

THE POSTMODERN AMERICAN MAN IN SAM SHEPARD'S CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS

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Abstract: *Sam Shepard is one of the main figures of the postmodern American playwrights. In most of his plays, Shepard focuses on depicting the character of the American man and the struggles he faces in order to identify his masculine identity. Curse of the Starving Class (1977) presents the struggle of the American man inside his family. Shepard presents a family where both the father and the son face masculinity crisis because of their inability to identify their masculine identity.*

Key Words: Sam Shepard, masculinity, crisis, family, identity

In the late nineteen seventies, Shepard started writing his family plays. *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) was the first of his family plays which also included *Buried Child* (1978) and *True West* (1980). According to Shepard, the family is the base of everything: "What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything...Even a love story has to do with family...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). The family resembles the whole society. Shepard wanted to criticize his community through presenting the deteriorated American family. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, masculinity crisis appears to be the result of the destruction of the postmodern family.

In addition to being a family play, *Curse of the Starving Class* carries new themes; one of them is the effect of 'heredity' on the characters of the play. Heredity plays an essential role in forming one's identity. This new aspect was borrowed by Shepard from other playwrights of his period, so he pictured how the son might inherit the same disease and characteristics of the father. Addiction to alcohol is another aspect which affects the male characters and their identity. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Shepard presents the alcoholic father who is the main reason behind the destruction of his family. What adds to the play's originality is its style, for it can neither be considered as totally realistic nor totally symbolic. The new style embedded in the play is "grotesque realism" (Barnhisel, Critical Essay). *Curse of the Starving Class* shows that Shepard started a new stage of writing plays, and that his plays can be placed with those of great American dramatists of his period, as Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, whose family plays drew the way for Shepard to follow.

Curse of the Starving Class was first premiered on 21 April 1977 at London's Royal Court Theatre. The play is composed of three acts which depict how the members of a family struggle because of 'the curse of the starving class'. The family is influenced by a curse, but Shepard does not specify what the curse is (Smith, J. Overview). The play also presents how the postmodern man struggles to find his place inside his family. However, in a destroyed family, salvation is impossible.

The setting of the play is a realistic one. The play is set at a farm house that is located in an avocado farm in the West, away from the city and its modern life. All the incidents of the play take place inside the kitchen that includes a table, four metal chairs, a refrigerator and a small stove. The refrigerator is significant in the play, for it is empty from the inside. It resembles the poverty of the starving class. The family that lives in the house is a traditional family that depends on farming for living. This family consists of four members: the father Weston, the mother 'Ella', the son 'Wesley', and the daughter 'Emma'. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Wesley struggles to define his masculine identity in a family of "idiosyncratic misfits: Weston, a ne'er-do-well drunken, wandering father; Ella: an absent-minded, unstable mother; and Emma, a brilliant willful younger sister" (Rosen, Sam Shepard a Poetic Rodeo, 112).

The play starts with Ella and Wesley speaking together in the kitchen. Wesley is a young cowboy wearing a “sweatshirt, jeans, and cowboy boots” (Curse, 5). The kitchen’s door is broken, and Wesley is trying to fix it. Wesley’s act of fixing the door shows his connection with this house. He wants to protect the house and the family, so Wesley appears to be a caring and a helpful son at the beginning of the play. Wesley resembles Shepard himself who tried to take care of his family during his early years. Ella asks her son to stop fixing the door: “You shouldn’t be doing that...He should be doing it. He’s the one who broke it down.” (Curse, 5) Ella mentions that the one responsible for this act is the father, so he should fix it instead. Although the father does not appear yet, his actions reveal his violence and bad state. Weston broke the door when he was drunk. The father, here, is an addict to alcohol, the same as Shaprd’s father. Shepard presents the father as corrupt because of his addiction. Unless of being the one who protects his family, Weston brings fear to his family members, especially the mother: “I was scared” (Curse, 6). Patriarchal authority which is the base of the traditional family fails here because the father’s role is opposite to that of the traditional ‘breadwinner’ father.

