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Male Conflicts in Sam Shepard's Family Trilogy

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After Sam Shepard wrote *Curse of the Starving Class* (CSC) in 1976, his style of writing considerably changed and the focus of his dramas shifted to the family to the fullest. He himself declared in his interview that his greatest interest was to write something about family at that time. I want to illustrate this change of his lines. So, I would like to deal with Sam Shepard's family trilogy, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child* (BC), and *True West* (TW). It is true that there are also some plays that treat the family as their theme in his earlier works. However, I feel that his view on the family is represented most clearly in these plays. In particular, when we read these plays, we soon realize that he sticks to the image of the conflicts between male characters, especially between father and son.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate these conflicts in detail. I would like to pick up some noteworthy topics as the evidence of these conflicts. First, I pay attention to the self transformation of male characters. It is described as the replacements of their positions and those of their costumes. Next, I attempt to explain the meaning of the acts of violence that each character shows here and there in these plays. Then I make a reference to the nature of the conflicts between male characters in detail. Besides, there is a close connection between this image of conflicts in these plays and the personal history of Shepard himself. Shepard was disgusted at his

father and argued with him again and again. I would like to argue this point through a close analysis of the above topics.

I. Self Transformation

In Shepard's family trilogy, some male characters seem to achieve the self transformation. This is described as the various replacements of their costumes and those of their positioning. It is all the more effective to examine the evidence when we consider the family dramas. For in them the relationship between the characters and their settings and costumes that characterize the casts is more important than other kinds of his dramas.

First and foremost, I would like to identify what Sam Shepard thinks when he decides the settings of his plays. At the beginning of *True West*, Shepard declares his idea about them as follows:

The set should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects, or colors. No objects should be introduced which might draw special attention to themselves other than the props demanded by the scripts. If a stylistic "concept" is grafted onto the set design it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters' situation, which is the most important focus of the play.

Likewise, the costumes should be exactly representative of who the characters are and not added onto for the sake of making a point to the audience. (TW, 3-4)¹

Here, we can notice that when he writes plays, Shepard takes their settings and costumes seriously. So, it will be useful to consider them in detail for the sake of making clear what Shepard wants to convey to the audience by writing these dramas.

First, I deal with the replacement of the costumes. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, we can notice the notable statement as to what one's costume means. In the third act, the father, Weston, says, "[E]very time I bent down to pick up somebody's clothes I could feel that person like they were right there in the room. Like clothes were still attached to the person they belonged to. ... It was good to be connected by blood like that." (CSC 186)² It is very interesting that the clothes are treated as the substitute for their wearers themselves.

Here, I would like to give a detailed explanation of the replacement of the costumes between father and son in the third act. This is the most remarkable scene that shows the replacement in this play. In this scene, the son, Wesley, wears his father's costumes that are thrown away in the garbage and says as follows.

I started putting all his [Weston] clothes on. ... And every time I put one thing on 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. (CSC 196)

In this scene, we must pay attention to the fact that Wesley himself feels that he seems to inherit something from his father by wearing his father's costumes. Furthermore, Wesley wears his father's clothes willingly. We can regard this fact as the evidence of his will that he tries to replace his father's position somehow.

After Wesley wears his father's costumes, he begins to show similar acts of violence as his father. He becomes clearly conscious of the inheritance and tries to do the same way that his father does at the beginning of the third act, such as taking all his clothes off and taking a bath several times. Although

his father says he succeeds in rebirth in this way, this doesn't have any effect on Wesley. This is the very same situation as his father once experienced. His father tells Wesley that he recognized his old man's "poison" after he saw himself infected with it (CSC 167). The "poison" represents the image of the menace of the inheritance. After all, the son also follows the completely same course as his father and results in the downfall. Furthermore, in fact, the father himself cannot escape from the same "poison".

Then, we can move to see the replacements of the male character's positions in the two plays, *True West* and *Buried Child*. By doing so, we can see the similar form of the inheritance as that of the characters' costumes shown in *Curse of the Starving Class*. First, I would like to deal with the replacement of positions between the brothers, Lee and Austin, in *True West*. It is expressed as the change of their jobs or positions.

At the beginning of this play, the younger brother, Austin appears as a successful scenario writer of a movie, while Lee proves to earn his money by committing a burglary. However, the situation suddenly changes the moment Kimmer appears. He is Austin's producer and happens to hear Lee's first scenario and thinks highly of it. So he decides to adopt it instead of Austin's one. On this occasion, the brothers' positions are totally reversed. Whereas Lee begins to write scenarios in earnest some way or other, Austin becomes desperate at the failure of his job, and declares that he will be a thief and then puts it in practice. In addition, both of them have a longing for the other's life. They show the replacement of their positions, and realize their own dreams in a sense.

