Buried Child Study Guide

Buried Child by Sam Shepard

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

After more than a decade as Off-Broadway's most successful counter-culture playwright, Sam Shepard achieved national fame and attention with his 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning family drama, *Buried Child*. The play is a macabre look at an American Midwestern family with a dark, terrible secret: Years ago, Tilden, the eldest of three sons belonging to Dodge and Halie, committed an act of incest with his mother. She bore his child, a baby boy, which Dodge drowned and buried in the field behind their farmhouse.

The act destroyed the family. Dodge stopped planting crops in his fields and took to smoking, drinking, and watching television from a lumpy old sofa. Halie, apparently seeking salvation, turned to religion with fervor. She spouts Christian platitudes and cavorts with the hypocritical Father Dewis. Tilden went insane with guilt and grief, spent time in jail in New Mexico, and has only recently returned to the farmstead, perhaps to set everything right. The secret is drawn out into the light of day, and the family curse apparently lifted, with the arrival of Vince, Tilden's estranged son, and his girlfriend, Shelly.

With its lower-class, sometimes humorous, recognizable characters and dialogue, *Buried Child* resembles the mid-century American realism and grotesquerie of Arthur Miller *(Death of a Salesman)* or Tennessee Williams *(A Streetcar Named Desire)*. However, its roots in ritual and its approach to monumental, timeless themes of human suffering— incest, murder, deceit, and rebirth—resemble the destruction wreaked by the heroes of Greek tragedy. The play contains many of Shepard' s favorite motifs: a quirky, often frightening, family of antagonists contained in a claustrophobic farmhouse somewhere in the great American Midwest.

Reviews of the play's New York premiere at the Theater for the New City on October 19, 1978, were mainly complimentary and congratulatory. Critics who had followed his ten-year career Off-Broadway were happy for Shepard's mainstream success, while mainstream critics who were unfamiliar with the playwright were pleased with the new discovery. Even critics who weren't quite sure what it was they had found in *Buried Child* assured their readers that they liked the play. In the *Nation,* Harold Clurman wrote, ' 'What strikes the ear and eye is comic, occasionally hilarious behavior and speech at which one laughs while remaining slightly puzzled and dismayed (if not resentful), and perhaps indefinably saddened. Yet there is a swing to it all, a vagrant freedom, a tattered song. Something is coming to an end, yet on the other side of disaster there is hope. From the bottom there is nowhere to go but up."

Shepard may have felt the same way. Whether he sought it or not, *Buried Child* marked a turning point in his career. With its success, he found his plays in demand in New York and across the country, and during the next ten years he created commercial successes like *True West, Fool for Love,* and *A Lie of the Mind* that found their way to Broadway and film. In 1995, Shepard rewrote *Buried Child* (the original director made changes to the play that went against the playwright's intentions). The new, author-approved version premiered at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago before transferring to

Broadway in April, 1996. In both cities, the play was hailed as a comical and insightful presentation of the disintegrating American dream.

Author Biography

Like the plays he writes, Sam Shepard's life and career have been unpredictable, wide-ranging, well-traveled, and, ultimately, quintessentially American. Shepard was born Samuel Shepard Rogers in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, on November 5, 1943. His father was in the Army Air Corps, and the family moved around from base to base before settling on an avocado ranch in Duarte, California. There, the future playwright found a love for horses and the outdoors that has remained with him ever since. He also picked up his father's drums and discovered a love for music that found its way into many of his plays.

In his semi-retirement, Shepard's father became an abusive alcoholic. After a series of violent confrontations, young Sam joined a touring repertory theatre group called the Bishop's Company, left home, and eventually found his way to the opposite coast: New York City. His arrival in New York in the early-1960s couldn't have been better timed. Although he was only nineteen years old, with a few months of acting experience and a single, unproduced play to his credit, the Off-Broadway theatre scene was just gaining momentum. It was there, in the tiny experimental studios and renovated churches of the underground theatre movement, that Shepard found his niche as a playwright.

His first professional production was a pair of one-acts, *Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden,* produced by Theatre Genesis at Saint Mark Church-in-the-Bowery in 1964. Although the popular press dubbed the new writer's work a pale imitation of Absurdist author Samuel Beckett *(Waiting for Godot),* the *Village Voice* and other counterculture publications gave him rave reviews and encouraged him to write more. Over the next several years, Shepard produced a series of experimental, poetic, musical one-acts and full-length plays that earned him a string of Obie Awards (Off-Broadway's equivalent of the Tony Award) and a cult following in New York and London, where he temporarily relocated in the early-1970s.

The Tooth of Crime (1972) and *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) earned Shepard wider recognition, and larger audiences, but it wasn't until *Buried Child* (1978) that he gained mainstream acceptance. The play earned Shepard his tenth Obie Award (no other American playwright has won more than two) as well as the Pulitzer Prize for drama. With typical, Midwestern-style humility, Shepard declared, ' 'If I was gonna write a play that would win the Pulitzer Prize, I think it would have been that play, you know. It's sort of a typical career Pulitzer Prize-winning play. It wasn't written for that purpose; it was a kind of test. I wanted to write a play about a family."

All of Shepard's plays are characterized by an obvious love of language and a flair for visual imagery. Often, the imagery he conjures is of the American West. His characters are obsessed with American myths and metaphors—cowboys and Indians, ranches, deserts, and other wide open spaces—and often the plots of his plays parallel familiar folk tales or religious parables. Thematically, he is often concerned with the American Dream and its effects on families, though the fathers, mothers, and sons that inhabit his work tend to be much darker, even more frightening aspects of those that appear in the plays, movies, and television of popular culture.

Since the success of *Buried Child,* Shepard has produced other popular plays, two of which, *True West* (1980) and *Fool for Love* (1983) have been turned into films. In the 1970s, Shepard himself turned to film, finding his way back to acting. He has appeared on screen in such films as *Days of Heaven, Frances, The Right Stuff, and Steel Magnolias,* as well as Robert Altman's film version of his play *Fool for Love* (1985)

Plot Summary

Act I

Buried Child occurs in a single setting: the large downstairs living room of a dilapidated Midwestern farmhouse. The creaky old estate is occupied by an odd, eccentric, and often frightening family who are removed from any traces of civilization outside. At the beginning of the play, Dodge, the clan's leader, is lying on a dingy old sofa, half-asleep, watching a television with no sound. As he listens to the rainfall outside, he begins to cough, tries to stifle his hacking with a slug of whiskey from a hidden bottle, and manages to stifle his choking only when his wife, Halie, calls to him from upstairs.

The opening dialogue between Dodge and the unseen Halie, though relatively short, provides a great deal of important exposition in a play that requires careful attention to clues and minor details. The plot of *Buried Child,* like most of Shepard's plays, is not often simple and direct but unfolds in a series of strange encounters and unsettling symbols.

Halie and Dodge, though married for quite a few years, seem estranged. She remains upstairs, except when she leaves the house. He seems to dwell downstairs, on the sofa, and he never goes out. He drinks, smokes, wears filthy clothes, and watches television almost constantly. She seems to have a preachy, religious streak in her, advocates propriety, and nags her lumpish husband incessantly.

Still, Halie, like almost all the characters in the play at one time or another, recalls the past, a time when things seemed more exciting, more normal. Remembering a day she once spent at the horse races, Halie says, "Everything was dancing with life! Colors. There were all kinds of people from everywhere. Everyone was dressed to the nines. Not like today. Not like they dress today. People had a sense of style." It is obvious from the very beginning of the play that something happened to this family□something mysterious, secret, and tragic□ that has forever altered their lives.

While Halie continues ranting from upstairs, and Dodge lapses into one of his coughing fits, their eldest son, Tilden, appears with an armload of corn which, he claims, he just picked from the field out back.

In spite of Dodge's protests that he never planted any corn, and that the produce was probably stolen from a neighbor's farm, Tilden pulls up a stool, puts down a milk pail, and begins husking the vegetables. While he works, Dodge questions him about his plans for the future. Apparently, Tilden has been away from home for more than twenty years, off in New Mexico by himself, and has only recently reappeared. Dodge seems eager to send him on his way again□an anxiety that begins to make sense later in the play, when Tilden's earlier illicit relationship with his mother surfaces.

Meanwhile, from upstairs, Halie continues her oration. She calls down to warn Dodge that they must care for Tilden, since he can no longer care for himself. Halie remembers the glory days of Tilden's youth, when he was an All-American football player and the family had such high hopes for his future. His younger brother, Bradley, they felt, was destined to fail, and all their dreams would come alive in Tilden. When Tilden turned out to be troublesome, Halie continues, they staked their hopes on Ansel, the youngest of the boys who, Halie claims, may not have been as handsome, but was by far the smartest. She rambles on about Ansel's accomplishments as a basketball player and a soldier, mourns his tragic death in a motel room on the night of his honeymoon, and suggests Father Dewis, their pastor, might help them erect a statue of their fallen son in the town square.

Halie finally descends the stairs. She is dressed completely in black, as though mourning, and on her way to a lunch appointment with Father Dewis. She argues with the two men about the rain outside, the corn on the floor, and Bradley, causing Dodge to complain, "He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's out there in the backyard!" A hush falls over the room. Dodge has spoken the apparently unspeakable in this household. While his comment goes unheeded and unexplained for the time being, it haunts the rest of the play, as the family's terrible secret is slowly revealed.

Halie finally leaves for her rendezvous with the pastor. Dodge curls up on the sofa and falls asleep. Tilden steals his whiskey and leaves. Then, in the silence that falls over the house, Bradley stomps in through the front door, the hinges of his wooden leg creaking as he walks. He removes Dodge's baseball cap, plugs in a pair of electric clippers, and begins cutting his father's hair while he sleeps. The lights fade on the first act.

Act II

Later the same night. Vince, Tilden's son, appears with his girlfriend, Shelly. They are traveling across the country from New Jersey to see Vince's father, who they think is still in New Mexico, and have stopped by unannounced to visit Dodge and Halie. They are expecting a joyful family reunion. Instead, they are greeted by the grumpy, drunken Dodge and the distant, half-crazed Tilden, neither of whom seem to recognize Vince.

