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Familial Disintegration and its Psychological Impact in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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Abstract

Sam Shepard (1943-2017) was an acclaimed American playwright renowned for his exploration of familial themes. His works often examine the complexities and dysfunctions of family life, making him an important figure in modern theatre. *Buried Child* (1978), one of his most significant plays, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979. The play stands out for its dark, surreal portrayal of the family narrative, setting it apart from more conventional realistic family dramas. The disintegration of the family depicted in *Buried Child* serves as an example for broader societal issues, emphasising the family's crucial role as the foundation of society. This study aims to analyse the psychological aspects of familial disintegration in *Buried Child*, focusing on the reasons behind the family's breakdown and its psychological impact on its individual members. By applying Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Sigmund Freud's concepts of remembering, repeating, and working-through, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the

characters' dysfunctional behaviours. The research highlights the importance of addressing familial issues, as they influence societal health. Through this analysis, this study stresses the cyclical and multigenerational nature of trauma and the potential for psychological recovery.

Keywords: Communication, Differentiation, Dysfunction, Instability, Isolation.

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The family is a black hole that holds its off-spring in a deadly grip, eventually sucking them back into its vortex.

—David J. DeRose, *Sam Shepard*

1. Introduction

Buried Child (1978) is the third play of Sam Shepard's "family trilogy," written during the peak of Shepard's career and cultural significance. In 1979, the play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama, significantly increasing Shepard's fame. Contrary to his initial experimental works, the three family plays exhibited a more complex narrative framework, perhaps contributing to their greater popularity among a wider audience. Shepard deconstructs the idealized portrayal of the family in this play, a topic of ideological significance for many Americans during that period. *Buried Child* is primarily acknowledged as a significant contribution to American theatre, providing a sharp analysis of the breakdown of the American family and the deceptive nature of the American Dream. The drama explores themes of dysfunction, hidden secrets, and the intricate psychological complexities of its characters. In spite of the extensive research conducted on these elements, there is still a requirement for a more concentrated psychological examination of the family dynamics using specific theoretical frameworks.

2. Literature Review

The Themes and dynamics of Shepard's plays, notably *Buried Child*, have been the subject of countless studies. For instance, Harold Bloom's book *Sam Shepard* (2002) offers a comprehensive examination of Shepard's career, focusing in particular on the thematic and symbolic aspects of his writings. Bloom highlights the recurring themes of repressed pain and the deceptive nature of the American Dream, placing Shepard's plays within the broader framework of American disillusion. Nevertheless, Bloom's study primarily focuses on themes and only extensively explores psychological theories that could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the fundamental family dysfunctions.

In *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*, J.S. Bottoms (1998) focuses on the depiction of crisis in Shepard's works, analysing the effects of these crises on both individual and collective identities within families. While Bottoms highlights the societal and cultural aspects of these crises, his analysis lacks an in-depth exploration of specific psychological frameworks that would offer a more detailed comprehension of the dynamics within families. By utilising Family Systems Theory and Freud's concepts, which provides a comprehensive examination of family interactions and the persistence of dysfunction through generational patterns, the present study fills this gap.

M.C. Roudane's (1984) *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* is a scholarly collection of essays that provides a critical analysis of Shepard's plays in the context of American theatre. Roudane's book analyses Shepard's thematic concerns, such as examinations of family relationships and criticisms of society. This study is significant for comprehending the broader scope of Shepard's contributions, but it lacks a concentrated psychological examination of family breakdown in *Buried Child*.

D.J. DeRose's (1992) study, *Sam Shepard*, examines how the symbolic portrayal of secrets and suffering in Shepard's plays contributes to the physiological and emotional breakdown of the family. Although DeRose's analysis briefly addresses the effects of unresolved trauma, it falls short of a thorough psychological investigation. Based on Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Freud's concepts, the present study expands upon this analysis by investigating the impact of characters' varying

responses to trauma, whether they address it or ignore it, on their psychological well-being and the broader dynamics within the family.

A.J. Saddik's (2007) book, *Contemporary American Drama*, situates Shepard inside the broader framework of American theatre, emphasising the American Dream and the dysfunctional family as manifestations of contemporary social concerns. Saddik examines the function of the American West as a metaphorical and concretely severe setting that intensifies family hardships. In addition to Saddik's insightful analysis of the environmental symbolism in Shepard's works, the present study broadens this viewpoint by establishing a direct connection between these environmental elements and the psychological conditions of the characters, which demonstrates how external stressors contribute to internal family dysfunctions.

A thorough biographical and thematic examination of Shepard's plays is provided by M. Tucker's book, *Sam Shepard* (1992), with a particular focus on the transmission of trauma and instability within families. Tucker explores the symbolic and tangible inheritances present in *Buried Child*, including Vince's acquisition of the family home and the profound impact of dysfunctional family dynamics. Building on Tucker's work, the present study conducts a more thorough analysis of generational characteristics using Bowen's theory, which elucidates how familial dysfunction is not only transmitted through actions but also profoundly embedded in the psychological structure of the family.

3. Plot Summary

Buried Child takes place on a farm in Illinois, where Halie and Dodge live with their two sons, Tilden and Bradley (an amputee). Halie plans to meet Father Dewis for lunch. We discover that Tilden, their eldest son, had been living in Mexico but returned recently. Tilden brings corn from the field behind the house; Dodge suspects it is stolen, mainly since nothing had grown there in years. Additionally, readers discover the existence of a younger dead son named Ansel. Halie then explains that she asked Bradley to shave Dodge's hair, but Dodge expresses reluctance. Halie leaves, dressed in funeral clothes. Later on, Tilden gives Dodge a pill to help him drift into sleep. Tilden quietly takes the bottle of whiskey and

slips out of the house. Bradley appears on stage and begins shaving Dodge's head while he is sleeping. Later, Vince, Tilden's estranged son, arrives with his girlfriend, Shelly. They find Dodge sleeping on the couch and his head is bloodied and bruised. As Dodge awakens, Vince and Shelly speak with him, but Dodge fails to recognize Vince. When Tilden enters carrying carrots, he does not remember Vince as well. Later, when Dodge realises his bottle of whiskey is missing, his anger flares. Vince leaves to buy Dodge a bottle, hoping that it will lead to some recognition from his grandfather.

After Vince departs, Shelly speaks with Tilden and he reveals to her the existence of his buried child in the yard. Bradley suddenly appears. Tilden's fear of Bradley forces him to flee the scene. Bradley's behaviour turns aggressive as he interrogates Shelly, mistakenly believing she arrived with Tilden. Later, Dodge advises Shelly to disarm Bradley by disposing of his wooden leg. Halie returns with Father Dewis, indulging in alcohol and wearing a yellow dress. Upon encountering Shelly, Halie initially ignores her presence. Feeling obliged to confront the family, Shelly refers to their hidden truths. Dodge eventually gives in to Shelly's inquiry, admitting to the buried secret: Tilden's child, born of incest between Halie and Tilden, was drowned by Dodge and buried in the yard. Meanwhile, Vince returns home drunk, acting all crazy and violent. Halie finally recognizes him as her grandson. Dodge also appears to recognize Vince, expressing a sense of death awaiting him at any moment now, starts discussing the need for a will and gives the house to Vince. In the end, Tilden reappears, carrying the buried child as he ascends the stairs. Halie's comment is heard from upstairs, observing the abundant vegetables in the field behind the house.

4. Theory and Analysis

4.1. Theatrical Framework

The first theory applied in this study is Freud's "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through." Freud explains that individuals tend to unconsciously repeat past traumas in present relationships, re-enacting early patterns of dysfunction, isolation, and pain. This repetition leads to overreactions in current situations, as past traumas are triggered. To

overcome this, working-through involves actively processing these emotions with the help of a therapist. By confronting resistance, patients gradually integrate their past experiences into their present lives, with resistance intensification indicating progress (Freud, 1914).

The second theory is Bowen's Family Systems Theory, which provides several important concepts.

