



IDENTITY CRISIS AND FAMILIAL DISINTEGRATION FROM A POSTMODERNIST VIEW IN SAM SHEPARD'S *TRUE WEST*

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Abstract

Sam Shepard and his generation are products of the postmodern society which arises out from the postwar capitalist boom in the sixties. American male members who belong to this generation lack the capability to locate themselves in the frame of individual and national identities of their country. They expose the uncertainties and inabilities of postmodern identity. Shepard's family plays demonstrate that postmodern Americans are entrapped in a vicious paradox of American identity. They can't locate their identities either utilizing postmodern ideals for establishing one's identity nor can they establish their identities in the past ideals that have been lost and buried within American heritage and history. This article aims at exploring identity crisis in *True West* based on Derride's postmodernist concept "Free Play" and Lyotard's "the fall of metanarrative". It also examines how identity crisis plays an important role in the individual and familial deterioration and disintegration throughout Austin's and Lee's characters.

Introduction

True West is stamped with Shepardian linguistic simplicity, culturally, politically, socially and individually thematic concerns. It rests upon the aspects of postmodern cowboy's life in an American atmosphere of familial, cultural, and historical disintegration. *True West* maintains Shepard's exposure of the betrayal of the American dream, the obliteration and bankruptcy of postmodern American culture, Americans' alienation from their world, the dead myths and postmodern Americans' endless search for a sense of reality in their life. It dramatizes the Post-WWII human being's attempts to create meaning of life. It also portrays the Post-WWII human being's failure to attain a sense of reality and meaning which consequently result in despair and hopelessness. Neither religious certainties, social values, nor psychological

developments of that era could locate him/ her in the disrupted world or create a meaning of life. He/she felt alienated in his own surroundings. As a matter of fact, the Second World War brought an end to the metanarrative "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). Postmodernism and postmodern American drama have been created from this chaos and distortion.

Postmodernism is a process of reacting against and questioning ideas and concepts related to modernism. It is the denial of modernists' scientific methods, originality, and authorship which according to modernists lead to universal order and rationality. There is no objective truth or fixed realities in postmodernism or as Pinter states: "There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and

what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false"(qtd in Kreps 47).

Derrida is one of the most remarkable contributors to postmodernism. He coins the term "Free play" by which he means that no stable reality, identity, or meaning exists. Depending on Derrida's concept "Free play", the signifier in postmodernism does not refer to any stable signified or fixed meaning, stable reality, or identity. It indicates that "there is no center but only free play, . . . there is no ultimate origin but only a never-ending play of differences in a system of discourse"(Hans, Derrida and Spivak 810). It is as Austin declares in *True West*: "There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!" (True West 59), or exactly as Dodge ultimately puts it: "There's nothing to figure out [in the postmodern world]. You just forge ahead."(Buried Child 36). Derrida's perception of identities conforms with what happens to many of Shepard's characters such as Lee and Austin in *True West*, Tilden and Vince in *Buried Child*, and Wesley and Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*.

Carla J. McDonough states that in the 20th century masculinity is represented through two conflicting ideals. The first ideal is "the ideal of masculine success". It represents the man who adheres to the ways, ideals, and the style of life of postmodern American society. The second ideal is "frontier ideal of masculinity". It represents the males who look for freedom and adventure of the cowboy lifestyle. In other words, this ideal represents the life of the Old West, the image of the macho man which is a recurrent theme in Shepard's plays (47).

Austin and Lee, the two main characters in *True West*, represent the two conflicting ideals of identity. They are trying separately to reserve a room for their roaming selves in the context of postmodern American identity. They expose the postmodern fragile, fragmented, double, and roaming identity. Exactly as Megan Williams states *True West* is an illustration of theories of postmodern identity. He adds Austin and Lee allegorize "two ways modern man attempts to solve his feelings of placelessness and alienation" (Saddik 132).

Discussion

True West is driven by Shepard's anxiety to make a home within the frame of postmodern American identity for his postmodern American generation. The heart of *True West*, is "this conflict between the intellect and the emotions, the physical wild man part and the reasonable, intellectual side"(Clum 173). *True West* is the most autobiographically Shepardian play. Austin and Lee are two sides of one character. They are a clear representation of Shepard's double character and identity. In fact, Shepard "Wrote himself [in] *True West* as two warring brothers ... two sides of the same Sam Shepard"(Cadwalladr). According to Henry Schvey in, *A Worm in the Wood: The Father-Son Relationship in the Plays of Sam Shepard*:

Austin the successful Hollywood screenwriter, clearly represents the side of Shepard that has accommodated itself to material success, the aspects that have moved him from his counter culture roots in the Off-Off-Broadway theatre movement of the sixties to a commercially successful career as a film star. Lee, although presented as Austin's brother in the play, is in fact his alter-ego, the part of Shepard's divided self that is rough and crude, lives outside the law, and is drawn toward the elusive image of his father. The play, then, is not so much about between two brothers as it is an externalized metaphor of the dialectic between the dual aspects of Shepard's psyche. (19, 20)

Moreover, Austin's and Lee's opposite characters express the anxiety, trouble, ambivalence, and placelessness of Shepard in his life. They "represent two sides of the same person, and neither version is more authentic"(Crank and Wagner-Martin 90). Shepard comments on *True West*:

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 to live with. (Murphy 131)

First, the opening scene of the play provides the two brothers with two different identities. Each brother has distinguished himself with a different ideal for establishing his life and his identity. Austin adopts the lifestyle, values, and self-images of the postmodern world "the ideal of masculine success". He is a screenwriter for Hollywood. There is apparently an established sense of reality in his life and a stability of his identity as a business man (screenwriter). He is pursuing his career satisfactorily. He has recently isolated himself in his mother's house while his mother is on vacation in Alaska. He is to take care of his mother's plants and to concentrate on his business. However, Austin isolation is broken by Lee's arrival from the desert.

Lee, on the other hand, is a representative of the lifestyle, values, and self-images of the "American frontier". He is an outcast in the desert. He has come to steal from his mother's neighborhood. He is a thief, a drunkard, and an icon of violence. Lee associates himself with the lifestyles, values, and images of the pioneering cowboy figure. He has escaped his postmodern life to find a sense of reality and a sense of his identity in the Old West. However, Lee does not find a sense of reality by associating himself with the unreal copy of the Old West. There is only a simulacrum of the Old West. Lee has been trying to find his real identity in "the ancient meaning of myth" which has been lost in the American culture and which is no longer adequate for modern time (Rosen 5). The images, lifestyles, values of the cowboy based upon the "American frontier" are there in the American culture and history as dead myths and half-truths. They exist as a memory, but they are not a workable reality for Lee and Austin to establish their individual and national identities upon.

From another angle, deconstruction of myths and prevailing images is a postmodern means. The artificially prevailing images of Lee (the cowboy figure) do not have a real resemblance or connection with the American culture and heritage. The 20th

century idealized cowboy is artificially consisted of ads and filmic images, Shepard says:

I think we've always fallen victim to advertising from the get go. From advertising campaigns. The move westward was promoted by advertising. You know, "Come West!" "Free land!" "Manifest Destiny." So we've always been seduced by advertising ... We've fallen into that thing, you know. So the American Dream is always this fantasy that's promoted through advertising. We always prefer the fantasy over the reality. (Roudané 70)

Shepard satirizes and deconstructs the myths of the Old West by associating Lee and Austin with images of the Old West and the cowboy figure. Both Lee and Austin in *True West* in different timings are associated with images of the Old West and cowboy figures. They are overwhelmed by their nostalgic feeling for the Old West where they imagine their true identities can be easily located. Meanwhile, Shepard illustrates that the lifestyle, values, and images of the pioneering cowboy figure that- he constantly idealizes and associates his characters with - do not exist. According to Shepard, American society searches for "the ancient meaning of myth" which has been lost in the American culture and which is no longer adequate for modern time (Rosen 5). The images, lifestyles, values of the cowboy based upon the "American frontier" are there in the American culture and history as dead myths and half-truths. They exist as a memory, but they are not a workable reality for Lee and Austin to establish their individual and national identities upon.

Eventually, Lee's attempt to associate and identify himself with the images, lifestyles, and values of the cowboy figure "American frontier", leads to his dissatisfaction. He is "unsatisfied with his own, drifting lifestyle. His return to the city has been prompted by the fact that, like Tilden, he cannot survive indefinitely in the wild, and needs to find human company and some sense of stability"(Bottom 194). There is no objective truth or fixed realities in the Old West. Lee now is seduced by the "ideal of masculine success" and by its codes of life, identity, and its images after his arrival to his

mother's neighborhood. When he has broken into a neighbor's house, he describes it to Austin as: "Like a paradise kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside. Warm yellow lights. Mexican tile all around. Copper pots havgin' over the stove. Ya' know like. They got in magazines... Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know". (True West 15).

Lee starts free playing with his own identity. He shows Derride's perception of floating identities in the postmodern era. He starts identifying himself with the "ideal of masculine success". He views people who have established their identity upon postmodern ideal of life and identity as happy people. He is amazed how they have achieved such happiness in their lives. How they have made their homes like a paradise that he is familiar with only in magazines. Austin shows his boasting agreement of his brother's comments on the way of life in the postmodern world. It is like a paradise.

