

BETWEEN FAILED UTOPIAS AND POSITIONS OF POWER - (RE)DEFINING AMERICAN SOCIOPOLITICAL AND CULTURAL VALUES IN DAVID MAMET'S *OLEANNA* AND *THE ANARCHIST*

Raul SĂRAN

West University of Timișoara

raul.saran@e-uvvt.ro

DOI: 10.35923/AUTFil.62.16

Between Failed Utopias and Positions of Power - (Re)Defining American Sociopolitical and Cultural Values in David Mamet's *Oleanna* and *The Anarchist*

Regarded as one of the most appreciated contemporary playwrights in postmodern American literature, David Mamet creates his plays in order to challenge the audience to reflect upon the continuous and fast changes that occur in the American society, both from a sociopolitical and cultural standpoint. From the controversies of political correctness in the academic space to the failures of the criminal justice system, the plays revolve around the idea of power, which determines a new perspective in which the American values are defined and integrated in the public spheres of everyday life. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze and identify the main social, political and cultural elements that Mamet presents in two of his plays, *Oleanna* and *The Anarchist*. Through a close reading and an analysis of the action of the two plays, the main purpose of the article is to demonstrate that certain aspects of the cultural space, along with the cultural identity in the United States revolve around power relations, which are determined by a series of elements, reunited under a paradigm that Mamet called a “failed utopia”.

Keywords: *American contemporary drama; American society; David Mamet; failed utopia; political correctness*

When it comes to the representations of the social, political and cultural American values as they have been depicted in the American drama, we notice the fact that several playwrights have focused their works around a particular

theme, one that was based mostly on exposing several frailties of the categories aforementioned, portraying a decadent and morally damaged paradigm of the “American Dream” as we know it today. From Tennessee Williams to Eugene O’Neill and from Edmund Albee to Sam Shepard, just to name a few, the embodiment of American values has been gradually and continuously exposed and presented as a shallow social construct, which revolves around a series of inadequacies and paradigms configured around a space that keeps changing from one decade to another, evolving and determining several changes in the ways these American values are being perceived. However, when we look at the American society of the past decades, we notice that the changes that occurred in the American society from a sociopolitical and cultural standpoint have been defined by a series of concepts that have reshaped the ways in which we refer to the embodiment of the American values. Through the appearance of concepts such as political correctness or gender equality and the several changes that have occurred in the American judicial system, the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century United States of America is a radically changed place from the rest of the 20th century, becoming a space in which mentalities, attitudes towards certain social categories and views regarding the American landscape have been severely altered. And when we look at the ways in which the American drama has been keeping up with all these sociopolitical and cultural changes that occurred for the past decades, we notice that there is a playwright who has encapsulated and integrated all these changes that the society went through in his works.

We are talking about David Mamet, one of the most appreciated contemporary American playwrights, which has redefined American drama as we know it today. However, one particular aspect that we will explore in the following paper is not just the ways in which all these changes have shaped the American society, but rather what happens when these “new” American values are confronting with the traditional ones and, more specific, how does David Mamet capture the “essence” of this process of (re)defining the American sociopolitical and cultural values – Michael L. Quinn (2004: 93) arguing that “Mamet’s plays use a specific realistic rhetoric to strike a deep but somewhat inaccessible chord in American intellectuals—inaccessible because the critics themselves often participate in the same ideological processes that form the matrix of Mamet’s work”. Thus, the following paper revolves around two of David Mamet’s plays: *Oleanna* and *The Anarchist*, the first one being published in the 1990s, while the second one in the 2000s. The two plays have been selected not only because of the fact that they are similar in terms of plot construction and structure – as both of them are two-character plays – but mostly because of the fact that the struggle for power is more easily to observe and more visible in both plays, in which the process of (re)defining sociopolitical and cultural values is captured by Mamet under a similar shape of the literary discourse. The paper revolves around a statement of the author, who suggests that *Oleanna* “is a play about failed Utopia, in this case the failed Utopia of Academia” (Mamet 1993a: 10). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the two plays of David Mamet from the perspective of two “failed

utopias”, while trying to identify the ways in which we can refer to the two plays as failed utopias of academia, on one hand and of the American judicial system, on the other, while arguing that the (re)defining of the American sociopolitical and cultural values in David Mamet’s *Oleanna* and *The Anarchist* revolve around a series of conflicts which are meant to challenge the existent power structures and show that the American sociopolitical and cultural values are represented by a “mixture” between the traditional values and the “new” ones, their configuration being determined by a series of both static and dynamic values that determine the evolution of the paradigms that form the American society as we know it today.

