Oleanna: A Cognitive Poetic Reading

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Abstract

A relatively new discipline, Cognitive Poetics is concerned with the process through which meaning is shaped and analyzed. What is known as the American model of Cognitive Poetics makes use of the theories of Cognitive Linguistics to provide a fresh outlook for reading literary texts. One of the concerns of this model is with studying metaphor as an important means of meaning-making. In proposing the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson assert that metaphor is not just a matter of words, rather it is inherently conceptual. They claim that our conceptual system is metaphorically shaped and the conceptual metaphors which shape our understanding affect not only our language but also our behavior as well as how we make sense of the world around us. Lakoff and Johnson define conceptual metaphors as our means of understanding one concept in terms of another. They argue that conceptual metaphors help us comprehend abstract concepts in terms of more concrete ones. Using CMT, this article attempts to read David Mamet's Oleanna *in terms of two of the most common conceptual metaphors, namely LIFE IS A PLAY and ARGUMENT IS WAR. It intends to explain how these conceptual metaphors become the underlying structure of the characters' interaction throughout the play; a play which takes place in an academic setting. The article demonstrates how words become weapons in the hand of characters to obtain power over one another. They are entrapped in a language which does not allow them to behave beyond the confines of a performance or a verbal battle.*

Keywords

Cognitive Poetics; Metaphor; Conceptual Metaphor; David Mamet; *Oleanna*

Introduction

Following the emergence of the cognitive sciences, metaphor came to be understood in terms of the crucial role it plays in the formation of the human conceptual system. The science of Cognitive Linguistics, in particular, challenged the long-held traditional principles which ignore the conceptual nature of metaphors. Metaphor was no longer a matter of esthetics, nor a matter of words, but was viewed as having a crucial role in how human beings perceive and interpret the different matters in their lives such as love, success, time and language. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson has made a great contribution to viewing metaphor in a different light. In addition to the claim that "most our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature," Conceptual Metaphor Theory argues that the linguistic metaphorical expressions are the manifestations of a metaphorically shaped cognition.[1] Seen from this perspective, metaphor becomes not only an important but an essential factor in shaping the thoughts, reasoning and attitudes of people. Stockwell points out that the American model of Cognitive Poetics is generally oriented towards Cognitive Linguistics and benefits from related theories. This model has been highly influential all around the world, with its main concerns being metaphor, conceptual structures

1 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), 4.

and issues of reference.[2] As Steen and Gavins assert, metaphor is one the most exciting realms where Cognitive Poetics and Cognitive Linguistics intersect.[3] Having its foundations in cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, Cognitive Poetics attempts to provide a fresh outlook into reading literary texts. This relatively new approach to reading literary texts proposes that "the readings may be explained with reference to general human principles of linguistic and cognitive processing, which ties the study of literature in with linguistics, psychology, and cognitive science in general".[4] Moreover, what Cognitive Poetic critics attempt to accomplish is to a large extent the process through which the meaning of a literary text is shaped. Therefore, Cognitive Poetics turned its focus to the "process" of meaning-making and not its "product".[5] Metaphor, as mentioned, is considered by cognitive theorists as the main tool of fabricating meaning and knowledge. Consequently, the Cognitive Poetic critics have been concerned with how the meaning is shaped, transferred and comprehended by the means of metaphor in literary texts. Employing CMT, this essay attempts to explore two of the most conventionalized conceptual metaphors, ARGUMENT IS WAR and LIFE IS A PLAY, in David Mamet's *Oleanna*. The essay will try to demonstrate how the metaphorically informed cognition of the play's characters influences their attitudes and behavior and how this matter contributes to the main theme of Mamet's play. As such, the analysis focuses on the inter-character discourse. As Lakoff and Turner demonstrate, LIFE IS A PLAY is one of the most pervasive metaphors by means of which one comprehends life and all its components. Phrases such as "He always plays the fool," "That attitude is just a mask" and "Take a bow!" are all the linguistic manifestations of this "extraordinarily productive" conceptual metaphor.[6] However, linguistic evidences are not the only manifestations of the permeation of this conceptual metaphor. Neil Gabler explains that LIFE IS A PLAY has become a style of living and a cultural tradition:

> [T]he old Puritan production-oriented culture demanded and honored what he [Warren Susman] called character, which was a function of one's moral fiber. The new consumption-oriented culture, on the other hand, demanded what he called personality which was a function of what one projected to others. It followed that the Puritan culture emphasized values like hard work, integrity and courage. The new culture of personality emphasized charm, fascination and likability. Or as Susman puts it, "the social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality was that of a performer. Every American was to become a performing self. [7]

Kovecses believes that LIFE AS A SHOW or SPECTACLE is one of the foundational metaphors of American culture, even though it is not an American invention.[8] Elsewhere he maintains that LIFE IS A PLAY or SHOW is a highly conventionalized conceptual metaphor; a conventionality

2 Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: an Introduction* (Hoboken: Routledge, 2002), 9.

