

Buried Child



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SAM SHEPARD

Sam Shepard was born in rural Illinois to a farmer and a teacher. He worked on a ranch in his youth before moving to New York in 1962, where he first lived with Charlie Mingus Jr., son of the great jazz bassist. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Shepard was involved in both the theatre and in folk music, winning many independent theatre awards and collaborating with such stars as Bob Dylan and Patti Smith, with whom he was romantically involved at the time. Shepard was also a regular at the Chelsea Hotel, which was a hotbed for music, poetry, and theatre. In the mid 1970s, some of his most famous plays were produced in San Francisco, including *True West*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, and *Buried Child*. *Buried Child* garnered Shepard mainstream attention and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1978. Around this time, Shepard began his career as a film actor. He has written over 40 plays and has acted in well over 50 film and television shows, even earning an Academy Award nomination in 1983. Shepard is also an author, screenwriter, and director of theatre and film.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the mid 1970s, an oil crisis and a stock market crash led to an economic recession, including incredibly high rates of inflation and unemployment in the United States. *Buried Child*, which premiered in 1978, portrays a Middle-American agricultural family effected by this period of financial stagnation, as evidenced by their less-than prosperous farm. More broadly, the family and its thwarted dreams can more generally be seen as representing an America that, in the late 1970s, had become worried about its future as a moral and economic leader of the world.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, considered to be the quintessential American family drama, was a major early influence on Shepard's work. Although it too centers on a dysfunctional family, Shepard says that his goal was to "destroy the idea of the American family drama." In addition, *Buried Child* is part of Shepard's *Family Trilogy*, which also includes *Curse of the Starving Class*, and *True West*. Each of these plays explores themes of family and the American Dream.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Buried Child*

- **When Written:** The mid-1970s
- **Where Written:** San Francisco
- **When Published:** 1978
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** The living room of a rural Illinois farmhouse, 1978
- **Climax:** When Dodge admits to the infanticide
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient (theater)

EXTRA CREDIT

Firsts. *Buried Child* was the first Off-Broadway play to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

Autobiographical. Although *Buried Child* is a work of fiction, Shepard seems to draw on details from his own life. Like Dodge, Shepard's father was an alcoholic farmer, and like Vince, Shepard left his rural home to pursue the arts.



PLOT SUMMARY

In the living room of a rural Illinois farmhouse, Dodge, a sickly old man, sits on the couch watching an old television and sneaking sips of whiskey from a bottle hidden under a cushion. We hear the sounds of **rain**. Halie, Dodge's wife, hears Dodge coughing from upstairs and suggests that he take some medication, but Dodge ignores her. From their separate rooms, the hostile couple argues. Halie tells Dodge that she is getting ready for a lunch with the priest Father Dewis, and that their middle son Bradley will be coming over to cut Dodge's hair, which Dodge adamantly refuses to allow. Halie suggests that Tilden, their eldest son, will look after him.

Tilden enters, wet and muddy, holding an armful of **corn**. When Dodge asks where the corn came from, Tilden explains that he has just picked it in the fields out back. Dodge, certain that there has not been corn out back for decades, commands Tilden to return the corn to where he found it, but Tilden dumps the corn in Dodge's lap.

Tilden shucks the corn, and the two men ignore Halie's voice as she begins to reminisce. Unaware that Tilden is in the living room, she expresses both the worry and disappointment that she feels for Tilden and Bradley. Halie laments the death of her youngest son, Ansel, and as she finally enters, dressed in funeral attire, she fantasizes about memorializing him with a statue. Fully absorbed in her fantasy, she recounts Ansel's death and blames it on his marriage into a Catholic family.

Halie notices the mess of corn and berates Tilden and accuses

him of stealing. He begins to cry. Dodge comes to his defense. Halie and Dodge insult each other, but Halie is silenced when Dodge makes a puzzling comment about his flesh and blood being buried in the back yard. Halie tells Dodge to make sure that Tilden doesn't go back to the fields, and then she leaves for her lunch.

The two men discuss the mysterious circumstances that brought Tilden back to the family home. Dodge falls asleep and Tilden covers him the cornhusks, steals his hidden bottle of whiskey, and then goes back outside. Bradley enters from the porch, wet with rain, and notices the mess. He is an amputee with a wooden leg. He limps over to the sleeping Dodge, and begins to shave his head with an electric clipper.

Later that night, the rain continues, the mess has been cleaned, and Dodge is asleep in the same position, his scalp bleeding from the haircut. On the porch, Vince and Shelly, a young couple, arrives. Shelly is incredibly amused by the pastoral setting, but Vince warns her to be serious, wanting to make a good impression on Dodge and Halie, his estranged grandparents.

They enter into the living room, and Vince heads upstairs to see if anyone is home. Dodge wakes up and startles Shelly, who explains that she is Vince's girlfriend, and that they decided to stop by on their way to find Tilden, Vince's father, in New Mexico. Vince comes downstairs, but Dodge is confused and does not recognize him. He reveals that Tilden is also here at the house.

Tilden enters with an armful of **carrots**, but also does not seem to recognize Vince. When Shelly presses him, Tilden says that his son is dead and buried in the backyard. Shelly offers to help peel the carrots, and Vince grows increasingly more confused and agitated by his family's lack of recognition. Dodge begs Vince to go get him a bottle of alcohol, and he agrees, leaving Shelly alone with Dodge and Tilden.

Shelly continues to press Tilden about Vince, but Tilden is still unable to place Vince in his memory. Tilden admires Shelly's fur coat, and she allows him to wear it. Tilden reveals that he did have a son but that Dodge drowned it, and no one knows where it's buried. Shelly is horrified, and Dodge moves to stop Tilden from talking, but then falls to the floor.

Bradley enters and begins to interrogate and intimidate Shelly. Frightened, Tilden bolts off. Bradley forces Shelly to open her mouth and puts his fingers into it. He drops Shelly's fur coat over Dodge's collapsed body.

The next morning, the sun shines into the living room. Bradley sleeps in Dodge's place on the couch, his wooden leg nearby, while a weak Dodge leans against the television. Shelly enters from the kitchen and offers Dodge a bowl of soup, but he refuses. Shelly believes Vince will return, but Dodge mocks her optimism. He also tells her that Bradley isn't as frightening as he looks, and suggests that all she'd need to do to incapacitate

him is throw his wooden leg away.

Shelly tells Dodge that she spent the night in Halie's room and saw family photos featuring a mysterious baby. Shelly interrogates Dodge about the matter and he deflects her questions. Halie and Father Dewis enter. Halie now wears a yellow dress and carries a bouquet of yellow roses. They are drunk and flirtatious until they notice the scene in the living room. Embarrassed, Halie asks Father Dewis for advice, and he does not know how to respond. Halie laments the state of her family.

Bradley and Dodge fight over the blanket, and in a burst of frustration Shelly throws the bowl of soup against the door. She taunts Bradley with his prosthetic leg, while Father Dewis makes feeble attempts to get her to stop. Shelly tells the family that she was excited to meet them but they are nothing like the idyllic family Vince described, and she chides them all for keeping their gruesome secret. Despite protestations from the other family members, Dodge finally admits to the murder, explaining that Halie had a child, apparently with Tilden, and that he drowned it and buried it in the back yard.

Suddenly, Vince crashes through the screen porch in a drunken stupor. Dodge and Halie finally recognize their grandson. Halie asks Father Dewis to help with Vince, but he admits that he is unable to. As Halie laments her formerly sweet grandson's transformation, she and Father Dewis go upstairs together.

Vince enters from the porch, and Dodge announces that he is bequeathing the house to Vince. Vince taunts a whimpering Bradley with the wooden leg. Shelly tells Vince that she is leaving. Vince explains to Shelly that he was compelled to come back to the farmhouse after having a vision of his ancestors. Shelly leaves him. Father Dewis comes downstairs and Vince tells him to leave. He throws Bradley's wooden leg outside.

Vince notices that Dodge has died and covers him with the blanket. Tilden enters from the back yard with the corpse of the child. As he ascends the stairs, we hear Halie from upstairs, observing a field full of vegetables behind the house.



CHARACTERS

Dodge – A farmer now in his seventies, Dodge is the central character and sickly patriarch of the family. His once-prosperous farm is now barren and rundown, and he is an alcoholic invalid who tries to hide his drinking from his wife. He acts ornery and hostile to his family, and seems disappointed with all his children. Over the course of the play we learn that Dodge murdered the child that his wife Halie had with his son Tilden. Dodge is in the last days of his life, and as he nears his end, he gradually begins to open up and reveal the secret (the buried child) that has been plaguing the family for decades. Although incredibly reluctant at first, Dodge's eventual admission of this secret allows for the possibility that the family

will move forward from its tendency towards dysfunction.

Halie – Dodge’s wife, who is in her sixties. Halie attempts to ignore the bleak circumstances around her by indulging in a mix of nostalgia, religion, and extra-marital sex. She worships the somewhat fictionalized memory her third son, Ansel, who died in rather mysterious and odd circumstances. In addition, she attempts to cover up the fact she had a baby with her eldest son Tilden. During the first act Halie leaves for a lunch meeting with Father Dewis, and does not return until the following morning, in Act Three—clearly suggesting that she’s having an affair with the minister. Halie’s ideologies and behavior are often at odds. She rails against Dodge for his cynicism and nastiness, citing religion as her guide, and yet her own actions are wholly self-interested. For much of the play, Halie is present only through the sound of her voice, which is heard from offstage.

Tilden – A man in his forties, Tilden is the eldest son of Dodge and Halie. He was a former all-American football player, but is now “burned out,” “profoundly displaced,” and seems to be mentally ill in some way. He is living at the family home after running into some sort of mysterious trouble in New Mexico, where he had gone to seek a life away from his family. It’s also revealed that Tilden had sex with his mother Halie, and the child they had together was killed by Dodge (resulting in the “buried child”). Tilden’s promise as a young man and failure to achieve greatness is perhaps the most palpable example of the failure of the American Dream. Throughout the play he harvests **vegetables** from the fields that Dodge and Halie assume to be barren, and at the end of the play he unearths the corpse of the buried child. Tilden is also Vince’s father, though he doesn’t seem to recognize his son.