***Oleanna* – When Political Correctness Meets the Academia**

Ever since its premiere in 1992, David Mamet’s two-character play has caused quite a stir in the American society, often being classified as controversial, mostly due to the fact that Mamet challenges the traditional roles of professor and student in the academia, while revealing the “clash” between two contradictory mentalities of the time. The play revolves around two main characters: John, a university professor and Carol, a female college student who files a complaint against him, accusing her professor of sexual misconduct and harassment, while demanding severe consequences for his inappropriate behavior. In this situation, John considers himself a victim, does not understand what is happening to him and why and tries to come to terms with his student, as the struggle for power and control between the two leads to a very tensioned atmosphere, which keeps building up to a heated argument that ends in a violent conflict. However, despite the setting, critics such as Brenda Murphy (2004: 124) argued that it is not necessarily a play about the educational system, but rather about the balance of power that surrounds it: To say that *Oleanna* is about education, however, would be like saying that *Glengarry Glen Ross* is about the real-estate business. Mamet uses the education system as a vehicle for his perennial subject, [...] in this case the ironic desire for both power and understanding in human relationships” (124).

In order to understand what David Mamet might suggest when he refers to *Oleanna* as a “failed utopia”, we need to take into consideration the ways in which he addresses this conflict between the two different social and cultural American values, as well as the differences between John’s traditional, patriarchal perspective regarding the relationship between himself and the student (including here the position of power, which he considers to be in his advantage, as a college professor) versus Carol’s perspective, one that seems to be deeply rooted into concepts such as political correctness, gender equality and even modern teaching, which places the student on the same level as the teacher in terms of authority. In this case, we might argue that John and Carol can be regarded as symbols of the struggle for power that determine the paradigm shift between the traditional values (represented by John) and the “new” one, which can be interpreted through Carol’s attitude towards John. Therefore, in order to clarify the ways in which Mamet (re)

defines several social, political and cultural values of the American society, our interpretations will revolve around several critical paradigms, which reveal a series of perspectives that will help us comprehend the ways in which *Oleanna* was perceived by the literary critics. In this case, our analysis will start from one of Thomas Porter's theories. In the article *Postmodernism and Violence in David Mamet's Oleanna*, Porter (2000: 15) argues that the "advocates" of postmodernism bring forward the idea tolerance and accepting the differences in "cultural diversity, the elimination of racism, sexism, and homophobia, in the name of personal freedom", while the "ideologues of the right" understand this "tolerance of difference" as "contributing to the decay of traditional order and to the dismissal of any foundational guidelines for society", with the result being "a balkanizing suspicion of the 'other'" (15). As a result, *Oleanna* "gives this cultural swirl and the forms of violence that characterize it a local habitation and a name" (15). From this theory, we can already notice a few ways in which the sociopolitical and cultural status of the American society begin to change, including here the cultural "swirl" that Porter identifies in Mamet's play. Therefore, as we have previously argued, *Oleanna* brings into question the conflict between the traditional "order" and the new, postmodern values, which include toleration, a firm rejection of homophobia (which, up to some extent, includes sexism as well) and, last but not least, the political correctness, a concept that, as we are about to see in the analysis of the play, occupies the central place in Mamet's work. From what we have mentioned so far, it is safe to assume that this is one of the ways in which Mamet's "failed utopia" can be interpreted when it comes to *Oleanna*. The suspicion regarding "the other" is one of the most important elements that lead to power struggle and, most importantly, to a fight for a very specific place in the society. While John struggles to maintain control over his position as a very respected member of the American academia, Carol is trying to challenge, question and even "dethrone" not only a very respected professor from his position, but an entire way of thinking. As Dan Kulmala (2007: 102) suggests, *Oleanna* can be interpreted as a "postmodern-day allegorical depictions of contemporary power struggles for place", in which the two different social and cultural values interact and even contradict themselves "through John's and Carol's desire for a secure place within the institution of education in American society, through John's lesson on education, and through Carol's and her group's challenge to John's authority" (102).

