

The struggle for gender identity in david mamet's sexual perversity in chicago



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David Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974) is a postmodern drama that portrays the stereotypical and traditional images about women during that era. This piece of work really concentrates on the power relations based on gender, and the void that appears between genders. Though there are no consistent characters, or plot, the dialogues represent the features connected to this topic properly. There are no moral values, no normal relationships at the edge of an era when women's roles in society are changing. This latter statement is something, even Danny acknowledges and says out loud in the drama. Vulgarity, the dehumanization of women like "Deaf bitch" (Mamet 69), also language usage and the lack of communication are topics in the drama that are going to be analyzed. Other topics that need to be examined - besides self or gender identity and the lack of communication - are the lack of empathy and moral values, femaleness, self-knowledge and self-hood, not to mention the hierarchy built into society. What really have a power in the drama are communication and language; these are the embodiments of expressing the unstable masculinity when the requirements of the social institution are neglected, and women's roles are changing, developing.

First of all, the question of language with all the hostility can be traced back to insecurity. Women's femininity starts to get a bigger role in society, more possibilities are opening for them. Therefore, the male identity is questioned through the use of a language style that is vulgar, hostile, derogatory and disrespectful towards women. The politics of gender is not the same, hierarchical patterns are starting to fade. The method of speech becomes the metaphor for existing and for identity that is dramatized. The characters

inner features and relationships are expressed through their words and manifestations. Intimate relationships become limited, empty ones. The void between genders though is still present: “ Commercial artist, huh? ...Lots of money in that. I mean, that’s a hell of a field for a girl” (Mamet 29). Bernie demonstrates the perversity itself through degrading women by using obscene, disrespectful words. Here, he verbally insults Deborah, as he supposes that she is a “ girl” who cannot maintain a job as important as a commercial artist’s. He does not even consider her a grown-up women based on this excerpt. This whole refers to the lack of basic human values, communication, or thinking; that in a perverted way actually can lead to aborted relationships.

According to the previously mentioned features, the topic of power-relations is also important. Women are not represented equally, they play a secondary role; the gender focus is on the male characters: “ Women are marginalized because they aren’t brokers, players, in a world where spirituality and emotion is devalued, and everything is negotiable” (Roudané qtd. in Hudgins and Kane 139). The key word is value here. Patriarchy is still present, though it is changing as well. Marginalization depends and relies on social requirements that favor the superior masculine characteristics. In a way, Bernie is the one who embodies the leader figure who affects Danny’s behavior and way of thinking. His behavior adds to the misogynistic views connected to women. Though what is portrayed is different from misogyny; it is more likely the representation of aborted values and emptiness in both sides.

How female identity exists and formed is represented and manifested: “Mamet’s plays address a pressing contemporary issue, namely, women’s changing roles and positions as women impact on men’s gender identity in recent American society” (Németh 12). It is referring to how upside down the features of life and relationships have become. According to Lenke Németh, feminist assessment appears in a way that men are struggling to avoid women; also that women are just mothers and wives, therefore the crucial aim is to have connections with men and not with women. This statement is however can be argued, as turning the male world upside down, women have bigger roles than that. That is why the vulgarity is present, objectification occurs through that language. Danny is the one who starts to look away from the well-known norm, but Bernie pulls him back.

Also, another important factor is that women do not have names.

Anonymous women appear in the beginning and also in the end, being called bitch and other obscene words. This is how men show their masculinity; it refers to gender bias as well. Sexual hints are presented throughout the whole drama, it is like women only consist of and can be recognized by their body parts: “ Flat belly, beautiful pair of tits” (Mamet 67). It refers to their role and their worth. An interesting and sad thing is that Deborah and Joan start to think about themselves exactly in this way towards the end of the drama. They just cannot accumulate to their changing role, cannot find the balance between how they would like to be treated and their actual treatment from the male characters.

