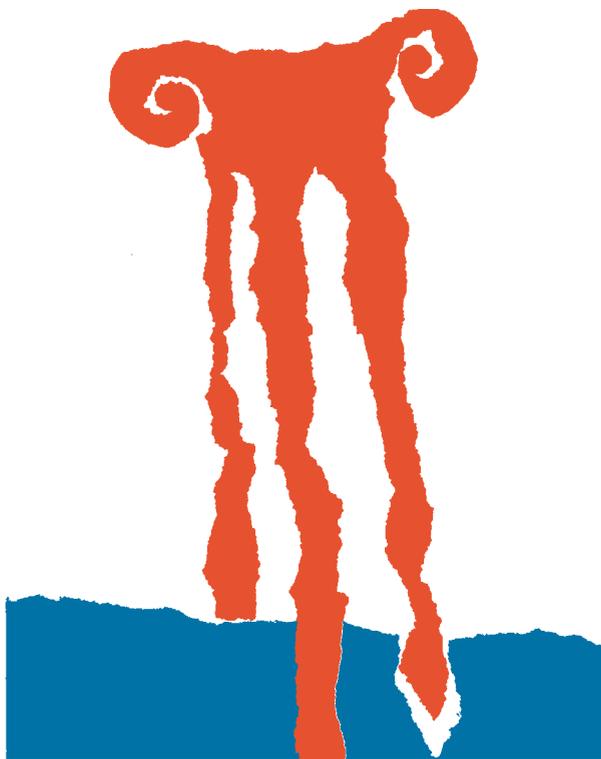


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**Visions of the True West: Sam Shepard,
Identity and Myth**

Juan A. Tarancón

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Visions of the True West: Sam Shepard, Identity and Myth

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Abstract

Ever since Sam Shepard began his career on the Off-Off Broadway theatre scene of the mid-sixties, he managed to combine the formal experimentation and the contesting attitude expected from a celebrity brewed in the cafés of New York's Lower East Side with a unique personal imagery that invoked popular-culture icons. However, when in the late 1970s he started to produce family dramas rooted in the US well-made play tradition, the harmonious critical response cracked. With this paper I mean to throw light onto Shepard's extensively quoted and censured shift. I will hopefully illustrate the extent to which his family plays continue to address the same concerns as his early more experimental ones –mainly the adoption of popular myths, the persevering research on characterization in the theatre, and the exposition

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of the ingrained contradictions of the self— while, at the same time, they reconsider traditional notions of realism in the face of larger political changes.

Sam Shepard's *True West* was first produced at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in July 1980 and was often considered his most realistic, accessible and straightforward play to date (Tucker 1992: 136; Shewey 1997: 131; Oumano 1987: 138; Kleb 1981: 120). It represented Shepard's third swerve into domestic drama, a genre that no US dramatist, from Clifford Odets to Edward Albee to such contemporaries as John Guare or Lanford Wilson, could refrain from experimenting with. After *Buried Child* and *Curse of the Starving Class*, two melodramatic pieces that talked of decline and lineage degeneration, Shepard produced *True West*, a sincere and often blunt play about two antagonistic brothers that meet unexpectedly at their mother's bungalow in a Southern California suburb. He rose to the occasion with an insight into the archetypal story of Cain and Abel from the perspective of the legendary West of cowboys, now the province of Hollywood enterprises. Interestingly, *True West* reveals itself as an incisive examination of Shepard's vision of the mythic and of its function in contemporary so-

ciety. Often considered a “modern teller of myths” (Graham 1995: 114), Shepard has expressed his belief that myth, in its ancient sense, has been “demolished” (in Rosen 1993: 5). In turn, his articulation of the mythic is similar to Lyotard’s commercial mythology as anticipated in *The Postmodern Condition* (1980). Shepard uses stories and characters borrowed from every expression of popular culture to make poignant statements about contemporary man. The eclecticism that this new mythology discloses serves, ultimately, to stress the disintegration of culture and the emptiness of the individual in a society that, as William G. Doty has noted (1995: 189) “celebrates its own ‘mythlessness’ because it considers itself truly ‘scientific’”. Shepard uses a wide variety of artifacts and icons taken from popular culture to create a nostalgic landscape that conjures up images of a golden past in the face of contemporary social breakup. In this paper I have attempted to contextualize and to account historically for the changes in Sam Shepard’s writings in the 1970s. Moreover, given Shepard’s reliance on popular myths and folk stories of the US West, I would like to synthesize the use he makes of communal legends and the postmodern celebration of the decline of narratives that persistently breaks the smooth surface of even his less experimental plays. It is my contention that a play like *True West*, with its reliance on mythic dynam-

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ics, contains the possibility both of the holistic reading and of the contrary deconstructive one. Shepard's treatment of pop artifacts elevates postwar manufactured commodities to the status of myth in a society that, as Doty observes (1995: 189), considers itself postmythical, which creates a further tension that must be viewed against traditional conceptions of myth as delineated by Joseph Campbell in the late forties and the dynamics of liberal capitalism that informs postmodernism.

