acts violently when giving Dodge a hair cut in Act One. The cruel haircut and the act of putting corn husks over Dodge are incredibly offensive and violent visuals. When Tilden tells Shelly the tale of a baby murder in Act 2, the violent image of the father is revealed. The spectator is left with a terrible image of this heinous crime of drowning a baby. The moment Tilden tells Shelly that Dodge killed the baby is heartbreaking. Bradley is seen frightening Shelly at the end of Act 2. Bradley's actions have terrified and intimidated Shelly. Bradley's obscene gesture of sticking his finger in her mouth is an attempt to belittle her. Bradley frequently intimidates others by taking advantage of their flaws. While Bradley initially wants to assassinate Dodge's father in order to gain control over Dodge's family, Shelly wants to support Dodge. Act 3 has Dodge admitting his guilt and detailing the infant's cold-blooded murder in public. He says to them, "I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it" (124). Vince only discovers who he is and how to be recognized by the play's conclusion after resorting to violence. Drunk, he bursts through the door, slinging booze bottles on the ground. Vince gets his aggression, dominance, and power from his Uncle Bradley and grandfather Dodge. When Vince uses a large folding hunting knife to create a hole in the screen large enough for him to crawl through and onto the sofa, crushing Bradley to the ground, there are further graphic depictions of violence. In addition, he displays his animosity against Bradley by moving his wooden chair out of reach, demonstrating his violent and aggressive stance. The fallout from incest not only damaged the marriage but also drove family members toward drinking. The first step toward turmoil in a marriage is for Dodge and Halie to be

bereft and not communicate. As the Act progresses, Dodge can be heard having fits of coughing and Halie's voice can be heard coming from the top of the stairway. Halie fails to see that he is taking long swigs in secret, which is why he is doing this repeatedly. The lack of communication between the two of them is a bad thing since it makes it difficult for a meaningful conversation to occur and degrades the mood within the family. Halie is making advances at the clergyman while being guilty of having an incestuous relationship. It appears that there is more between them than first meets the eye. Dodge says something wise when Vince keeps asking his grandfather where Halie has disappeared: "Don't worry about her." She'll be gone for several days. She says she'll be back but she won't be. (he starts laughing) There's life in the old girl yet! (Stops laughing)" (87-88). Shepard brings this problem to a peak by include a clergyman's incident in which, heavily intoxicated, Halie and Father Dewis engage in a profoundly spiritual conversation that adds depth to the overall situation. In general, it depicts the corruption and depravity of the clergy. It seems like Shepard planned to introduce a clergyman in this episode. This interpretation of the clergymen is depressing; it's like watching blind people lead blind people. When they have the opportunity, they provide entertainment, and the next day, they deliver a magnificent sermon on the benefits of abstention. This is a sign of utter depravity and ignorance. Dodge becomes more irate with Halie despite her clandestine relationship with Father Dewis despite her incest. He turns to binge drinking to block out his depressing emotions. Dodge's frustrations drive him to become a devoted cynic. When Halie orders Tilden to clean up the mess before Bradley gets there, Dodge responds quite angrily and treats him filthily. It sets off an emotional chain reaction in Halie, who describes how she hates Dodge and his mental state. Dodge uses deft maneuvers to sidestep his wife's accusations. Being a skillful dodger, he always sneaks a sip or two before hiding the whiskey bottle under the sofa so no one can see it.

In this work, the family has been destroyed by alcoholism and reality denial. When Dodge goes to bed, Tilden sips from the same bottle that Dodge had hidden from Halie, and Tilden finishes it off. Shelly is served whiskey by Halle, who reaches into the

clergyman's pockets for a silver flask after they return from lunch somewhat inebriated. Later, Vince returns, hungover, and he carelessly smashes empty bottles. Aside from this, at the play's conclusion, Vince's family only discovers who he is when he is inebriated and acting violently after spending the entire evening in a pub. To avoid dealing with the fundamental issues—namely, their own shortcomings and complicities in regards to incest and murder—everyone in this family quarrels over little matters. Putting blankets or coats over oneself or another represents everyone's cooperation in concealing the truth and one another. This family is so deeply troubled by shame and corruption that none of the members can even talk to each other on a regular basis. Dodge's drinking and Halie's infidelity have both contributed significantly to this family's crisis, and they should take the biggest blame. Dodge's denial of reality paints a picture of poor health, illustrating how the effects of shame wear a person down until almost nothing is left. Halie's frequent speaking from offstage, which creates a great distance from her family, and her words demonstrate her emotional alienation from them. In *Buried Child*, denying reality is a severe psychological crisis that has terrible consequences for the family and the person. In conclusion, the story revolves around a single family whose discordant behavior throws everything into disarray and full disarray. In this play, Sam Shepard delves deeply into several subjects that climax in a crisis. He portrays the working-class family in this drama, which is the subject of abnormal fantasy, guilt, and self-perpetrated violence. According to Barnes (*Best American Plays Eight Series 1974–1982* 156), "Shepard makes a searing indictment of the American family, seeing it as a destructive unit rather than a supportive one" in reference to this play. As a result of these two universally frowned upon practices, incest and infanticide are the causes of family conflict, as demonstrated by Sam Shepard. Sam Shepard illustrates how violence occurs and a life that is utterly destroyed. He also depicts Americans' incapacity to accept truth and fulfill their responsibilities in life.

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