

# Surreptitious Affairs, Contracts and Dehumanised Masters in the World of Salesmen-A Study of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*

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## Abstract

Caught in the holocaust of thriving consumerism, the salesmen of David Mamet's 'Glengarry Glen Ross' indulge in stealthy and sneaky deals. Pecuniary interests play havoc on their lives. In the relentless quest of the American Dream they become victims to immoral deeds and corrupt business practices. Exploitation and coercion become the order of the day. They fail in their attempt to form healthy relationships, be it business or personal, in a demoralized society.

## 1. Introduction

Critics have for decades spoken about, with a sharp tongue, the ruthless and inhuman nature of the world of business and materialism. Aspirants in the field hope to get instant success and thereby money; which promise a magnificent worldly life, but the centre does not seem to hold for the modern American life. Eventually what has emerged is basically a consumerist society where the wants of the common man never get appeased. In a struggle for the best monetary beneficial life the American seems to forget that the spirit is reneged into some dark recesses while the heart urges for more and more pleasures. In the process the common man lives in an unethical and amoral world, where all human values are discarded. America's great playwright, Arthur Miller has, many years ago, portrayed the life of a real-estate salesman as representing the ambitious yet unsuccessful American and symbolising the drawbacks of that old success myth, the American Dream. He presents how the capitalistic system plays havoc on the life of the poor salesman who maintained a relentless quest for success, but with an unrealistic view of life. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* became an instant hit and a severe blow on the American Dream and Capitalistic society. Mamet in the present times, in an overly new fashion, examines and throws a scathing eye on the ways of a money-motivated and greedy society. He depicts how ethics are twisted so much so that the demands of the materialistic society are met. As a result relationships are persistently maintained for pecuniary interests. With the resultant unhappy soul the American wears the veil of bliss and contentment in spite of a debilitating foundation of aborted ties.

## 2. Discussion of the Play

The real-estate men of *Glengarry Glen Ross* are enamoured in an endless pursuit of instant success and immense wealth, sacrificing the coziness of close bonding. The ordinary man as represented by the middle-aged Shelly Levene, Dave Moss, George Aaranow as against the comparatively younger Ricky Roma are engaged in a war against their capitalist bosses, Mitch and Murray; equally against the secretary and immediate master, John Williamson. With a view to gaining accessibility into a world of infinite glory in business they are engaged in a tug-of-war, where only one section is bound to win. Surreptitious affairs and contracts mark their lives, which are intended to outwit a colleague and become the topper in the sales contest. Each one's motive is to win the Cadillac or at least the set of steak knives assigned to the best salesman and the runner-up respectively.

The Salesmen are as such entrapped in a closed world of sales or no sales, victory or defeat. They are tied up by the unbending rules set by their unseen owners, Mitch and Murray, the real-estate business being the paradigm of capitalism. These "absent owners" who "like Godot, never appear" (Bigsby 122), are like other bosses of capitalism, are unreachable. In their system of consumer economy, they remain elusive and run their shady operation like a big business in the down town office with the help of hired manager, Williamson. They devise rules; install bonus plans, and bent rules for their advantage. They treat the salesmen like "sweatshop" workers and tap out the utmost from them. The dehumanised masters operate their specious *laissez-faire* philosophy to trap the malcontent salesmen.

Philip C. Kolin (4) maintains that Mitch and Murray not only epitomize the corrupt bosses of capitalism, but also represents the pitfalls of false friendship, a dominant theme in the play. Levene, once the star of the sales, is down on his luck and is found to savour the bitterness and shame of it. He suffers the throes of impending dismissal and nudges close at Williamson's elbows, pleading to provide him with prospective leads. He in sheer desperation garrulously encounters the complacent and cruel Williamson. He claims that as a successful salesman, he was in close companionship with Mitch and Murray, who in turn have enjoyed the fruits of Levene's toil and sweat. He had once proudly paid for Mitch's car when they were on Peterson (18). He had also bought a trip to Bermuda for Murray. He also boasts to have generated the dollar revenue sufficient to buy

