

Curse of the Starving Class Study Guide

Curse of the Starving Class by Sam Shepard

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Plot Summary

Curse of the Starving Class is a play in three acts by Sam Shepard that tells the story of a dysfunctional family living in a farmhouse they are planning to sell in the hopes of moving on to bigger and better things.

Act 1 opens with Wesley piling broken pieces of the front door into a wheelbarrow, although Ella, his mother, thinks he should leave the pieces for his father to clean up since he broke the door in the first place. The events of the previous night are discussed and then Wesley leaves. Ella starts speaking about menstruation, and during this talk, Emma, her daughter, enters and joins in. Emma is carrying materials for her 4-H project on how to cut up a chicken for frying. She goes to look for her chicken in the family's refrigerator only to find it is gone. Emma accuses her mother of boiling the chicken and then leaves in a huff.

Wesley returns and begins to yell about how the chicken is pointless in the face of other things. When Emma returns, she, Wesley, and their mother begin to argue about the starving class and if they are a part of it. In the heat of the argument, Wesley urinates on Emma's posters causing her to storm off, threatening to take the horse and run away.

Ella confesses to her son she is planning to sell their house and take the money for a trip to Europe. Emma comes back, drenched in mud from being dragged by the horse and speaks to her mother about wanting to become a mechanic in Mexico.

Taylor, Ella's lawyer, enters and talks about selling the house. Wesley returns with a lamb from outside. The conversation between the three in the kitchen is tense when Ella comes in, and she and Taylor head out for a business meeting. Wesley is left alone with the lamb until Weston stumbles in drunkenly, bearing a bag of artichokes he purchased while paying a visit to a property in the desert that belongs to him. Act 1 ends as Weston and Wesley discuss how best to get rid of the maggots living in the lamb's digestive tract.

Act 2 starts with Wesley again, who is working on a new front door for the house. Emma is there as well, and they are discussing their house being sold and the nature of their mother's relationship with her lawyer. Wesley compares the way everything is being suburbanized to being invaded by zombies, and talks to his sister about how he wants to go to Alaska.

Weston comes back, even drunker this time, and demands to know where Ella is. He tells them he has found someone who wants to buy the house. Wesley tells his father Ella has been speaking to a lawyer about selling the house, and Weston gets angry, threatening to kill Ella and Taylor. He passes out immediately after his outburst. He continues his rant as soon as he wakes up, ignoring his son's suggestions about planting avocados, then he's out cold again at the kitchen table.



Ella returns with groceries and says she knows there is a curse working against family. Ellis, the owner of the bar where Weston drinks, enters with \$1500 and says he owes Weston for the sale of the house; Ella orders her son to throw him out. Mother and son find out Weston is in debt to some dangerous men. Wesley says he'll take the money to the men, but Ella says no. Taylor shows up then with the final draft of the deed of sale for the house. Ellis threatens Taylor, and the lawyer asserts that Weston is in no position to sell the house.

In the midst of all this, Sergeant Malcolm enters and tells the family Emma has been arrested for shooting up and riding her horse through the Alibi Club that Ellis owns. Taylor takes his leave, although Wesley thinks he should be arrested. Ellis takes back the money saying he is owed it for the damage Emma did to his bar. The act ends with Ella agreeing to pick Emma up from the police station.

Act 3 finds Weston awake and in clean clothes. He is talking to the lamb about cutting off the testes of lambs and throwing them to the roof so an eagle can eat them. Wesley shows up bloody and tells his father he tried to get the money back. Weston tells his son that he cleaned up and did the laundry and offers him breakfast. Ella comes in and says she has been to the jail to visit Emma. It is not long before Ella starts screaming at Weston. He tells her to take a nap on the table. She is reclining on it as Wesley, who is naked, comes in, takes the lamb, and leaves with it.

When Wesley returns, he tells his father he killed the lamb so that they would have something to eat, but Weston is angry and shows him the refrigerator stocked with food. Weston thinks about fleeing to Mexico to avoid the men to whom he owes money, and Wesley suggests finding Taylor to get the money back for the desert property. Emma enters as Weston leaves, and Wesley tells her he can feel himself becoming their father. Emma steals from Ella's purse and announces she is starting a life of crime.

There is an explosion offstage then, waking up Ella who has been sleeping on the table. Emerson and Slater, men to whom Weston owes money, enter carrying the lamb carcass and bragging about how they blew up Weston's car, probably killing Emma who was in it. They threaten the family and then leave. The play ends with Wesley and Ella talking about Weston's story about the eagle.



Act 1 Part 1

Summary

The play contains no true scene divisions, but for easier discussion, the rather long acts of this play have been divided into more manageable sections.

Act 1 of *Curse of the Starving Class* begins in a farmhouse kitchen. There is a pile of broken wood pieces indicating a broken door. Wesley is taking the pieces and putting them into a wheelbarrow to get them out of the way. His mother, Ella is winding an alarm clock as she enters and tells him it is not his job to clean up the mess since his father, Weston, was the one to make it. But since Weston has not returned to the house since he broke down the door, Wesley continues to pick up the pieces. He asks his mother if she called the police last night, and she says she did because she was afraid for her life. Wesley does not think the situation was that bad, since Ella had locked the door and his father was just trying to get inside.

