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FATHER-SON CONFLICT IN SAM SHEPARD'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT:Sam Shepard's family plays can be studied in terms of various relationships in a family: between spouses, father and son, mother and daughter, mother and son, and between siblings. However, of these, father-son conflict is the most troublesome and his works from the earlier to the later ones explore father-son relationships repeatedly. The existence of a familial inheritance, handed down from the past generations, is so powerful that everyone in a family seems to be cursed. However far away one lives from his/her roots, or good education he/she acquires, it is still in vain. Guilt or immorality is in the depth of hereditary traits; in fact every family member inherits the predicament in a way. Therefore, Shepard's characters are full of anger and vengeance, and besides there is no good side in his plays. In his real life the playwright reveals that he feels sympathy for his mother but hatred for the father. This article seeks to reveal how severe the familial inheritance and father-son conflict is in Shepard's own life as well as in his plays.

Key Words: Sam Shepard, Family, Father, Son, Conflict.

SAM SHEPARD'IN OYUNLARINDA BABA-OĞUL ÇATIŞMASI

ÖZET:Sam Shepard'ın aile ile ilgili oyunları bir aile içindeki farklı ilişkiler açısından ele alınabilir: eşler arası, baba-oğul arası, anne-kız arası veya kardeşler arası. Ancak bütün bunlar arasından baba-oğul çatışma en sancılı olanıdır ve erken oyunlarından son oyunlarına kadar yazarın oyunları tekrar tekrar baba-oğul ilişkilerini inceler. Nesilden nesile geçen ailevi mirasın varlığı o denli güçlüdür ki ailedeki herkes adeta lanetlenmiş gibidir. Birey kendi köklerinden ne kadar uzakta yaşasa da veya iyi bir eğitim alsada, sonuç değişmez. Suç veya ahlaksızlık kalıtsal özelliklere kazanmış gibidir; temelde ailedeki herkes bu laneti bir şekilde miras alır. Bu nedenle, Shepard'ın karakterleri öfke ve kin doludur ve iyi bir taraftan söz edilemez. Yazar gerçek yaşamında, annesine sempati beslediğini ancak babasından nefret ettiğini açıkça belli eder. Bu makale, Shepard'ın yaşamı yanı sıra oyunlarında da ailevi mirasın ve baba-oğul çatışmasının ne denli şiddetli olduğunu ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sam Shepard, Aile, Baba, Oğul, Çatışma.

Father-son Conflict

Sam Shepard is one of the American playwrights who examine domestic problems such as household conflicts, notably father-son conflict and functional disorders in a family. His plays such as *Buried Child* (1977), *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) and *Fool for Love* (1983) hold a mirror to the corruptions in the 1960s and 1970s, and reveal how this decadence penetrates into the nuclear family and society.

Shepard was born into a family in which the father was a drunk and fond of poetry. His father's existence in his life was so effective that he could not help reflecting his predicament concerning his father in his most plays. What he recalls about his father is rather annoying: "He was very strict, my father, very aware of the need for discipline, so called, very into studying and all that kind of stuff. I couldn't stand it – the whole thing of writing in notebooks, it was really like being jailed" (Shewey, 1997: 17). Loneliness is his father's indispensable nature, and he loves desolate and open desert and guns as does Shepard, and finally he distances himself and is estranged from his family and friends because of his alcoholism and bad temper. Shepard's father is a man of disorder and his life is full of fights, quarrels and escapes. Eventually he is run over by a car after fishing and spending time with a Mexican woman.

