# A Life in the Theatre Study Guide

## A Life in the Theatre by David Mamet

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.



The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". 

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". 

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Introduction

*A Life in the Theatre* is one of American playwright David Mamet's early successes. The two-character drama/comedy has hallmarks of Mamet's later work: intense characters; taut, revealing dialogue; and a mentor/teacher relationship. Describing life in the footlights from an actor's point of view, *A Life in the Theatre* focuses on the relationship between two thespians: Robert, an older, experienced performer; and John, a relative newcomer. Though Robert's guidance is welcomed by John at first, as the play progresses Robert falters as an actor and mentor, and John emerges as a mature actor.

Mamet was inspired to write *A Life in the Theatre* by what he had observed backstage as well as by his own experiences in his short, unsuccessful career as an actor. *A Life in the Theatre* made its premiere at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, in February 1977. A slightly different, expanded version of the play debuted in an off-Broadway production in New York City's Theatre de Lys in October 1977.

*A Life in the Theatre* has been regularly performed around the world since these first productions, and though a few critics vehemently dismissed the play, it has received generally positive review. Many who praise the play share the opinion of Edith Oliver in the *New Yorker*. Writing about the original New York production, Oliver declared, "Mr. Mamet has written—in gentle ridicule; in jokes, broad and tiny; and in comedy, high and low—a love letter to the theatre. It is quite a feat, and he has pulled it off."

# Author Biography

David Mamet was born on November 30, 1947, in Chicago, Illinois. He is the son of Bernard Mamet, a labor lawyer, and his wife, Leonore. Mamet's parents had high expectations for Mamet and his younger sister, Lynn. Mamet's father especially emphasized the importance and potency of language. The family spent hours arguing for the sake of argument, and Mamet learned the subtle nuances often found in well-spoken words. This experience had a direct bearing on Mamet's plays, for he is known as a master of subtle dialogue.

After his parents' divorce when he was eleven, Mamet lived with his mother for four years, then moved in with his father. At this time, Mamet got his first taste of theater, working backstage and doing bit parts at Chicago's Hull Theatre. At first, Mamet wanted to be an actor, and to this end he studied the craft in New York City's famous Neighborhood Playhouse with Sanford Meisner. When he was deemed not talented enough to succeed as an actor, Mamet returned to college and began writing. His first full-length play, *Camel*, was his senior thesis and was performed at his school, Goddard College.

After graduation, while Mamet wrote plays, he supported himself with some small acting roles and by teaching acting at Goddard College and Marlboro College in Vermont. During this period, he began writing what became his first hit when it was produced in 1974, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. The play won the Joseph Jefferson Award for the best new Chicago play before it moved to off-off-Broadway and off-Broadway productions in New York City. *Time* magazine said it was among the ten best plays of 1976.

Mamet's next play, *American Buffalo*, was regarded as an even bigger smash. Again, it opened in Chicago first, but this time when it moved to New York City, it was staged on Broadway in 1977. Around the same time, Mamet wrote his homage to those actors he observed in his brief acting career, *A Life in the Theatre*.

Several years later, in 1984, Mamet won the Pulitzer Prize for one of his most respected plays, *Glengarry Glenn Ross*. The story revolves around survival in a dog-eat-dog business environment. Similarly, Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow* (1988) revolves around another cut-throat business world, that of Hollywood and the movie business. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Mamet wrote a number of screenplays, many of them adaptations of others' work, and was well-versed in the harsh business of getting movies made.

In 1992, Mamet produced one of his most controversial works, *Oleanna*. This play concerns unfounded allegations of sexual harassment surrounding a male college professor and a young female student. Mamet directed the original Broadway production of this and several other of his plays in the 1990s. He also directed the occasional film. Mamet's reputation is based primarily on his writing, however, and he is considered one of the best American playwrights of the twentieth century.

# Plot Summary

## Scene I

*A Life in the Theatre* opens backstage after the end of an opening night performance. Two actors talk. They are Robert, an older actor, and John, a relative newcomer to the stage. Robert compliments John on his performance and asks about his plans after the show. John informs Robert that he is going out for dinner. He compliments Robert's performance in one scene, but tells him he was "brittle" in another. When Robert questions him on the latter, John backpedals, faulting the actress in the scene. Robert pontificates on being an actor. Robert asks about another scene, and John flatters him. Robert takes the opportunity to expound on his feelings about the scene, implicitly praising himself. John later invites Robert to join him for dinner. As they leave, John notices that Robert still has some makeup on. John fetches a tissue and wipes it off.

## Scene 2

In the wardrobe area backstage, John worries about being in Robert's way. Robert soliloquizes a line, to which John is indifferent.

## Scene 3

John and Robert are onstage in a play set in the trenches of World War I. John plays a character very upset over the killing of a fellow soldier by the enemy. Robert's character tries to calm him down. John's character decides to charge the enemy. He is shot after running offstage.

## Scene 4

Backstage after a curtain call, Robert chides John for his swordplay in the Elizabethan piece they are in. Robert shows him how to do it right, and they practice a couple of times.

## Scene 5

Robert pontificates to John on how actors, and others, work on their bodies but not their voices and accents. Offensive sounds are his pet peeve. He tells John about the importance of style and that they, as actors, must continue to grow. Robert admonishes John several times to keep his back straight. When John asks if his back is straight, Robert says no.

## Scene 6

At the end of the day backstage, John is on the phone telling someone he cannot go out with him or her because he is obligated to go out with an actor, Robert. Robert appears, telling John that he must have a life outside of theater. John will not tell him who was on the phone.

## Scene 7

The pair meet coming in for a morning rehearsal. Robert is more friendly than John.

## Scene 8

At the backstage makeup table, John and Robert ready themselves for a performance. Robert believes the show will be special this night. Robert pesters John about a new brush he has. John is terse with him. Robert compliments John on how he takes care of his possessions, then asks him to do a little less during their scene together. John is offended by Robert's implications.

Robert becomes frustrated when the zipper on his fly breaks. John insists on helping him pin it, but has problems completing the task.

## Scene 9

John and Robert are in a scene onstage in a lawyer's office. Robert plays the lawyer. John's character, David, enters, informing Robert's character that David's wife is pregnant with the lawyer's child. In the middle of the scene, Robert flubs a line, but corrects himself. The scene ends with Robert's character wondering if he will be harmed by David.

## Scene 10

Robert and John are in the wardrobe area. Robert is angry at "all of them," and though John inquires, he never finds out who "they" are.

## Scene 11

The pair are appearing in a scene together. Robert forgets several words and whole lines. John has to prompt him.

## Scene 12

Robert and John change clothes backstage. Robert complains that their costumes should be washed more often. He asks John if he is tired. John says only a bit.

## Scene 13

John and Robert are reading a new script. Robert reads along, commenting on the author's intention. John reads his lines, though Robert interrupts him with his musings and directions related to his needs.

## Scene 14

Robert and John are eating at the makeup table during a break. Robert inquires about an audition John had that day. John tells him it went well, which prompts Robert to speak of how a person cannot control what others think of him. He assures John that if the people holding the auditions seemed not to like him, it does not mean he is not a good actor. John tells Robert that he knows this. Robert hopes that John gets the part.

## Scene 15

John and Robert are dressing backstage for a performance. Robert is complaining that the play would be better if there were more experimentation.

## Scene 16

Robert is onstage doing a scene with a monologue. He flubs his lines.

## Scene 17

John and Robert are at the makeup table. When Robert begins musing aloud on the objects at hand, John asks him to be quiet. Robert is offended, telling John that he has breached theater etiquette. Robert says he is only trying to educate the younger generation. John is indifferent, but apologizes. Robert does not accept the apology, and the scene ends at an impasse.

## Scene 18

Onstage, Robert and John are performing a lifeboat scene rehearsed in scene 13. Robert forgets some of his words. John has a monologue at the end of the scene in which he tells Robert's character that he does not know what he is talking about.

## Scene 19

John and Robert stand in the wings waiting for the cue to go onstage. Robert is talking to himself. John asks Robert about a line of his that he has forgotten. Robert does not know what the line is, though he tries to remember it. His insistence that he will remember it leads to John missing his cue. John panics, but finally goes onstage.

## Scene 20

Backstage, John is dressing in street clothes. Robert enters, talking to himself, when he notices and compliments John's new sweater.

## Scene 21

John is on hold on the telephone backstage. Robert enters, complaining about everyone taking a piece of his paycheck. Robert wants John to go for a drink. The person John is waiting for comes on the line, and he makes an appointment. Robert leaves to go for a drink on his own.

## Scene 22

John and Robert are taking off their makeup after a scene. Robert complains about critics, saying that they praised John's performance too much. John listens politely, but disagrees. Robert calls him a "twit," then uses one of John's towels. John tells him to use his own towels.

## Scene 23

On a darkened stage, John rehearses some lines alone. Robert interrupts, informing John that he has been watching. Robert tells John that he has become a good actor. Robert goes on about the theater being part of life before leaving. John starts to rehearse again when he realizes that Robert is still watching him. John calls him out, and sees that Robert is crying. Robert pulls himself together and seems to leave again. John begins again, but Robert is still there.

## Scene 24

In a play set in a hospital, John and Robert play doctors performing surgery. John and Robert disagree about what line they are on. John says his line, but Robert shakes his head, then forgets his next speech. Robert insists they are at a different part of the play. John walks offstage, leaving Robert alone. As Robert addresses the audience, the curtain is brought down on him.

## Scene 25

Backstage, Robert has cut his left wrist deeply. John wants to take him to the hospital or doctor, but Robert insists that he is fine. Robert will not let John take him home either, but sits and rests for a moment after John leaves.

## Scene 26

After a show, Robert and John exchange compliments on their scenes. Robert tells John that his father always wanted him to be an actor. John gets ready to leave. When Robert asks, John says that he is going to a party. Robert talks about life as an actor in the theater. John asks him for a loan. Robert gives him the money, and John exits. Robert addresses the empty house from the stage, thanking him for their attention. John reappears, telling him they are locking up the theater so he has to leave. John goes again, and Robert says good night.

# Characters

## John

John is a young actor, relatively new to the theater. At the beginning of *A Life in the Theatre*, he is nervous about performing, so much so that he has not eaten in several days. In scene 1, he looks forward to dinner as his appetite has returned now that opening night is over. In these early stages, John is respectful of Robert's opinions, knowledge, and pontificating about the theater. John compliments him on his performances and invites him to dinner.

John listens to Robert's directions on acting until scene 8, when Robert asks him to do less with his performance. John is insulted by this advice. Thereafter, John replies in terse phrases and monosyllables to Robert's musings and mentions his costar's faltering lines. John himself improves as an actor over the course of *A Life in the Theatre*.

## Robert

Robert is an older actor in the theater. From the first scene, he plays mentor to John, reveling in long-winded speeches about aspects of the theater, acting, and life. Robert appreciates John's willingness to listen and the compliments he gives the elder performer. He is sensitive to every aspect of how life in the theater relates to life outside, though it seems for Robert that all of life is a performance.

# Themes

## Reality and Fantasy

The lines between reality and fantasy are blurred by certain aspects of *A Life in the Theatre*. For Robert, life is the theater. He plays the role of a professional actor both onstage and off, insisting on indoctrinating John with his accumulated knowledge. Throughout *A Life in the Theatre*, Robert does not draw many definite boundaries between the fantasy world of the theater and the reality of life offstage. Though he tells John in scene 6 that an actor must have a life outside the theater, in scene 5, Robert goes on about how ugly sounds, like voices and accents, bother him on and offstage. The reality of being human breaks into Robert's fantasy life as an actor, however, when he begins to forget his lines onstage. Adding to this reality is John's regular rejection of Robert and his values in the second half of the play. Still, at the end of *A Life in the Theatre*, Robert speaks his final words onstage to an empty house. At his core, he cannot accept the difference between theater and life.

