

The Offstage Character in Modern American Drama: Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights and explains the impact of the offstage character, which is widely prevalent in the American drama, on the onstage characters and the audience as well. In the 20th century, American drama is marked by the loss and absence which depict the dark side of American society because of the ramifications of the two World Wars. These consequences are the major reasons behind man's hopelessness, alienation and failure. With the great development in the field of psychology, at the hand of Sigmund Schlomo Freud in the 19th century, which paved the path for the writers to deeply burrow in the psychological issues that man suffers from in the modern and postmodern era. Consequently, writers, like Shepard, try to examine the hidden issues of their characters by dint of the offstage character in the context of a family that represents the society. These unseen characters have influential roles including; catalyst roles and the proximate cause which uncover the cause of the obliteration of American family members in the darkness of their sin. This paper also examines; the role played by the absent character in dealing with the critical issues of American society, such as the incestuous issues and the failure of the American dream.

Key words: Sam Shepard. Offstage Character. American Drama. Buried Child. American Dream.

INTRODUCTION

The offstage character, also known as unseen character, is a character that is physically invisible from the stage. S/He is never seen by the audience but known through the dialogues of the characters onstage. Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz explains the offstage character as "an offstage or unseen person, living, dead, or imaginary, who does not foot on the stage throughout the entire action of the play, but is spoken of by the onstage characters because of the profound effect he or she has on the onstage action" (Mahfouz, 2012).

The technique of the offstage character is as old device of dramaturgy as the offstage character had been used in the early Greek drama as a driving force and stimulus for action. King Laius in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Jason's bride in Euripides's *Medea* are offstage characters, nevertheless they are indispensable to the advancement of the plot. These offstage characters work as motivating forces for action in drama. Likewise, the offstage character does exist in Renaissance drama as Shakespeare who created Rosaline's character in his play *Romeo and Juliet*. Rosaline as an offstage character functioned as a "foil to Juliet and to stress the predicament of the two lovers" (Mahfouz, 2012). Yet, Mahfouz contends "it was Strindberg, Ibsen and Chekhov who excelled in using absence as a theatrical device and weaving it into the fabric of their drama" (Mahfouz, 2012).

The phenomenon of absent characters has been robustly used in modern American drama in order to draw the attention of the viewers as well as readers to the main role of this theatrical device. Earlier studies focused on the major characters onstage in presenting and handling certain issues related to American society. Absent characters were considered subsidiary to the major and even the minor characters in the dramatic works. Critical issues in the modern American society have been only discussed, reflected and dramatized through the lens of the major and minor characters onstage. However, the role of the absent character is considered to have a vital role in dramatizing American life. It was only studied through its relationship to the major and minor characters, without it being given the space for a thorough examination. Thus, the present study posits that there is a gap in earlier studies resulting from the overlooking of the study of the absent character and its contribution to dramatic texts and to describing the complexities of American life.

The issue of the American Dream is directly highlighted in Shepard's *Buried Child*. This mythical notion has been fixed in the minds of American people who may adopt a wrong method to achieve their objectives. The majority of American writers are associated with the idea of this mythical dream in order to make their people optimistic in pursuing their aspirations. Logically, it is something good and right for every person to engage in achieving his or her dreams, but the policy should not be egocentric. However,

Sam Shepard proves through his writings that the so-called American Dream was the main cause for people's plight since this dream comes to its end through the destiny of the absent character of the play.

THE OFFSTAGE CHARACTER AND MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA

Modern American drama is a title used to define some of America's most influential dramatic work throughout the twentieth century, in which economic, political, social and cultural changes that occurred in America after World War I. It employs devices such as irony and satire, besides the concept of realism which dominates American drama. According to Stephanie Arnold, realism can be considered "the distinctive manner in which a playwright chooses to describe, express, interpret, or present her or his worldview" (Arnold, 1998). There was a need for a new literary concept in response to the romanticism and idealism of melodrama which was prevailing at that time, and also because of the development of science. The main goal of writers was to depict everyday life with all the issues that it conveys. Thus, the advent of realism was needed to express the writer's point of view of life and dramatize it on the stage away from the idealism of romanticism that is far from reality. The writers started depicting their negative social issues looking for the correction according to the standard code of humanity through the realistic style. As they commenced writing in revealing real life of their society, they concluded that using one particular style of writing would give a drab view, picture, of life which is no more sought after in the modern age. Therefore, modern writers fused their styles by two or more key techniques to draw a colorful picture of life to attract people attention of their life, as J. L. Styan claims "it is impossible to find a play of, say, naked realism or pure symbolism, and the best playwrights are constantly resourceful" (Styan, 1981: xii). Since absence exists in real life, it is natural to use the absent character in their literary writing to be plausible as well as accurate.

