

## Psychosocial or Mythological: Sam Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse* as a Liberal Ironist

Muhammad Hussein Oroskhan\*, Bahee Hadaegh

Department of English Literature, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Fars, Iran

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Hussein Oroskhan, E-mail: h.oroskhan@gmail.com

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: January 23, 2021

Accepted: March 15, 2021

Published: May 31, 2021

Volume: 10 Issue: 3

Advance access: May 2021

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

American West has conjured up a shining image in the media but a complex subject in the research studies. Among the iconic elements that represent the American West, the image of cowboy has occupied a unique place. Relatively, mythological or psychosocial methods may contribute to the comprehension of the image of cowboy. In this vein, an examination of cowboy with regard to the aforementioned perspectives are studied but proved insufficient because it is almost impossible to draw a fine distinction between these two matters. Nevertheless, the core of this study by attributing to one of Shepard's late plays entitled *Kicking a Dead Horse* tries to address the issue of cowboy with regard to Richard Rorty's liberal ironist to prove that neither mythological nor psychosocial approach is appropriate enough to study the image of cowboy whereas Shepard's emphasis on self-creation as buttressed by Richard Rorty's liberal ironist is the suitable method for analyzing the image of cowboy.

**Key words:** Mythological, Psychosocial, Liberal Ironist, Cowboy

### INTRODUCTION

Neither John Watkins Chapman, an English painter who "spoke of 'postmodern painting' around 1870" (Best & Kellnor, 1998, p. 11) nor Rudolf Pannwitz in his book, *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur*, "to describe the nihilism and collapse of values in contemporary European culture" (ibid.) could guess that the term that they are using for the first time would provoke so many controversies among the intellectuals of latter part of twentieth century. A pretty exhausting task can be the offering of a concise definition of the concept of postmodernism, mainly because of the nature of this concept that invites many wide ranges of thoughts under its umbrella. The root of this non-definitive nature depends on the growing understanding of its recent theorists to appeal to the impossibility of "speaking meaningfully about an independently existing reality" (Hicks, 2019, p. 6) though still it may be possible to canonize certain names as the postmodern vanguard: "Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francoise Lyotard and Richard Rorty" (p. 1). Our reasoning behind siding with Stephen Hicks' bold gesture of canonical postmodern theorists is the persistent occurrences of these philosophers in literary criticism. Seemingly, they have been the handy tools of literary critics to approach different literary genres; nevertheless, among them all, Richard Rorty is himself opening up a new perspective in literary criticism that can be of great value if fully apprehended. What has mainly fascinated Rorty as a postmodern philosopher is the isolation of subjective thought that can persistently result in a new gesture since the individual is ever allowed to question

his status. For Rorty, having "talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change" (Rorty, 1999, p. 7) which is not possible in the world of philosophy since in philosophy, constant arguing is always done with the purpose of achieving one and the same result whereas developing the ability of speaking differently creates the chance of having endless possibilities for the self to recreate itself again and again. In this vein, Rorty has created the notion of a liberal ironist that avoids being stagnated in one fixed mindset and flows freely to redescribe himself for a better goal and purpose. Moreover, Rorty finds his great examples of liberal ironist among literary authors especially when those literary authors are investigating the construction of the self like the American playwright, Sam Shepard whose writing is "a journey into the mystery of the self and mapping these states of consciousness" (Grant, 1991, p. 553). In his view, Shepard's theater tended toward "the rapid shifts of awareness and the sensations of the experience in writing" (p. 550). His search of American self is catapulted to the geographic location; for him, American self is closely correlated with the American west and through extensively exploring this factor, he has been called "a conduit that digs down into the American soil and what flows out of him is what we're all about" (qtd. in Kroll, Guthrie, and Huck, 1985, p. 71). This being the case, one of the highlighted issue that is persistently capturing Shepard's attention regarding the American west is the image of cowboy. Shepard's fascination with cowboy is readily revelatory even from the title of his one-act plays like *Cowboys*, in which he

