Chapter I

Introduction

Truth: Mamet’s Central Concern

Truth, both as an attribute of the human soul and as a dynamic
metaphysical principle of the universe, governs David Mamet’s dramatic art. In
his most prolific career as dramatist, essayist, novelist, screenwriter and film
director, David Mamet stands out, first and foremost, as an artist devoted to
truth. In his artistic vision, all lies can only have a temporary existence, and
must always finally give in to the divine principle of Truth. The need for truth
in human relationships forms the prominent motif of his plays. The playwright
drives home this need by bringing to the stage the lies to which humans are
prone in contemporary America.

In a series of three related lectures at the Columbia University, later
published as *3 Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (1998),
Mamet observes that the institutions of American communal life—the courts,
politics, advertising, education, and entertainment—are all engaged in a lying
contest. In Mamet’s moral perspective, it is our nature, as a society, as human
beings, as men and women, [...] to lie, to love to lie, to lie to others, to lie to
ourselves, to lie about whether we lie [...]” (78). But lies, wrecking the
foundations of mutual trust, only break human relationships and generate moral
chaos and social disharmony. In order to redeem themselves from spiritual
chaos, hence, humans must overcome their lying nature by committing
themselves to truth. This commitment demands enormous courage and the
exercise of the Will of the Spirit. In Mamet’s moral vision that is the only way
to restore interpersonal harmony and peace in the spiritual void of American
society. The dramatic actions of Mamet’s plays, therefore, underscore the need for an inner change among Americans—a spiritual movement from Lie to Truth.

The present study, scrutinizing a selection of plays authored by David Mamet, seeks to explore the moral principle of Truth as a dynamic spiritual force in mankind that always prevails over lies. The movement from Lie to Truth, it posits, is not only a deep, unconscious spiritual need in humans but also a metaphysical process in which all lies are driven to inevitably end in truth. It proceeds from the hypothesis that David Mamet’s central artistic concern is the moral crisis in American society which has resulted from denying the life of the human soul and veering away from God, the Truth of the universe. The moral lesson suggested as subtext in Mamet's oeuvre, this study postulates, is that humankind cannot live a life of lies eternally at the expense of its peace, and hence, of necessity, should adhere to the divine principle of Truth.

In Mamet's view, the inner urge to know the truth is the basis of the communication between a play and its audience. As he said in his interview with Esther Harriott, "the theatre is the place where people go to hear the truth" (Harriott, "Interview" 78). The truth about the American society that Mamet presents in his drama is the plethora of lies, illusions and deceptions that wreak havoc on the whole society. His plays present the tragedy of the human soul brought about by the contemporary world of lies. To present the spiritual anguish and moral chaos that grip America, David Mamet chooses and depicts a wide range of characters from urban America—desperate men (and marginally, women) in tense situations who struggle for a way out and seek the peace which their tragic condition has wrenched out of their souls: in *Lakeboat,*
eight crewmen aboard a merchant mariner exhibit the loneliness, boredom and existential agony of their routine life as they indulge in fictions about an absent crew-member; in *The Duck Variations* two old men wearied of life while away their time in a park in existential despair; in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* sexually perverse singles strive unsuccessfully to enter into an emotionally fulfilling relationship with the opposite sex; in *American Buffalo* three low-life “friends” in a junk-shop plan a robbery and fail in it; in *Edmond* a sexually frustrated husband quits his wife and stumbles into a life of horror and crime in New York City; in *Glengarry Glen Ross* four real estate salesmen are frantically engaged in a cut-throat sales competition that compels them to betray each other; in *Speed-the-Plow* a sexually vulnerable Hollywood executive, invested with the power to greenlight films, exploits his temporary secretary as much as he is exploited by her; in *Oleanna* a self-obsessed college professor is accused of sexual harassment by a female student after a private counselling; in *The Cryptogram* a sensitive ten-year old boy is psychically tormented into insomnia by the false relationships between his parents. These and the like are Mamet’s characters, who represent a wide cross-section of American Society. Mamet is fascinated by them all, and, even as he mocks at their amoral actions, portrays their tragic destiny with compassion.

**Artistic Vision Both Spiritual and Ethical**

Mamet’s dramatic purpose, however, is not solely to present the external realities of American society. His artistic vision is as much spiritual as it is ethical. His art depicts the decadent ethics of American society as the outcome of its denizens’ metaphysical disconnections. As an ardent student of classical Greek drama, Mamet has the conviction that the true realm of drama is the
awesome universe with all its inscrutable mysteries and inner realities. Therefore, his real dramatic achievement lies in his fusion of ethics and metaphysics so as to bring out their interrelationship. “[M]y plays are about the individual’s inner spirit. The theater concerns metaphysics, our relationship to God; and ethics or our relationship to each other,” Mamet tells critic Matthew Roudane in his 1984 interview. He almost suggests that “our relationship to God” is closely, even inextricably, related to “our relationship to each other.”

In consonance with this view, his plays project a moral vision that is perhaps unique in modern American drama: truth, as a moral force in individuals, is a temporal correlative of the Truth that governs the universe as an immutable and invincible principle, and therefore must be adhered to in any human attempt to find peace.

This adherence to truth in order to eschew lies is not a mere social and moral need; it is an inevitable process in the evolution and revelation of Truth. As a divine metaphysical force, Truth emerges in the human universe as an act of God to prevail over lies, by driving the protagonist to acknowledge it, through self-recognition or confession. Remarkably, Mamet discerns this dynamics of Truth as governing human life, and consequently, all drama that mimics life. He clearly posits his dramatic theory in *3 Uses of the Knife*: “[. . .] the subject of Drama is the Lie. At the end of the Drama THE TRUTH—which has been overlooked, disregarded, scorned and denied—prevails. And that is how we know the Drama is done” (79). Mamet’s artistic vision, which is both moral and metaphysical, is thus rooted in the structure of the dramatic action presented on the stage.
Dramatic Structure and Moral Vision Interrelated

The ultimate emergence of truth, as well as the acknowledgement of it by humans who can no longer conceal it, according to Mamet, is the end toward which all dramatic action is directed. It is important, in the light of this dramatic theory, to examine the structure of Mamet’s plots to perceive the playwright’s moral vision. Mamet has described his plays with a traditional structure—American Buffalo, Oleanna and The Cryptogram—as “classically structured tragedies” (qtd. in Lahr, “David Mamet” 68). These plays demand the audience’s attention to the transformation the protagonists undergo and the final inner illumination—“the Truth”—with which the dramatic action comes to an end. The progression of the action is dialectic, from thesis through an encounter with the antithesis to the final synthesis. In this dialectics, the primeval atmosphere of cordiality and complacence the protagonist apparently enjoys at the beginning is the thesis; some form of Lie upsets this atmosphere and precipitates action, and this forms the antithesis; and synthesis results when the unexpected occurs and when fortuitous reversals of situations or intentions bring the moment of Truth in which, all lies and self-deceptions dispelled, the protagonist sees things as they are, and in a new light.

The dramatic actions in Mamet’s plays are analogous to those in classical Greek drama. They ultimately bring out the truth that humans, for all the powers they assume and exhibit in megalomaniacal hubris, cannot shape their own ends. Mamet’s characters may hopefully engage themselves in actions characterized by chicanery or self-deception, but ultimately they realize, and so does the audience, that all their efforts to achieve their goal by lying to others or to themselves must necessarily fail. They have to inevitably realize that there exist invincible powers outside of them, that there is a destiny
that shapes their ends. This *anagnorisis*, or self-knowledge, about the finite nature of human powers, is at the heart of Mamet's moral vision. This vision, rather than merely being social, underscores the human need to be vitally related to the ultimate realities of the universe and hence, is metaphysical.

The moment of self-knowledge gained by the protagonist and shared by the empathetic audience is significant in Mamet’s drama. The present study, therefore, purports to bring out the central truth in Mamet’s dramatic art—the inevitable failure of lies in the face of Truth—by analyzing the progression in the protagonists’ language-driven actions. The analyses are based on two classical principles: first, the Aristotelian principle of tragedy as the story of the protagonist; and second, the Stoic principle of moral action performed “in accordance with nature.” The focus is on the larger truths that emerge out of the protagonist’s moral actions in the face of the lies that seek to corrupt and destroy him. The analyses take cognition of the fact that Mamet’s early episodic plays, produced under the influence of the revues of Chicago’s Second City, offer no such moral action of a central character, yet the inevitable revelation and recognition of the Truth—some inner reality hidden with word masks at the beginning ultimately surfacing at The end—is consistently emphasized as constituting Mamet’s artistic vision.