Dodge hollers for more whiskey and rails about the haircut he was given while he was asleep, which has left him with patchy bald spots and cuts on his scalp. Tilden brings in an armload of freshly picked carrots, which he proceeds to cut and scrape in preparation for dinner. Shelly is initially terrified by the gloomy house and its strange inhabitants. She urges Vince to leave and at least spend the night in a hotel and return the next day. Vince, however, is adamant about staying. He tries to prove he is part of the family by making funny faces and noises he used to make as a child at the dinner table, but his father and grandfather ignore him.

While Vince becomes more and more exasperated, Shelly, oddly enough, is drawn into the fold. She sits down with Tilden and helps him clean the carrots. To clear his head and perhaps restore some sense of normalcy to the scene, Vince agrees to run to the

store to fetch more whiskey for Dodge. He pleads with Tilden and Dodge to try to remember who he is while he is gone and assures Shelly that she will be safe in his absence.

Once Vince leaves, Tilden opens up to Shelly. He describes how he, too, used to drive across the country, through the snow and the deserts, admiring the trees and the animals. He, too, once had a sense of adventure. According to Tilden, his life changed with the arrival of a baby in the house□a baby that was quite small and simply disappeared. "We had no service. No hymn. Nobody came," Tilden laments. Only Dodge knows where the corpse is, he insists.

Shelly, terrified once again, has little time to react to this macabre story of murder and deceit before Bradley comes stomping into the room from outside and immediately bullies Dodge and Tilden into submission. He insults and humiliates his older brother until Tilden scampers offstage. Dodge lies quivering and coughing on the floor while Bradley, to assert his control in the house, orders Shelly to stand still and open her mouth. He places his fingers in her mouth, then drops her coat over Dodge's head as the scene ends.

Act III

It is the next morning, and a change has come over the household. The rain has stopped, the sun is shining outside, and birds are singing. Bradley has fallen asleep on the sofa, his artificial leg lying nearby, while Dodge leans against the television, using Shelly's coat as a blanket. Shelly, meanwhile, has suddenly become a nurturing, motherly figure to the ailing Dodge. She emerges from the kitchen, bright and happy, with a bowl of warm soup broth for the man she now calls her "grandpa." Some things still haven't changed, however. Dodge is as irascible as ever. He refuses to eat the soup and complains loudly that Vince didn't return the previous night and probably stole the money he was given to buy Dodge's whiskey.

While Shelly attempts to calm and care for Dodge, Halie, who was also gone all night, returns home with Father Dewis. She is now wearing a bright yellow dress, with no sign of her black mourning clothes, and carrying an armful of roses. Both Halie and the Father are a little drunk and have obviously been out for a night on the town. Halie attempts to assume her usual position in the house, nagging Dodge, scolding Bradley, and completely ignoring Shelly.

The balance of power shifts again, and Shelly takes a stand. She grabs Bradley's artificial leg, wielding it like a weapon and leaving the once tyrannical bully helpless and whimpering on the sofa. As the shocked family and pastor listen in amazement, Shelly's frustrations pour out. She describes what she and Vince had hoped to find□the perfect American family he remembered from his past. She confronts them with what they really are: strangers in their own house who commit murder and bury the bodies in their backyard.

Shelly's outrage draws a confession from Dodge. Against the wishes of his wife and son, the old man breaks down and explains the family's gruesome, tragic secret: Years ago, after all the boys were already grown and the family and farm were quite prosperous, Halie unexpectedly became pregnant. She and Dodge hadn' t been sleeping in the same bed for six years, so he knew the child wasn't his. The baby, it seemed, belonged to Tilden, who would carry the infant through the fields at night, singing to it and telling it stories. Unable to stand the insult or allow a child who wasn't his own to grow up in his household, Dodge drowned the baby and buried it in the yard.

Halie is mortified that Dodge has allowed the truth to surface and frantically cries for her lost Ansel. "What's happened to the men in this family!" she screams, "Where are the men!" As if on cue, Vince comes crashing through the screen door, drunk and hurling empty liquor bottles. The prodigal son has returned. As the youngest and strongest of the surviving male children, and the only member of the family who is free of guilt and complicity in the clan's awful crimes, Dodge immediately declares Vince the heir to the estate. While Dodge screams out his last will and testament, leaving almost everything to his grandson, Vince sets about restoring order to what is now his home.

Shelly finally reaches her breaking point and leaves. "I can't hang around for this," she complains to Vince, "I'm not even related." Vince tosses Bradley's artificial leg outside, and his now-pathetic uncle crawls out after it. Father Dewis excuses himself from the terrible scene, leaving Halie upstairs crying. Dodge, meanwhile, has quietly died. Vince covers the dead patriarch with a blanket and places Halie's roses on his chest. Then he takes Dodge's cap, puts it on, and lies down on the couch, staring at the ceiling. The play has come full circle, with the new man of the house once again stretched out on the sofa.

To complete this final tableau, Halie begins calling to Dodge from upstairs, just as she did at the beginning of the play. She tells him about the fields outside, filled with corn, carrots, and potatoes, miraculously produced by the recent rain and the day's bright sunshine. While she describes this impossible farmer's paradise, Tilden enters from outside and slowly walks upstairs, carrying the muddy, rotten corpse of a small baby he has just unearthed from the yard: the buried child.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The setting of this three-act play is a farmhouse in Illinois, and all scenes are played out in the living room with a screened porch visible in the background. Dodge, who is the owner, farmer of the land, the husband, and father of the family who lives there, is on stage during the entire play. Dodge is a drunken, ill, argumentative, old man who has a blanket that seems to suggest a child's security blanket. His body is usually covered with it, but sometimes, when he is trying to avoid what is going on, he covers his head with it.

Halie, his wife, does not appear right away, but her voice is heard from the upper floor where she spends most of her time. Halie expresses concern for Dodge and, on the surface, seems to be a caretaker, urging her husband to take his medicine when he coughs. Halie voices religious piety and self-righteousness. When Dodge tells her he does not enjoy anything, she responds, "It's no wonder people have turned their backs on Jesus!" and "It's no wonder the messengers of God's word are shouting louder now than ever before." Then she complains that Dodge has become "an evil, spiteful, vengeful man."

There are sexual undertones in the exchanges between Dodge and his wife. Halie speaks of an old boyfriend who was a 'breeder' of race horses. Dodge comments: "I bet he taught you a thing or two, huh? Gave you a good turn around the old stable!" And later, "And he never laid a finger on you, I suppose? This gentleman breeder-man."

The reader soon learns, however, that she is anything but a caring wife. Halie is carrying on an affair with the minister of her church, Father Dewis, and she dresses to meet him and brings him home the next day, both of them slightly inebriated. The minister, for his part, is more caricature than real and is ineffective at solving any of the problems of this highly dysfunctional family. Halie insists that she meets with him to talk about a monument for their son, Ansel, who is dead. Halie believes that Ansel was the most promising of their sons and would have achieved greatness; instead, he died in a motel room on his honeymoon. Halie also complains that he would still be alive if he had not married into the Catholics, whom she labels the Mob. Remembering the wedding, she says, "I think even the priest was wearing a pistol. When he gave her the ring, I knew he was a dead man. . . . But then it was the honeymoon that killed him. I knew he'd never come back from that honeymoon."

Tilden, one of Dodge and Halie's sons, who had been All-American halfback, has returned home from living in New Mexico. Tilden is somehow disabled, probably emotionally, and is unable to earn a living. When the play begins, Tilden is bringing in ears of corn from "out back" and husking it on the living room floor, even though Dodge insists that those fields have not been planted for thirty years. Halie tells Dodge, "You've gotta watch out for him. It's our responsibility. He can't look after himself anymore, so we

have to do it. Nobody else will do it. We can't just send him away somewhere. If we had lots of money we could send him away. But we don't."

Bradley, their other son, has a wooden leg, because he chopped his leg off, at some time or another, with a chain saw. Bradley comes to the house from time to time to brutally shave his father's head, leaving it gashed and bleeding. Life has made him vicious. Bradley tries to assert his role as the one in charge of the family, but no one takes him seriously. Halie tells Tilden he must get the corn husks cleaned up before Bradley comes. He's "going to be very upset when he sees it," she says. "He doesn't like to see the house in disarray." Halie says that she had expected Tilden to take care of Bradley, since Tilden was the oldest. "I had no idea in the world that Tilden would be so much trouble," Halie says.

Veiled allusions are made to some kind of secret in the back yard. Halie tells Dodge not to let Tilden go out in the back yard anymore. "I don't want him back there in the rain," she says, "He's got no business out there." Dodge and Tilden discuss knowing about "it." "Why'd you tell her it was your flesh and blood?" Tilden asks. Dodge tries to keep him from going into the back yard: "Don't go outside. There's nothing out there. Never has been. It's empty."

Act 1 Analysis

The author, Sam Shepard, is interested in families, particularly dysfunctional ones, which is probably a reflection of his own growing-up experiences. His father was a violent alcoholic who seemed to the son like a lost child. Shepard watched his father slowly withdraw, not only from the family but from the world. This play is the quintessential dysfunctional family story. Father and mother, husband and wife, have a severely broken relationship, although Halie pretends it is still intact. Dodge's life consists of his couch, television set, and bottle. Halie pretends to care about her husband's health but lives in isolation from him upstairs. Halie also pretends self-righteousness and a sickeningly supercilious religiosity and is sexually promiscuous, to the point having an affair with the minister of the church she attends.

Some of the best farmland in the world is in Illinois. The setting, a rich and fruitful farm, provides a sharp contrast for this story to a marriage and a family that has been anything but productive. What should be orderly - a farm family, Norman Rockwell-like - is, in fact, chaotic.

