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Works Cited

Stoner, Richard. "True West." *Masterplots II: Drama, Revised Edition*, September 2003, pp. 1-3.
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True West**Sam Shepard**

Given Name: Samuel Shepard Rogers

Born: November 5, 1943; Fort Sheridan, Illinois

Quick Reference

First published: 1981, in *Seven Plays*

First produced: 1980, at the Magic Theatre, San Francisco

Type of plot: Realism

Time of work: The 1980's

Locale: A suburb forty miles east of Los Angeles

Principal Characters:

Austin, a suburbanite scriptwriter in his early thirties

Lee, his older brother, in his early forties

Saul Kimmer, a Hollywood producer

Mom, Austin and Lee's mother, a woman in her early sixties

The Play

True West opens at night with both brothers in their mother's kitchen, where all the action of the play will occur over three days. Crickets and occasional barks of coyotes can be heard. Austin, in charge of the house while their mother is vacationing in Alaska, tries to write at the kitchen table; Lee, having arrived unexpectedly after living for three months in the desert, drinks beer and talks. The brothers are opposites in dress and demeanor: While Austin, dressed in a cardigan and jeans, is the neat suburbanite, Lee, in soiled second-hand remnants, conveys the menace of a desperate loner.

They have not seen each other in five years and are awkward and tense. This tension grows when they discuss their father, a mysterious character who lives in the desert, and is further fueled when Lee mocks Austin for writing television scripts. When Austin asks how long Lee intends to stay at the mother's house, he says that his stay depends on how successful his burglaries are in the neighborhood. He further frightens Austin by asking for his car in order to case the area. Austin refuses to give Lee the car but tries to help him by offering money and a place with his family up north. Lee attacks Austin for insulting him with such a handout. After a pause, Lee calms down and recounts his success with dogs trained for fighting. He rejects Austin's offer by saying that the north is too cold and then leaves.

The next morning Lee returns from his nocturnal walk through the neighborhood and tells Austin how the area has changed for the worse with development. Both brothers remember their youthful escapades in the area's foothills, but Lee breaks their nostalgia with a description of a house that he cased. Austin, apprehensive, asks Lee if he ever grew lonely while living in the desert. He answers mysteriously by saying that Austin never really knew him. Austin changes the subject by announcing that Saul Kimmer, his producer, is coming to visit shortly and that he would appreciate Lee's absence. Lee bribes Austin into giving him the car keys to leave. Reluctantly, Austin does, and as Lee exits, he announces that he has a story to sell the producer as well.

The next scene opens in the middle of Austin's conversation with Kimmer, a loudly dressed Hollywood producer. Lee enters with a stolen television and announces his regret at returning too soon. When Austin tells Kimmer that Lee has lived in the desert, Kimmer thinks of Palm Springs and starts to discuss golf. Playing along with the misunderstanding, Lee talks Kimmer into a golf game the next morning at which Lee will relate his idea for a Western. Kimmer, not quite sure what to make of Lee but intimidated by him, agrees to the golf date and leaves. Austin, astounded by Lee's actions, asks for his car keys back; Lee just smiles.

That night, Lee dictates his story sketch to Austin, who types it perfunctorily. As Lee becomes more serious about the story, Austin becomes more skeptical of its plausibility, finally stopping his

typing and dismissing Lee's tale as contrived. Lee warns Austin that he has his car keys and will return them only after Austin finishes helping him. Austin's fear of Lee grows, and Lee aggravates it by reminding Austin that most murders occur between family members. Lee then softens, gives the car keys to Austin, and says that selling this story could change his life. He goes on to admit that he envies Austin's middle-class life; Austin, surprised, confesses his envy for Lee's independence. With this truth out, the brothers now work together on the story line. When Lee asks again for the car keys, Austin reluctantly gives them to him.

In act 2 the brothers' situations are reversed. During golf, Lee has successfully sold his story to Kimmer at the expense of Austin's script. When Kimmer arrives and calls Lee's story a true Western, Austin argues that there is no West any more, only freeways and Safeways — the subjects of his stories. Austin's frustration drives him to drink, which makes him not only less frightened of Lee but also, ironically, more like him. That night Lee is writing at the typewriter while Austin taunts him by claiming that he can steal toasters better than Lee can write. By morning, Lee is smashing the typewriter with a golf club while Austin proudly polishes a row of toasters that he has stolen during the night. Lee recognizes that he really needs Austin's help to write, and angrily pulls out all the kitchen drawers and, finally, the telephone off the wall. Amid the debris, Austin calmly makes a large pile of toast and asks Lee if he could accompany him into the desert. Thinking that Austin is ridiculing him, Lee smashes Austin's pile of toast. However, Lee soon realizes Austin's changed attitude and makes a deal with him: Austin will write the script, and Lee will take him into the desert.

The last scene of the play opens at midday with the brothers working well together on the script. Mom's unexpected return from Alaska disrupts them. She has returned because she misses her plants, now thoroughly wilted and dead; she shows little concern over the destroyed kitchen or even for her sons. Lee realizes that his wish to join this middle-class world is insane and decides to go back to the desert alone. Austin, angry that Lee will not take him, grabs the telephone cord and throttles Lee with it. As they struggle, the mother claims not to recognize anything and leaves. When Lee appears to be dead, Austin releases the cord and tries to get to the door. Lee, however, springs up and blocks his exit. The lights fade to moonlight as the two brothers "square off to each other, keeping a distance between them."

