American Buffalo Study Guide

American Buffalo by David Mamet

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Thorstein Veblen wrote that business wisdom, when reduced to its basest form, frequently resorts to "the judicious use of sabotage" an idea that David Mamet explores in his *American Buffalo*. First performed in Chicago in 1975, the play made its way to Broadway in 1977, Although Mamet had already achieved some success with his *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1972) the response *to American Buffalo* was highly favorable, despite the occasional harsh review. Many critics applauded Mamet's ability to capture the cadences and ambiguities in everyday American speech: *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll, for example, remarked that "Mamet is someone to listen to. He's that rare bird, an American playwright who's a language playwright." Edwin Wilson, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, stated that Mamet "has a keen ear for the idiosyncrasies and the humor of everyday speech." While some critics dismissed *American Buffalo* (like the *New York Daily News's* Douglas Watt) as "a poor excuse for a play" and (like the *Christian Science Monitor's* John Beaufort) "too superficial to waste time upon," most were enthusiastic about Mamet's look at the ways in which three petty crooks plan to steal a coin collection in the name of "good business."

Mamet's plays (and this one is no exception) are radically different from ones written in previous theatrical eras and periods. Characters rarely speak in full sentences and their language (depending on the topic at hand) is often a mix of half-thoughts and obscenities, making the plays at tunes difficult to read. When performed, however, these seemingly inarticulate utterances yield a rhythm found in few other playwrights' work. "Part of the fascination of the play," wrote *Women's Wear Daily's* Howard Kissel, lies in "noting how the same banal language takes on different colors as we perceive the changing relationships" between the characters.

The conflict explored by Mamet here is the clash between business and friendship between a man's ethics and desire to succeed in a world where so much of the population has subscribed to a shared myth of capitalism. As one character tells his younger friend, "there's business and there's friendship"• two worlds which will be combined and then torn apart by the time the play is finished.

Author Biography

When asked by interviewer John Lahr to describe his youth in the *New Yorker*, Mamet remarked, "My childhood, like many people's, was not a bundle of laughs. So what? I always skip that part of the biography." A quick review of his background, however, suggests the means by which Mamet has been able to so accurately depict the anger and idiom of American men. Born in Chicago, Illinois, on November 30, 1947, he was raised in a Jewish neighborhood on the city's South Side. His father, Bernard Mamet, was a labor attorney and (as Mamet has described him) an "amateur semanticist." His mother, Lenore Silver, was a teacher. They divorced in 1958 and Mamet moved in with his mother and her new husband whose violent temper is described in Mamet's essay, "The Rake." At the age of fifteen, Mamet returned to live with his father and worked as a busboy at the Second City, Chicago's famous improvisational theater. Resisting his father's suggestion that he become an attorney, Mamet left Chicago to study theater and English at Goddard College in Vermont, where he received his bachelor of arts degree in 1969 (he also studied at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theater from 1968-69).

After a teaching stint at his alma mater, Mamet returned to Chicago, where he worked at a number of different jobs (cab driver, cook, waiter) while trying to begin a career in the theater. After realizing that he was (as he described himself) a "terrible" actor, Mamet focused his artistic energies on play-writing and directing. His first success was *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1972) which was awarded the Joseph Jefferson Award for best new Chicago play of 1975; it was later produced off-Broadway in 1976. *American Buffalo* (1975) won the Drama Critics' Circle Award for best American play and prompted Clive Barnes, of the *New York Times*, to proclaim of Mamet, "The man can write."

Since then, Mamet has become a favorite with critics and audiences. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1984 for *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a searing and satiric look at real estate salesmen based, in part, on his own experience working as a telemarketer peddling worthless land. *Speed-the-Plow* (1988) caused a stir in the New York theater scene when the pop star Madonna was cast as its female lead, but the play was another success and was nominated (like *Glengarry Glen Ross*) for an Antionette ("Tony") Perry Award. Greater controversy was caused by *Oleanna* (1992), Mamet's look at sexual harassment: the play culminates in a male professor assaulting a female student who has destroyed his career with sexual allegations. Other works include *The Cryptogram* (1994) and *The Old Neighborhood* (1997).

Despite his extensive success with drama, Mamet's talents are not limited to the theater. His screenplays for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *The Verdict* (1982), *The Untouchables* (1987), *Hoffa* (1992), *The Edge* (1997), and *Wag the Dog* (1998; written with Hilary Henkin) have made him an in-demand presence in the world of major motion pictures He has also written and directed four films: *House of Games* (1987), *Things Change* (1988), *Homicide* (1991), and the adaptation of his play *Oleanna* (1994). In addition, he has written collections of essays, a book on directing film, a book on acting,

and two novels. Although playwriting is his foremost vocation, Mamet has proven himself to be a versatile and unpredictable force in the American literary scene.

Plot Summary

Act I

American Buffalo takes place in "Don's Resale Shop," a secondhand junk store run by Don Dubrow, the play's protagonist. When the play opens, Don is instructing Bob, his young protege, in the art of "good business". Don offers pointers and advice which Bob accepts and echoes. The two discuss last night's poker game, held in the shop, and the virtues of Fletcher, a character who is never seen but who embodies all of the values that Don is trying to impart to Bob. Don offers other fatherly advice, such as, "Never skip breakfast" and "it wouldn't kill you to take a vitamin." Their relationship, like that of a father and son, is thus established.

Their moment of quiet bonding is cut short when Teach, a friend of Don's, enters the shop and delivers an impassioned harangue about another friend of theirs, Ruthie, who begrudged him a slice of toast at the neighborhood diner that morning. Bob leaves to fetch the two men coffee from the same diner. Like Don, Teach offers his own personal wisdom on the topic of business and the need to keep it separate from friendship. (The "business" discussed in the play is always gambling or robbery.) When Bob returns, he speaks to Don about "the guy" he has been watching and informs him that he saw him put a suitcase in his car. Although Bob has forgotten to bring back Don's coffee, Don is delighted with Bob's information and sends him back to the diner to fetch the missing beverage.

Teach is suspicious about Don and Bob's conversation, and badgers Don into telling him about its subject. Don agrees and explains that a week ago, "the guy" came into the shop and offered him ninety dollars for a buffalo-head nickel that Don had mixed up in random pieces of junk. Deducing that the nickel must be worth much more (since "the guy" made a point of haggling him for the price), Don decided to steal it back from him along with any other coins he may have. He has enlisted Bob as his assistant and Bob has been watching "the guy's" house, which is around the corner from the shop. Later that night. Bob steals the guy's coin collection.

Teach, however, decides that *he* should "go in" instead of Bob, who he calls a "great kid" but also an amateur who will not be able to complete a job as potentially complicated as this. Teach also refers to a past job where Bob, strung out on drugs, used a crowbar to break into a house. Although the details of this past caper are never revealed, the mention of it enrages Don, who tells Teach, "I don't want you mentioning that." Don feels that Bob is "trying hard" and that Teach should "leave him alone." Teach, however, is undaunted and tells Don that "simply as a business proposition" Don "cannot afford to take the chance" of using Bob for the job.

Don starts to waver on his previous stand and Bob returns from the diner. Don tells Bob to "forget about" the "thing." Bob tells Don he needs fifty dollars, which Don gives him. Although this is not spoken of openly until the end of the play, Bob is asking Don for

money to support a drug habit. Bob exits, leaving Don and Teach to plan the robbery, which they do by looking in a guide to coins. ("You got to have a feeling for your subject," Teach explains.) While discussing how Teach will enter the house, Don becomes nervous about his partner's lack of preparation and decides to call Fletcher and have him work with them. Teach adamantly refuses, but Don insists that he "wants some depth." Teach reluctantly agrees and leaves the shop to go take a nap. He will return at 11:00 in order to carry out their criminal plans.

Act II

It is 11:15 that evening and Teach has not yet arrived. Don is also unable to reach Fletcher, whose phone line only offers him a busy signal each time it is called. Bob arrives (to the surprise of Don), asks him for more money and then offers him the sale of a buffalo-head nickel that he "got downtown". His actions here are clearly suspicious, but Don still feels guilty about shutting Bob out from the robbery; he therefore agrees to buy it on the condition that they look up its value in the coin-collector's guide. Bob, however, will not relinquish the coin and it is at this point that Teach enters, incensed at Bob's presence. Don scolds him for his tardiness, and Teach convinces Don to give Bob enough money to leave, which he does. Teach wonders about Fletcher's whereabouts, but Don tells him that Fletcher will arrive because "he said he'd be here".

In order to begin some "planning" and "preparation," Teach attempts to call "the guy" to make sure he is not home, but his nerves and incompetence cause him to keep dialing wrong numbers. Because Fletcher has still not arrived, Teach argues that they should complete the job themselves. Don, always loyal to his friends, wants to wait, but Teach convinces him that Fletcher cannot be trusted by telling a spurious story about Fletcher cheating during the previous night's poker game. Teach then takes a gun out of his pocket and the two argue over its necessity: Don feels that it is an unnecessary risk but Teach insists that it is a needed precaution.

As the tension between them rises, Bob returns; despite Teach's wishes, Don lets him in the shop. Bob tells them that Fletcher was mugged and is in the hospital with a broken jaw. Teach does not believe him and suggests to Don that Bob is in league with Ruthie or even Fletcher himself. Teach insists that Bob has gone behind their backs and performed the job with the others. Wanting to be sure he knows all the facts before making any accusations, Don asks Bob to name the hospital into which Fletcher has been admitted. Bob answers, "Masonic ... I think" and Don calls there to check his story. Bob is nervous and becomes more frightened when he is asked about the buffalo-head nickel; he offers vague explanations for his having it. When Don's call reaches Masonic hospital and he is told that Fletcher was never admitted, he and Teach interrogate Bob, who insists on the validity of his story and that he just said "Masonic" because he "thought of it." Teach gives Bob one last chance to be honest and demands that he tell them "what is going *on*, what is set *up*, ... and everything you know." When Bob proclaims his ignorance, Teach grabs a nearby object and hits him with it on the side of the head. Don looks away and tells Bob, "You brought it on yourself."

However, Ruthie then calls the shop and tells Don that Fletcher was, in fact, mugged and that he has been admitted to Columbus Hospital not Masonic. As before, Don verifies this information with a phone call and the story is confirmed. Teach still grills Bob (whose mind becomes more foggy from the assault) about the nickel and gets a new story, specifically, that Bob bought it "in a coin store." Don, however, is finished with the job and tells Teach to leave the shop. Teach retorts with, "You seek your friends with junkies. You're a joke on the street, you and him," causing Don to physically attack him.

During the fracas, Bob gets Don's attention with a simple statement: "I missed him." When asked to explain, the two men learn that Bob had never spotted "the guy" that morning and that his entire report about him "leaving with a suitcase" was a lie. They also learn that Bob *did* buy the nickel in a coin store "for Donny." This infuriates Teach, who begins smashing the display cases in the shop while proclaiming, "There Is No Law. There Is No Right And Wrong. The World Is Lies. There Is No Friendship." Finally, he sits down and the three are still. Don sends Teach out to get his car so they can take Bob to the hospital. Bob looks at Don and apologizes for all the trouble he thinks he has caused, but Don tries to comfort him with, "You did real good. That's all right."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The play opens with Don, owner of Don's Resale Shop, and Bob, his "gofer," discussing Bob's presence in the shop. It becomes apparent that Bob was supposed to be watching someone at his or her home. He left his post because the person hadn't come out, and Bob thought maybe they had left through the back door. Don is upset. The store-owner tells Bob that they had a business deal, and his reason for giving up on the job isn't good enough. Don tells Bob that action counts, not intentions, that action talks and bullshit walks. Bob tells Don that he's sorry, and Don replies that he's not mad at him.

As he cleans up the debris from a poker game, Don explains that he's only trying to teach Bob something. Don describes Fletcher, one of their poker-playing companions, as a fellow who stands for something. According to Don, if Fletcher were put down in a strange town with only a nickel in his pocket, by nightfall he would have the town under his control. This is not talk, Don says, this is action. Fletcher has skill and talent and the determination to arrive at his own conclusions.

Bob and Don then discuss the previous night's card game, when Fletcher won four hundred dollars. It comes up that another player, Ruthie, also did well. Bob mentions that he likes her, and Don agrees, but he seems less sincere about it. Don asks Bob if he thinks Fletcher was born with his abilities, or if he learned them. Bob says Fletcher learned them. Don agrees, and points out that everything he and Fletcher know they picked up on the street. That's all business is, common sense, experience, and talent.

As Don and Bob discuss a questionable business deal Fletcher struck with Ruthie, Don tells Bob that business is just people taking care of themselves. He goes on to say that there's business, and there's friendship. A moment later, he says that people don't have friends in this life.

Ironically, Don then offers to buy breakfast for Bob, reminding him that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Don eats yogurt, because it's good for him. Mentioning this leads him to suggest that Bob should take vitamins. Bob complains that they are too expensive. Don then offers to buy them for Bob. He claims that it's only because he can't use Bob in the store if he's like a zombie. Bob once again explains that he left his post just to go around the back. Don says he doesn't care, and asks him if he sees what he's getting at. When Bob says he does, Don replies that they'll see.

