Oleanna

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID MAMET

Born in Chicago, David Mamet grew up in a largely Jewish neighborhood and attended a progressive independent school in the city's affluent Lincoln Park neighborhood before matriculating to a low-residency college in Vermont. After school, Mamet worked odd jobs while he chased his dream of becoming an actor—but when few roles materialized, Mamet decided to write and stage his own plays while teaching and directing in Chicago, Vermont, and New York. In the mid-1970s, Mamet began achieving success as a playwright, and he won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his famed play *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Mamet went on to form the prestigious Atlantic Theater Company in New York in 1985 alongside William H. Macy. In the 1980s, Mamet continued to achieve success as a playwright while moving into screenwriting and film directing, adapting his own plays *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna* for the screen and receiving acclaim and award nominations for his adapted screenplays of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *The Verdict*. A controversial but pivotal figure in American theater, Mamet is known for his cynical, clipped, and often even vicious dialogue, which critics have termed "Mamet-speak," and for his controversial perspectives on gender roles, political correctness, and world politics.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Oleanna's clearest historical parallels are the 1991 confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas, and the allegations of sexual harassment brought against him by Anita Hill—a law professor who had worked with Thomas at the US Department of Education as well as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. When George H.W. Bush nominated Thomas to the Supreme Court of the United States, the already-controversial nomination hearings were further complicated when Hill alleged that Thomas had sexually harassed her. Hill's testimony, which detailed sexually provocative statements Thomas had made to her during their work together, was cruelly and callously questioned, belittled, and ultimately dismissed, and Thomas was later confirmed (albeit by a narrow majority.) The media frenzy about sexual harassment and political correctness reverberated throughout American society—and as of today, women's allegations of sexual harassment or even abuse, such as those leveraged by professor Christine Blasey Ford against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh in 2018, are still regularly overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Oleanna is a controversial work of art which holds at its heart the assumption that people in general—regardless of gender—are power-hungry, covetous, and cruel. Plays which feature an examination of moral decay at the heart of society stretch back through time all the way to ancient Greece—Euripides's *Medea* and Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* feature characters, male and female, whose own personal ambition, casual cruelty, or desire for vengeance turns them into monsters. Mamet no doubt drew inspiration from classic Greek theater in developing the two complex, hateful forces at the center of the play. In contemporary theater as well, examinations of moral ambiguity, lust for power, and imbalances in gender equality are frequently featured on some of the biggest stages in the world: David Ives's 2010 play *Venus in Fur* owes a great deal to *Oleanna*, as the entirety of the play features an extended argument between a director and an actress over the political, societal, and sexual ramifications of a nineteenth-century novel about sadomasochism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Oleanna*
- **When Written:** Early 1990s
- **Where Written:** New York, NY
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** John's office at an unnamed university
- **Climax:** When Carol overhears John call his wife "baby" on the phone and tells him not to use such nicknames, John snaps and beats Carol up, stopping himself just before breaking a chair over her head.
- **Antagonist:** John and Carol are dual protagonists and antagonists.

EXTRA CREDIT

Origins. The title *Oleanna* refers to a satirical Norwegian folk song written in the mid-1800s. The lyrics to "Oleanna" satirize a dream of a beautiful, plentiful utopian settlement. The real life Oleanna was founded by Norwegian composer Ole Bull as part of the New Norway colony in Pennsylvania, and it famously failed, forcing the Norwegian immigrants who'd begun to make their homes there to move away. The folk song's indictment of unachievable, untenable ideas about how society ought to be mirrors Mamet's investigation into how American society, too, is in failure because of its desire to become a utopia.

PLOT SUMMARY

John, a university professor, takes a **phone** call in his office while his student Carol sits opposite him at his desk, waiting to have a meeting with him. John is on the phone with his wife Grace—they are in the process of closing on a house, and Grace, who is having some kind of problem with the real estate agent, urges John to come over to the property. John promises that he'll meet her there shortly before hanging up. John asks Carol why she's come to see him—clearly upset, she meekly admits that she's having trouble getting by in John's class, and can't understand what the class is about. John condescendingly tells Carol that she's a "bright girl" and will figure things out before taking another phone call—this time, from his lawyer Jerry, who also urges him to come to the new property. John assures Jerry he'll be there soon. After hanging up, John continues his conversation with Carol—they discuss his book, a core text of the class, and the ideals within it. John believes that "modern education" is a "curse," and little more than a "hazing" ritual. Carol confesses that she herself is doubting her choice to come to university in the first place—all her classes just make her feel "stupid." John tells Carol he empathizes her—when he was in school, he says, he too struggled to understand not just the concepts he was being taught, but their larger utility.

John's wife calls again, and he abruptly tells her he'll be there soon. Carol, who has intuited what John's conversations are about, asks him if he's buying a house to go with his "promotion"—John is up for tenure, and the promotion is all but a done deal. Carol expresses nervousness about what her grade in the class will be. John tells her that he'll make her a deal—if she comes to weekly tutorials in his office and really works to understand the material, he'll give her an A for the semester, regardless of her previous grades. Carol points out that the university has "rules," but John says he'll simply break them—he likes Carol, he says, and wants to help her

As the two begin discussing the course material—and the failures of modern higher education—Carol becomes upset, and gets angry with John's assertion that most higher education is irrelevant. When Carol appears on the verge of tears, John puts an arm around her shoulder to comfort her, but she shrugs him off violently. Carol says she has to tell John something—something she's "never told anyone"—but before she can divulge her secret, the phone rings again. Jerry picks up and begins talking to his wife and Jerry—who are now both at the new house—and is stunned when they confess that the reason they're trying to hurry him over there is because they've thrown him a surprise party to celebrate his promotion. As John hangs up and tells Carol that he has to leave, she remarks how nice it is that the people he loves are throwing him a party—but John remarks that "there are those who would say [a surprise is] a form of aggression."

In Act Two, John and Carol are back in his office—but it's clear that something has shifted between them. John is explaining to Carol that he's always tried to be a good teacher, in spite of his qualms about higher education. He says he realized, when he was first put up for tenure, that it was hypocritical of him to covet the promotion as badly as he did—but reasoned with himself that taking the job would allow him to continue his professional mission and also provide for his family. John explains that in bringing a "complaint" against him, Carol has delayed John's ascension to tenure—and ultimately is going to cause him to lose the house he and his wife are trying to buy.

Carol asks John coolly why he's asked her here. John says he wants to make things right with Carol, and settle things before the issue goes before the tenure committee. Carol says she thinks that John is manipulating her into retracting her statement. John reads from Carol's statement, which he has on his desk. It includes allegations of physical assault and implies that John tried to bribe Carol for sex by implying she'd get a good grade in his class if she came to his office weekly. John insists he was only ever trying to help Carol—and says that if she wants to "settle" things, he still can. Carol, though, is up in arms about John's abuses of his power, and his complicity in a system which hurts people like her. She refers to a "group" she's a part of, and implies that her actions against John are on their behalf.

Carol accuses John of mocking his students, acting hypocritically, and participating in the hazing rituals he claims to detest in pursuit of his own personal gain. John retorts that he's only human. Carol stands up to leave, insisting that she'd prefer to discuss her complaint in front of the tenure committee. As Carol walks towards the door, John follows her. He grabs her arm and attempts to restrain her from leaving as she shouts for help at the top of her lungs.

In Act Three, John and Carol are in John's office once again. John admits he has asked Carol back against his better judgement—and she implies she has come here against hers, as well as the advice of the "court officers." Carol is nervous about being there, but John begs her just to hear him out. John's phone rings, but he angrily answers it and insists he can't talk. John calmly tells Carol that he is being denied tenure and discharged from his job. Carol accuses John of trying, once again, to manipulate her into recanting by getting her to pity him. Carol says she cannot recant—to do so would be to overlook and thus endorse John's egregious behavior. She turns to her notes from class and reveals she has kept a record of times where John has spoken in ways she believes are inappropriate, calling female students "dear" and commenting on their "fetching" outfits. Carol says John's comments are tantamount to rape. She then proceeds to pull John's own book from her bag and lambast him for creating a text that deliberately tries to confuse students with bizarre language and lofty ideals.

Carol tells John that she now has power over him—and he

hates her for it. He agrees that he does. Carol again refers to her "group," and says they're all angry about John's casual mockery of education, when many of them are dependent on education to pursue the same kind of security John himself is afforded by his university job. John promises Carol that he can learn to change, but Carol calls him a "little yapping fool" and turns to leave. Before she exits the room, however, she tells John that there is something he could do to perhaps get her to recant. She pulls from her bag a list of books her group wants banned from the university. John surveys the list and sees that his own book is on it. He tells Carol to get out of his office, incensed by her blatant attempt at what he believes is censorship.

John's phone rings, and he answers it—the conversation deflates John. When he hangs up, Carol says she thought he already knew that she was pressing charges of criminal battery and attempted rape because of his earlier attempt to restrain her from leaving the office—her group, she says, has encouraged her to do so. John sinks into his chair and tells Carol to get out. She gathers her things and heads for the door.

John's phone rings once again—it is his wife. She is clearly upset, and he tells her that everything is going to be okay, referring to her affectionately as "baby." Carol, at the door, turns around and tells John not to call his wife baby. John flies at Carol and begins savagely beating her. He reaches for a chair and raises it above his head, preparing to bring it down on Carol. At the last minute, he regains his cool and drops it, then returns to his desk and begins shuffling some papers around. "Yes," Carol says, "that's right."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John – John, a professor at an unnamed American university, is one of the two dual protagonists and antagonists in *Oleanna*. Pompous, self-absorbed, cavalier, and contrarian to a fault, John is an already-powerful man on the verge of amassing even more power: he is up for tenure, and only a few pieces of paperwork stand between him and the security he's been searching for all his life. As John meets with his student Carol to discuss the struggles she's having in his class, he talks at length—and without a filter—about the deep flaws in higher education, and the arbitrary, idiotic nature of the entire concept of academia. John claims to have struggled intensely throughout his own schooling, resulting in a contempt for the trappings of higher education, but also a desire to remake and reform the very institutions that once made him feel inadequate. John seems well-intentioned if a bit self-obsessed and out of touch throughout his conversation with Carol, and it is only in the second act, once she files a harassment claim against him (citing his putting a hand on her shoulder to comfort her and his offer to give Carol an A for the semester should she attend private tutorials with John for the rest of the term), that his actions are seen in a new light. John may have had the best intentions in the world as far as helping Carol, but in a changing social environment, John's old-school masculinity, pretentious pontificating, and casual dismissal of the very institutions which stand to give individuals like Carol a sense of community and purpose draw her ire and propel her towards revenge and retribution. Ultimately, John turns into an even more violent version of the person Carol has believed him to be all along. He threatens her physically at the end of the second act, and beats her violently at the end of the third, confirming his contempt for and anger towards the consequences of his behavior, which was once but is no longer part of the status quo.

