

The Decay of Social Relations in Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*

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انحلال العلاقات الاجتماعية في مسرحيتي لعنة الطبقة الجائعة و الطفل المدفون لسام شيبيرد

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الملخص:

لقد اختار الكاتب الأمريكي سام شيبيرد العائلة نواة لاعماله المسرحية. وقد صور الكاتب الواقع مخلوطا مع الاسطورة واللامعقول. صورة العائلة في اعماله هي صورة فاسدة ومشوهة، اما افرادها فهم رجال ونساء فاشلون ومحطمون ويرتبطون مع بعضهم بعلاقات متحللة وغير اخلاقية، ان هذه الصورة المتحللة الفاسدة هي انعكاس للواقع الأمريكي، تتناول هذه الدراسة العلاقات الاجتماعية المتحللة في مسرحيتين للكاتب هما لعنة الطبقة الجائعة و الطفل المدفون. الكلمات المفتاحية: شيبيرد، العائلة، لعنة الطبقة الجائعة، الطفل المدفون.

Abstract

The American playwright Sam Shepard chose the family as a nucleus for many of his plays. He depicts the American reality and mixes it with absurdity and myth. The families in his plays are spoiled and deformed units. Their members are failed and ruined American men and women tied by decayed immoral relations. This rotten deformed image is seen as a mirror to reflect the reality of the American society. This paper studies the decayed relations in two plays *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*.

Key Words: Shepard, family, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*

I certainly do not want to depress the hell out of people,
but I think you've got to go through the night to get to the day,
and I haven't gone all the way through the night yet. (Sam Shepard, VerMeulen,86)

The American playwright Sam Shepard, born in 1943, places the family at the core of most of his plays. *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) and *Buried Child* (1978, Pulitzer Prize winner 1979) are among the main works that tackle this subject. Written successively, these two plays have many thematic and technical similarities a point enhanced by the fact that familial and social relations are examined in both plays.

The family has a special importance because it is the first brick the whole society is built upon. It is the central unit that links the individual to the world. If this unit is deformed, then everything will collapse. Being aware of its critical position, Shepard depicts different American families with estranged fathers and mothers, alienated brothers and sisters and totally unbalanced family members that brutally fight each other along the course of events. Concerning this point, Allen rhetorically asks:

What does not 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. (Allen, 148)

Sam Shepard who is known by his autobiographical allusions in his plays, usually reflects his personal environment. His characters are driven from real life, controlled by their shameful ugly past and motivated by their sense of loss. Consequently, their actions are dominated by their brutal nature and violence that is reflected in language and behavior. Shepard, himself, clarifies:

I grow in a condition where the male influences around me were primarily alcoholic and extremely violent, and at the same time, like lost children, not knowing how to deal with it. Instead, they were plunked down on the desert not knowing how they got there. And slowly they began receding further and further and further away- receding from the family, receding from society. (Roudane, 71)

Each of Shepard's two plays, *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, focuses upon the decay and destruction of familial ties in a post-modern American family. In the two families, there are characters who strive painfully and endlessly to find their places inside the family. The opening scenes in the two plays reflect an image which is full of disunity and disharmony.

The setting in both plays is the family house. *The Curse of the Starving Class* starts with the mother Ella speaking to her son Wesley about the drunken father who smashed the door violently in the night. This action leads to arouse a sense of fear in the mother as well as the son. She calls the police because she is "in danger of my life. I was being threatened" (*Curse*,136). Wesley also clarifies: "I listened like an animal. My listening was afraid. Afraid of sound. Tense. Like any second something could invade me. Some foreigner. Something indescribable" (*Curse*,137). The violent invasion of the father gives an ironic fearful image about the traditional protector of the family. This image of the alcoholic, careless and violent father is re-emphasized in *Buried Child*. The father here has lost his powerful image and turned to be "very thin and sickly looking" (*Buried*,63), staring at the T.V.; yet, with a worse fondness of drinking. The frightening invader in the first play is turned to be a ruined old man in the second. Still fearful, he is the killer of his wife's and his son's incestuous child. In other words, Weston and Dodge are typical representatives to the collapse of the American Dream.

Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class* is absent at the beginning whereas his violence can be noticed in the remains of the broken door. The mother and the son are speaking about the spiritual and the physical damage that he caused. The conversation indicates that the relationship between Ella and Wesley is stronger than her relation with Weston. She speaks with her son frankly about her feelings of fear towards the husband. Wesley also is nearer to his mother than to his father when he describes his state of fear due to the horrible violation of the night. The continuous absence of the father creates a huge gap between him and the family members which cannot be redeemed. There is no real communication between Weston and his wife from one side, or between him and his two children from the other. When the play opens with Wesley fixing the door, it gives a symbolic meaning for his attempt to fix the situation between them. An action which is refused by Ella thinking that it is her husband's responsibility:

ELLA: (after a while) You shouldn't be doing that.

WESLEY: I'm doing it.

ELLA: Yes, but you shouldn't be. He should be doing it. He's the one who broke it down.

WESLEY: He's not here.

ELLA: He's not back yet?

WESLEY: Nope.

ELLA: Well, just leave it until he gets back.

WESLEY: In the meantime we gotta' live in it.

ELLA: He'll be back. He can clean it up then. (*Curse*,135)

Ella is in need of love and protection which Weston cannot provide. On the contrary, he becomes a source of threat to the family. Ella's emotional and spiritual needs are reflected in her careless character. Calling the police at midnight reflects her need for protection. Her need for love is unconsciously reflected in the frank conversation with her son with its "Oedipal echoes" (Clum,174). Ella lacks many things inside the family and she tries to find an outer provider for them. Taylor the lawyer, is the one who will fill-up her physical and spiritual needs. She will have a relation with him

and will chose him to sell the house for her, thinking that he is a true friend. Even when Wesley warns her against his father's anger, she tells him:

ELLA: He can't hurt me now! I've got protection! If he lays a hand on me, I'll have him cut to ribbons! He's finished!

WESLEY: He's beat you to the punch and he doesn't even know it.

ELLA: Don't talk stupid! And get this junk out of here! I'm tired of looking at broken doors every time I come here. (*Curse*,174)

On the other hand, Dodge in *Buried Child* represents again a collapsed image of the American father. He is "the embodiment of nihilism, never leaving the ratty sofa to which he seems physically attached" (Clum,180). He exists physically, but his spiritual absence is very clear on the members of the family. Dodge himself is aware of this reality when admits: "My appearance is out of his domain! It's even out of mine! In fact, it's disappeared! I'm invisible man!" (*Buried*,68).

Symbolically speaking, the family members practice many actions that mean killing the father. The mother Halie wears her mourning clothes, Tilden "performs a burial ritual several times: he brings corn from the backyard and puts it in his father's lap, then he covers Dodge with a blanket, and eventually Tilden places corn husks on him" (Anghel,111). Concerning the same point, the other characters have similar symbolic actions :

Halie and Venice place roses on him, then Tilden's brother, Bradley, puts Shelly's fur coat over Dodge, and finally Vince also covers his grandfather with a blanket. Bradley is more aggressive and impatient and even cuts his father's hair and hurts him, which may suggest his younger son's wish and impatience to take his father's 'crown'. (Ibid)

Dodge, like Weston, fails to act his role as a protector to the family. When Tilden, his elder son, returns from a failed attempt to leave the family he unwelcomes him although he knows that Tilden is in need for his protection:

DODGE: ... What'd you come back here for?

TILDEN: I didn't know where to go.

DODGE: You're a grown man. You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age. It's unnatural. There's nothing we can do for you anyway. Couldn't you make a living down there? Couldn't you find some way to make a living? Support yourself? What'd'ya come back here for? You expect to feed you forever.

TILDEN: I didn't know where else to go. (*Buried*,78)

Dodge in *Buried Child* is a worse and more pathetic version of Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*. When Weston gets older, he will definitely be like Dodge. Both of them are anti-social men without friends or normal social relations who seek to be away from civilized societies. When Tilden brings the corn, Dodge accuses him of stealing them from the neighbors and he clarifies:

DODGE: I haven't had trouble with neighbors here for fifty-seven years. I don't even know who the neighbors are! And I don't wanna know! Now go put that corn back where it came from! (*Buried*,70)

Weston, who is a war veteran, also has an anti-social character. He wants to sell the farm and go to Mexico. He wants to escape from his responsibilities as a father, husband and bread provider since he failed in fulfilling them.

WESTON: ... I was thinkin' I could sell it and buy some land down in Mexico.

WESLEY: Why down there?

