



Born-dying: The Dramatic Function of the Child in Sam Shepard's *The Buried Child*.

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Abstract

Because every action is in fact a reaction to something else, drama is obviously best understood in the light of effects and their causes. Worldwide concern as innovation, globalization, shifting values, emerging poverty, and changing gender roles disturb traditional families and challenge the very idea of marriage all through the world. Unsurprisingly, the emerging marriage and family, in effect, become the central issue in modern drama. Sam Shepard clearly explained the notion of family: "What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything. Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other – everyone is born out of a mother and a father and you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle" (Adler, 2002: 111)

At various points, however, marriage in modern drama is apt to represent a standing tension between these two dramatic forces- mother and father. In other words, just as in traditional moral theology the purpose of marriage is defined as principally the proliferation and education of children, in drama, the dramatic function of childhood is the direct personification of the conflict of forces which is the marriage of mother and father. Outstandingly, in some cases children function as "necessary evils". They are there because the playwright just cannot do without them. In other cases, their actual presence throughout the play is terminated. In all cases, the child's significance is large enough to occupy the position of source of the drama's title as it is the case in Edward Albee's *The play about the baby* (1998) and Sam Shepard's *The Buried Child* (1979).

This then is the topic: the dramatic function of children in modern drama, along with the frequent necessity of making a point by eliminating a particular child and all it stands for. The child in *The Buried Child* will be a direct representation of the case.

The conclusion sums up the major findings of the research.

Sam Shepard (Chronology).

1943 November 5: Samuel Shepard Rogers, named Steve, is born, Fort Sheridan, Illinois.

1949 Starts school in South Pasadena, California.

1961 Graduates high school and begins training in animal husbandry.

1963 Moves to New York and finds work as a busboy at the Village Gate nightclub in Greenwich Village. Changes name to Sam Shepard.



1964 October 10: *Cowboys and The Rock Garden* premiere at Theatre Genesis (dir. Ralph Cook). November 23: *Up to Thursday* premieres at the Village South Theatre, under the sponsorship of Edward Albee's Playwrights Unit (dir. Charles Gnyss).

Sam Shepard still one of the major living forces in American drama today.

Indeed, studies on the history of childhood and the significance of children during Christian times is one of the many reasons that interest in children is growing in a range of academic disciplines. As the "Sons of David", children are blessed by Jesus. He makes them models of entering the reign of God and model of greatness in this reign as well." Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs'(Matt. 19:14). (Bunge, 2007: 15).

Yet in the Old Testament - Jewish tradition or in the Epistles, children are not mentioned as recipients of the same kind of action, actual children were rarely mentioned, and only in relation to parents. And the matter was not better with the Roman child whose life or death was something the father decides.

Such studies as these are helping to reflect more seriously on a number of questions regarding the nature of children and their dramatic function in modern drama. In approaching this dramatic function, drama as a key literary genre offered a decidedly wakeup call for those innocent offspring. Actually, two observations about modern American drama generally must be mentioned. First, almost all of the dramatic children are illegal babies such as the baby in O'Neill's *Abortion* (1914) or *Strange Interlude* (1926) and Shepard's *The Buried Child*. Second, the same children have no names of their own.

As such, the playwrights in general seem to find it convenient to associate the child with a dramatic function that is primarily metaphorical. Because, just as he is reluctant to put this illegal innocent beginner on stage on the first place, he withdraws it – destroys it – in order to make a further point, one frequently expressed in terms of the salvation of the relation of the sinful parents.

Actually, sometimes the reverse happens. The attempted child sacrifice may not work. In Stringberg's *The Father*, for instance, the child is saved by his mother. So, the sacrificed child, as John Ditskey argues "need not be put to death; it can be allowed to die; be slain; be abandoned to a parentless fate be aborted or somehow thwarted from coming into its own existence; be mutilated or ... be "disappeared"(Ditskey, 2009: 8).

