Glengarry, Glen Ross Study Guide

Glengarry, Glen Ross by David Mamet

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Introduction

David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* was first presented at the small Cottlesloe Theatre of the Royal National Theatre, in London, England, on September 21, 1983. The critics gave the play strongly positive reviews and the production played to sold-out audiences. It was later awarded the Society of West End Theatres Award (similar to the American "Tony" Award) as best new play. The American premier of *Glengarry Glen Ross* took place at Chicago's Goodman Theatre on February 6, 1984; with one cast change, the production then transferred to Broadway's Golden Theatre on March 25, With very few exceptions, the New York critics recognized the play as brilliant in itself and a major advance for Mamet as a playwright. Nevertheless, ticket sales were slow and the play lost money for two weeks. After it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, sales increased significantly. It ultimately ran for 378 performances, closing on February 17, 1985.

Many critics in both England and America pointed out that, for all its use of "four-letter words," *Glengarry Glen Ross* is a morality play. They noted that the work is an abrasive attack on American business and culture and a withering depiction of the men whose lives and values are twisted by a world in which they must lie, cheat, and even steal in order to survive. Virtually all of the critics commented extensively on Mamet's use of language, not only to create tension and define character, but also as a sort of musical poetry: "hot jazz and wounding blues," as Frank Rich, critic for the *New York Times* put it. Even those few critics who were lukewarm about the play as a whole appreciated the distinctive, powerful language. Critics also appreciated the savage, scalding comedy of the play.

The influences of playwrights Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter on Mamet has been pointed out by numerous critics, and Mamet has said that he has also been influenced by Lanford Wilson, Eugene Ionesco, Bertolt Brechl, and Anton Chekhov. He has also acknowledged the influence of Thorsiem Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. A strong nonliterary influence has been his study of the Stanislavsky system (named for the famed director of the Moscow Art Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky) of actor training as interpreted and taught by Sanford Meisner and Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio.

Author Biography

David Mamet was born in Chicago, Illinois, on November 30, 1947, His father was a labor lawyer and his mother a schoolteacher. After his parents' divorce in 1958, Mamet lived with his mother and sister. He played football, wrestled, and was a voracious reader. In 1963, he moved to North Chicago to live with his father and attend the private Francis Parker school where he first took drama classes and played the lead in a musical. He also worked backstage at Hull House theatre and at the famous improvisational Second City Company.

Mamet studied literature and drama at Goddard College in Vermont, where he received a B.A. degree in 1969. His first short play, *Camel*, was written to fulfill his thesis requirement. During his time at Goddard, he spent a year "in the field" at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in New York City, where he studied the Stanislavsky system of acting under the direction of Sanford Meisner. During his college years Mamet's summer jobs included work as an actor and "specialty dancer" with several theatres. Following his graduation in 1969, he worked in Montreal with a company based on the campus of McGill University. He then returned to Chicago where he worked as a cab driver and, for almost a year, in the office of a "dubious" real estate firm. The latter experience is clearly evident in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. In 1970, Mamet taught acting at Marlboro College in Vermont, where he wrote *Lifeboat*, based on his experiences with one summer job. The following two years, he taught at Goddard and, while there, presented the first versions of *Duck Variations* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago. Duck Variations* was subsequently presented in Chicago in the fall of 1972, marking the first production of a play by Mamet in his hometown. In the fall of 1973, Mamet moved back to Chicago. *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* was presented by the Organic Theatre Company in the summer of 1974, drew large audiences, and was awarded the prestigious Joseph Jefferson Award. In 1975 he completed *American Buffalo* and that work was presented by the Goodman Theatre with critical and popular success. On January 23, 1976, *American Buffalo,* with a new cast, opened at St. Clement's theatre in New York City, receiving generally positive notices. Mamet moved to New York the next month. That summer *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and Duck Variations* opened at the Off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theatre, where they would enjoy a long run; in February 1977, *American Buffalo* opened on Broadway and was awarded the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.

Marnet's career flourished throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with such notable works as *Edmund* (1982), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), *and Oleanna* (1992). He also ventured into film during this period, writing the scripts for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *The Verdict* (1982) which won an Academy Award nomination *The Untouchables* (1987), *andHoffa* (1992). His success as a screenwriter led to opportunities as a director, including the films *House of Games* (1988), *Homicide* (1991), and *Oleanna* (1995), all of which he also wrote.

Plot Summary

Act I

Glengarry Glen Ross has a daring structure with two very different forms for the two acts. Act One is broken up into three scenes, each set in a different booth in a Chinese restaurant in Chicago; while not clearly stated, all of the action may be occurring simultaneously. Through these scenes we come to know the jargon of the real estate sales world: "lead" is a sales prospect; the "board" is a chart of sales closings; "sit" is a face-to-face meeting with a prospect; "closing" is getting the customer's signature on a contract and a check. We also learn, bit by bit, that there is a sales contest on and that the winner of the first prize will receive a Cadillac, second prize a set of steak knives all the rest of the salesmen will be fired.

In the first scene, Shelly Levene, once a top salesman but now, in his fifties, down on his luck, is begging Williamson, the real estate office manager, for "A-list" leads. Levene has not closed a sale in months but he is convinced that one good lead will restore his confidence and put him back on track. As the salesman becomes more desperate, Williams offers to sell him the leads for $50 each and a percentage of any commissions Levene might earn. Levene agrees to the offer but doesn't have the cash.

In the second scene, David Moss and the hopeless George Aaranow, both men in their fifties, commiserate about the difficulties of closing a sale, especially without the good leads and the good leads go only to those who close sales. Moss suggests that if they could steal the leads from their office a competitor would be willing to buy them. When Aaranow asks if Moss is suggesting a burglary, Moss acts as if the thought had never occurred to him. However, he eventually not only suggests a burglary but insists that Aaranow must carry it out and that Aaranow is already involved as an "accessory" before the fact "because you listened."

In the third scene, Richard Roma, the office's star salesman, is talking with a man named Jim Lingk, Roma delivers a virtual monologue that seems to be about sex, loneliness, and the vagaries and insecurities of life. His tone is intimate and conversational, indicating that Lingk is an old friend of his. At the end, however, his tone changes and it is revealed that he has been lulling Lingk into a sales pitch with his casual demeanor.

Act II

Act II plays out the forces set in motion in the previous act with a more conventional structure. It is also much more comic than the first act. The act opens in the ransacked real estate office the next morning. A police detective, Baylen, is there to investigate the burglary and one by one the salesmen are called into Williamson's office to talk to the detective. Roma arrives and demands to know if his contract for the sale of land to