While Ella makes breakfast, Wesley launches into a monologue about the events of the night before as he cleans up the debris. He talks about lying in a field taking in all that was happening around him. He speaks of barking dogs and cars going down the street, one of them being his father's Packard. After a while he hears his mother crying and the sound of vehicles on the freeway. When his speech is finished, he hauls away the wheelbarrow, leaving his mother alone.

Ella starts talking about the details of a girl's first period because she wants her daughter to know the truth about what happens to a woman's body. Emma, her daughter, enters wearing her 4-H uniform. She is carrying posters for her project about the correct way to cut up a frying chicken. She tells her daughter how important it is to know where she can get sanitary napkins and that Emma should never get them from the machines in bathrooms because they are not really sanitary.

Emma explains about her project and goes over to the refrigerator to search for her chicken she was going to use for a demonstration only to find it is not there. Ella seems nervous, and Emma comes to the conclusion her mother has boiled her chicken. The daughter goes on a tirade about how she raised the chicken herself before killing and cleaning it only to have her mother boil it. Ella asserts her innocence, but Emma leaves in a huff. She can be heard offstage still ranting about the chicken.

Wesley re-enters, wondering why there is so much screaming, and once he understands what's happened, he gets his mother to admit she did boil the chicken, though she did not know it was Emma's. Since Emma did not write her name on the chicken, Wesley does not know how she expected anyone to know that it was hers. Wesley looks over Emma's project posters and, while his sister is still screaming in the background, he urinates on them. An argument arises between Ella and Emma about whether or not the family belongs to the starving class, and Emma thinks since Ella is



eating breakfast at the moment, there is no way they are starving. Emma is disgusted by her family and announces she is going to take the horse and leave the house. Ella tells Wesley Emma is having her first period, much to his disgust.

Analysis

From the start of the play it is clear it is about family drama. The play revolves around this dysfunctional family and all the things that happen to them. The children seem to be well on their way to turning into their parents. Wesley has the less confrontational nature of his mother, whereas Emma is all anger and delusions like her father. The two of them argue just as much as their parents do, showing there is hardly ever peace in the Tate house unless one of them is alone.

The play takes place in the kitchen of the farmhouse. The kitchen has long been held as the center of a family's home, so the fact that all of the drama and conflict takes place there is symbolic of just how dysfunctional the family really is. The fact that a broken door is the very first thing the audience is introduced to is a sign of how violence and disorder will continue to be a theme throughout the rest of the play.

Cleaning up at the beginning of the play becomes a trend for Wesley. He is constantly trying to clean up or fix the messes his father winds up getting into because they ultimately affect the entire family. Wesley is trying to be the man of the house, to take care of everything since his father is too busy drinking to do it. The audience sees him trying to fix the door, but he never finishes because he is constantly interrupted by some new crisis arising.

Ella is winding an alarm clock when she makes her entrance, and this seems to symbolize the family does not have much time. It is almost as if there is a ticking time bomb waiting to go off and destroy them.

Vocabulary

Oil cloth, sanitary, squalor, methodically, upstage, hemorrhage, revel, invade, jodhpurs, valves, ignition, incubator, circumcised, reconnaissance, downshifting, lifters, debris, mismatched, foreigner, decals



Act 1 Part 2

Summary

Wesley gets into an argument with his mother about how poor they are, and she tells him they will have more money very soon. Since Weston has just been fired for his job, Wesley cannot see how this is true. His mother admits they will have enough money to leave and visit Europe.

Wesley asks his mother where she plans to get the money to go to Europe, and she relents, telling him that she has a lawyer friend named Taylor who is helping her with the negotiations for selling their house and tractor as well as the orchard and the land itself. She says all of it will fetch a good price because it can be turned into items that people will be interested in buying. Wesley is not pleased by this and tells Ella she's crazy. They get into another argument, this one about who takes better care of the house, and Wesley leaves to go feed the sheep. He insists when Weston finds out what she's doing, he will kill her, but Ella replies he won't find out.

Emma comes back, covered in mud from being dragged by the horse. The girl goes on about how disgusted she is with her life the way it is, and Ella tries to soothe her with words about their new life in Europe. Emma informs her mother they will still be the same people, even in Europe, so it does not matter. She is disappointed she could not go to Mexico to work on fishing boats and fix cars until she could write books as she had planned. Ella tells her she does not know how to do those things and she does not understand her daughter anymore. Emma delights in this.

When her mother leaves the stage, Emma begins to talk to the refrigerator as if it were a person, telling it they are not members of the starving class. Taylor, Ella's lawyer friend, enters then and watches the girl. He introduces himself as Ella's lawyer, leading Emma to think her mother is in trouble. Taylor asks what happened to their door, and Emma explains her father broke it down because he was angry. She accuses Taylor of using her mother since Ella is not a businesswoman, and Taylor pretends to be offended. He takes a seat at the table and goes on about what a nice home they have and how the location and potential of the land is worth more than the actual house.