**Truth and Lie—Definitions**

Since the final perception of truth basically constitutes Mamet’s moral vision, the terms “truth” and “lie” need clear definitions, in view of the diverse meanings attributed to “truth” by thinkers and theorists for centuries, the term resists definition. Yet, it lends itself to specific meanings if one restricts it to a few classic definitions. At the outset, one must acknowledge Immanuel Kant's
postulate that the absolute truth about external objective reality—the object as
in itself is—is unknowable, for what humans discover as truth is merely the
collaborative outcome of the interaction between the senses and the percipient
human mind as they observe external things. What is ultimately obtainable
through such observations is the interpretation of surface realities, not facts
about the inner realities of things. However, truth as an entity in the human
mind is definable. Aristotle, in his treatise *Metaphysics*, defines it as follows:

> Of one subject we must either affirm or deny any one predicate.
>
> This is clear, in the first place, if we define what the true and
> false are. To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it
> is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that
> it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that
> it is not, will say either what is true or what is false; but neither
> what is nor what is not is said to be or not to be. (*Metaphysics*
> 419)

All statements that affirm or deny something, insofar as they conform or do not
conform to reality, are either true or false. “Iraq has weapons of massive
destruction,” for instance, must be either true or false depending upon its
correspondence to reality. But such a statement in itself does not involve the
question of morality. It becomes a moral issue only when the statement tends to
influence the speaker’s behaviour and urges him or her to action. In such a
situation it is not the conformity to external reality that constitutes truth; on the
other hand, it is its consistence with the inner reality of the speaker that
determines its truth value.

Thus, with reference to the human mind, truth is being internally
consistent with whatever one says, knows or believes to be. Conversely, lie is
the state of the mind in which the correspondence between reality and one’s being is violated willfully, as when one prevaricates, or unwittingly, as when one suffers from fantasies, illusions or self-delusions. A few instances from Mamet’s dramatic actions will throw light on this observation: in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* Bernie Litko brags to his disciple Danny about his sexual escapades with young women, while he knows within his being that he cannot form an intimate relationship with any woman, as is evidenced later by his failure to initiate an affair with Joan. Bernie’s claim to successful relations with girls is a lie. In *American Buffalo* Bob, in an attempt to convince his master Don Dubrow that he is a “man of action,” says that he saw the coin-collector leave his house for a holiday, when he does not know whether he has really left. His false utterance is an instance of mendacity. Teach in the same play declares that friendship is a great value, but he interferes with the friendship between Don and Bob and creates a rift to serve his own selfish, business purposes. His actions hardly correspond to what he professes. He labours under several illusions which, as the antitheses of reality, must properly be called lies. In *Glengarry Glen Ross* the salesmen know that the Florida swamplands they are out to sell to gullible customers are worthless, yet, to win the sales competition, they need to play false not only to their customers but to their own colleagues. Their profession compels them to live a lie. The common element in all these examples is that all the characters are false to their inner selves. They need to suppress the truth in their being in order to succeed in life.

In the sphere of moral action, thus, “lie” is being ontologically inconsistent with one’s utterances and deeds. But with reference to metaphysics, as something that must undergo transformation in the face of Truth, “Lie” signifies more than a false utterance. It is a comprehensive term
for every specious truth—everything that seems to be true on the surface of it and at first sight, but which later proves to be false or wrong. Deceptions, illusions, delusions, and fantasies unrelated to factual reality, in this broad sense, are all forms of “Lie.” In a word, “‘Lie’ is any apparent, transient impression that a subsequent revelation belies. And what brings about this revelation is Truth. As a divine principle, as a dynamic agency that eternally causes the exit of all transient, specious truths. Truth belongs to the sphere of metaphysics. Mohandas K. Gandhi, who considered his whole life an “experiment with Truth,” had a metaphysical vision of Truth as God. He averred: “I have known God only as Truth. There was a time when I had doubts about the existence of God, but I never doubted the existence of Truth. This Truth is not something material but Pure Intelligence. It rules over the Universe; therefore it is Ishwara (The Lord)...” (99).

Aristotle’s postulate of causative truths in his *Metaphysics* is helpful to understand the dynamic nature of (Divine) Truth as an immutable principle:

Now we do not know a truth without its cause; and a thing has a quality in a higher degree than other things if in virtue of it the similar quality belongs to the other things as well (e.g. fire is the hottest of things; for it is the cause of the heat of all other things); so that that which causes derivative truths to be true is most true. Hence the principles of eternal things must be always most true (for they are not merely sometimes true, nor is there any cause of their being, but they themselves are the cause of the being of other things). (*Metaphysics* 419)

In the light of Aristotle’s enunciation, humans possess “‘derivative truths” because the same Truth that has brought the universe into existence and
governs it governs the human universe as well, and causes truths to dawn in
human minds down the centuries. It is Truth that brings humans face to face
with their lies and illusions, urges them to act right, and is thus the cause of
their self-realization. It is the power that always breaks through the carapace of
lies and ultimately surfaces.

[Mamet's Drama as Performance]

Mamet’s profound concern for the internal truth of his drama determines
the reductive physicality of the stage performance. Mamet’s play spaces are
characterized by a rigid economy in order to ensure the audience’s total
attention to the linguistic action that takes place on the stage. Whatever the
scene of action—a park facing a lake, a singles’ apartment, a junkshop, a real
estate office, or a Hollywood studio—stage properties are reduced to the
minimum. The number of the characters performing onstage is two or three.
Most of the plays, especially the traditionally-structured ones, observe the
classical unities of time, place and action. Mamet is deeply aware of the
constraints on a theatrical artist. He cannot allow himself or his audience to be
distracted by any element that he considers extraneous to his artistic purpose.
He cannot bring in detailed descriptions of natural phenomena as a novelist
does, for instance, and cannot offer authorial comments on some critical
moments in his characters’ lives. Yet, he turns these very shortcomings to his
best advantage to concentrate on the plot or action which is the soul of drama.
Quoting Stanislavsky, he states that the purpose of his playwriting is to “bring
to the stage the life [. . .] ‘of the Human Soul’”—through the soul of the play
rather than the soul of the actor (*Some Freaks* 77).
The soul of the play is the dramatic action, and the audience’s empathetic participation in it. All the elements that constitute the superstructure of a drama—stage, setting, lighting, music, dramatis personae, their costumes and dialogues—must subserve the achievement of this central purpose. By putting the audience and the protagonist in the same position, by making them share the moral vision at the end, the dramatist aims to bring about a change in the audience’s perception of the world. When the protagonist, undergoing some spiritual crisis, resolves it and feels philosophical as a result, the same feeling is evoked in the empathetic audience. The action demonstrated on the stage before us, as Mamet says in 3 Uses of the Knife, “makes us better, make the world better [sic], perhaps, because of what we have perceived” (12).

**Stoic Philosophy of Action**

The enormous significance that Mamet attaches to “action” eliminates the notion of “character” as a compound of certain inherent virtues that motivate action. Mamet’s protagonists are simply humans who, in the face of a crisis or dilemma that challenges their earlier equipoise, exercise their will, and establish their power to modify their inner being. Character is nothing but one’s capacity to act and to change oneself with one’s free will. This is an idea that Mamet has derived from Stoic philosophy which posits a doctrine of action. C. W. E. Bigsby quotes him as saying in an interview:

As the stoics say, generosity, correctness, accomplishment, mutuality, self-acceptance—you wish to become the excellent man or woman—what prevents you? Nothing. That’s one of the commandments of stoical philosophy which is the philosophy of
today? What prevents you? Nothing. (David Mamet 133)

Moral Action in Mamet’s Films

This “philosophy of acting” informs the moral actions of Mamet’s
protagonists in his films as well. The world portrayed in the films is largely
peopled with conmen and their victims. The characters are vile, wicked and
ruthless especially when questions of sex, money and power interfere with
human relationships, yet the possibilities of exercising one’s spiritual will or
staying morally unstained are always emphasized at the end. The plots are
tightly constructed to bring out ultimately the possibilities of redemption from
depravity.

Mamet’s 1982 film The Verdict demonstrates man’s capacity for inner
change and upholding human value above monetary concerns. Frank Galvin,
the Boston lawyer notorious for his heavy drinking at the expense of his
professional responsibilities, exhibits his ability to redeem himself and to keep
himself morally upright. Flis innate honesty is revealed when he decides to take
up the case of a victim of careless hospital treatment, rejecting the offer of huge
money to defend the culprits.

