Chapter III
The Triumph of Truth

The Whole Governing the Universe

To lie is human; to prevail over the Lie, divine. The transcendent power of Truth is a vision rooted in Mamet’s religious faith that God is the Truth of the universe—the Whole that rules over Nature and humans alike. In a lecture delivered at the Harvard University in 1988 Mamet expresses his view of the Divine Will governing the (human) universe in accordance with the laws of “natural selection”: “All professions, achievements, impulses are thrown up to compete, to strive, to an end which is not chance, but is the effect of some Universal Will. [. . .] It is in the interests of the Whole [. . .] that some are driven to pursue the arts, that some are driven to pursue power, or wealth, or solitude, or death” (Some Freaks 5). The human need to live in harmony with the Whole, and the consequences of a life cut off from God’s moral laws, informs Mamet’s artistic vision. Postmodern humans who have denied God, Mamet’s plays suggest, drift in self-blindness in a world of lies that ultimately lead them to moral chaos and psychic disintegration. Their inner harmony depends on how they commit themselves to Truth to reject the lies that confront them. The “classically structured” plays selected for scrutiny in this chapter dramatically demonstrate how the protagonists prevail over the Lie with their spiritual will and make themselves whole.

Failure of the American Dream

Mamet’s business plays present an apocalyptic vision of America as a nation that has been disjointed and crumbling down. The American Dream that
held forth the view of a vast country where the ideals of democracy, freedom and progress would reign supreme, a land that would offer every earnest hardworker the opportunity to change from rags to riches in no time, has collapsed. In a nation where greed and self-interest blind the citizens to any larger social interests, ethics and human relationships have undergone abysmal degradation. The Speaker in Mamet’s *The Water Engine* (1977) expresses the failure of the Dream thus: “What happened to this nation? Or did it ever exist? [. . .] With Equality, Liberty ... In the west they plow under wheat. Where is America? I say it does not exist. And I say that it never existed. It was all but a myth. A great dream of avarice. . . . The dream of a Gentleman Farmer” (64).

The obsessive pecuniary concerns of a wealth-centred, commercial and consumerist society have eroded all moral and spiritual values and have unleashed aggressive instincts.

A fierce, blind will to succeed in cut-throat competitions at all costs drives the corporate world, be they the barons of big business or the workforce that serves their interests. It is a predatory world in which nothing is sacred, and in which the only doctrine piously and fanatically translated into action is “the survival of the fittest.” The power play of bigoted groups seeking vengeance on their erstwhile oppressors, justifying the “natural” forces of social Darwinism that seek to substitute one domination for another, only aggravates the rampant violence that robs the possibilities of peace on either side. The human spirit, as an image of God, and with values such as love, righteousness, truth, compassion, mercy and justice inherent in its nature, must naturally struggle for its survival in such a spiritual wasteland. It is these death-throes of the human soul that drive Mamet's dramatic actions. The crying spiritual need of contemporary American society, Mamet’s plays suggest
through their subtexts, is the reestablishment of the human soul’s organic connections with the Cosmos through the regeneration of faith in the living God. It is also suggested that the remedy for the psychic maladies lies in one’s spiritual will to truth.

**Protagonist-Centred Plots**

This chapter analyses five classically structured plays of Mamet—*American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *Oleanna*, and *The Cryptogram*—to demonstrate how Mamet’s metaphysical vision of the Whole blends with his dramatic structure to fulfil his artistic purpose—to inspire ethical action in the audience. The plays are constructed in accordance with the Aristotelian principle of the single protagonist governing the whole plot. As the playwright says in his interview with John Lahr:

> That is what drama is. It’s not about theme, it’s not about ideas, it’s not about setting, but what the protagonist wants. What gives rise to the drama, what is the precipitating event, and how, at the end of the play, do we see that event culminated? Do we see the protagonist’s wishes fulfilled or absolutely frustrated? That’s the structure of drama. You break it down into three acts. (qtd. in Lahr, “David Mamet” 55)

All drama, Mamet says in *3 Uses of the Knife*, falls into a pattern of threefold organic relationships: “Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; act one, two, three” (73). The progression of the action is dialectical: the protagonist wants something (thesis); someone or something interferes with his wish and upsets it
(antithesis); the protagonist gets his wish fulfilled or absolutely frustrated (synthesis). This pattern can be discerned in the five plays examined here.

Once the antithetical element that upsets the hero’s plan is identified, the denouement or catastrophe that ends the play can be understood in all its importance. In two of the plays the antithesis that unbalances an existing relationship is an outsider—an external agent who is outside of the interpersonal sphere of two people: in American Buffalo it is Teach, who disrupts the harmonious relationship between Don Dubrow and Bob; in Speed-the-Plow it is Karen, Bobby Gould’s temporary secretary. In the other three plays the unbalancing element belongs to the same sphere to which the protagonist belongs. In Glengarry Glen Ross, though the play belongs to a different genre which Mamet calls a “gang comedy,” the aggressive competitive spirit generated by Mitch and Murray temporarily upsets the camaraderie that prevails among salesmen. In Oleanna the professor’s own student vengefully ruins her teacher’s prospect of obtaining his tenure and settling in his profession. In The Cryptogram the parents of the ten-year old protagonist upset him psychologically—the father by leaving the family, the mother by flirting with her husband’s friend and being callous to the boy’s suffering.

**Final Emergence of Truth**

If such are the exposition and the complication, how does the drama arrive at its denouement? How are the opposing forces of thesis and antithesis resolved into a synthesis? The moments of synthesis are the most significant in Mamet's drama. They demonstrate how, to use a phrase from Speed-the-Plow, things are “made round” when the Truth comes out, inevitably, defying all
attempts to conceal it or deny it. Mamet explicates his vision of the “whole” in his *3 Uses of the Knife*:

[The Drama] is done when the hidden is revealed and we are made whole, for we remember—we remember when the world was upset. We remember the introduction of That New Thing [the power that causes the conflict] that unbalanced a world we previously thought to be functioning well. We remember the increasingly vigorous efforts of the hero or heroine (who stands only for ourselves) to rediscover the truth and restore us (the audience) to rest. [. . .] At the End of the Play, [. . .] when we were all but powerless, all was made whole. It was made whole when the truth came out. (80)

Truth must come out, either through the protagonist’s self-knowledge of his own failings or through the acknowledgement of some wrong done. Truth in drama, analogous to God in human life, is the agent that directs all things to their resolutions. Drama is made whole when the truth that has been concealed or denied is revealed or acknowledged at the end; humans are made whole when the God they have denied—the Truth of the universe they have discarded—is restored to their souls. Only the restoration of organic connections with the Cosmos and God can make humans whole and give them peace. In this sense the structure of classical tragedy conforms to Mamet's metaphysical vision. Adopting a structure that causally connects events, Mamet's plays present the false gods that possess the contemporary American psyche—Mammon, success, fame, progress, information explosion and so on—and thus underscore the need to commit oneself to Truth, the attribute of God and of the human soul. The progression from Lie to Truth, in Mamet's
plays, is inevitable, for Truth is a metaphysical principle that always breaks through lies and emerges triumphantly.

The plot in the classically structured plays is not concerned with humans’ attempts to make sense of an absurd and ennui-ridden existence as in most of the episodic plays. On the other hand, it dramatizes the progress of the protagonist who, with his initial moral position temporarily jolted by the Lie that confronts it, ultimately triumphs over it. The final moment is characterized by an anagnorisis or recognition which is the principal character’s discovery or acknowledgment of some fact that leads to the resolution of the plot. Greek tragedy invariably shows how the protagonist, at the end of the drama, feels powerless in the face of Destiny as he arrives at the final truth about his own actions.

To cite a few instances. In Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex the hero, after all his frenetic attempts to find out the polluter of Thebes, ultimately discovers that his own Destiny-driven actions have caused the plague in his kingdom; in Euripides’ Hippolytus, when King Theseus feels relieved that he has righteously killed his son Hippolytus for loving his step-mother Phaedra, Artemis, the Goddess of Chastity, reveals to him the truth that Hippolytus is innocent and that it is Phaedra who is guilty. In Heracles, another tragedy by Euripides, the hero kills his wife and his children in a demented state that has been caused by Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus. Tie comes to his senses and regrets what he has done, but still feels that the gods who have led him to act madly may have a higher purpose unknowable to mortals. In this recognition of the inscrutable nature of the universe, and in his acknowledgement of his incapacity to penetrate the cosmic mysteries, Heracles gains his peace.
Mamet's urban characters are light years away from the classical protagonists in their socio-cultural milieus and in their vision of the universe and attitude to God, yet the lesson they learn about these ultimate realities is similar in spirit. The lesson is that man is not as omnipotent as he presumes himself to be in his self-blindness. His hubris is always quelled by powers that transcend his own. Mamet affirms in an essay titled “Liberty” that whoever arrogates to himself the attributes of God will undergo transformation “from arrogance to humility in the twinkling of an eye” (Some Freaks 104). For the dramatist, the significant moments of tragedy are those in which the protagonist gains self-knowledge when “his state is transformed from King to Beggar—like Oedipus Rex, like Lear, like any nation that has grown old” (Some Freaks 105).

Similar moments are discernible in Mamet's classically structured plays—every protagonist gains some sort of self-knowledge at the end—but the arena of conflict changes. The protagonists are pitted, not against the gods or the hidden realities of the universe, but against the societal forces that challenge their integrity and innate goodness and seek to destroy them. In American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross and Speed-the-Plow—Mamet's plays on American business which Ruby Cohn designates as the “Business Trilogy” (“Phrasal Energies” 50)—Mamet presents his protagonists as conflicting with the Lie of the business ethic. They depict American corporate business as driven by the unethical principles of self-interest, chicanery, venality and betrayal. In each play the Lie seeks to wreak havoc on the immaculate spirit of man, only to be defeated by the invincible power of Truth at the end.
American Buffalo

Indictment of Business Ethic

American Buffalo (1975), Mamet's first full-length play to earn him recognition as a most promising American playwright, is a powerful indictment of the American capitalist system that is treated as synonymous with sophisticated larceny. By presenting three low-life characters who speak the language of big business throughout their plan for a robbery, Mamet brings out the nexus between the principles that govern corporate business and downright criminality. Mamet frankly voiced this connection in his interview with Richard Gottlieb in 1978:

> The play is about the American ethic of business. About how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business . . . . There’s really no difference between the lumpenproletariol and stockbrokers or corporate lawyers who are the lackeys of business . . . . Part of the American myth is that a difference exists, that at a certain point vicious behavior becomes laudable, (qtd. in Gottlieb 275)

The Plot

American Buffalo, with its slender plot presenting three marginal low-life characters, allegorizes the unqualified self-interest and dishonesty that govern corporate business. Don Dubrow, the owner of a junkshop in Chicago, feels he has been cheated in a recent deal in which a coin-collector has bought a five-cent “buffalo” coin from his shop for ninety dollars. Don presumes the nickel coin is worth five times more than the bargained money and plans with Bob, his ex-junkie disciple, to rob the man’s coin-collection when he sets off
from his apartment for a weekend travel. Teach, a thief and associate of Don, learns about their plan and, claiming to be the right person for the job, gets Bob eliminated from their partnership. However, Don finds Teach too inept for the business and includes Fletcher, a man of action, to accomplish it. In the late evening Fletcher, mugged by robbers and admitted in a hospital, fails to meet his partners at the scheduled hour. Bob unexpectedly arrives at the junkshop with a buffalo coin to sell. The misinformation he gives about the name of the hospital in which Fletcher has been admitted makes Teach suspect that Bob has carried out some private deal with Fletcher and betrayed his “friends.” In high dudgeon, he hits Bob viciously and trashes Don’s shop. When Bob’s innocence is proved, Don regrets his unwarranted cruelty to his dear disciple, and reproaches Teach for the injury he has inflicted on the kid. Both take the bleeding Bob to hospital.

Critical Responses

Critical responses to American Buffalo from the early to the recent years reveal that recognition of its merits came, not unanimously, but by fits and starts. At the beginning the utmost critical attention was paid to the street language of the three characters—their scatology and blasphemy—even though the playwright’s unique ability to precisely capture the cadences of underclass speech was widely acknowledged and applauded. Several critics could see virtually nothing in this apparently plotless play filled with tedious dialogues. Walter Kerr wrote in New York Times: “Nothing at all happens . . . which is what finally but firmly kills it as a possible event in the theatre” (3). Brenden Gill’s first impressions of the play in 1977 were an instance of the misunderstanding which the play’s deceptive exterior could create (though he
rectified his views six years later). In the February 28, 1977 issue of *New Yorker*, Gill was highly critical of the play’s “street language attempting in vain to perform the office of eloquence,” and remarked further: “The playwright, having dared to ask for our attention, provides only the most meagre crumbs of nourishment for our minds” (54).

Even though the plotlessness, the fragmented and obscenity-ridden language of the characters and the sense of nothingness that characterize the play’s exterior caught the utmost attention of the critics of the play and bewildered them at the beginning, positive critical responses were not lacking. Peter James Ventimiglia observed in *Journal of American Culture* the moral underpinnings of the play: “If Mamet's play is about acquisitiveness and greed, it is also about the human bond of friendship and its triumph over these influences” (203). In their article in *Modern Drama* June Schlueter and Elizabeth Forsyth commented on the bleak vision of “America as junkshop” projected in the play:

> The junkshop, with its piles of once treasured, now rejected cultural artifacts, proves to be a powerful image for an America in which the business ethic has so infiltrated the national consciousness and language that traditional human values have become buried under current values of power and greed,” (499).

C. W. E. Bigsby observed that *American Buffalo* is “a savage satire on the collapse of American values, on the process whereby American liberal principles have been accommodated to a rapacious self-interest. It enacts the disintegration of community and the failure equally of language and morality” (*Critical Introduction* 262). Mamet also acknowledged that the play was about the erosion of American consciousness which was leading the people “to
suspend [their] ethical sense and adopt in its stead a popular accepted mythology and use that to assuage [their] conscience . . (qtd. in Barnes, “Introduction” 441-42). The play’s central concern, however, is not merely to dramatize the degeneration of American ethics, for Mamet has reiterated that he is averse to a superficially realistic portrayal of social realities; as a believer in the Stoic and Judaic doctrine of action, his purpose is to present the potential man has for transcending his inner decadence by exercising his moral will. *American Buffalo* demonstrates, through the action of the protagonist, how humans can always take a firm moral stand, with their free will, in their social and interpersonal relations and find a way out of their moral predicaments.

**Protagonist-Centred Action**

Though the character of Teach has made *American Buffalo* an actor’s play, with veteran actors like Robert Duvall and Al Pacino playing the role and engaging the audience in rapt attention, Don Dubrow, the owner of the junkshop, is the real protagonist of the play. In *Broadway Theatre* Andrew B. Harris quotes Mamet’s acknowledgement that the play is about Don who is “tempted by the devil [Teach] into betraying all his principles” (101). The true meaning of the play lies in what Don makes of himself in the wake of his entanglement with the “devil.” Don’s paternalistic “lessons” to his gopher Bob in the beginning constitute the “exposition” of the action. Mamet depicts the healthy human relationship between the two with great care and providing numerous details. Bob regrets that he has foiled to keep watch on his mark, the coin collector whose house Don plans to burglarize. At this, Don takes it upon himself to initiate him into the world of “business,” telling his disciple that in this world “Action talks and bullshit walks” (4). The ideal man of action for
Don is Fletcher, their mutual friend who exhibits amazing skill at card games. And skill is not something one is born with but one develops through self-training: “Everything. Bobby: it’s going to happen to you, it’s not going to happen to you, the important thing is can you deal with it, and can you learn from it. [. . .] That’s all business is . . . commonsense, experience, and talent” (6). As Bob wonders if it was “talent” that Fletcher once stole their friend Ruthie’s pig-iron, Don justifies the deed as “business.” “That’s what business is [. . .] People taking care of themselves” (7). It is not good business, Don goes on, to mix up business and friendship, which must be kept separate from each other. Don complements this initiation into the strict “principles” of business with his transcendent principles of friendship—through his action.

A Compassionate Mentor

If business is people taking care of themselves, friendship is taking care of others and of each other. In a world where people would “do anything” to get the things they desire, Don keenly feels the absence of true friendship: “You don’t have friends this life” (8). His concern for Bob’s well-being transcends all his business interests. He is anxious that Bob is neglecting his health by drinking too much coffee and skipping his meals. If Bob cannot afford expensive nutritious food, Don is only too willing to get him some. His kind, repeated instructions to Bob to buy something to eat at the Riverside restaurant reveal the strong bond of a genuine friendship. Bob, answering Don’s questions mostly in monosyllabic utterances, is typical of the aphasic, inarticulate youth who, despite his intellectual debilities, can still strive to fulfil his master’s expectations of him. He is too obtuse to distinguish between eating and drinking and too forgetful to bring coffee with Don and Teach’s breakfast
later, and even to bring his own breakfast (8). But these vulnerabilities hardly weaken their mentor-protege relationship. Only a business thought can temporarily corrupt it, Imbibing the principles of business, Bob lies to his mentor to pretend that he is a man of action and to get closer into his favour. It is this lie—that Bob saw the coin collector leave his house with a suitcase for an apparent out-of-town travel—that sets off the whole action of the play.

**Teach: the Lie**

Though the plan to steal is the deal that binds Don and Bob, there are still remnants of humanity left in the shopowner’s benevolence toward his dullard assistant. Teach, on the other hand, is the embodiment of the business ethic that has debased the contemporary American psyche. The anarchy in his psyche is in direct proportion to the anarchy of the language through which he reveals his fears, mistrust, inadequacies, insecurities, loneliness, and frustration. Wrenched syntax, ellipses, contradictions, non-sequiturs, erratic grammar, incomplete sentences, repetitions, and the plethora of obscenities with which his speech is loaded—all bring out the chaos in his inner being. He has a hilarious exterior with all his megalomaniacal pretensions to generosity and omniscience; beneath it, however, is a formidable being that demands the audience’s serious attention.