The father is usually a model for his son to follow. Weston is not a good model for his son. As a result, Wesley is in crisis, and the feeling of loneliness dominates over him: “Makes me feel lonely”. This loneliness is a common characteristic of all Shepard’s heroes who face masculinity crisis. Wesley is attached to his roots because his roots help him in defining 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”. Wesley’s crisis begins when he starts mixing those beautiful feelings with the terrible state and the quarrels that happen between his parents: “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). According to David DeRose, Weston’s violent attack symbolizes the destruction of the ‘protective circle of the family’. He threatens the safety of his family, and leaves them defenseless (De Rose, 92). Wesley suffers from his father’s behavior, and from the terrible relationship between his parents.

Emma, Wesley’s sister, appears as a rebellious young lady. She resembles the postmodern woman who wants to free herself from man’s authority. The relationship between Emma and Wesley is a terrible one, too. 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 destroys her charts:

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 has a strong character. She is educated and has the ability to criticize her own family. She wants to leave her family and to start a new life. Her character is opposite to that of Wesley who is connected with his house and the life at the farm. This juxtaposition between the brother and the sister is essential because one of the main reasons behind man’s crisis lies in the power of woman. Emma is more powerful than her brother, so she has the ability of looking toward a new future. However, Wesley is weak. Shepard, here, presents how the change in the role of women affects men negatively because they are not able to show their authority over women.

Emma has a plan of going to California. She has dreams to fulfill; she wants to be independent. Emma’s state shows the freedom of woman in the postmodern period. 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...” Unlike the traditional woman who depends on man for living, Emma wants to work and to live her life the way she likes “I like cars. I like travel” (Curse, 18). She is an ambitious, strong, young lady. Emma is the representative of the new woman of the postmodern period; the woman who is more powerful than man.

Poverty is one of the reasons of man's crisis. When a man feels that he is unable to make his family satisfied by their living, he will become upset and hopeless. One of the main problems that lead to poverty is unemployment. Weston is jobless: "I thought Dad got fired" (Curse, 13) says Wesley. Weston's family is poor because he is unable to work and to support them; a matter that not only affects Weston himself but also his son. Wesley's crisis, then, can be related to the poor and unsatisfactory condition of the family. Wesley, as all members of the family, keeps opening the refrigerator. Wesley is upset, and he believes his family is from the starving class.

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)

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the family has nothing to eat, and this is the direct reason for their problems. Shepard wants to show that the poor condition of the postmodern family leads to men's crisis.

Ella rejects the fact that they are poor because she has a dream of going to Europe after selling the house: "They have everything in Europe. High art. Paintings. Castles. Buildings. Fancy food." Ella resembles the woman who rejects the life of poverty: "I'm selling the house, the land, ...Everything" (Curse, 14). On the other hand, Wesley, who is connected with his house and land, rejects her idea: "This is where I live" (Curse, 15). He prefers being poor to leaving his house. The son reveals the new generation that is connected with its roots. Wesley is similar to Vince in *Buried Child*. Both are connected with their roots at the beginning, and both turn to be like their fathers at the end. Shepard wants to show that there is no hope for heroes to survive in the postmodern period. They will be haunted by the terrible image of their fathers. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Wesley needs to see his father strong although the fact reveals his weakness. The postmodern man, resembled by Wesley, does not have a hero to imitate. Wesley, then, will be a failure like his father.

The relationship between Ella and her husband reveals the wife-husband relationship of the postmodern era. According to patriarchal authority the wife depends on her husband for living and protection. In the postmodern period, the roles of men and women changed leading to a change in their relationship and in the patriarchal authority as well. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Ella is free to act the way she likes neglecting her husband and his role as a man, for "she has very little affection or even respect for her husband" (Smith, J. Overview). 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 lost one of his legs, so physically he lacks power. Weston's weakness gives Ella a reason to neglect him. Ella not only scorns her husband, for she betrays him as well. She makes a sexual relationship with Taylor, the man who buys the house from her. She goes outside the house with him without telling her husband. The relationship between Ella and Weston reveals that the postmodern man is no more superior in his relation with his wife. He is weak physically and spiritually, so this new role makes him face masculinity crisis.

