

Family Reintegration: A Healing Process of Traumatic Effect in Sam Shepherd's *Buried Child*

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Abstract

This article explores the dimension of family trauma and healing in Sam Shepherd's play *Buried Child* through a Freudian lens. It investigates how repressed secrets of the Dodge family, the murder of an infant born out of incest relation between the mother of the family, Halie, and her eldest son Tilden affect the psychological and emotional well-being, economic affairs and interpersonal relation. It investigates how repressed secrets within the Dodge family, particularly the hidden crime of filicide, affect their psychological and emotional well-being. Based on Freudian theories of repression and catharsis, this article examines how the eventual confession of the crime leads to the process of healing and family reintegration. Analyzing the repressed psychic pain and their healing through confession, the article argues repression of painful secrets would disintegrate the family ties which can be healed through confession and leads to psychological relief and reintegration.

Keywords: Filicide, healing, incest, psychoanalysis, reintegration, repression.

Introduction

Sam Shepard's second play *Buried Child* portrays the integration of a Midwestern farm family which has long been disintegrated following the murder of an infant born from an incestuous relationship between the mother, Halie and her eldest son Tilden. Dodge, the head of the family, buries the child as an attempt to hide the impending fear of shame and guilt. With the burial "The family tries desperately to establish some sense of normalcy by suppressing the horrible events in hopes that they will disappear from the family's collective memory" (Opipari, 2010, p.123). The family avoids the normal and meaningful communication, which further dysregulates the ties and bonding with the members. But with the wearing of time, the memory of filicide surges back and gradually affects their emotion and family affairs. This agrarian family, which was once a well-established and produced enough milk to fill Lake Michigan, gradually turns away from farming. The faith and reliance of family members in family affairs and support weaken. The faith and reliance of family members in family affairs and support weaken. The suspicion and mistrust towards own family members grow and the fruitful communication gets obstructed. The members feel a constant threat of the consequences of hovering around them. According to Freud, repression is a defense mechanism in which traumatic memories or impulses are forced out of conscious awareness, only to resurface in other, often destructive, ways. In *Buried Child*, the family's refusal to confront their crime reflects this Freudian notion of repression, as

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Dodge attempts to hide the event, believing it will fade from memory. However, as Freud (1976) argues, even the painful event driven out of consciousness and out of memory have apparently saved the person from a large amount of unpleasure, but the repressed wishful impulse continues to exist in the unconscious (p. 2215). This results in dysfunction in various aspects of person's daily life.

The impending threat compels the family members to become hypervigilant, constantly watching each other and move around them with suspicion. They live in perpetual fear that their dark secret will be exposed, leading to a profound moral, emotional, and structural collapse. As James A. Crank (2012) explains, "The secrets of the family's past hang over the play like a dark cloud that threatens to annihilate the family's existence, and each member viciously attacks anyone who tries to expose any piece of information that might bring dishonor or shame to the family's place in the town" (p. 59). The relentless need to conceal the crime constantly consumes their energy, causing communication among the family members to break down, severely weakening their familial bonds. Dodge, once a prosperous Midwestern farmer, abandons his land, becomes bedridden, and turns to alcohol and television for escape. His wife, Halie, neglects her household responsibilities and engages in an extramarital affair. Their eldest son, Tilden, returns home, unable to sustain himself, while the youngest, Bradley, an amputee, struggles with his dependence on others. Instead of supporting one another, the family members withdraw, avoiding meaningful communication and further fracturing their relationships.

When Tilden's forgotten son, Vince, and his girlfriend, Shelley, arrive at the family home, a tense confrontation ensues as the family members debate whether to let them in. Shelley soon realizes that Vince is completely denied any recognition of his familial ties, with the family rejecting any notion of a flesh-and-blood connection. Eager to impress Shelley and prove his belonging to a well-established agrarian family, Vince attempts to reconnect. However, Dodge harshly rebuffs him, exclaiming, "Stop calling me Grandpa, will ya'! It's sickening. 'Grandpa.' I'm nobody's Grandpa!" (Shepherd, 1998, p. 1210). Dodge, preoccupied with the burdens of the family, shows no interest in welcoming Vince or Shelley. Vince, baffled and humiliated by the rejection in front of his girlfriend, bursts out in frustration: "How could they not recognize me? How in the hell could they not recognize me? I'm their son!" (p. 1213). Vince's desire to reconnect is met with indifference; instead of being welcomed, he is treated as an outsider. The family fears that Shelley might uncover their dark secret if she stays. Despite being insulted, Shelley stands by Vince and supports his attempts to reunite with his family.

