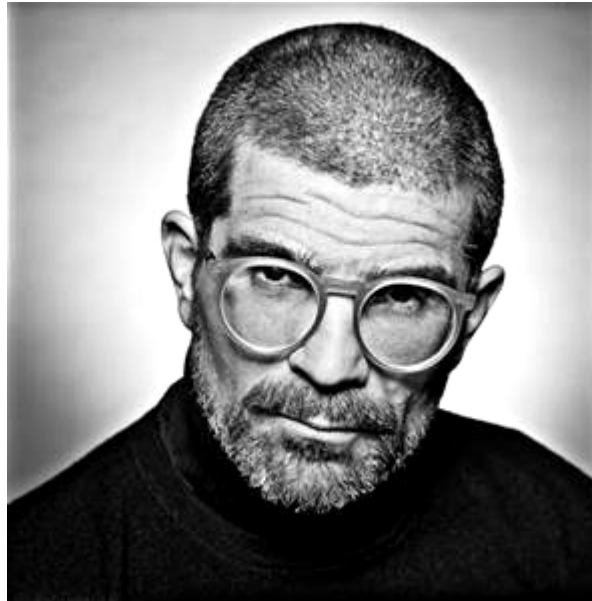


FILM

Oleanna (1992)



David Mamet

(1947-)

ANALYSIS BY ACT

Oleanna is a community founded in the 19th century in Ole Bull's colony, New Norway, Pennsylvania. The folk song "Oleanna" satirizes the utopianism of Ole Bull. The play and film *Oleanna* by David Mamet mocks the oppressive "utopianism" of Feminist political correctness in higher education and throughout the country as Old Bull.

The play premiered in 1992 in the radical Feminist utopia of Cambridge, Massachusetts. According to reports, Feminist females in the audience were furious by the end of the first act. Making stock responses, they identified with the female against the male. Later that year the play appeared off-Broadway and *The New York Times* reviewer called it "an impassioned response to the Thomas hearings." The year before, Feminists led by Anita Hill had tried to block the conservative Clarence Thomas from the U.S. Supreme Court by making false accusations against him of "sexual harassment." Throughout the 1990s the periodical *Heterodoxy* edited by David Horowitz documented many cases similar to the one in *Oleanna*. In 2013 the U.S. Department of Education sanctioned the punishment of male students for sexual harassment based on accusation alone, depriving them of due process.

Oleanna is an inversion of *The Lesson* (1954), a famous European play by Ionesco in which a professor is a personification of Nazism and a female student is his victim. In Mamet's play the student turns into a fascist, her "group" is analogous to Nazis and the professor is their victim. The British novelist John Fowles similarly depicted Feminists as Nazis in *Mantissa* (1982). In response to political correctness in the 1980s the conservative broadcaster Rush Limbaugh popularized the term Feminazis.

QUOTATIONS

The quotation from Samuel Butler that opens the print edition of the play is ironic understatement lamenting “the absence of a genial atmosphere,” noting that children (students) are able to act happy even in a hostile environment like a London alley (or an American college) because they have never known anything else. There is a pun on “faculty”: “Young people have a marvelous faculty of either dying or adapting themselves to circumstances. Even if they are unhappy—very unhappy—it is astonishing how easily they can be prevented from finding it out, or at any rate from attributing it to any other cause than their own sinfulness.” In the background of this play, off stage, there are male students who are like the professor in being sexually harassed by Feminists for their “sinfulness.” The quotation from the folk song “Oleanna” evokes the irony that liberals from Europe came to America to escape “slavery” and a century later liberals enslaved others with Political Correctness.

ACT I

Limiting the cast to only two characters heightens the sense of social division and the polarization of opposites—male and female, professor and student, middle-class and lower-class. The professor has the common name John, connoting ordinary and representative. He is in his faculty office talking on the telephone with the student Carol seated across his desk from him, a common situation in colleges everywhere. Carol likewise is a common name, with the connotation of a Christmas carol, which becomes bitterly ironic. The text of the play identifies the two speakers as John and Carol rather than differentiating the professor from the student, expressing an egalitarian perspective.