In the 1987 film The House of Games Dr. Margaret Ford, a psychiatrist
who chances to encounter a gang of conmen in the house of games, is
fascinated by their cons and gets herself involved in them. But when she finds
herself conned into a fake murder, she comes to her senses. She redeems
herself from the disastrous games finally by killing the conman Mike, and thus
symbolically cleanses herself of the deceits to which she has been prone as a
psychiatrist.
The power of pristine innocence and naivete is adroitly brought out in *Things Change*, a screenplay Mamet co-authored with Shel Silverston in 1988. Gino, an old Sicilian shoeshine man, agrees to act as a proxy in a murder case trial and serve a three-year imprisonment in exchange for a fishing boat offered by a crime gang. Before the court hearing, the old man is mistaken for a gang leader, is taken to a criminals’ den in Nevada and is given a friendly treatment by the Mafia don. Gino’s quite natural behaviour as a shoeshine man, with all his unqualified innocence and goodness, brings him out of the gang unscathed.

Mamet’s adaptation of Terrence Rattigan’s *The Winslow Boy* (1999) depicts the heroic battle of a genteel Edwardian family for whom truth and honour were indispensable values of human life. When their 13-year old boy Ronnie Winslow, studying in a naval college, is wrongly accused of committing forgery and stealing a postal order, there is nothing that the family would not stake to establish the truth and rescue the boy from dishonour. The choice of Rattigan’s “timeless story” of a great battle for justice and truth reveals Mamet’s obsessive moral concern as an artist. Mark Guppy, who reviewed Mamet’s film, has brought out this concern in laudable terms:

> The truth was nothing but a cheap commodity to be bought and sold in *Wag the Dog*. This time around, Mamet shows us just how much we have lost with this attitude. People weren’t morally superior back then, but they were held to a higher standard. [...] While some norms change, may be it is time to stop spelling 'truth' in lower case letters. (Guppy)
Language as Action

Truth or honest action, especially the lack of it in a money-driven contemporary society, is at the heart of all of Mamet’s plays too, with this difference: there is only a little physical action that is presented on the stage. Stage directions and scenic changes are minimal. The characters’ action is propelled entirely by their dialogues. Their language, instead of being descriptive, is “prescriptive,” that is, possessing the capacity to influence behaviour. By influencing their own behaviour as well that of the listeners, their verbal exchanges direct the action of the play toward the end desired by the dramatist. Through the mere dialogues of two or three people on the stage Mamet can present profound inner conflicts and a final moral vision that constitutes the truth of the play. Mamet’s drama, as performance, aims to enable the audience to share this moral vision and to commune in this truth. The early episodic plays predominantly present the bleak vision of a meaningless and purposeless world that mystifies the characters, but the classically structured plays (with two or three acts) bring in, as subtext, a vision of metaphysical realities—Divinity and Destiny—the consciousness of which makes them whole and brings them peace.

Mamet’s Classical Sensibility

The idea of Mamet’s metaphysical vision would not perhaps be far-fetched if one acknowledges the truth that Mamet’s artistic sensibility is essentially classical rather than postmodern. Mamet does share with the postmoderns the ambivalence caused by a confounding and incomprehensible human world, yet his is a classical sensibility that reveres religious and cultural traditions, respects form and order in everything, and longs for “making things
round” and into a whole. The universal vision projected by the ancient classical
dramatists—the interplay between human life and the ultimate realities of
Destiny, Divinity and Moral Law—fascinates Mamet immensely. It is
noteworthy that he chooses to describe his *American Buffalo*, *Oleanna* and *The
Cryptogram* as “classically structured tragedies” and is “proudest of the craft”
in them (Lahr, “David Mamet” 68). His Hellenistic leanings, revealed in quite a
few of his theatre essays, are reinforced by his choice of the title for his latest
movie *Spartan* (2004)—an espionage thriller dealing with the kidnapping of
the President’s daughter. If Chekhov, Beckett, Pinter and Freud have been the
most pronounced literary influences on his postmodern sensibility, the Torah,
Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Sophocles, and Aristotle have been formative moral
influences on his classical sensibility and his cosmic vision of life.

**Postmodern Degeneration of Metaphysics**

Over and again, Mamet regrets that postmodern American drama, unlike
classical drama, is disjoined from the spirituality that informed all primeval
drama. Lie finds all spectacle, drama and religious observance related. In their
primordial state, they serve the purpose of the spiritual union of the spectators.
The purposes of postmodern drama, on the other hand, are different. Spectacle
in its origin and drama in American society are at once similar and poles
apart—similar because art still attracts large audiences, dissimilar because
present day art is “pagan” and divested of “religious awe” (Covington, “Salon
Interview”). In an essay in *Tikkun* (Nov. 99) Mamet expressed his profound
concern for the present-day degradation of the metaphysics of the mimetic art:

> Into what service has the dramatic impulse been pressed? It was
called into existence to serve God, as an exercise of investigation
and awe in the face of the mysteries. It exists to serve God still, but the identity of God has changed. The God is Mammon, and the plays are shorter (thirty to sixty seconds). [. . .] Theater, (particularly Tragedy), the celebration of the Unknowable, has given place to the Commercial, the celebration of our own omnipotence. (“The Question”)

Conception of the Whole

Classical Greek drama and philosophy fascinate Mamet precisely because they present human life as inextricably related to the ultimate realities that govern the universe. Mamet’s conception of the Whole—the Divine Will and Intelligence ruling the universe—is derived from a classical tradition. The Upanishads of the 8th century B.C., the earliest sources of a philosophical vision of human life in relation to the universe, serve as a good starting-point to discuss this tradition, though they are not perhaps a chief influence on Mamet’s metaphysical conception. The Upanishads posit that Truth is the all-encompassing principle of the universe. The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, for example, calls this principle “Atman” or the universal soul which is “satyasya satyam”—Reality of reality or Truth of truth:

Just as a spider (produces thread out of itself and) moves about in its own web, just as from a fire minute sparks fly about, exactly so, verily, from this Atman have come forth all [. . .] energies, all worlds, all gods, all beings. Its Upanishad (‘mystic name’) is Truth of truth. The energies, verily, are truth; this (Atman) is the Truth of those (energies). (II. 1. 20)
With a similar vision, the Stoic philosophers of the fourth century B.C.—of whom Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus, Chrysippus and Marcus Aurelius were the most prominent—posited that Logos or Divine Reason animates and governs the sensible appearances of the universe. These philosophers perceived human reason as the essence of the divine in mankind. To them the universe is a rational and perfect whole, and humans, endowed with reason, can live a virtuous life by exercising this faculty in consistence with Reason, the Whole (Divinity) that rules the universe. Seneca, the foremost Stoic philosopher to influence Mamet, writes in his “Moral Epistles’ of the vital interrelationship between the Divine Being and man’s moral sense:

God is near you, he is with you, he is within you. This is what I mean, Lucius: a holy spirit indwells within us, one who marks our good and bad deeds, and is our guardian. As we treat this spirit, so are we treated by it. Indeed no man can be good without the help of God. He it is that gives noble and upright counsel. In each good man ‘a god doth dwell, but what god we know not. ("XLI. On the God Within Us.")

One of the ethical imperatives that follows this perception of the indwelling Divinity is that man should freely perform actions that pertains to his (rational) nature, but should remain indifferent to occurrences that are beyond his control. This is the means to attain peace. The philosophical doctrines of Stoicism, with their emphasis on the relationship between man and God, have profoundly influenced the Jews since the third century B.C. They have shaped David Mamet’s philosophical vision, as can be seen in his numerous allusions to Stoic thought in his essays, interviews and his plays that explore the God-Human relationship.
The vision of the Whole closely corresponds to the Judaic faith that Mamet espouses fondly and profoundly. According to the Judaic traditional belief, a single, transcendent God created the universe and that His Divine Intelligence eternally governs all the natural world and human affairs alike. The following excerpt from an article on “Judaism” in Encarta succinctly elucidates the God-Human relationship:

The mind of God is manifest to the traditional Jew in both the natural order, through creation, and the social-historical order, through revelation. [...] The content of that revelation is the Torah (“revealed instruction”) God’s will for humankind expressed in commandments [...] by which individuals are to regulate their lives in interacting with one another and with God. By living in accordance with God’s laws and submitting to the divine will, humanity can become a harmonious part of the cosmos. (“Judaism”)

“Living In Accordance With Nature”: Stoic Doctrine

The God-Nature-Human topology outlined in the foregoing Stoic and Judaic doctrines is central to Mamet’s metaphysical vision. It is surprising that Matthew Roudane, who brilliantly enunciates the “classic American view of Nature” in his essay “Mamet’s Mimetics,” considers the playwright’s view of Nature as undoubtedly “postmodernist” (26)—a conclusion perhaps incongruent with the playwright’s observations on “natural processes” which Roudane finds “surprisingly close to the classic American view of Nature.” In “Decay: Some Thoughts for Actors” Mamet writes:
If you can keep in touch with natural processes, with yourself and
your God, with the natural rudiments of your profession—the
human necessity to tell and hear stories—with the natural process
of growth and decay, then you can, I think, find peace, even in
the theater. (WR 116)

This is only Mamet’s “Stoic” plea to his reader to conform to nature, and not a
postmodernist American view of Nature which Mamet’s drama is alleged to
represent. As observed earlier, Mamet’s is an essentially classical sensibility
that insists on the need for “natural” interrelationships between God, Nature
and Humankind. His observation is quite in tune with the Stoic doctrine of
“living in accordance with nature.”

