

**T.C.**  
**İSTANBUL ÜNİVERSİTESİ**  
**SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ**  
**BATI DİLLERİ VE EDEBİYATLARI ANABİLİM DALI**  
**AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI BÖLÜMÜ**

**YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ**

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE  
AND GENDER IN DAVID MAMET'S PLAYS**

**GİZEM KURTSOY**

**2501040359**

**TEZ DANIŞMANI: DOÇ. DR. H. ÖZDEN SÖZALAN**

**İSTANBUL, 2007**

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN DAVID MAMET'S PLAYS

Gizem Kurtsoy

---

## ÖZ

Bu tezde David Mamet'in *The Woods*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, ve *Oleanna* adlı oyunlarında yer alan karakterlerin ilişkileri, konuşma biçimleri ve toplum tarafından belirlenen kimlik konumları incelenerek, toplumsal cinsiyet ve dil arasındaki ilişkiler ele alınır. Yapısal ve bağlamsal açıdan farklılıklar gösteren bu oyunların ortak noktası, birebir insan ilişkilerinin toplumsal etkileşimin bir yansıması olarak betimlenmesidir. Oyunlar toplumsal cinsiyetin kültürel kodlar tarafından belirlendiğini ve cinsel rol davranışlarının bireylerce sorgulanmaksızın kabul edildiğini örnekler. Erk ve kimlik arasındaki bağlantıların da ele alındığı bu çalışmanın temel sorunsalını, toplumsal cinsiyet ve söylem ilişkisinin hangi biçimlerde karşımıza çıktığı, cinsiyet rollerinin dilde nasıl yapılandırıldığı ve dolayısıyla nasıl değişmeye açık olduğu gibi sorulara Mamet'in oyunlarında verilmeye çalışılan yanıtlar oluşturur.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies the relationship between gender and language through a close examination of the interaction, the speech patterns, and the socially constructed identity positions of Mamet's characters in *The Woods*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and *Oleanna*. The three plays selected for analysis vary in terms of structure and setting, yet they are all preoccupied with the portrayal of one-to-one relationships as a model of social interaction. The plays, indeed, illustrate how gender is culturally constructed, and how conventional patterns of sexual identities are unquestionably accepted by the individuals. Mamet's representation of the relationship between power and identity also fall within the scope of this study insofar as their connection with gender issues is concerned, but the main focus of the dissertation is on the ways in which the plays show gender's relation to discourse, and reveal how gender roles are constructed within language and, hence, are subject to change.

## **PREFACE**

David Mamet's career as a playwright began in the "me decade" of the 1970s where the social activism of the 1960s was largely replaced by individualism, and the political idealism turned into a concern with the self. America emerged defeated from the Vietnam War which killed and spiritually wounded many Americans. At the start of the decade President Nixon proved to be popular with the American people, however he had to resign in 1974 for his involvement in the Watergate scandal. Corruption was everywhere and the American dream was fully transformed into the pursuit of material wealth and self indulgence.

Mamet's plays can be considered to respond to this historical context as they present a critique of the American society, its values, destructive myths, and decaying human relationships including those between the opposite sexes. His focus is on the ways in which individual experience is framed by social reality; and since it is language in which that reality is constructed, language, for Mamet, is not only a tool to convey plot or subjects, but, more importantly, the very subject of his plays.

In Mamet's work the relationship between language and power is interrogated, and gender becomes the focal point in his discussion of the ways in which the possession or the acquisition of certain discourses determines one's position in power relations. It was this preoccupation of Mamet's that I found particularly interesting, and which led to the writing of this dissertation. I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Ayşe Erboru who has encouraged me with her enthusiasm and inspiration, and has introduced me into the world of David Mamet. I am also indebted to my advisor Asst. Prof. Dr. Özden Sözalın, who read this dissertation several times and stayed up to discuss and revise it with me; and this study would not have been possible without her amazing, thought provoking lectures in American Theater and Literary Theory. I also would like to thank our Research Assistant Cenk Yay who offered his kind help for the formal improvement of this dissertation. I owe a lot to the librarians at Bilgi University for their great assistance in finding my sources. I also give my special thanks to my friends in İ.Ü. EAT/Deneyisel Sahne with whom I entered the fascinating world of theater, and particularly to Bayer

Alyakut who supported me with his very existence. And I am thankful to my sisters for their encouragement and help. Finally, I owe a special debt to my father and mother who have supported me throughout my studies with all their heart; this dissertation is dedicated to them, with love and respect.

# CONTENTS

PAGE NUMBER

ABSTRACT .....	iii
PREFACE .....	iv
CONTENTS .....	vi
INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>1. <i>THE WOODS</i></b> .....	<b>9</b>
1.1. The Plot of <i>The Woods</i> .....	9
1.2. A Fable at Work: <i>The Woods</i> .....	9
1.3. Getting into the Woods: Dusk .....	14
1.4. Getting Lost: Night .....	24
1.5. Acquisition of Selfhood: Morning .....	35
<b>2. <i>SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO</i></b> .....	<b>44</b>
2.1. The Plot of <i>Sexual Perversity in Chicago</i> .....	44
2.2. Language of the Perverse: Humanity in Oblivion .....	44
2.3. The Failure of Language .....	52
<b>3. <i>OLEANNA</i></b> .....	<b>82</b>
3.1. The Plot of <i>Oleanna</i> .....	82
3.2. Language, Power, Gender .....	84
3.3. The Language of the Patriarch .....	98
3.4. Discursive Battles .....	111
3.5. "Whichever side you choose, you're wrong." .....	117
CONCLUSION .....	126
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	131

## INTRODUCTION

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 co-operation. 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.<sup>1</sup>

David Mamet was born in 1947, in Chicago where he spent his childhood and adolescence, and later went to college in Vermont and spent most of his time in the theatre department. In fact, Mamet came to writing via acting in college; later he was employed as a teacher of acting at Marlboro College (1969-1970), and started writing plays for his students to play. *Lakeboat* was first produced at Marlboro. Then he went to Goddard College and worked as an Artist-in-Residence, there he co-founded St. Nicholas Theatre Company (later reformed as St Nicholas Players), and wrote *Duck Variations*. Some of his major works in drama in 1970s are *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1971), *American Buffalo* (1975), *The Woods* (1977), *The Water Engine* (1977), and *A Life In The Theater* (1977). When 1980s came, Mamet's reputation began to spread internationally, in 1980s and 1990s he presented *Edmond* (1982), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983, Pulitzer Prize in 1984), *The Shawl* (1985), *Speed-the-Plow* (1988), *Oleanna* (1992), *Squirrels* (1993), *The Cryptogram* (1994), *The Old Neighbourhood* (1997), and *Boston Marriage* (1999). As a distinctively productive artist David Mamet produced an impressive number of works as an author, essayist, playwright, screenwriter, and film director. Some are: the screenplay of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *The Verdict* (1982), *The Untouchables* (1987), *Wag The Dog* (1997); screenplay and direction of *House of Games* (1987), *Homicide* (1991), *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997); direction of *The Winslow Boy* (1998); the screenplay of the film versions of his plays like *American Buffalo* (1996), and screenplay and direction of *Oleanna* (1994); adaptations of *The Cherry Orchard* (1985), *Uncle Vanya* (1988), *Three Sisters* (1990); novels, *The Old Religion* (1997), and *The Village* (1994); collected essays, *Writing in Restaurants* (1986), *Some Freaks* (1989), *Jafsie and John Henry* (1999); and many others including the children's plays and radio plays.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Mamet, **Writing in Restaurants**, New York, Penguin Books, 1987, p. 27.

Besides working as an actor or stage manager, David Mamet was also employed previously as a realtor, office cleaner, window washer, and taxi driver; and worked in a truck factory and a canning plant. These mundane works have provided him with “a sensitivity to the American vernacular unequalled by any other playwright, but they also alerted him to what he sees as the profound alienation which typifies an urban America in which activity is detached from meaning and desires are unrelated to human need.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Mamet portrays, in his works, a disintegrating society that has lost its sense of community, and sense of values apart from the ones offered by a competitive capitalism. Perhaps Mamet is a social critic who denounces the brutality and ruthlessness of capitalism, and exposes the alienations generated by urban capitalistic life. He is a kind of moralist that regrets the transformation of real values into artificial ones, of humanity into commodity, and the decay of language hardly expressive of real human needs. Given this lack of communality, the loss of the sense of belonging, the theater exists, for Mamet, “to address that need for community, for trust, that perceived sense of entropy which lies at the heart of his plays.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, theater is the place where the ideals come true in action on the stage, and he praises theater for being a community act. Accordingly, he defines the purpose of the theater as “to transcend the individual conscious mind, to put the spectator in a communion with his or her fellows on the stage and also in the audience, so as to address the problems that cannot be addressed by reason.”<sup>4</sup>

In his critique of society, Mamet actually aims the American dream rather than its realities. There is a strong sense of betrayal and loss in his plays, deriving from the great American myth that fails to meet its promises. He depicts a nation that has lost its purpose in the hope of the possession of that myth. The creation of that myth, in fact, has its roots in the possession of the continent; the story which began by an act of theft actually follows its course with its successors. As Bigsby points out: “The supposed frontier virtues of a sturdy masculine self-sufficiency that took by force what was denied by right are echoed in his plays by people who

---

<sup>2</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, **Contemporary Writers: David Mamet**, Ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Bigsby, “David Mamet,” **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Henry I. Schvey, “Celebrating the Capacity for Self-Knowledge,” **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 61.

deploy that rhetoric and dispose those myths in a world that has lost its epic dimensions.”<sup>5</sup> America is like a new Eden where its inhabitants fell into with hope to find their “ideal,” yet disillusioned in the end. However, “[t]he irony of Mamet’s characters derives not from a collapse of faith in the American dream but from the persistence of that faith beyond reason, and from the prosaic nature of the dream they choose to embrace.”<sup>6</sup>

Along with *American Buffalo* which first brought David Mamet critical attention, in plays such as *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *A Life in The Theater*, *The Water Engine*, and *Oleanna* David Mamet examines a society that is propelled by the so-called business ethics. What he says for *American Buffalo*, that it “is about the American ethic of business . . . About how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business,”<sup>7</sup> is actually true for all his above cited plays. In this realm of business one can only succeed at the expense of another. This competitive world of one-upmanship is most explicit in *Glengarry Glen Ross* where the realtors are threatened by a sales competition in which the winner will get a Cadillac, the second a set of steak-knives, and the losers will be fired. In fact it is a matter of life and death for these salesmen to betray in order to survive in the business. It is such a world that one speaks only to beguile and can overreach even the closest friends. Mamet comments:

[The American Dream myth] interests me because the national culture is founded very much on the idea of strive and succeed. Instead of rising with the masses one should rise from the masses. Your extremity is my opportunity. That’s what forms the basis of our economic life, and this is what forms the rest of our lives. That American myth: the idea of something out of nothing.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, this sense of loss and alienation his characters go through is not merely a product of the consumerist capitalist society. Yet, what they lack is the language to verbalize and thus annihilate that loss. As Leibner duly puts it:

---

<sup>5</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, **Contemporary Writers: David Mamet**, Ed. by. Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gottlieb, “‘The Engine’ That Drives Playwright David Mamet,” **New York Times**, January 15, 1978, p. D4.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew C. Roudané, “Something Out of Nothing,” **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 46.

In Mamet's world, if man is shown as alienated and corrupted by the tainted value system of capitalism, he is not depicted as a victim of the economic order. Rather than bring out an external cause for man's alienation, the plays emphasize his responsibility in propagating and nurturing corruption: Mamet's moral, again and again, is that people are absurdly their own tormentors.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, his are self-centered characters who are indifferent to everything except the fulfilment of their own desires; they feel a deep need for contact and love, yet their self-absorption makes them even more lonely and frustrated. Thus, to neutralize their loss they desperately retreat into fiction where they construct themselves a coherent world of deception. Therefore it is not by chance that many of his characters are hucksters, con men, charlatans, or salesmen. Storytelling is a primary fact in these characters' lives by which they reveal their most hidden desires and fears, and sometimes even form an alternative medium out of it for communication. And as Deborah Geis suggests, this performative aspect of language becomes a metadramatic tradition in Mamet.<sup>10</sup> At the heart of his plays and films there is always a storyteller and a listener; they deploy language to conceal, deceive, and invent; and the truth generally lies in what is not said. David Mamet believes the dramatist's task is a similar one; thus, storytelling becomes a tactic both for his characters and for the playwright:

It occurred to me while I was doing *House of Games* that the difficulty of making the movie was exactly the same difficulty the confidence man has. For the confidence man it is depriving the victim of her money; for me it is misleading the audience sufficiently so they feel pleased when they find out they've been misled, tricking them so that every step is logical, and at the end they've defeated themselves. So, the process of magic and the process of confidence games, and to a certain extent the process of drama, are all processes of autosuggestion. They cause the audience to autosuggest themselves in a way that seems perfectly logical but it is actually false.<sup>11</sup>

Mamet is a moralist but he never falls into didacticism in his plays. Moreover; similar to the works of his contemporary fellow playwrights like David Rabe, Sam

---

<sup>9</sup> Pascale Hubert-Leibler, "Dominance and Anguish: The Teacher – Student Relationship In The Plays Of David Mamet," **David Mamet: A Casebook**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, p.83.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah R. Geis, "David Mamet and The Metadramatic Tradition: Seeing "The Trick From The Back,"" **David Mamet: A Casebook**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, p.p. 49-68.

<sup>11</sup> John Lahr, "David Mamet: The Art of Theatre XI," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Kane, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, p. 113.

Shephard, and Lanford Wilson his plays are realist but deviate from the traditional understanding of realism. Mamet shows a spiritually lost culture, and how people have departed from their true natures and fallen apart with their community. For that reason, he is a realist, but he never shows his characters reaching an acknowledgement of their corruption though they might sometimes sense it if they can find an alternative way of communication beyond the limited scope of their language. Mamet constantly refers to truth and reality, and speaks of values and social responsibilities in his essays. However, it is impossible to see such a spirit in his plays; on the contrary his characters replace truth with deception, and they do not have any sense of values. Even his urban settings like singles bars, junk stores, real-estate offices, brothels, and polluted environments suggest the degenerateness of the society. But Mamet's moralism lies in the fact that by presenting the corruption he wants to create an awareness in his audience which his characters could not reach. His is a different kind of realism since he does not "offer us a faithful reproduction of reality, but rather fragments of that reality as it can be perceived, for instance, through a keyhole, or through a window whose frame, together with the walls that surround it, makes it impossible for us to see the complete picture of the subject observed and forces us therefore to imagine the rest, the invisible, the unseen."<sup>12</sup>

Mamet is very successful in capturing the rhythms of urban life in his language, but it is never a simple reflection of what is heard on the streets. As Christopher Edwards observes:

[Mamet] possesses a wonderfully acute ear for the vernacular of Chicago and recreates it in all its raw poetic vigour, repetitive obscenity and desperate velocity. But the powerful naturalism of the speech is not mere literal transcription of what is heard. Like all naturalism, it only seems so because of the conscious artistry of the author. Mamet's effect is accomplished by way of a stylized formality.<sup>13</sup>

Because of this scatological dialogue and the sexist language Mamet deploys, and of the all-male structure of his early plays like *Lakeboat*, *Duck*

---

<sup>12</sup> Alain Piette, "The 1980s," **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Edwards as quoted in Asli Tekinay's **Contemporary American Drama: 1960-2000**, İstanbul, Bogazici University Publication, 2001, p. 45.

*Variations, American Buffalo, A Life in the Theatre, and Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet himself has sometimes been accused of being misogynistic. Even when he includes female characters in his plays like *Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Edmond*; or *Oleanna* in 1990s these characters were taken as a further evidence of Mamet's misogyny who is blamed for depicting submissive female stereotypes. However; identifying the author's personality with his fictional characters is a very limited critical approach. Although Mamet admits being fascinated with the communal aspect of male bonding,<sup>14</sup> he cannot be accused of misogyny since he exposes the sexist language of his male characters as an indicator of their powerlessness. Besides:

[T]he exclusion of women from these plays implies that the values the male characters traditionally associate with the "feminine"—compassion, tenderness, empathy, spirituality—are seen as threatening to their business ethos; in the business world such values are characterized as weakness, "and weakness is despised as effeminate and dangerous." By banishing women and the values they purportedly represent from these plays, Mamet thus shifts the focus to an examination of "the cocoon of the traditional American masculinity myths" inside which he himself was raised. It is these values of machismo—toughness, strength, cunning—which have become appropriated and apotheosized by American business, alchemized into the fool's gold of power, greed, and competition.<sup>15</sup>

And far from representing submissive female characters, Mamet's women constantly resist the labels attached to them, and expose how the male system of oppression works. Within this system they are consistently tried to be made the objects of male desire, yet they both literally and metaphorically escape male capture. In fact, Mamet's women are revolutionary because they cannot be fixed within male representation. Just like Steven Price explains:

Mamet ironizes the monomyth: there are no successful love stories anymore. His plays are masculine not because they objectify women but because they acknowledge their inability to objectify them; they question the validity of their own representations of women precisely because women are the objects of desire; they do not attempt realistic portrayals of women

---

<sup>14</sup> David Mamet, "In the Company of Men," *Some Freaks*, New York, Viking, 1989, p.p. 85-91.

<sup>15</sup> Hersh Zeifman, "Phallus in Wonderland: Machismo and Business in David Mamet's *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*," *David Mamet: A Casebook*, Ed. by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, p.p. 124-125.

because such portrayals would always be an illusion masking the lack within the protagonist himself.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, it is crucial to understand Mamet's view of language to fully acknowledge the role of his female characters. To him, language is not a tool to convey plot or subjects, but it is the very subject of his plays. In his plays language becomes both a central theme and a poetic device; he is concerned with how language affects social interaction, and how it influences the thoughts and actions of people. He believes that language is a powerful element that determines the actions of human beings rather than the other way around. There is not a "true self" for his characters that act out different roles from time to time, instead they constantly shift from one role to another, and whatever role they are in constitutes their fragmented selves; since they "are their language; they exist insofar as —and to the extent that — their language allows them to exist."<sup>17</sup> And there is not a given reality for his characters; on the contrary, within their interaction or the stories they make up they constantly define reality itself. And finally, there is not any plot in his plays in the traditional sense, the only action taking place is the conversations between his characters, and he wants the reader/audience to examine how these characters interact and define their subjectivities through that interaction. Therefore, the issue of sexual identities that he takes up in his plays cannot be detached from his concept of language as a determinant of action. Just as Levene in *Glengarry Glen Ross* says, "a man is his job,"<sup>18</sup> and identifies manhood with the ability to sell worthless property, his male characters define their identities through their gendered discourse as a sexual being, and try to objectify women in their subjectivity construction.

This dissertation aims to study the relationship between gender and language through a close examination of the interaction, the speech patterns, and the socially constructed identity positions of Mamet's characters in *The Woods*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, and *Oleanna*. The three plays selected for analysis vary in terms of structure and setting, yet they are all preoccupied with the portrayal of one-to-one relationships as a model of social interaction. The plays, indeed,

---

<sup>16</sup> Steven Price, "Disguise in Love: Gender and Desire in *House of Games* and *Speed-the-Plow*," **Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet**, Ed. by Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Storey, "The Making of David Mamet," **Hollins Critic** 16, no. 4 (October 1979): p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> David Mamet, **Glengarry Glen Ross**, New York, Grove Press, 1983, p. 75.

illustrate how gender becomes an object that is given meaning by society, and how this meaning is unquestionably accepted by the individuals through interaction with society. Mamet's representation of the relationship between power and identity also fall within the scope of this study insofar as their connection with gender issues is concerned, but the main focus of the dissertation is on the ways in which the plays show gender's relation to discourse, and reveal how gender roles are constructed within language and, hence, are subject to change.

In the first chapter, *The Woods* is taken up for its portrayal of a sexual relationship and its close examination of the problematics of romantic relationships between men and women. Taking his characters out of their familiar urban environment and placing them in a country setting, David Mamet detaches nature from its idyllic connotations and examines how sexual role patterns permeate personal relationships. The play reveals the political construction of all relationships and of sexual identities, and the part language plays in this construction.

The second chapter proceeds with *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, in which another sexual relationship is portrayed – this time in an urban surrounding - in interaction with other people as representative of the whole society. The play, in which Mamet deals with the influence of sex role stereotyping in 1970s urban America on heterosexual relationships, and the role of language in sexual objectification, illustrates how the capitalistic city milieu constricts its inhabitants and forces them to consistently reproduce their given gender roles.

Finally, the third chapter handles *Oleanna* which dramatizes the interaction between a teacher and a student in an academic environment. Mamet, this time, portrays a female student and a male professor occupying gendered identity positions, having different backgrounds of culture and social class, and deploying different languages. The play exposes the connection of power with one's place in a specific linguistic community. And with a shift of his female character's role in the power relationship Mamet openly shows how gender roles are subject to change through language, and stresses the need for new ways of human interaction that could stand against the dynamics of power.

## **1. THE WOODS**

### **1.1. The Plot of *The Woods***

Constituted of three scenes (Dusk, Night, Morning), Mamet's play *The Woods* takes place in the porch of a summer house, in early September. The lovers Ruth and Nick have come to the summer house of Nick's family in the country for the weekend. In Scene 1 they converse, talk on the natural surroundings, and get ready to make love. In Scene 2, Nick comes to the porch near Ruth distressed, having failed to sleep. Ruth tries to comfort him; suggests holding him while sleeping, and going for a walk, yet she cannot ease him. They tell each other stories concerning their families. Then Nick abruptly wants to have sex with her but she cannot respond. Ruth gives Nick a bracelet as a gift and inscribed on it are the words "I will always love you. Ruth," but he rejects it. They quarrel and Ruth decides to go back the next day. When the morning has come in Scene 3, their fight gets more destructive; Ruth swings an oar at him, and in return Nick hits her in the mouth and she falls off the porch into the mud. In regret, he apologizes and asks her to stay, saying he loves her. Ruth relieves him by telling a story she had earlier begun about the children who go in the woods and get lost, and then lay down in the forest putting their arms around each other. The play ends in the middle of Ruth's sentence as she goes on telling the story.

### **1.2. A Fable at Work: *The Woods***

Most of Mamet's plays undertake the analysis of the problematics of interaction between individuals in society. These plays are mainly constructed of duologues between two people and through the dramatization of one-to-one relationships Mamet presents the dynamics of social interaction. First performed in November, 1977, at the St. Nicholas Theatre, *The Woods* depicts a heterosexual relationship between two characters, Ruth and Nick. In a conversation with Henry I. Schvey, Mamet points out: ". . .it is a play about heterosexuality, which is just not a hot theatrical topic over here. . . . a subject that people would rather not address—

why men and women have a difficult time trying to get along with each other."<sup>1</sup> In his plays like *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which we may refer to as his business plays, Mamet portrays how possibilities of companionship are destroyed by commercial aspirations and forces. In *The Woods*, along with the strong element of competitiveness in society, he explores how sexual role patterns impinge on personal relationships. Specialists working on gender issues observe that studies focusing on heterosexual dyads and informal conversations in one-to-one or small group relationships draw the attention away from an understanding of gender as a structural principle organizing other social institutions and the interplay of gender with systems of inequity.<sup>2</sup> However, Mamet's dramatic choice in that direction does not exclude society to look at individual relationships, rather for Mamet two people are enough to form a society and it is possible to trace the social forces at play in the relationship between two people. Therefore, insofar as social conventions are in control, there is a politics to all relationships including those between the sexes, and since politics operates through and within language, the role of language in social interaction becomes one of Mamet's major concerns. He says, "Everybody uses language for his or her own purpose to get what he or she wants . . . No one ever talks except to accomplish an objective."<sup>3</sup> Thus, as in his many other plays, language, as well as being a poetic device, turns out to be Mamet's central theme in *The Woods* where he digs into the nature of sexual identity and traces the failure of relationships in language. Through the dramatization of a seemingly simple heterosexual relationship between Ruth and Nick, the play illustrates the ways in which power relations and gender roles are socially constructed within language.

Mamet himself classifies the play as one of his classically structured tragedies along with his other plays *The Cryptogram*, *Oleanna*, and *American Buffalo*. The play adheres to the Aristotelian unities of action, place, and time. According to Mamet, "A tragedy has to be the attempt of one specific person to obtain one specific goal, . . . he either gets it in the end or doesn't get it . . ."<sup>4</sup>, which

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry I. Schvey, "Celebrating the Capacity for Self-Knowledge," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 68

<sup>2</sup> Bonnie McElhinny, "Theorizing Gender in Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology," **The Handbook of Language and Gender**, Ed. by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Bigsby, "David Mamet," **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 48

<sup>4</sup> John Lahr, "David Mamet: The Art of Theatre XI," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Kane, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, pp.118-119

in the case of *The Woods* can be exemplified as Ruth trying to work out their relationship. The lovers Ruth and Nick relate in a rural environment, at Nick's summer house, in three unbroken scenes. As Dennis Carroll also suggests:

The pressure of unbroken time and space on the lovers, a condition which is almost a threatening challenge to achieve 'meaningful' intimacy, is built into the play's formal shape: three scenes which evoke the old-fashioned three-act play, titled 'Dusk', 'Night', 'Morning'.<sup>5</sup>

It is indeed through this very stasis in the environment that Mamet emphasizes the isolation and stasis prevalent in the lives of the characters. Mamet's usual urban surroundings in his works is not chosen as the setting here; instead the lovers Ruth and Nick have come to the summer house to escape the pressures and disruptive nature of urban life, and it is especially Ruth who sees the background as idyllic to the point of creating a poetry out of it:

Ruth: I wish we could stay up here forever.  
Nick: You wouldn't like it.  
Ruth: No?  
Nick: No.  
Ruth: Yes, I would.  
Nick: You'd be bored.  
Ruth: No, I wouldn't. No.  
(Pause.)  
Why would I be bored?  
I love it here.  
Nick: Things change.  
Ruth: In winter?  
Nick: Yes. In Winter. *Many* times.  
Ruth: I know they do. That's why I like the country.  
In the city we can never know each other really.  
(Pause.)  
It's clean out here.  
And, plus, it's quiet.  
Anything is possible. (Pause.)  
You can see the way things are.<sup>6</sup>

However, whether it is the city or the country they are positioned in, Mamet's characters are lost by definition, and cannot come to terms with their environment.

---

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Carroll, **David Mamet**, London, Macmillan, 1987, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, pp. 42-43.

Ruth and Nick have so much internalized the pressures they had hoped to leave behind and the sexual role patterns society have imposed on them that they have become the very expression of these pressures. Here Mamet frustrates the expectations by discharging the natural setting of its idyllic associations, and presenting nature itself as the source of threat. Both the structurally unbroken scenes and the country setting with its stillness become the very manifestation of the characters' stasis they feel inside. They are totally lost characters, alienated both to themselves and their environment. Their lives are plotless, and Mamet confirms this also structurally by reducing the plot to a minimum. It is precisely for that reason that Richard Eder denounces Mamet's plays:

In these plays the characters accept their isolation from each other without real struggle. And there is no movement, no action that breaks out of this isolation, or that even seriously attempts to. The language and the emotions move; and they illustrate a situation, but the situation remains static.<sup>7</sup>

And in defence of the playwright, C.W.E. Bigsby contends:

As in *The Woods*, Mamet's characters do sense the inadequacy of their lives and feel the necessity to make contact. The problem is that they seem literally demoralized; they find themselves in a context in which their gestures are subverted at point of origin by their own spiritual confusions and by the public forms of a society structured on necessities other than those dictated by human needs.<sup>8</sup>

Eder sees the failure of will in Mamet's characters as a structural weakness, whereas Bigsby points it as one of Mamet's main subjects. Yet, Bigsby also regards the characters as immured in their isolation and stasis like those of Beckett's.<sup>9</sup> It is true that Mamet problematizes the need for contact and the influence of social pressures upon the characters, and like Beckett foregrounds language. However, Beckett exemplifies the total breakdown of language as a means of human communication whereas Mamet sees a gleam of hope in the act of talk itself. Where

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard Eder, "David Mamet's New Realism," *New York Times*, 12 March 1978, SM11.

<sup>8</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, *Contemporary Writers: David Mamet*, Ed. by. Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Beckett considers the act of talk as human inaction in the face of existential absurdity, Mamet takes up language as the action itself.<sup>10</sup>

In *The Woods* nothing happens in terms of the conventional idea of action; Ruth and Nick just sit on the porch of the house and converse; to put it differently, nothing happens in the play except the act of talk. But Mamet's point lies in that very act of conversation. The audience/reader examines how these two people belonging to opposite sexes interact. Mamet's very emphasis is on the movements of the dialogue. In his idea of language, language does not reflect reality, but it simply creates reality itself. Therefore it is needless to search for hidden layers of meaning among the words poured out by the characters; instead what constructs the vivid relationship between the two is the ebb and flow of the dialogue. Thus, he points out: "Our language had weight and meaning to the extent to which it was rhythmic and pleasant, and its power came from a juxtaposition of sounds in a world in which we were overtly pantheists."<sup>11</sup> Ruth and Nick's languages are loaded with social conventions; the acquisition of language does not always guarantee the ability to think for oneself, social forces impose particular beliefs on the individual's mind, and thereby s/he becomes the manifestation of society. In such a state Ruth and Nick are lost characters, unable to express their desires and fears. In this context their situation is a stasis. But to Mamet the socialization of language is inherent in individuals and it is an on-going process. Since "a statement is always an event that neither the language (langue) nor the meaning can quite exhaust,"<sup>12</sup> by the very act of being in a conversation, by simply getting the process going, Ruth and Nick's inaction transforms into action. In other words their inability to communicate (act) is the very action of the play. It is for that exact reason that they are not immured in their stasis. Instead their relationship is constantly defined and redefined by language. Their attitudes towards nature become a way of saying 'the unsaid.' And being in the act of conversation leads them to create alternative ways of expressing their desires and fears; in their isolation and dissociation, they desperately stick to fiction. Thus they create their fable:

---

<sup>10</sup> Wei-Jan Chi, **The Role of Language in the Plays of Mamet, Wilson, and Rabe**, The University of Iowa, 1991, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> David Mamet, **Writing in Restaurants**, New York, Penguin Books, 1987, p.6.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, **Archaeology of Knowledge**, Trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 31.

[A] dramatization of the differing needs of men and women, a fable of sexual relationships conducted not in Mamet's typical urban environment but in the countryside. The woods of the title, however, figure as the *locus classicus* of fairy tales where the protagonists conventionally play, become lost, and acquire selfhood by coming to terms with their fears and desires. This is such a tale or fable in which that maturation process is duly enacted. Beginning at dusk and moving through the night to morning, it traces the stages of an exemplary tale of human relationships.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, by dusk, in the absence of an absolute truth and meaning to their existence, Ruth tries to exist through the idea of a romantic relationship with Nick, whereas Nick identifies himself by establishing his male integrity through the practice of brutal sexuality. The implication is manifest in their attitude towards nature, the stories they tell, and the clash between the languages of the poetic and the prosaic. By night, the exposure of Ruth's desire by her stories is countervailed also with stories of death and violence by Nick giving a clue of his ultimate fear. Their relationship is lost in words in the process of redefining their selfhood; a transition act where Ruth and Nick shift languages a few times. By morning, as Ruth ceases to define herself through the relationship, she becomes more self-confident. The languages have totally shifted with Nick falling in the realm of the poetic where he comes to terms with his unconscious fear through the narration of his dream.

