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ABSENT CHARACTERS AS PROXIMATE CAUSE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY  
AMERICAN DRAMA

by

SARAH EMILY MORROW

Under the Direction of Matthew C. Roudané

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the status of a specific subset of absent characters within twentieth century American drama. By borrowing the term “proximate cause” from tort law and illuminating its intricacies through David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, this thesis re-appropriates proximate cause for literary studies. Rather than focus on characters whose existence remains the subject of critical debate, this set of absent characters presumably exists but never appear onstage. Despite their non-appearance onstage, however, these absent characters nonetheless have a profound effect upon the action that occurs during their respective plays. Highlighting the various ways in which these characters serve as the proximate cause for the onstage action of a given play will expand the realm of drama and literary studies in myriad ways.

INDEX WORDS: Abstract, Absent characters, American drama, Susan Glaspell, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, David Hume, David Mamet, Clifford Odets, Proximate cause, *Treatise of Human Nature*, *Trifles*, Tort law, Thesis, *Waiting for Lefty*

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AMERICAN DRAMA

by

SARAH EMILY MORROW

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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Sarah Emily Morrow  
2009

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AMERICAN DRAMA

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May 2009

## DEDICATION

To Dr. Rita Felski, who told me that I wasn't cut out for graduate school; and to my friends and family, who never believed her.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

American drama is consumed with loss. It can be argued, too, that American drama is consumed with absence. From its beginnings, American drama has concerned itself as much with what does not appear onstage as with what the audience sees. Despite this pervasive “presence of absence,” though, the phenomenon of absence’s effects in American drama remains relatively unexplored. While a handful of unseen characters have received critical attention thus far, contemporary scholarship fails to address the prevalence of American drama’s absent characters. As a remedy to this oversight, this thesis will discuss the absent characters in a handful of key plays: Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*; Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty*; and David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Using these plays, I hope to illuminate the ways in which absent characters drive onstage action in twentieth century American drama.

Extant drama scholarship pays some attention to absent characters in American drama; however, this treatment often proves cursory and peripheral to more central themes in these plays. Christopher Bigsby and Matthew Roudané, for example, occasionally mention absent characters in their work on American drama, but their focus tends to remain on the conflict between prominent public issues in American culture and the way these issues play out in the private tensions of American drama’s characters. Consequently, a character like Lefty Costello and his absence from the onstage action in *Waiting for Lefty* remains ignored in favor of a discussion of the “authenticity of [the play’s] dialogue” as evidence of the “more subtle interplay of private and public worlds” at work (Bigsby, *Critical Introduction* 201). Even scholars who directly address characters’ absence fail to notice the impact of this absence on a given play’s

onstage action. Linda Ben-Zvi and Susan Abbotson represent two such scholars. In their attempts to address Minnie Wright's absence in *Trifles*, they reduce her to "her condition [...] shared by other women who can be imagined in the empty subject position" and "a symbol of all women trapped in loveless marriages" (Ben-Zvi 35; Abbotson, *Thematic Guide* 262). Meanwhile, scholars such as Philip C. Kolin fall into a similar trap when treating *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Even though the absent Mitch and Murray remain the sole subject of his critical work, Kolin refuses to acknowledge the significance of these characters' absence save for a passing comment that they "are responsible for many of the situations in the play [but] never step foot on stage" (3). All of these scholars fail to acknowledge an absent character's vital importance to a play's structural integrity. In spite of their non-appearance onstage, absent characters nonetheless provide the impetus for the action that unfolds before the audience.

Although the topic remains relatively unexplored, absent characters in American drama often serve as the "proximate cause" for the action that occurs onstage. This study begins with an explanation of this term and the way it can be re-appropriated for literary studies. The term "proximate cause" does not originate in literary studies. Instead, this term comes from tort law. *Black's Law Dictionary* defines proximate cause as "a cause that directly produces an event and without which the event would not have occurred" (Garner 88). Proximate cause should not, however, be confused with physical proximity to events that occur. Instead, proximate cause provides the "'legal cause' of an accident or injury" (Buckley and Okrent 37). The key to understanding this concept lies in the foreseeability of injury as a result of one's actions; if the injury caused in a negligence case could have been reasonably foreseen as a result of a person's actions, then the person's actions become the proximate cause of the injury (Buckley and Okrent 37). To provide an example, albeit a simplistic one: a pedestrian steps into a busy intersection.

An oncoming car swerves to miss the pedestrian and in the process collides with another car in the next lane. One could reasonably foresee that the pedestrian's actions would have caused the automobile accident, since the first car would not have needed to swerve if the pedestrian had remained on the sidewalk. As such, the pedestrian's misstep is the proximate cause of the accident. Although discussion of proximate cause in tort law frequently highlights the tenuous nature of the concept, understanding the basic facets of this concept proves fruitful for broader examinations of causation.

The legal definition of proximate cause has relevance for other discussions of cause and effect. David Hume, although writing nearly two centuries prior to the publication of the plays discussed in this thesis, explores the relationship between cause and effect in his 1739 *A Treatise of Human Nature*. In this work, Hume reveals that the relationship between cause and effect hinges primarily, though not entirely, on the concepts of contiguity and priority: contiguity being the fact that cause and effect occur in approximately the same time and place; and priority referring to the conclusion that "cause always occurs prior to its effect," or that "effect always succeeds its cause" (Norton and Norton I28). Furthermore, Hume acknowledges the intricacies of causal reasoning, through which people can infer causes and effects for a given situation. Causal reasoning allows for the inference "either that some *no longer perceivable* cause (an earlier rain) has produced the effect now experienced (a thoroughly wet countryside), or that some now experienced cause (smoke in the kitchen) will produced a *not yet perceivable effect* (the shriek of the nearby smoke alarm)" (Norton and Norton I27). The unperceivable nature of some causes and effects leads one to question why "we not only infer absent causes and effects, but also believe in them" (Norton and Norton I27). This inference of absence, particularly of absent causes that will prove most useful for literary studies.

With Hume's exploration of cause and effect in mind, proximate cause aptly describes the manner in which this thesis will discuss absent characters in American drama. Despite the term's specificity to the legal profession, proximate cause accurately defines the way that characters who remain offstage nevertheless "produce events" onstage that would not have occurred had the characters appeared onstage. To use Hume's logic, these absent characters represent the "no longer perceivable cause" that produces the effect(s) seen by the audience. What the audience might not realize and what critics have thus far failed to discuss, though, is the fact that these absent characters *are* the causes—in fact, the proximate causes—for the onstage action. While the audience and the critics might infer this absence, the ways in which absent characters produce the effects or foreseeable injury seen onstage deserve attention and elaboration. Regardless of whether the foreseeable injury/onstage action comprises an individual episode within the action or the climax and denouement of the entire piece, the vital component of these scenarios lies in the absent character's (or characters') non-presence onstage. The very absence of these characters from the onstage action provides the stimulus for the events that occur onstage.

American drama's absent characters function as proximate cause in several different ways; subsequent chapters of this thesis will explore the myriad circumstances surrounding absent characters. Characters like Minnie and John Wright in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Lefty Costello in Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, and Mitch and Murray in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* offer unique examples of absent characters whose existence never comes into question. In *Trifles*, John Wright has died prior to the beginning of the play, and Minnie Wright sits in jail on suspicion of his murder. Neither of these characters appears onstage; however, the entire premise for the play would disappear if these characters were to appear.

Similarly, Lefty Costello remains offstage throughout Odets's play—hence the title *Waiting for Lefty*. If the characters who do appear onstage no longer need to wait for Lefty, though, then the play's central tension disappears. As the owners of the real estate agency in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mitch and Murray never make their presence known during the play. These men do, however, contrive the sales contest that consumes the onstage real estate agents. Without their contest or their absence, though, the visible men would have no reason to commit many of the acts that comprise the play's action.

Attempting to address all of the absent characters in American drama would require much more space than this study allows. Although not receiving explicit treatment here, several other types of absent characters nonetheless deserve critical attention elsewhere. While the plays examined in this thesis never have their existence questioned, others might not actually exist. For example, the absent son in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* could represent merely one of the myriad tools that George and Martha use as part of their mutual torture game; he could also actually exist, as Martha insists he does throughout the early acts of the play. In any event, the couple's continued discussion of their son and his allegedly pending appearance spin the play towards its climax. Along similar lines, Booth's girlfriend "amazing Grace" in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* might exist; however, given the brothers' penchant for deception and hustling, Booth's repeated comments about Grace provide yet more evidence for his struggle to impress his older brother Lincoln and to prove his superiority. In spite of the ambiguity regarding Grace's existence, Booth continues to prepare for their romantic dinner and plan their future together (however dubious). Regardless of whether or not these characters actually exist, however, their absence from the stage serves as the proximate cause for various

events within their respective plays—and as such prove themselves worthy of eventual critical attention along the lines of the study that will unfold here.

Having discussed the relationship between cause and effect, re-appropriated the term “proximate cause” for literary studies, and elucidated the ways in which absent characters function as proximate cause in American drama, this study strives to give critical attention to this vital component of America’s most provocative literary form. In all of the plays chosen for examination, the absent characters become the proximate cause for the action that occurs onstage; without them, all of these plays ultimately would lose their efficacy as dramatic works. The effects that result from the absence of certain characters propel these plays toward their conclusions. In addition, the fact that playwrights have used absent characters in this fashion throughout the last century suggests provocative courses of inquiry for future scholarship. The implications of this trend in terms of the American literary psyche could provide ample material for further study. If these implications are not explored in my own scholarly work, the hope remains that others will take notice of American drama’s absent characters as proximate cause and help construct the narrative they so richly deserve.

