

Exchanging Roles In Sam Shepard's True West

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Abstract

The drama of the modern world and especially American drama is engaged in the modern man's relation to himself and to society as well. The modern American man lives in a state of uncertainty and instability because of the many shocks and changes in his life, such as the failure of the American 'Nightmare' and the two world wars that he was engaged with. So, modern drama is a response to the changing circumstances of modern society.

Sam Shepard is one of the pioneers of modern American drama. **True West** (1980) tackles important themes and ideas like death or betrayal of the American dream, the decay of the American national myth, the growing mechanization of the American lives and the search for the roots of the American family.

In his **True west**, Shepard explores the American man's double nature and his attempt to find another identity by exchanging roles in life. Austin and Lee are two brothers who encounter each other for the first time in five years. Austin is a screenwriter who tries to plough his way in life by writing a love story and film it in television, while his brother Lee is a cowboy, illiterate man.

When they meet each other they confess their failures in life and decide to exchange their roles. Austin becomes a cowboy and Lee tries to be a screenwriter. Shepard shows the reality of the American man and how he is unconvinced and dissatisfied with his life. He shows the true west of America and the reality of being an American man. Because of these changes and uncertainties in his life, the American man feels himself dissatisfied with his life and tries to find another life and another identity.

Research objectives

- 1- To analyse the view points of the characters at the beginning and at the end of the play, and to show the contradiction they experience in their lives.
- 2- To explore the idea of the writer about the real west, and his investigation to distinguish the true west from the fake one.

Man's Double Nature in the Play

Modern drama is a reflection to the happenings of modern man. In America, capitalists could persuade people that America is the Eden of earth and they will find their dreams. "In the US there was this myth of American character formed on the frontier. This myth was destroyed by industrialization, massive immigration at the beginning of the century, and the resulting urbanization. Now the question seems to be, what experience constitutes being an American". (Quoted in Saddik: 1). Modern American dramatists shed more light on the reality of being an American individual in the modern age. Sam Shepard tries to uncover the hidden truth which is the authenticity of the American dream and the tangible face of the west.

Many of Shepard's plays such as *La Turista* (1967), *Action* (1975), *Angel City* (1976), *Buried Child* (1979), followed by *True West* (1980) and later *Simpatico* (1994), explore the flimsy boundaries of identity and the difficulty of discovering an authentic self outside of the roles, masks, images and performances that mark human action (ibid: 131). **True West** is the first major play by Shepard which is fully mature and full-length play. The play represents Shepard's perspective towards authenticity and role-playing in American society.

Shepard lived a complicated and insecure childhood. Because of these changes and uncertainties in his life, he tries to record them in his plays. **True West** (1980) by Sam Shepard depicts a sibling relationship and shows how two brothers exchange their roles in life. Austin and Lee are two brothers, have an encounter for the first time in five years. Each one lives his life as he thinks that is the best for him, then they discover that this is not the life that they crave for and try to lead another life and assume a new identity, one which may provide a sense of belonging for them. When the brothers meet each other and uncover the reality of their lives, they decide to exchange their roles. Austin, the screenwriter wants to take the role of the cowboy, of Lee, while Lee admires the life of Austin (Abbotson : 224).

This play shows how Shepard looks at the American life and the American people. He pictures them as people who lack the certainty and stability in their lives; they try to find a new life for themselves because they are dissatisfied with their current status. Lee and Austin want to exchange their roles because they feel that there is something missing in their lives. The exchanging of the roles in the play is intended by Shepard to show the double nature of the American man in the modern world. He wants to show the duality of the modern American man and that is apparent in most of Shepard's characters.

Shepard's characters are usually given the opportunity to be not only characters but performers also. They are allowed to express themselves on the stage. As literature is a mirror of life, one can simply notice that **True West** is a panoramic study of the modern reality and the modern status of man. When Austin and Lee feel that they are not satisfied with their lives, they simply exchange roles in an attempt to find better identity in order to tell the audience about their reality. Because in most of Shepard's plays, the characters tell the audience about themselves more than what the other characters or the writer tell (Marranca : 10).

