True West Study Guide

True West by Sam Shepard

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Introduction

Sam Shepard's very successful playwrighting career began in the mid-1960s when his often bizarre and anti-realistic plays were produced in experimental off- off-Broadway theatres such as La Mama and Theatre Genesis at St. Mark's Church m-the-Bowery. The launching of Shepard's playwrighting career is generally attributed to a 1967 review by Michael Smith in the *Village Voice.* Smith's enthusiastic appraisal of the first two of Shepard's early plays—*Cowboys* and *The Rock Garden* (both 1964)—brought the playwright to the attention of mainstream critics and audiences. By 1976, Shepard had more than thirty of these mostly one-act plays to his credit and had become an established cult figure.

With *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) and *Buried Child* (1978), Shepard began producing what are now considered his major plays, works defined by a clear focus on such topics as dysfunctional families and social fringe dwellers These plays, in contrast to his earlier work, also display a more conventional approach to plot and character. His popularity broadened and by the time *True West* appeared in 1980, many critics felt that Shepard was at the forefront of new American playwrights and, along with other dramatists such as David Mamet, Marsha Norman, and Beth Henley, was defining a new decade of theatre.

While *True West* represents a continued movement in Shepard's drama toward realistic charactenzation, plot, setting, and dialogue, the play also has touchstones in his experimental days, retaining a number of unusual, fantastical elements—such as the grotesque violence and the startling transformations of its two main characters. Some commentators refer to these later plays as examples of "magical realism" (a literary genre denned by the works of such writers as Jorge Luis Borges and Federico Garcia Lorca) because they begin with realistic characters and situations but gradually acquire more bizarre qualities until they finally seem to fuse realism and fantasy. In many circles *True West* was hailed as a breakthrough for Shepard, a work in which experimental drama was successfully melded with the more conventional elements of modern theatre. Though *True West* is one of Shepard's most accessible dramas, it retains the unmistakable signature of his earlier adventurous work.

Author Biography

Sam Shepard was born Samuel Shepard Rogers, Jr., in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, on November 5, 1943. Because his father was in the military, Shepard's family moved frequently during his childhood (including one move to the South Pacific island of Guam) before settling in Southern California. As he related in an interview in *Theatre Quarterly,* Shepard's adult perception of his early life, especially "that particular sort of temporary society that you find in Southern California," has led in many of his plays to investigations of the feeling "that you don't belong to any particular culture." This sense of rootlessness has led Shepard to explore (and often fuse) two facets of the American experience: the mythical West and the American family.

Noted for his bleak portrayal of American family life, Shepard's own upbringing was complicated by a very strict alcoholic father. Shepard left home while still a teenager, eventually arriving in New York City in 1963, a period in which the burgeoning and experimental off- off-Broadway theatre movement was experiencing a jolt of energetic creativity. Shepard had gone to New York to pursue a career as a rock musician and perhaps try his hand at acting; he knew very little about theatre. But living in the artistically-charged atmosphere of the Lower East Side, Shepard was soon writing plays that were produced and received enthusiastically by the small, non-commercial off- off-Broadway theatre houses.

Too unconventional in his early plays and still a commercial risk with his off-beat later plays, Shepard is the most successful and respected American playwright never to have had a play premiere on Broadway. (Though a 1996 revival of *Buried Child* [1978] was directed by noted actor and experimental impresario Gary Sinise, a founder and the creative director of the influential Steppenwolf theatre company in Chicago, and enjoyed moderate success on Broadway.) Shepard's plays continue to be popular off-Broadway and in regional, educational, and experimental theatres around the country, and he has won numerous awards and honors for his work. *Buried Child* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1979, and he has received eleven Obie Awards as well as a New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *ALie of the Mind (19B5).*

In 1974, after returning to America from a three-year stay in England, Shepard launched another successful career as a movie actor and has appeared in many films. Among his better-known performances are roles in director Terence MaUick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) and Phillip Kaufman's *The Right Stuff* (1983), a film that gained him an Academy Award nomination for his portrayal of test pilot Chuck Yeager. He has also appeared in such popular films as *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Thunderheart* (1992), and *The Pelican Brief* (1993), among others. He is also a successful screenwriter and film director, having adapted and/or directed many of his own works, including *Fool for Love* (1983) and *Silent Tongue* (1994).

Following the popularity *True West* in 1980 he again found success with *Fool for Love* and mixed successes with *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), *States of Shock* (1991), and

Simpatico (1994). In the 1990s Shepard expanded his writing focus to include prose with the 1996 collection *Cruising Paradise: Tales.*

In Shepard's personal life, he married actress O-Lan Johnson Dark on November 9,1969. Before their divorce, that union yielded a child, Jesse Mojo. During his acting work on the film *Frances* in 1982, Shepard became involved with his costar Jessica Lange. Though never married, the couple have maintained a longstanding personal and working relationship. They have two children, Hannah Jane and Samuel Walker.

Plot Summary

Scene 1

True West takes place in a kitchen and in the adjoining breakfast alcove area of a well-kept Southern California suburban home about forty miles east of Los Angeles. The alcove is filled with house plants, mostly Boston fems hanging in planters. In the first scene, it is night and crickets are chirping outside while Austin, a neatly dressed man in his early thirties, is seated at the glass breakfast table in the alcove writing in a notebook. He is working by candlelight while moonlight streams through the alcove windows. His older brother. Lee—dressed in a filthy, white T-shirt, tattered overcoat, and baggy pants—reclines against the kitchen sink, mildly drunk, a beer in his hand.

Austin and Lee are together for the first time in five years, and it is clear that Lee is jealous because his mother chose Austin to take care of ihe house while she vacationed in Alaska, He is also intimidated by Austin's status and refinement. Lee's conversation, with its subdued hostility, bothers Austin, who is trying to write, but Austin remains polite. Lee has just returned from the Mojave Desert, where he visited with their father. When Austin asks how long Lee plans to stay, the older brother reveals that he intends to burglarize the houses in the neighborhood. He requests the use of Austin's car, and when Austin objects and seems too condescending, Lee grabs and shakes him violently, demonstrating his superior physical strength.

Scene 2

On the morning of the next day, Austin is misting hts mother's plants and Lee is sitting at the alcove table drinking beer. He reports that he went out the night before on foot and scouted houses to burgle. Austin informs Lee that the movie producer he is writing for is coming to visit and Lee agrees to leave for a few hours if he can take Austin's car.

Scene 3

It is afternoon and Austin is meeting with Sau! Kimmer. Hollywood movie producer, who loves the "great story" that Austin has described for him and only needs a synopsis to convince studio executives to bankroll Austin's screenplay. Lee returns prematurely, carrying a stolen television set. After introductions Lee ingratiates himself with Kimmer and persuades the producer to go golfing with him the next morning. As Austin maneuvers Saul out the door. Lee tells Kimmer he has an idea for a contemporary Western movie: the producer suggests having Austin write an outline for consideration.

Scene 4

It is night, coyotes bark in the distance, and Lee is dictating his story to Austin, who is reluctantly typing an outline. Austin finds Lee's story preposterous, "not enough like real life," but Lee is desperate to finish and subtly threatens Austin if he doesn't help. Lee has begun to have visions of a steady income and a life filled with middle-class amenities and says to Austin, "I always wondered what'd be like to be you," Austin responds by saying he used to envy the excitement of Lee's life: "you were always on some adventure."

Scene 5

The next morning. Lee is at the table with a set of golf clubs discussing the early morning round of golf he has jusl finished with Saul Kimmer. He claims that Saul liked the outline so much he gave Lee a set of clubs as an advance, Austin takes a bottle of his mother's champagne to celebrate and then learns that he is to write the script of Lee's outline rather than work on his own script. Austin is angry and calls Lee's story the "dumbest" he has ever heard in his life. At the height of their argument, Lee threatens Austin with a golf club.

Scene 6

That afternoon, Kimmer joins them and admits that he prefers Lee's story to Austin's, adding that he likes Lee's plan to use some of the money from the sale of the script to set up a trust fund for the brother's father. Austin refuses to write the script, even though Saul says the deal is worth three hundred thousand dollars for the first draft alone. The producer claims that Lee has "raw talent, "that his story about the "real West" has "the ring of truth." Austin shouts that "there's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue!"

Scene 7

It is night again, and throughout this and the following scene, the dog-like yapping of coyotes intensifies into a frenzy as their pack grows in numbers, perhaps luring and killing pets from suburban yards. Lee is at the typewriter, struggling to type with one finger while Austin sits on the kitchen floor, drunk and singing. Lee complains that he needs quiet to concentrate, and Austin suggests that maybe he will try his hand at burglary now that Lee has taken up screenwriting. Lee scoffs at this, saying Austin couldn't steal a toaster. Meanwhile Lee is angnly getting tangled up in the typewriter ribbon but calms down to beg Austin to help him get his story down on paper. Austin interrupts to tell Lee the "true to life" story about how their father lost his false teeth.

Scene 8

Just before sunrise the next morning, Austin has reappeared with numerous toasters stolen from neighborhood houses and Lee has methodically smashed the typewriter with a golf club and is burning pages of the script Both men are now drunk and the house is a shambles. All of the house plants are dead and drooping from lack of water. Austin starts making toast and Lee tries to phone a woman he knows in Bakersfield, California Austin tells Lee he wants to come with him to live in the desert. Lee agrees to take him if Austin will write what he dictates of his story.

Scene 9

At mid-day, in blazing heat, the house is covered with debris—bottles, toasters, the smashed typewriter, a ripped out telephone, etc. It is like a desert junk yard at high noon in intense yellow light. Austin is scribbling in a notebook while Lee, shirtless and beer in hand, is slowly walking around the room, picking his way through the objects on the floor. When Austin reads back what Lee has dictated, it sounds cliched and "stupid" to Lee and he denies dictating it.

Their mother enters, having returned early from her vacation to Alaska. She is taken aback by the mess in the house, especially her dead plants, but she seems more interested in telling her sons that the famous artist, Pablo Picasso, is in town to visit the museum. Austin informs her that Picasso is dead and that he and Lee are leaving for the desert. But Lee insists that he's going alone, that he's giving up on the screenplay, and that he needs to borrow his mother's china, something "authentic," to take with him to the desert

Austin attempts to stop Lee from leaving by strangling him with a piece of phone cord. His mother, meanwhile, calmly insists that Austin should not kill his brother and exits, saying she's going to check into a motel, that she doesn't recognize her house any more. When Austin releases the tension on the cord around Lee's neck it appears that Lee is dead, but after a few moments Lee leaps to his feet and the two brothers square off as a single coyote is heard in the distance and moonlight falls across the room.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Mom has gone to Alaska, leaving her son, Austin, to watch her house and keep her plants watered. Austin is seated at a table with a cup of coffee, a cigarette, and a typewriter, scribbling in a notebook. In his early 30s, he is neatly dressed in stark contrast to his older brother, Lee, who appears to be homeless. Lee is drinking a beer and fishing for information on how long their mother will be gone, interrupting Austin with questions that indicate he feels a bit inferior. Austin is patient while Lee tries to shore up his own self esteem by bragging about his survival skills in the desert, where he lives for months at a time. The conversation only gets intense when the subject of their father comes up. Lee sarcastically asks Austin if he wants a medal for going to see their father, and that their father told him all about his visit. When Austin tries to talk to Lee about their father, Lee cuts him off.