Bradley – The other son of Dodge and Halie, and about five years younger than Tilden. Bradley is an amputee with a wooden leg—he supposedly cut his leg off with a chainsaw by accident. He is an aggressive bully toward his father, his older brother, and Vince’s girlfriend Shelly. At the end of each of the first two acts, Bradley asserts his authority by demonstrating his physical power over another character, but in the third act he is finally emasculated when his prosthetic leg is taken away from him.

Vince – A young man in his early twenties, and Tilden’s son by an unknown mother. Vince and his girlfriend Shelly stop by the farm unannounced, as Vince is apparently looking to reconnect with Tilden. When his grandfather and father don’t recognize him, however, Vince becomes disturbed and abandons Shelly at the house for a night. At the end of the play Vince returns in a drunken stupor. Dodge leaves the house to him just before he dies, installing Vince (possibly) as the new patriarch of the family. Vince is a key example of the powerful and magnetic family bond, as he simply cannot stay away from his roots, even at the expense of his own happiness.

Shelly – Vince’s girlfriend, a young woman in her early twenties. At first she looks forward to meeting Vince’s family, as she imagines them to be quaint and romantic country folk. She is then spooked by the reality of the family’s strangeness, and when she is abandoned by Vince, Shelly begins to try to uncover the family’s secret. She provides an outside perspective on the family, and becomes a proxy for the audience.

Father Dewis – A protestant minister in his sixties. Halie speaks highly of him in act one, but when we meet him in act three, he is drunk, ineffectual, and lecherous. It’s implied that he’s having an affair with Halie, and there is a suggestion that the faults of his character suggest faults with religion more generally.

Ansel – Ansel is the third son of Dodge and Halie, and never appears onstage. Ansel dies decades before the events of the play. Halie remembers him as a model son, although the circumstances surrounding his death are bizarre and mysterious. Ansel’s death becomes an external event that Halie uses to rationalize her own dissatisfaction with her life.

The Baby / Buried Child – Sometime before Ansel’s death, but before Vince’s birth, Halie and Tilden had a child together. Dodge murdered this baby and buried it somewhere unknown, and the family has kept the secret for decades. When Dodge finally admits to the murder at the end of the play, Tilden unearths the corpse of the child from the backyard and brings it into the house.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FAMILY AND ITS DEMISE

At its core, *Buried Child* tells the story of the breakdown of a traditional, twentieth-century family unit. During the play, Shelly, the girlfriend of one of the characters and therefore an outsider to the family, compares the family farmhouse to a Norman Rockwell painting. Her first impression, then, is of a perfect, idyllic family living a perfect life. But Shepard’s goal in establishing such a “picture-perfect” family is to immediately and obviously subvert it, and in fact to subvert it before Shelly makes her observation, so that even as Shelly delivers her statement the audience knows how profoundly wrong she is. Essentially Shepard uses the play to explore a family that has fallen into total dysfunction.

Rather than being a source of love and mutual support to each other, the characters in the family engage in grotesque

struggles for power and authority. Dodge and Halie, the patriarch and matriarch of the family, may have been the proprietors of a successful farm, but now their land is useless and they can barely stand to be in the same room together. Dodge, once a powerful figure, is nearly immobilized by illness, and Halie rails against his uselessness while also using his immobility as an opportunity to do as she pleases. They are both ineffectual family leaders and often try to use other characters to defend themselves against each other.

The family's middle-aged sons—and Dodge's possible replacements for the position of patriarch—vie for leadership, but certainly aren't cut out for it. Tilden—once a golden-boy in high school—is no breadwinner, but rather has recently returned home due and needs to be observed and cared for like a child. The power-hungry Bradley is abusive to his father in his attempts for power, but the leg he lost as a youth thwarts his effectiveness and makes him bitter and unable to actually lead (or even wield power effectively).

Along with these various power-struggles, the emotions of guilt and shame—and the breakdown of communication about these feelings—conspire to drive the family apart. Dodge drinks himself to death, Halie acts promiscuously and lives in the past, Tilden runs away, and Bradley becomes at once both vicious and cowardly. Further, the play focuses the source of the family dysfunction around the two great literary taboos of family: incest and murder. It's revealed that, years earlier, Dodge murdered the baby that was the product of Halie's long-ago incest with Tilden. Dodge's act was a gross distortion of the patriarchal role, just as Halie's relationship with Tilden was a corruption of her role as mother. While the patriarch of a family is traditionally the source of its moral standards (as well as financial success), Dodge's moral outrage was so harsh that it resulted in the murder of a baby, which tore him and his family apart. By working with these motifs, Shepherd also connects his play back to the dramas of ancient Greece—*Oedipus Rex*, *Agamemnon*, etc.—and links this Midwestern American family to those tragically-fated families of Classical mythology.

Many explorations of family in fiction and drama depict seemingly normal families and then reveal the cracks and problems beneath. Shepherd attacks the family drama from another angle, depicting a family that is essentially nothing but cracks and problems. However, it is important to note that despite the constant dysfunction, the family never ceases to be a family. Vince, after all, returns to the family to try to find meaning in his life, and even when he tries to escape, he realizes he cannot leave behind his ancestors, and so he returns. Even if the members of the family feel totally trapped by their destructive familial unit, the play also demonstrates the power of this unit—the tightly knit bond that keeps families together, for better or worse.



FAILURE AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Each of the members of the family in *Buried Child* is in some way a representation of a failed attempt at achieving different parts of the “American

Dream”—prosperity, freedom, family, and happiness, usually represented by owning one's home and raising a family. Dodge was once a prosperous farmer but his farm is now in utter disrepair, and according to him has not produced anything in years. Now basically immobile from illness, alcoholism, and old age, he lives in bitterness, entirely subject to the whims of others. Further, his act of murdering the incestuous baby of Tilden and Halie is what led to the failure of his family: his morality as father figure did not support his family, and instead it was so harsh that it destroyed it.

Halie sought the American dream in her family and its continuation, yet an intense admiration for her football-playing son, Tilden, led to a sexually inappropriate relationship with him. Now, the repercussions of that act have resulted in her family falling apart: two of her children are alive but burned out, and at least one more is dead. She experiences extreme discontentment in her marriage, and to escape uses a mixture of hypocritical religiousness and promiscuity, as well as a nostalgia so great it might be better described as fantasy.

Tilden had at one time left the farm for New Mexico, presumably in search of some kind of autonomy after the murder of his incestuous child, but has returned under hazy but nefarious circumstances. He is seemingly mentally disturbed and is treated like a child. Tilden's choice to leave the farm and his mandated return to it represent a failure to go out and secure his own prosperity and freedom. Likewise Bradley, the middle son, would perhaps have been capable of taking over and operating the farm, but he lost a leg, and because of this, is unable to assume the leadership role he desires. His physical impairment makes it difficult for him to live autonomously and happily, and he takes his bitterness out on his family.

At the outset, Vince seems to be the character most likely to break out of the pattern of failure and stagnation in his family. Vince is an artist with a beautiful, intelligent girlfriend, and he has left rural Illinois to pursue a music career. The story of his escape from Illinois to the city to pursue his dream of playing saxophone in many ways embodies the modern American dream. Yet he returns to visit his family and tries to connect to his past—and though what he finds is horrific, he cannot escape its pull. At the end of the play, even though Vince will presumably assume the leadership role at the farm—another embodiment of the American Dream—he has also given up his relationship with his girlfriend Shelly, his own personal dreams, and perhaps even his sanity.

Though the play focuses directly on this single family and makes no wider claims, there is a sense that through the play Shepard may be portraying these failures to warn his audience

against buying into the cultural ideal of the American Dream at all. The play seems to suggest that it's not simply that these characters failed to achieve the American Dream, but rather that the dream itself is false and unobtainable—or at least it's never as ideal as it seems from the outside.



THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

The family's history weighs on the present world of the play like a curse. The characters in *Buried Child* constantly reminisce about the past and provide differing accounts of past events, as they seemingly revise their histories in order to cope with the present bleakness that they live in.

From the outset the audience is trained to think twice before believing any of the characters' stories. In the first moments of the play, Halie recounts a memory of going to a horse race that Dodge maintains is false. Throughout the play, Halie then tells stories about her deceased youngest son Ansel, the details of which other characters often correct. Despite the fact that these stories about Ansel may be fictional, Halie seems to believe them (or at least *want* to believe them), and thus they serve as examples of how present circumstances can invite a person to revise their own personal history.

Tilden has returned home to escape his murky criminal past in New Mexico, but is confronted by the arrival of his estranged son, Vince. For the most part, Tilden chooses to ignore this part of his past, barely speaking to Vince at all. By the same token, Vince has taken this trip with his girlfriend to find his father and confront his past. What he ends up encountering is a family who has completely revised him out of their collective history. The only time that he is remembered is after he reappears towards the end of the play, drunk and unintelligible. Halie then offers a possibly revisionist memory of him as a sweet, unassuming little boy, much like her memories of her son Ansel. And when Vince himself tries to leave the family, he has a vision of his ancestors and his own self dissolving away that brings him back: he comes to believe that he can't exist without his connection to that past.

The shadowy past of the family, always present in the play, is not proven until the final moments, when Tilden brings the corpse of the buried child inside. By this point Dodge has already admitted to the murder, but we are unsure about what to believe, because all of the characters have been somewhat unreliable thus far. The gesture of the child being brought inside then seems to lift the curse of the past (as **vegetables** suddenly start growing on the farm) and brings the family's secret into the open. This moment, which ends the play, represents the past being unearthed and confronted. This offers a possibility of the family's sins being absolved, and the only hope for renewal in an otherwise entirely grim story.



RITUALS

Shepard plays with two ancient opposing rituals in *Buried Child*: harvest and burial. In the play, these rituals reflect changes in power dynamics between the characters, and foreshadow the instances of death and the possibilities for rebirth. *Buried Child* takes place over the course of a **rainy** day and into the next sunny morning. As the play progresses and new information about the family comes to light, the torrential rain can be seen as an almost Biblical washing away of the family's sinful past.

During the first and second acts, Tilden brings into the house freshly picked **corn and carrots** that he says are growing out back, even though Dodge insists that nothing has grown there in years. This is representative of "harvest," which is traditionally seen as a time of renewal (plants dying in order to provide new life through seeds and food). Tilden's harvest and the rain that seems to cause it can be seen as the undercurrent of change for the family's bizarre renewal that becomes the play's climactic event.

