

# The Investigation of Identity Construction: A Foucaultian Reading of Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*

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## Introduction

The present article aims at demonstrating the pervasiveness of normalizing judgment in American society that makes the people fixated with lists that rank order everything in any relations. Foucault's studies address themselves explicitly to the question of the problematization of sexual activity, government, body, etc. however in turn they reveal the processes and practices through which subjectivity has been constituted. Foucault believes that modern society is a disciplinary society based on the mechanisms of panopticon which is a metaphor for a new kind of social regulation. It is a type of prison which is designed by Bentham. In this panopticon, the prison building is structured in a way that makes the inmates think they are permanently under inspection and control; this belief of constant visibility leads to self-surveillance. According to Foucault, power is a network or a web of relations which spreads throughout the society. Power is not a one way practice, only from top to bottom. It does not just come from those in authority; instead it manifests itself in many different ways and from many different points. Foucault is critical of the notion of power possessed by some people or institutions and the belief that power is only connected with limiting and oppressing. He believes that power is in the hands of multiple forces and it works through discourse. There is power in all human relations and it penetrates through society. A subject does not exist as naturally self-contained but is contrived by the double work of power and knowledge in order to maximize the operation of both. In fact power and knowledge are so inter-related that Foucault joined them into a single term: Power/ Knowledge. Indeed it is impossible for one to be without the other; systems of power require some truth to be derived to justify what they seek to do. Disciplines of knowledge constantly divide the population into separate categories which are the prime instruments of power.

Discourse is a key word in Foucauldian terms which is introduced in *Madness and Civilization* (1967). Foucault defines it as a system which is constituted of structures made by institutions that determine what is true and what is false in a particular field. A discourse is basically a system of knowledge that makes certain statements possible. "Foucault believes that discourse should be seen as a system which organizes the way we understand reality, not the reality itself" (qtd. in Mills, 2003).

## Method

This article endeavors to have a Foucauldian reading of Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*. After providing a brief survey of some of Foucault's main essays which have been referred to in this article, the drama is discussed according to those theories. His theories regarding the omnipresence of power and the potent for resistance in a panoptic-like society are mostly discussed in this essay.

## Discussion

Before getting deep into the analytic practice, clarification of the elemental terms used in this study seems necessary. Throughout his work Foucault was concerned with the development and formation of the concept of power. He believes that power is in the hands of multiple forces and it works through discourse. There is power in all human relations and it penetrates through society. "It directs the circulation of knowledge and discourse and forms our self image" (qtd. in Mills, 2003). Foucault puts it in the following way in *Power/Knowledge* coinage:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...power is employed and exercised through a net like organization...individuals are the vehicles for power, not its points of application (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 1980).

Foucault criticizes this view, arguing in *History of Sexuality*, the first volume (1978), that power is something which is performed, something more like a strategy than a possession. Power should be seen as a verb rather than a noun, something that does something rather than something which is or which can be held onto. He portrays power as a major force in all relations within society. In an interview entitled "Power and Sex", Foucault argues that the multiple power relations are not easy to observe:

The relations of power are perhaps among the best hidden things in the social body... [Our task is] to investigate what might be most hidden in the relations of power; to anchor them in the economic infrastructures, to trace them not only in their governmental forms, but also in the intra-governmental or para-governmental ones; to discover the in their material play (1988).

Resistance is another concept readers would come across in this study. It is defined as the possibility of contesting power, in other words, any given individual may resist his or her position as a subject. Resistance is a part of a power relationship and is not external to it. According to Foucault, power and resistance coexist and they are dependent upon each other, in fact as Foucault believes "resistance is written into power" (qtd. in Smart 2003). In Volume I of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that "where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently,

this résistance is never in position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978). This is an important and problematic statement. In order to be a relation where power is exercised, there has to be someone who resists. Foucault expands it so far as to claim that where there is no resistance, there is no power relation.

According to Foucault, individual is complete but society puts the pressure on it from the outside, and as a result, the society alters the individual's dreams and restricts its ability to express itself. Foucault disputes a model of individuality:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals...The individual is an effect of power and...it is the element of its circulation (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 1980).

Power comes first and the individual is an effect of power, designed for it rather than by it. Therefore the individual is the material of power, a vehicle for power, even though it sees itself as free of power but in fact occurring. This model lets power to conceal itself and to operate so effectively.