In effect, this increase parallels the child's innocence and his parent's sin. But also, and even more importantly, the playwrights dramatize the purity of those children by putting them to death without ever having been named. Indeed, the nameless babies were considered too delicate, too innocent for their names to be known publically. The missing name, the name which the un-



named, dead child never receives, paradoxically releases him, Clair Raymond argues "from the confines of the father's power of speech, since he never takes up the paternal prerogative to name the child" (Raymond, 2007: 114).

The point of all this then, the unnamed identities avoids becoming fully part of the parental family. Shelly in *Buried Child* introduces this notion in an exchange with Dodge:

SHELLY: There's a baby. A baby in a woman's arms....

.....

SHELLY: She's looking down at the baby like it was
somebody else's. Like it didn't even belong to her.

DODGE: You think just because people propagate they
have to love their offspring? (Shepard, *The Buried Child*, 1979) 53.⁽¹⁾

Admittedly, unnamed, out-of-bound children are observed through and only through the world of the living perspectives representing a soul-less culture.

Drawing out these observations, this brings me to the point of this paper: the dramatic function of the child on stage. The practical aspect of putting a child on stage, definitely, involves special work rules. As Edward Albee puts it "Put a child on stage, people listen to the child. The child cannot carry the message very well...." (Ditskey, 2009: 4). Those children cannot be trusted to remember their lines; they distract the audience with their loveliness as well as their clumsiness.

John Ditskey, on his part, has a different line of reasoning. He asserted: "True. The child cannot carry the message very well, but the child can be the message – sometimes tellingly, often incomparably even when (as is more usual) not in fact literary present" (Ibid.).

Offstage crying, infantile surroundings or even the remaining bones of a once-lived baby, all serve to endow these neglected or literally absent figures with figurative or dramatic life. The baby in Albee's *The Play About The baby* is never seen on stage. His physical presence is always at

question except for his offstage crying and the infantile surroundings where the parents live. More interesting is what Albee manages to do in *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Where the child does not and did not existed. Nevertheless, this fantastic son hides the extent of parent's own personal failings. While the once-lived body of the baby in *The Buried Child* is important enough to occupy the position of source of the drama's title

⁽¹⁾- (Subsequent reference will be to this edition and will be sited by page number).



Structurally, the latter play provides just the right balance to knit these contradictory facts together. On the surface, the family seems to be a normal hard- working, God-fearing family. But it hides dark secrets, forbidden desires, and emotional turmoil. Here Shepard's masterful use of tight casual connections reduces a complex reality to a set of conditions in an attempt to uncover "sources of guilt and ... the painful confrontations between parents and their children" (Demastes, 1988: 105).

In effect, the very meaning of the family comes into questions as these characters threaten, vilify, rebut, and snip at one another. Yet, somehow they remain locked seemingly in their family unit and really with a secret which trapped them in long term pattern of destructiveness. Shepard views this American family life certainly not as the happy, well-balanced stereotype portrayed in popular media, but a fount of guilt, oppression and cruelty.

Dodge does not act as a loving nurturing father. Really, he denies any effective bond with his family. "You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?" (53). His wife Halie, is a mother and a grandmother who violates traditional values. In her old age she is carrying on an affair with the family's pastor and in her younger days committed an incestuous relation with her oldest son Tilden, an act that resulted in a mid-life pregnancy.

The existence of the child and its fate are the secrets upon which the play pivots. Actually, the title alludes to the illicit burial of this illegal infant and the play explores a tentative search for the truth about the baby that ends in clouds of ambiguity: "TILDEN: We had a baby. Little baby. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other.... So small that nobody could find it. Just disappeared" (45).

What injects elements of mystery and strangeness into the jocular action is the arrival of the estranged grandson Vince with Shelly in anxious tow. The family becomes, as Peter Lang argues "a battleground where semidetached, unhappy people keep their distance from each other. Emotional and mental disturbance engulf them" (Taav, 2000 : 63).

When Vince attempts to make contact with Dodge, Halie and Tilden, they look at him blank-faced, lost in worlds of their own. The family nurses an awful secret, the facts of which, when disclosed by Dodge, still leave crucial questions about guilt and motives shrouded in doubt.

