

A Postmodernist Reading of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

UNE LECTURE DE POST-MODERNE DE SAM SHEPARD'S *BURIED CHILD*

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Abstract: This paper attempts to analyze postmodernism as a style in Shepard's late-twentieth-century's play, *Buried Child*. As an example of a postmodern drama, *Buried Child* embodies ambiguity, discontinuity, pluralism, perversion, deformation, disintegration, deconstruction and difference that Ihab Hassan has identified as essential to postmodern works. Moreover, it is attempted to show that in his depiction of American Family in decline, Shepard brings into account a consideration of postmodernity according to Baudrillard's theory of "simulation" and "loss of the real", Derrida's concept of "deconstruction", and Lyotard's theory of "the fall of grand narratives". Finally, the study reaches the conclusion by displaying that all these features altogether have been the real key to the sense of fragmentation felt among the family members, which bring to light the postmodernist environment of the postmodern world.
Key words: Postmodernist Literature; Intertextuality; Metanarrative; Language Game; Parody; Pastiche; Simulacrum

Résumé: Cet article tente d'analyser le post-modernisme comme un style à la fin du XXe siècle jouée dans la pièce de Shepard, *Buried Child*. A titre d'exemple d'un drame post-moderne, *Buried Child* incarne l'ambiguïté, la discontinuité, le pluralisme, la perversion, la déformation, la désintégration, la décontraction et la différence que Ihab Hassan a identifiées comme étant essentielles à des œuvres post-moderne. En outre, il est tenté de montrer que, dans sa description de la famille américaine en déclin, Shepard met en considération d'un élément de la postmodernité selon la théorie de Baudrillard de «simulation» et «perte du réel», le concept de «décontraction» de Derrida, et la théorie de «la chute des grands récits» de Lyotard. Enfin, l'étude arrive à la conclusion en affichant que toutes ces caractéristiques au total ont été la véritable clé de sens de la fragmentation senti parmi les membres de la famille, qui mettent en lumière l'environnement de post-moderne du monde post-moderne.

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*Received 20 November 2010; accepted 16 January 2011

Mots clés: Littérature postmoderne; Intersexualité; Métrait; Jeu de langage; Parodie; Pastiche; Simulacre

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to render a postmodernist reading of Sam Shepard's family play *Buried Child*. After an introduction to postmodernism in literature, in general, and in drama, in particular, Shepard's *Buried Child* is analyzed, which is finally followed by the analysis of the play within a postmodernist frame, in which the theories of the three French philosophers, Jean- François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, are taken into account.

2. POSTMODERNISM AND LITERATURE

We have perceived profound changes in our social and political life style in recent decades. Our traditional notions and manner of living are increasingly being challenged. Such challenges have resulted in a crisis of authority which is known by the general term of "postmodernism".

To begin the discussion with a straightforward description of the idea of the "postmodern", to sum it up with, to explain and grasp its basis for a full-fledged understanding of the plural phenomenon of "postmodernism", and, in other words, to come up with a clear-cut definition of the event, according to which one can place its relevance to the contemporary culture, literature and finally, theatre, "is all but impossible":

In fact, as we shall see, this sort of clear and concise process of identification and definition is one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge. In our day-to-day lives, we expect common sense and accessibility. From the perspectives of scientific reason or philosophical logic, clarity and precision should be the sole aim of thought. But postmodernism, in contrast, often seeks to grasp what escapes these processes of definition and celebrates what resists or disrupts them. It would therefore follow that not only might such a simple definition miss the complexities of the postmodern, it would also be in danger of undermining the basic tenets of what makes it such a radical and exciting area of contemporary critical thought and artistic practice. (Malpas, 2005: 4)

Like the slipperiness of the term and the concomitant difficulty of defining it, the prefix "post" in "postmodernism" is open to doubt. In many of the postmodern debates, according to some critics, as the "post" preface implies, the postmodern designates a process of historical succession according to which, "postmodernism" is something that either follows or replaces what is known as "modernism". However, those who think about "post", in these cases, quite simply, to mean "after", do not agree whether postmodernism is a break from modernism, a continuation of modernism or even both. In fact, in this regard, it is almost impossible to generate agreement about precisely what "modernism" is, much less "postmodernism".

In the case of the term's evolution, postmodernism was originally coined in the 1940s to identify a reaction against the Modern movement in architecture. However, it first began to be widely used in the 1960s by American cultural critics and commentators such as Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler who sought to describe a 'new sensibility' in literature which either rejected modernist attitudes and techniques or adapted or extended them. In the following decades the term began to figure in academic disciplines besides literary criticism and architecture – such as social theory, cultural and media studies, visual arts, philosophy, and history.

Such wide-ranging usage means that the term becomes overloaded with meanings. Among these, however, three various uses of the term may widely be identified:

First, postmodernism represents a number of developments in the arts and culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. The reference point and point of departure for this type of postmodernism are the different forms of modernism that developed in the arts and culture in Europe in the first half of the century.

Second, it designates the rise of new frameworks of social and economic organization, again approximately since the end of the 1939-45 war. As such, its reference point and point of departure is the tendency of modernization which specified the early years of the century, with the development of industry, the growth of the mass market, and the speed in automation, travel and mass communication.

