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## Shadows of the Dream: Sam Shepard's *True West* and the American Self

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### ABSTRACT

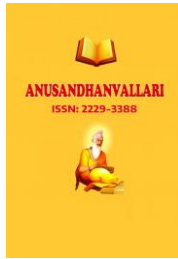
Sam Shepard's *True West* interrogates the instability of American identity by exposing the shadows beneath the nation's celebrated dream. The play disrupts traditional binaries of good and evil, civilization and savagery, art and commerce, exposing that these forces coexist within a single cultural self. The play resists a simplistic division between the responsible Austin and the reckless Lee, instead fusing their qualities to suggest that both characters embody the contradictory impulses of a single identity. The play highlights the commodification of imagination in late 20<sup>th</sup> century culture. Hollywood emerges as a symbolic landscape where stories lose authenticity and become marketable package deals, reflecting Shepard's scepticism about American society that reduces ideals to consumer products. Shepard exposes the Dream as both promise and illusion. The play stands as a cultural analysis of America itself. The study explores Shepard's *True West* as an examination of the distortions of the American Dream while also suggesting the possibility of renewal through self-awareness. The play reveals that recognizing the conflict between moral integrity and corruption can open a path towards a more authentic American Dream.

### KEY WORDS

American identity, Hollywood, cultural analysis, American Dream, conflict, corruption, moral integrity, renewal.

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American Dream is the ideal that every individual, irrespective of background, has the opportunity to achieve success, prosperity and upward mobility through hard work, determination, and freedom of choice. Sam Shepard's family plays present the American Dream as unstable and conflicted. They depict the struggle of his characters filled with rivalry, suspicion, frustration, and broken ideals. His characters often chase freedom, prosperity, and recognition, but their efforts expose emptiness, greed, power crisis, and disconnection. In *True West*, Shepard narrates the pursuit of the American Dream as a struggle shaped by duality. He "wanted to write a play about double nature" (Wade 103). The double nature reflects human life, where individuals make choices that reflect multiple sides of their personality. The duality is identifiable in Austin and Lee in their pursuit of the American Dream. The play illustrates that family conflict exposes the contradictions in human nature. Eric Braun notes, "Conflict is part of being human, and it is never plain and simple" (Braun). The statement highlights that



human nature often contains opposing impulses, such as order and chaos, honesty and deceit, or ambition and fear.

Shepard begins the play by creating a hostile atmosphere, filled with raw, uncontrolled, and chaotic aspects of life. Lee remarks, “Ya’ got crickets anyway. Tons a’ crickets out there” (True West 5). By pointing out crickets, Shepard highlights the contrast between ordered world represented by Austin and the untamed world represented by Lee. While Austin’s life is governed by rules, routines, and social expectations, Lee embraces chaos, spontaneity, and instinct. The crickets symbolize the natural and uncontrolled environment. They highlight the freedom and unpredictability that Lee values. At the same-time they show the tension and conflict between the brothers’ very different views of life. In *True West*, Austin embodies the values and ambitions of America’s younger generation, whereas Lee reflects the traits and mindset of the older generation. Through their interactions, Shepard reveals that human nature embodies both structured ambition as well as untamed impulse, and that these opposing forces exist in a constant, often destructive, interplay.

AUSTIN: Well, you can stay here as long as I’m here.

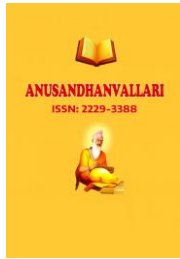
LEE : I don’t need your permission do I

AUSTIN: No.

LEE : I mean she’s my mother too, right?...She might’ve just easily asked me to take care of her place as you. (Shepard 7).

Shepard establishes the conflict of authority between the brothers in their mother’s house. Austin assumes authority over the house and tells Lee that he cannot stay there without his permission. Lee firmly resists this hierarchy by insisting his equal claim to the space. Lee’s casual remark about watering the plants is a pointed assertion that undermines Austin’s authority. What seems like a domestic quarrel reflects a struggle tied to the American Dream – the contest for ownership, legitimacy, and recognition. The Dream often places individuals in competition with one another in the pursuit of stability and success and the brothers’ rivalry exposes the fragility of such claims. Shepard suggests that the Dream does not resolve tensions within families or communities but instead sharpens them by turning even ordinary interactions into contests of power. “*True West* digs into the myths of American life. There are several allusions to Biblical stories and ideas in *True West*. The main conflict of the story between the two brothers somehow alludes to the old story of Cain and Abel. The play represents Lee as Cain and Austin as Abel” (Vahdati 248). In *True West*, Shepard reworks the Cain and Abel myth to expose sibling rivalry as a universal struggle rooted in ambition and betrayal. Shepard examines the American Dream as a force that turns kinship into conflict and creativity into competition and reveals the fragile line between family bonds and destructive rivalry.

