

Sam Shepard's "Curse of the Starving Class": The Contemporary Family and the "Curse" of the American Dream

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Abstract: This paper sheds light on the theme of the American Dream and its negative impact on members of the middle and lower classes in their search for a better life in the modern American society. Sam Shepard's social and political play *Curse of The Starving Class* (1978) indicates the strong relationship between literature and politics and the great impact on literature of the changes and developments in the society. The paper is an attempt to prove that the American Dream is a deluding goal. Members of the Tate family struggle to keep their falling farm house, a symbol of their status in the society, but there is no hope of any kind for them. Despite Ella's protestations that they "don't belong to the starving class," they are all trapped in its trauma. Their dreams fade and they are destroyed by the disillusionment of the capitalist system.

The nuclear family, that is the basic unit of the society, functions in this play as the microcosm in which an account of the disappointment and destruction of the 'American Dream' and its negative impact on the social cultural, and political landscape of the modern American society, are discussed. Thus Shepard becomes a leading representative and the voice of the depressed and underprivileged classes who struggle for change and creating a better life.

Keywords: postmodern drama, political theatre, American Dream, American family.

Political theatre is an attempt to analyze the nature and function of theatre in relation to the dynamics of the society and the audience's involvement in it. It is a daring re-consideration of the moral values of the society, and a deep investigation of political topics and contemporary events. It encourages the individual to recognize his own critical understanding. It gives a direction to the people and helps them discover their strengths and build their confidence in a way that they can improve their solidarity, express their opinions and assert their collective determination. Political drama raises questions rather than provide answers. A good example is Shepard's social and political play *Curse of the Starving Class* which represents the strong relationship between literature, society and the individual.

Sam Shepard, American playwright, actor, television and film director, is the author of notable works, including his Family Trilogy: *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978), *Buried Child* (1978), and *True West* (1980), all of which have received considerable acclaim. *Curse of the Starving Class* was awarded the Obie Award. Shepard is considered the leading representative of post-war American drama for being the 'voice of America' of that period. According to Shepard, family is the base of everything. In an interview in 1988; he asserts the significance of family and heredity:

What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything.... Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other, everyone is born out of a mother and a father, and you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle. (Adler 111)

Taking a realistic approach, Shepard concentrates mainly on decay, strife and estrangement in the family and society. In this tragedy he focuses on the inner dimensions of the characters and the emptiness of an artificial, decadent society. Shepard avoided concentration on the commonly admired American values. Instead, he focused on the disintegration of the American family while pursuing the dream of raising and improving their social status and how they are beaten and suppressed in the struggle. Thomas P. Adler says that:

Shepard displays a peculiar power in his highly symbolic family problem plays and allegorizing the American experience, of deflating the myth of America as the New Eden – whether the proverbial “garden” be an orchard in California or a farm in the Midwest – and of showing the new American Adam as the cause of a new fall from grace.(Adler 112)

To Shepard, the family stands for the American spirit. Shepard, throughout the play wants to criticize his community, its social, cultural, and political reality, and the anguish resulting from the deprivation of the family values which struggle to stay alive. The play reflects a gloomy and comic psychological account of the American family; it is about the aggressive conflicts between its frustrated and disintegrated members who are unable to live together and the degradation and destruction of the familial spirit and morality under the influence of a materialistic system.

This play is a social satire in three acts; its plot focuses on a grotesque, disturbed and dysfunctional family: the Tate family. It combines a profound, semi-autobiographical exposition and criticism of 1950s American rural life through a surreal black farce.

Act 1 opens with Wesley trying to fix the broken door of the kitchen and piling the broken pieces into a wheel barrow, but Ella, his mother, asks him to leave fixing the door for his father since he broke the door in the first place, “You shouldn't be doing that...He should be doing it. He's the one who broke it down” (*Curse* 5).

