

Unnatural Narrative Features in David Mamet's Plays

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Abstract

One of the outstanding representatives of the contemporary play scene, David Mamet's works have been widely acclaimed for their deep thematic excavations, multidimensional characterizations, and ingenious narrative strategies. His play creations touch upon the profound issues of society and human nature in terms of content and demonstrate a high degree of artistic achievement and depth of thought in terms of form through complex psychological analysis of characters and innovative narrative techniques. Starting from the theory of unnatural narrative, we take the three works of David Mamet, *The Woods*, *Boston Marriage*, and *American Buffalo*, as samples and focus on the anti-imitation and non-statutory unnatural narrative features of characterization, plot setting, and process transitions, to decipher Mamet's plays' transcendence of the traditional temporal linear, logical, coherent, and realistic imitation, and to provide new perspectives and thoughts for the study of his works. In this way, Mamet's plays are interpreted as a transcendence of traditional time linearity, logical coherence, and reality imitation, providing new perspectives and thoughts for studying his works.

Keywords

David Mamet, unnatural narratives, narrative strategies, American Drama.

1. Introduction

American playwright David Mamet (1947-) "undoubtedly was the most beloved and widely-attended playwright of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States" [1]. American playwright David Mamet has won over ten theater awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the *Village Voice* Obie Award. His plays *American Buffalo* (1975), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), and *Oleanna* (1993) have attracted wide attention in domestic and international academic circles. David Savran considers him "the leading defender-linguist in American theater circles" [2]. Some scholars also claim that "there is no doubt that he has become one of the top playwrights in American theater since 1975" [3]. Since the release of his works, audiences have been triggered to reflect deeply on the nature of human nature, society, and language, and they have attracted extensive attention and discussion in the academic world. Some scholars have explored the ethical dilemma of the United States from *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* [4], and some scholars have started from the unique language styles of his plays and explored the tremendous artistic tensions shown by the intertwining of different language styles [6]. Some scholars explore Mamet's creative characteristics, theater theory, and the significance of studying Mamet in contemporary American theater by compiling interviews with Professor Nadel [7]. However, in addition to the ethical dilemmas, artistic tension, and linguistic style of Mamet's works, the unnatural narrative techniques in his plays have also strengthened the thematic meaning of Mamet's plays. However, few scholars have paid much

attention to them; therefore, as an important part of his artistic attraction, it is worthwhile to explore the characteristics of the “unnatural” in his works.

As an emerging branch of narrative theory, unnatural narratology is committed to exploring narrative phenomena that transcend conventional narrative logic and the logic of reality. It is a supplement to the existing narrative theory and a reexamination and transcendence of the traditional narrative concept, opening up new research perspectives and paths. According to Richardson, unnatural narratology refers to “narratives that violate the statute of mimesis by offering impossible events; they are not purely non-realistic narratives, but anti-realistic narratives” [8]. In other words, the narratives explored in Unnatural Narratology violate this statute of mimesis by offering apparently impossible events. They no longer mimic or reproduce reality but explore the relationship between narrative and reality more complexly and profoundly. As Qiao [9] puts it, it emphasizes the narrative’s experimental, extreme, transgressive, and non-statutory nature, providing new perspectives and methods for understanding complex and varied narrative texts. David Mamet’s plays are known for their sharp social criticism, tight narrative structure and subtle use of language. He skillfully employs unnatural techniques that break through conventional narratives, breaking the boundaries between reality and fiction, challenging the audience’s cognitive habits, and triggering profound reflection and resonance. Applying the unnatural narrative theory to the study of David Mamet’s plays can explore his unique artistic charms and further expand the boundaries of our perception of the possibilities of dramatic narrative. Therefore, this study aims to take three dramatic works, *American Buffalo*, *The Woods*, and *Boston Marriage*, as samples and, through an in-depth analysis of the unnatural narrative features in David Mamet’s plays, explore how he employs these features to construct the dramatic world, portray the characters, and convey the thematic ideas, and in turn, to reveal their artistic value and social significance.

