

## Channelising Human's Inherent Good Nature: A Study on David Mamet's Humanistic Outlook in 'GLENGARRY, GLEN ROSS'

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### Abstract

Produced in 1983, 'Glengarry, Glen Ross'(GGR) concerns a real life estate business. It portrays four salesmen: Levene, Aaronow, Moss, and Roma. Its central action revolves around the cut throat competition among them and in the business world as a whole. It has ample scope for examining David Mamet, a promising American playwright's, humanistic outlook. In 'GGR,' Mamet sets out to write his own experience in a real estate office, where he worked in 1969. The real-estate business Mamet attacks in this play is just a sample of the corrupt American business world. He criticizes not just the real-estate business, but the whole capitalist system which has enslaved America.

**Keywords:**humanistic outlook, American business world, capitalist system, just society

Produced in 1983, 'Glengarry, Glen Ross'(GGR) concerns a real life estate business. It portrays four salesmen: Levene, Aaronow, Moss, and Roma. Its central action revolves around the cut throat competition among them and in the business world as a whole. It has ample scope for examining David Mamet, a promising American playwright's, humanistic outlook. In 'GGR,' Mamet sets out to write his own experience in a real estate office, where he worked in 1969. The real-estate business Mamet attacks in this play is just a sample of the corrupt American business world. He criticizes not just the real-estate business, but the whole capitalist system which has enslaved America.

'GGR' was produced nearly thirty-five years after Arthur Miller's (1967) 'Death of a Salesman,' but has a striking resemblance to it. Both Miller's Loman and Mamet's salesmen are typical representatives of American capitalist system. The dissimilarity is that in Miller's play, though there was a compromise with American dream, the play upheld moral and spiritual values to a certain extent, but in Mamet's play, the degradation is shown in its extremity (Nightingale 2004).

Humans alone have the advantage of learning from experiences. Through this play, the playwright stresses the significance of considering life's experiences as lessons to be observed. He

also focuses on how success in business is directly proportionate to ethical and value based attitude and practices. The basic tenet of humanism is that human beings are basically good. In 'GGR', Mamet insists on channelizing the inherent good nature to lead a successful life.

A competition announced by Murray and Mitch, the Directors of the real-estate company, forms the story line of 'GGR.' The competition is that one who sells the most land will be rewarded with a Cadillac car. One who comes second will get steak-knives and the losers will be fired. This pressurizes the salesmen and induces them to indulge in unfair means to reach their target. And finally no one wins the contest. As Piette (2004) observes, "The characters of Glengarry, Glen Ross are deprived of any human warmth and compassion and are constantly steeped in an atmosphere of fear, greed and ruthlessness: the higher the pressure, the lower the ethics." It is because of this 'pressure,' humans, in this modern world, forget to be humanistic. Such inhumane acts certainly cause havoc in the society.

By exposing the wily nature of the salesmen, who cheat people with their captivating language, Mamet is actually passing a scathing attack on the unethical business practices that have been in the society for quite some time. The inhuman principles have got deeply rooted in the business world. Mamet tells Roudane, "The play concerns how business corrupts, how the hierarchical business system tends to corrupt. It becomes legitimate for those in power in the business world to act unethically" (Roudane 2001). So Mamet does not find fault with the individuals, but feels that the society is responsible for such unethical activities of the individuals.

In his remarks about an ideal society, Kurtz (1973) says:

A just society is one that ought to allow individuals to satisfy their tastes, follow their careers, fulfill their moral and aesthetic visions and guide their own destinies as they see fit, without under social pressure or governmental restrictions.

In a society that disposes the failure ruthlessly, it may not be unreasonable for its citizens to disown the human values and business ethics to scale the heights of their profession. Through this play, which has no humanist representative, Mamet wants to insist on the need for humanism which will uproot all the other falsehood – betrayal of friendship, breaching of family ties, mushrooming of corruption, sexual abuses and above all, lack of security.

The salesmen in Mamet's play do not rely on their business knowledge though they have practical knowledge. They are skillful business men, who can articulate their intentions and win people's trust. But, they do not use their knowledge gained out of experience effectively. Using it for wrong purpose and to reach their goals through foul means, they fail in their endeavours. Levene, for example, is the 'Machine' of big success. He is annoyed that he has not been allotted the premium leads. He clearly states that the success he has attained in the business in the past has been the result of his perseverance, sincerity and skill. Hence, he demands the most favorable leads.

Though Levene is declining in his business, he is a genuine human being who has self-respect. Even during hardships, he does not ask for 'charity' and 'pity'. He only seeks a 'chance'. He requests Williamson, the Manager in-charge of allotting the leads to potential salesmen, "Give me a chance. That's all I want ... and all I want is a chance. It is a streak and I'm going to turn it around. (pause) I need your help" (Mamet 1984). He wants to prove his supremacy in the business world.

Levene's anxiety brings to mind Willy Loman of 'Death of a Salesman'. But Levene is not a 'man of infinite contradictions' (Venkateshwarlu 1990) like Loman. As Venkateshwarlu puts it, Loman's "contradictions speak about his psychological state and his indecisive response to social

values.” On the contrary, Levene’s focus is only on the target and not the means, which is the flaw in his character. With all the years of experience and the knowledge those experiences have given him, he breaks into the real estate office and steals the leads. It is this wrong attitude that results in his failure and scales his image down as a business man.

