UDC 821.111(73).09-2 Shepard S.
821.14.09-1 Sophocle
https://doi.org/10.18485/bells.2024.16.18

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POSTMODERN REIMAGINING OF THE OEDIPUS MYTH IN SAM SHEPARD'S *BURIED CHILD* AND *A PARTICLE OF DREAD*

Abstract
In his dramaturgical work, Sam Shepard often explores the tragedy of a family life fraught with ineffectual patriarchy, dysfunctional familial relations, and cursed genealogy. Family discourse as the focal point of a tragedy is reminiscent of the Greek tragic canon, most notably the myth of Oedipus. Oedipal themes are present in Shepard's *Buried Child* and *A Particle of Dread*, which is a direct adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. This paper will address the postmodern reinterpretation of myths from the standpoint of theorists such as Linda Hutcheon and Roland Barthes, and the two plays will be compared to the Sophoclean precursor regarding the inexorability of fate, the "curse on the house" motif, rituals of pollution and purification, and cultural and familial collapse.

Key words: Sam Shepard, postmodernism, the Oedipus myth, Greek tragedy, family curse

1. Introduction

There is a deep sense of tragedy inextricably woven into the fabric of Sam Shepard's plays. The landscape of those plays betrays a typically American iconography inhabited by modern-day mythical figures who carry the

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weight of a society lacking a centre as their tragic flaw, having been plunged into postmodern fragmentation and alienation. Shepard's world is, in Christopher Bigsby's words, "a world in which myths of masculine independence and existential truth have collapsed into anomie, psychosis and a destabilising violence" (Bigsby 2004: 167).

It can be argued that Sam Shepard incorporates elements of Greek tragedies into his plays, reconstructing the myths embedded in them in a manner that lends the primordial Oedipal motif a startlingly new, contemporary dimension. Primarily, the traces of the postmodern contesting of the mythical master narratives through their ironic retelling can be found in some of his most popular works such as *Buried Child*. This particular play, in the vein of Sophoclean *Oedipus Rex*, investigates a generational conflict that stems from a dark past, which seeps sinisterly into the present while endangering one's sense of self. Similarly to ancient Greek tragedies, Shepard explores the extent of free will in the face of an inexorable past, pondering the concepts of genealogical curse, incestual relations, destiny as genetic determinism, and rituals of pollution and purification.

Shepard never simply recasts myths in their original skin but uses mythological, tragic webbing, its form, and recurring themes in order to experiment with his own ideology and aesthetic principles of fragmentation, division within the self and with the wider, social context, a process which culminated in his final play, *A Particle of Dread*.

A Particle of Dread, subtitled *Oedipus Variations*, Shepard's least produced play, is a direct adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, pastiched into a murder-mystery and family drama which borrows heavily from the original, but also provides rich commentary on modern cultural values. In the notes on the play, Shepard describes using the material of the original Greek play as a way of transforming art and culture in society, while pondering the nature of fate and destiny – the main, enduring drivers present in Greek tragedies that confront the individual with their role in the course of a harsh and unforgiving universe:

> I think Sophocles must have had an intention. [...] I think he knew very well what we all know yet pretend not to. I think he knew we each have a destiny and a fate. That they work side by side, whether we see it or not. That this destiny is somehow written; forecast, like the weather. I'm still trying to work out the difference between fate and destiny. I know that destiny is the thing that you're written to do and fate is perhaps the thing you

> do with it, or vice versa. But the idea that, regardless of what you do, this thing has already come down; it is already written. (Shepard 2013)

This paper will address the traces of the ancient Oedipus myth in Shepard's *Buried Child* and *A Particle of Dread*, more specifically, concepts of fate and destiny (*moirai*), the "curse on the house" motif, rituals of pollution (*miasma*) and purification (*katharmós*), and the analogy between familial and cultural collapse. Commentary will be provided with respect to the postmodern transformation of the original Sophoclean plot and the way in which Shepard turns genealogical specificities into a symbol of American societal alienation, metonymically moving away from the realm of familial into universal.