In an article assembled by Robert Coe for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1980, Sam Shepard maintained that for him "we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal" and disclosed that with *True West* he "wanted to write a play about double nature" (in Wade 1997: 103). Yet, when compared to his previous efforts to dramatize the wobbly condition of the self, *True West* proves to be, if only on the surface, a more conventional play. Many critics, maybe aided by the explicit autobiographical traits in the play, rushed to demonstrate that the two brothers stood for the two conflicting sides of Shepard's nature, the playwright and the cowboy, the celebrity and the outcast. William Kleb, in his well-known article "Worse Than Being Homeless: *True West* and the Divided Self", took the issue a little further and exposed the inconsistencies of the narrative to illustrate his

claims that the play is the product of Austin's repressed mind and that Lee is "a figment of [his] imagination" (1981: 120). And Shepard himself said once that, should the play be made into a film, he would have one person playing both roles (in Wade 1997: 103). These narrow and limiting readings of the play do not seem very satisfactory to me, because they dramatically diverge from the audience's experience of the vital stark hostility of the two brothers. In this analysis, rather than close the play off, I mean to open it up for an inexhaustible scrutiny capable of integrating the arbitrariness of some of the situations as denounced by Kleb or even Tucker (1992: 137) and the realism heralded by the critics mentioned above. The interest in writing a play about the two split sides of human nature that Sam Shepard voiced in his conversations with Robert Coe is also reflected in the play's social milieu. In the course of the action, the two leading characters summon different social orders, namely those that result from their adherence to the frontier myth and the institution of the family, but neither of these manages to constitute the kind of belief structure that the characters seem to be demanding so badly. From this point of view, *True West* is also about the exhaustion of myth and about its immediate consequences. The play suggests that the erosion of myth –and of myth's communal context– entails the attenuation of community, and this is rep-

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resented, first, through the disintegration of one family and, second, through the isolation of the different family units living in the Southern California suburbs. *True West* addresses the myth of the West anew to comment on the suburban middle-class that populates California, that is to say, the new West.

As it has been mentioned above, the play continues the theme of the dualistic conflict that Shepard so much liked in Brecht's *In the Jungle of the Cities*. It is built on the continuous confrontation of two brothers Austin and Lee, and, during nine scenes that resonate with the musicality, unity and purpose of the different movements of an opera, they argue incessantly over their individual antagonistic present, past, and future lives as they try to write the script for a western. Lee is a petty thief that has turned up unexpectedly at his mothers house. There, he finds his younger brother Austin, a seemingly devoted husband and son that is watching over the suburban bungalow while their mother takes a vacation trip to Alaska. The nature of the two brothers, the former responsible and compromising, the latter impulsive and wild, ensures that they soon start arguing about apparently insignificant things, which brightens up the dramatic action with sheer energy. The play resonates with the mythic overtones of a male frontier-like scenario where conflicts are worked out between men. In the course

of the representation, the two brothers switch roles, yet the sense of a deeply-rooted antagonism and inevitable conflict informs the performance all the time. The presence of Lee is never accounted for. He starts interrogating Austin, who, unsuccessfully, tries to write a first draft of the movie script he is to submit to Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer, who is visiting him the following day. Austin tries to be patient and keep calm -presumably, his brother's behavior is not new to him- while Lee displays his flamboyant sarcasm. Austin initially manages to weather the storm. He remains distant in an effort to preserve his authority within the household, but Lee eventually erodes Austin's self-control. He moves around the kitchen like one of the coyotes that yap outside, taking over the physical space and, when he asks Austin for his car, the conversation winds up in their first physical confrontation. Again, Shepard has not attempted to create rounded characters that clash on the basis of their distinct opposing identities, as these identities prove to be unnatural and badly unstable. It is instead the arrangement of each scene and the musicality of the characters' speech and demeanor that render the play harmonious and give the audience the impression of a more consistent and realistic piece. Yet, this time the set is made to conform to the tradition of the US well-made play. People who had gone to see other previous Shepard's productions often faced a

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nearly bare stage, but on this occasion Shepard himself gave abundant directions as to the arrangement of the set. The action takes place in the lavishly-furnished sitcom-style kitchen of a home in a California suburb. A note on the scene even indicates the different plants and appliances that decorate and furnish the room as well as their precise location.