The ritual of burial is another crucial part of the play—it's even in the title. As power shifts between the men in the house, each of them is somehow symbolically "buried" to signify the death of their control. In the first act, after Tilden husks the corn he has found, he spreads the husks over Dodge's sleeping body. This symbolic burial demonstrates that although still alive, Dodge has no control or power in the family anymore. Later on, Bradley buries Dodge in Shelly's coat. By doing this, he exerts his dominance over Shelly by taking her protective outer layer, and over Dodge by burying him in the coat. Then, when Bradley's prosthetic leg is taken from him and he loses all of his power, he buries *himself* in this same coat.

When Dodge does finally die, this burial ritual is repeated again when Vince, who now assumes the leadership role in the family, covers him in his blanket. With Dodge's death, more harvest occurs. Halie finally notices that the fields behind the house are full of vegetables, while at the same time Tilden unearths the corpse of the buried child and brings it upstairs to Halie. As the family's secret is quite literally brought out into the open, the crops grow for the first time in decades, allowing for the possibility of a hopeful future.



RELIGION

Shepard only portrays religion in a negative light in the play, but the kind of religiosity the characters illustrate is more about hypocrisy and self-righteousness than genuine belief. This kind of shallow religion is then presented as an entirely inadequate coping strategy for dealing with the grief and shame that befalls the family. During the last day of his life, Dodge slowly begins to give up on suppressing the guilt he feels for his sinful past, but Halie, who will live on, clings tightly to the idea of religion, even if her

behavior does not demonstrate its values. From the outset, Halie concerns herself with what is and isn't "Christian" behavior (as a method of judging others), but at the same time she subtly references her own incestuous and adulterous behavior, and she obviously states her hatred of Catholics and the contempt she feels for her husband.

When we finally come face to face with Father Dewis, Halie's religious mentor and the play's embodiment of religion, we find an ineffectual and sinful man. He drinks and carries on an affair with Halie in front of her dying husband. After Dodge admits to the murder of the baby, Dewis joins Halie upstairs in her bedroom, but quickly returns downstairs and says that he "can't help her." In addition to demonstrating religion's seductive power over the vulnerable, this moment encapsulates Shepard's take on religion. When we pervert and manipulate the institution of religion for our own purposes, it may be useful for justifying our actions and soothing our consciences, but it is wholly inadequate to help in dealing with trauma.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



RAIN

The torrential **rain** in *Buried Child* signifies the cleansing of the shame and guilt that hangs over the family. Only in act three, when the family's secret infanticide is revealed, does the rain cease. In addition, the rain allows the long-dead crops grow, suggesting that as Dodge becomes able to admit his guilt, the family can finally experience some sort of peace or renewal.



VEGETABLES

The **vegetables** that Tilden finds in the back yard during the **rainstorm** represent the unearthing of the family's past secrets. As more of the family's past is revealed, the family's barren farm seems to grow more fertile, more prosperous. Once Dodge admits to the murder and dies, Halie observes a full field of crops, indicating that what's left of the family may have a future just as the farm itself now seems to, and that both the family and the farm may be able to move beyond their sinful past.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Buried Child* published in 2006.

Act 1 Quotes

☞☞ "You should take a pill for that! I don't see why you just don't take a pill! Be done with it once and for all. Put a stop to it. It's not Christian but it works. It's not necessarily Christian, that is. We don't know. There's some things the ministers can't even answer. I, personally, can't see anything wrong with it. Pain is pain. Pure and simple. Suffering is a different matter. That's entirely different. A pill seems as good an answer as any."

Related Characters: Halie (speaker), Dodge

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation introduces us to the hypocritically religious side of Halie's character. While she invokes religion with reasonable frequency, muddled statements like this one ("It's not necessarily Christian, that is. We don't know. There's some things ministers can't even answer.") indicate that she calls on religion when it is convenient, abandons it when it isn't, and is generally casual about its teachings.

This is also an interesting quotation because she distinguishes here between pain and suffering. Halie believes that it is appropriate to take a pill to cure the physical pain of Dodge's cough, but she indicates that it would not be appropriate to take a pill to cure suffering, that suffering has some kind of importance that shouldn't be erased. Indeed, throughout the play we see each family member encased in his or her own suffering, and, though they are all family, nobody seems to be trying to ease anyone else's suffering. Halie's statement proves prophetic, in a sense, because the family's suffering cannot be eased until it reaches an aggravated fever pitch and the family secret is revealed.

☞☞ Halie's Voice: You always imagine the worst things in people.

Dodge: That's not the worst! That's the least of the worst!

Related Characters: Dodge, Halie (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 16



Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Dodge has just accused Halie of encouraging Bradley to shave Dodge's head, which Dodge did not want. He makes a speech about how she was trying to "dress up the corpse" for company by having his head shaved and outfitting him with objects like a pipe and the Wall Street Journal, an accusation which alludes to Halie's penchant for fantasy and revisionism. In the exchange that follows, in which Halie says he is imagining the worst, and Dodge says it's "the least of the worst," he is making one of the many veiled references that appear throughout the play to the family secret (the buried child). So this exchange is a coded one in which Dodge accuses Halie of emasculating him and creating a fantasy, Halie tells him he is imagining the worst, and Dodge reminds her that her behavior has been much more depraved, likely referring to her incest and adultery. It is one of many examples of the family members jockeying for power over one another, humiliating each other, and reminding each other of their past mistakes.

●● Halie's Voice: Tilden's the oldest. He'll protect you.

Dodge: Tilden can't even protect himself.

Related Characters: Dodge, Halie (speaker), Bradley, Tilden

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Dodge, the ailing patriarch, is threatened by his son Bradley, who is violent and aggressive with him. In this exchange Dodge is worried that Bradley will shave his head while he is sleeping again, and Halie insists that their other son Tilden will protect him. This is another example of Halie's delusions, in which she imagines her family to be much more functional than it is. Tilden is clearly mentally disturbed and vulnerable, but Halie still insists (when not confronted by the actual presence of Tilden) that he is the beloved football star who can fulfill his role as oldest son. This is an example of Shepard casting doubt on the reality of the American Dream; Halie relies on the traditional idea that the oldest son would protect his father, but this has never been the reality of their family, which readers understand more and more as the family secrets come out. For his part, Dodge recognizes that Bradley is dangerous and Tilden is incapable, but the family has degenerated so much that nobody will listen to Dodge and provide the care he desires.

Dodge's violence and cruelty to others makes this negligence seem understandable, but the unavoidable conclusion is that the family has descended into chaos.

●● Tilden: I never had any trouble.

Dodge: Tilden, your mother told me all about it.

Tilden: What'd she tell you?

Dodge: I don't have to repeat what she told me! She told me all about it!

Related Characters: Dodge, Tilden (speaker), Halie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange Tilden and Dodge are discussing Tilden's mysterious time in New Mexico, which Shepard obliquely indicates was marred by trouble, though all the reader knows is that Tilden was forced to come home because he could not look after himself anymore. However, this exchange becomes more meaningful in light of the play's later revelation that Halie conceived an incestuous child with Tilden. The double significance of this passage shows how the past weighs on this family, particularly the parts of the past that everyone knows but nobody is willing to speak about. Because these parts of the past have not been acknowledged and dealt with, the family members can continue to use shameful parts of the past as leverage over one another.

This passage is also an example of the ways in which the family members taunt each other and strive for power and dominance. In this scene Tilden wants to be treated like an adult, but Dodge continues to assert himself by prodding at Tilden about New Mexico. This is another case in which Shepard is poking a hole in the American dream. While the American dream indicates that a son should strike out on his own and succeed as his father had done, not only did Tilden fail to succeed on his own, but the home he returns to is a barren farm that is practically abandoned by his cruel and inept family.

☛ Tilden: I didn't do anything.



Dodge: Then why should I have worried about you.

Tilden: Because I was by myself.

Dodge: By myself?

Tilden: Yeah. I was by myself more than I've ever been before.

Related Characters: Dodge, Tilden (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Tilden reframes his time in New Mexico. While Dodge leads us to believe that Tilden got into trouble in New Mexico, Tilden insists that trouble wasn't the reason he came home. "I was lonely," he says, and doesn't elaborate further. The passage leads the audience to believe that this is an important statement, but at this moment in the play, the audience does not yet understand what he is referencing. Later, it becomes clear that Tilden fled home for New Mexico after Dodge drowned Tilden and Halie's child (which Tilden was particularly bonded with), and the loneliness that Tilden is referencing is darker than anyone could have imagined at this point in the play. Throughout the play, the family interacts with each other through veiled barbs like this one that almost always reference the past--it's as though their entire dynamic in the present is governed by horrible things that happened years earlier.

☛ You've gotta watch out for him. 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. But we don't. We never will. That's why we have to stay healthy. You and me. Nobody's going to look after us. Bradley can't look after us. Bradley can hardly look after himself... I had no idea in the world that Tilden would be so much trouble. Who would have dreamed? Tilden was an All-American, don't forget. Don't forget that. Fullback. Or quarterback. I forget which.

Related Characters: Halie (speaker), Dodge, Bradley, Tilden

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 25-26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Halie moves between her nostalgic fantasies and her recognition of the decaying state of their family life. While she recognizes that her two sons are unable to take care of her and Dodge, it is absurd for her to insist that she and Dodge "have to stay healthy" and take care of Tilden, as Dodge is clearly near death and is incapable of taking care of his son.

This also provides a classic example of Halie's nostalgia for a time in which she seems to believe her family embodied the American Dream, and her confusion over why the family has not turned out the way the American Dream promised. Halie can't understand why Tilden, since he used to be a star fullback, is now helpless and "so much trouble." This seems steeped in denial, since she and Tilden had an incestuous relationship that produced a child that Dodge murdered; any one of those factors could have deeply affected Tilden's adult life. In addition, the fact that Halie gives this speech in full earshot of Tilden shows the bizarre cruelty of the family, as Halie does not even attempt to spare Tilden his dignity by giving such a negative assessment of his potential in private.

☛ I put all my hopes in Ansel... Course then when Ansel died and left us all alone. Same as being alone. No different. Same as if they'd all died... He was a hero. Don't forget that. Brave. Strong...

