

Corruption of Moral Values and Spiritual Decay in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*

Ali Hadi Mulla Al Adilee

aali.eflu@yahoo.com

General Directorate of Education at Diwaniyah, Ministry of Education, Iraq

Abstract

David Mamet (1947) is one of the most distinctive dramatists in American literature. He wrote more than thirty five plays and many of them directed by himself. *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), a play for which he was achieved Pulitzer Prize. It truly relates to real estate salesman whose company has forced a ruthless regimen. Mamet in *Glengarry Glen Ross* shows how these salesmen ignored the moral values and believed in lying, cheating and manipulating others in any possible ways. Moreover, this article attempts to analyze this play based on Lyotard's notions of meta-narratives. The result will show how the inalienable right of life, liberty and quest of happiness turn into a competition in the business world, more so the land oh dream has become a lottery in which one will reach and gain money by beating the others.

Key Words: David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Meta-narrative, Capitalism

1. Introduction

David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* first opened on September 21, 1983 at the small Cottesloe Theatre of the Royal National Theatre, in London, England. It immediately received positive assessments. It was later awarded the Society of West End Theatres Award as best new play. Also, the New York critics acknowledged the play as a chief progress for Mamet as a dramatist.

David Mamet is considered as one of the most outstanding playwrights who wrote *Glengarry Glen Ross* as a reflection of many social glitches. This play shows Mamet's obsession with some of the most unanswered anxieties in America. *Glengarry Glen Ross* is assumed as an influential work which could win Pulitzer Prize. In this play, the theme of competition in order to be better than others is clearly evident. As Nightingale (2004) has declared "*Glengarry Glen Ross* offers a portrait of a battle for survival, a Darwinian struggle in which the salesmen offer a dream of possibility. In a play about real estate there is, in fact, very little real in *Glengarry Glen Ross*" (p. 98), consequently, "the characters of *Glengarry Glen Ross* are deprived of any human warmth and compassion and are constantly steeped in an atmosphere of fear, greed, and ruthlessness: the higher the pressure, the lower the ethics" (p. 98).

Brietzeke (2007) has noted that Mamet in *Glengarry Glen Ross* "reduces the world of the [play] to a series of sales transactions in which the man who succeeds—and it is the man's world—is the one who can successfully close the deal and exert his will upon a victim How much money they make, what cars they drive, if they're married or not, where they live . . . and how many kids they have remains a mystery" (pp. 125-126). As Bigsby (2004) proposes: "In a utopian society such as America only the past and the future offer a true form. . . . In between is a provisional world in decline, reaching for a perfection beyond immediate reach, existing between impure nostalgia and importunate hope" (p. 20).

1.1. Problem Statement

This article will inspect David Mamet's play, *Glengarry Glen Ross* through the theory of metanarratives by Lyotard. Thus, it will be a critical analysis of Mamet's obsession with such concepts as capitalism and the American dream. In addition, the writer is going to exhibit how Mamet employs dramatic language as one of the most practical means in the creation of his skepticism of the already mentioned metanarratives. Kerkhoff (2001) as a theater critic has noted that,

David Mamet is credited with reinventing American theatrical language. His terse, cryptic dialogue is

marked by a staccato rhythm and tough, often profane language . . . the style and rhythm of his dialogue has seeded an addition to the theatrical lexicon: Mametspeak, which entails the same sort of condensation found in poetry. The lack of stage directions is yet another aspect of Mametspeak's minimalism. The power of the playwright's characters stems from the way they reveal themselves through language that conveys its meaning as much from what is being withheld as from the words actually spoken. (Retrieved from www.fb10.unibremen.de/anglistik/kerkhoff)

Therefore, language plays an important role in Mamet's plays because it is through the feature of language that the audiences can better understand the characters' personality. Matthew Roudane and Leslie Kane have commented the importance of language in character formation. In *American Drama Since 1960: A Critical History*, Roudane (1996) notes, "What makes the Mamet hero so theatrically engaging concerns an invisible inner drama, a sub-textual crisis that haunts him: underneath his character's hardboiled, enameled public bravado lies a figure plagued with self-doubt and insecurities" (p. 166).