Austin, the younger brother, is the clean-cut educated suburban father that makes an easy living writing movie scripts. Lee is already in his forties and, like their father, he lives in the desert. Lee is the discontented movie-like Western hero that at the time survives as a housebreaker. The two brothers, who are poles apart when the representation starts off, are transformed and become indistinct to the point where they cross over into each other's role and apparently singular personality. While Lee tries to come up with a movie script for Austin's producer, Austin starts behaving like Lee, eventually breaking into the neighboring houses and fostering the idea that Lee will agree to take him to the desert to live. The consistency of the play results from the theatricality and expressiveness of the characters' otherwise inopportune and embarrassing confrontations. Moreover, the tempo of the play is determined by a carefully assembled pattern of outbreaks of struggle and

violence and quieter moments at which the characters gasp for breath.

Austin eventually accedes to Lee's unremitting requests and loans him his car. He knows that Lee will use it to rob the neighbors but in this way he secures some time to deal with Saul Kimmer without the embarrassing presence of his brother. While the producer meets Austin, Lee enters into the kitchen carrying a television set. Rather unexpectedly, and implausibly, Kimmer and Lee arrange a game of golf for the early morning and Lee then badgers Kimmer until he agrees to consider an idea he has for a western. After the golf game Saul Kimmer decides to abandon Austin's love story and do Lee's true-to-life western instead. At this point in time, the reversal of roles becomes apparent. Lee was formerly associated with their father and the desert while Austin was clearly on their mother's side. As Lee pours beer down and talks of his incursions in the desert, Austin waters his mother's plants with a vaporizer. This initial disposition, Jeffrey D. Hooper notes (1993: 77) evokes a pre-Christian conflict between the patriarchal and the matriarchal orders. However, things are not so unequivocal and early in the play Lee seems to resent his brother's Ivy League Diploma and suburban paradise. When Austin invites Lee to spend a couple of days with him and

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his family, Lee attempts to ridicule his brother, but his words sound rather embittered and full of resentment (1986: 9):

AUSTIN: You could come up north with me, you know.

LEE: What's up there?

AUSTIN: My family.

LEE: Oh, that's right, you got the wife and kiddies now don't ya'. The house, the car, the whole slam. That's right.

AUSTIN: You could spend a couple days. See how you like it. I've got an extra room.

LEE: Too cold up there.

The audience gains a deeper insight into the psyche of the two brothers when Lee returns from a little tour around the neighborhood and tells Austin about his potential victims (1986: 12):

AUSTIN: See any houses?

(pause)

LEE: Couple. Couple a' real nice ones. One of them didn't even have a dog. Walked right up and stuck my head in the window. Not a peep. Just a sweet kinda' suburban silence.

AUSTIN: What kind of place was it?

LEE: Like a paradise. Kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside. Warm yellow lights. Mexican tile all around. Copper

pots hangin' over the stove. Ya' know like they got in the magazines. Blonde people movin' in and outa' the rooms, talkin' to each other. (*pause*) Kinda' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know?

Lee admits that he is dissatisfied with his life and, furthermore, is not immune to the things his brother represents. Lee yearns for the suburban paradise Austin has and views his script as an opportunity to change his life around, make some money and buy a house (1986: 24). After all, Lee says he always wondered what it would be like to be his brother (1986: 26). Austin, on the contrary, envies Lee his drifting way of life. He is attracted to Lee's individualism and involvement with the land. By the end of act one the initial friction and antagonism gives way to the acknowledgement of their mutual jealousy. The initial seemingly stable identities start to dissolve and each brother begins to adopt the originally distinguishing posture of the other. Lee obsessively sets about writing a movie script for Saul Kimmer while Austin, enraptured by his desire to abandon everything and escape to the desert, becomes violent and surprisingly irrational. The contours of their identities begin to blur and the two brothers gradually switch roles. The beginning of scene seven has Lee struggling to type with one finger and Austin sitting on the kitchen