Considered in terms of the corporate world, Teach represents the extremely self-centred entrepreneur who cannot tolerate any rival in his deals and who would sacrifice any human value to ensure the achievement of his goal. His money-centred mind cannot conceive of anything except in terms of business. Loyalty is a value to him only as it relates to his own business deal, and if it is a value in the larger sphere of human relationships, it should always be
subordinated to serve the exigencies of business interests. This is the “philosophy” of business that governs all his speeches in the play.

On his first entrance Teach is seen fretting and fuming at the condescending attitude exhibited by Ruthie earlier at the Riverside restaurant. While it reveals his sensitivity to insults, it is essentially a business sensitivity that cannot tolerate the ingratitude of Ruthie who forgets all his generous offers to her in the past. At the heart of his fulmination is the thought that the treatment Ruthie gives him in return is the opposite of what he has given her:

Only, and I’m not, I Don’t think, casting anything on anyone: from the mouth of a Southern bulldyke asshole ingrate of a vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come. [. . .] I have always treated everybody more than fair, and never gone around complaining. [. . .] No, I’m sorry, Don. I cannot brush this off. They treat me like an asshole, they are an asshole. [. . .] The only way to teach these people is to kill them. (10-11)

Teach’s grudge against Ruthie’s friendship with Grace is that they form a partnership to cheat others while playing cards. In his view friendship is good, but it should not turn into a partnership that tends to destroy the “business” prospects of others. “Friendship is friendship, and a wonderful thing, and I’m all for it. I have said different [. . .] Okay. But let’s just keep it separate huh, let’s keep the two apart, and may be we can deal with each other like some human beings” (15). Teach’s words are starkly ironical because, himself quite incapable of separating friendship and business, he seeks to separate his own friends to serve the sole interest of his own business—that is, theft. In Teach’s narrow vision of life people can only live as partners in business; friendship is valuable only insofar as it is an element in partnership.
The “Devil’s Temptation”

Since the motor force that drives business is self-interest, according to Teach, success in business invariably necessitates removal of rivals. When Teach learns about Don’s plans to burglarize the coin collector’s apartment with his disciple’s assistance, he starts to question the junkie’s ability to cope with the task, and poses himself as the right partner in the “business.” As he did earlier, he once again harps on the need to keep loyalty and business apart. Since he cannot snap the tie between Don and Bob so easily, he slyly starts with an appreciation of the loyalty that binds the two. He gradually brings round Don to feel the need for putting business above personal loyalty, and ends up insinuating about the possibility of the protege betraying his mentor in business:

This loyalty. This is swell. It turns my heart the things that you do for the kid. [. . .] All that I’m saying, don’t confuse business with pleasure, . . . I’m sorry. [. . .] you take care of him, fine. (Now this is loyalty.) But Bobby’s got his own best interests, too. And you cannot afford (and simply as a business proposition), you cannot afford to take the chance. (34)

Mamet aptly describes this business talk of Teach as the devil’s temptation. The devil and the successful businessman are akin in that they always persuade their hapless victim into believing that all their doings are in his best interest when, in truth, they do everything to achieve their own purposes. Teach temporarily succeeds in appealing to Don’s self-interest and getting Bob removed from the robbery plan. But it is not long before Don finds Teach’s competence questionable, despite the latter’s vacuous claims to know everything about the job, and decides to enlist Fletcher, their mutual friend who
has the “depth” to deal with the deal. Teach is hurt that Don does not trust him adequately. Don, however, is firm in his decision to have Fletcher with them, which leads the disgruntled Teach to ultimately compromise with the situation on account of the “division of labor” it facilitates: “You think it’s good business to call Fletcher in? To help us. [. . .] Well the okay. [. . .] A division of labor. [. . .] (Security. Muscle. Intelligence.) Huh? . . . This means, what a traditional split” (52). Act One closes with the decision of all the three to meet at Don’s Resale Shop at 11 p.m. to execute the robbery.

Act Two demonstrates how the all-consuming spirit of business turns all’—master, disciple and business partner—into liars. As Don is waiting for Teach and Fletcher at 11 p.m., Bob arrives unexpectedly, claiming falsely that he has “found” a buffalo nickel which he wants to sell for what it is “worth.” Obviously Don’s teachings to his protege has infected him, and the conversation between the two before Teach joins them shows how a business deal—selling Bob’s nickel—turns both master and disciple almost into strangers negotiating business. In sharp contrast to the cordial intimacy of the First Act, pure monetary concerns govern their dialogue, and either attempts to profit more and lose less in the new “deal.” Don, who believes that a buffalo nickel’s market value (by the coin collector’s example) is ninety dollars or more, hesitates to give the fifty dollars Bob wants for it. As Bob insists on knowing the coin’s worth before he gets the money from Don, the master is keen on sending him away by telling him that the worth can be known only by referring to the coin book. He cannot do that at the moment because he is waiting for Teach and Fletcher “to play cards.”

Teach, who arrives late because his “watch broke,” is surprised to find Bob there in that odd hour and to know about the new “buffalo nickel” deal.
Since Fletch has not joined them till then, Teach’s paranoiac mind begins to suspect that both Bob and Fletcher might have stolen coin collection themselves and betrayed them. Flis questions to Don after both of them have hustled off Bob reveal his suspicion, though Teach does not openly state it. As Don tries to find Fletcher’s whereabouts making phone calls, Teach sees the missing partner’s delay as an unwarranted restraint on their “free enterprise” and starts defining the term:

TEACFI. You know what is free enterprise?

DON. No. What?

TEACH. The freedom . . .

DON. , . . yeah?

TEACFI. Of the *Individual*. . .

DON. . . . yeah?

TEACFI. To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit

DON. Uh-huh . . .

TEACFI. In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit (72-3).

Since moral questions hardly govern “free enterprise,” in paranoiac distrust Teach even imagines that Fletcher could have broken into the apartment and got all the coins for himself. Don, never losing his poise, has to alleviate his doubts by telling him that Fletch does not know the target place at all.

**Erosion of Loyalty**

The progression of the play’s action at this point brings out the tense atmosphere of fear, insecurity and deepening suspicion that prevails in Don’s Resale Shop. The prolonged absence of Fletcher on the spot, and its possible
connection with Bob’s recent deal, evokes a sense of betrayal in Teach which Don too, as his loyal partner in the business, shares with him. This shift in loyalty is the precipitating event in the play, since it is the diabolic spirit of business that temporarily blinds the soul in him and turns him a silent spectator to the violence Teach perpetrates on his disciple. Teach gains the courage to ill-treat the “lying” Bob only after ensuring Don’s allegiance to him. His comments on Bob’s information about Fletcher, who has been mugged and admitted in a hospital with a broken jaw, are replete with sarcasm and disbelief. Reveling in the confidence that Don is on his side, he ridicules the ex-junkie’s pretensions to the facts about Fletcher:

Well, how about this, Don? Hlere Fletch is in Masonic Hospital a needle in his arm, huh? Flow about this? [. . .] Would you believe this I told you this this afternoon? [To Bob] Hey, thanks for coming here. You did real good in coming here. [. . .] We really owe you something.(88-89).

The ensuing dialogue exquisitely brings out the depth of Don’s present relationship with Teach and his allegiance to the devil in all his actions. When Bob naively asks what is the “something” he is likely to get, Don cuts in and answers: “He don’t know. He’s saying that he thinks we owe you something, but right now he can’t think what it is” (89). “We” in this context indicates the mutuality of their partnership in which one would implicitly acquiesce in everything that the other one does. Don’s psychic identification with the self-centred and crime-minded Teach explains his unsympathetic behavior toward his dear disciple at the climax of the play’s action. When both of them ask Bob about Fletcher, the junkie, in his characteristic mental obfuscation, cannot remember the name of the hospital in which Fletcher has been admitted. Teach,
pontificating with his assumptions of omniscience, can only interpret this as Bob’s persistence in lying. He wants to bring out the truth by beating up Bob, but he is wary of Don’s loyalty to Bob. Hence he uses the very word to keep Don from interfering in his violent action. “Then let’s make this clear: Loyalty does not mean shit, in a situation like this; I don’t know what you and them [Fletch, Ruthie and Grace] are up to, and I do not care, but only you come clean with us” (93). As Bob reiterates his inability to precisely name the hospital, in utter frustration and uncontrollable anger Teach grabs a nearby object and savagely beats him in the head. This situation, in which a benevolent soul is corrupted by a self-blinding business exigency and turns apathetic toward someone whom he loves, forms the climax of the play.

**Moral Awakening**

The denouement concerns how Don retrieves himself, through self-recognition, from his moral degeneration and anchors himself in his loyalty to his beloved gopher. The sight of the bleeding Bob brings alive the springs of sympathy and affection in Don. Though he justifies Teach’s violence saying “You brought it on yourself,” in a few seconds he is seen casting off his garb of business loyalty and coming out with his spontaneous self, taking pity on him: “Bob, [...] Now, we don’t want to hit you. [...] You know’, we didn’t want to do this to you. Bob. [...] We didn’t want to do this” (94-95). Teach, who cannot think of anything else but the present business and its failure, at once senses this transformation coming over Don, which is expressed in his parenthetical remark: “(Don’t back down on this, Don. Don’t back down on me, here).” But Don’s loyalty to Bob is too staunch to ally itself with Teach’s business principles. A phone message from Ruthie gives out the truth that
Fletcher is in Columbus Hospital, which clears all doubts in him about Bob’s innocence. Don realizes that he has done a great harm to the kid, and at once feels the need to take him to hospital, wiping out all thoughts of the business that had blinded him to his love for Bob.

In an interview for the New Theatre Quarterly (Feb. 1988) Mamet considered the moment of Don’s self-recognition as of great importance. Of the inner change Don experiences in the play he said:

[B]ecause he abdicated a moral position for one moment in favour of someone’s momentary gain, he had let anarchy into his life and has come close to killing the thing he loves. And he realizes at the end of the play that he has made a huge mistake, that rather than his young ward needing lessons in being an excellent man, it is he himself who needs those lessons” (qtd. in Jones 21).

The dramatic action of American Buffalo is intended to lead to this moment of inner illumination, when the protagonist recognizes his true position in the face of the hostile forces working against him. This anagnorisis or “reversal in recognition” constitutes the moral vision of American Buffalo, Mamet's first “classically structured tragedy.”

**Rejection of the Lie**

There is a spiritual rebirth in Don as he firmly rejects the Lie (Teach’s business philosophy) that has attempted to enslave his total moral being: “You get out of here. [. . .] The stinking deals you come in here. [. . .] You stiff this one, you stiff that one . . . you come in here, you stick this poison in me . . . (hitting him) [. . .] You make life of garbage” (101). When Don has overthrown
the Lie, the lie that Bob confesses with genuine regret—that he had not really
spotted the coin collector leaving his house that morning—seems
inconsequential to him. In striking contrast to Don’s equanimity, Bob’s
confession evokes a sense of nihilism in Teach and drives him to trash Don’s
shop in extreme outrage and frustration:

The Whole Entire World.
There Is No Law.
There Is No Right and Wrong.
The World is Lies.
There Is No Friendship.
Every Fucking Thing.

Pause.
Every God-forsaken Thin’g.

[.................................]

We all live like the cavemen (103).

Governed absolutely by greed and self-interest, Teach cannot realize, as Don
does, that there are larger truths outside the world he represents. He cannot
realize that the World is Lies precisely because of the degenerate business ethic
he espouses. It is the ethic which, with the survival of the fittest as its
governing principle and constantly attempting to eliminate rivals, discards all
laws, moral sense and honest human relationships—the values that constitute
the Truth of the human world.

Don Dubrow can swing back from the Lie to the Truth because his
instinct for spontaneous human relationships overcomes the monetary concerns
that blindfold him for a moment. This resilience of the human spirit enabling a
self-redemption from moral decadence is the spiritual vision Mamet
communicates to the play’s audience. As Perry Luckett
summarizes, “American Buffalo insists on the positive value of human relationships, which must supersede the predatory credo of American business” (1243).

**Glengarry Glen Ross**

**A Gang Comedy with Moral Underpinnings**

American business imaged as sophisticated robbery, with chicanery, venality and criminality as its hallmarks, is the leitmotif in another business play—*Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), Mamet's dramatic masterpiece that won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1984. Although the play does not present a single protagonist or a dialectical progression of action, it strictly belongs to the Mametian canon in its thematic concern—in its depiction of the ultimate overthrow of all lies by Truth. The same moral vision that drives the other business plays of Mamet governs this play too—the inevitable failure of lies. The play is about the predatory struggle of four real estate salesmen for their survival through a sales competition, yet the possibility of regarding all of them as a single character—the American Salesman—is not ruled out. Mamet has suggested in an interview with Esther Harriott that in “the gang drama or the gang comedy,” the type of drama to which the play belongs, several characters struggle together or with each other to achieve a single goal, their frenetic pursuit generally ending in a fiasco. Thus, in Mamet's conception, the “single protagonist” of *Glengarry Glen Ross* is presented as various aspects of the same character:

It’s a play about a group of people who are laboring in a given set of circumstances that affects them all, [and how it affects them all] in their interactions with each other. And what happens in
these plays is that the protagonist is split into a number of different aspects, just as it happens in a dream. The protagonist is not now one protagonist, but a bunch of different aspects in search of the same goal. (qtd. in Marriott, “Interview” 94)

In the light of Mamet's definition, *Glengarry Glen Ross* has an ostensibly loose structure that conceals its taut traditional structure. It presents four real estate salesmen striving to achieve a single purpose, which can be viewed as a single protagonist (The Salesman) engaged in a frenzied pursuit of his goal (the premium leads or the Big Sale). Complementing this “unity of action” are the unities of time and place, the action taking place within twenty four hours, and both venues of the action—the Chinese restaurant and the real estate office—thematical related to the salesmen’s single goal. Thus in this play Mamet clearly steers away from the episodic toward the organic structure. Stephen Brook describes it as an “impeccably constructed play [with] a marvellous gallery of prototypical salesmen” (“On the Line” 34). Frank Rich observed that “[a]s Mr. Mamet's command of dialogue has now reached his most dazzling pitch, so has his mastery of theatrical form” (“A Mamet Play” Cl7). This structural enhancement, however, only subserves the playwright’s primary artistic concern—to present his most realistic vision of the real-estate salesmen’s inner tragedy. The world of business that Mamet presented as a den of thieves in *American Buffalo*, and as a criminal enemy of progress in *The Water Engine*, returns in *Glengarry Glen Ross* as a cruel system that transforms its workforce into predatory competitors striking at each other for survival.
The Plot

Act One presents four real-estate salesmen—Shelly Levene, Dave Moss, George Aarownow and Richard Roma—engaged in business talk at different booths in a Chinese restaurant. Mitch and Murray, the proprietors of the real-estate firm, have announced a sales competition. The salesman who accomplishes the biggest sale and gets on top of the “board” (performance chart) will win a Cadillac; the second-prize winner will get a set of steak knives; the other two will lose their jobs. The deadline for the salesmen to prove their worth is the thirtieth of the month. The top man on the “board” will get the “premium leads” (the best prospective clients) and the rest will have to close their sales with the other leads distributed at random by the firm’s manager John Williamson. Shelly Levene, the erstwhile sales champion but lately down on his luck, attempts to bribe Williamson to get the premium leads for his survival, but cannot make the down payment demanded by the manager. Dave Moss and George Aarownow, two senior salesmen, are frustrated by the insecurity and anxiety they get as their reward from their employers. Deciding to “strike back,” Moss plans to steal the leads from the office and sell them to Jerry Graff, a sympathetic entrepreneur. Richard Roma, the outstanding salesman of the moment, adroitly closes a deal with a stranger, James Lyngk, and looks forward to winning the Cadillac.

When the Second Act opens, the real estate office has been burglarized and the leads have been stolen. Baylen, a detective, is investigating. Roma, who has closed the final sale to win the Cadillac, is completely upset. And so is Williamson, who is answerable to Mitch and Murray for the loss of the leads. Levene enters, exulting over the grand sale he has closed with the Nyborgs for 82,000 dollars and feeling like the supreme closer that he had been earlier.
Moss and Aarownow cannot stomach the humiliation brought upon them during Baylen’s investigation of the “suspects.” As Roma is praising Levene for his miraculous sale, James Lyngle arrives to cancel his contract and claim his cheque. Roma and Levene instantly enact a fiction to bamboozle Lyngk to prevent the cancellation, and at the same time are constrained to face Baylen’s investigation alternately. Finally, in a heated wrangle with Williamson for his insensible interference in the Roma-Lyngk crisis, the “big mouthed” Levene unwittingly reveals himself to be the thief. He has carried out Moss’s robbery plan and sold the leads to Jerry Graff, ’with Moss sharing half of the profit. Just before Levene’s arrest, Roma, knowing little about his colleague’s fate, offers to close Levene’s leads by taking half of the commission for himself.

Profane Language Conceals Inner Realities

The scatological vocabulary and the imagery of aggressive sex that fill the speeches of the salesmen throughout the play reveal the subhuman level of existence which, as sensitive humans, they are fated to resist. Their four-letter words reveal the agony and despair in which they are destined to carry on an insecure existence. Thus foul words gush out of Levene’s mouth when Williamson refuses to heed the salesman’s problems in selling worthless lands and ensuring his survival: “A deal kicks out ... I got to eat. Shit, Williamson, shit” (17). When the manager ignores Levene’s past achievements and takes into account only his recent sales, the salesman retorts:

“Lately kiss my ass lately. That isn’t how you build an org [. . .] You’re burning my ass, I can’t get a fucking lead, you think that was luck? My stats for those years? Bullshit . . . over that period of time . . . ? Bullshit. It wasn’t luck. It wasn’t luck. It was skill.
You want to throw that away, John . . .? You want to throw that away?” (18).

The same kind of profanity characterizes Levene’s tirade against Williamson when the latter, blind to the camaraderie and communality that binds the workforce, ruins Roma’s business prospect through his irresponsible interference: “No, fuck that, you just listen what I’m going to say: your partner depends on you. [. . .] a man who’s your ‘partner’ depends upon you. . . . You have to go with him and for him . . . or you’re shit, you’re shit, you can’t exist alone . . .” (98).

