Chapter IV
The Authentic Jew

Fighting Unconscious Anti-Semitism

The ontological disconnections observed in the preceding chapters—the inner discord that prevails among the estranged people of America who cannot connect meaningfully with either their present or their past life—form the basis, at a different level, of Mamet's Jewish plays as well. If Mamet's ruthless portrayals of business and familial relations in American society bring out the inner chaos resulting from a sense of betrayal, alienation and humiliation, Mamet’s Jewish plays too, with the author's Jewish consciousness predominant in them, depict similar spiritual experiences. *The Old Neighborhood* (1997), David Mamet's “family-oriented” autobiographical play consisting of three episodes, is essentially a play that deals with “spiritual issues.” Like most of the plays in the Mametian canon, it is about broken relationships and humans’ attempts to connect, to belong, and make themselves “whole.” But the connections sought by the characters in this play are presented from a distinct Jewish point of view. As Jewish characters reminisce over their past and regret the loss of their cultural and spiritual heritage, their capacity to reconnect with their cultural past and gain inner strength is suggested.

The characters in *The Old Neighborhood*, representing the much-maligned Jewish community that has been scapegoated and given to self-loathing for centuries, give vent to the repressions in their racial psyche and seek to attain to their self-worth as human beings. They realize the need to dispel the Lie that has been injected into their racial psyche and has been passively acknowledged by it—that Jews have called upon themselves the anti-
Semitic hatred and persecutions perpetrated on them. The Jewish cultural consciousness might have eroded in the American Melting Pot, yet, once the Jews shed their “unconscious anti-Semitism” and exercise their spiritual will to preserve their human worth, they can reconnect themselves to their glorious heritage and live in harmony with each other. The true Jew, in David Mamet's moral vision, is one who gives the lie to one’s mythic image as a detestable being and, evolving into a man or woman of moral action, revives and reestablishes his racial and spiritual connections.

Mamet: The Jewish Artist

After *The Cryptogram*, David Mamet’s artistic self seemed to be chiefly preoccupied with staying connected to his Jewish spiritual heritage and anchoring itself in it. Intensely conscious of his identity as a third-generation descendent of Ashkenazi immigrants from Eastern Europe, Mamet registered his concern for the decadence of a race that had been both physically vigorous and spiritually wholesome. Mamet’s art took new forms, besides drama and film, to express the author’s deepening Jewish concerns. *Passover* (1996) and *Bar Mitzwah* (1999) picturesquely described two cultural ceremonies of the Jews. A television film titled *Lansky* brought out the Jewish identity of a Mafia don. His 1997 novel *The Old Religion* was based on the true story of Leo Frank, a Jewish pencil-factory manager in Georgia, who was falsely accused of raping and murdering a 13-year old white girl and, subjected to untold humiliations and cruelties, was finally castrated and lynched by a furious anti-Semitic mob.

Jewish consciousness has reigned supreme in Mamet’s psyche throughout his artistic career, but only rarely has it formed the all-pervasive
theme of his works. The films and plays he produced toward the end of the twentieth century are studded with lexicons from Hebrew and Yiddish, the traditional languages of the Jews. Cultural terms like Passover, Ceder, Bar Mitzwa, Yom Kapur, the Shiva, Alavasholem etc. pervade the author’s essays and non-dramatic works. Frequent allusions to the Holocaust and the persecutions on Jews in exile exhibit the author’s conscious efforts to right the wrongs done to a “beautiful and good people” who, as he proudly wrote in “The Decoration of Jewish Houses,” have “a magnificent and ancient history of thought and action” living in their blood (Some Freaks 13).

Homicide: The Jewish Dilemma

The one failing that Mamet finds detrimental to the evolution of the healthy Jewish sensibility is self-loathing. Homicide (1991), Mamet’s screenplay for his film dealing with Jewishness as the central theme, emphasizes the need for Jews to counteract anti-Semitism in themselves. Bobby Gold, the Jewish protagonist in Homicide, is a detective who is too duty-conscious to identify himself with his fellow Jews. His self-consciousness as a Jew is no deeper than a sense of humiliation he feels as when someone calls him a “kike.” Accidentally he is entrusted with a case involving the murder of Mrs. Klein, an elderly Jewish woman owning a variety store in a ghetto. Gold is brought round to perceive his own Jewishness by the “family” of Jews surrounding the murdered woman. What appears to be just another “homicide” at the beginning is discovered shortly as part of the genocide carried out by a neo-Nazi gang that still continues the anti-Jewish extermination campaign of Hitler. Gold, though he is callous to the fate of the Jews at first because of his self-loathing as a Jew, is racially regenerated by
Mrs. Klein’s granddaughter, and voluntarily involves himself in a terrorist campaign that counteracts anti-Semitism. In a bid to prove himself a Jew, he joins the conspirators and blows up a neo-Nazi printing press that generates anti-Jewish activities. After the sabotage he finds that he has been under surveillance, and his entry into the press and exit have been photographed to blackmail him. He faces a moral crisis in which he has to choose between assisting the Jewish conspirators in their fight for their homeland and being loyal to his profession. He chooses the latter.