The mismatch between Halie and Dodge sets the tides in motion. Halie has gone from a life in the city that had variety and stimulation to that of a farmer's wife, and it has not worked out very well. Halie has dealt with the disintegration of the marriage and her own dissatisfaction by indulging in an incestuous relationship with Tilden, her own son, with disastrous consequences. From that time forward, chaos slowly invades the homestead. When the play opens, we see her frantically hanging on to her role of responsible wife and, at the same time, carrying on a scandalous relationship with the

minister of her church. At the end of the play, it is over for her. Dewis tells her grandson he will need to take care of his grandmother.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Two new characters are introduced at the beginning of this act—Vince, Dodge and Halie's grandson, and his girlfriend, Shelly. Vince has not seen his family for six years, and he and Shelly are stopping in to see them on their way to New Mexico to visit his father, Tilden. Vince is unaware that Tilden has come back home.

Even though it has only been six years, no one recognizes him—neither his grandfather, Dodge, nor his father, Tilden. "Did I betray some secret ancient family taboo?" he pleads. Vince demonstrates tricks he had performed when he was a child, but still no one recognizes him. Shelly tries to persuade him to leave but is sympathetic to Tilden, who brings in an armful of carrots. Shelly offers to help him with the carrots. Dodge persuades Vince to take money from the kitchen table and go get a bottle of whiskey to replace the one that Tilden has removed.

Shelly and Tilden talk about Vince, and Tilden says, "I thought I saw a face inside his face." Tilden cannot remember having seen him before. Then Tilden also tells her about a little baby. "We had a baby. Little baby. Could pick it up with one hand," he tells her. "So small nobody could find it. Just disappeared. We had no service. No hymn. Nobody came."

Act 2 Analysis

The children reflect the brokenness of the family structure. Incest is typically seen as a father on daughter situation, but Shepard makes it more shocking and disastrous by reversing the roles. In this play, it is a mother bearing a child by a son. Shepard believes that America has failed to hold on to its aspirations, and this story expresses that theme. This family has completely lost touch with its original hopes and dreams.

Another recurring theme in Shepard's drama is betrayal, and this story depicts betrayal of many kinds. The father has betrayed his family by sinking into alcoholism. The mother is a living betrayal of the husband, the marriage, and the family. The children have been continually betrayed by a father and mother who did not fulfill their responsibilities to them. While Shepard does not place the blame for the disaster on any one character, both mother and father are treated unsympathetically. This, too, is no doubt autobiographical. Shepard heaps blame on the father in this story, but the mother comes in for her share as well.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

With Vince gone, Shelly tries to make herself at home and even tries to be kind to Dodge. Shelly stays overnight, even though she is afraid of Bradley. Halie and Father Dewis have returned, and Dodge threatens to tell the family secret, which frightens Halie. Vince finally returns, drunk and angry, throwing whiskey bottles at the wall of the porch. Halie finally acknowledges him, saying he had been a sweet little boy, like an angel. In the ruckus following Vince's return, Dodge bequeaths the house and the farm to him, everything except the farming tools, which Dodge declares are to be burned in a bonfire and his body thrown on top of it.

Now the secret is revealed—Tilden and Halie had been involved in an incestuous relationship that resulted in the birth of a baby boy. Dodge had been so angry that he drowned the baby and buried it in the backyard. Police had come and searched for the baby, but the body was never found. After all is revealed and Dodge has bequeathed everything to Vince, Halie retreats to the upstairs with Father Dewis, who comes back down and tells them that she is going to need help. Shelly gives up on Vince and the situation, and she leaves.

Then it is discovered that Dodge has died while all of this was going on. Simultaneously, Tilden comes in from the back yard, wet and muddy and carrying the corpse of the baby, which he has dug up. The curtain drops.

Act 3 Analysis

The basic conflict in this story is between Halie and Dodge. The climax is realized with Tilden's digging up the corpse of his baby, which coincides with the death of his father, Dodge, who had murdered the baby. Save for Vince's triumphantly taking ownership of the farm, the ending would be pure chaos.

Chaos theory is a principle in modern physics that defines reality as structured unpredictability. Applied to literature, it refers to the juxtaposition of two concepts—the uncertainty that inevitably exists in the universe and the equally inevitable structure that holds the world together, sometimes called orderly disorder. Some critics have applied this theory to literature on the basis that ideas that come out of the scientific world also influence the culture at large. These critics call the phenomenon 'Theatre of Chaos' and position Sam Shepard in this movement. These critics see evidence of this orderly disorder dichotomy in The Buried Child.

What is more orderly in 20th Century America than a farm? However, the inhabitants of the farm in *The Buried Child* are a disorderly mess. Tilden's return home, coupled with Vince's arrival, force the disorder to spin out of control, with one person, Vince, left in

charge. At the end, we do not know what the outcome will be, but the prospects are not good.

At the same time, the play ends on a hopeful note. There is a feeling that there has been some resolution. The grandson has escaped and returned and will now be the one who will move to the center of the stage. The beat will go on. This, too, is representative of Shepard's philosophy that, while the American family is in trouble, it cannot be written off, because it is also the source of everything. There is a Biblical allusion to the prodigal son in both Tilden's and Vince's return home, although neither is greeted with a feast of a 'fatted calf.' They do, however, seem to represent some hope for the continuation of the family, if not its redemption.

However, this play is not in the happily-ever-after tradition. It leaves the audience with more questions than answers. Shepard's ambiguity is intentional. Shepard never explicitly says a baby was born of incest between mother and son, but it is strongly implied. Shepard also never tells us that Tilden has been in jail in New Mexico for some unexplained crime, but he implies it. Vince seems to be the only one who behaves rationally, yet his way of dealing with their rejection is to go off on an alcoholic spree. The conclusion is ambiguous as to whether there may or may not be hope for the future with Vince moving into Dodge's role as head of household, owner, and cultivator of the farm.

Characters

Bradley

Bradley is Dodge and Halie's middle son and, accordingly, seems to have received the least attention and respect from his parents. As a child, he was never expected to amount to much. After he accidentally cut off one of his legs with a chain saw, they gave up all hope for him, praying that Tilden would be able to care for his younger sibling.

As an adult, he occupies a strange, not quite clear place in the household. Although he no longer lives with his parents, he visits often. Bradley has become a mean, sometimes violent, bully. For some reason, he cuts his father's hair while he sleeps, leaving him with bald patches and cuts on his scalp. When Tilden leaves corn husks scattered around the living room, Halie worries that Bradley will be upset. "He doesn't like the house in disarray," she warns. "He can't stand it when one thing is out of place. The slightest thing. You know how he gets." Initially, Bradley is even able to intimidate the strong-willed Shelly. Bursting in on the interloper when she is alone with Tilden and Dodge, he takes her coat away from his simpleton brother, runs him off, then forces her to stand still while he puts his fingers in her mouth.

Once separated from his artificial leg, however, Bradley is a simpering coward. Near the end of the play, Shelly regains her dignity by grabbing the leg away and threatening the family with it. Finally, Vince tosses the limb out in the yard and Bradley makes his final exit on his belly, crawling out the door after the prosthetic limb that he believes will make him whole.

Father Dewis

Father Dewis is the smallest part in the play, but he acts as an important foil to Halie. Claiming to be an upright Christian who abhors the sins of her family around her, Halie apparently spends a great deal of time in the company of the good reverend. She has been bargaining with him to help her convince the City Council to erect a statue honoring her dead son, Ansel. Early in the play she disappears for a lunch meeting with Father Dewis.

The two of them return the next morning, obviously drunk after a night on the town. Father Dewis does not acknowledge his indiscretion or the paradox of the family's religious advisor consorting with the mother of the household. When the scene becomes threatening, Father Dewis backs away, claiming, "This is out of my domain." In the end, faced with the strong will of Vince, the new patriarch of the house, Father Dewis leaves Halie upstairs crying and makes a tactical retreat.

Dodge

Dodge is one of the most important figures in the play. Once the strong, energetic, successful leader of the family and its farm, he is now in his seventies and has degenerated into a slovenly, drunken, curmudgeonly old man who spends all his time smoking and drinking, curled up on the sofa watching television. The change in Dodge's lifestyle and personality is understandable, given his family's past: After raising three children and helping build a prosperous farm, his wife, Halie, conceived a fourth child with their eldest son, Tilden. Unable to live with the shame, and perhaps threatened by the presence of a male child in the house that wasn' t his own, Dodge murdered the baby and buried it in the backyard.

For years since these terrible events the family has kept the buried child a secret. Each member of the household has found his or her own way of dealing with the guilt. Dodge's comfort, such as it is, has been in forcing the memory as far back in his mind as possible, through denial and slowly drinking himself to death. Although his general demeanor is grumpy and acerbic, his wry comments and sarcasm occasionally make him unintentionally funny.

In the end, it is Dodge who confesses the family's secret. Unable to live with the guilt any longer, he admits all the sordid details of incest and murder. Then, just before he quietly dies, he leaves the farm to Vince, his grandson who, it is assumed, will try to rebuild the family's shattered legacy.

Halie

Halie is the hypocritical, promiscuous mother and grandmother to the strange Midwestern clan of *Buried Child*. At the beginning of the play, she seems like an elderly wife who has been ignored and perhaps abused by her drunken, lazy husband. While Dodge lays in front of the television all day, drinking whiskey and smoking cigarettes, Halie stays upstairs, occasionally calling down to check on him and encourage him to take his pills. She seems devoutly religious and complains about modern ways that she finds anti-Christian. When she finally appears, she is dressed all in black, seemingly mourning the death of her favorite son years earlier. She is on her way to meet Father Dewis, the family's religious advisor, who, she hopes, will help her get a statue of her son erected in the town square.

In spite of her claims to propriety and family values, however, Halie is not a sympathetic character. She nags her husband incessantly, complains about the worthlessness of her sons who have survived, and ends up spending all night drinking with her reverend friend, returning home with him the next day, dressed gaily and carrying an armful of roses. Her actions are all the more reprehensible in light of the family's tragic secret: She committed incest with her eldest son, Tilden, sending a ripple of destruction through the entire family.

Shelly

Along with Father Dewis, Shelly is an outsider in the play. She is Vince's girlfriend from New Jersey and has been brought along on his odyssey into the past expecting to meet his father and grandparents, who, she has been told, are a typical, happy, friendly American family. Instead, she is met by a frightening band of eccentrics who insult and degrade her and don't seem to recognize her boyfriend as their blood relation.