Upon entering the house, Shelley immediately senses the deep, irreparable rift within the family. Accepting the fractured state of the relationships, she takes it upon herself to engage with the family, initiating conversations with the hope of bridging the rift. As she forms these connections, she uncovers the horrifying secret: the family had hidden the truth about the murder of an infant. With Dodge confessing his involvement and the discovery of the baby's decaying body, the long-buried secret finally comes to light.

While much research has been conducted on the themes of secrecy and familial dysfunction in *Buried Child*, less attention has been paid to the psychoanalytic dimensions of repression and catharsis in the family's eventual reintegration. Existing analyses often focus on the social or symbolic meanings of the family's decay, but they overlook how Freud's psychoanalytic theory—particularly his concepts of repression, trauma, and catharsis—can be applied to understand the family's psychological dynamics. This article addresses that gap by using Freudian psychoanalysis to examine how the buried secret affects the characters' psychic health and how its eventual revelation serves as a catalyst for emotional healing and family reintegration.

Methodology

This study employs a Freudian psychoanalytic approach, analyzing key concepts such as repression, trauma, and catharsis as they manifest in the Dodge family's interactions. Through a close reading of the text, the article highlights how the family's suppressed guilt and fear resurface and how confession functions as a therapeutic process, facilitating the characters' recovery from psychological and emotional wounds. By grounding the analysis in Freudian theory, this article offers a fresh perspective on how Shepard's play engages with deeper psychological processes related to familial trauma.

This article deals about the effort of healing painful memory and its effects on thought, emotion and behavior. Psychoanalytic theory assumes that painful memory continues till it is repressed and its effect will reduce only when it is expressed. The traumatic event that lies in the psyche can't be suppressed to erase it. If it is suppressed it affects the persons in their functioning. The way to heal from the psychic pains according to Sigmund Freud is to express it with the therapist. Freud (1976) adds:

If what was repressed is brought back again into conscious mental activity - a process which presupposes the overcoming of considerable resistances - the resulting psychical conflict, which the patient had tried to avoid, can, under the physician's guidance, reach a better outcome than was offered by repression (p. 2216).

Freud's notion of how repression forms and continues in the psyche and the way to get relief from the psychic pain are basis of this article.

Discussion

The play opens around thirty years after the murder of the infant. The act of murdering the infant remains in the depth of memory that affects the emotion and functions of the family members. Dodge is deeply traumatized with the betrayal of his wife and horrible crime of murdering an innocent infant. The impact of the event appears, at first, in the communication patterns which impairs the family bond and then in economic and social sides. The members of the family are, as C.W.E. Bigsby (2000) argues, "estranged from one another and from themselves. The space between them seems unbridgeable. Emotions are intense but unstained. The hand that would caress, balls into a fist. Husband and wife, father and son, lovers, brothers, are all strangers" (p.172). The suspicion grows to such extent that even the father and grandfather refuse to recognize Vince when he returns home after six years. This failure does not come from their cognitive dysfunction, but it has come from their efforts to erase the past. Opiari (2010) adds, "The secret is the white elephant in the room: the more they focus on avoiding discussion of it, the more it becomes a part of their everyday lives because they talk about trying not to talk about it" (p.136). They are even reluctant to remember who they were connected to. The compelling concern to them is to hide the secret of the crime.

The pressing concern to hide the crime makes the members shrink from normal activities. Opiari (2010) further adds

Open families who talk about the precipitating event are likely to see the event in less shameful terms because they are able to express their emotions in an open forum. On the other hand, individuals in closed systems who shut themselves off both from the outside and from other members...are doomed to dysfunction because their silence only reinforces their shame (p.125).

The shame born out of filicide makes the family avoid being connected with the family members and people outside around. They fear obstructs the family members to recognize Vince when he returns. Matthew Roudane, states, "One need not be a devout follower of Freud to respond to the Oedipal dimensions in the play . . . the buried child and the buried truths of the past, repressed through years of denial, rejection, and indifference, are the greatest sources of disconnection in the family" (as cited in Opipari, 2010, p.123). The shock is apparent from the emotional and behavioral patterns of the member. The suspicion with other members prevails in the family which has obstructed the communication among them. To some extent, the denial of communication helps to shield the secret, but it does not help in integrating the family ties. In Ann Wilson's (1993) words "this refusal safeguards the family secret, creating the curious effect that the denial of history, and hence of identity, is in fact what holds the family together because it gives them a common purpose (p.111)." The denial just helps them hide the secret and saves them from the shame temporarily. But the wound continues to plague their minds.