2. Postmodern Reimaginings of Myths

James Robinson locates crucial differences between modernist and postmodernist approaches to mythic authority in his comparative study of Eugene O'Neill and Sam Shepard's plays reliant on Greek myths, *Desire Under the Elms* and *Buried Child*, respectively. While O'Neill is seen as reverent in his transfiguration and invocation of classical tragedies, Shepard rebukes veneration in favour of irony and parody (Robinson in Maufort 1989: 153). He questions the authority of the mythical material, aligning himself with the contemporary sentiment of the "vast will to unmaking" (Hassan in Robinson 1989: 154).

Having that in mind, Shepard's scepticism with regard to any authority, even that of the Greeks, makes his plays suitable for analysis based on postmodern theories. Linda Hutcheon, in particular, explored postmodernist interrogations of myths as master narratives and the need to expose "our culture's means of ideological legitimation" (Hutcheon 2002: 101). Furthermore, she states the difference between modernist and postmodernist methods which resembles Robertson's view:

> This last point is often made in terms of the difference between the modernist use of myth as a structuring device in the work of, for instance, Mann, Pavese, or Joyce and the postmodern ironic contesting of myth as master narrative in the novels of Barth, Reed, or Morrison, where there is no consolation of form

> or consensual belief. Modernism has been seen as creating its own form of aesthetic authority in the face of a centre that was not holding, but if that point is made, it usually entails claiming that postmodernism is to be defined as anarchic, in complicity with chaos, accepting of uncertainty and confusion. (Hutcheon 2003: 6)

For Hutcheon, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that "uses and abuses, instals and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (Hutcheon 2003: 3). Unlike modernism, postmodernism never returns to the past, nostalgically lamenting the stability of its moral or aesthetic values. It rejects any consolation of a stable and ordered meaning, but posits a self-conscious, critical, and parodic reworking of the traditions it borrows from, exposing their master narratives as illusory and incredulous. The reimaginings of myths as an example of such parodic transfiguration are always "fragmented echoings" (Hutcheon 2003: 11) insofar as they incorporate and challenge that which they parody, turning historical continuity into ironic discontinuity. In her *Poetics*, Hutcheon quotes Roland Barthes' "de-mythologising" as a way of getting beneath the "natural" assumptions which constitute master narratives such as art or myth – everything that is considered unchangeable, universal and eternal needs to be demystified (Hutcheon, 2003: 8).

Eleftheria Ioannidou's study of dramatic rewritings of Greek tragedy in the period between the 1970s and the 2000s introduces the idea that these texts serve as a "means to interrogate foundational narratives of modernity", treating the canon like the "product of the material, discursive, and cultural transformations laid bare in the act of rewriting" (Ioannidou 2017: 1). Correspondingly, the transformation of the cultural landscape that is modern-day America is one of the central topics that appear in Shepard's myth-based work.

Adopting a deconstructive approach to tragedy, Shepard adopts the tragic notions of a tainted genealogy, inescapable fate confronted by human free will and rituals of pollution and purification, applies them to the landscape of Midwestern America, and uses them to question the notions of loss, suffering, and violence that have led to the "collapse of the individual subject and the relinquishment of linear historical progress" (Maffesoli in: Ioannidou 2017: 13) in the postmodern world.

In an interview with Carol Rosen (1993), Sam Shepard addresses this ontological question by describing myths as having the purpose of tracing

ourselves through time in a quest for our emotional selves. This connection with the past is fruitful inasmuch as it acts as a "thread in culture", which connects us with the "family of generations and generations of races of people, tribes, the mythology of the ancient people" (Rosen 1993: 5).

> Myth served as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and the future. Because they were hooked up with the lineage of myth. It was so powerful and so strong that it acted as a thread in culture. And that's been destroyed. Myth in its truest form has now been demolished. It doesn't exist any more. All we have is fantasies about it. Or ideas that don't speak to our inner self at all, they just speak to some lame notions about the past. But they don't connect with anything. We've lost touch with the essence of myth. (Rosen 1993: 5)

Shepard conceptualises myth as a connecting river between the different dimensions of space and time, which has become fragmented in contemporary society, leading to the collapse of human identity. He therefore uses the framework of ancient tragedies and the common theme of a curse on a family present in the Oedipus myth in order to underline that familial, and, more widely, social pathogeny can negatively affect individual subjectivity. A comparative analysis between Sophocles' play and Shepard's *Buried Child* and *A Particle of Dread* serves to illuminate the way postmodern authors such as Shepard, recast myths, directing them towards their own ideology of social aberration, fragmentation, and alienation of the contemporary world.

