

## ERASING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT IN SAM SHEPARD'S "TRUE WEST" AND "BURIED CHILD"

**Olfa Gandouz**

Sattam Ibnu Abdelaziz University, SAUDI ARABIA;  
The University of Gabes, TUNISIA

olfagandouz@yahoo.fr

**Abstract.** From a postmodern approach, this paper studies the notion of erasure in Shepard's *True West* (1980) and *Buried Child* (1979), and it focuses on the impossibility of erasing the agrarian past, as well as the inability to ignore the postmodern present. To better understand the playwright's redefinition of erasure, it is pertinent to first study the relationship between the past and the present in *Buried Child*. The author refers to Harold Bloom's *Anatomy of Influence* to examine the way Shepard revisits the frontier and the Corn King myth. Realism, postmodernist features, simulacrum, surrealism, absurdity, Aristotelian tragedy, dramatic elements, and thematic concerns are deployed to explore the protagonists' quest for self-definition, for finding out the characteristics of a true Westerner, and for disclosing that the true Western self is reformed through going beyond erasure and blurring the boundaries between temporal planes.

**Keywords:** truth, classical and postmodern, past vs. present, intertextuality, simulacrum, Western identity

### INTRODUCTION

The present paper studies the notion of erasure in Shepard's *True West* (1980) from a postmodern approach and analyses the two brothers' different considerations regarding true Western identity. Indeed, unlike Austin, who is pragmatic and stands for the contemporary Western culture, Lee is isolated, and he prefers to live in the wild desert. What is specific about Austin is that he is preoccupied with the project of designing a scenario for his new movie. A sense of comedy arises when Lee believes that he has the

true-to-life version of the West, but Austin informs Saul that Lee’s version is mythical and unrealistic. In the same context, the dramatic aspects of *Buried Child* arise because of Dodge’s inability to erase the roots of the past and Halie’s refusal to erase the past or to forget about her lost son. The identity crisis in the two postmodern plays stems from the impossibility of erasure. The use of postmodern notions like simulacrum, intertextuality, deconstruction, plurality, and the absence of truth aims at presenting the impossibility of erasure and at reinventing a new, balanced and fluid compromise between the past and the present. The new stable self-emerges after the mission of decentralisation.

#### BACKGROUND

This part examines the aesthetics and poetics of erasure in Sam Shepard’s *True West* and *Buried Child*. There have been various critical readings of the plays, but most critics have focused on the postmodern features without paying attention to the notion of *erasure*. To start with, in an article entitled ‘A Postmodern Reading of Sam Shepard’s *True West*’, Joodaki focuses on binary opposition, metanarratives, duality, and the self-reflexivity of the text to show that Shepard can be considered a postmodernist writer. He concludes that ‘the postmodern world can be regarded as a stage in which characters come, get decentered, fragmented and all of a sudden feel themselves in a catch from which there is no way out’ (Joodaki 2013, 211). The postmodern features are made conspicuous through the presence of fragmented utterances, which reflect the divided inner souls of Shepard’s characters. Joodaki’s considerations of the stage as a ‘postmodern world’ show the role of the postmodernist trend in shaping the playwrights’ ideas about the alienation of the postmodern and fragmented selves. This idea is explored to scrutinise the theme of erasure from a postmodern perspective.

In the same context, the Iranian scholar Vahdati emphasises ‘The Postmodernist Rendition of Myth in Selected Plays of Sam Shepard’. He delves into the intricacies of the American self and focuses on several American idealised myths (the myth of rebirth, the myth of the cowboy, the myth of masculine autonomy, and the myth of incest). The aim is to lament over the loss of some ideals. He argues that ‘Postmodern society has killed the beauty, life, and nature with its rough laws. The themes of an integrated American family, loyalty, love and greatness have given their places to the disjoined families that corrupt nature with their fake dreams of success and wealth’ (Vahdati 2012, 254). Vahdati explores the differences between the past and the present and examines Shepard’s nostalgic tone. This tone is traced to show the impossibility of erasing the roots of the past and to understand the characters’ attempts at freezing the moments of the glorious past. On the other hand, in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Philip Auslander classifies Shepard among the most famous postmodernist writers who have sought to create new hope for the next generations and to enhance their sense of belonging. The critic refers to the notion of pastiche to prove that ‘Shepard’s concept of character seems to evoke the idea of the fractured, postmodern self.... Shepard points to a new, anti-modern understanding of dramatic character’ (Auslander 2004, 120). The inner self of the postmodern character is tormented and fragmented because of the dissolution and erasure of traditional ideals. Accordingly, we shall dig deep into the close relationship between traditions of the community, myths of the past and burdens of an identity crisis.