Lee manages to snatch Saul Kimmer's acceptance of his story to be bought by Hollywood, which he claims to be a true representation of True West: "so ya' think there's room for a *real* Western these days? A true to-life Western?"(True West 24). Austin does not imagine that his brother's story can be accepted since it is not authentic, Lee is only creating "illusions of characters"(True West 48), drawn from "fantasies of a long lost boyhood,"(True West 48). It is based on illusion and it does not have any reality. Austin adds to Saul Kimmer that" [Lee has] been camp[ing] out on the desert for three months. Talking to cactus. What's he know about what people wanna' see on the screen! I drive on the freeway every day. I swallow the smog. I watch the news in color. I shop in the Safeway. I'm the one who's in touch! Not him!" (True West 42). However, Saul Kimmer accepts Lee's story and asks Austin to help in screenwriting Lee's story. In this point of time, identity transformation begins. Austin changes his identity to be a thief, a drunkard, and he becomes a fan of his brother's style of life in the desert.

Second, the boundaries of Austin's and Lee's entirely different identities have become blurred. The clear distinction that Shepard draws between the two brother's identity is ruined. The question

and the quest of their identities begin. Austin exposes new aspects of his personality that have been associated with his brother's character as if he has deprived his brother from the lifestyle and values of the "American Frontier" and placed himself. He suddenly decides to abandon his postmodern life due to his lack of reality in the postmodern world: "There's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!" (True West 59). He feels nostalgic for the desert life, for his brother's freedom, and for a world without restraints:

AUSTIN. I wish I wasn't – I wish I didn't have to be doing business down here. I'd like to just spend some time with you.

LEE. I thought it was 'Art' you were doin'. (True West 18)

Likewise, Lee shows his lack for a solid sense of his identity. He reveals new aspects of his personality that were associated with Austin. He has taken Austin's place. He has become the screenwriter for Hollywood. He does not put too much importance on reality and authenticity of his story. He knows that the history either true or false, it is only a fiction and a commodity for sale. Furthermore, he shows that he hates his mobility and freedom. He longs for stability of life, for systems, and values embedded in the "ideal of masculine success". Therefore, he places himself in front of the typewriter:

LEE. I'm a screenwriter now! I'm legitimate. [.....]

AUSTIN. Now I'm the intruder. I'm the one who is invading your precious privacy! (True West 45).

Austin and Lee illustrate Americans' performance of postmodern identities. Americans are just performing that they have a sense of their real identities. Lee pretends that he is a real icon of the cowboy figure but suddenly his solid identity dissolves. He then starts his job as a screenwriter. He performs that he has attained his stable identity, stable address, and stable name. He has given up living like the sand of the desert that is daily moving. He hopefully places himself in front of the typewriter

as a stone in a postmodern concrete building. However, he places himself in front of the typewriter without any qualification or experience. Saddik argues that Shepard views characters' identity as a performance; his characters do not rest upon the fiction of authentic or intrinsic. It is due to the lack for any true representative of a national character. (137) Lee is not qualified to be an artist, but he performs to establish his identity upon the "ideal of masculine success" and to become a businessman as he has just planned. Lee is like Vince in *Buried Child*, he is optimistic about getting a sense of his life by connecting to his roots, he then shows despair when he is not recognized by his relatives. Exactly as Roudané states: "Shepard's characters are caught in a 'terrible binary of hope and hopelessness' (2), or express what Shepard called the "despair and hope" of the sixties; they act out both the spiritual dislocation and the protean survival instinct of traumatic times"(Lahr).

Third, *True West* is a true interpretation of Lyotard's concept "the fall of metanarrative" in the postmodern era. It clarifies the non-existence of the old ideals and the usefulness of ideals of the present for establishing a comprehensible identity. That is, the title of the play indicates that there is a True West. Both Lee and Austin claim the authenticity of their stories which symbolically indicate the suitable and workable American identity. Readers and audience expect that Shepard will ultimately find a home within the context of postmodern paradox of American identity. On the contrary, "[True West is] Shepard's attempt to synthesize the characteristics of the "true West" - a West that is represented neither by the love story of Austin nor by the implausible chase sequence of Lee"(Hoeper).

