

# The Investigation of Identity Construction: A Foucauldian Reading of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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## ABSTRACT

Shepard is peculiarly powerful in his symbolic family problem plays: *True West*, *Buried Child* and *Curse of the Starving Class*. He allegorizes the American experience and undermines the myth of America as the New Eden. The present study seeks to critically explore Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* in terms of Foucauldian conception of identity construction. Shepard is depicting a dystopian world with its bewildered characters; however he has still got a romantic view of individuals trying to grapple with the society in order to get unity and order. This Shephardian attitude towards human beings is seemingly a free agent that overlaps the Foucauldian view which establishes a philosophy focusing on the relationship between the self and the society. The present essay attempts to demonstrate the complicated relationship between the self and the opposing forces.

Keywords: Family problem plays; Technologies of power; Power/knowledge; Subject.

## INTRODUCTION

The researcher is going to emphasize the pervasiveness of normalizing judgment in American society that makes the people fixated with lists that rank order everything in any relations. Foucault's studies address themselves explicitly to the question of the problematization of sexual activity, government, body, etc.; however, in turn they reveal the processes and practices through which subjectivity has been constituted. Foucault believes that modern society is a disciplinary society based on the mechanisms of panopticon which is a metaphor for a new kind of social regulation. It is a type of prison which is designed by Bentham. In this panopticon, the prison building is structured in a way that makes the inmates think they are permanently under inspection and control; this belief of constant visibility leads to self-surveillance. According to Foucault, power is a network or a web of relations which spreads throughout the society. Power is not a one way practice, only from top to bottom. It does not just come from those in authority; instead it manifests itself in many different ways and from many different points. Foucault is critical of the notion of power possessed by some people or institutions and the belief that power is only connected with limiting and oppressing. He believes that power is in the hands of

multiple forces and it works through discourse. There is power in all human relations and it penetrates through society. A subject does not exist as naturally self-contained but is contrived by the double work of power and knowledge in order to maximize the operation of both. In fact power and knowledge are so inter-related that Foucault joined them into a single term: Power/ Knowledge. Indeed it is impossible for one to be without the other; systems of power require some truth to be derived to justify what they seek to do. Disciplines of knowledge constantly divide the population into separate categories which are the prime instruments of power.

Discourse is a key word in Foucauldian terms which is introduced in *Madness and Civilization* (1967). Foucault defines it as a system which is constituted of structures made by institutions that determine what is true and what is false in a particular field. A discourse is basically a system of knowledge that makes certain statements possible. "Foucault believes that discourse should be seen as a system which organizes the way we understand reality, not the reality itself" (cf. Mills, 2003, p.53).

In this essay, the researcher endeavors to have a Foucauldian reading of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*. After providing a brief survey of some of Foucault's

main essays which have been referred to in this article, the drama is discussed according to those theories. His theories regarding the omnipresence of power and the potent for resistance in a panoptic-like society are mostly discussed in this essay.

Before getting deep into the analytic practice, clarification of the elemental terms used in this study seems necessary. Throughout his work Foucault was concerned with the development and formation of the concept of power. He believes that power is in the hands of multiple forces and it works through discourse. There is power in all human relations and it penetrates through society. "It directs the circulation of knowledge and discourse and forms our self-image" (cf. Mills, 2003, p.35). Foucault puts it in the following way in *Power/Knowledge* coinage:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain ... Power is employed and exercised through a net like organization ... individuals are the vehicles for power, not its points of application (Foucault, 1980, p. 98).

Foucault criticizes this view, arguing in *History of Sexuality*, the first volume (1978), that power is something which is performed, something more like a strategy than a possession. Power should be seen as a verb rather than a noun, something that does something rather than something which is or which can be held onto. He portrays power as a major force in all relations within society. In an interview entitled "Power and Sex", Foucault argues that the multiple power relations are not easy to observe:

The relations of power are perhaps among the best hidden things in the social body... [Our task is] to investigate what might be most hidden in the relations of power; to anchor them in the economic infrastructures, to trace them not only in their governmental forms, but also in the intra-governmental or para-governmental ones; to discover the in their material play (119).