### 1.3. Getting into the Woods: Dusk

In commodity societies there is the illusion of individuals as unitary social entities. In a commodity society, "both the capabilities available to the person and the resources available to society are construed as 'things' having a prior natural or utilitarian value in themselves."<sup>14</sup> In Western bourgeois way of understanding properties have a prior value to themselves and therefore the idea of possession constructs the possessor as a unitary social entity. However; the Kantian idea of

---

<sup>13</sup> Johan Callens, "The 1970s", **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Marilyn Strathern, **The Gender of the Gift**, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1988, p. 135.

“thing-in-itself” is disproved since objects do not have pre-existing values, ‘existence precedes essence,’ and an object exists so long as it is in relation to other objects.

[T]he object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not pre-exist itself, held back by some obstacle at the first edges of light. It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, psychoanalytic structural analysis puts the split self against the coherent Cartesian subject; subjectivity is a source of alienation and ambiguity:

According to this view, the self, or subject, is dispersed along a chain of signifiers. Thus, although the ego works to depict itself as fixed, unified, and in control, in actuality the self is constantly in process, fragmented, and displaced.<sup>16</sup>

Counterposed to this illusive idea of self integrity, by presenting split and alienated characters who are under the control of social and cultural discourses, Mamet actually deconstructs traditional Western patterns which present unitary social beings totally in control of their thoughts and actions. In his dramatic presentation individuals are introduced as registers of their encounters with one another, emblematic of social interaction in general. Characters are dependent upon others for knowledge of their inner selves. As socio-cultural norms are produced and reproduced through discourse, and social life mostly takes place in ordinary conversation, his characters are presented in conversational and everyday interaction. Both products of social and cultural discourses, and also producers of these discourses —emphasized through the sequential unfolding of conversation— by simply participating in the act of talk, these characters constitute a manifestation of the interplay of discursive formations.

*The Woods* does not provide us with a linear plot development, the first scene opens with Ruth and Nick already sitting on the porch of the summer house, and they were there the previous day. They escaped to the summer house from the

---

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> From Shirley F. Staton’s introductory notes to Jacques Lacan’s “Seminar on the Purloined Letter”, *Literary Theories in Praxis*, Ed.by. Shirley F. Staton, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987, p. 321.

pressures of the city, yet they are still urban dwellers in guise of the country. As products of capitalistic urban America they assume themselves to have unitary beings; however they are fragmented and displaced characters defining their subjectivity through their relationship with the other. Their dependence on one another is reciprocal since Ruth defines her subjectivity through a committed love affair with Nick, while Nick preserves his male integrity and power through this dependent position of Ruth. Both acting out the sexual role patterns dictated by the social discourse, they shape their own relationship through the sequence of their conversation. As Wei-Jan Chi observes:

The poignant irony is that Mamet's characters pride themselves in exercising total control over every social situation, but the sad fact remains that it is the conventions that are in control. In their zeal to play out the ritual, they allow themselves to be played by the ritual.<sup>17</sup>

Since language does not have the function of communicating the thoughts, Ruth and Nick are unable to voice their desires, needs, and fears. Their failure to speak a language to express their anxieties and hopes is caused by their being unconsciously bound by social conventions. Social conventions which frame Ruth's desire also prevent her to be a self-confident, articulate person to express her needs. Acting out her sexual role pattern she appears to be the stereotypical garrulous woman speaking too much but never actually introducing her point directly. In the distribution of discursive labor, Ruth takes her part in the indirect speech style by means of which she attains a poetic language. On the other hand, in a patriarchal society where commitment is associated with dependency, which is totally against male autonomy, sentimentality is ardently avoided in the case of men. Therefore, Nick's need is more directly physical compared to Ruth's need for a romantic commitment. He calls himself into being through the power he establishes over Ruth; to preserve his integrity he needs Ruth's dependency upon him and committing himself to a romantic relationship means the loss of his manliness. His one-up discursive position is indicated through his lesser engagement in interactional maintenance work and his direct speech style. He is deployed in the language of the prosaic, his language is devoid of sentiment making use of simple sentence structures and monosyllabic words.

---

<sup>17</sup> Wei-Jan Chi, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

In this first scene while Ruth insists on her chatter, Nick is the more reticent character. It is obvious that the more silent one is looking for something in the more talkative. And in fear of not saying what is needed, Ruth tries to control her impulses by the continuous flood of her language. However, the absences and the spaces in the narrative play a crucial role. What is unsaid between the two surfaces at first in their attitude towards nature, as Callens maintains:

The two in effect share little beyond need, and even that need is different in its nature. By the same token they speak a different language, turn to different metaphors, perceive the world around them differently.<sup>18</sup>

Thereby, the first image that appears is that of seagulls. The image speaks for isolation since the bird apparently chooses to be alone in the sky:

Ruth: These seagulls they were up there,  
one of them was up there by himself.  
He didn't want the other ones.  
They came, he'd flap and get them off.  
He let this one guy stay up there a minute.<sup>19</sup>

Intentionally or not Ruth uses the male pronoun for the bird suggestive of Nick who urges to preserve his independency and male autonomy. Indeed, this opening image indicates one of the challenges for the couple to overcome; they should transcend this urge to isolation in order to be more intimate. To this image Nick responds with a reference to herons which are migratory birds that do not stay in winter, reminiscent of temporary relationships to ease the sexual impulses. But Ruth, who sees a rhythm to nature and wishes to acquire the same harmony in their relationship, keeps making references to nature.

Ruth: You could live up here. Why not?  
(Pause)  
People could.  
You could live right out in the country.  
I slept so good yesterday.  
All the crickets. You know?  
With the rhythm.  
You wait.  
And you hear it.  
Chirp.  
Chirp chirp.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Johan Callens, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p.

13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. (emphasis mine)

She establishes a connection between the harmony she sees in nature and her desire for commitment in this relationship, yet her speech is elliptical; instead of saying it directly she puts it by making generalizations through the pronouns and subjects she uses. However, her enthusiastic reactions to nature are constantly negated by Nick. When Ruth draws a raccoon image, his response is suggestive of his fear of entrapment. Just like Nick, they become vicious when caught and put in a cage:

Ruth: Over there. I saw his eyes. He ran off.  
Nick: They get in the garbage.  
Ruth: No. I know. They eat it. When I saw it, I did not know what it was. Then it ran off.  
(Pause)  
Nick: We had them up here all the time.  
Ruth: When you were young.  
Nick: We'd catch them in a milk container.  
Ruth: Are they vicious?  
Nick: Very.  
Ruth: Yes. I thought so.  
Nick: And you couldn't keep them 'cause they'd gnaw their way out.  
Ruth: I was thinking . . . wait. Wait! They ate wood? The raccoons?  
Nick: No. You know. They'd chew it.  
Ruth: To get out.  
Nick: Yes.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, as Ruth desperately tries to stick to the natural phenomena in order to prove her point in the necessity of commitment, not only Nick's contradictory responses, but also nature itself becomes a source of threat. She supports her point by referring to "appetites": "I thought our *appetites* are just the body's way to tell us things that we may need."<sup>22</sup> She tries to convince Nick to comply with the natural order insisting that what is natural must also be beautiful. Nick counteracts: "What about cigarettes?"<sup>23</sup> She reconciles to her submission to a male by explaining it with the natural order: "It all has properties. It all is only things the way they are."<sup>24</sup> In fact, her point becomes a discouragement for Nick since the fact that "nothing lasts" in nature is redolent of Nick's ultimate fear, death.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Ruth (*sigh*): We fall away from ourselves. We grow fat. We fall away. The women, too. And men. We pick the people that we know are bad for us. We do that all the time.

Nick: We do. (*Pause*.) Why?

Ruth: I don't know. Nothing lasts. (*Pause*.) This is what I thought down on the rowboat. It had rotted. It had gone back to the Earth. We all go. That is why the Earth is good for us. When we look for things that don't go back, we become sick.<sup>25</sup>

Actually death is a source of threat for both of them. In Ruth's case, her fears turn up as she constantly changes the subject, makes precise references to the sounds ('Chirp. Chirp Chirp,' 'Swssshh. Chhhrsssh. Swwwssshhhh. '), and abandonment, loss and decay are her thematic constants (she speaks of birds leaving, of bears without lairs, of a decaying boat, of women that cannot go to sea).<sup>26</sup> However; she sees a way out of this threat in a romantic commitment with Nick, as a woman brought up with the social conventions of a patriarchal society she does not question her dependent position. But for Nick the idea of commitment itself is reminiscent of death, the loss of his male integrity. In fact, when Ruth is for the first time clear in expressing her desire in commitment – where she uses the pronoun 'we' meaning themselves- by referring to a sign of love, the bracelet her grandmother had given her, the fact that she dropped it in the water turns over to herself since it gives Nick the chance to negate commitment.

Ruth: It fell.

It floated down. I dropped it.

(*Pause*)

I can still see it.

Floating down.

It went so slowly.

(*Pause*)

It was a necklace and I wore it as a bracelet.

Wrapped around.

My Grandmother's.

(*Pause*)

Nick: Nothing lasts forever.

Ruth: We could do that.

Nick: What Ruth?

Ruth: Wear things.

Nick: What?

Ruth: We could wear anything. Rings, bracelets.

Long, slim necklaces.

Gold necklaces.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

We'd wrap them on our wrists.  
(Pause)  
Wrapped around.  
To show that we are lovers.  
(Pause)  
There are so many things that we could do.  
I'm glad we came here.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that Ruth interprets their vacation as a sign of commitment from Nick, however Nick discourages Ruth's confidence with his direct, monosyllabic questions, and tries to make it evident that she is not the special someone since he came to the summer house with other people many times before. Dennis Carroll argues that "Ruth's reactions to nature already characterise her as a kind of Earth Mother - she professes being alive to the natural cycle, and stresses how healthy things spring from the ground and finally return to it."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, despite Nick's discouragements, she keeps establishing a connection between their relationship and nature. But Nick does not seem interested in the natural surrounding; he is already familiar with it. Ruth speaks elliptically to open up her wish to be spiritually more intimate, she starts with "I" to refer to their relationship, then uses "their family," and finally she enunciates the pronoun "we." But as a response Nick's "we" is direct and something different from Ruth's as if he wants to clarify once again that their relationship is limited with sexual impulses:

Ruth: I would love it up here in the Winter.  
(To self:) Buying toys or flowers for their family.  
Nick: Mmm.  
Ruth: We could sit and watch the snow and make a fire. We could get a clock.  
We'd cuddle up inside our quilts and watch the fire.  
Nick: We came up here in Winter one time.  
Many times.  
Ruth: You did?  
Nick: A few times.  
Ruth: Tell me.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p.p. 29-30.

<sup>28</sup> Dennis Carroll, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>29</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 32.

At this point storytelling appears for the first time in the play as a strategy for the characters, who in their alienation look for a coherent meaning in life. Even if it becomes later a means of communication between the couple, here story is a means of evasion for both of them. As Bigsby points out:

The essence of the fairy-tale and the bedtime story is to deny the reality of suffering, to insist that there's no human need which is not met, no terror which cannot be neutralized. Anxiety, fear, betrayal and desertion may exist, but only momentarily, only as a preparation for a more complete security.<sup>30</sup>

It is apparent that story is a way out for both Ruth and Nick to escape the harsh realities of life all of which lead to a single reality, death, in the end. In Heidegger's terms they experience *Angst* in the face of death. Instead of creating meanings out of life to overcome this angst, they desperately look for a given meaning; instead of trying to develop a mutual understanding, they insist on exploitative relationships. When it is no longer possible to escape, stories come to their rescue. As a child Nick used to come here to the summer house with his family, and his father used to tell them stories of the Indians, or from the War. These stories made him feel safe and content "because all things had stopped,"<sup>31</sup> when a story was told. And it seems as a grown up man now, he experiences a disillusionment similar to that of a child when s/he discovers Santa is not real. "I thought that was what life was. . . . To be still."<sup>32</sup> He thought life was a moment of stasis, to hear what happens and be content just like listening to a story. The repetitive enunciation of the word "content" indicates the very lack in Nick's life, and this lack reincarnates in Ruth's wish "Tell me one."<sup>33</sup> Instead of acknowledging the fact that their needs are incongruent, she wants him to give her what she wants through stories now, and accordingly defines storytelling:

Oh, thank you. Good. This is the best.  
This is the best thing two people can do.  
To live through things together. If they share what they have done  
before.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, *op. cit.*, p.p. 34-35.

<sup>31</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods in The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

But Nick counters with a threatening story of a crazy man who thought Hitler told him to do things to his wife, and who later killed himself. This man imagined he had been kidnapped by the Martians, and Nick believed him when he was a child. As he now does not know whether to believe it or not, he binds the subject with his existential void.

Nick: They all go on.  
(*Pause*)  
All we have are insights.  
(*Pause*)  
Who knows what's real?  
Ruth: Yes.  
Nick: They exist all independent of our efforts to explain them.  
Everything does. (*Pause*) We cannot know it. (*Pause*)  
My father. *Waltz*.  
(*Pause*)  
They had seen things.  
(*Pause*)  
Who knows. If they were real or not.  
Ruth: Yes.  
Nick: Whether they were real or not.  
(*Pause*)  
He had had insights.  
(*Pause*)  
The things he saw. (*Pause*.) Whether he had imagined them or not.  
He had had insights.  
(*Pause*)  
Do you know?<sup>35</sup>

The repetitive rhythm of the words “insights,” “real or not,” including the pauses in his speech indicate Nick’s disturbed psyche, his problem with the meaning of his existence. Here the function of storytelling also starts to change with the rhythm of the speech. Unknowingly Nick offers himself through the rhythmic flow of his language and exposes his vulnerabilities. Thus a chance of genuine contact occurs as now they are redefining the meaning of storytelling by the very act of talk. As Carroll observes:

The potential for positive contact tends to be manifested less in the text of dialogue than in nuance, implication, pause and silence; and in the will and intent that the rhythm of words, more than the word choice itself, portends.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 40-41.

<sup>36</sup> Dennis Carroll, *op. cit.*, p.27.

But this time Ruth's response results in a retreat since she still takes storytelling as a tactic. Once again connecting storytelling with the ideal of a romantic relationship imposed upon her by the social discourse, she tries to soothe Nick as a mother-lover figure.

Ruth: But we don't have to be afraid.  
Because we have each other.  
(*Pause.*)  
Nick: I'm not afraid.  
Ruth: Of course you're not. But I meant if you *were*.  
As in a story. (*Pause.*)  
Because we have each other.  
(*Pause.*)  
Will you take me in the house?  
I want to lie down next to you.  
I want to stick my fingers in you.  
I'm so glad we are here.  
When I am with you, Nick, I feel so strong.  
I feel like I know everything.  
(*Pause.*)  
I wish we could stay up here forever.<sup>37</sup>

The rhythmic unity of words in the above quotation is also a remarkable example of how she defines herself, sexuality, and nature and how she unites them with her ideal love image in the poetic discourse she develops. Overlooking their lack of congruence, she persistently wants to stick to a fiction. Apparently she sees a transcendence to sexuality, and elevates it further by establishing a connection with the charm of the natural surrounding. And being there in this idyllic place with him comes to define her subjectivity: a woman who gets the power of her existence through her dependent position on a man. And what makes the situation tragic is her desire in a stasis.

Unable to appreciate this chance for a genuine contact, they push their incongruence aside for the time being and take shelter in sexuality. While they are going inside the house to make love at the end of Scene 1, Ruth still persists in her tactic and takes his word to continue the story of Herman Waltz who fell in a hole with Nick's father. As they define their subjectivity through their mutual but selfish dependency on each other with their act of talk, the clash between their speech

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

patterns gets deeper by the end of Scene 1. For now they have gotten in the woods, it gets harder for them to attain real contact.

## 1.4. Getting Lost: Night

Just like David Mamet who once said, “[we] don’t trust words. Our anger is so great that we can only blurt and stammer,”<sup>38</sup> his characters do not trust words. Their language is socially conditioned, and their social masks constitute a restraint which prevents them from attaining genuine contact. Despite this disfunction of language, they keep trying to communicate and “their initial attempts to connect give way to power-plays in coercion and domination.”<sup>39</sup> The situation is no different in the case of Ruth and Nick. It will not be wrong to say that the more Ruth pushes forward for commitment through her personal lyricism, the more the breach between them widens. The clash between the languages of the poetic and the prosaic becomes more and more intense. The more Ruth expects from Nick, the more he becomes indifferent; her expectant position renders her weak while it makes Nick more powerful. However, in all this mess their insistence on keeping the act of talk going, and the rhythm of their language propel them to create an alternative language through storytelling. Apart from their inconsistency, story is dropped out to be a tool of tactic and becomes a language through which they expose their weaknesses and offer their inner selves. Although they have created it themselves, the challenge for them is to evaluate this opportunity duly.

Scene 2 opens with Ruth sitting on the porch, and Nick who has been unable to sleep comes in. It is apparent that Nick who repeatedly asks the time is restless; Ruth, still in her mother role, tries to console him. Trusting herself in a lie, she pushes Nick to believe: “Everything is just the way it should be.”<sup>40</sup> This time more reluctant in his attitude, Nick resists her attempts. He is like a restless child; as he cannot sleep now, something must be wrong. Consequently, the two lovers “make

---

<sup>38</sup> Dennis Carrol, *op. cit.*, p.27.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

<sup>40</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods in The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 47.

disguised overtures to one another to enter into their scenarios of how life should be; . . .”<sup>41</sup> Thus, Ruth whose dreams of a romantic affair have been shaped by the social discourse persistently tries to fit Nick in her scenario. She keeps offering him to go out for a walk through the whole scene. But Nick keeps negating her feigning the rain as an excuse, since this time Ruth’s wish does not fit in his masculine scenario. When they cannot settle down, inconsequential subjects open up like the television commercials appearing up in the middle of a program. What is being emphasized with these is not the content, but the rhythm of the words flowing. Accordingly, Dennis Carroll points out:

[T]he dialogue is the barometer of this pattern. It is highly formal and strict in its rhythms. It makes much use of repetition, and some of it seems trivial and inconsequential, so there is tension at times between the portentous rhythm of what is being said and the tenuousness of the actual content.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, when Ruth asks Nick to go for a walk, and he turns her down, the opening conversation on their rowboat is a remarkable example on how the rhythm works:

Ruth: Come on.  
Nick: No.  
Ruth: We’ll go put the rain stuff on and go out to the Point.  
Nick: No.  
Ruth: Where the old rowboat is.  
Nick: It isn’t on the Point.  
Ruth: It’s not? The rowboat?  
Nick: No.  
Ruth: I saw it out there.  
(Pause.)  
Nick: The Point is over there. (*He points.*)  
Ruth: That’s where the rowboat is.  
Nick: It is?  
Ruth: Yes.  
Nick: Then it’s not our rowboat.  
Ruth: No?  
Nick: We kept our rowboat in the Cove.  
Ruth: It’s not your rowboat?  
Nick: No.  
Ruth: Oh.  
(Pause.)

---

<sup>41</sup> Dennis Carrol, *op. cit.*, p.60.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

Nick: Is it blue?  
Ruth: It's a kind of blue.  
Nick: What is it?  
Ruth: Green.  
It could of faded.  
Nick: What's it called?  
Ruth: I don't know.  
Nick: Did you see a name on it?  
Ruth: No. I don't think so.  
Nick: On the transom?  
Ruth: Near the back? The transom's near the back?  
(Pause.)  
The transom is the stern. Right, Nicky?  
Nick: Yes.  
Ruth: It's gone. It doesn't have one.  
It got rotted off. I told you.  
(Pause.)  
What was yours called?  
Nick: I don't remember.  
Ruth: Let's go take a walk. We'll put the stuff on. Boots and stuff.  
Nick: There's lightning.<sup>43</sup>

Since Ruth still cannot express her desire directly, her poetry speaks up her romantic yearnings. She is in tune with the natural surrounding, and actually sees it as poetry itself. On the other hand, Nick's poor language, devoid of sentiment, is repellent. This time she is more direct in her use of pronouns, but her erratic sentences against Nick's complete grammatical units make her speech metaphorical. Although she is in the country now, she carries the gendered discourse wherever she goes with herself, she cannot get rid of the social boundaries she has attained in the city; in order to speak of her desires she has to use elliptical patterns. On the other hand, Nick's formal sentence structures and his spare language also reflect how he conforms to the social role designed for him. As the saying goes "he is a man of his word"; whatever will be said, will be said directly, there is no need to beat around the bush.

Nick: If you want to, take a walk. It's alright.  
Ruth: Come *on*, Nick, I don't want to take one by myself, for chrissake.  
(Pause)  
I want to be with *you* out there. It will be wet, but we will not be *getting* wet. Our faces, just. The two of us.  
I always thought, I always wanted it to be like this.  
With my lover. In the country.  
In the middle of the night. This is so beautiful.

---

<sup>43</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods in The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p.p. 48-50.

Here we're awake. All by ourselves.  
Oh, Nicky. All alone.  
(Pause)  
Nick: I'm glad that you're happy.<sup>44</sup>

What is said of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* is partly applicable for Ruth and Nick: "To a great extent, language performs for the characters the function of a smokescreen, which prevents the true discovery and revelation of self."<sup>45</sup> Besides hiding their true desires and fears behind the veil of language, especially Ruth's poetic language drifts her to self-delusion. As a product of patriarchal discourse, she keeps reproducing the social norms by voicing what is expected of her role as a woman. What she wishes through her elliptical speech is to be stuck in time which is totally distinct from reality. Her description of her ideal relationship supports the point:

Just sitting out here in the Winter.  
Bundled up. Not moving.  
Like some married couple in a picture.  
Rocking back and forth.<sup>46</sup>

Then in order to console the restless Nick, Ruth starts telling a story her Grandmother used to tell her and her brother when they were kids. This famous story by Brothers Grimm (*Babes in the Wood*) concerns two children who are left in the care of an Uncle. However, the Uncle does not want to take care of them and pays two men to take the children into the woods and then kill them. But the men cannot accomplish the task and leave the children in the wood. But unable to fend for themselves, the children die at the end. Nevertheless, Ruth adapts this story to herself and her brother, and skips the unhappy ending. While she tells the story, the children suddenly become 'we,' also turning into an allegorical reference to Ruth and Nick's relationship: "We had to take care of each other, and be very careful not to go too far [not to get lost]."<sup>47</sup> However, this story she tells to soothe Nick is one of tactic, but in between she starts telling her real story which concerns her Grandmother and their passionate love with her Grandfather that is symbolized through the necklace

---

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51-52.

<sup>45</sup> Wei-Jan Chi, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 52.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Grandma gave her. Thus they begin to create their alternative language through which they lay bare their inner selves and real concerns. The love of her grandparents constitutes a symbol of her ideal love image. She is also symbolically looking for the same passion through the bracelet (necklace) she regrets losing. This is a “they lived happily ever after” story that she creates through her own narration and thoroughly believes its potential like a child who believes in fairy tales:

She loved him. They were married.  
Nothing, even he was crippled—or she was—could separate them.  
She was his. Forever.  
They had made a vow.<sup>48</sup>

It is apparent that she wants to have the same passion in their own relationship since she identifies herself with Grandma and wants to do the same as they did before:

They would lay in bed.  
I saw the Photograph of what she looked like. And of him.  
When she was little, too.  
She looked like me.  
She said he was like Iron. He could lift her in one hand.  
They'd lie in bed all day and never speak . . . they'd take long walks.<sup>49</sup>

This story of Ruth is a threat to Nick. First, the idea that men have to be strong, which is imposed by the patriarchal social norms, recurs in the image of Grandpa. Men do not always benefit from this idea, but it also establishes pressure upon them. And this would prevent any man who has fears like Nick from opening out. Secondly, their passion is “a challenge to Nick to respond psychically and sexually to Ruth with the same intensity.”<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, Nick's story about Waltz and his father who fell into a hole during World War II is also a threat to Ruth. After they had been rescued, Waltz went mad and killed himself. He was a man who used to beat his wife. This misogynist figure and the image of male bonding indicated through Waltz and his father's relationship do not conform to Ruth's faith in the achievability of a long term

---

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> Dennis Carrol, *op. cit.*, p.63.

committed relationship between man and woman, and the story's conclusion "reinforces her fear of isolation indicated before in the image of seagull."<sup>51</sup>

A lightning flashes and Ruth, still excited about the natural surrounding, remembers that they (probably she and her friends) used to turn the boats upside-down during the rain and sit inside them when they were kids. Her excitement turns Nick on and "she succeeds in pulling him into her world and briefly his prose is reshaped as verse."<sup>52</sup> He is on the verge of opening up his domestic wish similar to Ruth's, but Ruth's self-indulgent interrogative style anxious to get tangible results about herself draws him back. Among her insistent "tell me"s and repetitive patterns, she cannot ask directly if she is the one. Instead, her pushing questions are replied with equally repetitive "I don't know"s, and their relationship remains in limbo as he gets back to monosyllabic responses:

Nick: I'd sit here.  
Ruth: Yes.  
Nick: And think about things like that.  
Ruth: Would you? (*Pause.*) What things?  
Nick: You know.  
(*Pause.*)  
Ruth: Tell me.  
Nick: Homes and things.  
Ruth: When the storms blew.  
Nick: Yes.  
Ruth: What about them?  
Nick: Living in them. Being warm.  
(*Pause.*)  
Ruth: Being in them with somebody.  
Nick: Yes.  
Ruth: Please tell me.  
Nick: I don't know.  
(*Pause.*)  
Ruth: Tell me.  
Nick: Just these thoughts I had.  
Ruth: When you would settle down.  
Nick: Yes.  
Ruth: Here?  
Nick: I don't know.  
Ruth: Who with?  
(*Pause.*)  
Nick: I don't know.  
Ruth: And what would you think?

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, "David Mamet: all true stories," **David Mamet**, Ed. by. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, p. 189.

Nick: How it would be.  
Ruth: How would it be?  
Nick: I don't know.  
Ruth: Yes. You do. Tell me.  
Nick: I don't know.  
Ruth: Please tell me. (*Pause.*) Please tell me. (*Pause.*) Please<sup>53</sup>.

Nick fantasizes about relationships just like Ruth does. They both dream up a fairy tale of relationships, they want to reach a happy ending without striving and then live happily ever after. The gendered discourse of the patriarch is given voice also in Nick's persona, as he idealizes a woman who would both sexually satisfy him and be like a mother to him that would warm him up. Instead of resisting that role considered for women, Ruth complies with it; she can easily regard women as men's possession in relationships, and persistently asks Nick if she is that woman he is dreaming of. Her persistence on concrete answers finally ends up with a sharp negation:

Nick: And . . . you know, we would meet and we would just be happy.  
Ruth: You would.  
Nick: Yes.  
(*Pause.*)  
Ruth: What, with Houses?  
Nick: Yes.  
Ruth: Here?  
Nick: No.<sup>54</sup>

Nick's ideal woman image constructed by the social discourse is both for and against him. It is for him because as a man he would benefit from women's inferior position in the relationship, he would be the possessor of a 'commodity' that would enable him to define his subjectivity. But if this woman happens to be Ruth, that means he would give her what she wants, and that eventually would deracinate his advantageous position. However, he thinks if he kept her in limbo without the ultimate satisfaction, she would always be in need of him so that he could feel himself complete. Therefore, he has to negate her to pursue his dominant male subjectivity.

---

<sup>53</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p.p. 65-67.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Now that she is negated, Ruth tries to persuade him that she may be the one. Her assertion is that she may not be the exact counterpart of what he used to have in his dreams, but once he lets the unexpected, he would see that it may be good, too. However, she still cannot express her point directly, and resorts to elliptical patterns:

Ruth: Not if you thought it. (*Pause.*) But sometimes things are different than the way you thought they'd be when you set out on them.

This doesn't mean that, *you* know, that they aren't . . . that they aren't . . . Wait. Do you know what I mean?

Nick: No.

Ruth: That they aren't good.

Just because they are different.

(*Pause.*)<sup>55</sup>

All this stammering and failing to confront her point directly indicate her self-distrust and render Nick more dominant in the power-play. The gaps in her speech give him (and also the audience) the chance to interpret her words as he wishes. Thus, he can say he does not understand her when her words do not suit his purpose. But then Ruth still pushes forward and suggests that he fears. Although Ruth has implied it to soothe him that there is no need to be afraid, Nick takes it as an offence to his male integrity, and he praises himself immediately by paltering her and chuckling her minced words. Since she is humiliated by his chuckles now, she starts to go for a walk by herself. It is quite evident that Nick does not want to be alone, but he also cannot meet her need for contact, therefore takes refuge in sexual overtures. However, he is crude in his behavior turning it into an assault. As Bigsby rightly points out:

Indeed, in a parody of her need for contact he launches on a crude sexual assault, forcing her to abandon the gentility of her protective language: 'You tore 'em, will you hold on, for chrissakes?' In terms of the basic rhythm of the play this is a moment of defeat for Ruth. Increasingly desperate, she is reduced to bizarre legalism: 'If you come up here with me,

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

that means you are .... when you come up here that means you are committed ... If you are a man. Because I am your guest.<sup>56</sup>

Nick's use of force reflects his attitude towards this relationship, and objectifying Ruth sexually helps him to recognize himself as subject. His behavior is also an assault against Ruth's lyricism. For an immediate reaction, Ruth's language changes; her poetry suddenly transforms into street talk. And since he is rejected sexually, Nick holds on to verbal power in order to preserve his male integrity:

Will you shut up one second, please?  
(*Pause.*)  
You talk too much, Ruth.<sup>57</sup>

As she settles for her defeat Ruth's language starts to change gradually. Desperate, her next attempt is to give Nick a bracelet as a gift. Inscribed on it are the words she cannot pronounce: "Nicholas. I will always love you. Ruth." However, Nick once more rejects her and refuses to put it on. And Ruth reacts in prose: "Then go fuck yourself."<sup>58</sup>

On account of her evident need, thanks to the bracelet, Ruth makes a final attempt and manages to verbalize her expectation. When her rhetorical question is reversed and she is asked why she came there, she falls back on her poetic discourse using natural phenomena as a metaphorical tool:

Ruth: You don't know why I did? Are you dumb?  
What do you mean?  
(*Pause.*)  
Caw, caw, caw, the gulls fly.  
They eat fish?  
Nick: I don't know.  
Ruth: They either eat the fish or insects. (*Pause.*)  
We eat fish. The fish eat seaweed.  
It all dies, the things turn into shells.  
Or deposits. They wash up. As coral.  
Maybe they make sand, or special beaches.  
They decay and wash away.

