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# ***True West* by Sam Shepard [Plot Summary]**

**Author:** Sam Shepard, **also known as:** Samuel Shepard Rogers, VII, Samuel Shepard Rogers, and Samuel Rogers Shepard

**Genre:** plays

**Date:** 1980

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## **Table of Contents**

[Essay](#) | [Source Citation](#)

## **Introduction**

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

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

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

## **Plot**

### **Scene 1**

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

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

## **Scene 2**

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

## **Scene 3**

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

## **Scene 4**

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

## **Scene 5**

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

## **Scene 6**

That afternoon, Kimmer joins them and admits that he prefers Lee's story to Austin's, adding that he likes Lee's plan to use some of the money from the sale of the script to set up a trust fund for

the brother's father. Austin refuses to write the script, even though Saul says the deal is worth three hundred thousand dollars for the first draft alone. The producer claims that Lee has "raw talent," that his story about the "real West" has "the ring of truth." Austin shouts that "there's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue!"

## Scene 7

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

## Scene 8

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

## Scene 9

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

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

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

## Characters

**Austin:** At the beginning of the play, Austin is the apparently conventional brother dressed in a light blue sports shirt, a light tan cardigan sweater, clean blue jeans, and white tennis shoes. In his early thirties, he is neat and organized, clearly a responsible adult. He appears to be an accomplished writer and, in fitting with his accountable nature, has been chosen by his mother to take care of her house while she is on vacation in Alaska. In the first half of the play he tries hard to be polite and understanding with his apparently less-refined older brother, Lee, and is dominated by Lee's violence and superior strength. In the second half of the play, however, Austin's behavior begins to reflect his brother's, becoming coarse and sloppy in his demeanor and appearance. By

the end of the play, Austin is profoundly drunk, has stolen numerous toasters from the neighborhood, and is on the verge of strangling his brother to death. As evidenced by Lee's increasing seriousness and new dedication to writing traits that Austin displayed at the play's outset it is clear that the brothers have exchanged significant aspects of their personalities. Austin, for his part, reveals a desire to emulate his brother's wilder tendencies, to live a less-structured, more adventurous life.

**Lee:** Lee is Austin's older brother and something of a social misfit. He is in his early forties and, at the beginning of the play, appears completely uncivilized. He is dressed in a filthy T-shirt, a pink suede belt, a tattered brown overcoat, and shoes with holes in the soles; he is a poster child for careless slobs. Lee has come to visit Austin following a reunion with the brothers' estranged father, who lives in the desert. Obviously lacking in financial security and social graces, Lee is jealous of his little brother's success and refinement. Initially, he swills beer, talks aggressively, plans burglaries in his mother's neighborhood, and bullies Austin. When Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer arrives, Lee butts in and deflects Kimmer's interest away from Austin's screenplay by proposing his own idea for a film set in the "true West." While Lee appears close to a successful screenwriting deal, he becomes very anxious about success and the prospect of actually writing the script. With no writing or typing skills, he needs Austin's help. Just as the older brother is seeing the benefits of emulating his brother's discipline, however, Austin has become too drunk to help him. As Austin has become infatuated with the idea of living Lee's wild and free life, Lee has glimpsed the possibilities that honest success offers.

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

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

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