

**SAM SHEPARD'S *TRUE WEST* (1980)  
AS A DRAMATIC TEXT AND IN PRODUCTION:  
LITERARY AND THEATRICAL DOUBLES**

**HANDOUT FOR CLASS DISCUSSION AND GENERAL REVISION OF  
CRITICAL APPROACHES**

INTRODUCTION and OBJECTIVES:

This activity aims to foster a critical debate based on the principles of critical pedagogy that will also help students revise and compare the tenets of the critical approaches to the study of literature studied throughout the course at the end of the academic year. Using a digital resource and the general reading guide below, provided by the lecturer, students are invited to engage in the collective analysis and discussion of a theatrical text. They are encouraged to interact with each other's ideas to enrich their reading experience and critical thinking skills.

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After having watched together the video-recording of the 2014 production of *True West* by the Tricycle Theatre directed by Phillip Breen, available at the online streaming platform *Digital Theatre*, consider the following topics for class discussion, and revise thus key concepts in the syllabus of the subject *Practical Criticism Applied to English Literature*:

- Does the play raise questions about key concepts in critical pedagogy such as empathy and respect for (cultural, ethnic, gender) diversity? In which ways?
- Has reading and watching the play in performance, as well as engaging in a collective critical discussion in class, been useful to you in any way to raise awareness on any of the social values above?
- Do you, then, think that literary and theatrical texts can be useful tools for social or personal transformation?

These issues can be related more specifically with some of the critical approaches to the study of literature and the interpretive techniques that we have come across in this course.

1. **A reader-response/ audience response approach:** How was your experience of reading the play different from watching a recorded performance of it? Was it useful to see the play in performance to grasp its meanings? In which ways did meaning

emerge in performance? Do you think that the fact of watching it together with your classmates in a cozy space as the *Espai Cultural* changed in any way your perception of it? Did you like the actors' performance? The set and its transformation are particularly important in this play for the perception of its meanings. What did you notice in this regard? Does the final scene leave any room for hope?

2. **Gender criticism and a feminist approach:** How are male and female characters portrayed and perceived by the audience? On what terms could a feminist critique of this play be constructed? Are there any significant roles for women? Do you think that their presence, absence or their (mis)representation is acceptable for 21st-century audiences?
3. **Myth criticism:** What biblical foundational myth can the siblings' rivalry be connected to? What is its source? Please consult also an appropriate academic source, such as a dictionary of literary terms, to find out about the motif of **the doppelgänger or the double**. How is it used in *True West*?
4. After reading the text above, consider whether doubling in *True West* can also be connected to **materialist criticism** and the dark side of capitalist societies. How does the play's script reflect issues about the "trade of writing"? Pay attention to the metanarrative language and the opposition in the play between the idealized perception of the writer as an artist "dreaming things up" and the real task of writing down a work.
5. **A formalist reading:** How does language reflect all the issues above? Consider each character's voice at the beginning and at the end of the play, as well as repeated phrases. What do they reveal? Is their discourse liberating or, ultimately, the source of entrapment?

## REFERENCES

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<http://napced.blogs.uv.es/>