Third, it indicates a peculiar type of theoretical writing and reflection, usually though not completely, writing and reflection which chooses the first or second area as its goal. (Hooti and Shooshtarian, 2010:14)

For most critics, the easiest way to start thinking about postmodernism is by thinking about modernism, the movement from which postmodernism seems to grow or emerge. The term postmodernism (in relation to literary studies and its difference to modernism) was first popularized and employed by the American literary critic Ihab Hassan, whose interventions in the postmodern debate were crucial and, who made use of it in order to specify emerging tendencies in literature in the 1960s. Hassan defined postmodernism as an anti-formal anarchism as well as a new aesthetic formation. He brought together the various trends of postmodernity. Postmodernism, according to Hassan, "was an impulse of negation, a celebration of silence and otherness that was always present, though always repressed, within Western culture" (Walmsley, 2006: 408). "Decentering" was in fact the concept Hassan followed in his contribution:

For Hassan, postmodernism was an impulse to decentre, to create ontological and epistemological doubts as we accepted, and became intimate with chaos. This spirit of indeterminacy was, to some degree, counterbalanced by the principle of immanence insisted that humankind has a strong tendency to imaginatively create and appropriate all of reality to itself. (ibid)

Hassan, as well as the principle architectural commentator of postmodernism, Jencks, holds that the interrogation or revolutionary vigor of earlier forms of modernism had inured over the twentieth century to conventional artistic practices and considerable institutional forms. It should be noted that the points of the critiques undertaken by these two writers suggest clearly various definitions of the ways in which postmodernism arises out of and goes beyond this now institutionalized modernism.

In thinking about the difference between modernism and postmodernism, one often runs into the question of an antagonism between the two. Regarding the same idea, Waugh has argued that:

Where modernism is preoccupied by consciousness, showing how the workings of the mind reveal individuals to be much less stable and unified than realist psychology would have us believe, postmodernism is much more interested in fictionality. (qtd. in Nicol, 2009: xvii)

The perspective of this work, however, is formed through an understanding of literary postmodernism as a radicalization of the primary conceits of modernism, as a mode which crosses many disciplinary boundaries and defies any attempt to be constrained or limited to one systematic set of ideas by means of articulating two key relationships: firstly; of postmodernist literature to modernist literature and, secondly; of postmodernist literature to postmodernist culture.

That the idea of "postmodernism in literature" focuses on one kind of writing, namely, narrative fiction, is a truism and as Nicol (2009) explains;

Postmodern fiction is far too diverse in style to be a genre. Nor is it a historical label, like 'Victorian fiction', as to speak of the late twentieth century as the postmodern 'period' would be to misrepresent a great many contemporary writers whose work cannot usefully be related to postmodernism. I would prefer to think of postmodern fiction as a particular 'aesthetic' – a sensibility, a set of principles, or a value-system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth century. (xvi)

Postmodernist fiction, then, either as a break or as a continuation of the modernist one, is an international phenomenon with major representatives from all over the world:

Gunter Grass and Peter Handke (Germany); Georges Perec and Monique Wittig (France); Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino (Italy); Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie (Britain); Stanislaw Lem (Poland); Milan Kundera (former Czechoslovakia); Mario VargasLlosa (Peru); Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia); J. M. Coetzee (South Africa); and Peter Carey (Australia). (Lewis, 2001: 123)

However, as Federman states in *Self-Reflexive Fiction* (1988), "it cannot be said that these writers ... formed a unified movement for which a coherent theory could be formulated". (qtd. in Lewis:123)It is difficult to disagree with this, as the literary works of these postmodernist authors vary a great deal. Yet, they do have certain things in common. According to Lewis:

Some of the dominant features of their postmodernist fiction include: temporal disorder; the erosion of the sense of time; a pervasive and pointless use of pastiche; a foregrounding of words as fragmenting material signs; the loose association of ideas; paranoia; and vicious circles, or a loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse. (123)

There are, however, a few characteristics that are seen frequently in postmodernist literary works to be added to this list, such as: ambiguity, complexity, decenterment, and fragmentation in dialogue, extreme use of black humor, parody, allegory and disintegration.

As Hutcheon says "whereas in modernist one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing, in postmodernism pastiche and fragmentariness are seen as liberating" (qtd. in Newman,1985: 266), traits such as these are encountered time and time again in the bare, bewildering landscapes of contemporary fiction. Aldridge puts it like this in *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (1983):

In the fiction of [postmodernist writers] ... virtually everything and everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which conditions in the real world they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they may be said to depart. The conventions of verisimilitude and sanity have been nullified. Characters inhabit a dimension of structureless being in which their behaviour becomes inexplicably arbitrary and unjudgeable because the fiction itself stands as a metaphor of a derangement that is seemingly without provocation and beyond measurement. (qtd. in Lewis: 123)

Postmodernism, as mentioned before, questions not only the nature of existence and concepts of reality, it also take up issues such as the fictionality and textuality of those realities. Literary postmodernism has subsequently been adeptly summarized by Waugh as "a quest for fictionality" (Waugh, 2006: 10), one that is oriented toward a paradoxical premise: belief in nothing but uncertainty.