3. The Oedipal Tragedy of *Buried Child*

Sam Shepard is masterful in melding the individual with the collective by assuming ancient mythic formulas such as the one from the Oedipal myth, decontextualising and subsequently recontextualising them so they can reflect his belief in the instability of human identity in a spiritually bankrupt social milieu. Shepard individualises mythic, traditional concepts to a postmodern end – he wants to rework and revitalise ancient archetypes in order to provide fresh and original commentary on the social reality his characters occupy.

In a similar vein, *Buried Child* is a play in which Sam Shepard reworks some aspects of the traditional Greek myth of Oedipus such as the curse on the house, mother-son incest, the myth of decline/death and recovery/rebirth as well as the search for one's identity.

Oedipus may be characterised as a typical Sophoclean hero, simultaneously in line with Aristotle's view of what tragedy entails. Namely, he is *spoudaios* – noble and respectable in a moral sense, albeit not a paragon of perfection since he needs to be able to arouse feelings of compassion and later on pity and fear. Oedipus as a tragic character also experiences a *peripeteia* or reversal of fortune as the result of some *hamartia* (mistake based on ignorance, not a character) (Kirby 2012: 418). When further inspecting elements of Sophoclean tragedy, authors such as H.D.F. Kitto locate *δικη* (*dike* – justice) as a unifying element in all Sophocles' plays. In his tragic universe *δικη* represents a complex cycle by which natural balance is restored in the world. In the Sophoclean tragedy, "the ἀδικία (*adikia* – wrongdoing) – the slaying of a father and marriage with a mother is not suspected by anyone and thus not purged in order to restore the natural balance in the world. This allows it to fester undetected until it ultimately emerges in the form of a physical plague. While Aeschylean tragedies carry a sense of austere moral laws that must not be breached, Sophocles introduces a disaster without intention, one coming from negligence or ignorance. In this case, the curse on the house motif may also be identified as Oedipus himself in *Coloneus* finds the source of his tragic demise in his bloodline: 'Perhaps the gods were angry with my family from of old' – a long-delayed recoil of *δικη* (Kitto 2003: 148).

Heilman (1992: 640) addresses Oedipal themes in Shepard's *Buried Child* by locating the genealogical curse in the "self-centredness, various animosities, and especially in the distant murder that symbolise the human failure of the family".

The principal myths of Athenian tragedies focus on several households, one of which is the House of Oedipus, where the incestuous crime between a mother and son leads to "a dangerous multiplication of familial identities" which has fatal consequences for the community at large (McLure 2012: 367). Similarly to the precursor, Shepard's play features "recognitions between family members, kin murder, and incest" (ibid.).

In *Buried Child*, a poster family of rural Illinois comes to encompass the Greek myth of the House of Thebes, and the murder of a father becomes the murder of an infant. The ailing patriarch of the family described in the

play, Dodge, murders an infant, begot after an incestuous union between his wife Halie and his son Tilden. Again, there is a connection to the Sophoclean play in the relationship between Oedipus/Tilden and Jocasta/Halie. This then becomes the dark family secret that brings a curse upon his house.

The crime from the past seeps into the present, becoming externalised as the genealogical curse which cripples Dodge's three sons – Ansel is dead, Tilden is psychologically unstable and Bradley is an amputee. The infanticide leads to Dodge's crops withering, echoing the plague from the beginning of *Oedipus Rex*, making his family farm literally and figuratively barren. The destructive family life as the product of a dark past is shown as the pollution that needs to be exorcised so that the family and their estate can become revitalised.

There are some similarities to Sophocles in the pattern with which the play ends in terms of the purification ritual as a means by which the concrete manifestation of *miasma*, i.e. the murderer is exorcised. A counterpart to the concept of pollution, purification is a distinctive feature of the original Greek tragedy. Meinel (2015: 49) describes pollution *(miasma)* and purification (*katharmós)* in *Oedipus Rex* as "ritual mechanisms whose function is precisely to allow understanding and to provide the (ritual) means for coping". Purification is, therefore, the means of choice by which Thebes copes with its present misfortune (ibid. 54).

