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Mimesis and Violence in Sam Shepard's *True West*

Many of the plays comprising Sam Shepard's canon depict instances of violence: "The structure of his work reflects both an abhorrence for it [violence] and fascination with it, and with the menace which may lead to it" (Bachman 406). This idea is poignantly dramatized in Sam Shepard's 1980 play *True West*, where two brothers enact an escalation of conflictual tension that erupts into violence. By the conclusion of the play, their volatile interactions become potentially homicidal. Ironically, this danger is predicted early in the text by the character Lee, one of the two brothers, who states, "You go down to the L.A. Police Department there and ask them what kinda' people kill each other the most. Who do you think they'd say?... Family people. Brothers. Brothers-in-law. Cousins. Real American type people" (23-24). Shepard's dialogue actually reflects the prevalence of violent victimizations between siblings in our current society - these incidents are noted among the most common types of violent domestic crimes (Kreinert 331). Within this context, many scholars have commented on the complexity surrounding the relationship of the two brothers in *True West*, and have posed questions concerning their conflict such as "where does the danger originate?" (Graham 15). Sibling rivalry may be one way to answer this question, and the notion of rivalry in regard to violence is a key element of Rene Girard's mimetic theory. Thus, a potential explanation of the violence in *True West* can be found through the work of René Girard and his theories on mimesis and the origins of violence. In this paper, I will use Girard's mimetic theory to explore and elucidate the underlying motivations behind the characters' interactions, which in turn stands to teach us about the roots of fraternal violence as seen in *True West*.

Before continuing, it is essential to introduce the key principles inherent to mimetic theory. Girard argues that “Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats” (*Violence* 49). But what engenders the loss of distinction? Girard suggests this is facilitated through mimetic rivalry, which begins as mimetic desire. According to Girardian thought, desire is mimetic and originates from the imitation of another person’s desire. This mimesis creates a triangular structure of desire, whereby a metaphoric triangular framework is comprised of the “self, the other as mediator... and the object that the self or subject desires because he or she knows, imagines, or suspects the mediator [model] desires it” (Williams 33). This frame allows each figure (i.e. the self and the other) to become both the imitator and the model (*The Girard Reader* 9), leading to an intensification and escalation of mimetic rivalry over the object. Next, the unbridled mimetic rivalry engenders a breakdown of distinctions, erasing any differences between the model and the self (Girard 400). A state of undifferentiation arises, and according to Girard, violence stems from this undifferentiated state (*Violence* 56). Additionally, after the loss of differentiation, the antagonists (i.e. the model and the self) become identical, or doubles; “Mimetic rivalry, thus, is a quest for Difference [sic] that destroys whatever cultural reality there is to differences” (*Oedipus* 97). In this paper, I will first delineate the instances of violence within *True West*, which culminate with the strangulation of one brother by the other. Then, in line with Girard’s theory, I will explain how Shepard establishes a differentiated state at the start of his play, introduces the concept of triangular desire (both at a surface level and then eventually at more profound levels), and then depicts a deterioration of the differentiations as the reciprocal mimetic rivalry

heightens. Lastly, I will demonstrate how Shepard dramatizes the undifferentiated state, leading to an atmosphere conducive to fraternal violence.

Shepard's *True West* centers on two brothers: Austin and Lee. Austin, a successful screenwriter who lives "up North," is staying at his mother's home in Southern California with the intention of completing his latest project in solitude (while his mother is on a trip in Alaska). However, his disheveled, drifter brother Lee, who he hasn't seen for over five years, appears at the house unannounced. Lee deliberately interferes with Austin's business meeting with Saul Kimmer, a producer interested in Austin's work, and eventually, persuades Saul to produce his own idea instead of Austin's. As the tension between Austin and Lee escalates, they appear increasingly more alike, and eventually, the boundaries originally established between them are eliminated. By the end of the play, when their mother finally returns home from Alaska, the once tidy kitchen (the setting of the entire play) is in complete disarray, and the two brothers, who at first appear as polar opposites, now seem as if they are one and the same person. The final image of Shepard's play is of the two brothers squaring off (59), as if they are a reflection of one another, leaving the heightened conflict between them unresolved.

