Sam Shepard and the "Familial Maze": Possible Worlds Theory in *Buried Child*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to address Sam Shepard's treatment of American family in *Buried Child* focusing on 'world construction.' In order to explore the process of world creation in the play, the writers draw on the works of Marie-Laure Ryan, a key theorist in 'possible worlds theory,' one of the orientations in cognitive poetics. Considering Shepard's highlighting of the bonds among the family members figuring in his plays, the interactions of characters with Textual Actual World (henceforth TAW) are of paramount importance and contribute to what Ryan calls 'tellability.' Central to our analysis is the consideration of the characters' private worlds' interactions and their intrafamilial and extrafamilial conflicts. Shepard is also centrally concerned with American (popular) culture and its underlying myths, hence the prominence of the theme of American Dream in his oeuvre. As such, the projection of the characters' wish worlds is central in Shepard's play. Considering these "wish worlds" in terms of possible worlds-theory could be rewarding. Many of these wish worlds, it is argued, hinge on the notion of American family whose consideration by Shepard stems from his interest in the questions of origins, identity, selfhood, and autonomy.

Keywords: Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*; Marie-Laure Ryan; possible worlds theory; cognitive poetics; American family

INTRODUCTION

Shepard's solemn consideration of the notion of American family stem from his interest in the questions of origins, identity, selfhood, and autonomy. These are highlighted in his family plays; in the words of Matthew Roudané, typically "strange or absent fathers, distant mothers, wayward sons, and confused daughters animate the stage" (2002, p. 67). As a matter of fact, the defaced and distorted version of the theme of American Dream that is associated with success, love, and happiness is displayed in Shepard's drama.

Sam Shepard's work has been read from various theoretical perspectives (psychoanalytical, sociological, cultural studies, feminist, etc.) but rarely from a philosophical perspective. We believe that reading Shepard's plays through possible worlds theory, the more philosophically-oriented tendency in cognitive poetics, can shed light on the seminal concerns in them (the way characters cognitively relate to their

family/society/culture; the process of identity fashioning, individual and collective; American history; the enduring myths in American culture, etc.).

The present paper attempts to examine the applicability of possible worlds theory, as one of the subdomains of cognitive poetics, to Sam Shepard's famous family play, *Buried Child*. Cognitive poetics, an interdisciplinary and multi-methodological field of study, is actually the process wherein mind and language work together. As for this paper's analysis, there exists an interwoven thread in the reader's cognitive process in that the mind is constructing worlds in tandem so as to have a better insight into the literary work and the possible worlds theory of narratology. Therefore Shepard's focus on the ways the theatrical images projecting the familial relationships can be perceived in the reader/audience's mind seems to be of paramount importance for his tendency towards world construction.

The majority of possible worlds approaches to date have contributed to the study of fiction. Elena Semino demonstrated an extensive examination of possible words model on poetry (1997). As for drama, Thomas Pavel has occasionally referred to it in his *Fictional Worlds* (1986). But it is Marie-Laure Ryan who has amply written about drama in terms of possible worlds theory. She, with Jan-Noël Thon, proposes that in Transmedial studies such as drama "[T]he replacement of 'narrative' with 'storyworld' acknowledges the emergences of the concept of 'world' not only in narratology but also on the broader cultural scene" (2014, p.1). It appears that by means of the concept of 'world' Ryan aims to resolve the classical narratologists' problem with drama: the idea that it cannot be easily included within the scope of narratology, since it is devoid of narrative mimetically. Therefore, after a brief survey of possible worlds theory, we offer a cognitive poetic reading of *Buried Child* in the light of this theory.

POSSIBLE WORLDS: FROM THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS TO FICTIONALITY

The origin of the theory of "possible worlds" can be traced to the seventeenth century and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's concern with philosophical logic. Leibniz (1969, pp. 333-4) maintains that there exist "an infinity of possible worlds […] as thoughts in the mind of God," and among these worlds, only one is the actual world. In the second half of the twentieth century, some philosophers and logicians tapped into Leibnizian concept of possible worlds as a "convenient tool in building a semantic model for the modal operators of necessity (symbolized as □) and of possibility (◊)" (Ryan 1991, p. 16). A host of eminent philosophers of the analytical school such as Jaakko Hintikka, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Rescher and others firmly give credence to the assumption that "our actual world is surrounded by an infinity of other possible worlds" (cited in Bradley and Swartz 1979, p. 2). Accordingly, nothing could be more valid than the real world we live in.

