

## THE TRACE OF POSTMODERN FEATURES IN DAVID MAMET'S AMERICAN BUFFALO

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**Abstract:** The present research intends to study the multifarious interface of postmodern features and power relations in David Mamet's distinguished drama, *American Buffalo*, in light of Michel Foucault's theory of power. This investigation seeks to find the discreet hints of postmodern aesthetics ingrained in the storyline of the play, and simultaneously scrutinize how Foucault's theory of power brightens the plentiful accounts of power relations, intervention, and confrontation amid the characters. Taking advantage of Foucault's theories of power as an omnipresent force that works through discourses, associations, and communal dealings, this paper scrutinizes the way in which Mamet's employment of such postmodern components as disjointed descriptions and verbal play interweaves with and impedes the power relations in the world of *American Buffalo*. By positioning the characters in a mesh of power dealings that regulate their movements, stimulations, and identities, this exploration analyzes the central power skirmishes that drive the melodramatic pressures in the play. As well, the contemplation of ethical predicaments resulting from the power subtleties signified in *American Buffalo* delivers important considerations of issues of reconnaissance, supremacy, and confrontation.

**Keywords:** American Buffalo, Foucault, Disjointed Descriptions, Verbal Play, Power.



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### Introduction

In present-day American theater, the plays of David Mamet have long been measured as imperative examples of postmodern drama, classified by their disjointed accounts and inspection of power hints. Amid Mamet's wide-ranging assortment, *American Buffalo* (1975) implies a touching contemplation of human dealings, rapaciousness, and the exploration of power in metropolitan America.

This study is going to examine the complex mesh of postmodern elements interlaced in *American Buffalo*, illuminating the stratum of convolution that define the play's thematic infrastructures. Taking advantage of the hypothetical opinions of Paul-Michel Foucault, particularly his theory of power and its exhibitions in communal organizations, this investigation means to clarify the ways in which power undercurrents act in Mamet's play. Foucault's idea of power as a widespread force that determines human beings' identities and communal networks offers a perspective through which to scrutinize the power brawls and dialogues in the world of *American Buffalo*.

By using Foucault's concepts in the analysis of the play, this paper aims at determining the indications of power associations imbedded in the play's characters, dialogue, and chief themes. Thus,

through a close reading of Mamet's text and a critical engagement with Foucault's theoretical agenda, this study attempts to clarify the distinctions of power forces at play in *American Buffalo*, depicting the ways in which power acts as a dominant force determining the lines of the characters and driving the narrative forward.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The study of postmodern features in David Mamet's *American Buffalo* through the lens of Michel Foucault's theory of power leads to some key questions and challenges:

- How are power forces at work depicted in the characters, dialogues, and communications in *American Buffalo*, and to what extent do these dynamics mirror Foucault's conception of power as a prevalent force functioning in societal associations?
- In what ways do the postmodern features of the play, such as fragmented narratives and linguistic play interconnect with and form the power struggles and negotiations portrayed in the text?
- How do the characters in *American Buffalo* deal with issues of agency, control, and resistance in the context of power structures, and how are these dynamics affected by postmodern artistic choices made by Mamet?

In spite of the wide-ranging research on Mamet's plays and the critical examination of power relations in literature and theater through Foucault's theories, there is a perceptible gap in the current research concerning the particular intersection of postmodern features and power forces at work in *American Buffalo*. Whereas studies have investigated facets of Mamet's style and themes within the larger framework of postmodernism and power, there remains a need for an attentive inspection that probes profoundly into how the postmodern elements of the play, including language experimentation and narrative fragmentation lead to the depiction and investigation of power relationships as hypothesized by Foucault.

### **Significance of the Study**

The inspection of the postmodern features in David Mamet's *American Buffalo* in light of Michel Foucault's theory of power is significant in the fields of literature, theater studies, and cultural theory for numerous reasons; first of all, this study provides its readers with an exclusive opportunity to study the connections amid postmodern aesthetics and power dynamics in a particular literary work. By investigating how postmodern features in *American Buffalo* interrelate with Foucault's theories of power, the research brings about a detailed understanding of how arty expressions reflect and refer to larger societal structures.