Williams (Quoted in Saddik: 132) argues that **True West** is an illustration of some theories of the postmodern identity; she adds that Austen and Lee suggested exchanging their roles as a way to solve their feelings of placelessness and alienation. A sense of dislocation and discontent was controlling the lives of the brothers, that is why they suggested exchanging their roles in an attempt to find belonging.

As a matter of fact, Shepard's play depicts the reality of the west. He wants to shed more light on the reality of the west. Almost all people thought of the west as the place where man can find himself and his identity. But Shepard proves the opposite, he depicts the modern man in this west as a man who is disappointed, depressed and wants to change his reality and his whole life and tries to find another one because nothing can provide him with the satisfaction he needs. Modern man feels the deficiency of everything in his life, he does not belong to where he is, and nothing can give him better life.

Although the play generally talks about family issues and sibling relationships, deeply it tackles the double nature of the modern American man and shows the duality of his life. It unveils the fake myths of the west in which the American people always place their hopes to avoid facing the bitter reality of their being (Abbotson : 224).

True West as a title is an ironic one and it carries a meaningful and expressive picture of the west. Shepard wants to show that it is not a true west but a fake one. The west is not as people think it is, it is not a utopian society, and he says that America is not utopia. The west in Shepard's perspective is a place where man is not convinced with his reality. It is a place where people look for a better life and new identity as in the case of Lee and Austin. Austin and Lee try to find something better for them by exchanging their roles in life and this is known for Shepard's characters, who often have more than one self; they change their selves throughout the course of the play. 'The Shepard's characters have not simple self but several selves which are continually changing' (Marranca : 10).

The play is about two brothers, Austin and Lee and their absent mother. The relationship between the brothers is not an easy one because they have been set from each other for five years and they have chosen completely different lives. Austin is an educated man, he has home and family and he is writing a love story for a producer to be filmed. His brother Lee has a different life; he is a cowboy, illiterate, lives in the desert and has nothing to worry about, because he is an outcast and unemployed. Most of the time, Lee is a thief and lives in the desert (Krasner : 293).

Unexpectedly, Lee arrives to the house where Austin labors to have some civility and calmness to complete his story. The relationship between the brothers is calm till this moment, but the struggle starts when Lee comes between Austin and Saul Kimmer, the producer of the story. Lee diverts the attention of the producer from Austin's imaginary story to his realistic and truer- to- life draft. He wants to be a

screenwriter like his brother and he tells the producer about his story and succeeds in convincing Kimmer of his contemporary western story. The tension between the brothers develops as Lee asks Austin to write his story because Lee is unable to write. In this moment, the struggle will give birth to a new life for both of them. Austin agrees to write Lee's story, instead, Lee will take Austin to the desert. That transformation in the characters proves that they don't feel safe in the west, "their identities are insecure, they blend into another one, exchange roles and assumes disguises." (Roudane : 27).

Austin is not like Lee, he appears softer and wiser. At the beginning he offers help and offers money to Lee; he enjoys the coming of his brother and enjoys the recalling of the memories of their youth together. This reveals that he yearns to his past because he feels that his present is empty and not considerable (Abbotson : 229). When Austin agrees to type the draft of Lee he [Lee] admits his likeness to Austin's middle class comfortable life. But Austin also admires Lee's free life and he is intrigued by Lee's life as evidenced by his attempt to drink and steal.

Ironically, Austin, the civilized and educated man attacks Lee first because Lee refused to take him to the desert at the beginning. Suddenly, Austin becomes violent to the refusal of his brother. This shows the role exchange in the play; Shepard shows the exchanging of the features and the characteristics of the characters with one another. Austin's double nature urges him to neglect his love story and go to the desert. He wants to experience a new life and a new world because he is not satisfied with his current life after the diversion of the producer from him to Lee's draft.

