

A Postmodernist Reading of Sam Shepard's *True West*

ABDOL HOSSEIN JOODAKI

*Department of English
University of Lorestan
Khorramabad, Republic of Iran
Joodaki367@yahoo.com*

SAMANEH SHOOSHTARIAN

*University of Lorestan
Khorramabad, Republic of Iran*

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to render some vivid postmodernist features in Shepard's True West (1980), which is inspired by myths of American life and popular culture. Shepard's True West suggests so many interesting postmodern elements. With a departure from conventional norms of character, dialogue and narrative; the elements of pastiche, subjective irony, and savage humor have become hallmarks of most of his works. These features and some of the basic traces of postmodern literature, including Lyotard's theory of the end of meta-narratives and language game, Derrida's deconstruction and Baudrillard's simulation, as well as language fragmentation, uncertainty and duality, altogether, have given Shepard's True West a postmodern atmosphere.

Keywords: grand narratives; post modernist; self-reflexivity; binary oppositions; simulacrum

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to render a postmodernist reading of Sam Shepard's family play *True West* (1980). The study starts with a very brief introduction of *True West*. Then, it is followed by its postmodernist analysis of the play within a postmodernist frame, in which the theories of the three French philosophers, Jean- François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, are taken into account.

TRUE WEST: A QUICK SURVEY

Although it did not receive an outstanding award like *Buried Child* that won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979, *True West* (1980) has arguably become Shepard's signature and, according to many critics, it remains the most praised of Shepard's plays in American theatres. The story of the play can be regarded as an essential expression of Shepard's vision, investigating the main concerns of his career: masculinity, West identity, and the individual's attitude toward communal relations. *True West* is regarded as Shepard's signature because according to him;

This is the first one of my plays I've been able to sit through night after night and not have my stomach ball up in embarrassment ... I've worked longer on this than any other play. I rewrote it thirteen times. *True West* is the first play I've truly lived up to. (qtd. in Mcteague 1996, p. 107)

In an article assembled by Robert Coe for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1980, Sam Shepard maintained that for him “we’re split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal” and disclosed that with *True West* he “wanted to write a play about double nature” (qtd. in Wade 1997, p. 103). Shepard wrote the play during or after a stay at his mother’s home in Pasadena in August 1979, and it is set in “a kitchen and adjoining alcove of an older home in Southern California suburb, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles” (*True West* 3). The title of the play refers to a Western-oriented pulp magazine of the same name, a choice that, according to Wade, “may initially suggest an attitude toward the West that is more parody than endorsement” (p. 294).

The two-character play, *True West*, is about two brothers, Austin, a Hollywood screenwriter, and Lee, a loner and a thief who lives in desert. Their mom is on vacation in Alaska and their father is totally absent. The play establishes the brothers’ comparisons and contrasts: Austin represents the social order, while Lee represents the wild of nature. Both brothers are looking for something they feel is lacking, both dream of a ‘thing’ that will fulfill them, and towards the end of the play it is, in fact, the life-style of the other brother that will serve as this longed-for fulfilment. Meanwhile, Andreach (1998) analyses the play within familial context “with the parents separated, the burden of reconciling the family, and perhaps healing it in resolution, falls on the shoulder of the offspring” (p. 178).

Austin’s control over the house is demolished by the uninvited invasion of his brother, who brings chaos with him. The fundamental dramatic tension begins when Lee comes between Austin and the film producer, Saul Kimmer, who has been supporting a project written by Austin. Lee, in fact, ignores Austin’s project and sells Saul his own story, that of a ‘contemporary Western’, one that would be “true to life” (Shepard 1981, p. 42). The tension becomes harsher as Lee who is not able to put his ideas into script, breaks the typewriter and begs Austin’s assistance. This struggle produces a great deal of accusations and confessions and finally draws the brothers into a strange intimacy; Lee promises to take Austin to the desert if he helps him in writing the scenario. As a result, both men’s personas are portrayed as “unstable compositions of shifting, conflicting desires, devoid of any reliable sense of self and thus capable of volatility” (Bottoms 1998, p. 195).

It is true that the two brothers shift roles, Lee becomes Austine, and vice versa, yet they were a fake from the start.

AUSTIN: (moves back into alcove) All right. Take it easy.

LEE: I'm gonna' be leavin' this area. I don't have time to mess around here.

AUSTIN: Where are you going?

LEE: Never mind where I'm goin'! That's got nothin' to do with you. I just gotta' get this done. I'm not like you. Hangin' around bein' a parasite offa' other fools. I gotta' do this thing and get out.

(pause)

AUSTIN: A parasite? Me?

LEE: Yeah, you!

AUSTIN: After you break into people's houses and take their televisions?

LEE: They don't need their televisions! I'm doin' them a service.

AUSTIN: Give me back my keys, Lee.

LEE: Not until you write this thing! You're gonna' write this outline thing for me or that car's gonna' wind up in Arizona with a different paint job.

(Shepard 1981, p. 24)

While Lee was unable to live in the desert like his father, Austin has abandoned his wife, his kids, and “the whole slam”. They were not that different. Indeed, the reversal of roles only serves to disclose their similarities. After all, neither of them was the person he