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## Theatricality of women's voice: *An Embarrassing Position* by Kate Chopin

**Abstract.** The paper offers an analysis of *An Embarrassing Position*, the only extant and not very well-known theatre play by Kate Chopin. Even though it is only one-act-long, the play does not only contribute to the greatness of the artistry of the author, but it also subtly and wittily raises the question of societal imbalance and women's right to self-deciding. Hence, the aim of this paper is both to expose the theatricality of women's voice embedded in the play validating women's stance and foretelling women's emancipation, and to bring the play to the broader attention of academics as a unique, still underexamined, work of Chopin. In order to establish this light comedy play within a serious domain of women's rights struggle, as well as to inscribe this short piece of work into the long list of Chopin's writings which are pro-feminist in their overtone, the paper uses hermeneutic analysis with elements of Derrida's deconstructionist theory of *différance*, and employs Carl Jung's idea of *synchronicity*. Derrida's deconstruction serves to uncover the inner inconsistencies residing within the humorous lines of the play, whereas *synchronicity* provides the scaffold for the play's events that bonds the analysis elements into one meaningful whole.

**Keywords:** feminist discourse, the cult of domesticity, deconstruction, *différance*, synchronicity.

### 1. Introduction

Chopin has been unequivocally recognised as a prolific short story writer and skilful interpreter of women's lives, an author whose numerous short stories and two novels have been submitted to careful academic scrutiny. Yet besides Chopin's most appreciated works, there is one piece of writing that seems to have eluded scholarly attention, a one-act comedy play *An Embarrassing Position*, which, therefore, this study ventures to examine and, consequently, encourage academic discussion of the play.

The lack of scholarly interest in the play is an important reason but it is not the only motivation for the analysis. It is Chopin's linguistic artistry, which not only presents inconvenient truths about social imbalance and portrays women's emancipatory pursuits, but does it in a humorous and witty manner; it is straightforward but it simultaneously avoids controversy.

Since Chopin's language is simple and unassuming, but also well-articulate and crisp, in voicing deep meanings and constructing multilayered messages, it calls for equally nonconventional tools to uncover the hidden message of the play and to confirm

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the seriousness of Chopin's point, concealed underneath the humorous triviality. Therefore, this hermeneutical analysis resorts to two challenging analytical tools, Derrida's theory of deconstruction and Jung's concept of synchronicity, as these two seem to have the capacity to encompass and highlight the interpretative areas addressed by Chopin and, hence, to disclose the significance, and the prophetic message of the superficially cheerful and overt content of the play.

As far as deconstruction is concerned, the paper mainly draws from the literary aspect of the theory and focuses on the textual interpretation of Chopin's work. Hence, deconstruction is employed to follow the subtle traces of Chopin's radical ideas aimed at disruption of the rhetoric of power that reside beyond the primary concepts and basic meanings of words. Also, deconstruction serves an exposure of fine incongruities that lie at different layers of the play and thus enables one to establish a new language of the play with which Chopin's words can be read out as feministically inspiring. In the course of the analysis, besides the literary dimension, the philosophical dimension of deconstruction is also occasionally addressed, as the paper seeks to expose and subvert the binary oppositions present in the play and to reveal the repressed meanings which aim at changing the hierarchy of social inequality.

Regarding synchronicity, its well-recognised capacity to manifest hermeneutics and to explore the text will be addressed and thus, the foundations for the play's analysis will be established. The idea of synchronicity will connect the traces, meanings and concepts displayed by Derridean deconstruction and will generate these elements into one meaningful whole thus contributing to the exposure of the play's hidden overtone.

The paper begins with setting the scene for the 19<sup>th</sup> century social relationships and the introduction of the ideology of the cult of domesticity prevailing at that time to indicate the social unacceptability and inappropriateness of Eva's, the play's heroine, behaviour and thus, to provide the background for the further scrutiny of Eva's proceedings and ultimately, for the paper's conclusions. After that, the key concepts of the theory of deconstruction and the idea of synchronicity are introduced. Finally, the play's genre, the title, the time, the setting, the characters' names, the plot with particular attention devoted to binary oppositions as well as the play's lines are analyzed. The paper closes with the presentation of the results of the analysis and conclusions.

## **2. The cult of domesticity**

Chopin's writings seem both to be shaped by and to encompass all the ground-breaking events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even though some of them happened either shortly before, or not long after Chopin's birth. Thus, the Civil War, the Suffragettes movement and the First Women's Rights Convention, either were echoed or directly addressed in her works. All these, however, were dealt with to picture the writer's primary concerns, women's freedom and women's right to self expression in all spheres of life, constrained at that time by the American cult of domesticity.

The cult of domesticity was a fossilized and unchallengeable construct which delineated the private and the public for the upper-middle class. It set the rules of conduct and solidified the roles of both a woman and a man, primarily the concepts of wife and

husband, but it delimited women only. At the core of the ideological postulates of the cult of domesticity rested the idea of the pure femininity, shaped by religious rigidity and the natural biological weakness of the female sex. The embodiment of the ideal femininity in real life was the true woman, also called the light of the home, or the flawless angel of the hearth.

The concept of the true woman made 19<sup>th</sup> century females submissive and obedient prisoners of social appropriateness. "If anyone, male or female, dared to temper with the complex of the virtues which made up True Womanhood he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of the civilisation and of the Republic" (Walter 1966: 152). The true woman had to follow four core rules in order to earn social acceptance, esteem, and respect, namely: the rule of piety, the rule of purity, the rule of submissiveness, and that of domesticity.

