



***The English Experience Set Work Review: an introduction to the novel, its themes and reasons why it is a great text to teach Grade 12 students.***

## INTRODUCTION

Is it possible to make a fresh start when there is so much about the past that is still unresolved? This is the question that lies at the heart of Craig Higginson's *The Dream House*, for the individuals that populate the novel, as well as the country in which they live.

Studying *The Dream House* will encourage matriculants to explore the link between personal past and national history. The novel is a subtle, moving exploration of the notions of identity and belonging, loss and renewal, and the possibility of emergence from the shadow of the past.

'It's here at last – the South African novel that throws off all the literary baggage of political cliché and posturing and gives us an honest exploration of not only what it is to be human, but what it is to be South African in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.' – *Kate Turkington, City Press*

## PLOT SUMMARY

It is the eve of moving day on Dwaleni Farm in the Natal Midlands. The old farm buildings are being razed to make way for a smart new housing development. The land is in a state of transition and, as the last of its old inhabitants prepare to leave, they take stock of what has been and mourn what never was.

Patricia, the erstwhile owner of Dwaleni, dreams of spending her final days staring at the sea from the window of her childhood home in Durban, but she soon discovers that the past cannot be left behind so easily. She and her long-time servant, Beauty, are packing the last of their belongings, sorting through a lifetime of memories and trying to decide what should be discarded. Patricia's husband, Richard, is in the advanced stages of dementia and is roaming the surrounding farmlands, desperately searching for something that isn't there.

As Patricia trawls through the relics of her past, an unexpected visitor slips in through the back door. Patricia is about to be confronted with the crimes and wounds of the past in the form of a boy she once loved as the child she never had. His name is Looksmart and his journey to Dwaleni has been fuelled by a deep-seated rage and the desire to confront Patricia. Years before, she had loved and raised him as her own, but he left the farm under a cloud of hatred and he is about to tell Patricia why. Looksmart's revelations threaten to destroy the foundations of Patricia's life at Dwaleni, but is there any truth to his words? Is it possible that Looksmart himself does not know the whole story?

## AT A GLANCE

**Title** The Dream House

**Author** Craig Higginson

**Date Published** 2015

### Key Themes

- The shadow of the past
- Memory and truth
- Loss and disappointment
- Retribution and forgiveness

## KEY THEMES

### The shadow of the past

*The Dream House* tackles the question of how the past impacts on the present at both a personal and national level. Its contemporary South African setting and the issues with which the novel engages are familiar and highly relevant to Grade 12 students. *The Dream House* grapples with contentious topics like persistent inequality and racism in a way that is accessible, but not self-righteous or blatantly didactic.

Against the backdrop of a country still in a state of transition, the personal struggles of the main characters of the novel take on greater significance. Each of them is, in some way, trying to discard the burdens of the past and make a fresh start, but is this possible, when they don't truly understand those burdens? Will confronting the truth of the past mean that they can free themselves of hatred? Or are the wrongs of the past too indelibly etched on their characters to be erased?

### Memory and truth

The unreliable nature of memory is poignantly explored through Richard's suffering from an advanced stage of dementia. Higginson sensitively and effectively captures Richard's sense of disorientation, frustration and fear as he roams through the farmlands, while simultaneously trying to navigate the ravaged landscape of his own mind.

Yet Richard is not the only character whose memory is not to be trusted: each of the characters are, in their own ways, trying to grope through the mists (both literal and figurative) that enshroud them to find the truth of their collective past, but the 'truth', it turns out, will not be the same for each of them.

### Loss and disappointment

An unfulfilling marriage, a stillborn child, an unrequited love, a vicious assault and a brutal murder: these are just some of the sources of loss, pain and disappointment in the lives of the characters in *The Dream House*. As these characters trawl through the past and, quite literally, unearth the bones from long-forgotten graves, they are forced to examine how these past pains and losses have shaped the people they have since become.

### Retribution and forgiveness

An unspoken need for forgiveness haunts the characters in *The Dream House* as they are forced to confront the distressing revelations from the past. For hatred and resentment to be released, pardon must be sought, even from those who are in no position to grant it. The novel closes on an ambiguously optimistic note, nonetheless, as each character departs Dwaleni Farm with a deeper understanding of the pain they have felt there.

## WHY CHOOSE THIS NOVEL

- Its local, contemporary setting is immediately accessible and relevant.
- It deals with some of the most contentious issues facing modern South Africans sensitively and insightfully.
- Higginson's lyrical, contemporary writing style makes the novel readily accessible to Grade 12 readers.
- Young South African adults will easily relate to its universal themes of belonging, identity, truth, forgiveness and emerging from the shadow of the past.



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