WESTON: I like it down there. (*Curse*,160)

Later on , when the bankers want their money back Wesley advises his father to run away again to Mexico:

WESLEY: They'll be coming for you here. They know where you live.

WESTON: Where should I go?

WESLEY: How 'bout Mexico?

WESTON: Mexico? Yeah. That's where everyone escapes to, right? It's full of escape artists down there. I could go down there and get lost. I could disappear. I could start a whole new life down there.

WESLEY: Maybe. (Curse,195)

Weston and Dodge seem incapable of mixing with their families and with the society they are living in. It is believed that "Shepard's fathers, seeking refuge from the strictures of civilization in the desert, are usually absent or destructive; wandering drunks or embittered nihilists" (Clum, 176). This becomes clear when Weston buys a piece of land in the desert and "it is the macrocosmic view of the barren garden in *Buried Child*" (Ibid.) According to Hart, the desert in Shepard's plays is the "illusory, eminently male landscape" (Hart, 105), whereas, Clum sees it as "the father's desert dream [which] reflects the tensions between isolation and society" (Clum, 174).

Like *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child* also reflects the absence of communication between the family members. It opens with Dodge and Halie speaking with each other but from different floors since she is upstairs in her room. This point reflects the gap between them. Being disconnected from her husband like Ella, she is trying to find a protector and a giver for her needs. She has a relation with the minister.

Halie is seen as

the typical Shepard matriarch. She is either occupying her room upstairs, filled with pictures of the past and expressing idealized images of her sons, or off having an affair with the ineffectual minister. Halie descends from her upstairs room dressed in mourning, but returns in yellow, her arms full of flowers, still an image of fertility, wife and mother to men who represent forms of sterility. (Ibid.,180)

The Oedipal theme dominates the relation between the mother and her son Tilden. The title refers to the incestuous child that is as a result of this forbidden relation. Dodge kills this child and buries it in the family farm. This buried child is turned to be the rotten secret the family keeps. There are many similarities between *Buried Child* and *Oedipus*. The family land is also cursed and "it includes the theme of incest. The crops have failed and there has been no rain" (Jacobus, 1291). Holding an armful of corn, Tilden is compared to the "corn god" who is a "symbol of renewal" (Ibid.)

Speaking about the same point, the Oedipal complex does not distinguish the relationship between Halie and Tilden only, but it also foreshadows the relationship between Halie and her dead son Ansel. Her feelings of jealousy are very clear when she describes him at the moment of his marriage:

He was going with her, thinking he was free. Thinking it was love. What could I do? I couldn't tell him she was a witch. ...I watched him leave. I watched him throw gardenias as he helped her into the limousine. I watched his face disappear behind the glass. (*Buried*,74)

Halie considered Ansel her hero. He is her only hope in life and with his death she has lost this hope. In her eyes he is better than her other two sons since he is "Brave. Strong. And very intelligent" and he "could've been a great man" (*Buried*, 73). She thinks that he is the only one who can take care of her and her husband when they become old since "Bradley can't look after us. Bradley can hardly look after himself" (*Buried*,72). And Tilden has to be watched because "he's still a child" (*Buried*,77). Halie expresses her sadness and loneliness about Ansel's death:

... when Ansel died that left us all alone. Same as being alone. No different. Same as if they'd all died. He was the smartest. He could've earned lots of money. Lots and lots of money. (*Buried*,73)

In both plays, the family relations are decayed and disturbed. Both men and women are not aware of their roles anymore. They are careless and oblivious their responsibilities. They rarely speak to each other, if they do, the feelings of hate and disgust are very clear in their speech. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Ella orders her son to stop fixing the door because it is the father's responsibility. Then in another occasion she accuses Weston of not living in the house:

WESLEY: Somebody does live here!

ELLA: Who? Not your father!

WESLEY: He works on it. He does the watering.

ELLA: When he stand up. How often is that? He comes in here and

Passes out on the floor for three days then disappears for a week. You call that work? I can't run this place by myself. (*curse*,147)

Following the same steps, Weston also accuses Ella of being irresponsible in not doing the laundry for a long time and prevents his daughter Emma from doing it:

WESTON: (*pushing laundry to one side*) She didn't do any of this. It's the same as when I brought it. None of it!

EMMA: I'll do it.

WESTON: No, you won't do it! You let her do it! It's her job! What does she do around here anyway? Do you know? What does she do all day long? What does a woman do?