**Truth: Conformity to Spiritual Mature**

To conform to nature is to be true to one’s own rational and spiritual
nature and to God—a virtue from which present-day American society has
been estranged owing to its obsessive materialism. In their essence, Mamet’s
plays are about postmodern humanity’s deviations from “nature.” In his essay
“Mamet’s Mimetics” Matthew Roudane precisely brings out the playwright’s
methods of portraying these deviations. Observing that most of Mamet’s
dramatic actions occur outside of the home, Roudane makes an almost
exhaustive inventory of Mamet’s play spaces:

But what characterizes his play spaces? His plays unwind in
offices, junkshops, pawnshops, hotels, coffeehouses,
interrogation rooms, peep shows, department stores,
pornographic movie theaters, regular theaters, whorehouses,
automobiles, boats, health clubs, libraries, movie houses,
beaches, city parks, radio station studios, jails, missions,
subways, railroad parlor cars, restaurants, bars, woods and various unspecified (and often seedy) urban locations—usually Chicago, sometimes New York City, and in Speed-the-Plow, Hollywood. (7-8)

Roudane points out with remarkable insight that "Mamet’s theater [with such non-Natural settings as mentioned above] measures the distance we have traveled from the classic American view of Nature” (“Mamet’s Mimetics” 20). His observation on Mamet’s dramaturgy is accurate when he states that Mamet’s sets and settings, while they “create an overriding impression of contemporaneity,” are hardly instances of “objective mimeticism” (23). He points out:

Mamet’s play spaces are much more complex than usually recognized: more than realistic-looking offices or clubs, these environments become subtexts themselves, implied playscripts which audiences may aurally and visually “read.” This becomes a crucial element of Mamet’s mimetics [...]. (“Mamet’s Mimetics” 24)

In the light of Roudane’s observations, the most recurrent subtext that Mamet’s audience is urged to “read” constantly is the cultural and moral disaster that has befallen postmodern mankind inasmuch as it has failed to live in conformity to nature. Mamet’s 1977 play The Woods brings out the joys and merits of natural ways of living. Set on the porch in a summerhouse far from the urban madding crowd, it portrays Ruth and Nick spending a night in the latter’s family cabin. Ruth is vivacious and quite sensitive to the delights of Nature, and contrasts sharply with her aphasic and inarticulate lover. Ruth observes that at the roots of existence, impelled by the instincts of hunger and
sex, humans and all other living organisms are close to Nature, devoid of any
pretence or falsity, which makes them beautiful:

The tastes we have for [food] ... It must be the same [as our
sexual appetite]. Our body says we need these things. They all
come from the ground. The vegetables, (pause) Minerals. All
pills and ointments. Everything comes from the ground, in some
way or another. Then we eat it. [...]! saw the fish grab insects
right out of the air. It all has properties. It all is only things the
way they are. (pause) That is all there ever was. (pause) What
they are and what they do. And that is beauty. (The Woods 8-10)

It is the way all organisms live in accordance with their nature that fascinates
Ruth, and the thought is reinforced toward the end of the first scene. “That’s
why I like the country. In the city we can never know each other really. (Pause)
It’s clean out here. Plus, it’s quiet. Anything is possible. (Pause) You can see
the way things are” (30). Though it all appears to be a series of banalities
exchanged by the lovers to pass the time, these are wise observations of one
who is sensitive to the natural functions of living beings in the country. What
invests the creatures in Nature with beauty, according to Ruth, is that they are
ture to their distinct “properties,” and manifest themselves “the way they are,”
without the need for masks or shams.

Civilized life seems degenerate to a sensitive mind like Mamet’s
because the urbanites have fallen away from their distinct human nature—their
capacity for self-awareness and self-examination—and fallen victims to the
superficial pleasures offered by their commercial and consumerist society. In
his “Salon Interview” with Richard Covington Mamet emphasized the need for
a whole society to take an inward look at the way it has been psychically
conditioned by commercial values: “I think that’s part of our national problem, how to extricate ourselves sufficiently-to be able to take a look at the life we lead and perhaps have a better time” (qtd. in Covington).

**Materialistic Orientation of American Culture**

In a comprehensive view, Mamet’s plays powerfully bring out the disastrous consequences of human relationships rendered unnatural owing to their metaphysical alienation and their obsessive materialistic orientation. If interpersonal and social relationships are a shrieking failure in American society, it is because its denizens have killed God, the embodiment of the highest spiritual values that humanity needs to live in peace. Having no truth values to imbibe from a spiritually barren culture, the society can only revel in shams and illusions. Contemporary America is a land of false gods—progress, riches, success, fame, power, and sensation—the myths of the present century’s soulless materialism. It is a nation where life is considered a commercial enterprise, where predatory cutthroat competition, chicanery and venality are the law, and where human worth is invariably measured in dollars. It is a culture in which children are sexually abused at a very early stage, and male adolescents are possessed by the venomous notion, handed down by their elders, that "THE WAY TO GET LAID IS TO TREAT [GIRLS] LIKE SHIT" (LB 55). It is a World of Fiction in which most men and women, falling victims to the environmental pollution of the tinsel world, fill their psyche with fantasies about the magnificent adventures and incredible strengths of the fictitious celluloid heroes and heroines. The social institution of marriage, for the most part, has broken down. Mamet’s plays reveal that marriages in America are transient contracts that end up in divorces in no time and the
divorcees often leave their children, as Carol regrets in *Reunion,* the legacy of a dysfunctional family.

In Mamet’s moral vision, the entire American national psyche is in the grip of lies that erode the individual’s inner spirit. No spiritual regeneration is possible until the devils in the psyche are exorcised. As Andrew Schenker points out, Mamet suggests the truth that “only when the myths are put aside and people come face to face at last with reality can the problems of our society and the world begin to be solved” (Schenker). The cure for humanity’s psychological ills and moral evils lies in the restoration of a conscious will to be true. Truth as a sociological need, for Mamet, implies honest action. It includes the moral virtues of veracity in speech, loyalty in relationships, love of honesty and simplicity, and the rejection of all shams and illusions.

**Causes of Alienation: Four Soul-Negating Theories**

The moral degeneration Mamet portrays in his plays stems directly from the denial of the soul by an entire culture. For the last two centuries the West has been psychologically governed and conditioned by a variety of soul-negating theories—the materialistic theory of free enterprise, the scientific theories of evolution and psychoanalysis, and the philosophical doctrine of existentialism. These theories, half-truths taken as absolute truths, have deeply eroded the inner spirit of man and its relationship with the cosmos.

The foremost of these despiritualizing forces is the politico-economic system of capitalism, which emerged closely on the heels of 18th and 19th century industrialism. Founded on the phenomenon of industrialism, capitalist enterprise created in man an obsessive concern for material goods and their consumption. The commodity fetishism fostered by it deprived humans of their
potentialities for self-knowledge. In his book *The Sane Society* Erich Fromm brilliantly analyses the corrosive effects of the new materialistic attitude on the human self:

[Man’s] energies, which were once devoted to the search for God and salvation, were now directed toward the domination of nature and an ever-increasing material comfort. He ceased to use production as a means for a better life, but hypostatized it instead to an end in itself. [. . .] [M]an himself became a part of the machine, rather than its master. He experienced himself as a commodity, as an investment.” (309)

As a thoroughly materialistic philosophy, capitalism reduced man to a consumer and a marketable commodity. It engaged his energies in an endless struggle for economic prosperity. Denying every other reality or value except material well-being and the hedonism that issues out of it, it isolated him from his spiritual nature.

The second cause of humanity’s spiritual alienation from the cosmos was Charles Danvin’s evolution theory. Darwin convincingly put forward the anthropological truth that man is a complicated descendent of the amoeba and a species that survives in accordance with the principle of the survival of the fittest. But his theory, failing to envision the internal realities of humankind that distinguish it from the other species—the human soul, its dynamic consciousness and its relationship to God—robbed human minds of a cosmic vision of life.