For a better understanding of the concepts discussed so far, we will analyze four parts of Mamet's play that we have considered relevant for the following demonstration, while trying to identify the ways in which the "failed utopia" determines a reconfiguration of several sociopolitical and cultural American values. The following scene takes place in the second act of the play, in which Carol has made great progress in shifting the balance of power from John, the male teacher, to herself, the female college student who confronts the patriarchal authority. The ubiquitous state of tension appears to benefit Carol, whose role changes from the helpless student who comes to her professor's office to seek help into a strong, demanding and determined advocate of the

women's rights, who seems to value reason beyond her feelings. This is the turning point, the moment in which the balance of power is turning in favor of the "new" values, the place in which the "failed utopia" of the academia begins to take shape and reveals not just a conflict between generations, but between two different ways of perceiving the same language, while containing different meanings:

JOHN: (He reads.) «He told me that if I would stay alone with him in his office, he would change my grade to an A.» (To CAROL:) What have I done to you? Oh. My God, are you so hurt?

CAROL: What I «feel» is irrelevant. (Pause)

JOHN: Do you know that I tried to help you?

CAROL: What I know I have reported.

JOHN: I would like to help you now. I would. Before this escalates.

CAROL (simultaneously with «escalates»): You see. I don't think that I need your help. I don't think I need anything you have.

JOHN: I feel...

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. And to say, and to say, «Oh. Let me help you with your problem...» (Mamet 1993b: 49-50)

Although we might come up with different variations of what John's response might have been when he was interrupted by Carol, the most simple and effective way in which we can understand the professor's attitude towards Carol's actions is to argue that, above everything else, John – and, implicitly, his entire system of social and cultural values – has become a marginalized one. Or, to be even more specific, as Porter (2007: 23) suggests, "John is, by definition, the Other". In this case, however, the other is not assimilated and integrated into the new social and cultural values. The redefining of these categories appears to be in an open conflict with the traditional values, which automatically implies an inability of the two to coexist into the same place. As we can see in the play, as the tension keeps increasing, it becomes more and more obvious that the discrepancy between John and Carol's perspectives will determine an unfortunate outcome for at least one of the two protagonists. Again, Mamet is creating the proper space for another possible dimension of the failed utopia, which, in this case, can refer to the exact impossibility of the two different paradigms to cooperate and form a better – or, at least, a properly functioning – educational system. The failed utopia becomes, in this case, a space of obtrusive misconduct and conflicts, in which challenging the authorities means not only the subordination of them, but the total replacement. John, therefore, must not be forgiven and, even more than that, must be immediately excluded and marginalized, in the name of "justice" and, of course, in the name of political correctness, which, as we can see, becomes the proper way of setting a powerful example and, even more important, a precedent:

CAROL: The issue here is not what I «feel.» It is not my «feelings,» but the

feelings of women. And men. Your superiors, who've been «polled,» do you see? To whom evidence has been presented, who have ruled, do you see? Who have weighed the testimony and the evidence, and have ruled, do you see? That you are negligent. That you are guilty, that you are found wanting, and in error; and are not, for the reasons so told, to be given tenure. That you are to be disciplined. For facts. For facts. Not «alleged,» what is the word? But proved. Do you see? By your own actions. That is what the tenure committee has said. That is what my lawyer said. For what you did in class. For what you did in this office.

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. Why should I...? What I say is right. (Mamet 1993b: 63-64).

As we have noticed so far, Mamet's play tries not only to question this transition from the traditional social and cultural values to the "new", postmodern ones, but also brings into question the legitimacy of the American academic space in terms of morality and its capacity (or lack of capacity) to adapt and integrate all these different ways of assimilating "the other". When it comes to the social structures and the ways in which the dynamic of human interactions within these structures change once the struggle for power determines a paradigm shift in terms of the "dominant" other, according to Stanton Garner (2000: 41), *Oleanna* "forces metapedagogical awareness of several overlapping concerns: the ambiguous status of the personal and the public in institutional settings, the relationship between speech and power, the politics of interpretation and advocacy, academic constructions of authority, and the uncomfortable erotics of interactions in and out of the classroom"; as a result, "one of its most confrontational (and fascinating) edges lies in the ways it foregrounds the structures and dynamics underlying academic discussions of it" (41). Therefore, the "failed utopia" of the academia turns into an impossibility of assimilation. The traditional values are meant to be left behind, as they do not represent the current progressive paradigm. Although John tries to understand what he did wrong and argues that he is willing to learn from his mistakes, Carol remains determined in her attempt to undermine his authority and bring his academic career to an abrupt end. As she gains more and more control over the situation, John realizes that his social and cultural values have brought him in this place, but it appears that it is too late for him. Carol's view of the political correctness appears to be rather a punitive one rather than an inclusive one, turning the situation into what appears to be a simulacrum of a trial. Carol obtains not only control over John's academic career, but even over his life as well. From this point forward, John represents not just the symbol of the failed utopia of academia, but also a symbol of the failed utopia of preserving traditional social and cultural values:

JOHN: I don't understand. (Pause)

CAROL: My charges are not trivial. You see that in the haste, I think, with which

they were accepted. A joke you have told, with a sexist tinge. The language you use, a verbal or physical caress, yes, yes, I know, you say that it is meaningless. I understand. I differ from you. To lay a hand on someone's shoulder.

