

## Fragmentation and Indeterminacy in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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### Abstract

This study has focused on a postmodern and present reading of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*. The play contains many postmodern points and the characters, were studied through postmodern theories of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Ihab Hassan. The characters of the play and their disintegrated life revolves around old beliefs in grand narratives and their struggle with the suspicion they have started to have, towards those grand narratives. The grand narratives, which are prominent in the play, are that of Christianity and that of the American dream. This postmodern play like other postmodern text is a hybrid, contains many references to previous works in the form of pastiche and transgressing genres through using many elements from Gothic style. The gaps within this postmodern text, which according to Hassan's theory of postmodernism are called indeterminacy create a sense of confusion, mimicking the postmodern condition of distrust and lack of a stable reference point. The element of indeterminacy and the gaps require the reader to be an active participant to fill the gaps of the text. The results of the study show that these elements have created a sense of ongoing discovery in a world filled with uncertainties. The results also show how the characters have started questioning the grand narratives but are still for most part under their influence.

*Key Words; Fragmentation, Indeterminacy, participation, Sam Shepard, Buried child, Jean François Lyotard, Ihab Hasan, postmodernism*

### 1. Introduction:

The postmodern elements of Indeterminacy, Fragmentation, were used to answer questions one. The *Buried Child* portrays the elements of postmodernism and the elements of postmodernism can be easily traced in the play. Hassan's (1986) elements are easily traced in the play, fragmentation is present on all levels in the play, form, characters, family and relationships and seem to be accepted by the characters if not preferred since they all go on with the things the way they are. Indeterminacy is also available in the beliefs and actions of the characters as well as the past, which seem to be ambiguous and the memories to be displaced. The elements of indeterminacy and fragmentation, coupled with suspicion in grand narratives, all add to the sense of loss of a fixed reference point in the postmodern world and promote the need to abandon grand narratives and seek and only trust truth in the immediate context.

Many critics have asserted to the postmodern nature of Sam Shepard's plays, and have categorized *Buried Child* as a postmodern work. Both Malkin (1999) and Schmidt (2005) have pointed out to the postmodern anxiety, Schmidt has said about the play to be indicative of Lyotard's "the postmodern condition".

Malkin (1999) wrote in his book *Memory-theater and postmodern drama* that the drama since 1970s is postmodern drama and can be defined and examined through how it reacts to past. Schmidt (2005) in *The theater of Transformation: Postmodernism in America Drama* also wrote about the American

theatre, from the 1960s and '70s, mentioning that it emphasizes on a postmodern drama than modern and favours the fragmentary, surface play of theatre and the shifting registers of character identity, to institute a theatre of transformation.

## 2. Discussion and Result:

### 2.1 Fragmentation and Indeterminacy

The definition of this element is, "Indeterminacy often follows from fragmentation. The postmodernist only disconnects; fragments are all he pretends to trust. His ultimate opprobrium is "totalization"-any synthesis whatever, social, epistemic, even poetic."(Hassan, 1986, p.504)

Hassan (1986) calls "indeterminacy or rather, indeterminacies" (for the sake of the pluralism under scrutiny), "which include all manner of ambiguities, ruptures, and displacements affecting knowledge and society." (p. 504). Hassan (1986) himself points out to the close relation between indeterminacy and "fragmentation", explaining that the latter follows the former (p. 505). Hassan (1986), quoting Kristeva, mentions "That which, through language, is part of no particular language... That which, through meaning, is intolerable, unthinkable: the horrible, the abject" (p. 506) is the postmodern. The postmodernists' tendency towards hybridization is related to rejection, or suspicion, of all forms of fixity, determinacy, authority and purity. According to Hassan there is no trusting the stable and determined, "Indeterminacy often follows from fragmentation. The postmodernist only disconnects; fragments are all he pretends to trust. His ultimate opprobrium is "totalization"-any synthesis whatever, social, epistemic, even poetic."(Hassan, 1986, p.505).

In the Shepard's play *Buried Child*, nothing is certain, given and for sure as many critics have pointed aptly. Malkin (1999) notes that in postmodern plays, past is no longer grounded and it floats within the collective unconscious in a place of fragmented identity. Malkin (1999) notices in studying the *Buried child*, that there is a tension between remembering and forgetting.