Lingk the previous night had been filed or stolen. Williamson waffles but eventually says that it was filed before the burglary. The sale will put Roma "over the top" and win him the Cadillac. Aaranow is nervous about being questioned and Roma advises, "tell the truth, George. Always tell the truth. It's the easiest thing to remember." Levene enters and says he has just sold eight parcels {properties). As he is discussing the closing, Moss comes out of the office highly insulted by Baylen's accusatory treatment. The tension leads to savage, and very funny, confrontations with Roma and Levene. After Moss stalks out, Levene continues crowing about his success with Roma flattering and egging him on. Williamson comes in and Levene boasts about his sale. He attacks the office manager, telling him he has no "balls" and belittling him for having never been out on a sit. Roma spots Lingk coming into the building and smells trouble. He and Levene quickly go into an improvised scene with Levene playing a rich investor. Lingk is there because his wife insisted he cancel the contract. Roma stalls him saying that he has to get Levene to the airport. He further states that he has a prior obligation and that he will talk to Lingk on the following Monday. Lingk says that he has to cancel before that his wife has called the Attorney General's office and the contract cannot go into effect for three business days after the check has been cashed. Roma claims that the check hasn't been cashed and that it won't be cashed until after he has talked to Lingk the following Monday. Aaranow bursts into the middle of this scene complaining about how he was treated by Baylen. Williamson, trying to be helpful, tells Lingk that his check has already been cashed. Lingk leaves after apologizing profoundly to Roma for having to back out of (he deal. Roma screams at Williamson for ruining his deal. Seething, he goes into the office for his interrogation with the detective. Levene picks up where Roma left off, attacking Williamson for scuttling his friend's sale. In his anger, Levene lets slip that he knew the contract had not in fact gone to the bank. Williamson realizes that the only way Levene could have known this information was if he had been in the office the night before, which he states. Williamson now knows that it was Levene who broke into the office and stole the leads. Adding insult to the broken salesman's injury, he also points out that Levene's sale was worthless the people he closed were well-known eccentrics who had no money. When Roma comes back, Williamson enters his office to talk with Baylen. Roma says he wants to form a partnership with Levene. When Levene goes in to talk with Baylen, Roma tells Williamson that his "partnership" with Levene means that Roma gets all of his own commission and half of Levene's. The play ends with Aaranow saying that he hates his job and Roma leaving for the Chinese restaurant to hunt for more prospects.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Seated in a booth at a Chinese restaurant, two men are engaged in a heated discussion related to real estate sales goals. Shelly Levene, an old workhorse of a salesman, is having a run of bad luck and is trying to convince the real estate office manager, a younger man named John Williamson, to help him by sending a few good sales leads his way. However, Williamson's real objective tonight is to relieve Levene of his position.

Levene tries every tactic he can think of to maintain his position and his dignity, reminding Williamson of his past performance as a top sales representative for the company, but Williamson is unmoved by Levene's pleas. Levene simply isn't bringing in the numbers anymore. Williamson repeats what Levene already knows, that the salesmen at the top of the board in the sales contest get the best leads.

None of Levene's attempts to explain his slump are working, so he tries to cut a deal with Williamson. He offers to give Williamson five percent of each sale he can bring in plus fifty bucks. Williamson ups it to ten percent and a hundred bucks on the table now. Levene can't even pay for his dinner, let alone a hundred dollar bribe, so he's forced to accept a lukewarm lead from Williamson. Williamson throws some cash on the table to pay the check and leaves the older man sitting alone.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Mamet sets the tone of desperation with the first words out of Shelly Levene's mouth, which pervades the scene. The sense of panic and frustration are almost palpable as Levene comes as close as his dignity will allow to begging for his job from someone who has never actually sold anything in his life. Levene's outrage is directed at more than a job or an office manager, but rather at life itself, which is ushering him along to make room for younger men with more vitality and time.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

In a different booth at the same Chinese restaurant, Moss and Aaronow, two other sales representatives from the real estate company have just finished dinner. They are disgruntled over the injustice of the new sales contest. It's outrageous to them that their jobs should hinge on some contest and not prior performance or loyalty, especially given the sales volume they each made in the Glen Ross subdivision.

Like Levine, they too have made every excuse for every failed deal. Now the pressure is just too great because two men from the office will lose their jobs because of the new sales contest. Aaronow has the bent countenance of a man resigned to a dire fate, while Moss puts up a false bravado. Both men know that the ax could fall on one, or both, of them and they talk because it seems a more civilized option than crying.

Jerry Graff has the right idea according to Moss. Graff used to work for a real estate company, but went out on his own and is clearing thousands of dollars a week and doesn't have to answer to anybody. Every lead that comes in is his alone. Graff invested in a list of names of four or five thousand nurses and is making a fortune just from contacting the women on that list. According to Moss, this is the most brilliant sales plan ever devised because nurses always have steady income with some in savings as well. Graff is filling up the subdivisions with the names on that purchased list.

Both Moss and Aaronow agree that something should be done about the ridiculous situation at their office. Somebody should get to the owners where it will hurt them most. Moss casually tosses out the idea that somebody should rob the office, steal the leads and in turn sell them to Jerry Graff. Talking off the top of his head, Moss figures that each lead would probably bring at least a buck, maybe a buck and a half.

Moss knows that there have to be at least five thousand leads for the high-end Glengarry subdivision alone and anybody selling those to Graff could make a healthy amount of money. Moss used to work for Graff, and knows that it would be easy to sell him the leads. Aaronow needs more clarification about Moss' real intentions because selling the stolen leads would be a criminal act.

Moss admits that he has spoken to Graff, who is willing to give both Moss and Aaronow jobs in addition to a split of a five thousand dollar fee in exchange for the leads. All Aaronow has to do is break into the office tonight, steal the leads and get them to Moss, who will either be at the movies or having dinner. Aaronow realizes that he has just been implicated in a crime and whether or not he chooses to act on it, he is now an accessory because of the simple act of listening to a plot placed before him by a man he considers a friend.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

The new pressure for sales is bringing out unsavory characteristics in the men who work there, prompting them to consider activities that they probably never would have considered if not faced with imminent job loss. These men are younger than Levene and their pressures are different in that they are still trying to achieve the pinnacle of success that the business world defines for men in their forties. They still have the fire in the belly necessary for sales success, but the walls are closing in and will push them to make choices that may be foreign to their normal code of conduct in order to survive.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

In the same Chinese restaurant, Rick Roma is talking to Lingk, who is seated one booth over. He launches into a monologue about the illusion of security that human beings create in order to get through their lives. Safety nets are put in place every day in the form of bank accounts, relationships, or clean consciences, but they are just temporary shields against disasters that never really happen. Most of the things that people worry about do not happen, so all that anybody has is the moment; and should any misfortune come along, there is probably enough in your reserve to cover it. However, Roma feels that the ultimate weapon is living without the fear to begin with.

With that, Roma introduces himself to Lingk for the first time. He points out a piece of property called Glengarry Highlands on a map of Florida, which he has spread out in front of the man.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

Ross sits in the same restaurant as the other characters, but he's not in the same place at all. While the other men bemoan the injustices looming before them, Ross is selling by using the oldest tactic there is - creating invincibility. By removing the emotional obstacles associated with a buyer's objections, Ross has created a nirvana not in the actual real estate but in the state of mind of the unsuspecting Lingk, who will never know what really happened.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

The real estate office has been broken into as evidenced by shattered glass, a boarded-up window and general disarray inside. Roma bounds in to find Williamson and Aaronow milling about with a police detective nearby. Sensing immediately what has happened, Roma demands to know if the contracts are safe. He had secured Lingk's signature yesterday. Williamson confirms that the contract was safely delivered to the bank last night. Roma is over the top now, elated to know that he has won the contest and the new Cadillac is his.

Roma's elation is tempered by the fact that other smaller contracts did not make it to the bank, so he'll have to go back to his customers and grovel for signatures again. This outrage, coupled with the fact that the premiere leads have been stolen, leaves Roma at a momentary loss. Then, Shelly Levene bursts in declaring that he has sold eight units in the Mountain View subdivision. Roma is impressed by the older man's deal, which means an eighty-two thousand dollar sale with twelve thousand dollars in commission.

The chaos in the office finally registers with Levene. His immediate thought is to question if the leads are safe, because he's ready to get back out and sell. His sales slump is over and he's anxious to capitalize on this positive turn of events.