Resistance is another concept readers would come across in this study. It is defined as the possibility of contesting power, in other words, any given individual may resist his or her position as a subject. Resistance is a part of a power relationship and is not external to it. According to Foucault, power and resistance coexist and they are dependent upon each other, in fact as Foucault believes "resistance is written into power" (cf. Smart, 2003, p.133). In Volume I of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that "Where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). This is an

important and problematic statement. In order to be a relation where power is exercised, there has to be someone who resists. Foucault expands it so far as to claim that where there is no resistance, there is no power relation.

According to Foucault, individual is complete but society puts the pressure on it from the outside, and as a result, the society alters the individual's dreams and restricts its ability to express itself. Foucault disputes a model of individuality:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals...The individual is an effect of power and ... it is the element of its circulation (Foucault, 1980, p. 98).

Power comes first and the individual is an effect of power, designed for it rather than by it. Therefore the individual is the material of power, a vehicle for power, even though it sees itself as free of power but in fact occurring. This model lets power conceal itself and operate so effectively.

Shepard combines realistic and nonrealistic worlds. He never gives either world precedence, but he juxtaposes them in multiple dramatic actions or in a series of scenes. He does not resolve his work into a totally representational whole. Shepard provides the cohesiveness by juxtaposing various elements, from realistic moments of characterization and setting, combined with nonrealistic speeches and stage images. He combines contradictory actions in some of his plays for instance his Pulitzer prize-winning *Buried Child*. In this drama we see a series of found selves which are juxtaposed to build the characters. Shepard, in *Buried Child*, links contradictory lines of actions and dramatizes sudden and puzzling transformations of various sides of a character. As a result, the dramatist is not alone in creating a work of art but he is engaged in a joined workshop of various objects, words or characters, taken from life.

*Buried Child* is an inquiry into the power relations of the American community. No one denies that once there was a child, born, but later killed; however, like other plays of child murder, there is a symbolic suggestion of incest which should be defended or possibly rejected. Fertility is one of the main focuses of Shepard in all his dramas and in fact in *Buried Child*, especially the myth of fertility and the link between bodily health and the health of the land are portrayed. The bareness of the field behind the house and the decline of the farm seem interrelated to

Dodge's declining health: "You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing!" (Shepard, 2009, p. 14).

Shepard relates in *Buried Child* the life story of three generations of a family each is almost unknown and totally incompassionate to the preceding or even the following one. In this way he attempts to destabilize and replace the joyful and desirable dreams of the American Dream to catastrophic, undesirable ones, though this resistance is never in a position of exteriority.

### Shepard's Resistance in *Buried Child*

After working as the most successful playwright in Off-Broadway for more than a decade, Sam Shepard achieved fame and success with his Pulitzer Prize-winning family drama, *Buried Child*. The play is a macabre look at an American Western family which has a fatal secret: Years ago, Halie who is the mother of three sons, after not having slept with Dodge, her husband, for six years, became pregnant; Tilden, the oldest son belonging to Halie and Dodge committed the act of incest with his mother. She bore his child, a boy which is the curse of the drama. Dodge decided to remove the curse by drowning the child and burying its corpse in the farm behind their house on which Dodge stopped planting crops since then. He started smoking, drinking and watching television from a lump old sofa. Seeking salvation, Halie turned to religion enthusiastically and started a new relation with hypocritical father Dewis. Becoming insane, Tilden sought shelter in New Mexico where he spent some time in jail and has only recently returned to the farmstead, perhaps to make everything right. Upon the arrival of Tilden's estranged son, Vince and his girlfriend, Shelly, the secret is drawn out into the light of day and the curse is lifted. In the final act, however, Tilden comes home with a muddy corpse who is perhaps the second Vince. As it is evident, the play contains many of the motifs that Shepard favored: a family of antagonists entangled in a claustrophobic farmhouse somewhere in the great American Midwest. *Buried Child* has its roots in ritual and timeless themes of human suffering: incest, murder, deceit and finally rebirth which resembles the destructive features that ruined the heroes of Greek Tragedy.

*Buried Child* marked a turning point in Shepard's career. The play was hailed as a comical and insightful "presentation of the disintegrating American dream" (Clurman, 1962, p.55), stated by Clurman. In the *Nation*, Harold Clurman wrote about the play:

What strikes the ear and eye is comic, occasionally hilarious behavior an speech at which one laughs while remaining slightly puzzled and dismayed (if not resentful), and perhaps indefinably saddened. Yet there is a swing to it all, a vagrant freedom, a tattered song. Something is coming to an end, yet on the other side of the disaster there is hope. From the bottom there is nowhere to go but up (Clurman, 1962, p.89).

