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A Foucauldian Reading on David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*

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Fulfillment for the Degree of MA in English Literature**

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Abstract

This thesis is mainly focused on the Foucauldian analysis of power in two David Mamet's most acclaimed plays – *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*. The primary concern of this study is to show the omnipresent possibility of resistance in human relationships in these two plays and then to illuminate the fact that Mamet's characters could be ultimately considered as free individuals provided with chance of resisting.

This study discusses the subject in three main chapters besides chapters of introduction and conclusion. Providing a theoretical framework for the body of this study; the second chapter deals with an overview of Foucault's ideas concerning discourse, power/knowledge, the disciplinary power, the repressive hypothesis and finally his definition of resistance to power, and his suggested means for resistance. The following chapter focuses on a closer analysis of the first play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, based on Foucault's notion of discourse, disciplinary power, and resistance. The fourth chapter is also the application of Foucault's notions of power/knowledge, discourse, and resistance on the side of the female character of the second play, *Oleanna*.

The concluding chapter presents the researcher's findings: the impossibility of acting outside the existing power structures, the possibility of resisting power from within and Foucault's 'care of the self' as the only way to traverse the power-defined field of possible actions. The thesis shows that, Mamet's protagonists resist the existing power structures effectively by taking the position of resisting agents. In a word, the forms of domination, exploitation, and subjection are the three main forms of struggles they defiantly fight against.

Keywords: discourse, power/knowledge, ideology, language, subjectivity, individualism

Chapter One

Introduction

General Background

David Alan Mamet, born in Chicago on November 30, 1947, is one of the seminal figures in contemporary American drama whose position in literary field, especially the realm of drama, is publicly recognized as incomparably significant. He is regarded by most critics “as a member of a very small pantheon, the best of American dramatists—in the view of some, the best of this century’s dramatists writing in English” (Hudgins, Kane 6). The American critic Phillip Kolin writes, “If Miller, Williams and Albee from a first generation triumvirate in the American theatre, then Rabe securely stands with Mamet and Shepard as the triumvirate of the second generation of American playwrights since 1945” (quoted in Cohn 117). Coming to mention people who have had impression on Mamet, we are faced with such a diverse list of names, which encompasses literary figures, economists, and psychologists.

A partial list of literary influences ranges from Sophocles to Beckett, from Trollope and Thackeray to Pinter, from Dreiser to Wilder, and includes the great Russians, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Eisenstein. Extra-literary figures as diverse as economist Thorstein Veblen and psychologist D. W. Winnicott, in addition to Mamet's knowledge of popular culture and music and an immersion in folk music from Leadbelly to the "neofolk" movement also shape the ideas that emerge in his plays and films. (Hudgins, Kane 6)

He is tacitly acknowledged as a genuine descendant of such playwrights as "Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, and Eugene O'Neill" yet his style of writing dialogue is so rarely distinctive that it has become singularly identified as Mametspeak (Christopher Bigsby 63). Intentionally fragmented; Mamet's use of language is so noticeable for its poetic imitation of vulgar, streetwise jargon, accurately shaped for effect. Most of his plays deliver a penetrating social observation and profound moral vision of estranged fellows of lower-middle class, fringe characters, situated generally in marginal places. Simply put, social and spiritual issues are always the notions touched upon in his plays.

Mamet came into fame as a writer of the new realism with his first plays such as *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974) and *The Duck Variations* (1976), a literary style which uses language in a naturalistic fashion and focuses on conspicuously limited number of characters in a confined situation. His next play *American Buffalo* (1975), located in a Chicago waste store astounded both critics and audiences with its grotesquely unadorned outlook and antisocial attitudes. His next highly distinguished play, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) brought Mamet a Pulitzer Prize. It is about four Chicagoan salesmen working as real estate agents. Mamet then adapted the play for a screen play which made into a film version in 1992 with collaboration of James Foley as director. Mamet has also written other

successful plays such as *A Life in the Theatre* (1977), *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), *Oleanna* (1993), and *Dangerous Corner* (1995), which is an adaptation of the 1932 play by English writer J. B. Priestley. Undeniably, Mamet has written plays which are exclusively related to the businessmen's life. Ruby Cohn puts Mamet's *American Buffalo*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Speed-the-Plow* under a category termed "Business Trilogy" (59). These three plays are male-cast plays which vibrantly embody the ferocious and competitive culture of American business. However, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *American Buffalo*, among the 'Business Trilogy', are commonly considered to be more well-liked and persuasive. Unquestionably, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1984, and *American Buffalo*, which brought Mamet an Obie as best playwright in 1976, most effectively demonstrate the law of a dog-eat-dog society.