Carol – At first glance, Carol is a meek, insecure girl struggling under the weight of what's expected of her—by her parents, her peers, and society—as she navigates college life. When Carol first comes to John's office, she tells him that she's having trouble keeping up in his class—and also, she implies, with even seeing the purpose of higher education. John sees himself in Carol, empathizing with her struggles and her growing disappointment with the rote rituals of institution, and Carol, though standoffish, seems open to John's help. In the second act, the tables have turned—Carol, with the support of a radical on-campus "group," has filed a sexual harassment claim against John, threatening his chance at tenure and his very position at the university. Carol wants to teach John a lesson—and the meek, lost front she presented in the first act may have been a manipulative façade designed to provoke John into behavior that crossed a professional boundary. Carol is self-admittedly angry at the power structures all around her, at the men who uphold them, and at the systems which prioritize granting even more privilege and power to men like John while neglecting students who are in actual in need of institutional support. Whether Carol has harbored these feelings all along and is engaged in a conspiracy to bring down the old guard at the university, or whether her conversation with John about the "hazing" rituals of academia itself was what radicalized her, it's clear that Carol wants to burn the system to the ground. In many ways the play's most controversial character, Mamet paints Carol as something of a feminist nightmare—a choice that has drawn the ire of critics and scholars but has kept audiences and readers intrigued and scandalized since *Oleanna*'s premiere in the early 1990s.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Grace – John's wife.

Jerry – John's lawyer.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE DESIRE FOR POWER

David Mamet's *Oleanna* is a two-person play which unfolds over three acts. As the play progresses, the power dynamics between the about-to-be-tenured university professor John and his meek, struggling student Carol slowly reverse themselves. Both characters want more power than they have, and will do terrible things to get it—and through the subversions of power that his two characters enact upon one another, Mamet uses them as analogues for the argument that the desire for sociopolitical, sexual, and economic power motivates the very worst of human behavior.

Over the course of the play's three acts, John and Carol's mutual desire for power—over the other person, over their own circumstances, and over the university community they're both a part of—becomes painfully clear. In the first act of the play, Carol has come to John's office to seek help in regard to his class. The subject or nature of the class is never revealed—but it becomes clear, as John and Carol discuss the source material (John's own book, an indictment of the state of contemporary higher education in America), that her inability to wrap her head around the issues John discusses each week makes her feel powerless. John is on and off the **phone** with his wife Grace and his lawyer Jerry discussing the impending purchase of a grand new home for himself and his family—he discusses his candidacy for tenure, which is all but a done deal, and pontificates with swagger about education, privilege, and pedagogy. John has all the power, while Carol grows increasingly agitated about her smallness and powerlessness within a system that privileges those who have a head-start in life. John attempts to comfort Carol by putting a hand on her shoulder and even offering her the chance to start the class over in private weekly sessions in his office, but Carol rejects these gestures, instead collapsing into tears as she talks about how "bad" she is.

In Act Two, as the lights come up and John begins speaking, it becomes immediately clear that a power shift has taken place. He is on the defensive now, trying to explain himself, his teaching methods, and attempting to justify why he wants tenure so badly—even in the face of his disdain for the modern university system. It soon becomes evident that Carol has filed a harassment claim against John, citing his deployment of a lewd anecdote, his attempt to touch her, and his offer to give her an A should she come visit him in his office for private sessions. As John attempts to ask Carol to retract her claim, he treads lightly and carefully—she is angry, and as a student leveraging a harassment claim against her teacher, she is ironically the one with all the power. John knows this, and is terrified of it. When Carol attempts to leave the office, he physically restrains her, desperately trying to salvage an ounce of power—but he doesn't realize that in seeking to regain power over Carol, he is giving her allegations real weight.

By Act Three, the scales have tipped completely. John has lost his chance at tenure and his new house, and he is preparing for the idea that his job, too, will soon be taken away from him. Carol, on the other hand, exudes a newfound grace and power as she berates John for his callous denouncement of higher education and his casual flaunting of his societal and economic privilege. She knows that she has John beat—and, conscious of the fact that she has the upper hand, tries to use her power, however ill-begotten it is, to satiate her own desires. She presents John with a list of books her "group" wants banned from campus, and among them is John's own text. John refuses Carol's demands, deciding that his morals are more important than regaining a weakened version of his former power. However, when Carol makes a passing comment that sends John off the deep end, he savagely beats her—and it seems as if the power is back in John's hands as he holds a chair over the cowering Carol's head. As John calms himself and sets the chair down, though, he realizes that he has been playing right into Carol's hands. "Yes. That's right," Carol says as John slinks away from her—confirming that she has total power over him, and is able to both predict his actions and goad him on as a means towards her own desired end: the destruction of John's power.

John and Carol are both power-hungry people with little regard for the feelings or needs of others. John talks blithely about what a joke and a scam education is, ignoring the meek, put-upon student in front of him even when she expresses how offended she is by his comments, given how hard she's worked just to gain admission to the university. Carol, angered by John's boastful displays of power and wealth, decides to turn the tables on him—and casts his banal, thoughtless anecdotes and infantilizing offers of help and guidance in a predatory light as she brings her allegations of harassment before the tenure committee. Both characters want power, and will do whatever it takes to regain the power they feel the other has stolen from them. As Mamet pits John and Carol against one another, he uses their power-grabs to suggest that power—and the desire for it—corrupts people and motivates them to carry out terrible acts of physical and emotional violence in pursuit of influence and authority.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Written largely in response to the 1991 confirmation hearings of Supreme Court justice

nominee Clarence Thomas—and the allegations of sexual harassment leveraged against him by his former coworker Anita Hill during said hearings—*Oleanna* takes a cynical view of contemporary gender relations. When John's student Carol brings harassment allegations against him just as he is about to be reviewed for tenure at the university, his life comes crumbling down—and Carol, backed by a "group" implied to be a feminist organization determined to root old-guard masculinity out of the university, seems all too happy to watch him fall from grace. David Mamet, whose conservative views and disdain for political correctness are intrinsic to his work's point of view, argues through *Oleanna* that the rise of political correctness in American society has emboldened feminists to take vindictive action against powerful men for no reason other than to delight in their suffering. This argument, though controversial and decisively flawed, is at the heart of the twisted power dynamics between John and his student Carol.

Oleanna transfigures a real-life political fracas into a more personal tale, but retains the same bitterness towards women who, in Mamet's view, vindictively try to interfere with men's ascension to greater personal or political power and influence. Mamet certainly takes an unforgiving stance as he uses John, Carol, and John's tenure review as an allegory for Thomas, Hill, and Thomas's Supreme Court hearings. He suggests that Carol—with the support of her "group," implied to be a radical feminist cadre—either becomes determined to prevent John from ascending to further power after she is offended by his braggish nature and slights against the modern university system, or, more insidiously, went to his office portraying herself as meek and confused in order to gather ammunition to use against him at the behest of her "group." Either way, Mamet suggests that Carol has designs on John's tenure—and his reputation more generally—as a form of retribution against the status quo and old-guard policies that elevate and favor even mediocre men. He frames Carol as vindictive and petty at best—and, at worst, part of a larger feminist conspiracy.

In the first half of the play, John is a slightly self-obsessed and pompous if benign presence. Once he begins to get agitated by Carol's attempts to prevent him from getting tenure—which she ultimately reveals are transparently retaliatory, meant to put him in his place as a reaction to his "self-aggrandizing" teaching methods and "sexist and pornographic" views—John becomes more sinister, and in turn seeks retribution against Carol. He physically restrains her when she tries to leave his office without promising that she'll retract her statement, thus fulfilling the claims Carol made against him: that he is self-obsessed, power-hungry, and sexist.

Towards the end of the play, as John begins to act as weary, beaten, and meek as Carol herself did at the start, Carol only becomes more powerful and self-assertive. While in the first act she claimed not to understand the definitions of several relatively simple terms, in the final act her speech becomes nuanced and even weaponized. She attempts to control how John himself speaks, and her casual, biting insinuation that he shouldn't call his wife Grace "baby" is ultimately what sends him off the deep end. He beats her savagely, completing his transformation into the abusive, dangerous, unhinged man Carol wanted to portray him as all along.

Mamet ultimately implies that Carol's trajectory in the play has been to infiltrate John's life, weaponize his own words against him, and deprive him of the power and job security he has rightfully earned. Even if John's views on education are mildly offensive and provocative for the sake of being provocative, and even if he's a bit of a drag as a person, at the start of the play he isn't violent or dangerous. It is only through the pressures of Carol's systematic attack on his character that John becomes the very thing Carol wanted to paint him as.

Mamet portrays Carol as an angry, jealous, vindictive woman who decides to stop John from achieving more power because she disagrees with him and what he stands for. He asserts that her leveraging of sexual harassment claims against him are baseless and false, built off of an exaggerated reaction to John's comforting gesture of putting a hand on Carol's shoulder in a moment of distress. Mamet wants to demonstrate, through Carol, his belief that "angry" feminists have the power to dismantle the lives of relatively innocent men—and seek to wield that power, emboldened by society's tilt towards political correctness and sympathy for anyone who claims to be a victim.

EDUCATION AND ELITISM

John and Carol originally meet to discuss the difficulties Carol is having keeping up in John's class, and with university life more generally. Over the course of their initial conversation in the first act, John and Carol both express the disillusionment they feel with the state of higher education in America. In the process, they become ciphers for Mamet's argument that education has, in many ways, become an elaborate "hazing" ritual meant only to confer elite privileges on those willing to jump through a seemingly never-ending series of metaphorical hoops.

The fact that *Oleanna*—in many ways a bloodbath of power-grabs, conspiracies, and shocking acts of violence—is set in a university allows Mamet to explore the elitism, corruption, and moral bankruptcy that he feels lies at the heart of higher education in modern America. John, a professor, is on the verge of getting tenured at his university. Once the committee meets and confirms that John is qualified (which he already knows he is), he will have job security for life, and largely uncontested power at the university. Even though John wants tenure—and the financial security that comes with it, which will allow him to purchase a new home for his family and send his children to private school—he lambasts higher education openly in front of his frustrated, struggling student Carol. He says that he himself struggled as a student because tests, essays, and all the other

benchmarks of success within education are designed "for idiots [...] by idiots." John insists that traditional education is flawed—he even goes so far as to imply that it is a failure entirely—and regards himself as a maverick who feels a "responsibility to the young."

John's comments are offensive to Carol—though she's struggling to keep up in her classes and indeed has a hard time seeing the larger point of putting herself through such turmoil every day, she becomes upset when John admits that he feels education has become arbitrary and relatively pointless. Carol states that she—and many other students like her—have worked hard to gain admission to this university and others, fighting against social prejudices and economic disadvantages alike in hopes of bettering themselves and securing a good future. John's assertion that education is pointless, Carol suggests, has the potential to create chaos and animosity rather than enlightenment—but John actually doubles down on his disdain for academic structures and policies.