The ethnicity that characterizes Mamet’s *Homicide* invites adverse criticism from racist critics who view the author’s perceptions of the loss of Jewishness as more paranoiac than factual. Reviewing the screenplay in *New Republic*, Wieseltier excoriates Mamet for his apparent obsession with anti-Semitism. According to him, *Homicide* is a film in which “the foul fundamentals of Mamet’s Jewishness are clearly established”:

> The whole world wants the Jews dead. There is no difference between the paranoid view of the world and the Jewish view of the world. History has left the Jews no choice but to die or to kill. Violence is a lovely and legitimate expression of Jewish identity. A kind of secular Kahanism, pure and simple. Mamet is the latest in a long line of Jews who owe their Jewishness entirely to anti-Semitism. In Mamet’s case, though, the religion of tough guys is especially virulent” (“Machoball Soup” 46).

As a non-Jew, perhaps, Wieseltier cannot empathize with the humiliations which the Jews in the Diaspora have been forced to endure throughout their ethnic history. As a committed Jew in whose sensitive psyche this whole “history” remains alive, Mamet is keen on projecting before his race the ugly
past it has lived, so that the race could gain self-knowledge about its true beauties and potentialities of which he himself has evolved as the paradigm.

Stephen Moss, in his essay “Home is the Hunter,” quotes Mamet as saying:

> As the children of immigrant Jews, we are spurred in our need to observe by the memory of old humiliations, of old indignities. Trained not to assimilate, we have found useless the virtues of compromise with our environment. . . . True to our past, we live and work with an inherited, observed, and accepted vision of personal futility, and of the beauty of the world, (qtd. in Moss)

Hence, in Mamet’s “Jewish” writings, the need for Jews to realize their self-worth and to commit themselves to a spiritually wholesome “Jewish” life gains importance. As a writer yearning for his ethnic authenticity, he delineates his Jewish characters as striving with the Will of their Spirit to connect with and to belong to their race. In *Homicide*, amidst all the violence and suspense characteristic of a cop movie, Mamet presents the Jewish dilemma through its central character Bobby Gold. The Jewish detective is devoted to his profession, benevolent by nature, and sweetly persuasive in speech, but he has lost touch with the distinct cultural heritage of the Jews. He cannot read or understand Hebrew and Yiddish; nor can he empathize with the humiliations and persecutions his “people” have gone through for generations as “outsiders.” Among the Jews frustrated with their sufferings as exiles and fighting for the formation of their homeland, Gold is an alien. Only after lending his service in the Jewish cause does he attain his Jewish identity.

Gold’s spiritual anguish gnaws at his heart even after he has made his moral choice after the sabotage. By firmly refusing to hand the hit-list of Jews to the conspirators he has proved his greater loyalty to his profession, but the
question that perturbs him is whether the people to whom he has “sworn” to be so loyal are his own. For all his devotion to his duty, he considers himself only an outsider now. Gold’s inner void is revealed in the last moments of the film when Randolph, a criminal holding the disarmed Gold at gunpoint, asks him if he would beg for his life. Gold replies that he would not, for “It’s not worth anything” (HOM 120). Fie probably feels his worthlessness as a police officer who has honestly served in an alien country, but is himself cut off from his spiritual heritage. It is an awareness he has gained through his temporary communion with his people. The true meaning or worth of life for him lies in serving where he belongs—his own people in his own homeland, with all his cultural and spiritual connections.

The Old Neighborhood

*The Disappearance of the Jews* (1982), *Jolly* (1987), and “Deeny” (1997)—three one-acters strung together to make one play, *The Old Neighborhood*—bring out the Jewish attempts to come into an awareness of their distinct racial self. Each (one-act) “scene” stands by itself, and in each the characters are seen striving to make up for the losses they have suffered either as members of the Jewish community or as the progeny of generations of loveless parents or simply as a lonely soul searching for its metaphysical links. In the first two scenes, especially, the characters weigh their present against their past, and assessing the relative values of either, seek to arrive at an inner truth that would offer them the peace they long for.

What connects the episodes in *The Old Neighborhood*, through the central character Bobby, is the author’s intense concern for the decadence of Jewish values in the multi-cultural urban society of America and the earnest
attempts of Jews to revive them. Bobby, whom Mamet has acknowledged as
his alter ego, undertakes a nostalgic journey down the memory lane. Now in his
“thirties or forties,” he visits his hometown of Chicago and shares his past and
present experiences with his friend, his sister and his former lover in sequence
during a week end. In the first two visits his Jewish consciousness is the
predominant factor. In brief, *The Old Neighborhood*, as Steven Drukman
observes in his article on Jewish actor Peter Riegert, is about “Bobby’s
ambivalent relation to his Judaism, or more precisely, ‘Jewishness,’ and how it
informs his sense of belonging to this world” (52).