---

<sup>56</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, "David Mamet: all true stories," **David Mamet**, Ed. by. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, p. 190.

<sup>57</sup> David Mamet, **The Woods** in **The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond**, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p.

77.

<sup>58</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 82.

(Pause.)  
Then they form the islands.  
(Pause.)  
Nothing lasts forever.  
(Pause.)  
Don't make me go home.  
(Pause.)  
I want to live with you. Go put it on.<sup>59</sup>

However, her final attempt is also turned down by Nick. Though they share a common *Angst* her need is totally inconsistent with his own need in finding an object to construct his subjectivity. It is an issue of power; he is at once in control of her through words – “Do you know that you demean yourself?”<sup>60</sup> – and dependent on her existence:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.<sup>61</sup>

Utterly defeated Ruth backs down and decides to leave the place. Her poetry speaks up her decision:

Well, I'm going to take it. So that's it.  
So you can just relax. I've had enough of this. (Pause.)  
Life goes on.  
Drip *drip*.  
Drip *drip*.  
Do you feel better now?<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 83-84.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>61</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” **Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 3**, Ed. by. James D. Faubion, Trans. by. Robert Hurley and Others, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 331.

<sup>62</sup> David Mamet, **The Woods in The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond**, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p.86.

As it can be observed through the continuum of the act of talk both Ruth and Nick yearn for intimacy and contact. However, it is such a power-play that the person whose need becomes evident happens to be the weaker party making the other dominant. Although they have created an alternative language, it is Ruth who comes to enunciate her need in the end. Since weakness, inadequacy, indigence, insufficiency, and lack are the synonyms (with negative connotations) for need only a woman can declare that she is in need. What the dominant patriarchal discourse has taught her is that she can only construct her subjectivity through her dependency on a man. Thus, it is not by chance that Ruth is the one who opens up. But in Nick's case, although he is dependent on Ruth in another way, he holds the control in the face of her need. Thereby, his need for his subjectivity surpasses his need for contact. Although Ruth steps into the realm of the prosaic a few times, and Nick into verse, they cannot get rid of their sexual role patterns that has been dictated by their gendered discourse. As a result the breach between their speech styles deepens by the end of Scene 2. It seems "loneliness is irremediable"<sup>63</sup> as Ruth's last story about Martians indicates, they are lost in the woods of their relationship, her poetic narrative speaks once more:

They played upon us.  
We had been alone the whole time.  
We had wanted it for so long that they came and they knew  
our desires.  
There was no one there.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, **Contemporary Writers: David Mamet**, Ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 56.

<sup>64</sup> David Mamet, **The Woods in The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond**, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 88.

## 1.5. The Acquisition of Selfhood: Morning

In Mamet's plays, a conversation between two characters often involves a process of defining reality, the reality of their relationship or the reality of a certain situation. For Mamet, reality is not some absolute, unchangeable entity unmediated by outside interventions. Rather, reality is a product of human perception subjected to negotiations through dialogue. Often his characters create a tangible reality with words; they talk and talk until a version of "truth" is established by consensus. To a great extent, most of Mamet's dialogue presents human beings engaged in a process of defining reality.<sup>65</sup>

Likewise, Ruth and Nick define their own relationship through dialogue. By Scene 3 the balance of power shifts along with their use of the language of the poetic and the prosaic. Now that Ruth has ceased to expect anything from Nick and decided to leave the place, Nick's unspoken desire for companionship surfaces. This time Nick's expectant position renders Ruth more powerful giving her self-confidence. Through the course of the dialogue, she comes to express herself more directly while Nick starts to use poetic terms to express his unsaid fear-desire. Story still appears as a tool for communication between them helping Nick to pour out his repressed fears and find consolation in the arms of the storyteller 'mother,' Ruth.

Nick who was indifferent to the natural surrounding in the previous scenes shifts roles with Ruth and comes to express his desire elliptically through references to nature. He wants Ruth to stay but he cannot enunciate it directly, instead he chooses to say it the other way around: "I am not glad that you're going."<sup>66</sup> He speaks of herons and beavers to evoke her enthusiasm. Just like Ruth repeating her offer to go for a walk before, this time Nick keeps saying in spite of Ruth's rejections that he will call her up after she leaves. Elizabeth Grosz gives a plausible explanation of the situation:

[T]he displacement of desire onto other things means that the demands through which desire is symbolized actually has not one, but two objects: one spoken (the object demanded), and one unspoken (the maintenance of a relationship to the other to whom the demand is addressed). So the thing demanded is a rationalization for maintaining a

---

<sup>65</sup> Wei-Jan Chi, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>66</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 91.

certain relation to the other: the demand for food is also a demand for recognition, for the other's desire. The catch is that even if this recognition is granted, we can't assume that it will always be granted ("Will you still love me tomorrow . . ."); hence, we repeat the demand, endlessly.<sup>67</sup>

Now that they have changed positions, its reflection on their language is remarkable. He implies a connection for the first time: "Do we have an aspirin?"<sup>68</sup> It is now Nick who keeps bringing suggestions, he tries to guarantee seeing Ruth again, but this time Ruth keeps negating him. It is now Ruth's speech that is nearly monosyllabic; through the rhythm of the dialogue, she is now the reticent and the dominant:

Nick: Do you want to go inside and lie down for a while?  
Ruth: No.  
Nick: Did you get any sleep?  
Ruth: I didn't want to sleep.  
Nick: You could go in and take a nap. I'll wake you.  
Ruth: I can nap on the way back.  
Nick: What will you do when you get back?  
Ruth: I don't know.  
Nick: Do you want to call me up to tell me you got in alright?  
Ruth: No.  
Nick: Did you take your wet stuff?  
Ruth: Yes.  
Nick: There's any stuff you want to leave, I'll bring it in.  
Ruth: Why would I want to leave it?  
(Pause.)  
Nick: To dry.  
Ruth: It's alright.  
Nick: Call me up tonight to tell me you got in alright.  
Ruth: I have things that I have to do.  
Nick: Oh.  
(Pause.)  
I'll think about you.  
Ruth: Will you.  
Nick: Yes.  
Ruth: You'll think about me while you're here.  
Nick: Yes.  
(Pause.)  
Ruth: I bet.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Grosz as quoted in Don Kulick, "Language and Desire," **The Handbook of Language and Gender**, Ed.by. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 126.

<sup>68</sup> David Mamet, **The Woods in The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond**, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 96. (emphasis mine)

<sup>69</sup> **Ibid.**, p.p. 97-98.

Ruth now plays her part as the rational, while Nick is the emotional character. Her sharp and cold replies are highly reminiscent of Nick's earlier style. She is strong and self-reliant now, she does not insist on going for a walk with Nick any more: "Just leave me to be by myself for a minute."<sup>70</sup> She does not carry out what is expected of her as a woman, instead she refuses to stay fixed in her role, therefore her actions are revolutionary:

Women need not merely function as mirrors, as objects of male desire; they have access to a revolutionary method which violates the dialectic designs of their male oppressors. By challenging the power structures established in the plays, and more importantly, by challenging the expectations of the other characters and their audiences, [. . .] [they] embody this revolutionary femininity.<sup>71</sup>

As they have changed positions now, it seems Nick has lost the grounds on which he establishes his identity. It was Ruth's social position as a woman which rendered him complete as a man. But now Ruth's determined discourse does not let him direct her as he wishes. Therefore, he tries to tyrannize Ruth through her physicality. He believes he could still preserve his male integrity through brutal sexuality, he is sure to see Ruth's body anytime he wants, however, Ruth subverts the power structures once again. Not only she herself does not take shelter in sexuality any more, she does not allow him to use her as a sex object. In the face of Ruth's conflict, as if to testify whether his power still works or not, Nick wants to have sex with her. He expresses this in a demeaning way, he wants to stress that his attempt is devoid of emotional content to overpower Ruth. But she ridicules him, and by mirroring the exact same language he uses she reverses his tool of empowerment. What happens is the Foucauldian splitting of discourse into its own contra objective, she is both a participant in and a critical antagonist of the value system that constructs her:<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>71</sup> Ann Hall, "Playing to Win: Sexual Politics in David Mamet's *House of Games* and *Speed the Plow*," **David Mamet: A Casebook**, Ed. by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, p.139

<sup>72</sup> Imtiaz Habib, "Demotic Male Desire and Female Subjectivity in David Mamet: The Split Space of the Women of *Edmond*," **Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet**, Ed. by Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 79.

Ruth: I'm—just grow up—I am going swimming. *Please.*  
(*She moves away from him.*)  
Nick: Come upstairs with me.  
Ruth: Will you come and call me in a half an hour?  
Nick: I want you to come upstairs with me. I want to fuck you.  
(*Pause.*)  
Ruth: That's charming.  
Nick: Is it?  
Ruth: Yes. It is.  
Nick: I want to fuck you.  
Ruth: Well, you just go fuck yourself. I'm going swimming.<sup>73</sup>

His last weapon, sexuality, taken from his hands and left guardless, Nick holds on to language as a weapon and insults Ruth: "You're so full of shit."<sup>74</sup> But Ruth does not remain silent and a battle in words begins. She uncovers his fear, and exposes that he takes cover in misogynist stories to feel himself complete. It is striking that she scorns his story by expounding it to have a homosexual implication, and subverts his misogyny using the tools of patriarchy against itself. An assault against his manhood means reducing him to nothingness, since his subjectivity is constructed upon his sexuality. Therefore, as a response he immediately reduces Ruth to non-being through his verbal attack: "You're *nothing*, honey."<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, when Nick tries to take her self-respect back through verbal power, "You have no self-respect,"<sup>76</sup> their fight in words transforms into physical violence, Ruth swings an oar at him, and Nick hits her in the mouth, she falls off the porch. As a matter of fact, his physical power yields him totally weak within the power play; he confesses to be frightened while Ruth mocks his fear: "Fuck me, I don't want to die."<sup>77</sup> It is now Nick who is after a romantic ideal, he takes over Ruth's sentimental discourse; as he describes his ideal woman his socially bound discourse reveals how gender is a social construct. However; Ruth's reversed position in the power play subverts this construct:

Nick: All my life I thought that I would *meet* a person.  
She . . .  
Ruth: What?  
Nick: She would say, "Let us be lovers." (*Pause.*)

---

<sup>73</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p.p. 101-102.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

She'd ask me.  
"I know who you are." (*Pause.*)  
"I know what you need."  
"I want to have your children." (*Pause.*)  
"I understand you."  
"I know what you are."  
Ruth: (*to self, very softly*): Oh, God.  
Nick: I would fall down. I would fall down and thank God.  
I'd thank God for my life.  
I'd kiss the Earth.  
Ruth: You read too many books.<sup>78</sup>

Foucault argues that silences "are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses."<sup>79</sup> Self is a linguistic construct; therefore Nick tries to develop for himself an integral identity and hold power within language, but the silences – what he avoids saying in his male bound discourse – reveal his repressed fears, desires and insecurities. Mamet insists on topic changes, avoidances, and silences in everyday conversation to expose this repression. In *The Woods* the use of narratives becomes an additional device to disclose unspoken fears and desires. The poetic language Nick attains in the last scene finally leads him to the narration of a dream. Like the very structure of dreams his speech style in this narration is elliptical and metaphorical. The image of the wild bear, which was first presented in Scene 1 trying to find his cave upon which the house had been built, recurs in Nick's dream in Scene 3. It becomes the central image in the first truly personal story Nick is able to tell. Through this image Nick speaks of his pain and insecurity,<sup>80</sup> and storytelling appears once more as an alternative medium for communication:

I have these dreams at night. I dream. No, wait. I'll tell you. (*Pause.*)  
I see the window, and the shades are blowing. There has come a breeze, and all the curtains blow.  
They are on fire.  
It laps around the window. On all sides.  
Someone is calling my name. Nicholas.  
I swear to you.

---

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 109-110.

<sup>79</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1., London, Pelican Books, 1981, p. 27.

<sup>80</sup> Dennis Carrol, *op. cit.*, p.64.

I hear them in a voice unlike a man or woman. When I look, I do not want to know. I know that there is something there. I look. I see a bear. A bear has come back. At the window. Do you hear me, Ruth? Do you know what this *is*? To crawl beneath my house. This house is *mine* now. In its hole it calls me. In the Earth. (*Pause.*) Nicholas. He's standing upright. On his legs. He has a huge erection. I am singed. He speaks a human language, Ruth. I know. He has these thoughts and they are trapped inside his mouth. His jaw cannot move. He has thoughts and feelings, BUT HE CANNOT SPEAK. If only he could *speak*.  
If only he could say the thing he wants.<sup>81</sup>

It is highly significant that the bear is unable to speak out his feelings, and is associated with inarticulateness. The bear image is also a threat for Nick from a more powerful male like the Grandpa. It is associated with the masculinity that Nick feels threatened by.<sup>82</sup> For fear of losing Ruth, Nick reveals that his brutal attitudes had grown out of his own emotional weakness. Fears are actually desires – the desire to avoid shame, embarrassment, danger, punishment, etc.<sup>83</sup> Nick's fear had taken its root from the patriarchal discourse that forces the male figure to be powerful and potent. What he fears most is to be unable to meet Ruth's ideal male image that corresponds to Grandpa, which is also constructed by the gendered discourse of the society. Therefore, he represses his own need for an emotional companionship and tries to construct a powerful male figure by prioritizing physical satisfaction. According to Lacan desire is associated with absence, loss, and lack. The bear image as associated with masculinity and a lack of genuine language for contact can be read within these terms. In Lacan's theory infants do not have any sense of division or separation when they are born. "Because they sense no separation, and because their physical needs are met by others, infants do not perceive themselves to lack anything; instead, they imagine themselves to be complete and whole."<sup>84</sup> Lacan calls this phase, 'Imaginary.' Later infants pass through the 'Mirror Phase' where they exit the Imaginary and perceive the difference between themselves and the others. This transition is traumatic because they realize "that caregivers are not just *there*. Nourishment, protection, and love are given (always temporarily) as a result of particular signifying acts, like crying,

---

<sup>81</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods in The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 112.

<sup>82</sup> Dennis Carrol, *op. cit.*, p.65.

<sup>83</sup> Don Kulick, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

squirming, or vocalizing.”<sup>85</sup> Thus the infant carries on with the ‘Symbolic Order’ where they come to signify their needs, and through signification they are no more needs but ‘demands’:

Once needs are formulated as demands, they are lost to us, because needs exist in a different order (Lacan’s *Real*, which is his name for that which remains beyond or outside signification). In a similar way that Kant argued that language both gives us our world of experience, and also keeps us from perceiving the world in an unmediated form, Lacan asserts that signification can substitute for needs, but it cannot fulfill them. This gap between the need and its expression – between a hope and its fulfillment – is where Lacan locates the origins and workings of desire.<sup>86</sup>

In other words, desire arises when an infant experiences the loss of its sense of wholeness. However; we will never attain our object of desire, but without knowing this we put signifiers in place of our needs. To use Derrida’s term, ‘*différance*’, the sign will always lack a full presence, “signifiers enforce an endless postponement of ‘presence’.”<sup>87</sup> Because of this postponement we can never reach satisfaction, instead desire is replaced with desire forever. Nick establishes his identity through the Other’s, Ruth’s, dependent position, he imagines himself being whole by overpowering Ruth. However, when the balance of power shifts in their relationship, his lack resurfaces as the phallic image of the bear incorporates in his dream. For Lacan, the ‘phallus’ is “the privileged signifier, which helps all signifiers achieve a unity with their signifieds.”<sup>88</sup> In his dream, Nick fully acknowledges his lack since the phallus belongs to an imaginary other and is to remain out of his reach. Within this vulnerable position his need for companionship arises, yet a language to express this need is also out of reach. He is the bear that wants desperately to return to its lair; unfortunately however, he will never be able to grasp the signifier to verbalize his feelings.

Yet, there is still one alternative as Mamet shows. According to Kristeva the relationship between the mother and the infant during which Lacan calls the Imaginary phase is based on sounds, rhythms, gestures, and movements. Kristeva

---

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>87</sup> **A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory**, Ed. by. Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, Peter Brooker, Cornwall, Prentice Hall / Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997, p. 171.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

calls this the 'semiotic level,' but as we grow up social discourse regulates the semiotic; and the 'symbolic level,' which is associated with logic and rationality and therefore with men, dominates the semiotic. However; the symbolic cannot exist without the semiotic; we attain a coherent self, our subjectivity through the symbolic, but the pressure of the semiotic constantly ruptures the symbolic. We can discover this activity in dreams, and in the practice of poetic language. Kristeva sees a revolutionary feature in the use of poetic language:

The possibility of radical social change is, in her view, bound up with the disruption of authoritarian discourses. Poetic language introduces the subversive openness of the semiotic 'across' society's 'closed' symbolic order: 'What the theory of the unconscious seeks, poetic language practices, within and against the social order.'<sup>89</sup>

In this respect, it is highly significant that Nick attains a poetic language and narrates his dream. Through their poetic narrations Ruth and Nick create an alternative, revolutionary medium against the patriarchal discourse imposed upon them. It is the sense of loss, the unknowable feature of life that brings them together; in the hope of neutralizing their sense of loss, they stick together. There is the fact of decay, and only their togetherness might be a substitute for their desire in wholeness. Nick's fear of death, loss, and meaninglessness finally surpasses his fear of loss of power. But their ordinary language practice does not let them express their need for communication and companionship, thus they develop another language through the rhythmic flow of their speech. Especially Ruth's language is revolutionary because through her act of speech she has subverted the balance of power in the relationship and got Nick to drop off his protective social discourse.

After his story, Nick makes a declaration of love, but rather "it is a plea for her to enter into his world, to accept him as he is, to accept his inarticulateness and his insecurities."<sup>90</sup> Ruth is aware of the content of this declaration; she accepts his plea, and she goes on with the story of the babes in the woods. As she now assumes the role of mother, her story is of comfort and reconciliation:

---

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>90</sup> Dennis Carrol, *op. cit.*, p.66.

There were two children . . .  
Go to sleep. It's alright.  
Go to sleep now.  
They went for a walk.  
Into the Forest. (*Pause.*)  
Their Grandma told them not to go too far.  
Or else they might get lost.  
For you must all be careful when you go into the woods.  
And they went in.  
It started to get dark.  
He said he thought that they had lost their way.

[ . . . ]

They lay down.  
(*Pause.*)  
He put his arms around her.  
(*Pause.*)  
They lay down in the Forest and they put their arms around  
each other.  
In the dark. And fell asleep.<sup>91</sup>

The story told by Ruth is an allegory within allegory. David Mamet presents the play as an allegory, the characters are not fully characterised; we are not given the characters' past, details about their lives like what jobs they do, etc.; the dialogue is sparse and formal, and their language is socially conditioned.<sup>92</sup> In *The Woods* what Mamet tells us is a fable of relationships, seeking the failure of relationships in language. Ruth and Nick are these children lost in the woods, like the Grandma who tells them not to do this or that, society shapes the roles appropriate for their gender. At all costs, they get into the woods, get lost, yet at the end hold on to each other not as dependent but as autonomous beings. Whether they will get out or not is to be seen "the next day . . ."<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 118.

<sup>92</sup> Dennis Carrol, *op. cit.*, p.66.

<sup>93</sup> David Mamet, *The Woods* in *The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond*, New York, Grove Press, 1987, p. 119.

## **2. SEXUAL PERVERSITY IN CHICAGO**

### **2.1. The Plot of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago***

*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* dramatizes the urban routines and relationships of four people through 34 scenes in a montage pattern. The time of the play is 'approximately nine weeks one summer' (1976). The settings as bars, apartments, and offices represent the urban Chicago life. An "urban male in his late twenties," Dan Shapiro works in the same Loop office with his "friend and associate," Bernard Litko. Their conversations are mostly based on sex talk. On the other hand, the commercial artist Deborah Soloman, "a woman in her late twenties," shares the same room with her friend Joan Webber who is a kindergarten teacher. Bernie comes across Joan in a bar, and wants to meet her but Joan openly indicates that she does not find him sexually attractive. Bernie assumes a derogatory attitude during the later course of their talk and we do not see the two together again. In another scene Deb and Danny meet in a library, they are attracted to one another and they end up sleeping together. Later they try to deepen their relationship; when their affair flourishes Deb moves in Danny's apartment. But as they see each other more often, their friendship with Bernie and Joan gets worse; Bernie starts to have sex talks with another pal, and Joan gets cross with Deb since she leaves her. However; after a short while Deb and Danny start to fight over small matters, and soon afterwards they part their homes. And in the end, both return to their friends Joan and Bernie.

### **2.2. The Language of Perversion: Humanity in Oblivion**

First performed in 1971 by St. Nicholas Theatre Company, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is the first play that brought David Mamet his national reputation, it was voted best Chicago play of 1974, and won an Obie Award for Best New Play after its off-off-Broadway production at St. Clement's Theatre, New York in 1975. The play

concerns four people, Dan Shapiro, Bernard Litko, Deborah Soloman, and Joan Webber, living in urban Chicago. Just like *The Woods*, the play mostly portrays characters in one-to-one relationships, but unlike the later play David Mamet takes up power relationships not just in heterosexual affairs but also in same sex relationships. Although its theme is similar to that of *The Woods*, the tone of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* can be defined as comedy while *The Woods* is mostly lyrical. Apart from the portrayal of Dan and Deborah's friendship with Bernard and Joan, which is apparently representative of gender's relation to society and culture, like *The Woods*, the play presents a heterosexual affair whose potential to develop into a genuine companionship is destroyed by sex role stereotyping prevalent in 1970s urban America. In other words, David Mamet asks the same question here: "Why don't men and women get along?"<sup>1</sup> And his answer is once more the same: instead of trying to communicate, characters use language to influence and persuade others, and "men, in both their language and behavior, regard women as objects of conquest, as beings who possess what men want yet refuse to yield it."<sup>2</sup> Ruth and Nick find a way out in their quest since they have defined and redefined their relationship through language; but in the city milieu where the acquisition of capitalistic values is the only way to survive, Dan and Deborah can only produce and reproduce the gender roles through language and widen the gap between them. Thus, language is once again David Mamet's central theme in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, as he seeks how sexism is produced within society and culture through language using mostly the media, and examines the nature of verbal interaction between people.

*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* depicts mid-1970s' urban America, and Mamet himself defines this period as the "jejeune super-sophistication"<sup>3</sup> of the American people, and he presents us an "urban microcosm [that is] inhabited by rugged, unsophisticated, often inarticulate men."<sup>4</sup> What we obtain from the play in general is the panorama of a degenerate society which has inherited the most negative aspects of 60s' sexual revolution. The lack of true affection and intimacy are

---

<sup>1</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, "David Mamet: Remember That Name," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> David Mamet, **Writing in Restaurants**, New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1986, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Pascale Hubert-Leibler, "Dominance and Anguish: The Teacher – Student Relationship In The Plays Of David Mamet," **David Mamet: A Casebook**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, p.69.

predominant in relationships, and physical attraction acts as a substitute for love and commitment. As Anne Dean puts it, "Because of the dominating influence of all things sexual, erotica flourished, pornography boomed, and sex could be found in the unlikeliest of places."<sup>5</sup> It is such a time that kindergarten teachers are raped and children are sexually abused at cinemas, and these have become ubiquitous events. The real perversity is the fact that people have forgotten their most humane aspects and offer themselves only as sexual beings. The four characters and their relationships Mamet portrays in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* belong to such a society in which "sex really has become a dirty word, a sniggering pastime for the easily bored. Rather than fulfilling its original function as an integral part of an emotional relationship, sex is for them little more than a cheap thrill, something men "do" to women and for which women should be grateful."<sup>6</sup>

In this capitalistic urban society the only value left to human beings is the exchange value; human relationships have been corrupted, and the existing language is not expressive of real human needs. As Bigsby contends, "What is missing from his characters' lives is any definable sense of values beyond the material, any clear conception of need unrelated to immediate physical urgencies."<sup>7</sup> And people are alienated and lost to themselves. But this sense of loss Mamet's characters experience does not totally emanate from a consumer society, the characters themselves are unable to express their feelings, which would be a step forward to their recovery. They yearn for certainty, stability, coherence, and dominance, thus they create fantasies. The alienation these characters experience cannot be eliminated solely by a change in the social system. With the reductive and sexist language deployed by the media, they themselves constantly produce and reproduce the system, that is to say, they are both victims of the capitalistic system and of themselves. Mamet's characters are not only alienated from the product of their work, but also from human life, testifying to Marx's observation:

---

<sup>5</sup> Anne Dean, **Language as Dramatic Action**, London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1990, p.51.

<sup>6</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, **Contemporary Writers: David Mamet**, Ed. by. Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 49.

What is true of man's relationship to his work, to the product of his work, and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, to their labor, and to the objects of their labor . . . each man is alienated from others, and . . . each of the others is likewise alienated from human life.<sup>8</sup>

Alienated both from their labor and humanity, everyone establishes an exploitative relationship with the other. People treat each other as commodities, and use power to obtain what they want and meet their need in this 'material.' Possessing and consuming become the sole purpose of their lives, thus they regard everything, including the human relationships, in these terms:

This commodity-man knows only one way of relating himself to the world outside, by having it and by consuming (using it). The more alienated he is, the more the sense of having and using constitutes his relationship to the world.<sup>9</sup>

The very structure of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* enacts its meaning, "scatological, powered by a neurotic energy, it has the pace of the city – furious, relentless; its style is that of its characters, apparently flip, laid back and hip."<sup>10</sup> Episodic with 34 scenes, the play's structure suggests the alienation and dislocation its characters' experience in the fast pace of capitalistic urban life. Congruent with this relentless urban rhythm, each successive scene takes place in a different location, and these locations including apartments, offices, porn movie theatres, and singles bars are highly significant of the city milieu. While dramatizing such an environment in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, David Mamet especially focuses on sex regarded as commodity. The singles bar, symbol of urban alienation, is the place where these people most frequently go, then meet someone, and have sex without feeling. In their zeal to consume, people become objects of pursuit and sexual consumers. Sex happens to be a power game establishing the other, that is to say women, as the sexual object of a one-sided fantasy that yields men a subject position. The male characters' language is mostly to do with possessing and consuming, and their conversations are dominated by sex talk. Anne Dean claims that the lives of Mamet's characters are as shallow as the fictional lives of soap

---

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx as quoted in C.W.E. Bigsby, **Contemporary Writers: David Mamet**, Ed. by. Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, **op. cit.**, p. 51.

opera heroes and resemble many aspects of an obscene joke, and the form of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is reminiscent of such dirty jokes, especially with the dirty stories told by Bernie to Dan as if they were his real sexual adventures.<sup>11</sup> Although they speak comfortably of most intimate subjects, these characters are terrified of disclosing their inner selves and fears to each other. They are totally isolated, and behind this urban pace rhythm there lies a huge void:

The frenetic verbal affrays that the characters indulge in are their way of concealing the vacuum that exists at the root of their lives; the abandon with which they bounce wisecracks and platitudes off one another only partially conceals their desperation. So long as they can continue to joke, criticize, and fantasize, they can delude themselves that they are happy.<sup>12</sup>

The fear of the female, and of female sexuality is dominant in the play. Especially Bernard uses language to conceal his insecurity. He sees women as sexual objects and uses them as the subject matter of his absurd fantasies in order to establish a certain power over his friend Dan. He tries very hard to impress Dan with the stories he tells, but if the fact that we never see him in a real relationship with women is considered, it seems that he is highly terrified of women. To hide his insecurity and fears he assures a masculine posture, and objectifies women through words:

Tits and Ass. Tits and Ass. Tits and Ass. Tits and Ass. Blah de Bloo.  
Blah de Bloo. Blah de Bloo. Blah de Bloo. (*Pause.*) Huh?<sup>13</sup>

Here and through the whole play women are described in sexual terms; with the male definition they become “broad”, “cockteaser”, “prostitute”, “cunt”, “bitch”, “chick”, “pussy”, and “pig,” and they are reduced to a purely physical level. Bernard’s view of women is pornographic and metonymic, his non-sense words also express his contempt for women, in that way he praises himself and hides his fears. But the fact that he asks for his friend’s affirmation in the end actually reveals his insecurities.

---

<sup>11</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p. 58.

Like most of Mamet's plays it is possible to examine the role of language in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* from two different angles, since David Mamet uses language both thematically and poetically. There is a reciprocal relationship between language and society – the social determinism of language and the linguistic determinism of society.<sup>14</sup> While each person's language is designated by society, the operations of society are also determined by the language people use. Seen thus, language cannot be viewed simply as a vehicle of communication. Mamet's drama is mostly about power, and his characters use language to exert and sustain that power. Within the language and power paradigm, in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, David Mamet examines the production and reproduction of gender roles, and "His characters employ a kind of subtle linguistic coercion as a means of influencing and persuading their companions to concur with their way of thinking."<sup>15</sup> Language thus becomes a tool for the scattering of certain ideologies. For instance, although Bernard's language is a product of the society, his sexist attitudes pass through to Dan, and at the end his language and behavior become as crude and offensive as Bernard's. On the other hand, Bernard assumes subjectivity through the use of a sexist language, but he also subjects himself to the language of a male-dominated society. Richard Harland explains the relationship between language and society as follows:

The individual absorbs language before he can think for himself: indeed the absorption of language is the very condition of being able to think for himself. The individual can reject particular knowledges that society explicitly teaches him, he can throw off particular beliefs that society forcibly imposes upon him – but he has always already accepted the words and meanings through which such knowledges and beliefs were communicated to him. Words and meanings have been deposited in the individual's brain below the level of conscious ownership and mastery. They lie within him like an undigested piece of society.<sup>16</sup>

In tune with this view of language, David Mamet indicates the reciprocal relationship between society and language with a focus on the four characters'

---

<sup>14</sup> Norman Fairclough, **Language and Power**, London, Longman, 1989 as quoted in Wei-Jan Chi, **The Role of Language in the Plays of Mamet, Wilson, and Rabe**, The University of Iowa, 1991, p.115

<sup>15</sup> Anne Dean, **op. cit.**, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Harland, **Superstructuralism**, London, Methuen & Co., 1987, p. 9.

relationships to each other in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. In fact, as Mamet points out, the play treats this relationship as its theme:

Voltaire said words were invented to hide feelings. That's what the play is about, how what we say influences what we think. The words that the older [character] Bernie Litko says to Danny influence his behavior; you know, that women are broads, that they're there to exploit. And the words that Joan says to her friend Deborah: men are problematical creatures which are necessary to have a relationship with because that's what society says, but it never really works out. It is nothing but a schlep, a misery constantly.<sup>17</sup>

As well as using language as his main theme, David Mamet presents the reader with the poetry of the rhythms of an obscene language. In this capitalistic urban society people use a denatured language shaped by the public myths of a culture and they constantly produce and reproduce the given gender roles; David Mamet gives a poetic account of such a society by capturing the rhythms of colloquial American speech. It is by that distinguished ability of his that David Mamet have won his reputation as a 'language playwright' : "It is the terse crosscut exchanges, however, a distinguishing factor in his writing, that have won him critical acclaim for his ability to capture rhythms, intonations, and idiomatic peculiarities of living speech."<sup>18</sup> A few of his plays have been likened to a musical score and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is one of them; Ross Wetzsteon has described the play as "a series of fugue-like vignettes"<sup>19</sup> and Jack Kroll called it "a sleazy sonata of seduction."<sup>20</sup> Mamet's musical language is not there by chance, his plays do not mirror what is going on in the streets; Mamet chooses every word he uses with great precision and he works till making them rhythmically perfect. What he captures through his rhythms is not merely the streets but the individual's inner spirit. And he never uses obscene and scatological language in order to score cheap laughs out of sexist jokes, as one of his players says: "He is anything but arbitrary. . . . It would be interesting for those who believe his work to be obscene to take out all those words

---

<sup>17</sup> C. Gerald Fraser, "Mamet's Plays Shed Masculinity Myth," **New York Times**, 5 July 1976, p. L7.