## Friendship, Growth, and Development

At the core of *A Life in the Theatre* is a tension between friendship and growth and development. In scene 1, the older actor Robert takes the younger actor John under his wing, befriending him. At first John welcomes the attention of the mentor, inviting him to dine with him after opening night and complimenting his performance. John takes Robert's cues and advice seriously, though he does keep much of life private. As John grows in confidence and experience as an actor, and Robert continues to treat him with the same, somewhat overbearing attitude, their friendship becomes more professional. Though John becomes frustrated with Robert's never-ending commentary and the decline in his ability to remember lines, he still can feel a friendly sympathy for the elder actor. In scene 8, for example, John insists on fixing the zipper in Robert's fly when it becomes stuck.

Though John is disturbed by the fact that Robert is watching him from the shadows as he rehearses in scene 23, he is concerned when he realizes that Robert is crying. When Robert cuts his wrist—something of a suicide attempt—John tries to take care of him, but Robert will not let him. Though John has probably learned something about the theater through their friendship, he has also developed as a person because of this bond.

## Human Condition and the Cycle of Life

Though Robert and John are actors and *A Life in the Theatre* concerns existence on and offstage, the problems and concerns brought up are universal to humankind. Both John and Robert need attention, an audience. They have chosen the theater as their profession, their place in the universe. Humans want the attention of others; Robert and

John have made their livelihood by it. Each also acknowledges the other throughout the play, positively as well as negatively, providing a more intimate audience of one. They form a relationship that is not without tension.

Related to the idea of the human condition in *A Life in the Theatre* is the cycle of life. The older teaches the younger, who replaces the older. Robert is the elder actor. He tries to impart his accumulated knowledge and wisdom to John as a mentor/friend. John, as the younger and less experienced actor, willingly accepts Robert's attention and respects his wisdom. But as John grows more confident as an actor, he becomes less interested in Robert's words. Soon, Robert's acting skills decline as John's continue to rise. Robert forgets lines during his scenes and cannot accept John's corrections. John no longer needs him and merely tolerates his mentor. Robert tries to hold on to John by watching from the wings as he rehearses alone in scene 23 and by making a suicide attempt in scene 25. By the end of the play, John pities the old man as he is forced to take his bow and exit the stage.

# Style

## Setting

*A Life in the Theatre* is a comedic drama set in a nonspecific, though contemporary, time. The action of the play is confined to places within a theater. While the scenes from "real" plays are set onstage, Robert and John's relationship develops in the backstage areas. These include the wardrobe area, the dance room, the makeup table, the wings, and other undefined backstage areas. By setting this play only in such places in the theater, Mamet constructs a version of the theater world for the audience. Most theatergoing audiences never see what goes into the making of actors and plays. By limiting the settings to the theater, Mamet gives *A Life in the Theatre* a concentrated authenticity. Yet because a majority of the scenes take place backstage, parallels to everyday life, people, and relationships also can be drawn.

## Vignettes, Plotting, and Time

Because *A Life in the Theatre* comprises twenty-six scenes, it is not constructed in the same way as a two-or three-act play. Each scene is a vignette. A few are no more than a handful of lines, while the longest is about twelve and one-half pages. The latter is scene 1, which sets up the play and its tensions. The majority of scenes are only two to three pages. The brevity of the scenes affects their content and the way the plot is drawn. Action is limited. The evolution of Robert and John's relationship —the heart of the play—is constructed through their changing attitudes toward each other. Often this can be found in the nuances of the short scenes. Though it is obvious that over the course of the play a significant amount of time has passed, it is not specifically delineated. Time is measured by these spoken and sometimes unspoken changes in the characters.

## Plays within a Play

The scenes where Robert and John perform scenes from other plays serve several purposes. Mamet parodies several types of plays, providing some humor. Additionally, the playlets show how John and Robert do their job as actors in the theater. Over the course of the play, John becomes a more confident actor, while Robert's decline is highlighted by his flubbed lines. This aspect comes to head in scene 24, the surgery scene. Robert loses his place in the playlet and will not listen to John's cues about where they are. John finally walks offstage in frustration. Thus, the playlets also provide another forum that highlights the development of John and Robert's relationship.

In several cases, the playlets also implicitly reflect on the nature of that relationship as well as the characters themselves. In the first playlet, scene 3, Robert plays the experienced soldier trying to calm the younger, very distraught soldier. John's character charges the enemy from the trenches and is shot. In scene 9, the playlet in the lawyer's

office, Robert plays a lawyer while John plays a wronged man. In the previous scene, one set backstage, Robert has insulted John by asking him to do less on stage. Then, in scene 9, John's character confronts Robert's lawyer character because he has impregnated John's character's wife. There is confrontation brewing: John could beat him up or they could talk about it. Robert also flubs one line, showing his decline as an actor. These playlets underscore much about *A Life in the Theatre*.

# Historical Context

Like other aspects of American life, commercial theater struggled in the early 1970s. Fewer real taboos were left after the freewheeling 1960s. Few plays of quality were produced on Broadway, and much money was lost. Fringe theater and off-Broadway were places where dramatic innovation was taking place. Off-Broadway was where many new and developing writers were nurtured, including Mamet, Sam Shepard, and David Rabe. Many of their plays were introspective, trying to make sense of life in a broken society. Mamet was but one playwright encouraged by Joseph Papp and his Public Theater and New York Shakespeare Festival. Papp was a producer who developed the plays of Mamet and other playwrights off-Broadway, before bringing them to Broadway. By the late 1970s, these playwrights and their work were reaching Broadway. Mamet's *American Buffalo* was produced on Broadway in 1977. Broadway was very profitable in 1977, setting new revenue records.

Another reason for Broadway's newfound profitability was musicals like *A Chorus Line*. In the 1970s, there were several behind-the-scenes plays, but the dance musical *A Chorus Line* was arguably the biggest. The story focused on struggling dancers trying to make it. *A Chorus Line* was created in rehearsal based on stories from real dancers, and opened in 1975. The dance musical won a Pulitzer Prize in 1976 and played on Broadway for more than a decade. The biggest musical in 1977 was another long-running hit, *Annie*. At the end of the 1970s, theater was on an upswing both creatively and financially because of these successes.

# Critical Overview

From the play's first productions in Chicago and New York City, most critics either found much to praise in *A Life in the Theatre* or dismissed it entirely. Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* wrote of the Chicago production, "It is slight, but it does not lack consequence. It has bite and it also has a heart." His opinion of the play improved when *A Life in the Theatre* was produced off-Broadway. He wrote, "Though the work has serious undertones, it is, first of all, a comedy—and Mr. Mamet's language glistens. His writing is a cross between the elegant and the vernacular, an ironic combination that is uniquely his own." Many critics who liked *A Life in the Theatre* praised the content of the playlets. T. E. Kalem of *Time* wrote, "With marvelous mimicry, Mamet conjures up parodistic echoes of past play-writing titans together with melodramatic fustian [pompous] talk."

John Simon of *The Hudson Review* complimented certain aspects of *A Life in the Theatre* but wrote

[U]ltimately, two problems weigh down *A Life in the Theatre*. One is that these are all anecdotes, quips, rivalries that can be hung on any theatrical stick figures, which is, in fact, what John and Robert are. Under the all too typical mockery, there are no human beings.

The *New York Times*' Walter Kerr did not like the play at all, sharing Simon's concerns. He argued,

Mr. Mamet has not listened well himself; the loosely linked entertainment, intended as a charm bracelet, is skimpy, imprecise, too easy, and more than a little bit borrowed. Nonetheless, expectation continues to sit in the air. Mr. Mamet, attacking his trade as often and as assiduously as he does, will come along."

Harold Clurman of *The Nation* was one critic who could find no redeeming value in *A Life in the Theatre*. In addition to deriding the playlets as unreal, Clurman wrote, "What we see is not a life in the theatre (not even a reasonable caricature of it) but a cliché that exists for the most part in the minds of those 'out front' who know the theatre chiefly through anecdotal hearsay."

After its initial runs, *A Life in the Theatre* was regularly produced in the United States and abroad. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mamet's reputation as a playwright had skyrocketed, with the success of *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1982) and other plays. Because *A Life in the Theatre* was written toward the beginning of Mamet's career, it was sometimes seen by later critics as a throwaway. Others saw it as a early indication of what was to come, especially in terms of his use of language. Of a 1989 production in London, Douglas Kennedy of *New Statesman & Society* wrote, "It has its moments; especially in its spot-on observations of backstage paranoia—but it's ultimately too lightweight to be anything more than a series of interlinking sketches which don't amount to much." In contrast, Michael Billington of the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*

declared, "Mamet simultaneously satirises the fragility of theatre and celebrates its almost masonic rituals. But what motors the play (even in an early piece like this) is the dazzling economy of language."

The way *A Life in the Theatre* was perceived by critics continued to evolve in the United States as well. Of a 1990 New York production, Alvin Klein of the *New York Times* wrote, "[I]t now seems naïve to perceive the play as pure homage, since it isn't a particularly effective one. And many colored interpretations could be tantalizing in the view of Mr. Mamet's considerable later work." Yet Klein's colleague, Wilborn Hampton of the *New York Times*, believed the play retained its power. Writing about a 1992 production by the Jewish Repertory Company, Wilborn argued

*A Life in the Theatre* stands up extremely well. It is infused with the playwright's obvious affection for the theater and the people who populate it. And like Mr. Mamet's other works, the play has hidden depths of real poignancy.

# Criticism

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

# Critical Essay #1

*Petrusso is a freelance writer and editor living in Austin, Texas. In this essay, Petrusso interprets the relationship between John and Robert in Mamet's play and argues that, despite most critics' interpretations, Robert depends on John from the beginning of the play.*

Many critics who have written about David Mamet's *A Life in the Theatre* have maintained that Robert and John have a mentor-protégé relationship. Early on, they believe, Robert dominates the relationship, though the roles reverse as the play progresses. By the end, critics hold, John has matured and become the dominant person in the relationship. Catharine Hughes of *America* is one such critic. Writing about the original off-Broadway production in 1977, Hughes claims

At first, the older Robert is the obvious mentor, and John merely the subservient apprentice. But John begins to enjoy some success, and there is a considerable role reversal, which finds the veteran becoming increasingly insecure and dependent.

However, a closer analysis of the play shows that it is John who controls the relationship from the beginning. Robert needs someone to listen to him, to validate his existence as an actor and a person. This is a role that John willingly fills, at least at first. While John gets something out of this at the very beginning, Robert becomes a pitiful annoyance midway through *A Life in the Theatre*. As Hughes and others have argued, by the end, Robert depends fully on John as a lifeline. Only John interacts with the outside world, in contrast with Robert, who is out of touch with it. Robert is truly the needy one, the protégé when it comes to real life.

In scene 1, the longest scene of *A Life in the Theatre*, the nature of John and Robert's relationship is established. From the first lines, Robert seeks out John, rather than vice versa. Robert delivers the first line of the play: "Goodnight, John." John responds "Goodnight," but does not use Robert's name. Robert wants to start the conversation, and John plays along. Robert proceeds to compliment a scene that John has apparently been in, the bedroom scene. John thanks him and leaves it at that. In turn, John does not compliment him, but rather the audience that saw their performance that evening. This slight shows that John does not feel the need to garner Robert's favor, but Robert has an interest in John's.

A bit later in the conversation, John does compliment Robert on his courtroom scene. Robert cannot take the accolade at face value, but insecurely dismisses it by saying, "I felt it was off tonight." When John offers a bit of criticism as a follow-up, opining that the doctor scene was "brittle," Robert questions him in detail about what he means. Robert asks if it was really he who was at fault, or his female co-star. John backpedals from his obvious criticism of Robert, first changing what he said, then placing the blame on Robert's female co-star.

While these exchanges could be interpreted as John's establishing himself as Robert's lesser in the mentor-student relationship, they also show that John is learning how to feed Robert's ego. Throughout the rest of scene 1, John provides a forum for Robert to express his interpretation of his performance. John compliments Robert to satisfy the elder man's ego, giving John control of the relationship. John does not depend on Robert's compliments the way Robert depends on John's ear.

