

The Modern Portrait of The American Family in Sam Shepard's *True West*
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Abstract

Sam Shepard (1943-2017) was born to Sam Rogers the sixth and Jane Elaine Schook Rogers on Nov. 1943 in Fort Sheridan, Illinois. To keep the family tradition, he was nicknamed Steve to distinguish him from his father who was a military man. The family was moving from a place to another before staying in a farm in California where they raised sheep and grew avocados. At the age of eleven and while Shepard was studying at school, he received a copy of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* from one of his friends which was a new experience for him. In 1963, Shepard moved to New York where his talent of writing developed. He found himself in the middle of a rapidly transforming social and cultural world. At that time, he changed his name from Steve Rogers to Sam Shepard to break his heredity of the name and to distance himself from the ties of the family. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1978 due to his masterpiece *Buried Child*.

Key words: Shepard , *True West* , family and brothers.

Introduction

True West, the third in Sam Shepard's family plays, was first performed at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in July 1980 under the direction of Robert Woodruff, it was brought to New York for Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre and opened there on December 23, 1980 (Tucker, Martin 1992, 163). The production later was transferred to the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York where it enjoyed a run of 762 performance" (Ibid).

According to Shepard, *True West* is the purest and most complete of the family plays (Harper, William 2006, 5). It also seems to be Shepard's most realistic work; the dialogue is natural, the characters are psychologically motivated and the action depicts a real picture of modern American family (Cerrito, Joann and Laurie Dimauro 1999, 178). In an interview, Shepard stated that the idea for writing this play came to him and he wrote it in the shortest amount of time. He then said, "True West is the one he felt was the closest to being perfect" (Harper, William p.6). While some critics suggest that the play has no plot, Shepard believes that the play's themes are of man violence, which has its roots in his own family, of fragmentary social world, of the decay of family relationships, self-division and the link with the saga family whose stories create a harmony disrupted in the modern world" (Biggsy, Christopher 2002, 22). The play is also viewed as a new approach in Shepard's work:

"True West can be viewed as a complete naturalistic drama, which is very likely to reason it has achieved recent popular success and has been called by many the most accessible of Shepard's plays. But on this account Shepard could respond that though such views has been a real play, they have missed the "true" play" (Demasters, Williams 1987, 242).

After more than forty years of its appearance, True West still attracts an amazing young audience. Shepard admits, "The amazing thing about the play is "the disaster inherent in the American family that is very resonant now with the audience" (Shepard, Sam 2002, 68). Then he goes on to say:

"One of the great thing about kid's coming to the theatre to see True West is that they are directly involved with the question of identity, of who they are. Now we could still be involved with that when we are sixty or seventy years old, but for kids it is monumental because their lives are just becoming and I think that anything speaks to that question of identity calls the kids' attention. It is unbelievable! There are kids going to see it who weren't born when the play was written" (Ibid, 69).

The last words that are left to David Krasner suggest that True West has arguably become Shepard's signature piece, the leanest, most pointed of his full length work" (Krasner, David 2006, 4).

1. The Loss of the West in True West

One of the themes discussed in *True West* related to the nature of American mythic West. Shepard, as the title of his play implies, is asking what the real West is" (Bloom, Harold 2003, 63). According to William Kleb, the myth of the West is dramatized through two brothers. Then he states that:

"The two brothers in True West are simply stand-ins for the Old Man and the Old West through Lee as an empty dream, and for Mom and the New West through Austin as a mirage" (ibid).

Kleb, then, argues that Lee represents the Old West, which characterized by manliness, vigor, rootlessness and violence. Whereas Mom and Austin stand for the New west, a world that stands in a direct apposition to the Old West. It is the west of suburb and freeways, toasters, colour T.Vs, cocker spaniel, and houseplants (Kleb, William 1981, 122).

The play is also a comment on the New West, which refers to the suburban middle class that populates California. It seems that the West has always-special significance to Shepard:

"I just feel like the West much more ancient than the East... Wyoming, Texas, Montana and places like that...you really feel this ancient thing about the land. That's premedical.. It is this thing about space. No wonder these mysterious cults in Indian religion spang up... it has to do with the relationship between the land and

the people... It's much more physical and emotional to me" (Biggsby, p. 23).