Piety was believed to be "the most fundamental of all women's virtues and the source of women's strength. (...) It belonged to a woman by divine right, [and it was] a gift of God and nature" (Welter 1966: 152). By the virtue of piety, women bore the single responsibility for "throw[ing heavenly] beams into the naughty world of men" (Welter 1966: 152). Thus, whereas a man could indulge into the materialistic pursuits offered by the booming economy of the industrialisation era, his wife became "a hostage [left behind] to all the values which he held so dear and treated so lightly" (Welter 1966: 151).

The purity rule was as important as the rule of piety. Women were obliged to keep the virtue of chastity until their marriage, and throughout their whole life warned against any undue familiarity with men. "[E]ven such trifling events as sitting with another man in a place that [was] too narrow; read[ing] out of the same book [showing] eagerness to see anything" (Welter 1966: 155), were viewed highly improper and might have condemned a woman to social marginalization. "[A]bsence of purity was unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some low order" (Welter 1966: 154), a fallen woman.

The next rule that was of help in guiding women's proper behaviour, and in shaping it in line with societal demands, was the rule of submission. Submission, like the piety and purity, was considered a solely feminine characteristic, divinely instilled in women by God. By the virtue of submission women were supposed to follow men's whims both in private and social spheres, even when they had to act against their own will. Mrs. Elizabeth Poole Sandford attempted to define women's role in terms of submissiveness in the following way: "A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of inferiority" (Welter 1966: 159), whereas another author of manuals of women's conduct, Clarissa Packard, reminded a woman that she should work in silence, suppress "her talents to her husband's good" and revere "his wishes even when [she] does not his opinions" (Packard in Welter 1966: 160).

The fourth of the set of rules of the true woman, the rule of domesticity, upheld the contemporary state-of-the-art restricting the area of women's activity to family and her home, thus artfully excluding women from all, traditionally-viewed as men's, spheres of civil and political life. A woman had to find "her true dignity and beauty" in household chores in her home, where she was secured "not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind" (Welter 1966: 162).

For the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century, the prolific prescriptive literature addressed to women maintained these highly idealised and much unattainable standards, of socially acceptable womanhood, even though they deprived women of their individuality, and hindered their pursuits for subjectivity. Every 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman was expected to judge herself by the four core rules of the cult of domesticity and also was subject to the scornful judgement by others through being faithful to them. Without the rules “everything was ashes, with them [a true woman] was promised happiness and power” (Welter 1966: 152).

All the above mentioned standards of the ideology of the cult of domesticity amount to a fine litmus paper of the analysis, and thus are applicable to detecting how far-fetched, in terms of social acceptability and the 19<sup>th</sup> century convenience Eve’s behaviour is, and how much Chopin challenges the social order. A night visit of a young single woman paid to a young bachelor seems to push the limits of the 19<sup>th</sup> century appropriateness and could not be otherwise delivered but in the comedy form, hence the assumption adopted in the present paper that the unduly behaviour of the heroine is not merely a misbehaviour of an inexperienced, childish young girl, yet to the contrary, it is the result of a skilful plan of the author to veil the unacceptable and render it in an amusing form.

### 3. Deconstruction

Derrida’s deconstruction belongs to the classics of the contemporary philosophy and literary theory, and as such it has been one of the most thoroughly examined, described, both appreciated and challenged, phenomenon in the academic world. Bearing in mind that nowadays, it appears to have been past its prime, the paper refers to deconstruction as “mature” and a bit “outmoded” theory, yet the one, which still has not said its last word (see: Burzyńska 2013: 13).

Hence, it is the unquestionable power of the textual analysis of deconstruction which exposes the text for multilayered and versatile interpretation that drives the hitherto analysis. The textual demystification and exposure of instability of meaning, tracing the residing within texts inconsistencies, exploring the textual margins, questioning the literal message, reevaluating and provoking, help to reread the text of the play and to establish it both within and beyond the feminist perspective, in Jungian realm of numinous synchronicities.

Apart from the literary aspect of deconstruction, the paper also draws from the philosophical dimension of deconstruction, and thus is concerned with questioning metaphysics of presence and challenging the system of dualistic oppositions that lie at the heart of the metaphysical philosophy. Deconstruction aids the analysis conducted in this paper by disclosing the imbalance residing within the metaphysical system of binaries in order to subvert the unjust dichotomy which has always favored one element over the other.

The major Derridean tool to the practice of deconstruction, the concept of *différance*, is implemented to undermine the literal meaning of the text and to create the variety of possibilities, as well as to announce inherent disparities owing to which the meaning can grow to “a potentially endless chain of signifiers – polysemous, intertextual,

subject to infinite linkages (...), always differential and deferred, never present (...) original unity” (Venuti 2003: 238).

Also, since Chopin assumed the position of an objective, non-marginalizing, and careful observer, deconstruction in the analysis does not aim at questioning Chopin’s statements and message, yet rather at reaching deep down to the layers in which the author could safely convey her message, without being accused of the overt challenge of the ideology of the cult of domesticity, which would have equalled to challenging God’s order. Hence, the analysis ventures to call into question the superficial triviality of the play and to highlight Chopin’s covert message instead, rather than Chopin’s standpoint, and consequently, to make this paper a catalyst for further academic analyses.

