

## Domestic Violence in Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*

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(Received 18 / 4 / 2007. Accepted 26 / 6 / 2007)

### □ ABSTRACT □

This paper attempts to examine family relationships in Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*, focusing on the violence, both verbal and physical, that governs those relationships. Attention is paid to the causes and manifestations of the violent relationship between Weston and his wife Ella as well as to its effect on their children Wesley and Emma. In the process, the paper foregrounds the wider historical context of domestic violence as well as Shepard's skillful use of memorable visual images and narrative episodes in illustration of aggression within the family.

**Keywords:** Domestic Violence, Aggression, Primitive, Civilized.

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## العنف المنزلي في مسرحية لعنة الطبقة الجائعة للكاتب سام شيبارد

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(تاريخ الإيداع 18 / 4 / 2007. قبل للنشر في 26 / 6 / 2007)

### □ الملخص □

يحاول هذا البحث دراسة العلاقات الأسرية في مسرحية لعنة الطبقة الجائعة للكاتب الأمريكي سام شيبارد مركزاً على العنف، بشقيه الجسدي واللفظي، الذي يحكم هذه العلاقات. وفي هذا الصدد، يركز البحث على أسباب العلاقات العنيفة ومظاهرها بين ويستون وزوجته إيلا، ويوضح أثر تلك العلاقة العنيفة في وليديهما ويسلي وإيما. وفي أثناء ذلك، يُظهر البحث مهارة شيبارد في استخدامه لصور مرئية وقصص رائعة تجسداً لتلك العلاقة العنيفة ضمن العائلة، كما يضع تلك العلاقة في سياقها التاريخي.

كلمات مفتاحية: عنف منزلي، عدوان، بدائي، متحضّر.

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The idea of having the police come to investigate friction within their families leaves characters in some of Sam Shepard's plays uneasy and disoriented. Wesley, in *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), feels "humiliated" by it: "Makes me feel like we're someone else .... Makes me feel lonely. Like we're in trouble or something".<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Bradley, in *Buried Child* (1978), is against seeking police assistance: "No! Don't get the police in here. We don't want the police in here. This is our home" (122). Likewise, Austin, in *True West* (1980), rejects a similar suggestion, telling his blackmailer: "You're my brother" (23). The assumption underlying the attitude of these characters is that domestic dispute or violence is a private issue that should be settled within families away from public attention and police investigation or court trial. It also implies that these families, being American, are supposed to be free of troubles or acts of violence. However, in *True West*, Lee challenges Austin's view by rhetorically asking:

You go down to the L. A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. What do you think they'd say?..... Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in-law. Cousins. Real American-type-people. (23-24)

In other words, according to Lee, family bonding does not necessarily inhibit violence. On the contrary, it may sometimes increase the possibility of violent outbursts.

Lee's remark is not without its resonance for his theatre audience. Contemporary research on violence in American families concludes that "aside from war and riots, physical violence occurs between family members more often than it occurs between any other individuals".<sup>2</sup> Sam Shepard, like David Rabe and many other contemporary American dramatists, appears to concur with such a conclusion. He very often draws unsavoury pictures of family life and values, and always appears intent upon debunking and deconstructing the myth of the All-American happy family, in which pain, anxiety and strife are excluded, and American values are celebrated.<sup>3</sup> Home in many of his plays, especially *Buried Child* and *True West*, is not exactly "a cheerful, cozy place, a quiet refuge where a loving family gathers in the evening for happy, contented communication".<sup>4</sup> Rather, it is shown to be the site where family members may not only get worried, frustrated and angry, but also assaulted, both verbally as well as physically, and even murdered.

This paper attempts to examine family relationships in *Curse of the Starving Class*, focusing on the violence, both verbal and physical, that governs those relationships. Attention is paid to the causes and manifestations of the violent relationship between Weston and his wife Ella as well as to its effect on their children Wesley and Emma. In the process, the paper foregrounds the wider historical context of domestic violence as well as

<sup>1</sup> . Sam Shepard. *Seven Plays* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1986) 136-37. Further reference to this and other Shepard plays by page number in the text is to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> . Murray A. Straus and others. *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* (New York: Anchor Books, 1986) 32.

<sup>3</sup> . C.W.E. Bigsby. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, Volume Three (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 326.