Therefore, the issues of past, remembering and identity are linked together and with the postmodern ideas of subjectivity and the lack of universal truth and portray the postmodern in this play. Schmidt (2005), mentions that postmodern playwrights (including Shepard) favored the "fragmentary, surface play of theatre and used the shifting registers of character identity, to institute a theatre of transformation, characters, situations, spaces, and time change and shift under the gaze of audience and actors". According to Schmidt (2005), these transformations indicate what Jean-François Lyotard called "*the postmodern condition*".

These ambiguities that are never solved coupled with the fragmented portrayal of the past through the remembrance of different characters, clearly indicates the postmodern attitude of distrust and suspicion. The instances of these ambiguities involve the reality of the supposed incest, the father of the born baby, Halie's memories of the past regarding her single life, or regarding Ansel (another son who died)'s achievements in life and his death, they mysterious growth of corn, Tilden's twenty years' time away from home, what he has done that has changed him, the nature of Tilden's health and his problem, Bradley's part in the incident with the chainsaw that cost him his leg, why Tilden was in jail, Bradley's birth place and father, Vincent's relation to the family and why he was not recognized, who killed the baby.

All these issues are shrouded in mystery, since the characters do not seem to agree with each other on what happened which raises the question whether some of them happened at all. The two ambiguities, which are most prominent, are related to the issue of Ansel's achievements and the reality of incest and the real father of the baby born and the father of Bradley.

Halie is the only person within the family and all characters who seems to have a high opinion of Ansel. She is also the only person, who mentions him, and other never mention him, unless they are objecting to the facts that Halie brings up regarding him.

HALIE. Ansel could've been a great man. One of the greatest. I only regret that he didn't die in action. It's not fitting for a man like that to die in a motel room. A soldier. He could've won a medal. He could've been decorated for valor. I've talked to Father Dewis about putting up a plaque for Ansel. He thinks it's a good idea. He agrees. He knew Ansel was his favorite player. He even recommended to the City Council that they put up a statue of Ansel. A big, tall statue with a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other. That's how much he thinks of Ansel.

TILDEN. Ansel was a hero? (Shepard, 2006, p.27)

It is not only Tilden who objects to this fact, but also Bradley, who objects when Halie mentions that the statue of Ansel will have a basketball in it. This shows that there are many ambiguous things regarding Ansel. Bradley later on in the play also objects to the truth of this fact, despite Halie's reproach.

HALIE. [...] Ansel's getting a statue, Dodge. Did you know that? Not a plaque but a real live statue. A full bronze. Tip to toe. A basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other.

BRADLEY. (*His back to Halie.*) He never played basketball! (Shepard, 2006, p.97)

The issue of true fatherhood is central to the plot of the play, concerning the buried infant, Bradley and Tilden's son, Vincent. However, the most important one concerns the identity of the father of the buried infant. Dodge throughout the play mentions the infant many times; however, his statements contradict each other. The first time he mentions the infant is in act I, although it is in passing. The issue of fatherhood is brought up when he mentions Bradley's birthplace and refuses to admit being Bradley's father. Dodge mentions that the buried infant, however, is his flesh and blood. "He was born in a hog wallow" (Shepard, 2006, p.32) and "He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's out there in the backyard!" (Shepard, 2006, p.33).

Tilden is also curious about this unspoken part of their past and questions Dodge's statement relating the infant being his flesh and blood. However, Dodge refuses to speak about the matter, but in his refusal, the words are still very revealing. The reference to the last time he seeded the corn if read metaphorically, could make the issue of the identity of the father of the infant more complicated by casting doubt whether Dodge could in fact be the father of the infant himself. Later on in the play, there is still much doubt about the father of the infant, Tilden believes that he was the father of the infant mentioning it to Vincent, "I had a son once but we buried him." (Shepard, 2006, p.58).

TILDEN. Why'd you tell her it was *your* flesh and blood?

DODGE. I don't want to talk about it.

TILDEN. What do you want to talk about?