However, they both want to live in the desert like their father does. They dispute with each other over whether they go to the desert together or not. The purpose of this struggle

between them is to reach the place where their father belongs and to get the same position as him. And then, they hang in the balance, and cannot escape from the present situation. At last, they fall down together. This is the similar image as the last scene of *Curse of the Starving Class*. We refer to this similarity of the image in detail later.

In *Buried Child*, the key position is the couch which the grandfather, Dodge, tries to keep occupying almost all through the play. But Dodge is deprived of this position by his second son, Bradley, and then by his grandson, Vince. When the third act opens, Bradley occupies this position using Dodge's blanket. However, his occupation doesn't continue so long. When his mother, Halie, comes home, she displays her power and tears the blanket from him easily. Then, his artificial leg is taken away from him by Shelly (Vince's girlfriend) and then by Vince. So, he cannot help losing the position at this point and goes out to the offstage.

At the final scene, Vince gains possession of Dodge's position at last. The following quotation shows this replacement most clearly.

DODGE is dead. His death should have come completely unnoticed. . . . VINCE places the roses on DODGE'S chest then lay down on the sofa, His body is in the same relationship to DODGE'S. (BC 131)³

Before this scene, Dodge wills almost all his property to Vince. And Vince's behavior seems to have a symbolical meaning. He buries the dead body of his grandfather with the blanket and then sets himself at the same position as him before. And the play ends with this situation left behind. This situation shows that Vince becomes the head of this family.

In addition, I would like to refer to the fact that Tilden,

Dodge's eldest son, committed incest with his mother, Halie, and had a baby in the past. This can be regarded as a symbolic act to deprive Dodge of his position as Halie's husband. At the end of this play, Tilden steps up the stairs toward Halie's room, bringing the corpse of their baby. At this point, they have a new composition in their house. There seems to be the two worlds in this house that are compatible with each other. One is Vince's world on the first floor and the other is the one of Tilden and Halie on the second floor. Although, at this point, the situation apparently seems to maintain the balance of them, we can forecast that the time will come when they have crash with each other. This shows the new confrontation between father and son, that is, Tilden and Vince.

The similar replacement of positions occurs between the female characters. Shelly spends one night in Halie's room alone in her absence. Besides, she declares that she feels as if the house were hers. However, Shelly can't achieve the replacement and finally leaves this house alone, because Halie comes back and recovers her power again. The fact that the outsider of the family fails to replace proves that the blood relationship plays a very important role in achieving the replacement. Shelly fails to achieve it because she has no blood relationship to Halie.

We see the self transformation of the characters from the viewpoint of the replacement by taking notice to their costumes and their positions. There are a lot of descriptions of the replacement between the two generations in these plays. These show the image of the conflicts between male characters. The frequent descriptions of this image appear to show that Shepard has the great interest in this theme. Later, we will see the nature of the conflicts.

II. Acts of Violence

In examining Shepard's family trilogy, we should notice that almost all the male characters show their violent nature here and there, or, furthermore, some of them even commit a serious crime. From the viewpoint of the blood theme, I consider these acts of violence as the most remarkable representation of the heritage by blood relationship from one generation to another. I would like to list up all these acts and examine them for each.

At the beginning of *Curse of the Starving Class*, the father, Weston, destroys the door of the house on a drunken impulse. On the other hand, the son, Wesley, cleans up the chips of the broken door in silence, that is, he settles the problem his father produced instead of his father himself. However, we see a complete reversal of the roles between them in the third act. At this point, Wesley suddenly shows his violent aspect. Wesley's love for the lamb that he took care of before has cooled off and he finally kills it. On the other hand, Weston begins to show the strong affection for the lamb.

In *Buried Child*, I would like to begin to deal with the acts of violence of Dodge's second son, Bradley. Although he lost one leg in an accident, he is described with a powerful image. Such descriptions seem to suggest the possibility of his violent nature. For example, at the end of the first act, he cuts his father's hair without permission while he is sleeping. According to Dodge's statement, we know that this is not the first time. In a symbolical sense, this is regarded as his attack to replace his father's position. And, at the end of the second act, he shows his violent aspect again in a different form. He forces Shelly to open her mouth and he tries to put his fingers into her mouth. As many critics have pointed out, we can say that Bradley symbolically rapes Shelly at this scene. At the same

time, it is also notable that he has weakness of mind. For example, when his mother blames him for his bad manner, he only continues crying without resisting her.

