

Oleanna Study Guide

Oleanna by David Mamet

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Plot Summary

"Oleanna" is a short three-act play surrounding the consequences of miscommunication between a male college professor and his impressionable female student.

In Act One, Carol drops by her John's office, her professor. She is looking for guidance, as she is failing the class and is desperate to do better. When the curtain rises, John is on the phone with his wife Grace arguing about the house they are buying now that John has been offered tenure. John cuts the conversation short so he can address Carol, who sits across from him listening to the entire conversation. Now that she has John's attention, Carol complains that no matter what she does in John's class, she can't seem to get ahead. She's doing everything John has asked her to: she bought and read John's book, she shows up for class, she takes notes, but there's something in the language that she can't quite get a handle on. When it's clear that John doesn't have time to engage in a long conversation with Carol, John tries to dismiss her but Carol breaks down into tears berating herself as stupid. John attempts to console Carol by speaking plainly to her, dropping all pretense of the professor-student relationship. When Carol composes herself, she asks why John has put aside his important meetings to speak with her. He answers, "because I like you."

John's casual conversation continues as he benevolently offers Carol an "A" for her work thus far. He says she can start the course over and that grades don't matter. What matters to John is awakening her curiosity about the subject. He says that as long as she comes for regular meetings in his office to discuss class themes, he'll give her an "A." Throughout their meeting, Carol keeps careful notes of everything John says even though he urges her to put the notebook away. Their conversation continues with Carol growing increasingly more upset as John uses words she can't understand. She is so frustrated that she begins screaming and crying. To comfort her, John stands up and puts his arm around her, but she backs away and shouts "NO!" Soon after, John rushes out of his office to meet his family for a surprise birthday party.

Act Two begins with another meeting in John's office. Since leaving the first meeting, Carol has joined a support group that convinces her John sexually harassed her during the last meeting. She has brought up a formal complaint against him and delivered it to the tenure committee who are now holding a meeting to discuss whether or not John should be granted tenure. John has called Carol to the office to discuss the miscommunication and misconceptions of their last meetings. He seems sure that the tenure committee will dismiss her claims, and he would like to protect Carol before their decision affects her future. Carol's attitude from Act One has completely changed: she is more confident, realizing that she now holds power over John's future. Even though she admits the accusations might have been fabricated, John cannot deny that they occurred. He did put his arm around her and suggest private meetings in his office in exchange for an "A." Even though it could be argued that Carol has taken John's comments out of context, he cannot deny that they were ever said.



Carol's anger comes not from John's treatment of her, but from his seemingly elitist, flippant treatment of higher education. During their initial meeting, John compared college education to hazing and insulted the tenure committee. In Carol's mind, John's sins are sins against the entire student body, a bold display of the power struggle in academia: professors have all the powers while students are forced to follow their self-aggrandizing rules. In the report, Carol has accused John of being sexist and elitist. Towards the end of their conversation, John urges Carol to see him as a human being, not as a symbol for something larger: he has a family, a home, responsibilities, and a real love for his job. No matter what he argues, Carol refuses to be swayed. She wants to follow the rules set forth by the university and for the proper authorities to handle John's case. She stands to leave and John begs her to sit back down and finish their conversation. She refuses to listen, so John grabs her arm, which causes Carol to desperately shriek and scream for help as if she's being abused. Rather than fight back against John's physical restraint, Carol immediately shouts for others to help her.

In Act Three, John has realized that the tenure committee found some validity to Carol's complaint and has suggested disciplinary action in addition to retracting his tenure offer. Not only is John losing his house due to Carol's complaints, he also stands to lose his job. John is desperate for Carol to retract her complaints and admit that she misconstrued the events of their first meeting. He attempts to apologize for his contribution to their conflict, but Carol balks at his apology by saying that he doesn't fully understand the consequences of his actions. In her mind, John has tried to rape her - both physically and academically. She questions John's true belief in free-thought: if he believes that everyone should make up their own minds on issues, why is he questioning the tenure committee's decision to suspend him. Don't they have the right to free thought as well? In a role reversal from Act One, Carol is now controlling and condescending while John is pleading and desperate.

As their final conversation comes to a close, Carol presents her requirements if John would like her to drop her case. She would like him to support the removal of many academic texts, including the book John wrote himself, from the school library. This suggestion goes directly against John's view of free-thought and free-speech favoring Carol's extreme conservative agenda. This request causes something to snap in John's mind, and he suddenly doesn't care if he loses his job. He must stand up for what he believes in. He must fight against bullies and censors like Carol. He demands that she leave his office but before she goes, Carol chides John for calling his wife "baby." This comment steps totally over the line as Carol is no longer judging John's academic life but his personal life as well. He grabs Carol and begins beating her, shouting that he would never rape her - he wouldn't even touch her with a ten-foot pole - and that she has no right to comment on his marriage. He raises a chair above his head and threatens to throw it at Carol and calls her a "cunt." Carol collapses on the floor and repeats to herself "Yes. That's right ... that's right."



Act One: Part One (Summary and Analysis)

Act One: Part One (Summary and Analysis) Summary and Analysis

At the opening of the play, John is on the phone while Carol, the student, sits opposite him at his desk. John is on the phone with his wife, Grace, arguing about the home they are buying. The fact that the play opens with a telephone highlights the importance of communication in this play. John wants Grace to call their real estate agent, Jerry, so he can answer some "significant" questions John has about their land. John and Grace have already put down a deposit on their house, and Grace is worried that they're going to lose it. John wants Grace to distract the selling realtor for fifteen-twenty minutes until he can get down there himself. One of John's main concerns is whether or not the yard will be big enough for their son.

Throughout the telephone conversation, it is clear that John and Grace aren't communicating well. Although the reader can only hear the conversation from John's point of view, it appears that Grace thinks that John is minimizing her concerns. John is clearly distracted and feels rushed in the conversation because he has a student sitting in his office, waiting to discuss something with him. That student is Carol. It's also clear that Carol has been eavesdropping throughout the conversation, and when John finally hangs up the phone, she asks him what he meant when he called something a "term of art." John tries to explain the term, but he says it's one of those things that might have been explained to him a long time ago that he's long since forgotten. Carol seems inappropriately interested in John's conversation, and John feels the need to apologize to Carol for seeming distracted. Carol says, "You don't have to [apologize] to me," which seems to insinuate some intimacy between them (Page 9).

During John and Carol's initial exchange, the reader will immediately notice Mamet's distinct dialogue style in which few sentences are completed and characters are constantly interrupting each other. In "Oleanna", this gives the effect that John and Carol are talking AT each other rather than with each other. This is ironic because throughout the play, John complains that he wishes he and Carol could actually communicate. Keen readers will see that John rarely lets Carol get a word in edgewise. He talks over Carol, constantly interrupting her, showing that in their conversations, he is the dominant one.

