

**Social and Familial Disintegration
in
Sam Shepard's Family Plays**

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Samuel Shepard Rogers III

- Nov 5th 1945 - July 27th 2017
- His own family experiences.
- Early involvement in theatre.
- Playwriting: Avant garde (experimental one-act plays), political plays, and lastly family plays.
- From Off-off-broadway to Hollywood.



Family Trilogy

- It, at first, included *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976) , *Buried Child* (1979) and *True West* (1980).
- Later on, he added two more plays *Fool for Love* (1983) and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) and so these plays were simply referred to as the **Family Plays**.

Curse of the Starving Family

The play is about a **nuclear family** that consists of a Father (Weston), a mother (Ella), a son (Wesley), and a daughter (Emma).

The lawyer (Taylor), and the crooks (Ellis) & (Slater)

Curse of the Starving Class

This play is the **first** of a major sequence of five “realistic” plays that deal with, as **Robert Coe** says, the “traditional theme of the American plays” which is the *disintegration* of the American family.

Marranca, another critic, “the cause [of disintegration] is within [internal] as much as without [external]” (Marranca 43).

Another critic, Weiss says that Shepard has been “concerned with **masculine rage and violence** for almost thirty years, and his representation of violence on the stage is nearly always coupled with **references to war**” (Weiss 77).

Marrance also says that [C]haracters **interrogate** their own identities, as “father” or “son,” or members of a “class” or “society,” only to find no connection between those roles (familial and/ or social) and their perceptions of themselves. The end result is that the **family exists almost by accident**. It becomes a tenuous connection, no more meaningful than **strangers** who share the same space. (37)

Weston, as the head of the family, is “an alcoholic, violent, indebted, a **victim** and a **victimizer**”
(Bigsby 2000: 182).

- WWII
- Cold War
- Capitalism
- He victimizes the family by neglecting them.
- He literally has no idea about his place and role in the family.