The first three sentences of the play refer to “the land.” By repetitive emphasis the particular land that concerns John becomes metaphorical, evoking the nation--the whole land--giving national scope to the implications of the play. John says “I don’t understand,” before Carol says the same thing about her studies. The first act establishes several such parallels between the two, calling attention to what they have in common as human beings, affirming transcendence of gender. John points out some parallels to Carol. He is trying to be egalitarian and friendly, but his situation is disruptive. His phone conversation is full of interruptions, broken sentences, misunderstanding, frustration, and the fragmentation characteristic of Postmodern literature, especially plays, in particular by British playwright Harold Pinter, the main aesthetic influence upon Mamet. The audience must try to infer what is going on, like Carol the student. John is repeatedly interrupted by his wife, the one in control of their relation to “the land.” In Feminist terms, she has the “power.” Yet, in the position of Carol, the audience is likely to be annoyed by his talking on the phone and by not being able to fully integrate the fragments of his conversation. The audience is likely to blame him and fail to appreciate that he is obligated to his wife as well.

John apologizes to his wife twice, once because of misunderstanding—“I don’t mean that”—and once apparently because of his strident tone. His wife, also strident, is urging him to come and meet her about their purchase of a house. Although his responsibility to his wife is arguably greater than his responsibility to advise a student outside of office hours, John feels obligated to the student. Under increasing pressure he promises his wife to leave in “fifteen, in twenty” and then “in ten or fifteen minutes.” John and his wife Grace are in a crisis. Grace is concerned they will lose the house they want to buy, or the deposit. John reassures her, optimistic and supportive, and they express love for each other.

His first words to Carol the student are an apology. Ironically, in Act I John is more polite to her than he is to his wife. When he asks Carol, “Don’t you think...?” and she replies “...don’t I think...?” the implication is that she is not an independent thinker, a point emphasized at the outset and throughout the play. When she asks if she said something wrong, John bends over backward: “No, I’m sorry. No. You’re right. I’m very sorry. I’m somewhat rushed. As you see. I’m sorry. You’re right.” In Act I he apologizes to her 14 times. Carol never apologizes. She never thanks him for giving her attention outside of office hours when he is in a rush. Professors are notorious for neglect of advising and for missing office hours. For a professor, John is unusually generous.

This professor is also exceptionally modest, as when defining the phrase “term of art” he admits that he is not sure of its meaning. Both characters are insecure and hypersensitive, their conversation faltering and

fragmentary, leaving many gaps in communication that cause false inferences and misunderstanding. When John says tolerantly that everybody forgets things, Carol denies it: “No they don’t.” In contrast to her absolutism, he is tentative, saying “I think so.” He calls her coming in to see him a “compliment” rather than an unwelcome delay. When he starts to discuss her academic status she evades the subject and asks about his personal life: “You’re buying a new house.” John is professional in remaining focused on her as a student: “I have no desire other than to help you.” Diplomatic when he might be abrupt, the professor does not say, “You’re flunking the course. He blames “missed communi...” He goes so far as to lie to avoid hurting her feelings: “You’re an incredibly bright girl.”

When he says “I think you’re *angry*” she admits, “It is true. I have *problems*...” She indicates that she comes from a lower socio-economic class. She is angry about her status and resents his. She stands up to leave. He could have let her go and rushed to his meeting with the realtor and Grace—to a fulfillment of their dreams. Had he not been so generous, his life would not have been destroyed: “Here: Please: Sit down.” He tries again to teach her. He reads aloud a sentence from her paper that is vague and vacuous. Carol is super-defensive, insisting that she is doing the best she can and has to pass this course. John blames himself for her failure—typifying the male feminist. He questions his “criteria for judging progress in the class.” Unlike many professors John did not assign his own book in the class, but when she came in previously he told her to buy and read his book in an effort to improve her understanding of his course. Carol feels that if she does everything she is told then she ought to pass the course. Otherwise it is not fair. She claims to be doing “everything I’m told.” She is thinking like a child, provoking the professor to say, “Look. I’m not your *father*.”