#### **4. Synchronicity – “mutual attraction of related objects”**

Carol Jung, a German psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, the founder of analytical psychology and author of a number of major psychological concepts, coined the term *synchronicity* in order to give the name to the phenomenon of mutual attraction of the related objects, also known as an “acausal connecting principle”, to describe an energy-based connection between an individual psyche and the external world (see: Jung 1973).

The concept draws from the assumption that an idea, or conviction born in one’s psyche can be materialized in real world owing to the human’s unconstrained power of creativity. It also implies that human psyche is capable of exerting its will over the matter, and further that both psychic and physical can meet, as they are not susceptible to the three-dimensional world limitations. Hence, one of the basic premises of synchronicity is the psychic relativity of time and distance, which assumes that both the psyche and the material world are primarily two different forms of energy and therefore, they do not need to depend on time or space to occur. What they, however, need to rely on, is a person’s unconscious psychological processes that trigger off the events which then get materialized in the outer world.

Another important assumption of synchronicity is the idea of an undividable unity of matter. According to Jung (1973: 103), matter is not merely a material substance but a compound of interconnected energy fields organized by a pre-existent psyche. Furthermore, both the matter and the spirit co-create the so called *unus mundus*, or the One World, the superordinate level of reality, in which everything pursues harmony. This “unitary domain outside the human categories of space and time, and beyond [human] division of reality into matter and spirit” (van Erkelens 1990: 201), presupposes the existence of a balance force in the universe that strives for stability (see: Main online). Moreover, since synchronicity assumes “the parallelism of time and meaning between psychic and psychophysical events” (Jung 1973: 115), *the divine cosmos*, as *unus mundus* is also called, challenges the commonly-accepted “pre-established harmony, which [always existed] as a universal [natural] order” (Jung 1973: 126) and arises as an empirical manifestation of its universal balance force instead.

In terms of the formal foundations, synchronicity rests on the idea of collective unconscious (see: Jung 1973: 33). As defined by Jung, collective unconscious is a reservoir of the human psyche containing its decisive inherited elements called

archetypes. Archetypes, called also “patterns of behaviours”, are a set of shared concepts existing beyond a person’s unconscious that emerge as the themes or characters of dreams, and which also manifest as beliefs, patterns of thinking, signs, myths, and legends (see: Jung 1973: 20).

The collective unconscious can only be accessed through the unconsciousness hence it only becomes available in the states of oblivion, such as dreams, mediation, or periods of emotional agitation. Furthermore, as it is by means of affects that “a particular content [is allowed] to a supernormal degree of luminosity”, which gives “the unconscious a favorable opportunity to slip into the space vacated” (Jung 1973: 29), the phenomenon of synchronicity requires the co-occurrence of two factors: “an unconscious image that comes into consciousness either directly (i.e., literally) or indirectly (symbolized or suggested), in the form of a dream, idea, or premonition, and an objective situation, which coincides with this content – the one (...) as puzzling as the other” (Jung 1973: 40). Thus the notion of synchronicity emerges as an extreme exemplification of the circumstantiality, whose essence can only be grasped through the subjective personal experience, the one which, however, evades any scientific explanation.

Indeed, for years, the idea of synchronicity has confused scholars as resisting to scientific proof, and extended “the Western world’s core conceptions of nature and the psyche” (Cambray 2009: intro.) to the limits of acceptability. The claims poised by synchronicity have been viewed as lacking scientific standards and deprived of academic ground. However, the situation has changed due to discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century quantum physics, which both confirmed the core premises of Jung’s concept and put synchronicity in a broader frame (see: Cambray 2009, intro.).

Quantum physicists have posited that as it is the energy that creates the basis for the whole material world, things resolve in energetic fields first and only then do they acquire their material form. Moreover, since everything in the universe is interconnected through energetic fields, hence the matter is an indivisible and interrelated tissue, which objects any divisions, and which always pursues unity.

Apart from the quantum physics findings, most recent research in the field of psychology also confirm scientificity of synchronicity, although they challenge the phenomenon’s core, once-mystical, premises. Instead of the mystic numinosity of the co-occurring events new psychodynamic theories postulate the natural background of the phenomenon and associate synchronicity with “significant psychological change—transformation, transcendence, and an expansion of consciousness” (Williams 2010: ix).

The so called naturalistic theories of synchronicities of Faber (1998) and Williams (2010), rest on “the naturalistic understanding of the intricate psychological process assumed to produce (...) seemingly acausal events” (Williams 2010: 108). Faber (in: Williams 2010: 108) posits that “[i]n synchronicities we see (experience) the return of the repressed.” For Williams (2010: 108), “synchronicities function as progressive events arising out of the need for human beings to continually resolve inevitable life problems of being, doing, and becoming by connecting to their idiosyncratic creative process.”

Essentially, in both views, “synchronicities are intimately associated with an individual’s need to provide essential answers to ultimate questions such as who am I, what do I really want, how do I acquire such knowledge, and how best do I put it to use?”

(Williams 2010:112) and as such revolve around the key notions pertinent to human's worldly experience. Hence also, they not only take synchronicity beyond the contested realm of occultism, but they also support the impact of synchronicity on shaping an individual's experience and enhancing an individual's progress both in psychical and social dimensions.