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Leogrande, "A Man of Few Words Moves On to Sentences," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, "New York Letter," **Plays & Players** 23, no. 12, September 1976, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Jack Kroll, "The Muzak Man," **Newsweek**, 28 February 1977, p. 79.

and see just how much their absence would affect both the sense and rhythm of the piece.”<sup>21</sup>

Besides Mamet’s obscene poetry, what makes *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* distinguished in its verbal style is that Mamet invents a linguistic personality for each character. Bernard uses an aggressive language which exposes his false shield of confidence, and Dan’s ingenuousness and dependent position on his friend/mentor is revealed in his use of certain phrases favored by Bernard. There is vitality and innocence in Deborah’s speech but it is squashed as the play progresses; she finds only disappointment and frustration in her relationship. Joan longs for love but is afraid of it; her language is cynical and hard, but Mamet suggests a sense of vulnerability under her brittle, sassy linguistic bravado.<sup>22</sup>

In the world Mamet portrays in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, it is quite unlikely for a relationship between a man and a woman to succeed, since the pressures of language and the cultural fiats are always upon their heels. Although his account is funny, Mamet’s view of such a world is bleak; relationships have become mere power games, and emotional commitments are regarded as a threat to their irresponsible lives. The men view women only as sex slaves and objects for their own pleasure, and women see men as enemies and creatures devoid of emotion. The media presents degrading and exploitative images of women through television programs and films. Public myths of sexuality are spread through the media, and a feminine stereotype is created consciously and systematically. As a result women either desperately try to fit in these roles cast for them by the media and craved by men; or they become men haters. And the result is not much different in the case of men, as they, too, cannot escape the pressures of the media, and try to fit in a false image. Mamet, who complains about the influence of same pressures in his personal life, directly blames the media for the situation:

Well that’s just, unfortunately, tales from my life. [. . .] My sex life was ruined by the popular media. It took a lot of getting over. There are a lot of people in my situation. The myths around us, destroying our lives, such a great capacity to destroy our lives. [. . .] You have to sleep with every woman

---

<sup>21</sup> Connie Booth, interview with author, 2 December 1986, Hampstead, London, as quoted in Anne Dean’s **Language as Dramatic Action**, London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1990, p.63.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Dean, **op. cit.**, p.p. 83-84.

that you see, have a new car every two years—sheer, utter nonsense. Men who never have to deal with it, are never really forced to deal with it, deal with it by getting colitis, anxiety attacks and by killing themselves.<sup>23</sup>

In *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* Mamet's characters are indeed perverse, but in a different sense: "The perversity Mamet has in mind emanates from his characters' diminished perception of each other, their lack of understanding, and the cold, inhumane manner in which they conduct their lives."<sup>24</sup> Although they yearn for love and affection deep inside, they are unable to break loose from the public myths that surround them. They have substituted material values for moral ones. They use language not to communicate, but to influence the other. The more frustrated they are in reality, the more they retreat into fantasy. They are unable to see the other except as a sexual being, and sex is a vehicle for men by which they establish their subjectivities. In short, they are the "dead souls" of a degenerate society.

### 2.3. The Failure of Language

It's impossible to have spiritual empathy if you don't have spirit. That is what is lacking. That's the point. That is what each person has to discover in himself.<sup>25</sup>

Constituted of 34 short scenes, the montage pattern of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* suggests the disruptive effects of day-to-day urban routine, the spiritual poverty and emptiness of urban American civilization. Structurally the scenes can be divided into three categories: the same sex scenes, the opposite sex scenes, and the four scenes in which each of the four characters are depicted alone. The scenes generally present the characters' interaction on a one-to-one base, except the scenes in which Dan introduces Debbie to Bernard, and Dan helps Debbie to move in. The same sex scenes can be examined within the teacher-student paradigm, and

---

<sup>23</sup> C. Gerald Fraser, *op. cit.*, p. L7.

<sup>24</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> David Mamet as quoted in Mimi Leahey's "David Mamet: the American Dream Gone Bad," *Other Stages*, 4 Nov. 1982, p. 3.

storytelling once more becomes a crucial element in these scenes. In the opposite sex scenes, we observe how the male myths influence the lovers' relationships, and how Mamet's women subvert the given gender roles. On the other hand, the soliloquy scenes reflect the isolation and alienation these characters experience, and expose their hidden insecurities.

The placing of the scenes in the play is very important and suggests the influence of the mentors, and the capitalistic patriarchal culture, on the lovers' relationship. The longest scenes, the first and the last, which involve Bernard and Dan, mark the strength of male bonding, and suggest a prelude-coda model with an apparent difference in Dan as the equal of Bernard in the end. And throughout the whole play the teacher-student scenes are followed by or interspersed with the lovers' scenes. In that way, Mamet presents us with a structure of comparisons, which is enhanced by the differences in the languages used. Here the effect of Mamet's structure is strictly related with the effectiveness of language.<sup>26</sup>

The first scene in which Bernard tells Dan an unlikely story about his recent sexual exploit sets the tone for the play that is fast, funny, and outrageous.<sup>27</sup> Bernie's story is not simply the sexual fantasy of a pervert, it is also a demonstration of power for his friend Dan whom he wants to impress desperately. He wants Danny to believe his story; his enthusiasm, and the fast rhythm of his speech have a hypnotic effect on Danny; and as he goes on with the story he seems so enchanted by his own words that he also seems to believe his own tale. With this first scene, David Mamet presents Bernie as the character with the 'knowledge' and Danny as his disciple.

Most of Mamet's characters are mediocrities, losers who generally occupy the lower echelons of American society. [. . .] marginalized by their occupations and their isolation. Whether they be casualties of capitalism—those for whom the American dream never materialized—or outsiders, it is clear that they do not have access to the power conferred either by money, status or, for that matter, love.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Dennis Carroll, **David Mamet**, London, Macmillan, 1987, p.p. 54-55.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Dean, **op. cit.**, p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> Pascale Hubert-Leibler, **op. cit.**, p.p. 73-74.

Although they do not have access to power which the American dream has promised them, their need for that power is very much alive, thus they find different ways of relating themselves to this power. One of these ways is the undertaking of the teacher role in the relationship and the other is, as Christopher Bigsby has suggested, storytelling:

For David Mamet, an admirer of Chekhov's work, storytelling also becomes fundamental, not only a central strategy of the writer, struggling to give coherence to a chaotic experience, but also a basic tactic of characters for whom it becomes a resource, a retreat and ultimately the only available redemption, if only because it implies the minimal community of teller and listener. [. . .] The primary fact of their lives is a missing intimacy, and loss is his central theme. But in the face of this they compulsively elaborate fantasies, create plots, devise scenarios or simply exchange rumour and speculation.<sup>29</sup>

Michel Foucault's essay "The Subject and Power," is a useful guideline in the analysis of teacher-student paradigm as a mechanism of power. Foucault examines power relations, and distinguishes power relations from relationships of communication, and objective capacities. However, he never sets them as separate domains: "It is a question of three types of relationships that in fact always overlap one another, support one another reciprocally, and use each other mutually as means to an end."<sup>30</sup> Objective capacities are the technical apparatus brought into play to achieve a certain goal, and this goal in a teacher-student relationship is to "ensure apprenticeship and the acquisition of aptitudes or types of behavior."<sup>31</sup> To further this goal "a whole ensemble of regulated communications," constituted of "lessons, questions and answers, orders, exhortations, coded signs of obedience, differentiation marks of the 'value' of each person and of the levels of knowledge"<sup>32</sup> is needed. Although Foucault takes the actual educational institution to exemplify these three types of relationships, they can also be applied to explain the teacher-student relationship in Mamet's plays, for instance; Bernie's stories can be counted as his objective capacities, the apparatus by which he attracts the attention of his

---

<sup>29</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," **Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 3**, Ed. by James D. Faubion, Trans. by Robert Hurley and Others, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 338.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 338-339.

disciple and guarantees his apprenticeship; and in relationships of communication the right to speak is always assigned to the character in the teacher role, that is Bernie in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*.

Finally, according to Foucault, power is “a mode of action upon the actions of others: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions.”<sup>33</sup> The professorial discourse can also be regarded as a kind of power, an action upon an action: it is “inherently directive—it determines the content of communication, initiates and terminates it, imposes silence or demands answers—and controls and acts upon the student’s discourse.”<sup>34</sup> The teacher’s role in the relationship is limited; s/he is the guide who tells the student not what to do, but only how to do a certain task. His or her discourse can be either interactive or autonomous. In the interactive mode the student may have the right to speak, but it is limited with the answers to the teacher’s questions. But in the autonomous mode, “the teacher assumes the pose of the lecturer and delivers the text of his lesson, gives orders and advice, without inviting any comment other than unconditional acceptance from his listener, whose role it is to commit his words to paper or memory and submit to his authority.”<sup>35</sup> Correspondingly, while Bernie tells his stories to Dan, Dan’s comments and questions support and encourage his tales and his role as a “knowledgeable” man in sexual issues.

Danny: So how’d you do last night?  
Bernie: Are you kidding me?  
Danny: Yeah?  
Bernie: Are you fucking kidding me?  
Danny: Yeah?  
Bernie: Are you pulling my leg?  
Danny: So?  
Bernie: So tits out to here so.  
Danny: Yeah?  
Bernie: Twenty a couple years old.  
Danny: You gotta be fooling.  
Bernie: Nope.  
Danny: You devil.  
Bernie: You think she hadn’t been around?  
Danny: Yeah?  
Bernie: She hadn’t gone the route?

---

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>34</sup> Pascale Hubert-Leibler, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Danny: She knew the route, huh?  
Bernie: Are you fucking kidding me?  
Danny: Yeah?  
Bernie: So *wrote* the route.<sup>36</sup>

As Danny asks questions about the previous night, Bernie gives rhetorical questions in reply in order to attract his attention more by his suspension and to emphasize how 'successful' he was with women. The exchanges between the two illustrate how "Mamet captures perfectly the grammatical anarchy of idiomatic conversation in the repetition of "building" words like "so" and "yeah" and the abbreviation of a sentence such as "Twenty, a couple years old."<sup>37</sup> The age of the girl in Bernie's story constantly changes, she becomes eighteen, nineteen, twenty-five, etc. related with Bernie's intention in the story, he seems uncertain whether to draw the girl as naive or mature since he cannot decide which would effect Danny the most. Committing his role as the student, Danny wants to encourage Bernie with his remarks of surprise about the age of the girl to further his story.

Bernie gives exact time and place details regarding his adventure to make it sound realistic to Danny. It seems Danny enjoys the details, and in order not to interrupt the story he keeps encouraging Bernie with monosyllabic asides to further the story:

Danny: So tell me.  
Bernie: So okay, so where am I?  
Danny: When?  
Bernie: Last night, two-thirty.  
Danny: So two-thirty, you're probably over at Yak-Zies.  
Bernie: Left Yak-Zies at one.  
Danny: So you're probably over at Grunts.  
Bernie: They only got a two o'clock license.  
Danny: So you're probably over at the Commonwealth.  
Bernie: So okay, so I'm over at the Commonwealth, in the  
pancake house off the lobby, and I'm working on a stack of  
those raisin and nut jobs . . .  
Danny: They're good.  
Bernie: . . . and I'm reading the paper, and I'm reading, and  
I'm casing the pancake house, and the usual shot, am I  
right?

<sup>36</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.p. 9-10.

<sup>37</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

Danny: Right.  
 Bernie: So who walks in over to the cash register but this chick.  
 Danny: Right.  
 Bernie: Nineteen-, twenty-year-old chick . . .  
 Danny: Who we're talking about.  
 Bernie: . . . and she wants a pack of Viceroy's.  
 Danny: I can believe that.  
 Bernie: Gets the smokes, and she does this number about  
 how she forgot her purse up in her room.  
 Danny: Up in her room?  
 Bernie: Yeah.  
 Danny: Was she a pro?<sup>38</sup>

To keep his student's attention awake, Bernie embellishes his narration with details, and seizes on a question-answer technique; his "communication regulations" seem to be effective for his goal as Danny is eager to ask the intended questions. And to embellish his story, "Bernie creates an atmosphere of Yuppie-style establishments, where neon lights and potted palms endeavor to give some class to what are, essentially, late-night pickup joints."<sup>39</sup> What is more, the names of bars and restaurants "add to the aura of Bernie's sexual adventure: "Yak-Zies" and, especially, the onomatopoeiac "Grunts."<sup>40</sup>

Danny repeatedly asks if the girl was "a pro," that is, a prostitute as if that would change the course of the tale or make it more interesting. As for Bernie, this information is inconsequential since he has not decided yet whether the girl should be "a sexually voracious virgin who has been deranged by his charms, or a hard-nosed trouser to whom such exploits are routine."<sup>41</sup> It is highly significant here that a woman's description is obviously in the hands of a man, she would be "a pro" or anything else depending on whichever suits his purpose better, she has no subjectivity other than that he finds most appropriate. Thus, he repeatedly responds to Danny with the same remarks, "at this point we don't know." Correspondingly, at this point, whether there is really such a woman he met or not the previous night is not important; even if they really exist, women are always only the objects of male fantasies, mere fictions, and their definition is limited with socially bound male

---

<sup>38</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.p. 10-11.

<sup>39</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58

imagination. As Luce Irigaray makes it clear through the title of her book, she is “the sex which is not one;” just as her physical existence, her desires are also ignored:

The feminine is figured as an absence within the real as well as the imaginary and symbolic orders. She has neither penis, nor phallus nor the Father's name. [ . . . ] She has no singular, prized penis to erectly figure her interaction with the outside world. Her multiple, diffuse, tactile sexuality is eclipsed in the predominant phallic scopophilia of western eroticism. Female desire is repressed from the cultural imaginary much as her physical body, seen in relation to the male sexual organ, is perceived as a passive negative space. Like Marx's money she does not signify independently, but as an exchange value, mediating and signifying male desire.<sup>42</sup>

As Bernie goes on with his story he gets carried away with his fantasy, and starts to lose credibility. They are in a hotel room and he claims the girl wore a World War II flak suit before making love to him, and wanted him to do the sounds of bombs as if they were in a war. The eager student Danny wants to learn every point in the lesson, but the details the teacher gives get more and more ambiguous, and so it becomes more difficult for Danny to form a picture of the moment, and he ingenuously asks how Bernie got in with the flak suit on her. As for Bernie, he is at the most impressive part of his subject, and Danny's questions are now nothing but interruptions. He is the supreme authority, and questioning much about the details would be questioning his abilities in his subject matter. Danny's duty is to listen now, thus Bernie's parts in the speech gets longer not allowing him to intervene:

Danny: What are you doing?  
Bernie: Fucking.  
Danny: She's in the Flak Suit?  
Bernie: Right.  
Danny: How do you get in?  
Bernie: How do you think I get in? She leaves the zipper open.  
Danny: That's what I thought.  
Bernie: But the shot is, while we're fucking, she wants me, every thirty seconds or so, to go BOOM at the top of my lungs.  
Danny: At her?  
Bernie: No, just in general. So we're humping and bumping and greasing the old Flak Suit and every once in a while I go BOOM, and she starts in on me. "Turn me over," she says, so I do. She's on her stomach. I'm on top. . . .

---

<sup>42</sup> Claire Goldstein, "On Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is not one,"" **Women's Studies Resources**, (On-line) <http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/wstudies/frenchfem.html>, April 23, 2007.

Danny: They got a flap in the back of the Flak Suit?  
Bernie: Yes. So she's on her stomach, et cetera. In the middle of everything she slithers over to the side of the bed, picks up the house phone and says "Give me Room 511."<sup>43</sup>

Finally Bernie reaches the conclusion in his story where the girl calls her friend who is in another room and wants her to help them by making airplane noises. As she is reaching to her climax she loses her mind by his 'charm' and sets the room on fire, yet at that moment Bernie makes up his mind, and denies both to her and himself that 'happiness':

Bernie: [. . .] So the whole fuckin' joint is going up in smoke, the telephone is going "Rat Tat Tat," the broad jumps back on the bed and yells "Now, give it to me *now* for the love of Christ." (*Pause.*) So I look at the broad . . . and I figure . . . fuck this nonsense. I grab my clothes, I peel a sawbuck off my wad, as I make the door I fling it at her. "For cab fare," I yell. She doesn't hear nothing. [. . .] Whole fucking hall is full of smoke, above the flames I just make out my broad, she's singing "Off we go into the Wild Blue Yonder," and the elevator arrives, and the whole fucking hall is full of *firemen*. [. . .]  
Danny: Nobody does it normally anymore.  
Bernie: It's these young broads. They don't know what the fuck they want.<sup>44</sup>

Bernie's fear and contempt for women is to such an extent that he "concludes his imaginary exploit without having reached orgasm: it is as if, even within the realms of a dream, to submit to such an action is to acknowledge some form of commitment."<sup>45</sup> To express his scorn, he flings money in her face while leaving; in his imagination she is the 'prostitute' and he is the 'unsatisfied customer.' Through the use of storytelling Mamet also exposes the desires and fears of his characters: "Safely mythicised as willing collaborators in their own seduction, women cease to threaten," and "[s]afely displaced into fiction they lose their power to engage his confused and vulnerable emotions."<sup>46</sup> But even in the safety of his own imagination Bernie feels contempt, and that reveals his insecurity concerning

---

<sup>43</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.p. 15-16.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, "David Mamet: all true stories," *David Mamet*, Ed. by. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, p. 175.

women and his sexual problems. What would hide his fear best, and sell him powerful and potent could only be the fictional reversal of his own situation against women: him possessing of what women want, yet refusing to yield it to them. Bernie's language also reflects the role of films and television on misogynistic attitudes, like these characters he acts out his role. While running away from the flames, he is like the 'cool and powerful' James Bond figure who is never deceived by the false sexual charm of women.

As Bernie blames the girl for her perversion the main idea of his first lesson becomes more pronounced. He corrects his student's mistake; it is not the society, or anything else which is wrong, it is only the women who are responsible for the corruption. And what Danny should bear in mind as a learning student is that prostitution is not a job that appeared conditionally to earn a living, but it is something within women, it is a behavior pattern. Mamet's irony here arises from the fact that Bernie actually reflects his own perversion on women; he is the creator of this fictional female character, but he blames her for perversion. By reproducing a false, mythical figure, and passing this understanding to his student, he himself contributes to the formation of a perverse society.

Through the portrayal of a teacher-student relationship, Mamet can explore and unveil the motivations that regulate the exercise of power. In *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, he exposes Bernie's most hidden desires and deficiencies about sexuality by portraying him as a figure who tries to establish power over his friend with his sexist, misogynistic stories that reflect him as an experienced potent man. As the older character, Bernie is apparently not successful with his relationships with women, time is passing for him, and the only access to a dominant, successful position available to him is the pedagogical relationship he establishes with Danny. This kind of relationship is extremely valuable since its most probable outcome is supreme power, yet it is also a reciprocal relationship beneficial for both parties. Mamet's characters all have difficulties with communication, partly because of the insufficiency of their language, and partly because of the social system they are forced to live in, they mostly fail to establish intimate contact with each other. Just as Christopher Bigsby points out, "[t]he primary fact of their lives is a missing

intimacy.”<sup>47</sup> No matter how hard they try, they mostly fail to achieve such intimacy, thus, the teacher-student relationship works as an opportunity to fulfil their need in companionship: “Here, as in the father-son relationship, the exercise of power is mitigated by feelings of solicitude and love, and a real concern for the other’s well-being.”<sup>48</sup> And the teacher-student relationship is also a defence against death: “The only way to reverse the process of disintegration which destroys self-confidence and eventually identity itself is to replace the terrifying image of one’s decay by a positive image of oneself, constructed and projected—principally in speech—to be reflected in the admiring attitude of an “other.””<sup>49</sup>

Thus, not just the student, but also the teacher becomes heavily dependent on his/her student. Exactly for that reason, when Danny meets Deborah and they start to have an affair getting “serious”, Bernie feels abandoned, and resents Danny’s relationship with Deb. In fear of losing Danny to Deb, Bernie tries to influence Danny’s view of Deborah by underestimating her:

Bernie: So what are we doing tomorrow, we going to the beach?  
Danny: I’m seeing Deborah.  
Bernie: Yeah? You getting serious? I mean she seemed like a hell of a girl, huh? The little I saw of her. Not too this, not too that . . . very kind of . . . what? (*Pause.*) Well, what the fuck. I only saw her for a minute. I mean first impressions of this kind are often misleading, huh? So what can you tell from seeing a broad one, two, ten times. You’re seeing a lot of this broad. You getting serious? But what the fuck, that’s your business. Right? [. . .] I mean what the fuck, a guy wants to get it on with some broad on a more or less stable basis, who is to say him no. (*Pause.*) A lot of these broads, you know, you just don’t know. You know? I mean what with where they’ve been and all. I mean a young woman in today’s society . . . time she’s twenty two-three. You don’t know where the fuck she’s been. (*Pause.*) I’m just *talking* to you, you understand.<sup>50</sup>

Considering how Bernie asks the question about the beach, it seems going to the beach was some kind of a ritual for them, therefore; Bernie does not expect to be turned down, but actually when he is, he obviously feels betrayed, and starts

---

<sup>47</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, **Contemporary Writers: David Mamet**, Ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> Pascale Hubert-Leibler, **op. cit.**, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> David Mamet, **Sexual Perversity in Chicago** in **Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet**, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.p. 38-39.

carefully to diminish Deborah's importance. He does not criticise Deborah openly, he should not be seen jealous or resentful in order to be taken seriously by Danny, and seeming too dependent and needy would also lose his position of power in Danny's eyes. For that reason, he begins by praising Deborah, but right after he calls her "broad," and implies that she may not be trusted since she probably has had a dubious sex life. With his contradictory remarks about Deborah he undermines his statements, and tries to arouse Danny's suspicions. Bernie's contempt for women also makes itself apparent in his speech whereby he implies that women are 'unknowable creatures,' no matter how many times they have seen each other, it will always be impossible to know a woman's intentions 'since she is the born devil.' In that way he also tries to make Danny believe that their relationship with Deborah is a superficial one, and it is doomed to be just sexual. What Bernie does is actually a step by step verbal destruction of Deborah; he defines her through his sexist language, and tries to persuade Danny to pick up the same kind of language. Once more he posits himself as the 'experienced, knowledgeable teacher' whose advice is to be trusted, and renders Danny in need of his advice suggesting that he does not know women. Supposedly he is having a conversation with Danny, but without even pausing, he does not let Danny to comment on anything. When he calls attention to Deborah's sexual past, he speaks of her like a diseased person; this reveals the double standards of patriarchal ideology working for the benefit of men; while having sex can be a casual act for men, women should save their 'purity,' and preserve their virginity.

The fact that Bernie repeatedly enunciates the words "what the fuck" furthers the coarseness of his innuendo and grounds the conversation at the most basic level. By doing that, he suggests that Deborah is not worth any serious consideration, and she probably is no different from the "pro" in his initial fantasy. Bernie furthers the insinuation with his indeterminate remarks about Deborah's age, like the fantasy girl, she is about "twenty two-three." Bernie concludes that he is merely "*talking*" to Danny about Deborah, and this reminds the linguistic distinction between 'talking' and 'speaking' that takes place in *Glengarry Glen Ross* between Moss and Aaronow<sup>51</sup>, and makes the linguistic approach of Mamet who sees 'language as action' once more apparent.

---

<sup>51</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p.p. 62-63.

On another plane, there is a similar teacher-student relationship between Deborah and Joan, yet it would be too reductive to interpret Joan as a person who wants to destroy her friend's relationship simply out of jealousy. As a woman who resists the ideal feminine stereotype, she has lost her belief in the success of heterosexual relationships:

Joan: . . . and, of course, there exists the very real possibility that the whole thing is nothing other than a mistake of *rather* large magnitude, and that it never *was* supposed to work out. [. . .] I don't know. I really don't know. I think I *do*. Well, look at your divorce rate. Look at the incidence of homosexuality . . . the number of violent, sex-connected crimes (this dressing is for shit) . . . all the antisocial behavior that chooses sex as its form of expression. Eh? [. . .] . . . physical and mental mutilations we perpetrate on each other, day in, day out . . . trying to fit ourselves to a pattern we can neither understand (although we pretend to) nor truly afford to investigate (although we pretend to).<sup>52</sup>

It is evident that Joan's cynical, knowledgeable attitude towards relationships influences Deborah just as Bernie's sexism gradually passes to Dan. But, when compared to Bernie, Mamet portrays a more sympathetic teacher character with Joan; what makes her behavior more understandable is the fact that while Bernie establishes power over Dan just for the sake of power, besides his need for companionship, Joan's resentment against Deb and Dan's relationship is based solely on her fears of losing the intimacy she has found in Deborah's friendship:

Joan: So what's he like?  
Deborah: Who?  
Joan: Whoever you haven't been home, I haven't seen you in two days that you've been seeing.  
Deborah: Did you miss me?  
Joan: No. Your plants died. (*Pause.*) I'm kidding. What's his name?  
Deborah: Danny.  
Joan: What's he do?  
Deborah: He works in the Loop.  
Joan: How wonderful for him.  
Deborah: He's an Assistant Office Manager.  
Joan: That's nice, a job with a little upward mobility.  
Deborah: Don't be like that, Joan.

---

<sup>52</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.47.

Joan: I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me.  
Deborah: How are things at school?  
Joan: Swell. Life in the Primary Grades is a real picnic. The other kindergarten teacher got raped Tuesday.<sup>53</sup>

Joan asks commonplace questions to Deborah, but underneath she cannot hide her bitterness. Ross Wetzsteon has described Joan's statement: "Whoever you haven't been home, I haven't seen you in two days that you've been seeing," as "the utter clarity of total grammatical chaos."<sup>54</sup> This language Joan uses here establishes a contradiction to the unnatural, sophisticated language she adopts while teaching Deborah; it is now streetwise and purely American. Mamet's characters confuse the tenses, cut the sentences in the middle, and do not take any care to make grammatically correct statements; such language reflects the urban neurosis these characters have. Although this language seems natural, "in [Mamet's] text . . . everything that is written is *intended* . . . it is never just there for the sake of it,"<sup>55</sup> forming a poetry counting every word, and even every pause in the characters' speech.

Joan's sarcastic tone in her speech actually reflects her vulnerability as she tries to appear tough although she is highly scared of being left alone. In spite of the fact that she does not even see Danny once, and does not know him, she denigrates him by regarding his job with disdain, and wants to imply that he is an inappropriate lover for Deborah. Moreover, she even tries to make Deborah feel guilty and emotionally responsible by suggesting "that her life is tormented and fraught with problems enough as a kindergarten teacher, without Deborah adding to her misery by keeping away from home."<sup>56</sup>

In Mamet's plays, because of the gender roles constructed and conveyed by our language, the rare heterosexual relationships are predestined to fail, and when they start they usually end in disaster. Homosexuality, latent or overt, exists in many relationships and can be seen frequently within the teacher-student paradigm. Both

---

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 26-27.

<sup>54</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, *op. cit.*, p.p. 37-39.

<sup>55</sup> Jack Shephard, interview with author, 13 March 1986, National Theatre, London as quoted in Anne Dean's *Language as Dramatic Action*, London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1990, p.70.

<sup>56</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p.70.

Bernie and Joan “value only the apparently simple, undemanding and essentially adolescent camaraderie of the same sex,”<sup>57</sup> and implant the same to their proteges, and homosexual implications are plenty within their teacher-student relationships.

Whether Joan and Deborah’s relationship has a sexual nature is indefinite, but Mamet drops some hints: they share an apartment; when Deborah first meets Dan she says she is “a Lesbian” (p.23); later, when they have sex with Dan, she retracts, but this time she explains that she has had “some Lesbianic experiences . . . and . . . enjoyed them” (p.26); like Bernie, Joan is jealous of Deborah’s involvements other than theirs, and sees Danny as an intruder; and her protective concern for Deborah’s welfare can also be attributed to their emotional-sexual bonding.

On the other hand, Bernie’s “insistent and overemphatic displays of masculinity seem to suggest [homosexuality].”<sup>58</sup> Considering that homophobia is a kind of repression of homosexual impulses, “[t]he threat of being emasculated, either by women . . . or by men, is everpresent, only to be allayed through a strong male bond that empowers each male in it.”<sup>59</sup> Bernie talks about his childhood experience with a man who abused him in a cinema, but when Danny questions him he panics, and his contradictory remarks reveal his panic even more as he first claims that the event could have ruined his life, but later he deems it unimportant. His hatred towards homosexual men is manifest, he calls a homosexual sales assistant “a fucking fruit” (p.42), and instead of emphasizing child abuse, he calls the pervert in the cinema a “faggot queer” (p.44). And the implication of homosexuality gets stronger as he undermines Deborah and tries to get rid of her as a challenge. When they spend time together with Danny, the things they do are generally associated with heterosexual dating: they go out to the movie house (although they go and see pornography), spend evenings at Bernie’s apartment, and go to the beach for the weekend. In short, latent homosexual desires and fears mark the male relationships portrayed in the play.

---

<sup>57</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, **Contemporary Writers: David Mamet**, Ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 48.

<sup>58</sup> Anne Dean, **op. cit.**, p.76.

<sup>59</sup> David Radavich, “Men among Men: David Mamet’s Homosocial Order,” **David Mamet**, Ed. by Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, p. p. 72-73.

In *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* Mamet portrays a society in which people can only regard themselves as sexual beings. This capitalistic, urban lifestyle forces them to conceive themselves and the others as commodities to possess. As Bigsby points out, "one individual approaches another with a tainted bargain, an offer of relationship now corrupted by the values of the market."<sup>60</sup> Relationships have come to such a point that it is easier to have sex than to ask out:

Deborah: I like your apartment.

Danny: Yeah? I'm glad.

Deborah: I like it here.

Danny: So, look, so tell me. How would you like to eat dinner with me tomorrow. If you're not doing anything. If you're not too busy. If you're busy it's not important.

Deborah: I'd love to eat dinner with you tomorrow.

Danny: You would, huh?

Deborah: Yes.

