

AUSTIN AND LEE'S SIBLINGS' RELATIONSHIP REFLECTED IN *TRUE WEST* BY SAM SHEPARD

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the sibling relationship between Austin and Lee in True West by Sam Shepard, through the lens of Deborah Gold's sibling typology (1989). Siblings play crucial roles in shaping individual identities. This study categorizes Austin and Lee's relationship into five types: intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, and hostile. The analysis reveals that Austin and Lee's relationship fluctuates between apathetic and hostile, leading to verbal and physical confrontations. With 27 instances of negative interactions and 18 positive interactions, their sibling bond is predominantly defined by hostility. It can be concluded that their relationship is driven by rivalry, distrust, and aggression. It affects their lives and personal growth. The study underscores the importance of examining sibling relationships to understand how family relationship contribute to individual behaviors and psychological outcomes.

Keyword: *sibling, relationship, True West, and rivalry*

1. INTRODUCTION

Family relationships are central to human development which affect psychological growth, socialization, and individual behavior. Sibling relationships are unique because of their duration and intimacy. [Bierdst, 2013]. Family members are linked in important ways through each stage of life, and these relationships are an important source of social connection and social influence for individuals throughout their lives. Family connections can provide a greater sense of meaning and purpose as well as social and tangible resources that benefit well-being [Thomas et al., 2017]. Some sibling relationships are marked by mutual support, affection, and shared life experiences, while others may be characterized by rivalry, conflict, and even hostility. These relationships play a significant role in shaping the identity and behavior of individuals throughout their lives whether it positive or negative [Dagun, 2002]. Siblings influence each other's emotional well-being, social skills, and even parenting styles [McHale et al., 2011].

The portrayal of sibling dynamics in literature provides valuable insights into the complexities of familial interactions. In Sam Shepard's *True West*, the relationship between Austin and Lee offers a striking example of sibling rivalry and dysfunction. It is set against the backdrop of American suburbs and explores the themes of identity, family, and the destructive nature of sibling rivalry. In an interview, Shepard stated that the idea for writing this play came to him and he wrote it in the shortest amount of time. He then said, "True West is the one he felt was the closest to being perfect" [Portrait et al., 2023]) Meanwhile, In an interview with Robert Coe, Shepard spoke of *True West* as, a play that probes into the perception of man's dual nature [Ali, 2021]) As a Pulitzer-nominated work, *True West* delves into the darker aspects of family life, particularly focusing on the conflict between the two brothers [Shepard, 2018]. Family relationships may become even more important to well-being as individuals age, needs for

caregiving increase, and social ties in other domains such as the workplace become less central in their lives [Thomas et al., 2017]

True West symbolically represents a violent relationship between Austin and Lee who can be viewed as incarnating opposite extremes of the creative artist. The two brothers are featured on antagonistic relationship in which Austin is all earnestness, and life is all inspiration. [Sharhan, 2019] Austin and Lee are depicted as adult siblings who lead vastly different lives but are forced to confront their relationship when they are unexpectedly brought together. The contrasting personalities and life choices of the brothers create tension and ultimately lead to conflict. Austin, the educated and successful screenwriter, represents order and stability, while Lee, the rebellious and unrestrained drifter, embodies chaos and unpredictability. The play establishes the brother's comparison and contrast: Austin represents the social order, while Lee represents the wild of nature. Both brothers look for something as they feel a lack, both dream of a 'thing' that will fulfill them, and toward the end of the play it is, in fact, the life-style of the other brother that will serve as this longed-for fulfillment [Joodaki & Shooshtarian, 2013]. Their interactions are marked by competition, jealousy, and a deep-seated need for validation, all of which contribute to their strained relationship.

This study aims to analyze the sibling relationship between Austin and Lee in *True West* through the framework of Deborah Gold's sibling typology. Gold's typology, developed in 1989, categorizes sibling relationships into five types: intimate, congenial, loyal, apathetic, and hostile. Each type is characterized by specific attributes, such as emotional closeness, instrumental assistance, psychological engagement, and conflict. The types range from intimate, which reflects the highest level of sibling closeness and support, to hostile, which is marked by resentment, anger, and a lack of emotional connection.

