



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***A MARXIST READING ON THE DISINTEGRATION OF AMERICAN  
FAMILIES IN SAM SHEPARD'S TRUE WEST AND CURSE OF THE  
STARVING CLASS***

**ABDULHAMEED A. MAJEED**

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**By**

**ABDULHAMEED A. MAJEED**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Univesiti Putra Malaysia in  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**November 2015**



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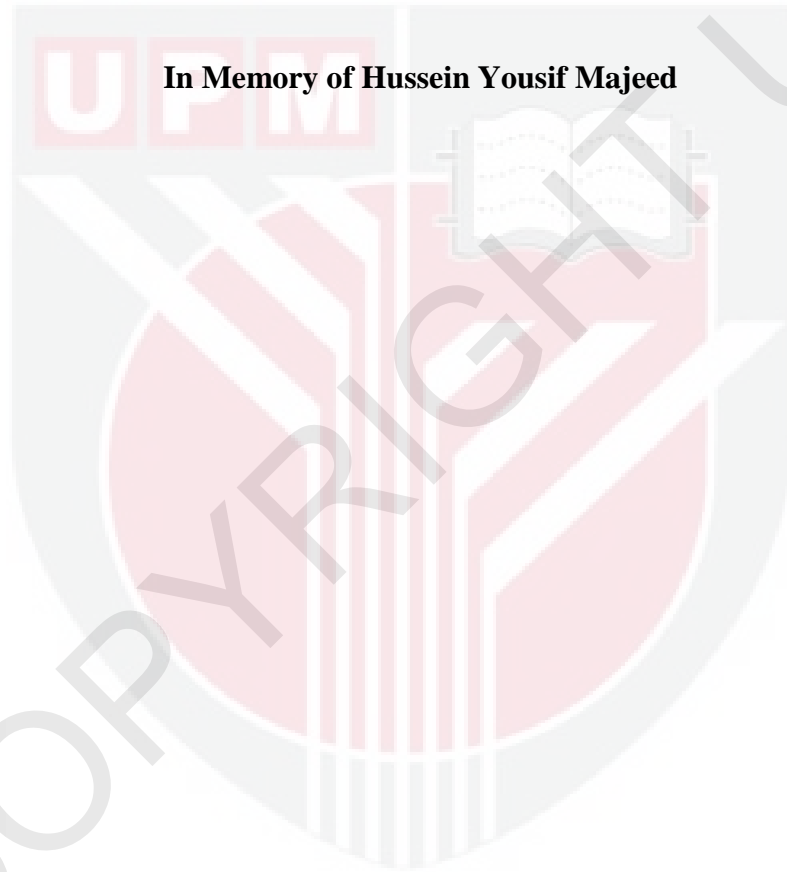
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**In Memory of Hussein Yousif Majeed**



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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in the fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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**November 2015**

**Chairman : Rohimmi Noor**  
**Faculty : Modern Languages and Communications**

American society began to experience the effects of capitalism in the twentieth century. The whole system of social values was modified by capitalist influence which pervaded the American society. People started to be valued in terms of commodity, and the struggle between the capitalist class and the working one is intensified. The materialistic struggle invaded the family household, and modern American drama depicted the effects of the capitalist culture of consumption on family relationships. Family members perceived that they were 'things' and 'commodities' in Twentieth-century America.

Thus, this research tries to achieve three objectives. The first objective is to analyse class conflict in the selected plays as a materialistic struggle between capitalists and the proletariat in the face of the American Dream. The second objective is to examine the characters' capitalist ideology. Capitalist ideology wants the public to believe that the American Dream is still alive and attainable. Objective three is to explore the capitalist ideology which is inherent in the characters' behaviours to argue for a distorted American Dream.