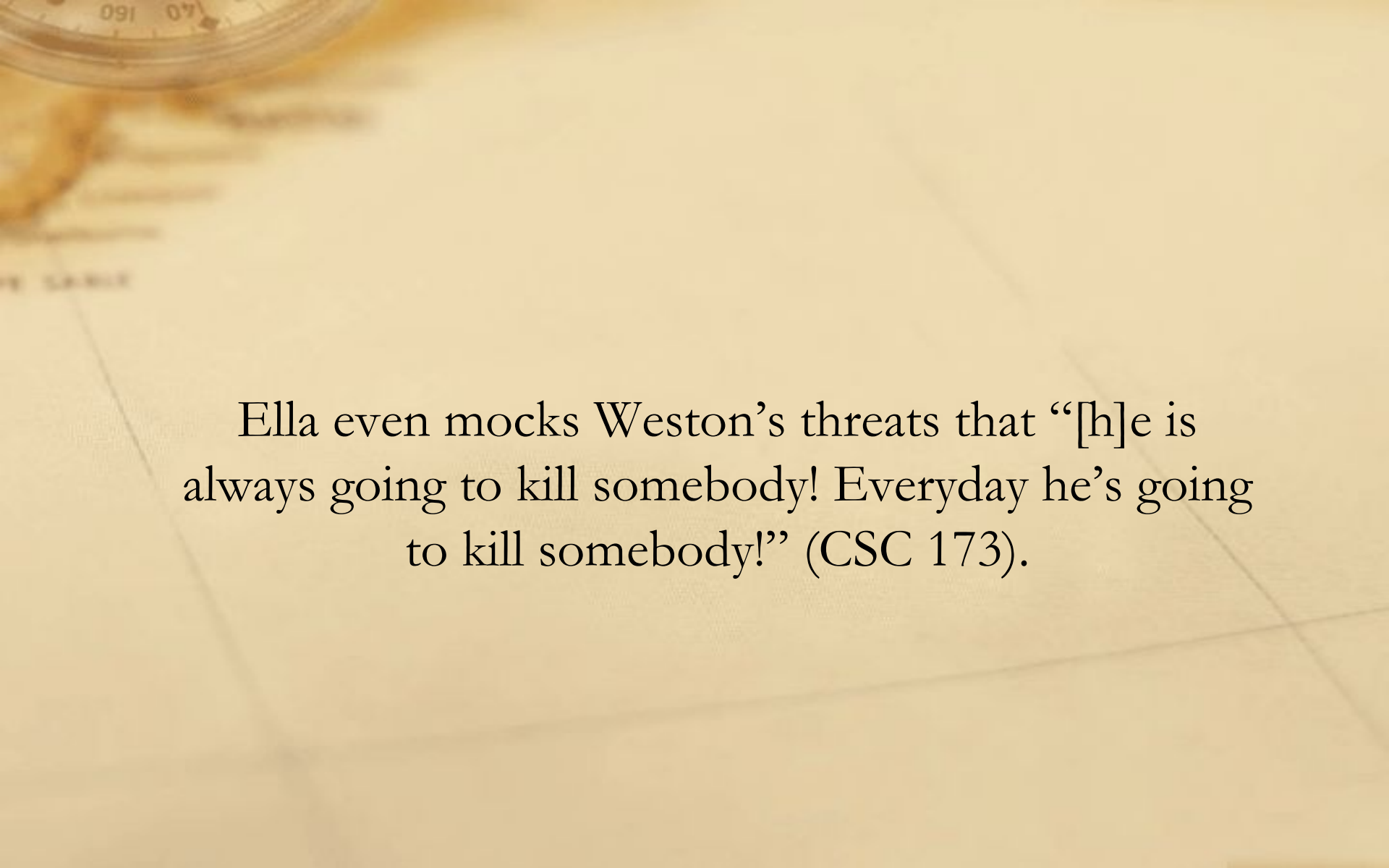
- Weston has chosen to booze rather than anything else because there is a “**mysterious trauma**” that neither men nor women understand it. Shepard maintains that the “**medicine**” is “**booze**” (Jacoby).
- Alcohol plays an important role in modern American drama because it “may allow a release of emotions” and “free man to do what he wants” (Proehl 27)..
- However, Weston’s drinking habit is not normal at all, and **Ellis** who owns Alibi Club says that he has seen hard cases like that of Weston. He also assures Wesley and Ella that Weston’s drinking is **dedicated** to some reasons because he drinks like Canadians and will not stop till he is “**flat out**” (CSC 175).

