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# Exploring “Absent Presence” and “offstage Space” in Sam Shepard’s True West

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## Abstract

There are several dramatic characters who enormously appeal to us since they are attractive. Part of this attraction might be owing to their strong stage presence. More interesting, however, are characters who do not appear on stage but their “absent presence” is so strong that influences the characters who do appear physically on stage. There are numerous examples of plays from classic to modern in which the action of the play is driven by a character who is not materially present but is thematically central to the play. The present paper explores the “absent presence” in Sam Shepard’s True West (1980) to show how a character who is not physically present on stage can affect the lives and decisions of character who do have material presence on stage. The examination of this device can not only reveal multiple layers of the play, but can also attract the attention of playwrights to this device to explore it in their plays.

This is a qualitative research for which library sources and reliable Internet sites have been utilized.

**Keywords:** absent presence, offstage space, dramatic characters, True West, Sam Shepard.

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## Introduction

There are numerous plays in which the central character is a character who does not appear physically on stage. This might happen owing to various dramaturgical reasons. Sometimes dramatists employ this technique to indicate dominant socio-political, economic and gender discourses. Therefore, the employment of this strategy can serve different purposes. In extending the play to the offstage space, no attempt is made to display certain characters or events directly on stage.

True West, the third play of Shepard’s quintet of family plays (including *Buried Child*, *Curse of the Starving Class*, *True West*, *Fool for Love*, and *A Lie of the Mind*), is mainly interpreted by critics as a play of rivalry between brothers. William Demastes, however, is of the belief that the play is more accurately “a struggle between two halves of the self” (Demastes, 1987). The conflict between the intellect and the emotions, the physically strong, wild side and the reasonable, intellectual side. This interpretation is in turn reinforced by Shepard’s statement that “We’re split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal” (Bottoms, 1998: 94). In her essay “Reflections of the Past in True West and A Lie of the Mind” Leslie Kane astutely observes that “an interpretation of sibling rivalry and split personality that neglects the crucial factor that Lee is at home in the desert (Shepard’s characteristic refuge for fathers as far back as *Holy Ghostly*) fails to recognize the older brother as rival and

extension of the father” (Kane, 2002: 144). Shepard’s plays also lend themselves well to psychoanalytical studies since as Bigsby has put it “Shepard’s characters often seem borderline psychotics. On occasion they have already crossed the border. Their insanity lies precisely in the fact that they are obsessive.” (Bigsby, 2000: 166) The present study seeks to take these observations further and explore the absent presence of the father in the course of the play.

## The Theoretical Framework

### Absent Presence

William Gruber in his book “Offstage Space, Narrative, and the Theatre of the Imagination” attracts our attention to the interesting fact that the number of plays with central characters who never appear physically on stage far exceeds what we might expect. In his book he traces this device from classic comedies such as Terence’s *The Girl from Andros* or *Pot of Gold*, and Plautus’s play *Casina* through Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* to modern plays such as Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Maria Irene Fornes’s *Fefu and Her Friends*. These are all examples of plays which are structured around a centralized “absent presence”. This might seem to be ironic that the characters who neither appear nor speak might be represented with much greater authority compared to the characters who appear, act and speak on stage, particularly in theatre where stage presence is of great significance. The fact that should not be overlooked, however, is that the operation

of this technique in all these plays is not identical.

Gruber suggests that in most cases the use of this strategy has to do with sexuality and gender. Therefore, in his opinion the absence of female characters in plays such as Plautus's *Casina* or Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* can be related to their larger cultural "invisibility" in Western theatre history in general. He then admires the dramatists' astuteness to represent these important and dramaturgically powerful characters in terms of their hiddenness (Gruber, 2010). He asserts that excluding one sex of characters entirely from the stage can result in such characters becoming more, rather than less, significant in the eyes of the audience. He thus acknowledges this strategy as one favored by modern playwrights "whose ambitions for their work are broadly political and sometimes expressly feminist" (Gruber, 2010, 146).

Nevertheless, this strategy is not always employed to reveal the operations of gender and sexuality. For instance in the context of *Waiting for Godot*, Gruber believes "to be visible- to be embodied- is to be capable of being hurt" (Gruber, 2010).

