

Destructive Consequences of Pseudo-Education Powers in David Mamet's *Oleanna*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the destructive consequences of pseudo-education on its two only characters, John (a professor) and Carol (a graduate student) in David Mamet's play *Oleanna* (1992). At the same time, *Oleanna* functions as a microcosm of pseudo-education, representing it as a global dangerous problem. An attentive reading of this perplexed play reveals that the struggle for power and accusations of sexual harassment in the play are no more than symptoms of the fatal corrupted education. Already corrupted, John and Carol enter the play with pre-meditated designs: John trying feverishly to dissuade Carol from pressing charges against him; Carol determined to derive linguistic and physical evidence to condemn John. Ultimately, both of them pay the heavy price of their corrupted minds. John loses his tenure and all its privileges; and Carol 'learns' more about tricks and set-ups. *Oleanna* is an urgent call for educational reformation worldwide. Metaphorically, readers and spectators compare what happens to John and Carol with

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similar situations in real life; and they go further to see the sharp contrast between pseudo-education and the constructive positive one.

Pseudo-education destroys the minds and identities of John and Carol in David Mamet's play *Oleanna* (1992)¹, respectively a professor

¹ "It seems that 'Oleanna' is in fact 'Oleana'. Ole Bull (1810-1880) was a Norwegian virtuoso violinist who took his music all over the world until, finding himself in Pennsylvania, he fell in love with the place. In 1852 he bought a vast tract of land and tried to set up an idealistic community, which he called 'Oleana', where fellow Norwegians could live peacefully and escape the tyrannies of their homeland. In fact, the land he had bought was completely unsuitable for farming and the venture failed. He, and many other settlers who had joined him, lost a great deal of money and most of them, Ole Bull included, returned to Norway. The site of his venture is now the Ole Bull National Park. An 'oleana' is thus used to refer to the hopeless pursuit of an idealistic, even utopian, dream where all things are naively held to be possible". <http://www.benchtheatre.org.uk/plays0203/oleanna.html> Following is a version of the Norwegian folk song *Oleanna* (*Oleana*), (Translation from the Norwegian by Pete Seeger)

Ole, oleanna, ole, oleannaole, ole, ole, ole, ole, oleanna Oh to be in Oleanna,
that's where I'd like to be

Than to be in Norway

and bear the chains of slavery

Little roasted piggies

rush around the city streets

Inquiring so politely

if a slice of ham you'd like to eat

Beer as sweet as muncheners

springs from the ground and flows away

The cows all like to milk themselves

And the hens lay eggs ten times a day

The women there do all the work

As round the fields they quickly go

Each one has a hickory stick

And beats herself if she works too slow

In Oleanna land is free

The wheat and corn just plant themselves

Then grow a good four feet a day

While on your bed you rest

yourself <http://www.mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=4455> Mudcat Café

We think that the title of *Oleanna* is an imitation of this Norwegian folk song dreaming about a better life in America. Unfortunately, the Norwegian peasants who migrated to America were very much disappointed by a harder life. Using it as a title for his play, Mamet invites a metaphoric relationship between the story of the song and *Oleanna*. Both the singer and Carol follow the wrong path for fulfilling a dream. The singer and his

and a student. The whole three-act play takes place at John's university office. Being the only two characters in the play, John and Carol take a full chance to go into long dialogues on sex, power, knowledge, understanding, and education, interrupted sometimes by John's phone calls. Act One presents Carol sitting in John's office complaining about her inability to understand John's lectures and the text book, prescribed for the course. It is noticeable that Carol does not ask for help in passing the course because she thinks she deserves to pass it. Instead, she focuses on her following the instructions, attending the classes, taking notes, and reading John's text book:

I did what you told me. I did, I did everything that, I read your *book*, you told me to buy your book and read it. Everything you say I ... (*she gestures to her note book.*) (The *phone rings.*) I do. ... Ev ... (Act I, p. 9).²

But this announcement by Carol comes fairly late. For in the pervious eight pages of the play, she practically does not say anything meaningful except asking about the meaning of "term of art" (Act I, p. 2). At the beginning, she patiently listens to John's long phone call (Act I, p. 1-2). Readers and spectators get involved early in the play, in questioning the nature of the relationship between Carol the student and her professor John. The big question must have to do with Carol's rudeness and John's tolerance of her rudeness. John's perplexity in giving the meaning of "term of art" is confronted with Carol's shameless sarcastic question "You don't know what it means...?" (Act I, 3).

