



True West

Study Guide by Course Hero



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Book Basics

AUTHOR

Sam Shepard

FIRST PERFORMED

1980

GENRE

Comedy

ABOUT THE TITLE

The play *True West*, set in the far west of the United States, east of Los Angeles, considers the mythology of the American West created by media and existing in the minds of people

who long to change their lives. This West is a rugged, romantic, but often violent place where people are free to reinvent themselves. The play questions whether this idealized version of the West is real or true and ultimately suggests that the idea of a true west is a fantasy.

In Context

Shepard's "Double Nature"

Austin and Lee, the brothers and main characters in *True West*, are often considered one another's "doubles," or two sides of the same person. "I wanted to write a play about double nature," Shepard said about the writing of *True West*. He continued, "I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided." As the play progresses, the brothers switch personality traits in a gradual role reversal, emphasizing the idea that they are in fact different manifestations of the same person. Shepard was fascinated by the psychology of human behavior, and he approached his characters by considering the multiple personalities within an individual. Describing how he created characters, Shepard said, "There are these territories inside all of us, like a child or a father or the whole man." Many of Shepard's plays are considered "identity showdowns," in which characters struggle to prove themselves.

True West is partly an exploration of different territories in Shepard's own life, as well. The main characters—the brothers Austin and Lee—reveal two distinct sides of Shepard's personality. Like Austin, Shepard experienced screenwriting, selling scripts, and pitching stories to agents. Like Lee, Shepard, who once confessed he attempted to steal a hotel painting, was involved with various petty crimes, though not with much skill. American actor John Malkovich, who starred in a famous performance of *True West*, pointed out that Shepard and Lee both achieved screenwriting success despite

"[defying] all the things we're told we have to do to be successful." Lee, a homeless thief, has no education or background in screenwriting but talks a producer into using his script idea. Shepard similarly skipped the route of formal education. He dropped out of college, moved to Manhattan, and experimented with drugs. He described his first playwriting success as "a great coincidence." Malkovich describes Lee as "the side of Shepard that's always being strangled but never quite killed." Shepard married in 1969, had a child, and wanted to be a family man. But in letters to a family member he describes an impulse to wander. Shepard felt he had "an adversary of my imagined self ... This greedy one, never satisfied, always hungry for something 'more,' something different, something else, something elsewhere." Shepard struggled to accept this "greedy" part of himself and longed to battle it. Lee's nomadic lifestyle reflects this side of Shepard's character.

Finally, Austin and Lee represent two different generational archetypes—the well-behaved family man and the alcoholic drifter. Shepard's work often deals with "violent and unknowable men" like the brothers' absent father and the effect of this absence on the alcoholic and aggressive Lee. The mystery and violence surrounding Lee and Austin's absent father reflects Shepard's long-term view of his own father. Shepard called his father "an outsider" whose alcoholism pulled him further from societal obligations as the years went on. Alcoholism ran in Shepard's father's side of the family. "You can't remember when there was a sober grandfather," Shepard said in an interview. Shepard himself fought alcoholism for years before going into treatment. He realized he was imitating the patterns of his father, "who I swore I would never resemble."

The Old West, Hollywood, and the American Dream

The regions of the United States west of the Mississippi River, especially the Great Plains and Southwestern states, have long held the American imagination. There's hope and promise on the frontier, but there's violence too. In *True West* the genre of American films known as the western that dominated the first half of the 20th century inspires the script the character Lee pitches to shallow Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer, who is driven by the glittering promise of a popular story and even

greater fame. Westerns, such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946) or *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), provide the setting for moral dramas featuring clear heroes and villains and frequently dramatize quests for vengeance. These films are characterized by scholars as "revenge seeking, rough violence, bandits, [and] bounty hunters." The absence of law or structure in the so-called Wild West forces heroes to succeed against such bandits "by the use of violence and the exercise of physical courage."

While Lee's script follows the conventions of this type of western, the playwright Shepard knew, according to critic Johan Callens, "the wild West was quasi-fiction—its cowboys and Indians, its heroism and lawlessness, its veneer of male bonding." There was a stark difference between the adventurous West in the movies and the dangerous true West of reality. In Shepard's play, the real West is darkly revealed, in part, through Lee's poverty and the violence he and his brother Austin display toward one another.

By the time *True West* was performed in the early 1980s, the classic western genre was in decline. After the 1950s filmmakers began to gravitate toward more sophisticated narratives. Scholars note that in westerns, "the figure of the cowboy grew darker and more complicated." Several westerns after the 1950s fall into the category of "revisionist westerns," such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Unforgiven* (1992), and *The Hateful Eight* (2015). These feature a traditional western setting, but the characters become fallible, morally complex, and inwardly tortured—no longer simply good lawmakers or evil outlaws.

These films often "reinvented, redefined, ridiculed, and questioned" genre conventions as noted by scholars. Some westerns, for instance, adopted the colonized Native Americans' point of view. The genre's new twist came at an opportune time. Many Americans, still recovering from the atrocities of World War II (1939–45), felt disillusioned with the American dream of conventional material success. They engaged in the countercultural rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s. Like these revisionist westerns, *True West* skewers the older, simpler westerns and the suburban American dream. Shepard showcases these mythic American images for the purpose of dissolving them in dramatic conflict.

The play presents a drama where neither of the two main characters is a clear hero and neither is a clear villain as they morph into each other and back again.

Movies, like the frontier, provide the promise of escapism. But, by the end of the play, neither brother gets what he wants. When Lee's melodramatic script emphasizes a "chase scene," Shepard reveals the elusive quality of escape and the consuming quality of such dreams for those who chase them. The storytellers of Hollywood—people like Shepard himself—don't avoid the play's critique, either. Lee and Austin eventually destroy the entire house, including the typewriter that manufactures their narratives.

The dark fate of both main characters demonstrates how neither the fictions of Hollywood nor the adventure of the frontier offers real escape. Writer Don Shewey wrote of the play, "In the new West they 'swallow the smog'; in the true West, real men bite the dust."

True West Performances

The play premiered in 1980 at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, where Shepard held a playwriting residency. It starred local actors Peter Coyote as Austin and Jim Haynie as Lee. Local audiences loved the show. By the time the play opened in New York later the same year, critics were calling Shepard "the hottest young playwright in America."

The New York version, however, disappointed both audiences and Shepard. Shepard never saw the New York *True West*. But he was angry the production abandoned the original actors for better-known movie stars Tommy Lee Jones and Peter Boyle. After Shepard publicly denounced the production in New York's newspapers and director Robert Woodruff quit, the play's first New York run ended quickly.

A 1982 Chicago revival had much greater success. Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company produced *True West* with two actors who would launch big careers after the play, Gary Sinise and John Malkovich. This production, which later transferred to New York's Cherry Lane Theatre, was praised by reviewers for its comic quality. The play continued with actors such as Jim Belushi, Erik Estrada, and Dennis Quaid stepping into the lead roles.

When *True West* returned to Broadway in 2000, stellar actors Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly alternated playing Austin and Lee. They'd switch roles after each performance. According to Reilly, actors in old English theater would frequently switch roles in a production. Hoffman believed role-

swapping was ideal for a play like *True West*, where the two main characters start as opposites and later reveal their similarities. One reviewer thought switching roles embodied "*True West's* most vital idea": "Austin and Lee begin to resemble each other in ways both predictable ... and surprising." Both actors uniquely earned Tony Award nominations, and the production garnered Tony nominations for best play and best director.

Author Biography

Early Life in Rural California

Playwright, screenwriter, musician, and actor Sam Shepard was born Samuel Shepard Rogers III on November 5, 1943. Shepard made his name with darkly funny and surreal plays often set in the American West, along with many dramatic film roles. Shepard's father was a pilot in the Air Force, and the family moved to several military bases after Shepard's birth in Illinois. His father was an alcoholic with nomadic tendencies, whose personality traits inspired many of the explosive characters in Shepard's works.

The family eventually settled on an avocado farm in Southern California. As a young man Shepard worked on a ranch and briefly studied agriculture at Mount San Antonio College. He discovered acting interested him more and left college in the early 1960s to join a traveling theater troupe called the Bishop's Company Repertory Players. Fascinated by jazz and the work of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, Shepard headed to New York City. There he hoped to experience the stage as both writer and actor.

Playwriting: Absurdity, Satire, Risks, and Acclaim

New York's off-off-Broadway scene in the early 1960s was an exciting place for a young playwright. Experimental work of all kinds was encouraged. But Shepard sensed American theater lacked a strong, distinctive voice like Beckett's. "American art was starving," he later said of the 1960s—the decade he began writing plays.

He found success quickly. Early plays *Chicago*, *Icarus's Mother*, and *Red Cross* won the Village Voice newspaper's Obie Awards, given to Off-Broadway theater, during the 1965–66 season. Shepard also began collaborating with well-known musicians Patti Smith and Bob Dylan.

From 1971 to 1974 Shepard lived in England, where he wrote *The Tooth of Crime* (1972) and *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974). He then returned to America as the playwright in residence at San Francisco's Magic Theatre. There his work began to mature, taking on more absurd themes and satirizing the dryness of American culture. Shepard's mid-1970s plays include *Killer's Head* (1975, a look inside the mind of a murderer), *Angel City* (1976, about Hollywood's destructive potential), and *Suicide in B-flat* (1976, about the death of a jazz musician).

Plays in the late 1970s went on to mine the potential of tense family drama and blood relationships. These plays had small casts, acidic dialogue, and bleak post-industrial western settings. From 1977 to 1980 Shepard wrote and produced the three plays known as the "Family Trilogy": *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *Buried Child* (1978), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and *True West*. The last depicts the conflict between an aspiring playwright and his social outlaw brother as the men collaborate fitfully and violently on the script for a Hollywood western.

Later plays include *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), *The God of Hell* (2004), *Ages of the Moon* (2009), and *Heartless* (2012). He also wrote a short story collection called *Days Out of Days* (2010). In 1986 Shepard earned membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters. American playwright Christopher Shinn recalls, "[Shepard] always wrote from ... a zone of trauma, mystery, and grief ... He took the big risk every time."

Acting and Television

Shepard is also known as an accomplished film actor. He received critical acclaim for roles in the films *Days of Heaven* (1978) and *Resurrection* (1980). His breakout role came in 1983, when he played test pilot Chuck Yeager in *The Right Stuff*, earning an Academy Award nomination. Shepard both wrote and starred in the 1985 film *Fool for Love*, based on a play he'd written in 1983. He also appeared in several films based on novels, including *All the Pretty Horses* (2000) and *The Pelican Brief* (1993). Familial conflict and myths of the

American frontier continued to dominate Shepard's film and playwriting careers. He played outlaw Frank James in 2007's *The Assassination of Jesse James* and outlaw Butch Cassidy in 2011's *Blackthorn*. Dark family-centered dramas included *Out of the Furnace* (2013), *August: Osage County* (2013), and *Cold in July* (2014).

Shepard was married to American actress O-Lan Jones from 1969 to 1984. He also had a long-term relationship with American actress Jessica Lange. After Shepard's death from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis on July 27, 2017, he was remembered as a skilled actor and revolutionary playwright. *New York* magazine called him "the greatest American playwright of his generation." His physical presence and influence on the many media he practiced placed him at the front rank of creative drama.

