

Motifs of Repetition of Fate and Return to the Past in Some of Sam Shepard's Plays

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Abstract: Sam Shepard once commented on what he deemed the notion of family and heredity: "What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean? 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." Critics consider *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) and *Buried Child* (1978) the first two parts of a "family trilogy" completed by *True West* (1980), or the first two plays in a quintet – those three works plus *Fool for Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). *True West* and *A Lie of the Mind* are flooded with references to the past, as the characters eagerly attempt to fix familial and cultural history. The obsession with memory leads to an awareness of erosion, perhaps a desire to forget, repress, ignore, deny or falsify the facts. However, in Shepard's work, nothing is further from the truth that all the characters feel in their unconsciousness and refuse uttering. The terms "homecoming" and "heritage" are bullets capable of crushing any preconceived notion of either. Upon closer inspection, legacy takes the form of addiction, disconnection, and displacement whereas homecomings provide shelter and entrapment, offering numberless opportunities to recover, dredge up, or scatter the ashes of the past.

The plays that will be considered to illustrate the repetition of fate and regression to the past are *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West*. The dramatic realism and the gothic melt to show how deviations, considered to occur in fantasies, in remote geographical areas and never in real life, actually occur in real life, and the unauthorized becomes authorized.

Shepard belittles the myth of America as the new Eden, the West as the foundation of the American Dream and the American man as Adam living in an amazing country. This man is the cause of the fall from grace. *Curse of the Starving Class*, premiered in 1977 at London's Royal Court Theater, indicates such fall right in its title. The dysfunctional family at the center of the drama helps explore the issues of home, hereditary, rootedness, escape to be able to change, determinism not to follow the past and failure to do so.

Throughout the play, characters are left with "Nothing" to eat and they stare and open an empty refrigerator. The emptiness conveys an almost metaphysical feeling of agony and anxiety. It is an allegory to the spiritual starvation amidst plenty. In *True West*, Austin feels hungry and takes with him many toasters to satisfy his inner need for something nice and warm. Such need arises because of the lack of a nice, warm house to satisfy the starvation of its members. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, the opening image shows the son Wesley carting off the wood from a broken-down door, indicating that the home as a place of shelter and safety has been violated. Therefore, Weston, the alcoholic father has not found peace inside the house and has looked for it outside and abandoned the family for a long time. The insecurity of their home has made Ella, the mother, wishing to change place and leave the house instead of working to fix the problems and keep the family together. Halie, the mother, in *Buried Child* also wishes to leave the house, but being unsuccessful in the act, and wanting to forget her sins, plunges in an affair with a reverend. Austin's and Lee's mother in *True West* has left on vacation in Alaska and after seeing the house in a total mess, upon her return, decides to leave. The incapability to cope with the problems and the emptiness in the characters' lives makes them give up instead of fighting, makes them leave hopeless for something different in order to change but as Emma, the daughter in *Curse of the Starving Class* says, "...we would all be the same people" (Shepard 1981). Wesley, the son, in *Curse of the Starving Class* is the only one committed to and physically fighting to keep the house and orchard and not sell them. Austin, in *True West*, fails to be strong and is devoured by the masculine power of the ruthless until he leaves for the desert. Shepardon constantly challenges the mythicizations of the American nuclear family as it appears in popular culture and he shows the discrepancy between the real and the imagined.

An image that Shepard employs to indicate the strong family connections one cannot escape from is the blood. Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class* says, "It was good to be connected by blood like that... wasn't just a social thing, but an animal thing." (Shepard 1981). Wesley's shedding of his own blood and the blood of the butchered lamb are only two among several examples. The earliest mention of blood, in fact, is to the "curse" of Emma's first menstrual period. Ironically, Emma's coming to fertility solely precedes her death in a bloody car bombing

meant to kill her father. So the bloodline itself becomes a curse: the past catches up with one, the child paying for the sins of the father. The family curse extends both backward to the past and forward into the future: "It 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. Before that even. In the air. We're surrounded with it . . . It goes forward too. We spread it. We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down and then pass it down again" (Shepard 1981).

The blood is an element adopted by the Old Testament, the obedient Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac but slaughters the lamb instead; also, the blood of the lamb is smeared on the doors of the faithful Jews going out of Egypt as a protection against the angel taking their firstborn sons. In the New Testament, Christ, prefigured by Isaac, is the submissive lamb who sheds his blood on the cross for the sins of mankind, after giving himself under the auspices of bread and wine to his disciples to be eaten in communion; also, Christ becomes the Good Shepherd tending and watching over his flock of lambs, who are the new faithful ones.

Wesley slaughters a lamb, imitates his father's ritual cleansing in hot and cold baths, put on his clothing and is washed in the blood of the lamb as the gospel proclaims. However, the ritual proves ineffectual: "...it didn't work. Nothing happened". (Shepard 1981). Wesley thought of himself as the lamb being sacrificed to bring salvation. He had the lamb's blood dripping down his arms, and he thought it was him bleeding. Yet, he felt that "a part of Weston was growing on him . . . taking over," so that he felt he was going backwards. The sacrifice was not effective and what should have been a sacrament of communion became instead a grotesque gorging that did not satisfy the spiritual hunger. Wesley was trying to be reborn but only noticed he was becoming more like his father.