The offstage character in Modern American Drama slightly differs from the ancient pattern as it has a background from the reality of life. Furthermore, modern dramatist, Shepard concentrates on the psychology and morality of the individuals to reveal the predicament of the microcosm of the American society that suffers from. The drastic developments in every aspect of life in the 20th century made life very sophisticated to be understood by a layperson. Besides the advanced steps in the field of psychology at the hand of Sigmund Freud in the 19th century help the playwrights to focus on the psychological issues of Man after the Two World Wars that left the modern man desperate in life. In addition, the technique of the Elizabethan and Victorian dramaturgy became fruitless to fulfill the requirements of the modern epoch. Thereupon, there is a dire need for a new phase of literary method to suit the new mentality of the modern layperson. The ethics and psychological studies are the promising topics of the modern playwrights for "revealing the complexity of human personality and philosophical inquiry. The external realities are no longer paramount" (Madran, 2006).

Thus, American dramatists used the technique of the offstage character in their works forcefully as Daryl Gonder claims, "consider absence as a psychological paradigm" (Quoted in Mahfouz, 2012), American prominent dramatists like O'Neill and Shepard believed that it is "aspects of character, narrative, and stagecraft" (Mahfouz, 2012).

John M. Clum notes that *Buried Child* visualizes the dark side of the West part of American society via the role of the offstage character. Clum states "Buried Child gives us a dark vision of agrarian America in which the land, even the 'catastrophic' weather, seems poisoned by the human inhabitants" (Clum in Roudane, 2002). Either as American gothic or an advanced variant of Greek catastrophe, the offstage in the play welcomes examination on many levels like the corruptions of American family and the concept of American Dream. Shepard's *Buried Child* speaks to a white-collar family separating and turning out badly as a result of unfaithfulness and traitorousness.

The family, in the Modern American Drama, portrays in *Buried Child* as a disintegrated family with a disabled patriarch, one dead child, an amputee man, a simpleton and obscene mother. The play is an impression of what was going on all over America. This family turns into a microcosm of the general public with its powerful delineation of the weak family bond. Shepard focuses on the consequences of an infanticide action of the family to show an unhealthy family.

THE AMERICAN DREAM IN SHEPARD'S PLAYS

Samuel Shepard Rogers III (1943-2017) is one of America's most prominent and shining names both in the theatre and screen in the second half of the 20th century for his huge body of contribution to the American literature. He presents unprecedented feats that are related to American society by integrating many colors of literary movements in order to give clear encaustic and depict the American actual life of his time.

Shepard was affected by his family's background that associates with the features of ambiguity, sin, pessimism, infidelity, and dysfunctional family. Therefore, he refuses the notion or the myth of the American Dream in his interview with Roudane as he states: "I don't know what the American Dream is. I do know that it doesn't work. Not only doesn't it work, the myth of American Dream has created an extraordinary havoc, and it is going to be our demise" (Roudane, 2002). Accordingly, he adopts in his theatrical techniques the emotional territory rather than mundane physical reality. This is because he believes that theatre has great power for making visible a hidden as Nelson Pressley states that "Theatre is a mediated display to be actively analyzed, not simply/enjoyed; the goal is to spark critical engagement, during the performance and beyond, on the part of the spectator/citizen" (Pressley, 2014: 55).

In the field of drama, Shepard has produced more than forty plays that articulate various themes and ideas (Grege & Wong, 2001). His masterpiece, *Buried Child*, belongs to the family drama which is considered as the second play of his trilogy; the first was *Curse of Starving Class* in 1977, *Buried Child* in 1978 and the last one is *True West* in 1980, which

deal with the infanticide and incest themes. Undoubtedly, *Buried Child* has psychological implications that study the effect of the secret on the consolidation of the family. In this respect, Matthew Roudané debates,

One need not to be a devout follower of Freud to respond to the Oedipal dimension 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. (Roudane, 1996)

Likewise, Lynda Hart observes that Shepard's play submits to Ibsen's/Strindberg's style of "realism in theme and structure" (Galens, 1999). The past which gradually encroaches on the present and mask the future. Eric Andrew Lee notes that "Buried Child is a puzzle, in which Shelly tries to disentangle the mystery of the Dodge's family keeping in mind the end goal to comprehend what is going on"(Lee,2003). In this manner, the audience in *Buried Child* might not comprehend what is going on when the play opens as they need a while to get used to the set-up.

