



## Postmodern Humanism in David Mamet's 'THE CRYPTOGRAM'

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### ABSTRACT

David Alan Mamet, a promising 20<sup>th</sup> Century American playwright, highlights the two most important aspects of postmodern humanism – the dichotomies of human person's fundamental attitudes and victimization in 'The Cryptogram' (CG). The play delineates the shift in the parents' rudimentary frame of mind, especially the mother, toward their child and highlights the loss of credibility of parenthood. It also focuses on the negative impact the self-willed and authoritative nature of parents will have on children. This paper examines 'The Cryptogram' and affirms the need for nurturing humanism in families in this modern era.

**Keywords:** Postmodern humanism, victimization, authoritative attitude, parental responsibilities, psychological disorders

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Paul Kurtz (1988), in 'Forbidden Fruit' enumerates a list of responsibilities parents have toward their children. Apart from providing the children with education, shelter and food, parents have a more important responsibility to give their full support in building the whole personality of the child. In the name of freedom, the parents give a lot of autonomy to the younger generation which actually misleads them. Parents give full freedom to their children not only to release the children from the parental pressure, but also to relieve themselves of some of the parental responsibilities. 'The Cryptogram' produced in 1994, is a pathetic story about a boy, whose psyche is affected due to the want of parental care.



'CG' highlights the two most important aspects of postmodern humanism – the dichotomies of human person's fundamental attitudes and victimization. The play presents the shift in the fundamental attitude of parents, especially the mother, toward their child highlighting the loss of credibility of parenthood. It also focuses on the negative impact the self-willed and authoritative nature of parents will have on children.

John, a ten year old boy, is the protagonist of the play, which "dramatizes profound betrayal and abandonment of family and friendship" (Kane 1995). His father, Robert, has left the family to live with another woman. His mother, Donny, feels very much upset and she does not try to understand the mental turmoil the boy is undergoing. Donny, at first, does not know why her husband has left her, but when she comes to know about it, she feels more upset because no man in her life has been faithful. She and her husband's friend, Del, reprimand John constantly which leads to the child's psychological disorder. The play ends with a hope for the mother that she may have a good companion in Del, but leaves John bewildered.

Robert's attitude reminds one of Mamet's play 'Mr.Happiness,'(MH)where a police personnel, who has an illicit affair with another woman seeks Mr. Happiness' advice before taking a decision to desert the family. It also resembles 'Edmond' where the protagonist leaves his wife and goes in search of sensual pleasure. Mamet, who makes the policeman seek counselling in 'MH,' does not do so in 'CG.' He wants to highlight the self-willed nature of humans and project the state of affairs in the families where there are such attitudinal problems with the parents. This comparison also brings to the fore the shift in the fundamental nature of human beings over the years.

Mamet's delineation of the boy's condition is heart-rending. The boy loses his sleep, because he misses his father. Explaining the plot to critic Lahr, Mamet says, "It's not that the kid can't sleep but why can't the kid sleep? So, the kid can't sleep because he knows, subconsciously, that something is unbalanced in the household. But then why is nobody paying attention to him? I thought Aha! Well, this is perhaps the question of the play" (Lahr 2001). Del compares John's sleeplessness with people's sleeplessness in their old age. This sounds preposterous, because grown-up people's minds will be full of complicated and mature thoughts and John is a ten year old boy whose mind is supposed to have playful and innocent thoughts.

Mamet insists on how the elders' treatment of a child like an adult leads to confusion in the young minds. Del talks in a philosophical tone to the boy:

Del: Their (grown –ups) thoughts are of two things.

John: Yes?

Del: Of what they're leaving.

John: Yes?

Del: And what they're going toward. Just like you.

.....

John: How do you know that?

Del: Well, you know, they say we live and learn (Mamet 1995).



The imposition of such philosophical meandering confuses John and leads to his talking about death at this young age.

