



RELIGACIÓN. Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades

ISSN: 2477-9083

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Centro de Investigaciones en Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades

Ecuador

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RELIGACIÓN. Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, vol. 4, núm. 16, 2019, pp. 228-235  
Centro de Investigaciones en Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades  
Quito, Ecuador

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## Collapse of Moral Values and Spiritual Decay in David Mamet's *American Buffalo*

Colapso de los valores morales y la decadencia espiritual en David Mamet's *American Buffalo*

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### ABSTRACT

Decay of morality has been the focus of many American dramatists. David Mamet as one of the most well-known writers has a particular position in this regard. His plays, in particular *American Buffalo* mean to depict a critical situation in which the only way through which the different characters can survive is just through cheating on each other. This study is going to analyze this play in detail in order to show that the concept of American Dream seems so serious and real for the characters that makes them unaware of its being a lie. Likewise, the current study will declare that through *American Buffalo*, Mamet has criticized the entrepreneurial arrangement which has led to the characters' wretchedness. To do so, the theory of grand narratives by Lyotard as this paper's main methodology will be applied. The aim of this article is to show how the dramatist criticizes the capitalistic system and indicate to the destructive effects of this system on the human condition.

**Key words:** Spiritual Decay, David Mamet, *American Buffalo*, American Dream, Grand Narratives, Lyotard

### RESUMEN

La decadencia de la moralidad ha sido el foco de muchos dramaturgos estadounidenses. David Mamet como uno de los escritores más conocidos tiene una posición particular al respecto. Sus obras, en particular *American Buffalo*, representan una situación crítica en la que la única forma en que los diferentes personajes pueden sobrevivir es simplemente engañándose unos a otros. Este estudio analizará esta obra en detalle para mostrar que el concepto de Sueño Americano parece tan serio y real para los personajes que les hace ignorar que es una mentira. Del mismo modo, el estudio actual declarará que a través de *American Buffalo*, Mamet ha criticado el acuerdo empresarial que ha llevado a la miseria de los personajes. Para ello, se aplicará la teoría de las grandes narrativas de Lyotard como metodología principal de este artículo. El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar cómo el dramaturgo critica el sistema capitalista e indicar los efectos destructivos de este sistema en la condición humana.

**Palabras clave:** decadencia espiritual, David Mamet, búfalo americano, sueño americano, grandes narrativas, Lyotard

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Recibido: 03/02/2019 Aceptado: 09/06/2019

## Background of the Study

As one of the greatest American playwrights, David Mamet has always tried to reflect upon the current realities in his country. In fact, his plays display a number of definite postmodern characteristics. He has mostly been concerned about the bitter social realities and how they have influenced many generations. According to Dean (1981), Mamet has dedicated most of his arty life to analyzing and expressing these issues which have “a tremendous capacity to destroy our lives” (p. 55). Because his plays are mostly postmodern, it is essential to present a short introduction to postmodernism and its development. Connor (2004) as a critic has had a thorough scrutiny of postmodernism. He has declared,

Having expanded its range and dominion hugely during the first period of separate accumulation in the 1970s and the syncretic period of the 1980s, the idea of the postmodern began for the first time to show its rate of expansion during the 1990s... By this time, ‘postmodernism’ has also entered the popular lexicon to intensify a loose, sometimes dangerously loose, relativism... So, whereas postmodernism had expanded its reach in academic discussion, it had shrunk down into a casual term of abuse in more popular discourse. (p. 5)

In his book *Postmodern/Drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage*, Steven Watt (2001) has declared that “drama and theatre play ancillary roles at best in the most influential commentaries on postmodernism” (p. 16). In addition, in her book *Theatre of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama* (2005) Kerstin Schmidt has defended the view that drama is a strictly postmodern genre,

Drama and theater [that] are particularly suited to raise questions about the relationship between the text, discourse and performance, about the transformation of fixed words on the page into an articulation on stage, about presence and representation, about the pluralized and fragmented self, about the role of spatiality, and about drama’s own conditions and processes of existence – all of which are major postmodern concerns with inevitable theatrical silences that cannot be stopped or shortened by simply turning the page of the text and are teeming with meaning. (p. 8)

*American Buffalo*, which was performed in Chicago in 1975 for the very first time, was so successful that could make its way to Broadway in 1977. The play happens in a junk shop owned by Don. Don who has paid about ninety dollars to a customer for a buffalo nickel now is hesitant about its real value. He and his young assistant, Bob, come up with the idea of stealing the coin. Bob declares that the customer has gone out for the weekend. Teach as Don’s friend becomes aware of the plan and encourages Don to accept him instead of Bob because Bob is untried and unreliable. Teach even advises Don to steal the full coin collection. Later, Don wants Fletcher as another friend to join Teach. Teach, however, argues that he can handle the whole plan without Fletcher.