often tried his hand in “reinventing one’s identity” (Crank, 2012). Indeed, cowboys occupy an important place in Shepard’s mind whenever he needs to have a basis from which to build “the idealization of American identity” (Madachy, 1985). Focusing on Shepard’s interests in cowboys, one can see how he began his career as a playwright by writing a one-act plays like *Cowboys* and end it by writing a play carrying the same theme. His *Kicking a Dead Horse* written in 2007 is one of his late work which minutely reflects Shepard’s view on cowboy not as a young person but as an old man near the end of his career. Therefore, the following study while first undertaking the history of cowboy through two mythological and psychosocial perspectives to prove to what extent determining the meaning of the concept of cowboy is elusive if it is centered on a fixed platform. Nevertheless, the core of this study will lend pervasiveness to Shepard’s *Kicking a Dead Horse* with respect to Rorty’s theory of a liberal ironist to be situated in a better place to understand the nuances of Shepard’s view of cowboy and Rorty’s contribution on literary criticism.

## DISCUSSION

### Richard Rorty and Literary Criticism

Richard Rorty commences his seminal book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, by presenting his human utopia as a network of human relationship among which human beings are interacting with each other while being sensitive to the sufferings of other human beings. He dispels the notion that you can achieve an ideal society when its members are always trying to meet a set of criterion; but simultaneously its members are driven by “imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers” (Rorty, 1999, p. xvi). For Rorty, this is the cohesive tie that can establish an ideal society, a kind of sensitivity that can foster outlasting solidarity among its members. As long as, different members of a society are remaining acutely sensitive to the sufferings of its other members, it would be “difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, ‘They do not feel it as we would,’ or ‘There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?’” (ibid.). Achieving this type of society may be theoretically easy but in reality it demands the legitimation of the needs of self-creation as important as human solidarity. As such, Rorty sketches an especial type figure named “liberal ironist” (p. xv). Undoubtedly, sketching this type of society is the result of his persistent pondering over the thoughts of his previous philosophers including Kant, Hegel, Foucault, Habermas and Dewey if we need to be just focusing on the major philosophers.

Rorty sketches his platform far back to the time of two big philosophers of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel. His two hundred-year flashback to start with Kant and Hegel emanates from the fact that both of these philosophers responded differently to the concept of truth by viewing “the world of empirical science as a made world” (ibid.). Though they both grant science a respected status, they “persisted in seeing mind, spirit, the depths of the human self, as having an intrinsic

nature” (ibid.). This is utterly untenable for Rorty because he deems it as a moment of escaping from admitting the constructiveness of truth by dividing it into two realms of truth and “higher truth, the truth about mind, the province of philosophy that is still a matter of discovery rather than creation” (ibid.). Rorty just sees it as an implication of word-play and incidentally tries to attack the concept of truth from this direction. He demeans truth by considering it as a figment of human mind to cope with the external worlds. He insists that “world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not” (p. 5). This clearly makes a watershed in the development of his thought as he later labels truth as just sentences that human beings make and use to interact with each other. As such, he warns us against being “justified in believing a sentence true with the claim that the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called ‘facts’” (p. 5). At this juncture, he claims that so long as the languages are made by human beings “truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences” (p. 8).

The next time that Rorty stops in his line of mulling over the precedent philosophers is on the duality occurring between Michel Foucault and Jurgen Habermas. He roughly describes the difference between these two by mentioning that “Michel Foucault is an ironist who is unwilling to be a liberal, whereas Jurgen Habermas is a liberal who is unwilling to be an ironist” (p. 61). Rorty clarifies his description of Foucault by explicating his perspective on the world. Foucault can never trust any sort of system, in his view, any modern system even if it claims to improve a liberal policy is indirectly controlling and leading his individuals that the wish to expect any reform in the society is unreachable since “our imagination and will are so limited by the socialization we have received that we are unable even to propose an alternative to the society we have now” (p. 64). Nevertheless, Habermas is totally hanging on the other side of this view by trusting the society and its capabilities to become democratic and indeed necessitates the fact that individuals’ “self-image embody the universalism, and some form of the rationalism, of the Enlightenment” (p. 67). Habermas’ critical point in Rorty’s view is the substitution of ‘communicative reason’ for ‘subject centered reason’ which quite consequently dissolves the individual within the society so as to be called a democratic society. Rorty sees the ideal outcome of this society when a dialogue is held among its members and then “whatever view wins in a free and open encounter” (ibid.) is called call “‘true’ (or ‘right’ or ‘just’)” (ibid.).

