



Sam Shepard's *True West*: A Fraternity Battle

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Abstract

This study examines how Sam Shepard has treated various themes to present the reality of postmodern American life. Shepard also dramatises the conflict between the claims of the past and the realities of the present. The present paper focuses on the battle between two brothers and the qualities they inherit from their parents. It reflects the distinction between the reality and myth. Apart from that it explores how Sheppard debunks the American myth of family and the myth of American dream; it also compares the New West with the Old West. The focus is also on the escapism of characters from reality of past in order to attain a new identity. In *True West*, Shepard presents a contrary vision to the traditional American Dream that infuses much of our life and literature. Sam Shepard gives a tragic depiction of society in which he perceives good being erased out slowly by the evil forces. The degeneration of traditional myths and the rise of a new mythology in a society that considers itself post mythical and purely scientific expose the dispersal of meaning, the waning of community, and the psychological backbone of individuals whose selves have been torn apart.

Keywords: fraternity, crisis, hostility, betrayal, revenge, duality, reality, society, battle

Introduction

True West is set in suburban kitchen in a Southern California and is the final play of Sam Shepard's family trilogy. The play's title *True West* itself shows ambiguity. It posits the existence of two wests, one is true and the other is false. In an interview with Robert Coe, Sam Shepard speaks of *True West* as, a play that explores the concept of man's dual nature:

I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with. (qtd. *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* 131)

In *True West*, Sam Shepard puts two brothers, Austin and Lee, in a fraternal battle to show the reality of an idealised America. It cherishes a number of unusual, peculiar elements such as the grotesque violence and the surprising transformations of its two main characters. Sam Shepard symbolises Austin and Lee's quarrel with Cain and Abel with a small twist towards the end wherein the younger brother Austin chokes neck and almost kills his older brother Lee with a telephone cord.

In *True West*, Sam Shepard examines and explores the entertainment industry, family relationships, and the life of the modern cowboy. Lee comes from the desert west that is synonymous with the myth of the frontier American West. Austin's life, on the other hand, is centred in the twentieth-century West of Southern California. *True West*, "is both a

geographical reality and a psychological frontier; and it is on this psychic frontier that the battle between Austin and Lee takes place" (*Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages* 97). There is no clear answer for which one is the true West. Symbolically, these two different western locals represent the conflicting ideals of masculinity that the family myth expects American men to consolidate. However, under its realistic surface there exists Shepard's traditional abstract theme of the impossibility of the American family to successfully attain its goal of the perfect life as established by the modern American family myth. *True West* is characterized as a civil war of family life, a showdown between brothers.

True West begins when a family is already split; Austin and Lee are discussing their mother's departure for Alaska. Beneath this seemingly ordinary conversation is the brother's indignation for one another and their desperation for California dream. Austin, the younger brother is a script writer for movies settled in the North, married and prosperous, is a true eastern middle-class urban intellectual who has come to the West to write a new script and to settle a deal with Saul Kimmer, the film producer. He stays at his mom's house during his absence. Lee, his elder brother, a drifter in the desert, illiterate, belligerent and a loner, is a true descendent of his father. He is on the scene to make money through stealing. Both are for making money, but for Lee money is a necessity and for Austin it is a comfort, a dream that all Americans cherish. Lee meets Austin in Mom's kitchen, while he is still working on his project. Austin as a Westerner has an inner desire to return to his roots. He cannot escape from the haunting memories of his past. When Kimmer stops by to have Austin sign an agreement for a screenplay, Lee persuades Kimmer to accept his idea instead of Austin's.

Things turn ugly when Kimmer agrees to take Lee's idea instead of Austin. The whole action of the play takes place in a single setting.

The images of violence are substantially portrayed and two brothers, Austin and Lee are depicted to indulge in acts of violence. Sam Shepard himself admits, "I think there's something about American violence that to me is very touching... I can't put my finger on it, but it's the source of a lot of intrigue for me" (*New York Times* B26).

In this play violence starts from scene One, Lee behaves in a violent manner when Austen objects to lend a car to him. This event marks the beginning of the conflict that takes place between the brothers. Lee's unexpected and unwelcome arrival to his mother's house from the desert breaks Austen's concentration. His actions, behaviour and words spring up violence and chaos. Lee, after returning his brother's car keys constantly dares Austen to violent acts. He provokes him to kick him out of the house, but Austin tries to be condescending and bring some sense in Lee.