1. **Sibling Position:** Bowen incorporates Toman's sibling profiles, where the oldest child tends to take on leadership while the youngest becomes a follower. Sibling position affects partner choice, divorce likelihood, and can lead to triangulation when parents strongly identify with a child (Haefner, 2014; Hall, 1991).
2. **Family Projection Process:** Parents may project their issues onto a dependent child, leading to dysfunction within the family. This often results in the child being labeled as the "problem," though the issue originates from the entire family, especially the parents (Hall, 1991).
3. **Differentiation of Self:** Differentiation refers to the balance between individuality and togetherness in relationships. Highly differentiated individuals maintain a solid sense of self, while less differentiated people are more influenced by emotional pressures (Hall, 1991). Self-differentiation is key to reducing emotional stress and maintaining healthy family dynamics (Haefner, 2014).
4. **Multigenerational Transmission Process:** Emotional patterns repeat across generations, often leading to decreased self-differentiation in younger family members. Without intervention, these patterns persist, but higher differentiation can be achieved through conscious effort (Hall, 1991; Titelman, 2014).

4.2. Buried Child's Psychological Analysis

Shepard is intensely interested in exploring the dynamics of the American family in his literary works. He portrays the American family as a troubled social unit with disconnected members, lacking love and

emotional bonds, and burdened by psychological and emotional pain. Shepard challenges commonly held notions about the American family as a typical and well-functioning social institution. These notions include questioning the idea that social harmony can be achieved if every family member strictly follows their assigned role. However, Shepard's families do not adhere to traditional roles, leading them to be labelled as "troubled" or "problem" families (Kadhem, 2013).

Buried Child features an epigraph by Pablo Neruda that is mainly sarcastic:

While the rain of your fingertips falls,
while the rain of your bones falls,
and your laughter and marrow fall down,
you come flying. (Shepard, 1984, p.61)

This epigraph shows that there is little hope of flying (Bigsby, 1985). The family members lack a strong connection. Dodge, the elderly patriarch, is a rather unpleasant person in his late seventies, battling both alcoholism and an unidentified health condition. He lounges on a worn-out couch in the living room, covered by a worn blanket, engrossed in the television. Halie, a woman in her mid-sixties, lives a secluded life upstairs and seems involved in a romantic relationship with Father Dewis, the local Protestant priest. In a rustic farmhouse, a husband and wife engage in a lengthy, long-distance conversation, their voices filled with intensity. However, their words echo each other because none takes the time to listen and understand the other. It is crucial for the stability of the family that the connection between the mother and father remains strong. Their relationship is the foundation, and if it becomes fragile, the entire house structure may crumble, resulting in a harmful emotional effect on their children (Cardullo, 2019).

Albah and Alothman (2023) find that "the manner in which children are treated plays a crucial role in shaping their identities" (p.324). Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory suggests that the parents' relationship plays a vital role in maintaining the stability of the family system. When the central relationship is not functioning well, it can lead to intense

emotional and behavioural issues in their children. The dysfunctional relationship between Dodge and Halie is an excellent example of this. Their relationship is marked by disdain, disloyalty, and a lack of emotional connection, significantly affecting the other family members. As a result of his parents' bad relationship, Tilden experiences emotional instability and a cutoff from reality. He seems mentally unwell and incapable of functioning independently, representing a person who has internalized his parents' unresolved problems.

Another example is Bradley. His behaviour is characterized by aggression and manipulation, which may result from the chaotic atmosphere created by his parents. His behaviour indicates a lack of healthy boundaries and an effort to establish dominance in a disrupted family dynamic. The American gothic family is composed of specific character stereotypes: the father, who has lost his sense of identity; the mother, who is disconnected; and the son, who is plagued by ghosts from the past. The father is the central part of Shepard's family. A recurring character stereotype is a father who maintains emotional distance while arguing with a dominant mother. The father consistently fails to fulfil his role as the head of the family, neglecting both his spiritual and physical presence and disregarding the responsibilities and duties that come with it. He is often characterized as being harsh, aggressive, and prone to excessive drinking (Kadhem, 2013).

Dodge's current state is a stark contrast to his past self. In the play, Tilden brings a bunch of unshucked corn into the house from the barren fields. Dodge removes the husks from the corn and covers his father's body with them by the end of the first act. This symbolic act reveals to the audience that Dodge is intended to be seen as a mere shell of his former self. He has lost his strength, humanity, and vitality due to factors such as old age, illness, excessive drinking, and guilt (Cardullo, 2019).

Dodge is described as being "*very thin and sickly looking*" (Shepard, 1984, p.63) to the extent that he is unable to distance himself from his family physically. Instead, he started looking for happiness by watching television and drinking the whisky bottle under his couch cushions (Kadhem, 2013). He is living "a weary life in which he gains no relief and

even if he seeks or gets comfort, it is simply a false comfort” (Azeez, 2022, p.11). Dodge’s clothes show that he has not left the living room for a very long period, giving the impression that he is somehow confined by his sins towards his family and his inability to fulfil his duties as a father. Dodge exhibits a lack of care and responsibility as a father, evident in his refusal to fulfil his paternal duties (Kadhem, 2013).

Family Systems Theory suggests that the stability of the nuclear family is based upon the proper functioning of the parental subsystem. Dodge’s isolation affects this subsystem, resulting in a breakdown in family structure and roles. The absence of a solid and effective male lead in the family results in an uneven distribution of power, which in turn causes heightened levels of anxiety and instability within the household. Dodge’s emotional cutoff from his family members results in a breakdown of connection and lack of emotional support. This cutoff maintains the family’s dysfunction across generations. The family’s failure to acknowledge Vince upon his return shows the depth of emotional cutoff and estrangement arising from Dodge’s isolation.

Dodge breaks conventional assumptions of the typical American parent and husband. While the typical American father would typically enjoy the company of his wife and children at home, Dodge appears most at ease when isolated. In the first scene, he tells his wife, Halie: “[d]on’t come down!” (Shepard, 1984, p.64) as he converses with her. Dodge’s apparent tendency for seclusion appears to be directly related to losing his role as the household leader. In act one, he expresses his dissatisfaction with Halie about cutting his hair by his son Bradley: “[m]y appearance is out of his domain! It’s even out of mine! In fact, it’s disappeared! I’m an invisible man!” (Shepard, 1984, p.68). Dodge is effectively non-existent as a paternal figure to his sons. As a fallen parent, Dodge has abandoned his authority as the head of the family due to his own wrongdoings and violations against his family. The members of his family have seized his fragile grasp on patriarchal authority. He lacks control over his household (Kadhem, 2013).

Dodge’s failure to differentiate himself from the family’s neglected emotional problems results in his retreat and seclusion. The inability to

keep a healthy level of differentiation harms the whole family, not allowing other members to achieve their own differentiation. By applying Family Systems Theory, it becomes clear that Dodge's alienation and refusal to fulfil his responsibilities as the family patriarch played a crucial role in the family's demise. The individual's actions disrupt the functioning of the family unit, resulting in heightened levels of anxiety, emotional cutoff, and the projection of unresolved problems onto those who inherit them. Consequently, this creates a recurring pattern of dysfunction that impacts numerous generations.

Another character pattern in Shepard's plays is the "alienated" mother. Shepard depicts the mother as emotionally and physically estranged from both her partner and children. She displays minimal or non-existent affection towards her children and demonstrates hostility towards her husband (Kadhem, 2013). Halie consistently and firmly opposes him, posing a continuous challenge to his patriarchal power. Throughout most of the play's first act, Halie remains on the upper floor, distancing herself from a husband she neither harbours affection for nor holds in high regard (Kadhem, 2013). At the start of the play, she is even called "Halie's voice" (Shepard, 1984, p.68). In the concluding moments of the play, she can be heard speaking to her husband from offstage in her usual way, disregarding his words and moments of silence. Her awareness focuses solely on the realities she made up to maintain her perception of sanity. She is oblivious to Dodge's death, just as she has been oblivious to his existence for numerous years (Tucker, 1992).

