

The Back Side of Myth: Sam Shepard's Subversion of Mythic Codes in *Buried Child*

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Niles: He's a myth!

Paulette: So are you!

Niles: You can't kill a myth!

Paulette: Turn him around Niles! Show me his back side.

Among the many talents that Sam Shepard commands is an ability to manipulate cultural and theatrical codes and to produce in the audience the impression of something at once disconcertingly familiar and inexplicably strange. Just as the audience relaxes into recognition of the conventions, subcodes subvert the expected meaning and transport the audience into a theatrical world governed by idiolectic rules of Shepard's own making.¹ The epigraph cited above, drawn from *Suicide in B²* provides an extra-textual point of entry. In this short exchange, Niles and Paulette speak volumes about Shepard's attitude toward and manipulation of myth and mythic patterns. Like Niles, Shepard believes that myth is unkillable, that it is ". . . an ancient

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formula that is expressed as a means of handing down a very specific knowledge. The thing that's powerful about a myth is that it's the communication of emotions, at the same time ancient and for all time. They'll always be true."²

Yet like Paullette, he realizes that myths are also constricting and that their form or manifestations must at times be turned around and even violently altered. Our heritage as preserved in oral and literary tradition may remain true, but our perception of this heritage does not remain static; thus our own cultural stereotypes influence our interpretation of semantic and syntactic codes. As readers or audience, however, we tend to read our myths as though they were static, as though our own limited perspectives, not the myths themselves, were "true" and "for all time."

Recognizing that we interpret our culture automatically, Shepard continually undermines the conditioned response of his readers/audiences, showing them the "back side" of myth. In so doing, he suggests that while this perversion of myth and disruption in the patterns of nature produce frustration and alienation, the process is also liberating. Shepard's plays demonstrate that what is true on a cultural level is also true on a theatrical level; even as he subverts mythic codes, Shepard subverts theatrical codes and with them audience expectations.³ An understanding of the ways Shepard accomplishes this undermining of our conditioned responses allows us not only to interpret the plays but also to explain the intellectual confusion and the emotional tension they engender.⁴ An examination of the myth of the family in *Buried Child* can suggest a paradigm for mythic approaches to all of Shepard's works.⁵

When we speak of "the myth of the family" in *Buried Child*, we are, of course, speaking of a complex of semiotic systems. We will limit this discussion to two of these systems: the national and the archetypal. On the one hand, Shepard presents and sabotages the American myth of the "Norman Rockwell" rural family; and, on the other, he presents and subverts the broader, more ancient myths of the universal family--the Great/Terrible Mother (as discussed by Carl Jung and Eric Neumann) and the Father or King as embodiment of the land (as presented by Jessie Weston, T.S. Eliot and James Frazer).⁶ Yet he does so with a clear sense that these myths have become worn, frayed and even clichéd.

The American family, the primary world-creating mythic pattern in *Buried Child*, is presented as a complex intertextual, behavioral and psychological cultural paradigm. In Shepard's dramatic and theatrical world, as in the world of common experience, we observe and analyze this cultural paradigm by recognizing the familiar subcodes produced by a natural process of overcoding. The resulting patterns include stereotypic relationships between husband and wife, mother and child, father and child, and grandparent and grandchild as well as traditional motifs such as the faithful wife, the husband as provider, the son as all-American sports hero, the Protestant minister as spiritual model, the old folks at home and the hard-working, clean-living farmer. These stereo-

types lead us to expect what Shelly, in the second act, thinks she sees--a Norman Rockwell American house and family. But Shepard calls forth this familiar, even clichéd image of the American family only to contrast it with the stage picture of what this particular family has become. Shelly, an outsider, introduces the contrast in an exchange with Vince:

Shelly: This is the house?

Vince: This is the house.

Shelly: I don't believe it!

Vince: How come?

Shelly: It's like a Norman Rockwell cover or something.

Vince: What's a' matter with that? It's American.

Shelly: Where's the milkman and the little dog? What's the little dog's name? Spot. Spot and Jane. Dick and Jane and Spot.⁷

In many ways, Shelly serves as an internal model of response for the audience, beginning by patronizing, as we do, what she thinks she sees--the rural WASP family idealized in the first grade readers of the 1940s and 1950s. Yet within moments both our and her expectations are defeated; instead of laughing at a quaint grandma and grandpa, this American city-girl finds herself terrified and threatened by something alien and alienating. Shelly finds that the Rockwell picture is a sham, a paper and color reproduction that covers a morass of powerfully dangerous emotions. Her epiphany becomes our theatrical response:

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

Vince: Well I hate to disappoint you!

