

**Deconstructing American Values and Moralities in Wendy  
Wasserstein's *An American Daughter***

Submitted by

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### **Abstract**

This research studies the Deconstruction of American Values and Moralities in Wendy Wasserstein's *An American Daughter*. It examines how Wasserstein's *An American Daughter* can be seen as a means of exposing the structural contradiction dwelling at the core of the American society. It anticipates such reading through the use of Jacques Derrida's concept of *Pharmakon*. The results reveal the correlation between Wasserstein's disruptive thinking and Derrida's deconstructive approach.

**Key words:** Deconstruction, An American Daughter, Wasserstein, Derrida, Pharmakon

This paper will entirely argue that Wasserstein's *An American Daughter* can be read as a way of exposing the structural contradiction that dwells at the core of American society. Then, by introducing Jacques Derrida's concept of *pharmakon*, it becomes obvious that Wasserstein questions and undermines American mainstream values, moralities, beliefs and loyalties at the time of Clinton era through dismantling stereotypical representation of women on stage. Wendy Wasserstein offers a new vision of theater and asks the readers/audience to look at the ambiguities of their society and their ideas, even when things seem, at first glance, clear and fixed. Wasserstein shares Derrida's articulation of deconstruction: it "improves our ability to think critically and



to see more readily the ways in which our experience is determined by ideologies of which we are unaware" (Tyson 241).

Derrida assumes that the nature of the Western tradition of thought, language, culture since Aristotle and Plato has generated an entire history of binary oppositions: a tendency to form things in dualism in which one half of the binary is always privileged over the other. Therefore, Derrida's deconstructive strategy is to show how binaries can be dismantled to the point of undecidability which "problematizes any final decision about the meaning of a text" (Powell, *Deconstruction for Beginners* 30). Hence, Drawing on Derrida's deconstructive approach in reading "Plato's pharmacy," one could notice the similar turn of Derrida's structural model in reading Wasserstein's play *An American Daughter*.

Derrida traces Plato's privileging of speech over writing in Plato's essay *Phaedrus* which appeared in *Dissemination*. In this essay, Plato presents his ideas in the form of the myth of Theuth to explain why speech is better and more authentic than writing. Theuth offers his invention; writing, to the God-King of Egypt as a gift and a cure which helps the Egyptians become "wiser and to improve their memory" (Silverman 19). But the King Thamus receives it as a poison rather than a cure because, according to him, writing will not produce wisdom, but "it will teach the people to rely



on alien, external marks and to forget the true interior knowledge that is written in the soul; that of the spoken word” (Silverman 19). Besides, he goes on to compare speech and writing to good and evil memory. Writing is dangerous, he claims, the “evil” kind of memory serves as a “mere reminder” (Powell, *Derrida for Beginners* 75) and a substitution of true and essential knowledge, while “good” memory is associated with speech and the internal capacity to remember.

For Derrida, there is an oppositional force which dominates Plato's text; speech/writing and good/evil, etc. These oppositions demonstrate that writing was associated with enhancing forgetfulness and imitation because one repeats without knowledge, while speech was viewed as representing knowledge and truth. Derrida takes these binaries and dismantles the text by focusing on a single word, the ‘pharmako’. The word pharmakon appears in the myth when Theuth praises writing as a pharmakon (i.e. a remedy). Theuth presents writing to the God-King as a way to improve their memory. But the king refuses his gift and considers writing a poison for memory rather than a cure. For Derrida, Theuth and the king concentrate on one aspect of the pharmakon which figures the significant nature of the effects of the pharmakon. According to Derrida, "the pharmakon produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth "(Dissemination 103).



Derrida is neither accepting nor rejecting the good or the evil side of writing. Rather, Derrida subverts Plato's privileging of speech over writing in "Plato's Pharmacy" through a detailed analysis of Theuth's notion of the 'pharmakon' showing that "this reversal is already at play in Plato's text" (Silverman 22). Derrida explains the pharmakon as a "Greek word that includes among its meanings poison, medicine, magic potion" (Position 70). He defines the term as a "double-edged word" (Of Grammatology xlix), which possesses "no meaning and cannot be channelled into a definition" (Of Grammatology lxxi), so it is "neither the cure nor the poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside, neither speech nor writing" (Positions 43). Derrida observes that the translation of pharmakon has a problematic aspect because it signifies two opposite meanings and both of the positive and negative connotations of the term pharmakon are linked and inseparable. One cannot, ultimately, distinguish "the medicine from the poison, the good from the evil, the true from the false, the inside from the outside, the vital from the moral, the first from the second, etc" (Dissemination 211).

