

# Baudrillard's Theory of Simulation and Death of Real in *Buried Child* by Sam Shepard

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**Abstract:** Analyzing literary works through philosophical theories has attracted a lot of attention. Postmodern plays are of excessive popularity in this regard. Sam Shepherd's *Buried Child* which was published in 1978 is regarded as one of the most imperative plays in which Shepherd has portrayed the disappointment and disillusionment of the American Dream as a metanarrative that has been shattered. This research intends to approach *Buried Child* through Baudrillard's theory of simulation and death of real in order to see how diverse characters are escaping the reality because of the cynicism caused by the concept of American Dream. This research is going to show the close association between Baudrillard's hypothetical attitudes towards the subject of simulations and capitalism in the post-war America. It can be concluded that as Baudrillard (1988) believed, "It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing that fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of the saving the reality principle" (p. 172). Thus, the whole story of the buried child signifies the reality attitude and simulacrum because Shepherd meant his audience to recognize the absence of reality.

**Key Terms:** American Dream, Simulation, Disillusionment, Death of Real, Sam Shepherd, Baudrillard, *Buried Child*

## 1. Introduction

Sam Shepard (1943-2017) was an American actor, writer, dramatist, scriptwriter, and director whose plays are of high popularity due to their austere and expressive features, black comedy, and drifting characters who are mostly living on the country's peripheries. *Buried Child* is the name of a play which was written by Shepard and first performed in 1978. It could win the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and caused Shepard to become extremely renowned as a dramatist. The play portrays the disintegration of the American nuclear family in a setting which is filled with dissatisfaction and cynicism towards the American dream.

To be more explicit, the play's first act begins in 1978. Dodge is taking a drink and tries to hide his bottle from his wife while watching TV in a recliner. When Dodge starts coughing, Halie tells him to take his medicine as his wife yells from a room in a separate area of the house. Halie informs her husband that Bradley, their son, will come over to cut Dodge's hair while she goes out to meet Father Dewis for lunch. Their other son, Tilden, enters carrying a head of grain and covered in rain. Tilden denies taking the corn from the back of the house when Dodge questions him about where he got it, despite the fact that everyone is aware that the family ceased planting corn in the field years ago. Dodge then questions him about his time in Mexico and New York. Halie reveals that Tilden is the one who can take care of them after their eldest son, Bradley, cut one of his legs while splitting wood. Halie is concerned about what will happen to them because Tilden does not seem to be able to care for them. As she speaks of her beloved son, Ansel, who

passed away at a hotel while on his honeymoon, Halie descends the stairs. Halie believes Ansel perished because his wife was a Catholic and accuses her daughter-in-law of being responsible for her son's passing. Tilden is warned by Halie for taking the grain and instructed to remove it before Bradley gets there. When Dodge stands up for Tilden, he and his wife begin to argue. Halie eventually departs the home. Halie walks away without reacting to Dodge's claim that his sole real son is buried in the yard. Dodge stops Tilden as he attempts to depart as well. Following Dodge's nap, Tilden takes his concealed whiskey bottle and leaves. Then, Bradley comes in, and cuts his father's head while Dodge is still sleeping.

After six years, Vince makes his way back home in the second act with Shelly as his girlfriend. When they get inside, Shelly waits downstairs while Vincent searches upstairs. Shelly is startled by Dodge as he stands up and tries to explain why they are in his home. According to Shelly, Vincent believed his father Tilden was in Mexico and was not aware that he had actually moved back in with his parents. When Dodge enters the downstairs, he believes Vince to be his father despite not knowing Vince. Dodge catches Shelly off guard, but Vince won't go.

Tilden enters carrying a bag of carrots. But he refuses to distinguish between his own son and the one he says is buried in the backyard. So that Vince might spend more time with his father, Shelly volunteers to assist Tilden. While this is going on, Dodge requests some alcohol, and when Vince realizes he can't get his father to recognize him, he offers to go get some. Shelly attempts to get Vince to take her along, but he declines; as a result, she stays at home with Tilden and Dodge. Even though Tilden still can't identify Vince, he informs Shelly that Dodge drowned a baby in the family and no one knows where he was buried. Dodge tries to silence Tilden but is unsuccessful and reclines on his chair. Additionally, Bradley enters and insists that Shelly takes Tilden with her and Vince. Bradley pushes Shelly back and sticks one of his fingers in her mouth as he tells her that she should drown Dodge instead of trying to save him when she tries to stand up.

