

# Meaning Perpetually Deferred: A Derridaean Study of Sam Shepard's *True West*

Bitra Darabi<sup>1,2</sup> & Mehdi Sepehrmanesh<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of English Literature, Karaj Azad University, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Department of English Literature, Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran

Correspondence: Mehdi Sepehrmanesh, Department of English Literature, Karaj Azad University, Tehran, Iran.  
Tel: 98-919-528-5469. E-mail: mehdi.sepehr330@gmail.com

Received: January 26, 2012

Accepted: June 5, 2012

Online Published: August 21, 2012

doi:10.5539/ells.v2n3p69

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v2n3p69>

## Abstract

This article aims at reading Sam Shepard's *True West* from deconstructive point of view. Derrida with coining the word "Differance", consisting of the words to "defer" and to "differ", disturbs the presence of meaning, contending that no stable meaning exists. Meaning is forever fallen into the trap of "differance", causing the meaning to defer, that is, the signified is always deferred and we are just dealing with play of signifiers. Moreover, he believes that in each set of binary oppositions, the two sides of opposition not only add to each other but also take the place of each other and thus supplement each other. This is in fact what happens in *True West*. Characters' identities have unstable nature. Each character changes their identity from one type of personality to another one, thus plunging themselves into finding floating identities. In addition, the characters supplement each other; they need each other to be completed, as two sides of opposition, without having priority over each other. Therefore, what fills the space of the play is the indeterminacy regarding Derrida's ideas of supplement and "differance" propelling the characters into having unstable and changing identity.

**Keywords:** binary opposition, differance, floating signifier, signified, supplement

## 1. Introduction

The present study is an attempt to investigate the traces of Derrida's deconstructive view in Sam Shepard's *True West*. After World Wars I and II, the attention turned against objectivity and truth that intellectuals supposed to have attained through reason and knowledge whereby they could constitute objective reality in social institutions. However, after these wars in which more than 100 million people were killed, a sense of uncertainty overwhelmed the world in different fields of science. In physics, Einstein with his theory of relativity contends that what we call truth is relative and has a fluid stance. In philosophy, Nietzsche (1885) by his famous assertion holds that "old God liveth no more; he is indeed dead" (p.253) raises a storm of protest at the objectivity of truth and contends that truth is not absolute. Furthermore, the inception of postmodernism emerging out of modernism shakes the foundations of modernity; the modernity which is concerned with rationality, objective reality and truth. Doubting the nature of truth and reality, postmodernism has changed the notion of reality to something subjective, based on the situation a person lives in or the culture that embraces them. Moreover, with the advent of deconstruction, Derrida's poststructuralist view of the world challenges the very institutions of modernity through which objective reality and truth have been taught. Charles Bressler (2007) explains that for Derrida and other postmodernists, no objective reality exists, but the subjective one, the creation of "human mind". Truth is "relative" depending on the "nature", "culture" and "social influences" of a person's life. "Many truths exist, not the truth". Objective reality of the modernity has been supplanted by the subjective reality of the postmodernism in which many "interpreters of reality" come to life (p.99).

## 2. Derrida's Deconstructive View

Structuralism and most significantly its founder, Ferdinand de Saussure, concentrate on sign which itself is divided into two parts, signifier and signified, confirming that signifier corresponds to the signified. That is to say that each word (signifier), written or spoken, carries a meaning (signified); "a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas" (Saussure, 1915, p.4). However, with the advent of post-structuralism following Derrida's deconstruction, structuralism's chief idea of the correspondence of signified and signifier is questioned.

Derrida sets against this view of language (Founded by Saussure) by developing a coined word “differance” to which he refers as “to differ”, to be unlike and dissimilar in nature and “to defer”, to delay, maintaining that meaning is not present in itself but in the other words around and forever postponed since “language is a differential network of meaning” (Norris, 2005, p.24), and there exists just difference in language through which we can recognize the word. Hans Bertens (2001) conducts the same issue, maintaining, “words are never stable and fixed in time ... because the meaning we see in words is the product of difference, that meaning is always contaminated ... Every single word contains traces of other words-theoretically of all the other words in the language system” (pp.124-125). Meaning is trapped in a play of signifiers mainly resulting from difference in language. This is like finding meaning in a dictionary, which refers us to the other words, thereby causing the meaning of the word to delay, not allowing a signifier to rest and find a signified. This is actually what happens in Derrida’s Differance, best argued by Mark Currie in his *Difference* (2004) that, the differance signifies that the relationship between the elements of a sentence is always in “motion”, and that the meaning of any sign comes from those elements and words preceding and those following the very sign (p.54). Derrida (1982) in his *Differance* comprehensively defines “differance”:

*Differance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be present, appearing on the stage of presence is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or future considered as a modified present. (p. 394)*

Moreover, Derrida argues that the two sides of opposition are in need of each other since a part of meaning exists in the other side. He, furthermore, notes that the two sides of opposition not only complete each other but also take the place of each other and thus supplement each other. They need each other to be completed. More importantly, neither of them has prior status over the other term. Their existence depends on each other. Simply put, Derrida believes that no text has a determinate meaning since the signifier never arrives at a definite signified, it is always floating in a chain of signifiers. M. H. Abrams (2000) contends that, “for Derrida’s chamber of texts is a sealed echo-chamber in which meanings are reduced to a ceaseless echolalia, a vertical and lateral reverberation from sign to sign of ghostly non-presences emanating from no voice, intended by no one, referring to nothing, bombinating in a void” (p.246). Moreover, he adds, “what Derrida’s conclusion comes to is that no sign or chain of signs can have a determinate meaning” (p.246). This paper is an attempt to trace the mentioned notions of Derrida in Sam Shepard’s *True West*.

### 3. Sam Shepard’s *True West* as an Indeterminate Text

Sam Shepard (1943), the director, writer, and actor is a well-known American playwright who has written more than fifty plays and the numerous awards he has received illustrate the originality of his works. His plays are mostly concerned about family fragmentation in America, loss of identity, nostalgia for the past, power struggle and old and new values of the west. However, another compelling concept, indeterminacy, regarding Jacques Derrida’s *Difference* and *Binary Opposition* can be traced in his works too. Likewise, as discussed earlier, the text of the play, *True West* by Sam Shepard has the same features. His characters do not render a signified for their indeterminate behavior, changing from one kind of personality to another one. Therefore, identity, personality and the significant concepts for them become inherently indeterminate, as this indeterminacy is a part of their floating nature. In addition, the characters in the play, Austin and Lee, act as two sides of opposition, who not only add to each other but also take the place of each other. At the end, they need each other to be completed. A line here is moved above before the head line

#### 3.1 Floating Meaning of *True West*

The name of the play is *True West*, and the word “true” has been treated in different ways and with different names such as true story, true west, true character or identity and true writer. True West; what is true west in the story? The word “true” has an unstable character for each character in the play. The word conveys different meanings for each character and situation in the play. True west as a sign changes its significance when it arrives at a certain character and there it tends itself to a mobile stance. First, we see that in the play, each character has their own definition of true west but as the play progresses, the same concept changes again for each character. For Austin, the writer and younger brother, city is his true west as a place of civilization and authenticity, where “it’s been built up” and he can enjoy “his imagination” (Shepard, 1997, pp. 11-12). This comfortable place, the house where he is living, (the symbol of the whole city) changes its meaning and authenticity when it comes to being defined by his older brother, Lee, who has just come back from desert where he has “beenspendin’ a lota’

time” (Shepard, 1997, p.9). To Lee, true west is desert, a place where he has been living for three months, a place of originality, experience and imagination and where he can find serenity and comfort without any distraction from outside. To mother “true west merely is vastness; the Alaskan frontier” where it is “cold and dissolute” (Krasner, 2006, p.113). For their mother, who has a compelling role in the play but her existence and appearance is not to be seen much, true west seems to mean Alaska where she can relax, have fun and where she has gone to be away from the father of the family, an alcoholic man, for whom desert is his true west where he can find solace by drinking alcohol. It is true that for both Lee and father desert is their true west but for each has a completely different meaning. Therefore, as we can see for each character, the meaning of true west is different, acting as a signifier not finding its signified. This is similar to what Derrida says in his *Differance* that signifier does not find its signified and it is always deferred. Signs are just trapped in a play of signifiers referring to each other without resting on a definite signified as the concept of true west here, which has a floating existence and its meaning changes as it falls into the hand of each character. For each character, as we can see, it has a different meaning, not a stable one. As soon as it passes to a character, its meaning shifts. True west as a signifier does not signify a fixed meaning because of falling into difference of meaning. Even for producer, Saul Kimmer, true west is a place where he can earn “a large sum of money” (Shepard, 1997, p.34). Money is very important. It is striking to notice that the very concept that has a different meaning for each character changes its meaning again for the same characters during the course of the play. For example, as brought up before, at the beginning of the story true west for Austin is the city and the house where he is living as a site of civilization but during the course of the play, it changes its meaning. True west for him becomes desert as a place where he can exercise his imagination, explore experience and find stability and solace to write his stories. This is, at least, what he thinks. He asks Lee to teach him and take him to the desert to live a new life since he thinks there is nothing for him in the city. Lee gets surprised and says:

LEE: *(stands) What're you, crazy or something? You went to college. Here you are down here, rollin' in bucks. Floatin' up and down in elevators. And you wanna' learn how to live in a desert!*

AUSTIN: *I do, Lee. I really do. There's nothin' down here for me. There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was a life here then. But now - I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. On the way to appointments. Wandering down streets I thought I recognize that turn out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I misremember. Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in a postcard. Fields that don't even exist anymore. (Shepard, 1997, p.48-49)*

Austin is fed up with his true west, which is city life, and wants to change it and go to the desert in order to “search for the self”, but it is not clear whether he can be successful in his search or not though what he needs most is “stability” (Procter, 1988, p.42), and a better place to live or exercise his imagination. The identity of true west for him changes from city life to desert. It is not just Austin for whom the meaning of true west changes. Lee also changes his true west and it becomes city with houses around where he can steal whatever he wants; “a paradise”, and when he is asked by Austin how the place was, he replies.

AUSTIN: *What kind of a place was it?*

LEE: *Like a paradise. Kinda' place that sorta' kills ya' inside. Warm yellow lights.*

*Mexican tile all around. Copper pots hangin' over the stove. Ya' know like they got in the magazines.*

*Blonde people movin' in and outa' the rooms, talkin' to eachother. (pause). Kida' place you wish you sorta' grew up in, ya' know.*

AUSTIN: *That's the kind of place you wish you'd grown up in?*

LEE: *Yeah, why not?*

*(Shepard, 1997, p.12)*

His previous paradise was desert. Nevertheless, when he sees the houses around where he can easily steal from them, his paradise changes and becomes a city with houses. Moreover, he becomes a writer typing a screenplay for a producer from Hollywood. As Krasner (2006) clarifies the matter that, the “sibling rivalry” proceeds through the play. Each is resolved to set himself free from his “predictable” behavior. Each seeks to be born again by the other. Austin implores Lee to take him to the desert and teach him how to live there. Lee is shocked. How can his younger brother leave his “Hollywood success” for “scrounging and “hustling”? Austin, nevertheless, argues that he wants to find out the “True West” rather than living in “his make-believe town”. Conversely, for Lee, the screenplay is “his shot on the wheel of fortune” (p.112).

The meaning of true west for each person changes compared to their previous meaning of they have of it. Thereby, the meaning of true west defers. It loses its instability to arrive at a definite destination, but as soon as it tries to reach a point of meaning, it departs and flows in a chain of signifiers and never becomes stabilized. It falls into *differance* of meaning.

### 3.2 *The Question of True Identity*

Following true west and its mobile meaning for each character of the play, it is time to consider identity and brood over what identity is. Once again we see the word *true* finds its significance in this play. At the beginning of the play, Shepard describes the characters' appearances and the way they are dressed,

AUSTIN: *Early thirties, light blue sports shirt, light tan cardigan sweater, clean blue jeans, white tennis shoes.*

LEE: *His older brother, early forties, filthy white t-shirt, tattered brown overcoat covered with dust, dark blue baggy suit pants from the Salvation Army, pinksuede 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. (Shepard, 1997, p.2)*

Even stage direction is pointing how easily the character can change as when they change their costume. At the beginning of the play, two characters are depicted; one of them Austin as a writer writing a screenplay in order to give it to a producer whom he later meets. He is very reasonable, calm and well-dressed. His identity is now marked as a writer:

*night. Sound of crickets in dark. Candlelight appears in alcove, illuminating AUSTIN, seated at glass table hunched over a writing notebook, pen in hand, cigarette burning in ashtray, cup of coffee, typewriter on table, sacks of paper, candle burning on table (Shepard, 1997, p.5).*