Wesley returns then, and Emma tells him who Taylor is, making the lawyer feel like he is in enemy territory. Emma only confirms that he is. Wesley has brought a lamb with maggots into the kitchen he is trying to treat and places it in a fenced-in area. Emma, Taylor, and Wesley argue about what will happen if they sell the house and whether or not the sale can be stopped by their father when he finds out, and Taylor informs them their father might just have to deal with it. Ella finally makes an appearance and is surprised to see Taylor there already. Taylor tries to make nice with Ella's children, but they are both cold toward him. Emma goes so far as to say if her mother sells the house, she will leave forever. Taylor and Ella leave soon after, leaving Wesley alone with the lamb.



Weston appears, carrying a grocery bag full of artichokes and yelling because he knocked over the garbage cans on his way in. He looks inside the empty refrigerator and rants about how everything is left up to him including shopping and taking care of the home. He explains he purchased the artichokes when he went out to Hot Springs to see some land he had bought. He tells his son the land was sold to him by a man who told him it would be a sound investment. Wesley wants to know how much money his father put down on the land, which leads to Weston telling him it was none of his business and then admitting the land was worthless.

Weston asks where Ella is, and tells Wesley when she returns from wherever she is, she needs to do his laundry for him. They discuss the maggots in the lamb's digestive tract, and then Weston admits he has been thinking of selling their house and buying some land in Mexico, but Wesley should not tell his mother.

Analysis

The play begins with Ella and Wesley discussing what happened to the door, and this will continue. The two of them are often found sitting in the kitchen discussing the other members of their family. They argue because both of them see themselves as caretakers for the family and the house. Wesley actually maintains things, and he is often seen feeding animals or trying to take care of the lamb with maggots. Ella thinks what she is doing is best for the family as well. Each of them are, in their own way, trying to do what they think is right while Weston and Emma shout and ruin things around them.

Both Weston and Emma have violent outbursts, and it is often suggested Weston wants to kill someone. At the very beginning of Act 1, Ella says she was afraid for her life when her husband came home drunk. Even Weston himself says he will kill Ella and Taylor when he finds out his wife is trying to sell the house. No one in the family seems surprised at this level of violence. Wesley certainly seems almost resigned to it, and this is especially apparent in how he methodically cleans up the debris from the broken door, even as his mother is going on about how it should be his father's responsibility to clean up the mess. Wesley knows his father is not going to clean it up and does not seem surprised or upset about it.

Vocabulary

investment, artichokes, nitroglycerin, explosive, starving, maintenance, replenish, larder, hoax, depreciate



Act 2 Part 1

Summary

Act 2 begins in the kitchen where a pot of the artichokes that Weston brought home is bubbling on the stove. The sound of construction can be heard, and it becomes apparent Wesley is trying to build a new door for the house. Emma is at the kitchen table working on new posters to replace the ones Wesley urinated on, and she asks her brother if he thinks Taylor and their mother are having an affair. Wesley does not know about that, but he does think Taylor is after the money he stands to make off the sale of their property.

Emma is of the opinion Ella is using Taylor to better herself since she has been put down by her husband for so many years. She says she imagines Ella and Taylor traveling, and launches into a story about their car breaking down in Los Cerritos where she is a mechanic and is the only one who can fix the car. Wesley does not want to hear her fantasies and tells her to check on the artichokes. Emma is too busy with her work to do it, and Wesley accuses her of being “on the rag”.

Wesley asks his sister if she actually understands what is happening surrounding the sale of their house. He speaks of the suburbanization going on around them, and says a single family will not move into their house, but the land will be redeveloped. He compares this to a zombie invasion. Emma begins to wonder what will happen to her and Wesley if their parents never come home, and she thinks there is a lot they could do with the house if that were to be the case. Wesley has no interest in this and tells her he has a plan to go to Alaska, which Emma thinks is crazy.

Analysis

At the beginning of this act, Wesley is in his role of fixer, just as he was in the first act. He will never get to finish the door that he is building, but he is trying since there is no sign of his father. He is also concerned that his sister, who is still young, is not really aware of what is going on with the sale of the house and their parents. He sees it as his duty to inform her, but he is much like his mother, and does not really explain things well. It is important the land, rather than the house, is really what all the commotion is over. The land will certainly last longer than the house or the people who live in it, so it is the solid investment the people are seeking to make.

In this section both Emma and Wesley talk about the other places they wish to be. Wesley has a dream of going to Alaska if their parents do not return, and Emma speaks of herself being a mechanic in Mexico. Both of them wish for different lives, yet they do not want their house to be sold. It seems as though they have both given up any hope the life they currently are living will get any better, and so all they can do is dream of new ones.



Even Ella is tired of the life they lead, if Emma is to be believed, and she has gone off with her lawyer to spend money. This is a fairly low point for Emma, and it appears she has given up hoping for her family to be any better than it is now.