1. Intimate. Siblings share a deep emotional bond, frequently communicate, and are each other's confidants. This type of relationship is characterized by mutual support, trust, and care. [Gold, 1989]
2. Congenial. Siblings have a strong friendship and care for one another, but their emotional closeness may not be as intense as in intimate relationships. They maintain regular communication and offer support when needed. [Gold, 1989]
3. Loyal. Siblings fulfill their familial obligations and offer support during crises, but their relationship lacks deep emotional involvement. They maintain contact out of a sense of duty rather than personal closeness. [Gold, 1989]
4. Apathetic. Siblings have little emotional or instrumental involvement in each other's lives. They may have minimal contact and are indifferent to one another's successes or failures. [Gold, 1989]
5. Hostile. Siblings negative feelings toward each other, such as anger, resentment, and jealousy. Their relationship is marked by conflict, aggression, and a lack of emotional support. [Gold, 1989]

This research explores the psychological and behavioral consequences of their broken relationship, particularly the role of rivalry and conflict in shaping their interactions by applying the framework above. It highlights unresolved tensions and conflicts within family that can have far-reaching effects. By examining the relationship between Austin and Lee, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of sibling relationships and their influence on individual development.

1.1 Research Method

This research employs a qualitative approach, focusing on the content analysis of *True West*. Content analysis is a research method that systematically examines the content of communication, such as texts or dialogues, to identify patterns, themes, or categories [Abdi, 2020] In this study, the dialogue and interactions between Austin and Lee are analyzed to categorize their relationship according to Deborah Gold's sibling typology. The content analysis method is used to analyze the data by systematically identifying patterns in the content of Austin and Lee's interactions in *True West*. [Gold, 1989]

This method helps interpret and classify dialogue, behavior, and emotional expressions between the characters into specific relationship types. The data is collected through watching the movie, reading the script, quoting and analyzing the evidence that corresponds to each of the five types of sibling relationships between them by detailing the kinds of sibling relationships and the impacts of their relationship as siblings. By examining their dialogue and behavior, this study seeks to understand the relationship and the underlying factors that contribute to their conflict.

1.2 Result and Discussion

This part examines the results concerning the complex sibling relationships between Austin and Lee in *True West*. The two-character play, *True West*, is about two brothers, Austin, a Hollywood screenwriter, and Lee, a loner and a thief who lives in desert. Their mom is spending vacation in Alaska and their father is totally absent. The play establishes the brother's comparison and contrast: Austin represents the social order, while Lee represents the wild of nature. Both brothers look for something as they feel a lack, both dream of a 'thing' that will fulfill them, and toward the end of the play it is, in fact, the life-style of the other brother that will serve as this longed-for fulfillment. (Joodaki & Shoostarian, 2013). This examination utilizes Deborah Gold's sibling typology to emphasize how these relationships affect their personal identities and their overall relationship. Through analyzing significant conversations and actions, the writer intends to enhance comprehension of the wider effects of sibling connections on individual growth and familial interactions in a literary framework. Chapman in Syarhan [2018] defines conversational analysis as "an area of social studies that is particularly concerned with the structures, patterns and regularities in naturally occurring conversation". It is a discipline that pays much attention to the contextual use of language and its various functions by inspecting the sequential interactive structures shaped by linguistic and non-linguistic strategies as part of social behaviour [Syarhan, 2018].

Lee : She gonna' be up there a long time?
 Austin : I don't know.
 Lee : Kinda' nice for you, huh? Whole place to yourself.
 Austin : Yeah, it's great.
 Lee : Ya' got crickets anyway. Tons a' crickets out there. (looks around kitchen) Ya' got groceries? Coffee?
 Austin : (looking up from writing) What?
 Lee : You got coffee?
 Austin : Yeah. [Shepard, 1981 p.2]

Based on the first evidence, Lee asks to Austin how long Mom will be in Alaska. He thinks that this current situation is favorable for Austin to have the place to himself. Lee's tone seems casual, but Lee actually feels jealous and is a little sarcastic. While Lee attempts to engage in small talk, Austin appears uninterested. This interaction hints apathetic relationship where there is lack of genuine connection between the brothers even though they haven't seen each other for a long time. Despite the seemingly casual conversation, this interaction hints at a complex relationship with unspoken tensions and a certain distance between the two characters. The interaction above shows a negative impact.