the premium lead in Nineteen Seventy Nine (20). His glittering achievements gave Mitch and Murray a solid foundation in real-estate business. Levene recaps, “Those guys lived on the business I brought in” (22). He adds, “You were here you’d of benefited from it too” (22) to Williamson. But such a scintillating past does not do good to enable him to get a “lead hotter” than the “deadbeats” he is offered. Williamson’s cold and unrelenting ways embody the tough and stern attitude of capitalism before which humanitarian concerns are uncared for. To worsen the situation Williamson bargains for a high amount as bribe on each of Levene’s sale, which is unlawful. He settles on “twenty percent, and fifty bucks a lead” (24), and tries to extract hundred bucks from the professionally and financially sinking salesman, Levene. He even turns down his prayer made on personal grounds, mentioning his daughter. Levene pleads, “I’m asking you. As a favor to me? (Pause.) John. (Long pause.) John: my daughter...”. Thus fully aware of his near fall into the irrevocable abyss of failure Levene musters control and assumes confidence while he appeals to Williamson. But he breaks down then and there, at times verging on to abusive and obscene words or else reverting to self-pity. He becomes the victim of disintegrated relationships whether it is official or personal. Like a sacrificial animal he falters on the stage maniacally crying out about his influence on the bosses as a threat to Williamson,

LEVEENE. Well, I want to tell you something, fella, wasn’t long I could  
pick up the phone, call Murray and I’d have your job. You  
know that? Not too long ago. For what? For nothing. “Mur, this  
new kid burns my ass.” “Shelley he’s out.” You’re gone before  
I’m back from lunch. I bought him a trip to Bermuda  
once... (26).

“In Glengarry Glen Ross relationships appear to exist only to facilitate commercial success and to establish which party is in control” (Dean 197). If in the first scene of Act 1, Levene’s appeal to friendship and sympathetic understanding is shoved away by the cold hearted and apathetic manager, the second scene is marked by Moss’s trapping a fellow salesman Aaronow, into the scheme of ripping off the office of its most prospective contracts. This indeed is a sure and easy way of achieving victory in the sale of ‘leads’ and climbing the ladder of success. The cunning and insidious Moss, who moves in on Aaronow into unwittingly yielding to Mosses urging him to break into the office himself and secure the leads, ensnares the gullible and inept Aaronow. Moss hopes to make sure of his access “on the board” as his sales figures are on the ebb. What more, Moss forces the idea into his friends mind and calls it his (Aaronow’s), as he was the listener. Jerry Graff, their former colleague and now the owner of another reputed firm is expected to buy the leads for a high price. But they seldom realise that Jerry Graff is yet another capitalist to extort huge profits out of the business they make. As salesmen their predicament is never on the reverse, it appears, in the all-engulfing system. Aaronow the weaker of the two is in a doubled doom when he complies with the demand of Moss. Knowingly or unknowingly his denials become assertions caught in Moss’s fabulous language constructs. Instrumental to Moss’s villainy he becomes liable to Moss’s dubious philosophy that loyalty should be one-sided, making him promising that he would not betray Moss. But on the other hand, Moss threatens to reveal his name as an accomplice when he gets caught, if he did not comply. Aaronow, who is now aghast, cries out, “Why are you doing this to me, Dave. Why are you talking this way to me? I don’t understand. Why are you doing this to me at all...?” and pities himself, “Well, well, well, talk to me, we sat down to eat dinner, and here I’m a criminal...” (45). This kind of talk culminates in:

MOSS. I lied. (Pause.) Alright? My end is my business. Your end’s  
twenty-five. In or out. You tell me, you’re out you take the  
consequences.  
AARONOW. I do?  
MOSS. Yes. (Pause.)  
AARONOW. And why is that?  
MOSS. Because you listened (46).

Moss intends to mean that, as they are unfortunately part and parcel of this mechanical and corrupt world, nobody can stay away by being innocent or free of crimes.