*The Disappearance of the Jews: Recalling Heritage*

*The Disappearance of the Jews,* at first sight, is a medley of the faulty
memories of two Jewish friends who meet in a hotel room after years of
separation. As the play opens, Bobby and Joey reminisce about their juvenile
escapades. They are not sure which of their old friends—Howie Greenberg or
Jeff—they tied to his bed and threw in the snow in a Winter Camp years ago.
But soon it is revealed that Joey’s reminiscence is bound up with something
that concerns him throughout the episode—the loss of male vitality. The first
event the friends discuss ends up with a remark on the sexual degeneration that
has befallen Howie: “Howie turned out to be a fag. [. . .] Isn’t that something,”
Joey tells Bobby (10). Thus what seems to be a casual personal memory of two
friends suggests the theme of the whole episode, namely, the Jewish
degeneration from vitality to sterility in an age of moral decadence.

In the second scene, neither Bobby nor Joey can remember for sure the
name of the girl he had in his youth. What is brought to light in their nostalgic
exchanges is the haziness of the relationship with the “broads” besides their
nominal and physical identities. Whether it was Rosen or Rubovitz, whether it was “some Jew broad” or “some folk dancer,” they are merely memories of the past of which the friends hardly care to think. As with Howie Greenberg, the sexuality of the girls also is said to have lost its distinction. Bobby thinks they were “dykes” and Joey adds, “They were before their time” (12).

The blurring of the boundaries of sexuality between men and women may be innocuous in relationships that demand no commitment on either side, but in a marriage where racial identities clash with each other and are devoid of mutual respect, the consequences may be disastrous. Racial dichotomy has destroyed conjugal harmony at Bobby’s home. When asked by Joey about his life with his wife Laurie, Bobby bewails: “I should never have married a shiksa” (14). His marital problems go beyond his differences with his gentile wife toward a deeper concern for his progeny. The erosion of distinctions disturbs him as he thinks of his son. What is going to be his son’s racial identity? Joey points out that the Judaic law will identify him as a Jew only if “his mother is a Jew” (15). “Fuck the law,” Bobby retorts, for it is not the legal sanction that is important to him. He is anxious that his son cannot grow up as a Jew if he is brought up by a “shiksa” who cannot share Jewish feelings. His wife once cast a slur on Jews that wounded Bobby to the quick: “If you’ve been persecuted so long, eh, you must have brought it on yourself” (15).

Scapegoating the Jews for the cruelties inflicted on them is nothing new to Bobby. Accustomed to swallowing such blame on the victim, Bobby says he started thinking if his wife’s words “could be true. Joey, however, wants to rescue him from such self-degradation. The truth, he argues, is quite different from what the Jews have been made to believe themselves to be:
Don’t let that white shit get into your head. [. . .] the reason they
goyim [non-Jews] hate us the whole time, in addition they were
envious is; vve don’t descend to their level . . . (pause) because
we wouldn’t fight. [. . .] these cocksuckers in a fuckin,’ wrapped
in hides come down and 'cause we don’t fight back they go
“Who are those people . . .?” (pause) “Hey let’s hit them in the
head.” Because we have our mind on higher things, (pause)
Because we got something better to do than all day to fuckin’
beat the women up and go kill things. (16)

In his rebellious spirit that seeks to right the wrongs done to the Jews Joey
obviously contrasts with the passive Bobby. His intense consciousness of the
Jew’s inner worth as a human being is the light at the end of the tunnel—the
end to the shameless acceptance of shame.

The third scene in The Disappearance of the Jews elaborates upon the
theme of the life-enhancing values of Jewish cultural and spiritual heritage—in
contrast to the debilitating contemporary forces, social and cultural, that rob the
Jews of their vitality. The difference between the two is one between what is
life, and what is not. Joey fantasies himself being in Europe in the pre-War
days, fully experiencing the physically vigorous and spiritually nourishing
Jewish way of life, and contrasts it with the dreary restaurant life he is dragging
along in America now. “I was meant to be hauling stones, or setting up fence
posts, something . . . Look at me: the way I’m built, and here I’m working in a
fucking restaurant my whole life. No wonder I’m fat. I swear to God” (17). He
deeply regrets the missed connections between his cultural past and his
vacuous present. In the European days, he fantasies, he could shove aside a
huge tree blocking the road dispensing it with a crowbar; and he possessed the
brawn to “pick up an ox” (18). On the spiritual plane, rabbis would tell him the
truth about the world and unravel its mystery. All this glory is lost in the
present-day world impoverished by unenlightened careerism and insipid,
fattening foods:

I feel in my heart I was meant to work out in the winter all day.
To be strong. Of course we’re schlepping all the time with heart
attacks, with fat, look at this goddam food I sell . . . that stuff will
kill you, it killed my dad ... it is good to harvest wheat, to forge,
to toil; [...] the time should come we’re sixty we look back, our
wives are there, our children, the community . . . and we are
sitting there, we are something . . . And we’ve been men. You
know? [...] And we’ve lived! We’ve lived the life we were
supposed to live, (pause) Not this, Bobby. Not this . . . . (18)

But Bobby points out that Europe was not all roses in those days. The
horrors of the Nazi extermination camps would not have been a “picnic” for
Joey had he been there during the Holocaust. The mere mention of the Nazis
evokes a rebellious impulse in Joey who feels he has missed a chance to stand
up for the Jews then: Fuck the Nazis. Fuck the Nazis, Bob, Em saying, give a
guy a chance to stand up . . . Give them something to stand for” (19). Joey’s
heroic spirit may be adorable as a fantasy, but Bobby is too realistic to
romanticize the tortures which the victims of the camps really went through:
“No, Joe, no. You don’t know what you would have done. [...] You don t
know what the fuck you would have done, what you would have felt. None of
us know” (19).

Bobby’s attempts to tie Joey down to reality are of no avail, since the
latter’s fancy takes wings once again, now over the life in a European shtetl. In
Europe, carrying on his juvenile sexual escapades with Polish whores or “some young Jewish thing” in the small towns would be nearly impossible, Joey imagines, “[b]ecause you were a Jew. If you wanted to go out fuck around who’d have you? If you stayed home you would be found out” (20). Yet, nocturnal adventures were not lacking in the European shtetls. Joey’s macho wings take to further heights as he imagines his wife Judy in a shtetl, getting old and suffering from “some incurable disease.” He would not be old. He would keep contemplating life, when the orphaned daughter of one of his customers would come to attend on him and offer him some baked stuff prepared for him.

Both Bobby and Joey share their pride over the illustrious names in the movie industry—Mayer, Warners, Fox, Charlie Chaplin. “Miller-White Shoes” is another evidence of the achievements of the Jews in all spheres of life. But all this euphoria over their racial identity with the big names conceals the domestic disaster that has disconnected the friends from their spouses and battered their psyche. Joey now confesses how he got married wrong, and is always seething with uncontrollable anger. “I pray every night I pray that I can get through life without murdering anybody,” he says (23). He expresses a deep wish to kill his wife and children, take a plane, and disappear into the woods where, after living an absolutely free life, he could die as cloistered visionaries and scholars do. Sometimes he harbours suicidal thoughts too—the eternally fearful, insecure life as a Jew and the drudgery of a meaningless life without intimate human connections urge him to wish for death. The meaning of life and blissful relationships were available only in the past. There were mystic rituals which, though painful to go through, would transform an aspirant into a man: “. . . they’d take you in a hut. You’d come out, you would be a man.”
And, by God, that is what you would be” (26). No such fulfilment is available for a man now.

In a world devoid of vital relationships—familial, social and racial—both Bobby and Joey feel an unbearable spiritual vacuum. Both make a feeble attempt to revive their decadent traditions. While Bobby “invents ceremonies” and struggles hard to keep up prayer in a way he used to, Joey has just joined a new synagogue with his wife Judy. As the play closes, the friends are intent upon practicing self-restraint as part of their spiritual exercises. Either wishes to have a cigarette to ease himself of his tension, and either controls his desire with his moral will:

JOEY. You wanna go get some [cigarettes]?

BOBBY. I almost do, but I shouldn’t.

JOEY. No, I shouldn’t either. (Pause.) Isn’t that something?

BOBBY. Yes. It is, Joe.

JOEY. Isn’t that something?

BOBBY. It’s one for the books.

This dialogue that closes the play is apparently inconsequential, but it serves to convey the meaning of the play. Notably, almost in every Mamet play, whether the plots are episodic or progressive, the central character always exhibits at the end of the play a moral choice which the playwright describes as an expression of “the Will of the Spirit.” Mamet’s concluding scenes invariably suggest that it is for man to make or mar himself through the moral choices he makes with his free will. “Isn’t that something,” Joey asks at the beginning with concern over Howie Greenberg’s choice of homosexuality. He asks the same question at the end, with a mild sense of self-elation, when he has chosen not to smoke,
despite the pressing need for it he feels at the moment. Moments such as these, including the resumption of Bobby’s prayer and Joey’s synagogue worship, are significant in Mamet’s plays, for they hint at the human attempts to transcend the predicaments in their lives and to commit themselves to moral advancement.