Another, more subtle aspect of John and Robert's relationship is established in scene 1. At one point in the scene, Robert inquires about John's plans for the evening. John tells him that he is going out to eat. The conversation drifts away from this topic, but, toward the end of the scene, Robert brings up the subject again. John is more specific about what he wants to eat. Robert again plays coy, telling John that he cannot eat at night because he has a weight problem. This elicits another compliment from John, who also asks about Robert's plans. Robert reveals that he will be going home to read or take a walk. It is John who goes out into the world, while Robert retreats to his private, insular domain. Because of the way Robert handles John's polite inquiries ("Why'd you ask?"), John is nearly coerced into asking Robert to join him. Without John, Robert would not be going into social situations.

The nature of the relationship between John and Robert is underscored by the final incident in the first scene. John notices that Robert has some makeup remaining behind his ear. It is John who gets the tissue, spits on it, and cleans the makeup off. Robert needs John more than John needs Robert.

The patterns of dependency established in scene 1 continue throughout the play. As John becomes less tolerant of Robert's ranting and declining acting skills, Robert wants John's attention even more. He gets desperate by the end, when he feels that John does not really care anymore. These changes are seen when John is somehow part of the world outside of the theater.

The next scene in which John is involved in the outside world is scene 6. In scenes 2 through 5, John listens and responds to Robert's theatrical musings with open-mindedness. In scene 6, a relatively short scene, Robert catches John on the phone. John is turning down a chance to go out with a close friend of unstated gender to go out with Robert. John sounds like he would rather be going out with this friend than Robert. When Robert maintains, "We all must have an outside life, John. This is an essential," it is an ironic statement. Robert does not practice what he preaches. When he asks John with whom he was speaking, John will only say, "A friend." John keeps much of his life and many of his feelings to himself.

After this exchange, John is a little less tolerant of Robert. The six lines of scene 7 are dominated by Robert, and John is merely polite. In scene 8, Robert tries to be the dominant person in the relationship, asking John to "do less" in their scene together. John does not take such an obvious criticism lightly. Robert then creates another situation in which he needs John to take care of him. He notices that the zipper on his trousers is broken. Instead of allowing John to bring in an outside person ("the woman," probably a wardrobe mistress), Robert allows John to fix it with a safety pin for him.

Though John does it in part because of guilt, he also takes the opportunity to comment on Robert's weight, which he believes might be increasing. Robert's attempt to show real dominance—controlling how John acts on stage—totally backfires.

In scene 14, John has again interacted with someone other than Robert. He has recently auditioned for another role, and Robert asks him about it while they eat a meal between shows. By this point, Robert's boorishness has increased. He complains more about the powers that be, and he begins to forget lines and flub his acting. John goes along with Robert's demeanor to a certain point, but says nothing to encourage Robert to speak to him. John continues this attitude in scene 14, though he reveals nothing about what he thinks or feels about the audition or what Robert says. It is also worth noting that none of Robert's auditions is discussed or depicted to further emphasize that John is the only one who functions outside of the theater.

It is seven more scenes before John again connects to the outside world. He finally tells Robert to "shut up" in scene 17, a pivotal scene that shows John finally directly challenging Robert's attitude. Robert tries to leverage his position by reminding John, "The Theatre's a closed society," among other things, but John continues to hold his own. Late in the scene, John apologizes for his transgression, if only because it might shut Robert up about the rules of the theater. In scene 19, John's distrust of Robert is confirmed when the elder actor is unhelpful about a forgotten line and makes John miss his cue.

When John next interacts with an outside person, he cares little for Robert's feelings. In scene 21, as in scene 6, John is on the telephone, waiting for the person on the other end, Miss Bonnie Ernstein, to get back to him. It is obviously an important call related to his career. As John listens and waits for her, Robert continues to rant about the theater. Robert tries to get John to end his call and go out with him; John refuses. The caller gets on the line, and John talks to her, much to Robert's displeasure. Robert finally leaves to drink on his own as John makes an appointment with Miss Ernstein. Again, John has a life—human interaction outside the theater—while Robert does not.

In the next few scenes, Robert tries to hold onto his friendship with John but to no avail. Robert cannot make John listen any longer. John does not tolerate Robert's criticism of John's positive reviews in scene 22, or appreciate Robert's furtive watching of John's solo rehearsal in scene 23. In the last two scenes of *A Life in the Theatre*, John has both potential and real non-theater interactions. In scene 25, Robert has cut his wrist in what could be seen as a suicide attempt. John tries to get him to go to a hospital or doctor, and even offers to go home with him or take him home, but Robert refuses all help. Robert revels in John's attention, which is all he seems to want or need.

The last scene of *A Life in the Theatre* shows how little John and Robert's relationship has changed. John is still clearly in the driver's seat. Robert still compliments John in hopes of holding onto him, but John will only allow him a few moments. When Robert asks, John tells him that he is going to a party. He does make inquiries about Robert's plans, but when Robert says that he is hungry, John does not offer to go for a meal with him, as he did in the beginning. Instead John uses Robert's need for him for his own

gain. He allows Robert to light his cigarette and goes on to borrow twenty dollars from him. Before this point, John has not taken anything from Robert. But because he is so in control of the relationship at this point, John can do as he pleases. Though Robert gets the last line in the play, "Goodnight" to an empty theater, it is John who tells him he must leave so they can lock up. As in scene 1 of *A Life in the Theatre*, John holds the keys to Robert's personal and professional happiness.

**Source:** Annette Petrusso, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

# Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay on David Mamet's* A Life in the Theatre, *author Anne Dean reviews the drama with special regard to the two central characters, and argues that, ultimately, the drama may be written as much about the theatre life as life itself.*

Without exception, all of Mamet's characters are storytellers or performers—or both. They are somewhat like O'Neill's gallery of misfits in *The Iceman Cometh;* rather than face the realities of an uncertain, often threatening world, they rely upon illusion and the performance of a comforting role to get by. Actors all, they prefer the relative security and coherence of their fictional "pipe dreams" to the incompleteness and ambiguousness of cold experience.

In Mamet's world, to act is also to exist, to make a mark in space. His characters take on their myriad roles to create meaning in their lives, and to give themselves importance and substance. That these roles are sometimes as unsatisfactory as the reality they are designed to conceal is one of the recurring ironies of his work. In *A Life in the Theatre*. Mamet's characters are literally actors, professional players who perform in public as a career. However, Robert and John do not restrict their acting abilities to the stage—they are actors both in and out of the theatre. They put on the costumes and makeup for the drama they must perform as actors, but Mamet makes it very clear that the roles they perform onstage are but a small part of their mimetic gifts. They never stop acting; from the moment they awake to the moment they go to sleep, Robert and John are each performing a role for the benefit of the other. They strive to reinforce their own self-images as they quibble, bicker, and generally try to upstage one another. Their "real-life" performances become hopelessly confused and merge with the characters they represent.

When Mel Gussow first saw the play, he described it as "a comedy about the artifice of acting" but when, some months later, he saw a revival, he felt that "it was about the artifice of living." The very title of the work gives a clue to Mamet's intentions: it is at once a parody of Stanislavski's autobiography, *My Life in Art* and an indication of the analogy he intends to make between life and drama. It also points to the pastiche he will use affectionately throughout the play and subtly suggests the serious elements that both offset and contribute to its humor.

*A Life in the Theatre* is primarily a comedy, but one that is not without pathos. Mamet describes the work as a "comedy about actors" but goes on to say that

as such it must be, and is, slightly sad. It is, I think, the essential and by no means unfortunate nature of the theater that it is always dying: and the great strength and beauty of actors is their bravery and generosity in this least stable of environments. They are generous and brave not through constraint of circumstances, but by choice. They give their time in training, in rehearsal, in constant thought about their instrument and their art and the characters which they portray.

In an essay about the play, Mamet quotes Camus as saying that the actor's task "is a prime example of the Sisyphean nature of life." Even as that metaphorical rock begins to roll backward, the actor doggedly continues with the struggle. Further he notes how "a life in the theater need not be an analogue to 'life.' It *is* life." For example, Robert is terrified of losing his touch, of growing old and becoming obsolete in the modern world, hence his insistence upon the necessity for actors to grow and accept change—although change is, in fact, the last thing he can accept. At the beginning of the play, John is full of the insecurities of youth: he is naïve, eager to please, and most reverential of his older colleague. As the work progresses, however, his reverence turns to contempt and irritation as he comes to believe—perhaps erroneously—in his own star quality.

Mamet recalls Sanford Meisner humorously remembering a certain kind of actor, whom it is wise to avoid: "When you go into the professional world, at a stock theatre somewhere, backstage, you will meet an older actor—someone who has been around a while. . . . Ignore this man." Freddie Jones, who played Robert in the 1979 Open Space production agrees that this character can be exasperating, but also points out that he fulfills an important function in the work: "The play is an allegory about death and rebirth—Robert is on the wane and the young actor is on the way up."

Evanescence is a fundamental concern in *A Life in the Theatre*; an actor's life is, of necessity, evanescent; there is nothing fixed about a stage performance. At the end of the evening, the player's exploits live on only in the imagination of the audience. As a result, Mamet believes that "this is why theatrical still photographs are many times stiff and uninteresting—the player in them is not *acting* . . . but *posing—indicating feelings*."

Actors constantly tell each other stories because "the only real history of the ephemeral art is an oral history; everything fades very quickly, and the only surety is the word of someone who was there, who *talked* to someone who was there, who vouches for the fact that someone told him she had spoken to a woman who knew someone who was there. It all goes very quickly, too." As Mamet notes, Robert relies upon ephemera and nostalgia to capture important memories, recall past glories, and reflect upon his career. In spite of his assertions that he is "modern" in outlook, Robert's speech is florid, hyperbolic—sometimes positively Victorian in nature. In an ecstasy of theatrical self-indulgence, he speaks of

A life spent in the theatre. . . . Backstage. . . . The bars, the House, the drafty halls. The pencilled scripts . . . Stories. Ah, the stories that you hear. (scene 26)

This is not the speech of everyday conversation: it is studied, pretentious, and melodramatic. Robert is not acting a part here, but merely making random observations about his experience of theatrical life. It is clear that the often overripe diction of certain melodramas has influenced him to the extent that even the most ordinary discourse is imbued with theatricality and exaggeration. Thus, Robert clings to the past because it comforts him to do so. Old-fashioned diction lends him a specious sense of security as he battles to fend off fears of impending obsolescence—in and out of the theatre.

The main metaphor of the play is, as the title suggests, that all life is a kind of theatre. Here, as elsewhere in his drama, Mamet seems to be saying that the kind of life his characters are forced to endure is a second-hand affair, full of clichés and desperate pretensions. Not only this, but their metaphysical position is unclear. In *A Life in the Theatre*, perhaps more obviously than in his other works, Mamet depicts the absurdity of the human condition. In the image of the solitary actor speaking out into an empty space, he conveys not merely the egoistic need for posturing center-stage by an affected narcissist, but the futility and desperation of man's uncertainty of his place in the universe. The potency of the image is clearly intended to extend far beyond the theatre into a question concerning the very existence of God. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard touches upon a similar theme. The Player cries out in alarm that his one purpose in life as an actor has been seriously undermined—he suddenly realizes that he is performing without an audience:

You don't understand the humiliation of it—to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable—that somebody is *watching.*

Similarly, in Arthur Miller's *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, the characters' uncertainty as to whether the seraphically decorated ceiling is bugged or not is surely intended to carry resonances beyond their immediate situation. They conduct their lives as though unseen eyes are indeed watching, but neither they nor the audience are ever able to verify this fact.