EMMA: I don't know. (*Curse*,167)

Weston and Ella hate each other and each wants to get rid of the other without paying any attention to the children and their needs. This becomes clear when each one of them plans to sell the land and the family house without telling the other. Weston and Emma are considered representatives for all the American men and women. Weston is like all the other men who returned from World War II and they are "no longer able to relate to the women they had left behind" (Bigsby, 10). While Emma is one of the women who "suffered an incredible psychological assault, mainly by men who were disappointed in a way they didn't understand" (Simpson, 209). In fact those men who "come back from the war, had to settle down, raise a family and send the kids to school- and they couldn't handle it" (Ibid.)

On the other hand, the couple in *Buried Child*, have the same feelings of hate and carelessness in their speech. Halie is very mean and aggressive when she speaks with Dodge:

You sit here day and night, festering away! Decomposing! Smelling up the house with your putrid body! Hacking your head off til all hours of the morning! Thinking up mean, evil, stupid things to say about your own flesh and blood! (*Buried*,76)

His careless disconnected character can be noticed when he says a sentence which mirrors his position in the play: "So, What difference does it make? Everybody knows, everybody's forgot" (*Buried*,77).

Each of Shepard's families "has lost touch with its own visions, in which myths have become fantasies, family units have collapsed, language is broken" and in the world of his plays "men and women, apparently programmed to respond to different needs, circle one another warily, no longer sure of their own roles, compelled by a passion with the power to destroy". (Bigsby, 9)

Naturally, as a result for this disastrous situation, all the family members will suffer. Yet, sons' and daughters' suffering is doubled. Even when they strive painfully to protect the family, their attempts are in vein. Emma and Wesley have a very bad relation. They are fighting all the time, showing no respect for each other.

EMMA: What a type of family is this?

ELLA: I tried to stop him but he would not 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 is stupid thing to spend your time on.

EMMA : I am leaving this house. (*Curse*,142)

In such conditions, leaving the family is a natural reaction. Emma in *Curse of the Starving Class* is planning to leave the house and to be an independent woman without showing any concern for her parents. In fact her parents represent the main reason behind leaving the family house. She wishes if they never back while speaking with her brother:

EMMA: (*after a long pause*) You think they'll come back?

WESLEY: Who?

EMMA: Our parents.

WESLEY : You mean ever?

EMMA: Yeah. Maybe they'll never come back, and we'll have the whole place to ourselves. We could do a lot with this place. (*Curse*,164)

Emma wants to travel to Mexico and "to work on fishing boats" or to be a "mechanic" (*Curse*,149). This indicates her need for freedom and to get rid of man's dominance. Unfortunately, Emma's attempts to escape from the family house lead to her destruction at the end when she dies in a car explosion. It is believed that "Emma attempts to escape America altogether by abandoning its borders as well as its principles. She wants to deny her heritage by renouncing her family's name and creating a new identity for herself down in Mexico" (Modachy, 85).

Opposite to Emma, Wesley wants to stay in the family house and he rejects the idea of selling it. He wants to reunite with his father and mother, but in vein. This is clear when he speaks to his father:

WESTON: (*to WESLEY*) What do you think of it?

WESLEY: I wouldn't sell it.

WESTON: You wouldn't sell it. You couldn't sell it! It's not yours!

WESLEY: I know. But I wouldn't if it was.

WESTON: How come? 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*,167)

Wesley is the only hope for the family since he is attached to the land. He realizes that his existence is related to his family and to his land. In spite of his dream to travel to "Alaska" (*Curse*, 164), he believes that "however violent and destructive, family is the only refuge, but family cannot really protect one" (Clum, 179). Wesley is doomed to be like his father as Weston describes it:

WESTON: Good you are 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 around. , ' You think that's fair. (*Curse*,168).

Being called Weston by his mother, Wesley ironically becomes like his father. Clum believes it is "violence" that was inherited from one generation to another (Clum, 178). Like Weston, Wesley is unable to protect the family that is once destroyed by his father. Wesley describes his inevitable similarity to his father :

I started putting all his clothes on. His baseball cap, his tennis shoes, his overcoat. And every time I put one thing 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 (*Curse*, 197).