Weston, the father, had broken the door when he had returned drunk the night before as his wife had closed it in his face. His violent attacks threaten the safety of his family and frightens them. Shepard presents the father as addicted to alcohol, unable to work and support his family. Slightly drunk, Weston enters the house speaking to himself. He opens the refrigerator to find it empty, hunger makes him upset and angry, “I don't know why we keep a refrigerator in this house.” The family has nothing to eat; they suffer hunger pangs. This is their ‘curse’ and the main reason for their problems. Weston is idle; he is not the traditional ‘breadwinner’ father and cannot satisfy the needs of his family. His role is the opposite of the patriarchal type which is the base of the traditional

family. Poverty and the lack of patriarchal authority are the main reasons for the masculinity crisis of an individual. In his struggle to regain his status in the family, Weston adopts a terrible relationship with his children and wife. The strife between Ella and her husband represents strained marital relationships in the contemporary age. In the postmodern era the familial role between men and women has changed radically with the decline of the patriarchal authority of the husband. Ella is an independent woman with a mind of her own. A self-centered and absent-minded mother, she indulges in daydreams and fantasies to escape the gloom and hopelessness of her situation. She denies her actual bankruptcy because social status is decided by the economic status of the family.

When Wesley opens the refrigerator and finds it empty, the conversation goes thus:

Wesley: I'm hungry.

Ella: How can you be hungry all the time? We're not poor. We're not rich but we're not poor.

Wesley: What are we then? (Curse 12)

Ella not only scorns her husband, she betrays him as well. She decides to sell the house and to start a new life without even telling him: "He's not going to kill me. I have every right to sell. He doesn't have a leg to stand on" (Curse 16). Weston, a previous pilot, has lost one of his legs in the war, so physically, spiritually and symbolically he lacks power. Weston's weakness makes him face a masculinity crisis as a result of which Ella further neglects him. She plans to visit Europe before she gets old and it becomes too late. "They have everything in Europe. High art. Paintings. Castles. Buildings. Fancy food.... I'm selling the house, the land.... Everything" (Curse 14). Ella aspires for the American dream of prosperity and luxurious life. So she tries to sell the farm to Taylor, a greedy land dealer, even if it means going to bed with him. Weston speaks as a powerful man, "I'll track her down and shoot them both in their bed. In their hotel bed.... I was in war. I know how to kill" (Curse 38). Weston uses violence against his wife only to prove his manhood.

The refrigerator is opened and closed by every member of the family but it is often empty. It is the center of the hunger and starvation theme of the play and a symbol that emphasizes the meaning of deprivation of the family members. All the characters feel hungry though they all agree that they do not belong to the "starving class". "Starving" in the play stands for the "hunger" for satisfaction resulting from psychological agitation within the characters. Their starvation is not just physical or economical; what they miss is love, trust, close familial relations and affection. The refrigerator is the story of their lives as Americans starved for a sustenance that is no longer there and they all search for. As Adler calls it, "the spiritual starvation amidst plenty":

The starvation is multilayered, not only physical and emotional, but spiritual as well... [It] conveys an almost metaphysical feeling of anguish and desperation. (Adler 112)

Like many Americans under the Capitalist system, the family is controlled by the ethic of consumerism. They believe that buying and owning things are a guarantee of future success. They borrow money from the banks because it is offered to them easily and they think it does no harm. Weston, the irresponsible father who has driven his family deep into debt, not only borrows to buy, but his analysis of the fantasy world of the American economy gets even more frighteningly alarming when he uses “invisible money”:

“The whole thing’s geared to invisible money.... You never hear the sound of change anymore. It’s all plastic shuffling back and forth. It’s all in everybody’s heads. So I figured, if that’s the case, why not take advantage of it? Why not go in debt for a few grand, if it is all numbers? If it’s all an idea and nothing’s really there, why not take advantage?” (*Curse* 194-195)

