

Volatile Identities in Sam Shepard's *True West*

Asst. Lect. Ranya Jassam Hamad
English Department, College of Education for Women, Al- Iraqia University, Iraq
Email: ranyazaidan1234@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sam Shepard's *True West* dramatizes the internal psychological conflict described in Sigmund Freud's structural model of personality id, the ego, and the superego through the intense and shifting relationship between the two brothers, Lee and Austin. According to Freud, the human psyche is composed of three significant hypothesized parts: the id, the ego, and the superego. The first signifies the primitive desires and instincts, the superego symbolizes moral ethics, and the ego mediates between the two while navigating external reality.

Austen, apparently the cultivated screenwriter, represents the ego in the play. He functions as a mediator between Lee's wild behavior and the expectations of the outside world. He is composed, mature, and controlled, serving as the antithesis of his brother Lee. They are different in every regard. However, as the play progresses, the rational and logical brother crumbles as his behavior becomes increasingly similar to that of his brother's, and vice versa. The brothers melt into a one character.

As *True West* is a clear dramatization of the fragmentation of postmodern identity, this study discusses the notion through a Freudian lens. Lee and Austin do not have fixed personalities but fluid expressions of the psyche's internal conflict due to the postmodern fragmentation condition. Exposing how the struggle between id, ego, and superego can unravel the very notion of a stable self, which results in resorting to the primitive nature of the self (the Freudian id), ingrained in the human psyche as the only constant identity that Austen and Lee find themselves with.

Keywords: Volatile Identities, Sam Shepard's, *True West*.

1. The Fragmentation of Postmodern Identity through the Lens of Sam Shepard

Fredric Jameson describes a present in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," which is quite comparable to the one Shepard portrays in his plays and interviews. Jameson explains:

The disappearance of a sense of history, ...how our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions ...Think only of the media exhaustion of news: of how Nixon and, even more so, Kennedy are figures from a now distant past (1983, 125).

Jameson's postmodern concept is based on the belief that man's identity in contemporary society has been lost since the "postwar [economic] boom" and the scholarly institutionalization of modernity in the 1960s. Man's incapacity to find himself in this time and place, his individual, and national origins, as well as his position within a coherent and intelligible linear history, have all been lost. A person's perception of their private and public identities is taken away from them. The "unique self and private identity" that characterized the "modernist" aesthetic has vanished (Jameson, 1983).

We are trapped in a never-ending quest for an unachievable past as members of Jameson's twentieth century. Like Lee, who critiques Kirk Douglas's *Lonely Are the Brave*, the only pasts that a viewer of the twentieth century may learn about are those that we create through popular imagery and preconceptions in the media for his idea of a "true-to-life western" (Shepard, 1980, 19). In the film, these figures are merely blank cardboard representations. They don't exist in history or have anything to do with time. They expose the history we are looking for as little more than a collection of consumable items, surfaces, and manufactured images.

Shepard nationalizes Jameson's portrayal of postmodern society in an interview with Kenneth Chubb of *Theatre Quarterly*:

I was in Wisconsin, in Milwaukee, and for the Fourth of July we have this celebration. ... You begin to have a feeling of this historical thing being played out in contemporary terms - I didn't even know what the Fourth of July meant, really...being in America now... you don't have any connection with the past, with what history means; so you can be there celebrating the Fourth of July, but all you know is that things are exploding in the sky...which creates a certain kind of chaos, a kind of terror, you don't know what the fuck's going on (1981, 4).

Shepard characterizes the present as a temporal disjunction in this text. It is characterized by actual "explosions" and bits that no one individual can contextualize.

Robert Coe wrote an article for The New York Times Magazine in 1980. Sam Shepard insisted that "we're split in a much more terrible way" (in Wade 1997,103).

The play's overtly autobiographical elements may have helped many critics determine that the two brothers represented Shepard's dual nature as a playwright and the famous and the outcast, the playwright and the cowboy. Accordingly, the playwright's inner conflict is embodied through Austen and Lee's personalities, even down to the shift of personalities the brothers undergo as the battle of the loss of one cohesive identity, as the playwright does. Moreover, Shepard's resort to the idea of the Wild West is an attempt to grapple with a thought that is rooted in place and time.

