

Différance: David Mamet's *Oleanna* [In English]

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DOI: 10.22034/jltil.2021.528499.0

Received: 22 Mar, 2021

Revised: 22 May, 2020

Accepted: 17 Aug, 2021

ABSTRACT

Oleanna, takes place in the office of a male professor who receives visits from a student, Carol who seeks help to understand John's book which is part of the curriculum. By applying the theories of Derrida such as undecidability, indeterminacy, binary opposition, supplement, différance to this drama, it is demonstrated that Mamet's text is an indeterminate one in which nothing stable comes out of it. The characters, the words, power structure, all are engaged in an undecidable différance in which no sign reaches its signified and it continues to the point that even the ending of the play is undecidable

Key words: Undecidability, Indeterminacy, Binary Opposition, Supplement, Différance.

Characters and Words as Floating Signifiers

According to Saussure, each sign is composed of a signifier and a signified in which each signifier (written or as sound) signifies a concept. However, this very idea is challenged by Derrida who claims that we are dealing with a chain of signifiers, while the signified is forever postponed. Each signifier is referred to other signifiers without reaching any definite signified. Therefore, what we face is a play of signifiers floating forever in this chain. Each sign falls into the trap of différance in which a sign does not find its signified since it is deferred, thus we do not have stability of meaning. Likewise, in *Oleanna*, there are characters and some concepts which do not have stable meaning and status, changing their place frequently from one position to another without finding stability of meaning.

Both characters of the play, at the beginning, have one particular kind of behavior but as the time goes on, they change their behavior and at the end each becomes a new character. As Myriam Diocaretz asserts: "Mamet's characters frequently become altered although they apprehend alterity in radically different ways" (286). John as the protagonist of the play seems to be a successful teacher since he has written a book which is part of college curriculum. He is a

knowledgeable man using academic words when he is speaking, which are not mostly conceivable to the students. Carol, who has come to John's office to be helped in order to pass her course, is given a book written by John, which she does not understand at all. At the beginning, it is the teacher who has the power, indoctrinating her. But at the end it seems that Carol is the powerful one whose help John needs to keep his status. This process will never stop to the end and we are not sure who is the stronger. In this play "each partner is usually accorded equal time; thus, in the throes of *Oleanna*, the professor dominates the first scene, but the student dominates the second"(Cohn 63).

Mamet's characters are signifiers, floating, changing constantly from their previous positions. Therefore, they're not ending up with a signified. It seems that these two characters (John and Carol) are trapped into *différance*, never reaching a specified signified and thus forever floating. They do not have a stable personality. They do not move in a linear manner. Their behavior changes several times during the play which causes the reader to baffle. In the first scene, it is John who has the power and tries to help Carol and shows his power by means of his education and use of technical words, which makes Carol confused, and accordingly, she accuses him of using too many technical words. She is always looking for definitions of words he says. As Cohn asserts: "The student's opening line requests a definition: "What is a 'term of art'?" This is a prelude to her other lexical questions - about paradigm, index, predilection, allegations, indictment. In the first scene the student accuses the professor of "lots of the *language*," and in the last scene again: The language you use' "(79). However, as time goes on, it is Carol who through using the notes that she has taken from John's speech imposes her power on him which makes him beg her to forget the notes that she decides to report it to the Tenure Committee which may cause him his devastation. However, up to here, the reversal of their roles has just happened. Nevertheless, at the end of the play, again we witness that it is not clear who has the power and it is indeterminate to define one specific role for the characters as they are constantly changing their roles and become another character. As said, it seems that they are fallen into the *différance* of meaning where no stable and definite meaning can be given to sign since the destination of each signifier is another signifier rather than a signified. Similar to the movement of the signifier, which does not find a signified and rather leads to other signifiers, the characters' movement and behavior in the play are also indeterminate and undecidable; thus, we cannot find a definite signifier for them. They do not have any stable personality according to which we can judge them. This instability of behavior similar to that of language instability does not suffice the need of the characters to show their power so they have to use the physical violence which depicts their power more intensively as Heather Braun says:" In those moments when language begins to conceal more than it

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reveals, Mamet's characters frequently resort to violence, forcefully and often futilely trying to recapture the seeming control that their words alone cannot master"(103). By the way, at the end it is not clear what happens to them, which one becomes the powerful one and which one surrenders. The end of the play like the characters' behavior becomes indeterminate and undecidable as Richard Badenhausem argues: The play is "necessarily provocative because its events take place within a landscape of indeterminacy"(3). The whole play then takes place in an atmosphere of indeterminacy.

