*MEMORY AND IMAGINATION IN SAM SHEPARD'S "*BURIED CHILD*"*

Florentina ANGHEL[G]

Abstract: *Starting from theories which interrelate memory and imagination, the object and the "analog", the analysis below aims at establishing a relation between memory and creation in Sam Shepard's "Buried Child". Although it is not a self-reflexive play, the tensional knots that defy common experience provide the audience with the necessary evidence of how the image preserved in one's memory is distorted in time. Two planes can be followed in the attempt to identify the relation between memory and imagination: one that suggests a collective memory since Shepard's characters act as if they were familiar with old rituals and myths and want to symbolically and imaginatively communicate a message through symbolic actions, another that tackles simpler and immediate effects of interlaced memory and imagination.*

Keywords: *memory, imagination, myth, drama.*

The interlacing of memory and imagination has been long debated in literary theory, philosophy and psychology and remains a resourceful topic for literary creation. Theories take us back to Plato and the phenomenon of the presence of an absent thing, with reference to the past, and to Aristotle's statements "memory relates to the past" and "[it] is a state of affection" of Perception or Conception. (Aristotle, 2014) Aristotle also considered that memory "belong[ed] to the faculty of intelligence only incidentally, while directly and essentially it belong[ed] to the primary faculty of sense-perception". (Aristotle, 2014)

Later Sartre wrote about the existence of an object perceived in the past in the subject's imagination as an image having a weaker reality (Sartre, 9). However, philosophers agree with the fact that the image is the result of the action of external things on the subject's body through senses and nerves (Descartes), that the image is an affection of the human body (Spinoza), that remembrances are the awakening of an affection of the human body provoked by mechanical causes (Spinoza) and that imagination can partially produce the truth (Spinoza apud Sartre, p. 13). The image and the connection between images are associated with the idea of hazard and, as Levy shows, they are also closely connected to creation. Since the object recollected and represented as an image is the presence of an absent object, then the image created in art is an attempt to make an object present "without taking away its absence". (Levy 144) The image obtained is an *analog* of the object, without being the object. (Levy 144) This new perspective upon Sartre's imaginary bridges memory and imagination in art.

While Sartre considered that the *analog* is not a very clear image of the object in the subject's consciousness, Ricoeur referred to a "phenomenology of mistakes" related to the problem of memory and exemplified by "the failed fit and the faulty grasp". (Ricoeur, p.10) Ricoeur further stated that the search of memory, which implied practice and the use of the subject's capacities, may lead to jamming and abuse. Such a digression from the original object to an image that bears the mark of the subject's personality as well as the imprint of time implies a leap to the fantastic or fictional realm, a make believe that brings together memory and imagination. While memories anchor the individual in the past and outline an identity dependant upon the context in which the person lived, imagination allows the individual to change his identity with

* University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters florianghel1@yahoo.com

BDD-A14551 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 07:51:08 UTC)

each creation. Thus writers abandon their worldly identity, identify with characters in their works and reach fulfilment. Yeats admitted that a writer changes his personality when he writes and T. S. Eliot considered writers should surrender themselves, become spokespersons of their generations, and create *impersonal* works. Consequently, the movement from object to image reflects the sequential order from memory to imagination, which actually parallels the metamorphosis of the real experience into a fictional work of art.

The interrelation between memory and imagination is thus at the basis of literary works, which are reflections of reality and distortions of it at the same time. They spring out of the author's memory, sensitivity and creative abilities and are implicit reflections of all these, but they may also be knitted around this theme in an explicit way. What makes them differ generally lies in technical devices, as it will be illustrated in the analysis of *Buried Child*. Sam Shepard wrote and staged his first plays in 1960s, at a moment when uncertainty and border-crossing prevailed due to the Cold War, to people's first flight to the moon, to a more intense exchange of cultural influences which both enriched and endangered the idea of tradition and nationality. Although an adept of realism, Shepard intertwined events moulded on real life experiences, on the one hand, and symbolic actions and myths, on the other, making his plays cross the boundaries of immediate and simple realities and interlace American traditions and features with universal elements. *Buried Child*, 1978, brings together the playwright's contemporary myths and rituals and myths of the ancient time, suggesting the interference of personal and collective memory, transcending the cultural and temporal American borders.

In *Buried Child*, self-reflexivity is not an explicit device, which would have revealed the author's principles of memory-imagination interdependence, but which would have also deprived the play of ambiguity and tension. Shepard creates a multilayered work resting complexity on the characters that, despite their limits, betray a kind of instinctive wisdom that makes them follow an already set pattern which on the one hand places the family in the line of mythological ones, on the other hand, through their antiheroic behaviour and appearance, draws the family in a caricatural contemporaneity. Therefore two planes can be followed in the attempt to identify the relation between memory and imagination: one that suggests a collective memory since Shepard's characters act as if they were familiar with pagan rituals and want to symbolically and imaginatively communicate a message through metaphoric actions, and another that tackles immediate effects of interlaced personal memory and imagination.