Moss also bewails, in scatological vocabulary, his fate of having to deal with insolent customers. Pollacks are “deadbeats” (28); and Indians are impossible people to sell: “Fucking Indians, George [. . .] A supercilious race. What’s this look on their face all the time? [. . .] Their broads all look like they just got fucked with a dead cat, I don’t know. [. . .] Christ . . .” (29-30). Most customers go back on a closed deal and “kill the goose” just when the salesman heaves a big sigh over closing it. The leads he gets from the office are worthless and hopeless: “We’re stuck with this lucking shit” (30).

Salesmen as Predators

Such pervasive profanity is not intended to be a faithful reproduction of the language of frustrated American salesmen. Glengarry Glen Ross is the kind of play that draws the audience’s attention to its inner realism more than its external realism. Its real theme is the plight of the human spirit brought about by the capitalist philosophy which, like its anthropological and psychological counterparts, alienates man from himself. The predatory features of capitalist enterprise which Mamet satirizes in Glengarry Glen Ross may be viewed as the
direct descendents of those embedded in the philosophies of Darwin and Freud.

In his book *The Sane Society* Erich Fromm insightfully brings out the close relationship among Capitalism, Darwinism and Freudianism:

Darwin gave expression [to the principle of competition and mutual hostility] in the sphere of biology with his theory of a competitive ‘struggle for survival.’ [. . .] Later, Freud under the influence of the same anthropological premises, was to claim it for the sphere of sexual desires. FI is basic concept is that of a “homo sexualis” as that of the economists was that of the “homo economicus.” Both the ‘economic’ man and the ‘sexual’ man are convenient fabrications whose alleged nature—isolated, asocial, greedy and competitive—makes Capitalism appear as the system which corresponds perfectly to human nature, and places it beyond the reach of criticism. (75)

The language of Mamet's salesmen is for the most part subhuman and aggressively sexual because their living conditions have drained them of their humaneness. Founded on the Darwinian premise of the “survival of the fittest,” capitalism has turned the workforce of nations into predators feeding on each other for their survival. Like Darwinism and Freudianism earlier, Capitalism rejects the soul in man. By overemphasizing environment and biological urges as the prime forces determining human nature, the anthropological view projected a one-sided view of man as merely a higher order animal devoid of any spirituality. Capitalism further narrowed down the view, making man a disposable consumer commodity among the material commodities churned out by the industries and among the corporate communities that administer these industries. Man, however, is a distinct being in nature who must transcend his
animal and material being in order to attain to his own being as a human. Happiness, harmony, love and freedom are his inherent spiritual needs. A man-oriented society should fulfil these needs, for as Eric Fromm says, they are “dynamic factors in the historical process which, if frustrated, tend to arouse psychic reactions, ultimately creating the very conditions suited to the original strivings” (78).

**Survival sans Ethics**

Glengarry Glen Ross dramatizes how the degenerate business ethic seldom allows room for the higher needs of humans and forces workers to fight for their basic material needs. Curiously, the salesmen in the play struggle for material needs graded at three levels: Levene the Machine is striving for a bare survival beyond the current month; Moss is a middle-order salesman who has transcended the need for survival and hence, while aiming higher, can weigh the pros and cons of different systems of work (represented by Mitch and Murray on the one hand, and Jerry Graff on the other) and decide upon the better one; Roma is the successful achiever who aims at the highest rewards from the existing system. Even though their needs are different, all the three salesmen act with an almost animalistic impulse of self-gratification and consequently, though unconsciously, toward mutual destruction. Mamet takes adequate care to present this impulse, not as “hereditary,” but as motivated and internalized in the salesmen by the seminal principles of “free enterprise”—avarice and the drive for power.

Mamet satirizes the capitalist self-interest in The Water Engine by making Lawrence Oberman, himself a self-centred lawyer, pose the question: “Who said that if every man just acted in his own best interests, this would be a
paradise on Earth?” (WE 43). In all his business plays Mamet directs this question at the capitalist system that desecrates all human ideals such as freedom and democracy by exploiting them to serve its ravenous self-interest. *Glengarry Glen Ross* reveals how this governing business principle, infiltrating into the workmen’s psyche, urges them to act dishonestly. Reviewing the film version of this play, Kevin Alexander Boon observed that while the characters’ actions in the play are “clearly unethical [. . .] the screenplay itself is not without ethics, inviting us to examine how a screenplay in which all characters are unethical manages to construct an ethical point of view” (Boon, “Dialogue” 51).

*Glengarry Glen Ross* presents America’s salesmen as the products of a self-serving entrepreneurial system. In the opening scene Shelly Levene, the veteran salesman now down on his luck, would go to any extent to obtain the premium leads from Williamson and resolve his survival crisis. Being at the lowest rung of the performance ladder, and his job for the next month at stake, he urges his younger manager to understand his problems in closing the deals. He struggles hard to convince Williamson of his value for the company’s growth in the past, but to the diehard manager past achievements mean nothing, and what counts is Levene’s present performance on the basis of which he has to “marshal” the leads. While turning a deaf ear to Levene’s tall claims, Williamson proves vulnerable to corruption. Never willing to give the premium leads on compassionate grounds, he agrees to give them for a twenty percent commission. He refuses to hand the hot leads to Levene because the latter does not have the one hundred dollars for “down payment.” This callous, inhuman treatment vexes Levene, and he avenges himself at the right moment by joining hands with Moss in burglarizing the real estate office.
Moss is another salesman who has taken lessons in self-interest from his capitalist mentors. In the Second Scene he tells Aarownow how he has been trained to act in absolute self-interest, regardless of the deceptions wrought upon the customers. He recalls his training as a novice in the profession:

I’ll tell you, you got, you know, you got . . . what did I learn as a kid on Western? Don’t sell a guy one car. Sell him five cars over fifteen years. [. . .] Guys come on: “Oh, the blah blah blah, I know what I’ll do: I’ll go in and rob everyone blind and go to Argentina cause nobody ever thought of this before.” (31-32)

Mamet brings out the inherent humanity of his salesmen as he makes them see how sales contests force the workforce to cheat the customers: “It’s not right. [. . .] And it’s not right to the customers ” (31). Their plight is that their lies to customers cannot be sustained for long. When the salesman believes he has conned the client and clinched the deal for good, the gull returns like a ghost from the dead with claims of withdrawal, reducing all his efforts to nothing. Adding to all these, uncertainties and insecurities is the paltry ten-percent commission he gets as his reward. Moss, who has imbibed the lessons inculcated in him by his mentors, turns them to serve his self-interest. If it is right to rob gullible customers of their savings, it is equally right to rob the real estate office. When the straightforward Aarownow shudders at the thought of robbery, Moss seeks Levene’s assistance to execute his plan.

The dramatic action in Glengarry Glen Ross progresses toward the truth that dishonest deeds only go up in smoke. In a marvellous "sales pitch" at the end of Act One, Roma, the salesman on top of the "board," attempts to push worthless tracts of “Glengarry Highlands” to Lyngk and almost closes his deal with the gullible client. But in Act Two the gull returns to rob the salesman of
his dreams. However much Roma and Levene attempt to hoodwink Lyngk further, ultimately both salesmen find out that their “skills” are powerless before Truth.

Levene too, who exults over having closed his grand deal with the Nyborgs, learns later that his “insane” clients have conned him by giving him a worthless cheque. His conquest of the leads in the burglarized office is transient, and all his efforts to conceal his complicity in the robbery go up in smoke through a reversal of intention. He thinks he has gained power over Williamson in the wake of his irresponsible reference to Lyngk’s cheque and starts hurling abuses at him, but betrays himself because of his big mouth.

The Ultimate Failure of Lies

In an overall perspective, the ultimate vision Glengarry Glen Ross presents, beyond the ethical vision of a demoralizing capitalist system, is the vulnerability and futility of human actions founded on lies. This vision is not very different from the philosophical vision at the end of Edmond: “You cannot control what you make of your life.” The final moments of Glengarry are a lesson in the power of Truth. Excluding the impeccably moral Aarownow, who is a man of conscience and who suffers from no delusions, the other three salesmen in the mad sales-race learn that their purposes are theirs but their ends none of their own. In the eyes of these salesmen, who are keen on ensuring success at any cost, there may or may not be a divinity that shapes human ends. But in Mamet’s spiritual vision there is a metaphysical power that always triumphs by directing all lies towards their inevitable end—in Truth. In American Buffalo the planned robbery, based on Bob’s lie, fails to come off; in The Water Engine the corporate barons cannot destroy the blueprint of the
engine though they destroy the inventor; in *Glengarry Glen Ross* the conmen are all gulled by the invulnerable universal power of Truth. Since it is Truth that always triumphs, in Mamet’s moral vision it becomes imperative for humans to conform and commit themselves to this universal principle.

**Salesmen: Not Monsters, but Sensitive Humans**

The question remains whether Mamet's salesmen, with all their lies, deceptions and villainous ways, deserve the audience’s sympathy. John Simon faults Mamet for the way “he revels in their brazen, agile crookedness,” and considers this attitude “immoral, reprehensible” (“Salesmen Go” 73). Simon would admit such immoral behavior “in a totally cynical work such as *Volpone*, where the victims are merely inept versions of the villains” but the salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross* who mercilessly cheat their innocent victims, are “monsters” (“Salesmen Go” 73). Such a view, however, hardly chimes with the playwright’s artistic intentions. Mamet does sympathize with his crooked salesmen, not revelling in their crookedness, but sharing the spiritual anguish of a pathetic people striving to succeed by foul means yet with all their inherent humanity. To call them “monsters” is to see only their chicanery at a superficial level and to strip them of their spiritual dimensions which Mamet brings into focus. In Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* both the villains and the gulls are “humorous” characters driven by their inherent human foible of cupidity. They are crooked and depraved by choice, and they have none to blame but themselves for their misfortunes. In *Glengarry Glen Ross* the salesmen are driven by the exigencies of an inescapable system of livelihood-competitive capitalism that holds out the myth of success and forces people to resort to all crooked ways to achieve it. As Henry I. Schvey has remarked,
The true villain of the play (and this accounts for its great success) is the *system*, not the tribe of hustlers who implement it by cheating others out of their hard-earned savings. [. . .]. In the tradition of the gang comedy which Mamet employs, the real conflict and confrontation is between “individuals and their environment much more than between individuals opposed to each other” (“Power Plays” 106).

Levene, Moss and Aarownow are all merely the agents of Mitch and Murray—capitalists who need a vast workforce to exploit the people’s dreams of happiness and a secure life in order to achieve their own dreams of fabulous wealth and global power. These salesmen achieve the stature of tragic protagonists as their inner spirit struggles to retain its innate goodness and resists the forces that make monsters of them.

For all their enforced depravity, Mamet’s salesmen are men of conscience who evince at least an occasional sympathy for their victims. It is a human quality not observable in Ben Jonson’s villains or Mamet's entrepreneurs. Both Levene and Roma wage an acidic war with their superior who is blind to the struggles of a profession that compels them to sell their souls for material gain. They curse and abuse Williamson as “shithead” because, without the least understanding of the plight of the workmen on the streets and only insisting on the rules of the company, he represents the gutter of a system in which they are destined to rot as subhuman beings. Aarownow is an idealized salesman who keeps his mind undefiled even in such a dehumanizing system. As Mamet says of this character: “Aarownow has some degree of conscience, some awareness; he’s troubled. Corruption troubles him. The question he’s troubled by is whether his inability to succeed in the society
in which he is placed is a defect [. . .] or a positive attitude. So Aarownow is left between these two things and he’s incapable of choosing” (qtd. in Roudane, “Interview”). The other salesmen too are quite human in their longing for the universal needs of happiness, compassion, harmony and freedom which the corrupt Williamsons deny them. In a “world of clock-watchers, bureaucrats and officeholders” who hardly respect their strenuous labour or their dignity as human beings, they intensely feel themselves to be, as Roma tells Levene, “the members of a dying breed [of men]” who need to “stick together” (105).

Thus Glengarry Glen Ross is a strong plea for the world’s workforce to be treated with the dignity and the compassion they deserve. The salesmen are predatory in their sales practices, but their essential humanity consists in their consciousness of their spiritual reduction which they resist through their fiery, aggressive language. Mamet’s great achievement in his play is that he has delineated his salesmen in the capitalist jungle not as monsters but as sentient and sensitive humans. Aarownow’s anguished utterance at the end—“Oh, God, I hate this job”—points out the peak of the salesman’s sensitivity.

**Speed-the-Plow**

**Dialectic Progression towards Synthesis**

*Speed-the-Plow*, the third play in Mamet’s Business Trilogy, closely resembles *American Buffalo* in respect of the dialectic progression of its dramatic action. After the slight generic deviation into melodrama in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, it resumes the strictly classical structure that characterizes the earlier business play. Critics who fail to notice the architectural patterns in Mamet’s plays only consider their superficial features and ignore the author’s deeper moral and spiritual concerns. Jonathan Lieberson, for instance, in his
review of *Speed-the-Plow* in *New York Times Review of Books*, remarks that “Mamet’s are actors’ plays, opportunities for spectacular performances, while not always conveying much of interest in themselves,” and as for this particular play, it is “a disappointment, at moments startling to watch yet morally unchallenging, even insipid” (3). He observes further that the profanity of Mamet’s dialogues only serves to evoke prurient laughter:

One sometimes feels [...] that the playwright’s central concern is the punchline that gets a laugh or a gasp rather than the character or the situation. The plays are all too often reminiscent of vaudeville and comic pornography or, at its worst, the coarse world of Miami Jewish comics and female wrestling” (4).

There are other critics, however, who have appreciated the structural perfection and the subtleties of Mamet’s “classically structured plays.” In his review of the Broadway production of the play Jack Kroll observed: “In three acts whose classic structure would make Aristotle dance the hopa, Mamet turns his Hollywood take off into something more subtle, more disturbing, more ambiguous—and even funnier” (“Terrors of Tinseltown” 83).

**Theme of Seduction and Redemption**

Besides sharing the dialectical plotting of the business plays, *Speed-the-Plow* is closely akin to *American Buffalo* also in its theme of seduction. In *American Buffalo* the seductive and divisive devil is a crook who adopts the rhetoric of business to break into a relationship in order to achieve his selfish ends. In the new play with the Hollywood milieu it is a temporary female secretary of the Head of Production who sleeps with him and speaks the rhetoric of idealism to clinch a clandestine business deal. In both plays the diabolic attempt to change
the protagonist’s original plan and ruin an existing relationship is foiled. The forces of corruption prove to be weak before the intimate friendship between two people who, despite their human foibles, weather the storm and stick together. The action in both plays dialectically starts from a thesis, then faces its antithesis, and finally resolves into a synthesis.

**Play with a Spiritual Dimension**

The world of business satirized in *Speed-the-Plow* is Hollywood show business, where the capacity to sell oneself is the most coveted quality. Douglas Kennedy remarks that in this play Mamet is “confronting that all-American need to sell yourself—but is now examining it as it operates within a corporate culture that is as rapacious as it is spiritually barren” (43). Mamet’s artistic purpose, however, transcends the realistic depiction of Hollywood sycophancy and debauchery. The spiritual dimensions of *Speed-the-Plow* are clear both in Mamet's choice of the title and in the epigraph tagged at the beginning. In a discussion of the play with Jerome B. Gomez, the director of the play, Bart Guingona said:

> Everyone asks me what is 'speed-the-plow.' It's really taken from an old English prayer that asks God to speed-the-plow at the start of the day, the start of the workday. Once you realize [Mamet] has taken a prayer and made it into the title then it takes on another dimension. Suddenly, it becomes a battle of good and evil. (qtd. in Gomez)

The prayer to God that the work one is starting anew should end well, without impediments, bears a close relation to the responsibility that Bobby Gould, the new Head of Production, is undertaking anew, and also suggests the
impediment he will face before executing it successfully. The epigraph, a quotation from Thackeray’s *Pendennis*, outlines a significant God-Human relationship: the man who performs his earthly duties with integrity and commitment is a greater value to the God-created earth than the philosopher who finds only vanity and sham in it and therefore shuns it. The excerpt says that the earth “is the work of the same Power as the immeasurable blue yonder” and hence, whatever the fortunes or misfortunes one finds around him, one should fulfi l one’s earthly responsibilities that Power allots to each. This idea is quite in tune with what Mamet says about himself in an essay in *Some Freaks*, where he sets down his belief that it is by some Universal Will that he had debuted into an artistic career (*Some Freaks* 5). The quotation from *Pendennis* ends with the belief that it is God who orders “to each some work upon the ground he stands on, until he is laid beneath it.” Man attains his peace when he carries out, with undivided attention, the duties allotted to him by God; deviating from them or acting against them, he loses it. This is the “lesson” the two Hollywood executives learn at the end of *Speed-the-Plow*.

**The Plot**

The play dramatizes in three acts the circumstances that lead to the vision contained in the epigraph. Bobby Gould and Charlie Fox are bosom friends who have risen together from the mailroom in Hollywood. Gould has just assumed office as the Head of Production, with power to “greenlight” any script that he thinks can be made into a film—if the production cost is below ten million dollars. Charlie Fox brings him a sensational prison story of sex and violence that can be successfully turned into a “buddy film.” But Gould has already received from Richard Ross, Head of the Studio, a novel about the
“historical effects of radiation” which need to be given a “courtesy read” before considering its worthiness for filming. Karen, Gould’s temporary secretary, is asked to read it and report to her boss at his house that evening. Karen is all admiration for the Apocalypse Novel which, leading to a philosophical vision of God in the world facing an apocalypse, dispels fear from people’s hearts. She sleeps with her boss that night, and by the time Gould meets Fox again next morning, he has been transformed. Fie insists that the Apocalypse Novel should be filmed to instill courage in a fear-ridden world. Only by making Karen confess her “business deal”—that her bedding with her boss was to get him to screen the novel—can Fox bring round Gould to the true business of Hollywood, which is to make films that would bring large audiences. Karen is sent out, and, in accordance with their previous decision, the friends decide to screen the “buddy film” with Ross’s approval.