Such moral conclusions are unfortunately ignored when criticism tends to focus more on the fragmentary and elliptical aspects of Mamet’s dialogue, and misguided critical conclusions result from incongruous theories applied to the playwright’s moral vision. Evaluating The Disappearance of the Jews as a play that emphasizes the “paralysis” of Jews who find themselves in an irredeemable cultural crisis, J.A. Nelson concludes his essay “A Machine Out of Order: Indifferentiation in David Mamet's The Disappearance of the Jews with this comment:

Joey and Bobby are caught between an ever-increasing disillusion of cultural identity, and a lack of sacrificial resources to generate new life. It is this paralysis that the play conveys.

[. . .] The two men occupy a post poised between cultural extinction and genocide at the hand of the righteous persecutors [Mamet would perhaps never agree that the persecutors are “righteous”]. The machine that is carrying them is petering out in a hostile environment. Immobility and remembrance of things past become the only choices of “action.” (467)

If one examines the subtext of the play carefully, resisting the temptation to graft any extraneous theory into the text, one may find that the “immobility” that Mr. Nelson attributes to the two friends is the least characteristic of Mamet’s characters. As the play reaches its final moments, the “remembrance
of things past” becomes the means by which they realize their ancestral glory and the possible sources of their strength and cultural replenishment. Rather than succumb passively to their hostile self-alienating environment, they attempt to shape their own spiritual environment that would nourish their body and soul. The possibility of revitalizing relationships—with one’s relations, one’s culture or one’s God—is never ruled out in Mamet’s plays, especially the episodic plays.

**Jolly: A Study in Emotional Abuse**

*Jolly*, the second one-acter in *The Old Neighborhood*, dwells upon the theme of the decadence of Jewishness in the American melting pot, not as reminiscences of an old culture, but as the cause of familial disintegration and emotional abuses in the childhood life of Jolly, Bobby’s sister who is now married with children. In *The Disappearance of the Jews* Bobby bewailed the domestic disorder that had occurred due to his marriage to a *shiksa*. *Jolly* centres on the oppressions Bobby’s sister had gone through as a child, consequent upon her Jewish mother’s remarriage to a *sheigetz*—a non-Jew. When Bob ("Bobby” in the previous play) visits her during the weekend, she narrates her miseries in an emotionally estranged family where her own mother and her stepfather had been the chief villains. Bob, who has also experienced parental torments as a boy before he left the broken home, shares Jolly’s indignation at the generations of abuses perpetrated on children in their family. The release of her repressed anger brings solace to Jolly; her brother too, his marriage on the rocks at the time, finds comfort in the harmony of the happy home that his sister has established with her loving husband Carl.
A Story of Oppression and Repression

As in most Mamet plays, *Jolly* opens *in medias res*. The titular character is through her narration of the ceaseless torments her stepfather is still inflicting on her, and the vivid recollection of their recent telephonic conversation prepares the audience to participate in the fury erupting from her repressed psyche. In that phone call her stepfather has disapproved of the way she is raising her children. Bob, who is no stranger to the man’s oppressions, reacts at once in dismay: “Oh, Lord . . . how long can this go on? . . . How long can this go on? Wait a minute. Wait a minute ... You should cease ... all meetings, dialogue ... You should take an oath never to talk to, meet with, . . . And the children most especially. How can this, are we going to expose another generation to this . . . this . . .” (33-34). Bob’s outburst reveals his profound concern to call a halt to the tortures handed down for generations by his ancestors. In his autobiographical essay “The Rake: A Few Scenes from My Childhood” Mamet narrates how his stepfather’s persistent cruel behaviour toward his sister had descended directly from their grandparents. Mamet’s grandfather, a salesman on the road who visited his family only during weekends, would always beat Mamet’s mother. Mamet narrates the cruelties of the ancestors:

Their family (Mamet’s grandparents) had a fiction, and that fiction, that article of faith, was that my mother was a naughty child. And each Friday, when he came home, his first question as he climbed the stairs was “What has she done this week . . . ?” At which my grandmother would tell him the terrible things that my mother had done, after which she, my mother, was beaten. (“The Rake” 71)
Whether the sins of the fathers are visited on their children or not, *Jolly* seems to suggest, parental violence certainly is. Regularly beaten up by her father in her childhood, Mamet’s mother discharged the repressions of her childhood traumas on her daughter. In the play, Jolly perceives the source of her stepfather’s cruelties to her. When he told her that he had been “in therapy” to free himself of the repressions caused, according to him, by her bad upbringing of her children, she could see the origin of such accusations: “And when he said it, I heard his father’s voice. [. . . ] And I saw. Me had turned into his father (34). Mamet suggests that the prime cause of the children’s indignation at their violent parents, as they grow into maturity, is the way the oppressors blame their victims for their victimization. In “The Rake” Mamet narrates how a round kitchen table in their house “was associated in our minds with the notion of blood.” Mamet tells his reader that the glass table often became the object of their stepfather’s uncontrollable temper, and every time he smashed it, the children were supposed to know that they had driven him to lose his temper.

