

**The Ideal of the Family
In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)**

**The Ideal of the Family
In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)**

Dr. Adel M. Abdelsamie^(*)

Sam Shepard was born on November 5, 1943, at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. His father was serving as a bomber pilot in Europe at that time; his mother as did many women, faced the challenge of a newborn son alone. When his father came home, the family began to move from one army base to another. During the absence of his father, Shepard's mother became the guardian person for her son. In the mid-nineteen-fifties, Sam's father left the army and moved with his family to Duarte, California.

The teenage Sam, however, became discontented; perhaps because of the failure of his own family to find satisfaction in the pursuit of the ideal American family unit. Sam wrote indirectly of Duarte that it was "the kind of place you aspire to get out of the second you discover you've had the misfortune to have been raised there" (Mottram 6). His father was a disillusioned alcoholic who deserted his family and drifted to a "final hideaway in Santa Fe, New Mexico" (Luedtke 155). At the age of nineteen, Sam left Duarte to New York at a time when a new brand of Off-Broadway theatre was receptive to a new generation of playwrights like Sam Shepard.

The family unit that Shepard depicts in his plays written for the then-new Off-Broadway experimental theatre, is not the ideal image of the traditional American family. Rather, he employs the family as a metaphor for the whole frustrated contemporary human condition, an image of the family that is prevailed with the "poisons of past generations within the family" (Mottram 132).

A Shepard play depicts the American family not as a heaven of protection against a hostile world, but as all life; that is violent and contradictory. Its members rather than enjoying the surroundings of love, security, ease of soul and satisfaction; they experience familial starvation, lacking sense of belonging and assertion. In a Shepard play family members do not interact or unify to formulate a stable human institution that may function according to the traditional familial philosophies. The family members neither communicate to one another nor they attempt to do so. Instead, "they are all locked into narcissistic conceptions of self and disagree about the literal and metaphoric nature of the home" (Simard 23-24). They crave to escape the confinement of family and home; yet they are all ill-prepared for the outside world. Family becomes in Shepard

^(*) English Dept., Aswan Faculty of Arts- South Valley University

imprisoning, weighty and compelling. Family members are torn between the demands of a socialized conduct and the curse of a more realistic behavior. In all, the different family members depicted in a Shepard's play devour each other in a relationship based on exploitation (Mottram 133).

The aim of this paper is to study Sam Shepard's debasing portrayal of the American family ideal; of a stable, interdependent, sound and safe family unit, in his "1979 Pulitzer Prize-Winning family drama, *Buried Child*, [in which he] takes a macabre look at one American Midwestern family with a very dark secret" (theatredatabase.com). Shepard's image of modern American family contradicts the concept of the family ideal supported by conventional sociological philosophies. The ultimate outcome is that modern American family image does not succeed in rewarding its followers.

It can be argued that Sam Shepard, "the most important playwright of his generation," cautions Americans against the degenerative state of modern American society (Mottram VII). He is cynically able to portray the modern American family life as an integral part of the modern American experience which he is skillfully and metaphorically able to create in the imagination of his audience. He succeeds in going "beyond criticizing the moral and physical disintegration of the American family," to the denial of the existence of a stable, mutually interdependent family unit (Marranca 16).

In his plays Sam Shepard is able to attack the idealistic dogma of the contemporary American family. His aim is to put on stage the confusion of the degenerative familial relationships through the use of theme, characterization, imagery, structure and symbolism.

Originally the American family consists of a man and a woman united by the bonds of marriage affirming that "their marriage is for as long as they both shall live" (Adams 15). It is also understood that monogamy is essential for marriage and that adultery is to be seen as a serious threat to the stability of the marriage to the whole family as a result, and consequently to the society's "demand for the legitimacy of children" (Cavan 408). Such a union "provides companionship, love, sexual satisfaction, children, and security" (Cavan 10). Upon marriage the couple is supposed to move into a dwelling separate from both sets of parents, planning for the coming of children. It is also understood that "sex and mating must be restricted to one pair within the unit, the father and mother" (Adams 31). This is because the American family is a unit based on solidarity and because American society expects rigid adherence to the universal taboo of incest within the family unit. Such a stable,

The Ideal of the Family In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)

secure familial foundation established in this way functions as "the ideal instrument for the early formation of a child's personality and as the intimate group that guides the adolescent on his way toward maturity" (Cavan 11).

A nuclear family, typically the husband, the wife and the children live together in one household. These different family members perform social roles appointed to the family by society; and the interaction of the family members "in terms of these roles gives a unity of the family" institution (Cavan 3). The family members of the traditional family usually adopt roles that conform to some generally accepted systems. The husband and the wife enact their prescribed roles in relation to each other, but with certain areas of freedom at the same time.