Vocabulary

esteem, boonies, frontier, lots, undiscovered, garage, architecture, demonstration, mechanic, enclosure



Act 2 Part 2

Summary

Weston comes stumbling in, clearly drunk. Emma starts to leave, uncomfortable, but Weston tells her to sit down and asks Wesley what he is building. Wesley tells him he's building a new door and then has to explain to his father Weston himself was the one who tore down the old one. Weston immediately changes the subject to the laundry that has not been done yet, and he demands to know where Ella is. Wesley refuses to answer, but Emma admits her mother is off with her lawyer.

Weston complains about the smell of the cooking artichokes, the fact Ella left in his car, and the laundry has not been done, and when Emma offers to do it, he tells her it is her mother's job and it will wait for her to get back. The conversation then turns to what would happen if the house were to be sold, and Wesley says he would not sell anything. Emma says she does not know what she would do if it were sold, and Weston informs them he has found a buyer for the land. Emma leaves angrily once again.

Wesley wants to know who this buyer is, and his father says it is the man who owns the Alibi Club where he drinks. This man has offered up enough money for Weston to be able to go to Mexico as he wishes to. Wesley eventually confesses Ella is in the middle of trying to sell the house too, and that is the reason why she has been meeting with Taylor. This leads to an outburst from Weston where he vows he will kill both Ella and Taylor because it is his house and Ella has no right. Weston passes out on top of the table after this.

He wakes up when Wesley approaches and asks what Taylor looks like because he wants to find him just like he wants to find the man who sold him the worthless desert property. Wesley suggests his father not kill Taylor because that is illegal, and Weston counters Taylor is not expecting to be murdered. He drifts off again in the middle of his rant.

While Weston is passed out, Ella comes in with groceries and asks about all the artichokes. Wesley tells her Weston brought them home from the desert, and Ella makes a sarcastic comment about the property Weston purchased. She throws the artichokes to the floor saying how pointless they are when they do not even have any other food. Wesley figures out Taylor was the one who sold the desert land to Weston. Ella denies it, but Wesley is not convinced.

Ella has already negotiated a deal to sell their property and all that is left to do is sign the official papers. Wesley wants to know if his mother is planning to run off with the lawyer, but he does not get a straight answer. He tells his mother Weston has already sold their property off to Ellis who owns the Alibi Club. Ella is not pleased by this because she does not think her husband is even competent enough to make such a deal. Wesley warns her Weston has already threatened to kill Taylor, but Ella is not



bothered because Weston is apparently always going to kill someone. This time, Wesley is worried Weston will actually do it, and that he will kill Ella too. Ella still is not terribly upset and informs her son everything that has happened to the family is because of a curse that has always been on them and always will be on them.

Analysis

It becomes even clearer Ella has no real love for Weston. She comes home bearing groceries and throws out the artichokes Weston brought, effectively rejecting his attempts to provide for the family and making room for the things she has bought. Ella definitely seems to think she is the one who is the provider for the family, and bristles whenever anyone else tries to claim otherwise. This conflict is echoed in how both Ella and Weston are trying to sell the house, and their dispute over who really owns it. Their argument is futile, however, since Ellis has the deed to the property. This echoes back to the chicken in Act 1 and how Emma had not written her name on it, so no one knew it was hers. Now the deed to the house is in Ellis' name, clearly making it his.

Weston comes in asking questions and demanding information, making it clear he still sees himself as head of the household. This is especially ironic since Wesley is in the middle of trying to repair the door his father broke down, which is something Weston himself should be doing. He has also made a deal to sell the house which he sees as his, and he, much like Ella, cannot see how his spouse has any claim to it. The audience gets to see just how violent and delusional he is, as Weston says himself that he will kill his wife and Taylor for what they are doing.

Vocabulary

pathetic, invisible, atoms, adjustment, slaughter, fathom, avocados, inherit, convince, venomous



Act 2 Part 3

Summary

A large man with tattoos and flashy jewelry enters the kitchen. He is none other than Ellis, the man Weston sold the house to. He laughs at Weston who is still passed out and introduces himself to Ella and Wesley. Ella is upset Ellis did not bother to knock, even if there is not a door in place at the moment. Ellis basically says he can do what he wants because the house is his now, and he pulls out the \$1500 he owes Weston for the house. Apparently Weston has signed the house over to him before he even got paid, but since Ellis was such a good man, he followed through and brought the money.

Ella wants Ellis out, but there is not anything Wesley can do since Ellis has the deed to the house and is practically threatening him. Ella tries to wake her husband, but he remains slumped over on the table. It is then explained that Weston owes a lot of money to people who could easily kill him. When it becomes apparent Weston is not going to wake up, Ella and Wesley get into yet another argument about what should be done with the money. Wesley wants to pay off the men who are after his father and tells Ella there is not even enough money for her to use to go to Europe.

Adding to the confusion, Taylor arrives then, bearing the last draft of the contract for Ella's sale of the property. Ella tells him Weston has beaten her to it, but Taylor does not seem to think this is legitimate. Since Weston is a ward of the state, he should not be able to sell the land legally. Ellis says he has had the deed checked over and there was no problem, but Taylor continues to argue that Weston is in no fit state to sign legally binding documents. The argument escalates, and Wesley warns Taylor he should not get involved in something he cannot get himself out of. Taylor stands firm, insisting there are powerful corporations on his side.