Austin : You could come up north with me, you know.
 Lee : What's up there?
 Austin : My family.
 Lee : Oh, that's right, you got the wife and kiddies now don't you. The house, the car, the whole slam. That's right.
 Austin : You could spend a couple days. See how you like it. I've got an extra room. [Shepard, 1981 p.8]

Austin and Lee start to soften, Austin asks Lee to visit in his home in north. Lee looks a little bit envy with Austin perfect life. "The whole slam" in here, means everything. For Lee, Austin has a very perfect life. Austin represents stability, with a family, a house, and a car, while Lee seems to lead a more transient and uncertain existence. "You could come up north with me, you know." Austin's offer of hospitality to Lee demonstrates his generosity and willingness to reach out to his brother and reconnect on a personal level and strengthen their familial bond, despite any past tensions between them. Lee's response to Austin's invitation reveals his independent spirit and reluctance to tie himself down to a conventional family life. His skepticism about Austin's offer may stem from a desire to maintain his freedom and independent spirit. At this point, their relationship turns to loyal stages. They become closer than before, which good for their communication later. It is categorized as positive impact.

Austin : Where were you, the Mojave?
 Lee : Yeah. The Mojave. That's right.

Austin : I haven't been out there in years.
 Lee : Our past needles there.
 Lee : Up here it's different. This country's real different.
 Austin : Yeah. Foothills are the same though, aren't they?
 Lee : Pretty much. It's funny goin' up in there. The smells and everything. Used to catch snakes up there, remember?
 Austin : You caught snakes.
 Lee : Yeah. And you'd pretend you were Geronimo or some damn thing. You used to go right out to lunch. [Shepard, 1981 p. 9]

Austin and Lee delves into their shared past, evoking memories of their childhood adventures in the foothills. The word "Our past needles there" means old moments in their childhood. Even though the city is built up and look very different but there's one place, foothills, that remain the same as it was. "The smells and everything. Used to catch snakes up there, remember?" The moment when they were catching snakes and exploring the foothills highlights a connection to nature that transcends their present circumstances.

In recalling these memories, Austin and Lee find common ground rooted in their shared experiences of exploring the natural world reflects a desire to revisit the innocence and simplicity of their youth. It reveals a bond between Austin and Lee that is strengthened, which represent loyal relationship. After rewinding their childhood moment, they are getting closer as time pass by despite any present conflicts or differences. This evidence is classified into positive impact.

Through the analysis of 45 interactions between Austin and Lee, it was found that their relationship primarily falls into the apathetic and hostile categories.

a. Apathetic Interactions.

Many of Austin and Lee's early interactions are characterized by indifference and emotional distance. Despite being brothers, they seem to have little interest in each other's lives. This is evident in their conversations, where there is a lack of genuine concern or affection. For example, in one scene, Austin offers to help Lee with a screenplay, but his offer is met with suspicion and hostility, indicating a lack of trust and emotional connection.

b. Loyal Interactions

There are moments in the play where the brothers show a sense of familial duty and obligation, particularly in their discussions about their mother. However, these moments are fleeting, and their loyalty to each other is often overshadowed by their personal conflicts.

c. Congenial Interactions

Although rare, there are instances where Austin and Lee seem to get along, sharing memories of their childhood or discussing their plans for the future. These moments are brief and often interrupted by conflict, but they provide a glimpse into the potential for a more positive relationship.

d. Hostile Interactions

The most significant category is hostility. Austin and Lee frequently engage in verbal and physical confrontations, with their rivalry escalating throughout the play. This hostility stems from their deep-seated resentment of each other's life choices and perceived successes. Lee's jealousy of Austin's career and Austin's frustration with Lee's recklessness are central to their conflict. The play culminates in a violent altercation, symbolizing the complete breakdown of their relationship.

The hostile nature of Austin and Lee's relationship has several psychological and emotional consequences. For Lee, his resentment toward Austin's success fuels his destructive behavior. He feels inferior and compensates for this by trying to undermine Austin's achievements. Austin, on the other hand, feels a sense of responsibility toward Lee but also harbors deep frustration at his inability to help his brother. This frustration eventually leads to anger and violence, as Austin loses control over his emotions.

The emotional distance between the brothers also affects their ability to communicate effectively. Their conversations are often filled with misunderstandings, accusations, and defensiveness. Instead of working through their differences, they allow their negative feelings to fester, leading to further conflict. The lack of emotional support in their relationship reflects the broader theme of isolation and alienation that runs through the play.