Although she is initially intimidated and scared of the clan, Shelly is strong-willed by nature. First she tries to fit in by helping Tilden with the vegetables he keeps bringing in from outside. "I'll cook the carrots," she tells Vince. "And I'll do whatever I have to do to survive. Just to make it through this thing." Left alone with Dodge, Tilden, and Bradley for the night, Shelly appears the next morning renewed, energized, and ready to take on the responsibility of caring for the crazy crew. She tries to nurture Dodge, bringing him soup broth and calling him "grandpa." Her efforts go unrewarded, however. Dodge shuns her, Halie ignores her, and even Vince pushes her aside as he assumes control of the household. Finally, exasperated, she storms out, telling Vince, "I can't hang around for this. I'm not even related."

Tilden

Tilden is Dodge and Halie's eldest son and father to Vince. As a child, his parents expected great things from him. He was an All-American football player, and they hoped he would care for his less responsible younger brother, Bradley, after he accidentally lost his leg to a chainsaw. But somewhere along the way Tilden went astray. Although the details aren't described clearly, he disappeared for several years, apparently got into some trouble in New Mexico, spent some time in jail, and was eventually driven out of the state. Now he has returned home, penniless, withdrawn, and mentally unstable. Strangely, Tilden keeps bringing in armloads of vegetables he claims to have harvested from the fields outside, even though, Dodge insists, the fields haven't been planted in years.

Tilden's ability to pull crops from fallow fields is symbolic, and directly related to the secret of the "buried child" in the play's title. Years ago Tilden committed incest with his mother, Halie, and they produced a baby boy, which Dodge murdered and buried in the yard. His mother, like the fields on the farm, was past middle age and hadn't been with her husband or "fertilized," in a long time. Tilden's virility proved the family's undoing, and his ability to pluck corn and carrots from thin air shows his unfortunate talent still exists. At the end of the play, after Dodge confesses the grisly truth to Shelly, Tilden walks out into field, exhumes the corpse of his murdered son/brother, and carries it upstairs to his mother so they can finally be together□a ghastly little "family."

Vince

Vince is twenty-two, adventurous, and a sort of prodigal son figure in the play. After at least six years away, he has decided to take his girlfriend, Shelly, on a cross-country trip from New Jersey to New Mexico for a reunion with his father, Tilden. They stop along the way to visit his grandparents, Dodge and Halie, expecting a warm, friendly, familial welcome, with a turkey dinner on the table and excited conversation about the good old days. Instead, they encounter the surly, drunken Dodge and, unexpectedly, Vince's half-crazed father, Tilden, neither of whom recognize their estranged relative. A little panicked, but ever resourceful, Vince leaves Shelly behind while he goes to buy some whiskey for Dodge, in the hopes that the liquor will calm him and help him remember.

Vince is gone for the entire night, and while he is away a lot changes. His Uncle Bradand terrorizes Shelly. His grandmother, Halie, returns home after a night of carousing with Father Dewis. Shelly confronts the quirky clan, and in the ensuing family feud, Dodge admits the truth about the "buried child" in the field outside. Just in time to pull all the loose ends together, Vince comes crashing through the door, drunk and hurling liquor bottles. Recognizing in Vince some hope for his family's future, Dodge promptly recites his last will and testament, leaving the farm and the house to Vince. He then promptly expires on the floor.

Vince takes on a new attitude with his unexpected windfall, and decides to stick around. "I've gotta carry on the line," he tells Shelly. "It's in the blood. I've gotta see to it that things keep rolling." Dismissing his confused girlfriend, he sets about putting his house in order by chasing out Bradley and Father Dewis. Then he reclines on the equivalent of the family throne□the living room sofa□to ponder his next move as the new man of the house.ley appears

Themes

American Dream

In literature, as in life, the *American Dream* contains elements of adventure on the open road, the exploration of far frontiers, and family and financial success. These ideas permeate nearly all of Shepard's plays and are used effectively as a criticism of contemporary American society in *Buried Child*. In this dark vision of the American Midwest, Shepard presents the disintegration of the American family and suggests that, as a culture, Americans have an embarrassment of riches and a paucity of spirituality and morality. For most of the play, his view of America in the late-twentieth century is one of selfish, brutal, and hypocritical tyrant wannabees who care little for one another and are mainly interested in physical pleasures and power over others.

Dodge, the father and grandfather of the household, talks about things that American patriarchs are supposed to talk about□family, the farm, even baseball. But he is not the loving, nurturing father who knows best. "You think just because people propagate they have to love their offspring?" he growls. "You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?" His wife, Halie, is certainly no better. Though she feigns religious piety and pines for the days of traditional values, in her old age she is carrying on an affair with the family's pastor and in her younger days committed incest with her oldest son, an act that resulted in a mid-life pregnancy. This American family is definitely not the happy, well-balanced stereotype portrayed in popular media.

Shepard's use of backwoods country twang in the voices of his characters, along with images of the land outside big cities and the uncharted vast-ness of open spaces in America suggest some of the country's earliest and most important myths□the frontiersman, westward expansion, and rugged individualism. Vince, initially one of the "outsiders" of the play, has a quintessentially American road experience late in the play that causes an epiphany that sends him back to the farm with a renewed sense of purpose. In a frenetic monologue, Vince describes how he drove all night through the rain with the windows open, "clear to the Iowa border." En route, he examined his reflection in the windshield and saw his face changing into the faces of generations of his past, "every last one. Straight into the corn belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me." Vince's experience is a reminder of the interconnectedness of individuals, families, and whole communities in America and lends the play's climax a faint glimmer of hope. As Vince assumes control of the household, and Tilden carries the corpse of the exhumed "buried child" upstairs to its mother, there is the sense that, through the lessons learned by mistaken generations, this family, and America as a whole, may revitalize itself, stir from the ashes of moral destruction, and rise, Phoenix-like, to soar again.

Family

Acknowledging his thematic interest in the concept of *family,* Shepard once observed, "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 father. It's an endless cycle." Still, in spite of everyone's common evolution from a father and mother, the family ties in *Buried Child* become more twisted and significant than most people ever experience.

The play begins realistically enough, with the offstage voice of an elderly wife, Halie, nagging her semi-drunken, oafish husband (appropriately named Dodge) who lies on a lumpy sofa all day watching television. Very quickly, however, this stereotypical image of a marriage in its twilight years turns into a nightmarish vision of adultery, incest, and murder. The couple's eldest son, Tilden, has returned home after a twenty-year absence. He has been in some kind of trouble in another state and is obviously suffering from mental illness. Bradley, their second son, has lost a leg in a chainsaw accident and terrorizes his father and brother. A third son, Ansel, was, according to Halie' s skewed recollection, murdered on the night of his honeymoon. His mother remembers him as the accomplished adult he never grew to be; she wants to have a statue of him erected in the town square.

Into the midst of this motley clan plunges Vince, son to Tilden and grandson to Dodge and Halie. He has returned home after a six-year absence, hoping to find the perfect, warm, and normal American family he remembers from his youth, complete with turkey dinner on the table and smiling, kindly grandparents. Oddly, though, no one seems to recognize him, though the other men of the house quickly take a liking to his girlfriend, Shelly, who has come along for the ride. The most horrific aspect of this house of horrors is the terrible secret they have kept for decades: Tilden is the father, with Halie, of the slain Ansel; Dodge, resentful and threatened, murdered the infant and buried it in the yard.

Shepard's view of family life in the American Midwest recalls some of the best-known family tragedies of dramatic literature, from the Greek tragedy Oedipus Rex to Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Each of these works calls upon primal urges and fears buried deep inside humanity□lust, jealousy, love, and greed□to reveal essential, if undesirable, truths about family relationships and humankind.

Style

Symbolism

In literature, a symbol is something that represents something else. Symbols are often used to communicate deeper levels of meaning. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel *The Scarlet Letter,* for example, the red letter "A" worn by Hester Prynne is a symbol not only of her supposed crime (adultery) but also of her neighbors' bigotry and her own courageous pride. *Buried Child,* like most of Shepard's plays, is suffused with symbolism, which he uses to communicate deeper, though sometimes ambiguous, levels of meaning to his audiences.

Some of the strongest symbols in *Buried Child* are related to nature and fertility and reinforce the play's central image: the dead, buried child in the field. The vegetables Tilden continuously carries into the house are one such symbol. Crops have not been raised on the family farm for many years. In all that time, the fields have gone unplanted and have grown over with weeds and scrub brush. Still, Tilden manages to harvest the fallow fields, just as he was capable of conceiving a child with his own middle-aged mother years before (it is suggested that Halie was past menopause, and therefore fallow herself, when her tryst with Tilden occurred). Realistically, his harvest is nonsensical, but as a symbol, it complements his dreadful act of incest and illustrates his obsession with his lost child, his need to pull life from the dead ground.

The rain and sunshine that fall on the farm near the beginning and end of the play are also essential ingredients to understanding the play's deeper, partially obscured meanings. Rain and water have always been symbols of cleansing and purification, thus their use in baptismal ceremonies of the Christian church. At the beginning of *Buried Child,* a soft rain falls on the family's farmhouse and all its visitors, washing away the dirt and the smell and, symbolically, the sins of their past. By the third act, which takes place the following morning, the sun is shining brightly, birds are singing, and a new day, literally and figuratively, has dawned. The sunshine brings crops back to the fields and a new leader to the recently purified house. Dodge dies, Bradley is ejected, and Vince assumes the mantle of family head.

While there are several other objects that may function as minor symbols in the play, such as Bradley's wooden leg, Dodge's baseball cap, and the blanket on the sofa, the most obvious and important one is the dead child itself, which oddly might offer some hope in this otherwise grim drama. Doris Auerbach, in *Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, and the Off Broadway Theatre,* noted, "The play ends like a miracle play with the symbol of the resurrection. The child is taken from the tomb, tended by its father and carried up, not to the patriarchal figure who lies dead on stage before us, but to the mother who is waiting above. *Buried Child* leaves the audience with hope for a revitalized America, for one that nourishes its children and holds the promise of the American dream once again."