On the other hand, in ‘Shepard Writes about Writing,’ Brenda Murphy analyses the theatrical performances of Shepard’s plays and examines the postmodern theatrical techniques. She deduces that there are affinities between Shepard and some classical writers. However, the differences lie in Shepard’s use of ‘a dark Romanticism, closer to the Gothic imagination of Poe or the cosmic despair of Melville than to the transcendental optimism of Emerson’ (Murphy 2004, 124). While some critics have focused on the idea of

decentralisation in Shepard’s theatre, others attacked the playwright for holding a central position, for embracing the values of mainstream culture and forgetting about the voices of the margin. For example, in her *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, Jeanette Malkin attacks Shepard by affirming: ‘Shepard has always spoken from a well-centred posture: identified with a Midwest terrain, with a mid-1950s popular imagination, with a centred masculinity’ (Malkin 1999, 155). He is attacked for being a misogynist and for giving women a secondary position. This view can be discussed by showing the way Shepard reinvents the image of Mother America and calls for empowering women and erasing all sorts of gender gaps. Malkin also differs from the critics mentioned above in the sense that she disagrees with the classification of Shepard as a postmodernist playwright. She writes, ‘I find it difficult to accept plays that crave homecoming, that are set in the kitchen or salon, and that cannot evade connections of blood and soil-as still belonging to a postmodern aesthetic’ (Malkin, 1999, p. 244). She considers Shepard a playwright good at writing family plays, but he cannot be considered a postmodernist writer. This claim is contested by offering a postmodern reading of *erasure* in Sam Shepard’s selected plays.

## MAIN FOCUS

The plays have a wide range of critical reviews, but to the author’s knowledge, few critics have been interested in the poetics and the aesthetics of *erasure* in Shepard’s plays and his transcending of the categorised division of the Old and the New West. This part seeks to examine the politics of erasure from a postmodern perspective. Baudrillard’s interpretation of *simulacrum* is deployed to show that each brother is a replica of the other and that both of them fail at obliterating the past and the present or at finding a true self. Language games are also examined to question the notion of truth

and to study the way characters recreate language according to their subjective needs.

#### ISSUES, CONTROVERSIES, PROBLEMS

The main argument in this part lies in the postmodern Adam's self-alienation and his vacillation between the values of the Arcadian old South and the New West. Accordingly, the controversial dilemma of the characters and their heated debate over defining a 'True Western self' is studied through analysing the poetics and aesthetics of erasure. Moreover, this part addresses the issue of the convergence and the divergence between the past and the present. It sorts out the manner Shepard unearths the ghosts of the past and solves the identity crisis at the closure of the plays.

#### HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

To better understand the notion of *erasure*, we'll start with a theoretical framework about its postmodernist interpretation. A historical account of post-Second World War America (the failure at erasing the boundaries of gender, race, ethnicity, the agrarian past and the industrial present) will also be taken into consideration. The notion of *True West* has been the source of debate among historians and critics. To start with, Limerick represents the dilemma of redefining an *Authentic West* using the following terms: 'the search to distinguish the Real West from the Fake West has become a nearly impossible quest, a game with ever-changing rules and no winner' (as cited in Handley & Lewis 2011, 1). It is a continuous quest as there are hazy lines between myth and reality. This blurred vision is the outcome of a cultural transition, of the urbanisation of the antebellum West and of the attempts at erasing the Agrarian past. From a postmodern angle, 'the primary concept under erasure is being itself, a presence that is now absent' (Erasure 2003, 14). It

is the case of the old west, which is constantly present in the mindscape of Shepard’s protagonists. Some characters in the plays under consideration are ostracised because of the continuous attempts at erasing the values of the past.

Indeed, what is specific about the agrarian West is that it was based on utopian ideals. At this juncture, the true Westerner used to be able to shape his destiny, and he used to be endowed with the principles of self-achievement, hope, and loyalty to his family. Indeed, ‘national and hence the individual conscience was clear, had no past, only a present and a future’ (Lewis 1995, 7). The Southern Agrarian American did not have a past because he contributed to putting the first bedrocks of a newly-invented nation, and in believing that he was setting the ground for a better generation. However, the urban Western citizen erased the values of the past, and the agrarian utopia was replaced by the nightmare of urbanisation. Accordingly, the postmodern Adam has faced the dilemma of being torn between the ideal values of the agrarian past and those of the urbanised present. Consequently, ‘the Southern hero, [became] a useful foil for the unlovely present or symbol of some irreplaceable loss’ (as cited in Gaston 1970, 178). The spiritual loss of the Southern hero is responsible for the identity crisis and the tragic downfall of the Southern families in the two plays under examination.