Roma the youngest man in the sales force is found to move in on the kill, his newly obtained client, James Lingk, when the third scene opens. He takes position in a booth in the seedy Chinese restaurant, aiming his eyes and mind on the hapless victim to be. He begins quite dramatically, his seemingly harmless speech, partly tawdry existentialism and pseudo-philosophical talk. He keenly embroiders it with obscene sexual references to draw in the initially hesitant and shy ‘mark’, Lingk. His high talk on the vagary of day-to-day life and his exhortations of a moraliser, intended on attracting the client, definitely serve the purpose. Roma, a superbly crafted character is an exception to the other sly yet, ‘not up to the mark’ ageing salesmen. He, who makes the best use of his youthful thrust to ensnare customers to become the hotshot salesman, adopts an over-familiar manner to melt down all the pretensions of strangeness from the side of Lingk. Roma’s “vacuous and pretentious” (Dean, 204) talk is absorbed as that of a high intellectual by Lingk, who reaches out to Roma in the

end for the need of a true pal. Until we come to know that Roma has not introduced himself earlier enough in the scene, it is understood that the audience are also prone to think that they are former acquaintances. We view with helpless thoughts that Link eventually becomes a prey to Roma's stealthy intentions.

True to the customs of members of such a demoralizing system, Roma is trying to victimise an easily gullible and innocent victim who doesn't seem to have a will of his own. Link who is seated in a booth other than Roma's is gradually hypnotised by the salesman's covert strategies. Roma with his generalisations, philosophical observations and sexual small talk accomplishes with flying colours, the ensnaring act. He progresses,

ROMA. ...Eh? What I'm saying, what is our life? (Pause.) It's looking forward or it's looking back. And that's our life. That's it. Where is the moment? (Pause.) And what is it that we are afraid of? Loss. What else? (Pause.) The bank closes. We get sick, my wife died on a plane, the stock market collapsed... the house burnt down... What of these happen...? None of'em. We worry anyway (48).

Roma delivers uninterrupted except for Link's sparse, brief short-syllabic responses. At the most unexpected moment Roma pounces on him flourishing a map of Florida with the development Glengarry Highlands, a tract of land for obvious sale, saying, "What is that? Florida. Glengarry Highlands. Florida" (50). Ultimately he commands Link's obeisance for immediate contract as a customer. The scene apparently suggests the growth of mutuality, healthy companionship between two lonely strangers in a restaurant. In essence Roma's rambling speech is a mixture of petty sentimentalism and existentialism. The masquerade of intimacy was evidently aimed at pinning down the client.

Roma accomplishes the betrayal of a friend by the sheer use of language, his speech typifying the king of agreed, assurance, hope and comfort which the salesmen pontificate in their desperate lives. Levene's idea that they sell not only land but the customer as well applies to Roma too. The customer, who in turn, dreams of building a secure and fruitful life out of the barren desolate and unproductive land, along with the salesmen are doomed to face a grim and shattering fate. The ultimate sales pitch is, "And maybe that's true; and that's what I said: but look here: what is this? This is a piece of land. Listen to what I'm going to tell you now:" (51). Although the scene ends there, the audience has the knowledge that Roma's merciless batter will continue until at last the practically inarticulate prey, Link is anaesthetised for safe consumption. Link is unmistakably made to believe that it was his own idea to buy the land. The word "Glengarry" has appealed to the hearing sense of Link that he seldom fights back to resist the coerced sale. The romantic and mellifluous sounds stand as a sharp contrast to the bitter, harsh, obscene, crossfire dialogue of the salesmen's deliverances. The names seem to guarantee absolute joy and satisfaction to the buyer, which he is incapable of getting in his everyday jarring rhythms of a lopsided life. Link's succumbing to the salesman's deception and greed achieves a tragic dimension at the end of the scene. Roma's slick, fast-paced speech with lots of pauses in between is clearly a manipulated one that Link is incapable of discriminating. At the end of the new acquaintance's carefully embellished speech, Link is forced into thinking that it was his demand to buy land from Roma for his own gains. Language it seems is an instrument of coercion, deception, and exploitation or rather revenge used against not only clients but also friends and superiors in the topsy-turvy world of real-estate business. "Once again," maintains Anne Dean (207), "the function of language as a means of communication has been subverted and forced to serve corrupt ends."