Archetypes

An archetype is an original□the pattern for all that follows. Throughout his career, Shepard has dealt with mythic subjects and archetypal characters in his plays, lending his work a sense of mystery, ritual, and atavistic purpose. In *Buried Child,* nearly all the characters are archetypes of one kind or another. Dodge, the aged patriarch of the family, is the archetypal domineering father figure who threatens, rather than nurtures, his children and ultimately must be overthrown. His type of character has appeared in the stories humans tell since time out of mind, from Oedipus's father, Laius, to Shakespeare's King Lear.

Each of the men in *Buried Child* represent some type of tragic son figure. Tilden, like Oedipus, lusted after his mother, even conceiving a child with her. Bradley suffers the humiliation of the male fear of castration, bearing a wooden leg as a symbol of his anxiety and attempting to compensate for his terror by bullying everyone around him. The long dead Ansel has been made into the heroic figure he never was by his mother, much like Willie Loman idealizes Biff and Happy in *Death of a Salesman*. Vince returns home with the expectations of the long-lost prodigal son and emerges as a conquering hero figure. As strange and frightening as these characters' actions become in the play, they always seem at least a little familiar to the viewer because of the archetypes they represent.

Historical Context

In many ways, *Buried Child* exists outside of time and apart from history. The plot of the play is the ages-old, familiar story of youth overthrowing age, intertwined with murder and incest, death and resurrection□terrible human impulses that have shocked and fascinated audiences for thousands of years. The play's characters are mainly archetypal figures, recognizable from centuries of stories and myths scattered across cultures and around the globe. Still, Shepard's family drama is anchored in a particular place and a particular age□1970s America□and this environment, if not directly obvious in the play, certainly influenced the playwright and his work.

Although practically any era can be called an age of turbulent politics for one reason or another, the 1970s were particularly difficult and painful for the United States. The decade saw the end of the painful Vietnam War, which altered a great many Americans' perception of war as an unsavory but noble effort. It was also during this era that the country developed a cynicism toward the democratic process and the people it elevates to its highest offices. This cast of doubt has plagued American politics ever since. The problem evolved from a series of unsuccessful presidents, corruption in public offices, and disastrous domestic and foreign policies.

In 1974, Republican President Richard M. Nixon, once a widely popular leader with daring foreign policy ideas, was forced to resign from the executive office in the wake of the "Watergate" scandal. Watergate involved illegal break-ins, wire taps, and subversion of the constitution for the cause of furthering Nixon's political career while simultaneously discrediting his enemies (a noted paranoid figure, Nixon was known to keep an "enemies list" that kept track of those who had in some way aggrieved him).

Although he has since become a popular and effective negotiator and ambassador for the United States, Carter's presidency was afflicted with errors of judgment and bad fortune. The country experienced a terrible energy crisis during the late-1970s, leading Carter to encourage conservation of electricity and heating oil and causing gasoline rationing across the country. In 1977, Carter signed away the Panama Canal. Although the deal had been planned since the canal's construction a hundred years before, it was news to most of the country, who blamed the loss on Carter.

Finally, in the midst of an economic crisis and mounting domestic discontent, Carter's administration suffered a terrible foreign policy debacle. Because the United States agreed to harbor the Shah of Iran during his political exile in 1979, Iranian militants, led by the Muslim extremist Ayatollah Khomeini, seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took more than fifty hostages. Carter approved a rescue mission that failed, resulting in more bad press for the president. His shame was compounded when the captives weren' t released until more than a year later, when Republican Ronald Reagan became president in 1981.

While *Buried Child* has nothing to do directly with macro-politics, the sense of abandonment, helplessness, and cynicism many Americans felt in the 1970s is

apparent in the micro-cosmic world of the play. The past, for this dangerously disturbed Midwestern family, was infinitely better than the present, and no one seems quite willing to stake much on what the future might hold. Any hope Bradley might have presented for a normal, productive life was cut short, literally, when he lost his leg. Tilden, Halie reports, was once an All-American halfback, destined for greatness. Now he is an ex-convict with a shattered psyche and a tremendous burden of guilt. The unseen Ansel was next on his mother's pedestal. He was "the smart one," prepared to succeed where his brothers had failed. But he, too, lost his struggle against the barbaric world outside, and was killed in a hotel room on the night of his honeymoon. (Yet each of the sons' falls from greatness, save Bradley, could merely be fiction, since it is known that Ansel never reached adulthood. It can be construed that Tilden's accomplishments exist only in his mother's mind as well.)

One at a time, each member of the family stumbles forward, only to be driven back by catastrophe. Dodge summarizes their experiences in this bleak American landscape when he chides Shelly, "You're all alike, you hopers. If it's not God then it's a man. If it's not a man then it's a woman. If it's not a woman then it's politics or bee pollen or the future of some kind. Some kind of future."

While Shepard's characters were facing grim prospects in the America of the 1970s, the playwright himself was thriving in the burgeoning world of Off-Broadway theatre. Developed in the late-1960s and early-1970s as an alternative to the high-priced, predictable, popular entertainment offered by the mainstream Broadway scene, Off-Broadway was a collection of smaller, less expensive, often experimental theatres where the work of new playwrights, like Shepard and Arthur Kopit *(Oh Dad, Poor Dad...),* could be given a chance at production and a live audience. In an interview with *Theatre Quarterly,* Shepard once described the exhilaration he felt as a developing artist in this era:

On the lower East Side there *was* a special sort of culture developing. You were so close to the people who were going to the plays, there was really no difference between you and them□your own experience was their experience, so that you began to develop that consciousness of what was happening ... I mean nobody knew what *was* happening, but there was a sense that something was going on. People were arriving from Texas and Arkansas in the middle of New York City, and a community was being established. It was a very exciting time.

Critical Overview

By the time *Buried Child* opened in New York in 1978, Sam Shepard was well-established as a counterculture playwright. The play earned him his unprecedented tenth Obie Award—no other American playwright had garnered more than two of Off-Broadway's highest honor. But with *Buried Child* Shepard had also found his way into the mainstream theatre, complete with larger audiences, critical raves from the popular press, and the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1979.

Although admitting Shepard was definitely not "commercial," the Nation's Harold Clurman, in his review of the Buried Child premiere at the Theatre for a New City on October 19,1978, called him "quintessentially American," and asserted, "I am convinced that he is not only a genuinely gifted but a meaningful writer." To illustrate Shepard's importance to the theatre and New York at the time of the production, Clurman observed, "The production cost $2,000: the actors receive a pittance. Two utterly worthless musicals now on Broadway cost more than $1 million each."

What was it about *Buried Child* that elicited such excited response? For several critics, it was Shepard's ability to tap into America's self perception in intriguing new ways. *"Buried Child,* for all its enigma, is a powerful reflection, no matter how 'funny' the mirror, of the dilemma of present day America," wrote William A. Raidy in *Plays and Players*. Raidy called the play Shepard's most interesting to date and the most stimulating play of the Off-Broadway season. He further noted, "Shepard reaffirms his position as one of America's most adventurous and imaginative playwrights."

In his review for *Time,* T. E. Kalem suggested, "If plays were put in time capsules, future generations would get a sharp-toothed profile of life in the U.S. in the past decade and a half from the works of Sam Shepard. His theme is betrayal, not so much of the American dream as of the inner health of the nation. He focuses on that point at which the spacious skies turned ominous with clouds of dread, and the amber waves of grain withered in industrial blight and moral dry rot."

Shepard was also praised for his use of language and unique, strong character portrayals. In *New York* magazine, John Simon declared of *Buried Child,* "This is the best Shepard play I have seen in some time, which means that it is powerful, obsessive stuff, intensely theatrical, not always disciplined but always wildly poetic, full of stage images and utterances replete with insidious suggestiveness even if they don't yield unequivocal meanings." Critic Jack Kroll wrote in *Newsweek:* "Like Tennessee Williams, Shepard writes strong parts. Even the 'minor' characters—a futile Catholic priest here—are fully magnetized to the play's core."

Because he was still relatively young (thirty-five at the time of *Buried Child's* premiere) and hadn't established himself yet as a major popular playwright, Shepard's work still drew comparisons to many other writers. In the *New York Times,* Mel Gussow noted,

"The buried child of the title, though actual, reminds us of the imaginary child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It is a dark secret, whose existence is never to be acknowledged in public. Although the play deals with a homecoming□one of several points in common with Harold Pinter□it is equally connected to Edward Albee."
In ‚*American Playwrights: A Critical Survey,* Bonnie Marranca added, "An odd play for Shepard, in the sense that his plays have always been identifiable by their striking originality. This one has the most echoes of plays of other writers: Ibsen's *Ghosts,* Pinter's *Homecoming,* and Albee's The American Dream come immediately to mind."

In deeper explorations of *Buried Child' s* literary conventions, scholars have observed Shepard's unique, tricky blending of realism with symbolism, which achieves unexpected results for audience members. "Shepard's play carefully sustains a realistic veneer, adhering almost formulaically to the familiar Ibsen/Strindberg brand of realism in theme and structure," observed Lynda Hart in *Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages*. Hart pointed out that *Buried Child* contains all the essential elements of a well-made, realistic drama, including a naturalistic set, meant to represent a shabby, middle-class American living room; psychologically real, motivated characters; and a fatal secret, hidden in the past and revealed gradually by exposition and character discoveries, until a horrifying climax pulls many of the clues together. Still, she noted, some pieces of the puzzle don't fit. "Motives are left undiscovered," Hart pointed out. "The past is revealed but fails to illuminate the present; character becomes increasingly disorganized and action unpredictable. The two antithetical forms [realism and symbolism] jarringly combine to produce an uneasy, inexplicable action that taunts our ability to make our observations intelligible."

Shepard revised the text of *Buried Child* for a Steppenwolf Theatre production in Chicago in 1995. His changes made it more clear that Tilden was the father of the "buried child," and, according to most reviewers, introduced more humor into the play. The Chicago production was successful enough to earn a Broadway run of the revised play in 1996, which has since prompted several revivals in regional theatres across the country.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Glenn is a Ph.D. specializing in theatre history and literature. In this essay he examines the importance of the harvest ritual to the plot and character construction of Buried Child.