Also, through a thorough investigation of Mamet's play, the study probes into the complications of contemporary theater and the ways in which dramatists discuss themes of power, control, and authority. By focusing on *American Buffalo*, acknowledged for its raw depiction of human nature and interactive associations, this study emphasizes the significance of Foucaultian power subtleties in theatrical accounts. Moreover, the examination of power relations in *American Buffalo* includes wider inferences for cultural theory and critical studies. By using Foucault's theory to a particular cultural artifact, the study contributes to unending discussions about power structures, surveillance, and discipline in the present-day society.

Besides, the analysis of postmodern features in Mamet's play develops the discourse on postmodernism in literature and theater, underlining the ways in which fragmented narratives and language games can light up power undercurrents and social standards. In fact, this study will add a new-fangled aspect to postmodern scholarship by linking aesthetic novelties to Foucault's theories of power.

## Literature Review

### On the Play

"Ethical Perversity in America: Some Observations on David Mamet's *American Buffalo*" (1981, pp. 270-275) by Barbera is about the ethical intricacies and moral obscurities present in Mamet's *American Buffalo*. In this paper, the researcher, Barbera, discusses themes related to ethical predicaments, dubious behavior, and abnormal principles portrayed in the play. Moreover, the paper analyzes how *American Buffalo* depicts characters who are included in ethically problematic activities or make morally uncertain choices. It also investigates the gray areas of ethics and morality as represented in Mamet's work and discusses how these themes mirror wider social matters.

Besides, the paper presents a criticism of capitalist morals and consumer culture as revealed in the play. It inspects how Mamet's narrative signifies the darker aspect of American society and the moral impasses encountered by human beings in a profit-driven system. The paper additionally studies the ethical scopes of power forces at work and control within the play. It actually analyzes how characters compete for power, manipulate others, or engage in immoral behavior in their chase of personal profits or supremacy, reflecting on the moral inferences of such movements.

"Real Classical Money: Naturalism and Mamet's *American Buffalo*" (2006, pp. 330-346) by Dietrick examines the association of naturalism as a literary movement and Mamet's *American Buffalo*. Dietrick probes into the features and main beliefs of naturalism as a literary movement, which arose in the late 19th century. Naturalism often underlines describing life "as it is" with an emphasis on illustrating the raw and unfiltered realities of human life. The paper also studies how naturalistic features are noticed in Mamet's play, such as deterministic dealings, resolute realism, and an illustration of characters formed by their surroundings.

Likewise, the paper compares and contrasts naturalism with realism as another literary genre. Whereas realism concentrates on portraying ordinary life and experiences authentically, naturalism has a more deterministic and scientific attitude, often showing characters as sufferers of their situations. By scrutinizing how *American Buffalo* is similar to or different from naturalistic settlements, the paper shows Mamet's storytelling selections.

"(Re) Making of Identity: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of David Mamet's *American Buffalo*" (2023, pp. 15-28) by Rehman and colleagues also analyzes the multifaceted themes of identity formation, social dynamics, and cultural impacts as depicted in *American Buffalo*. This paper examines how the characters in *American Buffalo* struggle with their sense of self and how their identities are created in the socio-cultural framework of the play. It studies how such issues as class, race, gender, and socioeconomic position affect the characters' observations of themselves and others.

Moreover, the article shows the emphasis on the procedure of identity (re)construction, demonstrating the moments of alteration, self-discovery, or clash in the characters' journeys. It examines how the characters go through the encounters to their identities, redefine themselves, or confront communal view points in the pursuit of self-discovery. To achieve this goal, the article has employed a socio-cultural approach with the intention of disclosing the plentiful communal and cultural subtleties in *American Buffalo*. It examines the broader societal conditions and historical effects that define the characters' movements and engagements of the play.