DODGE: ... we were a well-established family once.... All
the boys were grown.... Then Halie got pregnant again. Out



the middle a nowhere, she got pregnant. We weren't planning on havin' any more boys.... In fact, we hadn't been sleepin' in the same bed for about six years (65).

Dodge attempts to keep the secret hidden, for the reason that there remains a degree of indeterminacy and unverifiability about the biological father, and since "It made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothing. Everything was cancelled out by this one mistake. This one weakness" (66). And because the child conception was so "unnatural", Dodge did not expect the child to live. When it did, he himself drowned the child, "Just like the runt of the litter," (Ibid.) and buried its remains out back. Although his wife is far from the expected maternal image, by killing and taking the child away, Dodge has cracked Halie depriving her of her youngest child who is not only dead but buried in an unmarked grave, without any recognition that he has existed.

Apparently, the child's sacrificed option is the assessment of the extremity of the situation the dramatic parents find themselves in. Because the child's own existence is a manifestation of familial shame. A similar instance of child murder in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* (1925) aches for the issue. Her the young lovers confirm the depth of their love through the death by suffocation of their newborn infant.

Evidently, those parents are convinced that only by this means they can restore the chance for some sort of futurity for their household in favour of achieving reconciliation, no matter how repulsive their past deeds.

Soon after his confession, Dodge died. Vince arrives recognizing that he was mystically and fatally connected to the family. The reflection of his face in the windshield allows him for the first time to understand himself and his situation. His reflected image later "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.... Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized" (72).

Ironically, sensing that the more he attempts to run away from his family, the more he comes to the realization that he is connected to the family. Vince determined to inhabit there despite his inklings and intentions to the contrary. Because this returning grandson, in Shepard's words, "...is the resurrection of the buried child. It is a return that coincides with a bountiful harvest and that opportunely provides for a replacement of the dying patriarch, Dodge" (Coen, 1996: 108).

Inevitably, the younger generation must replace the elder, regardless of the psychic pain the process engenders in both parent and child. Vince had inherited the farm, surrounded by fields that were long barren and now suddenly fertile and productive. Unmistakably, even the corpse of the child may be interpreted as an indication that social and psychological regeneration is occurring. Yet the truth is lucid. These images of renewal only serve to heighten the decay within. For the final stage image of the play with Tilden resurrecting the tiny disgusting



mess of rags and bones of the "buried child" replaces any chance of growth or development. Simply, the helpless infant is indeed drowned and buried. Perhaps he is an assessment of dominance refracted through the prison of the scattered bones deemed too small to live because he is born-dying, born to die.

Conclusion

A sacrificial alter upon which children are sacrificed to redeem marriage is the case with the modern stage. Clearly, this stage is no more having the ancient platitude about having children in order to save marriage. On the contrary. It is as if by ridding themselves of their sometimes troublesome offspring, parents can preserve the harmony of their present; in that they accomplish the one by doing the other.

Arguably, not all drama means the same. Each playwright has his personality and unique style, and their themes are at variance with their text. But the basic point is that, in an attempt to preserve their present, characters in their plays sacrifice their children. Outstandingly, most of them, if not all, shared the same layered patterns. Generally, so many of the plays considered children the expendable detritus of adult relationships. Besides, the dramatic children in their texts are illegal, nameless figures. And many such children, even when they appear on stage are neither to be seen nor heard.

Actually, they use these psychological, craftsman's tricks so as to render dramatic children into unnatural, outcast figures. In effect, this leads into a willing disavowal of a physical space in the world of living, or to a reverse effect as to make the audience take the role of a judge approving or disapproving of the sacrificial act.

Of course, theatrically, two or three hours playing time will never reduce the losses the child suffers at the hands of the adults. But surely it helps increase the audience's sensitivity to the children always treated as if they were their father's sin.

In a word, it suffices to be a child in drama to have merited, by that fact alone, a fact as convenient as the child-death in *The Buried Child*. But in this real world, Arab and Muslim children, without drama, are regularly put to death with a still-born slow motion as ruthlessly mechanical as Herod's massacre of the innocents.



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⁽¹⁾- (Subsequent reference will be to this edition and will be cited by page number).

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