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## A Modernistic Urge behind a Post-modern Impulse: Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper will focus on Sam Shepard's modernistic nostalgia for past within the framework of Post-modern techniques used by the author in the play *Buried Child*. Through the dialogues of the characters, their grieving on the loss of faith, loss of identity and existential crisis that continuously grips the characters, the paper will throw light on the author's lament for the "loss of the real" or what Jean Baudrillard calls the "Hyper-real" within a post-modern American culture. An attempt has thus been made to examine the broader issues of the play such as the breakdown of American culture, the crumbling down of American dream and the rendering of the American family as a dysfunctional unit. The paper will try to bring out how the characters strongly wish to restore the glory of American culture in general and American dream in particular. This modernistic yearning for restoration within a Post-modern American society will be the primary concern of this paper.

**Keywords: Sam Shepard, postmodernism, myths, reality**

Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* was first presented in 1978. This play depicts America's disappointment and disillusionment with the American Dream and other myths that have accumulated in American cultural consciousness and the resulting breakdown of traditional family structures and values. *Buried Child* incorporates many Post-modern elements such as the mixing of genres, the deconstruction of a grand narrative and the use of pastiche and layering and symbolism within the realistic framework of a 'family drama'. The use of these post-modern elements is to show the universal frustrations of the American people—a constant sense of loss that haunts the characters. Through their dialogues loaded with lamentations, one gets a clear view of their sense of outrage at the loss of traditional American values.

In the play, Dodge is an ageing, impotent and dysfunctional patriarch of the family. He is in his 70's and has been emasculated by his son and the infertility of his fields. He has lost interest in life from the time his wife Halie committed incest with his elder son Tilden and from the day he killed the child born out of incest (the actual Buried Child in the play). From the below mentioned dialogues of Dodge, one can see his sense of estrangement, loss and alienation from the family and American culture:

Dodge: "Nothing gets me excited.... My appearance is out of his domain! It is even out of mine! In fact it is disappeared! I am an invisible man".

Dodge to Vince: "Persistence see? That's what it takes. Persistence. Persistence, fortitude and determination those are the three virtues. That's how the country was founded. You stick with those three and you can't go wrong".

Dodge's faith has received a tremendous setback and the metaphysical anguish of Dodge is undeniably presented in these lines:

Dodge to Shelly: Full of hope. Faith, faith and hope. You are all alike you hoppers. If it is not God than it is a woman. If it is not a woman then its politics or bee pollen or the furniture of some kind....The past? Jesus Christ. The past is passed.”

His disillusionment with America is clear in his conversation with Shelly:

Dodge to Shelly: “It is stupid! LA is stupid! So is Florida. All those sunshine states. They are all stupid”.

Likewise since the time of incest with her son Tilden, Halie, the wife of Dodge and mistress of the priest Father Dewis is no longer the same woman. In order to escape the catastrophe and trauma of her life, she abandons the family to socialize with Father Dewis and takes refuge in her past, by hero worshipping her lost son Ansel.

Halie: “when Ansel passed away he left us all alone.....He could have earned lots and lots of money.....He was a hero, don't forget that. A genuine hero brave, strong and very intelligent”.

The joy from her life has withered away from the last thirty years

Halie to Tilden: “We haven't had corn here for over thirty years”.

Bradley is the aggressive son of Dodge and Halie. He lost his leg in a chainsaw accident and is emasculated by his being a cripple. His failure in life is given vent through his aggression.

Bradley to Shelly: “They don't talk to me like that now. Not anymore. Everything's turned around now. Full circle. Isn't that funny”.

He consoles his frustrations and disenchantment with his family and country pretending to be happy. The sarcasm in the below lines depicts the loss more than anything

Bradley to Dodge: “I'm not telling her anything! Nothing wrong here! Nothing's ever been wrong! Everything's the way it's supposed to be! Nothing ever happened that's bad. Everything is all right here! We are all good people! We have always been good people. Right from the very start”.