As the final act, the third act narrates the events of the following day. Shelly wakes up and cooks for Dodge but he does not eat. Dodge suggests that Shelly should throw away Bradley's leg but Shelly is stunned to hear what Dodge suggested to her. Shelly tells Dodge that she slept in Halie's room and that she looked at their family photos and noticed a family photo in which Halie was keeping a baby. Halie returns home with father Dewis and both are awfully drunk. Dodge asks Shelly to protect him and goes as far as to hide under her coat. Only when the two enter the living room, they see Shelly and Dodge and Bradley on the sofa.

Everyone in the room starts shouting at the other person for no apparent cause as Halie tries to hide some things in her home but is unsuccessful. Finally, Dodge admits that he killed the child that Halie and Tilden had together. Then, after getting wasted, Vince arrives home and starts smashing empty bottles everywhere while telling Shelly that he had intended to run away but changed his mind. Shelly, who finds the situation intolerable, makes the decision to leave Dodge begins to discuss his desire to set fire to his possessions there. After that, while the others are debating, Dodge passes away in silence. When Vince notices that Dodge has passed away, she gives him a rose and sets it on his chest. Then Tilden appears from the outside, holding a dead infant, and informs them that they have some vegetables in their back garden because of the rain.

### 1.1 Review of the Related Literature

So far, *Buried Child* by Shepherd has been the subject of too many analyses, and this part is going to introduce a number of them briefly. However, there is no article regarding this play's investigation through Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and death of real and so, this research will be the first one in this respect. "Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*: The Ironic Use of Folklore" (1983) by Nash is the name of an article which argues how this play borrows heavily from the images and motifs found in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. It is stated that *Buried Child* is a serious play that pulls at the very bone and marrow; its plot can be regarded as a modern form of the theme of Western mythology, the death and rebirth of the Com King.

As other articles about Shepherd, we can refer to "The Back Side of Myth: Sam Shepard's Subversion of Mythic Codes in *Buried Child*" by Putzel and Westfall (1989), or "Beyond Bedrooms and Kitchens: A Critical Analysis of the Mother Figures in Sam Shepard's Family Plays" in which Blaser (2013)

has declared that men are the main roles in the plays of Sam Shepard. This is obvious not only by the steady documented attendance of the male characters, but also by the profuse articles investigating Shepard's male characters. In Shepard's family plays, which mainly involve *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *True West*, and *A Lie of the Mind* (Lahr), this captivation with men results in an emphasis on the father/son relationship. Fathers and sons seem to "dominate" Shepard's works. Blaser has announced that Shepard's mother characters are misinterpreted in literature but his female characters are not simple women. Although they are troubled, they represent agency and strength.

In "Familial Disintegration: A Study of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*", Mir and Vijaya (2017) have attempted to examine the numerous reasons of crisis, bringing about the breakup of a family. This article has also focused on "identity crisis, masculinity crisis, lack of belongingness, search for roots, association with past and witnesses distorted relationship between father and sons" (pp. 612-615). Some other features including incest and infanticide which cause acquisitive annihilation of family have been investigated as well.

## 1.2 Methodology

As stated by Banks and his colleagues (1996), simulacra and simulation is the name of a theory by Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) as a French sociologist and cultural theorist, in which he studied the links between reality, symbols, and society (p. 3). According to Goldman (2003), simulation refers to the copies that portray things that had no original. Baudrillard's books and articles have been of great popularity particularly because of their intricacy. In this study I will analyze Sam Shepherd's *Buried Child* according to one of Baudrillard's influential theories as "simulation", because this notion is regarded as an appreciated means in the examination of postmodern literary texts. According to Gołąb (2016), Baudrillard's theoretical approaches to the nature of simulations were inspired by the beginning of globalist capitalism and consumerism, industrial progresses and the political atmosphere in the post-war west (p. 29).

Most of Baudrillard's work revolves around simulation. As Baudrillard (1988) noted, "We live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning" (p. 87). As it was mentioned, Baudrillard employed the notions of the simulacra, the copy without an original, and simulation as being vital to a better interpretation of the postmodern plays. Simulacra and simulation are mainly about how symbols and emblems are linked with instantaneous realities. Baudrillard (1988) claimed that our present society has "replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is of a simulation of reality" (p. 85). Also, these simulacra are not "merely mediations of reality, nor even deceptive mediations of reality; they are not based in a reality nor do they hide a reality, they simply hide that anything like reality is relevant to our current understanding of our lives" (p. 91).