Danny: Well, okay, that's nice. That's very nice. I'm going to look forward to that.<sup>61</sup>

It is highly significant that Deborah and Danny first meet, then have sex, and finally Danny asks Deborah shyly, with hesitation to go out for dinner. As Carroll observes, "The talk here is comically banal, repetitive, gawkily austere [. . .]"<sup>62</sup> It seems being sexually intimate is a lot easier than establishing communicative relations.

Correspondingly, these characters look for affection but are unable to go beyond sexual impulses. Even some moments of tenderness that they have caught are the result of sexual intimacy they could sustain:

Danny: Do you ever fantasize about making love with other women?

Deborah: Do you fantasize when we make love? (*Pause.*) The last time we made love, I fantasized about other women.

Danny: The last time I masturbated I kept thinking about my left hand.

Deborah: Did you?

---

<sup>60</sup> C.W.E. Bigsby, *Contemporary Writers: David Mamet*, Ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 50.

<sup>61</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.25.

<sup>62</sup> Dennis Carroll, *op. cit.* p.57

Danny: Yes.  
Deborah: Did you?  
Danny: Yes.  
*Pause.*  
I love making love with you.  
Deborah: I love making love with you. (*Pause.*)  
Danny: I love you.  
Deborah: Does it frighten you to say that?  
Danny: Yes.  
Deborah: It's only words. I don't think you should be frightened by words.<sup>63</sup>

As Bigsby claims, “[m]uch of the play's humour derives from [. . .] the ironic space between a confident language of sexual aggression and a fumbling incompetence when confronted with the reality of potential relationships.”<sup>64</sup> Just like Ruth and Nick in *The Woods*, the challenge for Danny and Deborah is to move their relationship beyond sex, yet the quality of their language defines their relationship. Thus, the above scene is a turning point in Danny and Deborah's relationship. Their socially conditioned language and their social masks are restrictions for them to attain genuine contact. The social myth imposed on Danny by Bernie that women are unknowable creatures displays its effect in Danny's language. In his consciousness women are unknowable, they are a source of fright, therefore it is safer to stay within the level of sex rather than commitment. For that reason it is easier to make a bedroom chit-chat, and to talk about sex organs, but one way or another Danny is in need of expressing his feelings, thus he hesitantly transforms the sex talk into a declaration of love. Yet, Deborah's distrust in heterosexual relationships, which is the social role attitude imposed by her mentor, Joan, also shows itself in her distrust in Danny's words. It seems when “they can set aside their verbal armoury developed for social role-playing, they have nothing with which to replace it.”<sup>65</sup> Like most of Mamet's characters, they do not trust words, yet unlike Ruth and Nick in *The Woods*, they cannot create an alternative medium, therefore their attempt to connect is doomed to fail in power-plays.

Although Deborah and Danny flutter in their efforts to establish a real connection, Bernie feels abandoned and wounded as shown in the scene that

---

<sup>63</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.41.

<sup>64</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby, “David Mamet: all true stories,” *David Mamet*, Ed. by. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, p. 175.

<sup>65</sup> Dennis Carroll, *op. cit.* p.57.

depicts him isolated, talking to imaginary buddies. He tells his 'buddies' about Danny's affair, and pretends to be the 'experienced' advisor whose opinion should be taken:

Bernie. So the kid asks me "Bernie, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. The broad *this*, the broad *that*, blah blah blah." Right? So I tell him, "Dan, Dan, you think I don't know what you're feeling, I don't know what you're going through? You think about the broad, you *this*, you *that*, you think I don't know that?" So he tells me, "Bernie," he says, "I think I love her." (*Pause.*) Twenty-eight years old.  
So I tell him, "Dan, Dan, I can *advise*, I can *counsel*, I can speak to you out of my *experience* . . . but in the final analysis, you are on your own. (*Pause.*) If you want my *opinion*, however, you are pussy-whipped." (I call 'em like I see 'em. I wouldn't say it if it wasn't so.) So what does he know at that age, huh? Sell his soul for a little eating pussy, and who can blame him. But mark my words: one, two more weeks, he'll do the right thing by the broad. (*Pause.*) And drop her like a fucking hot potato.<sup>66</sup>

Bernie's fears and insecurities about losing his power over Danny surface in this scene where Mamet depicts him in soliloquy. His reference to nonsense words to undermine their relationship reveals the pressure he is under. The simple rhythm of the words "blah blah blah" reduces Danny and Deborah's relationship to a level of absurdity, and by this way Bernie feels secure with his reductive language. Once again in his experienced, knowledgeable teacher role he calls Danny "the kid," and underestimates his age to reclaim the power he obtains through Danny's studentship. Besides frequently referring to Deborah as a "broad", he reduces women to the crudest level of sexual objects by claiming that Danny confuses sex with love: Danny is "pussy-whipped," and would "sell his soul for a little eating pussy."

In his teacher-like tone Bernie implies that he has made similar 'mistakes' when he was young, 'but now has reached maturity and learned from his mistakes.' And now he makes his "final analysis" that Danny would go through the same path as his, and "drop her like a fucking hot potato," yet "all he needs is some careful

---

<sup>66</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.46.

proding and manipulation.”<sup>67</sup> If he could get rid of Deborah, he could regain Danny’s friendship, and his powerful image.

Joan makes a similar prophesy when Danny and Deborah move in together, though she grants a longer time period: “I give you two months.”<sup>68</sup> She, too, regards Danny as a hindrance for their friendship with Deborah, but different from Bernie, she makes it very clear to Danny with her attitude and mean behavior.

Right after they have moved in together, we see Bernie declaiming to some co-workers about Equal Rights Amendment. It seems, as a reaction to being left alone for a woman, he has apparently become a total misogynist who has committed himself to the “enlightenment” of others:

Bernie: Equal Rights Amendment? Equal Rights Amendment? I’ll give you the fucking Equal Rights Amendment. Nobody ever wrote *me* no fucking amendments. Special *interest* groups, *okay* . . . but who’s kidding who here, huh? (*Pause.*) We got baby seals dying in Alaska and we’re writing amendments for broads? I mean, I’m a big fan of *society* . . . but this bites the big one. I’m sorry.<sup>69</sup>

Although Bernie is far more misogynistic than Nick in *The Woods*, his sexist discourse can also be interpreted in the light of the concept of subjectivity construction presented by psychoanalytic feminist theory. In the myth of femininity constructed by the patriarchal ideology, women are either ‘angels’ or ‘whores’ and “the mutually exclusive categories of femininity oppress women in profound ways.”<sup>70</sup> Throughout the whole play, by categorizing women according to the patriarchal discourse of which he partakes, Bernie constantly produces and reproduces this ideology, and also tries to draw Danny to the same path. In Lacanian terms, he constructs his subjectivity by projecting his “lack” on women. Besides his efforts to establish his power over Danny, he also tries to impoverish women with his objectifying discourse. Women become the signifiers of the Other in his gendered discourse, and ‘as a man of power’ he has the authority of whether to give women their rights or not. He adheres to the social hierarchy that human beings are superior to animals, yet in this social ladder, he deems women not even worthy of the value

---

<sup>67</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p.71.

<sup>68</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.48.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50

<sup>70</sup> Ann Hall, *op. cit.*, p.137

given to animals. As Linda Dorff explicates, “[W]hen the phallus is seen as the structural determinant for meaning in language, women are relegated to a position outside discourse, for the “phallus is exchanged [only] between men”.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Bernie reduces women to nothingness, and establishes his own being through the non-being of an Other. As Irigaray asserts, “[w]omen exist only as an occasion for mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man, indeed between man and himself.”<sup>72</sup> For that reason, in Bernie’s discourse women exist insofar as they become his materials to be used in his stories which he tells to influence Danny, that is, they are merely sexual toys to embellish his narrations.

Mamet’s women in the opposite sex scenes in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, also fall between two stools; they are both participants in the system, but also subvert it with their fragmented discourse peculiar to women. They serve as the object upon which ‘the lack’ is projected, but also embody a subversive force against male autonomy. As men constantly try to establish their identities through their power over women, women on the contrary constantly disrupt the “male mythology [that are] fictional systems by which males in a social order construct the gender “male” as a subject identified with the phallus.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in its portrayal of the relationship between Joan and Bernie as an exact counterpart of Bernie’s success stories, the scene which takes up Bernie and Joan’s encounter in a singles bar constitutes a remarkable example of how women resist male definitions:

Bernie: How would you like some company. (*Pause.*) What if I was to sit down here? What would that do for you, huh?

Joan: No, I don’t think so, no.

(*Pause.*)

Is there something I can do for you?

Bernie: Nope. [. . .] (*Pause. Sits down at her table.*) [. . .] So here I am. I’m just in town for a one-day layover, and I happen to find myself in this bar. So, so far so good. What am I going to do? I could lounge alone and lonely and stare into my drink, or I could take the bull by the horn and make an effort to enjoy myself . . .

Joan: Are you making this up?

---

<sup>71</sup> Linda Dorff, “Reinscribing “The Fairy” The Knife And The Mystification Of Male Mythology In The Cryptogram,” **Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet**, Ed. by Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 177.

<sup>72</sup> Luce Irigaray, **This Sex Which Is Not One**, trans. Catherine Porter, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 193.

<sup>73</sup> Linda Dorff, **op. cit.**, p. 177.

Bernie: So hold on. So I see you seated at this table and I say to myself, "Doug MacKenzie there is a young woman," I say to myself, "What is she doing here?", and I think she is here for the same reasons as I. To enjoy herself, and perhaps to meet provocative people. (*Pause.*) I'm a meteorologist for T.W.A.<sup>74</sup>

Just like he ignores women in his discourse, Bernie ignores Joan's reply that she would not like his company, and sits down at her table. She is openly the object of his desire, and in order to impress her, he now creates a story that would make him sound romantic and rousing. As Anne Dean notes, "His line is an extraordinary amalgam of lies, patronage, and soap-opera bravado."<sup>75</sup> He does not use his Jewish name, Bernie Litko, and chooses a typical WASP name in order to eliminate the chances that she might be an anti-Semitic since he desperately wants her to fancy him. In addition, he takes on another job to sound rich and charismatic. Yet, Joan first exposes and disrupts his construction by openly making fun of the incredibility of his story: "Are you making this up?" Yet, Bernie sticks to his fiction, and tries to emphasize that he intends a temporary "layover," and says he acted on impulse taking "the bull by the horn." The use of the word horn in singular, rather than the familiar plural stands as a phallic image in his narration.<sup>76</sup> But apparently Joan has heard enough:

Joan: Can I tell you something?

Bernie: You bet.

Joan: Forgive me if I'm being too personal . . . but I do not find you sexually attractive. (*Pause.*)

Bernie: What is that, some new kind of line? Huh, I mean, not that I mind what you think, if that's what you think . . . but . . . that's a fucking rotten thing to say.

Joan: I'll live.

Bernie: All kidding aside . . . lookit, I'm a fucking professional, huh? My life is a bunch of having to make split-second decisions. [. . .] So just who the fuck do you think you are, God's gift to Women? I mean where do you fucking get off with this shit. You don't want to get come on to, go enroll in a convent. You think I don't have better things to do? I don't have better ways to spend my off hours than to listen to some nowhere cunt try out cute bits on me? I mean why don't you just clean your fucking act up, Missy. You're living in a city in 1976. [. . .] You're a grown women, behave like it for chrissakes.

---

<sup>74</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.p. 18-19.

<sup>75</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Huh? I mean, what the fuck do you think society is, just a bunch of rules strung together for your personal pleasure?<sup>77</sup>

Strikingly, even when he is rejected by Joan, Bernie continues to stick to his fiction. Joan's rejection is an ultimate disruption of Bernie's ego that depicts itself unified and in control. For that reason, his language becomes more vicious as a reaction, and "He alternates obscenities with biting sarcasm until, finally, he resorts to something that Mamet's characters often rely upon when under pressure: he cites civic rules of conduct."<sup>78</sup> Bernie's reference to society in a way suggests that the language he uses is supported also by the society. This sheds light on the relation of language to society, and Mamet's views on the issue. This view is totally opposite the traditional view that language is simply a vehicle of communication; instead it is an instrument to shape people's opinions. Even the language used in everyday conversation conveys hidden ideologies. Here, Bernie totally believes every word he utters, he is rejected and the unity of his ego is crashed, but he does not merely use these sentiments to conceal his defeat, actually he is convinced that his words belong with common sense. Bernie believes, if a woman drinks alone in a singles bar, every man has the right to molest her since she is a commodity on the sexual market to please men. Thus, in rejecting Bernie, Joan not only undermines Bernie's self-reliance, but also violates the social convictions. Through Bernie's language, Mamet actually exposes that people blindly hold on to social myths, and in fact Bernie unconsciously perpetuates these myths with his gendered and socially constructed discourse.

Bernie is in fact a slave to the language he uses and tries to make women slaves of his objectification through this language. But Joan uses the same instrument, language, as a weapon. Bernie constructs his subjectivity through his sexuality, therefore Joan's rejection and her statement that Bernie is not sexually attractive for her is merely an insult to Bernie's subjectivity, it is to negate his existence. As he cannot obtain the object of his desire, his self-image is destroyed. Thus, his rhetoric attains an aggressive tone with insults. But, "[a]s the abuse

---

<sup>77</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.p. 20-21.

<sup>78</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

tumbles out and his grammar collapses, Bernie's agony is almost tangible; he does all he can to crush the woman who has, in a sense, murdered him with words."<sup>79</sup>

When Bernie continues retaliating Joan, he calls her "cockteaser," and this word changes the course of Joan's behavior:

Joan: I think I'd like to be left alone.  
Bernie: Ah, you're breaking my heart. [. . .] You know that?  
Joan: I'm terribly sorry.  
Bernie: Sorry don't mean shit. [. . .]  
Joan: Sometimes I think I'm not a very nice person.  
Bernie: You flatter yourself. (*Joan rises.*) So where are you going now?  
Joan: My little boy is sick, and I really should be getting home.  
Bernie: Cockteaser.  
Joan: I beg your pardon?  
Bernie: You heard me.  
Joan: I have never been called that in my life.  
Bernie: Well, you just lost your cherry.  
Joan: I . . . I find that very insulting.  
Bernie: Go get a lawyer, bitch. Go get a writ, you got yourself a case.  
(*Pause.*)  
Joan (*sits down again*): I . . . I'm . . . I'm very sorry if I was being rude to you.  
Bernie: Oh, you're sorry if you were being rude to me.  
Joan: Yes.  
Bernie: You got a lot of fuckin' nerve. (*Rises, calls for check, exits.*)<sup>80</sup>

Dennis Carroll's interpretation of the conclusion of the scene as a reversal of roles – the woman who now wants to have sex is rejected by the man who was initially attracted to, but was rejected by her – is indicative of the very sexist point of view exposed and criticized in the play:

[Bernie] plays his last card and calls her a 'cockteaser'. This she finds both insulting and sexually arousing – even as she complains in high dudgeon, she sits back down. But Bernie does not press his advantage – because his initial interest in Joan has been displaced by his need decisively to best her in a game of one-upmanship. Her sitting back down indicates that sex, at least, is a possibility. He doesn't want it. [. . .] The scene is one of Mamet's most mordantly hilarious. In its dialectical movement – its cross-over between a man who wants a woman and then doesn't, and a woman who doesn't want a man and then does – it parallels in miniature the development and demise of the central relationship between Dan and Deb.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>80</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p.p. 21-22.

<sup>81</sup> Dennis Carrol, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

As Wei-jan Chi asserts, it is highly unlikely that a woman would find Bernie's insult "sexually arousing. In his analysis Carroll cannot see the impact of the word "cockteaser" on Joan. Actually, it is clear that the word puts Joan on the defensive. She sits back not because she has changed her mind about Bernie, and decided to have sex with him, but because the connotations of the label put on her by a man are more difficult to bear than bearing Bernie himself.<sup>82</sup> Though it might seem that Bernie has won the game of one-upmanship, he does nothing but deceive himself as victorious since Joan has actually never participated in his game. From that point of view, Bernie's reconstitution of power is nothing but a self-deceit, an illusion. It is precisely for that lack of success with Joan that immediately after the incident Bernie advises Danny to act in the same way, since "[a] successful student can no longer serve as a docile mirror reflecting the teacher's enlarged image and nothing else."<sup>83</sup>

Bernie: The main thing, Dan. . . . The main thing about *broads*. . . . Is two things: One: The Way to Get Laid is to Treat 'Em Like Shit. . . . and Two: Nothing . . . *nothing* makes you so attractive to the opposite sex as getting your rocks off on a regular basis.<sup>84</sup>

On the other hand, it seems that the teachers' lessons have proved effective since Danny and Deborah start to fight over trivial matters. They have become more and more impatient with each other, and it has become harder to tolerate the other, thus both of them compete with words. Especially the cruelty of Danny's tone is highly reminiscent of his teacher, Bernie's. But "[t]hey both use black, sardonic humor and cruel remarks to upstage one another and their quickfire dialogue temporarily disguises the emptiness that lies just beyond their words."<sup>85</sup>

Danny: Do we have any shampoo?  
Deborah: I don't know is your hair dirty?  
Danny: Does my hair look dirty?  
[. . .]  
Deborah: Well, I'm not going to look. If you want to know if there's any shampoo, you go look for it.

---

<sup>82</sup> Wei-Jan Chi, **The Role of Language in the Plays of Mamet, Wilson, and Rabe**, The University of Iowa, 1991, p. 111.

<sup>83</sup> Pascale Hubert-Leibler, **op. cit.**, p. 78.

<sup>84</sup> David Mamet, **Sexual Perversity in Chicago** in **Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet**, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p. 22.

<sup>85</sup> Anne Dean, **op. cit.**, p. 79.

Danny: [. . .] You know very well if there's any shampoo or not. You're making me be ridiculous about this. (*Pause.*) You wash yourself too much anyway. If you really *used* all that shit they tell you in *Cosmopolitan* (and you do) you'd be washing yourself from morning till night. Pouring derivatives on yourself all day long.  
Deborah: Will you love me when I'm old?  
Danny: If you can manage to look eighteen, yes.  
Deborah: Now, that's very telling.<sup>86</sup>

Their fight over such a trivial matter is tragicomic, the scene is totally absurd but Danny shifts the responsibility by blaming Deborah of being ridiculous. With his sarcastic remarks, he obviously expects to overpower Deborah, but Deborah does not stay fixed in her role as a woman and surrender, but responds with cynical remarks. Danny tries to diminish her self-esteem by ridiculing her for applying *Cosmopolitan* beauty hints, but contradictorily he wants her to look eighteen when she is old. Danny's remarks also expose that their relationship could not transcend the level of physical attraction. He tries to go back to the level of physicality, but cannot seize the same attraction they once had; in fact it seems more likely that he is conforming to Bernie's motto, "The Way to Get Laid is to Treat 'Em Like Shit":

Danny: You're going to wear dirty hose?  
Deborah: I think I'm out of clean ones.  
Danny: So you're going downtown in dirty hose?  
Deborah: Do you want me walking around with a naked la-la?  
[. . .] *DEB retrieves dirty hose from bag and starts changing into them.*  
Danny: You make me very horny.  
Deborah: It's the idea of dirty panties, Dan. You're sick.  
Danny: I love your breasts.  
Deborah: "Thank you." (*Pause.*) Is that right?  
Danny: Fuck you.<sup>87</sup>

Yet once again, women frustrate male expectations; it is obvious that Danny's crude sexual overtures are not charming for Deborah, and she makes fun of them. As a result, Bernie can not find the grounds to stand upon to establish his identity, so their argument gets more violent with words. Danny's final remark, "Fuck you," is actually nothing but a wish, he neither gets affection, nor sex from Deborah, who refuses to be either 'an angel' or 'a whore.'

---

<sup>86</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p. 51.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Perhaps, Danny is a good student to follow the path of his mentor. As he is directed, he fails to have a successful relationship with a woman. But now because of a woman, he has also lost his male-bonding that provides him affection and care, since Bernie has now chosen to tell his sexual adventures to other guys, not to Danny. The loneliness Danny feels deep inside is apparent while he tries to defend Bernie against an “imaginary coworker” in his soliloquy scene:

Danny: [. . .] I know what you're saying, and I'm telling you I don't like you badmouthing the guy, who happens to be a friend of mine. So just let me tell my story, okay? So the other day we're up on six and it's past five and I'm late, and I'm having some troubles with my chick [. . .] and I push the button and the elevator doesn't come, and it doesn't come, and it doesn't come, so I lean back and I kick the shit out of it three or four times. [. . .] And *he*, he puts his arm around my shoulder and he calms me down and he says, “Dan, Dan . . . don't go looking for affection from inanimate objects.” (*Pause.*) Huh? So I don't want to hear you badmouthing Bernie Litko.<sup>88</sup>

Bernie's simple advice inspires Danny because he desperately looks for love and kindness in life and he regards Bernie's words as a sign of affection. While he attacks the elevator door, Bernie's statement calms him down. This statement is perhaps meaningful for Danny who probably imagines Deborah in place of the door; whether Bernie knows the state of the affair or not we do not know, but obviously Bernie subconsciously regards Deborah as an “inanimate object.” And like the mechanical objects' frequent malfunction Deborah “doesn't “function” properly; she has caused great difficulties for both men; she has interrupted the natural, easy flow of their lives and is, therefore, less than human.”<sup>89</sup> Both Deborah and Danny have failed to turn their relationship into something more transcendent. Later Danny makes a fake try in order to shift the responsibility on to Deborah, and tries to speak to Deborah late at night although he knows she cannot respond during her sleep. Therefore, Danny comes to the point that, only Bernie is worthy of his love and friendship, neither Deborah nor any other woman can substitute for this trustworthy friendship. It is not surprising that Danny defends Bernie against an imaginary

---

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>89</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

coworker, although Bernie does not hear it, it is a kind of apology, and praise of their friendship.

After he has cleared the ground, Danny tries to return to his old friend and mentor. Significantly, Bernie and Danny see a porn movie before their final break up with Deborah, serving as a kind of ritual which restores their male-bonding. After this ritual Danny and Deborah have a big fight, we see Danny acquire his mentor's language and tone when Deborah resists conforming to the role of "mother" who could give comfort and relief after her reprehension:

Danny: I don't mind physical violence. I just can't stand emotional violence. (*Pause.*) I'm sorry Deb. (*Pause.*) I forget who I'm talking to. I'm sorry. You're very good for me. Come here. (*Pause.*) Come here.  
Deborah: No. You come here for christ's sake. You want comfort, come get comfort. What am I your toaster?  
Danny: Cunt.  
Deb: That's very good. "Cunt", good. Get it out. Let it all out.  
Danny: You cunt.  
Deb: We've established that.  
Danny: I try.  
Deb: You try and try. [. . .] You're trying to understand women and I'm confusing you with information. "Cunt" won't do it. "Fuck" won't do it. No more magic.<sup>90</sup>

Deborah is right in her point that Danny does not really try to understand her. After their fight he tries uttering a few words for a sorry; just as he asks Deborah to come he does not make any actual effort to settle their problems. It seems that the 'prophesy' of their mentors have come true, and the state of their communication is irreparable, just as Deborah says; there is "no more magic." They once had caught sexual attraction and romance as its consequence, but now it is impossible either to further their relationship to commitment or to go back to the old days.

Before they split up their belongings and completely return to their mentors, Deb's genuine isolation is very telling. She has once believed that they could work out the relationship, and thus resisted Joan's lack of faith in relationships. But now she has experienced it herself with disappointment, and it seems Joan turns out to

---

<sup>90</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p. 57.

be right. This failure reminds her of a story her mother used to tell, a story showing how we attach ourselves to things as a compensation for people:

Deborah: My mother used to tell a story about how I came into the kitchen one day while she was preparing an important dish. I was about four. I said, "Mommy, can I have a cookie?", and she for some reason misunderstood or misheard me, and thought that I said that I wanted a "hug," so she gave me a "hug," and I said "Thank you, Mommy. I didn't want a cookie after all."  
(*Pause.*) You see? What is a sublimation of what?  
(*Pause.*) What signifies what?<sup>91</sup>

After they break up, Danny returns to his mentor, Bernie, and they continue their job, filing/categorizing women. They keep reducing women to purely physical levels, they lie down on the beach and decide whether the women who pass by them are beautiful or not. It is a kind of ritual for Danny and Bernie, and presents the strength of male bonding in a comic way. They are unable to see women as human beings; within their shallow understanding women are "inanimate objects," or walking pieces of flesh:

Bernie: In a way it's sad. To think I gaze upon the highest man can wish for. . .  
[. . .]  
Danny: Hey, Bernie, isn't that whatsername?  
[. . .]  
Bernie: Naaa. This broad is much better looking.  
Danny: I think it's her.  
Bernie: This broad has a lot more class.  
Danny: No . . .  
Bernie: Lookit her boobs. (*Pause.*) Am I right or not? [. . .]  
Hey don't look behind you.  
Danny: Yeah?  
Bernie: Whatever you do, don't look behind you.  
Danny: Where?  
Bernie: Right behind you, about ten feet behind you to your right.  
Danny: Yeah?  
Bernie: I'm telling you.  
Danny (*looks*): Get the fuck *outta* here!  
Bernie: Can I pick 'em?  
Danny: Bernie . . .  
Bernie: Is the radar in fine shape?  
Danny: . . . I gotta say . . .  
Bernie: . . . *Oh* yeah . . .

---

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Danny: . . . that you can pick 'em.<sup>92</sup>

The rhythm of the speeches in this last scene parallels that of the first scene in which Bernie tells his absurd sexual fantasy to Danny. However, there has been a distinct change in Danny's role in terms of the teacher-student paradigm. Rather than being an eager ingenue who interrupts the teacher only to learn and to encourage him, he has become nearly equalized with Bernie in terms of 'experience' – that is to say, he deceives himself as being experienced like Bernie – and of his sexist tone. He is now “less the eager pupil to Bernie's teacher than a wised-up accomplice in lechery.”<sup>93</sup> Here, women are the mere objects of their gaze, and it is pathetic that they are not a part of the scene, but only 'gazers' outside. Bernie also exposes his lack of imagination by regarding 'a physical object,' a woman, “the highest man can wish for,” and it is obvious that he will never attain 'it.' Within their illusory happiness both men have picked up a humorous tone and stuck to a game of gazing to cheer themselves up.

However; as they criticize and categorize women around them, Bernie sees a woman whom he defines as “something of a pig” and suddenly he flares out, unveiling his insecurities and hatred concerning women:

Bernie: Now she is *not* a good-looking girl. (*Pause.*) In fact she is something of a pig. (*Pause.*) You see? That's all it takes [. . .] Makes all the fucking difference in the world. [. . .] I mean who the fuck do they think they are all of a sudden, coming out here and just flaunting their bodies all over? [. . .] I come to the beach with a friend to get some sun and watch the action and . . . I mean a fellow comes to the beach to sit out in the fucking sun, am I wrong? . . . I mean we're talking about recreational fucking space, huh?<sup>94</sup>

Bernie is deplorable in revealing that women, good-looking or not, makes “all the difference in the world,” actually, he unknowingly defines the boundaries of his

---

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 62-64.

<sup>93</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>94</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p. 68.

own existence. He also feels hatred against women because desperately needs, but is unable to attain them, for that reason he denies the fact that they have come to the beach at least to 'peek' what they are unable to possess. However, his reference to the beach as a "recreational fucking space" betrays his own assertions, as he "presumably uses the obscenity as an expletive but there is, surely, a sense that he wishes it were a verb instead!"<sup>95</sup>

Both Bernie and Danny give away their insecurities and fears about their sexuality while boosting their self-confidence through objectifying women. In this last scene, the audience would nearly feel pity for their pathetic situations; although they are amidst a lot of people they are isolated more than ever, trying desperately to get in. This becomes most evident in their cruel and hostile attitude toward a woman to whom they are both unseen:

Bernie: Hi.  
Danny: Hello there.  
*Pause. She walks by.*  
Bernie: She's probably deaf.  
Danny: She did *look* deaf, didn't she.  
Bernie: Yeah. (*Pause.*)  
Danny: Deaf *bitch*.<sup>96</sup>

It is significant that Mamet has made Danny utter the final words in the play. His language is apparently that of Bernie's, and he has successfully become a misogynist like his mentor. Before their relationship with Deborah, we do not see Danny feeling such hatred and showing such malice against women. As Anne Dean asserts, "[f]or him to utter the final, brutal words in a brutal play is Mamet's way of dramatising how fatally Danny has come under Bernie's spell and how he has absorbed the deadening influence of an artificial and sterile society."<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>96</sup> David Mamet, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p. 69.

<sup>97</sup> Anne Dean, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is a familiar urban story told by David Mamet; it lays bare how we create our socially-bound, gendered identities through language and power relationships; and within this paradigm Mamet provides the reasons for the failure of the relationships between men and women. In the scene where Joan is depicted alone, she tells a story to her “imaginary toddlers” about a woman who is hag by night and human by day; the story is significant in that it acknowledges the challenge for the relationships: people all have hags in themselves, but it is also up to them to seek out the human part. Both Bernie and Joan made a ‘prophesy’ about Danny and Deborah’s relationship, and their ‘prophesy’ have come true, yet not because it is their fate, but because “what you say influences the way you think, the way you act, not the other way around.”<sup>98</sup> Neither Deborah nor Danny could disregard their mentors and their own social roles, and could have their own words; therefore could overcome the hag in themselves.

---

<sup>98</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

### 3.OLEANNA

#### 3.1. The Plot of *Oleanna*

David Mamet's *Oleanna* was first performed at the Hasty Pudding Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1992 as the first production of Mamet's new Back Bay Theater Company.<sup>1</sup> The play was also directed by Harold Pinter a year later in London, and the film version of *Oleanna*, directed by David Mamet, was released in 1994.

*Oleanna* is constituted of three acts taking place in the office of John, a college professor teaching classes on higher education. In the course of the play John is visited by his twenty-year old student Carol three times. In the first act Carol, who has been experiencing difficulties in John's courses asks for his help. As Carol wants to speak and ask questions, John frequently cuts them off with his own responses. On the other hand their talk is frequently interrupted by the phone calls coming from John's wife and his friend Jerry who want to make John come to their not yet bought new house (paid deposit) to give him a surprise party for his not yet granted tenure. John does not believe Carol pays sufficient attention to his class, and thinks she is lying when she says she does. He thinks of going home in ten or fifteen minutes, but when Carol calls herself "stupid," he objects and stays to share his own experience with education as a young man. He tries to convince Carol that higher education is not as essential as people think it is, that it is just a prejudice. As through their talk Carol often has difficulty to understand the academic language John uses, these expressions about education are also hard for her to get. Towards the end of the first act, John offers Carol an "A" if she will just come to see him in his office during the semester to start over the class. Carol wants to learn the reason of this offer and John's answer is that because he "likes" her and thinks they are "similar." John goes on questioning the necessity of college education, and Carol revolts and wails that she feels bad since she does not understand him. Then John goes over to her and puts his arm around her shoulder. As Carol is on the verge of telling him a secret that she never told anyone, the phone rings again and the subject turns into John's new house and tenure announcement.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Oleanna Debuts at Cambridge Mass." **David Mamet Society**, (On-line) <http://www.mamet.eserver.org>, May 25, 2007

The second act opens at John's office again. Carol has lodged a complaint against John to the tenure committee that he has sexually harassed her. She has been connected with and advised by an unspecified "Group" in the college. John reads Carol's charges against him: he is sexist, elitist, racist, he told a rambling sexually explicit story, moved to embrace her, and offered her an "A" if she visits him in his office. John does not deny that he has said these but he explains that she has misunderstood him. In this act Carol is interrupted by John less frequently than she was in Act I. Carol finds John's comments on higher education paradoxical since she thinks he both criticizes and benefits from the system. John talks about his family responsibilities, how he was hurt, and appeals to her by using humanistic terms. After his last appeal Carol is once more about to tell him something about her Group and position. However, the phone rings again and Carol, convinced that John's humanistic approach is not genuine but only aimed for her to drop the charges, moves to leave. John physically restrains her and says he just wants to talk, yet Carol calls for help.