Now, it is Austin's turn to question Lee. Austin learns that Lee plans to rob houses in the neighborhood, and suggests he choose another locale. When Lee refuses, Austin offers him money. This angers Lee, who collars his brother and says he can do that to their father, but not to him, that he is capable of taking care of himself. While they listen to the crickets outside, Lee is reminded of a woman botanist who could tell the temperature by the number of pulses the crickets made. Lee says he met her in the desert, when he was making big money with a fighting dog. Austin suggests Lee move in with him and his family, but Lee says that type of life is not for him. Austin asks if he wants to sleep, but Lee says he does not sleep.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The play opens with the introduction of two brothers who have clearly chosen different paths in life. It is a sibling rivalry worthy of Cain and Abel. The older brother is a troubled, irresponsible man frustrated that he cannot live up to his younger brother's success. Lee has chosen, instead, to follow in their wayward, drunken father's footsteps, living hand to mouth in the desert by disreputable means. The event that brings the brothers together is Mom's vacation. While Austin has been invited and has left his family to care for Mom's place, Lee has shown up unannounced. As the play progresses, readers are left to wonder if Mom brought Austin in just to protect her place in case Lee should turn up. It is not clear how much communication the family has with this prodigal son, but when he finds Austin in charge of Mom's place, it rekindles his feelings of jealousy and inadequacy.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

The following morning, while Austin waters the plants, Lee marvels at the number of locks Mom has on all of her windows and doors and wonders what she has that warrants such protection. Austin suggests antiques or simply things that hold sentimental value for her. Lee brings up his housebreaking skills again and, comparing himself to his brother, muses that Austin never had more on the ball than he did, but they turned out so differently. Austin offers him breakfast, which Lee rejects. Austin asks Lee where he went during the night. Lee says the coyotes were keeping him awake, so he went out to the Mojave. It reminded him of when they played there as boys. Lee caught snakes, while Austin pretended to be characters in the Westerns. Austin persists, asking Lee if he was casing houses in the area. Lee launches into a romantic description of a warm, rich home and the beautiful people in it, ending with a wish that he had grown up in a place like that. Austin is surprised, telling Lee he has always said he hated all things domestic. Lee tells Austin that he does not know him well.

Lee then tells Austin a story about passing through the desert on the way to see their father. Lee wound up staying for three months; he had some visitors; he had a dog. Austin asks if he missed people, saying he sure would, but Lee says no. Then Austin asks if he can be alone in the house that afternoon to meet with a producer. Lee takes advantage of the opportunity to try to borrow Austin's car, but Austin refuses. Lee then accuses Austin of wanting him out of the house for fear he will embarrass Austin. Austin pleads with Lee, telling him he needs to convince the producer that his story is worth funding. Lee offers to convince the producer for him, but Austin quickly tells him "that's not the way things are done out here." Lee pretends to be wounded by the remark. Reluctantly, Austin tells Lee he can use the car if he will bring it back by 6. Lee reminds Austin that when he owned a car, he loaned it to him. Austin tells Lee he wishes he did not have to work and could just spend time with him.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Lee has cased his own mother's house and determined that she is extremely security conscious. When he and Austin conclude that she has little of value to protect, one can only surmise that the locks may be there to keep Lee out. No doubt she knows that he steals for a living. Even Austin, who has less contact with Lee, treats his brother's profession quite casually. Lee has also been checking out other houses and waxes romantic about one in which he wishes he had grown up. Perhaps he thinks, like we all have at some time that if he had grown up differently, his life today might be better. Unfortunately, he has to compare himself to a brother who grew up in the same environment and yet, is as successful as he is not.

Lee recalls that even when they were children, there was every indication that he would be the dangerous thrill-seeker (he caught snakes in the desert), while Austin would make his living with his imagination (he pretended to be movie characters). Austin learns that Lee's last stay in the desert was for three months. Although Lee does not say exactly where, it might have been with a woman he met or in a house he broke into. Austin admits that he needs people around him, while Lee professes his need to be alone. They have chosen roles as opposite from one another as possible, probably to succeed in different worlds, rather than compete against one another.

Conflict surfaces again when Austin asks Lee to leave for a few hours so that he can meet privately with a producer at the house. When Lee queries him about the script he is pitching, Austin puts him off. Lee, seeing an opportunity, manipulates Austin into loaning him his car. Lee accuses Austin of being embarrassed of him, threatens to rough up the producer if he does not see things Austin's way, and then promises to return the car with a full tank of gas. This is a hustler employing the tricks of his trade. Even after Austin has given in, Lee reminds him that when he owned a car, he loaned it to Austin.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

Producer Saul Kimmer and Austin are wrapping up a successful meeting when Lee walks in carrying a stolen television. Austin makes the introductions. Lee apologizes for interrupting, but then inserts himself into the conversation. Lee is now hustling Saul, mispronouncing his name, badgering him about playing a round of golf, and finally extracting a promise from him to read an idea he has for a script. Lee assures Saul that Austin will put it down on paper for him. Austin is finally able to help Saul escape. Austin then asks his brother for the keys to his car, but Lee just smiles.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

When Lee walks into Austin's meeting with Saul, it is not by design. It is after six, the time Austin asked him to be back with the car. However, Lee is a thief, an opportunist by trade. Lee seizes the opportunity to prove himself to his brother by competing with him on his own turf. Lee drones on interminably - like he did in his successful attempt to borrow Austin's car - until Saul agrees to whatever he asks, just to end the conversation. Then, the scene ends with Austin asking Lee for his keys, a symbol of control. Lee keeps them. Lee is, literally and figuratively, in the driver's seat now.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

Austin and Lee are working on Lee's outline. Austin is impatient to finish and is prompting Lee to continue, but Lee will not be rushed. Austin is trying to make him understand some finer points of the screenwriting craft, such as the difference between an outline and an entire script. Lee wants to be sure his entire story is fleshed out. Lee attempts to motivate Austin by mentioning that he might be moving on soon. When the script becomes more and more contrived, Austin is incredulous and sarcastic. Austin and Lee argue about whether the story is true or too fantastic to be believed.

In the ensuing discourse, Austin tells Lee he is doing him a favor by writing the script. Lee is incensed and doubts that Austin has any intention of showing the script to Saul. Austin says he can do it himself, that he is cooperating only to get his keys back. Lee gives them to him, then asks if Austin is going to kick him out or call the police. Austin says no, and as a reason, adds that they are brothers. Lee claims that does not mean anything, since most people who kill each other are related. Austin assures Lee that they are not insane and will not be driven to acts of violence. Lee is not too sure and sits down slowly, and then he begins to talk about giving up on the script and dismantling diesels to sell for parts, a job that could make him as much as $10,000 a week. Lee then says he does not want to take Austin away from his own work.

Austin encourages Lee to continue, tells him the script could turn his life around, and that he could buy a ranch. Lee suggests helping their father, but Austin responds that the old man needs more than money to get his life in order. This frustrates Lee, who belittles Austin's easy life. So, Austin sits back and tells Lee it is his decision whether to continue or not. Lee mentions the big money he could make from dog fighting, and then says he will see it through, and that he has always wondered what it would be like to be Austin, away at school with books and blondes. Austin says he has always thought Lee had the right idea, going from one adventure to the next.

When Austin begins to type again, Lee asks for the keys. Austin slides them across the table. Lee asks if he could really afford a ranch. Lee then continues his story about two men chasing each other, each one thinking he was the only one who was afraid. The one chasing does not know where the other one is taking him, and the one who is being chased does not know where he is going.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

While the brothers collaborate on Lee's script, each tries to take the lead. Austin, who is not fully on board with the project, is trying to rush through the outline. When Lee challenges him, Austin tries to convince him that he is doing what is necessary at this stage in the process. Lee is in over his head and begins to have doubts, exacerbated by

Austin's criticism. Lee becomes increasingly defensive and begins his usual manipulation. Lee uses guilt, threatens, and challenges Austin. Lee needs his brother's help and goads him into revealing his level of commitment by returning his car keys to see if that is really all he is after. Even after Austin remains poised at the typewriter, Lee brings up a last deterrent - physical violence or even murder. Austin does not take him seriously, but Lee appears to consider it.

Austin turns Lee's thoughts toward what a successful script could mean in terms of money and lifestyle. While the idea of owning a ranch appeals to Lee, he is frustrated when Austin tells him he cannot help their father. Lee, who strongly identifies with their father, hears this as a condemnation of his own life and a condition of Austin's acceptance of him. Lee defends himself by attacking Austin's easy life. In words that will come to have meaning for Lee, Austin tells him the work is harder than he thinks.

Austin then takes another tack. Austin stops pushing Lee and puts the ball in his court, telling him it is his decision. Lee takes one more flight of fancy, reveling in the memory of how much money he made dog fighting, before he decides that this is his opportunity to experience his brother's life. Lee is pleased when Austin reciprocates by telling him he has always admired his adventurous wanderings. Lee asks for Austin's car keys. Again, a very symbolic gesture of the power struggle between the two of them, and Austin passes the keys to Lee.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

The following morning, Austin is washing dishes, and Lee is sitting at the table with an expensive bag of golf clubs. Austin is trying to get Lee's story straight. He has apparently told several versions of what transpired during his golf game with Saul. Were the golf clubs a loan, a gift, or an advance on the script? When Austin asks Lee exactly what his advance will be, Lee hedges and retells the story of how he closed the deal on the ninth hole. Austin reminds him that the deal is not final until there is a contract, but Lee assures his brother that Saul will not back out, because he won his chance on a bet.

Austin proposes they celebrate with champagne. Lee then delivers a crucial part of the deal he has made, that Austin will be writing his screenplay, instead of the one on which Austin was working. Austin is furious and leaves to call Saul, but Lee tells him he will not be in until later than afternoon. Austin then disbelieves that Saul would drop his project without talking to him first, so he pumps Lee for more information. In his incredulity, he tells Lee that his story is the dumbest he has heard in years, and then decides Lee must have beaten Saul to cinch his deal. Lee, angered that his brother does not believe he measures up, lunges at him, brandishing a nine iron. Lee then backs down and asserts, simply, that Saul liked his script. Lee appeals to his brother for help, saying that he might leave town at any time, unnoticed, while Austin cannot and that he is stuck. Lee again tries to get Austin to tell him about his script, but Austin clams up. Lee taunts him, saying he is afraid, now, that the competition is a little too close to home. Lee continues to say that Saul is out at that very moment shopping his script around. Suddenly, Austin lays claim to the script, saying they have no right to peddle his work. Austin is angry and wants to be alone, take a drive, but Lee refuses to return his keys.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

Lee is on Austin's turf. Saul's expensive clubs are a powerful symbol of that turf. Austin tries to be happy for his brother and to celebrate his legitimate success, but as Lee's story changes, Austin becomes increasingly agitated and suspicious. Austin is someone who plays by the rules. The idea that Lee's script might be produced instead of his, because his brother sank a putt during a game of golf, flies in the face of everything in which he believes. Austin realizes Lee has done what he does best; hustled Saul in some way. However, he is frustrated in his attempts to have Lee tell the same story twice, and he is insulted by this turn of events; it threatens his image of himself. Lee's script could be a success, while his could fail. Lee is obviously pleased at besting his brother. Austin, finding himself on shifting sand, at first denies the script, and then claims it.

When Lee has had enough of Austin's insults, he threatens him with a golf club, but stops short of hitting him. Conversely, when Austin is pushed to the edge by Lee, he looks for an escape. In the scene's climatic conclusion, the brothers' rivalry resurfaces with a vengeance, because they find their roles suddenly reversed. Lee is succeeding, while Austin is failing. Austin reacts by claiming the script as his work, and then wanting to be alone when the tension becomes too much to bear - a trait seen only in Lee, until now. Lee refuses to hand over the keys and refers to Austin as boy, further emphasizing his new-found superiority.