### On the Theory

"Michel Foucault on Power/Discourse, Theory and Practice" (1987, pp. 15-33) by Schneck presents an analysis of Foucault's theories on power, discourse, and their interdependence in many ways. Schneck has investigated Foucault's conceptualization of power as a collective and many-sided force that acts in numerous networks and activities. Schneck also analyzes the way in which Foucault

confronts customary philosophies of power as entirely domineering and in its place, he accentuates its fruitful sides in defining communal associations and identities.

The mentioned research similarly emphasizes Foucault's discourse analysis, which examines how power is instigated through language, knowledge, and social practices. It scrutinizes the way in which discourse determines insights, ethics, and social constructions, influencing the passage of power in society. Similarly, this study discusses the association between theory and practice in Foucault's work, bearing in mind how his hypothetical understandings of power and discourse notify practical submissions in numerous fields such as politics, education, healthcare, and penal systems.

"Foucault's Theory of Power" (2014, pp. 13-26) by Lynch offers an inspection and analysis of Foucault's important theory of power. The paper actually probes into Foucault's distinctive viewpoint regarding power, which moves off the traditional interpretations concentrated merely on coercion and domination. Foucault's theory underlines the discrete, relational nature of power, observing it as creative, fluid, and omnipresent throughout societal relations and associations.

Lynch's paper examines how Foucault expresses power as dynamic, implying that it produces knowledge, rules, and subjectivities. Furthermore, Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, as realized in institutions like jails and schools, is a principal argument in this analysis. This research paper discusses Foucault's ideas on biopower and governmentality, which include the regulation of populaces and individuals through apparatuses of control and organization. In fact, Lynch examines how these notions form present-day forms of power and supremacy.

"Power/Knowledge" (2020, pp. 73-79) by Foucault argues that power and knowledge are inseparable; they are interweaved forces that determine and affect each other in multifaceted ways. Foucault contends that power functions through the production and propagation of knowledge. Knowledge is not neutral but is permeated with power forces at work that manage societal standards, institutions, and practices. Those who control knowledge also wield power over others.

Foucault defies the old outlook that power is exclusively intimidating and suppressive. He stresses how knowledge systems, such as scientific discourses, educational institutions, and cultural demonstrations, are apparatuses of power that form reality, describe truth, and control behavior. Foucault's perception of discursive power underscores how language, discourse, and systems of meaning construction are vital to the implementation of power. Through discourses, definite knowledge assertions are raised, whereas others are relegated, leading to the production of societal hierarchies and exclusionary practices.

## Methods

Michel Foucault, a very important French thinker and social theorist, is famous for his revolutionary studies on power, knowledge, and discourse. Foucault's theory of power is a significant element of his greater investigations of communal structures, associations, and the ways in which power acts in plentiful settings. Here are foremost sides of Foucault's theory of power:

- Not like customary valuations of power as a device maintained by the population or establishments, Foucault conceptualizes power as a conscientious dynamism that is social and drawn-out. Power, as supposed by Foucault, is not controlled but employed in systems of relations, discourses, and practices. It is not wholly tyrannical but also prolific, defining human beings' doings, acts, and identities.
- Foucault highlights the importance of discourse in the operation of power. Power is not simply an observable, explicit force but is entrenched in language, knowledge systems, and societal

practices. Discourses form how we see reality, build truths, and control behavior, thus applying power in delicate and often unnoticed techniques.

- Foucault emphasizes the strategic characteristic of power, stressing that power functions through strategies of control and regulation. Nevertheless, he also refers to the possibility for resistance and subversion within power forces at work. Resistance, for Foucault, is not merely a reversal of power but a strategic engagement with power relations to defy overriding discourses and practices.
- Foucault's later work probes into the notion of biopower, which signifies the ways in which power works at the level of populations, bodies, and life itself. Biopower involves methods of surveillance, control, and regulation that control not only human beings but also the whole populace, affecting health, reproduction, and societal rules.

## Results and Discussion

### Power Dynamics and Relationships

*American Buffalo* by David Mamet is a famous American play that premiered in 1975. *American Buffalo* is a two-act play that revolves around themes of loyalty, friendship, and the dark side of the American Dream. The play portrays some criminals who arrange a theft that fails, leading to deception and tension among the characters. This drama is well-known for its piercing conversations, penetrating character crossing points, and inspection of the complexities of human nature.