In the third Act, John has lost his tenure along with his house. He has asked Carol to his office to apologize. In this Act Carol talks more than John, and declares that she finds his behaviors exploitative. She says she does not want power and revenge but she wants understanding. But in response John says it is useless since his job is over. Carol offers him that if he suggests the banning of some books including his own in the college curriculum, she and her group will drop the charges against him. John does not accept her offer on the grounds that she is dangerous and he should stand against her. Then he receives a call from his lawyer, informing him that they have placed criminal charges against him accusing him of attempted rape. John decides to speak to his lawyer, then at that moment his wife calls, he wants Carol out, on the brink of her leave she warns John not to call his wife "baby". John grabs her and begins to beat her and throws her to the ground while swearing. He picks up a chair to hit her, but then lowers the chair and moves to his desk. The play ends with Carol's words: "...yes. That's right."

### 3.2. Language, Power, Gender

Standing as a highly controversial play and raising different responses from the audiences, *Oleanna*, too, depicts the power dynamics of one-to-one relationships, which in this case is between John and Carol, as representatives of society. However, unlike *The Woods* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* that concern sexual relationships, in this later play power relationships are portrayed in the context of an actual teacher-student relationship in the academy. Related with the fact that the Senate Hearings on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy<sup>2</sup> were held a year before *Oleanna*'s debut, the play is widely thought to concern issues of sexual harassment and political correctness. However, to regard the play as simply about sexual harassment and political correctness would be a misreading of *Oleanna* in which Mamet "uses the education system as a vehicle for his perennial subject, what he calls "human interactions," in this case the ironic desire for both power and understanding in human relationships."<sup>3</sup> In *Oleanna* Mamet examines the relationship between language, power, and gender and presents us an in-depth picture of human relationships. Both John and Carol occupy "gender-specific identity positions"<sup>4</sup> displaying different backgrounds of culture and class. John, who belongs to a gender that has always had access to the institution of higher education enjoys the power and authority provided by his position, whereas Carol, in addition to her economical disparities, experiences intellectual difficulties adapting herself to the academy since her gender has not been a part of this tradition for long. The difference between John and Carol also shows itself in, and works through the different languages employed by the characters. Language constitutes an ideological tool of empowerment for John who speaks the highly elite language of the academy in relation to Carol who does not understand any of 'the concepts' and 'the precepts' used by her teacher. Simply owning what Carol wants to have access to, John refuses to give Carol what she needs and tries to keep her indebted. However, in the face of John's identity position as a man and a teacher, Carol, like most of Mamet's female characters, resists her fixed gender role and emerges as a

---

<sup>2</sup> "An outline of the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas Controversy," **Center For History and New Media**, (On-line) <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/122/hill/hilloutline2.htm>, May 18, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Brenda Murphy, "Oleanna: language and power," **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Kellie Bean, "A Few Good Men: Collusion and Violence in *Oleanna*," **Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 109.

revolutionary female character by subverting the power dynamics between them, and shifting her position in the teacher-student relationship. In this context of shifting gender roles, David Mamet presents how power and gender relationships, and the subjectivities regarding these are constructed within language. The psychological destruction of both characters at the end of the play, suggests the seeking of a real alternative to the politics of dominance imposed by the system instead of a reversal of power.

The title *Oleanna* is a reference to the nineteenth-century utopian community “established in Western Pennsylvania by a Norwegian singer who wanted an ideal, planned housing community in which his fellow countrymen could live.”<sup>5</sup> The title is formed by the combination of the names of the singer, Ole Bull and his wife, Anna: Ole-anna. Thus, it is appropriate to say that “*Oleanna* is a play about failed Utopia, in this case the failed Utopia of Academia”<sup>6</sup> that traditionally has had the claim to constitute an alternative to the systemic relationships where the politics of dominance is always prevalent. David Mamet’s representation of the dramatic action is in the form of tragedy, and, like *The Woods*, the play adheres to the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action. In Mamet’s words, “[it] show[s] the High (the Hero) brought low, and at the play’s conclusion, couple reversal of the situation and recognition on the part of the Hero.”<sup>7</sup> As Mamet has made it clear in a conversation, “[t]he professor is the main character. He 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.”<sup>8</sup> Another comparison Mamet makes between classical tragedy and his play concerns the use of the telephone, which “functions, as per usual, as a chorus or title card – to introduce new information, emotional or factual, or to comment upon the old.”<sup>9</sup> Mamet identifies the distinguishing characteristic of tragedy as the maintenance of a certain distance between the audience and the characters:

---

<sup>5</sup> Richard Badenhansen, “The modern Academy raging in the dark: misreading Mamet’s political incorrectness in *Oleanna*,” *College Literature* (West Chester Univ., PA) (25:3) [Fall 1998] , p.14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> David Mamet, “Introduction: Recognition, Reversal and Aesthetic Distance,” **Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood**, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> John Lahr, “David Mamet: The Art of Theatre XI,” **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Kane, p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> David Mamet, “Introduction: Recognition, Reversal and Aesthetic Distance,” **Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood**, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. xi.

Drama has to do with circumstance; tragedy has to do with individual choice. The precipitating element of a drama can be a person's sexuality, their wealth, their disease . . . A tragedy can't be about any of those things. That's why we identify with a tragic hero to be ourselves. That's why it's easier for the audiences initially to form an affection for the drama rather than the tragedy. Although it seems that they're exercising a capacity for identification—"Oh, yes, I understand. So-and-so is in a shitload of difficulty, and I identify with them, and I see where the going's bad, and I see where the hero is good"—in effect they're distancing themselves, because they'll say, "Well, shit, I couldn't get into that situation because I'm not gay or because I'm gay, because I'm not crippled or because I am crippled . . ." They're distanced.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Mamet seems to be drawing a parallel between the Aristotelian theatre and Brechtian 'alienation.' However controversial these two theories may sound, Mamet implies that the elements of 'fear' and 'pity' in the classical tragedy create 'the aesthetic distance' between the audience and the characters, and their actions. The audiences identify with the characters of tragedy and consequently experience fear and feel pity for them, but this pity allows them to distance themselves, to recognise that these characters are not themselves indeed. In fact, Brechtian theatre does not totally disregard the effect of identification, thus Badenhausen draws a parallel with Mamet's *Oleanna* and the Brechtian theatre: "Brecht's minimizing of narrative in favor of cultivating an audience's identification with sociopolitical issues represented *through* his characters resurfaces in Mamet's conception of John and Carol."<sup>11</sup> What Mamet aims with identification is not the audience's identification with the characters but with how power dynamics work through and within language.

Brechtian theatre does not provide the audience with easy solutions, and clear-cut endings, but wants the audiences to leave the theatre with questions in their minds. In other words, it makes the audience realize the constructed nature of meaning/reality, and see reality from a different perspective, allowing for new interpretations. Terry Eagleton defines this as a characteristic of "modernist literary works" in which the "act of enunciating" becomes the "content" so that the work is not taken as the reality itself, instead the readers are encouraged to produce their

---

<sup>10</sup> John Lahr, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Badenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

own critical accounts and by that way construct their own version of reality.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Elin Diamond draws attention to the relationship between representation and the represented, and the ways in which 'reality' itself is constructed by the realistic forms: "Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it produces "reality" by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths[. . .]"<sup>13</sup> Another theatre critic, David Sauer distinguishes modernist realism on the stage from "postmodern realism" – or "new realism" as other critics call it:

At the end of the modernist realistic play there is closure and full revelation of the hidden or inner realities. [However in a postmodern work] there is no distinction between appearance and reality; both are the same, since everything is on the surface. There is no conflict between art and nature: nature is not a separate thing but, rather, a part of the artificially constructed human idea of reality—formed largely by mass media presentations of nature in books, films, television, and photographs. As a consequence, there is no closure as in modernist realism—no full revelation of the buried secrets so that the audience feels it knows the full truth as it has interpreted it by reading the signs all along.<sup>14</sup>

Mamet's *Oleanna*, too, provides the audience/reader with a similar sense of lack of closure, and leaves the audience/reader with unanswered questions and gaps:

Mamet returns to a world in which the gaps between words and deeds remain. The play is theatrically powerful precisely because its author never fills in such gaps. Instead, the theatergoer thinks, Is Carol framing John? Are her accusations legitimate? Is Carol simply the first to have the courage to challenge a patronizing and, perhaps, womanizing male teacher? Is John so much a part of an inherently misogynistic world that he is blithely unaware that his well-meaning actions are in fact highly sexist? Mamet invites the audience to respond to these and many other issues.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Terry Eagleton, **Literary Theory: An Introduction**, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p.170.

<sup>13</sup> Elin Diamond, **Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater**, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> David Kennedy Sauer, "Misreading Sexuality on the Post/Modern Realistic Stage," **David Mamet**, Ed. by. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, p. 204.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew C. Roudané, **American Drama Since 1960: A Critical History**, New York, Twayne, 1996, p. 173.

The lack of closure owing to the gaps in *Oleanna* is precisely what causes the diversity of reactions to the play. Those critics who insist that the play has a classical realistic form ignore the fact that they, too, are filling in the gaps themselves. For instance, Kellie Bean views the play as handling a backlash story exhibiting anxieties over the political correctness movement:

In telling a backlash story, Mamet's play embraces a conservative generic paradigm: American realism. In its "relentless plotting toward the white, middle-class, male privilege," American realism, like *Oleanna*, mystifies its ideological preoccupations through apparently transparent works that tell reassuring and conciliatory stories of the benign wonders of patriarchy (Dolan 85). In the tradition of realistic drama, *Oleanna* portrays a patriarchal family struggling to survive—and relieves anxieties over the family and cultural hegemony by circumscribing troublesome female characters squarely within the patriarchal borders of the stage.<sup>16</sup>

Other critics, like John Moore, consider Mamet's characterization of Carol as an evidence of the writer's 'misogyny' that reflects female characters stereotypically submissive, and even as 'femme fatale':

I've got to hand it to the Bas Bleu Theatre for eviscerating and emasculating my least-favorite Pulitzer-winning playwright, the psychologically damaged provocateur David Mamet. Unfortunately, I don't think needling holes in the narcissistic windbag of the American theater was necessarily its intention. Mamet is a mean, manipulative playwright whose spiteful stories spew forth with misogyny. 'Oleanna,' for example, concerns a psychotic female student who brings down a college professor on fabricated sexual-harassment charges.<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, Elaine Showalter reads Carol as an unsympathetic character, whereas John is, in her view, a sympathetic character devoted to his family: "In making his femme protagonist a dishonest, androgynous zealot, and his male protagonist a devoted husband and father who defends freedom of thought, Mamet does not exactly wrestle with the moral complexities of sexual harassment."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Kellie Bean, *op. cit.* p.p. 115-116.

<sup>17</sup> John Moore, "Gender-bending 'Plow' runs aground with missing male-female struggle," *Denver Post*, Denver, Colo.: [Feb 5, 2003](#). p. F.05.

<sup>18</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Acts of violence: David Mamet and the language of men. Review of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*, by David Mamet," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6 November, 1992, p. 17.

However, these critics seem to be mistaking character for writer and seeing John as representing Mamet's own point of view, and disregarding Mamet's emphasis on the power structures which have placed John in the superior position he initially has over Carol, and on the differences of gender, age, social status, and economic class between his characters, upon which such hierarchical relations are built.

In a similar manner, some critics see Carol's transformation in the second act as unconvincing, and Carol is seen as a character who does not have her own ideas, but simply influenced by, and representing the views of her 'Group' :

If Carol does have some feeling of compassion for John, and the scene seems to indicate she does, she cannot exercise it because it is no longer her prerogative to do so. She no longer speaks or acts as an individual, but only as an agent of the Group. The Group has subsumed her identity into its own, and she has become as rigid and unforgiving as it must be.<sup>19</sup>

All these critics and many others try to impose their psychological readings of John and Carol, but Mamet's characters do not yield to such readings, in fact, rather than being characters in the conventional sense, they occupy subject positions created in and through language. As Sauer argues, "Attempts to interpret *Oleanna* by the standards and approaches of modernism can only lead to frustration."<sup>20</sup> It is exactly for those standards and approaches that the audiences, like the critics, have ended up choosing either between Carol and John, and build their case on this binarism.

Considering the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas Hearings was a hot political issue at the time of *Oleanna's* debut, it is understandable that the play is generally considered to be about sexual harassment and political correctness. But David Mamet himself repeatedly opposed the idea, and explained that the play is about power:

---

<sup>19</sup> Roger Bechtel, "P.C. Power Play: Language and Representation in David Mamet's *Oleanna*," *Theatre Studies* 41, 1996, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> David Kennedy Sauer, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

It is a terrible date play. But I never really saw it as a play about sexual harassment. I think the issue was, to a large extent, a flag of convenience for a play that's structured as a tragedy. Just like the issues of race relations and xenophobia are flags of convenience for *Othello*. It doesn't have anything to do with race. This play—and the film—is a tragedy about power.<sup>21</sup>

Those critics who view Carol as an unsympathetic character overlook the fact that John's overconfident behaviors by means of which he tries to establish power over Carol during Act I is what has caused the prevention of a real communication between them. On the other hand, viewing Carol as the agent of a 'revengeful feminist group,' as a puppet of other people, denying that women have the power to express themselves is actually a political strategy belonging to the patriarchal ideology:

[W]e have different expectations about the way men and women should (or do) conduct themselves linguistically. Men are expected to be direct, women indirect. While that distinction in itself does not necessarily create a disadvantage to women, it is the basis of a familiar double-bind. If a woman is indirect (i.e. a proper woman), she is variously *manipulative* or *fuzzy-minded*. If she is direct she is apt to be called a *shrew* or a *bitch*. Denying expressive power to women is a political act.<sup>22</sup>

David Mamet himself evaluates the reactions of the audience and regards it as the evidence of guilt laying itself bare in their responses like Claudius uncovering his guilt when seeing the play in *Hamlet*:

Shakespeare has Hamlet tell Horatio that he has heard that guilty creatures, sitting at a play, may so forget themselves as to enter into spontaneous self-confession. [. . .] I saw such transport operate, night after night, during the first New York run of my play *Oleanna*. [. . .] I saw audience members berate, and, in one case, even strike a home-bound actor. The play moved the audience out of itself. The cant of the times, the rabid demand for hypocrisy, and its attendant burden of fear, was loosed by the play. The aesthetic distance allowed the audience to suspend its reasoning power [. . .] and the (variously interpretable) viciousness, blindness, condensation and savagery of the characters in the play moved the audience to fear and, regularly, to rage. Quite a compliment.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Norman and John Rezek, "Working the Con," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Kane, p. 125.

<sup>22</sup> Robin Lakoff, "Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting 'Women' and 'Power' in the Same Sentence," **The Handbook of Language and Gender**, Ed. by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> David Mamet, "Introduction: Recognition, Reversal and Aesthetic Distance," **Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood**, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. xii.

Perhaps what makes *Oleanna* the controversial play it is its preoccupation with the relationship between language and reality, and language and power. Like the other two plays previously discussed in the first two chapters, *Oleanna* is about how reality is constructed in and through language and how power relations are maintained, and can be destabilized by means of language. In Act I John has the power to decide what things mean; through his verbal power he interprets Carol's actions, but later with the reversal of roles in Act II and Act III this power shifts to Carol. Earlier in the play John says: "Well, you see? That's what I'm saying. We can only interpret the behavior of others through the screen we . . . Through the screen we create."<sup>24</sup> This is precisely the point the play tries to make; it is about who has the power to interpret, and from which ideological stance. And with all these critical views and audience responses what we witness is only their own screen. As David Sauer puts it, "[t]he objective reality of the characters in *Oleanna* cannot be seen except through one framework or another—so it is one's own frameworks that one confronts when watching the play."<sup>25</sup> It is not a classical realist play, so it does not hold a mirror to nature, but to the audience showing how they construct the reality itself through their own screens.

Foucault defines "a series of power processes" as consisting of "enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy." One of these, "enclosure," includes constrictive settings used as places of teaching and apprenticeship.<sup>26</sup> Correspondingly, all three acts in *Oleanna* take place in the professor's office, with its suggestions of all that academic 'knowledge' Carol could not attain. Among Mamet's other plays, *Oleanna's* setting stands quite different, since it appears as a more cultured place.

David Mamet used the language of realtors/salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and the con men in *American Buffalo*, or an urban language reflecting the fast pace of city life in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. In *Oleanna* he deploys a

---

<sup>24</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in **Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood**, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> David Kennedy Sauer, **op. cit.**, p. 210.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," **Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 3**, Ed. by James D. Faubion, Trans. by Robert Hurley and Others, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p.p 338-339.

sophisticated language taking place in the academy. The participants of that setting have a specialized language that assigns them status if they have the ability to employ that discourse. The specialized discourses *Oleanna* includes are of academia, of the feminist movement, of real estate, and of the law; and to deploy the language of these discourses provides a linguistic mode of authority. This power that language offers also determines how one character reads the actions of the other, and shows the unstable nature of power that can shift from one sentence to the other. Christopher Bigsby rightly argues that *Oleanna* “is a reminder of the power of interpretation, or the fact that language defines the nature of the real and hence human relationships.”<sup>27</sup> Gender can also be added to Bigsby’s observation since it is a crucial factor within the power relationship between the teacher and the student. Although some critics claim that Carol and John’s relationship is not inflected with gender politics, sexual politics within the play cannot be limited only to a rhetorical strategy used by Carol to change her position in the hierarchy since the power John exerts on Carol is highly related with his gender prerogative. Focusing on sexual politics in the play, Kellie Bean suggests that Carol’s place in the drama could not be taken by a male character: “Male and female characters are not interchangeable on the Western stage; representations of masculine and feminine identity are not ideologically equivalent there.”<sup>28</sup>

Within this scope, John is a successful scholar, father and husband, he is about to be granted tenure therefore has the chance to secure himself and his family economically; whereas, Carol is a young female student belonging to the lower-middle-class. As Bean affirms, “The male professor represents the institution of the university, a sign of cultural authority to which his gender has always enjoyed access and that women like his student have only very recently entered.”<sup>29</sup> His gender is a prerogative that provides easy access for John to the academy, thanks to that access he can employ the discourse of the academia and by that language sustains his social, cultural, and economic power and status. To attain similar opportunities, Carol needs access to the academic discourse John deploys, and pass her courses which in the end would provide her a diploma. She has come to the university seeking knowledge to better her life; yet, as a woman she experiences

---

<sup>27</sup> C.W.E Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 233.

<sup>28</sup> Kellie Bean, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

problems with attaining that goal, therefore asks for help from John which also means an acknowledgement of his power. As a teacher John's job is to teach Carol how to use that language and guide her for the attainment of the same privileges, but in fact Carol's interests are in conflict with John's, because John wants to exert and sustain power through his role as a teacher therefore needs to extend her apprenticeship, but to teach Carol that language means her independence.

In addition to the teacher-student role patterns, John and Carol display gender-specific behavior characteristics and communication patterns. At the beginning of the play they represent traditional gender roles; John is depicted as a strong and articulate person, "[h]e is objective, logical, direct, self-confident, and is non-emotional except for brief moments of anger."<sup>30</sup> He is very ambitious and therefore successful in his work, in compliance with his breadwinner position, who has to provide money, a comfortable house and a good future for his family, whereas, "[i]n contrast to John's bravado and self-assurance, Carol is meek, weak, and searching."<sup>31</sup> She does not understand John's book and the things he lectures about in the class, for that reason she feels inferior, but tries to hide her inferiority by acting and smiling as if she understands the course. She has come to the University "to better herself, but all she finds is isolation, loneliness, and a lack of understanding,"<sup>32</sup> she is emotional in her attitude, and does not have self-confidence.

In terms of communication patterns, John and Carol deploy masculine and feminine communication traits during Act I. How conversation is organized exposes the distribution of power between men and women; the general patriarchal assumption in society is that women talk more than men, and that they usually talk nonsense, however research outcomes indicate otherwise:

The organization of conversation reflects the power discrepancy between men and women, especially when we compare the empirical findings about the distribution of turns between males and females with the traditional stereotypes about who does more talking than whom. Floor-

---

<sup>30</sup> Bonny Ball Copenhaver, **The Portrayal of Gender and a Description of Gender Roles in Selected American Modern and Postmodern Plays**, East Tennessee State University, 2002, p. 239.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

holding and topic control are associated with power in the conversational dyad. The traditional assumption is that women do most of the talking, usually about nothing. Yet Spender (1980) found that typically men hold the floor 80 per cent of the time. Further, even more surprisingly, when male active participation dips below about 70 per cent both men and women assess the result as "women dominating the conversation." Other research shows that men generate most of the successful topics in mixed-group conversation: women's attempts are ignored by both men and other women in the group (Leet-Pellegrini 1980). [ . . . ] Earlier research (e.g. Zimmerman and West 1975) suggested that one way in which men maintain their conversational dominance is by violative interruption of women.<sup>33</sup>

Conforming to these results, in their first meeting with Carol, John does almost all of the talking. By means of his privileged use of language he frames long, convoluted sentences without paying any attention to straightforwardness and clarity, and he constantly interrupts Carol or completes her sentences for her. Thereby, he maintains his conversational dominance, and thus his power and authority as a teacher. Furthermore; his speech is gender exclusive, he uses the masculine pronoun when referring to all students and the tenure committee members. In comparison, Carol is hesitant and timid in her use of words, constantly trying to find the right words to express herself, and she speaks in phrases rather than complete sentences. She is interrogative, consistently asking questions. Commenting on John and Carol's conversational traits, Richard Badenhausen says "Carol prefers clarity to language that obscures meaning. John, on the other hand, repeatedly employs an artificially-heightened vocabulary that draws attention to his academic status."<sup>34</sup>

However; in the course of Act II things start to change between Carol and John, and round off with Act III. Carol seeks understanding and help from John, but when John refuses to give Carol what she has asked for in Act I, Carol finds this source of comfort, support, and understanding in her unidentified Group with the beginning of Act II, and their roles start to permute. As a humble and inquiring student she has gone to her teacher to learn, but when John insists on his bravado, bombarding her with an incomprehensible jargon, and when her expectations remained unanswered, "Carol discovers that she can use the rhetorical strategies of

---

<sup>33</sup> Robin Lakoff, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Badenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

sexual politics to change her position in the hierarchy.”<sup>35</sup> Apparently, with the deployment of a feminist discourse the balance of power is shaken by Carol, and the power to interpret the Other’s actions and define his subjectivity passes to Carol. With the opening of Act II the audience learns that Carol has made a complaint and reported John to the tenure committee for sexual harassment. What John believes to be harmless and innocent is regarded as sexist, elitist, self-aggrandizing, and demeaning by Carol. However; the reversal of roles in the power relationship does not help John to reach a revelation, instead he insists on the preservation of his position, but in face of his futile efforts Carol gains more power, he physically restrains Carol from walking out of his office and as a result he is committed to trial for attempted rape. With Act III, the number of modes of discourse that John has to deal with rises to three: the feminist discourse that Carol deploys, the discourse of the real estate against which he fights to preserve his house, and the discourse of the law against which he would defend his innocence. The last of these leaves John totally powerless, and thus he resorts to violence to regain his power, and brutally beats Carol. Kellie Bean exposes how this act of violence by John is closely related with gender politics:

[V]iolence against women always contains the threat of sexual violence. [. . .] woman functions as the site at which masculine anxieties over power and gender are relieved through physical, and often sexualized, violence. Certainly this is the case in Mamet’s *Oleanna*. When in the final moments of the play John says, “*Rape you . . .? Are you kidding me . . .? I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole,*” he embraces the regressive notion of rape as a sex act based on erotic desire (79). He also seems to believe that by simply denying an erotic investment in his student, he can ignore the possibility of sexual violence between them. In fact, John does not rape Carol, but when he concludes the diatribe with, “*You little cunt . . .,*” John conflates his violent act(s) into a final blow against Carol’s sexuality, reducing her to a crass anatomical reference and moving his beating of Carol closer to sexual violence (79).<sup>36</sup>

With her access into a new linguistic community, Carol shifts her position in the gendered hierarchy, and simply for that reason her role is a revolutionary one within the power relations based on gender. Although the formation of a real revolutionary subjectivity outside the boundaries of hierarchical power relationships

---

<sup>35</sup> Christine MacLeod, “The Politics of Gender, Language and Hierarchy in Mamet’s ‘Oleanna,’” *Journal of American Studies*, 29.2, 1995, p. 207.

<sup>36</sup> Kellie Bean, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

would be the most desirable since that would be the alternative to power-bound relationships, this is quite impossible in the case of Carol, since to abandon hierarchical relationships she simply has to take place in one and have power first. Thus, her transformation is revolutionary in this world where women do not even have the right to seek power:

[T]he ancient platitude that men are more comfortable with power than are women; that it is right and natural for men to seek and hold power; that for a woman to do so is strange, marking her as un-feminine and dangerous. This belief allows a culture to exclude women from full participation in any of its politics, not only in the most typical and specific sense of that word, “the art or science of government or governing”; but also in the more general sense I am assuming here, “the ways in which power is allocated and that allocation justifies, among the members of a society.” In this latter definition, *politics* extends beyond government to other public (and private) institutions.<sup>37</sup>

From Act II onwards, Carol also subverts the traditional behavior patterns and communication traits pertaining to her gender whereas John tries to stay fixed in his role as a product of gendered hierarchies. Although Carol is an object at the mercy of masculine forces, at first of John, then of the tenure committee, and generally of the academy itself, she resists her own status again, constituting an example to the “Foucauldian splitting of discourse into its own contra objective, its deconstructive twinning into a sly alterity.”<sup>38</sup> Carol has the destructive force of Mamet’s women; she is “simultaneously the object of male power and the subjective agency of male ethical disempowerment [ . . . ] she exist[s] in the liminal zone of [her] own subjectivity, struggling forever on the edge of a becoming determined by men but also aimed oppositionally at them.”<sup>39</sup> Where John tries to defend his strong, rescuing patriarch position as a family man, and his logical, self-confident persona as a scholar in Act II, Carol becomes more self-confident, expressive, and instructive; and her changing position in the hierarchy can even lead John to show emotional reactions which is deemed as a traditional feminine behavior trait. Yet, since he cannot slip out of his traditional role, he feels the necessity to resort to

---

<sup>37</sup> Robin Lakoff, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>38</sup> Imtiaz Habib, “Demotic Male Desire and Female Subjectivity in David Mamet: The Split Space of the Women of *Edmond*,” *Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet*, Ed. by Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 79.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

violence in order to restore his masculinity in the end. What he keeps doing is to depend on a woman and try to exert power over her for the maintenance of his identity, but Carol constantly subverts the grounds on which he would establish his subjectivity.

Their gender-specific communication patterns also change in Acts II and III, with Carol who has become more articulate, demanding, and instructive, able to establish long sentences in convoluted patterns, whereas John is more hesitant with simple sentence structures. It is now Carol who does most of the speaking, and has the power to interrupt John's speech. On the other hand John becomes the one who asks for explanations for the mystery words, and asks Carol to repeat what he does not understand. Linguistically, Carol becomes the teacher and John the student. Some critics regard this unexpected change in Carol as a flaw in character development, but the best answer to these comments comes from Robin Lakoff's analysis:

The most important scene in the play, to my mind, is not shown: how Carol moves from the inarticulate and uncomprehending child of Act I to the articulate and politically astute woman of the remainder of the play. By Act II it is Carol who is making the long, uninterrupted speeches and John who is questioning and expostulating in fragments. Some commentators see this as a flaw of character development: how does Carol achieve this command of language? (It is less often asked how John loses it.) The assumption of many analysts is that she is spouting the dialogue given her by the feminist "group" we never see, rather than that such notions might have been inchoate in her. While it is true that Carol, like virtually all Mamet's women, is a paper cutout (and John is not much more), if we see the ability to speak as a sign of potency, then once Carol has been provided with explanations and with a way to get power, articulateness might follow automatically. Similarly, deprived of his unquestioned power, John might lose his ability to speak.<sup>40</sup>

As one critic observes, Mamet's women "are all located within a contemporary materialist and symbolic patriarchal capitalist economy of sexual objectification, but from inside this location they each enact a systemic disruption that denies the play's male purveyor his enjoyment of the system."<sup>41</sup> Carol can be seen in such an in-between state; she takes place within the power dynamics but

---

<sup>40</sup> Robin Lakoff, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>41</sup> Imtiaz Habib, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

she very well knows that hierarchies are unstable, that subjectivities and gender roles are adopted by power relationships, that power is maintained through language. Thus by changing her position in the relationship, at the cost of her own destruction, she teaches John and the audience this very lesson she knows, and leads us to think of an actual alternative to the reversal of power positions which are structured upon the dominance of One over the Other. That is to say; in *Oleanna* “Whichever side you choose, you’re wrong.”<sup>42</sup>

### 3.3. The Language of the Patriarch

Act I opens with John talking on the phone to his wife. The topic of the conversation is the house they are about to buy, and it seems that there is a possibility that they lose the house – we later learn that it is a plot to make John go home for a surprise party - thus John’s tone on the phone is very nervous, he speaks in a haste with cut off sentences. David Mamet deploys his familiar pauses and repetitions in John’s talk, suggesting John’s anxiety and weakness against the discourse of real estate that he is not familiar with. Meanwhile, Carol is seated across the desk from him waiting for his phone call to end:

John: And what about the land. (*Pause.*) The land. And what about the land? (*Pause.*) What about it? (*Pause.*) No. I don’t understand. Well, yes, I’m I’m . . . no, I’m *sure* it’s signif . . . I’m sure it’s significant. (*Pause.*) Because it’s significant to mmmmmm . . . did you call Jerry? (*Pause.*) Because . . . no, no, no, no, no. What did they say . . .? Did you speak to the *real* estate . . . where *is* she . . .? Well, well, all right. Where are her notes? Where are the notes we took with her. (*Pause.*) I thought you were? No. No, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that, I just thought I saw you, when we were there . . . what . . .? I thought I saw you with a *pencil*. WHY NOW? is what I’m say . . . well, that’s why I say ‘call Jerry.’ Well, I can’t right now, be . . . no, I *didn’t* schedule any . . . Grace: I *didn’t* . . . I’m well aware . . . Look: Look. Did you call Jerry? Will you call Jerry . . .? Because I can’t now. I’ll be there, I’m sure I’ll be there in fifteen, in twenty. I intend to. No, we aren’t *going* to lose the, we aren’t *going* to lose the house. Look: Look, I’m not minimizing it. The ‘easement.’ Did she say ‘easement’? (*Pause.*) What did she say; is it a ‘term of art,’ are we *bound* by it . . . I’m sorry . . . (*Pause.*) are: we: yes. *Bound* by . . . Look: (*He checks his watch.*) before the other side *goes home*, all

---

<sup>42</sup> The legend on the *Oleanna* film poster.

right? 'a term of art.' Because: that's right (*Pause.*) The yard for the boy. Well, that's the whole . . . Look: I'm going to meet you there . . .