In scene five, the violent streak is once again manifested when Lee threatens Austin with a golf club for his remark, "What'd you do, beat him up or something?" (Sam Shepard: *Seven Plays* 30). Lee gets frustrated as he recognizes that he cannot re-create the mythic American West or achieve his goal that he has set for himself without the help of his brother, he smashes the typewriter with a golf club and burns pages of his script which exhibits his violent disposition. Stephen Bottoms observes, "Lee's violence seems to heighten and accelerate with his growing awareness of the futility of his position" (*The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* 202) Likewise, Austin falls into a drunken, unruly violence as he recognizes the emptiness of modern civilization and his fabricated identity.

The sibling quarrel that has been limited to verbal abuse so far turns physical at the end of the play. Austin with a ripped telephone cord tries to strangle his brother and their mother helplessly tries to persuade them to fight outside the house and says, "I can't stay here. This is worse than being homeless" (Sam Shepard: *Seven Plays* 58). Austin does not kill Lee because they are "trapped by the umbilical cord of their connectedness" (*Modern Drama* 21). Violence here is stayed before it could turn out to be fatal because it gets discharged by an exhibition of aggressive behaviour by the brothers. The problem of violence in families has been neglected by society. Sam Shepard draws a parallel between the conflict that perplexes society and the violence that is seen within the four walls of home. This play is a tragic depiction of society by Sam Shepard in which he perceives good being erased out slowly by the forces of evil.

As it has been mentioned above, the play persists with the theme of the dualistic conflict. It is constructed on the continuous confrontation of two brothers Austin and Lee, and, throughout nine scenes they argue incessantly over their individual antagonistic present, past, and future lives as they try to write the script for a western. Lee is a minor thief that has turned up unexpectedly at his mother's house. There, he finds his younger brother Austin, apparently devoted husband and son that is watching over the suburban house in absence of their mother who is on trip to Alaska. The nature of the two brothers, the former impulsive and wild, the latter responsible

and compromising, ensures that they soon start arguing about seemingly insignificant things, which enlightens up the dramatic action with sheer energy. The play reverberates with the mythic implications of male frontier-like situations where conflicts are engaged between men.

In the course of the description, the two brothers switch roles, yet the sense of a deeply-rooted antagonism and inevitable conflict informs the performance all the time. The presence of Lee is never accounted for. He starts interrogating Austin, who, unsuccessfully, tries to write a first draft of the movie script he is to submit to Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer, who is visiting him the following day. Austin knew his brother's behaviour and presumably tries to be patient and calm - while Lee shows his flamboyant sarcasm. Austin initially manages to pacify storm. He remains distant in an effort to preserve his authority within the household, but Lee eventually erodes Austin's self-control. He moves around the kitchen like one of the coyotes that yap outside, taking over the physical space and, when he asks Austin for his car, the conversation winds up in their first physical confrontation.

Sam Shepard has not attempted to create rounded characters that clash on the basis of their distinct opposing identities, as these identities prove to be unnatural and badly unstable. It is instead the arrangement of each scene and the musicality of the characters' speech and demeanour that render the play harmonious and give the audience the impression of a more consistent and realistic piece. Yet, this time the set is made to conform to the tradition of the US well-made play. People who had gone to see other previous Shepard's productions often faced a nearly bare stage, but on this occasion Sam Shepard himself gave abundant directions as to the arrangement of the set. The action takes place in the lavishly-furnished sitcom-style kitchen of a home in a California suburb. A note on the scene even indicates the different plants and appliances that decorate and furnish the room as well as their precise location.

Austin, the younger brother, is the neat educated suburban father that makes an easy living writing movie scripts. Lee is already in his forties and, like his father, he lives in the desert. Lee is like dissatisfied Western movie hero that at the time survives as a housebreaker. The two brothers, who are poles apart when the representation starts off, are transformed and become indistinct to the point where they cross over into each other's role and apparently singular personality. While Lee tries to come up with a movie script for Austin's producer, Austin starts behaving like Lee, eventually breaking into the neighbouring houses and fostering the idea that Lee will agree to take him to the desert to live. The consistency of the play results from the theatricality and expressiveness of the characters' otherwise inopportune and embarrassing confrontations. Moreover, the tempo of the play is determined by a carefully assembled pattern of outbreaks of struggle and violence and quieter moments at which the characters gasp for breath.