A policeman arrives then asking to speak to Ella. Emma has been arrested for riding her horse through the Alibi Club and shooting up the bar with a rifle. An estimate of how much damage was done needs to be figured out, but no one was in the bar, so no one was hurt. Ellis snatches the money from Wesley since his bar was damaged, and Taylor sneaks away.

Wesley wants the policeman to go arrest Taylor because the lawyer is a con man, but Sgt. Malcolm is only there on business concerning Emma. Ellis is under the impression Weston told his daughter to shoot up his bar, and vows he is going to make sure Weston knows not to mess with him.

Sgt. Malcolm suggests Ella come down to the police station to sign a statement giving permission for Emma to be arraigned. Ella says she will, and Weston wakes up as the policeman leaves. Husband and wife stare at each other for a moment before Ella runs off. The act ends with Weston getting up and opening the refrigerator.



Analysis

The similarities between Weston and Emma come to light even more in this act. They both use violence to express their feelings and go on rants and storm off when they do not get the answers they want. Emma seems to have reached her limit with being able to put up with her family and their lot in life and has turned to violence and crime to express her displeasure. Both of them are subdued eventually though, as Weston passes out drunk and Emma gets put in jail.

Taylor enters the argument over who has rights to the house, not really to side with the family, but because he wants to assure his own gain. His character symbolizes capitalism and gain for gain's sake in this act, and indeed for most of the play. He agrees with Ella that Weston is not even competent enough to sell anything, but it does not matter since the deed has already been signed, and for all of Taylor's boasting, there does not seem to be anything he can do.

Meanwhile, Emma's actions in this section have basically destroyed any chance of her having a bright future and work to separate her from the wholesome farm girl stereotype. Ellis accuses Weston of having sent the girl to shoot up his club, further showing how similar the two are and how the two of them react violently to disputes.

Weston being passed out for the entirety of the argument about the sale of the house removes him from it. When he wakes up the argument is over and it is as if by missing his chance to do violence and yell as he normally would, he has risen above it. Being passed out while his daughter was off shooting up Ellis' club could be read as Weston's temper and actions passing to Emma.

Vocabulary

stupor, trigger, incompetent, attache, executive, petty, corporations, arraigned, psychologically, sergeant



Act 3 Part 1

Summary

Act 3 begins the next morning, back in the kitchen of the farmhouse. The lamb is in its fence, and the door has been finished by Weston who is clean for once and folding laundry as coffee brews. It seems he has undergone a transformation. Weston is talking to the lamb, assuring it there are things much worse than maggots, and he launches into a story about how he was once castrating lambs when an eagle came swooping down, wanting the testes of the lambs. Weston realizes this and throws the testes onto the roof for the eagle to take.

Wesley comes into the kitchen during the story, his face and hands bloody, and he wants his father to continue the story. But Wesley already knows how the story ends, so Weston will not finish it. Weston asks about the blood, and Wesley informs him he has been trying to get his money back from Ellis who has stolen the money and their house. Weston doesn't agree because he has gotten it into his head he is going to stay in the house.

It seems Weston has had a sudden change of heart to go with his change in demeanor. He speaks of waking up and walking around the house, realizing he was the one who owned this land, and how good that made him feel. His morning activities, including bathing and walking around naked, have made him feel like a new person. He even did the laundry for the whole family, saying that doing so has made him feel closer to each member of his family. Wesley is hungry, so Weston tells him to go take a bath and he will make some breakfast. Even though Wesley is no longer on stage, Weston continues to speak to him, talking about how he's thinking about joining the Grower's Association and growing avocados like Wesley had mentioned once. He plans for them to pick the avocados themselves and then eventually resell the land in the desert.

Analysis

Act 3 begins with a Weston that the audience has never seen before. He is sober, clean, and being a productive member of his family for the first time. He tells Wesley he has done many things that morning including bathing and walking around naked. This is a ritual of sorts that seems to indicate a kind of symbolic rebirth for Weston. The kitchen table seems to be important for this ritual since it was after waking up from being passed out atop it Weston was reborn in a way.

This act has Weston trying to find ways to be closer to his family, to reclaim some of the time he has wasted with them before it is too late. It is almost as if he can feel there is some tragedy coming for them that will ruin everything.

Wesley enters covered in blood from where he has been trying to get the money for their house back from Ellis, continuing in his role as the person who tries to fix



everything for the family. He also slaughters the lamb he has been trying to take care of for the entire play. This turn to violence for Wesley who has not been violent so far shows he too is becoming like his father, which is illustrated when he puts on the soiled clothes Weston was wearing before his “rebirth.”

Vocabulary

buzzard, castrating, antics, ewes, bred, aeronautics, remnants, oblige, downstage, pastureland, intentions, preoccupied



Act 3 Part 2

Summary

Ella comes into the kitchen looking tired, but Weston doesn't speak to her until she inquires about the lamb. They discuss it, and Weston asks her where she has been all this time. Ella has been at the jail and wants to know why her husband is cooking and doing the laundry. Weston doesn't seem to think there is anything strange about him doing this, and Ella ends up telling him she was at the jail to visit Emma who has numerous charges against her including assault and breaking and entering. This makes Weston proud because he thinks his daughter has accomplished something great, and he says she gets her temper from him. Ella is not pleased.