And it seems that most times when he would shatter the table, as often as that might have been, he would cut some portion of himself on the glass, or that he or his wife, our mother, would cut their hands on picking up the glass afterward, and that we children we were to understand, and did understand, that these wounds were our fault. (“The Rake” 69)

Little children, in their helpless state, may be forced to swallow these lies, but the truth in their soul emerges in their consciousness as they mature, and bestows upon them the courage to question the elders with a vengeance. In *Jolly* Bobby’s sister fumes at the way she was treated “like filth” by her mother.
and her stepfather, and her brother joins her in her inveterate aversion, saying: “there’s no excuse for them” (35).

As Jolly unfolds her bitter experiences one after another, it becomes clear that her present fury is rooted in the sense of powerlessness which her loveless parents had injected into her psyche by exercising their superior will over her. She had no choice of her own in anything. At the age of ten, her stepsister Carol would share her bed at night, and turning “all over the place,” would rob her of her sleep. If she vented her grievance over it the next morning, the mother would only give a cruel reply: “She is his daughter and this is the case. If you can’t sleep, sleep on the floor” (35). When Jolly had been married with children, both her mother and stepfather, as newly married couple, seemed to love her children for a while, taking them out and getting them whatever they wanted. Soon, however, when she moved with her family, they seemed to keep themselves completely out of touch. Asked over phone about their long silence for six months, her mother explained that her husband had been in “counselling.” He had been “repressing his feelings” about the way she raised her children. He was learning to live “facing his past.” As grownups, Bob and Jolly can now see that it is a whacking lie. They know who the “counsellor” is, and can hardly tolerate her “psychobabble” (37). Their aversion for their lying and loveless parents only grows more intense: they mock at her mother’s explanation, for it is diametrically opposed to the truth they perceive:

BOB. Well, of course. Of course. That’s how they all live. Facing the past. Facing the past. Looking at the past. *Fuck* him.

AND fuck “counselling,” is the only thing I’m saying ...

JOLLY. . . . I’m with you.
Jolly also fumes at the injustice done to her. She recalls that it was she who had been attending on her mother as she lay dying, for the stepfather had just left the “infirm woman” to her fate. Carol, her stepsister, had not even cared to attend her mother’s funeral. Yet, when it came to the sharing of her mother’s “antiques,” only Carol could get what she wanted. Jolly was given nothing to remember her mother by. She had not wanted any costly memento: “Nothing very valuable, God forbid, except that it had a meaning for me” (39). It would be refused under some pretext, and the only choice she was left with was to “stop asking” any more. Later, when she asked for her portion of the money which the stepfather had put in a trust after selling her mother’s possessions—for her family badly needed money as they were moving—he would only give an elusive reply: “I am not convinced I would invade the trust if I could’ (41). Jolly knew what it meant, i.e., a refusal, and understood that a man with a lying heart could hardly be straightforward in his language.

Worse than having to listen to lies was the necessity to lie to herself. When her mother was alive, Jolly could never be plain to her about her desires. She had to tell her the exact opposite of what she wanted. “Some dress. If I wanted the dress, I would have to say “naaaaah.” [. . .] And of course, she would buy it for me. But if I said, ‘God, what a gorgeous dress.’ Hey. You laiow what?” (42). Jolly could not excuse her mother for forcing her to lie to herself. The shame of having had to sell her dignity to get the things she desired finds its release later in Jolly’s foul language: “fuck her, though she’s dead! (Pause) Fuck her, and fuck the lot of’em’ (42).
The same principle of oppressive self-assertion operated in the present of festival gifts too. Both Bob and Jolly were harshly treated in these too, for they never got what they asked for or were given what they never asked for. Jolly was not given the pair of skis she had wanted, and on Christmas day Bob was given a plaid reversible raincoat which he did not like and therefore sold it out in Fields. They carry only unhappy memories of the presents.

Jolly’s bitter past has taught her the need for parental care and kindness in a family. Parents who love their children do know what they want, and Jolly herself has become the paradigm. “I know what my kids want. It’s not that difficult. It’s Just Not” (45). Before marrying Carl she “couldn’t drop an egg,” but now she has turned into a fine cook good at preparing varieties of food (46). She feels elated to think of the good future her children, and their progeny, would have as they learn the good things from their mother. Herself cooking at home every night, she has created an atmosphere where the children have naturally learnt cooking. She has radiated the joy of togetherness by making them play games and watch their favourite movies. To cap it all, she has got a loving and lovable man—“the finest and the best man”—as her husband (47).

