"The Struggle to Find Meaning:" Masculinity Crisis in Sam Shepard's *True West*

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Abstract   As a set of socially constructed traits and behaviors, masculinity is generally connected with men. Some of these masculine attributes include freedom, integrity, financial independence, strength, and stability. These traits vary by context and are affected by social factors. When a man is unable to conform to the stated expectations, he is said to be in crisis either consciously or unconsciously. This paper brings to the fore the issues of masculine identity, the crisis of masculinity, and its consequences regarding the male characters, Lee and Austin, in Sam Shepard's *True West*. The role of their disintegrated family, the stress over their future careers, as well as their backgrounds bring both Lee and Austin to the verge of crisis. The consequences are committing crimes, drinking alcohol, giving vent to their anger, frustration, and perpetrating violence.
Key words   identity; masculinity; masculinity crisis; *True West*; Sam Shepard

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Introduction

As one of the America's most acclaimed dramatists, Sam Shepard has written about fifty plays and has spotted his plays lightening not only theater houses but also the coffee shops and college campuses throughout the American and European stages. Many of his plays such as *Action* (1975), *Angel City* (1976), *Buried Child* (1979), and *True West* (1980) deal with the loose boundaries of identity, the question of freedom, and the inability of finding a true self on the side of characters. Shepard's

interest in exploring the dramatic forms emerged in Europe after the World War II is observed from the fact that he has combined the notions of The Theater of the Absurd and features of American culture with the violence and anarchy which are pervasive in Pinter's drama. He has mentioned in one of his interviews that "I'd like to try a whole different way of writing now, which is very stark and not so flashy and not full of a lot of mythic figures and everything, and try to scrape it down to the bone as much as possible" (Chubb 208).

In *Modern American Drama*, C. W. E. Bigsby argues that Sam Shepard has "found in performance a symbol of lives which are the enactment of stories with their roots in the distant past of ritual and myth as well as in a present in which role and being have become confused" (193). This confusion of role and being is another way of saying that Shepard's characters struggle with their troubled identities and search for their stabilization. Bigsby further points out that in Shepard's plays "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" (116).

Shepard has been revered by many scholars and critics, for example, Carol Rosen puts Shepard on a pedestal considering him to be "after all the most original and vital playwright of our age" ("Emotional Territory" 1). Likewise, William M. Demastes suggests that "the originality and ingenuity of Sam Shepard have placed him among the top of America's list of playwrights" (97). Regarding the themes of his plays, Richard Gilman in his introduction to *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* encapsulates that "the majority of his plays deal with one or more these matters: the death or the betrayal of the American Dream, the decay of our own national myths, the growing mechanization of our lives, the search for roots, and the travail of the family" (xi).

True west, Shepard's first major play, is first premiered at the Magic Theater in 1980 and is set in the temporary world of California, as Shepard himself has called it (Bigsby 186). Performed in two acts, *True West* revolves around four characters in general and two brothers, in particular; Austin and Lee. The action takes place in a kitchen and an adjoining alcove in a Southern California suburb. Austin, who is in his early thirties, is a married Hollywood scriptwriter who is currently visiting his mother's house while his mother is away in Alaska and left him in charge of the house. His older brother, Lee, on the other hand, is a petty thief who has just been back visiting his father in the desert and now enters his mother's house for the first time in five years. In Act 1 we see the rivalry between Austin and Lee. While Austin struggles to focus on his screenplay, Lee keeps asking him silly

questions. Their reconnection is an opportunity to get to know each other better. Austin's patience and prudence are in sharp contrast with Lee's dominant, volatile and shady character. Saul, a stereotypical Hollywood producer, comes between the two brothers and creates antagonism between them. When Saul and Austin discuss Austin's project, Lee steps in and tells Saul that he can write better stories than those of his brother. Lee believes his story to be more authentic. He sets a meeting with Saul and makes Saul fall for his story. The logical, calm and reserved Austin we see in Act 1 turns into a jealous, domineering, and querulous character in Act 2. It is as if the two brothers suddenly shift roles and Lee becomes Austin and Austin adopts Lee's personality. Austin cannot stand Lee's story and does not waste his time writing it down. Lee taunts Austin with his lack of courage and coaxes him into breaking into people's houses. Meanwhile, seeing that Lee bewilderingly fiddling with the typewriter, Austin goes and steals a whole bunch of toasters. While Austin and Lee childishly arguing, their mother returns home confused by his son's appearances as well as the state of her house. Austen tells her that he and Lee have decided to live in the desert like their father's but Lee thinks that Austin is not prepared to live in the desert. Austin responds by trying to strangle Lee, meanwhile, their mother bursts out of the house in dismay, Austin lets go of Lee, and as he walks to the door, Lee stands up. The lights fade as Austin and Lee face each other.