Thus it can be said that both quantum physics as well as synchronicity theories posited by the naturalist lay firm foundations for the scientificity of the phenomenon of synchronicity and facilitate its relevance to the present analysis. Hence, the phenomenon of synchronicity seems applicable in the analysis twofold, on the plot plane, to found an acausal relationship between the events of the play, and further, on the semiotic plane, to establish a connection between the results of the deconstruction analysis and the reflection on Chopin's message. Moreover, even though there may still be voices claiming the lack of academic verifiability of the notion of synchronicity, quantum physics theories, naturalistic synchronicities theories as well as an inexhaustible spontaneity of the intuitive experience and the dynamic of the psyche involved in the act of synchronicities alike, prove the notion useful for the purposes of the present paper.

## **5. The hermeneutic analysis of Kate Chopin's comedy play, *An Embarrassing Position***

### **5.1. The play – main information**

*An Embarrassing Position* is a one-act play written by Chopin Oct. 15-22, 1891 for the New York Herald drama competition. Its “[e]arlier titles are: *A Little Comedy at Parkhams*; *An Evening at Parkhams*; *A Social Dilemma*; *An Embarrassing Situation. Drama in One Act and One Scene*” (Seyersted (ed.) 2006: 1009). Although the play did not win any award, it was published in the St. Louis *Mirror* magazine in the December 19, 1895. Before that, the play had been rejected by publishers five times and as such it inscribes on the long list of Chopin's works discarded by her contemporaries. Ever since, it has also been viewed as Chopin's minor work unable to compete with the author's most appreciated works.

The play was published on request since its publisher was a long-time admirer of Chopin (see: Shaker 2003: 97). In fact, “Chopin was virtually guaranteed of Reedy's support many years before she called on it, and she might have used *the Mirror* (...) to showcase the unorthodox politics enacted in her more daring fiction” (Shaker 2003: 97).

In the 1970s, along with the rediscovery of Chopin as a writer, the play was published by the Library of America in the collection, *Kate Chopin Complete Novels and Stories* and although Chopin's biographers did not devote much of their attention to the play – Per Seyersted does not even include the play in the listing in his first biography of Chopin, *Kate Chopin A Critical Biography*, 1980 – Emily Toth, situates it in a rather thought-provoking context.

The biographer first mentions the play as Chopin's unsuccessful attempt to receive some feedback from her first literary model, William Dean Howells, yet after that Toth includes a commentary referring to unconventionality of Chopin's works for which “[l]iterary moralists and censors always offended Kate – and they dogged her from the

very beginning of her career” (Toth 1990: 192). Therefore, I would dare to claim that the low interest of scholars does not merely relate to the lack of the incentive content, or the low literary value, of the play, but it is rather an effect of the mainstream focus on Chopin’s works, which naturally restricts its analyses to a limited number of short stories and two novels, predominantly to *The Awakening*.

To support the view of the value of the play as an unappreciated and deserving more insightful approach piece of Chopin’s writing, it is worth mentioning that in 2010, a famous American composer, Dan Shore, adapted the play as a 30-minute-long comic opera, which turned immediate success. Apart from receiving favorable reviews as “[o]ne of the most utterly charming pieces [of the] year”, the play also received a Big Easy Entertainment Award, 2011, and won National Opera Association Chamber Opera Competition, 2013 (Mahne 2013: online).

## **5.2. An Embarrassing Position – genre**

*An Embarrassing Position* is a one-act comedy of manners, whose compact form hides a stirring content. The choice of the genre, the plot of the play as well as its length seem to be driven by the author’s major purpose of creating a favorable space for an unpopular idea, promoting women’s unconstrained right to self-determination and individual freedom, to be announced in a humorous and concise way.

As a comedy of manners the play is “witty [and] cerebral in form (...) [It] depicts and (...) satirizes the manners (...) of a contemporary society. (...) [It] is concerned with social usage and the question of whether or not characters meet (...) social standards”, and the play’s plot, referred to a “scandalous matter, is subordinate to the play’s brittle atmosphere, [and] witty dialogue” (Britannica: online).

In the play, the author privileges the voice of women over the voice of men and plays as much on the appearances as with appearances. Thus on the one hand it is the main heroine’s socially improper behaviour that needs correction; however, as the plot develops, the superficial naivety of the main heroine, Eva, reveals unexpected wisdom, whereas seemingly mature experience of the main male character, Willis, discloses nothing but shameful craftiness.

The fact that Chopin voices feminist concerns by and large makes the work also fall into the characteristic of a comedy as advocated by George Meredith, the author of the most extensive debate over the comic genre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and thus Chopin’s play can be described in Meredith’s words as a related to women’s status “humor of the mind” and “a corrective laughter” used both as a means of women’s advancement and an instrument aimed at shaping a progressive society (Meredith 1897: online [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org)).

As far as the length of the play is considered, the comedy is only one act, and as such, it does not require much time to follow, but it allows enough time to voice doubts concerning the true face of social appropriateness and to promote women’s freedoms. At the end of the play, untypically for the comedy of manners, yet typically for Chopin, the author restrains herself from any pungent commentary or punch line, which could be too limiting for the play’s feminist overtone, but leaves the audience in a quandary. The play ends, but the subtle impression of a certain incongruence as for the equality of the

two sexes stays with the audience. The discrepancy between what is felt and what is believed grows to gradually undermine the basics of what has been viewed as socially proper and appropriate thus paving the way for the true recognition of the equality of the two sexes.

