



THE FAMILY REVISITED IN SAM SHEPARD'S *BURIED CHILD*

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ABSTRACT

The counterculture movement set up artistic, cultural and literary manifestations that led to a revision of American society behavior and values. Sam Shepard's play *Buried Child*, written within this context, makes a deep critique of both the American family and the American dream.

Keywords: Counterculture movement. *Buried Child*'s critique and interpretation. Critique of American society.

Conservatism, religiousness and sexual repression are features of the bourgeois family that are put into question by the counterculture movement that occurred in the United States in the sixties. The movement starts in the late fifties with the Beat Generation, represented mainly by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. It is a movement for social and political protest and personal liberation through experimentation with drugs and rejection of sexual taboos and leads to the conflict of generations and family relationship and questions the structure of American society (BRADBURY; RULAND, 1992, p. 395). The Vietnam War and the Cold War were in their high and American society was divided between the sense of heroism, national sovereignty and the protests asking for peace. Artistic and literary manifestations occurring at this time set a new aesthetic process, later known as postmodernism. Many factors add to make those manifestations possible such as the structuralist (and later poststructuralist) thought of Foucault, Derrida and Barthes, the fast development of science and technology, the importance of media and information in an increasingly consumer society and so on. Embedded in this new reality the world lives in, artists, writers and architects start creating new styles and projects. Happenings and performances, mainly in the sixties, emphasize the act of creating art. Experimentalism and avant-garde movements increase. Literature is highly influenced by the movement. Many fiction writers, poets and playwrights who

take part in that "boiling" social moment reflect it somehow in their works.

Sam Shepard is one of those playwrights. He starts Off Broadway in 1964 with two plays: *Cowboys* and *Rock garden*. These first plays already convey his concern with themes connected with American society: cowboy's life and family relations. Doris Auerbach affirms that Shepard's main theme is America (1982, p. 1). In fact, many of his works such as *Rock garden*, *The holy ghostly*, *The tooth of crime*, *Curse of the starving class* and *True west* present a critic of the American way of life by subverting and even destroying its myths: the American dream, the American land, the American hero, the American family. His 1979 Pulitzer Prize *Buried Child* is another good example of his corrosive criticism of the American family.

Buried Child depicts the disintegration of a rural family in Illinois. Shepard portrays the family decadence in several ways: Dodge, the father, is old (he is in his late seventies), sick and alcoholic. Halie, the wife and mother, does not care for her husband and children. Dodge is sick and she leaves him alone with their two sons who are not able to take care of him. Tilden, the eldest son, is a halfwit. Halie says that if they had money they could send him away because he is a burden. Bradley, the other son, is crippled and a violent person. Halie's hope concerning her children were focused on Ansel, the third son, but he died in a motel room with his catholic wife and not in the battlefield, as Halie wished. In an attempt to compensate her loss, she imagines him as a hero, the American hero who deserves a statue, "[a] big statue with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other."² The irony contained in this mixed image of the basketball player and the soldier exposes and at the same time subverts the symbols of American heroes. Ansel neither played basketball nor went to Vietnam, but the statue would turn him a hero, no matter if he had actually done such things. The symbol (the statue) is more important than reality itself. The hero is part of the American dream, but he is destroyed by the American defeat in the Vietnam War and the loss of the belief of America's greatness. Halie's denial of reality is a pathetic attempt to rescue this lost hero.

Another aspect of the decadence of family relations is that parents and children in *Buried Child* do not convey any kind of bonding, on the contrary, all the links are broken. There is no dialogue among the members of the family. Throughout the play, they act as if they were talking to themselves. They rarely respond to the other's presence or speech. Halie, for instance, who is absent most part of the play, enlarges the gap concerning language and communication, emphasizing the dismemberment of the family at its deepest level: lack of presence, lack of communication, lack of any kind of link. This rupture opens space for the absurd and the grotesque in the play, such as Tilden bringing

vegetables from a place where they are not supposed to be grown and Bradley cutting his father hair while he sleeps, a scene that conveys violence and lack of respect by the other. This is the only way those people find to achieve some kind of interaction and communication. The conversation between Dodge and Tilden about the corn Tilden brings to the room is an example:

Dodge: Where did you pick it from?

Tilden: Right out back.

Dodge: Out back where!

Tilden: Right out in back.

Dodge: There is nothing there!

Tilden: There is corn.

Dodge: There hasn't been corn out there since about nineteen thirty five! That's the last time I planted corn out there!

Tilden: It's out there now. (BC, p.11)

This dialogue emphasizes the gap that exists between Tilden and Dodge's worlds, but it also conveys that there is something more, something strange that happens *out there*. The lack of communication hides or denies it, but at the same time it also highlights it. Throughout the play, Tilden's and Dodge's discourses do not match and full communication is hardly achieved. Through strange images though, such as Dodge's symbolic burial, Tilden tries to say something to Dodge, maybe that it is no longer possible to ignore whatever is "right out back". At the same time it mixes things up, the absurd in the play also gives hints about the reason of the family disruption.