Nonetheless, the husband is usually seen as the head of the family. His fundamental role is wage-earning; but he is simultaneously expected to adopt "a familial and a vocational role" (Cavan 413). It is expected, according to Cavan, that the husband-father "is to work as steadily as possible ... and to give love, kindness, particular care, and material support to his family" (Cavan 413). On the other hand, and for the most part, the husband-father receives society's damnation and denouncement "if he does not work or if he neglects, refuses to support, abuses or deserts his wife and children" (Cavan 413). The typical husband-father is supposed to be successful in his career, is also expected to be successful in "fitting into society's ideals of civilized behavior" (Reimer 43). He is typically rational and calmly enacts in the roles of leader and advisor for the other members of his family. However, he is expected to disclose independence and rigorous individuality as well as physical energy which enable him to be the assertive and energetic protector of the rest of his family members.

The main domain of the wife-mother is the home and she is contented to be its keeper (Cavan 9-10). She finds satisfaction in helping her husband and their offspring achieving their goals within the family and outside of it. She is responsible for adequately preparing the children to take over their places outside the family at the appropriate time of their adulthood. As a general rule she is supposed to be self-sacrificing, loyal to her family, and faithful as a helpmate to her husband.

Typically the children of the American family are nurtured by their parents within the protection of the family until the time when they are adequately prepared to find partners and leave the nest to form their own new, independent families. It is true that the parents of the new couple are helping that couple when the need arises; yet the young couple is generally supposed to be independent and self-supporting (Adams 15). In

this way the American family cycle preserves itself and keeps going on its general issues: "getting married, becoming parents, making a home, getting ahead, and holding families together" (Caplow 275).

Through harmonious interaction among the different members performing their prescribed roles, the family unit as a human institution comes to function usually and systematically in harmony with community mores (Cavan 3). Although family members seek to maintain the family as a unified group by satisfying their personal needs within the family, they keep their individuality without completely immerse in the family (Cavan 3). On the whole, the general opinion of Americans is that "the family is a deeply rooted institution in the United States; it is by far the most favored group with which adults associate themselves " (Cavan 1).

Buried Child (1978) reflects, perhaps, Shepard's interest in the family institution as an incitement for his work. In an interview by Kevin Sessums Shepard states that:

[The family] is a thing that people can relate to. You can't escape this thing of being related by blood. And everybody somehow or other knows what those relationships are. Even though people are very different, those relationships are so similar they form a field for people to relate in. It's interesting to me that it is those ties that you never really get away from – as much as you might want to try. (Shepard 78)

Buried Child and other two Shepard's plays, namely *Curse of Starving Class* (1977) and *True West* (1980) are known as family trilogy plays. They have the thematic and structural integrity that separate them from plays written before them. It is true that the theme of family appears early in his work, for example, in his one act play *The Rock Garden* (1964); yet *Curse of the Starving Class* is the beginning of an intense exploration of family dynamics. In an interview by Jennifer Allen in *Esquire*, Shepard comments on his interest in the family in his plays:

What doesn't have to do with the 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. (Shepard 143)

The family trilogy with two other later plays; *Fool for Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) form five family plays. However, the trilogy plays are marked by some sort of structural integrity operating on a centripetal pattern of action: every play in this trilogy is structured on a level of interaction which narrows with the following play, a compression that drives the plays inwardly.

The Ideal of the Family In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)

To begin with, *Curse of Starving Class* examines the dynamics of the family within a social context. The characters beyond the family unit in this play confirm the predominance of the socio-political hierarchy. These people help incarnate the social milieu that the play depicts. In other words, the social components of heredity as well as its biological aspect are equally explored in *Curse*. Economics and social class help determine and inform one's heredity and environment. The socio-political order is shut up in inescapable conflict with the biological order.

In his second play of the trilogy, *Buried Child*, Shepard narrows the exploration of family dynamics focusing only on the familial order excluding the social and economic orders of the socio-political hierarchy. The playwright concentrates on the minimal familial order: Shelly the representative of the social order, as well as Father Dewis, the representative of the supernatural order, leave the action of the drama by the end of the play. Thus, unlike *Curse*, in which the biological order and the socio-political order are irrevocably locked in a dialectical impasse, *Buried Child* brings about a tentative reconciliation between the two orders. Understanding and accepting one's heredity perhaps allows the possibility of change and growth.

In his third play of the trilogy, *True West*, Shepard still narrows the focus more than in *Buried Child*. The conflict between two ways of life; between the dominance of the social and the dominance of the natural moves from a conflict within the family unit to a conflict within the individual psyche. The father figure who represents the natural order does not appear on stage, while Mom and Kimmer, who both represent the socio-political order are excluded from the dramatic action by the end of the play. Only Austin and Lee, whose struggles for an authentic identity have changed them into opposites of their original and diametrically-opposed selves, remain on stage. Their stand-off in the final scene of the play highlights the need for balance between the two orders, the two ways of life to achieve true existence.

Buried Child, in which Sam Shepard has a quasi-realistic look at the American family, is a dark drama permeated with a "contradictory and ambiguous web of relationships and events"(Mottram 138). The play projects multiple layers of symbolic meaning which wipe out the basics of the American family ideal. The family members in this play are the heirs of the failed myth of "the American Dream [that has] gone sour" (theatre-louisville.blogspot.com). In other words *Buried Child* "calls forth [the] familiar, even clichéd image of the American family only to contrast it with the stage picture of what this particular family has become" (Putzel, webpage).