Buried Child is recognized to be the masterwork of Shepard as it highlights the life of American society. It blends three literary techniques: realism, surrealism and symbolism. As a result, he presents a family in the condition of sub-consciousness as its members are no longer able to recognize between the reality and illusion "because (American) family life is deteriorating"(Wilson,1998:xi). Moreover, they can get information not from their communication, but through their intuition because they are mentally disturbed and in decline. And this is the job of writers to uncover the shortcomings besides the sins within their society.

It was on June 27, 1978, as a date of the actual appearance of *Buried Child* on stage at San Francisco's Magic Theatre. Though it ran for six weeks, the great success was after one year later at Theatre De Lys. The Pulitzer prize for drama(1979) was awarded to *Buried Child* and it was the first Off-Broadway play to achieve such prize. In spite of his multi colors writings in various issues in more than one genre of art, it is *Buried Child* which paved his way to sit beside the trilogy of American playwrights' theatre: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. In this context, Susan C. W. Abbotson claims:

Shepard had a string of provocative exploratory plays through the 1960s and 1970s, however it was not until *Buried Child*, with its 1979 Pulitzer Award, that his abilities were completely recognized. This remaining parts a characterizing play of his oeuvre, which comprises of more than 50 stage plays and screenplays. (Abbotson, 2005)

THE OFFSTAGE CHARACTER IN *BURIED CHILD*

Buried Child is woven around, a baby boy, the offstage character, who is the result of an incestuous relationship between Halie and, Tilden, her eldest son. The baby boy has played the focal role in the play, yet he was already killed and buried before the commencement of the play for the purpose of stirring the curiosity of the audience. The audience and reader as well, at first glance, are left perplexed concerning

the queer miserable actions of Dodge, the head of the family, and the chaos atmosphere on the stage. Hence, the attention is focused on the circumstances of the family's past time linked to the present one because all the important events of this family happened with, offstage character, the baby boy. Miller states about the past "We live in a world made by men and the past" (Harris, 1994:51). So the past is represented by the action of the child's burial that associated with, Dodge, head of the family and this is what Bigsby claims "The past ... is represented, as it is, by buried baby, the product of an incestuous relationship"(Bigsby in Roudane, 2002).

Likewise, this play gives an exciting record of one of the rotted Midwestern American families which is highly criticized through the role of the offstage character. Dodge's family has an indelible secret. Before many years, Tilden, the eldest of three children of Dodge, and his mother, Halie, had committed a crime of familial lust. The result of this forbidden affair was a baby boy whom Dodge suffocated and covered him in the farm behind their estate. In spite of the fact that the wrongdoing goes unnoticed since the family made an agreement to hold a hidden secret forever, this secret crushes the family and the family unit is overwhelmed in disorder. The arrival of Vince, Tilden's irritated child, and his girlfriend, Shelly, denote a crucial moment in the play. While Vince and Shelly have expected a thoughtful welcome from Vince's family, neither Dodge nor Tilden perceives Vince. While Vince goes out to bring whiskey for his granddad Dodge, Shelly stays with the Dodges. Shelly is strongly stunned by the odd conduct of the family, yet she has recently been familiar with. She decides to discover their strange life, dispositions and relations. Shelly succeeds to coax Tilden out of himself. Finally, the frightful wrongdoing is uncovered. At last, Dodge admits the homicide. when Vince returns home with whiskey, Dodge wills his property to him. After that, Dodge dies and Vince replaces his place on the sofa. Thus, essentially, *Buried Child* is a depiction of the turbulent relationship among Dodge's family individuals. In the light of impacts and their reasons, the anarchic existence of the Dodges exhibited on the stage is an immediate consequence of what happened previously, i.e., the forbidden relationship is followed by a grisly child murder of the little kid. Thusly, one of the principal topics of *Buried Child* is the effect of the offstage character, shown by the buried boy, on the course of the play's activities.