Austin finally agrees to Lee's incessant requests and lends him his car. He knows that Lee will use it to rob the neighbours but in this way he secures some time to deal with Saul Kimmer without the embarrassing presence of his brother. While the producer meets Austin, Lee enters into the kitchen carrying a television set. Rather unexpectedly, and

implausibly, Kimmer and Lee arrange a game of golf for the early morning and Lee then hounds Kimmer until he agrees to consider his idea of western for movie. After the golf game Saul Kimmer decides to drop Austin's love story and do Lee's story which is true-to-life western instead. At this point, the reversal of roles becomes obvious. Lee was formerly associated with their father and the desert while Austin was clearly on their mother's side. As Lee pours beer down and talks of his incursions in the desert, Austin waters his mother's plants with a vaporizer.

Jeffrey D. Hooper notes that this primary disposition evokes a "pre-Christian conflict between the patriarchal and the matriarchal orders" (Modern Drama 77). However, things are so ambiguous that early in the play Lee seems to feel bitter about his brother's Ivy League Diploma and suburban paradise. When Austin invites Lee to spend a couple of days with him and his family, Lee tries to deride his brother, but his words sound rather spiteful and full of resentment.

Lee acknowledges that he is discontent with his life and, furthermore, is not influenced by the things his brother represents. Lee pines for the suburban paradise that Austin has and views his script as an opportunity to change his life around, make some money and buy a house. After all, Lee says he always wondered what it would be like to be his brother. Austin, on the contrary, envies Lee's way of life. He is allured to Lee's individualism and involvement with the land. By the end of act one the small tiff and antagonism gives way to the acknowledgement of their mutual jealousy. At the beginning, apparently stable identities begin to dissolve and each brother starts to adopt each other's distinguishing identity. Lee obsessively sets about writing a movie script for Saul Kimmer while Austin, tempted by his desire to abandon everything and escape to the desert, becomes violent and surprisingly irrational. Their identities begin to blur and the two brothers gradually switch roles. In the beginning of scene seven Lee is struggling to type with one finger and Austin is sitting on the kitchen floor with a whiskey bottle. While Lee is trying to concentrate on his work, Austin gets drunk and takes a little tour through the neighbourhood. At that time, Austin has already acquired a western accent and speaks humorously in response to Lee's request for help, "I can tell ya' a story off the tongue but I can't put it down on paper" (*Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* 18). The escalating tension ends with the final battle between the two brothers. At first Lee openly refuses to take Austin with him to the desert but the two end up making a deal. Austin will write the script for Lee about the two men that chase each other across Tornado Country, and Lee, in turn, will take him to the desert. In the final scene, Lee is tired of everything and changes his mind. He starts to leave but Austin grabs the phone from the floor, lunges at him and wraps the cord around his neck. The two stumble about the kitchen as Austin strangles Lee from behind. When Lee falls almost unconscious Austin releases him and starts moving towards the exit, Lee jumps to his feet and stops Austin from escaping. At this moment, the brothers are crouching and watchful for each other's next step, the lights go slowly dim and the play concludes. It leaves spectators in ambiguity with the doubtful feeling that the conflict is not resolved and, furthermore, cannot be resolved, that the two brothers will fight to death in similar outbursts of drunken violence.

True West is also about the extinction of myth and about its immediate ramifications. The play posits that the abrasion of myth entails the frailty of community. This is depicted through the disintegration of family and the isolation of the different family units living in the Southern California suburbs. *True West* addresses the myth of the West anew to remark on the suburban middleclass of California, that is to say, the new west.

True West resorts to two incompatible mythic schemes that seek to integrate the different versions of masculinity that is represented by two antagonistic brothers. Lee stands for the myth of the frontier while Austin represents a new Western hero associated with the industrialized West. The former is associated with unbound manliness, trailer, drifter, rootlessness, humour and violence. The latter with family ties, sophistication, comfort, suburban bungalows, and freeways. Stephen Bottoms remarks:

Shepard's ideas on myth are consistent with the doctrines of high modernism, the denouement of plays like this and their ultimate failure to integrate Shepard's mythic vision and reflect something like a shared system of values leave him closer to postmodern tenets. (*The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* 8)

In *True West*, Lee represents the halfwit that still holds some absurd fantasy about the past. In the opening scene of the play, with his reference to the "forefathers" (*Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* 6), Lee unveils the connections with the frontier myth—although Austin does not initially know what he is talking about. At first sight Lee seems to connect with the genuine essence of myth as described by Sam Shepard:

Myth served as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and the future. They just speak to some lame notions about the past. But they don't connect with anything. We've lost touch with the essence of myth. ("Emotional Territory: An Interview with Sam Shepard" 5)

But the action proves that Lee's perspective is delusive and futile. Lee's conception of the West is little old-fashioned romantic notion of unbound individualism and disdain for regulation in a male scenario that only exists in his imagination and that, ultimately, conceals no heroism at all. The new way of expressing the world and the self is through the recollection of a number of old artefacts and icons, that is, through an inadequate appropriation of the past. Bonnie Marranca has noted that, "contemporary life is dominated by the images of things, not the things themselves" (*American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard* 20) and as has been mentioned above, the relationship established with these images does not reflect a shared system of values. In America there is pathos of inverted emphasis, the goal is not to grow old, but to remain young, not to "mature away from mother", but to cleave to her. Moreover, in myth, the hero must show society the way to its rebirth through trial and sacrifice. The tragedy in *True West* results, not only from the desolation and the ultimate ineffectiveness of both Lee's fantasies and Austin's present life, but also from the stable comparison of

the two protagonist's yearnings throughout the play. Lee's daydreams are hostile for his maturation and the development of the community, and Austin's achievements are empty and sterile. Moreover, after Lee's imminent shift, it is his brother Austin who rejects the society that Lee desires for. The presence of Austin always undermines Lee's dreams and aspirations. Austin becomes then the upholder of a more vacuous frontier dream and with his regression he ties Lee down. There are no heroes in *True West*, not at least the kind of hero that can help revitalize society. The degeneration of traditional myths and the rise of a new mythology in a society that considers itself post mythical and purely scientific expose the dispersal of meaning, the waning of community, and the psychological backbone of individuals whose selves have been torn apart.

Sam Shepard's handling of the myth of the frontier also serves to voice both the anxiety and scepticism of a nation that was undergoing its particular moral crisis after the disastrous defeat in Vietnam and the disturbance of the institutional order prompted by Nixon's dishonourable resignation. During the dramatization of the play's simple two-sided conflict, the mythic position Lee adheres to at the beginning is always magnificently counterbalanced by an antithetic discourse, one that advocates the values of the nuclear family.

In a similar way, the attraction of the family always leads to confront the desires of a life, cut off from social requirements and regulations. When Lee tells Austin about the utopian vision of domesticity he had while peeping through the neighbour's window, he also perceives it as the "place that sorta' kills ya' inside" (*Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* 12). To intensify the failure of the institution of the family, Lee informs Austin of a whimsical detail about the murder rate of the country; the kind of people that kill each other the most are members of the same family.

In the unfolding of the story, this can be seen as another act of intimidation by Lee to force Austin to write his movie script. However, Lee's sarcastic remarks discredit the idea that the family is the vertebral column of society and, in addition, bring the inevitable echoes of the story of Cain and Abel. The truth is that, as it has previously been said; Lee and Austin will be "driven to acts of violence". The lights go to black as the two brothers "square off to each other" (59) gasping for breath after their unruly latest fight, and Lee's commentary on the country's murder rate comes to mind once more the two brothers might go on fighting to their deaths. Sam Shepard's abundant and clear notes for the closing scene of the play also help foster this idea. Not unlike the traditional history of the West as told by Hollywood, which tries to adapt the paradigm of the manly conquest or cattle drive to elements like the family or the community, *True West* attempts to integrate two versions of masculinity. Yet, as the lights fade for the last time after nine scenes of confrontations and battles, the effect of the moonlight in the upstage causes the audience to see the figures of the two brothers "caught in a vast desert-like landscape" (59). At the end, after all the role shifting, both Austin and Lee return to a primitive uncivilized stage. They are in the desert which is emphasized by a coyote that can be heard in the distance and they seem to have abandoned civilization, but the play advances no further conclusion. As Sam Shepard has suggested, "[a] resolution isn't an ending; it's strangulation"

(*The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* 3). Sam Shepard leaves the characters in an everlasting state of derangement by not ending the play in a more conventional way. The ending does not settle for an optimistic resolution or the false belief that the individual is autonomous, nor does it give in to the satisfaction of bringing the subject to a deceptive completion.

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