The play simply tells a story of two brothers who by the end of the play try to kill each other. Austin, the prodigal son, is a good husband who leads a happy life, while Lee is a failure. He is the thief and the outcast. At first, Austin seems to be the only one who survived the devastations of his family and somehow moved on a sense of prosperity. Whereas Lee is, at first, the mirror image of his father, a drunkard, homeless, and has no direction in life. He is the aimless and alienated hero of the western myth who lives by his code of morality: John Callens states that some critics read the play as:

"The Old true West of Lee versus the new consumer West of Austin, but this is to underestimate Shepard's complexity and his sense of humor. He knew that the Wild West was quasi-fiction.. Its cowboys and Indians, its heroism and lawlessness, its veneer of male bonding. Even as a teen-ager, he was not naively nostalgic, his stage cowboys tend to be old men, ghosts, or composites. By 1980 it is impossible to recall the True West, if there ever was one, but the two brothers.. the wild man and the domesticated man... might join to concoct a new fiction, or they might destroy one another" (Callens, Johan 1998, 52).

In most of Shepard's early plays, the American West presented as a source of freedom and authenticity. However, *True West* presented as both geographical reality and psychological frontier, and it is on this psychic frontier the battle between Lee and Austin begins (Hart, Lynda 1987, 98). Metaphorically, Shepard refers to the tension between civilization through Austin and savagery through Lee. *True West* approaches tragedy in the clash between these two opposite places. Robert Corrigan described the essence of the tragic spirit with a metaphor that seems to be in an opposition to Austin's fate:

"In the tragic situation man finds himself in a primitive country that he had believed his forefathers tamed, civilized and charted, only to discover they had not one of the greatest holds that tragedy has always had on the imagination is that it brings us into a direct touch with the naked landscape" (Corrigan, Robert W. 1973, 8).

Lee is regarded as the manifestation of a primitive country that Austin has denied. The "naked landscape" refers to Austin's need to have a world similar to the natural primitivism of his brother Lee. According to Corrigan, it is the "inner dividedness" of the tragic protagonist which causes all the catastrophic ends." (Lynda, Hart, 99). He argued that the brothers are doubly divided. First, they have two halves of one character, and at the same time, they individualized as two persons. The tension between them awakens the dormant part of their character. The struggle in the play thus occurs between Austin and

Lee (the geographical frontier) and within each of the individual characters (the psychological boundary) (ibid).

Being envious of each other, the two brothers decide to switch roles. Lee endeavors to be a playwright and to live in the suburban paradise where his brother lives, while Austin declares that he wants to live in the desert. He envies his brother's drifting way of life and is attracted to Lee's involvement with the land. It seems that each one is seeking the other, each wants to taste the other half of life.

When the play begins, Austin insists that his world is the only real one and that he is really in touch with it: "I drive on the freeway every day! I swallow the smog! I watch the news in colour T.V! I shop in the safe 1821 way, (Shepard, Sam 1981). (II. P. 42.43) Lee, on the other hand, is dissatisfied with the restrictions of the civilized world, yet he is disenchanted with the life he has led.

"Lee: I always wanted what it would be like to be you".

"Austin: you did?"

"Lee: Yea, sure. I used to picture you walkin' around some campus with your arms full of books." "Blonds chasin' after ya".

"Austin: Because I always used to picture you somewhere."

"And I used to say to myself "Lee's got the right idea." "He's out there in the world and here I am. What am I doing?" (I. p. 32).

Role reversal in *True West* reflects the psychic state of modern western man who is homeless, anxious, irresolute and divided. He has no intimate feeling of belonging to his land. It seems that the mythic Western landscape is becoming more and more remote, dead issue as Austin puts it, and the two brothers are left at the end frozen, stuck between an empty dream and a substantial reality (Kleb, William 123). John Lahr argues that for Shepard, America is not just geographic locations, it is the vagueness of the land that divides the two brothers. They, like Shepard, suffer from double emotions of the West: primitive self-sufficiency and modern luxury (Kane, Leslie 2002, 144). This is clear when the two brothers exchange roles. Austin cannot recognize his place any more, it now reminds him of the 1950s, which has nothing to do with reality. He, by the end, tells Lee:

"There is nothing down here for me. There never was, When we were kids here, it was different. There was a life there then. But now. I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar." (II.p.58).