Shepard metaphorically denies the availability of "true American identity" throughout Austin's and Lee's characters. They continue fruitlessly searching for reality in their life and a sense of their real identities. They eventually encounter destruction and despair. As Clum puts it: "Indeed, the frustration for Shepard's characters, and perhaps for Shepard himself, comes from seeking a non-existent essential, unified American masculinity". (173). Austin, who shows a solid sense of his identity at the beginning of the play, is

frustrated. He consequently decides to leave his own business and his life to live in the desert. Lee, who has come back from the desert and whose life and identity are supposedly established upon the "American frontier", has also decided to become a businessman and to leave the desert. This irresolution and confusion of role and identity is the center of Shepard's characters. Bigsby addresses this dilemma in terms of a sense of inconsistency and instability in Shepard's work:

There is no consistency. Moods, dress, identity can switch in a second; characters are fractured, divided, doubled until the same play can contain, as independent beings, what are in effect facets of a single self . . . But if this fluidity contains a threat of anarchy the opposite is equally menacing. As a writer, Shepard has spoken of his desire 'To not be fixed'. This is what keeps his characters on the move. (qtd. In Saddik 130)

The idea of a True West or true American identity in the play disappears gradually. It is ruined when Lee ruins the typewriter due to his inability to perform his new claimed identity. Violence is all over their mother's house. He is to quest for his identity in the "American frontier" again. He has not taken "some kinda' philosophical decision ... [Actually he] chose to live out in the middle a' nowhere ... 'cause [he] can't make it here!" (Crank and Wagner-Martin 92). In other words, Lee has taken his decision to return to the desert because of his inability to locate his identity and life in the postmodern world. However, both Austin and Lee are now unable to grasp a reality of their lives or their identities. They can't find a role for themselves in either ideals of establishing one's identity. Their identity and existence have become threatened and confused.

The dominating atmosphere now reveals the non-existence of True West, true life, or true identities in the life of postmodern American man. It is only a creation of Hollywood and its screenwriters. They can't find their true identities either by connecting with their past or with their present due to fakeness. The past has been lost and adjusted to be commoditized in films, TV series and so on. The

present does not concern human being nature. It is established and based upon values and codes of pragmatism, materialism, and capitalism. Austin and Lee ultimately meet their self-destruction. The personified ideals in their characters lead to self-ruin. Neither the "ideal of masculine success" nor the "American frontier" is workable for Americans.

Apparently, Lee and Austin struggle to stabilize their lives and identities by defining themselves with the "ideal of masculine success" and the "American frontier". These ideals are supposedly guides for Austin and Lee to locate a sense of their true identities and a true meaning of their lives in a postmodern chaotic and unclear world. Having established their identities with the identity guides for Americans, it will lead to fortify their individual characters and nuclear family units from dissonance and disintegration. It is quite the opposite, Lee's and Austin's identity crisis is increased. They live out a state of loss after they have tried both ideals to define themselves. Their loss and destruction are reflected negatively on their individualities and families. Vahdati states that:

Shepard seeks to depict the undeniable effects of postmodernism on the lives of Americans.... Shepard's plays show Lyotard's idea of an end to all consoling myths of intellectual mastery and truth. The most specific concerns of Shepard in his plays consist of the reflection on the traditional meanings of myth and their obliteration in the postmodern societies, and the nostalgic effect that this eradication of myth brings with itself to the present life. (246)

The negatively familial effects on Austin's and Lee's familial lives are illustrated. Individually, Austin and Lee have developed mutual hostility. They have performed physical attacks towards each other. The play ends while Austin is trying to strangle his brother due to his rejection to take him to the desert. On the familial and social level, Austin is going to estrange and alienate himself from his social circle and from his family. By the end of the play, he pleads his brother to help him escape from his artificial world: "There's nothin' down here for me. There never was." (True West 58). It is an act of

resigning from his unsatisfactorily social, individual, and familial roles. Austin's family is certainly going to suffer from absent fatherhood. So, Austin's individual disintegration is not the ultimate result, but Austin's family is also going to disintegrate.

Finally, Lee and Austin repeat the same identity quest and self-destruction of their father. Austin, who has supposedly fortified his identity and family by defining himself with the postmodern ideal of life, encounters the same identity crisis, and the same familial disintegration as his father. It has already happened with his father's family. His father separated from his mother. He is alienated from society and his mother is alienated from urban life. She does not perform her role when she finds her children fighting; she is only searching for entertainment. She is distant, unemotional, and out of touch. Austin is on the way of his father. He is living out his self-destruction; similarly, his family is on its way to disintegrate. That is how identity crisis contributes in disintegrating the postmodern American family.

Conclusion

Lee and Austin express a sense of dislocation and dissatisfaction with their identities. They are as many of Shepard's characters who are continuously transforming their personalities. They are free playing between the "American frontier" and the postmodern ideal "the ideal of masculine success". However, they find themselves entrapped between the traditionally irretrievable and non-existent values, relations, and identities. They show their frustration and despair with their endless and fruitless search. Due to their inability to accommodate themselves within the context of American identities, they eventually achieve their self-destruction instead of their self-realization. However, postmodern Americans' fruitless and self-destructive search for their true identities negatively affects the integration and harmony of American family.

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