The second act happens before the midnight on the same day while Teach and Don are getting ready for the break-in and are waiting for Fletcher. Teach who hates Fletcher tells Don that he is not unreliable and it is better to perform their plans without him. While Don is coaxing Teach not to use his gun, Bob appears at the junk shop and tries to sell Don a buffalo nickel, like what Don had sold the customer. They ask him about the source of the coin but Bob is indirect. Teach thinks that Bob and Fletcher have committed the robbery themselves. He asks Bob where Fletcher is. Bob tells him that Fletcher was attacked by some Mexicans and is in a hospital, but when Don calls the hospital, they say that there is no one with this name in the hospital.

Bob tries to convince them that there is a mistake, but Teach hits him with a metal thing. Another friend calls and verifies Bob’s story by mentioning the correct hospital’s name. Don calls the hospital and approves that Fletcher has been in the hospital. Bob admits that the customer’s leaving with a suitcase was not real, and he bought the second nickel from a coin seller to compensate Don’s loss. Don reprimands Teach for hurting Bob and wants him to take him to the hospital.

## Significance and Innovation of the Study

David Mamet is such an outstanding playwright that there can be found a great number of articles and books regarding the analysis of his works. The present study intends to investigate *American Buffalo* as one of his well-

known works through a postmodern approach. To do so, the writer will benefit Lyotard's theory of grand narratives in order to analyze how a postmodern writer like Mamet has always been obsessed with criticizing such perpetual grand narratives as the concept of American dream or capitalism.

### Literature Review

Mamet's plays and *American Buffalo* in particular have been so far criticized from different angles by many scholars; for example, *Understanding David Mamet* by Murphy is an analysis of many of David Mamet's plays. Murphy has especially focused her attention on Mamet's most significant plays like *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Oleanna*, *American Buffalo*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *The Cryptogram*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *Edmond*, *The Woods*, *Lakeboat*, *Boston Marriage*, and *The Duck Variations*—as well as his three novels—*The Village*, *The Old Religion*, and *Wilson*.

Murphy also has declared how Mamet's less acknowledged works can provide important context for his major plays. In addition, *The Plays, Screenplays and Films of David Mamet* (2008) has studied David Mamet's works as the most important alive American dramatist. This book means to provide the latest revision of the criticism of Mamet's work. Along with all the existing studies regarding Mamet's works, the writer of the present study has decided to talk about one of the most widespread themes in Mamet's plays, especially in *American Buffalo*.

### Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism is such a vast literary movement that many critics and scholars have come up with different theories regarding the analysis of postmodern works. One of the most important and leading scholars is Lyotard. Lyotard has been highly preoccupied with a strong opposition against grand narratives. According to this French thinker, hesitation, cynicism, and incredulity in such metanarratives are what shape the postmodern world. He believes that such narratives should give their place to a number of petti narratives. Grand narratives are claimed to form a particular feature of postmodernism which are "narratives about narratives of historical meaning, experience or knowledge, proposing a society legitimation through the anticipated completion of a (as yet unrealized) master idea" (Appignanesi & Garratt, 1995, pp. 102-3). One of these narratives as already mentioned belongs to the concept of "American Dream" as one of the strongest grand narratives. Lyotard assumes postmodernism as the end of such concepts. In other terms, he presumes the postmodern age as an era during which everything is crushed or disjointed.

### Discussion

#### Corruption of Morality

The characters of *American Buffalo* are intended to show the characteristics of the working-class. Mamet once commented on the American society as a "society with only one bottom line: How much money you make" (Carroll, p. 32). Like many other characters in Mamet's plays, the characters in this play also show a number of people who are trying hard in order to subsist against the lies in an American community (MacNicholas, 1981, p. 66).

Like Miller's salesman, these characters also think that they can be wealthy; so, they are ready to overlook any moralities and standards so that their dreams come true. Mamet has said that "the ethics of the business community is that you can be as predatory as you want within a structured environment" (Carroll, 1987, p. 33).