Marie-Laure Ryan (2014) in line with other literary theorists and narratologists (Pavel; Doležel) has further extended possible worlds theory with the aim of providing solutions to various issues within the semantics of fictionality. They suggested that the semantic domain or universe projected by a literary text itself can be considered as an independent alternative possible world (APW) that turns out to be as actual world (TAW) the time the reader immerses in a fiction. This is what Ryan (1991) labels as "recentering" wherein the reader is pushed into a new universe where the TAW of the fictional world the narrator presents becomes the actual world for the reader. In this sense, every proposition within the fictional world attains possibility and truth value. Once the reader is recentered, Ryan (1991, p. 109) proposes "the modal structure of narrative universes" wherein "the internal description of the semantic universe projected by the text" is examined. For describing the internal structure of "the textual universe as a dynamic combination of textual actual world (TAW), on the one hand, and the different types of alternative possible worlds

formulated by characters, on the other hand" (Semino 1997, pp. 86-7), Ryan (1991) suggests that the possible worlds as private worlds or virtual domains exist in the thoughts or minds of the characters. What's more, Ryan (1991) expatiates on the characters' mental activities that are composed of two sorts of elements: "some involve truth-functional and fact-defining propositions while some others do not" (p. 111). As for the first group of propositions, Ryan reminisces "'thinking that p,' 'hoping that p,' and 'intending p,'" and in regard with the other group of propositions, she offers "the emotions, subjective judgments, and fleeting perceptions before they are turned into knowledge" (ibid.). These propositions have to be integrated to constitute "the image of a world" (ibid.).

By modifying Lubomir Doležel's systems of modalities (as mentioned above), Ryan (1991) proposes some alternative possible worlds (APWs) that constitute the narrative universe, and the conflicts within them, which bring about plot development and its tellability. Additionally, Margot Norris declares that by modification of the fictional modalities, Marie-Laure Ryan restricts them "to the private worlds in the minds of characters rather than by treating them as operatives of world- construction" (2014, p. 9). The private worlds or virtual worlds are as follows:

> (1)*Textual Actual World* (*TAW*): what is presented as true and real in the story; (2) *Knowledge World* (*K-World*): what the characters know or believe to be the case with the T/AW; (3) *Prospective Extension of K-World*: what characters expect or hold to be future developments in TAW; (4) *Obligation World* (*O-World*): the commitments and prohibitions constituted by the social rules and moral principles which the characters are subject to; (5) *Wish World* (*W-World*): the wishes and desires of the characters; (6) *Intention World* (*I-World*): the plans and goals of the characters; (7) *Fantasy Universes* (*F-Universes*): the dreams and fantasies of the characters and the fictions they construct.
>
> (Ryan 1991, pp. 113-123)

In knowledge world or K-world, the reader copes with knowledge, belief, and ignorance of the characters within the fictional universe. Ryan suggests that a possible K-world is "an incomplete representation", and an impossible K-world "involves contrary-to-fact propositions". Ryan (1991) distinguishes four epistemic categories: the first one is correspondence and knowledge (+) where "x holds p firmly for true"; the second proposition is composed of conflict and misbelief (–) where "x hold p firmly for false, while p is true"; the third one contains absence and ignorance (0) where "p is unknown to x"; and the last one draws the reader's attention to indeterminacy, uncertainty, and question (i) where "x is either uncommitted to the truth of p or leans to some degree toward the truth (i.e. , considers p possible, probable, unlikely, etc.)" (p. 115). The focal point is that the reference world of a character's K-world may not only be TAW, but any of the private worlds of the narrative universe (p. 116). In like manner, prospective extension of K-world corresponds to Todorov's predictive mode[1] in that "the K-world of characters includes a prospective domain, representing their apprehension of the tree of possible developments out of the present situation" (ibid).

Obligation world or O-world is a "system of commitment and prohibition defined by social rules and moral principles" on the grounds that there always exists the authorial power (ibid). A character's or person's O-world is fulfilled and satisfied in T/AW, if all the obligations have been fulfilled and none of the "interdictions transgressed" (ibid). Ryan (1991) divides the actions in O-world into: "credits (acquisition of merit), debts (acquisition of demerit), and neutral" (p. 117). Then, it is obvious that the acquisition of merit "makes characters rewardable" and acquisition of demerit "makes characters punishable" and there would be no credit (ibid). In regard with the relationships and conflicts in O-world, Ryan (1991) touches on Todorov's conditional mode, "if you do p, I will do q" (ibid). Threats, for instance, according to Ryan (1991), offer an interesting conflict: "[B]y issuing a threat,

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characters create an obligation, and if the precondition obtains they will be in 'debt' until they execute the threat" (ibid). In wish world or W-world, the key word is "desire"; also, it is known as "the axiological system" that occupies personal values or desires, or in other words, what deemed as good, bad, neutral, or desirable by a character.

The other virtual domain is fantasy universes or F-universes. In this type of private sphere within the narrative universe, the reader grapples with what the characters in the story create within their minds such as dreams, hallucinations, fantasies, and fictional stories (Ryan 1991, p. 119). The notion of "recentering" in this case takes place for the character as well as the reader since F-Universes itself has a new system with a new TAW at the center and the APWs or F-worlds surrounding it. Ryan states that "[F]or the duration of a dream, the dreamer believes in the reality of the events he or she experiences, and the actual world of the dream takes the place of T/AW" (ibid). It aims to sort out the ontological realms present within the narration, like in Ryan's assertion "crashing through the wall to enter another room" (ibid).

In addition to the above-mentioned private worlds, Ryan (1991) holds that "the private domain of characters is not exhausted by sincere beliefs and desires, or genuine obligations;" yet, the purpose becomes a sort of deception (ibid). Hence, she introduces Mock K-World, Mock O-World, Mock W-World, and Mock I-World as pretended worlds (p. 123). That is, they sometimes pretend to believe in something, pretend to be under an obligation and pretend that they wish something or have a specific goal.