Carol as a Deconstructionist

Another incident, which makes the play exciting and more indeterminate, is that Carol takes notes of whatever John says. She exploits them as a weapon against him. She condemns him that he is going to have an affair with her; she also condemns his view of education.

As said, she is like a deconstructionist who employs the text against itself, and now she uses what he has said as an accusation against him. "Each of John's utterances will be decontextualized and reassembled, then hurled back at him as accusations. Harassment and assault appear as the perfect postmodern deconstruction: unpredictable, dangerous, in arbitrary context, and the result of conflicting social ideologies and forces"(Larner 113). However, he rejects all of the accusations and we as readers might give right to him, but she has taken notes of the exact words of him. This is an undecidable moment as to decide who is right and who is wrong. Here, he is reading what has been jotted down by Carol:

JOHN: Well, all right. (Pause) Let's see. (He reads.) I find that I am sexist. That I am elitist. I'm not sure I know what that means, other than it's a derogatory word, meaning "bad." ... "Told a rambling, sexually explicit story, in which the frequency and attitudes of fornication of the poor and rich are, it would seem, the central point ... moved to embrace said student and ... all part of a pattern..." (Pause) (He reads.) That I used the phrase "The White Man's Burden" ...that I told you how I'd asked you to my room because I quote like you. (Pause) (He reads.) "He said he 'liked' me. That he 'liked being with me.' He'd let me write my examination paper over, if I could come back oftener to see him in his office." ... "He told me he had problems with his wife; and that he wanted to take off the artificial stricture of Teacher and Student. He put his arm around me..." ... (He reads.) "He told me that if I would stay alone with him in his office, he would change my grade to an A." (*Oleanna* 20)

This is a list of accusations having been listed by Carol, which she believes she has taken them from John's speech. John, on the other hand, rejects these and says whatever he has told her has been for her own good and that he wanted to

help and sympathize with her. But she sees it in a different way, and that they are facts: "Sufficient? Sufficient? Sufficient? Yes. It is a fact... and that story, which I quote, is vile and classist, and manipulative and pornographic"(ibid 28). He argues what she says is just accusation, but to her they are facts: " JOHN: ... 'I cannot help but feel you are owed an apology. I have read. (Pause) And reread these accusations". ... CAROL:

Excuse me, but those are not accusations. They have been proved. They are facts" (*Oleanna* 33-34). As noticed, we cannot decide who is right and who is wrong. Here, as Howard Pearce states: the predicament of interpreting the play falls upon a choice between two attitudes toward the dynamics of true performance. "Was the young woman responding to a sexism situation which, in the final image, is ultimately revealed to the audience as the truth of the teacher's character, or was the teacher forced into a desperate, uncharacteristically violent and hateful act because of the enormity of her false accusations?" (113). The teacher argues that they are just accusations and he does not mean what he has said, but on the other hand, those are his exact words written down by Carol. Facts or accusations, that is the question here that no one can surely answer as both are right in their view and have their own reasons. As Michael L. Quinn argues: "Mamet seems to attack "the harassment problem from the traditional Americanist perspective of the presumption of innocence and the burden of proof, and to imply that decisions made before such due process are probably unjust; the real truth in *Oleanna*, like the idea of utopia itself, is ultimately deferred"(105). This makes the play more indeterminate as these two are the only characters of the play on which the foundation of the play has been based and if we cannot decide about them or their behavior, then what is there left to decide. Clearly John does not just get it—"he never sees anything sexual about the contact, but the moment does have some effect on her that he ignores." And when he pleads, at the start of the second act, "What have I done to you? How can I make amends?" He sounds convincing, but he has no clue of what he has done. More importantly, "the audience has no clue either; the incident is never alluded to again, and the confession is aborted, incomplete. The apparent buried secret of realism is never revealed" (Sauer 215).

