Speed-the-Plow Study Guide

Speed-the-Plow by David Mamet

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Introduction

David Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow* is one of several successful plays he has written about the business world. Filled with Mamet's trademark, rapid-fire dialogue, *Speed-the-Plow* focuses on the ruthless nature of Hollywood and the movie industry. Mamet was familiar with this environment, having written several produced screenplays in the 1980s. The title *Speed-the-Plow* is derived from an old English farming phrase which was used to confer good luck and a swift and profitable ploughing. Critics and scholars have speculated that Mamet might be comparing Hollywood's fast pace and profit motivations to this past, for in the play cold business fact wins out over artistry and idealism.

Speed-the-Plow was first produced on Broadway in the Royale Theater, opening on May 3,1988. The play was a box office success even before opening night, in part because pop star and cultural icon Madonna played the role of Karen, the temporary secretary. Advanced ticket sales exceeded $1 million. To many critics, Madonna's celebrity made an ironic comment on the play's action. Like many of Mamet's plays, *Speed-the-Plow* highlights men and their complicated relationships. Mamet has been routinely criticized for writing over-simple, objectified female characters over the course of his career, and this play received similar accusations regarding Karen.

Critics gave *Speed-the-Plow* generally good reviews during its Broadway production. Mamethad won the Pulitzer Prize for drama several years earlier for his 1984 play *Glengarry Glenn Ross,* which also focuses on men in the business world. Many critics saw similarities between *Speed-the-Plow* and *Glengarry Glenn Ross* and found the latter superior. Still, most praised Mamet's use of dialogue and taunt plotting. Critics disagreed on the value of the play in the Mamet canon. Some saw it as a variation of Mamet's business dramas and therefore unoriginal, while others found deep meaning in the seemingly superficial depiction of two Hollywood producers looking for a big break.

Author Biography

David Mamet was born on November 30, 1947, in Chicago, Illinois, to Bernard Mamet, a labor lawyer, and his wife, Leonore. As a child, Mamet's parents had high expectations for their son 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 subtleties inherent to well-spoken words. This experience had a direct bearing on Mamet's plays, for he is known as a master of dialogue.

Mamet's parents divorced when he was eleven, and he subsequently lived with his mother for four years before moving 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 it became evident that acting was not his true calling, Mamet returned to college (Goddard in Vermont) and began writing. His first full-length play, *Camel,* was his senior thesis and was performed as a student production.

Mamet continued to write following his graduation. He supported himself with small acting roles as well as working part-time teaching acting at Goddard and Marlboro, another college in Vermont. During this time, he began writing what would become his first hit: 1974' s . 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. Appraising the New York version of the show, *Time* named it among the ten best plays of 1976.

Mamet's next play, *American Buffalo,* was regarded as an ever bigger smash. As with its predecessor, the play debuted in Chicago. When the production moved to New York City in 1977, however, it went directly to Broadway. Several years later, in 1984, Mamet won the Pulitzer Prize for one of his most well-respected plays, *Glengarry Glenn Ross.* The story revolves around survival in a dog-eat-dog business environment: real estate. Similarly, Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow* (1988) revolves around another cutthroat business: Hollywood and the entertainment industry. Mamet wrote a number of screenplays, many of them adaptations of other's work, throughout the 1980s and 1990s and he became well-versed in the harsh business of film.

In 1992, Mamet produced one of his most controversial works, *Oleanna*. The play concerns the unfounded allegations of sexual harassment by a young, female student against a male college professor. Mamet directed the original Broadway production as he had previously done with several of his plays. The playwright also branched out into directing films. He has helmed (as well as written) such motion pictures as *House of Games* (1987), *Things Change* (1988), and *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997); he has also written the screenplays for *The Verdict*¦ (1982), *The Untouchables* (1987), *The Edge* (1998), (with Hilary Henkin) *Wag the Dog* (1998), and Lansky (1999), among others. By

the end of the 1990s, Mamet was regarded as one of the contemporary masters of the dramatic form, an emerging power in Hollywood, and a virtuoso of dialogue.

Plot Summary

Scene 1

Speed-the-Plow opens in Bobby Gould's new office in the morning. Gould, the newly promoted head of production at a movie studio is reading a book when Charlie Fox enters. Fox is very excited about something, but Gould continues to leaf through the book he is reading, making fun of its contents. Gould becomes suspicious when Fox asks if he can "greenlight" (approve) a movie deal, but his fears are quickly abated as Fox elaborates. Fox was visited earlier in the morning by a big movie star, Doug Brown, who is free to do a movie with him based on a prison script that Fox had sent him earlier; the star has given Fox until 10 am tomorrow to come up with a deal. Gould immediately calls his superior, Ross, and while he waits for him to call back, he and Fox discuss the Doug Brown story.

Ross calls back and says they will meet in ten minutes. In the meantime, Gould and Fox discuss the script, which is a prison movie/buddy picture, with "action, blood, and a social theme." Before Fox can ask, Gould assures him that he will get a co-producer credit. Gould thanks Fox for his loyalty because he could have taken the deal elsewhere. They discuss the strategy for the meeting. Gould will do the talking, summarizing the script in one line for Ross. Before they can finish, Ross calls telling Gould that he has to be out of town until tomorrow morning. Fox worries that his option will expire before they can talk to Ross, but Gould assures him they will talk to Ross in time. Fox realizes they are going to be rich, and Gould tells him that they will be very rich. Gould, though, says that money is not everything and people are more important in their business.

Gould calls for coffee, but the temp does not know where it is. While they wait for her to bring coffee in, Fox remains jumpy, finally picking up the novel Gould was reading earlier, titled *The Bridge; or, Radiation and the Half-Life of Society. A Study of Decay*. Fox suggests he make the book into a movie, then jokes that he should do it instead of the Doug Brown picture. Karen, the twentysomething temporary secretary, comes in with the coffee. While Karen is there, Fox and Gould talk about how they have been loyal friends for many years and how they are whores in their business. Gould says that most everything they make is garbage, and Karen asks why that is. The men try to answer, but can only come up with "That's the way it is."

Karen says that she does not know what she is supposed to do on her job. Gould says not to do anything but cancel all his appointments until the meeting with Ross, make lunch reservations for him and Fox, and then leave. She goes to the outer office to do these tasks, and Gould tells Fox to leave so he can get some work done. Fox says that he thinks Gould will make moves on Karen. Gould denies this, but after Fox speculates about Karen, Gould says that he thinks she would go out with him. They make a bet for $500 that Gould can get Karen to come to his house and have sex with him. Fox leaves.

After a moment, Karen comes back into Gould's office. She was unable to get the lunch reservation he wanted, but after Gould starts to point out her mistake, she realizes that she should have mentioned his name. Gould has her sit down and he explains what happened in the office that morning. Gould offers her the opportunity to do the courtesy read on *The Bridge,* as long as she gives her report on it to him that night at his house. They also get into a discussion on purity and principles, and Gould admits he wishes he had them. He sends Karen back to make the proper reservations as well as call Fox and inform him that he owes Gould $500.

Scene 2

In Gould's apartment later that night, Karen is enthusiastically telling Gould about the novel. She explains that the author theorizes that all the radiation around us is sent by God and changes us constantly. Karen says that the novel has changed her. Gould thanks her, telling her that they have made a connection because she has shared this book with him. He offers to help her in the business, and she says that she wants to work on this film. She insists that this novel should be made into a movie, that it is a pearl. Gould does not think anyone will see the film. Karen says the script to Fox's prison film is not what people want. Gould talks about how everyone wants something from him. Karen tells him that she knows he wants to sleep with her, and she understands him. She tells him she knows that he is frightened. She says she is the answer to his prayers for purity, for the book has enlightened her.

Scene 3

In Gould's office the next morning, Fox comes in wanting assurance that they would be co-producers credited above the title. Gould informs him that he is not going to do the Doug Brown film. Fox sarcastically says that he should do the novel instead and ruin his career, then goes on a verbal rampage which ends with him asking Gould if he slept with Karen. Gould avoids the question, saying he will see Ross by himself and will not do the Doug Brown project. Fox points out that he promised him yesterday and that he could have taken the project elsewhere yesterday. When Fox asks, Gould says that he will be greenlighting the novel instead. Fox tells him he cannot make this book and he will lose his job if he does. Gould says that he was up all night thinking, and that he needs to do his job differently. Fox thinks he is totally crazy and says anything he can to convince Gould of this.

Fox wants to ask Karen one question. Fox asks her what they talked about and if they became intimate. Karen is suspicious and answers in vague terms. Finally, Fox asks if she would have slept with Gould if he had not greenlighted her book. She admits that she would not have. Gould is confused as to what he should do until she reminds him that "we have a meeting." At that point the executive decides to go the safe route and make the prison film with Fox. Gould changes his shirt and has Fox show Karen out. Fox berates her while Gould changes. The two men leave for the meeting. Gould assures Fox that above the title the names will read "Fox and Gould."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The play opens in the office of a film producer, Bobby Gould. There are boxes and painting materials all over, evidence that Gould is in the process of moving into the office. Gould is sitting at his desk reading when Charlie Fox walks in. The first thing Gould says to Fox is that when the gods would make us mad they answer our prayers. This first line foreshadows a conversation Gould will later have with the temporary secretary Karen. Gould then comments on the kinds of movies he is responsible for producing: "If it's not quite 'Art' and it's not quite 'Entertainment,' it's here on my desk." He reads aloud to Fox from the book he has been reading. It is pretentious and confusing.

When Fox says he has to talk, Gould replies that if you're too busy to have fun in the movie business, you're just a slave to commerce. You're nothing. Fox asks what Gould's new deal is, what kind of movie he can "greenlight" (approve for production). Gould replies that if the budget is over ten million dollars he needs the approval of Ross, the head of the studio. If it's less than ten million, he can greenlight it.

Fox begins to tell Gould that someone had come to him that morning. Before he can finish, Gould becomes upset because he thinks Fox has come to his office to "promote" him (get him to make a movie). Gould says that everyone in town is trying to "promote" him. One thing he does not need is someone else promoting him. Saying that he is drowning in "coverage," Gould picks up a script: "The Story of a Horse and the Horse Who Loved Him." He says that his reply to those who want to "promote" him, including Fox, is that they should go through the channels. Then he asks Fox if, instead, he came to congratulate him on his new promotion.

Fox offers Gould his congratulations, and Gould asks if he deserves the promotion. Gould says he does, because he's a prince among men and Yertle the Turtle. Gould says that's enough, and asks what Fox brought him.

Fox says that earlier that morning Doug Brown, a major movie star, had come to his house. Fox asks Gould how would like to have Brown "cross the street" to do a picture for their studio. Brown is free next month, and he loves a script Fox had given him. He will "cross the street" to do the film with them.

