The Agamemnon Myth of the Curse in Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*

Yim, Harksoon
(Dongeui University)

I

After his early and transitional plays, Sam Shepard seems to drop much of the spontaneity and experimental enthusiasm in his middle period. Another notable change is in the way he utilizes myth. While in his early plays Shepard utilizes the myth of American West or popular culture, from the seventies onward his use of myth becomes more organic and tends to be oriented to classical mythic formula in his full-length realistic plays. Especially in *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, his use of classical mythic analogues becomes very apparent: those obvious stage images on the surface level in the early plays are replaced by the allusions to classical myths on the underlying structural level.

Although we can find allusions to classical myths in early plays such as *La Turista*, the turning point of his conscious use of myths in his plays must be traced back to his self-imposed exile period. As his early works were influenced by his first reading of the absurd dramatist Beckett and by Brecht, his middle period was influenced by his reading "most of the Greek guys," as he says:

When I went to England in the early seventies, I suddenly found myself having a kind of dry spell. It was difficult for me to write, so I started to read. And I read most of the Greek guys—Aeschylus, Sophocles—I
studied up on those guys, and I’m glad I did. It was just amazed by the simplicity of the ancient Greek plays, for instance—they were dead simple. Nothing complex or tricky [. . .] which surprised the hell out of me, because I’d assumed they were beyond me. But now I began to comprehend what they were talking about, and they turned out to be accessible. [. . .] They’re all about destiny! That’s the most powerful thing. Everything is foreseen, and we just play it out. Like Oedipus [. . .] the thing is laid down, and there’s nothing he can do about it. (Cott 145)

From this trek to the ancient archives, he confirmed “his own view of a world in which human destiny is shaped to a considerable extent by forces outside ourselves” (Schvey, “Master” 50). Characters trapped by cultural, social, political, and familial conflicts in his early plays are replaced by characters trapped by such fate as his Greek models are trapped. But his mythic plays are more than variations of the Greek tragedies because he reshapes classical myth to suit modern contexts.

The structure of the Agamemnon myth underlies *Curse of the Starving Class*, although it is distorted and only partially used in Shepard’s recasting of it. Weston neglects his duty as a husband and has been away from home, just as Agamemnon is unfaithful to Clytemnestra while away from home. Weston returns home only to be blocked at the locked door by Ella, while Agamemnon comes home to be killed by his unfaithful wife. The relationship as husband and wife between Weston and Ella is well expressed in the estrangement of their individual dreams. Weston wants to go to Mexico to be an escape artist while Ella to Europe to have “a whole new place.” Wesley blames his mother for her harsh treatment of his father and kills her symbolically while Orestes kills his mother on behalf of his father. Emma is also very sympathetic to her father, identifying herself with him by demonstrating her father’s “nitroglycerine” in her temper. But her model is Electra. Like the grudging Electra, Emma always challenges her lying mother. She also derides her mother in relation to her mother’s lawyer friend. At the end, however, she is killed as an Iphigenia; her fate differs from that of her model, Electra. Thus Shepard takes a wholly negative twist, departing from the more upbeat conclusion of the *Orestia*.

In its underlying structure, however, the play deals intensely with the
The Agamemnon Myth of the Curse in Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class*:

Inheritance of a family curse. Now we may have to note that this theme of inherited curse is intensified through the undercurrent mythic structure borrowed from the Agamemnon myth in which the family curse of Tantalus is handed down through Atreus to Orestes.

II

As in the Agamemnon myth, the curse of the Tate family is described as having been handed down from Weston’s father. It is inevitable because it is congenital, a genealogical fate which looms as incontrovertible (Glore 60). The curse of the family is inherited through its bloodline, although each of the family members perceives the curse differently. All the family members recognize that something dangerous runs in their blood. To Emma, it is highly explosive dynamite. Ella, who insists that she did not inherit a curse from her own family but later admits that she is infected with it by her sexual contact with Weston, perceives a curse running in the Tate family’s bloodline as “the tiny little swimming things” (*Curse* 174). To Weston, it is a poison that he inherited from his father. Wesley, too, has a feeling of something happening in him, as demonstrated in his monologue: “I could feel the space around me like a big, black world. [. . .] Like any second something could invade me. Some foreigner. Something undescrribable” (*Curse* 137).

When the play begins, Wesley is cleaning up the debris of the door which his father broke in his drunken binge the previous night. In spite of Ella’s insistence to leave the broken door alone and to let his father do the work, Wesley continues to clean it up, showing his sympathy toward his father. This first scene foreshadows the play’s finale. In other words, Wesley’s cleaning up the debris of the door broken by his father prefigures the punishment of Wesley and the other family members for the misdemeanor of the head of the family. Further, if we follow the actions of the family members, we shall see the parallel situations between *Curse of the Starving Class* and the model myth, the Agamemnon myth, which helps the play shape the theme of curse.