JOHN: It was devoid of sexual content.

CAROL: I say it was not. I SAY IT WAS NOT. Don't you begin to see...? Don't you begin to understand? IT'S NOT FOR YOU TO SAY.

JOHN: I take your point, and I see there is much good in what you refer to.

CAROL: ...do you think so...?

JOHN: ...but, and this is not to say that I cannot change, in those things in which I am

deficient ... But, the...

CAROL: Do you hold yourself harmless from the charge of sexual exploitativeness...?

(Pause)

JOHN: Well, I ... I ... I ... You know I, as I said. I ... think I am not too old to learn, and I can learn, I...

CAROL: Do you hold yourself innocent of the charge of...

JOHN: ...wait, wait, wait ... All right, let's go back to...

CAROL: YOU FOOL. Who do you think I am? To come here and be taken in by a smile. You little yapping fool. You think I want «revenge.» I don't want revenge.

I WANT UNDERSTANDING.

JOHN: ...do you?

CAROL: I do. (Pause) (Mamet 1993b: 70-71).

That being said, we move on to the last part of our analysis regarding David Mamet's *Oleanna*, the part of the play which has been considered the most controversial of the entire play, due to its violent ending. However, it is one of the most representative scenes in the play when it comes to the power struggle between the traditional social and cultural values and the "new" ones. Since we discuss the influence of political correctness in this play, it is necessary to take a look at the ways in which this concept influences the matter of language, as the linguistic function of being "politically correct" will determine a more comprehensive perspective and will help us understand the paradigm shift from the "old" values to the "new ones" even better. According to John Lea, author of *Political Correctness and Higher Education: British and American Perspectives*, the linguistic nuances that the political correctness promote are strictly influenced by a poststructuralist paradigm, in which the relation between the signifier and the signified is altered by a possible replacement of the "center". By positioning his theory into a rather Derridean approach, he argues that when it comes to political correctness "it is now not so much a question of substituting one word with a more appropriate one, or indeed banning words because they are seen as offensive, but accepting that once the bond is broken between a word and the reality that it is intended to represent, any word is able to take on new and potentially multiple meanings" (Lea 2009: 6). As we will see in the closing scene of the play, this change of meaning represents the beginning of the end for John and for the traditional social and

cultural values that he represents. The quest for power that Carol initiates in the second act of the play finds its ways through the power of language, determined by the paradigm of the political correctness. Also, here is the point in which we can notice the discrepancies between John and Carol's perspectives even closer. While John resembles the "old" linguistical approach, in which a word such as "baby" resembles nothing that might be considered as potentially harmful, the "new" approach that Carol represents not only condemns this attitude that she considers sexist and misogynistic, but functions as an agent of imposing power and severe repercussions. Serving as the decisive factor in triggering John's desperate attitude towards Carol, the boundaries between professor and student are completely removed, while the failed utopia reaches its tragic climax:

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. He moves to his desk, and arranges the papers on it. Pause. He looks over at her.)

...well...

(Pause. She looks at him.)

CAROL: Yes. That's right.

(She looks away from him, and lowers her head. To herself:) ...yes. That's right.

(Mamet 1993b: 79-80)

As John Lea (2009: 9) suggests, "the execution of power is at its strongest when we do not immediately register its existence. That is, political correctness is now so much part of the taken-for-granted of public sector professional life that one instinctively knows what should be said here, and not there, what needs to be done to satisfy this requirement without compromising that, and so on" (9). Therefore, from a social and cultural standpoint, we might argue that John's impossibility to adapt and reinvent his values leads him to a mental collapse, through which he does nothing more than proclaiming his own defeat. In this case, we might argue that in the case of our demonstration, Carol's last words, "yes. That's right" (Mamet 1993b: 80), could be interpreted in two ways: either we take into consideration the hypothesis that she self-proclaims her "victory" in her fight for power against John (which means that the political correctness has found a way, through Carol, to defeat the patriarchal society represented by the professor) or, if we consider the entire American social and cultural landscape, it simply means that Carol uses John's attack against him.