Next, I would like to treat Dodge's crime in the past. Although he is sick and can't move fully now, he committed a serious crime in the past. He knew the fact that the baby his wife gave birth to was the result of the incest between his son and her. As a matter of course, he couldn't control his anger and killed the baby and buried it in their back garden. This has been the top secret of this family.

Then, I would like to focus on Tilden's behavior. Unlike Dodge who killed the baby, he doesn't directly show the act of violence in the play. But we are informed that he had got into some trouble in New Mexico and was enforced repatriation. Although we cannot know the details of this event, we cannot deny the possibility that he might have appealed to violence there. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that he had incest with his mother and betrays his father in the cruelest way. This is regarded as a kind of appearance of the violence.

Finally, I want to treat Vince's case. At the third act, Vince returns home drunk and breaks the door into pieces. His acts of destruction remind us of the same image of Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*. As Tavv has demonstrated, "Ironically, it is this degenerate display which allows him at last to be recognized as a member of the family, first by Dodge and then by Halie." (Tavv 58)⁴ Here, we can see the members of the family are characterized by the acts of violence. Furthermore, roughly speaking, they recognize their blood ties on the ground of the mark of violence common to them.

In *True West*, the brothers show the violent nature here and there. The most striking example of this is in the last scene of

this play. The brothers collide with each other over the matter to get the position of their father symbolically. At this point, in particular, the younger brother, Austin, shows his violent aspect. He nearly kills his elder brother, Lee. However, before this scene, Lee gets angry at the difficulty of writing a scenario and begins to show the violent actions. He breaks the typewriter with the golf club violently. As we know from this description, he has a terrible temper. This is the image common to almost all the characters in these three plays, such as Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*. From the viewpoint of the crime, both of the brothers commit a burglary. Lee tries to break into even his mother's neighbors' houses. Austin challenges the theft obstinately, because Lee who has no knowledge of the scenario deprived him of his position as a successful scenario writer.

So far, we see the acts of violence of the characters of these plays. I lump all of them together under one head. In each case, by paying attention to the order of these acts, we know that they have the similar pattern. That is the way that the father shows the violence at first, and then his son shows the similar nature to his father. This pattern between the generations is almost completely kept in these works. This can be seen as the representation of the inheritance by the blood relationship. Although there should be a lot of things to show the ties between the parents and their children, we can say there is no reference to these things in these plays except for the acts of violence. The frequency with which almost all the characters get mixed up in the acts of violence is unusual. So, we may consider that Shepard deals with the acts of violence as the clearest evidence to show the inheritance from one generation to another. In varying degrees, the frequent occurrence of this violent image seems to be regarded as the evidence of

the inheritance. There is no question that Shepard is greatly interested in this image and sticks to it. So, it is important for us to pay attention to this theme in reading his plays.

III. Conflicts between Male Characters

Finally, I would like to give careful consideration to the matter of the conflicts between male characters, because we encounter them the most frequently in these plays. This image of conflicts seemed to be the most interesting topic for Shepard at that time, for he is male himself and his personal history — he once suffered from the conflicts with his own father — influenced his writing seriously. Here, especially, I would like to make a comparison among the last scenes of three plays. We may consider that each of them ends with the conflicts between male characters. Unlike Shepard himself and his father, not all of these compositions of the conflicts are the ones between father and son. However, it is sure that this image of male conflicts is the main problem at the root of his plays.

The composition of the male confrontation is most apparent in *True West*. As we have carefully seen above, at its last scene, the two brothers quarrel about whether they go to the desert where their father lives alone for a long time together or alone. The younger brother, Austin, tries to strangle his brother to death with the cord of the telephone. They fight in order to win a victory and to reach the position of their father earlier than the opponent. This seems to symbolize the battle between two brothers in order to decide the winner who can reach the same level as their father and take the place of him. That is, in a certain sense, this is a power struggle and the purpose of it is to establish a new sort of dynasty. As a result of this conflict, neither of them wins. They cut one another's

throats. Tavv describes this situation as follows.

Having so attacked his brother, Austin has, in fact, trapped himself; if he loosens the cord, Lee will kill him, and if he doesn't, he will kill Lee, thereby destroying his only hope for a new life. ... He cannot escape unless he lets go of the cord, and if Austin does, Lee will not let him escape. (Tavv 74)⁵

As to *Curse of the Starving Class*, at its last scene, the mother, Ella, and the son, Wesley, tell the story about the eagle and the cat. The following passage is the part of it.