Keynote at the Beginning

It is a credit to Mamet's artistry that the play’s opening lines presage the moral dilemma the protagonist will face before his prayers are answered. Bobby Gould strikes the keynote of the play as he says: “When the gods would make us mad, they answer our prayers.” What maddens him is the “monster” he is reading—a novel about radiation and its effects, which has come to him for a “courtesy read,” and which confounds him about its quality as a book for film-making. Neither quite an “Art,” nor an “Entertainment,” it puts the new Head of Production in a “wilderness.” The questions he reads from the book have set him thinking seriously: “How are things made round? Was there one thing which, originally, was round . . .?” (3). Though Gould’s reading is perfunctory at the moment, these are the questions that will disturb him
Harmonious Friendship

The arrival of Charlie Fox, his intimate friend, takes Gould out of his present “wilderness” to the green pastures of male company with its cohgnicent’’ fun, hearty tete-a-tete, and mutual teasing. The new Head of Production, though he is proud of the sudden recognition he has got from the media—“I’m drowning in ‘coverage’”—and the people seeking his favour while he is “hot,” establishes his intimacy with Fox at once. Fox congratulates his friend on his promotion, and takes the privilege of asking him to greenlight the prison story in which the famous Dough Brown has agreed to feature. Gould is only too willing to film the script and make Fox its co-producer, for Fox has always been a loyal friend since their mailroom days and stuck to him at each stage of their careerist growth. Gould is overwhelmed with gratitude to think that Fox has not “gone across the street” with the Dough Brown project minding his own self-interest. Fie tries to talk to Richard Ross, the Head of the Studio, in person about the new film, but Ross has got called to New York and will be back only the next morning. Gould assures Fox that he will definitely forge the bond for the buddy film, and both start fantasizing the “shitloads of money” they would acquire once the film is produced. At this juncture Fox sights the radiation novel on the desk and learns that it has come to Gould from Ross for a courtesy read. Reading a few lines from it, Fox sarcastically suggests that Gould make “this sucker” into a film in place of his own buddy film, hardly sensing that what he is frivolously suggesting is going to put him in a crisis soon. Gould proudly proclaims that it is really in his power to do so if he likes:
“Yeah / could do that. You know why? Because my job, my new job is one thing: the capacity to make decisions” (24).

**Tempting the Devil**

To add to this irony of situation comes Karen, Gould’s temporary secretary who will rob that power of him, influence his “decision” and get him in her grip. As Karen serves them coffee, Gould and Fox treat her poorly, and in characteristic male fashion flaunt their intimacy in front of her, calling each other in sexist phraseology: “You’re just an Old Whore . . . Proud of it. Yes, yes . . . Soon to be a rich old whore . . . .” Their imagination runs wild as they stretch the whore image unashamedly:

FOX. And here we are. Two Whores. [To Gould:] you’re going to decorate your office. Make it a bordello. You’ll feel more at home [. . .] and come to work in a soiled nightgown.

GOULD. Hey, after the Dough Brown thing, I come to work in that same nightgown, I say “kiss the hem,” then every swinging dick in this man’s studio will kiss that hem. [. . .] They will french that jolly jolly hem. (26)

Karen seems rather indifferent to this male sexist talk and only feels “silly” that she does not know what she is supposed to do. Gould asks her to cancel all his engagements for the day, book a lunch table for two at the Coventry at one o’clock, and then go home. When she has left, Fox has Gould accept a bet asserting that Gould cannot get his temporary secretary to bed with him. Gould, a narcissist, is quite confident that he can, and will win the bet.
This precipitates the Gould-Karen relationship which plunges the man in power in the moral dilemma of the final act.

In the dialogue that ensues between her and her boss after Fox’s departure, Karen calls herself “naive,” but her conscious repetitions of the word tend to imply that she is not. The next moment the “nai’ve” woman feels the need to think in a “business fashion” in a job like this, which indicates her readiness to get into a “deal.” Gould, a hardcore businessman, exploits her by appealing to her self-interest—her aspirations for participating in the “thrill” of “an exciting world” like this. Though she is a temporary secretary and merely a stand-in for one day, he involves her in the decision-making that is his sole privilege. In a business talk that is comparable to Roma’s sales pitch in Glengarry Glen Ross, Gould slowly moves in on his victim to fulfil his secret desire. He throws repeated hints to his listener that he is primarily a “businessman,” and that it is not uncommon for people in his job to try “hooking” him to get what they want. “You follow me?” he asks Karen, who, of course, cannot miss his meaning. He hints further at the favours he can offer with his power: “’cause this desk is a position to *advance*, y’ understand? It’s a platform to *aid*, to push someone along” (41). He points out how responsible his post is, with its “pressure, many rewards” and how nothing but commercial success can influence his choice of the scripts given to him.

Gould takes the bait closest to the victim by mentioning about the Apocalypse Novel which he needs to give a “courtesy read” before finally deciding that it is “unsuitable for the screen.” When Karen suggests that there may be “something” valuable in the book, he agrees to it, but he cannot think of doing good to people in a job like this. He cannot hope to be “pure” in a position that corrupts him and makes him “a Big Fat Whore” (43). Since “the pressure just gets worse,” he asks
Karen to give the Apocalypse Novel a courtesy read and report on it at his house that evening. Karen feels “flattered” by his request and agrees to do so. As she starts for home, Gould asks her to arrange lunch for him and Fox at the Coventry, “and tell him he owes me five hundred bucks.” Fie naively hopes for sexual conquest over her with his power, but does not know that she is aiming at conquest of his power with her sex. He is elated that he has conned her and “hooked” her.

The “Temporary” Lie

The Second Act dramatizes how Karen outcons the conman, and clinches her own deal with Gould the businessman. She bamboozles her boss with her “fantastic” report on the Apocalypse Novel and brings out an almost religious conversion in him, concealing her real motive behind her admiration of the truths in the book. The ostensible naivete in Karen’s speech and action in the First Act, in contrast to the profound human concerns she exhibits in the Second, makes her one of the controversial women characters of Mamet. In complexity of portrayal she is next only to Carol o ‘Oleanna, Mamet’s most controversial play. Reviewers and critics have asked the right questions about her intriguing role. Jack Kroll asks: “This temp can’t find the coffee machine, can’t punch the right button on the phone, but she can make a Hollywood hardnose throw away 11 years of scheming to follow her into the paths of spiritual redemption. Or is she a more consummate con artist than the two aces themselves?” (“Terrors of Tinseltown” 83). Piqued by Mamet's portrayal of Karen, Moira Hodgson remarks that “[w]omen in his plays always seem to function as plot elements, as sources of complication rather than as rounded, living characters” (875).
Mamet hardly distinguishes between men and women in portraying his antagonists. Teach in *American Buffalo*, Lawrence Oberman in *The Water Engine*, and Mitch and Murray in *Glengarry Glen Ross* are male antagonists. In *The Cryptogram* both parents and a male family friend cause the inner conflict in the protagonist John. It is pointless to discriminate Mamet's antagonists on the basis of gender since the dialectical progression of action in Mamet's classically structured plays is consistently the same: the protagonist’s conflict with lies, his temporary defeat at their hands, and his final conquest over them. In the episodic plays the characters are presented as conflicting with the lies within them. Edmond, for instance, has to get over his hatred and tear of the blacks—the “lies” society has injected into his consciousness—before he can attain his peace in prison. In the classically structured plays the protagonists are invariably male, and the Lie they confront is externalized, either as individuals or as a hostile system. Male or female, the antagonist in a Mamet play represents the Lie that upsets the protagonist’s initial plans, brings about a crisis in his soul, and leads to his ultimate self-knowledge.

**Devil Quoting the Scripture: The Apocalypse Novel**

In *Speed-the-Plow* Karen plays the Lie that the protagonist needs to expel, though it appears, as always in Mamet, under the garb of truth. This “truth” in the Apocalypse Novel that wins her heart is the theory of causal determinism put forward by the ancient Stoics. Mamet, a staunch believer in Stoic philosophy, incorporates it in *Speed-the-Plow* as a fiction that embodies the wisdom needed for a peaceful human life. It is a philosophy that explains how “things are made round.” Briefly stated in the words of Dr. Keith Seddon,
causal determinism is the Stoic theory that all events in the world are preordained and predestined:

Events occur when they do because they are caused by prior events, and these events were caused to occur when they did by events yet more prior—and so on all the way back to the beginning of the world. And all the way forward to the end of the world (Seddon).

The message from the Apocalypse Novel, as Gould learns from Karen’s “fantastic” observation on it, is that all phenomena in Nature, having originated from God, are being led by that Power towards their inevitable apocalyptic end. Things are made round when all phenomena return to their Source and when all crises, including the crisis of nuclear radiation, are resolved in that Primordial Power. The stoic endurance and courageous acceptance of all occurrences beyond human control expels fear, and brings peace.

The philosophic vision contained in the Apocalypse Novel is closely akin to that the eponymous hero in Edmond attains finally in prison—that he has been led to his ultimate destiny by a Divinity. In the novel about the Apocalypse the Tramp under the Bridge says: “All fears are one fear. Just the fear of death. And we accept it, then we are at peace.” And Karen sees all events are connected, and lead to their end: “And so, you see, and so all of the events ... the stone, the instrument, the child which he met, led him there” (47). And what is true of an individual’s destiny is true of the entire human history: “He says that the radiation . . . all of it, the planes, the televisions, clocks, all of it is to the one end. To change us—to bring about a change—all radiation has been sent by God. To change us. Constantly” (48). This vision of God as the maker and destroyer of all creations, and the need for faith in a
world coming to an end, are not merely intended to be the subject of the “courtesy read” novel. They are put forward as the basis of a philosophy which, in the playwright’s spiritual vision, could bring peace to an audience facing the Apocalypse.

Studied exclusively as philosophy, this "causal determinism" certainly presents a cosmic vision of life, but it has no exchange value in the popular business of Hollywood. But the diabolic nature of Karen’s role in *Speed-the-Plow* consists in her attempt to exploit this philosophical truth to rob Gould of his power. She quotes passages from the novel literally like the proverbial Devil quoting the Scriptures. As she waxes eloquent over the power the book has given her and the change it has brought in her, her eulogy acquires religious overtones. The novel becomes “The Book”; words exhorting the listener not to fear, and the reassurance that “embracing” the fear (if not Jesus) is bound to bring him “peace,” the cadences of an intensely passionate sermon—all bring out the apparent religious fervor of a messenger of God earnestly trying to win a depraved man to her own “religion.” But it is not long before all this piety is revealed as a sham, a garb the devil has worn to clinch a business deal, exploiting Gould’s keen sense of responsibility as Head of Production.

Gould understands that Karen wants him to greenlight Apocalypse Novel, but as a responsible Head he cannot concede to it because it is against his “business principles.” His duty as a decision-maker in “a People Business” is of paramount importance to him. He tells the girl plainly that he respects her enthusiasm in her job but cannot film the book: “But this book, you want us to make, won’t Get the Asses In the Seats. [... My job: my new job ... is not even to "make," it is to “suggest,” to “push” [... choosing from Those Things
which The Public Will Come In To See” (54). The fact that the novel has changed her is not sufficient reason for making it into a film. “You know that I can't make this book” (56).

In an essay entitled “Women” Mamet quotes George Lorimer, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, as saying that “one should not do business with a woman; if they are losing, they’ll add their sex to it; and if they are winning, they’ll subtract their sex from it, and treat you harder than any man” (*Some Freaks* 23). Mamet endorses this observation as “absolutely true,” and it is totally applicable to Karen’s behavior towards Gould in her “business.” When her ‘partner” refuses to change over to her “decision” about the Apocalypse Novel, she throws off her naivete and starts to talk straight about her deal. She says she knows why Gould wanted her to come. “I knew what the deal was. I know you wanted to sleep with me” (57). Gould denies having asked her to sleep with him but Karen only wants him not to lie. It was his fear that had prevented him expressing the desire of his heart. But Karen could look in his depraved heart. She confesses that she too is depraved, and knows what it is to be “lost,” which brings her and her boss on an equal plane. Moreover, as the Apocalypse Novel says, all things must come to their natural end. It is their destiny that they should embrace what they fear and end it—by uniting in bed.

**Conversion by the Devill**

The Third Act opens with what Robert Brustein calls the “almost religious conversion” Gould has undergone (“Last Refuge ” 64). Charlie Fox is completely upset by his'dramatic *volte-face* on their earlier decision about the buddy film. Gould is obdurate about screening the Apocalypse Novel and will not greenlight the prison story. Fox strongly believes that this is a
metamorphosis that has come over his friend after sleeping with the secretary who has influenced him like a "'witch." (69) Fox’s observation is quite correct if one recalls what Banquo says of the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*:

> And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
> The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
> Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s
> In deepest consequence” (*Mac.* 1.3.136-39).

Karen seeks to ruin Gould’s prospects, not with “honest trifles,” but with a fervent eulogy of metaphysical truths that conceals her dark intentions. At first she attempts to convince him, passionately, of the value of the book as a potential expeller of fear from people’s hearts. She tries to win him over by appealing to his sense of social responsibility. Failing in it, she brings down the philosophy of the Apocalypse Novel to a purely personal level, to her relationship with her boss. She urges him not to be afraid, to embrace his fear, in other words, to accept her.

At the beginning of the Third Act the devil has possessed Gould. We see him rooted in his new faith, quoting passages from the book in the same way Karen did in the previous Act. Charlie Fox’s great task is to exorcise the devil that possesses him and reconvert him to his original faith—the true business of Hollywood. In a torrent of rebukes that would put a whore to shame, he makes a frenzied attempt to bring round Gould to the great loss both would suffer if he greenlighted the Apocalypse Novel. When Gould says that he has thought the whole night about the right thing to do and that he has come to “believe in the ideas that are contained in the book,” Fox retorts: “Hey, I believe in the Yellow Pages, Bob, but I don’t want to *film* it” (67). Fie points out that by making a fatal decision Gould is throwing his life away and also his own chances in it—
all for “a piece of pussy” (69). The new secretary, Gould must realize, has seduced him only to win his power:

The broad wants power. How do I know? Look: She’s out with Albert Schweitzer working in the jungle? No: she’s in movieland, Bob, and she trades the one thing that she’s got, her looks, get into a position of authority—through you. [. . .] She lured you in. “Come up to my house, read this script . . .” She doesn’t know what that means? Bob: that’s why she’s here. (71)

All this reasoning, however, cannot change Gould’s firm belief in the valuable ideas in the Apocalypse Novel. Blind to the loyalty that he had greatly appreciated earlier in Fox, the new Head alienates himself from his friend and asserts his power over him: “I’m your superior. Now, I’ve made my decision” (74).

**Final Redemption**

Fox understands that all that is left for him is the trump card he needs to play—to bring the truth out of the devil’s own mouth. Karen is called in. At first averse to answering Fox’s questions about her intimate relationship with her boss the previous night, she is obliged, because Gould wants her to speak out, to answer the direct question: Would she have slept with Gould had he not agreed to greenlight the Apocalypse Novel? Gould repeats the question and demands the answer: “Without the bullshit. Just tell me. You’re living in a World of Truth. Would you of gone to bed with me, I didn’t do your book.” Karen’s twice repeated “No” proves that they all live in a World of Truth indeed.
All abstract truths such as those in the Apocalypse Novel dwindle into insignificance before a concrete, trusted human relationship that is given the lie. Gould’s instant reaction to Karen’s betrayal is: “Oh, God, I’m lost” (78). Her confession opens his eyes to the reality of the situation, and at once he feels the need to think and choose clearly—not merely the film that can be screened but also the relationship that would be enduring. Gould understands that Karen’s nocturnal relationship with him and all her concern for truths were nothing more than a concealed business deal. His relationship with Fox also consists of business deals, but it is one of proven loyalty and friendship of many years, and one that promises the collaborative growth of both, together, to ever-increasing heights.

**Things “Made Round”**

Gould makes his moral choice: he rejects the Lie that intruded in their genuine, loyal relationship. Fie asks Karen to quit. Fie realizes that the cosmic vision presented in the radiation novel might do good to people, but will not sell in the “People Business” of Hollywood (28). His prime responsibility as the new Head of Production is to think in a business fashion. It is the earthly duty Providence has allotted to him—though it is the “sinkhole of slime and depravity” that is Hollywood (28). With the choice of this truth he is at peace now, and the gods answer his prayers now, having made him “mad” for a while. Things are made round when all lies, which are merely deviations from the Truth, return through a historical process to the point where they started, that is, to the Truth. That is the message that *Speed-the-Plow* brings home to the audience, its action ending where it started.
FOX: Well, so we learn a lesson. But we aren’t here to “pine,”
Bob, we aren’t here to mop. What are we to do here
(Pause.) Bob? After everything is said and done. What are
we put on earth to do?
GOULD: We’re here to make a movie.

Oleanna

Power Play: Controversial Theme

Mamet’s moral vision of Truth as a power that ultimately reveals itself
and prevails is reinforced in Oleanna (1992), Mamet’s most controversial play
apparently on the issue of sexual harassment in academia. It is a “classically
structured tragedy” in which the protagonist, instead of an antithetical force
interfering in his relationship with someone dear to him (as in American
Buffalo and Speed-the-Plow), directly confronts the Lie that functions like the
classical Furies, pays the price for his hubris, and ultimately gains self-
recognition about his powerlessness in the face of the powers beyond his own.
The Lie in the academe represented in Oleanna surprises the truth, not with a
metaphysical mask as in Speed-the-Plow, but as wilful misrepresentation of the
truth.