2. Unnaturalness of Characterization

The significance of narrative lies in refining and conveying a story’s core values and deep emotions in a simple yet tense way, and capturing the key elements that drive the story forward. On this basis, unnatural narratives stand out with their unique perspectives and techniques, which show extraordinary advantages in certain situations, and bring unprecedented experiences and deep thoughts to the audience by breaking the conventional narrative logic and reality framework. Richardson emphasizes that the scope of research in unnatural narratology should go beyond the boundaries of fiction and hyperfiction and delve deeper into exploring the phenomenon of unnatural narratives in other literary genres to contribute to their interdisciplinary development and impact [8]. A play is a literary genre, a form of literary expression that presents the plot and characters of a literary work through stage dialogue, action, and set design. David Mamet’s play, *The Woods*, is unlike any other work in the genre and has received polarizing reviews. Those who speak highly of the play claimed that the “plot was properly presented and tense, and the play even ended with the feeling that one’s hair was standing on end” [10]. On the other hand, Critics found that the play’s “verbal expression bordered on the level of a banal and absurd soap opera” [10]. The play skillfully focuses on the characters of Ruth and Nick, and Mamet masterfully captures the dialog between them. In the opening scene, she describes, “These gulls are parked over there, and one has to be alone. He didn’t want the other gulls to be with him. If the other gulls flew over, he flapped his wings and chased them away. He only lets this partner stop there for a while.” Upon hearing such a detailed description from Ruth, Nick responded gently, “And then what happened?” [12] verbal indifference makes one feel that this should not be an exchange between a pair of lovers. In this play, the dialogues between the characters are characterized by an “unconventional” narrative structure and “unconventional” communication and interaction, and the narrative content is

presented as an “impossible” story world. In terms of narrative content, it presents an “impossible” story world.

Characters are the pullers of plot development and the core makers of plot tension. Through their actions and choices, they constantly reveal the light and darkness of human nature and ultimately lead the story to an unexpected and reasonable ending. The plot’s direction in unnatural narratives often exceeds the reader’s conventional expectations. However, when examined in detail, these “unexpected” endings can always be closely linked to the characters’ personalities and the logic of their behaviors, which are “reasonable”. From the perspective of unnatural narratives, “there is a certain degree of unnatural emotions, i.e., physically, logically, and humanly impossible emotions, in those pioneering, antimimimodal narratives” [13]. “Unnatural” is relative to the ‘natural emotions’ we experience in our daily lives. The application of unnatural narrative in theater creation breaks traditional narrative boundaries, explores novel emotional expression and story structure, and brings the audience a unique aesthetic experience and profound thinking. In this work, as a couple, Nick and Ruth always have an unusual reaction when facing the natural outpouring of emotions. Whenever Ruth passionately tells Nick about birds’ chirping, Nick always says lightly, “I think crickets squeak too” [12]. As people live in a network of social relations, communication plays a vital role in the relationship between people, which lies in the inherent social nature of human beings—a nature that makes the close connection between individuals and society inevitable. People have social attributes that tightly bind their existence and development to the fabric of society. However, judging from the communication between them, even if they are friends in the ordinary sense, this kind of communication is very likely to break a friendship, and it is even more unbelievable that such communication happens between lovers. In other words, this kind of communication and relationship between Ruth and Nick has a degree of unnatural emotion.

Moreover, as a regular human emotional need, love should flow naturally from the subject. In addition to the episode already presented, Nick shows no genuine concern for his lover or others, except for the two sexual demands he makes on Ruth. His words and actions give the impression that he is indifferent to everything around him except for his eagerness for immediate sex, and he is unwilling to communicate with his closest partner, which is “logically” impossible or unnatural in the characterization, since “in love, there are no real enemies, only two individuals with absolute differences; through encounter, declaration, and loyalty, they ultimately transform these infinite differences into a creative existence” [14]. However, the “love” between Ruth and Nick in the play seems to present an unusual relationship. The characterization in *The Woods* shows the “impossibility” and “unconventionality” of the relationship between the lovers. These unnatural characteristics provoke the audience to think deeply and resonate with them. However, it is worth noting that this kind of unnatural characterization is not unique to *The Woods*, as Mamet’s unnatural characterization has been present in many of his works throughout his creative career. In Mamet’s writing, the characters are no longer straightforward binary oppositions of good and evil. However, they are full of gray areas of human nature, and their behaviors are often influenced by multiple factors such as the environment, social pressures, and personal desires, demonstrating a non-natural, non-linear development trajectory.