Consequently, Derrida depends on the double bind of this word to overturn Plato's entire philosophical tradition. According to him, the meaning of pharmakon is not fixed because "writing as pharmakon is both poison *and* cure and *neither* poison *nor* cure" (Powell, *Derrida for Beginners* 83) which results in an undecidability of its



meaning. And it announces ambiguity “by bearing in it the other of meaning which effectively destabilises, its location, translation and definition” (Wolfreys 40). But, Derrida does not merely invert the priority from speech-writing to writing-speech or from good-evil to evil-good; instead he dismantles all the binary distinctions that organize Plato's text, to the point where opposition itself “gives way to a process where opposites merge in a constant undecidable exchange of attributes” (Norris, *Derrida* 35). In this sense, “writing, which had been pushed to the outside, marginalized, is now suddenly seen to be in the very heart of the interior” (Powell, *Derrida for Beginners* 80).

Hence, Derrida assures that “translators should look at how pharmakon (or any writings) signifies, rather than trying to determine and fix what it signifies” (Powell, *Derrida for Beginners* 84) because the pharmakon deconstructs the idea of center which is a significant point in terms of any questioning of the values of a binary opposition. This determination of pharmakon as a double edged word; which is not only signifying cure, good, inside, interior, and true but also bearing poison, evil, outside, exterior and false at the same time, informs Wasserstein's questioning the American society.



*An American Daughter* opened in April 1997 On Broadway sheds light on the critical large issues of the early Clinton era, 1990: “The Nanny gate” scandal (Balakian, *Reading the Plays* 139). The situation of career oriented women who are trying to defend their identity as women in a world full of contradictions and obstacles. This scandal had been presented by Time magazine and The New York Times and unfortunately Zoë Baird and then Kimba Wood obliged to withdraw their nominations for Attorney General because the press declared that they had employed illegal immigrants to take care of their children, and they did not pay their Social Security tax. Their withdrawal revealed the larger picture of the nature of the American society and its moralities and principles. Besides, it became obvious that women were still marginalized in the mainstream. The status of professional American women is still charged with child care and family relations, rather than about women's qualifications to sustain work in public office. They are still evaluated on a binary scale of good versus bad. On the contrary, Wasserstein's heroines stand in sharp contrast to this common evaluation of women defying any attempt of binary categorization.

According to Derrida the inversion of the opposing terms of any binary opposition is not considered a result and does not produces a final solution but it rather produces an unexpected gap, a new concept and a new ambiguous moment. This moment of ambiguity “often starts at a given point of weakness in the discourse”





(Leitch 182). This is expressed in writing, according to Derrida, as deconstructive aporia. An aporia, according to Christopher Norris, is a blind spot or “moment of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean” (Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* 19). The notion of the primacy of man over woman, appearance over reality, good over evil, interior over exterior and so on is a similarly aporetic structure. The Western philosophical tradition relies upon that the second part of the opposition is the marginalized one. Thus, Derrida suggests that a violent binary hierarchy like man/woman is “so familiar an argument that we would accept it readily if we did not stop to think about it” (Of Grammatology xvi). *An American Daughter* interrogates this perspective by disrupting the patriarchal ideology; the logocentric system which deems the male as the dominant half of the binary. Wasserstein challenges the means, the manners, and matters of traditional representation of women with patriarchal structure by exposing the invisible barriers and obstacles which face modern women's opportunities in public arena in America, highlights the way the community views and considers women and reveals the true concepts of American ideology at that time.

The play takes place over the course of two weeks in September 1994. “It is part political satire and part morality tale” (Balakian, *a feminist voice* 225) which centers on



a critical moment in the life of Dr. Lyssa Dent Hughes, an idealistic liberal, doctor in her forties. Wasserstein here creates other cultural representations of the female identity and offers Lyssa a way out into a new order that breaks with the mainstream culture. The standard reading of *An American Daughter* considers Lyssa at the top of the pyramid; she is the presidential nominée for Surgeon General. Wasserstein presents an image of the main female character who challenges the patriarchal order by being “a woman of obvious importance” (Ben Brantley, online).