In order for a plot within a fictional universe to be started and developed, these APWs must yield to some relationships with each other. The primary level of conflict, Ryan postulates, is the one between TAW and the private worlds. Likewise, there may be other conflicts between the private worlds of an individual character. And last but not least is the important level of conflict between the private worlds of different characters.

In the following pages we will try to read Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* in terms of the modality of the possible worlds projected in it.

THE PLAY

Buried Child (1978), the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1979, along with *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) and *True West* (1980) comprise Sam Shepard's family trilogy. This play, in a shift from epistemological dominant to ontological uncertainty, portrays a postmodern marginal family, "a 'normal' Midwestern farm family" (Roudané 2002, p. 348), fraught with fragmented identities and impotencies, including the father (Dodge), the mother (Halie), two sons (Tilden and Bradley), Tilden's son (Vince) and his girlfriend (Shelly); the play "imagines the slow dissolution of the family from the inside" (Crank and Wagner-Martin 2012, p. 57). An old secret is unearthed when Vince, Tilden's son comes back home after six years; The shattered memory of a buried child born of incest of the mother and the elder son, Tilden, haunts the family after years and changes the course of their lives; the play culminates in a new generation despairingly supplanting the older one. According to Susan C. W. Abbotson (2005), the "dark secrets this family keeps subvert the myth of small-town wholesomeness and show how Shepard views the American agrarian ideal" (pp. 162-163). Bestowing upon this modality, Shepard manifests/projects a possible world of an American family stuck in the world of "arid sterility" (Schvey 1993, p. 22); their house is parodically depicted as a house of the dead rather than a home: a half-witted son, a paralyzed son and a corpse father.

Although in modern drama's treatment of the family -- Tennessee Williams's or Eugene O'Neil's, for instance -- a partly satisfying resolution is usually achieved, Shepard's more open-ended plays abound with ambiguities and gaps that preclude closure. As a

metaphorically counterculture playwright, Shepard has often expressed his contempt for neat, conclusive endings: "I think it's a cheap trick to resolve things. It's a complete lie to make resolutions" (Taav 2000, p. 56).

Buried Child's plot at first seems to be linear and conventional. However, by the second act, it becomes more and more absurd and complicated as there appears, in Abbotson's words, "a careful blend of the surreal with the superreal" (2005, p. 166). In the first act, some ordinary events occur such as Dodge and Halie's conversation about Halie's past or, later on, Tilden's homecoming. Tilden enters with a bunch of corn he claims he has picked from the backyard, while Dodge and Halie insist that the backyard is barren. There are, however, some turns and twists when Vince, accompanied by his girlfriend Shelly, turns up and none of the male members of the family, even his father, Tilden, recognize him. The plot further thickens in the third act when an old secret is uncovered and at the end; Tilden once again enters carrying the bones of a child murdered by Dodge some forty years ago.

INTERTEXTUAL PATTERNS AS POSSIBLE WORLDS IN *BURIED CHILD*

Alluding to his own life and career, Shepard's play also frequently borrows from other dramatists; the world of the play appears to tally in all respects with our 'actual' world. Shepard's birthplace and the play's possible setting, Illinois, Dodge as a typical and an abusive alcoholic patriarch of the house identifiable with Shepard's father, the house (objects such as the sofa, TV, stool, pail, and so forth on the stage) all give the reader the assumption that the TAW corresponds in all other respects with their 'actual' world and they are capable of extracting information from their own actual-world encyclopedia (Doležel 1998), and "will therefore flesh out the fictional world on the basis of their geographical and historical knowledge" (Semino 1997, p. 86). Hence, in this case, the play is very close to Ryan's "principle of minimal departure." Moreover, the other issue to be considered in this regard is the reader's "encyclopedia" or "intertextual frames" (Eco 1979, p. 20) or "fictional encyclopedia" (Doležel 1998, p. 177) as well as "doctrine of intertextuality" or "generic landscape" (Ryan 1991, p. 54). In one aspect, *Buried Child*, in Don Shewey's terms (1997), bears the burden of Shepard's old works whose storyworlds the reader can remember and refer to. As Shewey mentions, "all the way back to the woman's one-sided conversation in *The Rock Garden.* The familiar yet stylized domestic activity recalls *Action,* the overlapping realities *Suicide in B-flat,* the flying veggies [is the reminiscence of] *Curse of the Starving Class*" (p. 122).