Weston tries to offer his wife coffee, but she flies off the handle insisting she doesn't want any coffee and she wants the lamb out of the kitchen. Seeing his wife is not in a good mood, Weston tries to convince her taking a nap on the table, as he did, will have her waking up as a whole new person. Ella thinks it over and climbs up on the table to lay down since Weston seems so sure it will make everything better. While Weston tells Ella of the wonders of napping on the table, Wesley enters, not wearing any clothes, and takes the lamb, leaving before his father can see him. According to Weston, lying in comfort makes a person forget what is real while the hard table can rejuvenate.

Weston goes back to preparing the breakfast as Ella gets sleepy on top of the table. He goes to look for Wesley, but upon not being able to find him, he begins to eat the food himself while his wife sleeps. Wesley enters wearing the dirty clothes his father had soiled in his drunkenness in the previous act. When asked why, he replies the clothes fit him. He also admits he has butchered the lamb so the family would have food. The family does have food though, since Ella has been shopping, and Wesley goes to the refrigerator and starts eating the things he finds. Weston admits he might have ignored some of his duties, but his family was never without food. Ella sleeps through all of this, despite her husband's attempts to wake her.

Wesley warns his father the people he owes money to are going to come to kill him. Even if Weston has changed, Wesley knows the people Weston was involved with have not, and the man is still in danger from them. Ellis also still technically owns their house now, but Weston was too drunk when he signed the deed and doesn't remember it happening. He says he can't run from these men because he is supposed to be with his family, but slowly he starts to remember how he got the way he was. He speaks of borrowing money, thinking one day he would be able to make a profit. Weston has been looking for satisfaction and happiness for so long, only to realize too late it was there in his family the whole time. Wesley's advice is for his father to head to Mexico, and Weston leaves.



Analysis

When Ella returns to the house and tells Weston what has become of their daughter, he says Emma has inherited his temper. Emma is more like her father than her mother, and it is almost as if Weston has passed on his anger to his daughter now that he appears to have let go of it.

Weston convinces his wife to have a nap on the table as he did, telling her she will feel like a new person when she wakes up. The man is clearly trying to make a new beginning for his family since he has realized he has been neglecting his responsibilities to them. Of course this realization is much too late, as the events that will nearly ruin the family have already been set into motion.

Weston is forced to flee in this section, as finally the effects of the way he has been living his life catch up with him. He is fleeing to Mexico, which has been set up throughout the play as a place to go to escape by both Emma and Weston, and the latter is certainly hoping he will be able to escape those who are after him.

The fact that Wesley is the one who tells him to leave and go to Mexico, while wearing Weston's clothes, shows he is firmly stepping into his father's place now that Weston is being forced to vacate it.

Vocabulary

malicious, equestrian, assault, regulation, deliver, trespassing, violation, butchered, generous, malicious, intestine, deliver, reborn, inheritance, descendant, migrated, investors

Act 3 Part 3

Summary

Emma shows up then, having heard the conversation between her brother and father. She doesn't think Weston will last long in Mexico and wants to know why Wesley is wearing his father's clothes and eating food off of the floor, which he is. Wesley has tried everything else though, he says. He took a bath and walked naked around the house like Weston did, and he does not feel any better.

Emma tries to wake her mother, but it does not work. Wesley tells Emma about how he felt like he was turning into their father as he put on his soiled clothes earlier. Emma, it turns out, has seduced the sergeant in order to get out of jail, and is looking for money in order to start a life of crime. She rummages through her mother's purse, stealing money and the car keys. Ella wakes then and yells at her daughter, but Emma runs off. Wesley is mistaken for his father since he is wearing his clothes, and Ella calls him Weston and asks what is going on with Emma.

Just then, there is a loud explosion and Emerson and his partner, both men to whom Weston owes money, enter laughing and explaining they have blown up Weston's car since he did not pay for it. They are carrying the carcass of the lamb Wesley butchered and joking about how it looks like afterbirth. Ella wants the men out of her house, but Wesley is looking at the wreckage of the car. Ella asks how long she was asleep and says she had a dream about Emma leaving. Wesley tells her Emma was actually just in the kitchen.

Staring at the butchered lamb makes Ella remember a story, and it is the same one Weston was telling earlier about the eagle and the lamb testes. She says the eagle persisted in swooping down until a cat came and sprang onto the roof. The two animals fight in midair, with cat in the eagle's talons, until they both crash to ground. The play ends here.

Analysis

As her father is embracing trying to be more of a family person, Emma is embracing a life of making profit with crime. Both of them speak of profit in this act, Weston talking about how he only got into debt because he thought he could borrow money until he made a profit. It is clear they are the more unstable members of their family, and in the end they are both gone. Weston flees and Emma is blown up in the car she is trying to steal.