Weston, the head of the family, is a displaced man. He neglects his
duty as the patriarch of the family, though he thinks he has done his
duty by bringing in a bag of artichokes, “hardly sustaining nutrition and
far from being considered part of a staple diet” (Demastes 234). By the
time the play begins, he had already bought a piece of arid desert land
and, on a drunken rampage, broken the door of the family house. Further,
he has been away from home most of the time. Thereafter, he sells the
family farm to pay his debts and to get away to Mexico, showing
absolutely no sense of responsibility as the head of the family, like his
Greek model, Agamemnon.

However, in the second act, after a long sleep, he acts like a changed
man. According to Rodney Simard, Weston tries to stop the curse from
repeating in order “to gain control of his own existence” (Simard, “Sam”
86). Weston tells his son that he has experienced a rebirth, explaining
how it has happened. He says that he took off all his old clothes and
walked around naked; he took a hot bath and then a cold one; he wore
some clean clothes. After this ritual of rebirth he does laundry and cooks
breakfast for himself and for Wesley. He seems to talk and act like a
changed man.

Some critics believe that Weston has an epiphany and is really reborn
as a changed man (Glore 59; Hart 73; Schwey, “Worm” 19; Randall 122).
But his epiphany or rebirth is as sterile as the desert land that he
previously bought. As his desert land has no potential value for his
investment, so his “rebirth” offers no sound foundation for his future. His
doing laundry is only out of caprice, as is the occasional farm work he
does. His talking of the family bond and of an avocado ranch is only
nonsense. It does not signify anything to Wesley who knows the
irreversibility of the past events. By the time of his alleged rebirth, he
has already sold the farm. But he cannot get any money to pay the debts
because the money is taken by the buyer, Ellis, who is the owner of the
Alibi Club. Ellis keeps the money because his bar has been shot up and
raided by Emma. So there is no way to pay the debts. He is already
pursued by the gangsters for his overdue debts. But Weston still is in his
dream. He thinks that all these troubles of the past have nothing to do
with him, only because he is reborn:
The Agamemnon Myth of the Curse in Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* 297

If this is supposed to make me feel guilty, it’s not working! It’s not working because I don’t have to pay for my past now! YOU UNDERSTAND ME? IT’S ALL OVER WITH BECAUSE I’VE BEEN REBORN! I’M A WHOLE NEW PERSON NOW! (*Curse* 192)

Weston, along with some critics, seems to be under a delusion or to have a wrong idea of rebirth. A genuine rebirth would be different from what he experiences; it would require his subsequent actions different from what he acts thereafter. Rebirth usually comes with a perception that one is guilty or sinful and with a repentance for one’s guilt or sins. And more importantly, to give rebirth a good basis, one must take the responsibility for one’s past sins or wrongdoing. However, he does not really repent his past misdeeds. He even tries to justify his past actions: “I know I ignored some a’ the chores around the place and you had to do it instead a’ me. But I brought you some artichokes back, didn’t I? Didn’t I do that? I didn’t have to do that” (*Curse* 192). In this hollow appeal he simply evades his responsibility for his past behavior.

Weston reveals one last piece of evidence of his false rebirth. As Wesley advises him to go to Mexico, he simply runs away. If his rebirth were valid and at work within him, he would have to stay home, keep his family safe and face his creditors bravely, even if he might be killed in the confrontation with reality. He contradicts himself when he leaves home, where, he says, he found what he wanted all the time. Before escaping, he explains the reason he has been away from home:

> I just went off a little while. Now and then. I couldn’t stand it here. I couldn’t stand the idea that everything would stay the same. That every morning it would be the same. I kept looking for it out there somewhere. And all the time it was right inside this house. (*Curse* 194)

Weston is not changed at all through his alleged rebirth. As a natural wanderer, he still cannot stand the idea of everything staying the same. So he is going to keep looking for something out there in Mexico as an escape artist: “Mexico? . . . It’s full of escape artists down there. I could go down there and get lost. I could disappear. I could start a whole new life down there” (*Curse* 194). But he can hardly be called an
identity-seeker, as Florence Falk names him (“Role” 187). He cannot
understand reality around him because he is a dreamer. Following
Wesley’s advice, he leaves for Mexico. He still dreams that he can find
Taylor who sold him the desert land, and that he can get his money back
so that he can start a whole new life in Mexico.

