

The Impact of the Westerner's Image on the American Voters

Rereading of Sam Shepard's *True West*
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The significance of the American West as an ideal for masculine forcefulness and independence has a great influence on the American life in general and on the political affairs in particular. Although cowboys and gunslingers have disappeared, the ideal of bold and valiant men continues to persist in America.

In 1980, the year in which Sam Shepard introduced his play *True West*, The United States was engaged in a hostage crisis with Iran. In November, 1979, anti-American demonstrators goaded by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini had marched on the American Embassy in Tehran, seized control, and taken sixty diplomats as hostages. Iran threatened to put these hostages on trial and execute them as spies. This unprecedented event brought howls of protests from the American Public and contributed significantly to president Jimmy Carter's loss in the 1980 election and the coming of Ronald Reagan. The American Public demanded action or a rescue in order to save the American honor. Ronald Reagan's public image was tied to the American West. Although he was raised in a solidly Midwestern State of Illinois, in the

1930s Reagan moved to California, where he became a successful Hollywood actor. He considered himself a true Westerner in spirit. His image as a Westerner was reinforced by his acting career. In many of his movies, he usually played the brave and wholesome Sheriff or Cowboy who killed the outlaws, saved the school marm, and brought justice to the wild West. ⁽¹⁾

So the strong frontiersman image that Reagan offered proved irresistible to American voters for eight years. Janice H. Rushing, in her essay, "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth", states that the obvious fact about Reagan is his appearance as a Westerner. She adds

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that his experience as an actor aids in assembling the image. ⁽²⁾ This paper tries to show the impact of the Westerner image on the American voters and how *True West* helps to reinforce such image. The Western desert (frontier) has always been a source of attraction for Americans. It is the representative of the Old West and the myth of uncharted, romantic American frontier where everything is possible, and where one can form a new identity. In Shepard's play *True West*, the characters of Austin and Lee are defined by their relation to the old West. Austin is a sophisticated city boy and Lee is someone who can survive in the desert- someone who knows the land and can make things happen with his instinct and physical prowess. He can tell the difference between urban and rural coyotes, " They don't yap like

that on the desert. They howl. These are city coyotes here." (3)

Frank Rich pointed out in his New York review of the original Broadway production of the play that *True West* is a worthy direct descendant of Mr. Shepard's *The Curse of The Starving Class* and *Buried Child*. Many of his persistent recent themes are present and accounted for- the spiritual death of the American family, the corruption of the artist by business, and the vanishing of the Western Wilderness and its promising dream of freedom.⁽⁴⁾ Juan A. Taronco says that many critics rushed to demonstrate that the two brothers stood for the two conflicting sides of Shepard's nature, the playwright and the cowboy, the celebrity and the outcast. She criticized William Kleb who claims that the play is the product of Austin's repressed mind and that Lee is a figment of imagination. She concludes that these narrow and limiting readings of the play do not seem very satisfactory because they dramatically diverge from the audience's experience of the vital stark hostility of the two brothers.⁽⁵⁾

Though Shepard, described by Coe as the poet laureate of the American West, was born in Illinois in 1943, he grew up on a ranch in Duarte, California, and had a personal experience with the physical labor of ranching and raising livestock. Once he admitted that much of his knowledge of the West came through movies and TV and he

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expressed his admiration for those 16 or 17 year-old guys who took on this entire country, and didn't have any rules moving cattle from Texas to Kansas city , from North to

South.⁽⁶⁾ So Shepard himself found inspiration and comfort in the Western code of freedom and self-direction.

Shepard's *True West* was first produced at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in July 1980. Maurice Bassan says that the two brothers, Austin and Lee, constitute two aspects of the American self, the Westerner and the Easterner. Lee, the Westerner, is violent and anarchic criminal bachelor, inhabitant of Western desert places.⁽⁷⁾ He is described in the stage direction:

" .. early forties, filthy T shirt, tattered brown overcoat covered with dust, dark blue baggy suit pants from the Salvation Army, pink suede belt, pointed black forties dress shoes scuffed up, holes in the soles, no socks, no hat, long pronounced sideburn, ' Gene Vincent' hairdo, two days' growth of beard, bad teeth."⁽⁸⁾

While Austin, the married successful screenwriter, is described, "light blue sports shirt, light tan cardigan sweater, clean blue jeans, white tennis shoes."⁽⁹⁾ Austin is seen writing by candlelight when his brother Lee has just returned from the Mojave Desert, where he visited his father. The two brothers are together for the first time in five years. The mother vacationed in Alaska leaving

Austin to take care of the house. Austin asks his brother Lee how long he plans to stay and Lee answers that he intends to burglarize the houses in the neighborhood and asks for Austin's car. When Austin rejects, Lee grabs and shakes him violently, demonstrating his superior physical strength.

