

Rebirth or Relapse: Subversion of Myth in Shephard's *Buried Child*

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American playwright Shepard's plays are known for their open endings. The ending of Shepard's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Buried Child* is intriguing. Some critics see this ending as a sign of the rebirth of American families and the revival of American dream. But this article stands on the opposite position to give a negative answer to Haile's "That may be the sun" (Shepard, 1981, p. 66) at the end of the play through illustrating Shepard's authorization and subversion of two important myths in the play, which is a way of parody in postmodern theory. By digging the family scandals and corruption of American families in the play, it is expressed that perhaps the natural world has a chance to be reborn, but not human society under the pathetic and corruptive social background.

Keywords: parody, subversion, myth, buried child

Introduction

In an interview when asked about his real meaning of *Buried Child*'s ending, American postmodernist writer Sam Shepard is dismissive of the certain and clear conclusion of a story: "I think giving the audience a satisfying answer at the end is a cheap trick. It's just like giving a small gift box with ribbons to the audience. Nothing more" (Graham, 1995, p. 20). Shepard therefore, never deliver "little gifts" to readers and in his masterpiece *Buried Child*, when confronting with revived backyard, Halie's wonderment: "Maybe it's the sun" (Shepard, 1981, p. 66), leaves readers great unlimited space to imagine this profound ending line. Can the sun, on behalf of life and hope, really bring health and rebirth to this pathetic and corruptive family? On the one hand, some critics like Nash, Putzell and Westfall hold the negative attitude towards it. Thomas Nash illustrates Shepard's subversion of myths form one view of the old corn king while Putzell and Westfall mainly put emphasis on the specific ancient codes in this play. Nevertheless, it would be better if both the validation and subversion of these two major myths are to be explained. On the other hand, critics suggest there still exists a stint of hope for American society to realize American dream and consider this ending full of vitality and hope. This difference is in line with Shepard's creation concept of scripts to create such a different view towards this story. The argument here holds that Halie's epilogue indicates nothing revival but another similar tragedy

characterized by Vince as the new king through illustrating how does Shephard authorize but subvert these two myths: the vegetation myth of corn king and the legend of holy grail.

The Vegetation Myth of Corn King

As many critics have explained, Shephard used two ancient myths related with ancient fertility rituals, both expressing the theme of death and rebirth. The first myth could be traced from the images and motifs found in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. This myth mainly emphasizes the corn king's health guarantees the wellbeing of the tribe and the fecundity of the land but when he gradually grows old and loses power, the crops will die and the land will become infertile. Before this event, therefore, he must be ritually put to death so that the king's spirit may be transmitted to younger and more effective hands and the new king will ensure the rebirth of the corps and the land. Shepard imitates this myth in his own way by establishing Dodge as the dying king of his family and his land. In the early moments of the play, Dodge awaits death in a costume of khaki clothes, his body draped in colors that symbolically represent the withering of his body and soul. In the play, the scenes of Dodge are always accompanied with the seemly incessant rain. Thomas Nash calls this rain "a significant rain" which "washes the marrow from the bones of the buried child, fertilizing the long-neglected cornfields, preparing the land for a miraculous rebirth" (Nash, 1983, p. 487). It will never stop and keeps washing and purifying everything until witnesses the death of Dodge, the old corn king. Because Dodge's powers are failing, the land has become barren, but no worthy successor has arrived to take over. Into this situation comes Vince, Dodge's grandson. In Act Three Dodge recognizes Vince as a deserving inheritor and wills him the farm and the house. Then Vince vows to restore the farm, which embodies a ritual process showing the regeneration of the land. It is noticeable that the revitalization of the land following Vince as the new king takes the form of this ancient myth and thus in some ways Shephard authorizes the validity of this myth. But what Shephard really refers to the enthronement of Vince does not merely show the rebirth of the farm but also the cycle of tragic fate for this family. In this sense, Shephard actually subverts the myth by tragically showing that Vince is just another Dodge. In Act Three, Vince takes all kinds of violent behaviors to express his anger and despair, which is completely different from how he likes before he left home to buy drinks for Dodge. After seeing what Vince has done, Dodge ironically recognizes him as his grandson and even names Vince as his heir to this land. Maybe this way of inheritance for Vince is more concerned with degenerating into the same person as Dodge, a cruel, unfeeling, embittered old man than just reclaiming his family heritage. After Vince's hysterical yelling, he finally calms down. In the end, he was lying upright on Dodge's sofa, staring at the ceiling with straight eyes, which may be the normal physiological response after being drunk. But more importantly, this reflects his great spiritual loss. The following monologue before Vince is drunk carries profound meaning:

"I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him.....And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing....." (Shephard, 1981, p. 64).

As Putzel and Westful said: "by viewing himself as an artifact, by moving from his subjective I-centered self-definition to an objective he-centered self-definition, he is able to see Dodge, Tilden and himself as part of

a continuum....." (Putzel & Westful, 1989, p. 113). This is a continuation of family bloodlines in which Vince finds himself, the same face, eyes and body with his predecessors. Actually, the death of Dodge indicates the disappearing of Vince's true himself, a lively, hopeful and creative young western cowboy. So, Dodge is still alive under the disguise of Vince's body. Just as Haile mistakes Vince lying on the sofa for Dodge, she asked, "Dodge, is that you?" (Shephard, 1981, p. 66), a thin voice keeps lingering beside readers' ears, "Yes, it's Dodge". Natural world is able to get the chance of reviving through changing a new king but not the human world.

The Legend of Holy Grail

Another ancient myth Shephard adopts is Chretien de Troyes' Perceval, or the Story of the Grail. The constant elements of the Grail stories used by Shephard in *Buried Child* are the wounded Fisher King who may be cured if he is asked the proper questions by the quester, the barren land, and the questing knight who must triumph over great difficulties and must ask the old king right questions in order to revitalize the king and bring the regeneration back to the land. In *Buried Child* readers could easily analogize this degenerated family itself as the barren land and the questing knight as Vince. The king, Dodge, is diseased and decrepit, as Halie tells readers: "You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing! Smelling up the house with your putrid body! Hacking your head off till all hours of the morning!" (Shephard, 1981, p. 17). But Shephard subverts this myth by errantly assigning Tilden as the king and Shelly as the quester. In the act three, Shelly continuously asks: "what's happened to this family anyway" (Shephard, 1981, p. 48), "Was Tilden telling the truth about the baby" (ibid., p. 49) and Tilden is eager to talk and unveil the family secret that Dodge has killed and buried Halie's last child, perhaps a child of incest between Tilden and his mother. Even though Dodge and Bradley always scream at Tilden to stop, some truth still comes pouring out. But unfortunately, the questions have come from the wrong person, and the answers have come from the wrong mouth. Consequently, the king, Dodge dies, which implies that the land and the family have not been revitalized. Shephard introduces the paradigm of the myth, but he subverts it by reordering the characters and plots to form a new pattern, one without the rebirth ending of the original.

But why Vince fails to ask the right question and thus is not able to be the savior of the family and the land? Maybe he is just too self-centered and too much self-concerned on his own predicament and confusions, the fact that his family refuse to recognize him and the inner uncertainty about his own identity. At the outset he appears to be an innocent young man returning home to reacquaint himself with what he calls his "heritage." He is looking forward to the family full of hope which used to be folksy, happy and benign. So immature is Vince that he expects his home to remain exactly as he remembers it: simple, comforting, protective. Therefore, after he is refused by Dodge and Haile, he falls into the formidable abyss of despair and misery. As a result, he degrades from the well-meaning innocent quester of Act Two to the violent sadist of Act Three, from a promising knight bearing great mission to the controlled puppet of the old king's afterlife. He fails to realize this family's nature and to ask Dodge that critical question unveiling all the truth about this house. Consciously, he is on a quest for his father, and beyond that, he merely seeks to recapture his youth. Whereas in *Holy Grail*, Chretien's Perceval, is reborn and transforms from a self-centered fool into a humble hero who brings revitalization to the land and cures the wounded king. As mentioned above, this is a kind of parody, mainly