On the other hand, Jolly gets into a frenzy to think that her parents “never thought a moment of my happiness” (46). Her thoughts go back to her detestable “Mom” who never cared to know what her daughter or her granddaughter needed. When Jolly’s family was moving, Carl was jobless, and they were destitute. Her mother who visited them was quite insensitive to the real needs of the family. Jolly’s children were growing fast and needed new shoes. Even when Jolly had mentioned their urgent need, her mother would only give them expensive “vanity sets” as gifts. Even when it was a festive
occasion, she would only present what she wanted. Thus, at one Christmas, Jolly was given a “Big Present”—not the skis she had wanted but the expensive Red Leather Briefcase her mother had bought for her. In retrospect, Jolly regards them as acts of unkindness that originate in her mother’s marriage to a gentile husband. Her mother’s apathy towards her children, Jolly thinks, is due to her estrangement from her Jewishness: “And the fucking skis. The Christmas skis. One thousand generations we’ve been Jews. My mother marries a sheigetz and we’re celebrating Christmas. [. . .] Jingle bells, (pause) Ah, what the hell, (pause) And the Big Present” (48).

Jolly recalls how, “behaving hysterically” and summoning up her courage, she turned down the gift, and was accused of ruining the happy occasion. Bob shares with his sister the humiliation of being made to feel “ungrateful” to the mother on the occasion. The curse on the Jewish race continued as the curse on the Jewish children: whatever cruelties they had suffered, the victims were always to blame. Both Bob and Jolly ironically reenact the way in which they took the blame for ruining the happy occasions:

BOB. Why did you ruin those occasions, Jol?

JOLLY. Well, that’s right. I ruined them. ... I ruined them. . , .

because I was an Ungrateful Child. Why did you ruin them,

Buub?

BOB. Because I was an ungrateful child.

JOLLY. I know that you were, (pause) You know, and I carried,

I had to carry that fucking red briefcase for three, or four years, all day, full of books, These Are Your Skis. (49)
Salvation through Moral Will

From the lessons of her past Jolly has understood that self-willed aggression on the desires of others is the root cause of estrangement between people. She has seen that emotional terrorism ruins familial harmony and peace for generations. She has consciously broken the chain of violence down the generations and set her own family on the path of mutual love and regard. She is not only a loving mother to her children but also a kind sister who can give her brother the comfort he needs in his desperate moments. Her solacing speech to her brother is the paradigm of respect for other people’s feelings. When she asks Bob if he would like to go back to his wife Laurie, he replies that he would not. Jolly comforts him further: “If you do. No one’s going to think you foolish. I swear to you. [. . .] If you do. I’m not saying you should... Or you should not” (50-51). She makes him understand how welcome he is at her home if he chooses to stay back. The rest of the play reveals the psychological equilibrium Bob has attained after he has unfettered his unconscious as much as his sister has done. The next morning he tells her that he had a sound sleep, for he felt “safe” in her house. Before he leaves, Jolly assures him once again that hers is “[a] house full of folks who love you” (55).

The play ends with Jolly’s narration of a dream she has recently had. Her mother, in “the sweetest voice,” asked her daughter to open the door of her room in order to save her from the people who were threatening to kill her. On opening the door, Jolly found, from the ghastly expression on her mother’s face, that she had herself come to kill her daughter. Jolly now feels relieved to think “It Was Only a Dream” (56). She is thankful to the Mercy that saves her from harm all her life, and she expresses her faith that humans need to cleanse their depraved minds, by making a “Complete and Contrite Apology” in order
to be free from divine retribution. Her final words are revelatory of the spiritual faith that has transformed her into the benevolent being that she is.

**Deeny: Musing Over Mysteries**

“Deeny,” the final and shortest scene in *The Old Neighborhood*, diverges from the theme of Jewishness and takes on metaphysical questions to ponder. Unlike the reminiscences of things past and lost that characterize Bobby’s previous visits, it is a hodgepodge of musings about the intractability of human experience. Deeny, the eponymous character, has been briefly introduced by Joey in *The Disappearance of the Jews* as a recently divorced woman working in a cosmetics store at Fields (28). She is Bob’s former lover. Bob meets her after visiting his sister, but the encounter between the old flames leads to no romantic reminiscences. Rather, it reveals Deeny striving, in her loneliness, to find the meaning of life in a world of uncertainties—a world where the truth is always elusive. The whole play is almost a monologue, with Deeny speculating on a wide variety of subjects and Bob acquiescing in her thoughts now and then.