Act 2, Scene 6

Act 2, Scene 6 Summary

Lee and Saul are in the kitchen; Austin is in the alcove. Lee prompts Saul to tell Austin how he feels about Lee's story. Saul tries, but Austin is too angry and defensive. Saul wants Austin on board and reassures him that both scripts are still a go. When Austin refuses to work on Lee's script, but demands a percentage for his work on Lee's, Saul says he will drop Austin's script altogether. Austin lashes out at Saul, accusing him of being as big a hustler as Lee. Saul tries to appeal to Austin by telling him money from the project will be set aside in a trust for their father, managed by Lee. Austin says he has already given their father money, which he drank. Austin then pleads with Saul, telling him everything is riding on his script. Saul says the love story he has written does not have the ring of truth to it like Lee's. This angers Austin, who tells Saul that Lee has been in the desert for months, whereas he has been living here and knows what their audience wants. In a last-ditch effort to salvage some of his pride, Austin tells Saul he is a fool, all dried up. Saul tells him he has always followed his instincts, and he has never been wrong. This time, it is Saul who asks to meet with Lee. Lee gets Saul's name right for the first time.

Act 2, Scene 6 Analysis

Austin is feeling completely displaced. His strong moral code and his pride leave him unwilling to listen to Saul or to work with Lee. Interestingly, Austin employs some of the same manipulative devices that Lee has used. Austin tries to shame Saul, calling him a hustler. Saul does not react to the insult at all. Saul is the one person in the room sure of who he is.

Lee continues to antagonize Austin with his superior position in father-figure Saul's eyes, telling him that he did not have to offer this "bone" to him; he had to persuade Saul that Austin was right for the job. To further emphasize the role reversal, Lee plans to care for their father, something Austin has tried - and failed - to do. Saul also reveals that Austin has never been offered as much for a script of his own. When the insults, money, and shame fail to get Saul what he wants, he cuts Austin's legs out from under him by saying he will not produce Austin's script. Now, in addition to his pride, Austin may lose his career. Like a cornered animal, Austin lashes out, attacking Lee's work and life experiences that he feels are inferior to his own. Austin insults Saul. Finally, he witnesses Saul asking Lee to lunch, and Lee, in turn, demonstrating a measure of respect by finally getting Saul's name right. Lee has somebody who believes in him, and it has made him somebody.

Act 2, Scene 7

Act 2, Scene 7 Summary

Austin is drunk and singing, which is distracting Lee, who is seated at the table trying to write his script, painfully pecking away at the keys, one finger at a time. Austin continues to interrupt with a drunken dialogue about how Saul thinks Austin and Lee are the same person. Lee suggests he ease off the booze or leave the house, but Austin tells Lee he is enjoying his company for the first time. Austin attempts to remind Lee of their places in life - his as a scriptwriter and Lee is a common criminal. Lee reminds Austin that he is the one now making a living as a writer. Austin then tells Lee he could succeed at Lee's profession as well. Austin attempts to get Lee to wager that he cannot break into someone's house and steal a toaster. Austin tries to get up and make good on his threat to burglar, but is too drunk. Ironically, as the role reversal is complete, he utters the words Lee first said to him: "Don't worry about me. I'm not the one to worry about." Austin continues to assume his new, bad boy role, by declaring that he is going to commit crimes beyond imagination.

Lee does not seem to recognize himself in this dialogue, but tells Austin that he sounds like their father. Austin replies that they all just echo each other when they are drunk. Lee appeals to Austin to help him with the script and with bringing their father to live near them. Austin says he has had it with their father. Lee tries again, promising Austin money, and that he will disappear after the script is completed. It reminds Austin of their father and his last visit. Austin gives his account to Lee of how their father had lost all of his real teeth, and then lost his dentures while bar hopping with Austin one night.

Act 2, Scene 7 Analysis

The brothers have truly traded places. Lee is banging away at the typewriter, while a drunken Austin distracts him with idle conversation. Austin makes several attempts to gain the upper hand by reminding Lee that he knows little about script writing. When that fails to cower Lee, Austin threatens to become proficient at Lee's profession. In an echo of Austin's lack of support, Lee tells him he does not have what it takes. Just like Austin once angered Lee by dismissing his story, Austin now tells Lee he is not the one to worry about. Austin still wants Lee to need him and baits Lee to ask him again and again, but rejects his pleas. The power struggle continues while Lee, once again, brings up caring for their father. Austin dismisses the idea, because if he could not help their father, Lee certainly is incapable.

Act 2, Scene 8

Act 2, Scene 8 Summary

Lee is whacking the typewriter with a golf club and dropping pages of his burning script into a bowl. Austin is polishing a long line of toasters on the kitchen counter. Both brothers are drunk, and Mom's plants are dead. Austin is pleased with his overnight foray into the criminal world, and is crowing about his success. Lee is not enjoying his new career, but takes time to belittle Austin's petty theft. Austin, in turn, chastises him for beating up a perfectly good typewriter and golf club, saying he should consider all the struggling writers and golfers who never had access to good equipment.

Lee shuns Austin's offer of toast for breakfast, saying it is a woman he needs. Apparently, he has someone in mind. Lee fumbles in his wallet for the number and tries in vain to get assistance from the operator in finding "Melanie Ferguson" in Bakersfield. Austin tells him he is better off and promised that he will take care of him. Lee says he does not need taking care of - at least not by his brother.

Austin begins to butter the toast popping up from all the toasters. This aggravates Lee, who tells Austin it was not such a big deal to steal toasters. In the argument that ensues, Austin says he likes beginnings, while Lee says he is partial to endings. Austin asks to go with Lee to the desert. Lee says he would not last a day. Austin reminds him that he also said Austin could not steal a toaster.

Lee does not understand Austin's interested in leaving his posh life for the harshness of the desert. Austin tells him there is nothing in the city for him; nothing is real. Lee tells him that he lives in the desert only because he cannot make it anywhere else. Austin provokes Lee by asking him, again, if he wants toast. Lee knocks the plate out of his hands and crushes the toast underfoot, and then he circles Austin on the floor while he is cleaning up the mess. They strike a deal. If Austin will write the script, Lee will take him to the desert.

Act 2, Scene 8 Analysis

This scene marks the height of hilarity, both in visuals and dialogue, while both brothers have resorted to heavy drinking and forgotten Mom's plants, which are all dead now, in their efforts to cope with their new lives. Surprisingly, it is Austin who has best made the transition from responsible citizen to petty thief, throwing off all vestiges of his former stuffy self. Lee is struggling within the confines of his new role and is looking for an escape. When he fails to reach a woman to take his mind off his struggle, he acknowledges his need to be cared for. Austin is feeling superior, because he, on the other hand, has succeeded at stealing. Although Lee does all he can to put down Austin's achievements, Austin rubs his nose in it be polishing the stolen toasters and offering Lee toast. Lee is violent again, knocking the plate from Austin's hands and

circling him like an animal who has found his prey. Lee cannot face the idea of failing. In his anger, he reveals deep-seated fears of inadequacy.

Act 2, Scene 9

Act 2, Scene 9 Summary

Lee has resumed dictating his story to Austin, but the brothers are bickering about the language. Mom returns to find her house a disaster. Austin explains the mess as a celebration of Lee's successful script, adding that, when they finish, the two of them are going to the desert. Mom asks about the toasters. Austin says only that they were part of a contest which Lee has won. When Mom notices the dead plants, Lee assumes his life-long role of screw-up and says he distracted Austin.

Mom then tells the brothers that Picasso is at the museum. Mom refuses to believe Austin when he tells her that Picasso is dead, and she insists the three of them go meet him. Austin reiterates that he is leaving for the desert with Lee. When Mom questions their plans, Lee begins to change his mind. Mom reminds Austin that he has a family and cannot go. Mom continues to come up with reasons and Lee agrees. Then Lee begins to back out of even finishing the script, saying it is too hot to work, suggesting they postpone the deal, even admitting that it was a dumb story, after all.

Lee then begins to help himself to Mom's fine china and silverware, items he promises to get back to her, but obviously plans to fence.

Austin gets angry and tells Lee he cannot just drop the whole thing. Mom tells them they cannot fight in the house. Lee says he will be as insane as Austin if he stays in town. In the play's climax, Austin attacks Lee, wrapping a phone cord around his neck. He tells Lee he's not taking the car or Mom's things, and that he is staying. Mom treats the fight as boys' roughhousing, and then asks Austin if he is killing Lee. In a tense exchange, Austin gets Mom to retrieve the keys Lee has thrown across the floor. Mom begs him to let go of Lee and tells him that killing his brother would be a savage thing to do. Austin assures her that he is capable of killing Lee and even going alone to the desert. Mom announces that she is checking into a motel. Austin promises he will get things cleaned up for her, but she leaves. Austin tries to make a deal with Lee for a head start. Lee appears to be dead, but just when Austin moves toward the door, he leaps up and blocks the exit.

Act 2, Scene 9 Analysis

The play concludes with a climatic confrontation. Any progress the brothers have made in healing old childhood hurts, reconciling themselves to their roles within the family, and understanding each other, begins to unravel the moment Mom comes home. Mom says little, but what she says indicates that she was very much a part of assigning the brothers their roles within the family, and that her expectations are the same as ever. Mom reminds Austin that he is the responsible one who should have sold a script and cannot leave his wife and family to go live in the desert. Mom is incredulous that Lee

has sold a story, easily believes it is his fault her plants have been killed, and tells him that his brother is not like Lee or his (no-good) father.

It sets the rivalry in motion again, perhaps for the last time. Lee resumes his role as screw-up and begins to make his escape by stealing his mother's things. Austin insists that they see the project through. When he fails to convince Lee, Austin is moved to the violence that Lee has only threatened. Austin chokes his brother to subdue him and considers killing him. Mom, who is completely out of touch with reality, has set up the altercation, but she calls Austin's intent savage and, at the crucial moment, leaves to get out of the way. Austin tries to bargain with Lee, but Lee tricks him. The play ends with the brothers squaring off for a fight that will probably end with the death of at least one of them.

Characters

Austin

At the beginning of the play, Austin is the apparently conventional brother dressed m a light blue sports shirt, a light tan cardigan sweater, clean blue jeans, and white tennis shoes. In Ms early thirties, he is neat and organized, clearly a responsible adult. He appears to be an accomplished writer and, in fitting with his accountable nature, has been chosen by his mother to take care of her house while she is on vacation in Alaska In the first half of the play he tries hard to be polite and understanding with his apparently less-refined older brother, Lee, and is dominated by Lee's violence and superior strength. In the second half of the play, however, Austin's behavior begins to reflect his brother's, becoming coarse and sloppy in his demeanor and appearance. By the end of the play, Austin is profoundly drunk, has stolen numerous toasters from the neighborhood, and is on the verge of strangling his brother to death. As evidenced by Lee's increasing seriousness and new dedication to writing— traits that Austin displayed at the play's outset—it is clear that the brothers have exchanged significant aspects of their personalities. Austin, for his part, reveals a desire to emulate his brother's wilder tendencies, to live a less-structured, more adventurous life.

Saul Kimmer

Saul Kimmer is a slick Hollywood movie producer in his late forties who comes to the house to discuss business with Austin but ends up playing golf with Lee and agreeing to back Lee's screenplay rather than Austin"s. He is cartoonishly dressed in a pink and white flower print sports coat with matching polyester slacks and black and white loafers. While a significant device in shifting the action of the play-—sparking pivotal changes in each brothers' behavior—the character of Kimmer is little more than a stereotype of a fast-lalking, soulless Hollywood executive. It is clear thai he cares little about the artistic merits of either brother's screenplay but is merely interested in which film will make him more money.