In the meantime, the police detective has interviewed both Moss and Aaronow, who have emerged from the office insulted and outraged that they should be questioned and possibly held for suspicion in the commission of the break-in and robbery.

Levene is anxious to begin his story of how he closed his big deal this morning, and goes into excruciating detail in an almost minute-by-minute account of his prowess at using the old style selling techniques that made him a champion. Roma is enthralled because he has a similar selling style, and praises Levene for his sales savvy and his fortitude for making it in the business for so many years.

Williamson, however, doesn't give Levene the reaction he has expected. Instead, he tells the older man not to get his hopes up too high because the deal hasn't closed and the customer has a questionable reputation. Levene's dignity has been challenged so he retaliates in the only way he knows how to with this man, by challenging Williamson's skills and threatening to go work for Jerry Graff.

Roma, who has kept quiet through all this, now sees Lingk coming in the front door and whispers to Levene to play along with what he is about to do. Lingk has come to get his money back because his wife does not want to go through with the Florida deal. At first, Roma thinks this is just an ordinary objection that he can handle, but Lingk mentions that his wife has called the Attorney General's office to determine their rights in backing

out of a contract. It turns out that the Lingks have three days in which to cancel their deposit check.

Roma stalls by engaging in a theatrical dialogue with Levene, who is posing as a corporate executive who just happens to be Roma's customer and needs an immediate ride to the airport. Roma assures Lingk that the check has not been cashed and that they will talk about it on Monday, which is nearly a week away and clearly past the legal three-day grace period for the Lingks.

Roma almost makes it out the door when Williamson overhears the conversation. Williamson tells Lingk that the contract went to the bank yesterday and the check has been cashed. The news crushes the already distraught Lingk, who leaves the office mumbling incoherently.

Roma explodes at Williamson for ruining this deal and costing him six thousand dollars and the Cadillac. He launches into an attack on Williamson's management skills and lack of savvy in real world business practices. When the police detective calls Roma in for questioning, Levene takes the opportunity to verbally attack Williamson as well. Levene tells Williamson that, in this business, you have to rely on your wits and that you shouldn't say anything at all if you can't think on your feet as Williamson has just exhibited.

Williamson dismisses Levene's ranting but the older man won't be quieted, telling Williamson that he could at least show some emotion knowing that he cost Roma six thousand dollars on that deal. Levene tells Williamson that if he's going to make something up, he'd better be sure it will help the situation or he shouldn't say anything at all.

Williamson wants to know how Levene knew that he made up the information that Lingk's check had already been cashed. In fact, Williamson had not taken the check to the bank last night, and when he left the office it had still been on his desk. The only one who seems to know this fact, other than himself, is Levene, which means Levene must have been in the office last night, saw the contract on the desk, and robbed the office.

At first, Levene is outraged at this affront to his dignity. Even when he realizes that he has been caught, he still tries to free himself from the situation by offering Williamson up to fifty percent of all his sales from now on. Williamson is unmoved by his pleas and tells Levene that the deal he made this morning is no good because that customer is notorious for calling all the time and putting offers on properties he can't afford.

Levene is trapped and walks toward the police detective resigned to his fate. As soon as the door closes, Roma realizes what has happened and his predatory sales instincts are aroused. He demands that Williamson give him half of Levene's leads and commissions. Williamson neither agrees or disagrees but Roma leaves, headed back to the Chinese restaurant.

Act 2 Analysis

Mamet has painted a vivid picture of greed and desperation in this microcosm symbolizing American business ethics. The diverse personalities exhibit the characteristics of those who fall somewhere on the business food chain. It's eat or be eaten, and some just don't have the constitution to survive and will be weeded out.

Some, like Levene, will outlive their usefulness to the tribe and resort to destructive tactics to try to hold on to their position and security. The secret is that there is no security in the world of commerce, especially if you are a washed up real estate agent selling worthless land to people who can't afford it.

Written in the 1980's, the play is just as relevant today for those experiencing angst from the shaky dot com economy. Mamet has tapped into timeless themes of the human condition when it is placed in contention and contest for the elusive "more."

Characters

George Aaranow

George Aaranow is a fairly stupid salesman in his fifties who seems to be sucked into Moss's scheme to steal the leads and sell them to a competitor. In Act II, Aaranow displays the only loyalty shown in the play: he keeps his mouth shut about Moss.

Baylen

Baylen is a police detective in his early forties. He is in the ransacked office in Act II to investigate the burglary and, although we never see him in direct questioning, he is rough enough to outrage even the tough salesmen.

Shelly Levene

Shelly Levene is a man in his fifties, formerly a hot salesman and now down on his luck. He needs a sale to survive. In Act I, scene 1, Levene pleads with his office manager, Williamson, for good leads and agrees to bribe him but doesn't have the necessary cash. Levene is so strapped for cash that he even has to worry about having enough to buy gas. He is the only character about whom we learn anything of his outside life: he lives in a resident hotel, he has a daughter, and the daughter is apparently dependent on him and perhaps is even in a hospital. When we see him in Act n, he enters the ransacked office crowing about having just closed a sale for eight parcels. He tells a detailed story of how he forced the buyers, two old people with little money, to close. In his new-found glory, he also berates Williamson for not being a man, for not knowing how to sell. In his excitement, he lets slip the fact that he knew that Williamson had not turned in Roma's contract for the Lingk sale the night before and Williamson perceives that Levene could know that only if he had been in the office. He knows that Levene did the burglary and, in spite of pleading by Levene, turns him in to the police.

James Lingk

James Lingk is a customer to whom Roma sells a parcel of land. Lingk* s wife sends him back to cancel the deal, thus leading to an impromptu improvisational scene between Roma and Levene and a blown deal because of Williamson's intrusion. Even after he knows that Roma lied to him, Lingk apologizes for breaking the deal.

The Machine

See Shelly Levene

Dave Moss

Dave Moss is a bitter man in his fifties who sets up a deal to sell the stolen leads to a competing firm headed by Jerry Graff. In Act I, scene 2, he seems to have trapped George Aaranow, a fellow salesman, into doing the actual burglary. In Act U we see an outraged Moss after he has been interrogated by the police. He says that no one should be treated that way and decides to leave for the day. Later, in an attempt to save himself, Levene tells Williamson that it was Moss who set up the burglary.

Richard Roma

Richard Roma, in his early forties, is the "star1' salesman of the office. In Act I, scene 3, he seems to be talking to a friend but it turns out that he is merely softening up a stranger, Jim Lingk, for a sales pitch. In Act U we learn that he did close the deal but sees the deal fall through due to the ignorant intrusion of Williamson. Near the end of the play Roma seems to want to team up with Levene but even that apparent show of unity is just another scam.

John Williamson

John Williamson, a man in his early forties, is the office manager and is in charge of giving the "leads" to the salesmen. This gives him great power. He gives the best leads to those who have the best sales records, and the only way to sell is to have the best leads. In Act I he agrees to give top leads to Levene if Levene pays him fifty dollars per lead and twenty percent of his commissions. In Act II, Williamson is with the police detective, Baylen, questioning the salesmen. Williamson does intrude into the scene being played out by Roma and Levene in an attempt to keep Lingk from cancelling his contract and, in his ignorance, manages to spoil the deal. Both Roma and Levene attack him verbally and Levene lets slip the clue that allows Williamson to expose Levene as the burglar.

Themes

Duty and Responsibility

The major theme of *Glengarry Glen Ross* is business and, by extension, capitalism. Mamet never discusses, neither to praise nor to condemn, the workings of business; he shows the quintessential paradigm of business, the salesman, striving to survive by his wits in the system and how it damages and drains his better humanity. In the published play, Mamet includes a quote of the "Practical Sales Maxim: 'Always Be Closing.'" Everything is business, even personal relationships.