Despite her interest in John's personal life, Carol has actually stopped by John's office to discuss his class, in which she is a student. It's clear that Carol is struggling and she asks John for guidance. John acknowledges how humiliating it can be for a student to ask a teacher for help, and he admits that he has no desire but to help Carol. He can tell she wants to do well in his class, but her work is failing. On her behalf, Carol is frustrated because she's doing everything John has asked her to: she bought and read



John's book, she shows up for class, she takes notes, but there's something in the language that she can't quite get a handle on. While Carol tries to defend her arguments about why she is struggling, John accuses her of making up her struggle because she's angry. Carol admits that she has problems, but they're due to her socio-economic background. She's had a different upbringing than most of the other students at this school. John suggests that maybe his class isn't right for Carol, and she becomes extremely emotional, crying out that she must pass this class. She continues to argue that she's done everything required, and John snaps that he is not Carol's father. Carol is shocked by this statement and starts to argue, incredulously, with John, but the phone rings: it's Jerry, the real estate agent.

When John hangs up, he asks Carol what she would like him to do. Carol, nearly in tears, simply asks John to teach her. She's read John's book and doesn't understand any of it, particularly the topic of "virtual warehousing of the young" (Page 12). Carol prattles on about how students have come from all over the country to learn at this particular college and this particular class, but she simply doesn't understand what John teaches. She walks around from morning until night with one thought running through her head: that she's stupid. It's clear that John doesn't want to get into a long conversation about Carol's self-esteem so he encourages Carol to come back once she's made a proper appointment during his office hours. Today, he has important phone calls to make and meetings to attend to. When she senses John is trying to shrug her off, Carol becomes increasingly manipulative saying that John thinks she's stupid and that she'll never learn. Her temper rises and eventually, she's shouting at John, "I failed. Flunk me out of [your class]. It's garbage. Everything I do" (Page 13).

When he hears this, John settles and tells Carol that he once felt worthless and pathetic as well. All his life, he grew up hearing how intelligent he was but people thought he acted stupidly. To John, the mystery of learning was ever present. The mystery of "how people learn ... which is what I've been speaking of in class. And of course you can't hear it, Carol. Of course you can't" (Page 14). This exchange is interesting because it highlights important gender roles in the play. Carol, a female, feels possessed by her failures. They define her. John, a male, on the other hand, feels empowered for overcoming his own feelings of self-doubt. One critic writes, "Mamet's female character is weak because of this self-doubt and negativity, while the male character is strong by contrast, having reversed this situation without any outside assistance."



Act One: Part Two (Summary and Analysis)

Act One: Part Two (Summary and Analysis) Summary and Analysis

At the end of John's long diatribe on the struggle to learn in the real world, he takes responsibility for Carol's lack of understanding saying that he's had other problems on his mind. He compares himself to a pilot who, while flying the plane, realizes that his mind has drifted and he's seconds away from crashing. He says that he'd like to speak to Carol personally - like a father would speak to his son - rather than as a student and teacher. He starts to say something very interesting about "We can only interpret the behavior of others through the screen ... we create" when the phone rings (Page 16). It's Grace calling with more questions and problems about the house. John speaks curtly to his wife, telling her that he's with a student and that he can't talk to her now. He ends the conversation by saying, "I love you. Listen, listen. I said, I love you" (Page 16), which again highlights the fact that John and Grace are not communicating well.

Carol realizes that John is buying a house because of his recent promotion and asks why he's chosen to stay with her when he has more important issues to deal with. John says, "Because I like you" (Page 17). Interestingly, in response, Carol says, "You said everyone has problems," which John actually never said (at least not yet). This is an important moment in the play because it is the first, and only, time that Carol fabricates something John has said. Although this tiny fabrication has little bearing on their conversation at the moment, it foreshadows Carol's tendency to spin the truth to her own best uses. Nonetheless, John talks about some of his problems (buying a house, his wife, his work) which seems somewhat personal and therefore inappropriate. His biggest problem, he asserts, is a problem Carol also suffers from: fear of failure. He breaks into long diatribe about the artificiality of higher education. The tests students encounter are, for the most part, designed by idiots: "There is no need to fail at them. They are not a test of your worth. They are a test of your ability to retain and spout back misinformation. Of course you fail them. They're nonsense" (Page 18). During his speech, he insults the tenure team (saying he wouldn't hire them to wax his car) and lets slip that his tenure hasn't been approved yet, but he's buying a house anyway.

At just this moment, when John is worked up about the artificiality of education, Carol interrupts to say that she's here to talk about her grade. In the midst of his emotion, John simply says Carol can have an A, even though she doesn't understand the material: "Your grade for the whole term is an "A." If you will come back and meet with me. A few more times. Your grade's an "A." (Page 19). It's important to note that previously, Carol had been solely concerned with her grades and passing the class. In Act 2, she forgets this concern and takes advantage of John's benevolent offer. This moment is critical in the play and has divided critics: some say that in breaking the rules



and holding secret meetings, John is insinuating an inappropriate relationship with his student. Others say that Carol takes advantage of the opportunity, spinning it to mean much more than John intended. If read one way, the exchange seems innocent. If read another way, John's motivations seem lascivious. Their conversation continues on Page 20:

CAROL: There are Rules

JOHN: Well. We'll break them.

CAROL: How can we?

JOHN: We won't tell anybody.

CAROL: Is that all right?

JOHN: I say that it's fine.

CAROL: Why would you do this for me?

JOHN: I like you. Is that so difficult for you to... There's no one here but you and me.

Their conversation continues as Carol cites further questions she has about John's lectures. She reads directly from her notes and when John asks that she put her thoughts in her own words, Carol is unable to. This particular lecture was about justice, and that every citizen is entitled to a speedy trial, a fair trial. John's point in the lecture was that there is a difference between equality and justice. One needn't stand trial unless he is accused. If one is accused, he is entitled to a fair trial, but one's life is not incomplete without a trial in it. In a way, he is making a parallel between trials and higher education: "So we confound the usefulness of higher education with our, granted, right to equal access to the same. We, in effect, create a prejudice toward it" (Page 21). In a way, John is arguing that society created a prejudice that anyone without higher education is less valuable than those with higher education. He asks Carol for her thoughts on the topic but continually interrupts her while she is speaking. Finally, Carol shouts "I'M SPEAKING," immediately shutting John up. Even when she has John's attention, however, she fails to fully formulate her thoughts. It's interesting to note, however, that as John speaks, Carol makes meticulous notes in her notebook. John reminds her that this is not a lecture, just a simple meeting, to which Carol ominously replies, "I want to make sure I remember it" (Page 23). This is an interesting statement because it seems that Carol desires to document the facts. As the play progresses, however, it becomes clear that Carol only wants to remember facts that she can manipulate later.

When it's clear that Carol has nothing valuable to say about higher education, John continues with a strange, somewhat inappropriate anecdote about how rich people copulate more frequently than poor people. To John, copulation is like higher education—it is not necessarily such a good thing. But education is so important to Carol that when he questions it, she becomes angry. When John suggests that Carol look over



some demographic charts, she explodes saying that she doesn't understand them. She is clearly frustrated and upset, so John stops talking and puts his arm around her. Immediately, Carol shouts "NO!" and walks away from him. Because Mamet rarely includes physical stage directions for his actors, this movement is particularly poignant. When John tries to shush Carol the way an adult shushes a child, Carol says, "I feel bad" and "I'm bad. (Pause). Oh, God" (Page 25). This exchange highlights Carol's emotional vulnerability. It appears as if she's had some form of abuse in her past life as the act of physical contact (John touching her shoulder) is immediately followed by shame. Although the moment has little importance in the first act, it will soon come back to haunt John.