When John offers Carol the chance to secure an A for the term—regardless of the bad grades she's earned so far, at the halfway point of the semester—by attending weekly private tutorials with him in his office, he tells her that the two of them can break the rules with impunity and shirk the traditional structure of a university course. Carol is hesitant at first, and seems nearly scandalized by John's flouting of protocol. When Carol asks John why he'd risk so much to help her, he insists it's because he likes her and wants to help her—but Mamet seems to be suggesting that John's desire to break the rules comes from his own need to prove to both himself and Carol that the university's systems are outdated and irrelevant.

Even though John wants to portray himself as a contrarian who shirks the arbitrary rigors of university life, his excitement about his own candidacy for tenure—and the abject fear he feels when the security that tenure would provide is taken away after Carol accuses him of harassment—forces him to reexamine his own true beliefs. John has to admit that even though he looks down on and talks badly about the arbitrary nature of the university, he has participated in the institutional mechanisms that have afforded him power and support. He rails against the state of the university, but is completely at the mercy of the university's maintenance of the status quo; if the institution crumbled or his tenure was revoked, he would be in trouble. When Carol's accusations ultimately prevent John from securing tenure—and threaten to remove him from his position as a professor entirely—he realizes that even if the university is a glorified "hazing" ritual, he is dependent upon the continuation of such customs.

It's worth noting that Mamet himself attended a progressive, nontraditional secondary school and matriculated to a low-residency college program before ultimately working as a professor at the college from which he graduated. John's views on education are, perhaps, similar to Mamet's—given his nontraditional background in education and his controversial politics, it's fair to extrapolate from *Oleanna*'s overall contempt for higher education that Mamet, too, sees the institution of the American university as a failure. Ultimately, as John's career is sacrificed to protocol and red tape, Mamet suggests that even if the university is a corrupt institution with no modern utility or relevance, it will continue on in its present form—for better or for worse.

HYPOCRISY AND MANIPULATION

Hypocrisy, manipulation, and deliberate misinformation are at the heart of *Oleanna*, in which two characters work to hide parts of themselves from one another even as the twisted intimacy between them deepens. As John and Carol deceive, destabilize, and extort one another, Mamet argues that there can often be an element of manipulation in even the best-intended actions—and that hypocrisy and duplicity often define human relationships.

Both John and Carol are guilty of hypocrisy and manipulation from the very start of the play—and as the action continues to unfold, their crimes against one another, rooted in their sins of duplicity, escalate to a terrifying crescendo. At the start of the play, John is pedantic, self-obsessed, and blind to his own privilege—but he's not necessarily a bad guy, and certainly doesn't seem to harbor any ill intent towards Carol (or, for that matter, any desire to have sex with her, as she will later claim he tried to do.) At the same time, underneath all of John's seemingly good intentions and his desire to genuinely help Carol, he is a hypocrite. John rails against the state of higher education, and yet is a hapless cog in the very machine he claims to loathe. He is up for tenure, and obviously desperate for the promotion to be made official. Though he sees the university as a series of meaningless hoops to jump through, and questions the very value of standardized education in America, he wants to be a part of the institution for selfish reasons—for money, for pride, and, it's implied, so that his son will have a legacy to slide into and a leg-up into academia when he grows older.

Later in the play, John reveals himself to be not only a transparent hypocrite but also a transparent manipulator. After Carol leverages allegations of assault against him and threatens his chances at tenure, he calls her to his office to talk with her, to apologize to her, and to lay the groundwork for asking her to recant her statement. Carol catches onto what John is up to, and calls him out on it. John is both a hypocrite and a manipulator—and though he's a failure at both, they clearly define a large part of the way he moves through the world. John's initial intentions in his relationship with Carol may have been good, but when cornered, John falls back on his worst human impulses and allows hypocrisy and manipulation to seep into his actions and his decision-making.

There are two ways to read the character of Carol, and to account for her actions over the course of the play. At the start, Carol seems to be a meek and confused student struggling to keep up with her coursework. She comes to John out of desperation to ask for his help—she is desperate to do whatever she can to improve her grade, and clearly overwhelmed not just by the contents of John's class but by academic discourse itself. She doesn't understand words like "paradigm," and admits to feeling conflicted about why she's even pursuing an education in the first place when it only makes her feel incompetent and useless.

As the play continues to unfold, however, Carol changes drastically—in Act Two, she is decidedly more confident, and by Act Three, she is leveraging the kinds of words and syntax John used in the first act against him, railing about the imbalances of power within the university and hinting at her involvement with a "group," who has been urging her to stand strong behind her complaints against John. Mamet seems to be implying, through Carol's rapid transformation, that the front she presented not just to John but to the audience in the first act was a mask and a facade. Carol was never the meek, unassuming, dull student she claimed to be, and never felt the depths of frustration and inadequacy she expressed to John: she manipulated him through her words and actions with the intent of bringing him down and destroying his career.

Carol's actions could also be taken at face-value, and her escalating anger can be read as a consequence of her deepening involvement with her "group." In this reading of the play, Carol is not a manipulator from the start, but she is still a hypocrite. She claims to be an outsider who can't keep up with the academic discourse surrounding her at all times, and who hates her peers for smiling and nodding through classes that they must be struggling with, too, but when drawn into her "group," she adopts the pedantic language of academic and political correctness and chooses to side with the very people she claimed to feel distant from rather than with the man who wanted to help her feel a sense of connection.

Oleanna has endured as a staple of contemporary American theater since its premiere in the early nineties in spite of its controversial messages in part because of the characters at the heart of it. John and Carol are two enigmas: two products of modern-day disillusionment, social politics, and changing standards for how people—especially men and women—can and ought to relate to one another. As political correctness and social accountability rise, old institutions and protocols threaten to fall by the wayside. John and Carol are caught at the intersection of this struggle, and turn to their basest and cruelest survival mechanisms as a result.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

JOHN'S PHONE

When the play begins, John is on the phone, seemingly working out a contentious situation with his wife—they are closing on a house, and though the other side of the conversation can't be heard, John's wife seems to be implying that there's a problem with the deal. John finally extricates himself from the call and begins his meeting with his student, Carol, who has come to his office to ask for help with John's class. Throughout their meeting in the first act—and the more charged, increasingly violent meetings they have in act two and act three—John's phone rings intermittently and often, and his reactions to the interruptions from his wife Grace and his lawyer Jerry go from agitated excitement to abject despair as it becomes clear that John is going to lose his house, his job, and perhaps even his marriage.

John's phone, then, comes to symbolize the parts of his life outside the university—his personal and professional relationships, his hopes and dreams, his marriage and his child. As Carol enacts her campaign of retribution against John, she does so with only marginal information about who he really is outside of the university. When Carol submits a harassment claim which threatens to derail not only John's chance at tenure, but his entire life, he begs her for mercy and tries to get her to withdraw her statement by appealing to her pity for his wife and child, and how her actions will affect them—but Carol will not be deterred. Who John is when he's at work, her actions assert, is indeed who he is in real life. The university is not a separate enclave where John's words and actions are detached from their real-world implications—in fact, Carol suggests, the opposite is true. Carol's campaign to bring John to heel for his pompous, contrarian, and casually sexist behavior within the university would be an all-out onslaught were it not from the periodic interruptions from the "real world" through the telephone—interruptions that remind John of all he stands to lose, and reinvigorate Carol's desire to show John that how he operates within the walls of the university have consequences beyond them.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Oleanna* published in 1993.

Act 1 Quotes

JOHN: What is a "term of art"? It seems to mean a *term*, which has come, through its use, to mean something *more specific* than the words would, to someone *not acquainted* with them … indicate. That, I believe, is what a "term of art," would mean. *(Pause)*

CAROL: You don't know what it means…?

JOHN: I'm not sure that I know what it means. It's one of those things, perhaps you've had them, that, you look them up, or have someone explain them to you, and you say "aha," and you immediately *forget* what…

CARO: You don't do that.

Related Characters: Carol, John (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

When Carol asks John, her professor, what the phrase "term of art"—a phrase she's just overheard him use on a phone call—means, he struggles to answer her, providing a vague and rambling response. When Carol calls him out on his ignorance, he tries to defend himself—but Carol sees through his act, and continues to assert that he's wrong. This exchange, which occurs very early on in the play, hints at the underlying resentment Carol has towards John—and the desperate power plays between the two, often related to language and academia, which will come to define the play itself. John's elitism and hypocrisy combined with Carol's feigned naivete and blatant manipulations make them both complicated, rather unlikable characters whose animosity towards one another will spiral out of control and leave them both wounded.

CAROL: I did what you told me. I did, I did everything that, I read your *book*, you told me to buy your book and read it. Everything you *say* I … *(She gestures to her notebook.) (The phone rings.)* I do…. Ev…

JOHN:… look:

CAROL: …everything I'm told…

JOHN: Look. Look. I'm not your father. *(Pause.)*

CAROL: What?

JOHN: I'm.

CAROL: Did I say you were my father?

Related Characters: John, Carol (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

Carol complains that in spite of doing "everything" John has told her to do to pass his course—presumably in shorter asides after class—she's still unable to understand the material or keep up with her seemingly carefree classmates. John, frustrated with her whining, retorts that he's not Carol's father. The piercing rejoinder—patriarchal, condescending, clipped, and cruel—throws Carol off-guard, and represents one of the first major communicative issues the pair has throughout the play. John acts callously towards Carol when she's in a moment of need—and seemingly realizes what he's said as soon as he's said it. John purports to want to help Carol not just pass his class but really understand it, but in this moment of frustration he lashes out and speaks to her in a way that's unprofessional and borderline inappropriate. This is just one of the many pieces of ammunition Carol will gather against John as the first act unfolds—and it's an interaction that will come back to bite him in the second and third acts.

JOHN: I'll tell you a story about myself. *(Pause)* Do you mind? *(Pause)* I was raised to think myself stupid. That's what I want to tell you. *(Pause.)*

CAROL: What do you mean?

JOHN: Just what I said. I was brought up, and my earliest, and most persistent memories are of being told that I was stupid. "You have such *intelligence*. Why must you behave so *stupidly?*" Or, "Can't you *understand?* Can't you *understand?*" And I could *not* understand. I could *not* understand.

Related Characters: Carol, John (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

John tries to get through to Carol—to level with her and express empathy—by telling her about his own early struggles with education in childhood. He says he knows

how she's feeling as she flounders in her university classes—he, too was made to feel stupid and inadequate by those who should have been teaching and helping him rather than tearing him down. This passage represents one of many instances in the first act in which John attempts to get closer to Carol and help her feel better by revealing something personal. Carol, however, reads these attempts inappropriate and crossing a line—or at least, she will pretend to once she decides to bring a harassment claim against John in the second act. Carol, it seems, is deliberately baiting John into trying to reveal more about himself—the only way the self-absorbed man seems to know how to relate to other people—in order to draw out moments which could later be read, when taken out of context, as predatory.

JOHN: If I fail all the time, it must be that I think of myself as a failure. If I do not want to think of myself as a failure, perhaps I should begin by *succeeding* now and again. Look. The tests you see, which you encounter, in school, in college, in life, were designed, in the most part, for idiots. *By* idiots. There is no need to fail at them. They are not a test of your worth. They are a test of your ability to retain and spout back misinformation. Of *course* you fail them. They're *nonsense*.