In this part, I want to show similarities among Foucault's theory of power as subtle and prevalent and the communications between the characters Don, Teach, and Bob in the play. Consistent with my examination, Foucault's theory defies the old notion of power as wholly top-down and unified. As an alternative, he recommends that power is dispersed through social relations and serves in diverse types and methods. This matter is in agreement with the exchanges among Don, Teach, and Bob in *American Buffalo*, where power subtleties are not constant but continually changing and defied between the characters.

In the drama, Don, Teach, and Bob are included in a multidimensional mesh of power brawls and labors to employ power over one another. Each character tries to use control, manipulate circumstances, and follow their own benefits, echoing the diffused quality of power that Foucault defines. The quote by Don, "You tell him, Teach, you tell him how it is" (Mamet, 1975, p. 21), emphasizes the deep sense of power and admiration given to the character Teach. Dubrow's appeal encapsulates the audience's dependence on Teach to transport their feelings correctly and ardently.

In another excerpt, Teach says, "I'm not asking for advice, I'm telling you what you're gonna do" (Mamet, 1975, p. 26), signifying a robust sense of power and willpower. It demonstrates a denial of paying attention to others. Teach believes in his own judgment, owning a firm belief in his ability to dictate the course of action for others. However, these power dynamics are not restricted to one character ruling the others but contain a dynamic interaction of power dealings.

Likewise, the characters in *American Buffalo* use plentiful policies to apply control over each other like exploitation and pressure. Teach, above all, displays controlling conduct as he tries to control Don and Bob for his own benefit. Such abuse epitomizes how power can be implemented via subtle methods and interpersonal forces at work instead of open power.

Foucault also distinguishes the probabilities of confrontation and contestation in power structures. In the dialogues among Don, Teach, and Bob, we see opposition where characters drive back against labors to control or control them. This confrontation highlights the inconsistency of

power dealings and the intervention of human beings to challenge foremost power forces at work.

### **Discourse and Knowledge**

This section is going to argue how language acts as an instrument of power between the characters in the play, largely via the discussions amongst Teach, Don, and other characters. Benefitting from Foucault's notion of discourse, which emphasizes how language makes social legitimacies and power structures, I will inspect the disjointed and monotonous exchange of ideas in *American Buffalo* to elucidate the ways in which power is declared and transferred thru language.

In *American Buffalo*, language serves as a principal device through which power dealings are acknowledged, conserved, and defied. Teach's violent language and Don's authoritarian manner are examples of how language is used as a tool to underline hegemony, regulate interactions, and practice the authenticities of the characters' world in the pawnshop background. Teach's dialogue in the play every so often signifies violence, influence, and pressure. His rough and potent language echoes his attempts to employ supremacy and guidance over Don and Bob. For example, Teach's confrontational tone and use of vulgarity in relation with Don forms his demand to rule the dialogue and assert his control in the group.

Don's dialogue, on the other hand, can be considered as a paternalistic and protective tone towards Bob. His speech transports power, leadership, and a sense of control over Bob's movements and choices. Don's use of language echoes his status as a mentor figure and emphasizes the power dynamics at play in their association. In the quote, "I'm not teaching him, I'm not giving him anything. I'm showing him how to do it" (Mamet, 1975, p. 31), shows a distinctive attitude of the character speaking these words. Don accepts a mentorship role towards another character. This quote mirrors his belief in the power of useful knowledge and experience.

Also, the fragmented and repetitive nature of dialogue in *American Buffalo* can be examined through Foucault's concept of discourse. The characters' fragmented dialogues, pauses, interruptions, and loops of repetition indicate the struggle for power, the negotiation of meanings, and the creation of societal realities in the pawnshop setting. For example, the fragmented conversations between Teach, Don, and Bob disclose the fundamental strains, indecisions, and power disparities that characterize their exchanges.

