

David Mamet's *Oleanna*: A Contravention of University Ethics Through Controversial Defamation

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Abstract

Objectives: This study aims to explore the potential risks associated with lecturer-student interactions in a university setting. It also endeavors to underscore the roles that instructors and students play within the academic environment and how they respond to any potential issues that may arise.

Methods: The study adopts a critical approach to analyze Mamet's *Oleanna*. It relies on textual analysis of the play, complemented by an interview with the dramatist David Mamet to enhance the understanding of his intentions. The language used by each character, considered a fundamental element, is crucial in unveiling their genuine motivations.

Results: The study demonstrates that many significant problems can be identified and effectively managed. It also affirms that the relationship between the professor and the student is inherently contentious unless built on mutual respect and understanding. Ignoring appropriate university ethics may lead to instances like Carol defaming Professor John. Therefore, establishing a calm and secure learning atmosphere, free from improper behavior by some lecturers or students, is deemed the most suitable approach.

Conclusions: The study concludes that individuals may intentionally conceal their true intentions to avoid embarrassment. Manipulating goals to justify means is identified as a violation of university ethics. Professor John, instead of violating university ethics like Carol, accepted defamation and humiliation. This emphasizes the importance of maintaining ethical standards in academic settings.

Keywords: Defamation, ethics, Mamet, *Oleanna*, University.

انتهاك الأخلاق الجامعية من خلال التشهير المثير للجدل في مسرحية (أولينا) لديفيد مامت

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ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحري عن المخاطر التي تنتج عن الانسجام أو التفاعل الذي يمكن أن يحصل بين الأستاذ والطالب في المحيط الجامعي. وتؤكد أيضاً على الأدوار التي يلعبها بعض الأساتذة والطلبة في البيئة الجامعية ومدى استجابتهم لبعض المشاكل المحتملة وقوعها.

المنهجية: في هذه الدراسة، جرب اعتماد أسلوب نقدي لتحليل مسرحية مامت (أولينا). كما اعتمد على التحليل النصي للمسرحية الذي جرى تعزيزه من خلال المقابلة مع الكاتب المسرحي (ديفيد مامت) من أجل تحقيق الفهم الحقيقي لكتابات. وقد عُدَّت اللغة المستخدمة من قبل كل شخص عنصراً أساسياً وحيوياً لكشف الدوافع الحقيقية لكل فرد في هذه المسرحية.

النتائج: أظهرت النتائج أن هناك الكثير من المشاكل التي يمكن تشخيصها ومعالجتها بطريقة سلمية. وقد أكدت الدراسة أيضاً على أنَّ العلاقة بين الأستاذ والطالب إن لم تكن مبنية على التفاهم والاحترام المتبادل تبقى مثيرة للجدل على نحو متواصل. وإن جهل (كارول) للأخلاق الجامعية الصحيحة شجعها على تشويه سمعة البروفيسور (جون). لذلك أصبح العمل على تحقيق بيئة جامعية آمنة وهادئة خالية من السلوكيات غير اللائقة التي قد تمارس من قبل الطلبة أو ربما من بعض الأساتذة هو من الأمور المهمة الواجب إكمالها على نحو سليم.

الخلاصة: وفقاً لخلاصة الدراسة فإن هناك الكثير من الأشخاص الذين قد يخفون نواياهم الحقيقية عن عمد لتجنب الوقوع في الإحراج. وقد خلصت الدراسة إلى استنتاج يؤكد أن التلاعب بالأهداف لتبرير الوسائل يعد انتهاكاً للأخلاقيات الجامعية. ونتيجة لذلك فقد قبل الأستاذ (جون) التشهير والإذلال بدلاً من التحول إلى شخص منتهك لهذه الأخلاقيات على عكس ما فعلت الطالبة (كارول) من أجل أن ترضي رغباتها وتتمكن من تنفيذ خططها الشيطانية.