From the first scene of *Buried Child*, the effect of the missing character is seen. Before presenting any personages of the play, Shepard, purposely, needs to gather people to look at the state of the house and its furniture after the murdering of the little child. Everything is in a hopeless state. It is a frail farmhouse, the stairs which, "lead offstage left up" (I. p. 1) are old with a worn-out carpet on the steps. Upright, there is an old seat, "with the stuffing turning out in spots"(I. p. 1). The light is sparkled faintly with a faltering light. Downright the couch, there is an old-fashioned chestnut TV with "glimmering blue light originates from the screen, however no picture, no solid" (I. p. 1). Behind this grim climate, there are types of dim elm trees. It is raining intensely outside. The ranch was once prosperous: "creating enough drain to fill Lake Michi-

gan twice over” (III. p. 57). The pitiful condition of the house is an immediate result of the horrifying homicide of the kid, i.e., the offstage character.

Shepard presents the offstage character that has a considerable effect upon the personages onstage. No important action can be done onstage without its effect though it was a very little baby. Therefore, all the family members tried to bury the past of their life just like burying the little baby. They do not realize that past resists to be separated from the present, “the past is real, and it affects everything that occurs in the present. It affects what things become. Individuals change and act as they do mainly because of what is the past” (Irwin, 1991). By doing so, they lost their present, identity and future as they transform into “life in death” just what had happened to the people of Coleridge’s poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* due to killing an innocent creature. Accordingly, the family members lead a life in darkness and their existence becomes aimless besides their future is obscure. As a result, they lost their lives along with their past and present as well.

The thought of the truant character in *Buried child* is shapeless since the audience ought to recall what they have seen and heard. Thus, toward the end of the play, they can connect the activities to the buried infant. On the other hand, around the end of the play, it gets to be reasonable that the missing character is the person who has obstructed the progress of Dodge’s life. We are, indirectly, informed at the tongue of Dodge as he tells Shelly that they were a happy family and doing good in every aspect of their life; “Dodge: We were a well-established family once. Well-established... This early in the year. Carrots too. Potatoes. Peas. It’s like a paradise out there” (III. p. 57). But, the infanticide of the baby is considered as the watershed in their life which crystallizes their life. The patriarch of the household gradually becomes drunk and heavy smoker due to the sin he had done in killing and burying the infant boy in the backyard of the house. And this is a natural reaction of the human being after committing a sin or when s/he gets frustration as Abbotson states; “Dodge’s drinking is a classic reaction to guilt, as a person attempts to obliterate the memory of his or her past with alcohol” (Abbotson, 2003). He becomes careless about everything in his life even his own appearance as well as his health, “He’s very thin and sickly looking ... starts to cough slowly and softly” (I. p. 1). He lives in the shade of his sin and as the sin is associated with the darkness and prison for a kind of penalty. Consequently, he does not leave (the house) the stage, as a kind of prison, since the commencement of the play till his death, “I rarely go out in the bright sunshine, why would I go out in this?” (I. p. 4).

The offstage baby causes a great torment in two phases; physically as well as psychologically upon the Dodge’s family. Dodge divorces his old delightful life and does nothing just drinking and smoking to end his anguish. Instead of supporting his members of the family, he relies on them to supply what he needs besides that he prefers to live in solitude since the time of his sin, “emphasizes his lack of a public role” (Mathisen, 2009 :15). And “I haven’t had trouble with neighbors here for fifty-seven years. I don’t even know who

the neighbors are! And I don’t wanna know!” (I. p. 7). The rest of the family, each one ignores the other; Tilden behaves like a lunatic and his father tells him to leave the house as he is the cause for the chaos of their life. Whereas, Bradley is introvert because he is amputated, and he keeps ill-treated Dodge due to the murder of the baby. In return, Dodge keeps threatening him by killing and he does not want him in the house anymore. Halie keeps going out with (a local minister) Father Dewis as the daily work in her life. Trying to be religious woman because of the heavy burden of her violating the ethics of human beings, but, in reality, she is having an affair with the minister as Dodge admitted, “Halie is out with her boyfriend. The Right Reverend Dewis” (I. p. 25). Pretending that, she turns to the religion as a kind of redemption of giving birth to an illegitimate child who was killed by Dodge, “with fervor” (Galens, 1999). Indeed, she keeps sinning and betraying her husband and family as well.