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floor with a whiskey bottle. While Lee is trying to concentrate on his work, Austin gets drunk and undertakes a little tour through the neighborhood. By this point, Austin has already acquired a western drawl, not unlike Lee, and speaks witty amusing lines in response to Lee's pleas for help because, as he had anticipated (1986: 18), he can tell a story "off the tongue but ... can't put it down on paper". The mounting tension ends with one final battle between the two brothers. At first Lee openly refuses to take Austin with him to the desert but the two end up making a deal: Austin will write the script down for Lee as he narrates his story about the two men that chase each other across Tornado Country, and Lee, in turn, will take him to the desert. In the final scene, tired of it all, Lee changes his mind and, ready to leave again, starts collecting his mother's antique plates and silverware, but Austin grabs the phone from the floor, lunges at Lee, and wraps the cord around his neck. The two stumble about the kitchen as Austin strangles Lee from behind. When Lee's body goes limp Austin releases him, but just as Austin starts moving towards the exit, Lee jumps to his feet and blocks Austin's escape. At this point, with the two brothers crouching and watchful for each other's next step, the lights go slowly to black and the play concludes. The spectator leaves the theatre with the unsettling feeling that the conflict is not resolved and, furthermore,

cannot be resolved, that the two brothers will fight to death in similar outbursts of drunken violence.

It has been mentioned above that Sam Shepard repeatedly resorts to widespread mythic conceptions in his plays. Shepard himself has frequently talked and written about myth, and most of the theatre critics that approach his work strive to integrate popular mythic patterns and his highly personal dramaturgical designs. Doris Auerbach, for instance, perceives him as a modern “‘mythmaker’ because his subject is America [and] the dream betrayed” (in Smith 1998: 33), although he often located these concerns in the non-commercial venues of Off and Off-Off Broadway. However, it remains to be elucidated here what this too-often-underdefined critical concept designates in the looming postmodern society that witnessed such Shepard’s productions as *True West* and, moreover, what are these myths that Shepard summons in his work. In his essay “Silent Myths Singing in the Blood: The Sites of Production and Consumption of Myths in a ‘Mythless’ Society”, William G. Doty sticks to the general idea that myths have a unifying function. Myths, Doty states (1995: 190), provide “the coherences of meaning that pull the disparate elements of society into some sort of cultural integrity”. From this widely shared

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critical perspective, myth becomes, in Doty's words (1995: 193),

one of the fundamental elements by which "civilization" adds the communal sharing of the city ... to the individual experience of living in the world, even when that world in its postmodernist dimensions lacks the cohesiveness and elegance of earlier ideals.

Likewise, Doty suggests that "myth-ed stories are the linguistic funds from which social discourse is always drawn" (1995: 193). We can proceed once it seems clear that myths, if we accept Doty's interpretation, are generally regarded as firmly established societal meanings that add to people's experience of their individuality and by virtue of which they relate to the community, and, moreover, that the experience of the mythic has a clear linguistic foundation. Yet, as a consequence of our poststructuralist sentiments, myths also reveal artificially constructed value systems that can of course be changed. William G. Doty (1995: 206) also attempts a brief typology of myth on the basis of the different ways they signify and, among the ten types he outlines, he mentions the Western frontier, whose manifestation he terms a "rhetorical structure ... excellent on showing the bare bones of the relevant psychological and rethorical images in classical cowboy movies", and, by extension, in the literature of the US West. Nevertheless, the Western frontier as mythic manifestation, frequently

attributed to most of Shepard's plays, also partakes of some other types delineated by Doty, more precisely, and insofar as the frontier dream projects value judgements, gender modeling and role choices and aspirations, it can be seen, in Doty's own words, as a larger "overarching cultural frame" (1995: 206). Judging from Shepard's various and vague definitions of myth, one is tempted to conclude that, although his use of the concept is often ambiguous, he presupposes these ideas sketched by Doty and that he also conceives myth as "value judgements and data-rich conclusions that determine the national budget" (Doty 1995: 205).