In the middle of their conversation, the phone rings yet again. This time, Jerry says that the agreement on the house is void. John is outraged shouting that it's HIS house and that they can't take it away from him. As with the previous conversations, Jerry asks if John is coming down but again, John refuses. He continues to shout demanding that Jerry take Grace and leave immediately, leaving the home owner to "stew in it" before he suddenly stops short. It appears that all of these calls to lure John to the house have been fake. Grace was hoping to surprise John with a party at the new house to celebrate his tenure and was hoping to lure him out of the office early. Once again, this phone call highlights the struggle to clearly communicate, which is the central theme in the play. Carol overhears John's conversation and when he hangs up says, "They're proud of you" (Page 27).

JOHN: Well, there are those who would say it's a form of aggression.

CAROL: What is.

JOHN: A surprise.



Act Two: Part One (Summary and Analysis)

Act Two: Part One (Summary and Analysis) Summary and Analysis

John opens the second act with a long (two-page) speech about his philosophies on teaching. Carol sits across from him at the desk, listening. Although it's not stated initially in this act, Carol has recently brought up accusations against John to the tenure board saying that in their previous meeting, John sexually harassed her. Now, the tenure board is preparing a meeting to hear Carol's case. Despite the fact that John seems sure the board will immediately throw out Carol's claim, in the time it takes them to deliberate, he stands to lose the deposit on the house he's purchasing. The mortgage company won't sell him the house without his raise in salary and his tenure won't officially be approved until after the meeting. Ultimately, Carol's claim - whether founded or unfounded - stands to ruin John's life. He has called Carol in for this meeting in the hopes of convincing her to drop her claim so his tenure can be approved as scheduled.

When the curtain rises, John is in the midst of a long diatribe about his views on education. It is the longest uninterrupted speech in the entire play. John opens by saying that he loves to teach, and likens it to performing: two things he enjoys greatly. When he went into teaching, John had strong ambitions to change the face of formal education. His teachers had been stuffy, almost robotic, academic figures and he wished to address his students informally. Perhaps, he is willing to admit, he has taken that mission too far and addressed Carol's concerns too informally. When the possibility of tenure arose, John admits that he coveted it - the promotion, the recognition, and most of all, the financial security for himself and his family. John stresses the importance of his familial duties. He wants Carol to see him as a human being with responsibilities not only to the school but also to his family at home. He would never do anything to put their financial security in jeopardy. He further explains that when tenure was offered, he leapt at the opportunity to purchase a home for his family under the basis that tenure would be granted. Although Carol doesn't yet have a family of her own, John argues that she must understand the value of good home: "Now, as you don't have your own family, at this point, you may not know what that means. But to me it is important. A home. A Good Home. To raise my family." (Page 29).

Moving on to the upcoming Tenure Committee meeting, John is adamant that they will throw out Carol's claims of sexual harassment and that when they do, Carol will be shamed and embarrassed. Even so, in the time it takes, John will lose the deposit on the house he's picked out with his wife and son to further their lives. As a human being, Carol must understand the gravity of her accusations: they stand to ruin John's future. Somewhat patronizingly, John assures Carol that everyone gets frustrated with their teachers. As a schoolboy, even he was angered by teachers hurt and humiliated him,



which in fact helped lead him to become a teacher himself. He never wished to hurt or humiliate Carol, yet he never fully apologizes for his actions. Throughout the argument, John remains academic, dissecting their conversations almost like a scientist, analyzing with a literary brain. After receiving the report of Carol's accusations, John admits to being hurt and confused. On Page 29 he explains why he invited Carol to this meeting by saying, "I asked you here to ... in the spirit of investigation, to ask you ... to ask (Pause) What have I done to you? (Pause) And, and, I suppose, how I can make amends. Can we not settle this now?"

Carol balks at John's request, saying that he is simply trying to bribe her, to convince her that she's wrong to move forward with her case. She cites her careful notes as proof that all her accusations are true, but John is still confused. He genuinely doesn't understand how any part of their previous conversation could be misconstrued as sexual harassment. Pompously, Carol says that it doesn't really matter what John has done to her. It's much bigger than that. John's sins are sins against the entire student body, a bold display of the power struggle in academia: professors have all the powers while students are forced to follow their self-aggrandizing rules. In the report, Carol has accused John of being sexist and elitist. Her accusations of sexual harassment cite the story of fornication and the pretext of their last meeting: "He said that he 'liked' me. That he 'liked being with me.' He'd let me write my examination paper over, if I could come back oftener to see him in his office ... He told me he had problems with his wife; and that he wanted to take off the artificial structure of Teacher and Student. He put his arm around me..." (Pages 30 - 31). After reading from the official report, Carol demands John to deny that it happened. Of course he cannot. It did happen, but, in John's opinion, not in the way Carol's report projects it.

In a stark contrast to the previous act, Carol is far more empowered, often shouting over John, demanding that her point be heard. Throughout their last meeting, John repeatedly claimed that people don't say what it is they mean. In John's mind, communication is flexible and requires emotional context. Carol has interpreted John's words literally in her report, completely ignoring context. Because he's so confident that the board will dismiss Carol's claims, John says that he'd like to help Carol before things escalate. In a complete character turnaround, Carol is no longer interested in John's help. She is empowered by her newfound role as both victim and aggressor:

JOHN: ... What have I done to you? Oh. My God, are you so hurt?

CAROL: What I "feel" is irrelevant.

JOHN: Do you know that I tried to help you?

CAROL: I know what I have reported.

JOHN: I would like to help you now. I would. Before this escalates.

CAROL: (Simultaneously with "escalates.") You see. I don't think that I need your help. I don't think I need anything you have.



What makes Mamet's dialogue so interesting is that it can be interpreted many different ways. There are few stage directions to coach actors on delivery, which makes reading the text particularly ambiguous. In this scene, for example, it's not clear whether John's offer to help Carol "before this escalates" is really to protect Carol's interests or his own. It's also unclear whether Carol truly feels victimized by John's actions (if she did, would she attend another unsupervised meeting with him?) or if she recognizes the unexpected power this exchange has given her. The reader can only interpret Carol's behaviors. In the previous act, Carol was solely concerned with passing John's class. She was desperate for his help. He made no blatant sexual advances and certainly did not physically assault her. Now, Carol's attitude has flipped: she is no longer concerned with passing John's class; she is focused on retribution. Keen readers will remember the shame Carol felt at the end of Act One and wonder if she is acting out against a previous abuse. Perhaps she is taking control of this situation in ways she couldn't previously take control of abusive situations. This theory is all trajectory: there is no further evidence of abuse or manipulation in Carol's past. Other readers may side with Carol and feel that John has manipulated his relationship with Carol and used his position of power to make inappropriate advances. Interestingly, Carol unabashedly admits that whether or not the charges she has filed are true, John cannot deny they occurred. Ironically, during this second meeting, Carol says, "We don't say what we mean. Don't we? Don't we? We do say what we mean. And you say that, "I don't understand you" (Page 31). The entire play dissects the conversations that occurred in the first act. By the end, every sentence, every word, every nuance has been twisted into something else as both characters defend their innocence. As a result, "Oleanna" is one of the most controversial and talked-about plays to ever hit the stage.