Tilden is the elder son of the family. After his incest with his mother he has no purpose, no direction in his life. He is confused, ashamed, embarrassed about the Buried Child and its death. The thoughts of the dead child keep haunting him and he is afraid of the secrets being leaked out. He wants to escape the burdens of his guilt and this tension between guilt and redemption pins him throughout the play. Tilden's trodden belief is apparent in these lines with Shelly

Tilden to Shelly: “She left, Church or something. It's always Church. God or Jesus or both.

He tries to get away from the emptiness of his life as we see in the dialogue between him and Shelly

Tilden to Shelly: “We would cook these carrots ya know. You could cut'em up and we could cook'em. You and me”.

Fear of complete nihilism and things getting totally bleak is always haunting Tilden

“That's a lovely stretch of road. I've driven that stretch before and there is no end to it. You feel like you are going to fall right off into blackness”.

Vince and Shelly are the other two important characters of the play who at first bring to the readers an objective side of what actually is happening with the absurdities of the family to such an extent that their own identity gets blurred. Vince is the son of Tilden who along with Shelly presents the bird's eye view of the dysfunctional Dodge family. He comes back to his family after a long time and is dumbstruck to see nobody recognizing him. He does his best to show his identity but fails, strongly symbolizing how America is reluctant to accept its old values

and traditions and how as a family it no longer nourishes its children. Vince's surprise at his family and its condition clearly signifies the state of America and its tension to restore its glory.

Vince: "What the hell is going on here? What's happened to everybody.....I don't know what is going on here but I need some help to figure this out.....Something has fallen apart. This isn't how it used to be. Believe me. This is nothing like how it used to be".

Frustration of Vince to show his identity is at a deeper level associated with the craving of Americans for regaining their culture and identity and to retrieve its glorious American dream.

Vince: "How could they not recognize me! How in the hell could they not recognize me I'm their son. I'm their flesh and blood. Anybody can see we are related".

The insanity of the family and the crisis of not getting recognized takes a toll on Vince who suffers an acute existential crisis symbolizing the effects of the American cultural breakdown on the new generations

Vince: "A murderer? No, no, no! How could I be a murderer when I don't exist? A murderer is a living breathing person who takes the life and breath away from another living, breathing person. That's a murderer. You've got me mixed up with someone else?"

Shelly is the girlfriend of Vince who along with him becomes the objective commentator of the play. Before visiting the family of Vince, she is excited to see a happy family but to her dismay she sees a contrasted picture of what she had imagined. From Act 2 of the play when she visits the family till the end of the play she is the only character who is in her senses and regularly comments on the state of the family. But at the end she also falls prey to the bleak and grim atmosphere of the family. Shelly's imagination of good and refined American family is presented in the dialogue with Vince

Shelly to Vince: "American? Where's the milkman and the little dog? What is the little dog's name? Spot.Spot and Jane.Dick and Jane and Spot. See spot run."

Shelly's notion of an 'ideal' family is shattered when she encounters the actual condition, as she talks to Vince:

Shelly to Vince: "Vince, maybe we ought to go. I don't like this. I mean this isn't my idea of a good time...I thought it was going to be turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kinda stuff".

The sense of emptiness and breakdown of American culture and cultural neurosis is strongly put forth in the dialogue between Shelly and Dodge

Shelly to Dodge: "The feeling that nobody lives here but me. I mean everybody is gone. You're here, but it doesn't seem like you're supposed to be (pointing to Bradley) Doesn't seem like he is supposed to be here either. I don't know what it is. It's the house or something familiar. Like I know my way around here. Did you get that feeling?"

The madness and nothingness of the family gets the better of Shelly and she begins to doubt her own existence as well:

Shelly to Halie: "I am here! I am standing right here in front of you. I am breathing, I am speaking. I am alive. I exist. DO YOU SEE ME?"

To conclude one can say that the Post Modern techniques used by Sam Shepard does not allow any enjoyment or the free play to the characters as is the case with the majority of post-modern dramas. The play brings to the forth the sordid and bleak picture of American society, family and culture, of how America at one time was full of glory and happiness symbolized by corn in full bloom in the backyard of Dodge family and how these values were trampled and made to die just like the Buried child. The need of the hour and the constant urge and desire of both the author as well as of characters is to renew the faith, culture and the American dream in

this Post-modern world and outlook. The task is difficult but if not accomplished, the consequences can be disastrous.

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