2- Multiplicity of Beings

True West also reveals itself as an examination of the two conflicting sides of Shepard's. The two brothers as many critics demonstrate, can be viewed as two opposite extremes of the same artist. Shepard himself once said that "if the play should be made a film, he would have one person playing both roles" (Sam,

Shepard 122). The play seems to be a sort of discourse on two different brands of identity. And the two brothers can be seen as the two contrasting sides of an artist. Shepard in this account states:

"I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphoric or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a state of what it feels like to be two sided. It is a real thing, double nature" (Shewey, Don 1997, 133).

Lee finds it difficult to write. He asks Austin to help him write the script otherwise he will not take him to the desert. The tension seems to come to an end when Austin agrees to help Lee as the latter narrates his story about the two men who chase each other across Tornado Country. Though they quarrel so many times, but they are finally able to write a screen play. For Shepard, it is only through this struggle that art created. William Demastes maintains, "True West may be more accurately viewed as a struggle between two halves of the self" (Kane, Leslie 143).

In an interview, Shepard comments on the idea of multiplicity of beings:

"I think that we are not just one person, we are a multiplicity of beings; Not to get philosophical about it, but it is easy to me see characters in the shifting. We are used to looking at character in a traditional sense, of being Something we can define by behavior or background. For me, anyway, it may not be interesting to lock down the character with specifics" (Shepard, 75).

According to some critics, True West has also been called "West Coast Endgame", at which the brothers claim kinship with Beckett's Hamm and Clove (Rosen, Carol 2004, 139). The ravenous body and the troubled mind. Each incomplete in himself, and interdependent, yet doomed to be hostile.

3. Male Violence

Shepard's fascination with male violence had its roots in his own family. He himself admitted that his concern with male violence dealt with attitudes which had been inculcated into him from a very young age." He once stated:

"Violence may be an evil force, but what in fact is it? I know what this thing about because I was a victim of it, it was part of my life, my old man tried to force on me a notion of what it was to be a "man". And it destroyed my dad, but you can't avoid facing it. I grew up in a condition where the male influence around me were primarily alcoholic and extremely violent" (Dugdale, John 1989, 62).

Shepard attempts to explore the nature of violence which is deeply rooted in the American society. Lynda Hart, in this account, suggests that not only Shepard, but Americans in general are concerned with violence and they love to see it in plays and films" (Hart, Lynda 72). In True West, Shepard presents a physical menace that the audience can feel its pressure. The two brothers have a sadistic desire to dominate each other. And the tension between them begins

when Austin asks Lee to leave the house for few hours since the former is trying to write a first draft of the movie script to submit to at Hollywood producer, Soul Kimmer, who is visiting him the following day. In making his brother leave the house, Austin does not want Kimmer to know that he is related to a man like Lee, because Austin, the successful screen writer, has escaped the legacy of his family. And Lee represents everything Austin has escaped. For Kimmer, to see Lee is to admit where actually Austin came from.

Trying to take over his brother's business, Lee comes back home intentionally to get his keys. His presence which is never accounted for disturbs Austin. And the tension gets stronger when Lee tries to belittle Austin stating that he can write "true to-life" stories that would make real and wonderful motion pictures. This competitiveness within business would eventually tear the brothers apart as Lee states. "competitiveness getting kind a close to home, isn't it?" (II. P.38)

The tension then increases leading to a Cain-Abel conflict when Lee tells Austin that murders are committed in the family and the most family murders are committed by brothers. May Angelou comments on the state of brotherhood when she says:

"I don't believe an accident of birth makes people sisters or brothers. It makes them sibling, gives them mutuality of parentage. Sisterhood or brotherhood is a condition people have to work at" (Play Gide 2008, 7).