Gould immediately picks up his phone and tells the secretary to get Ross. The secretary apparently doesn't know how to reach Ross. Gould explains there's a button on the console, and finally she seems to understand.

Gould hangs up, and asks Fox if he's all right. Fox says that he needs coffee. They discuss how the Doug Brown situation came about. Fox says that he had found a script in the company's files, a prison story. He loved the script, and he had given it to Brown's

"guy." The guy had given Brown the script. Months passed, and Fox hadn't heard anything. Then, this morning, Brown had come to Fox's house and said he wanted to do the film with Fox's studio.

While they discuss this, the secretary calls Gould and tells him Ross will get back to them. When the phone rings, Gould tells the secretary "no calls," except from Ross. He also tells her they need coffee.

Fox and Gould talk about how this is like something out of a fairy tale, and the phone rings again. It is Ross. Gould asks if he needs some good news. He says he has a surprise, but he wants to tell him in person. He asks Ross if he has five minutes. Then he looks at his watch, and says they'll be there. He starts to say that Charlie Fox had come in with something, but gets cut off. He hangs up and tells Fox they're to see Ross in ten minutes. Fox says he needs some coffee.

Gould asks Fox to tell him the story. Fox hesitates, but then agrees that it's best for Gould to tell Ross the story. It's "A Douggie Brown picture," a *Buddy* picture. It will star Brown and "the flavor of the month." As Fox begins to outline the story, Gould calls the secretary again and asks for coffee. The movie has action, blood, a social theme, and a girl.

As they discuss how to present the story to Ross, Gould assures Fox that his name will go on the film as a co-producer. Fox thanks him. Gould responds that he should be thanking Fox, and he does. He also says Fox should get a "bump," or a bonus, because he could have taken the project "across the street." Gould observes that loyalty kept him with the studio. Fox replies that it was only common sense, and also that Gould has been good to him.

Fox goes on to say that "we were all happy" for Gould when he got his promotion. Fox says he feels lucky. Gould replies that he's the lucky one. But Fox says it was good to have someone to come to with the project. He adds that he works for the studio, and his loyalty has always been to Gould. Gould says that he "owes" Fox. Fox says that he was just doing his job. Gould responds that he knows that sometimes this was difficult for him. Fox says he hesitates to ask for the credit because he doesn't want to exploit Gould's new position. Gould says he shouldn't hesitate about anything, because he brought him gold. He's grateful for this project and for all Fox has done over the years. Then he says: "Let's go make some money."

Fox says he needs a cup of coffee. Gould tells him he can get it in Ross' office. Gould outlines the plan to Fox: get in, get out, and give the pitch to Ross in one sentence. Gould tells Fox to let him talk, "no disrespect." Fox replies that he understands.

Then the phone rings. It's Ross. He's been called out of town to a meeting. Gould and Fox have been pushed to the next morning at ten o'clock. But Fox says that Brown only gave him until ten the next day to confirm the deal. Gould says that it's no problem, that Ross will be back the next morning and if he isn't, they'll get him on the phone wherever he is. But he'll be back, there's only one chance in a "quillion" that he won't be. Gould

stresses that he wants to give the news to Ross in person, because that will make Fox the Bringer of Good News, and forgo a bond with Ross. Fox points out that Gould will also move up to the big league.

When Fox hesitates, Gould asks if he really thinks Ross would turn this opportunity down. Fox replies: "Lord, I believe, aid thou my unbelief," quoting the apostle Thomas, who would not believe that Christ was resurrected until he put his hands in the wounds.

The two men begin to discuss all the money they are going to make. Fox asks "how much?" Gould replies "lots and lots." Then Gould says that money is not the important thing. Ironically, he says that money is not gold. What can you do with it? Buy things? But where would you keep them? What would you do with them? Take them out and dust them off from time to time? With characteristic irony and vulgarity, Mamet has Gould say: "I piss on money." Don't mess with people, though, because people are what it's All About. Moviemaking is a People Business.

Fox agrees, but then says that they're going to kick the ass of a lot of people. Fox says he has spent twenty years "in the barrel" and he's going to settle some scores. Gould says, "I know," and Fox replies that he doesn't know, that he's forgotten. But he says it with "due respect." When Gould says that there are better things to do, Fox asks Gould to show him what they are.

Fox asks for assurance that Ross won't screw him out of the deal, and Gould says absolutely not, that Fox has his word. Fox assures Gould that he trusts *him*, he knows *him*.

Fox needs a cup of coffee. Gould calls his secretary for the coffee, and he has to tell her where the coffee machine is. Fox asks if he got a new "broad" with the new job. Gould replies no, it's just that his regular secretary is out sick. Fox comments that the new broad is cute. Gould replies: "She's cute? ...she's nothing."

Fox picks up the book Gould was reading at the start of the play, and asks what it is. Gould says it's a novel by an "Eastern Sissy Writer." It's called: "The Bridge: or, Radiation and the Half-Life of Society. A Study of Decay." With it is a note from Ross asking Gould to give the book a courtesy read. Fox says, "I wouldn't just give that a *courtesy* read, I'd *make* this sucker." Gould agrees. Fox suggests he make it in place of the Doug Brown *Buddy* movie. Gould says that he could because his new job is one thing: the capacity to make decisions. Fox observes, "It's lonely at the top." Gould adds, "But it ain't crowded."

Karen, the secretary, comes in with the tray of coffee. She asks Gould how he takes his coffee, and Fox says that he takes his coffee the same way he makes his movies, with nothing in it. This is because he is an Old Whore. Gould agrees, and says he's proud of it, He adds that Fox is an old whore, too. Fox agrees, but adds that he's soon to be a *rich* old whore. Gould agrees, and Fox adds that he deserves it, because he has been loyal to Gould since the mailroom. He's gone step-by-step in Gould's shadow. He never forgot Gould, and Gould never forgot him. Fox then adds that he never forgot Gould

because of all of Gould's shit that he had to eat. Gould seems surprised, but before he can respond Fox adds that the wheel came around and here they are.

Gould warns Fox that from now on others are going to plot against him, like they plotted against Gould. They're going to go back to their Tribal Caves and plot against Fox the hack. Fox adds, "That *powerful* hack." Gould finishes the thought with, "Let's go steal his job." They both talk about how others will praise Fox to his face, and tear him down behind his back.

Gould tells Karen to put down his appointment with Ross for ten o'clock tomorrow, and cancel whatever might be in his book in its place. He also tells her to notify his regular secretary, Cathy, about the meeting.

Fox asks Karen if she will move up the ladder with Gould. She says she is just a temporary. Fox asks if she would stay on if... Before he can finish, she says again that she's a temporary. He notes that everything is temporary, until it's not. Fox then asks Karen if she thinks Gould's office is a good place to work. She replies that she's sure it is. Fox replies that it's wonderful to have such certainty. Fox then talks to Gould about taking initiative but getting on credit for it, being just a cog. Gould says to Karen that Fox is talking about himself. Fox says that he is talking about his historical self, for he is a cog no more.

Gould tells Karen that she has come at an auspicious time, because in this sinkhole of slime and depravity something is about to work out. All the garbage that he and Gould put up with is going to pay off.

Karen asks why it's all garbage. Gould says that not all of it is, but most of it is. She asks why. Gould tells her he thinks that is a good question. He asks Fox why. Fox replies: "Because." Fox says that life in the movie business is like the beginning of a new love affair: it's full of surprises and you're constantly getting screwed. Karen asks why it should be that way. In return, Fox asks why nickels should be bigger than dimes. That's just the way it is. Gould adds that it's a business with its own unchanging rules. Fox agrees, and says the *one* thing is that nobody pays off on work. They claim to be mavericks but all they really want is the endorsement of their superiors. If you want to do something in Hollywood, it better be one of the five major food groups. The *upside* though, is that the one time you *do* get support, then you can do something.

Fox asks Gould what it's like to be head of production. Is it more fun than miniature golf? Gould replies that if Fox put as much energy into his job as he put into kissing his (Gould's) ass . . . Fox says his job *is* kissing Gould's ass. Gould tells Fox not to forget it.

Karen tells Gould that she feels silly saying it but that she doesn't know what she's supposed to do. Gold tells her not to do anything, call it a Bank Holiday. He suggests to Fox that they leave. He tells Karen to cancel anything in his book for today, and if anyone calls to tell them to call back tomorrow. He'll be in at ten a.m. for his meeting with Ross. When she is done canceling his appointments, she can go home.

Fox asks Gould where they're going for lunch. Gould says they'll go the Coventry. He tells Karen to make an appointment there: a table for two, at one o'clock. Karen exits, and Gould tells Fox that all he has to do is eat his doo-doo for eleven years, and eventually the wheel comes round.

Gould tells Fox that he hopes that if the shoe were on the other foot he'd act the same way. Fox responds that he knows Gould would, because experiences like this film are what make it all worthwhile.

Gould says that he's going to find a *lot* of things now that will make it all worthwhile. He thinks they could build themselves in to split ten percent. Fox adds "...of the net." Gould says that he's learned two things in twenty years in the entertainment industry. The first is that there is no net, and the second thing he's forgotten.

Fox asks Gould what he's going to do until lunch. Gould says he's going to work. Fox replies that Gould never did a day of work in his life. He says that for eleven years Gould has either been scheming or zigging and zagging. The real reason Gould is staying, according to Fox, is to "put the moves" on the new secretary. He adds that it will not work.

Gould asks Fox why he thinks she won't go for him. Fox says that she "falls between two stools." She is not a "floozy," but she's also not so ambitious that she would sleep with Gould to get ahead.

Gould asks what if she just "liked him." When Fox hesitates, Gould asks if Fox is saying that no one loves him for himself. Fox replies that no one does in *this* office. Fox adds that he isn't saying that Gould doesn't *deserve* it: in fact, he does. He doesn't want to take the *shine* off their deal. Gould says it's no problem. The he adds that he bets she *would* go to bed with him. Fox says he bets she would too. Gould replies that he thinks she likes him, and she would go out with him. Fox asks how much. After some give and take, they make a "gentleman's bet" for five hundred dollars that Gould can get Karen on a date, get her to his house, and that he can get her to sleep with him. As Fox leaves, Gould reminds him of their plans to meet for lunch at one o'clock.

Gould works at his desk alone for a moment, and then Karen enters. She has been unable to get him a table at the Coventry at one o'clock. As they talk, she realizes that she should have used his name. She says she was naive. Gould tells her there's nothing wrong with being naive. Karen says that much of a job like hers is learning to think in a business fashion. Gould tells her that's what makes the life exciting.