Set in the 1970's rural America, *Buried Child* depicts the fragmentation of the family unit as well as the breakdown of the familial relationships. The males in Dodge family are all disappointed for they have not fulfilled their dream of being successful. The mother-wife figure of Halie should have been the backbone of the family, the glue that keeps the family members together. Yet, she causes chaos because her illegal pregnancy and her affair with Rev. Dewis undermine the family's order and stability. Roudane adds: "The buried child and the buried truths of the past, repressed through years of denial, rejection, and indifference, are the greatest sources of disconnection in the family" (Roudane 219).

The roots of the family in *Buried Child* are planted in their middle-American farm, which is suggestive of the traditional image of peace, prosperity and self-reliance. Nonetheless, the farm in this play is marked by "misunderstanding, fear and violence among family members, by an intense sense of personal and cultural loss, and by a need to establish individual and family identity" (Goist 115). Shepard attacks thus in this play the validity of one of America's most inherent concepts; namely the existence of a stable, mutually interdependent American family.

The play opens on the interior of a middle-class American living room. The neglected interior of a dilapidated farmhouse suggests a state of disintegration at the opening image of the play:

Old wooden staircase down left with pale, frayed carpet
The stairs lead off stage left up into the wings with no landing.
Up right is an old spots Down right of the sofa, with the
screen facing the sofa, is a large, old-fashioned brown TV. A
flickering blue light comes from the screen, but no image, no
sound. (11)

Since Ibsen and the advent of modern drama, the living room has become the prototypical setting for the action of family drama. However, the warmth and hominess generally associated with a living room are denied in *Buried Child* by the reality of the drab décor specified by such elements of stage props as 'frayed' carpet, 'old, dark green sofa', 'faded yellow shade' for the lamp and several 'bottles of pills' on the night table (11). Theatrically, the worn-out and old furniture is a sign of the family's indifference to regeneration and renewal. The elements of the interior of the house are integrated with the threatening exterior, since the house is surrounded by dark elm trees that give an aura of mystery.

The husband/father figure and the patriarch of the family, Dodge, in lieu of functioning as a farmer reaping the fruits of his farms, hence, supposedly leading a normal and secure family life, turns out to be a harsh, cynical old man spending his days sitting on the living room sofa

**The Ideal of the Family
In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)**

watching TV and drinking alcohol. In his late seventies, Dodge sits wrapped in an old brown blanket. His wife, Halie, is offstage, upstairs. When speaking to each other, one must shout to be heard by the other because of the distance between them, a physical distance that signifies a much deeper emotional husband-wife separation. The first image of the play is, therefore, one of separation and incommunicability (Mottram 138).

When Dodge first appears, "he wears a well-worn T-shirt, suspenders, khaki work pants and brown slippers. He's covered himself in an old brown blanket. He's very thin and sickly looking, in his late seventies. He just stares at the TV" (10). Like the furniture, Dodge appears to be waiting for the last hints of life to wane before he is discarded. Dodge has ceased to function within the economic and social orders of the socio-political hierarchy. He planted corn for the last time a very long time ago. He says: "I haven't had trouble with neighbors here for fifty seven years. I don't even know who the neighbors are! And I don't wanna know" (17).

Dodge for some time has dodged and turned aside the responsibilities and the emotional demands of his supposed traditional role as the head of the family. He turns, instead, to pills, whisky and watching an imageless television. He has no longer any illusions concerning the image of the idealized family concept. The screen becomes blank. He confesses: "I don't enjoy anything" (16). However, he clings to his right of familial sovereignty symbolized by his old brown blanket.

Dodge, the family's dysfunctional patriarch, is perhaps the only character who is aware of the impending extinction of the family (Simard 28). Dodge's sons are either psychologically or physically crippled or dead. For the inhabitants of this Illinois farmhouse, life has been neither satisfying nor nurturing.

Shepard helps us, as an audience, see Halie at first in the form of the idealized image of the traditional wife/mother showing concern for the welfare and the reputation of her family. For example, she is anxious about the health of her husband, instructing him to take the pills when she hears him coughing threatening him to come down and force him if he does not comply: "Dodge! You wanna pill, Dodge? ... It's the rain! ... No sooner does the rain start then you start. Dodge? ... I'm coming down there in about five minutes if you don't answer me!" (12).