### **Surveillance and Control**

In this section, I want to discuss the notion of surveillance in the communications of the characters in the absence of literal surveillance devices. By drawing on Foucault's idea that power is sustained through observation and regulation of behavior, I will study how the characters' relentless observing of each other's allegiance and purposes acts as a kind of surveillance in the play.

In *American Buffalo*, the characters' treatment towards each other can be regarded as a sort of surveillance, where they are involved in endless observation and valuation to measure reliability, intentions, and possible treachery. In spite of the nonappearance of physical surveillance mechanisms, the characters' attentive watching of each other's actions functions as a means of authority and power allegation in their interactive subtleties. The characters in the play, mostly Teach, Don, and Bob, display an intensified sense of inspection and doubt towards each other. Teach once says:

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, 1975, p, 103)

This quote condenses a sense of prevalent suspicion and pessimism that characterizes the associations between the characters. In fact, the idea of behaving each other as objects of surveillance indicates an endless inspection of one another's actions, behaviors, and intents. The characters in the

play are included in an unyielding estimation of each other to measure dependability, steadiness, and possible infidelity. This atmosphere of suspicion and surveillance makes an edgy and instable environment where every action and word is examined for veiled meanings or underhanded intentions.

Teach's declaration in the mentioned excerpt represents a deep sense of disenchantment and ethical vagueness. His perspective that the world lacks ethical principles, veracity, and authentic alliance reinforces the idea of a chaotic and impetuous authenticity where customary values and directions are maltreated. This viewpoint regarding the world and each other underlines a postmodern receptiveness that confronts the notion of constant accuracies and moral predictabilities. The characters' incessant observation of one another can be observed as an extant apparatus in a world where assurance is fragile, associations are transactional, and truthfulness is sporadic.

Teach's doubt of Bob's capabilities and purposes, Don's shielding, still attentive viewpoint towards Bob, and the overall atmosphere of vacillation and arduousness signify the never-ending replication and evaluation of faithfulness and stimulations amid the characters. The characters' horror of being cheated or outfoxed necessitates them to perceive each other thoroughly. Teach's fear about hidden treacheries and Don's watchfulness of Teach's violent strategies typify how the fear of being blindsided fuels the characters' surveillance-like performances, pointing to their vulnerability and indecision in the power delicacies of the pawnshop setting.

Furthermore, the idea of the panopticon, as conjectured by Foucault, implies that the mere possibility of being observed leads to self-regulation and compliance with societal values and power constructions. In *American Buffalo*, the characters' awareness that they are being checked by each other produces a self-policing dynamic where the terror of results for infidelity or deceit influences their actions and selections.

For instance, Teach's unceasing enquiring of Bob's faithfulness and competence, along with his uncertainty towards Don's purposes, creates a net of surveillance-like dynamics where confidence is fragile and motivations are recurrently under inspection. Also, Don's authoritarian supervision of Bob's activities and Teach's controlling strategies to get authority over the circumstances further underscore how observation and valuation serve as apparatuses of power and stimulus among the characters.

### **Resistance and Subversion**

This section seeks to examine the matter of power and confrontation as expressed through Foucault's lookout that where there is power, there is also conflict. Through inspecting Teach's defiant tactic and Bob's noncompliance as signs of confrontation against Don's authority and the capitalist system they live in, I will scrutinize how the characters' struggles to destabilize old monetary arrangements through theft reflect a sort of opposition against the old practices.

In *American Buffalo*, the characters' crossing points validate the multi-layered contact amongst power and confrontation. Teach, Don, and Bob each move around a pyramid of power, with Teach using authority through violence, Don asserting power as the apparent lead, and Bob hesitant amid obedience and disobedience. The characters' scuffles for power and freedom heighten the fundamental weights that result in their confrontation.

Teach's noncompliant personality and confrontational actions can be assumed as a technique of confrontation against Don's authority and the entrepreneurial arrangements that control their world. Teach's recurrent encounters to Don's assessments, his mistreatment with Bob, and his proclivity to bend or deviate from standards echo a insubordination of traditional power nuances and social practices in this framework.