Act Two: Part Two (Summary and Analysis)

Act Two: Part Two (Summary and Analysis) Summary and Analysis

As their conversation continues, Carol continues to exert her newfound power, talking over John, even shouting at him, demanding that she be heard. She dissects John's theories of education as a performance, which further antagonizes her frustrations: "You say that higher education is a joke. And treat it as such, you treat it as such. And confess to a taste to play the Patriarch in your class. To grant this. To deny that. To embrace your students." Claspng her notebook, Carol argues that John cannot deny her accusations because he said it himself because he admits he loves power. He loves "to deviate. To invent, to transgress ... to transgress whatever norms have been established for us. And you think it's charming to "question" in yourself this taste to mock and destroy ... You call education "hazing" and from your so-protected, so-elitist seat you hold our confusion as a joke, and our hopes and efforts with it. Then you sit there and say, "What have I done?" (Page 33). It's interesting to note that in the middle of her speech, Carol switches from a singular "me" or "I" to "us" and "we" perhaps embodying the voice of her entire support group - the group that encouraged her to bring charges of sexual harassment against John. The main point of her fury is not the alleged actions of sexual harassment, but John's seemingly flippant attitude toward higher education, something Carol holds in highest esteem.

As Carol stands up to leave, John pinpoints a key element of the conflict: Carol's and his inability to clearly communicate with one another. After Carol says "Good day" before her exit attempt, John says "Nice day today." In that moment, he is taking communication down to a base level, agreeing the day is pleasant. This agreement takes Carol completely by surprise; she doesn't understand what John is trying to do or why the pleasantness of the day is important until John explains. It is important because "it is the essence of all human communication. I say something conventional, you respond, and the information we exchange is not about the "weather," but that we both agree to converse. In effect, we agree that we are both human" (Page 34). This is important because John (and many of the readers) feels that Carol is attacking him as a symbol for something else. On page 32 he urges Carol not to see that he's not "a bogeyman." The introduction of this word "bogeyman" gives important insight into Mamet's view of the dangers of academia as a whole. In academia, particularly within the literary sphere, students are encouraged to analyze characters, plot devices and other objects as symbols of something greater, but although heralded in academia, this analysis offers no real-world skills. In fact, Mamet seems to be arguing that there is an inherent danger in teaching students this viewpoint. John worries that Carol sees him as a symbol of power rather than as a real man. By battling against John, she is, in some way, battling against the injustices of her life. Readers will remember Carol's complaints



of inequality in the school from Act One (that she comes from a different economic background than the rest of the students, and that she gave up so much to attend this school). The problem now is that Carol sees John as a symbol of power rather than as a man with his own fears and aspirations.

Additionally, Carol's accusation that John enjoys being the "Patriarch" of his class hints at the gender roles first presented in Act One. Power struggles and equality between genders is a longstanding issue in academia (among other issues, for many years women were not permitted to teach in elite universities - often referred to as "old boys clubs" - and even when they were permitted, were paid far less). John offhandedly makes a remark about his "white man's burden" (Page 23), which fanned the flames of Carol's frustration. Additionally, John called the tenure committee "Good Men and True" which further aggravates Carol because she knows one of the committee members to be female. In short, Carol's accusations include a strong accusation of John's sexism, a claim that will further escalate in the final act.

It is also interesting to note that whenever Carol cites her notes, John continues to ask her use her words, a request he repeatedly made in Act One. The fact that Carol cannot summarize her own thoughts highlights Carol's misunderstanding of the higher education system. At the end of Act Two, John once again tries to explain his role as a professor in the system. He cannot teach students anything, he can only offer his opinion, his view on the topics while trusting his students to make up their own minds in the end. Carol struggles to reconcile this position and demands facts. In Carol's mind, everything from education to sexual harassment is seen in black-and-white. This explains her loyalty to the notes, which forces the sexual harassment case into a he-said, she-said model, which ultimately places the burden of proof on the accused (in this case, John must prove that he did not intend to sexually harass Carol rather than Carol proving that she was sexually harassed). This model ultimately favors the victim. Although Carol appears to have the upper-hand in this situation, John is still perceived as a more powerful character because he still holds the ability to bring Carol to a stuttering stop with his rhetorical skills. Carol's power - her power over John's future and her verbal (shouting) power in this scene - are clearly attempts to cover up her debilitating self-consciousness and self-doubt.

During the second half of their conversation, the phone once again rings. It is Grace asking John's advise about how to proceed with the house. John assures her that he is dealing with the accusations now and that she should call Jerry. Desperately, John assures his wife that the deal will go through and that they will own the house, but it seems that Grace isn't convinced. She's worried that they're not only going to lose their deposit but also their dreams. After hanging up, John's dialogue appears more anxious or desperate than before. When faced with the finality of Carol's decisions his requests border on begging. In this moment, it's clear to Carol that she has all the power so she immediately rises to leave. John asks her stay and continue discussing the incident like adults, but Carol is no longer interested. When she rises to leave, John says, "Sit down, it seems we each have a ... Wait one moment. Wait one moment ... just do me the courtesy to ..." (Page 36). When it's clear that Carol isn't listening, John restrains her from leaving. Immediately, Carol starts shouting "LET ME GO!" and screaming for



someone to help her. As she screams, the curtain falls. This tiny action is a microcosmic study of the power struggle between these two characters. While John easily steps out of academia's conventions, Carol is nearly paralyzed by them. Within the sexual harassment case, Carol has perfected her strategy, again illustrated in this final action: Carol views herself as a weak, unable to fight back against John - either physically or rhetorically - so she relies on the conventions of systems. Rather than fight back against John's physical restraint, Carol immediately shouts for others to help her.



Act Three: Part One (Summary and Analysis)

Act Three: Part One (Summary and Analysis) Summary and Analysis

John has asked Carol back to his office against his better judgment. Even Carol admits that she was surprised by the offer and repeatedly stands up, saying that she'll leave. John wants to start everything over. To have just one meeting where he feels they are both being heard as rational adults, not as symbols for something else. Even though it "profits" Carol to carry on with her legal case, John asks her to hear him out. Much like in Act One, Act Three is full of false starts and interrupted thoughts, highlighting the characters' cyclic struggle to communicate. It is interesting to note because the balance of power has shifted, so too have their roles in the conversation. Now, Carol is the one constantly interrupting John, and whenever Carol attempts to end the conversation, John practically begs her to stay, to hear him out. In another interesting shift, John's concern for keeping his job mirrors Carol's initial concern with passing John's class. John is no longer interested in keeping his tenure, or even clearing his good name, he is solely concerned with keeping his job so he can continue to support his family. Carol says that the court officers told her not to have any contact with John, but she's here of her own free will. John is confused by this: why are court officers advising Carol. As far as he knows, the complaint is an in-house university affair to be handled by the tenure committee. John doesn't yet know that Carol has taken her case further, filing legal action saying that during the first meeting, John tried to rape her.

John starts out the third meeting by apologizing for his actions. He starts to say that he has read and reread Carol's accusations, but she immediately interrupts shouting that they're not accusations, they're proven facts. They begin to argue about whether or not Carol's complaints have been proven when the phone rings. John answers, shouting into the phone that he cannot talk now. The caller seems particularly concerned with John's mental state, seeming to ask repeatedly if he's okay. John assures the caller that he's fine and hastily hangs up the phone. Unbeknownst to John, Carol's accusations of rape have leaked to the outside world but John remains ignorant of the charges. These calls continue to come in throughout the final meeting, but as in Act One, it takes a number of calls before John actually receives the message (continuing the symbolism of broken communication). To keep things somewhat civil with Carol, he refers to her complaints not as accusations but as an indictment, a large word Carol doesn't understand which, of course, frustrates her. John is simply trying to start an acrimonious discussion of the events, but Carol will hardly let him get a word in edgewise:

JOHN: An "indictment"... is a ... "bill of particulars." A...