Then Gould asks her if she wants a thrill in her life: a chance to play at the Big Table. She says yes. He tells her about Fox forming a relationship with Doug Brown and that they're going to make a movie together. Karen asks if it's a good film. Gould responds, "I'm sorry." She asks the same question again. Gould replies that it's a commodity. He doesn't know if it's a good film. He says he's not an artist, that he's a businessman. He tells her that in his job, someone is always trying to "promote" him, to get him to do something that is in his or her best interest. But his business is to make decisions for

the studio. He has to say "no" much of the time. But it's a good job, because it's a job of responsibility. Gould goes on to say that one time in a billion someone was loyal to him. He says he's talking about Charlie Fox. Fox stuck with him, did him a favor. With the new project, they can rise together. That's what the job is. It deals with *people*.

Gould picks up the book he was reading. Gould asks Karen who Mr. Ross is. She replies that he's the Head of the Studio. Gould agrees, and tells her that the author's agent gave this book about the end of the world to Ross. Ross told the agent he'd read the book, and then he gave it to Gould to read. That way, when Ross tells the author that he loved the book but it won't make a movie, he can say something intelligent about it. This is called a "courtesy read." No one has any intention of making the book into a film but it's read as a courtesy. This doesn't mean the Hollywood people are depraved; it's just how business is done.

Karen says she thinks she understands, but asks what if there is something in the book. Gould replies that he'd be delighted. He says his job corrupts him, he's always wondering what people want from him, and everything is a task. Karen asks if it has to be that way. Gould replies that he prayed to be pure, he asked God to give him the job as Head of Production, give him a platform to be "good," and he'd be good. He got the job, he's been there one day, and he's become a Big Whore. The author has a reputation for being "artsy," the book is automatically considered to be unsuitable for the screen, so Gould looks on it as just a "courtesy read."

Karen asks Gould if he enjoys his work. Gould says he does, very much. He asks Karen if she thinks she would enjoy it. She replies that she thinks she would enjoy it very much. Gould asks what she would enjoy. She says she would enjoy making decisions. She starts to say that she thinks that if you could keep your values straight, if you had principles... Before she can finish, Gould says she's correct. He asks if she wants to talk about purity, or turn the page. She says she wants to talk about purity.

Gould says that if you don't have principles, then each day is hell. All you've got is "good taste," and that's worthless. Each day the pressure gets worse. He asks Karen to do him a favor, to read the book for him. She says she would be flattered to read it. Gould tells her he needs a report on it by tonight. She says she won't be able to start reading it until after work. He says that is fine, he's going to be home. He tells her that when she's finished she should bring the report to him, and they'll discuss it. Karen agrees, and thanks him. Gould asks her to call the restaurant and tell them to reserve a table for him and Mr. Fox in twenty minutes. Then she's to call Fox's secretary and have her try to reach him and tell him that Gould will be twenty minutes late and that Fox owes him five hundred bucks.

Act 1 Analysis

Like many of David Mamet's plays, "Speed the Plow" explores the human cost of striving for financial success with humor, irony, and much vulgar language. Many of the early lines, especially by Gould, are funny at first, but later have more dramatic

repercussions. Gould's comment, that when the gods would make us mad they answer our prayers, foreshadows a conversation he has with Karen about his job and prayer. His observation to Fox about art versus entertainment sets up a major theme of the play: should movies try to touch people, move them, and entertain them, or should they just entertain? Gould states that if you're too busy to have fun in the movie business you're just a slave to commerce. He will try to have some "fun," and in the end, he will become a "slave to commerce." Finally, Gould sets up another theme of the play, complaining that since he has been given some authority to greenlight projects, everyone wants to promote him.

Fox's introduction of the Doug Brown project begins the action of the play in earnest. The seemingly unimportant detail of Gould's "girl" being unable to properly work the phone system subtly introduces Karen, whose alleged naivety and innocence leads to the play's climatic confrontation between Gould and Fox. Fox's need for coffee also helps set up this situation. When Karen at last appears onstage, there is a special irony in Gould's observation that she isn't so cute, that she's nothing. In the original Broadway production, Madonna played the secretary, and many men probably disagreed with Gould's opinion.

While the two men discuss the best way to make their presentation to Ross, another major theme of the story is introduced: loyalty. Over the years, Fox has remained loyal to Gould even when Gould was promoted past him. The conflict between art and entertainment, or more specifically, commerce, and the introduction of a new would-be "player," the temporary secretary Karen, will test this loyalty.

When Fox quotes scripture, it is another subtle touch of the irony that Mamet brings to his plays. Both Gould and Karen talk about praying and about serving God. But it is Fox, who in some ways represents the pure commercialism of Hollywood, who can quote the Bible and, in the end, shows basic morality in his loyalty to Gould and to his job responsibilities.

When Karen brings in the coffee the conversation again foreshadows later developments with irony. Fox says that Gould is a whore, selling himself to succeed. Karen seems unsure of how to react to the discussion that follows, but later in the play it becomes apparent she knows exactly what Fox means.

Karen's departure leads to another bit of irony and vulgar humor. After a discussion of whether or not Karen might find Gould attractive, the two men make a "gentleman's bet." Gould bets that he can get Karen to sleep with him, and Fox bets that he will fail. The irony is that they call this crude wager a "gentleman's" bet, although such behavior is hardly the way a real gentleman would act.

Karen returns after Fox leaves, and Mamet sets the stage for the situation that will lead to the play's crisis and climax. Gould uses the pretentious, boring book he has been reading as his "hook" to get Karen interested in him. He asks her to read it and then come to his house to report on it to him. By pretending to make her part of the decision-making process, Gould seems to be the typical Hollywood predator, using his power as

a producer to lure the naive young woman to his "casting couch." This, too, is part of the irony that Mamet weaves through the entire play.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act 2 opens that night at Gould's apartment. Gould and Karen are there together. As the Act opens, Karen is reading to Gould from "The Bridge."

After reading a section of the book, Karen begins to tell Gould what she thinks the meaning of it is. She says that, according to the book, all radiation has been sent by God to change us constantly. Gould asks how it's supposed to change us. Karen replies that it's to change us to a new thing, and that we don't need to be frightened. It comes from God. She says she felt empowered. Gould repeats the word "empowered," and Karen says that she hopes he's felt that, when something finally made sense. It's not *courage*; it's *greater* than courage. Then she adds that perhaps it *is* courage. She says that Gould has felt like that. Gould seems unsure. Karen explains that it's like they say in *stories*, where one thing changes you. Gould says that he doesn't know if he's felt like that. Karen says that it puts you at peace.

Trying to explain it more, Karen quotes from the book. "What was it that you feared? *Embrace* it..." She says that when she took the temporary job at the studio she might find something. But it was too much. It all came at once. Then she asks Gould for another drink.

Karen asks Gould if he knows what the author is talking about. Without giving Gould a chance to answer, she says that the author is talking about a life lived in fear. The author says that "It Says In The Book, it doesn't have to *be* so..." The author says that we are living in the Dark Ages, in the last days. Karen says that the book is written with such love that it's a thing to be thankful for.

Gould tells her that she's done a fantastic job on the book. It means something. She's shown a *freshness*, or as she said it, a *napvety*. He says a person dreams about making a connection, but he feels like he's *done* it. Karen reached out to *him*, shared this thing with him. That's what he's been missing. He says it's so rare that someone shows some *enthusiasm*. Gould says he wants to thank her. Karen replies that it's nothing. Gould tells her it's something he wants to do for her. He says that if there's something she wants to do in the *Studio*, then he would like to help her.

She thanks him, and says that there is something she absolutely wants to do. She wants to work on the film. He says if he can, he will get her work on the *Prison* film. Karen replies no, she wants to work on the Radiation film. She doesn't care in what capacity. It would be so important to her to *be* there to help, even if it was just to get coffee. Gould hesitates. Karen asks if she's put him on the spot. He says that she has, just a little. He emphasizes that this was just a "courtesy read." The chances were astronomically slim that anything would come of it. But she reminds him that he also said he wanted to *investigate* it, because once in a while one finds a pearl.

Gould reminds her that the book is about the End of the World. Karen says that's why it's important. She reminds Gould that he said someone's job was to read the manuscripts. She asks why they are read. Fox says he gets it, that once in a great while one is worth making. Karen asks why not this one. Gould tells her that he's going to pay her the compliment of being frank. This book, which has meant so much to her, Won't Make A Good Movie. He respects her enthusiasm, but this book won't Get The Asses In The Seats. It may sound crass, but his new job is not to "make," it is to "suggest" good work choosing *from* Those Things Which the Public Will Come In To See. If they don't come to see it, what's the point? She said it took a certain kind of courage to face a fact. This is the fact here.

Karen asks Gould why he thinks people won't come to see this picture. Is he ever wrong? She says she thinks people would come to see it. She would. It's about what we feel. Karen says that everyone is frightened. Gould echoes her statement, surprised. She says that everything is breaking down. Gould asks: "It is?" Karen says: "It's over . . .Things as we know them . . ." and Gould asks: "Are over?" Karen replies, "Of course they are." She says that the book spoke to her. It *changed* her.

Gould agrees, but points out that the fact that it changed her, that she liked it, that she'd like to see it "go" is not sufficient reason for the studio to pay fifteen million dollars to film it.

Karen says someone can make a decision to film the book. Gould says that it's Richard Ross. Karen says she read the prison film script. She thinks it's despicable, it's degrading to the human spirit. The sex, the titillation, the violence are not what people want. Gould replies of course people want that. That's what studios are in business for. To *make the thing everyone made last year*, the image people want to see. That is what they want. It's more than what they want; it's what they require. When he tells Ross about the Doug Brown film, Ross is going to fall on Gould's neck and kiss him. Gould tells Karen that she knows he can't make the Radiation book.

Karen replies that she doesn't know that. Gould held out hope to her that morning. Gould says *everyone* has feelings, *everyone* would like to make a difference, everyone says they're a maverick. But everyone is just one part of the whole. Nobody's a maverick. Gould repeats what he said at the beginning to Fox: everyone is trying to promote him; everyone wants something from him. Karen says she understands. Gould asks her if she understands how could she act this way. She replies that Gould asked her to come to his house. She knew he wanted to sleep with her.

Gould denies that he wanted her to sleep with him. She tells him he doesn't have to lie. She says they both want the same things. They both want love. She knew what he really wanted when he asked her to come over. Gould asks: "You came to...?" Karen replies that she thought "why not?" Gould continues to question her: "I asked you here to sleep with me?" She responds that she read the book, she's been depraved, and she's been frightened. She knows Gould is too. Gould asks if she thinks he's frightened, and Karen says she knows that he is. But she would have come to his house anyway. She asks if that is depraved. She says she knows what it is to be lost, and she knows

that Gould is lost. She says it was not an accident that she came to work for Gould. She says that sometimes we ask for a sign, and then we see that *we* are the sign. We find the answers. She says that in the book one of the characters realizes that the world must end, and that realization gave him a vision of infinity. She asks Gould if he sees. He says: "No."