There is a sense of fatalism in the character of Weston. He says that
he watched his father always and absorbed his poison. As noted, he
merely drifts and drinks, working only as the whim moves him. Without
a clear hold on reality, he can hardly make any mature decision in his
life. He appears to be a displaced man ensnared by the curse. But he is
not punished for his wrongdoing. He hands down the curse.

The relationship of Weston and Ella parallels that of Agamemnon and
Clytemnestra although Ella does not actually kill her husband. Ella’s
irresponsibility parallels that of Weston. She does not act like a wife to
Weston or a mother to her children. She is a whore, mother, and wife, a
troubling distortion of a traditional matriarch (Falk, “Men” 100). She
barred the door against her husband, preventing him from coming in the
house the night before the play begins. Her action may be explained by
the fact that she already had a lawyer boyfriend, Taylor. She is thus a
contemporary Clytemnestra figure, one who has betrayed her marriage.

Ella also fails as a mother. She does not take care of her children. She
even asks Wesley to take care of Emma. “Check on Emma for me would
you, Wesley? [. . .] Keep an eye for Emma, Wes. She’s got the curse”
(Curse 147, 155). Ella only wants to make some money from selling off
the farm to go to Europe, although she has no specific or sound reason
for going there.

Ella’s sexual awareness is suggestive of incestuous longings.1) She

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1) Lynda Hart, interpreting Wesley’s transformation into his father as Wesley’s
symbolic murder of his father, and pointing to Ella’s recognition of Wesley as
Weston, speculates that “the oedipal theme clearly informs the father and son
relationship” (75). Ann Hall agrees with Hart: ”the play concludes in oedipal
triumph. The son [. . .] now takes the father’s place with his mother, perhaps
on the edge of a new incestuous Eden” (94). “Juicy” this view may sound, yet,
in fact, there is no intense father-son conflict nor mother-son infatuation:
Wesley does not show any sign of sexual interest toward his mother. Thus
there is little evidence of the oedipal theme in the father-son relationship, such
must have watched Wesley’s penis, for she compares his penis with her father’s, noting the similarity of circumcision between Wesley’s penis and her father’s. However, her desire is directed in the safer direction of a lover. Later in the play, she goes out to have a business lunch with her lawyer friend and spends the whole night, apparently with the same man.

In the first act, Ella does not seem to understand that she is also infected with the curse of the Tate family although she did not inherit a curse from her own family. In talking with Wesley and Emma, she alludes to her plan to go to Europe. She thinks that they, Wesley, Emma and she, can be totally changed people if they have “a whole new place” in Europe. She cannot understand what her daughter says: “It’d be the same as it is here. [. . .] we’d all be the same people” (Curse 148). But later in the play, Ella admits that she is captured by the fate, the curse of the family. She shows her perception of the curse with which her family is surrounded. She clearly knows that she has the curse and that she has to pass it down:

It’s a curse. I can feel it. It’s invisible but it’s there. [. . .] 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. (Curse 173-74)

After this statement of her perception and her disappointment about her lawyer friend Taylor, she seems to trap herself in a maternal role that, in essence, is alien to her true nature. She gives up her plan of escape to Europe. She resumes her nominal duties as a mother; she goes to sign a statement for her apprehended daughter, Emma. Finally, as remaining parent in the family, she shows a clear familial vision in relaying Weston’s eagle story. She presents an image of self-destruction as she tells of an eagle and a cat fighting each other in the middle of the sky and eventually crashing down together “like one whole thing.”

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2) Weston’s eagle story, a metaphor for mutual destruction, is significant because it parallels the play’s plot itself. But many critics give different meanings to the

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Emma inherits the family curse as well as the female curse. Like her father, she has a very hot temper. Despite her denying it, she has inherited what she calls the "highly explosive nitroglycerine" in her blood from her father. She has enough courage to call her mother "a spoiled brat" (Curse 142). She yells about the chicken, and shoots up the Alibi Club like a drunken gunfighter. She tries to escape from the hostile situation of her family. She leaves the house on a horse only to be dragged across the corral. That failed attempt at escape changes her mind. She claims: "Suddenly everything changed. I wasn’t the same person any more. I was just a hunk of meat tied to a big animal. Being pulled" (Curse 148). A graphic metaphor for fate. Having given up her escape, she explains her escape plans in the past tense, which means that she cannot escape from the hideous family. On the mythic sense, she is cursed to act out her predestined role as a member of this cursed family.