Upon this duality of abandoning society for not providing any space for self-creation and the necessity of dissolving individuals within a democratic society, Rorty takes the mid-road to express his views of ideal society by urging philosophy to take on a new role: “Philosophy fails to unify private autonomy with community justice. Future philosophy should reweave but not to unify private social ideas” (ibid.). The turning point of Rorty’s mind is reached by his aligning with pragmatist views of philosophers like Dewey. Pragmatists spur a new reading of the world by just substituting one question with another: “which descriptions of the human situation are most useful for which human purposes?

For the question: which description tells us what that situation really is?" (Voparil, 2006, p. 122)). This seemingly simple change would show pragmatist's total abandonment of the inherent nature of truth expounded previously with the sole actions necessary to forward human being's purposes of grappling a fruitful life. Therefore, Rorty puts theorizing aside and inquires a good substitute for achieving his utopia. In his view, "this is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel" (1989, p. xvi). The reason that he is driven to arts in general is its capabilities to picture the sufferings of human beings in its best form for us which are absolutely imperative for Rorty's Utopia. He then introduces his "'poeticized' culture as one which has given up the attempt to unite one's private ways of dealing with one's finitude and one's sense of obligation to other human beings" (p. 68).

Rorty sees a liberal ironist as the only one who is able to represent his "poeticized culture". A liberal ironist neither is following Foucault's total rejection of societal systems nor is being slave to Habermas' "communicative reason", but Rorty's ironist is always doubtful about his beliefs and ideas. This feature helps him to recreate himself for a better purpose and sees himself anew in the world. Nevertheless, his self-recreation would never cause the harm of others as Rorty's priority for his ironist is to foster a sensitivity to comprehend other's pain and suffering while recreating himself. For Rorty, such an atmosphere would be best seen in the works of arts, "that is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress" (p. xvi). As such, Rorty prioritize literature over philosophy to better guide the young people finding themselves in the society; "imaginative literature took the place of both religion and philosophy in forming and solacing the agonized conscience of the young" (Rorty, 2008, p. 66).

### American West and Cowboys

Browsing the TV channels any time during day or night, one can readily see an old cowboy movie. A group of tough-reliant man mount to their sturdy horses who are guiding a herd of the cattle along a trail searching for the next watering hole and singing lone and mournful songs to their cattle late at night. This is the history of the West in which cowboys are the running force in shaping the wide wilderness into an iconic picture on the eyes of people around the world, however, this iconic picture is clouded with countless questions over its true identity. Fact and fiction are the two words pushing the concept of American West. William W. Savage Jr., in his seminal work entitled *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History & Culture* studies the history of the cowboy and why they are being considered as a "conjecture offered as fact, speculation passed off as history and allowed to stand as though the burden of proof lay in other, more significant cultural quarters" (Savage, 1996, p. 6). Savage singles out the impossibility of defining the fine line between the history of American West as factual or fictional and consequently the impossibility of reaching one