David Castronovo calls *True West* the "wild parody and disjointed presentation of crazed American dreams" (104). In a related vein, Matthew Roudane observes the characters in *True West* to be "less concerned with social change and more fixed, at best, on discovering some genuine force in a world filled with shattered families and the iconography of popular culture" (3). In contrast to his previous plays which portrayed opaque imageries and confusing monologs, Shepard's *True West*, in a sense, is simply understandable and transparently obvious. Douglass Watt comes to the same conclusion with his review in the *New York Daily News:* "what we see before us in *True West* is a slicker Shepard, but one just going through familiar paces in a thin variation on the old theme" (366).

Some critics pay attention to the autobiographical aspect of *True West* and study the relationship between the father living in the desert and Shepard's actual father who also spent some time in the desert since he could not "fit in with people" (Shepard, "Motel Chronicles" 56). Alex Vernon, on the other hand, analyzed the issue of staging violence in Shepard's *True West* and *The Day of the Locust* and argued that "violence can only be contained and controlled, either ritually or artistically, for so long; for as long as identity formation remains an unending process" (147). Sheila Rabillard worked on the plot, structure and the local order of

Shepard's plays and claimed that "*True West* is structured with astonishing strictness according to principles of repetition and reversal, both on the scale of gesture and visual image and in terms of the general behavior of the two principal characters" (52). Furthermore, Juan A. Tarancon in a rather thorough study worked on the mystic aspect of Shepard's *True West*. According to Tarancon, Shepard has changed the conventional meaning of myth and used "stories and characters borrowed from every expression of popular culture to make poignant statements about contemporary man" (8). Reliance on the mythic dynamism of *True West* makes Tarancon conduct both a holistic reading and a deconstructive one.

For Shepard, himself, in the heart of *True West* is the "conflict between the intellect and the emotions, the physical wild man part and the reasonable, intellectual side" (Weber 37). He stated that "I wanted to write a play about double nature, one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphoric or any of that stuff, I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided" (Rosen, "Sam Shepard" 119).

Very close to the aim of this paper is a study conducted by Sahar Ahmad Mokbel on Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977). She dissected the play in the light of gender studies and analyzed "the struggle of the American man inside his Family" (19). She, further, examined the role of father and son in the face of masculine crisis and assigned the crisis of masculinity to be the result of the destruction of the postmodern family. Likewise, this paper attempts to examine Shepard's *True West* considering the issues of masculinity, the role of family, and crisis. Masculinity as a socially and culturally constructed entity plays a major role in the lives of Austin and Lee. In fact, growing up in a society where masculine men are expected to be active, domineering and strong, creates a major crisis for both men and women. The family in *True West* resembles the whole society. Shepard's representation of a deteriorated family is to criticize American society. This paper aims to look at those masculinity issues Austin and Lee are struggling with and examines how these issues in the modern society become a major crisis. Consequently, we will see how the crisis of masculinity reveals itself in the form of violence on the part of Austin and Lee and therefore reflects in the society. The two brother's drinking problems, as well as the sudden shift of their identities, are other issues related to the crisis of masculinity.

Discussion

Masculinity, in general, is a set of representation connected with being a man. While for some, masculinities are biologically grounded, it is concluded that they

are "socially and historically constructed" (Hearn & Morgan 4). These socially constructed attributes have found their place in the mind of a child and conformity to them becomes the ideal image occurring in infancy. As a universal common trend, masculinity is characterized by virility, energy, and strength while femininity is nothing but submission, innocence, and passivity. These contrastive gender distinctions are much revered, acknowledged as well as criticized in the world of literature. The issues of masculinity and the characteristics attributed to men are highly debatable. However, what is definite is the crisis men go through when performing masculinity.

Due to its wide applications of the concept, what the crisis of masculinity means actually remains unclear. According to John MacInnes, the crisis of masculinity arises from the "fundamental incompatibility between the core principle of modernity that all human beings are essentially equal (regardless of their sex) and the core tenet of patriarchy that men are naturally superior to women and thus destined to rule over them" (11).

Likewise, Tim Edwards chooses two sets of concerns from which masculinity crisis originates. According to him, crisis either happens from without or from within. The former is related to "the position of men within such institutions as the family, education, and work" (7-8) while the latter "centers precisely on a perceived shift in men's experiences of their position as men" (8). These two sets of crisis directly affect each other in a way that a crisis from without can be a crisis from within and vice versa.