Act two discloses the robbery having been carried out, the office is in trashes and the bewildered salesmen have collected to designate their fate. Roma, who boasts that he has closed the deal with Link, comes exultant, but is appalled to hear that robbers have secured all the addresses of prospective customers. His interrogative appeals go unheard on the crafty Williamson's deaf ears. Aaronow comes to voice his ethical and humane concerns and is evidently worried about the bosses' loss and the loss incurred by the salesmen. He is intimidated at the thought of the impending interrogation at the hands of Baylen, the detective who is in the premises doing his work. Aaronow's repetitive question "Were the leads insured" (59), shows his paranoia and powerlessness over the whole situation. Roma's apparent fortitude and dare-devil attitude is marked but he fails to decode Aaronow's "I'm, I'm, I'm, I'm fucked on the board" and "I can't close 'em" (56) as indicative of his knowledge of the robbery and his own lot as an accomplice. Aaronow's speech is implicative that he is worried not mainly about his position on "the board" but for fear of apprehension. But he is pledged to reticence, till the end which itself is the most harrowing experience. But for 'business' sake and the sake of his friends' and his own future he is bound to remain so.

Roma is in contradiction fantasising his victory and his new position, having closed the deal with Link. He muses, "Then I' over the fucking top and you owe me a fucking Cadillac" (54). His survival tactics makes him acknowledge the talents of his fellow-salesmen though it is Aaronow or Levene. He energises the downcast Aaronow, who bewails, "I'm no fucking good" (57). He consoles, "That's not... Fuck that shit, George. You're a, hey, you had a bad month. You're a good man.... You hit a bad streak" (57), like a genuine

comrade. On the other hand Roma is also excited and on his nerves end about the loss as it is revealed in his broken and incomplete sentences as the other salesmen use elsewhere. Horrified at the huge loss of leads, he cries, “They stole the phones. They stole the leads. They’re... Christ. (Pause.) What am I going to do this month? Oh, shit ...” and his mumbling to himself, “Fucking Mitch and Murray going to shit a br... what am I going to do all...” (59) likens him to the other salesmen who have lost faith in the system and the deceptive manager. But he finds courage and complacency to advise Aaronow, who is on the tip of anxiety saying, “Always tell the truth. It’s the easiest thing to remember” (61). A man of wisdom he is, he gains an unabated victory over the other disgruntled salesmen. Moreover he voices his scathing remarks, which is an expression of the salesmen’s dissatisfaction over the injustice wrought by the sales contest. His disgust and disdain for the authority is pointed. He rails, “Fuck that, John. You know your business, I know mine. Your business is being an asshole, and I find out whose fucking cousin you are, I’m going to go to him and figure out a way to have your ass... fuck you ...” (63). Roma flies into a rage when Williamson torpedoes his sale with Lingk,

ROMA. You stupid fucking cunt. You Williamson ... I’m talking to you, shit head.... You just cost me six thousand dollars. (Pause.) Six thousand dollars. And one Cadillac. That’s right. What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about it, asshole. You fucking shit. Where did you learn your trade. You stupid fucking shit. Where did you learn your trade. You stupid fucking cunt. You idiot. Whoever told you could work with men? (95-96)

For business ends he has forged an abusive, obscene and on the whole immoral language with which he hopes to whip not only his clients but also superiors standing against his selfish material interests.