American Dream

The American dream that we can "get ahead" through honest hard work is undermined by the fact that, for these salesmen at least, the only measure of success is material and the only way to succeed is to sell. They are selling land probably worthless land to people who dream that buying that land will somehow provide the big score, the chance to make large profits when they resell it. It is interesting to note that no one mentions building on or settling on the land; it is always referred to as an investment opportunity. Moreover, the salesmen will say anything and promise anything to "close."

Alienation and Loneliness

Certainly all of the characters suffer alienation both from nature and other people. They are apparently unfamiliar with the land they sell and refer to it as "crap." It is just a commodity. They are also alienated from their customers, whom they despise, and from each other. They do have a unity in despising what they know is an unfair system, but whenever it seems that friendship is involved whether with one another or with a customer we soon learn that it is just another scam, another preparation for "closing." For example, Moss seems to commiserate with Aaranow but is really setting him up to do a burglary for him; Roma seems to be having a heartfelt conversation with Lingk, and it even appears to the audience that they are old friends; but, we find that he is just disarming a stranger when he produces a sales pamphlet; Roma suggests that he and Levene work as partners only to betray him almost immediately afterwards.

Language

Language will be discussed in some detail under "style," but it should be noted here that language is also a major theme in *Glengarry Glen Ross.* Language as a means of communication has been subverted. Nothing that is said is necessarily true even when it seems to be in support of friendship or to express a philosophy of life. Language is used by these people solely as a tool to manipulate potential customers and each other.

Deception

Deception is at work on every level. We see lying and fantasy as a way of thinking and operating: certainly there seems to be little truth to anything anyone says to anybody. The most explicit example is in Act II when Lingk comes to the office to cancel his contract. Roma and Levene put on an elaborate improvised show for him in which Levene pretends to be an important executive with American Express who is a large investor in the land Roma is trying to sell. Throughout the play, the characters immediately turn to deception when they are in a tight corner which is most of the time.

Success and Failure

Success and failure are very easily measured in the closed world of *Glengarry Glenn Ross* and by extension in die larger world of American capitalism. To succeed is to get money; to fail is not to get money. Again, it is not only the salesmen who measure success materially: their customers also think that if they buy the land they will sell it at a huge profit and eventually get something for nothing. Also, if these people do not make sales their whole sense of self is destroyed. For the salesman, selling is not just a job but a persona; it is who and what they are.

Morals and Morality

There is no mention of morals or morality or even business ethics in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Morality and ethics are not part of the operating procedure. In Roma's pseudo-philosophical discourse to Lingk, he says that he does "that today which seem to me correct today." While Roma purports to accept that there may be an absolute morality, he says, "And then what?" It is the very absence of morality which gradually dawns on the audience and frames the entire play. These people operate in a vicious jungle in which only the strong survive and nothing else matters.

Conscience

Similarly, not one of the characters is troubled by conscience. Conscience does not seem to exist as a part of anyone's makeup. Again, it is Roma who mentions the concept in Act I, scene 3: "You think that you're a thief? So What? You get befuddled by a middle-class morality ... ? Get shut of it. Shut it out. You cheated on your wife ,..? You did it, live with it. (Pause) You fuck little girls, so be it?"

Sexism

Glengarry Glen Ross depicts a world of men and men's relationships. Selling is the sign of manhood. Roma and Levene both tell Williamson that he is not a man because he has never actively made sales. There are only two females who are even mentioned in

the play: Lingk's wife and Levene's daughter. Lingk's wife has forced Lingk to confront Roma and cancel his contract. Roma commiserates with him and, seemingly at least, wants to talk to him man-to-man about his problems. Lingk does cancel the contract with apologies for having "betrayed' * Roma. Levene's daughter, for whom he has provided an education, is apparently ill. This barely-mentioned daughter seems to provide the only glimpse of human warmth in this group of men.

Anger and Hatred

In that world of vicious competition devoid of morality or friendship, all the characters seem to operate out of anger and hatred: they are angry at Williamson for not producing better leads; they are angry with each other because the success of one means the failure of another. They are caught in an unfair system and they know it. Finally, at the end of the play, Aaranow states openly what all, wilh the possible exception of Roma, feel: "Oh, God, I hate this job."

Style

Plot

The structure of *Glengarry Glen Ross* is unusual. Act I consists of three brief scenes, each scene a duologue. Through these scenes we learn the jargon of the real estate sales world, come to know the characters involved, and are introduced to the possiblity of a burglary of the sales office by two of the salesmen. Act n has a more conventional structure and is similar to that of a mystery play in which the perpetration of the crime is sought and caught. However, it would be a mistake to think that the interest of *Glengarry Glen Ross* is sustained by the plot. The main action is contained in the language and takes place through the shifting relationships and stories of the characters.

Action

Mamet is very clear about what is important in his plays. In one of his essays in *Writing in Restaurants* he points out that it is not the theme of the play to which we respond, but the action. In another essay in the same book he points out that "good drama has no stage directions. It is the interaction of the characters' objectives expressed solely by what they say to each other not by what the author says about them." There is very little description even of the set in *Glengarry Glen Ross* and no directions for character action. Character is habitual action, and the author shows us what the characters do. It is all contained in the dialogue. There is no nonessen-tial prose.

Language

In *Writing in Restaurants* Mamet says, "Technique is knowledge of how to translate incohate desire into clear action into action capable of communicating itself to the audience." The Characters in *Glengarry Glen Ross* are created by the language they use and, for the salesmen, at least, their livelihoods depend on their use of language. This language is not used to communicate truth but rather to hide truth, to manipulate others, savagely attack each other, and to tell stories that celebrate victory as Levine does when telling how he closed a deal for eight parcels of land. It is no mistake that the salesmen far outshine the office manager Williamson, the customer Lingk, and the police detectiveBaylen (although through the reactions of Aaranow and Moss we know that Baylen also uses language powerfully when he is in charge of the interrogation off stage in Williamson's office.) Language is ammunition in the primal battles for power and survival.

It is widely agreed that Mamet has an exact ear for male dialogue (Robert Cushman, an English critic, says, "Nobody alive writes better American"). However, his language is not naturalistic, not an exact copy of how people really speak; it is very carefully structured. The speech patterns, repetitions, interruptions, hesitations, great outbursts

of savage obscenities, and scatologocal bombs becomes a sort of poetry. Remember, stage dialogue is not written to be read but rather to be heard. Mamet's dialogue becomes musical. As Jack Shepard, the actor who played Roma in the first production, put it, "The rhythms are slick, fast, syncopated, like a drum solo." We hear and feel the power of the music and sense the fear, panic, and desolation beneath it. The rhythm and the action are the same; the salesmen use their arias or duets to impress and control their audience, whether that audience is a potential customer or a colleague, or the theatre audience. And the theatre audience can get caught in these stories just as the characters on stage can. Levene's story in Act H of the closing, his cutting away of nonessential words, the masterful uses of pauses in the storytelling, and the story itself (he tells of sitting silently for twenty-two minutes by the kitchen clock), and the solemn toast that took place after they signed draws the audience into the world of Levene. Roma's speech to Lingk in Act I makes little logical sense, but it is masterful. Roma spins a tale filled with allusions to common bonds of sexuality, guilt, acceptance of oneself and of life, and builds a sense of male comradeship. He gives no pause in his double and triple talk except to allow Lingk to agree with him. Roma plays on Lingk's obvious need for male friendship. He uses language to fascinate and then, like a cobra, strikes with the sales presentation.

