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## Family Ruins: Symbolism and Decay in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*.

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### ABSTRACT

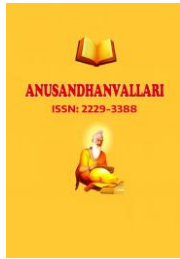
Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* employs symbolism as a central dramatic device to interrogate the fractured realities of the American family and to examine the disintegration of cultural values in contemporary society. The play presents a domestic setting that appears ordinary on the surface, but gradually reveals unsettling layers of secrecy, denial, and moral decay. Shepard's symbols range from everyday objects to natural elements resonate with the American audience by transforming familiar realities into unsettling metaphors for cultural collapse. At the heart of these symbolic strategies lies the concept of decay. The erosion of familial bonds, the weakening of patriarchal authority and the suppression of truth are dramatized not through abstract discussion but through material objects, gestures, and silences that embody disintegration. Shepard ridicules the contradictions of a society clinging to myths of fertility, continuity, and the American Dream while concealing its failures and traumas. Ultimately, Shepard's symbolism transforms the familiar domestic world into a stage where the collapse of values is exposed and the possibility of renewal lingers uneasily, leaving the audience to reckon with a society in decline.

### KEY WORDS

symbolism, moral decay, fractured realities, cultural values, cultural collapse, family bonds, patriarchal authority, American Dream.

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Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* dramatizes the collapse of the American Dream through symbols of decay that permeate setting, character, and narrative. The play is also one of the most striking theatrical meditations on the disintegration of the American family. The play perfectly captures not only the collapse of familial relationships but also the erosion of cultural ideals associated with the American Dream. Symbolism is a literary and artistic device in which symbols – objects, figures, colours, or events – are used to represent abstract ideas or deeper meaning beyond their literal sense. According to Cuddon, "A literary symbol combines an image with a concept (words themselves are a kind of symbol). It may be public or private, universal or local. They exist, so to speak" (Cuddon 699). Cuddon defines that a symbol is something that carries a deeper meaning beyond its literal sense. A symbol, whether literary or artistic, functions as a bridge between the visible and the invisible, the



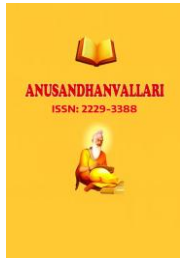
concrete and the abstract. It is noticeable that the manner in which symbols operate with literature and the arts differs according to medium and mode of expression. A literary symbol belongs to the realm of language and narrative. It appears in novels, plays, poems, and short stories, where words and images are invested with meanings beyond their literal sense. By contrast, an artistic symbol arises in the sphere of the visual and performing arts. It communicates not through words but through forms, colours, shapes, sounds, and gestures. Shepard's plays are distinguished by its powerful use of symbolism, which gives his plays resonance far beyond their immediate action. By embedding symbolism into everyday objects and landscapes, Shepard exposes the fractured dream of America. Shepard's skilful use of symbolism in *Buried Child* gives the play layers of meaning beyond its surface story. He has excellently catered to the taste of the audience, reflecting the contemporary American life. Oumano reveals, "The plays of Off Off have a common language that is built on a self of new symbols. The new symbols are a function of the new audience, for Off Off is an audience-oriented theatre...The audience participates, they boo, they cheer, but most of all they enjoy the plays and they attend the theatre because the new symbols are as familiar to them as they are to the playwrights" (26). The new symbols reflect the cultural awareness and resonate with audiences because they were familiar to their own experiences. This idea applies directly to Shepard's *Buried Child*. The symbols such as the withered cornfield and the buried child speak to the collapse of the American Dream and the decay of family life. It is also understandable that "one needs to acknowledge fully the mythic-symbolic dimensions of *Buried Child* to become aware of its complexities" (Callens 413). The observation draws attention to the fact that *Buried Child* cannot be read only as a realistic family drama. Callens suggests that the play's true depth lies in its mythic-symbolic layers, which transform a seemingly domestic narrative into a universal allegory. By urging the audience to recognize the symbolic structures, he highlights Shepard's technique of blending realism with myth.