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

Of course, all but the most naive audience realize that Shelly's expectations are unrealistic, that the Norman Rockwell family is a cultural construct, a fiction expressing the way Americans once wanted (and perhaps still want) to see themselves and to have the world see them. Yet the Rockwell images are so ingrained, so much part of American nostalgia that they have become true; the past has been reconstructed to conform to the fiction. The audience shares Shelly's terror and Vince's confusion precisely because "home" for many, however ragged it may have been, takes on a silver lining with the passage of time. Shepard also plays on the primordial fear (and common

childhood nightmare) of returning home to find parents gone and strangers in the house.

To understand that what is happening on the plot level--Shelly is terrified--is also happening on the level of audience response--we are disconcerted, confused, perhaps even threatened--we must return to the first act, to the stage moments that precede Shelly's entrance. From the outset: Dodge does not act as we would expect fathers and grandfathers to act; Halie is a mother and grandmother who violates a pattern we have come to expect; Tilden's half-witted actions are not those of the all-American football hero winning one "for the Gipper"; and the thirty-years-fallow family farm is not the overproductive field of the American middle west. Nor do any of these characters seem appropriate to Shepard's set. Our expectations clash with what we witness, even as the semantic system of the text clashes with the proxemic and pictorial systems of the performance. The contradictions of the expected family system together with the play's lack of exposition--what Pinter calls lack of "verification,"⁸--reconditions us, with the result that when Shelly comes on stage in the second act, her dilemma echoes ours and our responses are subsumed by hers.

Vince also enters the family home with realistic expectations; he believes that his memories will enable him to understand his present situation, that the present will be contiguous with the past, that his expectations, based on past experience, will be fulfilled. Vince wants to find icons, idealized memories come to life, but these characters act rather as indexes; as a result, no one recognizes him.⁹ His memories have recreated the past to coincide with our American cultural idealization of the family. His expectations are the same as the stranger's (Shelly's) expectations, and so he too is a stranger to Dodge, Halie, Tilden and Bradley.

Eventually, the reality of Shelly's experience with the "family" enlarges her expectations and she begins not only to overcome her terror, but also to think of the house as her own:

Dodge: Don't sit there sippin' your bouillon and judging me!

This is my house!

Shelly: I forgot.

Dodge: You forgot! Whose house did you think it was?

Shelly: Mine (110).

Shelly goes on to explain her feeling that she is the only one in the house, that she is somehow on another plane of time, and yet she says that she feels "Something familiar. Like I know my way around here." No longer expecting the Norman Rockwell icon, she is able to experience the reality of the family--the festering secrets, the animosity, the jealousy, the defeated hopes. Just as spectators' anxiety lessens when they recognize familiar conventions, Shelly's terror subsides on stage when she is given familiar domestic duties--peeling

carrots. Her terror is transformed into a sense of belonging off-stage when she sleeps in Halie's upstairs room; our confusion dissipates when we surrender to the idiolect and integrate the play into our subconscious.

Vince also learns to relinquish his iconic memories and to embrace the family as it now is, and he too is transformed while off-stage on his drunken drive into his past. The lack of continuity between his past, as represented by his memories of his grandparents' farm, and the present, as represented on stage, leads Vince to run, to get into the car and drive "clear to the Iowa border." His flight away from the family is, of course, a flight away from himself, a last attempt to retain his idealized memories. When Vince sees his reflection in the windshield he sees himself for the first time. Just as this epiphany allows him to understand himself and his situation, so the narrative passage in which he relates his epiphany gives the reader/audience the information needed to decode the action of the play:

I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield, I watched him breathe as though he was frozen in time. And every breath marked him. Marked him forever without him knowing. And 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 (130).

By viewing himself as an artifact, by moving from his subjective I-centered self-definition to an objective he-centered self-definition, he is able to see Dodge, Tilden and himself as part of a continuum; as a unit they are beyond time (synchronic) while as individuals they are subject to time and change (diachronic). We see that Vince's experience allows him to know who he is in relationship to Dodge and Tilden, a transformation acknowledged by Dodge and Halie, who now recognize him. In Shepard's drama, as in Blake's poetry, the "eye altering alters all"; when Vince sees himself differently others see him differently. Unlike Shelly, who remains a visitor from another culture and another time, Vince is drawn back into his festering family. He returns to claim his inheritance, but his return reconciles nothing; he is not the prince who will restore the wounded land.