ELLA. ... And they [the cat and the eagle] fight. They fight like crazy in the middle of the sky. That cat's tearing his chest out, and the eagle's trying to drop him, but the cat won't let go because he knows if he falls he'll die.

WESLEY. And the eagle's being torn apart in midair. The eagle's trying to free himself from the cat, and the cat won't let go.

ELLA. And they come crashing down to the earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing. (CSC 200)

Some critics argue that the battle between the eagle and the cat symbolizes the conflict between the husband and the wife, for they sell the house for each at their own discretion and go down together.

However, judging from Ella's question to her son whether he remembers "that story your father used to tell about that eagle" (CSC 199), this story may be regarded as the continuation of the story Weston begins to confess at the beginning of the third act. Ella and Wesley transforms the story a little and

Ella says the cause of the battle between the eagle and the cat is "the entails" of the lambs. But, according to Weston's story, it seems to be the testes of the castrating lambs. We can recognize Weston's version of the story is the plausible because of the fact that Weston often told the story to his family. The testes of the lambs can be regarded as the most remarkable thing to show the essence of the masculinity. Then, we can see the meaning of the battle between the eagle and the cat differently.

That is, the image of the battle between the eagle and the cat seems to symbolize the conflict between father and son, that is, in this case, Weston and Wesley. The target of this conflict seems to be the masculinity to get the position as the head of the family. This seems to be symbolized by the testes of the lambs. The fact that both the eagle and the cat are pointed out by the pronoun "he" supports this idea. And the result that the eagle and the cat fall down together means the downfall of father and son together. And, it also means the downfall of their family as a whole. This shows the menace to the power of heredity. This is the similar image to the downfall in *True West* as we see above.

In *Buried Child*, the composition of the conflicts between the male characters is more complex than the other two works because the number of the characters is larger. So, at first, we begin to pick up some conflicts between brothers. They all disappoint their parents' expectations, especially Halie's. Nash regards this situation of the brothers as the transformation of the typical form shown in folklore and analyses it as follows.

In folklore, it is a recognized rule of narrative that the third son is the heroic one. Therefore, as the folkloric roots of the drama become more evident, it is clear that a kind of "heroic vacuum" paralyzes the family, a void that will

soon be filled, however. (Nash 487)⁶

This seems to mean that there is no winner among the brothers. Unlike the brothers in *True West*, they never clash with each other directly. The eldest son, Tilden, is afraid of his younger brother, Bradley, and escapes from him in the second act. As to the third son, Ansel, there never happens any trouble with his brothers directly, since he is dead. At this point, Vince appears as the existence that fills up a vacant post. We see this in detail later.

Then, we see the examples of the conflicts between fathers and sons. There are four cases in this pattern, that is, the conflict between Dodge and Tilden, between Dodge and Bradley, between Dodge and Vince (though this one is between grandfather and grandson), and then between Tilden and Vince. I would like to deal with these cases in turn.

First, there is one symbolical act common to these three men, Bradley, Tilden, and Vince. They attempt to bury Dodge symbolically with something. In the second act, Tilden covers sleeping Dodge with the husks of corn. At the very end of the same act, Bradley drops Shelly's coat on the sleeping Dodge. And at the end of this play, Vince covers dead Dodge with the blanket. From this common act, we can read their desire to take the place of Dodge somehow.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to mention that except for Vince, Tilden and Bradley attempt to attack Dodge while he is sleeping. It is unfair of them to make a surprise attack on their enemy. But the truth may be that they are so afraid of their father that they can't do anything without using such unfair means.

In Bradley's case, in addition to his attempt to get his father's position on the sofa, he tries to cut his father's hair without permission. This is also regarded as the symbolical

behavior to take control of his father and to replace him as the leader of the family.

Next, we see Tilden's case. As we see so far, Tilden, in fact, deprives Dodge of the position as the husband of Halie by means of the incest with her. But, he neither gets the position of the family's leader nor becomes the heir to Dodge's property. It is Vince who achieves both of them. At the end of the play, after Dodge's death, we can see the new composition of father and son, that is, Tilden and Vince. These two men don't fight directly and keep a little distance from each other.

Here, we set our sight on Vince. He comes home for the first time in six years. At first, his family doesn't recognize him, and he is greatly embarrassed about this situation. Although he tries to revive their memories somehow, it doesn't have any effect on them. He can't sit still after understanding the present situation, and he says he is buying whiskey for Dodge as an excuse for leaving from this situation. In the car, Vince thinks of his blood relationship with his ancestors as in the following passage.