<sup>4</sup> . Sara Munson Deates and Lagretta Tallent Lenker. *The Aching Hearth: Family Violence in Life and Literature* (New York: Plemun Press, 1991) 1-21 (1).

Shepard's skillful use of memorable visual images and narrative episodes in illustration of aggression within the family.

In one of his early interviews, Shepard points out that an image is central to his dramatic writing strategy: "I would have like a picture, and just start from there".<sup>5</sup> What is significant about this statement in connection with *Curse of the Starving Class* is that the picture involves a domestic act of violence prior to dramatic action. As reported, verbal violence by way of shouting, cursing and threatening precedes physical violence, but the act itself underlines "a strong association between family violence and alcohol abuse", and does in particular confirm that alcohol is "an immediate antecedent of wife abuse".<sup>6</sup> Alienated by her husband's drunkenness, money laundering and tendency to come late at night, Ella decides to lock him out. In retaliation, drunken Weston breaks the door and assaults Ella verbally and physically. However, he runs away shortly afterwards, because his terrified wife calls the police. Seeking police assistance is Ella's only escape from death. She underlines this point in her explanation of the situation to her indignant son Wesley: "I told you, he was trying to kill me" (137)! Thus, the beginning of *Curse of the Starving Class* establishes the partners as persons whose relationship is characterized by violence. This is foregrounded in Wesley's conduct following the reported act of violence. He is shown to be methodically picking up and throwing "*the pile of wooden debris... into an old wheelbarrow*" (135). Wesley's methodical way of dealing with the consequence of that violent act suggests that he is not strange to such violent encounters. In other words, violence in this family home is recurrent; therefore, Wesley's response to it is habitual; it is almost mechanical.

*Curse of the Starving Class* dramatizes the aftermath of the violent act and portrays its consequential complete breakdown of familial bonding and values. Communication is non-existent or uncommunicative, in that when they converse, they do not exchange views in a familial manner, but, like Austin and Lee in *True West*, Ella and Weston merely trade abuse and verbal insults. Weston is away for the most part of the play, and as soon as he comes back, Ella goes away. When they happen to be both at home, one or the other is shown to be sleeping or unconscious. In other words, they are not placed in a situation whereby they can engage in dialogue, let alone a healthy one. Failure of communication, mixed with fear on Ella's part, is underlined by their mutual reactions when they eye each other at the end of Act Two: "*WESTON sits up with a jolt on the table. ELLA jumps. They look at each other for a moment, then ELLA runs off stage*" (181). Ella is at the time rushing to visit their jailed daughter Emma. The daughter's problem should justify a meaningful discussion between the parents, but Ella neither tells Weston about Emma nor asks him to accompany her to see Emma. Nevertheless, when Ella is back, she tells Weston about the daughter; but their conversation is nothing more than an exchange of violent verbal abuse over who is to blame for the daughter's aggressive contact from the hereditary point of view. Thus, the broken door is a telling visual image of the nature of the relationship between Weston and Ella. This is why Shepard skillfully keeps it unfixed for the whole part of the play.

<sup>5</sup> . Sam Shepard. "Metaphors, Mad Dogs and Old Time Cowboys." An interview with Kenneth Chubb and the editors of the British journal *Theatre Quarterly*. Reprinted in *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*. edited by Bonnie Marranca (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981) 187-209 (191).

<sup>6</sup> . Bonnie L. Yegidis. "Speaking the Unspeakable: Family Violence in American in the 1990's." In *The Aching Hearth*, 23-32 (26).

The broken door has a further symbolic function. It is supposed to be “the barrier that insulates the family from the menace of the outside world”.<sup>7</sup> Weston, being the father, is expected to be responsible for the welfare and security of the family; instead he himself ironically becomes the agent of outside aggression. The family problem or vulnerability is compounded by his running away: “He not only violates their safety, but by virtue of his absence as father and protector, he leaves them open to attack and invasion from others”.<sup>8</sup> While Wesley is cleaning up the debris, besides recalling the verbal and visual violence between his parents, he expresses his fear of such as imminent invasion:

I could feel the space around me like a big, black world. I listened like an animal. My listening was afraid. Afraid of sound. Tense. Like any second something could invade me. Some foreigner. Something undescrivable (137).