Even more, she makes John fully aware of the fact that she has acknowledged his attack as an act of desperation, which means that he would not dare to “touch her with a ten-foot pole” (79) due to the fact that his social and cultural values mean nothing and are not considered the “standard” anymore. To this matter, Quinn (2004: 104-105) argues that Mamet “is writing against the current social trend toward accepting charges of harassment without material evidence or convincing corroboration; the professor’s life has already been shattered, his reputation and character apparently altered, before such questions of evidence have ever been considered”, which is a direct statement regarding Mamet’s positioning towards this matter, in the sense that the American author “seems to attack the harassment problem from the traditional Americanist perspective of the presumption of innocence and the burden of proof, and to imply that decisions made before such due process are probably unjust” (105), which makes the idea of truth, as well as the idea of utopia, “ultimately deferred” (105).

Granted, by becoming “the other”, John finds himself in the position of succumbing to the political correctness that he still does not accept as being totally “correct” – and which could be interpreted in different ways, although David Mamet’s text does not take any side - while the failed Utopia that Mamet suggests becomes, through the linguistical “weapon” of political correctness, the representation of a redefined system, whose social, cultural and even ethical values are adapted and reshaped in order to represent and support the illusion of a sense of equality, but one that could easily turn into a weapon of oppression. As the political correctness “destroys” John’s life, the failed utopia of academia becomes the failed utopia of the American ethical system, which applies not only in the social and cultural interactions between professors and students, but also in the simplest conversations, in which any “wrongfully” used word or a certain action might have, in the eyes of a certain public, devastating repercussions. Nevertheless, there is no “real” winner here – and I would argue that taking sides is not necessarily the point here. No one really “wins” from these types of interactions because, as David Kennedy Sauer (2004: 221) argues, the real culprit here is the system itself: “When the professor has control and power, he is distorted by the system; when the student has it, she is distorted as well. The fault is not in the individual psychology of each character, as it would have been in modernist realism, but, rather, in the system as a whole” (221). Brenda Murphy (2004: 136) argues the same, while also highlighting the tragic (and subtle) undertone of the play: “Nobody wins, although, with Mamet directing, John does achieve a level of enlightenment. The tragic irony, of course, is that it comes too late”.

Now it is time to look at another two-character play of the American playwright, a play in which the balance of power alternates once again from one side to “the other” and, therefore, may change the perception regarding the configuration of the American judicial system.

***The Anarchist* – A Case of Justice Versus Justice**

The second play written by David Mamet that we will analyze in this paper is one of his least notable works of drama, especially judging by its critical reception. Treated with mixed reviews by the specialists and not widely discussed in the academia, *The Anarchist* follows the same formula that the American playwright has applied in the case of *Oleanna*. This time, however, we will not be discussing political correctness or gender equality in the academia, but we will focus on another controversial subject, one that has been continuously debated for decades (or even centuries) and still represents a “hot” topic in the American society, which is the American judicial system and the ways in which the concept of justice is being understood, applied and, last but not least, whether its efficiency may or may not be placed under a question mark. As we have mentioned before, *The Anarchist* tells the story of two characters, both finding themselves in an office of a women’s penitentiary, but on different sides of the law. The first character is Ann, a prison parole review officer, who finds herself in a position of having to make a very difficult choice. The subject of her choice is Cathy, a prisoner who was convicted for killing two police officers in the middle of a riot, while being a member of a radical movement. Cathy has served thirty-five years in prison, during which she claims that she has become a different person and argues that she discovered God. Her purpose is to obtain a clemency from Ann, in order to visit her dying father, but the final decision belongs to Ann. From this point forward, the play goes on as a conversation between the two, which turns into an investigation initiated by the prison parole officer, while Cathy tries to defend her position and brings up a series of arguments meant to convince Ann that she is eligible for a short-term release.

