

Meaningful Cruelties: An Artaudian study of Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*

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ABSTRACT

Sam Shepard is an eminent American playwright who uses cruelty to hurl scathing attack on contemporary American culture, which coincides with the theatrical whim of French theorist Antonin Artaud. This paper aims to analyse the elements of Artaud's theory theatre of cruelty in Shepard's Play Curse of the Starving class. In theory of Theatre of Cruelty Artaud questions, the ability of language for a meaningful communication. He calls for a performance on stage which uses gestures, sound, music and lights to create a visceral impact on audience, and for this he considers cruelty as a necessary element. Curse of the Starving Class forms a contemporary theatre of cruelty, in which spiritually devastated characters exhibit cruelty towards each other. Cruelty is not only seen in the physical form but also in verbal and psychological forms. The use of sound, light and music further augments the visceral impact on audience. Shepard has shown his dramatical excellence in filling the theatrical space with silences, images and pauses to question the verbal in efficiency of language.

Keywords: Antonin Artaud, Cruelty, Sam Shepard, Theatre, Visceral

I. INTRODUCTION

Sam Shepard has always experimented with the content and form of his plays, challenging both the acceptable social norms and theatrical structures. He has innovatively employed various forms of cruelty in his plays. The use of violence and cruelty in plays generates fascinating visceral impact on audience and connects them with Artaudian concept of theatre. Critic Matthew Roudane asserts that "Shepard...drew from Antonin Artaud the power of sacred, the violent, and the myth" (4).

Antonin Artaud was a French actor, director, and theorist, whose revolutionary ideas about theatre are contained in his book *The Theatre and Its Double*. Throughout his life, he struggled with chronic mental illness, which made him aware of the horrid contingency of conscious and unconscious mind. His ideas of Theatre of Cruelty were quite eccentric and could not be well understood by contemporary theatre personalities however, after his death, his ideas were embraced by many poststructuralist intellectuals of twentieth century. He has influenced modern theatre artists "who have sought to eradicate the traditional viewpoint of text as supreme authority in an effort to establish a more immersive relationship with audience" (Delano 1).

An attempt has been made in this paper to examine the play *Curse of the Starving Class* through the theoretical prism of Antonin Artaud's theory of "Theatre of Cruelty". The theory provides a broad spectrum to understand the manner in which violence and cruelty functions in the play. A deeper analysis of the play reveals the

presence of various forms of cruelty along with other elements of theory of Theatre of Cruelty, such as distrust on language, use of theatrical devices and incorporation of myth. These elements work together as catalyst to make the play a thought-provoking masterpiece of theatre.

II. CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS

Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* is a three-act play. It was first staged at Royal Court in London on April 21, 1977. The play is centred on a nuclear family of four, staying on a farm in the West. All of them are completely disconnected with each other and are lost in their own desires. They suffer with losses and debt. Characters are introduced by other characters through the narration of their violent actions and impish thoughts; audience then witnesses the cruelty exerted by these characters in various longer scenes and acts. Weston is an alcoholic father, Ella is ignorant wife and mother, and Emma is a dreamer. Wesley is the only character who tries to keep the family united.

III. ARTAUDIAN CONCEPT OF CRUELTY

According to Artaud a performance on stage should bombard spectators with sensory experiences to which they must respond intuitively, and for such a theatre, cruelty is an essential requirement. He connects underlying cruelty with relentless external forces. These external forces can be easily found in the standard physical form of cruelty, and in fact Artaud's own theatrical productions contained bizarre images of distressed bodies. In his play, *Le Jet de sang*, he pictured human limbs, flesh, and blood falling down from the sky, all over the stage, to represent collapsed civilization. However, his concept of cruelty is not limited to these customary illustrations. He has further elaborated that "by cruelty he does not mean physical violence, but the theatricalization of human passions, love, crime, struggle, and madness in a manner that feels terrible to the human spirit" (Selim 606). In *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud elucidates meaning of cruelty for theatrical performance that "it is not the cruelty we can exercise on each other by hacking at each other's bodies, ... but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us" (79).