Shepard leaves many questions unanswered in *True West*, such as why does Lee suddenly appear at his mother's house in the first place? What exactly occurs on the golf course that causes Saul to suddenly change his mind about Austin's screenplay and decide to produce Lee's instead? And most notably, what happens directly after the final moment of the play? Even though Shepard leaves some aspects of the plot open to interpretation, *True West* does indeed function as what Girard would call an "agent of demystification" ("Interview" 31), meaning the text exposes the centrality of mimesis to the human condition. Girard's interest in literature (or dramatic literature) stems from his belief that effective writers are "mimetic writers" (Girard

418), a prime example of this being Shakespeare. “Shakespeare is not interested in sides; Shakespeare feels human sympathy for all of his characters and has great antipathy for the mimetic processes that turns them all into equivalent doubles” (Girard 417). Coincidentally, Shepard’s views pertaining to Shakespeare correlate to Girard’s, revealing that Shepard either consciously or instinctively understands the unavailability of the mimetic process. In support of this notion, Shepard explains a Girardian outlook when asked if he considers himself a “moral optimist” (Roudané 75):

I don’t take sides in that issue. Look at the violence in Shakespeare and, to me, Shakespeare is beyond morality, if you know what I mean. He’s not taking sides, he’s not interested in morality. What he’s interested in is something internal. He’s interested in the Gods, he’s interested in the forces, the powers at work that cause all of this stuff, and how it flows through human beings, and how human beings behave in ways they are not even conscious of, or if they become conscious of them, it’s still beyond their control. (Roudané 75)

Both Shepard and Girard, then, agree that a violent act is not the fault of an individual or character per se, but rather the result of an unconscious, uncontrollable force. While Shepard never uses the word mimesis, his opinion of Shakespeare and the violence that appears in Shakespearean drama is strikingly similar to Girard’s, signifying that Shepard intrinsically understands mimetic desire (which can be synonymous with force or power) and how it produces a violent outcome in *True West*.

As noted above, I will start by illustrating how violence actually manifests in Shepard’s *True West*, a play described as “a ‘civil war’ of family life, a showdown between brothers” (Kane 143). Indeed, a hostile atmosphere is immediately established in the opening moments of

the play. In the first scene, prior to any substantial exposition of the characters, Shepard dictates that Lee “suddenly lunges at Austin, grabs him *violently* by the shirt and shakes him with tremendous power” (8, my italics). Hence, the violence is actually a method Shepard uses to introduce the two brothers and establish their relationship. Throughout the remainder of act one, Shepard includes references foreshadowing the inevitable extent to which the violence between the brothers will eventually reach. First, in scene two, Lee complains that the incessant howling of the coyotes kept him from sleeping, causing Austin to reach the conclusion that “they [the coyotes] must’ve killed somebody’s dog or something” (10). Similarly, in scene three, Lee, after interrupting a business meeting between Saul and Austin, excuses himself, saying that he is going to go “watch a little amateur boxing now” (17). The foreshadowing of violence continues when Lee explains to his brother that homicidal acts are generally the result of family members killing one another to which Austin responds with “We’re not insane. We’re not driven to acts of violence. Not over a dumb movie script” (24). Nevertheless, in the second act, the violence does heighten to a homicidal level. Toward the beginning of the second half of the play, Lee brandishes a golf club over his younger brother’s head (31), and then later, smashes the typewriter in a deliberate manner with the same exact golf club (42). These sporadic eruptions of violence culminate in the final scene when Austin attacks Lee, “wraps the cord [telephone cord] around Lee’s neck, plants a foot in Lee’s back and pulls back on the cord, tightening it” (57). Although Lee survives, the concluding tableau of the play leaves the audience uncertain as to what will happen next between the two brothers. “The final image is not a resolution, as Shepard himself has pointed out, but a timeless confrontation” (DeRose 113).