Along with working on the stage, he has also attained praise and acclamation as a motion-picture screenwriter and director. As well as writing screenplays for himself to direct such as *House of Games*, *Things Change* and *Homicide*, he has also written screenplays for others (Bob Rafelson's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* and Sidney Lumet's *The Verdict*). Besides, Mamet has written prose works and nonfiction writings such as *Writing in Restaurants* (1987), *Freaks* (1989), and *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (1997) which is Mamet's reflection on theatre. *Cabin* (1992), *Make-Believe Town* (1996), and *Jafsie and John Henry* (1999) are essays on Mamet's life and wide-ranging interests. *The Village: A Novel* (1994) and *Passover* (1995) are Mamet's other prose works.

Statement of the Problem

The thesis is going to investigate how those salesmen, Levene, Roma, Moss, and Aaronow—and their supervisor, Williamson, who work together selling undesirable real estate at swollen prices, in the play are devoid of individuality and have been changed to docile bodies through modern approach to discipline. They now do what the dominant power has decided for them. The researcher then embarks on showing that how the place the salesmen work in is an exemplary architecture that would operate to transform and change them from individual to subject. It could be said they are captured in a Panopticon-like building that causes in the prisoner a state of consciousness and invariable visibility that promises the unintentional function of power. Individuals, in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, are judged not by the inherent rightness or wrongness of their acts but by where their actions place them on a classified scale that compares them to everyone else (Gutting 84). The sales office of the play serves as a microcosm of capitalist culture: as the top man gets a Cadillac and the bottom man gets fired, every man must not only work for his own success but also wish for—or vigorously engineer—his co-workers' failure. The researcher is going to emphasize the pervasiveness of normalizing judgment in American society that makes people fixated with lists that rank-order everything. The characters are examined through the place they take up in the lists that both draw out the truth about those who undergo the examination and, through the standards they set, control their behavior (86). Other parts are going to be focused on revealing the reversed polarity of visibility. In simple words, to show how in modern age the use of power is typically hidden, but it controls its objects by making them highly visible. In some parts showing how the society has been changed to a multitude of dominated others are going to be highly emphasized. In short, how power is

dispersed throughout society, in a multitude of micro-centers (86-87). Bringing *Oleanna* under inspection the researcher plans to illustrate how the imbalance of power relations between the two main characters heads to the production of knowledge that subsequently stands as a declaration for power. In other words, the researcher embarks on examining how “no form of knowledge emerges independently of complex networks of power and that the exercise of power produces certain types of knowledge” (O’Farrell 101).

Objectives and Significance of the Study

Hypothesis

Examining *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the researcher intends to prove how the discourse of capitalism gives birth to a brutal world which is solidly founded on jungle’s rule, the survival of the fittest. In other words, the discourse of business forces the salesmen into a war-like competition in which there is no room for those incapable of following the codes of business. Simply put, failure is what the salesmen must be most afraid of while tricking a customer into signing the sale contract. There is no doubt that morality is to be harshly rejected because of its nonconformity to the discursive rules of the dominant discourse. Besides, the researcher wishes to reveal how the real estate office as a business institution functions as a modern site of control. In other words, the office building brings the salesmen under the incessant flow of panoptic gaze which comes from the side of the company bosses. Examining *Oleanna*, the researcher embarks on demonstrating how Carol, the female character, enthusiastically challenges the patriarchal norms of her society while attacking her male opponent, John. However, at the beginning she is not supported by a powerful discourse which could provide her with an interpretive framework. But, the

discourse of feminism appears to play the role of a linguistic community which its ultimate function is manufacturing knowledge; a type of partial knowledge in the interest of a particular class of society. This seemingly objective package of true statements, labeled as the discourse of feminism, actually makes Carol able of exercising power over her male professor. In other words, Carol proves that why there is a mutual dependency between power and knowledge. Moreover, exposing the character's true intention of coming to the field of university is another task which will be undertaken in the fourth chapter.

