

# The Study of Power Relations in Sam Shepard's *True West*

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## Abstract

The current research intends to have a critical investigation of Sam Shepard's *True West* in terms of Foucauldian concepts of power and knowledge. It will be stated that Shepard's plays would portray a world in which there is a lack of communication between characters. What is going to be found verifies the intricate relationship between these characters. According to Foucault, this paper is going to conclude that individuals are enforced by society, and accordingly, the society changes their dreams and limits their ability to express themselves. Likewise, in *True West* in the relationship between Lee and Austin, power is the most important feature. In fact, the characters are an effect of power.

**Key Terms:** Power/knowledge, Foucault, Shepard, *True West*

## 1. Introduction

Sam Shepard (1943-2017) was one of the most renowned literary figures in America. His reputation is chiefly due to writing about 58 plays as well as a number of books of short stories, essays, and diaries, which led to his winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979 for his play *Buried Child*. His plays can be divided into three classifications of musical, cowboys and family plays.

*True West* is regarded as one of Shepard's well-known plays which was initially produced at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in July 1980 and was often measured as his most realistic play (Tucker, 1992, p. 136). *True West* happens in a suburban kitchen in a Southern California and is the last play of Sam Shepard's family trilogy. The play's title as *True West* denotes obscurity. It suggests the being of two wests, one is true and the other is false. In an interview with Robert Coe, Shepard spoke of *True West* as, a play that probes into the perception 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. (as cited in Roudané, 2002, p. 131)

This play revolves around two brothers, Austin and Lee. When the play starts, we see Austin sitting in his mother's house while she is on vacation. This has provided Austin with the chance of working on his script. Lee as his older brother arrives at the house while he has not met Austin for a long time. Austin suggests that Lee leave there because there is a conflict between them, and then Lee says that he will break into the neighbors' homes at night, which causes Austin to stop arguing.

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The following day Austin tells Lee that he has to go because he has an appointment with a Hollywood producer to take a look at his scenario. Lee accepts his request just under one condition: Austin must give him his car's keys. Austin agrees but after Saul as the producer arrives, Lee arrives back at home and interrupts their meeting. Lee and Saul agree to play golf the next day without Austin. Lee talks to Saul about his idea for a script and Saul likes it. This issue makes Austin jealous of his brother. The first act ends with depicting Austin as he is typing Lee's story.

The second act starts by showing Lee while he has just come back home from golf with Saul. Austin figures out that Saul likes Lee's script more than his. Thus, Austin threatens to leave Lee to write the script himself. Saul comes to their house and Austin talks about his dissatisfaction with his preferring Lee's idea over his. Saul then suggests Austin to write both his and his brother's screenplays, but Austin does not agree. This leads Saul to find another writer for Lee's story. After that, we see Lee and Saul getting ready for lunch.

Austin is so sad that he gets drunk while Lee tries to write his screenplay on the typewriter. He wants Austin's help but Austin ignores him, and in return Lee starts drinking with his brother. The next day Austin is mending the toasters that he stole from the neighbors' homes and Lee is writing with the typewriter. Lee wants to call a woman for their company, but Austin doesn't agree because he's married. Austin says he will write Lee's script if he takes him to the desert.

The next day their mother comes back. Austin tells her that they are going to the desert. Lee says that he doesn't think Austin is apt for living in the desert. Austin attacks Lee and begins to stifle him and their mother runs out of the house. Austin believes he's killed Lee and thus, he lets go of him. As he goes to the door, Lee gets him as the lights stop burning. Now, this paper aims at discussing the power relations in *True West* by applying Foucault's theory of power and knowledge.

## **2. Problem Statement**

A famous play like *True West* has been the subject of so many studies so far. However, there remains a gap regarding its analysis through Foucault's theories which the current paper is going to fill. It is believed that after *Buried Child* and *Curse of the Starving Class* as two overemotional plays which were about failure and family deterioration, Shepard produced *True West* as a truthful and often unsharpened dramatic piece about two opposed brothers who meet without prior notice at their mother's house in a Southern California district. Shepard wrote this play with an awareness of the archetypal tale of Cain and Abel from the viewpoint of the mythical West of cowboys. Captivatingly, True it is going to analyze how the West exposes itself as a perceptive inspection of Shepard's visualization of the mythological and of its occupation in modern society.