What is specific about the Agrarian South is that it cannot be erased from the national mindset. It has become part of the national memory to the point of associating it with authenticity. This romanticised vision can be traced in Turner’s frontier myth, where he declared that the West succeeded in getting rid of the Eastern frontiers and in constructing a new democratic nation. Therefore, ‘The great West thus became for Turner and his followers that mythical region that was more real than the real West. The physical area West of the Mississippi valley, because it had become a region of the mind and part of a national theology’ (*apud*. Thacker 2006, 17). Put differently, some historians associate the Agrarian West with authenticity because it marks the beginning of the ‘young nation’.

In addition to the Old South, the New South is also an important period that cannot be erased from the memory of the American Adam because it marks the development of the United States. In fact, after the Second World War, the land of opportunities has gained global power, and it has become the leader of the world. What is specific about the New South is its 'urban planning narrative that embodies a set of cultural values, notably privacy, exclusivity, and security. American suburbs, above all else, place a large emphasis on the primacy and the notion of safety and protection from the previous ills of the inner society' (Hanlon, 2018, p. 135). The American suburbs enhanced the socioeconomic progress as they helped some American citizens achieve certain financial, psychological, social and personal stabilities. This positive transformation was considered one of the major secrets behind the consideration of the West as 'a True West'. The Urban West could not be erased from the memory of the American Adam because it brought innovative ideas. Accordingly, some historians were fascinated with this phase, and they focused on 'how irrigation caused the desert to bloom, and on how this formula attracted migrants from the American South' (Gale Group, 2016, p. 27). The New South is another remarkable place that could not be erased from the American mindset.

Shepard is proud of the positive transformation of the West from a wild area to a civilised continent. On the other hand, he laments over the turmoil of some postmodern Western American citizens, and he condemns them because of their attempts at erasing their roots. Accordingly, the next analytical part broaches a postmodern reading of erasure in Shepard's selected plays. Each part starts with a theoretical aspect of some postmodern notions and moves to the textual analysis of the relevant plays. The rationale behind choosing postmodernism is that it 'involves the erasure of the ethical or the substitution of ethics by aesthetics' (Ahmed 1998, 45). Put differently, the aesthetics of erasure can be understood through the absence of moral and cultural ethics. In a nutshell, postmodernism succeeds in blurring the boundaries between the past and the

present as it erases all types of linearity inherent in modern thought. This dichotomy is the catalyst behind the dissolution of family bonds in some of Shepard’s plays.

#### ERASURE AND IDENTITY CRISIS

The dichotomy between the old and the new West is traced through the structure of the play. “All nine scenes take place on the same set; a kitchen and adjoining alcove of an older home in a Southern California home” (3). “There is no wall division or door to the alcove” (3). This description alludes to the presence of a well-knit and warm family; however, the audience is misinformed about the dysfunctionality of the family and the split of its members. This misinformation reflects the Ambivalence of the American family and its oscillation between the fact of mobility and that of settlement. The traditional family has been dissolving since the late 1960s. In the sixties, the solid American family was affected by social transformations. The collapse of the family is made obvious through the presence of a nameless family whose members are called by their names.

Austin and Lee have an identity crisis as each character claims to possess a unique and true definition of the West. In this way, ‘the relationship between history and representation in the American West [becomes] dramatically complicated and the distinction between them far less easy to maintain because our postmodern age places notions of truth in quotation marks’ (Handley & Lewis 2011, 3). The long journey into a True West can be construed through the absence of centrality and of a transcendental signified. In his *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*, Derrida defines deconstruction as: ‘A system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain of the play of signification infinitely’ (Derrida 2005, 354). The absence of fixity in the play stems from



the presence of two scenarios and the absence of a final transcendental signified. The first scenario is based on Lee's consideration of a True West as a type of paradise regained. He ideally delineates the West "like a paradise...a couple a' real nice [houses]... Kinda'place that sorta' kills ya' inside. Warm yellow lights. Mexican tile all around. Copper pots hangin' over the stove. Ya'know, like they got in the magazines. Blond people movin' in and outa' the rooms, talkin' to each other." (Act 1, 12). This depiction reflects Shepard's glorification of rustic happiness and the celebration of family integration before the presence of a capitalist machine in the garden.

