

**The Destruction of the American Dream in
Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class***

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There has always been a tendency in literary criticism to categorize works into strictly-defined compartments depending merely on the 'form' and 'content' of the individual 'text.' Such a tendency, however, disregards the inherent relationship of exchange existing between the 'text' and the 'context,' that is the social, cultural, and political reality out of and into which the literary text is born, thereby pre-determining and limiting the possible horizons of interpretation of the text in question. To some extent, Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*, first staged in London in 1977, has been a victim of such disregard, and under the influence of the same attitude its general reception has been merely as a 'family play.' The aim of this article, on the other hand, is to relate the 'text' of the play to its larger 'context' and argue that *Curse*, as well as being a 'family play,' is an illustration of the destruction of the 'American Dream' in the American family.

Most critics tend to categorize *Curse* as a 'family play' and consider it as an indication of Shepard's "moving toward the mainstream of 'serious' American drama, adding to the roll of family plays by [Eugene] O'Neill, [Arthur] Miller, [Tennessee] Williams, and so forth" (Bottoms 152). It is true that, on the textual level, the play is a 'family play' and there is no need to challenge the existing critical agreement on this matter. However, on the contextual level, one may assert that the domestic aspect of the play is only functional. Such functionality, the interpretive effect of which is the articulation in *Curse* of an account of the disappointment of the 'American Dream' in the second half of the 1970s, occurs in two ways. First, the nuclear family, that is the basic unit of society, functions as the microcosm in which certain social themes can be discussed in a limited setting. Second, the family setting makes possible the inclusion of autobiographical elements offered by the playwright to reinforce the discussion of the play's themes.

Several critics have accepted Sam Shepard as the leading representative of post-war American drama for being, as he is, the 'voice of America' in the period in question. One critic, for instance, has suggested that Sam Shepard's plays "may be viewed as artifacts that document contemporary American

history, and [...] social and political landscape [since they] function as a storehouse of images, icons, and idioms that donate American culture and American sensibility" (Wade 2). Likewise, appreciating Shepard's deliberate and increasing stress upon the 'contextual' rather than 'textual' elements in his art, another critic has maintained that

at the centre of Shepard's dramas, throughout his career, is an exploration of theatricality. It is an exploration that grows progressively richer and even thematically suggestive as Shepard moves away from the more abstract examination of theatrical event and brings into his plays evocative images from the American cultural landscape. (Rabillard 67)

Generally speaking, Shepard's self-conscious and deliberate shift of his emphasis from the 'text' to the 'context,' has also been an indication of the playwright's increasing concentration on social, rather than artistic concerns:

[I]n Shepard's hands, then, theatrical performance penetrates the thematic. Indeed, Shepard reveals the desolateness of a theatrical culture [...] His exploration of theatricality moves beyond the superficial exhibitionism of popular American culture, beyond the violence of male performance, to suggest the deeper anxieties of modern western society. (Rabillard 70)

However accurate these comments might be, there remains the fact that with respect to *Curse*, Shepard's concern with the state of the American nation has not yet been fully examined. This constitutes a point of departure for this article. Leslie Wade has explained that from the end of the World War II until the early 1970s the United States had prospered economically, which "spurred a psychology of abundance" (95) in the country. However with the oil crisis of 1973 and its aftermath, the country came to be aware of its economic vulnerability:

[B]etween 1973 and 1978, the price of oil rose from \$3 to \$28 a barrel, and the U.S. economy, which had been driven for years to world prominence by the ready supply of cheap fuel, fell into the throes of a severe recession [...] In the ten years following 1973, inflation, high unemployment, and increased competition from foreign industry contributed to a deep apprehension in the American workplace. The country was forced to acknowledge its limits, and many questioned if the nation could lay claim to the promises of the American dream any longer. (Wade 95-96)

In this context, it was clear that *Curse* would be dominated by such themes as the search for identity, the spiritual void and lack of nourishment

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caused by materialism and urbanization, and the destruction of the American Dream.