By the end of the play, Vince will become Dodge rather than cure him. As a result, our ultimate response is more like Shelly's than Vince's. Like us, she is an audience who is only temporarily drawn into the family circle, and, like the second-level audience out in the house, she takes in information in an attempt to solve the mystery, to exhume the buried child. Toward the end of

the play, she speaks for us when she screams "There isn't any reason here! I can't find a reason for anything" (121). The family has not matched the picture in her imagination, what Dodge calls her "hallucination"; two codes have clashed and Shelly is desperate for explanations.

Shelly's presence on stage helps us to understand the extent of Shepard's subversion of the myth of the family. Vince sees only male ancestors, and all of the offspring mentioned in the play, both alive and dead, are male. Halie, according to the paternalistic cultural codes that determine traditional family relationships, should be the matriarch, the homemaker who provides food, clothing, and nurture for her family. But what have we in Halie? An absent mother, upstairs, profoundly unaware of what is happening to her family and her land. She, more than the other characters, should be able to see the imaginary corn that Tilden is able to touch. Yet she remains oblivious. Even Dodge, fragmented as he is, recognizes this: "Things keep happening while you're upstairs, ya know. The world doesn't stop just because you're upstairs. Corn keeps growing. Rain keeps raining" (75). The ill Father may refuse to absent himself, but the Mother, who is responsible for control, has abdicated.

The progeny of Shepard's stage force the audience to reconsider the traditional sign of the mother figure. Halie believes that Ansel, her pride and joy, the perfect athlete and patriot, has been killed by the Catholics--eradicating by another mythic system that she is incapable of fighting. Bradley is legless and impotent. Tilden, the former "All-American" (Halie cannot remember whether he was a fullback or a quarterback, 72) is now "profoundly burnt out and displaced," incapable of action even though he senses that action is vital and continually attempts, as when he brings in the vegetables and confesses the family secret, to repair the damage. Halie does manage to recognize her grandson Vince when no one else will acknowledge his existence, much less his relationship, but even then she does little to point out the inconsistency in the family reaction, much less to probe the reasons for it or attempt to correct the aberration. Lastly, and most significantly, her youngest child, that with indeterminate paternity, is not only dead but buried in an unmarked grave, without any recognition that he has existed. Even Ansel gets a statue "with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other" (73), an obvious parody of the American myth.

As a result of her dismal track record, Halie, the mother archetype, sells out to conventional religion, to the very system that killed her Ansel, in the person of Father Dewis. Halie puts all her energy into escape, into her relationship with the prodigal preacher. She seeks not spiritual regeneration through another mythic system, but rather a drunken good time with an impotent image of masculine spiritual leadership. Here again, Shepard has introduced a resonating sign-system only to manipulate it. The spectator is accustomed to the icon of the spiritual leader, a representation of order, strength, and stability, yet for Shepard's worldly, sophisticated San Francisco or East Village spectators this is another fictional construct. During the crisis-

ridden climax in Act III, Halie continually appeals to Father Dewis for help in preventing the exposure of the family secret and in imposing stability on the decaying family. Responding initially by cowering behind the roses that he carries and offering half-hearted pat phrases of advice, Dewis finally admits defeat: "I'm just a guest here, Halie. I don't know what my position is exactly. This is outside my parish anyway" (126). His eventual solution is to suggest that "we should go upstairs until this blows over" (128), thereby restoring Halie to her upstairs blindness, with the implication of a bit of infidelity to sweeten the oblivion. Father Dewis, then, is both the antithesis of the traditional "man of God," and, (prophetically) for a late 1980s audience, the model for the new ministry, the Jim Bakkers and Jimmy Swaggarts.

Although Halie is far from the expected maternal image, she recognizes the threat to her power in the person of Shelly, another powerful feminine force who does attempt to nurture. Shepard's subversion is once again at work as the foreigner, the woman who is clearly not maternal by nature or inclination, gradually takes over the maternal duties. Even Shelly's physical description suggests life and vivacity:

Shelly is about nineteen, black hair, very beautiful. She wears tight jeans, high heels, purple T-shirt and a short rabbit fur coat. Her makeup is exaggerated and her hair has been curled (83).

Dodge, though half-dead, is lucid enough to notice that Shelly is a "regular fireball" (90) and he is lusty enough to request a massage. Shelly is Tilden's only ally in the matter of the vegetables, never questioning their source, simply assisting him in their preparation, even endowing them with talismanic power to protect her as she says--in spite of her terror at Vince's departure--"I'm fine. Now that I've got the carrots everything is all right" (99) and continues chopping them. Later, she prepares bouillon for Dodge, a healing offering that is refused, so she drinks it herself. Eventually, she takes even more control in a courageous step; as a symbol of her new power, or her assumption of the maternal role, Shelly sleeps in Halie's room, among the family pictures.