The interesting fact is that they think because of being deprived of many rights due to their place in the society, they can justify any crime that they commit. They believe in improving their standing in the world by any means which are mostly immoral. Their benefits even make them scheme against each other and forget about friendship. However, they can earn nothing. Mamet has actually emphasized the importance of personal benefits in an American society. This issue can be easily noticed in this line:

Teach: You know what is free enterprise? The freedom...Of the Individual...To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit...In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit...The country's founded on this... (*American Buffalo*, 1975, pp. 57-58).

This play is very much like *Glengarry Glen Ross* because the characters of this masterpiece are also ready to disrespect any moral values in order to satisfy their needs; for instance, some values like rapport, care and faithfulness are all

rotten in such a world. The following lines from *Teach* demonstrate this idea:

TEACH: We're talking about money for chrissake, huh? We're talking about cards. Friendship is friendship, and a wonderful thing, and I am all for it. I have never said different, and you know me on this point. Okay. But let's just keep it *separate* huh, let's just keep the two apart, And maybe we can deal with each other like some human beings. (Mamet, 1975, p. 15)

The reason of this resemblance is due to the fact that *American Buffalo* was so successful that Mamet decided to apply its themes in another play and this is the way he came up with *Glengarry Glen Ross* which could very well show an American capitalist society. For Mamet, some concepts like the "American Dream" are just some lies which have been influenced many lives. American dream refers to a number of desires, especially the economic opportunities and are able to give chance for all people to gain money, success, and happiness.

One of these grand narratives belongs to the notion of American dream. Lyotard argues that these grand narratives have lost their power to legitimize discourses. As he (1979) says "The grand narrative have lost its credibility, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (p.37). It is assumed that most of the predominant subjects in Mamet's plays are in close connection with the failure of American myths, the decline of American idealism, the regularity of manipulation and dishonesty in business (Nemeth, 2001, p. 38). Bigsby (2004) has also acknowledged that,

The play's ostensible simplicity ... expands into a parodic version of the American dream, a social drama, and a metaphysical work of surprising complexity and genuine originality. With its echoes of another America, uncontaminated by entrepreneurial greed, a product of utopian rhetoric rather than psychotic fear and aggression, *American Buffalo* offers a portrait of the Republic in terminal decay, its communal endeavor and individual resilience all but disappeared. The trust and unity invoked on its coinage have now devolved into paranoia, the security and hope it once offered into a frightening violence. (p. 57)

In other words, American dream as a grand narrative has been criticized by Mamet. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard has discussed the emergent distrust towards the many grand narratives and has accredited that,

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives [...] The narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language [...] Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? (pp. 24-25)

American dream as one of the very long-rooted grand narratives is not of any value and this is clearly recognized in *American Buffalo*. Mamet wrote this play to show his cynicism towards this notion and to say how destructive it can be. Any character's pursuit of this dream makes him do any prohibited action, denoting the dishonesty of this myth because it once meant to give anybody the same opportunities but now it allows for any illicit act. When asked about the emphasized position of American dream in his works like *American buffalo*, Mamet answered that,

It interests me because the national culture is founded very much on the idea of strive and succeed. Instead of rising with the masses one should rise from the masses. Your extremity is my opportunity. That's what forms the basis of our economic life, and this is what forms the rest of our lives. That American myth: the idea of something out of nothing. And this also affects the spirit of the individual. It's very divisive. One feels one can only succeed at the cost of someone else. Economic life in America is a lottery. Everyone's got an equal chance, but only one guy is going to get to the top. "The more I have the less you have." So one can only succeed at the cost of, the failure of another, which is what a lot of my plays *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*—are about. . . (as cited in Roudane, 2003, p. 6)

Ironically, Mamet shows how America, which is the land of opportunity, has become land of moral corruption: the only one can reach to the top by defeating the others. In *American Buffalo*, it is quite ridiculous to see manipulation, stealing and betray have become the great methods in business world. And everything is possible in such as a business. Furthermore, there is no place for human values in this business. This meaning can be seen through Teach's speech "There is no one loyal bone in the bich's body" (Mamet, p. 14)