Through exchanging words between the spouses, we come to know that the buried baby has affected their conduct, their lifestyle and never talk about their past life when they got married. Talking about the triviality of events like the rain, horse racing, television programs is as an attempt to escape from their distasteful past, “to avoid having to face big issues, including their own failure and complicities” (Abbotson, 2003). And when they try to reminisce their past events, they obviate the era of the little boy before getting married from Dodge. So Halie feels nostalgic for the past which was full of happiness, colorful and shining like during the trip with a horse breed, “everything was dancing with life! colors... Not like today” (I. p. 3). Thus, the present time is somehow nasty and the word ‘today’ gets Dodge back to the miserable time and asks his wife whether she has any relation with the breeder and she gives no comment.

The process of murdering the baby shakes the mentality balance of Dodge’s family as nobody can behave in a mature manner though they are more than thirty years. As what had happened to Tilden though he is in the late forties and the father of two sons, he cannot protect himself from his youngest brother Bradley, “Tilden can’t even protect himself (from Bradley)” (I. p. 6). In addition, he behaves like a little boy as when his mother threatens to kick him out of the house if he hides the truth, he starts to cry. Moreover, he asks a permission of his father to bring a chair as if he is his teacher:

TILDEN: Can I bring my chair in from the kitchen?

DODGE: What?

TILDEN: Can I bring in my chair from the kitchen?

DODGE: Sure. Bring your chair in. Just don’t call it a chair when it’s a stool. (I. p. 8)

Because of the unseen character, Tilden became a husk of the man and a half-crazy character as he is described by Clum as, “Tilden is physically intact” (Roudane, 2002: 180). This is after the disgracefulness of the baby birth, Ansel, that changes him in a radical way, “something about him is profoundly burned-out and displaced” (I. p. 7). He is according to the viewpoint of his mother as, “Who would’ve dreamed. Tilden was an All-American.. halfback” (II. p. 37). He loses his feeling and passion after Dodge burying his son. So, he leaves to New Mexico to forget what has happened to

him, but he gets a lot of trouble and imprisoned there. Then, he comes back to reunite with his family thinking that he may get some sensation and company, but instead, he gets harsh loneliness as he states to his father, "I was alone. I thought I was dead ... I was more lonely than I've ever been before" (I. p. 15). He fails to get repose by accompanying his parents, indeed, he wants to be near his buried son as Abbotson states, he "displays no current affection for his parents... but his care for the land and the dead son seems to have rejuvenated the farmland" (Abbotson, 2005).

Shepard, intentionally, presents the Dodge's family with the three saturated males, but they are physically and psychologically deformed for exaggerating the dilemma of the infanticide of the baby, Ansel. Instead of being the patriarch of his family, Dodge keeps lying passiveness and complaining from the cruelty of his sons besides that he does not go out of the house, "You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing!" (I. p. 15). He is watched by his family to provide him his needs. Whereas Tilden is, at first, the hero and the savior of the family future. Halie thinks that he would look after his brother, Bradley, as well as his parents, but the fact is so bitter to all the family as Tilden cannot take care of himself, "He's still a child" (I. p. 14). So how could he be responsible for the family's requirements? At the last, there is Bradley who is amputated due to the casual accident and he hardly managed himself. Thus, the three males are disabled and need help.

Undoubtedly, there is no one just the matriarch of the family, Halie, who can sustain her family. As she cannot bear the heavy burden of the family, she mourns and praises, Ansel, her buried child that he may sponsor them all:

Ansel wasn't as handsome, but he was smart. He was the smartest probably. I think he probably was. Smarter than Bradley... I think he was smarter than Tilden too... He was the smartest. He could've earned lots of money. Lots and lots of money. He would've took care of us, too. He would've seen to it that we were repaid. He was like that. He was a hero. Don't forget that. A genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And very intelligent. (I. p.10-11)

An attempt is to remove the dust from the past and eradicates the umbrella of obloquy that the family has suffered from, Halie has acknowledged her responsibility of the family obscenity. She wears in black, as a kind of self-deception, from top to bottom. This is not for lamenting the poor child, but to change the reputation of her own family which has severe deformed. So we note that Westgate elucidates her action:

In *Buried Child*, Halie's attempt to memorialize Ansel offers a case in point. She attempts to make Ansel (who was, most likely, never an all-American athlete and was certainly not a decorated soldier) a hero in order to give the family a different history than that with which it is burdened: the decomposing patriarch, the crippled sons, the buried child. (Westgate, 2005)