3. Unnaturalness of the Plot Setting

Plotting plays an important role in building the story framework, promoting the development of the plot, and profoundly revealing the characters and thematic ideas in the drama. Adding unnatural features such as “anti-imitation” and “anti-statute” to the plot not only breaks the constraints of traditional narrative and explores novel narrative modes but also profoundly explores the complexity of the characters’ hearts and the diversity of their emotions, thus

broadening the audience's cognitive boundaries of the real world and stimulating them to think deeply about human nature, society, and the nature of existence, which will broaden the audience's cognitive boundaries of the real world and inspire them to think deeply about human nature, society and the nature of existence. Alber points to unnatural narratives in literature as an expansion of the dimensions of human thinking and cognitive horizons that 'challenge our limited view of the world and invite us to address issues that might otherwise go unnoticed' [15]. In traditional narratives, we are often accustomed to accepting stories and plots that conform to the laws of physics, logical reasonableness, and the realm of human experience. However, unnatural narratives dare to cross these boundaries and create spaces that transcend reality, logic, and even the realm of human cognition. Mamet's dramatic works often adopt a non-linear narrative structure, breaking the narrative framework of traditional drama through plot interruptions, repetitions, and flashbacks. As one of his representative works, *Boston Marriage* challenges traditional concepts with its dramatic plot, focuses on women's emotions and independence, provokes social and cultural reflection and revelation, and demonstrates the charm of artistic innovation. In the play, Anna and Claire are a pair of homosexuals, and their differences gradually unfold since the beginning of the play, ending in an embarrassing conclusion in the ups and downs of the plot.

In this play, the "unnatural" presentation of Anna and Claire as a homosexual couple, their relationship, and their communication with each other makes the reader think about the relationship beyond ethics. For example, Anna repeatedly declares that the purpose of her new relationship is to get money from it in order to support her lover, Claire, who is in financial straits. She tells Claire: "The money I get from the new relationship is enough for you and me to live comfortably," and shows a certain degree of sadness when Claire disapproves of what she is doing [16], thus we can see that the relationship between the two people and the relationship between them is intricate and "unnatural". *Boston Marriage* is "a reflection on the marriage relationship, the compromises between partners, the needs of each, and the sacrifices each is willing to make" [17]. While marriage is traditionally viewed as a contract between a man and a woman in the social structure of society, *Boston Marriage* disrupts this established norm by describing intimate relationships between women or between non-traditional partners. *Boston Marriage* is often interpreted as a challenge to gender roles and the institution of marriage in the society of the time. The setting itself is unnatural in that it defies the generally accepted notions of gender and marriage at the time and is characterized as "anti-parody." For Nielsen, "unnatural narratology is not a hermeneutic but a position that challenges other views. It rejects the general assumption that all narratives work 'naturally' and the a priori position that readers always interpret texts by this assumption" [18]. The unnaturalness of the plotting is intentional on the author's part. He deliberately cuts off the plot's progress to allow the reader to reflect on the issues of love that the play reflects. The plot's setting's unnaturalness contrasts with the work's natural narrative.