The search for identity, both personal and social, is bound up with the fragmentation of the family in *Curse*. This has been explained in a recent book as follows:

A basic concern of Shepard's characters is the struggle for individuation in the face of constraining family ties. This is a universal issue but in a family as bereft and isolated as the Tates, individuation is nearly impossible. Attempts to save the self are associated with fantasies of flight or escape that often end in destruction - alcoholism, selling the ranch, "zombie" cities, explosions. The family does not have a cohesive structure to assist its members in defining their identities. (Sparr, Erstling and Boehnlein 569)

The first reference in the play to the lack of harmony in the family comes in the first paragraph, in which a description of the scene is given. The scene is a farmhouse kitchen and there are "four mismatched metal chairs set each side of the table" (Shepard 135)*. The family in the play is a typical nuclear family comprising the father, Weston, the mother Ella, the son Wesley and the daughter Emma. At first glance, the names of these characters suggest a sense of coherence and harmony in the family. The relationship between the father and the son is obvious in their names, Weston and Wesley, and the sense of continuity evoked by the names of the mother and the daughter Ella and Emma appear to represent the idea of harmony, as the letter 'l' is followed by the letter 'm' in the alphabet. However, as one critic has also suggested, the symmetry in the names of these characters is much more complicated as it relates to the search for identity:

Curse of the Starving Class displays its schematic organization by dividing up most of its text among four principal family member/speakers in an artificially symmetrical scheme - Weston/Wesley; Ella/Emma. This contrived conflation of names suggests, early in the play, that the text relates the younger figures to the older; and, as the play progresses, we see certain ways in which the children replicate or substitute for their parents. In general, *Curse* voices and reiterates a process in which self-identification takes the form of assuming aspects of the identity of another. The text also voices resistance to that process. The language suggests that the assimilation of the physical traits or behavior of the older

* All quotations from the play are from Shepard, Sam. *Seven Plays*. Ed. Richard Gilman. Toronto, New York: Bantam Books, 1986.

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by the younger is either an inevitable or natural process of inheritance, a logical transfer of some substance from one person to another: the physical image of the father reproduced in the body of the son, the poison of the father inherited by the son, the curse of menstrual blood inherited by the daughter (Lyons 125).

This argument may be exemplified by giving the general depictions of all four characters in the play. Weston, the father, is a wild and violent drunkard, who comes home only once in a while and that for the purpose of leaving his laundry to be washed. His frustration with his circumstances and hopelessness are signified by the desert land he owns in a region called Hot Springs, and by the artichokes he brings from the desert as food for the family. Ella, the mother, on the other hand, is a woman who does not wish to accept her material conditions as a lower-middle-class person. Early in the play, she tells her son Wesley about her plans to sell the farm and move to some other place such as Europe, where she thinks is "a whole new place" (148). Ella's plan is extremely significant not only because it connotes her alienation from her husband, but also and more importantly for the expression of the death of her 'American Dream.' In normal conditions the route of the migratory movement would be from Europe to America, as had been for centuries. However, as Ella's 'American Dream' proves to be a nightmare, she is resigned to a radical change in her life. Hence, it is also revealed in the play that she has arranged the selling of the house with the help of a lawyer, namely Taylor. Emma, the adolescent daughter, is depicted almost similarly as her mother in that she does not want to acknowledge her existing circumstances, and especially the social status of her family. She feels herself in a painful need to assert that "WE DON'T BELONG TO THE STARVING CLASS! THERE IS A STARVING CLASS OF PEOPLE, AND WE'RE NOT PART OF IT!" (Shepard 142). The fact is that Emma is fully aware of the circumstances of her family and thus tries to compensate for this bitter truth by yearning for the life styles of other people. She reports to her mother, for instance, that "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" (139). The heated pool of the Thompsons is Emma's 'American Dream,' yet she cannot have it. Another example of Emma's denial of the social status of her family is her preoccupation with a demonstration she prepares for a local fair. Her demonstration is about how to cut up a frying chicken, which may be read as her pretence of upper-class table manners. In brief, Emma denies herself and constantly tries to find the answer to the question "How am I ever going to get out of here?" (147).