One could consider the Western wilderness to be a representation of the Freudian id. Both brothers are looking for something that is paradoxically stable and etched. Sam Shepard uses the characters of Austen and Lee to illustrate how the id thrives on the contemporary fragmentation of identity.

3. Sigmund Freud's Structure of the Human Psyche

According to Sigmund Freud's structural concept of personality, the id, ego, and superego are the three interdependent systems that make up the human psyche (Freud, 1923). These components influence behavior by shaping how individuals perceive reality, manage desires, and conform to societal norms. While this theory was developed nearly a century ago, it remains a foundational concept in psychology (Ciccarelli & White, 2017; Feldman, 2019).

1. The Id

The most fundamental and unconscious component of the personality is the id, which is present from birth. It seeks instant satisfaction of fundamental biological demands, including hunger, thirst, and sexual desire, and functions on the pleasure principle (Freud, 1923, 13). According to McLeod (2013), the id is irrational and impulsive, with no understanding of social rules or consequences. "The id knows no judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality" (Freud, 1923, 17). This lack of moral awareness means the id must be regulated by the other two components to allow for socially appropriate behavior.

2. The Ego

Early in life, the ego arises from the id and serves as the logical bridge connecting the id and reality (Freud, 1923). It functions on the reality principle, postponing indulgence until the environment allows for safe and realistic satisfaction of desires

(Feldman, 2019). Ciccarelli and White (2017) describe the ego as the "executive branch" of the personality, making decisions based on logic and external conditions. Freud often compared the ego to a rider trying to control the powerful id while navigating the real world (Freud, 1923).

3. The Superego

The superego, which is a representation of internalized moral ideals acquired from parents and society, first appears between the ages of three and five. (McLeod, 2013). The conscience guides behavior toward what is deemed "right" and away from what is deemed "wrong." There are two subsystems inside the superego:

The conscience, which causes guilt when moral principles are broken. When behavior is in line with one's values, pride is formed by the ego ideal. (Feldman, 2019). According to Ciccarelli and White (2017), some people have an overly strict superego, which can cause undue anxiety or guilt.

Interactions between the Id, Ego, and Superego

Conflict among these three components is central to Freudian theory. For example, the ego may struggle to satisfy the id's desires while also adhering to the superego's moral expectations (McLeod, 2013). This inner conflict can lead to the use of defense mechanisms like repression or denial, which help reduce anxiety but may also distort reality (Feldman, 2019). Freud believed that striking a balance between these systems was essential to mental health. When the id dominates, behavior may become impulsive; when the superego is too strong, individuals may experience excessive guilt or perfectionism (Ciccarelli & White, 2017).

True West takes deep psychological tensions between two brothers, Austin and Lee, who represent opposing forces in human nature. Through Freud's lens, we can interpret their conflict as symbolic of the id, ego, and superego, illustrating inner psychological struggle externalized through character dynamics. The deterioration of the basic unit of the human psyche, the id, is aided by the inevitable loss of identity that the postmodern man suffers.

4. Freud's Tripartite Psyche Aided by the Collapse of Postmodern Identity in *True West*

The connection between Austin and Lee, is a symbolic representation of opposing psychic powers, applying Sigmund Freud's structural model of self, which consists of the id, ego, and superego. In conjunction with postmodern themes of instability and fragmentation, Shepard challenges conventional ideas of identity, morality, and narrative coherence, as this dual theoretical lens makes clear.

An insignificant crook named Lee has suddenly shown up at his mother's residence. While their mother is on vacation in Alaska, he discovers his younger brother Austin, an apparently loving husband and son, keeping vigil over the suburban cottage. The two brothers' personalities are complete opposites; while the latter is impulsive and untamed, the former is accountable and accommodating guaranteeing that they soon begin to quarrel over seemingly little matters, adding vivacity to the dramatic action.

Overtone of a male frontier setting where disputes are resolved amongst males reverberate throughout the play. However, the performance is constantly informed by a sense of enduring hostility and unavoidable confrontation. Lee's presence is never explained. He begins questioning Austin, who attempts in vain to prepare a first draft of the screenplay for the film he will present to Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer, who will be paying him a visit the next day. Lee exhibits his flamboyant sarcasm, while Austin tries to remain composed and patient; presumably, he is accustomed to his brother's behavior. At first, Austin is able to weather the storm. In an attempt to maintain his power in the home, he stays aloof, but Lee eventually weakens Austin's self-control. He takes over the kitchen by moving around it like one of the coyotes that yap outside. The conversation ends in their first violent altercation when he begs Austin for his automobile. Once more, Shepard has not made an effort to develop well-rounded characters who clash because of their clearly opposed identities, which turn out to be abnormal and extremely unstable. Hence, the fragmentation becomes palpable.