However, in terms of plot and action, the play has some similarities to other playwrights' works. The ending of Ibsen's *Ghost*s, for instance, where Oswald Alving exclaims, "the sun—the sun" to his mother is very similar to *Buried Child*'s ending when Halie says "[M]aybe it's the sun. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's the sun" (p. 32). Thomas Adler in "Ghosts of Ibsen in Shepard's *Buried Child*," notes that in the pun there exists a semantic relationship between the plays ("the audience hears both 'sun' and 'son'") and also the revelation of a horrible secret and raining are other important similarities between the two plays. "[T]he shapes of dark elm trees" (p. 63) signaled in the opening stage direction of the play suggests references to Eugene O'Neil's *Desire under the Elms* (Cardullo 2009, p. 1). Additionally, there are echoes of O'Neil's *Long Day's Journey into Night* in *Buried Child*. Lauren Porter believes that both share "cyclical structures, with final scenes that become ironic mockeries of their opening episode," however, they differ noticeably in their philosophical tendencies (p. 108). Vince's return, with a girlfriend (Shelly), as a homecoming shares something with Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* (Bigsby 2000, p. 183). Tilden's position as an all-American high school football star, who fails to live up to his expectations,

escapes to the West and then returns home in despair, is reminiscent of Biff Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Such intertextual relations in Shepard's drama could be considered as exemplifying what Doležel calls "postmodernist rewrite" (1998, p. 206). "All postmodernist rewrites [the successor worlds]," Doležel suggests, "*re*design, *re*locate, and *re*evaluate the classic protoworld" (ibid. emphases in original). Doležel (1998) proposes three distinct types of these 'postmodern rewrites': transposition, expansion, and displacement. In transposition, and predominantly in Shepard's instance as the successor world, the play "preserves the design […] but the rewrite tests the topicality of the canonical world by placing it in a new, usually contemporary, historical, political, and cultural context" (ibid). In expansion, Shepard's *Buried Child* encompasses the breadth of the protoworld, modern drama in this case, and as a result, the protoworld and the successor world stand as "complementary" to each other (Doležel 1998, p. 207). Epistemological uncertainties regarding the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge and its limits figure in Shepard's play, but also figuring are ontological uncertainties such as modes of being or identity, the purpose of life plus the worlds and the violation of their boundaries projected by a fictional text (McHale 1987).

INTRAFAMILIAL CHALLENGES: CHARACTERS' APWS CONFLICTS IN *BURIED CHILD*

The play opens on a rainy morning; Dodge, the old, paralyzed, dysfunctional father in his seventies is the only one seen laid on the sofa on the stage. Although he cannot move from the sofa or buy his own drink, he still desperately tries to maintain the pose of a patriarch controlling his family. Halie's voice, sometimes shouting due to Dodge being hard of hearing, is heard from upstairs. Halie's account of the memories of her secret affairs, at the beginning, engenders the fantasy universe that is in conflict with Dodge's K-Worlds: in one sense, Dodge's K-world of Halie's fidelity is frustrated and, in line with that, his powerlessness means that his W-world is unfulfilled, and yet there is his belief world that there has never been racing on Christmas contradicted by Halie who reveals one of her secret affairs:

> DODGE: They never raced on New Year's!
> HALIE'S VOICE: Sometimes they did.
> DODGE: They never did!
> HALIE'S VOICE: Before we were married they did!
> […]
> HALIE'S VOICE: I went once. With a man. (p. 67)

Halie continues that her companion was "a wonderful man. A breeder" who knew everything about the horses and there with him "everything was dancing with life" (p. 68). This gives us a hint about Halie's character foreshadowing her incestuous relation with her son. From another perspective, there is Halie's W-world, her wish to punish Dodge. Interestingly, the word 'dodge' means "[to] evade (a debt or obligation) in a cunning or dishonest way."[2] This largely accords with Dodge's behavior and O-world in the play that seems to be in conflict with Halie's O-world. There is a "debt" on Dodge's part non-payment of which involves a moral infraction, and in return there is Halie's attempt to take revenge, to make herself, in Ryan's terms, "liable to reciprocal action" (1991, p. 117). Dodge's retort about Halie's ex-boyfriend is: "And he never laid a finger on you, I suppose? This gentleman breeder-man?" (p. 66) Halie wishes to bother Dodge (a W-world); she also intends (an I-world) to have her other son, Bradley, give a haircut to Dodge who is frightened of him. Dodge's response, in return, a W-world, is far from reality due to his paralysis and impotency: "You tell Bradley that if he shows up here with those clippers, I'll kill him!"

(p.67); yet, later on he admits to his decay: "My appearance is out of his domain! It's even out of mine! In fact, it's disappeared! I'm an invisible man!" (p. 68).

Tilden's entrance from the backyard, "his arms loaded with fresh ears of corn" (*BC* 69) in the first act appears to be in conflict with Dodge's and Halie's K-world of the barren backyard:

> DODGE: Where'd you pick it from?
> TILDEN: Right out in back.
> DODGE: There is nothing out there!
> TILDEN: There's corn.
> DODGE: There hasn't been corn out there since about nineteen thirty-five! That's the last time I planted corn out there!
> TILDEN: It's out there now.
> […]
> HALIE' VOICE: Not since about nineteen thirty-five. (pp. 69-70)

In a Beckettian fashion, both Dodge and Halie reject Tilden's claim or K-world that there exists anything in the backyard "since about nineteen thirty-five." This exact mentioning of the time twice is a hint that generates one of the gaps (what happened in nineteen thirty-five) in the play for the reader to fill in? Likewise, there appears another gap that will not be filled in to the end the play, that is, the mysterious reference to Tilden's trouble in New Mexico discussed between the father and the son which is the reason for Tilden' return. Here, Dodge and Halie's K-world is not shared with the reader.