CAROL: All right. Yes.



JOHN: In which is alleged...

CAROL: No. I cannot allow that. I cannot allow that. Nothing is alleged. Everything is proved ...

JOHN: Please, wait a sec...

CAROL: I cannot come to allow...

JOHN: If I may ... If I may, from whatever you feel is "established," by ...

CAROL: The issue here is not what I "feel." It is not my "feelings," but the feelings of women. And men. Your superiors who've been "polled," do you see?

Carol's diatribe continues as she relentlessly argues that John's superiors have seen Carol's complaints and found John to be guilty. To be negligent. To be wanting and in error, and as a result, they have decided that he needs discipline. In exasperation, John agrees, he has just received word that the tenure committee has decided not only to revoke their offer, but to suggest academic suspension, meaning that John will lost not only the financial security of tenure but also his job. Carol is completely unsympathetic, saying that it is John's actions alone that have brought him to this sorry state. She sees that he is trying to "charm" her and convince her to drop the charges but she won't relinquish her power. She knows all his arguments: that he has worked hard for his career, that he has financial responsibilities, that she is ruining his future, but she doesn't care: "you sit there , and you tell me stories. About your house, about all the private schools, and about privilege, and how you are entitled. To buy, to spend, to mock, to summon. All your stories. All your silly weak guilt, it's all about privilege; and you won't know it. Don't you see? You worked twenty years for the right to insult me. And you feel entitled to be paid for it" (Pages 39 - 40). No matter what John argues, Carol has no interest in his complaints. She believes that John has worked hard for his career not for financial security or love of academia, but for his coveted position - that of a privileged white male with the power to insult her.

John is clearly blindsided by Carol's complete lack of empathy and asks, "Don't you have feelings?" and Carol jumps on that as indicative of his oppression - if she doesn't take his side, she is subhuman, like an animal, without feelings. Whether or not Carol personally regrets the charges against John, she cannot retract them because she has a responsibility to the institution, to her fellow students, to her group, to see the charges through: "Because I speak, yes, not for myself. But for the group; for those who suffer what I suffer. On behalf of whom, even I, were, inclined, to what, forgive? Forget? What? Overlook your ... it would be wrong" (Page 40). She reads from her trusty notebook citing many different quotes of John's flirting behaviors in class, including seemingly innocent phrases like, "Have a good day, dear" and "If you girls would come over here..." (Page 40). In Carol's mind, these innocuous phrases show not only John's sexist attitude toward his female students, but also his position of power. Using his "paternal prerogative," John speaks to his students the way a father might speak to his children. It's interesting to note that in Act One, John tries to explain highfalutin



academic themes to Carol "Listen: I'm talking to you as I'd talk to my son. Because that's what I'd like him to have that I never had. I'm talking to you the way I wish that someone had talked to me. I don't know how to do it, other than be personal" (Page 16). It seems that, at the time, John had honestly been reaching out to Carol (and perhaps his other students) in a friendly way to make academia a more welcoming environment. Readers will remember that John often felt alienated and humiliated by his professors, so his familiar language with students, however misguided, could be representative of his desire to create a relaxed, nontraditional, learning environment. Because he had no personal experience to model that rapport after, Carol interprets it as inappropriate.

Latching on to John's idea of an untraditional learning environment, Carol begins attacking his book. She reads from the book's inside cover, which says that writing is "of that fine tradition of inquiry. Of polite skepticism," which causes her to erupt: "You say that you believe in free intellectual discourse. YOU BELIEVE IN NOTHING. YOU BELIEVE IN NOTHING AT ALL!" (page 41). Carol's rage comes from the idea that John mocks the very institution that provides his ideals: his space for free intellectual thought, his financial security, his home, his position of power. Because Carol challenges this position, and now holds power over him, she acknowledges that John hates her, or at least, hates her power so much so that free discussion - free intellectual thought - is impossible. Carol admits that she hasn't come here to hear John's apology. She hasn't even come here to gloat. In a complete role-reversal, Carol has come to John's office to lecture him. If John thinks the recent turn of events in his life is unfair, she urges him to see the world from her point-of-view, from the point-of-view of her group: what's unfair is that some students must work hard to get into a good school like this, and when they get there, they are mocked and belittled by elitist teachers such as himself. Carol and her group have overcome prejudices (economic, sexual, etc) in order to learn, and when they arrive, they are forced to endure sexist language and physical advances. Again, she brings up John's arm around her shoulder. John insists that the touch was completely devoid of sexual content, but Carol shouts, "I say it was not. I SAY IT WAS NOT. Don't you begin to see ...? Don't you begin to understand? IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY" (Page 43).

This moment in particular highlights Mamet's concerns with the definition of sexual harassment. "Oleanna" was written in the midst of the political correctness movement of the 1990s. Common examples include phrases like African-American replacing Black or African, gender neutrality in writing, and great concern about interpersonal behavior that could be construed as sexual in nature or intent. Mamet hoped the play would highlight the absurdity of this movement through the relationship between his two extreme characters: John is completely insensitive to the dangers of political correctness and refuses to censor himself (either because of ego or because of ignorance). Carol, on the other hand, represents the absurd extremes of political correctness: If taken to its logical extreme, this mandated sensitivity could become so invasive, so overpowering that everyday interactions could be construed as sexual and could therefore be punished. Carol herself admits that her charges against John may be false but he cannot admit that they happened. Mamet's message, therefore, is that what began as a rule to protect basic human rights has been transformed into an unstoppable tool for the malicious and power-hungry.



Act Three: Part Two (Summary and Analysis)

Act Three: Part Two (Summary and Analysis) Summary and Analysis

In a turn of events, Carol now takes her moment of power to present John with her true agenda. She says she'll consider retracting the charges if John will support the removal of a list of books from the school library, effectively banning student access to the texts. John's book is among the listed texts. John is absolutely flabbergasted by the idea: it goes against everything he believes in, particularly free thought and academic freedom. Despite his sputtering, Carol reminds him that her group is entitled to an agenda as well. For a moment, John had considered breaking his personal ideals to keep his job, but in the end, the idea of legacy is far too important for him to bend his morality. Putting all pretense of professionalism aside, John shouts at Carol to "Get out of here ... Get the fuck out of my office" (Page 45). Giving him one final opportunity to reconsider, Carol presents him with a statement the group would like him to sign before they retract their claims against him. Fueled by anger and pride, John shouts that he has his name to think about - the name hanging on his office door - he is a teacher and a father: "I've got a book with my name on it. And my son will see that book someday. And I have a respon... No, I'm sorry. I have a responsibility to myself, to my son, to my profession..." (Page 45). It's interesting to note the sense of responsibility both characters feel in their situation. John feels the responsibility to protect free thought for all students, while Carol feels the responsibility to protect all students from John's elitist, condescending viewpoints. This is the key to the conflict of censorship: both sides feel they are bound to uphold certain ideals that intrinsically clash with their opponent's viewpoint.