Wesley, the idealistic son, struggles in order to avoid being a failure like his father. He clings to his roots which help him define his identity. He is connected with the land of the West: “I could smell the avocado blossoms...I could feel this country close like it was part of my bones” (*Curse* 5). Wesley rejects the idea of selling the house because it means a lot to him. His house and his identity are linked together, so losing his house would mean losing his identity. Wesley’s act of fixing the door shows his connection with this house. He wants to protect the house and to keep his family together. Wesley’s crisis begins when these feelings begin to intermesh with their terrible state of poverty and the continuous quarrels between his parents. The theme of fragmentation of the family in the play is interconnected with the wife-husband relationship, which is described here symbolically in broken, incomplete expressions:

Feet coming. Feet walking toward the door. Feet stopping... Foot kicking the door. Man’s voice. Dad’s voice. Dad calling Mom. No answer...Wood splitting... Glass breaking... Man cursing. Man going insane. Man yelling. Shoulder smashing. Whole body crashing. Woman screaming. Mom screaming. (*Curse* 8)

The father is not a good role model for his son. Wesley suffers from his parent’s behavior and finds that both his parents are idiots; instead of thinking of how to protect their family they both want to sell the house: “She can’t think. He can’t either” (*Curse* 29). Wesley needs to see his father strong but reality reveals the opposite. Wesley, the postmodern son, does not have a hero to imitate; he then will be a failure like his father. Shepard shows how the son might inherit the diseases and characteristics of the father because heredity plays an essential role in forming one’s identity. The physical image and the weaknesses of the father’s character are reproduced in Wesley’s body. Thus the children substitute for their parents. Inheriting and watching each other, they all learn similar traits, infected with this social ‘curse’ which possesses them and they can do nothing about. The ‘curse’ is that they are part of the social ‘starving class’ but they hold on to the ‘American Dream’ which they cannot attain. Wesley returns, and brings a sick

lamb from outside. The lamb is affected by ‘maggots’. It resembles Wesley himself, for both are infected victims and need treatment. There are Biblical allusions too; Abraham wanted to sacrifice his son Isaac but then slaughters a lamb instead. Christ himself was the lamb who shed his blood for the sins of mankind. Wesley is the victim of both his biology and the political-social system of his country (Adler 117).

The feeling of loneliness is a common characteristic of all Shepard’s heroes who face masculinity crisis including Wesley “Makes me feel lonely”. The struggle between the estranged parents ruins all mutual understanding with their adolescent rebellious daughter Emma. She, like her mother, does not want to acknowledge the bad circumstances and the social status of her family, “We don’t belong to the starving class! There is a starving class of people, and we are not part of it!” (*Curse* 142). Infected by the American dream she is also yearning for the lifestyle of richer people, yet she cannot have it. She tells her mother, “the Thompsons have a new heated pool. You should see it, Ma. They even got blue lights around it at night. It’s really beautiful. Like a fancy hotel” (*Curse* 139).

The fact is that Emma is fully aware of the hard circumstances of her family and like her brother Wesley, she criticizes the parents because of their wrong behavior and their wish to sell the house for their selfish purposes. Emma represents the contemporary liberated woman in the play. She wants to free herself and become independent of man’s authority in her search for security and meaning in life. She plans to go to Mexico and live a life full of adventure. She enthusiastically plans to become a mechanic and pursue her projects and horseback fantasies. She dreams of new possibilities and a better life: “I was going to work on fishing boats... I was going to work my way along the coast... I like cars. I like travel” (*Curse* 18). Emma wants to work and to live her life the way she likes.

The change in the role of modern women affects men negatively because in this case they cannot exert their authority over women. So the relationship between Emma and Wesley is a difficult one. Emma is carrying materials for her 4-H project on how to cut up a frying chicken, which may be read as her pretense of upper-class table manners. She goes to look for her chicken in the family’s refrigerator only to find it is gone. Emma accuses her mother of boiling the chicken and begins to argue with her and with Wesley. The language between them lacks respect, as Emma says to her brother: “Eat my socks.” Her brother in return ridicules her and her work, and he urinates on her charts and destroys them:

Emma: What type of family is this?