The play opens with talking about the door which is broken by the father of the family, Weston, who is supposed to be the guardian of his house and family against outsiders. Here the image of home as the place of security and shelter is violated. This sense of security will be violated in the course of the play when Taylor, the lawyer friend, and Ellis, a local club owner to whom Weston owes money lay siege to the house. These shatter the physical safety of the house but this sense of security is shattered spiritually as well when Ella comes home with the lawyer as it is proved that he is her lover. Ella intends to sell the house in order to bring "change" and "a little adventure to [their] lives" (18); she wants to be the person who controls the money of the family and decides about it. Money is a means to reach power, safety and most important of all, freedom. She wants to reinvent and refresh herself, to become cultured, even though it is difficult to imagine her having the interest that she professes in "High art, Paintings, Castles, Fancy food." (20). But it appears that she believes changing place will lead to a way she can remark herself.

All the afore-mentioned features are just arrays of power. It is the aim of the researcher to, instead of concentrating attention on motivation and interest of groups, classes or individuals, lead the analysis to the various complex processes through which subjects are constituted as affects of objectifying powers. Power is not a commodity of an individual; it circulates through the social body, functions in the form of a chain. As a

result individuals are not agents of power, they are neither alienated by power nor possess power, "one of the prime effects of power [is] that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals (Gordon, 1980).

Shepard utilizes a wonderful array of strategies to undermine and overwhelm the realism of *Curse*. He has drawn upon Surrealism, physical comedy, symbolism of Christianity, the Hollywood gangster films as well as Absurdism. But the tragedy of *Curse* is borne on dialogue and physical actions more outlandish than the situation can deliver.

Weston's sense that "it was good to be connected by blood like that. That a family wasn't just a social thing. It was an animal thing" (73), when he washes the family's clothes and further more in another occasion when Wesley fights with Ellis to reclaim the father's money and comes home with blood on his clothes are only two among several images of blood in this drama. Near the end of the play, Emma whose fertility barely precedes her death has a bloody accident with the car, which means killing her father, so the blood line becomes a curse: the past catches up with present, a child pays for the sins of the father. The curse extends to cover both past and present. Individuality is not the highest possibility of human life, even if we can attune society and in fact power to allow it appear. Instead the social institutions need individuals to make them feel they are free, so that they remain vulnerable to the truths they have contrived for their own efficiency. Here the power, as Foucault in his essay *Power/Knowledge* clarifies is not the power of an absolute monarchy, it is anonymous, impersonal power that saturates the pettiest moments of their personal lives, forces them to what they should be, even becomes them "No one strictly speaking, has an official right to power and yet it is always exerted in a particular direction, with some people on one side and some on the other (Bouchard, 1977).

Regarding Foucault's ideas about the productivity of power relations in consequence of the resistance that is engendered by every exertion of power, the dissenting attitude of Shepard toward the situation of family and man, in general, in American society can be detected in *Curse of the Starving Class*. His non-conformist view is enacted in the way he narrates the play and sets the stage. Shepard is highly critical of the present status of family in the West. He goes beyond discussing the physical disintegration of the American family to a close investigation of what it means to be a member of a family; what it means to be the father of a family, what is the role of the mother. As Foucault ponders, "Where there is power, there is resistance (*The History of Sexuality*, Vol.I, 1978), Shepard investigates American family plays written since the war and turns against them. His plays seem able to integrate highly individualistic or even

eccentric behavior. He undermines the power of patriarchy in the play to demonstrate the collapse of the American Dream. The narrative technique used by Shepard in this play can be considered the product of a resisting act against the traditional dramatic derives to demonstrate his nonconformist view of the position and role of family in the present century. To reflect his rebellious spirit, Shepard subverts some major dramatic techniques in his drama with regard to the matter of formal structure and linguistic texture. In this part of the thesis the researcher attempts to demonstrate that the text itself is engaged in a self-destructive struggle, just like the way West and the glamorous aura of American Dream are demolishing the people's lives. Shepard aims to show that no such thing as traditional American Dream exists anymore and he reflects it in his narration of the play and likewise in his expressing the story of the eagle and the cat. Shepard's stage directions suggest a kind of reading which demands wholeness and stability on character's part, however no such thing happens, because no such thing exists in Shepard's critical view.