But Shelly will never succeed in restoring this family. When Halie returns and notices the usurpation of her role, she instigates the action that will eventually drive Shelly from the house, abandoning Vince to the destructive arms of his family. This done, Halie does not then reassume her maternal role, as the audience might expect if they anticipate the conventional rules of plot development (why bother to expel the threatening element without returning the threatened structure to psychic health?); rather, she returns upstairs, to images of the past, to the peculiar view of her domain that appears to her through her window. Of course Shepard and his audience recognize that the old cliché of the devoted American mother has long ago been shattered, but nevertheless Shepard understands the power and endurance of

the myth, and he again exploits audience nostalgia to set up and undermine the eternally sacrosanct Mother.

Running parallel to the myth of the American family is another more archetypal pattern or intertextual code--that of the Wounded Land or Fisher King, employed and undermined with genius by T.S. Eliot in "Gerontion" and "The Waste Land." This pattern comes to us through Grail legends, specifically the quest of Percival, and has become almost as much a cliché as the Norman Rockwell vision of America.¹⁰ Shepard draws on two key elements of this myth: 1) the quester who comes to a land laid waste, blasted into sterility and dryness by an unknown agent; and 2) a King, wounded or decrepit with age, who may be cured if he is asked the proper questions. The knight, out of courtesy, cannot bring himself to inquire. If he refuses to speak, the King will die and the land will remain waste. If the quester inquires, the King will be revitalized and the land will return to fruitfulness.

In *Buried Child* we have obvious analogues to the Wounded Land myth. The family farm, once thriving, has produced no crops for years, reflecting the degeneracy of the family itself. The "king," or head of the family, Dodge, is diseased and decrepit, as Halie tells us: "You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing! Smelling up the house with your putrid body! Hacking your head off till all hours of the morning!" (76). As in the myth, the cause of the curse is initially unknown and must be brought to light through careful questioning.

Vince, the long-lost grandson, comes to reclaim his family heritage, and, if he is to follow the pattern of our expectations, he should be trying to solve the mystery, to restore the family and the land to health. But Vince is too self-centered, too concerned with his own predicament, the fact that his family refuses to recognize him. Although he performs infantile tricks, such as drumming on his teeth and playing puppeteer with his navel to trigger recognition in his grandfather, he attempts to treat only the symptoms, not the causes of the disease, and his efforts fail.

The regenerative questions are eventually asked, but they originate from an unexpected source: Shelly, the female, the outsider. In a family unaccustomed to communication, the external force must carefully probe the wounds. But Shelly is the wrong questioner, and she asks the wrong person. Tilden, the traditional heir to the kingdom, is eager to talk and articulates an almost Beckettian view of language: that verbal exchange constitutes life, that without it we are isolated in the void, or, in other words, dead:

Tilden: You don't wanna die do you?

Dodge: No, I don't wanna die either.

Tilden: Well, you gotta talk or you'll die.

Dodge: Who told you that?

Tilden: That's what I know. I found that out in New Mexico. I thought I was dying but I just lost my voice.

Dodge: Were you with somebody?

Tilden: I was alone. I thought I was dead (78).

It is one of Shepard's ironies that the most psychologically unstable character is, in fact, the most perceptive, the only one who is working, in his own pathetic fashion, to bring in the corn, to uncover the mystery, to restore the health of the kingdom. This is a worthy task for the heir, but he is, unfortunately, as doomed to failure as are Dodge and Vince. Shelly attempts to begin a dialogue with Tilden at the end of Act II, and Tilden is eager to reveal the family secret, that Dodge has killed and buried Halie's last child, perhaps a child of incest between Tilden and his mother. Throughout the exchange, Dodge screams at Tilden to stop; even Shelly, the instigator of the confession, says "Don't tell me anymore! Okay?" (104). Nevertheless, the information comes pouring out. But the questions have come from the wrong person, and the answers, valid as they may be, have come from the wrong mouth. Consequently, the king, Dodge, dies, which implies that the land and the family have not been revitalized. Shepard has introduced the paradigm of the myth, but he has subverted it by reordering the characters and plots to form a new pattern, one without the regenerative ending of the original.