Characters

Austin

Austin is strongly devoted to his craft. He believes in the integrity of his work but also wants to impress Hollywood producers. He's often caught between his own needs and the needs of his father and brother. Though Austin has achieved material success and a career, time with his nomadic brother Lee makes him realize how disillusioned he is with his own city life. He and Lee are competitive and combative, but Austin seems to have a real desire to connect with his brother at several points in the play.

Lee

Lee is aggressive, brutal, controlling, and often physically violent. But he's also vulnerable and unhappy, expressing both contempt and desire/jealousy for Austin's life. Lee resents the assumption he lacks intelligence. When he has an opportunity to prove himself as a scriptwriter, he wants to improve his own situation and get his father out of poverty.

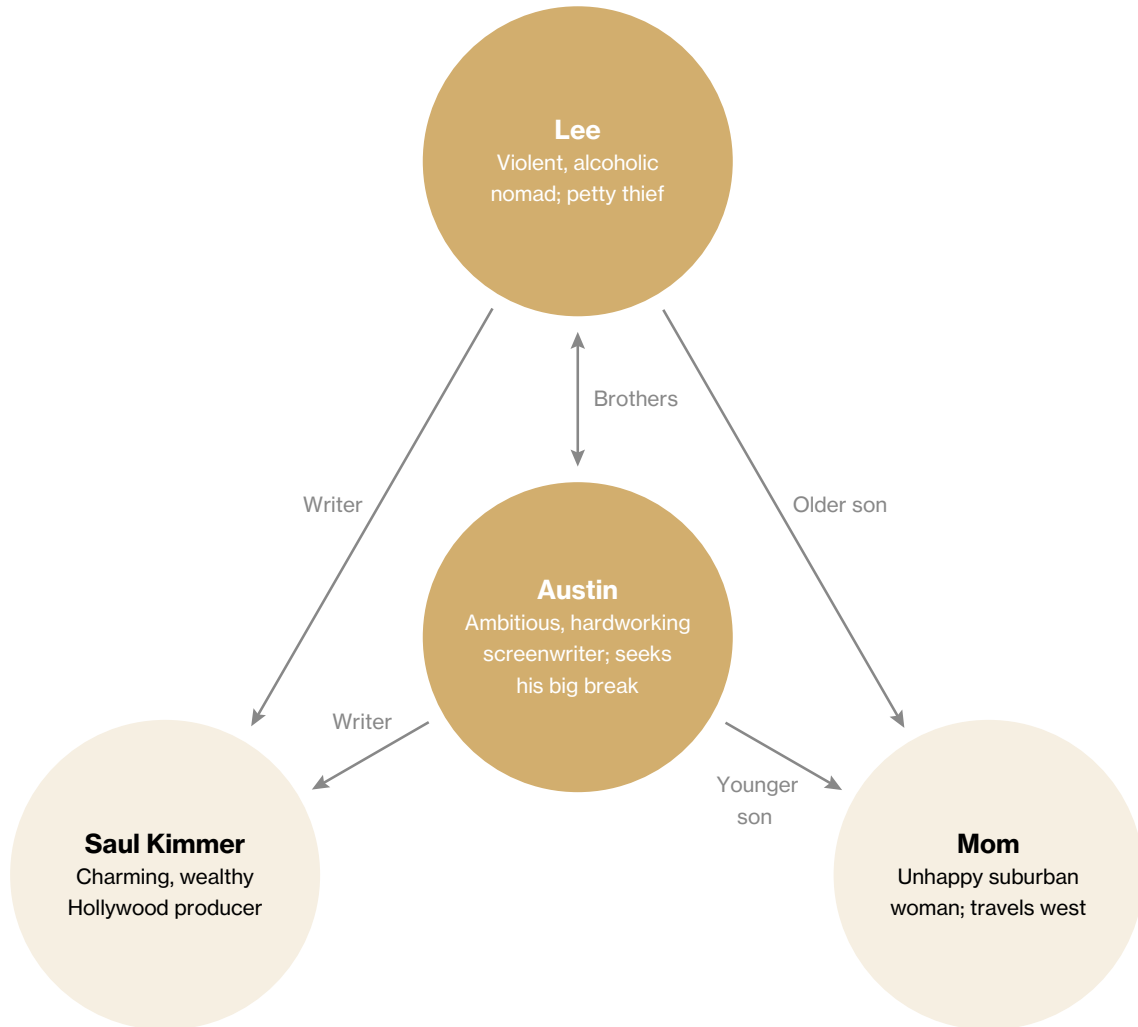
Saul Kimmer

Saul expresses interest in Austin's script idea, but later drops it for an idea Lee proposes. Saul is seemingly friendly and diplomatic but primarily driven by profit motives.

Mom

Mom leaves for a vacation to Alaska and returns to find her house ravaged by Austin and Lee. She appears lonely and dissatisfied with her life and her warring sons.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Austin	Austin is a young, Ivy League-educated screenwriter in Southern California. He's hardworking and ambitious, with a home, wife, and children.
Lee	Lee is a homeless alcoholic drifter who lives in the Mojave Desert. He frequently robs wealthy houses.
Saul Kimmer	Saul Kimmer is a Hollywood producer.
Mom	Mom is a traditional Southern California homeowner.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Two adult brothers, Austin and Lee, are staying in their mother's Southern California home while she's on vacation in Alaska. Screenwriter Austin is working on a new script while homeless Lee drinks beer and annoyingly asks Austin questions about his job. Lee spends his time mostly in the Mojave Desert and earns a living by stealing appliances from wealthy suburban homes. The brothers' father—"the old man"—is an alcoholic living somewhere in the desert. Though his location is never revealed, and he never appears onstage, his presence is much felt.

Austin tells Lee he needs privacy for a meeting with Hollywood agent Saul Kimmer later in the day. Lee asks to borrow Austin's car, and Austin reluctantly lets him to get rid of him. Saul arrives for the meeting and praises Austin's script idea when the two are interrupted by Lee, who has returned early. Lee annoyingly engages Saul in conversation and gets Saul to agree to a golf game the next morning. Lee then mentions he has an idea for a "true-to-life" script for a western. Saul says he'll look at Lee's idea if Austin writes an outline.

After the meeting the brothers grudgingly work together on

Lee's script as Lee dictates ideas to Austin. They argue over the plot, which Austin thinks is contrived and improbable but Lee insists it should unfold exactly as he's planned. The tension erupts in a demand from Austin that Lee return the car keys. Lee agrees and says he's leaving town anyway. Realizing Lee has nowhere to go if he leaves and will probably turn to crime, Austin encourages Lee to finish the work. Maybe the money from the script can change Lee's life for the better, Austin says. Lee agrees to continue with the script and dictates a dramatic scene to Austin in which two men chase each other through the Texas Panhandle.

Act 2

The next morning Lee returns from his golf game with Saul. He announces that Saul loves his idea for a western and plans to pursue Lee's script instead of Austin's project. Austin is shocked and asks if Lee threatened the agent. Lee denies using threats. Instead he and Saul gambled, Lee says, and Saul lost. Austin is outraged the two gambled with his script. He has staked everything on the script's success!

Saul returns to the house and explains Lee's idea to him as "the ring of truth," and he says he instinctively recognized Lee's story as a winner, so studios are competing for it already. Saul adds he and Lee discussed the poverty of the brothers' father. They can use the script profits to give their father a trust fund. Since Austin knows the material already, Saul says, Austin has to write the entire script. Furious, Austin refuses. He thinks Lee's story is ridiculous, and he insists he's more in touch with what audiences want. Saul won't change his mind.

At night Lee works on the script, frustrated, while Austin drinks himself drunk. As Lee struggles to write in the noisy house, Austin suggests he should try Lee's profession of stealing since Lee seems to be succeeding at scriptwriting. Lee bets Austin can't "steal a toaster without gettin' busted." While Austin keeps drinking, Lee begs for help writing the script's characters and dialogue. Lee promises to disappear after they've made money. Their father tried and failed to disappear, Austin reminds him. He tells Lee a wild tale how their father lost his teeth, and the two drink together.

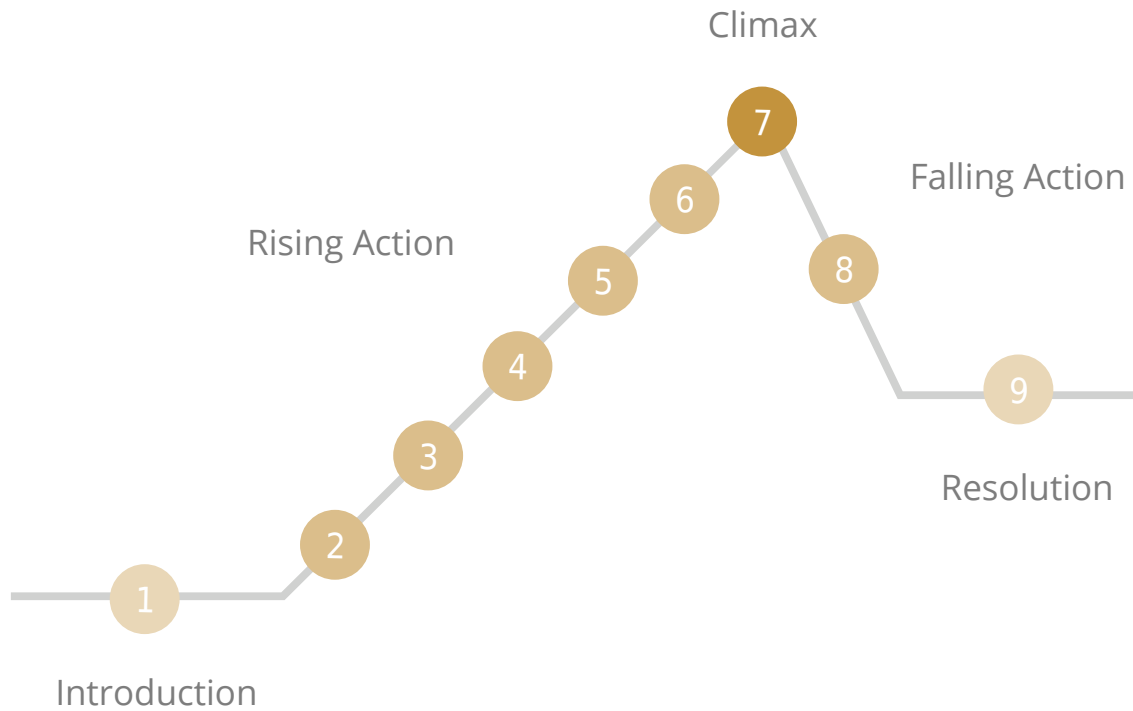
By morning the house is a mess and the brothers out of control. Lee burns his script and smashes the typewriter. Austin lines up several toasters he's stolen during the night and makes great amounts of toast for no reason. Lee tries

unsuccessfully to get the number of a woman in Bakersfield, California, for sex. Austin, enjoying the smell of toast as the sun rises, suddenly asks to join Lee when he returns to the desert. At first Lee refuses. Austin can't survive desert life, he says, and no one chooses to be a nomad. Austin protests he feels lost in city life, no longer recognizing his surroundings. Finally Lee, in control, agrees to take Austin to the desert if Austin will write Lee's script exactly the way he dictates.