Lyssa seems to conquer man's world, “has it all”, and most of all being a perfect fit. She is a descendent of Ulysses S. Grant and the daughter of a conservative Republican Indiana senator-Alan Hughes. She is a wife of Walter Abrahamson; a liberal sociology professor and author of an influential book on liberalism called *Towards a Lesser Elite* whereas he has not published serious work after that, and a loving mother of two wonderful boys. Besides, her long friendship with Dr. Judith Kauffman a successful African-American Jewish professor of oncology who is unhappy and depressed about not having children and unable to “maintain life or stop death” (44). In addition to that, the first lady of the United States is one of her former college-classmates. From the point of view of Senator Alan Hughes, “My daughter was always a do-gooder...I hope that reporter realizes how lucky this administration is to get her” (33). It seems that Lyssa is a perfect person as a daughter, a wife, a mother,



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and moreover a successful professional career woman. So, dramatically she is the most important link between different lines of action and participating equally in all of them. She is the dramatist's most important device in preserving the unity of the play.

Lyssa's passionate search for perfection opens the gate to look at the harsh brutality of the American society and figures out what is happening out there. Through the realistic eyes of a professional working woman, Lyssa is obliged to face the either/or logic of her society throughout a televised interview with her at her home. Wasserstein has chosen to present her heroine throughout the media to provoke the power mainstream structure of the American society and to mirror what the American principles, trends and values have become. Hence, Timber Tucker, a TV reporter interviews Lyssa so ruthlessly.

At a given moment in act1, scene 4, at the brunch before the televised interview, the long standard life of Lyssa which seemed solid and secure is now confused and contradicted. Walter incalculably says that Lyssa once ignored or misplaced jury summons. Then, Morrow McCarthy, a gay conservative family friend with a strong anti-abortion, says this information in the interview. Over the next few days the mass media attacks her and she becomes all of a sudden the target of public opinion. In addition to that, Lyssa makes a public remark about her mother as being “the kind of an



ordinary Indiana housewife who took pride in her icebox cakes and cheese pimento canapes” (37). After this remark New York Post headlines read, “Dr. Icebox Shops” (47) which complicate the situation and makes it worse. Lyssa is caught up in terrible circumstances where things become absolutely catastrophic.

Lyssa's campaign turns into a battle and the media makes of it a scandal overnight. It seems that when it comes to politics and media, everything is brought to light whether public or private. The press does not care who Lyssa really is or what she really believes in, or what she can do for the Americans, but what matters is how to spark it and make use of it. There is no possible interpretation for what is happening except that Lyssa has been judged according to the confused, mixed, fake and hidden convictions of her society rather than her qualifications as a public nominee for a higher position. In this regard, the borders between appearance/essence are broken down where both of them are mixed. Act 1, scene 2 begins with Walter watching television and the news anchor announces that Lyssa's nomination happens because of the death of Surgeon General Dr. David Burns in a plane crash and the defeated nomination of Dr. Charles McDermott. He never mentions her actions as healthcare administrator or her conviction of the “public health is good government” (15). Rather, he emphasizes the apparent side of her privilege heritage; Lyssa is the daughter of a conservative



Senator Alan Hughes and a descendant of Ulysses S. Grant. In this sense, Lyssa is identified through American political patriarchy, which strips her of her own identity.

Progressively, in the course of the play, Lyssa has to do with politics which does not mean simply power, principles, moralities, values or content. She is dealing with hypocrite society that appreciates appearance and performance over essence and content. This means that, her relation with her society is never simple; it is filtered. Lyssa is forced to adopt another strategy which is, in reality, not her own. In act 2, scene 1, Walter urges Lyssa to listen to her father's political consultant Billy Robbins; “the best spin control man in the Senate” (65). Billy coaches Lyssa and helps her overcome the situation. Billy advises her to depend on the sense of feminism not on her liberal views because “Basically, Americans will forgive a wife who with the help of her loving family overcomes a personal deficiency” (66). She ought to avoid all feminist issues and emphasize family values instead of her liberal, elitist and political views in her televised interview as getting elected is “just a question of knowing what the people want, giving it to them and then getting on with it” (66).

Besides, he urges her to hold the interview in the kitchen which feels more “homey” (50) in order to give the impression that her family supports her. In this regard, her life is programmed for her and not simply prescribed. Everything she does is assigned and



decided previously in order to serve a fake ideology. Accordingly, Billy asks Lyssa to be another person and advises her to reinforce traditional female gender roles because it is the only way to save her career. In that case, one could say that hypocrisy presupposes truth and principles; appearance presupposes reality and essence, and performance presupposes content and efficiency. She is only defined by apparent and deceptive notions which emphasize the confused, mixed messages and beliefs of her society and the deterioration and shallowness of the American norms.