What's particularly interesting about Carol's position is that the audience never fully understands her agenda or her motivations for wanting censorship in the schools. She presents a variety of frustrations at her socio-economic background, her relative impotence, and her simple lack of intelligence, but her true motivations for blackmailing John are hidden from the audience. The only part of Carol's character revealed to the reader is exactly what she reveals to John - which may or may not be an honest representation. Because she wants to keep her motives secret from John, they are also kept secret from the audience. Perhaps Mamet wishes to use this absence to suggest that, no matter what the motivations, sensitivity to political correctness may be exploited.

In the middle of their argument, the phone rings. It appears to be Jerry, again calling to make sure John is okay. Angrily, John assures Jerry that he's fine even though he no longer has a job and has been sleeping in a hotel rather than at home. He starts to ask Jerry to tell Carol that he'll be home this afternoon, but stops short. It appears that Jerry has finally told John the truth: that Carol has filed criminal charges against him. John



shouts, "What? Who, who what can they do...? (Pause.) NO. (Pause.) NO. They can't do th... What do you mean? (Pause.) But how ... (Pause.) She's, she's, she's here with me (Page 46). Although it's not written in the text, it is almost as if Carol is smirking when she says, "You tried to rape me. (Pause.) According to the law ... I was leaving this office, you "pressed" yourself into me. You "pressed" your body into me" (Page 46). John is absolutely shocked and calmly asks Carol to leave. As Carol stands, the phone rings one final time. It appears to be Grace because John calls her "baby." Before she leaves, Carol turns around and says, "... and don't call your wife "baby" (Page 47). This is the final straw. John pounces on Carol shouting and calling her names like "You vicious little bitch" and beating her wildly. He lifts a chair over her head as if to drop it on her and says, "Rape you? Are you kidding me? ... I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little cunt" (Page 47). Carol cowers below him on the floor as he lowers the chair and calmly rearranges papers on his desk. Carol merely looks at him and says to herself, "Yes. That's right" (Page 47).

The ending of "Oleanna" is meant to be shocking to readers and audience members alike. Carol's final statement, that John shouldn't call his wife "baby" crosses a line. Carol sees herself as an advocate for political correctness policing sexist men like John in the hopes of making the world a better place for women. Carol has clearly abused the power of a victim by escalating her academic complaints to legal charges. By chiding John's nickname for his wife, she is essentially saying that John's treatment of Grace is sexist and patriarchal. In this moment, she is insinuating that John's treatment of Grace is the same as his treatment of her, which in her mind, accounts to rape. By calling Grace "baby," Carol is snidely suggesting that John is raping her. In the end, John's violent outburst fulfills the prophecy of Carol's complaints. He does abuse and batter Carol. He does call her sexually explicit and degrading names that would fulfill any legal standards for harassment. The final questions lingering for the audience is whether Carol goaded him into these actions or if there here harboring in his character all along. Does a victim ever deserve to be abused? Carol's reaction - cowering in the corner repeating "Yes. That's right" could be interpreted two different ways. First, she could agree with John's definition of her as a "vicious little bitch" or a "cunt." Perhaps she's been called these abusive names before or finally sees the effect her actions have had on John's life. What's more likely, however, is that Carol is not agreeing with John's words but with his actions. "Yes. That's right" could be an acknowledgement that she saw John's violent actions coming, or even expected them. Either way, John has played into Carol's hands and she now has all the ammunition she needs to ruin his life.



Characters

John

John is one of the two main characters in the play. He is given no physical description and is simply listed in the character list as "a man in his forties." From the dialogue in the play, readers are able to discern a bit more about him. He is a professor teaching at a well-respected university. He doesn't adhere to traditional professor-student relationships and enjoys employing a "free thinking" environment in his classrooms. At the opening of the play, John lives in relative security: he is in the process of buying a new house in a middle-class neighborhood, enjoys a well-paying job (at which he is about to receive tenure), is white, well educated, and academically respected. This position makes him somewhat pompous and condescending, but he is good at heart. He seems genuinely concerned with awakening curiosity in his students and enjoys sharing his viewpoints with them. John's actions throughout the play are somewhat questionable: he may be inherently oppressive and may even sexually harass Carol, but he is a likeable character because he is open and honest with his emotions. He is genuinely confused and concerned by Carol's complaints. He honestly explains his motivations, desires, and passions hoping they will portray him as human rather than as a symbol for elitist power. Through the process of opening up to Carol - honestly describing his hopes, dreams, and fears for the future - John's character transitions from a somewhat vain self-righteousness to humble modesty. By the end of the play, John has been stripped of everything he values - his job, his home, and perhaps even his family - as a result of Carol's absurd quest for political correctness.

Carol

Carol is one of the two main characters in the play. She is given no physical description and is simply listed in the character list as "A woman of twenty." From the dialogue in the play, readers are able to discern a bit more about her. She is a student at a well-respected university and is enrolled in one of John's classes. At the opening of the play, Carol is struggling in the course and has come to John's office for guidance on how she can raise her grade and ultimately pass. From their first meeting, Carol lays out a wide variety of frustrations she feels as a result of her socio-economic background, her gender, and her relative lack of intelligence. As a result, Carol feels oppressed within the school and unable to reach her higher education goals. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that Carol is not interested in simply passing John's class, she is interested in gaining power, pushing a personal political agenda, and processing an unexplained amount of anger. Carol's character undergoes a stark change as the play progresses. In Act One, she is portrayed as a confused, depressed schoolgirl who only wants to do well in John's class. By the end of the play, Carol is a manipulative, intelligent woman pursuing a strongly developed political agenda. Based on the text alone, it's impossible to say whether Carol is a mature manipulator who assumes the role of a naïve schoolgirl to advance her political agenda, or if she is truly a naïve



schoolgirl swept up in the political agenda of an external force. Regardless of her motivations, Carol embarks on a political journey to advance the agenda of political correctness at the cost of John's livelihood. Some critics have argued that because John is honest while Carol is elusive, her character has been simplified into a villainous form to symbolize the dangers of government censorship. The play, therefore, creates a bogeyman not out of John, but out of Carol.

Jerry

Jerry is never seen on stage in the play but frequently calls John on the phone. He appears to be John's best friend, confidant, and liaison when dealing with the realtors during the purchase of his new home. Jerry phones John frequently to check on his emotional state and is the one who reveals Carol's decision to pursue criminal charges against John.

Grace

Grace is never seen on stage in the play but frequently calls John on the phone. She is John's wife, whom he sometimes refers to as "baby." Throughout the various phone calls, it appears that John and Grace don't communicate well, but are ultimately in love and looking forward to purchasing their new home together.



Objects/Places

John's House

John's House is the big purchase John hopes to make with the new raise from his tenure. At the opening of the play, he is on the phone with realtors ironing out the final details of the sale. As the play progresses, he loses his house and the down payment as a result of Carol's accusations.

Tenure

Tenure is what John has just been offered at his university. Tenure gives John a huge raise and ensures that he cannot be fired from his position. With the offer, John decides to purchase a new house before the tenure committee has officially approved his new opinion. John loses not only his tenure offer but also his job as a result of Carol's accusations.