subversion, used by Shephard. The famous theorist Bakhtin, on the basis of Tynjanov, proposed "polyphone", which further develops the theory of parody by viewing parody as a form of "double-voiced". As Bakhtin points out "parody borrows a stylistic style and uses it for expressive purposes, and these purposes are, in a sense, a reversal of the original purposes, or at least contradictory to the original ones" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 86). In *Buried Child*, Shephard subverts this myth through making Vince get deeply trapped in his own plight and never get chance to approach the truth of his tragic life due to various reasons, thus though in line with form, still completely contrary to the original myth's essence. To understand what does this family expects may answer the reason why Vince fails to restore himself and this family. Undoubtedly, this has an inextricable link with Dodge's violence and Halie's matriarchy. Considering Dodge has received considerate attention from critics, more emphasis here will be put on discussing Shephard's subversive portrayal of Halie's personality contrary to traditional good women figure.

The Terrible Mother: Halie

According to Erich Neumann, the Terrible Mother is she who dismembers, devours, and destroys and who, like the witch in the fairy tale wants to eat children. He regards an ancient goddess Chicomecoati as "the corn mother the goddess of voluptuousness and sin" (Neumann, 1972, p. 82). If we can accept Dodge as the corn king, Halie may represent the corn mother in some sense. Through the play, Halie actually dominates and manipulates all main characters of this play. One of the central impressions of Act One is Halie's continual abuse of Dodge. Dodge is lying alone on the sofa helplessly with torment of illness on his body but has to be trapped with Halie's incessant questioning. She asks Bradley to cut his hair, though she denies, and every time Dodge will get horrible hurt by Bradley, which makes readers can't help thinking maybe she is the one who hurts this wounded king and destroys the family. Worst of all, Halie doesn't only abuse Dodge. Her incestuous desire for Tilden tends to devouring and destroying him. Just like Tilden said: "I was alone, I thought I was dead" (Shephard, 1981, p. 19), he is totally lost about himself, not knowing what to do or where to go. In some sense he dies and on behalf of another buried child of this family. By contrast, Vince seems lack Tilden's complexes and hence would not appear to be a victim of Halie. In fact, however, he inherits the "Terrible" nature of Halie as well as the cruelty and violence of Dodge. His emotional reactions in Act Three make clear that he is imprisoned by his violent nature unconsciously. He hardly gives promise of the revitalization of the family. Instead, he sees himself as a destroyer: "I am a murderer! Don't underestimate me for a minute! I'm the Midnight Strangler! I devour whole families in a single gulp!" (Shephard, 1981, p. 61). His inheritance from Halie as strangler and devourer becomes painfully evident. At the final part of the play, Vince, the buried child who has now become one of the living dead, is cut off from all connection with humanity, staring mindlessly at the ceiling, oblivious of the passing of life or death.

Conclusion

Although "Buried Children" tells an extreme story, the extreme elements of this play contain the universal social problems. In a mechanized and commoditized postmodern society, Americans' desire to find roots and seek identity gets wrapped and distorted by the media and icy machines where humanity, emotions and care are buried. People are becoming indifferent, estranged, anxious and perverted, and society is becoming

increasingly disordered and chaotic. Under this circumstance, even though the revived backyard appears as a symbol of regeneration of this land, Vince as new king, under the guise of Dodge's soul still fails to become the great savior and bring rebirth to this pathetic family. In this family, surely, some things happened but some would never change. So, "Silence. Lights go to black" (Shepard, 1981, p. 66). That's maybe the sun but not the revival.

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