## 2. Discussion

The reason why the present study has chosen Shepherd's *Buried Child* is that it is a dark look at an American family with a terrible secret which devastated the whole family. Actually, it influenced the whole family because Dodge did not plant crops in his yard and started smoking, drinking, and watching television from a bumpy old couch; Halie decided to devote her time to religion. Tilden went mad with guilt and sorrow; he also spent some time in prison in New Mexico, and has just returned home. In fact, what we see in this play reminds us of some well-known plays including Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Again there is a family that belongs to the lower class of the society, the family members who seem unable to interact properly with each other. However, such themes as incest, homicide, deceitfulness, and return add to this play's complication.

### 2.1 Simulacrum in *Buried Child*

Postmodernist French theorist Baudrillard (1994) has claimed that a simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but a truth in its own place that is the hyper-real. Based on what this thinker has announced, the simulacrum copies something that is not novel. Baudrillard has appreciated four sorts of representation: (1) basic reflection of reality; (2) perversion of reality; (3) pretence of reality; and (4) simulacrum, which "bears no relation to any reality whatsoever" (p. 84). In *Simulacra*, one of the important facts is that a simulation

covers the lack of reality after being substituted by hyper-reality. Generally, Baudrillard's simulation infers the death of the object which it was meant to reproduce (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 12).

As previously mentioned and from the very beginning of the play, Dodge and his wife are not with each other. Dodge is on the sofa watching TV while Halie is upstairs, getting ready to go to the church. It is evident that Dodge knew the child he once buried was not his and the father was Tilden. This is what motivated Dodge to kill the child, drowning it and afterwards burying it in the yard. Later when Vince comes back home, it resembles rebirth, as stated by the American theatre scholar Bruce J. Mann (1988), "Vince cuts a hole in the porch's screen and dives through it into the living room, a stage emblem of birth, as if he were the buried child itself being reborn in order to take over control from Dodge" (p. 88).

According to Mir and Vijaya (2017), *Buried Child* actually shows three generations of a distorted American family by depicting eccentric behavior and faults that represent each member's inner struggles. What is noticeable is the desolation of their lives (p. 612). DeRose (1992) has stated that,

Again, Shepard borrows from the classical Greek family myths, incorporating such archetypal narratives as the Orestean homecoming, oedipal incest, the battles of fathers and sons, as well as patricide and infanticide. *Buried Child* also exhibits a particular indebtedness to Henrik Ibsen's modern family classic, *Ghosts* (1881), both in its narrative pursuit of a dark family secret and in its thematic preoccupation with the revelation of the son's true identity and spiritual inheritance. (p. 99)

Incest is regarded as a widespread theme in Greek mythology and Shepard also employed this theme in *Buried Child* through showing incestuous interactions between the members of the family. What has led to the whole family's destruction is related to these interactions. One of the features that can be fulfilled through satisfying American dream is the dream of happy family which has been destroyed in this play. Roudane (2002) discussed Shepard's comment on the idea of family and said:

"What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean? 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". (p. 111)

Shepherd depicted his country as an egocentric, brutal and twofaced land, where people are indifferent towards each other. In *Buried Child*, Sam Shepard illustrated the failure of household associations. This issue is in accordance with what Baudrillard stated about the idea of communication that has been reduced to the transfer of short messages; besides, he did not believe in freedom to express one's own ideas; Shepherd stated that,

"The family was no longer viable, no longer 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". (Roudane, 2002, p. 67)

The other important point is related to the subject of identity crisis. As Harriot (1988) indicated, "*Buried Child* continues Shepard's obsession with identity" (p. 12). An example is noticed in Tilden's reaction when Vince says,

**Vince:** (reentering, to Tilden.) you want anything, Dad?

**Tilden:** (looks up at Vince.) Me?

**Vince:** Yeah, you. Dad. That's you". (Shepherd, 1978, p. 98)

Any character in this play is preoccupied with finding him or herself a true identity. Vince, who is Dodge's grandson, really embraces this quest for identity. Just like the already mentioned selection of the play, there is another part which shows this crisis. Vince left his home six years ago and came up with a new identity for himself in New York. Before returning home, he assumed that his family would forget him. He says Shelly, "I just don't want to have them think that I've suddenly arrived out of the middle of nowhere completely deranged" (p. 85). As he comes back his house, he is not acknowledged by anyone, and is even rejected by Dodge and Tilden. In the second act, he is hardly trying to form his identity but gets humbled as Dodge discards him:

**Vince:** Grandpa, where did Halie go? Maybe we should call her.

**Dodge:** What are you talking about? Do you know what you're talking about? Are you just talking for the sake of talking? Lubricating the gums?