In this paper, the word *katharmós* will be used separately from the interpretation of *katharsis* in Aristotle's *Poetics* in relation to the tragic plot, focusing instead on the religious and ritual area of usage of the word. Namely, Stephen Halliwell describes ritual and religious *katharsis* as mostly concerning people or a place or area of land. (1986: 186) Furthermore, combining aspects of both physical and spiritual significance, ritual purification can be used to cleanse "dangerously unclean" individuals who carry the pollution of blood guilt. Given the plague-ridden landscape of Thebes and Oedipus as the carrier of the genealogical curse, a ritualistic purification is to be expected as the dramatic denouement of this tragedy.

Just as the city cannot thrive until Laius' murderer is exiled or killed, the family farm cannot flourish without Dodge's death. Nash (1983) who describes the plot of Buried Child as "the Fall of the House of Oedipus" (p. 487), argues that the end of the play is graced by a symbolic rebirth of the family patriarch in Dodge's grandson Vince, which can be equated with the concept of tragic purification of the pollution caused by incest

and infanticide. After the murderer in the form of Dodge is exorcised, Tilden appears carrying the sin-made-flesh in the form of the dead child in his hands, while Halie comments on the paradise of a rich yield of corn, carrots, potatoes, and peas which are finally growing in a once plague-ridden landscape, as if heralding a new age of vitality, bathed in sunlight. What these two plays have in common is a crime committed in the past that pollutes the present, and the purgative effect of bringing the "skeletons", in the case of *Buried Child* quite literally, out in the open, which might seem conducive to regeneration in the future.

If we transpose tragic codes quite literally onto the plot of an arguably postmodern play, then this lush greenery should usher in new life. The natural balance, once disrupted by the plague, should be restored as the cycle of *dike* is completed. However, if Shepard's loyalty to postmodern fragmentation and incoherence is taken into account, then this "rebirth" can be interpreted as being an ironic commentary of the traditional Greek formulas, inapplicable in America of Shepard's time. This is an aspect of Shepard's plays that will be further discussed in relation to *A Particle of Dread*, where the futility of a purification ritual that would cure societal malady is more explicitly stated.

Another structural similarity to the original play lies in the fact that *Buried Child*, just like *Oedipus Rex*, follows the path of a search for one's identity while grappling with the forces of destiny that interfere with the quest. Oedipus' tragedy can be traced to his lack of knowledge about his origin and his true identity. He is unable to escape his destiny in the form of the sin from his past that, which, irrespective of his free will or knowledge, determines the tragic outcome of his life. While Oedipus is seeking to identify the cause of civic pollution, only to find the murderer of Laius in himself at the end of his laborious investigation, Tilden's son, Vince, is searching for an identity beyond his family.

Shepard problematises determinism linked to heredity in a similar way Sophocles presents the concepts of destiny or fate. Vince is unable to break free and change as long as he yearns to identify himself with the pictures of the family history hung on the walls of his family home. There is a scene in the play where Vince is looking at himself in the windshield and his reflection melts into the faces of his predecessors, showing the inescapability of genetic ties.

> 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. Same eyes. Same mouth. Same 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. (Shepard 1997: 72)

Rather than leaving his dysfunctional family behind in the quest for a life that would be his own, the ending of the play leaves Vince with his body "in the same relationship to Dodge's" (Shepard 1997: 72), lying on the sofa and staring at the ceiling. Having replaced the family patriarch, Vince asserts his affiliation to the family, and proves the dominance of genetic markers in shaping one's life.

Heilman (1992: 644) identifies the substance of Shepard's myth-inspired plots as "sonorous of an age of deep skepticisms". This disillusionment is reflected in the hold of the past upon the present and the disconnect and alienation between the individual and the wider social context. Unlike the original, where the quest for meaning and self-identity actually leads Oedipus to the truth and self-knowledge, albeit painful, the search for a meaningful and stable identity in a fragmented world of *Buried Child* seems futile.