Related Characters: Halie (speaker), Ansel

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes during a bizarre monologue of Halie's in which she progressively inflates her opinion of her dead son Ansel, showing the audience her delusions in action. She begins the monologue seemingly uncertain as to Ansel's place in her estimation ("Ansel wasn't as handsome, but he was smart. He was the smartest probably. I think he probably was."), but by the end of the monologue she has convinced herself that Ansel was the greatest person in the family, and deserves to be commemorated with a full statue in town.

This is a clear example of Halie's unwillingness to be honest with herself about the family's problems, constantly blaming

others for her own difficulties. Here, she blames Ansel's death for the demise of the family, suggesting that her other sons meant nothing to her after Ansel was gone, a deeply cruel statement coming from their mother. This monologue also shows how the past in this play acts as both scapegoat and irritant. Because the bad events from the family's past are never openly spoken about, nobody is held accountable to the truth of the past. Halie is free to revise her family's history as she sees fit, allowing her to evade responsibility for her faults. This slippery presence of the past also allows family members to cruelly torment each other by referencing events without conscientiously diving into them.

☞ He was blind with love. Blind. I knew. Everyone knew. The wedding was more like a funeral. You remember? All those Italians. All that horrible black, greasy hair. The rancid 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. I knew it. As soon as he gave her the ring. But then it was the honeymoon that killed him. The honeymoon. I knew he'd never come back from the honeymoon.

Related Characters: Halie (speaker), Ansel

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

This statement, referring to Ansel's wedding day, is the first indication that Halie may have had an incestuous relationship with her sons. The revelation, which comes about as Halie expresses bizarre and possessive feelings towards her son and an obsessive focus on his honeymoon, shows another layer of deep dysfunction within the family, and indicates the power and violence of the family bond. This is one iteration of the theme that returns again and again in the play—the idea that no family member can ever escape the family.



This revelation is particularly disturbing, since it comes in a monologue that is full of hatred for Catholics, blaming Ansel's death on his Catholic wife, whom Halie describes as "the devil incarnate." Halie is the character in the play for whom religion is most important, but her blanket hatred of Catholics shows how dogmatic and perverse her sense of religion really is. It also shows how deep her sins are and how shallow her empathy is, as her feelings toward Ansel's marriage are only ones of violent jealousy, and never

happiness for her son.

☞ Things keep happening while you're upstairs, ya know. The world doesn't stop just because you're upstairs. Corn keeps growing. Rain keeps raining.

Related Characters: Dodge (speaker), Halie

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This complex statement, which comes in a conversation about whether or not there is corn growing in the backyard, gives the audience a sense of the contested reality the family is living in. Tilden, the family member most haunted by their secret, has always been able to see the corn growing in the back yard, and he continues to bring it inside throughout the play. Dodge has previously said to Tilden that there is no corn outside, but here, speaking to Halie, he claims that there is. Halie claims that she can see the backyard from upstairs and there is no corn. Symbolically, this has to do with each family member's willingness to admit to the existence of the murdered child. Halie is in complete denial, while Dodge is willing to reference the child at times when it is convenient for him (in other words, in order to taunt or gain power over other family members) but not at other times, so it makes sense that his statements about the corn are contradictory. Tilden, who makes the family aware of the corn in the first place, is the character for whom it seems most crucial to bring the secret out in the open, and he is the one who, at the end, literally exhumes the body. The imagery of the corn growing and the rain coming down also relates to the process of bringing forward the family secret. The rain and the corn give a sense of possibility for the family, of potential cleansing and renewal if everyone can acknowledge the truth of what happened.

●● Halie: I don't know what's come over you, Dodge. I don't know what in the world's come over you. You've become an evil man. You used to be a good man.

Dodge: Six of one, half a dozen of another.

Halie: You sit here day and night, festering away!
Decomposing! Smelling up the house with your putrid body!
Hacking your head off till all hours of the morning! Thinking up mean, evil, stupid things to say about your own flesh and blood!

Dodge: He's not my flesh and blood! My flesh and blood's buried in the back yard!

The Baby

Related Characters: Halie, Dodge (speaker), Bradley

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 32-33

Explanation and Analysis

If it isn't clear to the audience yet that something very bad has happened in this family, it should be now. This revelation comes at the end of an argument in which Dodge insulted Bradley, and instead of defending Bradley's worth or character, Halie resorts to berating Dodge for his willingness to insult their son. This argument is another example of the family's cruelty to one another and their constant leveraging of the past in order to gain power. Though it is not entirely clear why Dodge brings up the buried child, it seems that he understands that bringing it up would abruptly end the argument, since Halie, who lives in a nostalgic world of denial and fantasy, cannot address the reality of the dead child. This clearly shows how Dodge only acknowledges the child out of convenience, while Halie cannot acknowledge it at all.

Dodge's statement about the child is complex, as it seems to imply that the child was his, though we learn later that it was Tilden's. Since Dodge's statement about the child comes after his disavowal of the familial tie between himself and Bradley, the statement can be read more broadly as an admission that the family ("flesh and blood") was ruined as a result of the murder of the child.

●● Dodge: You're a grown man. You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age. It's unnatural. Couldn't make a living down there? Couldn't find some way to make a living? Support yourself? What'd'ya come back here for? You expect us to feed you forever?

Tilden: I didn't know where else to go.

Dodge: I never went back to my parents. Never. Never even had the urge. I was always independent. Always found a way.

Tilden: I didn't know what to do. I couldn't figure anything out.

Dodge: There's nothing to figure out. You just forge ahead. What's there to figure out?

Related Characters: Tilden, Dodge (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most clear illustrations of Shepard's cynicism about the feasibility of the American Dream. While Dodge is clearly beholden to the American Dream logic that his son, as an adult, should strike out on his own and be able to succeed without help from his family, Tilden has failed at this task. The fact that each of the family's sons has been unable to be independent (Bradley is disabled, Ansel is dead, and Tilden is mentally ill) shows the power of the family in always bringing the children back to their house and their chaos, and it also shows the gap between American expectations and the reality of American lives. In addition, this exchange shows the cruelty and delusion of the family. That Dodge can ridicule Tilden for failing in his adult life without feeling guilt or remorse for Dodge's own role in ruining Tilden's life (murdering his baby and causing him to flee home) shows the deep dysfunction of the family.

Act 2 Quotes

●● Shelly: I don't believe it!

Vince: How come?

Shelly: It's like a Norman Rockwell cover or something.

Vince: What's a matter with that? It's American.

Related Characters: Shelly, Vince (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which occurs after the audience has soaked in the family chaos of the first act, is profoundly ironic. Shelly, the only character unfamiliar with the family, is introduced as having high hopes for Vince's family. The appearance of the little farmhouse evokes Norman Rockwell style Americana (Rockwell was a painter famous for idyllic scenes of mid-twentieth century American life), and Shelly gently mocks Vince for having a family that she assumes to be a sweet, classic American family. This passage is meant to directly juxtapose the imagery and narrative of the American Dream with the dystopian chaos the audience has just witnessed for the duration of the first act. Importantly, Vince, who broke ties with the family six years prior for unspecified reasons, doesn't protest Shelly's overly-sunny assumptions about his family. Whether this is out of forgetfulness or denial, the audience is unsure, but it is telling that his only protest is "What's a'matter with that? It's American." This seems to reveal that Shepard believes that this cruel and dysfunctional family, not the Norman Rockwell illusion, is what truly typifies the American family.

☞ ...I mean Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it's a new thing for him. I kind of find it hard to relate to. But he feels it's important. You know. I mean he feels he wants to get to know you all again. After all this time...

Related Characters: Shelly (speaker), Dodge, Vince

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the play, Shepard gives us the sense that the gravitational pull of this family is inescapable. Bradley can't leave because he's injured, Tilden tried to leave and failed, Ansel died when he left, and Vince, who seems to have built a nice life outside of the family, is now feeling compelled to return. While Vince is never explicit about his initial motivations for returning (though he does speak later of trying to flee the house and then returning after a vision, in which he looks at himself and sees only his ancestors,

showing him that his identity is inextricable from his family), it seems like he is beginning to think about creating a family of his own and wants his girlfriend to meet his family first. This shows the weight of family and the past on the characters in the play. Their lives are all stunted by their familial relationships and by the burden of past familial dramas that none of them can forget. Vince shows this most explicitly, as when he is introduced he seems like a functional, normal person, and by the end, after just a day with his family, his behavior becomes violent, manipulative, and erratic.

☞ We had a baby. He did. Dodge did. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other. Little baby. Dodge killed it... Dodge drowned it... Never told Halie. Never told anybody. Just drowned it... Nobody could find it. Just disappeared. Cops looked for it. Neighbors. Nobody could find it... Finally everybody just gave up. Just stopped looking. Everybody had a different answer. Kidnap. Murder. Accident. Some kind of accident.

Related Characters: Tilden (speaker), The Baby / Buried Child, Halie, Dodge, Shelly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first reference to the buried child that is an outright admission rather than a veiled comment intended to harm or silence another family member. Throughout the play, Tilden seems to have a need to exhume the secret (and the literal corpse) more than any other character, so it makes sense that he would be the one to first confess the secret to Shelly.

The opening of this passage shows how the family secret has warped everyone's sense of the past and of truth. Tilden, who is the biological father of the child, seems confused about to whom the child belongs. Tilden is capable of identifying that an awful thing has occurred, and he provides some specifics, but he balks at admitting that his own incestuous involvement with Halie produced the child. Tilden also, in his claim that nobody could find the body and nobody had an answer for why it was gone, speaks to the swirl of misinformation and trauma surrounding the family having kept this a secret for so long. What is missing for them is both a literal body and also a truth; without both of these, the family cannot move on.

☛ Yeah, he used to be a big deal. Wore lettermen's sweaters. Had medals hanging all around his neck. Real purty. Big deal. This one too. You'd never think it to look at him would ya? All bony and wasted away.

Related Characters: Bradley (speaker), Dodge, Tilden, Shelly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Bradley (who, in a typical confusion of identities between family members, believes Shelly is with Tilden instead of Vince) is in this passage insulting Tilden in front of both Shelly and Tilden, in an effort to shame Tilden and assert Bradley's own power. This insult plays on the expectations of the American Dream, that the football star should turn out to be a successful adult. Bradley mockingly plays up Tilden's past in order to make it seem even more shameful that he has failed to live up to his youthful promise as an adult. This is an example of the ways in which family members in the play use distorted versions of the past to manipulate and hurt each other, and it also shows the dysfunctional dynamic between brothers. Instead of helping one another find the strength to care for their parents, the brothers are consumed by a bitter competition to assert themselves as the more powerful member of the family. Ironically, this competition seems to drain both of them of their ability to behave normally, making them seem weaker and more erratic rather than dominant.