The language that Donny and Del speak also confuses John. They speak in codes, to prevent the boy from knowing about the father's desertion. They ask John to go upstairs to sleep since they desire to have a free discussion. But, John keeps asking about petty things like his coat, cap and the fishing rod. He continues to feel upset thinking that he has only torn the blanket. All these show his mental depression. He is obsessed with thoughts about his father's absence. He lacks the security he used to feel in his father's presence.

John, who gets warmth neither from his mother nor from the atmosphere of the house, finds warmth and comfort in the blanket "a poor substitute for his parents' warmth" (Kane 1999). From his mother, he comes to know where it has been bought. Donny, in a quiet and comforting mood, says: "Do you know. When you were small. You slept in it. All the time. We covered you" (Mamet 1995). This adds to the dependence the boy already holds for the blanket. John's simple thoughts about the blanket gain more significance and develop into a strong sentimental attachment. He, who, at first, talks about ordinary things like cap, starts talking about matters which are far beyond his age. The boy doubts whether there is any such thing as thoughts and whether what they do is living or dreaming: "May be there is no such thing as thought.... And we are a dream. Who knows we are here? No one knows we are. We are a dream. We are just dreaming...." (Mamet 1995). This piece of introspection sounds like a complex rambling. Mamet shows that all this disorientation is due to Robert's self-willed act of deserting the family. While humanism advocates individual's freedom, its insistence on individual's responsibility is also noteworthy. Robert's obstinate nature prevents him from visualising his family's plight after his desertion.

Like Robert, Donny and Del too remain indifferent toward John's plight. They try to show only their authoritarian attitude and display no compassion for the boy. It is not only that Del does not understand John's need for care and attention, but also that she victimizes John for his father's mistakes. She is annoyed at John's repeated questions about his father.

Donny : We'll find out when he comes home, John. Must we do this every night?..... He Always has a Reason" . . .  
John : When is Dad coming home?  
Donny : He'll be here when he gets here, I think (Mamet 1995).

Another instance of dominance and indifference towards the boy's feelings is found when Donny and Del go to the extent of medicating him to let him slip into deep slumber. Unable to find Robert anywhere, they consider John a disturbance, because they are not able to discuss anything in front of him. So, even without thinking about the side effect the medicine will have on John, they force him to take the medicine. John feels very much upset about the unsympathetic and cruel nature of Donny and Del. He says, "No one understands. You think that I'm in something. You don't know what I'm feeling" (Mamet 1995). Donny lacks understanding of her own son's feelings. Through Donny and



Del, Mamet juxtaposes the variation in human beings' fundamental attitudes in the past and the present.

Though John is not able to explain to them what is bothering him, he tells them that he is frightened about some voices and things that he hears and sees before he goes to bed. He even says that because of his fear, he soaks the bed in his sweat.

John : I don't want to go to sleep.

Del : Alright, alright, I'm going to promise you... look at me, John. I'm going to promise you if you take this and ...you take this and go upstairs then you won't be afraid. I promise. (pause) I promise you (pause)

John : I sweat through the sheets.... (Mamet 1995).

Mindless of his disturbed thoughts, they insist on his taking the medicine. If they had noticed his strange and unusual behavior, they could have prevented further deterioration in John's psychological condition. It does not require a psychiatrist to understand the child's mind. A certain degree of consideration and care on the part of Donny would have brought back John's mental stability. The total dismissal of his fears and the shoddy treatment of the boy have resulted in his psychoneurosis. A mother in the past would have been really considerate and affectionate. This difference in the understanding of humanity of the past and present, which Mamet tries to emphasize, is widening in the postmodern context.

Warren S. Gramm (1991), in his article titled 'Humane Drain: Environmental, Institutional-Systems Impact on Formation and Use of the Human Resources,' which was written in the context of the Centenary Celebrations of 'Humane Treatment of Animals' poses the question: "What is the prospect for extending such a Campaign to 'man' the 'higher' animal? Can religious and secular humanism be joined in a successful movement to a humane, just society?" The boy in 'CG' needs such 'humane treatment: When a boy of ten talks about death, any mother will feel astonished, but Donny does not have even the slightest shock.