## CHAPTER 2

## “PROXIMATE CAUSE”: FOUNDATIONS AND RE-APPROPRIATIONS

Despite its potentially confusing nuances and its infrequency of usage outside of tort law, the concept of proximate cause pervades everyday life. Instances of proximate cause exist in any number of quotidian situations, even if what we tend to experience are its effects. But what is meant by the term “proximate cause”? How does this term have any relevance for literary/drama studies? In order to understand how absent characters function as proximate cause in twentieth-century American drama, a clear definition of the term itself and an explanation of its origins becomes necessary. Attempting to use a legal term to describe events in dramatic literature presents multiple difficulties, however; in light of these difficulties, finding a less jargonized explanation of cause and effect can supplement the initial definition of “proximate cause” and aid the transition from legal to literary studies. The following chapter, therefore, will elucidate the legal definition of proximate cause before attempting to re-appropriate the term for literary studies. This re-appropriation will use David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* as a means of discussing cause and effect within a non-legal framework and as a stepping-stone towards the realm of literary studies. In Hume’s own words, “’tis impossible perfectly to understand any idea, without tracing it up to its origin, and examining that primary impression, from which [it] arises” (1.3.2.4)<sup>1</sup>. Ultimately, a new, relevant concept should appear that will illuminate the readings of the plays discussed in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> References to Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* are given by book, part, section, and paragraph number throughout the remainder of this thesis.

## Proximate Cause in Tort Law

The concept of proximate cause re-appropriated for this thesis finds its origins in tort law negligence cases. Tort law comprises civil (as opposed to criminal) wrongs committed against persons that result in harm done to one or more of the involved parties. Of the several broad categories of committable torts, negligence and its various components comprise some of the most complex concepts within this area of legal studies. This complexity arises from the fact that “negligence resembles probability theory, in which specific conduct is more likely than not to be considered negligent under a particular set of circumstances” (Buckley and Okrent 18). Thus, rather than dealing with concrete concepts that remain immutable from one situation to another, negligence dwells on the likelihood of various consequences given a particular set of circumstances. Negligence, in a very real way, is a “case-by-case” area of tort law. Moreover, negligent behavior may consist of either acts or omissions that result in injury to another party. That negligent behavior may consist of an omission—in other words, something *not* present or immediately noticeably to an observer—bears significance here. Just as an omission may have profound, visible consequences in some negligence cases, so do some characters who appear omitted from plays nevertheless manage to affect the action that occurs. A fuller explanation of this phenomenon follows later in this chapter.

Negligence cases contain four elements, all of which are required for negligence to exist: duty of care; breach of the duty; causation of injury to the victim; and damages to the victim (Buckley and Okrent 19). The third of these elements, causation of injury to the victim, provides the theatre inhabited by proximate cause. In its most basic manifestation, causation requires that the “defendant’s misconduct produce[s] the plaintiff’s injuries,” a phenomenon also known as “causation in fact” (Buckley and Okrent 31). The legal encyclopedia *American Jurisprudence 2d*



elaborates on the concept of causation in negligence cases, explaining that “liability for negligence is predicated upon a *causal connection* between the negligence alleged as the wrong and the injury of which complaint is made, and the common law refers the injury to the *proximate*, not the remote, cause” (qtd. in Buckley and Okrent 35, emphasis added). This passage continues, establishing that “‘causation in fact’ is regarded as an aspect of ‘proximate cause’ [...] the term ‘proximate cause’ [is] descriptive of the actual ‘cause in fact’ relation which must exist between a defendant’s conduct and a plaintiff’s injury before there may be liability” (qtd. in Buckley and Okrent 35). Neither selection refines the definition of proximate cause, however, once establishing that the term somehow corresponds to the basic premise that the injuries evident in negligence cases must have a cause. As such, searches elsewhere may reveal the nuances of proximate cause.

*Black’s Law Dictionary* offers two definitions for proximate cause, as “a cause that is legally sufficient to result in liability” or as “a cause that directly produces an event and without which the event would not have occurred” (Garner 88). Buckley and Okrent emphasize that proximate cause offers “a legal, not a physical concept,” further explaining that “the proximate cause of an injury is not necessarily the closest thing in time or space to the injury and not necessarily the event that set things in motion” (513). Rather, the vital component to proximate cause lies in what some consider the “zone within which the plaintiff’s injury was reasonably foreseeable as a consequence of the defendant’s behavior” (Buckley and Okrent 37).

Foreseeability, then, bears significance for proximate cause. Hart and Honoré echo the importance of foreseeability when determining proximate cause:

It is true that courts appear to take seriously, as raising causal issues, such further questions as whether the defendant’s conduct was the ‘proximate cause’ of the

harm or whether the harm was ‘too remote’. [...] But the issues in question are [...] better answered by asking whether, all things considered, the defendant should be held liable for the harm which ensued, or, on another view, whether the harm was foreseeable. (xxxiv-v)

While the “appeal to foreseeability or risk” involved with negligence cases proves problematic for some critics of proximate cause, these basic concepts nonetheless prove valuable when discussing certain absent characters in American drama (Hart and Honoré 254)<sup>2</sup>. In order to make the transition from the legal world to the literary world, though, one must first look at causation more generally.

#### Hume and Causation

One cannot discuss causation without mentioning David Hume’s seminal work of eighteenth-century philosophy, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Begun during Hume’s teenage years, the *Treatise* took nearly a decade to complete and met with almost immediate criticism from the intellectual community. The three-part *Treatise of Human Nature* attempts, according to the work’s subtitle, “to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects”—a project that encompasses three books, several hundred pages, and myriad philosophical arguments. Hume acknowledged faults within this work, spending much of his remaining life attempting to refine the concepts he ambitiously strove to explicate during his early adulthood: first drafting an *Abstract* of the *Treatise* that consolidated what he considered to be his key points; and later “recast[ing] his views into [...] a more palatable form” by publishing what readers know today as *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and *A Dissertation on the Passions* in separate volumes (Norton and

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of foreseeability’s critics and their opinions, see Hart and Honoré.

Norton 198). Despite complaints upon its initial publication that “the book, although showing signs of genius, was difficult to understand,” though, Hume’s seminal work has continued to garner critical attention throughout the last two hundred and seventy-five years (Norton and Norton 111). Part of the reason for this phenomenon lies in Hume’s theory of causation, which receives ample treatment in the first book of the *Treatise*.

Much of Hume’s discussion of causation occurs in book 1, part 3 of the *Treatise*. At the beginning of part 3, Hume describes causation as one of “seven different kinds of philosophical relations” that also include resemblance, identity, relations of time and place, proportion in quantity or number, degrees in any quality, and contrariety (1.3.1.1). Four of these relations (resemblance, identity, relations of time and place, and proportion in quantity or number) require little beyond initial observation that will “at first strike the eye, or rather the mind; and seldom require a second examination” (1.3.1.2). Meanwhile, the other three relations (causation, degrees in any quality, and contrariety) depend “not upon the idea,” but upon memory and experience for their potency (1.3.2.1). Of these latter three relations, the key to causation lies in the relation that two objects have to one another; moreover, this relation remains one “of which we receive information from experience” (1.3.1.1). In other words, our understanding of cause and effect develops empirically, rather than from any innate or divine inspiration: “only *causation* [...] give[s] us assurance from the existence or action of one object, that ‘twas followed or preceded by any other existence or action [...] and when from experience and observation we discover, that their relation in this particular is invariable, we always conclude there is some secret *cause*, which separates or unites them” (1.3.2.2). Causation, therefore, remains intimately tied to empirical evidence.

Three concepts prove integral to understanding causation as described by Hume: contiguity, priority of succession, and “necessary connexion.”<sup>3</sup> Hume observes that “tho’ distant objects may sometimes seem productive of each other, they are commonly found upon examination to be link’d by a chain of causes, which are contiguous among themselves, and to the distant objects [...] we may therefore consider the relation of CONTIGUITY as essential to that of causation” (1.3.2.6). In this instance, Hume acknowledges the multiplicity of meaning contained within “contiguity” and the appropriateness of these multiple meanings to his concept of causation. Occasionally, contiguity implies proximity so close that a cause or series of causes makes physical contact with the effects or objects experiencing the effects; for example, one witnesses the cause-and-effect relationship when billiard balls move after striking each other. At other times, contiguity connotes a relation that, while intimate, does not necessarily have to maintain physical contact. Such a relationship exists between rain and wet grass; while one might not see the rain hitting individual blades of grass, the undeniable link between the two remains. Whether one billiard ball strikes another and sets the second ball into motion, or rain causes grass to become wet, though, the proximity of the causes to the effects remains the crux of the contiguity which Hume considers vital to causation.

Hume’s second key concept for causation, priority of succession, appears straightforward: a cause must always precede its effect. Hume arrives at the necessity of priority of succession through “a kind of inference or reasoning,” explaining that “if any cause may be perfectly co-temporary with its effect, ‘tis certain [...] that they must all of them be so [...] The consequence of this wou’d be no less than the destruction of that succession of causes, which we observe in the world; and indeed, the utter annihilation of time” (1.3.2.7). Although Hume offers

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<sup>3</sup> The spelling of “necessary connexion” will be modernized throughout the remainder of this thesis, except when quoting directly from Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*.

little elaboration on this point, its importance nevertheless proves vital. Given the temporal upheaval that would occur as a result of the causative collapse Hume describes, the necessity for priority of succession to remain in place becomes clear. Moreover, clues within Hume's language point to the importance of common sense and empirical evidence when considering priority of succession. The "inference or reasoning" mentioned by Hume must occur as a result of repeated observation of causes and effects, which in turn leads to the logical conclusion that priority of succession exists within causative relationships (1.3.2.7). Assuming the linear nature of time, while perhaps a broad assumption in the post-postmodern world, allows for causes to precede effects and thus gives priority of succession an important place within Hume's theory of causation.

