

Glengarry Glen Ross: Act 1 Scenes 1 and 2

"Things get set... you get a certain mindset... a guy gets a reputation..."

The play opens in a dining booth at a small Chinese restaurant. Shelly Levene, once a top salesman but now, in his fifties, down on his luck, is begging Williamson – the real estate office manager – for ‘leads’. He’s not closed a sale in some time, but he’s convinced that one ‘A-list’ lead will put him back on the right track. He’s desperate because, to stimulate better performance, the office bosses (Mitch and Murray) have organised a sales competition. Top man at the end of the month wins a Cadillac car... but if you can’t get on the board, you’re fired!

Across the restaurant at the same time, Moss and Aaranow have just finished dinner. They are disgruntled over the sales contests, believing loyalty to the company should be enough to secure their jobs. The new pressure for sales is bringing out the worst in Moss, who is still trying to achieve success that the business world defines for men. He has a fire in his belly – but it’s a dog-eat-dog world and he’s going to have to get his hands dirty if he wants to survive.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. How many leads has Shelly recently ‘kicked out’?

- (a) One
- (b) Two
- (c) Three
- (d) Four

2. What does Shelly blame for his recent poor sales?

- (a) Himself
- (b) Bad luck
- (c) Poor accounting
- (d) New laws

3. What is Williamson’s first name?

- (a) Dave
- (b) Edward
- (c) Robert
- (d) John

4. Who does Shelly want to partner up with?

- (a) Moss
- (b) Roma
- (c) Aaranow
- (d) Amari

5. How much does Williamson demand for one of the ‘hot’ leads?

- (a) Twenty dollars
- (b) Fifty dollars
- (c) One hundred dollars
- (d) Two hundred dollars

6. Who does Aaranow say never try to sell to?

- (a) Polacks
- (b) Indians
- (c) Housewives
- (d) Deadbeats

7. Moss uses what colourful metaphor to express how the bosses have overexploited the market?

- (a) They cooked the chicken
- (b) They strangled the cat
- (c) They killed the goose
- (d) They shot the camel

8. With whom has Moss cut a side deal to get better working conditions?

- (a) Jerry Graff
- (b) Mitch and Murray
- (c) Oscar and Hans
- (d) The police

9. Where does Moss plan to be so he has an alibi when the leads are stolen?

- (a) Brooklyn
- (b) Battery Park
- (c) Como Inn
- (d) Gurney’s Hotel

10. Why does Moss say Aaranow has to help him at the end of the scene?

- (a) Because you’re my friend
- (b) Because you listened
- (c) Because of the money
- (d) Because of your family

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Act 1 Scene 1 begins with a desperate plea for help from Shelly to Williamson. Why is Shelly so desperate? How does desperation present itself in his lines?
2. Act 1 drops the audience into the middle of a professional argument between two real estate workers. They are comfortable with an 'argot' (the jargon or slang of a particular group of people) that may be unfamiliar to the audience. What examples of jargon can you pluck from the first two scenes?
3. The new pressure for sales is bringing out unsavoury characteristics in the men who work in the office. What are the most unpleasant characteristics on display?
4. Mamet sets up an age difference between his characters. Levene and Aaranow are in their fifties; Moss and Williamson are in their forties. How does this difference present itself in the characters?
5. Both scenes reveal a power dynamic in the office. Which man ends up 'on top' at the end of each scene? How do they establish their dominance in different ways?

Literary Study: *microcosm*

“...Sales promotion, ‘you lose, then we fire you...’ No, it’s medieval... it’s wrong.”

A **microcosm** is a small, self-contained system or environment that reflects, in miniature, the structures and characteristics of a larger society. In literature, it refers to a **setting** that represents broader societal themes or universal truths on a smaller scale. In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, David Mamet uses the real estate office as a microcosm of American society, exposing the ruthless logic of capitalism and its corrosive effects on human relationships. The office operates under a cutthroat system where success is measured solely by sales, echoing the competitive ethos American corporate culture. The American Dream promises upward mobility through hard work – but only for those who can outmanoeuvre others. The sales contest, which rewards top performers and discards the rest, symbolizes a zero-sum economy where one person’s win depends on another’s loss. Despite relentless efforts, some characters remain trapped in insecurity because the truth is that luck and systemic inequality outweigh hard work.