الكلمات الدالة: التشهير، أخلاقيات، مامت، أولينا، الجامعة.



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1- Introduction

In fact, the objective of a skilled playwright is to create a true successful drama that is distinguished by the plot, language, and characters that give it its distinct soul. The dialogue that defines modern drama expresses the characters' public opinions, as opposed to their concealed intent, which can reveal the surprise. Since the language employed and the plot of most contemporary American drama are so genuine, it never feels as though the characters are constrained by a specific script. Due to this, the modern American playwrights used to base their dramas on actual incidents that they had either personally experienced or that had been reported by reliable media or people. A brief biography of the playwright himself could help audience understand his perspectives and ideologies. Thus, it is essential to explain the author's background and viewpoints before discussing any social and sensitive issue. David Alan Mamet, who was born in 1947, is a well-known American playwright. He is skilled in addressing societal concerns that are connected to people's lives through his creation of plays, picture books, and novels (Adler, 2009). However, Mamet's family's instability has significantly influenced his actions and accomplishments, creating a bleak impression in the process. All of these early struggles and difficulties had unusually frightening impact on both Mamet's internal psychology and his career as a playwright. His multiple migrations appeared to be made more difficult by his family's relocations. Regarding Mamet's premise of theater, it is explicitly applied to address the need for trust and community that underpins the majority of his plays. Consequently, he states the following to clarify the significance of the theater:

In a morally bankrupt time we can help to change the habit of coercive and frightened action and substitute for it the habit of trust, of self-reliance, and cooperation. If we are true to our ideals we can help form an ideal society—not by preaching about it, but by creating it each night in front of the audience—by showing how it works in action. (Mamet, 1993, p.27)

He believes that the theater is "in its essence, is not repeatable. For Mamet, each occasion, like each life, is unique. That is part of what gives it value, and that fact is in itself a value" (Bigsby, 2004, 35). In regards to this, Edward J. Esche (2004, 84) states in his essay "David Mamet" that for Mamet, the theater is the setting where intent and intention can be honored "no subject is a fit subject for drama which does not involve a possible choice. Choice is thus an absolute necessity, both from the point of view of character and, by extrapolation, from the point of view of the audience". Mamet made his playwriting debut in the turbulent 1970s. He received praise from critics for his plays' distinctive but severe poetic language and incisive societal criticism. Accordingly, the playwright's viewpoint and the viewpoints others have read are very different.

When one pays close attention to Mamet's characters, they develop a sense of interest about what they might be up to beyond the audience's immediate suspense. The characters in Mamet's writings are represented as being fixated on monetary gain and the yearning for friendship. In their Darwinian quest to claw their way to the top of the American corporate ladder, they find themselves growing more and more cut off from interpersonal relationships. Mamet's plays do, in fact, tend to shock a specific segment of theatergoing public for four main reasons: "its alleged machismo, misogyny, violence (physical and verbal), and the Jewish cultural heritage that he [Mamet] claims for himself, especially in his most recent work" (Piette, 2004, 74). For this in mind, the dramatist is anxious to do his task well since the artwork does not depart from the adventure's framework.

In terms of Mamet's understanding of people, he concentrates on personifying man as a unique species in his plays. His characters are troubled and agitated; they have forgotten how to communicate and have stopped contemplating why they are still alive. Though the plays themselves disclose the warped logic of such individuals as well as the nervousness with which they strive to mask it with boredom and self-revealing appeals, they also reveal the characters' desperation to do so. It seems unlikely that environment, fate, or heredity are to blame for Mamet's characters' inability to understand either themselves or one another. Mamet frequently emphasizes how difficult it is to survive in the current, corrupt society, but he also continuously points out that he appreciates human perseverance, even as he gives the audience situations that are frequently dismal.

In Mamet's literary works, one could find a delicately ambiguous adoration for even his most horrifying characters as they battle with the difficult chore of living and loving, sometimes to comic effect and other times to nearly tragic impact.