Related Characters: John (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

John is an iconoclastic figure at his university—he sees higher education as little more than a "hazing" ritual, and he has nothing but contempt for the ways in which people see modern higher education as a requirement rather than a privilege. As he attempts to comfort Carol, who is struggling to prove herself academically, he does so by trying to make her feel better about being unsuited to traditional testing methods. This passage reveals John's utter lack of regard for traditional structures—and yet as a professor, he is complicit in maintaining these rituals, issuing tests and essays to his students even as he rails against their lack of utility in measuring "worth" or intelligence. John's hypocrisy when it comes to the university is one of Carol's major complaints against him. She feels he shouldn't be able to lambast higher education the way he does—and still benefit from institutional support and power, and even be granted tenure by the very system he claims he wants to tear apart.

Because of hypocritical moments like this one, Carol believes that John loves himself more than his ideals—and Carol wants to prove this to him, no matter what it takes.

CAROL: There are rules.

JOHN: Well. We'll break them.

CAROL: How can we?

JOHN: We won't tell anybody.

CAROL: Is that all right?

JOHN: I say that's fine.

CAROL: Why would you do this for me?

JOHN: I like you.

Related Characters: John, Carol (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

When John offers Carol the chance to start his class over by attending weekly tutorials in his office—tutorials which will, it seems, consist of an unstructured, at times chaotic, and even problematic dialogue like the one they've been having for the duration of the first act—she seems skeptical of his offer. She has been failing his class, and though she's desperate for a way to turn her grade around, she's suspicious of John's motives in allowing her exactly what she wants. John insists he "like[s]" Carol and simply wants to help her learn—but his motives are perhaps not truly so pure. At worst, Carol believes, he is attempting to prey upon her sexually; at best, she thinks, he's using her as a kind of guinea pig to test his iconoclastic teaching methods and achieve professional glory or personal satisfaction through tutoring her. John is already a narcissist and hypocrite in Carol's view—and this exchange only deepens her belief that his motives in helping her are suspect.

CAROL: I was saying … I was saying … *(She checks her notes.)* How can you say in a class. Say in a college class, that college education is prejudice?

[…]

JOHN: … that's my *job*, don't you know.

CAROL: What is?

JOHN: To provoke you.

Related Characters: John, Carol (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

When John makes a controversial statement about college, stating that it's "prejudice"—in other words, an "unreasoned," unfounded, and unquestioned belief held by a large group of people—Carol becomes upset and nearly irate. She is offended by John's dismissal of an experience that she and many of her peers have worked hard to earn the chance at having—but John insists it's his "job" to "provoke" students like Carol into considering controversial points of view. This moment demonstrates John's desire for power over his students' thoughts and experiences, his lack of regard for political correctness, his disrespect for the very institution which provides his livelihood, and his tendency toward both hypocrisy and manipulation. He wants to manipulate his students' points of view, even if it's hypocritical of him to criticize a system which defends him, confers power upon him, and is full of lots of other men just like him—men who believe "provok[ing]" others is more important than preparing them to successfully complete school and enter the real world.

CAROL: But how do they feel? Being told they are wasting their time?

JOHN: I don't think I'm telling them that.

CAROL: You said that education was "prolonged and systematic hazing."

JOHN: Yes. It can be so.

CAROL: …if education is so *bad*, why do you do it?

JOHN: I do it because I love it.

Related Characters: John, Carol (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Carol points out that John's cavalier rejection of modern education as little more than a "hazing" ritual is not a helpful, illuminating "provocation" for his students to consider. Rather, it is a cruel, thoughtless indictment of their choices, and their belief in the power of education to make them better people. John reveals what a hypocrite he is in this passage, as he claims to "love" education even though he wants to go beyond criticizing it and condemn it entirely. John is able to talk the way he talks because of the privilege and power he has due to his age, his gender, and his position in the university—he has nothing to lose in poking fun at education and making a joke of it. Meanwhile, his students have everything to lose in seriously considering his reckless and fairly baseless assertions about the path they've chosen in life. This moment illuminates John's manipulative role in his students' lives and furthers Carol's resentment of John.

Act 2 Quotes

JOHN: You see, *(pause)* I love to teach. And flatter myself I am *skilled* at it. And I love the, the aspect of *performance*. I think I must confess that. When I found I loved to teach I swore that I would not become that cold, rigid automaton of an instructor which I had encountered as a child. Now, I was not unconscious that it was given me to err upon the other side. And, so, I asked and *ask* myself if I engaged in heterodoxy, I will not say "gratuitously" for I do not care to posit orthodoxy as a given good—but, "to the detriment of, of my students."

Related Characters: John (speaker), Carol

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 41-43

Explanation and Analysis

As act two opens, it becomes clear from the opening monologue delivered by John—this speech—that the power dynamics between him and Carol have shifted. His tone is subdued and explanatory—he is trying to explain himself to her in an earnest tone rather than speaking wildly and chaotically about whatever tangential topic his whims suggest. At the same time, his speech here—even when he's trying to really level with Carol—is designed to alienate her and confuse her. It's almost as if John has truly lost sight of how to get through his students, and is only able to speak in the self-aggrandizing, self-absorbed way he's gotten comfortable with throughout his years of power and privilege as a professor. John's assertion that what he loves about teaching is the "performance" of it shows his two-faced nature and his hypocritical tendencies—he admits openly that teaching allows him to "perform" a different version of himself, and to take risks in his thoughts, speech, and "provocations" that he otherwise would not. Teaching, in other words, is a playground for John—when for his students, learning is often a very serious endeavor.

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." That I... That I insist on wasting time, in nonprescribed, in self-aggrandizing and theatrical *diversions* from the prescribed *text* ... that these have taken both sexist and pornographic forms ... here we find listed [...] instances "...closeted with a student" ... "Told a rambling, sexually explicit story [...] moved to *embrace* said student and ... all part of a pattern ..."

Related Characters: John (speaker), Carol

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

As John reads aloud from the harassment complaint Carol has filed against him with the tenure committee, he sees himself through her eyes for the first time—and is completely unwilling to believe that there is even a grain of truth in any of her allegations. However, as audiences hear John recite Carol's list of grievances, it's easy to recognize the incidents, sentences, and speeches which her allegations point to. There was no real sexual charge to the interactions between John and Carol in the first act, and though his benign rambling about the state of higher education read more as zany and provocative than truly damaging. However, when taken out of context, his words and actions from the first act do read as highly inappropriate and "part of a pattern" of intimidation, seduction, and manipulation. This sudden change in perspective reveals the problematic nature of John's behavior—as well as the crucial importance of context when it comes to interpreting it.

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. Are you part of that group? *Yes. Yes.* You Are. You've *done* these things.

Related Characters: Carol (speaker), John

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

When John tries to tell Carol that the things in her report are mere allegations—not facts—Carol tries to explain to John that he is not the one who gets to decide how he makes other people feel. She refuses to allow him to condescend to her anymore—she has taken decisive action to take away his "power" to do so. She is the one with the upper hand now, and she wants to use her newfound position to tell John the things she was no doubt thinking privately throughout the entire first act. She accuses John of misusing his power, acting manipulatively, and selfishly benefiting from a system which privileges people like him rather than the individuals it should actually be protecting—its students. This moment flips control of the situation from John to Carol, showing how easily the manipulative, domineering atmosphere John created can turn against him.

CAROL: How can you *deny* it. You did it to me. *Here*. You *did*... You *confess*. You love the Power. To *deviate*. To *invent*, to transgress [...] whatever norms have been established for us. [...] And you pick those things which you feel *advance* you: publication, *tenure*, and the steps to get them you call "harmless rituals." And you perform those steps. Although you say it is hypocrisy. [...] You call education "hazing," and from your so-protected, so-elitist seat you hold our confusion as *a joke*, and our hopes and efforts with it. Then you sit there and say "what have I done?"

Related Characters: Carol (speaker), John

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

As John tries to deny many of the allegations Carol has made against him, she points out how ludicrous it is for John to sit before her and try to deny them. John doesn't want to admit to his misogyny, his elitism, his manipulation, and his hypocrisy—even when his actions and comments from the first act, when taken out of context, paint a picture of him as a condescending, sexist, and needlessly provocative figure who openly relishes the power he's been given by the very systems he rails against. That is, John literally confessed to many of the charges before Carol even made them, but now he fails to see any connection to his own behavior. Carol doesn't want for John—and other men like him—to be able to get away with such egregious behavior anymore. Her actions—themselves hypocritical and manipulative—have all been in the name of bringing John to heel and forcing him to consider the effect of his words and his actions. When he refuses to do so even with confronted with the cold, hard

truth, Carol becomes incensed by John's inability to reckon with the truth of who he is.

Act 3 Quotes

JOHN: They're going to discharge me.

CAROL: As full well they should. You don't understand? You're angry? What has *led* you to this place? Not your sex. Not your race. Not your class. YOUR OWN ACTIONS. And you're *angry*. You *ask* me here. What *do* you want? You want to "charm" me. You want to "convince" me. You want me to recant. I will *not* recant.

Related Characters: Carol, John (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

In act three, John summons Carol to his office to talk with her once more—and despite their disastrous conversation in the second act, she agrees. It soon becomes clear that John wants to double down on his attempt to manipulate Carol into recanting her statements to the tenure committee—not only has he lost his chance at tenure and forfeited the house he hoped to buy, but he is, he says, soon going to be discharged from the university entirely. Carol, though, feels no sympathy or pity for John—she wants him to see that he is not a victim, and that he has no one to blame for his predicament but himself. Carol is staunch in her agenda and hews closely to her plan—she is not going to relent, and she is determined to make John see just how futile his various attempts to get her to do so really are. Whereas the first act showed how John manipulated Carol and her classmates as a way of advancing his own power, Carol does something similar here; she manipulates the facts of John's behavior in order to strip his power away.

CAROL: Even if I were inclined, to what, forgive? Forget? What? Overlook your…

JOHN: …my behavior?

CAROL: …it would be wrong.

JOHN: Even if you were inclined to "forgive" me.

CAROL: It would be wrong.

JOHN: And what would transpire.

CAROL: Transpire?

JOHN: Yes.

CAROL: "Happen?"

JOHN: Yes.

CAROL: Then *say* it. For Christ's sake. Who the *hell* do you think that you are? You want a post. You want unlimited power. To do and to say what you want. As it pleases you—Testing, Questioning, Flirting…

Related Characters: John, Carol (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65-66

Explanation and Analysis

As John begs Carol to retract her claim of sexual harassment against him, she faces a moral conundrum. She tells John plainly that for her to recant would be morally "wrong"—even if she did privately forgive him, she could never do so publicly at the expense of her group, her morals, and her ideals. When John asks what would "transpire" were Carol to forgive him publicly and recant, Carol seizes on John's inability to restrain himself from using elitist language and trying to use it to assert his power, over her even in a conversation which should be genuine. She suggests that his use of obscure or elevated language is a way of differentiating himself from those he looks down upon—and attempting to keep himself in a position of power by holding language and information all to himself, even as he criticizes higher education for the ways in which it fails to create an equitable environment for all.