In this conversation with his wife John plays the role of rescuing family man. Although his wife has called him to lure him to a surprise party to celebrate his promotion in the academy, he believes they are really losing the house. John thinks he will get rid of his student in "ten or fifteen" minutes and come to the rescue of the house for his family, and he tells his wife what to do until he arrives. She is to have the realtor show her the basement again to delay the realtor until the rescuer comes, and call Jerry, a friend, since only a man can substitute for the head of the family in the meantime. John's attitude indicates that he believes Grace cannot handle the problem on her own, she is not practically capable of problem solving, and needs not only material but also emotional security.

Through this telephone conversation, David Mamet highlights dominance and subordination at the very beginning of the play; here, in addition to his role as patriarch, John actually introduces his difference from Carol by using academic terms against the specialized language of the real estate. During the course of these two discourses Carol is both physically and symbolically outside. Hence, Carol's opening words are: "What is 'a term of art'?"<sup>44</sup> In the academic culture language is the most important system, and Carol's question not only displays her inability to take part in this culture, but also exposes the play's concern with specialized discourses. Brenda Murphy puts it appropriately: "*Oleanna* is about the use and abuse of terms of art, specialized language or jargon which serves as the ticket of admission into restricted linguistic communities that confer power, money, and/or privilege upon their members."<sup>45</sup>

As if to emphasize her exclusion, John answers Carol patronizingly and confuses her with complex terms:

---

<sup>43</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Brenda Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

Carol: What is a 'term of art'?  
John: Is that what you want to talk about?  
Carol: . . . to talk about . . . ?  
John: Let's take the mysticism out of it, shall we? Carol? (*Pause.*)  
Don't you think? I'll tell you: when you have some 'thing.' Which  
must be broached. (*Pause.*) Don't you think . . . ? (*Pause.*)  
Carol: . . . don't I think . . . ?  
John: Mmm?  
Carol: . . . did I . . . ?  
John: What?  
Carol: Did . . . did I . . . did I say something wr . . .<sup>46</sup>

John snaps in response answering Carol's question with a question, and continues with another question which Carol cannot answer. He uses perplexing words like "mysticism," and "broach," and thus provokes isolation and embarrassment in Carol. And finally, by directly addressing Carol with her name in a question form he makes it clear that he controls the space, that the office, and hence the academy in general, is his special domain. However; his power and status have so much blinded him that he cannot see that Carol asked the question to really learn the meaning of the phrase; without even listening to Carol or letting her talk he puts forth his own interpretation, and implies that she is trying to open up the conversation in a rather mincing way.

Indeed, Carol has come to John's office to seek admission into the academic world, she very well knows that she is excluded from this community because she does not understand the language used there and in the course materials: "It's difficult for me . . . The *language*, the 'things' that you say."<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless; she has to learn the language "to pass this course,"<sup>48</sup> and thus "to get on in the world."<sup>49</sup> She has tried to do this by taking notes and following John's words as a rule:

"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 [. . .] everything I'm told." (p.8)

---

<sup>46</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Carol has tried what she has been shown to do, yet failed, and come John to be helped. But, instead of helping her, John further complicates Carol's problem with his incomprehensible language, and claims that he understands her. The word "understand" appears in the text for many times, ironically, however, it does not convey the meaning attached to it, but happens to represent the misreading of the Other. Instead of trying to understand Carol, John once again presents his own interpretation of Carol and accuses her of lying when she tells him that she finds the language difficult:

John: I'm sorry. No. I don't think that that's true.  
Carol: It *is true*. I . . .  
John: I think . . .  
Carol: It *is true*.  
John: . . . I . . .  
Carol: Why would I . . . ?  
John: I'll tell you why: you're an incredibly bright girl.  
Carol: . . . I . . .  
John: You're an incredibly . . . you have no problem with the  
. . . Who's kidding who?<sup>50</sup>

John, whose job requires the ability to read his students' needs better, seems to fail to read Carol and do his job properly. Badenhausen likens John's reading of Carol to one's reading half of a novel and then trying to explain its meaning, since he repeatedly interrupts Carol in the middle of her sentences.<sup>51</sup> His attempts in reading show that the act is finally about power, to prove his righteousness, and the specialized language he uses in this act makes him feel more attached to the discourse of that particular culture. Robin Lakoff explains this sense of belonging that the academic discourse creates:

[U]niversity people love to talk ... the discourse of academe seems (and not only to non-initiates) especially designed for incomprehensibility ... [and, finally], [t]oward the outside world [the special languages of the academy] are elitist: we know, you cannot understand, you may not enter. But for insiders they are a secret handshake. When I encounter my profession's term of art in a piece of writing or a talk, I am obscurely comforted: I am at home among friends.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 6-7.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Badenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Robin Lakoff as quoted in Richard Badenhausen's "The modern Academy raging in the dark: misreading Mamet's political incorrectness in *Oleanna*," *College Literature* (West Chester Univ., PA) (25:3) [Fall 1998], p.14.

Moreover, although Carol tries to explain, John gags her and disregards the different social and economic background she is coming from. He does not pay any attention to his student's concerns and ideas by not letting her speak, controls the progression of the conversation, and determines the specific language that is to be spoken. Despite the fact that Carol has asked for help with the language used, he chooses to maintain his power by drawing attention to Carol's inadequate use of language in her paper:

John: Here: Please: Sit down. (*Pause.*) Sit down. (*Reads from her paper.*) 'I think that the ideas contained in this work express the author's feelings in a way that he intended, based on his results.' What can that mean? Do you see? What . . .  
Carol: I, the best that I . . .  
John: I'm saying that perhaps this course . . .<sup>53</sup>

Instead of explaining Carol how to surmount her problem in language, or showing her a model by the help of which she could revise her writing John humiliates her by asking two questions that cannot be answered. Then, instead of encouraging her, he recommends her to drop the course. Teaching seems for John is a vehicle to display power, since what he does here is to emphasize his own ability in speaking this privileged language. In fact, John heightens Carol's lack of self-confidence and self-esteem even more with his derogatory attitude and self-aggrandizing tone:

Carol: But I don't *understand*. I don't *understand*. I don't understand what anything means . . . and I walk around. From morning 'til night: with this one thought in my head. I'm stupid.<sup>54</sup>

In acceptance of her weaker position, Carol asks John to read her, to analyze her when John tries to relieve her of the anxieties that he himself has caused:

---

<sup>53</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

John: No one thinks you're stupid.  
Carol: No? What am I . . . ?  
John: I . . .  
Carol: . . . what am I, then?  
John: I think you're angry. Many people are. I have a *telephone* call that I have to make. And an *appointment*, which is rather *pressing*; though I sympathize with your concerns, and though I wish I had the time, this was not a previously scheduled meeting and I . . .  
Carol: . . . you think I'm nothing . . .<sup>55</sup>

John's attempts to becalm Carol end up with denying Carol's feelings and with verbal destruction of her identity: if "no one" thinks she is stupid, Carol's account of herself must not count in her teacher's small, contained world. Carol's question in response can thus be read in two ways: she either demands an exact definition of herself or wants to learn where she fits in if her account does not count. Here, each character presents their own reading to the text in question: John re-identifies Carol as angry and not stupid, and Carol believes the professor thinks of her as insignificant.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Carol's reading proves more significant; just like in the opening telephone conversation with his wife, John is very impatient with Carol, and his attitude towards her implies that she is a troublemaker. He portrays himself as a very busy man who has to do a lot of important stuff rather than spending his precious time with 'irrelevant matters' like Carol's.

In the traditional Western understanding of language, speech is seen as natural, direct, and more expressive of meaning, whereas writing is seen as artificial and a rather twisted way of expressing thought. The assumption is that in speech words come out of the speaker's mouth spontaneously, and therefore represent the speaker's thoughts directly; however in writing signs come between the speaker and thoughts, and hence lose plausibility.<sup>57</sup> The purpose of the office hours in academia is closely related with that perception of language, "professors encourage students to clear up their questions about assigned readings in "office hours," which exist as a "place" where enlightened mentors explain orally the dense written discourse, under the tacit assumption that speech operates more directly and therefore more

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Badenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982, p.100.

clearly.”<sup>58</sup> Although she fails to attend the designated office hours of her professor, this is exactly why Carol goes to speak to her teacher in his office. As an undergraduate student in his class, Carol belongs to a lower social class and has come to the university to move upward. But she has encountered problems in understanding the language in the course material, which is an obstruction before her goals, and thinks that she may overcome her problems in class with the help of the ‘clarity of speech.’ However, her encounter with the professor seems not to materialize the promises it gives; disappointed, Carol bursts and elevates her voice to the professor for the first time:

Carol: Nobody *tells* me anything. And I *sit* there . . . in the *corner*. In the *back*. And everybody’s talking about ‘this’ all the time. And ‘concepts,’ and ‘precepts’ and, and, and, and, and, WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? And I read your book. And they said, ‘Fine, go in that class.’ Because you talked about responsibility to the young. I DON’T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS AND I’M FAILING . . .<sup>59</sup>

After Carol has raised her voice, John tries to balance the power between them, and he tells her a personal story about his own studentship. He talks about his own failure as a student, and draws a parallel between himself and Carol:

I was brought up, and my earliest, and most persistent memories are of being told that I was stupid. ‘You have such *intelligence*. Why must you behave so *stupidly*?’ Or, ‘Can’t you *understand*? Can’t you *understand*? And I could *not* understand. I could *not* understand.[. . .] The *good* people. The *capable* people. The people who could do the things, I could not do: learn, study, retain . . . all that *garbage* – which is what I have been talking of – If you are told . . . 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*.<sup>60</sup>

Ironically, John directly speaks to a female student but he uses a masculine pronoun while generalizing Carol’s situation as a student. Besides, John claims they

---

<sup>58</sup> Richard Badenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

are similar, but instead the more he tells the more he exposes how different they really are: he experienced a failure when he was young, but now managed to become a professor; what's more he demands the same things that he calls "garbage" from his own students: to learn, study, and retain. It seems that Carol is not capable of achieving what was so easy for John: "If I do not want to think myself as a failure, perhaps I should begin by *succeeding* now and again."<sup>61</sup> Moreover, he criticizes the teaching method he experienced, but he himself puts Carol within the limits of his own description:

John: It is Not Magic. Yes. Yes. *You*. You are going to be frightened. When faced with what may or may not be but which you are going to perceive as a test. You will become frightened. And you will say: 'I am incapable of . . . 'and everything *in* you will think these two things. 'I must. But I can't.' And you will think: Why was I born to be the laughingstock of a world in which everyone is better than I? In which I am entitled to nothing. Where I can not learn.

*Pause.*

Carol: Is that . . . (*Pause.*) Is that what I have . . . ?<sup>62</sup>

Actually, just as he did not listen when Carol tried to explain her own condition, John is disregarding the possibility that Carol may be different from him or the other students, he does not even consider that she may be experiencing difficulties just because she is a female student. Instead, he prescribes her feelings and thoughts, and defines her situation: she is frightened, incapable, the laughingstock, everyone is better than her, and she cannot learn. Her final question implies that Carol, too, takes what John says as a description of herself.

John goes on criticizing the old-fashioned teaching models, but when he describes the teacher-student relationship, he frames it in terms of power. Yet, what he despises as a method is actually the exact description of his own: "The notion of 'I know and you do not'; and I saw an *exploitation* in the education process,"<sup>63</sup> since his academic language, which stands as a mystery to Carol, constantly implies that

---

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

he knows but she does not. Within his secure position, John continues reflecting his ideas on the education system with his disapproval of the tenure committee:

John: Yes. They're *garbage*. They're a *joke*. Look at me. Look at me. The Tenure Committee. The Tenure Committee. Come to judge me. The Bad Tenure Committee.

The 'Test.' Do you see? They put me on the test. Why, they had people voting on me I wouldn't employ to wax my car. And yet, I go before the Great Tenure Committee, and I have an urge, to *vomit*, to, to, to puke my *badness* on the table, to show them: 'I'm no good. Why would you pick me?'

Carol: They granted you tenure.

John: Oh no, they announced it, but they haven't *signed*. Do you see? 'At any moment . . .'

Carol: . . . mmm . . .

John: 'They might not *sign*' . . . I might not . . . the *house* might not go through . . . Eh? Eh? They'll find out my 'dark secret.'

Carol: . . . what is it . . . ?

John: There *isn't* one. But *they* will find an index of my badness . . .

Carol: Index?

John: A ' . . . pointer.' A 'Pointer.' You see? Do you see? I *understand* you. I Know. That. Feeling. Am I entitled to my job, and my nice *home*, and my *wife*, and my *family*, and so on. This is what I'm saying: That theory of education which, that *theory*.<sup>64</sup>

Mamet presents a stereotypical patriarchal figure in John; "[t]he role of the father [,and husband] in this case is to provide material comfort; in exchange he enjoys validation from the community and control of the home."<sup>65</sup> For that reason, he is desperately in need of the grant of that tenure; yet, he has an arrogant confidence that the tenure will be his which is why he has already bidden on the house as soon as he heard the announcement. Kellie Bean explains on what grounds his confidence lies:

Like individual men in patriarchal culture, John stands as a kind of symptom of the masculinist ideology guiding his identity and behavior. His connection to an unnamed, unseen force—the Tenure Committee—that confers power based on one's relationship to it imitates the role of patriarchal authority in Western culture. That is to say that by occupying the appropriate identity position, both within the university and without, John enjoys security and privilege that Carol does not.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>65</sup> Kellie Bean, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

The institution supports his position as a patriarchal family man, and therefore entitles him his power over his family and his students. Actually, that is the exact reason why he has chosen teaching classes on education: "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."<sup>67</sup> Thus, he chose to be one of the exploiters, one of those bosses, in order not to be one of the exploited, or, in his words, a failure. Now that he has guaranteed his position, having the power so, he feels that he can criticize this system. However; he "merely stages a resistance to the status quo, feigns an attempt to undermine the paternal powers that be, while in fact seeking out the security of that position for himself."<sup>68</sup> Being a part of that system, he both enjoys his position and the opportunity to denounce it. He makes a similar display of power when Carol wants to know about her grade:

John: Of *course* you want to know about your grade. And, of course, you can't concentrate on anyth . . . (*The telephone starts to ring.*)  
Wait a moment.

Carol: I should go.

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

[. . .]

Carol: But we can't start over.

John: I say we can. (*Pause.*) I say we can.

Carol: But I don't believe it.

John: Yes, I know that. But it's true. What is The Class but you and me?

Carol: There are rules.

John: Well. We'll break them.

[. . .]

Carol: Why would you do this for me?

John: I like you. Is that so difficult for you to . . . <sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. 16.

<sup>68</sup> Kellie Bean, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>69</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p.p. 18-19.

In fact, it is difficult for Carol to understand John especially with all the complicated jargon he deploys and with the power he uses as he likes. His supreme security in his position as a teacher allows him to make his proposal to start over the course, a gesture which he previously defined as “to take off the *Artificial Stricture*, of ‘Teacher,’ and ‘Student.’”<sup>70</sup> Although he describes and attacks education as “hazing,” “ritualized annoyance,” and “something other than useful,”<sup>71</sup> he very much enjoys the power education entitles him. Here, he first displays his power by refusing to answer the phone call; the phone rings a few times throughout their conversation, John answers the phone or not to his own will, thus he symbolically controls the conversation by choosing between Carol and the other people on the phone. John also asserts control over the academia through control of the words; “I say we can” is the most evident example. His delusion that he is in control of his class is actually what brings his downfall later; Carol is aware that she is bound by the school rules, thus she objects to the proposal. John, too, is in the same position, but he dismisses Carol’s concerns since he assumes the tenure committee has granted him that authority. As Kellie Bean asserts, “John might as well say to Carol, “I’ll create new rules, and they will reinvent the same relationship (based on class and gender) that ensures my dominance and your submission.”<sup>72</sup> John seems to forget the fact that although he has certain powers over his students, there are authorities more powerful than him like the tenure committee, and that to remain in the hierarchical position at first requires the acknowledgement of the other dominant forces. John’s contradictory ideas on college education confuse Carol more and more as the conversation goes on:

John: Should all kids go to college? Why . . .

Carol: (*pause*) To learn.

John: But if the child does not learn?

Carol: If the child does not learn?

John: Then why is he in college? Because he was told it was his ‘right’?

Carol: Some might find college instructive.

John: I would hope so.

Carol: But how do they feel? Being told they are wasting their time?

John: I don’t think I’m telling them that.

Carol: You said education was ‘prolonged and systematic hazing.’

John: Yes. It can be so.

---

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>72</sup> Kellie Bean, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

Carol: . . . if education is so *bad*, why do you do it?<sup>73</sup>

The more John speaks, the more confused and frustrated Carol gets. First he tells Carol that everybody can be successful in school and it is not difficult; then he tells college education is a prejudice, it is not that necessary. Noticing his hypocrisy that he makes criticisms from within his secure position, Carol asks directly why he does the job if education is so bad. Once his insincerity is exposed, John tries confusing Carol more with demographics. He knows that statistics has a lot more difficult language for Carol, and that he can restore his power immediately in this way. Panicking, Carol bursts in anger:

Carol: NO, NO – I DON'T UNDERSTAND. DO YOU SEE??? I DON'T UNDERSTAND . . .

John: What?

Carol: *Any* of it. *Any* of it. I'm *smiling* in class, I'm *smiling*, the whole time. What are you *talking* about? What is everyone *talking* about? I don't *understand*. I don't know what it *means*. I don't know what its means to *be* here . . . you tell me I'm intelligent, and then you tell me I should not be *here*, what do you *want* with me? What does it *mean*? Who should I *listen* to . . . I . . .

*He goes over to her and puts his arm around her shoulder.*

NO! (*She walks away from him.*)<sup>74</sup>

After her emotional outburst caused by John's exertion of power on her, he goes over to console Carol and puts his arm around her shoulder. It seems this physical touch awakens something in Carol that she starts for a confession:

Carol: I feel bad.

John: I know. It's all right.

Carol: I . . . (*Pause.*)

John: What?

Carol: I . . .

John: What? Tell me.

Carol: I don't understand you.

John: I know. It's all right.

---

<sup>73</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. 24.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Carol: I . . .  
 John: What? (*Pause.*) What? *Tell* me.  
 Carol: I can't tell you.  
 John: No you must.  
 Carol: I can't.  
 John: No. Tell me. (*Pause.*)  
 Carol: I'm bad. (*Pause.*) Oh, God. (*Pause.*)  
 John: It's all right.  
 Carol: I can't talk about this.  
 John: It's all right. Tell me.  
 Carol: Why do you want to know this?  
 John: I don't want to know. I want to know whatever you . . .  
 Carol: I always . . .  
 John: . . . good . . .  
 Carol: I always . . . all my life . . . I have never told anyone this . . .  
 John: Yes. Go on. (*Pause.*) Go on.  
 Carol: All of my life . . . (*The phone rings.*) (*Pause* John goes  
 to the phone and picks it up.)<sup>75</sup>

According to David Sauer, Carol's confession scene is a key example of Mamet's use of gaps in the narrative. Her confession is expressed in negatives like "I can't," "I didn't," "never," "not," "I feel bad," and "I'm bad;" there is no positive assertion, thus her secret remains hidden.<sup>76</sup> As she is about to tell her secret, her speech is interrupted by another telephone call, and this time John, who determines the course of the conversation, decides to answer the phone. And as in Act II and III the issue is Carol's complaint to the tenure committee, her secret is not mentioned in the play any more. To Sauer the scene has strong postmodern aspects: it is fragmented, continually interrupted, and ultimately aborted. For that reason, it must not be mistaken and read as a realistic scene; unlike the modernist confession, the secret is never revealed, and no allusion is ever made back to the secret. Here the author does not present himself as the authority that predetermines interpretation; instead Actor, Audience, and Author are left without a subtext to interpret.<sup>77</sup>

Foucault defines confession as a "ritual of discourse," and this ritual develops within a power relationship. For someone to confess, it is necessary that there is another person present, and this person is the authority who calls for the confession, listens, evaluates, decides to punish, forgive, console, or reconcile. As a result, this

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 26-27.

<sup>76</sup> David Kennedy Sauer, *op. cit.*, p.p.211-212.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

ritual discharges the confessor of his/her burden, redeems, and purifies; it liberates and promises salvation.<sup>78</sup>

As John answers the phone he, therefore the audience/reader, too, finds out that the telephone calls were a ruse to make John come home for the surprise party. In a way, by answering the phone and choosing to leave, John abuses Carol's feelings and leaves her with her burden; the confession unarticulated, Carol cannot liberate herself from her trouble. But; "[w]hat is important is not *what* her secret was but John's total lack of recognition of her vulnerability in being about to reveal it."<sup>79</sup> They appear to have seized a kind of understanding when Carol is about to confess. It is obvious that John's touch is closely related with her confession, but John just ignores her feelings, and the act ends with his self-complacent tone that finds surprises as a form of aggression.

### 3.4. Discursive Battles

Act II is a transition act where John is gradually becoming weaker in his position, and Carol is becoming stronger in hers. Carol has made a complaint to the tenure committee about John, John has lost some of his self-confidence and self-importance he had in Act I, and now he is the one who expects something from the other, therefore the weak party in the power relationship. And Carol is seen getting more self-confident and articulate about how she feels and thinks. Carol's transformation is interpreted in several ways, and generally thought as a flaw in character development. However; regarding the play's postmodern form, David Sauer asserts that Carol's character is constructed in terms of gaps or leaps on purpose: "The actor (and audience) are given no answer to the transformation, and frequently they simply construct their own interpretations (often focusing on "the group") in the absence of any authorial direction."<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Carol's transformation can also be considered in terms of the fact that in the pedagogical

---

<sup>78</sup> Michel Foucault, **The History of Sexuality**, Vol.1: An Introduction. Trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Vintage, 1980, p.p. 61-62.

<sup>79</sup> David Kennedy Sauer, **op. cit.**, p. 213.

<sup>80</sup> David Kennedy Sauer, **op. cit.**, p. 208.

relationship the student's motivation for entering into the relationship is usually low, because of this fragile agreement the teacher-student relationship is susceptible to disruption:

[I]f the pedagogical relationship seems a wonderfully seductive means of averting fate and reconstructing both present and past, it is also a knife that cuts both ways: the teacher becomes heavily dependent on the sanction of his student, which induces a transfer of power in the relationship. [. . .] [thus] the teacher has to deal with the double threat of creating a rival for himself and losing his domination over the student. [. . .] The tension caused by the conflicting interests of teacher and student is bound to come to a head eventually.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, starting from Act II, with Carol's acquisition of a more articulate role, John gradually loses his domination over Carol. In the face of Carol's power, John tries various strategies in order to get Carol to withdraw her complaint from the tenure committee. First, he tries to maintain his job through emphasizing his breadwinner position at home:

John: I love to teach. And flatter myself I am *skilled* at it. And I love the, the aspect of *performance*. I think I must confess that. [. . .] I asked myself and *ask* myself if I engaged in heterodoxy, I will not say 'gratuitously' for I do not care to posit orthodoxy as a given good – but, 'to the detriment of, of my students.' [. . .] When the possibility of tenure opened, [. . .] I asked myself if I was wrong to covet it. And thought about it long, and, I hope, truthfully, and saw in myself several things in, I think, no particular order. (*Pause.*) That I *would* pursue it. That I *desired* it, that I was not pure of longing for security, [. . .] That I had duties *beyond* the school, and that my duty to my home . . . That tenure and security, and yes, and *comfort*, were not, of themselves, to be scorned; and were even worthy of honorable pursuit. And that it was given me. Here, in this place, which I enjoy, and in which I find comfort, to assure myself of – as far as it rests in The Material – a continuation of that joy and comfort. In exchange for what? Teaching. Which I love. [. . .] 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.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Pascale Hubert-Leibner, *op. cit.*, p.p. 78-79.

<sup>82</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p.p. 29-30.

John admits that he was covetous of the promotion and that it meant to secure his position in his family life. However; although he seems to criticize himself, in deploying an academic jargon and praising a conventional patriarchal role within the family, John elevates himself, and tries to preserve his dominant position within the hierarchical teacher-student relationship and within the family. He tries to assert his power through the language that has worked before; as he describes his view of teaching he uses words that he thinks would suppress Carol like “heterodoxy,” “gratuitously,” “orthodoxy,” and “detriment.” His overconfident stance displays itself as he goes on:

Now: The Tenure Committee will meet. This is the process, and a *good* process. Under which the school has functioned for quite a long time. They will meet, and hear your complaint – which you have the right to make; and they will dismiss it. They will *dismiss* your complaint; and, in the intervening period, I will lose my house. [. . .]  
Now: I see I have angered you. I understand your anger at teachers.<sup>83</sup>

It is significant that John who denigrated the tenure committee and the educational system in the beginning now praises its process of judgement and the system under which this process functions. Because he needs the power of the institution now, he defends the academic process. He is still very sure about himself and very confident that the tenure committee will support his back. He persists in his self-assured attitude by defining Carol’s feelings and claiming that he understands her. Yet, his arguments do not work, and Carol knows that he expects something from her in asking her to his office, and with that power she is the one now who directly questions his intentions and demands him to come to the point: “What do you want of me?”<sup>84</sup> This time John tries another tactic and exerts a traditional feminine behavior, expressing his feelings:

I was hurt. When I received the report. Of the tenure committee. I was shocked. And I was hurt. No, I don’t mean to subject you to my weak sensibilities. All right. Finally, I didn’t understand. Then I thought: is it not always at those points at which we reckon ourselves unassailable that we are most vulnerable and . . . (*Pause.*) Yes. All right. You find me pedantic. Yes. I am. By nature, by *birth*, by profession, I don’t know . . . I am always looking for a *paradigm* for . . .<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

By portraying himself as vulnerable and hurt he tries to appeal to Carol's humanity and build her sympathy. And this time, it is he who claims to have difficulty in understanding. But Carol is not moved by his display of emotions. Instead, she frustrates his expectations when she firmly wants him to use the simpler synonym for his complex word, paradigm, and thus begins to control the course of the conversation by deciding which words he should use. Although John still does most of the talking in this act, he speaks less than he has in Act I. And Carol is beginning to establish longer sentences. She may still ask questions or speak in short phrases, but she also has the power to interrupt John:

John: If it is important to you. Yes, all right. I was looking for a model.

To continue: I feel that one point . . .

Carol: I . . .

John: One second . . . upon which I am unassailable is my unflinching concern for my students' dignity.<sup>86</sup>

Here, Carol begins to speak, but John asks her to let him speak, and Carol lets him to complete his words. But a few seconds later, as John insists on his self-assured manner, Carol does not let him overpower her with his language:

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.

John: I feel . . .

Carol: I don't *care* what you feel. Do you see? DO YOU SEE? You can't *do* that anymore. You. Do. Not. Have. The. Power.<sup>87</sup>

When Carol's report to the tenure committee is read, it becomes obvious that the power at issue is closely related with interpretation. Carol was seeking admission into the linguistic community John is in, but John did not help her, and Carol has found herself another linguistic community that gives her the power to interpret John's actions. As a reversal of Act I, John is now unable to understand Carol's construction since the discourse is unfamiliar to him. He regards his actions as innocent, however, in Carol's interpretation they have become sexist, elitist, and pornographic. And she interprets his words that he "liked" her as he "liked being

---

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

with” her, and that he would give her ‘A’ if she came oftener to see him as sexual harassment. Now that she has found her power in another discourse, she does not need John to teach her his linguistic skills, and simply refuses his questionable offer of help. And she openly denies him the power to appeal to her sympathy by which he hopes to restore his authority. And just like John named Carol’s actions, the power to name actions has now shifted to Carol, and it seems Carol is a more competent and careful reader than John:

You love the Power. 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. But you should question it. Professor. And you pick those things which you feel *advance* you: publication, *tenure*, and the steps to get them you call ‘harmless rituals.’ And you perform those steps. Although you say it is hypocrisy. 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?’ and ask me to understand that *you* have aspirations too. But I tell you. I tell you. That you are vile. And that you are exploitative. And if you possess one ounce of that inner honesty you describe in your book, you can look in yourself and see those things that I see. And you can find revulsion equal to my own. Good day. (*She prepares to leave the room.*)<sup>88</sup>

As the conversation goes on Carol becomes more and more expressive and confident. When he reads the report Carol has presented to the tenure committee, John does not believe those precise expressions are hers, but here Carol proves her linguistic ability as she makes her most pointed criticism and summarizes the essence of the problem to John. And her reading of John’s actions turns out to be more accurate since she can analyze John’s hypocrisy in his resentment of authority while at the same time wielding power. In fact, he is in flagrant contradiction with the ideas he supports in his books. Carol’s reading of John’s actions also displays John’s misinterpretation of Carol where he assumes she resents authority; however, as it is apparent in her coming to John’s office, Carol recognises and accepts his

---

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 34-35.

authority and the rules of the institution, and does not have any objection to the academic process, but she simply wants to be a part of the academy, and enjoy its comfort and security like John does. She is now angry with him because, although he does not admit it, he wields power, and disregards her right to ask for the same power.

As Carol is about to leave, John returns to his masculine behavior traits and tries to appeal to Carol's humanity with a philosophical tone. By taking a logical stance he bases his argument on Carol's final words, "Good day":

John: You said 'Good day.' I think it is a nice day today.

Carol: *Is it?*

John: Yes, I think it is.

Carol: And why is that important?