Lee

Lee is Austin's older brother and something of a social misfit. He is in his early forties and, at the beginning of the play, appears completely uncivilized. He is dressed in a filthy T-shirt, a pink suede belt, a tattered brown overcoat, and shoes with holes in the soles; he is a poster child for careless slobs. Lee has come to visit Austin following a reunion with the brothers' estranged father, who lives in the desert. Obviously lacking in financial security and social graces. Lee is jealous of his little brother's success and relinement. Initially, he swills beer, talks aggressively, plans burglaries in his mother's neighborhood, and bullies Austin. When Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer arrives. Lee butts in and deflects Kimmer's interest away from Austin's screenplay by proposing his

own idea for a film set in the "true West." While Lee appears close to a successful screenwriting deal, he becomes very anxious about success and the prospect of actually writing the script, With no writing—-let alone typing—skills, he needs Austin's help. Just as the older brother is seeing the benefits of emulating his brother's discipline, however, Austin has become too drunk to help him. As Austin has become infatuated with the idea of living Lee's wild and free life. Lee has glimpsed the possibilities that honest success offers.

Mom

The mother of Austin and Lee appears at the end of the play, returning from her vacation in Alaska to discover her house in shambles. In her early sixties, she is a small woman dressed in a conservative white skid and matching jacket with a red shoulder bag and two pieces of matching luggage. Her response to the disaster is eccentrically muted. She speaks softly, chastising her sons in a tone that makes her seem relatively unconcerned, even while Austin seems to be strangling Lee to death. Having read that a Picasso exhibit was coming to the museum in her home town, she thinks it means that Picasso himself will be there, unaware that Picasso has already died. While appearing a trifle odd, Mother's reaction to the carnage her sons have wrought indicates that she has grown accustomed to such behavior and no longer feels a need to respond to it. Her detached attitude toward her sons' irrational actions suggests that this incident is not unique in the brothers' relationship.

Themes

Change and Transformation

Central to a thematic analysis of *True West* is the exchange of personality traits between brothers Austin and Lee as their conflict over screenplays develops. In the beginning, they are polar opposites, as the clean-cut and conventional Austin confidently prepares his script for the Hollywood producer, Saul Kimmer, and the ill-kept and anti-social Lee announces his plans to burglarize the neighborhood. By the end of the play, however, Lee and his movie idea have won Kimmer's favor, and Lee is attempting to be industrious while Austin has assumed Lee's habits of heavy drinking and petty crime.

The catalyst for this transformation is the Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer and the opportunities he represents for each of the brothers. In the beginning, Austin seems to be relatively accomplished and confident as a writer, but Kimmer is offering Austin his "big break," his opportunity for fame and fortune within the framework of his conventional life. Austin seems to be a steady, middle-class family man. He has a wife and children "up north," an Ivy League education, and a determination to gain fame and fortune through hard work in the highly competitive entertainment industry. But when Kimmer rejects Austin's movie idea in favor of his crass brother's script proposal, Austin loses his sense of superiority. He is transformed as he loses the connection with his familiar concept of self. Confronted with the possibility that his intelligence, drive, and talent may not be enough to attain his dreams, Austin suffers an identity crisis. He is left a hollow shell (as he says in the play "there's nothing real down here, Lee! Least of all me!"). In this state of mind, Austin tries out Lee's identity to see how it suits him; he adopts an irresponsible attitude, steals toasters, and talks of ditching his conventional existence for an adventurous life of crime and travel.

For Lee, Kimmer represents more than a chance for fame and fortune; he represents an opportunity for parity with—or even genuine superiority over—Austin as well as legitimacy in the eyes of the conventional world. Initially, Lee approaches Kimmer as a con artist, just as he has approached so many other people in his life, but when Lee sees an opportunity for respectability, he is transformed into a comically desperate man struggling to gain what he has disdained most of his life: a comfortable, middle-class existence.

The simplest explanation for putting his characters through these reversals is that Shepard is demonstrating that things are often not as they seem. Reality is complex and slippery, maybe even hopelessly elusive, and the man who seems to be a steady middle-class provider for his family might not be quite as stable as he appears. Shepard is also suggesting that a violent, animal-like nature might He just below the surface of all human beings, waiting only sufficiently trying circumstances to crack the shell of a public persona and reveal the capacity for horror underneath.

Ultimately, Shepard is suggesting that what is attributed as personality, character, and a sense of identity might be little more than public role playing that, upon close inspection, does not come close to revealing the true nature of the person. This can be extrapolated to infer that a person engaged in this role playing may even convince themselves that their identity is what they have created. When confronted with the possibility that this role may not be their true self, the realization can often be traumatic —as it is for Austin.

In Lee's case, the persona he exhibits at the beginning of the play is most likely his true self. He has learned not to care what others think of his behavior and, as a result, has become free to act on any impulse that occurs to him. When his idea for a film receives serious consideration from Kimmer, however, Lee begins to understand the benefits that can be reaped from playing a role. As Austin did at the play's outset, he learns to control his baser instincts in the service of attaining respect and wealth.

Identity: the Search for Self

At the beginning of the play, Austin and Lee, like most human beings, take their identities for granted and would consider those identities stable and unchanging if they thought of them at all. Austin is a little more self-assured about himself, confidently feeling "in charge," even in the face of Lee's threatening behavior. But after Kimmer rejects his movie idea in Scene 6, Austin's sense of identity is shattered He repeats the personal pronoun ' T' as a way of trying to hold on to his old sense of himself—"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 m touch! Not him!"

But in the next scene, Austin is only in touch with the alcohol he consumes as his hazy mind gropes for a new sense of identity. Set adrift from his old persona, he tries Lee's on for size: "well, maybe I oughta' go out and try my hand at your trade. Since you're doing so good at mine." He also decides that he's going to live in the desert, like Lee, because he's now decided "there's nothin' down here for me. There never was.... I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar." Perhaps most significantly, he even begins to taunt Lee physically, testing the idea that he might be able to hold his own with Lee in terms of brute strength. This idea gets evaluated at the end of the play when he seems to have overcome and strangled Lee.

At the beginning of the play, Lee is much more defensive about his self-image. To some extent convinced that Austin's sophistication is enviable, Lee fakes sophistication of his own: "you got coffee?... Real coffee? From the bean?" Stung by his mother's preference for Austin as a house-sitter, Lee asserts his competence in domestic matters: "she might'vejust as easily asked me to take care of her place as you.... I mean I know how to water plants." However, it is as a natural man, as a desert survivor, that Lee most confidently defines his sense of self. But after Kimmer tempts Lee with the hope of becoming more conventional and sophisticated, Lee temporarily discards his desert-rat identity and tries to assume a new one: "I'm a screenwriter now! I'm legitimate." But

when this new identity fails, Lee shouts, "here I am again in a desperate situation! This would never happen out on the desert. I would never be in this kinda' situation out on the desert."

The resolution of these two identity crises comes at the very end of the play when Lee rises from the floor with the phone cord around his neck and it's clear that Austin has not defeated Lee physically. Lee is still the physically stronger of the two, as well as the more cunning. Lee has given up his attempt to adjust his sense of self and is going back to the desert, though he plans to bring with him "something authentic" so he can feel more "civilized." As for Austin, the future is less clear, but he will also probably carry with him a more complex sense of self than he had before.

In a 1980 interview with Robert Coe in the *New York Times Magazine,* Shepard said that in *True West* he "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 something we've got to live with."

Style

Realism

Shepard's story of two brothers contending for superiority as screenwriters begins in a realistic style, a style that Shepard rejected in the early phase of his playwrighting career. The realistic style as a conscious literary movement began in the 19th century as a reaction to romantic melodramas. These melodramas were an approach to story telling that offered outlandish situations, characters, and dialogue in the hopes of thrilling and entertaining an audience (and at the expense of presenting believable works of fiction). Mark Twain's essay, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses (1895)," is a classic example of the outraged response that realists had to this exaggerated form of storytelling.

As realism gained wider acceptance among readers and critics, however, it became evident that this form also had artistic limitations. Not the least of these limitations is presenting a reader or audience with characters and situations that bear little difference to those that they might encounter in their everyday life; the risk being that such commonplace material could easily be perceived as boring or dull. In addressing this pitfall, writers have embraced, among myriad other styles, the disciplines of both fantastic melodrama and hard realism. Many twentieth century authors have incorporated extravagant elements into their otherwise realistic writing to expand evocative possibilities and express what cannot be so easily suggested in a realistic framework. In *True West* Shepard has it both ways as he begins the play m a realistic style and gradually introduces bizarre elements to achieve a mythic dimension in his story.

Shepard's realism begins with a detailed description at the beginning of the play text of what the characters should wear and what the stage set should look like. Shepard's uncharacteristic attention to such detail includes specifications for costume colors and fabrics and for set detail as specific as "Boston ferns hanging in planters at different levels." Some of the specifications could be considered significant in themselves, like "the floor of the alcove is composed of green synthetic grass," but most of the realistic detail is designed to simply create a neutral backdrop for the evolution of character and situation on stage. In a prefatory "note on set and costume" Shepard specifies that "the set should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects, or colors" because "if a stylistic 'concept' is grafted onto the set design it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters' situation, which is the most important focus of the play."

In mis realistic setting, the characters speak casual dialogue filled with realistically elliptical speech like "you keepin' the plants watered?" and simple, monosyllabic answers like "yeah." Shepard specifies dialogue style with orthographic spellings of informal speech—"ya' got crickets anyway Tons a' crickets out there." As early as 1974, in an interview in *Theatre Quarterly* with Kenneth Chubb, Shepard announced 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.... it could be called realism, but not the kind of realism where husbands and wives squabble and that kind of stuff." By starting in a realistic style and gradually adding non-realistic elements, Shepard was able to satisfy his characteristic interest in mythic qualities but in a much subtler way than in his earlier plays.

The Grotesque

The grotesque refers to aspects of a story that are so exaggerated and strange that they call attention to themselves as unreal. By the end of *True West* Austin and Lee are less like the plausible characters who began the play and more like primal savages as they square off against one another in the final scene. The incongruous qualities that Shepard almost imperceptibly introduces into *True West* gradually modify the impression of the two brothers and their situation until Austin and Lee become more mythic and evocative than two squabbling brothers could realistically be.

The first hint of the grotesque is Lee's matter-of-fact announcement that he's going to burglarize the neighborhood. This, combined with his extremely slovenly appearance and his eccentric assertion, "I don't sleep," at the end of the first scene, suggest that he is almost supernatural. Increasing violence also accentuates the play's separation from the normal, from Lee's menacing of Austin with a golf club in the fifth scene to his methodical destruction of the typewriter, burning of the film script, trashing of the kitchen, and ripping of the telephone off the wall in Scene 8. Austin adds to the grotesquerie in the opening of Scene 7 when, completely drunk, he shocks the audience with his drastic transformation. Furthermore, his "real" story of his father's false teeth is so surreal that it adds significantly to the play's distorted atmosphere.

In this same scene, the sound of the coyotes begins to build beyond natural levels. At the beginning of the play, the sound of the crickets and coyotes is environmental noise and a realistic part of the play's western setting. However, as the brothers begin their transformations and their situations become increasing bizarre, the coyotes' howls become nearly oppressive, a clamorous expression of the turmoil each brother feels. The encroaching coyote howls also signal the transformation of the house from a normal suburban dwelling to a wilder, more primitive environment.