CAROL: Do you hate me now? *(Pause)*

JOHN: Yes.

CAROL: Why do you hate me? Because you think me wrong? No. Because I have, you think, *power* over you. Listen to me. Listen to me, Professor. *(Pause)* It is the power that you hate. So deeply that, that any atmosphere of free discussion is impossible. It's not "unlikely." It's *impossible*. Isn't it?

JOHN: Yes.

Related Characters: John, Carol (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Carol asserts that John's hatred of her stems from the fact that she now has power over him—power she's gained by outwitting him and manipulating him. She suggests that a powerful man like John is so incensed and indignant about having his power stripped from him that it literally prevents him from having a "free discussion" with someone more powerful than him. John confirms Carol's accusation—speaking, perhaps, the first honest words the two of them have really exchanged in the entirety of the play's action. John has denied or ignored his own love of power thus far, insisting that what he really wants is to teach students and help them see the world more clearly. This passage, however, makes clear the fact that all John actually wants is to maintain at a remove from the rest of the world—and float above those he sees as unequal or unworthy. While Carol may have misrepresented facts in her complaint about John's behavior, this moment shows that the core of her claim was nonetheless true: John really does abuse his power over students.

CAROL: Do you want our support? That is the only quest…

JOHN: …to ban my *book*…?

CAROL: …that is correct…

JOHN: …this…this is a *university*… we… […] No, no. It's out of the question. I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking of. I want to tell you something I'm a teacher. […] It's my *name* on the door, and I teach the class, and that's what I do. I've got a book with my name on it. And my son will *see* that *book* someday. And I have a respon… No, I'm sorry I have a *responsibility*… to *myself*, to my *son*, to my *profession*…

Related Characters: John, Carol (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In the depths of his despair, John receives what seems to be a life raft from Carol—she offers him to recant her statement to the tenure committee and even try to reason with them in his favor. The condition, however, is that John remove a list of books—including his own textbook—from the university's curriculum. John decides that nothing—not even the chance at personal and professional salvation—is worth renouncing his work. This choice demonstrates just how self-obsessed John is, but it also seems to confirm that he does have some kind of moral code. For all the flaws and problems within his beliefs about the state of education and pedagogy, John believes in the work he's done and the theories he's put out into the world—so much so that he sacrifices his job and personal life in the name of keeping those ideals alive. At the same time, the gesture is a narcissistic one—it's almost as if John chooses to save a glorified image of himself at the expense of his real self.

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.)* After how I treated you …? You should be… *Rape you…?* Are you kidding me? *(He picks up a chair, raises it above his head, and advances on her.)* I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little *cunt*…

(She cowers on the floor below him. Pause. He looks down at her. He lowers the chair.)

Related Characters: John, Carol (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78-79

Explanation and Analysis

As Carol prepares to leave John's office, she feels powerful enough to casually, callously warn him not to call his wife "baby," which she's just heard him do over the phone. This

provocation is the final straw for John—Carol has destroyed his professional future, his chance at a house, and now seems to be trying to dismantle his very relationship with his wife. His savage beating of her and his cruel, condescending speech is every bit as "vicious" as he accuses Carol of being. He demeans her appearance, openly states that he loathes her because her "political correctness," threatens his power, and, in beating her, confirms what she has been suggesting about him all along—that his unchecked power is inherently violent, and that what he truly desires is not to nurture his female students but to belittle them and make jokes out of them. Carol's manipulations have led to this point, but so have John's; this moment represents the climax of their ongoing power struggle.

CAROL: Yes. That's right. *(She looks away from [JOHN,] and lowers her head. To herself:)* …yes. That's right.

Related Characters: Carol (speaker), John

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79-80

Explanation and Analysis

As John returns to his desk and begins shuffling papers around just seconds after having come terribly close to bringing a chair down over Carol's head, Carol remains on the ground, stunned—and seemingly a little bit excited—by what has just happened. "Yes. That's right," she says, revealing that her worst beliefs about John's true character have at last come up to the surface—in large part because of her own deliberate manipulations and provocations. This line is the play's final moment—and within it, Mamet suggests that Carol has, all along, been twisting the knife, so to speak, in order to gather enough ammunition against John to truly destroy him personally, not just professionally. Mamet's larger implications about the state of political correctness, feminist action, and sexual harassment issues in America are dark, to be sure—he seems to suggest that feminism's goal is to entirely dismantle old-guard power structures, especially those which protect and provide for men like John. In this closing incident, Carol is revealed to be something of a feminist nightmare—she has a deliberate agenda from the get-go, and she uses facsimiles of naivete and femininity to enact that agenda and bring a technically innocent (if self-obsessed and out-of-touch) man to heel.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

In an office on an unnamed university campus, John, a professor, takes a **phone** call at his desk while his student Carol sits opposite him, waiting for him to finish. On the obviously-frustrating phone call, John talks with his wife Grace, who is touring a house they're hoping to buy. He talks about "the land," "the "easement," and mentions "a term of art." His wife is clearly frustrated with whatever's happening at the house, and John tells her to "call Jerry," their lawyer, before promising he'll come to meet her in fifteen or twenty minutes. He promises his wife that they will not lose the house, and tells her he loves her before hanging up the phone.

The opening lines of the play firmly establish the power dynamics between John and Carol. John is loud, flamboyant, confident, and self-absorbed—and completely uninterested in Carol—while the meek Carol is quiet, subdued, and clearly in need of something from John.

John scribbles some notes and apologizes to Carol for being distracted. She asks him what a "term of art" is. John asks her if she would rather talk about what a "term of art" is, or what she came to his office to discuss. He reminds her that he is "somewhat rushed." Seeing Carol's disappointment, however, he apologizes and explains that a "term of art" refers to "a term, which has come, through its use, to mean something more specific than the words would, to someone not acquainted with them… indicate." After a brief pause, Carol implies that John himself doesn't know what a "term of art" is. John says he once looked it up and forgot what it meant, the way many people do—Carol retorts that people "don't do that." John insists that if something doesn't interest someone, of course they might forget about it.

Throughout the play, Carol and John will repeatedly square off about the words and terms John uses—often hypocritically, as a means of showing how educated and elevated he is. Here, John confesses that he doesn't even really know what one of the terms he freely uses means, revealing to Carol a slight vulnerability. Already, the power dynamics are inching away from their initial balance.

John apologizes again for being distracted, but Carol insists he doesn't need to apologize to her. John suggests they "get on" with their discussion, and tells Carol that he has no desire but to help her succeed in class. Carol is clearly upset and insists that though she does what she's "told" to do, takes notes, and has even purchased and read a book written by John, she's still finding the "language" of the course difficult.

The power dynamics between the two are made even more clear. Carol is struggling, and desperately wants John's help. John is willing to hear her out, but doesn't see her as a priority, as he has other matters to attend to.

John says he has a hard time believing that Carol is struggling so profoundly, and remarks that she's "an incredibly bright girl." He says the reason he believes she's struggling in class is that she's angry. Carol again insists that she has done everything John has told her to do. The **phone** rings again. John says he's not Carol's father. Carol, stunned, says she didn't say or imply that John was her father, and asks why he'd say such a thing, but John picks up the ringing phone.

John is condescending and smug towards Carol, implying that his controversial class subject and teaching methods have made her so "angry" that she can't participate in the class. When John says he's not Carol's father, he's implying that she doesn't have to do what he says at every turn—but he's being hypocritical, because Carol has been taught to respect and even revere her professors and instructors.

John tells the person on the other end—Jerry—that he can't talk, and will call him back. He hangs up the **phone**, turns to Carol, and asks what she wants him to do. He says that both of them are just "two people" who have "subscribed to [...] certain institutional" protocol. Carol, her speech scattered and nervous, expresses anxiety about showing her parents the grades she's earned so far, and begs John to just "teach" her. She tells him she can't understand his book. John asks her what she doesn't understand, and she replies "any of it."

John's contempt for and disinterest in Carol's problem is still evident—but by rejecting the phone call from Jerry, he's at least showing he's intrigued by her. Carol reveals the depths of her struggles in class—she's totally lost. John has all the power and knows it, and will use it as the act unfolds.

John asks Carol for an example of something she doesn't understand. She opens her notebook from class and tells him she can't get her head around the phrase "virtual warehousing of the young" and "The Curse of Modern Education." John begins explaining the terms before backpedaling, insisting that his book is "just a book." Carol, however, retorts that everyone around her has come to university to learn, "to be helped," to do things, and to know things. Carol is afraid that she'll fail—increasingly often, she says, she's feeling stupid. John tells Carol she's not stupid—she's angry.

John seems troubled, just a bit, by how seriously Carol is taking his book, and by how upset she is at her inability to understand it. John's conflicts over his book, and over teaching in general, will become more clear as the play unfolds. A pattern is beginning to emerge—the lower Carol sinks into self-pity and confusion, the more John relinquishes his façade of power, certainty, and pomposity.

John tells Carol that he wishes he could help her with her anger, but has a **phone** call to make and an appointment to attend. Because Carol dropped into his office and didn't schedule her meeting, he can't help her now. Carol self-pityingly tells John that he must think she's stupid. He replies that he does not. She accuses him of calling her stupid, but he again says that he didn't, and asks her when she thinks he said such a thing.

This passage shows a new thread that will emerge between John and Carol as the play goes on. She is either reading too much into his words or purposefully misunderstanding them. She asserts that he called her stupid, when he did not—John is confused and upset that she'd accuse him of such a thing. Carol's manipulation of John's words seems to suggest that she has come into his office with a hidden agenda.

Carol insists that she's stupid, and will "never learn." She wonders aloud what she's doing at school—in her classes she's unable to keep up with the discourse. She doesn't understand what anyone around her is talking about. She explains that she signed up for John's course because she was intrigued by the class's promise to discuss "responsibility to the young," but now she can't keep up, and is failing. She begs John to just fail her already, and condemns herself as "stupid" and "pathetic."

Carol sinks deeper and deeper into self-pity in a dramatic show of anxiety and defeatism. It's possible that these emotions are genuine—or it's possible that Carol is exaggerating them in order to appeal to John's nature and manipulate him into something.

John asks Carol, who has stood up during her tirade, to calm down and sit. She does so. He tells Carol that he knows what she's talking about, and begins telling her a story about himself. He says he was "raised to think [him]self stupid." His earliest memories, he says, are of being told that he was behaving stupidly and failing to understand simple concepts. "How people learn," he says, was a mystery to him. He spent his whole life, he says, comparing himself to other people—"capable people." The class Carol is in, he explains, is investigating how and why young people, when told they cannot understand things correctly, take that as a "description" of themselves. John says that if Carol doesn't understand what he's teaching, it's his own fault—he admits he's been busy and distracted with buying a house.