In a narrative framework transcending conventional logic, the core storytelling constructs--time, space, the flow of events, and character identities--are imbued with remarkable turbulence and unpredictability. "The basic method for non-natural narratologists to construct a poetics of non-natural narratives is to carry out a theoretical exploration centering on the two basic issues of "discourse form" and "interpretive path" of non-natural narratives" [19] through the systematic analysis of the unique language patterns, structural arrangements and narrative techniques in unnatural narratives, and it can help readers cross the boundaries of conventional narratives, and dig deeper into the deeper meanings and complex emotions behind unnatural texts. "Time, plot, and narrator constitute the three core propositions of unnatural narratology" [19], and in *Boston Marriage*, the plotting aspect presents a mind-boggling unnaturalness. It is mainly manifested in the fact that Anna and her lover, Claire, will argue about several issues. However, the fireworks are powerful, and the servant always

appears to interrupt their conversation and block the development of the plot [12]. As a servant, it would be understandable if she interrupted her master's conversation by chance; however, her presence at each conflict is irreconcilable, giving an "unnatural" character to the plot's development. "In natural or statute narratives, beginnings and endings are important in marking out the story's scope, providing a framework for the story, introducing the storyline, and resolving uncertainty" [20]. However, non-plot settings can move the story forward to a certain degree and add depth. Not only in *Boston Marriage* in the advancement of the plot, but also in many other plays of Mamet, the author deliberately arranges several plots ups and downs and twists and turns, forcing the audience to temporarily leave the established narrative track to re-examine and rethink the plot and characters they have seen before, and inadvertently deepening the audience's understanding of the complexity of the plot.

4. Unnaturalness of Process Transitions

The process of transitions is a key node in the storyline. It plays a crucial role in the story's development, which not only promotes the evolution of the plot but also profoundly affects the growth of the characters, the audience's emotional investment, and the deepening of the story's theme. With its unique perspective, profound theme, and superb artistry, *American Buffalo* has won widespread acclaim and recognition, fully demonstrating Mamet's creative talent and potential and establishing an important position for him in the American theater world. Those who like the play claim that *American Buffalo* is a profound critique of the moral decay of American society and that the grocery store is a reference to the United States: "The grocery store is a pile of cultural products that were once valuable but are now being thrown away. The grocery store is a symbol of the United States, whose sense of nationhood and language have been deeply affected by an ethical slippage that has made traditional values insignificant compared to the current sense of entitlement and greed" [21]. It has also been portrayed by some critics as "a world of criminals full of obscenities, with vivid but meaningless dialogues" and "many limitations of plot and language" [22]. Mamet is an outstanding writer with deep moral concern and social responsibility, who once wrote: "Ethics is not only the first principle of literary creation but also of human behavior and human interaction, requiring writers to be honest, ethical, and at the same time interesting and touching" [23]. Therefore, the "simple" plot and the "vulgar" dialogues play an important role in driving the story forward, but they are the playwright's ingenious arrangement as a clever vehicle for exploring the business ethics and its philosophical implications in the play. The dialogues play an important role in driving the story forward.

In this play, the escalating interests might appear to disrupt the sequence of the story's progression. However, from the perspective of unnatural narrative, the emergence of "anti-mimicry" or "impossible" events is precisely the method to guide the narrative into an innovative form of expression, transcending the traditional mode of mimicry in a perpetually evolving process. The emergence of "anti-parody" or "impossible" events leads the narrative into an innovative expression that transcends the traditional parody mode in continuous transformation. In *The Unnatural Narrative Voice*, Brian Richardson states that, "like contemporary fiction, contemporary theatre has long since moved beyond simple, humanized narrators to create unnatural narrators who transcend and subvert the boundaries of individual consciousness" [24]. Contemporary drama in narrative art is no longer satisfied with the traditional narrative mode but creates unnatural narrative forms to transcend and subvert the boundaries of individual consciousness to open up a broader and deeper narrative space and field of meaning. In exploring the unnatural process transitions and turns in the drama *American Buffalo*, we mainly analyze them from multiple dimensions, such as plot development, character behavior, and narrative techniques. The "grocery store" in the play cannot be