1.2. Significance of the Study

As already mentioned, Mamet has always been concerned with a number of cultural and social features of the American context. What leads to this study's significance is that there will be a thorough examination of corruption of moral values and spiritual decay in Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* through the theory of grand narratives by Lyotard. This article will mainly focus on Lyotard's ideas because his attitude includes opposition against meta-narratives. Lyotard chiefly believed that doubt and skepticism in these metanarratives shape the postmodern world.

American dream is one of these metanarratives which plays an important part in *Glengarry Glen Ross* because the characters in this play are so enthralled by the American dream that they cannot distinguish their departure from reality. They are stuck between their past and future and cannot see their dejected situation. In other words, the splendid dreams of the past are put side by side with the idealistic future that is assured by the American Dream.

1.3. Background of the Study

David Mamet, born on November 30th 1947, is an American playwright, essayist, screenwriter and film director who won a Pulitzer Prize and also for *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) he could receive a Tony nomination. His distinguished works include *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), *American Buffalo* (1975) *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), *Oleanna* (1992) and *Speed-the-Plow* (1997).

Glengarry Glen Ross shows four distracted salesmen who work at a real estate office in Chicago, managed by an emotionless man, Williamson, who provides them with leads so that they encourage naive clients to buy valueless land in Florida. The play exhibits how these four people's lack of ethics leads them to theft under the semblance of free competition. Therefore, as Hayman (1994) denotes:

Cleverly and disturbingly, Mamet plays with the idea that the difference between robbery and Chicago salesmanship is only a difference of degree. These hardboiled real-estate salesmen have no moral scruples; and what they are selling has no value—tracts of undeveloped land which cannot be developed. The only commodity that has value—for them—is the "lead," the contact with the potential buyer. Some leads are valueless, the value of the lead depending on the wealth and gullibility of the client. (p. 228)

In addition, Mamet and his well-known play, *Glengarry Glen Ross* are so remarkable that they have attracted a lot of attention because there are many articles or books regarding their analysis through different approaches. Here just a few instances will be discussed. One of these important books is *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* written by Bigsby (2004). This book is regarded as a comprehensive version which covers the works of one of the most renowned American playwrights. This book also includes a number of supplementary chapters which probe into Mamet and acting, his fiction, and criticism.

Another important book in this regard is *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action* (1990) by Anne Dean. In this book, Dean acknowledges that Mamet is probably the first

true verse playwright because of his detailed examination and use of language as dramatic action. Five of Mamet's best known plays are studied comprehensively: *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *American Buffalo*, *A Life in the Theatre*, *Edmond*, and *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Another book includes *David Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross: Text and Performance* by Leslie Kane (2013).

Lyotard as the theorist of the present study is mostly famous because of his *The Postmodern Condition*. In this book, Lyotard argues that the impression of the postmodern condition incites pessimism about worldwide concepts. Lyotard also indicates that we have expanded our desire for metanarratives thanks to the progress of knowledge since World War II. He claims that the narratives we use to validate a number of specific laws are fundamentally unmerited.

1.4. Methodology

The present article intends to investigate David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* in the light of Lyotard's grand narratives, especially the American dream. Therefore, its degrading effects will be revealed. Lyotard (1924-1998) is a French post-structuralist philosopher who is primarily renowned for his exceedingly dominant formula of postmodernism in *The Postmodern Condition*.

Tyson (1994) has proclaimed: "The American Dream Blinds us to the enormities of its own failure, past and present: the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, the virtual enslavement of indentured servants, the abuses suffered by immigrants populations, the widening economic gulf between America's rich and poor, the growing ranks of homeless and hungry, the enduring socioeconomic barriers against women and people of color, and the like" (p. 58).