3 Gerard Steen and Joanna Gavins, "Contextualizing Cognitive Poetics", in *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, edited by Gerard Steen and Joanna Gavins (London: Routledge, 2003), 10.

4 Steen and Gavins, "Contextualizing Cognitive Poetics", 10.

5 Geert Brone and Jeroen Vandaele, *Cognitive Poetics: Goals, Gains and Gaps* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 3.

6 George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 20.

7 qtd. In Zoltan Kovecses, *Metaphor in Culture Universality and Variation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2005). 186.

8 Kovecses, *Metaphor in Culture Universality and Variation*, 184.

that applies both to the conceptual and linguistic metaphors.[9] Kovecses clarifies that here the term "conventionality" is not used in the sense of "the arbitrary relationship between linguistic form and meaning".[10] He explains that "conventionality is conceived of as the degree to which either a linguistic or a conceptual metaphor has become entrenched in the course of its use".[11] Like all conceptual metaphors, LIFE IS A PLAY is shaped by its constituent mappings. These mappings include A PERSON IS AN ACTOR, THE ROLES IN LIFE ARE PARTS, THE BEHAVIOUR IS THE ACT, THE STORY OF ONE'S LIFE IS THE SCRIPT and THE CONVERSATIONS ARE DIALOGUES.

Lakoff and Johnson state that structural metaphors, not unlike ontological and orientational ones, are based on "systematic correlations within our experience".[12] What sets these kinds of metaphors apart, however, is that they do much more than render concrete an abstract concept so that it can be easily referred to, quantified or oriented. Structural metaphors allow for structuring one concept in terms of another.[13] As an example of such conceptual mappings, Lakoff and Johnson offer the conceptual metaphor RATIONAL ARGUMENT IS WAR. They argue that in order to understand the concept of argument, human beings structure it in terms of physical conflicts, a notion that is more readily apprehensible for them. In answer to the question of why the concept of WAR is such a good source domain for ARGUMENT, Kovecses states that: "The reason probably is that the verbal institution of arguments has evolved historically from the physical domain of fighting. Thus, the historical origin of the concept of argument (i.e., war or fighting) became a natural source domain for the target that has evolved from that origin (i.e., argument)".[14] Fighting is an integral part of nature and is found perhaps "nowhere so much as among human animals"; the difference being that as "rational animals," we have developed a more legitimate and less physically aggressive way of engaging in battles.[15] What human beings call "rational argument" in fact follows the same structure of physical wars, only modified to be carried out verbally. Consequently, say Lakoff and Johnson, "we humans have evolved the social institution of verbal argument".[16] In carrying out these arguments, we make use of the same techniques our ancestors used in battlefields:

> Each sees himself as having something to win and something to lose, territory to establish and territory to defend. In a no-holds-barred argument, you attack, defend, counterattack, etc., using whatever verbal means you have at your disposal—intimidation, threat, invoking authority, insult, belittling, challenging authority, evading issues, bargaining, flattering, and even trying to give "rational reasons." [17]

9 Zoltan Kovecses, *Language, Mind and Culture: a Practical Introduction* (N.Y: Oxford UP, 2006), 127.

10 Kovecses, *Language, Mind and Culture: a Practical Introduction*, 127.

11 Kovecses, *Language, Mind and Culture: a Practical Introduction*, 127.

12 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 61.

13 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 61.

14 Kovecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed (N.Y.: Oxford UP, 2010), 75.

15 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 62.

16 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 62.

17 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 62.

Therefore, not only do we understand arguments in terms of war, but also we perform them as such. The conceptual metaphor of ARGUMENT IS WAR is so firmly established in our cognitive system that it would be difficult for us to comprehend arguments in any other term.[18]

In his discussion of "coercive philosophy," Robert Nozick recognizes the war-like quality of philosophical arguments and criticizes philosophers who are trained to force their audience into believing what they hold to be true. He calls these kinds of arguments "intellectual karate" or "intellectual judo" and tells his readers, therefore, not to "look here for a knockdown argument that there is something wrong with knockdown arguments, for the knockdown argument to end all knockdown arguing".[19] What comes to be cognitively significant about the source domain of WAR, then, is its battle-like features which it maps onto the target domain of ARGUMENT, hiding, as the result, any other potential non-adversarial characteristics that an argument could adopt. The notions of "academic objectivity" and "critical detachment" with which scholars are supposed to carry out arguments still preserve in themselves the desire to win over the opponent and "whether the operative notion of argument is as proof-leading-to-truth or as language-game-leading-to-agreement, arguments are being conceived as having an essentially adversarial structure".[20] Therefore, it should be no surprise that argument-as-war shapes the minds of the practitioners of the most logic-oriented fields of discourse such as philosophy and academia:

> We routinely speak, for example, of *knockdown*, or even *killer* arguments and *powerful counterattacks*, of *defensible* positions and *winning strategies*, and of *weak* arguments that are easily *shot down* while *strong* ones have a lot of *punch* and are *right on target*. Moreover, we continue to use this language even after we have very carefully and very conscientiously distinguished what we do as philosophers, critics, and educators from the shouting, name- calling, and animosity that characterize dysfunctional families, relationships gone awry, and contentious faculty meetings.[21]

Life is a play

In *Oleanna*, in which the roles of the teacher-student take on a literal sense, Carol and John use performance to reverse the roles of mentor-protégé. At the beginning of the play, John is seen criticizing Carol's paper rather condescendingly. Shortly after, he tells her that he must leave since he has an appointment with a real estate agent about the new house he is about to buy. After Carol desperately admits that she would probably "never learn" and that she is "stupid," John begins to talk to her about how the traditional educational system had made him feel the same way.[22] He, then, says that he believes in a more liberal academic system in which the "Artificial *Stricture*, of 'Teacher', and 'Student'" does not exist.[23] John continues to refer to tests as "*garbage*" and "a *joke*"

18 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 4.

19 Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1981), 5.

20 Daniel H. Cohen, "Argument is War… and War is Hell: Philosophy, Education, and Metaphors for Argumentation". *Informal Logic*, no. 17.2 (1995): 178–9.

21 Cohen, "Argument is War", 178.

22 David Mamet, *Oleanna* in *Mamet Plays 4: The Cryptogram, Oleanna, The Old Neighborhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 11.

23 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 16.

which are designed "in the most part, for idiots. *By* idiots" and are "a test of your ability to retain and spout back misinformation".[24] He also severely rebukes the tenure committee for putting him through a similar "Test" to grant him the tenure which in fact he is most likely to get. He tells Carol: "they had people voting on me I wouldn't employ to wax my car".[25] Carol, who is already shocked by his professor's radical thoughts, becomes even more surprised when he offers to give her private lessons and, in the case that she attends, to give her an A. John explains that he is willing to do this since the important thing is not the grade but that he can awaken her interest in the subject. What makes John's radical theories about education less candid and more pretentious is the paradox in his behavior toward fulfilling them to which Carol also objects. What Carol seems to be having a hard time comprehending is how John can denounce the same academic system which has given him the platform he is using to speak against it. She tells him: "How can you say that in class. Say in a college class, that college education is prejudice?"[26]

The fact that John performs the role of a conformer out of the fear of losing his position is quite clear. In the beginning of the first act, when Carol is emphatically insisting that she has to pass the course, John ignores her pleading by asserting that they have both subscribed to "certain institutional" rules they cannot deviate from.[27] A few moments later he tells Carol about the banality of those rules and again praises them as "a *good* process"[28]. This is the same process under which "the school has functioned for quite a long time" when his tenure is jeopardized by Carol's complaint.[29] In one speech which comes at the opening of the second act, John himself confesses that he is not "pure of longing for the security" which tenure offers, implying that he should not be condemned for performing as a conservative at times, especially in front of the tenure committee. In his speech, John tries to redefine his performing the role of an orthodox on occasion as simply a part of the innocent struggle any human being has to go through for survival. Carol, however, considers both his being the "clown" of the tenure committee and his pretentious transgressions as indications of his thirst for the power which performing grants him in both cases.[30]

> CAROL: You *confess*. You love the Power. To *deviate*. To *invent*, to transgress … to *transgress* whatever norms have been established for us. And you think it's charming to "question" in yourself this taste to mock and destroy. But you should question it. Professor. 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.[31]

Despite his unconventional ideas about establishing a new system of education, John seems to be deeply entrenched in the discourse of the existing old one. As Brenda Murphy notes, John's book about education "seems to be little more than an expression of his own anger at the

24 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 16–17.

25 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 17.

26 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 22.

27 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 9.

28 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 30

29 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 30.

30 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 44.

31 Mamet, *Oleanna,* 34.

educational system in language that is acceptable to the academic community".[32] Elsewhere, when he is harshly criticizing the conventional academic system, he cannot help but use the words of academic discourse such as "index" and "predilection" which are incomprehensible to Carol. In other words, John tries to condemn a system by using both its own language and its platform. Moreover, his concerns with obtaining tenure and buying a new house outstrip any genuine concern he shows about educating Carol. At the end of the first act, when both characters seem to have reached a connection and Carol is about to confess something seemingly important, she is interrupted by a telephone call that summons John for a party thrown on the account of his achievement in receiving tenure. As Sauer argues, the important thing "is not *what* her secret was but John's total lack of recognition of her vulnerability in being about to reveal it".[33] A similar interruption happens at the end of the second act and after John and Carol are about to reach an agreement about their situation. Again just as Carol is about to open up about the feminist Group that has supported her filing the complaint, John receives another call about the new house. Like a sudden wakeup call, the phone call makes Carol realize that John has probably been convincing her only to maintain his position and his precious house and, therefore, suggests that they should continue to discuss the matter in the Committee Hearing.