The third concept illuminating causation, necessary connection, represents perhaps the most complex concept for Hume's theory. For Hume, necessary connection provides the golden ticket linking a cause to its effect. Because "an object may be contiguous and prior to another, without being consider'd as its cause [...] there is a necessary connexion to be taken into consideration; and that relation is of much greater importance, than any of the other two above-mention'd" (1.3.2.11). The exact nature of this necessary connection, however, remains somewhat elusive. In the *Abstract* of the *Treatise*, Hume attempts to provide a succinct explanation of necessary connection as a phenomenon that is "commonly supposed [...] that the cause possesses something, which we call a *power*, or *force*, or *energy*" before admitting that "our own minds afford us no more notion of energy than matter does" and that, therefore, "either we have no idea at all of force and energy, and these words are altogether insignificant, or they can mean nothing but that determination of the thought, acquired by habit, to pass from the cause to its usual effect" (26). Once again, Hume highlights the importance of empirical evidence

when discussing causative relationships. Although the actual energy transferred from one billiard ball to another remains unseen by the naked eye, repeated observation of billiard balls striking each other makes clear the “*power, or force, or energy*” exchanged between the two balls (Norton and Norton 26). Similarly, one does not need to see the exchange of force between a raindrop and a blade of grass to understand that the rain (the cause) will make the blade of grass wet (the effect). Necessary connection, because of its intangibility, falls within the realm of that which must be experienced in order to understand the link between a cause and its effect.

In the introduction to their edition of the *Treatise*, Norton and Norton explain that causation “provides the basis for a form of reasoning in so far as it carries us beyond present experience, or, ‘beyond what is immediately present to the senses’” (I27). That which lies “beyond what is immediately present to the senses” bears the most significance for this thesis.

According to Norton and Norton, Hume

wants to explain, that is, why it is that we not only infer absent causes and effects, but also believe in them—why when the countryside is thoroughly wet we not only *think* or have the idea of falling rain, but also *believe* that rain has fallen, or why when we see smoke in the kitchen we dread the shriek of the smoke alarm. In general terms, his explanation of phenomena of this sort is to suggest that causal reasoning turns our *ideas* of absent causes or effects into something like a *present impression* of those same causes or effects. (Norton and Norton I27-8)

Norton and Norton’s explanation of Hume’s “present impressions” of absent causes will have significant bearing on subsequent chapters of this thesis. In addition, the absent causes alluded to by Hume’s *Treatise* find some of their most potent examples in the absent characters of American drama. While these characters do not appear onstage during a given play, they have

undisputed effects on the actions of the play proper. Combining Hume's theory of causation with the basics of proximate cause outlined earlier will more fully illuminate the concept of proximate cause re-appropriated for drama and literary studies.

### Proximate Cause and American Drama

What, ultimately, do tort law and David Hume have to do with American drama? The connections initially appear tenuous at best. Legal studies and eighteenth-century philosophers hardly appear to have much in common, and neither has a strong foothold within literary studies. Further inspection, however, reveals that tort law and David Hume can in fact inform each other. Concepts from both fields of study find similarities with each other, and understanding these similarities allows for an in-depth, nuanced approach to causation in general. These two concepts of causation also have profound correlations with American drama, particularly when examining absent characters. Outlining these correlations and their importance for drama studies will consume in the remaining pages of this chapter.

One of the most immediate connections between proximate cause in tort law and absent characters in American drama lies in proximate cause's status as a non-physical concept. Within negligence cases, the proximate cause of the defendant's damages does *not* have to be the cause closest to a tortious act in space or time. Rather, a cause is "proximate" in the sense that it has the most potent connection to a given set of events or consequences. Following such logic, absent characters in American drama can serve as proximate cause, too. These characters do not remain close to the onstage action of a play in any physical sense. In fact, these characters stay totally removed from the characters and actions perceived by the audience. Despite this physical removal, though, absent characters potently affect the onstage action in a play.

In addition to the non-physical aspect of proximate cause, the role of foreseeability in proximate cause bears significance for American drama. The concept of foreseeability in tort law asks the question, “Were the plaintiff’s injuries a foreseeable consequence/effect of defendant’s actions?” We can ask the same question of absent characters: is the onstage action of the play a foreseeable consequence of a given character’s absence? The answer, frequently, is yes. Through close examination, one notices that the events witnessed by the audience can be traced to the characters who remain offstage. Entire chains of events remain causally connected to the absent characters. Occasionally, these characters’ absence serves as the basis for the onstage action of a play. In many instances, the whole premise of the play would collapse if the absent characters were to appear. With the foreseeability question answered, absent characters’ status as proximate cause in American drama solidifies.

Just as facets of tort law find applications within the realm of literary studies, so do various parts of David Hume’s theory of causation. The three elements of causation that Hume discusses in the *Treatise of Human Nature*—contiguity, priority of succession, and necessary connection—find particularly intriguing connections to American drama. Although Hume’s concept of contiguity, which stresses the importance of proximity between cause and effect, would appear to contradict tort law’s assertion that a proximate cause need not be closest to an event in space or time, one need only a nuanced reading to find the relevance of contiguity to absent characters. Hume admits that even a cause which seems distantly removed from its effect nonetheless remains connected through a series of causes contiguous among themselves. In this way, contiguity applies even to the most remote of causes and effects. Similarly, a proximate cause may be one of several causes at work within a tort law case but still serves as that with the most potent connection to a given consequence. When applied to absent characters in American



drama, contiguity takes a form much like that described by Hume and embodied by proximate cause. These characters, while occasionally separated from the onstage action of a play by several steps or sets of circumstances, still maintain a contiguous and potent connection to this action. They serve as proximate cause. Meanwhile, absent characters also embody Hume's priority of succession in their status as (proximate) cause. Their absence must "pre-date" the action of the play, in a sense: the onstage characters must be aware of the characters' absence from the opening moments of the play; otherwise, in many instances, the entire premise for the play collapses.

Perhaps the trickiest part of Hume's theory of causation, the "necessary connection" between cause and effect elucidated in the *Treatise of Human Nature* find echoes in the "causal connection" described in *American Jurisprudence*. Moreover, both of these "connections" illuminate the status of absent characters in American drama. While Hume falters somewhat in his description of the necessary connection that must exist for a specific effect to have a specific cause, he does highlight the important fact that an event might meet the first two criteria of this causation theory and yet not serve as the cause of a specific effect. *American Jurisprudence* better explicates the notion of causal connection by focusing on the intimate relationship between cause and effect, or action and injury. When applied to American drama, though, the connection between absent characters and onstage action becomes more clear. In these plays, the characters' own absence affects the action that occurs onstage. Just as Hume explains that repeated observation of a cause and effect reveals the necessary connection between the two, so does close inspection of specific plays within the American dramatic canon reveal the causal connection between absent characters and onstage action.

The final aspect of Hume's theory of causation with relevance for literary studies lies in his discussion of absent causes and effects. With his acknowledgement that the observance of wet grass, for example, assumes a previous albeit unwitnessed rain as the cause, Hume recognizes that certain causes appear "absent" or unseen to the observer. The observer retains the idea of the absent cause, though, and infers the necessary connection between said cause and the witnessed effect. This retained idea becomes what Hume considers a "present impression" of the absent cause. Absent characters in American drama have a similar role within their plays. Onstage characters frequently mention a given absent character over the course of a play. These utterances have multiple effects: they confirm the absent character's identity; and they help other characters and audience alike to retain the idea of the absent character. The onstage characters and the audience watching the play witness the effects of a character's absence, and their awareness of the absent character likens to the present impression described by Hume. This present impression profoundly affects the fates of the onstage characters.

Having explored the foundations of proximate cause within legal studies and causation according to David Hume, a new appropriation for proximate cause begins to take shape. Hume's discussion of causation illuminates some of the more intricate aspects of tort law's proximate cause, which in turn facilitates the application of this legal term to twentieth century American drama. Proximate cause, for purposes of this literary study, refers to a specific set of absent characters within American drama. These characters, while never seen by the onstage characters or the audience, bear the trademarks of causation as highlighted by tort law and David Hume: they have undeniable effects upon the actions of their plays, and their connections to these event are foreseeable, contiguous, and necessary—indeed, proximate. With this re-appropriated term and its new application in mind, multiple examples of absent characters acting

as proximate cause within their respective plays come to mind. The remaining chapters of this thesis will explore three plays containing such characters: Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, and David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Although the circumstances surrounding each character's absence vary, the common thread among them remains the integral roles they play as the proximate cause for the onstage action of their respective plays.

## CHAPTER 3

GETTING WHAT THEY DESERVED: SUSAN GLASPELL'S *TRIFLES*

Having established the framework within which proximate cause will serve as the basis for discussing absent characters in twentieth century American drama, an in-depth exploration of these characters commences. The three works selected for discussion throughout the remaining pages of this thesis each offer absent characters who function as the proximate cause for the onstage action that occurs during the plays. Every absent character in these plays presents a unique study in proximate cause, though, a fact that reveals the dynamic nature of this theatrical phenomenon. By the conclusion of the following chapters, the works and characters presented will have clearly established the prevalence of absent characters acting as proximate cause within twentieth century American drama.

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* represents this thesis's earliest instance of absent characters as proximate cause. Written in 1916 and originally performed by the Provincetown Players, *Trifles* depicts five men and women who come to the home of Minnie and John Wright in search of evidence pertaining to John Wright's murder (Biggsby, *Critical Introduction* 25). These characters include George Henderson, the county attorney; Henry Peters, the sheriff; Lewis Hale, a neighboring farmer; Mrs. Peters; and Mrs. Wright (Glaspell 558). John Wright has died prior the opening scene of the play, and Minnie Wright has been taken to prison as a suspect in her husband's murder. Over the course of the play, the men and women separately try to discern what has transpired in the Wright home. Henderson, Peters, and Hale concern themselves with the seemingly more obvious potential locations for evidence. The bedroom where the murder took place and the shed consequently occupy the men's attention for most of the play. Mrs.

Peters and Mrs. Hale, however, remain in the Wrights' kitchen, finding evidence of a motive among such "trifles" as a disheveled cupboard, a broken birdcage, and a dead bird wrapped in poorly stitched pieces of quilting. By the end of the play, the women have concluded that Minnie Wright probably did, in fact, murder her husband. Sympathizing with her circumstances, Mrs. Peter and Mrs. Hale tamper with the most damning of the trifling evidence—the dead bird and the quilting pieces—in an attempt to absolve Minnie Wright of her crime.