This fictional multi-person world becomes chaotic as Halie comes into view; there emerges a clash in the interaction of agential constellation; the fixed hierarchy of the agents, father/mother/children, is disturbed manifested in Halie's W-world and I-world about overturning Dodge's patriarchy. In her dialogues with Tilden, Halie says: "It's our responsibility. He can't look after himself anymore, so we have to do it. Nobody else will do it. We can't just send him away somewhere. If we had lots of money we could send him away" (p. 72). Halie clearly wishes to be separated from her husband forever by sending, but it cannot be fulfilled as they cannot afford sending him to a home, hence the mock O-world of the responsibility to look after Dodge.

The second act starts with the entrance of two new characters, Vince and Shelly. Vince has returned to his birthplace after six years but he is not sure about his family's reaction. Ironically, when Vince, Dodge's grandson, returns his grandfather does not recognize him. In other words, Dodge's and Vince's K-worlds are in conflict or, as Ryan proposes, there is absence or ignorance (0): "p [Vince] is unknown to x [Dodge]" (1991, p.115); correspondingly, another way of accounting for this is that Dodge's wishes not to be reminded of the past (W-world). Yet from another viewpoint, this lack of recognition may stem from a pretended private world that is a mock-belief (K-world); that is, due to total indifference and dysfunctionality, as a defense mechanism, Dodge would rather not recollect his grandson, Vince, and as a result confuses him with Tilden, Vince's father, that was supposed to stay with him:

> VINCE: Grandpa, it's Vince. I'm Vince. Tilden's son. You remember?
> (DODGE *stares at him*)
> DODGE: You didn't do what you told me. You didn't stay here with me.
> VINCE: Grandpa, I haven't been here until just now. I just got here. (p. 87)

Conversely, in the third act, Halie, who has a keen interest in the past, as well as Dodge are able to identify Vince and there is an apparent correspondence between their K-worlds and Vince's.

Narratologically, Shelly, the other female character, plays the role of an intradiegetic narrator. This does not mean that she is literally a narrator but in effect she functions as an outsider and observer who by interrogating the family members about the strange things she witnesses satisfies her K-world and divulges secrets to the audience; in other words, she "objectifies the action of the play" (Hall 1993, p. 98). Similarly, when Tilden enters the stage for the second time carrying carrots picked from the backyard this time he does not recognize his son, Vince, either. It has to be noted that there is a mistake in Vince's K-world regarding Tilden assuming that he still lives in New Mexico. Here is how Shelly reacts to Tilden's non-recognition of his son: "This is supposed to be your son! Is he your son? Do you recognize him! […] I thought everybody knew each other!" (p.92). Tilden's answer, uttered emotionlessly, as K-world is: "I had a son once but we buried him" (ibid). In another dialogue, Dodge says: "they will steal your bottle! They'll cut your hair! They'll murder your children! That's what will happen" (p. 93). The word murder here contributes to filling in the gap created before in the play through some hints (starting with the very title of the play) about a child who has been buried. Plot-wise – and thematically – the play hinges on the speculations formed in the minds of some characters (Vince and Shelly) as well as the readers about some knowledge gaps -- mostly about identity (who is who in this gothic family drama). From Tilden and Dodge's remarks the readers along with some characters in the play understand that there has been a child (fathered by Tilden) who has been possibly murdered. These speculations indicate the 'possibility' of another world of crime and horror behind the façade of the apparently mundane affairs of an ordinary American family.

While Vince leaves the house to buy drink for Dodge, Shelly tries to help Tilden remember Vince as his son (a W-world). After a long discussion, Tilden tells her "something that is true" pertaining to "a baby […] a little tiny baby"; his W-world, however, is in conflict with Dodge's O-world as the following speech has it: "I can't. Dodge won't let me" (p. 103). Tilden explains to Shelly:

> We had a baby. Little baby. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other. So small that nobody could find it. Just disappeared. We had no service. No hymn. Nobody came [….] [Referring to Dodge] He's the only one who knows where it is. The only one. Like a secret buried treasure. Won't tell any of us. (pp. 103-4)

Tilden in this fragmented F-universe uncovers the truth. It is fragmented because Dodge is constantly interrupting Tilden's speech which is violating his O-world (keeping the secret of murdering the child born of the incestuous relation between Tilden and his mother).

EXTRAFAMILIAL CHALLENGES: TAW/CHARACTERS' APWS CONFLICTS IN *BURIED CHILD*

If we consider the dilapidated farm house in Illinois (the setting) as the TAW, reminiscent of the past for the American family inhabiting there, some non-actual, unrealized alternative possible worlds are revolving around it that consolidate the interactions and the conflicts within the play. In this regard, Landy F. Sparr, Susan S. Erstling and James K. Boehnlein (1990) interestingly refer to Alexis de Tocqueville's, the French Sociologist, observation during his visit to the United States:

> In the United States a man builds a house in which to spend his old age, and he sells it before the roof is on; he plants a garden and lets it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he brings a field into tillage and leaves other men to gather the crops. (p. 564)

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These lines are exactly in tune with the TAW of Shepard's family plays, particularly *Buried Child*.