Significance of the Study

According to Foucault, whose ideas strongly influenced the development of new historicism, power circulates in all directions, to and from all social levels, at all times. Here Foucault's picture of modern power challenges the propositions of most revolutionary movements, in particular, Marxism. These movements recognize peculiar groups and institutions (for example, the bourgeoisie, the central bank, the military high command, the government press) as sources of dominion, the destruction or allotment of which will lead to liberation. In the pre-modern world, when power was centralized in the royal court and a few related institutions, such a revolutionary movement could be successful (Gutting 87-88). Here we could see why this research is worth being undertaken because even after the government offices, the military bases, and the official newspapers are taken over, there remains innumerable other centers of power that resist the revolution. This analysis suggests the reactionary conclusion that meaningful revolution, hence genuine liberation, is impossible: the only choice to the modern net of micro-centers of power is totalitarian domination (88). Although the pessimism underlying the Foucauldian's views of power brings about disappointments for those who passionately support radical, revolutionary

liberation, but it, at least, proves the uselessness of extremism that causes brutal massacre of innocent people. Another reason that proves the usefulness of the thesis is its capability to reveal the hidden malevolence of the seemingly benevolent institutions and policies in disguise of modern savior. Technically speaking, for instance, capitalism makes bubble-like hopes for modern society of America but practically it is an ideological tool for its main heads.

Purpose of the Study

Chapter three focuses on the first play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The first section intends to expose the dominant discourse which has confined the characters to its interconnected net and to reveal its mechanisms which construct the characters' understanding of themselves and the world around. In other words, the salesmen are not instinctively compelled, in its Darwinian sense, but their actions are closely tied to the discursive regulations imposed on them. The next section is going to examine the relation between power and business institution and to study how disciplinary power functions as a self-regulatory practice. Simply put, the researcher plans to demonstrate how a business institution as a modern place of control exercises disciplinary forces on its workers. The last section is allocated to the notion of panopticism and the reversal of visibility between the exercise of power and the objects of knowledge. Chapter four is mainly about the second play, *Oleanna*. The researcher steps forward to elucidate how Carol, the female protagonist, utilizes the unevenness of power relations to translate reality. Moreover, the conflict between the discourse of feminism and academy and the way Carol resists are the issues which would be studied.

Research Questions

Here are some questions that the researcher is going to scrutinize through the theories of Foucault.

1. Why does Roma, the top salesman, decide to get along with the company policy?
2. What is the ultimate purpose of the panoptic isolation in *Glengarry Glen Ross*?
3. How do the company runners, Mitch and Murray, keep the hierarchical order of the business discourse?
4. Does the arrest of the salesmen by police make their resistance a failure?
5. How does Carol interpret the reality after getting the admission ticket to the discourse of feminism?
6. How does Carol make use of the discourse of feminism?
7. Does Carol stand as a Foucauldian resisting agent? If yes, how?

Review of Literature

Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975) is one of the primary sources for my thesis. In this book, Foucault brings two types of punishment that he calls them Technologies of Punishment. The first type, Monarchical Punishment, involves the repression of the multitudes through brutal public displays of execution and torment. The second, Disciplinary Punishment, is what Foucault says is practiced in the modern era.

Disciplinary punishment gives professionals (psychologists, programme facilitators, parole officers, etc.) power over the prisoner. Foucault also compares modern society with Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon design for prisons: in the Panopticon, a single guard can watch over many prisoners while the guard remains unseen. The dark dungeon of pre-modernity has been replaced with the bright modern prison, but Foucault cautions that visibility is a trap. It is through this visibility, Foucault writes, that modern society exercises its controlling systems of power and knowledge. This book mainly provides the theories needed to analyze the play by its arguments about power/knowledge and punishment. Through this book the researcher tries to show that how man is a recent invention, a product of capitalistic society in the service of the dominant power. The third major book is a book on Foucault titled *Foucault A Very Short Introduction* (2005). This book was very helpful because it makes understanding Foucault's theories very easy and explains all his major views in simple way. *The Cambridge Companion of Foucault* (2005) provides an organized and extensive survey of Foucault's major themes and texts, from his early works focused on madness through his history of sexuality. The book has also paid attention to thinkers and movements, from Kant through present feminist theory that is specifically important for understanding his works and its effect.

The last book that made the journey of knowing Foucault a memorable one and gave such a comprehensive picture of him is undoubtedly *Michel Foucault* (2003). The book, written by Sara Mills, is divided into six parts. The first part is about Foucault's intellectual and political development, the second one is about the relation between power and institutions, the third is about discourse, the fourth talks about power and knowledge, the fifth concerns body and sexuality and the last chapter questions madness and sanity from a

Foucaultian point of view. The second, third and the fourth chapter had great influence on my reading of Mamet's plays.