The language used by Mamet to convey the ambiguities of life both in front of and away from the footlights seems once again to be effortless and completely authentic. It is, of course, far from effortless but as carefully wrought and constructed as that found in any of his plays. Nothing is included without a reason, every word forwards the plot or comments upon a previous action or emotion. It is true that the text resembles a number of conversations that have been faithfully captured and rendered verbatim. Mamet does indeed include all the ellipses and idiosyncrasies of ordinary conversation but, as John Ditsky has noted, although the dialogue may *appear* banal or merely naturalistic, it is "a deliberately bland language [that] is used to mask action of only apparent simplicity." Mamet allows us to cut through the excesses of Robert's hyperbole and see beneath the brevity of much of John's dialogue by his careful manipulation of every word they utter. He provides a fascinating glimpse into the personalities of men who do all they can to hide their true feelings. Emotions may often run riot in this play, but it would be difficult without Mamet's linguistic virtuosity to ascertain those that are genuine and those that constitute yet another aspect of an unceasing performance. Patrick Ryecart, who played John in the Open Space production considers that

what Mamet achieves with so little is . . . quite incredible. With so few words, he can tell us all we need to know about Robert and John. He achieves amazing economy. He must write a great deal in the beginning and then set about bringing it right down, paring and paring, getting the words down to the narrative bone. The text of *A Life in the Theatre* is not only supremely funny, but also brilliant in its conciseness.

*A Life in the Theatre* is a kind of love letter to everything Mamet holds dear about the stage and its performers. The lines of the text are imbued with a sweetness and affection that are not wholly negated by the often critical stance adopted by the playwright. Like Chekhov, Mamet has the ability to like and even admire his characters at the same time as exposing their weaknesses and faults. Mamet's own summary of the play is that it is "an attempt to look with love at an institution we all love, The Theater, and at the only component of that institution (about whom our feelings are less simple), the men and women of the theater—the world's heartiest mayflies, whom we elect and appoint to live out our dreams upon the stage."

The work was first staged in 1975 at the Goodman Theatre, Chicago and was then produced in 1977 at the off-Broadway Theatre-de-Lys in New York City. Since then, it has enjoyed a number of revivals, the most recent of which was at the Open Space Theatre, London in 1979. The play has been described by Michael Coveney as being "rather like Terence Rattigan's *Harlequinade*, with a nod in the direction of Molnar [*Play at the Castle*] and Pirandello [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*]." Although Mamet has expressed his admiration for Rattigan's work, and there is certainly more than a hint of Molnar's verbal trickery in the play, the presiding genius of *A Life in the Theatre* is undoubtedly Luigi Pirandello. In both his dramas and his fiction, Pirandello, like Mamet, creates works that explore the many faces of reality. He examines the relationships between actor and character, self and persona, and face and mask, and was a precursor of the work of writers such as Anouilh (*Dear Antoine*), Giraudoux (*Intermezzo*), Genet (*The Balcony and The Maids*), and Stoppard (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*), all of which explore the possibilities inherent in such a concept. Pirandello wrote:

Your reality is a mere transitory and fleeting illusion, taking this form today and that tomorrow, according to the conditions, according to your will, your sentiments, which in turn are controlled by an intellect that shows them to you today in one manner and tomorrow . . . who knows how? Illusions of reality, represented in this fatuous comedy of life that never ends, nor can ever end.

In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a company of actors rehearses a play, which is itself an illusion of reality. As the rehearsals progress, six created characters—other aspects of illusion—enter and interrupt the proceedings. Raymond Williams describes how "the resulting contrast between these various stages in the process of dramatic illusion, and the relation of the process to its context of reality, is the material of Pirandello's play." Michael Billington notes how Mamet demonstrates that "the theatre [is] a place that both imitates life and devours it. . . . w here . . . actors begin to feel trapped inside their stage roles. . . . one gets so occupied with representing life one ceases to notice it passing one by."

Certainly Robert's life has been "spent" in the theatre in every sense of the word. He explains to John how his life as an actor cannot be separated from that which he lives when not onstage—the time spent somehow merging and becoming one:

*Robert:* . . . the theatre is of course, a *part* of life . . . I'm saying, as in a grocery store that you cannot separate the *time* one spends . . . that is it's all part of one's *life.* (*Pause*.) In addition to the fact that what's happening on *stage* is life . . . (scene 23)

Robert has become so much a creature of the theatre that his own identity is unclear. Robert, the man, puts on the mask of Robert, the actor; that Robert is himself a character played by a real actor merely adds to the metadramatic ironies. Where does reality end and fantasy begin? A mock-prayer spoken by Guildenstern in Stoppard's play accurately sums up the fantasy life into which it is all too easy for actors to retreat when he intones "Give us this day our daily mask."

In *A Life in the Theatre*, Mamet constantly blurs the boundaries between life and art, and the work has been described by Mel Gussow as "a triple Pirandello." He observes how "the actors play to [an] imaginary audience, while we, behind the scenes, see and hear the artifice—the asides, whispers and blunders." The real theatre audience watches two actors playing another two actors, who in turn perform to an unseen audience apparently located at the opposite end of the stage. We see Robert and John perform to their audience with their backs toward us, whereas when Mamet's play proper is in progress, they play facing outward into the stalls. This is the way in which the first American production was staged, and Mamet has called this staging "a beautiful solution." He goes on to explain how it operates in practice:

. . . Gregory Mosher and Michael Merritt, the play's first director and designer, respectively. . . . decided that it might be provocative if, a *second* curtain were installed —this one on the *upstage* portion of the stage. It is behind this curtain that the audience for the "plays" in which John and Robert play sits. This curtain is opened when John and Robert are onstage, which is to say, playing in a "play." Thus we see the actors' backs during the *onstage* scenes, and we get a full-face view of them during their moments *backstage.*

The theatre audience therefore listens to the characters' backstage gossip, witnesses the ambiguity between the roles they inhabit onstage and their real selves, follows the inexorable shifts in power, and learns to detect the reality behind what looks artificial and the speciousness of what is presented as truth. Patrick Ryecart speaks about the metadramatic ironies within the work:

The kind of play which constantly reminds the audience that it *is* indeed a play can become very tedious and rather patronizing. However, Mamet is very good with this in *A Life in the Theatre*. In our production, we had a mirror at the back of the set which enclosed the audience even more within the piece, making them really feel a part of it . . . they were thus brought right into the action in a very unselfconscious way. Not only this, but Mamet brings them into the action in another, brilliant way: on the first page of the text you have a direct reference to them. John says, "They were very bright" and goes on to flatter them further. They were "an intelligent house," he says, "attentive," and so on. Mamet includes at least five instances of direct audience flattery within the first few moments of the play!

The playwright therefore incorporates the outside world into the work, fusing theatre and reality in a memorable dramatic form. Robert's benediction at the conclusion of the play, addressed to a supposedly absent audience but in fact spoken to the real stalls, similarly identifies a gesture of incorporation. Robert stands alone center-stage as he delivers his farewell speech:

*Robert:* . . . The lights dim. Each to his own home. Goodnight. Goodnight. Goodnight. (scene 26)

Much of the humor in the play derives from Robert's pompous efforts to link life and drama. Whereas Mamet is in no doubt whatever that direct connections do exist, he invests Robert's linguistic forays on this topic with an undercutting irony and wit. Robert has a certain idea of himself as a consummate professional, what has been called "a flamboyant actor of the old school," an "old Wolfitian barnstormer," well as "an ageing, histrionic bombast." Patrick Ryecart comments upon Robert's self-importance and hilarious egotism, and marvels "at his ability to be such a huge fish in such a tiny, insignificant building . . . such as the thirdrate rep theatre in which he obviously works." Because of Robert's many years in the theatre, he feels perfectly justified to act as John's mentor and guide, endlessly pointing out the ambiguities of and the connections between life and art. He strives to maintain his sense of superiority and worldliness by prattling on incessantly about the importance of the theatre. He grandly avers:

*Robert:* Our history goes back as far as Man's. Our aspirations in the Theatre are much the *same* as man's. (*Pause*) Don't you think? . . . We are explorers of the *soul*.

and later

*Robert:* About the theatre, and this is a wondrous thing about the theatre, and John, one of the ways in which it's most like life. . . . in the *theatre*, as in life— and the theatre is . . . a *part* of life. . . . of one's *life*. . . . what's happening on *stage* is life . . . of a sort . . . I mean, it's part of your *life*. (scene 23)

The way in which Robert emphatically underscores the words "theatre," "stage," and "life" suggests the urgency he feels in communicating some of what he believes to be his profound insight. Mamet breaks up his sentences, making him begin again and again without finishing and inserting phrases such as "of course," "of a sort," and "I mean." All this serves to undercut the portentousness—and pretentiousness—of the tone. Robert believes he has a truly important task to perform; however, he is constantly shown to be full of self-delusion and evasion and his hyperbolic remarks are therefore somewhat diminished in the light of our knowledge of his true state of mind. He struggles to find meaning in banality because to admit the frailty of his position as a third-rate actor struggling to make a living on the very fringe of the profession would be to invite terror and despair. Tennessee Williams once wrote that "fear and evasion are the two little beasts that chase each other's tails in the revolving wire cage of our nervous world. They distract us from feeling too much about things." Fear and evasion are certainly present behind Robert's false bluster and phony air of confidence. So long

as he can keep on talking, inventing, and pontificating, he can convince himself —and, hopefully, others—of his importance as an actor.

Robert has become the kind of performer who gives his all to plays that do not warrant such devotion; nagging doubts about his worth force him to struggle to find depth where none exists and to give performances of almost Shakespearian profundity in scenes that are little more than badly-scripted soap operas. Certainly, none of the scenes we witness bear any scrutiny whatsoever: they are laughable because of their in-built pretentiousness. Watching Robert and John flinging themselves wholeheartedly into such poorly-crafted episodes is a source of much humor and reminds the audience that the two men are very far from the center of American theatrical excellence. Indeed, they spend their time playing to half-hearted provincial audiences who are probably among the "bloody boors," "bloody s—ts," and "boring lunatics" (scene 10) whom Robert decries in a fit of rage.

Although both players seem to be dedicated to the work they are given to perform, it is Robert who works doggedly to invest their dreadful scripts with some sort of artistic credibility and, amazingly, finds it! As he and John discuss the "Lifeboat" scene, Robert waxes lyrical about the script's 'profundity':

*Robert;* . . . I'm just thinking. "Salt. Saltwater." Eh? The thought. He lets you see the thought there. . . . Salt! Sweat. His life flows out. . . . Then *saltwater*! Eh? . . . "Kid, we haven't got a chance in hell.". . . . "We're never getting out of this alive." (*Pause.*) Eh? He sets it on the sea, we are marooned, he tells us that the sea is life, and that we're never getting out of it alive. (*Pause.*) . . . . The man could write . . . . Alright. Alright. (scene 13)

Mamet invests a scene like this with just enough evidence of the sheer tawdriness of the material Robert and John are given, and then goes on to show the older actor in ecstasy at the quality of the text. All his pretensions fritter away before us while he remains gloriously unaware of the absurdity of his position. The heavy significance of his words act as a hilarious correlative to the tackiness of the script. He sounds like a particularly anxious—although naïve—undergraduate faced with his first essay in literary criticism—his frequent use of "Eh?" acts as an indication of a need for approbation and a shared opinion. Mamet ends the discussion of this particular slice of dialogue with Robert's assertion that "the man could w rite. . . . Alright. Alright." The repetition suggests a mind mulling over what it considers to be first-class literature, pondering on the brilliance of one who could garner so much meaning, so much *life* into a metaphor about the sea. Robert's previous experience as an actor has apparently taught him little about quality writing; it is quite absurd that he should admire that which is so blatantly hackneyed and risible.

Elsewhere, Robert talks about the trite legal drama in which he and John are about to perform. John asks him how he is feeling as they prepare to go onstage:

*John:* . . . How do you feel this evening?

*Robert:* Tight. I feel a little tight. It's going to be a vibrant show tonight. I feel coiled up.