Uncertainty, or what is known in one of the French philosopher's realm "delogocentrism", is the essence of postmodernism introduced by, Jacques Derrida, one of the most influential thinkers of the latter part of the twentieth century. Derrida's deconstruction theory, basically, refers to the re-reading or breaking down of a text to show the multiple meanings at work which tries to subvert the logic of opposition within language. As Butler asserts:

The central argument for deconstruction depends on relativism, by which I mean the view that truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks of the judging subject. It is difficult to say, then, that deconstructors are committed to anything as definite as a philosophical thesis. Indeed, to attempt to define deconstruction is to defy another of its main principles – which is to deny that final or true definitions are possible, because even the most plausible candidates will always invite a further defining move, or 'play', with language. For the deconstructor, the relationship of language to reality is not given, or even reliable, since all language systems are inherently unreliable cultural constructs. (2002:16)

Therefore, the postmodernist approach to literary creation, which effectively invests in the production of what could be called a series of meta-realities, aims at leading the reader to the general conclusion that truth, reality and experience are in essence purely subjective and personal. This is achieved through the use of language, which draws attention to itself as a means of creative expression. For the majority of postmodernist writers, "language constitutes reality; it does not describe the world but constructs it". (Childs and Fowler, 2006: 52)

Reality, fictionality and hyperreality is the subject which is discussed by the prominent French philosopher: Baudrillard. Baudrillard (1988) asserts, now, the Western society has entered the fourth phase of development, the "hyperreal". In the fourth phase, or the order of simulation, meaning "implodes" and

we move from reality to hyperreality. This hyperreality is nothing but the direct result of advances in information technologies. As Bertens notes:

We have entered the hyperreal ... Whereas the real was produced, the hyperreal is reproduced. The hyperreal is a reproduced real, the real as 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality', constructed 'from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models', a 'meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium'. (1995:146)

Apparently, a central tenet of Baudrillard's argument is that, in contemporary culture, the object and the sign have become indistinguishable; therefore, we have replaced reality with simulation and the hyperreal. In the age of hyperreal:

The image dominates, and the 'normal' relationships are turned on their head. The age of production has given way to the age of simulation, an age, in which, products are no longer made and then sold; they are sold before they exist. (Waugh, 2006: 413)

In this simulated world, we can create our virtual selves, one that have no basis in reality; it means that every social role we adopt is "already pre-coded to such an extent that there is no possibility of breaking free from the matrix of representations into a genuine, personal response" as Waugh explains (ibid).

In the condition expressed, in which representation becomes more important than the events being represented; no possibility of resistance and interference is suggested by Baudrillard, while Lyotard keeps the possibility at least in limited and local levels.

On the other hand, the contemporary culture, or the postmodern condition, as Lyotard defines it, is the state of disillusionment with metanarratives. Metanarratives are total philosophies of history setting out the rules of narratives and language games, which establish ethical and political rules for the society. According to Lyotard, these metanarratives that traditionally used to give cultural paradigms, some forms of legitimation or authority, have "lost their credibility" since the Second World War and notes the idea that "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives". (1984: xxiv)

The postmodern condition, as Lyotard defines it, is the state of disillusionment with such metanarratives. No system and no metanarrative is all-inclusive and universal. The outcome of this incredulity toward metanarratives is what Lyotard calls "delegitimation", the process by which metanarratives lose their power to legitimize discourses. According to Lyotard:

In contemporary society and culture — postindustrial society, postmodern culture — the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation. (37)

In relation to literature, in general, and drama, in particular, postmodernism calls into question theatre and drama, quite remarkably, in many different ways and, traces of them can be followed in some commentaries on the term, famous among them are Jean Franoise Lyotard's "postmodern condition" and Jean Baudrillard's "simulations". Hassan represents a long list of names, which signifies postmodernism for him in some ways. "There are very few playwrights on his list: Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Handke, Bernhard, Shepard and Wilson" (Schmidt, 2005: 9). For Hassan, postmodernism in drama:

veers toward open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invention of silence-veers toward all those and yet implies their very opposites, their antithetical realities. (qtd. in Schmidt: 16)

3. BURIED CHILD

Buried Child was premiered at 1978 and won Shepard the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979. The story of *Buried Child* is built around a classical topic, seeking roots and a sense of identity, but the story is narrated in a distinctly postmodernist style with discontinuity, pastiche, and what seems to be an irresolvable tension.

The play in general is a mystery, as the audience or the reader alongside with Shelly (Vince's girlfriend) tries to unravel the secret. "The play is also a mythic exploration of family guilt and betrayal, conveyed by a complex web of symbols." (Abbotson, 2003:50)

In *Buried Child*, Dodge, the center of the story – the patriarch, and his wife, Halie, presenting the old-time chauvinistic portrayal of women being part whore, live in the same house ostensibly but are in fact apart. Dodge sits immobile on the sofa for much of the play, while Halie is either offstage or reminiscing about a son who died, called Ansel. Their eldest son, Tilden, an idiot-savant who has a complex relationship with both his mother and his father, brings in produce from outside and another son, Bradley, the incomplete one-legged bully, cuts their father's hair while he sleeps. Tilden's son, Vince, the prodigal son, looking for his roots and meaning whom Dodge has made his heir, arrives with his girlfriend, Shelley, an anchor to reality and an outsider in the play. Vince takes possession of the family homestead, chasing off Bradley and taking Dodge's place after his death. At the close Tilden walks on carrying the corpse of the child Dodge had drowned and buried years previously, as Halie, offstage, comments on the wonderful crops outside.