☛ Hey! Missus. Don't talk to me like that. Don't talk to me in that tone a' voice. There was a time when I had to take that tone a' voice from pretty near everyone. Him, for one! Him and that half brain that just ran outa' here. They don't talk to me like that now. Not any more. Everything's turned around now. Full circle. Isn't that funny?

Related Characters: Bradley (speaker), Dodge, Tilden, Shelly

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

More than any other character, Bradley is obsessed with having power over his family members. We see this, for example, in his treatment of Tilden, and in his penchant for

violently shaving Dodge's head while he is sleeping. In this passage we get a glimpse of what might have bred Bradley's violence; it seems that Bradley, as the weakest brother (due to his disability), was pushed around as a child, particularly by his brother and father. For Bradley, then, avenging the wrongs of the past is a primary motivation for his character. This is not unlike his other family members, though which past each one is avenging varies.

Through Bradley's character, Shepard is pointing the audience towards an understanding that cruelty begets cruelty, and that family dysfunction propagates itself through generations if issues are not resolved in the open and people are not held accountable for their behavior. Shepard seems to be saying (via Bradley) that a family is a structure that can easily descend into chaos once its members feel divided from one another by something like cruelty or a family secret.

Act 3 Quotes

☛ Dodge: You forgot? Whose did you think this house was?

Shelly: Mine. I know it's not mine but I had this feeling.

Dodge: What feeling?

Shelly: The feeling that nobody lives here but me. I mean everybody's gone. You're here, but it doesn't seem like you're supposed to be. Doesn't seem like he's supposed to be either. I don't know what it is. It's the house or something. Something familiar. Like I know my way around here. Did you ever get that feeling?

Related Characters: Dodge, Shelly (speaker), Bradley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 87


Explanation and Analysis

It's in this passage that the readers get a sense that Shelly is being sucked into the family's logic. She is experiencing the same eerie inability to recognize what is around her, mistaking the family's house for her own. This passage, and the conversation that surrounds it, is another indictment of the American dream in which Shelly seems to have trouble reconciling the idyllic farmhouse with the haunted and bitter family that resides there. Her statement that the house feels familiar to her, though nobody seems to belong there except for her, can be read as a statement about the

betrayal of the American Dream. She cannot imagine that a family this dysfunctional can be keeping up appearances, maintaining their classic American house, putting photographs and crosses up on the walls, while ripping each other apart behind closed doors. If the farmhouse represents the American Dream, then Shepard is telling us that it is hollow, that it is all surfaces, and that those surfaces conceal a dark interior.

Well, prayerfully, God only hears what he wants to. That's just between you and me of course. In our heart of hearts we know we're every bit as wicked as the Catholics.

Related Characters: Father Dewis (speaker), Halie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Father Dewis comes into the house with Halie, clearly drunk in the middle of the day after having committed adultery with her. He then proceeds to say that he is not worried about being punished because "God only hears what he wants to," a statement that undermines the very foundation of the faith that Father Dewis claims to represent. This quotation harkens back to Halie's statement about how Dodge could take the pain pills even though they might not be Christian, because there are things that even ministers can't answer (there is little question now as to why she might think this, or why she might have such a casual attitude towards her faith). The statement also reminds us of Halie's prejudiced rant against Catholics when she blames them for Ansel's death. Father Dewis, it seems, has unintentionally pointed out Halie's hypocrisy by admitting that they are "every bit as wicked as the Catholics." There is not a single character in the story that displays genuine faith, and because of that, religion, like the American Dream, is presented as something hollow, a pretense that characters maintain because it is socially acceptable.

Halie: Ansel's getting a statue, Dodge. Did you know that? Not a plaque but a real live statue. A full bronze. Tip to toe. A basketball in one hand and a rifle in the other.

Bradley: He never played basketball!

Halie: You shut up, Bradley! You shut up about Ansel! Ansel played basketball better than anyone! And you know it! He was an All American! There's no reason to take the glory away from others.

Related Characters: Bradley, Halie (speaker), Ansel, Dodge

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 97-98

Explanation and Analysis

This moment showcases the grandiosity and absurdity of Halie's delusions. She has convinced the hypocritical Father Dewis to erect a statue of her son Ansel, whom she remembers (it seems dubiously) as a sports hero. While many questions have been raised as to the quality of Halie's memory, this exchange shows, perhaps most clearly, the extent to which she feels she needs to rewrite the past. Halie is not simply satisfied with her saccharine and manipulated narratives of the family's past—she also feels the need to also have others recognize her delusions by casting them in bronze. When Bradley attempts to fact-check Halie, she lashes out at him, refusing to admit to her own falsehoods and accusing Bradley instead of trying to "take the glory away" from Ansel. This shows how heavily the past weighs on these characters, as well as the cruelties they are willing to propagate in the present in order to protect a past that is traumatic and dubiously remembered.

We can't not believe in something. We can't stop believing. We just end up dying if we stop. Just end up dead.

Related Characters: Halie (speaker), Dodge, Father Dewis

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 99



Explanation and Analysis

This statement is, in a somewhat twisted way, Halie's attempt at justifying her consuming nostalgia and her revisionist memories. She refers to Dodge as somebody who is dead because he stopped believing in anything.

Though Dodge is not wholly honest about the family's past, he is certainly more up front than Halie about his children's failures and about the existence of the buried child. In this way, Halie is indicating that Dodge, by refusing to believe her manipulated narratives about family and their past, has stopped believing in anything, and she implies that perhaps she finds her life force and happiness from her delusions. This is somewhat heartbreaking, as Halie may gain a sense of haughtiness from her bizarre sense of the family's past, but she does not seem to find happiness and compassion in it; she is clearly as petty and cruel as any other character in the play. It is also important that this statement is framed in the context of religion. In a religious context, finding something to believe in or something to give life a purpose generally comes with a practice of humility, truth-seeking, and kindness. For Halie, though, the thing she believes in actually makes her more isolated and cruel than she likely would have been if she were willing to face the truth. This shows Halie's perverse sense of religion and the kinds of rituals that give life meaning.

☛ Don't come near me! Don't anyone come near me. I don't need any words from you. I'm not threatening anybody. I don't even know what I'm doing here. You all say you don't remember Vince, okay, maybe you don't. Maybe it's Vince that's crazy. Maybe he's made this whole family thing up. I don't even care anymore. I was just coming along for the ride. I thought it'd be a nice gesture. Besides, I was curious. He made all of you sound familiar to me. Every one of you. For every name, I had an image. Every time he'd tell me a name, I'd see the person. In fact, each of you was so clear in my mind that I actually believed it was you. I really believed that when I walked through that door that the people who lived here would turn out to be the same people in my imagination. Real people. People with faces. But I don't recognize any of you. Not one. Not even the slightest resemblance.

Related Characters: Shelly (speaker), Bradley, Halie, Dodge, Vince

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis



Shelly makes this speech at a point in the play when her behavior has dramatically shifted. While she came to the house as a playful and rather timid person, after spending a day with the family she has become assertive, aggressive,

and even violent. In the scene leading up to this she has shouted, hurled a cup against the wall to attract attention, and kidnapped Bradley's false leg. Though her behavior has begun to mirror the chaos of the family, she is the one character that doesn't drift towards its illusions. Shelly knows that something is deeply wrong, and she begins to call them out on it here, which will lead to her extracting the full story of the buried child.

Shelly has been, throughout the play, an embodiment of disillusionment with the American Dream, and in this speech she explains to the family that they are nothing like the people she thought they would be. This is an extrapolation of the theme that American expectations about family life are unrealistic and even toxic. The theme of the American Dream is inextricable from the family's chaos; the family dynamic Shepard portrays is an example of the brew of disappointment and delusion (from Halie in particular) the myth of the American Dream can produce.

☛ ...Halie had this kid. This baby boy. She had it. I let her have it on her own. All the other boys I had had the best doctors, best nurses, everything. This one I let her have by herself. This one hurt real bad. Almost killed her, but she had it anyway. It lived, see. It lived. It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be part of us. It wanted to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even when everyone around us knew. Everyone. All our boys knew. Tilden knew... I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it.

Related Characters: Dodge (speaker), Shelly, The Baby / Buried Child, Tilden, Halie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 109-110



Explanation and Analysis

This is the climax of the play, in which Dodge tells Shelly the story of the buried child. Dodge seems to do this in part because Shelly has goaded him into it, and in part because he wants to shock Shelly. He seems to relish it when she tells him she isn't sure if she wants to know, and the thought of scaring her seems to push him ultimately into revealing the secret. In Dodge's recounting he does not omit his own cruelty—he dwells on it, in fact, talking about how he allowed Halie to almost die having her incestuous child without doctors. This shows the ways in which Dodge has partly brought about the family's downfall by being so

vengeful and possessive. He goes on to blame Tilden's love for the child for Dodge's decision to kill it, stating that "it made everything we'd accomplished look like nothing." This is another instance of Shepard revealing the toxicity of the American Dream, in which the ideal of the perfect nuclear family of successful parents and children leads to more dysfunction than if people had honest expectations about family life. Dodge implies that he killed the child because it was the one thing he felt didn't fit in with their perfect life (which seems to be an idealized memory in itself). Ironically, this murder, more than anything else (like the birth of the child itself), is what actually throws the family into chaos.

☞ I was gonna run last night. I was gonna run and keep right on running. Clear to the Iowa border. I drove all night with the windows open. The old man's two bucks flapping right on the seat beside me. It never stopped raining the whole time. Never stopped once. I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it as though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield I watched him breathe as though he was frozen in time and every breath marked him. Marked him forever without him knowing. 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. The eyes. The mouth. The breath. I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the corn belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me. Then it all dissolved. Everything dissolved. Just like that.