The play ends with Ella telling Wesley the end of the story that Wesley had refused to finish. The eagle and the cat both crash to the ground in the end, presumably dead. This can be used to symbolize the family who has fought with each other and the things against them until the family as they knew it was dead. Ella and Wesley, who were



always very similar are the only members of the family left at this point, echoing the beginning of the play where they were the only two onstage.

Vocabulary

carcass, afterbirth, overcoat, credentials, overhead, upkeep, remedy, overtures, hypnotic, retreating



Characters

Ella Tate

Ella is the mother of the Tate family. She is a somewhat flighty character who never really wants to accept any blame for the things that happen to the family in the play. She is always quickly changing topics and focus, switching her moods just as quickly, which makes it seem like Ella is trying to hide things. Ella has little to no respect or love for her husband, and she is trying to sell their house without his knowledge or approval.

Ellis

Ellis is the owner of the Alibi Club where Weston spends his time drinking. He is greedy and takes advantage of the Tate family through Weston's drunkenness. When Weston sells him the Tate's house and drunkenly signs the agreement, Ellis refuses to let him back out of the contract. He is very much a petty, dishonest man who enjoys taking advantage of people. His character is not really fleshed out any more than that, and it is clear he exists just to be a villain.

Emerson

Emerson is a man to whom Weston owes money. He shows up at the end of the play to blow up Weston's car and antagonize the family. He is another character with no real dimensions who is only there for gratuitous villainy.

Emma Tate

Emma is Weston and Ella's daughter. She is a young girl, probably around thirteen, since she is just starting her cycle. She appears not to have very much depth and to embody the stereotypical farm girl with her chickens and being in 4-H. However, it becomes clear there is much more to her when she begins to act out and talk of living a life of crime. Her behavior is just as chaotic as the fate of the family, and she seems to almost be the embodiment of all of them.

Sergeant Malcolm

Malcolm is the police officer who comes to tell the family Emma has been arrested. He is only used in the plot for this reason.



Slater

Slater is Emerson's partner in crime. He is a stock "follower" character.

Taylor

Taylor is Ella's lawyer, hired to help her sell the family's property. He is also the man who sold the worthless desert property to Weston. He seems to stand completely for capitalism and the suburbanization Wesley talks about. Taylor is another kind of villain, though a less outright one, who works against the family.

Wesley Tate

Wesley is Weston and Ella's son. He appears to be about seventeen years old and has a lot of anger about his situation. As a result, he has dreams of going to Alaska and leaving his family behind. He is the character who is always doing something, and seems to be the one responsible for maintaining the house. Wesley does strong and sometimes shocking things, and fears turning into his father.

Weston Tate

Weston is Ella's husband and Emma and Wesley's father. He is a drunk with a tendency towards violence and yelling because he is unhappy with his family's financial situation. He owes money to gang members and sells his house to Ellis, the bar owner, to try and make some more money to pay off these men. Weston spends most of his time complaining and living in the past, at least until the third act when he seems to get his act together, only to be thwarted in the end.



Objects/Places

Broken Door

The play opens with Wesley picking up the pieces of the door that his father broke down the night before.

Mexico

Both Weston and Emma mention their desire to go to Mexico. Emma wants to go to become a mechanic until she can write a novel, and it is suggested Weston flee to Mexico to avoid the men to whom he owes money.

The Kitchen Table

The kitchen table is present for all three acts in the play. During the second Act, Weston passes out on top of it, and when he wakes up he feels like a new person. Ella is convinced to nap on the table as well so perhaps the same thing will happen to her.

Refrigerator

The Tate family refrigerator is opened and closed by every member of the family. Emma goes to it to look for her chicken for the demonstration on how to cut it, and spends time talking to it about how they are not members of the starving class because they have food to eat.

Emma's Chicken

Emma raises a chicken herself, hand feeding, killing, and plucking it so that she can use it for her 4-H demonstration. Ella ends up boiling the chicken, because she did not know it was Emma's.

Alaska

Wesley has a dream of running away from the home if his parents do not come back and going to Alaska.



Europe

Ella says that she is going to sell the house so she can have money to take a trip to Europe. When Emma complains about how disgusting she finds her family, Ella tells her they can go to Europe, but Emma thinks they will be the same people even in Europe.

Packard

One of Weston's cars is a Packard that Wesley hears when he is lying in a field the night the door gets broken down.

Alarm Clock

At the beginning of the play, Ella enters, winding an alarm clock that seems to serve as a timer for how much time the family has left.

Lamb

A lamb belonging to the family has maggots in its digestive tract that Wesley is trying to cure. At the end of the play, he butchers the lamb so that the family will have food even though they already have things to eat.

Artichokes

Weston brings home a bag of artichokes he purchased while visiting some property he bought. Ella later throws them out.

The Desert Property

Taylor has sold Weston a piece of useless land out in the desert for which Weston wants his money returned.

The Kitchen

The entire play takes place in the Tate's kitchen which is not well furnished and is the scene for many arguments.

The Deed

When Weston sells the house to Ellis, he signs the deed over to him. This overrides both Weston and Ella's claims to the property.

The Alibi Club

The Alibi Club is the bar owned by Ellis. Emma shoots it up and rides a horse through it in the second act, landing her in jail.