Judging by the plot, we might argue that Mamet’s intention could be to expose certain aspects of the judicial system, focusing on those aspects in which the spirit of the law might appear as a subjective matter, especially when we correlate it with the matter of morality. From this perspective, Cathy’s interrogation may be perceived as a direct confrontation between the power of justice, represented by Ann and the struggle of the accused, which takes the form of Cathy’s own attempt at self-defense. Regarding the matter of ethics in the judicial system, Theodore Kubicek (2006: 5) argues, in a book called *Adversarial Justice: America’s Court System On Trial*, that lawyers and law students “are endlessly taught ethics, but these teachings are not concerned with truth in the courtroom but rather with irrelevant matters such as civility, evidentiary matters, trial tactics, lawyers’ collegiality, client relationships, so-called professionalism (actually a meaningless word under America’s adversarial system), and billing practices”. From the discoveries based on the evidence that the text suggests, we might argue that Ann represents the epitome of trial tactics. While she appears to be the calculated figure of the judicial system, Cathy is constantly trying to deconstruct Ann’s appearance of an objective, professional and impartial “judge”. By trying to take advantage of the knowledge that she gathered in her thirty-five years of conviction, Cathy

becomes the atypical representative of the figure of rebellion. From a member of a radical movement that tries to create chaos by sheer physical force and assault, Cathy is now in a position where she uses the weapons of the system in an attempt to overcome her adversary. Therefore, the power struggle between the two women who find themselves on different sides of the law turns into a verbal duel, in which the stakes revolve around the ways in which they relate to one another, both as prisoner versus parole officer, accuser versus defendant and, last but not least, state versus individual. Thus, we can argue that *The Anarchist* could be interpreted as a play that revolves around the failed utopia of the judicial system:

CATHY: No, it's not all right. Or am I meant to be perpetually persecuted . . .

ANN: But . . .

CATHY: No. No. What does it mean? That someone has «said» this or that? Or «mouthed doctrine»? It's words. It's sounds. It changes nothing.

ANN: It's mere words.

CATHY: That's right.

ANN: But you acted upon them.

CATHY: That's not what I was tried for. Unless it was a political crime. Was it a political crime?

Ann: . . . I.

CATHY: No, if my "views" could not be adduced in mitigation of my crime they cannot be adduced now to extend my . . .

ANN: I . . .

CATHY: . . . to extend my punishment. Separate the speech, which you declare was mere foolishness.

ANN: . . . except . . .

CATHY: . . . and I agree with you.

ANN: . . . except . . .

CATHY: No. There is the pamphlet. And there is the crime. If they are linked, then I am being persecuted. If I am only being punished for the crime with which I was charged. I have served my term. I beg your pardon. You were speaking (Mamet 2013: 40).

As we can notice from this paragraph, the social and cultural values regarding the American justice are once again questioned and challenged by the two protagonists. While Ann represents the power of the authority, who establishes the nature and paradigm of the judicial system, with its clear and rigorous structure, Cathy becomes a symbol of the "other", in which justice might be interpreted in a different way, by adapting the contents of the law to personal experiences and the right to rehabilitation in which she appears to believe. As the play goes on, we notice that Cathy tries to take over the conversation by imposing her own beliefs regarding the judicial system. Analogue to *Oleanna*, we might argue that Mamet illustrates another shift of power between the two protagonists. If, in the case of the first play, John represents the figure of power in the beginning only for the roles to switch from

the second act until the end, in the case of *The Anarchist*

Cathy seems to be taking the role of the dominant figure in the conversation between her and Ann. As she gradually takes control over the conversation by constantly interrupting Ann and displaying a strong, powerful and confident attitude, Cathy reverses the roles of accuser and culprit by questioning her conviction and by taking a stand against Ann and, even more, against her social and cultural values, as well as the social and cultural values that define the American judicial system. As Barry Goldensohn (2014: 128) suggests, the conflict generated by the two characters in the play revolves around what he calls a “reflex sympathy for the prisoner in our culture” (128) which can be understood and interpreted as “an uneasy tension between the position of the characters in this play facing over a serious conflict of values. Pity and terror, yes; automatic sympathy, no” (128), while adding that “It is clear that many people turn more conservative with age and the arrival of an amplified sense of human frailties, moral and intellectual, the distrust of absolute conviction, and the development of a sufficiently expanded sense of evil” (128). While Cathy discovers and tries to amplify these human frailties that she identifies in Ann’s attitude towards her, Ann’s efforts to overcome Cathy’s power become an effort to protect and justify her social and cultural values in front of the prisoner. By becoming the accused, Ann forces herself back into regaining the position of power through a direct confrontation with Cathy, but finds herself into a precarious position as soon as Cathy challenges the power structures of the State, accusing the American judicial system of a certain incapability to rehabilitate its prisoners, while trying to exploit what she considers to be a malfunction of the judicial system:

CATHY: Those who have served. (Pause) A Life term. Those who have...

ANN: Killed.

CATHY: I have no problem with the word. And have served, a term, of thirty-five years...

ANN: Your sentence is indeterminate.

CATHY: . . . may be released.

ANN: Because?

