**“David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* can be seen to conform to Aristotelian tragedy more than Euripides’ *Orestes*.” Discuss.**

The assumption that there is no difference between a ‘tragic’ play and a play conforming to the genre of tragedy can easily be made; however, the difference is substantial. Tragedy can be defined as a “lamentable, dreadful or fatal event or affair; calamity disaster”, whereas a tragic play is defined as containing “characteristics of a tragedy.”(Dictionary.com) My argument will involve the comparison of *Orestes* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, concerning their relevance to Aristotle, an Ancient Greek philosopher whose blueprint for Attic tragedy involved the concepts of hubris and catharsis among others. My thesis is that for a twenty-first century reader and audience, *Glengarry Glen Ross*can be considered more of a tragedy than *Orestes*, as the play adheres tothe values of Aristotelian tragedy more closely. Despite belonging to the history of tragedy, Euripides’ *Orestes*explores fewer elements of Aristotelian tragedy, demonstrating the variety of Attic tragedy in the fifth century and the limits of Aristotle’s theory. Ultimately, both texts subvert the conventions of Aristotelian tragedy to a certain extent, as the prevalence of Aristotle’s ideas about tragedy isscarce in both *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Orestes*.

The study of the philosopher Aristotle led to Renaissance scholars inferring from his *Poetics* that Attic tragedy should consist of the Three Unities. The Unity of time: a tragedy should occur within a time period of twenty-four hours. The Unity of place: a tragedy should occur in a single location. The Unity of action: a tragedy should follow one clear plot. In what follows I will focus on the unities of time and place, before moving onto a consideration of tragic protagonists.

The structural unity of time evident in *Orestes* is representative of an Aristotelian Attic tragedy as *Orestes* is constructed in real time. The decay of power, nobility and greatness into chaos demonstrates a unity of time as the play’s last moments are dramatic due to revenge, chaos and madness occurring in a short time period, with Apollo being the only solution to the problem, which heightens the drama of the play.

Similarly, *Glengarry Glen Ross* also adheres to the structural unity of time as there are subtle time references throughout Act Two that suggest the events take place in less than twenty-four hours. Williamson’s repeated order “Go to lunch”(Mamet 2004, 52) indicates the time of day in this play; however such references can be easily missed. As the play progresses, there are more time references with Shelly Levene noting “it ain’t even noon”(Mamet 2004, 44), evidently expressing a linear time pattern. However, mystery is created in Act One as it is unclear whether the unity of time entirely conforms to Aristotelian ideals; a question of whether the three conversations between Williamson and Levene, Moss and Aaronow, and Roma and Lingk are occurring sequentially or simultaneously can be raised, as there are no indications towards a shift in time. An interpretation of this could be that all conversations are occurring simultaneously, although each conversation is separate from the other which is symbolic of the play’s theme of social fragmentation; the characters’ lives overlap as the workplace forces them together. There is a sense of coexistence without community in this cut-throat business.

As far as the unity of place is concerned, *Orestes* seems typical, as it is set entirely in the palace at Argos, essentially providing the play with a social class divide. Typically, Attic tragedies were staged on the palace steps, at the boundary between institutional power and the polis.However,*Orestes* is unusual because it is set inside the palace with Orestes lying down in a weak, fatigued state, gripped by a “cruel wasting disease” (Euripides, 2), conveying that the palace, the heart of the city, is where corruption lies. Contrarily, *Glengarry Glen Ross* can be considered as less of an Aristotelian tragedy as the play’s events occur in two locations: the “real estate office” (Mamet 2004, 27)and a “booth at a Chinese restaurant.”(Mamet 2004, 1), which encapsulates consumerism and speed, which shape the men’s lives and are characteristic of the post-World War Two epoch. However, the play’s plot can be seen conforming to the Three Unities as the two settings intertwine with each other, which is evident through Roma’s sell to Lingk, starting in the restaurant and finishing in the office. This demonstrates the breakdown of societal divisions of public and private, work and leisure, as the characters’ business takes place in both locations: wherever the characters are, they are “at work.”