On his part, John does not mind Carol's frequent use of sharp direct questions and the negative form "no". For example, a quick count of her "nos" in the first ten pages of the play reaches up to twenty times. This kind of dialogue is anything but a conversation between a graduate student and a professor at a university office which is, besides the

group follow their feelings and emotions to make a better change. They failed. Similarly, a young generation, Carol and her group wrongly use their desire to develop education. They find John an easy target for their dissatisfaction with the whole educational system. A serious academic problem as such requires much more than blind emotions of taking revenge.

² All quotes are taken from David Mamet's *Oleanna*. 1993 Edition. Random House of Canada Limited. Toronto.

classroom, a very formal place. Being over twenty, and a graduate student, Carol is not a fresher, and being in his forties John is not a fresh professor. They both must have a good idea about what an academic institution is and the rules of conduct that must be followed therein. Throughout the play, John and Carol dive more and more into informality, disrespect, rudeness, hatred, hurting, and enmity towards each other. Passivity rules *Oleanna*. This paper deals with the notion that *Oleanna* is about the pre-empted and pre-meditated intentional abuse of education at the hands of its two characters, John and Carol. The basic reason for the abuse of education in the play is obviously John's and Carol's unknowingly-perceived pseudo-education. Ironically, both of them live under the illusion that they have received genuine education. It goes without saying that a young woman like Carol is still struggling and very much confused about running her education and life in general. However, as we shall see, she has already been "injected" with enough doses of pseudo-education to play the dirty game of dishonesty and deception against John. Although fairly young, she is professional in shameless immoral set-ups and tricks.

Criticism on *Oleanna* thus far has, according to our limited research, missed the point: critics who discuss the play as a struggle for power,³ and those who focus on sexual harassment and political correctness⁴. The other more serious weakness in *Oleanna's* previous criticism is the misunderstanding that many critics have fallen into, of the plot structure, in thinking that Carol learns how to empower herself in the process of the action, and that in a similar way John develops his defense mechanisms as the action of the play proceeds.

³ The following critics interpret *Oleanna* as a continuous struggle for power between John and Carol: see Eun-Joo Lee (2005): pp177-195; Lee Sheldon (2004): p 88; Susanne Tietze (2003): p76.

⁴Paula Kamen sees *Oleanna* to be "about a crazed college student who is brainwashed by radical feminists to accuse a professor unfairly of sexual harassment and thereby destroy his career". p 37.

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/mutahu/Doc?id=10032560&ppg=46> ; See also J. K. Curry who thinks of *Oleanna* as a play " about exaggerated or distorted claims of harassment, for John actually has said or done many of the things in Carol's report, though in slightly different context". <http://mtprof.msun.edu/Fall1997/JKCURRY.html>

On the other hand, this paper reveals the fact that John and Carol are victims of their pseudo-education: consequently, their ignorance destroys them both: John loses his tenure and all related benefits, and Carol gets more corrupted by her own nasty plan to destroy John. This article explains how the play proper is the final stage of Carol's pre-planned attack on John, and John's pre-planned counter-attack to try to defuse Carol's set-ups. Carol's SEEMING weakness and confusion in Act One are no more than the practical tools of her first major step of a big vicious plan to destroy John⁵. She is already powerful the way she appears in acts two and three, long time before the 'real' action of *Oleanna* starts. Similarly, John is never the same. He is never got by surprise as he seems to pretend, but he only underestimates Carol's evil smartness. It is evident that the structure of the plot is so complicated to the degree of alluding many readers into the concepts of the struggle for power and sexual harassment. These two major elements in the play are professionally interwoven with the basic and most important one: the destructive influence of pseudo-education. Mamet cleverly creates Carol to fool not only John but also whoever of the readers and spectators chooses not to follow the play attentively. She becomes a great dramatic tool to bring together the play and the audience into a serious involvement of thinking about the problems discussed and to, then, decide about them. To achieve this purpose, Mamet leaves most of the action to what is literally unsaid in the play. He takes readers and spectators into a campus to imagine what has happened between John and Carol before the first scene of the play, which starts with their meeting in the office. Most readers and spectators already have their own, direct or indirect, real university experiences. Mamet is so smart to activate the

⁵ Puzzled by Carol's radical change after Act One, and failing to see it as an inseparable part of a pre-planned scheme to trap John then to destroy him, the following critics have missed the point and reasoned Carol's change to the encouragement she receives from her class mates or Group. It seems that these critics have forgotten that it takes not an encouragement but may be a spell of magic to make the big change in her happen the way it does. Encouragement alone can never create the Carol we meet in acts Two and Three. In this context, Carol never changes as a smart and a tricky character, but she only moves from low profile technique in Act One to the offensive and destructive techniques in acts Two and Three. For these critics' misunderstandings, see Sibelan E. S. Forrester (2004): p176; Meyer Dinkgr (2001): p 37; Mark Fortier (1997): p 94; Goggans (1997): pp 433-441.

spectators' minds and get them directly involved not in the general way of attending a stage, but in the specific way of bringing to mind their educational experiences.