true picture of cowboys. Few symbols personify the ideal American character more than the rugged cowboy; his reserve, tough, resilient gesture behind that taciturn exterior is the source of amusement for many people. Though we are so familiar with the image of the cowboy on horse-back, it is unbelievable to note that there never existed any horses in America when Columbus arrived. The first generation of Spanish conquistador brought horses and cattle to the New World as draft animals and as source of food (Cook, 1992). Before long, in the unfenced American environment, they began to escape, to breed and to develop the ability to survive draught in the wilderness. By the mid-nineteenth century immense herds of cattle wandered around the vast land of America. In this regard, for studying the history of American cowboys, one is only needed to search back not more than two hundred years. The actuality of the cowboy life should be viewed with respect to its first basis and its subsequent and continuous construction during the last two hundred years. Though cowboys' horses are brought up to America by the Spanish people, one is not to be bewildered by the romanticized image of cowboy as "a mounted sombrero wearing knight errant looking for adventure, righting the wrongs of evildoers, and making a name for himself as he saved the community" (Blazina, 2003, p. 34). There is no doubt that shining picture out of the cowboys is more believable to be "the work of professional writers, journalists, and filmmakers who are often located outside the West itself or in that peculiar corner of it, Hollywood" (White, 1993, p. 24) and at the best we should admit that we are "dealing at bottom with an image" (Savage, 1996, p. 31), and to believe that the cowboy itself has become a site from which the profuse of meanings and definitions are springing. This being the case, President Theodore Roosevelt calls the cowboy a "Man's man" someone who "will not submit tamely to an insult, and is ever ready to avenge his own wrongs. [He possesses] the stern, manly qualities that are invaluable to a nation" (Savage, 1996, p. 21).

### Experimental Procedures

Cowboys seem to be the production of American West. Nevertheless, every day's presentation of cowboy would make us think that as much as American West has been influential in creating an icon like cowboy, the production has also been influencing the West. The first thinking that it appears in everybody's mind is how the wilderness of American West has been decisive in the creation of cowboy. Examining the ways that nature can affect human beings are as various as the nature itself. The field of environmental psychology covers this issue mainly. Moreover, recently the new field of geographical psychology has tapped at the same issue in a broader way. What is common to both is the effect of the situation in which the human being is living in the construction of psychological phenomenon in their minds. Nevertheless, in the case of geographical psychology, the cause is the vast spatial nature. The point being made is that geographical psychology aims "to integrate psychology and the different levels of geographic analysis by focusing on the spatial distribution of psychological phenomena and their relations to features

of the macro environment” (Rentfrow and Jokela, 2016, p. 391). In this vein, a study of the interaction of these two views are attributed to this field: “the spatial organization of psychological phenomena and how that organization relates to individual behavior and the macro environment” (p. 392). To better explain this new field, Rentfrow and Jokela in their article entitled “Geographical Psychology: The Spatial Organization of Psychological Phenomena”, enumerate three essential factors to minutely investigate the interaction between spatial organization and psychological phenomena. As such, their three pillars are “social influence, ecological influence, and selective migration” (ibid). The first one is related to the time when an individual is situated within a community and is driven forward by the norms and standards which are followed by the whole community, in other words, “social norms encourage certain types of behavior” (p. 396) among these groups of people. A prominent example of this case is; “residents of smaller communities may place more value on social obligations and trust compared to residents of larger and more economically vibrant places, who tend to be more individualistic” (Levine et al, 2001, p. 547). This may explain the strong bond between the cowboy and his codes. He truly follows his principles with his utmost power. The second feature of geographical psychology carries more similarities with the title of this field as it covers those “features of natural and built environments... that can affect individuals’ psychological processes” (Rentfrow and Jokela, 2016, p. 396). Again, statistics have proved that “in countries with demanding climates and limited natural resources, residents display more communal and collectivistic values compared to individuals in less harsh environments” (Van de Vliert, 2013, p. 471). In continuation with the previous feature, this one can also prove the reason behind cowboy’s solid loyalty to his principles and codes. And at last, selective migration is focused on uncovering the reasons behind individual’s migration to “places that satisfy and reinforce their psychological needs” (Rentfrow and Jokela, 2016, p. 370). Migration is considered to be the last feature explaining the relation between environment and individuals living in it. If the historical point is taken into consideration, one notices that in 19<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of driving herds was already familiar on the small scale by the Cowboys before the civil war but then the carriage of the cattle was taken on the commercial scale and ramped up after 1865. This means that Cowboys were initially introduced to the United States due to business matters. Nevertheless, later on the image of lonely cowboy who is always in the search of a new place became the magnetic picture of cowboy. His tough character is not to be satisfied easily and the gratification of his desires is done by the constant exploring of different places. In this regard, it is highly agreed upon that “people high in agreeableness are more likely to settle down in one place for a longer time, perhaps because they value the social relationships they have developed in their local community” (Jokela et al, 2018, p. 398). Amazing as it sounds the constructed image of the cowboy is better in compliance with the theory of geographical psychology.