In *True West*, this strategy is not employed to reveal the operations of the power of discourses of sexuality. Nor is it utilized to serve political purposes. It is used for dramaturgical purposes. The way the playwright extends the space of the play to the desert and makes the audience use their imagination to see the Old Man in the desert and then observe the heavy influence of that

materially absent character on the deportment and the present action of the two brothers who are physically present on stage is a major source of the pleasure gained from the play.

### Offstage Space

Gruber in another chapter of his book explores the concept of offstage space in dramatic works. He reexamines the employment of the techniques of "showing" and "telling" in dramatic performance. While conventionally "showing" is the preferred technique in drama, he attracts our attention to the dramatists' choice to "substitute imagined events for perceptual ones" underscoring the role of imagination in dramatic performance. (Gruber, 2010)

He then goes on to clarify the kinds of "absences" he has in mind and explains that as with the conversations in real life where people tell each other stories about the past "they tell their friends about a fight they had with their boss, about the snowfall last week, about a visit to the dentist" (Gruber, 2010: 7) in the conversations that take place in plays the characters talk about the things that have happened to them. Gruber believes in plays "Characters often refer in retrospect to places, people, or events that the audience does not actually see dramatized." (Gruber, 2010:7) The clearest examples are when the characters recollect the past. The audiences consider such recollections to have taken place "offstage" in what McAuley has called "referred space". (McAuley, 1996)

### A Brief summary of True West

Austin, a handsome scriptwriter takes care of her mother's house in Southern California while she is away. He is trying to benefit from this privacy to work on his synopsis but his brother's arrival disappoints him. Lee, a sloppy alcoholic, who has been living in the Mojave desert and is now planning to steal from the houses in the neighborhood, disturbs Austin. Austin expecting a movie producer asks Lee to leave them alone for the meeting. Lee accepts, but returns in the middle of their meeting with a stolen TV. Lee invites the producer to a golf match during which he persuades him to have a look at his plot for a script. Over the night, Austin helps Lee to type his ridiculous scenario about two men chasing each other in the desert.

The next day, after the golf match, Lee returns home and informs Austin that the producer has opted for his scenario rather than that of Lee. He then asks Austin to help him finish his scenario. Austin who cannot believe his ears is devastated when the producer comes by and enthusiastically talks about Lee's scenario while calling Austin's scenario cliché and boring. That night the two brothers seem to exchange identity with Austin getting drunk and Lee trying to type his scenario while they talk about their father who has run away from the house and now lives in the desert. Austin, who has managed to lead a respectable civilized life all, of a sudden, feels the urge to leave everything and go to the desert. He begs Lee to take him there. Lee accepts provided that Austin helps him in typing his script.

Their mother's unexpected return from her trip to Alaska takes them by surprise. She has returned since she started missing all her plants. She believes Picasso is in the town and they should not miss the opportunity to visit him. Austin informs her that they are going to the desert together. Lee denies. The two brothers get into a fight where Austin attempts to strangle Lee with a telephone cord. Believing he has killed his brother, Austin decides to leave. However, Lee quickly gets on his feet and blocks Austin's way.

### Absent Presence and offstage space in True West

The play is set in a kitchen in a Southern Californian house. Early on in the first scene of Act One, when the two brothers engage in a conversation, their father is drawn into their conversation:

Austin: So, you went out to see the old man, huh?

Lee: Yeah, I seen him.

Austin: How's he doing?

Lee: Same. He's doin' just about the same.

Austin: I was down there too, you know.

Lee: What d'ya' want, an award? You want some kinda' medal? You were down there. He told me all about you. (Shepard 4)

Therefore, The Old Man is introduced into the play shortly after the beginning. In this early mention, the audience might not realize the thematic significance of this character; however, as the play moves on, he assumes more and more importance. Moreover, the audience learns more about the two brothers

in light of their relationship with their father and the extent to which they are influenced by him. Near the end of the first scene of Act One, when Austin offers to give Lee some money if he needs some, Lee overreacts:

Lee: Don't you say that to me! Don't you ever say that to me! (just as suddenly he turns him loose, pushes him away and backs off) You may be able to git away with that with the Old Man. Git him tanked up for a week! Buy him off with yer Hollywood blood money, but not me! I can git my own money my own way. Big money! (Shepard 7)

This is the beginning of the process of gleaning the information given to us by bits and pieces about the absent character of the Old Man. He receives money from Austin, however, he is not wise enough to know how to spend the money. All the money he gets from his son goes to drinks.