Therefore, Mamet checks spectators' own education, and he does not mind if the play initially fools them to think of it as a student's problem begging, in her own way, for passing a course. Or, if the spectators take the play to be about a womanizer professor who is professional in seducing female students through trapping them to come to his office under the ploy of tutoring them. Again, all of this and much more are in *Oleanna*, but they are not the real basic issues. The very complicated and difficult-to-answer embedded questions in the play are: Is this what education all about? Is this why parents send their daughters to schools? Is this why professors get their Ph.Ds? Is this why America or any other country establish universities? These questions the play raises are not merely sympathetically moral ones.

Mamet and readers or spectators are very much aware that such a phenomenon of power abuse on the part of professors or students is not an overwhelming one in the world universities. However, few as they might be, pseudo-professors and students still posit the greatest danger ever for the whole world. How many generations of students would a professor teach? How many families would spring, in long time run, from Carol?

Not less dangerous are the deviations that John and Carol as failures in education go into to compensate for their lack of good education. They are as multiple as what ignorance might generate. It is "tragically" funny how John praises and justifies stupidity and failure:

All right. (*Pause*) I came *late* to teaching. And I found it Artificial. That notion of "I know and you do not"; and I saw an *exploitation* in the education process. I told you. I hated school, I hated teachers. I hated everyone who was in the position of a "boss" because I *knew* -- I didn't *think*, mind you, I *knew* I was going to fail. Because I was a fuckup. I was just no goddamned good. When I ... late in life... (*Pause*) when I *got out from under*... when I worked my way out of the need to fail. When I ... (Act I, p. 22).

This is one, among many examples, on how John and Carol use what seems to be a philosophy of education to cheat each other and finally devastate each other. A high level of patience and carefulness is needed when reading *Oleanna* to Figure out our way in its very perplexed plot. Reading the whole text, readers become aware that the plot is somehow up-side-down. In other words, John and Carol know exactly, before the actual play starts, where they are heading. Each has already known what to expect and has already plotted his/her plan⁶. The way they address each other proves a long-time acquaintance. John never rejects Carlo's many protests that she has not understood anything from his classes and his book:

No. No. 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." How can I do that if I don't, if I fail? But I don't *understand*. I don't *understand*. I don't understand what any-thing means ... and I walk around. From morning 'til night: with this one thought in my head. I'm *stupid*. (Act I, p.12).

Such a language cannot be the language of a first-time acquaintance. John has not said anything offensive to Carol before her nervous speech. So, Carol must have known John really well to talk to him on equal terms. Readers do not expect a graduate student to use seven negative forms in an eight-line speech when addressing her professor, especially when the professor is as calm as John. Besides, Carol is the one in need of help, and those who are in need usually behave themselves, suppressing their nervousness even when offended. Most importantly, one wonders why John practices such a high degree of self-control in dealing with Carol.

⁶ C. W. E. Bigsby believes that John and Carol have not learned from their past experiences: "Mamet's characters have no functional past. They are stranded in the present. The past is inert, dysfunctional, like the discarded objects in Don Dubrow's resale store in American Buffalo. It does not inform the present except as the origin of a now degraded language or as the source of a set of decayed and disregarded values". p 216. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/mutahu/Doc?id=10014980&ppg=216>