The symbol of rain has rich and varied meanings across literature, art, and culture. Its interpretation often depends on context, but some common symbolic associations include – renewal and fertility, cleansing and purification, sadness and melancholy, and change and transformation. The African poet John Pepper Clark describes, "It is drumming hard here/ And I suppose everywhere" (lines 8 – 9). The poem symbolizes rain as symbol of the troubles ordinary people face in daily survival. In *Buried Child*, it keeps on raining till the second act. Rain emerges as a powerful symbol and it reflects both the family's entrenched secrets and the potential for renewal. Shepard uses rain not only to mirror the pervasive guilt that haunts the family but also to hint at the possibility of revelation and rebirth once hidden truths are exposed. In the beginning of the play, it symbolizes chaos and trouble entering the family.

HALIE'S VOICE: You know what it is, don't you? It's the rain! Weather. That's it. Every time. Every time you get like this, it's the rain. No sooner does the rain start then you start/ You should see it coming down up here. Just coming down in sheets. Blue sheets. The bridge is pretty near flooded. What's it like down there? Dodge?

DODGE: Catastrophic. (Shepard 64)

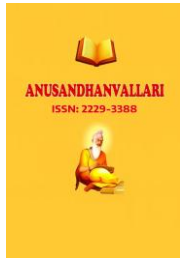
The relentless rain reflects the stagnant and oppressive atmosphere of the farmhouse. The rain mirrors Dodge's own sense of entrapment, as he struggles under years of hidden shame and guilt. Dodge's description of the rain as catastrophic highlights his perception of the family crisis as overwhelming and uncontrollable. The rain constantly reminds him of the buried child and the consequences of the family sins. As the characters confront the consequences of their buried secrets, even simple tasks take on a symbolic significance. Tilden affirms, "It's picked. I picked it all in the rain. Once it's picked you can't put it back" (Shepard 70). The statement symbolically proclaims that past sins cannot be undone and that one must face the consequences of their actions. It emphasizes the inevitability of moral reckoning, showing that attempts to hide wrong doing are ultimately futile. Dodge warns



Halie, “Things keep happening while you’re upstairs, ya know. The world doesn’t stop just because you’re upstairs. Corn keeps growing. Rain keeps raining” (Shepard 75). Dodge highlights the inevitability and ongoing flow of life, regardless of attempts to avoid or ignore it. Staying upstairs symbolizes a desire to escape reality. The references to growing corn and falling rain draw a connection between human deeds, nature, and moral responsibility. Just as crops grow and rain falls whether observed or not, the family’s buried secrets and sins persist in exerting their influence. Symbolically, Dodge acknowledges that guilt, consequences, and the passage of time are relentless forces that cannot be halted. All the family members experience agony and depression. Halie says, “Still raining. I love the smell just after it stops. The ground.” (Shepard 77). The words symbolize the ongoing chaos and the turbulence within the family, represented by the unrelenting downpour. Despite the hostility, Halie expects the possibility for harmony and peace. While the family is mired in guilt and dysfunction, Halie hopes that renewal and reconciliation are possible. Halie remarks, “Dodge? Is that you Dodge? Tilden was right about the corn you know. I’ve never seen such corn. Have you taken a look at it lately? Tall as a man already. This early in the year. Carrots too. Potatoes. Peas. It’s like a paradise out there, Dodge. You oughta’ take a look. A miracle. I’ve never seen it like this. Maybe the rain did something. Maybe it was the rain” (Shepard 131 – 32). The barren land symbolizes the family’s emotional and spiritual decay, reflecting years of neglect, dishonesty, and moral corruption. The infertile land reflects the family’s inner emptiness and the breakdown of their bonds. Tilden’s sudden appearance with lush corn contrasts this decay. Rain, as a recurring element, symbolizes both cleansing and revelation, washing away denial and forcing acknowledgement of buried truths. The thriving crops suggest that despite the family’s decay and buried secrets, life and growth are still possible.