Accordingly, the study approaches the title in a Marxist approach, showing the superficialities and discrepancies of the capitalist system. It focuses on the dysfunctions of the family due to the materialistic conceptions of its members. Sam Shepard depicted the family deterioration and cut of communication in his plays in accordance to the capitalist conception of family members life. The Marxist reading of the plays selected shows the vulgarity and futility of the capitalist values of the Americans in their endeavors to cope with the materialistic standards of success of the American Dream.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Master Sastera

**PEMBACAAN PENDEKATAN MARXIS TERHADAP DISINTEGRASI  
KELUARGA AMERIKA DALAM KARYA SAM SHEPARD *TRUE WEST*  
DAN *CURSE OF THE STARVING CLASS***

Oleh

**ABDULHAMEED A. MAJEED**

**November 2015**

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Masyarakat Amerika mula mengalami kesan kapitalisme pada abad kedua puluh. Seluruh sistem nilai sosial telah dimodifikasi oleh pengaruh kapitalisme yang meresap ke dalam masyarakat Amerika. Rakyat mula dinilai dari segi komoditi, dan perjuangan antara kelas kapitalis dan golongan bekerja menjadi tegang. Perjuangan dari segi materialistik yang menakluki kehidupan rumah tangga dan drama Amerika moden menggambarkan budaya kapitalisme terhadap konsumsi ke atas hubungan kekeluargaan. Ahli keluarga mempercayai bahawa mereka ialah 'barangan' dan 'komoditi' dalam abad kedua puluh Amerika. Kajian ini mendekati tajuk ini dari segi pendekatan Marxis yang menggambarkan kedangkalan dan diskrepansi sistem kapitalisme. Kajian ini memberi fokus pada disfungsi keluarga disebabkan oleh konsepsi materialistik ahli mereka. Sam Shepard memperlihatkan bahawa kemerosotan nilai kekeluargaan dan terputusnya komunikasi dalam lakonannya adalah selaras dengan konsepsi kapitalisme dalam kehidupan berkeluarga. Pembacaan pendekatan Marxis terhadap lakonan yang dipilih menunjukkan bahawa vulgariti dan futiliti dalam nilai kapitalis rakyat Amerika dalam usaha mereka untuk menghadapi standard materialistik terhadap kejayaan impian rakyat Amerika.

Oleh sebab itu, kajian ini cuba untuk mencapai tiga objektif. Objektif pertama adalah untuk menganalisis konflik kelas dalam drama terpilih sebagai sesuatu perjuangan materialistik antara fahaman kapitalisme dan proletariat dari segi impian rakyat Amerika. Objektif kedua adalah untuk meneliti karekter ideologi kapitalisme. Ideologi kapitalisme menghendaki umum mempercayai bahawa impian rakyat Amerika masih hidup dan dapat dicapai. Objektif ketiga adalah untuk meneliti ideologi kapitalisme yang tersirat dalam tingkah laku karekter yang mempertikaikan impian rakyat Amerika yang diputarbelitkan.

Oleh itu, kajian ini mendekati tajuk ini dengan menggunakan pendekatan Marxis yang menggambarkan kedangkalan dan diskrepansi sistem kapitalisme. Kajian ini juga memfokuskan ketidakfungsian keluarga disebabkan konsepsi materialistik ahli mereka. Sam Shepard memperlihatkan bahawa kemerosotan keluarga dan

terputusnya komunikasi dalam lakonannya adalah selaras dengan konsepsi kapitalisme dalam kehidupan ahli keluarga. Pembacaan pendekatan Marxis terhadap lakonan yang terpilih menunjukkan vulgariti dan futiliti dalam nilai kapitalis rakyat Amerika dalam usaha mereka untuk menghadapi standard materialistik bagi menjayakan Impian rakyat Amerika.





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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 18 November 2015 to conduct the final examination of Abdulhameed A. Majeed on his thesis entitled "A Marxist Reading on the Disintegration of American Families in Sam Shepard's *True West* and *Curse of the Starving Class*" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*“Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.” (Karl Marx)*

### 1.1 Introduction

American society underwent the consequences of capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Family cultural values were generally modified by the capitalist influence which pervaded American society. As Wakefield states, “In the twentieth century spouses view themselves and each other in terms of money – how much he/she is “worth” is directly proportional to how he/ she can earn” (Wakefield 5).

The family constitutes the backbone of any society, but the ills in society can be traced to the distortions in the value system for the family in modern societies. Parsons, a sociologist, notices that the “loss of the function of the family” can be traced to the requirements of the contemporary family, which has been noticed by outside agencies, as opposed to the former practices of needs met by the family itself. However, Lasch claims that the family is surrounded by outside forces and the family environment can be invaded by the public state.