The play's structure is a traditional three-act structure where Shepard depicts three generations in the lives of a grotesque family: the characters and conflicts are established in the first act, the conflict gets worse and the antagonist gets stronger in the second act, and the whole conflict seems to resolve in the third act. The characters' bizarre behavior and outwardly exaggerated defects symbolize inner psychological defects and archetypal generational conflicts that have shaped these characters' lives.

On a mundane level, the plot relates how the family farm passes from one generation to the next and goes through cycles of decay and regeneration. But on the mythic level, the play tells a family story of guilt and betrayal, in which the older generations have abdicated their responsibility, and handed down an inheritance of emotional sterility that the younger generation needs to recognize, understand, and transcend. (52)

This family constantly argues over minor things to avoid having to face the big issues, including their own failures and complicities in relation to a murder and its effects on a pain-filled dysfunctional family in the American mid-west. The number of times characters cover themselves or each other with blankets, coats, or corn husks symbolizes the extent to which all are complicit in hiding from the truth and each other. This is a family so buried in guilt and so corrupted that the members have lost the power to communicate, even on a daily basis. Halie's infidelity (past and present) and Dodge's drinking have greatly contributed to the breakdown of this family, and they bear the brunt of the guilt. Dodge, all denying reality, is evidently worn out from the start, a picture of ill health, showing how the effects of guilt wear a person down until there is hardly anything left. Dodge, in fact, denies any affective bond with his family, claiming that "just because people propagate [does not mean] they have to love their offspring. You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?" (Shepard, 1981:112). His impotence (and eventual death) is signaled by his prone position on the sofa, and his burial under Tilden's corn husks.

In the course of the play, the problems of the past are always in progress with the present. The past in *Buried Child* is in some way the present. The present generation has to pay back the sins of the past generation. Unwilling to move on, Dodge tries to deny the possibility of new growth, even as Tilden covers him with the corn he has picked. Dodge's drinking is a classic reaction to guilt, as a person attempts to obliterate the memory of past deeds with alcohol. What Dodge has done—drowned his wife's illegitimate child—we do not learn until near the close of the play. It is implied, though never with certainty, that the child is the result of an incestuous relationship between his youngest son, Ansel (now dead), and his wife, Halie, although it is also possible that the father was Tilden. There is also uncertainty about whether Ansel ever existed: he may be a figment of Halie's imagination to help her deal with the death of the child that Dodge buried.

Halie's emotional estrangement from her family is shown both by what she says and by the fact that she frequently speaks from offstage, creating as great a distance from her family as she can. In the first Act she enters, all in black, dreaming of honors for Ansel. While threatening to throw Tilden out for stealing the corn Dodge enters the ensuing argument defending Tilden. She tells Dodge that he is spiteful, stinking and mean, and Dodge replies the argument when he says that Bradley belongs in a hog wallow, that Bradley is not his flesh and blood and in this way the reader is mystified with his cryptic statement: "my flesh and blood's out there in the backyard"(77). Halie's black garb at the start suggests mourning, and she talks at length about her dead son Ansel, but it is more than him for whom she mourns: she mourns for her whole family. Her change to yellow clothing and the armful of yellow roses she carries in the final act contribute to the possibility of hope as the burden of death seems to have lightened, but Halie is drunk, and still ends the play offstage as she began, so any progress remains ambiguous.

As a result, nothing is direct in the play and as Shepard conveys no direct thoughts or ideas he allows none of his characters to decrease this kind of feeling of ambiguity and uncertainty. Like Halie who says: "We can't shake certain basic things. We might end up crazy". (119)

4. ARGUMENT

Shepard's *Buried Child* has definitely the quality of a postmodern play. Perhaps, the play's postmodernity represents itself better in the representation of a life and characters in which coherence, unity and center seems to be fading away. The characters suffer from a lack of sustained unity to keep them together. Unlike the unified and coherent figures of modern dramas, Shepard seems to portray his characters as voids, perhaps to show both the emptiness of their lives and the void of their contemporary culture.

In *Buried Child* the members of Dodge's family, not satisfied with their roles, constantly change their functions, however, no satisfaction is fulfilled and, the fact that all members of this family have been forgotten is that they are all trapped in the hands of postmodern condition.

5. PASTICHE

In *Buried Child*, Shepard gives his play the quality of a pastiche by imitating and referring to numbers of previous works of other artists. Bottoms (1998) states:

More ambivalent still is *Buried Child*, with its exploitation of a variety of different myth schemes, from Oedipus to Osiris. As with his use of pop- cultural sources, there is something of self-consciousness of postmodernist pastiche in these instances, the ironic manipulation of the redundant fragments of ancient stories which have lost their power to affect us in their original form. (12)

Presenting a veritable patchwork of allusions to well-known family plays, the action of *Buried Child* as a whole recalls that of Pinter's *The Homecoming*, with Tilden and Vince coming back home, and Shelly like Pinter's Ruth being included in a variety of family relations. Bradley's assault on Shelly (to open her mouth and put his fingers in) recalls the assault on Lulu in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

The plays surreal comedy and its absurd actions seem like absurdist plays of Ionesco. Moreover, *Buried Child*'s "imagery, characters, and family secrets all resound in Ibsenesque way, as in *Ghosts*, secrets from the past enter into the metaphoric language and imaginative style" (Rosen, 2004: 129). In the course of the play:

As Halie speaks from upstairs, she talks as if to Dodge, though she is heard now only by Vince, remarking that what is sown and washed in by the rain will be reaped, and assigning a cause to the growth of the crop: "Maybe it's the sun" (132). The pun in the curtain line on "sun/son" alludes directly to Ibsen's *Ghosts*, reminding audiences not only of a source for the realistic modern family drama structured around a secret that is only gradually revealed, but also of the earlier playwright's delineation of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children. The remains of the buried son have literally fertilized the earth in a grimly Gothic manner (perhaps appropriately calling to mind the line from T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* asking whether "that corpse you planted in your garden has begun . . . to sprout"). (Adler, 2005: 119)

In this play, Shepard demonstrates a postmodern fondness of allegory which allies his work with that of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Tilden's position, a farmer "All-American Fullback" (1981: 72) who failed in life and ran away to Mexico and then returned home reminds the reader of Biff Loman in Miller's play.

Halie, always reminding her golden past is reminiscent of Amanda Wingfield in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. The references to "palm trees" (66) at the beginning of the play echoes O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*. The incest between the son and the wife recalls union of Abbie and Eben in *Desire under the Elms* and the violent murder of the baby is also common to both plays.

Finally, the secret of the play, the revelation upon which the play is dependent, recalls Mary's painful revelation at the close of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. However, Rosen believes, "The nature of

secret of *Buried Child* is more a device akin to the secret in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*." (2004:130)

All these features together get *Buried Child* close to an interlocking pastiche, which makes the play's postmodernity more prominent.

In the case of gothic features of the play, according to Bottom:

Also in gothic tradition, the play is populated by grotesque ... on one level, the entire play reads as an ironic pastiche of the gothic genre ... list of classic gothic themes which are used as *Buried Child*'s device; order often breaks down: chronology is confused, identity is blurred, sex is twisted, the buried life erupts. (1998:159-160)

The use of gothic in this play in fact enables Shepard to show his sense of moment by moment temporal fragmentation which is a postmodern feature indeed.

6. LANGUAGE FRAGMENTATION

Buried Child demonstrates a degree of language fragmentation that is one of the prominent aspects of postmodernist aesthetic production. In the course of the play most of the characters are unwilling to say anything, but at the same time they need to talk, "to avoid falling into vacuum" (165).

Aimless and fragmented conversations are the exact result of talking for the sake of talking. As Tilden tells his father the reason of his coming back home, a simple reason perhaps, "I was alone. I thought I was dead." (1981: 78), Tilden felt lonely and needed a company; "you gotta talk or you'll die" (ibid). This statement is another variation on Descartes: I talk therefore I am.

7. BAUDRILLARD'S LOSS OF THE REAL

Baudrillard's theory of "loss of the real" in *Postmodern Condition* is a point that can be felt in *Buried Child*. Required to keep the secret for so many years, the family, in fact, has come to believe that there has never been a secret to keep it untold. And this is exactly the family's fabricated illusion and the case of their being far away from reality.

Baudrillard's concept of postmodernity in *Buried Child* manifests itself exactly here, where reality and fabrication seem inseparable and suggests a perfectly believable simulacrum of the events that really happened.

Some critics even have suggested that "There is an uncertainty about Ancel's reality, thinking he may be Halie's creation to help her deal with all that had happened." (Abbotson, 2005:161). Tilden also seems so bewildered and out of touch with life's reality, but he is reconnecting to the land in which rain has created new growth. Perhaps, for these characters consistency lies in a sense of loss, of threat, of anxiety, and of tension. Tensions of Dodge's family are the direct result of losing reality which is buried in the backyard and they try to ignore.

In sum, being discussed in a postmodern frame work, the family have lost the sense of the real, because the society made them far away from reality; all they are offered are myths generated by the media, "myths that unlike those rooted more securely in the sensibly, are finally evidence of the fragmentation rather than gestures of resistance" (Abbotson, 2003:211).

Due to the loss of reality which is according to Baudrillard, one of the hallmarks of postmodernism, all family members have lost the true connection with life, the fact Vince and Shelly discover at the early moments of their entrance.

8. LYOTARD'S THE FALL OF GRAND NARRATIVES

Over the course of his career, Shepard's work has increasingly exhibited a postmodernist suspicion that the redemptive powers of modernism's paradigms might in fact be fault. As a result, the Lyotardian breakdown

of the grand recits or master narratives has been a constant preoccupation in Shepard's family play: *Buried Child*.

Two master narratives which seem to be broken in the course of the play are religion, in general, Christianity, in particular, as well as the Enlightenment.

In postmodernist theatre there is not any exact meaning for religion and morality. Shepard in *Buried Child* directly challenges the fall of religion in the family life and puts their social values "under erasure" in Derridian terms. Although none of the characters in the play seem to have any moral scruples at all, it is the offensive actions of Halie and the apparent religious character, Father Dewis, which disgust the readers as well as spectator's reactions. Whatever the characters action and decision are, Shepard expresses no hint of his personal feeling toward them. He does not condemn or reproach any one of his characters. However, the attitude of these characters towards life reflects the postmodern condition in which the old grand narrative of Christianity and morality has no longer any place.