Being transformed into aggressors, Lee and Austin turn their mother's suburban California kitchen into an arena where they fight and chase each other. Lee writes a script in which he presents a real story of two brothers; each one is chasing the other without knowing where to stop:

"Each one separately thinks that he is the only one that is afraid. And they keep riding like that straight into the night not knowing where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he is going." (I. P.33)

Getting tired of it all, Lee changes his mind and decides, in the end, to go to the desert alone. Austin, who becomes infuriated, realizes his brother's betrayal. He wraps a telephone cord around Lee's neck and strangles him leaving the conflict unresolved in the end. It seems that much of the brother's violence comes from their awareness of the futility of their positions. The dichotomy between Austin and Lee refers to the dichotomy between civilization and wilderness (Bottoms, Stephen J. 1998, 200). It is the American West, whether urbanized or wild, that frustrates the characters' desires and change them into aggressors. In a comment on "American Violence" Shepard shows that:

"There is something very moving about it, because it has to do with humiliation. This sense of failure runs very deep may be it has to do with the frontier being systematically taken away... I can't put

my finger on it, [but] you don't have to look very far to see that the American male is on a very bad trip" (Shepard, 26).

Austin does not abandon his new dream, and rejects the life of the artist, which he now views as artificial. He states that "there is nothing real down here" (II. 58). Like Austin who has lost touch with the land, Lee is hostile to the desert. His words and gestures emanate violence and chaos. He belongs to "a lost frontier and the wild perils of the old west which To contributes to his alien quality" (Hart, Lynda, 89).

When being asked about the reason of tackling physical violence in most of his plays, Shepard answers

"Because life is violent. Violence rules the world. So why not we embrace it? We live in extremely violent times, in this world, I'm not all for heads rolling, but this is a violent country, is it not?" (Shepard, 7).

4. Autobiographical Elements: The Image of the Absent Father

True West has an autobiographical impulse. It transcends some of Shepard's real experience in life. He, in this regard, wrote:

"I never intended this play to be a documentary of my personal life. It is always a mixture. You cannot get away from certain personal elements. I do not want to get away from certain personal elements that you use as hooks in a certain way. The further I get away from these personal things the more in the dark I am" (Shewey, Don 132).

In *True West*, Shepard portrays another patriarch father who has actually deserted his family in a more literal sense than Dodge. Shepard's plays of 1970s and 1980s, as Carla J. McDonough puts it:

"Deal with Images of men who abandon their responsibilities toward jobs and families in favour of a self-absorbed life alone in a desert region or in the bottom of a tram And they see liquor bottle" (Mcdonough, Carla J. 1997, 38).

The image of the absent father can be traced in Shepard's real life and it is significant that the old man has some points in common with his father. He comments on his father's life:

"He was a pilot. Having joined the army after his "grandfather lost the family farm during the depression. Returning from combat wounded and emotionally disturbed, he becomes an alcoholic who left the family on many occasions for a solitary life in the desert. You could see his terrible suffering living a life that was disappointed and looking for another one. It was past frustration, and argent he was a man with a lot of problems that are still mystery to me. Connected with the war I guess" (Rosen, Carol, 15).

Shepard's relationship with his father, which was disturbed, remained unresolved even after his death. And when asked if his feelings toward the father had been changed, Shepard replied:

"My relationship with him is the same. It is a relationship of raga absolute unknowing. I never knew him, although he was around all the time. There is no point in dwelling on it. My relationship with him now is exactly as the same when he She was alive" (Shepard, 76).

Despite the father's absence, Shepard could feel his presence all the time. He was the driving force behind his successful plays. Thus, the image of the absent father became a central issue in most of Shepard's plays. Megan William argues that most of Shepard's plays are:

"A series of nowhere-men who have willingly abandoned a sense of time, place, and history... without the ability to space and time. They became ground themselves in deprived of sense of private and public selves" (Williams, Megan 1997, 49).

It is necessary that the old man in True West remains nameless and unreal. He has acknowledged his inability to lead a successful life. Despite the fact that the father never appears on the stage, and does not utter a single word, yet he is viewed as the source of the deep tension within the family realm. He still lives everywhere in the house. The sons have inherited his habits, and, like him, they feel the need to escape the city life and to move to the desert where he lives.