One day Shepard does not go to school, steals a bicycle with a friend, and is detained by the police. His father becomes very angry and does not even go to release him from the police custody. With this event, his troublesome relationship with his father gets even worse and never improves again. Shepard's sister Roxanne remembers the son and father relationship:

It was hit and miss, always hit and miss. There was always a kind of facing off between them, and it was Sam who got the bad end of that. It was dad who always set up if it was on or off. Dad was a tricky character because he was a charismatic guy when he wanted to be warm, loving, kind of a hoot to be around. And the other side was like a snapping turtle with him and Sam it was that male thing. You put two virile men in a room and they're going to test each other. It's like two pit bulls. (Shewey, 1997: 18)

The idea that man can harm his family despite his being far away is one of Shepard's most important theses. And this derives partly from inherited traits. Though the father is not there any longer, he leaves the 'curse' behind, and this passes onto other younger males at home, either it is Shepard himself or his male characters.

In 1956 when Shepard was twelve years old, his family moved to an avocado ranch in Duarte, South California, the setting for the *Curse of the Starving Class* which tells the story of problematic and alienated members of Tate family: Weston, the irresponsible, cruel and alcoholic father in debt and his wife Ella, the shrew mother. And their rebellious children, Wesley, the daydreaming son and Emma, the tomboy daughter are two exact copies of the father and mother. All family members seek to run away from the ranch in the end. For this purpose Weston and Ella try to sell the ranch separately without knowing about each other and everything is then complicated.

In real life Shepard's father reaches quite an old age, becomes a real drunk, and his health deteriorates, evoking Weston, the father character in the *Curse of the Starving Class* (Clum, 2002: 174). Shepard marries drama actress O-Lan Johnson in 1969 and writes *The Holy Ghostly* in the same year. The play is a sort of ghost story of an Indian ritual of a father and his son sitting around a camp fire. It is another play focusing on father-son relationship as an autobiographical document of the author himself. The playwright tries hard to find the reason why his father left home. He partly blames capitalism and the society for it

(Boehnlein, Erstling and Sparr, 1990: 574). Although he tries to understand, reach, and be close to his father towards the end of his father's final years, the playwright feels sympathy for mother throughout his life, but a kind of oedipal hatred for his father claiming that his bigger and better eye comes from his mother, but the smaller and worse one from his father (Hall, 1993: 96). Furthermore, at the end of *Curse of the Starving Class*, after the father leaves and the daughter is blown up, only the mother and the son remain. Why mother and son are left behind in the end is another question remained to be answered. The close relationship between Shepard and his mother might be the answer.

Although Shepard openly emphasizes that he does not feel sympathy with his father and his way of life, he realizes that, like any male, he bears some characteristic similarities with his father (Boehnlein at al., 1990: 573). This nightmarish feeling annoys him though he admits that this is the case. In the works of Sam Shepard, there are traces of a powerful inheritance handed down from the past generations. And the inherited quality is a destructive one cursing each next generation. Although it is mostly a male-based one, the females are affected by it in a way.

The basic conflict in the family in *Curse of the Starving Class* is between the desire to abandon and the desire to unite the family. To illustrate, Emma, the daughter, behaves rebelliously after learning her parents are selling their ranch separately though she already intends to break the ties with them. However, the households want to escape from the family which is utterly bereft of the most essential values constructing a family; it is not a sweet home sheltering happiness or respect any more. As the play advances, it reveals that the son and daughter are not much different from their parents. They naturally reflect what they inherit from their family. That is because they are fed from the same source either in literal or figurative meaning. The names of the children connote those of the parents: Weston and Emma the children of Wesley and Ella. Shepard believes that the children unconsciously live their parents' subconscious realms and fantasies:

Certain things that occur inside the family often leave marks on the emotional life and are far stronger than fantasy. What might be seen as the fantasy is, to me, just a kind of rumination on those deep marks, a manifestation of the emotional and psychological elements. The thing is not to avoid the issue but to see that it exists. (Boehnlein at al., 1990: 573)

The Tate family, in *Curse of the Starving Class*, sees itself 'cursed,' and condemned to live in misery, chaos and bad luck because they think they carry a cursed trait and are controlled by a strange power. The home they share has become an odd place where they do not live in peace and order, but where they just happen to come across the other members. In fact, living together is a sort of suffering for them. Therefore, the father's offer suggesting a new try to come together is rejected because it is too late for a new start, and it is not an obligation, either.