### 5.3. The summary of the plot

The plot of the comedy play is set in New Orleans in the 1890s in the snugger of the suburban residence of Willis Parkham, a young and wealthy American bachelor, who is running for a political office.

At 11:30 pm, after the “political meeting”, which Parkham allegedly organized, he is visited by Eva Artless, a young cheerful and witty daughter of one of his friends, an army officer, Mr. Artless. The heroine, Eva, brought up by her eccentric father “on unconventional and startling lines” (Chopin in: Seyersted (ed.) 2006: 164) invades Mr. Parkham’s privacy in the least convenient moment, since soon after her arrival, Parkham has another unexpected guest. The unanticipated visitor is the reporter for the Paul Pry, a newspaper journalist critically commenting on the latest political affairs and sniffing about for gossips. Even though Parkham does his utmost to conceal the presence of Eva, his efforts fall through. The scandal is about to break, so the panicky young gentleman resolves to save his political career and proposes to Eva. Surprisingly enough, he gets rejected, as the seemingly naive young lady has her own will and is not eager to resign from the precious freedom and self-determination about her own future. Willis’s proposal immediately gets Eva’s riposte, smart and reasonable:

And this is an offer of marriage! I never had one before! I never want one again! So Mr. Willis Parkham, you think that my future happiness depends upon becoming your wife. Well, permit me to inform you, that you are making a curious mistake. The idea of being your wife has never entered my mind. And so little does my future happiness depend upon your society, that I intend to quit it just as soon as I can (Chopin in: Seyersted (ed.) 2006: 173).

Paradoxically for the 19<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries, in the play it is the female character, who resolves the situation, or rather leaves it unresolved, against the main hero’s wish. It is also Eva, who is attributed with the fine qualities of the mind, whereas Parkham arises as an emotionally unstable and indecisive individual with “varying moods”, and as a changeable person whose distractedness and feverish agitation result in excessive maladroitness. Eva observes his incoherence closely, yet also empathically, and “faces him, seriously and resolutely”, with an unwavering dignity and common sense. Indeed, Willis’s clumsiness and lack of certain graces, juxtaposed with Eva’s wit and intelligence, expressed in sharp, but not harsh, verbal agility, leave no illusions as for Chopin’s standpoint. Chopin advocates for women and questions social order founded on hypocrisy with the same ease and wit with which Eva rejects Willis’s ridiculous offer.

### 5.4. The title of the play

The etymology of the word *embarrass*, which appears in the title of the play, is as follows: “1670s, ‘perplex’, throw into doubt, from French *embarrasser* (16c.), literally ‘to block,’ from Italian *imbarazzo*, from *imbarrare*, ‘to bar,’ assimilated form of *in-*

‘into, upon’ + Vulgar Latin *barra* ‘bar’- anything which holds, obstructs, impedes. Meaning ‘to hamper, hinder’ is from 1680s. Meaning “make someone feel awkward” first recorded 1828” (etymonline.com). The noun *position* comes “from Latin *positionem* (nominative *positio*)”, “act or fact of placing, situation, position, affirmation”, “to settle, dwell, be home”. The meaning “proper place occupied by a person or thing” is from 1540s” (etymonline.com).

From the above dictionary entries of the words *embarrass* and *position*, the title of the play can be interpreted as a referral to the presupposed, righteous situation in which the characters of the play shall inevitably meet. As it can be drawn from the meanings of the words, even though the plot of the play superficially implies the loss of dignity and honor, and makes the event of the get-together in question socially frowned upon, or at least ridiculed (a woman visits a man in the middle of the night), it indeed draws on a natural behavior of a self-constituting adult to freely choose their place of stay. Also, as the etymology of the word “embarrass” suggests, the position, though socially discarded, is not morally wrong, and taking into consideration that in fact a night visit can be objectively puzzling, it seems to skillfully support Chopin’s subversive plan to make a fissure in the shell of the fossilized 19<sup>th</sup> century social system for women’s stance to be announced, and consequently, discerned.

### **5.5. The analysis of the setting – Willis Parkham’s snuggery**

According to a dictionary definition, snuggery is a “neat comfortable place, a small secluded room; to be snug [means:] to be close, to be slyly and comfortably concealed” (yourdictionary.com). Thus, as the referential meaning of the word indicates, a snuggery is a place of concealment, comfortable yet, restricted and secluded. The designation of the place of concealment is to hide something that an individual wants to keep secret. However, as deconstruction prompts, the innate quality of the hidden is exposure, which implies that the hidden only makes sense, when juxtaposed with the unveiled.

Chopin seemingly uses the snuggery to introduce and to emphasize the concept of concealment vs. disclosure as the semantic dominant of the play: in the snuggery Willis’s nature is revealed, and so is Eva’s self-determining standpoint, Cato’s simple wisdom is never listened to and thus remains unrevealed, whereas allegedly discovered by the prying reporter scandal, throws the light on the leading theme of the play, women’s social inequality.