Accordingly, what is manifested the above is the simple categorization of the cowboy in the background of

geographical psychology. Ensuing from this perspective is the view that the constructed image is far away from the realities of the west and more close to a mythical interpretation of the west to be showed on the silver screen or occupy the book markets of fictional writings and how “a myth about the West becomes a story that explains who westerners and who Americans are and how they should act” (White, 1996, p. 28). Therefore, the second perspective with which to unroll the story of cowboy is mythological perspective. Myth is not irrelevant to geography as through history “Myths have been invoked to explain geological processes, particularly those manifested violently, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and floods” (Vitaliano, 2007, p. 4). However, the modern meaning of myth which has drawn considerable attention in the century has been central in constituting certain literary works and iconic symbol. Ulrich Gehmann in his article “Modern Myths” commences his study of the concept of myth by providing a basic definition of the myth as what “constitutes the very base for human life (Gehmann, 2003, p. 110)”. Then he continues his further investigation of the notion of myth by comparing the modern myth and the traditional myth. His definition of traditional myth is founded upon one basic feature which is the historical dimension and can be found in any traditional society. In his opinion, historical dimension refers to “a beginning in time, an *illo tempore* from where the world as it is started to exist, even if the reference point cannot be dated exactly” (ibid). Once settling one basic feature for the traditional myth, he assumes the absence of this feature in modern myth and develops a theory of modern myth. In his conclusion, he affords two characteristics to modern myth; timelessness and self-referential. Indeed, his attention to the first feature results in the second one. The reason that the modern myths are timeless is that “they behave as if they have existed forever; they don’t seem to care about history since they don’t need an *illo tempore*, a remote past of origin to justify their existence” (ibid). As a domino effect, while not referring to anything outside because there is no attempt of defining a cosmic origin, they “refer to themselves – interpreted in logical terms, they therefore have no reference (ibid) “. In this respect, the story of cowboy is a renewed package for the readers because it is unnecessary to search and dig out the timeline history of the cowboy as the constructed myth out of the cowboy is self-referential and its meaning is always defined and redefined by referring to the image of cowboy. This means each time a new facet of the cowboy is shown to the audience, there is no need to historically refer back to the origin of that feature whereas the nature of myth allows its production to circulate around countless numbers of meanings. Moreover, Michael Bell in his article entitled “Myth and Literature in Modernity: A Question of Priority”, brings the meaning of modern myth under a new purview. He affirms the modern usage of myth as a common practice in modern era. In his study, he proposes a new point of view through which a writer has decided to found the usage of the myth; “There is a subtle, but significant, difference between an authoritative insight based on myth and a personal vision wrapped in the authority of myth” (Bell, 2011, p. 210). This last definition

of modern myth forces the categorization of modern myth beyond boundaries and imagines its existence out of a limited number of categorizations as it allows as many definitions as there are individuals since the approval of one individual is enough for the existence of one myth around the concept of cowboy. This being the case, we may wonder what can be the suitable perspective with which to approach the case of cowboy and study its role in fictional work like Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse*. To solve this matter, the rest of this study will address the application of Richard Rorty's theory of the liberal ironist on his *Kicking a Dead Horse* and how it can be appropriate method to approach the study of cowboy in fictional works.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