The interview that conducted with Lyssa's family in act 2, scene 3 and entitled “An American Daughter: A Family under Siege” (62) reflects the real nature of the American society. Timber as a TV reporter cannot miss up the chance. Instead of emphasizing Lyssa's efficiency, knowledge and abilities which qualify her to be the physician of the nation, Timber focuses on her private life and her missed jury duty as a core point. He asks brutal, private and irrelevant questions about her mother, her father's fourth wife and whether she is too perfect for the American public. He is clouding the issue in order to sway public opinion and provoke public anger. This is representative of what the American press and government are becoming today. Americans do not really care for law enforcement systems, efficiency, unity, order or content; what they really care about is the apparent image of society—form. So his questions lead Lyssa to evil and passivity where she forms disorder against order.



Tucker insists on defining the problem as “a crime” (63), but Alan describes it just as an “oversight” (63). Then, Timber uses Lyssa's statements about her mother to undermine her: “Did you feel her horizons were limited?” When Lyssa challenges the question, Timber responds: “many women in America feel your attitude towards your mother is your attitude towards them” (65). Lyssa becomes very angry about the irrelevant questions to her qualifications for Surgeon General which turn apart opinions and views. But Timber continues attacking Lyssa making from her position a national case to seek his own selfish profits in his career. He accuses Lyssa of thinking herself “too good for public life” (66), but Lyssa sees prejudice against women's sense of perfection in his comment and answers him as follows:

There's nothing quite so satisfying as erasing the professional competency of a woman, is there?... That kind of hardworking woman deserves to be hung out to dry. That's a parable the Indiana housewives can tell their daughters with pride. They can say for those of you girls who thought the Lyssa Dent Hughes generation made any impact, you're wrong! Statistically they may have made an impact but they're still twisting in the wind just like the rest of us (67).



Lyssa's answer undermines the most basic binary oppositions that dominate the mainstream culture of the American society; the mind/body, good/evil, man/woman, true/false and inside/outside. While her society is trying to diminish and marginalize her and render her the qualities of the inferior part, she breaks borders and takes the side of good, true, knowledge, reason and consciousness. This confirms an oppositional ambiguity within these dualisms. The play ruptures these traditional contradictions which are thought to characterize the discourse of logocentric reason.

Lyssa reaches a state of ambiguous responsibility: on the one hand towards her contemporary political norms and ideals; and on the other hand towards her own convictions, ideology and feminism's promises. Lyssa wants to serve in public life but not at the cost of her beliefs. In essence, she chooses to fight it her own way. Whether to cheat her values and principles or stand for them; the choice is so hard. If her decision is simple or if she knows that the best thing to strive for is this position, the choice, then, would be straightforward. But the fact is that her nomination and her decision are two folded and are bearing double standards. So she shows a strong rejection to this political mainstream with its deterioration of moralities and values by taking off her headband during the interview. It is a mark that she does not accept this masquerade or promote this conditional identity, or subject to her society's contradictory principles. This is of course true in the sense that she withdraws her





nomination at the end of the play. Lyssa feels like she lives in a world where none of the known conventions holds any longer. She realizes that their values turn out to be just as dogmatic as the ones they were striving against. Therefore, the boundary between appearance/essence blurs. Wasserstein shows how the American mainstream culture at that time is framed by both fact and illusion which challenges assumptions of objectivity, truth, and authority.

In this regard, Wasserstein questions what is real and who has the authority to decide what a true representation is and what true principles, moralities and values should be. Lyssa suggests that the landscapes of private/public and reality/appearance spheres, and the borders which divide them, are arbitrary, constructed and fragile. Lyssa blurs these boundaries by choosing not to be associated with either the values of the media or with an androcentric public sphere. Her withdrawal highlights the future of American justice, attitudes and trends. She tells Timber, "I really wanted that job. I would have been good" (68). Taking her decision before the election stresses the power of the media and its deterioration. As towards the end of the play Timber Tucker informs Lyssa about his broadcasting theory: "Whatever is happening this moment won't be happening; three minutes later. So, in the long run, how important is it? " But she answers him ironically: "To the person it happened to it's a lifetime. It's a whole memoir" (68). His words symbolize the confused powers, contradicted principles and



mixed aims of media and makes Lyssa more aware of the ambiguity and fragmentation of her society.