In fact, the meaning of the snuggery in the play’s overall design may be interpreted as a symbolical representation of the falsity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century society construct, of its hypocrisy and two-facedness in which the double standards of the cult of domesticity concealed the violence, cruelty and negligence of women with the silent public approval at convenience of the beneficiaries of the practice, men. Hence, the association between the snuggery and the 19<sup>th</sup> century society seems to be Chopin’s purposeful act aimed at focusing the public attention on the festering problem of women’s social inequality.

### **5.6. The time of the play – 11.30 pm**

Chopin carefully chooses the time of the play and sets the clock at 11.30 pm, at seemingly the most theatrical point of the time in terms of its division of cyclical time and in terms of its symbolical meaning.

The dramatic contrast between day and night is the moment when binary pairs are juxtaposed: darkness and light, life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, reason and emotions, male and female. While in the metaphysical world of dualities, daytime is symbolically related to the masculine, active principle, and to the conscious state within mankind, nighttime is related to the feminine, passive and unconscious principle, associated with fertility and potentiality (see: Cirlot 2001: 228) Interestingly, it is darkness that “preexists the differentiation of matter. The dualism of light/darkness does not arise as a symbolic formula of morality until primordial darkness has been split up into light and dark. Hence, the pure concept of darkness (...) corresponds to primigenial chaos. It is also related to mystic nothingness, (...) a path leading back to the profound mystery of the Origin” (Cirlot 2001: 76-77).

In the play, Eve arrives at night, when the nightly mysterious concealment creates a favorable environment for synchronicity to occur. It is the night that lets Eve draw from the Jungian archetypal repository, otherwise inaccessible, since at night, as notices Frith Luton (a Zurich-trained Jungian analyst and psychotherapist) “[t]he world can speak to us in a completely new way. The rational, scientific *façade* of the world, though still present, becomes alive with the vibrancy of the presence of the numinous” (frithluton.com). The night prepares the unconscious for the moment of revelation and it is Eve, the mother of all life and the patron of oneness that directs her steps to Willis Parkham’s house, where in the small microcosm of the snugery, will decide on her own fate, and presumably, on the fate of all women.

### **5.7. The heroine’s name and surname**

Both the name and the surname of the heroine of the play are telling and also marked. The name associates with a mother figure and the surname, basically, with positive qualities of a person’s character. Thus the name Eva – “[m]eaning: [l]ife, [s]ymbiosis” – connotes the mother of all life, “the biosphere; all living things” (Abarim Publications: online Biblical Dictionary) and the beginning of a new life. It also refers to the collectivity, and therefore can be broadly referred to other women, not merely to the heroine herself, which implies that the choices and the fate of the heroine can be recognised as representative for other females too. This fact is also meaningful as far as the heroine’s choices are concerned. In the play, Eva can be read as the first woman to determine the female subjectivity and to voice the female’s stance. Eva does not succumb to stereotypes and does not wish to commit her life to marriage. She is not an obedient girl, staying in her place, but a daring young woman who thinks for herself and who will rather look for new choices the life offers than choose marriage as a way to happiness. Furthermore, since the name Eva also designates the biosphere of all living things, the heroine seems to be innately compelled towards the universal balance and equity, the state in which none of the elements shall prevail.

The heroine's surname, Artless, refers essentially to the character's features and particularizes the heroine's mental and moral characteristics. Hence, the heroine can be viewed as a "person who is innocent of sin or evil", "ingenuous" and "noble in nature, high-minded; [and] honorably straightforward" (etymonline.com). Artless, meaning "innocent" but also "free-born", suggests that the very first female, is not going to resign from her freedom, and despite being characterized by the virtues of purity and simplicity, she is equipped with the sense of autonomy and determination to decide about herself and her life. Moreover, the surname, being the play of the two meanings, "uncontrived" and "lacking art, knowledge, or skill", implies that the heroine has a sincere disposition, deprived of cunning, and is a person who wishes to earnestly act towards the symbiotic co-existence.

Also in terms of binary oppositions, the heroine seems to be a uniting entity attributed with metaphysical qualities valorized both negatively and positively. She is simultaneously natural, uncultured, and ingenuous, as opposed to civilized, cultured, and artful, and as such she oscillates between the centre and the margin, capable of unifying the extremities and of merging the accepted and the scorned over alike.

### **5.8. Synchronicity of events**

The play rests on the foundation of empirically materialized synchronicity displayed in the form of a set of spontaneous encounters and coincidences. Blizzard, an accident that caused obstruction on the road and delayed arrival of Eva's father, the startling decision of Eva not to stay at her own house for the night but stay at Parkham's instead, and the unseasonal visit of a haunting for a scandal inquisitive reporter relate to one another yet, simultaneously, defy any straightforward explanation in terms of their interrelatedness.

While the causal link between the blizzard and the accident on the road, and consequently, the hindered comeback of Eva's father can be drawn, it is hardly possible to establish the similar connection between Eva's decision to spend the night at Willis's house and the reporter's unseasonal visit, which timing is striking even nowadays. In fact both of the visits, Eva's and the reporter's, seem highly improbable, if not impossible, particularly when considered through the prism of the social rules of 19<sup>th</sup> century America. However, Jungian rule of synchronicity provides a valid explanation for the two, as well as for the rest of the plot's string of events.

The events become Jungian creative acts and "the continuous creation of a pattern that exists from all eternity, repeats itself sporadically and is not derivable from any known antecedents" (Jung 1973: 113). Chopin mirrors this continuous creation and makes the plot's events act like guideposts that "move [characters] forward [to] a new phase of their life" (Rowland 2019).