According to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, one of the most remarkable influences of postmodernism has been inciting skepticism towards a number of widespread philosophies. Williams (2002, pp. 210-214) has stated that, "the narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently unjust." A loss of confidence in metanarratives has an important influence on the way we approach anything in the world.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard has defined the postmodern period as an era in which metanarratives cannot be trusted anymore. Metanarrative refer to a range of

abstract ideas which form the base of comprehensive notions of the world. Lyotard believes that the postmodern era has been constructed of smaller narratives. As a matter of fact, Lyotard has come up with the idea which verifies the preference for small narratives as a replacement for the absolutism of grand narratives.

2. Discussion

The first scene of the play takes place in a Chinese restaurant where Shelly Levene is trying to persuade John Williamson his manager to give him some of the Glengarry leads. Williamson will only give him leads if Shelly gives him cash for them, but Shelly does not have any money and leaves without any of the leads. Next, Moss and Aaronow are showed while they are talking about the stress that they have been going through to sell the leads, and that they can't take it.

Moss comes up with the scheme of stealing the leads and selling them to another real estate agency. He wants Aaronow to help him and commit the burglary. Aaronow refuses to take action which makes Moss frighten him into the thought that he is already a partner just because he now knows everything about Moss's plot. In the next scene we see Richard Roma as the one who is selling land to a man named Lingk.

Later in the play, the audiences are introduced to the real estate sales office where these men work and has been broken in. Williamson has called the police and a detective is questioning the salesclerks. We then see Lingk, the man who Roma was with in the restaurant. He enters the sales office and wants to cancel his sale after speaking with his wife. Roma tells him his check has yet to be cashed, but Williamson intervenes and tells Lingk that the check has been deposited. Williamson also tells Lingk that his check is in the bank.

This issue enrages Roma makes him argue with Williamson. Then, Roma is questioned by the detective. In the middle of this, Levene says by mistake that he knows the check hasn't been cashed. Thus, Williamson blames Levene for the burglary because the only way through which Levene could know this is just by being in Williamson's office. Finally, Levene confesses that he and Moss were the ones who stole them. Next, Williamson tells Levene that the Nyborgs do not intend to purchase land because they are just two old people who enjoy talking to salesmen.

Roma's investigation has been done and Williamson goes to speak with the detective. Roma suggests that Levene works with him and the detective decides to speak with Levene in the back room. Roma that does not know anything about Levene's revelation wants to work with him and tries to make a deal with him. Thus, he invites Levene to eat Chinese food with him as Levene is called by the detective, distraught and overwhelmed. Roma leaves the office to go for lunch and Aaronow returns to his desk in order to make his calls as usual.

Now, this play's main characters will be introduced in detail as the followings: Shelley Levene as an old salesman who has had just a few big sales at the start of the play. He's distressed and feels as if his job is endangered because he has been unable to sell any land recently. Levene also tries to encourage people to help him that is somehow like begging. Richard Roma is another character and is regarded as the biggest seller of land at the office. He seems to be a nice character, but actually he can be assumed as a liar who attempts to get money for himself.

As another main character, Dave Moss is also trying hard to sell property. What is particular about him is that he is so ambitious and angry that he decides to steal the Glengarry leads for money; he also decides to enforce Aaronow to be his accomplice through menacing to show him as a willing contributor. Compared with other salesmen, George Aaronow is regarded as the least immoral character. He declines to help Moss steal from the office even after he is threatened by him to do so and despite the fact that he has a lot of reasons to worry about his future because he has not been able to sell much land and he is also obsessed with Moss's indecorously involving him in the office break-in.