Halie is often delusional, engaging in nostalgic thoughts about an idealized past while disregarding the current reality. This behaviour suggests her emotional cutoff from the family's problems. She is involved in an adulterous relationship with Father Dewis in search of emotional satisfaction beyond her family. Her emotional connection with Father Dewis forms a triangle that redirects her emotional focus away from her family. This triangle briefly decreases tension between her and Dodge but also worsens the family's alienation. The external relationship intensifies the internal family conflict, as Halie's focus and affection are divided, leaving Dodge and the children to deal with their problems without her help.

Halie projects her unaddressed sorrow and remorse regarding the family's history, specifically the buried child, onto her family members. Tilden's emotional instability and Bradley's aggressive behaviour are evident as a result of this projection. Her failure to confront her own emotional problems adds to her children's psychological and emotional issues, thus maintaining the dysfunction within the family. Her emotional detachment signifies a type of emotional cutoff. She evades addressing the fundamental problems in the family and creates emotional and physical distance from the suffering and dysfunction that are present at home. This cutoff hinders the process of resolving conflicts and forming strong emotional connections.

Shepard aims to convey the isolation and detachment between Halie and her husband by keeping them physically apart. In addition, Halie is consistently dressed "*completely in black, as though in mourning*" (Shepard, 1984, p.73). This external appearance further emphasises her estrangement from the rest of the family, symbolizing the loss of her conventional maternal role. By portraying Halie as a woman with repressed sexual desires, Shepard demonstrates the severe decline in Halie and Dodge's marital relationship (Kadhem, 2013). Furthermore, it signifies the danger that feminine sexuality presents to patriarchy:

Halie's Voice: I went once. With a man.

Dodge: (*mimicking her*) Oh, a "man."

Halie's Voice: What?

Dodge: Nothing!

Halie's Voice: A wonderful man. A breeder.

.....

Dodge: When was this anyway?

Halie's Voice: This was long before I knew you.

.....

Dodge: And he never laid a finger on you I suppose? (*long silence*) Halie?
(*No answer. Long pause.*). (Shepard, 1984, pp.65-67)

Halie's sexual desire is not limited to her youth, but it persists even now as Dodge proclaims, "[s]he won't be back for days ... There's life in the old girl yet!" (Shepard, 1984, pp.87-88). Despite being in her mid-sixties, Halie is not a timid woman who conceals her sexuality. Her engagement in a sexual relationship signifies the breakdown of her marriage to Dodge and a decline of the love they once shared for each other and their sons. She has lost both her love and respect for her family. Like Dodge, Halie differs from the conventional image of the American mother, who symbolizes the essential connection that unites the family. However, Halie's family is in disorder, mainly because of the mother's weakness, which is apparent in her obsessive sexual desire (Kadhem, 2013).

Similar to Halie, Tilden, the oldest son of Dodge, and the most childlike among the others, exhibits a sign of mental instability, as mentioned in the stage directions: "*[s]omething about him is profoundly burned out and displaced*" (Shepard, 1984, p.69). Dodge, however, harbours neither faith nor confidence in him. Tilden, described as a mentally weak person, is unable to carry out the responsibilities expected of the eldest son. He contradicts the traditional image of the eldest son due to his "*burned out and displaced*" mental state and his involvement with his own mother, which has led to his psychologically uprooted state. Despite being the eldest, Tilden cannot provide care for his elderly father and shield him from the aggression of his brother, Bradley. According to Dodge, he "can't even protect himself" (Shepard, 1984, p.68). Tilden is haunted by his father's decision to give up his responsibilities as a parent, resulting in him being weak, fragile, compliant, and reliant on others. Given the loveless, greedy, and absurd interactions inside this family, it is not surprising that Tilden's efforts to completely free himself from his father's influence are eventually unsuccessful (Kadhem, 2013).

Tilden can be also traumatized by the unknown incident that led to his departure from New Mexico that he has abandoned his sanity. He expresses a feeling of disassociation and incompetence but also a sense of innocence. Unearthing the corn and carrots (and subsequently the buried child) implies an extraordinary ability. In contrast to Dodge, he establishes an immediate connection with Shelley and enthusiastically discusses the family's trauma (Heuvel, 2019). Tilden demonstrates low

differentiation, indicating that he faces difficulties preserving his identity while maintaining emotional bonds with his family. He cannot distinguish his thoughts and emotions from the unresolved emotional problems in his family. His homecoming and unpredictable behaviour, exemplified by the act of bringing vegetables from a garden that was believed to be infertile, shows his connection with the hidden traumas and issues of the family. Khawla Gharib Faraj (2024) emphasises that “[t]he child’s feeling of rejection from his parents and the lack of perceived affection from them leads to the feeling of fear, withdrawal from the family environment, and becoming increasingly introverted” (p.217).

As the eldest son, Tilden was supposed to take on a leadership position and be a role model for his younger siblings. The combination of these expectations, together with the chaos in the family, caused him to feel overwhelmed, leading to his breakdown and inability to differentiate. The family’s instability and his parents’ emotional disconnection hindered his ability to succeed in this position. Tilden’s mental issues are developed by an accumulation of high expectations, unresolved familial trauma, and the lack of parental assistance. The stresses he faces directly result in his regression and inability to act independently.

In contrast, Bradley forcefully suppresses any indication of vulnerability by intimidating others in order to establish dominance as the younger sibling. However, his false confidence is shaken every time his prosthesis is removed, revealing the root of his fear of emasculation and foreshadowing his return to a whining kid in the last act (Heuvel, 2019). Tilden embodies the Oedipal desire to seduce the mother, while Bradley, his younger brother, embodies the opposite part of killing the father. He exhibits hostile, abusive, and violent behaviour (Kadhem, 2013). Violence is the only means by which one may establish their identity and status in the family. For instance, in the play, Vince demonstrates his inheritance by using the threat of force to seize possession of the family estate and assert his dominance (Heuvel, 2019).

The concept of sibling position might explain Bradley’s attitude. Being the middle sibling, he often experiences feelings of neglect and being surpassed by his siblings. According to Family Systems Theory, middle

siblings in dysfunctional families may exhibit aggressive behaviours in order to get attention or prove their existence. His bullying and abusive nature are his defence mechanisms to cope with emotions of inferiority and neglect. He uses violence as a means of proving his significance and acquiring dominance in a family where he is emotionally neglected. His desire to control Tilden and others might be seen as an attempt to establish a unique position and sense of identity in the family's structure.

Bradley's personality contrasts with Tilden's. While Tilden displays a timid and obedient attitude towards Dodge, Bradley exerts control over his father through his physique and violent behaviour. Bradley's arms and shoulders are "*extremely powerful and muscular*" (Shepard, 1984, p.82), and physically, he is a "*big man*" (Shepard, 1984, p.81). Due to Bradley's abusive nature and unwillingness to yield to his father, Dodge both harbours fear and animosity against him, as he says to Halie: "[h]e was born in a goddamn hog wallow! That's where he was born and that's where he belongs! He doesn't belong in this house!" (Shepard, 1984, p.76). Bradley's first words in the play serve as a clear indication of the intense rage that fills him: "[s]onuvabitch! Sonuvagoddamnbitch!" (Shepard, 1984, p.81). His "*left leg is wooden, having been amputated above the knee*" (Shepard, 1984, p.81), causing him to walk with an "*exaggerated, almost mechanical limp. The squeaking sounds of leather and metal accompany his walk coming from the harness and hinges of the false leg*" (Shepard, 1984, p.82). Bradley's physical deformity is only a visible representation of his psychological and emotional deformity (Kadhem, 2013). The reason for violence "stem[s] from an inferiority complex in an individual who feels inferior to others due to a physical or psychological defect, and consequently reacts with violence towards anyone they believe is insulting them because of this defect" (Abdullah and Alawi, 2022, p.426).