Shepard's stage directions suggest mostly movement and action rather than telling or narration. Ella enters in Act I "sleepily"; Wesley stares "blankly" in Act III and "coldly" in another point in the same Act. When Weston enters home and is informed about his wife going with a lawyer with the name of Taylor, he just "stares at her [Emma] drunkenly, trying to fathom it" (Act II, 58). However most of Shepard's stage directions gain meaning from their context. The action is halted repeatedly during the play while the characters just stare at each other. The word "pause" is favored in this drama by Shepard. At such moments, the meaning that their gaze carries seems to reflect on itself, makes the play a bit ambiguous, blank. Communication cancels. However, in other parts, a stare or a look starts a kind of gap in the plot which can be in the form of a monologue or a conversation.

However unusual it is to talk to objects on stage, but in Shepard's anti-conventional dramas, an object can be thought as another character. Characters seem to look at other characters as if they were objects or at objects as if they were characters. Emma speaks to the empty refrigerator, soothing it and promising that soon it "will get some company", "little eggs tucked into your sides and some yellow margarine tucked into your little drawers". Suddenly she remembers her chicken; she insults the fridge "you haven't seen my chicken have you? You mother fucker! *She slams the door to refrigerator and turns away. She sees Taylor standing there. They stare at each other.* Taylor smiles. Taylor: Your mother here?" (Act I, 28). Shepard is in the habit of playing with words and texts to create jokes in the play. In Act I: *Taylor and Ella exit. Wesley stands there for a while. He turns and looks at the lamb.*

**WESLEY.** (staring at lamb) Eat American Lamb. Twenty million coyotes can't be wrong. *He crosses to refrigerator and opens it. He stares into it.*

**WESLEY.** You're out of luck. Santa Claus hasn't come yet. *He slams refrigerator door and turns to lamb. He stares at lamb (Act I, 18).*

Here Wesley starts his meditation on the raw and the cooked, to be a starving lamb in a "civilized household" or to be a starving lamb tied to a log in the rain outside a shack in Korea: "Someone's hungry. And his hunger takes him outside with a knife and slits your throat and eats you raw. His hunger eats you and you are starving. *Loud crash of garbage cans being knocked over offstage right*"(Act I, 19). The sound signifies an entrance, Weston's entrance who is the source of a series of stares and ambiguities.

In traditional realistic plays, the meaning of the dramatic action exists in the material world of the play – the behavior of the characters, the architecture of the set, the furniture and costumes of the characters. "The real and the symbolic fuse, signifier and signified become one whole thing. Shepard's repeated use of the pause and the gaze does the opposite: it divides, forcing the symbolic subtext ... to the surface ... while focusing attention on the object and the actor ... (Callens, 1998). The lamb can be a good example. At first it is a symbol of fertility, farm and production; Taylor, the lawyer, states: "It's a shame to see agriculture being pushed to the back-ground" and then lamb is placed "up center stage" (Act I, 19) by Wesley. The same lamb, near the end of the play, stands for innocence, salvation, sacrifice, starvation, "castration, rebirth, the lamb of God, afterbirth, loss, death, meat, the civilized (inside), the uncivilized (outside) and throughout, of course, for Wesley and his relationship with his father" (Callens, 1998). Shepard brings a live lamb on the stage in front of live audience, the "lamb is heard "baaing" in the dark" at the beginning of Act III. Even though it seems realistic but the dramatist aims at showing the end of the animal's life, it is his announcement of suicide. Another example is when Wesley urinates on Emma's charts (her link to the social world outside the house). Surprising as it was for the audience, Shepard directed that the pissing scene should be performed "*facing front*". Both mother and Emma look at Wesley's penis, his claim to manhood even the mother compares it favorably to her father's. Shepard uses this scene to shout his resistance against the dominant traditional way of dramaturgy. Wesley not only destroys Emma's chart and turns the kitchen to a toilet but he also shatters the illusion of character, stage, and dramatic performance. In fact Shepard is following two aims, he portrays farfetched images not only to shout his resistance to the accepted norms of

dramaturgy but also to confirm Foucault's view about the relation of individuals and the society. Foucault disputes that the individual is self-contained and complete and that is the society that is pressing on it from outside. Foucault writes in a very clear statement of his position.