In visual terms this is represented by the outrageous mess that Austin and Lee make of their mother's home. By the last scene of the play, the debris has created a "sea of junk," in "intense yellow light," as if the house were "a desert junkyard at high noon." According to Shepard's textual directions, by the end of the play "the coolness of the preceding scenes is totally obliterated" and the set is no longer a domestic home. It is now a mythic battlefield. Quite unrealistically, the house plants that have only been without water for a day and a half are now all dead. Austin and Lee's peculiar mother doesn't recognize the home as hers and leaves to check into a motel. And finally, "the figures of the brothers now appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape." Austin

and Lee have become elemental forces in a mythic struggle and not merely brothers competing for screenwriting honors

Historical Context

The Persistence of Frontier Ideals in American Culture

The title of Shepard's play, *True West,* is significant in many ways but one clear reference is to the American frontier West as an ideal of masculine forcefulness and independence. Though cowboys and gunshngers have disappeared, the ideal of rough and ready men continues to persist in America. The characters of Austin and Lee are defined by their relation to the myth of the old West. Austin is a sophisticated city boy, an Ivy League egghead with little apparent aptitude for survival skills or physical force. Lee, on the other hand, is someone who can survive in the desert—who knows the land and can make things happen with his instinct and physical prowess He, for instance, knows the difference between urban and rural coyotes—"they don't yap like that on the desert. They howl. These are city coyotes here"—and his movie idea is for a true-to-life, contemporary Western. When Austin has his identity crisis, he wants to leave his wife and children and live on the desert to get in touch with a more elemental self, and when Lee rejects the temptations of civilization it is to the desert (which serves as the closest thing to the unsettled frontier of the old West) he will return.

All through 1980, the year that Shepard introduced his play, the U.S. was engaged in a hostage crisis in Tehran, the capital of Iran. Parts of that situation illustrate the persistence of masculine, frontier ideals in American culture. In November of 1979, anti-American demonstrators goaded by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeim had marched on the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, seized control, and taken sixty diplomats as hostages. Khomeini eventually threatened to put these hostages on trial and execute them as spies. They would not be freed until January of 1981, 444 days later. Throughout 1980, this unprecedented takeover of a U.S. Embassy brought howls of protest from the American public and contributed significantly to President Jimmy Carter's loss in the 1980 election. The American public demanded action, reprisals, or a rescue, and the government's inability to immediately answer this direct challenge to American sovereignty was perceived as an. insult to American honor.

Then, on the evening of April 24, 1980, a ninety-man commando group with eight helicopters and six transport planes took off from Egypt and the Arabian Sea to rendezvous in the Iranian desert in an attempt to rescue the hostages. But numerous problems culminated in the collision of one of the helicopters with a transport plane and eight men were killed and five others were injured. The ignominy of this failed mission was perhaps the greatest blow to American pride during the 1980 hostage crisis. Unlike their counterparts in Western folklore, the calvary (the U.S. government and its soldiers) had failed to arrive and rescue the settlers (the hostages) from the villains (the Iranian terrorists).

The U.S. Elects a President from Hollywood

Another important ingredient in *True West* is the apparent criticism of Hollywood values. By 1980 Shepard was a fairly successful actor and screenwriter. While his work in Hollywood contributed to his monetary success and allowed him the freedom to pursue his theatre art, many speculate that Shepard's experience in the movie industry also made him cynical about the business. In *True West* he is at least somewhat critical of what Hollywood represents.

While the character of Kimmer can be perceived as neither good nor evil, the description of his garish clothes and his dialogue make him sound quite showy and suggest a lack of genuine taste. And his world is obviously a world of shallow commerce rather than of art When Lee asks Kimmer "whatkmda' stuff do ya' goinfor?," Kimmer says, "oh, the usual. You know. Good love interest. Lots of action." Austin eventually calls Kimmer a "hustler" and theirs is an unashamed language of business as they refer to "projects," "seed money," and "commercial potential." And perhaps most importantly, the accountability entailed in their "deals" is as ludicrous as Kimmer's clothes. They sell movies on a mere synopsis or outline of the plot and demand $300,000 up front for a simple first draft. As Kimmer says so succinctly through Lee, "in this business we make movies, American movies Leave the films to the French."

In the 1980 Presidential election, America's tolerance for Hollywood values, shallow or otherwise, was demonstrated in its election of Ronald Reagan as the country's fortieth president Before entering politics, the sixty-nine-year-old conservative, who also served two terms as the Governor of California, had a long and successful career as a Hollywood actor. In the 1980 Presidential campaign, Reagan made a large impact with slick television commercials that exploited his style over substance cinematic image. Public opinion polls also revealed that he probably gained votes with an impressive showing in the televised presidential debate with Jimmy Carter in October. In November, Reagan won in a landslide, gaining fifty-one percent of the popular vote (43 million) to Carter's forty-one percent (35 million) The electoral vote was even more lopsided, with Reagan winning 489 to 49 and Carter taking only six states and the District of Columbia

Many political commentators suggested that Reagan's overwhelming victory was facilitated by the increasing impact that television charisma was having on American politics. Confronted with a campaign where television presence was perhaps the most important political quality, Reagan's twenty-year career as an actor in over fifty Hollywood films enabled him to exploit the medium brilliantly Others speculated that Reagan's success was strongly rooted in his (or his publicists') ability to extrapolate his good guy screen persona (which often took the form of a virtuous cowboy) into the arena of world politics. Much as the heroic Hollywood cowboys were able to solve complex problems with simple, manly actions, Reagan's political style was built around a return to basic decency and noble values. While these attributes performed wonderfully in films, the real world often presented situations in which good and bad were difficult to distinguish and which required complex solutions. Nevertheless, following a declining economy and the rigors of the Iran hostage crisis, the strong,

frontiersman image that Reagan offered proved irresistible to American voters for eight years.

The American public's desire for the simplicity of times such as those m the old West found fulfillment in a president such as Ronald Reagan. In Shepard's play, Austin also expresses a desire to return to a more basic way of life—although his motivation is based on a different set of circumstances. Given the public climate at the time that *True West* was written and produced, Shepard had probably encountered more than a few individuals who, for any number of reasons, wanted to return to the true West.

Critical Overview

True West has had an interesting production history that suggests the secret to the play's success might lie in its sense of humor. *True West* was first performed in July of 1980 at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, where Shepard had for six years served as the playwright in residence. Directed by Robert Woodruff, this production was performed with well-known local actors and was very well-received. Reviewing the play for the journal *Theatre,* William Kleb noted that "the comic elements in *True Wesfweve* stressed" in this initial production.

Because of Shepard's rising status (he had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for *Buried Child),* the play was then brought to New York City where, in the words of the *Village Voice's* Don Shewey, the play "had become a media event, breathlessly anticipated as the latest work by 'the hottest young playwright in America. '"In December the play officially opened off-Broadway at Joseph Papp's Public Theatre, but by that time a rancorous conflict between Papp and director Woodruff over casting and artistic differences had become public and was dominating the critical response to the play. New York movie actors Tommy Lee Jones and Peter Boyle had taken over the roles of Austin and Lee, but the stars were feuding, the official opening had been twice postponed, and after disastrous preview performances the dissatisfied Woodruff resigned from the production. Papp replaced Woodruff as director, thereby alienating Shepard, who joined Woodruff in denouncing and disowning the production (though Shepard never came to New York City to see it because he was working on a movie at the time). Papp insisted that he altered little in Woodruffs staging, but the controversy succeeded in overshadowing the production itself. Frank Rich, writing for the *New York Times,* praised Shepard's play but denounced Papp's production, saying that the production was "little more than a stand-up run-through of a text that remains to be explored." Focusing on the Papp controversy, Rich asserted, "this play hasn' t been misdirected; it really looks as if it hasn't been directed at all." He added that "you know a play has no director when funny dialogue dies before it reaches the audience." Rich concluded by saying "it's impossible to evaluate a play definitively when it hasn't been brought to life onstage."

Some reviewers agreed in part with Rich. T. E. Kalem, writing for *Time,* said that "certain errors of perception and direction are quite evident, but enough of the true Shepard is here to do him honor Papp has certainly retained Shepard's singular gift for lunging simultaneously at the jugular and the funny bone." Other reviewers, however, dismissed Shepard's play as well as Papp's production. Douglas Watt of *the Daily News* found the play "simplistic," though he noted that "oddly, most of the first half of 'True West' is exceedingly funny." Writing for *Newsweek,* Jack Kroll found the play "an unfortunate mess" saying that "the new actors, Peter Boyle and Tommy Lee Jones, are sometimes effective and funny, but they seem distant from the play and uncertain about the effects they're trying for." *Christian Science Monitor* critic John Beaufort found the production "tedious" and the humor "harsh and abrasive." *New York Times* critic Walter Kerr simply found the play filled with "pretentiousness," its thematic issues recycled and

unconvincing. The Public Theatre production of *True West* closed after only fifty-two performances.

However, the critical reputation and vitality of Shepard's play was saved two years later by a Chicago-based production. The small Steppenwolf Theatre, founded in 1976 and led by fledgling actors Gary Sinise and John Malkovich, produced a widely praised rendition of the play that emphasized Shepard's sense of humor. It sold out in Chicago for a six-week run and then ran twelve more weeks in a larger, more commercial Chicago theatre. This production then transferred to the off-Broadway, Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City in October of 1982. Sinise performed double duty, both directing the production and playing Austin while Malkovich's energetic portrayal of Lee astounded audiences. The two actors later went on to considerable movie stardom but were both making their New York debuts in the Cherry Lane production. Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* called the production "an act of theatrical restitution and restoration." The critic exclaimed that now one could see that "it was the [1980] production not the play that was originally at fault." In the Steppenwolf version, the play was "rambunctious and spontaneous," as well as "uproarious," with a performance by Malkovich that Gussow called "acomic original." Shewey echoed this sentiment in the *Village Voice,* calling the play "a rip-roanng comic production ... featuring the *beyond-Animal House* performance of John Malkovich." According to Gussow, Malkovich was "amusing and menacing at the same instant." Gussow observed that with this production "no one forgets that the playwright means to be playful." Gussow ended his review prophetically by saying "'True West,[1] revivified, should now take its rightful place in the company of the best of Shepard." The Steppenwolf production ran for 762 performances, at the time a New York record for a Shepard play. The production was subsequently videotaped and broadcast on the Public Broadcasting System's *American Playhouse* series in January of 1984. This version was also released as a feature film in 1986.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Nienhuis is an associate professor of English at Western Carolina University. In this essay he examines the nature of myth as it pertains to Shepard's play. Nienhuis also discusses the abundant humor in the work.

As critic Frank Rich pointed out in his *New York Times* review of the original Off-Broadway production of Shepard's play, *"True West* is a worthy direct descendant of Mr. Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child.* Many of his persistent recent themes are present and accounted for—the spiritual death of the American family, the corruption of the artist by business, the vanishing of the Western wilderness and its promising dream of freedom." Critics and scholars have since elaborated on these and related themes, pointing out, for example, that Lee represents the vanishing "old" West and Austin the plasticized, overdeveloped "new" West of Hollywood and its adjacent suburbs. It has been further stated that American myths such as the legendary American West or the tradition of the stable family not only fail to sustain contemporary Americans but often, in their elusive-ness, delude and frustrate them.

The investigation of such themes has also suggested that *True West* is Shepard's most personal and autobiographically revealing play—that Austin and Lee's desert-dwelling father is inspired by Shepard's own absent parent and that Austin and Lee represent divided aspects of Shepard himself. Henry Schvey, writing in *Modern Drama,* suggested that "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 counterculture 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 a bout between two brothers as it is an externalized metaphor of the dialectic between the dual aspects of Shepard's psyche." Or, as actor John Malkovich has so succinctly and colorfully put it, "Lee is the side of Shepard that's always been strangled but never quite killed."