Wesley places a lamb inside the kitchen. The lamb is affected by 'maggots'. Placing a lamb inside a kitchen is not a usual thing. The lamb represents Wesley himself, for both are infected and need treatment. Wesley is suffering from masculinity crisis. Unless his family helps him, he will be destroyed. On the other hand, Weston appears for the first time in the play by the end of the first act. Weston is "a very big man, middle aged, wearing a dark overcoat which looks like it's been slept in, a blue baseball cap, baggy pants, and tennis shoes. He's unshaven and slightly drunk" (Curse, 25). Weston enters the house to find the lamb inside the kitchen. Weston is astonished, so he speaks with himself: "Is this inside or outside?" According to Greg Barnhisel, one of the main themes in the play is the struggle between the inside and the outside (Barnhisel, Critical Essay). The family is destroyed because the outside is attacking the inside. The lamb is supposed to be outside the house, so it represents that in a destroyed family, everything can penetrate into the house. Weston's house, then, is not satisfactory. It lacks family unity, and this is one reason behind his weakness.

Weston's crisis is apparent as he continues speaking to himself. He opens the refrigerator to find it empty: "I don't know why we keep a refrigerator in this house." He becomes angry, so hunger pushes him to be upset and hopeless: "What's everybody waiting for, a miracle! THERE'S NO MORE MIRACLES! ...IT'S ONLY ME! MR. SLAVE LABOR HIMSELF COME HOME TO REPLENISH THE EMPTY LARDER!" (Curse, 26). Weston

represents every father who lost hope in his ability of being a real father. Wesley, on the other hand, represents every son who is lost and cannot find a good father to imitate. Shepard wants to show that the American man fails to prove his masculine identity because of the struggles he faces inside his family.

The second act of the play starts with Wesley and Emma criticizing their parents. The disunity of the parents leads the children to “function as parents and the parents as children” (Roussel, 7). To Emma, her mother is after Taylor because: “She doesn’t want to be stuck out here in the boonies for all her life”. She knows that her mother is selling the house for her own benefit. Wesley finds that of his parents are idiot: “She can’t think. He can’t either” (Curse, 29). The children are mocking their parents because of their wrong behavior. Both parents are thinking of selling the house instead of thinking of how to protect their family. Shepard wants to show that the postmodern man’s crisis is the result of the postmodern destroyed family.

The father-son conflict starts as Weston tells his son that he is going to sell the land and the house.

Weston: What do you think of it?

Wesley: I wouldn’t sell it.

Weston: ...What good is it? What good’s it doing?

Wesley: It’s just here. And we’re on it. And we wouldn’t be if it got sold. (Curse, 34)

Wesley refuses 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 means losing his identity. Wesley represents the new generation that needs to identify its identity through the connection with the land and the roots. Wesley still hopes of finding his identity. On the other hand, Weston is totally different from his son. Weston represents an elder generation that has lost hope in the present life. Weston can get rid of his house, the place where he belongs, without being affected because he has already lost his identity. Wesley tries to convince his Dad not to sell the land:

Wesley: We don’t have to sell, you know. We could fix the place up.

Weston: It’s too late for that. I owe money.

Wesley: I could get a job.

Weston: You’re gonna’ have to.

Wesley: I will. We could work this place by ourselves. (Curse, 38)

Wesley is young and wants to fix the place where he lives. He is hopeful because he is still young. What Shepard is trying to show is that the young generation of men is full of hope in the future. In fact, this hope cannot last because in the postmodern period, man is destroyed and cannot survive.

