

# [Shepard's Desolate Deserts: The Place Where Finitude Meets Revival]

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**[Abstract]** *This article addresses the literary symbolism of the desert landscape in combination with an ecocritical perspective and subsequently proceeds to analyze selected plays by Sam Shepard, focusing on the significance of the desert landscape, which has a profound impact on the psyches of his characters. Sam Shepard, as an author of American myths, adds an ancient and mystical quality to his desert environment, which intricately contributes to the development of the protagonists' identities. The Western viewpoint of the desert as a place of danger and death is compared and contrasted with the spiritual potential of this arid land.*

**[Keywords]** *desert landscape; American Southwest, modern American drama; Sam Shepard*

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The interplay between literature and landscape has been an enduring subject of scholarly endeavor, with landscapes often serving as the backdrop against which narratives unfold. The narrative capacity of the landscape itself extends beyond mere settings and has the potential to become an essential element that invites readers into an interpretative sphere. One such landscape that has captured the literary imagination is the vast and formidable desert. Commonly viewed as a barren backdrop, the desert landscape is richly imbued with cultural significance and symbolic meaning. This article seeks to transcend the conventional role of the desert as a mere stage for stories, instead aiming to position it as a character in its own right within the selected literary texts. The desert, with its stark beauty and unforgiving terrain, has played a particularly intriguing role in literature, serving most often as a space for adventurous tales of survival but also for stories of introspection and the transformation of the human mind. This article further delves into the representation of the desert landscape in Sam Shepard's plays. It aims to contrast the Western subjective portrayal of deserts, in which deserts are considered hostile places of life-threatening and extreme experiences associated with images of ruin and death (Haynes 65), with the emergence of the desert's spiritual dimension, influencing the trajectory of characters' identities. Through an examination of selected plays, namely *Operation Sidewinder* (1970), *True West* (1980), and *The Holy Ghostly* (1970), the symbolic dimensions of the desert will be scrutinized, uncovering how Shepard utilizes its features to instill his works with deeper meanings and metaphors. By adopting this perspective, this article will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of the desert landscape in literature, recognizing it as an active participant that shapes the very essence of the stories and reconstructs its characters' personalities.

Potteiger and Purinton, in their book *Landscape Narratives*, claim that "landscape not only locates or serves as background setting for stories, but is itself a changing, eventful figure and process that engenders stories" (5). Although landscapes in literature are most often perceived as a background to the actual story rather than a narrative on their own, there is no question about their narrative potential and their symbolic role. When it comes to landscape narratives, it is essential to take into consideration that the stories embedded in landscapes are products of shared cultural experience, and these stories can only possibly be interpreted through a viewer, who becomes a creator and a storyteller in these spatial narratives, which are silent but persistent (10). As such, natural environments can carry different connotations in different cultures or even time periods. Landscape narratives display the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world, as they offer insights into the complexities of humans' relationship with the environment, inviting interpretation and evoking a variety of emotions and associations.

A major change in the perception of landscape and nature in literature was brought by Romantic authors, beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the Romantic era, writers and poets expressed a heightened appreciation for nature and the landscape, which is "a regular feature of the literature associated with Romanticism" (Mellard 474). They viewed nature as a source of inspiration, spiritual connection, and aesthetic beauty. Similarly, the desert landscape had been neglected until the emergence of this movement.

“The Romantic aesthetics of nature changed all this and from the late eighteenth century onwards writers came to be inspired by the new possibilities offered by waste spaces of various kinds. This new interest in the aesthetics of deserts was made possible by a new imaginary of landscape in which affect and environment came to reflect one another” (Tynan 17). From the Romantics onwards, writers in their Western subjectivity have frequently sought out desert landscapes as locations where death and finitude are confronted, associating them with an image of exhaustion and ruin (Tynan 3). Tynan proceeds to name some well-known desert writings, such as Charles Doughty’s travel book *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888) or John C. Van Dyke’s work of environmental aesthetics *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances* (1901). In the United States, by 1910 deserts became associated with the very height of American culture. The previous understanding of a desert, as a piece of land where agriculture, industry and commerce was impossible, developed into a picture of an aesthetic wonderland, giving rise to desert nature writing (Teague 3). Some famous nature writers of the twentieth century should probably not be neglected here, the most prominent authors touching on the subject of the desert being Mary Hunter Austin and (some years later) Edward Abbey, whose autobiographical book *Desert Solitaire* (1968) describes his life and work as a park ranger in the American Southwest; it illustrates both the isolating and cruel nature of the desert landscape and also its vast beauty. In addition to Abbey’s isolating experience, Haynes comments that “deserts also threaten the inner self. Their immensity, solitude and silence pose questions about identity and meaning that are not easily dismissed [...] Yet for many people deserts have been intensely alluring. For the Old Testament prophets and the Desert Fathers they were places of purification and spiritual renewal” (7).