Before examining these two sets of crisis in *True West*, it necessary to have some ideas about the masculine identity and the criteria on which Austin and Lee's identities are formed. Masculine identity in a narrow sense is the personal conception of oneself as male and in a broad sense is the manifestation of male intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Work and consequently financial security as the fundamental factor of masculinity is the central core of masculine identity. The plot of *Tue West* reaches the point that Austin and Lee's masculine identities become dependent on the producer, Saul Kimmer. Austin has attempted to build a relationship with Saul over time based on mutual trust and understanding as well as his own talent. On the other hand, Lee's sudden intervention shatters Austin's future prospects and encourages violence in him throughout the course of the play. According to Mathew Roudane, Austin and Lee "find themselves caught within a terrible binary of hope and hopelessness, struggling with their own distorted versions of objective reality" he, then, states that these two characters typically exist in an ongoing "state of shock" (2). This state of shock is the same as the masculine

crises Austin and Lee are struggling with. One can claim that since the characters are in fluctuation, they are on the quest to find authenticity in life or as Lee says "What I need is something authentic, something to keep me in touch" (60). For Mark Siegel, "Neither character embodies in himself a healthy, integrated personality, nor is there during the course of the play any indication that they will merge or repair each other" (246). Annette J. Saddik sees both Austin and Lee as two characters craving for stability and fixed identity, however, they realized that freedom only achieved through their instability and fluidity in their characters (130). It is also reflected in the idea of 'shift' in both Lee and Austin's moods; the former from active to passive and the latter from passive to active aggression and finally violence. Nonetheless, the character's understanding of their situation only aggravates their crises.

While Lee enjoys more fluidity and freedom as one of the advantages of his immoral life, Austin is taking pleasure in his stability. Lee has the miraculous ability to change his identity throughout the course of the play. Lee's barging in on Austin at the very outset of the play destroys Austin's autonomy and ruins his solitude. Lee steals Austin's identity and shatters his social status. Austin, on the other hand, "wishes to… relinquish himself to the positive freedom and anonymity of Lee's present" (Williams 60).

Heredity plays an important role in forming both Austin and Lee's identities. It is presented in the play how the sons can inherit the same characteristics as those of their father. The father is absent in the play; however, through Austin and Lee's conversation, there are some hints that their father is a drunk old man who lives in the dessert. William Kleb takes the absence of the father, who is being called 'the old man' many times by sons, as a "rumor, a ghost, a memory" (71). The father's absence is filled in by his son's presence especially Lee. Like his father, Lee is characterized by his manliness, humor, violence, vigor, and masculinity. In fact, Lee is a stand-in for his father. For example, in the first scene when Austin offers Lee money, Lee speaks up for his father:

> (Lee *suddenly lunges at* Austin, *grabs him violently by the shirt and*
> *shakes him with tremendous power*)
> LEE. Don't you say that to me! Don't you ever say that to me!
> (*just as suddenly he turns him loose, pushes him away and backs off*)
> You may be able to git away with that with the Old Man. Git him
> tanked up for a week! Buy him off with yer Hollywood blood money,
> but not me! I can git my own money my own way. Big money! (7)

Here, the absent father plays the role of the desired masculinity featured by traits that are not necessarily based on appropriate social masculine norms such as drinking alcohol, living in the dessert and having no proper occupation. Moreover, we can see that Lee as a representative of his father stands up for him and does not allow Austin to do what he did to their father. Nevertheless, later in the play, Lee suggests that they help their father with the money they earn from the script. Lee's close relationship with his father is explicitly illustrated in his defense of his father:

> LEE. We could get the old man out'a hock then.
> AUSTIN. Maybe.
> LEE. Whatdya' mean, maybe?
> AUSTIN. I mean it might take more than money.
> LEE. You were just tellin' me it'd change my whole life around. Why wouldn't it change him?
> AUSTIN. He's different.
> LEE. Oh, he's a different ilk, huh?
> AUSTIN. He's not gonna change. Let's leave the old man out of it.
> LEE. 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, huh? (27)

According to Michael Taav, Lee "views himself and his father as being, in essence, identical — and therefore equally susceptible to change—and is insulted that Austin would view them otherwise" (124). There are scenes in which Lee is satisfied with the way he performs his distinct masculinity and proves to be the man. For example, Lee desires to go into dog fighting as a masculine act. "God that little dog could bear down. Lota' money in dog fightin'. Big money" (28) or he used to catch snakes on the hills. Lee proves his masculinity via expressing these bold acts seen as true and proper on his part.