It should be mentioned that at the very outset of the play the conversation between the two brothers starts with talking about their mother who has gone to Alaska:

Lee: So, Mom took off for Alaska, huh?

Austin: Yeah.

Lee: Sorta' left you in charge.

Austin: Well, she knew I was coming down here so she offered me the place.

Lee: You keepin' the plants watered?

Austin: Yeah.

Lee: Keepin' the sink clean? She don't like even a single tea leaf in the sink ya' know.

Austin: (trying to concentrate on writing) Yeah, I know. (Shepard 2)

This is done in line with Shepard's

strategies in his time or memory plays. True West together with A Lie of the Mind are considered widely two plays in which memory plays a pivotal role. As Kane precisely observes "Lee immediately bridges the gap between past and present by drawing attention to their mother's habitual obsession with cleanliness- a fact obviously well known to both of them." (Kane, 2002: 142). However, we do not hear any more from them about her until near the end of the play, when she unexpectedly materializes. Thus, in spite of the fact that the mention of their mother precedes the mention of their father in the course of the two brothers' conversation, she is not a central character in the play as regards the action of the play. Nor does she appear to exert much influence on her sons' behavior whether in the past or in the present.

Not only is there no trace of admiration in the speech of Lee and Austin about their mother, but they do not hesitate to heap scorn upon her tendency to value the old stuff she has brought to the new place:

Lee: Antiques? Brought everything with her from the old place, huh. Just the same crap we always had around. Plates and spoons.

On the other hand, references to the Old Man continue throughout the play and advances the action of the play. The reader can piece the information together and envisage him living in the desert. This central absent figure is made dramatically present by their continual reference to him throughout the play. After the introduction of the Old Man through the dialogues of the two brothers,

"desert" starts to assume significance in the life of this family. Critics have pointed out the autobiographical aspect of Shepard's work, his father being represented in a number of his plays. Shepard explains "My dad lives alone in the desert. He says he doesn't fit with people." (Shewey, 1997: 108) Desert features strongly in Shepard's work. In fact, the very encounter between the two brothers is the point at which the New West of civilized, suburban America meets the wild Old West.

After Lee's meeting with Saul (the producer) for playing golf, he tries to persuade Austin to help him type his scenario. They talk about the money Lee can gain by selling the script and the first thing they think they can do with the money has to do with their father:

Austin: ... You know what a screenplay sells for these days?

Lee: No. What's it sell for?

Austin: A lot. A whole lot of money.

Lee: Thousands?

Austin: Yeah. Thousands.

Lee: Millions?

Austin: Well...

Lee: We could get the old man outa' hock then.

Austin: Maybe. (Shepard 27-27)

Once more the Old Man is brought into conversation to take the action of the play forward. Lee uses him to persuade Austin to help him type the script which is "Contemporary Western. Based on a true story." (Shepard 18) Austin believes "There's no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue" (Shepard 35). However, Austin is

convinced the Old Man is so set in his ways that changing him if not impossible is highly unlikely. This is another piece of information we glean from their talk about him.

Lee: Maybe? Whadya' mean, maybe?

Austin: I mean it might take more than money.

Lee: You were just tellin me it'd change my whole life around. Why wouldn't it change his?

Austin: He's different.

Lee: Oh, he's of a different ilk, huh?

Austin: He's not gonna' change. Let's leave the old man out of it. (Shepard 27)

Gradually, near the end of the fifth scene of Act One, Austin asks Lee to give his car keys back and when Lee asks him where he is heading, after a pause he replies:

Austin: I might just drive out to the desert for a while. I gotta' think. (Shepard 34)

Therefore, Austin, who has been portrayed as a "well-balanced, self-made man, entirely at home in the plastic, bourgeois environment of his mother's home" and "exemplifies the New West commercialism and social conformity" (Bloom, 2003: 55) begins to yearn for the desert. The influence of the absent presence of their father is exerted more and more strongly. No matter how hard he has tried to adopt the stable, respectable and intellectual life of a Hollywood scriptwriter he cannot resist the "call of desert", since his identity is deeply rooted in it.

In the sixth scene of Act One Austin realizes that Lee has abused their father to gain Saul's sympathy to persuade him to buy

his script. He has made Saul believe that he is going to use the money he will earn by writing the script to help his father who is “destitute” and “needs money”, which infuriates Austin since as Kane puts it “is a distortion of family history and fact” (Kane, 2002: 143), another key point in this play.