*An American Daughter* “is about living at time when principles take second place to pragmatics...Virtual reality replaces reality itself” (Bigsby 365). In that vein, Lyssa realizes that it is not a day of freedom, democracy or perfection; rather it is a day of minimizing the future and clearing up the deterioration of her society. At the end of the play, Lyssa's conservative father, Senator Alan expresses this idea to Lyssa:

There's some idea of America out there right now that I just can't grab onto. I know I'm supposed to have opinions based on the latest polls, and not personal convictions or civil debate. It doesn't intimidate me. But it's certainly not our most illuminating or honest hour. (70)

Wasserstein exposes the sordidness of life in America which seems to have lost its moral compass, its progressive values, liberalism, Social injustice, and lost touch with its role models. In this sense, *An American Daughter* is not “an accommodation and entertaining” play but “a sort of angry play” (Cohen 259). Lyssa’s nomination and withdrawal are significant because they expose the hypocrisy in politics, the continuing backlash against feminist women, and the media’s contribution to this all.



It is important to realize that the text of *An American daughter* is more complex than just distributing all common appearance of women on stage because it discusses deeper ideas and deconstructs the most basic standards of the American society throughout Lyssa's nomination. In terms of the deconstructive reading, Lyssa's nomination, her interview with Tucker and the "jurygate" scandal signify how the American basic ideals turn upside down or in other words it echoes deconstruction in "carrying out several gestures which can seem either contradictory or in tension with one another" (Winter 7-8). Hence, the text of *An American Daughter* is "at war with itself" (Barry 69). Upon this "key words" (Lodge and Wood 64), the American mainstream claimed culture, politics, moralities, values, loyalties and principles unravel to the point of becoming undecidables. The term signals the "play of heterogeneous or doubled signifiers" which "refuse definitive ordering or successful totalisation" (Leitch 99).

By playing on the significant meaning of Lyssa's nomination and the effect of "jurygate" scandal, one can undermine the oppositional structures of the American society and expose how principles, priorities, feminist idealism, liberal ideas and conservative codes explode into a multiplicity of meanings, denoting the notion of an undecidable. Up to this, the argument stands that the character of Lyssa is a source of comedy and ultimately tragedy, that she signals a reversal of a binary opposition; Lyssa



who has been pushed to the outside is now suddenly at the heart of the interior facing the duplicity of her society. When she takes the part of the privilege side, her clear and obvious principles, her relationships with others, her attitude towards her community turn down. It derives Lyssa to conclude that she “does not know what really smart means anymore” (56) and Quincy acknowledges that “the Lyssa Dent Hughes generation is still twisting in the wind” (69).

Consequently, reading Lyssa against the grain like this liberates a more “productive, fine-grained, distinctly deconstructive reading” (Caputo 76) of the character as someone who is aware of the structural inequalities in society and is unwilling to take up her assigned role at the bottom of the social pyramid. Therefore the term jurygate can be used to undermine previous assertions with regard to American society and demonstrate a collapse of borders, and an image of a knowledgeable, articulate Lyssa who displays profound insights into the working of society, as opposed to the vain and high-handed system portrayed within media and politics. Correspondingly, "Through Lyssa's active political engagement, *An American Daughter* offers a focused perspective on the twisted moral value system of a society that privileges performativity and sensation over content and principle" (Czekay, *Not Hoving It AIL* 41) Hence, seeking Perfection is considered a myth.



This paper indicated the correlation between Wasserstein's disruptive thinking and Derrida's deconstructive approach. Just as Derrida asserts that binary opposition signifies two opposite meanings which display how a text can be dismantled to the point of undecidability, the same applies to Wasserstein *An American Daughter*. The play cannot be locked within male/female, inside/outside, appearance/reality, and true/false dichotomy; there is a sense of openness attached to these oppositions and embodies undecidability. In a sense, Wasserstein deconstructs the either/or logic of the American society by creating characters who embody privileged properties. At the end of the play, Wasserstein shows the hypocrite nature of the American society and reinforces the deterioration and shallowness of the American norms. Wasserstein exposes that selfishness, illusion, disorder, appearance, fragmentation, and ambiguity characterize contemporary American society.

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#### مستخلص الدراسة:

يدرس البحث تفكيك القيم و الأخلاقيات الأمريكية في مسرحية ابنة أمريكية للكاتبة ويندي واسيرستين، وكيف يمكن تناول تلك المسرحية لواسيرستين كوسيلة لكشف التناقض البنيوي الذي يوجد في نواة المجتمع الأمريكي. ويقوم بعرض تلك القراءة من خلال استخدام مفهوم الفارماكون عند جاك دريدا. وتشير نتائج البحث إلى وجود ترابط بين أفكار واسترستين المشوشة ونهج دريدا التفكيكي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التفكيك، ابنة أمريكية، واسيرستين، دريدا، الفارماكون