The same idea of being torn between the present and the ghosts of the past is the main thematic concern in *Buried Child*. The identity crisis is made clear from the very opening stage directions. The stage is furnished with the presence of an 'old wooden suitcase down left with pale, frayed carpet laid down on the steps' (Act 1, 63). The semantic register of antiquity's 'old, pale' indicates the atmosphere of darkness. Also, the presence of tokens of the past could not be erased. The opening scene is also marked by the presence of "an old dark green sofa with the sufferings coming out in spots" (63). The interplay between the dark and the green colour shows the nostalgic tone towards the Green agrarian America and proves that the boundaries of the past cannot be erased. In the same context, the American historian Henry Nash argues that the agrarian past cannot be erased from the memory of the American Adam, as it is the epitome of American glory. In his *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith states that:

The image of this vast and constantly growing society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society- a collective representation, a poetic idea that defined the promise of American life...So powerful and vivid was the image that down to the very end of the nineteenth century it continued to seem a representation, in Whitman's words, of the core of the nation, 'the real genuine America (1957, 138-139)

The nineteenth century is engraved in the minds of some American citizens, and it cannot be erased from the collective memory because it is marked by positive reconstructions, moral perfection, and sacred values. In *Buried Child*, the protagonists are living dead and are isolated like monads because they are erasing the values of the past. For instance, Dodge has a dysfunctional family because its members are not embracing the Puritan values of individuality and hard work. They are rather passive creatures who want to achieve their dreams without any effort. They resort to alcohol as a means of oblivion and of erasing the dark present. The anxiety of the family is made obvious from the very opening stage directions when the space of the family is depicted as a barren place characterised by the absence of motion. The audience is invited to the house of Dodge, where passivity reigns supreme. ‘The screen facing the sofa is a large, old-fashioned brown TV. A flickering blue light comes from the screen, but no image, no sound’ (Act 1, 63). TV addiction suggests that the characters are passive spectators in the stage of life. Silence evokes the absence of any real communication and shows the erasure of the principles of family sanctity. This type of erasure is responsible for the failure of the American dream of reconstructing an ideal family.

The common point between the two plays lies in facing the failure of establishing well-knit families. The disrespect of the values of the past that are based on family harmony and integration leads to the tragic mood of the plays. In fact, “the erasure of a rooted past gives rise in Shepard’s plays, as well as, to anxieties of an erased future” (Malkin 1999, 119). This anxiety is explored through the tragic dilemma of Dodge and Austin’s families; tragedy stems from breaking away from the ideal values of the past. Erasing the roots of the golden past is responsible for the absurd dimension in the two plays. The theme of erasure in the two plays can also be analysed through the chasm between the mythical past and the postmodern present of absurdity.

## ERASURE AND THE MYTH OF THE UTOPIAN WEST

In *True West*, Lee is situated at a dramatic centre between the mythical or utopian West and the postmodern reality of futility. Lee embodies a romanticised vision of the West, and he recalls Jefferson's utopian view of the West as 'the place where countless numbers of settlers could find free land, employing axe and plough to create a natural democracy' (De Matthew 2014, 10). 'Turner firmly established the West as the crucible where America's mission [has developed]' (De Matthew 2014, 11). At the beginning of the play, the audience is misinformed about Lee's fragmented self and his divided inner house, which is composed of an ideal and another real consideration of the West. This utopian view is made conspicuous through his insistence on watering the plants: 'You keepin' the plants watered?' (5). The myth of the Old West is further constructed through the image of the cowboy. In this respect, Lee informs the film producer: 'I haven't seen a good Western since *Lonely are the Brave*. You remember that movie... Kirk Douglas. *Helluva's* movie. You remember that movie, Austin' (18). This story is engraved in Lee's mind because it contains a true-to-life Western hero who is victimised by the development of suburbia.

The hero and his horse are killed while trying to cross the highway. 'In the elegiac Western, all things beautiful and noble are destroyed by the ugly and mundane devices of the modern world... Horse, like [the cowboy], represents freedom, honesty, constancy, and purity... the killing of horses represents the end of the frontier era' (Indick 2008, 18). Shepard puts an end to the frontier myth when he ironically highlights the business mentality of Lee. The reversal of roles and Lee's metamorphoses from being attached to the desert into being a materialistic screenwriter show the split between the lost agrarian myth and the present business rat race. The revision of Turner's frontier myth is manifested when Austin thinks that there are mountains in the Panhandle: "Now they're supposed to abandon their trucks, climb on their horses and chase each other into the mountains?" (22). Lee "there aren't any

mountains in the Panhandle!” (22). The mountain has a symbolic dimension within the Western legend as it stands for “anarchic freedom” (Leonelli 2007,43). Freedom is a myth because the postmodern Adam is chained by mammon. In his commentary about the relationship between truth and reality, Shepard writes, “myth in its true form has now been demolished. It does not exist anymore. All we have are 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.” (Rosen 1995, 5). We infer through this statement that truth remains a mere illusion in the play.