This absence of rebirth, is supported by another mythic pattern at operation in *Buried Child*. According to James Frazer, many primal cultures, particularly agrarian societies, choose as their leader the strongest, most perfect specimen of the clan, known variously as the Corn King or the Stag King, who remains in power so long as he remains unblemished by age, disease, or disfigurement. In the earliest occurrences of the pattern, a female, representing the fertility of the land and the people, mates with the most powerful man, who reigns for a year, then is sacrificed in the Autumn to insure that fertility continues in the new solar year.¹¹ *Buried Child* recalls this myth even in the earthy colors Shepard stipulates in the initial set directions. But the brown and khaki Dodge wears, the colors of earth without vegetation, predominate. More obvious perhaps is the vegetative imagery, made concrete by the supposedly nonexistent corn and carrots that Tilden keeps bringing in from the supposedly fallow fields.

Having set up the pattern, Shepard now twists it. Mythic law dictates that the virile king must be sacrificed, but Dodge cheats, and sacrifices the child to the earth. To further undermine the pattern, the sacrifice, like Cain's, is unacceptable to the gods, for it is not offered in the proper spirit and is, in itself, flawed. The gods demand the most perfect, and are presented with the most imperfect, for the child may be the product of incest and is certainly not the king, or even the heir. As a result, the gods blast the earth, just as they do in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, until the sacrilege is exposed and redeemed by the proper sacrifice.

Contained within this frame is another twisted mythic pattern, one that also dictates the plot of *Oedipus*. If the king will not offer himself, the

potential sacrifice--the infant--must somehow be rescued, must grow to perfect manhood and return to set things in order. But in *Buried Child*, the infant is indeed drowned and buried, the rebirth prevented. Baby Oedipus dies on the mountainside; Moses drowns in the Nile; Jesus is killed in infancy by Herod's soldiers. As would be true for each of these mythic systems, the premature death of the "hero" in Shepard's play insures that the pattern cannot be completed, that the new order is doomed. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the paradigm is central to the structure of human society, for inevitably the younger generation must replace the elder, regardless of the psychic pain the process engenders in both parent and child. If it does not occur, children remain arrested in development (as are Vince and Tilden) and parents gradually lose potency. When the imperfect king refuses to abdicate, refuses to sacrifice himself for the good of the society, only sterility can result.

The importance of observing this pattern is evidenced by the practices of primal cultures that do not sacrifice their king yearly but permit him to reign only so long as he remains in perfect health. In *Buried Child* Dodge has long since lost his youth, his virility, and his health, both physical and psychic. His drunkenness, his dependency on pills, his hacking cough suggest his decrepitude. He, like Samson, has even been shorn of his strength through a disfiguring haircut. Yet he refuses to depart.

In some cultures, Frazer tells us, when the tribe observes that the king is no longer acceptable as an ideal specimen, he is challenged by a more virile member of the group. In other cases, members of the tribe approach the king while he sleeps and cover him with a blanket or a pile of leaves as a ceremonial burial to suggest to the king that he must sacrifice himself.¹² In *Buried Child* Shepard presents us with two images that echo these practices. Dodge regards his blanket as a mantle of kingship, constantly worrying about its location and snatching it back when anyone attempts to claim it. In addition, Vince claims the blanket at his grandfather's death as a sign that he has grasped rulership at the end of the play. More obviously, Shepard provides us with a stunning visual image that echoes primal tribal practice: at the end of Act I, Tilden gently and ceremoniously covers his sleeping father with cornhusks. To contemporary audiences, this image is extremely powerful, but few can justify its potency intellectually without an awareness of the archetypal vocabulary upon which it calls. If we recall primal practice, its message becomes clear. Tilden is telling the old king that it is time to move on, that the land and the family will not return to health without his death.

Let us focus now on the performance text, in which Shepard reiterates visually the structural process he has pursued rhetorically. Four particularly potent mimetic sequences illustrate this process of transcoding, the layering, adaptation and subversion of differing patterns: 1) the audience's first perception of the space in the opening moments of the play; 2) the actions of various characters in response to the corn; 3) Bradley's impotent

"rape" of Shelley at the finish of Act II; and 4) the audience's last impression of the space at the play's close.

If we ignore the conventional architectonic aspects of the theatrical space itself (seating arrangement, presence or absence of proscenium arch and curtain, etc.), which may not be directly under the control of the playwright, then we must look to the audience's initial perception of the set as the playwright's first opportunity to signal his symbolic paradigms. Since most audiences will read rather than see *Buried Child*, Shepard's elaborate stage directions, as dictatorial in tone as they are descriptive, provide a vital indication of his strategy.