Before Bob can leave, Walter Cole, or "Teach," enters the store, muttering about Ruthie. He had just come from a restaurant, where Ruthie and her friend Grace were finishing up breakfast, and there were plates and crusts of food all over. Teach had sat down with them to have a cup of coffee. He took a piece of toast off Gracie's plate, and she had said: "Help yourself." This angered Teach because she seemed to be condescending to

him. Teach says that he often buys snacks and other things for the poker players, and never makes anything of it, but he takes one slice of toast from Gracie's plate, and she has to comment on it. He says that he has been hurt in a way that he doesn't even know what to do.

Don tries to reassure Teach, and then sends Bob out for food and coffee for the three of them.

After Bob leaves, Don and Teach discuss the previous night's card game. Teach had not done well, and Ruthie had. Teach denies this has anything to do with how he feels about her. Don says that Ruth is a good card player, but Teach says she isn't. He says that Grace is always by Ruth's shoulder, and Don replies that she's Ruth's partner. Teach says let her be her partner. But Grace often walks around the table, getting an ashtray or some coffee, and nobody hides their cards. Teach says that if she walks behind him, he's going to hide his cards.

Then he echoes what Don had said, saying that they're talking about money. Friendship is wonderful, and he's all for it, but the two things should be kept separate. He says he knows Don has a soft spot in his heart for the women, and that Bob likes them too. Teach says that he likes them, too.

Don and Bob begin to make small talk, and the discussion turns to collectibles Don has from an event in 1933 (probably a World's Fair, or similar event). Don says there were all kinds of licensed souvenir items sold at the time, combs, brushes, clothing, etc. And now there are people who collect the items. Don says that if someone just walked in off the street and wanted a compact, he'd charge them fifteen bucks. Teach is amazed, and comments on all the stuff he's thrown out, things his father kept in his desk drawer, toys in the back yard. If he had kept these things, he'd be wealthy today, cruising on a European yacht.

Bob comes back with a bag full of coffee and food. He tells Teach Ruthie isn't mad at him. Teach asks him how he knows, and he responds that Ruthie told him. Teach reminds him that he wasn't supposed to talk to her, and Bob replies that she asked him if Teach was at the shop. At Don's urging, Teach tells Bob that it's all right, then mutters to himself that everything's all right to someone.

Teach tells Don that he shouldn't eat yogurt, because he "has a feeling" about health foods. Don replies that it's not health food, it's only yogurt, and it's been around forever. They used to joke about it on the radio show "My Little Margie." Teach responds everybody has a right to their own opinion.

Don discovers that the people at the restaurant had forgotten to give Bob his coffee. Bob volunteers to go back and get it, but first he asks to talk with Don. Bob says he saw the guy he was supposed to have been watching. The guy had left in his car, with a suitcase and a coat. When Bob leaves to get Don's coffee, Don tells him to get himself something to eat.

After Bob leaves, Teach asks Don if the cooks at the restaurant had done his bacon right. They hadn't. The talk turns again to business, that if you want it done right, you have to be there.

Teach asks Don what he had spoken with Bob about. Don says it's about some guy he and Bob spotted. Teach guesses that they intend to steal jewelry from him, but says he only wants to know for the sake of conversation. Don tells him they are after some coins. While Teach listens, Don makes a phone call to a potential buyer, and arranges to contact the buyer about "various pieces" that will be available later that night. Don plans to steal the coins from one collector and sell them immediately to the other. That way, he's not sitting on the stolen merchandise. Teach wonders if the buyer is an asshole, then he notes that it doesn't matter. It's business.

Don tells Teach how he met "the mark," the man they intend to steal the coins from. He had come into the shop and browsed around. He picked up a buffalo head nickel, and asked Don how much he wanted for it. Don almost said, "Two bits (twenty-five cents)," but instead asked the mark what he was willing to pay. Teach agrees this was a good business move. After the mark browsed some more and pretended interest in a few other items, he haggled with Don over the cost of the coin. Finally they settled on ninety dollars, but Don feels the coin is probably worth five times that amount. The mark left the store without the other items, and without paying for them.

The next day, the mark came back again, did more browsing, and then asked if Don had any more "articles of interest." Don said not offhand, so the mark left his card and asked Don to call him if anything cropped up. Don is angry, feeling like he'd been treated like a doorman, and then told to call if he finds any other coins. Teach asks Don if he's going to "get" the mark, and Don replies, "You know I am."

Teach asks who is going to break into the house. Don says Bob is, and then adds that he's a good kid. Teach says not to send the kid in. He tells Don that he admires his loyalty, and respects what Don is doing in trying to help Bob. But a guy can be too loyal. He has to consider business. If Don wanted the mark's blender, or a Magnavox, it would be fine to send Bob (who Teach repeatedly calls "the kid") in. But this is a real *job*, and Don doesn't want the mark to return and immediately know he's been had. There may be a safe, or at least a good lock or two. The job calls for someone who's not going to mess with silverware or a digital clock.

During his speech, Teach makes a reference to Bob's drug use. Don becomes angry, and tells Teach he doesn't want that mentioned; Bob is clean and trying hard. Teach apologizes.

Don says that Bob is no dummy, and Teach agrees. But he says the job is beyond Bob's ability. Teach points out that this is not a game, where if something goes wrong you just give everything back and get to go home. If there's the least chance that something could go wrong and bring the police in, or if the coins can't be found, then Don shouldn't take that chance. Teach wants to get the mark too. There is no shame in this. And it's

fine that Don takes care of Bob, that's loyalty. But it's in Bob's best interest, too, if he is not sent. Don just cannot afford to take the chance.

Don tells Teach he already set up the plan with Bob. Teach responds that Don set up the plan and then told Bob. Don doesn't deny it. After a long pause, he tells Teach that he gave ten percent to Earl, who put him in contact with the potential buyer. Teach responds that it means ten (percent) off the top, and a forty-five, forty-five split. Don asks about Bob's share, for spying on the mark. Teach replies a hundred, a hundred fifty, or, if they hit big, whatever.

Teach says he will go into the house, while Don "minds the fort." He tells Don that fifty percent of some money is better than ninety percent of the broken toaster that he'll get if he sends Bob. They don't know if there's an alarm, or what would happen if the mark walked in. If "somebody" was nervous and hit the mark with a table lamp it would ruin everything, and all because Don didn't take the time to go first class.

Bob comes back with Don's coffee. Teach tries, none too subtly, to get Don to tell Bob that he's out of the plan. Don wants to wait. Then, Bob asks for an advance on his share of the money. He says he doesn't *need* it, implying that it's not for drugs, but that he really wants it. Don finally agrees to give Bob some money for spotting the mark, and add a loan to it. He tells Bob they're not going to do the job now, but lets Bob think that they may do it later. Eventually, Don tells Bob to just forget about the job. Bob leaves. Teach tells Don that he's doing the right thing for Bob, and that it's the best thing for everyone. Besides, what's done is done.

Don and Teach begin making their plans. Teach wants to have everything well planned out, because if people are loose, they pay the price. He asks for a crash course on coins, so he will know what to take and what to leave behind. He also suggests they should think about what other kinds of things they might take for their trouble. Don says he doesn't know, and Teach admits it's hard to make up rules about this sort of thing.

Don pulls out a book he bought on coin values. Teach looks through it, and asks Don what he thinks is the value of a particular coin. Don guesses thirty-six dollars, and then eighteen sixty. He is shocked to find out the coin is only worth twenty-five cents.

Don asks how Teach is going to get into the house. Teach says he'll find an open window, or some other easy means. People always leave some easy way to get into their home. Don presses the issue, and Teach says he didn't know there was going to be a test. They argue briefly, and finally Teach tells Don not to push him, that he is not "other people."

Then Don surprises Teach by telling him he wants to bring Fletch into the plan. Teach is angry, and states that they do not need him. Don tries to call Fletch on the telephone, but the line is busy. Teach tries to talk Don out of it. He says he is hurt, just as he said about the incident with Grace. Finally he agrees that Fletch might be helpful. They agree to a three-way split, making Fletch an equal partner. Don will continue to try and reach Fletch on the phone. Teach, who hasn't slept since the poker game the night

before, is going to take a nap. He agrees to meet Don and Fletch at the shop at eleven o'clock that night, and exits. Don mutters a comment about "business."

Act 1 Analysis

Unlike many plays, "American Buffalo" is not divided into scenes, and it has only two acts. Many plays have three acts. The entire play takes place in a junk shop. There are only three characters, and very little action. Like most of David Mamet's plays, the emphasis is on dialogue, not events. The dialogue is choppy, and often crude. Some of the lines are in parentheses, meant to show a different, perhaps more reflective mood on the part of the speaker. This is also very typical of Mamet.

As the play opens, Don's disappointment in Bob's failure to fulfill his assignment lays out the underlying themes of the play: business, the drive for money, and the demands business deals make on people. In showing how greed drives Don to betray Bob, Mamet offers a critique of capitalism and its emphasis on "looking out for number one." It's clear that Don likes Bob, but he's also disappointed and a little angry that Bob has failed to successfully accomplish the assigned task of watching someone.

From early on, it is also evident that Don is a sort of mentor, and almost a father figure, to Bob. In some of the early productions of the play a mature actor played Bob, but it has now become fairly standard for a young actor to play him, to emphasize this relationship. Bob is somewhat slow witted, and determined to please Don. In return, Don not only tries to teach Bob how to survive in the world, but also looks out for him. He encourages him to take vitamins, and when Bob complains of how expensive they are, Don says he will pay for them. He attempts to cover up his concern by saying that if Bob is unhealthy he'll be of no use, but the truth is obvious. Don also insists that Bob get something for breakfast when he sends him for coffee.

By using the device of having Don and Teach share their "wisdom" with Bob, Mamet has them reveal their feelings about life, loyalty and success. In a similar way, even though you never meet them, the characters' vivid discussions about Fletcher, and to a lesser extent Ruth and Grace, make them almost become characters in the play.

The first two topics of conversation, Bob's failure to stay at his post, and the poker game the night before, also show the underlying irony of the play. Don talks about how business demands that you complete what you agree to do, that it's action not talk that matters, and that one can't make excuses. He says skill and talent and determination are necessary. And he talks about Fletcher's success at poker. What he doesn't mention, and no one mentions during all the talk in the play, is work. Normally, when someone talks about what is necessary for business success, one of the main things mentioned is hard work. But all the characters in "American Buffalo" are trying to achieve success, what they consider business success, without working at it. Whether by a card game, a robbery, or a chance big sale in a junk shop, the characters are always looking for another "quick deal."

During the discussion of the poker game it also becomes apparent that Bob really likes Ruth and Grace, and Don says he does too, but he has little respect for them. The story about Ruth and Fletcher and the pig iron shows that ethics and legality have little importance to these characters when business is involved. Don says that business is people taking care of themselves, and the unspoken understanding is that it doesn't matter too much how.

Teach walks in swearing about Ruth, and how he feels she mistreated him. His anger builds until he says that the only way to teach people like Ruth and Grace is to kill them. At the time, it seems like Teach just blowing off steam, but it foreshadows his violence at the climax of the play.

Don's good-natured attitude, as opposed to Teach's underlying anger, is shown with subtle humor when he sends Bob out for coffee. He tells Bob to get something to eat, and tells Teach that Bob says he isn't hungry. Teach echoes Don and tells Bob he has to eat. Then Don tells Bob to get Teach something to eat, to get him an English muffin. Teach says he doesn't want an English muffin. Like an overly kind mother, Don tells Bob again to get Teach an English muffin, and Teach says again that he doesn't want an English muffin. Finally, Teach tells Bob to get him an order of bacon, real dry, real crisp, and that if he tells "the broad" it's for Teach, she'll give him more. He also tells Bob not to talk with Ruth if she's at the restaurant. Through it all, Teach keeps making snide comments.

Teach's show of anger continues after Bob leaves. Don and Teach discuss the previous night's card game, and Teach talks about Ruth in foul terms. His anger and filthy language regarding Ruth, Grace, and the cook at the restaurant seem funny in a rough sort of way at this point in the play, but they foreshadow the suspicion and violence that Teach brings to the shop at the play's climax.

Anger and violence are not the only themes that begin in these early scenes that will reach an unexpected conclusion at the end. The comedy that is mixed in, even at the end, also starts off quietly in this scene. In an offhand question, Teach asks Don if he's seen his hat that he thinks he left it there the previous night. Don say's he hasn't seen it, but if Teach left it there, it's there. Teach's hat will come back up in conversation several times, and pay off with an unexpected sight gag at the end of the play. Discussions about seemingly unimportant topics like collectible memorabilia and the weather also introduce factors that will become important as the story moves ahead.

When Bob returns, he tells Don that he saw the mark, and it seems that the action is going to move forward again, Then Bob leaves, and the play returns to Teach complaining, now about how well his bacon is done. Again, this is a deceptive use of humor, because Teach's comments about getting things done yourself foreshadow the logic he will use to convince Don to betray Bob. This comes only a few minutes later, when Teach has learned about the plan to steal the coins. Once this happens, the mood changes, and the play takes on a dark tone.

Teach tries to convince Don to eliminate Bob from the plan and put Teach in his place. As he does this, Teach's ego becomes increasingly dominant. It's clear why he's called "Teach," as he obviously thinks he knows more than anyone else. Don defends Bob when Teach makes a reference to Bob's drug use. Teach apologizes but he also says he's glad the accusation is out in the open. And it's especially obvious that he considers himself superior to Bob, even though he says he likes him and respects Don for all he's done for Bob.

