

Miscommunication in oleanna



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In David Mamet's *Oleanna*, John, a university teacher, attempts to explain to his student Carol how he himself struggled with education as a child, in order to make her feel better about her own hardships and create an emotional connection with her. However, it is clear that no matter how John tries to explain concepts to Carol, he will never fully be able to connect with her due to the differences between them. This could also be seen as a criticism of the modern education system and of traditional teacher-student relationships, as Mamet shows the audience that they are not always effective. Ultimately, *Oleanna* appears to be a microcosmic representation of the problem of miscommunication, since the characters pointedly fail to connect throughout the play.

Although John persistently tries to empathize with Carol, the audience sees through the characterization of John that he may be too ignorant of her feelings to make a meaningful connection with her. John uses declaratives throughout one early scene, for example when he states 'well, I know what you're talking about,' conveying the fact that John is patronizing and that his attempt at building a connection with Carol is futile. In fact, it may be seen as a moment of hubris, because Carol, contrastingly, does not know what John is talking about, especially because of the complex lexis that John integrates into his dialogue, for example when he mentions 'verbiage'.

John reveals further arrogance with the repetition of 'you will become frightened' which can be seen as John trying to be controlling, telling Carol how to behave and perhaps even inciting fear in her. The use of the pronoun 'you' does signify that he is trying to look at the situation from her perspective, but his comments are alienating, like the hyperbole of 'you will

become the laughingstock of the world', deepening the divide between them and demonstrating the failure of the little connection they have. This can also be seen as hypocrisy from John because he is talking so negatively about the American Education system, the system that he himself has a connection to.

Furthermore, John does not consider political correctness, a major movement during the 1990s, during his conversation with Carol. Not only does he take long turns, showing his speaker dominance, which can be seen as rude, he tries to speak to Carol on a personal level when he says, ' I am speaking to you as I would speak to my son' which appears to be very intimate. John is inappropriate with his words, but in this extracts he holds the power over Carol (who uses political correctness), and this expresses Mamet's view that the political correctness was restricting and did not allow freedom of speech. The use of the prop when the phone rings shows John is negligent about Carol, again making John appear rude. During his phone call, he uses the term of address, ' student' to describe Carol and prosodic features here emphasize the boundary between Carol and John which juxtaposes Johns previous comment where he parallels Carol to his own son.

Carol cannot connect to John during this extract and it may be that she is overwhelmed by John's lengthy speeches. When Carol does interrupt John, stichomythia becomes prevalent in the form of interrogatives such as ' why?' and ' what?' which suggest that she is growing frustrated with John. Carol's minor sentences such as, ' no you don't', show how she is challenging John's authority, perhaps even challenging his masculinity because she is rejecting his opinions, but this merely severs their connection further because it

highlights their different opinions. A modern audience may see Oleanna as sexist because of its portrayal of Carol who Mamet depicts as manipulative in Act 1. Indeed, there is evidence of this in this extract when Carol asks John, ‘why would you want to be personal with me?’ revealing that she has misinterpreted John’s words, foreshadowing events later on in the play when Carol uses John’s hamartia to her own advantage, indicating further that they cannot connect because they do not understand each other. In Act 2, the audience here Carol’s views which seem to suggest that the cause of their failure to connect is caused by John’s elitism. One problem of communication displayed in this section is the power struggle between the two characters, highlighted by Carol who uses minor sentences such as ‘You. Do. Not. Have. The. Power’ to make it clear to John that she is not of a lower status or class than him and she too can patronize him. Prosodic features reveal Carol’s anger when she asks the rhetorical question, ‘did you misuse the power?’

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antithesis of John's inappropriate language; she addresses him as 'professor' throughout the section reminding him of his position and the environment that they are in. Structurally, this may also be seen as a rejection of John's previous attempts to connect to her because of Carol's upholding of the traditional teacher-student divide between them.

Carol continues to clarify that she and John have no connection throughout the section. Her accusations reflect the Reasonable Woman Standard, a law established in San Francisco in 1991, which gives bias to a woman who is deemed 'reasonable' in sexual harassment cases, as Carol is not only reasonable but also rather emotive in her dialogue. She speaks fluently (no stage directions indicate pauses in her speech) and uses the rule of three, 'to deviate, to invent, to transgress' to bring to light what John has done wrong. The polysyndetic listing reveals what Carol's real impressions of John are; that he is 'vile and classist, and manipulative and pornographic'. Even modern audiences, after hearing this bold, emotive language, flashback to John's behavior in Act 1 to remind themselves if John's actions were really as hideous as Carol claims. However, due to the postmodernist nature of Oleanna, from the very first production it has divided opinions as John's actions can be interpreted in a multitude of ways.

Peripeteia and gender roles are addressed in this section as the power has shifted from John to Carol, implying that the connection they have is changing. John flouts quantity; expressing his lack of control of the situation and the repetition of the pronoun 'I' suggests his selfishness. The many pauses show that he is at a loss for words, contrasting his earlier use of complex diction. It could be seen as John is now weaker, taking on the

stereotypical submissive role of a woman whereas Carol has gained 'masculine' like dominance, exemplified by her short, abrupt sentences such as 'good day' hinting the finality of her speech; a discourse marker to let John know the discussion is, in her eyes, over. This seems to show the turbulence of Carol and John's changing relationship; making it harder to connect when they have to adapt to the shift in power. Additionally, adjacency pairs, usually a sign of communication are used by Carol and John, when Carol asks 'is it?' and John replied 'yes I think it is'. This exchange appears to demonstrate to the audience the opposite of a connection: hostility.

Ultimately, the plot of Oleanna is driven by a fraught mis-connection between its central characters that leads to chaos and conflict. Mamet presents the problems that appear when two people are unable to properly interact. He also stresses the importance of having a connection to be able to communicate effectively and the relevance of connections in society, especially in the 1990's, when traditional roles between the student and the teacher (or a man and a woman) were becoming increasingly turbulent.