The family home is repeatedly violated. In fact, throughout the play, strangers, including the family exploiters or blackmailers, the police and even a lamb enter the house freely without permission, bringing with them trouble and intensifying the inhabitants' sense of fear and insecurity. Moreover, Wesley's fear is later given a mythic proportion, linking it with his loss of the house which, in turn, is related to the loss of the country as a whole:

So it means more than losing a home. It means losing a country. It's a zombie invasion. Taylor is the head zombie. He's 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. (163)

Therefore, the family home is not insulated against outsiders, nor is it the domain of family safety and security.

Actually, the family home itself becomes the symbol of the family's disunity and disintegration. A considerable part of dramatic action in *Curse of the Starving Class* is devoted to showing how each of the partners one-sidedly seeks to sell the house, despite the fact that it is jointly owned. In the process, they are both left vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous outsiders. More importantly, selling the house is itself exploited to highlight personal and socio-historical differences between the partners. These differences in themselves at least in part account for the unhappiness of the marriage and the violence that governs it. Ella wants to sell the house in order to go to Europe, because she believes Europe has history and culture: “They have everything in Europe. High art. Paintings. Castles. Buildings. Fancy food” (143). On the other hand, Weston seeks to earn money “enough to get to Mexico” (168), the new American frontier. These opposed destinations are important not just because they confirm the split of the marriage, but more importantly, because they place domestic violence within a wider context. Weston's and Ella's personal differences are nationally or historically rooted. The American frontier is historically marked by the return of the civilized European colonialist to the conditions and simplicity of primitive society: “Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines”.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Weston is tied with the American growth, while Ella is aligned with the return

<sup>7</sup> . Lynda Hart. *Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) 69.

<sup>8</sup> . David J. DeRose. *Sam Shepard* (New York: Twayne, 1992) 92.

<sup>9</sup> . Frederick Jackson Turner. *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1957) 4.

to the civilized root. This is clear in the abusive exchange between Ella and Weston that takes place following Ella's return from her visit to Emma in prison. Ella sees her daughter's violence as part of the "inheritance" from the family line on Weston's side: it is the family curse. On the other hand, Ella distances herself from the family and identifies herself as an outsider, a member of a different breed of people. This identification draws an ironic rhetorical question from Weston: "Well, it's true. You come from a different class of people. Gentle. Artists. They were all artists, weren't they?"(188) Weston's question in effect confirms Ella's claim. On the other hand, Weston frequently associates himself with the explosive and the wild, which he inherited from his parents. For example, speaking about Taylor, who at the time is seeking to finalize a deal with Ella, Weston menacingly boasts:

He's not counting on what's in my blood. He doesn't realize the explosiveness. We don't belong to the same class. He doesn't realize that. He's not counting on that. He's counting on me to use my reason. To talk things out. To have a conversation. To go out and have business lunch and talk things over. He's not counting on murder. Murder's the farthest thing from his mind (171).

Thus, in underlying the differences between Weston and Ella along these terms, Shepard may be building upon Frederick Jackson Turner's view of the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization."<sup>10</sup>

Metaphorically personalized, Ella and Weston respectively represent sharply opposed parts of the self: "the natural" and "the socialized." This opposition always bears "the possibility for explosion."<sup>11</sup> Artichokes and groceries visually objectify this opposition between the primitive and the civilized, with all its attendant violence. Weston's return home is marked with verbal and visual violence. Sounds of "cursing" and "crashing" of things off stage are soon followed by Weston's introduction near the end of Act One looking "*unshaven and slightly drunk*"(156). Weston brings with him desert artichokes and places them in the refrigerator. The importance of artichokes as visual properties associating Weston with the primitive part of the self is accentuated with the introduction of their contrast, the groceries which Ella brings back with her from a city supermarket. Ella soon removes Weston's artichokes from the refrigerator to be replaced by her groceries. This replacement symbolically dramatizes the violent nature of the relationship between Weston and Ella. In other words, the replacement of Weston's artichokes by Ella's groceries is a further example of the ongoing violent struggle between "the primitive" and "the socialized" represented by Weston and Ella respectively.