*John:* Mmm.

*Robert:* But I don't feel tense. . . . Never feel tense. I almost never feel tense on stage. I feel ready to act. (scene 8)

The repetition of the words "tight" and "tense" indicate the extent of Robert's nervousness, despite his denials. The way he almost spits out his response to John's initial query suggests the reaction of one who is not merely "coiled up" but rather pitched on the edge of nervous collapse. The alliterative sound of the repeated *t* adds to the tension and demonstrates all too clearly Robert's deep-rooted anxiety. That he should refer to the show as "vibrant" and declaim in the manner of an Olivier or a Gielgud that he is "ready to act" is quickly shown to be an absurd pretension given the vacuity of the scene that follows in which stage props refuse to work properly, cues are missed, and both actors go completely to pieces with a script that would shame a troupe of amateur players.

Robert may elevate the theatre into a kind of holy shrine for the worship of moral values and all that is laudable and pure, but he is all too capable of indulging in spiteful and cruel denigrations of his fellow performers. Life in the theatre and life outside have merged for Robert and become hopelessly confused. When he speaks of an actress whom he despises for her unnecessary "mugging" and "mincing," he mixes up moral standards and theatrical technique. He avers that the woman has "No soul . . . no humanism. . . . No fellow-feeling. . . . No formal training. . . . No sense of right and wrong" (scene 1). Thus "soul" and "formal training" are inextricably linked in Robert's mind. What the actress is probably guilty of is daring to upstage him and what we are witnessing is little more than petulant jealousy.

In a mistaken effort to side with Robert against the woman, John comments that she relies on her looks to get by:

*John:* She capitalizes on her beauty. (*Pause.*)

*Robert:* What beauty?

*John:* Her attractiveness.

*Robert:* Yes.

*John:* It isn't really beauty.

*Robert:* No.

*John:* Beauty comes from within.

*Robert:* Yes, I feel it does. (scene 1)

Patrick Ryecart comments on this scene:

At this stage, John hangs onto every word Robert utters. He wants to establish a bond, a trust, a feeling that they are in league together and plunges ahead rather recklessly. He thinks he will be pleasing Robert but actually succeeds in rather annoying him. This sort of conversation is so true, so superbly caught . . . people getting themselves into corners whilst trying to flatter or please and then having to eat their words.

Despite his irritation, Robert knows that John is trying to please him and feels smugly secure in the knowledge that he has the young man on his side. He even lets John lead the conversation, a rare event indeed. It is very infrequently that Robert responds to a remark with only a monosyllabic "yes" or "no," but on this occasion he feels confident enough to restrict his comments. His complacency is momentarily rattled, but John qualifies his statement about beauty by offering, by way of atonement, the assertion that the woman's charm "isn't really beauty." He is anxious not to upset what he currently sees as the fine sensibilities of his companion. Once Robert's responses have assured him that all is still well and that they are friends, John even chances a platitude: "Beauty comes from within." It could almost be Robert speaking here, clichès to the fore.

Robert may lecture John about the importance of good behavior, sensitivity, and the evolution of theatrical "etiquette," but such sentiments are easily jettisoned when his own security is threatened. Far from behaving in a gentlemanly fashion, he calls the actress a "c—t" and announces that he would willingly murder her if he thought he could get away with it (ibid). Later, he swears at John, calling him a "f—ing twit" (scene 22); Mamet utilizes the irony in John's overly polite reply, "I beg your pardon" to consolidate further our doubts about Robert's claims that he embodies all things fine and elevated in the theatre.

To make quite certain that the audience should not even momentarily take Robert a little too seriously, Mamet deflates his pomposity by having him use the most hackneyed clichés ("the show goes on", scene 1 and "good things for good folk," scene 14) or, more frequently, by setting his speeches in contexts that by their very nature undermine their seriousness. For example, he rambles on about the necessity to "*grow*" as artists while John is practicing at the barre: the latter is more concerned with looking at his own reflection in the rehearsal room mirror than with listening to Robert's platitudes yet again. Consequently, he responds infrequently and appears to practice selective deafness, not really taking in what is being said. The scene ends with his prosaic question, "Is my back straight?" to which Robert can only reply, "no" (scene 5). Elsewhere, John interrupts his colleague's speeches with such demotic remarks as, "Please pass the bread" (scene 14), "How's your duck?" (ibid.), and "May I use your brush?" (scene 17). He also frequently responds to Robert's speechifying with an "mmm," a linguistic tic Robert himself adopts toward the end of the play, signifying the level of influence the younger man gradually exerts over him.

Mamet describes one of the play's intentions as a means of delineating a turning point in the acting careers of the two players. However, the actual moment of change is ambiguous. Mamet notes how "the event we have decided on as the turning point . . .

was, looking back, quite probably not it at all." Nevertheless, it is clear that Robert views *any* change with caution and trepidation. He tells John that the process of life is "a little like a play" (scene 5) in which "you start from the beginning and go through the middle and wind up at the end" (ibid.). As Robert speaks airily about his favorite analogy, Mamet imbues his words with fear. That acting, like life, has a beginning, a middle, and an end is a sobering thought for Robert. As he speaks, the logic of his narrative pulls him inexorably into dangerous and frightening areas. Like those of Emil and George in *The Duck Variations*, Robert's speeches have a habit of wandering into territory he would rather not explore.

Patrick Ryecart describes as "those terrible scenes" the episodes in which Robert pathetically lingers backstage to hear the voice of the new generation as it practices onstage and where, tragically, he attempts to cut his wrists. Robert is a genuinely tragic figure, but one who is drawn without sentimentality or condescension. Freddie Jones notes how "The character of Robert is drawn with great powers of observation and is completely without sentimentality. The writing is witty, observant, but never sentimental. What's sentimental about getting old? . . . Mamet's writing is astute and compassionate, not sloppy." Patrick Ryecart believes the work is wholly without cloying sentimentality:

I don't think it is at all sentimental. On the contrary, it is often very harsh. Even in those terrible scenes where Robert stays behind and the young actor catches him watching and listening with great sadness . . . and where he tries to slash his wrists . . . these are totally unsentimental. It would have been easy for Mamet to veer over the edge but he does not. . . . There is nothing remotely excessive or cloying in the play. Each situation arises quite naturally out of the text.

This is a view which is not shared by Milton Shulman who avers that "there is a hollow and artificial ring to this sentimentalised portrayal of the life-style of actors." Mamet walks a fine line between genuine pathos and overt sentimentality, and mostly succeeds in avoiding the latter. Colin Stinton has observed how the playwright is constantly—even pathologically—aware of and on the lookout for "creeping sentimentality" in his work and will go to great lengths to excise all traces of it. In *A Life in the Theatre*, Mamet wishes to demonstrate the generosity and bravery of actors but, in so doing, realizes that he must temper any potential sentimental incursions with irony. Perhaps he goes a little too far. He is at such pains to show up the pretentiousness of Robert and the rampant ambition of John that, although we still regard them with affection, we also see them diminished as representatives of their profession. However, in spite of his characters' inadequacies—perhaps even because of theme— we do enjoy Mamet's representation of their experiences and attitudes. There is also an often unstated but nonetheless tacit expression of friendship in the play; despite Mamet's ironic deflations, the bond that exists between Robert and John ensures that we regard them with warmth and empathy.

The depiction of character through language is wonderfully accurate in this play. Each actor's speech changes subtly throughout to indicate his present mood and John's move from gauche naïveté at the beginning of the work to unnerving selfreliance by the end is superbly controlled. John has less showy dialogue than Robert but this is no way

detracts from the power of his presence. Of this aspect of Mamet's writing, Patrick Ryecart says:

It all comes down to reaction to Robert's words . . . John "speaks" just as much as if he had three pages of dialogue—You can make or break an entire speech just by your reaction . . . If reaction is not catered for in the writing then it is a different thing . . . but in a good play with good writing (as this has) it doesn't matter if a character has ten minutes of silence—if its relevance is there, then it is fully justified.

There *is* a bond that unites Robert and John, but its strength is sometimes weakened, as in the latter's eventual move away from his colleague. John no longer feels he need tolerate Robert's endless rhetoric and this is shown through the almost monosyllabic quality of most of his lines, a brevity that demonstrates all too clearly his impatience and exasperation. However, Patrick Ryecart insists that John's behavior is perfectly understandable; he does not see him as a cold and callous individual, but merely one who is quite naturally trying to get on with his own career and avoid the proselytizing excesses of his garrulous friend. Ryecart suggests John does not mean to be cruel and his gradual rejection of Robert is entirely legitimate.

You cannot have a relationship that goes beyond working with everyone. . . . Robert has been such a bloody old bore that, frankly, you can't blame John for his coolness, if that is what it is. I *know* these types like Robert; they sit in their dressing rooms with a little tin of sardines and they drone on and on and they are so *boring*. . . . It isn't necessarily coldness or cruelty . . . I would argue that it is not callous for John to want to get away from such a person.

However, in spite of such assertions in defense of John's character, Mamet's play does hint at his dismissive nature and his brash, ambitious manner. His language is terse, even curt, and his responses to Robert's verbal forays take on a rather brutal impatience. He becomes patronizing and sarcastic, apparently absorbing the very worst aspects of Robert's personality. This is clearly *not* the kind of education that Robert had in mind! Where once John was eager to please, in the later stages of the play he becomes arrogant and rude. His actions may be understandable, given the often trying circumstances he has to endure, but Mamet ensures that he is, nonetheless, seen as rather cool and calculating.

A good example of the gradual change in the actors' relationship occurs when John tries to rehearse alone onstage. Suddenly Robert appears and launches into a long speech that is both dubiously flattering and coolly critical of the younger man's work. John is irritated enough to indulge in a little sarcasm; he decides to mock Robert by echoing one of his favorite theatrical terms, "fitting":

*Robert:* . . . It's good. It's *quite* good. I was watching you for a while. I hope you don't mind. Do you mind?

*John:* I've only been here a minute or so.

*Robert:* And I've watched you all that time. It seemed so long. It was so full. You're very good, John. Have I told you that lately? You are becoming a very fine actor. The flaws of youth are the perquisite of the young. It is the perquisite of the Young to possess the flaws of youth.

*John:* It's fitting, yes . . .

*Robert:* Ah, don't mock me, John. You shouldn't mock me. It's too easy. (scene 23)

John can perceive the edge to Robert's "flattering" remarks; Robert observes that he had watched John "all that time"—a period that was apparently only a minute or two. The implication is surely not that John is mesmerizing in his ability to fit so much power and meaning into his acting but that he is laboring the point, spinning out what should be brief and succinct. To counteract this inference and to play it safe, Robert immediately states that John is becoming "a very fine actor." However, he then deflates this by mentioning "the flaws of youth" and then, in another verbal swerve, reverts to complimentary remarks about John's abilities—although he is almost certainly insincere. His use of the rather archaic word "perquisite"—twice—is another indication of his fussy and pedantic nature; it is no doubt intended to demonstrate his learning and superior command over language, but probably only succeeds in irritating rather than impressing John. There is in this exchange a sour sense of the alienation that is gradually developing between the two men; they no longer speak to one another as they once did and now expend their energies trying to falsely flatter or deflate egos. Robert's habit of referring to the "fitness" of things has obviously rankled John to the extent that he now nastily throws a mocking echo of it into Robert's face.

Robert's last remark, "You shouldn't mock me. It's too easy," can be interpreted in two contrasting ways. His plain and simple diction is in marked contrast to his usual verbose style and could be intended to indicate that this is indeed the real Robert. The mask of pretense has been momentarily cast aside and the true identity of the man is revealed. A bitter, self-deprecating irony can be detected in the words and, for the first time in the play, Robert is perhaps acknowledging his own absurdity and egotism. On the other hand, he may be simply admonishing John for using sarcasm to demonstrate his irritation; as a professional, John should be able to counter any attack by means more worthy than parody.