This is complex and perplexing for some. The character is given the chance to share his viewpoint on delicate themes tackled by the playwright himself in several of his later works. Whatever form it takes, the main aim of this study is to learn more about how universities operate and the unforeseen evil plans that students devise. For this reason, Mamet goes to great lengths to reveal wicked intents and covert acts in this regard. However, it is challenging to understand the real motivation behind a person's erratic behaviour. Due to the keen anticipation of certain viewers, the surprise at the play's conclusion is realized, lending it its importance. By stirring up more conflict, Mamet is successful in capturing the two characters' wounded psyches as a result of miscommunication to show the extent of their suffering in this play. Art and drama in particular should depict the suffering and problems of the public in order to offer an outlet or remedy. Consequently, the problem of violating university ethics will be covered in detail in the section following in light of the female student's accusation of harassment by her professor.

2- Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992): A Contravention of University Ethics

The act of violating a law or rule is known as a contravention. As a result, moral behaviour is supported by the value of reputation, which in turn depends on friendly relationships, making moral violations into disgusting acts. There are terrible people in *Oleanna* who are willing to break the law to further their own agendas at the expense of the innocent. In the America of Mamet, the goal of security and social mobility through education and hard effort is simply another delusion used by the dishonest to deceive the innocent. This is the meaning of the term *Oleanna*. A female student accuses her male professor of sexual impropriety in this drama, which was written amid the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas sexual harassment incident. According to Gardner Elysa (2004, 1), *Oleanna* was seen as "a response to the Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, in which Thomas was accused of sexual harassment by former assistant Anita Hill", when it first exhibited in 1992. Due to its significance, Mamet used apparent controversy involving one of the senators to illustrate how women have the power to discredit and bring down well-known and important persons. In order to demonstrate the issue of ethics violations, Mamet plans to apply the facts of this episode to the context of a university.

The three acts of Mamet's play *Oleanna* feature a fabricated argument between a college lecturer and a female student. He is in his forties, and Carol, a twenty-year-old college student, paid him three office visits. Her goal is to solve a challenging and important problem. John appears to have a pressing need for a home for himself and his family. He is unable to hesitantly respond to Carol's demand because of this. Carol accuses John of harassment after a pointless meeting and threatens to cancel his appointment to the tenure track. This leads to a potentially fatal encounter when John physically abuses her to the point of being about to kill her. As soon as John recognizes himself, he stops, goes back to his desk, and sits down. The play closes with both characters in shock over what has transpired. Geraldine Shipton (2007) claims that John is conceited, picky, and verbose but he prefers his philosophy in relation to this conflict. Carol appears uncertain and ashamed as a result because getting a better education is her top priority as she claimed.

From the very beginning of this drama, a tone of definite slander takes over. Mamet challenges the audience to show a female student caught up in her damaged psychology by using evil conduct in the university arena. Carol should be treated as a human being with the right to protest against merciless humiliation by the professor as they follow the evolution of their relationship (Abbotson, 2003). According to the professor's expectations, the students and the lecturers should respect one another and foster moral sophistication. To validate one's humanity, one must use a language of forgiveness instead of intimidation. Thus, losing the ability to accomplish significant concern is not crucial, but avoiding harming other people is what matters most.

Obviously, Carol's insistence on knowing the significance of John's course material clearly raises the possibility of conflict. She actually wants a response, but John is too busy worrying about his own issues. Without a doubt, John is the one who motivates Carol to attack him since he believes he is capable of carrying out his preferred actions. A significant difference may be seen in the two characters' conversation:

Carol: I'm doing what I'm told. I bought your book, I read your...

John: No, I'm sure you...

Carol: No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's difficult for me.