Sam Shepard has often been called a mythic playwright, one whose work summons the contradictory images and archetypes of American life - killers and cowboys, Hollywood and farmsteads, rock n' roll and the open road. He is, as Wynn Handman, the artistic director of the American Place Theatre once remarked in an interview with *Newsweek,* "like a conduit that digs down into the American soil and what flows out of him is what we're all about."

What often flows out of Shepard are characters and stories that are at once exciting and recognizable as American allegories as well as shocking and repulsive for what they tell us about human instinct and behavior, regardless of cultural background. His is the gift of sight where many fear to look - a sort of witch doctor of modern America or, as Jack Gelber wrote in his introduction to Shepard's *Angel City, Curse of the Starving Class & Other Plays,* a shaman. "Anthropologists define the shaman as an expert in a primitive society who, in a trance state induced by drugs or music or other techniques, directly confronts the supernatural for the purposes of cures, clairvoyance, the finding of lost objects, and the foretelling of the future," Gelber explained. "Sam Shepard ... is a shaman - a New World shaman. There are no witches on broomsticks within these pages. That's the Old World. Sam is as American as peyote, magic mushrooms, Rock and Roll, and medicine bundles."

Shepard's unique brand of American shamanism has led him to explore the thoughts in the mind of a murderer seated in the electric chair in *Killer's Head*(1975), and the hip, dexterous verbal wit of dueling rock musicians in *The Tooth of Crime* (1972). He has plumbed the depths of the film industry and pop culture in plays like *Angel City* (1976) and *True West* (1980), and wrestled with quirky relationships in *Cowboy Mouth* (1971) and *Fool for Love* (1983). One of the most interesting features of these plays is their portrayal of recognizable *rituals*. From the seemingly random rules of engagement Hoss and Crow observe in *The Tooth of Crime* to the Indian bones and totems used by Rabbit to jump start the creation of a stalled disaster movie in *Angel City,* rituals of one kind or another figure prominently throughout Shepard's work.

Perhaps nowhere, however, is ritual as important as in *Buried Child*. On its surface, the play seems like a fairly typical, if somewhat dark, family drama, but surprises lie in wait below. In an article for *Modern Drama,* Thomas Nash noted, "here, behind the seemingly trivial squabbles and musings of a typical Midwestern family, are the shadows of sacrificial rites and the shades of dying gods."

The "sacrificial rites" found in *Buried Child,* though perhaps not immediately obvious, parallel primitive agricultural rituals associated with planting, tending, harvesting, and celebrating crops, activities which were essential to non-industrialized agrarian

societies. As Venetia Newall noted in an article for *Man, Myth, and Magic,* "It is difficult for us to realize nowadays, with tins and frozen foods available throughout the year, and imported tropical fruits on our tables even in the middle of winter, the anxiety which our ancestors felt as they waited for the annual harvest."

To help relieve their anxiety, and to rejoice as a community when their efforts met with success, early farming cultures developed a variety of rituals meant to bless the earth and the seeds that were sown, appeal to the various gods that represented elements necessary to crop growth, such as rain and sunshine, and preserve the spirits that inhabited the fields and their bounty from year to year. Such rituals have surrounded the planting and harvesting of wheat, corn, and rice - the principal crops of most of the earth's population - for thousands of years. The ancient Greeks, for example, worshiped Demeter, the goddess of grain, and developed rituals designed to please her, keep her spirit alive within their crops, and promote its renewal each spring. American Indians developed Corn Dances, while many European communities from the Middle Ages to the present day make dolls from the last sheaf harvested, or leave a few ears standing in the field until the next planting. Once the harvest left the field, it was time for rituals of gratitude, which typically involved fellowship in the community and great feasts. To this day, the Jewish community celebrates Sukkot - the Feast of the Booths - and most Americans and Canadians observe Thanksgiving in the fall, during harvest time, just as the Pilgrims may have done in Plymouth Colony in 1621.

In *Buried Child,* Shepard draws upon the essential elements of these rituals - fertility and nourishment, growth and maturation, death and resurrection - and symbolically provides each a chilling dual meaning. One of the most important and recognizable sacrificial rites dramatized in *Buried Child* is the death of the old Corn King and the birth or, in this case, resurrection, of a new Corn King. Behind this ritual, shared in one form or another by many different cultures, is the notion that a spirit inhabits the corn plant, and the spirit must be kept alive from the time the plant is harvested until the following year, when a new field is planted, in order to ensure a bountiful new crop.

The plot construction and characters of *Buried Child* contain echoes of this ancient corn ritual. Outside the house lies a fallow field, which hasn't been planted in years. Inside, sickly and near death, lies Dodge, the patriarch of the family and, in ritual terms, the symbolic "Corn King" whose spirit must be kept alive until a successor is found. Like the old man with a long beard, leaning on a scythe, who is the symbol of the Old Year, annually dying on December 31, Dodge is almost helpless, and entirely dependent on his wife and sons while waiting for the infant New Year or, in this case, a young, strong new Corn King, to replace him. The play reaches its climax when the old Corn King dies and a new one, the outsider, Vince, assumes the throne.

Early in the play, one of Dodge's sons, the emotionally disturbed Tilden, covers his sleeping father with the husks of the corn he has mysteriously brought in from the field. Although he will not inherit the role of new Corn King at the end of the play, Tilden is nevertheless a symbolic part of the ritual. He represents the youth and virility his father, now dying on the stalk, once had, making him a threat to the old Corn King. To amplify his role as his father's aggressor, and possible heir to his throne, Tilden is able to reap

more than just crops from an empty field. Years before, he managed to impregnate his own mother, long after she and Dodge had stopped "planting the field" as it were. "We weren't planning on havin' any more boys," Dodge admits to Shelly late in the play. "We had enough boys already. In fact, we hadn't been sleepin' in the same bed for about six years."

Dodge's middle son, Bradley, is another candidate for the title of new Corn King, though he is even less likely to wrest the office from the cantankerous patriarch than Tilden. When Bradley is first mentioned by Halie, Dodge expresses contempt for his offspring, who has the unusual habit of sneaking into the house and cutting his father's hair while he sleeps. "You tell Bradley that if he shows up here with those clippers, I'll separate him from his manhood! " Dodge warns. But Bradley has already been symbolically castrated. He lost a leg in a chainsaw accident and, though he bristles and blusters as loud as any playground bully, without his leg he is reduced to a whining, pre-pubescent schoolboy.

Still, just as Dodge feared, Bradley appears after the old man falls asleep. Standing over Dodge's rumpled, wheezing form stretched out on the sofa, Bradley mutters, "Harvest's over, Pops," and proceeds to savagely cut his father's hair, as if he were husking an ear of corn. With this act, the old Corn King falls even closer to his death.

Vince's appearance on the scene in Act II finally signals the arrival of a potential new Corn King. Young, strong, and untouched by the terrible family secret that has crippled the rest of the men in the household, Vince introduces a renewed spirit of hope into the grim ceremony. For a time, Vince is at once the buried child, the lost Ansel, and himself - all the missing sons of the family. Perhaps recognizing the seriousness of the threat Vince represents, Dodge, the old King, and Tilden, a contender for the throne, claim not to recognize the boy, though both are eager to win the favor of Shelly, the new female Vince has brought into the male-dominated homestead.

To formulate a plan of attack, and perhaps steel himself for the battle to come, Vince leaves the house on a mission for Dodge, his symbolic nemesis in the fight for the Corn King title. While he is away, each of the inhabitants of the house makes a play for power. Halie returns home with a man from the outside - Father Dewis, who turns out to be completely ineffectual and metaphorically impotent. Bradley's bullying turns to whimpering when Shelly takes his artificial leg and wields it like a weapon. Tilden, left with no other choice, leaves the scene to exhume the "buried child," the root of all their troubles.

When Vince finally returns home from his overnight driving odyssey through the symbolically purifying rain, he cuts his way through the porch's locked screen door and steps through, like a baby emerging from its mother's womb. Nash observed: "Clearly, Shepard has used this dramatic moment as a *symbolic rebirth,* calculated to correspond to the exact moment when Tilden, alone in the rain, must be pulling the decayed corpse of the buried child from the mud of the cornfields." In terms of the symbolic ritual he is reenacting, he has returned just in time for the new season's planting. With his dying words, the old Corn King (Dodge) wills the house and fields to the new Corn King

(Vince). Outside, after the cleansing rain and nourishing sunshine, the crops miraculously begin to burst through the soil of the fields. Inside, after a long season of blight and decay, hope is renewed as the buried child is carried upstairs for a homecoming with its mother, and a new Corn King reigns from his living room throne.

Critical Essay #2

Examining Shepard's dual career as a Hollywood actor and an experimental playwright, Brustein reviews the heralded 1996 revival of Buried Child, *for which Shepard both revised and wrote new material. Comparing the play with the author's autobiographical* Cruising Paradise, *the critic finds that while the play deals with difficult themes, it is ultimately deserving of its status as a modern classic.*

Challenging the camera over a period of thirty years, Sam Shepard's face appears in sepia and black-and-white on the jackets of three newly issued books. The chiseled bones, the two deep furrows in his forehead, the uncombed mane and dimpled chin are physical constants. What the camera also reveals is how the acid of years and circumstance have etched radical mutations in Shepard's appearance. Something more than passing time is responsible for his transformation from the youthful hipster depicted in Bruce Weber's unposed photo for *The Unseen Hand and Other Plays,* to the engaging, rather shy young man of Weber's cover shot for *Simpatico,* to the unshaven, haggard, vaguely anguished figure in Brigitte Lacombe's portrait for *Cruising Paradise,* to the harrowing, glowering desperado in Richard Avedon's recent celebrity mug shot for *The New Yorker*. Avedon's black-bordered photograph shows the face and neck of its now middle-aged subject weathered by outdoor and indoor experience, his brow threatening, his mouth drooping at the edges with surly contempt. You can almost sense him tapping his foot, an unwilling subject, impatient to return to his horses and the open air, who doesn't know what in hell he's doing in a New York studio.