The first point that generates intricacy in the play is the deferral of the narration of the buried child's secret story. The first time, he is mentioned in the play is in Act II where Tilden sees Vince in the house. Vince tries hard to be recognized but Tilden says: "I had a son once but we buried him" upon this statement Dodge harshly looks at him and orders him to "shut up about that", because Dodge claims that he (Tilden) doesn't "know anything about that". The story is silenced so that in the second part of the same Act, Tilden just narrates the final part of the buried child's story, that once there was a baby but "Dodge killed it". For the second time in the play the story is left aside because again Dodge prevents it to be narrated till at the end of Act III that Dodge himself tells the whole story and dies. Up to that part the reader does not know whether *Buried Child* is a kind of symbol or whether the play is about a sick child for whom one should sympathize. In fact Shepard, by keeping the story a secret, creates a sense of mystery in the drama. Shepard's family dramas are claustrophobic. They take place in a cluttered dining room, living room and a kitchen. They are not spacious. He chooses these settings so that he can demonstrate the forces which are upon a given family. He leaves them to live in a seemingly isolated, barren land with occasional mentions of the outside world. Through the play, the characters are always waiting for something in the outside world to happen so that it changes their lives, Austin and Lee in *True West* wait for the Hollywood producer to bring them fame and wealth, in *Buried Child*, the family recourses to have "All American" members so that the curse upon the family is dispelled; in effect some outside force is in charge of their adversity or prosperity. To be "All American" has constructed, in Foucault's terms, a gigantic "Panopticon" whose controlling supervisor is the individual member's illusion of knowing its characteristics; however, as everyone contends no definite definition exists for it. This illusion is made, artistically and artificially constructed through many ways, whether through media, ads or even books and magazines. In this way, each individual is a power force, he follows the orders of power intentionally but unconsciously; as a result each individual is its own

"central tower". The "Panoptic mechanism" that Shepard pictures in this play, *Buried Child*, is enacted by America itself, its values and priorities. Sam Shepard is the critic of the American life with his main focus on American family. *Buried Child* explores the inner tensions of a rural existence, father-son relationships and the place women hold in an ambiguous domestic atmosphere. Simply mysterious and to some extent humorous, *Buried Child* is a vision of a troublesome family transformed into a symbol of America's loss of innocence.

America, the land of hope, has deceived many by its fabulous eye-catching images; however, the reality is something totally different. In his plays, Shepard's characters shout a lot and fight each other quite often. He admits it freely: his work is violent because it is about America, "It's a tangible presence, and you feel it everywhere in America. There is no need to be frightened of it. I find I can use it as a vehicle for other feelings" (Roudane, 2002, p.70). He portrays a view of America as a broken, fragmented, unhappy society. He is critical of the present America, claiming that American Dream does not exist anymore:

I don't know what the American Dream is. I do know it doesn't work, not only doesn't it work, the myth of the American Dream has created extraordinary havoc, and it's going to be our demise ... this notion that not only were we given this land by God somehow, but that we're entitled to do whatever we wanted to with it, regardless of the consequences, and reap all the fortunes out of the land, much to the detriment of everyone else ... this rampant puritanical class of European colonialism ... behind the whole thing is land-hungry Europeans wanting to dominate. The move westward was promoted by advertising, with words like 'Free Land', 'Manifest Destiny' ... we always prefer the fantasy over the reality (Roudane, 2002, p.75).

Throughout the play, Halie boasts of her sons especially Tilden and Ansel, claiming that they used to be "All-American(s)". Even though she never clarifies this term, but it seems that she relates it with taking responsibility: "I always thought he'd be the one to take responsibility. I had no idea in the world that Tilden would be so much trouble ... Tilden was an All-American, don't forget that. Fullback. Or quarterback. I forget which" (Shepard, 2009, p.16). To have "All - American" members is an advantage of this family, even though no such mottos as the "Land of hope" and "Land of free" for America mean anything substantial any longer. Once upon a time, the spirit of the American West meant the triumph of individualism, to have unlimited potential, tran-

scendent power and of course love of the country. These are the ideals and values of America beside the point that the criteria by which a person is evaluated, whether he is an "All-American" or not. In effect the people in American West are under the constant gaze of themselves and others; whether they fulfill those values or not and consequently whether they are real Americans or not.