Carol is so offended she seems to have a problem with her own father. Interrupted by a phone call from his lawyer, John cuts him off: “Jerry. I can’t *talk* now.” He is giving Carol a higher priority than his wife, his realtor, and his lawyer. He asks her, “What do you want me to do?” She demands “*Teach* me,” but she does not understand his class or his book or anything. Again he blames himself: “Well, perhaps it’s not well *written*...” But she does not understand “*Any* of it.” John tries to explain the idea that because society is coercing many young people into going to college who are not suited for it, the educational system is prolonging their adolescence. Carol insists that John should help her “To get on in the world.” She feels entitled to advancement beyond her ability in accord with “affirmative action.” She says “I don’t understand what anything means,” confirming her feeling that she is stupid, which makes her more angry. She accuses John falsely of saying that she is stupid: “You said it.” The text contradicts her and John assures her that he “never would say that to a student.” Her false accusations on minor issues in Act I prepare for her false accusations on major issues later.

John finally tries to break free to rush off to his appointment with his realtor and his wife: “though I sympathize with your concerns, and though I wish I had the time, this is not a previously scheduled meeting and I...” Carol stops him with another false accusation: “You think I’m nothing.” She maintains his attention on herself by insulting him. Then her self-pity becomes overbearing: “nobody wants me.” She collapses: “It’s garbage. Everything I do.” Again, he could escape, but instead he begs her to stay: “Please sit down.” He thanks her and tries to help her feel better by comparing himself to her when he was her age. “I’ll tell you a story about myself. (*Pause*) Do you mind? (*Pause*).” Like her, he “was raised to think [himself] stupid.... And I could *not* understand.” Carol repeats that she cannot understand concepts at all. John again blames himself, like a self-loathing male liberal: “Well, then, that’s my fault. That’s not your fault... And I am sorry and I owe you an apology.”

He goes on confessing to his own inferiority complex. “Listen: I’m talking to you as I’d talk to my son...the way I wish that someone had talked to me. I don’t know how to do it, other than to be personal.” John transcends gender in talking to her as he would to his son, affirming their common humanity. Interrupted again by the telephone he tells his wife “This is important too. I’m with a *student*.” Again he expresses his love and reassures his wife, just as he is trying to reassure his student. He tells Carol “I like you... Perhaps we’re similar.” John is trying his best to establish for his student the “genial atmosphere” that is affirmed in the quotation from Butler that introduces the play.

John relates to her how he “worked his way out of the need to fail.” Trusting her, he reveals that he is up for tenure, making himself more vulnerable. When she says “I should go,” he has another opportunity to

escape. His telephone rings but this time he ignores it, giving his student his complete attention: "We'll start the whole course over. I'm going to say it was not you, it was I who was not paying attention." He is right in that he is not paying enough attention to his hostile academic environment. Though the course is only half over, he gives her more than an undeserved passing grade: "Your final grade is an 'A'." During the Feminist Period (1970-present) professors throughout higher education have been intimidated by student evaluations and political correctness into systemic inflation of grades, reducing the credibility of degrees even from the most prestigious schools. John's generosity is due in large measure to his fear in anticipation of his evaluation for tenure. His only stipulation is that Carol meet with him a few more times: "What's important is that I awaken your interest, if I can, and that I answer your questions."

He resumes by explaining his critique of higher education: "It has become a ritual, it has become an article of faith. That all must be subjected to, or to put it differently, that all are entitled to Higher Education." He asks Carol twice for her opinion: "Good. Good. *Good*. That's right! Speak up!" But the girl cannot complete a thought. This is not good. When he tries to resume his encouragement she is so angered—"I'M SPEAKING"—that he apologizes to her 4 times. When she says "I'm keeping you," he has still another opportunity to escape her. Instead he offers to advise her on her "wage-earning capacity" with and without a college degree, trying to help her be practical and face reality—a rare professor indeed. She refuses, yelling at him "I DON'T UNDERSTAND."