Characteristically for synchronicity, the events get linked to some emotionally stirring personal experience, with Eva's distress caused by her father's hindered arrival, and Willis's agitation caused by the reporter's undue visit. Eva becomes the focus and the trigger of the chain of the events, since, as a female, she is believed to be endowed with sensitivity often inaccessible for men. In a moment of emotional upheaval, the situation Eva never experienced before, when she can and should decide for herself, the heroine

gets access to the unconscious wisdom and triggers the synchronicities, which are both the results of her state and the “winks” from the universe confirming she is on the right path. At the same time Willis, threatened by the perspective of getting discredited, trashes in the net of societal expectations with no relevant conclusions as to his behavior. He is too cultured and thus too rational to contact the unconscious and contest the set rules.

Eva and Willis are subjects of the play, its hero and heroine; simultaneously they also become objects of a broader game of the universe, handy tools foretelling the inevitable transformations: Eva represents the female force that announces new relations, Willis embodies the outlived social construct to be revisited. Yet, whereas Eva follows the deeply ingrained in the synchronicity idea that there “is an energy directing [people] towards a meaningful and fulfilled life” (Rowland 2019), Willis remains oblivious to the signs of the universe and clings to the old structures. As a result, when the heroine releases the “creativity (...) located in the power of imagination, in the psyche, [in her] inner being (...) and [a] mysterious part of it known as the unconscious” (Rowland 2019) to voice her will, Willis remains stuck in social constraints.

However, the basic truth that lies at the heart of synchronicity says that the universe detests inequity, and hence one might assume that the process of penetrating the artificial construct of social biases already exists in the collective unconscious and what it only needs is materialization.

### **5.9. The plot analysis with elements of deconstruction**

Even though very short and hilarious, the comedy comprises four major, “disturbing” moments which, when analyzed from deconstructionists’ perspective, crack open and expose different that might be assumed content.

The first disquieting moment of the play is the introduction of the characters of the comedy, when Miss Eva Artless is described as “[b]rought up on unconventional and startling lines by eccentric father, a retired army officer” (Chopin in: Seyersted (ed.) 2006: 164). Following the paradigm of metaphysical binary oppositions, “unconventional and startling lines” seem to be juxtaposed with “an army order”, and even though it is “order” which is privileged over the presumably disordered “unconventional and startling lines”, the overtone of the play rather suggests the latter alternative to be valued higher. Moreover, it is “the startling lines”, which shaped the heroine of the play into the outspoken and daring person who, with her unwavering approach as to who should decide about her future, opens the dispute over the broader issue of what women are and what they are not allowed to.

Chopin blurred the roles of women and men in an attempt to emphasize the equality of the sexes. Thus, an inexperienced, yet self-determined, young woman adamantly faces a mature man, who is shaken by the unexpected situation, and when the reporter arrives at Willis’s house and discovers the presence of Eva, she decides resolutely, Willis is thrown into despair. The arrival of the reporter is the climax of the play and the last element of the chain of meaningful coincidences and also the event which most contributes to the emotional upsurge of the characters. From that moment, the plot events gather pace to find their open-ended finale.

As a result of the synchronicities, Parkham offers Eva marriage. The explanations and cover stories aimed at excusing and concealing Eva's presence in his house preceding his proposal cast a shadow on Parkham's decency. In fact, he comes over as a hypocrite and liar. By cunning and trying to trick Eva into believing that he is deeply devoted to her, Willis becomes the opposite of all good virtues characteristic of Eva. Thus also it is Parkham himself who subverts the metaphysical hierarchy disclosing the putridity of the centrality of the binary opposition man vs. woman, and little can do the explanations that he might have cared for his political career from which he had already resigned. Actually, as it happens in case of works of famous authors, Parkham's indecency clouds upon the moral condition of men in general, pointing at a hypocritical, double-standard disposition of a well-respected man.

When Eva declines Willis's proposal without hesitation, the question arises whether she is a naive or a wise young lady. Based on Chopin's allusion that the heroine has been "brought up on unconventional and startling lines," it seems more probable that Eva can be characterized as clever and self-reliant than dummy. Similarly, Eva's witty ripostes and bright dissection of the situation which she faces, not only testify of her intellectual skills, but they also contribute to the comedy's ease and grace, making the play a pleasurable performance. In either event, Eva's free way of expression is uncommon for 19<sup>th</sup> century women, who were supposed to be passive and obedient responders rather than high-lifted and intelligent interlocutors, and as such seems remarkable.

In reply to Parkham's clumsy proposal, Eva cries out she never wants to have a marriage offer again and she manifestly questions her future happiness as depending upon her becoming Parkham's wife. Still, Parkham insists on them getting married to-night. The old-fashioned spelling of "to-night", even though obviously not striking in Chopin's times, nowadays attracts attention and partially determines the direction of the following interpretation: Eva is submitted with a choice of marrying to-night or to-morrow and has to decide on her future. Marrying to night (n.): "the dark part of a day", also "absence of spiritual illumination, moral darkness, ignorance" (etymonline.com) does imply clinging to the stereotypes and deprived of true morality, traditional rules which Eva ventures to break. At the same time, night is symbolically related to the feminine, unconscious and fertile, thus Eva may draw from the night's supportive energy to make up her mind and usher in a new power balance within the society. Moreover, since the option of the to-morrow (a daytime symbolically points at the conscious activity related to the masculine) marriage is not presented to Eva as a valid one, but rather as a word play hence one may presume twofold, that Eva was *a priori* deprived of a legitimate choice, or that she does prefer to stick to her own instincts.