The concrete milestones of time and place are challenged at the beginning of the play. In one scene, time is regressive rather than linear, reflecting the disintegration of the self and the emergence of suppressed impulses. Time itself breaks down as the distinctions between the conscious and unconscious dissolve, and the play turns into a depiction of internal psychological strife. Austin says time "stands still when you're having fun" (Shepard, 44). These remarks are made while intoxicated, following Saul's rejection of Austin's script. Since his sense of place and time has been disrupted, he does not respond to Lee's question about time. Additionally, Lee seems to have lost his sense of location when he inquires, "Well, what County are we in?" (Shepard, 1980, 46). Living in the present moment, the brothers are lost because they can't "cognitively map" their place and the time they live in, as Jameson theorizes.

Kane (2002) believes that the characters in Shepard's late plays are eager to seek the past to find any juncture of self, 'the burden of a vexatious past' (140). This is proved through the story that Lee is writing something he calls "true story" (18), yet when Lee turns to discuss the true West with Saul, he brings up 'Kirk Douglas *Lonely are the Brave* as his model for a true-to-life western, which shows the issue that postmodern viewers only identify with the West through images and stereotypes (Williams, 1997).

Saul Kimmer represents the Hollywood movie machine. It is a place where dreams are sold to give people a sense of hope, to find the roots of the past that ground the audience. Compared to his brother, Lee is more familiar with the Hollywood dream machine. As Lee develops a death-themed screenplay and explains "tum[ing] myself right inside out" and "[g]ettin' paid to dream. Ridin' back and forth on the freeway just dreamin' my fool head off (Shepard, 1980, 25). He is aware that Hollywood continuously exacerbates the alienation and sense of placelessness that moviegoers sought to overcome by attending the theater. Hollywood sells the audience on the passing of significant times in American history rather than offering an escape from our postmodern environment. Man simply needs to learn how to sell the demise of America's history in order to seize a new wilderness in the twentieth-century frontier of Hollywood's manufactured images.

However, the wilderness that Hollywood presents is manufactured and mechanical; hence, it doesn't tempt Lee or Austen, as they prefer to go to the desert at the end. Butler states that in postmodernity, "the notion of human identity is essentially constructed like fiction," and this is what Saul is selling, not identity but the dream of one. The wilderness of identity that Hollywood presents is unnatural, but the desert is. The desert in the play is a constant symbol of the West and the fracturedness of family; hence, Lee and Austen's father lives there, leaving them behind. But it also symbolizes freedom through abstraction and bareness. The desert is a perpetual motif in the play that drives and attracts both Lee and Austen. When Lee first comes to visit, Austen asks:

Austen: Well, wasn't it hot out on the desert?

LEE: Different kinda' heat. Out there it's clean. Cools off at night. There's a nice little breeze.

LEE: Up here it's different. This country's real different.

AUSTIN: Well, it's been built up.

LEE: Built up? Wiped out is more like it. I don't even hardly recognize. (Shepard, 1980, p. 10)

The desert is bare and without inhibitions. After losing the script to his brother, Austen can't handle the confines of his urban life. His career starts to seem a tool to

fixate him in this life and not a natural impulse, as he begs Lee to take him to the desert, stating that he is lost in life. Austen says:

When we were kids here, it was different. There was a life here then. But now I keep comin' down here thinking it's the fifties or something. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar... Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard... Fields that don't exist anymore. (Shepard, 1980, p. 49)

Lee's inability to write is due to his feeling misplaced and unnatural, stating that this would never happen to him in the desert, and he had better return to it. (Shepard, 1980), Lee's sense of freedom that the desert provides him with influences Austen. At the play's conclusion, he even intimidates Lee to take him to the desert with him. Austen's erratic behavior morphs into that of his brother, but what is it about the desert that makes it such a desirable destination?