Carol is quite right in suggesting that what John has worked for is obtaining the "power".[34] As it was mentioned before, John himself asserts that he longs for security and he certainly proves to go to an extreme of physical violence when it is jeopardized. The system which grants the comfort and its concomitant power to its members does so on the condition that they all exhibit a more or less identical character conforming to its rules. As a result, performance becomes an indispensable part of the lives of the individuals who wish to conform in order not to be alienated. That is why even John's unorthodox and intriguingly radical ideas about education inevitably become only a part of his larger scale performance to remain in the system he bashes. No matter how revolutionary his thoughts are, they give him just enough power and enough theatrical quality to his "act" for him to stay in the play. John himself confesses that he loves "the aspect of performance" of his job as a teacher. As Skloot points out, John does not use performative acts to "enlarge space for reflection and engagement but rather to beguile and enthrall his tuition-paying audiences."[35]

In a society constructed based on the metaphor of relations-as-performances, putting on a show is not only a survival mechanism for the individuals, but also a concept based on which they shape their identities. John is not only concerned about losing tenure but also is anxious about losing an identity which he has shaped by his impressive performances as the intelligent teacher. In his essay on two of Mamet's movies, namely *House of Games* and *Spanish Prisoner*, McIntire-Strasburg argues how the teacher-like characters of both films depend on their performing this role

32 Brenda Murphy, "Oleanna: Language and Power" in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 127.

33 David K. Sauer, "*Oleanna* and *The Children's Hour*: Misreading Sexuality on the Post/Modern Realistic Stage" in *David Mamet*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004), 213.

34 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 42.

35 Robert Skloot, "*Oleanna*, or, The Play of Pedagogy" in *Gender and Genre Essays on David Mamet*, eds, Christopher C. Hudgins and Leslie Kane (NY: Palgrave, 2001), 98.

for maintaining a sense of self even though they are neither knowledgeable nor honest in playing it. He continues to explain how presenting "knowledge" strengthens these mentors:

> The "knowledge" that these teachers present to their students ultimately reinforces the students' interpretations of their situations. Such revelations serve to cement the role of authority the teachers play within the pedagogical relationship as they offer perlocutionary statements of their ability to construct the correct context within which their students may come to an understanding of their relationship to the world around them.[36]

Carol, however, does not allow for the "cementing" of authority in the hands of John. She decides to rebel against John's role of the powerful mentor and hers of a failing student through the same means of performance. Both the society she lives in and the teacher she seeks education from teach her the lessons of manipulation through language and performance for personal gain. The main performance of Carol takes place offstage and the audience only sees its results in the characters' aggressive confrontations later on. When the second act begins, it becomes apparent that by playing the role of an innocent and helpless student, Carol has filed a complaint against John accusing him of inappropriate behavior. Carol's offstage performance reverses the roles of teacher-student which seemed unchangeable in the first act, a process which little by little causes John's downfall. Her second offstage performance in which she accuses John of attempted rape becomes the final blow which strips John of all his authoritative power. In the following section, their power relations will be discussed in more detail as they engage in more attempts to defeat one another.

Argument is war

The conceptual metaphor of ARGUMENT IS WAR finds its way, although implicitly, into the academic world of Mamet's *Oleanna*. The play is composed of three acts, all of which take place in John's office who is a university professor. John is about to be granted tenure and has as a result decided to buy a new house. The play begins when Carol, one of John's students, comes to his office to talk about her unsatisfactory grade. Throughout the play, their conversation is interrupted several times by the phone calls that John receives and which function, as Mamet explains, as "a chorus or title card – to introduce new information, emotional or factual, or to comment upon the old".[37] Carol seems to be confused and keeps repeating to John, throughout the first act, that she does not understand "*any* of it".[38] John tries to help her by sympathizing with her befuddlement and providing her with a different outlook on education. He tells Carol that her grade is an A, provided that she comes to his office so that they can review the course together. When the second act begins, it becomes clear that Carol has filed a complaint against John on the account of sexual harassment. With his tenure at stake, John tries to negotiate with Carol and persuade her to retract

36 Jeffrey O. McIntire- Strasburg, "Performing Pedagogy: Teaching and Confidence Games in David Mamet's 'House of Games' and 'The Spanish Prisoner,'" *The Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association,* no. 38.1 (2005), 34.

37 David Mamet, Introduction. *Plays 4: Oleanna, The Cryptogram, The Old Neighborhood*, By David Mamet (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xi.

38 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 9.

her false accusations throughout the rest of the play. Carol, who has now successfully usurped the power, continues to condemn John's inappropriate behavior towards his students. Finally, Carol proposes that she would retract if John agrees on a ban of his book from the university syllabus. John, however, refuses to do so and in the end, their argument degenerates into an act of physical violence.

