

# The Plays: Themes & Issues

"So I tell him, "Dan, Dan, I can *advise*, I can *counsel*, I can speak to you out of my *experience*. . . but in the final analysis, you are on your own. (Pause.) If you want my opinion, however, you are pussy-whipped."

**Sexual Perversity in Chicago**

"For the question is: **What powers exist?** . . . And what looks after us? . . . *Is* there an order in the world. And . . . you ask . . . and *can* things be known. *Can* things be known. (Pause.) And, of course, they *can*."

**The Shawl**

## **The Plays: Themes & Issues**

Director, Angus Jackson on themes of personal liberty and responsibility; women in Mamet's plays; points for discussion

## Women in Mamet

“Women are very different from men, I think.”

Mamet, *New York Times*, 5 July 1976

Much has been written about the role of women in Mamet’s plays. Many critics, noting the macho characters in an often heavily loaded male dominated world, have accused Mamet of misogyny.

Our judgment may rest on whether we believe that Mamet is celebrating the sexism of his male characters or not. According to Director Angus Jackson, Mamet is not “sanctioning men’s behaviour in the play, what he’s doing is presenting it.”

The idea that the audience interpret the play rather than having the play interpreted for them, an idea close to Mamet’s heart, may seem to suggest that this is true.

Other critics, in examining the often destructive way in which Mamet’s male characters behave, have even gone so far as to call him a feminist writer!

We find reference to the rise of feminism in the early 1970’s in the States in *Sexual Perversity* when Bernie scathingly refers to the Equal Rights Amendment, “ We got baby seals dying in Alaska and we’re writing amendments for *broads?*”. Certainly the movement was strong and difficult to ignore, and Mamet does indeed credit it with “turning (his) head around a lot.”

The more prominent women’s roles in *Sexual Perversity* were in part a reaction to criticism that Mamet did not write substantial parts for women. His initial reaction was “I don’t know anything about women ... I am more around men; I listen to more men being candid than women being candid. It is something I have been trying to do more of.” Mamet had also considered changing the homosexual couple in *The Shawl* to a heterosexual one, again in an attempt to provide more interesting parts for women.

Mamet’s misogyny is certainly an ongoing debate and for many, the jury is still out!



## Points for discussion

- ▶ To what extent does Bernie represent the “pre feminist” generation and is Danny a symbol of someone stuck between the old and the new?
- ▶ What effect, if any, would there be in changing the homosexual relationship to a heterosexual one in *The Shawl*?
- ▶ Should a writer such as Mamet bend to pressure to write outside of his experience? Why/why not?
- ▶ Could a version of *Sexual Perversity* be written 25 years on? If so, what changes might there be in language and in terms of the relationships between the characters? Try experimenting with a section of script.

“The men certainly get more of a voice, but they use it to condemn themselves.”

Director, Angus Jackson

## Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Shawl.

Like many modern playwrights, Mamet gives few clues in the printed text about characters or setting. He strongly believes that the dialogue within the text should speak for itself: "any ambiguities are intentional!"

Mamet says of *The Shawl*, "Finally we have to make up our own minds about what it is that we have seen." (New Theatre Quarterly, 1988) And so it is with any of Mamet's work. The plays speak for themselves and detailed synopsis or commentaries are not necessary.

*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (written in 1973) and *The Shawl* (1985) in part reveal the diversity of Mamet's work.

In *Sexual Perversity* we journey through the lives of the four main characters, two male and two female, in an almost cinematically constructed play of 34 short scenes, set over a period of nine weeks.

*The Shawl* is a more contained play, set over three days in 4 acts. Ironically at a time when Mamet was involved in the movie industry, it has more theatrical values in its structure, being set over a short time and in the same place.

## What they said about:

### Sexual Perversity in Chicago

*"All the characters are losers. To me, it's a play about insight ... It's about four different ways of dealing with or failing to deal with insight. Joan intellectualizes everything, Debbie uses catch phrases, Danny jokes everything away, and Bernie tries to overpower everyone."*

[Mamet, Village Voice, 1976](#)

*"The action and the dialogue are grounded in a specific place and time ... yet the truths Mamet has extracted from this common clay ring with a simple eloquence and universality."*

[Richard Christiansen, Chicago Daily News, 1974](#)

### The Shawl

*"David told me once that he started to write The Shawl in part because people said to him "You always write such wonderful characters but you don't write plot" ... So he set out to exercise plot writing as a craft. And I think it came out beautifully. Everybody gets fooled at least once in the play."*

[Lindsay Crouse, New York Times, 1985](#)

*"Like Pinter, he demonstrates a superlative ambiguity. It's up to the actor to strip away the layers to reveal what's beneath. The shading has to be just right, the tone completely accurate. In purely technical terms, finding the right way to say something in a Mamet play is like a treasure hunt; there are clues but there are also many incorrect turns you could make."*

[Connie Booth \(Miss A, Theatre Upstairs, Royal Court, 1986\), from Drama, No.1988](#)



Before reading Angus Jackson's interview, think about what themes you think run through both plays and others that are specific to one or the other.

Do you think themes are important in the study of Mamet's work? If not, what are the most important elements?

## Director Angus Jackson discusses responsibility and personal liberty in *The Shawl* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*.

There's a very important idea which runs through both plays "What is the value of seeking answers or advice from other people?" In *The Shawl* John sets himself up as being "the one who knows." He supplies secret information to individuals about themselves. He has a customer, a woman looking for answers, and a male protégé who is also his lover. But for every bit of information he supplies to his acolytes, they want more and ultimately he can't shoulder that responsibility; they are getting no satisfaction, he is suffering from personal demons.

In contrast, in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, Bernie is a sexual bragger, always ready to share advice about what women want with his friend Dan who is embarking on an honest love affair. Deb, Dan's new love, also has a mentor figure in Joan, a reductive analyst of the world. These mentors at times are more than willing to pass on their advice and knowledge gained from personal experience but it's not at all clear how helpful that is to the young lovers.

And so the questions are - "What is the benefit of taking answers from other people? Where does the responsibility lie? What sort of answer is actually a useful answer?" and "Are we all on our own?" (and whether this would be a depressing outcome or not.) In *The Shawl* John sheds those looking for answers from him. In *Sexual Perversity In Chicago* Bernie continues to offer advice. It's clear that *Sexual Perversity In Chicago* has a more bleak ending, but there are of course other factors at play.

The other interesting thematic comparison one can make revolves around personal liberty. In *The Shawl*, Miss A is described as regressed, bound not as a result of coercion or influence but something within her. The central speech is full of images of regression and to an extent each character is limiting their own freedom, either by choice or by blindness. In *Sexual Perversity In Chicago* the characters are liberated, certainly sexually, certainly in their own minds they are - it was a time of sexual liberation. But it is a pained liberty which the characters can't quite get hold of, and they are struggling to squeeze their fair share of happiness out of that.