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Auszug aus:

*Abiturwissen: Übungsklausur mit Musterlösung: Sam Shepard
- True West*

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Sam Shepard – True West: Questions

1. Summarise the plot of the play in two or three sentences!
2. How does the “old man” influence the action in the play?
3. The plot is structured around central oppositions, such as “the desert” vs. “the city”. Find two other oppositions and explain their role in the play!
4. Comment on the title *True West*!

Try to answer these questions before reading the answers below!

Answers

1. The play *True West* by Sam Shepard is about two brothers who are initially very different, but gradually acquire each other's character traits and habits and even begin to change roles. While Austin is a promising writer who has his life under control, his brother Lee is a drunkard and a thief who comes to Austin's neighbourhood only to break into houses. When Lee starts to write as well, he turns out to be more accepted by the producer, which makes Austin start drinking and giving up his well-ordered life.
2. The “Old Man” is the father of the two protagonists in the play. Even though he never appears as a person in the course of the play, he is omnipresent and often talked about. The father of the two brothers does not live up to the standards of society and has fled from civil life to the desert. Since both Austin and Lee will probably have been influenced by their father both in social and genetic terms, his role is an active one in the play although he never physically appears. Austin defines himself in a contrary way to his father, which means that his father serves as a negative role model. One of his aims in life, so it seems, is not to become like his father. Lee, on the other hand, could not quite abandon his social surroundings and lives, just like his father, outside of society's norms. One could say that both brothers are deeply influenced by their father. The fact that this influence does not only concern their past but also the present is made clear when Austin starts drinking and feels the pull of the desert, which represents the desire to leave the social framework he is living in.

3. There are a number of oppositions around which the plot of Shepard's Play *True West* is structured. When considering the development of the main characters and their creative work, it is remarkable that they initially have very different notions of art. While Austin sees a higher ideal connected with art, Lee regards it as a business. So one of the central oppositions would be art as a source of inspiration and education vs. art as a source of money. At the beginning, Austin refuses to work with Lee on the plot set in "Tornado Country"; his standards as an artist stop him from doing so. Lee rather listens to the advice of the producer on what the audience wants to see and on what sells. He ridicules Austin's effort to produce art – his standard of art can be measured in the acceptance of the audience and the financial outcome.

[As there are more than two dichotomies, you will probably want to know what they consist in. Rather than answering the questions above correctly, here is some extra information in short]

- identity vs. family: the struggle of the characters to find their own identity, apart from their family
 - order vs. chaos: Austins stands for order, Lee for chaos (drinks, steals). Both give up their way of living; Austin starts drinking, Lee stops stealing.
 - Wild West vs. Free West: see below
4. When it comes to America, there exists a variety of stereotypes that are often being referred to. There is something like the "Wild West", which we can see in Cowboy films. The endless wilderness, tough men, guns, alcohol, shootings, death are attributes of this cliché. The central word in this context would be freedom. There is, or at least there used to be, plenty of space on the American continent where brave men could go when they wanted to live seperatedly from the city and the laws of citizenship.

Another cliché connected with the new world is the American Dream, in which everyone can climb up from "rags to riches" if he or she only worked hard enough. Again, freedom plays a central role here, but in this case it is freedom of self-development and self-fulfillment within society.

Both stereotypes are reflected in Sam Shepard's play *True West*. The outlaw Lee is initially associated with the Wild West, while his brother Austin represent the successful career within society. But as it is always the case with



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