2.1. Immoral and illegal paradigms of Capitalism

Capitalism plays a great in *Glengarry Glen Ross* because it is the origin of any immoral action in this play. Mamet has written *Glengarry Glen Ross* based on his personal experiences because when he was trying hard to become a prosperous writer, he had to have some part-time jobs, including working for a company like what he has depicted in *Glengarry Glen Ross* in which he could see that the salesmen were just a little better than offenders or criminals. However, he

appreciated them because of their melodramas and poetry that they employed in order to create more impressions on their customers. In fact, one of the powerful features about Mamet is his ability to imitate the American language in order to show the essence of the capital system. The following sentence is a clear instance:

ROMA: What's the fucking point in any case...? What's the point. I got to argue with you, I got to knock heads with the cops, I'm busting my balls, sell you dirt to fucking deadbeats money in the mattress, I come back you can't even manage to keep the contracts safe. (2.1.214-219)

Mamet has applied such a language so that he introduces us into the dark world of capitalism. He attains this goal through his specific style, involving characters' quick speech, recurrent cutting each other off, and repeating themselves at the same time as the other is talking:

MOSS: P.S. Two guys get fucked.

AARONOW: Huh.

MOSS: You don't ax your sales force.

AARONOW: No.

MOSS: You...

AARONOW: You...

MOSS: You build it!

AARONOW: That's what I...

MOSS: You fucking build it! (1.2.176-184)

As a grand narrative, American dream has been degraded through the application of such a language. In fact, the importance of using this language is that it helps the writer to depict the anguish and fascination of the salesmen as ones who are in search of free opposition as one of the axles of the American dream. In fact, Mamet is regarded as an author who writes truthfully. According to Roudane (2004), "*Glengarry Glen Ross* may appear flawed with its overused expletives, but when audiences understand Mamet's aesthetic—that the language functions as a kind of street poetry, a deliberately embellished dialogue—then the acerbity of the language takes on non-realistic qualities" (p. 335). This language is hired to specify the penetrating anxiety of the salesmen as a result of trying hard to endure in the severe world of capitalism.

In his book *American Drama 1900-1990*, Don Shiach (2000) has declared that,

The language he writes for his dramatic figures is muscular, tough street slang and frequently obscene. His plays have been criticized for their foul-mouthedness His characters are clearly meant to sound as though they are talking the everyday street language of the times without the literary intervention of the playwright. However, his dialogue is strictly speaking not realistic, because it is self-consciously written as a kind of musical fugue with very definite rhythm. The language has been deliberately shaped and 'scored' by the dramatist. (p. 46)

In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet dooms the deceitful contemporary society of America and intends to indicate how the corrupt ones can be so powerful in business world. What we face in this play is that the current American society is disregarding all the moral standards and is searching for the victory which finally leads to desperateness and disappointment.

All these four salesmen are looking for a way to defeat their colleagues. Even their enthusiasm about selling more land is based on conquering other co-workers. The top seller wins a Cadillac, the second one will get steak knives, and the other two sellers will get the sack. This approach is what we witness in a capitalistic society because the one who sells the most is going to be the only salesman who can get the great Glengarry leads. Moss believes the new sales elevation is "medieval... it's wrong" (32). And then he claims that it is the managers' mistake because "it doesn't have to be this way" (33).

As noticed, the challenge that has been instigated by Mitch and Murray, forces the salesmen to forget morality in order to be superior. They must sell a range of valueless land, or they will lose their job. This issue puts a lot of stress on the employees because they have to decide to what extent they should stray from ethics to protect their job. As the play starts, we see Roma, Levene, Moss, and Aaronow in a dilemma. From the very first line of the dialogue, it is made clear that they have to make a choice. In order to achieve their goal that is selling more land, they stick to deceitful methods and forget about honest ways.

A very important feature which highlights the salesmen's seriousness in achieving their objective is the act of robbery. The plan for

robbery is first arranged by Dave Moss in the second scene of Act 1. Moss knows that Roma is much better than him and he cannot defeat Roma, so he come up with the scheme of robbery in order to protect his job and get the highest prize.

Also, the way these salesmen try to deceive their clients is an evident instance of moral values' decay. The following quote is an example of how Roma influences his customers. After Lingk acknowledges that he is not the one who must decide what to buy, Roma instantaneously pretends to be his friend and tries to persuade him to have a drink with him in order to converse about Lingk's problems.