Lee also admires the life of Austin and wants to be a screenwriter and to live the life of middle class people like his brother. Susan C.W. Abbotson in her Thematic Guide to Modern Drama comments on the brothers saying:

In one sense the brothers are two halves of the person : Lee portrays the darker, more dangerous id which Austin concerned with placating the superego has spent his life repressing. Thus the play explores Shepard's belief in people double nature whereby one side is repressed in favor of the other. (229)

Shepard shows that the west is not the suitable place for living because as the audience notices, none of the brothers is comfortable in his life, thus they attempt to change their lives. At the beginning, Austin was not satisfied with Lee's life and Lee in return also was not convinced in city life and the art of Austin. But then they decide to take each other's role in a way to find mind peace and stability. Lee wishes to live his brother's middle class life and Austin longs to live in the desert and experience a new world, as he explains; 'I don't know. I wish I wasn't ---I wish I did Have to be doing business down here. I 'd like to just spend some time with you' (Shepard 14).

These lines show that Austin is not satisfied with his current life; he wants to discover a new life, a real and truer life. Austin wishes that he does not have to stay in his kitchen all the time and that means his life is imposed on him. He did not choose to stay but there are no more choices and solutions. Lee on the other hand wants to experience his brother's life, he wants to be a screenwriter, he says:

... if that oh- story of yours doesn't
go over with the guy –tell him I got
couple a' 'project' he might be interested in
Real commercials. Full a' suspense. True-to life stuff (15).

Lee's words visualize the reality of the west; he is not satisfied with life too. At the beginning, he was proud of his life, the life of the desert which symbolizes manhood and courage. But when he suggests his project to be a screenwriter, he unveils the reality of his uncomfortable life in the desert. In this time, the two brothers confess their failures in life, they decide to exchange roles and by doing this Shepard shows the duality and the double nature of the American individual. Ironically, Austin starts to drink and steal houses as Lee did at the beginning, while Lee struggles to type the draft. Shepard shows that the brothers' attempt to switch their lives is a result of the inability and ineffectiveness of their lives. For that reason, they try to find a place in which they can feel they fit more.

Shepard wants to show the sense of dislocation and displacement of the individuals in modern America. The longing of the brothers to a new life comes as a result of their feeling of displacement, neither of them is satisfied with the life which he leads, but even the alternatives are not suitable and convincing for both (Biggsy :20). Lee the cowboy, the man of desert doesn't belong to the city, he is a man of adventure as Austin imagines him 'you were always on some adventure" (26).

Austin does not belong to the desert because he is a man of writing, he cannot live out of the city, as Lee pictures him ' I used to picture you walkin' around some campus with yer arms full a' books' (26). This is the reality of both, each one has his own life even when they want to exchange their roles and experience a new one, still they cannot live in one another's place. This proves that both lives of Austin and Lee were just an illusion.

True West reflects the double nature of the American self. Shepard shows the American man as a creature without anything certain in his life. The play depicts the struggle between the brothers, between the cowboy and the screenwriter. Many critics prove that the play talks about the double nature of the self.

Because, the brothers who are set apart from each other when the play begins they cross over into each other's' role. The reversal of the roles becomes apparent when Saul Kimmer neglects the love story of Austin and takes Lee's story which is truer to western life. Lee changes his idea about city-life after he sees how his brother lives; he has family and home while Lee has nothing. Lee admits that he is

dissatisfied with his life and he is not immune to the things that his brother represents. He longs for the life of Austin and he thinks that the script of Austin is an opportunity to change his life. He envies the life of Austin and wonders what it would be like to be his brother.

On the contrary, Austin envies Lee's drifting and free life. He admires the irresponsible way of Lee's life style, he is attracted to Lee's individualism and involvement with nature. They still envy one another's life till they both admit jealousy. At the beginning, their seemingly stable identities start dissolve throughout the course of the play. Lee obsessively prepares for writing his draft while Austin abandons everything. He asks Lee to take him to desert. The desert becomes his salvation (Westgate : 731).