1. Sibling Rivalry

The sibling rivalry between Austin and Lee can be seen as a reflection of broader societal issues. Shepard uses their relationship to explore themes of competition, identity, and the American dream. Austin represents the conventional path to success, with his career in Hollywood and his stable family life. Lee, on the other hand, rejects

societal norms and seeks a more unconventional lifestyle, marked by risk and rebellion. Their rivalry is not just a personal conflict but a metaphor for the larger societal tension between conformity and individualism.

Shepard's portrayal of sibling rivalry also touches on the destructive nature of competition. In modern society, individuals are often pitted against each other in the pursuit of success, leading to feelings of inadequacy, resentment, and isolation. Austin and Lee's relationship exemplifies how competition, when left unchecked, can erode family bonds and lead to emotional and physical harm.

2. Impact on Individual Identity

The sibling relationship in *True West* plays a crucial role in shaping the individual identities of Austin and Lee. Their interactions reveal their insecurities, desires, and internal conflicts. Austin, who has pursued a conventional path marked by professional success and family stability, struggles with his sense of responsibility toward his brother. He feels obligated to help Lee, but he is also frustrated by Lee's refusal to conform to societal expectations. This internal conflict is exacerbated by Lee's constant undermining of Austin's achievements, leading Austin to question his own choices and identity.

Lee, on the other hand, defines himself in opposition to Austin. His sense of self-worth is deeply tied to his rejection of the conventional life that Austin represents. Lee sees himself as a rebel, someone who lives on his own terms, even if it means engaging in criminal behavior. However, beneath this rebellious exterior, Lee harbors feelings of inadequacy and envy. His hostility toward Austin is rooted in his belief that Austin has had an easier life, filled with opportunities that he himself has been denied. This belief fuels his resentment and drives his destructive behavior.

As the play progresses, the boundaries between Austin and Lee's identities begin to blur. In a pivotal scene, Austin, who has always been calm and rational, snaps and engages in physical violence, mirroring Lee's aggressive tendencies. Conversely, Lee expresses a desire to settle down and pursue a more conventional life, reflecting Austin's influence. This role reversal highlights the complexity of their relationship and suggests that their identities are not as fixed as they initially appear. Shepard uses this dynamic to explore the ways in which sibling relationships can shape and even distort individual identities.

3. Relation to Sibling Typology

Deborah Gold's sibling typology provides a useful framework for understanding the complexity of Austin and Lee's relationship. While the play primarily depicts apathetic and hostile interactions, there are moments that hint at other types of relationships. For example, in the few congenial moments, the brothers reminisce about their shared childhood experiences, suggesting that there was once a bond between them. However, these moments are fleeting and quickly give way to conflict, highlighting the fragility of their relationship.

The absence of an intimate relationship between Austin and Lee is significant. According to Gold's typology, intimate siblings share a deep emotional connection and are often each other's closest confidants. In *True West*, this type of relationship is conspicuously absent, suggesting that the emotional distance between Austin and Lee is too great to be bridged. This lack of intimacy is a key factor in the breakdown of their relationship, as it prevents them from forming a meaningful connection that could help them resolve their conflicts.

The prevalence of hostile interactions in the play aligns with the idea that sibling relationships can be a source of both support and conflict. In Austin and Lee's case, the hostility in their relationship stems from deep-seated issues related to identity, competition, and resentment. Shepard uses their relationship to explore the darker aspects of sibling rivalry, showing how unresolved tensions can escalate into violence and destruction.

4. CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing the drama text, it can be concluded that Austin and Lee's sibling relationship in *True West* reveals the complexities of familial bonds, particularly how sibling rivalry can lead to hostility and conflict. The majority falls into the hostile category. This hostility manifests in verbal and physical violence, driven by feelings of resentment, jealousy, and competition.

The psychological and emotional impacts of their relationship shows how the lack of emotional support and effective communication leads to a breakdown in their bond. Their relationship serves as a metaphor for the tension between conformity and rebellion in modern society.

Austin and Lee demonstrate the destructive potential of unresolved sibling rivalry and the importance of understanding which addressing the underlying issues in family relationships. The findings of this study contribute to the broader knowledge of sibling relationship in literature and provide valuable insights into the psychological effects of sibling rivalry and hostility.

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