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All these characters are ironically in search of an outlet from their conditions and basically from themselves, while they are also in search of selfhood and social status. They are not content with what they find in life and thus try to find solutions for themselves, but never for the family. The solution Ella finds is to sell the farmhouse, which functions as the family's "basis of cohesion" (Wade 97) throughout the work, and look for a better life in another place. However, the loss of the unifying element brings total destruction to the family at the end. Just like her mother, Emma's solution is a fancy dream to go to Mexico and live a life full of adventure, thereby escaping from the 'American Nightmare,' in which she is stuck, and in which life is static, if not retrogressive and dilapidating. Likewise, her constant wish to leave the house leads to her destruction at the end when she dies in her father's car while trying to escape from the house.

Early in the play, the only exception to this denial of the self is Wesley, who is the character through whom Sam Shepard brings into the play many of the confusions he experienced in his teenage years in the America of post-war economic boom and growing consumer economy. As far as the first two acts are concerned, Wesley appears to be the only person in the house with a positive sense of his own circumstances. This is expressed in the following monologue which he utters at the beginning of the first act:

I was lying there on my back. I could smell the avocado blossoms. I could hear the coyotes. I could hear stock cars squealing down the street. I could feel myself in my bed in my room in this house in this town in this state in this country (Shepard 137).

Since he is content with what he is, when the idea of selling the house is revealed, Wesley is the only one to disagree by saying "Somebody does live here!" (146). When his mother talks about the advantages of Europe such as "High art. Paintings. Castles. Buildings. Fancy Food" (143), Wesley's reply is "They got all that here" (143). In other words, he looks to America, and especially to the west, as the place in which he will have a sense of himself and will be putting down roots. His attitude towards the social status of his family is also different. This is best exemplified by his urinating on the chart Emma has prepared for her "How to cut up a frying chicken?" demonstration. Wesley believes such pretence is "stupid thing to spend...time on" because "It's just bones" (141-142). Wade observed that "Wesley, importantly, serves as the conservator of the farm and argues against its sale; it is he who gathers the broken bits of the kitchen door and repairs its splintered frame" (97). When everyone else, including Weston, is preoccupied with selling the house and making good money to have better life somewhere else, Wesley is still trying to cure the disease of an infected

lamb, which he brings into the kitchen. Talking to the lamb he says: "You're lucky I'm not really starving" (156). The implied meaning of 'starvation' here, and actually all through the play, is not a physical but spiritual starvation, which will be explained later. However, in this particular utterance, Wesley means that he is not in a futile search for something other than what he is and thus he can still operate normally in daily life. The lamb is actually lucky for that. The pessimistic tone affects Wesley too, when the real nature of his identity, pre-determined by blood, is revealed later on.

The issue of blood ties is the major factor that determines the theme of selfhood and identity in the play - specifically the idea of a "natural process of inheritance" (Lyons 125). Since the name of the playwright's father was also Samuel Shepard, and the original name of the playwright is Sam Shepard VII, and that he himself has a son named Samuel, it may be strongly suggested that the idea of the son being a repetition of the father in *Curse* is an allusion to the life of Sam Shepard. This idea of blood determinism, together with the concept of the 'curse,' is tightly woven into the texture of the play especially in terms of the theme of identity. One critic has suggested that

Sam Shepard, the most protean of active American playwrights, has written about revolution and land reform and organized crime and the decline of the West (in both the Spenglerian and the John Wayne senses), but his laconic truisms sound most universal when he focuses on the tightly confined agonies of blood kin. He especially comprehends their symbiotic bonding: time and again in his plays, family members reverse roles or take on each other's characteristics because the nature of the interaction between them matters more than who plays which part. They are trapped in patterns so central to their lives that any liberation or enlightenment in one member is immediately offset by the regression of another (Henry 55).