The moment that Wesley has inherited everything from his father, even his clothes, Weston has started a new life. Taking off his clothes is a metaphorical sign for his new start. Weston's final realization, that everything he dreams of exists in his land and inside his family, is too late. The family unit is collapsed. The land is taken by the banker. All his family members are destroyed. His final conclusions that: "This could be a great place if somebody'd take some interest in it" and " I actually was the owner" (*Curse*, 186) seem silly, meaningless and out of date. Weston is the main reason behind the destruction of himself and of his family members. The family is starving physically and spiritually. They are in need of food and the empty refrigerator in the middle of the house is highly symbolic in this concern. But their spiritual starving is greater and more effective since they are in bad need of love, respect, care and mutual understanding. The final story about the eagle which destroys itself through

catching a cat causing its death seems typical to mirror all the family members in their self-destructive journey of life to catch their dreams.

In *Buried Child* also, the sons are affected by the disharmonious family. Tilden, the eldest, is mentally unstable. He returned from a failed attempt to leave to Mexico. He describes his suffering when he is alone by saying:

TILDEN: I was alone. I thought I was dead.

DODGE: Might as well have been. What'd you come back here for?

TILDEN: I didn't know where to go. (*Buried*,78)

Tilden realizes that the family is the only place that he can live in although it is rotten and decayed. He is attached to his house, and is always connected to the "images of fertility" in the play (Clum, 181). Holding corn at the beginning of the play, speaking about the family farm all the time and standing in the rain are symbolic references to his fertility. This image will be completed with the arrival of his non-recognized son, Vince. Yet, it is a deformed and decayed image since he is father of the incestuous buried child. Definitely this foreshadows the late fertility of the sterile family farm due to the corps of the buried child. Tilden is the one who reveals the family secret at the end when he enters holding the buried dead corps since "you gotta talk or you'll die" (*Buried*, 78).

The other son, Bradley, is very mean and aggressive. He is an amputee whose fearful physical appearance is just a reflection of his violent nature. He behaves brutally with Shelly when he puts his fingers in her mouth. Even the father is suffering from his brutality and violence when he cuts his hair while sleeping.

Shepard in *Buried Child* tries to give "a dark vision of agrarian America in which the land, even the catastrophic weather, seems poisoned by the human inhabitants" (Clum, 180). Still there is a kind of hope with the arrival of Vince the "third generation" of the family who wants to "reconnect to his family roots" (Ibid.) In this sense, he is similar to Wesley. Both Wesley and Vince are ambitious young men who want to correct the wrong situations by leading their families instead of their fathers. When Weston escapes, he abandons his role for his son Wesley who wears his father's clothes. Similarly, when Dodge dies he leaves the farm for Vince, a point that indicated the continuity of the family line. When Weston describes it as an inherited "poison" from father to son, Vince expresses it as the following:

And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face and it went on like that. (*Buried*, 130)

It is the curse that is inherited from one generation to another. Shepard has depicted it faithfully when he mirrors two American families very similar to each other. Each is distinguished by the decayed relations, spoiled roles and damaged principles. Shepard's families are deformed units known by their immoral relations and violent members.

Conclusion:

The American playwright Sam Shepard, exposes the raw tensions of the American family and confronts problems of the lost individual in an industrial mechanized society through statements of psychological and spiritual displacements, loss of connections, loneliness and self-deception. Like O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, Shepard's concept of the family is centered on his dream of the ideal family and his desire to make peace with it rather than to understand it.

In general terms, the world of American family drama shows a concern for family failure and destruction. Following O'Neill, Shepard is obsessed with the failure of family harmony and the disintegration of family unit due to the weakness and decay of familial relations. The world of his plays is made up of family struggles and disappointments and usually :

The protagonist searches for freedom and longs for security. He may escape from the family, may triumph over its oppression, or may be destroyed by it. If he survives, he recapitulates the

struggle in his own marriage or with his own children. Or, as survivor, he is left alone and anguished by the loss of family. (Scanlan, 7, 49)

In *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, Shepard reflects the ruined American family. The fathers abandoned their roles since they failed in achieving their dreams. They are irresponsible husbands and violent fathers. The conventional image of the father as a protector of the family is converted to be a source of threat. The mothers are careless incestuous women seeking for personal lusts instead of being the source of love and security. Sons and daughters are rootless and lost. They strive painfully to find place in their families; yet, the more they try their need for belonging increases. Living in such a dilemma, the decay of familial relations and social ties is inevitable.

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