The brothers work to finish the script by hand and create chaos and filth in the house. As they debate the wording of a line, Mom unexpectedly returns from Alaska. She's surprised the place is a mess and her houseplants are all dead since Austin promised to care for them. The brothers apologize, but Mom is more interested in a supposed appearance of the artist Picasso nearby. They can't attend, Austin says, because they're going to the desert. But Lee revokes his offer to take Austin with him. Austin demands Lee honor their deal. While Lee packs Mom's plates to take with him, Austin violently begins strangling Lee with the phone cord and forces Lee to return his car keys. Mom fears Austin will kill his brother. Despite Austin's pleas for her to stay she leaves for a hotel, saying she no longer recognizes her home.

Lee goes silent. Austin believes he's dead and moves quietly to the front door. Suddenly Lee gets to his feet and blocks Austin's exit. The two face each other, adversaries caught in the struggle, "still but watchful for the next move," as the play ends.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Austin tells Lee he's meeting Saul about a script.

Rising Action

2. Lee pitches his own script to Saul.
3. Austin learns Saul chooses Lee's script over his.
4. Austin asks to come with Lee to the desert.
5. Lee makes a deal with Austin.
6. Mom returns early from Alaska.

Climax

7. Lee reneges on the deal, and Austin strangles him.

Falling Action

8. Austin attempts to flee the house.

Resolution

9. Lee gets up and blocks Austin's exit.

Timeline of Events

Next morning

Austin lends Lee the car so he'll go out while Austin meets with Saul.

That evening

Austin agrees to write Lee's script outline, but the brothers disagree about the plot.

That evening

Lee attempts to write his script but ends up drinking with Austin.

Afterward

Austin wants to go to the desert. Lee agrees to take him if Austin writes the script.

Next

Night

Austin tries to write, but Lee keeps talking. Austin refuses to let Lee use his car.

That afternoon

During Austin's meeting with Saul, Lee arrives and pitches his script.

Next morning

Lee comes back from golf with Saul and tells Austin he convinced Saul to buy his script.

Next morning

Austin has stolen toasters from the neighborhood. Lee destroys the typewriter.

Midday

Mom returns unexpectedly from Alaska to find Austin writing Lee's script and her house in chaos.

Lee revokes his offer to take Austin to the desert. Austin strangles Lee.

Then

Mom leaves. Lee gets up and blocks Austin's attempt to escape.

Scene Summaries

Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

It's night in a Southern California suburb. The sound of crickets fills the air. Adult brothers Austin and Lee, together for the first time in five years, sit in the alcove of their mother's home.

Austin, a playwright, is writing on a typewriter by candlelight. Lee stands leaning against the sink, drinking from a six-pack of beer.

The two discuss their mother's Alaska vacation. Austin says he's house-sitting for their mother and watering her plants. Lee asks if Austin has groceries and coffee, and Austin tentatively offers Lee some coffee, which Lee declines. Curious about Austin's work, Lee asks if his brother's always written by candlelight. Lee says "I did a little art myself once" but refuses to answer Austin's questions about his art, saying only, "It was ahead of its time." The brothers briefly discuss their recent, separate visits to see their father.

Austin asks Lee how long he plans to stay, and Lee says his stay "depends mostly on houses." Austin suggests Lee go to a different neighborhood. Their dialogue reveals Lee is canvassing the neighborhood with plans to steal valuable items. Austin worries Lee will "get picked up," and Lee angrily tells Austin he's been doing fine on his own for five years. Then Lee asks if he can borrow Austin's car for a day. When Austin refuses, Lee says he'll steal the car. Austin offers to give Lee money. Enraged, Lee grabs and shakes Austin violently. He says their father might take Austin's "Hollywood blood money" to buy alcohol, but Lee can make money himself.

The two men separate. Lee complains about the crickets and mentions a female botanist told him cricket pulses reveal the temperature of the air. Lee met the botanist in the desert where he was training a pit bull to be a fighting dog. Austin invites Lee to stay in his family's home "up north", but Lee says it's "too cold up there." Austin asks if Lee wants to go to sleep. Lee replies he doesn't sleep, with no further explanation.

Analysis

The entire play is set in the kitchen and alcove of Mom's house. The domestic scenery and the small space can give a sense of claustrophobia. As both brothers start to feel increasingly trapped, the setting reflects their feelings.

Crickets and coyotes are constantly in the background, and they're especially loud at night. The constant noise reflects the menace of nature and the wild danger of the West. As the play explains later, coyotes kill domestic animals leashed to houses like theirs.

Mom is infrequently mentioned until Scene 9, but her location is significant. Alaska is as far West as an American traveler can get—the last frontier. Each member of the family has tried to escape to the "true" West, now even Mom.

The brothers, who at first appear to be complete opposites, demonstrate the tension between the domesticated indoors and the unruly outdoors. Austin speaks casually but formally while Lee uses contractions and repetitions, frequently changing topics. He seems unable to focus. Austin is educated and reserved, while Lee at this point already is irresponsible and aggressive.

Shepard's notes on the set and the costumes say "the evolution of the characters' situation" is the play's main focus. Every object onstage relates somehow to the two main characters' transformation. For instance, Austin's typewriter and candle show he has a certain image of himself as a writer—devoted, earnest, and wise. Lee connects the candle to the mythic image of "Forefathers" writing in "cabins in the wilderness." Lee in his own mind believes Austin's career is as much about myth and image as it is about true accomplishment.

The dialogue reveals the power dynamic between the brothers. Lee at first appears to be tentative and polite towards Austin, inquiring about groceries and asking if he's interrupting. But Lee quickly shows he resents Austin's position of power: Austin is in charge of the house; he has the car and money to spend. Since money is linked to stability, manhood, and independence, Austin's offer of money emasculates Lee. Since money implies dominance, it is an attempt to assert power. As the scenes with Saul Kimmer, the producer, will reveal in greater depth, wealthy people call the shots.

Austin also holds the keys to the car. In the spread-out American West, especially highway-thick Southern California, a car means freedom and mobility. As more communities developed in the western United States, having the independence of automobile travel became central to American life as it had never been before. In the expansive American west, a car was essential in most areas outside large cities. Without car keys each brother will be physically trapped. The brothers' fights over the keys are fights over which of them will achieve freedom in life. At first Austin, the car owner, appears to have vastly more options. Lee notices how Austin has gained all the trappings of American material success or the American dream. He has "the wife and kiddies ... the house, the car, the whole slam."

As early as Scene 1 Lee shows his complicated envy of Austin's career. Lee alludes vaguely to "art" he's done in the past, implying his art was visionary and misunderstood—"ahead of its time." The process of creating a supposed movie script in *True West* can be seen in the play as similar to the process of writing and controlling the narrative of one's own life. Each brother is each scripting his own story, and each critiques the other's script—and life—extensively. When Austin says "I don't want any trouble," Lee counters, "That's a dumb line." Lee wants to control his story. He doesn't want it dictated by his father's actions or by Austin's pity. Lee embodies the dogged self-reliance of the old West of legend.

But is Lee really self-reliant or independent? His time in the desert seems purposeless. He gets money through stealing others' possessions and gambling on a fighting dog. He lives on the margins of society. There's something mythical and surreal about Lee's life. He doesn't even sleep.

Is Austin, who's taken the more conventional path, responsible for Lee in any way? Are the two of them responsible for their father? How should family members take care of one another? The "old man" is a touchy topic, inciting Lee's rage early in the play. The audience never meets the brothers' father, but they learn his situation is dismal and possibly hopeless. While Austin fears failing his father, Lee fears becoming him. As the play proceeds, Lee will in fact prove more invested in the idea of helping their father than Austin does.

Act 1, Scene 2

Summary

Back in the alcove in the morning, Austin waters plants and Lee drinks beer. Lee has toured the house and noticed their mother locked up her valuables. Austin suggests the antiques have meaning to her, and Lee scoffs. Why would she keep "phony" plates with "Idaho decals," of all things? He doesn't want to be "invaded by Idaho" when he's eating.

Austin asks if Lee went out the night before. Lee did; the coyotes kept him awake. Austin reminds Lee he doesn't sleep anyway. Lee replies Austin must be "pretty smart." Even though he's never been more "on the ball" than Lee, he's getting invited to important people's homes while Lee's breaking into them! Austin offers to make Lee breakfast, and Lee repeats he can take care of himself.

Lee tells Austin he spent last night wandering around the Mojave Desert, escaping the nighttime heat. Up where their mother lives, Lee says, construction's "wiped out" the landscape. The brothers reminisce about playing in the desert as children. Austin asks Lee if he saw any houses on his walk. Lee describes a large house "like a paradise" decorated like a magazine spread, a "place you wish you sorta' grew up in." Austin thought Lee hated fancy houses but Lee responds Austin doesn't know much about him. Austin asks why Lee moved out to the desert in the first place and he says he was on the way to see their father, but ended up staying in the Mojave for three months. Austin is surprised: three months of solitude? Even three nights would drive Austin crazy. But Lee says he didn't mind.

Austin then says a producer is coming to the house later to discuss a project. He asks if he can have the house to himself for a few hours. Lee agrees—if he can borrow the car. Austin again refuses. Lee accuses his brother of trying to "hustle" the producer. No, Austin says, he just wants to "convince him it's a worthwhile story." After Lee offers to "convince him for ya" Austin reluctantly agrees to loan Lee the car, as long as he'll return it by six. Austin wishes he didn't have the appointment since he wanted to spend more time with Lee. But Lee's already headed out the door with the car keys. Lee adds if the producer doesn't like Austin's idea, he has some projects in mind—"real commercial. Full a' suspense. True-to-life stuff."

Analysis

Austin is still the responsible brother, watering his mother's plants as requested. Lee's derision of his mother's "junk" antique plates that disturb diners with the image of the remote state of Idaho shows apparent contempt for material wealth. To Lee the plates are purely there to show off since they aren't worth any money. But later the audience will learn that Lee's contempt is not heartfelt. The plates will recur in Scene 9 when Lee, who's glimpsed a different life, decides he wants them after all.

The desert surroundings become clearer to the audience in Scene 2. The coyotes are more of a threat. Austin alludes to wild coyotes killing domesticated pet dogs. Lee tells him the desert coyotes are more intimidating and primal since "They don't yap ... They howl." The urban development in town appears positively "built up" to Austin and negatively "wiped out" to Lee, a seeming major difference to the brothers.

Sound and silence frame the play in the audience's imagination. The ever-present yapping of the coyotes and chirping of the crickets contrasts with the "sweet kinda' suburban silence" Lee saw on his nighttime walk. In the play, sound is chaos, while silence is peace. The character development of the two brothers shows in the tone and sound of their dialogue. Their voices start out completely different, then begin to sound the same.

The house Lee describes is a peaceful image he compares to the stylized, unreal portrayals in magazines. Austin will invoke the idea of "paradise" to describe a similar suburban home in Scene 7, when he and Lee are switching roles. For now Austin is surprised that Lee is attracted to such a domestic, innocent image. But Lee has tapped into a deep pain and longing for an ideal he'll never achieve. The house "sorta' kills ya' inside" because no one can achieve the fantasy of the perfect life. It's always out of reach to everyone.

