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Betrayal and Guilt in Sam Shepherd's Buried Child

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by

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

{وَأَمَّا تَخَافَنَّ مِنْ قَوْمٍ خِيَانَةً فَانْبِذْ إِلَيْهِمْ عَلَى سَوَاءٍ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْخَائِنِينَ}

صدق الله العلي العظيم

(الانفال (58)

{If thou fearest treachery from any group, throw back (Their Covenant) to them, (so as to be) on equal terms: For God loveth not the treacherous. }

Allah spoke the truth

Surah al-Anfal (58)

(Ali, 1987)

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Betrayal and Guilt in sam Shepherd's Buried Child

Abstract

As part of the family trilogy of Sam Shepard, *Buried Child* has been understood in that the corruption of the nuclear family has been identified as the theme of the play, and the guilt and the secret of this American family is the buried child who is regarded as the incestuous relationship between Halie and Tilden

The present study is concerned with the theme of betrayal and guilt in *Buried Child* by Sam shepherd. This study aims at showing how the playwright Sam Shepherd presents the theme of betrayal and the theme of guilt in his play. The present study is concerned with analyzing Betrayal and guilt. It deals with the following subjects: Sam Shepard's life, betrayal and guilt, and the analysis of Halie and Dodge character. The study concludes that the family is dispersed, mired in betrayal and guilt, and is doomed.

1-Introduction

The current study deals with the following aspects in details: Sam shepherd's life since his childhood till his death and the motivations that has led him to write his plays and delving in the theme of betrayal and guilt. The second part deals with the details of betrayal the meaning and types. Also, this part deals with guilt and its meaning and types. And the last part deals with Dodge and Halie's character

2- Sam Shepard

Sam Shepard, born Samuel Shepard Rogers III on November 5, 1943, and died July 27, 2017 used to be an acclaimed American playwright, actor, and author. He is regarded one of the most innovative and influential figures in modern-day American theater. Was consider to be "the greatest American playwright of his generation. (Wikipedia: Sam shepherd)

“He won the Pulitzer Prize for *Buried Child*. He was a finalist for the W. H. Smith Literary Award for his story collection *Great Dream of Heaven*, and he has also written the story collection *Cruising Paradise*, two collections of prose pieces, *Motel Chronicles* and *Hawk Moon*, and *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, a diary of Bob Dylan's 1975 Rolling Thunder Review tour. As an actor he has appeared in more than thirty films, including *Days of Heaven*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *Steel Magnolias*, *The Pelican Brief*, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *The Notebook*. He received an Oscar nomination in 1984 for his performance in *The Right Stuff*. His screenplay for *Paris, Texas* won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1984 Cannes Film Festival, and he wrote and directed the film *Far North* in 1988 and cowrote and starred in Wim Wenders' *Don't Come Knocking* in 2005. Shepard's plays, eleven of which have won Obie Awards, include *The God of Hell*. *The Late Henry Moss*, *Simpatico*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*, which won a New York Drama Desk Award. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Shepard received the Gold Medal for Drama from the Academy in 1992, and in 1994 he was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame. (Shepard, Vintage eBook *Buried Child* 2006)

The plot and characters in Sam Shepard's play "*Buried Child*" are not based on a specific real-life event or individuals. However, Shepard drew inspiration from various sources and his own observations of American family dynamics and the struggles of the working class. His play "*Buried Child*" is a play that delves into themes of family dysfunction, buried secrets, and the disintegration of the American Dream. Set in a farmhouse in rural Illinois, the play centers around the deeply troubled and dysfunctional family of Dodge and Halie. The family's dark and mysterious past is gradually revealed as their secrets come to light. (El-Hoseini, Sam Shepard: Cultural and Biographical Contexts 2016)