Dramatic Irony

Glengarry Glen Ross is a very funny play in spite of its dark moral vision of a corrupt and demoralizing system. Part of the reason we are able to respond positively to the play is Mamet's use of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony means that the audience knows more than some or all of the characters. Mamet assumes that we will feel superior to the characters on stage, that we know we live in a better world and behave in a better manner than they. This allows us to feel superior. We also sense, and this too figures into the dramatic irony, that Mamet likes and even admires his characters. In spite of their venality, greed, immorality, lack of loyalty, and vicious lies, he sees them as victims of the system in which they are forced to strive. It is the system that forces them to use their considerable talents to achieve unworthy ends. The characters are quickwitted, brilliantly audacious, and display the sort of tenacity common to all great comic characters. Perhaps the ultimate irony is that, to some extent, we do admire these characters and so recognize ourselves in them.

Historical Context

Business

While most people may not be familiar with the inner workings of a high pressure real estate sales office, the world surrounding *Glengarry Glen Ross* in 1983, the year the play was completed and first performed, certainly made that world seem not only plausible but almost inevitable. The 1980s in American business were a time of corporate takeovers, both friendly and unfriendly, in which those engineering those takeovers reaped personal rewards in the tens of millions of dollars. Frequently, those takeovers were funded by high-yield "junk bonds," first proposed by Drexel Burnham Lambert executive Michael R. Milkin. Assets of the target company were pledged to repay the principal of the junk bonds, which yielded thirteen to thirty percent.

Former Japanese prime minister Kakuei Tonaka was convicted in Tokyo District Court October 12 of having accepted a $2.2 million bribe from Lockheed Corporation to use his influence to persuade All Nipon Airways to use Lockheed Tristar jets.

Politics

Social Security legislation was signed by President Reagan which delayed cost-of-living increases in payments and increased payroll deductions.

President Reagan told an evangelical group at Orlando, Florida, on March 8 that the Soviet Union was "an evil empire," and was "the focus of evil in the modern world." On March 23, President Reagan had proposed his "Strategic Defense Initiative," a high-tech shield of satellites that would use lasers to shoot down incoming enemy missiles. Senator Ted Kennedy dubbed the program "Star Wars," and few scientists believed the program to be possible despite its projected staggering costs.

On October 25, three thousand U.S. Marines, accompanied by three hundred military personnel from Caribbean nations, invaded the island nation of Grenada to topple "political thugs" who had taken over the government in a coup on October 12, and who seemed to be creating a new bastion for communism in the Caribbean.

November 2, President Reagan signed legislation to create a holiday in January to celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King, a holiday which will be ignored by financial markets and most business firms.

Environment

Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt, who had fought to open federal lands to private exploitation including oil drilling, resigned October 9. He had caused outrage by lightheartedly declaring that his coal advisory commission was a well-balanced mix: "I

have a black, a woman, two Jews, and a cripple." In the Soviet Union, commercial fishing ceased in the Aral Sea. The draining of water from the inland sea's two source rivers in a massive project to irrigate surrounding desert had shrunk the sea by one third, doubled its salinity, and created an ecological disaster as winds blew chemically contaminated dust and salt from the sea bottom onto surrounding fields, poisoning water supplies and even mothers' milk

Communications

In December, Chicago motorists began talking on cellular telephones in their cars, available at $3,000 plus $150 per month for service. The telephones quickly became not only handy business tools but highly desirable status symbols.

Miscellaneous

Cabbage Patch dolls became black market items as stores ran out of supplies.

Critical Overview

The initial critical reactions in London to *Glengarry Glen Ross* were overwhelmingly, but not unanimously, positive. Robert Cushman in the Observer called it "the best play in London." He was especially taken with Mamet's use of language and mentioned his "fantastic ear for emphasis and repetition and the interrupting of people who weren't saying anything anyway. Nobody alive writes better American." He went on to say, "Here at last, carving characters and conflicts out of language, is a play with real muscle: here, after all the pieces we have half-heartedly approved because they mention 'important' issues as if mentioning were the same as dealing with. *Glengarry Glen Ross* mentions nothing, but in its depiction of a driven, consciousless world it implies a great deal."

Michael Billington in the *Guardian* talked of Mamet's brilliant use of language to depict character and attitudes and praised both the play and the production. Milton Shulman in the *Standard* praised the play and said, "There is a glib, breathtaking momentum in the speech rhythms that Mamet has devised for this pathetic flotsam." Clive Hirschhorn in the *Sunday Express* was not enthusiastic about the first act, but called the second act "a dazzler." Michael Coveny in the *Financial Times* was enthusiastic and said, "The text bubbles like a poisoned froth." Giles Gordon in the *Spectator* called the play "something of a let-down," and went on to say of the production that the "actors give the performances they always give."

In New York, the plaudits were even greater. The most important critic, Frank Rich of the *New York Times,* gave a rave review of the play and said, "This may well be the most accomplished play its author has yet given us. As Mr. Mamet's command of dialogue has no w reached its most dazzling pitch, so has his mastery of theatrical form." Howard Kissel in the influential *Women's Wear Daily* was very positive and mentioned that, in spite of the lack of physical movement in the first act (which he likened to "some arcane Oriental puppet theatre"), the mood was not static: "intense animation comes from Mamet's brilliant dialogue, the vulgar sounds one hears on any street corner shaped into a jarring, mesmerizing music."

The headline above Clive Barnes's *New York Post* review read, "Mamet's 'Glengarry:' A Play To See and Cherish." Barnes called it "Mamet's most considerable play to date." He said that Mamet's language was able to "transform the recognizable into the essential," and that "the characters and situations have never looked more special. " Jack Kroll in *Newsweek* said, "Mamet seems to get more original as his career develops," and called him, "The Aristophanes of the inarticulate." He went on to say, "He is that rarity, a pure writer." Dennis Cunningham of WCBS said, "I could simply rave to the heavens," and called *Glengarry Glen Ross* a "theatrical event, altogether extraordinary, an astonishing, exhilarating experience ... and that rarest of Broadway achievements, a major American play by a major American playwright." Douglas Watt of the *Daily News* found the play dull and said, "To elevate it to the status of a bitter comment on the American dream would amount to cosmic foolishness. It is what it is, a slice of life."

Glengarry Glen Ross continues to receive serious critical attention. The first book-length study of Mamet was C. W, E. Bigsby's *David Mamet*, published in 1985, which studies Mamet's works from the beginning through *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Bigsby sees Mamet as a major writer whose concern has been with "dramatizing the inner life of the individual and of the nation." Dennis Carroll's book-length study, *David Mamet*, published in 1987, assesses Mamet at "Mid-Career," and deals with the plays in thematic categories. Carroll also considers Mamet's place in the larger context of drama and theatre and points out that, while each major play is open to many different interpretations,' "This is the mark of any major artist whose special qualities nag at the sensibilities, but who cannot be too easily pigeonholed or defined. His achievements already stamp him as a major American playwright of his generation, whose work has both the vividness and the power to cross national boundaries."

A brilliant major study by Anne Dean, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action,* focuses on Mamet's celebrated use of language and Mamet as a dramatic poet. There have been many critical essays dealing with *Glengarry Glen Ross*, some of the best collected in *David Mamet: A Casebook,* edited by Leslie Kane. Mamet and *Glengarry Glen Ross* have also become the subjects of numerous masters theses and doctoral dissertations.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Browne is an instructor at the State University of New York who specializes in drama. In this essay he discusses morality and characterization in Mamet's play.