This could be related to Shelly's "epistemic quest." She is alone with Dodge and has looked into all the rooms. In the following passage, like a detective, she is referring to the picture upstairs in Halie's room, "all the crosses on the wall" (p. 110), and interrogating Dodge:

> SHELLY: Your whole life's up there hanging on the wall. Somebody who looks just like you. Somebody who looks just like you used to look.
> DODGE: That isn't me! That never was me! This is me. Right here. This is it. The whole shootin's match, sittin' right in front of you. That other stuff was a sham.
> SHELLY: so the past never happened as far as you're concerned?
> DODGE: The past? Jesus Christ. The past is passed. What do you want to know about the past?
> SHELLY: Not much. I know there was a farm. (p.111)

The pictures clearly invoke the TAW of the play in the past that contradicts today's family disintegration. Thomas P. Adler (2002) mentions the pictures as "traces of the family 'heritage'" (p. 115), a heritage Vince wishes to revive or reconnect to. Una Chaudhuri (1995) even goes further and extends her view beyond the familial ties. She reads the farm in the picture as "an allegorical representation of the old America, the onetime heartland" (p. 109).

Marranca and Dasgupta (1981) believe that *Buried Child* "lacks a strong social reference point. The family depicted represents a private, closed, highly individualistic universe that exists beyond the conventions of society" (p. 109). However, As T E. Kalem in *Time* asserts on reviewing *Buried Child,* "If plays were put in time capsules, future generations would get a sharp-toothed profile of life in the U.S. in the past decade and a half from the works of Sam Shepard". In this sense, within the play the reader can identify some references to the AW of 1960s and 1970s contributing to the TAW. Shepard's interest in the West forges references to New Mexico and the youth's tendency or W-world to leave home en route for old West encountering disillusionment. Tilden here is a representative who attempts to make his dreams come true, but he is not successful and has to return to his family after twenty years of doing nothing: broken, hollow, shell-shocked.

The other reference is to Vietnam War. Ansel, the other son in the family, is said to be a war hero. Halie several times alludes to his heroism as a soldier in the play and intends to build a statue of him with "a basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other" (p. 73). She refers to him as "a genuine hero. Brave. Strong. And very intelligent" (p. 73). Ansel has died long ago, but Halie still grieves for him as the family hero who in another possible world -- or in counterfactual conditionals that is different from the TAW of the play -- could have been capable of bringing them honor and wealth. This generates an inception to enter another of Halie's F-universes about the past. In an obvious exhibition of schizophrenic illusions, Halie touches on the conditional possibilities concerning Ansel that are far from reality and were never realized: "Ansel could've been a great man. One of the greatest. I only regret that he didn't die in action […] A soldier. He could've won a medal. He could've been decorated for valor" (ibid). Halie also mentions Ansel's wedding in the past:

> The wedding was more like a funeral. You remember? All those Italians. All that horrible black greasy hair. The smell of cheap cologne. I think even the priest was wearing a pistol when he gave her the ring I knew he was a dead man […] But then it was the honeymoon that killed him […] I kissed him and he felt like a corpse. (p. 74)

Through double recentering, the reader/audience can travel to another storyworld with a distinct TAW, that is, Ansel's wedding day where the natural and real worlds of wedding

are mingled with the supernatural and surreal worlds wherein "the priest is wearing a pistol" and a living person feels "like a corpse."

Memorializing Ansel's case as a hero is an attempt to compensate for "the decomposing patriarch, crippled sons, [and] the buried child" (Westgate 2005, p. 738); it turns into as an excuse for Halie's wish (a W-world) to go out with, ironically, Father Dewis, a protestant minister, and contravene another O-world in the play that illustrates to some extent the family's disintegration.

Shelly is keen on uncovering the secret; she tells them all: "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" (p. 122). Dodge for the first time takes refuge in the F-universe and uncovers the truth. It is highly ironical that up to this moment in the play Dodge has been seriously resisting the urge in others, especially Tilden, to break the "pact" they had made and reveal the truth. Halie and Bradley are the ones who attempt to stop Dodge from speaking out the secret. Bradley keeps saying: "we're all good people! We've always been good people. Right from the very start" (ibid). But Dodge, weary of all the years of silence and denial, breaks his silence and confesses. He travels back to the time when they were an apparently well-established family with a prospering farm and grown-up sons. Suddenly, Halie gets pregnant "out the middle of nowhere" while they had not been sleeping in the same bed for about six years (p. 123). Eventually, Dodge acknowledges Tilden's earlier reference in the second act that he has murdered the child:

> It lived, see. It lived. It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be a part of us. It wanted to pretend that I was its father…. We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothing. Everything was cancelled out by this one mistake. This one weakness […] I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it.
>
> (p. 124)

Dodge's intention (I-world) to purify the family by an act of murder could be taken as alluding to the fundamental contradictions in America's (Puritan) history.