Even Austin has trouble reaching the impossible ideal. His own desperation and keenness to succeed become clear in this scene. Austin represents the profit motivations of the new urbanized West, which is an entirely different ecosystem than Lee's ruthless desert. In the new West people have to build relationships, networking and charming others to get ahead. They have to respect authority rather than challenge it. Their behavior has to be honest and straightforward. And they have to earn the right to be heard. Austin, though, is still at the

bottom of the food chain. The audience never learns much about his project. It's a "period piece" and a "love story"—genres the audience may consider artificial and mannered—and it has great personal meaning to Austin. He will struggle to prove himself and to convince Saul Kimmer his narrative deserves to be told.

In Lee's more brutal world anyone who wants power has to seize it for himself. The only way to get ahead is by hustling or tricking others. He doesn't have patience for Austin's more delicate maneuvers. Austin can't imagine living outside the social framework of family and friends—he wouldn't "spend three nights in a motel by myself." But Lee has no use for the expectations and codes of society.

Still, Lee's sensitive to the way Austin is pointedly excluding him from the Hollywood world. And Austin tentatively expresses a real desire to reconnect with Lee. The hint of admiration and respect, the way the brothers want to have a relationship but can't express this desire, makes the characters more poignant. Both are invested in the performance of masculinity and strength, especially Lee, and neither wants to back down and admit need—at least not yet.

When Lee hints about a story, neither Austin nor the audience takes him seriously. He hasn't earned credibility in the new West. But the next scene will upend several assumptions about Lee's inability to survive in the city.

Act 1, Scene 3

Summary

In the afternoon of the same day, Austin sits in the alcove with producer Saul Kimmer, who is enthusiastic about Austin's script idea and plans to get "some seed money" before Austin writes a draft. Lee returns, carrying a stolen television set, and apologizes for intruding. Austin introduces Saul and Lee, adding Lee lives "out on the desert." Saul politely asks if Lee lives in Palm Springs, and Lee says he does. When Saul praises the Palm Springs golf courses, Lee mentions he plays golf and suggests the two get together for a game. Despite Austin saying Lee is only "down for a visit," Lee cleverly and suavely talks Saul into joining him for an early game the next morning.

Once Saul agrees to reserve a golf course, Lee offers to leave

so Austin and Saul can continue their meeting. He adds he "just got Austin's color TV back from the shop." Lee then asks Saul if he's involved in television—does he produce westerns? Austin tries to move Saul away from Lee, but Lee tells Saul he's got a great "contemporary Western" in mind. As Saul listens with polite interest, Lee graphically describes a scene from the western film *Lonely Are the Brave*. It's the one in which "the man dies for the love of a horse."

As Saul prepares to leave, Lee asks him one more time about his western script. Saul says if Lee dictates the story to Austin, he'll take a look at the outline. Saul exits, and Austin tells Lee to return the car keys. Lee just smiles.

Analysis

The first two scenes established the brothers' characters, their desires, and their areas of conflict. Scene 3 begins the role reversal, pitting them against one another. At the beginning of the rising action, things look pretty good for Austin. He has a career, he has a plan, and he's won Saul over with his project. But in this this scene, the stage is set for a reversal of fortune. At first it will appear that Lee's fortune improves as Austin's declines, but as things develop, neither character has a straightforward arc. There are still surprises to come in the next scenes.

Saul as a character represents the practical, perhaps uncomplicated, money-minded and powerful men of Hollywood. Like the two brothers he's looking for a narrative—a good story. But his goal is turned outward, not inward. Saul wants to show American viewers stories they'll want to see. Do viewers want hopeful fantasy or gritty reality, he asks? Do they want unusual nuance or comforting clichés? Through Saul, Shepard explores how ideas like the wild West and the American dream are manufactured and sold, exploiting consumer hopes, desires, and longings. This approaches the theme of the play.

Lee enters the scene, symbolically, with a television. He doesn't want to escape through an imaginative TV show, but he does recognize a television will sell for a lot of money. And the TV gives him a convenient segue to pitch his script to Saul.

Lee's negotiating style in Scene 3 shows Austin—and the audience, watching through a mostly silent Austin's eyes—how crucially he's underestimated his brother. Lee plays the

character of a wealthy Palm Springs golfer since he knows this character will interest Saul. Meanwhile Saul feigns polite interest in Lee's rambling dialogue. Both men are performing skillfully.

The scene also brings up the different codes of the new West and the old West. When Saul suggests a golf game, it's merely a formality, not an actual offer. In the new West people like Saul are too busy to play golf with someone they've just met. But Lee sees an opportunity to get ahead and maybe to earn himself a spot in Austin's world. In the old West people do what they say they'll do. And men have a "real sense a' fraternity"—intimate friends in a sense, until they're enemies.

Characters in *True West* continually challenge each other. Pauses in the script, like when Lee suggests orange juice or reminds Saul of the golf date, indicate characters are trying to figure out what to say or do next. Something has changed; someone has issued a challenge or been challenged himself. As the scene develops, Lee becomes more menacing and more powerful. The bond between Saul and Austin becomes a bond between Saul and Lee. Near the end of the scene Lee blocks Saul's way out the door, indicating he's about to intervene directly, so his possible threatening of Saul becomes more plausible.

The tragic story Lee tells from the film *Lonely Are the Brave* catches Saul, Austin, and the audience off guard. Lee holds them momentarily captive. His story gets at real emotion and loss. The stakes were high in the old West—the true West where not everyone survived. *Lonely Are the Brave* has been called "one of the bleakest westerns ever to grace the big screen." The 1962 film, acknowledged by critics other than Lee as one of the greats, shows how the genre can go beyond clichéd morality plays and produce real scenes of human tragedy.

Why did Lee pick this quiet moment of suffering, rather than a more dynamic shootout or moment of heroism, as the Western scene he remembers? Does the true West require pain, loss, and death? The audience isn't sure yet what to expect from Lee's screenplay. But the final exchange between the brothers—Lee's smile and refusal to return the car keys—shows he knew what he was doing all along.

Act 1, Scene 4

Summary

That night after the meeting with Saul, Austin types as Lee dictates the plot of his movie. They disagree on whether the protagonist is at the Texas border or 50 miles from the border. Lee says "A lot can happen in fifty miles" and insists every detail needs to be correct even though Austin reminds him they're only writing an outline. Lee continues the story. As the protagonist drives his truck towards the border, with his horse trailer and his horse, a man driving a cattle trailer begins following him. Lee's protagonist realizes two things at once. The man behind him is the husband of the woman he's sleeping with, and he's in "Tornado Country," or the Panhandle. And, Lee adds, he has a third realization. He's low on gas.

Austin gets up, frustrated. The plot's too contrived, he tells Lee. No one runs out of gas with "horses conveniently along with them," and no one gets chased through "Tornado Country." He thinks Lee has just come up with an excuse to get the two men chasing each other on horseback. An angry Lee flings a beer can at the noisy crickets in the alcove windows. Austin suggests they take a break, but Lee wants to get it done. It's his last chance, he says. He'll be leaving the house soon. Unlike Austin, he doesn't want to be "a parasite offa' other fools." Austin protests. He's not a parasite; Lee's the thief! Austin demands his car keys back, but Lee, more and more in charge of the dynamic, says he'll keep the keys until Austin writes the script outline. Reluctantly Austin sits back down at the typewriter.

Lee asks Austin if he even plans to show the outline to Saul. Austin replies Lee can show Saul the outline himself the next day when they play golf. Austin's just writing the script to get his keys back. Lee tosses the car keys to Austin, who pockets them slowly. Now Lee wonders aloud what Austin will do. Call the police? Kick him out? Family members kill each other the most, Lee says, especially in the heat.

Austin says, "We're not driven to acts of violence like that." He tells Lee to sit down so they can finish the script. After considering his options, Lee sits back down at the table but tells Austin he'll find "easier money" elsewhere. Austin encourages Lee to stick with his movie idea. If the film script sells, Austin adds, Lee could improve his life. Lee asks if he

could earn enough to get their father out of debt. Austin says no; their father won't change.

"He's not gonna' change but I will," Lee replies. He imagines his leisurely life "gettin' paid to dream." After a pause, Austin asks Lee what he wants to do. Again he pushes Lee to finish the story. Lee agrees—after all, he's always wondered what life would be like in Austin's shoes. Austin admits he's envied Lee's adventurous life. After the two commit to finishing the script, Lee reminds Austin he offered the car if Lee wanted it so Austin returns the keys.

As the scene ends, Lee describes the next turn in the script's plot to Austin. The two men are chasing each other, both afraid and both unsure where they're going.

Analysis

Shepard uses the brothers' scriptwriting process to expose and mock audience expectations of stories on the screen. Do filmgoers want to see a nuanced, surprising conflict like the one Austin wants to write? Or do filmgoers enjoy exaggerated dramatic stories like Lee's, where coincidences move the story along in a way they never could in real life? Should art reflect reality or offer an escape from reality? Does true art offer emotional truth or gritty realism? These are major questions about the nature of art in general and writing specifically.

The word *true* provides some verbal irony. As Lee pointed out in the first two scenes, Austin loves using his imagination. His stories aren't truth at all. But while Lee pitched Saul a "true-to-life" western, his story is also unrealistic and anything but true. Austin is right; events probably wouldn't happen the way Lee describes them. Moviegoers might feel cheated, and they wouldn't be able to suspend their disbelief. They'll expect realism and get fantasy instead.

But Lee's travels have given him access to details Austin doesn't know. Details like the geography of the Texas Panhandle or the purpose of a gooseneck trailer for livestock make Lee's version true even if the plot is contrived. Even if writers make up a story, Lee implies, they can never escape the real world. Lee also knows the conventions of a movie plot require accelerated conflict and higher-than-usual stakes to keep viewers excited. The "chase scene" makes viewers tense, and the tension makes them care about the outcome.

The scene also goes deeper into the brothers' expectations of

themselves and of each other, upending what the audience has learned about them so far. When Lee says the script is his "last chance," his desperation is clear. He may not get an audience with a member of Austin's world again. He has one shot at earning an honest income and not turning into his father. For the first time the audience senses Lee wants more from life. While Austin has been the more sympathetic character so far, now Lee starts to become relatable too.

At the same time, Austin also gets more complicated. Lee, who steals from other people for a living, calls Austin a "parasite offa' other fools," implying Austin's career isn't much different. Austin manufactures fictions, sells them to the public, and takes studio money—more money, Lee believes, than his labor-light desk job has earned him. And Austin may be the brother who's truly "stuck." He's bound to a home and family, at the mercy of studio executives, and unable to make his own fortune the fabled American way.

When Austin realizes how desperate Lee truly is, he sees Lee may not really want a life on the margins. Lee still thinks Austin's help is patronizing. Lee's a man of the old West, and he can fend for himself. But his reserves are starting to break down. When Lee brags about how much money he could make stealing a car in Sacramento, he's trying to convince himself he made the right choice.

The brothers openly admit each wants a taste of what the other has. Lee envies Austin's Ivy League education and Hollywood connections—Austin has earned respect. Austin envies Lee's outdoorsman experience—Lee has tasted adventure. But for everything the brothers get, they give up something else. Lee has surrendered financial security. Austin has relinquished his own freedom to travel. Is it possible for both brothers to get what they want and work together, or will they be pitted against each other?