Ella: I tried to stop him but he wouldn’t listen.

Emma: (To Wesley) Do you know how long I worked on those charts? I had to do research. I went to the library. I took out books. I spent hours.

Wesley: It’s a stupid thing to spend your time on.

Emma: I’m leaving this house! (*Curse*, 12)

Emma's strong character is opposite to that of Wesley who is connected with his house and the life at the farm. As a postmodern woman she is educated and has the ability to look forward toward a new future. Yet with no guidance from their parents, Wesley and Emma are lost souls. Emma becomes the victim of criminals and Wesley prepares to assume his father's role as a violent drunk. Their dreams are vanishing and they are destroyed in the relentless march of a 'civilization' which leads to the death of the American family.

Shepard's characters may not be perfect, but they are real and life-like people with the depth of humanity that he attributes to them. They are all people that we can recognize in the world around us. Annamaria Pileggi, Professor of Practice in Drama in Washington University, says:

This is a family that is down and out. They're starving, and not only in the physical or economic sense. They're starved for intimacy, for love, for companionship. Their needs aren't being met and they're literally wasting away... Shepard's theme is the dissolution of American family life How the sins of the father are passed down to the son, and how that inheritance affects the rest of the family.... This is a recognizably American landscape, and these characters are all people that we can recognize in the world, and yet the structure and experience of the play are deeply unsettling, almost Absurdist. Shepard is constantly displacing audience expectations and assumptions in a way that's almost nightmarish. *Curse of the Starving Class* is a very funny play. We do recognize ourselves in these characters, which keeps us from simply dismissing their foibles. (Pileggi)

The "curse" in the title of the play refers to everything, from the tragic flaws inherited from ancient generations down to the new ones, which damn whole families and force the action towards inevitable disaster.

Thus, when at the end of the play Wesley and Ella talking about Weston's story about an eagle that picks up a cat in its talons, the cat fights so fiercely that both, the cat and the eagle, come crashing down, and fall to earth to be killed at once. It is not only the animals that are destroyed, but also the myths of "identity," "family," and "prosperity." In other words, the promise of the American Dream.

The play is a symbolic drama; it depicts the social and political landscape in the contemporary American history during the second half of the twentieth century. The unnatural absurdist plot of *Curse of the Starving Class* embodies what Shepard thinks is wrong with America. The play deals with the themes of search for identity, both personal and social, the lack of spirituality, the loneliness and fragmentation of the family, and the continuous physical and psychological starvation of its members for familial intimacy and contentment. The unrest of the family and the psychological disturbance of its members result from the society that is full of dishonest, sharp-dealing, exploitative businessmen and a rapidly changing economic boom run by men who want to transform

the natural landscape into houses or restaurants. Thus this dark comedy becomes an exploration of the American family psyche; it depicts the reality of poverty-stricken families and the mentality and the psychological disturbances that accompany it. It exposes the nature of the capitalist system which controls the American society and its negative impact on the middle and working classes. The Tate family represents the lower-middle-class American families that today's economy has made all too familiar all over the world. The members of the family are all ambitious for a better life, but cannot escape the vicious circle of violence and desperation in which they are trapped. It is an account of the disappointment and the decline which result from the disillusionment of the American dream. The materialism and urbanization of the American dream are fragile things in a harsh-dealing Western political and economic system which spells ruin and unhappiness. The play reflects the diminishing role of the family which is on its way out as an institution. More than losing a house, a family or a culture is at stake; it is like losing the country.

Contrary to the popular notion that poverty means simply being hungry, naked and homeless, Shepard wants to say that real poverty is being unwanted, unloved and uncared for; this is the greatest poverty. The remedy for this kind of poverty can be found in our families and inside our homes, rather than outside in the society and the country at large.

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