However interesting and fruitful these investigations might be, it is possible that such close attention to Shepard's serious themes has often blinded critics, audiences, and readers to the richly subtle and irreverently unconventional humor in Shepard's play. Certainly, the production history of *True West* suggests that it can be disastrous to overlook the play's sense of humor. Contrasting the 1980 Public Theatre and the 1982 Steppenwolf/ Cherry Lane Theatre productions of the play, *New York Times* critic Mel Gussow remembered that the original "seemed, for the freewheeling Mr. Shepard, uncharacteristically heavy-handed." And when critic Douglas Watt reviewed the first New York production of the play in the *Daily News,* he confidently proclaimed that Austin's monologue about his father's false teeth was "phonier" than Lee's movie idea. Watt also disapproved of the mother's departure at the end of the play, calling it"symbolism [that] hits you on the head like a 2-wood." Perhaps sensitivity to Shepard's sense of humor is important to the viewer or reader of *True West* because without it the

play will seem "heavy-handed" or pretentious rather than an effective exploration of Shepard's persistent themes—and a biting satire of modern life in the West.

Much of the humor in *True West* plays off the very serious sense of menace that Lee brings to the action. The earliest manifestation of humor, for example, is a form of comic relief. In die first scene, Lee's menacing quality has been clearly established when he "suddenly lunges at Austin, grabs him violently by the shirt and shakes him with tremendous power." Austin placates Lee with an apology, there is a "long pause," and then Lee makes a drastic and comical shift in subject—"those are the most monotonous fuckin' crickets I ever heard in my life." This line has been set up by Lee's implied appreciation of the cricket sound at the very beginning of the play—"ya' got crickets anyway. Tons a' crickets out there." And the relatively small laugh from his profane second reference to crickets is simply a preparation for a much bigger laugh in Scene 4 when an exasperated Lee is arguing with Austin over the validity of the chase scene in Lee's movie: (Lee turns violently toward windows m alcove and throws beer can at them, screaming) goddamn these crickets! (yells at crickets) Shut up out there! (pause, turns back toward table) This place is like a fuckin' rest home here How're you supposed to think!"

Much of the humor m the play comes from Lee's annoyance We all feel annoyed in our lives but are often embarrassed by the obvious triviality of it, so we enjoy identifying with Lee's exasperation, especially when it is expressed in clever ways ("now who in the hell wants to eat offa' plate with the State of Idaho starin' ya' in the face. Every time ya' take a bite ya' get to see a little bit more."). In part, we laugh at Lee's annoyance because he freely expresses feelings that most people are too embarrassed or self-conscious to state aloud. Consequently, the more trivial the causes for Lee's annoyance, the funnier it is for the audience. For example, in Scene 7, the irritated Lee, the adept desert survivor, straggles with something as ordinarily manageable as a typewriter ribbon. Furthermore, Lee's annoyance is humorous because it comes from the silly attempt to assume an overnight competence in the complex art of screenwriting. His newfound sense of filmmaking expertise makes him funny: "I'm trying to do some screenwriting here!!"

Saul Kimmer is another source of humor in *True West* because he is so ridiculously slick and shallow. Thus, it is funny when Lee can manipulate Kimmer (one con man conning another) even though Lee can't get Kimmer's name right. From his "inadvertent" early entrance with the stolen television set to Saul's unctuous exit line, "I'll give you a rmg," Lee's triumph over the pretentiously self-important Saul Kimmer is our own joyful and risible triumph over the phonies who surround us in our daily lives.

Beyond Kimmer, however, the movie industry itself is treated humorously for the ridiculous practices it routinely employs. For example, Lee's description for Kimmer of the pathos in the ending of the film, *Lonely Are the Brave,* is simply the beginning of hilarious send-ups of movie ideas. When Lee is outlining his story for Austin in Scene 4, for example, it is obvious that he is making the story up as he goes along:

Lee.. And number three—Austin-I thought there was only two.Lee: There's three. There's a third unforeseen realizationAs Austin later says, "it's the dumbest story I ever heard in my life"

True West, of course, focuses on transformations, and transformations of many kinds are funny when we see them as postured, opportunistic, and insincere—especially when the transformation is drastic. In Shepard's play, Lee's attempt to transform himself into a legitimate screenwriter, though perhaps ultimately pathetic, is funny because he has made such a pretense earlier of disdaining Austin's comfortable and conventional materialism. Thus, when Lee adopts new and temporary ambitions, his aspirations look pathetically adolescent and ridiculous: "a ranch? I could get a ranch" An even more subtle example occurs in Scene 5, when Lee suddenly becomes a responsible momma's boy and says to Austin, "you shouldn't oughta' take her champagne, Austin. She's gonna' miss that."

It is perhaps a toss-up as to whether Austin's or Lee's transformation is funnier. Lee's is funny because of his desperation, and we laugh at it out of relief because his desperation is not ours Lee probably reaches his comic peak in the last scene when he has lost touch with whatever instinctive quality he might have had as a storyteller and in a new and false hypersensitivity to language rejects a perfectly colloquial line like, "I know this prairie like the back a' my hand." Then, when the inebriated Austin suggests as an alternative the ludicrous, "I'm on intimate terms with this prairie," Lee says, "that's good. I like that.... Sounds original now."

Austin's transformation, on the other hand, is funny because it is a liberation, and we laugh because we would sometimes like to "let go" ourselves. But after Austin becomes liberated through too much drink in Scene 7, much of the humor comes from the irony this liberation creates. Specific lines are funny when they work as ironic echoes from the beginning of the play—now it is Austin who says,"don't worry about me. I'm not the one to worry about."

Perhaps the main benefit from examining the humor in *True West* is that it can explain some aspects of the text that have consistently presented problems for audiences, critics, and readers. Perhaps foremost among these is Austin's story about his father's false teeth. Initially the story is jarring because it is so specifically mundane and bizarre, but the story can have a wonderful pathos if it is performed or read with a feeling for its sense of humor. It is delivered, one must remember, by someone who is very drunk, and much of the humor comes from Austin presenting the story as profound when he has temporarily lost his sense of judgment. However, if the story is presented to the audience without its sense of dark humor, it will sound pretentious and even silly rather than twistedly hilarious and, at moments, even profound and moving.

A similar problem occurs with the appearance of Austin and Lee's mother, which will seem unreahstic or arbitrary unless it's played as humorous. Laughter often comes from the incongruous and unexpected and the Mother's understated response to the phenomenal mess in her house certainly fits this description. But the unexpectedly calm response from the mother is also disturbing to audiences and readers because it is the

culmination of the play's gradual shift from the realistic to the grotesque. Her comically limpid response to the devastation helps to assure that the play will end in a grotesque rather than a realistic style. Realistic responses to such a mess would probably include rage or sorrow, but when she explains her reason for returning early from Alaska ("I just started missing " all my plants") it's clear that she is not a realistic, conventional mother, for as soon as she sees that all her plants are dead she exhibits a sense of acceptance ("oh well, one less thing to take care of I guess") that immediately contradicts her stated reason for returning home.

This discord that Shepard creates with his bizarre mother figure is so extreme that it perhaps tests the limits of humor, but taking her comically is necessary to mute the very real violence that is taking place between Austin and Lee as the play closes. In her disconnected frame of mind, the mother sees her sons' violence as a commonplace occurrence, a little boy's tussle, saying "you boys shouldn't fight in the house. Go outside and fight." Thus, Shepard's eccentric portrayal of violence is perfectly complemented by her comic obliviousness: she says the right words but doesn't feel the meaning behind them—"you're not killing him are you? You oughta' let him breathe a little bit." The humor is certainly dark, but to not see the mother as humorous is to risk an excessively heavy-handed reading of a rich comic line like, "that's a savage thing to do."

Source: Terry Nienhuis, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, Hoeper outlines the parallels between Shepard's True West *and the biblical parable of Cain and Abel, comparing the two tales of sibling rivalry.*

"Myth speaks to everything at once, especially the emotions," writes Sam Shepard *(American Dreams-The Imagination of Sam Shepard,* edited by Bonnie Maranca, [New York], 1981). Acting on this indirect authorial invitation, critics have understandably devoted much attention to the mythic elements in Shepard's work. Most notably, Tucker Orbison has exposed three levels of mythic response in *True West:* the mythic West of the cowboy; the mythic "mystery of the artist" in which the writer delves into the self to explore archetypal conflicts "fraught with the terrors of nightdreaming"; and finally the mythic conflict of the doppelganger, the "second self," as revealed in the role reversal of Lee and Austin at the play's crisis.

Important as these three levels of mythic response are, the play explores yet another—and arguably a more important—myth through its biblical allusions and parallels. The play's plot harks back to the archetypal story of Cain and Abel—in the Byronic variant in which Cain, the peaceful tiller of the soil, is a sympathetic figure, while Abel, the smug slaughterer of sheep, is inexplicably favored by a bloodthirsty deity. As in Genesis, the action takes place to the east of Eden. Shepard sets his play *"in a Southern California suburb, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles."* Lee describes the suburban homes as being "Like a paradise" and Austin subsequently comments, "This is a Paradise down here.... We're livin' in a Paradise."

Granted, these references to Paradise have the informality of a clich6 and the sibling rivalry between Austin and Lee is a fairly hackneyed literary motif; nevertheless, the biblical story of Cain is part of our common cultural heritage, and any story of fraternal battle recalls it in some measure. Further, the more closely one looks at Shepard's play, the more reminders there are of the pre-Christian conflict between Cain and Abel. One fairly common interpretation of the story in Genesis is that it was part of an effort by the invading Hebrews to discredit the matriarchal worship of the indigenous Canaanites According to this interpretation, the story of the Fall is at heart a symbolic exploration of the problem of evil. How does a patriarchal society that assumes the existence of a beneficent masculine creator account for evil? It lays the burden of original sin at the feet of the first woman. And her first offspring is Cain, the original murderer.

By discrediting women and those who serve women or worship women, the ancient patriarchs may have sought to combat the matriarchal worship of the Triple Goddess in her many manifestations as Astarte, Ishtar, Ms, Artemis, Aphrodite, Demeter, Diana, and others. Before the invasion of the Hebrews, the Canaanites worshipped a variety of gods, but fertility rites were central to their religion and the triple goddesses Asherah, Anath, and Astarte were worshipped with special fervor as life-bringers and harvest-givers. As Pamela Berger has noted, "Almost every major excavation of middle Bronze Age through early Iron Age sites (2000-600 BC) has produced terra-cotta plaques impressed with the nude female holding plant forms and standing in such a position that

she can be identified as a goddess" *(The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of The Grain Protector from Goddess to Saint,* [Boston], 1985). The springtime planting of seed, the summer-long ripening, the fall harvest, the wintery decline into the soil, and the subsequent resurrection were seen as mirroring female fecundity and as most appropriately revered by offering the fruits of the soil in libations and cakes of wheat. Cain's ritual offerings of grain and libations were characteristic of the worship of the Goddess. Abel's bloody sacrifice of a sheep from his fold was characteristic of early Hebraic devotion. The symbolic conflict between matnarchal and patriarchal worship in Genesis is complemented by the more directly historical account m the book of Joshua of the efforts to destroy the worship of the Goddess.

At the beginning of *True West* there are hints of this pre-Christian conflict between the patriarchal and matriarchal orders. The play is set in the mother's home. Her neighborhood is like Paradise. Her home is filled with vegetation:

The windows look out to bushes and citrus trees. The alcove is filled with all sorts of house plants in various spots, mostly Boston ferns hanging in planters at different levels. The floor of the alcove is composed of green synthetic grass.

Her plants are being served by a dutiful son. Her name is given as "mother" or "Mom," nothing more.