The Group

The Group is an unnamed political party that Carol joins in the wake of her initial meeting with John. According to Carol, the group convinced her that John sexually harassed her during their meeting, and she refuses to drop the charges unless John meets the group's censorship demands.

John's Office

John's Office is where the entire play takes place over a course of three meetings. Very little description is given of the office, except that John has a large desk covered with stacks of papers, and a bookshelf where he keeps a copy of his book. The fact that all three meetings take place in John's office is significant because it is a secluded space where their dialogue cannot be heard. There are no witnesses to what transpires between John and Carol, which will create a true he-said, she-said environment in court.

Grades

Grades are what is most important to Carol during her initial meeting with John. She claims that as a result of her socio-economic background, she is unable to keep up in his class and is failing. All she wants to know is what she can do to get a high enough grade to pass the class. As the play progresses, Carol's other motivations comes to light.



Political Correctness

Political Correctness is at the heart of John and Carol's conversations. Carol feels that John's politically incorrect stories about fornication, and his seemingly sexist remarks about the tenure committee and his students, are blatant enough offenses to political correctness that they border on rape.

Free Thought

Free Thought is what John values most in his classrooms. He believes that students' imaginations should be sparked about academic topics, and that free thought - the ability to believe whatever you feel is right - is more valuable in school than subjective exams and grades.

Higher Education

Higher Education is what Carol values above all else. She claims to have worked hard and made many sacrifices to attend a respected university, and that from his protected, elitist position, John mocks her struggles and desires with his belief in "free thought." Carol's agenda is to bring censorship back into schools and uses political correctness as a way of pushing that agenda.

The Telephone

In the play, the telephone on John's desk represents communication. Throughout the play, John's telephone rings as people from the outside world attempt to get in contact with him. Over the phone, it becomes clear that John and his wife don't communicate well, and the theme of broken communication emerges.

John's Book

John's Book is his most prized possession. It represents a literary legacy of his beliefs, and he is proud of the fact that one day his son will hold a book with his name on the cover. Carol despises John's book and uses it as a tool to manipulate him while pushing her political agenda. She promises to drop her complaints against John if he will sign a statement requesting his book's removal from the school library. He flatly refuses.



Themes

Sexual Harassment

"Oleanna" was written in the midst of the political correctness movement of the 1990s, and Mamet's play is clear commentary on the dangers of differing definitions of sexual harassment at the time. Common examples of the 1990s harassment movement include phrases like African-American replacing Black or African, gender neutrality in writing, and great concern about interpersonal behavior that could be construed as sexual in nature or intent. Mamet hoped "Oleanna" would highlight the absurdity of this movement through the relationship between his two extreme characters: John is completely insensitive to the dangers of political correctness and refuses to censor himself (either because of ego or because of ignorance). Carol, on the other hand, represents the absurd extremes of the movement: If taken to its logical extreme, this mandated sensitivity in language could become so invasive, so overpowering, that everyday interactions could be construed as sexual and could therefore be punished. Readers (and viewers) witness the initial meeting between John and Carol and spend the rest of the play deciding for themselves whether John has taken advantage of his position of power to sexually harass Carol. Carol herself admits that her charges against John may be false but he cannot admit that they happened. Mamet's message, therefore, is that what began as a rule to protect basic human rights has been transformed into an unstoppable tool for the malicious and power-hungry.

At the end of the play, it is revealed that Carol has accused John of raping her. Every audience member - no matter whom they side with in the argument - can see that John never physically raped Carol. Given their interaction, the charges of rape and battery are extreme. Many audience members will interpret John's behavior as abusive and feel his punishment - suspension from the university - is justified. Very few audience members, if any, would argue that John deserves criminal charges brought up against him. Yet his situation is not unbelievable. What happens to John in the play could very well happen in real life. By presenting this reality on the stage, Mamet forces his audience to question the nature of sexual harassment. Mamet never supported censorship through the political correctness, and "Oleanna" begs audiences to question whether these perverted precautions can be avoided, or if political correctness should be scrapped altogether.

Higher Education

By pitting a university professor against a student, Mamet is irrevocably calling the idea of higher education into the arena. There is an innate balance of power in this particular type of relationship, with the student typically less powerful within a university setting than the professor. "Oleanna" turns that preconceived power balance on its head by creating a situation in which a power-hungry student threatens to ruin her professor's life. Through John's character, Mamet questions the need for higher education in



society. John believes that it is simply a means-to-an-end, and even likens higher education to hazing - students are forced to endure horrific rituals meant enforced by the administration to "teach" them what the administration deems valuable. John questions whether higher education is good for society or bad for it, and whether students actually learn. To combat this, he has employed "free thinking" in his own classes with the hopes of awakening student curiosity rather than imposing his personal knowledge. He requires students to put ideas into their own words rather than memorize other's definitions. As a result, students who struggle to form their own views, like Carol, struggle. When she confronts John about his teaching style, Carol is completely taken aback by John's views - that higher education may not be valuable. To Carol, there is nothing more valuable than a college degree, and she claims to have overcome serious obstacles and ridicule in order to achieve this dream. She claims that John's power has made a mockery of her hard work, and the hard work of other students in the school. This balance of power, and the need to have voices and opinions heard, is at the heart of the communication struggle in the play.

Communication

The struggle to communicate is an important theme in both the structure and delivery of this play. Mamet's distinct writing style is full of stopped sentences, interruptions, and unfinished thoughts, which makes the dialogue extremely difficult to read on the page. Mamet employs these interruptions for a variety of thematic reasons. First, they illustrate the power struggle between the characters. In Act One, John repeatedly interrupts Carol as she speaks, which shows the reader that John is arrogant and has more concern for his point of view than Carol's. Even when he asks Carol to answer questions, he interrupts her, which shows that he has little interest in what she actually has to say. By Act Three, it is Carol constantly interrupting John, which shows that she has no interest in his excuses. No matter what he has to say, she won't listen unless her demands (or the demands of her group) are met. In Act Two, there are fewer interruptions, which symbolizes that both characters are at their most willing to hear the other out, yet the pair are unable to reach a consensus.

Throughout the play, the phone on John's desk rings frequently. This symbolizes many things. First, through the ensuing conversations, audiences get a sense of the way John communicates in the "real world" outside of the classroom environment: he employs the same language as with Carol, which shows that he hasn't elevated his vocabulary to impress or demean her - it's simply the way he speaks. It also highlights John's somewhat broken down communication with his wife, Grace, and inadvertently exposes Carol to John's intimate relationship (the fact that he calls Grace "baby"), a moment that explodes the play's final scene. In contrast, audiences are given no context for Carol's real life communications, and therefore never sees Carol as she truly is. Carol mentions communicating with a group, but the audience never sees or hears this communication. Therefore, the audience never knows for certain whether Carol is manipulating John or being manipulated by the group (if it even exists). The entire play seems to be a study of how human beings actually communicate. In the end, John is forced to resort to physical violence when he feels his verbal message isn't being received.