In his words, “The sanctity of the home is a sham by in a world dominated by giant corporations and by the apparatus of mass production” (xxiii). This has made some critics, like Zorn, assert that the American capitalist class in society is the most powerful, arrogant and bloodthirsty in the world and that everybody suffers from its effects. He further affirms that despite their being a tiny minority, they are the ruling class because they not only own and profit from the means of production but also control the state in order to maintain their power and profits. A Business Week Magazine caption reads “Capitalism Destroys the Family”, and government policies are considered as the main sources of this problem based on the politician’s view. However, based on economists’ views, the free market causes the breakup of the traditional American family, not free welfare. The newspaper claims that free-market forces, which are forced upon us by capitalist society, are responsible for breaking up the working-class family.

Despite the glowing accolades, however, Shepard’s rise in critical recognition has not been consistent, nor is it unanimous. Long-time Shepard critic Kerr has condemned the playwright for intentionally encouraging a cult audience, claiming audience responds as a group “to the rather primitive and deliberately enigmatic signals being sent from the stage”. However, he does amplify this contention by maintaining that Shepard does not appeal to a general audience, rather he “embraces all comers and all tastes, provoking them into a universalized response” (Kerr 3).



This further attests to the view held by the outside world of American society as a capitalist society, referring to capitalism as a production mode that revolves around the implacability between two fundamental classes: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie, the minority, has been described as having a “monopoly of the means of production while the proletariat, on the other hand, forms the vast majority of the population labeled in terms of their need of the means of production” (Malpas 10).

However, the literature does not cover the aesthetic realm of Marxism which should be taken into consideration. But, like all cultural manifestations, it is a product of the socio-economic and ideological conditions of the place and time in which it is written, whether or not the author creates works that incorporate ideology in the form it evolves. As literature reflects real life, it provides options of interest to Marxist critics: Literary works might be inclined to instill ideologies in the readers or might demand that the reader criticize ideologies i.e., literary texts do both. Tyson asserts that the best form for Marxists is Realism, because it resents and depicts the real world and its injustices, socioeconomic and ideological contradictions and encourages the material and historical (63).

The first of the two plays selected for this study is *True West* (1980), which sheds light on the fragmentation of the American family, depicting disillusion and disappointment embedded in the mythology of the American Dream. This includes a scene with brothers struggling against each other in an attempt to build their individual dreams at the expense of the other. They are depicted by the author as characters who hold on tenaciously to the ideology passed down from their forefathers to them which represents America as a democratic land of opportunities, with boundless hopes, but also reflects a side which results from people focusing on economic prosperity and professional prominence.

Many of Shepard’s plays major on American families, while many other notable playwrights, like Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neill, David Mamet, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee, and other dramatists, were busily engaging with the condition of the American family, and therefore the theme of the family was popular among all of them and thus frequent in their work. The family dilemma is a repeating denominator in modern American drama since all domestic plays reveal characteristics and cultural manifestations that are plainly American.

Shepard is interested in presenting his characters in a filial setting, with the passion and struggle deep-rooted in such surroundings. He presents his personal vision of the American Dream and its predestination and destiny through his domestic plays. However, his works offer a revealing image of American beliefs and values which thus act as vehicles to explore the researcher’s exploration of the relationship between the family and the American Dream.

The American Dream is an ideology that can be described with a range of superlatives; it is probably the bitterest and most ticklish, the American Dream remains to this day a paradoxical birthmark that presents itself as an awesome treasure deeply etched within the identities of Americans, to the point that they are entirely devoted to attaining it and portraying and depicting its success without any second thoughts as to what has been sacrifice to attain the height;, although not given

to mediocrity, or the lop-sidedness of any individual, knowing full well that for every level one attains there is always some element of sacrifice which cannot be disputed, my main interest in this issue lies in the fact that, over time, people have been misinformed by business-minded people hiding under the guise of the American Dream, which has not really been researched owing to moving with the crowd of the America Dream and what it purports to offer.

As aforementioned, when it comes to obtaining information about the American Dream, the sky may be the starting point. However, many of these sources are at best at a macro-level and all too often about politics, religion and fluctuating socioeconomic demographics. This has compelled me to raise questions about whether anything “micro-level” has been researched or written about extensively. In this context, my main concern is: “what about the distortion in the ideology?” At one point, it dawned upon me that little has been done to both zero in on or shed light on the plight of the teens affected by this unexpected and frightening position change in their otherwise everyday environment. The distortions in the ideology of the American Dream in modern history have been analysed on a relatively small scale in terms of the many victims who suddenly found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time in full pursuit of what America seemed to offer them.

