

Persuasion and credulity in institutional conflicts



**ASSIGN
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Theatre has always been an outlet for the articulation of opinion and the careful expression of controversial or uncomfortable topics. It may be easy to forget in this current age of trigger warnings and hypersensitivity, but some of the theatre's many roles in society are to provoke thought, to discuss relevant subject matter, and to explore what it means to be human. Two examples of plays that unashamedly succeed in fulfilling these roles are *Oleanna* (written in 1992 by David Mamet) and *Doubt: A Parable* (written in 2005 by John Patrick Shanley). Both deal with controversial themes—sexual exploitation and pedophilia—and are focused on conveying the power struggles between opposing forces. In the former, it is between a well-meaning college professor and a manipulative political activist group; in the latter, it is between the head of a patriarchal religious system and a female principal with societal limitations.

The institutional forces present in these two plays are so strong that—in an attempt to vie for support in the intellectual battle—they are able to bend certain weaker-minded characters to their will with relative ease. One character in each work of drama gets caught up in the middle of the struggle between two incompatible ideologies, and is used as a tool by the author to indicate the severity of the conflict. It is Carol in *Oleanna* and Sister James in *Doubt*—who, throughout their character arcs, flip back and forth between the opposing ideas presented to them. In essence, both Carol and Sister James fall victim to the powerful compulsions of their respective institutions and, as evidenced by their intellectual inconsistencies throughout the two plays, are ultimately unable to think critically for themselves or seize any real authority of their own.

In 1992, playwright David Mamet puts to use a minimalistic style (in both cast size and scenic conceptualization) to pose the question, “ How dangerous is political correctness?” His play *Oleanna* depicts Carol, a struggling college student totally lacking in power over her education, who turns to manipulation and deceit in order to take vengeance upon perceived wrongs committed by her professor, John. She begins the play in John’s office discussing her inability to succeed in her class with John and, after finding their recurrent meetings fruitless, she joins a political activist group on campus. This group encourages her to accuse him of sexual harassment and threaten to charge him with rape if he does not meet her demands. In the furious final moments of the play, John loses his temper and assaults Carol.

A modern-day, progressive reading of *Oleanna* may lead the reader to sympathize with Carol and read John’s actions as atrocious; however, as it is likely the author’s intention to vilify Carol’s manipulation and portray John’s aggressive Act-III actions as justified, I will, for the purposes of this essay, contend with Mamet’s original intent. It stands to reason, then, that John is the sympathetic character and the one meant to be the play’s protagonist. Therefore, despite the fact that the group Carol mentions joining nor its members ever make a physical appearance in the play, I would argue that the activist group is the play’s true antagonist.

It is first introduced in Act I that Carol has trouble understanding concepts and it is hinted at that she perhaps isn’t so intelligent. When she and John are discussing his class lectures, she says, “ I’m doing what I’m told. It’s difficult for me. It’s difficult . . .” (Mamet 6). Then, a few pages later: “ 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" (12). It is crucial to note that it is her herself admitting these things, even despite John's statements to the contrary: " You're an incredibly bright girl . . . You're an incredibly . . . you have no problem with the . . . Who's kidding who?" (7). It is clear here that Carol has poor study habits and is doing poorly in class due to her inability to comprehend certain concepts.

It is also suggested several times that she lacks the skill to effectively articulate herself. When she asks for clarification on a certain topic discussed in class, she pulls out her notes in reference. John then says, " Tell me in your own . . ." but she insists, because she wants to " make sure that [she has] it right" (27). Later in the conversation as well, she begins to take notes on what he is saying. " You don't have to take notes, you know," John says, " you can just listen" (34). She again maintains that it's the only way she can remember the information. This dialogue is important, as it furthermore mirrors her behavior in the second half of the play as well. At the beginning of Act II, John is reading the report she submitted to the tenure committee:

Carol: Then you . . . [Points]

John: " Consult the report"?

Carol: . . . that's right.

John: You see. You see. Can't you . . . You see what I'm saying? Can't you tell me in your own words?

Carol: Those are my own words (49).

Even when Carol is asserting herself, making an attempted appeal for power, it is ironically still communicated through the voice of another—as there is little doubt that the entire report was conceived by her “group” as a means to further its agenda. Therefore, it stands to reason that after she joins the group, she merely becomes their puppet as opposed to John’s—leaving her still, even in her moment of apparent victory, powerless.