In Arthur Miller’s sense, the “noble standing” expected of a typical Aristotelian protagonist “no longer raises our passions” in comparison to a fifth century audience, failing to resonate with modern audiences as Miller states “in this day and age few tragedies are written” which is a justification for Mamet not complying with Aristotelian ideals. However, Shelly Levene can be identified as a tragic hero as “the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were”. Levene adheres to Miller’s “common man” who is “ready to lay down his life” and “battle to secure his rightful place in the world”. (Miller 1949, 1-2).

Levene deteriorates as the play progresses as he contemplates “rob[bing] the place”(Mamet 2004, 22). He is representative of the struggle of the economic crisis that occurred in the 1970s where the “inflation rate soared” (Moss 2000, 497), suggesting that he once lived up to his title as ‘The Machine’, despite the economic backdrop of this play.The audience is able to see the contrast between “Shelly ‘The Machine’ Levene”(Mamet 2004, 35) of the 1970s to the disempowered Shelly Levene the audience is met with. Levene’s downfall allows him to be viewed as the main protagonist as he begins and ends a weakened man. One interpretation of ‘The Machine’ is that Levene’s old age and experience demonstrates his failure within the business as he now pleads for Williamson to “give me the lead”( Mamet 2004, 9). The company no longer has any use for him, leading to his self-destruction.

Another interpretation is that part of the tragedy stems from Levene seeming most powerful when he is least human; he rejuvenates and becomes ‘The Machine’. This is supported by the violent language of “It was fucking great” (Mamet 2004, 42), following what he thinks is an important sale. This demonstrates Levene’s sense of euphoria as he relishes in the “solemn”(Mamet 2004, 42) sale. Shelly is least human and least sympathetic, becoming most powerful and animalistic when he is in the office; that is when he is ‘The Machine’. This is evidently seen when Levene celebrates his sale using the language of war and defeat with “locked in on them”, “wilted” and “slumped”(Mamet 2004, 42) showing Levene celebrating the conquering of other humans. Levene’s brief return as ‘The Machine’ conveys that his hubris is emerging from his growing confidence. This is potentially Mamet’s purpose of heightening the tragedy of Shelly Levene’s downfall.

Euripides presents Orestes as an unstable, diminished character, much like Shelly Levene. Euripides capitalises on physicality as Orestes is in a fatigued state, laying “headlong from his couch”(Euripides, 2), with the use of levels indicating that Orestes is below the other characters. He is driven to “transports of madness” (Euripides, 10) where he transitions from states of “frenzy” to “fancy” (Euripides, 9). The transition made between these two contrary states heightens Orestes’ sense of deliriousness, as he experiences mad visions that are invisible to the audience. The emphasis on “fancy” reminds the audience that Orestes is an unreliable character as he sees things that other characters and the audience do not (unlike in Aeschylus’ version where we are exposed to the Furies, and Clytemnestra’s ghost, so Orestes can be trusted). The language of this is not typically Aristotelian and is not expected of an Attic protagonist. By the play’s end, Orestes develops a sense of righteousness “I should not grow tired if I had these wicked women to slay forever”(Euripides, 20), conveying a lack of remorse of the matricide; with “forever” showing Orestes’ extended arrogance and his failure to embrace his residing guilt. Orestes’ transition from guilt-ridden to righteous violence suggests that he is not a character to be admired; a question can be raised whether his actions in the play are just. The contrast between the play’s beginning and end is evident as Orestes is positioned “from the roof”(Euripides, 19) where he is physically above Menelaus, suggesting he has gained all power and is of more authority inside the palace. The location of Orestes inside the palace suggests that Euripides is providing a political critique of Ancient Greek society: we can read the play as an allegory of political chaos and corruption. At this time, the fall of Athens was becoming inevitable, and it was increasingly vulnerable towards the end of Euripides’ life; Athens didn’t fall to Sparta until shortly after Euripides’ death, suggesting that disarray was inescapable.