Exploring specific Family Systems Theory concepts may help us gain a more in-depth understanding of his character. One such concept is the Family Projection Process, which explains his aggressive and abusive personality. His actions might be seen as a projection of the family's unresolved problems. In a dysfunctional family, individuals often project their fears and frustrations onto one another. Bradley internalizes these

dynamics and expresses them through aggressive behaviour. Moreover, his acts of bullying and violence might be the result of the gap left by Dodge's decision to give up his position as the head of the family. Bradley attempts to establish his authority without clear leadership by resorting to destructive methods. Furthermore, his brutal behaviour might also be seen as an emotional cutoff. Through the use of violence, he avoids the confrontation of emotional distress and unresolved familial matters.

Bradley seemed furious against the whole world, on the verge of bursting at any time. Upon entering the home, he assaults his father by using a set of electric clippers to shave his hair while he is sleeping. Bradley's wooden leg not only represents his psychological abnormality but also symbolizes his inherent fragility. He is entirely dependent and unable to function without his limb. After losing his wooden leg, Bradley behaves childishly and complains to Halie, saying: "[m]om! That's my leg! Get my leg back! I can't do anything without my leg" (Shepard, 1984, p.120). Consequently, he expects obedience and attention from others as a consolation for his deformity. He consistently shows an obsession with dominating and terrifying Dodge: "[w]e could shoot him. (*laughs*) We could drown him! What about drowning him?" (Shepard, 1984, p.106). Therefore, Bradley has taken over the majority of the authority that Dodge has lost, thereby completing his role as a "haunted" son who is destined to follow his "fallen" father (Kadhem, 2013).

Dodge, entirely estranged from his own family, fails to recognize Vince, his grandson who has been absent for six years, upon returning home (Kadhem, 2013). In Shepard's plays, blood relations often seem entirely disengaged. Vince acknowledges that his father and grandfather are utterly unaware of his identity. Vince is suspicious (Abbott, 1994). He vocalizes his thoughts, questioning "[h]ow could they not recognize me! How in the hell could they not recognize me! I'm their son!" (Shepard, 1984, p.97). In response, his grandfather retorts, "[y]ou're no son of mine. I've had sons in my time and you're not one of 'em" (Shepard, 1984, p.97). According to Family Systems Theory, the family strives to sustain dysfunctional stability. Vince's reappearance poses a potential danger to the equilibrium the family has built despite its inherent disorder.

Identifying Vince would include addressing previous issues, experiences, and traumas that the family has repressed in order to preserve their dysfunction. In addition, the family members have created an emotional cutoff from troubling memories and unsolved matters. The emotional cutoff is an obstacle to recognizing Vince since doing so would oblige them to confront repressed memories and traumas.

Like Tilden and Bradley, Vince is a “haunted” child destined to carry on the father’s sins. However, Vince is “doubly haunted,” for he is burdened by the mistakes of both his father (Tilden) and grandfather (Dodge). Feeling disappointed by his family’s lack of recognition, Vince attempts to awaken their memories by showcasing his childhood skills. He displays his ability to bend his knuckles in an unnatural direction, speaks through his belly button like a ventriloquist, and plays his teeth as if they were piano keys. Vince imitates his father, Tilden, by resorting to his childhood behaviours. This behaviour allows Vince to adopt his father’s harmful way of life more completely (Kadhem, 2013). Employing Sigmund Freud’s theory, the family is trapped in a pattern of repeated dysfunctional behaviours. They repeat previous patterns of denial, deception, and alienation, resulting in their unwillingness to acknowledge Vince. The compulsion to repeat deepens their entrapment in their trauma, rendering them incapable of moving on.

After his unsuccessful efforts to be acknowledged by his family, Vince gets ready to leave the house for some time. However, he eventually comes back in a drunken and hostile state, falling to the same curse that has plagued the whole family:

Suddenly Vince comes crashing through the screen porch door up left, tearing it off its hinges. Everyone but Dodge and Bradley back away from the porch and stare at Vince who has landed on his stomach on the porch in a drunken stupor ... He has a paper shopping bag full of empty booze bottles. He takes them out one at a time as he sings and smashes them at the opposite end of the porch, behind the solid interior door, stage right. (Shepard, 1984, p.125)

Undoubtedly, Vince is exhibiting the same behavioural patterns that Dodge has long shown (Kadhem, 2013). Vince's repetition of Dodge's actions may also indicate a psychological bond with his grandfather. Freud suggests that people often develop an unconscious identification with important family members, particularly those who have greatly influenced the dynamics inside the family. Vince's use of alcohol may serve as an unconscious desire to establish a connection with or comprehend his grandfather's experiences and the historical background of his family.

Due to Vince's drunken state and aggressive behaviour, his family quickly recognizes him; for now, he is similar to them, and there is some unseen bond among them. Dodge tells him: "[i]t's me! Your Grandfather! Don't play stupid with me!" (Shepard, 1984, p.143). However, Vince shows the same lack of recognition that has troubled Dodge and Tilden (Kadhem, 2013). When Halie addresses him using his name, Vince responds, "Vincent who? What is this! Who are you people?" (Shepard, 1984, p.126). Vince has now abandoned his previous identity and adopted a new one: "I am a murderer! ... I'm the Midnight Strangler! I devour whole families in a single gulp!" (Shepard, 1984, p.126). Freud's theory suggests that people unconsciously repeat previous experiences and traumas to work through them. Vince's dramatic declaration may serve as a means for him to manifest the repressed pain and dysfunction inside his family. Bowen's theory highlights the interdependence of family members and their impact on each other's behaviours. Vince's anger might be seen as a result of the dysfunctional interactions within the family structure. His declaration of being a killer indicates the inner trouble and unresolved familial problems. The words emphasise his attempt to differentiate himself from the family dysfunction. By adopting a dramatic identity, he may be attempting to establish his uniqueness while also struggling with the overpowering impact of his family.

His name "Vincent" is derived from Latin and means "conquering" or "victorious" (Hanks et al., 2006, p.271), which is symbolically relevant to the play. His conquering of his grandfather's property and ownership of

the house represent his victory over alienation and his embrace of his family's complicated, gloomy heritage. As a "haunted" son burdened by his father's influence, Vince usurps or replaces his father by falling to the negative behaviour patterns passed down to him and repeating his father's mistakes. Vince explicitly refers to this repeated pattern when he announces to the whole family, "[m]aybe I should come in there and usurp your territory" (Shepard, 1984, p.126). Upon Vince's arrival at the house, Dodge immediately hands over his belongings to him, stating: "[g]o ahead! Take over the house! ... It's yours ... I'm gonna die any second now. Any second. You won't even notice. So I'll settle my affairs once and for all" (Shepard, 1984, p.128). When he heard this, Vince "*strides slowly around the space, inspecting his inheritance*" (Shepard, 1984, p.128) while holding the knife firmly between his teeth. Vince's behaviour now mirrors the loveless and hostile environment that had already affected the family members before his visit. He gets trapped in the vortex created by the ancestral curse. Vince, despite his proclaimed ability to "devour whole families in a single gulp" (Shepard, 1984, p.126), has fallen victim to the same misfortune that plagues his family: "I just inherited a house ... I've gotta carry on the line. I've gotta see to it that things keep rolling" (Shepard, 1984, pp.129-130). Vince's desire to "see to it that things keep rolling" might be his ultimate acceptance of his inevitable destiny (Kadhem, 2013).

The Multigenerational Transmission Process notion explains how patterns and conflicts are passed down through generations. The play portrays the transmission of familial secrets, traumas, and behaviours from one generation to another. Vince's acknowledgment of his responsibility to "keep things rolling" (Shepard, 1984, p.130) symbolizes his embrace of the generational transmission, in which unresolved matters and legacies are passed on, shaping his sense of self and behaviour. The family continues to experience dysfunctional relationships as a recurring pattern. Under Vince's leadership, things will "keep rolling," just as they always have been (Kadhem, 2013).