By saying family members murder each other more frequently than anyone else, Lee references the fierce loyalty and viciousness only families are capable of. As much as Austin may want to kick him out, Lee knows he won't. They're family, after all, and they're loyal. The play will show how this theme is to be questioned.

Lee specifies the most common murderers are "real American-type people"—upstanding people who follow social conventions and whom no one would expect to be killers. But Austin misses the implication. Normal people aren't "driven to acts of violence," he reassures himself. The interchange

foreshadows the brothers' escalating conflict in Act 2. For now the family violence is simmering under the surface. The heat and the sound of the crickets contribute to the pressure-cooker environment, in which each brother will buckle under the stress together and separately, and possibly reinvent himself.

As Austin presses Lee to finish the script, the audience wonders how much Austin really wants or expects his brother to succeed. Up to now Austin has been the successful one in the family—the good one—and this position comes with power and privilege. When he warms toward his brother, promising him change, is he really sincere or is something else going on?

The brothers' attitudes toward the "old man" show their hopes and fears for themselves and each other. Lee thinks his father's capable of change. It's America, where anyone with ingenuity, gumption, a little money, and a little luck can pull himself up by his bootstraps and succeed. This is the tradition of the Western settlers. Part of Lee still wants the American dream. And if their father has hope, he won't pass a legacy solely of failure on to Lee.

Austin sees something different in his father—the impossibility of salvation. Success isn't available to just anyone who gets lucky, Austin believes. He emphasizes "there's a lot of work involved" in his career. Each brother at heart believes the other's success came with a certain amount of luck and each thinks he's the one who truly deserves what the other has. It's complicated and going to get more so.

The final scene Lee describes, with the unknown danger of the "endless black prairie," parallels the situation of the two brothers. Neither knows where he's going. Both are hiding their fear. But who's chasing, and who's being chased? The audience isn't sure. The brothers will soon become part of the story they're telling, in unexpected ways the playwright will reveal.

The song between acts, "Ramblin' Man" by Hank Williams, is in the voice of a traveler who abandons his family for the open road. The song evokes a mythology right out of westerns, a hero rambling or wandering in search—like Austin and Lee—of something new.

Act 2, Scene 5

Summary

As the play moves along in time, the next morning Lee has returned from golf with Saul. He claims Saul liked the outline and gave him a fancy set of golf clubs as part of his advance. Austin is skeptical but praises Lee for getting Saul's approval. Most writers spend their whole lives waiting for a breakthrough, Austin says. He reminds Lee the deal isn't official, however, since there's no contract. Lee assures him Saul made a final commitment after the men "gambled for it" during the golf game, adding a new element to the story. Austin says they should toast and gets out a bottle of champagne.

Lee has more news: Austin will be writing the script. Austin protests he's already working on one, and Lee says Saul plans to drop Austin's story. Shocked, Austin tries to call Saul but can't reach him. He can't believe Saul would pick Lee's "idiotic" story of "two lamebrains chasing each other around Texas." Who would ever go see the film? Lee corrects him—it's a movie, not a film. Besides, he adds, Austin isn't the only one with good ideas.

Incredulous, Austin asks Lee if he physically harmed or threatened Saul. Lee says "I convinced him!" and lunges at Austin with a golf club, but stops before hitting him. Lee reiterates Saul genuinely liked his story, and he "beat [Saul] fair and square" in the bet. And even if law enforcement did come after him for threatening someone, Lee says, he could escape. Austin is the one stuck in town.

Still trying to understand what happened, Austin protests he wrote Lee's outline and deserves credit. He demands his car keys back from Lee so he can drive to the desert and think for a while. Lee refuses. They're "partners now," Lee says, and they have writing to do. So a new relationship of the brothers has begun.

Analysis

The opening scene of Act 2 is when the role reversals begin in earnest, and the brothers begin to unravel. Lee gains narrative power while Austin loses it.

The audience never learns if Saul lost a bet or if Lee

threatened him. Either way, the play implies Lee coerced Saul somehow. The play has conditioned the audience to believe Austin is the more trustworthy character since he's portrayed as more compassionate and levelheaded. So they're likely to believe Austin's version of events. But as the audience learns more about Austin and Lee in the frenetic second act of the play, their sympathies may change.

Lee wants Austin to think the merits of the story won Saul over, saying "he liked the outline already" and the gamble was just a formality. Still, the gamble represents the chance every Hollywood script takes. There's a great deal of effort, a lot of money on the table, and slim odds of success. Gambling is another convention of the western genre—betting was a high-stakes, high-intrigue way to decide important questions and build suspense.

Saul's idea of entertaining, robust "American movies" contrasts with Austin's more cosmopolitan idea of "films." Austin looks down on the formulaic spaghetti western. Lee thinks Austin's showing elitism and continually refers to his brother's "Ivy League" education and how it makes him think he's better than other people. But Austin realizes how much of his identity is wrapped up in his livelihood, his ideas, and his writing talent. His success is almost entirely out of his own control. He's at the whim of what sells. While Austin thinks Saul's appraisal of talent is genuine, Lee, a Hollywood outsider, has an entirely different take on it. Of course Saul tells everyone he likes their scripts; he gets ahead by lying, just like Lee, which binds them in a new relation.

Lee's angry at Austin's assumption he has no skills but physical intimidation, but he uses this same intimidation and power to trap Austin with a swing of the golf club. For his part, Austin has lost control. The way events are unfolding "doesn't make any sense." He begins to feel a strong need to escape, to go to the desert, to go West. This is the reader's first major clue that Austin's security and happiness aren't what they seem. He still believes in an orderly world with rhyme and reason, but his structure will morph into chaos and disorder quickly the closer he gets to his brother.

Lee continues his casual intimidation in the final line, giving Austin orders to "relax." The two will get to spend time together but not in a way either of them anticipated.

Act 2, Scene 6

Summary

It's afternoon, and Saul Kimmer is at the house explaining the situation to Austin. Saul says he was impressed by Lee's story and he'll continue Austin's project at the same time. Austin's furious that Saul gambled with his work. Besides, Austin can't write both scripts. Saul explains Austin is the only possible screenwriter for Lee's project since he knows the material as Lee's brother. Austin protests he's not familiar with the story at all—what do terms like "Tornado Country" and "gooseneck" even mean?

Saul informs Austin that Lee told him about their father's poverty. The brothers can use the studio money to give their father a trust fund, which—to Austin's disbelief—Lee has volunteered to manage. Austin refuses to write the script. He's missing out on good money, Saul says. There's heavy studio competition for the outline already, and Lee has "raw talent." Austin insists Lee is conning Saul.

Apologetic, Saul now says he doesn't see how he can continue with Austin's original script. Austin can't believe it. He has everything at stake in his script, and he's been meeting with Saul for months. Saul says he has to follow his "gut reaction," and Austin protests, "You lost! That's your gut reaction." He wonders what inspires Saul about Lee's "phony" story. "The ring of truth," Saul says, "something about the real West." Lee knows nothing about what moviegoers want to see, Austin claims. While Lee camps in the desert, Austin is more "in touch" with the real world of the city. The idea of the West, he says, is "dead" and "dried up." Saul repeats he has to follow his gut instinct, says he'll call Lee the next day, and leaves.

Analysis

Shepard keeps the audience guessing about the sincerity of the characters' stated motivations. Does Lee really want to help his father with the money, or did he spin a sympathetic tale to get money for himself? Saul won't confirm or deny gambling or intimidation on the golf course. Is his story of following his "gut instinct" believable? Has he been conned by the intrigue of Lee's gruff, oddball personality and raw, uncensored speech—a rarity in Hollywood? Or was he really

moved by the simple story Lee presented of cowboys and outlaws?

The scene also introduces the possibility Saul is conning Lee, instead of Lee conning Saul. The producer may be exploiting Lee's outsider status and experience with "the land" to get studio money. Saul's interest in Lee recalls films about poor men of the West—men who show grit through suffering and who talk to cactuses. In truth, such films are made by rich executives, and the poor men are played by rich actors. As Lee explains to Austin in Scene 8, he's not a Boy Scout or an actor. There's nothing glamorous about his life. Like Austin's job, Lee's daily life only seems exciting to those who don't have to live it.

Saul himself is at the mercy of larger market forces like the major studios. Like every other character in the play, he's trapped by something. He's unable to make completely independent decisions. Like a character in a western hoping for good fortune, Saul's going to "take the gamble." At the same time, he knows the risk if it doesn't pay off. But for the play, he's in.

Nevertheless, at least to the brothers, Saul sounds genuine and sincere. He wants to help their father. His condescending question to Austin—"We're big enough for that, aren't we?"—indicates he believes Austin will generously support his brother or he will make that happen.

The brothers' competitive drive emerges when Austin can't stand Lee's success coming at his own expense. He waited months and years for an opportunity Lee gets in a night with luck, coercion, and force.

When Austin's attack on his brother's credibility fails, he stands up for the integrity of his art. Real art, Austin believes, is provocative, thoughtful, and unusual. The difference between Austin's script and Lee's raises the question of what audiences really want from art. Do they want to see complex characters in believable situations that reflect their own lives? Or do they want to escape from the "smog" and tedium of daily life and enjoy a wild, impossible fantasy? The longing to escape runs through *True West*, connecting each member of the family in both their lives and their struggling work.

Devotion to art and principle has helped Austin escape the family curse of his father's and brother's nomadic lives. Austin has wanted more than money: he wants a meaningful legacy. But no matter how hard he works, he can't escape the family

trait of loss, dissatisfaction, and being a discontented "ramblin' man." As Austin explains in Scene 8, he feels just as aimless as Lee does. Austin says "there's no such thing as the West anymore." He thinks industrial changes in the landscape and the new urban way of life have made old-West grit and force irrelevant. No one can just escape to the desert. Still, once Austin loses the opportunity he thought would change everything, he sees the seductive possibilities of a new start on the frontier too.

Act 2, Scene 7

Summary

That night, Lee types by candlelight. Austin is lying on the floor, drunk, and singing loudly, to Lee's annoyance. The coyotes and crickets are back out in full force, and Lee can't concentrate on his script. A drunk Austin suggests Saul thinks he and Lee are the same person. Lee tells Austin to go outside instead and drink. Austin says Lee will still have to deal with crickets, coyotes, and "Police Helicopters ... Hunting for the likes of you."

Lee protests he's a screenwriter now. Austin laughs. Since Lee is so good at his trade, he says, maybe he should try Lee's job and steal a television. Lee replies Austin couldn't even steal a toaster. Austin thinks he can—does Lee want to bet? Lee offers to bet Austin's car or his house, or he'll give Austin screen credit if he wins. But Austin wants "something of value" on the table. When Lee threatens to kick him out, Austin says he'll take a walk in the desert, but he's too drunk to stand.

Concerned, Lee asks if he should call Austin's wife. Austin stands up again. His wife is far away, he says, and he doesn't need help. He's going to commit bigger crimes than Lee can imagine. And he's looking forward to a walk through the neighborhood at night. "We're livin' in a Paradise," he tells Lee. Lee says he sounds like their father. Maybe the two could bring their father out to live near them, Lee suggests. Austin swings at Lee and screams he's done with their father. He went out of his way to help their father, Austin claims, and got nothing in return.