According to mimetic theory, in order for the violence to peak in the concluding scene, the differentiations established at the start of the drama need to concurrently breakdown as the

conflict escalates. Shepard's clarity at the beginning of the text in regard to the setting and the characters provides a point of departure for the particular differentiations within the play to collapse, allowing for the juxtaposition of the initial world of the play (differentiated state) with subsequent chaotic environment (undifferentiated state). He does this firstly through his "special note" about the set: "the set should be constructed realistically.... If a stylistic 'concept' is grafted onto the set design it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters' situation..." (3). Shepard intends for the set to explicitly indicate a specific and realistic place (i.e. a kitchen), reflecting the specific, yet disparate, personalities of the two protagonists/antagonists, which I will explain in more detail in a moment. Therefore, the evolution of the set throughout the action parallels the progression of the characters' mindsets. The action, at first, is also clearly taking place *inside* of the house, and there is a definite boundary between the indoors (i.e. a domesticated environment) and the outdoors (i.e. the wilderness). Furthermore, the time of day is another method Shepard utilizes to create a clear, distinct environment. Initially, the characters are entirely cognizant of the time of day and they are on a regular sleep schedule, at least in the case of Austin. (Lee relates that he doesn't sleep, but he does indeed understand the difference between day and night). In reference to the time, it is also significant that Shepard begins by placing the action clearly in the "present."

Moreover, the character descriptions of Austin and Lee further substantiate the fact that the play begins in a differentiated state. Both brothers have specific characteristics and traits, establishing that they are an "unashamedly stereotypical pair of opposites" (Bottoms 191). This idea is first delineated through their clothing as described in the script. Shepard states that Austin is wearing a "light blue sports shirt, light tan cardigan sweater, clean blue jeans, white tennis shoes" (2). Lee, on the other hand, is wearing a "filthy white 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,” and is described as being unshaven (2). Shepard further exposes the dichotomous nature of the two brothers through their personalities and preferences. Austin is focused, concentrating on his work, while Lee is wandering around the kitchen, “mildly drunk” (5). It is noteworthy, however, that in the beginning of the play Lee is never inebriated per se; the alcohol consumption, at first, is simply a method to illustrate his character. In addition, Austin is a responsible family man, who lives up North with “the wife and kiddies” (9) and has an Ivy-League education. In contrast, Lee describes himself as “a free agent” (8); he is a criminal, who partakes in illegal dog fighting and periodically commits acts of breaking and entering. He has spent the last three months living in the Mojave Desert and is barely literate. Concerning their preferences, Austin goes “crazy” (13) without people while Lee chooses to live in isolation in the desert and simply laughs when Austin asks him “Didn’t you miss people?” (12) The polarized personalities of the two brothers continue to be exposed through their conflicting perspectives of the screenplay. Austin repeatedly refers to his work as “research” and “business,” whereas Lee is more concerned with the notion of “art.” This distinction between their ideas is demonstrated in the opening scene of the play when Austin refers to his screenplay as “just a little research,” to which Lee responds with “You may not know it but I did a little art myself once” (6). Their differing opinions are representative of dissimilar mentalities; Austin is the discipline and technique while Lee is the “raw talent” (34) and imagination. William Kleb takes this comparison between the brothers a step further in his chapter “Worse Than Being Homeless: *True West* and The Divided Self”: “Austin represents objectivity [sic], self-control and self-discipline, form and order, the intellect,

reason. Lee stands for subjectivity, anarchy, adventure, excess and exaggeration, intuition and imagination” (121). In summary, the two brothers are unequivocally opposite.