Style

Point of View

Not Applicable - Play Format

Setting

The entire play takes place in John's office at the university, over a course of three meetings. Very little description is given of the office, except that John has a large desk covered with stacks of papers, a telephone, and a bookshelf where he keeps a copy of his book. Mamet rarely gives physical descriptions of settings or characters so that directors can interpret the words to suit many different situations. How might the message of the play differ if John worked in a tiny cubicle office without windows versus a vast corner office with marble ceilings overlooking the sea? In a way, physical descriptions of the office shouldn't matter: Carol's manipulation and the broken-down communication between them shouldn't be affected by outside facts. The heart of *Oleanna* is found in the humanity of it, regardless of socio-economic backgrounds, race, or age. The fact that all three meetings take place in John's office is significant because it is a secluded space where their dialogue cannot be heard. There are no witnesses to what transpires between John and Carol, which will create a true he-said, she-said environment in court. This model ultimately places the burden of proof on the accused (in this case, John must prove that he did not intend to sexually harass Carol rather than Carol proving that she was sexually harassed). This model ultimately favors the victim, which is, arguably, exactly what Carol intended all along.

Language and Meaning

The entire play is composed of dialogue between John and Carol, with very few stage directions or descriptions. At the opening of the play, John's language differs greatly from Carol's. He is an academic who uses an extensive vocabulary to convey his points. Carol, on the other hand, is an undergraduate college student who seems befuddled by John's language and frequently asks for definitions. As the play progresses, Carol's frustration increases as she shouts at John to simply say what he means, without artistic flair or elevated language. Mamet's goal in writing *Oleanna* this way, is to study the subtext of conversations - what people say versus what they really mean, particularly with common exchanges in light of the movement toward political correctness. On the page, John appears to openly communicate with Carol, but Carol misconstrues or manipulates what is said to further her political and personal agendas. The play focuses on dialogue and conversation alone, and it is written in Mamet's signature stop-start style. His plays are typically sparse on action, with notoriously realistic dialogue—so realistic that he has often been accused of tape recording conversations and transcribing them. Often, the rhythm and diction of Mamet's dialogue

is as important to the themes as what is actually being said. In the case of *Oleanna*, the constant interruptions are indicative of the characters' constant struggle for power.

Structure

Oleanna is a very short, three-act play discussing the effects of broken-down communication between a male university professor and his female student. The play is a very short 40-pages but showcases an extreme plot arc and exhilarating climax. Mamet's distinct writing style is full of stopped sentences, interruptions, and unfinished thoughts, which makes the dialogue extremely difficult to read on the page. Mamet employs these interruptions for a variety of thematic reasons, mainly because they illustrate the power struggle between the characters. Act One is the longest act in the play at 21-pages. In this act, all the important information is revealed. Although not much seems to happen on the page - John and Carol simply have a long conversation about education - the rest of play dissects every line from that conversation seeking out tiny nuances that may have been twisted into something else.

The communication between John and Carol is integral to the structure of the acts. In Act One, John repeatedly interrupts Carol as she speaks, which shows the reader that John is arrogant and has more concern for his point of view than Carol's. Even when he asks Carol to answer questions, he interrupts her, which shows that he has little interest in what she actually has to say. By Act Three, it is Carol constantly interrupting John, which shows that she has no interest in his excuses. No matter what he has to say, she won't listen unless her demands (or the demands of her group) are met. In Act Two, there are fewer interruptions, which symbolizes that both characters are at their most willing to hear the other out, yet the pair are unable to reach a consensus. The entire play is structured around the study of how human beings communicate. In the end, John is forced to resort to physical violence when he feels his verbal message isn't being received.



Quotes

"There are people out there. People who came here. To know something they didn't know. Who came here. To be helped. To be helped. So someone would help them. To do something. To know something. To get, what do they say? To get on in the world ... But I don't understand. I don't understand. I don't understand what anything means" (Page 12).

"Listen to this. If the young child is told he cannot understand. Then he takes it as a description of himself. What am I? I am that which can not understand" (Page 15).

"We can only interpret the behavior of others through the screen ... we create" (Page 16).

CAROL: There are rules.

JOHN: Well. We'll break them.

CAROL: How can we?

JOHN: We won't tell anybody.

CAROL: Is that all right?

JOHN: I say that it's fine.

CAROL: Why would you do this for me?

JOHN: I like you. Is that so difficult for you to... There's no one here but you and me (Page 20).

JOHN: ... that's my job, don't you know ... To provoke you.

CAROL: ... To provoke me? ... To make me mad? ... to make me mad is your job?

JOHN: To force you to ... listen (Page 22).

CAROL: (Pause) They're proud of you.

JOHN: Well, there are those who would say it's a form of aggression.

CAROL: What is?

JOHN: A surprise (Page 28).

JOHN: ... What have I done to you? Oh. My God, are you so hurt?

CAROL: What I "feel" is irrelevant.

JOHN: Do you know that I tried to help you?

CAROL: I know what I have reported.

JOHN: I would like to help you now. I would. Before this escalates.

CAROL: (Simultaneously with "escalates.") You see. I don't think that I need your help. I don't think I need anything you have (Page 31).

"But to the aspirations of your students. Of hardworking students, who come here, who



slave to come here - you have no idea what it cost me to come to this school - you mock us. You call education "hazing," and from your so-protected, so-elitist seat you hold our confusion as a joke, and our hopes and efforts with it. Then you sit there and say "what have I done" (Page 33).

"Because it is the essence of all human communication. I say something conventional, you respond, and the information we exchange is not about the "weather," but that we both agree to converse. In effect, we agree that we are both human" (Page 34).

"The issue here is not what I "feel." It is not my "feelings," but the feelings of women. And men. Your superiors, who've been "polled," do you see" (Page 39).

CAROL: My charges are not trivial ... the language you use, a verbal or physical caress, yes, yes, I know, you say that it is meaningless. I understand. I differ from you. To lay a hand on someone's shoulder...

JOHN: It was devoid of sexual content.

CAROL: I say it was not. I SAY IT WAS NOT. Don't you being to see...? Don't you begin to understand? IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY (Pages 42 - 43).

Topics for Discussion

David Mamet has a very distinct writing style, particularly when it comes to his dialogue. First, describe Mamet's writing style in "Oleanna". Then, explain how this distinct style reflects the play's themes and content. Does this style add to or detract from your enjoyment of the piece? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the balance of power between John and Carol. At the opening of the play, who holds the most power in their relationship? How can you tell? Describe how that power balance shifts through the course of the three acts. In the end, who has the most control in their relationship? How was that control gained? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What is the role of the telephone on John's desk? Why does it constantly ring? Who is trying to get a hold of John during his meetings? What does this tell you about his character? In the context of the play's themes, what does the telephone symbolize? In your opinion, is it used effectively? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

David Mamet's plays are notorious for being void of physical descriptions and stage directions. Why do you think this is? Consider the few stage directions present in "Oleanna". What importance do these particular actions have in the play? What does John's physical actions at the end of the play say about communication in general? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

There are two main interpretations of Carol's character: that she manipulates John from the beginning, and that she is manipulated by a powerful "group" looking to advance a political agenda. In your opinion, which of these interpretations makes the most sense? Why? In the end, does it matter how Carol is viewed? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Both John and Carol have distinct viewpoints about the importance of education. How does John feel about higher education? How does this viewpoint contrast with his lifestyle? Compare / contrast John's views of higher education with Carol's views of higher education. How do these views contribute to their conflict? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Discuss Carol's final line in the play, "Yes. That's right." What do you think she meant this? What does this final line tell you about Carol, her motivations, and her relationship with John? Do you think this is an appropriate way to end the play? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.