Critics consider *Buried Child* part of a family trilogy including *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) and *True West* (1980), but there are more facets of the idea of family that circulate. Adler adheres to the idea of Gothic family, as outlined by Margot Gayle Backus in her study "The Gothic Family Romance", and states that Shepard's play demonstrates that "unauthorized" deviations (Adler, 111), which Backus considers fantasies that never happens in real life (Backus, 242), can become authorized and real. Shepard succeeds in creating a realistic work by showing the subversive and repressed elements and memories that families try to keep buried, by presenting deviations that may naturally occur in "real life". According to Adler, "what is ordinarily 'unauthorized' suddenly becomes 'authorized' and uncovered for all to see through patterns of ritual action and sociopolitical analysis of a collective guilt in which the audience is implicated if not complicitous." (Adler in Matthew Roudané, 133) However, many "unauthorized" actions are exaggerations and implicitly charged with symbolic

BDD-A14551 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 07:51:08 UTC)

significance, while there is a prevailing discrepancy between facts, memories and the images of the American family as projected by the characters.

Buried Child presents the audience with more versions of what a family may mean: the immediate image is the family we see on stage, but despite the realism rendered by the visual perception, it is a striking image of disunity and conflict which rests on the images and memories each character holds: the ideal family in Vince's memories which acquires shape in Shelley's imagination; the caricatural Rockwell family in Shelley's memories; Halie's imaginary successful son; and, beyond all these, a mythicised family drawing the audience back to the Greek tragedies. By reuniting the American cultural and social context with other cultural areas, Shepard eventually writes against the mythicised traditional American family and insists on the syncopal flow of tradition from generation to generation. The transgressive elements he identifies as axes of a family's identity are not those promoted as common elements of ideal American families, for instance the fact that Shelly and Vince expect to find traditional preparations for dinner and a dog, but what they really find: a shattered family, a heavy drinker ruling the house, a family different from the ever present models in commercial films and TV programmes.

The first plane on which memory and imagination act almost instinctively shows Shepard's use of innovative devices, some of them unrealistic. The playwright uses simple characters like Dodge, an old man who despite his being ill keeps drinking heavily, but whose authority is recognized and repeatedly and metaphorically challenged in the house within a father-son conflictual frame and within a husband-wife degraded relationship. The images Shepard creates echo an ancestral memory of family dissent. Dodge and Tilden, his elder son, never argue, yet Tilden performs a burial ritual several times: he brings corn from the backyard and puts it in his father's lap, then he covers Dodge with a blanket, and eventually Tilden places corn husks on him. Similarly, Halie and Vince place roses on him, then Tilden's brother, Bradley, puts Shelly's fur coat over Dodge, and finally Vince also covers his grandfather with a blanket. Bradley is more aggressive and impatient and even cuts his father's hair and hurts him, which may suggest his younger son's wish and impatience to take his father's "crown". These symbolic ways of killing the father represent an *analog* of the real fact without being the fact. They are also a testimony of man's evolution, of civilisation and education since these characters refrain from showing more aggressiveness. There is also a conflict between Dodge and Vince emerging from Dodge's refusal to recognize Vince as his grandson. Dodge associates the young man with the danger of losing his central position in the house, but this is a result of his having recognised Vince's potential. However, Vince has to go through an initiation journey to demonstrate that he can lead the family and that he deserves the house. These symbolic actions, a kind of rituals of entombment and the initiation journey, remind of Osiris' and Fisher King's myths. Within the play and unlike the mythological figures, the sons use their imagination to express their wishes while fearing to act. What the audience are presented with represents the *analog* and not the fact.

The author uses symbolic and ritualistic forms of aggressiveness which sweeten the conflicts within the family but waken the audience to universal myths. Thus the middle west American family is set on a journey towards antic Greece, Egyptian mythology, Biblical mythology, etc. Tilden and Bradley echo Oedipus in their attempt to "bury" their father by covering him with different things. Their father does not embody Laius, but a promoter of contemporary myths like watching TV and drinking while doing this. The buried child is a variant of Osiris, a character in Egyptian

BDD-A14551 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 07:51:08 UTC)

mythology that was killed by his brother and was buried in the Nile Valley, making it fertile. Similarly the buried child, killed by a member of the family, makes the land fertile and Tilden brings corn and vegetables from the back of the house – a miraculous and unrealistic side of the play. Emasculated and forgotten on the couch, Dodge is the Fisher King waiting for the young man, here Vince, to come and take over the farm, while Vince is generally seen as the prodigal son. Therefore, there is a harmonious fusion of myths and cultures in this play.

Dodge's wife, Halie, weaves around events in the past that she consciously distorts to reach the satisfaction that neither her husband nor her sons could offer her. Although aware of the way in which her son Anselm died, without having provided his parents with more hope, Halie imagines him as the perfect son and passes her time trying to convince people and the priest that Anselm deserves a statue.