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals...The individual, that is, is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is I believe, one of its prime effects. The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle (Power/Knowledge, 1978).

Wesley is therefore the bearer of the effect of power on individual characters. He performs under the pressure of power but to the reverse of its instructions; kitchen is not the place to urinate, Wesley is an oppressor, he resists the dominant standards of society just as Shepard does. Both of them act to the contrary of the accepted norms.

Again in Act III, Wesley appears as completely naked which for the second time shatters the representational frame, "moving out ward into the real" (Callens, 1998). *Curse of the Starving Class* takes place in a farmhouse kitchen but Shepard directs the characters on the limited boundary of the stage. In his stage direction, the kitchen has no walls, no doors. The left part of the stage represents the interior of the house and the outside, on stage right. There exists a working refrigerator on stage left, which is next to a stove "set right up next to each other" (Act I, 3). A table with "four mismatched chairs" is located center. Shepard's utilization of the "isolation" technique is another instance of his resistance. In an open field, Shepard puts some ordinary objects to emphasize the real aspect of the play; however disconnected from their environment, which is against realist drama. In addition to isolated object, the actions are isolated as well. The play starts in Act I by lights going up on Wesley, collecting pieces of wooden debris which this "goes on for a while". Act II is initiated with the siblings, each engaged in their own occupations; Emma, making a new sets of charts and Wesley building a new door. Shepard insists on characters being concentrated on their own jobs; the stage direction states:

*They each continue working at their separate tasks in silence, each of them totally concentrated. Wesley measures wood with a tape measure and then cuts it on one of the chairs with the saw. He nails pieces together. After a while they begin talking but concentrate on their work (39).*

In brief, Shepard likes to highlight each action in separation from the other ones, to lift them out of their context, to look at them as separate tasks. His technique subverts the realist convention of connectivity in stage setting and action. Shepard intends to demonstrate and magnanimize the distance between the members of a family on the first level and criticize the traditional dramaturgy on the second, a "resistance" show off.

The four mismatched chairs are set for four mismatched members of the Tate family, while the table is misused as a bed. To enhance the realistic image of the play, Shepard puts a stove and the refrigerator on the stage. Along with them, there are other things on the stage which connote orderly and common behavior. Each Act begins with a cooking scene which later is replaced with attention to the refrigerator. Refrigerator is referred a lot in the play and is the most significant object. It stands for "hunge (desire) and absence" in Lacanian terms (Callens, 1998). Thus, Shepard's use of the characters and images changes the audiences understanding of the play.

Shepard's use of the pause and the gaze, the visual landscape he creates profoundly decenters our experience of the play. It reminds us of the real ..., even as it assembles a dynamic dreamscape, highly condensed, overdetermined, its constantly shifting images caught in a recurrent rhythm of disorder and destruction (1998).

What the writers of this article suggest in this play is that Shepard's stage directions are in fact performance text, non-realistic and irrational in some parts. At the level of plot, the play concerns with the selling of a farm house. This is the stuff of a traditional, well-made melodrama. Both parents, each separately, decide to sell the house. The son, Wesley is the only person who cares for the place and this causes the root conflict of the play. He informs each of the parents about the other's secret scheme and in Act II, the climax occurs, both deals collapse and the house and the money paid for it by the bar owner are lost. Wesley is the moral pole of the play and analyses the situation from time to time in social realist terms: "So it means more than losing a house, losing a country" (Act II, 33). While watching the play or reading the text, the audience or reader is constantly engaged with the question that whether the hero (Wesley) can cope with the situation and save the family and its members or not. This indicates that the play moves in the direction of realism. Even though the tone of the play is to some extent comic and bizarre and the text is realistic but the stage direction challenges this realistic text. Shepard combines this story of sale of the house with the story of the return of the absent father. Concerning mythology, the father, coming back is "a god of vengeance, laying down the law" (Cima, 1986). However, Weston does not fulfill the myth because upon coming back home, drunk, he announces that he intends to sell the house,

instead of comfort, he erupts with threat and vengeance. The rest of the Act centers on him and selling the house, rising to the noisy climax around him. He sleeps on the table. "unconscious", as Shepard describes him.