When Bob returns and asks for money, another major theme comes in to play. He won't say why he needs the money, only that it's not for drugs. As events play out it will be discovered that every one of the characters is hiding something from the others.

After Bob leaves, the rest of Act 1 involves Don and Teach making plans for the robbery, and the fateful decision to bring Fletch into the plan. This decision leads to the confrontation and violence at the climax of the play.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act 2 begins later that evening, at the time when Don, Teach and Fletch are scheduled to meet and carry out the robbery. As the act begins, Don is on the phone, obviously upset. As he hangs up, Bob walks into the shop. Don asks what he is doing there, and Bob tells him he has to talk to him. Don asks why, and Bob replies that it's business. Bob says he needs some money. Don asks what for, and Bob says he found a coin, a buffalo head nickel. He asks Don if he wants it.

After a pause, Don asks Bob what he's doing there. Again, Bob says he needs money. Don asks to see it; he has to look at it to know if he wants it. Bob seems surprised, and asks if Don doesn't know if he wants it. Don replies that he probably does, but he needs to know if it's worth anything. Bob says that it's a buffalo, it must be worth something, and Don points out that the question is what is it worth, just like with everything else.

Don asks Bob if he was at the restaurant, and if Fletch was there. Bob says that he wasn't, but that Ruth and Grace were there for a minute.

Bob tells Don that he can tell him what the nickel is. Don replies that the date alone doesn't mean anything, that what's important in a coin is what condition it's in. You have to look it up. But the book is just an indicator.

Don asks Bob what he wants for the coin, and Bob says only what it's worth. Don says he'll look it up, but Bob complains that they still won't know. Don responds that they'll get an idea, an idea they can deviate from. Bob points out that the mark paid ninety bucks, and Bob replies that he was a sucker. He asks Bob if he (Don) is a sucker. As an aside, he also says that he's busy. Bob says that some coins are worth that kind of money, and Don says that oddities, freaks of nature are. He says that the silver in the coin is worth maybe three times the face value, and asks Bob if he wants fifteen cents for the buffalo nickel.

When Bob says that he wants more than fifteen cents for it, Don asks again what he does want for it, and Bob says again that he wants what it's worth. Don asks to see it, and Bob asks why. Don starts to say so that he can look in the book, and then gets angry and says not to let him see it. Bob says the book is meaningless, and Don says the book gives a basis for comparison. He says they can talk, negotiate. Then he asks if Bob needs money.

Bob says that he came to the shop, and pauses. Don asks again what he needs. Then Bob asks why Don is there so late. Bob says that he and Teach and Fletcher were going to play cards. Don asks what time it is.

Just then Teach enters the store. He immediately asks what Bob is doing there. Don asks again what time it is, and Teach asks where Fletcher is. Bob says hi to Teach, and

Teach responds by again asking what Bob is doing there. Bob replies simply that he came in.

Don asks again what time it is, and Teach asks if he's late. Don responds that he is, and Teach says his watch broke. When Don says all he had to do was look at it, Teach says he took it off when it broke.

Both Teach and Don become angry. Teach asks if Don is his keeper all of a sudden. Don replies that when he is paying Teach to do something, he expects to know where he is. Teach says that Don isn't paying him to do a thing, that they are doing something together. He says the broken watch is his concern; the *thing* is both of their concern. He says that jumping all over each other is not good business.

Teach says that he understands nerves. Don says there are no nerves involved. Teach asks what they're talking about, a little lateness, some excusable lateness, and a couple of guys who are understandably a little excited. Don says he doesn't like it. Teach says for Don to not like it, then. He suggests everyone get a writ. He says he has a case, Don has a case. He starts to say Bob has a case, and then pauses, and says he doesn't know what Bob is doing there.

Don tells Teach to leave Bob alone, and the two of them begin to argue over Teach's attitude toward Bob. Trying to make peace, Bob tells Teach that he found a nickel, and shows it to Teach. Teach asks Don if it's worth anything, and Don says they don't know yet. He says they're going to look it up. Teach asks if they're going to do that tonight, and Don says he thinks so.

Don has tried again to call Fletch. He hangs up the phone. Teach asks where Fletch is, and Don says he doesn't know. Teach asks if Fletch said he'd be there, and Don says he did. Teach asks where he is, then, and again asks why Bob is there. Don tells Teach to leave Bob alone, and that he is going to leave.

Teach asks if it's like the bowling league. Fletch doesn't show up, and so they'll suit up Bob and give him a shot. Then he apologizes, and says he spoke in anger. He complains that everyone can make a mistake but him.

Bob says that it's ok, but Don says nothing. Teach continues to explain, and asks Don what he wants him to do. He said he was sorry.

Don tells Bob he'll see him tomorrow, and begins trying to call Fletch again. Bob tells Don that he needs money. Don asks what he needs, and Bob says he wants to sell the buffalo nickel. Teach says he'll buy it, and Bob says they don't know what it's worth. Teach asks Bob what he wants for it, and Bob says fifty dollars. Teach tells him he's out of his mind. He gives Bob a "fin" (five dollars), and tells him to get lost. Bob says it's worth more. Teach asks how he knows that, and Bob says he thinks it is. Teach tells him to keep the fin like a loan, and to keep the nickel, and to leave. Bob says he needs more.

Don still hasn't reached Fletch, and hangs up the phone. Teach tells him to give Bob a couple bucks for the nickel. Bob says they can look in the book tomorrow. Don asks Teach if he bought the nickel. Teach says not to worry about that, just to give Bob some money to get him out of there. Don asks how much, and Teach says he doesn't care. Don asks Bob how much, and then tells Teach he doesn't know why he's supposed to give Bob money. Teach says again to just give Bob some money. Don reaches into his pocket and hands Bob a ten, and then some more money. He asks if that's okay. Bob says they'll look it up. Don agrees that they'll look it up tomorrow.

Bob tells Teach that he should talk to Ruth. Teach asks why. Bob says just "because." Teach just says he'll see Bob tomorrow. They all say goodbye, and Bob leaves.

Teach asks again where Fletcher is. Don says not to worry, that he'll be there. Teach says the question is when he'll be there, and then suggests that maybe Fletch's watch broke. Don agrees that maybe Fletch's actual watch broke. Teach asks if Don is saying that his didn't. He asks if Don wants to make a bet. He bets all the money in his pockets against all the money in Don's pockets that if he walked out the door he would come back with a broken watch. Don tells him to calm down. Teach says he is calm, he's just upset. Don tells him not to worry about it, and Teach asks who is going to worry about it then.

Teach says this should prove something to Don, but Don responds that it doesn't prove anything. Fletch is just late. Teach asks: "And I wasn't?" Don agrees that Teach was, and Teach says he got bawled out for it. Don says Fletch is late for a reason. Teach says he doesn't accept that. Don replies that that's Teach's privilege.

Then Teach asks what Bob was doing there. Don says that Bob told him; he wanted to sell Don his nickel. Teach asks where Bob got the nickel. Don replies that he thinks Bob got it from some guy. Teach asks who, and Don says he doesn't know.

Teach asks again where Fletcher is. Don says again that he doesn't know, but that he'll show up. He picks up the phone again, and dials. Teach asks if they scouted the mark's house. Don says no. Teach says they should do it now, and tells Don to hang up the phone. Don hangs up, and tells Teach that Bob already saw the mark leave with a suitcase. Teach says that they should, just to be sure. Don agrees.

Teach tells Don to call up the mark. Don agrees this is a good idea, and searches for the mark's number. He finds it and dials. Teach starts to tell Don what to do if the mark answers and he tells him to hang up now. Don hangs up. Teach tells Don if the mark answers, don't arouse his suspicions. He says if there is an answer, tell him he's looking for a wrong number. Don gives Teach the phone and the mark's card, and Teach dials. Someone actually answers the phone, and Teach asks if "June" is there. Then he asks about the number he has called. It turns out he misdialed the mark's number, and actually called someone else. Then he gave what he thought was the wrong number, but it was actually the number he dialed. He dials again, and gets no answer.

Teach tells Don that he doesn't mind when he's careful. What gets Teach mad is when Don gets loose. Don asks what Teach means, and Teach says Don knows. He says he came in, and the kid, Bob, was there. Don says Bob doesn't know anything. Teach asks why he was there, then, and Don says to sell him the buffalo nickel. Teach asks if Bob wanted to sell it that night, a valuable nickel. Don says they don't know yet if it's valuable.

Teach asks where Fletch is. Don says he doesn't know, and dials the phone again. Teach says Fletch is not home. Don speaks into the phone, and identifies himself. He says he's looking for Fletcher. Teach asks Don if he's calling the restaurant. Don hangs up. Teach says Fletcher should be horsewhipped with a horsewhip. Don says that Fletch will show up, and Teach begins to complain about the restaurant. He says the way the restaurants' owners act is not free enterprise.

Teach asks Don if he knows what free enterprise is. Don says no, and Teach says that free enterprise is the freedom of the individual to embark on any course he sees fit in order to secure his honest chance to make a profit. He says that the country was founded on this idea.

Don asks Teach if he had a chance to take a nap. Teach says "Big deal," and continues with his philosophical comments. He says that without free enterprise people are just savages in the wilderness sitting around some vicious campfire. He says that's why Ruth burns him up. Don has been on the phone again, and Teach grabs it he listens and then hangs up. He says Fletch isn't home, and they should give up on him. Don says that Fletch will show up. Teach asks Don if he really believes that, and Don says he does. Teach says Don is full of it. Don says not to tell him that. Teach says he talks to Don that way because he respects him. Don asks what has made Teach such an authority on life all of a sudden. Teach says his life, and how he's lived it. Don asks what that means. Teach says it means nothing. But the shot is Don's. He has one night only, and too many guys know what is happening.

Don asks who knows. Teach says he and Don, Bob, Fletcher, Earl, the buyer, and maybe Grace and Ruth. Don says Grace and Ruth don't know. Teach replies "Who knows (if) they know or not." He says that it's not always clear what's going on.

Teach brings up the pig iron deal between Fletch and Ruth. Don asks what happened. Teach says that Fletch stole some pig iron from Ruth. Don mutters that he had heard that. Teach replies that it's a fact, and they have to face facts. Teach says Don has to wake up, or he's going to find that Fletch has done the job by himself.

Don responds that Fletch wouldn't do that. Teach says that Fletch would, that he is an animal. Don says that Fletch doesn't have the address. Teach responds that is wise, and says that they should go get what is theirs. Don says they have a deal with Fletcher. Teach points out that they had a deal with Bob. Don asks what that means, and Teach says it means nothing.

Don now says that Teach is full of it. Teach says that he just has the courage to face some facts. He says that sometimes Don scares him. He says they have a job to do, and they should go. Don says they're going to wait for Fletch. Teach says to give him one food reason why they should wait, and he'll sit down and not say a word. Don says Fletch knows how to get in the house. Teach starts for the door.

Don asks Teach where he's going. Teach says he's going home because Don is messing with him. He says Don is being ridiculous. Don repeats that Fletch knows how to get in, and Teach asks where the mark lives, Fort Knox. He goes on about how easy it would be to get in: break a window, break in the back door. Don asks what if the mark has a safe. Teach says that if there's a safe, there's a combination, and they just have to find it. People always write combinations down because they are afraid they'll forget them. Since they are creatures of habit, the combinations will be written somewhere where they can be found. Teach says he will be able to find the combination in fifteen minutes, tops.

Don says he doesn't know. Teach asks why he is demeaning himself pleading with Don to protect his best interests. He says that if anyone said he would do that for Don, or for anyone, he would call them a liar. He says he is not Fletch, and Don should thank God he is not.

Teach makes fun of Don saying that Fletch is so good at cards. He says Fletch is a cheat, he cheats at cards. Don asks where he gets this from. Teach says nothing. Don presses Teach, and says again that he doesn't believe him. Don says he plays cards with Fletcher, he leaves him alone in his store, and that Fletch could steal from him any time. He says that Teach is just spreading poison, and he doesn't want to hear it.

Teach tells Don to think back to the hand the night before where he lost two hundred dollars. When the hand came down to just Don and Fletch, Fletch spilled his drink. Everyone looked down. When they looked back up, and Fletch showed his cards, he had a king-high heart flush. Then Teach says that when he folded, he folded the king of hearts. Don asks why Teach didn't call Fletch out. Teach replies that he's not Don's keeper, that it's not his responsibility to cause bloodshed.

Teach says Don shouldn't be mad at him, he's not the cheat. He says he thinks Ruth is working with Fletch, although he could be wrong. Don tells Teach not to mess with him, and Teach replies that he doesn't mess with business associates, and he's here with Don to do business.

Teach tells Don to open his eyes. The kid comes in with a coin like the one Don used to have, and then the guy they brought in to the deal doesn't show up. They don't know why Fletcher didn't show up, but they are better off without him.

Teach asks Don what time it is. Don says it's midnight. Teach says he's going out to the mark's house. He asks for the address. Then, Teach pulls out a revolver and starts to load it. Don says he doesn't like it. Teach tells him not to look at it. Don tells Teach that he's serious, and Teach replies that he is, too. Don asks why they need a gun, and

Teach says it helps him to relax. Teach says that if something inevitable occurs and it's the guy or him, he wants a deterrent. Don says he doesn't want it taken along, and Teach says he won't go without it. As they continue to argue, some police go by outside. Teach says the police have the right idea, that they are armed to the hilt. If social customs break down, soon everybody's lying in the gutter.