Speaking to Dodge, Halie shows the same kind of concern for their son Tilden whom she sees as a child. She says to Dodge: "You see to it

that [Tilden] doesn't drink anything! You've gotta watch out for him anymore, so we have to do it" (19-20). She also defends their son, Bradley, who sadistically cuts his father's hair while the latter is sleeping. She states that Bradley is merely showing responsibility for Dodge's appearance. Similarly, Halie shows protection of their idealized son, Ansel, who died at the hands of a gang of criminals. He dies during the honeymoon of his marriage from an Italian woman. Ansel's death, which leads perhaps to a spiritual death of his parents, symbolically represents the disappearance of happiness promised to American families by the inherent, idealized family image. Ironically, the mob that killed Ansel is analogous to the degenerative family members of Dodge's dysfunctional family who metaphorically kill the fulfillment of the American dream of the family ideal. Halie spins "heroic myths" about Ansel's life, to defend the promise of the American Dream concerning the family ideal (Mustazza 38). In Halie's own words:

He [Ansel] was the smartest. He could've earned lots of money. Lots and lots of money. He would've took care of us, too He was a hero. Don't forget that. A genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And very intelligent. Ansel could've been a great man. One of the greatest I only regret that he didn't die in action A soldier. He could've won a medal I've talked to Father Dewis about putting up a plaque for Ansel. He thinks it's a good idea ... He even recommended to the city council that they put up a statue of Ansel. A big, tall statue with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other. (20-21)

Halie sees in Ansel the image of the ideal husband that she does not have: smart, brave, money-maker and caretaker of his family; a husband image that is completely opposite of Dodge who is thin, consumptive and semi-invalid. Halie has thus a larger-than-life view of her son.

However, the initial characterization of Halie as an idealized wife-mother is reversed, and a dysfunctional image of Halie takes place during the dramatic action of the play. To begin with, Halie is a sexually frustrated wife who has not slept in the same bed with her husband for a long time. As a result she has committed with her son, Tilden, an incestuous mistake the product of which is the child that Dodge buried in the backyard. Dodge explains to the rest of the family members why he killed the child: "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 canceled out by this one mistake. This one mistake (65).

Again, Halie leaves the family home to meet the local cleric Father Dewis with whom she is expected to spend two days adulterous luncheon

**The Ideal of the Family
In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)**

engagement. When she returns home after her date, Dewis comes with her and both of them are slightly drunk. Thus, Halie is changed from an austere elderly woman to an amorous mistress (Mustazza 40). This change is objectified by the change of her black dress, black hat with veil and black gloves, to appear wearing "*a bright yellow dress, no hat, white gloves and her arms [are] full of yellow roses*" (56). Therefore, Halie fails to be the traditional ideal wife/mother figure. As a mother/wife image, Halie puts all her energy into escape through a drunken good time with an impotent image of a masculine spiritual leadership. Moreover, Father Dewis, who is supposed to be a representation of order, strength and stability, is portrayed as the antithesis of the traditional man of God.

Perhaps, Halie attempts to alleviate her sense of disappointment over life that has fallen short of an idealized family concept. Therefore, she seeks redemption from the family's state of death-in-life existence and tries to escape into Christianity. This is theatrically evidenced by the crosses adorning the walls of her room. She also longs for life and fertility rather than death and sterility. Her entrance with Father Dewis illustrates her choice of life over death. Her bright yellow dress and the yellow roses she carries signify her longing for rejuvenation. Moreover, her sexual encounter with Dewis affirms her identification with fertility and life. Dodge refers to this quality in Halie when his nephew, Vince, asks where his grandmother has gone: "Don't worry about her. She won't be back for 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)" (33). It is noteworthy that Halie's lunch with Dewis is the most social act the inhabitants of Illinois farm undertake.

Moreover, Halie's judgment of things being 'Christian' or 'not Christian' perhaps provides her with an ethical measure. When Dodge says that he does not enjoy anything, Halie finds his pessimism an excuse to turn to Christ: "That's the kind of statement that leads people right to the end of their rope It is no wonder people turn to Christ! (16)." However, Halie does not choose Christianity on faith, but rather on desperation, and as an attempt to escape from the sordid reality of her home. Halie's affair with Dewis does not bring her what she has anticipated. For example, he turns to be completely ineffectual when she appeals to him when Vince threatens to usurp the territory in Act III:

Halie: (to Dewis) Father, why are you just standing here when everything's falling apart? Can't you rectify this situation?

Dodge laughs, coughs.

Dewis: I'm just a guest here, Halie. I don't know what my position is exactly. (67)

Dewis leaves the house unable to provide divine or even human comfort: "She's going to need someone. I can't help her. I don't know what to do" (71). Although Halie's affair with Dewis fails on spiritual level, the sexual success of the encounter is evident in her transformation.

Tilden is Dodge and Halie's elder son and the first one to appear during the dramatic action. He is a big, childlike man in his late forties, a former footballer player whom the playwright describes as "profoundly burned out and displaced" (16). He has recently returned from an absence of twenty years in New Mexico where he had a trouble with the law. The sudden appearance of Tilden; moreover, disturbs and threatens Dodge:

Dodge: You're a young man. You shouldn't be need your parents at your age. It's un-natural. There's nothing we can do for you now anyway. Couldn't you make a living down there? Couldn't you find some way to make a living? Support yourself? What'd 'ya come back here for? You expect us to feed you forever?