The close relationship between erasure and the myths of the past can be detected through the corn myth in *Buried Child*. What is specific about the narrative American myths is that they ‘frequently associate corn with primal generative power’ (Kabatchnick 2012, 87). In the play, the corn myth is paradoxically associated with sterility. This type of sterility is figurative as it stands for the postmodern vacuum where nothing grows. Even rain, which is supposed to be the symbol of regeneration, is associated with the barren land. In this respect, Dodge affirms that rain is not natural in the industrial zone where the postmodern Adam is suffocated by the foggy view. In one of his utterances, Dodge declares: ‘It looks like rain to me!’ (Act 1, 64). The use of ‘like’ shows the appearance of the artificial and the erasure of the natural. When Tilden collects corn after rain, Dodge asks him to put it back and not to have any trouble with the neighbours. In reality, ‘Dodge pushes all the corn off his lap onto the floor... Tilden starts picking up the ears of corn one at a time and husking them. He throws the husks and silk in the centre of the stage and drops the ears into the pail each time he cleans one’ (Act 1, 71). The act of rejecting the stolen corn proves the absence of fertility and highlights the differences between the agrarian past and the Industrial New West, where nothing blooms naturally. Dodge’s advice to the young generation is not to forget about the past, and his lesson to the older generation is not to ignore the present. He reveals to his son: ‘The world doesn’t stop just because you’re upstairs. Corn keeps growing. Rain keeps raining’

(Act 1, 75). He is implicitly delivering the message that the erasure of the past or the present is the main factor behind the dramatic case, the physical and spiritual disintegration.

#### ERASURE AND SIMULACRUM

The absence of truth and the impossibility of erasure can also be studied through the notion of *simulacrum*, which is based on the absence of originality and the presence of replicas. From Baudrillard's postmodern lens, "simulacrum is used to deny the possibility of anything being the singular source or origin of any idea or a thing" (Buchanan 2010, 434). In this context, Austin accuses Lee of being a stealer, and he pokes fun at his scenario and his consideration of the old Agrarian West as a true west. "It's the dumbest story I ever heard in my life... It's idiotic. Two lamebrains chasing each other across Texas! Are you kidding?" (30)<sup>2</sup> Austin can be criticised because he mocks Lee for sticking to the values of the old West, but his mental roadmap shows that he is still deeply attached to the motherland. In reality, "Austin sees his mother's neighbourhood as a simulacrum of something he vaguely remembers (Roudané 2002, 182). He is torn between different selves: the romantic self that keeps nostalgic for a lost golden age and another pragmatic self that struggles to survive the nightmarish reality. In this way, "Austin and Lee's old and new roles are all simulacra, and the search for the true self is, in fact, impossible" (6). The idea of simulacrum is conveyed through the similarity between the brothers and through Austin's romanticism. Although Austin and Lee are living like monads, they have many areas of convergence. The area of convergence between them appears when Austin depicts the new west using the following terms: "streets turn out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I misremember... Fields... I am looking at the smell of the night. The bushes. The orange blossoms. Dust in the driveways. Rainbird sprinklers. Lights in people's houses. You're right about the lights, Lee. Everybody

else is living the life. Indoors. Safe. This is a paradise down here” (40-41). This description entails the presence of copies and shows that neither the old nor the new West can be considered a true West.

Simulacrum can be traced through the use of language and the presence of echoes. For instance, Austin’s words are similar to Lee’s utterances. When Lee addresses his brother: “You couldn’t steal a toaster without losin’ yer lunch” (40), Austin answers, “You really don’t think I could steal a crumby toaster? How much you wanna’ bet I can’t steal a toaster! How much? Go ahead! You’re a gambler aren’t you?” (40). The remarkable use of the verb to steal shows that Lee’s scenario is not original and that it is based on copying Douglas’ movie. Austin plays with words and distinguishes films from movies: “In this business, we make movies, American movies. Leave the films to the French” (30). While movies have a business goal, French films seem to be based on the arts for the sake of the arts. In this way, Shepard criticises the idea of trivialising some American movies during the 1980s, and he is attacking some movie makers who “sell movies on a mere synopsis or outline of the plot and demand 300,000 dollars upfront for a simple first draft” (Gale 1998, 21). This materialistic dimension has affected the quality of the Hollywood industry and has produced movies that misinform the audience about the reality of the American dream. Accordingly, Shepard becomes “a mythmaker because his subject is America and the dream betrayed” (*apud*. Smith 2005, 33). This betrayed dream appears through the industrial nightmare.

#### INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ERASURE IN BURIED CHILD

The presence of copies and the absence of originality can be examined through the idea of intertextuality in *Buried Child*. From a postmodern perspective, “postmodern intertextuality [is] a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new

context” (Hutcheon 2000, 118). Put differently, intertextuality shows that writers cannot remove the traces of the past. This postmodern idea is explained by Harold Bloom, who declares that writers face the anxiety of influence because the act of writing is based on influential readings. In this context, the critic raises the following problematic: ‘how can they [authors] give pleasure, if no way they have received it! But how can they receive the deepest pleasure, the ecstasy of priority, of self-begetting, of an assured autonomy, if the way to the true subject and their true self lies through the precursor’s subject and his self’ (Bloom 1997, 116). Bloom argues that writers cannot produce a pleasurable piece of writing without going through the pleasure of reading. Accordingly, the true self is dissolved because the writer is unconsciously influenced by previous writings. The idea of intertextuality or the fact of being influenced by ancestors is traced through the affinities between *Buried Child* and other works belonging to the American Canon. For example, the atmosphere of sterility in *Buried Child* is a reminder of the barren land in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, where rebirth becomes an alien notion. Optimism appears in the final scenes of the two literary works. Like in the postmodern play where the sun illuminates the final scene to show that the ghosts of the past cannot be buried, the dog in the modern poem is as a sign of survival ‘oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s a friend to men\ or with his nails he’ll dig it up again’ (Eliot 72, 74). The dog serves as a means of protecting the human being from external peril and functions as a sign of rehabilitation. In the same way, ‘the buried child in the play serves to emphasise the male perspective force, functioning like the dog in T. S Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which also causes regeneration’ (Roudane 2002, 85).

The buried child in the final scene is represented as a sign of erasing all the manifestations of mediocrity and opening a new chapter of prosperity. In the final scene, there is a remarkable use of a pun of the sun\son. A voice repeats the following lines: ‘Maybe it’s the sun. Maybe that’s the sun’ (Act 3, 132). The rays of the sun allude to the disappearance of the illegitimate son and the removal

of the different sorts of moral and cultural sterility. This pun is another indication of Shepard’s influence by the canon of modern drama. In fact, ‘the curtain line on "sun/son" alludes directly to Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, reminding audiences not only of a source for the realistic modern family drama structured around a secret that is only gradually revealed but also of the earlier playwright’s delineation of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children’. (Adler 2005, 119). Shepard is influenced by the father of realism, and he inherits Ibsen’s idea of fate as a major marker of cultural identity. The image of the buried child shows that this child is the scapegoat for the sins and the illegitimate marriage of the mother and her son. In short, the technique of intertextuality proves that cultural heritage cannot be denied and shows that Shepard cannot erase the remarkable influence of writers like Eliot and Ibsen.

#### ERASURE AND LANGUAGE GAMES

In addition to the use of puns, Shepard is skilled at using language games, which indicate the impossibility of being limited to one signified or erasing meaning. The betrayal of truth is further indicated through the language games of the play. Before dealing with Saul’s game about a true-to-life scenario in the true West, it is pertinent to define language games. In his *Shakespeare’s Universe of Discourse*, Keir Elam declares that the world of theatre is characterized by the remarkable presence of language games because “dramatic discourse is always destined, if not on the page then at least potentially on the stage, to interact with its physical and behavioural surroundings, and especially with the body and its movements, in the production of meaning” (as cited in Larson 1991, 79). The linguistic games in some plays are thus characterised by the gap between verbal and the behavioural profile of the character, and on the dichotomy between reality and lies. In Saul’s game about truth, Austin’s scenario about the new West and Lee’s outline about the old South are accepted as tokens of truth. Saul