Lee asks Austin for a little help with the characters in his story. "Those are illusions of characters," Austin says, "fantasies of a long lost boyhood." He adds Lee bullied Saul into a deal, and now Lee has to hold up his end of the bargain. Lee offers to

split the money with Austin and disappear forever after the script's done. Their father tried to disappear, Austin points out, and ended up losing his teeth. Lee hasn't heard this story. He joins Austin for a drink.

Their father's teeth started falling out, Austin says in a bizarre story. The government stipend he received didn't cover the cost of removing all the teeth. Instead their father found a low-cost dentist in Mexico. It took him eight days to travel to the border, where the dentist took "all his money and all his teeth." Austin went to visit their father and took him out to a Chinese restaurant. Their father put his extracted teeth in a bag with the food leftovers, then took Austin out drinking. At some point in the night they lost the bag of teeth. They looked later but they couldn't find the bag. "Now that's a true story," Austin adds as the brothers continue to drink.

Analysis

Shepard's production notes for the play say Scenes 7 and 8 should be marked by "the sense of growing frenzy in the [coyote] pack." Sound returns as an important force. The louder noise from the coyotes mirrors the increasingly fractured emotional and physical states of the characters. The cadence of the dialogue—Austin's now slurring his words—makes the characters "sorta' echo each other," as Austin says.

The two brothers have reversed roles already here. Each brother is now an exaggerated version of the other one's persona in the first scene. Lee is a more belligerent writer, demanding quiet and solitude. Austin is a more irritating drinker, unapologetic about interrupting Lee. Both have unleashed traits deep within themselves they never would have admitted were there. The brothers are shown as two sides of the same person—two sides fundamentally at odds.

In Scene 7 each brother must come to terms with his incorrect assumption the other's life is easy. Austin uses hyperbole to claim he'll commit "crimes beyond the imagination." He still senses Lee's theft is part of a fantasy he can act out, like the storybook "fantasies of a long lost boyhood" he sees in Lee's characters. Meanwhile, Lee's failure to adapt to his new role shows in his comic tangling of the typewriter ribbon. Austin tells Lee the truth about his life, a sentiment Lee will repeat to Austin in Scene 8. His career takes hard work, sacrifice, and facing the real possibility of failure. Stakes are high. Second

chances don't exist. Each brother tries to prove himself by implying he's the real man, the one who really struggles.

As the rising action moves toward its climax, pressure begins to close in around the brothers. Austin's suggestion of police helicopters hunting Lee recalls the chase in Lee's script. Austin senses he has become the "intruder" or the antagonist, while Lee's the one pleading for help. The hunter and the hunted have switched places in the brothers' revolving identities.

In the final three acts the brothers become increasingly aware any ideal or fantasy they've hoped for has disappeared. Austin says "the days of Champagne are long gone"—fortune and prosperity, represented by champagne, aren't going to return. The brothers switch to drinking beer and whiskey, both associated with the working class. Austin describes a suburban "Paradise" similar to the house Lee described in Scene 2. Now both brothers are in a sense standing outside of a peaceful, happy illusion of American life, and they're not allowed in. There's a sense of longing in both monologues.

When Austin says "Nobody can disappear," he hints at a genuine fear of his family legacy and what it means. The "old man" brings out a special rage in both brothers. Austin's unsuccessful attempt to help his father strikes a nerve. Austin cared for his family, he did what he was supposed to do, and it didn't help. His father kept seeking a way out. Mom's sought an escape, too—in Alaska. As Austin tells an anecdote about their father, the brothers bond over the shared worry they'll join their parents in searching for an illusory escape hatch. They worry they, too, will find themselves trapped.

The bizarre story about their father's teeth returns to a central question of the play: What makes a story true? The father's story is like a western. It involves a man on a quest, without government assistance and traveling through extreme climates in "eight days in the rain and the sun." Like Lee's characters he's headed south to Mexico. But unlike a western, the story has no moral. The ending is anticlimactic. They never find the teeth, itself an absurd situation. Their father's plight doesn't improve after his journey. Instead, it becomes marginally worse. The truth of the story emerges in its refusal to follow narrative convention and make any kind of sense.

Act 2, Scene 8

Summary

It's dawn the next day, and the brothers have been up all night. Lee is smashing the typewriter with a golf club. He's burning pages of his script in a bowl in the middle of the alcove. Austin is polishing several stolen toasters lined up by the sink. Both brothers are drunk, and empty beer cans and whiskey bottles cover the kitchen floor. The houseplants are dead.

Austin remarks the neighborhood will wake up to "a general lack of toast." He asks Lee if a criminal should think of the victims. Lee replies, "Ask a criminal." He thinks Austin was stupid to steal so many toasters instead of other, more valuable household supplies. Austin says Lee only challenged him to toasters. He protests Lee's destruction of the typewriter is insulting to writers who "persisted beyond all odds." Golfers, too, would be insulted by Lee's ruining a good golf club.

Lee wants some physical release and wonders if it's too late to call a "local woman." Austin is surprised Lee can't tell the time by the sky's light since he spends so much time in nature. He offers to make Lee some toast and drops bread in each toaster. Lee considers driving to Bakersfield but won't tell Austin why. Lee then begins to search for a phone number for women from several pieces of paper in his wallet. Austin suggests Lee call the operator and get the number.

As Austin sings and hums to himself, Lee asks the operator for the number of a woman in Bakersfield. After overturning the drawers in the kitchen to find a pen or pencil, Lee returns to the phone, but the operator's hung up. Lee rips the phone from the wall in frustration. Austin urges Lee to forget about the woman and butters his toast, saying the smell of toast at sunrise "makes me feel like anything's possible." Suddenly he asks to go out to the desert with Lee.

Lee insists Austin couldn't survive in the desert. People only learn desert survival skills because they have to, Lee says. And Austin has a good life; why would he give it up? Austin says there's nothing left for him in the city. He's surrounded by "streets I misremember" and "fields that don't even exist anymore." Lee refuses to let Austin come with him, and Austin begins to beg. Lee snaps he's living in the desert "'cause I can't make it here!"

When Austin offers Lee toast again, Lee knocks the plate from his hand. For a moment "it appears Lee might go all the way this time." As Austin begins to pick up the toast, Lee circles him "in a slow, predatory way." Lee says he'll make Austin a deal: Austin writes the screenplay exactly as Lee tells him to, puts Lee's name on it, and gives Lee the profits. Then Lee will take Austin to the desert. Austin agrees. He holds out the plate of toast from the floor, and Lee slowly takes a bite.

Analysis

The opening of Scene 8 is meant to astonish the audience with how far each man has descended. Their motivations have been established, but their actions are designed to shock. Why is Lee destroying the script after all his work, and why so dramatically? Why did Austin steal every toaster in the neighborhood? The extremes are absurd and comical, but they build towards chaos and complete destruction. Drinking brings out an unusual honesty in the brothers, and their words and actions become truer to who they really are.

Lee's fire recalls the unforgiving nature of the desert, which now intrudes into the house. Austin has stolen the picturesque American family breakfast scene symbolized by the toaster from as many suburban homes as he could, relishing the chance to act outside the law. In fact, Austin's trying to learn how to be a criminal just as Lee tried to learn to be a writer. When asked about "correct criminal psychology," Lee admits he doesn't identify as a criminal. He still can't help criticizing Austin's thieving technique, wondering "how many hundreds of dollars" Austin passed up for toasters instead of the real objects of crime.

Both brothers want an identity change, but neither can escape who he is. Lee has failed to write a satisfactory screenplay, and he's lost his only ticket to a middle-class life. He thus turns to a familiar form of companionship and comfort by searching for a woman's number. Austin tells Lee "a woman isn't the answer." Marriage and companionship haven't solved Austin's problems, and they won't solve Lee's.

As Lee's search for a pen demonstrates, sometimes looking for comfort only makes life more difficult. Lee's phone call and Austin's toast fixation provide absurd comic relief for the audience as the play increases the stakes for the characters in the violence that continues to build.

This scene indicates there's no way out of trouble and failure, regardless of the path chosen—the lone cowboy or the suburbanite. Austin's mentions of imprisoned writers and struggling golfers show how even these seemingly easy professions have dark sides and devastating possibilities. Austin mocks Lee's "determination and guts" and sense of himself as the self-made western hero who's capable of anything. For now, the more real and wild lawless forces continue to tackle tamed domestic life as the coyotes kill "people's cocker spaniels."

Is there any hope for salvation? Austin still thinks there might be. His momentary sense of bliss in morning toast gives way to true longing. The play's been building up to Austin's request, which leads to the brothers' final showdown. Austin wants to live the dream of the old West, a land he said didn't exist anymore in Scene 6.

But Lee now more realistically doesn't believe in salvation. Since the possibility of beginnings is overwhelming, he prefers the finality of endings. Lee tells Austin there's no dream—only desperation and survival tactics. Just as Lee's script recalls a childhood fantasy of horses and cowboys, Austin's dream of the desert comes from the camping tips in "a Boy Scout handbook."

Austin's monologue about the surreal nightmare-like nature of his city life shows the boundaries of fantasy and reality, life and art, have blurred for him. He doesn't know if he lived on certain streets or if he saw them on a postcard. He keeps "thinkin' it's the fifties" or searching for a suburban ideal from the 1950s, lost long ago. He no longer knows what the "true West" is, anywhere.

So Lee strikes a deal with him. If Austin wants to rewrite his narrative, he has to let Lee do the same. Writing the script is Lee's chance at control. Neither brother feels he has been in control of his life, and now both want to script their own futures. The brothers' bargain sets the stage for the climactic final act. How will this building power struggle end?

Act 2, Scene 9

Summary

It's the middle of the day. Yellow light fills the kitchen and alcove, still in the same messy condition as in Scene 8. The rooms look like "a desert junkyard at high noon." Austin is writing frantically in a notebook. Lee paces, drinking beer. Austin's shirt is open, and Lee is shirtless as both brothers are more elemental.

Austin reads Lee's dialogue back to him, including the line "I know this prairie like the back a' my hand." Lee says that the line is a cliché and that it's Austin's job to change it. Austin comes up with "I'm on intimate terms with this prairie." After mulling over the line, Lee agrees to the edit.

As the two continue to work, their Mom joins the play and enters with her luggage. At first, Austin and Lee don't notice her. When they look up, they're surprised to see her back earlier than expected. They ask about her trip to Alaska. She wonders what happened in the house to cause the destruction. Austin says they're celebrating—Lee sold a screenplay, and he's taking Austin out to the desert to live. She asks if they'll be joining their father and says, "you'll probably wind up on the same desert sooner or later." Her sons explain the stolen toasters absurdly by claiming Lee won a contest.

Mom came back early because she missed her houseplants, but now she sees that the plants are dead. Her sons apologize. She tells the boys she's read news of someone important coming to town. Picasso is visiting the art museum, she says, and they should go. Austin reminds her Picasso's dead. Anyway, the brothers don't have time to visit since they're leaving. Lee pauses—now he's not sure Austin's "cut out for the desert." Austin pleads with Lee to honor their deal.

Lee says they'll "postpone" the deal and reminds Austin he thought the story was dumb all along. Lee asks Mom if he can borrow some plates and silverware and starts taking plates from the cupboards. He's been eating off plastic, he explains, and he needs "something authentic."