She breaks down again, asking him "Who should I listen to?" In a comforting gesture he goes to her and puts his arm around her shoulder but—"NO!" she walks away from him. Finally she confesses, "I'm bad." She is about to confide in him something she has never told anyone, when the phone interrupts again. John is later every minute to his appointment and yet he still says "I can't talk now." He refuses to leave his student until his wife tells him the realtor has declared their agreement void. In a passionate exchange with Jerry his lawyer, John threatens to sue the realtor, then says, echoing Carol, "I don't understand." Finally the truth behind the phone calls is revealed. All is well. Grace and Jerry have set him up for a surprise party in the new house, to celebrate his tenure announcement. John is so shaken up by the surprise reversal that he suggests it is a "form of aggression." Otherwise Act I ends with a positive reversal, in contrast to the reversal opening Act II, which is more clearly a form of aggression.

ACT II

John's long opening speech builds suspense as to why he is saying all this to Carol. He begins by emphasizing his motives: (1) "I love to teach"; (2) "I swore that I would not become that cold, rigid automation of an instructor which I had encountered as a child." Since the 1950s women had often criticized "the cold, rigid automation" of men. John is self-critical, sensitive and accommodating—the New Man molded by political correctness, the compliant feminized male—an "Uncle Tim" as such men are known today, a variation on Uncle Tom. Despite his laudable motives, John questions his selfish motives—a "covetous" desire for tenure, security and comfort.

So far in the play, he has given Carol his highest priority. Now he considers "That I had duties beyond the school, and that my duty to my home, for instance, was, or should be, if it were not, of equal weight." Ironically, in being more than fair to Carol, he has been less than fair to his wife. The climax of his opening speech is the revelation in passing that Carol has filed a complaint against him—a surprise to the audience, since she seemed on good terms with him at the end of Act I, accepting his sympathy. We can only wonder what he has done to warrant such ingratitude. Her complaint has delayed his tenure decision, the basis of his house loan. "I will lose my house.... I will lose my deposit... I see I have angered you. I understand your anger at teachers. I was angry with mine. I felt hurt and humiliated by them. Which is one of the reasons that I went into education."

Trying to persuade Carol to drop her complaint, John confesses to his "weak sensibilities." And his offensive claim to knowledge: "You find me pedantic. Yes. I am." He is like one of the professors forced to endure Marxist "re-education" and driven from the classroom into the fields for hard labor by young Communists during the 1960s Cultural Revolution in China. Feminists in the United States called their indoctrination programs "sensitivity training."

John begs Carol to reconsider: “What have I done to you?” She calls his plea an attempt “to force her to retract.” His response is a famous line from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1916) by T. S. Eliot, one of the most influential poems of the 20th century: “That is not what I meant at all.” The line is repeated to call attention to the allusion. The parallel of John to J. Alfred Prufrock adds to the pathos of this insecure professor, who is never seen out of his office. John suffers far more than fear of rejection by a single woman, his life is destroyed in the name of all women.

Carol’s inflation since her deflation at the end of Act I is evident when she claims to represent the whole student body of the school. John reads her report accusing him of sexism, elitism, pornography, and embracing—“all part of a pattern.” Her dialogue, her limited vocabulary and the sample of her writing quoted in Act I indicates that Carol is incapable of writing that report. It was concocted by her Feminist “Group.” This would account for her abrupt transformation from a cowering supplicant to a vindictive aggressor. As Feminists say, she has been “empowered.”

The report claims he told a “sexually explicit story, in which the frequency and attitudes of fornication of the poor and rich are, it would seem, the central point.” This refers to his unguarded anecdote: “When I was young somebody told me, are you ready, the rich copulate less often than the poor. But when they do, they take more of their clothes off.” This was his example of “an article of faith” that should be rejected. Ironically, everything done to John in the play is based on a Feminist “article of faith” about men. Carol also accuses John of using the phrase “The White Man’s Burden.” Feminists see white men as oppressors and deny that they have any burdens. She also accuses him of saying he liked her, of asking her to “come back oftener to see him in his office,” and of putting his arm around her. Everything he has done intending to help and comfort her has been perverted and turned against him.