Levene too is on the racks not just because he is the culprit. The leads, he boasts to have closed, prove to be stale. The old couple has been stamped “deadbeat” as they are insane and they just liked talking to salesmen. In the beginning he becomes ecstatic over his victory to evocate the whole story of his triumph, though it finally turns out to be temporary. “He generates an almost sexual excitement as he details the moment when the clients signed the all important contract,” says Anne Dean (207). Such is his exultation to have ‘seduced’ a rather old brow beaten couple into signing the cheque. Harriet and Bruce Nyborg were kept in rapt attention in their kitchen when Levene with his rhetorical skill overpowers them. He relates this amidst utter confusion when Roma and Moss are engaged in a verbal fight. But with the talents of a consummate actor and story-teller he concludes how they “imperceptibly slumped” (74) before they took the pen and signed the “eight units. Mountain View” for eighty two thousand dollars. In spite of Williamson’s warning, “if the sale sticks, it will be a miracle” (75), Levene hopes that he has undoubtedly won a trip to Hawaii, and the savoured car, Cadillac and therefore saved himself from jail for the crime done. He equates himself with the job saying, “A man’s his job and you’re fucked at yours” (75) retaliating to Williamson. He denounces the manager “who typically ‘marshals’ his sales force by terror tactics” (Kane, Weasels 93), for what he stands for, “You can’t run an office.... You don’t know what it is, you don’t have the sense, you don’t have the balls” (76). He proves himself to be the corrupt and deceptive salesman of the establishment that pressurises the underlings to remain so. He himself gets “slumped” forever, never to return as the covetous and sly salesman, after he is trapped by the looming system and the all-powerful Williamson.

Mamet brilliantly portrays how Roma and Levene feign mutual admiration and approval of each other’s capabilities. Roma hearing the Nyborg story pretend to be so impressed as to utter a word or two of flattery. Ascribing his own skill in closing to have learnt from Levene, he acknowledges, “Like you taught me...” and he cheers Levene, “That was a great sale, Shelley” (74). Having reinforced the sense of achievement in Levene he succeeds in deceiving him as to be a close friend at heart. Levene dismisses this in a modest way and makes protestations and counter compliments to the ‘earnest friend’. But the audience comes to the realisation that it is quite unlikely for such a friend to shatter the ties of loyalty and friendship within a wink of an eye. He urges the manager as soon as Baylen takes Levene in for further interrogation and custody, “Williamson: listen to me: when the leads come in... listen to me: when the leads come in I want my top two off the list. For me. My usual two. Anything you give Levene.... I GET HIS ACTION. My stuff is mine, whatever he gets for itself, I’m taking half. You put me in with him” (107). He is a business wolf who gets the share of the carcass of the doomed salesman, a prey to the atrocities of the big corporate business lion.

The seeming affinity and regard between Roma and Levene lead them to enact an improvised play in the process of bamboozling the customer Lingk. In a final effort to help Roma in his struggle to save his sale of land to Lingk, Levene partakes in it getting a cue, ‘Kenilworth’ from Roma. This may be a chance for Levene to reciprocate to Roma’s support and acknowledgement of his merit recognized earlier in the scene. As soon as Roma spies his customer outside the office, Levene gets the signal to take up the role of a successful out-of-town executive, D. Ray Morton. He is introduced to Lingk as, at first the director of all European sales and services for American Express and later the senior vice-president American Express. Roma pretends that Mr. Moron should be ridden to O’Hare Airport; his intention is to prevent Lingk from talking to Roma too long enough to demand a refund, as he proposes to renege out of the contract due to strict instructions from his wife. Roma

rightly senses that Lingk is short of male camaraderie, and he is acting only on his wife's insistence. All of a sudden he changes tactics and acts as if he is no more bothered about the deal, offers a drink together and sermonises:

ROMA. ...I want to tell you something. 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 you're being untrue... or that she would abandon you if she knew. This is your life. (Pause.) Yes. Now I want to talk to you because you're obviously upset and that concerns me (93).

But when Williamson thwarts the deal by telling Lingk, against Roma's words, that his contract has definitely gone to the bank, Roma with his back to Lingk, with no show of heed, insidiously turns against Williamson: "You fucking shit. Where did you learn your trade.... You idiot" (96). Thus Roma tramples upon any sort of healthy communion for the sake of pure business interests, even though it may be his colleagues, his superior or the unfortunate clients who reach out for a close understanding.