The spirituality of deserts stands in opposition to our Western understanding of the desert landscape, which consists of many contrasting notions. As Michael Welland states, “The desert is a place of contrasts, of extremes, a place of staggering beauty and unimaginable violence, a place where the margins between success and failure, between life and death are slim, a place of timelessness and ephemerality, a place of good and evil” (9). In his desert-situated plays, Sam Shepard seems to take all this into consideration, and he offers a wide variety of perspectives on how to perceive his desert landscape. Shepard, widely known as an author of American myths, sets many of his works in the Old West, and his characters are no strangers to desert landscapes. For him, “America is a combination of the psychic release found in the myth of the frontier and the West – the freedom of the American male wandering on an endless landscape – and a frustrating maze” (Reaves 6). Shepard was born in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, but during his childhood his family moved throughout the United States. The most influential episode for his future work as a writer was when the family moved to California, first to a suburb in Pasadena when he was five, and at age eleven to an avocado ranch in Duarte, where he “felt more at ease in the country and away from the stuffy suburban atmosphere of Pasadena” (Crank 3). The new environment served as an inspiration and backdrop for many of his plays, films, and other writings. Throughout his career, Shepard stays loyal to his agricultural roots, and on many occasions he contrasts open spaces with suffocating cityscapes.

For instance, one of his earliest plays, *Cowboys #2* (1967), portrays its characters on a busy city street, playing cowboys and Indians in an imaginary desert. Desert landscapes are also part of Shepard's screenwriting career, and as such should not be forgotten. Wim Wenders' desert road movie *Paris, Texas* (1984), co-written by Shepard and awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, opens with a long aerial shot of a vast desert, utilizing this cinematographic style to emphasize its power as a symbol of the solitude, emptiness, and isolation that the main character, Travis Henderson, feels at the beginning of the movie. Since Shepard's wastelands occupy as extensive a place in his complete work as American deserts do in the Southwest, only the plays in which the desert is foregrounded as means of characters' metamorphosis will be analyzed in the following part.

As Haynes observes, "Even now the desert is rarely subject; it is the enemy, the 'Other' to both the individual and civilization" (153). Landscapes emerge as a natural setting for a cultural story, owing to the dualism of "culture" being in opposition to "nature". The desert, with its arid terrain and harsh environmental conditions, serves as a symbol of untamed wilderness and ecological resilience. Yet juxtaposed against this formidable backdrop is the cultural presence of human societies, whose interactions with the desert landscape illuminate the entanglement of the nature-culture dichotomy, drawing attention to the natural environment from the perspective of human society. In this interpretation, human society is almost always a subject, while nature becomes an object. In Shepard's *Operation Sidewinder*, a play that is (among other matters) concerned with the clash between technology-driven society and the spirituality of nature, the desert is predominantly perceived by the main protagonists as a scary and dangerous place, yet its role in the play becomes gradually stronger. On one hand, military personnel, operating within a framework of materialism and technological advancement, are driven by pragmatic concerns and a desire for control. They view the desert landscape primarily as a strategic battleground and a resource to be conquered and exploited for military purposes. On the other hand, the Native American characters embody a deeper connection to the land and a reverence for its spiritual significance. For them, the desert is not merely a geographical space, but a sacred environment intertwined with their cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs. "More than any other demographic group in Shepard's work, Native Americans provide a powerful image of harmony with the land and with the cosmos at large" (DeRose 64).

Throughout the play, there are many remarks from the protagonists regarding the danger that the desert poses, which makes the reader believe that the desert environment in this play serves as an "other" to our Western culture. From the Euro-American perspective, the desert is viewed very differently from those for whom this arid land is their home (Welland 181), and this corresponds with the approach the characters in *Operation Sidewinder* take towards the desert environment. "What was hostile terrain to the white man was sacred land, representing an ancient and traditional way of life, to the Native American" (DeRose 57). There are two main considerations of the desert in this play; the people of the Western civilization, the "outsiders" of the desert, perceive it as a place

of danger and potential death, and as an alien and hostile environment where survival becomes a test of individual strength and willpower; all of this is emphasized by the constant presence of a rattling sidewinder snake. By contrast, the Native Americans view the desert landscape as a sacred place, capable of saving the world from impending doom. The Indigenous communities recognize the desert's profound significance as a sacred space filled with ancestral wisdom and cultural traditions:

Many indigenous cultures believe that Earth is a sacred environment and regard themselves as an integral part of a holistic and living landscape, relating to the landscape in ways that reflect their experiences. The intricate, holistic, and interconnected relationship between people and the natural environment and its resources is formed primarily in spiritual terms instead of as material asset. This differs from the Western understandings of land and landscapes. (Marques et al. 37)