## **3. Literature Review**

*True West* has attracted many researchers and critics who have approached it through diverse perspectives. For instance, "Sam Shepard's *True West*: A fraternity battle" (Mir & Vijaya, 2017, pp. 178-181) has investigated the way through which Shepard would treat different themes in order to portray the truth of postmodern American life. It has been also shown how Shepard also stages the battle between the claims of the past and the truths of the present. In another article, de Francisco (2004, pp. 283-296) has revealed the degree to which Shepard's family plays discuss the same worries as his early more experimental ones.

"Effacing Myths and Mystification of Power: Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*" (2009) by Prohászka-Rád (pp. 60-77) argues that the play which is read in the conceptual framework of Victor Turner's theories on ritual and Michel Foucault's "The Subject and Power," eradicates the mechanism and policies of a power that subjects individuals into subjection.

The other article that is going to be mentioned here belongs to Joodaki and Shooshtarian's "A Postmodernist Reading of Sam Shepard's *True West*" (2013). This article has discussed some postmodernist features in Shepard's

*True West*, which is enthused by myths of American life and popular culture (pp. 201-212). To achieve this goal, it has applied Lyotard's theory of metanarratives and language game, Derrida's deconstruction and Baudrillard's simulation, as well as language fragmentation, which altogether, have given Shepard's *True West* a postmodern atmosphere.

#### **4. Methodology**

The main methodology applied in this study is Foucault's theory of power and knowledge. Foucault's theories are chiefly revolving around the association between power and knowledge, and the way through which they are used as a form of social control. Foucault's works show that he was mostly concerned with the expansion and establishment of such concepts as power. He would argue that power dominates all the interactions between people. According to Mills (2003), "it directs the circulation of knowledge and discourse and forms our self-image" (p.35). Foucault (1980) states this issue in the succeeding way in *Power/Knowledge* coinage:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain ... Power is employed and exercised through a net like organization ... individuals are the vehicles for power, not its points of application. (p. 98)

Foucault criticized this interpretation, and declared in *History of Sexuality* (1978) that power is something which is achieved, something more like a policy. Power should be regarded as a verb rather than a noun, something that does something rather than something which is or which can be held onto. He depicts power as a key force in all dealings in society. In an interview entitled as "Power and Sex", Foucault (1988) said that the manifold power relationships are not easy to perceive:

The relations of power are perhaps among the best hidden things in the social body... [Our task is] to investigate what might be most hidden in the relations of power; to anchor them in the economic infrastructures, to trace them not only in their governmental forms, but also in the intragovernmental or para-governmental ones; to discover the in their material play. (p. 119)

Foucault assumed that modern society is a penal one which has its foundation in the mechanisms of panopticon as a metaphor for a new type of social control. It is a kind of prison that is planned by Bentham. In this panopticon, the prison building is designed in a way that cases the prisoners to presume they are enduringly under scrutiny; this idea of continuous inspection results into self-surveillance.

According to Foucault, power is a system or a network of associations that is present in the whole society. Power does not just come from the powerful ones; instead it demonstrates itself in many diverse ways and from many diverse perspectives. Foucault is critical of the notion of power haunted by some people or organizations and the idea that power is only linked with controlling and dominating.

He believes that there is power in all human associations and it infiltrates through society. As a matter of fact, power and knowledge are so inter-related that Foucault united them into a single term: Power/ Knowledge. Undeniably it is unmanageable for one to be without the other; arrangements of power need some truth to be derived to validate what they intend to do. Standards of knowledge continuously divide the people into distinct groups which are the major apparatuses of power.