There is a knock at the door. It's Bob. Teach doesn't want Don to talk to him, but Bob says he has to talk to Don. Finally, Teach pulls Bob into the shop. Bob says he has to talk with Don. Teach says he doesn't have to do anything that they don't tell him he has to do. Bob tells Don that he has been at the restaurant, with Grace and Ruth, and that Fletch is in the hospital.

Teach asks why Fletch is in the hospital, and Bob says he got mugged. Teach says he's full of it. Bob says Fletch got mugged by some Mexicans, and they broke his jaw. Ruth and Grace just got back from the hospital and thought that Don would come over.

Teach begins to prod Don. He asks if Don would have believed this if he had told him this during the afternoon. Don asks Bob when the mugging happened, and Bob says "before." Bob says that they are going to see Fletch tomorrow, in the morning. Don asks if the hospital has hours in the morning. Bob says he guesses so.

Teach says thanks to Bob for coming, and that he did real good in coming to the shop. He says that he and Don really owe Bob something. Bob asks what, and Don says that Teach doesn't know. Bob thanks Teach, and heads for the door. Teach tells him to wait around. Bob says he will, for a minute. Teach asks if he's busy. Bob says he has things to do. Teach asks if he has a date. Bob says no, he has business.

Don asks what hospital Fletch was taken to. Bob says "Masonic." Don says he doesn't think they have visiting hours until after lunch. Bob says they'll go see Fletch then, but he has to leave now. Teach tells him to hold on, that they should take care of him for coming there. Bob says that it's okay, he'll see them later. Don asks Bob what's going on. Bob says nothing is going on. Don asks Bob where he got the nickel. Bob asks what nickel. Don says he knows what nickel. Bob says he got it off a guy he met downtown. Teach asks what he was wearing, and Bob says "things." Don asks how Bob got the nickel from the guy, and Bob says they talked.

Don tells Bob he looks funny. Bob says he's late. Don points out that it's after midnight, and asks Bob what he's late for. Bob says, "Nothing." Very sadly Don asks Bob if he's messing with him. Bob says he's not. Don asks where Fletcher is. Bob replies that he's at Masonic Hospital. Don dials information and asks for the number for Masonic Hospital. Bob says that Fletch might not be there. He says he really doesn't remember what Ruth had said, so he just said it was Masonic Hospital. Don calls the hospital, and finds out Fletcher's not there.

Don begins to question Bob. Bob says that "they" broke Fletcher's jaw. Teach asks who "they" are. Bob says he doesn't know, but they broke Fletcher's jaw. Teach wonders why they just all of a sudden decided to break Fletcher's jaw. Bob says they didn't care that it

was Fletcher. Teach asks who would take him out by accident, and asks if it was Grace and Ruth. Bob says that they wouldn't do that, and Teach responds that he's not saying they would. Bob asks Don what Teach is saying. Teach starts to explain what he's saying and Don interrupts, asking Bob where Fletch is. Bob says he's in the hospital, and Don Teach says, "Aside from that." Bob responds that that's all he knows.

Teach tells Bob not to get smart with him. He says they've been sweating blood all day on this, and they want some answers. Don tells Bob he'd better answer Teach. Bob says he understands.

Teach then tells Bob that loyalty means nothing in a situation like this. He doesn't care what Bob is up to with Grace and Ruth, but he'd better come clean with Teach and Don. Bob says Fletcher may have been in a different hospital. Teach asks which one, and Bob says it could have been any one of them. Teach asks Bob why he said "Masonic," and Bob says he just thought of it.

Teach tells Bob to tell them here and now, for his own protection, what is going on and everything he knows. Don says quietly that he can't believe what's happening. Bob says he doesn't know anything. Don tells Bob to tell Teach what he knows. Bob says he doesn't know anything, and starts to say "Grace and Ruthie…" when Teach grabs a nearby object and hits Bob on the side of the head. Teach begins swearing at Bob and threatening him. When Bob starts to cry, Teach says it doesn't mean anything to him.

Bob calls out to Don, and Don tells him he brought it on himself. Don asks again what hospital Fletcher is in, and Bob says he doesn't know. Teach says he better make one up, fast. Teach tells Don not to back down. Don tells Bob that he has to see their point, that they don't want to hurt him, but he comes in and is the only one who knows the plan.

Just then the phone rings. It's Ruth, and from the conversation it sounds like Bob has been telling the truth about Fletcher. Bob also tells Ruth that Bob isn't at the shop. Don calls another hospital, and finds out Fletcher has been admitted. He asks when visiting hours are. He tells Teach that Fletcher is in the hospital with a broken jaw.

Bob says he feels funny, and Teach notes that his ear hurts. Don tells Bob to tilt his head the other way. Teach says that they've messed up, but that they haven't entirely blown the job. Don tells Bob they'll take him to the hospital, and for him to say that he fell down some stairs and hurt his ear. Don gives Bob money, and tells him to get anything he wants inside the hospital.

Bob says he doesn't want to go to the hospital. Teach tells him he's going, and that's the end of it. Bob says he has to do the job. Don replies that they're not doing the job that night. Bob persists that he wants to do the job, if not tonight, then some other time. Teach insists that he's not going to do it. Finally, Don says it's over. Teach replies that it's not. Don tells him to leave Bob alone. Teach says that he's in it, and it's not over. He asks Bob where he got the coin. Bob says he wants to go to the hospital. Teach asks again where he got the nickel, and tells Don to watch. After a pause, Bob says he

bought the nickel. Teach asks where, and Bob replies that he bought it at a coin store. Teach asks why, and Don tells him to get his car. Teach asks Bob how much he paid for it. Bob tells him he paid fifty dollars.

Again, Teach asks Bob why he paid so much for the coin. Before Bob can answer, Don tells Teach again to get his car. Teach keeps asking Bob why he would do such a thing, and finally Bob says that he did it for Don.

Teach tells Don and Bob that they make his flesh crawl, that he can't take it any more. Don tells Teach that he's through with him because he has "lamed this up real good." Bob says that Teach hit him, and Teach says he did it for Bob's own good, and for the good of all. Don tells Teach to get out. Teach objects, and infers that he thinks Bob is lying. Don tells him he doesn't care. Teach asks if he believes Bob, and Don says again that he doesn't care anymore.

Teach calls Don a fake, and tells him he has no friends. He says it's no wonder Don screws Bob around. Don tells Teach to shut his mouth. Teach replies that Don looks for friends among junkies, that he and Bob are a joke on the street. Don tells Teach again to get out, and Teach refuses.

Quietly, Bob begins to mutter about himself. Don and Teach argue, and Don advances threateningly toward Teach. Finally, Don hits Teach. Teach says that he lives with madmen, and he and Don continue to argue, while Bob keeps muttering. Just before Don hits Teach again, Bob stops him and admits he lied to Don that morning. Teach begins raving, and breaking things in the store. Don tries to calm him down, and finally succeeds.

Teach asks Don if he's mad at him. Don says no, and tells Teach to go get his car. It's raining outside, and Teach asks Don if he has a hat. Don says no. Teach takes a piece of newspaper and begins making a paper hat. Don tells Bob they're taking him to the hospital. Teach looks at himself in the window and says he looks like a sissy. Then he says he will get his car, and honk the horn for Don and Bob to come out.

Don tells Bob he's sorry. Bob says he messed up, but Don replies that he did real good. Bob tells Don he's sorry, and Don replies that it's all right.

Act 2 Analysis

Mamet introduces his theme of "business" at the very start of Act 2. Now, it's Bob who brings it up. It seems as if he's trying to act on the lessons Don and Teach taught him. In the end it is revealed that instead Bob has tried to do an act of kindness for Don, buy a nickel that Don can resell at a profit. It's business, but it's to benefit Don, not Bob. But Bob's act of kindness will bring about suspicion, betrayal, and ultimately violence.

Just as Bob has tried to learn the business lessons others have taught him, he seems to be trying to develop "street smarts" as well. While he and Don are discussing the possible worth of the coin, Bob's suspicions are aroused by Don's presence in the store

so late. He senses Don is trying to hide something from him, and Don betrays Bob by lying to him. He tells Bob that he, Teach, and Fletch are going to play cards. This is not his last betrayal.

When Teach arrives he immediately begins questioning Bob's presence, and the spirit of suspicion grows. Don tries to deflect Teach's suspicion and put him on the defensive by questioning Teach's late appearance. Teach will later use this against Don, when Fletch fails to appear.

Teach's sarcasm turns increasingly hostile as the questions mount up and the tension grows. He shows none of his previous consideration to Bob, and makes snide comments about almost everything Bob says. He wants Bob out of the way, and finally gives him some money, and gets Don to do the same, to get Bob to leave. Bob leaves, saying that he'll come back the next day, look in the coin book, and implies that they'll make a fair deal on the coin. Then Bob leaves.

With Bob gone, Don and Teach begin discussing Fletcher's absence. Although Don denies it, it's obvious he is nervous about the situation. He repeatedly calls Fletcher's number and gets no answer. Teach suggests that they call the mark's house to see if he's there, to ensure that it's safe. After a false start, Teach calls a wrong number, actually gets someone on the phone, and then has to cover up the reason for the call. This is one of the few genuinely humorous moments of the second act.

After getting no answer at the marks home, Don resumes trying to reach Fletcher. Teach continues complaining, about Bob, about Fletcher, about the restaurant. Then he states what is probably Mamet's underlying theme for the play. He says that free enterprise is the freedom of the individual to embark on ant course he sees fit to secure his honest chance to make a profit. And then he says: "The country's founded on this." Don's Resale Shop, and the deals and schemes that revolve around it are, for Mallet, a symbol of America and the American way of life. Teach again condemns Ruth, because she fails to have this vision. And he tries to tie his ideas in to the Holocaust, although his comparison makes little sense.

When Don fails once more to reach Fletcher, Teach suggests that they go ahead without him. When Don refuses, Teach reveals what he has been hiding from Don: that he knows Fletcher cheated in the card game the night before. Teach only reveals this because he stands to gain by letting Don know the truth. He is not motivated by any sense of fairness or honesty, again showing Mamet's theme that even telling the truth about a wrong committed is tainted by self-interest.

Finally Teach announces that he's leaving to commit the robbery. As he prepares to leave, he pulls out and loads a pistol. Don is shocked, and argues with Teach about it. Now, all of Teach's comments about people being deserving to be killed, or horsewhipped, and his other violent statements, are proven to be more than just angry comments made by an irritable person. Teach is truly dangerous.

Before the gun issue can be resolved, Bob returns. He tells Don and Teach about Fletcher being mugged, and they both become suspicious. Despite his affection and protective attitude toward Bob, and despite having just seen how dangerous Teach can be, Don begins to side with Teach against Bob. Mamet's theme again drives the action, as all other considerations are put aside to pursue self-interest.

Then they get the call that Fletcher is really in the hospital. Realizing that Teach attacked Bob when he was telling the truth, Don and Teach tell Bob that they'll take him to the hospital, and make up a story that he fell down some stairs. Bob says he has to do the job, but Don says it's over; there will be no job. Teach presses the issue, and says that the job is not over.

When Teach tries to redeem himself by making Bob admit where he got the coin, Bob's underlying decency is revealed. Bob bought the coin for fifty dollars, planning to sell it to Don for as much, but believing Don could resell it for much more. He put his own money on the line, with no thought of profit, to help his friend. At this point, Don turns on Teach, and violence again erupts. Bob confesses he lied about seeing the mark, and Teach loses control and begins trashing the shop. The violent actions of Don and Teach and Bob's emotional breakdown reflect the barely restrained chaos that has run just beneath the surface throughout the play. Teach, the most violent of the three, ironically complains: "We all live like the cavemen."

Then, the violence subsides. The three men are reconciled, and in a humorous reminder of the early conversation about his lost hat, Teach makes a paper hat out of newspaper to protect his head from the rain when he goes to get his car to take Bob to the hospital. And despite all that happened, Don tells Bob that he did real good, again taking his place as Bob's friend and mentor.

Characters

Bob

Bob is Don's "gopher" and serves him in the dual capacities of coffee-fetcher and surrogate son. While he does listen patiently to all of Don's lessons on how to "do business," the audience also learns that he frequently borrows money from him to support a drug habit. Slow-witted and dull, he is not as talkative nor excitable as Don or Teach, but he does remain faithful to Don, even after he is assaulted by Teach on the grounds that he has betrayed their robbery scheme to other thieves.

Walt Cole

See Teach

Don Dubrow

The owner of Don's Resale Shop, Don is a seller of junk who plans the robbery which drives the play's plot. He is the "business associate" of Teach and a father figure to Bob. Early in the play, he tries to instruct Bob on how to be a "stand-up guy," a conversation that reveals many of his values and assumptions. Using the never-seen Fletcher as his example, he explains that, to succeed, a man needs "Skill and talent and the balls to arrive at your own *conclusions*." According to Don, "Action talks and bullshit walks." Like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Don believes that he understands exactly what qualities are needed for success in the world of "business:" he tells Bob, "It's going to happen to you, it's *not* going to happen to you, the important thing is can you deal with it and can you *learn* from it" Although he appears headstrong when talking to Bob, his own need for lessons in loyalty is exposed when he allows Teach to convince him to cut Bob from the plan.