Hegemonic masculinity is found in societies where man is more powerful and superior to woman (Sawyer, 26). Hegemonic masculinity is one of the characteristics of the traditional cowboy; however, the postmodern cowboy fails to be powerful. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston tries to show that he is powerful, and that he is superior to other members of his family because he is the father: “I’M BEING TAKEN FOR A RIDE BY EVERY ONE OF YOU! I’m the one who works! I’m the one who brings home food! THIS IS MY HOUSE! ...SHE CAN’T STEAL MY HOUSE AWAY FROM ME” (Curse, 37). Weston speaks as if he is the ‘breadwinner’ of the family. In fact, he is jobless and cannot support his family with anything, not even food. Weston, then, is trying to prove what he is not. When Wesley tells him that his mother sold the house for Taylor, he becomes angry. He feels that she is trying to be superior over him. His masculinity is affected, so he turns to be violent. His violence is a way to prove that he is still powerful, especially when he knows that she went out with Taylor: “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 speaks as if he is a powerful man although his personality is the opposite of what he tries to show. He wants to use violence against his wife only to prove his manhood. Weston is the symbol of the postmodern American man who is unable to prove his masculine identity.

Weston lacks the ability of protecting and supporting his family, a matter that makes his wife scorn him. Ella feels free to act the way she likes, and her aim is to rebel against her husband and to live freely: "He can't hurt me now! I've got protection! If he lays a hand on me, I'm finished with feeling like a foreigner in my own house. I'm not afraid of him anymore" (Curse, 41). Ella is not afraid of her husband because she knows that he is powerless. The change of the role of the postmodern woman is clear here, for the woman becomes free and powerful. However, Weston is weak and cannot do anything. Not only Ella scorns him but also her lawyer Taylor: "He's unable to get insurance. He's unable to hold a steady job. He's absent from his home ninety percent of the time. He has a jail record" (Curse, 45). Weston's weakness makes him scorned by everyone. His state is that of the postmodern man who is frail and unable to act his role in his family.

Inheritance is an important theme in *Curse of the Starving Class*. Shepard wants to show that the son inherits his father's traits. Weston faces masculinity crisis, so his son will face it too. Weston tells his son that he himself carries the same traits of his father:

Weston: Good. You're growing up. I never saw my old man's poison until I was much older than you. Much older. And then you know how I recognized it?

Wesley: How?

Weston: Because I saw myself infected with it. That's how. I saw me carrying it around. His poison in my body. You think that's fair? (Curse, 35-36)

Wesley struggles in order not to be a failure like his father in the first two acts of the play, but in act three, he turns to act his father's role. Shepard wants to tell that if the father is not able to act his role properly, his son will be like him. Hence, the child pays for the sins of his father (Adler, 113). The postmodern American man will be a failure because the American family lacks the image of the true father.

An exchange between the roles between the father and the son takes place in act three. Weston appears in a new look. He has changed to become a new character: "I was gonna be reborn this morning or something. Couldn't believe my eyes...like I was coming back to my life after a long time a' being away" (Curse, 52). Weston wants to correct all the past and to start a new life with his family. His ideas have changed, and he does not want to sell his home anymore. He wants to fix the house, to take care of the land, and to act the role of an ideal father. Weston new dreams cannot become true because his family is already destroyed and no hope is left for reuniting the family. On the other hand, Wesley appears wearing his father's clothes. Not only his appearance is changed, but also his character is changed, too. He is drunk and upset. Emma tells him: "You're sick! What're you doing with his clothes on? Are you supposed to be the head of the family now or something?" (Curse, 61) Wesley inherited his father's traits, so he feels as if he is the father: "I could feel myself retreating. I could feel him coming in and me going out. Just like the change of the guards". Wesley who has tried to be hopeful at the beginning of the play turns to be hopeless and destroyed because he has become like his father. Shepard, thus, presents the crisis of the postmodern man and his inability of surpassing such a crisis.

In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the father and the son face masculinity crisis due to the lack of family unity. Their crises are revealed through their relation with each other and with the other members of the family: the mother and the daughter. Wesley represents the postmodern cowboy who fails to find a place for himself in his family. His father, mother, and sister affect him negatively and his relation with each of them reveals the impossibility of communication and unity among family members. Not only has the destruction of his family affected him, but also the loss of his home and land. On the other hand, the father belongs to an elder generation. The father's crisis shows that in the postmodern era, man is frail and hopeless. As a result, Shepard's postmodern hero lacks all the characteristics of the traditional American cowboy. Shepard's new image of the cowboy presents how the American man's character has shifted from a heroic figure to a destroyed one.

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