For Honey, a character described by Shepard as “a very sexy chick with long blonde hair and tight pants, high heels, etc.” (*Four Two-Act Plays* 153), the desert is a place to be wary of. She even mentions reading a desert manual before coming there with her husband to film a desert documentary, and her incompatibility with the desert is only heightened by her inappropriate attire. The “otherness” of the desert is further apparent from the perspectives of other characters. These include Dr. Vector claiming that his sidewinder computer is at the moment “surviving on one of the most inhospitable deserts in the world” (178), or the ranger who comes with the warning that “this desert's no place to play around in” (190). As the play advances, Honey changes her impression of the desert as she experiences its nightly aesthetics. Shepard carefully depicts the new scene in his stage directions to deliberately transform our sense of the environment. The previous scenes, saturated with bright yellow desert lights and rhythmic rattle of the sidewinder snake (152), shift to the bluish color of a full-moon night and a starry sky, accompanied by the sound of crickets and the howls of coyotes (180). Shepard exploits the importance of the onstage lightning in several of his desert plays.

In *True West's* Scene 9, although the whole play is set in a Southwest suburban house, he instructs the production to use an intense yellow light; the effect should be like “a desert junkyard at high noon, the coolness of the preceding scenes is totally obliterated” (*Seven Plays* 50). Later, in the very last scene of this play, “lights fade softly into moonlight” and the two brothers should appear to be in a vast desert-like landscape with a coyote howl heard in the distance (59-60). The use of light onstage has several functions, including to convey important information about the environment and geographical location, or to create mood; light “has the greatest effect on the audience. Light is an incredibly influential design element when it comes to establishing mood and creating an emotional response” (Malloy 257). Taking into consideration the metaphorical impact of the color schemes in theater design, yellow is most often, as in this given context, connected with sun and sunlight, but it can also serve as a symbol of warning, and an orange hue is very often associated with a sense of danger. In contrast, blue can represent tranquility, calm, and security (Malloy 75), corresponding to the newly acquired sentiment

that Honey feels towards the desert as she muses that “it’s so peaceful and nice” out in the desert at night (Shepard, *Four Two-Act Plays* 181).

In *Operation Sidewinder*, the major breakthrough comes by the end of the play, when Honey, along with her companion (called simply “Young Man”), completely change their earlier personalities, as well as their attitude towards the desert environment. They “seem to be in a totally different frame of mind now. Calm, spiritual, totally accepting of the whole ritual” (215). Both of these characters have previously shown their dislike towards the desert, Young Man even shouting at Honey, who has already been entranced by the ritual chanting of Hopi Indians by that time, that he is “not walking back down into that desert alone” (212), yet they both leave their quest for power and survival behind, discarding their original materialistic values and becoming one with the ritual and the desert. However, their spiritual salvation is interrupted by the Desert Tactical Troops, emphasizing the clash of different cultures and attitudes towards the desert and the natural world. In the end, although Honey and the Young Man are representatives of Western culture, they show “how these devastated spaces, in their very strangeness and solitude, may offer a potential re-enchantment and revivification” (Tynan 7) and that the desert landscape offers a “potential salvation where man overcomes himself” (Tynan 224). It is precisely in this empty and exhausted environment where Shepard’s characters find their salvation and spiritual renewal. *True West* bears a similar significance, yet the desert itself never directly appears in the play despite its important role.

In *True West*, the desert landscape serves as a symbol of escape and exile, and of the search for a new identity for the two brothers. At first, the younger brother, Austin, is questioning how it could be possible to live alone with no human contact out in the desert, yet as the play progresses, he starts persuading Lee to teach him how to survive in the desert environment, as he plans to embark on a search for his new identity, quitting his screenwriter career. He declares: “There’s nothin’ down here for me. There never was” (Shepard, *Seven Plays* 49). While Lee prefers living out in the desert because he is convinced he “can’t make it” in the city (49), for Austin, a screenwriter striving for success in the competitive world of Hollywood, the desert represents a tantalizing escape from the pressures and constraints of his urban existence. When Austin becomes nervous because his movie project is to be dropped by the producer, he even suggests that he might just drive out to the desert for a while since he needs to think (32), expressing his need for a change of pace and environment. Considering the clash between the new West and the old West and the question of which one of these is the actual true West, there is also an apparent contradiction between the urban and the natural world. Austin represents city life by both his neat external appearance and behavior, while his brother Lee embodies the fierceness of nature and, most likely, of the desert. Lee comments on the yapping of the city coyotes, differentiating them from the howl of the desert ones (10), and compares the heat in the city with the heat in the desert, saying it is “different kinda’ heat. Out there it’s clean. Cools off at night. There’s a nice little breeze” (11), referring to his experience in the Mojave Desert and setting it against the sultry and suffocating feeling of the city and suburbs. Austin’s attitude towards the desert wasteland and the