Bigsby affirms, “In *True West* the improbable is acted out as though a dream fantasy had been infiltrated into everyday experience, a scene, incidentally, which appropriates the aesthetic values of the Hollywood world it appears to parody” (166). Shepard frames the brothers’ rivalry against the backdrop of popular culture, with Hollywood serving as a symbol of the American Dream. Shepard reveals that in the modern world success is measured by recognition within mass media. He criticizes the corrupt nature of the Hollywood Industry, which has become a platform solely for making money. Lee conveys, “No sweat. Hey, ya’ know, if that uh–story of yours doesn’t go over with the guy–tell him I got a couple a’ “projects” he might be interested in. Real commercial. Full a’ suspense. True- to-life stuff” (True West 14 – 25). Shepard presents the American Dream through the lens of popular culture. He uses irony to expose its contradictions. The casual utterance, “No sweat” suggests that success can come without hard work or training. Shepard exposes the reality that Hollywood is measured by entertainment and profit rather than depth and originality. He reveals that real success in Hollywood depends on producers and



markets. Shepard highlights that American Dream appears open to all, yet in reality it is shaped and limited by the demands of popular culture. The producer Saul Kimmer affirms, “I am absolutely convinced we can get this thing off the ground. I mean we’ll have to make a sale to television and that means getting a major star. Somebody bankable. But I think we can do it. I really do” (Shepard 15). Saul’s words reveal the dominance of consumer logic in shaping cultural production. The assurance is grounded not in artistic merit but in the mechanics of the market place where television exposure and a bankable star determine value.

In *True West*, the pursuit of success drives the conflict and highlights Shepard’s examination of the American Dream. Austin’s vision of success is tied to education, discipline, and the approval of established institutions, while Lee’s vision of success depends on improvisation and lure of quick rewards. These opposing drives collide and subsequently turn the home into a battleground where ambition is tested and undermined. In the play, Lee attempts to persuade Saul to enter the Hollywood system and prove himself capable of success on terms usually revered for professionals like Austin. By presenting himself as a storyteller worthy of Saul’s attention, he challenges Austin’s monopoly over cultural legitimacy and claims his own space within the arena of the American Dream. “More importantly, Shepard focuses on the game of power struggle taking different images from American popular culture as a medium to give the game of power a universal significance” (Tripathy 91). His effort to convince Saul illustrates both the allure and the instability of success when filtered through popular culture and market values. In *True West*, “Competition is another reason behind the fragility of the relationship between the brothers. It reflects the system in the American capitalist society. When Austin and Lee start to have the same work, the competition appears and adds hatred to their relationship....” (Moosa 96 – 97). In *True West*, the ‘game of power’ is not a neutral contest but a destructive struggle where each participant seeks dominance rather than balance. By drawing on images from popular culture, Shepard reveals that competition easily mutates into rivalry that corrodes family bonds and personal identity.

LEE : I got a Western that’d knock yer lights out.

SAUL: Oh really

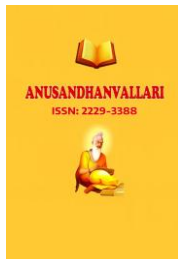
LEE : yeah. Contemporary western. Based on a true story. ‘Course I’m not a writer like my brother here. I’m not a man of the pen.

SAUL: Well–

LEE : I mean I can tell ya’ a story off the tongue but I can’t put it down on paper. That don’t make any difference though does it? (Shepard 18)

Lee’s conviction exhibits his hunger for validation. Convincing Saul is not only about selling a story but about securing acknowledgement in a world that usually excludes him. Lee, unlike Austin, demonstrates a strong manipulative streak. He employs guilt, anger, self-pity, and even a false sense of empathy to gain control over others. With charm and persuasion, he manages to win people’s attention and make them more receptive to his ideas. His tactics prove effective when he persuades Saul to consider a screenplay that does not even exist. Lee’s ability to read Saul’s mind and adapt his manner of speech allows him to converse with apparent intelligence and decency, ultimately securing Saul’s interest and support. Lee’s maneuvering to win Saul’s favour reflects the opportunistic side of the American Dream, where ambition is fuelled less by vision and more by the immediate chance to rise above one’s circumstances, even if it means exploiting the moment.