Thirdly, Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst, discerned the unresolved conflicts between the conscious and the unconscious in the human psyche as the cause of the widespread neurosis in human civilization, and suggested that
the cure lies in the ego’s balanced fulfilment of the demands of the id (libido) and the superego. Freud, like Darwin, rejected the human soul and denied any higher nature to man. “Man,” he categorically asserted, “is not different from, or better than, the animals. [. . .] Flis later achievements have not been able to efface the evidence, in both his physical structure and his mental dispositions, of his basic equality with them” (qtd. in Waelder, 154). Both Darwin and Freud only instilled in humanity a conception of the human individual as an arena where opposing forces—biological and psychological—were eternally battling with each other for survival and supremacy. David Mamet’s *The Duck Variations* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* bring to the stage the deep influences of Darwinism and Freudianism in confounding the human psyche and devastating human spirituality.

The fourth factor that negated the human soul was the philosophical doctrine of atheistic existentialism, which enormously revolutionized post-war Western thought. It posited that human life had nothing to do with any objective reality outside of the "human universe," and that it only consisted of making one’s own destiny with one’s given freedom regardless of any external moral authority, divine or human. Though Mamet disclaims any knowledge of existential philosophy, the amoral individualism advocated by Sartrian subjective philosophy becomes the subject of discussion by Mamet’s characters in *A Life in the Theatre* and *Edmond*. The plays bring to the stage the moral and spiritual chaos engendered by the conception of man as an abandoned being struggling to make sense of a meaningless and purposeless universe where God is “dead.”
Countering Spiritual Negation

Viewed in a historical perspective, the representative plays of European and American dramatists—Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, Lillian Heilman’s *Little Foxes*, Clifford Odet’s *Golden Boy*, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story*, to cite some outstanding instances—are dramatizations of the impact of these materialistic, scientific and philosophical theories on the human spirit. The psychic fragmentation of a whole society that occurred in the wake of the application of these theories to human life became the obsessive theme of American drama until the 1950s. In his essay “American Theater and the Human Spirit” (1955) American dramatist Elmer Rice remarked:

If, at present, the drama is at a lower spiritual and intellectual level than we would wish it to be it is because we live in a time of anti-intellectualism and spiritual negation. We have taken the human mechanism apart in an effort to find out why it does not tick, but we have not discovered the formula for reassembling it so that its triumphant carillon may ring out to heaven. (119)

David Mamet, perhaps more than any other contemporary American dramatist, is intensely, aware of the “spiritual negation” that characterizes present-day American culture. Countering it vigorously, he attempts, through his dramatic art, to restore the soul that it has lost. His plays celebrate the renaissance of the human soul by staging actions in which the human capacity for making moral choices and effecting inner changes is demonstrated.
Elusive Metaphysics, Mistaken Mimetics

One difficulty Mamet faces in presenting the moral truth of his plays is that he has to fuse his ethics with metaphysics; it is not merely “our relationship to each other” that is his concern; in his artistic vision, drama is concerned with “our relationship to God.” He must inculcate spiritual values in an audience that has denied the human spirit for decades. How is the “awesome” to be driven home to an audience that has rejected it or is blissfully oblivious of it? Mamet resolves the problem by delineating the moral ills and evils that confront men and women when a whole culture is blind to the presence of the awesome. To emphasize the human possibilities for creating a moral world, the prevailing moral chaos must be brought to the stage at first. To bring out the value of truth, the futility or destructiveness of lies must be demonstrated at first. This is what Mamet’s plays do, and this is the playwright’s mode of dramatic presentation. This mode has misled several critics and has generated several misconceptions about the author’s true artistic purposes.

Mamet criticism, mostly centred on the “realism” of the economic, social and political issues presented in the plays, has shunned a serious discussion of the spiritual issues that underlie them. David Sauer and Janice Sauer, in their recent essay “Misreading Mamet: Scholarship and Reviews,” have rightly pointed out:

Reviewers and critics who have misread Mamet force him into the category of nineteenth century realistic writers for whom ‘The Material seemed to be, and, perhaps, was, the central aspect of life.’ When he is forced into this category, the audience sees nothing at the center, finding his plays to depict meaningless
materiality, a junkshop assemblage out of *American Buffalo*. Or worse, they discover negative messages, like the sexism found by those who assume he is represented by his onstage characters, who are misogynistic. (Sauer 235)

Most critical views on Mamet’s art do not chime in with the author’s dramatic theories, which are basically Aristotelian and Stanislavskian, and his moral principles, which are Judaic and Stoical. Quite a few critics have found little correspondence between Mamet’s dramatic theories and his characters’ actions on stage. “His theatre essays are full of references to truth,” observes C. W. E. Bigsby, but is puzzled that “his plays are something else” (*Modern American Drama* 202). Bigsby’s early appreciation of Mamet’s dramatic achievement was based on the Beckettian or Pinteresque “absurd” vision of life that he discerned in Mamet’s plays, although his recent evaluation of Mamet has changed significantly. T.E. Kalem of *Time* also took Mamet for an absurdist and commented that the “absurd” worldview in *The Duck Variations* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* was obsolete: “In part, audiences have adjusted to the metaphysical void that permeates absurdist drama, the absence of meaning and purpose that so puzzled and infuriated them when the early Pinter plays appeared” (“Pinter Patter” 68). It was a covert suggestion to Mamet to refrain from such “endangered dramatic species” as the Theater of the Absurd.

A great deal of the early evaluation of Mamet’s plays was done with the yardstick of objective realism. Kalem’s review of *The Water Engine* was written to point out how Mamet’s plot had falsified historical facts: “This is fitfully atmospheric but basically false. Mamet, 30, who was unborn at the time he writes about, does not realize that resilience, fortitude and fellow feeling
were the sustaining forces of the Depression years. It was the teenagers of the 30’s who forged, fought and won the U.S. victory of World War II” (“Trickle” 84). John Simon, writing for New York, criticized the play as if its plot were from real life: “However, our inventor [of the water engine] has managed to send off the blue prints to the bright son of a friendly candy-store owner. The kid may grow up to realize the dead inventor’s plans. Of course, 44 years have gone by, and he hasn’t yet; but if The Water Engine can be pul on stage and get rave reviews, anything is possible” (“Dirty Pool” 60).

John Lahr’s critiques and reviews brought to light the "American truths” of Mamet’s plays. In his view American Buffalo was a satiric attack on American social realities, especially the failure of the American dream: “In a society that promotes the myth of equal opportunity, mobility is crucial. The American must always feel himself in motion, pursuing his destiny and his fortune. The result is a restless, rootless, insecure society which has no faith in the peace it seeks or the pleasure it finds. American Buffalo superbly evokes this anxious and impoverished world” (“American Buffalo” 353). Lahr’s review of Glengarry Glen Ross in New Society, too, considered the play as a social satire—an expose of a dichotomous society where, if a few are winners, many must concomitantly be losers (“Winners and Losers” 477). Frank Rich, in his essay on Speed-the-Plow, observed that the play was perhaps “the most cynical and existing yet” of the literary tradition of Hollywood exposes (“Mamet’s Dark View” C17).

Reviews and critical essays apart, much of the research on Mamet’s works in general, too, has focused on some specific American experience. Carla Jane McDonough, for instance, has contended that “the assertion or shaping of masculinity tends to be the crucial issue” for David Mamet, Sam
Shepard, David Rabe and August Wilson, "‘who are all too often read by theater and drama critics as writing about the universal American experience rather than the experiences of American men’ (‘Staging Masculinity’ 3910A). John Steward Kitts’ investigation of “Masculinity Construction in the Narratives of David Mamet” considers “Mamet’s true artistry—his literary impulse—as lying not in those areas most discussed in previous scholarship (e.g., our failure to communicate, the evils of capitalism), but in his blistering attack on the patriarchal nature of American society” (Kitts 5151 A).

“Artistic Truth” Primary Concern, Not Objective Truth

Mamet has reiterated in his interviews and essays that his drama does not aim at any photographic representation of “objective truth.” His overwhelming interest is in the truth of art emerging out of the dramatic action itself—a conception which is closely akin to I. A. Richards’ definition of artistic “truth.” In Principles of Literary Criticism, Richards cites the example of Daniel Defoe’s novel:

The ‘Truth’ of Robinson Crusoe is the acceptability of the things we are told, their acceptability in the interests of the effects of the narrative, not their correspondence with any actual facts involving Alexander Selkirk or another. [. . .] It is in this sense that ‘Truth’ is equivalent to ‘internal necessity’ or rightness” (212).