When first performed in 1992, *Oleanna* was largely reviewed as a play about political correctness. Later on, and after Mamet's comments on the nature of his play, critics shifted their focus from viewing *Oleanna* as a play about sexual harassment to a work on the complexity of language and power relations.[39] Mamet asserts in an interview:

> […] I never really saw it as a play about sexual harassment. I think the issue was, to a large extent, a flag of convenience for a play that's structured as a tragedy. Just like the issues of race relations and xenophobia are flags of convenience for *Othello*. It doesn't have anything to do with race. This play – and the film – is a tragedy about power.[40]

According to Murphy, this tragedy is a result of John and Carol's failure to connect and, consequently, to understand each other. She observes that, throughout the first act, the characters are essentially uttering their own separate monologues. Murphy believes that their inability to communicate with one another is compounded "by the extreme self-absorption of both characters and by the fact that each is talking both to relieve anger and frustration and to get what they want, a passing grade for her and tenure, a house, and security for him".[41] The desire to overrule one another and the thirst for winning power make John and Carol blind to and incapable of establishing a human bond. Their nearly constant struggle for the sole purpose of defeating their opponent and achieving their goals makes John's office a battlefield in which it becomes extremely difficult to find any hint of human closeness amidst the hostility to punch and avoid being punched. Moreover, the urge to win by any possible means becomes a testament to the underlying ideology which has determined how these characters view an argument. The ideology which chains the human mind into thinking about verbal disputes in terms of physical battles does so by the determining power of underlying conceptual metaphors which structure cognition. As Cohen argues, "what the pervasive argument-is-war metaphor reveals is that the operative ideology commits us, if not to truth and falsity, or to right and wrong sides, at the very least to winners and losers".[42] Indeed the role that the conceptual metaphor of ARGUMENT IS WAR plays in the structure of the characters' cognition becomes the most conspicuous when, at the end of the play, John and Carol engage in an actual physical conflict. It seems that the animalistic hostility that was, as Lakoff and Johnson maintain, "institutionalized" as a rational argument in an academic atmosphere finds its way back to the physical domain and declares its reality of existence and its true nature.[43]

39 Murphy, "Oleanna: Language and Power," 124–5.

40 Geoffrey Norman and John Rezek, "Working the Con" in *David Mamet in Conversation*, ed. Leslie Kane (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 2001), 125.

41 Murphy, "Oleanna: Language and Power," 129.

42 Cohen, "Argument is War," 181.

43 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 62.

In *Oleanna,* the conceptual metaphor of ARGUMENT IS WAR barely finds expression through linguistic forms. However, its pervasiveness is manifested more implicitly and through the conflict ritual which constitutes human behavior while arguing.[44] The authors of *Metaphors We Live By* explain that "our implicit and typically unconscious conceptions of ourselves and the values that we live by are perhaps most strongly reflected in the little things we do over and over, that is, in the casual rituals that have emerged spontaneously in our daily lives".[45] As it was mentioned earlier, in the case of carrying out arguments, this ritual consists of the acts of intimidation, threat, invoking authority, insult, belittling, challenging authority, evading the issue, bargaining and flattery. The controlling power of the ARGUMENT IS WAR conceptual metaphor is reflected in the characters' pursuing these aggressive verbal means even when they consciously try to form a more human relationship. During the course of these three acts, the characters seem to be struggling at times to emancipate themselves from the chains of the forceful metaphor that dictates the acts of verbal violence. However, not only are they dragged time and again into the metaphor-based discourse that views arguments as battles, but also they sink to the level of physical conflict in which the metaphor has its roots.

At the beginning of act one, John is seen talking on the phone about the issues related to the real estate and the house he is about to buy. (In the adapted movie version, John's voice is heard while the camera has not yet entered the office; the viewer hears it while it "resonates throughout the institution and dominates it" indicating his, yet intact, authority).[46] While he is talking, he mentions the expression "a term of art". When he hangs up, Carol who is initially there to talk about her grade, asks John about the meaning of the expression. John, however, misunderstands Carol's question as an act of evading the issue at hand and responds with a verbal counteract of belittling her intentions:

> CAROL: (*pause)* What is a "term of art"?
> JOHN: Is that what you want to talk about?
> CAROL: … to talk about…
> JOHN: Let's take the mysticism out of it, shall we? Carol? *(Pause.)* Don't you think? I'll tell you: when you have some "thing". Which must be broached. *(Pause.)* Don't you think …? *(Pause.)*[47]

Therefore, John is seen declaring his position of power from the outset. Carol, who seems surprised by John's behavior, innocently asks him if she has said something wrong. After a short pause, John seems to become conscious of his offensive tone and perhaps comes to the realization that he has to free himself from the presupposition of an imminent war between them. Therefore, he apologizes to Carol, making the excuse that he is just "somewhat rushed" and continues to explain what a "term of art" means.[48] However, when they return to the issue of Carol's grade

44 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 63.