regarded as a real shopping mall. The owner, Donnie, is far from a real businessman in his ability to strategize, and his financial power is not comparable to that of an honest businessman; he is just a bottom-feeder who sells old things and plays cards for fun. *American Buffalo's* plot revolves around the three main characters: Donny, Teach, and Bobby. At the the story's beginning, the three share common interests and goals. However, as the the deal's complexity increases, Don begins to wonder if Teach is sincere in his cooperation, and this crisis of trust sets the stage for the ensuing conflict. "Teach forcefully alters the pattern of friendship and trust that had existed at the grocery store, and he succeeds in convincing Donnie to sever his bond with Bob during the upcoming robbery" [25]. The story's plot development is full of uncertainty due to the increasing crisis of trust and conflict of interest between the characters. Moreover, in the telling of the story, "the narrator is both fully self-conscious of his or her own identity and masks it, crossing the boundaries of a narrative voice" while also "alienating the narrative act, making the individual reader highly attracted to the protagonist in a different direction" [26], as reflected in *American Buffalo*, where the characters' behavior is often not bound by conventional logic. While Teach's performance in the play can be summarized as self-aggrandizing and tongue-in-cheek, he always declares, "I never do anything behind someone is back" [27]. However, on the level of process transformation, he completely deviates from his self-promotion every time he self-promotes. If this incomprehensible practice of Teach's is only once or occasionally a few times, he repeats the pattern almost every time he appears. Moreover, the other characters openly accept what he does. One could say that the level of tolerance he receives from the other characters feels unnatural, and his words and subsequent behavioral shifts are also highly "unnatural." In the drama of natural narrative, "a type of narrative that can circle back to the beginning, that is, where the last sentence of the work becomes the first sentence again, and so on for eternity, there is no end to this type of story" [28]. However, in the work *American Buffalo*, with the recurring process twists and turns, the audience can not accurately predict what will happen next accurately, and this uncertainty breaks the traditional pattern of narrative progression, making the story more compelling and more unnatural. In Mamet's work, the unnatural narrative is not limited to an isolated phenomenon in a single work. However, it is one of the central features that runs through several of his works. These works often construct a narrative space that transcends the logic of reality through the non-linear time structure, the interweaving of multiple narrative perspectives, and the non-realistic portrayal of characters' inner worlds.

5. Conclusion

After deeply analyzing the unnatural narrative features in David Mamet's plays *The Woods*, *Boston Marriage*, and *American Buffalo*, it can be found that his theatrical works are a profound reflection on the real society and a bold challenge and reconstruction of the traditional narrative techniques. With his unique perspective and skillful technique, Mamet constructs an unnatural narrative space full of tension and contradiction, leading the audience into a familiar and unfamiliar world. These characters are not only the condensation and distillation of social phenomena, but also the excavation and exploration of the depths of human nature. Through the unnatural character settings, Mamet successfully breaks the boundaries of traditional narratives, allowing the audience to feel constantly surprised during the viewing process. In addition, Mamet's play also shows the unique charm of unnatural narrative in its plot setting. He skillfully uses plot jumps and interludes to break the rules of the real world and builds a narrative plot full of surprises and challenges. These unnatural plot settings not only enhance the drama of the work but also make the audience realize "anti-imitation" and "impossibility" while enjoying the work. The twists and turns in the story's progression are also full of unnatural narrative elements. He is good at using accidents and coincidences to push the

development of the plot, making the whole story full of uncertainty and openness. This non-linear narrative not only breaks the singularity and certainty of the traditional narrative but also allows the audience to gain more imagination and a thinking dimension while participating in the plot. David Mamet's plays are unique in the theater field with their unique unnatural narrative characteristics. Through unnatural characters, plot settings and process twists and turns, he has successfully constructed a narrative space full of tension and contradictions, leading the audience to think about the complexity of human nature and social changes in the process of viewing. Using this unnatural narrative technique not only enriches the expression and aesthetic experience of the play but also provides us with new perspectives and ideas to understand and explore the real world.

Acknowledgements

A phrase achievement of the 2021 General Project of Fujian Provincial Social Science Fund: "Unnatural Narrative Strategies in David Mamet's Plays" (FJ2021B095).

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