plays with words when he is teased by Austin, and answers in a diplomatic way, “I want to continue with your project too, Austin. I am ready to go all the way with your brother’s story. It’s not though we can’t do both. We’re big for that aren’t we?” (34). The inclusive ‘We’ shows that Saul is not a committed film producer, as he is equipped with a business mentality and is preoccupied with collecting money. We infer from this situation that Saul is lying about the validity of Austin’s scenario. He is flouting the maxim of quality as he provides Austin and the audience with a piece of false information about an authentic Western scenario. On the one hand, he informs Austin: “We have big studio money standing behind this thing. Just based on your outline” (33). This business orientation is meant to show the postmodern mixture between high and low culture (art vs business). On the other hand, the producer perceives Lee’s scenario as a more authentic script: “It has the ring of truth, Austin... Something about the real West... Something about the land. Your brother is speaking from experience... But nobody’s interested in love these days, Austin. Let’s face it” (35). What is ironic about this utterance is that Saul defines Lee’s scenario as a plausible script that encapsulates the roots of authenticity, yet his use of the expression “ring of truth” denotes the fake aspect of the old western script. In this respect, Austin attacks Lee, and he argues: “There’s no such thing as the West anymore! It’s a dead issue! It’s dried up, Saul, and so are you” (35). The use of negation is another indication of the absence of a final signified and the failure to reach the truth.

#### ERASURE AND THE POSTMODERN CIRCULARITY OF THE PLAYS

The inability to attain the final truth about a true Western identity is also conveyed through the circularity of the play and its open-endedness. In reality, “there’s no closure as there are no Telos or predetermined points of closure. The writer has no final authority over the sibling rivalry or the text as Austin and Lee continue

fighting each other, and the stage becomes darkened” (Joodaki, 2013, 132). In the final scene, the mother decides to go back to Los Angeles: “It was the worst feeling being up there in Alaska. Starting a window. I never felt so desperate before... I can’t stay here. This is worse than being homeless” (63). The mother leaves California to recapture the dream of the old West, but she is disillusioned with the nightmarish reality in Alaska, where fraternal violence reigns supreme. The end is marked by the absence of any resolution as the brothers keep on fighting over ‘the unattainable California ideal and become wanderers in an endless wasteland’ (Varner 2013, 28).

The same circular shape of the play is noticed in *Buried Child*, which opens and ends with Halie’s voice. At the beginning, his voice used to be tinged with a tone of bitterness, and he defined pain using the following words: ‘pain is pain. Pure and simple. Suffering is a different matter’ (Act 1, 65). The difference between pain and suffering is that pain is temporary, but suffering can affect the next generations. It is the case of the buried child who suffered from the effects of his parents’ sins. The closure of the play is marked by the same scene of suffering and the solemn mood of burying the illegitimate child. However, the final scene is characterised by the presence of a glimmer of hope. The burial of the son can be interpreted as a sign for cleansing the roots of evil and of the act of erasing all the sins and unearthing the values of the past. Accordingly, an atmosphere of contagious regeneration dominates the final scene. Halie is surprised by the reappearance of a greenfield: ‘It’s a miracle, Dodge. I’ve never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it’s the sun... Maybe the rain did something. Maybe it was the rain.’ (Act 3, 132). The rain has a cathartic effect as it purifies the souls of protagonists, and it invites the audience to recognise the playwright’s message about the necessity of creating a compromise between the virtuous values of the past and the present. In the end, ‘the remains of the buried son have fertilised the earth in a grimly Gothic manner (perhaps appropriately calling to mind the line from T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* asking whether “that corpse you planted in your garden has begun... to sprout”). (Adler

2002, 119). Paradise is regained in the final act after the erasure of the sins of the ancestors. Halie's voice becomes balanced only when the dichotomies and the divisions are erased. The rebirth of natural order emerges after the erasure of all forms of superficiality and artificiality.

The significance of this part lies in showing Shepard's success in unearthing the organising values of the Old and the New West. Although there are some limitations, we revealed Shepard's success in creating a smooth compromise between the past and the present at the end of the two plays. The absence of resolution plays shows that Shepard is keen on changing the vision about the relationship between the past, the present, and the future. The tragic mothers in the two plays are blamed for sticking to the past (Old South) and erasing all the ties of the present. The playwright succeeds in the reversal of the traditional view about the true Western American citizen. The protagonists in the two plays leave the stage after becoming aware of the dangers of erasing the boundaries between the past and the present. Both Halie and Austin and Lee's mother go through moments of self-discovery in the final recognition scene. They find out that their tragic flaws consist of erasing the traditional values of family sanctity. The open closure of the two plays contains an optimistic tone, and it carries a new hope for a brighter future based on a reconciliation between the past and the present. However, Shepard was condemned by some critics because of the Beckettian absurd tone of his plays. It is argued that 'Shepard took the theatre of the absurd as his starting point to experiment with language, character and action' (Crank 2012, 27). This view can be discussed by referring to the optimistic tone at the end of the two plays under examination in this part. Optimism can be interpreted as a positive sign for the theoretical success of the playwright and his characters' success at achieving moments of psychological awakening. The aim is to invite the audience to recognise the dramatic consequences of temporal erasure and its role in bringing about psychological turmoil.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