**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?" (p. 89)

## 2.2 Death of Real and Fabric Realities in *Buried Child*

Hooti & Shoostarian, (2011) remarked that "Baudrillard's concept of postmodernity in *Buried Child* manifests itself at the point where reality and fabrication seem inseparable and suggests a perfectly believable simulacrum of the events that really happened" (p. 83). Thinkers as Abbotson (2003) have proposed that "There is an uncertainty about Ancel's reality, thinking he may be Halie's creation to help her deal with all that had happened (p. 161). In fact, everyone seems so disconcerted with the reality. Conceivably, for these characters reliability is characterized through a sense of loss, of menace, of fretfulness, and of strain. Because of the death of reality which is based on Baudrillard, one of the symbols of postmodernism, all family members have lost the true association with life.

What Baudrillard means by death of real can be noticed in the buried child because the reason why Dodge killed it was his fear of facing the reality. Thus, he murdered the baby in order to evade the real. Even his name as "Dodge" represents the idea of escape and inability to encounter the reality. Like many other plays of that time, this play also paid especial attention to the concept of "American Dream". Dodge is shown as a man who is incapable of achieving his American Dream because his family does not work and the farm that he built many years ago is barren. This situation signifies an announcement by Baudrillard (1994) that we live in a place that is far from reality, a place that is lost in the ruins of its own replication. Thus, to understand what is meant by reality, we have to comprehend what reality is not (p. 3).

As a matter of fact, a substantial feature of postmodern plays like *Buried Child* is to criticize such metanarrative as American Dream which seem outdated. Shepard has shown his criticism in some other plays as well. Even the place where all the story is taking place is the representative of this disapproval. It can be said that what Shepherd has depicted as a postmodern setting is what is characterized by simulation. In order to be more familiar with the term "postmodernism", it should be announced that this concept was initially devised in the 1940s to signify a reaction against the modern movement in architecture. Yet, it was in the 1960s that this term was extensively used by American critics.

As an instance of a postmodern drama, *Buried Child* exemplifies such features as "ambiguity, discontinuity, pluralism, perversion, deformation, disintegration, deconstruction and difference" that have been identified as crucial in postmodern works (Hooti & Shoostarian, 2011, p. 76). In *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now* (1983), Aldridge has stated,

"In the fiction of [postmodernist writers]... virtually everything and everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which conditions in the real world they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they may be said to depart. The conventions of verisimilitude and sanity have been nullified. Characters inhabit a dimension of structure less being in which their behavior becomes inexplicably arbitrary and unjudgeable because the fiction itself stands as a metaphor of a derangement that is seemingly without provocation and beyond measurement." (p. 112)

As already stated, postmodernism inquiries the essence of being and notions of reality. Baudrillard (1988) has declared that the western society has entered the fourth stage of development that is the "hyper-real". In this phase of simulation, meaning "implodes", we move from reality to hyper-reality. This hyper-

reality signifies the undeviating consequence of developments in information technologies (p. 84). As Bertens (1995) has announced:

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

### 3. Conclusion

The current study was an analysis of *Buried Child* through the theory of simulation and death of real introduced by Jean Baudrillard. In other words, this paper meant to probe into one of the most central perceptions of postmodernity, that is, Baudrillard's amplification of the idea of simulation. It can be concluded that this play revolves around such themes as guiltiness and unfaithfulness. What was noticed in the play was in accordance with this French thinker's ideology that the postmodern society is characterized by its disillusionment, loss of meaning and interaction with reality. Every character in this play suffered from the problem of identity crisis and just as suggested by the name "Dodge", they all tried to evade the real world. It was also mentioned that the setting was a symbol of a postmodern society which has been characterized by barrenness and desolation. Besides, the buried child as the most important symbol in this play stood for the reality that had died while everyone was afraid to face it.

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