In *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, a volume of prose pieces that gathers Sam Shepard's impressions of Bob Dylan's 1975 tour, which he joined with the initial project of writing the script for a planned film chronicle, Sam Shepard states that "[m]yth is a powerful medium because it talks to the emotions and not to the head". According to him, for the mythic to serve its integrative purpose, it must appeal to the spectator's inner fantasies. "Some myths", Shepard continues, "have the capacity for changing something inside us" (1987: 62). A few years later, in a short essay by Sam Shepard written originally in 1977 and entitled "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library", myth appears as a poignant and convincing

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element in the design of his plays and in the effect they have on the audience; and in 1993, in a relatively recent interview (Rosen 1993: 5), Shepard reflected on the traditional meaning of myth and stated that it originally “served a purpose in our life”. In that same interview, Shepard further illustrated his own approach (1993: 5):

Myth served as a story in which people could connect themselves in time to the past. And thereby connect themselves to the present and the future. Because they were hooked up with the lineage of myth. It was so powerful and so strong that it acted as a thread in culture. And that’s been destroyed. Myth in its truest form has now been demolished. It doesn’t exist any more. All we have is fantasies about it. Or ideas that don’t speak to our inner self at all, they just speak to some lame notions about the past. But they don’t connect with anything. We’ve lost touch with the essence of myth.

It is evident that Shepard, not unlike Doty, looks at the role of myths as providing “the coherences of meaning that pull the disparate elements of society into some sort of cultural integrity”. We have seen that, on the one hand, Shepard uses myth to achieve an emotional response from the audience. On the other, he approaches myth and mythic elements as resources capable of producing an integrative experience in a society where social cohesion has been replaced by inde-

terminacy and doubt. Even in a society where myth has lost its ancient supremacy, it always offers a certain sensation of depth and echoes of universal harmony to know that present malaise can be dealt with through a resurrection of the past -however fruitless this belief might ultimately be. Throughout his career, Shepard has often invoked the unifying power of national symbols with the conviction that identity and meaning lie somewhere in the past. His characters look back in time in order to find the nuclear ethics that can ultimately endow their lives with a purpose and upon which a society can be firmly established. In his chronicle of the Rolling Thunder Revue tour, the mythic country of New England appears as an essential constituent of their national (but unknown at the moment) value system. He wrote about these emotions in *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, his fractured account of the Bob Dylan's 1975 tour (1987: 45):

A feeling that in the past at least there was some form or structure and that our present state of madness could be healed somehow by ghosts. Everywhere replicas of history are being sold. Townspeople are wearing costumes, flags are flying. The present is being swallowed whole by the past. Inside of all this, Rolling Thunder is searching for something too. Trying to make connections. To find some kind of landmark along the way. It's not just another concert tour but more like a pilgrimage. We're looking for ourselves in everything.

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This approach to national myths is rather ambiguous. “Invocation and debunking”, Callens claims (1997: 137), “go hand in hand”. In his plays, Shepard makes ample use of mythic patterns that range from the rhetorical structure of the Western frontier, with its dubious frontier ethic, to archetypal biblical stories, but, in general, while it chronicles their devastating consequences for the individual, the dramatic action confirms that by 1979 these notions about myth are antiquated and ineffectual. As he suggests, the original purpose of myth is now corrupt and all that is left is misrepresentation, a distorted perception of mythologies that proves unable to “connect with anything”.

Shepard also employs a number of mass culture objects that modernity has turned into pop relics and, moreover, he summons US icons taken from popular culture. Shepard’s use of mythic formulas evidence the loss of the essence of myth, which will ultimately serve to denounce the alienation of the individual from his environment, but the adoption of kitsch imagery, which includes old Impalas, chrome diners, B-movies or Gene Vincent-like hairdos, and cultural icons such as Paul Bunyan, Tammy Wynette, Mick Jagger, Jesse James, Mae West or Kirk Douglas, unveils one further contradiction at the core of postmodernism. It is significant that Doty distinguishes

between these popular myths and those that function as overarching worldview determinants. The nostalgic attachment to these outmoded objects exposes the rapid “obsoletization” of commodities and the threatening dynamics of a new emerging culture for which the characters in Shepard’s plays are not prepared. Only in this new culture we call postmodernism, in which swiftness has become a commodity in itself and uncertainty is celebrated by the institutions, do these objects attain a mythical status. Yet, the same culture that turned these objects into kitsch myth has rendered myth ineffectual. And it is this contradiction that leads the audience to see bigger contradictions in the United States and perceive the country’s disintegration. Unlike archetypal stories, the imagery mentioned above cannot reflect a wholeness or reveal a distinct social purpose. Instead it reflects and reveals the fragmented nature and the loss of objectives of the contemporary world. Imagery is a powerful device, because, to use Marranca’s expression (1981: 19), it is not “tied to motivation”. Moreover, she states (1981: 20), it is metaphoric and representational, but, in plays like *True West*, all that it can represent is a metaphorical disarray. In *True West*, the spaces that the mythic images employed by Shepard help outline soon become strange. The suburb appears as unfamiliar as the desert, and Lee and Austin progressively detach themselves from their mother’s

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house. These modern myths, as Shepard has put it, “don’t speak to our inner self at all, they just speak to some lame notions about the past”. Thus, in his plays, the various allusions to myth contribute -not without irony- to the acute sense of tragedy inherent in the fate of the protagonists, and, furthermore, unsettle theatre audiences by exploding their ideas about individual and social consciousness.