45 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 235.

46 Geraldine Shipton, "The Annihilation of Triangular Space in David Mamet's *Oleanna* and Some Implications For Teacher-Student Relationship in the Era of Mass University Education," *Psychodynamic Practice* 13.2 (2007): 145.

47 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 4.

48 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 4.

and her term paper, John once again assumes authority and by what John Jacque Weber calls an "underlying condescension" criticizes her work:[49]

> JOHN: (*Picks up paper.*) Here: Please: Sit down. (*Pause*) Sit down. (*Reads from her paper.*) "I think that the ideas contained in this work express the author's feelings in a way that he intended, based on his results." What can that mean? Do you see? What…[50]

Murphy says of this part of the play that "Carol's statement in her paper […] ridiculed by John, is actually an accurate description of John's book, and his academic discourse generally. But because Carol cannot use the language of John's linguistic community effectively, he makes fun of her efforts, asking: 'What can that mean?'".[51] Meanwhile, Carol has taken the position of bargaining and insisting that she must pass this course and she has done everything John has said to accomplish that. John, however, makes use of the strategy of invoking authority and mentions that there is a certain "*criteria* for judging progress in class" and they have both "subscribed to certain arbitrary" and "certain institutional" rules.[52] Having sensed John's condescending remarks, Carol breaks down and tells John that she is failing and he might as well flunk her:

> CAROL: No, you're right. "Oh, hell." I failed. Flunk me out of it. It's garbage. Everything I do. "The ideas contained in this work express the author's feelings." That's right. That's right. I know I'm stupid. I know what I am. (*Pause*) I know what I am, Professor. You don't have to tell me. (*Pause*) It's pathetic. Isn't it? [53]

Carol's desperation invokes a feeling of sympathy and compassion in John which drags him out of the necessity to win the battle and, in other words, out of the imposing power of argument-as-war conceptual metaphor, a paradigm by which he has been managing his actions, although unconsciously. He confides to Carol that he, too, felt incompetent as a student and hated teachers. He continues to denounce the educational system which is exploitative and makes teaching an "artificial" notion with the motto of "I know and you do not".[54] While trying to set himself free of the metaphor, John also attempts at using a more colloquial and a less specialized vocabulary, saying that, like her, he always felt he was failing: "Because I was a fuckup. I was just no goddamned good".[55] Having a sympathetic outlook is precisely the remedy which Daniel H. Cohen offers for eradicating the hostile effects of argument-as-war conceptual metaphor. "What if," says Cohen, "a genuine understanding of one side in the debate requires at least the commitment of a sympathetic reading? If that is ever the case, then preparing to argue will get in the way of interpretation.[56] As Geraldine Shipton remarks, in response to John's efforts "at times there is something soft and tender in Carol's demeanor as we see her entertain some of John's ideas but it doesn't last and

49 Jean Jacque Weber, "Three Models of Power in David Mamet's *Oleanna*" in *Exploring the Language of Drama From Text to Context,* eds. Jonathan Culpeper, Mick Short and Peter Verdonk (London: Routledge, 2002), 112.

50 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 7.

51 Murphy, "Oleanna: Language and Power," 127.

52 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 8–9.

53 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 11.

54 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 16.

55 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 16.

56 Cohen, "Argument is War," 181.

anger or frustration erupts in her," causing her to interject violently.[57] Carol, evidently, does not seem capable of appreciating John's sympathetic feeling and sounds even more confused. She is shocked by John's revolutionary ideas about education and his questioning the current academic system; she does not even understand why John would propose to personally help her to get an A. Murphy argues: "It becomes clear that, in assuming her anger arises from the same resentment of authority as his does, John has completely misunderstood Carol. Carol does not object to authority or to the institutions that wield power, she simply wants access to them".[58] Thus, what Carol truly desires is to gain power and render her opponent powerless and for that reason, she does not steer from the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor, rather she takes control and assumes the role of the winner of the battle during the course of the next two acts. The fear of giving up power to Carol forces John to place himself, once again, in the battlefield which he naïvely assumed could be abandoned.