The ending of the play may be counted as the most indeterminate part of the play. This part is when John's Tenure has not been granted, and he is going to be homeless as he does not have any money to buy the house and even the deposit, he has given to the real state would go up into the air. In the first act, he was the powerful one teaching her to understand the instructions, but during the play as she has written down his words and employed them against him, she becomes the powerful one, whose help John needs. None of them has turned out to be powerful, and it is argued that even Mamet himself has insisted that "*Oleanna* does not take sides when it came to choosing between the two available versions of the

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play's ending" (MacLeod 201), in which it is not clear whose will, will be the superior one and more determinate. Power changes hand during the course of the play and this dissemination of power continues until the end of the play where when he calls his wife "baby", she orders him not to call her wife "baby", which actually infuriates him and makes him lose his temper:

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.) (She cowers 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. (*Oleanna* 43-44)

This is the ending of the play in which he loses his temper and begins to attack her physically since he believes she has interfered in his private life, and it is none of her business to command him what to call his wife, thus in a way he is defending his family than assaulting her physically. As Silverstein explains: "The beating at the play's end offers itself less as an act of aggression than as a form of defense of the family) that, as the guardians of traditional values, find themselves under attack from those who flock to the rallying cry of difference" (113). He gets furious and starts beating her which shows his physical power but, on the other hand, the seemingly ironic "yes" she says at the end does not determine who owns the power. As Garner says: *Oleanna* works in the "psyche over time, and despite its conclusive final sentences, this student's response reveals textual engagement as something more open-ended"(49). He may be physically powerful as shown here, but Carol has written some words from him that his life will ruin more and this beating seems to be a real proof to exacerbate to his misery. However, this does not end the play as its indeterminacy exists in the very word "yes" she says which does not conclude that who finally beats the other. As Matthew Roudane in his "Betrayal and friendship: David Mamet's *American Buffalo*" elucidates "audiences are taken by the lack of closure, by the sheer indeterminacy of the play's resolutions. Questions linger. Uncertainties remain"(70). No definite closure is

granted to the ending of the play.

Carol and John as Binary Opposition

According to Derrida, in a binary opposition, the two sides of opposition not only add to each other but also take the place of each other and, therefore, supplement each other. The two characters of the play are acting like two sides of a binary opposition in which neither side can claim to be on the privileged side, but both are kind of involved with each other. John as the protagonist of the story is considered to be the powerful one as he is the teacher who seems to be knowledgeable using academic terms which are not familiar to the students. Therefore, he is the powerful one when compared with his student Carol who has come to be instructed by him. Carol regards herself to be stupid who does not know what he says and just notes down what he says. She is in the inferior position. From the beginning, it is seen that John is using the technical words, which she does not understand. Both characters possess power. John's derives from his role as a teacher and from the knowledge he possesses. Carol's is based on an authority derived from her gender at a moment when that is invested with social and political force. The battlefield, on which they meet, however, is largely linguistic. Each "deploys his or her own jargon to which they seek to make the other subject. The battle is waged entirely at the level of language ... They are both the victims of language and its arch-manipulators" (Bigsby 197). Being a teacher means that you are in a high position and your social class is more domineering:

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

(*Oleanna* 3)

CAROL: "Virtual warehousing of the young" ...

JOHN: "Virtual warehousing of the young." If we artificially prolong adolescence...

CAROL: ...and about "The Curse of Modern Education." JOHN: ...well... (ibid 7)

JOHN: I said that our *predilection* for it...

CAROL: *Predilection*...

JOHN: ...you know

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what that means.
CAROL: Does it mean
"liking"?

JOHN: Yes. (*Oleanna* 18)

As noticed, John as the teacher is using the academic words which Carol does not understand, and through this he demonstrates his power. The book he has written is also difficult since she does not know the language: "CAROL: No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's difficult for me. It's difficult... JOHN: ...but... CAROL: I don't ... lots of the language..." (*Oleanna* 4). Moreover, when she is speaking, he interrupts her words repeatedly and does not allow her to complete her sentence as he wants to show his power to her.

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?

CAROL: ...I...

JOHN: No. No. I'll tell you why. I'll tell ... I think you're
angry, I...

CAROL: ...why would I... (*Oleanna* 4)

This is one example in which he tries to impose his power with words on her. He does not let her finish her sentences and intends to decide for her. She has no voice but to listen to her or write down what he says as a way of learning from him.

Another case through which John is illustrated on the privileged side of the binary and Carol on the inferior side is when through the first act, John is using the longer sentences, which symbolizes his power and his privilege over her.

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...

JOHN: ...have an appointment with a realtor, and with my wife and... CAROL: You think that I'm stupid.

JOHN: No. I certainly don't.