John: 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. [. . .] perhaps it is not your job to 'fix' me. I don't want to fix you. I would like to tell you what I *think*, because that *is* my job, conventional as it is, and flawed as I may be. And then, if you can show me some better *form*, then we can proceed from there. But, just like 'nice day, isn't it . . .?' I don't think we can proceed until we accept that each of us is human. (*Pause.*) And we still can have difficulties. We *will* have them . . . that's all right too. (*Pause.*)<sup>89</sup>

What John suggests in his appeal is that they reach an agreement that they are both human beings, and if they accept that they would also acknowledge the fact that it is natural to have different view points. And he further suggests this would lead them to a kind of understanding for they would agree to differ in their opinions. John's approach seems to work this time, since, as she later claims in Act III, Carol wants to reach an understanding, too. Thus, she begins to tell him something about her position and the Group, yet what she is going to say remains unknown once again because the phone rings, and John picks it up. While he is speaking to his wife, John unconsciously reveals that his real purpose is not to understand and

---

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 35-36.

communicate with Carol, but to regain his house: “. . . we’re *taking* the house . . . I’m dealing with the complaint.”<sup>90</sup>

After the revelation of John’s real intent, Carol decides to stick to the “conventional process,” (p.37) which John praised in the beginning of Act II, and leave the case to the tenure committee. Then, once again, John maintains his patriarchal attitude in claiming that he is trying to “save” (p.38) Carol from the humiliating results of this case. But Carol does not pay attention to his bravado, and starts to leave the room. Finally, John resorts to the one form of power he is still sure of, and physically restrains her from leaving. Shouting, Carol appeals to institutional authority which constitutes John’s action as an assault:<sup>91</sup>

LET ME GO. LET ME GO. WOULD SOMEBODY *HELP* ME?  
WOULD SOMEBODY *HELP* ME PLEASE . . . ?<sup>92</sup>

### 3.5. “Whichever side you choose, you’re wrong.”

Act III opens once more and finally in John’s office, where Carol’s transformation that has started in Act II becomes complete. Totally destroyed, John has lost all of his verbal competence, whereas Carol has gained full power through her command of language. The complete shift of power between the teacher and student shows itself even from the very beginning of their conversation; John is the one who has asked for the meeting to apologize and openly ask Carol to retreat, and he is grateful to Carol for coming:

Carol: Yes? What is it you want? (*Pause.*) What is it you want?  
John: I’d like you to stay.  
Carol: You want me to stay.  
John: Yes.

---

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>91</sup> Brenda Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>92</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p.38.

Carol: You do.

John: Yes. (*Pause.*) Yes. I would like to have you hear me out. If you would. (*Pause.*) Would you please? If you would do that I would be in your debt. (*Pause.*) (*She sits.*) Thank you. (*Pause.*)<sup>93</sup>

It is now John's turn to sit and listen to Carol's opinions and interpretations. Now that Carol's discourse has won the power struggle, she verbally controls the conversation: when John calls the charges against him "accusations," Carol objects and defines them as "facts."<sup>94</sup> Carol, who became very insecure in the face of John's profound jargon in Act I, now shows no meekness when John uses the word "indictment," and directly demands the explanation of the word: "You will have to explain that word to me."<sup>95</sup> When John insists on his definition of the charges as "alleged," she insists on her own reading, too:

"No. I cannot allow that. I cannot allow that. Nothing is alleged. Everything is proved . . ."<sup>96</sup>

And now she has the power to reveal that John's love of words is actually his love of power, and she draws the boundaries of his power with her linguistic control:

Carol: Transpire?

John: Yes.

Carol: Happen?

John: Yes.

Carol: Then *say* it. For Christ's sake. Who the *hell* do you think that you *re*? You want a post. You want unlimited power. To do *and* to say what you want. As it pleases you – Testing, Questioning, Flirting.<sup>97</sup>

Against Carol's unfamiliar discourse John is now the one who asks for explanations of words or declares that he does not understand. Instead of trying to maintain his power through his language, he is hesitant in his words to bring Carol to his side. He no longer plays the role of the man of logic, but speaks of feelings. However, it is too late for John, who had assumed that the tenure committee would

---

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

support him in his patriarchal cause, yet by previously deeming himself more powerful than the school authorities he has been preparing his own downfall. Now he has to recognise their definition, and deal with the judicial discourse along with Carol's:

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? To whom *evidence* has been presented, who have *ruled*, do you see? Who have weighed the testimony and the evidence, and have *ruled*, do you see? That you are *negligent*. That you are *guilty*, that you are found *wanting*, and in *error*, and are *not*, for the reasons so-told, to be given tenure. That you are to be disciplined. For facts. For *facts*. Not 'alleged,' what is the word? But *proved*. Do you see? *By your own actions.*<sup>98</sup>

To maintain his male integrity, John depends on the power he exerts over his female students. However, Carol is able to analyze John's actions and the source of his power, therefore she can subvert the power relationship:

You don't understand? You're angry? What has led you to this place? Not your sex. Not your race. Not your class. YOUR OWN ACTIONS. [. . .] You tell me, you are going to tell me that you have a wife and child. You are going to say that you have a career and that you've worked for twenty years for this. Do you know what you've worked for? *Power*. For *power*. Do you understand? And 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. Your Home. Your wife . . . Your sweet 'deposit' on your house . . .<sup>99</sup>

With the help of her feminist discourse Carol disrupts the hierarchical relationship and denies John his enjoyment of the patriarchal system that purveys him his power. By changing her position within the hierarchy, she shows John how it feels to be subjected to that power, to be in the position of the oppressed. It is ironic

---

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

that just like his students are bound by the words that would come out of his mouth, and their future is in his hands with the grades that he gives, John's career, thus his family, and all his future aspirations are now in the hands of an authority superior to him. And since she is not only subject to her teachers but also to the school rules, to the educational system, and finally to a world of patriarchal capitalist economy, Carol knows well that hierarchical relationships always involve the existence of one higher position from the other like the tenure committee to John, and to remain in that hierarchy requires the recognition of higher roles and the acknowledgement of the limits of one's own power:

Carol: [. . .] we worked to get to this school. (*Pause.*) And some of us. (*Pause.*) Overcame prejudices. Economic, sexual, you cannot begin to imagine. And endured humiliations I *pray* that you and those you love never will encounter. (*Pause.*) To gain admittance here. To pursue that same dream of security *you* pursue. We, who, who are, at any moment, in danger of being deprived of it. By [. . .] By the administration. By the teachers. By *you*. By, say, one low grade, that keeps us out of graduate school; by one, say, one capricious or inventive answer on our parts, which, perhaps, you don't find amusing. Now you *know*, do you see? What it is to be subject to that power.<sup>100</sup>

In fact Carol is now the teacher, and John is the student; and she is instructing John that as long as hierarchical positions are maintained, a real communication and free discussion is impossible:

Carol: Why do you hate me? Because you think me wrong? No. Because I have, you think, *power* over you. Listen to me. Listen to me, Professor. (*Pause.*) It is the power that you hate. So deeply that, that any atmosphere of free discussion is impossible. It's not 'unlikely.' It's impossible. Isn't it?<sup>101</sup>

And also it is impossible to pose an alternative to the systemic relationships while at the same time enjoying the security of it. Carol is also aware of the source of John's power, she very well knows that power is attained through language, through the skillful use of that language to construct meanings, to make

---

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 45-46.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

interpretations. For once she gains that ability to use her discourse she elevates herself within the hierarchy:

Carol: My charges are not trivial. You see that in the haste, I think, with which they were accepted. A *joke* you have told, with a sexist tinge. 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 begin to see . . .? Don't you begin to understand? IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY.<sup>102</sup>

Carol is actually teaching John that his position is so fragile that once somebody learns its source it is easy to forfeit his place, therefore he should not trust himself and his powers such. Actually, she does not look for revenge or take pleasure in being part of a game of power; she has shifted her position within the hierarchy, because only then she can show him how it feels to be in her shoes. But, John cannot step out of his traditional male role, and resists Carol's lesson. He is now lamenting on the loss of his paternal prerogative:

Carol: You think I want 'revenge.' I don't want revenge. I WANT UNDERSTANDING.

John: . . . *do* you?

Carol: I do. (*Pause.*)

John: What's the use. It's over.

Carol: Is it? What is?

John: My job.

Carol: Oh. Your job. That's what you want to talk about.<sup>103</sup>

Given his last chance, John fails to see beyond his own self-interest. Thus, Carol gives up her efforts, and indulges in the power game with John. She knows that in the higher education system, somebody must select the textbooks, and this selection brings power. In fact, selection means the control of knowledge that is the

---

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47.

basis of the university. Hence, Carol introduces her list of books to be banned, and when John tries to object, she defends her right to choose:

John: Academic freedom . . .  
Carol: Someone chooses the books. If you can choose them, others can. What are you, 'God'?  
John: . . . no, no, the 'dangerous.' . . .  
Carol: You have an agenda, we have an agenda. I am not interested in your feelings or your motivation, but your actions. If you would like me to speak to the Tenure Committee, here is my list. You are a Free Person, you decide.<sup>104</sup>

John's objection to Carol's demand is based on the notion of "academic freedom," however John's efforts are pointless and self-contradictory since a few minutes earlier he has admitted that free discussion is impossible within power relations, and power is one of the basic structures of the academia. John does not further his weak argument, and takes the list to have a look at the demands, but when he sees his own book among the list, he totally gives up the role of rebellious teacher and openly appeals to authority:

John: No, no. It's out of the question. I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking of. I want to tell you something. I'm a teacher. I am a teacher. Eh? It's my *name* on the door, and *I* teach the class, and that's what I do. 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* . . .<sup>105</sup>

Here, John poses himself as a hero who carries out his responsibility for his family, himself, and his profession at the risk of losing his job, and takes stand against the "wrong" and "dangerous" (p.50) Carol. However; "[a]s a text that formally inscribes his name in a longstanding tradition of academic writing, John's book serves as a kind of intellectual progeny."<sup>106</sup> Therefore, trying to ban his book is a direct insult against his "manhood," and cannot be tolerated. What's more, a few seconds later, the phone rings again, it's his friend Jerry; John has not been home

---

<sup>104</sup> **ibid.**, p. 48.

<sup>105</sup> **ibid.**, p.p. 49-50.

<sup>106</sup> Kellie Bean, **op. cit.**, p. 117.

for two days staying in a hotel and thinking, for that reason he just learns from Jerry that he has been committed to trial for attempted rape. It seems he is in trouble with an even more powerful discourse now, that of the law, by whose definition he may become a rapist. He has totally lost his control, and finally Carol does her finishing blow:

John: I have to talk to my lawyer.  
Carol: Yes. Perhaps you should.  
*The phone rings again. Pause.*  
John: (*picks up phone. Into phone*) Hello? I . . . Hello . . . ? I . . . Yes, he just called. No . . . I. I can't talk to you now, Baby. (*To Carol.*) Get out.  
Carol: . . . your wife . . . ?  
John: . . . who it is is no concern of yours. Get out. (*To phone.*) No, no, it's going to be all right. I. I can't talk now, Baby. (*To Carol.*) Get out of here.  
Carol: I'm going.  
John: Good.  
Carol: (*exiting*) . . . and don't call your wife 'baby.'  
John: What?  
Carol: Don't call your wife baby. You heard what I said.  
*Carol starts to leave the room. John grabs her and begins to beat her.*  
John: You vicious little bitch. You think you can come in here with your political correctness and destroy my life?  
*He knocks her to the floor.*  
After how I treated you . . . ? You should be . . . *Rape you . . . ?* Are you kidding me . . . ?<sup>107</sup>

Although "private is political" was the slogan of 1970s' feminist movement, private domain is still deemed sacred, a place where it is strictly forbidden to interfere with. This belief is in fact a precious supporter of men's power and oppression at home. For that reason, Carol's statement that not to call his wife "baby" is for John the straw that breaks the camel's back. Just like her demand for his book to be banned, what Carol does is literally finishing John, since both through the academia and his wife John was constructing his identity; she has already taken his power at school, and what has been left to him is his wife and family. Thus, when his linguistic powers fail him, John resorts to violence to regain his power. However; as Foucault makes it clear when he distinguishes a power relationship from a relationship of violence, John absolutely destroys his chance, if there is any, to repossess his power:

---

<sup>107</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. p. 51-52.

In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions. A relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks, it destroys, or it closes off all possibilities.<sup>108</sup>

John is completely pushed out of his academic discourse which was his real source of power, and he falls into verbal abuse which displays his hidden sexism. His way of reclaiming his power actually brings his real downfall. His appeal to violence is a result of his being part of the misogynist tradition of patriarchy, as Bean asserts: "That tradition allows him to treat her disrespectfully, to "be personal" with her, to touch her, to offer her a better grade in exchange for more frequent visits, and finally, to beat her."<sup>109</sup> As Richard Badenhausem claims, it is important to read John's act of violence and verbal assault in terms of Mamet's idea of language; since in his view language is the action itself, here John is honest with Carol and finally reveals his misogynistic character.<sup>110</sup> It seems that Carol has proved to be right in reading John's actions, and she seems to be successful in her aim of getting John reach an awareness; though it is too late for him, John arrives at a tragic self-recognition as he lowers the chair he has picked up to hit Carol:

I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little *cunt* . . .  
*She covers on the floor below him. Pause. He looks down at her. He lowers the chair. He moves to his desk, and arranges the papers on it. Pause. He looks over at her.*  
. . . well . . .  
*(Pause.) She looks at him.*  
Carol: Yes. That's right.  
*She looks away from him, and lowers her head. To herself.*  
. . . yes. That's right.<sup>111</sup>

William H. Macy's acting in the film version of *Oleanna* directed by Mamet himself confirms this recognition by John as when he lowers the chair his face expresses astonishment and despair at his own violence. But what have caused distinct controversy are Carol's final words rather than John's, since

---

<sup>108</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," **Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 3**, Ed. by James D. Faubion, Trans. by Robert Hurley and Others, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 340.

<sup>109</sup> Kellie Bean, **op. cit.**, p. 122.

<sup>110</sup> Richard Badenhausem, **op. cit.**, p. 15.

<sup>111</sup> David Mamet, *Oleanna* in **Plays: 4 Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood**, London, Methuen Drama, 2002, p. 52.

various critics have presented different interpretations to Mamet's ambiguous ending. For instance; Kellie Bean regards Carol's statement as an acknowledgement of John's power over her:

Although the plot punishes John for his treatment of Carol, the visual argument of the play celebrates John's power over Carol. *Oleanna* ends with a stark image of female submission to masculine dominance.<sup>112</sup>

Likewise, Thomas Goggans suggests a defeat in terms of Carol since, he claims, she has misinterpreted John because of a previous incestuous child abuse in her past, a "misinterpretation fated by her personal history and merely mischanneled by the self-interested Group which pursues, in John, a legitimate perpetrator of hierarchic abuse but the wrong representative of Carol's literal 'patriarchal' abuse."<sup>113</sup>

However; John's act of violence is a total loss of his power, thus Carol's words cannot be read as a submission to John's power. On the other hand, a sexual abuse in Carol's past proves pointless since Mamet does not provide the reader with a background story for his characters, instead he intentionally leaves gaps in his narrative. Besides, Brenda Murphy regards both characters as totally destructed in the power game they are engaged.<sup>114</sup> It is true that both characters are destructed in the end because none of them can step out of the power dynamics, but Carol stands as a revolutionary character since although she stays within the hierarchical relationship, by simply changing her position, she teaches John that his power, and his identity, along with his gender role, is a mere construct which can be deconstructed within language. Thus, her final expression can be read as a chilling verification of John's recognition. She might not present a real alternative to the power relationships that she strongly criticizes, but it is Mamet himself who presents it with his thought provoking ending.

---

<sup>112</sup> Kellie Bean, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>113</sup> Thomas H. Goggans, "Laying Blame: Gender and Subtext in David Mamet's *Oleanna*," *Modern Drama*, Winter 1997; 40, 4, Academic Research Library, p. 440.

<sup>114</sup> Brenda Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

## CONCLUSION

David Mamet's plays point at the linguistic construction of gender, power, and subjectivity; in his dramas by focusing on the relationship between language and power, he mainly examines the production and reproduction of gender roles, and identity positions. As an urban writer he problematizes the urban life style that has permeated into the very beings, communication patterns, and behaviors of his characters. In his exploration of subjectivity, by presenting fragmented selves who are in illusion of having integrated beings, he deconstructs the traditional Western understanding of centered and stable identities. Mamet demonstrates the fact that capitalism has turned human beings into commodities, and human relationships have become simple exchanges of commodity. The society he pictures is a slowly disintegrating one full of people who are alienated both to themselves and to the others as well as their labor. In this world of one-upmanship obtaining power turns out to be the only way to gain identity, and language becomes a political tool in the construction and preservation of subjectivity. And the most common way for the acquisition of selfhood for men is to exert power over women; male subjectivity appears to be based on female oppression, laying bare the cultural construction of gender.

Although society obviously imposes certain belief and behavior patterns in the individual, there is a reciprocal relationship between society, language, and the individual; what is imposed by society is also perpetuated by the individual. Therefore, the sense of loss and alienation people feel is not merely a product of the consumerist society; in fact individuals constantly produce and reproduce the system. Deprived of the language to overcome their estrangement, they stick to fiction and fantasy. It is precisely for that reason that storytelling is a primary fact in the lives of Mamet's characters. But storytelling has also a curative effect for Mamet, since the act itself is a communal one for it simply includes at least two people. And it is exactly at that point he draws a parallel between theater and storytelling, and storytelling becomes a metadramatic tradition in his dramas. Indeed, the act of talk is the very action in his plays; rather than a medium to convey plot, language is Mamet's central

theme. He wants to draw attention to the interaction of people, and hence to show how language creates thought and action, and our gendered identities.

Besides the thematic affinities Mamet's plays have with those of his American contemporaries, his treatment of language connects him especially with European dramatists such as Beckett and Pinter whom he highly admires. Like theirs, his characters suffer from alienation and non-communication, however, unlike them, Mamet sees a remedying factor in the act of talk since it has the possibility of developing alternative ways of communication. On the other hand, it is impossible to fit Mamet in a single dramatic form or movement since he makes use of various conventions like absurdism and realism; and Aristotelian, Brechtian, and postmodern techniques. He is a realist in that he presents a bleak portrayal of the corruption of human relationships; however, he is also postmodern because he focuses on language and exposes the process of defining reality. He sees a kind of 'alienation' in Aristotelian 'identification,' and like Brecht he minimizes his use of narration and leaves the play full of gaps to let the audience draw its own meaning. In a world full of fragmented experiences, his account of reality is also in fragments, therefore postmodern. And unlike the traditional realistic theater, his refusal to reproduce reality emphasizes the constructed nature of reality.

As it is language that produces meaning and reality, Mamet is especially interested in the ebbs and flows of the dialogue. His characters use a highly scatological, obscene language, but Mamet's skill lies in the fact that he captures the rhythm of American colloquial language and produces poetry out of it. The course of the dialogue determines the action of his plays, therefore his words are never there just for the sake of being there. There is a strong sense of music in the rhythms and intonations of that live speech he projects. Yet, what Mamet seizes with his language is not the real streets, but the inner worlds of lost and isolated beings.

Finally, by "falling between two stools," taking place both inside the capitalistic patriarchal system and constituting a resistance against it, his female characters become Mamet's most crucial agents of suggesting an alternative to

the oppressive, gendered system of human relationships. Their very fragmentary beings stand as a threat against male illusion of self integrity; and so long as they struggle against male fixation they question the validity of power dynamics. Their disruptive stance comes to prove that gender roles are, in fact, cultural constructs. Indeed, the plays analyzed in this study demonstrate Mamet's account of the politics of dominance and the discursive formation of gender.

In his treatment of a love affair in *The Woods*, Mamet seeks the reasons of unmitigated conflict between the sexes. Though he has chosen the country as his setting, he does not attach idealistic connotations to the natural surrounding; on the contrary, the characters are seen maintaining their sexual roles dictated by society. Mamet's analysis of the effect of social conventions on a couple displays the fact that all relationships are, in truth, political, including the relationships between the sexes. He points out language for the failure of relationships since it becomes a tool of empowerment and prevents genuine communication. But thanks to the reversal of roles through a shift in the languages of the poetic and the prosaic, and the effective use of stories as a substitute for conversation, Ruth and Nick seize the chance to relate, demonstrating that gendered identities are linguistic products.

*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is a bleak picture of 1970s' urban Chicago; with its singles bars, porn movies, extremely obscene language, and its restless urban rhythm, the play resembles a tawdry sex joke. Its characters live a refined life detached from any social responsibility, without having any sense of values. Urban life has circumscribed them to such an extent that they are driven aimlessly by its incessant speed. Within this civic wilderness the only thing that makes sense to them is to consume recklessly. Thus, sex has also become a commodity, and women the objects of male sexual fantasies. Men try to bring stability and coherence to their meaningless lives with the fantasies they create, but women characters refuse to stay within the boundaries of male definitions. In fact it would be surprising if any heterosexual love affair worked out under such pressure. Dan and Deb cannot settle on their relationship because they are devoid of the language to express their feelings; instead the prevalent patterns of gender relations seize them gradually through the medium of their mentor's

language, and they fail as a couple. Deb loses her faith in love like Joan, and Dan becomes even more dangerously sexist than his friend Benie. There is a prevalent perversity in this surrounding that Mamet hints at, which is, indeed, the culturally constructed notions of gender and identity.

Having quite a distinct setting, *Oleanna* offers a despairing account of academia with its focus on the power relationship between a male professor and a female student. The play appears to concern a case of sexual harassment and political correctness, yet Mamet does not change his usual subject, but deploys education system as a means to examine human interaction. John and Carol's identities are defined by their gendered behavior characteristics and communication patterns, and Mamet presents certain discourses as tools of empowerment. John uses his academic discourse to dominate his female student, and also tries to preserve his male integrity through his position as a family man. As a woman coming from a different cultural and economic class, Carol wants to make use of the same privileges John enjoys, but she does not find the necessary instruction she expects from John; instead an unidentified group helps her. With her acquisition of a feminist discourse she shifts her position in the power relationship, and demonstrates the defining power of interpretation. With Carol's subversion and the reversal of roles, Mamet exposes that power, gender, and identity are unstable notions subject to change, and calls for a search for alternative ways of communication to the established discursive power relationships.

The three plays analyzed in the dissertation have some common points as well as differences. Both *The Woods* and *Oleanna* are classically structured tragedies, but *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* has an episodic structure with short scenes reflecting the fast urban rhythm. However, since what is left unsaid is crucial in all of them, absences and gaps are commonly used devices in the narration of all three plays. Both *The Woods* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* depict heterosexual relationships, and ask the same question: "Why don't men and women get along?" And both plays give the same answer: the seeking of power and the gendered identities. Nevertheless, the two plays have different tones; while *The Woods* is lyrical, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is presented as

comedy. On another plane, all three plays involve a clash between two kinds of language deployed by the opposite sexes. In *Oleanna* and *The Woods*, the characters' roles are totally reversed in the manner of classical tragedies, but the changing roles belong to the female characters. Though they differ in content, "need" and "desire" are important notions for all three plays in which male characters try to exert power to attain them, and call themselves into being through the power they establish over women. Thus, all men assume to have fixed and unified subjectivities, but women characters have disruptive effects on this illusion. When their power is shaken men can resort to physical violence in *Oleanna* and *The Woods*, yet verbal sexual violence is everywhere within *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*. Finally, all three Mamet plays assert that reality, identity, power, and gender are products of language that should be questioned.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Badenhausen, Richard: "The modern Academy raging in the dark: misreading Mamet's political incorrectness in *Oleanna*," **College Literature** (West Chester Univ., PA) (25:3) [Fall 1998], pp.1-19.
- Bean, Kellie: A Few Good Men: Collusion and Violence in *Oleanna*," **Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher C.Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, pp.109-124.
- Bechtel, Roger: "P.C. Power Play: Language and Representation in David Mamet's *Oleanna*," **Theatre Studies 41**, 1996, p.p.29-48.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. : "David Mamet: all true stories," **David Mamet**, Ed. by. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, pp.163-202.
- : **Contemporary Writers: David Mamet**, Ed. by. Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby, New York, Methuen, 1985.
- : **Modern American Drama, 1945-2000**, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- : "David Mamet," **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.1-40.

- Callens, Johan: "The 1970s," **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.41-56.
- Carroll, Dennis: **David Mamet**, London, Macmillan, 1987.
- Center For History and New Media: "An outline of the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas Controversy," **Center For History and New Media**, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/122/hill/hilloutline2.htm>, May 18, 2007. (On-line)
- Chi, Wei-Jan: **The Role of Language in the Plays of Mamet, Wilson, and Rabe**, The University of Iowa, 1991.
- Copenhaver, Bonny Ball: **The Portrayal of Gender and a Description of Gender Roles in Selected American Modern and Postmodern Plays**, East Tennessee State University, 2002, p. 239.
- Culler, Jonathan: **On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism**, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982, p.100.
- Dean, Anne: **Language as Dramatic Action**, London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1990.
- Diamond, Elin: **Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater**, London, Routledge, 1997.
- Dorff, Linda: "Reinscribing "The Fairy" The Knife And The Mystification Of Male Mythology In The Cryptogram," **Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, pp.175-190.

- Eagleton, Terry: **Literary Theory: An Introduction**, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Eder, Richard: "David Mamet's New Realism," **New York Times**, 12 March 1978, SM11.
- Foucault, Michel: "The Subject and Power," **Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 3**, Ed. by. James D. Faubion, Trans. by. Robert Hurley and Others, London, Penguin Books, 2000, pp.326-348.
- : **Archaeology of Knowledge**, Trans. by. A. M. Sheridan Smith, London, Routledge, 2002.
- : **The History of Sexuality**, Vol. 1., London, Pelican Books, 1981.
- : **The History of Sexuality**, Vol.1: An Introduction. Trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Vintage.
- Fraser, C. Gerald: "Mamet's Plays Shed Masculinity Myth," **New York Times**, 5 July 1976, p. L7.
- Geis, Deborah R.: "David Mamet and The Metadramatic Tradition: Seeing "The Trick From The Back,"" **David Mamet: A Casebook**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, pp.49-68.
- Goggans, Thomas H. "Laying Blame: Gender and Subtext in David Mamet's *Oleanna*," **Modern Drama**, Winter 1997; 40, 4, Academic Research Library, p.p 433-441.
- Goldstein, Claire: "On Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which is not one,"" **Women's Studies Resources**, <http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/wstudies/frenchfem.html>, April 23, 2007. (On-line)

- Gottlieb, Richard: "‘The Engine’ That Drives Playwright David Mamet," **New York Times**, January 15, 1978, pp. D1-4.
- Habib, Imtiaz: "Demotic Male Desire and Female Subjectivity in David Mamet: The Split Space of the Women of *Edmond*," **Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, pp.77-94.
- Hall, Ann: "Playing to Win: Sexual Politics in David Mamet’s House of Games and Speed the Plow," **David Mamet: A Casebook**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, pp.137-160.
- Harland, Richard: **Superstructuralism**, London, Methuen & Co., 1987.
- Hubert-Leibler, Pascale: "Dominance and Anguish: The Teacher – Student Relationship In The Plays Of David Mamet," **David Mamet: A Casebook**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, pp.69-86.
- Irigaray, Luce: **This Sex Which Is Not One**, trans. Catherine Porter, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Kroll, Jack: "The Muzak Man," **Newsweek**, 28 Feb. 1977, p. 79.
- Kulick, Don: "Language and Desire," **The Handbook of Language and Gender**, Ed.by. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp.119-141.
- Lahr, John: "David Mamet: The Art of Theatre XI," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Kane, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, pp. 109-122.

- Lakoff, Robin: "Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting 'Women' and 'Power' in the Same Sentence," **The Handbook of Language and Gender**, Ed.by. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp. 161-178.
- Leahey, Mimi: "David Mamet: the American Dream Gone Bad," **Other Stages**, 4 Nov. 1982, p.3.
- Leogrande, Ernest: "A Man of Few Words Moves On to Sentences," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, pp.27-30.
- MacLeod, Christine: "The Politics of Gender, Language and Hierarchy in Mamet's 'Oleanna,'" **Journal of American Studies**, 29.2, 1995, pp.199-214.
- Mamet, David: "Introduction: Recognition, Reversal and Aesthetic Distance," **Plays: 4, Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood**, London, Methuen, 2002.
- : **Glengarry Glen Ross**, New York, Grove Press, 1983.
- : **Plays: 4, Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood**, London, Methuen, 2002.
- : **Sexual Perversity in Chicago and The Duck Variations: Two Plays by David Mamet**, New York, Grove Press, 1974.
- : **Writing in Restaurants**, New York, Penguin Books, 1987.
- : "In the Company of Men," **Some Freaks**, New York, Viking, 1989, pp.85-91.

- : **The Woods; Lakeboat; Edmond**, New York, Grove Press, 1987.
- McElhinny, Bonnie: "Theorizing Gender in Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology," **The Handbook of Language and Gender**, Ed.by. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp.21-42.
- Moore, John: "Gender-bending 'Plow' runs aground with missing male-female struggle," **Denver Post**, Denver, Colo.: [Feb 5, 2003](#). p. F.05.
- Murphy, Brenda: "Oleanna:language and power," **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.124-137.
- Norman, Geoffrey, and John Rezek: "Working the Con," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed. by Kane, p.p.123-142.
- Piette, Alain: "The 1980s," **The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher Bigsby, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.74-88.
- Price, Steven: "Disguise in Love: Gender and Desire in *House of Games* and *Speed-the-Plow*," **Gender and Genre: Essays on David Mamet**, Ed. by. Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane, New York, Palgrave, 2001, pp. 41-60.
- Radavich, David: "Men among Men: David Mamet's Homosocial Order," **David Mamet**, Ed. by. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, pp. 69-80.

- Roudané, Matthew C.: **American Drama Since 1960: A Critical History**, New York, Twayne, 1996.
- : "Something Out of Nothing," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, pp. 46-53.
- Sauer, David Kennedy: "Misreading Sexuality on the Post/Modern Realistic Stage," **David Mamet**, Ed. by. Harold Bloom, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, pp.203-226.
- : "Oleanna Debuts at Cambridge Mass." **David Mamet Society**, (On-line)  
<http://www.mamet.eserver.org>, May 25, 2007
- Schvey, Henry I.: "Celebrating the Capacity for Self-Knowledge," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, pp.60-71.
- Selden, Raman,  
Peter Widdowson, and  
Peter Brooker: **A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory**, Eds., Cornwall, Prentice Hall / Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997.
- Showalter, Elaine: "Acts of violence: David Mamet and the language of men. Review of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*, by David Mamet," **The Times Literary Supplement**, 6 November, 1992, p. 17.
- Staton, Shirley F.: **Literary Theories in Praxis**, Ed. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.
- Storey, Robert: "The Making of David Mamet," **Hollins Critic 16**, no. 4, October 1979, p. 1.

- Strathern, Marilyn: **The Gender of the Gift**, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1988.
- Tekinay, Aslı: **Contemporary American Drama: 1960-2000**, İstanbul, Bogazici University Publication, 2001.
- Wetzsteon, Ross: "David Mamet: Remember That Name," **David Mamet in Conversation**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2001, pp.9-15.
- Wetzsteon, Ross: "New York Letter," **Plays & Players 23**, no.12, September 1976, pp.36-42.
- Zeifman, Hersh: "Phallus in Wonderland: Machismo and Business in David Mamet's *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross*," " **David Mamet: A Casebook**, Ed.by Leslie Kane, New York, Garland Publishing, 1992, pp.123-136.