Teach

As his nickname suggests, Teach is a man who sees himself as a guru-like figure, dispensing parcels of wisdom to Don and Bob. He constantly offers platitudes which seek to instruct the others in the ways that "business" is conducted: "A guy can be too loyal," "Don't confuse business with pleasure," "It's kickass or kissass," and "You got to have a feeling for your subject" are a few of the many "rules" he recites during the play. Teach subscribes to the notion that free enterprise is "The freedom of the *Individual* to Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit" in order to "secure his honest chance to make a profit" and that, without such a code, "we're just savage shitheads in the wilderness." Like Don, Teach believes himself to be adept in the world of deal-making and business. Yet his circumstances reveal his skills to he unprofitable

Underneath Teach's "lessons" runs a current of anger at those who have succeeded in the fields of which he sees himself as an expert. When Don tells him that Ruthie and Fletcher won at last night's poker game because they are good card players, Teach ascribes their victories to cheating rather than skill. His anger at the world and at his own meager place in it culminates in the end of the play, when he smashes the display cases in the junk shop, shouting a new set of "rules:" 'There Is No Law. There Is No Right And Wrong. The World Is Lies. There Is No Friendship."

Themes

Friendship

When *American Buffalo* opens, Don is lecturing Bob on the importance of committing himself to the "business" deal they have made; Bob is supposed to be watching the target of their robbery but has instead returned to the junk shop Don tells him, "Action counts. Action talks and bullshit walks." After Bob apologizes, Don protests, "Don't tell me you're sorry I'm not mad at you." What the audience learns from this remark is that Don is genuinely interested in helping Bob become more astute in the ways of their own brand of business. He tells him that he should model himself after Fletcher, a "standup guy" and card shark who had to "learn" all he knows about becoming a success. Don impresses upon Bob the importance of attitude and intelligence when confronting the business world: "Everything, Bobby: it's going to happen to you, it's *not* going to happen to you, the important thing is can you deal with it, and can you *learn* from it."

Don's father-figure interest in Bob is implied through the advice he offers him on a number of topics. When he sends Bob to the diner to get coffee, he insists that he buy something for himself, since "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day"; later, he urges Bob to take vitamins. His most important lesson, however, is what he tells Bob about friendship: "There's lotsa people on this street, Bob, they want this and they want that. Do anything to get it. You don't have *friends* this life... " The implied end of this sentence "is worth nothing" reveals the high value Don places on friendship and people protecting each other from what he calls the "garbage" of the world. As the play proceeds, Bob is revealed to be a drug addict, frequently asking Don for money to support his habit which Don "lends" him, preferring not to press him for explanations. By the end of the play, however, Don forsakes his friendship with Bob in the name of business an action which causes him a great deal of shame, since he knows he has failed to follow his own advice. The last scene of the play shows their relationship being rebuilt and Don trying to make amends for his doubting the strength of Bob's devotion.

Like Don, Teach seems to hold up friendship as an absolute good. He enters the play cursing Ruthie, a mutual friend, for making a joke when he took a piece of toast off her plate at the diner. Her remark of "Help yourself' causes Teach to rage at her for forgetting all the times he has picked up the check: he tells Don, "All I ever ask (and I would say this to her face) is only she remembers who is who and not to go around with *her* or Gracie either with this attitude. The Past is Past, and this is Now, and so Fuck You.'" Ruthie's remark has hurt Teach because she has not lived up to the code of friendship that he assumes he embodies.

However, when Teach sees the chance to make "real classical money" in Don's robbery scheme, he immediately tries to talk Don into dismissing Bob. Hiding his avarice under the guise of "good business," Teach convinces Don that Bob, although Don's friend, is not a good candidate for such an operation: "A guy can be too loyal, Don Don't be dense on this. What are we saying here? Business." When Don does remove Bob from

the plan and their plot begins to turn awry, Teach suggests that Bob has betrayed them a false implication which, nonetheless, is believed by Don until the final scene of the play, when he realizes that it is he who has betrayed Bob in the name of "good business."

Success and Failure

Don and Teach are small-time gamblers and" thieves who constantly spout aphorisms that they think attest to their "business" savvy: "Things are not always what they seem to be," "You got to keep clear who your friends are," "Don't confuse business with pleasure" and "You got to trust your instincts" are only a few of their many saws. Don lectures Bob on "good business" and Teach tells Don that he should exclude Bob from the robbery because "as a *business* proposition" he "cannot afford" to have someone with his lack of experience break into a house.

Anyone watching the play, however, can see that their theory does not convert into practice. The viewer learns that a poker game took place last night in the shop, where Don "did allright" (very likely a euphemism) and Teach ended the game "Not too good." When the game is discussed, Teach attributes his loss not to his own lack of skill but to Ruthie's cheating: "She is not a good cardplayer," Teach asserts, because her "partner" is always "going to walk around," presumably to glance at everyone's cards. (Teach later claims that Fletcher, last night's winner, cheats as well.) When Teach uses a collector's guide to quiz Don on what coins they should steal from their future victim's collection, Don shows his ignorance in this field by guessing that a certain coin is worth $18.60 instead of its actual worth of twenty cents. Later, when Teach tries to call the collector's house to be sure he is not home, he keeps transposing parts of the phone number, resulting in confusion and frustration instead of the "planning" and "preparation" he desires. Both Don and Teach have fully subscribed to the myths of "business" and how it should be practiced, but both are failures, since all of their knowledge resides in their adages instead of experience.

Deception

American Buffalo's plot is one that relies on implication and innuendo rather than concrete events. When the robbery is being arranged, Don and Teach have agreed to meet Fletcher at the junk shop at 11:00 that night. Bob has been told that he will not be involved and the two would-be criminals are satisfied that their planning will result in a successful "shot"

However, when Teach enters the shop after 11:15 and finds Bob there, the viewer (like the characters) becomes suspicious. Bob is trying to sell Don a buffalo-head nickel, much like the one they had originally planned to rob before Teach entered the play. Don is furious with Teach's tardiness, and Teach is equally furious at Bob's presence in the shop. Their tension grows when Fletcher does not arrive and cannot be reached by phone; Teach then begins insinuating that Bob, Fletcher, and Ruthie have stolen the

coins themselves and that Bob has offered to sell the buffalo to Don because he needs some fast money. When Bob tells them that Fletcher was mugged and has been admitted to the hospital with a broken jaw, Don calls the hospital to check his story and is told that Fletcher was never admitted. Convinced they are being hustled, Teach strikes Bob on the head. Don, Bob's former protector, mutters, "We didn't want to do this to you." The viewer is now completely convinced that Bob has betrayed the two men.

This deception lies not between Bob and the two men, however, but between Mamet and the audience. The playwright leads the viewer to believe that Bob has betrayed Don and Teach and lied about Fletcher's absence. This is not the case: Ruthie calls Don and tells him the name of a different hospital to which Fletcher was admitted and the viewer learns that Bob did not steal the nickel from the intended victim's home. Because of their lust for "business" and assumption that everyone else holds these same cynical values, Don and Teach are eventually deceived by their own attitudes. Teach thus ends the play a speechless fool, and Don must then try to heal his friendship with Bob.

Style

Setting

American Buffalo takes place m Don's Resale Shop, a secondhand "antique" store (really a junk store) run by Don Dubrow. Although Mamet's script never describes the set in any detail, the play's scenic designers have always made a point of filling the stage with as much junk as possible: Clive Barnes (writing for the *New York Times*') called the Broadway set "astonishing" and described it as "an agglomeration of trash that must have taken a team of assistants months to acquire." This same praise was even offered by critics who found fault with the play itself. For example, writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, Edwin Wilson found the play "not heavy enough" but the set to be a "triumph of clutter." The set, therefore, serves as a way for a viewer to instantly create some assumptions about the characters, specifically, that they are lower class, small-time "businessmen" who spend their days surrounded by the debris of other people's success. As Frank Rich of the *New York Times* stated, the junk shop is a "cage emblematic of the men's tragic sociological imprisonment."

However, the setting does more than allow Mamet's trio a space in which to scheme their robbery; it allows the playwright to highlight the notion that the characters are living in a world of metaphorical "junk." Throughout the play, Don and Teach give and receive lessons on such topics as honor, capitalism, and friendship topics which are abandoned and left for "junk" when their robbery plan becomes threatened or when they fear they might miss their chance to make some easy money Although they profess to have solid codes of "business" ethics, their desire to succeed pushes them into a world of moral * 'junk."

Symbolism

The item discussed throughout the play is a buffalo-head nickel that Don sells to a customer for ninety dollars. Deciding that the coin must be worth "five times that" because of the way the customer behaved when buying it, Don plans to rob the coin back from the customer (along with the rest of his coin collection) and sell it to another buyer for more money. Although Don and Teach's robbery is never executed, the coin remains an almost constant topic of conversation between them. Both view the nickel as a representation of the wealth for which they strive and both are certain that stealing the nickel (and the rest of the guy's coin collection) will bring them (as Don states), "real classical money."

Despite the glory they invest in it, however, the coin eventually comes to symbolize the degree to which the two men sacrifice the values in which they seem to so strongly believe at the start of the play. Like the real American buffalo, their friendship, ethics, and trust in each other vanishes and, again like the real American buffalo, these things vanish due to an increasing fervor for riches and power. The beauty of the buffalo herd

and the bonds of friendship are alike in their falling prey to capitalism and Teach's definition of "free enterprise:" "The freedom... of his. Individual.... To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit.. . In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit." As he toes to explain this to Don, Teach echoes one of Mamet' s authorial concerns: "The country's founded on this."

Dialogue

While all playwrights employ dialogue as their primary artistic tool, Mamet is exceptional in that his dialogue often hides or reveals a character's true thoughts or attitudes toward the subject at hand. The dialogue in *American Buffalo* is representative of Mamet's work in that it is highly fragmentary, filled with asides and pauses, and captures the rhythms and nuances found in everyday speech. Comparing the play's dialogue to elevator music, *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll noted Mamet's ability to capture "the dissonant din of people yammering at each other and not connecting." While the characters do talk to each other, they are just as often talking at each other as well, trying to bluff and sound their partners by using seemingly innocuous phrases. For example, when Teach fears that Don and Bob are concocting a robbery scheme without him, he tries to "nonchalantly1' learn about it through a "simple" conversation in which Don does everything to avoid revealing his scheme.

In this conversation, Teach uses words in the same way a person uses a metal-detector on a beach: as the prospector searches for valuable metals, Teach probes his friend's mind to learn whether or not he has been cheated out of his "shot." Both Teach and a prospector hope to find something valuable: a nugget of gold or the plan Don has hatched with "the kid." Don tries to steer him away from the topic by asking him if he has enough money in his meter and being purposefully vague; Mamet's placement of pauses pinpoint when a character is formulating his next attempt to seek out or conceal information. A reader should also note that the lines in parentheses are meant to mark (according to Mamet), "a slight change of the outlook on the part of the speaker perhaps a momentary change to a more introspective regard." While other playwrights offer actors and readers numerous parenthetical adverbs before lines to suggest how they should be said, Mamet asks the actors and readers to consider each speaker's "conversational goal" and how using only the most common words he will try to achieve it. Once this is understood, the inflection and tone of each line should become more clear.

Historical Context

Although written in 1975, *American Buffalo* premiered on Broadway in 1977, in the midst of a theater season notable for its collection of odd and, at times, disturbing array of new characters. The winner of that year's Pulitzer Prize, Michael Cristofer's *The Shadow Box*, concerns the ends of three characters' lives as they wait for the deaths that their respective terminal illnesses will bring Albert Innaurato's The *Transfiguration of Benno Blimpie* examines a frightening mother-son relationship, where the child is filled with food by his mother to compensate for her never having loved him. *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia*, by Preston Jones, looks at old-school southern racism as seen through a bigoted fraternal order. John Bishop's *The Trip Back Down* follows the slow decline of a racecar driver who attempts to find victory one last time. *Ashes* by David Rudkin, is a theatrical yet clinical report of a miscarriage. While the season did have its all-out comedies (such as Neil Simon's *California Suite*, the musical *Annie*, and a remake of *Volpone* titled *Sly Fox*), the New York scene offered audiences a great amount of dark drama.

The 1976-77 season also saw new plays by artists with solid theatrical reputations. Tennessee Williams's *Vieux Carre*, may have been reminiscent of his earlier work in its evocation of a seedy New Orleans populated with troubled souls, but the show closed after only seven performances. Harold Pinter (a playwright whom Mamet has praised throughout his career) offered puzzled theatergoers *No Man's Land*, a play keeping in-tune with other Pinter pieces and their blend of reality and absurdity.