So, the study of the American Dream is going to be highlighted in the dialectic Marxist conceptual framework. This dialectics falls under the category of class privilege. Barry defines class privilege as “one of the many tangible or intangible unearned advantages of higher-class status, such as personal contacts with employers, good childhood health care, inherited money, speaking the same dialect and accent as people with institutional power” (55). In other words, class privilege means the benefits or treatment that one gets by being in a higher social class or by having connections with people who will help elevate their status or lifestyle. This class privilege is usually seen among the upper class in a society where the class structure of the society is constructed in such a way that only the upper class will reap the benefits. Furthermore, class privilege is “hereditary ruling classes” and “traditional elites” whose position is solidified through their involvement in the material and economic bureaucracy in Marxism (62).

The dialectic Marxism leads to a conflict approach. This approach is treated in terms of internalized classism. Weis and Dolby argue that “internalized classism is an acceptance and justification of classism by working class and poor people, such as feelings of inferiority to higher-class people, feelings of superiority to people lower on the class spectrum than oneself, hostility and blame toward other working class or poor people, and beliefs that classist institutions are fair” (113). It also involves that “people from the working or lower class who tend to internalize the society’s dominant economic ideology or beliefs and use it to their advantage towards themselves or towards other people from the same class” (114). It is a form of “accepting or validating classism by the working or lower class” (114). Internalized classism, moreover, “happens because the society bought into the belief that they are ranked by their position in society and the treatment that they received is based on these ranks” (115).

## 1.2 Justification of Text Selection

The reason behind the selection of Shepard's *True West* and *Curse of the Starving Class* is ascribed to two justifications. First, they abound with Marxist representations of social classes. The plays represent a social class division which make the fictional characters split into bourgeois and working classes. So, I found it justifiable if focus on the struggle between these classes to proceed a sound and, simultaneously, methodological textual analysis of the characters and their pursuit to achieve their economic wealth. Additionally, the selected works are accessible materials for discussing the economic conflicts in the American society at the time. Here, Shepard's dramatic structure has appealed to me as a reasonable reflection of such conflicts.

The second justification is their exemplification of the American dream. They are fertile texts for scrutinizing the essence of the American Dream and its influence upon the Americans' economic thinking. As such, studying the American Dream could be easily found in these plays. Moreover, the projection of the American Dream in the plays' context would enrich my study's argument. That is, the false American Dream. In this respect, Shepard's portrayal of unattainable American Dream would be of utmost importance for my study since it fortifies my argumentation of the false American Dream's.

## 1.3 Statement of the Problem

The study of the American Dream has been played out in various academic research. In general, the American Dream attracts dreamers seeking to fulfil their aspirations and material objectives. Yet, few academic studies argue for the demise of the American Dream. While some studies analyse the fall of the American Dream psychologically and sociologically, my research will approach the fall of the American Dream in the light of Marxism.

Thus, the research argument lies in its emphasis on two individual oppositional perceptions of the American Dream. The characters try to fulfil their dreams in each other's territory, but they fail to achieve that. Although they fail to achieve the American Dream, they still cling to it. These oppositional relations will be pursued by utilizing Caudwell's concepts of bourgeois pacifism, capitalist economy and utopian liberty and Georg Lukacs's commodity fetishism and objective reality.

## 1.4 Objectives of the Study

This research has three objectives:

The first objective is to analyze class conflict in the selected plays as a materialistic struggle between capitalists and the proletariat in the face of the American Dream. The fictional characters in *True West* and *Curse of the Starving Class* face a material struggle. These characters strive to fulfil their dreams via the work opportunities available in American society. Yet, they fail to do that because the production means

are controlled by the capitalist class, and the characters fall victim to their proletarian class.

The second objective is to examine the characters' capitalist ideology. Capitalist ideology wants the public to believe that the American Dream is still alive and attainable. The characters wander through several places and states to find prestigious jobs and good work potential. Their fantastic quests force them to believe that they are able to fulfil their dreams. But, they cannot recognize the falseness of their dreams since they seem to be capitalists, while the real capitalists are the owners of economic production power.