As well, Bob's disobedience, such as his disinclination to get through with the theft or his ancillary acts of eccentricity, specify a confrontation to the power forces at work imposed by Teach and Don. Bob's inward brawls, his struggles to assert himself notwithstanding his deceptive ordinary position, and his inquiring of the moral implications of their dishonest movements all denote practices of opposition in the play.

The characters' participation in the planned theft of the valued coin collection can be also studied as a collective act of resistance against the recognized financial order. By engaging in a criminal plan to disturb the old exchange of goods and capital, Teach, Don, and Bob defy the rules of capitalist society and proclaim their agency through different means. Teach says:

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... (Mamet, 1975, pp. 57-58)

As noticed, the theft can be taken as a representative signal of resistance to the universal differences and power disproportions that form their lives. In fact, the characters' actions in *American Buffalo* typify the complicated association amid power and resistance in postmodern society. As Foucault proposes, where there is power, there will always be forms of resistance that arise in reaction to domineering systems.

### **Normalization and Marginality**

In this part, I attempt to examine how the characters existing on the social margins in the play act in accordance with Foucault's inspection of how standards are imposed and nonconformity is preserved in society. By investigating the characters' participation in actions considered illegal by social values, such as theft and criminal schemes, I will show how power outlines and controls what is measured standard or divergent.

Don, Teach, and Bob are depicted as characters existing on the peripheries of society in *American Buffalo*. Their contribution to unlawful activities and their general sense of estrangement from typical social arrangements position them as relegated human beings steering the fringes of orthodox standards and beliefs. Their position as outcasts functions as a lens through which to study Foucault's theories on power and normalization. The characters' inclusion in unlawful activities, like planning a theft or taking part in shady relations, emphasizes the implementation of social averages and the mechanisms through which power controls behavior. As Teach states:

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)

In this quote, Teach is talking about a significant theme that echoes the intersection of friendship, money, and power. Teach's speech mirrors the intricacy of human relations when money and personal interests come into play. He highlights the significance of keeping the pursuit of money discrete from the ties of friendship, signifying that mingling the two can result in difficulties and possibly hurt the interactive forces at work among human beings.

Teach's concentration on money as a dynamic force emphasizes the capitalist nature of society and how it affects human behavior. The characters of the play, via their chipping in illegitimate actions like arranging a robbery, are stimulated by the aspiration for monetary success and power. This chase of money discloses the ultimate stresses and power clashes present in their associations, ultimately bringing about infidelities and skirmishes.

Teach's supervisory approaches, Don's tough inclinations, and Bob's defenselessness and

helplessness to outward stimuli put emphasis on the ways in which power forces at work influence and induce the actions of human beings standing on the confines of society. Foucault's concept of power as a force that defines and governs what is regarded as systematic or atypical is reflected in the infrastructures among the characters in *American Buffalo*. Teach, as the dominant character, sets the manner for what is proper in the pawnshop atmosphere, while Don's labors to endure power and Bob's contests with decreeing agency underline the multi-layered ways in which power fixes collective boundaries and classification of behavior.

### Conclusion

In summary, the study of postmodern elements in Mamet's *American Buffalo* in light of Foucault's theory of power has shown the connection amongst imaginative manifestation, narrative production, and power traces in present-day theater. By examining the convolutions of Mamet's drama and engaging with Foucault's views concerning power as a collective and interactive dynamism, this paper has delivered a systematic comprehension of how power serves as a prevailing theme in *American Buffalo*.

Through the examination of postmodern features like disjointed descriptions and verbal play, we have observed how Mamet entwines a net of power associations that affect the dealings, struggles, and identities of the characters. As we can declare, it is understandable that the hints of postmodern elements in *American Buffalo* serve not only as artistic embellishments but as robust signs of the multifaceted power subtleties that strengthen the story. The amalgamation of postmodern aesthetics and Foucauldian models of power in this examination has provided a profounder recognition of the ways in which art reverberates, dooms, and discusses the power structures of society.

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