In Act one, Carol repeats what we just read in the above-mentioned quotation that her aim is understanding, knowledge, and academic help. However, three pieces of evidence in Act One defy her claim. The first piece of evidence, she goes personal right away and listens carefully to John's talking on the phone. It is impolite for a student to do so. Likewise, it is very unusual for a professor to run personal matters while a student is sitting and listening. If it were an office hour, then again John is wrong and in cases of important personal calls, like the ones he runs, he should close the door, and should not allow students to stay. Immediately after the long call, Carol is rude enough to ask about part of it: "what is a 'term of art'?" The second piece of evidence, both John and Carol have no problem whatsoever with interrupting each other spending long time (stumbling, tattering) before they discuss Carol's problem (Act I, p. 2-9). In normal professor-student meetings, we understand the students' (especially female students) embarrassment coming to the professor's office. More often students who ask for help in passing a course would be more embarrassed. What is really strange here is John's mumbling and stumbling; he becomes very equal to his student. Why has such a degradation in John's professorship occurred? How come that a professor, who supposedly has nothing to fear concerning his relationships with students, would be confused and hesitant? Therefore, John must have had something else in mind knowing what he has immorally done against Carol and, God knows how many, other female students. The final piece of evidence, the most important element in the play is timing. From his phone calls, it is very obvious that John is extremely busy and in a great hurry to leave: "I'll be there in fifteen" (Act I, p. 2). Does John have the nerves to argue with a girl-student her grade problems?! Does he have time, not only to listen to Carol's story, but strangely enough, to tell about his own educational personal record? Knowing that he is in the process of buying a new house, John himself invited Carol to his office:

You paid me the compliment, or the "obeisance" -- all right -- of coming in here ... All right. *Carol*. I find that I am at a *standstill*. I find that I ... (Act I, p. 5).

Why would John thank Carol for coming, at this very critical time for him? Even more important than buying the house is John's tenure⁷ approval:

As I said. When the possibility of tenure opened, and, of course. I'd long pursued it, I was, of course, *happy*, and *covetous* of it (Act II, p. 43).

Earlier, Carol directly asks John: "They granted you tenure" (Act I, p. 23), he answers: "Oh no, they announced it, but they haven't *signed*. Do you see? "At any moment ..." (Act I, p. 23). Living at such critical times, even a sick-minded professor (a sex-maniac) would totally avoid any little risking incident. Why would John go this far with Carol risking his career, family life, and future?

Now it is crystal-clear that the problem between John and Carol started a long time before the beginning of the play's action. It is evident that things started at least two semesters before. When John makes his generous offer to Carol "Your grade is an 'A'. Your final grade is an 'A'.", Carol's answer is "But the class is only half over..." (Act I, p. 25). Earlier, Carol "dreams" of passing the course: "I *have* to pass this course, I ..." (Act I, p. 9). Why should John go into such a concession! Carol's later-exposed power, her seriousness, and awareness are already known to John and they explain his very lenient way when dealing with her.

In Act Two, we meet a "new" Carol: outspoken, serious, to the point, and tough:

⁷ "This system is not used in Britain, but is common in many (not all) American universities. On first appointment, a professor or lecturer is effectively on casual contract, on approval; that appointment only becomes permanent once 'tenure' has been granted. A request for tenure is made to a panel of senior professors of the university who consider the applicant's standing in their particular field, the status they will bring to the faculty and, significantly, their publication record. You may apply for tenure at any time you like, after about six or seven years is typical, and if the application is successful, the job security is very high indeed, almost for life. Certainly a professor with tenure cannot be dismissed for professional reasons or for ceasing research or publication. However, if the application is refused, there is no appeal, and the applicant must leave straight away". <http://www.benchtheatre.org.uk/plays0203/oleanna.html> Bench Theatre.

Professor. I came here as a *favor*. At your personal request. Perhaps I should not have done so. But I did. On my behalf, and on behalf of my group. And you speak of the tenure committee, one of whose members is a woman, as you know. And though you might call it Good Fun, or An Historical Phrase, or An Oversight, or, All of the Above, to refer to the committee as Good Men and True, it is a demeaning remark. It is a sexist remark, and to overlook it is to countenance continuation of that method of thought. It's a remark ... (Act II, pp. 50-51).

So, Carol is already empowered by her own smartness as a representative of her group. She obviously has done her homework in trapping John for a considerable time before coming to his office. John must have sensed this a long time before their first meeting in the play. This well explains his shaky subject position. It is not humbleness or an educational (behavioral) technique for a professor to demean himself to a student the way John does. What in the world is the teaching or personal merit in John's confessing to Carol that he has been known to people as a stupid person? :

Carol: People said that you were stupid...?

John: Yes.

Carol: When?

John: I'll tell you when. Through my life. In my childhood; and, perhaps, they stopped. But I heard them continue.

Carol: And what did they say?

John: They said I was incompetent. Do you see? And when I'm tested the, the, the *feelings* of my youth about the *very subject of learning* come up. And I ... I become, I feel "unworthy", and "unprepared", (Act I, p. 17).