Buried Child criticizes the moral and physical breakdown of the American family and thoughtfully examines what it means to be a part of a family. One attractive characteristic of this play is its ability to include

highly individualistic elements effectively. The sons are the only normative characters in these domestic plays. The parents are portrayed as comically incompetent and clueless individuals who fail to understand or take action in different situations. They exhibit a lack of success as parental figures and are even more distressed and lacking in self-discipline than their children (Marranca, 1981). From the very start of the play, there is an apparent lack of connection among the family members. Dodge and his wife are physically separated, with Dodge on the sofa engrossed in watching TV while Halie is upstairs preparing to attend church (Mohammed et al., 2022).

Both Dodge and Halie live in imaginary worlds. Dodge, immovably seated on his sofa and hidden beneath his blanket, separates himself from the external world, attempting to hide and escape from his family and past (H. Bloom, 2002). Shepard employs the technique of blanket snatching in multiple plays, where the blanket symbolizes warmth and security. Stealing the blanket signifies the loss of this warmth and the betrayal of affection by family members (Tucker, 1992). In the meantime, Halie immerses herself in photographs from the past and her family during its happiest time (H. Bloom, 2002). Halie reminisces about her deceased son, Ansel, portraying him as a talented basketball player.

In contrast, Bradley contradicts this claim by stating that “[h]e never played basketball!” (Shepard, 1984, p.116). Certain critics have proposed that there is an ambiguity about the existence of Ansel, arguing that he might be an allusion to Halie’s imagination, created to assist her in coping with the events that have occurred (C. Bloom, 1995). The name “Ansel” may be linked to the word “angel,” thus indicating Halie’s idealized recollection of him as a war hero. However, Bradley and Dewis remember him, although Bradley doubts his mother’s idealized perception of him. Halie’s emotional alienation from her family is evidenced by her words and frequent offstage dialogue, which deliberately creates a significant detachment from her family (Abbotson, 2005).

The play contains numerous paradoxes. The contradictions between characters’ words and actions and the gaps between their actual behaviour and societal expectations, such as Halie’s monologue. Descending the

stairs, she discusses Catholicism, her love for her child, and her profound respect for the church and Father Dewis. These rapid changes occur, with each idea being swiftly followed by another. She undergoes a transformative process, where she wholeheartedly embraces positive thoughts, then transitions to a state of desperation, followed by fear, and finally changes into a nearly demonic side of herself, expressing her anger about the honeymoon. These contradictions reflect her mood swings and temperament (Marranca, 1981). Halie says, “[y]ou better get this cleaned up before Bradley sees it” (Shepard, 1984, p.76), while aggressively scattering the corn across the room. The dialogue is in stark contradiction to the action. In the opening scene, Halie and Dodge engage in a heated argument; however, as soon as Tilden enters the scene, they surprisingly find common ground and affectionately agree that nothing has grown in the backyard since 1935 (Marranca, 1981). The fragmentation of the characters and their dialogue indicates the psychological fragmentation that these family members have undergone as a result of being raised in an abusive home (Abbotson, 2005).

Initially, Halie’s black attire conveys a sense of grief, and she spends some time lamenting the loss of her son, Ansel. However, it is not only him that she laments. Her transition to yellow clothes and the number of yellow roses she holds in the final act emphasise the chance for hope as the weight of death appears to have lightened. However, despite her drunkenness, Halie concludes the play offstage as she started at the beginning of the play, leaving the progress ambiguous. On the other hand, the colour yellow may symbolize not hope but rather the envy that is the root cause of the difficulties faced by this family. Dodge harbours an endless lack of trust towards his wife, and their children have been led to compete against each other in order to attract attention. Tilden exhibits no emotional attachment towards his parents or his son, Vince. He is secretly aggressive towards his father, and his touch of Shelly’s coat can be interpreted as a form of sexual harassment. Bradley, the second son of Dodge, attempts to assert control over his father by shaving Dodge’s hair (Abbotson, 2005).

This family engages in many conflicts over trivial matters to escape taking responsibility for their own mistakes. The frequency with

which characters cover themselves or one another with blankets, coats, or corn husks signifies how they all attempt to hide the truth and avoid an honest connection. This family is so consumed by guilt that they have entirely lost the ability to communicate with each other regularly. In fact, Tilden's warning, if you stop talking, you no longer exist, implies that the family does the talking but with very little real communication. Dodge is exhausted from the beginning, showing a clear image of poor physical condition, emphasizing how the consequences of guilt gradually consume people until their soul is nearly drained. The character's powerlessness (and eventual death) is apparent from his vulnerable positions throughout the play and his burial beneath Tilden's corn husks (Abbotson, 2005). Furthermore, Baina Mater Altaniji and Wafa Omar Barhomi (2023) state that "[t]he dominance of conflicts within the family environment ... negatively impacts the children in the family, causing them to ... resort to adopting retaliatory behaviours towards themselves and others to express their anger" (267).

Shepard's protagonists find themselves trapped in a dreadful paradox between optimism and despair, yet they understand the necessity of striving and adapting in order to maintain their freedom. By exploiting the dual meaning of "forge" (Shepard, 1984, p.78) (advancing or shaping), Dodge summarizes the concept of the changing self, common in Shepard's works: "[t]here's nothing to figure out. You just forge ahead" (Shepard, 1984, p.78). Tilden, for example, knows that "you gotta talk or you'll die" (Shepard, 1984, p.78), referring to the conflicting needs for silence and speech in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) and *Not I* (1973) (Saddik, 2007). The critic Stephen Bottoms (1998) describes the Dodge family's existence as a "sodomasochistic vacuum" (p.164). They are dependent on one another, and as a result, they can only display disdain towards each other. Family dynamics become highly competitive as each individual yearns for communication but struggles to find a willing listener. Shelly, being an outsider, serves as the essential listener to enable their communication, but what she discovers is unpleasant (Abbotson, 2005).

Shelly is the only actual outsider, offering an objective viewpoint to the family's collapse. As an outsider, she is shocked and disturbed by the

family's turmoil, secrecy, and uncomfortable environment. Her first attempts to communicate with the family are met with resistance, bewilderment, and animosity, demonstrating how deeply rooted the dysfunction is. Shelly finally discovers the family's terrible secret: a buried child, which represents their collective grief and disgrace. Her surprise and disgust at the situation reveal the family's history of denial and suppression. Through Shelly's perspective, the audience acquires a better understanding of the family's psychological deterioration, their reluctance to address the past, and how this unresolved pain festers within each member, maintaining their continual breakdown.

According to Freud's "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through," Tilden's attempts to uncover the hidden truth of the buried child symbolize his efforts to bring repressed memory to the surface. This behaviour is a subconscious effort to cope with unresolved matters. His behaviours, such as his obsession with gathering vegetables from a garden that is believed to be infertile, represent his persistent effort to unearth the buried secret. These actions can be interpreted as a reflection of his "compulsion to repeat" the trauma associated with the buried child. This compulsion signifies the necessity to confront and resolve the hidden and troubling truth of his family.

Buried Child is a dark investigation into an American family with an ugly secret that has devastated the entire family. Dodge stopped growing crops in his yard and instead smoked, drank, and watched television on a worn-out couch. On the other hand, Halie chose to dedicate her time to religious pursuits. Tilden experienced a mental breakdown due to overwhelming feelings of guilt and sadness. Additionally, he served a prison sentence in New Mexico and has recently returned home (Mohammed et al., 2022). Indeed, it appears that everyone is disconnected from reality. Feelings of loss, threat, anxiety, and tension define the reality of these characters. As a result of the death of reality, a significant concept in postmodernism, all family members have lost their genuine connection to life (Mohammed et al., 2022). The characters' denial of reality and dysfunctional behaviours can be explained by applying Freud's concept of repression. Dodge, Halie, and Tilden exemplify how repression is a defence mechanism to prevent distressing memories and emotions from entering consciousness.

In act two, Dodge firmly addresses Tilden: “[y]ou shut up about that! You don’t know anything about that!” (Shepard, 1984, p.92). It shows the family’s limited understanding of reality and the level of denial in which they live. Additionally, it reveals their deceptive behaviour to cover their wrongdoings.