When Vince returns home with his girlfriend, Shelley, and tries to make a connection, they are ignored and rejected. He is not recognized by anyone, even refused by his grandfather, Dodge and father, Tilden to have any flesh and blood relation. In the words of Matthew Roudane, "No wonder the parents claim they do not even recognize their own living children. Love is absent in [the play]. Isolation is the norm. Denial has become both a source of comfort and anguish. A willed ignorance preserves this family (as cited in Opipari, 2010, p. 137). In Shelley's query about the family affairs, Bradley refutes and says, "We don't have to tell you anything, girl. Not a thing. You are not the police, are you? You are not the government (p.1222). The members are frightened to talk any affairs about family with the outer world. They fear that the communication with them reveals out what they have hidden in the mind. Bradley's statement "we made a pact! We made a pact between us! (p. 1223), shows the strategy the members have adopted. The members are at no position to communicate about the affairs with themselves or with others.

Along with the denial of the crime by avoiding the contact, the family also uses another defense mechanism- sublimation to hide their glaring dysfunction and relieve their anxiety. The Dodge's family creates dishonest stories so routinely that all truth becomes subjective. Dodge's statement, "See, we were a well-established family once . . . The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over . . . Everything was settled with us. All we had to do was ride it out" (p.1223) is a strategy to protect him from the disgrace. Creation of the story of happiness and perfection of Dodge's family is a defense strategy to mask their disgrace and to make them appear functional to the outer world.

In reality, the well-established family is shattered into pieces. Dodge sees no place and no identity at home, nor he hopes that he will be reconnected with the family again. He says "Who do you think I mean? How far back can you go? A long line of corpses! There's not a living soul behind me. Not a one. Who's holding me in their memory? (p. 1219)". He has lost his faith and reliance on his wife and his sons. While living in such neglected and purposeless state, Vince's entrance with his girlfriend, Shelley, creates a setting in which the family could discuss about the crime they have repressed for years. Shelley's evoking helps Dodge to confess the crime. Tilden's dug out the decayed skeleton of a child. This confession helps the members to unburden.

Conclusion

Sam Shepard's play *Buried Child* examines the damaging effects of suppressed painful memories and healing of it through psychoanalytic approach. The Dodge family, which was weighed down by the buried secret of filicide, gets shattered economically, psychologically and emotionally. Following Freudian approach of catharsis and free association, the family is eventually reintegrated.

Freud's concept of repression, which proposes that painful memories that a person experiences are pushed down into the unconscious to avoid emotional distress. In the play, the buried child symbolizes the family's collective effort to repress their distress. The repression of the memory protects the family from guilt and shame but it ultimately leads to their psychological dysfunction.

As time passes, the buried secret resurfaces and Dodge, as the head of the family, turns out to be suspicious to everyone including family members and indifferent with the family affairs and detaches from the family members. Tilden, burdened by guilt, regresses to a childlike state, while Halie clings to a false image of the past. The repression of the traumatic event prevents the family from confronting their pain, leading to emotional fragmentation. According to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, repressed memory eventually returns back and affects in emotion, cognition and behavior of the person. In Sam Shepherd's play *Buried Child*, the major characters undergo in dysfunctional behaviors - Dodge withdraws from farm work and family responsibility, Tilden's experiences irritability, and instability and the communication and trust within the family members fraught. The suppressed memory continually haunts the family members, symbolizing Freud's idea that psychic pain, will continuously exert until it is healed.

The play exhibits that Freudian theory of free association and catharsis heal the psychic wounds. Vince's return with his girlfriend, Shelley to his home, acts as a catalyst for the settlement of the family's confrontation rooted in the buried child. Vince and Shelley, initially taken as outsiders, are able to create the environment in which the family find the courage to confront the long-repressed trauma, which culminates in the symbolic unearthing of the buried child. This confession of crime and guilt enable the family members to begin the process of healing, aligning with Freud's belief that trauma can only be resolved through its expression.

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