John keeps urging Carol to use “her own words,” but she is unable to think independently and keep referring to her notes and to the report written for her by her Group. She expresses the dissociation from males that has been promoted in Women’s Studies programs throughout the country since 1970: “I don’t think I need your help. I don’t think I need anything you have.” Feminists empowered themselves by waging a gender war that inverted the ideals of higher education. Speaking “on behalf of my group,” Carol exults in the revolution and John’s loss of power: “The. Power. Did you misuse it? *Someone* did. Are you part of that group? *Yes. Yes. You Are. You’ve done* these things.” His “group” is white males. Unable to think for herself in Act I, Carol has become a group thinker in Act II. It no longer matters what John himself did, as a white male he is guilty of all the sins of his group, a scapegoat sentenced to career death with no trial, no due process, no appeal. Group thinking is tribal, barbaric, and childish. In this play, Feminists resemble the Nazis in being: (1) group thinkers; (2) motivated by hatred of a different group; (3) book banners; (4) fascists—“I don’t care what you think”; and (5) inhumane—“I don’t *care* what you feel.” Torturing men is more gratifying than gas chambers.

John pleads for his life: “Please... I’m not a *bogeyman*. I don’t ‘stand’ for something.” He is a human being, not a symbol. Carol is now so dissociated from reality she claims to be doing John a favor. Then she accuses him some more, of making a “demeaning remark.” She intends to tell the woman on his tenure committee about it. She is offended that males are allowed to teach at all. She challenges his right to speak to a woman in his office and to “play the *Patriarch* in your class.” To Feminist groupies “The Patriarchy” is the Evil Empire and all men are Darth Vader.

Carol’s longest speech in the play projects the characteristics of her Group onto the conventional John: “You love the Power. To *deviate*. To *invent*, to transgress...to *transgress* whatever norms have been established for us...this taste to mock and destroy.... But I tell you. I tell you. That you are vile.” After this onslaught spewed in his face, John says in response, “Nice day today.” He makes a plea for humanity: “I don’t think we can proceed until we accept that each of us is human.” He asks her to tell him “In your own words. What you want. And what you feel.” But she replies, “My Group”—like a robot.

Trapped and desperate, when she starts to leave the room he traps her—“I have no desire to *hold* you, I just want to *talk* to you.” Though he restrains her for a moment, his whole life is in her grip, making her demand ironic: “LET ME GO.” The gripping scene intensifies his desperation. Now he is more in her grip than ever. Ironically also, she plays the helpless victim in distress at the hands of a vile abuser.

ACT III

John confesses his alleged sins like a recanting heretic in the Spanish Inquisition or a Communist in the infamous Moscow Trials. “Everything is proved” against him without proof. Exulting in her power over him, Carol again projects the characteristics of her Group when she accuses *him* of wanting only power—“unlimited power”—and mocks him for feeling entitled to tenure: “It’s all about *privilege*.” Presumably the tenured women on the faculty are not privileged. Nor is her Group, the college Gestapo.

Consulting her notes, Carol is outraged that John said to students, “Have a good day, dear”; “Now, don’t you look fetching”; and “If you girls would come over here”—“And what is that but rape; I swear to God.” In *Against Our Wills* (1975) Susan Brownmiller declared that “All men are rapists.” In *Intercourse* (1987) Andrea Dworkin argued like other radicals that even consenting heterosexual intercourse is rape and that men should be murdered. She was given a front-page review in *The New York Times*. The bestselling revenge novel *The Women’s Room* (1977) by Marilyn French was adapted to television with the title “The Burning Bed” and inspired a number of women to burn their husbands alive. Mamet is understating the fanaticism of radical feminists during the late 20th century.

Carol says “You think I am a frightened, repressed, confused, I don’t know, abandoned young thing of some doubtful sexuality, who wants, power and revenge.” He is honest: “Yes. I do.” She now accuses him of hating her (for the same reason she hates him): “Because I have, you think, *power* over you.... It is the power that you hate. So deeply that, that any atmosphere of free discussion is impossible.” John gives up trying to teach and agrees that discussion has become impossible. The more he has yielded and apologized and begged forgiveness, the more arrogant and tyrannical she has become: “I came here to instruct you,” she says, embodying the inversion of the power structure in higher education as Feminists took control. All around the country many thousands of students like Carol, indoctrinated by the Group, were scorning their male professors for being male. They were like the chorus of young barbarians in the ironic line from the Pink Floyd album: “*We don’ need no edjacation, we don’ need no thought control!*”

Carol complains that to be admitted to this school she had to overcome prejudice against her sexuality, whereas in fact the prevailing sexual prejudice in higher education nationwide is against heterosexual white males, as she and her Group are demonstrating in their persecution of John. Complaining that she has been humiliated, she and her Group have established sexual harassment policies designed to humiliate males and ruin their lives with accusations of rape without due process. Having complained against him for offhand comments she now complains that she herself “might” be subject to complaints for “One capricious or inventive answer on our parts, which, perhaps, you don’t find amusing.” Feminist double standards have made a farce of their claims to be pursuing “social justice.”