THE PLOT OF REBIRTH AS POSSIBLE WORLD IN *BURIED CHILD*

Dodge's I-world and W-world are determined at the end of the play when he is to "sell" his dilapidated house figuratively -- as Alexis de Tocqueville mentions about Americans -- to his grandson, Vince:

> DODGE: Go ahead! Take over the house! Take over the whole god damn house. You can have it! It's yours! I'm gonna die any second now [...] you won't even notice. So I'll settle my affairs once and for all [...] the house goes to my grandson, Vincent [....] my harnesses, my bits, my halters […] and all related materials are to be pushed into a gigantic heap and set ablaze in the very center of my fields. When the blaze is at its highest, preferably on a cold, windless night, my body is to be pitched into the middle of it and burned 'til nothing remains but ash. (p. 9-128)

Dodge has suffered a long time with respect to his K-world about the sordid truth -- the child born of the incestuous affair, killed and buried -- and has a great desire/wish to get rid of all this. This case is also reminiscent of Ryan's formulation about the conflict in characters' private worlds: the conflict in Dodge's private worlds. His W-world and K-world are in conflict because on the one hand he knows the truth and on the other hand he wants to keep it secret.

In addition, what is significantly incorporated here is the motif – the Basic Plot, in Christopher Booker's terminology -- of rebirth. The idea of fire as a cleansing, salvific

element is one of the symbols in rebirth leading the reader towards the conception of another world where redemption and atonement are possible. Dodge wants to be ritually burnt to atone for the past. The idea is that Vince will rise from his ashes phoenix-like. Christopher Booker (2005) intriguingly proposes a conclusive prototype for the plot of rebirth that aptly suits this play:

> (1) a young hero or heroine falls under the shadow of the dark power; (2) for a while, all may seem to go reasonably well, the threat may even seem to have receded; (3) but eventually it approaches again in full force, until the hero or heroine is seen imprisoned in the state of living death; (4) this continues for a long time, when it seems that the dark power has completely triumphed; (5) but finally comes the miraculous redemption: either, where the imprisoned figure is a heroine, by the hero; or, where it is the hero, by a Young Woman or a Child. (p. 204)

Buried Child portrays the curse as the 'shadow of the dark power' which has subjugated or 'imprisoned' the family and Dodge in particular in a state of 'living death.' Finally, it is Vince's emergence that would end this curse. By and large, the plot of rebirth suggests that the world in which we live is not the only one and that it is possible to get out of it and re-enter it again, in another context, as if this second birth would transport the person in a new, 'possible world'; this new person in this new possible context is Vince, the inheritor.

In yet another sense, these symbols of rebirth would indicate that Vince is a kind of revenant – the same buried child who has returned for his legacy. Schvey (1993) asserts that Vince is seen sniffing roses, which is redolent of his awakening. As such, there is indeterminacy in the K-world of the play. The possible K-world in the play prior to the end of the play on the one hand is more or less incomplete as it, in Ryan's nomenclature (1991), "fits on its reference world [TAW] like a cover with some holes in the middle; the location of the holes is determined" (p. 115). In this case, the buried child is the one drowned by Dodge. On the other hand, it is more or less complete, since it is "like a cover that is too small [and] the regions beyond the cover remaining unsurveyed" (ibid), hence Vince's return or so many allusions to Ansel in Halie's F-universes involving the recruitment of *low-probability*. Even, in a broader view, considering the symbolic significance of the buried child, American murderous history comes into view (e.g. Vietnam War mentioned above)

Moreover, Vince's second return to the house near the end of the play is accompanied with a speech which consolidates the plot of rebirth. Vince returns after a long drive the night before towards Iowa borders and in a relatively long monologue tells about his reflections when he saw his face reflected in the windshield:

> VINCE: It was as though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him […] I saw him dead and alive at the same time […] I watched him breathe as though he was frozen in time […]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. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized. Still recognized the bones underneath. (p. 130)

Vince's reincarnation as the new patriarch in the family in this quotation vividly projects a future world as a possible world; it takes place when he looks at the windshield and sees Dodge's face or 'another man' which is simultaneously dead or 'frozen in time.' What is more, pertaining to this, the corn is reminiscent of a famous myth in western mythology about fecundity: "the birth and death of the corn king". Dodge is the corn king in the winter of his life (Nash 1983), and is also considered as the archetypal image of the sick king presiding over a cursed, blighted land (Patraka & Siegel, 1985).When he dies, his descendant,

Vince, sits on his throne and becomes the new corn king. Here Halie, who had initially denied the growth of corn in the backyard, addressing the dead Dodge, declares:

> Dodge? Tilden was right about the corn, you know. I've never seen such corn. Have you taken a look at it lately? Dazzling! Tall as a man already. It's like a paradise out there, Dodge. (p. 120)

In this regard, Schvey believes that the legacy Vince has inherited does not accord with rebirth and regeneration; it is rather a trap evidenced by the scene as follows: "[Vince] *lays down on the sofa, arms folded behind his head staring at the ceiling. His body is in the same relationship to Dodge's in this tableau vivant*" (p. 131). 'In this tableau vivant,' Schvey (1993) adds, "Shepard clearly indicated that Vince is not reawakened but entombed by the poisons of a deadly past, just as the position of his body suggests death not life" (p. 24). Likewise, in the final scene of the play and after the heavy rain, Tilden enters the stage carrying his last harvest, his primary W-world that this time is realized, but too late: the corpse of a small child that "mainly consists of bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth" (p. 132), buried in the backyard. This "gives striking, concrete form to the death and corruption, haunting failure and futility at the core of Shepard's world" (Grace 1992, p. 186). According to Luther S. Luedtke (1989), however, the rebirth may after all have occurred as "the waters have raised [buried child] from its grave" (p. 153). Or, we may say that what we have in the play is a parody of the rebirth motif. In this reading, the possible world of salvation/purification/rebirth could be said to figure as a mock-W-world.