This is how beautifully he is pictured as a writer. Another character, his older brother Lee, is also described from the beginning as a loafer and drunkard: "soft moonlight fills kitchen illuminating LEE, beer in hand, six-pack on counter behind him. He is leaning against the sink, mildly drunk; takes a slug of beer" (Shepard, 1997, p.5). Lee at the beginning of the play gets the key of Austin's car and goes out and returns with a set of TVs stolen from neighbors. His identity is illustrated as a stealer and gambler. There is a producer, Saul Kimmer, who has come to talk about Austin's project, his story, and he accepts it as a good one. Meanwhile, Lee enters the house with a stolen set of TVs. He soon gets along with Mr. Kimmer and feels comfortable with him. He intervenes between Kimmer and Austin and tells Saul that he has a story, a "true story". Saul and Lee gamble in a game of golf and Lee wins. The gamble is that if producer loses, he should accept Lee's story as a screenplay and he actually loses the match. Accordingly, he refuses Austin's project and instead accepts Lee's story as something bankable. Austin is supposed to write the outline of Lee's story for Saul but as he hears that Saul has dropped his story and wants to work on Lee's story, he gets mad and loses his stability. When he refuses to write Lee's story, Lee belittles his capability that Austin is a person, good for nothing and cannot do anything but write and cannot even steal a toaster. In the next scene, Austin is shown as having stolen different kinds of toasters without even feeling guilty of what he has done,

*AUSTIN has a whole bunch of stolen toasters lined up on the sink counter along with LEE's stolen TV, the toasters are of a wide variety of models, mostly chrome, AUSTIN goes up and down the line of toasters, breathing on them and polishing them with a dish towel...*

AUSTIN: *(polishing toasters) there's gonna be a general lack of toast in the neighborhood this morning. Many, many unhappy bewildered breakfast faces. I guess it's best not to even think of the victims. Not to even entertain it. Is that the right psychology?*

LEE: *(pause) what?*

AUSTIN: *Is that the correct criminal psychology? Not to think of the victims?*

LEE: *What victims? ...*

AUSTIN: *The victims of crime. Of breaking and entering. I mean is it a pre-requisite. For a criminal not to have a conscience? (Shepard, 1997, p.42-43)*

He is satisfied with his deed, having stolen the toasters. Moreover, in the same scene Lee is seen changed as a writer, finger-typing a story. This scene is best described in the stage direction depicting both changing characters: "night. Coyotes, crickets, sound of typewriter in dark, candlelight up on LEE at typewriter struggling to type with one finger system, AUSTIN sits sprawled out on kitchen floor with whiskey bottle, drunk" (Shepard, 1997, p.36). Austin who at the beginning is depicted as a respectable, reasonable and calm writer loses his character and stability and becomes a drunkard and stealer. On the other hand, Lee who at the beginning was a

gambler and loafer has turned into a writer typing a story; "I'm a screenwriter now! I'm legitimate." (Shepard, 1997, p.37) Even when Shepard speaks of his characters, he believes that they are not to be "fixed" and this is what makes his characters "on the move" (Bigsby, 2004, p.168). Both characters have lost their identity and fixity and turned into the other character's identity as being the two halves of one person as Austin holds that Saul "thinks we're the same person" (Shepard, 1997, p.37). Each character becomes the other one's half in order to complete each other. A writer who is supposed to remain a writer changes into a loafer and stealer without even feeling guilty of what he has done. On the other hand, a stealer and gambler changes into a writer. It seems that "each recreates the other based on his image of the other. Although these transformations are, in the realistic framework of the play, too sudden, Austin reminds us that realism is an illusion, as is the concept of stable character" (De Rose, 1992, p.111), as he talks about Lee's story and the characters of his story that, "those aren't characters... Those are illusions of characters" (Shepard, 1997, p.40). Similar to the characters in Lee's story, who are "illusion of the characters", the characters of the *True West* as well, Austin and Lee, seem to be illusion of the characters and like floating signifiers we cannot even define their true character and identity. As we see in them the "landscape of the self is characterologically temporal and tentative" (Falk, 1981, p.194). As soon as we get ready to put the name of the writer, as a signified, on Austin, he falls into difference and his identity defers and becomes a loafer and stealer. He is left mobile as a signifier, which never reaches its signified. The same is true of Lee who at the beginning is a loafer, gambler and stealer but changes into a writer. A signifier leads to another one and causes a play of signifier in which the signified is delayed forever. Both are like floating signifiers and thereby have a mobile identity and character. Their identities are fragmented hovering like suspended signifiers in the *Differance* of Derrida. We cannot decide and tell which personality each of them possesses.