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The next morning Austin informs Lee that the movie producer (Saul Kimmer) is going to visit and Lee agrees to leave for a few hours if Austin lends him the car. Saul Kimmer arrives and expresses his content over Austin's story, "I'm absolutely convinced we can get this thing off the ground. I mean we'll have to make a sale to television and that means getting a major star. Somebody bankable. But I think we can do it. I really do."⁽¹⁰⁾ Then he adds, "I mean it's a great story. Just the story alone. You've really managed to capture something this time."⁽¹¹⁾

Before Saul's departure, Lee returns carrying a stolen television set. Lee manages to persuade Saul that he has got a Western story, "Yeah. Contemporary Western. Based on a true story. 'course I'm not a writer like my brother here. I'm not a man of the pen."⁽¹²⁾ and he can tell it by the tongue. When Lee asks Kimmer if there is still a room for a real Western these days, Saul answers, "Well, I don't see why not. Why don't you uh- tell the story to Austin and have him write a little outline."⁽¹³⁾

So Saul suggests that Austin writes the outline for Lee. The next morning Lee is seen dictating his story and Austin reluctantly typing. Austin expresses his disgust over Lee's story for he finds it, "... not like real life. It's not enough like real life. Things don't happen like that."⁽¹⁴⁾ The two brothers quarrel over this matter and Austin decides to give up writing the outline for Lee claiming that, "... I've got my own project. I don't have time to write two scripts."⁽¹⁵⁾ At this point, Lee shocks Austin with the news that Saul Kimmer is going to drop Austin's story, "No, he said he was gonna drop that other one."⁽¹⁶⁾ Austin could not believe this and Lee tries to explain the reason for that saying, "I been tellin' ya. He said he liked the story a whole lot. It was the first authentic Western to come a long in a decade."⁽¹⁷⁾ When Austin becomes sure that Saul prefers Lee's story, he criticizes Saul for accepting such story:

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.... Now you are trying to tell me you like his story. How could you possibly fall for that story?

It's as phony as Hoppalong Cassidy. What do you

See in it? I'm Curious. ⁽¹⁸⁾

Saul's answer reveals American worship for the Western heroes and stories, "It has the ring of truth, Austin.... Something about the real West.... Something about the land."⁽¹⁹⁾ Austin insists that, "There 's no such

thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue! It's dried up."⁽²⁰⁾

Despite Austin's pejorative assessment, the Western image retains an evocative and active power. This image represents the values of the common, middleclass citizens and the idealized stature to which only mythic heroes can hope to attain. These values are the American attitudes toward truth, justice, honor, preparedness, righteousness, free enterprise, and common sense. Lee recalls the film "Lonely Are the Brave", starring Kirk Douglas, in which Lee says, "the man dies for the love of a horse."⁽²¹⁾

Leslie A. Wade, in her essay, "Sam Shepard and the American Sunset", states :

Lee's life in the desert is no noble
adventure but the result of
desperation and a deficiency
of social skills. Still, his casual knowledge
of the Mojave and the San
Gabriels, along with his evocation Of
the Texas panhandle suggests an earthly vitality and
a "saturated" kind of experience. This
element is what Saul emphasizes when he tells Austin
that he is backing
his brother's project.⁽²²⁾

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When Saul Abandons Austin's love story and decides to do Lee's true-to- life Western one, the reversal of roles between the two brothers becomes apparent.

Lee expresses his dissatisfaction with his life. He yearns for the suburban paradise he thinks his brother lives in. He dreams that his script would be an opportunity to change his life and settle down in city:

Austin: Absolutely. You could really turn your
Life around, you know. Change things.