When Gould says he doesn't understand, Karen asks if he'd like to. He says he doesn't understand her. She says he was frightened and that forced him to lie. But she forgives him. She reminds him that during their conversation that morning he said he'd prayed to be pure. Gould says he was joking. She says she looked in his heart and saw him. People can need each other. They needn't be afraid. Again, Gould says he doesn't understand. Karen says he can if he wishes to. She says the world is dying. They prayed for a sign. She became a temporary worker in his office. He asked her to read the book. She read the book. The meaning of all that is that he was put here to make movies people need to see, to make them less afraid. In spite of their sins, she and Gould could do something that would bring them alive. They wouldn't need to feel ashamed. Karen reminds Gould that he prayed to be pure. What if his prayers were answered? He asked her to come to his house. Here she is.

Act 2 Analysis

As Act 2 opens Karen and Gould are discussing "The Bridge." Karen finds the book very worthwhile and meaningful, and tries to explain it to Gould. He asks questions, showing interest in the book's themes. Then he compliments her on her work, and praises her as a person who is different from the typical jaded Hollywood type. It is apparent he is drawing her in, trying to build up her opinion of him to aid in his planned seduction.

Then Gould begins to set the bait. He offers to help her get a job in the studio. She replies that she wants to work on the movie. It's at this point that the hunter becomes the hunted. Gould offers to get her work on the prison film, but she says she wants to work on the radiation film. She would do anything to work on it.

Mamet now uses the kind of verbal sparring that has made him famous. Gould is surprised, but tries to regain momentum by telling Karen that he is going to pay her the compliment of being honest with her. Then he states the Hollywood maxim that the role of the moviemaker is to make the kind of movies people want to see. Karen counters that she would come to see this picture, and she thinks others would, too. She asks Gould if he is ever wrong about what would make a successful movie, and then she talks about the decay of society. He seems not to have noticed that things are falling apart. In showing how out of touch Gould is, Mamet mocks an industry that has made him wealthy. In addition to his stage plays, he has written several films. But he is not afraid to bite the hand that feeds him.

They continue discussing the possible success of a movie about the end of the world versus the prison film. Finally Karen says that she thinks the prison movie is degrading and should not be made. Gould says that this is the type of movie people want to see.

Then he tells her he is unable to make the radiation film, and she knows it. Karen replies that she does not know that. The book changed her, helped her to become a better person, and it can do the same for others. She says she knows that Gould asked to read the book and come to his house so he could get her to sleep with him. He acts surprised, as if the thought never crossed his mind.

As Karen talks of how she has been depraved and frightened, but the book helped her find peace, she completely turns the tables on Gould. Instead of him using his power as a studio executive to get what he wants from the naive secretary, she uses her seeming openness, her feminine attraction, and Gould's own desires to get what she wants from him. She wants the radiation movie made, and he wants to sleep with her. Well, here she is.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

Act 3 is set in Gould's office the next morning. As it opens, Gould is sitting behind his desk and Fox enters. Fox says that he was up all night. He had been thinking, on the one hand, whether he was worthy to be rich. On the other hand, he felt *greedy*.

Fox asks Gould if their discussion yesterday about producer status on the new film meant that they would "share" the above-the-title position. He also feels this is only the *beginning*, because they can bring *more*.

Gould replies that he isn't going to do the Douglas Brown film. Fox replies that he doesn't blame him, because it's bad. If he were Gould, he'd do the film on Radiation. Then, he'd spend the rest of his life in a packing crate. Fox says he can't get over the people who waste filmmakers' time. If they saw a movie like this, would they sit through it? He reads part of the "coverage" (a brief synopsis and analysis that covers the story of a proposed or finished screenplay) for "The Bridge," describing the world in its final decay. Sarcastically he calls it a *Summer* picture. He reads some more, and then adds that, in Scene Two, the hero comes out of the bar and finds that his horse is gone. Then Fox says he needs a drink, even though it's only ten o'clock in the morning.

Fox begins talking about how someone looks forward to something and yet they think it's never going to happen. He admits that he felt jealousy toward Gould, because they started out together, and he always said that someday he'd get something for himself and he'd be up there *with* Gould. Fox also acknowledges that for several years he was riding on Gould's coattails. He thanks Gould for being a friend and never bringing it up. Fox is glad he can pay it back. He adds, speaking of paying it back, does he really owe Gould the five hundred dollars?

Gould seems confused, so Fox asks, crudely, if Gould slept with the girl. Gould replies that he's going to see Ross by himself. Now Fox is confused. He says he thinks they should talk about this. Fox adds that he brought Gould the picture. They should go to see Ross together.

Gould says that he's not going to take Ross the Prison Film. Fox says he doesn't understand. He reminds Gould that Gould told him yesterday he was going to get Ross to greenlight it. He promised Ross that he would. Gould says that he knows he did. Fox asks if he's joking. Gould says he's not. Fox says that he could have taken the film across the street and had a deal yesterday. He'd be the Executive Producer of a Doug Brown film. He says that Gould must be joking, and starts to talk about when Gould takes the film to Ross.

Gould repeats that he's not taking the film to Ross. Fox asks why not. Gould says he's going to greenlight the Radiation book. Fox says that he isn't. Gould says that he's going to if he can.

Fox tells Gould that he's not upset with him. But, what he's paid to do is to make films that make money. That is what Ross *pays* them for. Gould *cannot* make the radiation book. Gould replies that he's going to try. Fox says Ross will not do it and he will not *let* Gould do it. Gould points out that, according to his contract, he can greenlight one picture a year under ten million dollars, at his own discretion, without Ross' prior approval or consent. Fox says that Gould will find that his contrAct 1s worthless. The clause is a *sucker* clause. If he insists on it he will become a laughingstock, and no one will *hire* him. Even his best friend, Fox, won't hire him. He won't understand why Gould did what he did, making a movie that no one will watch. He asks Gould what's wrong with him. Then he asks if he's read the book. Gould asks Fox if he has. Fox replies he read the coverage.

Gould states that he and Fox have different ideas. Fox asks since when. Gould says he was up all night thinking about why he was called to his new job. He says he believes in the ideas that are contained in the book. Fox replies that he believes in the Yellow Pages but he doesn't want to film them. He asks why Gould is doing this to him. Gould says that Fox can take the prison film to Ross. Fox responds that if he takes the film to Ross, Ross will make the film and just give Fox a "thank you." Fox needs Gould for protection. He tells Gould that he's "going toidy" over his whole life, and asks Gould if he's always hated him. Gould says no, and Fox asks why he's doing this. Gould replies that he thinks that we have a few chances to do something right. He tells Fox that he's wasted his life, but he thinks he's found something. Fox asks Gould what's happened to him. Gould says he thinks the prison movie has a place, and he respects Fox. Fox says he doesn't want Gould's respect, because it *stinks*. He tells Gould that he's going to buy something worthless, he's going to spend a million dollars for sleeping with a woman. He mocks Gould's statement that he was up all night thinking, saying that he was up all night having sex. He reminds Gould that he said his life was a sham, and then says that after two days in the job he can't handle the strain. Gould's name will become a *punchline* in Hollywood.

Fox tells Gould he's throwing his life away, and asks Gould what the secretary did to him. Gould replies that she did nothing to him. Fox asks if she's a witch. Gould replies that she did nothing to him, they just talked. Fox responds that they just talked and Gould decided to throw his career away, and Fox's chances along with it. Fox begins hitting Gould and insulting him. Finally Fox tells him that if he wants someone to take charge, he will. He tells Gould they have a meeting, and asks Gould if he can fix himself up. Gould says no, and repeats that he is going to greenlight the radiation book.

Fox says that he sees what has happened, and is going to explain it to Gould. A beautiful and ambitious woman has come to town. Why? The same reason everyone else does, for power. Men get it through work, women though sex. How does Fox know? Because she's not out with Albert Schweitzer working in the jungle, she's in movieland. She has traded the one thing she has, her looks, for a position in authority,

through Gould. Nobody likes to be promoted, but that's what happened to Gould. She lured him in. She knew what would happen when he asked her to read the script and go to his house. It's why she was there.

Fox goes on to describe how Karen got to Gould: how lonely he must be, how hard the world is, how no one understands him. But she understands him. Gould says she *does* understand him. Fox responds that that's *first-rate.* Gould repeats that she understands him, and that she knows what he suffers. Fox mocks Gould and calls him a *whore.* Gould may want sympathy, but he won't get any. Fox says that, speaking frankly, Karen just took Gould to town. Gould replies that she came to him. Fox asks why he thinks she came to him. Does he think he's that good looking? She *wants* something from him. Gould is nothing to her but what he can *do* for her.

Gould asks Fox what he thinks Karen wants from him. Fox says she wants him to greenlight the radiation book. Gould asks why. Fox replies because Gould is Head of Production. What else? Hearth and home? Love? Children? No, she wants him to greenlight some bizarre idea. Gould replies it's not a bizarre idea. Fox challenges Gould to tell the idea of the movie to him in one sentence, because that's what they need to put it in "TV Guide." He challenges Gould to tell him the story. Gould tries, but makes little sense.

Fox picks up the book and reads a section out loud. He mocks what he's read, and says he wouldn't believe it if it were true. He asks Gould what's happened to him, has he let his sex drive run the office? Gould tells Fox to get out.

Gould reminds Fox that he is his superior. He says he's made his decision, and is sorry it hurt Fox. Fox replies that it ruined his life. Again Gould says he's sorry. Fox asks how sorry he is. He wants to ask just one question of Karen, and then he'll go. Gould says it won't make him change his mind, but he agrees. Fox gets on the intercom and asks Karen to come in.

When Karen comes in, Fox asks where Cathy, the regular secretary is. Then he tells Karen he has just one question for her, and then he'll leave her alone. Fox relates what he understands what happened between Karen and Gould. At one point, she says that she and Gould talked about making a film that would make a difference. Fox says he's not going to ask her what gives her the insight to know what will make a good film. He also says he won't ask her what brought her to this job. When Fox says that he understands that Karen and Gould became intimate, she says he should leave. He tells her that she's at the Big Table now, and Gould will say what's what. She admits they became lovers.

Fox asks if Karen went to Gould's house to get him to greenlight the radiation book. She says yes. Fox asks that if Gould had said "No," would she have gone to bed with him. She says she doesn't want to answer the question. Gould says he wants to know the answer. Finally, she says she would not have.

Gould says that he is lost. Karen begins to plead with him, reminding him of the things they had discussed. Fox tells her he knows who Gould is, but who is she?