Objective three is to explore the capitalist ideology which is inherent in the characters' behaviours to argue for a distorted American Dream. The characters still cling onto their ideological belief that they can fulfil their dreams. Notwithstanding this, the American Dream is be attainable unless there are sufficient work opportunities. The characters lack those opportunities yet try to work. Their labour energy is distorted due to the absence of labour and economics.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the real causes behind the conflicts in these plays. This study shows how such conflicts are deeply rooted in the capitalist system, which depends on the exploitation and degradation of other classes because of its monopolistic attitude towards others, who are often at its mercy.

The research is also significant because it contributes to the scholarship on the selected plays. Both literature and critical theory will benefit from this research. In literary terms, the research studies a dramatic genre concerning human relations. In the selected works, there is a constant struggle to reinforce the human position in American society. Various individuals are struggling to affirm their identities as human beings, but they face difficulties and dilemmas.

The plays expose the core conceptual meaning of the American Dream. This is the thematic aspect of the plays. In literature, in all its genres, there should be a theme underlying the literary piece which reveals the author's vision of the world. In the selected plays, Shepard seems to present various themes. The inherent, as well as the explicit, themes revolve around the plays' depictions of the state of man in a degenerating society. The American Dream long lusted for is being followed, but in a different way.

This theme is an essential label of the plays. They also thematize those individuals looking for the American Dream on the same social periphery. In *True West*, for example, Lee and Austin are brothers with different visions of the American Dream. Lee, on the one hand, seeks the American Dream from a desert background. He aspires to leave the desert for the city to fulfil his dream. Austin, on the other hand, tries his best to fulfil the American Dream in the desert, where his brother repudiates his dream, though he is well educated in society. In the long run, they both fail to fulfil their dreams. It is significant that they both still cling to the American dream, though it seems unattainable to them.



Critical theory will also benefit from this research. The research incorporates both traditional Marxist theory and its sequential argumentative ideology. The research utilizes Marx's theory of the human condition in economic societies. These conflicts are dominated by a certain bourgeois powerful authority in the face of an exploited proletariat class which suffers a poverty-stricken life.

## 1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study in this research is limited to two plays. These plays are *True West* and *Curse of the Starving Class*. There could be other approaches, such as feminism or psychoanalysis, but these are excluded from my research, thus the focus is on Marxism alone.

For this study, it is necessary to state categorically the range of my research topic: “A Marxist reading on the disintegration of American families in Sam Shepherd's *True West* and *Curse of the Starving Class*”. Therefore I will depict the characters in a way which rightly fits their disposition as a reflection of the disintegration of American families in *The True West*; my main focus will be on the major characters, Lee, Austin and Saul Kimmer, who vividly convey the disintegration experienced in most American homes, the same focus will apply to the *Curse of The Starving Class*.

As in any research, limitations and obstacles are inevitable, and here the analysis of the two plays is based on the disintegration of families in view of the distortion of the American Dream, and not the juicy parts which have at times been researched previously. Secondly, during this study, the area of work I will cover is limited for both plays; and on a final note, especially, the task brings together work from a different perspective. This thematic aspect embodies the traditional “cowboy” of the American mentality.

## 1.7 Conceptual Framework

This research studies Shepard's *True West* and *Curse of the Starving Class* by applying a Marxist conceptual framework. In this view, Karl Marx's philosophy of social classes will be introduced. It will demonstrate how Marx lays the foundations of social and cultural relations. In addition, it will go through general Marxist thought and how it contributes to cultural studies. In this respect, Marx's social ideology represents the background for the rest of the research's use of Marxist theoretical concepts.