Past generations have a strong influence on the present families. Weston has poisoned the family, and Wesley has followed in his father's footsteps. The households feel that they are all directed in every aspect. Living far from his home, Weston's father, too, had lived a similar life to that of Weston, so this unconsciously performed tradition would not change and it would last forever. That is why Wesley is certainly obliged to live a cursed life of his ancestors. The fears and pessimism which is thought to exist both in Shepard's own life and in his plays reflect dimensions of familial inheritance and indispensability as the playwright makes Ella say in *Curse of the Starving Class* (1990):

Do you know what this is? It is a curse. I can feel it. It's invisible, but it's there. It's always there. It comes unto us like nighttime. Everyday I can feel it. Everyday I can see it coming. And it always comes. Repeats itself. It comes even when you do everything to stop it from coming. Even when you try to change it. And it goes back. Deep. 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's bigger than government even. It goes forward too. We spread it. We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us. (173-4)

A similar situation takes place in some of his other plays: In *Buried Child*, being drunk, Vince begins to behave like his grandfather; in *True West*, the brothers change identities; in *Fool for Love*, the son repeatedly deserts home as his father did in the past. Metaphorically speaking, man, the animal, carries that monster in his DNA. As he grows older, the monster grows, too. And when he grows older enough to destroy, he begins to give harm; he could even bury his own offspring as his parents did earlier. It reflects the idea that every event is the same as those previously experienced by ancestors. The fact that humans are genetically similar is a Shepard's recurrent theme, which is re-enacted again and again in his plays.

All these troubled family interrelationships in his plays are reflections of Shepard's own problems with his father, an incorrigible alcoholic, who abandoned his family. Shepard, on one hand, reflects the undesirable father character, on the other hand, shows the fear to be caught in the same trap of being that problematic father. Shepard's father lives alone in the desert, and cannot get along well with people, and at times writes to Shepard telling that he is proud of him, but he is in misery and in need of money. In such a mood the playwright writes *Curse of the Starving Class* (Shewey, 1997: 108).

In *Buried Child*, Dodge, the father, wants a son from his own blood to leave his seat, symbolically to replace himself. Just before his death, the young Vince comes as the chosen son to continue from where the elder one has left. Now Dodge can die in peace because he has found a true heir for his bequest. Finally the deal is done and again the male decides on what the coming scene should be (Hall, 1993: 101). Dodge's sofa will not be emptied forever; Vince takes his place, the sofa, which stands for a chaotic life or death rather than the life itself.

Vince, the grandson and his girl friend Shelly pay a visit to his grandparents after some six years of leave. First Vince is ignored by every member of the family including his own father Tilden who is busy carrying corn, seemingly with no apparent reason, from the back garden which is said to have yielded no products for a very long time, and who ends up carrying a corpse of a dead child in his lap who was buried just after the birth as a punishment by Dodge since this is an incestuous child of Tilden and his mother.

The indifference by all family members brings Vince to the edge of insanity. It is interesting that he is only recognised by the households when he gets too drunk to behave reasonably. Shelly tries to convince him to leave but Vince is bound and determined not to leave there. When Shelly finds out that Vince is determined to stay, she is astonished and cannot realize it because she thinks that it is just an illogical decision to stay in such a maddening house. Seemingly, the only person who can save herself from the curse of the family is Shelly, because she has the privilege and advantage of having a different heredity (Biggsby, 1985: 243). But Vince is tied to the family by blood and it is impossible for him to break with it:

SHELLY: You want to stay here?