In most of Shepard's plays, the desert is connected with the imaginative room to dream while the city is associated with the corruption of that dream (Ibid). That is why Austin wants to go to the desert; he wants a place where he can think better. He wants to be like his brother. It is Lee who thinks better as Austin believes and that is the reason that makes Lee's story more realistic and down to earth which was finally accepted by Saul Kimmer.

Austin turns instinctively into the desert frontier for stability and certainty because he feels that he does not belong to his current place and life in general. The desert becomes a place that provides safety and certainty to Austin. The desert becomes the place of authenticity, of origin and of the real life. After his failure to be a screenwriter Austin wants to exchange his role with his brother and to go to the desert. He thinks that the desert is a utopian place; he wants to pursue his utopian vision of the desert.

In contrast, Lee admires the life of the city, when he saw the life of Austin and how he is living, typing his story, having his own home and family. He starts to be like Austin when he asks him to write his play. Lee yearns to city and family life. This shows man's double nature in the modern American world. Man is not certain of what he wants and what he wants to be. From the very beginning, the play shows the struggle between the brothers and this struggle represents the violent and undisciplined spirit of the old west represented by Lee. While the other represents the effect, controlled emptiness of the contemporary culture (Siegal : 240).

The most important thing the play explores is the myth of the double and Shepard himself clarifies the idea saying: "I wanted to write a play about double nature...I think we are split in much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal" (Quoted in Bassan : 12). These words show that the intension of Sam Shepard is to uncover the reality of the modern man and the reality of the west. He wants to show that the west is not a utopian society. It is the west of disintegration, of double nature and duality. Shepard also explores the theme of the dysfunctional family in the modern world. As Austin and Lee do not feel any sense of belonging, they were obliged to look for another life and identity (Krasner : 293).

Austin and Lee were left alone, the father abandoned them and escaped to the desert. The mother also is absent for a vacation to Alaska. This shows the irresponsibility of the parents towards their sons which led them to abhor their lives

and to look for a new world. They decided to switch their roles and lives, experience a new world and try to find another identity. Lee's life in the desert is not a noble adventure but the result of the abandonment of the parents, desperation and the deficiency of the social skill (295).

The sense of desperation and loneliness comes as a result of the dysfunctional family and this is apparent in Shepard's plays. In **True West** the father is absent, he escaped to the desert and left his family alone. The mother is also absent for Alaska in a vacation. This ultimately leads to the destruction of the other members of the family, as in the case of Austin and Lee. By reading the play, one can notice that the American family is what concerns the dramatist, victims and victimizers, the pursued and pursuer. In this play there are no survivors, no remission of pain. There are spaces which prove to be unbridgeable between the members of the family (Roudane': 5).

Williams (Quoted in Saddik:132), states that:

While Austin initially clings to a lingering nostalgia for a stable sense of identity, relationships and history, Lee 'registers a potentially positive sense of freedom which accompanies man when he loses his nostalgia for history and realizes that identity and the past are only myths to be performed and manipulated.

This shows how Shepard dramatizes the American man. The play shows that there is no rest and good life in modern America. No one can escape the bitter life. Sheppard dramatizes the relationships between fathers and sons, husbands and wives. All these relationships prove to be failure. That is one of the reasons that make the modern man look for another world and another identity as in the case of Austin and Lee.

Stephen j. Bottoms in an essay in The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard states that the reality in Shepard's plays is always problematic shown, many of his characters appear to be pairings as in the double nature in the case of Austin and Lee in **True West** (60). They represent different sides of the writer's own consciousness. Bottoms adds that Shepard reveals a constant insistence on mixing existential on metaphysical matters over the reality of human beings and identity (61).

As a matter of fact, it is apparent that what matters to Sam Shepard is the American family. In most of his plays, he pictures an American family that suffers from hard circumstances in America. In his plays he shows that someone has to suffer in his life. In the **True West** he pictures the relationship between two brothers and their absent parents. Father never appears in the play but the audience hears about him from the other characters. Shepard shows that each member of the family is like another member. There is a similarity between Lee and the 'Old Man', his father. Both of them live in the desert and they cannot live in the city. Lee says he cannot get a 'pencil' in the city, how can he live 'here'?