*Trifles* offers an intriguing study of absent characters as proximate cause with the presentation of two characters who never appear onstage. Neither Minnie nor John Wright ever walks across the stage during this brief play, although their absence remains palpably present. These two characters' names are invoked onstage a total of sixteen times, first with the stage directions' description of "the now abandoned farmhouse of John Wright" and finally with Mrs. Hale's declaration that "[she] knew John Wright" (Glaspell 558, 563). Of these sixteen invocations, eleven refer to John Wright; the remaining five refer to Minnie Wright. John Wright is referred to alternately as "John," "Wright," and "John Wright" by the Hales. Mr. Hale uses all three names when speaking of the deceased farmer, displaying his familiarity with the use of Wright's given name (Glaspell 559). Mrs. Hale makes reference to "Wright" and "John Wright," although she never uses the familiar first name by itself (Glaspell 560). By contrast, Henderson and the Hales speak of "Mrs. Wright," but only Mrs. Hale uses Minnie Wright's maiden name of Foster (Glaspell 560); even after the murder, Minnie Foster Wright remains tied to the identity of her deceased husband. Susan C. W. Abbotson comments on this phenomenon, stating that upon marrying, "[a woman] loses her former identity, along with her maiden name, and becomes subsumed by her husband" (*Thematic Guide* 263). Regardless of the disparities in

appellations, however, these onstage utterances serve to keep the characters in the audience's mind at the same time that they highlight the characters' absence.

Despite the unequal distribution of appellations in Glaspell's *Trifles*, the utterance of Minnie and John Wright's names functions like the "present impression" of absent causes referred to by David Hume. These absent characters, as with Hume's absent causes, find themselves removed from the present onstage action of the play. With the Hales' and the Peters' references to the absent characters, though, the onstage characters verbalize their retained idea of Minnie and John Wright. Furthermore, the Hale and Peters couples highlight for the audience the necessary connection between the Wrights and the events of the play. The utterance of Minnie and John Wright's names force an understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship between the characters' absence and the action witnessed by the audience. The Wrights' absence is the reason the other characters search the house: Minnie Wright sits in jail, unable to provide the party with the evidence they need; John Wright has died under mysterious circumstances, necessitating an investigation into the details of his demise. The use of these characters' names onstage calls to mind the absent husband and wife, making their absence all the more present and palpable to the audience.

While the absent character in *Trifles* receives some critical attention, nearly all of the criticism pertains exclusively to Minnie Wright's non-appearance during the play. Much of this criticism relates the heroine's absence to other thematic elements in the play, but in many instances, even these elements are mentioned only in passing. Scholars such as Linda Ben-Zvi and Abbotson discuss Minnie Wright's absence as a convention allowing the audience to focus on other, presumably more central, issues within the play. In her essay discussing the origins of *Trifles*, Ben-Zvi argues that "by not physically representing Minnie on the stage, [Glaspell] is

able to focus on issues that move beyond the guilt or innocence of one person” (35). Ben-Zvi further asserts that “since the audience never actually sees Minnie, it is not swayed by her person but, instead, by her condition, a condition shared by other women who can be imagined in the empty subject position” (35). Along similar lines, Abbotson claims that Minnie Wright’s absence “serves the dual function of allowing her to avoid particularity and so serve as a symbol of all women trapped in loveless marriages, as well as ensuring that our attention is focused on the reactions of those others” (*Thematic Guide* 262).

Other scholars recognize Minnie Wright’s absence as commentary on the interaction between the theatre and the audience. Lucia Sander refers to the “invisibility effect,” which in the case of *Trifles* refers to “a character who is central to the plot of the plays [but] is kept in the wings, denied a stage presence” (26). As a theatrical device, “it is the architecture of the play itself that obstructs our vision of its protagonist” (Sander 28). Through the audience’s inability to see or interact with Minnie Wright, Sander also argues that this play “is a testimony to the power of silence in the theatre” and “a lesson on, or a performance of what the theatre is all about” (28, 30). From this perspective, Minnie Wright’s status as “dead to the stage” not only forces Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale to use their memories of her to come to new insights about themselves, but also mirrors the experience of the audience upon leaving the performance and reconstructing its events in order to draw their own conclusions (Sander 31). J. Ellen Gainor recognizes Minnie Wright’s absence as evidence of Glaspell’s consciousness “of both the audience and the concept that the spectator is the force somehow allowing or driving the action, the unfolding of character, the revelation of meaning” (40). Quoting a theatre review speaking in part to Glaspell’s use of offstage characters, Gainor emphasizes that “like the women, [the audience] must piece out the story by inference”—a key device of the detection genre (41). As a

participant in this genre, Glaspell questions the patriarchal order through a variety of mechanisms, not the least of which is the “decision to make both the criminal and the victim off-stage characters” which “means that no direct confrontation or confession can occur” (Gainor 50).

While many scholars have attempted to glean thematic significance from Minnie Wright’s onstage absence in *Trifles*, none have noted the profound and unique influence this heroine has as the proximate cause for the onstage action of the play. Applying the characteristics of tort law’s proximate cause to Minnie Wright reveals that, although remaining offstage, this woman nonetheless manages to directly influence the play’s outcome. *Black’s Law Dictionary*’s definition of proximate cause proves helpful in this instance. Legally, proximate cause provides “a cause that directly produces an event and without which the event would not have occurred” (Garner 88). Minnie Wright and her absence certainly fulfill this requirement. Were Minnie Wright not already in prison, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale would have no need to accompany their husbands to the Wrights’ home. Without the amateur investigatory efforts of these women, the motive behind John Wright’s murder would remain a mystery. Using this logic, Minnie Wright’s absence “directly produces” the “events” of the play; without this “cause,” the play’s action would not occur.

In addition to embodying the dictionary definition of proximate cause, Minnie Wright and her absence fulfill the concept’s foreseeability requirement. One can ask, “Is the action that occurs onstage during *Trifles* a foreseeable consequence of Minnie Wright’s absence?” Put another way, one can posit whether a reasonable person would make the connection between the heroine’s absence and the events that transpire onstage. After some consideration, the answers to these questions present themselves. The onstage action of this play occurs as a direct result of



Minnie Wright's imprisonment, which keeps her out of sight (though not out of mind). This imprisonment and its accompanying absence create the opportunity for the sheriff and the county attorney to return to the crime scene and look for evidence with a neighbor's help. Taking Henderson, Peters, and Hale into consideration, then, one could reasonably foresee that these men would conduct the search that occupies most of their onstage time during the play. What of Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, though? Although a reasonable person might not foresee that the sheriff's and neighbor's wives would accompany them to a crime scene, the women's desire to comfort Minnie Wright arguably could be a foreseeable result of the heroine's imprisonment. Their philanthropic efforts keep the women in the kitchen and living space of the Wright home, a logical location for the sundries sought and collected. The events of the play thus evolve as the foreseeable consequence of Minnie Wright's absence, making her the action's proximate cause.

For all of the discussion of Minnie Wright's absence from the stage in *Trifles*, hardly any scholarship tends to the absent victim—John Wright. As with some of the discussion of Minnie Wright's absence, many of the mentions of John Wright's absence occur in passing as part of discussions of other topics. C.W.E. Bigsby notes that *Trifles* is “a well-observed study of male arrogance and insensitivity,” and he mentions John Wright as “the man [who] imprisons the woman” (*Critical Introduction* 25); however, Bigsby does not discuss the significance of John Wright's absence within the structure of the play. Abbotson, too, recognizes John Wright as a figure “who clearly see[s] women as a subservient group whose concerns hold little importance” (*Thematic Guide* 262). She notes that John Wright “destroyed Minnie Foster, just as he destroyed her canary” (Abbotson, *Thematic Guide* 263). Like Bigsby, though, Abbotson fails to note John Wright's absence from the stage or the possible ramifications of this non-appearance. Although Gainor takes note that “John, too, is a significant yet absent male character,” she makes

no attempt to elucidate her reasons for this assertion (54). Dying prior to the opening of the play does not render John Wright unworthy of critical attention, however. The significance noted by Gainor and alluded to but not elaborated on by other critics lies John Wright's influence over the onstage action despite his physical absence from the play. This influence manifests itself in ways similar to Minnie Wright's, making John Wright another example of an absent character acting as proximate cause in American drama.

Close inspection of John Wright's role in *Trifles* reveals that he, too, functions as proximate cause within the play. The fact that a proximate cause need not be closest to an event in space or time bears particular importance in this case. Over the course of the play's opening moments, the onstage characters establish that John Wright has died and that Minnie Wright sits in jail on suspicion of her husband's murder. Using Hume's concept of priority of succession, the events that transpire prior to the opening of the play make sense as causes. While Minnie Wright has to remain offstage and in prison for the onstage action to occur, John Wright's death must occur before Minnie Wright can become the murder suspect. Thus, John Wright's death or absence precedes Minnie Wright's absence from the stage, which results in the effects evidenced by the play's events. This chain of causes leaves John Wright farthest removed from the play's events in terms of time, but he claims the title of proximate cause in the process.

Necessary connexion also helps to determine John Wright's status as proximate cause within Glaspell's work. Because he remains well beyond the scope of the play's world as seen by the audience, this victim/villain's causal participation initially may appear dubious. Keeping in mind the experiential nature of Hume's necessary connection and the causal connection described in *American Jurisprudence*, though, John Wright's role reveals itself more definitively. The audience witnesses the effects of John Wright's absence as the events of *Trifles* unfold,

much like Hume's observer experiences the effects of a given cause or set of causes. While Hume's observer remains aware of the "*power, or force, or energy*" linking cause(s) and effect(s), the audience viewing Glaspell's play feels the connection between John Wright's absence and the onstage action (Hume 26). In addition, the "'cause in fact' relation which must exist between a defendant's conduct and a plaintiff's injury" for a tortious act to occur correlates to the intimate relationship between absence and dramatic action (qtd. in Buckley and Okrent 35). Having the onstage characters outline the events during the play's opening moments clarifies this connection for the audience, but one cannot deny that John Wright's death proximately causes the play's onstage action.