John allows himself to be vulnerable in this passage, admitting that he too has struggled with education and the pointlessness of academia. He explains that he has developed the class Carol is in entirely out of a desire to reckon with this problem at the heart of education. John seems to really care about his students, and is perturbed by the idea that one of them is struggling so profoundly when his whole goal is to make learning more equitable.

Carol cannot believe that people once told John he was stupid, and asks him who told him such things. He says that people told him he was stupid in his childhood—even if "they've stopped," he says, he can still hear them "continue." John compares himself to a pilot flying a plane who, when he finds his mind wandering, begins berating himself for being terrible at his job and unworthy of the "precious cargo of Life," and ends up crashing the plane. Carol retorts that the pilot could have just collected himself and his thoughts and kept going. John says that this is what he's trying to explain to Carol—she must not begin believing herself "incapable" just because she finds herself "frightened" or overwhelmed.

John reveals that he's haunted and dogged by feelings of inadequacy—he and Carol, it seems, are on more even footing than either of them realized.

John tells Carol that he's talking to her the way he'd talk to his own son—in a "personal" way, attempting to communicate the things that he wishes someone had once told him. Carol asks why John would want to be personal with her. John tells Carol that "we can only interpret the behavior of others through the screen we […] create." As he's talking, the **phone** begins ringing again, and again he picks it up, apologizing to Carol. His wife Grace is on the other end, and he explains that he's with a student and will be there as soon as he can—everything, he promises her, will work out.

This time, when John answers the phone, he doesn't assure his wife that he's rushing to her—he prioritizes Carol now, having become intrigued by her complaints and motivated to help her through her problems.

John hangs up the **phone** and explains that there are some problems with the final agreements on the new house he and his wife are buying. Carol asks him if he's buying a new house "because of [his] promotion," and he tells her she's right. Carol asks why John is staying to talk to her rather than going to attend to the issues with the house—John replies that he's chosen to stay because he likes Carol. Carol asks why, and John says it's because they're "similar."

John reveals a lot in this passage, shifting the power dynamics between himself and Carol even further. He tells her openly how excited he is about tenure, and about the house—but also reveals that he's more interested in focusing on her because he sees himself in her. This is somewhat of a narcissistic compliment, and shows that while John tells himself—and his students—that he's invested in their success, there's a part of him that wants to help them as a way of making himself feel better about his own past failures.

Carol asks John if he has problems, too, and he says he does. Carol asks him what his problems are. He says he has problems with his wife and his work, and that his problems are similar to Carol's. She asks him how they're similar, and he explains, after a brief pause, that because he came late to teaching—because of the "need to fail" he felt as a result of being told he was stupid in childhood—he has always seen "an exploitation in the education process."

John reveals that he's had to work hard to extricate himself from harmful patterns in his life—patterns that stem from the same frustrations and doubts Carol is feeling right now.

Carol asks John how he stopped feeling the "need to fail," and John replies that he had to examine his actions. He didn't want to think of himself as a failure anymore—and decided he needed to start "succeeding now and again." John tells Carol that the tests she is going to come up against "in school, in college, in life" are designed "for idiots [...] by idiots." Failing tests is normal—tests, he says, are not a test of "worth," but simply of one's ability to retain and regurgitate information. John says that he himself is, right now, being tested by the university's tenure committee. Though they've announced that he's being granted tenure, they haven't yet signed his contract. The same kind of thing, he says, is happening with the house he's trying to buy.

Like most everything in this play, John's speech in this passage can be seen in two lights. There's a part of him that's being genuine and trying to level with Carol—but there's also a part of him that is self-obsessed and contrarian for the sake of being contrarian. John wants to be seen as controversial and iconoclastic, in defiance of the system he's a part of—but doesn't realize how hypocritical this may make him seem to others.

John begins to elaborate, but Carol interrupts him, saying that she wants to know about her grade. John caustically replies, "Of course you do." Carol asks if it's "bad" of her to want to know about her grade. John apologizes for the way he spoke to Carol and says, more empathetically, "of *course* you want to know about your grade." The **phone** rings again, and Carol gathers her things, saying she should go. John tells Carol he'll make her a deal. Carol tells him to answer the phone, but he says that what he has to say to her is more important.

John has begun to see Carol as an equal of sorts—but can't help condescending to her when she reveals she's concerned about her grade. John believes students shouldn't worry about their marks, but fails to see that the systems around them make them beholden to these arbitrary measures of worth, no matter how useless John himself might think they are. John is in a privileged position where he's able to shirk these markers, and has little real empathy for his students, who are unable to shrug off grades, tests, and essays so easily.

John tells Carol, again, that he wants to make a deal with her. He says that if she stays, they can "start the whole course over" together—and he'll give her an A. The **phone** stops ringing. Carol, stunned, points out that the semester is only halfway over, but John again reiterates that he will give her an A for the entire semester if she comes back to meet with him a few more times—he wants to answer her questions and help her truly understand the material, and isn't interested in how she does on tests or essays.

This offer John makes to Carol seems both genuine and self-serving. He wants to help Carol, but there's also a part of him that wants her to be awed and amazed by his rogue approach to teaching. He also wants, in part, to prove to himself that his own methods are better than the university's. Nearly everything John and Carol do in this play can be seen from at least two different angles, and this offer is no different.

Carol says they can't start over, but John says they can. Carol points out that there are rules. John says the two of them can break them, and simply not tell anyone about their arrangement. Carol asks why John would do such a thing for her, and he reiterates that he likes her. After a moment's pause, Carol takes out her notes and begins going over her questions with John.

Carol is skeptical of John's offer at first—but once she realizes he's serious, she jumps at the opportunity to take him up on it, desperate to pass the class with flying colors.

Carol tells John that she was confused, in class, when he referred to "hazing." She looks through her notes to try to find the exact phrase he used—John encourages her to stop referring so much to her notes and instead try and put things in her own words, but Carol continues flipping through her notes until she finds the lecture on hazing. John expounds upon his theory that academia is hazing, or "ritualized annoyance"—students are fed books, "grill[ed]" on what they've learned, and made to participate in the "sick game" that is higher education. John posits that higher education is now nothing more than a ritual that everyone is "subjected to."

John is trying to get Carol to think differently and to hew less closely to the structures and protocols of the class. He believes that the "rituals" of education are outdated and arbitrary, and wants his students to think differently. Again, though, there's a part of him that wants this for his own selfish reasons—in order to confirm his own theories about education.

John asks what Carol thinks about what he's just said. She says she doesn't know what she thinks. He asks her to think back to the example he used in class. Carol looks down at her notebook, but John again urges her not to lean so heavily on her notes. Carol looks up and begins repeating the example John used in class to talk about higher education, by comparing it to the right to a fair trial. Justice, he says, is a "right"—but a person's life is not "incomplete without a trial in it." John explains that he believes there is "confusion between equity and utility" when it comes to education.

John reveals his whole theory about education in this passage. He feels that the pursuit of higher education has become a given—and thus a trap. He seems to be implying that only those who really want to educate themselves should be pursuing advanced degrees—but his theory is incomplete, as he mocks the very power structures which he himself is complicit in.

Carol asks if John believes that higher education is "prejudice," and he says he does. Carol, shocked, asks how he can say such a thing—John encourages her to always "speak up" and ask such questions. He elaborates on his statement, explaining that a prejudice is any "unreasoned belief" that people are subjected to. Education, he reasons, is in this way like prejudice.

John shows just how contemptuous he is of contemporary higher education in America, shocking and dismaying Carol. He is unaware of the effects his words have on others, concerned only with spreading and validating his own thoughts and theories.

Carol tries to interject, but John keeps talking. Eventually she becomes frustrated and shouts that she is trying to speak. John apologizes profusely, and then lets Carol have the floor. She asks how John could possibly say, in a college class, that "college education is prejudice." John replies that it is his job to provoke his students and make them mad—in order to force them to question what they know.

Carol becomes upset and even slightly irate as she considers John's contempt not just for education, but for students like her who pursue it. John insists it's his "job" to inspire such strong, confused feelings and to upend the status quo—again, prioritizing his own ego over his students' feelings.

John talks about a joke his friend told him when he was younger: "The rich copulate less often than the poor. But when they do, they take more of their clothes off." The joke confused John, but he spent years obsessed with it. When he finally realized it meant nothing and was just "some jerk thing," he felt free. He compares this feeling to the feeling of realizing that higher education is not necessarily "an unassailable good." Carol and her fellow students, he says, have been trained to hold education "so dear" that when John questions its utility, they become angry. Fired up by his own ideas, John stops to make a note.

This seemingly banal anecdote will come to have devastating consequences for John later on in the play. He's so swept up in his own thoughts and theories, and so enraptured by his own ideals, that he fails to see how this somewhat lewd and bizarre anecdote might offend Carol—or give her ammunition against him.

John continues ranting, talking to Carol about his own desire to buy a nice house "to go with the tenure" and allow his children proximity to private school. He begins talking about how public school is designed to use children to "improve the City Schools at the expense of [their parents'] own interest," but stops himself, and asks Carol if he's boring her. She looks up from her notebook and explains she's just trying to make sure she'll remember what John is telling her. John says he's not lecturing her, he's just trying to talk with her.

John is truly flying off on a tangent now, discussing his own personal life and personal beliefs outside of the university. He has, he believes, found a willing listener—a person he can bounce ideas off of almost for sport.

John and Carol continue debating the use of a college education. John states that young people now believe college is their "right," but Carol retorts that being told they're simply wasting their time will upset young people. She points out that John, in his book, asserts that education is "prolonged and systematic hazing," and asks why he is in academia if he hates it so much. John replies that he doesn't hate education—he loves it.

Carol is quick to point out John's hypocrisy—but he insists he's not being hypocritical, he's trying to change the system from the inside out.

John suggests Carol take a look at some statistics about the demographics of college students from the mid-1800s up through 1980, but Carol replies that she can never understand charts. John tries to tell her how charts can be useful, but Carol explodes, shouting that she doesn't "understand [...] any of it." She says she often sits in class, smiling and nodding and taking notes, all the while feeling out of place, uncertain of who to listen to, and unsure of what anything she's learning means. John approaches Carol and puts his arm around her shoulder, but she shouts "NO!" and walks away from him.

Carol is truly upset now—John's tangents and maxims have, it seems, further destabilized her and made her question more deeply what she's doing in school. John wants his controversial statements about education's flaws to empower his students, but he fails to see how his callous indictment of the whole system can hurt and upset the very people he's supposed to be nurturing.

John continues trying to calm Carol from a distance. He shushes her and tells her to "let it go," reassuring her that everything is "all right." Carol calms down, and begins saying something, but stops herself mid-sentence. John asks her to finish her thought and tell him what she's thinking—she says she can't. John asks her to tell him once more. Carol replies only that she's "bad" and "can't talk about this."

Carol, it seems, has a secret—or at least something she's nervous to discuss. What this secret might be is never revealed throughout the play, but one could speculate that Carol's feelings of "badness" are tied to the things that will soon be revealed about her involvement with her group, and her conspiracy against John.