Austin, on the other hand, is like his mother who appears at the end of the play. He likes the life of the city, he wants some calmness in order to finish his 'research' as he calls for the love story that he writes. That is shown to the audience at the beginning of the play. As the play progresses both Lee and Austin want to exchange roles and switch their lives. In one moment, they discover that they have to change their lives in an attempt to get a new life and a new identity. The cowboy becomes screenwriter and the screenwriter becomes a cowboy.

This exchanging in the roles comes as a result of the dysfunctional family and the hard circumstances of life. No one feels comfortable in his life. The gap between the sons and their parents also play an important role in their unstable lives. Shepard shows that the American man has no fixed and stable life because he cannot find better circumstances for himself and his family. He wants to say that the modern American man has no real identity but he still looks for that identity because of the bad conditions of life, the American man starts to change his life in an attempt to find a better one. Even when Austin and Lee exchanged their roles they were not sure of their lives. Before the end of the play when they quarreled with each other, the audience does not know what will happen to them at the end. Shepard did not solve the problem but left the audience bewildered about the brothers' future because that is what he wants to deliver, the bewilderment and uncertainty of the modern American man.

When he presented **True West**, Shepard's perspective of identity as a presentation had been protracted to the idea of the capitalist American dream and the truth about its reality. **True West** contributed in uncovering the fiction of any claims to an 'authentic' or intrinsic national being grounded in cultural origin, race, social class or sexuality, inviting access to the fluid definitions of American character that could be presented on the stage and generating potentials of depiction in the distorted limits beyond those offered in the character representations of modern realism (Saddik : 137). So, the mission of **True West** was to uncover the reality of the west, to show people the bitter truth of their community. It's not the land of opportunities anymore, the society is controlled by the capitalists and the one who talks is money only.

CONCLUSION

Exchanging roles is an important theme in Sam Shepard' **True West**. Many researches have been done on the play, but not on this specific idea. The American west has been described as a land of opportunities and the paradise on earth, but Shepard, and according to the findings of the paper, proves the opposite here. As mentioned in the paper the title of the play is an ironic one, and the aim of the play is to present the real west for his audience. He wanted to write a play about how people are divided and double natured.

The researcher concludes that Shepard's play visualizes the dislocation and placelessness of the American man and his attempt to find better reality and new identity. Due to the inauthenticity of, and dissatisfaction with their lives, Austin and Lee decide to exchange their roles, and this shows their double natures, they cannot find better life because Shepard leaves the audience bewildered to what will happen

to them as he ends the play with the brothers facing each other in a quarrel. The researcher concludes that, according to the play, the American man is a placeless, inauthentic and has no real identity in the modern age of America that's why he tries to exchange his role in life.

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پوختە

گۆرپنەوادی پۆل لە درامای (True West) ی (Sam Shepard)