city changes during the play; at first he cannot imagine living in solitude and away from civilization, yet he gradually shows his growing dislike for city life, stating “I drive on the freeway every day. I swallow the smog” (36), and realizing that “there’s nothing real down here, Lee. Least of all me!” (49). Yi-Fu Tuan, in his *Landscapes of Fear*, claims that “the city manifests humanity’s greatest aspiration toward perfect order and harmony in both its architectural setting and its social ties” (145), yet it is precisely these social ties and expectations that Austin wants to get away from as his own aspirations and ideals crumble. Just like Travis Henderson in *Paris, Texas*, Austin also wants to lose his identity and himself in the vast wasteland, and he thinks of the desert as his potential salvation. Although it is a place where an individual can feel “small and insignificant” (Limerick 10), it is still a place of freedom from civilization and personal rebirth. David Jasper, in his book *The Sacred Desert*, describes deserts as places “to be gone into” (131) and considers them places where one does not go to find one’s new identity but rather to lose it, to become anonymous. This might very well be the case for Travis in *Paris, Texas*, Austin in *True West*, and also for Austin’s father, who went to live in the desert and never came back. Their relationship with this void space is beyond simple physical presence; it implies an active exploration and introspection within the desert environment, rather than simply passing through or observing from a distance. Their journey into the desert is a transformative one, providing an opportunity for self-discovery and reflection.

In Shepard’s works, deserts also serve as places of introspection, places where characters can look within themselves and re-evaluate their lives. “The journey into the desert is, literally, a descent into the place on earth most feared, where demons, both inside and outside, are most powerfully encountered” (Jasper 27). In *The Holy Ghostly*, a dying man sitting by the campfire in the desert contemplates his strained relationship with his son. He is visited by mystical figures of the desert, such as the Navajo spirit of the dead and a witch, and the boundaries of reality and illusion become blurred. In the barren desert, the father, referred to as Pop, goes through a deep introspection, questioning his life decisions. Since deserts can function as “the external landscape for an inner spiritual journey” (Haynes 171), the desolate wasteland, mystical figures, and Pop’s decaying corpse become metaphors for the main character’s solitude, emptiness, and regrets on the verge of his life. “Deserts can be and have often been regarded as the geographical correlate of death” (Tynan 3), and from the Western viewpoint, they symbolize both physical mortality and spiritual decay and serve as reminders of the inevitability of death and the transient nature of existence. In this solitary and void desert purgatory, Pop realizes his lack of purpose in life; he is reminded of this by the Witch, who tells him that he has become a ghost because he never found out what he was here for and is currently “strung out between right and wrong, good and evil [...] the body and the spirit” (Shepard, *Unseen Hand* 101). In the end, despite Pop’s constant denial of his death during the majority of the play, even going as far as threatening the spirits with violence when they point out he is no longer among the living, he eventually becomes aware of the state he is in and maniacally speaks to his imaginary son, the

spirits, himself and his corpse: “The change in his old man. A changed man. Believe you me, Stanley, he wouldn’t believe it! Imagine me, crawlin’ off into the badlands like an old alley cat, knowin’ he’s dyin’, dyin’ alone. Tryin’ to save pain. Save face” (111). Although in *The Holy Ghostly* the desert can be considered more of a backdrop to the action than the actual force behind the protagonist’s mental shift, its plot revolves around the spirituality that Shepard would not be able to find in any other geographical space. The emptiness and solitude of the desert perfectly parallels the emptiness and solitude of Pop’s own soul and life. “This is the place of desert encounter: the encounter of the self with itself, encounter of the self with the other self, and encounter of the self with the unknowable Transcendent Other that in the end is not other than self or other self” (Jasper xiii).

The barren and desolate nature of the desert serves as a metaphorical backdrop in many literary works, influencing the characters’ personalities and contributing to the development of their identities. While in most literary works the desert usually serves as a backdrop for adventure and a place where characters fight for their survival and show their resilience, in Shepard’s plays the desert usually has a spiritual meaning, and the identities and personalities of his protagonists are questioned and altered. Drawing on research into desert symbolism in literature and culture, Sam Shepard’s desert landscape can be seen to transcend traditional associations of death and finality as Shepard employs it as a transformative space, facilitating the reconstruction of identities. His use of the desert overcomes simple symbolism as he reconsiders popular myths about desolate settings. This departure from conventional approaches to this landscape is evident in his portrayal of the desert as a place of salvation. His characters escape to the desert to discover and redefine themselves, emphasizing the possibility of renewal amid vast and inhospitable wastelands. The desert becomes a powerful setting for introspection, where characters contemplate their decisions in life.

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