CAROL: You said it. (*Oleanna* 7)

This is one instance of how he uses the longer sentences, which actually happens frequently in the play. She has behaved in a way that she thinks he has called him a stupid person who is mentally weak to understand what others say to him and she gets angry. He boasts about his position as a teacher who knows a lot and says that many people come to him to be instructed and learn from him. He helps them to find their status and it is through education that people, as John believes, find eligibility and status in the society and here Carol as well has come to him to learn something to be eligible in the society. He is powerful as he is more capable of using language than the other. As Brenda Murphy argues: "In a most fundamental sense, *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"(126). This is what gives him the privilege through which he can gain money and social position.

Carol on the Privileged Side

As observed, John is seen on the privileged side of the binary opposition in which Carol is considered inferior and uneducated, stupid and powerless person and John as the teacher is regarded as highly educated, academic and powerful one. This is what happens in the first act of the play in which a binary is established. John utilizes various means to reach his ends: he takes advantage of academic words, long sentences, interruptions, and introduction of new topics to impose his power on her and show him as a powerful one. She needs his help and implores him to help her with her problem:

CAROL: No. You have to help me. ...

JOHN: ...what can I do...? CAROL: Teach me. Teach me"

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JOHN: ...I'm trying to teach you.

CAROL: I read your book. I read it. I don't under... JOHN: ...you don't understand it.

CAROL: No. (*Oleanna* 6-7)

Here, it is she who needs him to help her out of her problem, which is her grade that she has to pass, and she needs him to teach her how to pass. Therefore, he is superior to her and he should instruct her. Moreover, it is he who implicitly calls her stupid because she does not understand his book or what he says or this is actually what she understands from what he says,

CAROL: ...you think I'm nothing...

JOHN: ...have an appointment with a realtor, and with my wife and... CAROL: You think that I'm stupid.

JOHN: No. I certainly don't.

CAROL
: You
said it.
JOHN:
No. I
did not.

CAROL: You did. (*Oleanna* 8)

Here, according to what Carol argues, he calls her stupid or at least a person who is nothing and does not understand anything and she is slow about learning materials given to her. This is the identity he gives her or at least she assumes he thinks so about her. This is what she appears at the beginning of the play in which John is the powerful one.

However, during the course of the play this priority of John is given to Carol or Carol usurps it. Carol substitutes him. He undergoes a drastic change in his situation; "he undergoes absolute reversal of situation" (Kane 119). From now on it is Carol who gains power by what she has written down from what he has told her when conversing. She plays the role of a deconstructionist and uses his own

words against himself. She has jotted down what he has been telling her, and she uses them as her weapon to take advantage of him and gains power from him. As mentioned, at the beginning of the story it was Carol who needed his help but now it is reversed, and it is him who needs her help because according to what she has recorded from him, he will lose his job, his position and the Tenure he is going to get from the Committee. She has recorded that there has been an attempted rape by him and that he has told her he likes her and wants to see her in private and etc. This is the weapon through which she attains power and threatens him. Now this is she whose language is stronger than before with a tinge of threat in it. This is she who now uses longer sentences and frequently interrupts his discussion.

CAROL: You see. I don't think that I need your help. I don't 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. Did you misuse it?
Someone did.

... And to say, and to say, "Oh. Let me help you with your
problem..." (...) CAROL: I don't care what you think.

JOHN: You don't? (Pause) But you talk of rights. Don't you see? I
have rights too.

CAROL: What gives you the right? Yes. To speak to a woman in
your private... Yes. Yes. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You feel yourself
empowered ... you say so yourself. To strut. To posture. To
"perform." To "Call me in here..." Eh? You say that higher education
is a joke. ... To embrace your students. (*Oleanna* 27-28)

Carol is directly saying that she intends to wrest the power from him. She is strongly accusing him of rape. Regarding the previous act, she is now a very aggressive and stronger person: "In the second act she returns, her language and attitude transformed. She is now aggressively confrontational, retrospectively interpreting his earlier gesture as an assault and deploying the jargonized language of militant feminism" (Biggsby 196). In addition, she uses stronger words

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and sentences questioning him, his power and his system of education in which no one understands him well. In retrospect to the previous act, in which she stutters when talking or she does not have enough confidence, here she employs longer sentences in which she is demonstrated as the dominant voice in the conversation. She changes a lot from the first act, and it remains a question for the audience that how she could change from a simple girl to a dominant voice in the play.