In the opening stage directions, Shepard specifies not just the configuration of set, properties, and characters, but, more important to this analysis, of color. The old sofa, from which the stuffing protrudes, is dark green; the lampshade is faded yellow; the old-fashioned TV is brown. Dodge is costumed in a worn T-shirt, khaki work pants, brown slippers, and covered with his mantle of patriarchal power, the old brown blanket. Taken on an iconic level, at face value, the qualities of these stage signs indicate age and drabness. On an indexical level, they indicate time and socio-economic station. Yet on a symbolic level, the colors communicate far more, for they are all usually associated with the earth and with fertility, suggesting the brown of the farm's soil, the green darkness of vegetation. Shepard stipulates, however, that another color be present: the "flickering blue light" that emanates from the television set, reflecting on Dodge's ravaged face and permeating the room. The presence of the unearthly light, cold and technological, colors our vision both literally and metaphorically. The stage picture communicates the complex layering of Shepard's contradictory signals, for although the primary natural colors are perceptible, they are observed through, and only through, the unnatural sterility of video light. The play's action, Shepard's idiolectic code, thus begins to unfold in the presence of both primal and contemporary artifacts, of the signs of fertility cults and the signs of popular culture.

Shortly after the play's opening image, the paradoxes are once again foregrounded visually with the entrance of Tilden bearing the ears of corn, a stage property that forms one of the most important and enigmatic images in the play, representing both the primal fertility myths and the American cultural code of the "corn belt," the "Norman Rockwell" placidity of the thriving agrarian society. Concretizing the imaginary, the physical action of bringing the corn from *outside* the system, from *outside* the set, from *outside* the possible world articulated by Dodge and Halie, automatically layers the two mythic codes that we have been discussing: Frazer's fertility myth and Rockwell's myth of the down-home American family. Shepard's stage directions delineating characters' movements and gestures suggest that the theatrical result of this intrusion from the outside will be a synthesis of these two codes:

- 1: [Tilden] stops center stage with the ears of corn in his arms and just stares at Dodge (69).
- 2: [Dodge] stares at the corn. Long pause . . . (69).
- 3: [Tilden] dumps all the corn on Dodge's lap . . . (70).
- 4: Dodge stares at the corn . . . (70).
- 5: Dodge pushes all the corn off his lap onto the floor (70).
- 6: Tilden starts picking up the ears of corn one at a time and husking them. He throws the husks and silk in the center of the stage and drops the ears into the pail each time he cleans one. He repeats this process as they talk (71).
- 7: [Halie] kicks husks (74).
- 8: Tilden starts crying softly to himself but keeps husking corn (76).
- 9: [Halie] kicking husks, striding back and forth . . . (76).
- 10: [Tilden] gently spreads the corn husks over . . . Dodge . . . until the floor is clean and Dodge is completely covered . . . except for his head (81).
- 11: [Bradley] violently knocks away some of the corn husks . . . (82).

These actions unfold, for the most part, in silence, thus foregrounding the kinetic over the rhetorical elements of the performance text. Spectators may disregard the symbolic significance and emotional content of the corn as image and concentrate specifically on the stage movement and manipulation of one particular property and still sense both ritual and conflict.

Note first that all Tilden's actions with the property are protective and nurturing. He holds it in his arms, he offers it to his father, he prepares it carefully for consumption, he "gently" covers his father with it. In marked contrast, the actions of the other characters are abusive and rejecting: Dodge pushes it to the floor, Halie kicks it, Bradley "violently" shoves it from his father's sleeping form. The group cannot comprehend and therefore attempts to exorcise the influence that Tilden has introduced. In addition, the tempo of the various actions reinforce the conflict: all Tilden's actions are slow, methodical, and repetitious, setting his action in synchronic time, suggesting ritual re-creation. Dodge, Halie, and Bradley, on the other hand, react impetuously with quick, energetic movement more indicative of "real" time, of diachronic action. Furthermore, the actions of the characters are at variance with their text; Halie orders Tilden to clean up the husks while she kicks them around the stage; Bradley "doesn't like to see the house in disarray," yet he also contributes to the mess. Thus the rhythm of the conflicting movements creates a dissonant counterpoint, a system of clashing codes that contribute to Shepard's idiolectic vision.

Just as Shepard refuses to allow audiences to explicate his plot and images with the automatic reflex of cultural conditioning, so he prevents us from forming a comforting vision of the play's temporal identity. The space before us--the set, characters, behavioral patterns and language--appears to

exist in the here and now, littered as it is with artifacts and references to popular culture that are easily identifiable. Upstairs, however, it appears that time has stopped, frozen in the family pictures and Halie's memories. To further complicate matters, the world outside blithely continues to operate in the past, yielding a flourishing farm that existed many years ago. Shepard's creation of this time warp, this three-fold cosmic chronology, is crucial to our understanding of his system, and particularly to our deciphering of his final stage image, the "buried child" itself. Coming from the world of the past, Shepard's idiolectic rules lead us to expect that like the corn and carrots, it should be presented as a living baby, yet the object on stage is a gruesome corpse folded in muddy rotten rags. In addition, the corpse is being borne upstairs, to the "third" temporal world. From the past, over the boards of the present, on the way to the future, this corpse--the most potent symbol in the play--unites the three chronologies.