The Truth of art, Richards goes on, “completes or accords with the rest of the experience [and] cooperates to arouse our ordered response, whether the response of Beauty or another.” Mamet too defines the truth of drama as what is “dramatically correct.” In his interview with Esther Harriott he says: “The
realistic writers over the course of 50, 60 years of American dramaturgy, retrospectively, [. . .] don’t seem so very realistic. What they do seem is true. What they do seem is dramatically and internally consistent” (qtd. in Harriott, “Interview” 79). A play is autonomous in its function, even when it deals with events similar to those in the external world. The soul of the play is the action of the protagonist—“what the protagonist wants.” It is the coherence between the rhythms of his speeches and his intentions that gives the audience the feel of ‘truth’ in the play. It is this “internal correctness,” the truth that lies within the play, which the audience needs to understand and appreciate.

**Weed to Accord with Mamet’s Dramatic Theories**

Mamet's dramatic theories, intended to elucidate his artistic purposes, have evoked diverse critical responses. While some have quoted Mamet’s theories profusely in their criticism, some recent critics have rejected them outright. “It’s futile to nitpick Mamet’s theories,” says Daniel Kraus, quite sceptical of their relevance to Mamet’s creations. “They’re just theories. The thing is, he has one of these damn theories for everything. And he follows them always. He has a Zen-like belief that a steadfast following of self-imposed rules frees the unconscious to be truly creative” (“Gadfly: The Rhythm Thief”). Kraus, though his remark concerns Mamet’s films, represents the general critical indifference to the theoretical base of Mamet’s dramatic art.

Mamet, on the other hand, has rightly pointed out that a true and worthwhile criticism of an author’s work needs to accord with his artistic principles and vision. He told Esther Harriott: “The rules of drama are so strict that if both parties—the critic and the author—understand those rules, that should be the basis and the vocabulary for discussion” (qtd. in Harriott,
"Interview" 92). It is not adequate, therefore, to view Mamet’s plays merely as studies in teacher-student relationships, as attacks on the ethical void of the capitalist system, or as a mirror of the falsity of American myths or of some specific “American experience” like male dominance or sexism in a patriarchal society. Mamet’s deeper concerns transcend these narrow social and national boundaries and seek to project man’s metaphysical, moral links with God. These links are implied in the plays, as subtext, through the deceptions and self-deceptions with which a whole culture is filled.

**Philosophical Vision Stoic and Judaic, Not Existential**

In a word, Mamet’s vision of life is philosophical. But the question arises whether it is postmodern or existential. When Matthew C. Roudane asked David Mamet whether he could be considered a playwright concerned with existentialist themes, the playwright’s reply was frank: “I never really understood what existentialism meant. I’ve tried a whole long time.” (qtd. in Roudane, “Interview”). Mamet sounds existential in view of the doctrine of freedom of action which both Stoic philosophy and the existential philosophy posit, but still the two philosophies are poles apart. The absurdist techniques Mamet adopts from Beckett, Pinter and Albee to drive home the senselessness, anxiety, ennui, and alienation resulting from the spiritual emptiness of postmodern life should not be confounded with his philosophy. Mamet is far from being an existentialist.

Existentialist doctrine, especially of the sort the atheistic Sartre propounded, rejects all *a priori* values for man. It is man alone, the existentialist assumes, who forges his own values and destiny in a post-war world where it makes little difference whether god existed or not. As Sartre
said in his lecture *Existentialism and Humanism*, “Man makes himself; he is not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality, such is the pressure of circumstances upon him” (50).

**Spiritual Orientation Prominent**

For Mamet, on the contrary, *a priori* spiritual values are all-important. Whereas the existentialist flatly denies any “nature” to man, Mamet’s central concern as a writer is the spiritual nature of man and its struggle for survival when the myths of society and man’s own illusions stifle it. The existentialist’s concern for the post-war human predicament starts from a sense of total abandonment in the metaphysical void that confronts man. Mamet’s concern for the modern man’s plight, conversely, proceeds from his acute sense of the human soul shorn of truth and honesty and encrusted with lies. Mamet believes that no human society could afford to be nonchalant towards the loss of spiritual values—love, compassion, truthfulness, loyalty, justice, faith etc.—especially in a god-forsaken world such as he finds around him. As Bigsby points out, “[Mamet] is prone to refer to the human spirit: ‘Every reiteration of the idea that nothing matters debases the human spirit . . . Who is going to speak up for the human spirit?’ his answer is ‘The artist. The actor’ who works on ‘that stage which is the proponent of the life of the human soul’” (*Modern American Drama* 209).

The inherent nature of the human soul is its connective capability. In its pristine state of unified consciousness, it connects everybody and everything with everybody and everything. (Why should nationals of every hue and disposition, and every citizen of the world, surge with compassion and concern
for the victims of the September 11 catastrophe, of American bombing in Iraq, or of the Tsunami devastations of Indonesia? It is the spiritual bond of humanity that connects each to each straight, uninhibited by the analytical function and the divisive principles of the human mind). Mamet’s plays deplore the severance of this bond of human consciousness that occurs as the conditions of modern life lead to soul murder. As the playwright has said, “It’s impossible to have spiritual empathy if you don’t have spirit. That is what is lacking [in society]. That is the point. That is what each person has to discover in himself” (qtd. in Schvey 101). When the human mind is estranged from unified consciousness of the human spirit and discriminates beings on the bases of racial egotism, intelligence, affluence, class, colour, religion, nationality and every other surface reality, psychic fragmentation is the natural result.

Mamet depicts an amoral universe—a psychic universe where things have fallen apart, and where humans have turned incapable of valuing anything or anybody in terms of the whole. Blind to their spiritual roots, and torn asunder by the profound social and academic impact of various modern and postmodern “isms,” their minds can only have a fragmented view of everything, The “broads” men ogle are merely “tits and asses”; a man, by virtue of his color and race, is a “coon,” a “cocksucker”; the titillation of adolescent sex is the key to the understanding of the whole universe; conjugal relations between men and women are hardly more than a transient contract of togetherness; friendship is simply the advantage of a momentary business relation; and what is hailed as the “Century of Progress” is only the opportunity created for promoting the rapacious self-interest of capitalist tycoons and of their ilk; in a word, postmodern American life lies, as “Man” casually mentions in Mamet’s Edmond, within the ambits of “pussy, power, money” (ED 23).
Mamet’s plays suggest that even in such an amoral human universe the possibilities of redemption are not ruled out so long as humans can exercise their spiritual will. The human soul, represented by Mamet’s protagonists, always exercises its inherent unifying power and seeks to form itself into a whole. As William Herman observes in his essay “Theatrical Diversity from Chicago: David Mamet”:

Mamet’s obsessive themes are broken relations, the failure to form relations, the impossibility of forming relations, and yet the endless pursuit of these relations. It is as if the characters were possessed with an ontological weakness that can only be strengthened by the relation toward which they endlessly strive” (130-131).

The “ontological” need for connection is characteristic of Mamet’s characters. The human spirit consistently forms and develops these connections in order to evolve towards some larger identity. As Christopher Bigsby remarks in his essay on David Mamet, “[Mamet’s] fascination with deracinated characters, with those who perform rather than live their lives, is itself a comment on the consequence of surrendering a grasp on certain inner truths having to do with identity” (Cambridge Companion 7). This identity is not only that of the individual with society but also, at its deepest level, of the human spirit with God and the universe. But this deep need, felt unconsciously by Mamet’s characters, is revealed through a fragmented language that expresses their loneliness, existential anguish and despair. Their attempts to connect and their success or failure provide significant moments in Mamet’s drama.
Language Conceals Psychic Truths

Lie as the subject of drama—as something that conceals the truth at the beginning but is ultimately exposed for what it is—is adroitly and powerfully brought to the stage by the linguistic technique Mamet employs pervasively in his drama. The characters express themselves in a language that belies the truth of their inner being which, however, emerges at the end of the play. Several critics have discerned that the fragmented and rhythmic language of the characters serves best to express the longings of the human soul in despair. Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* was among the earliest critics to find “The Muzak Man” in Mamet. He remarked that Mamet was “that rare bird, an American playwright who’s a language playwright”; “a cosmic eavesdropper who’s caught the American aphasia”; and a playwright whose characters “address one another with the forked tongues of paranoia, insecurity, hostility, desperation” (“Muzak Man” 51). The aggressive, obscene language of the characters also serves a similar purpose of concealing their inner being. In *Critical Survey of Drama* (1985) Perry Luckett has observed that the characters’ scatology only brings out the “nuances of loneliness and need that lurk behind the verbal fireworks” (1235). William Herman has found in such profanity more than an apparent tape-recorder reproduction of low-life language: “The obscenity [. . .] stems not just from an extraordinary ear. [It] is not in the service of a naturalistic surface. It is constructed in the service of his characters’ deep need for concealment” (130). Anne Dean, in her profound analysis of Mamet’s “language as dramatic action” has pointed out:

Possibly one of his greatest achievements resides in his ability to suggest what lies just beneath the surface of their speech. He is able to draw attention to that which is barely apprehended by the
speakers themselves. [. . .] The tough and gritty language in a play such as *Lake boat* conceals its characters’ desperate loneliness and sense of abandonment; behind their incessant references to sex, gangsters and gambling there lies emptiness. (25)

The offensive language of Mamet’s characters, hence, opens the window on the world of their forlorn, lonely and frustrated spirit. The purpose of Mamet’s linguistic technique is revealed only when one removes the naturalistic spectacles with which one often tends to view the verbally driven actions of his characters. It is perhaps an exaggeration, even incorrect, to consider Mamet’s profane language as “pervasive.” In truth, Mamet employs a wide variety of styles to suit different characters, themes and milieu.