Every thought that comes to Deeny’s mind is expressed with an uncertainty that finds no solution. She starts her speculations speaking of gardening. Is it love of it or a sense of duty that wakes up people to attend to it? Is it wise to raise plants artificially from seeds “put in by the radiator”? Will not plants be “bom” without such “forcing”? What is the feeling sex creates as one grows up—that “it is a mystery,” or that “it is a convenience”? Has empirical science discovered the ultimate truths—the smallest molecule, for instance—or is there a spiritual vision that discerns subtle truths that lie beyond the reach of the physical sciences? What is the nature of the faith one has at present? Is it just a belief in something that someone says—what one reads in a
newspaper, for instance? Or is it a deeper belief that there is a law governing all nature and humanity and that inevitably “things will right themselves”? If one believes that all things come to a natural end, does it follow that the end is the beginning of something else? What is the value of the truths that have turned into cliches through repetition? Is the value of the things which interest us purely subjective? When primitive tribes mutilate their physical organs as an experience in a communal ritual, do they get pain, or pleasure? Is it a pain that brings the pleasure of shedding one’s individual identity so as to become a symbol of that community? Looking back at the things past, does one grow sick of them? Or does one feel the consolation of growing out of them? Deeny craves for certainties about the innumerable thoughts and feelings that confound her ageing mind.

As Deeny’s musings finally return to the thought that started her dialogue with her former lover—“They say there’s going to be a frost”—she appears to have developed a belief in truth as objective reality: “I am sure that there is. [. . .] Despite the fact that they say it” (65). She knows “it will grow cold” irrespective of how she would feel it. Yet, what makes her feel cold within her being is the intractable nature of the world. Shams and illusions envelop it, and the truth is always beyond the reach of human reason. The world is a “shithole” for her, and it would cease to be one “if only [she] just could find it true” (65). She thinks only a world free from falsehood and deceptions—in a word, truth—could bring her the peace her soul longs for. With that longing Deeny finally parts from her former lover.
David Mamet: Committed to Jewish Selfhood

In the final analysis, Mamet’s *Homicide* and *The Old Neighborhood* bring out the playwright’s profound concern for reconstructing the Jewish identity of his “people” in a country where their traditional racial distinctions are eroding in the process of assimilation. As Christopher Bigsby remarks:

If America had lost its communal instinct, its sense of validating myths and authoritative principles, so, too, he suspected, had he. He had let something go, believing that to do so was a virtue, only subsequently to realize the extent to which it threatened something he came to believe was of primary importance. (Bigsby, *Cambridge Companion* 9).

Both in his screenplay and in his autobiographical play Mamet attempts earnestly to regain Jewish self-respect by fighting anti-Semitism first within the self-loathing Jews, and then outside of them. With his reputation as a supreme artist he becomes the voice of his people and calls upon them to wipe out the humiliations of their long-persecuted race. He stresses their need to look upon themselves as the torchbearers of a tradition that cultivates wisdom and moral strength in those who follow its Halakah—the “way” God has ordained them in the Torah.

Deep in Mamet’s Jewish consciousness is the long history of the persecutions of the Jews in the Diaspora. What hurts him especially is the way the Jews were abjectly scapegoated for the miseries heaped on them by the oppressors. Down the generations in European history, whether it was the Black Death that swept Europe in the 1300s, or the financial and commercial crisis in Germany and Austria in the 1800s, or the defeat of the Germans in the First World War, Jews have always been made to swallow the blame for their
massacres. The severest blow dealt upon the Jewish consciousness is the Holocaust, and the deep wounds left by it remain unhealed in the Jewish psyche, even after the Zionist movement sensitively and fiercely reacted against anti-Semitism and succeeded in establishing a separate State of Israel in 1948. Mamet’s Jewish characters never fail to cry down the atrocities of the Concentration Camps whenever a mere mention of it is made in the plays.

In his interview with John Lahr Mamet says that the Jewish ethic is based not on faith but on action. “You don’t have to have faith. You don’t have to believe anything; you just have to do it,” the playwright says, even though one wonders how one could “just” go on doing anything without any belief in it (qtd. in “Interview” 75). Both in Homicide and in The Old Neighborhood, however, the characters engage themselves in actions that closely pertain to their faith in their Jewishness. Bobby Gold, the detective in the screenplay, blows up the Nazi printing press because he needs to ascertain his Jewishness. In the family-oriented play Joey’s synagogue worship and Jolly’s “Complete and Contrite Apology” are based on their Judaic faith.

Mamet had debuted into the showbusiness as an “outsider,” with neither a happy home as a child nor a secure homeland as a Jew—not knowing where he belonged. Toward the end of the twentieth century, as he almost drew the curtain down on playwriting and turned his attention to other creative forms, he seemed keen on establishing his Jewish connections and facing the fury that drove him to bring forth his amazingly prolific creations. With the single exception of Boston Marriage (1999), his atypical Victorian comedy about a pair of lesbians, his last plays of the century show him as a writer chiefly preoccupied with releasing the repressions of his childhood and replenishing his Jewish self. As C. W. E. Bigsby admirably sums up:
The writer who had first appeared a quarter of a century earlier as the author of plays exploring the collapse of language, community, the moral self, now stood as an essayist, theatre and film director, screenwriter, poet and novelist increasingly concerned as individual and artist, with the nature of faith and the Jewish self.

(Modern American Drama 236)