Materials and Methodology

Definition of Key Terms

Discourse

At the most fundamental level in Foucault's work discourse refers to the material verbal traces left by history. He also defines it as a specific style of speaking. To make it short, it could be declared that discourse is an array of controlled statements, the fundamental component of discourse, which connect with others in expectable and probable ways (Mills 54).

Power/knowledge

Power is dependent and based on knowledge and uses knowledge; on the other hand, power recreates knowledge by forming it in parallel with its mutual intentions. Knowledge makes the recreation of power's fields of exercise possible. In other words, there is a mutual and bilateral dependency between power and knowledge and Foucault states that exerting of power is not feasible without knowledge and the inevitable outcome of knowledge is power (Foucault, Prison Talk 52).

Panopticon

Giving a historical account, the Panopticon was a prison project delivered by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century which clusters cells around a pivotal watching tower. Panopticon is an exemplary disciplinary structure positioning prisoners in such a way that renders them detectable without the observer being seen. Panopticon is in the shape of a ring that places each inmate in an isolated cell, detached from and unseen to all the others. A tower, occupied by an overseer, at the centre of circularly distributed cells enables the observer to look into any cell anytime. Foucault argues that the maximum possibility of observation and visibility forces the inmates to act as if he is under the incessant surveillance and this state of consciousness consequently forms an internalized disciplinary practice guaranteeing the automatic operation of power (Gutting 82-84).

Power

Foucault notes a number of features related to power and offers definitions standing decisively in opposition to more traditional Marxist and liberal definitions and theories of power. Power and oppression should not be carelessly reduced to one thing for a number of reasons in Foucault's inspecting of the term. Firstly, power spreads and extends its ubiquitous net embracing every infinitesimal places that it leads seeking freedom in the cost of radical overthrowing of power structures to grand illusion. Secondly, Foucault affirms that power and resistance are both the sources of pleasure; some find it in exerting power and some in resisting. Thirdly, power is the main cause of new types of behaviors through adjusting and designing its subject's everyday actions.

1. Power is a relation not a thing

2. Power is productive not simply repressive
3. Power is not placed in the hands of the State. Power is not an exclusive property localized in government and the State. Rather, power is floating throughout the social body.
4. The operation of power is at the most micro levels of social relations. Being omnipresent at every level of the social body is one of the main features of power.
5. Power is carried out in a strategic and war-like way (O'Farrell 96-100).

Sovereign Power

Sovereign power is submission to the law of the king or central authority leader. Foucault believes that sovereign power gradually replaced by disciplinary power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even in modern days, however, there is a tension between disciplinary power and the remnants of sovereign power (During 143-144).

Disciplinary power

Discipline is an apparatus of power which governs the behavior of individuals in a social body. This process is done by regulating the organization of space, of time and people's behavior and activity. It is carried out with the aid of intricate systems of surveillance. Foucault accentuates that power is not discipline; rather discipline is one way in which power could be carried out. Foucault characterizes discipline as a set of tactics, processes and specific ways of acting which are linked with certain institutional contexts and which then is generally infused in ways of thinking and behaving (O'Farrell 101-102).

Episteme

Foucault introduces this term in his book *The Order of Things*. Episteme refers to the orderly insensible structures underlying the production of scientific knowledge in a specific place and time. Forming the conditions of possibility for knowledge is possible through this epistemological field. Sometimes this term is compared to that of T.S Kuhn's paradigm (Smart 23-24).

Motivation and Delimitation

This study is chiefly based on library and electronic sources. The ideas on which this study is based deal with the notion of "discourse", "disciplinary power" and "power/knowledge". Foucault points out that our perception of the external world is feasible just through a mediatory ground which he calls discourse (Danaher, Schirato, Webb 31). In *Understanding Foucault (2000)* it is mentioned that "what comes between ourselves and our experience is the grounds upon which we can act, speak and make sense of things" (31). Foucault uses the phrase 'de-centering the subject' to criticize humanism and to subsequently reason that "that the subject is not free but is hedged in on all sides by social determinations. Indeed, Foucault argued that the very idea of a subject is a social construction, produced through discourses that position subjects in a field of power relations" (Scott 85). To make it short, it could be declared that discourse is an array of controlled statements, the fundamental component of discourse, which connect with others in expectable and probable ways. The strict regulation on discourse imposed via a series of rules that finally manage the dissemination and spreading of specific utterances (Mills 54).