Despite the intensity of the season, however, few audiences and critics were prepared for the brutality and verbal violence *of American Buffalo*. While other plays offered studies of bisexuality (Albert Innaurato's *Gemini*), insanity (Pavel Kohout's *Poor Murderer*) and wife-swapping (Michael Stewart and Cy Coleman's *I Love My Wife*), Mamet's play proved to be the most shocking, primarily due to its unadulterated use of obscenity. Writing in *The Best Plays of 1976-1977*, Otis L Guernsey Jr. stated that Mamet "has mastered a verbal instrument of high quality," but Guernsey also felt that the playwright uses this instrument "to shock and alienate his audience with some of the foulest language ever heard on a stage " Thus, despite the fact that its plot is a relatively common one found in many genres, *American Buffalo* gained a certain notoriety for its use of honest street-talk; while this may not have been surprising in the cinema (*Dog Day Afternoon, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *The Exorcist* were all recent blockbusters that made great use of visual and verbal obscenity), many people still felt that the content of drama would remain more "refined." Since then, the theater world has largely accepted playwrights' use of "foul language," but in 1977 the shock was felt among audiences and critics

Critical Overview

While Mamet's current reputation as an important American playwright is established and secure, *American Buffalo* was the first of his plays to receive intense critical attention. The play premiered on Broadway in February of 1977 (following its successful 1975 debut in Chicago) to reviews ranging as wide as the characters' emotional highs and lows in the play itself. Clive Barnes, writing for the *New York Times*, stated that although this play marked Mamet's first trip to Broadway, "It will hardly be his last," for "This man can write " Like Barnes, other admirers of the play called attention to Mamet's ability to recreate the rhythms of everyday speech heard in the conversations of his lowbrow characters. Likening the play to a "jam session for jazz musicians," *Women's Wear Daily's* Howard Kissel wrote that the "fascination" of the play lies in "noting how the same banal language takes on different colors as we perceive the changing relationships" of the characters. Similarly, Edwin Wilson (writing in the *Wall Street Journal,*) stated that "the language, though limited, is extremely accurate" and that Mamet "has a keen ear for the idiosyncrasies and humor of everyday speech." Perhaps the greatest praise came from *Newsweek's* Kroll, who likened Mamet to British play wnght Harold Pinter (*The Homecoming*) but with his artistic ear "tuned to an American frequency."

Several reviewers, however, were shocked by Mamet's use of obscenity. For example, *Time's* Christopher Porterfield described Mamet's dialogue as "forlornly eloquent" and praised his "infallible ear for the cadences of loneliness and fear," but the critic also remarked that Mamet "revels a bit too much in this scatology and blasphemy." He further suggested that if Mamet were to "Delete the most common four-letter Anglo-Saxonism from the script.. .his drama might last only one hour instead of two." John Beaufort, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, called the play "excessively foul-mouthed" and remarked that its content (like its language) smacked of "gratuitous sensationalism." (These charges against Mamet's dialogue were renewed when his *Glengarry Glen Ross* premiered in 1983.)

Like their opinions of Mamet's idiom, critics were also divided in their perception of *American Buffalo's* themes and reflection of contemporary American life. For example, Irving Wardle, writing in the London Times, stated that a viewer "would have to be tone deaf to miss the music, irony and virtuosity" of Mamet's dialogue but followed this compliment by describing the play as a "suffocating tedium" where the characters are "at a standstill." The National Broadcasting Company's (NBC) Leonard Probst complained that "the center of the play is missing"; The *Daily News* stated that Mamet "promises much more than [he] delivers" and labeled his work "a poor excuse for a play." *The Wall Street Journal's* Wilson wrote that Mamet's characters exist in a vacuum and that they "are too rooted in their own junk, in their own pathetic schemes, in their own fake philosophy to speak for others."

But these critics were not the only voices responding to Mamet's study in anger and shady business several others praised Mamet for creating an almost allegorical tale of capitalism's dark side. Michael Billington, writing in the British *Guardian*, called

American Buffalo a "deeply political play" and one that "makes its points about society through the way people actually behave." Directly contradicting Wilson's remarks, Victoria Radin (of the *Observer*,} praised Mamet's ability to show the characters "without patronage and with respect and even love for these little people" who "resemble the little person in all of us."

American Buffalo's reputation has grown since its first performances. Now regarded as one of Mamet's most representative works, the play is still studied and discussed by scholars of modern American drama. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Patricia Lewis and Terry Browne suggested that the play epitomizes Mamet's style, since it "does not rely on external plot or movement" and offers a "subtle development of character created out of inner movement and conflict." In his essay, "David Mamet: The Plays, 1972-1980," Stephen H. Gale remarked that although the play is "not sufficiently developed or epic enough to be as convincing as it might be," it is an important example of Mamet's career-long study of relationships. Perry Luckett, in *Magill's Critical Survey of Drama*, called *American Buffalo* an "excellent example" of Mamet's "facility for urban speech" and ability to detail "the subtle manifestations of competition, trade, and the drive to acquire that he believes have nearly overwhelmed America "

While critics have disagreed about *American Buffalo'*& relevance and weight, most concur with Kissel, who could be describing many Mamet plays when he writes, "Generally in the theater the relationship between language and action is oversimplified here the distance between the two is stimulating."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Moran is an educator specializing in literature and drama. In this essay, he examines the ways in which Mamet's play explores the characters' beliefs in "The God of Business."

William Butler Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion" ends with the speaker stating that, since he cannot find a theme for his art, he must delve more deeply into his own experience to seek one: "Now that my ladder's gone,/I must lie down where all the ladders start,/In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." Like the speaker of Yeats's poem, the characters in David Mamet's *American Buffalo* are searching for satisfaction which they are sure will bring meaning to their lives in the form of financial success. And, again like the speaker of "The Circus Animals' Desertion," the three men all lose hope that they will ever find it: their "ladders " of friendship and their shared myth of capitalism are systematically stripped away, until they are left pitiful, dejected, and lying like dogs in the "foul rag-and-bone shop" of their hearts.

To hint at the values and assumptions of the three men inhabiting the "foul rag-and-bone shop" of Don Dubrow's Resale Shop, Mamet's play contains an epigraph. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is peeling down the alley in a black and yellow Ford." These lines (attributed by Mamet to a "folk tune") equate God with the automobile one of the foremost symbols of American capitalism and consumerism. Although the characters do not dress in expensive suits or carry briefcases, Mamet uses them to illustrate the ways in which members of the proletariat (lower class) have fully ingested and accepted the myths of American capitalism; as the play progresses, the characters are seen (in various ways) bowing down to the "God of Business." This God, which dictates the way these petty thieves behave, allows them to excuse any betrayals or underhandedness in His name.

By the end of the play, however, the God becomes an angry one, as vengeful as any imagined by Jonathan Edwards (an eighteenth century theologian who spoke frequently of God's wrath toward sinners), and extracts a terrible payment. "Business" is an easy label to use in sugar-coating all kinds of deception, but if the God is invoked too often, He will demand great sacrifices from His believers. As "Don's Resale Shop" is a euphemism for "Don's Junk Store," "Good Business" is a euphemism employed by the characters to, as Mamet has described in an essay for the London *Times*, "suspend an ethical sense and adopt in its stead a popular accepted mythology and use that to assuage [their] consciences like everyone else is doing " What the play specifically examines is the way that one man Don becomes an acolyte of the God of Business to the point where he almost loses the one thing that gives his life *human* (rather than financial) meaning: his relationship with Bob.

The opening scene of the play establishes Don and Bob's relationship, which initially mirrors that of a teacher and student. Scolding Bob for not watching the house of the man they intend to rob, Don tells him "You don't come in until you do a thing" and that "Action counts." Bob keeps offering excuses until Don states, "I'm not mad at you."

While a viewer may find this surprising due to the tone of Don's reprimands, a further conversation reveals that Don is genuinely interested in Bob's future and ability to operate in then: low-class world of business: he tells Bob, "If you want to do business," then excuses "are not good enough." Bob must have "skill and talent and the balls" to arrive at his "own conclusions," or he will never succeed. Don invokes the God of Business in the form of Fletcher, an offstage gambler and minor business deity who embodies all of the values Don wants to impart to Bob: "You take him and put him down in some strange town with just a nickel in his pocket, and by nightfall he'll have that town by the balls. This is not talk, Bob, this is action."

According to Don, Fletcher "was not born that way," but he had to "learn" how to be a success, and this idea that open eyes and intelligence will lead to financial success is the crux of Don's myth and lesson: "Everything, Bobby: it's going to happen to you, it's *not going*, to happen to you, the important thing is can you deal with it, and can you *learn* from it." (While Clive Barnes wrote in the *New York Times* that their relationship "may be homosexual," this seems both unlikely and irrelevant to the issue of friendship sacrificed for business that Mamet explores.) Unlike one based on business, their relationship offers returns not financial but emotional Don offers Bob the idea that he can be a success and Bob offers Don his devotion and discipleship. Together, they mimic a father-son relationship that each of them is lacking in his life outside the junk shop.

When Teach enters the shop, however, the mood of the play changes from one of quiet bonding to one of fury. His opening harangue about a begrudged piece of toast reflects *his* ideas about friendship and its attendant duties:

"So Grace and Ruthie's having breakfast, and they're done. *Plates... crusts* of stuff all over... Down I sit. 'Hi, hi.' I take a piece of toast off Grace's plate and she goes 'Help yourself.' Help myself I should help myself to a piece of toast it's four slices for a quarter. I should have a nickel every time we're over at the game, I pop for coffee...cigarettes...a *sweet roll*, never say a word...But to have that shithead turn, in one breath, every fucking sweet roll that I ever ate with them into *ground glass* (I'm wondering were they eating it and thinking "This guy's an idiot to blow a fucking *quarter* on his friends)...this hurts me, Don. This hurts me in a way I don't know what the fuck to do."

As with Don and Bob, Teach sees friendship as a form of give-and-take between its participants but with an important difference: Teach bases it not on emotional grounds, but material ones. While arguing about a piece of toast may seem trivial, Teach's monologue illustrates the degree to which he believes that friendship is a means of sharing *things* rather than emotions a characteristic that will resurface later, when he convinces Don to cut Bob from the robbery plan Ironically, Teach complains that there "is not one loyal bone in that bitch's body," but later convinces Don to be disloyal to Bob so that Teach can become part of the robbery plot.

Teach's name reflects his assumptions about himself and what he sees as his knowledge of human nature and business. Throughout the play, he offers dozens of aphorisms that he uses to boost his own self-image. When looking through the coin

collector's guide, he tells Don that there is "one thing" that makes "all the difference in the world----- Knowing what the fuck you're talking about. And it's so rare, Don. So rare." His lament for the stupidity of the world, of course, naturally excludes himself as a part of it. Unlike the lessons of Don, which are carried out in practice until Teach begins to (as Don calls it) "poison" his mind, Teach5 s lessons are hollow and reflect his understanding not of real business, but the *myth* of American capitalism "You got to have a feeling for your subject," "It's kickass or kissass," and "You want it run right, *be* there" may be theoretically true but are never practiced by Teach, whose legitimate "job" (if he even has one) is never alluded to by any of the characters. And almost as if to answer the charge of, "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich," Teach has a stockpile of excuses for his low-class status, including the assertion that his companions cheat while playing cards One of his most ludicrous excuses is voiced when he hears Don tell him how much old antiques are worth: he mutters, "If I kept the stuff I threw *out*... I would be a wealthy man today. I would be cruising on some European yacht." Don simply replies with an "Uh-huh," for he knows that despite all of the noise he makes, Teach is a junk shop Polonius (a wise counselor from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet,*) and an negative example of the "action talks and bullshit walks" philosophy.

While Teach's adages may be empty, he is flamboyant and convincing, and it is his skill as an orator that begins to corrupt Don, leading him to accept Teach's dictums. Although Don claims to know the difference between "talk" and "action," he, too, has enough greed within him to begin believing Teach's ideas; the card game that took place the night before in the junk shop serves as the perfect metaphor for the way that Teach and Don begin to interact. Poker is a game combining business and friendship: one plays with his comrades but the ultimate goal is to win their money. The rewards are not emotional, but financial, and these are won by the means of being HTzfriendiy bluffing, being secretive, and even cheating Although Teach is a friend of Don's and obviously has some sort of shared past with him, he employs cardplaying skills rather than sincerity to edge his way into Don's plan and ultimately make him forsake Bob. Like Shakespeare's King Duncan (in *Macbeth*) who states, "There's no art/To find the mind's construction in the face" only to later be assassinated by the traitorous Macbeth, Don is adept at offering advice but less able to apply it to his own practices. This is especially true given that Don sees Bob not himself as the one in need of guidance.

Don is also not as distant from Teach as he might think. When telling the story of "the guy" who entered the shop and bought the nickel for ninety dollars, he brags of his business acumen, saying, "he tells me he'll go fifty dollars for the nickel So I tell him (get this), 'Not a chance.'" He then tells Teach that the buyer's behavior suggested "it's worth *five* times that" and then begins to focus more on the buyer's personality rather than his wallet: "The next day back he comes and he goes through the whole bit again. He looks at *this*, he looks at *that*... And he tells me he's the guy was in here yesterday and bought the buffalo off me and do I have some other articles of interest.... And so I tell him, 'Not offhand....' He leaves his card, I'm s'posed to call him anything crops up.... He comes in here like I'm his fucking doorman.... He takes me off my coin and will I call him if I find another one. .. Doing me this favor by just coming in my shop." Don's depiction of the buyer as a pompous con-artist who "takes him off allows him to justify -to himself and to Teach that the buyer deserves to be robbed. Rather than accept his lack of business

sense, Don (like Teach) blames another for his being taken as a rube. *Not* stealing back the coin would simply be bad business.