John, a college professor in his forties, is iconoclastic in his views on
higher education; Carol, his twenty-year old student, has difficulties in
understanding his course in education and is failing it. Growing anxious about
her poor grade, she meets John in his office where in an informal “class” the
professor tries to provoke her thoughts on the subject of education. Their
private exchanges reveal the dichotomy between their levels of thinking—the
professor conceiving of higher education as humanistic and thought-oriented,
and the student pursuing it as pragmatic and result-oriented. John expresses his heterodox views with unguarded illustrations and comparisons that impress the bewildered student as sexist, racist, classist, and elitist, and as an exhibition of his “unlimited power.” Failing to get the solutions to her problems from the professor, the outraged student meets her campus “Group” and interprets the professor’s ideas and comradely touch in her own way. Instructed by the Group in the language of political correctness, she returns to the professor and exhibits her own power by charging him with sexual assault on her. Her report to the Tenure Committee ruins both his career and peace. The student triumphantly assumes the power to control her teacher’s thoughts and even his private feelings, which ultimately drives the professor to burst into a spasm of violence.

**Polarized Audiences**

Following closely on the heels of the Anitha Hill-Clarence Thomas issue of sexual harassment in the workplace in the 1990s, *Oleanna* created an unprecedented furore amidst theatregoers. Though its author averred that its plot had been conceived long before the real-life event, the contemporary relevance of the play’s action was not lost on them. The blatantly false accusations of the female student against her apparently well-meaning professor polarized the audience, each group sympathizing either with Carol of the first act or with John of the next two acts. The primal responses to the play went in favour of the beleaguered professor’s undeserved fate, and theatre audiences were reported as ferociously joining in their hatred against the actress playing Carol and booing her out during the last moments of the play.

In her review of *Oleanna* feminist critic Francine Russo mentioned that, as
John’s final beating of Carol evoked gasps and hisses in the audience approving of the professor’s action, a woman in the audience said “I wanted to punch her out myself ’ (Russo 96).

In reaction to this gut response, attempts were made in academic circles to defend Carol’s cause by demonstrating how John’s unguarded use of language and irresponsible teaching in Act One provokes Carol to speak and behave, in Acts Two and Three, quite like her authoritative teacher. Ultimately, however “balanced” critics have attempted to be in their analyses of the two characters, the final outcome is one in which the deserts of the one are highlighted at the expense of the other. On the one hand, there are critics like C. W. E. Bigsby, John Lahr and Arthur Holmberg who look upon Carol as representing the political powers that seek to substitute thought with dogma, and hence, provoking the loathing audiences direct at her. In Modern American Drama, 1945-2000 Bigsby points out that the portrayal of the characters is clearly unbalanced:

It is certainly true that the faults are not evenly divided. Carol plainly speaks a language which is not her own. She over-interprets words and actions and pursues her quarry with what she sees as detachment but what, in truth, seems closer to vindictiveness. For his part, John is unprofessional, patronizing, remiss in his duties, but scarcely worthy of an attack which is plainly disproportionate. (203)

On the other hand, there are feminist critics like Elaine Showalter who, in her review of the play in Times Literary Supplement, cannot approve of Mamet’s misogynistic targeting through his portrayal of a female student who makes false charges against her teacher: “In making his female protagonist a
dishonest androgynous zealot, and his male protagonist a devoted husband and father who defends freedom of thought, Mamet does not exactly wrestle with the moral complexities of sexual harassment” (“Acts of Violence” 17). In consonance with such a view, there are critics like Christine MacLeod, Steven Ryan and Richard Badenhausen who attribute Carol’s unfair behaviour in the second half of the play to John’s exhibition of authority, his futile educational theories and poor pedagogic methods. All of them proceed from the consensus that *Oleanna* is a play about the struggle for power—a truth its author has acknowledged. According to them, the much-reviled Carol’s metamorphosis into a merciless woman of power in Act Two is not a bolt out of the blue but evolves naturally out of the encounter in Act One.

To MacLeod the conflict between the professor and his female student is based not primarily on the politics of gender but on a dramatic shift in hierarchy and power which is a pervasive theme in Mamet’s plays. Citing the power play of the real-estate salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross* as an essential feature of “competitive individualism,” she argues that the same “operative maxim”—the survival of the one at the expense of the other—applies to *Oleanna* too. “Carol’s struggle of supremacy, I believe, owes more to the competitive compulsions of social Darwinism than to any specifically sexual hostility” (207). Steven Ryan falls in line with this view and observes that although the ostensible theme of sexual harassment in academia

may seem to be startlingly different soil for [Mamet] *Oleanna* is developed around one of Mamet’s most basic themes: human beings’ never-ending battle to dominate one another. This need to obtain power, closely linked to our most basic survival instincts,
is the sole force that drives such earlier predatory Mamet characters [of the Business Plays] (393).

To Richard Badenhausen, “this is more a play about teaching, and understanding: how to do those things well and the consequences of doing them poorly. Oleanna offers an ominous commentary on education in America and more particularly functions as a dire warning both to and about those doing the educating” (1-2).

While it is true that John’s actions in Act One are significantly responsible for driving Carol into the arms of “the Group,” a careful investigation of them reveals that John’s character, given a partisan reading by these critics, is not as black as they paint it in their fervid bid to absolve Carol of her guilt. MacLeod asserts that “it is impossible to condemn [Carol’s] abuse of power without being compelled simultaneously to look fresh at its ugly mirror image: the power that men have traditionally held over women” (210). Richard Badenhausen points out that the professor’s enjoyment of his power is derived from his elitist, “specialised discourse” of academe. Waging a war with American academics for their scant concern for the learning problems of students, he displays a Carol-like ferocity in his denunciation of John. In his appraisal, the professor is a poor teacher with “feeble pedagogical abilities”; an elitist misreader of his students who finds it “more rewarding to work with the brightest students in the class” and who neglects “his responsibility to his less gifted students”; an “authoritative teacher” using an “intentionally heightened vocabulary”; an “egocentric hypocrite” and “an opportunistic cynic”; a “dishonest character from the start” from whom Carol inherits her education “in the art of deception, dishonesty and skepticism” (3-10).
**John's Central Position**

Critics who approve of Carol’s abuse of power as merely her answer to John’s display of authority, and seek to accord her the status of a heroine, lose sight of John’s central position in the play. In the amoral world of competitive business, it is true, fair is foul and foul is fair. But such inversion of values does not apply in the academic teacher-student relationship portrayed in *Oleanna*. The play projects fair and foul not as homogeneous entities but clearly as antitheses. The conflict is not between one destructive force and another, but between the antithetical forces of benignity and malignity.

Drama, according to Mamet, is basically about how the protagonist’s wishes are fulfilled or “absolutely frustrated” (Lahr, “Interview” 55). John, the “single protagonist” in *Oleanna*, is doomed to his catastrophe by being rendered powerless by the political “Group” that Carol finally represents. Carol is the antagonist who, whatever her justifications for destroying her teacher, brings about his downfall. It is the protagonist who is “cleansed” and who evokes the emotions of pity and fear in the audience. It is not, therefore, a dual tragedy in which both the characters deserve equal sympathy, despite the author’s protestations that the play does not take sides. The overwhelming sympathy which the play’s first audiences are reported to have felt toward the teacher at the end of the play, before any “balancing” elements were introduced into it,* evidences that *Oleanna* is about the fate of the central character—John. As Mamet told John Lahr, “classically it’s structured as a tragedy. The professor is the main character. He undergoes absolute reversal of situation,

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* For instance, the 1993 Vintage Books edition of the play gives the stage direction for the professor’s comradely touch on his student as follows: “He goes over to her and puts his arm around her shoulder” (p. 36). On the other hand, “The Best Plays 1992-1993” (Eds. Otis L. Guernsey Jr. and Jeffrey Sweet) gives it as “John goes over and embraces her” (p. 158). Similar changes could be made during productions to “balance” the guilt on either side.
absolute recognition at the last moment of the play. He realizes that perhaps he is the cause of the plague on Thebes” (qtd. in Lahr, “Interview” 70).

This inner change in the central character is crucial in Mamet’s plotting. Any theatrical attempt, hence, to shift the audience’s attention from the protagonist to the antagonist, or to bring about a “balance” by augmenting the “domination” and harassment by the male character, as it was made in Harold Pinter’s production of *Oleanna* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1993, can only be made at the expense of the playwright’s moral intentions in the play. If the play was conceived as a tragedy in accordance with Aristotelian principles, as its author has acknowledged, then it is about the protagonist who, despite his excellent academic and human worth, meets with his catastrophe because of his hamartia.

The “reversal of situation” in Acts Two and Three results directly from the protagonist’s “reversal of intention” in Act One. John is demonstrably a successful teacher who, intending to provoke thought in his intellectually enfeebled student, provokes outrage in her by putting across his heterodox views on higher education. *Oleanna* opens with Carol’s anxieties about her failure to understand any of John’s educational theories, but when she does understand them at the encl of her private tutorial, she finds them shocking and negating her very existence at college, and joins hands with her campus Group to bring about his ruin.

**John’s Sconoclasm**

Since it is John’s iconoclastic theories that upset Carol and drive her into the hands of the PC Group, it is instructive to take a look at them. John Lahr believes that the professor’s views are derived from Thorstein Veblen whose
theories on education Mamet “cunningly glosses” (“Dogma Days” 123). Their closest analogy may be found in the educational philosophy of John Henry Newman who insisted in his lectures, published under the title *Idea of a University*, that “the true and adequate end of intellectual training and of a University is not Learning or Acquirement, but rather, is Thought or Reason exercised upon Knowledge, or what may be called Philosophy” (75). In his lectures Newman dwells at length upon the widely prevalent “error” in higher education—loading the memory of the student with “a mass of undigested knowledge” and forcing upon him “so much that he has rejected all.” The contemporary trends in university education, Newman thought, involved the danger of “distracting and enfeebling the mind by an unmeaning profusion of subjects” (78).

Carol, who encounters her professor with a failed grade in her course, is a good example of the American student whose mind has received no training in Thought or “Reason exercised upon Knowledge.” Her knowledge seems to be acquirement devoid of assimilation, existing only as half-remembered information. A pitiful product of an educational system in which students are merely trained, as John points out later, “to retain and spout back misinformation” (23), she cannot understand concepts that demand reasoning. Struggling to climb the social ladder from her lower socio-economic background through education, she expresses her plight: “I read your book. I read it. I don’t [understand] *Any* of it. What you’re trying to say” (11). Having “no command of language, no knowledge, no psychological understanding,” as Lahr observes, Carol is a challenge to John’s powers as a teacher (“Dogma Days” 122). John meets the challenge fairly well, although his teaching only reveals to him ultimately that he needs to learn a lot about the hostile world that
confronts him. In Act One he earnestly attempts to relieve his student of her problems in three progressive stages. Firstly he speaks to her, strictly as a teacher to a student, about how institutional rules render him helpless; secondly, he attempts to relieve her of her psychological obsessions by adopting a paternal and personal relationship; and thirdly, restarting her education in an unconventional “class,” he provokes both thought and anger in the student, which culminates in the reversal of situation in the subsequent acts.

**Keynote at the Beginning**

The telephone conversation that opens the play *in medias res* metaphorically outlines the plot of the play: a woman intervening in a proud mail’s prospects and finally destroying them. Carol is seated across John’s desk as he is talking over phone to his wife about the new house they are going to buy. The conversation reveals that John is faced with the threat of losing the house if he does not concede to a legal right claimed by the seller, a woman, over the land included in the deal. This right, called “easement” in legal jargon, is a “term of art” binding on the buyer, but John self-assertively refuses to grant it. He asks his wife Grace to consult Jerry, his lawyer, and look into the easement issue till he joins them after an interview with a student.

When John hangs up, Carol, who has been listening to the conversation, asks him what “a term of art” means. John is himself unacquainted with the jargon, and gives a vague definition that confounds the student. To the professor it is merely an inconsequential phrase that one needs to understand when an occasion demands it, only to forget it soon. The idea of forgetting astonishes Carol although, with her habit of taking down notes on every word she hears, her action contradicts her mistaken belief. Throughout the first act
she exhibits her lack of understanding and her mere ability to reproduce the
undigested words and phrases from the notes that she meticulously takes for
future reference. Only in vain does the professor persuade her to improve her
understanding of ideas by putting them in her own words.

**John's Threefold Encounter: First Stage**

As a teacher, John encounters his student’s problems in three respects—
academically, psychologically and philosophically. Firstly, Carol’s problem is
academic. She is undoubtedly an earnest student, but she suffers from
depression for unknown reasons. She does everything she is told to do by her
professor, but still cannot cope with the expected academic standards. An
excerpt from her failing essay reads: “I think that the ideas contained in this
work express the author’s feelings in a way that he intended, based on his
results” (8). “What can that mean?” the professor asks, and the question,
coloured with her self-pity for her inadequacy, only gives her to understand
that he thinks her to be “stupid.” She tells him that she comes from a different
social and economic background and *must* pass the course in order to “get on
with the world.” She does not understand anything in the book she reads, and
the jargon of learned discourse baffles her. “Teach me, Teach me,” she entreats
the professor, so that the course for which she is paying can obtain her a career
that would fulfil her socio-economic needs. John understands her plight, but
does not know how to help her in regard to her grade since, as a “human being”
in the teaching profession, he cannot meddle with the criteria for evaluating
students’ performance. “What do you want me to do? We are two people, all
right? Both of whom have subscribed to . . . certain arbitrary . . . certain
institutional [rules and regulations]” (10).
Second Stage

John’s teaching of Carol is further complicated as he perceives that her problems are more psychological than academic. Finding her obsessed with a morbid sense of her own stupidity, he feels that it is imperative to break down the barrier between teacher and student. His question “What can that mean?” immediately provokes self-pity in her. “I DON’T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS AND EM FAILING,” she bewails, and plunges into self-assertive denigration of herself: ‘That’s right. That’s right. I know I’m stupid. I know what I am. (Pause.) I know what I am, Professor. You don’t have to tell me. (Pause.) It’s pathetic. Isn’t it?” (14-15). John at once realizes that his student’s academic problems are entangled with her psychological obsessions. “Aha,” he utters, revealing his need for a change in his approach, and quickly establishes an emotionally shared relationship with Carol in which he finds the humiliations of Carol to be “similar” to those of his boyhood. He gets less formal, and speaks a “personal” language “as if I’d talk to my son,” with the earnest intention to prevent her suffering as he did in the past (19). He tells her how, as a boy, he was constantly run down for his inability to understand his lessons and for behaving “stupidly,” which engraved an image of stupidity in his young mind. With this degraded self-image he could not do things the “capable” people around him were doing successfully. That image had severely hampered his learning process. “And when I’m tested the, the, the feelings of my youth about the very subject of learning come up. And I [. . .] feel ‘unworthy’ and unprepared” (17).

Unfortunately, critics have construed John’s heartfelt expressions of the pains of his past as a contrived device to turn his student to his own ideas about learning. “Educational theory,” MacLeod remarks on this point, “suggests that
in a classroom or tutorial context [. . .] such apparently unhierarchical efforts of empathy are less than innocent. We may believe we are being open, supportive, receptive to a student’s feelings, when the reality is that we contrive to direct those feelings, frustrate their expression, or impose on them our own interpretation” (203). Such theories, however, can hardly be related to contexts where the emotional truth of the speaker is unquestionable, as John’s is. There is room to believe that the professor is absolutely true to himself and not manipulating his student because his views on the “curse” of formal education perfectly chime with the author’s own real-life experiences of his youth. In his interview with John Lahr Mamet has said: “I was like the professor in Oleanna who all his life had been told he was an idiot, so he behaved like an idiot” (qtd. in “Interview” 58). We all have school dreams, Mamet goes on to say, because our childhood days have been fraught with fears about the expectations of the world that could not be fulfilled. The only way to cope with those expectations, Mamet suggests, “is to do more, to work harder, to do more, to do it again” (59).

John’s words about how “I worked my way out of the need to fail” precisely echo Mamet's recipe to turn failures into success: to exercise the will to act. Only through unflinching and successive action must one establish one’s worth or capacity for achievement. “If I foil all the time, it must be that I think of myself as a failure. If I do not want to think of myself as a failure, perhaps I should begin by succeeding now and again” (22-23). This is clearly Mamet's Stoic conviction that nothing prevents anyone from achieving one’s goals so long as one acts without giving up whatever one undertakes. John’s anecdotes about his early life, hence, cannot be faulted as “teacher-oriented” rather than “subject-oriented,” as Badenhausen would distinguish it, or as a manipulative
pep talk, as MacLeod would describe it. Since the humiliations of John’s boyhood have formed the basis of his book on the whole subject of education, it may be perceived that the teacher and the subject he is talking about are inseparable. The teacher, even as he is attempting to relieve his student of her morbid low self-esteem, is questioning a conventional, timeworn system of education which, instead of developing wholesome personalities, is only ruining the learners’ psychic health with its legion of tests in undigested information.

John’s tragic flaw, as it is with all protagonists of classical tragedies, is hubris. The fact that he has gone through the struggle of academic life successfully has turned him inordinately egotistic. It drives him to disparage not only the education he has received but also his employers. He describes the tests in school or college as “designed, in the most part, for idiots. By idiots. [. . .] They’re garbage. They’re a joke” (23). He arrogantly remarks that the Tenure Committee that granted him tenure “had people voting on me I wouldn’t employ to wash my car” (23). In his self-blinding vainglory John forgets that all his denunciations are going down as facts in Carol's notes. His self-exaltation continues as he preens Himself over understanding her problems and so thinks that as a teacher he deserves the fruits of his job: “Am I entitled to my job, and my nice home, and my wife, and my family, and so on” (24).