If one accepts this viewpoint, then the psychological situation of the characters in relation to their ancestors becomes easier to understand. Ella's envy for the upper class, for instance, is not only a function of their average life style, but also of her family background. As Weston puts it in the third act, Ella is "from a different class of people. Gentle. Artists" (Shepard 188). Following the same logic, Emma, who is literally a continuation of her mother, yearns for higher social status and tries to escape from her realities. As Lyons suggests, the psychological relationship between mother and daughter is further emphasized by the reference to the menstrual blood of Emma, who begins to assume the psychological role of her mother as she

grows up. This is the 'curse' that is handed down to the next generation and Ella acknowledges this when she tells Wesley to keep an eye on Emma because "She's got the curse. You know what that's like for a girl, the first time around" (155). The same is valid for the relationship between Weston and his son Wesley. In the second act, Weston tells his son about the poison, in other words the 'curse,' he has inherited from his own father:

[I] watched my old man move around. I watched him move through rooms. I watched him drive tractors, watched him watching baseball, watched him keeping out of the way of things. Out of the way of my mother [...] Nobody saw him but me. Everybody was right here, but nobody saw him but me. He lived apart. Right in the midst of things and he lived apart. Nobody saw that (168).

Such a description of the way in which Weston's father has lived is actually a description of his own life and Weston thinks it is not fair to be predestined like this. Initially, Wesley seems to be clear of the 'curse,' but in the third act of the play the resemblance between the names of the father and the son goes beyond the literal and into the psychological. The poison of Weston now pours into the body and mixes with the blood of Wesley.

The transformation of Wesley's character in the third act is juxtaposed with a total metamorphosis of his psychology. After taking a sleep on the kitchen table and having a hot bath Weston is suddenly reborn as another person. He washes the laundry himself, completes the repair of the door, which he has broken at the beginning of the play, and even prepares breakfast for Wesley. Now Weston comes to reconcile with himself since the poison in his body is supposedly washed away during the bath, even though his financial circumstances remain the same. His attitude towards the family has also changed:

I felt like it was a good thing. It was good to be connected by blood like that. That a family wasn't just a social thing. It was an animal thing. It was a reason of nature that we were all together under the same roof. Not that we had to be but that we were supposed to be. And I started feeling glad about it. I started feeling full of hope (186).

It is right after this speech that Wesley utters the climactic sentence "I'm starving" (186) and goes out naked with the sick lamb under his arm. When he comes back into the kitchen in his father's dirty clothes he declares that he has butchered the lamb since they "need some food" (191). If one is to ignore the biblical allusions of the sacrificing of the lamb as discussed elsewhere (Lyons 127), it can be asserted that Wesley's act symbolizes the death of his early innocence and childhood. The killing of the lamb by Wesley has the

same function as the menstruation of Emma, in other words it is an act of growing up, which is inevitable for everyone. Especially when in his father's clothes, Wesley now becomes his father, whose character transformation proves to be a mere act of "willfully ignoring the extremity of his situation, and making a last-ditch attempt to re-impose some order on a life that has spun out of control" (Bottoms 162). However, Wesley's deed can accomplish nothing because by the time he butchers the lamb his father has recovered from his indifferent and violent mood and has brought home some food for the family:

[T]he one attempt by Weston to insert hope and direction into the family is rejected, especially by Wesley, who has accepted the family belief that it is too late to start over. The father's new sense of purpose, based on his feeling of connectedness, does not fit with the family's operating paradigm (Sparr, Erstling, and Boehnlein 170).

Now Wesley is caught in the vicious circle of the 'curse,' and what is in the blood eventually begins to operate in real life experience.

The question of identity, or rather the problem of identity, is important in itself as a theme in *Curse*. However, its main function can be observed when seen within the larger theme of the 'death of the American Dream.' As one critic has suggested:

[I]dentity' and 'roots' emerge as themes in Shepard. For if the 'American Dream' means anything more than its purely physical and economic implications, it means the hope and promise of identity, of a 'role' (Gilman xxii).

Given the fact that the themes of 'identity' and 'fragmentation of family' in the play are interconnected, their totality constitutes a sense of disillusionment with the 'American Dream'.