Sam Shepard had a diverse family. His father Samuel Shepard Rogers Jr. (a former Army officer and farmer), His mother Jane Elaine Shepard and had two younger half-sisters, Sandy Rogers and Roxanne Rogers, from his father's previous marriage. O-Lan Johnson is Shepard's first wife, with whom he had a son named Jesse Mojo Shepard. Jessica Lange is Shepard's longtime partner and fellow actor, with whom he had two children, Hannah Jane Shepard and Samuel Walker Shepard. his family played a significant role in shaping his life and artistic sensibilities. While his relationships with his parents and romantic partners had their complexities, they also influenced his work and provided rich material for exploration in his plays and writings. The nature of Sam Shepard's relationship with his parents, Samuel Shepard Rogers Jr. and Jane Elaine Rogers, has been described as complex and sometimes strained

Shepard had a difficult relationship with his father, Samuel Shepard Rogers Jr. His father was an Army officer and frequently moved the family from place to place due to his military assignments. The constant relocations disrupted Shepard's stability and had an impact on his upbringing. Shepard once described his father as an alcoholic and a womanizer, and their relationship was often tense.

Shepard had a closer relationship with his mother, Jane Elaine Rogers. She was a teacher and provided him with intellectual stimulation and encouragement in his artistic pursuits. Shepard credited his mother with fostering his love for literature and theater. Despite this, their relationship also had its challenges, as Shepard struggled with feelings of abandonment and displacement due to their frequent moves.

While Shepard's relationship with his father was strained, he had a close bond with his sisters. Roxanne Rogers, in particular, had a significant influence on Shepard's early interest in acting and the arts.

The complicated dynamics within Shepard's family, including his relationship with his parents, influenced his work as a playwright. Many of his plays explore themes of family dysfunction, hidden secrets, and the breakdown of communication. Shepard often drew inspiration from his own experiences and emotions, weaving them into his characters and narratives.

Later in his life, Shepard expressed a desire to understand his parents better and reconcile with the past. In interviews, he acknowledged that the complex nature of his upbringing had shaped his worldview and artistic sensibilities. He also recognized the impact of his parents' flaws and struggles on his own development as an individual and artist.

In Shepard's early life his father, served in the United States Army Air Forces during World War II and later became a teacher and farmer. His mother, Jane Elaine Shepard, worked as a teacher

before becoming a homemaker. Shepard spent his early years traveling with his family to various military bases across the United States. This transient lifestyle had a profound impact on.

He attended high school in Duarte, California, where he developed an interest in theater and acting. After graduating, he briefly attended Mount San Antonio College but dropped out to pursue a career in theater in New York City. His Professional career: In the 1960s, Shepard became involved in the off-off- Broadway theater scene in New York City. He co-founded the renowned experimental theater company, the Theatre Genesis, and began writing plays. His early works, such as "Cowboy Mouth" (co-written with Patti Smith) and "Chicago," gained attention for their bold and unconventional style. Shepard's breakthrough came with his play "Buried Child" in 1978, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Apart from being a prolific playwright, Shepard also had a successful career as an actor. He appeared in numerous films, including "Days of Heaven" (1978), "The Right Stuff" (1983), and "Black Hawk Down" (2001), among others. He was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role in "The Right Stuff."

In his Personal Life Shepard had a turbulent personal life. He was in a long-term relationship with actress Jessica Lange, with whom he had two children: Hannah Jane Shepard and Samuel Walker Shepard. The couple separated in 2009.

Sam Shepard passed away on July 27, 2017, at the age of 73 due to complications from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

“When you hit a wall of your own imagined limitations just kick it in.” (Sam Shepard)

2- Buried Child

"*Buried Child*" is a play written by Sam Shepard, first performed in 1978. It is one of The Family Trilogy which is a trio of plays by Shepard. It includes *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), *Buried Child* (1979), and *True West* (1980). (Wikipedia, Family trilogy 2017)

It tells the story of the dysfunctional and fragmented family of Dodge and Halie, who live on a rural farm in Illinois. The play explores themes of family secrets, buried truths, guilt, and the disintegration of the American Dream.