It is in this dim and disturbing atmosphere that Vince, Tilden's supposed son, arrives. He stayed away for six years and now he comes back to visit his grandparents. Shelly, his girlfriend, is with him. Their arrival raises another absurd situation: his supposed grandfather and father do not recognize Vince. His situation is similar to the biblical parable of the prodigal son, but in the play the biblical message of kinship acceptance and recognition is subverted in order to emphasize the break occurred in the family structure. In the biblical story, the son left home and "went abroad into a far country: and there wasted his substance, living riotously" (LUKE 15, 13). Vince did the same, playing music throughout the country, as conveyed by the black saxophone he brings with his luggage. Then, after had spent all his fortune, the prodigal son returns to his father's begging his forgiveness and the right to stay. His father welcomes him and gives a party to celebrate his return. As the eldest son asks for an explanation, the father answers that "thy other brother was dead and is come to life again; he was lost, and is found" (LUKE 15, 32). This is not Vince's case. Instead of celebration, he finds

indifference and even hostility. For Dodge and Tilden he does not exist, he is still “dead”. “Stop calling me Grandpa will ya!” protests Dodge. “Grandpa.’ I’m nobody’s Grandpa!” (BC, p.30). Tilden is even more reticent: “I had a son once but we buried him” (BC, p.31). Vince’s recognition only occurs when he starts acting in the same pattern of the family. When he stops appealing for the family’s memory and feelings and acts like them in the present, he is no longer denied. The subversion of the biblical story of the prodigal son represented by Vince’s ironic reintegration in the family emphasizes irony as both an instrument to establish a critique of family relations and an element which confers a certain instability to the play, by reversing the meaning of what is shown.

Shelly, Vince’s girlfriend, is the outsider who expects to find the perfect and happy rural family, but her illusions (as well as the audience’s) are destroyed. She is completely puzzled by Dodge’s and Tilden’s behavior. Nothing is what she expected: “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” (BC, p.30). Instead of going away, she gets increasingly involved with the family. She peels the carrots that Tilden mysteriously brings from the yard, she suffers a symbolic rape by Bradley, who makes her open her mouth and introduces his fingers into it. Only in the end she takes control of the situation, when she learns how to deal with the family. She realizes that through coherent discourse it is impossible to apprehend what is going on there. Then, she starts acting: first she takes Bradley’s wooden leg, the symbol of his failure and of his power as well, in a kind of revenge for the humiliation he inflicted on her (the symbolic rape). This way, she makes him impotent, unable to do anything against her, since he can not stand up and walk. He stays on the floor, in an inferior position, begging to be given his leg back. Shelly, however, ignores him and inquires Dodge about Tilden’s story of someone being murdered and buried in the yard.

There is a mystery involving the family, a secret that is blamed to be the reason of the family decadence. Tilden’s version arises first: “We had a baby. (*motioning to Dodge*) He did. Dodge did. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other. Little baby. Dodge killed it” (BC, p.41). Dodge asks him to stop talking, but Tilden goes on telling Shelly his version of the story: “He [Dodge] said he had his reasons. Said it went a long way back. But he wouldn’t tell anybody” (BC, p.41) The dark side in which the family is embedded is little by little being exposed. The suspicion that someone of the family committed a crime, Dodge, as Tilden suggests, becomes stronger. Tilden’s story, though, is contradictory and full of gaps. First, he mentions that the buried child could be his, then he says that Dodge had a baby. It is difficult to know, based on Tilden’s and even Dodge’s versions what really happened. The story is presented in a fragmented way, with Tilden, Dodge and Bradley adding whatever information

they want, and raising more questions instead of making the things clear: did this child really exist or is it part of the absurd game the family plays all the time? Who is the child’s father in fact? Who killed the child? Why?

A person who could elucidate the story is Halie, the supposed mother, but curiously, in any moment of the play she says something about it. She is silent and absent, highlighting the gap that exists in the story of the buried child and what it represents to the family. Halie is out of home since the day before and arrives with Father Dewis, the local priest, exactly in the moment when Dodge tells his version. When she left the house she was dressed in black, but now she wears a yellow dress and carries yellow roses. This change may be a sign for Halie’s image reversal. In the beginning, she presents herself as a sufferer, a person who has endured heavy losses: “[...]Pain is pain. Pure and simple. Suffering is a different matter. That’s entirely different. A pill seems as good an answer as any” (BC, 6), she says, meaning that there are no pills to cure suffer. She also seems to be concerned with Christian and moral values, but her behavior seems to disregard them. The dialogue between her and Father Dewis reveals their thoughts concerning religious matters:

Halie: What about God?

Dewis: Well, prayerfully, God only hears what he wants to. That’s just between you and me of course. In our hearts we know we’re every bit as wicked as the Catholics.

They giggle again and reach the stage right door.

Halie: Father, I never heard you talk like this in Sunday sermon.