The refrigerator is another visual property of a significant dramatic value. It is not simply there as part of a realistic setting, but more importantly, as a visual reminder that ultimately accounts for the violence within the family. Members of the family are not rich, but they are not poor either. In fact, they frequently bombastically deny belonging to the starving class. For example, at one stage, Wesley addresses a live lamb he has already brought inside the house: "You're lucky I'm not starving. You're lucky this is a civilized household" (156). Ironically, Wesley himself, not because of hunger later butchers the lamb, but because Wesley is bedeviled by the hereditary curse of the family. Nevertheless,

<sup>10</sup> . Turner 3.

<sup>11</sup> . Ron Mottram. *Inner Landscape: The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984.) 137.

the characters' repeated references to food and their obsessive opening and slamming shut the door of the refrigerator suggest a starvation of some sort. As White argues, "the quantitatively exaggerated imagery" and "the repeated insistence on the refrigerator" give "a mythic dimension to the hunger of the four family members," suggesting that their "hunger is spiritual" and not simply physical.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, there is no mention in the play of the words "love" and "God". Thus, one can assume that the characters' spiritual poverty prompts them to act violently.

Furthermore, the violent opposition between the socialized and the natural or primitive parts of the self, represented by Weston and Ella, is reinforced by means of very significant storytelling. In a soliloquy-like address to the lamb, Weston tells a story of an incident he repeatedly encountered while castrating lambs, which was a job he had to do. An eagle would come down and pick the tests of a castrated lamb. The spectacle of the eagle coming down and then flying up straight made Weston recall the first time he went up in a B.49. Obviously, Weston's story further associates him with the wild, the primitive, blood, and violence, but it also points to his desire to get free from the shackles of family life. Ironically, he tells the story just before he seems to embark on his aborted attempt at regeneration, represented by getting rid of his clothes, cleaning up his body, and the desire to reinstate the broken door. Weston's attempt at regenerating himself is aborted, because he is forced to run away, presumably to Mexico, to escape the wrath of angry creditors. However, Weston's episode acquires more important dramatic significance, when retold in a modified version by his wife Ella. In her version of the story, the tests are replaced by a cat which engages in a mid-air deadly struggle with the eagle:

And they fight. They fight like crazy in the middle of the sky. That 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'll die (200).

In other words, Ella's modification introduces the cat, which is a domestic animal. In this sense, the cat represents the civilized, the socialized as opposed to the eagle, which represents the wild and the primitive. Thus, the episode refocuses the audience's attention on the battle between the socialized and the primitive, and coming as it does at the end of the play, the episode conveys the sense that the family is left "in much the same condition as the eagle and the cat."<sup>13</sup> They are caught in a situation whereby they find themselves engaged in a deadly struggle for survival.

The fact that the modified version of Weston's story is addressed to his son Wesley suggestively underlines both the source of violence in *Curse of the Starving Class* and the reason for its generational continuity. Violence in the play is mainly "modeled and reinforced by family members."<sup>14</sup> This is because parents do normally act as "primary models of behavior for children to imitate"<sup>15</sup> not only during childhood but also in their adult life. Thus, like their parents, Wesley and Emma talk and act violently. To foreground the similarity between parents and children, Shepard gives the children names that are mere mutations of their parents'. However, as Emma acknowledges, the children's

<sup>12</sup>. Charles G. Whiting. "Food and Drink in Shepard's Theatre," *Modern Drama* 31. 2 (June 1988): 175-183 (176).

<sup>13</sup>. Mottram 138.

<sup>14</sup>. Barbra Whitmer. *The Violence Mythos* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997) 43.

<sup>15</sup>. Deates an Lenker 5

behaviour is not simply a matter of imitation, but something inherent and hereditary in nature. Emma underscores this point by way of warning Taylor of her father's explosive behaviour:

A short fuse they call it. Runs in the family. His father was just like him. And his father before him Wesley is just like pop too. Like liquid dynamite.... It's chemical. It's the same thing that makes him drink. Something in the blood. Hereditary. Highly explosive (152).