The reversal in dependence that occurs in Robert and John's relationship in fact begins much earlier. One of the most powerful aspects of the work is the peerlessly executed role delineation and subsequent role reversal that begins on the first page of the script and is concluded, neatly and succinctly, on the last. Patrick Ryecart observes how

there are two little instances of dialogue, right at the beginning and right at the end, which convey what the whole play is about. At the beginning, Robert says to John: "I thought the bedroom scene tonight was brilliant"—or words to that effect—to which John eagerly replies, "Did you?" He is at this stage delighted to have the praise of a respected and revered colleague. In the last scene, Robert says: "I loved the staircase scene tonight" to which John now replies: "You did?" It's so subtle but the effect of the

two is totally different. The nuance is entirely changed. John's new-found confidence and maturity just shines out . . . so Mamet, with those four little words, two at the start and two at the finish, conveys the essence of the piece. . . . The role reversal happens throughout the play but is set off by the opening words. . . . There are probably examples on every page in which you can see how Mamet builds up the sense of changing attitudes.

A further hint of irony is injected in that Robert's first compliment concerns the "bedroom scene" whereas at the end it is the "execution scene" that is discussed. Robert's professional "death" is thus carefully made ready by Mamet. It is tempting to read significance into the choice of bedroom scene— with its suggestions of intimacy and even regeneration —and the execution scene, which carries its own obvious implications.

Another good example of reversal in dependency occurs after an audition at which John believes he has done very well. He has received some good notices from the critics and these have, perhaps not surprisingly, made him a little conceited:

*Robert:* They've praised you too much. I do not mean to detract from your reviews, you deserve praise, John, much praise. . . . Not, however, for those things which they have praised you for.

*John:* In your opinion. (scene 22)

Robert continues to advise John not to take what the critics have to say too seriously, until John is moved to respond:

*John:* I thought that they were rather to the point.

*Robert:* You did.

*John:* Yes.

*Robert:* Your reviews.

*John:* Yes.

*Robert:* All false modesty aside.

*John:* Yes.

*Robert:* Oh, the Young, the Young, the Young, the Young.

*John:* The Farmer in the Dell. (ibid.)

Mamet captures the slightly bitchy, though ostentatiously sincere diction of an actor like Robert. There is more than a touch of effeminate spite in his remarks and Mamet picks up on his linguistic slip in the line, "Not, however, for those things which they have

praised you for," undercutting the words of Robert, a man who believes he has a superior command over language. As John defends his position, Robert half-smilingly patronizes him with short statements intended to annoy him. In case John should somehow miss the subtle deflation of all this, Robert then flounces off into what he wishes to convey as an affectionate scoff at the charming pretensions of youth. John remains quite unamused, responding only with the sardonic: "The Farmer in the Dell" with its echoes of nursery rhymes and childhood, perhaps intended to suggest Robert's incipient senility and imbecilic childishness.

Rival recriminations notwithstanding, both men know that they are engaged in something of an uphill battle to survive and this knowledge unites them. There are a number of overtly affectionate scenes scattered throughout the work, but perhaps the most touching of these occurs when John removes a smear of grease-paint from behind Robert's ear:

*John:* Here. I'll get it. . . . No. Wait, We'll get it off. . . . There.

*Robert:* Did we get it off?

*John:* Yes. (scene 1)

John's language is paternalistic, even down to the plurality of, "We'll get it off." He changes from the singular pronoun to the plural in order to render the sentence more intimate, something that Robert immediately notices and to which he responds,—in fact, he then uses the same style of speech. Moments later, *he* takes on the parental role; John throws the crumpled tissue toward the wastebasket but misses. Robert picks it up *"and deposits it in the appropriate receptacle"* murmuring: "Alright. All gone. Let's go. (*Pause*). Eh?" (ibid.).

There is, in this scene—and elsewhere in the play—the suggestion that there may be some latent homosexual feelings between the two men, although neither Patrick Ryecart nor Freddie Jones agree that any such implication exists. It is difficult to completely reject this inference, particularly when considering the scene in which Robert's fly breaks and John tries to fix it. Robert's exhortations for John to hurry up surely suggest more than a mere plea for speed; the double entendres practically collide as they spill out. The scene begins innocently enough:

*Robert:* My zipper's broken.

*John:* Do you want a safety pin?

*Robert:* I have one. (*Looking for safety pin.*)

*John:* (*Rising, starting to leave*.) Do you want me to send the woman in?

*Robert:* No. No. I'll manage. S—t. Oh, s—t. (scene 8)

Even here there are subliminal suggestions of what may follow. Having refused the attentions of the "woman," Robert struggles with the pin until John is moved to offer his assistance:

*John:* Oh, come on. I'll do it. Come on. (*Pulls out chair.*) Get up here. Come on. Get up. (*Robert gets up on the chair.*) Give me the pin. Come on . . . (ibid.)

They lose the safety pin, but John finally sees it and begins again:

*John:* Stand still now.

*Robert:* Come on, come on. (*John puts his face up against Robert's crotch.*) Put it in.

*John:* Just hold still for a moment.

*Robert:* Come on, for God's sake.

*John:* Alright. Alright. You know I think you're gaining weight . . .

*Robert:* Oh, f—k you. Will you stick it in.

*John:* Hold still. There. (scene 8)

Apart from being hilariously "naturalistic" dialogue that conveys Robert's desperation as he tries to get ready in time for his cue, Mamet's dialogue imbues both actors' speech with a subtly suggestive harmony. The repetition of pseudosexual phrases, such as "Come on" and "Hold still," deftly contributes to the flirtatious undercurrent of the scene. As it moves towards its conclusion, and John is placed with "*his face up against Robert's crotch,*" the scene provides John with a deliciously cheeky quip, which is at once an acknowledgment of the physical intimacy of the moment and a mildly sarcastic observation of the kind that might be frequently utilized by homosexual or effeminate men. The tone is quite different from that of the first scene, when Robert comments upon his weight problem and John replies: "You're having trouble with your weight? . . . But you're trim enough" (scene 1).

John may not be absolutely sincere in his flattery, but there is at this stage no trace in his tone of the impertinent and rather effeminate stance he later adopts. Robert's response to John's later saucy remark is itself suggestive and almost equally flirtatious; he responds with an obscenity (which may even be a half-conscious wish!) and an exhortation that it is difficult to ignore as yet another double entendre. Such a reading of certain scenes should not, however, be viewed as the mainspring of Mamet's intention in the play. Homosexuality may well be a subtext in specific instances, but *A Life in the Theatre* is not a work wholly concerned with the subject. To view it in this manner is to seriously diminish its impact and to lessen the subtlety of Mamet's characterization. It is enough to be aware that such an element probably exists and to leave it at that.

By the last scene in the play, the roles have reversed. It is Robert who is nervous and slightly uneasy in John's company; it is now Robert who accepts John's compliments about his performance with what seems to be excessive gratitude:

*John:* I thought the execution scene worked beautifully.

*Robert:* No. You *didn't* . . .

*John:* Yes. I did. (*Pause.*)

*Robert: Thank* you . . . (scene 26)

It is now Robert who is "not eating too well these days" because he is "not hungry" (ibid.), as opposed to John who, in the opening scene spoke of not having "had an appetite for several days" (scene 1), and it is now Robert who addresses the empty auditorium with a pathos that was not evident in John's earlier solitary speech.

In *A Life in the Theatre*, Mamet's dialogue is, once again, taut with invention. Milton Shulman notes how Mamet "cleverly reproduces those exchanges of hesitant compliments and sly insults that actors use when they discuss each other's performances." Mel Gussow feels that the language in the play "glistens. . . . [it] is a cross between the elegant and the vernacular. . . . [his] timing is as exact as Accutron. . . . he is an eloquent master of two-part harmony." As Robert and John's linguistic battle for supremacy gathers momentum, it is easy to see why Gussow feels that their language "glistens" and why he compares Mamet's timing to "Accutron." In the following scene, the playwright's command over rhythm and subtle inflection reaches its zenith. Robert feels that John is unfairly upstaging him during one of their scenes together and suggests that he should "do less":

*Robert:* (*Pause.*) In our scene tonight . . .

*John:* Yes?

*Robert:* Mmmm . . .

*John:* What?

*Robert:* Could you . . . perhaps . . . *do* less.

*John: Do* less?

*Robert:* Yes.

*John: Do* less???

*Robert:* Yes . . . (*Pause.*)

*John:* Do less what???

*Robert:* You know.

*John:* You mean . . . what do you mean?

*Robert:* (*Pause.*) You know.

*John:* Do you mean I'm walking on your scene? (*Pause.*) What do you mean?

*Robert:* Nothing. It's a thought I had. An aesthetic consideration.

*John:* Mmm.

*Robert:* I thought may be if you *did* less . . .

*John:* Yes?

*Robert: You* know . . .

*John:* If I *did* less.

*Robert:* Yes.

*John:* Well, thank you for the thought.

*Robert:* I don't think you have to be like that. (scene 8)

Freddie Jones has observed that Mamet's writing in such scenes is "fluid, musical. We really do speak in an iambic pentameter and Mamet's work is never rhythmically erroneous." Patrick Ryecart believes that examples like this scene consolidate Mamet's position as "a superb dramatic poet. There is a strong and true rhythm in the lines which propel the actors along."

The timing here is as acute as that to be found in any music-hall patter; it is reminiscent of the verbal bantering that occurs between many of Beckett's aging burlesques as they bicker and prod one another into responsive action. Robert begins politely and even deferentially, delaying the moment by pauses and contemplative noises, until he feels he can safely make his request. His nervousness and uncertainty as to the exact moment to choose is cleverly conveyed; he is perhaps a little unnerved by the curtness of John's responses, and believes that it may be prudent to wait a moment before stating his case. In the exchange that follows, "Could you . . . perhaps . . . *do* less" to "Do less *what???*" Mamet uses rhyme as well as rhythm. The phrasing is as tight and measured as jazz. Indeed, Patrick Ryecart comments upon Mamet's use of rhythm and rhyme. "'Do less', 'do less,' 'do less what' . . . the words are so musical. It's like jazz. The rhymes have the rhythms of the purest forms of jazz. I am sure Mamet listens to his texts as music . . . counting the beats, working in the pauses."

John is both outraged and indignant that he should be asked to modify his acting technique. He becomes coldly angry and his tone takes on a hint of menace. Certainly

Robert senses the potential danger and negates the request by pretending it was an "aesthetic consideration." When John merely responds with a less threatening "Mmmm," erroneously conveying to Robert a lull in his anger but probably intending contemptuous resignation, Robert decides to take on another tone. In an effort to buy back any lost sympathy, he tries to convey meek insecurity; the use of the uncertain "thought" and "maybe" are clearly intended to deflate the seriousness of his request and to show the unnecessarily ruffled John that it was merely a casual suggestion. When John counters his groveling with sarcasm, Robert again changes his tone, this time to indignation. He tries to impress upon John that his response to mild criticism is unprofessional and childish, wholly improper for a man of his "calling." Thus, Robert tries to stabilize an inflammatory situation by reverting to familiar sentiments— the need for a mature approach to acting in which one eschews minor and selfish considerations and embraces criticism in an endless quest for perfection.

Such high-minded sentiments are obviously something that Robert himself cannot adopt since, later in the play, he responds with almost hysterical venom to what can only be seen as poor critical response to his work:

*Robert:* The motherf—ing leeches. The sots. (*Pause.*) The bloody boors. All of them . . . All of them. . . . Why can they not leave us alone . . . (scene 10)

Elsewhere in the work, he describes critics as "F—ing leeches. . . . [who will] praise you for the things you never did and pan you for a split second of godliness. What do they know? They create nothing . . . . They don't even buy a ticket" (scene 22). To Robert, critics are ignorant philistines who lead a parasitic existence, living off professionals like him. Unlike actors, "they create nothing" and do not even contribute financially to the theatrical arts.