Consistent with this notion of contrasting starting points, each brother has dissimilar conceptions of “the West” as well. Their differing views of the West actually correspond to their disparate mentalities as outlined by Kleb. Austin’s West is the “New” West (Derose 109), a West of highways and Safeways (35), where “Gunfights are replaced by golf matches. The territory to be fought over is astroturf in a suburban kitchen” (Clum 186). Lee, on the other hand, believes in the “Old” West (Derose 109), the “traditional ideal of frontier freedom” (Bottoms 201). Lee’s West is just an artifice, as is Austin’s, and is similar to the West depicted in Hollywood Westerns, such as *Lonely Are the Brave* starring Kirk Douglas, Lee’s favorite movie. Lee has faith in this artifice, however, and considers the West an area where cowboys roam and ride horses across the desert. The Old West, or what Lee thinks is the true West, is what he hopes to capture in his “true-to-life” screenplay (8), or rather in his “art.”

Given this stark differentiation, it is difficult to fathom that the two figures that appear at the start of *True West* are the products of the same household. If they shared similar childhood experiences how did they become completely antithetical as adults? The textual evidence suggests that the two brothers have deliberately chosen their respective identities in order to purposefully appear as the exact opposite of the other brother, and as a result, they are binaries that only exist in relation to the definition of the other brother. “They have each shaped themselves in diametric opposition to their conception of the other” (Bottoms 193). Shepard, then, is allowing for another differentiation to eventually breakdown (i.e. the façade of their chosen identity).

After firmly establishing the dissimilarities between Austin and Lee, Shepard introduces the Girardian concept of triangular desire casting Austin in the role of the model, Lee as the self, and the screenplay that Austin desires (and obtains for a brief 12 hours) as the object. This structure first arises in scene two when Austin reveals to his brother that he has a meeting at the house the following day with a Hollywood producer, Saul Kimmer. Austin and Saul need to discuss the project “alone” (13), therefore, Austin tells his brother to leave the house for a few hours. This act instigates mimetic desire. Austin’s request causes Lee to explain that he, too, has ideas of his own for a screenplay and tells Austin that “if that uh – story of yours doesn’t go over with the guy – tell him I got a couple a’ ‘projects’ he might be interested in” (15). Lee, while living an isolated existence in the desert, did not have an innate ambition to be a Hollywood screenwriter, but after living under the same roof as his brother for less than twenty-four hours, Lee almost immediately imitates the desire of Austin. Suddenly, Lee (the self) desires the object (a produced screenplay) because the model (Austin) desires it.

A “sense of reality is lost and judgment paralyzed” (*The Girard Reader* 35) as the brothers engage in triangular desire. Lee deliberately interrupts the business meeting between Austin and Saul, ingratiates himself toward the producer, and eventually invites the producer to partake in an early morning round of golf. Moreover, Lee pitches his own idea for a screenplay: a “Contemporary Western. Based on a true story” (18). Austin, while agitated, keeps his composure throughout the scene because the object (the screenplay) is his possession at this point; Saul approves of Austin’s work and has indeed agreed to produce Austin’s “period piece.” However, in scene five, directly following the early morning golf date between Saul and Lee, it is revealed that Saul is now interested in Lee’s project and is impressed by Lee’s “raw talent” (34). Lee (self) usurps Austin’s position, gains possession of the object (screenplay), and finally

becomes the model. Saul changes his mind (for reasons Shepard never makes quite clear), and decides to produce solely Lee's concept, as verified when Lee bluntly explains to his brother that Saul is "gonna' drop that other one" (29). "Austin's anxiety turns to near hysteria as Lee tells him that Kimmer has decided to develop and produce Lee's project instead of Austin's, adding that Austin will be hired to write up Lee's idea instead" (Kleb 118). This change in Austin's composure is due to the fact that their mimetic rivalry is building in momentum. Upon hearing Lee's news, Austin immediately attempts to call Saul, and when Lee informs his brother that Saul won't be in his office "till late this afternoon" (30), Austin "hangs up the phone *violently*" (30, my italics). This is the first time in the play that Austin exhibits violent tendencies. Lee, then, escalates the violence; "Lee makes sudden menacing lunge toward Austin, wielding golf club above his head, stops himself..." (31). As the brother's desire for the same object becomes overt, so does their violence, causing the brothers to become increasingly more alike.