Emma acts as an Electra figure and an Iphigenia figure. Although the play does not imply Electra complex in her relationship with her father,

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3) Ella hands down a curse to her daughter through the menstrual blood. Glow notes that menstruation is "a curse that has been passed along from mother to daughter since the days of Eve" (60). Doris Auerbach, however, contends that naming menstrual blood a female curse is a misnomer because "it is not a symbol of death, but one of life, one of fertility and procreation" (49). Auerbach’s contention is, in a sense, right. By taking account of only the fertility and procreation, menstruation cannot be a curse. Rather, it must be called a blessing. But if the mythic dimension of the play is taken into account, her contention is totally wrong because the very ability of procreation is a curse to Eve given for her sin by God.
she is closer to her father than to her mother whom she hates enough to call her “a spoiled brat.” In this sense she is an Electra, one who instigates her brother to kill her mother. However, at the end, her fate differs from that of Electra. When she notices that Weston is selling the farm, she goes down on a horse and shoots up the Alibi Club, her father’s haunt. She knows that there is no hope and no reason to stay home. Finally, after escaping from jail, she tries her second escape, “never to return.” She is killed in an exploding car. Maybe the murder is totally accidental on one level because the gangsters want to blow up only the family car; or perhaps “Shepard somewhat startlingly kills her off” because “Emma’s learning experience is distinctively negative” (Cardullo, “Wesley’s Role” 6); or as Charles Lyons says, perhaps Shepard uses her as her father’s “surrogate” (128). Clearly, on the mythic level, the curse of the family may need a human sacrifice, not a lamb killed by Wesley. Like Iphigenia who is sacrificed for Agamemnon’s safe voyage to Troy, Emma may have to be sacrificed for her father’s safe trip to Mexico.

Wesley is very sober and practical when the play begins. He has also a keen perception. In his long monologue, Wesley shows his perception of the reality around him:

I was looking straight up at the ceiling at all my model airplanes hanging by all their thin metal wires. Floating. Swaying very quietly like they were being blown by someone’s breath. [. . .] I could feel myself lying far below them on my bed like I was on the ocean and overhead they were on reconnaissance. Scouting me. Floating. Taking pictures of the enemy.

4) Some critics think that Emma’s shooting spree is retaliative; Emma ravages Ellis’s Club “when she learns that [Ellis] has managed to buy up the family homestead” (Cardullo, “Sleep” 10; Whitng 498). Martin Tucker, seeing the Western-styled practice of justice in this incident, notes that Emma shoots up the Alibi Club “whose owner has swindled her father out of his house” (128). In a stage version of the play, it might be possible to make Emma hang around to eavesdrop Weston and Wesley’s dialogues after she exits in the second act. But the published version of the play does not allude to anything like that. Emma simply exits when Weston tells his children that he has found a buyer. Weston does not mention the name of the buyer yet. Later Weston discloses to Wesley that the buyer is Ellis. The critics’ misunderstanding is quite similar to Ellis’s: at the end of the second act, Ellis claims that Weston deliberately sent her to his club house.
Me, the enemy. [ . . . ] Like any second something could invade me. Some foreigner. Something indescribable. (Curse 137)

Although he does not know that he is going to be caught by the family curse, he senses that something terrible is happening around him.

In his perception of reality, Wesley wants his sister Emma to go away. By urinating over Emma’s 4-H charts, he tries to save her: “I’m opening up new possibilities for her” (Curse 143). He himself dreams of going to Alaska where he thinks he can have a lot of possibilities. He dreams of being a frontiersman in the undiscovered land. In this point Wesley is quite different from his father who wants to go to Mexico to be an escape artist.

But Wesley’s dream cannot come true because he cannot bring himself to act. He is already caught up by the curse. He tries to be reborn, applying the same remedy as Weston’s. But he does all this only to find himself in Weston’s old clothes. Donning his father’s clothes may signify the role reversal between father and son, and Wesley takes over Weston’s role as a family patriarch. On the deeper level, however, Weston’s clothes Wesley wears now symbolize the complete inheritance of the curse. The first sign of it reveals itself in the fact that he is very sympathetic to his father who has the destructive power. He acquiesces in his father’s wrongdoing by removing the debris of the broken door. However, he is not so sympathetic to his mother. Although he knows clearly what happened the previous night, he interrogates his mother about her reaction to the behavior of his drunken father. The point of his interrogation is to blame his mother for her harsh treatment of his father.

The classic analogues are clear here. Wesley is a sort of modern Orestes, one who kills his mother on behalf of his father. Wesley does not actually murder his mother, but he symbolically kills her with hatred and derision. At some points in the play, his voice is very scornful of his mother’s attitude. He derides her idea of going to Europe and her plan to sell the farm. Finally, he treats her as a harlot, insulting her by asking, “Where is your boyfriend? [ . . . ] Are you going off with him?” (Curse 171, 173).