On the other hand, in the case of the Enlightenment, postmodern existence "is a continual process of trying to find meaning in the face of the knowledge that meaning is always relative and contingent" (Nicol, 2009: 40). *Buried Child* reiterates Lyotard's claim that one traditional function of narrative is to legitimate knowledge and that all narratives, even if they were received only yesterday "must be suspected". In this condition, the "nostalgia for presence" intensifies the significance of the local rises as totalizing narratives lose their power and authority and the conditions of truth are recognized to be imminent in the rules of the game of inquiry. Thus, in *Buried Child* Tilden's sense of being in the family and at the same time not being, his sense of 'presence and not presence at home' by the time none of them satisfies the character as well as other characters whose existence and non-existence would make no difference in the family in which the American Dreams are all shattered, their language games in the course of the play would urge them to confine their speculations to the observable present.

The family members of the play allegorize the postmodern condition when it is a time for the end of Enlightenment project. In this postmodern culture there is no longer any myths or rituals to give one any guideline; instead, as Lyotard mentions, they have given their place to "little or local narratives" (1984: xxiv).

9. DERRIDA'S CONCEPTS OF DECONSTRUCTION AND BINARY OPPOSITIONS

The text of *Buried Child* is full of binaries which are one by one contradicted and dismantled altogether. It is a trait of postmodern drama that the different binaries of the play are placed in an ever shifting position in which none of them finds a privilege over the other.

The binary of past/present results in another binary that is coherence/incoherence. Fredric Jameson's definition of postmodernity "as a schizophrenic condition in which existence seems to have dissolved into a series of fractured presents without coherent relation to past or future"(qtd. in Bottoms:10), is completely adjustable to the play. At the surface level, the shared secret of the family has kept the family in a coherent position, but in fact the depth of their lives has become deeply disintegrated. By revealing the buried secret, Dodge dies and the surface dignity of the family is collapsed, but at the bottom still the revelation brings about a unity.

Vince's reverie on his fate and his realizing that he has lost himself also function as another binary of the play, since through this monologue paradoxically he knows who he is: "I studied my face... as though I was looking at another man, as though I could see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face" (Shepard, 1981: 130).

At the third act, in final gesture Dodge recites his will and everything goes to Vince. So, the hierarchy is reversed, and through this another binary is reversed again.

Lack of clear direction in life is in fact what all family members and especially Dodge's sons have in common with each other, as neither Tilden nor Bradley could find a way into life. Tilden leaves home in search of a free life; however, he finds nothing but solitude and disappointment. He is fond of adventure and driving but outside in the road he understands that there is nowhere to run to. "I was alone," he tells his

father, "I thought I was dead" (78), so he comes back home. The binary of inside/outside is evident in Tilden's action, as in neither of them he can get satisfaction.

Another binary opposition apparent in the play is the opposition in the concepts of creation and destruction. In *Buried Child* everything can be said to have a link to the idea of creativity and a vulnerable thing which grows: the corn, the carrots, Vince's musicianship as well as the roses. In this sense the play can be interpreted as a metaphor which represents the idea of stifled potential. On the other hand, the play acknowledges a lack of resolution in the fight between creativity and destruction and keeps the idea very much alive and unresolved at the end. For instance, Tilden's earlier entrance with corps is in contrast with his final entrance with the corpse. On the surface, they all suggest fertility, yet they had resulted in the sterility of all family relationships in deeper levels. In fact, in the story, the battle between creation and destruction is lost.

10. A MIXTURE OF GENRES

Buried Child is laid in the framework of realism; the play is essentially a family drama. However, added into the realistic framework are distinct elements of surrealism and symbolism.

In the case of the play's mood, "while the events of the play can all be accepted on a realistic level, the eccentric characters and their repeated refusal to recognize each other or embrace their own past take the action into surrealist mode." (Patterson, 2007: 60)

The three-act structure, the immediate time frame and the setting of the play in reality give it an overall realistic appearance. Yet the use of symbols such as the corn and the rain give the play a symbolist element while the fragmented characterization and actions like the multiple burials of Dodge are somewhat surreal or dreamlike.

The humor is also an essential element of the style, giving the play sardonic, black and even at times slapstick elements. All these stylistic elements combine to give the play an overall postmodern feel.

On the other hand, in addition to the different stylistic features of the play, an atmosphere of death and decay covers the deadly farmhouse of *Buried Child*, which gives the play a gothic quality.

In postmodernism distinctions between different genres blur; tragedy becomes like a farce and the tragic sense is more laughable and farcical than lamentable. This is exactly the case in *Buried Child*. Though the play is shocking and painful but it seems more like a savage farce. Bottles keep smashing, Bradley crawls helplessly in search of his wooden leg, and Father Dewis who has come in for some tea doesn't know what his position is.

The final optimistic images of fertility and Dodge's death according to Bigsby are also more a means of threat rather raising hope because they represent "a potential future which would continue the farce/tragedy of human life" (2002:188).

11. UNREADABILITY OF THE TEXT

As it was discussed before, *Buried Child* is full of contradictions; the fragmentary images of the play never make sense, and the language does not fill in the gaps and brings about more ambiguity. All these together make the process of reading the text difficult and almost impossible. This quality, however, has root in another postmodernist technique of writing called "allegorical impulse". In fact, there is a link between postmodern aesthetic and the problems of illegibility, unreadability and the impossibility of reading associated with the allegorical mode. The text of *Buried Child* also relates postmodernism's preoccupation with reading and its concern with the failure to read the signs.