IV. VARIOUS FORMS OF CRUELTY IN CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS

Curse of the Starving Class presents troubled relationship among family members. They are trapped in the social and domestic situations and have lost harmony in familial relationship. They are, spiritually famished, emotionally devastated and psychologically drained. In the pursuit of their inexorable desires they become intrinsically cruel towards each other. These yearnings are a kind of camouflaged 'curse' for them which has dragged them on the path of violence, starvation, and poverty. By bringing domestic violence in the theatre in this way, the energy of action is directly discharged on audience. Shepard makes the scenes on stage as dream-like double, which forces spectators to gaze inward and come to the terms with their own relentless impulses.

This “violence has a primordial function, “primitive fears” that, like drugs, somewhat substantiate his characters’ action as innate response” (Creedon 60).

Violence, in his plays, is not limited to a single character. His characters show a considerable outrage as much as their power allows them. In this naturalistic environment, each member gets crazy, performing their turn by victimizing the other. In this manner “each character plays a cruel and a victim role. This vicious cycle goes on and on endlessly” (Gormez 128). In *Curse of the Starving Class* cruelty acts on various planes such as psychological, domestic, verbal, mental, interpersonal and physical.

4.1 Physical cruelty

Male characters have been identified as source of physical cruelty in the play. Gormez Aydin remarks about Shepard that he “deals with the marital violence and makes suggestions about the reason for male violence” (142). All members of the family witness the physical cruelty of Weston, who actually should protect them, but he becomes a source of distress for them. Weston breaks the main door of his own home in the state of inebriation. The cruelty of action on the door can be felt on the psychological state of both wife Ella and son Wesley. Ella fears of her husband’s cruelty she says, “I was in danger of my life” (136). Wesley’s long monologue which describes his father’s brutal action drives the audience into the territory of fear, violence, and threat. Kicking, smashing, splitting of the wood, shouting, bottle smashing, glass breaking can be felt, in action, through the words of Wesley, making the heart of audience pound. Weston demonstrates physical and verbal violence, which directly effects the emotional state of other family members.

4.2 Verbal Cruelty

Females are cruel and aggressive in their own way. They might not be directly involved in the physical action, but they demonstrate verbal and interpersonal cruelty. Emma, the daughter of the family, is a postmodernist teenage girl, who is rebellious, and exhibits aggression through verbal violence. Unlike, typical soft-spoken females, she screams and yells and has cruelty deep-seated in her mind, which can come into action anytime in life. She raises her voice and yells when she feels that her mother has unjustly boiled a chicken, which she has raised and planned to kill,

EMMA. “kill it with an axe!” I had to spillit’s gut out! I had to pluck everyfeather on its body!141).

4.3 Psychological cruelty

Another female character, Ella demonstrate the other side of feminine passions, completely rejecting the normal womanly traits of a loving wife and mother. Ella appears to be scared of her husband, as he may kill her, but she has other ways to inflict pain on her husband. Wife-husband relationship is like an eagle-snake relationship. If Weston causes pain to Ella through physical abuse, Ella is cruel towards him by betraying him and indulging in an extra-marital affair with another person Taylor. She ignores her husband and “has very little affection or even respect for her husband” (Smith, Overview). She deliberately keeps the door closed and does not allow Weston to enter the house and forces him to drive away by calling cops. The power dynamics of the domestic environment does not lie completely in the Weston’s cruel behaviour, Ella has some share in it. She does not

mind making her own husband homeless. She wishes to execute her plan secretly, and then Weston will only be able "TO KILL (sic) HIMSELF!" (147).

Shepard has innovatively used cruelty in various forms to bring out the cruel aspects of human relationships. Ella is not only cruel towards her husband; she has no consideration for her kids as well. She has her own plans to sell the house and flee, if kids wish to accompany her they can otherwise she is hardly worried about their future.