Listening to John's 'confession,' we might forget Carol as being a student and think of her as a Catholic Church! Surprisingly, John is voluntarily taking the position of a poor 'sinner' who confesses to an excessively authoritative 'priest' (Carol). Moreover, it is ironic how John accepts his 'priest' to be inferior to him. Scandalously, John's confession concerns the very core of what a professor must not be.

John's language in *Oleanna* is a loud stupid cry for sympathy. His pseudo-education has had totally corrupted him to follow the cheap slogan "the end justifies the means". It would be unfair to accuse John of being immoral, because such a supposition upgrades him to be a person who knows the difference between what is moral and what is immoral. In other words, he is overwhelmingly corrupted to the degree that morality is no longer one of his options. To solve his problems with Carol John unfortunately gets immersed into new ones. So the best he can come up with is to live under the illusion that he can out-smart Carol, he starts with circumlocuting around the problem, interrupting her frequently. (Act I, pp.1-12).

Failing, John tries a second more stupid technique: revealing more of his own personal stupidity (Act I, pp.12-24). Considering himself stupid, and describing education as "*garbage*" (Act I, p. 16), John ignorantly thinks that he can fool Carol through bringing himself down to her level. Then he beautifies the conversation a little telling Carol: "Listen: I'm talking to you as I'd talk to my son". Carol's straight tough answer-question: "Why would you want to be personal with me?" (Act I, p. 19) surprises him a little, but he continues with his negative preaching on education. Then Carol inquires about his buying a new house and his promotion ending with the question: "Why did you stay here with me?" (Act I, p. 20). Cornered, John answers "Because I like you" (Act I, p. 21). By this time in the play, John is under the immense pressure of the phone calls urging him to leave to finalize the house-buying and he is already overwhelmed by the tenure's great worry to think for a second in liking Carol. Actually, he is trying to protect himself from Carol's and her group's eminent danger of completely destroying him. Smarter than him, and leading him to more degradation, Carol diffuses what John has tried

to accomplish by her tough and direct request: "I want to know about my grade. (Act I, p.24). Now John moves to his most stupid technique, thinking it to be his most effective weapon:

John: Let it ring. I'll make you a deal. You stay here. We'll start the whole course over. I'm going to say it was not you, it was I who was not paying attention. We'll start the whole course over. Your grade is an "A". Your final grade is an "A". (*The phone stops ringing.*)

Carol: But the class is only half over...

John: (*Simultaneously with "over"*): Your grade for the whole term is an "A". If you will come back and meet with me. A few more times. Your grades' an "A". Forget about the paper. You didn't like it, you didn't like writing it. It's not important. What is important is that I awake your interest, if I can, and that I answer your questions. Let's start over. (*Pause.*) (Act I, p. 25).

Saying all these non-sensical promises, John is dying to gain more time. He plans to delay any action against his tenure by Carol and her friends. Carol realizes his techniques very well; that is why she never responds positively to his generous offer of the "A" grade. Instead, she reminds him of the rules: "There are rules" (Act I, p.26).

Things get worse and more dangerous for John in acts Two and Three. In retrospect, this is exactly what Carol has planned for: to destroy John. Reporting John to the court and the Tenure Committee was exactly Carol's and her group's decision even before her first visit to his office. To do so, she needs solid concrete evidence. Intentionally, Carol accepts John's invitations to his office, and what goes on during the meeting was a pre-emptive set-up by her and her group. What happens later leaves no doubt that her only purpose is to collect more, real and fabricated, pieces of evidence enough to officially condemn John, and ultimately annihilate him academically, socially, and psychologically. John has had little or no chance to escape the conspiracy. His last resort was to try to dissuade Carol or at least to delay her.

Does John deserve what has happened to him? Yes, he does. What about Carol? Is she right in hurting John? Yes ,she is. Are her ways in hurting him right ones? Definitely, no. They are mean and cheap ways.

John and Carol have always tried to compensate for their shortage of the powers of education and knowledge by adopting a variety of immoral set-ups⁸. Carol takes the lead in Act Three to analyze why and how she and her graduate classmates have had to move against John. She expands her educational problems to include the body of students who have been oppressed by the university. At Carol's hands, *Oleanna* becomes like a full-scale trial of Education in practice. John represents the system or administration, Carol studentship. Like a professional lawyer, Carol investigates the professor in Act One, deriving the raw material of the "crime". In Act Two, the professor is given a chance to defend himself. In Act Three, Carol and her group take the unwavering decision to go all the way in convincing the authorities that John is a corrupted professor, academically and personally. Carol is very much aware that it is a very tough case because it is about power. That she and her group have to follow new untraditional ways to force authorities to condemn John. Carol is very much aware that John is no more than the tip of the educational corruption's 'ice berg'. Her real fight is not against John, it is rather against the entirely corrupted educational system. Without being forced to do so, it is extremely difficult for such a system to fire John. Carol initially accepts that the administration (authorities and professors) "seemingly" have the upper hand. But by the end of the play things get reversed. Through exposing the corruption of the educational system, students become more powerful and make the decisions.