Mamet has intended to portrait a situation which is so critical that the characters must deceive each other in order to persist. They seem not to be aware that the American dream is only a lie. In addition, he has meant to use his play as a means to complain about the capitalistic system which has made the characters despairing and forced to commit a lot of immoral activities. Teach is the main character in Mamet's play, he is cunning and manipulated, and has ability in convincing others. One of the critics, Bigsby declares that the false dream and savage rules of the capitalistic system have destroyed human values (1985, p.115)

Betrayal as one of the main themes in this play is the other devastating result of each character's blind following the American dream. Thus, Mamet in *American Buffalo* shows the ideals of American dream such as the unchallengeable right of life, freedom and the quest for happiness as directed completely to the elect of cheap world. In other words, the land of opportunity turns into land of moral corruption and things such as burglary, tricky and stealing have become the great methods in the business world. As one of the critics, Bigsby (2000) mentioned to this meaning when he said "the central theme of *American Buffalo* is whether vicious competition will outweigh personal attachments" (p. 241).

Teach urges Don to expatriate Bob from the business contract. By giving little amount to Don, Bob is removed from the deal. Don is influenced by Teach, the way he speaks and thinks. He expresses his perception and experience of the world. Anne Dean (1990) illustrates that Teach's technique and witty talk enables him to convince anyone (p .100)

Teach: One thing. Makes all difference in the world.

Don: What?

Teach: Knowing what the fuck you're talking about. And it's so rare

Don: So rare (Mamet p. 49).

His witty and skillful flexibility can be seen through his dialogues. It is quite contradictory that he knows most of the good things but utilizes all his abilities for wrong objectives. Mamet wants to reflect that people in American capitalistic society are using their potentials for illegal and immoral activities.

Mamet introduces his characters Don, Teach and Bob to show how America which is the land of success turns into an ironic mockery and American dream, which pushes these characters to committee diverse crimes, turns into a fantasy. This meaning is vivid when Teach revolts against the corruption of the American business world.

Teach: The Whole Entire World.

There Is No Low.

There Is No Right and Wrong

The World Is Lies.

There Is No Friendship.

Every Fucking Thing.

Every God Franken Thing. (Mamet, p, 103)

Within the perspective of the Teach's regressive logic and all of the characters share the same idea, much of *American Buffalo* seems to be a summation of characters' wrong ideas. In other words, ethical business and ideals of the capitalistic system have become lies, and social, moral and spiritual values are nowhere. Mamet states this meaning when he comments on his play:

*American Buffalo* offers is about an essential American consciousness, which is the ability to suspend an ethical sense and adopt in its stead a popular adopted mythology and use that to assuage your conscience like everyone else is doing (Kane, 1992, p. 123)

Mamet has had a great skill in the use of language in order to tackle with ideals of the American Dream and rules of capitalistic system. Within Mamet's language, there is no harmony between spoken words and its meaning. By using this technique, Mamet could create a sense of satire and irony that transfuses the action of *American Buffalo*. Furthermore, his language focuses on despair, immoral way of interaction of the society leading towards failure on both capitalism as well as spiritual level.

It should also be added that the language of Mamet's plays signifies the characters' internal world. The way each character employs the language shows how he is violent and this anger is displayed by a code language which is necessary to endure in such a corrupt world. By the help of this language, the play's audience is able to experience the world of these characters. Therefore, the characters' behavior is molded by their bristly speech. Mamet's way of applying language that in his idea is highly poetic is a means to show how real everything is. *American Buffalo* is unique for its employing local language. Mamet has used highly unmannerly and offensive statements which all make his narration exceptional. His linguistic talent is shown through the following part when Dean (1981) says:

Mamet worked iambic pentameter out of the vernacular of the underclass, he made it sound like people talking, and he made it funny. The language was an immediate sensation, and over the years it's made a lot of audiences very happy and a lot of actors very crazy. (p. 192)

In Act 1, we see Teach walking around the junk shop and appearing for the first time in the play while saying: "Fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie" (p. 9). The audience may be shocked by the way he speaks, but their shock very soon disappears because Teach continues to curse Ruthie in the following lines. And whenever he speaks in a better way, the audience may wonder if something bad will happen to him. Teach's invasive statements are a sign of his being a failure.