In *Buried Child*, the sacrificial death of the Corn King, represented by Dodge, and the rebirth of the new King in the person of Vince proves ineffective too. The new god is as impotent and as unable to bring renewal as the old. Shepard illustrates the action visually with ritual burials of Dodge. Halie (his wife) describes his body as "decomposing" and "putrid". Tilden (his son) puts the corn in Dodge's lap, later he covers his father with a blanket, and finally he places the corn husks on him. Dodge is covered with a rabbit-fur coat. Halie and Vince (the grandson) place roses on him and Vince covers him with a blanket. And in an image that suggests removal of potency, Bradley clips off his father's hair, cutting his scalp in the process. The three dramas integrate images of emasculation first of Bradley, one of Dodge's sons who has cut off his leg in a chainsaw accident, the removal of Dodge's scalp, the castration of lambs in *Curse*, the stealing of Lee's car keys in *True West*.

The characters in these three plays attempt to attach themselves to their maternal sides of the families. Wesley in *Curse* wishes to break free from the father, his alcoholism and indifference and copy his maternal grandfather. In *Buried Child*, the third son, the basketball star Ansell, who was Halie's special pride and joy and evidently the one demonstrating most promise to achieve greatness, died ignominiously in a hotel bedroom rather than as a war hero. In *True West*, Austin, a Hollywood screenwriter leaves his home and family in California to develop a synopsis for a film in the privacy and quiet of his mother's home. He demonstrates ambivalent behavior. At first, he is over-protective of his world, but once challenged, he trades his "woman-man" image for that of the "macho-man" capable of hard drinking, stealing and murder. There is the feeling that the sons seek shelter in their mothers' bosoms, which are expected to be the heart of the family, they tend to affiliate to the softer side of character but the rigidity and harshness of the man prevails and drags them.

The curse of the family, though not new to American drama, is well represented in *True West*. Each person is born into a family and as such takes on the burdens of the generations preceding him or her. Although Austin has tried very hard to escape the influence of his family, all of his attempts have failed. He has tried to get a sense of identity from his work and his accomplishments, but in the end they are all meaningless in relation to the identity formed for him in the family. Austin tries to deny that he is part of the family, but in the end cannot. In the end he is exactly like his brother and both of them are like his father, incapable of dealing with life in the regular world.

One of Shepard's major ideas in *True West* is that what most Americans have taught to want and value is all wrong. Indeed, money makes the world go round, but Shepard contends that one does not have to go around with it. In *True West* he offers a contrary vision to the traditional American Dream that infuses so much of our life and literature. Austin realizes that his entire identity—which, since his youth, has focused solely on achieving this dream—is completely wrong. What is right, instead, is to paint outside the lines and form an identity on one's own terms. For Austin that means giving up everything he has worked for and retreating to the desert. Austin is the representative of the order created by the suburban new West while Lee is the representative of the desert old West and the chaos it represents. In the end it seems that the chaos is the stronger force. The wild terrain slowly impinges and eventually takes over the kitchen. Indeed, by the end of the play it is hard to imagine a more devastated room. In Shepard's view, the order of the suburbs is the faulty ideal in the first place. One cannot form a real identity within its confines.

Curse of the Starving Class and *Buried Child* are so rooted in a particular time and place that it is difficult to see them apart from a larger political canvas. The ethics of consumerism that sees buying and owning things as a guarantee of

future success puts the attainment of money and power over providing emotional sustenance for one's family. There is an exposure of a myth of nationhood that pits the militarily strong against the weak and prides itself on dominance and conquest and oftentimes false heroics.

On the level of familial guilt, *Buried Child* exposes the way in which the patriarchy tries to impose order by silencing the crime of incest and murder of the born child, on the level of national guilt, the drama may suggest a type of historical amnesia, through which an unresolved historical event has been repressed. Halie makes this connection explicit when she remarks that "the smell" from "the stench of sin in the house" (Shepard 1981) arises not only from personal sin (the incest) but from public actions (military engagements) as well. Though assuredly not as concretely and tactilely presented as the skeleton of the buried child brought into the room by Tilden (the father), the nation's guilty past, such as racism, or religious and ethnic prejudice, or involvement in the military, the Vietnam War, comes back to haunt the present.

Shepard's time-driven picture of the history of this family and America conveys an enduring truth, that we are largely unsuccessful in affixing meaning to the past, in understanding its connection to the present, in breaking free of its vise-like grip.

The incapability to set free from the legacy are mirrored in the innate sins that cannot be washed by biblical rituals. The (grand)son's inability to break free and change shows a determinism linked to heredity. Rejecting change, the son either cannot, or will not escape from the design of the past, which he has beheld.

Wesley wishes to change but regresses and becomes an image of his father.

Vince, the grandson of a man who murdered a baby born out of incest, bears the resemblance to his grandfather, father and dead brother.

Austin, whose concept of the romanticized West transformed by Lee, regresses to the past to become like Lee.

Through plays such as *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, Shepard might definitely be indicating the path in which contemporary American drama itself refuses to be bounded any longer in either content or style. It is a project in which he has helped pave the way, by intertwining radical aspirations to traditional form.

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