Obviously, the relationship among the members of the family is not stable and even their dialogues are fruitless or ambiguous due to the past secret which deteriorates the intimacy and the affinity among them. In addition, nobody wants to talk with the other because of their exhausting

minds. Halie, therefore, should take her step in reconstructing her own family and evaluate the defects that had been nested in her family members. Though she is the main cause of the family disintegrating, she spends most of her time apart from her family members; either upstairs in her room or companies Father Dewis, whom she is having sexual intercourse with. Therefore, she has a vital role in creating a gap among all. "Things keep happening while you're upstairs, ya know. The world doesn't stop just because you're upstairs" (I. p.12).

Shepard constructs *Buried Child* around the offstage character and there is no any important event that happens without the role of the offstage character to exaggerate the effect upon both the reader and audience. So the whole family members try to forget the horrible plight by means of engaging themselves with other things. However, they live in the shadow of a catastrophe that refuses to be eclipsed. Accordingly, the eccentric behavior of Dodge's family has related to the lurking trail of the offstage character as they are all fully aware of their crime.

DODGE: What do you know about it?

TILDEN: I know. I know all about it. We all know.

DODGE: So what difference does it make? Everybody knows (I. p. 15)

Shepard adopts the technique of giving the audience and the reader information about the past events little by little (like the mystery and secret of the buried child). So at the end of the first act, we come to know the eccentric behaviors and the internal as well as the external defects of Dodge's family members.

Each of the family members is damaged in some way, and this damage usually manifests itself physically as well as psychologically. The family members in *Buried Child* each suffers from a collective repressed memory of a trauma that is (for most of the play) unspeakable. (Lee, 2003)

It was an intelligible fact that Dodge's family cannot encounter their plight and the buried secret needs someone to unearth it to remove the clouds of ambiguity and the absurdity. Thus, at the beginning of the second act, we witness Vince, Tilden's son, returns with his girlfriend, Shelly, to his grandparents. He is about twenty two-years-old, six years away from home, he expects warm welcome by his family. At the beginning, he is ignored as one of the family members because the family tries to abolish the past from their life. Then, when Dodge knew that Vince does not acknowledge their sin, he recognizes him, not Tilden.

VINCE: Grandpa, look, I just got here. I just now got here. I haven't been here for six years. I don't know anything that's happened.

DODGE: You don't know anything?

VINCE: No.

DODGE: Well that's good. That's good. It's much better not to know anything. Much, much better. (I. p. 25)

The two undesirable visitors, Vince and Shelly, sleuth the past events trying to understand what had happened to the family during the past six years. Therefore, reviving the past

by calling Dodge a 'grandpa' and Tilden 'Dad', both Dodge and Tilden ignore Vince through talking about the bottle of whiskey. They do not want to confirm Vince as a member of their family because it implies a confession that the buried child as their son, "Vince had been treated as a surrogate buried child. As the buried child had been deprived of belonging to the family, now Vince receives the same treatment; his rights of being a son are also being denied" (Ormianin, 1983).

Shelly is terrified of the gothic behaviors of the family members even the status of the house, "This is the house? It's so dark"(I. p. 19) and she tells Vince to leave. However, Shelly knows how she should behave to get out of this critical situation safely. In the beginning, she sympathizes with Dodge's head cuts, "Oh... you poor old man. What happened to your head?" (I. p. 20), then she explains why they are, she and Vince, here. She fails to achieve Dodge's trust because he dislikes speaking especially with strangers to keep the past hidden. In addition, she is insulted in dirty terms by Dodge as a kind of expelling them. Then she turns to Tilden and asks, unexpected to speak after long negligence, about his fatherhood of Vince "Is he your son?" (I. p. 28). At first, the audience knows that Tilden has a child besides Vince and all the family members "we" buried it as Tilden declares, "I had a son once but we buried him" (I. p. 28). Shelly urges by her curiosity to take a close step towards Tilden for extracting the truth.

SHELLY: *(To Tilden.)* Do you want me to take those carrots for you?

VINCE: Shelly—*(Tilden stares at her. She moves in close to him. Holds out her arms. Tilden stares at her arms then slowly dumps the carrots into her arms. Shelly stands there holding the carrots).*

TILDEN: *(To Shelly)* Here. You like carrots? Take 'em.