CATHY: Through lack of opposition. By the State allowing the usual definitions of the Indeterminate Sentence. Through judicial lethargy, or sloth, indeed, through chance or mischance. . .

ANN: But . . .

CATHY: But finally, if that release seems to the State the path least likely to bring upon itself additional work, anxiety, or trauma.

ANN: Yes. That’s right. And my question to you is: How could it be otherwise? Unless you were «the special case»; and why would that be. (Mamet 2013: 49-50).

As they both believe in the idea of justice, the perspectives regarding the judicial system are different. While Cathy believes in her right to receive a parole due to the fact that she has been incarcerated for over thirty-five years, Ann firmly believes that Cathy must remain incarcerated as punishment for

murdering the police officers. Their conflict reveals what the failed utopia of justice represents. Analogue to *Oleanna*, the two characters reveal the subjective aspect of the judicial system, as well as the ways in which Ann and Cathy's visions regarding the American justice are different, although they refer to the same concept. According to Markus Kirk Dubber (2006: 2),

it is not only in extermination, or even in crime more generally speaking, that we see failures of the sense of justice. The response to fundamental denials of personhood in crime itself puts great strains on the sense of justice. The temptation to deny the relevance of our sense of justice to those who denied it to others, and for that reason, is great. Not only crime, then, may disengage the sense of justice, so may its punishment. In fact, some might mistake the urge to deny an offender our sense of justice for a command of the sense of justice itself, confusing vengeance with justice, and incapacitation with punishment (2006: 2).

However, in *The Anarchist*, the sense of justice is not only being questioned through and because of the crimes that Cathy committed, but also due to the possible ways in which a symbol of anarchy such as Cathy might represent a threat to the entire American society for the fact that her social, political and cultural values might find their way beyond the gates of the penitentiary. From this point on, the interrogation becomes a struggle for the power of ideas and the ways in which Cathy's social and cultural values might replace Ann's, just as Carol's political correctness has become the dominant paradigm in *Oleanna*. Here, the dispute between Ann and Cathy reaches the point in which both characters consider "the other" to be harmful, both for themselves and for the values they represent:

CATHY: «. . . by what universal test do we know power?»

ANN: It comes from a gun?

CATHY: How else have you held me here? Through «natural right»? Through "a consensus of the governed"? People with guns were paid to keep me here. As someone Feared me.

ANN: . . . they feared your ideas.

CATHY: Ideas more vicious and violent than mine are entertained every day, in the minds of the most peaceful people on Earth. Doctrines more seditious are taught in the schools. They feared me.

ANN: As they should (Mamet 2013: 56-57).

Therefore, from an anarchist who fights the policemen and becomes incarcerated for years, Cathy turns into an anarchist of ideas, by challenging the pillars of the American judicial system. However, if we look at Ann, we might argue that, from Cathy's perspective, she can be interpreted as an anarchist as well, due to the fact that her "anarchy" involves a fight against Cathy's perspectives regarding the "broken" American judicial system. Although the title does not suggest which one of the two protagonist is the actual anarchist – although we are expected to believe that Cathy plays this role, mostly due to her actions and the reason why she is serving her sentence – we might argue that

Ann could be interpreted as a sort of “anarchist” that keeps oppressing Cathy in her quest for freedom, opposing her social values and trying to deconstruct and “destroy” her system of values in order to withstand Cathy’s “attacks” and annihilate not just her potentially threatening attitude, but rather her way of thinking. This could be noticed even closer if we look at the ending of the play. Although Cathy appears to have obtained the power that she needed, Ann maintains her decision and decides not to offer Cathy the parole:

CATHY: You have just sentenced me to a life in prison.

ANN: Yes?

CATHY: For speaking my mind.

ANN: Is that what I did?

(Pause.)

CATHY: Do you believe in mercy? What have you done in your long «service» to the State that was a human act.

ANN: I’ve done this. (Pause) They’ll take you back to your cell (Mamet 2013: 58).

