

# American Speech

Language and Realism in *Tooth of Crime* and *Buried Child*

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The realistic style is a hallmark of American drama, but neither of Sam Shepard's plays, *The Tooth of Crime* or *Buried Child*, seem to lay claim to the obsessive naturalism of the 1930's. Surprisingly, close examination of the linguistic modes employed reveals *The Tooth of Crime* to be, in fact, a legitimate legate of that realism. But *Buried Child*, despite its rejection of American realism, adheres more closely to the stereotype of the American Play. We will show why dialog such as the following from *Buried Child*:

HALIE: ...Tilden was right about the corn you know. I've never  
seen such corn. Have you taken a look at it lately? Tall as  
a man already.

(Child, p. 131)

is unrealistic, but typically American, while this dialog from *The Tooth of Crime*:

HOSS: You wanna drink or somethin'?

CROW: Lush in sun time gotta smell of lettuce or turn of the century.  
Sure Leathers, squeeze on the grape vine one time.

(Tooth, p. 227)

is realistic, but not stereotypically American.

Important to any discussion of “realism” is a working definition. As a first approximation, we will use a description of the realistic style advanced by Arthur Miller:

A play representing real rather than symbolic or metaphysical persons and situations, its main virtue verisimilitude, with no revolutionary implications for society or even a symbolic statement of some general truth. Quite simply, conventional realism [is] conventional because it implicitly support[s] the conventions of society. . . . (Miller, p. 81)

As Miller later points out, this definition breaks down in the face of playwrights such as Ibsen and Chekhov, usually labeled realistic: “writers whose whole thrust was in opposition to the bourgeois status quo” (Miller, p. 81). But the primary unanswered question in this definition is crucial: against what do we measure verisimilitude? To a modern audience, it certainly seems clear that *Buried Child* is closer to the life-action of our acquaintances than is *The Tooth of Crime* — does this mean that *Buried Child* is the more realistic play? Following this reasoning, is realism impossible for non-American art?

It seems clear that verisimilitude and thus realism are merely artifacts of a particular culture. In other words, a play can only be called “realistic” in

relation to a cultural model in which its action would be believable. Shakespeare's plays, by this definition, are realistic because they correspond to Elizabethan culture, regardless of the speech patterns' strangeness to a modern ear. Japanese plays may be realistic despite social interactions foreign to a Western audience.

We leverage this definition to claim that *The Tooth of Crime* is, despite its unique style, a realistic play. The characters speak in a language unheard in our society, but it is not impossible to imagine a sub-culture in which such argot is commonplace: some strange hybrid inner-city music industry gang of the present or near future. Given this fictive cultural reference, the play's action is clear and consistent: realistic.

*Buried Child*, on the other hand, speaks from an easily-identifiable mid-western culture. However, its action is spiked with symbolically-charged absurdities which lead us to question its realism. Our familiarity with the cultural reference makes us certain that piles of vegetables and a magical harvest in the back yard do not belong. We also have the eponymous buried child, whose presence in the play runs afoul of our definition's prohibition on such symbols.

O'Neill, O'Casey, and other "realistic" playwrights attempted as writers to master a reportorial use of their subjects' argot, metaphor, and diction to

achieve naturalism. *The Tooth of Crime* clearly reflects this school of drama in such passages as:

HOSS: My sleuth tells me you're drivin' a '58 Impala with a Vet underneath.

CROW: Razor, Leathers. Very razor.

HOSS: Did you rest up?

CROW: Got the molar chomps. Eyes stiched. You can vision what's sittin'. Very razor to cop z's sussin' me to be on the far end of the spectrum.

(Tooth, p. 227)

On the other hand, *Buried Child* is filled with the "simple talk" of Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd. *Buried Child's* speech is *common*, not *realistic*. For example:

TILDEN: Back yard's full of carrots. Corn. Potatoes.

SHELLY: You're Vince's father, right?

TILDEN: All kinds of vegetables. You like vegetables?

(Child, p. 93)

Although the words spoken are typical and normal, real people simply do not relate in this manner.

The realistic style is closely associated with “American” theatre, realism having been its hallmark for the better part of this century. American plays are stereotypically domestic, not political; prosaic, rather than poetic; and emotional, rather than intellectual. In addition, the notion of an inescapable past immutably defining the present and future is typical. Paradoxically, *Buried Child* most qualifies as an American play: the domestic family setting, the common prosaic mid-western dialog, the “hidden secret” which motivates the present scenario. *The Tooth of Crime* defies this stereotype: family drama replaced by a duel of Kings, highly stylized dialog aspiring to pure poetry; a sense of inevitable change stemming not from the past, but the future. The lone conflicting note regards the typical American preference for emotions over ideas. *Buried Child* blatantly advertises its symbolism, tantalizing the audience with possibly non-existent occulted ideas. For example,

HALIE: What does all this corn mean?

TILDEN: It’s a mystery to me. (Child, p. 75)

*The Tooth of Crime* leaves such symbolic speculation entirely up to the reader; it concentrates instead on Hoss’ emotional and physical response to Crow’s challenge — at the suicide of Hoss:

Hoss: Now stand back and watch some true style. The mark of a lifetime. . . . An original. It's my life and my death in one clean shot. (Tooth, p. 249)

From this linguistic evidence, we claim that *The Tooth of Crime* is a realistic, but not typically American, play. Its realism is simply that of a culture foreign to the average reader. In contrast, *Buried Child* describes not an unreal limbo, but our own back yard; a typically American play about family and the past. The jagged intrusion of symbol into this world rips it from the realistic and runs it into an American Absurd, a Beckettian legacy, but the story is still our own. Shepard's skill as a dramatist is amply illustrated by this polar pair of plays, utilizing multiple linguistic forms to create both a new realism—of normal behavior in an abnormal culture—and a new symbolism—of abnormal behavior in the American culture we call our own.

## References

- [1] Arthur Miller, "About Theatre Language" in *The Last Yankee*. Penguin Books, 1994.
- [2] Sam Shepard, "Buried Child" in *Seven Plays*. Bantam Books, 1984.
- [3] Sam Shepard, "The Tooth of Crime" in *Seven Plays*. Bantam Books, 1984.