During the play, some images seem to be significant and illusive; the audience keeps them in mind, perhaps to fit them together later and achieve a total understanding. Yet, some of them remain unconnected to the other parts of the play. The image of rain, for example, in the first two acts and the sense of strangeness and uncertainty in the play never make sense and the reason of Bradley's assault on Shelly by putting his fingers in her mouth, is not answered in the play.

Tilden's milking stool "with its inherent material overtones" (Wade, 1962: 56), the fertility of the land and the burial of Dodge under the product of the crop, all together come "to be explained away as simply a message to the eyes, rather than one to the mind" (Gilman xx). Vince adds another level of difficulty to the reading of the play by taking Dodge's place on the sofa at the end of the play.

The final Act of *Buried Child* opens with birdsong and sunshine and Haile who is dressed in bright yellow instead of mourning. It seems to refer to Dodge's talking regarding the connotation of 'new beginning' and 'hope':

DODGE: (looks toward porch then back to her) That's what I mean. See, you're glad it stopped raining. Now you think everything's gonna be different. Just 'cause the sun comes out. (Shepard, 1981: 131)

Adler states:

Yet the play repeatedly seem to warn that whatever significance they choose to assign to these incidents in their own reading, not the result of decoding some fixed set of meanings or symbols. (2005:175)

As a whole, the elements of the play can neither be interpreted nor separated. No conclusive cause or explanation can be attributed for what happened during the play, "Maybe it was the rain", "Maybe it was the sun" (Shepard, 1981:132).

For the audience or even readers the experience of the play is a subjective one, and if they arrive at the conclusion, as does Shelly, that "I can't find a reason for anything" (89), this is a more legitimate response as any other. This is exactly the place where Shepard decides to leave the drama without a certain sense of relief about the happenings, suggesting its postmodernist fluidity to cover itself, as the circle of Dodge just ended by his death is possible to keep going by Vince, although nothing is certain about anything in the play.

12. DECONSTRUCTION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

In *Buried Child* Shepard desires to show the inability of America to deliver on its promises. He also desires to highlight the fact that the so-called American Dream proves nothing but a fantasy of confused minds.

Vince and Shelly come eagerly to visit a house which is completely American with "turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kinda stuff" (91). But what they face is completely the opposite of what they had in their minds: a shattered family, a drunkard grandfather, a bewildered father who does not recognize his son and a child which is buried in backyard. The incestuous relationship of Tilden and Halie does not match the standards of the traditional, moral, American family. Also, none of the family's sons could be the true model of what American Dream supposes them to be, as all are impotent and irresponsible figures of a corrupted family. In this way, Shepard portrays a life which is completely the antithesis of American Dream and the ideal American kind of life is completely deconstructed in this play.

13. THE SENSE OF NON-ENDING

"The ending of all of the Victorian works are 'closed' while, the ending of modernist works are 'open'. The endings of postmodernist works are a hybrid of these two." (Hooti and Shooshtarian, 2010: 22). In postmodern plays endings are "both open and closed" because they are "either multiple or circular". As Mc Hale claims:

Endings constitute a special case of self-erasing sequences, since they occupy one of the most salient positions in any text's structure. Conventionally, one distinguishes between endings that are closed, as in Victorian novels with their compulsory tying-up of loose ends in death and marriage, and those that are open, as in many modernist novels. But what are we to say about texts that seem both open and closed, somehow poised between the two, because they are either multiple or circular. (1987: 109)

Regarding *Buried Child*, the elements of the play can neither be interpreted nor separated, and no conclusive causes or explanations can be attributed to what happened during the play. The play ends as it

was started, with Halie and Dodge talking with each other while Vince has taken Dodge's place, and through this effect, Shepard once again defers any kind of closure or resolutions in the play.

Partly because Shepard's plays refuse to provide the definitive sense of closure that audiences traditionally experience from dramatic realism, they invite multilayered readings – as allegorizations of experience, as symbolic structures, as mythic constructs. (Adler, 2005: 116)

14. POSTMODERN SENSE OF DOOM

In *Buried Child* characters are all isolated and cut off from the world, as though some apocalyptic event has cut off these characters from the world of everyday reality, "I don't even know who the neighbors are! And I don't wanna know!" Dodge says, (Shepard, 1981: 70). The family's shared past is so tragic, so they just forge ahead, maybe an apocalypse is awaiting them. The possibility of a apocalypse brings about a postmodern sense of ending in the play. Bottoms notes:

Buried Child by dripping into the viewer's consciousness with the relentlessness of the rain that continues throughout the first two acts and which may be the source of new life in the fields, or "catastrophic", or just "plain old rain". (1998:180)

However, it is not an age in which the sense of ending includes within itself the promise of revelation or meaning. It is an age of doubtfulness, in which everything keeps unresolved or open-ended.

In *Buried Child*, Dodge's death at the end of the play does not bring about salvation. The pattern is continued by Vince who takes Dodge's place on the sofa. The sofa has not been a place of life throughout the play; it has instead signified death. Shelly, whom Dodge refer to as a "hoper" (Shepard, 1981:109) and a life-affirming person, can no longer remain with Vince in his house of the dead, so she leaves. She leaves Vince not in the hope of finding an identity on the frontier, but in order to escape the disgusting family relationships of the dead house.