Although the balance of power appears to have been restored to Ann and, implicitly, to the American judicial system, we might argue that Cathy achieves a small personal victory through the fact that she managed to determine Ann to doubt her personal beliefs and perspectives regarding the judicial systems. Although the play ends with Cathy being taken back to her cell, we cannot say for certain which one of the two characters has won the battle for power. Although we might argue that each of them has won something as much as they have lost – with Ann winning the confrontation, but losing a part of her trust in the system and with Cathy managing to get inside Ann’s head and making her question the authority but losing the opportunity to leave the prison for a certain amount of time – both Ann and Cathy remain the exponents of the battles that the American system of justice has been dealing with for decades, having massive repercussions when it comes to the sociopolitical and cultural paradigms of the American society. However, Mamet does not imply that justice has or has not been served in this case, letting his audience interpret the interrogation process that takes place between Ann and Cathy as they wish. In the end, none of them could be declared the “winner”, as this remains one hypothetical case, a mirrored image of thousands similar cases that take place every single day in the United States, cases that brought the American system of justice in the form that it functions nowadays. The failed utopia becomes, therefore, the failure of the American system of justice to fully integrate and efficiently address the rehabilitation of the prisoners, while the discrepancy and the difficulty of communication between the state and the incarcerated ones, just like the discrepancy between Ann and Cathy, keeps increasing from one case to another.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to illustrate the ways in which *Oleanna* and *The Anarchist* can be discussed as two representations of a “failed utopia”, based on the ways in which the two plays challenge several structures of the American society, while showing that the quest for power in those structures influences and modifies the sociopolitical and cultural paradigm of the American traditional values as we know them, revealing that the American society consists of “failed utopias” which resemble the struggle for the positions of power that we have previously demonstrated in the two plays. Whether we talk about political correctness, gender equality or the ethics of the judicial system as we know it, Mamet’s views regarding the American sociopolitical and cultural values is that these structures are more dynamic than they might seem at first sight and what we might call “controversial” refers to a series of issues that cannot be avoided and that must be discussed and shown exactly because they are real and more present in the American society than we want to admit. As Marc Silverstein (1995: 104) suggests, “Mamet’s sense that theatre stages the contents of America’s collective unconscious and, through that staging, translates those contents into consciousness suggests (although he does not make this point himself) that theatre can demystify and perform a kind of ideology critique of the desires and values inhabiting our national unconscious”, one that “is a political unconscious, rather than some amorphous psychic entity” (104). Thus, Mamet’s critique is pointed directly to all of us, through these four characters and paradigms that he depicts in the two plays that we have analyzed in this paper. In the end, we might argue that the American society is not a static, but rather a dynamic space, which keeps adapting and evolving from one decade to another, which means that in order for us to truly understand the ways in which the American sociopolitical and cultural values can be defined, we need to understand that the United States of America is represented by John, as well as by Carol, of Ann and, last but not least, of Cathy, all of them being the embodiment of what it means to be a part of the American society.

References

- DUBBER, Markus Dirk 2006: *The Sense of Justice: Empathy in Law and Punishment*, New York University Press.
- GARNER, Stanton B. 2000: *Framing the Classroom: Pedagogy, Power*, *Oleanna*, in “Theatre Topics”, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 39–52.
- GOLDENSOHN, Barry 2014: *The Law Plays of David Mamet Race and The Anarchist*, in “The Yale Review”, vol. 102, no. 4, pp. 117–28.
- KUBICEK, Theodore L. 2006: *Adversarial Justice: America’s Court System On Trial*, New York, Algora Publishing.
- KULMALA, Dan 2007: “*Let’s Take the Mysticism out of It, Shall We?*”: *Habitus as Conflict in Mamet’s Oleanna*, in “Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism”, pp. 101–121.
- LEA, John 2009: *Political Correctness and Higher Education: British and American Perspectives*, Routledge.
- MAMET, David 1993: *Mamet on Playwriting*, “The Dramatists Guild Quarterly”, 30:2,

- pp. 8-14.
- MAMET, David 1993: *Oleanna: A Play*, Vintage Books.
- MAMET, David 2013: *The Anarchist: A Play*, Theatre Communications Group.
- MURPHY, Brenda 2004: *Oleanna: Language and Power*, in Bigsby, Christopher (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 124-137.
- PORTER, Thomas 2000: *Postmodernism and Violence in Mamet's Oleanna*, in "Modern Drama", vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 13-31.
- QUINN, Michael L. 2004: *Anti-Theatricality and American Ideology: Mamet's Performative Realism* in Bloom, Harold (ed.) *David Mamet. Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, pp. 93-110.
- SAUER, David Kennedy 2004: *Oleanna and The Children's Hour: Misreading Sexuality on the Post/Modern Realistic Stage* in Bloom, Harold (ed.) *David Mamet. Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, pp. 203-226.
- SILVERSTEIN, Marc 1995: *We're Just Human: 'Oleanna' and Cultural Crisis*, "South Atlantic Review" 60 (2), pp. 103-120.