Austin tried very hard to escape the influence of his family and to free himself from the paternal domination, but his attempts failed. Following his father's pattern, Austin shows his desire to abandon his responsibility as a father and a husband claiming, at the beginning of the play, that he came to his mother's house to water her plants while she was in Alaska. Actually, he came to isolate himself from his family. And in abandoning his paternal role, Austin is no better than his father in this regard.

The mother is shocked to hear that Austin will leave to the desert. She affirms that he has been trapped to imitate the destructive pattern of his father.

"Mom: you gonna go live with your father?"

"Austin: No. We're going to a different desert Mom".

"Mom: I see, well you'll probably wind up on the same desert sooner or later" (II.p.64)

It seems that the father still exerts a powerful influence over his sons liquor bottle. Even though he is physically absent. The boys' desire to reunite with him indicates their emotional connection with him and their inability to escape his behavioural pattern: "We could get the old man out of the house then... maybe if we could work on this together, we could bring him back out there". (II. P. 37)

It seems that the sons still have a great deal of the father's psyche within themselves. Doris Auerbach, in this respect, points out:

"The sons [in Shepard's family plays] are unable to end the repetition of abandonment. They are doomed to repeat the obsessive behavior of the fathers who leave wives and children in elusive search for themselves" (Tavv, Michael 2000, 121).

The play eventually ends with all three men leading solitary lives in the desert and fulfilling their destiny to follow the same destructive role. This destiny made Shepard once argue:

"Sometimes in someone's gesture you can notice how a parent is somehow inhabiting that person without their being any awareness of that. How often are you aware that a gesture is coming from the father?" (Robinson, James A. 1989, 151).

5. The Characters' Disconnection with the Land

It is viewed that the main conflict in the works of Shepard comes back to his unstable relationship with his own family. The characters' search for a lost childhood and their yearning for the paradise world of their youth have much in common with Shepard's real life.

In *True West*, the two brothers, much like Vince in *Buried Child*, meet unexpectedly as two strangers at their mother's house after not seeing each other for five years while their mother was on her vocation in Alaska. Being withdrawn from the social pressure of the outside world, they come back home to find refuge and warmth. When they meet, they feel they are unable to cope with each other. Bigsby, in his essay "Born Injured", thinks that:

"The characters in True West blend into one another, change roles, assume disguise and divide. They are not at peace with the land and always in a desperate search for some kind of refuge" (Bigsby, Christopher, p. 27).

By exploring the characters' struggle to find a new world, Shepard raises an existential question which is related to man's disconnection with himself and his land. This sense of separation seems to permeate the entire play till the very end where the two brothers' connection with their land diminishes dramatically.

The desire for the desert becomes overwhelming by the end of the play when the boys realize that they are fated to return to it. The desert seems to represent the promise of life outside the boundaries which always attracted the father as well as the sons. It is only the chaos of the desert by which they can find identity and freedom, the freedom that the old man sought, that Lee had experienced, and that Austin still seeks out.

Martin Tucker, in this concern, says:

"The father of the two boys also went off into the desert, abandoning wife and family. The boys are infected with the same dream as the father, who passed the disease onto Lee, and now

Austin. *The disease is that notion of the true West and its mythic sustenance for the real*" (Tucker, Martin 139).

Conclusion

True West appeared in 1979. This play belonged to a group of works known as "family plays", and presented the idea of disintegration of the typical American family. Shepard decided to write about the American family to reflect some autobiographical elements of his life. The central character in *True West* was the son who represented Shepard himself through which he fought a losing battle to extricate himself from the legacy of violence and alcoholism of a patriarch father. Shepard himself had experienced the deterioration of the family through the father's absence, since his father left the family several times. The father re-appeared metaphorically in *True West* as an alcoholic who deserted his family and acknowledged his inability to be a man of authority.

The theme of a family breaking up and going to pieces was at the core of *True West*. The characters are away from each other in which there is no release. The play presented two brothers who are quarrelling all the time. In the course of the play, they exchanged roles since they were envious of each other, and when the play ended; they appeared to be caught in a vast desert like landscape which was Shepard's metaphor for an apocalyptic end. The hero of this play walked out into the desert land, after a visionary quest, he came back home to the same place from which he escaped to meet again the desolating paradoxes of the family.

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