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## Compulsive Story Telling: Evasive Strategies in David Mamet's *The Duck Variations*

### **Abstract**

*Organized around fourteen variations, this one act play by Mamet discusses the themes of loss, decline and death. Being the victims of a highly competitive social order, two old men realize their own irrelevance. They engage in deliberate fiction making to fill the void in their lives. The paper analyses how story telling becomes the central strategy of the playwright.*

**D**avid Mamet is often acknowledged as one of the most productive and successful American playwrights of the post second World War era. Writing with a sense of commitment and social purpose, these playwrights who have been labeled as 'post absurdists' chose as their targets for criticism, the contemporary American situation itself characterized by the failure to communicate effectively and sincerely and the accompanying feelings of alienation, disorientation, and fragmentation.

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Written in 1971, Mamet's play *The Duck Variations* focuses on two old men who regularly occupy a bench in a park on the edge of a big city on a lake. They slowly develop an odd and reluctant friendship and the play becomes a discourse on old age and its accompanying psychological dilemmas. Mamet elucidates the social, cultural and individual experiences of ageing in this play. He has remarked that "the idea of writing the play came from listening to a lot of old Jewish men, particularly my grandfather." (qtd in Bigsby, 26)

The ageing figures George and Emil maintain a constant and apparently meaningless chatter in order to avoid the silence they fear. Their only resource lies in conversation, in the world as they recreate it. Bigsby aptly points out:

"Mamet's world is peopled by individuals who are for the most part baffled and disturbed, aware of a need which they can hardly articulate or satisfy. They elaborate fantasies, create pilots, devise scenarios or simply exchange rumour and speculation."  
(22)

This one-act play neatly organized around fourteen variations on the theme of loss, decline and death reveals Mamet in his most poignant mood. The two oldsters talk about whatever that comes to their heads in short crispy fragments. A glimpse of the boat in the lake inspires them to speculate about who is on board, the sight of the duck triggers an ongoing discussion on the bird's life cycle, its relationship to predators such as the Blue Heron and even the differences between ducks and pigeons. Mamet is here expressing through the mouth of his characters the principle of Social Darwinism or the survival of the fittest that operates in the life of the ducks. This is equally relevant to the life of human beings.

George : They got a leader. A lead duck. He starts...he's a duck. But he stays with the pack. Many times. He comes, he goes. He learns the route.

Emil : All this time there is another lead duck.

George : Of course. But, he goes, he lives, may be he finds a mate...

Emil : Yes

George : And he waits... The lead duck... Who knows?

Emil : He dies.

George : One day, yes. He dies. He gets lost...

Emil : And our duck moves up.

George : He is now the leader. It is he who guides them from one home to the next... Each of them has it in him to know when the time is to move... But he... He will be in charge until...

Emil : It happened to him, it's got to happen to him.