John continues encouraging Carol to share her thoughts with him. Carol begins speaking, and starts saying that in all her life, she's "never told anyone this." John encourages her to go on—but the **phone** rings. He goes over to it and picks it up. He tells Grace, who is on the other end, that he can't talk right now, but becomes absorbed in the conversation when he gets some bad news about the house. He becomes irate, and tells his wife to "put Jerry on." He begins talking to Jerry about the real estate agent, who has voided some sort of agreement. He tells Jerry to tell the real estate agent they will "see her […] in court," and repeats "screw her."

John is about to really get through to Carol, it seems—but just as he's on the verge of truly connecting with a student, which he's stated is his mission as a teacher, he allows the outside world to intrude, and becomes more concerned with his own personal life than the people to whom he has the greatest responsibility. John's remarks about the real estate agent also hint at the underlying anger and misogyny within him.

As John gets more and more irate and heated, he suddenly pauses, reacting to what's happening on the other end. He says he doesn't understand—and then asks if there is or isn't a problem with the house. After determining there's no problem, he says he'll head out "right away" and hangs up the **phone**, confused. Carol asks John what's going on—he tells her that all this time, his wife and friends have been waiting at the new house. They are throwing him a surprise party in celebration of the tenure announcement. Carol tells John he should go, and he agrees that he should. Carol tells John his family is proud of him. John replies that "there are those who would say [a surprise is] a form of aggression."

As John realizes that while he's been shut up in his office with Carol, his friends and family have been waiting for him, he feels a tension between his professional and personal duties. His remark about a surprise being a "form of aggression" foreshadows the twists and turns still to come as the play unfolds—and what "aggression" can look like in different situations.

ACT 2

John and Carol are seated in his office again, looking at one another across John's desk. John is telling Carol about how much he loves to teach—how he loves the performance aspect of the job. He tells her that he never wanted to be like the "cold, rigid automaton[s]" he had as teachers growing up. At the same time, he didn't want to be contrarian and unorthodox just for the sake of nonconformity.

The setting is exactly the same, but something has clearly changed—the power dynamics between John and Carol, so clear in the first act, have shifted decisively in between acts. John is now on the defensive, forced to explain himself and his motivations in an almost obsequious tone rather than his former self-aggrandizing one.

When the possibility of tenure, John says, presented itself, he found himself desiring it—but wanted to make sure that he was pursuing it for the right reasons. At the same time, he was "covetous" of the security tenure would provide, and knew that being granted tenure would allow him to purchase a home in which he could raise his family. Now, John says, because of a "complaint" Carol has brought forth against him, the tenure committee will have to delay signing John's contract and meet to hear and discuss Carol's complaint. In the process, John says, he will lose his deposit on the house, and will not be able to provide a home for his wife and children. Carol asks John coolly what he wants from her.

The revelation that Carol has leveraged harassment claims against John—threatening both his personal and professional life—shows that Carol is now the one with all the power. Her demeanor has changed—she knows she has the upper hand, and seems happy about it.

John tells Carol that he was "shocked" and "hurt" when the committee informed him of her complaint. He tries to explain that he always wanted to be the teacher he never had as a child, and has been searching all his life for a new "paradigm" in his profession. Carol asks John what "paradigm" means, and he tells her it means a model. Carol asks John why he couldn't just use the word "model." John revises his sentence, explaining that he has always been looking for a model for how to be a good teacher. One thing he's always seen as important, he says, is "concern for [his] students' dignity." He asks Carol point-blank what she feels he has done to her—and how he can make amends. He wants to "settle" the matter between them now before the tenure committee gets "pointless[ly]" involved.

John insists that his intentions in trying to confide in and help Carol were never anything other than pure, but Carol is determined to expose John's flaws and hypocrisies, pointing out how the things he professes to want out of his job are really just ways for him to position himself above his students and make himself seem more powerful.

Carol tells John that she thinks he's trying to figure out what he can do "to force [her] to retract," or otherwise "bribe" or "convince" her to recant her statement. John insists that is not what he is trying to do, but Carol says that in stating he wants to make "amends," John is only trying to get her to "retract." John says he knows that Carol is upset, and just wants to know what he has done to wrong her. Carol retorts that everything John wants to know is already in her report.

Carol accuses John of trying to manipulate her, when really, she has perhaps been the one manipulating him into revealing certain things about himself and behaving a certain way so that she can gather more and more ammunition against him.

John looks down at a piece of paper on his desk—Carol's report. He looks through it, narrating as he does. He says aloud that the report calls him "sexist" and "elitist," that he insists on "self-aggrandizing and theatrical diversions from the prescribed text," and that these diversions "have taken both sexist and pornographic forms." John goes on: Carol has, in the report, accused him of telling a "rambling, sexually explicit story [about the] frequency and attitudes of fornication of the poor and rich"—and lastly has accused him of trying to "embrace" her, and kept her in his office because he "liked" her.

John is genuinely shocked and confused by the assertions in Carol's report. Carol seems to be deliberately exaggerating the things John said and did to her in the first act—things which the audience witnessed, and seemed not to be sexually motivated in nature but which nonetheless crossed a professional boundary. Carol may be doing this so that John is forced to reckon with the ways in which his flouting of protocol and the "rules" is not noble, but reckless and hypocritical.

After a pause, John tells Carol that her report is "ludicrous." He claims that it is going to do nothing but "humiliate" Carol and make John lose his house. Carol asks John if he's denying the things that are in the report, and says he couldn't if he tried. She points out that he "drag[ged]" her into his office and made her listen to him rant about his beliefs. John looks down at the report and reads more from it; one part states that Carol alleged that John told her he'd give her an A if she "stay[ed] alone with him in his office." John asks Carol what she thinks he has done to her, and insists he was only trying to help her.

John is trying to undermine Carol's power by warning her that she only stands to humiliate herself. He's insisting that none of what she's implying is true—but at the same time, knows that in the current political climate, Carol's word is stronger than his own. He realizes that Carol has power over him, and is tacitly admitting that he is willing to negotiate with her in order to calm things down.

John says he wants to help Carol now "before this escalates," and she replies that she doesn't need John's help—or anything else he has. She accuses him of being part of a group that misuses power, and states that because of her report, he won't be able to do such things anymore. John tells Carol that her anger is "betraying" her. Carol says she doesn't care what John thinks. John asks her how she can say that when she talks about rights—he says that he has rights too. He begins babbling about his house and speaking sarcastically about the tenure committee, composed of "Good Men and True." He tells Carol that he's not a "bogeyman" and doesn't stand for anything—he's a real person with a real life and real problems.

John is growing more and more upset. He is having trouble getting through to Carol and manipulating her the way he wants to. In the previous act, his words seemed to really affect her, but now they have no power over her. John begins ranting and lashing out as a result of his power being destabilized—he is trying to appeal to Carol through his own desperation.

Carol cuts John off. She tells him that she came to his office only as a favor, at his personal request—she came, she says, on behalf of herself and her "group." She points out that in referring to the tenure committee as "Good Men and True," John is ignoring that there is a woman on the committee, and that his remarks are thus sexist and exclusionary. John asks if his oversight in such a remark is "sufficient" to deprive him and his family of a home. Carol retorts that it is sufficient, as it is "vile and classist, and manipulative and pornographic."

Carol knows she has gained power over John, and she intends to use it. She reveals in full her disdain for the way John speaks, and suggests that she has even more power than she seems to—she is backed by a mysterious "group," whose interests she wants to help facilitate. John fails to see why Carol is so angry at him—but she insists that that's the exact reason she is in fact angry.

Carol begins ranting against John, accusing him of speaking inappropriately to a woman in the privacy of his office. She says he not only calls higher education a "joke," but treats it like one—and does so proudly. She claims that John loves the power he has as a professor, but won't admit it. He calls teaching, publishing, and securing tenure "rituals," and yet goes through the steps to achieve them. She accuses John of being a hypocrite and mocking his hardworking students, who have come to college to learn. She urges John to look inside himself and "find revulsion equal to [her] own," then stands up and prepares to leave.

Carol now relishes the chance to point out all the ways in which John's speech and behavior are offensive to her. She asserts that her anger—and her actions against John—are all justified, and the fact that he can't see why they are is an even further indictment of his character.

John, though, comes back at Carol with a fiery rant of his own. He says he's not an "exploiter"—and that though he participates in systems he criticizes, to do so is human. He admits that sometimes to be human is to be "self-serving" and "conventional." He asserts that he was never trying to mock Carol or discourage her from pursuing an education—it is his "job," he says, to tell young people what he thinks and encourage them to develop thoughts and opinions of their own. He says he wants for both himself and Carol to simply admit that they're human.

John refuses to allow Carol's words to penetrate—he rejects all of her claims against him, and asserts that he is justified in his actions and even in his failures because he is "human." John seems to be scrambling for justification, trying to get Carol to see his point of view just as desperately as she's trying to get him to see hers.

John encourages Carol to tell him in her own words what she wants and how she feels. She mentions again that she has been talking to a "group." John says that "everybody needs advisers," and it's essential to hear other people's points of view. He tells her to go on, but then his **phone** rings. After hesitating a moment, he picks it up. John's conversation is clearly still about the house. He is talking to Grace, whom he calls "babe" and "baby," and insists her to have faith in the fact that the deal will "go through." He tells her he's "dealing with the complaint," and needs to get off the phone.

John's personal life intrudes on his professional predicament. He's clearly trying to soothe his wife, who's upset, and assure her that everything will be okay—even as it becomes clear that Carol has no intention of recanting or indeed even relaxing her claims against him.

Carol tells John that she doesn't want to talk to him about her complaint now—she wants to "stick to the process" and discuss it in front of the tenure committee. She apologizes for being "discourteous" to John, and says she needs to go. She gathers her things up. John tries to stop her, asserting that Carol is making a mistake. Carol says she shouldn't have come. John says he wants to "save" Carol—she takes offense at this remark and begins to leave. John tells her to sit down, but when she doesn't listen, he follows her across the room and grabs her. Carol shouts at him to let her go. John says he has "no desire to hold [her,]" and just wants to talk. Carol shouts as loudly as she can for somebody to come help her.

When Carol tries to claim complete power over John by walking out on him, he becomes more desperate than ever to stop her—and confirms the worst about himself, even as he insists aloud that he's not trying to coerce Carol into anything. This shows the depths of his fears about what will become of his life, but also proves that he thinks just as little of Carol's agency as she has asserted he does in her claim against him.

ACT 3

John and Carol are seated in his office once again. John says that he has asked Carol here against his better judgement, and she admits that she was "most surprised" he asked her to come, and can leave at any time. John asks her to stay, and wants to know if they can "begin *correctly*." Carol says that that's what she wants to do, too, but now feels uncomfortable. John insists he's grateful that Carol has come, and begs her to "hear [him] out." Carol says that the "court officers" told her not to come, and she begins collecting her things—she is clearly having second thoughts.

The power dynamics have shifted even further, and taken on stranger, more complex configurations. John seems more desperate and defeated than ever—and yet Carol is not fully in control, and seems dogged by the same self-doubt and uncertainty she felt in the first act. This new dynamic shows that power is not as clear-cut as it seems to be, and suggests that things are on the verge of yet another shift.