Tilden: I didn't know where to go. (25)

Tilden's inability to attain self-fulfillment or self-reliance or even to found a home of his own pushes him to come back to his ancestral home with its supposed familial environment.

Moreover, Tilden is completely alienated from his parents and the rest of his ancestral family members. This is staged tangibly by the visual stage image of the corn: he enters the living room with an armload of fresh corn which he claims to have harvested from a field in the back of the house where no corn has actually been planted for a very long time. This unrealistic cornfield underlines Tilden's disconnection from the present family and underscores his longing for the idealized image of the traditional, fruitful family relationships (Mottram 138).

Because food in a Shepard play can be seen, theatrically, as a symbol of communication, Shepard makes Tilden attempt in vain to share some corn with his family. When he drops the corn into Dodge's lap, the latter angrily pushes it off onto the floor. Likewise, Tilden's mother does not accept this corn and she , moreover, rebukes him: "What's the meaning of this corn, Tilden!" (22). In fact, both of Tilden's parents are not willing to sincerely communicate with their son. The three of them are cut off from one another, for they do not share a common conception of the literal or the metaphorical nature of a home. Tilden covers his sleeping father's body with the corn husks in an attempt to find some sort of human communication with his family.

Dodge and Halie's second son is the sadistic Bradley; physically and emotionally crippled one. Like Tilden, Bradley has been alienated from

**The Ideal of the Family
In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)**

the family and suffered for a long time. Verbalizing this sense of alienation and loneliness, Dodge states that Bradley "was born in a goddamn hog wallow! That's where he belongs! He does not belong in this house! He's not my flesh and blood!" (23-24). As an outcome of his sense of alienation and estrangement, Bradley becomes mean, sadistic, resentful and threatening. His left leg was cut off by a chain saw some time in the past and it is replaced by a wooden leg. He is thus both physically and emotionally maimed. Moreover, his cut leg is perhaps a vivid signifier of his state of being cut off from the rest of his family members.

Bradley is first seen in the play when he comes to the family house to trim Dodge's hair. Discovering his father asleep on the sofa, he violently removes Tilden's corn husks and sadistically attacks his father scalp with hair clippers leaving the old man's scalp cut and bloody. In so doing, Bradley metaphorically rids his father of his sovereignty. Bradley in Goist's words, is "symbolically stripping Dodge of any lingering potency he might still have" (Goist 121). The last 'lingering potency' Dodge still has is his assumed authority over the family that is evidently degenerates and vanishes away.

Dodge and Halie's third son, Ansel, is another example of the failure of the family to nurture its young and to prepare them for their own world away from the family according to the philosophy of the family ideal. Ansel is long dead, killed in a motel room as a victim of an unwise marriage to a woman with connections to a mafia mob. He is no longer a threat to Dodge who never mentions his name. Ansel is introduced to the audience only through Halie's memories in a long soliloquy which may function as "a comic eulogy to her dead boy" (Goist 116).

Thus the three sons of Dodge and Halie are impotent, absurd males who add to the fact of the family's degenerative state and to its deep sense of frustration. Tilden is mentally devastated because of his inability to connect with the rest of the family members to revitalize his impoverished spirit. Bradley is mean and sadistic; his cut off leg symbolizes his emotional cut off from the rest of the family. Ansel stands for the family members who do not have the skills to survive away from the family because his departure from it led to his death. Halie verbalizes her sense of disappointment when she desperately asks "What's happened to the men in this family! Where are the men?" (65). In fact, Halie's wondering concerns the "absence of the hierarchical relationship of the God-like father and the heroic son," promised by the ideal concept of the traditional American family unit (Robinson 154).

The appearance of Dodge and Halie's grandson, Vince with his girlfriend in this family moribund atmosphere can be seen as a kind of relief. The two young people perhaps introduce the potential of an optimistic change of the doomed family. Bringing youth and laughter, they arrive at the Illinois farm to visit Vince's grandfather on their way to visit Vince's father, Tilden, in New Mexico, not realizing that Vince will find his father in Illinois:

Shelly: (Laughing, gesturing to the house) This is it? I don't believe this is it!

Vince: This is it.

Shelly: This is the house?

Vince: This is the house.

Shelly: I don't believe it? (29)

In fact, Shelly's conception of the family and the house is as "a Norman Rockwell cover or something ... Dick and Jane and Spot and Mom and Dad and Junior and Sissy" (31). However, Shelly's great expectations are soon altered by the reality which lies within the house. When she is left alone in the living room, Shelly confronts the sleeping Dodge with his head cut by Bradley's haircut. She soon confesses her wish to leave rejecting that confusing home coming: "it isn't my idea of a good time" (33). Shelly's prospects are thus defeated only within moments. She finds herself terrified and threatened by an alien and alienating family unit:

Shelly: Can't we just drive on to New Mexico. This is terrible, Vince! I don't want to stay here. In this house. I thought it was going to be turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kinda stuff

Vince: Well I hate to disappoint you!