In coming down from the lush north to write a romantic screenplay, Austin may be said to be acting in the service of love (or Aphrodite) and his earnings will be used to support his wife and children. His decision to write by candlelight reflects his attempt to establish a romantic mood appropriate to the story he is staving to create. Like Cain, Austin is associated with vegetation; in his mother's absence, he has vowed to lend her flourishing house plants. The first lines in Scene 1 underscore that duty, and Scene 2 opens with Austin *"watering plants with a vaporizer.*" Like Abel, however, Austin is the younger of two brothers and he is clearly the better brother—kind, industrious, and moral.

In contrast, Lee comes up from the desert, like the nomadic Hebrews at the end of their exodus and the beginning of their conquest of Canaan. Somewhere in that vast desert Lee has communed with the "old man"—the father, whom Austin in his prosperity has apparently abandoned. Lee is Austin's sinister opposite, and his questionable character is clearly suggested by his appearance:

filthy white t-shtrt, tattered brown overcoat covered with dust, dark blue baggy suit pants from the Salvation Army, pink suede belt, pointed black forties dress shoes scuffed up, holes in the soles, no socks, no hat, long pronounced sideburns, "Gene Vincent" hairdo, two days' growth of beard, bad teeth

Lee is an outcast who prefers the company of the snakes in the desert to that of other men. A virtual illiterate, he makes his living by theft. For Lee, the candlelight by which Austin works is reminiscent of the "old guys," "The Forefathers." Most directly, the allusion is to the first settlers of the West, but the somewhat odd phrasing, the

repetition, and the capitalization draw our attention to the masculinity of these Forefathers and may recall the Hebrew patriarchs. Like those patriarchs and like Abel, Lee is associated with the sacrifice of animals. In Scene 1 he brags to Austin: "Had me a Pit Bull there for a while but I lost him... Fightin' dog. Damn I made some good money off that little dog. Real good money."

In Genesis blood sacrifice is required by the patriarchal deity Yahweh, and in *True West* Lee is clearly allied with the masculine and violent values of this deity. Even Lee's vocabulary associates him with blood sacrifices. When Austin innocently offers to give him money, Lee furiously rejects the gift, calling it "Hollywood blood money" and accusing Austin of attempting to use that money to "buy off" the "Old Man." Throughout much of the play, references to the father, who is (like the mother) left unnamed, prompt in Lee a sense of reverence and pride, while in Austin such references provoke an outbreak of hostility, guilt, or disgust. Thus, in the play, as in Genesis, the patriarchal and matriarchal systems clash.

In the Americanized mythology of *True West,* however, the biblical story of Cain and Abel undergoes ironic and comic revisions that undermine both the patriarchal values of Lee and the matriarchal values of Austin. The true American deity is Success, and Austin is initially that deity's favored child. The deity's agent is a Hollywood producer named Saul Kimmer, who has promised Austin a lucrative movie contract for the love story he is writing.

In contrast, Lee offers Saul a Western about a man's confrontation with his wife's lover and involving a bizarre chase in which two horses are taken by trailer to the Texas panhandle and then ridden into the desert at night. Lee seeks Austin's creative assistance in writing an outline of the plot, but he angrily rejects the notion that Austin's contribution is important or inspired: "Favor! Big Favor! Handin' down favors from the mountain top." The implication is that Austin is not like God handing down the tablets to Moses; what Austin hands down, Lee is quite prepared to reject. Clich6d as Lee's story is, it holds out the promise of a bloody duel at the end, the blood offering that Abel presented to Yahweh. As one might predict, the god of Hollywood eventually rejects Austin's comparatively wholesome love story and smiles on Lee's Western, just as the Old Testament deity accepted Abel's blood sacrifice and threw down the altar of Cain.

In Genesis, Saul is the king of the Hebrews who proves himself incapable of controlling the Philistines (I Samuel 31). The allusion works well within *True West.* With the rejection of Austin's script, Saul abandons all efforts to control the Philistines in American culture, whose indifference to refinement and art is well illustrated by their taste in movies. While Austin had been initially pleased to hear Lee refer to his romantic screenplay as "art," Lee desires no esthetic (i.e., feminine) qualities in his Western. He approvingly quotes Saul as saying, "In this business we make movies, American movies. Leave the films to the French " Further, when Saul promises to produce a movie based on Lee's story, Lee arranges to have "a big slice" of his profits (perhaps a tithe?) turned over to the father.

In the second half of the play, Austin becomes more and more embittered and increasingly similar to his evil brother. Having in a sense been failed by the matriarchal deity, Austin neglects her rites. He lets his mother's plants go unwatered, forgets about returning to his wife and children, and begs Lee to take him into the desert.

Meanwhile Lee, the creature of night, the desert, and the patriarchy, begs for Austin's creative assistance. Despite Austin's chiding that Lee is creating only "illusions of characters" drawn from "fantasies of a long lost boyhood," Lee's optimism about his story remains strong until Scene 7, when Austin tells him about his last encounter with their father. Lee's confidence is apparently shattered after he hears Austin's ludicrous description of their patriarch as a toothless, drunken beggar staggering from one bar to another and searching for the doggie bag of Chop Suey that contains his false teeth.

Scene 8 opens upon a tableau of defeatism and desolation, framed by their mother's "dead and drooping" house plants. That this opening tableau is symbolic and imbued with the irrationality characteristic of myth is borne out by the chronology of the play, which suggests that only forty-eight hours have passed since Austin was watering the flourishing house plants in Scene 2. Both brothers have lost faith in themselves and in the values that had allowed them to define themselves. Austin has transformed himself into a pale imitation of Lee by stealing toasters instead of TVs. Meanwhile Lee has become an even more frustrated writer than Austin had been in Scene 1. He stands before us smashing a golf club into Austin's typewriter with the regularity and impassivity of a metronome. Allen Ramsey aptly points out that this scene presents us with "the symbolic destruction of the West called Hollywood, with Shepard's three symbols of that world—the golf club, the typewriter, and the manuscript" *{Publications of the Arkansas Philological Society,* fall, 1989). For both brothers Hollywood has proven to be no Paradise.

Brutal and insensitive by nature, Lee is incapable of writing a screenplay for the same reason that he is incapable of treating women with tenderness or concern. Claiming that he needs a woman, he fumbles through his collection of scribbled telephone numbers, desperately dials the operator, and rips the telephone from the wall when even she hangs up on him. Clearly, Lee is no favorite of many-named Astarte. Just as clearly, Austin hasn't got the hang of male machismo. Having lost faith in the power of romance, Austin assures Lee that "A woman isn't the answer. Never was," but Austin is too wrapped up in his conscience and too concerned about his victims to be a self-satisfied liberator of small appliances. Nor can he treat women as casual sex objects; when Lee asks if he knows any women, Austin can only answer, "I'm a married man "

As this penultimate scene unfolds, Austin's strangely devotional attitude towards toast becomes the primary focus of dramatic concern. Lee finally demands angrily, "What is this bullshit with the toast anyway' You make it sound like salvation or something." And Austin replies, "Well it is like salvation sort of." Lee then concludes, "so go to church why don't ya." In a comic and incongruous fashion, the scene presents a veiled allusion both to the ritual offering of grain in matriarchal religion and to the breaking of bread in Christianity. The contrast between the two brothers, as well as the matriarchal and patriarchal systems of belief, is summarized by their own synopses: Austin loves

beginnings (birth, creativity); Lee counters that he has "always been kinda' partial to endings" (death, conclusions, conquest). The conflict between the brothers reaches a new level of intensity as Lee knocks away Austin's neatly slacked plate of bread and then methodically crushes each piece of toast. Finally, their temporary alliance in creating a script about mortal battle in the desert is ratified in a parody of communion when Lee "takes a huge crushing bite" of toast while staring raptly into his brother's eyes

The final scene presents a mockery of matriarchal religion to balance the dismissal of the patriarchy in Scene 7 and the parody of communion in Scene 8. First, we see the comic ineptitude of both brothers as writers. They argue over the clich6d line "I know this prairie like the back a' my hand"— eventually changing it to "I'm on intimate terms with this prairie" even though they are aware of the sexual connotation of the words. Is it too fanciful to see in this sentence a parody of matriarchal religion, with its emphasis on the planting of seed in the soil of Mother Earth? Perhaps. But then Mom arrives like a *deus ex machina* at the very moment that Lee repeats, "'He's on intimate terms with this prairie.' Sounds real mysterious and kinda' threatening at the same time." Yet if Mom is Mother Earth amid her wilted plants, hasn't she become trivial, irrelevant, comic, and a little mad?

Mom says she has come back from Alaska because she "just started missing all [her] plants." The greatest power of the Goddess was the ability to bring the dead back to life —possibly as an emblem of the annual rebirth of life in the spring. Thus, Isis resurrects her husband Osiris and is "responsible for the rebirth of vegetation " Similarly, in the ancient Ugantic mythology of Canaan, Anath brings about the resurrection of her brother/lover Baal. Although the plants remain dead in *True West,* Mom does announce a resurrection of sorts. She claims that "Picasso's in town. Isn't that incredible" When Austin points out that Picasso is dead, she merely reiterates, "No, he's not dead He's visiting the museum . . We have to go down there and see him.... This is the chance of a lifetime." With the patriarch rendered toothless and the matriarch demented, both brothers seem lost. The play concludes with Lee and Austin wanly circling each other "in a vast desert-like landscape" while a single coyote yaps for the kill.

True West is, of course, 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, but rather by the play itself, in which good is warped until it is indistinguishable from evil and craftsmanship of any kind is scorned in the pursuit of popularity. Later, in *A Lie of the Mind,* Shepard will begin toying with a synthesis of the masculine and feminine into what Beth calls a "woman-man." In *True West,* however, mothers and fathers, as well as matriarchy and patriarchy, are equally irrelevant to modern life. The modern West is a place guided by false materialistic gods who misjudge the efforts of men and set them at each others' throats. Mothers, fathers, gods, and goddesses are all equally comic, trivial, insignificant, and insane in the true West of Sam Shepard's *True West.*

Source: Jeffrey D. Hoeper, "Cain, Canaanites, and Philistines in Sam Shepard's *True West,"* in *Modern Drama,* Vol. 36, No. 1, March, 1993, pp. 76-81

Critical Essay #3

In this review o/True West's *Broadway debut, Rich offers a mixed assessment of the play, praising Shepard's text yet lamenting the shortcomings of this particular production.*

Some day, when the Warring parties get around to writing their memoirs, we may actually discover who killed *True West,* the Sam Shepard play that finally opened at the Public Theater last night. As the press has already reported, this failure is an orphan. Robert Woodruff, the nominal director, left the play in previews and disowned the production. Mr. Shepard has also disowned the production, although he has not ventured from California to see it. The producer Joseph Papp, meanwhile, has been left, holding the bag. New Year's will be, here shortly, and one can only hope that these talented men will forgive and forget.

At least their battle has been fought for a worthwhile cause. *True West* seems to be a very good Shepard play—which means that it's one of the American theater's most precious natural resources But no play can hold the stage all by itself. Except for odd moments, when Mr. Shepard's fantastic language rips through the theater on its own sinuous strength, the *True West* at the Public amounts to little more than a stand-up run-through of a text that remains to be explored. This play hasn't been misdirected; it really looks as if it hasn't been directed at all.

You know a play has no director when funny dialogue dies before it reaches the audience. Or when two lead actors step on each other's lines and do "business" rather than create characters. Or when entrances and scene-endings look arbitrary rather than preplanned. Or when big farcical sequences—-an avalanche of Coors beer cans, for instance—clatter about the stage creating confusion rather than mirth. Or when an evening's climax—the mystical death embrace of two fratricidal brothers—is so vaguely choreographed it looks like a polka All these things and more happen at the Public.