Each Mamet play draws its idiom and slang from the diverse occupations to which the characters are related. In her thoroughgoing examination of Mamet’s language Ruby Cohn maps out the wide range of his vocabulary: “*American Buffalo* draws from American gangster films”; “*Glengarry Glen Ross* is steeped in the unrealities of real estate”; “*Speed-the-Plow* views movie-making from a Hollywood perspective”; and “*Oleanna*, in contrast, calls down a plague of jargon on both houses—academe and feminism” (“Phrasal Energies” 76). The much-reviled scatological vocabulary of Mamet’s characters dwindles down as the playwright’s attention moves from the degenerate business sphere to more sophisticated ones. *The Shawl*, a play on the theme of divination, is absolutely free from scatology. The later plays *Oleanna* and *The Cryptogram*, dealing with academia and a child’s ‘soul murder’ respectively, contain only a couple of sex-related lexicons, and these
are inevitably uttered in moments of uncontrollable exasperation, and extreme "
desperation.

**Revelation of Mamet's “Personal Unconscious”**

It is not only the profoundly troubled souls of the characters that their
language conceals and reveals. The iconoclastic fury and the diatribes against
the lies of American society that characterize their dialogues are manifestations
of the author’s unconscious as well. The outrageous language Mamet puts in
the mouths of his characters reveals the neurosis which, had it not been
canalized through his creations, might have turned him “a criminal,” as he told
John Lahr in his “Paris Interview” (Lahr, “David Mamet” 59). In this context, it
would be worthwhile to take a glance at the particular circumstances of life that
have shaped the playwright’s mind and motivated his amazing productivity.

Born on 30 November, 1947 in Chicago, Illinois, as the only son of
Bernard Morris Mamet and Lenore June Mamet, David Allen Mamet grew up
in the company of his only sister Lynn in the city’s South Side. Bernard was a
labor lawyer who, with his penchant for the nuances of language and precise
expression, had an enormous influence on his children’s vocabulary and
communicative power. David’s parents divorced when the boy was 11 and at
high school—an event that depressed his sensitive mind and became the cause
of several repressions and confusions in his teenage life. In the same year
Lenore married a family friend, also named Bernard, and moved to the suburbs
of Plainfield with David and his sister. For quite a few years the two children
lived in the “emotional hurricane” of parental oppressions, and the impact of
the broken relationships at home led Mamet to find his “release” pervasively in
his works.
While a student, Mamet earned his livelihood working as a busboy at Chicago’s Second City, an improvisational troupe, and also backstage at the city’s Hull House Theater. The blackout revues he witnessed at Second City, most of them consisting of very few characters speaking very few lines, were among the earliest influences on Mamet’s artistry. After school he studied English Literature at Goddard College in Plainfield, where he wrote his first play Camel (1968), to fulfil his thesis requirement for the B.A. degree. Before his graduation in 1969 he went to New York City for one year (1968-69) to study acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse School. Sanford Meisner, the school’s director and an ardent practitioner of the Stanislavsky method, taught Mamet the principles of writing, especially how words not only describe but also prescribe human behavior. Mamet, however, soon found that acting was not his forte, and started his career writing and directing plays.

After his graduation Mamet got a position as instructor in acting at Marlboro College, Marlboro. The first play that he wrote there, to fulfil the requirements for the appointment, was Lakeboat, staged by his student-actors in 1970. Returning to Chicago after one academic year, Mamet worked as a cabdriver, shortorder cook, factory worker and telephone salesman. In 1971 he became drama instructor and artist-in-residence at Goddard College. He formed the Saint Nicholas Company, an ensemble of his best student-actors, out of whom William H. Macy has emerged as the outstanding actor in modern American drama and filmclom.

Besides staging classics, Mamet wrote his own plays for production. Two plays, The Duck Variations and Sexual Perversity in Chicago, staged at first by the ensemble group, were soon greeted enthusiastically in Chicago’s small experimental theaters as well. When his American Buffalo premiered in
Chicago’s Goodman Theater Stage Two in 1975, and advanced to New York’s Broadway in 1977, Mamet established his reputation as a most promising playwright of the American theater. By the end of the 1970s Mamet’s marvellous creative energy brought to the stages of Chicago and New York as many as twenty plays. His outstanding plays, from *American Buffalo* onwards, won him a number of prestigious awards for his contributions to the theater: Joseph Jefferson Award, Obie Award, New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and Pulitzer Prize, to name only a few. In 1977 Mamet married actress Lindsay Crouse, who acted in some of his films. Both divorced in 1991. In the same year Mamet married actress Rebecca Pidgeon, who has been, since then, an indispensable part of the author’s dramatic and cinematic career. He lives with her and their two children, Clara and Noah, currently dividing his time between homes in Vermont and Cambridge Massachusetts.

Mamet has produced more than 30 plays, about 20 screenplays and teleplays, several collections of essays, two novels and a poem. A brief chronological account of Mamet’s artistic creations, given below with the places and years of production in parentheses, reveals the author’s rich fecundity:


While explaining the sources of such amazing creativity, Mamet takes recourse to Freudian psychoanalytic theories. Art, in Mamet's view, seeks to “cleanse” the human mind and cure it of its “raging imbalance” by making the unconscious conscious. In the light of this theory, it is illuminating to learn about the internal hurricane that had driven the young Mamet to playwriting. The harrowing memories that had lain buried deep in his psyche surfaced with “The Rake: A Few Scenes from My Childhood,” Mamet's autobiographical essay which poignantly vents the emotional terrorism of his early life. It portrays the “cobbled-together family” in which Mamet and his sister Lynn, as school children, survived the tyrannies of their mother and stepfather at their home in the suburbs. On several occasions, the stepfather would fly into an insane fury. He would smash the round glass-topped dining table for every flimsy reason, cut his hand, and blame it on the children. Mamet’s mother Lenore, extremely self-willed and domineering, would always make Lynn toe the line. Though the essay simply narrates the terrors to which the two children were constantly subjected, Mamet apparently relates the emotional violence unleashed on Lynn by her mother to a violence-ridden heredity. Mamet’s mother herself had suffered such ruthless violence from her father as a girl.

The traumatic experiences of Mamet’s childhood have found their displacement through his art. Art, Mamet told John Lahr once, “stills two warring needs—the need to be accepted and the need to be revenged” (qtd. in Lahr, “Fortress Mamet” 74). In a psychoanalytical perspective, Mamet’s plays are the author’s sublimated revenge on the oppressors of his childhood, and the means by which he has unfettered his unconscious. “Nobody with a happy life went into showbiz,” Mamet has said in an interview with Alan Dershowitz (Stayton). Theatrical artists are merely unhappy people who “are driven to
lessen the burden of the unbearable disparity between their conscious and unconscious minds, and so to achieve peace," he acknowledges in 3 Uses of the Knife (50). As the artist makes his unconscious conscious and finds his peace, the audience also vicariously experiences the same equilibrium through the release of their unconscious.

Obviously, Mamet's art has synthesized his unconscious and his conscious and brought him peace. The theater was the place where he could find the right connections, form his ego, and unfold his unconscious. Mamet's sister Lynn has told Bruce Weber how Mamet's rage as well as her own was creatively transformed into art: “The very thing that could have destroyed us and driven us to silence ultimately led us to open our veins on white bond and make a living” (qtd. in Weber). Mamet's one-act play Jolly and his full-length masterpiece The Cryptogram, while rich in their inherent artistic truth, demonstrate how the release of repressions is a vital means of achieving psychological equilibrium.