On the other hand, Austin is the one who is always at home, passive, preoccupied with house plants, toasters, keeping the sink clean and finally he is the one who is in charge of the house. Austin's grave problem with Lee is that he reminds him of his father or as Stephen Bottoms points out, Lee's presence "inevitably brings the buried past back to the surface" (194). Austin's comfort zone is demolished once Lee challenges him to steal a toaster or keeps telling him that he will not survive in the desert. In other words, Austin's masculinity triggers to the point of murder and violence, he begins to drink alcohol, break into people's houses, and choke Lee with the telephone wire. Austin's ambivalent behavior speaks of his

masculinity crisis originating from his hidden desires toward a unique masculine figure and reunion with Lee and his father.

Such ambivalence lies in the fact that whether he wants to stay in his state, undisturbed by Lee or he wishes to take off to the desert and reunite with his father. On and on, in *True West*, Lee and Austin's struggles to find identity and masculine stability roots in their family and heredity, triggering a major crisis that is represented by violence and other aggressive acts like crime and drinking alcohol.

Now that we have examined Lee and Austin's identity construction and have seen that there is a shift in their identities from the onset of the play until the end, it is about time we demonstrated the consequences of their masculine crisis and the ways they are presented in the play. For Tim Edwards, family is the most complex arena within which the crisis of masculinity resides. Accordingly, for Shepard, the family is the base of everything: "What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything…Even a love story has to do with family…everyone is born out of a mother and a father, and you go on to be a father. It's an endless cycle" (Adler 111). In *True West*, the family is fragmented and denigrated. The father lives in the desert, the mother takes off for Alaska, Austin who is married and has a family of his own now lives with his mother and finally Lee goes back to home after five years. That being said, the disintegration of the family creates a crisis for each member of the family.

Work, as "the most fundamental foundation of masculine crisis," is connected to the crisis without and created a chaos for the unemployed (Edwards 8). Unemployment itself creates two most important crises; poverty, and loneliness. The case with *True West* is that Austin and Lee struggle with their jobs and neither one sees the other profession as fit and socially revered:

> LEE: You probably think that I'm not fully able to comprehend somethin' like that, huh?
> AUSTIN: Like what?
> LEE: That stuff yer doin'. That art. You know. Whatever you call it.
> AUSTIN: It's just a little research.
> LEE: You may not know it but I did a little art myself once. (Shepard 4)

Here, Lee looks down on Austin and the kind of job he does. He takes art for nothing as if everyone is capable of doing it. Lee mocks Austin at the beginning of the play distracting Austin of his writing and keeps saying "I realize that yer line a' work demands a lota' concentration" (3).

The quality of each character's masculine performance depends directly on the success in their work. Austin's success as a scriptwriter rests on Saul's financial support and assistance. However, the deal Austin hopes to make with Saul is much too petty for Lee to be taken seriously. Austin struggles to make Lee understand what he is doing:

> AUSTIN: Look, it's going to be hard enough for me to face this character on my own without —
> LEE: You don't know this guy?
> AUSTIN: No I don't know — He's a producer. I mean I've been meeting with him for months but you never get to know a producer.
> LEE: Yer tryin' to hustle him? Is that it?
> AUSTIN: I'm not trying to hustle him! I'm trying to work out a deal! It's not easy.
> LEE: What kinda' deal?
> AUSTIN: Convince him it's a worthwhile story. (13)

Thus, when Lee barges in on him with a new idea, Austin's working career becomes exposed to danger and consequently, the crisis occurs "I can't believe this. I just can't believe it. Are you sure he said that? Why would he drop mine?" (Shepard 31).

On the other hand, Lee's immoral risky job as a thief denigrates his social status. He is already unemployed and lives a poor nasty life. At first, Lee unknowingly struggles with his crisis, however, as the actions proceed, he becomes more aware of his status and crisis. The consequences of Lee's crisis manifests itself in his drinking problems, committing crime, and the act of violence. The same is correct with regard to Austin's fall into crisis.

The issue of crime can be observed as a social reaction toward individual's masculine crisis. Committing crimes are profoundly linked to the male sex. As Edwards points out, crime "is strongly related to rising unemployment…which finds expression and outlet through aggression and violence" (11). At first, Lee is the only one who has committed a crime i.e. breaking into other houses. Lee sees stealing as a totally masculine act and he is immensely proud of it. He goes as far as challenging Austin into stealing a toaster. When Austin steals a bunch of toasters, Lee remarks "I never challenged you! That's no challenge. Anybody can steal a toaster" (45). Lee commits crime without labeling or even seeing himself as a criminal. He takes pride in his masculine acts not realizing he is in deep crisis. In other words, he perceives his masculinity as quite normal.