It's a terrible shame. *True West* is a worthy direct descendant of Mr. Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child.* Many of his persistent recent themes are present and accounted for—the spiritual death of the American family, the corruption of the artist by business, the vanishing of the Western wilderness and its promised dream of freedom. If the playwright dramatizes his concerns in fantastic flights of poetic imagery, that imagery always springs directly from the life of the people and drama he has invented. Mr. Shepard doesn't graft symbols onto his plays He's a true artist; his best works are organic creations that cannot be broken down into their constituent parts.

The brothers of *True West* are both hustlers, or, if you will, modemday cowboys who have lost then-range. Lee (Peter Boyle) is a drifter and petty burglar, and the younger Austin (Tommy Lee Jones) is a screenwriter. The play is about what happens when the two men reunite in their mother's ticky-tacky suburban Los Angeles home. By the end of the evening, they have stolen each other's identities and destroyed the house, and yet they can never completely sever the ties that bind. Like the heroes in the "True life"

Hollywood movie western they write during the course of the play, Lee and Austin are "two lamebrains" doomed to chase each other eternally across a desolate, ever-receding frontier.

Mr. Shepard is an awesome writer. When Lee and Austin lament the passing of the West they loved (and that maybe never existed), they launch into respectively loopy, nostalgic monologues about the film *Lonely Are the Brave* and the now-extinct neighborhood of their youth. Amusing as they are, these comic riffs are also moving because they give such full life to Mr. Shepard's conflict between America's myths and the bitter, plastic reality that actually exists: Lee can no longer distinguish the true West from the copy, he finds in a movie; Austin discovers that his childhood memories are inseparable from the vistas he sees on cheap post cards Looking for roots, Mr Shepard's characters fall into a void.

The playwright also provides motifs involving dogs, crickets, desert topography, cars, household appliances (especially toasters and television sets) and the brothers' unseen, destitute father. As the play progresses, these images keep folding into one another until we are completely transported into the vibrant landscape of Mr. Shepard's imagination. Such is the collective power of this playwright's words that even his wilder conceits seem naturalistic in the context of his play. We never question that Lee would try to destroy a typewriter with a golf club or that the family patriarch would lose his false teeth in a doggie bag full of chop suey.

True West slips only when Mr. Shepard, a master of ellipses, tries to fill in his blanks. Does he really need lines like, "There's nothing real here now, least of all me," or, "There's no such thing as the West anymore"? The movie-industry gags, most of which involve a producer m gold chains (Louis Zorich), are jarring as well. Mr. Shepard's witticisms about development deals and agents have been written funnier by Woody Allen and Paul Mazursky, and they bring *True West* down to earth.

Still, these judgments must be tentative. It's impossible to evaluate a play definitively when it hasn't been brought to life on stage There's nervous energy at the Public, but it leads nowhere. Mr. Boyle, a loping, lllshaven figure in baggy clothes, is engagingly sleazy for a while, but his performance trails off into vagueness and repetition just as it should begin to build. Mr Jones is kinetic and finally frantic as he tries and fails to get a handle on the screenwriter. We never believe that these actors are mirror-image brothers locked into a psychological cat-and-mouse game. Theatergoers who venture to the Public must depend on their own imaginations to supply the crackling timing and the violent tension that are absent. Who's to blame? Please address your inquiries to the Messrs Shepard, Woodruff and Papp. And while you're writing, demand restitution. These men owe New York a *true True West.*

Source: Frank Rich, review of *True West,* in the *New York Times,* Vol 130, No 44807, December 24,1980, p C9

Watt, Douglas. *"True West* Moves Shepard m the Right Direction" in the *Daily News,* December 24,1980

Adaptations

The Steppenwolf production of *True West* at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City with John Malkovich as Lee and Gary Sinise as Austin was recorded for the Public Broadcasting System's *American Playhouse* series and then released as a feature film in 1987. This 110 minute film can be rented at selected video stores or purchased from Academy Home Entertainment, Shelburne, Vermont, or through Critics' Choice Video. It is also available in laser disk format from LaserVision.

An amateur production of the play directed by Charles Doolittle at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, Illinois, in December of 1988 was taped on videocassette, and the college also preserved a series of twenty-two slides featuring selected scenes from the play.

Topics for Further Study

Research the importance of music in Shepard's life and the way this interest gets reflected in his plays, especially his early work.

Research the statistics of domestic violence in America to see how accurate Lee is when he says, "you go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most.... 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." Is this statement an accurate one of domestic violence, explain how closely it reflects (or does not reflect) real violence between family members.

Research the subject of dysfunctional families in America and compare some of the more "common" dysfunctional features with the family in *True West.*

Research the rise of the off- off-Broadway theatre movement and read several of Shepard's early plays to see how they derived from and accurately represented that vibrant atmosphere of New York City in the early 1960s.

Compare and Contrast

1980: *Double Fantasy,* an album by former Beatles member John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono, is released in 1980, and on December 8 Lennon is fatally shot by a deranged fan with a handgun outside his New York City apartment building. Lennon's death increases support for laws controlling handguns, but president-elect Ronald Reagan rejects gun control legislation. U.S. handguns kill an average of twenty-nine people a day and fifty-five million handguns are believed to be in circulation.

Today: Largely due to an assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981 where his Press Secretary James Brady was shot and severely paralyzed for life, the "Brady Bill" requires a five-day waiting period before the sale of a handgun can be completed. Gun violence continues to be an alarming part of American culture, and as Lee says in Scene 4 of *True West,* "you go down to the L.A Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most.... Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in-law. Cousins. Real American-type people." Lee's remark has significance in that a large part of handgun violence occurs between family members—often children playing with their parents' weapons.

1980: Ted Turner's Cable News Network (CNN) goes on the air on June 1 among predictions from many that there can be no reliable audience for a 24 hour-a-day news channel.

Today: CNN, ESPN, and a host of proliferating cable networks have become international institutions. Nearly everywhere in the world where there is a television set there is CNN reporting the news. In the United States, the cable revolution has succeeding in nearly eclipsing the big-three networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—that used to rule the airwaves.

1980: On July 2, the U.S. Supreme Court rules in Richmond Newspapers versus Virginia that the press has a right to attend criminal trials.

Today: The most publicized and publicly monitored trial in history, the televised O. J. Simpson murder trial, has left many people wondering if jurisprudence is well-served by making criminal cases into media events.

What Do I Read Next?

The Rock Garden (1964) is a one-act play that, along with *Cowboys,* launched Shepard's play wrighting career. A series of strange conversations between a teenage boy and his mother and father, the play ends with a sexually explicit speech from the boy that some have considered obscene. Shepard says that *"Rock Garden* is about leaving my mom and dad."

The Tooth of Crime (1972) is a very unconventional two-act play with music that has often been called Shepard's "masterpiece." It portrays a battle for dominance in the popular music industry between an established country music idol and the newest rock singer sensation. Their battle resembles a Western "shoot-out," as well as urban "turf wars," and investigates our culture's need for celebrity status.

Angel City (1976) is a two-act play by Shepard that even more clearly than *True West* attacks the Hollywood film industry and the way it can corrupt the artistic spirit.

Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American*

West As Symbol and Myth (1950) is a very well-known work of historiography that analyzes the concept of the West in American history and how it translates into elements of modern culture.

William Goldman's *Adventures in the Screen Trade. A Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (1983) is an autobiographical expose of the Hollywood film industry. Goldman is a highly successful screenwriter and the author of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, All the President's Men, andThe Princess Bride,* among other well-known films.

In the Jungle of Cities (1923) by the great German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, portrays a mythic conflict between a timber merchant and a librarian. In an interview with Kenneth Chubb in 1974, Shepard said that Brecht was his favorite playwright and that *In the Jungle of Cities* is a conflict, "a bout, between these two characters, taken in a completely open-ended way, the bout is never defined as being anything but metaphysical."

Further Study

Grant, Gary. "Shifting the Paradigm: Shepard, Myth, and the Transformation of Consciousness" in *Modern Drama,* Vol, 36, no 1, March, 1993, pp 120-30

One of several valuable essays in this special issue devoted in large part to Shepard, Grant asserts that Shepard's dramatic style is a "new way of seeing" that is similar to the experience of listening to jazz or rock and roll music

Hart, Lynda *Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages,* Greenwood Press, 1987.

In addition to a valuable section on *True West,* Hart's book contains an interesting descriptive essay of Shepard's film career and an excellent biographical sketch of the playwright's life

Hoeper, Jeffrey D. "Cain, Canaamtes, and Philistines in Sam Shepard's *True West"* in *Modem Drama,* Vol 36, no 1, March, 1993, pp 76-82

Examines *True West* as a biblical allegory Hoeper compares Austm and Lee to the biblical figures of Cam and Abel, the combative sons of Adam and Eve.

Holstein, Suzy Clarkson "'All Growed Up' in the True West, or Huck and Tom Meet Sam Shepard" in *WesternAmerican Literature,* Vol. 29, no 1, Spring, 1994, pp 41-50

Citing similarities between Mark Twain's character Huck Finn and Lee and Twain's Tom Sawyer and Austin, Holstem suggests that Shepard's brothers could be understood as adult versions of these young literary characters.

Kleb, William "Sam Shepard" in *American Playwrights since 1945,* edited by Philip C Kolm Greenwood Press, 1989 Kleb's long essay in this valuable reference guide to American theatre provides an assessment of Shepard's reputation and a detailed and fascinating summary of the production histories of Shepard's plays, including the controversial production history of *True West.* The essay includes several very useful bibliographies

Kleb, William "Theatre in San Francisco- Sam Shepard's *True West "* in *Theatre,* Vol 12, no 1, Fall-Winter, 1980, pp 65-71

This review essay of the original production of the play in San Francisco suggests in its conclusion that *True West* may be Shepard's self-dramatization of divided identity and his most subjective and personal play.

Orbison, Tucker "Mythic Levels in Shepard's *True West* in *Modern Drama,* Vol 27, no 4, December, 1984, pp. 506-19

A thorough and detailed examination of what is meant when critics and scholars say that Shepard writes "mythic" drama.

Rosen, Carol "'Emotional Territory': An Interview with Sam Shepard" in *Modern Drama,* Vol 36, no. 1, March, 1993, pp. 1-11.

In his first extensive interview in a decade, Shepard discusses his themes, his methods of working, and many other interesting topics

Schvey, Henry I. "A Worm in the Wood The Father-Son Relationship in the Plays of Sam Shepard" in *Modern Drama,* Vol. 36, no 1, March, 1993, pp 12- 26.

The fathers in Shepard's plays, including the father in *True West,* are based on the relationship Shepard had with his own father. The presence of the father lingers in the son "like a worm in the wood "

Shewey, Don. "The True Story of 'True West'" in the *Village Voice,* November 30,1982, p. 115.

Areview of the 1982 Cherry Lane Theatre production by Gary Sinise's Steppenwolf company In addition to providing a review of the performance, this piece offers an analysis of the controversy that surrounded the onginal production two years earher at Joseph Papp's Public Theatre.

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Chubb, Kenneth Interview with Sam Shepard in *Theatre Quarterly,* Vol IV, no 15, August-October, 1974, pp. 3-16.

Coe, Robert. Interview with Sam Shepard in the *New York Times Magazine,* November 23,1980

Gussow, Mel "Brothers and Rivals" in the *New York Times,* October 17, 1982

Kalem, T. E. "City Coyotes Prowling the Brain" in *Time,* January 5,1981

Kerr, Walter. "Of Shepard's Myths and Ibsen's Man" in the *New York Times,* Vol. 50, no 3, January 11,1981

Kroll, Jack "California Dreaming" in *Newsweek,* January 5,1981. -

Rich, Frank "Shepard's *True West"* in the New *York Times,* December 24,1980.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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