DODGE. I don't want to talk about anything! I don't want to talk about troubles or what happened fifty years ago or thirty years ago or the racetrack or Florida or the last time I seeded the corn! I don't want to talk period. Talking just wears me thin. (Shepard, 2006, p.35)

Dodge's statements regarding this issue are always in contradiction with each other. Dodge mentions to Dodge, that in this house "They'll murder your children. That's what will happen". This statement once again casts doubts as to who the father is, and whether he is talking about his child that was murdered. However, in the third act, when Dodge decides to narrate what has happened to Shelly, his story is very clear, but in comparison to what he has mentioned earlier in the play, it is inconsistent. In this narration, he mentions that he was not the father of the infant and therefore, he did not ask for a doctor for Halie's labour but for the other boys, Bradley included, he got the best doctors. This shows that he does not mention that Bradley is not his flesh or that the infant was his flesh, as he did previously.

## 2.2 Participation

As Hassan (1986) mentions participation is caused Indeterminacy, since the gaps that exist need to be filled. The play like any other postmodern text, invites performance, “it wants to be written, revised, answered, acted out. Indeed, so much of postmodern art calls itself performance, as it transgresses genres. As performance, art (or theory for that matter) declares its vulnerability to time, to death, to audience, to the other.”(p.507)

The gaps and indeterminacy that was in every corner of the play, invites the audience to clarify them using their own imagination and asks the audience to draw its own conclusions. The gaps mentioned earlier and the lack of characterization in the play makes participation a necessity.

The characters as it befits a play is missing given that the voice of the author is usually not present in a play, however, Shepard limits himself in only describing the surroundings, appearance, words and tone of the characters, giving no further clues. In the play, there is no information about the characters' past or any clear indication of the way the lead their lives presently. This leaves all the characters open to suspicion, making them untrustworthy and fallible that in turn adds to the element of ambiguity and indeterminacy.

The character of Halie, Dodge, Tilden, Bradley all have to be discovered from the fragments of information given in the play by other characters. Dodge who portrays suspicion regarding the stories Halie narrates about her life as a young woman, and the fact that she was from city and not used to farm life only gives the portrayal of Halie's character.

Dodge mentions repeatedly that Halie is having an affair with the priest and that she has never been the virtuous type. However, no evidence is found in the play or given by any other character to prove that Dodge's account of Halie is true, except for Halie's absence of one night.

The character of Dodge is equally hazy, and it is only through Bradley's account that we can learn somethings about Dodge like his previous success in sports, and his bad temper and his ill treatment of Bradley when he Dodge was still powerful. Ansel's past given that he is dead and absent, is an enigma since different characters have differing and opposing ideas in his regard. While Halie worships Ansel, others fail to remember his heroic acts and object to their reality, making the reader doubt anything that Halie mentions about Ansel, his life, achievements, marriage and his death.

Bradley is equally an enigmatic character, Halie mentions that he is not capable of looking after himself and we learn that he has lost his leg in a chainsaw accident because he was not smart, which indicates that he might have done it on purpose for some reason. Dodge does not want Bradley to come because he cuts him when he is cutting his hair. Dodge also mentions to Shelly that Bradley is a pushover and has always been a push over, however; they seem to be afraid of him now. The fact that Dodge mentioned Bradley not to be his flesh and blood ads to the enigma as well. Halie also mentions that Bradley has many shortcomings, but attests that he feels responsible and is welcomed in his own house.

Tilden's character is not any less hazy that the rest of the characters, firstly it is not known whether or not he was part of the incest or not and whether he was the father of the infant, secondly nothing is known about his absence for twenty years which he spent in another city, expect that he got into trouble, thirdly it is unclear what is wrong with him and why others, Halie and Dodge and Bradley think he is incapable of doing anything and is in need of supervision. Finally, the most enigmatic of all is why he does not remember Vincent and why that part of his life in which he fathered Vincent is not mentioned at all.

All these gaps and indeterminacies invite the reader to participate and try to figure out and complete the gaps using their own discretion, unravelling the mystery and the characters as Vincent and Shelly try to unravel the issues.

## 3. Conclusion



The study of the elements of postmodernism which are abundant in this play, showed how the mood of the play is dependent on them. The lack of a stable truth and suspicion towards any generalizations about life and experience loom large in the play. The characters' sense of distrust is also always apparent, however, especially for the older generation the predefined truths of the past, still have a stronger hold.

This article attempted to trace the postmodern elements mentioned by Jean François Lyotard and Ihab Hassan in the text. The elements of Indeterminacy and Fragmentation have been studied about this text. The study shows how postmodernist elements are present in the play and reflect the themes.

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