- Geoffrey Proehl writes that

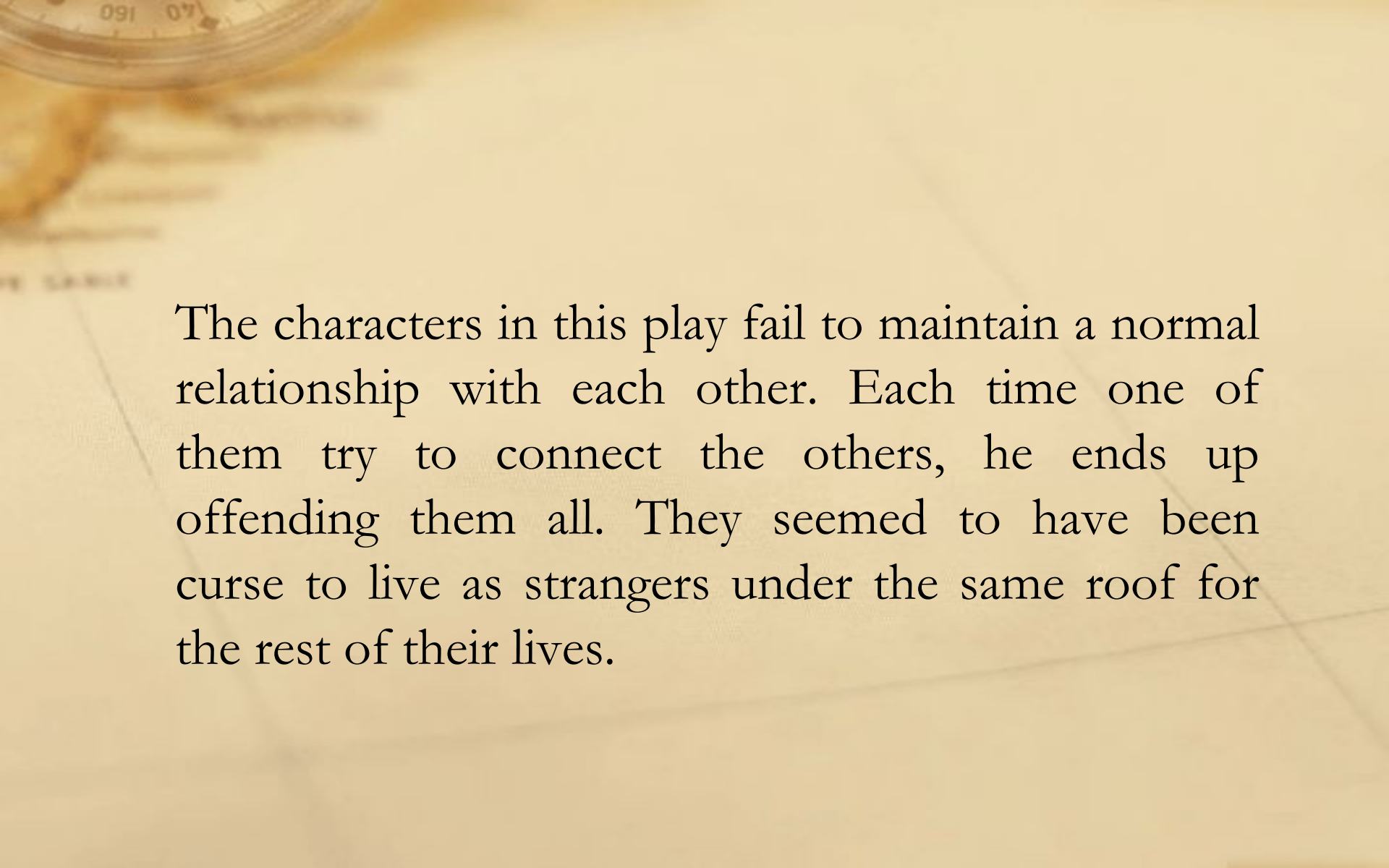
intensive drinking in particular begs to be **read**, but because it cannot be **read** in anyway, it becomes a useful dramatic device. It exists as the **effect** of some causes either in the **present** or the **past**, as **sign** or **symptom** that in one way or another, **foregrounds** itself (25).

He also says “drinking or drunkenness connote **weakness**, **waste**, **sloth**, **domestic violence**, **sexual profligacies**, **mental**, and **physical deterioration**, **madness**, **death**, and most importantly for the American drama, the **disintegration** of the American family” (29-30).

- He angrily looks into the fridge, and says
- “PERFECT! ZERO! ABSOLUTELY ZERO! NADA! GOOSE EGGS! *(he yells at the house in general)* WE’VE DONE IT AGAIN! WE’VE GONE AND LEFT EVERYTHING UP TO THE OLD MAN AGAIN! ALL THE UPKEEP! THE MAINTAINANCE! PERFECT!... IT IS ONLY ME! MR.SLAVE LABOR HIMSELF COME HOME TO REPLENISH THE EMPTY LARDER! *(CSC 157)*
- When the children boil the artichokes, Weston says “what’s that smell in here? What’s that smell?” and Wesley answers that it is the artichokes’. Weston says “they smell [stink] like that?” then he asks Wesley to stop



Ella even mocks Weston's threats that "[h]e is always going to kill somebody! Everyday he's going to kill somebody!" (CSC 173).

The background of the slide features a faded, sepia-toned map with a prominent compass rose in the upper left corner. The map shows various geographical lines and labels, though they are not clearly legible. The overall aesthetic is that of an old, historical document.

The characters in this play fail to maintain a normal relationship with each other. Each time one of them try to connect the others, he ends up offending them all. They seemed to have been curse to live as strangers under the same roof for the rest of their lives.

A vintage map with a compass rose in the top left corner. The map is aged and yellowed, with faint lines and text visible. The compass rose shows numbers like 091 and 071. The word 'SARIN' is partially visible on the map. The word 'SARIN' is also visible on the map.

Questions....