The second act begins when John has been informed of Carol's complaint and for that reason has invited her back to his office so that he can put the issue to rest. He starts his argument by justifying what Carol considers "hypocrisy," which is John's condemning the academic system and attempting, at the same time, to find a permanent place in it by obtaining tenure.[59] His tenure position now at stake, John tries to win the battle by a mixture of bargaining, flattery and intimidation. He states that he has long been "covetous" of achieving tenure and this desire is not completely unrelated to the security it entails.[60]

> Now, as you don't have your own family, at this point, you may not know what that means. But to me it is important. A home. A Good Home. To raise my family. Now: The Tenure Committee will meet. This is the process, and a *good* process. Under which the school has functioned for quite a long time. They will meet, and hear your complaint- which you have the right to make; and they will dismiss it. They will *dismiss* your complaint; and, in the intervening period, I will lose my house. I will not be able to close on my house. I will lose my *deposit*, and the home I'd picked out for my wife and son will go by the boards. Now: I see I have angered you. I understand your anger at teachers. I was angry with mine. I felt hurt and humiliated by them. Which is one of the reasons that I went into education.[61]

John's anxiety and his fear of loss are partly reflected in the confusion of strategies he employs to win his power back. In the above extract, he is seen somewhat belittling Carol by stating that since she does not have a family of her own, she is ignorant of what his situation is like. Then, in an apologetic retreat, he calls the tenure process which he harshly ridiculed in the first act, "a *good* process". He then intimidates Carol by saying that her complaint will definitely be dismissed, hence leaving her humiliated. In an act of bargaining, John tells his angered student that she might also be right. While trying to keep his authoritative veneer, the fear of losing ground to Carol makes his belittling and insult strategies interspersed with different bargaining gestures during the act:

57 Shipton, "The Annihilation of Triangular Space," 146.

58 Murphy, "Oleanna: Language and Power,"131.

59 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 35.

60 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 29.

61 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 30.

> JOHN: (*Pause*) I was hurt. When I received the report. Of the tenure committee. I was shocked. And I was hurt. No, I don't mean to subject you to my weak sensibilities. All right. Finally, I didn't understand. Then I thought: is it not always at those points at which we reckon ourselves unassailable that we are most vulnerable and … (*Pause*) Yes. All right. You find me pedantic. Yes. I am. By nature, by *birth*, by profession, I don't know … I'm always looking for a *paradigm* for…
> CAROL: I don't know what a paradigm is.
> JOHN: It's a model.
> CAROL: Then why can't you use that word? (*Pause*)
> JOHN: If it is important to you. Yes, all right. I was looking for a model. To continue: I feel that one point…
> CAROL: I…
> JOHN: One second … upon which I am unassailable is my unflinching concern for my students' dignity. I asked you here to … in the spirit of *investigation*, to ask you … to ask … (*Pause*) What have I done to you? (*Pause*) And, and, I suppose, how I can make amends. Can we not settle this now? It's pointless, really, and I want to know.[62]

Since Carol is the one with the upper hand in their war now, she responds to his bargaining attempts by challenging his authority and belittling his assumptions. Having cut John's preparatory speech short by asking what he wants from her, she now interrupts him and takes issue with his pompous choice of vocabulary. Unlike the first act, Carol no longer asks about the meaning of the words in order to learn them, rather to condemn and ridicule John for using them at all. When John realizes bargaining will probably not win his power back, he is seen returning into belittling and insult. He calls Carol's accusations "ludicrous" and threatens her that it will eventually "humiliate" her.[63] He implies that the reason for her unreasonable behavior is that she is "hurt". He then assumes his authority back by saying he would be willing to "help" her.[64] Counterattacking, Carol challenges John's authority by saying that he no longer has the power because he has misused it. She then calls him an elitist, a performer and an exploiter. However, when she prepares to leave the room, John once again desperately "tries to appeal to a broader common humanity through the linguistic ploy of starting with the formula, 'Good day,' and moving towards the principle that 'I don't think we can proceed until we accept that each of us is human'"[65]. Using the metaphor of ARGUMENT IS WAR, he goes on to state that although their desires might be "in conflict," there is no need for them to fight:

> …it is the essence of all human communication. I say something conventional, you respond, and the information we exchange is not about the "weather," but that we both agree to converse. In effect, we agree that we are both human. (*Pause*)
> I'm not a … "exploiter," and you're not a … "deranged," what? *Revolutionary* … that we may, that we may have … positions, and that we may have … desires, which are in *conflict*, but that we're just human. (*Pause*) That means that sometimes we're *imperfect*. (*Pause*) Often we're in conflict… (*Pause*) *Much* of what we do, you're right, in the name of "principles" is *self-serving* … much of what we do is *conventional*. *(Pause)*You're right. *(Pause)*[66]

62 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 30.

63 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 32.

64 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 33.

65 Murphy, "Oleanna: Language and Power," 131.

66 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 35–6.

Although John might seem to be trying to set both of them free of the vicious circle of argument-as-war by connecting with her student as a human being and not an opponent, his words have the tinge of a bargaining rhetoric. When Carol tries to leave the office for the second time, he tries to persuade her to stay by saying that he is just trying to "save" her, hence putting himself once again in the position of power. He then holds Carol to restrain her from leaving which leads her to shout for help.