Shelly: I'm not disappointed! I'm fuckin' terrified! I wanna' go! (91)

Shelly's anticipations become unrealistic because the 'Norman Rockwell' family image turns to be a mere fiction concerning a lifestyle modern Americans wish to have. As an outsider, Shelly's suppositions clash with the reality she witnesses: Dodge does not appear as one would expect fathers and grandfathers would do, Halie is a mother and a grandmother who violates the expected pattern, Tilden's half-witted actions are not those of the all American football hero, and moreover, their farm is not the over productive field of the American mid-west. Later on, during the dramatic action, Shelly is no longer expecting the 'Norman Rockwell' icon, instead she becomes perhaps able to experience the sordid reality of the family: the family secrets, their animosity, their jealousy and their defeated hopes.

**The Ideal of the Family
In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)**

Vince is, in fact, on a journey to reestablish his roots, to find out his past and his place in the life of his family. Shepard himself recognizes the inescapable reality of the family. In an interview by Kenneth Chubb and published in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, he states: "You can't escape, that's the whole thing, you can't. You finally find yourself in a situation where, like, that's the way it is – you can't get out of it" (Shepard 208). Interpreting Vince's heroic quest, Shelly says to the Dodges: "I mean Vince has this thing about his family now ... He feels it's important. You know, I mean he feels he wants to get to know you all again. After all this time" (32). Nonetheless, when Vince arrives at his grandfather's house, no one recognizes him contrary to what he expects. Ironically, the stagnant members of Dodge family are unable to recognize the possibility of revitalization that Vince represents. Dodge wonders: "Who are you supposed to be?", and when Vince calls him "Grandpa," Dodge denies that he is Vince's grandfather; "Stop calling me Grandpa will ya' ! It's sickening. 'Grandpa.' I'm Nobody's Grandpa!" (34-36).

Both Vince and Shelly have been, in fact, liberated from the family's heritage. They are not confined by the "commitments to places and people, unrestrained perhaps by traditional values and attitudes, free to think what they wish, [and] live as they please" (Mustazza 38). They symbolize a family lifestyle that is liberated from the Dodges' stagnation.

Most of the dramatic action centers on the characters' power to dominate each other and to ensure their inheritance from Dodge, the dying patriarch. Every one of the sons attempts to usurp the father's power. Vince is persuaded by Dodge to go to the store for a bottle of whisky. Later when he comes back, he is in a drunken stupor, singing while he is smashing empty liquor bottles all over the porch, signaling that he has just discovered his place within the family to which virility is synonymous with violence. This act of violence ironically earns Vince the Family's recognition:

Vince: What? Who is that?
Dodge: It's me! Your Grandfather! Don't play stupid with me!
.....
Halie: Vincent? Is that you Vincent?
.....
Shelly: You mean you know who he is?
Halie: Of course I know who he is! (66-67)

Vince assumes, thus, the characteristics of alienation from a genuine family conception. He gains full recognition from the doomed Dodge

family members only when he adopts their own dysfunctional familial characteristics of agitation, bewilderment and confusion. The cycle of rejection and alienation from sincere family image, a cycle that starts with Dodge, comes full circle within the family with Vince adopting the same characteristics of alienation. Vince peers through the screen at his degenerative family members and asks them: "Who are you people?" (67). Moreover, Vince's act of cutting a hole in the porch screen descending through it into the living room, is a sign of his rebirth into the moribund Dodge family (Mann 88).

Vince's show of Violence urges Dodge to name him his heir. Vince starts to torture Bradley by moving his wooden leg continually beyond the reach of his crawling uncle. Ultimately Vince is able to pull Dodge's old blanket off Bradley and to through it over his own shoulder. It is noteworthy that this old blanket, an emblem of family authority, has been usurped by Bradley from the family's old patriarch, Dodge, and Vince's act suggests an endless progression of authority from one violent man to another (Auerbach 57).

In an unsuccessful attempt to escape his heritage Vince drove long way to Iowa border where he was stopped by an image of himself experiencing a moment of revelation and self-recognition. In a long soliloquy Vince expresses a recognition of his place in the dysfunctional Dodge family and its heritage:

I could see myself in the windshield As though I was looking at another man And then his face And his father's face changed to his grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized ... I followed my family clear into Iowa. (70-71)

In order to complete the act of Dodge's succession, Vince has sacrificed himself, giving up his old identity that would have revitalized the Dodge family (Shea 7). Reinforcing the closed society of the Dodge family, Shelly runs away while Vince is beginning to assert his right to his heredity. When Dodge dies unnoticed by the others, Vince becomes the leader of the family, the inheritor of the patriarchal power taking Dodge's place on the sofa and assuming metaphorically and literally the corrupt tradition of the family, rather than creating a new one. Vince accepts his responsibility to "carry on the line ... to see to it that things keep on rolling" (70). Yet, Vince ironically inherits a sterile leadership because no one of the family members is left to be led except Halie: "My grandmother? There's no one else in this house" (71).