ROMA: *Forget* the deal, Jimmy. *Forget* the deal... you know me. The deal's *dead*. [...] I want to tell you something. Your life is your own. You have a contract with your wife. You have certain things you do *jointly*, you have a *bond* there... and there are *other* things. Those things are yours. You needn't feel *ashamed*, you needn't feel that you're being *untrue*... or that she would abandon you if she knew. This is your life. [...] Now I want to *talk* to you because you're obviously upset and that *concerns* me. (p. 93)

In order to encourage Lingk into buying land, Roma develops a close relationship with him and targets Lingk's problems within his family and with his wife. He says that through buying a piece of land, he can change be the man he has always wanted to be because this purchase proves him to be self-possessed, self-determining, and pleased. It can be declared that it is just due to such abilities that Roma is very successful in his profession.

As one of the most important metanarratives, the American dream has obsessed Mamet's mind to a great extent. This dream has such a destructive influence on morality that many of Mamet's works intend to scrutinize the ways through which business people like salesmen and clients can be corrupted by its dishonest features. *Glengarry Glen Ross* is amongst the best instances of these plays. According to what can be observed in this play, morality is not responded properly and this is why it disappears.

In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Roma is capable of persuading people to do what he wants; so he

can coax Ling into buying land. Roma uses any method in order to achieve his goals and win the competition, and therefore, making mistakes does not bother him. This competition stands for the cruelty that governs a capitalistic world. Dean (1990) states that,

The premise upon which *Glengarry Glen Ross* is based is, in a way, a paradigm of capitalism.... That the successful salesman is given the best leads while the runners-up are forced to accept inferior leads from the 'B' list or are even dismissed underlines the unfairness of a system that penalizes those, who are weak and needy but rewards those, who least need such support. (p.192)

Moss and Levene as Roma's co-workers use unkind words to define their leads, and they try to influence their colleagues into assisting them in cheating and deviating from the law. Levene struggles hard to persuade Williamson into giving him better leads so that he can increase his chances of winning the competition. Moss also tries to persuade Aaronow to help him in breaking into the office and stealing the leads. Neither of them think about morality.

2.2. Collapse of Spiritual Values

In this part, the writer is going to discuss the negative effects of the American dream and capitalism on spiritual values. The American dream one had a close relationship with an ingenuous society and morality. Nevertheless, the depression point made this uprightness or morality insignificant. The need and wish to be efficacious enforced any American person to be unresponsive towards the moral principles, and this issue turned America into a capitalist business society.

In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the pursuit of the American dream is a noteworthy issue for every one and makes them commit any crime and overlook morality. The viewers will come to understand how dark and vicious the American dream is because of ruining all the spiritual, religious and right values in the society and those who are in search of this dream are more influenced by this destruction. As Kane (1992) declares,

Glengarry Glen Ross is a play about a society with only one bottom line: How much money you make, the play concerns how business corrupts ... American capitalism comes down to

one thing ... The operative axiom is 'Hurrah for me and fuck you.' Anything else is a lie. (p. 123)

As mentioned, in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, we see a group of real estate agents, including Shelly Levene, Richard Roma, Dave Moss, and George Aaronow, whose bosses make them compete against each other. The winner who sells more will get a Cadillac and the two people who sell less will lose their job. This issue results into a number of immoral acts like cheating and trickery; for example, Moss employs a devious and cunning way to speak about this issue which causes Aaronow to become stressed out and mixed up. Moss tells him that they are "just talking" about stealing the leads. The following conversation very well shows how Moss approaches Aaronow to persuade him into robbery:

MOSS: I want to tell you what somebody should do.

AARONOW: What?

MOSS: Someone should stand up and strike back.

AARONOW: What do you mean?

MOSS: Somebody . . .

AARONOW: Yes ...?

MOSS: Should do something to them.

AARONOW: What?

MOSS: Something. To pay them back. Someone, someone should hurt them. Murray and Mitch.

AARONOW: Someone should hurt them

MOSS: Yes.

AARONOW: How?

MOSS: How? Do something that hurts them. Where they live.