4. Reenvisioning Oedipus: *A Particle of Dread*

Michel Maffesoli (2004) frames the notion of tragic in postmodern society by discussing the concept of destiny, i.e. *Tyche* (Fortune) and *Moira* (Fate). The tragic sense of destiny that lies in its inescapability, fatality, capriciousness, and pitilessness in the face of free will brings about the need for the irrational and the mysterious (e.g. fortune-telling in *Oedipus Rex*) as a way of countering predestination. In Sophocles' tragedy, Jocasta uses the word *moira* to describe the prophecy relayed to Laius, and the chorus, later on, invokes *moira* to appeal to the law of higher authorities (Knox 1998: 174).

Tragedy is seen as reliant on the necessity of destiny or chance that, paying no mind to the character of the individual, lead them along the path of the pre-written. The crux of the tragedy is the hopelessness of being acted upon by a higher power without being free to change your fate

– the very core of the paroxysmal Oedipus myth (Maffesoli 2004: 139). According to Vernant, Athenian tragedy raises questions about human agency and autonomy while grappling with religious powers, political and personal destiny:

> To what extent is man really the source of his actions? Even when he seems to be taking the initiative and bearing the responsibility for them does not their true origin lie elsewhere? Does not their significance remain to a large extent hidden even from the one who performs them so that it is not so much the agent that explains the action, rather the action that, by revealing its real meaning after the event, reflects light upon the agent's nature, revealing what he is and what in actual fact he has unwittingly done. (Vernant in Armstrong 2012: 478)

Ewans (1998: 441) similarly describes the concept of *moira* as "fate" or "destiny". It is important to note the influence of the divine as an element of those forces that are beyond our rational comprehension that "bind human actions together as action and consequence, and express the ways in which our *moirai* take shape".

Sophocles gradually shapes *moirai* by structuring his tragedies in such a way that the plot leads to one single outcome. In *Oedipus Rex*, Laius is cursed by the gods for violating the laws of hospitality by abducting Pelops' son, Chrysippus, after Pelops had taken him in for protection. After becoming the king of Thebes, Laius received an oracle that foretold that he would perish at the hands of his own son. Having fathered a son, Laius exposed Oedipus on Mount Cithaeron, only for him to be taken in by King Polybus and Queen Merope. Uncertain of his lineage, Oedipus comes to receive an oracle complementary to that of his father – he will come to kill his father and marry his mother, which is why he leaves Corinth in order to avoid his fate, only to encounter, and kill his father on the road to Thebes, unwittingly fulfilling the prophecy. The central paradox of the play lies in the fact that Oedipus is, in the words of Vayos Liapis, "at the same time both sleuth and offender, both perpetrator and victim of his own past acts and present delusion, both guarantor of his subjects' well-being and responsible for the ritual and physical pollution decimating his dominion" (Liapis 2012: 92).

Having this concept of *moirai* in mind, tragedy, as perceived by Maffesoli, can be seen as analogous to postmodern times inasmuch as it

depicts the instability of the self in the greater "social otherness": "In the drama of modernity one finds an optimistic claim to totality: totality of the self, the world, the state. In the tragedy of postmodernity there is a concern for entirety leading to the loss of the individual ego in a greater self of natural or social otherness" (Maffesoli 2004: 134).

In a fragmented mise en scène of postmodern times, there is a sense of tension between individual will and subjectivity and the external forces that threaten to subsume them. The new social landscape is marked by the "confrontation with destiny and cyclical return" (Maffesoli 2004: 135) of archetypal, tragic figures: "In fact, the force of destiny only serves to accentuate the growing power of the impersonal. What is at stake in this return of fate is the very negation of the philosophical foundation of the modern West: free will, the decisions of individuals or social groups acting together to make history" (Maffesoli 2004: 139). The concept of fate, as seen by Maffesoli, can be located in Sam Shepard's works in the form of American cultural isolation, fragmentation of identity in a universe wherein his characters are adrift, alone, and powerless.