Dewis: Well, I save my best jokes for private company. Pearls before swine you know. (BC, 50)

Father Dewis’ ironical tone has a double meaning: it criticizes religion, conveying the hypocrisy that exists within the religious system and subverts Father Dewis own image as a religious person, since it seems that his behavior and discourse contradict the principles of a person supposedly guided by faith and brotherly love. Father Dewis just reinforces the dissolution of the moral values of the family. A corrupted and vicious church suits a destroyed family. Both institutions have always supported each other, many times in a very hypocritical way. The same way Father Dewis is corrupted, so is Halie. Once more, Shepard uses biblical patterns to depict his characters. As Vince stands for the prodigal son, Halie stands for Eve, the sinner, the woman responsible for the fall from paradise.

In Dodge’s version of the crime, everything started when Halie got pregnant, not by him, since they had not slept together for six years. She had this child, “by herself” as Dodge says, like Eve when she was cursed by God to

have pain in childbirth. "This one hurt real bad. Almost killed her, but she had anyway" (BC, p.59) The child's father is not clearly revealed. Dodge suggests that Tilden "was the one who knew." Halie says that "Ansel would've stopped him [Dodge]. Then she adds: "Ansel would've stopped him from telling these lies." (BC, p.59). She is being ambiguous. What could Ansel have stopped Dodge from? From telling the lies or from killing the child, his own child, product of an incestuous relation? Halie was very fond of Ansel: "He was a hero! A man! A whole man!" (BC, p.59) Anyway, the child was conceived out of the pattern of family conception – husband and wife – and this is considered a sin by God's law. Adam and Eve were destroyed, expelled from the paradise because they sinned against God's law. The link was broken. The same happened to the family. Vince's return just restarts the cycle. When he arrives "out of the middle of nowhere completely deranged" (BC, p.25), drunk and smashing empty bottles against the porch, Dodge finally recognizes him: "It's me! Your grandfather! Don't play stupid with me! Where's my two bucks!" (BC, p.60). Dodge makes him his heir and just before dying, he recites his will, leaving the farm to Vincent. The rest of his belongings, he wants them burnt. Vince, then, by adopting Dodge's pattern, starts demanding and ordering. At this point, Shelly is leaving, she asks him to go with her, but he sends her away: "Off limits! Verboten! This is taboo territory. No man or woman has ever crossed the line and lived to tell the tale!" (BC, p.62) Vince identifies the family as the territory of taboos, the place where forbidden things such as incest and murder can happen. As an outsider, Shelly can not belong to that territory. Only him, as the legitimate heir has the right to rule it. Vince's role as the new family patriarch does not include solidarity or love towards the family. He repeats Dodge's behavior by being unkind and recognizing nobody else but himself. He tortures Bradley by holding his wooden leg, he does not care when Father Dewis tells him that Halie is not well: "My grandmother? There's nobody else in this house. Except for you. And you are leaving, aren't you?" (BC, p.65). While Vince puts flowers in Dodge's corpse and stares at the ceiling, Halie, upstairs, has her last vision: "...It's like a paradise out there, Dodge. You oughta take a look. A miracle." (BC, p.66). Then Tilden appears bringing one more thing from the earth: the child's corpse. He goes slowly upstairs to show Halie how mistaken she is. As Charlotte O'Kelly emphasizes, "[t]he family is a grave.[...] [t]he family can drown us and bury us. Parents can destroy their own children" (1979, p. 6). It is not, in any way, the paradise.

In *Buried Child*, Shepard destroys the myth of the perfect family with parents and children living harmoniously among themselves and society. He shows that the family is also a place for corruption and evil and conveys it through irony and absurd situations in order to emphasize the failure of the

American family and, in a broader sense, of the American dream: the hero is perverted, the land is sterile, the family no "longer nurtures their children" (AUERBACH, 1982, p. 1). *Buried Child* is a postmodern text, in the sense that it emphasizes open interpretations. Nothing is affirmed throughout the play, the readers and the audience only have the hints and the characters' versions, which can not be taken for granted. Shepard conveys that the paradise — the American myths — is lost, but as a postmodern writer he provides neither answers — there is only silence in the end of the play — nor any way to regain it. Gerald Weales calls attention to an interesting statement in Shepard's play *Hawk Moon*: "And far off you could hear the sound of America cracking open and crashing into the sea" (1982, p. 41). It is a recurrent theme in Shepard's works to establish a representation of a "battered and broken society." (WEALES, 1982, p. 41). *Buried Child* is one more outstanding way Sam Shepard found to depict it.

BURIED CHILD: A FAMÍLIA REVISITADA

RESUMO

Na peça *Buried child* o dramaturgo americano Sam Shepard efetua uma crítica ácida da família e do "sonho" americanos, ancorado no contexto pós-modernista da contracultura, cujas manifestações artísticas, culturais e literárias promoveram uma revisão dos valores e comportamentos da sociedade americana.

Palavras-chave: Contracultura. Crítica da sociedade americana. Crítica e interpretação de *Buried Child*

Notes

- ¹ Delzi Alves Laranjeira, Doutora em Literatura Comparada/UFMG
- ² SHEPARD, Sam. *Buried child*. New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1979, p. 15. Further references to the play are to this edition. The title will be abbreviated BC and included parenthetically within the text, followed by page number.

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