Lee: I could get me a house may be. ⁽²³⁾

On the contrary, Austin envies Lee for his way of life. He is attracted to Lee's individualism and involvement with the land. He says that he used to picture Lee somewhere, " ... different places. Adventures. You were always on some adventure."⁽²⁴⁾ and he adds that he used to say to himself that, " Lee's got the right idea. He's out there in the world and I am here what am I doing?"⁽²⁵⁾

The two brothers gradually start to switch roles. At the beginning of scene seven, Lee struggles to type with one finger while Austin sits in the kitchen with a whisky bottle. As Lee tries to concentrate on his work, Austin gets drunk and undertakes a little tour through the neighborhood:

Austin: ... Well, may be I oughta' go out and try
my hand at your trade. Since you're
so
good at mine. ⁽²⁶⁾

Lee pleads for help because he can tell a story off the tongue but he cannot put it down on paper and he promises his brother to take

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him out to the desert. Lee also tries to tempt Austin by offering him half the credit of the script:

Lee: I'll give you- shared screen credit. How 'bout

That? I'll have it put in the contract that this

was written by both of us.

Austin: I don't want my name on that piece of shit!

I want something of value. You got anything

of value?⁽²⁷⁾

In the next morning, Austin appears with numerous toasters stolen from neighborhood houses and Lee has smashed the typewriter with a golf club and is burning pages of the script. All the house plants are dead because of lack of water. At mid-day, the house is covered with debris- bottles, toasters, the smashed typewriter, a ripped out telephone, etc. The house seems like a desert junk yard at high noon.

Their mother returned from her vacation to Alaska. Though She is upset by the mess in the house , she is more interested in telling her sons that the famous artist, Pablo Picasso, is in town. Austin informs his mother that Picasso is dead and that he and Lee are leaving for the desert. Lee insists that he is going alone and that he is giving up the screenplay. Austin becomes furious and tries to stop Lee from leaving by strangling him with a piece of phone cord. The mother calmly says that Austin should not kill his brother and exits. When Austin releases

the cord around Lee's neck, it appears that Lee is dead but after a few moments Lee leaps to his feet and the two brothers square off as a single coyote is heard from the distance and moonlight falls across the room.

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Leslie A. Wade states that the ending of *True West* is a despairing one for the buffoonish mother steps aside as Austin rails at his brother for reneging on their deal . She also says that *True West* is not simply postmodern parody, parading empty and often- repeated images of the West. The attitudes of the frontier energize the brothers and engender a longing for fullness and the vitality that the West has long offered Americans. She concludes that Shepard's drama performs a kind of nationalistic service and that such works glorify the past and encourage a reverential attitude toward idealized former times.⁽²⁸⁾

The image of the westerner has its effect on the American public opinion especially when the United States experiences a certain crisis. Ronald Regan recognized the importance of American hero worship and myth making, particularly in regards to the West. The West still represented freedom for Americans for they saw the West as a place of escape and the Westerner as bravely standing on his or her feet. In his Speech at the opening of the "The American Cowboy Exhibit " at the library of Congress on March, 1983, Reagan Says:

Some of you may be aware of my
fondness for

The Western art. And in the last couple of years we've tried to bring its influence to the White House- a natural home for a very American expression.⁽²⁹⁾

Shepard's True West proves to be a play that celebrates the image of the Westerner. First, Lee who represents the Westerner is portrayed as bold, valiant, and free. His brother Austin envies him for his life in the desert and expresses his willingness to go with him to the desert. Saul Kimmer (the Hollywood producer) abandons Austin's story for Lee's one because Lee's story is one that "has the ring of truth... about the real West" and "... something about the land" as mentioned before. Sam

Shepard himself expresses his admiration for

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the free boys of the desert who move cattle from North to South. The American People also abandoned Jimmy Carter in 1980 and elected Ronald Reagan for his image as a true Westerner and a Hollywood actor who appears in most of his movies as the noble cowboy who killed outlaws and brought justice.

It is noteworthy that whenever the United States feels that there is a threat, real or imaginary, threatening the nation, there appears a need for the Westerner. That is why after the 11/9/2001 attacks, George W. Bush appeared frequently in a Cowboy hat identifying Osama bin Laden as an outlaw 'wanted dead or alive'. Such appearance works to assuage the fears of the nation and revealing the president as an American of courage,

dependability, and resolve attributes associated with the
loner cowboy fighting evils.⁽³⁰⁾

Notes

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