To her the “haste” with which her accusations were accepted by the administration is evidence not of prejudice but of their validity. When she claims that John made a sexual advance (sometimes it is an “advance” and sometimes “rape”) he denies it but offers to adapt himself: “I am not too old to *learn*.” She is even offended by his smile: “You little yapping fool.” Like a cat teasing a mouse, she offers the possibility that her Group might withdraw the complaint, but the condition is banning his book, among others. Oh, one other little thing. He must also sign a statement written by her Group, again like a Communist forced to sign a false confession.

“Get the fuck out of my office.” John finally stands up for himself and turns from a worm into a hero, becoming a martyr to free speech: “You’re *dangerous*, you’re *wrong* and it’s my job...to say no to you.... Go to hell, and they can do whatever they want to me.” On the telephone he tells his lawyer Jerry, “I got a little turned around.... It cost me my job? Fine. Then the job was not worth having. Tell Grace I’m coming home.” Jerry tells him and Carol confirms, “My Group has told your lawyer that we may pursue criminal charges.” Then Grace calls. He tells Carol to get out. Instead, she reprimands him again: “Don’t call your wife ‘baby’.”

“What?”

“You heard what I said.”

Feminists even presume to tell men what endearments they are allowed to use to their wives. John has repeatedly warned her that if she continues to persecute and humiliate him, if she pushes him too far, *she*

will be humiliated. “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!

What is most politically incorrect about this act is that by making Carol increasingly demanding and arrogant and unforgiving, the play has induced the audience to sympathize with John and feel gratification when he knocks her down--a *female!* After centuries of civilization, radical Feminists have replaced conventional relations between the sexes with barbarism, putting women at risk. Tribe against tribe. In court it will be her word against his anyway, he has nothing to lose. “I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little *cunt...*” Cowering in shock on the floor, she agrees. “Yes. That’s right.” At the end of Act I she confessed to him that she is “bad.” Now at the end of the play she lowers her head in evident shame and confesses to herself, “...yes. That’s right.”

SYMPATHY FOR FASCISM

Some reviewers of the play were more sympathetic to Carol than to John. Wade Bradford at *About.com* describes John as “deeply flawed,” “overly verbose,” “callous,” “pompous,” “abrupt,” “interruptive,” not giving Carol a “chance to speak.” [Carol has 219 speeches in Act I, the same as John.] He “doesn’t seem to be a very good or wise instructor. He spends most of his time waxing eloquently about himself and very little time actually listening. He does flaunt his academic power, and he does unintentionally demean Carol by shouting ‘Sit down’ and by physically trying to urge her to stay and finish their conversation. He doesn’t realize his own capacity for aggression until it is too late. Still, many audience members believe that he is completely innocent of sexual harassment and attempted rape.” Bradford thinks the play has no objective meaning and is “all about the perspective of each audience member.... Is the professor attracted to her in Act One?” Attracted? He would not touch her “with a ten-foot pole.”

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The *Wikipedia* review must have been written by one of the Group: “John remains unable to understand any point of view but his own.... Carol tries to educate him in his position of privilege and power, forcing him to recognize the fact that his desires and hatreds all center around obtaining and losing power over others.... She has documented daily occurrences of sexist remarks toward his students.” This reviewer agrees with Carol and the Group that John has no right to call his wife “baby” and claims the endearment is expressed “dismissively.” He is a “smug, pompous, insufferable man whose power over academic lives he unconsciously abuses” (by giving Carol an A). In the play John “knocks her to the floor,” whereas in this self-pitying review by the Groupie “John savagely beats her.”

Michael Hollister (2013)