After viewing John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt: A Parable*, an audience member is meant to be unsure of who or what to believe. It tells the story of a priest in 1964 who may be molesting a Catholic school student and the principal who is convinced of his guilt—and intent on proving it. It is written in such a way that no definitive answer is supplied; therefore, it is likely the intention of the playwright that viewers leave the theatre intellectually divided—or, at the very least, compelled to discuss the events they just saw unfold.

As the title suggests, uncertainty is a key thematic element of this play. The character that best represents these ideas in human form is Sister James, one of the school’s teachers and Sister Aloysius’s subordinate. A dramatic foil to Father Flynn’s and the principal’s unwavering confidence and determination, Sister James is malleable, naïve, and credulous. Sister Aloysius even says it directly in the second scene: “You are a very innocent person, Sister James” (Shanley 8). Much like Mamet’s *Carol*, none of the statements she makes seem to come from her own mind; she always makes an assertion or sides with another character immediately following a particular piece of persuasive rhetoric.

A subtle example can be found in Scene 2, when Sister Aloysius warns her not to show so much interest in history because it might sway the students to value it above the other subjects. Sister James responds, “ I never thought of that. I’ll try to treat my other lessons with more enthusiasm” (10)—which establishes her automatically obsequious nature. Sister James is completely under her command throughout the play; this explains why she accepts the idea that Flynn might be behaving inappropriately with Donald Muller without much critical thought. As soon as Aloysius expresses her own reservations, James finds suspicions in the one-on-one talk Flynn had with Donald in the rectory—suspicions she didn’t have until this moment: “ I didn’t think there was anything wrong with it. It never came into my mind that he . . . that there could be anything wrong” (21).

When this behavior is compared to her dialogue with Father Flynn later in the play, it becomes clear that Sister James assumes a similar demeanor when presented with a strong argument from the other side as well. When she inquires if his sermon about gossip was directed at anyone in particular, he responds “ What do you think?” She immediately changes the subject, asking instead about whether or not he made up the parable of the feather pillow (38). He soon comes back around, however, asking if she is convinced of his guilt. The following occurs:

Sister James: It’s not for me to be convinced, one way or another. It’s Sister Aloysius.

Flynn: Are you just an extension of her?

Sister James: She’s my superior.

Flynn: But what about you?

Sister James: I wish I knew nothing whatever about it (39).

These two exchanges demonstrate that even when questioned directly and encouraged to think for herself, she would rather avoid the issue and instead allow others' opinions to influence her.

It happens later in that very scene. Father Flynn waxes poetic about love, humanity, and how the "light in your heart" is not a weakness—essentially manipulating what he knows are her values to make a pathos appeal. She then confides that he is right, that Sister Aloysius has taken away her "joy of teaching" and that the principal is not a positive inspiration (41). She leaves the stage, but not before exclaiming "I don't believe it!" (42). It is at this point that she is completely under Flynn's spell, and the audience realizes James is merely a pawn to be moved to and fro.

The Failure to Resist Persuasion:

The key stylistic difference between these two plays is the portrayal of innocence versus guilt. While *Oleanna* is clearly written as more of a one-sided debate than that of *Doubt* (i. e., the audience is meant to side with John unwaveringly while the guilt of Father Flynn is more ambiguous), both of these plays are effective in conveying a character's inability to resist the persuasive voices of opposing ideologies. The authority figures in *Oleanna* and *Doubt* are strong-willed and self-assured, which ultimately proves too much for Carol and Sister James; in the end, neither of these two characters are able to conceptualize and act upon an original thought. Each and every

actionable step they take as their stories progress is at the whim of another character—whether they be present in the play like John and Father Flynn or merely mentioned like Carol’s progressive political group. While the primary focus of the plays may be to preach of the dangers of extreme progressivism and to demonstrate the limitations a nun faces in the Catholic Church, Mamet and Shanley also include the consequences of blind obeisance and subtly advocate the merits of critical thinking—despite strong institutional compulsions.

Works Cited:

Shanley, John Patrick. *Doubt: A Parable*. Theatre Communications Group, 2004.

Mamet, David. *Oleanna*. Vintage Books, 1992.