Critical response to *A Life in the Theatre* has been largely favorable, although some reviewers have criticized the lengthy pauses that exist between some scenes due to costume changes, positioning of props, and so on. However, as both Patrick Ryecart and Freddie Jones point out, these "longeurs" are crucial to the whole structure of the play. It is precisely *because* the audience is permitted a glimpse into a backstage world that is usually denied them that the play is so fascinating. Freddie Jones considers these moments as essential to the overall structure of the piece as the dialogue:

The most important thing in a work like this is not to rush. Part of the fascination of it is the drama of watching people at work. The way they put sight-holes in hoardings so that you can watch people digging a hole sixty feet below suggests the spell of watching—it is almost voyeuristic. You see bowler-hatted businessmen in the city avidly watching the laborers. The psychology of *A Life in the Theatre* is identical to that. If you rush it, it makes it look like a bottleneck, a failure in the script. If you trust it, do it leisurely, the only way you really can, it works . . . by moving more slowly, you are smoothing the action, making it fluent. . . . But as actors, you are always sorely tempted to rush, the pressure is so great. This must be avoided!

Similarly, Ryecart believes that "for a member of the audience, the hold-ups would not be seen as hold-ups at all, but as an integral part of the action which, of course, they are . . . they are what Mamet wants and are deliberately written into the play." Although there is a degree of sadness in *A Life in the Theatre*, there is also a great deal of humor, the majority of which undoubtedly stems from the brief scenes from the "plays" within the work. Ryecart recalls how

these scenes were very difficult to act because the writing is so deliberately bad, whereas the backstage scenes are easy due to the superb characterization . . . it is important to do the little scenes awfully well because if there are any areas in the play where one might lose the attention of an audience, it is there. They have to be very funny and the acting style quite different to the (most important) backstage scenes.

Freddie Jones stresses the importance of "a judicious use of 'ham' in the playlet scenes," to get the very best theatrical effect.

The structure of *A Life in the Theatre* is quite similar to that of Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* in that realistic action is coupled with brief scenes within scenes, which both comment upon and forward the action of the whole. However, the playlet scenes in Mamet's work forward the action only insofar as they contribute to the sense of inexorable decay on Robert's part and the increase of confidence on John's. This becomes more evident in the later scenes when lines are fluffed, cues are missed, and off-stage irritations intrude.

The first of these scenes is set "*in the trenches*." John and Robert are dressed as Doughboys and sit in a trench, "*smoking the last cigarette.*" Mamet has obviously seen a great many films that contain scenes of just this banal and clichéd type. The dialogue is appallingly—and hilariously—stilted and is redolent of B-films popular in the 1940s and 1950s in which actors like John Wayne and Audie Murphy conversed with a sincerity that only emphasized the dire quality of their scripts. Mamet captures perfectly the phony gritty dialogue spoken in such films—language only considered realistic by writers without any experience on which to base their fantasies and with "tin" ears for naturalistic cadences:

*John:* They left him up there on the wire.

*Robert:* Calm down.

*John:* Those bastards.

*Robert:* Yeah.

*John:* My God. They stuck him on the wire and left him there for target practice. . . . Those dirty, dirty bastards. (scene 3)

This is followed by a supposedly sophisticated scene in which two lawyers struggle to maintain their dignity. From the outset, Mamet ensures that the audience is unable to take this seriously since it has been preceded by the episode in which Robert's zipper

breaks and must be held together by a safety pin. Robert plays an urbane attorney, a successful individual at the peak of his career; a broken fly zipper hardly goes along with this image. Consequently, Robert must try to conceal his embarrassment and adopt an air of sobriety and authority. John, playing a lawyer, confronts Robert's character with the news of his wife's pregnancy:

*John:* Gillian's going to have a baby.

*Robert:* Why, this is marvellous. How long have you known?

*John:* Since this morning.

*Robert:* How marvellous!

*John:* It isn't mine.

*Robert:* It's not.

*John:* No.

*Robert:* Oh. (*Pause.*) I always supposed there was something one said in these situations . . . but I find . . . Do you know, that is, have you been told who the father is?

*John:* Yes.

*Robert:* Really. Who is it, David?

*John:* It's you, John.

*Robert:* Me!

*John:* You!

*Robert:* No. John: Yes.

*Robert:* How preposterous. (scene 9)

This is purely the language of soap opera, right down to the way in which both men pointedly call each other by name. There is also the additional joke of having John call Robert "John". This somehow adds to the idiocy of what the two men are doing in a play such as this. The short, almost monosyllabic sentences, quickly following one another add to the artificiality of the text, although the "writer's" intention is undoubtedly that it should be seen as realistic, serious dialogue.

The next playlet is written in a "Chekhovian" style. Here, Mamet manages to invoke aspects of several Chekhov plays while retaining a dialogue that is stultifying—even stupefying—in its boredom and banality. Robert is wheeled onstage in a bath chair by John—a sight that is in itself bound to cause tittering in the audience. Robert asks for his robe:

*John:* Oh, the autumn. . . . Oh, for the sun . . .

*Robert:* Will you pass me my robe, please?

*John:* Your laprobe. (scene 11)

In these lines, Mamet manages to suggest echoes of at least two of Chekhov's plays—*The Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*. The specific, and rather clumsy, reference to a "laprobe" is no accident since Serebryakov's laprobe falls about his ankles while he sleeps in act 2 of *Uncle Vanya*. Not only does Robert and John's script suggest not even an inkling of Chekhovian subtext (although the references to seasonal and meteorological topics are clearly intended to suggest one), it is also quite useless as naturalistic dialogue:

*John:* Maman says just one more day, one more day, yet another week.

*Robert:* Mmm.

*John:* One more week.

*Robert:* Would you please close the window?

*John:* What? I'm sorry?

*Robert:* Do you feel a draft?

*John:* A slight draft, yes. (*Pause.*)

Shall I close the window?

*Robert:* Would you mind?

*John:* No, not at all. I love this window . . . (ibid.)

The puerile repetitions and blatantly contrived questions render any hint of naturalism null and void. Mamet demonstrates how a poorly understood Chekhovian style can very easily turn into farcical absurdity. The script strains toward a Russian feel, but fails at every turn. John's assertion that he loves the window is a weak and clichéd reference to Gayev's affectionate speech to the bookcase in act 1 of *The Cherry Orchard*. Both are sentimental, but the difference is that Chekhov knew how to make sentimentality work as a means of character delineation whereas Mamet's imaginary dramatist does not. The scene drags on interminably; far from suggesting Chekhovian emotions such as apathy, frustration, and resignation, the fictional author achieves only a drawnout—and unintentionally hilarious —melodrama in which, literally, nothing happens. If the piece had genuine humor (apart from Mamet's wickedly ironic comedy), it could almost be Beckettian!

In the French Revolution scene, Robert's lengthy soliloquy reads a little like a scene from an inferior version of Büchner's *Danton's Death* or Sardou's *Robespierre*, the play commissioned by Irving to provide him with a truly "dramatic" role. There is definitely something of the Irving school of acting about Robert's part here. The "dramatist" clearly believes he can display a linguistic flourish in bombastic rhetoric and overwhelm through the power of words alone. Alas, the rhetoric is fatuous and frequently downright silly:

*Robert:* . . . The heart cries out: the memory says man has always lived in chains . . . has always lived in chains . . . (*Pause.* Bread, bread, bread, the people scream . . . we drown their screaming with our head in cups, in books . . . in newspapers . . . between the breasts of women . . . in our work . . . enough. (scene 16)

Robert must relish the opportunity of playing such parts. He can strut about displaying his selfimportance and enjoy the excitement of having the stage completely to himself. He has nothing to worry about, other than that he must give his best performance; the increasingly threatening presence of John is not even there to distract him. At this halfway stage of the play, Robert is still mostly in control, but there are already hints of John's lessening dependence upon him, and Robert's sad realization of this fact.

The vacuity of the piece Robert so lovingly performs bears little scrutiny. The "manliness" and robust nature of the speaker is meant to be conveyed in lines such as, "our head in cups . . . between the breasts of women," and similar bathetic exclamations. What is actually conveyed is the very limited imagination of the author. Whether the repetition of "has always lived in chains," in the first part of the speech is intentional or is an indication of Robert simply forgetting his lines is unclear. When, at the conclusion of the extract, he utters, "enough," it is difficult not to agree with him. Robert's character goes on to list the causes to which it is necessary to swear allegiance in the interests of the Revolution:

*Robert:* . . . Our heads between the breasts of women, plight our troth to that security far greater than protection of mere rank or fortune. Now: we must dedicate ourselves to spirit: to the spirit of humanity; to life: (*Pause.*) to the barricades. (*Pause.*) Bread, bread, bread. (*ibid.*)

This part of the soliloquy appears to lean toward Shakespearian rhythms, rhythms that are plainly ill-suited to the sheer vacancy of the words. Robert separates the "causes" by means of emphatic colons. Unfortunately for the grandeur of the speech, the final "cause" is "the barricades," which necessitates a change in tone and meaning. The call is surely to march *to* the barricades themselves, but the speech is so badly written that it could appear to be merely another in the speaker's list of worthy causes. The concluding, "Bread, bread, bread," serves to emphasize the true lack of passion in the writing, calling to mind, if anything, a musical moment from *Oliver*.

The scene about the barricades is not only noteworthy because of its accurate verbal humor, it also contains the visual debacle of Robert flinging back his head in a grandiose gesture and consequently losing his wig. The next time we see Robert's

thespian skills is in the famous lifeboat scene. It should be recalled that this is the episode to which he had given so much thought in an earlier scene, finding meaning where little existed and lauding the author to the skies. The dialogue is, once again, trite and risible but is here rendered totally ludicrous by the actors' obligatory *"English accents"* (scene 18). This is one occasion when an American actor's voice is most definitely called for:

*Robert:* Rain . . .? What do *you* know about it? (*Pause*. I've spent my whole life on the sea, and all that I know is the length of my ignorance. Which is *complete*, Sonny. (*Pause.*) My ignorance is complete.

*John:* It's gotta rain.

*Robert:* Tell it to the marines.

*John:* It doesn't rain, I'm going off my nut.

*Robert:* Just take it easy, kid . . . What you don't wanna do now is sweat. (*Pause.*) Believe me. (*Pause.*)

*John:* We're never getting out of this alive. (*Pause.*) Are we?

*Robert:* How do you want it?

*John:* Give it to me straight.

*Robert:* Kid, we haven't got a chance in hell . . . (scene 18)

The fictional dramatist is evidently attempting dialogue that is a hybrid of Steinbeck and Hemingway, the latter in his *The Old Man and the Sea* period. What he actually achieves is an inane and mannered version of such classic works. The "author" has a stab at metrical scansion: "the length of my ignorance" and so on. Such serious speculation is then mercilessly rejected in favor of phrases like, "It's gotta rain" and, even worse, "Tell it to the marines." The so-called sea-dog experience of the elder man is suggested in a series of clichés that would probably seem overdone in a children's adventure serial but that, as we have seen, Robert considers inspired writing. This truly dreadful piece of work probably is the best the actors have to perform, which is saying very little.

The final playlet takes place in an operating room; it is here that Robert's professional expertise is seriously called into question and where he refuses to take notice of John's desperate attempts to prompt him. The scene begins well enough: Robert, though in character, is momentarily back in his paternal role as an older surgeon doling out advice to his junior colleague. Offstage, his authority may be crumbling, but here it is he who teaches the novice the ropes and it is he who knows the tricks of the trade, just as Robert the actor knows well the tricks of his own profession. However, it soon becomes clear that Robert has mixed up his lines and is confusing the action here with that of another scene:

*John:* (*Pointing.*) What's that!!!?

*Robert:* What is what? Eh?

*John:* What's that near his spleen? (*A pause.*) A curious growth near his spleen?

*Robert:* What?

*John:* A Curious Growth Near His Spleen? (*Pause.*) Is that one, there?