شانۆی جیهانی مۆدیرن، بە تایبەتیش شانۆی ئەمریکایی، باس لە پەيوەندی مەزموونەکان دەکات بە خۆی و بە کۆمەڵگەشەو. مەزموونەکانی ئەمریکایی لەبارەکی نادۆڵی و ناجیگیدا دەژیەت چونکە ژانی پەریەتی لە گۆرپانکاری شۆکی گەورە. بۆیە درامای مۆدیرن دەبێت بە وەلامدانەوێک بۆ باردۆخە گۆرپانکاری کۆمەڵگە مۆدیرن. (Sam Shepard) یەکێک بوو لە پێشەنگانی درامای مۆدیرنی ئەمریکایی. شانۆی (True West 1980) باس لە کۆمەڵەیک بابەت و بیروۆکی گەرم دەکات وەک مردن، خیانەت لە 'خەونی ئەمریکایی'، خرافاتی نەتەوایی ئەمریکایی، زیاتر و زیاتر بە میکانیک بوونی ژانی تاکێ ئەمریکی، هەروەها گەران بەدوای رەگ و پەشەیی خێزانی ئەمریکی. لەم شانۆییەدا سام شێپەر (Sam Shepard) سروشتی دوو لایەنە تاکێ ئەمریکایی دەردەخات و باس لە هەوڵەکانی دەکات بۆ دۆزینەوادی شوناسیی تر لە رێگەی گۆرپنەوادی رۆڵەو. ئۆستین (Austin) و لێی (Lee)، کە دوو بران، بۆ یەکەم جار لە ماوەی (5) سالدا یەکتری دەبینن. ئۆستین سیناریۆ نووسە کە هەول دەدات لە رێگەی نووسینی چیرۆکی خۆشەویستی و پەخشکردنی لە تەلەفزیۆنەو رێگای خۆی لە ژياندا بدۆزێتەو. بەلام براکە، لێی، هیچ نیە جگە لە شوانکارەییەکی نەخویندەوار.

کاتێک کە یەکتر دەبینن، دان دەنێن بە شکستیان لە ژياندا، وە بریار دەدەن ئێشەکانیان ئالوگۆر بکەن. ئۆستین دەبێت بە شوان و لێی بە سیناریۆنووس. شێپەر (Shepard) واقعی تاکێ ئەمریکی دەخاتەروو، وەها وێنای دەکات کە لە ژيانی خۆی رازی نیە. لەم رێگایەو واقعی ئەمریکایی بوون نیشان دەدات، وە پێمان دەلێت کە، وای لێدەکەن لە ژيانی خۆی پەزەمەند نەبێت و هەولێ دۆزینەوادی ژيانیی تر شوناسیی تر بدات.

الخلاصة

تبادل الأدوار في مسرحية سام شبرد " الغرب الحقيقي "

يهتم المسرح الحديث وخصوصا المسرح الأمريكي بعلاقة الانسان المعاصر مع نفسه وكذلك بعلاقته مع مجتمعه. يعيش الانسان الأمريكي المعاصر في حالة من الشك وعدم الاستقرار وذلك يعود للمتغيرات الكثيرة والصدمات التي مر بها. من جانب فشل الحلم الأمريكي والحربين العالميتين التي مر بها من جانب اخر. لذلك المسرح الحديث انعكاس للظروف الهشة للمجتمع الحديث. يعد سام شبرد من اعمدة المسرح الأمريكي الحديث، ومسرحيته الغرب الحقيقي (1980) تحاكي مفاهيم وافكار مهمة مثل اجهاض الحلم الأمريكي وتلاشي اسطورة امريكا العالمية و تزايد مكننة الحياة الأمريكية بالاضافة الى البحث عن جزور العائلة الأمريكية. في الغرب الحقيقي شبرد يتطرق الى طبيعة الانسان الأمريكي المزدوجة ومحاولاته لأيجاد هوية جديدة عن طريق استبدال دوره في الحياة. اوستن ولي هما بطلا المسرحية يقابلان بعضهما لأول مرة بعد خمس سنوات. اوسن هو كاتب تلفزيوني يحاول شق طريقة من خلال كتابة قصة حب وعرضها على التلفزيون بينما لي اخيه هو راعي بقر غير متعلم. عندما يتقابلان يعترفان بفشلهما في الحياة ويقرران ان يستبدلا الادوار. اوستن يصبح راعي بقر بينما لي يحاول ان يكون الكاتب التلفزيوني. هنا يحاول شبرد ان يبين حقيقة الانسان الأمريكي الحديث وكيف هو غير راضي وغير مقتنع بحياته. يوضح شبرد حقيقة الغرب وحقيقة الانسان الحقيقي. بسبب تلك المتغيرات والشكوك في حياته، يشعر الفرد الأمريكي بعدم الرضا عن حياته ويحاول ان يجد هوية بديلة وحياة جديدة له.