The notion of triangular desire indeed fuels the conflictual tension between the brothers, however, the object of desire encouraging the mimetic rivalry is more profound and complex than the surface object of the screenplay. Certainly, Lee is primarily inspired to write and sell a screenplay because his brother Austin hopes to do so, but what both brothers desire more than the screenplay is Saul's approval. Thus, the deeper triangle of desire present in this play is Lee as the self, Austin as the model, and Saul's validation as the object. This is exemplified when Saul returns to the brothers' home for a second time in scene six and expresses to Austin that it is certainly possible to produce both projects; "It's not as though we can't do both. We're big enough for that, aren't we?" (33), to which Austin angrily responds with "'We'? I can't do both! I don't know about 'we'" (33). Surely Austin would have agreed to do both projects if the screenplay was his ultimate objective. But it is the approval of Saul that Austin deeply desires;

Austin wants to be favored over his brother by an authority figure. Lee parallels this desire, as demonstrated when Lee sets a golf date with Saul in order to gain a “real sense a’ fraternity” (17). This is not something typically needed in a business relationship, but obviously this is more than business (or art) for both Austin and Lee. The brothers’ rivalry over attention from Saul continues in scene five, a scene in which Saul does not even appear. Austin tells his brother, “I *know* Saul and he doesn’t fool around when he says he likes something.” Lee retorts with “I thought you said you didn’t *know* him” (28, my italics), inferring that Austin never built any real “intimacy” with Saul, a word that is consistently reiterated throughout Shepard’s play (ten times), signifying the relevance of this term in relation to the brothers’ inherent objective. Then, once Lee has possession of the object, he continuously flaunts this fact in Austin’s face, telling Austin, “I think he liked me a lot, to tell ya’ the truth. I think he felt I was someone he could confide in” (30). Lee never declares that he is a more talented writer than his brother, but instead that Saul *likes* him, indicating that validation from Saul is the underlying object of desire. The rivalry heightens again when Saul agrees to be Lee’s agent. Austin is furious over this “double betrayal” (Kane 143); “The model, even when he has openly encouraged imitation, is surprised to find himself engaged in competition. He concludes that the disciple [the self or Lee] has betrayed his confidence by following in his footsteps” (146). Lee openly acknowledges that there is indeed a rivalry between the brothers when he proposes that the “competition’s gettin’ kinda’ close to home isn’t it?” (32). This is not a competition over a screenplay, however, but a fight for approval from the surrogate father figure, Saul Kimmer.

True West contains yet another triangle of desire. While the brothers’ actions appear to stem from their urgency to obtain Saul’s approval, what is taking place here at a deeper level is a struggle for their *real* father’s approval. The triangle, then, is comprised of Austin and Lee as

the reciprocal self and model and the father's approval as the object. Their true father, while physically absent from the play, is "made dramatically present by their [the brothers] continual reference to him" (Kane 143). The metaphoric presence of this third triangle explains why Lee forcefully and threateningly lunges at Austin in the first scene of the play - the brothers are already entangled in a triangular framework of desire. Shepard indicates this intrinsic triangle within the first two pages of the text, before any suggestion of Saul Kimmer or a film project. After an uncomfortable silence, Austin inquires if Lee saw the "old man" during his stay in the desert. When Lee responds that he did in fact see their father, Austin mentions that he, too, went into the desert to visit their father. Lee responds with, "What d'ya' want, an award? You want some kinda' medal? You were down there. He told me all about you.... He told me. Don't worry" (7). This beat establishes the quest both brothers have to win the favor of their father, and what is more, Shepard's word choices of award and medal signify that there is some sort of competition taking place. Indications emerge throughout the play confirming that it is ultimately the father's approval that both brothers desire. For example, upon seeing the successful life Austin has created for himself, Lee gets the idea that writing a screenplay may be an effective way to win the father's validation, as it will provide money. This underlying motive is revealed in scene six, when Saul explains his decision to go forward with Lee's idea instead of Austin's. Saul divulges to Austin "Your brother told me about the situation with your father.... He needs money" (33). This comment incites an explosion in Austin: "I gave him money! I already gave him money. You know that. He drank it all up! (33). Austin's tactic failed, and now there is a palpable threat that Lee's imitation of Austin's choice will have a different effect. When Lee suggests that perhaps this screenplay will give them the finances to rescue their father, Austin "turns violently toward Lee, takes a swing at him, misses and crashes to the floor again." Austin