How do both Minnie and John Wright function as proximate cause within *Trifles*?

Resistance might appear from those who feel that an effect must have only one cause. Hume and tort law make provisions for multiple causes resulting in a given effect, and the Wrights certainly offer an example of such a phenomenon. In this instance, the concept of contiguity remains key for understanding how these absent characters function within the play. Contiguity can apply to a series, and Minnie and John Wright provide a series of causes for the play's action. In addition, the Wrights' absence displays the priority of succession highlighted by Hume's theory of causation. Finally, the foreseeability question first posed for Minnie Wright also applies to John Wright, and a reasonable person could foresee that his death/absence under suspicious circumstances would result in his wife's imprisonment and the subsequent crime scene investigation. When all of these facets of causation appear together, the Wrights' clearly provide the cause for the events presented in Glaspell's play.

Having explored the function of the absent characters in *Trifles*, several conclusions come to light. The extant scholarship makes several glaring oversights. John Wright's absence

as the driving force behind all of the action that occurs onstage receives no critical treatment. With the exception of Sander, much of the scholarship regarding Minnie Wright's absence fails to acknowledge her status as proximate cause, too. True, Minnie Wright's absence forces Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale to search the kitchen, and in the process they learn about themselves and their status within the community of women. However, these women—and their husbands and the county attorney—would not have gone to the Wright farm in the first place had Minnie Wright not been taken to prison prior to the start of the play. To take the Wrights' absence a few steps further, though, Minnie Wright would not have gone to prison had John Wright not been found strangled in his bedroom. Presumably, John Wright's death would not have occurred if he had not treated his wife as he did, either. As such, the Wrights become the proximate cause for all of the action that occurs onstage, and the audience feels their absence all the more keenly.

## CHAPTER 4

TO STRIKE OR NOT TO STRIKE?: CLIFFORD ODETS'S *WAITING FOR LEFTY*

In Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, two absent characters work in tandem as proximate cause for the play's onstage action. Minnie and John Wright, while absent from the play space for different reasons, both have an undeniable effect on the events that unfold for the audience. Other plays, though, have absent characters that function as proximate cause in different but equally compelling ways. The wealth of variety evident within a seemingly basic construct of twentieth century American drama merits further study, a project that will continue through the remaining chapters of this thesis. One example of this variety finds itself in Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*.

Another play with a conspicuous absent character, Clifford Odets's 1935 play *Waiting for Lefty* most often finds recognition as one of the most well-known of the "agit-prop" (agitation-propaganda) plays of 1930s theater (Abbotson, *Thematic Guide* 267; Miller 166). Loosely based on an actual taxi-drivers' strike that occurred in 1934, this play uses a taxi-drivers' union meeting as a framework for exploring the characters' backgrounds and their motivations for attending the meeting in progress. While the union members wait for their chairman, Lefty, to appear, union leader Harry Fatt attempts to talk the disgruntled employees out of striking and struggles to maintain control of the meeting. Interspersed among the simmering rage of the union meeting, five vignettes portray the circumstances that have brought the characters to taxi driving and the union meeting: Joe, a taxi driver with a starving wife and children; Miller, a lab assistant who leaves his job after refusing to work on a poison-gas project and spy on his coworkers; Sid, who has delayed his wedding for fear of not being able to support a wife and

family; Philips, a young actor and expectant father who cannot find work on Broadway; and Benjamin, a medical intern who finds himself without a job as a result of his supervisors' anti-Semitism. As the play draws towards its climax, the taxi drivers edge closer to striking. In the final seconds of the play, a man bursts into the meeting and informs the union that Lefty has been found "behind the car barns with a bullet in his head" (Odets 780). This exclamation provides the final catalyst needed to urge the union members to action, and the play closes with their cries of "STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!!!" (Odets 780).

Like *Trifles*, *Waiting for Lefty* offers a unique opportunity to study a central character's absence from the onstage action. Despite his name appearing in the title, Lefty never appears onstage. Instead, only his name is invoked a total of twelve times over the course of the play; most of these invocations occur in the first and final scenes. Lefty's name first appears during the play's opening moments, when an anonymous member of the union demands of Fatt, "Where's Lefty?" (Odets 769). Fatt echoes the question back to the "others in unison" who have joined in the chorus demanding Lefty's whereabouts, saying, "That's what I wanna know. Where's your pal, Lefty? [...] where the hell did he disappear?" (Odets 769). Before the union meeting transitions into the first vignette, Joe answers the repeated questions about Lefty, saying that he "honest to God don't know" where Lefty is, then offering, "Maybe a traffic jam got him, but he'll be here" (Odets 770). The only mention of Lefty's full name, by contrast, occurs shortly after this opening scene, at the end of the vignette between Joe and his wife Edna. As Joe finds the motivation to take action (albeit at his wife's behest), he tells Edna that he's "goin' down to 174th Street to look up Lefty Costello," then starts to mention that "Lefty was saying the other day. . . ." (Odets 772). With his introduction into one of the vignettes of the play, Odets attempts to personalize the title character. The familiarity with which Joe refers to Lefty

removes him from the remote, official-sounding position of union chairman and reinforces his status as a member of the working class, thus incurring the audience's sympathy. Although Lefty receives no more mention until the end of the play, his sudden reappearance through dialogue jars the audience just as it jars the union members to action. As the play reaches its climax, Agate Keller entreats his comrades not to "wait for Lefty" because "he might never come" (Odets 780). This brief foreshadowing finds its satisfaction in the next lines of the play, when the anonymous man declares, "They just found Lefty [...] behind the car barns with a bullet in his head!" (Odets 780).

From the outset of the play, Lefty's absence receives explicit attention from the characters onstage, and their commentary reinforces this absence in the minds of the audience. As with *Trifles*'s Minnie and John Wright, the onstage characters' utterance of Lefty's name in *Waiting for Lefty* functions as the present impression of an absent cause as described by David Hume. That the onstage characters will spend much of the play "waiting" for Lefty Costello to arrive at the union meeting is made explicit for the audience by the piece's title. The waiting caused by absence receives further reinforcement as the play opens, with the union members' demands regarding Lefty's whereabouts and Joe's attempts to explain the union leader's absence. This reinforcement of Lefty's absence serves another purpose, however. Each utterance of Lefty's name also recalls the as-yet-unseen character for the audience, creating a continuous albeit unspoken connection between the title character and the events that unfold onstage. Although this connection never receives any acknowledgement from the onstage characters, the present impression generated by mentioning Lefty Costello establishes him as the cause for the play's action. Much as the wet grass mentioned in chapter 2 generates the idea of

previously fallen rain, the usage of Lefty's name generates an idea of the missing union leader and reminds the audience that the whole premise for the play originates with his absence.

Although the taxi drivers in *Waiting for Lefty* continually remind the audience of the title character's absence, much of the extant scholarship regarding this play overlooks this fact in favor of the work's socio-economic and political relevance. Michael Woolf, Bigsby, and Abbotson ignore Lefty's absence in favor of commentary regarding the class struggles relevant to 1930s America. Woolf asserts that Odets's political agenda remains evident in his use of language throughout *Waiting for Lefty*; through conventions that "[build] on everyday speech patterns but elevates them towards a language of poetry," Odets strives to "elevate the language of the poor and, thereby, to suggest the potential for nobility in the dispossessed" (52). These linguistic tactics also "[affirm] the importance of the experiences of the poor and the exploited" (Woolf 52). Bigsby, too, speaks to the "authenticity of [the play's] dialogue" as evidence of the "more subtle interplay of private and public worlds" at work (Bigsby, *Critical Introduction* 201). Abbotson mentions the play's dialogue as "innovative for its time, in its attempt to recreate working-class cadences," and she argues that the dialogue "consistently conveys the strong emotions of both workers and the playwright, as they try to bring down the 'big shot moneymen' and create a more equitable society" (*Thematic Guide* 268).

Other scholars highlight aspects of the play not tied to language in their analyses of Odets's work. Abbotson goes further than many scholars in her analysis of the play as socio-economic and political commentary, claiming that "Odets wants the working classes to realize that they *do* have options, and strength in unity" (*Thematic Guide* 269). For Odets, "both blue-collar and white-collar workers are being exploited by the system [...]; the only way to change the system is to rise up united against it, and demand fairer wages and greater rights" (Abbotson,



*Thematic Guide* 270). Meanwhile, Gabriel Miller discusses many of the symbolic and agit-prop theatrical devices used to engage the audience. Miller pays particular attention to the audience's involvement in this play, since "agitprop [*sic*] sought to merge [actor and audience] and thus draw the audience into the play" (166). The most compelling of these entreaties to the audience, the call to strike that closes the play attempts "to achieve not an immediate result, but a more symbolic call to arms" by "linking actor and audience in a hortatory finale [...] as a family sharing common values and a similar consciousness" (Miller 168). Although Miller mentions the framework of the meeting, according to him the "true power of the play [which] is contained in the six episodes that provide its thematic center," he makes no mention of Lefty's integral role in the conduct of this meeting (170).