**Third Stage**

In the third stage of his education of Carol, when he ought to have discussed the book which the student finds incomprehensible, John is still persistent in voicing his own heterodox views on education that finally confound and enrage Carol. Cutting in on John’s “theory of education,” Carol
brings him round to the utilitarian urgency of her course: “I want to know about my grade” (24). Since a student can only get her grade by working for it—not by magic—John offers her an unconventional tutorial in which Carol might understand what she fails to in her regular class. He offers to give her an “A” for the whole term if she would receive her lessons by visiting his office “a few more times.” Realizing that formal tests are tormenting her with anxieties about her grade, he attempts to rid her of her fears saying, “Forget about the paper. [. . .] It’s not important. What’s important is that I awake your interest, if I can, and that I answer your questions. Let’s start over” (25-26). Of course, there are institutional rules, as Carol points out, but they need to be broken in a situation where working within the system fails to promote the student’s understanding of the course. In Carol’s case, especially, the system becomes less important than the student’s need to get a passing grade by working for it. John, quite blind to the effect of his ambiguous expressions on Carol, tells her the reasons why he would venture into this tutorial: “What’s the class but you and me? [. . .] We won’t tell anybody. [. . .] I like you. [. . .] There’s no one here but you and me”—ambiguities that the female student turns to her advantage later to ruin him (26-27).

**Incompatible Idealism**

The class starts over, with Carol sedulously taking notes in order to “know everything that went on.” John’s iconoclastic views on education, formed by his reaction to the academic torments of his youth, challenge the widely held “notion” that every student needs to be given higher education as a matter of right. John illumines his point comparing it with justice:
Justice is their right, should they choose to avail themselves of it, they should have a fair trial. It does not follow, of necessity, a person’s life is incomplete without a trial in it. […] we confound the usefulness of higher education, with our, granted, right to equal access to the same. We, in effect, create a prejudice toward it […] (29-30).

Such enunciations, given with apt examples, prove John’s effective teaching, anti they do “provoke” thought in the student, though not in the way he intends them to. “How can you say that? […] that it is prejudice that we should go to school?” Carol asks, understanding John’s statement in her own way (30). The professor’s views challenge the existing system, and she is obviously annoyed at the threat the professor poses to her fundamental right to “equity.”

At this point John commits the blunder of equating the provocation of anger with the stimulation of Carol’s thought. He feels elated that his method of kindling thought by provoking anger is a measure of his success, oblivious to its psychological impact on the listener: “Good. Good. Good. That’s right! Speak up! […] We are all subject to [prejudice] . . . When it’s threatened, or opposed, we feel anger and we feel, do we not? As you do now” (30). Saying that his job is to “provoke” and to force her to listen, he brings into his teaching an anecdote about how “the rich copulate less often than the poor” (32). Even as he enjoys the fruits of a college education, he is regardless of the needs of other students to attain to higher social levels through education. He reiterates the idea that college education has become “a fashionable necessity” for aspirants to “the new vast middleclass” who “espouse it, as a matter of right,” hardly asking themselves “What is it good for?” (35).
Such an outrageous idea inflames Carol who, learning that John is buying a new house after working as a teacher for twenty years, cannot bear with his skepticism about the worth of college education. She is annoyed that her teacher is questioning the very meaning of her existence at college. “If education is ‘prolonged and systematized hazing’ [. . .] if education is so bad, why do you do it?” she asks. John replies that he teaches because he loves his profession, and insists that the statistics of the last century reveal the worthlessness of education. The contradiction confounds her. “I DON’T UNDERSTAND. [. . .] I don’t know what it means to be here. [. . .] What do you want with me? What does it mean? Who should I listen to . . . I . . .” (36).

Seeing that he has upset her with his skepticism, John puts his arm around her shoulder to comfort her, only to cause her to shrink away in alarm. That touch rouses the deepest feelings in the psychically perturbed student. She feels “bad” about it, and struggles to reveal to him some personal secret (probably about child abuse) that has been repressed in her unconscious for years. “I can’t talk about this. [. . .] I always . . . all my life ... I have never told anyone this . . . All of my life. , But the repression fails to find its release as the telephone rings once again and interrupts its articulation.

A Provocative Act

The dialogue between John and Carol at the close of their first encounter bears immense significance in view of the confusion it aggravates in the profoundly depressed student. As soon as the teacher hangs up the phone, Carol, who has been watching the turbulence on his face during the call, asks him, “What is it?” John answers, “It’s a surprise party” (40). The ambiguity of his reply leads the young student to misinterpret it in her characteristic manner,
and the way in which he maintains the dichotomy between their different meanings proves fatal to him and puts him on the path of his doom. On several occasions, in her exchanges with her teacher, Carol has betrayed her incapacity for understanding the subtleties of language. Words like “index” and “predilection” baffle her, and have to be replaced with their simpler synonyms. When her teacher says society creates a prejudice toward higher education, she takes it to mean, “college education is prejudice” (30) [emphasis added]. When he tells her that it is his job to “provoke,” that is, to stimulate thought, she retorts: “To make me mad is your job?” (32). In the same vein, she splits the phrase “a surprise party,” picks out “party,” and takes it to mean “social gathering”—a meaning that suits her limited vocabulary or collocation, but very different from what her teacher has in mind at the moment.

Immediately following the telephone conversation that has upset John, the phrase “a surprise party” means “something more specific than the words would, to someone not acquainted with them, . . . indicate” (3). John has unconsciously employed “a term of art” that means, in this specific context, “a litigant who is taking me by surprise.” The telephone conversation that opens the play, as already noted, metaphorically epitomizes the dramatic action and introduces its central theme. It has already revealed how a woman has raised the issue of “easement” and will challenge John’s purchase of his new house until he concedes to her demand. Now, at the end of Act One, the same woman has grown aggressive and rendered the agreement void. Threatened with the loss of the house and immensely upset, and intensely aware that he is dealing with a depressed student, John cannot let Carol in on his own problems. He avoids explaining to her the true meaning of this “surprise party”—the woman who has suddenly deprived him of his prospect of buying his dream house.
Just at the inopportune moment when Carol is reeling under anxieties about her grade and her academic future, the teacher playfully acquiesces in her interpretation of the phrase he has just used. He joins Carol in her strain of thought and misleads her into believing that the “party” concerns the celebration in connection with the Tenure Announcement and the purchase of the new house (which is impossible with the existing impediments). By his teasing he only intensifies his desperate student’s urge to grow “aggressive” and avenge herself by frustrating his aims. The final utterances in their first encounter can be understood correctly only in the light of John’s thoughts in relation to the telephone conversation he has just closed. When, in her ignorance of John’s problems, Carol naively says the “party” shows how “They’re proud of you,” John mystifies her employing the other word she has totally ignored—“surprise.” “Well, there are those who would say it’s a form of aggression,” he replies to her (41). He means, in words that ring with dramatic irony, “an unforeseen assault”—a “surprise”—which is exactly what the professor is going to face in the subsequent acts.

**Coloured Critical Views**

“We can only interpret the behavior of others through the screen we . . . create,” John tells Carol when he sees the need to eliminate the “Artificial Stricture” of a teacher-student relationship to understand her better (19-20). Critics who fervently defend Carol’s authoritative behavior in the second half of the play put up convenient “screens” to criticize John’s actions in the first act. In her analysis of *Oleanna* MacLeod puts up a sustained defence of Carol against the student’s detractors who viciously describe her as “a cold-blooded bitch,” “a dishonest androgynous zealot,” “a viper,” “a Maoist enforcer” and so
on. But the ideological screen she creates for herself to justify Carol's behavior colours her conclusion. In her feminist vision the play, far from dealing with the theme of sexual harassment, portrays the reversal of hierarchical power in the social process. She describes Carol's power struggle with her professor as representative of the “newly insurgent social energies [...] contesting the inherited determinations of hierarchy” (212). She emphasizes the need for “a balanced or rational appraisal of the issues raised by Mamet's play” to evaluate Carol fairly, but hardly touches upon John’s views on the detrimental aspects of higher education in America—the central issue that sparks off the conflict between the teacher and the student during their first encounter.

The norm of conventional pedagogy—the screen some critics put before themselves to evaluate John’s teaching—also does not help appraise John’s genuine academic concerns. Both Steven Ryan and Richard Badenhausen maul the professor for flouting the norms of conventional pragmatic teaching. The primary function of a college teacher, they aver, is to help the student know something so that he or she can “get on in the world” by getting a passing grade. They conclude that John, who only confounds his students with his abstract and purely personal ideas of higher education, without training them in any of the basic skills they need, is a shrieking pedagogic failure. Steven Ryan states this conventional idea when he emphasizes John’s failure to fulfil Carol's utilitarian needs:

[She] craves certainty and desires John to mold his theories into a concrete body of information that she can copy down in her notebooks, memorize, and recite at will. [...] She desires fodder for her notebook, not incoherent academic jargon about the “virtual warehousing of the young” and other-to-her-meaningless
Badenhausen reiterates this idea when he states that “one essential ingredient of effective teaching is the capacity to read students—especially through their written and oral comments—to see what they need in their pursuits [. . .]” (6). Since John fails in this type of teaching, he argues, “the only possible result of their exchange is confusion and misunderstanding” (6). To Badenhausen John’s failure as a teacher is due to his love of hierarchic power, expressed through his pedantic “specialized discourse” and his insensitivity to his student’s plight.

**John’s Heterodoxy**

John’s character is misread when critics set out to evaluate his academic merit with such yardsticks. The professor’s tragedy is that he feels the need to rethink American higher education, not as an orthodox pedagogue, but as what R. W. Emerson would call Man Thinking. In “The American Scholar” Emerson speaks of the scholar’s need to break from the “chains of slavery” to books in order to flower into Man Thinking. Books, in Emerson’s view, are only instruments for furthering human thought, and not ends in themselves. He disapproves of the overemphasis that academies put on the value of books ignoring the power of Reason or Intuition:

> The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book [written by an author], stands upon it, and makes an outcry if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted
dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. [. . .] Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm. Hence the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as a sort of Third Estate, with the world and the soul. (48-49)

John is the Emersonian Man Thinking who has his “own sight of principles.” He thinks of higher education as something that transcends graduation, something to do with the human potential for thinking creatively and perceiving truths. We hardly know the content of his book on education, but the phrases like “virtual warehousing of the young” (11), “The Curse of Modern Education” (12), and “hazing” (28) culled out from it, suggest his humanistic concerns about the prevalent system of education. Consisting of nothing but the dissemination of dry “objective information” driven into students’ heads through drills in reading and writing, this system hardly helps the learners to gain insights into the world in which they live.

The youths joining the multitudinous courses in colleges engage themselves in the mad pursuit of graduation (which goes under the name of ‘education’), and rarely does anyone in the rat race stop to think what it is good for. The pressure of the loads of educational “information” on weaker minds is overwhelming, and students such as Carol who come from the lower social strata reel under it, unable to bear the strain. Most of them get to higher education with their hard-earned passing grades, but their command of language and their powers of accurate thinking, comprehension and analysis leave much to be desired. The dramatic action in *Oleanna* exquisitely demonstrates how the intellectual weakness of a student, while deserving the
audience’s utmost sympathy and attention, can yet be transformed into a destructive force when exploited by militant, dogmatic “Groups.”

Carol: Victim of Conventional Education

Egotism and elitism are John’s flaws as a man, but as a teacher he has an accurate and sympathetic understanding of his student’s psychological weakness and her intellectual inadequacy. Carol, on the other hand, is accustomed only to taking notes on objective information, memorizing them, and reproducing them in tests. She cannot cope with John’s course because both the jargon and the unconventional ideas contained in his book make demands on her powers of understanding. “I cannot understand” is a refrain she repeats throughout Act One, and a fact she proves throughout the play. Her fundamental problem is with language, as she confesses at the beginning itself (6). It is not only “specialized” phrases in John’s book that elude her understanding; even plain questions and statements are misinterpreted by her confused mind. She interprets a casual question about something she has written—“What can that mean?”—as a statement about her stupidity: “You think that I’m stupid. [. . .] You said it[emphasis added] (13). When her teacher feels the urgent need to rid her of self-pity before she learns her lessons right, he tells her: “I don’t know how to do it, other than to be personal . . . .” (19). After this explanation comes Carol’s illogical question: “Why would you want to be personal with me?” She cannot understand her teacher’s honest attempts to understand and help her. At the end of her private “class” she thinks of John as an enemy of higher education because her thought cannot transcend her pragmatic perspective of it. She sees John’s heterodox thought as heresy, for it poses a threat to her “right” to education, and is infuriated.
Discrepancy in Her Moral Position

In Acts Two and Three, the twists Carol gives to John’s utterances in Act One indicate the extremes to which her mental debilities, now compounded with her bigotry, can go. Her weakness, which earns the audience’s sympathy for her in the beginning, now turns her into a fearsome and despicable object precisely because the weakness has been transformed into a diabolic force of evil. The scorn she invites from the play’s audience is due less to her gender than to the discrepancy in her moral position. Mentally impotent, she has suddenly wielded the power of her “Group” to destroy the thought her teacher stands for.

The moment Carol ceases to be her true self, starts speaking in the voice of the Group, misrepresents everything that has occurred between her and her professor, and finally proposes the Group’s “agenda” to replace John’s, she degrades herself as an individual who has nothing to think on her own. Visiting her professor as a “stupid” and pitiable student who, as C. W. E. Bigsby observes, “seems to have only the most tenuous grasp not only of the course but of human relationships” (Modern English Drama 232), she gives the lie to her integrity as a being when suddenly, in language and behaviour, she wears the mantle of political correctness and seeks to dominate over her teacher. This preening herself on borrowed plumes is what turns her into a creature that most viewers “join in hating.”

The early audiences’ aversion for her behavior as a metamorphosed student is due to her falsification of the real issue with her teacher. She projects the conflict between her and John—her inability to get through the course with her poor understanding and John’s apparent inability to “teach” her to achieve it as a conflict between the teaching community and the student body: “You
can’t do that any more. You. Do. Not. Have. The. Power. Did you misuse it? Someone did. Are you part of that group? Yes. Yes. You are. You have done these things” (50). She belittles herself as a human being by arrogantly calling him names—“YOU FOOL. Who do you think I am? [. . .] You little yapping fool”—a merciless repayment to her benevolent professor who would never say she is “stupid” even when she neurotically asserts she is. She claims she is justified in her anger because she and the other students have been victims of his proud exhibition of power in his class. One wonders what prevented the “victims” from reporting John’s "sexist” behavior to the Group for action against him.

More than her lack of candour, her credibility about John’s classroom behavior is suspect, since, right at the moment she is framing “charges” against him, she betrays her infinite capacity for misreading human thoughts or intentions. In Act Two, reading her report to the Tenure Committee against him and realizing that he has unconsciously hurt her, John expresses regret and wants to “make amends,” but in Carol’s absolutely personal dictionary this means “to force me to retract [. . .] to bribe me, to convince me . . .” (46). “That is not what I said,” her teacher insists, and she refers to the only thing that props her diminutive intellect: “I have my notes.” And the way her mind organizes the “notes” she has taken in Act One confirms her tremendous capacity to distort the truth: “He told me he had problems with his wife; and that he wanted to take off the artificial stricture of Teacher and Student. He put his arm around me” (48). Carol challenges John to “deny that these things happened,” and the reader or the audience is quick to retort that they did, but not in the sequence she has wantonly arranged them in order to suit her cruel intentions. The entire series of her misinterpretations of the previous
happenings are revelatory of an inane mind bedeviled by the prodding of her Group which is keen on imposing its own “agenda” in the realm of higher education.

“Nothing is alleged. Everything is proved,” Carol claims (63). Each time she insists on it and dramatically ascends in her power over John, she proportionately descends in the audience’s esteem of her as a human being. Nothing is proved but her diabolic will to destroy, which is diametrically opposed to her professor’s moral will to help. Carol is simply repaying John’s benignity and sympathy with malignity and heartless tyranny. Even if she were justified in such retaliation against all professors for their exhibition of power over the students, she cannot be expected to confess to her failings as John remorsefully admits to: “What have I done to you? Oh. My God, are you so hurt?” (49). As the protagonist of the play, the professor recognizes the possibility of hurting his student and expresses an honest desire to make amends if he has erred. In the agenda-driven Group that aims to “substitute” domination by destroying the enemy, there is hardly room for such self-recognition or remorse.

Nor is there room for any open-minded discussion such as John offers Carol in Act One, despite the urgency of his need to move out to settle his domestic problems. The teacher does exercise institutional authority “to transgress whatever norms have been established” (52) for the students, but it is not to serve his self-interest. He expresses his honest views about modern education, but never does he attempt to transform her into his mirror image. No man of power would offer the opportunity for “free intellectual discourse” as John does:
I don’t know that I can teach you about education. But I know that I can tell you what I think about education, and then you decide. And you don’t have to fight with me. I’m not the subject. (Pause.) And where I am wrong . . . perhaps it’s not your job to ‘fix’ me. I don’t want to fix you. I would like to tell you what I think, because that is my job, conventional as it is, and flawed as I may be. And then, if you can show me some better form, then we can proceed from there. (53-54)

Blinded by her bigotry, Carol cannot accept this belief in freedom of thought. ‘YOU BELIEVE IN NOTHING. YOU BELIEVE IN NOTHING AT ALL” (67), she shrieks in contempt of his iconoclasm, refusing to believe in his conviction about a system that encourages thought. Now she is a devout disciple of her Group which, as John Lahr says, “demands diversity in everything but thought” (“Dogma Days” 124). And all she can do is deprive her teacher of his power of language and the thought that is expressed in it. “IT IS NOT FOR YOU TO SAY,” she asserts, and arrogates to herself all “power” to misinterpret John’s earlier utterances (70). Quite in the spirit of her PC Group she insists that meaning is what she gives to words, and has nothing to do with the context in which they are employed. The spasmodic violence that ends the play directly results from such wielding of linguistic authority by the irrational powers represented by Carol.