The death of reality is evident in the buried child, as Dodge’s act of killing it stems from his fear of confronting the truth; even his name reflects this weakness (Kadhem, 2013). The name “Dodge” symbolizes the idea of avoidance and the failure to confront reality (Mohammed et al., 2022). His death, which went unnoticed, is fitting for a man who has consistently avoided taking responsibility and escaping from taking an active role in life. This calm death is a suitable conclusion for a man who has dedicated an important part of his lifetime to being firmly seated on a sofa in front of a television, drinking alcohol as a shield against both the external world and his own family members (Kadhem, 2013).

Alcohol and alcoholism are recurrent in the play. Shepard’s works have earned him the label of a “booze writer” (Abbott, 1994, p.196) due to the significant role that alcohol plays in his plays. Shepard’s characters have been analysed by sociologists and psychologists as clinical representations of the impact of alcohol on family structures and human interactions. However, the incorporation of alcohol in his plays goes beyond conventional psychoanalysis. Shepard has a certain artistic sense and employs alcohol to increase a unique level of awareness and an excuse for escape for his characters (Abbott, 1994). Alcoholism can impair memory and hamper the ability to recall past experiences or traumas, thereby impeding the process of remembering and confronting repressed emotions. Dodge’s alcoholism hinders the process of remembering and working-through the repressed trauma of the buried child, thereby maintaining the state of repression and denial. In addition, family members may project their own problems onto the alcoholic person, blaming the family’s difficulties on him instead of addressing the root causes.

Moreover, Dodge’s consumption of alcohol is a typical response to feelings of guilt, he tries to erase memories of his previous actions or

experiences through the use of alcohol. Dodge has become the mockery of the traditional father, symbolized by his baseball cap as a crown, his sofa as a throne, and his blanket as a mantle, which the younger generations now compete for. The sons engage in a pitiful struggle, losing their strength and appearing almost as weakened as their father (Abbotson, 2005). Halie's past and present unfaithfulness and Dodge's alcohol consumption have significantly contributed to the degeneration of the family unit, and they should shoulder the majority of the responsibility for the guilt felt by all members (Abbotson, 2005). Shepard is also interested in treachery, guilt, and the interconnected issues of blame and responsibility. He sees the American inclination towards denial as self-destructive and proposes that people acknowledge their guilt for life to continue (Abbotson, 2005).

This play also explores the theme of identity crises. *Buried Child* illustrates Shepard's interest in identity, as evidenced by Tilden's response to Vince's question: "Vince: (*to Tilden*) you want anything, Dad? Tilden: (*looks up at Vince.*) Me?" (Shepherd 98). Every character in the play is obsessed with discovering their identity. Vince, the grandson of Dodge, wholeheartedly embraces this pursuit of identity. In addition to the previously described scene, another part depicts this crisis. Six years ago, Vince left home and adopted a fresh identity in New York. Prior to his return to his home, he felt that his family would fail to remember him. He tells Shelly: "I just don't want to have them think that I've suddenly arrived out of the middle of nowhere completely deranged" (Shepard, 1984, p.85). Upon his return, he is met with indifference and rejection from Dodge and Tilden, who fail to acknowledge him. In the second act, he barely cares to establish his identity but has a humbling moment when Dodge dismisses him (Mohammed et al., 2022):

Vince: I'm trying to figure out what's going on here!

Dodge: Is that it?

Vince: Yes. I mean, I expected everything to be different.

Dodge: Who are you to expect anything? Who are you supposed to be?

Vince: I'm Vince! Your Grandson!

Dodge: Vince. My Grandson.

Vince: Tilden's son.

Dodge: Tilden's son, Vince.

Vince: You haven't seen me for a long time.

Dodge: When was the last time?

Vince: I don't remember.

Dodge: You don't remember?

Vince: No.

Dodge: You don't remember. How am I supposed to remember if you don't remember? (Shepard, 1984, p.89)

Vince went on a journey towards what he believed to be his place of origin in order to find his father and confront his inner demons: an exploration of self-discovery and acceptance of one's own identity (H. Bloom, 2002). A process of embracing one's roots as an ultimate aspect of awareness, rather than merely a categorization based on ethnicity or time, is filled with denial and opposition (Tucker, 1992). According to his partner, Shelly, he has been to "every stupid little donut shop he ever kissed a girl in" (Shepard, 1984, p.119) to discover his ancestry (H. Bloom, 2002). Nevertheless, he confronted his greatest fear: the idea of being neither remembered nor welcomed by his family (Abbotson, 2005). Identity crises can occur when people face difficulties differentiating from their family of origin. Vince's identity crisis arises from his attempt to differentiate himself from his unstable family and build his own individuality. The characters' identity crisis is shaped by the projection of their parents' unresolved psychological wounds. For instance, Tilden's lack of purpose may be a projection of his parents' own sense of identity loss.

Ultimately, Tilden gazes into Vince's eyes and believes he sees "a face inside his face" (Shepard, 1984, p.100). This expression alludes to the inner child residing inside the adult, the past events shaping the current moment, and the father himself. Temporarily, Tilden believes that he recognizes his own face in his son. Every peculiar character in *Buried Child* seeks their ancestral lineage as if it were an item misplaced in the attic or hidden beneath the old sofa. In Harold Bloom's (1995) analysis,

the elderly grandfather, Dodge, is depicted as having a long lineage that can be traced back to his ancestors' graves. As we see him, he slowly disappears and turns into dust.

Furthermore, with all the familial issues, it is crucial to address the topic of gender roles. Shepard's plays often depict women surrounded by men without companionship or support. The men frequently show indifference towards them, or in addition, they treat them with either pretended or actual acts of brutality. The play contains instances of symbolic "rape." Shelly acknowledges that she cannot break out from the cycle of resentful male family members (Marranca, 1981). Despite this realization, she smiles and surrenders, stating that "I'll stay ... [a]nd I'll do whatever I have to do to survive. Just to make it through this" (Shepard, 1984, p.94). Rwa'a Sami Al-Nuaimy and Buthaina Mansour Alhelou (2021) state that "[v]iolence against women poses a significant threat to both women and society, as it disrupts the fundamental unit of society (the family)" (pp.184-185).

Shelly, similar to other female characters created by Shepard, behaves like a child who uses specific emotions, gestures, or actions to shield herself from the mistreatment caused by male dominance and authority. She does this by behaving like a submissive child who fulfils the requests of an oppressive father. This behaviour mirrors the child's instinct to protect himself\herself and manipulate the parent. As demonstrated by several of Shepard's female characters, the child pays the price for being saved. Similar to the majority of women in reality, they are at risk of experiencing verbal or physical kinds of harassment (Marranca, 1981).

The play depicts both subtle and explicit manifestations of misogyny, including Dodge's mistreatment of Halie and the marginalization of female characters such as Halie and Shelly. The play portrays the transmission of gender standards and expectations from one generation to another. The characters, specifically Tilden and Bradley, internalize and maintain conventional gender roles, contributing to the continuation of patriarchal values inside the family unit. The continuation of gender stereotypes through this transmission supports current power dynamics

and further marginalizes female characters, which leads to the destruction of families because of gender inequality.

Women in Shepard's society frequently experience victimization, but they also exhibit greater resilience than their oppressors and possess superior efficiency in survival techniques. Shelly endures harassment from Tilden, who massages her rabbit coat, and rape from Bradley, who forcefully inserts his fingers into her mouth. However, she seeks revenge by concealing Bradley's wooden limb, symbolically castrating him, and manages to escape (Marranca, 1981). Bradley's sexual harassment is a manifestation of his desire to assert dominance and manipulate others. Within a family dynamic, when he lacks authority, these actions are misdirected attempts to establish control and restore a feeling of empowerment. The sexual harassment is indicative of the more extensive deterioration of ethical and emotional values within the family unit.