Why, he might be asking, is a man who prided himself on being a private, even reclusive writer now willing to cooperate with this cosmopolitan world of hype and fashion? Once a mysterious presence behind a wealth of cryptic plays, today he finds himself a highly publicized celebrity, not through his theater work, which never managed to draw a mainstream public, but largely as a result of screen appearances, beginning with *The Right Stuff,* which brought him momentary fame as the new Gary Cooper. It is true that Shepard's movie roles have been occasional, even desultory lately, and that the once-prolific dramatist has only produced three plays in more than a decade. Yet, we are told, this will be Shepard's jubilee year. He has just enjoyed his first Broadway premiere - a revised version of the 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Buried Child* in the splendid Steppenwolf production (which will soon be closing). The Signature Theatre will stage a series of Shepard works next year off-Broadway, some old, some revised, some newly written. And Knopf and Vintage are issuing a series of Shepard volumes, the latest among them a collection of "tales" called *Cruising Paradise*.

Reading *Cruising Paradise* after seeing *Buried Child* (Brooks Atkinson Theatre) reinforces the impression that Shepard's writing is becoming increasingly autobiographical, if not self-absorbed. By common consent his masterpiece, *Buried Child* was the beginning of a relatively new phase in Shepard's work. Not long before he was discovered by Hollywood, he turned away from the rock-and-rolling hallucinogenics of *Tooth of Crime* and *The Unseen Hand* ("impulsive chronicles," as he now calls them, "representing a chaotic, subjective world") to compose domestic plays in a relatively

realistic style. It was around the same time that this itinerant road warrior settled into domesticity with Jessica Lange and permitted the studios to replace his broken front tooth. What was jagged and chaotic and parentless in the Shepard persona was now turning familiar and familial.

Indeed, *Cruising Paradise* suggests that the characters depicted in *Buried Child* (and other plays of the period: *Curse of the Starving Class, A Lie of the Mind, Simpatico)* bear a family resemblance to Shepard's own ancestors. As a matter of fact, a few *Buried Child* character names - Dodge, Vinnie, Ansel - are mentioned (though in different guises) in these brief stories, along with the weird names of some recurrent Shepard locales (Azusa, Cucamonga).

The name of Dodge, a cantankerous drunkard in *Buried Child,* reappears in the stories as his great-great-great-grandfather, Lemuel Dodge, who lost an ear fighting for the North and an arm fighting for the South. (These amputated parts may have inspired Bradley's prosthetic leg in *Buried Child.)* But Dodge, the dramatic character, is probably much closer to Shepard's own father, whose bourbon-soaked presence dominates the first half of *Cruising Paradise*. In "The Self-Made Man," Shepard remembers his father as a World War II fighter pilot in a silk scarf, who mournfully concluded that "aloneness was a fact of nature." In "The Real Gabby Hayes," he recalls him as man who loved the open desert and loaded guns, two passions inherited by his son. In "A Small Circle of Friends," he describes the way his father gradually estranged all his close companions as a result of his drinking bouts and temper tantrums. At one point, he attacked a man he suspected of having an affair with his wife, smashing his face on his raised knee and splitting his nose. And in "See You In My Dreams," Shepard recounts (in an episode recapitulated in *A Lie of the Mind)* how his father was run over by a car in Bernalillo after a three-day binge of fighting, fishing and drinking with a Mexican woman. His son buried his ashes in a plain pine box in Santa Fe's National Cemetery, feeling "a terrible knotted grief that couldn't find expression."

Most of these stories, like many of his plays, take place in motor courts - Shepard may be the most inveterate chronicler of motel culture since Nabokov made Humbert Humbert chase Lolita through the back lots of America. (Both writers recognize that nothing better suggests the bleak rootlessness of American life than a rented room.) In one of the stories - "Hail From Nowhere" - a man (the author?) is looking for his wife in a motel room, and discovers that she has abandoned him. He can't remember what they fought about, but in a companion piece, "Just Space," the woman describes him to her mother as someone who "carries guns" and tried to shoot her. I was reminded of a time when Shepard, having driven to Boston with a brace of shotguns in his trunk, threatened to use them on a *Herald* photographer who was stalking him and Jessica Lange through the streets of Beacon Hill. Rage, alcohol and a profound respect and awe for trackless nature - these constitute the basic Shepard inheritances. They also constitute the essence of *Buried Child*. Set in central Illinois in 1978, the play is about an alcoholic couch potato (Dodge), his hectoring unfaithful wife (Halie), two dysfunctional sons (the half-wit Tilden and the sadistic amputee Bradley), a grandson (Vince) and his girlfriend (Shelly). Some past nastiness is afflicting this family, a secret

that is gradually exhumed (along with the child) in Ibsenite fashion: Halie has borne a baby out of wedlock by her own son, Tilden.

Shepard monitors this story through strong and violent metaphors. At the end of the first act, Bradley cuts his father's hair until his scalp bleeds, and, at the close of the second, thrusts his fingers into Shelly's mouth in a gesture equivalent to rape. When Vince returns to the family, no one recognizes him. He responds by drinking himself into a stupor with his grandfather's whiskey. By the end of the play, Dodge has quietly expired, Vince has inherited his house, and Tilden - who earlier carried corn and carrots to dump them into Dodge's lap in some vague vegetative rite - enters with the decaying remains of the child who was buried in the garden. It is a remarkable moment, contrasting fertility and drought, invoking the lost innocence and failed expectations not just of a family but of an entire nation. *Buried Child* reverberates with echoes of *The Waste Land, Tobacco Road, Of Mice and Men,* even *Long Day's Journey Into Night,* but it is at the same time an entirely original Shepard concoction.

And the production that director Gary Sinise has fashioned with his Chicago company is a corker - easily the finest staging of a Shepard work I have ever seen. Robert Brill's vast set is composed of an endless staircase ascending to nowhere and wooden slatted walls decorated with the head of a lopsided moose that seems to be as drunk as the owner. The accomplished cast fills this space entirely, investing this dark gothic concerto of a play with elaborate comic cadenzas. James Gammon, a quintessential Shepard actor, is especially powerful as Dodge, rasping his part as if he were swallowing razor blades. Leo Burmester as Bradley drags his leg along the floor like Walter Slezak stalking John Garfield in *The Fallen Sparrow.* Terry Kinney plays the lobotomized Tilden in filthy boots and trousers, as if he had just been plucked from the earth himself. And Lois Smith is an eerie, frenzied, nattering Halie.

While *Buried Child* uses the family as a commentary on an entire nation, *Cruising Paradise* is oddly insulated from anything but Shepard memories. In most of these stories, this is not a pressing problem. Whether told in first or third person, they are drenched in a powerful nostalgia. "I found myself lost in the past more often than not," Shepard writes in "The Devouring Lion," which may explain why he has chosen the reflectiveness of narrative rather than the immediacy of drama for evoking his family history: the short tale is the perfect medium for reminiscing about yourself and your ancestors.

It is not, however, an ideal medium for talking about your experiences as a movie star. And what weakens and finally enfeebles *Cruising Paradise* is the self-regarding, oddly conflicted nature of the final stories. Here, in a series of twelve impressionistic vignettes, mostly written on location in 1990 for a film he was shooting at the time, presumably Volker Schlondorff s *Voyager,* Shepard goes by train to California for an initial meeting with the German director, then by car to Mexico for the filming. "I'm an actor now," he writes. "I confess, I don't fly. I've been having some trouble landing jobs lately because of this not wanting to fly; plus, I refuse to live in L.A." He also doesn't own a fax machine or a word processor, and he won't do "press junkets."

During appointments with costume and makeup, he realizes that he is going to be thrown together with perfect strangers on a long shoot. This makes him want to "either run or puke." He gets in a hassle with an assistant to the director who, because of Shepard's fear of flying, is required to make arrangements for a special limo. These arrangements are complicated by Mexican border regulations and Shepard's taste in cars. "I don't need a limo. Just get me a Chevy," he remarks. The L.A. weather reminds him of murder, "the perfect weather to kill someone in." Passing some "very chic people" in the hotel, "sinking into paisley, overstuffed sofas, reaching for silver trays full of cashews and almonds," he again thinks of murder. He remembers what Celine said in his very last interview: "I just want to be left alone."

Since he won't fly, or use technology, or engage himself socially, Shepard manages to create as much trouble for the studio as the most demanding star. He harasses his Austrian driver because he insists on wearing a tux while driving through the desert. He feels alienated from the director when, sick with *"la turista,"* he cries over a lost love ("I barely know the man"). In short, he behaves like a royal pain in the ass.

He arrives in Mexico finally after a series of harrowing adventures. The limo is stopped and stripped by some narcs looking for drugs. Shepard can only get a work permit by lying to a female bureaucrat, telling her he's Spencer Tracy. "I'm not an actor. I'm a criminal," he muses. "Maybe there is some inherent crime attached to pretending." These last stories contain some finely observed paragraphs about the Mexican landscape, the local villages and the Indian extras, but the very act of writing them while acting in a movie suggests the effort to maintain a literary identity.

Shepard knows that there is something inherently contradictory about his twin careers. It is a little jarring to find a man noted for his reserve and taciturnity talking about "this scene I'm playing now," about having "no idea whatsoever how to play this character." He has elected to follow the career of a public personality without sacrificing his privacy as an artist. This is not an easy choice. The face in the Avedon portrait suggests it's a choice that is tearing him apart.

Source: Robert Brustein, "Shepard's Choice" in the *New Republic,* Vol. 215, no. 3 & 4, July 15 & 22,1996, pp. 27-29.

Critical Essay #3

Calling Buried Child "Shepard's best play," Simon reviews the 1996 revival. The critic offers a highly favorable appraisal of the work, calling it "as good of its kind as it gets."

Buried Child is Sam Shepard's best play. It is what the French call *miserabiliste* theater, but as good of its kind as they come, as much of a classic as *Christina's World* or a George Price cartoon. The central concept of a rural American family going down the drain because of - literally - a skeleton in the closet may be a bit schematic and the symbol-ism-cum-absurdism a tad dragged in by the cat. Even so, the flamboyant blend of the comic and the horrific, the verbally teasing and visually terrifying - in short, the hair-and-hackle-raising humor - takes you to a Shepard country where, laughing and shuddering, you never know when you'll be rolling in the aisle or scared out of your wits.