Of all the four salesmen, Aaronow is projected as a business man with values and principles. But he lets his ethics go unauthenticated, because of his meek expressions. When his friend and another salesman, Moss, suggests looting their own real estate office to steal the leads and sell them to their competitor, he does not oppose it vehemently. He just expresses his shock: “Because, because, you know, it’s a crime” (Mamet 1984). Aaronow is overtly taken aback, when he comes to know that Moss wants him to break into the office: “You want me to break into the office tonight and steal the leads? (Mamet 1984)... why are you doing this to me, Dave. Why are you doing this all all...?... we sat down to eat dinner, and here I’m a criminal... (Mamet 1984). But, finally he agrees to the plan of stealing the leads. If he had been assertive, he need not have felt nervous on knowing about the police enquiry: “When I talk to the police, I get nervous” (Mamet 1984). Though he has not stolen the leads, he feels upset, because Moss has been planning with him to rob the leads and he has also given his consent to cooperate.

He is also worried about Moss’ absence, because he suspects that Moss would have stolen and he would be caught instead of Moss. All these lead to his final exasperation: “Oh, God, I hate this job” (Mamet 1984). As Mamet says, “Aaronow has some degree of conscience, some awareness, he’s troubled. Corruption troubles him” (Roudane 2001). In this corrupt and devious world, people like Aaronow are not able to succeed, because they lack assertiveness and are incapable of choosing what is right. This shortcoming in him not only results in the failure in the contest, but also places him as the least successful of all the salesmen in the play.

Roma is the most cunning and virulent business man. He sports success with an easy demeanour because of his wily way of talking. He will not spare any philosophy to win his client’s confidence. In an instance, to convince a customer named Lingk, he says,

I do those things which seem correct to me today. I trust myself. And if security concerns me, I do that which today I think will make me secure. And every day I do that, when that day arrives that I need a reserve, (a) odds are that I have it, and (b) the true reserve that I have is the strength that I have of acting each day without fear. (pause) According to the dictates of my mind (Mamet 1984).

This shows that he will go to any extent to save his skin.

Roma enacts an instant drama in front of Lingk, who has come to his office to get his contract cancelled according to his wife’s advice. He makes Levene play the role of one Mr. Ray, an imaginary Director of American Express. This scene acts as a splendid exposition of Roma’s skill as a salesman and the way in which Mamet has portrayed Roma shows his secret admiration for his salesmen, because, according to him, they are also in a way actors acting in real life, unlike the real actors who act only on the stage. Roma does this enactment to avoid talking to Lingk.

But, on knowing that Lingk is very particular about canceling the contract, he starts philosophising:

Your life is your own. You have a contract with your wife. You have certain things you do jointly, you have a bond there ... and there are other things. Those things are yours. You needn’t feel ashamed, you needn’t feel that you’re being untrue... or that she would abandon you if she knew. This is your life. Yes.

Now I want to talk to you because you're obviously upset and that concerns me (Mamet 1984).

These sweet coated words do not draw the admiration of the audience, because they know it is all meaningless since they do not come from the heart of the speaker, but to Lingk, it is all philosophy and worldly wisdom. He is totally carried away. But for Williamson's interference and revelation of the truth, Lingk would have been cheated and Roma would have won the rat race for Cadillac.

Kurtz believes that human experience with scientific intelligence and critical reasoning, should actually improve the humanistic values of the society and its dwellers. In 'GGR,' only utter chaos and subversion of values are found, because the experiences of the characters are not transcoded positively and the characters are not able to understand the need for humanism. They are driven blindly by the concept 'Survival of the Fittest.' To establish their position and status strongly and permanently, Mamet's salesmen are found wanting in humanistic approach to business. Humanists believe in "Creating conditions for free development of individuals and groups in the form of prosperity, equity, legality, participation and self-government" (Praag 1973). If Levene has put his experiential knowledge to proper use, instead of blowing his own trumpet and indulging in theft, if Roma has had the integrity to use his skills at communicating to satisfy the needs of his customers instead of using them for betraying the trust of his clients, if Aaronow has been assertive in implementing his ethics, and if Moss has used his knowledge for constructive purposes and not for evil deeds like looting his own company, all the four salesmen would have succeeded in winning the contest.

This is the essence of humanism that Mamet wants his characters, who, in turn, are people in the society, to practice. There is no need for acquisition of these ideals or qualities. They are already there in the minds of the human beings in the form of knowledge which is acquired through experiences. The only factor that is lacking is the understanding of these ideals and realizing the importance of practicing them. Thus, 'GGR' succeeds in highlighting the importance of humanistic outlook in business.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, a detailed study of Mamet's 'Glengarry, Glen Ross,' shows Mamet's cultural humanistic vision. In 'GGR,' he deals with the importance of humanistic outlook in the business world. He underscores the value of experiences and rational thinking through which knowledge about the world can be obtained which is the essence of cultural humanism.

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