**PC Group: Linguistic Control Inciting Violence**

In an insightful essay Paul McDonald examines the “unmanning effect” of PC groups’ “linguistic censorship” on men. As in Philip Roth’s novel *Deception*, McDonald says, the theme of sexual harassment in *Oleanna*
suggests an implicit indictment of PC and reveals it as “a pernicious and misguided phenomenon.” His remark on PC groups’ control over specific meanings of their choice deserves keen attention:

Linguistic censorship assumes that language is fixed, that some words are inherently bad. [As Oleanna demonstrates,] it is a mistake to take such a reductive view of language. The meanings it generates are potentially manifold and the reductive ambitions of PC censorship are impossible to reconcile with this simple fact. (McDonald)

MacLeod considers the shift in “linguistic authority” (a euphemism for linguistic censorship), as part of an irresolvable dynamic of alternating social hierarchies. She views “Carol's wrestling of control from John”—the power to define meanings in utterances—at a mythic level, as “the combative substitution of one domination for another” (213). But such an interpretation of Oleanna misses out the deeper mythic level at which the play operates and the moral issues involved in the “substitution of domination.” In other words, MacLeod’s argument, viewing the play purely in terms of retaliatory power relations, brushes aside the crucial question of moral evil and good. Supposing one acknowledges that John has dominated over Carol with his “love of power,” what or whom has he sought to destroy with that power, as far as the events of this play are concerned, except his student’s morbid self pity and her complacency about the test-ridden curse of modern education that has mentally and linguistically ruined her? The professor’s radical views on American higher education might be disagreeable to Carol and of her ilk, but has he attempted to impose them in a spirit of self-willed oppression as the Group in Oleanna flagrantly forces itself on him? A truly balanced investigation of the
central issues of Mamet's play should primarily be based on the antithetical moral forces—benevolence and malevolence, or on the widest level, the Truth and the Lie—in conflict.

Contrary to MacLeod’s interpretation that Carol derives her linguistic control from her teacher’s egoistic language, the source of the student’s combative language is her PC Group. Speaking with a forked tongue after her first visit, Carol stands in a totally false relationship with her teacher in the second half of the play. The self-denigrating ignoramus of Act One (that she claims, if not pretends, to be) turns into the sinister “young thing of some doubtful sexuality” precisely because she, having confessed to her problems with language at the beginning, is tutored in the language of power by the PC Group and seeks to superimpose their agenda on John’s thought by throttling his power of expression. Now she can employ the stilted vocabulary of academia—
countenance, hierarchy, impinge, paternal prerogative, recant — with ease, but she cannot tolerate her teacher’s use of index, indict, paradigm predilection, transpire, etc. Accusations can be “proved” as “facts”; the will to power and revenge can be coloured as the need for “understanding”; aggressive hostility and shameless blackmail can become “an act of friendship”—all because she is backed by her “court officers” (72) who wield the political power to pounce on any enemy at will.

The professor at first naively believes he can reason his student into a reconciliation, but slowly understands that her aim is his annihilation. He can agree to Carol's argument that his sex-tinged joke and his touch on her shoulder can only indicate his “sexual exploitativeness”—he has the sense to admit to the possibility of such an interpretation by the sufferer. But he cannot cede to the Group’s attempt to rob him of his life, his very being. As Man Thinking,
John is the Descartesian human who strongly believes in the dictum, “I think, therefore I am.” Thought determines John’s human and professorial existence. He may lose his job and give up the prospect of a new house, but he will never compromise with the Group’s agenda to ban his book included in their list. “I’m a teacher. I’m a teacher,” he asserts, and suggests he cannot yield his identity and integrity to the Group that has assumed all powers now. He is unnerved by the “surprise” attack on him, yet, exercising the Will of the Spirit, he stands his ground: “You’re dangerous, you’re wrong and it’s my job ... to say no to you. That’s my job. You are absolutely right. You want to ban my book? Go to hell, and they can do what they want to me” (76). Far from being devoid of belief in anything as his detractors portray him to be, John is a dignified man of strong convictions. Fie is committed to his profession, to the Truth of his thoughts and beliefs.

**Inevitable Violence**

The violence that erupts in the final moments of the play is the inevitable, disastrous consequence of strangling the expression of human thought and feeling. If “rape” is the word Carol would employ for the physical restraint on her in an attempt to “talk” to her, then the right words for her smothering of John’s mind are “attempted murder.” To John, a man of thought, nothing can be more precious than the life of the mind, and the assault on this life is unbearable for him. Already reeling under the rape charge that has ruined his career and his sense of integrity, he cannot let Carol deprive him of his spontaneous self-expression. He asks her to quit, but she stays back, listening to his telephone conversation with his wife in which he calls her ‘Baby.’ “Don’t call your wife ‘baby,’” she instructs John as she leaves. That final brutal
blow on him rouses the beast in him. He assaults her verbally and physically, all his attempts to be human and cultured nullified by the vengeful Group that Carol represents at this point. He beats her madly and shows her in her true colours: “You vicious little bitch. You think you can come in here with your political correctness and destroy my life? [. . .] After how I treated you . . .? You should be . . . Rape you . . .? Are you kidding me? [. . .] I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little cunt” (79).

The fury of John’s language reveals how the gentleman-professor of Act One has been dehumanized in the last moments. It is the natural outcome of wresting the voice of the human soul. Feminist critics, however, have voiced their protest against this typical violence perpetrated on women on the stage, “We don’t need a play that helps anyone feel good about a man beating a woman,” Deborah Tannen has commented (qtd. in Mufson, 113). Elaine Showalter concludes her review of the play saying that “[t]he disturbing questions about power, gender and paranoia raised in Oleanna cannot be resolved with an irrational act of violence” (“Acts of Violence” 17). Their feelings can be shared with due respect to feminist fury at male violence on the sociological plane, but it may be perceived that such violence would result under similar circumstances even where two men come into conflict. Melville’s Billy Budd is a classic example. The titular hero Billy, falsely accused of fomenting mutiny on the battleship The Indomitable, strikes his officer Claggart furiously and causes his death. Billy is the most loved of the sailors on the ship for his handsome features and his undefiled innocence, yet he deals the deathblow quite against his benign nature because, due to his stammering, he cannot give verbal expression to his fury at Claggart’s accusation. At his trial he regretfully tells Captain Vere that, had his expression not been choked, he
would not have struck his officer. Whereas the deadly violence of the genial Billy occurs due to the hero’s own disability—stammering—the violence in Oleanna is wilfully provoked by the power-drunk student crushing her teacher’s jugular. McDonald rightly points out the unmanning effect of such verbal rape on men, citing the examples of Philip Roth’s and David Mamet’s professors:

Frustrated by the accusation of sexual harassment, and his inability to argue against it, John physically attacks Carol. Like Philip of Deception, he becomes the violent abuser of women he is accused of being. In both stories women, informed by the ideology of PC, strive to control the language of these male characters. As this inhibits the ability of the former to communicate, so it diminishes them as men. [. . .] These two articulate people—both writers and college professors—are shown to resort, ultimately, to the last recourse of the inarticulate precisely because they have been denied the use of language.

(McDonald)

Mamet gives his professor the credit of recovering his humanity after those brief spasms of instinct-driven bestiality. His maniac fury touches its peak when he raises the chair almost with murderous intent to hit her, but yet controls himself and lowers it without smashing her head. “That’s right. [. . .] Yes. That’s right,” his student says, cowering under the attack yet buoyant over her success in ultimately disciplining her professor. But there is hardly any glory or grandeur in that triumph, since the audience is all the time aware of the pile of lies or distorted truths on which she has hoisted her flag. As the play closes, the audience’s sympathies clearly incline toward the well-intentioned
professor horribly victimized by the PC Group. In keeping with the principles of classical tragedy, the catastrophe that befalls Mamet’s protagonist rouses the emotions of pity and fear—pity for his downfall, and fear for the formidable forces of nemesis that have driven him to it.

A Plea for Freedom of Thought

For all the controversies over the political and pedagogic issues forming the subtext of the play, Oleanna is neither about sexual harassment nor about failed teaching. The title of the play perhaps holds the right key to its meaning. The epigraph Mamet quotes from an old folksong reads; “Oh! To be in Oleanna, that is where I’d rather be / Than to be bound in Norway and drag the chains of slavery.” It sings of a utopia that Europeans attempted and failed to form in the nineteenth century. At the heart of Mamet's ostensibly polemical play, then, lies the human soul’s eternal longing for freedom from oppressions of all sorts. The human spirit, whose inherent nature is freedom, is constantly engaged in a ceaseless battle to attain to its own nature, and ever refuses to “drag the chains of slavery” in any form. The anguish of human existence consists in man’s, and woman’s, inability to break these chains for good, and their having to seek the ever-receding mirage of absolute liberty while still retaining the dialectical forces of mutual oppression. A truly free world, the conflict in Oleanna suggests, is one in which the human soul feels itself totally at ease with the world and free from all oppression. It is a utopia mankind is doomed never to attain, yet must ceaselessly strive for it.

Mamet has called Oleanna “a play about failed Utopia, in this case the failed Utopia of Academia” (“Mamet on Playwriting” 10). John’s conception of higher education, for all its humanistic value, is utopian; for him the
academe is a place that ought to encourage free thought and liberate the students from the psychological oppression of tests and grades. But it fails to take into account the more urgent utilitarian needs of the learners. On the other hand, the monomaniacal attempts of the academe’s PC Groups to achieve liberation from domination by robbing others of their freedom of thought are also utopian; the endless chain of the “substitutions of domination” can only polarize the opponents for ever, and will lead to ever-escalating physical and emotional violence on either side, as the catastrophe in Oleanna reveals. John teaches Carol to fight the oppression of academic regimentation, but himself becomes a victim of ideological oppression. When will this war of oppressions cease to be, the play seems to ask, and perhaps implies the answer: when men and women break consciously free from the “chains of slavery” to institutionalized thought—academic or ideological—and respect each other as human lives having an inherent and indefeasible right to freedom of thought.,”

The Cryptogram

Familial Betrayals: Impact on Children

The Cryptogram (1994), the only full-length domestic tragedy Mamet has written and produced, deals with familial betrayals and their impact psyche of little children. With this play Mamet joins the mainstream American drama of the last fifty years which, as Gerald M. Berkowitz observes in American Drama of the Twentieth Century, primarily consists of “plays with a realistic, contemporary, middle-class domestic setting” (208). Berkowitz points out that the major twentieth-century dramatists like Odets, Miller and Williams addressed momentous socio-economic and political issues such as the Depression and the failure of the American Dream by dramatizing their
profound impact on American households. In the 1990s, in the prime of his
dramatic career, David Mamet too takes to writing family-oriented plays, but
he focuses his attention on the spiritual crises faced by children in the wake of
the emotional violence perpetrated on them by their parents. *The Cryptogram*
(1994) poignantly portrays the sense of alienation and nothingness that
emotionally kills a ten-year old boy as he perceives the lie his parents have
been living. In this play, John Lahr remarks, “[w]ith remarkable concision and
insight, Mamet has mapped out the dynamics of a soul murder (“Betrayals”
73). The repercussions of unsympathetic treatment of children by self-willed
and authoritative elders has been a major concern with Mamet as playwright.
Professor John’s iconoclasm in *Oleanna*, for instance, demonstrates the
inveterate aversion to formal education created in his boyhood by elders who
had constantly humiliated him pointing to his “stupidity.” A loving and
sympathetic attitude to children, Mamet suggests on the other hand, is bound to
create and sustain a healthy optimism and euphoria in them.

After the publication of Mamet’s 1991 essay “The Rake,” in which the
author reminisced the cruelties he and his sister had gone through in their
“fractured family,” critics have invariably regarded *The Cryptogram* as a semi-
autobiographical play. The play is set in 1959, when Mamet was an eleven-year
old child of divorced parents. John, the central character in *The Cryptogram*, is
a ten-year old who perceives himself as the child of a broken home. The
emotional abuse inflicted on the child by the mother at the end of the play is
closely akin to that of the mother described in “The Rake.” The
correspondences between John and his creator have compelled critics to
consider *The Cryptogram* as Mamet’s sublimation of his childhood repressions.
Michael Feingold remarks that the play “feels like a deep-buried memory of the
playwright’s own, striking with a force at once more personal and more profound than his other works” (97). John Lahr reveals that Mamet had kept this play “in his trunk since the late seventies because of its intensely personal material” until he let producer Zollo to mount it on stage (“Fortress Mamet” 81). Elsewhere he remarks that the emotional abuse Mamet and his sister had suffered as children forms the basis of this family drama:

Such bleak and brutal terrain—full of cloaked threat and blighted feeling—is a large part of Mamet's emotional inheritance. He survived to dramatize its wary and perverse psychological climate—a ferocious, repressed atmosphere in which, out of fear and impotence and blame, people become willed strangers to themselves. (“Betrayals” 70)

In a work of art, however, the author’s neurosis need not be the critic’s primary concern. More significant is the internal “artistic truth” conveyed by the play. Critical analyses of the play only need to investigate the spiritual issues embedded in it: how or why the little protagonist fails to face his emotional crisis, and the moral implied by its concluding moments.

**Cryptic Message**

The cryptic message of the play, suggested by the title *The Cryptogram*, has mystified critics. If they refuse to understand it, they attack its author, as John Simon does, as “one of our most pretentiously vacuous playwrights” and find in the “verbal games” of the play “a nitwit who read Wittgenstein. Or just heard about him” (“Broadway Goes Off” 76). On the other hand, if they attempt to understand, they come out with various interpretations of the encrypted issues in the play. Clive Barnes says in his review:
It has been suggested that this very brief play, set in 1959, is partly autobiographical, because some of its facts—primarily a father leaving home—apparently coincide with those of Mamet’s own Chicago childhood. [. . .] The important thing here is not memoir, but how powerfully Mamet has evoked the pain and process of childhood—the way we learn “the meaning of things that have occurred. (“A Tale of the Cryptic” 150)

Pointing out that The Cryptogram “is not casually titled [and that] it speaks in code,” Vincent Canby reviewed in New York Times that it is “about the high cost of the emotional games played in what are otherwise considered to be fairly well-adjusted families” (C3). John Lahr also consistently brings out in his review of the play how commonplace objects and events are heavily encoded throughout the play. In his view, every object repeated in the course of the play—the staircase, the knife, the blanket—has an inner meaning other than the surface meaning in which it is commonly understood. To decode the play, hence, one needs to penetrate the surface of the banal dialogues and the numerous repetitions that fill it. Mamet has called it a “classically structured tragedy,” that is, a catastrophe that befalls the little protagonist—the ten-year old John. It is not about John’s striving to read the meaning of the “adult vocabulary” of his elders, as some critics seem to discover in it; rather, the little boy is The Cryptogram that the elders fail to decipher because, blinded by their superior authority, they hardly care to understand it.

**Story of a Child’s Estrangement**

The play dramatizes John’s estrangement from his parents and his desperate decision to end his life when he feels totally abandoned by them. The
little boy suffers from chronic sleeplessness, which is the consequence of the false relationships among the three elders around him—Robert, his father who never appears in the play, his mother Donny, and Del, a family friend—all of whom are callous to his longing for parental love. Robert has promised to take John on a camping trip, but does not turn up. John gets agitated, not so much by thoughts about his trip as by some intuitive perception of deception and disintegration in the family. Every now and then he keeps climbing up and down a staircase that connects the living room below and his bedroom above. Neither his mother nor the friend who stays with them cares to understand what the boy is exactly ailing from and to relieve him of his depression. Both fail to decode the meaning of John’s sleeplessness—the “cryptogram” that challenges interpretation, and in their own self-absorption leave it to dissolve into nothingness.

**Specious Truths and Real Truths**

As the play opens, John and Del are already discussing “issues of sleep.” John, excited and sleepless, is packing for (he proposed camp with his father, who is yet to return home from office. Del is trying to explain away such sleeplessness as quite common for children before a trip, when Donny, herself agitated, drops the teapot in the kitchen and breaks it. “I’m all right. I’m all right,” she says, but she is not. Del ironically comments that a human being has to reveal himself when something is “disordered.” He almost presages the “upheaval” the family is going to experience due to Robert’s “going’ from home, even though the reference is merely to the trip at this point (10).

The chief cause of Donny’s agitation, obviously, is John’s chronic sleeplessness, as her first question on her entrance reveals: “John . . .? Why
aren’t you asleep?” (11). Basically a kind mother, Donny still possesses the will to dominate and oppress the boy. It is revealed from the very start as she refuses to allow him to wait for his father’s return and makes his trip conditional: “But you need your sleep. And if you don’t get it, you’re not going on the trip” (11). The boy asks again about his father—his absence is the cause of his anxiety and restlessness—and his question only annoys the mother: “Must we do this every night?” (12). Del suggests that John should be doing some work till he can sleep, and the boy is sent away to tidy up the attic which is in disorder after Donny’s rummaging. The mother bewails that John “[a]lways has a Reason” for not sleeping, but hardly attempts to find out the real reason by dealing with the child with motherly love.

**Attempts to Escape into Fantasy**

As soon as the boy is gone, Donny discusses with Del an old photograph and a stadium blanket which she has found in the attic. Their conversation is interrupted by John who, standing on the staircase, once again talks about the things he needs to pack—a coat, sweaters, fishing line, etc. When the elders below have answered his questions and sent him up once again, they chime in with each other on the secluded and meditative life of a monk—an “Oriental fantasy.” Donny indulges in this “fantasy of rest” to liberate herself from the weariness of life that oppresses her and, more than that, to be free from her responsibilities to those around her, like the old man in the fantasy whose sons are gone. Instead of committing herself to finding out what is troubling her son’s mind, she takes to a vacuously philosophical rumination: “Because sometimes it seems the older I get, the less that I know” (18). The more she seeks an escape into fantasy, the more the reality—the hard
reality of a psychically distressed child—stares her in the face. John returns wrapped in a plaid blanket, and keeps saying he tore it while taking it out of the box, even though Donny assures him that “that was torn so long ago” (19). As Del says, John’s mind is “racing” and is quite obsessed with the trip, and at a deeper level, with his father’s prolonged absence.