Murphy explains that "as Act III opens, Carol has clearly won the linguistic power struggle between them".[67] She begins by saying that she did not have to come here, intimidating John by invoking the authority of legal discourse. During the act, she tells John that the decision to accuse John was his superiors,' that his holding her will be considered "attempted rape" and an act of "battery," as her feminist group has informed her, "under the stature"[68]. Weber argues that both in the second and the third act:

> …the dominant status of academic discourse is threatened or even subverted by Carol's increasing use of legal discourse. A particular genre such as the office-hour interaction can thus be seen to draw upon a range of discourses, or even become a site of conflict between institutionally and ideologically diverse discourse-types.[69]

John who is now completely devastated, hopelessly struggles for the last time to save himself from his impending loss by using flattery. First, he expresses his gratitude to Carol, several times, for doing him the favor of coming in his office so that they can talk. However, before he is given any chance to free himself from the charges, Carol challenges his authority by telling him that it is his thirst for power that is causing his downfall:

> What I say is right. You tell me, you are going to tell me that you have a wife and child. You are going to say that you have a career and that you've worked for twenty years for this. Do you know what you've *worked* for? *Power*. For *power*. Do you understand? And you sit there, and you tell me *stories*. About your *house,* about all private *schools*, an about *privilege*, and how you entitled [. . .] You worked twenty years for the right to *insult* me. And you feel entitled to be *paid* for it.[70]

She continues to claim that the only thing John really desires is an "unlimited power" and a "post" which bestows on him such an authority. While in the first act she pleaded with John to "teach" her, she now declares that she is here to "instruct" him that he is not "God"[71]. However, the power that Carol accuses John of being after is the same power that Carol is struggling for throughout the play. On the verge of being defeated, John desperately tries to appeal to Carol's sympathetic emotions by asking her: "don't you have feelings?"[72]. Carol interprets this as an act of insult which dehumanizes her and dismisses it with contempt. John then attempts to bargain with her by saying that he sees "much good" in Carol's thoughts and is ready to "learn" and change for

67 Murphy, "Oleanna: Language and Power," 131.

68 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 51.

69 Weber, "Three Models of Power," 113.

70 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 42.

71 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 44.

72 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 42.

the better.[73] Carol, however, recognizes this as John's attempt to deceive her and calls him a "little yapping fool"[74]. As Shipton illustrates in his review of the movie version of *Oleanna*, nothing remains of an intellectual discussion: "the tables have been turned – she has become articulate and powerful and he is inarticulate, powerless, ruined: a sadomasochistic reversal has occurred and a collapse of thinking. Education as dialogue has stalled: there is no learning, no two minds working together but a brutal, mutually destructive couple instead".[75] Finally, Carol tells John that she will retract her complaint if he bans his book from the university syllabus. John, infuriated by the proposition, returns to a more aggressive form of insult and belittling by calling her "dangerous" and "telling her "to go to hell".[76] The ongoing war of their words comes to a head and retakes a physical form at the point which Carol instructs John not to call his wife "baby." Having already lost the battle and stripped of verbal means, John finds the only victory possible in physically overcoming his opponent and starts beating Carol.

Conclusion

Not unlike Mamet's other acclaimed plays, *Oleanna* explores the nature of the many-faceted connection between people. The conceptual theory of metaphor holds that these facets are comprehended by means of metaphors which have a significant impact on our behavior. In *Oleanna*, the effects of conceptualizing the concept of RELATIONS as PERFORMANCES and ARGUMENTS as WAR on the interactions among the characters can be observed. As these metaphors have delimited the characters' cognitions, performance becomes their way of communicating, and thus verbal sparring becomes an inevitable means of conversing. The conventionalization of these conceptual metaphors have made these people performers who deceive in order not to be deceived by another's spectacle, and use language not for establishing meaningful bonds but as a means of overpowering. Internalizing arguments in terms of war and interactions as performances deprive people of the chance to connect beyond the level of animal fighting. In the same way, the characters of *Oleanna* are entrapped within the boundaries of cognition and of a language which does not allow them to behave in any other way than within the realms of a verbal battle. Carefully observing her teacher's behavior, Carol acquires the thirst for power and the means to achieve it. Her constant note-taking, which was a sign of weakness at the beginning of the play, becomes her strength as she learns to manipulatively use language to her advantage. Since both have become fighters for power, neither takes the time to arrive at a mutual understanding. In the third act, Carol seems to be the one who is aware of this impossibility of having a reasonable verbal interaction when one is looking to gain power out of every word one utters:

73 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 46.

74 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 46.

75 Shipton, "The Annihilation of Triangular Space," 147.

76 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 50.

> 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? [77]

In the final scene, both John and Carol stand, after having had a physical conflict, as two people who have eventually descended to a level which neither imagined possible. The physical manifestation of war, which was already going on verbally, takes both of them by a kind of surprise and there follows a sudden realization of their true nature which is expressed by Carol's amazed final words: "Yes. That's right".[78] Indeed the true winners of the absolute power are the metaphors which have seized the control of their thoughts and behavior.

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77 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 45.

78 Mamet, *Oleanna*, 52.

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