The theme of *erasure* in some modern and postmodern family plays is still open to different interpretations. The study can be further developed by dealing with a comparative study and analysis of erasure in other modern American plays. In addition to Shepard, some of Eugene O’Neill’s plays can be studied to detect the dramatic aspects behind erasing the roots of the past or transgressing the limits of the present. Moreover, a postmodern feminist perspective can be applied to study the theme of erasure. Erasing the present and freezing the past in Eugene O’Neill’s family play entitled *Long Days’ Journey into Night* (1956) is one of the main arguments in the play. Mary Tyrone’s oscillation between the sweet past and the bleak reality can be another route to detect the repercussions of coping with the present. Hence, her husband’s attempts to erase the roots of the traumatic past can be examined to investigate the tragic effects of obliterating the past.

The aesthetics and the poetics of erasure can also be traced in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962). What is specific about this play is its parody of the traditional American myths (the myth of the cowboy, the corn myth of fertility and the myth of male virility). This family play is also concerned with dramatising the consequences of creating high barriers between the past and the present. Both O’Neill and Albee have influenced Sam Shepard in producing his family plays. The present section has focused on erasure in a Southern American context. The politics of erasure can also be studied in a Northern Irish American context. The comparative study is meant to deliver the messages of the playwrights about the impossibility of erasing the roots of the past and the inability to cope with the present. Delving into different American contexts aims at delivering a message about the necessity of solving the identity crisis by blurring the boundaries between the past and the present. Avoiding erasure and dismantling the temporal barriers may be read as the secret behind the psychic balance of some characters.

#### CONCLUSION

The examination of *erasure* from a postmodern perspective has shown that it is impossible to delete the roots of the past. Erasure encapsulates the key concepts of fixity, and it is in contradiction to the postmodern ideas of plurality and relativity. The final message of the playwright is to show that the true West does not exist and that there is no absolute truth. “The audience comes to a dead end, an aporia, because there are indefinite contradictory meanings or significations, and it is not easy to decide or choose the final signified. Any search for objective truth is a failure” (Joodaki 2013, 139). Henceforth, the old West remains a dream, and the new West is a mere illusion. Shepard raises his voice in resistance and calls for the erasure of the non-humanitarian capitalist project and, ultimately, for the rebirth of the utopian past. However, this nostalgic tone aims at eradicating the roots of vice and empowering those of human agency in an anti-humanist postmodern era.

#### KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Erasure:** It presupposes the disappearance and obliteration of some entities. From a postmodern context, erasure is an impossible project because of the multiplicity of different selves. In Sam Shepard, erasure is associated with tragedy, and some protagonists go through depressive moments whenever they try to erase the past or the present.

**Fragmented Self:** It is a misbalanced self that is based on divisions. In Sam Shepard’s *True West* and *Buried Child*, the dispersal is incurred by the gap between reality and illusion and between the past and the present.

**Intertextuality:** It is a literary device based on the mixture of different texts within the same piece of writing. This device shows that there is hybridity within the text and proves the influence of classical literature. For instance, the postmodern playwright, Sam Shepard, is influenced by his modernist forerunners like Ibsen or T.S. Eliot. Intertextuality shows the universality of the texts and makes the text valid for different ages.

**Language Games:** They are linguistic enigmas which are deciphered by specific characters of the play. They serve to create intimacy between some characters. They also create certain dramatic irony because the audience can better understand the hidden meaning of games than the characters themselves.

**Old South:** The Utopian American South is associated with the ideal American values and the possibility of achievement. Modern and postmodern American playwrights often lament the loss of the utopian Southern values. For example, Sam Shepard implicitly reveals that erasing the values of the Old South is responsible for the postmodern chaos.

**Simulacrum:** It entails the presence of copies and the absence of originality. From a postmodern perspective, the simulacrum is equated with imitating reality.

**Suburbia:** The development of suburbia marks another phase of American glory during the twentieth century. Levittown’s suburbs are exemplifications of the reality of the American dream. The suburbs helped middle-class families who started from scratch to achieve their dreams of owning small houses and of being endowed with socio-economic stability.

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