### 3.3 Characters, Binary Opposition and Supplement

We can also regard them, Austin and Lee, as setting up a binary opposition, Austin, the writer, and Lee, the stealer. They establish a binary opposition by which they get their meaning from each other. It seems that if there were not Austin, we could not have Lee. They seem "together form dual, opposed elements in a single self" (Orbison, 2006, p.80). They give to each other sense and consequently complete one another. As Derrida when talking about supplement believes that, not only one adds meaning to the other but also takes its place. We have Lee superior in power, in use of language and in experience as a privileged one and Austin as the inferior in power of language and experience. However, as the play goes on, not only does Austin add to it as a writer but also he takes the place of Lee and becomes a stealer also powerful in use of language. Actually, it can also be applied to and seen from a different perspective, if we consider the writer, Austin, as a privileged one being more educated, Lee as a stealer and gambler not only adds to and completes it, but also he takes the place of Austin as a writer and comes to a privileged status. Lee's identity has no meaning without Austin's. Obviously, "Lee is Austin's second self, Austin the first self or ego. Separately, they form the archetypal pattern of the hostile brothers, the elder violent and often unrestrained, the younger self-possessed and controlled. Together, they comprise opposite sides of one psychic entity" (Orbison, 2006, p.82). Both form one entity and identity and thereby they get their meaning and identity from each other. We cannot say which one is the privileged and the other the inferior as long as they get their meaning from each other. They are two halves of the same person; one is a writer and an educated and reasonable one and the other is the imaginative and experienced one. Actually, "when Austin agrees to help write the screenplay in exchange for Lee's taking him to the desert, some integration of craft and imagination begin to seem possible and they do manage to work together" (Murphy, 2002, p.133). They complete each other. We cannot separate them and say that one is the superior one and the other inferior. Both simultaneously give meaning to each other and complete each other without each having privilege over the other.

## 4. Conclusion

To sum up, the text of *True West* has an indeterminate nature in which the characters of the play fall into *Differance* of meaning, changing their personality from one type of personality to another one and it continues without finding a definite meaning for their floating signifier (identity). We are just facing with the play of signifiers, as Derrida believes, which are forever floating. Likewise, the identity of the characters in *True West* is never stable and fixed. As Bigsby (2004) maintains, the characters in the plays of Shepard are not stable and cannot be easily defined. Even when Shepard speaks of his characters, he believes that they are not to be "fixed" and this is what makes his characters "on the move" (p.168). Moreover, it is seen that how two main characters are considered as binary opposition needing each other to be completed, and thus supplement each other without each having privilege over the other.

**References**

- Abrams, M. H. (2000). The Deconstructive Angel. In David Lodge & Nigel Wood (Eds.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (pp. 241-253). New York: Pearson.
- Bertens, Hans. (2004). *Literary Theory: the Basics*. London: Routledge.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. (2004). *Modern American Drama: 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bressler, Charles E. (2007). *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (4th ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Currie, Mark. (2004). *Difference*. London: Routledge.
- De Rose, David J. (1992). *Sam Shepard*. New York: Macmillian.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1982). Differance. In Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryne (Eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (pp. 385-407, 2000). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Falk, Florence. (1981). The Role of Performance. In Sam Shepar, *Theatre Journal*, 2, 182-198. Derived from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207302>
- Krasner, David. (2006). *American Drama 1945-2000: An Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Murphy, Brenda. (2002). Shepard Writes about Writing. In Matthew Rouane (Ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* (pp. 123-138). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521771587.008>
- Nietzsche, Fredrich. (1885). *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Tran's Thomas Gommon, Hertfordshire: Wordworth.
- Norris, Christopher. (2005). *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Orbison, Tucker. (2006). Mythic Levels in Shepard's *True West*. In Brenda Murphy & Laurie J. C. Cella (Eds.), *Twentieth Century American Drama* (Vol.4). London: Routledge.
- Procter, Elizabeth. (1988). Off-Beat Humor and Comic Mystery in Shepard's Plays: La Turista, The Unseen Hand, The Mad Dog Blues, and Forsenic and The Navigators. In Kimball King (Ed.), *Sam Shepard: A Case book* (pp. 31-52). New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. (1915). The Object of Study. In David Lodge & Nigel Wood, *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 62-87, 2000). New York: Pearson.
- Shepard, Sam. (1997). *Plays Two*. London: Faber and Faber.