From his early one-act pieces of the 1960s to his lengthy more recent efforts, his plays have always expressed a mordant view on contemporary society, and the loss of a mythical order that works like *True West* expose contribute to his embittered social critique. Moreover, Shepard’s recuperation of myth is closely connected with a new experience of time, which is itself a substantial part of the dynamics of this new society we call postmodernism. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Richard Harvey has shown at length how different social formations cannot be abstracted from their experience of time, and, to use Harvey’s words (1989: 224), the development in western countries from the locality groupings of rural societies to liberal capitalism is paralleled by the transition from continuous time to the successive acceleration of time. These transformations in the way people experience time spring from the needs of a new economic system. The consequences of

these changes, which, above all, depend on the acceleration of time, affect people's experience of the past and the future. The time of people's life experience is somehow compressed, their knowledge of the past reduced and misleading, and, in turn, the future appears uncertain. In previous social formations, as Gurvitch maintains (in Harvey 1989: 224), the past was projected in the present and the future. The future tense of Shakespeare's plays, for instance, regards the events to come as if they had already taken place, one could look into the future with the certainty conferred by the knowledge that the unfolding events have been theorized down before they actually occur. As a result, Shakespeare's characters experience their own selves as an integrated whole and as a continuum in time. In contrast, when the experience of time is so compressed as it is in postmodern societies, it is impossible "to make connections" with the past or locate oneself in time through, as Shepard envisions, the dynamics of national myths. Likewise, his vivid recollection of New England, complete with "replicas of history" for sale and native residents "wearing costumes" on the Mayflower, proves that the recuperation of the past (and history) is only decorative, disclosing a different dimension of pastness when compared, for example, with the experience of the past in Shakespeare's work. This revamped past shows that some of its elements have been selected in

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the light of present political and economical pressures and, therefore, the lineage Shepard mentions proves insubstantial and any interaction with the characters' inner selves short-lived. Shepard's characters appear fractured and stranded as they negotiate their individuality in the midst of a cascade of popular images, national symbols, folk stories and legendary weirdos to which their identities are precariously connected and, in addition, their unsettled and transient vinculum with the past helps to sustain an indeterminate and unpredictable future. John Lion, founder of The Magic Theatre and responsible for the production of a number of Shepard's plays in the second half of the 1970s, also commented on Shepard's approach to character and noted (in Bottoms 1998: 186) that "the 'characters' he writes, while appearing whole, are actually fragmented, a series of masks, and, omigod, they are us". It is in this sense that, as the decade advanced, Shepard's output veered towards the ontological insecurity that according to seminal critics like Brian McHale (1987: xii) characterize postmodernist literature.

In a 1984 interview (in Bottoms 1998: 7), Shepard still considered mythic schemes a suitable mechanism to disclose the beliefs and principles that hold a community together and arouse unifying feelings in the audience. In this interview, he

insists that, through his depiction of mythic heroes and his handling of popular western legends, he sought to “snare ... emotions and feelings that are connected with everybody”. This approach is obvious in *True West*, where the characters want to secure their position in an all-inclusive social scheme that might confer a feeling of belonging, yet the final result leaves the audience skeptical as to the present significance of their aspirations. Shepard’s views on myth demonstrate that he, of course, is not ignorant about its traditional function, but his particular look makes myth’s current decadence manifest. *True West* resorts to two irreconcilable mythic schemes that seek to integrate the different versions of masculinity that the two antagonistic brothers represent. Lee stands for the myth of the frontier while Austin represents a new tamed breed of Western hero associated with the industrialized West. The former is associated with unrestrained manliness, trailers, mobility, rootlessness, humor and violence. The latter with family ties, suburban bungalows, freeways and PTA meetings. Although Bottoms maintains (1998: 8) that Shepard’s ideas on myth are consistent with the doctrines of high modernism, the denouement of plays like this and their ultimate failure to integrate Shepard’s mythic vision and reflect something like a shared system of values leave him closer to postmodern tenets. In *True West*, Lee represents the lamebrain that still holds