MODERN MYTH: THE HYBRID WORLD AND THE VISIBLE/INVISIBLE WORLD IN *BURIED CHILD*

In the final scene, with the emergence of the corpse, there appears an amalgamation of two ontologically distinct worlds in the same spatiotemporal situation: the room (inside) and the backyard (outside). To use Thomas Pavel's theorization, the difference between the house and the backyard is indeed a modern transposition of the difference between the profane and the sacred spaces (where the elements as irreal, higher above the everyday life, exist and we are not capable to perceive them) whereby the "normal" and the magical are neighbors.

From another viewpoint, two variants of modern myth emerge as a result of involvement of two kinds of semantic transformation. The first one occurs when the boundary between the natural and the supernatural domains are removed and the dyadic mythological world is transformed into a unified hybrid world; and the second one takes place when the boundary between the two domains is preserved. Both domains are natural, but one is considered explicitly as determinate "visible," and the other one, implicitly as indeterminate "invisible" (Doležel 1998, p. 187). In the first situation, the reader/audience grapples with the world of the surreal where the supernatural world of the outside merges with the natural world of the room inside. As Creedon (2015) quoting Louis Aragon points out, if "reality is the apparent absence of contradiction," a construct that obliterates conflict, then "the marvelous is the eruption of contradiction in the real" (p. 46). In Aragon's Surrealist sense of *le merveilleux*, *Buried Child* adapts for the stage an 'eruption of contradiction in the real,' while mindfully dramatizing the mechanics of this representation at work. In other words, surreal images bloom in the play when carrots and potatoes grow or erupt contradictorily -- miraculously -- in a barren garden whence Tilden harvests them and carries them inside. Likewise, Shepard unearths the "buried child" and thus delves into the world of the surreal.

We can also divide the worlds into visible-inside, and invisible-outside. In effect, the happenings inside the house are determinate, but, everything in regard with the backyard to

some extent remains indeterminate and mysterious both for the inhabitants of the fictional world and for the reader/audience. Tilden, as "the informer," is the only inhabitant of the visible domain who has access to "the flow of information across the boundary" and provides us with the events and activities of the invisible domain (Doležel 1998, p. 193). Paradigmatically, the invisible world is the traditional belief or myth that the family is the pillar, or foundation, of American capitalist, consumerist culture and society which popular culture, on the basis of the totality of received knowledge, is apt to project as ideal. This myth is perfectly captured by Shelly's idyllic first impression when approaching the family home: "It is like a Norman Rockwell cover or something" (p. 83). Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) was an eminent American painter, renowned for his stereotypical illustrations of American quotidian life. He once stated: "The view of life I communicate in my pictures excludes the sordid and ugly. I paint life as I would like it to be" (qtd. in Bogart 1995, p. 74). In *Buried Child*, with the emergence of the visible world of the play, Shelly concedes: "I thought it was going to be turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kinda stuff" (p. 91). Her illusions are shattered the very minute she enters the house: "[T]his isn't my idea of a good time […] I'd rather be anywhere but here" (pp. 88, 94).

CONCLUSION

In the present essay an attempt was made to shed light on one of the seminal plays in Sam Shepard's oeuvres – *Buried Child* – from a philosophical perspective. To this end, Marie-Laure Ryan's theorization of 'possible worlds' (which methodologically could be categorized under cognitive poetics) was employed as the theoretical lens through which to see into the modality of world construction in the play. Of seminal importance in this regard, it is argued, is Shepard's treatment of American family.Shepard portrays 'a possible world' of a dysfunctional American family parodically depicted as a house of the dead rather than a home. Like in many of Shepard's plays, there figures in this play the unearthing of a 'buried' K-world, occurring at the end. In this regard, an attempt is made to account for the intrafamilial challenges, or the conflicts between the family members through Ryan's model pertaining to APWs. Also analyzed in this regard is the conflict between TAW/APWs or, in other words, the clash between American society and the characters' W-worlds/I-worlds that are preposterously unrealizable.

Ultimately, the consideration of the American family in Shepard is related to the centrality of myth in his work. *Buried Child* exemplifies this well. It is a play which uncannily puts on display the contradictions inherent in the American popular culture, suffused with and inflected by myth, and the kinds of wish worlds it projects.

END NOTES

[1] Ryan (1991: 110) alludes to Tzvetan Todorov's *Grammaire de Décameron* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969) 46-49. In this book, Todorov distinguishes four modal operators for narrative propositions summarized by Ryan as follows: "the *obligatory* mode, for events dictated by the laws of a society; the *optative* mode, for states and actions desired by the characters; the *conditional* mode, expressing action to which characters commit themselves if certain other events happen; and the *predictive* mode, for anticipated events…"

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