The final scene of the comedy, when the play should apparently resolve, but it does not, is the most deeply ingrained in deconstruction philosophy. Eva's decision gets suspended and superficially unresolved. The play does not close up like deconstruction does not give up to encapsulation, and since there is no ultimate meaning subscribed and no ultimate reality presented, all interpretations are legitimate and possible. If Eva chose to marry Willis, she would conform to the social rules; if she objected, she would set an example and pave the way for a new power dynamic. However, no matter which ending succeeds, the heroine emerges as the spokesperson for other women and the catalyst of

changes that are symbolically initiated in the play and which aim at the redefinition of the social relationships.

Actually, Eva is a genuine rebel from the very beginning of the play as she, one by one, violates all the four core rules of a true woman decalogue, without guilt or confusion. Firstly, she resolves to leave her house driven by her own judgment of the situation, even though a woman should not “feel and act for herself” (Welter 1966: 159), thus breaking the rule of domesticity. Secondly, she arrives in a man’s house at night, which, according to the piety rule, amounts to the loss of her virtue and to the acquisition of a *fille de joie* status. Moreover, throughout the whole play Eva does not behave as a timid, submissive responder, but she acts as a man-equal, independent individual who relies more on her own guts than on another person’s opinion, and a fortiori not on social convenience. With such a behavior Eva openly defies the “true feminine genius [which] is ever dependent” (Greenwood in: Welter 1966: 160), infringing “perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women” (Welter 1966: 159), the virtue of submissiveness. Yet Eva was “brought up on unconventional and startling lines”, hence the lesson taught to the 19<sup>th</sup> century American women, famous for their innocence and piety, that “in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her” (Welter 1966: 159) must have eluded her attention, or may be, it was never taught to her. This question cannot be answered yet, what can be observed is the fact that by violating the core rules of the cult of domesticity, Eva openly challenged the “stable order of society dependent upon her (woman) maintaining her traditional place in it” (Welter 1966: 174) and thus she also violated “the order of the Universe” (Welter 1966: 159). If not for the comedy play, Eva would be a tragic heroine doomed to ostracism and social condemnation. Comedy lets the public turn a blind eye on her revolt and muse over the festering problem of inequality of sexes within the safe seclusion of their domesticity.

## 6. Conclusions

The paper sought no final interpretation of the one-act comedy play *An Embarrassing Position* by a well-recognised American author, Kate Chopin, but it aimed to present the play to the broader audience as well as to expose the theatricality of the woman’s voice in the play, and thus, to prove that via Eva, the heroine of the play, Chopin ventures to speak for women’s rights and subtly, yet firmly, prompts the breakthrough of the societal relationship inequality.

Through the hermeneutic analysis of the play, which incorporated the elements of the deconstruction theory of Jacques Derrida and the basics of the concept of synchronicity as defined by Carl Gustav Jung, this paper has ventured to argue that Eva is an active agent of the chain of events of the play, able to verbalize her own standpoint and capable of voicing the women’s stance. Also, this paper has hoped to show that the heroine is symbolically initiating the transformation of the anticipated change of the relationships between women and men.

The analysis has attempted to show that Chopin skillfully employed the genre of the comedy to expose the incongruities of the established social state-of-the-art and as a result, to subtly disrupt the imbalanced social rhetoric. It has also tried to prove that the

deprived of complexity, a few-event plot of the comedy combined with the length of the play and the choice of the genre set convenient foundations for a far more complex idea than it might be expected from a short comedy play.

The analysis has also endeavored to show that Chopin took a single opportunity to deftly advocate the views that were subversive, and as such, hardly acceptable for her contemporaries if put straightforwardly. Promoting women's advancement and prizing female smartness and eloquence as combined with forthrightness and decency arising from the genuine, unspoiled by social convenience moral fiber, the play scorns at the dubious plasticity of social appropriateness with wit and lightness of expression. Thus, when the author lets her audiences laugh at the superficial layer of the play, she simultaneously invites them to reach for the deeper, rebellious meaning of the comedy.

The elements of Derridean deconstruction implemented in the analysis aimed at revealing the equivocations and contradictions to be found in the text, whereas the concept of synchronicity has been introduced to provide an explanation for the chain of events of the plot and to enhance the overall message of the play. As a result, the heroine's figure can be viewed as a dynamic and active protagonist whose behaviour, even though questionable from the point of view of the contemporary social convenience, is a positive driving force of the play and of the predicted in the play social transformations alike.

As far as the plot of the play is concerned, it can be read as a message foreshadowing the transformation of the social inequitable relationships which has already germinated in energy fields of the universe and which seems to be inevitably heading for the desired symmetry until the symmetry has been reached, since the interconnectedness of the universe presupposed by synchronicity denotes that the balance already functions in human collective unconscious.

Concluding, taking into consideration that *An Embarrassing Position* is the only extant play of Chopin and considering the results of the analysis and the potentiality residing within the play, the paper dares to argue that *An Embarrassing Position* deserves its place within other Chopin's recognised and heavily anthologized works.

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