

From Individual to Cosmic-self: A Study on Humanism in David Mamet's 'The Woods.'

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Abstract

David Alan Mamet, a celebrated 20th century American dramatist, presents a warm relationship between a young couple in 'The Woods.' Produced in 1977, 'The Woods' (TW) has plenty of sentimental stories. In this highly competitive and materialistic world, humans seem to have lost faith in humane qualities like forgiveness and reconciliation, which are essential to nurture good relationship. The play stresses the significance of reconciliation and reciprocation of love for healthy bonding between men and women.

'TW' written in a 'legato mood' (Bigsby 1985), is about Ruth and Nick, who go to a cabin in the woods on a short vacation. Ruth becomes emotional and feels one with nature. She tells Nick about her experiences, from the listening to the chirping of birds to the stories about the Viking women, who kill their own girl babies. She sounds very romantic, but Nick, who wants to fulfill his physical needs, finds her talk very boring and approaches her with sexual desire. Ruth gets upset because of his brutal behaviour. When she presents him with a bracelet, he rejects it. This provokes Ruth and since Nick continues to be indifferent, she decides to leave the place. The next day, when she is about to leave, they pick up another quarrel, which settles things and ends in reconciliation.

This paper titled 'From Individual to Cosmic-self: A study on Humanism in David Mamet's *The Woods*' highlights reconciliation as an important aspect of nourishing a meaningful bond among humans. The paper also

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David Alan Mamet, a celebrated 20th century American dramatist, presents a warm relationship between a young couple in 'The Woods.' Produced in 1977, 'The Woods' (TW) has plenty of sentimental stories. In this highly competitive and materialistic world, humans seem to have lost faith in humane qualities like forgiveness and reconciliation, which are essential to nurture good relationship. The play stresses the significance of reconciliation and reciprocation of love for healthy bonding between men and women.

Placed in the serene woods, Ruth feels highly elated. As she feels in tune with nature, the mist in the woods seems to clear away the mist of her spirit. In contrast to the city life, she finds security here, security for not only her own being, but also for her relationship with Nick. The serenity of her mind resonates with nature and finds 'patterns' (Mamet 1979c) in natural objects. The peace she enjoys at heart is highlighted when she says: "You could live right out in the country. I slept so good yesterday" (Mamet 1979c), but she also says, "I listened. All night long" (Mamet 1979c). The 'sleep' she means is not the literal sleep. It is the echo of the calmness of her mind and heart. She feels happy on seeing Nick having a deep sleep. In the sameness of their feeling comfortable with nature, she gets an assurance that they can "live through things together" (Mamet 1979c). When she utters, "All things come from the ground" (Mamet 1979c), it looks as if she has found the roots of her existence in the woods.

Ruth wants Nick also to feel the same strength so that their relationship will become stronger and more meaningful. To instill in him the value of an everlasting relationship, she narrates the story of her grandmother, who loved her husband very much throughout her life. The value Ruth holds for her grandmother can be understood when she compares her grandmother with the earth. By sharing her thoughts and experiences with Nick, she feels that she can make him realize the importance of man-woman relationship.

In the woods, the company of Nick gives her energy and enthusiasm to live which she misses in the city: "In the city we can never know each other really" (Mamet 1979c). Ruth feels as

if she has known the road to a new life, which according to Thoreau is more enthralling than traveling it: “Alive as he was to the world, Thoreau maintained precedence for his inner mind. To know that the road to a new life was open was more important than traveling it.... As a free consciousness it was first of all the positive experience of feeling open to the world, and perhaps the word that came closest to expressing it for Thoreau was ‘innocence’” (Kaplan 1972). Ruth feels herself in such an excited state: “It’s clean out here. And, plus, it’s quiet. Anything is possible, you can see the way things are Like the stars. Like the way you look I always wanted it to be like this. With my lover. In my country. In the middle of the night. This is so beautiful. Here we’re awake. All by ourselves” (Mamet 1979c). It is not only the happiness that she finds in nature that matters. What gives her more contentment is her feeling that her relationship with Nick will last forever like her association with nature. Lamont (1973) says, “The Humanist’s keen responsiveness to every sort of natural beauty evokes in him a feeling of profound kinship with nature and its myriad forms of life.” In this respect, Ruth is a humanist representative in the true sense of the word, because in the different dimensions of nature and its beauty she finds the reflection of her own love and the happiness she is going to enjoy in her life with Nick.