I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. ... And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. ... And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized ... (BC 130)

We know that he strongly feels the ties of the blood relationship, for he says that he can recognize the faces of his ancestors whom he has not met. And after this point, he begins to show the acts of violence. And then, by seeing that Vince behaves violently, the rest of the family finally recognizes him as a member of them. Besides, he gets the position of Dodge as

the master of the house by succeeding to Dodge's property. Here, we can notice that there is a close connection between consciousness of the blood tie and the acts of violence.

We can find the origin of the fact that Shepard takes very seriously the relationship between father and son in the next statement. "The deeply ambiguous and conflicted relationship between father and son in Shepard's play is clearly rooted in Shepard's childhood and adolescence" (Schvey 14)⁷. And we deal with the evidence of this in his statement too as follows. "My name came down through seven generations of men with the same name each naming the first son the same name as the father..." (qtd. in Schvey 14)⁸. This has the similar course of thinking of the blood relation to Vince's one in the above-mentioned quotation. Like Vince, Shepard traces the history of his name toward its origin. Since the very moment of his birth, he has been slaved to his name that has been the same as his father. He tried to escape from the effect of this fact by changing his name. His personal conflicts with his father are reflected in his plays, and it is meaningful to read them by taking notice of the conflicts between the male characters.

Throughout the course of this article, I have attempted to demonstrate the meaning of the conflicts between male characters in Shepard's family trilogy. We cannot help noticing that there are so many examples of them. The consciousness of the blood relationship seems to play a very important role in describing these conflicts.

Shepard talks in his interview as follows.

Sometimes in someone's gesture you can notice how a parent is somehow inhabiting that person without there being any awareness of that. How often are you aware that a gesture is coming from your old man? (qtd. in Robinson

151)⁹

Here, he treats the moment when one awakens to what he has been unconscious of till that time. Although the topic is the gestures in this quotation, we can say the same thing about the consciousness of the influence of one's blood relationship. He sticks to the image of the inheritance by blood ties, and there are a lot of evidence of this in his works. Especially, the male characters in Shepard's family plays seem to be unusual. Shepard puts emphasis on describing their abnormal mentality and the conflicts between them.

Furthermore, I would like to show that there is a community between Shepard's own family and the image common to the family in his plays. He himself was on bad terms with his father. As we see above, he had the same name as his father since the very moment of his birth. This fact seemed to have a great influence on him. He became conscious of his identity and always thought of himself in connection with his father.

As we see above, we unconsciously have similarity to our parents. But, after we notice the similarity and the ties to them, the power of its influence should become stronger. So we come to stick to the blood relationship and cannot escape from it. We are conscious of the inheritance of the bad aspects of our parents, such as acts of violence, rather than that of the good aspects. So, in Shepard's plays, there are a lot of descriptions of the bad ones as marks of the inheritance from the parents to the children.

In this article, by taking notice of the conflicts between men, we have seen the image of the family that Shepard describes, and the power of the blood relationship that he sticks to. Although many writers treat the family as the theme of their works, Sam Shepard seems to have a unique point of view. In his plays, however hard the members of the family make

strenuous effort in order to escape from the present situation, they cannot achieve it and fall into the worse situation as a whole. And their image of going down together is the most peculiar point of his plays.

Notes

1. Sam Shepard, *True West* (1980), in *Seven Plays*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984. All the quotations from the text are referred to this edition, and are followed by page-number.
2. Sam Shepard, *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), in *Seven Plays*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984. All the quotations from the text are referred to this edition, and are followed by page-number.
3. Sam Shepard, *Buried Child* (1978), in *Seven Plays*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984. All the quotations from the text are referred to this edition, and are followed by page-number.
4. Michael Taav, *A Body Across the Map: The Father-Son Plays of Sam Shepard*. New York, Peter Lang, 2000, 58.
5. Taav, 74.
6. Thomas Nash, "Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*: The Ironic Use of Folklore." *Modern Drama* 1983 Dec.; 26 (4): 487.
7. Henry I. Schvey, "A Worm in the Wood: The Father-Son Relationship in the Plays of Sam Shepard" *Modern Drama* 1993; 36 (1): 14.
8. Cited in Ellen Oumano, *Sam Shepard: The life and Work of an American Dreamer* (New York, 1986), 13. qtd. in Shevey, 14.
9. The 1986 interview with Jonathan Cott, in Cott, *Visions and Voices* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p.156. qtd. in Robinson, James A. "Buried Children: Fathers and Sons in O'Neill and Shepard." 151-157 in Maufort, Marc, ed. *Eugene O'Neill and the Emergence of American Drama*. Amsterdam: Rodopi; 1989, 151.

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