Austin grabs Lee by the shoulders, saying he can't call off the deal. Lee pushes Austin backwards. Mom tells them to take their fight outside. Lee says he's leaving; he doesn't like what the town does to a person. Meanwhile, Austin's taken the ripped phone cord from the floor. He wraps the cord around Lee's neck, choking Lee until he can't speak. Austin tells Lee he's not going anywhere or taking anything.

As Lee struggles and fails to free himself, Austin demands his car keys back. Mom calmly asks Austin if he's killing Lee. Austin says he's "just stopping him." Lee throws the keys out of his pocket beyond Austin's reach. Still holding onto the cord, Austin asks Mom for the keys. Mom tells him to stop choking his brother. Austin can't; he's afraid Lee will kill him if he frees his hold.

Mom hands Austin the keys, but Austin still won't let Lee go. Mom says Austin can't kill his brother. In response Austin tightens the cord and insists he can kill Lee easily if he wants to, and he's going to the desert by himself. Mom says she's going to check into a motel, and Austin pleads with her to stay.

As Mom prepares to walk out, she reveals she felt desperate in Alaska. Austin tells his mother to stay in her home, but she says she doesn't recognize the house and leaves.

Austin continues to hold the phone cord. He says if Lee gives him a head start and lets him leave, he'll set Lee free. Lee doesn't move or respond. Austin slowly releases the cord and stares at Lee, whispering his name, but Lee appears dead. Austin stands and moves backward slowly. Then Lee gets to his feet—he's still alive after all—and blocks Austin's exit. A coyote howls in the distance as night falls. The brothers "appear to be caught in a vast desert-like landscape" as they stare at each other.

Analysis

The stage directions in Scene 9 reference conventions of the western genre. The distance between the safe home and the open desert has disappeared. The "desert junkyard" image specified in the directions gives a sense of destruction and hopelessness. "High noon," the title of a western film, is a phrase often used to indicate the time when a decisive confrontation between protagonist and antagonist is set to take place. Lee's shirtlessness reflects a primal, macho quality to his character, and his slow walk is a march of intimidation. The heat and the ambient tension make the scene seem less civilized and more feral, like the desert itself.

This scene continues Scene 4's work of satirizing the process of creation and scriptwriting. The brothers mull over clichéd, exaggerated dialogue. They're writing a version of the showdown they're about to mirror in their own actions. This time Lee's taking charge, with Austin feverishly working toward

his goal of getting to the desert. The brothers appear to be making some progress when the outside world interrupts and a parental authority figure appears, but in a passive role.

With Mom's unexpected entrance, the room becomes a small room again. Real-life responsibilities come flooding back into the brothers' minds. They didn't keep the houseplants alive. They explain their chaotic few days in the simplest terms possible. They had a contest, and Lee won. The old family dynamic is back; they can never transcend it. The boys return to the role of dutiful sons. Mom's surprised to hear Lee the itinerant sold a screenplay—instead of Austin the achiever. And she relegates Lee to the desert with his father. What's more, their mother went west to the frontier of Alaska and didn't find what she was looking for. She couldn't escape either.

Mom is entranced by the idea of seeing a famous artist. She refuses to believe Picasso is dead. Like Austin, she has hope in the salvation art can bring. Like Lee, she would use art to seize a rare opportunity and hopefully find the something that is missing from her life.

Mom's presence as a spectator to the final showdown may prevent Austin from ultimately killing Lee. She reflects the distance and insulation of suburban life, observing events at a peculiar remove. As her sons attack each other, she reminds them not to fight in the house as if they're children. She doesn't physically move to save Lee. Her appeal to the brothers' relationship—"He won't kill you. He's your brother"—shows she still believes being family offers immunity from acts of violence. But the play has proven rather the opposite.

Meanwhile, in one of the final, wrenching twists of the plot, Lee revokes his offer. The audience isn't sure why. Has he truly had second, wiser thoughts about what's in Austin's best interests? Is he using his advantage to manipulate his brother? Did he ever intend to take Austin to the desert in the first place? Lee's western is a "dumb story," he reminds Austin. The heroic cowboy can't succeed by his own ingenuity. There's no hope in the West, no more than in any location in these lives and in these times.

Lee surprises the audience again by taking the plates he so openly mocked in Scene 2. The nice silverware is "authentic," and he's choosing authenticity or truth over illusion. He realizes the stable life he's dreamed of is just as much a fraud as the cinematic, western-style showdown. The brothers have come full circle, and they're both stuck where they were at the beginning. The anxiety onstage escalates. As Lee renews his

commitment to a nomadic life, he can't yet see what the audience sees—Austin approaching him from behind with a weapon.

Austin has now become the scorned tragic hero seeking revenge. If he can't escape and have his freedom, Lee can't either. The brothers turn to primal instincts. Lee fights for his life like an "enraged bull." Murder may be "a savage thing to do," as Mom says. But Austin wants to prove he can be as savage as any outlaw in the West and survive alone without Lee's help.

The transfer of power and dominance between the brothers has been represented throughout the play by the car keys. The brother with the keys has independence and mobility—and a bargaining chip. When Austin demands the keys from Lee, he's seizing power again.

But when Mom moves to leave, he tries to stop her. Mom's presence is the last thread connecting him to a normal life, in which civilization rules over animal instinct. He's not as ready to leave as he thought.

Then Mom reveals her own sojourn on the Western frontier has only increased her despair. She tried to find fulfillment in nature, but instead the glaciers out the window made her feel "desperate." She longed to return to the artificial world represented by the museum exhibit. Her dilemma represents art's power over viewers: They need manufactured worlds to escape the pain of the real world. But she couldn't even return home. The house was unrecognizable—perhaps for reasons beyond its now chaotic physical state.

The play ends with the characters suspended in a state of tension. The chase is in full effect. Austin begs Lee for "a little headstart." He returns to the western language of gambling and betting, saying, "I'll make ya' a deal." Like the characters in Lee's drama at the end of Scene 4, the one being chased—Austin—isn't sure where he's going. He just knows he's afraid. The stage directions recreate a still scene meant to mimic two enemies—a cowboy and an outlaw—staring each other down in the wild West. One will shoot first, but which one? And when? The brothers have stepped into their own story, and life and art are inextricably mixed. In a final touch of drama, Shepard emphasizes the howl of "a single coyote" and the slow fade of the lights as the tableau lingers in the audience's minds.

“” Quotes

"When I'm eatin' I'm home. ... I'm not driftin', I'm home."

— Lee, Act 1, Scene 2

This quotation shows Lee's longing for a home base and a relief from his "driftin'" lifestyle. He'd rather not be reminded of or "invaded by" faraway places like Idaho, which represent danger, not promise. Lee expresses his motivation subtly. Superficially, he appears proud of his lifestyle. But from the beginning, he's looking for a way out.

"The man dies for the love of a horse."

— Lee, Act 1, Scene 3

Here Lee describes a tragic scene in the western film *Lonely Are the Brave*. His description encapsulates the big loyalties, risks, and stakes at the heart of the mythology of the American West. The Wild West of the movies is a frontier where men love their horses so desperately they die without them. Lee wants to infuse his script with this same sense of high risk and larger-than-life feeling.

"Family people. Brothers ... Real American-type people. They kill each other in the heat mostly."

— Lee, Act 1, Scene 4

Lee sees through the respectable veneer of the average American family who lives, like Austin, in the calm suburbs. Behind closed doors, they're most likely to "kill each other." The oppressive desert heat unleashes primal and instinctive urges in otherwise reserved people. The uniquely strong emotions families bring out in one another make them capable

of surprising acts of violence. For better or worse, family members remind each other of themselves and play shifting roles in their relations. Austin and Lee embody this in Act 2, to the shock of the audience.

"Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid."

— Lee, Act 1, Scene 4

As Lee explains what's at stake in the chase scene, he unwittingly describes his and Austin's psychological states. Austin thinks he's the only one with something to lose, hampered by responsibilities and high expectations. Lee thinks he's the only one who has to hustle and work hard to survive. As the characters progress and realize how similar they are, they learn they can't escape their fears, even by switching places.

"And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going."

— Lee, Act 1, Scene 4

The brothers' relationship often mirrors the dynamics of a protagonist and antagonist in a western movie—challenger and challenged, hunter and hunted, pursuer and pursued. But the brothers are switching places as the power dynamics shift between them. Neither "know[s] where he's going." Like the "one who's being chased" in Lee's story, they're running away from something and not sure where they're headed. The metaphor of the unresolved even circular chase highlights the play's sense of claustrophobia and inability to escape.

"Yer the one that's stuck. Not me."

— Lee, Act 2, Scene 5

Despite Lee's poverty and the possibility of his arrest for theft or violence, he believes Austin's the one who's really trapped.

Austin's "stuck" with investments like a house and family and a career in which he has to impress the rich and powerful. Lee, however, can come and go as he pleases. No one's depending on him, and no one can force him to do anything. Here Austin begins to wonder if he truly is "stuck" and whether he can be freed.

*"It has the ring of truth ...
Something about the real West."*

— Saul Kimmer, Act 2, Scene 6

Saul describes the authenticity he saw in Lee's script. What he means, according to Austin, is but a familiar image of the West, full of competitive, hyper-masculine cowboys, dramatic gun-sliding showdowns, and high-speed chases. This image, Austin thinks, is manufactured as much as any other script. Wealthy Californian Saul is intrigued by Lee's view of the world. It's gritty, unsanitized, and novel compared with the Hollywood bubble. But he overlooks Lee's true hardship and struggle.

*"I drive on the freeway every day. I
swallow the smog."*

— Austin, Act 2, Scene 6

The alienation and despair of urban life are frequent topics in literature. Austin will later talk about how lost he feels on a freeway he no longer recognizes. Here he tries to convince Saul his perspective is more "in touch" with filmgoers than Lee's because Austin performs the city's repetitive, mind-numbing rituals. He "swallow[s] the smog" and deals with the nuisance of urban development, and he understands how consumer ease can make life harder, not easier. He begins to wonder if he'd really be better off in the desert without all that.

"He thinks we're the same person."

— Austin, Act 2, Scene 7

Are the brothers really "the same person"? Austin refers to Saul's assumption the two men can work easily on a screenplay together, and Saul's willingness to discard Austin's idea for Lee's. But to the audience, the brothers might stand for different sides of the same personality, sides always in conflict. The same person can have both a need for approval, like Austin, and a hunger for freedom, like Lee. The brothers first represent a civilized, rational side and a violent, primal side of human nature. The representation is clear and even exaggerated. Austin's extremely rational while Lee's unusually violent. The play shows either extreme can lead to trouble.

"This is a Paradise down here."

— Austin, Act 2, Scene 7

Austin and Lee both witness suburban homes from the outside and describe their soft lighting and cleanliness as "Paradise." Austin thinks modern life has made residents forget the perfection of their surroundings. But he and Lee are stuck outside the safety of that "Paradise," watching the illusion of everyone else's perfect life. This image and Austin's distance from it further illustrate the gulf between on-screen perception and offscreen reality.

*"Now that's a true story. True to
life."*

— Austin, Act 2, Scene 7

Austin has challenged the brothers' notion of truth with a real anecdote about their father. The story involves their father misplacing his extracted teeth after a night of drinking. Like life, Austin thinks—and unlike a blockbuster movie—the story is messy, tragicomic, and full of failure. It lacks a clean resolution and is absurd.