It is useless to try to retell the plot, minimalist yet convoluted, but sense can be made of the seemingly preposterous: Shepard gives us his family's and his country's history as reflected in a fun-house mirror, the very distortions grinning their way to the core of an insidiously incisive truth. The couch-bound grandfather (James Gammon), cursing his family and world as he revels in his filth; the mild-mannered near-idiot son (Terry Kinney) who keeps bringing in things that grow or fester outside; the one-legge and violent elder son (Leo Burmester) who practices petty viciousness on other people; the grandmother (Lois Smith) who berates everyone and hangs out with an addled priest (Jim Mohr); the grandson (Jim True) who escaped to the city, returning years later with his saxophone and a girlfriend (Kellie Overbey) who wants out of this madhouse in which none of the family recognize her boyfriend - all of these compel us to join their metaphysical staggers between farce and melodrama.

Gary Sinise has directed this Steppenwolf production with the trademark Chicago athleticism whose physicality sometimes detracts from the deeper meaning; he also introduces non sequiturs such as Grandma's leaving white-haired and returning a flaming redhead. But he does keep the mayhem spinning, even if the finish is less devastating than it might be. In the remarkable cast, only Jim True strikes me as too dopey a beanpole for what is, after all, the nearest thing to an authorial alter ego.

The set by Robert Brill, costumes by Allison Reeds, and lighting by Kevin Rigdon are fittingly, frighteningly good. And to think that it took Shepard's masterpiece 18 years to reach Broadway! But at least it gets there in style.

Source: John Simon, "The Good Shepard" in *New York,* Vol. 29, no. 19, May 13, 1996 , p. 60.

Adaptations

While *Buried Child* has not yet been turned into a film, other Shepard plays are available on video, including Fool for Love, directed in 1985 by Robert Altman and starring Kim Basinger and Shepard himself; and *True West* (1986), directed by Allan Goldstein and starring John Malkovich and Gary Sinise.

Topics for Further Study

Shepard incorporates many symbols into *Buried Child* in order to communicate deeper levels of meaning to his audiences. Consider the importance of Bradley's artificial leg, Dodge's baseball cap, and the blanket from the living sofa as symbols in the play. What might each one represent? How are they used by different characters? How do they affect your understanding of the play's plot?

Read another contemporary American family drama, such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* Edward Albee' s *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf,* or August Wilson's *Fences,* and discuss the contrasting views of *family* each playwright presents in his work. Consider such things as: the responsibilities of parents; animosities among family members; sibling rivalries; and the effects of domestic violence.

Sam Shepard has been called *a postmodern* writer. Research postmodernism as a style in late-twentieth-century drama. What elements of postmodernism does Shepard incorporate in *Buried Child?* Which does he ignore?

Several scholars and critics pointed to corn and its harvest as one of the central images and ritual influences in *Buried Child.* Using an encyclopedia or the Internet, research the history of this important crop and try to find two to three examples of rituals associated with its planting and harvest. Be prepared to examine cultures as widely different as the ancient Egyptians, Europeans of the Middle Ages, and the Native Americans of a few hundred years ago.

Compare and Contrast

1978: On April 17, trading on the New York Stock Exchange reaches a record single-day volume of 63.5 million shares. On November 1, the Dow Jones industrial average soars 35.34 points, a record-breaking advance for a single day of trading.

Today: Trading on the New York Stock Exchange is often ten times the volume of two decades ago, with over 600 million shares changing hands on a single day. Single day rises and drops of hundreds of points at a time are becoming common. In March of 1999, the Dow average closes above 10,000 points for the first time in history.

1978: In *Bakke vs. the Regents of the University of California,* the U.S. Supreme Court affirms a lower court decision requiring the University of California Medical School to admit Allan P. Bakke, a white male who claimed he was a victim of "reverse discrimination" as a result of the school's minority admissions plan.

Today: The *Bakke* case is again making headlines across the country as American universities and state governments wrestle with Affirmative Action policies that many, including a handful of vocal minority leaders, say are outdated and unfair. Colleges in Texas and Michigan are named in lawsuits by disgruntled student applicants, and forced to abandon admissions and hiring practices that favor minority applicants.

1978: Various religious "cults" are in the news. A murder-suicide ritual claims the lives of 917 members of the "Peoples Temple" in Guyana, including spiritual leader Jim Jones.

Today: On April 4, 1993, followers of spiritual leader David Koresh's Branch Davidians, are killed in an FBI raid on their Waco, Texas, compound, after a fifty-one-day standoff. Many vocal critics claim the FBI conducted themselves improperly. In March, 1997, near San Diego, California, thirty-nine members of the "Heaven's Gate" cult, believing they will leave the corporeal world and ascend to "the next level," don purple shrouds, drink a mixture of vodka and poison, and lie down to die with plastic bags over their heads. As the world moves toward the new millennium, such "death cults" are reported to be proliferating.

1978: Broadway, in New York City, is the center of America's theatrical world. The average cost of mounting a play on Broadway is around $200,000, and a few dozen plays are produced in the 1978-79 season. Tickets are considered high-priced, with seats averaging $18. Off- and Off-Off-Broadway theatres, where plays cost only a few thousand dollars to produce and ticket prices average $3-5, are on the rise. The Off-Broadway scene becomes a haven for new and experimental playwrights.

Today: A smash on Broadway is still considered the height of success in the American theatre, though smaller, Off-Broadway theatres are everywhere (more than two-hundred by a recent count) and regional theatres in places like Chicago, Minneapolis, and Houston are becoming more influential. It costs well over $1 million to mount a play on Broadway, though only a handful are produced. In the 1992-93 season, only eighteen

plays were presented. Increasingly, Broadway has turned to musicals, revivals, and imports from abroad, mainly England. Large-scale, multi-million dollar spectacles such as Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Phantom of the Opera* are the norm.

What Do I Read Next?

In a career spanning more than thirty years, Sam Shepard has produced dozens of one-acts, full-length dramas, and screenplays. Some of his more popular plays include *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1983), and A *Lie of the Mind* (1985). These are all available in collected anthologies of Shepard's work such as *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays and The Unseen Hand and Other Plays.*

Buried Child echoes the plots, characters, and themes of some of the greatest plays in Western dramatic literature. Consider reading *Oedipus Rex* (c. 430-425 B.C.), Sophocles's tragedy about murder and incest in ancient Greece.

Death of a Salesman (1949) is Arthur Miller's modern tragedy about mediocrity and struggling with the American dream. *Buried Child* echoes many of its themes of disillusionment, delusion, and shattered hope.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1962) is Edward Albee's dark and twisted portrayal of a middle-aged couple's fights and fantasies over their imaginary son.

Buried Child, like many of Shepard's plays, recalls elements of popular myths and legends from society's shared past. The play is filled with symbolism and characters who resemble figures from the bible, childhood stories, and the myths of cultures around the world. For a scholarly exploration of the value of myths in human society, try Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell examines tales from *Oedipus the King* to *Beauty and the Beast,* and explains the archetypal hero common to all human beings.

Further Study

Bottoms, Stephen J. *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis,* Cambridge University Press, 1998.

One of the most recent studies of Shepard's work, Bottoms's analysis of Shepard's plays begins with his early, experimental one-acts, performed in churches and garages around New York in the 1960s; through his mainstream, full-length dramas and films of the 1970s and 1980s; and ending with *Simpatico,* produced in 1994.

Dugdale, John, compiler. *File on Shepard,* Methuen Drama, 1989.

This useful reference book, part of a series covering leading modern dramatists, contains a chronology of Shepard's career; descriptions and reviews of all his plays, from 1964-1985; selected quotes from the playwright himself; and a helpful bibliography of books and articles about Shepard and his work.

Shepard, Sam. *Cruising Paradise,* Vintage Books, 1997. A collection of forty short stories that explore some of the same motifs and themes found in Shepard's plays: America, the open road, solitude and loss, family, and the absurdity of life in show business.

Shepard, Sam. *Motel Chronicles,* City Lights Books, 1983. A sort of journal, filled with short stories, observations, and poetry by the playwright, mixed with black and white photographs.

Wade, Leslie. *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre,* Greenwood Press, 1997.

Wade's study of Shepard's career is part of a series of books called *Lives of the Theatre.* The volumes are designed to provide scholarly introductions to important figures and eras in world theatre, from ancient Greece to the present day. *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre* examines Shepard's evolving place in American dramatic literature from a leading Off-(and Off-Off-) Broadway experimentalist to a mainstream dramatist and filmmaker.

Bibliography

Auerbach, Doris. " *Buried Child*" in her *Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, andthe Off Broadway Theatre,* Twayne, 1982, pp. 53-61.

Clurman, Harold. Review of *Buried Child* in the *Nation,* December 2, 1978, pp. 621-22.

Gussow, Mel. Review of *Buried Child* in the *New York Times,* January 2, 1979, p. C7.

Hart, Lynda. "Realism Revisited: *Buried Child*" in her *Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages,* Greenwood Press, 1987, pp. 75-87.

Kalem, T. E. Review of *Buried Child* in *Time,* December 18, 1978.

Kroll, Jack, Constance Guthrie, and Janet Huck, "Who's That Tall Dark Stranger" in *Newsweek,* November 11, 1985, p. 71.

Kroll, Jack. Review of *Buried Child* in *Newsweek,* October 30, 1978.

Marranca, Bonnie. "Sam Shepard" in *American Playwrights: A Critical Survey,* p. 108.

Nash, Thomas. "Sam Shepard's Buried Child: The Ironic Use of Folklore" in *Modern Drama,* Vol. XXVI, no. 4, December, 1983, pp. 486-91.

Newall, Venetia. "Harvest" in *Man, Myth, and Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural,* Marshall Cavendish, 1970, pp. 1214-18.

Raidy, William A. Review of *Buried Child* in *Plays and Players,* February, 1979, pp. 36-37.

Simon, John. Review of *Buried Child* in *New York,* November 27, 1978, p. 118.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535