Carol stands up to leave, but John asks her calmly to stay. He tells her that if she will just hear him out, he will be "in [her] debt." Carol asks what John wants to tell her. He shuffles some papers at his desk, and says that after reading "these accusations," he feels he owes Carol an apology. Carol tells John that the events listed in the documents on his desk are "facts," not accusations. The **phone** begins to ring. Carol reminds John that the tenure committee has found her accusations to be factual. John shouts "ALL RIGHT" and picks up the phone. He tells whoever is on the other end that he will call back later, but cannot talk right now.

John seems to want to level with Carol and apologize to her—but when she points out how inadequate his apology is, he becomes incensed, and his reaction suggests that his attempt to meet Carol in the middle is nothing more than an attempt to manipulate her into doing what he wants her to do: recant her accusation.

John hangs up the **phone** and regains his cool a bit. He tells Carol that he has spent time studying the indictment. She says that she doesn't know what that word means. John explains that an indictment is a document in which things are "alleged"—Carol cuts off by telling him she "cannot allow" him to refer to facts as allegations. Carol says that this is not about what she "feel[s]" happened or what John feels happened—John's superiors have looked at evidence and "ruled" that John is guilty and is not going to be given tenure because of facts, not allegations.

John is trying to keep from admitting that he has actually done things to Carol worthy of the indictment—but Carol is diametrically opposed to John, and wants to make him see that whether or not he actually hurt or humiliated her is not for him to decide. He is the one with power—for him to wield it in such a way would be obscene.

John says that the university is going to discharge him. Carol says they should—his own actions have brought him to "this place," and now he's angry. On top of everything, Carol suggests, John has only invited her here to try, again, to get her to "recant" by invoking the well-being of his wife and child. Carol accuses John of abusing his privilege and of feeling just as entitled as the "idiots" he rails against.

Carol wants to show John that he's responsible for the things he says and does, but John doesn't seem to be able to understand that there's anything wrong with his actions.

John asks Carol if she has any feelings at all. Carol accuses John of comparing her to an animal just because she doesn't "take [his] side." He reiterates his question, and asks if Carol has any feelings. Carol replies that what she has is a responsibility—to the university and its students, and to her group. She speaks, she says, "for those who suffer what [she] suffer[s]." For her to overlook his behavior would be wrong, she says.

John is attempting either to manipulate Carol by further demeaning her, or trying to appeal to her mercy by pointing out that he's human and fallible.

John asks what would "transpire" if Carol overlooked his behavior and forgave him. Carol berates John for using the word "transpire" when he could simply use the word "happen." She accuses him of wanting "unlimited power." She pulls out her notebook and begins reading from it—she has documented dates on which John spoke to female students in ways Carol felt was inappropriate. She recorded him calling a student "dear," telling another she looked "fetching," and calling a group of women "girls." Carol closes her notebook and says that John's exploitation of his female students is tantamount to rape.

Carol points out further just how entrenched John is in the elitism he claims to loathe. She also points out his sexist actions. Even though his comments are relatively benign, Carol wants to show John that the things he says carry a certain weight because of the power and authority he has. At the same time, Carol's comments about John's words being equal to rape is rather extreme, almost a parody of the feminist beliefs Mamet criticizes throughout the play.

Carol pulls John's book from her bag. She reads from it, pointing out how inane and deliberately confusing the language within it is, and accuses John of "believ[ing] in nothing at all." John tells Carol that he believes in "freedom of thought." Carol replies that John actually believes only in a "protected hierarchy which rewards [him.]" She says she knows that he thinks her "full of hatred," "repressed," and desperate for "power and revenge." John agrees that he thinks these things. Carol thanks John for his honesty, and says that she feels this is the first moment in all their interactions in which he's "treated [her] with respect."

John has told Carol how badly he wants to help students, having been made for years to feel stupid and incompetent himself. Carol alleges that John has lost sight of this mission, and become just as corrupt, hypocritical, and disconnected as the very people he rails against.

Carol says that she came here not to listen to whatever John wanted to tell her, but to tell him something. He invites her to tell him what she wants to. She says that John hates that she now has power over him. He hates her power so much that the two of them will never be able to have a "free discussion." John agrees with this assertion.

Carol admits and points out the new power imbalance between them, and suggests that it angers John so much that he actually respects Carol less. Surprisingly, he agrees with this assessment.

Carol explains that though John mocks higher education and calls its rituals "hazing," she and many members of her group have overcome unimaginable "prejudices" and obstacles in pursuit of that education—and of the same security John himself pursues. At the same time, she says, in entering the institution, she and others like her subject themselves to the university's power, and its arbitrary judgement of its students. Carol asserts that the joke John told, the language he used with her in their first meeting, and the act of putting his hands on her were not "trivial" or "meaningless." John says that when he comforted Carol, the gesture was "devoid of sexual content." Carol shouts that she says it was not—and whether it was or not is not for John to determine.

Carol wants to point out that in spite of John's belief that because his intentions are good, he doesn't have to examine his speech, behavior, or actions, there are consequences for the things he says and does. John, she says, doesn't get to be the one to say how his actions affect others—that is for the people he interacts with to decide.

John says he understands Carol's point, and sees "much good" in her thinking. He asserts, though, that he is not "too old to learn" or change. Carol calls John a "little yapping fool" to think she is seeking revenge—what she wants, she says, is understanding. John says that none of it matters—his job is "over."

John continues to try and get Carol to take pity on him, or simply consent to try to understand him—but she refuses angrily, and lambasts him for his attempts to manipulate her.

Carol, incensed that John still wants to talk about his job, gathers her things and heads for the door. When she's almost there, though, she turns around. She tells John that it might be possible for her group to withdraw its complaint—as an "act of friendship." John asks what the group would "exchange" for its withdrawal of the complaint, but Carol says she's not thinking in terms of an "exchange." She's thinking of what her group might "derive" from John.

Carol's behavior in the third act—and in this moment in particular—suggests that she has been manipulating John perhaps since the very beginning of the play. She wants to "derive" things from him, and turn his own power against him in pursuit of the advancement of her own goals.

Carol tells John that her group will consider withdrawing its complaint and even speaking to the committee if John agrees to her terms. She produces from her bag a list of books which the group finds "questionable" and wants removed from the university curriculum. John laments the death of "academic freedom." Carol retorts that just as John has an agenda, she and her group have an agenda. She is only interested in his actions—and if he wants her to speak to the tenure committee, he will do as she says.

Carol is now openly attempting to manipulate John into doing the bidding of her group. John has, all along, been the one thinking that he wants to remake the university from the inside—but he has benefited from being complicit in its systems for too long to be able to make any real change. Carol's radical group is the one really changing things—and yet John will reveal the depths of his hypocrisy when he balks at their conditions for real change.

John asks for the list. Carol hands it to him, and he reads it over. When he gets to the end, he realizes that his own book is on the list. He orders Carol to "get the fuck out." Carol reminds John that his only chance of getting the group to "reconsider" is to agree to get the books removed from the curriculum—and to sign a statement. John, however, won't even look at the paper Carol tries to hand him. He says he will not withdraw his own book, and begins rambling about how he wrote it so that one day his son would see it and be proud.

The enigma that is John is further complicated in this passage. John is prideful, it seems, to the point of self-destruction—and yet it is unclear whether he values his ideals out of a genuine sense of duty to his students and the university system more broadly, or out of an outsized, misplaced amount of spiteful pride.

John confesses that he hasn't been home in two days—he's been living a hotel, "thinking [things] out." The **phone** begins to ring. John lets it. He tells Carol that he understands that he owes her a debt—but sees her demands as "dangerous," and will let the tenure committee "do whatever they want to [him]" rather than ban his own book from the university. Carol tells John to answer the phone.

John reveals just how sad and desperate he has become. At the same time, he hews to his own personal pride and principles—no matter what, he will not allow his own beliefs to be silenced. This can either be seen as noble, or self-absorbed to the point of stupidity.

John answers the **phone**. It is Jerry. He tells Jerry that things are all worked out, and asks him to tell Grace that he'll be home soon. John begins stuttering, confused, as Jerry tells him something. He is obviously angry and upset, and says that "she's here with me." Jerry hangs up on John, and then John sets the phone down. Carol says she "thought [John] knew."

Jerry has just revealed something terrible to John—and it is clear that in spite of what John previously thought, things are not going to "work out" for him.

John asks Carol what's going on. Carol replies that "according to the law," John tried to rape her. As she was leaving the office the last time she visited, he "pressed [his] body" against her. Her group, Carol says, has informed Jerry that they may be pressing criminal battery charges and attempted rape.

Carol makes it clear that she—and her group—want to punish John even further by pressing formal charges against him. John is genuinely confused, and almost unable to believe what's really happening to him.

John, in shock, sinks into his chair. He tells Carol to get out—he needs to talk to his lawyer. Carol agrees that he probably should do so. She gathers her things and prepares to leave. The **phone** rings, and John picks it up—it is Grace. He tells her that he can't talk right now, calling her "baby." He tucks the phone under his chin and tells Carol to get out of his office. Carol asks if his wife is on the other end—John tells her it's none of her business.

John has been trying to act, more or less, in what he feels is good faith towards Carol, and has even attempted to appease her throughout the third act. Now, though, after learning that she is trying to destroy not just his professional life but his personal life as well, he wants nothing to do with her—he is done trying to get through to someone who clearly only wants his destruction.

John resumes his **phone** conversation, assuring his wife—whom he again calls "baby"—that things are going to be okay. As Carol walks towards the door, she calls over her shoulder, warning John not to call his wife baby. John drops the phone, stands up, rushes over to Carol, and begins beating her. He calls her a "vicious little bitch," and accuses her of trying to destroy his life "with [her] political correctness." He knocks her to the floor, and says he'd never rape her—he wouldn't even touch her "with a ten-foot pole." He calls Carol a "cunt," and then picks up a nearby chair and raises it over his head.

When Carol tells John not to call his wife "baby," she's policing his speech and making a comment about how he talks to the women in his life. John is so incensed by this comment that he's driven to intense violence and hateful, demeaning speech. In this passage, one of two things could be happening—Mamet makes things ambiguous, as always. Either John confirms that he has, perhaps all along, harbored the resentments, gendered prejudices, and lewd thoughts Carol has suggested he has—or her actions have driven him off the deep end and drawn out parts of him that he's never even acknowledged. Either way, it's clear that a lot of anger has been simmering just below the surface of John's calm façade all along.

After a moment, John calmly sets the chair down and goes back over to his desk. He begins arranging some papers. Carol, still lying on the floor, says quietly to herself: "Yes. That's right."

The play's ambiguous final line can either suggest that Carol has been hoping for this violent outcome all along, so that she can use it as further ammunition against John—or, on the other hand, that while she didn't anticipate or encourage John's violence, she's not shocked by his desire to harm her in retaliation for her questioning his speech.

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