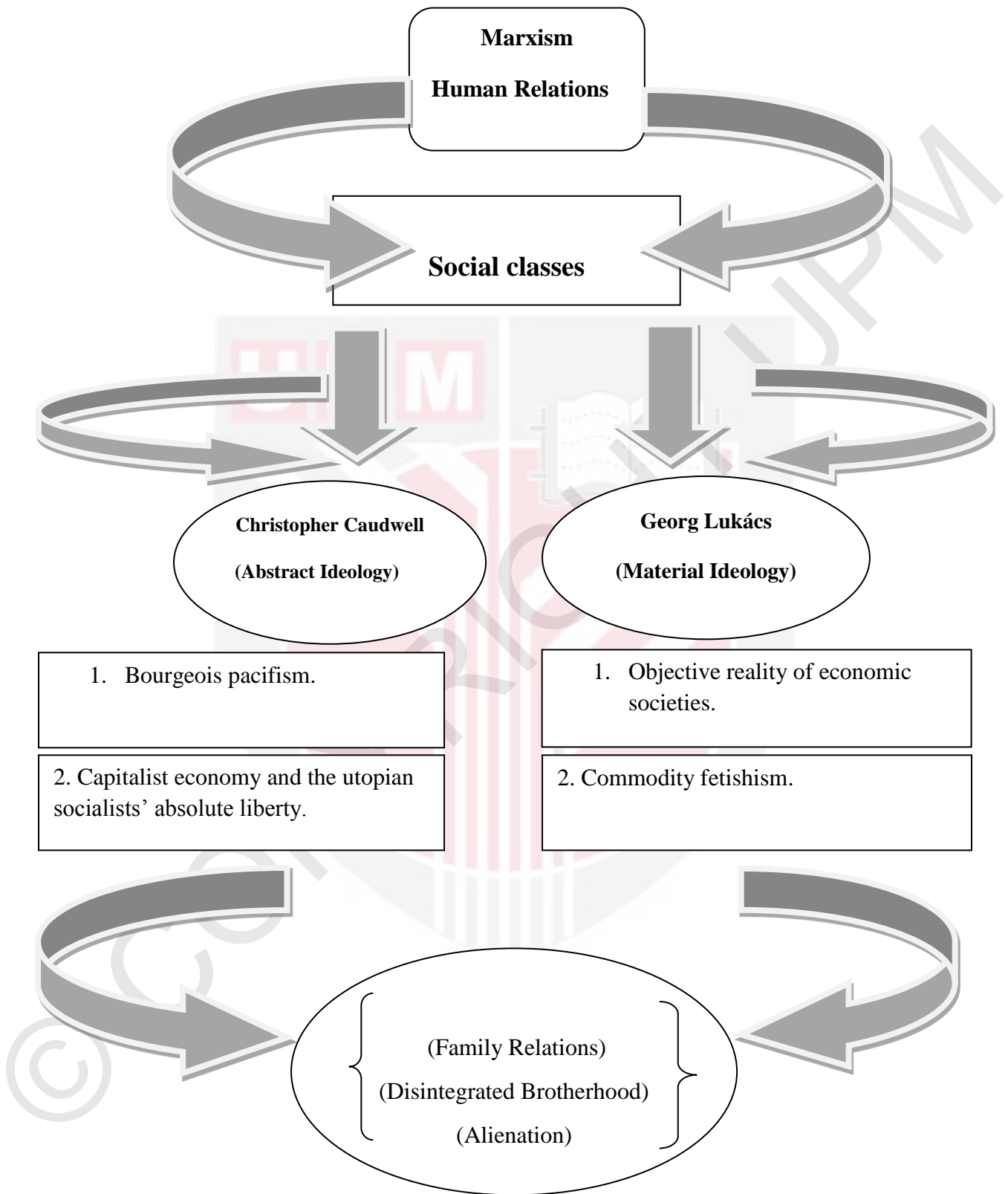
In the textual analysis, the focus will be on a Marxist theorist, namely, Georg Lukács. Lukács participated significantly in shaping the cultural premises of Marxist criticism. In his books, he frames several social ideologies. This research, however, will specifically use two of his reputed concepts, i.e. commodity fetishism and the objective reality of economic societies. They will be approached via textual analysis of the characters' pursuit of economic advancement in the plays.

This research will also utilize Caudwell's Marxist theory. It will mainly apply three concepts: bourgeois pacifism, capitalist economy and utopian socialists' absolute liberty. These interrelated concepts work together to achieve the cultural side of Marxist ideology.

Thus this research will be a Marxist study of the selected plays. It will use Marx's theory of social classes as a background to the conceptual framework. In expanding on this theory, my research will refer to Lukács and Caudwell. It will further use some relevant resources to reinforce the Marxist ideologies proposed by these theorists.



1.6.1 Figure 1.1 Marxist Ideological Relations



## 1.8 Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature. Therefore, my analysis will be more textual. The primary sources for this study are mainly the two selected plays on the disintegration of America families: . No survey or questionnaires are undertaken throughout the course of this study. In addition, no meaningful study can be done without secondary sources. Finally, in connection with my study, tertiary sources will not be left out as these play an important role in it. A conceptual framework will be used in the analysis.