The central plot revolves around the discovery of a buried child, a dark and haunting secret that has been kept hidden by the family. The presence of the buried child serves as a catalyst for the unraveling of deep-rooted family secrets and the breakdown of communication among the characters.

The play delves into the complexities of family relationships, portraying the strained dynamics between the family members. Each character harbors guilt and carries their own emotional burdens, leading to a sense of isolation and a breakdown in communication. As the play progresses, the family's troubled past is revealed, and the characters confront their own culpability and face the consequences of their actions.

"*Buried Child*" is known for its exploration of American mythology, the erosion of the American Dream, and the darker aspects of the human experience. It combines elements of realism and

surrealism, incorporating dark humor, poetic language, and symbolic imagery. "*Buried Child*" is considered one of Sam Shepard's most influential and iconic works. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979, solidifying Shepard's status as a leading playwright of his generation. The play's exploration of family dysfunction.

The initial curtain of *Buried Child* reveals an old man watching television in a decrepit farmhouse in Middle America. Dodge, a man in his seventies, sitting awaiting death as a release from the boredom of a hollow life. Occasionally he swings at a bottle of whiskey hidden in the lumpy folds of his couch. As Halie, his wife, nags and pontificates from the top of the stairs, we discover that an incessant rain has been falling in the untilled fields. A significant rain, it washes the marrow from the bones of the buried child, fertilizing the long-neglected cornfields, preparing the land for a miraculous rebirth.

Dodge has fathered three sons. Tilden, the eldest, once an all-American football player, is now a half-wit, reduced by the Fall of this House of Oedipus to the mentality of a child. As the play begins, he is plodding through the fields, picking the suddenly emergent corn. Bradley, the second son, has designs on his father's property; but he also has been reduced to a grotesque, having lost a leg in a chain-saw accident some years earlier. The youngest son, Ansel, is dead, killed in his motel room on the night of his honeymoon, after having married unwisely into a family with connections to the Mob. The youngest son, as we are constantly reminded by Halie, "was a hero," and he "would've stopped him!" In folklore, it is a recognized rule of narrative that the third son is the heroic one.

Like the House of Oedipus, the family of Dodge and Halie is cursed by the combined acts of overrating and underrating blood relations. Dodge explains the origins of the curse to the one character who has the least right to know - Shelly, a stranger. (Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*: The Ironic Use of Folklore)

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 really 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 be a part of 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.... 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. Talking' to it. Singin' to it. Used to hear him singing to it. He'd make up

3- what is Betrayal and its types

Betrayal can manifest in various forms, and understanding the different types can provide insight into the complexities of this theme. Here are some common types of betrayal:

- **Romantic Betrayal:** This type of betrayal occurs within a romantic relationship, where one partner violates the trust and fidelity of the other. Examples include infidelity, lying, or hiding important information from one's partner.

- **Friendship Betrayal:** Friendship betrayal involves the violation of trust and loyalty between friends. It can take the form of spreading rumors, betrayal of secrets, backstabbing, or betrayal in times of need.
- **Familial Betrayal:** Familial betrayal involves the betrayal between family members. This can include actions such as betrayal of sibling trust, manipulation, exploitation, or acts that harm or undermine the well-being of family members.
- **Professional Betrayal:** Professional betrayal occurs in the context of the workplace or professional relationships. It can involve actions such as stealing credit for someone else's work, breaking professional confidentiality, or sabotage for personal gain.
- **Political Betrayal:** Political betrayal happens in the realm of politics and governance. It can involve politicians breaking promises, betraying constituents' interests, or engaging in corrupt practices. **Cultural or National Betrayal:** This type of betrayal pertains to actions that are seen as betraying one's cultural or national identity. It can include actions such as treason, collaboration with enemies, or actions that undermine the values and interests of one's culture or nation.
- **Self-Betrayal:** Self-betrayal refers to situations where an individual betrays their own values, beliefs, or principles. It can involve compromising one's integrity or making choices that are against one's own best interests or personal growth.
- **failing to fulfill their duties betrayal:** someone can be considered a betrayer if they fail to fulfill their duties, including their duties as a father. When an individual neglects or abandons their responsibilities as a parent, it can be seen as a betrayal of the trust and expectations placed upon them. Failing to meet the obligations and duties of fatherhood, such as providing emotional support, guidance, and care for their children, can have significant negative impacts on the well-being and development of the child. The betrayal in this context stems from the breach of the fundamental trust and the failure to fulfill the role and responsibilities expected of a father.