If Sam Shepard's trajectory is to be narrowed down, one can come across Shepard's engagement with "the tortured question of personal identity" as one of his most "insistent thematic thread[s]" (Bottoms, 1998, p. 12). For Shepard, cowboy is the ideal image around which the monument of American identity is to be as structured and therefore the search for understanding the meaning of cowboys is equal for him as the search for American identity. In this regard, Shepard is always mesmerized by the effect of this image on this immense country. All his plays are filled with this image of cowboy to the extent that he is rewarded by the critics to be as the poet laureate of the American West. Sam Shepard's productive years of writing began in 1964 by two one-act plays at Theatre Genesis, *The Rock Garden* and *Cowboys*. Then, his journey towered by his family plays in 80s. Nevertheless, 21<sup>st</sup>-century was not an auspicious century for Sam Shepard and mainly his plays were neglected by the critics other than a couple of one-act plays which again revived the image of the poet laureate of American West in American people's minds. Among those, *Kicking a Dead Horse* is the one which is stuck thoroughly with the image of a cowboy and how the once cherished image is lost nowadays. Charles Isherwood points out that "*Kicking a Dead Horse* is a disappointingly arid lament for America's lost ideal and despoiled frontiers" and Brian W. Dippie better explain the reason behind this lost by noting that "[t]hrough most of the twentieth century western art was appreciated not for its imaginative powers but for its factual value as a documentary record of nineteenth-century western life.... accuracy was everything" (Dippie, 2007, p.317). Now all the accuracy which was around the image of cowboy is shattered in 21<sup>st</sup>-century and Shepard is trying to reach a respond for this matter in his *Kicking a Dead Horse*.

*Kicking a Dead Horse* portrays the great journey of Hobart Struther into the wide western landscape. The beginning of the play is the moment that Hobart has just finished up digging his dead horse's grave. Though cowboy's horses are truly imported product to be attached with the cowboy, still they have become the symbol of being cowboy and the central stage of this play. Hobart, the main character of the play, is stuck in the desert because of the unexpected death of his horse and at this moment he expresses his ambivalence in this way; "Now what? Nothing—nowhere—here I am—

miles from nowhere. Only one day into it and bottomed out. Empty—badlands—horizon to horizon" (Shepard, 2009, p.12). Nevertheless, out of his sheer respect for the horse, he begins digging a proper grave for his horse. In the continuation of the play, Hobart tries to put the dead body of the horse into the grave, a physical conflict that should be considered as a metaphor for the psychological and emotional conflict that Hobart undertakes against himself. Hobart, a man of sixty, has taken this journey for the purpose of what he calls "authenticity," a way of living or being that he is searching for but not finding it: "What? Authentic, I suppose? Beyond—What's that? What's beyond authentic?" (p. 16). The main story of the play is revolved around the confession of the self, in other words, the self is interrogating himself and is always ambivalent about the right solution. The dilemma before self compels it to respond in this way:

I'm not exactly sure what 'voice' to use. 'Voice' in the sense of—you know—what—what voice suits the predicament. The—uh—what predicament I'm actually—it's not at all clear. It's—but hopefully, as things roll along and find their natural—hopefully, something (p. 21)

Siegel believes that "Shepard has taken it upon himself to explore the possibility of new myths for our time, most frequently returning to the roots of so many American myths, the Old West" (Siegel, 1982, p. 241). If this proposition is accepted, then the main character of this play should be seen satisfied while arriving at the origins of his mythological background but what is apparent is that Hobart never stop trying to unravel the mystery of his life and understands the banality of the situation which can show his dissatisfaction over the uncertainty of the situation. Currently, he seems to suffer greatly as his kids have left him, his marriage reached a deadlock and his career began to downfall. Hobart's struggles continue as he reminds himself of his past so as to imagine the type of authenticity for himself. What Hobart endeavors to dig out from his past is the basis to which he would be able to attach himself and define his presence, nevertheless, all his attempts are futile and he is unable to find such a platform. Even he strips himself of all the accouterments associated with the life of cowboy but still is unable to find a status for himself. Seemingly, his life presents the complication that the cowboy or a Westerner encounters and feels in his life. How the individual is confronted with some choices to make but impossible to be made is the true message of this story. Hobart admits his efforts for authenticity but at the same time acknowledges his defeat:

Not to say that I haven't paid attention to it over the years—back when I worked for an honest living. Back in the days of AUTHENTICITY, when I "rode for the brand," as they say: mending fences, doctoring calves, culling cows. Right here, as a matter of fact. Not too far. Out toward Blessing. Valentine. Up past the White River. (Shepard, 2009, p. 32)