4.4 Wesley as witness of cruelty

Wesley's character is special in the play; he establishes a connection with the audience by becoming a direct spectator of all the cruelties happening on the stage. He acts as a witness of the violence exerted by other characters and thus becomes participant like audience sitting in the theatre. In the beginning of the play, he feels the horror of violence exerted by his father, the previous night. His deep long monologue makes the audience dwell deep into the psyche and allows them to feel the same danger as Wesley has felt. He also makes us aware of the cruel and unethical intentions of her mother.

V. OTHER ELEMENTS OF THEORY OF THEATRE OF CRUELTY

5.1 Distrust on language

In the theory of Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud questions the ability of the spoken words to communicate effectively. He rejected the dependency of the theatre on written and spoken text, and advocated a concrete language of theatre, "intended for the senses and independent of speech, has first to satisfy senses, that there is a poetry of senses as there is a poetry of language" (37). Shepard has also distrusted the mortal function of language; the characters keep expressing their thoughts without any meaningful communication taking place among them; completely alienated and out of sync. In Act I Ella is worried about Emma and asks Wesley to follow her, but Wesley pays no attention on what Ella has said. He replies about his father's action on revelation of the plan that Ella is trying to execute without Weston's knowledge.

ELLA. Check on Emma for me would you, Wesley? I don't like her being down there all alone. That horse is crazy.

Wesley's Voice. (Off) He's going to kill you when he finds out! (147)

Another mechanism that Shepard has used to overcome the communicative deficiency of language is by effective use of silence in the scenic space of the theatre. Silence serves as an antithesis for speech and has the ability to present the painful emptiness of human being. Characters pause their conversation abruptly and are seen on the stage completely still; staring at each other. At such moments, through gaze and silence communication is annulled and play is halted, forcing spectators to react. Weston when gets the news of his wife going with Taylor, he just "stares at her drunkenly, trying to fathom it (165). Stage directions in the play suggest mostly actions and movements rather than narration. In Act I, Ella enters 'sleepily', Wesley in Act III, stares blankly and coldly. The word "pause" is used throughout the play to signify stillness which indirectly illustrate starvation. In this manner he gives an opportunity to audience to decide whether it is spiritual or physical.

(Pause.) ELLA turns and opens the refrigerator again and stares into it. (149)

5.2 Use of theatrical devices

According to Artaud, words are not essential to express certain feelings and attitudes. He was extremely impressed by Balinese theatre where sound, costumes, and music are primarily used to reveal hidden insecurities of the mind and are more effective in drawing out the powerful reaction from spectators. In *The Theatre and Its Double* he mentions that theatre should “make use of everything gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness-rediscovers itself at precisely the point where the mind requires a language to express its manifestations” (12).

Shepard has effectively used sound in *Curse of the Starving Class* to portray the inherent cruel nature of characters and their puzzled life. The inefficacy of articulated language is filled by the outpouring of heightened sounds, shouts and screams. Loud crash of garbage cans being knocked over off stage (156), the sound of the explosion, the flash of light, silence (197), yelling, slamming, and screaming possess a function similar to that is used in Balinese theatre.

5.3 Use of Images

Artaud believed in impressive use of images to make a profound visceral impact on audience. In his book *The Theatre and Its Double*, he compares images with Chinese medicine and proposes to have “an idea of the physical knowledge of images and the means of inducing trances, as in Chinese medicine which knows, over the entire extent of the human anatomy, at what points to puncture in order to regulate the subtlest functions. (80)

In *Curse of the Starving Class* Shepard develops a series of images related to food. A good deal of eating and cooking goes on however, no one is actually interested in eating and drinking together. The refrigerator is sometimes completely empty and sometimes filled with food which does not interest anyone in the family. It represents the psychological starvation of the inhabitants. Such a hunger is again and again presented by the merciless slamming of the door of the refrigerator. The most striking relationship between ‘hunger’ and ‘survival’ is illustrated by the presence of a maggot infected lamb in the kitchen. Wesley, like a responsible caretaker, cures him, but his hunger continuously forces him to slaughter it. When he does not find food in the refrigerator he tells lamb,