Revelation of “Collective Unconscious”

It is not Mamet's “personal unconscious” alone that has surfaced in his artistic creations. His “collective unconscious” (not in the Jungian sense, but restricted here to mean the hereditary memories he inherits from his ancestors) brings out the cultural past that had alienated him from his racial and spiritual heritage. In his essay "A Plain Brown Wrapper" Mamet writes that his parents and grandparents, who were descendents of Ashkenazi immigrants, were considered “the superstitious scum of Eastern Europe” (Some Freaks 17). As a Reform Jew carrying the repressions of a humiliated and long-persecuted race, through his writings Mamet counteracted his unconscious anti-Semitism within
himself and found himself, not a ‘superstitious scum,’ but a proud and self-respectful member of a self-surpassing race which, though eternally in exile, has striven and succeeded as theater artists, business leaders and, occasionally, athletes too. Mamet’s screenplay *Homicide*, his novel *The Old Religion*, and his play *The Old Neighborhood*, are vigorous protests against the anti-Semitic hatred his race has faced for centuries. They are protestations of the true Jewish identity. Mamet’s sense of self-fulfilment urges him to resonate as the voice of his race. He writes in “The Decoration of Jewish Houses”: “God bless those in all generations who have embraced their Jewishness. We are a beautiful people and a good people, and a magnificent and ancient history of thought and action lives in our literature and lives in our blood' (*Some Freaks* 13). Mamet has regained his cultural roots. He is proud of where he belongs, and is at peace with his race.

To sum up: Mamet’s plays, in a holistic view, project the disharmony or utter moral chaos caused by the lies of the American society cut off from its metaphysical and spiritual roots. Dramatizing the ways in which the truths concealed or denied by the characters ultimately surface without fail, they ultimately bring out the triumph of Truth over all lies. As an eternal metaphysical principle and attribute of the Divinity governing the universe, Truth always prevails. When humans fail to acknowledge the truth by exercising their own free will, the Universal Will ultimately reveals it. That is the moral vision Mamet’s plays consistently project. This study purports to investigate Mamet’s dramatic actions in the light of this metaphysical vision, and find out the extent to which human will (or failure of will) and the Universal Will interact towards the final assertion of Truth.
Critical Approach

As for the critical approach adopted for the analysis of the selected plays, the traditional moral-philosophical approach is found to be appropriate, since David Mamet is primarily concerned with spiritual issues, and broad moral and philosophical questions are embedded in the plays selected for analysis. As Henry James asserts in his essay ‘The Art of Fiction,” “the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer.” To deal with a profoundly religious and reflective mind exploring the mysteries of the universe, the moral-philosophical approach is considered most suitable.

Chapterization

This study has a division of five chapters:

Chapter I provides an overview of Mamet’s artistic theories and purposes in order to propose that the dramatist’s concern is as much metaphysical as it is social or ethical. It considers Mamet to be an author devoted to truth first and foremost, and underscores the thesis that the need to commit oneself to truth in a World of Lies forms the all-pervasive subtext of his plays. Truth is an attribute of the Divine Will, to which the human moral will needs to conform and submit in order to experience peace. There is no redemption from the existential void experienced by the American society unless the people rid themselves of the lies that corrupt their soul. Mamet, consciously refraining from overt moralizing, projects this moral vision by bringing to the stage the death-throes of the human soul and its attempts to survive with the power of its moral will. The Introduction, thus, brings out the need to understand Mamet's deep spiritual concern if criticism of his achievement is to be worthwhile and congruent to his artistic purposes.
Chapter II analyses five early episodic plays—
*Laliceboat, The Duck Variations, Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Reunion,* and *Edmond.* All of them depict characters whose braggadocio hides their underlying despair and inner vacuum. Trapped in an existential void, the characters are engaged in a rational quest for the meaning of existence which they can find only in the transient interpersonal connections they can build with their fellow human beings. The brief episodic feature of the plays, together with the linguistic disconnections of the dialogues, splendidly bespeaks the inner fragmentation that has torn the whole fabric of American society to tatters. Yet Mamet does not fail to show this shambolic society its sources of harmony and peace—the restoration of its spiritual links with God and the Cosmos through faith, and the commitment to moral action that chimes in with the attributes of the Divine Will: self-knowledge, truth, compassion, benevolence, and justice. These are the traits the characters exhibit as each play comes to a close. In a world drained of meaning, all these spiritually estranged characters understand, the most important thing is “to be together.”

Chapter III analyses the dynamics of truth accentuated in the five classically structured plays of Mamet: *American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross, Speed-the-Plow, Oleanna* and *The Cryptogram.* What distinguishes these plays is the dialectic cause-effect sequence that characterizes the dramatic actions. In the first three plays, often grouped as the Business Trilogy, the antagonist (the Lie) temporarily intervenes and upsets the cordial relationship that prevails between the protagonist and his friend / coworker; but at the end the protagonist, exercising the moral will he is endowed with, rejects the Lie and reestablishes the primordial harmonious relationship. In *Oleanna* and *The Cryptogram* the Lie-Truth conflict is more pronounced. In these plays the Lie
does not upset any external relationship, but directly confronts the Truth represented by the protagonist, thus bringing Mamet’s moral concern in sharp relief. In *Oleanna* the Lie appears in the first part as a pathetic female student incapable of understanding anything in her course, only to surprise her professor later in her true colours as the representative of the Group that aims at his annihilation by subverting his authority. The Lie succeeds in destroying the professor’s career, but cannot force him to yield to its “agenda.” The power of the moral will, of Truth, is exhibited through the professor’s determination not to yield or submit to the Lie. In *The Cryptogram* the title signifies the mystery encrypted in the ten-year old protagonist’s chronic sleeplessness. The little boy confronts a number of familial betrayals which depress him and rob him of his sleep. Faced with the lies in the family, the sleepless boy—the “cryptogram”—instead of being decoded by the elders, himself intuitively decodes the meaning of the war knife, the torn blanket, and the envelope, all of which symbolize the betrayals that have brought about his psychosis. When all the truths have emerged, the protagonist makes ready for sleep at last—presumably by ending his own life. The progression from Lie to Truth is thus quite pronounced in the “classically, structured plays.”

Chapter IV brings out David Mamet’s growing Jewish concerns in the prime of his artistic career and his artistic attempts to explode the myths that seek to undermine the truths about the cultural and racial character of the Jews. The dramatist’s aim is to enable the audience to realize the glorious cultural heritage of a much-maligned race—a heritage which may still be preserved if only the race has the will to do so. After a brief scrutiny of the hero’s moral dilemma in Mamet’s Jewish screenplay *Homicide*, the chapter analyses the autobiographical play *The Old Neighborhood* in which the author’s sensitivity
In *The Disappearance of the Jews*, the opening scene, the Jewish vitality of the past is pondered and fantasized by Bobby and Joey, two Jewish friends. Their dialogues ultimately reveal the despair caused by their marital failures, which they seek to overcome through religious faith. *Jolly*, the second scene, serves to release the childhood repressions of Bobby's sister Jolly who, exercising her moral will in raising her family, has succeeded in breaking the cycle of familial violence to which she and her brother had been subjected as children. In the third scene, *Deeny*, Bobby's former lover muses over metaphysical questions about phenomena and existence which bring her no definite answers.

Chapter V establishes the viewpoint that in David Mamet’s plays lies always fail in the face of Truth, which is an attribute of the Universal Will. In Mamet’s moral vision the people of contemporary American society are alienated from God, the spiritual source of their being, and have fallen away from their inner nature. Self-blind, drained of religious faith and moral truth, they live lives of desperation. Their psyche is saturated with illusions of material success born of competitive greed, aggressive masculinity and the politics of power, and it needs to be purged in order to experience the peace it craves for. Mamet’s purpose as a dramatist is to bring to the stage the life, or rather the death, of the human soul overwhelmed by the lies of the world. American business, heterosexual relations, parent-child relations, and even simple interpersonal relations are depicted in Mamet’s plays as characterized by treachery, paranoia, insecurity and mistrust, which eventually rob the whole society of the possibilities of peaceful coexistence. Through his “stories” set in a variety of milieus Mamet demonstrates how lies inevitably fail in a world metaphysically governed by Truth. As a corollary, Mamet also suggests that
humans can transcend their tragic, discordant state if they could commit themselves to truth and exercise their moral will. It is these moments of Truth, in which lies are eschewed, and in which human spiritual nature is in tune with the Divine Will, that bring peace to the characters on the stage. By communicating to the audience the power of the moral action undertaken by humans through free choice, Mamet's plays show the way to peace.