then wails “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!” (39) Austin thought that if he gave his father money, he would win the father’s acceptance and become the favored brother. Likewise, if Austin did not want the father in his life, Lee’s comment would not have hit such an open nerve and cause such an explosive reaction. Although the absent father in *True West* is depicted as an alcoholic who loses all of his teeth, and then subsequently, loses his false teeth as well after leaving them in a doggie bag of Chop Suey, he “is still an object of sibling rivalry for brothers Austin and Lee” (Clum 181).

It is interesting to consider here that once this deeper desire rises to the surface of the action, Austin’s need for the original object (the screenplay) is completely forgotten. Girard argues that as the rivalry builds, the antagonists become “more and more fascinated by each other” and the “disputed object becomes secondary, even irrelevant” (*The Girard Reader* 13). Thus, by the conclusion of the play, even the object of the father is no longer of interest to the brothers, as they are becoming increasingly focused on each other. This notion gives even more relevance to the final image of the two brothers facing off, staring intensely into each other’s eyes.

In accordance with Girardian thought, Shepard dramatizes the loss of differentiations as the reciprocal rivalry over the object (or objects) builds in intensity. Austin and Lee are engaged in a process that causes the “destruction of specificities” (*Oedipus* 136) and the escalation of violence. But how does Shepard demonstrate the disintegration of the orderly environment? First, the set transforms from a neat and organized kitchen, where not even a single tea leaf is left in the sink (5), to a stage that Shepard describes as “ravaged” (50), “like a desert junkyard at high noon” (50); toasters, golf clubs, remnants of a screenplay, dishes, pieces of bread, beer bottles,

dead plants and even a telephone that has been ripped from the wall are all strewn throughout the kitchen, or what was once a kitchen, by the end of the play. The mother's sentiments, when she returns from Alaska, depict the extremity of the devastation: "I can't stay here. This is worse than being homeless" (58). Her comment actually correlates to another factor involved in breakdown of differentiations. Homeless, infers a lack of shelter, as if her home is not only unrecognizable, but it also no longer provides protection from the elements. "The outside comes inside in the form of the invasive animal sounds and a camp-like fire burning on a floor made of green synthetic grass" (Vernon 137). The crickets, in particular, serve an important function in dramatizing the progression into the undifferentiated state. Their purpose is twofold: first, they are indicative of the height of the rivalry (i.e., the louder the crickets, the more volatile the conflict), and second, the volatile conflict leads to an undifferentiated state, hence, the crescendo of the crickets also illuminates the breakdown that occurs between indoors and outdoors. They are illustrative of "the undomesticated midnight landscape of the second act" (DeRose 112). Likewise, the *heat* of the outdoors is suddenly intruding into the house, demonstrated by Lee who feels the need to shower himself with beer in order to stay cool. Lee also refers to the inescapable heat when he states, "I mean we're having a real scorcher here.... Must be in the hundreds" (53). Undoubtedly, the heat is symbolic of not only the undifferentiated state, but also of the heated tension from the mimetic rivalry between the two brothers that led to this undifferentiation in the first place. Moreover, time is suddenly meaningless by the end of the play. By scene eight, the second to last scene of the play, both brothers are completely oblivious as to the time of day. When Lee asks the formerly responsible Austin what time it is, Austin responds with "No idea. Time stands still when you're havin' fun" (44). In fact, the scene takes place "between night and day" (42) or "no time" (Smith 332). Besides the actual time of day, the

logical sequence of time is also nonexistent, meaning by the end of *True West*, “both past and present dissolve” (Kleb 123). Austin and Lee are lost in an environment where structure and order is non-existent.