Oedipus is present in two different characters in Shepard's play. The first one is Oedipus we know from the original Greek myth, the king of Thebes who unknowingly murders his father and marries his mother, Queen Jocasta. In the present timeline, Shepard introduces another, contemporary Oedipus in the character of Otto who is an old man in a wheelchair, haunted by nightmares in which he had seemingly killed someone. Otto, hearing of the murders committed in the desert, starts being plagued by a memory – "glimmer a fragment, glimpse of guts on the highway" (Shepard 2017: 27). The fragmentation of identity is further present in the character of Antigone, who, apart from being present in the play, also becomes Annallise in the present timeline, the daughter of Otto, who bears the burden of her father's incestuous and murderous history, and is trying to save her child from being haunted by the horrors of her past, or, as she calls it "the history of tears" (Shepard 2017: 51). Other characters such as Laius and Jocasta are also split into their modern counterparts in the form of Lawrence/Langos and Jocelyn, respectively.

Thomas (2021: 3) investigates the dramaturgical ties between *A Particle of Dread* and its Greek precursor, focusing on the presence of *miasma* – a crucial Greek concept of pollution and contamination that causes physical, emotional, and psychological suffering of the characters. Namely, in Ewans (1998: 441), *miasma* is described as "a literal and psychic pollution which

indicates that the community has in some way violated the normal order of the world and incurred the displeasure of the gods". Using *miasma* as a narrative procedure was common in Greek tragedies as it shapes the tragic story in such a way that the disordered pattern can be rectified, at a tragic and terrible cost.

Even though Oedipus might be interpreted as innocent in his ignorance according to the human point of view, he is the pollutant according to the religious standard of justice and as such must become "a *pharmakos* or scapegoat, an *agos* or stain that must be expelled to avert the plague" (Vernant in: Harris 2012: 292). Bernard Knox similarly states that in Ancient Greece the act of killing, however blameless, cut a man off from communion with his fellow people, and he could be absolved only through a purification ritual. Oedipus is still a polluted being, stained with sins of patricide and incest (Knox 1986: 271).

Both the original and Shepard's adaptation contain miasma as the basis for their demonstration of tragedy – as long as a people have the unsuspecting murderer in their midst, the affliction of impurity and pollution will be present in their community. *Oedipus Rex* begins with the description of a plague, the sign of divine condemnation of the city of Thebes:

> The city's drowning now. She lacks the strength to keep her head above the bloody surge. She's failing fast. The fruitful buds of earth are failing, women bear their labor pains in vain, and plague attacks, the hateful fire-bringing god. He leaps and leaves Cadmeia empty. Tears and ground have made dark Death the "wealthy one indeed". (Sophocles 2011: 4, 5)

A message from Delphi illuminates the cause of *miasma* as Creon relays the message that it was murder that had brought the plague to Thebes. The evil, that is, the murderer of King Laius needs to be purged either by exile or death. From that point, the plot moves in an expected pattern towards revelation as Sophocles uses all traditional elements of the tragic genre – "the traditional myth of Oidipous, the rhythm of sudden change or mutability, the miasma and the steps towards its removal, the story-pattern of riddle and decipherment and the momentum of the plot" (Ewans 1998: 445). Oedipus tries to dispel Tiresias' accusations with the help of Jocasta and the city elders, until, faced with the messenger from Corinth, he realises that he must know the horrible truth because the compulsion to know is stronger than his fear.

Contrastingly, in *A Particle of Dread*, the opening scene features an empty stage and Oedipus in black-striped bib overalls and janitor shoes mopping blood that is streaming from his gouged eye sockets. Soon after, in Scene 2, we are introduced to Uncle Del (Tiresias' modern counterpart) who dons a white butcher's apron splattered with blood and is digging his hands into bleeding animal skins, wringing them out afterward. It can be argued that, for Shepard, blood is the physical equivalent of the plague from the original and he follows the structure of the original tragedy by introducing the concept of physical pollution as a device that shapes the subsequent *moirai*. This is further reinforced by the Traveler's words to Oedipus when he warns him that "he himself is the sickness behind this utter collapse" (Shepard 2017: 56). Oedipus is the person who is the source of pollution the sickness becomes a part of his essence (Meinel 2015: 62). When Oedipus describes the "horrors of his own doing" (Shepard 2017: 74) at the end of the play, he recognizes himself as the pollutant "sick in [his] origins" (p. 74). Presenting blood as pollution made visible is arguably Aeschylus' narrative procedure (Meinel 2015: 65), as he is a tragic playwright that externalises pollution instead of making it intrinsical to a person, emphasising appearance rather than being, but Shepard unites the two traditional viewpoints into one.