The power dynamics in this play is evident in the questionable fallibility of the gods. “Tis’ Loxias I blame” (Euripides, 10) explicitly tells the reader that Orestes views Apollo as being culpable for Clytemnestra’s death. The cruelty and fallibility of Apollo in this play is evident when he admits “for the gods by means of Helen’s loveliness embroiled Troy and Hellas, causing death thereby” (Euripides, 23) showing that the gods were responsible for the Trojan wars. (This will be echoed in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: “as flies to the wanton schoolboys are we to th’ gods…They kill us for their sport [Shakespeare, scene 1]). Here, Euripides (unlike Aeschylus) presents the gods as fallible, perhaps suggesting that all figures of authority and power are morally questionable or flawed. This is perhaps an indication of Euripides’ anger being directed at the political leaders who failed to protect Athens during the time of the Peloponnesian War, where mayhem ensued.

Catharsis is the audience’s sense of relief from strong or repressed emotions which Aristotle believed should be a result of a tragedy’s ending, leaving audiences spiritually enriched. There is a strong sense of catharsis in *Glengarry Glen Ross* for a modern audience, more so than in *Orestes* as we can identify far more easily with *Glengarry Glen Ross*because the economic situation of the late 1970s and early 1980s resonates with a post-2008 society. This provides audiences with a sense of familiarity as the economic crisis of 2008, meant “a future postponed” and still has a lasting effect on the economy as unemployment remains “stubbornly high” (United States Unemployment Rate) in America.

Catharsis is produced at the play’s ending as the “the door is slammed”(Mamet 2004, 65),a reflection of Levene’s symbolic death. Levene’s symbolic death is emphasised when Roma states “what am I going to do this month?”(Mamet 2004, 31) which implies that a low income is not a problem for Roma and is only temporary, conveying that Roma has a chance of success. However, the same cannot be said for Levene as there is a possibility of his literal death as Shelly will likely struggle to find a new job due to his old age. This also connotes that Levene will be unable to provide for the “daughter” he mentions pleadingly to Williamson (Mamet 2004, 8), allowing audiences to feel a sense of pathos for his doomed character, as it can be interpreted that Levene’s dependents will also be affected by his symbolic demise.

By contrast, audiences today are unlikely to experience catharsis when watching Euripides’ *Orestes*,as a twenty-first century reader and audience cannot identify with the ideologies present in this tragedy. The play symbolises the madness and chaos of war; to understand this it has to be read against the later years of the Peloponnesian War, when Athens was much weakened.There is a possibility that Euripides didn’t want the audience to feel purified as the last moments in *Orestes*demonstrate the corruption of society as Orestes is redeemed by divine intervention for the matricide. But we are very distant from this history, so when Apollo puts a stop to the madness and assures Orestes of a happy future, a twenty-first century audience is unlikely to experience the catharsis that Shelly Levene’s story arouses.

To conclude, David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*can be read as more of an Aristotelian tragedy than Euripides *Orestes*by adhering to certain Aristotelian values more closely such as the Three Unities. The protagonists of both texts can be defined as ‘tragic’ without fully conforming to tragedy as in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Shelly Levene lacks the nobility that Orestes has and is more closely linked to Arthur Miller’s “common man”. However,Levene can be seen as a complex Aristotelian character due to his downfall, whereas Orestes subverts this convention through the peripeteia of the play, defining him as a justified man. Essentially, both texts defy Aristotelian conventions to some extent, but *Glengarry Glen Ross* adheres to them more so than *Orestes*.

Word count: 2,128

Works Cited:

Mamet, D. (2004). *Glengarry Glen Ross.* London: Bloomsbury.

Euripides (408 BCE).*Orestes.*Athens.

Miller, A. (1949). “Tragedy and the Common Man.”

Moss, G. (2000).“Economic and Energy Woes.”*America in the Twentieth Century.* New Jersey: Prentice Wall.

 Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tragedy>

“United States Unemployment Rate”<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/united-states/unemployment-rate>

Shakespeare, W. (1608). “King Lear.” *The Heath* [online]. [http://shakespeare.mit.edu/lear/lear.4.1.html. Retrieved 03/01/16](http://shakespeare.mit.edu/lear/lear.4.1.html.%20Retrieved%2003/01/16).

<http://olibelas.weebly.com/year-13-tragedy.html>