As a member of this society, Shepard in his works, is critical of this evaluating system and tries hard to stop its progression. For him, America has lost its innocence. *Buried Child* is a drama by which Shepard "resists", in Foucault's terms, and destabilizes the conventions of the American life style. One of Foucault's well-known statements about power relations is "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather, consequently, this resistance is never in the position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978, p.95). The speeches of Shepard's characters are too long and too narrative. Much of the background of the play is narrated; some events don't occur on the stage, they are narrated, in effect narration is a kind of device to inform the audience. "The movement of (Shepard's) plays, in general, subverts discourse, character, dramatic action and setting, all of the elements by which the "puzzle" of a play is traditionally fitted together" (Marranca, 1981, p.17). To this list the breakdown of dialogue should be added. His too much reliance on the narration devaluates the role of dialogue in drama. Considering his family dramas, it strikes to the mind that no character is fully listening to another one. While Halie in *Buried Child* calls Dodge about what Tilden is doing, Dodge asks him not to answer her mother. In fact Dodge intends the conversation to be broken. These plays can hardly be said to have a conversational flow; the characters seem to be unaware of what each other is saying or sometimes they prefer to ignore it. For Shepard, extended dialogue is occasional; however, one can see a drama which is mostly internalized in the self. It is as if there is first the need to tell all of oneself rather than a story. His "dramas" are constructed out of pieces, and even so, many of the plays refuse to end. The plays mitigate against the ideal of conceiving work as a totality, on a unified scale, offering instead only a sampling of feelings and events that have to be experienced in segments" (17). In fact it is Shepard's strategy to announce his resistance against the accepted norms of the society that he lives in. His narrative demonstrates how Americans experience events in segments; they have surface impressions and suffer the "loss of conversation as a way of communicating feeling" (17). Shepard revitalized realistic drama and intended to show changes in the

structure of experience in America; he altered "the contours of speech and, therefore, communication in realism (17). The breakdown of dialogue shown by Shepard in its dramatic form portrays the people's inability to sustain relationships in the world today. His characters illustrate the contemporary malaise by humiliating interaction, all which backup Shepard's resistance and being critical of the present society.

In the "European literary tradition, largely under the influence of the binary opposition within European religion, there is often a clear distinction between good and evil characters" (Peach, 2000, p. 57). At the end of the play, Dodge narrates the story even though everybody tries to stop him. This shows that not only Dodge who is the one responsible for the family is aware of the incest but also Bradley, the second son knows about the shameful act of his mother and elder brother, Tilden. Contrary to expectation, they go on living with each other. The act of incest drives Tilden half crazy and sets him off for New Mexico, prevents Dodge from working on the farm and keeps him corpse-like on a sofa at home. Halie, the mother turns to religion but seems to have some affairs with a priest. Bradley loses one leg in an accidental event. However, they live on in the same house. Even after Dodge kills the baby boy, they continue to live near each other. Their acceptance of the evil and letting it run its course, their full recognition of the curse forces is one of the major distinctions between these people and Euro-American standards of behavior whose ancestors were Christians with their protracted hierarchy of good and evil. Shepard wants to rebel against any standard, whether literal or behavioral. Shepard subverts the long established Euro-American hierarchy of good and evil. The other members of the family, Dodge and Bradley, do not force Halie and Tilden leave the family or the house, they live on together, however physically not mentally and emotionally.

### **Subversion of Western Realism**

Shepard changed his writing style and moved to a new direction in the experimental period of the mid-to-late 1970s. When *Curse of the Starving Class* premiered in London in 1977, it became clear that he has undergone the shift away from avant-garde toward a more conventional dramatic form. In 1979, *Buried Child* confirmed this claim, a three-act conventional play that deals with a family consisted of familiar types (drunk father, world-weary mother and anguished sons), enacting a series of personal conflicts. "Shepard was finally moving toward the mainstream of "serious" American drama adding to the roll of family plays by O'Neill, Odets, Miller,

Williams and so forth" (Bottoms, 1998, p.152). In Shepard's postmodern dramas the subject of family is embraced in a search for identity which is characterized by discontinuity and a sense of tension in the structure of the family and the form of the drama. His real preoccupation is the question of family, why a family is a family at all, what attaches them together, with what a family actually is and how it is held together (if indeed it does). However, no simple answer can be provided to these questions due to the mysteries hidden in these families and the character's disfunctionalities while confronted with diverse and complicated situations of the present.