AARONOW: What?

MOSS: Someone should rob the office (Mamet, p. 23).

These leads are the most important motivation of any immoral action in this play and refer to a number of cards which encompass information about potential people who are interested in buying land. Many of these leads are actually valueless, because they include information about those people who has no intention to purchase land. Other leads, specially the *Glengarry Highlands* leads, are the favored ones which are mostly given to the best salesmen, or those who are most likely to deal.

The desire to get these leads is the reason why any character in *Glengarry Glen Ross* feels

free to do whatever he wishes. Like some other plays, Mamet has turned the salesmen's competition into a small capitalistic organization in order to display how corrupt and disloyal people can be even in relationship with their closest friends.

The people that have been depicted by the author are good examples of Mamet's thematic apprehensions of postmodernism. Each salesman represents a person remote from others in order to expose the stressful business of sales as an idyllic symbol of capitalism's failure. The sales symbolize a degrading experience for the salesperson since they isolate them from each other.

As Kimbal (2004) has pointed out *Glengarry Glen Ross* depicts the essential role of the business ethic in shaping American values. Therefore, the characters in *Glengarry Glen Ross* are trapped in a moral quandary. In fact, this delusion of the magnificent past and an ideal future is employed to evade the clash of the dismaying authenticity of their life (pp. 95-97).

Many critics in both England and America believe that *Glengarry Glen Ross* is a morality play and attacks the concept of American dream. It is also famous for representation of some people who live in a world full of dishonesty, cheat, and robbery so that they can endure.

These characters are so preoccupied with winning that they are isolated from each other. Moral values such as scrupulousness and trustworthiness is dead for them. Even friendship and family are of no or less importance for them; this is why we never see their families throughout the whole play. Any relationship is fake in this play; for example, if they approach each other or any customer, it is just for their own benefits. A clear example is Moss. He goes to help him break into the office or Roma who has a seemingly warm talk with Lingk, but, in fact he is just beguiling him as a client to sign a deal.

Another example of the absence of humanity in this play is related to the conversation between Roma and Aaronow, when Roma asks Aaronow, "How are you?" (Mamet, 1996, p.35), Aaronow answers "I'm fine. You mean the board? You mean the board . . . ?" (Mamet, 1996, p.35). Worse than that, when Aaronow replies, "...I'm fucked on the board ... I can't close 'em" (Mamet, 1996, p.35), Roma feels consoled.

This play is filled with Trickery as a way of achieving goals; so, anything is prone to doubt. The matter of triumph and letdown is also very important in *Glengarry Glenn Ross*. The office that we observe in this play is a small representation of the capitalism system in America. So, if somebody wants to be successful, they have to have lots of money because lack of money will lead to failure. As Piette (2004) states,

Glengarry Glen Ross offers a portrait of a battle for survival, a Darwinian struggle in which the salesmen offer a dream of possibility. In a play about real estate there is, in fact, very little real in *Glengarry Glen Ross* and characters of *Glengarry Glen Ross* are eradicated of any human warmth and compassion and are constantly drenched in an atmosphere of fear, greed, and ruthlessness: the higher the pressure, the lower the ethics. (p. 78)

3. Conclusion

This study used the methodology of Lyotard in order to investigate David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. According to Lyotard, postmodernism is the age of skepticism towards such grand narratives as American dream and capitalism. Through the application of this French philosopher's theory, it was proved that Mamet has been so obsessed with social and cultural problems that he suggests there exists nothing so complete to adhere to and due to this issue, every philosophy or grand narrative is prone to doubt. It is also concluded that the grand narrative of capitalism has brought about the destruction of many moral values. It has turned human beings into a number of greedy people who are just after fulfilling their financial desires. For these people, it is only money that defines relationships. Hence, the world portrayed in the play is a chaotic place where existence of the richest is the central dictum. This is the reason why shows why Lyotard (1984) has criticized capitalism as "a vanguard machine dragging humanity after it dehumanizing it" (p.63).

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