VINCE: I've gotta carry on the line. I've gotta see to it that that things keep rolling... I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath... And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same nose, same breath. And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognised. Still recognised the bones underneath. The eyes. The breath. The mouth. I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me. Then it all dissolved. Everything dissolved. (Shepard, 1990: 129-130)

As a sort of prophecy, looking at his face in the mirror of inheritance, Vince foresees his future as well as his past. It is also true for the playwright himself. He comes to the conclusion that in real life, though he felt hatred for his father and criticised him harshly throughout his lifetime, he begins to behave like his father: he leaves his wife with his son in the middle of the desert, and lives with another woman, so in many ways he begins to identify himself with him and begins to develop empathy for a poor old man.

Vince and the dead body which Tilden carries home seem to be the same characters, and furthermore, it is likely that Shepard emphasizes the idea of being alive and dead at the same time. Shewey sums up this situation saying, "There are mutually exclusive realms existing on stage at the same time, in different dimensions" (Shewey, 2004: 24).

Fool For Love is set in a cheap motel room and tells the incestuous love story of half-siblings, May and Eddie. May is not sure about her feelings, and so has two contradictory fears: Eddie's decision to go or to stay. Therefore, she sometimes tells him to go, sometimes to stay. May does not trust Eddie because she fears that, one day, he might leave her again. The fear of being abandoned is not only May's, but once it was also the fear of May's mother. May's mother had experienced the similar fears previously. Here, we believe, Shepard suggests a universal existential fear for women: being abandoned. This fear makes them anxious all through their lives. And this anxiety may result in further psychological disorders, and even in committing suicide. May's mother was also one of these worried women and killed herself with a shotgun for fear that she might be abandoned. The universality or the similar scenario is again at work, and now again there is a gun which belongs to Eddie who is about to abandon May in the end.

Finally Shepard cries the despair of man and his futile struggle to hope while restricted by the strict ties of fate: "...Every time the thing's opened, there is some hoping, some hopeless hoping that goes on. Every time the lights come on, the yearning. We know it's empty. Why keep opening the door? Nobody's put anything in there!" (Shewey, 2004: 25).

Conclusion

Father-son conflict is a common theme repeatedly emphasized in Shepard's plays. There is no good or right side. The father is irresponsible while the son is irrational. The playwright sides with neither of these households, because he concludes that both are to blame. Neither of them is innocent. Moreover, the son is an exact copy of the father. As a matter of fact father is a mirror in which son sees no one but himself. They are in a fight to seek power. There is no wisdom, humanity or altruism, but selfishness. The inherited qualities are so powerful that all the households reflect the single source from which they are derived. As an example, at the end of *Curse of the Starving Class* Weston wears his father's worn-out clothes. In *Buried Child*, the dead child with red hair takes after his mother Halie, and similarly young Vince looks like his father. With the physical resemblances, what the writer tries to give is clear enough: we are all the same; none of us is innocent. Each of us is guilty because guilt or immorality is something deep in our human essence and everyone inherits this evil as a result of an existential destiny. When we were thrown into the world we had already had the curse.

The playwright comes to a conclusion that even though time passes, and ages and generations change, in fact everything is the same, nothing and nobody changes. What is seen as changing is nothing but an illusion. And this unchangeable situation is a universal one which leads to a monotonous, chaotic, and boring life.

The relationship between father and son is one of the most problematic ones not only in his plays, but also in his own life and in general. By criticising the existing family and its affairs, the playwright tries to underline the importance of the family, instead of underestimating it and its functions in contrast with what is being assumed. He dreams of a perfect nuclear family with a strong and responsible father, loyal and dedicative mother and reasonable and guiding grandparents although he knows such a family was very much something in the past.

Although the playwright examines American family, the themes and problems he handles are universal and they concern the whole society. He tries to show that anytime and anywhere the family unity is under threat. The American family, Shepard seems to suggest, has been deprived of its primary function which is to create civilised human beings. Furthermore, the previous families used to have special days and ceremonies which made the family and their interrelations cordial and important, but they are lacking for the time being. He reveals that parents must not forget about the past, and infer lessons in order to deal with the cruelty of the present ones.

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