If one compares the desert vs. The Freudian interpretation of the house's significance The setting of the play lends further credence to the Freudian interpretation: The home represents civilization, the structure, laws, and order of the ego and superego; The desert symbolizes the id wild, untamed, free from societal constraints; Lee is from the desert and longs to return there, signifying a retreat into the primal self; Austin, initially bound to the house, eventually expresses a desire to go to the desert, demonstrating his decline into id-like behavior; the house becomes a battlefield for the conflicting forces of the psyche, where the ego and id fight for supremacy; the house's physical space reflects the characters' internal struggle, making it a symbolic representation of the divided self and eventual erudition.

Initially, Austin represented the ego, as he is presented as the more sensible and socially acceptable sibling at the start of the play. He represents uniformity, order, and structure as a screenwriter working on a Hollywood movie (Shepard, 1980). In an effort to keep control and engage in dialogue with his brother, he acts as a mediator between Lee's disorderly conduct and social conventions. This illustrates how the ego maintains equilibrium between the id and superego (Freud, 1960). Critical interpretations contend that Austin's first identification as the "refined" sibling is a flimsy front for order (Roudané, 1997). He is a quintessential example of the ego attempting to preserve equilibrium in a chaotic world since his identity is linked to social achievement and outside affirmation.

On the other hand, Lee represented the id. Lee is untamed, impetuous, and motivated by instinct and want. He breaks into homes, lives in the desert, and acts in ways that are not acceptable in society. Similar to how the id might burst into consciousness and overthrow the ego's authority, his abrupt presence upends Austin's orderly life (Freud, 1960). He is the epitome of the pleasure principle's raw, wild desires. According to academics, Lee personifies the return of the repressed, a fundamental idea in Freudian theory, in which repressed

urges and desires reappear to subvert the ego (Kintz, 1992). The inherent conflict between the aware self and the unconscious forces it seeks to repress is symbolized by Lee's incursion into Austin's reality.

The Ambiguous Presence of the Superego

The play is less represented by a single character; the superego is evident in Austin's initial moral superiority, the mother's expectations, and the notion of success in Hollywood (Shepard, 1980). When addressing Lee's actions, Austin frequently invokes morality, implying that he is attempting to maintain an internalized norm. But as the play goes on, Austin himself exhibits a growing lack of moral clarity, suggesting that the superego's power is waning. Critics have pointed out that the lack of a strong parental figure, as their mother is away for most of the play, contributes to both characters' superegos being fragile (Bigsby, 2002). The brothers struggle to maintain internal discipline in the absence of a constant moral compass, which ultimately causes their psychological limits to crumble.

The Psychological Breakdown and Role Reversal. As the play goes on, the lines between Austin and Lee start to blur: Lee begins writing a screenplay, which is typically associated with Austin's structured world; Austin becomes more aggressive and primal like Lee.

Here's a thought. Saul Kimmer

LÈE: Shut up, will ya'!

AUSTIN: He thinks we're the same person.

LEE: Don't get cute.

AUSTIN: He does! (Shepard, 1980, p. 37)

This role reversal suggests a breakdown of the ego's control, allowing the id to take over (Freud, 1960); the superego also weakens, as both brothers forsake their moral and social restraint in favor of raw expression and desire; this shift reflects a psychic disintegration, where the internal structure of the individual collapses under the weight of suppressed desires and identity confusion.

According to Kintz (1992), the play dramatizes the disintegration of identity as the characters become indistinguishable from one another, implying that the self is a fluid and unstable construct rather than a fixed thing. This supports Freud's theory that the psyche is always changing and that its various parts are fighting for control, and the true manifestation of one is hidden under the guise of urbanity.

Conclusion

According to Shepard, the modern self is erratic, caught between the need to find one's true identity, the pull of one's instincts, and the expectations of society. In this sense, *True West* is not just a family tale but also a psychological investigation of the divided self. The play points out that the postmodern fragmentation has left both brothers devoid of any sense of a stable self. The fluid nature of the aforementioned identity has made the brothers resort to the desert (Freudian id), especially Lee. Lee's coming and going to the desert signals that the constancy that the bareness offers saves Lee from the dividedness and allows him to be himself. The subconscious replaces the fluid consciousness at the end of the play when Lee and Austen decide to go to the desert rather than accepting the fluidity of identity.

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