The semiotic density of Shepard's layered patterns and codes is also demonstrated in the description and actions of Bradley. Virtually all of these actions telegraph impotence, his own and Dodge's: the haircut he executes on the sleeping Dodge vividly suggests psychic castration, but his impotence is initially and visually suggested by his artificial leg and the various actions that surround it (he is victimized and rendered helpless by its removal). The leg is a natural appendage that is here rendered unnatural and technological by the squeaks that accompany its movement and the gestures Bradley executes to bend it. One of Shepard's most disturbing and enigmatic visual moments comes as the lights fade at the end of Act II, when Bradley orders Shelly to open her mouth wide, puts his fingers in her mouth, stares at her, pauses, withdraws his hand, and smiles. The gesture itself reiterates the pattern of impotency that Shepard has already set. Once again, a fertile action is rendered sterile: a sexual movement is twisted to form a grotesque parody.

The last moments of *Buried Child* are equivocal, leading to a variety of audience responses that may be contradictory and ambiguous but vividly reinforce the penumbral ambience of the play. At the end of the play we have collected a series of mythic patterns all of which have been twisted to prevent regeneration. Yet many readers and audiences find positive signs in the last moments of the play, in the visual images and in the lines.¹³ This response may suggest that the denouement of *Buried Child* is deliberately equivocal, or perhaps that spectators are so firmly committed to their nostalgic expectations that they refuse to interpret according to the presented signs.

First, let us consider the "buried child," from which the play takes its title. Obviously, there is more than one buried child in the play. On the plot level, the buried child is clearly the long-dead infant, whose exhumation is presented as a visual image in the last moments of the action. On a thematic level, however, Vince is also a buried child, unrecognized by his father and grandfather, with a character arrested in development and unable to grow without the exhumation provided when Halie recalls his angelic childhood and

Dodge finally makes him heir to the kingdom. Yet Tilden is also a buried child, driven back to psychological infancy by the pressures of his experience and knowledge. For Tilden, rebirth, if it has come at all, has come too late. He remains, at the curtain, still lost in the past.

There are hopeful images, however. The degenerated king, Dodge, is finally dead, and Tilden has literally and metaphorically unearthed the family secret, which should allow regeneration. With the corpse in his arms, Tilden moves in an upward direction, toward Halie, the maternal image, and toward the light. The land seems revitalized to Halie, who speaks of rain and sun and growth; Vince has pledged himself to rebuild the farm to its former splendor, and Shelly, the alien, has departed.

Still, Shepard warns us to hedge our bets by balancing each impression in the stage picture with a contradictory one. As index or symbol the exhumed corpse of the child may be interpreted as an indication that social and psychological regeneration is occurring. Yet the truth is sordid; the icon presented, a disgusting mess of muddy and decomposed rags and bones, subverts a pleasant stage picture. Halie's lines are encouraging, but we have learned from previous experience that we cannot trust her vision. Her final monologue is self-contradictory: she talks of the hard rain yet at the same time credits the sun (pun surely intended) with the growth of the land. In addition, she is still upstairs, still out of contact with her family and the physical space they inhabit. Tilden, the eldest son, the only one with a mythic imagination, has been passed over in the natural pattern of inheritance, and though he moves upward, the stage lights are gradually darkening. Vince may be the new king, stronger and younger than the old, with a vision of the future, but consider the proxemic relations that constitute the final stage image. The play ends with Vince in the same position that Dodge has occupied through most of the play: with the dirty blanket, the mantle of kingship, spread over him, stretched out on the green couch. This position suggests, at least to the eye, that Vince has merely replaced Dodge, that he will continue to act in the same manner as the old king did, that he will not change anything although the text rhetorically contradicts this impression through Vince's grandiose plans for the farm.

The ending of the play is problematic, yet it is consistent with the patterns that Shepard has constructed throughout the work. Because Shepard has broken and disrupted conventional codes we should not expect an unequivocally hopeful ending. Instead of pandering to conventional audience expectations, Shepard demands a significant restructuring of audience response. This restructuring, this reinterpretation of cultural codes, is crucial to an understanding of most of Shepard's works. Those who claim that his plays are "pre-intellectual" and "do not yield to analysis" are simply refusing to expand their horizons of expectation, refusing to look when Shepard shows them the back side of myth.