4-The Themes of Betrayal and guilt in *Buried Child*

In Sam Shepard's play "*Buried Child*" the themes of betrayal and guilt are prominent and serve as key elements driving the narrative and character dynamics. Here's an exploration of these themes in the context of the play:

Betrayal: Betrayal is a central theme in "*Buried Child*," as the characters grapple with the consequences of past betrayals and the resulting breakdown of trust within the family. Various instances of betrayal are revealed throughout the play, including:

- Dodge's betrayal of his wife Halie through an affair with another woman.
- Bradley's betrayal of Dodge by cutting off his leg as an act of revenge.
- Tilden's betrayal of the family by fathering a child with an unknown woman.
- Halie's betrayal of her family by maintaining a relationship with her own son, Tilden, and hiding the truth about their child.

These betrayals contribute to the overall dysfunctional and fractured nature of the family, highlighting the deep-seated issues and secrets that have eroded their connections.

Guilt: Guilt is another prominent theme in “Buried Child.” The characters in the play grapple with their own guilt and its lingering effects on their lives. Some key examples of guilt in the play include:

- Dodge’s guilt over his affair and the strained relationship it created with his wife. Halie’s guilt over her neglect and mistreatment of her sons.
- Tilden’s guilt over his past actions, including his involvement in a murder.

The characters’ guilt manifests in different ways, from Dodge’s withdrawal and bitterness to Tilden’s haunted demeanor. The weight of guilt further fuels the dysfunction within the family and contributes to their inability to confront and resolve their issues.

Both betrayal and guilt intertwine in “*Buried Child*” to highlight the complex web of relationships and the corrosive effects of past actions on the present. These themes underscore the deep-seated dysfunction, the erosion of trust, and the struggle for redemption within the play’s narrative.

5.2 Halie’s betrayal and guilt under the guise of religion

Halie is a complex character in “*Buried Child*,” and her actions, betrayal, and guilt play significant roles in the dynamics of the family.

Halie’s character and her experiences with betrayal and guilt:

Betrayal and Neglect: Halie’s character is marked by betrayal and neglect towards her family members. She neglects her sons, Tilden and Bradley, and favors her deceased son Ansel, whom she idolizes. This favoritism and neglect contribute to the family’s dysfunction and resentment.

Betrayal of Bradley: Halie’s betrayal is particularly evident in her treatment of Bradley, who lost his leg due to her negligence. She dismisses and ignores his suffering, further exacerbating his feelings of resentment and abandonment. This betrayal leads to Bradley’s aggressive and erratic behavior, reflecting his deep-seated anger towards his mother.

Affair and Betrayal of Dodge: Halie’s betrayal extends to her husband, Dodge. It is revealed that she has been having an affair, most likely with Father Dewis. This betrayal of marital trust fractures their relationship and contributes to Dodge’s bitterness and withdrawal. Halie’s affair further adds to the family’s web of secrets and dysfunction.

Guilt and Emotional Turmoil: Halie experiences guilt and emotional turmoil, though she may attempt to mask it with defensiveness and denial. Her guilt arises from her mistreatment of her sons, particularly Bradley, and her neglect of her family responsibilities. This guilt is evident in her attempts to rationalize her actions and justify her behavior.

Search for Redemption: As the play progresses, Halie’s guilt and conflicted feelings become more apparent. She grapples with the consequences of her actions and seeks some form

of redemption or absolution. However, her efforts are complicated by her deep-seated denial and resistance to facing her own guilt.