SHELLY: Sure. I like all kinds of vegetables. I'm a vegetarian. (I. p. 28)

The action of peeling and cooking the carrots is her excuse and the key for getting Tilden's trust to be familiar with him step by step. She interrogates him about his paternity of Vince, but he, unwittingly, dodges in his answer, "All kinds of vegetables. You like vegetables?" (I. p. 28). Then, Vince questions her to figure the peculiarity of his family's conducts and she keeps working on that by saying that "I'm helping" (II. p. 30). As a result, we can note all the members onstage entangles in the net of the buried child's case, the offstage character. Dodge does not disregard Shelly when she is so close to Tilden though he is communicating with Vince. He is fully aware that she is open-minded and can perceive any turn or word to decipher their precious fortifications.

She could get me a bottle. She's the type a girl that could get me a bottle. Easy. She'd go down there. Slink up to the counter. They'd probably give her two bottles for the price of one. She could do that. She has that air about her... Exceptional... *Dodge takes a short glance then looks back at Shelly.* (I. p. 30)

Shelly enters their life in death which is so harsh to live as they have a sense of alienation. According to the famous

German Philosopher Hegel, alienation "is the inevitable condition arising from the gap between human consciousness and the natural world between the inner world and the outer world" (quoted by Quinn, 2007). Everyone in Dodge's family is alienated because of the family's secret that they can neither cure nor endure. As a result, they forget the sensation of life as well as the past. This can be seen clearly when Dodge tries to prevent Tilden from making confession to Shelly.

TILDEN: We had a baby. *(motioning to Dodge)* He did. Dodge did. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other. Little baby. Dodge Killed it.

TILDEN: Dodge drowned it. Drowned it in the sink.

DODGE: Tilden? You leave that girl alone!

TILDEN: *(pays no attention)* Never told Halie. Never told anybody. Just drowned it.

TILDEN: So small that nobody could find it. Just disappeared. We had no service. No hymn. Nobody came.

DODGE: *(shuts off t.v.)* Tilden!

TILDEN: Nobody could find it. Just disappeared. Cops looked for it. Neighbors. Nobody could find it.

DODGE: Tilden, What're you telling her! Tilden! *Dodge keeps struggling until he's standing.*

TILDEN: Finally everybody just gave up. Just stopped looking. Everybody had a different answer. Kidnap. Murder. Accident. Some kind of accident.

DODGE: Tilden you shut up! You shut about it! ...

DODGE: Tilden! Don't tell her anything! She's an outsider!

TILDEN: He's the only one who knows where it's buried. The only one. Like a secret buried treasure. Won't tell any of us. Won't tell me or mother or even Bradley. Especially Bradley. Bradley tried to force it out of him but he wouldn't tell. (II. p. 39-40)

According to this confession of Tilden, Shelly and the audience comprehend the plight of the family and unravel all the ambiguity of their queer conduct. The family kills their little child and buries it, but what is the reason for doing this criminal action is still vague for the audience. When Bradley, a very aggressive member of the family, appears onstage, all the people onstage eschew him in order not to be hurt. Nibras Jawad Kadhem declares that "Bradley's physical distortion is just an external sign of his mental and enthusiastic disfigurement"(Kadhem, 2008). This offensive conduct is because of the infanticide of a little baby, the offstage character. He considers Dodge, his father, as the responsible for this crime and even he wants to kill him because his crime, "We could shoot him"(II. p. 41).

In the last act of the play, there is a long conversation between Shelly and Dodge about the past events of the family, particularly the picture in Halie's room. Shelly probes him about the little baby in Halie's arm and Halie looks uneasy as if the baby does not belong to her, "She's looking down at the baby like it was somebody else's. Like it didn't even belong to her"(III. p.43). Dodge pays no attention to

her questions as usual by talking about Tilden's past troubles in New Mexico. Moreover, Halie also ignores her inquiry concerning her grandson, Vince, as she directs the speech to another subject.

SHELLY: I came here with your grandson for a little visit! A little innocent friendly visit.

HALIE: My grandson?

SHELLY: Yes! That's right. The one no one seems to remember. ...

HALIE (*Suddenly alarmed, to Dodge*): Where's Tilden?

SHELLY: Don't ignore me! I'm telling you something!