You’re lucky it’s not Korea and the rains the pouring through cardboard walls and you’re tied to a log in the mud and you’re drenched to the bone and you’re skinny and starving, but it makes no difference because someone is starving more than you. Someone is hungry. And this hunger takes him outside with a knife and slit your throat and eat you raw. His hunger eats you and you’re starving. (156).

In the end of the play, Wesley indeed slaughters the lamb and comes in with his hands smeared with its blood. Shepard’s stage direction indicate that Wesley turns bestial, “Wesley crosses quickly to the refrigerator, opens it, and starts pulling all kind of food out and eating it ravenously. The more Wesley eats, the less satisfied he is;

he keeps “eating, throwing half-eaten food to one side and then digging into more. He groans slightly as he eats (192).

5.4 Inclusion of myth

Artaud favoured a continuous re-interpretation of the past through myths. In “*The Theatre and Its Double*” he mentions, “the true purpose of the theatre is to create Myths, to express life in its immense, universal aspect, and from that life to extract images in which we find pleasure indiscovering ourselves” (116).

Incorporation of mythic elements in contemporary setting certainly provides a mass appeal to Shepard’s play and apart from this, it makes his plays “so enjoyable and thought-provoking” (Flath 30). *Curse of the Starving Class* retells the myth in Oresteia. ‘Curse’ in *Curse of the Starving Class* is a family curse, which can’t be escaped, which is similar to the curse on the family of the Greek hero Agamemnon in Aeschylus’ Oresteia. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter to receive favourable winds for his voyage to Troy. In his absence, his wife Clytemnestra starts loving another man, and Agamemnon is murdered by her lover. Orestes, Agamemnon’s son, now decides to avenge his father’s death. The vicious cycle of revenge and cruelty cannot end; murder is always answered by a murder. The family in *Curse of the Starving Class* seems similarly destined to suffer. As mentioned by Ella in the second act that the curse is “invisible but it’s there. It’s always there. It comes onto us like nightmare” (165). This curse is considered as a germ, as an infection, and as liquid dynamite in the blood, which connects the masculinity of the family with a potentially destructive violence. Curse of cruelty and starvation is carried in the family from one generation to another and Wesley surely carries this. In Act III, Weston is reborn when his son Wesley comes dressed in his old clothes.

(WESLEY enters from right dressed in WESTON’S baseball cap, overcoat, and tennis shoes.

He stands there. WESTON looks at him. ELLA sleeps.)

WESTON. What’re you doin’ in those clothes anyway?

WESLEY. I found them.

WESTON. I threw them out! What’s got into you? You go take a bath and then put on some old bum’s clothes that’ve been thrown-up in, pissed in, and God knows what all in?

WESLEY. They fit me. (191)

VI. CONCLUSION

In the end, an Artaudian study of *Curse of the Starving Class*, allows us to understand the many levels on which the play acts on both the characters on stage and spectators in the theatre. Shepard has raised some of the most troubling questions about American families and society, including disintegration, violence and cruelty. The multitude of theatrical forms employed in the play such as gesture, music, sonorous outbursts, and silence augments the visceral impact on spectators and forces them to introspect. The play demonstrates, how the various forms of cruelty, both physical and psychological, work on the interpersonal relations of family members. They continuously interchange their roles of being assailant and victim. Shepard’s ability to

incorporate the concept of concrete language and connect it with powerful images makes the play a real presentation of the Artaudian vision of the Theatre of Cruelty. The association of the play with the myth further gives it a universal appeal. Shepard experimental approach clearly matches with Artaud's vision of making theatre a source of life, a place of ritual, ceremony, and healing; church and hospital to bring transformation.

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