Even those scholars who do mention Lefty in their discussions of Odets's play fail to recognize the significance of his absence from the onstage action. Christopher J. Herr invokes Lefty Costello's full name as a part of his discussion of fruit as a metaphor for financial security, wealth, and consumerism; however, Lefty appears only in the introductory comments, indicating that "the assembled members [...] await the arrival of Lefty Costello, a strike organizer for the union" (68). From this point forward, Lefty's absence disappears among a cornucopia of socio-economic commentary. Michael J. Mendelsohn and Gerald Weales, by contrast, take into account Lefty's significance as another of Odets's thematic theatrical devices. In Mendelsohn's view, "each character is a fragment of Lefty, and the wait that is taking place is actually a wait for the submerging of the individual in the group" (22-3). Lefty's death prior to the close of the play allows Agate Keller to continue the message of labor solidarity; however, "Lefty, very much alive in spirit, arrives in the body and voice of Agate Keller" (23). These assertions speak to Lefty's final absence; however, they deny Lefty's status at the outset of the play. Weales

makes the most significant comments regarding Lefty's significance to Odets's work, but even these leave much to be desired. After recognizing that *Waiting for Lefty* "says a great deal less about the actual taxi strike of 1934 than it does, by implication, about the general labor situation of the time," Weales glosses over Lefty and his absence (143). Dismissing Lefty's name as a "label" (147), Weales claims that the central action of *Waiting for Lefty* is not the waiting itself but the struggle that takes place for control of the union meeting" (148). Ultimately, "Lefty's absence provides an occasion, but his death is only an emotional fillip" in the wake of the other action that occurs at the end of the play (Weales 151).

In *Waiting for Lefty*, then, American drama finds one absent character who receives significant critical attention yet whose causative role remains overlooked. Moreover, this character manages to serve as the proximate cause for the onstage action in multiple ways. With the reinforcement of Lefty's absence throughout the play and the shattered hope of his eventual appearance, the audience experiences this causative role twice: first as an anticipatory absence that helps to frame the story; and ultimately as the permanent absence of death. In both cases, Lefty's absence meets the criteria for causation established by Hume and tort law. The absence that precedes the play's opening moments and provides the piece's title prompts the onstage characters to tell their stories via the vignettes that comprise much of the play's action. This first absence also provides occasion for discussion regarding the decision to strike. As such, Lefty's initial absence satisfies Hume's concepts of both contiguity and priority of succession. While the opening moments of *Waiting for Lefty* do not remain connected to Lefty's absence in any tangible way, one can visualize a contiguous set of events that credits an absent character as its source: the series of scenes depicting various union members' paths to the meeting begins with Joe's recounting of his argument with his wife; the occasion for Joe's story stems from demands

to “hear from the committee”; the interest in the committee’s opinions arises out of an attempt to deflect mounting confusion regarding Lefty’s whereabouts (Odets 669-70). This series of contiguous events also demonstrates Hume’s priority of succession. Lefty’s absence precedes all of the play’s onstage action, thus placing this phenomenon at the source of the contiguous chain of events observable by the audience. Since Hume stipulates that events may be contiguous and prior to a given effect without actually being its cause, though, how do the play’s events relate to the title character’s absence? Ultimately, close examination reveals the necessary/causal connection between onstage action and title character’s absence. There would be no “waiting for Lefty” if he were to appear onstage; indeed, his continued absence allows the union members’ stories to unfold, generating the audience sympathy that serves as one of the hallmarks of agit-prop theatre. Without Lefty’s absence, the entire premise of *Waiting for Lefty* would collapse. Lefty therefore serves as the proximate cause for the play’s onstage action.

After Lefty Costello’s absence has created the circumstances by which the audience learns why the union members have chosen to attend the meeting in progress, *Waiting for Lefty*’s title character serves as the proximate cause for the play’s climax. Upon hearing that Lefty’s body lies “behind the car barns with a bullet in his head,” the meeting attendees find the motivation needed to make their final decision to strike (Odets 780). Unlike the earlier example of Lefty’s function as proximate cause, the necessary connection between cause and effect in this situation becomes obvious. Immediately upon news of his death, Lefty’s comrades leap to action; one can surmise that Lefty’s death, of which they have just learned, prompts the union members to strike. The most fascinating aspect of this instance of proximate cause lies within the concept’s legal rather than physical nature, though. In particular, a given cause’s ability to be proximate without lying closest to its effect in space or time proves useful here. With Lefty’s

death, neither the audience nor the onstage characters know exactly when this unfortunate event occurs in relation to the messenger's news conveyed during the play's final moments. This uncertainty surrounding the timeline (Lefty's death, the discovery of his corpse, the messenger's trip to the union meeting location, the revelation to the union members) highlights the non-physical nature of proximate cause. Although the exact timing of Lefty's death in relation to the play's climax remains ambiguous, the effect of the bad news on the onstage characters proves undeniable and nearly immediate. In addition, although Lefty's death remains physically removed from the immediately observable world of the play, the effect of this permanent absence clearly reveals itself. As soon as the onstage characters hear the news, Agate urges his comrades, "to make a new world" and to "die for what is right" before demanding, "Well, what's the answer?" (Odets 780). The taxi drivers' response to "STRIKE!" not only answers Agate's question but also establishes Lefty's absence/death as this phenomenon's immediate cause.

In order to solidify this absent character's status as proximate cause, one must examine whether or not the onstage action of Odets's play represents a foreseeable consequence of Lefty's absence. Close inspection reveals that both the opening moments and the climax of the play do occur as a result of the hero's non-appearance, whether from unspecified delays or possible murder. Could a reasonable person foresee this connection, though? The delay of a key person's arrival at an already emotionally charged meeting very well might result in the need to deflect anger and to distract the meeting attendees from the absent character's tardiness. Without a clear plan for the meeting *sans* one of its most important attendees, the occasion for digression—in the case of Odets's play, the scenes highlighting various union members' plights—appears. After the series of scenes establishes the audience's sympathy for the taxi drivers, a return to the meeting proper conveys the situation's heightened tension. In such a

volatile environment, the death of the eagerly anticipated chairman could prompt the union members to immediate, arguably impulsive, action. Keeping these aspects of the play and line of logic in mind, the answer to this study's earlier question reveals itself. Tort law's key concept of foreseeability applies to both instances of Lefty Costello's absence, thus making them the proximate cause for *Waiting for Lefty's* onstage action.

As with *Trifles*, current scholarship fails to recognize Clifford Odets's use of an absent character as proximate cause. Despite Weales's acknowledgement of Lefty's absence from the union meeting, he fails to recognize that the "struggle for control of the union meeting" (148) exists because Lefty has not arrived. Fatt's attempts to conduct the union meeting according to his agenda are continually circumvented by other union members; these difficulties would be non-issues were Lefty to arrive at the meeting. Lefty's presence also would circumvent the union members' need to pass time while awaiting his arrival; as such, many of the vignettes that comprise the play would have little, if any, place in the course of the meeting. Lefty's absence consequently forms the entire pretext for *Waiting for Lefty*; his death merely makes explicit his status as action-driver throughout the play. From the outset, Lefty's absence has provided the unseen hand, the proximate cause driving the entire course of the union meeting.

## CHAPTER 5

TWO MEN, A PLAN, A CADILLAC: DAVID MAMET'S *GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS*

From the early twentieth century work of Susan Glaspell to the Depression-era political drama of Clifford Odets, absent characters influence American drama. The two preceding chapters of this thesis examined plays whose absent characters, though operating in very different circumstances, manage to provide the same type of impetus for the action within their respective environments. With two such rich examples from the first half of the twentieth century, though, one has to wonder whether or not equally compelling absent characters appear in contemporary American plays. The work of David Mamet provides one particularly intriguing set of characters who never appear onstage, proving that the phenomenon of absent characters as proximate cause does not remain limited to pre-war dramatic works.

The final and most recent play to be discussed here, David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Glengarry Glen Ross* provides two central characters who never appear onstage. First performed in 1983 and winning the Pulitzer Prize for drama the following year, this play offers a provocative glimpse into the shady world of fraudulent real estate sales. Working at the behest of the unseen bosses Mitch and Murray, four salesmen struggle to convince unsuspecting men and women to purchase pieces of property with whimsical names like Glengarry Highlands and Glen Ross Farms: Shelley Levene, struggling and past his prime; Dave Moss, embittered and wanting to rob the sales office; George Aaronow, disenchanted and hating his job; and Richard Roma, the slickly poised superstar. These salesmen pursue sales leads for the sake of their own commissions while simultaneously competing with each other: the top two salesmen will win a Cadillac and a set of steak knives, respectively; the other two salesmen will lose their jobs. The

real estate office is robbed in the midst of this sales contest, wreaking havoc on the results board and revealing criminals amongst the salesmen. At the same time, one of the men to whom Roma has sold property tries to renege on his contract, instigating an admirably underhanded run-around on Roma's part to save his sale. By the play's conclusion, Shelley has confessed to robbing the office; Moss has stormed out of the office with an emphatic "fuck you *all*" (Mamet 71); Roma has left for the Chinese restaurant across the street; and Aaronow has summed up much of the play with his dejected declaration, "oh, God, I hate this job" (108). Mitch and Murray, meanwhile, have yet to show their faces onstage.

As with *Trifles*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* presents two characters whose absence guides the play's onstage action. While no one explicitly mentions Mitch or Murray's absence, the continuous invocation of their names accentuates their absence from the stage. In this play, however, the audience never learns either character's full name. Unlike Minnie Foster Wright, John Wright, or Lefty Costello, Mitch and Murray are referred to by these single appellations throughout the play. Resembling *Waiting for Lefty*, most of the invocations of these men's names occur during the opening and closing scenes of the play: first when Levene and the office manager Williamson are discussing the sales leads; and later after the office has been ransacked. Levene, for instance, urges Williamson to "talk to Murray [...] talk to Mitch" within the first few pages of the play, and he repeats this entreaty multiple times before the close of the scene (Mamet 17-8). Levene also makes multiple references to everything he has done "for *Murray...for Mitch...*" (Mamet 20). Williamson, meanwhile, keeps his references limited to what "Murray said" throughout this dialogue (Mamet 20). During the second scene, by contrast, Moss and Aaronow complain about the unfairness of the sales contest; Moss bestows responsibility for all of the contest's problems on "Mitch [...] and Murray [...] 'cause it doesn't

have to be this way” (Mamet 33). Aaronow agrees, although he never invokes his bosses’ names. Moss hatches the idea to steal the leads during this conversation. Although he ultimately does not carry out the plan, Moss is the salesman who says that “someone should hurt them [...] Murray and Mitch” (Mamet 37).