In *Buried Child*, Shepard introduces corn as a central symbol of fertility and renewal. In the play, corn also symbolizes the American dream of prosperity. This unsettling abundance directly connects with the earlier symbol of rain. The appearance of corn after the rain reinforces Shepard’s theme that repressed history, like nature itself, will find its way to the surface. Vegetables like carrot and potato symbolize the buried secret of the family. Tilden enters the stage with his arms loaded with fresh corns. Dodge doubts that Tilden has taken it home from some neighbours’ farm. Dodge opines, “There hasn’t been corn out there since about nineteen thirty-five! That’s the last time I planted corn out there!” (Shepard 69). Corn, a classic symbol of abundance and prosperity in American farm life, becomes a symbol of loss here. The absence of corn reflects the disintegration of the family’s promise of stability and success. The sight of abundant corn in Tilden’s arms contrasts sharply with Dodge’s repeated insistence that nothing grows there. This symbolizes the persistence of life and truth, even in a family that tries to bury both. The corn in Tilden’s hand also symbolizes a burden he carries, like the family’s repressed history and the memory of the buried child. When Halie too argues that they have not planted corn for over thirty years, Tilden replies, “The whole back lot’s full of corn. Far as the eye can see” (Shepard 75). Corn here represents the legal heir of the family. Tilden foresees the continuity of family, land, and tradition. In the play, however, the family’s heirship is fractured by secret and denial. This is an announcement of the arrival of Vince to the farmhouse.

Shepard invests even ordinary vegetables with symbolic power, as seen when Tilden brings in the carrots. Tilden remarks, “I picked these carrots. If anybody wants any carrots, I picked ‘em” (Shepard 92). Unlike corn, which grows visibly above ground, carrots grow silently beneath the soil. The carrots are identified as a twisted crop of the family sins. Their very nature reflects the family’s buried secret. When Tilden brings the carrots into the house, the action becomes a metaphor for unearthing what has long been suppressed. Tilden admits, “I had a son once but we buried him” (Shepard 92). The long-hidden family secret is dug up and brought to the surface very much like the carrots. The play presents a haunting portrait of family decay, where secrecy and denial corrode the very idea of continuity. Tilden’s confession exposes the family’s deepest wound. The buried child stands for a past that the family tries to conceal but cannot escape. In contrast, when Tilden draws attention to the backyard’s



unexpected fertility and invites shelly, “We could cook these carrots ya’ know. You could cut ‘em up and we could cook ‘em” (Shepard 93), the imagery shifts from burial to harvest, from loss to nourishment.

The old sofa, where Dodge spends much of his time, stands as a powerful symbol patriarchy in *Buried Child*. positioned at the centre of the living room. It embodies the father’s place at the heart of the family structure, once the seat of authority and control. The old sofa is Dodge’s seat of power and he is always found seated on it. Once he falls down the sofa, he never gets back to it and finally dies. The sofa is almost worn out and thus, it not only portrays the lingering shadow of patriarchal dominance but also its collapse. Halie, Tilden, Bradley, and Vince attempt to take the dominant position and assert control over others. Tripathy delineates, “More importantly, Shepard focuses on the game of power struggle taking different images from American popular culture as a medium to give the game of power a universal significance” (91). Halie, Tilden, and Bradley fail to gain authority of the farmhouse. It is Vince who finally succeeds in attaining the patriarchal power of the house. Panigrahi describes, “Right from the moment Vince enters the house drunken and boisterous, cutting through the symbolic screen, he is recognized by all and Shepard uses the scene as Vince’s “rebirth”. At the end, when Dodge is dead as the mythical Corn King, Halie discovers corn, carrots, potatoes and peas growing “tall as man” creating a “paradise” out at the backyard” (129). Halie dropping a single rose between Dodge’s legs signifies her last ovation to the dying King. Moreover, the shaving of Dodge’s hair forcefully by Bradley symbolizes the loss of authority, a ritual of dethronement. Shelly’s kind act of providing her rabbit fur coat to Tilden symbolize the confidence, trust, and support extended by her to him, which forms the basis of the confession of the crime of infanticide.

Symbolism in Shepard’s *Buried Child* plays a vital role as it caters to the taste of the American public while simultaneously ridiculing the contradictions of contemporary society. Shepard’s symbolic images confront audiences with unsettling truths about the hidden fractures within the family and the nation. At the heart of these symbols lies the concept of decay, which emphasizes both the deterioration of traditional structures and the erosion of values once held sacred. Decay becomes not merely a physical condition but a cultural and moral reality. In this way, Shepard’s use of symbolism ultimately exposes the fragility of the American family and audience with a stark vision of a society deteriorating from within.

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