Related Characters: Vince (speaker), Shelly

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 117-118

Explanation and Analysis



In Act Two, Vince takes Dodge's money and goes to the store to get him whiskey, but fails to return until the next morning. This Act Three speech is then his explanation for why he ran away and why he returned. The audience understands that Vince fled the house after seeing the family chaos (which reminds us of Vince's six-year separation from the family that this visit has interrupted). It seemed like Vince felt that fleeing could save him from the

fate of his family members, but he describes seeing his face in the windshield and having a vision in which his face morphed into the faces of his family members and ancestors. Even as he was running, his family was there with him in his own face, telling him he could not escape. This speech points to Vince's identity as being intertwined with the family, and it is somewhat fatalistic in its conclusion that Vince, as long as he is himself, will not be free of his family. It also points to Shepard's dark ideas about the chaotic power of family and the inability to escape past traumas.

☞ Good hard rain. Takes everything straight down deep to the roots. The rest takes care of itself. You can't force a thing to grow. You can't interfere with it. It's all hidden. It's all unseen. You just gotta wait til it pops up out of the ground. Tiny little shoot. Tiny little white shoot. All hairy and fragile. Strong though. Strong enough to break the earth even. It's a miracle, Dodge. I've never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it's the sun. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's the sun.

Related Characters: Halie (speaker), Dodge

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This is the passage that concludes the play, and, for a work of such dark and fatalistic themes, it is a surprisingly optimistic conclusion. By this point the family secret is out in the open (partially marked by each family member's sudden ability to see the vegetables growing in the backyard). As Halie speaks this monologue, Tilden comes onstage carrying the bones of the buried child, which he has apparently dug up from the yard. Though it is grotesque imagery, the return of the body to the house symbolizes a restoration of honesty for the family, and the end of a secret that has created torment and suffering for a long time. That Halie, the character most wedded to the family's illusions about itself, gives this optimistic monologue about life and rebirth suggests to the audience that the family is benefiting from having finally dealt with the trauma of their past.

Throughout the play the vegetables growing in the yard have represented the family's secrets, and the rain has represented the relentless pressure to bring the secrets into the open. With the sun shining and the family realizing that the yard is fertile once again, the audience is left to

conclude that some real progress has been made.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

On a **rainy** day in rural Illinois in 1978, Dodge, a sickly man in his late seventies, sits on the couch in the living room of his old, rundown farmhouse. He stares at the television. After a while, Dodge looks to make sure that no one is watching him, then pulls a bottle of whiskey from underneath the couch cushion, takes a long drink, and returns it to its hiding place.

Dodge attempts to suppress a cough, but his wife Halie hears him, and she calls to him from upstairs, suggesting that Dodge take some medicine. From upstairs, Halie describes the torrential **rain** outside and blames it for Dodge's ills. Dodge ignores her, takes another drink, and lights a cigarette. He has another coughing fit, and Halie threatens to come downstairs, but Dodge tells her not to.

Halie again tells Dodge to take a pill for his cough. She wonders aloud whether taking medicine is the Christian thing to do, but concludes that Dodge might as well take it.

Halie advises Dodge not to watch any television programs that will get him excited, such as horse racing, and the two argue about what day of the week horse races are held. Halie recounts a fanciful story from a time before she and Dodge were married, describing how a handsome man once escorted her to a horse race. Dodge insults her for her promiscuity.

Halie lets Dodge know that she is going out to meet the minister Father Dewis for lunch, and that their son Bradley will be coming over later to cut Dodge's hair. Dodge adamantly refuses to let Bradley cut his hair. Halie says that Tilden, their eldest son, is in the kitchen, and suggests that he might protect Dodge—an idea the Dodge scoffs at. Dodge calls out for Tilden and then goes into a horrible coughing fit.

The opening moments of the play immediately establish Dodge, the family patriarch, as weak and vulnerable. The setting also gives us a sense of the family's lack of success and prosperity. The decaying family farmhouse is a fitting metaphor for both the failure of the American Dream and the collapse of this family.



The rain outside calls to mind the Biblical flood in Genesis—an image of both punishment and renewal. Dodge and Halie, far from being an ideal of family patriarch and matriarch, are ineffectual and constantly at odds. Halie doesn't even appear until much later—we know her only by her voice—as the couple seems to want to avoid each other.



Halie reveals that her knowledge of her own religion is suspect, but also that she uses religion when it's useful to her—and abandons it when it goes against her desires.



The anecdote about the horse racing not only shows how Halie seems to revise the past, but also further establishes the antagonistic relationship between husband and wife. The allusions to Halie's extra-marital activity help to paint a picture of the couple's specific dysfunction.



Halie and Dodge's argument about Tilden and Bradley further identifies problems the family is experiencing. The two adult sons are unable to take care of their aging parents like we might expect. In this exchange, Bradley is characterized as abusive and Tilden as unable to protect even himself, much less his father.



Tilden, a “profoundly burned out and displaced” man in his forties, enters, wet with **rain** and holding an armful of freshly picked **corn**. He simply stares at Dodge as Dodge’s coughing fit subsides. Dodge asks Tilden where he got the corn, and Tilden tells him that he has just picked it in the fields out back. Dodge insists that there hasn’t been corn out back since 1935, and Halie’s voice confirms this from upstairs.

Tilden seems to lack any emotional response to his father’s illness, emphasizing his “burned out” nature and also the fact that he may be mentally disturbed in some way. The first appearance of corn (the motif of the harvest) presents the possibility for eventual renewal, even though at this point Dodge seems wedded to the idea of his farm’s barrenness.



Dodge commands Tilden to return the **corn** to where he found out, but instead Tilden dumps the ears of corn on Dodge’s lap. Dodge asks Tilden if he’s in some kind of trouble. He tells Tilden that Halie has already told him about some mysterious incident in New Mexico that has landed Tilden back home in Illinois. Tilden exits to get a chair from the kitchen, and Dodge pushes the ears of corn off his body.

Dodge’s refusal of the corn is a refusal to acknowledge reality, much like his refusal to admit to his crimes. Tilden putting the corn in Dodge’s lap then forces Dodge to confront reality in a direct way. Here we also learn that Tilden has been forced to return home after trying to make a new life for himself elsewhere.



Tilden returns with a chair and pail and begins to husk the **corn**. Dodge asks Tilden what his plans are for the future, but says that he’s not worried about him. Tilden tells Dodge that he should have worried when Tilden was in New Mexico, but then changes the subject and asks Dodge for some of his hidden whiskey. Dodge plays dumb in response.

Although the details of Tilden’s time in New Mexico are hazy, the fact that Tilden brings up this lonely time to his father further emphasizes how the characters’ pasts weigh on them and their relationships in the present. Tilden is portrayed as a helpless, ineffectual man without a future.



From upstairs, Halie calls out to Dodge that Tilden should not be drinking anything. Unaware that Tilden can hear, Halie enters into a long speech about how she and Dodge need to stay healthy because Tilden can no longer take care of himself. She also reveals that their son Bradley accidentally cut off his leg with a chainsaw, and so he can’t be depended on to take care of the couple in their old age. Halie laments Tilden’s fall from All-American quarterback to disturbed criminal.

Halie continues to solidify our awareness of Bradley and Tilden’s dysfunction. The sons need to be looked after, and therefore are not suitable heirs to Dodge (or even functional adults). The mention of Tilden’s former athletic prowess demonstrates a uniquely American kind of nostalgia—it’s implied that the family once had achieved the “American Dream” (owning their farm, having a child who was a football star), but now that dream has collapsed forever.



Halie goes on to admit that once Tilden and Bradley exposed themselves as failures, she placed her hopes in her youngest son, Ansel. Halie finally enters from upstairs, appearing onstage for the first time. She is a woman in her sixties, and she wears full mourning attire. As she slowly descends the stairs, she lauds Ansel for his intelligence, bravery, and skills as a basketball player and soldier. She quickly skirts over the detail that Ansel died in a motel room.

Halie uses Ansel’s death as an excuse for the family’s demise without taking any responsibility herself. The quick reveal that Ansel died a rather humiliating death then demonstrates that Halie may revise the past in order to mitigate her feelings about the present. We see just how much Halie lives in a world of nostalgia (as she appears for the first time)—she seems to love her sons as they were in the past, but she is scornful of their present selves.



Halie, completely absorbed in her story, explains that Father Dewis wants to recommend to the city council that Ansel be commemorated with a statue. She then blames Ansel's death on the fact that he married into a Catholic family. She explains that Ansel died on his honeymoon, and, in a disturbing set of images, Halie suggests that she knew Ansel was going to die because their parting kiss the last time they saw each other was irregularly dispassionate.

Halie finally comes out of her reverie, and angrily notices the husks on the floor of the living room. Halie asks Tilden where the **corn** has come from, claiming that she can see fields from her bedroom window and that there is no corn to speak of. When Tilden insists that he picked the corn out back, Halie threatens to kick Tilden out of the house. This makes him start to cry.

Dodge reprimands Halie for upsetting Tilden, but Halie warns the men that they'd better clean up the mess before Bradley comes and sees it. A short argument ensues where Dodge insults Bradley, disowning him as his son, and claiming that his real flesh and blood is "buried in back yard!" Everyone freezes at this comment and the mood abruptly changes. Halie tells Tilden not to go out back again, and then she exits for her lunch with Father Dewis, telling the men she'll be back soon.

Tilden scolds Dodge for his comments about the back yard, but Dodge refuses to apologize or discuss the matter further, instead turning the focus back to Tilden's failure to be an autonomous adult.

As Tilden begins to head out back again—against Halie and Dodge's wishes—Dodge has another violent coughing fit. Tilden gets him some water, and Dodge takes a pill. Tilden helps Dodge get settled, covering him with a blanket. Dodge asks Tilden to stay with him, and Tilden agrees to. When Tilden tries to remove Dodge's baseball cap, however, Dodge refuses to take it off—he wants to protect himself against a haircut from Bradley.

Dodge falls asleep. Tilden steals Dodge's hidden whiskey, and then covers the sleeping Dodge with the **corn** husks and sneaks away.

Halie's faith in Ansel as the family's would-be savior continues to be undercut by her bizarre allusions to the incestuous feeling she seemed to have had for him. All this hints at something more sinister, as we will see. We also see Halie again using religion as a basis for prejudice and superstition.



Halie's denial of the corn's existence aligns her with Dodge—mirroring their refusal to acknowledge their past crimes. Halie's volatile reaction towards Tilden is in a way a representation of her intense and absolute refusal to revisit the family's past trauma. We also see Tilden acting especially childlike and helpless here.