Shepard's play presents the isolation of subjective thought that can persistently result in new gesture since the individual is persistently allowed to question his status and this is exactly what fascinated Richard Rorty as a postmodern philosopher. For Rorty, if Romanticism has substituted the

faculty of reason for imagination or for the simple reason of creating endless opportunities for self-creation, it is because they have come to this realization that it is better to have a "talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change" (Rorty, 1999, p. 34). Constant arguing is always done with the purpose of achieving one and the same result whereas developing the ability of speaking differently creates the chance of having endless possibilities for the self to recreate itself again and again. Generally speaking, Rorty is attracted to a "counter-tradition that delights in undermining the magisterial image of the philosopher supposedly upheld by Kant, Husserl" (McCarthy, 1990, p. 342). In his view, previous philosophers from Plato to Kant have explored philosophy as a distinct subject with its own unique language, therefore, they have been always in search of "reality's own language rather than merely the vocabulary of a time and a place" (Rorty, 1999, p. 48). Nevertheless, he is not fully in favor of the romantics to comprehend that nothing has an intrinsic nature whether it be "mind or matter, self or world" (Rorty, 1999, p. 48). And this is in exact compliance with Shepard's perspective in his play. Shepard never asserts anything with certainty. For him, there is no solid basis on which people's aim can be redeemed. In the same respect, Rorty names these bases as final vocabularies and defines them as what "all human beings carry about which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives ... they are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives" (Rorty, 2007, p. 61). But later on, Rorty attempts to reject these final vocabularies by the creation of his liberal ironist. He builds his three essential features of his ironist based upon his attitude toward final vocabularies which is an undissolved and continuing doubts on ever being to achieve reality. In this respect, Rorty defines his liberal ironist as follows:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal meta-vocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old. (Shepard, 1999, p. 44)

Rorty's liberal ironist avoids being stagnated in one specific vocabulary and is always trying to redescribe himself for a better goal and purpose since "redescription is a powerful tool for getting out from under stultifying final vocabularies" (Frazier, 2016, p. 61). Nevertheless, Rorty's liberal ironist gives priority to the notion of redescription since it is of prime importance considering its role in self-creation yet it can be cruel because you are forced to repeatedly refute your beliefs; "the redescribing ironist, by threatening one's

final vocabulary, and thus one's ability to make sense of oneself in one's own terms rather than hers, suggests that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, powerless. Redescription often humiliates" (Rorty, 1999, p. 70). Likewise, Shepard's cowboy in *Kicking a Dead Horse* experiences the same situation. Hobart feels the need to define himself. For doing it, he even strips himself of all the Western accouterments which leads him to become depressed and mixed up to make it determined decision over his life. Certainly, he is feeling humiliation, nonetheless, he finds no other way than accepting it because redescription, the task that he's performing, requires humiliation.

## CONCLUSION

Shepard himself can be considered as a liberal ironist since his characters and specifically the main character of this play are unable to hang on a specific basis and instead always wander around futilely. Their efforts never end with the purpose they have but still Shepard focuses on his characters to perform this difficult situation. The moment that the characters are persistently changing roles to find their true self but each time they reach an impasse, however, they have been forced to experience self redescription. Seemingly, this is the price of being fooled by false images seems we are "being seduced into believing one image and we prefer the image to the human being" (Jacoby, 1998), nevertheless, when we see the ruse of that image, we should undergo humiliation as the price of self redescription. Shepard's attempt is not to focus on identifying a flawless image or the true myth to justify the happenings of present time whereas since he holds the view that "myth in its truest form has now been demolished" (Rosen, 1993), he seems to be in search of creating his own system of analyzing the American west. Shepard emphasizes the notion that the shining cowboy is by default assumed quite falsely with certain features that has propelled him to an iconic status in American western culture which leads to the appearance of "a century of American children grew up imagining themselves to be cowboys" (White, 1996, p. 613) but also noting that the attempt of finding the true myth by referring back to its origin is useless and we should accept that the human being is forced to undergo endless self-creation which is accompanied by humiliation as the main character of *Kicking a Dead Horse* is experiencing it.