Violence is another crisis or ground for Austin and Lee to perform their masculinities. Hearn proposes that violence is a "resource for demonstrating and showing a person is a man" (The violence of men 37). Lee's attitude toward killing or violence is generally a negative one. When Lee becomes afraid of the possibility that Austin would kick him out, he states his opinion about American family thus:

> AUSTIN: You're my brother.
> LEE: That don't mean a thing. You go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. What do you think they'd say?
> AUSTIN: Who said anything about killing?
> LEE: Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in-law. Cousins. Real American-type people. They kill each other in the heat mostly. In the Smog-Alerts. In the Brush Fire Season. Right about this time a' year. (25)

Here, Lee's definition of the American people as killers is oddly interesting. His acts show both his detestation and admiration for family violence. Lee speaks ill of his brother and sees his intention as evil. In the meantime, he provides the ground for Austin's act of violence at the end of the play. Austin strives to strangle Lee since Lee decides not to bring Austin along to the dessert: "AUSTIN: (*tightening cord*) You're not goin' anywhere! You're not takin' anything with you. You're not takin' my car! You're not takin' the dishes! You're not takin' anything! You're stayin' right here!" (61). Austin's violent act upon Lee is an outlet for performing Austin's masculinity.

Another scene of violence in the play is when Lee has enough of fiddling with the typewriter and starts to smash it with the golf club. The typewriter can be a symbol of social status and institution. It is a means of achieving success and securing one's future, however, since Lee is unable to get around the typewriter, he ruins it violently.

The violence portrayed in the play on the parts of Austin and Lee is a means of showing their masculinities and a source of venting their crisis. As Kerry Carrington and John Scott demonstrate, masculinity is highly fluid and variable and one of the strategies employed to articulate masculinity is violence (660-1). In other words, masculinity is a combination of biological, social and cultural make-up.

Another issue which is quite prevalent throughout *True West* is drinking alcohol. It is another consequence of the crisis of masculinity in the case of Austin and Lee. As a model for his sons to follow, the alcoholic father is the main reason

behind the destruction of the family. As both a masculine act and distraction, alcohol is a nesting ground, a safe haven as well as an escape strategy in the face of crisis. Both Lee and Austin take turn drinking alcohol throughout the play. Lee, who never seems to eat, gulps down beer throughout the play, strongly reinforcing the impression of a primitive, uncivilized tramp. Despite being an aftermath of their masculine crisis, alcohol is also used as a catalyst bringing the brothers together and joining them with their drunk father:

> LEE. You sound just like the old man now.
> AUSTIN. Yeah, well we all sound alike when we're sloshed. We just sorta' echo each other. (39)

Here, Austin's shift of his character is vividly presented as a result of drinking alcohol. Alex Vernon recapitulates Lee and Austin's situations in this manner "The brothers' constant dispute over "true-to-life" versus "contrived" stories, and original versus cliché dialogue, is underscored by their own identity struggles and by their cliché speech" (136).

As it is illustrated, the crisis of masculinity occurs in the forms of violence and crime unless one performs it according to accepted social norms. While in crisis, men unconsciously accept who they are and believe their behavior to be the true kind of masculinity in which one can perform and follow. However, when one feels in danger either socially or physically, they grow a sense of frustration and loneliness in themselves. The same is true about Austin and Lee. For them, frustration is regarded as a search for masculinity in society.

Conclusion

As a social and cultural construct, masculinity plays an important role in the way men confront the problems of life. To make a division, the crisis with masculinity either happens within such institutions as family, education, and work or from men's experience of being a man. In this paper, we concluded that the construction of identity has a relationship with the crisis it brings about. It also represented that the lack of unity in the family and its fragmentation is the main reason behind the brother's masculinity crisis. Austin's job as a scriptwriter is threatened when Lee meddles in his affairs with a new story and Saul naively falls for it. Therefore, Austin falls into crisis, commits crimes, begins drinking alcohol and finally struggles to kill his brother, Lee. Austin's shift of character and disposition from the beginning of the play toward the end indicates his crisis of masculinity and identity

as well as his instability and fluctuation. On the other hand, Lee, as a man who has performed his masculinity and positioned himself as a man, is already faced with a crisis. He is already drunk and prone to committing crime and violence. Lee is attached to his root since it can define his identity. He is a representative of his father while Austin is inclined toward his mother and feminine attributes. Moreover, the absence of the father wreaks psychological devastation on the Austin and Lee and casts a shadow on their lives.

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