*Robert:* No, I think not. I think you cannot see a growth near his spleen for some *time* yet. So would you, as this man's in shock . . . would you get me, please, give me a reading on his vital statements? Uh, *Functions* . . .? Would you do that one thing for me, please?

*John:* (*Sotto.*) We've done that one, Robert.

*Robert:* I fear I must disagree with you, Doctor. Would you give me a reading on his vital things, if you please? Would you? (*Pause*) For the love of God?

*John:* (*Sotto.*) That's in the other part. (scene 24)

It is illuminating to look at this scene in some detail in order to glean how Mamet builds up the comedy. Robert is incensed that John should think he has forgotten what to do and persists with the wrong lines despite John's efforts to save the situation from disaster. Robert improvizes frantically; he begins to flounder. Panicking, he fishes around in his mind for any medical-sounding terms that might cover up John's "error." Eventually, he runs out of even remotely suitable "medical" words and requests "a reading on [the patient's] vital things." Patrick Ryecart recalls how this particular section always induced near hysteria in the audience and often led to considerable "corpsing" between Freddie Jones and him: "We often played the scene absolutely shaking with laughter," he says. Robert's intransigence unnerves John. He too begins to panic, and this is suggested by his pointed remark, highlighted by capital letters for full effect: "A Curious Growth Near His Spleen." As the scene limps weakly to its conclusion, John seems deflated and completely devoid of energy. He mutters: "We've done that one, Robert," calling his colleague by name to let him know that it is *he* who is at fault. Robert ignores this; he is adamant and carries on frantically like a man possessed, the professional to the end. To keep up the charade, he refers to John as "Doctor" even when all credibility has plainly been sacrificed.

A final mix of reality and artifice occurs in the next few lines when Robert berates John for a lack of feeling, which, it seems, is not only intended for his partner's onstage character:

*Robert:* . . . He's in shock. He's in shock, and I'm becoming miffed with you. Now: if you desire to work in this business again will you give me a reading? If you wish to continue here inside the hospital? (*Pause.*) Must I call a *policeman!!?* Have you no feeling? This man's in deepest shock!!! (ibid.)

Is Robert telling John the actor that he must cooperate if he wishes to "work in this business again"? Is it John the actor with whom Robert is "miffed?" Robert tries to make his "lines" sound as if they were written for him, while at the same time criticizing John for what he feels is his total incompetence and refusal to cover up his gaffe. However, when Robert mentions the *"hospital"* rather than the reality of the stage on which they both stand, he betrays his nervousness and fear of the younger man. He realizes that John is aware of his direct criticism and so, to be safe, once more moves into the relative security of fantasy. His final words, "This man's in deepest shock!!!" underlines the ambiguity. Which man is in shock? The imaginary patient or Robert himself?

Mamet prefixes his play with a short quotation from Rudyard Kipling's poem, *Actors:*

We counterfeited once for your disport,
Men's joy and sorrow; but our day has passed.
We pray you pardon all where we fell short—
Seeing we were your servants to this last.

This appears to be a comment on the decline of Robert but it could also be viewed as a worried reminder of the declining importance of theatre to the general public, a state of affairs Mamet is most anxious to prevent. *A Life in the Theatre* has been called "a wary hymn to the theatre" and so it is. It celebrates the fleeting joys of a satisfying performance and it dramatizes most touchingly the bond that exists between those who dedicate their lives to the stage. On the other hand, it offers a far from glamorous picture of theatrical life. For the audience, such a play is somewhat akin to watching a third-rate conjurer whose magic tricks all come to nought. We see behind the artifice into the sometimes painful areas that usually remain concealed; as Robert rather grandly avers of one of the fictional authors in the play, the writer "lets you see the thought there" (scene 13). The work may be a play about two actors and their particularly specialized lives in the theatre, but it is universal in its theme. It may be about acting, but it is also about the conflicts of age and youth, rites of passage, and simple human nature. Mel Gussow believes that *A Life in the Theatre* is a play in which "the author spoofs actors' insecurities, pretensions [and] illusions— the pretensions and ignominies of the profession." One might add to this that Mamet additionally deals with the "insecurities, pretensions [and] illusions" of life itself, the "ignominies of the profession" standing for the ignominies of human existence.

**Source:** Anne Dean, "A Life in the Theatre," in *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, Associated University Presses, 1990, pp. 119-47.

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt, author William Demastes discusses how the relationship between* Life in the Theatre's *two main characters reflects the theme of capturing the moment.*

Mamet does produce a more "epic" work in *The Water Engine* (1977) and later in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984). But before achieving these more "audience-pleasing" and epic designs, Mamet wrote *Reunion, The Woods, Dark Pony*, and other shorter works. As noted earlier, they are dramas that focus very specifically on select human relationships— between a father and daughter or man and woman, for example. Perhaps the most *popularly* successful of this type was *A Life in the Theatre* (1977). Several critics suggest that its popularity was due to its subject matter, the theatre, but it must be conceded that the dynamics illustrated in the relationship presented, between a veteran actor and a newcomer, plays a significant role in the play's gaining acclaim.

It is a play comprised of twenty-six scenes which, more than the other fragmented plays, works as an interesting experiment in manipulating conventional temporal considerations. The relationship moves from that of a student-teacher type, through various crises, into a secure and mature relationship based on understanding, once again despite language. Many themes are touched on—a variation on *theatrum mundi*, for example—but the key is less its traditional thematics than its structure. As Kerr congratulated Mamet on finding a working form for the material in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, so should he have congratulated Mamet for *A Life in the Theatre*. The play is chronologically ordered, one must assume, but it freely dispenses with actual day/date considerations, and the episodic structure —as in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*—does succeed at providing a framework for material while dispensing with the busy-ness of filling in or explaining away time lapses. One central theme, for example, is that life is fleeting and must be enjoyed for the moment—the *carpe diem* theme. Eliminating concrete time (to force life in the present) and choosing an episodic form enforce the theme and formally capture the essence of the elder actor's musings, "Ephemera! Ephemera!" Gussow suggests, "Acting is for the moment, and Mr. Mamet has captured moments that add up to a lifetime." If there is a unifying thread that binds the scenes, it is finally up to the audience to produce it, as was required in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. Life is episodic, Mamet suggests, and it is human artifice that insists on linking them and even on fossilizing them for understanding and for posterity. Mamet comes very close in this play to producing a work of raw material, then asking we put it together.

There was of course criticism of the play, namely that the characters and actions were stereotypical and clichéd, but given the choice of form, the characters and events could never be as developed as they would have been if given a more conventionally narrative approach. It is very likely that such was Mamet's intent, an argument that what we look at as "personality," whole and consistent, is rarely if ever experienced in the real world.

**Source:** William W. Demastes, Beyond Naturalism, Greenwood Press, 1988.

# Adaptations

*A Life in the Theatre* was filmed for television in 1979. Recreating the roles they created off-Broadway, Ellis Rabb plays Robert and Peter Evans plays John. The film was directed by Gerald Gutierrez and Kirk Browning, and produced by Peter Weinburg.

Another made-for-television version was adapted by Mamet in 1993. It featured Jack Lemmon as Robert and Matthew Broderick as John. Produced by Patricia Wolff and Thomas A. Bliss, directed by Gregory Mosher.

# Topics for Further Study

Choose one of the playlets that John and Robert perform and analyze it. Discuss the style of the playlet and compare it to other, similar plays.

Compare and contrast the relationship between Robert and John with that between the rival characters William Charles Macready and Edwin Forrest in Richard Nelson's *Two Shakespearean Actors* (1992).

In what ways could Robert and John have better balanced their mentor-neophyte relationship? Research the psychological aspects of such a relationship.

There were many backstage plays (a play that takes the audience behind the curtain) and musicals produced in the 1970s, including 1975's *A Chorus Line*. Choose one of these backstage plays and compare it to *A Life in the Theatre*. In your essay, consider the historical context in which such plays were produced. Why were they so popular?

# Compare and Contrast

**1977:** Studio 54, the first celebrity disco, opens in New York City. It attracts those luminaries and aspiring celebrities who want to see and be seen.

**Today:** Somewhat nostalgic movies about places like Studio 54 and about the people who went there are made. The emptiness of the lifestyle is often highlighted.

**1977:** *Annie* opens on Broadway, where it runs for 2,377 performances.

**Today:** Though it no longer plays on Broadway, *Annie* is still regularly performed in repertory and has been made into a feature film and television movie.

**1977:** In music, the burgeoning punk movement challenges the dominant rock bands, dismissing them as dinosaurs.

**Today:** Many musical styles, like punk and classic rock, exist side by side.

**1977:** There is general distrust of the American government because of the recent Watergate scandal involving President Richard M. Nixon.

**Today:** There is a sense of distrust of the American government because of the Monica Lewinsky scandal involving President Bill Clinton.

# What Do I Read Next?

*Oleanna*, a play by Mamet first performed in 1992, focuses on a topsy-turvy mentoring relationship between a female student and her professor.

*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a play by Luigi Pirandello, written in 1921, is the story of a group of actors rehearsing a play, which is interrupted by six created characters.

*Waiting for Lefty* is a play by Clifford Odets, written in 1935. Like *A Life in the Theatre*, the play is constructed of short scenes that contain realistic action.

*Harlequinade* is a play by Terence Rattigan, published in 1948. The play focuses on a regional acting troupe.

*It's Only a Play* is a comedic play by Terrence McNally, written in 1985. The plot focuses on people who have worked on a theatrical production, as well as critics and other hangers-on, as they await public reaction to their work.

# Further Study

Dean, Anne, *David Mamet: Language as Dramatic Action*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990, pp. 119-47.

This chapter offers interpretation of and covers topics critical to *A Life in the Theatre*.

Kane, Leslie, ed., *David Mamet: A Casebook*, Garland Publishing, 1992.

This collection of critical essays includes several that comment on aspects of *A Life in the Theatre*.

Lahr, John, "Profile: Fortress Mamet," in the *New Yorker*, November 17, 1997, pp. 70-82.

This biographical article covers the whole of Mamet's life and work.

Mamet, David, "A 'Sad Comedy' About Actors," in the *New York Times*, October 16, 1977, p. D7.

In this article, Mamet discusses the inspiration for and writing of *A Life in the Theatre*.

# Bibliography

Billington, Michael, "Life in the Final Stages," in *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, November 12, 1989, p. 26.

Clurman, Harold, Review in *The Nation*, November 12, 1977, p. 504-05.

Gussow, Mel, "Illusion within an Illusion," in *New York Times*, October 21, 1977, p. 12.

_____, "Mamet Wins with *Life in Theater*," in *New York Times*, February 5, 1977, p. 10.

Hampton, Wilborn, "Looking At Life As a Play," in *New York Times*, February 29, 1992, sec. 1, p. 18.

Hughes, Catharine, "Great Expectations," in *America*, December 10, 1977, p. 423.

Kalem, T. E., "Curtain Call," in *Time*, October 31, 1977, p. 94.

Kennedy, Douglas, "Hey, Big Spender," in *New Statesman & Society*, December 8, 1989, pp. 44-5.

Kerr, Walter, "Parody In and Out of Focus," in *New York Times*, October 30, 1977, p. D5.

Klein, Alvin, "An Early Tribute to Performers from Mamet," in *New York Times*, November 4, 1990, sec. 12, p. 21.

Mamet, David, *A Life in the Theatre*, Grove Press, 1977.

Oliver, Edith, "Actor Variations," in *New Yorker*, October 31, 1977, pp. 115-18.

Simon, John, Review in *The Hudson Review*, Spring 1978, pp, 154-55,

BOOKRAGS

# Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

**Project Editor**
David Galens

**Editorial**
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

**Research**
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

**Data Capture**
Beverly Jendrowski

**Permissions**
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

**Imaging and Multimedia**
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

**Product Design**
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

**Manufacturing**
Stacy Melson



*For more information, contact*
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

**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:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535