## REFERENCES

- Bell, M. (2011). "Myth and Literature in Modernity: A Question of Priority." *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 80(2-3), 204-215., doi:10.1179/095936811x12997586789575.
- Best, S., & Kellnor, D. (1998). *The postmodern turn*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Blazina, C. (2003). *The Cultural Myth of Masculinity*. Westport, Conn: Praeger.
- Bottoms, S. J. (1998). *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, Print.
- Coe, R. (1980). "Saga of Sam Shepard." *New York Times Magazine*, November 23: 56-9, 118, 120, 122, 124.

- Cook, J. H. (1992). *Fifty years on the old frontier as cowboy, hunter, guide, scout, and ranchman*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Crank, J. A. (2012). *Understanding Sam Shepard*. University of South Carolina Press, 2012. Dyne, Sarah A.
- Dippie, B. W. (2007). "What We Talk About When We Talk About Western Art." A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West. Ed Nicolas S. Witschi. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, Print.
- Frazier, B. (2016). *Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment: Philosophical and Theological ... Connections*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gehmann, U. (2003). "Modern Myths." *Culture and Organization*, 9(2), 105–119., doi:10.1080/14759550302805.
- Grant, G. (1991), "Writing as a Process of Performing the Self: Sam Shepards Notebooks." *Modern Drama*, 34(4), 549–565., doi:10.3138/md.34.4.549.
- Hicks, S. R. C. (2019), *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*. Connor Court Publishing Pty Ltd.
- Jacoby, O. (1998). director. *Sam Shepard: Stalking Himself*. *Sam Shepard: Stalking Himself*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk51mNH5CFY.
- Jokela, M., Elovainio, M., Kivimäki, M., & Keltikan-gas-Järtvinen, L. (2008). "Temperament and migration patterns in Finland." *Psychological Science*, 19, 831–837. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02164.x
- Kroll, J., Guthrie, C., and Huck, J. (1985). "Who's That Tall Dark Stranger?" *Newsweek*, November 11: 68–74.
- Levine, R. V., Norenzayan, A., & Philbrick, K. (2001). "Crosscultural differences in Helping Strangers". *Journal of CrossCultural Psychology*, 32, 543–560.
- Mccarthy, T. (1990). "Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rortys New Pragmatism." *Critical Inquiry*, 16(2), 355–370., doi:10.1086/448537.
- Rentfrow, P. J., & Jokela, M. (2016). Geographical Psychology: The Spatial Organization of Psychological Phenomena. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25(6), 393–398. doi:10.1177/0963721416658446
- Roosevelt, T. (1969). *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail*. New York: Winchester Press.
- Rorty, R. M. (1999). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge U.P.
- Rorty, R. M. (2018). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton University Press.
- Rorty, R. M. (2007). *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rosen, C. (1993). "'Emotional Territory': An Interview with Sam Shepard." *Modern Drama*, 36(1), 1–11.
- Savage, C. S. (1996). *Cowgirls*. Berkeley, Calif: Ten Speed Press.
- Savage, W. W. (1979). *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History & Culture*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Shepard, S. (2009). *Kicking a dead horse*. New York, New York: Dramatists Play Service.
- Siegel, M. (1982). "Holy Ghosts: The Mythic Cowboy in the Plays of SamShepard." *Rocky Mountain Rview of Language and Literature*, 36(4), 235–246.
- Van de Vliert, E. (2013). "Climate-economic habitats support patterns of human needs, stresses, and freedoms". *Behavioral & Brain Sciences*, 36, 465–480.
- Vitaliano, D. B. (2007). "Geomythology: Geological origins of myths and legends". *Geological Society, London, Special Publications*, 273(1), 1-7. doi:10.1144/gsl.sp.2007.273.01.01
- Voparil, C. J. (2006), *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- White, R. (1993). *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West*. University of Oklahoma.