*"I've always been kinda' partial to
endings myself."*

— Lee, Act 2, Scene 8

While Austin prefers the beginnings of stories, Lee prefers endings. Where Austin sees potential and possibility, Lee sees a dead-end road. The play analyzes the process of creating art and contrasts the brothers' differing perspectives on their lives through the bookends of a story. Austin thinks his life could go either way. Lee is no longer so sure he or Austin can change course.

*"There's nothin' real down here,
Lee! Least of all me!"*

— Austin, Act 2, Scene 8

In Scene 7 Austin criticized Lee's characters as "illusions of characters." Now Austin feels he himself has become a character or illusion in a narrative. He can no longer distinguish the streets and freeways he drives on from the landmarks in his memory. Here the play reflects on the mirages sold by art, and how easily mirages and myths can destroy people's sense of control over their lives.

*"I don't know if I'm killing him. I'm
stopping him."*

— Austin, Act 2, Scene 9

This quote indicates Austin doesn't intend to kill Lee, only to keep his brother from returning to the desert without him. But Austin also wants to stop Lee from usurping his own role as the visionary and the successful brother. He wants to prevent Lee from making the escape Austin can't make himself. Austin represents a failed attempt to stop the more primal, brutal part of the brothers' double nature from overwhelming the rational, civilized part he may still cling to in his rational side.

"I don't recognize it at all."

— Mom, Act 2, Scene 9

Throughout the play characters have observed unfamiliar

scenes, found familiar scenes unrecognizable, or felt an urge to leave a home they can no longer identify. Mom identifies with these feelings in her last line. After visiting Alaska—the new Western frontier—her perspective and surroundings have shifted, and she can't return home again. Like her sons she's lost the sense of stability and security home represents.

Symbols

Desert

The desert represents freedom, autonomy, and the ruthlessness of nature. The vast stretches of desert in the Southwest feature extremely hot and cold temperatures and unruly animals. They are ideal settings for westerns because deserts challenge the human ability to survive.

Deserts also represent escape and a kind of pilgrimage. When Lee and his father couldn't make it in a restricted urban society, they left for the desert. Austin realizes how shallow and temporary his own success feels and how alienating urban life has become. So he begs Lee to take him to the desert. Lee's own life is simpler out in the Mojave. He never has to accommodate anyone else or "sell myself down the river." Lee describes the harsh terrain as bringing its own peace, not like the calm of the suburbs, but a "Different kinda' heat. Out there it's clean. Cools off at night." The rising action of the play, trapped in the suburbs, only gets hotter. The tension is mirrored by the increasingly hot weather, which Austin and Lee can barely tolerate by Act 2, Scene 8. The play's final moment when the brothers face each other silently represents a freeze of the tension, not a comfortable cooling.

Toasters and Kitchenware

Toasters, plates, and other kitchen implements represent domesticity, ease, and comfort. They also stand for the suffocating limitations people accept in exchange for this comfort. The play takes place predominantly in a kitchen. At

first the room is in pristine condition. Later it's destroyed as the double nature of the brothers emerges and they realize the kitchen's easy comfort is an illusion.

When Austin makes his first foray into theft to prove himself to Lee, he steals toasters from multiple homes. In Scene 8 he relishes having disrupted a quiet, happy domestic meal for the families in town, with their "many, many unhappy, bewildered breakfast faces." With their illusion of domestic tranquility shattered, the suburban residents—like Austin when he confronts his own dissatisfaction—won't know what to do next.

When Lee attempts to leave for the desert in Scene 9, he shatters his mother's domestic peace in his own way—by taking her antique plates. He wants to eat off real china as "somethin' authentic." Like Austin, Lee's seen the artificial nature of his world and wants to anchor himself in reality through "authentic" materials.

Typewriter

Austin's typewriter symbolizes the process of creation and the manufacturing of written art. Through the scripts Austin and Lee write on the typewriter, they create a dream world to sell to the public. But the world they create doesn't satisfy them.

Creation, particularly writing for film, becomes both promising and destructive. Lee breaks the typewriter with a golf club—another instrument from the higher-class world that keeps shutting him out of stability and security. Austin asks his brother to think of "all the writers who never even had a machine." In doing so he's appealing to the fragile sense of hope he gets from his own writing. Once the typewriter is gone, there's nothing to manufacture. The brothers can finally face each other in Scene 8 and demand what they really want, if they could articulate it.

Themes

The American West

The western region of the United States, loosely defined as the states west of the Mississippi River, looms large in America's imagination from the start. Cowboys fighting Indians, prospectors striking gold, outlaws running wild, and families bravely settling the frontier contribute to an American ideal of self-reliance and strength through adversity. Set in the West Coast state of California, *True West* explores the allure and the dangers of the frontier.

It also juxtaposes this image of the American West with suburbia. There the legendary West is reduced to decals of the state of Idaho stuck onto souvenir plates. But at the same time the true West is pressing in at the windows through the chirping of crickets and the yipping of coyotes.

Myth versus Truth

Austin thinks Lee's story about a chase through the Texas Panhandle region is based on outdated, simplistic myths about the West, where heroes always have what they need to defeat villains. The script features "grown men acting like little boys" and "fantasies of a long lost boyhood," says Austin. He implies that Lee's story only exists in the realm of overblown imagination, not in the real world—the same accusation Lee levels at Austin's career. The brothers' childhood games also reflect their desires to be part of the western myth as conquerors and fighters. Austin pretended he was Apache resistance leader Geronimo, while Lee caught snakes. Are they different now? Austin's phrase "long lost boyhood" implies adults who enjoy westerns may have a desire to get back to the carefree pretenses of childhood.

Shepard's references to movie characters like Hopalong Cassidy and films like *Lonely Are the Brave* show the real West is a Hollywood-concocted fiction. As Austin and Lee both try to reshape their lives into the lives they want for themselves, they realize the damage this fiction can do. They can't achieve honor, vengeance, or freedom in the West no matter how much they try. Nor anywhere else.

Old versus New

Saul Kimmer is fascinated by how Lee's story represents the old West. There men supposedly operated outside of the law, danger waited at every turn, and strength and masculinity were prized. The new West of the 1980s brings urban development, rules, consumerism, and a different kind of competition. Which world is better? Which is more real? Lee wants to gain a foothold in the new West, while Austin thinks he wants to retreat to the old one. The old and new West emerge in the contrast between the desert and the suburbs, and between wild coyotes and the domesticated dogs they kill.

Family, Brotherhood, and Identity

Shepard has said the play is about double nature. Lee and Austin represent two halves of the same psyche. At first Austin appears to have faith he'll achieve success through hard work and the right connections, and Lee seems to take pride in living outside the margins of society. But their identities aren't as straightforward as they appear. As the two switch places, their true identities emerge.

Each brother recognizes some aspect of himself in the other. Each represents the other's deepest hopes and fears. Austin works hard at his career so he won't descend into Lee's poverty. Lee eventually chooses to return to the desert so he won't buckle under the stress and pressure Austin feels in the city. No matter which choice the brothers make, Shepard implies, they'll regret it. There's no way to win no matter which part of this joined self they live.

Family members in *True West* have a special kind of loyalty and hatred toward one another. Both Austin and Lee are frustrated by their inability to help their father, the unseen family member. They loathe him and fear turning into him yet can't abandon him completely. They seek help from their mother without realizing she's as lost as they are. Lee says family members are the people most likely to murder one another. Only family members can bring out the depths of emotion needed for real brutality.

Art as a Commodity

The best and truest story, according to Hollywood, is whatever people will pay money to see. Saul Kimmer knows Lee's gritty and unusual life experience will be a novelty in Hollywood. His script will sell even if the story is hackneyed and full of western clichés. Austin feels his own art is more in touch with the bleak realities of contemporary America, but Saul says "nobody's interested in love these days." Even Austin, the artist, knows how important financial security is. No matter how genuine or authentic his work may be, he needs money to live. So he needs to package his art as a consumer good.

Shepard uncovers the truth behind the art of Hollywood films. The stories are inauthentic, invented to appeal to audiences as a fantasy. Austin complains about the unbelievability of Lee's "true-to-life" script, though the script is typical of a western film. But unlike other commodities, art contains human desperation and emotion. Both Austin and Lee feel personal connections to their scripts and feel their writing reflects their lives. As artists, the play implies, they're commodities too.

Masculinity and Violence

Westerns traditionally present male characters who embody different ideas of masculinity: strong, courageous, and independent heroes, or brutal and savage villains. There's no room for vulnerability or doubt. Similarly, both brothers attempt to live up to an artificial ideal of manhood. Lee asserts his independence repeatedly in the first act, while Austin struggles to prove his machismo in the second.

Manhood is seen as primal and close to the land, like Lee in the desert. The brothers respond more instinctively and aggressively as the play goes on. Their final fight in Scene 9 has a feral, animalistic quality.

Violence is a staple of Shepard's productions. Fistfights are common, and actors often suffer injuries. They're also frequently required to tear down or physically damage the set. In *True West*, as their conflict reaches a boiling point, Lee destroys the typewriter and Austin turns to theft. By Scene 9 "the stage is ravaged," reflecting the inner turmoil of the

characters. The play approaches catharsis—the release of emotional tension—through physical violence. The two men hurtle inevitably toward a showdown only one of them will survive. Austin takes the tool Lee destroyed—the phone cord ripped from the wall connecting them to the outside —and turns it into an implement to strangle his brother.

Motifs

Drinking

In some ways, drinking holds the family together. Austin and Lee bond and become more honest when they're both drunk. They also grow more prone to violence, and their identities begin to merge. "We all sound alike when we're sloshed," Austin says. They also renew a certain lost connection with their father, who drank away all his money even after Austin's bailout. Once Austin's drunk, he can tell Lee a story about their father at the end of Scene 7.

Heavy drinking, like theft, is a behavior discouraged in most social settings. In Lee's solitary, isolated existence, though, he can drink as much as he chooses. To Lee, alcohol replaces the social engagement required in a world where he doesn't think he can make it. Austin, though more connected to social mores and values, also feels isolated. The brothers create their own sense of community and society through alcohol. When Lee and Austin drink to excess, they're rejecting the new West's codes of success and searching for the genuine emotion of the old West.

Television and Movies

Television and movies reveal how characters recognize the artifice in on-screen images of American life, but long to be a part of the artificial world anyway. Lee appears to reject televised entertainment. When he steals a TV, he says people

don't need their TVs anyway. Yet he desperately wants to write his own movie. Austin knows television and movies are explicitly about sales, packaging the West into fantasy spaghetti westerns with improbable plots and following money instead of craft. But he still wants his big break as a TV writer. Even though the brothers know they're being sold a false bill of goods, they can't help but want what's being sold.

Coyotes and Crickets

The desert animals' constant presence in the background reinforces the theme of the American West. In a production note Shepard compares Southern California's coyotes to hyenas in their "intense and maniacal" barks and pack instinct. The brothers mention how coyotes murder domesticated dogs, and the image adds to the play's sense of encroaching danger, fear, and pursuit. Crickets, like the southwestern heat, provide a constant background irritation meant to increase the play's sense of claustrophobia.

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