Notes

1. The "idiolect" is produced by the process Eco terms "overcoding," the superimposition of a secondary set of rules, often from a variant semiotic system, that influences spectator interpretation of the primary system. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (London: Macmillan, 1977) 133 ff.

2. Amy Lippman, "Rhythm and Truths: An Interview with Sam Shepard," *American Theatre*, 1:1 (April, 1984) 9.

3. Almost without exception, critics have mistaken this pattern of subversion for sloppy playwrighting. Even such avid admirers as Marranca accuse Shepard of "disorganized use of myth and symbol" and charge that "A predominant weakness is his carelessness in the plotting of the plays, which insist--sometimes foolishly--on subverting their own logical development." *American Playwrights: A Critical Survey* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1981) 90, 110. Ironically, in her criticism Marranca missed the point of her own observation; Shepard represents our contemporary *weltanschauung* by consciously and deliberately subverting codes. For a more sympathetic view, see Sheila Rabillard, "Sam Shepard: Theatrical Power and American Dreams," *Modern Drama* 30 (1987) 58-71.

4. This intellectual confusion is perhaps the single most discussed facet of Shepard's work. For example, Rodney Simard calls the plays "pre-intellectual" and praises their "visceral intensity" (*Postmodern Drama* [New York: University Press of America, 1984] 75), while Bonnie Marranca calls Shepard an "abstract expressionist," who relies more on the power of his images than on solid dramatic construction (*American Playwrights* 82, 110). Gerald Weals talks of "unanchored meaning" and claims that the plays "resist analysis," citing critics who believe Shepard to be "willfully difficult" and ultimately hollow, writing with sound and fury but signifying nothing ("The Transformations of Sam Shepard," in Bonnie Marranca, ed., *American Dreams* [New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981] 39), and Jack Gelber likens Shepard to a "shaman" and calls the plays metaphysical ("The Playwright as Shaman," in Marranca, ed. *American Dreams* 47).

5. Many critics have characterized Shepard's work of the late seventies, beginning with *The Curse of the Starving Class*, as his "family plays," or "domestic drama." See Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta, *American Playwrights* 81. Ron Mottram, in a biographical study and overview of Shepard's work, claims that *Buried Child* and *True West* "complete the family trilogy," but Shepard has continued his interest in the theme of family tension with *Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*. Ron Mottram, *Inner Landscapes: The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1984) 137.

6. Although these "archetypal" and somewhat romantic views of mythology have, to some degree, withered under the scrutiny of more careful mythographers, folklorists and psychologists, their effect on Shepard and on our western literature must not be underestimated. See Carl Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, Vol. 5 of his *Collected Works*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976); Eric Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973); James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., 12 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1907- 15); Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge, 1920; rpt. New York: Doubleday, 1957), T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

7. Sam Shepard, *Buried Child*, in *Seven Plays* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) 83. All references to *Buried Child* are drawn from this edition and will henceforth be acknowledged parenthetically in the text.

8. This is taken from a program note for a performance of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*, Royal Court Theatre, London, March, 1960, reprinted by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday, 1961) 206.

9. Following Peirce, we distinguish the icon, a signifier by similarity, from the index, a signifier by causal contiguity. See Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1931-51) 247-49. This definition is useful when considering the textual level of the drama but becomes problematic when considering the more complex semiotic relationships suggested

by the performance, for, as Jan Kott points out, in the theatre the actor is himself an icon ("The Icon and the Absurd," *The Drama Review*, 14:19).

10. The relationship between *Buried Child* and the myth of the Fisher King/Wasteland has been explored by Rodney Simard, *Postmodern Drama* 87-88, and by Thomas Nash, "Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*: the Ironic Use of Folklore," *Modern Drama*, 26:4 (Dec. 1983) 486-91. Even though critics claim they understand the relationship between the myth and Shepard's play, they persist in viewing the denouement of *Buried Child* as a hopeful, positive, and regenerative movement; see for example, Simard 88; Mottram 143; Marranta, *American Playwrights* 110.

11. James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* 348-61.

12. Frazer 353-59.

13. See, for example, Mottram 143; Marranta, *American Playwrights* 110; Simard, perhaps because he views Shepard in his postmodern context, is far more perceptive about the final tableaux when he notes: "As in Eliot's poem, the revivifying rain is suggested without being confirmed" (Simard 89).