> "… I put all my hopes on Ansel. Of course Ansel wasn't as handsome, but he was smart. He was the smartest probably. I think he probably was. Smarter than Bradley, that's for sure. Didn't go and chop his leg off with a chain saw. (…) He was the smartest. (…) He would have took care of us, too. He would've seen to it that we were repaid. He was like that. He was a hero. (…) A genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And very intelligent. Ansel could have 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." (Shepard, 72-73)

His absence offers her mind the freedom to imagine him as a hero and as very smart, despite his uninspired gesture of dying unmanly, unheroically. Her imagination vacillates between what she knew about Ansel, what he could have been and a false and more strongly imposed image ("He was a hero."). The past and her memories are very fluid and easy to shape so as to meet her expectations and she constructs his image against the background of the unpleasant memories she has with her other sons. However she accurately remembers how Anselm died and offers an image closer to the real one, yet vestured with her hatredful comments on her daughter-in-law: "I knew then that she'd cursed him. Taken his soul. I saw it in her eyes. She smiled at me with that Catholic sneer of hers. She told me with her eyes that she'd murder him in his bed. Murder my son." (Shepard, 74) Similarly, Dodge himself remembers vaguely and weaves around his wife's possible adventures with other men, which she fails to reconstruct.

The obverse of this plane is the one anchoring the play in contemporaneity and reflecting more concrete aspects of how recent memories develop imaginative frames. Vince makes Shelley expect a traditional family: a milkman, a dog, turkey dinners and apple pies. She is surprised to find a house like "a Norman Rockwell cover or something." Vince's answer – "What's a' matter with that? It's American." (Shepard, 83) – makes Rockwell a symbol for the American style and implies that caricatures sprout from real life. Vince shows tolerance and has emotions as he comes with his memories and family love, as he comes from the past and from another place missing the family he had left behind. His family love and his longing for his family have distorted the real image of it. He cares for the impression he may give to them: "I just don't want to have them think that I've suddenly arrived out of the middle of nowhere completely deranged". This surface conscious heritage is different from a deeper awareness of the past that shows how previous generations inhabit an individual. His initiation journey, that is going to buy whiskey for his grandfather, provides him with a revelation: he recognises in his face the faces of his predecessors palimpsestically set

BDD-A14551 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 07:51:08 UTC)

one over the other. His self awareness is also, paradoxically, an annihilation of his own self, a form of surrender to his family. “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. Clear on back to faces I’d never seen before but still recognized.” (130) He draws the axis to the past that makes him a real member of the family, ironically a drunkard like his father and grandfather, and thus able to replace Dodge who now recognizes him or recognizes himself in Vince.

The way in which Shepard’s characters manipulate the past reveals man’s creativity and strengthens the absence of the recollected object, being or event of the past. Furthermore, this family’s memories, the incest and the buried child, made its members separate, digress from the idea of family and from the past which they apparently buried, but against which they live their lives, making it present, vivid and spurring. Halie and Dodge hate each other and live separately as the barrier raised by the former’s love affairs and incest is reinforced by Dodge’s infanticide. Halie has a duplicitous behaviour, her room host pictures with all the members of the family which testifies her family love and she also shows a motherly affection for her sons, but she has an affair with Father Dewis which she ostentatiously shows in their own house, undermining her husband’s authority. Her behaviour may be a means of protection and a way to remind Dodge of his crime. Dodge is overwhelmed and paralysed by the burden of his infanticide and by Halie’s apparent indifference and finds consolation in whiskey. Tilden is imprisoned in his parents’ house due to his crimes and he is also the father of the dead child. Bradley is entrapped by his own clumsiness, he has cut his leg. They are interdependent, but Dodge, Halie and Tilden are ineluctably linked to the memory of the buried child.

Around the memory of the buried child spins the entire play, in other words around the absent object whose disappearance has generated and whose memory has maintained the tension and conflict in the family. The author chose the moment when the buried child had to come back, and he symbolically used elements like the rain, the corn, the carrots and Vince’s return to stimulate the characters’ memory and imagination, to make them impatient to disembarrass of the burden. Dodge’s family is an example of how an absent object and the memory of it can influence the evolution of people and is also an example of how an absent object can stir a playwright’s imagination. Symbolically Tilden brings the putrid body of the child from the back suggesting that they could eventually find their peace with Vince’s arrival in hopelessness.

Bibliography

Adler, Thomas. “Repetition and regression in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*”. in Roundané, Matthew (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Cambridge University Press, 2002: 111-122.

Aristotle. On Memory and Reminescence. Translated by J.I.Beare. The University of Adelaide. 2014. 26 Oct.2014. https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/memory/

Backus, Margot Gayle. *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Levy, Lior. „Rethinking the Relationship between Memory and Imagination in Sartre’s *The Imaginary*”. in Journal of the British Society for phenomenology, Vol. 43, No. 2, May 2012: 143-160.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Roundané, Matthew (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

BDD-A14551 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 07:51:08 UTC)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Imaginaţia*. Trad. Narcisa Şerbănescu. Oradea: Editura Aion, 1997.
Shepard, Sam. *Buried Child.* in *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981

BDD-A14551 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 07:51:08 UTC)