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some absurd fantasy about the past. In the opening scene of the play, with his reference to the “forefathers” (1986: 6), Lee unveils the connections with the frontier myth -although Austin does not initially know what he is talking about. At first sight Lee seems to connect with the genuine essence of myth as delineated by Shepard above -“a thread in culture”-, but the action proves that Lee’s perspective is delusive and futile. Lee is a cowboy who has never worked a cow. The myth he lays open is a barren and doomed one. Lee’s conception of the West is little more than an old-fashioned romantic notion of unbound individualism and disdain for regulation in a male scenario that only exists in his imagination and that, ultimately, conceals no heroism at all. The new way of expressing the world and the self is through the recollection of a number of old artifacts and icons, that is, through an inadequate appropriation of the past. Marranca has noted that (1981: 20), contemporary life “is dominated by the images of things, not the things themselves” and, as has been mentioned above, the relationship established with these images does not reflect a shared system of values. Shepard takes these ideas to the stage, which results in a new theatrical disposition that contributes to both the dramatization and the denunciation of the world’s fragmented nature.

In his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell writes (1968: 11):

It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid. We remain fixated to the unexorcised images of our infancy, and hence disinclined to the necessary passages of our adulthood. In the United States there is even a pathos of inverted emphasis: the goal is not to grow old, but to remain young; not to mature away from Mother, but to cleave to her.

Moreover, Campbell notes (1968: 16) that, in myth, the hero must show society the way to its rebirth through trial and sacrifice. The tragedy in *True West* results, not only from the emptiness and the ultimate ineffectiveness of both Lee's fantasies and Austin's present life, but also from the balanced juxtaposition of the two protagonists' aspirations throughout the play. Lee's daydreams are poisonous both for his maturation and for the development of the community, and Austin's achievements are hollow and sterile. In addition to that, the very dynamics of the transformation of the two brothers and the play's denouement betrays the decline of traditional mythical "aid" and the inevitability of the characters' neurosis.

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In the course of the representation, Lee soon demonstrates that he is aware of the need for social regeneration mentioned by Campbell. He seems to cling to the opportunity that his deal with producer Saul Kimmer symbolizes and dreams of forming a family. Originally, Lee's metamorphosis represents a step forward in the context of the play and although it could symbolically bring about the actual regeneration of society, it would be a phony rebirth because it cannot be ignored that his motivations are mean and egotistic, that he proceeds as if writing the script were another amusing pastime and not a job, and that he never gets the name of the producer right. Moreover, after Lee's impending shift, it is his brother Austin that repudiates the society that Lee lusts after and of which he once was a member; the presence of Austin always undermines Lee's dreams and aspirations. Austin becomes then the upholder of a more vacuous frontier dream and, with his regression, ties Lee down. There are no heroes in *True West*, not at least the kind of hero that can help revitalize society. What is more, as myths lose their essence, neurosis settles. The degeneration of traditional myths and the rise of a new pop mythology in a society that considers itself postmythical and purely scientific exposes the dispersal of meaning, the waning of community, and the psychological backbone of individuals whose selves have been torn asunder.

The play takes place in their mother's house to which the two brothers have returned after accomplishing what looks like the biblical pilgrimage of the prodigal son. Austin and Lee left their home in a quest for self definition but their present dissatisfaction reveals, once more, the inadequacy of myths in modern culture. When the play starts they have symbolically completed a journey; however, the action reveals that they are embarked in an inverted expedition. They return, not after accomplishing something like a self definition, but because they, in the words of Joseph Campbell, refuse to "mature away from the mother". It is true that the two brothers shift roles, Austin becomes Lee, and viceversa, yet they were a fake from the start. Austin has abandoned his wife, his kiddies, and "the whole slam", and Lee was unable to live in the desert like his father. They were not that different. Indeed, the reversal of roles only serves to disclose their similarities. After all, neither of them was the person he pretended to be. The opening lines of the play unveil that the two brothers seem to have returned to their infancy in the playground of their childhood years (1986: 5):

LEE: So, Mom took off for Alaska, huh?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

LEE: Sorta' left you in charge.

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AUSTIN: Well, she knew I was coming down here so she offered me the place.