#### **5. Discussion**

##### **5.1 Shepard's Power and Knowledge in *True West***

The association between power and knowledge, and how they are employed as a form of control can be very well noticed in *True West*. In fact, what has made this study apply the theory of Foucault is that Austin and Lee as two

brothers in *True West* are not confident about their manliness and thus their struggles to show its features in their personality, one through power and the other true knowledge, lead to vehemence between them.

*True West* shows a realistic setting (Tucker, 1992, p. 136), and is a postmodern play which devastates the grand narrative of a happy American family and what it means to be masculine. This play questions the power relations of two American brothers. Austin and Lee are in contrast struggles. Austin is writing a script and it seems that Lee's script is more appealing to the producer. This issue signifies Lee's tendency to destroy Austin's illusion of being more powerful and better. At some points this illusion is shattered through Lee's using violence.

According to Mottram (1984), *True West* is "a 'civil war' of family life, a showdown between brothers" (p. 144). To become more familiar with the two brothers, Austin who is educated is a Hollywood scriptwriter. He is intelligent and expressive. He speaks fluently and clearly. Austin is tidy and clean shaven, he wears a white shirt, and comes from the cold, "calm," and cultured northern United States where he has a wife and children; he also tells his brother that he hates loneliness. Throughout the story we understand that Austin "frequently performs traditionally female tasks" (Smith, 1989, p. 329), such as doing the dishes, making toast, or watering his mother's plants.

In contrast, Lee as Austin's older brother is not well-educated and knowledgeable. He speaks not very well and sometimes is angry. He is a thief. Unlike Austin, Lee is untidy, and wears an old T-shirt. Lee lives in the hot and wild Southern California desert because he likes the solitude of the desert. Lee is the symbol of masculinity. Thus, he discards any behaviors with traces of feminine implications. The difference between the two brothers that Shepard intended to show paves the way for the theme of the struggle over brotherly authority in the play.

James D. Reimer (1986) in his article entitled as "Integrating the Psyche of the American Male: Conflicting Ideals of Manhood in Sam Shepard's *True West*" had regarded Austin and Lee as "two contradictory American ideals of masculinity" (p. 41). Reimer (1986) has also added that Austin represents the model of masculine attainment through education, cleverness, and inventiveness while Lee's features are based on the ideals of rough individualist living who refuses education "in favor of physical and instinctual action" (p. 41). Despite their difference, Austin and Lee first disclose their secreted yearnings to be like each other (and thus become the ideal complete male) in the following dialogue:

Lee: I always wondered what'd be like to be you.

Austin: You did?

Lee: Yeah, sure. I used to picture you walkin' around some campus with yer arms fulla' books. Blondes chasin' after ya'.

Austin: Blondes? That's funny.

Lee: What's funny about it?

Austin: Because I always used to picture you somewhere.

Lee: Where'd you picture me?

Austin: Oh, I don't know. Different places. Adventures. You were always on some adventure.

Lee: Yeah.

Austin: 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?

Lee: Well you were settin' yourself up for some thin'

Austin: I guess. (p. 26)

These brothers are in constant struggle because one has a feature that the other one lacks. According to Foucault, power and knowledge are not regarded as independent concepts but are intricately connected. Actually, knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a purpose of knowledge.

As it has been stated earlier, this play seeks to depict the theme of the dualistic struggle and hostility between Austin and Lee as two brothers who argue nonstop over their specific incompatible circumstances as they struggle to write a script. Lee is a minor thief that has shown up out of the blue at his mother's house. The nature of the two brothers, one as being highly liable and cooperating, and the other as being thoughtless and rough, confirms that they soon begin quarreling about seemingly unimportant points.

The play echoes the mythic implications of a male dramatic piece in which struggles are mainly between men. Lee starts questioning Austin, who, vainly, attempts to write a first draft of the movie script he has to give to Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer. Austin tries to be easy-going and calm, while Lee shows his glitzy mockery. Austin at first stays aloof in order to keep his power within the house, but Lee finally corrodes Austin's power. He moves around the kitchen, taking over the physical space and, when he asks Austin for his car, the talk leads to their first physical clash.