According to Radavich, male masculinity is confused because of the rather disorienting world, and life-and-death emotional battles take place in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-for-gender-identity-in-david-mamets-sexual-perversity-in-chicago/>

drama; men cannot identify themselves either, they also struggle with work, competition and personal life: “ the men nervously assess other men, their strengths, prowess, and fitness...men critique the sexual attributes of women” (Radavich 345). That is how and why they treat women as less important. In a way, while women are searching and fighting for acceptance and equal rights, men are fighting for finding their male identity and masculinity. However, the only way of showing part of that masculinity is the way of derogatory speech they use when they talk to or about women. That shows that the search for identity is present for both genders. Masculinity though is something men are not willing to give up, just like their privilege – for the other gender –; also doing that would result in doing away with conventional social norms and expectations, also stereotypes. Though the shift in the male-centeredness is starting to change with women appearing in more and more fields like the same working place.

With gender issues in the center, in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* male bonding is in the foreground; male relationships are privileged. The cause of the phenomena mentioned in the previous paragraph can be frustration as an end-product of burdens created by society. Gender and gender identities have to meet with social expectations. Therefore, finding any kind of identity is complicated. Nevertheless, male identity seems more important though the pressures both at work or public places and at private life affect them all. The question of aimlessness and hostility climax in thinking about death. Bernie is the one who plays with the thought more times in the drama, even when he is with Joan:

This is life. You learn a lot about life working for the airlines. Because you're constantly in touch, you know with what?, with the idea of Death. (Pause.) Not that I'm a fan of morbidity, and so on. I mean what are you doing here? You're by yourself, I can see that. So what do you come here for? To what? To meet interesting new people or not. (Pause.) What else is there? (Mamet 19)

According to Skeele, there is a connection between what is evil and Mamet's works. The play is a morality play that is: " a play, allegorical in structure, which has for its main object the teaching of some lesson for the guidance of life, and in which the principal characters are personified abstractions or highly universalized types" (Mackenzie qtd. in Skeele 512). The moral message itself though is ambiguous in Mamet's plays; there is no direct address of specific sins in many of them. However, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is unique, as the title precisely assesses the " offending sin", that is the " Sexual Perversity". It refers to the dehumanizing and degrading use of sex, of gender itself. The main topic based on this viewing of the drama is the barrier between men and women. Both sin and salvation appear. Bernie – from this point of view – has the biggest role as he is the one who tries to corrupt Danny, and in a way, he succeeds which the reader can see at the end of the drama.

Each of the characters represent a " fall" if we consider morality and moral values. This shows that morality is actually something that is missing.

Considering the devilish actions and the lack of morality throughout the whole drama, it could be stated that there is no character development in connection with any of the protagonists. Therefore, the ending scene states <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-for-gender-identity-in-david-mamets-sexual-perversity-in-chicago/>

clearly that Danny does not stay in the right way or does not develop into something more than the devilish person that Bernie portrays throughout the whole drama. Another interpretation for this “fall” could be the war between men and women, and how it is portrayed. That is why where the writer places the characters is important. This is also a central topic expressed in a tangible method by placing them into evil spots, like bars.

Taking the title itself into consideration, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* refers to much broader issues than what perversity in itself means. It obviously depicts the gap between genders, but also refers to the lack of communication and respect. The word “perversity” portrays a kind of a twisted and reversed view about the world as well, that has a huge influence on the individuals.

The drama can be seen as a peak into gender and social politics as such. The shift in gender roles is hidden behind the lines; sexual and social alienation are present, also isolation is addressed as a topic of huge importance. The controversial issues considering gender roles, gender differences, past and present relationships, or gender as a term itself are repetitively shown throughout the entire drama mostly by how the men characters talk, think and act. It can be understood as gender discrimination in a way, as society itself is gender biased. Interpreting this, women are struggling to achieve equal treatment; oppression by social norms is also a crucial point that reveals itself by the objectification of the female characters.

All in all, the play can be interpreted as showing hierarchy between not just genders but individuals, too. Men cannot see women as anything else or

more than sexual objects; this leads to the failure of establishing, shaping, and maintaining relationships. According to Fatemeh and Azizmohammadi, society is the stage where it all happens. Women are resisting patriarchy and male privilege. Power relations can be seen in other Mamet plays as well; it is the case in *Oleanna*, too. Language contributes to these relations; it empowers and also reflects on identity. Women are also seen as the counterparts of subject, strength or dominance. They start to fight back oppression and being the embodiment of male desire. The dialogues show the act of talking, nevertheless, a form of isolation between the genders can be felt. That is how sterility becomes one of the major topics in the drama, as it is present in the relationships and in the behavior of the characters; it also can lead to emptiness.

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