Gould says he doesn't know what to do. Fox tells him that he knows the right thing to do. Karen tells Gould that he reached out to her. Fox mocks her, saying that Gould didn't reach out to her; he had sex with her on a bet. Gould tells everyone to be quiet, to stop taking a piece of him for a moment. Both Fox and Karen try to get Gould's attention. Then Karen tells Gould they have a meeting. Fox says he rests his case. Karen asks if she said something wrong. Fox tells her no, that they have a meeting, and he thanks her. Then Fox calls Ross' office, finds out that Ross is in, and leaves a message that he and Gould will be just a few minutes late.

Gould says he has to change his shirt. Karen says she doesn't understand. Gould tells her he's busy, and that Fox will show her out. She tries reading from the book, but what she reads means nothing. Gould leaves her to go to the washroom. Karen says she thinks she's being punished for her wickedness. Fox agrees, and then tells her she's stupid, because she made her move on something that would never be made into a movie. She says she doesn't belong there, and Fox says he'll help her out. If she ever comes onto the studio lot again, he'll have her killed. She exits, and Fox throws the book after her.

Gould comes back in. He tells Fox he only wanted to do something good. Fox says he knows. Gould says he wanted to do good, but he became foolish. Fox says that he learned a lesson. He adds but we're not here to *mope*. He asks Gould what they were put on earth to do. Gould says: "We're here to make a movie." Fox asks whose name will go above the title. Gould replies that it will be Fox and Gould. Fox replies: "Then how bad can life be?"

Act 3 Analysis

Act 3 opens in Gould's office the next morning, starting off with ironic humor. Fox enters and says he hardly slept the night before. Although he doesn't say anything about it, it seems likely Gould did not get much sleep either, but for a different reason. Fox says he was thinking about all the money they were going to make on the Doug Brown film, and projects in the future. Fox's observation that if he made the radiation movie he'd spend the rest of his life in a packing crate echoes Gould's comments to Karen about why "The Bridge" would not make a good movie. He says he read the coverage on it, and mocks the story. Then, just as Karen had the night before, Fox confesses some of his faults to Gould. This eventually leads him to asking about the bet.

When Fox asks Gould if he really owes him five hundred dollars, Mamet moves the play into its crisis. Gould's response, not admitting one way or the other about sleeping with Karen, but stating that he's not going to recommend the Doug Brown film to Ross, shows that he has betrayed his coworker for a sexual relationship. Betrayal of friendship is a major theme in Mamet's works. Often in his plays the betrayal is for money, but here it is for sex and power.

Fox tries to show Gould why the idea is a bad one. He makes no secret that he feels betrayed, but he also shows Gould that he is hurting himself. Despite the betrayal, Fox still acts as a friend. He also keeps his own interests in mind, but he is not entirely driven by self-interest. Gould tries to explain that his values have changed, and taken at face value, he seems idealistic. But Fox points out the truth: Gould is paying millions for sleeping with a woman. They argue, and then Fox begins slapping Gould. This kind of sudden, unexpected violence is also typical of Mamet.

The playwright's cynical view of Hollywood and the business world in general is reflected in Fox's statement that both men and women want power. Men get it through work, women through sex. Showing real insight, Fox outlines what has happened. Karen used her sexual attraction to gain access to Gould's studio power. She knew exactly what would happen when Gould asked her to come to his house, and she planned for it.

As this confrontation progresses, it becomes steadily clearer that although Gould has more authority, Fox has more understanding of the industry and human nature than his boss. This is shown even more when Fox calls Karen into the office and, like an attorney or a detective with a suspect, exposes her real motives and methods. This also reflects Mamet's fascination with cops and criminals (he is perhaps best known to moviegoers for his screenplay of the hit film "The Untouchables"). Gould is confused and rambling, but slowly realizes how he has been used. As this happens, his attitude toward Karen becomes suspicious, then cold and dismissive. He finally leaves her for Fox to deal with as he goes to clean himself up.

Karen is also transformed by this crisis. When she first comes into the office she seems confident, but under Fox's interrogation she becomes less and less sure of herself, and more like she had been the day before. Her attempts at sounding moral and insightful seem silly. Fox cuts deep when she claims that Gould "reached out to her" and Fox corrects her, saying that the producer had sex with her on a bet. Under Fox's relentless questioning she finally admits she only slept with Gould because he agreed to greenlight the radiation movie. When Gould leaves the room, Fox again shows his insight by pointing out to her that she made a mistake when she based her gambit on a bad movie idea.

After Karen leaves, Fox and Gould reconcile and set off to for the meeting to get the Doug Brown movie greenlighted. They are reunited by their loyalty, and their mutual love of making money. This, too, is a common theme in Mamet's plays.

The ongoing references to God lead to the final irony. Karen had tried to convince Gould that he was called to help people draw closer together. Gould says that God put them (he and Fox) on earth to make movies that make money. Karen's seeming innocence and idealism masked a desire for power. Fox, and in the end, Gould's simple desire to make a profit was at least honest.

Characters

Charlie Fox

Fox is a movie producer who is about forty years of age. As his surname suggests, Fox is a sly, wily character who is above nothing if it means career advancement. He is a man looking for his big break; when he finds it in the form of a possible deal with film star Doug Brown, he fights viciously to keep it. Fox brings the deal to Bobby Gould, a long time friend and business associate. Charlie has a one-day option on the Brown picture and urges Gould to act upon it. When the executive agrees to take the project to his boss, Fox is pleased and believes his fortune is made when Gould assures him a co-producer credit.

As a competitive aside, Fox bets Gould that he cannot get his temporary secretary, Karen, to sleep with him. Fox is chagrined the next day, when Gould tells him that he has decided to produce an adaptation of a book that Karen liked instead of the Brown picture. To ensure his project gets made, Fox literally beats up Gould and verbally assaults him, arguing that Karen was using him. Gould realizes the folly of trying to do something different or artistic in Hollywood. In the end the executive agrees to the safer course of action, and the aggressive Fox gets his movie deal.

Bobby Gould

Bobby is a movie executive, around forty-years-old, and the most central character of the play. Before the action begins, he has just been given a promotion to head of production at a major movie studio. Gould seems to value loyalty. When Charlie Fox drops in and tells him that a big movie star, Doug Brown, has come to him wanting to do a movie deal, Gould immediately arranges a meeting with his boss to get approval on the deal. Fox and Gould also make a bet over whether or not Gould can get his new assistant, Karen, to sleep with him. To that end, the executive gives a her a book for "courtesy read" (essentially a review copy of a book sent to movie studios by the publishers in the hopes of having an adaptation made) and invites her over to his home to report. She finds something of value in it, and convinces him to pursue a film adaptation of the meaningful book instead of the movie with Doug Brown.

The next morning, when Fox arrives for the meeting, Gould has won the bet and tries to get rid of Fox. After Fox berates Gould, physically beating the executive and proving that Karen slept with him only because he decided to go with the book, Gould realizes that the Doug Brown picture is the better, safer choice. By the end of the play, Gould takes Fox to the meeting instead of Karen, for he is unwilling to take chances.

Karen

Karen is a young woman in her twenties. She is working as a temporary secretary in Gould's office. Because she is a temp, she does not know where the coffeemaker is nor the right way to make a lunch reservation for Gould. Karen believes in values and principles. She is also naive about the movie business, at least in the other characters' eyes, because she thinks films should be good. Still, when given an opportunity, she takes it. Gould lets her do a courtesy read on a book and give him a report at his home. Karen's enthusiasm for the book touches something in Gould, and she convinces him to pursue it as his next project over the Brown picture. Afterwards, Karen admits she slept with Gould only because he greenlighted (approved production of) the book, and the men are convinced that Karen was only using Gould to further her own ambitions.

In contrast to the cutthroat business tactics of Gould and Fox, Karen is the voice of art and reason in the play. While she may have had ulterior motives for sleeping with Gould, it is clear that she believes in high quality and artistry in motion pictures. While it is obvious that Gould and Fox do what they do to serve their own careers and make as much money as possible, Karen's motives are less clear. She may simply be a corporate climber, but there is also evidence to suggest that her motives are in the service of improving the films made by Hollywood.

Themes

Friendship and Loyalty

The two main characters in *Speed-the-Plow,* Bobby Gould, the new head of production at a major motion picture studio, and Charlie Fox, a producer, have been friends for over twenty years. This friendship is at the center of the play, and their loyalty to each other makes it turn. Gould and Fox began their careers together in the mailroom at a studio and have remained loyal to each other over the years. When Fox unexpectedly gets the twenty-four-hour option to the next Doug Brown movie, Fox takes the project to his old friend Gould. Fox emphasizes that he could have taken the project "across the street," i.e. to another studio, but his loyalty and friendship compelled him to see Gould first. Gould seizes the opportunity, though his boss will be unavailable until the next morning.

The Gould-Fox friendship then undergoes a test of loyalty. Karen, the temporary secretary, is good-looking, and Fox bets Gould $500 that he cannot get her into bed. To accomplish this end, Gould has Karen do a reader's report on a novel and visit his home later to discuss her work. Karen does so, and convinces Gould that he would be doing "good" to make the novel into a movie rather than the Doug Brown project. The next morning, when Fox comes back for their meeting with the studio head, he is appalled to find that Gould has forsaken his loyalty and will go with Karen's project instead of the prison film.

Fox proceeds to do everything he can to make Gould act like a loyal friend and do his project instead. Fox only accomplishes his goal when he proves Karen is not what she seems, using her own words against her. Fox shows that Karen is using Gould to get ahead in Hollywood, while Fox's motivations are more pure. He has their best interests at heart, and wants to share success with his loyal friend. Fox argues, and Gould ends up agreeing, that they have more at stake with each other and that Karen is an outsider and a whore. *Speed-the-Plow* argues that Friendship between men is more important than a relationship□no matter what the motivation□with a woman like Karen.

Ethics, Honesty, and Idealism

Each of the characters in *Speed-the-Plow* has his or her own ethical standards. These ethics create conflicts between the characters. Charlie Fox is the simplest character ethically. He has no qualms about calling himself a "whore." He wants to be successful at any cost and works only for the money, the power, and the prestige. He sees Bobby Gould as his ticket to that end. He is not idealistic about the movie industry in the least. He accepts that movies are a commodity and does not pretend otherwise.

Bobby Gould is much more conflicted and complex. Like Fox, he also admits to being a "whore" and knows that movies are a commodity. He sees the opportunity in the Doug

Brown picture, no matter that the plot is a list of movie cliches. But Gould has some latent idealism. When he and Fox discuss how much money they will make off this project, it is Gould who points out that money is not everything. Much of Bobby's idealism is brought out by Karen. Gould tells her that he wants to do "good" films and that he wants to make a difference. To that end, Gould decides to greenlight the novel, which Karen believes is deeply meaningful, instead of the Doug Brown picture. Though Fox convinces him to do the Brown project by the end of the play, Gould has shown that he has deeper thoughts and motivations.