John: It's difficult...(p.6)

Carol hopes that her professor will explain the difficult subject since she plans to understand it properly. According to Brenda Murphy (2004), no one believes that Carol is the only student who struggles to understand John's lectures because John doesn't fully grasp the precise circumstance. There is no question that Carol prevails in this kind of conflict, but at the sacrifice of her self-respect and despite the fact that the two characters' goals may still be vague and subject to different interpretations. Carol claims that while being a dedicated and serious student, her personal issues and difficulties make her unprepared for the severity of the class. She therefore insists on passing the course in order to create a successful future for herself. Thus, she says "I have to pass this course, I..." John: Well... Carol: No, no, no, no, I have to pass it" (p.9). In this sense, her opportunistic behaviour might be understood as a determination to achieve her goals despite losing her respect.

John and Carol become involved in pointless conflict, which ultimately causes them to falter. This play is a tragedy about power, according to Mamet. There are only two characters, yet they have a lot to say to one another and have real feelings for one another. However, maintaining their positions becomes more crucial than looking out for themselves. They have created an unnecessary argument that causes them to lose control and inevitably result in a fight. She makes an effort to be strong and attributes her ignorance to the professor. Carol explains "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 notebook.) (*The phone rings.*) I do"(p. 9). Carol believes that she is following John's instructions (taking notes and purchasing his book), suggesting that her respect to his demands merits a higher mark than she has received. It appears that a perplexed Carol is unable to comprehend the course material and progressively grows impatient with the professor's futile efforts to clarify her position (Leibler, 1988). Perhaps this is one of the factors driving Carol to consider disparaging John. In this play, the professor and his female student are used to illustrate generation gap by demonstrating the differences in values, attitudes, experiences, opinions, and behaviour that emerge from older and younger individuals.

In this instance, the professor stands in for the university as a culturally significant institution, one to which men have traditionally had access and which women, like his student, have only lately joined. According to Kellie Bean (2001), this institution, a powerful tool of the current system, supports him, establishes, and ensures his influence over his students. But John is hollow and shallow because he has no control over his students. After all, John's status as a professor and his employment give him a certain advantage over Carol. Though John is an academic, but he shares many of Mamet's characters' concerns about acquisition. He accidentally neglects Carol, which makes her desire to get retribution to show that she is an unconquerable student. Even though Carol's concealed motives are somewhat vague and unreasonable, she is urged by a secret to jeopardize John's safety. She never shares her darkest secret, "so any interpretation made of her is necessarily a subjective, not objective, construction. She is not, finally, knowable in the complete sense that realistic characters are" (Sauer, 2004, 221). John's course material is undoubtedly challenging for Carol to understand, which is why she feels the need to ask him for clarification. Thus, Carol starts to question her motives and wonders whether she has a devious side.

Indisputably, the initial comprehension issues manifest in two ways: Carol's failure to comprehend the course material and John's misunderstanding of Carol and her challenges. To understand and resolve this issue, more than one meeting is required. Leslie Kane (2001, 164) verifies in the book, "David Mamet in Conversation" that Mamet has consistently claimed in interviews about *Oleanna* that each of the two characters, is "saying something absolutely true at every moment and absolutely constructive at moments in the play, and yet at the end of the play they are tearing each other's throats out". John's primary socioeconomic concerns arise from living in a materialistic world, and he craves the unique chance that a capitalist system puts individuals in positions of power. However, John and Carol's goals are the same just as their rhetorical strategies are. Carol bemoans to John how difficult it is for her to attend this college. She understands, however, that one of the advantages of education is economic improvement and that salary earning is associated with a college education. Carol resents John's haughty intellectualization of higher education since she views college as a way to improve her situation given her inferior social and economic status. With insistence, she is determined to improve her low grade in order to

maintain her low social and economic standing. The system distorts both the professor and student when one has authority and influence over the other. Instead of each person's particular psychology being at fault, as in modernist realism, the system as a whole is to blame (Sauer, 2004). Carol can be seen as a strange character because she finds her professor's patriarchal behaviour intolerable and is disgusted by it.