Ruth’s need encompasses Nick’s welfare. Likewise, an individual’s interest should expand with one’s fellow beings’ health and wealth. That is how people can see the universe within them. When a person focuses on the wellbeing of humanity, the transmission from the individual self to the cosmic self happens. Edger De Michael, a world famous astronaut, narrates his space travel experience in an article titled ‘Outer Space to Inner Space.’ He says that, to solve human problems, “man must rise from his present ego-centered consciousness to find universal harmony starting within himself” (Vijayji 1978). Quoting him, Falniker, the translator of ‘Science and Religion’ says that humans could explore the spaces within them only if they free themselves from their ego. Ruth’s attitude towards Nick and nature resembles this. Her realization of happiness is the result of her revelation of the self and its identification with the external world.

Nick’s perception of Ruth and his relationship with her is entirely different. He does not believe in an emotional bond with Ruth. Hence, he is not able to appreciate much of her philosophy. This is understood when he says, “I’m glad that you’re happy” (Mamet 1979c). He sees her only as an object of physical pleasure. Ruth’s bed time stories do not give him real comfort. He does not even want to accompany her for a walk. When Ruth finds the damp soil and

weather lively, Nick finds it irritating. He, unlike Ruth, does not believe in leading a significant life with love and poetry. He does not even seem to have the basic respect for the womenfolk: “They (women) have no sense of values” (Mamet 1979c). Nick totally contradicts all the sentimental values that Ruth holds.

As a mark of his disrespect for her feelings, Nick approaches Ruth for sexual pleasure. He feels disgusted when she refuses to yield to his desire. He exhibits an extreme insolence when he rejects the bracelet with a valuable wording “Nicholas. I will always love you.” (Mamet 1979c). The bracelet, which is a representation of their love, according to Ruth, remains just a lifeless object to Nick. He totally lacks consideration for her feelings, which makes Ruth decide to leave the woods.

Mamet brings in a change in Nick’s attitude because he, as humanism advocates, holds faith in “the principle of negotiation of differences and compromise” (Kurtz 1988). Hence, the sudden change in Nick’s behaviour when Ruth is about to leave may be surprising, but it is humanistic. As Bigsby (2000) comments, “He (Nick) confesses to being confused by his own need for a companionship which goes beyond mere physicality.” Nick understands that Ruth’s demand for commitment is reasonable and gets rid of his egoistic nature.

The couple’s quarrel in the last scene, summons up the brawl between a husband and a wife in John Osborne’s ‘Look Back in Anger,’ where the objects of reconciliation are the squirrel and the bear toys (Osborne 1957). Here, in ‘TW,’ it is the bracelet. Nick, who has realized his mistake, says, “You made the bracelet. It says you will always love me. You had it made. No. You don’t have to go. I don’t believe that” (Mamet 1979c). There is poetry and love not only in Nick’s words, but also in his heart.

Through a transformed Nick, Mamet asserts the fact that there will not be much meaning in life, beauty on the earth and love in all that exists, if everything looked similar and everyone thought alike: “What is the point? If one is like the other? Where is your friendship in that?” (Mamet 1979c). He wants his characters to understand that differences are essential factors, but at the same time there should be a give and take policy, a stepping back to give way for others’ feelings. Domination in any form will lead to failure in establishing a compassionate relationship.

In his response to a question about the failure to communicate to the self authentically, Mamet says: “The purpose of theatre, to me, is to examine the paradox between the fact that everyone tries to do well but few, if any, succeed” (Roudane 1996). This is true with forming relationships between men and women. In ‘TW,’ it is a success, in Mamet’s ‘Sexual Perversity in Chicago,’ it is a failure. As Bigsby (2000) remarks, “There is something of the civics teacher about David Mamet, as there is a sentimentalist.” Mamet emphasizes the need for emotions to bind humans. He believes that in this fast changing world, propensity or inclination toward sentiments is required to transform this mechanical globe into a humane one.

In ‘TW,’ Mamet highlights reconciliation as an important aspect of nourishing a meaningful bond among humans. He shows how relationships should be strengthened by emotional understanding. He also insists on the individual self’s transcendence into universal self. Thus, ‘TW’ establishes Mamet as a proponent of humanism.

Thus, this paper titled ‘From Individual to Cosmic Self: A study on Humanism in David Mamet’s ‘The Woods’ presents reconciliation as an important aspect of nourishing a meaningful bond among humans. The paper also studies the importance of the individual self’s transcendence into universal self.

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