The Ideal of the Family In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)

The most impressive image at the end of the play is that of Tilden carrying the muddy corpse of the buried child up the stairs to join Halie in her bedroom. In so doing, Tilden has unintentionally assured the family's corrupt stagnation enacted by all of the family members. Tilden has unearthed the product of the only connection he has been able to make with his family. This dead child incarnates the family's lack of vitality. It is a visual sign of the reversal of the great expectations of a stable, mutually interdependent family institution, the expectations that have drained the family members of their individuality, to bind them instead in a falsified sense of loyalty.

Again, the buried child, the product of an incestuous relationship within the family, is a solid evidence of the family's ultimate failure. It is a symbolical opposition to the American family conception concerning family solidarity based on the incest taboo within the family. Moreover, it is in general a symbol of the failure of the family to produce vigorous offspring. The secret corruptions of the Dodge family continue to resurface like the buried child itself, ironically binding the family members together in corrupt, dysfunctional relationships.

It could be that Shepard's message in *Buried Child* is to caution Americans against the impending moral and physical disintegration of the family unit. He suggests that the family ideal concerning stability, solidarity and mutual interdependence becomes only a myth. Shepard's message becomes clear through portraying a family unit whose members "devour each other in relationships based on exploitation, alienation, and lies" (Mottram 133).

To conclude, Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978) offers, however, a glimmer of hope and salvation for the guilt-ridden society of the mid-1970s. As America emerged from the war in Vietnam, the causes of that no-win situation were under intense examination. Moving toward a more positive, more productive image of America perhaps means admitting to the hidden guilt of the past. Only through recognition, understanding and acceptance can America move forward toward a healthier, more energetic society.

Works Cited

- Adams, Bert. *The American Family: A Sociological Interpretation*. Chicago: Markham Publishing, 1971.
- Auerbach, Doris. "Who was Icarus's Mother?: The Powerless Mother Figures in the Plays of Sam Shepard." *Sam Shepard: A Casebook*. Op Cit. 53-64.
- Cavan, Ruth Shorle. *The American Family*. New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1969.
- Goist, Park Dixon. "Sam Shepard's Child Is Buried Somewhere in Illinois." *Midamerica*. 14 (1987). 113-125.
<http://www.theatredatabase.com/20th-century/buried-child.html>.
[Accessed on 5th Jan. 2012].
<http://www.theatre-louisville.blogspot.com/2012/06/review-buried-child.html>. [Accessed on 10th July 2012].
- Luedtke, Luther S. "From Fission to Fusion: Sam Shepard's Nuclear Families." *New Essays on American Drama*. Ed. Gilbert Debusscher and Henry I Schvey. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989. 143-166.
- Mann, Bruce J. "Character Behavior and the Fantastic in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*." *Sam Shepard: A Casebook*. Ed. Kimball King. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988. 81-94.
- Marranca, Bonnie, ed. *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981.
- Mottram, Ron. *Inner Landscapes: The Nature of Sam Shepard*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984.
- Mustazza, Leonard. "Women's 'Roles' in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*." *Literature in Performance*. 5 (1985). 36-41.
- Putzel, Steven D. and Suzanne R. Westfall. "The Back Side of myth: Sam Shepard's Subversion of Mythic Codes in *Buried Child*." <http://www.journals.ku.edu/index.php/jdc/article/viewfile>.
[Accessed in February, 2012].
- Reimer, James D. "Integrating the Psyche of the American Male: Conflicting Ideals of Manhood in Sam Shepard's *True West*." *University of Dayton Review* 18 (1986-'87). 41-47.
- Robinson, James A. "Buried Children: Fathers and Sons in O'Neill and Shepard." *Eugene O'Neill and the Emergence of American Drama*. Ed. Marc Maufort. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989. 151-157.
- Roudane, Matthew, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Shea, Laura. "The Sacrificial Crisis in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*." *The Theatre Annual*. 44 (1989-90). 1-9.

**The Ideal of the Family
In Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)**

- Shepard, Sam. *Buried Child*. In "*Buried Child* " and "*Seduced*" and "*Suicide in B-Flat*". New York: Urizen Books, 1979. [All of other quotations from this play are taken from this edition].
- Shepard, Sam. "Sam Shepard: Geography of a Horse Dreamer," Interview by Kevin Sessums, *Interview*, Sept. 1988. 78.
- Shepard, Sam. "Metaphors, Mad Dogs and Old Times Cowboys," Interview by Kenneth Chubb and the Editors of Theatre Quarterly, in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*. Ed. Bonnie Marranca. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981.
- Shepard, Sam. "The Man on the High Horse: On the Trail of Sam Shepard." Interview by Jennifer Allen. *Esquire*, November, 1988. 143.
- Simard, Rodney. "American Gothic: Sam Shepard's Family Trilogy." *The Theatre Annual*. 41 (1986). 21-36.