Karen, the temporary secretary, appears to be the least honest and ethical character. When she is introduced in Scene 1, she appears to be naive and idealistic. She thinks films should be "good" and be meaningful for their audience. Gould gives her an opportunity to do the courtesy read on a novel, and she finds deep meaning in it. She convinces him to do the novel instead of the Doug Brown project. But Fox, quick to spot his own kind, reveals Karen's true nature. Karen wants to be a part of the Hollywood dealmaking process. Karen admits she slept with Gould only because he agreed to do the novel. Karen also says that she read the script for the Doug Brown project and that is was not very good. This is suspect for a woman who claimed to know nothing about the movie-making world. At a key moment, Karen reminds Gould that "Bob, we have a meeeting." The "we" shows Gould that Karen has forced herself into the process and has been less than honest about her intentions. What Karen really believes, beyond her own self-service, is never made clear.

Style

Setting

Speed-the-Plow is a drama set in contemporary times. Though it is not explicitly stated, the play probably takes place in Los Angeles, the movie industry capital of the world, at a major studio. The action is focused in two settings. Scenes 1 and 3 take place in Bobby Gould's new office. Because he has just been promoted to the head of production, the office is sparsely furnished with "boxes and painting materials all around," as the stage directions indicate. The brief Scene 2, where Gould and Karen meet to discuss her report on the novel, is set in Gould's home. It can be speculated that everything takes place in Gould's spaces because he is the man who ultimately makes the decisions. Charlie Fox and Karen are at his mercy, and they must try to influence him on his turf.

Karen nearly succeeds in getting her project off the ground because she is invited into Gould's private life. Fox uses the fact that this is a business deal□and the fact that Karen used sex to further her own ambitions□to his advantage in Scene 3. The office is where business is done, not at home. The spare sets also put Mamet's rapid-fire, though ultimately simple, dialogue at the forefront of *Speed-the-Plow*.

Foreshadowing

Several times in *Speed-the-Plow,* Mamet plays with lines that foreshadow future events in the play. However, the predicted events do not always work out exactly as intended. For example, Gould says that he "don't fuck people" in Scene 1, yet that is exactly what he does. Though it seems he will betray Fox and not get the Doug Brown picture made as he promised, Gould ends up backing out of his promise to greenlight Karen's novel. The novel itself is at the center of another example of foreshadowing. In Scene 1, Fox picks up the novel, *The Bridge,* and says in jest "Why don't you do it? *Make* it." A few lines later he suggests "Instead of our Doug, Doug Brown's *Buddy* film." Gould agrees with him, also in jest, saying "Yeah. Icould do that."

By the end of Scene 2, however, Karen has actually convinced Gould to do this very thing. In the beginning of Scene 3, Fox repeats this idea, with a clause attached, not knowing what Gould has decided. Fox says, "I were you, I'd do the film on Radiation. That's the project I would do; and then spend the rest of my life in a packing crate." Though Fox eventually convinces Gould not to do the novel, this kind of ironic foreshadowing adds texture to the play.

Dialogue

As a playwright, Mamet is often praised by critics for his realistic dialogue. Mamet writes dialogue in a way that reflects how people really talk to each other. Words overlap,

people interrupt each other, and sentences are often short and complete with pauses. In *Speed-the-Plow,* Mamet's language choices reflect his subject matter. Charlie Fox and Bobby Gould use Hollywood cliches (the buddy picture, for example) and other lingo (greenlighting a picture), to set the tone. Sometimes characters hide behind these cliches. For example, when Karen serves coffee to Fox and Gould, they use more Hollywoodspeak to emphasize their positions of power within the business to the self-described naive woman.

Historical Context

Like much of the 1980s, American society in 1988 was consumed with the ideas of success and image, the bigger the better. By 1988, there were 1.3 million millionaires living in the United States. This number included 50 billionaires. (By comparison, when adjusting for inflation, there were only 180,000 millionaires in the United States in 1972.) Because of an economy that saw vast growth during the 1970s, at least on the upper end of the economic scale, many people wanted to display their newfound wealth with high-end status items. Both Bobby Gould and Charlie Fox in *Speed-the-Plow* discuss how much money they will make off their deal and what it will get them. During this discussion, Gould says, "We're going to have to hire someone just to figure out the *things* we want to buy." Such greed was typical of the media-enforced images of wealth and success in the 1980s. Television shows celebrated the wealthy lifestyle. One popular televison show, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,* showed how celebrities and other rich people spent their money and lived their lives. Pop singer/actress/cultural icon Madonna, who played Karen in the original Broadway production of *Speed-the-Plow,* was a master at manipulating the media and toying with her image while making a big profit.

The attitude that bigger is better spilled over into the arts and mass media. On Broadway, large-scale musicals featured more elaborate sets and large casts. In the publishing world, there were many bidding wars for new novels. Neophyte authors received unheard-of advances on their work. Some of the most popular novels of the era were about the noveau riche and their hedonistic lifestyle. Authors like Jackie Collins, Judith Krantz, and Sidney Sheldon sold millions of books that celebrated the glitzy lifestyle.

Similarly, the film industry in the 1980s was concerned with big budgets and even bigger profits. The term "blockbuster movie" was defined by 1980s films like *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Batman*. Movies began being marketed and hyped by product tie-ins (such as action figures and soundtracks) released several months before the film itself hit the marketplace. But many of these movies put style and profit before substance. Gould chooses to greenlight the empty Doug Brown movie because it will profitable instead of the "arty" and unknown quantity contained in the novel. Still only a privileged few had enough power to get their movie projects made. Power was consolidated in a few hands, usually producers and studio heads. Mamet depicts Gould as being one of the powerful men in Hollywood whom Fox needs to get his Doug Brown project off the ground.

Hollywood, like many other aspects of society especially in the cultural milieu, was still very male-dominated. Though there were several prominent female film producers, such as Dawn Steel, and many prominent actresses with some clout, Meryl Streep for example, women had a hard time breaking into the industry. At the end of *Speed-the-Plow,* Fox throws Karen out of the studio. She has no place there in his eyes. The burgeoning feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s lost its way in the 1980s.

Though women made some progress in the workplace, their successes were seen as individual triumphs rather than collective steps forward.

Critical Overview

When *Speed-the-Plow* was first produced on Broadway in 1988, the casting of Madonna in the role of Karen was debated in the press more than the merits of the play itself. Many critics found the play up to Mamet's high standards. William A. Henry III, reviewing the play in *Time,* wrote, "Of all American playwrights, Mamet, 40, remains the shrewdest observer of the evil that men do unto each other in the name of buddyhood." Not all critics were impressed, however. In *New York,* John Simon stated: "The plot is minimal, barely sufficient to poke fun at Hollywood and show some derision for human nature." Simon also added, "And when you reduce it to its essentials, it is really only variations on a basic bitter joke."

Mamet's use of language is often singled out for praise, and *Speed-the-Plow* is no exception. Robert Brustein in the *New Republic* argued, "His ear for language has never been more certain or more subtle, but what distinguishes him from other playwrights with a natural control of the American idiom (Paddy Chayefsky, for example) is the economical way he can advance his plot, develop his characters, and tell his jokes without departing from, or announcing, his strong social-moral purpose. " *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll added, "there's hardly a line in it that isn't somehow insanely funny or scarily insane."

Many critics compared *Speed-the-Plow* to other male-oriented business plays written by Mamet, including 1984's *Glengarry Glen Ross* and 1975's *American Buffalo. Speed-the-Plow* was often considered the inferior of the three. Brustein paid a back-handed compliment when he wrote, *"Speed-the-Plow* is the deftest and funniest of Mamet's works, and the airiest too, since the characters are playing for relatively low stakes. In *American Buffalo, Edmond,and Glengarry Glen Ross, men are fighting for their very existence. In Speed-the-Plow they are skirmishing over movie deals and percentages of the gross." Moira Hudson in the Nation agreed, saying " Speed-the-Plow says nothing about Hollywood that hasn't already been said many times before, but Mamet manages through his language and timing to breathe life into old cliches. Glengarry Glen Ross a few seasons back was better."*

Despite flaws, critics generally agree that Mamet writes challenging texts for actors. The *Nation's* Hudson claimed, "Mamet is an actor's playwright, creating a language which is less simply overheard and recorded whole-cloth then boiled down, crafted and reassembled to create an intense, hyperrealistic theatrical experience." Nearly every critic found the original Broadway production performances of Joe Mantegna as Bobby Gould and Ron Silver as Charlie Fox flawless. Simon in *New York* said that the actors "play off each other dizzingly and dazzingly as they flesh out□or, rather, sound out□ the potential of the script, which depends almost indecently on the skill of its interpreters."

More controversial was the role of Karen and the woman who played her in that original production, the popstar Madonna. Many critics debated if the character of Karen was well-written to begin with. Hudson stated in the *Nation* that "Madonna's line readings are less deft than Mantegna's (or Silver's).... Still, she isn't all bad□or if she is, it's hard to

tell: The part she's been given is by far the least convincing of the three.... It is difficult to believe that someone as naive as Karen would actually be working in the movie business, and its just as difficult to believe someone like Bobby would be so easily swayed by her, despite her undeniable attractions."

Some critics thought Madonna's performance had merit. Time's Henry wrote: "Madonna's awkward, indecisive characterization seems calculated to ... sustain suspense by keeping the audience from reaching conclusions. Thus the question 'Can she act?' cannot be answered. The shrewdness in her performance is clear, but so, alas, is her thinking process: she lacks ease and naturalness." Kroll in *Newsweek* added, "She doesn't yet have the vocal horsepower, the sparks, and cylinders to drive Mamet's syncopated dialogue. But she has the seductive ambiguity that makes Karen the play's catalytic force.... Who better than Madonna□ Virgin, Material Girl□to give embodiment to the conundrum at the heart of David Mamet's scathingly comic play?"

Other critics were much less kind. The *New Republic's* Brustein acknowledged Madonna's importance as a pop star, but wrote, "Her performance is becomingly unshowy, but her modesty subdues her. .. . [She] gives a new dimension to the meaning of the word 'flat'." He concluded, "Her celebrity was bound to attract the wrong kind of attention to the play." John Simon in *New York* argued that "she is more of a temporary hindrance whenever she is on."

