

Purposefully  
imprecise: specificity  
in relation to power in  
'oleanna'



**EduFrogs**

In the play *Oleanna* by David Mamet, knowledge is power. The ability to be the more intellectually adept individual in a room allows for both John and Carol to capture and lose the role of teacher in their student-teacher relationship. John, the literal teacher, begins the play by employing this knowledge and subsequent power through vague rhetoric such as noun clauses and indefinite pronouns. Vague language is the currency with which John and Carol trade power, as it signifies knowledge without specifying the exact nature of that knowledge. When John purposefully fails to give exact definition of a word he is enacting his role as a teacher, the authority, whose job is to maintain student interest and inquiry. However, John unknowingly and ironically succeeds at “teaching” this power skill to Carol, allowing the power dynamic within the student-teacher relationship to fluctuate.

Ultimately, Carol gradually grows to be even more adept at using intentionally vague language to demonstrate her power and Carol eventually holds power over John. Intentional vagueness, a tool often employed by teachers, exemplifies the power held by John or Carol as it ironically is a sign of intelligence and it reveals the changing nature in the power dynamic between John and Carol: who is vague, and who is forced to clarify.

In the first act, John’s demeaning tone paired with noun clauses and general nouns establishes his role as the teacher; the one who exercises power. John carries himself with authority and superiority, and he feels that his vagueness is justified by his supposed preeminence. One of the questions John first asks Carol is “what” she wants “to talk about” (8). This mundane and superfluous question consists not only of a patronizing tone, but also a noun clause. The vagueness of the noun clause allows for John to

simultaneously control the discourse while also invest minimal person effort and attention into the relationship which he considers beneath him. John continues this trend in the purposefully imprecise pronoun “ something” in order to leave Carol uneducated and less informed on the subject matter than he is (14). Every time John uses an imprecise word, he coerces her into asking a question in order to understand John’s meaning. This leads to John becoming the sole influence on her opinions, as John’s ambiguity requires a definition only John can explain, allowing him to be the instructor. This vagueness even carries over into “ what [Carol] thinks” (21). The use of a noun clause to describe Carol’s thoughts not only means that they are undefined and obscure, but also that those thoughts will ultimately be defined and explained by John, her teacher. The power John attains through his unclear rhetoric provides for his facile mastery of the direction of the dialogue and also ironic success in his greatest love: teaching.

By the second act, Carol has begun to learn from John’s skillful and power-wielding vagueness and attempts some teaching of her own. As John recognizes Carol’s growing disposition for the role of the teacher, he attempts to reassert his superior role. He strains to accentuate his power through ambiguous pronouns such as “ it” and “ that”, using the obscurity of those pronouns to distort his true craving for power and disguise that craving (28). Indefinite pronouns become even more vague and complex in order to elicit a question, or sign of dependence from Carol. However, Carol also begins to employ a vagueness of her own. By not specifying the identity of “ that word”, Carol coerces John to ask for specification (29). The roles of teacher and student are now beginning to blend together and the power

dynamics seem to reach equilibrium. In this act, the relationship between Carol and John seems relatively equal; a relationship between two peers instead a student and teacher. Both Carol and John attempt to exercise power through their vagueness and these attempts begin to come into conflict with each other. When John intends to establish power by the usage of a noun clause, “ What wrong have I done”, Carol responds with the equally enigmatic pronoun “ whatever” (30). As John continues to practice esoteric rhetoric, Carol only continues to learn and improve from him, and this is ironically the exclusive skill which John is able to teach her. Carol’s finesse and ingenuity with intentional vagueness persists to develop exponentially, and by the third act, she has surpassed John, both as a teacher and as an equal.

In the final act, Carol is finally able to engage her power, as she is able to transform into the role of a teacher, becoming the dominate and proficient master of vague language. Paired with a consistent use of action and command verbs, Carol is able to demonstrate her capability of using her acquired knowledge, which she ironically absorbed from John, to replace and surpass him in the role of the teacher. Carol states that “ it is not for [John] to say” (43). Carol’s strong verbs allow her to demonstrate her ability to take action with the knowledge she has attained. The indefinite pronoun “ it” only allows for her statement to become more powerful, as “ it” can be construed as anything, negating any voice that John retained. Carol not only embodies the idea of power through vagueness, she uses it more effectively than John ever did. Carol is able to proclaim that “ what [she] says is right” and allows the undefined meaning of “ what” to inscribe an infinite number of possible

arguments. Through the use of increasingly strong verbs and intricate ambiguity, Carol masters the art of teaching by leaving John in the position where she started: undefined and asking questions.

The proportional relationship of vague rhetoric and power, along with knowledge and specificity, highlight the ironies in the poignant relationship Mamet invented. In this ironic world, the more ambiguously a character speaks, the more power he or she possesses. The more knowledge a character acquires, the less he or she exhibits it. With the teacher as the securely more powerful person, both John and Carol fight to say less, and define even less of what they do say. The world of Oleanna ultimately reveals one simple truth: the power of a character is fundamentally established by what she or he does not say.