It is this fear of being untrue to the God of Business that causes Don to accept Teach's terms. Although he insists that Bob is a "good kid" and deserves a * 'shot" at the robbery, Don is swayed by the siren song of Teach's capitalistic rhetoric: "A guy can be too loyal," Teach tells him. "Don't be dense on this." Urging Don not to "confuse business with pleasure," Teach begins a rapid-fire assault on Don's desire to remain faithful to Bob and brings up an incident when Bob had obviously failed them: "We both know what we're saying here. We both know we're talking about some job needs more than the kid's gonna skin-pop go in there with a *crowbar*." Still faithful to Bob, Don becomes enraged at Teach's insinuation of Bob's drug use and states, "I don't want you mentioning that.... You know how I feel on that" When Teach offers an apology, Don remarks, "I don't want that talk only, Teach. You understand?... That's the only thing " Although he is firm in his protection of his ward, Don is already beginning to see the upcoming job as one in which business, not friendship, will have to be considered.

Teach remains undaunted: "All I'm saying, the job is beyond him. Where's the shame in this7 This is not jacks, we get to go home we give everything back. Huh?... You take care of *him, fine*. (Now this is loyalty.) But Bobby's got his own best interests, too. And you cannot afford (and simply as a *business* proposition) you cannot afford to take the chance." When Don asks for a moment to consider this new idea, Teach becomes angry and resorts to sarcasm: "You don't even know what the *thing* is on this. Where he lives. They got alarms?... And what if (God forbid) the *guy* walks in? Somebody's nervous, whacks him with a table lamp you wanna get touchy and you can take your ninety dollars from the nickel shove it up your ass the good it did you and you wanna know *why*?... Because you didn't take the time to go first-class." Anyone sharing Don's belief in the "black and yellow Ford" of the American Dream would naturally want to "go first-class," and therefore Don agrees to cut Bob from the deal. When he informs Bob of his decision, Don gives him fifty dollars, which the viewer and Teach assume is for drugs but which Don feels too shameful to confront, since he had previously insisted to Teach that "the fucking kid's clean. He's trying hard, he's working hard." Thus, in a moment of guilt, Don has effectively paid off his conscience in order to follow Teach's ideals of business.

Like so many fictional crime-capers, however, the plan falls apart once everything is set in place and it is through this turning awry of the scheme that Mamet intensifies the previous Act's examination of business and friendship. Act Two begins at 11:15 that evening and Don is anxious over the fact that both Teach and Fletcher are missing. When Bob arrives, however, with a buffalo-head nickel to sell to Don, he becomes momentarily suspicious he asks Bob if he saw Fletcher or Teach at the diner and Bob responds, "No. Ruth and Gracie was there for a minute." Don's reply "What the fuck does that mean?" hints at his fear of being swindled. When Teach enters, Don forces him to bear the brunt of his nervousness and scolds him for his tardiness. Teach, however, is annoyed at Bob's presence and fears that Don has weakened his commitment to their now-shared ideals, he asks Don where Bob got the nickel and implies, through his pauses, that all is not as it should be:

TEACH: And what was Bob doing here'

saw the buyer leave his house on a vacation earlier that day, as he reported. Bob made up the story lo win back the good graces of Don, after he scolded him that morning for abandoning his post. Furthermore (and unbelievable as it may seem), he bought the buffalo-head nickel "in a coin store," as he originally claimed. "For Donny." The very fact that the audience is shocked by these revelations reveals the degree to which *they* like Teach and Don have accepted the myth of business, for if a viewer of the play assumes that Bob has been lying, he can see just how much the notion of the "dog eat dog" world has affected his attitudes and assumptions. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, "When you look into the abyss, the abyss looks back into you."

Teach"s response to this revelation is a physical manifestation of his intellectual and moral outrage. Brandishing a dead-pig-sticker he toyed with earlier in the play, he begins smashing everything in the shop, proclaiming a series of newfound adages. Unlike his earlier ones, however, these are formed from his own despair and humiliation at discovering that his myth of the God of Business is just that a myth: "My Whole Cocksucking Life. The Whole Entire World. There Is No Law. There Is No Right And Wrong. The World Is Lies. There Is No Friendship. Every Fucking Thing. Every God-forsaken Thing." He continues his ranting and ultimately concludes that, although he is "out there every day," there is "nothing out there." The "nothing" here is the emptiness of his own rhetoric and all of his accepted wisdom. Earlier he preaches to Don that without the ideals of free enterprise, "We're just savage shitheads in the wilderness." Now, however, he knows that his God of Business is an invention and that, when all of the aphorisms are laid bare. "We all live like the cavemen." He exits the play apologizing to Don for wrecking his shop and wearing a paper hat that he makes to protect himself from the rain. Despite his former beliefs and convictions, he is now (in his comical cap) the dunce of his own myth.

While Don waits for Teach to return with his car so they can take Bob to the hospital, he and Bob resume the quiet conversational tone which was interrupted by Teach. Bob is apologetic and repeatedly says, "I'm sorry. I fucked up." But rather than return to his stance from the beginning of the play, Don consoles him with. "No. You did real good.... That's all right.. .. That's all right." Don knows that he should have taken his own advice, such as when he told Bob. "Things are not always what they seem to be" and that he must now try to heal

DON. He told you He wanted to sell me the nickel.

TEACH. That's why he came here?

DON. Yes.

TEACH: To sell you the buffalo'

DON: Yes

TEACH. Where did he get it?

DON: I think from some guy

TEACH' Who" *Pause*

DON-1 don't know. *Pause*

TEACH- Where's Fletcher*?

DON I don't know. He'll show up.

Although Don has already displayed a slight suspicion about the coin, he refuses to mention this to Teach for fear of betraying Bob. But since Teach is not as soft-spoken or loyal to anything except his God, he again (as he did in Act One) attempts to make Don have "the balls to face some facts" and offers his own interpretation of events: "You better wake up, Don, right now, or things are going to fall around your *head*, and you are going to turn around to find he's took the joint off by himself." Don still clings, however, to the shreds of loyalty and friendship left in his heart until Teach begins working him from a different angle, explaining that Fletcher cheats at cards. The viewer knows that this story is false, but Don, in his anxious state, begins believing it because Teach is able to answer each of his protests against it: when Don asks him why he never exposed Fletcher as a cheat, Teach replies, "It's not my responsibility to cause bloodshed. I am not your keeper. You want to face facts, okay." Don is at his weakest here and again refuses to accept the notion that he may have been a dupe for another "business associate." And because he senses this about Don, Teach begins a fresh assault on all of the values that Don has tried to uphold for the entire play:

I don't fuck with my friends, Don. I don't fuck with my business associates. I am a businessman, I am here to do business, I am here to face facts.

(Will you open your eyes'.) The kid comes in here, he has got a certain coin, it's like the one you used to have ... the guy you brought in doesn't show, we don't know where *he* is (*Pause*)

Something conies down, some guy gets his house took off. (*Pause*)

Fletcher, he's not showing up All night Let's say I don't know why. Let's say you don't know why. But I know that we're both better off. We are better off, Don.

Like Othello, Don has been convinced by the "plausibility" of one who plays upon his most secret fears, and while Teach is no Iago (the villain in Shakespeare's *Othello*, who turns the title character against his wife), he is able to use language to transform the opinions and previously-held values of his "superior " Earlier in the Act, Teach defines "free enterprise" as "The freedom ... of the *Individual*... To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit.... In order to secure his chance to make a profit." Here, Teach is a hell-for-leather caricature of capitalism, "embarking" on a "course" founded on innuendo and insinuation in order to "make a profit," disregarding Don's concerns over loyalty to Fletcher and protection of Bob.

Teach, however, does not exist in a vacuum, and in order to demonstrate the prevalence and ubiquity of his mythology, Mamet engages in a daring theatrical maneuver at the climax of his play. When Bob returns to tell Don that Fletcher was mugged and is in the hospital with a broken jaw, Teach insists that he is lying and Don now unable to trust anyone except the man who has been filling him with half-truths for the last half hour calls the hospital to verify the story. When he is told that Fletcher was not admitted, he and Teach begin grilling Bob about the nickel and Fletcher's absence. The audience is completely convinced at this point that Fletcher, Bob, and possibly Grace and Ruthie have plotted against Don and Teach Bob can offer no answers to any of their questions and Teach finally is possessed by the God of Business, punishing he whom has doubted His powers:

TEACH I want you to tell us here and now (and for your own protection) what is going *on*, what is set *up* . where *Fletcher* is . and everything you know.

DON: (*sotto voce*) I can't believe this

BOB I don't know anything.

TEACH You don't, huh?

BOB No

DON: Tell him what you know, Bob.

BOB I don't know it, Donnie. Grace and Ruthie

TEACH' (*grabs a nearby object and hits Bob viciously on the side of the head)* Grace and Ruthie up your ass, you shithead; you don't fuck with us, I'll kick your fucking head in

Although a viewer would not condone Teach's action here, he can certainly appreciate his frustration at being betrayed. Even Don, Bob's former protector, states to Bob, "You brought it on yourself."

But this is the moment where the entire play finds its meaning and where Mamet lays down his winning hand: Ruthie then calls and says that Fletcher was admitted to the hospital which is verified when Don calls a different hospital from the one he had tried before. Bob then tells the men, "I missed him" which they discover means that he never the physical and emotional wounds caused by his forsaking friendship for the God of Business. As Mamet said in the *New Theatre Quarterly*, Don "undergoes recognition in reversal realizing that all this comes out of his vanity, that because he abdicated a moral position for one moment in favor of some monetary gain, he has let anarchy into his life and has come close to killing the thing he loves " Don has almost left his friend to the same fate as the real American buffalo, which moved in herds of their own comrades but whom were also destroyed by the wave of capitalism and Teacher-defined "free

enterprise" that swept the country. He is back in the "foul rag-and-bone shop" of his heart and must now rebuild his friendship with Bob if he is ever to find another "ladder" again. The "black and yellow Ford" has crashed, leaving the three men staring at the wreckage,

Source: Daniel Moran, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

Barbera argues in this essay that, despite characters who lack true intellect, Mamet's play is a work of high intellectual content that adroitly chronicles a facet of American existence.

David Mamet, currently an associate director of Chicago's Goodman Theater, was born in Chicago in 1947 and grew up on the city's South Side. He attributes his sense of dramatic rhythm in part to a job during his high-school years as busboy at Second City, the famous Chicago improvisational cabaret After several years in New England attending college and working at various theaters as a house manager and actor, Mamet returned to his native city and a series of odd jobs which included a stint teaching theater classes at the University of Chicago. Some of his plays were staged at small Chicago theaters during the early '70's including the St. Nicholas Theater of which Mamet was a founding member and first artistic director. The title of my essay is a pun on the title of a play for which Mamet received the Joseph Jefferson Award (best new Chicago play) in 1974, and later an Obie Award, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. So there is some reason to associate him with that city! It is the setting of many of his plays, including the one I shall examine here For *American Buffalo* Mamet again received an Obie, and it was named the best play in 1977 by the New York Drama Critics' Circle.

I say the setting of *American Buffalo* is Chicago, but in the text of the play the scene specified is "*Don's Resale Shop. A junk shop,*" and the city is not mentioned. There are telltale signs of locale however The traveler from New York to Chicago still encounters verbal differences: "soda" becomes "pop," for example, and "bun" becomes "sweet roll." So a Manhattan audience attending *American Buffalo* knows Teach is not from the Big Apple when he vividly complains "But to have that shithead turn, in one breath, every fucking sweet roll that I ever ate with them into *ground glass* ... this hurts me, Don." And a Chicago audience, when it hears a passing reference to "Lake Shore Drive," knows the setting is, as it were, the neighborhood. A sophisticated Chicago audience also recognizes the allusion in the following bit of dialogue:

TEACH: (... *Indicating objects on the counter*) What're *these*?

DON: Those?

TEACH: Yeah.

DON: They're from 1933.

TEACH: From the thing?

DON: Yeah. (*Pause*)

...

TEACH: They got that much, of it around?

DON: *Shit* yes. It's not that long ago. The thing, it ran two years, and they had (I don't know) all kinds of people every year they're buying everything that they can lay their hands on that they're going to take it back to Buffalo to give it, you know, to their aunt, and it mounts up.

The "thing" that ran two years was the 1933 World's Fair held in Chicago in celebration of the city's 100th anniversary. Although it took place during the Great Depression, the Century of Progress Exposition was so popular it was held over for another year and attracted 100 million people.

Aside from the few specifically Chicago allusions in *American Buffalo*, Don's Resale Shop could be located in any number of large American cities What is important is not Chicago, but a particular kind of urban American subculture urban because one does not imagine a character like Teach, his staccato manner, in rural Kansas, say, or Mississippi. And one is more likely to imagine a junkie like Bobby in an urban setting. But it is the characters' street language which is worth examining for a moment, because it has stirred controversy among the critics. Gordon Rogoff concluded that, "With friends like [Mamet] ... words don't need enemies," and Brendan Gill wrote of the play's "tiresome small talk," which attempts "in vain to perform the office of eloquence. ..." Jack Kroll, however, praised the "kind of verbal cubism" in which Mamet's characters speak, saying the playwright "is someone to listen to .. an American playwright who's a language playwright" and who is "the first playwright to create a formal and moral shape out of the undeleted expletives of our foul-mouthed tune."