Next Foucault embarks on discussing the relation between power and knowledge and puts forward his theoretically shocking doctrine about the mechanisms of knowledge production and sketches out the processes whereby something becomes known as a fact. He is interested in the exclusionary processes at work in relation to knowledge and scrutinizes the “anonymous, institutionalised and rule-governed model of knowledge- production” which refutes and disputes other equally valid statements (68). Therefore, rather than putting concentration on the singular theorists who are believed to have developed particular theories and ideas, Foucault intends to explain the intangible and institutional processes manufacturing truth and facts. In Foucault’s paradigm, the individual scholars are represented as solely the sites where the knowledge is produced and it is the complex selective-eliminatory processes of power/knowledge which paves the way of producing of truth and facts (67-68). In short, Foucault means to diminish the unjustly importance given to the role of individuals and draws attentions to the great impact of impersonal abstract forces in this process. Foucault also warns that power and oppression should not be carelessly reduced to one thing. Power spreads and extends its ubiquitous net, embracing every infinitesimal places, that leads seeking freedom in the cost of radical overthrowing of power structures to grand illusion and that is why the participation of the revolutionary, (say, communists) in seizing the state power is a doomed failure. They are essentially “...prisoners of an outmoded rhetoric of revolution” (Sheridan 111). However, Foucault’s realization was genuinely ground-breaking, demanding a perpetual and omnipresent form of revolution. In his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), Foucault indicates how power has been exercised differently in different eras in Europe, moving from an outstandingly ruthless public execution to seemingly more ‘gentler’ way of

punishment functioning in relation to a time-table which regulates the time of the prisoners. These two portraits of two different penal styles signal a historical shift which illustrates the transfer of the punishment of the body to the punishment of the soul. Foucault, however, argues that this substitution of confinement and surveillance instead of brutal physical penalty should not be necessarily considered as a progress or improvement.

Organization of the Study

This thesis includes five chapters. Besides the present chapter, the researcher develops the subject in three main chapters, and final chapter covers the concluding results. The second chapter is mainly concerned with Foucault's main terms. The first part is going to be a study on the notion of discourse and specifically the way Foucault defines and differentiates it with ideology and language. Moreover, it goes on to discuss and examine the internal and external exclusionary practices dealing with the production of discourse. The second part is focused on the concept of power/knowledge and considers the mechanisms of knowledge production and outlines the processes whereby something becomes credited as fact and truth. In addition, the mutual dependency of power and knowledge and the biased nature of knowledge are another main issues reviewed in this part. Finally, modern approach to discipline, production of docile bodies, the two typically modern means involved in the production of docile bodies, the repressive hypothesis and resistance are subjects considered in the last part. The third chapter and the following one are the applications. In these two chapters Foucault's concepts are applied to Mamet's two plays, *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*. The third chapter is going to discover the dominant discourse and sketch out its major characteristics. The researcher aims at showing

that the real estate office has taken shape of a microcosm of the capitalistic society. The following part goes on to reveal how the company runners, Mitch and Murray, embody the panoptic gaze and how the real estate office is actually a panoptic-like building. The last part of the third chapter intends to show the way the salesmen resist the existing power structure. The fourth chapter begins with indicating the bilateral relation between power and knowledge and the partial nature of knowledge which is always in the interest of a person or a group. The last part is a study on Carol, the female protagonist, and the way she resists the forces of a patriarchal society. The fifth chapter is the concluding one. The researcher comes up first with a summary of what have been declared in the three previous chapters and then in a separate part he would present what have been uncovered during his studies and then he will suggest something for further readings or research.

Chapter Two

Foucault and the Concept of Power

This chapter is mainly concerned with Foucault's main ideas. The first part is an analysis of the concept of discourse and particularly the way Foucault delineates and discriminates between discourse, ideology and language. Additionally, it carries on arguing and inspecting the internal and external exclusionary practices which run somehow eventually to the production of discourse. The second part is predominantly aimed at the concept of power/knowledge and reflects on the mechanisms of knowledge production and the procedures whereby something becomes reputed as fact and truth. Furthermore, the shared reliance between power and knowledge and the prejudiced nature of knowledge are another focal points studied in this part. Lastly, modern approach to discipline, invention of docile bodies and the two characteristically modern means directing to the production of docile bodies, the repressive hypothesis and resistance are another main themes pondered in the last part.