Thus, it can be noticed that the signs of ferocity are considerably depicted and the two brothers are portrayed to be engaged in ferocious actions. Shepard himself once said, "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" (Roudané, 2002, p. 129).

In this play vehemence starts from very first scene where Lee behaves in a fierce way when Austen declines to lend a car to him. This occasion symbolizes the commencement of the fight that occurs between the brothers. Lee's unforeseen and unwanted entrance to his mother's house from the desert disrupts Austen's meditation. His activities, performance and speech increase the violence and disorder.

After returning his brother's car keys, Lee continually invites Austen to intense situations in order to show his power. He incites him to throw him out of the house, but Austin attempts to be calm and sensible. In scene five, the violence is again demonstrated when Lee threatens Austin with a golf club for his statement, "What'd you do, beat him up or something?" (Gilman, 2005, p. 30).

Lee becomes irritated as he understands that he cannot reconstruct the mythic American West or attain his aim that he has arranged for himself without the help of his brother, he crashes the typewriter with a golf club and tears pages of his script which displays his fierce nature. Stephen Bottoms has remarked, "Lee's violence seems to heighten and accelerate with his growing awareness of the futility of his position" (Bottoms, 1998, p. 202). Similarly, Austin also starts to show violence as he realizes the bareness of modern society and his pretended individuality.

## **5.2 Collapse of Western Realism in *True West***

In *True West*, Shepard has depicted the battle between the assertions of the past and the realities of the current time through discrediting the American myth of family and the myth of American dream. It can be claimed that in *True West*, Shepard made the Western realism collapse by portraying an opposing image of the old American Dream and a terrible representation of society in which he assumes that the good is overcome by wicked powers. The deterioration of old myths shows the collapse of any meaningful concept, the declining of family and society, and the spiritual strength of people.

When *True West* opens, we see a fragmented family; Austin and Lee are noticed as talking about their mother's leaving home for Alaska. The brothers' resentment at one another is also obvious, too. Austin as the younger brother is a writer for movies in the North. He is married and successful, too and a middle-class city knowledgeable man who has come to the West to write a new script for Saul Kimmer.

He is now at his mom's house. Lee as his elder brother is a tramp in the desert. Some of his characteristics include being uneducated, quarrelsome and a recluse. In fact through the novel we understand that he resembles his

father. He makes money by theft. Lee meets Austin in the kitchen, while he is still working on his project. Austin as a Westerner has the desire to return to his origins. He cannot run away from the melancholy reminiscences of his past. According to Mir and Vijaya (2017),

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. (p. 180)

It can be inferred that Shepard's plays like *True West* which either happen in the family or revolve around the theme of the family show the collapse of this important setting. Sometimes like what is noticed in this play, Shepard has depicted the condition of the current world. Shepard encounters and analyzes the family which leads to a new look at the realism.

In *True West*, Shepard has discussed the old connotations of myth and their collapse in postmodern societies. Also, the characters like Austin and Lee are witnessed to set foot in imitations of reality because they know that the true reality doesn't exist. In fact, myths are not existent, but they are reproductions of the earlier myths.

## 6. Conclusion

As the analysis of *True West* by Sam Shepard, this study investigated the relationship between Lee and Austin as the main characters through Foucault's theory. It was stated that Shepard is markedly influential in his symbolic family problem dramatic pieces like *True West*. He would challenge the myth of American dream in his plays. As an attempt to investigate Shepard's *True West* in terms of Foucauldian concepts of power and knowledge, this paper argued that in this play Shepard showed a world with its befuddled characters. Also, by applying Foucault's theory of power and knowledge, it was stated that the characters of this play reject the fixed enigmas of behavior of their community. Finally, it should be stated that what was found emphasizes Foucault's belief that, "Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain ... Power is employed and exercised through a net like organization ... individuals are the vehicles for power, not its points of application (Foucault, 1980, p. 98).

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