I find myself in tune with Kroll. In any assessment of *American Buffalo* Mamet's use of language must be regarded as an achievement. If the vocabulary of men such as Bobby, Teach and Donny is impoverished, Mamet's rendering of it reminds us that vocabulary is only one of the resources of language Teach does have an eloquence when expressing his sense that he has been abused. Galled by Grace and Ruthie, he tells Don:

Only (and I tell you this, Don) Only, and I'm not, I don't think, casting anything on anyone from the mouth of a Southern bulldyke asshole ingrate of a vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come.

This sentence, so politely diffident at first, lets fall its invective in a rain of hammering trochees. It is marvelous invective, more vivid than that in James Stephens's "A Glass of Beer," and ironic to boot, for in the most vulgar language Teach has denounced as "trash" Grace's sarcastic remark, "'Help yourself.'" Teach is constantly undercutting himself this way, as when he says, again referring to Grace and Ruthie, "The only way to teach these people is to kill them." In Act 2, Don does not want him to take a gun on a robbery, and Teach replies that of course the gun is not needed:

Only that it makes me comfortable, okay17 It helps me to relax So, God forbid, something inevitable occurs...

The urban nature of the language in *American Buffalo* is a matter not just of its street vulgarity, or expressions such as "skin-pop" and "He takes me off my coin ...," but also of an abbreviation characteristic of urban pace. One of my Mississippi students told me she had a job in Manhattan which required her to answer the telephone saying, "Hello, this is so-and-so of the such-and-such company." A typical caller responded, "I like your accent honey, but could you speed it up7" Teach telescopes "probably" into "Prolly," and utters such staccato sentences as: "He don't got the address the guy?", and, "I'm not the *hotel*, I stepped out for coffee, I'll be back one minute." Such elliptic expression is a matter not of Mamet's invention, but of his ear for how some of us speak these days. On the Dick Cavett TV show (Mamet appeared on November 29, 1979 and January 16, 1980), Mamet mentioned entering an elevator and hearing a woman say, "Lovely weather, aren't we?"

Besides the play's language, a second critical issue which has resulted in opposing assessments of *American Buffalo* is that of its content, or lack of it. Gill complained, in the review I have already mentioned, that the play provides the meager and familiar message "that life, rotten as it is, is all we have." And in a review in *America*, Catharine Hughes found that what happens in the play "too often seems much ado about very little " Before I proceed with a defense of *American Buffalo* as being of intellectual interest, and as going beyond the "message" Gill found in it, a capsule of the plot seems in order.

In his late forties, Don Dubrow is conversing with the much younger Bob about a man Bob is supposed to watch. Four major motifs emerge from their conversation: friendship, looking out for oneself, business, and being knowledgeable Teach enters Don's junk shop and, while Bob is getting coffee, learns of Don's plan to rob the man Bob has been watching. After the man spotted a buffalo-head nickel in Don's shop and purchased it for ninety dollars, Don concluded it must be worth much more and that the man must have other valuable coins. Teach talks Don into cutting him in on the robbery, and convinces him Bobby is too young and, as a junkie, too unreliable to be part of it. That night the plan goes awry and Teach, in anger and frustration, "*hits* BOB *viciously on the side of the head*." This unjust attack stirs Don against Teach, and restores the solicitude toward Bobby we noticed in Don at the start of the play Even in this low-life ambiance, in effect, there is some decency. Though all three characters are losers, the friendship between Don and Bobby is something of worth.

It is in the relationships, tensions and contradictions in the patter of Don and Teach, concerning the motifs I mentioned, that the "content1' of this play resides. Take the motif of business. Don tells Bobby that in business deals intentions are not good enough: "Action talks and bullshit walks." And a bit later he defines business as "common sense, experience, and talent." This soon turns into, "People taking *care* of themselves " But if business is looking out for oneself, what is the relation between business and friendship? In passing, Don and Bobby have been discussing a business deal between Fletch and Ruthie. It seems that Fletch purchased some pig iron from Ruthie and made such a profit on it that Ruthie felt cheated. Was it unfair of Fletch to profit so much from a friend? Don, who defends Fletch, saying, "That's what business *is*," and "there's business and there's friendship, Bobby . .", goes on to say, "what you got to do is keep clear who your friends are, and who treated you like what." But that is clearly what

Ruthie has done, and that is why she is angry with Fletch and feels he stole from her Later we learn that when Don imagines the nickel he sold for ninety dollars must be worth much more, he feels *he* was robbed so much for "That's what business is." Contradictions and elaborations on "business" continue through the play. A funny definition of free enterprise will stand as a last example:

TEACH: You know what is free enterprise?

DON: No What?

TEACH: The freedom...

DON: ...yeah?

TEACH: Of the *Individual*...

DON: ...yeah?

TEACH: To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit.

DON: Uh-huh...

TEACH: In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit. Am I so out of line on this?

DON: No...

TEACH: The country's *founded* on this, Don. You know this.

Of course the individuals in this case see fit to embark on robbery. Part of Mamet's intent in *American Buffalo* is to expose the shoddiness of the American business ethic by having his low-lives transparently voice it. He said as much in an interview with Richard Gottlieb:

"The play is about the American ethic of business," he said "About how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ediical compromises called business. There's really no difference between the *lumpenproletariat* and stockbrokers or corporate lawyers who are the lackeys of business," Mr Mamet went on. "Part of the American myth is that a difference exists, that at a certain point vicious behavior becomes laudable [*New York Times*, January 15,1978]."

Mamet got the idea of an identical ethical perversity existing at both ends of the urban economic spectrum from Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) the American sociologist, economist, satirist, and sometime Chicagoan. In considering the relation between Veblen's thought and *American Buffalo*, one should start with Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). His theory of the leisure class is related to his theory of business enterprise in that Veblen saw businessmen as involved with the pecuniary and predatory interests of ownership, rather than with the industrial and social interests of

production. Teach is a good example of a Veblen "lower-class delinquent," and Veblen's ideas of emulation, and of the snob appeal of what is obsolete, are relevant to the play the latter, especially, as it applies to collecting rare coins and World's Fair memorabilia.

That Mamet is justified in expecting an audience to accept his play's small-time criminals as representative of American businessmen is arguable. One way of understanding the play's title mainly applies to them as members of a marginal class of society In a review of the play for the Nation, Harold Clurman wrote: "Look at the face of the coin, as reproduced on the show's playbill. The buffalo looks stunned, baffled, dejected, ready for slaughter The animal is antiquated, and the would-be robbers are a mess The combination is symbolic " Don and Teach and Bobby are as antiquated and out-of-it as the American buffalo or bison (successful American businessmen may or may not be ethical, but they are not marginal). We must admit that Don and Teach and Bobby are dumb They are not even streetwise, though Don and Teach may think they are. Fletch probably is streetwise consider the pig-iron deal, or the fact that he won at cards in the game in which Don and Teach lost. They admire and resent his success, and feel they have been cheated. They are envious of anyone who is knowledgeable and successful, such as the man who purchased the coin. Knowledge, an important motif in the play, is the key here. "One thing Makes all the difference in the world," says Teach. And when Don asks, "What?", he replies, "Knowing what the fuck you're talking about. And it's so rare, Don. So rare." Of course Teach does not know what he is talking about, as we learn in the routines about which coins are valuable, where the man would keep his coins, how to get into his house, and what to do about a safe.

This contradiction leads us to the other way of understanding the tide, a way which applies to the characters as representatives of the business class as well as representatives of a class of urban marginal crooks. For "buffalo" read the slang verb "to intimidate." It is because he does not know anything that Teach must try to buffalo Don. And it is common for businessmen to buffalo the public: "The windfall profits tax will dry up America's oil," and "If you don't buy this laxative no one will love you." Fletch evidently can buffalo successfully; Standard Oil can; Teach cannot (aside from Don, who buys his line, "Send Bobby in and you'll wind up with a broken toaster"). But to buffalo is as American as to bake an apple pie. Notions of the American way-democracy and free enterprise become corrupted when they enter the look-out-for-number-one rationalizations of crooks and unethical businessmen. Down-and-outs in a democracy may feel they have been cheated because "all men should be equal." Knowledge creates divisions among people, divisions of power and wealth, but such divisions can seem undemocratic, un-American. So robbing and cheating are attempts to restore justice. Or, "In America one is free to make a fortune for himself turns into Teach's definition of free enterprise. My modest conclusion is that in satirizing such corrupt notions Mamet *has* written a play of intellectual content.

Source: Jack V. Barbera, "Ethical Perversity in America-Some Observations on *David Mamet's American Buffalo" in Modem Drama*, Volume XXIV, no. 3,1981, pp 270-75.

Critical Essay #3

While finding Mamet's knack for dialogue admirable, critic Rogoff complains that Mamet's play apes crime films from the 1940s and 1950s without the benefit of those dramas' clever story lines. Rogoff acknowledges that Mamet achieves his dramatic goals although those goals are too modest for the critic's tastes.

David Mamet is apparently listening to America's lower class. The news he brings back in his new play, *American Buffalo* (at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway), is that Americans living on the dark underside of small business and petty crockery speak of macho frustrations almost entirely in four-letter words. If the news doesn't seem new or persuasive, that may be because we have heard more antiseptic versions of it on big and little screens, where with a little soap in their mouths--*American Buffalo's* (no of charmless deadbeats would be more at home.

Robert Duvall' s Walter Cole (known as Teacher) is the latest in a long line of Stanley Kowalskis trying to mimic the language they think businessmen use. Some of the linguistic turns are cleverly heard: Teacher-Kowalskis do like to say words like *averse, deviate, instance*; and they love to talk about planning, preparation, business propositions, and facing facts. Duvall's performance has as much body in it as it does dirty English, but it is more an expert impersonation of an archetype than an enactment of an authentic event.

How could it be otherwise? Mamet is imitating a hundred Bogart, Cagney, Robinson, and Brando movies, and he's not bad at the job. His dialogue has some of the vivacity missing from those movies. They were better at plot, however, and they didn't always treat Bogart and company like dummies. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Wilmer wasn't bright, but he had dignity. Mamet patronizes his trio: he is out to kill and get laughs. Modest ambitions, modestly achieved.

Source: Gordon Rogoff," Albee and Mamet The War of the Words" in *Saturday Review*, Volume 4, no 13, April 2, 1977, pp. 37.

Adaptations

American Buffalo was adapted as a film in 1996, starring Dustin Hoffman as Teach, Dennis Franz as Don, and Sean Nelson as Bob. Mamet wrote the screenplay and Michael Corrente directed. It is available from Samuel Goldwyn Home Video

Topics for Further Study

Look at some current bestsellers that offer their readers techniques for success in the workplace: are any of the values or assumptions suggested by their authors like those held by the characters in *American Buffalo*?

Compare and contrast the business ideals of *American Buffalo's* characters with those found in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. How do characters in Miller's play (such as Willy, Ben, and Howard) offer the viewer attitudes about business similar to or different from those seen in Don and Teach"?

Compare and contrast Mamet's depiction of "good business" in *American Buffalo* with that seen m his *Glengarry Glen Ross*: how do both plays (when read together) seem to create a world where the American capitalist mythology is exaggerated9

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* concerns a pair of tramps who wait for a man named Godot who never arrives. How is Beckett's Godot like Mamet's Fletcher? How are Don and Teach like Vladimir and Estragon, Beckett's devoted but anxious tramps?

What Do I Read Next?

Glengarry Glen Ross, Mamet's 1983 look at the workings of a real-estate office, is an intense and unnerving glimpse into the lives of seven salesmen and the methods they use to "close" then-deals with unsuspecting buyers of worthless land The play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and cemented Mamet's critical and commercial reputation.

Writing in Restaurants (1986) is one of Mamet's collections of essays. In it, he offers his own highly-charged opinions of the theater, Hollywood, and himself.

Although written in 1596 (almost 400 years before *American Buffalo*), Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* also examines the ways in which different people think of "business" as a way to excuse their own aggression.

Arthur Miller's 1949 drama *Death of a Salesman* examines the almost-insignificant role that an average American plays m the world of "big business" and how his self-delusion and desire for success eventually leads to his suicide,

The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) is a study of American beliefs in the myths of business and status Written by Mamet's intellectual hero, Thorstein Veblen, the book offers an expository look at the values held by the characters of American Buffalo

Joel and Ethan Coen's screenplay of *Miller's Crossing* (1991), like *American Buffalo*, examines the differences between business and friendship and how a single person attempts to straddle both sets of ideals.

Further Study

Bigsby, C W. E. and Christopher Bigsby *Modern American Drama-1945-1990*, Cambridge, 1992

This book offers a survey of American theatrical trends since World War II.

Dean, Anne. *David Mamet- Language As Dramatic Action*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990

This book offers an overview of Mamet's career, including analysis on such famous works as *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*

Kernan, Alvin B , Editor *The Modern American Theater*, Prentice-Hall, 1967

Although Mamet is not examined in this collection of essays, Kernan's introductory essay is an overview of American theater containing several points that could easily be applied to Mamet's work.

Mamet, David *True and False: Common Sense for the Actor*, Pantheon Books, 1997

This short book is Mamet's guide to acting, which may prove useful when trying to imagine how scenes m his work are meant to be performed

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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