There is no doubt that *David Mamet* is a major writer and perhaps the preeminent American playwright of his generation. As Dennis Carroll pointed out in David Mamet, Mamet is the only American playwright to emerge from the 1970s who has managed to establish a significant international reputation. His plays have appealed to a large and wide range of audience.

Glengarry Glen Ross met with success not only in London and New York, but had a long United States national tour and quickly received major productions in Tel Aviv, Israel; Johannesburg, South Africa; Dublin, Ireland; Marseilles, France; Genoa, Italy; Sydney, Australia; Helsinki, Finland; and Tokyo, Japan. Moreover, Mamet had had major successes before *Glengarry Glen Ross* and has continued to write excitingly and successfully for the theatre in addition to his steady output of scripts for movies and his career as a film director. Furthermore, as Carroll pointed out, Mamet has created a body of work rich in complex variations on his themes rather than merely repeating himself obsessively.

He has written plays focusing on relationships between men and women, parents and children, sexual politics, communion, redemption, the power of language and the debasement of language, the passing on of knowledge and tradition, to mention only some major themes. He has also written books of essays, childrens' plays, radio plays, and television scripts. While *Glengarry Glen Ross* contains many layers of (hematic concern, it is usually grouped with *American Buffalo* and *Speed-the-Plow* as major plays that focus primarily on business and capitalism. In American Buffalo the characters are small-time thieves who consider themselves to be businessmen. *Speed-the-Plow* focuses on Hollywood , where *the product* is films and the focus is on raw power and making money.

There is no doubt that Mamet is a moral writer who seeks to make the audience aware of what he sees as the spiritual vacuum in present-day America (and, judging from the broad range of productions, in other countries as well). We are pressured to succeed, to make more money, to buy more things that we don't need. We don't take the time to regenerate our spirit. We do not accept responsibility for what happens to ourselves but rather operate on received values without questioning whether they are good or even aimed at making us happy. People full of energy and talent spend themselves seeking empty rewards. Mamet says in his book of essays *Writing in Restaurants*, "Our civilization is convulsed and dying, and it has not yet gotten the message. It is sinking, but it has not sunk into complete barbarity, and I often think that nuclear war exists for no other reason than to spare us that indignity."

In another essay, Mamet says that "the essential task of the drama (as of the fairy tale) is to offer a solution to a problem which in nonsusceptible to reason. To be effective, the

drama must induce us to suspend our rational judgment, and to follow the *internal* logic of the piece so that our *pleasure* (our "cure1') is the release at the end of the story." We suspend reason in order to gain deep insights. The purpose of theatre is not to teach a lesson or to provide a neat "moral;" the purpose of theatre is to provide us with a communal experience which we then ponder, as we do all forceful experiences in our lives. Mamet does *not preach* his themes at us; his themes are played out. He does not describe his characters; he puts them into action. Mamet has said that the job of the dramatist is to translate the imperfectly formed desire of the characters into clear action that is capable of communicating itself to the audience.

In drama, just as in life, we judge people by what they do, by their actions. Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, rightly said that character is just habitual action. The dramatist must show us what the character does rather than have him described by either himself or others. In his studies of the Stanislavksy system of acting with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theatre, Mamet came to appreciate that the actor is always pursuing the character's objectives, trying *at each moment* to achieve what the character wants. This action, which is always present in well written dialogue, is known as the "subtext." It is by discovering the character's objectives and *how* the character would go about trying to win those objectives, and then doing those things the actions that the actor and the character become one and the same. It is not a psychotic experience for the actor; it is mental focus. Moreover, by focusing on winning those objectives the actor is freed from extraneous considerations. The actor performs the actions, and the "meaning" of the play is in those actions. It is precisely his mastery and *economy* of action in dialogue which impresses audiences and makes plays by Mamet challenging and exciting for actors,

Joe Mantegna, who has acted in several Mamet plays and films and played Roma in the first U.S. production of *Glengarry Glen Ross,* said in an interview with Leslie Kane in her *David Mamet: A Casebook,* "The great thing about David is the way he can say so much with so little.. . everything else seems so over-wntten. There are certainly other writers who have that capability, such as Shakespeare and Pinter. As much is said between the lines as with the lines." He also pointed out that because the writing is so concise and full of meaning, the actor must be precise in his choice of how each line is delivered. Mamet says that the actor does not need to characterize, he simply needs to find the correct action and then do it. From seeing those actions, the audience will draw its own conclusions about the character. Mantegna says, "You don't have to worry about dropping little clues or hints that will help the audience figure this out later. No, you just play the moment as real as you can."

Mamet has long been fascinated with language. His father would often stop conversation at the dinner table until David or his sister Lyn could find the exact word to express their meaning. In *Writing in Restaurants* he remembers that "our schoolyard code of honor recognized words as magical and powerful unto themselves," and that "The Schoolboy Universe was not corrupted by the written word, and was ruled by the power of sounds." It is that "power of sounds" which the characters in *Glengarry Glen Ross* use to achieve their objectives. As Jack Shepard, the Roma in the original London production, described it to Anne Deane in *David Mamet: Language ax Dramatic Action*,

"The rhythms are slick, fast, syncopated like a drum solo." Frank Rich, the critic for the *New York Times*, talked of the dialogue in musical terms: "In the jagged riffs of coarse, monosyllabic words, we hear and feel both the exhilaration and sweaty desperation of the huckster's calling." In the interview with Dean, Shepard recalled the great tension of the rehearsal period: "There is just so much to remember at any one time in Mamet's works . . . Mamet knows exactly what he wants... he is very fast, very dynamic." The language has the feeling of improvisation with speeches overlapping, people interrupting each other, thoughts unfinished. It sounds like ordinary street talk or natural speech, but it has been painstakingly and specifically created to have an impact. It is crafted for the actor to use as *action*. This fact is especially important for the actors in *Glengarry Glen Ross* because the characters use language and storytelling to survive and to celebrate survival. The characters themselves are actors. This is most obvious during the improvised performance with which Roma and Levene attempt to steer Lingk away from his intention to cancel his contract, with Levene playing the vice president of American Express who is a major client and friend of Roma. Roma gives Levene only a few cues on how to proceed, and Levene enters the role. Another obvious instance occurs when Williamson tells Roma that Murray, one of the partners in the firm, will take care of re-closing Roma's sales himself: "he'll be the president, just come in from out of town." Playing roles is natural for these people, and they change roles to suit their purposes in any given circumstances.

Levene is a master at this. In Act I he pleads with Williamson in an attempt to get good leads. He is submissive, repeats Williamson's name, John, is careful not be critical of him, strives to appear confident, uses delaying tactics to prevent Williamson from turning him down. At the same time, Mamet has incorporated the rhythms of desperation into Levene's speech. In Act n, when Levene tells the story of his sale, his enthusiasm and pride are unbounded and infectious. He carefully draws the scene, gives us enough detail without getting tedious, uses fluid phrasing to pull us along, and holds us in suspense as he recalls sitting silently at the kitchen table with the old couple for *"twenty-two minutes* by the kitchen *clock*" until "they wilted all at once. No *gesture* ... nothing. Like together. They, I swear to God, they both kind of *imperceptibly slumped.*" After this climax to the story, Levene provides a denouement as he quietly recalls having a small drink to solemnize the occasion: "Little shot glasses. A pattern in 'em. And we toast. In silence. (Pause.)" The story winds down gently and all are quiet in appreciation. The viewer may find reprehensible the fact that Levene has sold worthless land to old people who cannot afford it, but his story pulls us in and and we admire his performance nevertheless. The audience sees Levene the actor as masterful storyteller, and they also "see" Levene in a scene which he writes and in which he is the star actor. The viewer sees Levene selling himself.