15. BURIED CHILD: TRAPPED IN POSTMODERNITY

As a representation of a life in which coherence, unity and center seem to have no meaning, *Buried Child* is a play that is trapped in the course of postmodernity.

The characters of the play suffer from a lack of unity to keep them together as members of a family. The father of the family, who traditionally must act as a unifying center to the circle of the family, is not centered himself and cannot provide coherence. Disappointed with her husband, Halie seems to be involved in an affair with Father Dewis who is shown by Shepard as an exhausted, ineffectual minister who has come with Halie only to drink a tea. Character of Father Dewis seems intended to deliver an impending message; that religion and rituals are no longer resurrecting. In other words, Shepard tries to reveal that contemporary culture has come to the end of what Lyotard called as "grand narratives". Getting access to any universal truth is no longer possible, neither in Illinois nor in Mexico nor in any other place.

The family's relational disintegration is fed by both distrustfulness and loneliness and the mood of detached, brutal and emotionless interaction between the characters is maintained from the beginning toward the end of the play.

Throughout the play, the failures of the sons is the subject Dodge talks scornfully about, announcing that Bradley belongs to "a hog hollow" and that Tilden has "lost his marbles" and might as well be dead (76). In this case, suffering loneliness, Tilden returns to the home he hates and where he is himself hated simply for the sake of having some form of human contact. Thus he "once again demonstrates the postmodernist cogito: I am seen, therefore I exist" (Bottoms, 1998: 164). On the other hand, both Vince and his father "tend to derive from a world without roots, a world without a history and, more menacingly, without a future. And the sense timeless moment predominates" (Abbotson, 2005: 213).

In the course of the play, characters constantly change roles and functions. They are not dramatized as unified and coherent figures; rather Shepard portrays them as void, perhaps to show both the emptiness of their lives and the void of their contemporary culture. Characters of the play, as Bottoms notes, "seek to

create and recreate their personal appearances. Many of them manipulate an ever-shifting series of roles and masks, thereby, suggesting the absence of any underlying sense of the self." (15)

The fact that all members of this family have forgotten is that they are all trapped in the hands of postmodern condition. The disintegration of identity, lack of meaning, and purpose in life, are facts of the 21st century and all these together lead to the cynical outcome in *Buried Child*.

Characters of the play inhabit a world in which parents deny any kind of kinship with their children. Take for example Dodge's comments on this point, "You think just because people propagate, they have to love their offspring. You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?" (Shepard, 1981: 111-112)

Becoming disintegrated, they cannot show any kind of affection to one another; they become disloyal, they get involved in incest, and life is all of a sudden unbearable. This is in fact, another outcome of postmodern culture, due to that everybody feels a great contempt to one another, but at the same time, no one is able to make a complete break because there is nowhere to go to.

There is a great gap among the family that nothing can feel it in, neither the return of sons home, nor the exhumation of the buried child from the barren backyard, because in the presence of all of them there is an absence and a lack. Derrida refers to this lack as "difference"; this gap "serves not only to create the impression of the full presence of the character, but also to maintain its absence" (Murphy, 1992: 184).

Rosen's statement seems quite pertinent as he says "there always remain plenty of uncertainties as to the best way to live life in a culture addicted to nostalgia, violence, and secrecy" (2004:77).

16. CONCLUSION

Shepard's intention was to create a narrative which communicated and reflected the frustrations of American people but at the same time was engaging and entertaining. Set in a context which is easily recognizable, the American farming family, and centered on issues which are universal, the disillusionment with the American dream and the traditional patriarch, *Buried Child* reflects the universal frustrations of American people. The postmodern style which Shepard uses incorporates surrealism and symbolism in the realistic framework of a family drama. This platform allows for engaging visceral theatre. Shepard is able to create images in the imaginations of people through the use of surrealism and symbolism, evoke and harness the experiences of his audience through its postmodern nature and keep the audience comfortable in the trappings of realism.

Regarding the style, *Buried Child* incorporates many postmodern elements such as the mixing of genres, the deconstruction of a grand narrative, and the use of pastiche and layering. The use of humor is also an essential postmodern element.

As a concluding remark, it is good to mention that the world depicted in this family play and the means by which it is depicted have certain postmodern features in common. Loss of the real, unreadability of signs, and the end of metanarratives as key themes of postmodern are reflected in all. Lack of universal truth (Western Philosophy) in almost all the characters' lives is also evident in the play, as the characters think this universal truth will validate their lives and thus legitimate their society.

In sum, the incapability to accept decenteredness, heterogeneity, and multiplicity as the facts of 21st century, leads to disintegration of meaning, identity and purpose in this play. The characters of the play inhabit a world that is unable to confront the fact of contemporary culture and disregards the language games of political discourse. The play's grim and irresolute endings also have root in the family's denial of postmodern conditions, and its sticking to media-generated myths and fantasies.

For world's entanglement Shepard offers no solution; he, as a postmodern thinker does not suggest ways to salvation; rather he is a reflector that puts before us the world which is in catch.

Shepard's only suggestion is being a little more patient and practicing the language games of local cultures.

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