In the seventh scene of Act One, Lee who is trying to persuade Austin to help him write the script suggests the possibility of bringing their father back and getting him settled down there, to which Austin reacts strongly:

Austin: I don't want him out here! I've had it with him! I went all the way out there! I went out of my way. I gave him money and all he did was play Al Jolson records and spit at me! I gave him money. (Shepard 47)

Therefore, we realize Austin is not willing to bring their father and live as a family. He goes on to reveal another characteristic of the Old Man which is his ungratefulness. Apparently the Old Man fails to appreciate the care and help given by his son. This strongly resonates with the familiar theme of the “spiritual death of the American family” in Shepard's plays, based on which Bloom regards *True West* as the direct descendant of two other plays by him, namely *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*. (Bloom, 2009: 62)

As they go on talking about finishing the script and getting the money, Austin reveals more information about their father. Through recounting a rather lengthy recollection he provides the readers/ audiences with a colorful snapshot of their father which engages their imagination. He tells Lee how their father lost

his real teeth one by one and after that lost his false teeth. He “woke up every morning with another tooth lying on the mattress”. He moves on to explain how helpless he was with that situation in the Middle of Arizona with no money and no insurance. He begged the government for some kind of pension plan and they sent him the money but the money was not enough. He found a Mexican dentist in Juarez who accepted to do the job in return for little money. Then he went off hitchhiking to the border. It took him eight days to get there. Meanwhile his teeth kept dropping and his mouth was full of blood. Finally, he got there and the dentist took all his money and all his teeth. It was at this point that Austin went out to see him. Austin took him to a Chinese restaurant but he could not eat. He just drank. He then took out his false teeth since he could not bear them. He put them on the table. Then Austin asked the waitress to bring a doggie bag to take the food. They put the false teeth next to the food in the bag. On the way back, they went to all the bars up and down the highway. He wanted to introduce Austin to all his buddies. In one of those bars he left the bag in which he had put his teeth. They went back but they never found it.

This recollection, which brings the experience and witnessing of offstage events into the language of the story, is so visually rich that the readers/ audiences can see the whole story in their minds' eye. The character of the Old Man who has been referred to regularly over the course of the conversation between the two brothers, now takes on flesh and blood flows in his veins and ultimately he requires

a rich personal history. Up to this point, we had learned about his fascination with the desert, his irregular lifestyle, his carelessness with money, his compulsive drinking, his unchangeable eccentric habits, and his ungratefulness. It would not be difficult for Shepard to make the Old Man representable by an actor. Yet for dramaturgical reasons he consciously excludes him from the stage. This is how this character becomes a rich object of speculative thought. Even though he is not ever seen, the audiences can generate an idea of him living in the extra scenic space out in the desert. His presence is felt as strongly as, if not stronger than, that of the materially present characters in the play. Interestingly, it would not have been so moving if he had been given physical stage presence.

Ultimately, by piecing together the pieces of information obtained from the conversation of the two brothers, we manage to build up the character of the Old Man as clearly as those of the characters who are materially present on stage, if not more clearly. Of particular significance is the comparison between the character of the mother and the father. The mother who does appear on stage near the end of the play (Act 2, Scene 9) does not have a strong stage presence. She does not seem to be able to exert a profound influence on his sons.

In this play the Old Man is not like Godot in Beckett's play often present on the lips of the rest of the characters. Nonetheless, he thematically dominates the minds of his sons and their decisions about their future.

## Conclusion

In True West the main characters are the two brothers. There are also Saul Kimmer (the movie producer) and their mother who appear briefly on stage. However, their father who does not appear physically on stage is thematically a central character. He is introduced by the two brothers from the outset and is continually referred to. Moreover, his lifestyle preoccupies his sons' mind to such an extent that they cannot disengage themselves from his influence and the thought of going to the desert. Even Austin, who has tried all his life to dissociate himself from his origin and adopted the civilized, sophisticated life of a successful scriptwriter, ultimately finds himself unable to suppress the powerful urge to go to the desert. Therefore, in this play the overwhelming dominance of past and memory and the absent presence of the father is made possible by the crafty use of the offstage space and the Old Man who does not have a material presence on stage, proves to be the central character whose influence on his sons cannot be overlooked. In this manner, paradoxically, he exercises considerably more hold on the imagination of the readers/ audiences than if he physically appeared.

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