



SAM SHEPARD'S 'CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS': A PLAY OF FAMILIAL DISHARMONY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses the major play of Sam Shepard's **Curse of the Starving Class** subtitled as 'A Play of Familial Disharmony'. The play is about schism in the family leading to its disintegration. Weston, the head of the family, is a drunkard who is hated by his wife for drinking and its effect on the family. Wesley, the son, tries to transform his parents but fails. Emma, the daughter, tries to run away from the family and her state of mind is revealed in her reckless driving which leads to her arrest. At the end of the play Weston goes away to Mexico in an attempt to save his life from his ruthless creditors, Slater and Emerson. The play has conventional three acts and it was acclaimed with Obie award.

Key words: Forays, Paradoxical, Schism, Sprawl and Trilogy

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INTRODUCTION

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Buried Child in 1979, Sam Shepard was born on 5th November, 1943 in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, America. He won more than ten Obie Awards for his plays. He wrote more than fifty plays.

Much of Sam Shepard's fame and reputation rests on the work he has done since 1977. In that year *Curse of the Starving Class* was awarded an Obie prize for the best new play. In the view of some critics, 'Curse of the Starving Class' is a part of a family Trilogy which includes 'Buried Child' (1979) and 'True West' (1980).

Curse of the starving class takes place in the kitchen of a middle class American home. The play is about the curses which have fallen on the family. These include hereditary, biological and psychological curses. The central image in the play is hunger. Weston is the head of the family and his

repeated drunken forays and irresponsible spending have alienated his wife, Ella. This couple has a daughter, Emma and a son, Wesley. The rest of the characters in the play are Taylor, Ellis, Emerson and Slater. Shepard's calls Weston's family a Tate family.

The play is about the all-too-sudden invasion of a small southern California ranching community by the suburban sprawl of housing developments and super highways. The play tells about Weston's violent attack on his family, especially on his wife symbolises the destruction of the protective circle of the family. He violates not only the safety of the family but also neglects his duties as a father and protector. He leaves the family open to attack and invasion from others. Wesley is particularly sensitive to this sense of attitude by his father. Weston's drunken habits

made the family sad and miserable leading to frustration and disharmony.

Ella's dislike for Weston and her complaint to the police about Weston's attacks also makes it clear that Ella and Weston do not have any good conjugal relations, so the effect is disintegration of the family. Wesley tries to compromise his parents but fails. So the family suffers from disharmony and disunity. Both thematically and theatrically, **Curse of the Starving Class** contains images of violation and hostile conditions. The play tells about the impersonal invasion of uncontrollable socio-economic forces into the family unit. It also tells us a terrifying violation of a family and home at night by a drunken father who smashes down the front door indicates his rude behaviour towards his family.

According to Ella, the title 'curse' itself manifests in two different forms. Emma has just experienced her first menstrual period which her mother assumes is normal psychological function and also refers to her condition as a 'curse'. The curse controls from within and from without, it is both an internal biological and psychological structure and an insidious invader that penetrates the family's enclosure. This kind of emotional barrenness makes the family disturbed and again it constitutes another kind of curse to the starving family.

The central image in the play is hunger. The empty refrigerator is the sign of the family's deep-rooted starvation. But Ella tells Wesley somewhere in the play that they are neither poor nor rich, so they belong to middle class family and they suffer from the sense of starvation. Shepard frequently uses the absence of food or its frenzied consumption to indicate spiritual starvation. In this play Tate family denies that they are part of the starving class, but they are always hungry.

The hereditary curse as described by Ella slowly begins to go away from Wesley which is the personal habit of his father crept upon him. In a crucial encounter between father and son in Act II Weston tells Wesley that it is good for the son to recognize his father's 'poison' which he failed to recognize it in his life until he saw himself infected with it.

Wesley : Yes
 Weston : Yes, you do. I can see that you do.
 My poison scares you.
 Wesley : Doesn't scare me.
 Weston : No?
 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? (P.35-36)

From Weston and Wesley's conversation, it is clear that Weston has got genetic poison from his father, but he realizes it when he is grown up. So it is a kind of curse which comes from father to son and son to grandson. Ella calls it a kind of hereditary curse which continues from one generation to the other. Here, Weston's father, then Weston and now it is Wesley, tomorrow Wesley's son. It is a continuous process. So the curse will never end.

Shepard uses the monologues as a form of dramatic delivery closest to narrative, to convey Wesley's fantasy. According to Wesley, to satisfy one's own hunger he kills hungry lamb, which is a curse to a lamb from generations. This fantasy is a kind of psychological feeling that the innocent animals are being killed for the sake of satisfying one's own hunger. Here the lamb is being victimized for human hunger.

The theme of disintegration is found in the play. All the members of the family have their own plans to leave the house and decide to live separately, except Wesley. Wesley alone always tries to make the family united. Ella and Weston negotiate to sell their home and farmland to Taylor and Ellis. Ella plans to sell her farmland through Taylor, a lawyer, who plans to grab the land from Ella. It seems that Ella has had some secret relations with Taylor. Ella tells Wesley about her proposal of selling the farmland to Taylor and leaving for Europe permanently with her children. Weston's family suffers from disunity and disharmony which finally leads to disintegration.

Wesley : Where are we going Wesley :

Ella : Europe may be. Wouldn't you like to go to Europe?

Wesley : No

Ella : Why not?

Wesley : What's in Europe?

Weston also has got his own plan to sell the farmland to Ellis and leave for Mexico to escape life threat from his creditors, Emerson and Slater. Emma doesn't want to stay at home and she always thinks of going somewhere. Finally she is killed in an accident.

The various happenings described above suggest that the family doesn't have any harmony and peace. It lacks unity among the members of the family. Everybody has his/her own plans to escape from the burden of the family life and decide to live separately. Weston leaves for Mexico, Emma always dreams of her wanderings. Ella always plans

to go Europe. Wesley alone tries to unite the family but fails.

The structure of the play, however, continues to rely on images to a larger extent. Shepard depicts the family as a paradoxical-union, life-giving, nurturing protective, destructive, uncooperative but above all necessary and inescapable.

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