Just like the concepts of 'curse' or 'poison,' the idea of 'starvation' as reflected in the play presents more than one layer of meaning. More precisely, it is not simply physical starvation that is presented but also psychological starvation. The depiction of this psychology centers on the refrigerator in the kitchen. As one critic has observed: "[T]he centrality of the refrigerator to which the inhabitants of the house go again and again, seeking nourishment that will abate their appetite, gives this object, in repeated use, a kind of iconographic value" (Lyons 126-127). Every time the characters go to the refrigerator in the middle of or after a discussion they look inside, find nothing and then slam its door. As Weston puts it the refrigerator is almost always empty and "all it's good for is slamming" (Weston 157). Apart from

its symbolizing the inability of the family unit in terms of providing satisfaction for the physical needs of its members, in a larger context the refrigerator becomes the industrialized, urbanized and materialist American society governed by a capitalist economy and consumerism, or "Shepard's white allegorical monster of the starving class" (Daniels 213). By the same token, one may go as far as arguing that the refrigerator also represents the 'American Dream,' which is supposed to promise 'plenty,' but one which can no longer keep to that promise. Just like the refrigerator, the 'American Dream' proves to be 'cold' and 'empty.'

The sense of depletion in *Curse*, also refers to the consumption of the country by materialist 'monsters' like estate agents, businessmen, and lawyers, who are represented in the play by Ella's lawyer friend Taylor, and to some extent by Ellis, the bar-owner. Early in the play Wesley describes the workings of these forces of the capitalist economy by stating that "[s]o it means more than losing a house. It means losing a country. It's a zombie invasion. Taylor is the head zombie. He is the scout for the other zombies. He's only a sign that more zombies are on their way. They'll be filing through the door pretty soon" (Shepard 163). In other words, the expression of spiritual emptiness and sterility of the family unit is also juxtaposed with "a dystopian vision, an America of ravaged natural resources, rampant consumerism, and diminished individual freedom" (Wade 110). This is the reason why all the characters in the play feel that they have been "cheated by the American Dream" (Wade 97) both spiritually and materially. Hence, the end of the play does not offer any resolution, but Ella completes a story started by Weston earlier in the play. Perhaps the story may be read as a thematic summary of the play. The story is about an eagle and a cat fighting over the testicles of castrated lambs. When the cat is about to eat the testicles:

[An] eagle comes down and picks up the cat in his talons and carries him screaming off into the sky. And they fight. They fight like crazy in the middle of the sky. The cat's tearing his chest out, and the eagle's trying to drop him, but the cat won't let go because he knows if he falls he will die. And the eagle's being torn apart in midair. The eagle's trying to free himself from the cat, and the cat won't let go. And they come crashing down to the earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing (Shepard 200).

The symbolic function of this story is extremely significant in terms of constituting the bond between 'text' and 'context,' - even though Shepard himself has been particularly evasive about this. In an interview about *Curse*, "when the dialogue seem[ed] to rise toward myth and symbol, in the tale of the cat and the eagle, Shepard [...] evaded proposed interpretations with the

dismissive statement that his source for the beasts' struggle was a comic book" (Rabillard 65). It is clear that "this story, so clearly a metaphor for the self-destructive way in which the family members cling most desperately to those with whom they fight most savagely (namely themselves), ends the play on a powerful [...] note (DeRose 98). At the first symbolic level, the story of the eagle and the cat, both assertive animals, fighting for identity and nourishment may suggest the similarity with the struggle among the Tate family, from which none of them can escape even if they try so desperately. At the second layer of meaning, however, the story becomes a dystopic picture of the 'American Dream.' As long as one takes the testicles as a symbol of fertility, reproduction and promise of future existence, as well as nourishment, the fight in the story can well be read as the struggle of the individual represented by the cat, against the larger American society, represented by the eagle.

Finally, it may be suggested that *Curse* by Sam Shepard is a 'family play,' but not only a 'family play.' It is true that the central themes of the play revolve around questions of 'identity,' 'family' and 'physical and psychological starvation' in the family environment. However, these are only those aspects of the play when the 'text' is read for its own sake and free from its 'context.' However, when the larger 'context' of the play is taken into account, *Curse* proves to be more than a family play. With its themes, typical of family plays, interacting with each other and in their totality creating a comment on or a view of the 'American Dream,' the *Curse* shows the latter as it shatters down. Thus, when at the end of the play, both sides of the struggle between the cat and eagle come crashing down, it is not only the animals that are destroyed, but also the myths of 'selfhood,' 'family,' and 'plenty,' in other words, the promises of the 'America Dream.'

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