John employs a variety of techniques, one of which being his conviction that every professor's objective is to instill a sense of inadequacy in his charges in order to motivate them to develop as people and learn more about both themselves and the world around them. He becomes too compliant to fend off Carol's wrath after his chat with her on raising her grade to "A" level. He says in a hurried tone: "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" (p.25). Hence, Carol misunderstands what he meant to say, indicating that his aim is unclear. Alfie Kohn (2002, 70), however, asserts that grade inflation is a dangerous myth, "by pitting students against one another in the pursuit of a scarce commodity, the "A," grading all too often directs students' attention not to learning, but to winning". In Carol's allegation of sexual harassment, the act of defamation is seen. She admits that she has experienced harassment from her professor while in his office. The purpose of Carol's accusations against John is to damage his reputation, which is why they are so malicious. Carol lashes out at her professor in a rage, using abusive language: "What gives you the *right*. Yes. To speak to a woman in your private... Yes. Yes. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You feel yourself empowered" (p. 51). To prove that she is confined in John's office, she screams, "LET ME GO. LET ME GO. WOULD SOMEBODY HELP ME? WOULD SOMEBODY HELP ME PLEASE ...?" (p.57). Her declaration of the professor's abuse may incite and make her a more resilient student.

Initially, Carol feels weak to challenge her professor, but she is encouraged to press forward as a strong student to support the woman's self-actualization. Since the professor is eager to learn more, it is quite challenging for the reader to believe in Carol's claim. John feels her impending scream and decides to rub her shoulder to calm her down. This behaviour is originally perceived incorrectly, even though it is "an honest attempt to calm her, but the casualness with which he touches her without consent implies an unspoken male prerogative that goes to the core of the system that Carol challenges" (Abbotson, 2003, 257). If one cannot fully comprehend how the end justifies the means, it is impossible to discern the person's hidden intention. Intellectual people ought to be aware that one of the wrong people's personal whims is to employ complicated or concealed means to achieve the undeclared goal.

With confidence, Carol confirms that she has experienced a rape attempt. The professor attempted to put his hand on her shoulder as a result, but he refused to let her leave his office. Nevertheless, "it comes as a surprise because the text seems to indicate a lack of sexual desire in John and may also hint at more than a neutral appeal for Carol" (Skloot, 2001, 101). Carol wishes for her allegations to be taken as an example of women's attitude toward men's superiority, thus she states: "The issue here is not what I "feel." It is not my "feelings," but the feelings of women.... John: They're going to discharge me" (p.64). Carol identifies her professor's weakness despite the rationality of his words, prompting her to begin to negotiate. She insists that he must take his book out of the list of necessary readings for the class. John views her diabolic intent, which is evidently combined with her imprudence, as a grave humiliation and violation:

John: LOOK. I'm reading your demands. All right?! (*He reads*) (*Pause*) You want to ban my book?

Carol: We do not...

John: (*Of list*): It says here...

Carol: ... We want it removed from inclusion as representative example of the university.

John: Get out of here. (p.75)

Carol makes ridiculous charges that cause John to go from an articulate professor to a desperate man, while Carol changes from an awkward woman to a self-assured competitor and challenger. Carol is concerned on a psychological and academic level to the extent that she has devoted her thoughts to accusing her professor of rape attempts. John is shocked to learn that the basis of her claim of harassment is his refusal to let her leave his office. Hence, Carol asserts: "You tried to rape me. I was leaving this office, you "pressed" yourself into me. You "pressed" your body into me.... My group has told your lawyer that we may pursue criminal charges" (p. 78). John loses his wits and is going to beat her with a chair in

a fit of frantic rage. Then John realizes his quick mistake despite the intense fight and views himself as a monster. One may now observe the initial realization and comprehension that brings them back to their thoughts (Abbottson, 2003). Actually, Carol has wrapped up the play with her final statement, with neither side claiming victory. Due to the student's evil deed, this kind of violence eliminates the chance for intellectual maturity.