**Robert’s Betrayal**

The discussion about a knife Del gives John to cut the twine off the Tackle Box brings in the theme of betrayal that governs the whole play. “Where did you get the knife, though?” the boy asks Del, and instantly thinks of the instrument as a symbol for severing relationships. Seeing him disturbed deeply, Donny asks him to “calm down tonight,” but the boy cannot. He has already experienced two misfortunes—the broken teapot and the torn blanket—and now he has premonitions of “The Third Misfortune,” for he has read in a book that “misfortunes come in threes” (20). He is not allowed to speak out the Third Misfortune, for Donny and Del distract his attention by talking about the second one at length. The conversation takes a different direction until, a few minutes later, John speaks about his intuited feeling that the Third Misfortune could have occurred long ago and is only waiting to be noticed or recognized. He is right. As he starts upstairs, he picks up a white envelope that contains a letter about the Misfortune—the “surprise” announcement that Robert is leaving his wife.

**Cause of Psychosis**

Act Two opens with a depiction of the psychic void the Misfortune has created in the child. John pathetically expresses in a monologue the sense of vacuum that had gripped his psyche the entire day:
I thought that nothing was *there*. Then I was looking at my *book*. I thought “Maybe there’s nothing *in* my book.” It talked about the *buildings*. May be there’s nothing *in* the buildings. And … or on *my globe*. You know my globe? [. . .] And we are a dream. Who knows we are here? No one knows we are. We are a dream. We are just *dreaming*. I know we are.” (32)

The monologue reveals that John is intensely feeling the falsity of the relationships he finds around him, and this is what Donny and Del refuse to acknowledge. Del brings him medicine to calm him to sleep, and the boy can only bemoan: “No one understands. You think that I’m *in* something . . . You don’t know what I’m feeling” (34). He does not want to sleep, for he hears voices before he can fall asleep, and out of fear he sweats through the sheets. Yet, having spent a whole restless day, he takes the medicine to relieve himself of tiredness, and persists in his questions about his father’s return. Donny has to force him to go upstairs, since she herself needs relief from the misfortune that has upset her.

Feeling lonely and abandoned, Donny seeks to drown her worries in drinking in Del’s company. Their drunken dialogue, which begins with a celebration of their friendship and togetherness “[i]n *trial* . . . [and] in *adversity*” reveals Del’s unscrupulous opportunism that betrays both Robert and Donny (36). He exploits Donny’s loneliness and projects himself as the right man who could fulfil her need for “someone nice” in a failed marriage. He claims that he has looked for Robert everywhere but could not find him, and even thought “that it wasn’t a good *idea* to have come here,” though he adds that he would not interfere in their relationship (37). He pretends to feel “such a shock” over Robert’s leaving his family, but Donny says it could have
been foreseen, considering the “going-away present” he has given Del—the Big German Knife.

This “pilot’s knife” had a “meaning,” Donny says. It was meant for cutting the cords of a pilot’s parachute if it got snagged on a tree while landing from a warplane. It was the knife, in other words, that would “release” him from any entanglement. This is exactly how it has served Robert, being given as a present to Del. It has been used to abandon Donny. As John intuited earlier about the Third Misfortune, the pilot’s knife has turned into a symbol of Del’s complicity in Robert’s betrayal of his wife. For all his lies about his camping with Robert in the previous week, Del cannot conceal the truth about the latter’s betrayal. When Donny asks him how he got the knife, he tells her that Robert “generously” presented it to him at the camp, simply because he was interestedly looking at it. Donny understands this as a brazen lie, for she has recently seen this knife in the attic after Robert’s return from the camp. She asks the right question that entangles Del into bigger lies: “You said he gave it to you when you were camping. (Pause.) How could he give it to you when you were camping, when it was here in the trunk when you both came back?” (41).

Del’s dithering answers to Donny’s questions finally reveal the truth that he and Robert did not go camping at all, and that Robert had given the knife to him to shut his mouth about an affair he had with a woman in Del’s hotel room. Donny plunges into despair when she finds both the men she trusted have betrayed her. She furiously orders Del to get out. John, who appears in his bathrobe now, asks his mother: “Are you dead?” He aptly brings out the inner death or vacuum she is experiencing. Fie has been hearing voices in his sleep, and feels himself “perfectly alone,” as much as his mother now is. The truth that has just come into the boy’s awareness is imaged as a candle giving out
light in the darkness of a world of lies. “Mother [. . .] I saw a candle in my
room” (44).

**Sense of Nothingness**

Act III, which opens one month later, presents both mother and son
experiencing extreme loneliness and estrangement from each other that finally
proves disastrous to the child at the end of the play. They are moving house,
and all the household things have been packed up. John is obsessed with death-
wish, and his mother, who has lost all meaning in life, hardly attempts to give
the love her son desperately needs, and rather gets self-absorbed in an
existential void: “John. Things occur. In our lives. And the meaning of them ..
. the meaning of them ... is not clear. [. . .] We assume they have a meaning.
We must. And we don’t know what it is” (46). Herself frustrated in life, she can
hardly solace her son. When he tells her that he cannot sleep because of his
unfulfilled wishes, she can only reply to him as an adult, without the least
attempt to reach out to the world of the child and relieve him of his fears:

What do you want me to do, John? I am not God. I don’t control
the world. If you could think what it is I could do for you . . . if I
could help you [. . .] John, everyone has a story. Did you know
that. In their lives. This is yours. [. . .] I’m going to speak to
you as an adult: At some point ... At some point, we have to
learn to face ourselves. . .” (46).

Such “adult” rationality only cuts off the emotional bond between her
and her child and puts him off. Literally it sends him “upstairs,” where he can
plunge into his own death wish and “face” himself. Del returns to propitiate for
his betrayal of Donny and acknowledges to her the depravity that all humans
are heir to: “You’d think, if there were a ‘Deity’ we would all burn. (Pause.) Swine that we are. But we go on” (48). He wants to return the pilot’s knife that served to wrong both Donny and John. Now Donny tells him how Robert has wronged him by lying about the knife and getting him to believe that it had associations with the War. It is not really a “War Memento” won from the enemy, Donny reveals, for Robert bought it “From a man. On the street. In London” (50). His friend’s lie to him hurt Del, and only now he sees the value of truth in human life: “Oh, if we could speak the truth, do you see, for one instant. Then we would be free” (50). Del regrets that the life he is leading in his hotel is “trash,” and wants to cleanse his mind by confessing the truth he has concealed “for a long while”—his love for Donny.

It is precisely this latent love relationship ensuing his father’s desertion that torments the sensitive John into chronic insomnia. In Act One Donny recalls how, before the War, she and her husband would make love under a blanket and asks Del, who had stayed the night with them at the Point, if he had been upset by their intimate voices. Del replies to her: “Aren’t you sweet . . . aren’t you sweet to worry” (27). The clandestine relationship stirs John who has fallen asleep on the couch. The betrayal of the elders hurts his instinct for a truthful relationship between his parents and, waking with a jolt, asks: “What did they say? What?” It appears as if the scene on which he opens his eyes is already being enacted in his unconscious, stirring him to spring up into the conscious world the moment he perceives the truth. In the final Act too, just when Del is making his protestations of love for Donny, John appears before him twice, as if his instinct forbade them: “My mind is racing,” he says, and tells his mother: “I know that I should not think about certain things, but. . .”
Here is the clue to decode John’s sleeplessness, the clue that the two elders, especially the mother, fail to perceive.

The boy is obviously depressed by Del’s betrayal of his friend and his mother’s betrayal of his father. Curiously, the next question he asks is, “Where’s the blanket?” The blanket, the audience knows by now, is a symbol of parental love and warmth. It was a blanket under which his parents had made love in a camp, and it was a blanket in which they had covered John when he was a baby (29). John deeply longs for parental intimacy, and even if he could not enjoy their physical warmth, he badly needs the blanket as a psychological comfort.

**Parental Apathy and Emotional Abuse**

John’s tragedy is the inevitable consequence of his mother’s total indifference to the dismal thoughts “racing” in his mind. Her mind now set to receiving Del’s attention, she isolates her child from her self-centred sphere, harping on the subject of his sleeplessness once again without caring to discover its root cause: “John: John: [. . .] you must go to sleep. If you do not sleep, lay there. Lay in bed. What you think about there is your concern. No one can help you. Do you understand?” (51). Everyone in the world is alone, she prattles, forgetting that she has got at least one friend and that John is “perfectly alone.” She will permit him to unwrap the box containing the blanket only if he promises to go to sleep. Both elders talk to the boy treating him “like a man” (52), and extract the promise from him before they wish him good night.

Once relieved of the boy’s presence, now the elders are bent upon strengthening their love relationship. Donny is hopeless of man’s loyalty and
indulges in a general observation of “human nature” which is “filthy” and of
life which is a “cesspool” (53). Del asks her pardon for betraying her and, he
too indulges in a pseudo-philosophical inquiry into such occurrences: “Well,
why does it happen? [. . .] Is it chance? Do you think it’s some mystery? What
you encounter? What you provoke?” (54). Donny can understand where all
these questions are meant to lead to—his protestation of his love for her: “You
came to say your little piece—go on,” she urges him, and just when Del is
about to speak out, the stage direction announces John’s appearance at the head
of the stairs.

Donny hisses like a snake thwarted from mating: “Yes. Yes. John,
What?” (54). The sibilants express her intolerance and exasperation over the
boy’s inopportune interruption. Her repeated “what”s drive a sense of guilt in
the child, who cannot go beyond a mere “I” and “I only.” He comes down
longing for attention and care, but is only treated with indifference and scorn.
“I DON’T CARE. Do You Know What It Means To . . . Give . . .” (54). She
chides her child for not keeping her promise, absolutely oblivious to her own
promise to him he may use the blanket in the box. In fact, John has come there
to ask about the means to untie the box containing the blanket. His mother is
least interested in his problems now. She brusquely tells him that she cannot
like him, for he “lied’ when he broke his promise. She tries to hustle him off,
giving him a book to read. When John naively reminds her of her promise—
“You said I could have the blanket”—she curtly dismisses him, saying he could
sleep without a blanket. John starts to walk up the stairs in despair, without
responding to Del’s “Goodnight” to him. His indifference to the man whom she
regards as his “protector” provokes her anger. She grows aggressively self-
willed and commands him to say goodnight to Del. The boy stands grimly
silent on the stairs, feeling extremely lonely and frustrated, with none to alleviate his fears and give him solace. The mother shreds him emotionally, accusing him of giving her the ill-treatment she is actually giving him: “What must I do that you treat me like an animal? [. . .] Now, I’m speaking to you, John. Don’t stand there so innocently. I’ve asked you a question. Do you want me to go mad? Is that what you want? Is that what you want? [. . .] Can’t you see that I need comfort? Are you blind?” (56).

Driven to a Tragic End

All this while, the boy’s thoughts are totally absorbed in the fearsome voices he hears whenever he tries to fall asleep. Del persuades him to say “sorry,” but John’s mind revolves round the blanket his mother has refused him. Del, insensitive to the anguish that is deepening his death wish, hands him the pilot’s knife to unwrap the box containing the blanket. “I hear voices. They are calling to me,” John moans pathetically as he climbs the stairs to his dark room. His mother has already sent him off with a goodnight, and Del too gets rid of him by asking him to “take the knife and go.” The child’s last words suggest the fatal decision he is forced to take, with his knife flicked out, in order to “release” himself from the pangs of existence. “They’re calling my name. (Pause.) Mother. They’re calling my name” (57).

The Cryptogram is a bleak portrayal of the charade that characterizes conjugal relationships in American families and the tragic impact of familial disintegration on sensitive children who crave for truth in their parents. In his early episodic play Reunion Mamet dramatized the loneliness and despair that fills the lives of a divorced father and his loving daughter who craves for paternal love. In his recent domestic tragedy he has recaptured a similar
situation, this time a son longing for parental attention to his psychic needs, and failing to get it, driven to a tragic end. Reunion suggested the possibility of harmonious relationship between lather and daughter at the end. The Cryptogram, on the other hand, delineates the impossibility of preventing the psychic disaster of children who, in all their blissful and undefiled innocence, still have an instinct for truth and who see nothing but shams around them, especially in the immediate ambience of their lie-ridden families. In Reunion Bernie’s legal separation from his daughter results from his alcoholism, and the father can mend his ways and can still live with his emotional bonds intact. In The Cryptogram John’s parents live irredeemably self-centred and self-indulgent lives that render them apathetic to their child’s emotional estrangement and to his longing for parental warmth and protection. John’s father abandons his family, his abandoned mother seeks a new relationship with her husband’s friend, and all the three callously abandon the sensitive boy to his fate. The playwright has powerfully dramatized John’s tragedy as the natural outcome of his anguish over the lies that gnaw at his inner spirit.

**Truth Prevails**

Most remarkable in this tragedy is the progression from Lie to Truth. From the start, the lies of ciders are pitted against the truth the child seems to possess intuitively. John’s agitated psyche, manifested in his chronic insomnia, finds its ultimate ‘peace’ only when all the lies that beleaguer his soul are laid to rest and the truth about every elder in the family comes to light: Robert will never come home; he and Del had not gone camping the previous week; the pilot’s knife is not a War memento but one bought on a London street; it is not a gift but a payoff to shut Del’s mouth about Robert’s betrayal of his wife; Del
has not been a mere friend of Donny but has loved her for long; Donny herself is interested in receiving his amorous attention—such are the truths about the false relationships presented through the play’s “action,” and all these revelations virtually kill the little protagonist. The formidable truth John comes to understand in the last moments of the play is that, in the world of self-obsessed elders around him, all that he can get is, not the love he longs for, but violence and ruthless oppression. John’s mother can never decode the cryptogram of his sleeplessness, since her own passions blind her to her son’s inner turmoil. Finally, only John can put an end to his sleeplessness—by putting himself to the sleep that will free him from all fears and dreams—for good.

A Truly Tragic Event

The story of John’s sleeplessness gains in significance if we consider Mamet’s frequent associations of little children in his plays with sleep. In The Woods, Ruth lulls Nick to sleep, after a series of violent quarrels and assaults between them, by narrating the story of two children lost in the woods who could sleep hugging each other in blissful innocence. In the one-act play Prairie du Chien, the only being who can sleep calmly in the midst of all the violence on the train is the Listener’s school going son. The short play ends with the Storyteller’s comment: “Can you beat that? (Pause.) I’d give a lot to sleep like that. (Pause.) Yes, I would. Yessir, I would” (The Shawl and Prairie du Chien 86). In Jolly, the brother of the titular character spends a safe and peaceful night in her house, When her husband asks him next morning how he had slept, Bob replies: “Like a rock or like a baby” (ON 52). All these instances suggest that only grownups with frenzied and corrupt minds lose this
most precious boon of nature enjoyed by children—the ability to fall asleep in pure-hearted innocence. And nothing is a greater tragedy than a ten-year old boy succumbing to chronic depression due to his parents’ betrayals and finally driven to take his life by the mother who brought him into existence. As Aristotle says in Chapter XIV of *The Art of Poetry*, the tragic events that are most likely to evoke pity and fear in the audience are those that involve relations who are near and dear to one another, “when for example brother kills brother, son father, mother son, or son mother, or if such a deed is contemplated, or something else of the kind is actually done [. . .] (50). In *The Cryptogram*, the mother driving her little child to kill himself in search of his own peace—to rid himself of the world of lies that surrounds him—constitutes a truly tragic event.

In a short story titled “Soul Murder: A Family Matter” (1996) Mamet crisply brings out the psychological wonders that elders can work on children with just a few simple words that honestly encourage them. A mother in this story discriminates between two of her children who are up to her expectations and one boy who does not “deserve” her appreciation because he cannot “work” adequately. She threatens to seize her toys from him, and controls his physical movements even in a small action like walking to the next room. The boy feels small, and can conduct himself only in a stiff, self-restrained fashion. The woman walks away for a moment when a man, observing the boy’s humiliation, fantasies himself as his “guardian angel,” goes to him, and tells him that he is “not bad, but good.” The “angel” also gives the boy a coin which, every time he touches it, would “magically” remind him that he is not bad but good. As soon as the man gets out of the fantasy, the mother returns, and finds all the three children “smile and rise and organize themselves around
their bags” (“Soul Murder” 37). The story concisely brings out the emotional abuse most authoritative elders perpetrate on children and also suggests the simple means by which the emotional health of poorly performing kids could be sustained.

The moral message encrypted in *The Cryptogram* is akin to that in “Soul Murder.” Mamet’s domestic tragedy suggests the terrible psychic havoc caused by self-centred and self-willed mothers on their children. John’s mother says at one point that her son “has to learn the world does not revolve around him” (26). But ironically, this is precisely the lesson she needs to learn as a mother. She confesses her guilt over spending one week on her own, especially at a time when her boy’s wish to go camping has been unfulfilled. She is profoundly upset when her husband abandons her, but in her self-obsession forgets that their son feels abandoned by both. Her closed insular world leaves no room to sympathize with the anguish in her son’s soul. Instead of giving him motherly love and care, she persistently attempts to keep him out of her sphere. She selfishly seeks to make her own life meaningful by flirting with Del, but does not care in the least that by doing so she is alienating the boy further and rendering his life meaningless. She grows aggressive toward the sleepless child, denies him even the simple comfort of a blanket, and, tormenting him to the limits of frustration, drives him to take his life. *The Cryptogram* thus powerfully brings out the terrible impact of emotional abuse on sensitive children. Vincent Canby’s review of the play rightly puts forth the emotional response its tragic end is bound to create: “Not in any contemporary literature that I know has childhood been as movingly evoked as it is in *The Cryptogram* (Canby C3).
In an interview with Henry I. Schvey David Mamet has said: “Drama is basically historically about lies. That is what drama is about, somebody lying to somebody” (qtd. in Schvey 90). The full-length plays discussed so far make it clear that for Mamet, a playwright with an obsessive moral concern, the staging of the lies of the world is always to project before the audience a vision of the destructiveness of lies, and, in turn, to underscore the human need for commitment to truth for meaningful, authentic interpersonal relationships. Schvey lucidly expresses the ultimate moral effect Mamet’s plays produce on the audience:

Writing about people who are most often self-deceived or lying to one another, Mamet’s plays paradoxically allow us to celebrate basic truths about ourselves and our society more adequately than if their moral message was explicitly conveyed through didactic speeches” (“Power Plays 90).