Apart from the abovementioned ritual mechanism of pollution/ *miasma*, Shepard's play follows the formula of the original wherein there is also purification, albeit not a satisfactory one. Meinel (2015: 52) also locates the function of miasma in "making sense of the experience and misfortune which allows us to impose the desired narrative logic of cause and effect". Conceptualised through medical terminology, Thebes is a sick patient needing to be raised from their sickbed by means of ritual purification. Still, purification does not occur in the way hinted by Creon at the beginning of the tragedy, through death or exile – Oedipus is self-blinded and expresses a desire for exile at Mount Cithaeron, but this purificatory process is not staged, nor is Oedipus murdered. One of the interpretations of this unsatisfactory purification ritual is that, since exile would not leave space for later reintegration of the individual into the community, such purification is futile, corrupt, and insufficient for the hero to deal with his misfortune (Meinel 2015: 72, 73). There is a shift from the sickness of the city to focalizing the sickness of the individual as Sophocles seemingly questions the practicality of the customary and mechanistic purification when it comes to understanding human misfortune, emphasising the need for reintegration into society.

In *A Particle of Dread*, unlike *Oedipus Rex*, the denouement of the play brings about regeneration of the city which is now healed even though Oedipus'/Otto's exile or death were not explicitly stated. However, there is a shadow of the former pollution that lingers on as Shepard reestablishes that society is without a centre that has been torn apart from the inside out. Instead of shifting the focus from the collective (Thebes) to the individual (Oedipus) like Sophocles, Shepard does the inverse – he uses Oedipus' malady and the futility of traditional purification rituals to make wider social commentary on the state of the contemporary world.

> The whole city went back to being what it had always been – just a place where people came and went; births, lives, deaths. On the surface they seemed returned to health and self-confidence, but a distant memory still persisted, a shadow that never left. Something had been torn apart from the inside out. A ghost of something close at hand yet far enough away and so terrible as to pretend it never happened. (Shepard 2017: 76)

Shephard's invention in terms of re-envisioning mythologues lies in his ability to link archetypal mythic formulas with patterns of dysfunctional family life and political upheaval that are characteristic of America. Sam Shepard weaves those formulas into commentary on the horrors of the modern human condition as the modern man becomes alienated from the society he occupies, remaining wary of the existence of a panacea, which would, like the purification ritual in a tragedy, cure societal sickness.

5. Conclusion

Greek tragedies, with their archetypal nature, have been proven to be quite conducive to postmodern reinterpretation, most notably in the way individual destinies can be metonymically interpreted so as to account for the collective society the individual occupies. The postmodern crisis of contemporary society, its alienation, and fragmentation, are all reflected in the existential failures of protagonists in postmodern plays.

Through an analysis of his most prominent plays, *Buried Child* and *A Particle of Dread*, it can be argued that Sam Shepard adopts the recurring themes of the Oedipus myth such as cursed genealogy, indomitability of destiny, search for identity, pollution and purification rituals, only to

subvert them by transposing them onto the American cultural landscape of his time, where no ordered meaning or stable identity can be found, only uncertainty and confusion.

The discourse Shepard adopts from ancient tragic playwrights is the idea of a fatum that establishes one's identity being rooted in family. The family curse, therefore, hinders the individual in terms of having free will and condemns them to a fragmented and unstable subjectivity. Shepard's characters wrestle with the fatum of genetic determinism only to find it impossible to escape it or find a stable identity beyond their familial designations.

In postmodern reimaginings, the family subsequently becomes a metonym of society. The microcosms Shepard's characters inhabit are polluted, arid, barren, sterile, and plagued by past violence. The possibility of redemption in the future is shown as illusory given the extent of destructive forces of the past eating away at present, and the collapse of present-day society that leads to a sense of existential hopelessness.

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Received: 29 May 2024
Accepted for publication: 20 September 2024