One may wonder if the play's title has anything to do with the names of the characters or the location. Richard Christiansen (1992, 4) explains that this play is "a satirical song about an utopian community founded in 19th century Pennsylvania by Ole Bull, a Norwegian artist and nationalist". As a result, "Oleanna", a farming settlement, failed because the land it had purchased was rocky and barren, forcing the residents to leave for Norway. As the play progresses, it becomes clear how it applies to the academic utopian dream that failed. Mamet makes a clear comparison between this environment and academia, a place of learning and art that is apparently quiet but is actually founded in a mixture of political and personal prejudices. It is implied that the loss of teaching ethics enlightens the brains of both the professors and students.

In this respect, Mamet has spoken numerous times that "he does not take personally, the side of the one [character] rather than the other. He thinks that they are absolutely both wrong, and they are absolutely both right" (Kane, 2001, 144). More significantly, Mamet stresses that neither side completely defeats the other. He often stresses that "it's structured as tragedy. He [John] undergoes absolute reversal of situation, absolute recognition at the last moment of the play. He realizes that perhaps he is the cause of the plague on Thebes" (Kane, 2001, 119). No matter how John is viewed from a feminist standpoint, he will be let go. The professor receives a reprimand for being aggressive after the Tenure Committee decided to support Carol's complaint. Therefore, each heated dispute will result in a potentially hazardous encounter that reveals the individuals' disturbed psyches. In this situation, the professor's response is surprising since he is greatly perplexed by her charge, making it difficult to make the proper choice. Despite the fact that they are in a somewhat advanced period and civilized state, they exhibit strange situations that remind the reader of medieval savagery and the forest's emphasis on survival of the fittest. In other words, thinking about getting revenge illustrates the incentives for contravening the university's code of conduct by engaging in controversial defamation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the two protagonists are now aimless and have no place to call home. Both Carol and John wear masks, according to an accurate psychoanalysis, to conceal their objectives and guard against any potential vulnerabilities. To catch the fleeing prey, they act like greedy animals, metaphorically speaking. One could argue that Mamet offers a chance to denounce some female students who made up a fictitious story to disparage their instructors by tracking the effects of Carol's terrible deed. Carol is of the belief that her professor has taken an advantage of his status and her needs to demonstrate his dominance over her. By planning wicked deeds, she has therefore succeeded in terrifying her professor's future and security. All of her attempts to trap him show that she is experiencing a severe psychological disorder that is causing her to go into hysterics. Though Carol's unreasonable accusation is not established on actual facts, the professor's future is going to be so gloomy. Triumphant feelings, which are frequently referred to as one's ecstasy, serve as a driving force to defile the opponent's character and position.

The university's code of ethics is seen as a set of guidelines that should be respected and valued by both professors and students. Without a doubt, mutual respect is essential for the educational process to accomplish its goals and directives. Since he has given neither of the two characters his first attention in this play, the playwright claims to be taking a neutral stance. Despite the two characters' supposedly smart and controlled mentality, the viewer is surprised to sense the aura of a serious misunderstanding. It is somewhat unusual to hear about such heinous behaviour in university setting. Mamet aims to make the claim that not all aspirations are fulfilled, especially those that are based on shaky ground and unreasonable demands. It is implied that Carol has an unstable mentality and is an abnormal person who only cares about herself.

However, the professor is left alone to deal with his undeserved consequence as a result of the student's violation of university ethics, so the drama does not end in reconciliation. It is preferable to be in tough situations, contain rage, and tolerate as much as possible rather than being harsh and arguing about everything. Anyone pursuing illusions that control

their thinking must be ready to accept unpleasant result. To sum up, in order to create a genuine academic and scientific environment, there should be a shared understanding between the professor and the student that is primarily founded on reverence and integrity. More importantly, it is crucial to keep in mind that the top professionals distinguished out for their objectivity, self-control, and humane treatment. In addition, students must adhere to the academic guidelines provided by their professors without engaging in any reckless disagreement and controversial issue.

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