Austin is not entirely submissive to Lee. He maintains control over his emotions, feelings, and anger, drawing on his education and professional standing to his advantage. He responds with politeness and employs refined language when addressing Lee, who remains more of a guest in the house. Austin preserves his sense of dignity and self-respect, losing his composure only when Lee provokes him by questioning his intelligence and



courage. Austin affirms, “you think you can force me to write this?....And I’m not afraid of you either” (Shepard 23). This restraint reflects the American Dream’s emphasis on discipline, perseverance, and the belief that success comes through education, hard work, and rational self-control rather than through aggression or manipulation.

In *True West*, Lee comes to a moment of self-awareness where he acknowledges his need for transformation. He expresses a desire to move forward and establish himself as a successful figure in the Hollywood industry. Lee admits, “That’s right. He’s not gonna’ change but I will. I’ll just turn myself right inside out. I could be just like you then” (Shepard 25). At first, Lee is content with his rough, lawless lifestyle of stealing and hustling on the margins of society. However, exposure to Austin’s more orderly and educated existence inspires him to rethink his position. He begins to imagine reshaping himself into a civilized personality, revealing an unexpected aspiration for respectability and recognition. The play suggests that the pursuit of the American Dream often requires individuals to suppress parts of themselves, adapt to societal standards, and seek legitimacy in institutions that promise stability and success.

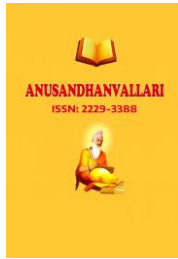
In *True west*, Shepard uses the conflict between Austin and Lee to reveal competing versions of the American Dream, one rooted in authenticity and the corrupted by commercial ambition. Austin is rational and logical as he relies on reason rather than persuasion or charm. He neither surrenders to the unpolished words of Lee nor gets convinced by his brother’s flattery. Instead, Austin articulates his impatience when he says, “I don’t want to hear about it, okay? Go tell it to the executives! Tell It to somebody who’s going to turn it into a package deal or something. A T.V. series. Don’t tell it to me” (Shepard 32 – 33). His tone captures not only irritation but also an outright refusal to become involved in Lee’s story. Austin makes it clear that he is fed up with hearing about Lee’s ambitions, which to him is more like opportunistic schemes designed to a distorted version of the American Dream. Shepard uses Austin’s cynicism as an assertion against such a system, presenting him as a character who refuses to chase success when it comes at the cost of authenticity.

In *True west*, Shepard portrays Lee and Austin as two neatly divided figures of good and evil. Instead, he merges their qualities into one unstable identity, showing that the modern men carry both impulses within the self. Austin, who begins as rational, moral, and civilized, later steals appliances and turns violent. Lee, who enters as the reckless drifter, reveals unexpected creativity and yearning for recognition. Their characters collapse into one another until the distinction between good and evil becomes blurred. The climax of this play makes this fusion most evident. As Austin attempts to strangle Lee, the conflict can be read not only as brother against brother but also as the symbolic attempt of one side of the self to kill off its darker counterpart. In trying to destroy Lee, Austin is also attempting to purge the evil within himself, the very impulses that the American Dream has awakened – greed, jealousy, and violence. Yet, Shepard refuses to resolve the struggle. By leaving the moment of killing suspended, he suggests that good and evil cannot be cleanly separated or eliminated. They remain locked together inside the same person.

The unresolved violence reflects Shepard’s vision of the modern American Dream. It no longer produces harmony but instead creates a fractured identity where the self is forced to battle itself. By dramatizing the conflict so vividly, Shepard suggests that awareness of the struggle is itself a form of growth. The modern men may never entirely escape the dual impulses of good and evil, but the very act of confronting opens the possibility of change. Shepard implies that within the fractured identity of America, there still exists the potential to reclaim integrity, authenticity, and creative truth.

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