Mamet based the characters in *Glengarry Glen Ross* to some extent on the men with whom he had worked for a year in a dubious real estate office in Chicago. He admired their ability to live by their wits and their dynamic addiction to what they did. He found them amazing. That does not mean that he approves of what they do. As he points out in *Writing in Restaurants*, "The desire to manipulate, to treat one's colleagues as servants, reveals a deep sense of personal worthlessness: as if one's personal thoughts, choices, and insights could not bear reflection, let alone a reasoned mutual

examination," Behind all the foul-mouthed manipulation and boasting are people who are empty or nearly empty of humane values. They victimize others, but they are victims themselves of a system which offers no rewards but money and punishes failure by taking away the means of earning a living.

The mass media has created an audience who expect everything to be neatly summed up and easily spelled out for them, including laugh-tracks to tell them when to laugh and somber music to tell them when to be sad. They want simple answers, lessons. Then they will know what to say about the play, if they feel the need to say anything at all, and can go on the next diversion. But that is not the job of theatre and David Mamet does not do that for us. *Glengarry Glen Ross* is character-centered and the characters are expressed through fast-paced action. The audience is given an exceptional and disturbing experience. Later, when we think about that experience, there are plenty of clues to the deeper meanings in the play for those who are attuned. The experience becomes our experience to ponder.

Source: Terry Browne, in an essay for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Kroll offers a mixed review of Glengarry Glen Ross, asserting that in "trying to wed the uncompromising vision of moral primitivism in [his earlier play] American Buffalo with a more accessible, even commercial appeal," Mamet introduces "elements of relatively conventional plotting and farce that occasionally wobble; the resolution of the real-estate-office rip-off doesn't quite ring true." Nevertheless, Kroll declares that "in all other respects Mamet is better than ever."

"It's contacts, Ben, contacts!" says Willy Loman. "Give me the leads!" exhorts Shelly (The Machine) Levene in David Mamet's dazzling new play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Willy dies the death of a salesman; Shelly says, "I was born for a salesman," but then suffers a fate that's a kind of grotesque counterpart to the ignominious end of Willy. Mamet's play is a funny and frightening descent into the Plutonic world of sleazy hucksters who peddle dubious real estate with deceptively poetic names like Glengarry Highlands and Glen Ross Farms,

Mamet's salesmen have created a lingo of their own, a semantic skullduggery that can fake out a prospective buyer with non sequiturs, triple-talk and aparody of philosophical wisdom that's breathtaking in its jackhammer effrontery. The first act of *Glengarry Glen Ross* consists of three colloquies in a murky Chinese restaurant as the salesmen spar and jockey with their fink of a boss (J, T. Walsh), with a befuddled client and with each other. The second act takes place in their sales office, which has been broken into and burglarized; a detective is on scene, and this squall of criminality blows open the hidden frustrations and ferocities of these jacketed jackals.

Mamet's pitchmen sandbag their gullible customers and slash away in cutthroat competition with each other, trying to win the "sales contests" their bosses use to drive them on, rewarding the winners with Cadillacs and the losers with threats of dismissal. Their code is pathetically macho; yet they have their own mystique, a perverse chivalry of chiselers. One of them recounts with almost mystic ecstasy how he nailed a deal with a pair of customers. "They signed, Ricky," he says. "It was great. It was like they wilted all at once No gesture... nothing. Like together. They, I swear to God, they both kind of imperceptibly slumped. They signed. It was all so solemn."

Mamet seems to get more original as his career develops. His antiphonal exchanges, which dwindle to single words or even fragments of words and then explode into a crossfire of scatological buckshot, make him the Aristophanes of the inarticulate. He makes the filthiest male-to-male dialogue pop with the comic timing of Jack Benny or pile up into a profane poetry that becomes the music of desperation. In *Glengarry Glen Ross* Mamet appears to be trying to wed the uncompromising vision of moral primitivism in *American Buffalo* with a more accessible, even commercial appeal. The move is a good one, but it costs him something. His second act introduces elements of relatively conventional plotting and farce that occasionally wobble; the resolution of the real-estate-office ripoff doesn't quite ring true.

But in all other respects Mamet is better than ever. He's that rarity, a pure writer, and the synthesis he appears to be making, with echoes from voices as diverse as Beckett, Pinter and Hemingway, is unique and exciting....

Source: JackKroll, "Mamet's Jackalsm Jackets," *mNews-week*, Vol. CIU, No. 15, April 9,1984, p 109.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, which originally appeared in the New York Times *on March 26,1984, Rich offers praise for* Glengarry Glen Ross, *applauding Mamet's ability to make "all-American music hot jazz and wounding blues out of his salesmen's scatological native lingo," and asserting that* Glengarry Glen Ross ' *'may well be the most accomplished play its author has yet given us."*

Rich is an American editor and performing arts critic.

The only mellifluous words in David Mamet's new play are those of its title *Glengarry Glen Ross* In this scalding comedy about small-time, cutthroat real-estate salesmen, most of the language is abrasive even by the standards of the author's American *Buffalo.* If the characters aren't barking out the harshest four-letter expletives, then they're speaking in the clammy jargon of a trade in which "leads," "closings" and "the board" (a sales chart) are the holiest of imperatives. There's only one speech in which we hear about such intimacies as sex and loneliness and that speech, to our shock, proves to be a prefabricated sales pitch.

Yet the strange and wonderful thing about the play at the Golden is Mr. Mamet's ability to turn almost every word inside out. The playwright makes all-American music hot jazz and wounding blues out of his salesman's scatological native lingo. In the jagged riffs of coarse, monosyllabic words, we hear and feel both the exhilaration and sweaty desperation of the huckster's calling. At the same time, Mr. Mamet makes his work's musical title into an ugly symbol of all that is hollow and vicious in the way of life his characters gallantly endure. The salesmen middle-class bloodbrothers of the penny-ante Chicago hustlers of American *Buffalo* are trying to unload worthless tracts of Florida land to gullible victims. It's the cruelest cut of all that that real estate is packaged into developments with names like * 'Glengarry Highlands" and "Glen Ross Farms."

Mr. Mamet' s talent for burying layers of meaning into simple, precisely distilled, idiomatic language a talent that can only be compared to Harold Pinter's is not the sum of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. This may well be the most accomplished play its author has yet given us. As Mr. Mamet's command of dialogue has now reached its most dazzling pitch, so has his mastery of theatrical form. Beneath the raucous, seemingly inane surface of *Glengarry* one finds not only feelings but a detective story with a surprise ending. And there's another clandestine story, too, bubbling just underneath the main plot: Only as the curtain fails do we realize that one of the salesmen, brilliantly played by Robert Prosky, has traveled through an anguished personal history almost as complex as Willy Loman's.

So assured and uncompromising is Mr. Mamet's style that one must enter his play's hermetically sealed world completely or risk getting lost. Taken at face value, the actual events, like the vocabulary, are minimal; the ferocious humor and drama are often to be found in the pauses or along the shadowy periphery of the center-stage action. But should this work fail to win the large public it deserves a fate that has befallen other

Mamet plays in their first Broadway outings that won't be entirely because of its idiosyncratic form. *Glengarry* which was initially produced at London' s National Theater last fall, is being seen here in a second production, from Chicago's Goodman Theater. Mr. Prosky's contribution aside, this solid but uninspired staging isn't always up to the crackling tension of the script.