"Shepard's characters are accomplished story tellers because they'd rather talk than act" (Marranca, 1981). Since other characters do not listen and the dialogue is mostly one-sided, in fact they speak for themselves and for the audience. "What Shepard has done is to link the oral tradition of poetry to the dramatic tradition, erasing the difference (momentarily) between drama (literature) and theatre (literature performed)" (1981). Throughout the second story, the audience comes to a better knowledge of the father. His entrance in Act I is mysterious. He comes with a strange appearance, in a violent behavior, talking with himself. He yells that he is "Mr. Slave labor, himself come home to replenish the empty larder". In fact, he is a failure. His alcoholism and irresponsibility that lead to selling the house are symptomatic of his deep failure both physically and mentally. He asks questions, not waiting for answers:

*He takes a few steps and stops cold when he sees the lamb. He just stares at the lamb for a minute, then crosses to the table and sets the bag of groceries and the laundry on the table. He crosses to the center and looks at the lamb inside the fence.*

**WESTON.** *(to lamb)* What in the hell are you doin' in here? *(He looks around the space, to himself)* Is this the inside or the outside? This is the inside, right? This is the inside of the house. Even with the door out it's still the inside. *(to lamb)* Right? *(to himself)* Right. *(to lamb)* So what the hell are you doing in here, if this is the inside? *(he chuckles to himself)* That's not funny (Act I, 19).

This is one of the several places that Shepard shows his character's failure, concluded with Wesley's attempts to save the house and the father, in fact, replacing him. At the level of a realistic text, the father is pathetic, incompetent but concerning the context, he does not fulfill the mythic image of a father, which is what Shepard attempts to portray, to warn in Western world.

The abrupt shift happens in Act III, Weston takes control of the house; he makes a new door for the house, heats coffee on the stove and fills the refrigerator. Even though in Act II, he was violent but in Act III he seizes the subject position, centered and in control of the house. Contrary to what was in Act II, in the final Act, Shepard's stage directions have Weston fold the laundry and cook breakfast which none is isolated or discordant. In this Act, there are no pauses or ambiguities. Weston has shed the uncertainties just as he has shed his clothes. This sudden shift

dramatized by Shepard is contrary to what has been shown in realistic plays.

In most of Shepard's plays, the characters accept each other's identities. In *True West*, Lee and Austin replace each other; Vince takes his grandfather's position in *Buried Child* and here Wesley seems to be faced with the same situation. In Act III, the audience cannot see the calm, confident man of the first Act. He seems to have lost the power to speak. He comes home with face and hands bloody, with no will to speak. His language is reduced to monosyllabic words and short sentences. He informs the father that "[Ellis] ran off with your money. And he has got the house too" (Act III, 54). Shepard's stage directions show Wesley in a state of shock and despair. However, once again Shepard's stage directions provide some clues to the underlying "truth" of the play. In his new role of a "domesticated male" (Callens, 1998) cooking and cleaning, Weston does another job, preaching gospel of rebirth and family connectedness. He advises Wesley to change his clothes and take a bath. However, now, Wesley is quiet different; he has adopted a new role; he stands for the father with all his feelings of failure and loss. He is experiencing disorder, the "unconscious", the word once Shepard used in the previous Act to describe Weston's mood. The reversal is an illusion because when Wesley wants to repeat the ritual of rebirth, this leads to failure, again he wears his father's clothes. Shepard is not very optimist about the future of this family. Even though he uses stage directions to show that there is some dim light for hope but immediately he demonstrates that, that hope was an illusion, nothing is remained to make anew. Therefore, his stage directions are tools in his hands to express his view of Western world.

## Findings

*Curse of the Starving Class* depicts Shepard's resisting view of American family and the situation of man in society. His narration and style of setting the stage, dramatizing a kitchen with no walls, not disintegrating inside from outside of the house, with intruders entering and leaving the house, undisturbed, all state his non-conformist view of the Western style of living and writing. As Foucault ponders, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (*The History of Sexuality*, Vol.I, 1978). Shepard manipulates and challenges the American family plays written since the war and resists them. In his plays, he demonstrates highly individualistic or eccentric behavior. He undermines the power of patriarchy and anticipates the collapse of the American Dream. His four characters are kept in a dilemma; however, any way they take, there is doom, catastrophe, and ultimate ruin.

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