Wesley does not try to escape from the terrible situation of his family.
The Agamemnon Myth of the Curse in Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* 303

He rather tries, pragmatically, to stop it. In the second act, he tries to persuade his father not to sell the farm and suggests a way of reestablishing the avocado ranch. With all of his efforts in vain, however, he kills the lamb for food. Earlier in the play he tries to save the lamb, as though he saw his own suffering in the maggot-ridden lamb’s suffering. This ritual slaughter of the lamb is part of Wesley’s endeavors to stop the family’s starvation, which can be a symbol of the family curse. To try to stop the curse, he sacrifices the lamb that can be identified with himself. Wesley, a son caught in a predestined role, is killed symbolically from the poison of his father. His fate resembles the fate of the lamb that he has been trying to save. As a transformed and cursed man in his father’s clothes, Wesley takes over the role of the family head: “He has no choice but to confront his [family’s] past, to accept his blood and strive to transcend it” (Wetzsteon 239). He has striven to alter the family’s terrible condition, but he eventually has to accept the family past and its blood.

III

Many critics believe that the family in Shepard’s domestic drama is a metaphor for society and that the disintegration of the family is a metaphor for American culture. Vivian Patraka and Mark Siegal see in *Curse of the Starving Class* “Shepard’s vision of American society as having lost its promise, independence, opportunity, and close ties to the land” (22). They argue that the land itself “is doomed as a source of values” because it is devastated by the speculators (22). Doris Auerbach also interprets the family in the play as a metaphor for society. She maintains that “the spiritual starvation of America is so pervasive that none can escape” (48). Of course, we can read a social criticism in the play through its surface manifestations: the action revolves around two independent plans to sell off the same family farm: one by the father,

5) Wetzsteon actually makes this statement about Weston, but I find that it has greater relevance to Wesley. For Wetzsteon, the play’s protagonist is Weston, whose “quest for spiritual liberation must circle back to its beginnings” (259).

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Weston, the other by the mother, Ella; and they are both swindled by land speculators and lose their farm. But the approach of social criticism seems to be, to borrow Shepard’s words, “an incomplete [or] partial way” (“Rhythm” 9) to probe into the meanings in the undercurrent of *Curse of the Starving Class* because the play deals with the human condition, not merely its social manifestations.

Although Shepard distorts the structure of the model myth in *Curse of the Starving Class*, he does not give his characters, except for Wesley, much freedom to act consciously. Wesley tries to stop the miserable condition of his family. Wesley’s efforts are very conscious, at least in the beginning of the play. As Simard says, “[Wesley] chooses to break rather than repeat the pattern of his heritage” (“American” 31). But he eventually succumbs to his family condition. Other characters’ acts of attempted escape are driven by their impulse or feelings of persecution. Weston’s rebirth does not work because it is false. Ella’s dream of escape and her plan of selling off the farm result from Weston’s neglecting his duty and her feelings of persecution. Although Emma has the whole trip planned out in her head, her escape attempts are also on impulse. Emma also has feelings of persecution. All the family members appear captured by the family condition which may be their fate handed down through the mysterious curse of the family, especially more so with the play’s undercurrent mythic structure borrowed from the Agamemnon myth.

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The Agamemnon Myth of the Curse in Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* 305


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Abstract

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Yim, Harksoon
(Dongguk University)

This paper deals with the mythic structure of Agamemnon myth with which Curse of the Starving intensifies its theme of inherited curse. Some critics have alluded to the mythic elements in the play, but none has delineated the play’s undercurrent mythic meanings related with the Agamemnon myth. Instead, many critics believe that the family in Shepard’s domestic drama is a metaphor for society and that the disintegration of the family is a metaphor for American culture. We can read a social criticism in the play through its surface manifestations. The approach of social criticism, however, seems to be an incomplete way to probe into the meanings in the undercurrent of Curse of the Starving Class since the play deals with the human condition, not merely its social manifestations. In its underlying structure the play deals intensely with the inheritance of a family curse. We may have to note that this theme of inherited curse is intensified through the undercurrent mythic structure borrowed from the Agamemnon myth in which the family curse of Tantalus is handed down through Atreus to Orestes.

Key Words: Sam Shepard, Curse, Starving Class, Atreus, Agamemnon, myth, inheritance / 폐 사퍼드, 저주, 기아가중, 아트레우스, 아가 명울, 신화, 대물림

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