The argument that Halie and Dodge have about Bradley continues to stress the tense and antagonistic relationships that the family members have with each other. Dodge's cryptic comment and the reaction that it elicits draw a mysterious connection between the family and the tract of land that now seems to produce crops. Combined with the title of the play itself, this increases the mood of something ominous and grotesque approaching.



When the family's dark past bubbles up, Tilden seems to attempt to confront it, while Dodge totally refuses.



In a sense, Tilden helping his ill father and tucking him in on the couch foreshadows a sort of burial process. Dodge is dying, and Tilden is attempting to help him pass on comfortably, and, in doing so, aiding in the renewal of the family—another ritual likewise associated with harvest. Bradley is again portrayed as a bully, even to his own father.



This symbolic burial further emphasizes the power shift occurring in the family, and displays Tilden's strange mental processes.



After a few moments, Bradley enters from the screen porch. His left leg is a wooden prosthetic, and he walks with a limp. He notices Dodge on the couch under the mess of **corn** husks. Bradley laboriously kneels beside Dodge, violently removes Dodge's cap, and begins to shave Dodge's head with a pair of electric clippers.

Coming out of Dodge's pseudo-burial, Shepard presents another obviously poor choice for Dodge's possible replacement in Bradley. Bradley's abusive (and petty) behavior towards his father exposes even more bitterness between the family's members, and again shows the childishness of even the grown children. Bradley's violent shaving of his father's head seems like another ritual associated with death—like shaving a prisoner before his execution, or shearing a sheep before slaughter.



ACT 2

That night, the **rain** continues. The mess from act one is gone from the living room, and Dodge is asleep on the sofa, his scalp bleeding from the aggressively short haircut. Vince, Tilden's twenty-two-year-old son, and Shelly, Vince's nineteen-year-old girlfriend, appear on the screen porch. Shelly is extremely amused by the pastoral setting, and compares the farmhouse to a Norman Rockwell painting. Vince scolds her for acting silly, explaining that the situation is tense because he hasn't seen his family in over six years.

Rockwell was known for his idyllic illustrations of family life in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the house reminds Shelly of a stereotypical all-American family, the behavior that the family displayed in the first act shows us just how false this sentiment is. Shelly begins to discover the darkness that clouds the family and she becomes our audience surrogate—providing a relatively sane outsider's perspective into the family's bizarre and sinister world.



The young couple enters, and Vince goes upstairs to see if anyone is home. Shelly notices Dodge on the couch, and he wakes up and startles her. While Vince is upstairs looking at photographs, Shelly attempts to explain to Dodge that she and Vince were on their way to New Mexico so that Vince could reconnect with Tilden, and that they stopped at Dodge's on the way for a visit.

By stating that the objective of the trip is to reunite Vince with his estranged family, Shelly sets up the couple as the external force that will challenge the family's desire to deny, escape, or falsify the past.



Vince comes downstairs, but Dodge is confused and does not recognize him. When Vince asks after Halie, Dodge responds by saying that she won't be back for days. Dodge also reveals that Tilden is here at the farmhouse, rather than in New Mexico like Vince thought. Spooked, Shelly asks Vince that they leave.

Dodge seems to mistake Vince for Tilden, showing just how deeply the family members are estranged from each other. Shelly's assumptions about the house immediately begin to transform as she witnesses this distressing level of alienation.



Dodge starts to comment on Shelly's physical appearance and she grows more frightened, begging Vince to leave, but he forces her to stay. Dodge calls for Tilden, who then enters with an armful of **carrots**, apparently from out back.

The family is frightening and strange to an outsider like Shelly, but Vince is determined to reconnect with his past. The carrots again represent the ongoing possibility of redemption or new life.



Tilden does not seem to recognize Vince, and when Shelly presses him, Tilden tells her that his son is dead and buried in the back yard.

Tilden's cryptic statement is reminiscent of Dodge's. The secret that the back yard holds makes Tilden unable to recognize Vince, and adds to the growing sense of mystery and horror. Tilden is clearly mentally troubled in some way.



As Vince grows even more confused by the situation, Shelly offers to take the **carrots** from Tilden and begins to help peel them. Dodge asks Vince to get him a new bottle of alcohol, and Shelly urges him to do so. Vince accuses Shelly of adding to the confusion.

While Vince struggles to get his bearings, Shelly offers to help with Tilden's harvest, taking action to establish some normality to the scene. Her helpfulness and friendliness positions her to uncover more about the family's past later.



While Vince makes various attempts to remind Dodge and Tilden of who he is, Dodge begs for alcohol and lasciviously comments on Shelly's beauty. Vince finally gives up and agrees to get Dodge his bottle.

Vince's desperation to be remembered by Dodge and Tilden suggests the power of the family unit, no matter how bad that family's behavior might be. Dodge grows increasingly less sympathetic as he leers at Shelly.



Shelly does not want Vince to leave her alone in the house, and she asks to come along, but Vince is bewildered and wants to be alone. He leaves Shelly, saying he is going to get the bottle and will return right away.

Vince seems suddenly in the grip of the family now, and automatically chooses Dodge's wishes over Shelly's.



Once Vince is gone, Shelly asks Tilden if he is really unable to remember Vince. Tilden says he finds something familiar about Vince but cannot recall him. Tilden asks Shelly to tell him some shred of personal information about Vince. When Shelly refuses, Tilden says that he also has awful secrets that he cannot tell.

Even though Tilden does not fully recognize Vince, the connection he feels for him again emphasizes the power of the familial bond. The comfort that Shelly has now cultivated with Tilden allows for the family's dark past to slowly begin emerging. Tilden seems to think that Shelly's reticence means that she has a horrible past of her own, so he trusts her.



Tilden admires Shelly's rabbit-fur coat, and Shelly allows him to feel it. She gives it to him, and he puts it on, taking pleasure in the softness of the material. Tilden tells Shelly that there was a time when he used to be free to adventure, but now he can't any longer. When Shelly presses him for more information, Tilden reveals that there was a baby in the family, but Dodge drowned it, and no one knows where he put it.

We see again just how childlike and developmentally stunted Tilden is. Shelly, as the audience's proxy, works to unearth the family's past. In this moment, one of the play's mysteries comes into focus as we learn the specifics of the curse-like crime that hangs over the household.



An agitated Dodge tries to get Tilden to stop telling Shelly this story, and he tries to stand and walk toward Tilden, but he falls. Tilden continues to tell Shelly that not even Halie or Bradley know where the corpse of the baby is buried. Meanwhile Shelly moves to help Dodge, but Tilden forcibly keeps her seated. Tilden tries to return Shelly's jacket to her, but she does not take it.

Dodge continues to try to suppress the past, but he is becoming too weak to stop it from coming out, as evidenced by his worsening illness. Tilden seems childlike and innocent, but he is still a grown man with a grown man's strength, and so another potentially frightening figure for Shelly.



The squeaking of a wooden leg is heard and Bradley enters. He sees Shelly and begins to interrogate her, asking who she is and what she's doing in the house. Bradley takes the coat from Tilden and tells Shelly that she should take Tilden away with her. He says that Tilden used to be a great football player but is now a failure. Bradley says the same is true of Dodge.

Bradley's public disdain for Tilden again reinforces the family's dysfunction. Here Bradley invokes the past, but unlike his mother, he uses it for ridicule rather than nostalgic reminiscing. Bradley is childish in his own way as he mocks his traumatized brother.



Bradley accuses Shelly of being with Tilden, mocking her by saying that women like men who are "important." Intimidated, Tilden bolts off.

Bradley's emphasis on "importance" is evidence of an insecurity with his own level of power within the family.



When Shelly offers to help Dodge, Bradley mocks her by saying that they should drown Dodge instead. Terrified, Shelly tells Bradley to shut up. Bradley then asserts his dominance by forcing Shelly to open her mouth and putting his fingers into it. As the act ends, Bradley has one hand in Shelly's mouth, and he drops the fur coat on Dodge, covering Dodge's head.

In a grotesque, horrifying show of force, Bradley vies for the position of power by frightening his older brother, symbolically "burying" his father with the coat, and physically dominating Shelly. Bradley's moral compass is determined by a desire for power, unlike Tilden, who although confused, seems like a decent person.



ACT 3

The next morning, the **rain** has stopped and sun shines into the living room. Bradley sleeps on the couch, his prosthetic leg detached nearby. Dodge sits against the television, visibly weak, wearing his cap and Shelly's coat.

The passing of the storm parallels the clarity that has begun to come from Tilden's attempts to reveal the family's past. Bradley sleeps in Dodge's former position of power, but his leg leaves him vulnerable for upheaval.



Shelly enters cheerily from the kitchen with a bowl of soup. She offers it to Dodge, but he refuses it, preoccupied with Vince's prolonged absence and his own craving for a bottle of alcohol. Dodge tries to get Shelly to give him a massage, but she declines.

Along with the improvement in weather, Shelly provides a positive point of view in the wake of the previous night's harrowing truth-telling episode—apparently the men seem less frightening and ominous in the light of day. These tonal shifts hint at more change to come.



Shelly believes Vince will return (at least to retrieve the saxophone he's left), and Dodge mocks her optimism. Shelly turns her attention to the change in weather, and Dodge mocks her further. Shelly tells Dodge that today feels different—that last night she was afraid, but she isn't today. Dodge assures her that Bradley is nothing to be afraid of, and suggests that he'd be even more useless if she threw away Bradley's prosthetic leg.

Shelly assumes that Vince will return, but it seems that he has been sucked into the life of the family already and is abandoning his life and dreams (represented by both Shelly and the saxophone). Dodge and Bradley's mutually abusive relationship remains strong. Even in his state of weakness, Dodge looks for ways to emasculate and get back at his son.



Shelly is shocked that Dodge would think of doing such a thing, but Dodge argues that he should not be judged in his own house. Shelly muses that the house feels familiar, like it's empty except for her, and that Dodge and Bradley seem out of place.

Again, Shelly provides the audience a lens to view the family. Despite the grotesque dysfunction of this particular family, there is still something about it that is universally recognizable. Shelly's observation also seems to hint at how stuck in the past the family is—everything feels out of place in the present.



Shelly tells Dodge that she slept in Halie's room, where she observed the family's history in photos, as well as crosses on the walls.

This description of the room reinforces Halie's penchant for both nostalgia and religion.



As Dodge tries to deflect her questions, Shelly asks him about a photograph depicting the whole family standing on a farm full of **corn** and wheat, with Halie holding a baby. Shelly says that Halie looks lost in the photo.