John : Do you ever wish you could die (pause) It's not such a bad feeling. Is it?

Donny : I know you are frightened. I know you are. But at some point, do you see...? (pause)

(Exits) (off stage) ...John, everyone has a story. Did you know that? In their lives. This is yours. (Del enters) And finally...finally... you are going to have to learn how you will deal with it. You understand? I'm going to speak to you as an adult: At some point... At some point, we have to learn to face ourselves... (Mamet 1995).

The chillness of authority with which she speaks is penetrating. Though her mind is perturbed, because of her husband's action, she should have realized that John does not deserve such a cold treatment. This makes John retreat into his shell darkened by ominous fears.

The life of modern man has become so complicated with the introduction and implementation of innovative ideas and challenges that a set of fixed ideology may be inadequate and



impossible to adopt. And as Yarbrough (1992) states, "There can be no turning back, ever, except to the most general." Hence, framing a permanent humanistic attitude becomes not only difficult, but also impracticable. Malloch (2006) states thus:

With the collapse of modern humanism's claims to a 'higher truth' of either reason or feeling, another variation has developed as an alternative to scientific humanism. This postmodern humanism places the consciousness of diverse ethnic, gender and counter cultural groups and individuals in the privileged space formerly held by reason and feeling. Using categories of dominance and subordination as the primary analytical framework, postmodern humanism has developed a focus on exposing variations on exploitation and victimization.

Exploitation and victimization, both at the micro and macro levels, kill the spirit of humans. Even in this age of robotics, working class people suffer under the clutches of bureaucracy. The sufferings of civilians have increased because of the wars waged by the nations to establish their power. The question 'Why should the commoners be held victims and fall prey to the desires of the power mongers?' remains unanswered.

For being the son of an irresponsible father, John is victimized by his own mother. As Kane (1999) remarks, John is frightened by the "absence of truthful, caring, ethically responsible people". Donny, who is not able to overcome the loss of her husband – loss not because of death, but because of betrayal and breach of marital bond – finds vent for her frustrations by being unsympathetic and rude to John. John is not able to understand the reason for the mysterious situation at home, nor is he able to explain what is bothering him. Donny's arrogance has prevented her from empathizing with John and this paralyses his senses and results in the psychological disorder. Mamet projects her agony when she shouts in an anguished state at an indifferent John finally, "Can't you see that I need comfort? Are you blind? For the love of God..." (Mamet 1995). Though it is quite natural for her to feel overly disappointed and upset, she, as a mother, could have had a better composure to understand the needs of the boy.

According to Gabriela Mistal, a Nobel Prize winner, "We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many of the things we need can wait, the child cannot. To him we cannot answer tomorrow. His name is today." Quoting these words, Krishna Iyer (2007) in an article titled 'Needed, a Code of Child Rights' discusses the importance of catering to a child's needs. Children, who are uncared for, become national and international criminals and terrorists. Such a 'worst crime' is committed in 'CG.'

The play begins with the characters discussing the three misfortunes. The fourth one, which is not identified by them, is the loss of John's psyche. Since the characters do not understand the importance of humanism, as Bigsby (2000) states in 'Modern American Drama,' "Things are coming to an end – a friendship, a marriage, a young boy's innocence." The annihilation of a young boy's innocence is the most pathetic of all the misfortunes.

By delineating the suffering of a boy because of the parents' self-willed nature, authoritative attitude and unsympathetic treatment, Mamet depicts the importance of humanism in families. By



substantiating victimization, as another form of anti-humanistic attitude, and bringing out the difference between the attitude and understanding of humanity in the past and present, Mamet presents the postmodern humanism in 'CG.'

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