Hereafter Levene takes up Roma's cause and passionately defines the credo of true salesmanship to Williamson, with the might of his new glory due to the recent sale. He takes up the thread left by Roma and lectures: "You can't think on your feet you should keep your mouth closed" and "You can't learn that in an office. Eh? He's right. You have to learn it in the streets. You can't buy that. You have to live it" (97). His over enthusiasm to extend support to a 'pal' leads him to make the fatal slip: "You be as cold as you want. A child would know it, he's right. (Pause.) You are going to make something up, be sure it will help or keep your mouth closed" (98). Williamson knowing that Levene cannot say that he is making up something without entering the office the previous night, closes in on him and forces him into admitting that he is the culprit. He shoves him away to the detective for grilling and immediate custody. The care and concern shown by Levene has already been proved false, as Levene has deliberately stolen all the leads including Roma's contract from the office. Whatever allegations he charges upon Williamson, apply to him and he digs his own grave. Perhaps "Their thralldom to the imperatives of 'business' at any cost has stunted them and prevents them from knowing either themselves or others" (Carroll 50). Even "Shelley, the Machine, Levene", who stood the sense of hardworking macho imagery and tough masculinity, is doomed to fail miserably in spite of his earnest attempts at forming relationships.

Williamson, the one who stands for the insensitive, inhuman, tough bureaucracy and part of the Machine, is the most abused of all the characters in the play. He stays apart with no feelings for his colleagues, totally cut out only to terrorise them into obliging the rules. He becomes the much-despised officer who is often denounced as little more than a secretary. He, who resists all appeals of a better understanding from Levene, unscrupulously accepts the suggestion to be a partner working for a commission in return for giving good leads. But once Levene fails to pay something in advance for short of money, he stealthily quits only to emerge as the master of events in Act two. Domineering over the battered salesmen, he remains callous and cold, whose sole duty is to "marshal" and "watch" the leads he has been entrusted with. He confesses his limitations, "... anybody falls below a certain mark I'm not permitted to give them the premium leads" (19), which implicates that it is a tortuous and prejudiced system that they are working for. He considers Levene too old a dog to be taught any new tricks, and objects to his demands. He speaks about the rigorous rules of the sales force, but is he guilty of consenting to accept a bribe from Levene. Levene's last-ditch effort to invoke sympathy with a reference to his daughter is of no avail before the hard-hearted executive. Williamson lacks the honesty and uprightness that a manager is expected to possess. He confusingly gives false or vague details about the aftermath of the robbery and misleads the horrified salesmen. About Roma's new contract, which has been stolen along with the others, he says, "They [robbers] didn't get the contracts" (53) and then "they got some of them" (54). Perhaps it is part of the ensnaring act he is engaged in, to locate the actual thief. He stands unperturbed by the bilious stream of invectives showered by the disgruntled salesmen for his machinations. In a world where the ultimate sales maxim is "Always be closing" (72), he keeps vigil of everything connected to the sales force. "A consummate con man, Williamson draws Levene to the bait and strings the trap" (Kane, Weasels, 100). With skill and far sightedness he works with cunning precision to oust a man whom he says has "a big mouth", the one who "fucked up" his office. Roma, who comes out from the inner office, after his session of the gruelling interrogation, bitterly explodes over the plight of the salesmen:

ROMA. I swear... it's not a world of men... it's not a world of men, Machine... it's a world of clock watchers, bureaucrats, officeholders... what it is, it's a fucked-up world... there's no adventure to it. (Pause.) Dying breed. Yes it is. (Pause.) We are the members of a dying breed. That's... that's... that's why we have to stick together (105).

But their destiny seems to be irreversible for the Machine is on the move again to prey upon far more salesmen in its circular motion. They are back at the seedy restaurants waiting for the turning in of clients as their victims.

### 3. Conclusion

Thus the play presents a realistic portrayal of the world of salesmen dominated by inhuman masters who in turn are representatives of a corrupt and immoral Capitalistic society. Relationships are formed only to get commercial contracts and later trampled upon after material ends are apparently satisfied. Their attempts at forming a healthy community are always thwarted by selfish business motives. They falter and fall on the way in the motion towards the upper strata of the ladder of success.

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