Shepard intends to create a kind of realistic drama which keeps its distance from the European neatly rational explanation; he blends some formal techniques with some elements of domestic drama which results in some sense of emotional disorientation in the audience. Shepard uses a "half-way in the dark writing style" (Bottoms, 1998, p. 153); the consequence of which would be to highlight, rather than iron out, the tensions and uncertainties that drive it. He presents his audience with a mixture of "the plastic artifacts of popular culture and the hallowed remnant of the legendary West. Shepard's vision was one of vacuities, of an America that sustains the forms of its myths but not their essence ... The Cowboy became his symbol for the death of the American West, which has surrounded to freeways and shopping malls and been corrupted by the Hollywood mystique" (Schlueter, 1999, p.12). His works seem to create a sense of surface without substance. "His early works used to be alien with those of realism. He used to create characters with sudden shifts of behavior, magical experiences. However, by the 1970s, Shepard was working within the very form he earlier repudiated: domestic realism, but with a twist" (13). 1970s is the date he wrote *Buried Child*, the drama that won the Pulitzer Prize. Though the nuclear family is prominent but soon after the play is started, it becomes clear that it is not Norman Rockwell's America. In his dramas he does not focus on some trouble in an American family or on some struggle between the characters over dishonesty, independence, etc. He portrays a troubled and dysfunctional family, a theatrical form that had traditionally aimed at sustaining the sense of a hollowed family. Superficially the play consists of a husband, a wife, sons and a grandson as a middle-American farm family; however, it becomes apparent that this portrait, deep down, is a caricature, a transformation of ordinary into the strange. Shepard demonstrates character's weaknesses side by side the physical deformity of characters, an alcoholic father, a brain-damaged son, a crippled son and a murdered infant,

presumably the child of mother and the elder son's incest. In fact he endeavors to have a portrayal of disability, passivity and decadence.

The old man aims at giving a simple explanation of the murder of the child which suggests the role of family in its own destruction: "It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be a part of us ... We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives ... I killed it" (38). The anti-family act of a family killing its own child which is Shepard's subversion of the American family, becomes moderated slightly in the end when Tilden exhumes the muddled corpse just as it is reported that the corns have grown abundantly in the yard, as they have throughout the play, preventing the audience's absorption into this deceptively "realistic" play world. However, Shepard's audience can never experience the sense of closure that is the enforcing element to secure the continuation of a family line and a characteristic of domestic realism:

Domestic realism relies on the audience's recognition of the behaviors of family life in progress, peered at through the imaginary fourth wall of the family living room by an audience convinced that life is like that (Schlueter, 1999, p.13- 14).

Utilizing the theatrical conventions, Shepard wants to lead the audience onto familiar ground then activates the tremors. His appropriation of domestic realism as a means of subverting the Euro-American accepted discourse, in Foucault's terms, helps to shape not the residual culture but of an emerging one. In Shepard's world, a dramatic form subverts the middle-class morality, not promotes it; he rejects the notion that the human behavior can be improved. His theatre challenged not only the optimistic vision of a country that yet believed in moral responsibility and the American Dream but also the artistic condition of several generations of realistic playwrights.

## CONCLUSION

No one denies that once there was a child, born, but later killed; however, like other plays of child murder, there is a symbolic suggestion of incest which should be defended or possibly rejected. Fertility is one of the main focuses of Shepard in all his dramas and in fact in *Buried Child*, especially the myth of fertility and the link between bodily health and the health of the land are portrayed. The bareness of the field behind the house and the decline of the farm seem interrelated to Dodge's declining health: "You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing!" (Shepard, 2009, p.14).

Drawing on Foucault's theory of power, it has been discussed that three generations of a family live in a farm house in *Buried Child*. They resist the stabilized codes of behavior of their community, while none of them is ever punished or abandoned from the community. Shepard subverts the concept of human "self" as a rational, knowable entity by portraying the splintered "self" and irrational, unpredictable of the characters' conducts. Each character replaces the other one as each passes Dodge's sofa to the next one. Pretending to go out to buy drink for his grandfather, Vince leaves the house to find a way to cope with the new situation and come to some understanding; however he returns like a violent intruder and takes control of the house; in fact he destabilizes the patriarchal power.

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