This point is reiterated by other characters, including Weston himself, but the fact that Wesley's name is mentioned this early in the play predicts that he is to replace his father and inherit all his character's qualities. This is underlined both visually and verbally. Like his father, Wesley is associated with blood and flesh. For example, just before his father's escape "*WESLEY wanders on stage from stage left, completely naked, his hair wet*" (189). He then picks up the lamb and carries it off stage right. Moments afterwards, Wesley reappears dressed in his father's clothes and reports butchering the lamb. The acts of butchering the lamb and putting on the father's clothes reinforce Wesley's association with his father. This is why Wesley's explanation of the second act appears redundant, except for the emotion involved in the verbal description of the act of transformation:

I started putting all his clothes on. His baseball cap, his tennis shoes, his overcoat. And every time I put one thing on it seemed like a part of him was growing on me. I could feel him taking over me..... I could feel myself retreating. I could feel him coming in and me going out. Just like the change of the guards (196).

No wonder then that Ella at that time mistakes Wesley for Weston.

On the other hand, though Emma's name is a mutation of her mother's, she can not be distanced from the hereditary curse of the family. Early in the play, while warning Taylor, Emma claims that she does not have the hereditary "fuse" in her blood. But in fact, blood is first mentioned in the play with reference to her when her mother gives her instructions as to how to deal with her first period, which the mother later relates to the family curse that "goes back and back to tiny little cells and genes. To atoms. To tiny little swimming things making up their minds without us. Plotting in the womb" (174). However, Emma's act ties her with the family curse or violence. For example, she fantasises about being a mechanic who is going to exploit the troubles of her mother and Taylor on a deserted road. But it is her involvement in acts of violent nature that establishes her as a character with explosive behaviour. This is embodied in her engagement in a shooting spree at the "Alibi Club," which is owned by one of her father's exploiters. This violent incident renders her in prison. But she is soon released through making sexual overtures to the guards. Emma's involvement in violence is reaffirmed, following her release from prison, by her decision to make crime her profession: "It's the perfect self-employment. Crime. No credentials. No diplomas. No overhead. No upkeep. Just straight profit. Right off the top" (197). Emma's declaration could be seen as a comment on a social problem of which she is a victim. For the moment she is out in pursuit of her aim, a "*huge explosion off stage*" (197) is heard, signalling her murder. This is soon followed by the appearance of the murderers, Emerson and Slater, "giggling" in happiness at their success. The murderers' intended target is Weston, but the fact that Emma is killed



shows that she is by no means innocent, and that though crime can sometimes pay, it is costly as well.

The fact that Wesley and Emma are chains in a violent hereditary line implies that they do not have a healthy relationship with their parents. For example, Emma's dialogue with her mother, at the beginning of the play, is charged with bitter emotions and full of abusive, verbal violence. The mutual verbal aggression is provoked by Ella's cooking of Emma's chicken which she prepared for a demonstration at a women club. Similarly, the dialogue between Wesley and Weston is uncommunicative in the sense that neither seems to understand the other. This is why the possibility for verbal explosion is always there. The play is in fact punctuated with violent verbal outbursts. For example, at one stage Weston addresses Wesley: "Jesus, you're enough to drive a sane man crazy! You're like having an espionage spy around. Why are you watching me all the time?" (168) Naturally, this feeling of being watched, this sense of lack of security, creates an atmosphere that is conducive to violence.

On the other hand, the relationship between the siblings is equally governed by violence. For instance, in the dispute between Ella and Emma over the chicken, Wesley sides with his mother. First, he seeks to silence Emma by using verbal violence in a very sarcastic way: "SHUT UP OUT THERE! YOU SHOULD'VE PUT YOUR NAME ON IT IF YOU DIDN'T WANT ANYBODY TO BOIL IT!"(141) Emma counteracts by shouting from off-stage "EAT MY SOCKS!"(141) This mutual verbal violence soon develops into physical, albeit a redirected one. To undermine Emma's plans, Wesley destroys her charts, the other items necessary for her demonstration. The destruction is done in the most obscene manner: "*WESLEY unzips his fly, takes out his pecker, and starts pissing all over the chart on the floor*" (142). This act of physical obscenity or violence predicts Wesley's association with the flesh in the same way that the chicken ties Emma with the flesh, but the theatre audience will almost certainly find his act equally offensive. Therefore, one would expect the audience to be denouncing the family by asking with Emma: "what kind of a family is this?" (142). It is a family which is shown throughout the play to be lacking familial values and is riddled with unhappiness, strife, and different acts of violent nature.

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