In the half-hour-long first act, that tension is particularly Pinteresque. We watch three successive two-character confrontations that introduce the salesmen as they conduct business in the Chinese restaurant that serves as their hangout and unofficial office. The dialogue's unfinished sentences often sound like code; one whole scene turns on the colloquial distinction the characters draw between the phrases "speaking about" and "talking about."

But these duologues in fact dramatize primal duels for domination, power and survival, and, as we penetrate the argot, we learn the Darwinian rules of the salesmen's game. Those who sell the most "units" receive a Cadillac as a bonus; those who hit "bad streaks" are denied access to management's list of "premiere leads" (appointments with likely customers). Worse, this entreprenurial system is as corrupt as it is heartless. The losing salesmen can still get leads by offering kickbacks to the mercurial young manager (J. T. Walsh) who administers the business for its unseen owners.

When the characters leave the dark restaurant for the brighter setting of the firm's office in Act n, Mr. Mamet's tone lightens somewhat as well. The office has been ransacked by burglars, and a detective (Jack Wallace) arrives to investigate. Even as the salesmen undergo questioning, they frantically settle fratricidal rivalries and attempt to bamboozle a pathetic, tearful customer (Lane Smith) who has arrived to demand a refund. As written (though not always as staged), Act n is farce in Chicago's "Front Page" tradition albeit of a blacker contemporary sort. While we laugh at the comic cops-and-robbers hijinks, we also witness the unravelling of several lives.

The play's director is Gregory Mosher, Mr. Mamet's long-time Chicago collaborator. Mr. Mosher's work is often capable, but sometimes he italicizes Mr. Mamet's linguistic stylization: Whenever the actors self-consciously indicate the exact location of the text's hidden jokes and meanings, they cease being salesmen engaged in do-or-die warfare. This is not to say that the actors are inept they're good. But, as we've seen with other Mamet works, it takes a special cast, not merely an adequate one, to deliver the full force of a play in which even the word "and" can set off a theatrical detonation.

The actors do succeed, as they must, at earning our sympathy. Mr. Mamet admires the courage of these salesmen, who are just as victimized as their clients; the only villain is Mr. Walsh's manager a cool deskman who has never had to live by his wits on the front lines of selling. Among the others, there's particular heroism in Mike Nussbaum, whose frightened eyes convey a lifetime of blasted dreams, and in Joe Mantegna, as the company's youngest, most dapper go-getter. When Mr. Mantegna suffers a critical reversal, he bravely rises from defeat to retighten his tie, consult his appointments book and march back to the Chinese restaurant in search of new prey.

Mr. Prosky, beefy and white-haired, is a discarded old-timer: in the opening scene, he is reduced to begging for leads from his impassive boss. Somewhat later, however, he scores a "great sale" and expands in countenance to rekindle his old confidence: Mr. Prosky becomes a regal, cigar-waving pontificator, recounting the crude ritual of a contract closing as if it were a grand religious rite.

Still, this rehabilitation is short-lived, and soon Mr. Prosky is trying to bribe his way back into his employer's favor. As we watch the bills spill from his pockets on to a desk, we at last see greenery that both befits and mocks the verdant words of the play's title. But mere's no color in the salesman's pasty, dumbstruck face -just the abject terror of a life in which all words are finally nothing because it's only money that really talks.

Source: Frank Rich, "Theatre- A Mamet Play, *Glengarry Glen Ross" in New York Theatre Critics'* Reviews, Vol. XXXXV, no 4, March 5,1984.

Adaptations

Glengarry Glen Ross was adapted as a film by David Mamet, directed by James Foley, and starring Jack Lemmon, Al Pacino, Ed Harris, Alec Baldwin, Alan Arkin, Kevin Spacey, Jonathan Pryce, Bruce Altaian, and Jude Ciccolella; distributed by LIVE Entertainment, Movies Unlimited, Baker & Taylor Video.

Topics for Further Study

Read The Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller and compare the view of selling in that play with that in Glengarry Glen Ross. Is Willy Loman anything like the salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross"?*

Investigate consumer protection laws in your state. Do you think they are needed to protect the consumer, or do they just provide more red tape for the businessperson?

Explore environmental problems caused by overdevelopment in Florida, Arizona, or Southern California.

How much does the name of a product reflect what that product actually is rather than what the producer would like us to think it is?

Are there limits on capitalism now? If so, what are they? Should there be more or fewer?

What Do I Read Next?

American Buffalo, Mamet's 1975 play about three low-life men plotting to steal a rare coin, gives another slant on Mamet's view of American business.

Speed-the-Plow is Mamet's 1987 "Hollywood play" produced in New York with Joe Mantegna, Ron Silver, and Madonna.

Oleanna, Mamet's 1992 play, deals with teaching and the power of "political correctness" to utterly destroy a college professor.

The Death of a Salesman is Arthur Miller's 1947 classic play about a salesman and distorted values in America,

Writing in Restaurants, a book of essays by Mamet, gives a good look at his philosophy of writing and his view of contemporary America.

A Whore's Profession, 1996, is Mamet's most recent book of essays about working as a writer.

The entry on David Mamet by Patricia Lewis and Terry Browne in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Volume 7: *Twentieth-Century American Dramatists*, published in 1981 by Gale, gives a good overview of Mamet's early works.

Further Study

Bigsby, C. W. E. *David Mamet,* Methuen, 1985, p. 15

The first book-length study of Mamet covers from the beginning through *Glengarry Glen Ross,* An excellent introduction to the approaches and themes of Mamet.

Carroll, Dennis David Mamet, MacMillan, 1987, p 155.

An excellent assessment of Mamet at mid-career, from the beginnings through *Glengarry Glen Ross* approached by thematic groupings

Dean, Anne. *David Mamet- Language as Dramatic Action*, Associated University Presses, 1990, pp 96-197

A brilliant analysis of Mamet's use of language, approached overall and play-by-play. There are also useful insights into themes and the rehearsal process taken from interviews by the author

Gordon, Clive Review of *Glengarry Glen Ross in the Spectator*, September 27, 1983

A remarkably unperceptive and arrogant review of the London production.

Kane, Leslie Interview with Joe Mantegna, in her *David Mamet*: A Casebook, Garland, 1992, pp 254-55,259.

A fascinating look into the work of a fine actor in approaching and rehearsing a character. There are other essays in the Casebookfiiat are helpful, notably "Power Plays. David Mamet's Theatre of Manipulation" by Henry I Schvey; and "Comedy and Humor in the Plays of David Mamet" by Christopher C. Hudgins.

Mamet, David *Writing in Restaurants*, Penguin, 1986, pp 3, 6,13,14,20,32,116,124-25.

A broad range of essays that are very useful in understanding of Mamet's view of theatre, tradition, technique, and life in general

Rich, Frank. *Review of Glengarry Glen Ross in the New York Times*, March 26,1984.

A long, rich, and insightful review of the New York production

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Hirschhorn, Clive. Review of *Glengarry Glen Ross in Sunday Express,* September 25,1983.

Kissel, Howard. Review of *Glengarry Glen Ross* m *Womens Wear Daily,* March 26,1984.

Kroll, Jack, Review of *Glengarry Glen Ross in Newsweek*, April 9,1984.

Shulman, Milton. Review of *Glengarry Glen Ross in the Standard,* September 22, 1983.

Watt, Douglas Review of *Glengarry Glen Ross m the Daily News*, March 26,1984.

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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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