Most significantly, the Girardian notion of the undifferentiated state is demonstrated through Shepard’s continuously evolving depictions of the two brothers, who transition from being polar opposites of each other to being indistinguishable from each other. As Girard explains, “When mimetic rivalry escalates beyond a certain point, the rivals engage in endless conflict which undifferentiates them more and more; they all become *doubles* of one another” (Girard 400). It is at this point, that the threat of dangerous violence, or even homicide, is present. This state is first illustrated through Austin and Lee’s clothing. Just as the brother’s clothing delineates their distinctiveness at the commencement of the action, their clothing later in the play demonstrates their uniformity. The brothers gradually begin to resemble each other, and by the final scene, Austin, who was once the epitome of clean-cut, is described as having “his shirt open” and is “pouring with sweat” (50). Lee is identical: “no shirt, beer in hand, sweat pouring down his chest” (50). The brothers also enter a state of inebriation, which epitomizes the mentality of the undifferentiated state. By scene seven, the mimetic rivalry is in full force and Austin is “sprawled out on kitchen floor with whiskey bottle, drunk” (36). By scene eight, “both men are drunk.” It is no longer a somewhat innocuous alcoholic beverage, such as beer, that is being quaffed either; it is, as Austin states, “serious stuff” (37). The undifferentiated state is further exemplified toward the end of the play when the brothers abandon their respective personas. Suddenly, Austin relinquishes his career as a writer and Lee denies being a criminal. The two brothers fervently hold onto these identities until they become completely engrossed in mimetic desire, creating a mutual obsession with each other and causing their constructed

personas to collapse. At the conclusion of the play they are doubles, “locked together in ... a potentially deadly fight” (Clum 186).

Shepard dramatizes the undifferentiation present in this text in yet another noteworthy manner. In fact, the loss of distinction is so integral to *True West* that Shepard could have easily titled his play *Undifferentiated State* instead. It is important to consider that what happens as a result of the reciprocal mimetic rivalry and the subsequent “violent effacement of differences” (*Violence* 64) is that Austin and Lee both essentially become their father. As their conflict heightens, the brothers begin to refer to each other as “boy” (as if that was how their father referred to them). Lee even comments that Austin sounds “just like the old man” (39), causing Austin to state “Well, we all sound alike when we’re sloshed. We just sorta’ echo each other” (39). Thus, it seems as though the father is emblematic of the undifferentiated state. What is more, the undifferentiated state is in actuality the *true* West. It is a “vast desert-like landscape,” where their father wanders around toothless in an inebriated condition. As a promise to her boys in the final scene, the mother tells her sons that they’ll “probably wind up on the same desert [as their father] sooner or later” (53). Therefore, as the brother’s manufactured identities come crashing down, so do their connotations of the West, and eventually their *true* selves and the *true* West are revealed.

In the end, the underlying motivations of the characters and the origins of the violence in *True West* can be explained through Girard’s mimetic theory, which in turn offers an explanation for the phenomena of fraternal violence. Austin and Lee demonstrate how the mutual desire over an object between siblings instigates a rivalry, causes the dissipation of differences, and culminates in violence. On a large scale, this can be used to understand other seemingly confusing but escalating conflicts, such as wars. However, the presence of Girard’s ideas in

Shepard's plays does not indicate the playwright's hope for social change, but rather his innate instinct to explore or discover "some genuine force in the world" (Roudané 3), something elemental (Bigsby 12). By reading *True West* through a Girardian lens, fundamental, elemental truths in regard to the human condition are indeed revealed.

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