In Vince's absence, the distinctive actions of the males become more evident. Everyone seeks Shelly's attention and wishes her to reflect their desires. Tilden, for instance, desires Shelly to maintain her silence and attentively listen to his tale about the buried child. Dodge expects her to serve him. While Bradley instructs her to stay still, he harasses her. The act is disturbing since Bradley's use of a prosthetic phallus raises doubts about his authoritative dominance precisely when he is attempting to show off his manhood (H. Bloom, 1995). In addition, Vince's hostile position, shown by his pleasure in breaking his bottles and tearing through the porch screen, mirrors the aggression inherent in Dodge and Bradley's behaviour and speech. According to Shepard, this behaviour represents the discontent American men felt due to the loss of the idealized frontier through which they had once proven their masculinity (Abbotson, 2005).

This focus on men concentrates on the father-son relationship. Shepard's writings prominently feature the theme of fathers and sons. Shepard exposes the father's efforts to prevent his son from acquiring authority. Dodge is a nasty parent whose sin continues to trouble him and evokes unconscious guilt in the audience (H. Bloom, 1995). The mother figure, devoid of strength, is not only incapable of protecting her children but also becomes the target of the father's violent tendencies projected upon

her: “[y]ou think just because people propagate they have to love their offspring? You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?” (Shepard, 1984, p.112).

Buried Child shows that the repressive nature of the father’s authority results in violence inside the family structure. The male characters in the play are undeniably associated with the more negative aspects of human behaviour. Dodge tries to gain control over the house’s activities while seated on the living room sofa, although his old age, physical weakness, and lack of power render him ineffective. At the start of the play, Halie, his wife, is clothed in mourning and often refers to him as a dead man. Both sons, Tilden and Bradley, have distinct characteristics: one is mentally unstable, and the other is a threatening force with a prosthetic leg (H. Bloom, 1995).

The mother character, Halie, is also caught in patriarchal norms and expectations. At the start of the play, she expresses apparent discontent with her connection with Dodge. However, instead of trying to change her overall relationship with men, she redirects her emotions onto other men. Initially, she turns to her son Ansel, and subsequently, after Ansel’s death, she shifts her focus to a “father of the church.” Although she may not actively engage in the activities of her domestic patriarchy, she still identifies with masculine characteristics, going outside the home to build monuments in their honour and seeking closer male companionship. Despite the great deal of information presented in the play that highlights the weakness of patriarchy, Halie persists in attempting to find a man who can satisfy her (H. Bloom, 1995).

Additionally, *Buried Child* demonstrates Shepard’s fascination with the American frontier myth. This drama portrays the mythological Old West as a mere dream devoid of its masculinity and adventurous spirit. Instead, it presents an unsettlingly secluded farmhouse inhabited by a family whose sinister secret has transformed them into monstrous beings, scaring anybody who dares to approach. Critics have often categorized this drama as belonging to the genre of “frontier gothic” due to its elements such as the buried child, the mysterious secret, and the rundown house (H. Bloom, 1995). The environment significantly influences family relationships. The

play's setting is in the American West, with a prevailing sense of self-reliance, traditional male dominance, and a challenging and brutal natural environment. These cultural and societal conventions intensify the family's dysfunction and reinforce traditional gender roles and power dynamics. Family Systems Theory acknowledges that families exist within more comprehensive social, cultural, and environmental frameworks. The cultural traditions and principles of the American West have an impact on the family's convictions, actions, and communications, hence adding to their dysfunction and conflict. The rural environment of the family farm separates the characters from external sources of support and intensifies emotions of loneliness and estrangement. The barren environment mirrors the inner conflict and deterioration inside the family, symbolizing their fragmentation and emotional detachment.

Like numerous other plays from that era, this play also significantly focused on the "American Dream." Dodge is shown as an individual who cannot attain his American Dream due to his low-income family and the infertile state of the farm he built several years ago (Mohammed et al., 2022). One of the dreams that can be realised through the American Dream is the desire for a contented family, which has been shattered in this play. Shepherd portrayed the nation as self-centred, ruthless, and deceitful, where individuals exhibit apathy towards one another. Shepard depicted the disintegration of families in his play *Buried Child*. Communication has been limited to the transmission of short messages, and there is a lack of liberty in expressing one's own thoughts (Mohammed et al., 2022). Shepherd further stated,

The family was no longer viable or valid somehow in everybody's mind. The "nuclear family" and all these coined phrases suddenly became meaningless. We were all independent; we were all free of that; we were somehow spinning out there in the world without any connection whatsoever, you know. Which is ridiculous. (qtd. in Roudane, 2022, p.67)

Shepard also remarks on the American Dream as a myth that women like Halie constructed (Middeke et al., 2014). She aspires to revive the family's honour by building "a statue of Ansel. A big, tall statue with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other" (Shepard, 1984, p.73). However, Dodge and his sons' scepticism over Ansel's abilities expose the fact that the American Dream is nothing more than an illusion. Vince, who is idealistic and desires to reconnect with his lineage, realises that "the family is a black hole that holds its off-spring in a deadly grip, eventually sucking them back into its vortex" (DeRose, 1992, p. 99). Upon Dodge's death, Vince becomes the rightful owner of the family residence, continuing the pattern of disdain, alcohol addiction, and violence (Middeke et al., 2014).

Buried Child also explores the theme of inheritance, explicitly focusing on Vince's assumption of his grandfather's property. The melodramatic storyline, involving the buried child and the implied incestuous relationship between Tilden and his mother, serves as an additional part of a family dynamic that is already clear: the declining health of Dodge, the careless and unfaithful Halie, their sons Bradley, who is physically disabled, and Tilden, who has mental issues, as well as the aggressive Vince, who initially appears as an outsider but later becomes the heir to the family's history (Marranca, 1981). Later, when Vince returns home, his arrival symbolizes a rebirth: "*Vince pulls out a big folding hunting knife and pulls open the blade. He jabs the blade into the screen and starts cutting a hole big enough to climb through*" (Shepard, 1984, p.127), and he enters through the hole in the screen as if he were the buried child himself.

Danish Ahmad Mir and R. Vijaya (2017) argue that *Buried Child* portrays a distorted American family across three generations, highlighting their unusual behaviour and flaws as expressions of inner conflicts. The grandfather has been replaced; he remains without a clear objective, drowning himself in drinking and television. The eldest son has lost his rationality; he cannot function as a mature person. The grandson is experiencing a state of displacement; his sense of belonging is uncertain (H. Bloom, 1995).

The play also narrates a mythical family tale of guilt and treachery, in which previous generations abandoned their responsibilities, passing on a legacy of emotional infertility that the next generation must acknowledge, comprehend, and surpass (Abbotson, 2005). Vince can be seen as a “bearer,” whether willing or unwilling, of the responsibility to atone for his family’s wrongdoings by sacrificing himself. The previous ruler, Dodge, has passed away, and now a successor named Vince has assumed the role, enduring the same struggles and difficulties (Cardullo, 2019). The death of the father is also seen as a form of inheritance: “[i]n death man continues the cycle” (Ismael, 2013, p.5).

Inheritance is closely associated with the Multigenerational Transmission Process, as described in Family Systems Theory. This theory suggests that families pass on patterns of behaviour, beliefs, and trauma from one generation to another, affecting the growth and functioning of family members. The multigenerational transmission of dysfunction in *Buried Child* strongly influences the behaviour and experiences of the family members, where trauma, secrets, and unsolved problems are inherited.

Vince’s monologue, in which he describes the vision of his family legacy while trying to escape towards the Iowa border, serves as the critical declaration of self-identification and family continuity in the play. Therefore, if anyone is to successfully establish a new and changed order in the family line, it should be him. Vince, instead of breaking free from the cycle of guilt and alienation that resulted from the murder and guiding the next generation of the family towards progress, chooses to take his place on Dodge’s couch (Heuvel, 2019). He is clarifying why he chose to take back his inheritance in that particular speech. While escaping towards the Iowa border the previous night, he caught sight of his own reflection in the mirror (Favorini, 2008), but it appeared

As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him ... [a]nd then his face changed. His face became his father’s face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father’s face changed to his Grandfather’s face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I’d never seen before but still

recognized. Still recognized the bones underneath. The eyes. The breath. The mouth. (Shepard, 1984, p.130)

Vince expresses how much he is aware of his family history and how every generation is linked. He sees his face as a mirror of his ancestors, returning in time and seeing how they all look alike. Vince also contemplates the deeper parts of his character that have been passed down across generations. He sees patterns in how people look and in deeper parts of their identities inherited from generation to generation. Vince denies the part of his life where he used escaping and running as a rational way to avoid facing his family. In the second act, he attempts to escape by swiftly entering the car and driving through the rain-soaked roads towards Iowa, towards the core of his being. He aims to reach the height of middle America, his birthplace, fully aware that he cannot avoid the influence of his lineage and the effect his family has on him (Tucker, 1992).