HALIE: Dodge! Where's Tilden gone? (III. p. 52-3)

Because of the offstage character, all the family members behave as if Shelly does not exist in their world especially when she scatters the past of the family. Furthermore, nobody wishes to hear the word 'grandson' as it activates the memory of the little child, the offstage character. Therefore, Shelly adopts a new style of speaking with them for getting recognition and an answer by breaking a cup and saucer, "*Shelly suddenly throws the cup and saucer against the R. Door. Dewis ducks. THE CUP AND SAUCER SMASH INTO PIECES. Halie stops, turns toward Shelly. Everyone freezes... (To Halie.) I am here! I am standing right here in front of you. I am breathing. I am speaking. I am alive! I exist. DO YOU SEE ME?*" (III. p. 52-3). At last, she has got what she is looking for and for that, Father Dewis tried to dismiss her out of the family to be away from the buried secret. Then, Halie threatens her by calling the police, but Bradley rejects the idea of police to keep the secret of their crime.

HALIE: Father, there's no point in talking to her any further. We're just going to have to call the police.

BRADLEY: No! Don't get the police in here. We don't want the police in here. This is our home. (III. p. 53)

Nobody of the family members even Father Dewis wants to disclose the secret of the buried child to a stranger, Shelly, as they had made a pact. Shelly accuses them of having a buried secret overtly "I know you've got a secret. You've all got a secret. It's so secret, in fact, you're all convinced it never happened" (III. p. 56). After that, Dodge declares, ignoring Halie's rejection, the whole story of their past six years and admits that he has the responsibility of killing the little baby because he is not his father, "I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it. There was no struggle. No noise. Life just left it" (III. p.58). He had done this because of the heavy burden of the secret which has changed their life drastically. After acknowledging the truth, it seems that the spell has gone from the life of the family besides they recognize their grandson, Vince.

DODGE: Where's my goddamn bottle!...

DODGE: It's me! Your grandfather! Don't play stupid with me! Where's my two bucks!...

HALIE: Vincent? Is that you, Vincent? (III. p. 59)

The revelation scene of Dodge in front of the family reminds us of the revelation scene of Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* as soon as he utters the truth, he passes away to get rest due to, "The truth is preferable, even when it leads

to death because a lie is never profitable" (Salami, 1999). Vince inherits the house and the contents of his grandfather, Dodge, because he is the only one who does not make any harm to the family besides he is the youngest and real grandson of Dodge who has his flesh and blood unlike, Ansel, the buried child. Then, Dodge dies silently, nobody notices his death just like the buried child without making any sound, when the sun shines again. The shining of the sun implies the outcrop of the truth and stopping the rain suggests the curse is over. So the corns spring again in the back of the house even the corpse of little baby returns to the house after the death of Dodge. When the secret disappears, the family retrieves the regularity of their life. All these things allude that the past cannot be detached from the present or future even if you bury it like what had Dodge done, you would lose the bedrock of the family life.

If the buried child has been the source of the family curse, then its exhumation may signify the end of that curse and an expatriation of the sins of the previous generation. The dead son whom the family has avoided and denied has been brought to light and faced, and the murderer, Dodge, has died, allowing the living son, Vince, to take charge with a clean slate. (Abbotson, 2005)

Findings

Death and non-presence mark the 20th century American drama and the most illustrated pattern to depict these aspects is the offstage characters. As drama reflects the actual life of the society so that adopting the offstage character could be a good technique that has been used by playwrights as it has a considerable impact on the stage. Shepard presents a deteriorated family whose relationship is disturbed via the offstage character to shock his society by the consequences of incestuous affairs. These detestable cracks within a family start after the infanticide of the baby boy, the offstage character, by Dodge which is considered the main cause that leads to the dysfunctional family as a result of his ignoring his wife for six years.

Shepard wants to say that the mother is the backbone who has the ability to gather all the family members or devastate the familial bond through adopting the theatrical technique of the offstage character. The offstage character shows the forbidden sin which leads to a rotting family. The offstage character reveals the bad condition of an incestuous relation within a family in both psychologically and physically in order to be avoided. Dodge's family has been perished with disgraceful memory because of the offstage character. Shepard, at the end of the play, hints to the dwindling hope of achieving the American Dream in the American society that everyone wants to get, yet it is a myth and our demise. Though nobody could see the offstage onstage, s/he successfully reveals many negative aspects of an American family's life and gets a significant impact on the audience, the society.

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