Act 2 (Lesson 1)

Act II plays out the forces set in motion in the previous act with a more conventional structure. The act opens in the ransacked real estate office the next morning. A police detective, Baylen, is there to investigate the burglary and one by one the salesmen are called into Williamson's office to talk to the detective.

Roma arrives and demands to know if his contract for the sale of land to Lingk the previous night had been filed or stolen. Williamson waffles but eventually says that it was filed before the burglary. The sale will put Roma "over the top" and win him the Cadillac. Aaranow is nervous about being questioned and Roma advises, "tell the truth, George. Always tell the truth. It's the easiest thing to remember." Levene enters and says he has just sold eight parcels (properties).

As he is discussing the closing, Moss comes out of the office highly insulted by Baylen's accusatory treatment. The tension leads to savage, and very funny, confrontations with Roma and Levene. Moss – the personification of rage – stalks out.

Knowledge Check

Can you answer these questions from memory? If not, skim and scan the first part of Act 2 to find the answers. Discuss your findings with a classmate or your teacher; record the significance of these moments in the play:

1. Describe the setting at the beginning of the second act.

   - **Significance:**

2. Why is Roma frantic when he enters the office in Act 2?

   - **Significance:**

3. What reassurance does Roma give Aaronow about talking to the police?

   - **Significance:**
4. What big news does Levene have when he enters in Act 2?

- **Significance:**

5. Describe Moss’ exit from the play.

- **Significance:**

**Important Theme: profanity**

The only mellifluous words in David Mamet's play are those of its title *Glengarry Glen Ross*. In this scalding comedy about small-time, cutthroat real-estate salesmen, most of the language is abrasive. If the characters aren't barking out the harshest four-letter expletives, then they're speaking in the clammy jargon of a trade in which "leads," "closings" and "the board" (a sales chart) are the holiest of imperatives. There's only one speech in which we hear about such intimacies as sex and loneliness and that speech, to our shock, proves to be a prefabricated sales pitch.

Yet the strange and wonderful thing about the play is Mamet's ability to turn almost every word inside out. The playwright makes all-American music hot jazz and wounding blues out of his salesman's scatological native lingo. In the jagged riffs of coarse, monosyllabic words, we hear and feel both the exhilaration and sweaty desperation of the huckster's calling. The middle-class bloodbrother salesmen are trying to unload worthless tracts of Florida land to gullible victims. It's the cruelest cut of all that that real estate is packaged into developments with names like 'Glengarry Highlands" and "Glen Ross Farms” – the only pleasant sounding words in the play.

When the characters leave the dark restaurant for the brighter setting of the firm's office in Act 2, Mamet's tone lightens somewhat as well. The office has been ransacked by burglars, and a detective arrives to investigate. Even as the salesmen undergo questioning, they frantically settle rivalries and attempt to bamboozle a pathetic, tearful customer who has arrived to demand a refund. While we laugh at the comic cops-and-robbers hijinks, we nevertheless also witness the unravelling of several lives. No wonder the play is so full of profanity, as these men are pushed to the edge of their ethical codes, and beyond, their moral degradation is echoed in the language they use.
Discussion Point: manhood

How is the notion of manhood different from culture to culture? How do men measure themselves against each other? Are men under less pressure or more nowadays? How do you think the notion of manhood has changed in the America of Glengarry Glen Ross, from the late-1940s to the 1980s setting of the play?

Study Questions

1. In Act 2, all of the conflicting egos of the office are brought together by the playwright. The result is explosive, with the salesmen arguing about the code of manhood by which they live.

   Find examples of characters who attack each other’s manhood – what elements of manliness are specifically brought up by (at least two) different characters?

2. Bearing in mind the attitude regarding manhood and honour espoused by Levene, Moss, Aaronow, and Roma, how are the remaining three characters outsiders from this concept of manhood? To what extent are Baylen, Lingk, and Williamson simultaneously in control of this system and victimized by it?

Office Gossip

Mamet based the characters in Glengarry Glen Ross to some extent on the men with whom he had worked for a year in a dubious real estate office in Chicago. He admired their ability to live by their wits and their dynamic addiction to what they did. He found them amazing.

That does not mean that he approves of what they do. He later wrote: "The desire to manipulate, to treat one's colleagues as servants, reveals a deep sense of personal worthlessness: as if one's personal thoughts, choices, and insights could not bear reflection, let alone a reasoned mutual examination," Behind all the foul-mouthed manipulation and boasting are people who are empty or nearly empty of humane values. They victimize others, but they are victims themselves of a system which offers no rewards but money and punishes failure by taking away the means of earning a living.