Themes and Meanings

While at its heart *True West* portrays the classic philosophical problem of distinguishing illusion from reality, it extends this theme to the dilemma the artist encounters in creating art that is true to life. Both thematic concerns are centered on the brothers' struggle to write a real Western story.

The play opens with the brothers' disagreeing on where the real West is. In essence, they are arguing over reality and illusion. Lee, the idealist, maintains that the West has been "wiped out" by development, while Austin, the pragmatist, accepts the West as the land of freeways and Safeways. However, both brothers fail to recognize the inevitable change occurring in their

idealized childhood West and in themselves as well even as it occurs in the play. While Lee wishes for Austin's pragmatic world, Austin begins to idealize Lee's desert life. He says to Lee that "there's nothing real down here" for him, but Lee punctures Austin's ideal West: "Do you actually think I chose to live out in the middle a' nowhere? Do ya'? Ya' think it's some kinda philosophical decision I took or somethin'?" The brothers' conflict suggests a paradoxical definition of reality as an uneasy combination of illusion and experience, producing the myths which are necessary for psychic survival.

The brothers' reversal of roles in act 2 reflects the inner conflict of the artist as a divided self. Each brother represents one requisite side of the artist's creativity: Lee, emotive, Dionysian; Austin, rational, Apollonian. As Kimmer says, each brother needs the other to create. However, each brother sees the other's strengths not as complementing but as replacing his own. Their struggle delineates the difficult, if not impossible task of harmonizing emotion and intellect in the creation of art, since by nature each side seeks to dominate the other. Only after the brothers exchange roles, climaxing in the humorous scene with the stolen toasters, do they recognize their need for this union.

The image of the brothers circling in the devastated kitchen offers a provocative but inconclusive ending. Some critics have suggested that this disturbing final scene reflects Sam Shepard's view of life as an endless struggle between illusion and reality, passion and reason; to be true, art must portray this struggle without a neat resolution.

Dramatic Devices

The setting allows the audience to accept True West as a realistic drama as well as a fable about art. Located forty miles east of Los Angeles, the setting is a meeting point for the modern West and the primitive one, represented by the desert, foothills, and the constant background sounds of crickets and coyotes. For Shepard, the coyotes become metaphors for the conflict between illusions and reality. Lee tells Austin that coyotes, icons of the mythic Wild West, have, in fact, become suburban pests. The desert also symbolizes the disparity between reality and illusion. Lee calls it empty; Austin sees it as more real than his urban environment. In the climactic fight scene myths and reality merge: The coyotes bark loudly, and the kitchen set dissolves into "a vast desertlike landscape" to reflect the brothers' confusion.

The kitchen represents this blend of reality and illusion. While it resembles the usual set of realistic "kitchen" dramas that deal with domestic conflicts, the kitchen — with its plastic grass carpet and potted plants — also emblemizes the artificiality created by the mother's attempts to make her ideal West real. Lee's description of another kitchen he spied, in an ersatz hacienda, underscores this symbolism. The domestic conflict occurring in the brothers' kitchen is more mythic than realistic, recalling the archetypal contest between Cain and Abel. In Shepard's fable, however, the father embodies a West idealized in films and pulp novels that attracts because of its escapism. Both parents, their namelessness befitting their mythic status, represent the allure and danger of

accepting myths as reality. At the end, Mom ignores the vivid reality of the brothers' struggle to declare that she can find nothing real in the house anymore.

More symbolically, the brothers' film stories portray the artist's divided self. Lee's ideal Western, the film *Lonely Are the Brave*, identifies him with the artist's emotional side that wants to create illusion and myth; Austin's story of his father's teeth makes him the artist's rational half that wants realism. Each story is incomplete in depicting reality, however; one is too maudlin and the other too rationally cool.

The play's role as a fable on art is most obviously revealed in its title, which Shepard borrowed from the defunct magazine *True West*. The magazine supposedly told true stories of the West, but was also inadvertently creating myths for its readers. So too, the brothers' fight over whose story is more true cannot be resolved, since both stories abstract reality and create myths that are partially true. The closing scene with the brothers forever frozen in struggle not too subtly hints that the only true story of the West is the play itself.

Critical Context

True West is the second of a series of plays, starting with *Curse of the Starving Class* (pb. 1976), that break from Sam Shepard's earlier nonrepresentational works such as *The Tooth of Crime* (pr. 1972). Structured in a representational form, these plays draw upon autobiographical material for their naturalistic plots involving domestic conflicts. The settings are either rural middle America (where Shepard was born), as for *Buried Child* (pr. 1978) and *A Lie of the Mind* (pr. 1985), or the Southwest (where Shepard grew up), as for *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Fool for Love* (pr. 1983), and *True West*. Character types and images reappear in these plays: a distant father in conflict with a dominating mother (resembling Shepard's parents) and children dislocated by their parents' sometimes mysterious behavior, and references to coyotes and barren land that evoke ambiguous interpretations.

Shepard employs his trademark technique of character transformation in these plays to represent divided characters whose struggles reflect his perennial concerns: critiquing American myths and portraying the artist's inner conflict in creating art. *True West*, in particular, has provoked much critical comment in response to its rendition of these themes. While some critics find the play troubling for its inconclusiveness, others find it a rich work full of provocative interpretations.

Essay by: Richard Stoner

Sources for Further Study

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