In September 1988, when the entire original cast left the production, several critics found the new cast, which included a professional actress in the role of Karen, inferior in their interpretation of the play. Frank Rich in the *New York Times* wrote, "the deep, shudder-inducing chill of the original production is gone." Rich went on to comment on Felicity Huffman, who took over the role of Karen. He wrote, "Mrs. Huffman's skillful performance is in most details similar to Madonna's ... yet less effective.... Madonna's awkardness and, yes, star presence, added essential elements of mystery and eroticism to a character who doesn't reveal her true, shocking hand (and power over powerful men) until late in the play." Simon, who had earlier dismissed Madonna's performance, said, "though each of the trio is good, and Felicity Huffman surely better than Madonna, the work suffers."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Petrusso discusses the complicated role of Karen in Speed-the-Plow, *particularly the manner in which she exemplifies the problematic nature of female characters in Mamet's plays.*

Many critics have noted that David Mamet does not write strong female characters. Indeed, many of his best plays, including *American Buffalo* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Glengarry Glen Ross,* do not feature women at all. One critic, the *Nation*' s Moira Hudson, writing on the original New York production of *Speed-the-Plow*, observed: "Mamet's parts for women have never been the equal of his parts for men: Women in his plays always seem to function more as plot elements, as sources of complications than as rounded, living characters." Many reviewers of the play have agreed that the character of Karen works in this fashion but are divided over the merits of drawing her as such. Critics such as Hudson find Karen unbelievable while others believe that the assistant's enigmatic nature is very powerful. By looking at Karen and her role within the play, it becomes obvious that both arguments have merit. Ultimately, though, Karen is a weak caricature of a woman. Mamet condemns Karen for her ambitions, while the two male characters□who have far more suspicious values (though more power)□are allowed to flourish in their rapacious environment.

Karen is by far the smallest role in *Speed-the-Plow;* this is brought into greater relief given the fact that the play is a three-character piece. Most of the text concerns the wheeling and dealing between Charlie Fox and Bobby Gould, the veteran Hollywood hustlers. Gould is the new head of production at a major movie studio; Fox is a producer with a twenty- four-hour option on a movie deal with a big, bankable star. Karen is merely the temporary secretary, filling in for Gould's usual assistant who is ill. Karen is not very competent in her position. Even before she is seen on stage in Scene 1, Gould is shown talking with her on the phone, helping her find the coffee machine.

The men also reduce Karen's character by commenting on her appearance. Fox says "Cute broad, the new broad." They only consider her in the most superficial manner. When she does finally bring them coffee, the Fox and Gould talk about how they are "old whores" and their long-standing friendship. They also discuss how powerful they are and will be when the movie deal is made. In many ways the discussion is a verbal display of their importance in front of Karen. It both puts her in her position as a lesser and works to impress her, like two male peacocks flouting their plumage during a mating ritual.

Gould and Fox continue to toy with Karen. Gould tells her she can go home after serving them coffee, canceling all his appointments, and making lunch reservations. After she leaves to do these tasks, Fox immediately begins to needle Gould about Karen. Gould decides to make a $500 bet with Fox "That I can get her on a date, that I can get her to my house, that I can screw her." After Fox leaves, Karen's incompetence brings her back into Gould's office. Karen could not get reservations at the restaurant Gould wanted. Karen quickly realizes her mistake: she did not mention Gould's name

when she was making the reservation. This reveals a problematic error in the persona Karen has chosen to present to Gould. First, how does one make a reservation without giving the name of the party who will using it? Second, it implies that Karen is somehow deeper because she might be hiding something. That is, she deliberately made the mistake so as to hide her true nature, that of a career-conscious, ambitious woman.

At this juncture, Karen begins to repeatedly call herself naive when talking to Gould, perhaps consciously reinforcing her status as a lesser to the man. This gives her some unexpected power, as Gould begin to believes that she is a green, helpless girl. There is no reason to believe otherwise. Karen services his ego by telling him that this job is allowing her to think in a business fashion. She politely listens to him describe some aspects of the business to her. While Gould is using this opportunity to win his bet, Karen is learning good deal about how business in Hollywood is accomplished. Gould looks at Karen only as an object when he offers her the opportunity to give a reader's report on a novel about radiation and the end of the world□even though the book has been deemed inappropriate for a film; he is using the "assignment " as an excuse to get her over to his house.

In the brief second scene (in Gould's apartment), Karen is the dominate force as she describes the book to Gould. Karen's appraisal of the novel does not make much sense, though she says it left her feeling "empowered" (a telling adjective regarding her rising status). She talks about how much the book touched her, but the dialogue as written by Mamet reveals little of who Karen really is. The scene illustrates her ambitions when Gould offers to help her get a job at the studio, and Karen says that she wants to work on the film adaptation of the novel. Karen continues to sound□in her own words□naive. She tells Gould "it would be so important to me, to be there. To help. If you could just help me with that. And, seriously, I'll get coffee, I don't care." Gould is slightly taken aback, but Karen continues to press the issue. Like Fox, she sees her opportunity and aggressively pursues it.

A key revelation occurs in Scene 2 when Karen reveals that she has read the script that Fox wants to use for his Doug Brown project. Someone as unaware of Hollywood practices□as Karen claims to be□would have no idea how to get her hands on such a script. Fox did not bring the script into the office, so Karen obviously found out about the Fox project and procured the script through means of her own. Not only does this illustrate the depth of her wiles, it indicates that her work assignment to Gould was no random act. In having Karen disclose a knowledge of the script, Mamet hints at the considerable calculation that has gone into Karen's association with Gould: it becomes clear that she sought out the temporary assistant position with the express purpose of getting her foot in the door.

Karen also knows how to play the sex card. She tells Gould, "I knew what the deal was. I know you wanted to sleep with me. You're right, I came anyway; you're right." Karen proceeds to turn the tables on Gould, trying to reinforce their status as equals. She describes them both as people who need companionship and love. She says they have both been bad. She tells him that she is the answer to his prayers. And based on the

discussions between Gould and Fox at the beginning of Scene 3, she appears to have succeeded.

The next morning, when Scene 3 takes place, Gould has decided to go with Karen's project instead of Fox's. Fox is appalled and immediately blames Karen, though he has no direct reason to believe it has anything to do with her. When Fox finds out it is because of her, he emphasizes their friendship and how Karen is an outsider. Fox asks at one point, "What is she, a witch?" Later, Fox says, "A beautiful and ambitious woman comes to town. Why? Why does *anyone* come here? Everyone wants power. How do we get it? Work. How do they get it? Sex. The End. She's different. Nobody's different. The broad wants power she trades on the one thing she's got, her *looks,* get into a position of authority□through you. She *lured* you in." Fox emphasizes Karen's difference, the fact that she is a woman and therefore cannot "work" to get success, to try to persuade Gould to change his mind.

Fox spends most of the scene cutting down Karen, her ambitions, and her project. He wants Gould to see her as a user rather than a savior. To salvage his project, Fox asks one question of Karen. Fox forces Karen to admit that she would not have become intimate with Gould if he had not agreed to make the radiation novel into a film. Gould cannot believe it. He says, "Oh, God, now I'm lost." Fox knows he has a leg up, and when Karen tries to save herself by saying "Bob. Bob, we have the opportunity," Fox goes in for the kill. The "we" is important here. It implies that Karen and Gould are linked, to the exclusion of Fox. Fox breaks that down when he says, "I know who he is, who are *you?* Some broad from the Temporary Pool. A Tight pussy wrapped around Ambition. That's who *you* are, Pal." Again, Fox focus on Karen's sex to bring her down. Gould is still uncertain, however, about his decision, and Karen and Fox say anything to get him to go their respective ways. But when Karen says, "Bob, we have a meeting," the issue is decided for him. Karen is only interested in getting her film made. The men regroup and go to the meeting together, effectively killing Karen's deal in favor of Fox's film. Fox tells Karen to leave the studio and never come back again.

Hudson's observation was correct: Karen is the plot complication in *Speed-the-Plow*. She is the source of jeopardy in terms of the "right" script being made, and she forces the other characters, primarily Gould, to question their values. Karen is not a fully drawn, realistic character but an excuse for the other characters to show off their maleness and power. Karen talks about values but in a superficial, manipulative fashion□despite hints that she may have altruistic intentions for her film. Any values she does have (idealism, for example) are condemned by Mamet. By having Karen sleep with Gould to get ahead, Mamet reinforces the idea that this is the only way for a woman to be successful in the business environment. The idea of her starting out in the mailroom, as Gould and Fox did, is never even considered□she wants to enter the business at the top. Thus, Karen is a series of contradictions that seem designed to make her enigmatic, but these contradictions serve the plot, not the character herself. Her potential to be anything more is never realized by Mamet.

Source: A. Petrusso, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Proclaiming that "nobody in theater today has a better ear for the language of American business than David Mamet, "Hodgson goes on to praise the realism, energy, and vitality of Speed-the-Plow.

Nobody in theater today has a better ear for the language of American business than David Mamet. Relentlessly on the make, his characters are not captains of industry but con men on the fringes of society, trying to batter down the doors of the bank with the only weapon at their disposal□their heads. Sometimes they succeed and fill their pockets, and sometimes they just give themselves colossal headaches. Without exception though, their language is vulgar and funny and charges the air with explosive energy.

In *Speed-the-Plow,* Mamet's latest play, directed by Gregory Mosher at the Royale Theatre, the subject is Hollywood. Bobby (Joe Mantegna) and Charlie (Ron Silver) have been friends for twenty years, ever since they started out together in a corporate mail room. Now Bobby is head of production at a major studio and Charlie is a producer who comes to him with a twenty-four-hour option on a "prison buddy" story starring (or directed by, it's not clear) the immensely bankable "Doug Brown." Bobby, snowed under a deskful of boring manuscripts □ including one about radiation and the end of the world by an "Eastern sissy writer"□ is delirious at the prospect. "Is there such a thing as a good film that loses money?" he asks rhetorically. "That's what we are in business to do□to make the thing that everyone saw last year!" The only problem is that Ross the Boss, whose approval Bobby needs to green-light a picture over $10 million, is flying to New York City on the company jet and won't be available until 10 o'clock the next morning. This is cutting Charlie's twenty-four-hour option a bit fine.

Mantegna and Silver, draped in off-white suits that look tailored by Bijan of Beverly Hills, are both excellent as two cynical hustlers about to hit the jackpot. (Mantegna's character, the one holding down a regular job, wears his suit with sneakers, no tie and no socks.) "It's lonely at the top," says Bobby ironically. "Yeah," agrees Charlie, "but it ain't crowded." Mamet captures the vernacular perfectly, littering the play with industry expressions and his signature repetitive phrases. It has often been observed that Mamet is a poor-man's Pinter, and it is true that the staccato exchanges are easy to mimic and at times threaten to turn cloying. But the two main actors' line readings are deft and point up the fact that Mamet is an actor's playwright, creating a language which is less simply overheard and recorded whole-cloth than boiled down, crafted and reassembled to create an intense, hyperrealistic theatrical experience. This, after all, is what art is all about.