Mitch and Murray’s names crop up again in the final scene of the play, when most of the characters remain concerned about how they will react to the news of the stolen leads. In the aftermath of the robbery, Roma makes the comment, “Fucking Mitch and Murray going to shit a br...” (Mamet 59). Aaronow maintains the same concern, saying to Williamson, “[...] I know that Mitch and Murray uh [...] they’re going to be upset” (Mamet 59). Williamson affirms this suspicion later in the scene, warning the salesmen that “they’re coming in, you understand they’re a bit *upset*” about the robbery (Mamet 75). In one of the last invocations of the bosses’ names, Levene claims that the whole business is “not right [...] and I’ll tell you who’s to blame is Mitch and Murray” (Mamet 78). This penultimate occurrence of the absent characters’ names takes on a much larger significance, however, for Mitch and Murray aren’t to blame only for the robbery—they remain culpable for all that has transpired since the curtain arose.

Mitch and Murray offer a complex example of absent characters in American drama, especially when viewed in light of Hume’s theory regarding an absent cause’s present impression on the observer. Unlike Minnie and John Wright, whose names are invoked individually throughout *Trifles*, references to Mitch and Murray frequently join the two names together. While the repeated references to the real estate moguls keeps them in the audience’s minds despite their non-appearance onstage, the conjoining of their names reinforces a joint rather than a several identity and liability. These men, acting as one managerial unit, manipulate their underlings and proximately cause the events that transpire onstage. At the same time, the



onstage characters make explicit Mitch and Murray's influence within the real estate office. The people "to blame [are] Mitch and Murray," according to Levene; this statement provides just one example of the multiple references to the boss' responsibility for the events onstage (Mamet 78). While the onstage characters in *Trifles* and *Waiting for Lefty* create present impressions of the absent characters through uttering their names, discerning the connection between absent character/cause and present effect becomes the audience's responsibility. In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, however, the present impressions created by onstage appellations receive reinforcement from the real estate agents' complaints regarding Mitch and Murray. The audience has only to remember what they have seen and heard in order to make the connection between present impression and witnessed effect.

Despite Mitch and Murray's palpable absence and its effects on the onstage action, few scholars have directly addressed this facet of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Abbotson and Bigsby speak to aspects of absence as related to this play; however, these comments tend to focus on other thematic elements of the work. In her discussion of the workplace in American drama, Abbotson reveals the prevalence of "an uninhibited competitive spirit that [the salesmen] see as key to democratic capitalism" at work in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (*Thematic Guide* 273). As a result of this drive, the "characters create illusions—not only for others, but also for themselves—to try to bolster their spirits [...] these salesmen rationalize every deceit that might close a sale, distorting language and ethical principles to justify what they do" (Abbotson, *Thematic Guide* 273). Although she fails to recognize Mitch and Murray's absence, the absence of truth in favor of illusions and deceit does pervade the actions of the characters. Bigsby discusses a similar form of absence in the characters' "will to believe [...] regarded as powerful and even potentially redemptive, and the ability to create fictions" (*David Mamet* 113). In addition, Bigsby

recognizes the power of absence in language evident in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, claiming that the play “has less to do with propositions about capitalism than with Mamet’s power to imply the spaces left vacant by human need and filled only with the brutalizing jargon of exploitation” (*Beyond Broadway* 286). According to this view, “those absences become crucial [...] they are what give the play its special force” (*Beyond Broadway* 286). Indeed, the ribald but ultimately emotionally devoid language represents a certain absence of emotion or conscience on the part of the salesmen; Mitch and Murray, though, certainly play their part in perpetuating this deficiency.

A handful of scholars have addressed Mitch and Murray’s absence from the *Glengarry Glen Ross*, although no one has discussed their absence as proximate cause for the action that occurs onstage. Leslie Kane mentions the two bosses several times in the course of her discussion of the Jewish influences in the play. She refers to the play “juggling nearly as many off-stage characters as appear on stage,” though she does not specify Mitch and Murray (Kane 57). Although Kane makes several more passing references to Mitch and Murray, much of the work focuses on thematic elements of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, among them “social justice, personal freedom, and the right to express oneself” (59). While, as above, these themes can relate to various types of absence, none of Kane’s remarks place Mitch and Murray within this context. Benedict Nightingale and Abbotson pay more attention to these two characters, although their comments pertain to Mitch and Murray’s representation of corporate America. For Nightingale, “what gives *Glengarry Glen Ross* bite [...] is that Murray and Mitch, company directors who remain safely offstage yet are frighteningly omnipresent, have introduced a system which means that [the] salesmen are not merely in competition but effectively at war with each other” (91). Similarly, Abbotson notes that “Mitch and Murray, two men on the next rung up in the company, are talked about but never seen. They are as faceless as they are careless of the

men who work for them [...] The threat of instant unemployment they constantly offer is what spurs on most of these characters to sell” (*Masterpieces* 181). Philip Kolin gives perhaps the most complete treatment to Mitch and Murray, acknowledging that they “are responsible for many of the situations in the play [but] never step foot on stage” (3). Kolin paints a picture of corporate America at its most corrupt, describing the “inflexible rules of the contest by which the salesman [*sic*] live or die” and the way the contest “typifies big business in America” (3).

Within this framework, Mitch and Murray’s absence from the stage represents “so many bosses in America” who are “hard to get at”; at the same time, “their corporate name is often invoked, collectively or individually, for its power and authority” (Kolin 3). In spite of this recognition, though, even Kolin’s analysis of these characters lacks a significant discussion of the characters’ absence as a determining factor in the outcome of the play.

Discussion of Mitch and Murray as proximate cause for *Glengarry Glen Ross*’s onstage action finds weight in Hume’s key concepts of contiguity, priority of succession, and necessary connection, particularly as they relate to causation. Although the relevance of these concepts to Mamet’s real estate moguls might appear dubious, inspection of the play’s circumstances reveals that Mitch and Murray satisfy Hume’s causative requirements. As several critics have noted, these two men manage to affect much of the onstage action without ever “step[ping] foot onstage” (Kolin 3). Despite the uncertainty of their exact offstage whereabouts, though, Mitch and Murray nonetheless remain near enough to their subordinates for their influence to take hold quickly. Multiple references to conversing with Mitch and Murray, for example, demonstrate the contiguity between them and the events that transpire onstage. Williamson’s admission in the wake of the office robbery that he “talked to Mitch and Murray and hour ago” indicates that the boss’ relationship with their subordinates remains close enough to prove conducive to

communication, influence, and fear (Mamet 75). Roma's threat to Baylen that he is "going *downtown* and talk to Mitch and Murray" about having Baylen fired, meanwhile, alludes to a general physical location while also highlighting the profound effect that the mere mention of their supervisors has on the real estate agents (Mamet 97). Perhaps most compelling of all, Mitch and Murray embody Hume's assertion that a series of events contiguous among themselves may provide the cause for a given effect. The climactic events of the play, the office burglary and Roma's clever swindling of the unsuspecting Lingk, occur as a result of the intense competition among the real estate agents. This competition arises in part from a desire not to be fired, the fate awaiting the bottom two sellers at the termination of the office sales competition. The sales competition in question originates with Mitch and Murray, though their motives for doing so do remain obscure. All of these interrelated events, however, ultimately have the same cause: Mitch and Murray.

With contiguity established between Mitch and Murray and the onstage action of Mamet's play, priority of succession and necessary connection solidify these men's causative status. Priority of succession should seem straightforward enough, but given the nuanced reading of events necessary to clarify contiguity, this second facet of causation also requires a careful examination. That a cause should precede its effect eventually proves reasonable and true in the case of Mitch and Murray. The case of the real estate sales competition offers an application of priority of succession. Although the exact details regarding the sales competition's duration do not receive clarification during the course of the play, Levene and Williamson's argument in the play's first moments establishes that the competition has begun prior to the curtain's rising onstage. Levene makes several references to "the board," insisting that if he doesn't "get on the board the thirtieth, they're going to can [his] ass" (Mamet 18).

Over Williamson's attempted explanations of the lead assignment procedures, Levene reveals that Mitch and Murray are "going to have a sales contest [...] Sales contest? It's laughable" (Mamet 20). While these comments might not necessarily confirm the timing of the sales contest or how long the sales board has hung in the office, Williamson's reference to the way leads are assigned "apart from the top men on the contest board" simultaneously supports assertions of a contest established prior to the opening of the play and alludes to possible consequences awaiting the contest's losers (Mamet 22). Since many of the events that comprise the play's onstage action stem from the pressure generated by the sales contest and its consequences, and because the sales contest is the brain child of the office bosses, one can surmise that the subsequent scenes demonstrate the effects of the causative role Mitch and Murray enjoy.

At the same time that Mitch and Murray satisfy causation's priority of succession requirement, the necessary connection that exists between this cause and the effects witnessed by the audience begins to coalesce. This concept, tenuous under even the clearest of circumstances, proves tricky to apply to these absent characters. The continuous threats to go downtown to see Mitch and Murray, hurled between associates in the sales office, indicates a reactionary attitude whose cause lies with the offstage characters. Furthermore, the manipulation of prospective buyers and the sales office robbery occur in response to the sales contest; whether or not the real estate agents actually want to own a Cadillac or a set of steak knives, none of them wants to lose his job because of poor sales results. In this environment, the necessary connection (or causal connection, to use tort law's terminology) between cause and effect lies in the fear generated by Mitch and Murray. Without this emotional manipulation, Levene, Moss, Aaronow, and Roma would have no impetus for reactionary responses to the events taking place around them. Mitch and Murray, rather than taking a causative position, would devolve into ineffectual supervisors

without the connection between cause and effect generated by the fear they instill in others. Because these men manage to keep their underlings within a vice grip motivated by fear, Mitch and Murray prove themselves the proximate cause of *Glengarry Glen Ross*'s onstage action.