The appropriation of Marxist theory will be highlighted by applying Caudwell and Lukacs's concepts. In chapter three, *True West*'s characters' dialogues are analyzed by using three of Caudwell's concepts, namely, bourgeois pacifism, capitalist economy and utopian socialists' absolute liberty. These concepts overlap and inherently interact to accentuate the Marxist elements in the play. Accordingly, the main characters' pursuit to fulfil their American Dream is analyzed by examining their behavioural trends. To illustrate, their actions and aspirations are embodied in their quests in their search for the fake American Dream.

Therefore, the concept of bourgeois pacifism will be applied to the characters' social classes. The second concept, the capitalist economy, is analyzed via the characters' search for work. The concept of utopian socialists' absolute liberty applied to the characters' travels throughout different states to profit from whatever material opportunities they can. These concepts are cited in Caudwell's major works; among them are: *Capitalist Illusion and Reality* (1977), *Pacifism and Violence* (1970), and *Utopian Society* (1982).

In the fourth chapter, *Curse of the Starving Class* is analyzed by using two of Lukacs's concepts, i.e. commodity fetishism and objective reality. The characters' work and material productions are analyzed via the concept of commodity fetishism; and the fake American Dream haunting these characters is highlighted by use of the objective reality concept. These main concepts are argued in Lukacs's seminal books *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), *Political Writings* (1972) and *Tactics and Ethics* (1929), and others.

## 1.9 Definition of Terms

**Marxism:** is an economic theory, it contains within it a manner or a political ideology for how to improve and change societies by implementing socialism, and socialism aims at distributing wealth to all members of the society and ending the control of capitalists over the means of production. Marxism aims to end the exploitation by Capitalists of the proletariat. (Burns 15)

**The American Dream:** It is an ethos of America in which there are many opportunities for prosperity, wealth and success. These opportunities can be achieved through hard work. The American Dream promises that all people can be rich, regardless of their social class, and it proclaims that "all people are created equal", and so it shows the ease of getting rich; and according to this dream, poverty is optional, poor people are those who do not themselves want to be rich (Hobby 10).



**Proletariat:** Citizens of the working class, those who do not own the means of production, those who do not have any property. Marx views the history of various societies as a history of conflict between victimized and victimizer who continuously oppose each other. That kind of conflict leads to the reconstruction or deconstruction of society. (Habib 5)

**Bourgeoisie:** A social class known for controlling the means of production and the factories through the exploitation of the underclass. In Marxist terms, the bourgeois dominate capitalist society and their main power comes via the exploitation of the proletariat (Guerin 30).

**Ideology:** Certain policies and beliefs that formulate the bases for economic and political systems. It is a group of discourses that comprise man's aims and deeds. The ideology is a vision of life, or a group of ideas suggested by the superior class of a certain society to all individuals in that society. The ideology can be defined as a set of concepts that are applied to general issues to make them fit political affairs. Implicitly speaking, every political or economic affinity requires a certain ideology, whether or not this ideology is advocated as an overt system of thought (Burns 59).

### 1.10 Thesis Organization

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter I includes an Introduction, the statement of the problem, the research objectives, the significance and scope of the study, the methodology, the definition of terms and organization of the thesis.

Chapter II focuses on a Review of the Literature and investigates previous studies on the plays of Shepard. Chapters III and IV discuss the analyses of the selected plays and the research findings. Each chapter will cover one play separately, while Chapter V will draw a conclusion to the study and make some recommendations for further research.

### 1.11 Conclusion

American society can, presumably, be described as one exploiting people at every opportunity by capitalists, under the guise of the American Dream, and this has over time been devastating. Before now, this theory was seen from the perspective of dreams in light of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, without much emphasis on disintegration and what this ideology has done to the masses. Although scholars have over time used this theory to analyze literary works, which has proven a productive venture, there is now a new dimension to analyze the uncommon aspects of the two plays via Marxist theory, as they have not been researched before from this perspective of the disintegration of American families. Thus, this perspective will be pursued by analyzing the characters as a reflection of society.

Shepard, in his two plays, depicts the ills of American society in economic groups, whose depiction is a true reflection of society in general. However, a deep understanding of the issue of the working class in society is also needed, as this will equip the researcher with the workings of Marxism in relation to the characters who play important roles and help in analyzing the plays.



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