That being said, the play is far from perfect. Its flaws center chiefly on its third character, Bobby's temporary secretary (played by Madonna). Karen is a semi-naïf who can't find the coffee machine and doesn't even know how to drop her boss's name when booking him a table at a fashionable restaurant. As the first act closes, Charlie says, "She's neither dumb enough or ambitious enough," and bets Bobby $500 she'll never go to bed

with him. Accepting this challenge, Bobby shows Karen the sissy-writer's radiation novel; he asks her to give it a "courtesy read" and to file a report on it at his house later that evening.

The brief second scene takes place in Bobby's living room, sparsely furnished with pink curtains, a Turkish rug on the sofa and a Mexican chest which opens into a bar. Karen appeals to Bobby's vestigial noble instincts and convinces him that the movie he should pitch to Ross the Boss is not the exploitative prison buddy picture but the radiation picture. The fact that this scene drags terribly and that Madonna's line readings are less deft than Mantegna's (or Silver's) has something to do with her talent as a stage actress. Still, she isn' t all that bad□or if she is, it's hard to tell: The part she's been given is by far the least convincing of the three. Mamet's parts for women have never been the equal of his parts for men: Women in his plays always seem to function more as plot elements, as sources of complication rather than as rounded, living characters. It is difficult to believe that someone as naïve as Karen would actually be working in the movie business, and it's just as difficult to believe that someone like Bobby would be so easily swayed by her, despite her undeniable attractions. (It is also difficult to watch Karen and not keep remembering it's actually Madonna.)

With the second act, and the return of Ron Silver, things go into high gear. When Charlie learns be is about to be screwed out of the chance of a lifetime, that his option on Doug Brown will expire through no fault of his own, his despair and desperation become palpable and even highly moving. All at once his beard grows unkempt and his natty suit seems to wrinkle up as if he's slept in it. Realizing he has only five or ten minutes to salvage his chances, he becomes a caged animal, lashing out with every argument at his disposal. When Bobby says he's going to green-light the radiation book because he believes in it, Charlie replies, "I believe in the Yellow Pages, Bob, but I don't want to film it." He asks Bobby to tell him what the novel is actually about, and when Bobby hesitates, he says, "If you can't put it to me in one sentence they can't put it in *TV Guide*. " Our sympathies go out to him because he is totally vulnerable, a two-bit hustler who knows it and isn't afraid to face himself. The prison buddy film is garbage, but what matters above all is loyalty and friendship. Bobby has broken his word.

Speed-the-Plow says nothing about Hollywood that hasn't already been said many times before, but Mamet manages through his language and timing to breathe life into old clichés. *Glengarry Glen Ross* a few seasons back was better, but there is likely to be little else on Broadway this season with his new play's energy.

Source: Moira Hodgson, review of *Speed-the-Plow* in the *Nation,* Vol. 246, no. 24, June 18, 1988, pp. 874-75.

Critical Essay #3

In this essay, Weales reviews Speed-the-Plow, *comparing it to Mamet's other works. While he found the play mean-spirited and often ugly, the critic admits his appreciation for the playwright's facility with dialogue.*

In Thomas Morton's *Speed the Plough* (1800), the most famous character is Mrs. Grundy, whose name became a synonym for British respectability, and she never appears at all. In David Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow,* the most pervasive character is also offstage: the American movie audience. As in Morton' s play, where characters are constantly guessing what Mrs. Grundy would think, Mamet's Hollywood hacks, who have their commercial credibility rather than their reputations to lose, assume that they know what will bring the moviegoers to the boxoffice: what brought them there last week. Their low estimate of the public is confirmed by the weekly listing of movie grosses; in the most recent *Friday the Thirteenth* topped . Anyone for *Rambo III?*

Mamet's up-from-the-mailroom dealers are rough diamonds□zircons, at least□who know each other so well that they can overlap one another's speeches, communicate in reiterated platitudes decorated with sometimes elegant obscenity. Bobby Gould (Joe Mantegna) has just become head of production at what we are to accept as a major studio and Charlie Fox (Ron Silver), who comes to him on his first day in power, has snagged a bankable star for a buddy movie he is trying to peddle. They agree to join forces, go onward and upward with the sellable schlock, but the path of true greed never runs smooth. Enter the woman, for that is the way it is with buddy movies and has been at least since *Gunga Din. Speed-the-Plow* is a Mamet variation on the buddy movie. His best plays *(American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross)* are set in male enclaves, and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* follows the buddy formula in its story. So does *Speed-the-Plow*. After the requisite feminine interruption, the two men go off together to face the studio head□ like Flagg and Quirt hurrying to the front in *What Price Glory?*□and the woman is tossed aside.

If there is a difficulty in *Speed-the-Plow,* it lies with the woman in the case. It is not, as some reviewers have insisted, because Madonna is playing Karen. Her performance is not as flashily free as those of Mategna and Silver, but she does a creditable job with a character who□unlike Bobby and Charlie□is never clearly defined. At first she seems to be the dumb secretary stereotype, too dense to find the coffee machine, but at this stage she may be only a reflection of Bobby's attitude toward women. He accepts Charlie's bet that the he cannot seduce her. In her big scene in Act II, having read and presumably been won over by the book on nuclear destruction that Bobby asked her to give "a courtesy read," she persuades him to present it to the studio head rather than the buddy script. She does so not by arguments, but by sleeping with him. In the last act, she has a new authority, a taste of power that leads her to the plural pronoun ("we have a meeting"), but if she were just another ambitious broad, as Charlie insists, she would not answer his direct question as she does, admitting that she only went to bed with Bobby to get the film made. That revelation frees Bobby, of his flirtation with art and social conscience and sends him back to his true calling as a junk merchant.

It is possible that Mamet intends Karen as an innocent for whom the true heart of Hollywood is as elusive as the coffee machine□just the person to be taken in by the "Eastern wimp" author's pretentious book. It sounds like the kind of work which fondles the annihilation of the world while it whimpers its dessicated whisper of hope. There is a marvelous moment in which Karen tries to use the book to resnare Bobby after he allies himself again with Charlie. She reads a ponderous paragraph and then, faced with defeat, insists that that is not the passage she has in mind and keeps flipping the pages hopelessly. Mamet seems to be using the book and Karen's naive embrace of it as a matter for satire, but there is a problem there too. Reviewers tended to describe the book as an "anti-radiation" novel, but it is called *Radiation* and, from what we hear of the argument, the author is using *radiation* and Mamet uses *decay* and *decadence* in his essays in *Writing in Restaurants,* as a necessary destructive stage to revitalization. Mamet's theory of decadence seems to me fair game for the satirist, but I am not sure that he is Bernard Shaw enough to guy his own ideas for the sake of the play.

Whether Karen's projected movie is a joke or a serious option for Hollywood or a comic suggestion that serious options are possible, it is rejected. Greed and vulgarity triumph. Yet Mamet has more in mind than a ritual chiding of Hollywood venality. In a group interview in the *New York Times* (May 16), Madonna called the play a metaphor: "it's not just about Hollywood. It's about life." Silver modified her metaphor by suggesting that this was still another of Mamet's examinations of American business: "You show me one person in business who decides to do something that's good if the sacrifice is their quarterly statement." The Mamet point of view is clear enough, but the play's successful borrowing of the buddy plot muddies the social theme. Bobby and Charlie are a reprehensible pair (each would sacrifice the other for an edge up), but Mategna and Silver give them so much energy, so much *chutzpah,* so much tacky charm that we find ourselves roofing for Bobby's return to chicanery. Maybe that is the point. Maybe the target is not Hollywood, not American business, but the audience itself.

Source: Gerald Weales, "Rough Diamonds" in *Commonweal,*Vol. CXV, no. 12, June 17, 1988, p. 371.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history behind the phrase "speed the plow." How is the phrase's meaning related to the themes of Mamet's play?

Compare and contrast *Speed-the-Plow* with Mamet's two other "business" plays, *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross.* What do these plays say about male relationships/friendships?

Compare and contrast *Speed-the-Plow's* Karen to Carol, the young female student in Mamet's *Oleanna*. Both claim to be naive young women, yet both are dishonest about themselves. Explore the psychological implications.

Explore the idea of "the culture of success," a predominant cultural force in the United States in the 1980s, especially in Hollywood. How does this cultural concept affect the actions of each of the characters in the play?

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What Do I Read Next?

Glengarry Glen Ross, a play that Mamet wrote in 1977, is a drama which also concerns men and their relationships in the business world. The play shows the lengths men will go to achieve success.

The Last Tycoon, an unfinished novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald and first published in 1941, explores Hollywood and relationships formed within the industry.

The Last Mogul: Lew Wasserman, a biography written by Dennis MacDougal, discusses the life of a Hollywood executive. The book includes insights into Hollywood business relationships.

Circus of Ambition: The Culture of Wealth and Power in the Eighties, a nonfiction book by John Taylor published in 1998, is a collection of essays discussing the rich and the culture of success, including Hollywood.

Oleanna, a play by David Mamet first produced in 1992, is a drama which concerns Carol, a young female university student who, like Karen in Speed-the-Plow, is also an enigma. The play focuses on a sexual harassment charge she brings against a male professor.

Further Study

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

This book discusses the role of language in Mamet's plays.

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

This biographical article gives a sweeping synopsis of Mamet's life and work.

London, Todd. "Mamet vs. Mamet: He's Playwright, Director, Theorist□and His Own Worst Enemy" in *American Theatre,* July-August, 1996, p. 18.

This article discusses Mamet's extraordinary use of language in his plays and contrasts this aspect of his work with his persona as director of his own plays.

Mamet, David. *The Cabin: Reminiscence and Diversions,* Random House, 1992.

This book contains a series of autobiographical essays.

Staples, Brent. "Mamet's House of Word Games" in the *New York Times,* May 29, 1988, pp. B1, B24.

This article discusses Mamet's extraordinary ear for language and how it affects dialogue in his plays.

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Henry, William A. III. "Madonna Comes to Broadway" in *Time*, May 16, 1988, pp. 98-99.

Hodgson, Moira. Review of *Speed-the-Plow* in the *Nation,* June 18, 1988, pp. 874-75.

Kroll, Jack. "The Terrors of Tinseltown" in *Newsweek*, in May 16, 1988, pp. 82-83.

Mamet, David. *Speed-the-Plow,* Grove Press, 1987.

Rich, Frank. "'Plow' and 'Butterfly': New Leads, New Light" in the *New York Times,* September 23, 1988, p. C3.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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