⁸ C. W. E. Bigsby relates John's and Carol's corruption to their insecurity: "These characters are now rootless people for whom the old maps no longer apply. They are adrift. John is not destroyed by Carol. He is already insecure in his relationship to the world. Carol is neither a victim nor an avenging harpie. She genuinely does not understand the world in which she moves and eagerly grasps at anything that seems likely to render it into her hands. The power that both seek and deploy is no more than a sublimated desire to feel that they command their lives. The irony is that to exert that power is to lose what they most seek, some sense of consolation, harmony and peace". p 246. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/mutahu/Doc?id=10014980&ppg=246>

Theatrically, the case for Mamet does not need more than two characters who would be just enough to represent education. Discussing the corruption of professorship and studentship, Acting like a judge Mamet needs to have things in control. As a case in point for the corrupted education, things in *Oleanna* need to be specific, clear, and well-organized. A bigger number of issues and characters might cause confusion for the readers and spectators who, like Mamet, would take the roles of judges to decide about first Carol and John, then to widen the scope of judgment to include whoever commits similar educational violations⁹. The world of *Oleanna* is the world of the most dangerous and perplexing problem ever: the corruption in Education. Having many universities, professors and students would create a multiplicity of details at the expense of discussing the real issues. With only one professor and one student, *Oleanna* is an extremely intricate "jungle" of complexities. Power, sex, and education are so mingled to create something like a Gordian Knot¹⁰. Carol resorts to "sex" to penetrate the long-time established corrupted educational system and then attack it. She is aware that John is protected by the status quo (Act II, p. 56) which unless shattered would grant him the tenure. What greatly helps Carol is John's vulnerability. Carol has been taking notes of John's behavioral violations for two semesters:

April seventeenth: "If you girls would come over here..."
I saw you. I saw you, Professor. For two semesters sit there, stand there and exploit our, as you thought, "paternal prerogative," and what is this but rape; I swear to God. (Act III, pp.66-7).

Carol's report to the tenure committee, which John has and reads parts of (Act II, pp. 47-9), includes a long list of accusations: John being sexist, elitist, and a waster of class time. More direct violations have to

⁹ This paper has made it clear that despite Mamet's highly professional way in narrowing the representation of pseudo-education down to a very limited number of characters and details, yet many readers, critics, have misread *Oleanna*

¹⁰ "The Gordian Knot is a legend associated with Alexander the Great. It is often used as a metaphor for intractable problem, solved by a bold stroke ("cutting the Gordian Knot"). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordian_Knot

do with inviting Carol to his office, telling her that he liked her and being with her. "He'd let me write my examination paper over, if I could come back oftener to see him in his office" (Act I, p. 48). Later on, these many accusations culminate in Carol's greatest accusation against John of rape: "You tried to rape me. *(Pause)* According to the law. *(Pause)*. (Act III, p. 77).

What is really disgraceful and shameful in the whole process of confrontation between John and Carol is its exemplification of a war between the university administration and the body of students. Such a split is the root of all educational evils. Spectators and readers alike, are real witnesses to many of Carol's claims which are not mere accusations. They really take place in Act One. Furthermore, Carol's rudeness and directness in addressing John are not definitely ungrounded. For a graduate student to be so rude with her professor hides what has been going on in class for two semesters. John is fully aware that Carol is backed by a group, her classmates and other students. He knows it for a fact that Carol's power is not only a personal one. Otherwise, he would not have had allowed her to stay long in his office and humiliate him every now and then¹¹. He would have kicked her out a few minutes after her arrival. Smashing him in Acts One and Two, Carol finally, in Act Three, spells out everything in a lawyerlike language. It would be a great unfairness for Carol to quote less than every single word she says in Act Three to show how powerful she was, is, and will be. What she well-planned in Acts One and Two come to an amazing evaluation of the educational system in Act Three. What Carol could not avoid using are the dirty tools of corruption her professor has been using for more than twenty years (Act III, p. 65). Carol believes that the nexus of the problem with John and university is the abuse of power:

Then why do you question, for one moment, the committee's decision refusing your tenure? Why do you question your suspension? You believe in what *you call*

¹¹ N. G. McClernan thinks that *Oleanna* "is not really about a man-woman misunderstanding, or a student reacting overzealously against what she truly believes is sexual harassment. This play is about a shadowy Group with an agenda to censor free thought by any means necessary. The Group creates a situation where John's life is ruined unless he capitulates to its demands". <http://www.mcclernan.com/mcclernan/oleanna.asp>

freedom of thought. Then, fine. *You* believe in freedom - of-thought *and* a home, and, *and* prerogatives for your kid, *and* tenure. And I'm going to tell you. You believe *not* in "freedom of thought", but in an elitist, in, in a protected hierarchy which rewards you. And for whom you are the clown. And you mock and exploit the system which pays your rent. You're wrong. I'm not wrong. You're wrong. You think that I'm full of hatred. I know what you think I am. (Act III, pp. 67-68).

Carol has realized that she cannot beat the system through protesting against the exams and grading procedures. She cannot also be effective and make real change reporting John's weaknesses in teaching. With the power in their hands, professors can easily refute the students' claims through parroting how lazy, careless, and stupid the students are. Maybe the most effective weapon students can use is to accuse professors of womanizing. This weapon works "beautifully" especially with academically-weak professors who would by necessity be ill-mannered. It also might work with liberal professors who really believe in the freedom of thought. Such a weapon works all the time with any professor. Because everywhere in the world it is always a sensitive issue whenever a professor is accused of flirting with his female students. Even when proven not guilty by a university or a court, any professor would forever suffer from the aftermath of sexual accusations.

The rightness and responsibility Carol talks about (Act III, p. 65) do not exempt her from great degradation into cheap corruption. She totally contradicts her repeated claims to understand (Act I, pp. 6-8, 12-16, 36. Act II, p. 52), to learn, and to get good education. Instead of reporting John as a very weak teacher, she jumps to the dirty business of trapping and tricking. Doing this, she copies the defects she condemns. What is the difference now between her and John? She might even be more deceptive than him.¹² Believing everything she says for a second,

¹² Discussing the negative nature of Carol, Jonathan Culpeper explains "In *Oleanna*, we witness a schema change in Carol, but it is a negative one, towards greater stereotypicality and depersonalization: she moves from an early view of John as an empowering tutor to a later view of him as oppressor, male predator and obstacle to her empowerment

Carol and her friends never negotiated things directly with John. For two semesters, they never talk directly and frankly to John that they do not understand his lectures and his books. Again, let us assume John to be the worst teacher morally and academically, how come that a class of graduate students never discuss such a dangerous matter with him. How many reports did the class write to the administration about the serious violations John had committed? Obviously, there is no mentioning of any claim, oral or written, throughout the play by any student against John prior to Carol's.

Throughout the play, Carol never ever hinted to such a thing. It is mean, cheap, and criminal for Carol and her group to wait for the extremely critical time of the tenure to file what Carol calls proved facts (Act III, p. 64) against John. It is a pure act of cheap revenge; which is anything but educational. Carol and her group become blindly driven by their emotions of hatred for John and the desire to destroy him, in a cheap act of taking revenge. If they had been rightly educated, they would have directed their academic dissatisfaction into a reasonable plan of reforming the educational system. But instead, they actually add more corruption to the already-corrupted system. A system that soon takes Carol's allegations against John as facts and truths. Knowing the text, readers realize that only some of the allegations are true, but never sufficient to deprive John of the tenure. How could the Tenure Committee deprive John of tenure through only using Carol's words against him; no witnesses, no physical evidence. Long time before Carol's first visit to his office, John has been very much aware and scared of her possible use of some articles of Political Correctness¹³ against him. Whenever used, Political Correctness is fatal. A faithful product for the corrupted educational system, Carol takes a short cut to destroy John.

who has to be ruthlessly removed". *Exploring the Language of Drama : From Text to Context*.

London, , GBR: Routledge, 1998. p 116.

<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/mutahu/Doc?id=10070613&ppg=127>

¹³ "Political Correctness ... is a term used to describe language, ideas, policies, or behavior seen as seeking to minimize offense to gender, racial, cultural, disabled, aged or other identity groups. Conversely, the term "politically incorrect" is used to refer to language or ideas that may cause offense or that are unconstrained by orthodoxy". http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_correctness

Mamet makes sure that he condemns both parties: teachers and students; the university. Contextualizing *Oleanna*, Mamet widely broadens the scope to include every school and university worldwide.