The moment of utmost importance is when Vince comes back, forcefully breaking empty alcohol bottles against the walls and passionately shouting while singing the “masculine” Marine battle hymn. During this condition of decline, Halie can finally identify him since his behaviour is more matching to theirs. Shepard thoroughly and anxiously examines the legacy that younger generations acquire from a dysfunctional patriarchy. Vince is burdened with an inheritance of violence that plagues the male members of his family (Middeke et al., 2014).

The final image conveys a sense of both hope and despair. Certain critics perceive the emergence of the buried child as the ultimate and ironic reunion in a play where family members cannot reunite or even acknowledge each other (Heuvel, 2019). Furthermore, the act of holding the body of the buried child could signify Tilden’s acceptance of the family’s wrongdoings, thereby enabling them to move on. Tilden initially had a fondness for travelling, enjoying the thrill of a speedy car journey and moving to New Mexico to distance himself from his family. However, he ultimately felt isolated and faced difficulties, leading him to return home and seek a sense of belonging, much like Vince is currently doing (Abbotson, 2005).

Additionally, the image conveys themes of fertility and growth. Darkness and rainfall are replaced by sunlight; the rain, having nourished the growth of fresh vegetation, implies that mortality can be replaced by rebirth. The play is set on Sunday, and the epigraph from a poem by Pablo Neruda establishes the merging of human and plant growth. It also evokes imagery of destruction and rebirth, alluding to falling and flying (Abbotson, 2005). Tilden brings in a buried child from the garden, which may be the result of incest, the deceased mythic hero Ansel representing the American Dream, or the victim of another illegitimate relationship. The presence of the body in the garden serves as a powerful symbol of a corrupt element within a perfect setting, similar to how African American playwrights August Wilson and Suzan-Lori Parks have employed the metaphor of digging for bones to uncover a hidden national history to light (Krasner, 2005).

Freud's concept of Working-Through is similar to how Tilden tries to deal with the pain of the buried child and make peace with his past. When Tilden digs up the buried child in the backyard, he comes into close contact with the family's painful past. By finding the child, he forces the family to face the hard truth they have avoided for years. When Halie saw the vast area of crops, she talked about a miracle, which suggests she had an awakening. As she starts to understand and accept her family's past, the idea of a miracle could symbolize hope or salvation. The vegetables represent the family's complicated past and the chance for new growth that can come from it. They also represent the process of healing and reunion.

Tilden has the unique ability to see what remains unseen by others at the start of the play, namely the vegetables in the fields behind the farmhouse. Furthermore, he can collect the corn ears, as he only recognizes and acknowledges the family's distressing past. "Tilden" means "fertile valley" (Dunkling, 1985, p.417), which symbolizes rich, fertile land ready to grow. Besides having a close connection to the land, he also has a deep link to his family's roots and history. In the end, Tilden has discovered the dead body of the child. After the family's guilt has been purified, even Halie can see the growth of corn, carrots, potatoes, and peas outside (Cardullo, 2019). Her voice offstage welcomes the bursting vegetables

from the ground, “[m]aybe it’s the sun. Maybe that’s it. Maybe it’s the sun” (Shepard, 1984, p.132), regardless of Dodge’s previous words, “[n]ow you think everything’s gonna be different. Just ‘cause the sun comes out” (Shepard, 1984, p.110). The “sun,” which has nurtured the growth of the crops, is symbolically represented by the “son” that Tilden carries in his arms at the end. Suppose the buried child has been the origin of the familial curse, in that case, the act of unearthing it may symbolize the termination of that curse and the cessation of the transgressions committed by the preceding generation. The dead son, whom the family has deliberately avoided and refused to acknowledge, has now been exposed and confronted, while the killer, Dodge, has passed away (Abbotson, 2005).

5. Conclusion

The examination of Shepard’s *Buried Child* employing Family Systems Theory and Freud’s Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through provides a more in-depth knowledge of the severe psychological consequences of familial dysfunction and disintegration. The American Dream is powerfully critiqued by Shepard’s portrayal of a troubled family, which reveals the concealed traumas and unresolved conflicts that exist beneath the surface of the so-called ideal family. The present study elucidates the interplay between alcoholism, hidden secrets, and inherited trauma in the context of family disintegration. The analysis of specific individuals, such as Dodge’s decision to abandon his patriarchal position, Halie’s negligence, Tilden’s struggling efforts to address his past, and Bradley’s hostility, illustrates how the behaviours of each member intensify the overall dysfunction. The analysis of sibling roles provides additional insight into the complex relationship of rivalry, animosity, and absence of solidarity that characterises the dynamics within the family, emphasising the distinct psychological effects on each person.

Furthermore, the examination explores the broader social and environmental elements that influence the challenges faced by the family, including the complex environment of the Western world and the overwhelming burden of societal norms and gender expectations. Through

the process of deconstructing the concept of the American Dream, Shepard not only offers a critique of the outer appearance of flawless family life but also reveals the underlying psychological challenges experienced by several American households. This work emphasises that Shepard's play is not only a story of personal flaws but also a more comprehensive analysis of the recurring pattern of trauma and the challenges of liberating oneself from deeply rooted dysfunction. In the end, *Buried Child* functions as a prominent reminder of the need to address concealed traumas and the possibility of achieving healing despite a process that is accompanied by difficulties and relies on personal and social decision-making. The conclusion of the play, marked by the re-emergence of the buried child and the demise of the patriarch, metaphorically implies the potential for liberation from the affliction of intergenerational dysfunction. Nevertheless, Shepard deliberately keeps the result uncertain, therefore acknowledging the intricate truth that although there is a possibility of reconciliation, it depends on the family's readiness to confront their history and actively strive for change.

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التفكك الأسري وأثره النفسي في مسرحية (الطفل المدفون) لسام شيبارد

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المستخلص

كان سام شيبارد (1943-2017) كاتباً مسرحياً أمريكياً مرموقاً اشتهر بتناوله للمواضيع العائلية. غالباً ما تتناول أعماله تعقيدات واضطرابات الحياة العائلية، مما جعله شخصية مهمة في المسرح الحديث. تعد مسرحية (الطفل المدفون) (1978) واحدة من أبرز أعماله، وقد فازت بجائزة بوليتزر للدراما في عام 1979. تميزت المسرحية بتصويرها القاتم والسريالي لقصص العائلة، مما ميزها عن الدراما الأسرية الواقعية التقليدية. يُعتبر تفكك الأسرة المصور في مسرحية (الطفل المدفون) مثالاً على قضايا مجتمعية أوسع، مما يؤكد على الدور المؤثر للعائلة كركيزة أساسية في المجتمع. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الجوانب النفسية للتفكك الأسري في مسرحية (الطفل المدفون)، مع التركيز على أسباب انهيار الأسرة و تأثيره النفسي على أفرادها. من خلال تطبيق نظرية الأنظمة الأسرية لموراي بوين ومفاهيم سيجموند فرويد حول التذكر والتكرار والتعافي، تقدم الدراسة فهماً شاملاً للسلوكيات المختلفة للشخصيات. يسلط البحث الضوء على أهمية معالجة قضايا الأسرة، حيث تؤثر في صحة المجتمع. من خلال هذا التحليل، تؤكد الدراسة على طبيعة الصدمة الدورية والمتكررة عبر الأجيال وإمكانية التعافي النفسي.

الكلمات الدالة: التواصل، الاضطراب، التمايز الشخصي، عدم الاستقرار، العزلة.