Abstract

The Ideal of the Family in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1978)

The aim of this paper is to study Sam Shepard's debasing portrayal of the American family ideal; of a stable, interdependent sound and safe family unit, in his 1979 Pulitzer Prize-Winning family drama, *Buried Child*, in which he takes a dreadful look at one American Midwestern family with a very dark secret. Shepard's portrayal of modern American family contradicts the concept of the family ideal supported by conventional sociological philosophies. The ultimate outcome is that modern American family image does not succeed in rewarding its followers. The family members in *Buried Child* are planted in their middle-American farm, which is suggestive of the traditional image of peace, prosperity and self-reliance. Nonetheless, the farm in this play is marked by misunderstanding, fear and violence among family members, by an intense sense of personal and cultural loss, and by a need to establish individual and family identity. Besides the father and the mother, Dodge and Halie, the three sons of Dodge family are, in fact, impotent, absurd males who add to the fact of the family's degenerative state and to its deep sense of frustration. Tilden is mentally devastated. Bradley is mean and sadistic. Ansel stands for the family members who do not have the skills to survive away from the family because his departure from it led to his death. Shepard's message in *Buried Child* is to caution Americans against the impending moral and physical disintegration of the family unit. He suggests that the family ideal concerning stability, solidarity and mutual interdependence becomes only a myth. Thus, Shepard's message becomes clear through portraying a family unit whose members devour each other in relationships based on exploitation, alienation, and lies. Moving toward a more positive, more productive image of America perhaps means admitting to the hidden guilt of the past. Only through recognition, understanding and acceptance can America move forward toward a healthier, more energetic society. This meaning is incarnated by Tilden's act of unearthing the buried child carrying it upstairs to Halie's bedroom, a sign first of corrupt, dysfunctional familial relationship, and second of the importance of recognition and the ultimate confrontation of the mistakes of the past.

الملخص العربي

تصور سام شيبيرد السلبي للنموذج المثالي للأسرة
في مسرحية "الطفل المدفون"، التي كتبها عام 1978م

يبرز هذا البحث التصور السلبي للنموذج المثالي للأسرة كما يعرضه الكاتب المسرحي سام شيبيرد من خلال مسرحيته "الطفل المدفون" التي كتبها في عام 1978م، وفازت بجائزة "بلنترز" للدراما الأسرية، وفيها يعرض شيبيرد للجمهور أسرة تقطن منطقة منتصف الغرب الأمريكي ويكتنفها سر دفين قاتم السواد، حيث تحمل الأم سفاحا من ابنها ليقم الأب بقتل الوليد ودفنه بالفناء الخلفي المنزل.

وهكذا يتناقض تصور شيبيرد للأسرة الأمريكية في العصر الحديث مع النموذج المثالي لهذه المؤسسة الإنسانية حسب موروث الفلسفات الاجتماعية، فلا تستطيع هذه المؤسسة تلبية الإحتياجات المعنوية والقيمية لأفرادها. فأسرة دودج في "الطفل المدفون" تعاني من سوء التفاهم، الخوف، العنف المتبادل، والإحساس العميق بالفقد والضياع على المستويين الشخصي والأسري، وذلك لعدم استطاعة أي من أفرادها تحقيق ذاته واستقلالته أو هويته ودوره الأسري.

عرض الكاتب المسرحي (شيبيرد) الأدوار المختلفة بداخل الأسرة - الأب، الأم، الأبناء - بصورة تتسم بالعمق والعبثية والشعور القاسي بالإحباط، فشخصية الإبن (تلدن) مثلا مشوشة عقليا، و(برادلي) سادى النزعة، والإبن الذي مات قبل بداية الحدث المسرحي - أنسل - يجسد لنا كجمهور متفرج أو قارئ للمسرحية فكرة الموت الأخلاقي والمعنوي للأسرة ناهيك عن دور كل من الأب والأم المغيبين عن أدوارهم وقضايا الأسرة.

وعليه تكون رسالة (شيبيرد) للمجتمع الأمريكي في العصر الحديث تحذيرية لتنبيه الأمريكيين للخطر المحقق وتفتت الأسرة وانهيارها على المستويين المحسوس والمعنوي، حيث يفترض (شيبيرد) في مسرحيته هذه أن مؤسسة الأسرة المثالية المتماسكة والمستقرة القوية بذاتها أصبحت كالأسطورة ليس لها وجود واقعي ملموس في العصر الحديث لدى الأمريكيين وحل محلها مكون للأسرة يلتهم فيه الفرد الآخر في علاقات أسرية قائمة على الأكاذيب والشعور بالإستغراب والإستغلال. ولكي تكون هذه المؤسسة أفضل مما هي عليه يتحتم على الجميع التعرف على أخطاء الماضي وتفهمها لعدم تكرارها، تجسدت هذه المعانى في الصورة المسرحية التي جعل فيها الكاتب الابن المذنب - تلدن - ينبش الأرض ليخرج الطفل المدفون ويحمله الى أمه - وأم هذا التعيس - ليواجهها به، بدلا من آلية التهرب والانتكار طوال الفترة السابقة.