Having reviewed Hume's criteria for causation, the absent Mitch and Murray clearly represent the proximate cause whose effects comprise the events that transpire onstage. Does their absence in and of itself bear any causative significance on *Glengarry Glen Ross*, though? While some scholars have touched on these men and the way their absence affects the onstage characters, few (if any) have discussed Mitch and Murray's absence as originating nearly all of the action that occurs onstage. This absence makes itself most keenly known in the speech patterns of the salesman Levene and Moss and the office manager Williamson. Levene's comments accurately reflect Kolin's assertion regarding invocation of the corporate name for its "power and authority" (3); he is the salesman most frequently urging Williamson to "talk to Murray" or "talk to Mitch" (Mamet 17-8). Levene also refers to his glory days as a salesman, when Mitch and Murray "*lived* on the business [he] brought in" (Mamet 22). These comments seek affirmation; one has to wonder if this search for affirmation would be as intense if Mitch and Murray appeared onstage to corroborate Levene's story. Moss uses these men as a scapegoat for the inequities of the sales contest in which the salesmen find themselves embroiled; it is he who says, "[...] who's responsible? [...] It's Mitch. And Murray" (Mamet 33). Because these men never appear onstage, though, Moss can more easily lay blame with the absentee supervisors without repercussion. Even Williamson's invocation of Mitch and Murray's names reveals the men's originaive power from offstage. This talking head spends much of his time referring to what "Murray said" or what "the word from Murray is" (Mamet 20, 62). Without his bosses' absence, though, Williamson would have no reason to play parrot for

the salesmen in the office. All of the characters in this play, in fact, act and react as a result of Mitch and Murray's absence.

Since Mitch and Murray, along with their absence, satisfy many of the criteria necessary for declaration as the proximate cause of *Glengarry Glen Ross*'s onstage action, the only question left to answer is that of foreseeability. Could a reasonable person foresee that these men's actions and absence would result in the events witnessed by the audience? Earlier portions of this chapter have revealed that Mitch and Murray remotely control the onstage action through emotional manipulation. In the pressure-cooker environment resulting from Mitch and Murray's sales contest and its consequences for the losers, one could feel compelled to resort to drastic measures—legal or not—in order to ensure victory. Whether selling shady real estate to unsuspecting buyers or stealing sales lead files from the office, the real estate agents' reactions make sense in light of Mitch and Murray's initial action: concocting the sales contest. At the same time, the real estate agents' onstage comments about their bosses display an understandable need to compensate for the inability to engage with their superiors. In the absence of the boss men, those left in the office might very well seek ways to understand the situation in which they find themselves. As such, the speech patterns displayed by Levene, Williamson, Moss, and Roma represent a logical response to Mitch and Murray's absence. Examination of the evidence, therefore, concludes that the events transpiring onstage in *Glengarry Glen Ross* are foreseeable consequences of Mitch and Murray's offstage actions.

As the most contemporary of the plays discussed in this thesis, *Glengarry Glen Ross* offers two absent characters who represent an amalgamation of characteristics displayed by earlier absent characters in American drama. Rather than have two absent characters individually influence different aspects of the onstage action or one absent character whose

effects prove varied and profound, David Mamet uses two characters who appear to function as one unit yet affect the play's events in multiple ways. Previous playwrights have maximized characters' absence in their efforts to provide a cause for what occurs onstage. In this play, though, Mitch and Murray provide the proximate cause for the onstage action through their own actions *and* their absence: first by concocting the sales competition, and then by remaining conspicuously absent while the real estate agents essentially self-destruct. By using these two men in multiple ways, their status as proximate cause becomes all the more potent. They overwhelm the stage in spite of their absence, and the audience witnesses the aftermath of the chaos they have initiated.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

Loss and absence, as mentioned in chapter 1, pervade twentieth century American drama. Some of the most compelling examples of these phenomena appear in absent characters. Throughout the American dramatic canon, absent characters repeatedly perform essential functions within their respective plays. In order to make sense of this theatrical device, though, one must provide a framework which will illuminate the value inherent in the myriad ways these characters affect the events that transpire onstage. This study has attempted to provide such a framework with David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* and tort law. Using Hume's theory of causation from his seminal work to further enhance tort law's definition of proximate cause, a new concept develops that applies to American drama studies. *Trifles*, *Waiting for Lefty*, and *Glengarry Glen Ross* offer only three examples of American plays whose absent characters function in the way outlined by the re-appropriated concept of proximate cause. The variety apparent even among the absent characters in these three plays merits the critical attention thus far denied them.

Tort law and David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* might initially appear an incongruous pairing for a discussion of American drama's absent characters. Further inspection, however, reveals that the concepts embodied by these two ideologies prove a propos for literary studies. Tort law's concept of proximate cause highlights the non-physical nature of a causative relationship. A proximate cause need not be the closest to its effect in space or time in order to be proximate. Rather, whether or not an effect is a reasonably foreseeable consequence of a given cause provides the key question for establishing proximate cause. Meanwhile, Hume's

seminal work presents three facets of causation that work neatly in tandem with proximate cause: contiguity, priority of succession, and necessary connection. Contiguity stipulates the proximity, whether directly or through a series of interrelated events, between cause and effect. Priority of succession requires that a cause always precede its effect temporally. Necessary connection offers the frequently intangible but nevertheless observable link between cause and effect. When considered together, tort law and Hume's work afford a new, nuanced understanding of causation, absent causes and effects, and the powerful influences these forces can exert throughout literary studies.

Extant scholarship pays some attention to absent characters in American drama, but most of this critical work focuses on the thematic significance of absent characters. This thesis does not intend to undermine the authority of well-established theatrical conventions, but instead strives to highlight an overlooked facet of these characters: the way they function within their worlds. As the proximate cause for a given play's onstage action, certain absent characters in American drama have a unique, overarching responsibility for all of the events experienced by onstage characters and audience alike. Many times, the absence of the character in itself proves the motivating force behind the onstage action. In a very real sense, to overlook these characters' roles as proximate cause is to ignore the entire premise for the play. These plays depend upon the absence of key characters in order for their stories to unfold.

The absent characters surveyed in this study afford three dynamic examples of proximate cause at work in American drama. Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* offers two absent characters who function as proximate cause for the onstage action in separate ways. Minnie and John Wright, although married and remaining offstage throughout the play, perform different causative roles. Minnie Wright's arrest leaves her removed from the onstage action, but the fact that she sits in

jail motivates Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters to explore her kitchen for items she might need or like to have. John Wright, meanwhile, has died prior to the opening moments of the play; however, his sudden death prompts the sheriff and county attorney to arrest Minnie Wright and search her house for evidence. Despite the fact that husband and wife both manage to play protagonist and antagonist to each other, one cannot deny that they also provide the proximate cause for *Trifles*'s onstage action. Without the death and arrest, the entire premise for the play collapses.

Whereas Glaspell's play presents two absent characters who provide multiple examples of proximate cause in American drama, Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*'s sole absent character embodies multiple absences that provide examples of proximate cause. Lefty Costello, the taxi drivers' union leader, remains missing from a key union meeting as the play opens. Without an explanation for Lefty's tardiness, the onstage characters argue over the decision to strike before sharing the circumstances that have brought them to the meeting. During the play's final moments, the onstage characters and the audience learn that Lefty has died under suspicious circumstances. The news of Lefty's death provides the catalyst needed for the union members to decide to strike. Lefty Costello thus manages to serve as proximate cause twice over: first by providing the title and premise for the play; and then, through death, giving the onstage characters the motivation to take a proactive stance.

The first two plays discussed in this thesis contain absent characters whose absence provides the proximate cause for the onstage action. David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, by contrast, uses two absent characters in a multifaceted approach to proximate cause. Mitch and Murray, the real estate office bosses, keep a vice grip on the men in their office through their actions and their absence. Their sales contest and its associated sales board spur many of the onstage characters to commit various crimes in the name of success and job retention. Although

Mitch and Murray's absence has little to do with the contest itself, they remain the masterminds and consequently bear some responsibility for the salesmen's actions. The bosses' absence does affect the onstage characters' interactions with each other, however; the constant threat of talking to Mitch and Murray downtown and the speech patterns evident among the real estate agents belie an influence most effectively explained by proximate cause. Meanwhile, these men maintain a much more antagonistic stance than do Glaspell's and Odets's absent characters. Even John Wright, despite his suspected mistreatment of his wife, becomes a victim at the hand of his wife. Mitch and Murray's oppressive influence over the onstage characters remains inextricably tied to their non-appearance onstage. Were these characters to appear, much of the tension that drives this Pulitzer Prize-winning play would dissipate.

While this thesis has demonstrated only the functional significance of absent characters in American drama, ample opportunity exists for further exploration of this topic. For example, many of the characters treated here stand in authoritative roles: John Wright as husband/spouse; Lefty Costello as union leader; Mitch and Murray as supervisors. The number of absent characters who enjoy positions of authority begs an explanation, particularly when these characters also act as proximate cause. When looked at in conjunction with other types of absent characters—parental figures and phantom figures, for example—this trend of placing absent characters in causative positions points to a more significant current within American drama. Whether one considers Sam Shepard's repeated use of absent fathers, Arthur Miller's invoked father in *Death of a Salesman*, the dead child over whom George and Martha argue in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, or even *Topdog/Underdog*'s "amazing Grace," potential explanations for the persuasive and persistent use of absent characters in American

drama deserves further exploration than this thesis can provide.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the potential connections between absent characters and the American psyche offers a tempting avenue for extending this study. Nevertheless, the ramifications of this trend bode well for the future of drama criticism and owes the concept of proximate cause credit for opening the doors to a new era of scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> For preliminary discussion of other absent characters, see Yoon; Burkman; Roudané *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Necessary Fictions, Terrifying Realities*, and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Toward the Marrow"; and Elam.

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