This ‘baked-in’ inequality is symbolised most potently through the leads, which are more than just pieces of paper. They represent ‘opportunity’ and ‘power’; in the miniature capitalist world of the office, the leads are scarce resources that determine who thrives and who fails. Access to good leads is the ultimate advantage: success isn’t based on skill or effort, but on who controls the flow of opportunity. The office is a microcosm of a capitalist society where wealth and privilege are unevenly distributed, and those at the top manipulate resources to maintain dominance. As desperation mounts, theft, bribery, and deception become normalized, reflecting a society where ends justify means and moral boundaries blur. Therefore, the leads symbolize the illusion of the American Dream: they promise success, but only a select few ever get the chance to pursue it.

Written in the 1980's, *Glengarry Glen Ross* was as relevant at the turn of the new millennium for those experiencing angst from the shaky dot-com economy – and is still relevant today as people grapple with banking crises that are destroying savings, trade wars that are undermining international efforts at economic cooperation, or with insecurity over the emergence of cryptocurrencies. Mamet has tapped into timeless themes of the human condition when people are placed in competition, contesting for the elusive ‘more.’

Activity

Mamet paints a vivid picture of greed and desperation in this microcosm of business ethics. The real estate office operates like a survival ecosystem where diverse characters exhibit the personalities of those who fall somewhere on the business food chain. It’s eat-or-be-eaten, and some just don’t have the constitution to survive.

Where do the characters of the play fall on this ‘food chain’? Who dominates? Who scavenges? Who gets eaten alive? Explore the power dynamics and hierarchies of the real estate office by creating a visual or symbolic representation of the ‘food chain’, explaining the factors that determine where different characters are placed.

Important Theme: *the slipperiness of language and communication*

"That's 'talk', my friend, that's 'talk'. Our job is to sell."

‘Language games’ is an idea from philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. It means that words do not have fixed meanings. Instead, their meaning depends on how people use them in different situations. Language works like a game with rules that change depending on the context and words can mean different things in different conversations. Wittgenstein argued that communication is flexible and shaped by individual people and usage, not by strict definitions.

In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet dramatizes Wittgenstein’s idea by showing how words shift meaning depending on context and intent. Characters constantly refer to acts of speaking (“*I’m telling you*,” “*That’s talk*,” “*We’re just talking*”) but these words and phrases rarely mean the same thing twice. Sometimes “*talk*” signals idle chatter, sometimes negotiation, and still other times a challenge to honesty. This instability reveals that language in the play is not about truth but about power and persuasion. Just like the land the salesmen are trying to sell, so too does speech become a commodity: words are tools for survival, and for winning one’s way to the top of the board. Meaning and truth become as slippery as the salesmen themselves.

Take Levene’s very first speech from Act 1 Scene 1 as an example. He says to Williamson: “*Roma’s a good man... He’s fine. All I’m saying, you look at the board... All that I’m saying, you’re wasting leads.*” Here, Levene uses the phrase ‘*all I’m saying*’ to imply that, despite what he just claimed, Roma is *not* a good salesman and that it’s *not* fine that he’s getting the premium leads. When he repeats ‘*all I’m saying*,’ it’s what Levene’s *not* saying that’s more important. Of course, Levene’s points are contrary to reality. The board, in fact, places Roma at the top, showing he’s not wasting the leads as Levene is ‘*saying*’. Here, the word *saying* becomes a code for – don’t worry about the facts, listen to my opinion instead. Language is being used for persuasion, not for telling the truth.

Throughout the first act, Mamet uses this ambiguity to show that in a dog-eat-dog world driven by sales and survival, communication doesn’t clarify – it conceals; language doesn’t connect – it manipulates. The more characters speak, the more unreliable and slippery language becomes.

Activity

Track back through the first two scenes of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, looking specifically for words and phrases like: “*I’m telling you*,” “*That’s just talk*,” “*That’s what I’m saying*,” and so on. Read around these phrases for the context of the line. Is the word being used to persuade, evade, reassure, obscure, or what? Show how the same word changes meaning across situations. Present your findings in a chart, mind-map, or even short essay, clarifying how Mamet shows language is a tool for survival rather than truth.