Themes

Infection

This theme appears in different forms in this play. The lamb has maggots in its body, Weston is an alcoholic who says he is infected with a poison that runs in his family, and Ella thinks the family is infected by a curse that is slowly ruining them. Emma is having her first period for the duration of the play, and the way it is used to justify her erratic behavior makes it seem like even this is something infecting her. Weston says the poison in him will be in his son, but it actually looks like the infection has gotten into Emma who acts more like her father than Wesley does. Weston's alcoholism is what ends up being the reason the house is sold to a dishonest man like Ellis, and he has long been too busy drinking to really pay attention to his family.

Suburbanization

The importance of land is repeated again and again in this play. The land is changing from the rich farmland it used to be into more urban type lots. Taylor wants Ella to sell the house so the land it is on can be turned into something else that will make money. Ellis, who ends up owning the house speaks of turning it into a steakhouse because it is near the interstate, meaning it will bring in more money. Wesley likens this takeover to a zombie invasion. He says everything is becoming prefabricated. This is stripping the character, the history from the land, and turning it into something marketable.

Ownership

Both Ella and Weston are trying to sell the house and the property, and they argue over who actually owns the house. Weston sees himself as the head of the family and therefore the owner, even though he does very little to actually take care of the house. Ella thinks since she does the shopping and takes care of making the house a home it is actually hers. It is not until Weston signs the house over to Ellis and has his symbolic rebirth that he starts to actually see what it means to feel like the owner of the house and land, but by then it is too late. Ellis has the deed in his name, making him the legal owner of the house. Having one's name on the property is also touched on at the beginning when Emma is looking for her chicken Ella accidentally boiled. Emma did not have her name on the chicken so Wesley thinks there is no way Ella could have known to whom it belonged.



Style

Point of View

Since this is a play, the reader and audience have the advantage of being able to see the story from their own unique point of view. The action is presented straight out and not told through any specific character's point of view removing character bias. This point of view also limits the looks inside of the character's heads forcing the audience to make their own judgments about the motivations and thoughts of the different characters.

Setting

The play takes place in California. There is still farmland although this is being turned into suburban properties fairly rapidly. The action of the play never leaves the kitchen of the family's farmhouse, although offstage events are spoken of. The concentration of the action in the room serves to draw the reader into the conversations and relationships between the characters more deeply.

Language and Meaning

Since *Curse of the Starving Class* is a play, it is easy to read the dialogue between the characters. The language they use seems appropriate for the time period and their status. There is a lot of symbolism in the play with simple objects alluding to more serious things. For example the artichokes that Weston brought are symbolic of his offerings to the family, and Ella throwing them out symbolizes her rejection of Weston's offering.

Structure

The play is broken down into three acts. Each act is packed full of movement of the characters, arguments and accusations. There are very few quiet moments, keeping each act full of action and drama. Over the course of these three acts only a couple of days pass, and though most of the action happens on stage in the kitchen, many events are said to have happened offstage.



Quotes

Sure I locked the door. I told him I was going to lock the door. I told him the next time that happened I was locking the door and he could sleep in a hotel.

I could feel the space around me like a big, black world. I listened like an animal. My listening was afraid. Afraid of sound. Tense. Like any second something could invade me.

Don't speak unless you know what you're speaking about! There's no such thing as a starving class!

Everyone wants a piece of land. It's the only sure investment. It can never depreciate like a car or a washing machine. Land will double its value in ten years. In less than that. Land is going up every day.

I like cars. I like travel. I like the idea of people breaking down and I'm the only one who can help them get on the road again. It would be like being a magician. Just open up the hood and cast your magic spell.

Look at my outlook. You don't envy it, right?...That's because it's full of poison. Infected. And you recognize poison, right? You recognize it when you see it?

I was in the war. I know how to kill. I was over there. I know how to do it. I've done it before. It's no big deal. You just make an adjustment. You convince yourself it's all right. That's all. It's easy. You just slaughter them.

See I always figured on the future. I banked on it. I was banking on it getting better.

I figured that's why everyone wants you to buy things. Buy refrigerators. Buy cars, houses, lots, invest. They wouldn't be so generous if they didn't figure you had it coming in.

You never hear the sound of change anymore. It's all plastic shuffling back and forth. It's all in everybody's heads. So I figured, if that's the case, why not take advantage of it? Why not go in debt for a few grand, if all it is numbers?



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who seems to care more for the house and property, Ella, Weston, or Wesley?

Topic 2

Is Curse of the Starving Class a tragedy? Why or why not?

Topic 3

How does the play seem to handle the more villainous characters like Ellis and Emerson? Is there anything more to them than meets the eye?

Topic 4

Is the Tate family a part of the Starving Class? How do you know?

Topic 5

Weston had a “rebirth” right before he had to flee. Did he deserve a second chance to own his land and get to know his family?

Topic 6

What does the slaughtering of the lamb represent?

Topic 7

Is this play realistic? If so, why? If not, what is it trying to accomplish?

Topic 8

Emma said the family would be the same even if they lived in Europe. Do you think moving somewhere else would have changed the family’s situation? How?