LEE: You keepin' the plants watered?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

LEE: Keepin' the sink clean? She don't like even a single tea leaf in the sink ya' know.

AUSTIN: (*trying to concentrate on writing*) Yeah, I know.
(*pause*)

LEE: She gonna be up there a long time?

AUSTIN: I don't know.

LEE: Kinda' nice for you, huh? Whole place to yourself.

Their persisting arguments indicate that Austin and Lee have lapsed into neurosis, disclosing, as well, society's ills. Besides, Shepard's handling of the myth of the frontier also serves to voice both the anxiety and skepticism of a nation that, as has been accounted for above, was undergoing its particular moral crisis after the disastrous defeat in Vietnam and the disturbance of the institutional order prompted by Nixon's dishonorable resignation.

During the dramatization of the play's simple two-sided conflict, the mythic position Lee adheres to at the beginning is always magnificently counterbalanced by an antithetic discourse, one that advocates the values of the nuclear family.

In a similar way, the lure of the family is always to confront the temptation of a life cut off from social requirements and regulations. When Lee tells Austin about the utopian vision of domesticity he had while peeping through the neighbor's window, he also perceives it as the "place that sorta' kills ya' inside" (1986: 12), following thus the widespread credo in the literature of the United States that integration in the family unit is destructive to the hero. However, Lee's position as voyeur looking from the outside in emphasizes, on the one hand, the frightening isolation of this ideal -yet threatened- US family and, on the other, the collapse of his own dismembered family. To intensify the failure of the institution of the family, Lee informs Austin of a whimsical detail about the murder rate of the country; the kind of people that kill each other the most are members of the same family (1986: 24):

LEE: Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in-law. Cousins. Real American-type people. They kill each other in the heat mostly. In the Smog-Alerts. In the Brush Fire Season. Right about this time a' year.

In the unfolding of the story, this can be seen as another act of intimidation by Lee to force Austin to write his movie script. However, Lee's caustic remark discredits the idea that presents the family as the vertebral column of society and, in

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addition, brings the inevitable echoes of the story of Cain and Abel (the motif of the good and the bad son was not new to Shepard's audience, it appeared in plays like *Cowboy Mouth*, *The Tooth of Crime* or *Buried Child*). Moreover, the brief exchange that follows throws some light into the play's conclusion (1986: 24):

AUSTIN: This isn't the same.

LEE: Oh no? What makes it different?

AUSTIN: We're not insane. We're not driven to acts of violence like that. Not over a dumb movie script.

The truth is that, as it has previously been said, Lee and Austin will be "driven to acts of violence". The lights go to black as the two brothers "square off to each other" (1986: 59) gasping for breath after their unruly latest fight, and Lee's commentary on the country's murder rate comes to mind once more: the two brothers might go on fighting to their deaths. Shepard's abundant and clear notes for the closing scene of the play also help foster this idea. Not unlike the traditional history of the West as told by Hollywood, which tries to adapt the paradigm of the manly conquest or cattle drive to elements like the family or the community, *True West* attempts to integrate two versions of masculinity. Yet, as the lights fade for the last time after nine scenes of confrontations and battles, the effect of

the moonlight in the upstage causes the audience to see the figures of the two brothers “caught in a vast desert-like landscape” (1986: 59). At the end, after all the role shifting, both Austin and Lee return to a primitive uncivilized stage. They are in the desert -which is accentuated by a coyote that can be heard in the distance- and they seem to have abandoned civilization, but the play advances no further conclusion. No compromise is possible. As Shepard himself has suggested (in Bottoms 1998: 3), “[a] resolution isn’t an ending; its a strangulation”. By not ending the play in a more conventional way, that is, by not restoring order and harmony arbitrarily, Shepard leaves the characters in an everlasting state of derangement, their selves fluid and vacillating. The ending does not settle for an optimistic resolution or the false belief that the individual is autonomous, nor does it give in to the satisfaction of bringing the subject to a deceptive completion. The ending speaks of the inadequacy and the resistance of the individual. One might never know the play’s resolution but, as Richard Ford writes in “Great Falls” (1989: 59), a short story included in his volume *Rock Springs* that always brings the inconclusive ending of *True West* to mind, the answer is simple:

it is just ... some coldness in us all, some helplessness that causes us to misunderstand life when it is pure and plain, makes our existence seem like a border between two nothings, and makes

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us no more or less than animals who meet on the road -watchful,
unforgiving, without patience or desire.

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