Mamet is deliberately and carefully vague about the setting. It takes place in a university, but we don't know which one; the location is not specified; the course Carol is studying is not mentioned; no indication of their ages is given. Only one of the characters even uses a name; the other is identified - for the purposes of the script only - simply as 'John' . As far as possible, it seems, the characters could be any of us, and the setting could be anywhere¹⁴.

Of course, not all professors and students are Johns and Carols, but the phenomenon of exploiting education is always there. The number of teachers and students involved is not small to be neglected. Needless to say that the influence of educational corruption directly affects every single part of a society. To say the least, professors and students are family members and/or parents who have to do their share in life. Unimaginable are the ramifications of a corrupted teacher or student.

Responsibility for Mamet is not to copy the bad examples, but to imitate the basic true values that are almost natural. What if Carol, and whoever in her place, be really a responsible citizen and follow the legal and moral steps to stop or change a bad teacher. At first, she should talk to him in order to discuss whatever she thinks wrong or unsatisfactory. If things do not work this way, why does not she see the department head, discussing and writing a report. Going upward in the hierarchy (the dean, the vice-president, the president of the university...), surely some solutions would be reached. It is unfair to say here “no, no, nothing would happen”, if every student is a responsible individual, things will change. Even in a highly corrupted educational system, there must be a chink for Justice and rightness. A purely corrupt system would have produced only criminals and idiots.

¹⁴ See <http://www.benchtheatre.org.uk/plays0203/oleanna.html>

Killing Carol or seriously hurting her at the end would not solve the problem or end it, that is why John “*lowers the chair... moves to his desk and arranges the papers on it*” (Act III, p.86). Carol is saved of great hurt or death, saying “Yes. That’s right”, and these three words are repeated again to be the last words of *Oleanna*, Mamet is perfectly right not to end the play in any way. As an idea and a concept the corruption of education can never have a beginning or an end. *Oleanna* presents a sample of a huge problem. Corrupted education allows for no puzzling or riddling. Mamet hides nothing of the plot to make it unfamiliar or astonishing. Without wondering about the fate of the hero or the marriage of the heroine, *Oleanna* remains to be a one-united organic whole. The huge responsibility of the audiences/readers is to discuss the state of education.

The big difference readers and audiences find with *Oleanna*, compared to many other plays and literary texts, is that they have specifics to imitate. No chance for too broad too general fruitless discussions. They find themselves thinking about a clear case where only two characters are involved in an educational problem. The professor’s office is the only place of action. As the play builds up, readers and audiences find out that the problem is deeper and more complicated than what it seems to be. Carol’s strategy does not ridiculously aim at pressing John to give her a high grade. Refusing any relinquishment, she questions John’s professorship and, more importantly, the whole educational system. The action of the play goes round and round between Carol and John. At the end, neither Carol nor John change their states of mind or subject positions. The end of the play circularly moves back to open up the beginning again, Inviting the readers to re a hyphen consider the complexity of the problem and its wider universal scope. Therefore, *Oleanna* demonstrates the devastating consequences of pseudo-education at both the individualistic and social levels worldwide. It follows that in the absence of creative solutions, the case of *Oleanna* and all other “*Oleannas*” worldwide would never reach ends.

Pseudo-education and its destroying consequences is a nasty viscous circle that clutches everybody. Mamet makes sure to include not only the professor but also the student as unsympathetic exploiters of pseudo-education . At first blush, the play seems to be an interesting story

limited to a professor and a student playing the immoral game of doubtful friendship of a teacher trying to tempt his student, and a fortune-hunter student who tries to use the teacher's lust to "milk", out of him, the highest grades possible. But after careful thinking and contemplation, attentive readers should find out that Mamet is challenging them and checking their ability to see the play as a complicated example for genuinely deep layers of the perplexing horrible world of pseudo-education. Readers are urgently invited to think about how to break this viscous circle and destroy it altogether. Mamet and readers of Mamet become aware of the universal scope of the problem and they understand that the student of today is the everybody of tomorrow, and that unless serious and urgent actions are taken to stop the sweeping and devastating consequences of pseudo- education, these consequences would continue to catharsistically destroy the entire world's institutions and accomplishments. Violence, wars, and all types of backhandedness are mainly the inevitable consequences of pseudo-education.

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