At first glance, this photo seems to depict the stereotypical, idyllic, "Norman-Rockwell-type" American family, and yet at a closer glance there are things very out of place—the mother seems estranged, and there is a baby who has now mysteriously disappeared. The photo seems to encapsulate Shepard's skeptical view of the idea of the American Dream.



Dodge continues to defend himself and claims disinterest in the photos, until Shelly asks Dodge outright if Tilden was telling the truth about the killing of the baby. Suddenly Dodge's demeanor changes, and Dodge asks Shelly where Tilden is. She tells Dodge that Bradley chased him out of the house. Dodge worries that Tilden will get hurt without supervision. He explains to Shelly that Tilden was once in trouble and can no longer be left alone.

In contrast to Halie's nostalgic tendency to revise history, Dodge chooses to ignore and deny the past. Yet this forgetfulness also seems to be selective to the crime Dodge committed. When the subject turns away from himself, Dodge volunteers information (albeit vaguely) about Tilden's return home.



Shelly and Dodge hear the sounds of Halie and Father Dewis on the porch. Dodge begs Shelly to stay and protect him. He hides under the fur coat. Dewis wears while traditional attire of a minister, while Halie is now dressed in a bright yellow dress and holding yellow roses. The pair are slightly drunk, and do not notice Dodge and Shelly.

From the moment Father Dewis is introduced, his behavior does not reflect the uniform that he wears. His drunken and lecherous actions seem to suggest that in the world of the play, even religion is too perverse to help the family.



Father Dewis jokes that deep down, he and Halie know they are "every bit as wicked as the Catholics." Halie and Dewis flirt as they enter the living room, but stop dead when they see Shelly and the scene in the living room.

Dewis's joke encapsulates the play's cynical viewpoint on religion. Although Halie broadly uses religion to justify her sense of right and wrong, she's just as wicked as the people she condemns—and she knows it, and doesn't feel guilty.



Embarrassed, Halie tries to clean up in the living room by taking the fur coat off of Dodge and covering the prosthetic leg with it. When Dodge protests, Halie whips the blanket off of Bradley, revealing his amputated leg, and throws the blanket on Dodge. Bradley wakes with a start and begs for the blanket, but Halie coldly rebukes him and he begins to cry.

This sequence of pseudo-burials symbolizes an ongoing transfer of power within the family. The dying Dodge is “buried” by the blanket, and this burial simultaneously removes Bradley from power and puts him at his most vulnerable.



Halie asks Father Dewis, who is at a loss for words, for advice on how to handle the bizarre assembly in her living room. In an attempt at seduction, Halie tries to find a bottle of whiskey, and reaches into Dewis’ pockets intimately as Dodge watches. Halie says that the roses that Father Dewis gave her wash away the smell of sin in the house.

Father Dewis, the embodiment of religion in the play, demonstrates his inability to solve problems, and worse yet, he encourages Halie’s adulterous behavior. The roses, an obviously weak fix to the dysfunction and “sin” in the house, reinforce this sense of ineptitude—similar to how Halie’s nostalgia attempts to cover up the horrifying reality of the past.



Halie finds the whiskey and drinks it in front of Dodge as she claims that a statue of Ansel, holding a basketball and rifle, will be built. Bradley interjects that Ansel never played basketball, but Halie tells him to shut up.

This fantasy gets to the heart of Halie’s revisionist delusions. Using the church to bolster false beliefs, she purposefully misremembers the past to repress the truths that have started to surface.



Not allowing anyone to get a word in, Halie continues to drink and lament the deterioration of society and its values. Dewis reminds Halie that it is important to believe in certain things, and she twists his words to rail against Dodge as an example of a person driven mad by lack of values. She throws a rose into Dodge’s lap.

Even when Dewis does offer advice, Halie willfully misinterprets it to emphasize her own points of argument. The rose on Dodge’s lap adds to the ongoing funerary symbolism.



Shelly finally interjects that she came to the house with Vince, and Halie does not seem to immediately recognize that Vince is her grandson. As Shelly continues to jog her memory, Halie suddenly becomes worried about Tilden’s whereabouts. Halie yells at Dodge for allowing Tilden to leave. Meanwhile Dodge begs for alcohol, Shelly yells at Halie to pay attention to her, and Bradley yells at Shelly for disrespecting his mother.

Halie adds to the sense that the family’s memory is selective, and that Vince, at least for the time being, has been erased. This moment also echoes Shelly’s conversation earlier in the act with Dodge, where Dodge used Tilden as way of redirecting the focus away from his own past.



As Halie laments the state of the family, Bradley steals the blanket back from Dodge, causing a ruckus. In a rage, Shelly takes the bowl of soup that she tried to give to Dodge and smashes it against the door.

After enduring horrible treatment, Shelly finally acts out. The outsider is able to grab the attention of the other characters by stooping to their level and speaking their language of violence.



Bradley calls Shelly a prostitute, and the two begin to argue. Shelly takes the fur coat and Bradley's prosthetic leg and taunts Bradley with it. Bradley covers himself in the blanket and whimpers. Dewis tries to get Shelly to return the leg, but proves useless.

Shelly tells the family to stay away from her. She says that she had come along with Vince and was excited to meet the family he had told her about, but that this family is unrecognizable as the family he described.

When Halie threatens to call the police, Bradley implores her not to, and Shelly chides the family for keeping their gruesome secret. Bradley, Halie, and Dewis command Shelly to stop interfering in their business, but Dodge finally relents and decides to tell Shelly the truth.

Despite protestations from Halie and Bradley, Dodge recounts how Halie had a baby, and apparently the child was Tilden's. Tilden was close with the baby, but Dodge was ashamed of it, and so he killed the child. Halie begins to claim that Ansel would have saved the child, and then there is a crash on the screen porch.

The noise comes from Vince, who is tearing the door off of the screen porch in a drunken stupor. Vince takes empty liquor bottles from a paper bag and smashes them while singing. Dodge and Halie finally seem to recognize him as their grandson, but in his drunken state Vince cannot recognize anyone.

Vince's drunken behavior continues on the porch, and when Halie asks Dewis for help, Dewis says that he's outside of his parish. Dewis invites Halie upstairs. She despairs at how her sweet grandson has turned into a monster, but then follows Dewis to the bedroom.

Vince enters the house through a screen porch window while Shelly goes out onto the screen porch. Dodge then begins to deliver his last will and testament. While Dodge delivers his speech, Vince keeps the prosthetic leg away from a whimpering Bradley, and goes to smell Father Dewis' roses.

The family's toxicity drives Shelly to take Dodge's suggestion from earlier in the act. In order to have a voice, her actions become more consistent with those of the family—she becomes more infantile, bullying, and grotesque in her actions the longer she stays in the house.



In this moment Shelly fully expresses the shattering of her Norman Rockwell preconceptions about the family.



The ever-persistent undercurrent of failure, resentment, and guilt that surrounds the family, paired with Dodge's severe illness, finally cause him to relent to Shelly's coaxing.



Dodge's speech clarifies the details of the crime, illuminating Tilden's estrangement, and expanding upon the implications of Halie's incestuous past. Even in this climactic moment of revelation, when the truth is finally spoken aloud to an outside audience, Halie still invokes Ansel as a fantasy solution.



Once the whole truth has been aired, the cloud of selective memory is lifted and the grandparents seem to recognize Vince as family (or perhaps they only recognize him now that he's drunk and aggressive—acting like a true member of their family). And yet, their earlier refusal to acknowledge him has apparently caused an identity crisis for Vince.



To reinforce the play's stance on religion, Dewis commits rather obvious adultery with a vulnerable follower of his in a time when guidance and wisdom are desperately needed.



Vince is barely recognizable in his drunken state. He immediately displays his power over the room by barging in and stealing the prosthetic leg—he is the new "alpha male."



Dodge declares that the house will go to Vince, the tools will go to Tilden, and the tractor and all the rest of his belongings will be burned in the middle of the field.

Shelly tells Vince that she will leave, but Vince wants to stay. Shelly asks Vince what happened to him the night before. Vince explains that he considered running away and drove all the way to Iowa, but then he saw his reflection and the reflection of his ancestors in the windshield of his car and he was compelled to return. Shelly leaves him.

As Vince continues to taunt Bradley with the leg, Father Dewis comes down the stairs. Vince throws the leg out of the room, and Bradley crawls to retrieve it. Dewis urges Vince to go see Halie, but Vince tells Dewis that they are the only two in the house, and that he should leave. As Dewis leaves, he tells Vince that he doesn't know how to help Halie.

Vince notices that Dodge has silently died. He covers Dodge in the blanket and places the roses on his chest, then lies down on the sofa and stares at the ceiling.

From upstairs, we hear Halie calling out for Dodge, telling him that Tilden was right, and that the field is full of **vegetables**. Tilden enters, covered in mud, holding the rotted corpse of a small child. He ascends the stairs towards Halie as we hear her considering aloud the **rain** and the sun, and how they make the plants grow.

With this declaration, Vince officially becomes the new patriarch of this collapsing family, Tilden is left in essentially the same position, and Bradley is punished for his abuse.



The image of Vince seeing his ancestors in his own reflection and being compelled to return demonstrates the intense power of the family bond and the power of the past. In this case, these forces prove insidious as they destroy Vince's relationship and his career goals. Sally has learned the truth, and now she escapes the family's grotesque world.



Vince's sense of power grows as he commands the space. However, this newfound power does not feel especially glorious, but rather it seems like the beginning of a new cycle of failure. Once again, religion (or at least Dewis's shallow, hypocritical kind of religion) is portrayed as ineffectual in the face of such problems.



Dodge's death completes the transference of power, as he is "buried" yet again. Vince now assumes the same position on the couch that Dodge was in at the beginning of the play, setting the new cycle in motion.



The corpse of the murdered child is "harvested" and displayed by Tilden, as everything that was "buried"—both the truth and the child itself—is now uncovered to the light of day. At the same time as this horrifying and symbolic "harvest" takes place, the resurgence of crops on the family's formerly barren land suggests the possibility for growth and renewal once the family has finally faced the truth. It's unclear if they will be able to do this—especially as Vince seems to have already become the new version of Dodge, and Halie continues to avoid the truth and focus on something positive and simplistic—but at least the possibility is there, as Shepard ends his grim play on this ambiguous note.





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