As David Kennedy Sauer explains: What happens to the "inarticulate, "slow leaner" Carol of the limited vocabulary in Act One to the articulate and controlling Carol of Acts Two and Three. What causes the change in outlook, in vocabulary, in confidence? The actor (and audience) are given no answer to the transformation, and frequently they simply construct their own interpretations" (217). From the following acts, she does not let him to raise his voice against her. She does not need him any more to teach her as he does not have the power any more as she says: you "Do. Not. Have. The. Power" (Ibid 27). It is now she who calls him stupid and fool: "CAROL: YOU FOOL. Who do you think I am? To come here and be taken in by a smile. You little yapping fool. You think I want "revenge." I don't want revenge. I WANT UNDERSTANDING"(*Oleanna* 38).

The binary opposition has reversed, and she has taken his place as Derrida believes. In this binary now again, we have one side as having priority over the other one. But as time passes in the play this also changes since they need each other to be completed.

Characters in Need of Each Other

In the first and the second act, the two of the characters are seated across one another which show that in each act one is powerful and they have been against each other:" JOHN is talking on the phone. CAROL is seated across the desk from him"(*Oleanna* 1). This is Act One and the following is the beginning of Act Two:" JOHN and CAROL seated across the desk from each other"(Ibid 24). As Sauer says: This is established from the outset when "he takes a chair and places it just across from the bench right. He is in control of the space. In the second act, to demonstrate the reversal of power, *his* first place to sit is on her bench. Physically this makes clear the psychological change in power and position that has happened between the two acts" (Sauer 214). However, in the final act, act three, both of them are depicted in way in which they are no more "across" each other and are in a plain way seated near one another as there is going to be a conversation and discussion happening between them for reconciliation: "At *rise*, CAROL and JOHN are seated" (Ibid 32). This act seems to be the act in which they try to converse to reach a resolution about themselves. They try to be friends as they need each other to be completed.

CAROL: All right. What if it were possible that my Group withdraws its complaint.

JOHN: What?

CAROL: That's right. (Pause)

JOHN: Why.

CAROL: Well, let's say as an act of friendship.

JOHN: An act of friendship.

CAROL: Yes. (Pause)

JOHN: In exchange for what. (...). Academic freedom... (*Oleanna* 39-40)

After the challenges ensued between the two main characters of the play, Carol who is now in the power position wants to make a deal with him as an act of friendship to make reconciliation between them. They claim that they would not report John's "corruption", as they say whereby he might lose his job, if he accepts to ban some books from university curriculum including his own book with which students have problems in understanding. She previously threatened him that she would report what he had told her to the Tenure Committee whereby he would lose his job since the Tenure Committee would examine getting Tenure to him by which he could save himself, he could buy a new house and therefore, find a better social and economic status. She argues that if he accepts her demand, banning some books from being taught at university, she would drop the file and withdraw her complaint against him.

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. (Pause)

JOHN: Give me the list. (*She does so. He reads.*) (*Oleanna* 40).

It seems that they both need each other to be completed. According to Derrida, this is what happens in a supplement process in which the two poles of binary not only add to each other but also substitute one another and thus complement each

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other. Here, the two characters in each act were on one side of the opposition respectively. In the first act, it was John who was in the superior position, but in the second act it was Carol but it seems that both need each other to be balanced. She needs him as he needs her; as Derrida argues that the two sides of the opposition not only need each other but also replace each other to be supplemented. Mamet here has aimed to find a "balance between the characters" (Price 165). Therefore, neither side can claim to be on the superior position but what is important is that both are in need of each other and as Francine Russo: "There's been a lot of smart analysis of this play to prove it's weighted on both sides"(97). Good needs bad as bad needs good to be supplemented. However, at the end of the play when he does not accept the deal, and she interferes in the relationship and in what he would like to call his wife baby, he gets angry and beats her. This action by itself also adds to the indeterminacy of the play as who at the end turns out to be the powerful and who the weak.

Conclusion

By the help of the theories mentioned, it is proven that the characters of the play, Carol and John, have floating natures that is constantly changing. At the beginning of the play, it is John as the teacher who holds the power but during the play it is Carol, who by noting what he has said, usurps the power and becomes the powerful one. However, this shift of power does not end here as at the end of the play it is not clear who is the power holder. Moreover, each topic that they are talking about is left unfinished without any conclusion. The topics are like mobile signifiers fallen into trap of *différance*, never rest on a fixed signified as the signified is postponed. In addition, the characters of the play act as two sides of binary opposition that neither side has the privilege status as they need each other to be completed, and they not only add to one another but also take the place of each other, thereby supplementing one another as is the case with Carol and John, who need one other to be completed.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to reviewers for their valuable suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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