Mamet's main concern has always been to discuss everyman's situation in a besmirched and pitiless business world through indecent and everyday language with disjointed rhythms. Anne Dean (1981) has said, "*In American Buffalo*, Mamet portrays a group of small-time crooks who thought themselves legitimate businessmen" (pp. 195-196). Mamet has attempted to accentuate the deplorable feebleness of a number of businessmen in an extremely mocking way because the story revolves around individuals without financial self-determination and their contest to continue. The characters are debilitated by the unethical world in the play which forces them to cheat and lie in order to survive.

Just the same as *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *American Buffalo* also means to show the dramatist's pessimism towards the cheap business world, its depravity, and the way people become indissolubly obsessed with their business goals. In *American Buffalo*, the close relationship between business and trickery is shown vividly in the play. Mamet's characters in this play are not that important in the business world and have no family bonds. They are just a number of friends whose attachment seems completely untrustworthy.

Teach as the leading character is a boastful man who is in search of his own benefits. Most of the times he criticizes others. When things go wrong, he says, "I go out there every day. There's nothing out there." The other typical characteristic of Mamet's plays also appear here when there is uncertainty. Words are also distorted or misunderstood by characters, and the communication is damaged.

In his heartbreaking and forceful setting, Mamet has provided the readers with an inaccurate image of American business. He has reached this goal through three failed crooks. These robbers embody the despoiled moral standards. The failed personage of *American Buffalo* actually epitomize a breakdown in life that has caused them to betray each other. In *American Buffalo*, Teach is the symbol of manly and phony images of mankind because in the whole play he is in search of triumph over others.

### **Disintegration of Identity**

As well as shattered grand narratives, postmodernism denotes the many disintegrated and broke identities. As a matter of fact, the postmodern self is a fragmented identity that result in an emotive uniformity. Jameson (1984, p. 62) contends that the united self could be true during the classical era, but postmodernism has made it come to an end.

Thus, the postmodern self is split and decentered. According to Gergen (1991), postmodern culture erases the category of self. The self is erased as the person is saturated with images from the media that "...furnishes us with a

multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self (p. 6). So, the images of the postmodern self are the reality of the postmodern self (Tseñlon, 1991, p. 118).

As the leading character, Teach is frequently worried and confused about his identity. He is not a business man for sure, but often talks about the business world. By depicting robbery as a commonplace incident in the business world, he brings about confusion. Mamet's characters and their fragmented identities can be said to represent the dystopia where they are living. Everyone cares only about himself and achieving his goal is more important than any bond. This fragmentation also signifies the tragic realities in the current era.

One of the reasons why he does so is that he wants to represent a real masculine. Masculinity is of high significance in all Mamet's works. Actually, Mamet has meant to show this theme in *American Buffalo* through the leading character. He believes that maleness is an obligation in the business world that is certainly masculine. Teach believes that the only way to achieve his objectives is through looking like a real man. Michael S. Kimmel (2006) has announced that,

American white men bought the promise of self-made masculinity, but its foundation has all but eroded. Instead of questioning those ideals, they fall back upon those same traditional notions of manhood—physical strength, self-control, power— that defined their fathers' and their grandfathers' eras, as if the solution to their problem were simply “more” masculinity. (p. 218)

Thus, some concepts are regarded just typical of women and the characters must avoid them such as alliance, love and trustworthiness. The following lines from Teach demonstrate this issue,

TEACH: We're talking about money for chrissake, huh? We're talking about cards. Friendship is friendship, and a wonderful thing, and I am all for it. I have never said different, and you know me on this point. Okay. But let's just keep it *separate* huh, let's just keep the two apart, And maybe we can deal with each other like some human beings. (Mamet, p. 15)

## Conclusion

Through the application of Lyotard's postmodern theory of grand narratives, this study concluded that Mamet's plays mostly represent the destructive influences of such concepts as the concept of “American Dream” and their normalness in the society. Mamet wants his audience to understand these damaging effects which make people use any immoral way to achieve their goals. In the end, he believes that the only way by which the problems are overcome is when these dreams and lies are ignored and people come up with the reality. Mamet's plays are highly about the widespread crisis of human beings; he has also been obsessed with the desertion and failure of the many grand narratives or myths. Mamet has also attempted to emphasize the effect of the American capitalistic system on corruption of such valuable concepts as individualism, relationships, and family. *American Buffalo* shows how different characters' greed to be economically successful leads to their failure at the end. Mamet in *American Buffalo* has delivered a clear and true portrait of capitalistic society which finally brings about the complete suppression of empathy, devotion, and reliability.

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