Halie's character in "*Buried Child*" serves as a reflection of the decayed American Dream and the disillusionment of family relationships. Her actions of betrayal and neglect, as well as her own guilt, contribute to the overall dysfunctional atmosphere within the play.

5.1 Halie's claim to be religious despite being a sinner is an important aspect of her character in "Buried Child."

Halie's religious identity and the contradictions it presents:

Religious Identity: Halie presents herself as a devoutly religious woman throughout the play. She references her faith, attends church services, and mentions her involvement with the church community. Halie uses her religious identity to project an image of righteousness and moral superiority.

Hypocrisy and Contradictions: However, Halie's religious identity is fraught with contradictions and hypocrisy. Despite her outward display of religious devotion, her actions and behavior contradict the moral values she claims to uphold. Her affair with Father Dewis, her neglect of her sons, and her favoritism towards Ansel are all actions that conflict with her professed religious beliefs.

Denial and Justification: Halie's religious claim serves as a way for her to deny and justify her own guilt and sins. She uses religion as a shield to deflect criticism and avoid confronting her own transgressions. Her religious identity becomes a tool for her to maintain a façade of righteousness while conveniently ignoring her own failings.

By portraying Halie as a character who claims religious devotion while engaging in sinful behavior, Sam Shepard highlights the complexity and contradictions of human nature. Halie's religious hypocrisy adds to the overall exploration of denial, betrayal, and the decay of traditional values within the play.

Dodge character and his habits in buried Child

Dodge is one of the main characters and a central figure within the dysfunctional family. The research gives some details about Dodge's character and his habits:

Physical Appearance: Dodge is an elderly man, around 70 years old, with a weathered and worn-out appearance. He is described as thin, weak, and frail, often seen sitting on a worn-out couch or a recliner.

Alcoholism: Dodge is an alcoholic and spends much of his time drinking. He is often seen with a bottle of whiskey or a flask, and he uses alcohol as a way to escape from the harsh realities of his life and the dysfunctional family dynamics.

Bitter and Cynical Attitude: Dodge has a bitter and cynical attitude towards life. He is disillusioned and resentful, filled with regret and disappointment. He often expresses his bitterness through sarcastic remarks and cynical observations about his family and the world around him.

Lack of Initiative: Dodge is characterized by his lack of initiative and motivation. He is stuck in a state of apathy and indifference, unwilling to take action or change his circumstances. He spends most of his time sitting or lying down, reflecting his passivity and stagnation.

Estranged Relationship with his Wife: Dodge's relationship with his wife, Halie, is strained and distant. They rarely communicate, and there is a sense of emotional disconnect between them. Dodge harbors resentment towards Halie and their deteriorating relationship.

Secrets and Hidden Past: Dodge carries a deep secret related to the family's buried child, which serves as a central mystery of the play. This secret weighs heavily on him and contributes to his overall bitterness and guilt.

In "*Buried Child*," Dodge has a few significant interactions with Shelly, who is an outsider to the family. One notable conversation between Dodge and Shelly occurs when she questions him about the family's buried child. Dodge reveals a part of the family's dark secret to Shelly. Here's an excerpt from their conversation:

Shelly: (curious) So, what happened to the buried child?

Dodge: (pauses, then reveals) It drowned. It drowned in its own blood.

This revelation shocks Shelly and begins to shed light on the family's troubled past. However, the play delves deeper into the family's complex dynamics and the repercussions of this buried secret. The conversation between Dodge and Shelly is just one piece of the larger puzzle that unfolds throughout the play.

Conclusion

The playwright Sam Shepard has presented in his play *Buried Child* and his other plays as well one of the most dangerous cases of the societies, the case of Family Dysfunction which leads to Betrayal and guilt beside many other themes that he has presented in his play and other plays are found in the older times reaching to the life in modern societies, from Oedipus myth till Sam shepherd's family Trilogy till now. The present study suggest that this case must be taken seriously and not for granted since it can lead to very dangerous consequences that effects the family which lead to the Destruction of the homes and so the destruction of society.

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