

Paradoxical Connections in Sarah Ruhl's Dead Man's Cell Phone: A Sociological Study

Ahmed A. Mohammad

Department of English Language, Faculty of Education, Koya University, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

ABSTRACT

The paper examines different types of paradoxical connections in Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* with respect to contemporary characteristics of American theatre. It is so clear that the play has a smooth transformation or connection between paradoxical states or situations. The transformation happens due to spatial, and temporal conditions, and different humankind values. The play is full of different types of connections due to social ties, contradictive life situations, death and life, the whole and the parts, the spatial and the temporal transformation, truth and lies, happiness and misfortune, fancy and facts, and humanity with technology. The study is qualitative depending on the study of the cases within the play that are contradicting each other, yet they serve in deepening the meaning and the understanding of the cases. The paradoxical issues to be studied in a comparative way, these comparative situations serve higher thematic issues in a philosophical dimension in very carefully woven relations between the characters and situational environment as well. The common sense that the play made is to accept the philosophy of black and white as positive paradoxical relation, that the black helps to see the pure white and vice versa. Common unanswered questions are to be presented in a rhetorical and philosophical manner; targeting these questions is the way of being closer to a bunch of truths about the complicated fabric relationships which link the characters all together.

KEY WORDS: Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Paradox, Social, philosophy.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The research is an attempt to depict the use of paradoxical connections between the opposite conditions that are used by Sarah Ruhl in her *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. The research is a qualitative study that depends on collecting all the types of paradoxical connections and analyzing them as a very effective literary device that contributes to the audience's understanding and their attitude toward the issues discussed within the play.

The plot of the play is direct with a serious attempt of tackling philosophical issues of life. The stage opens in a

café where the phone of a dead man never stops ringing. A woman at the next table, Jean, picks up the phone without knowing that she is opening a new stage of her life. She sticks in the middle of all the dead man's troubles, family issues, and life complications. She starts meeting with his widow Hermia, his mother Mrs. Gottlieb, and his mistress, then she falls in love with his brother, Dwight, and at the end of all these events, she meets the dead man himself, Gordon Gottlieb, telling her about his last moments in his life. (DMCP, 2009)

A paradox as a literary device can be defined as a statement of contradictory and sometimes absurd, yet both sides of such a connection can clarify a great idea that may hardly be clear using one of the two sides. Abrams (1999) defines paradox as "a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes good sense. An instance is a conclusion to John Donne's sonnet "Death, Be Not Proud".

Paradox seems to have a philosophical root. In the

Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (KUJHSS),
Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023.

Received 18 Dec 2022; Accepted 27 Feb 2023,

Regular research paper: Published 20 Jul 2023

Corresponding author's e-mail: ahmed.abdulaziz@koyauniversity.org

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case of paradoxical sentences, a question could be aroused whether the sentence itself is the paradox or the argument it claims. The central claim is not about being true or false, it is just described as a "philosophical paradox". George Orwell's claim from *Animal Farm* that:

"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." (A. F., 1944, p. 103)

This sentence is the best example of how the paradox is not necessary to be true or false. What Orwell claims cannot be contrition or absurdity, rather it misleads to a juxtaposition of some concepts and ideas that lead to an unexpected truth. (Rai, 1988)

The Concept of paradox is not new, its origin and its root can be traced back thousands of years ago within ancient philosophies; the conflict between Plato and Aristotle in the nature of philosophy is the best foundation to start any paradoxical studies in the field of philosophy. Plato's philosophy is more theatrical and abstract in nature whereas Aristotle's philosophy is more practical and experimental in nature. However, recently scholars started to explore paradoxes in organizational and management studies.

Organizational scholars such as Cameron, Quinn, Smith, Berg, and others refer to paradoxes as "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time." According to this definition "paradox" has three fundamental characteristics which are; contradiction, interrelatedness, and persistence. First, contradiction forms the root of paradox by having two opposite and incompatible forces and logic side by side. Second, the meaning of both paradoxical sides depends on each other in an interdependent relation, so to define one side the other side is necessary to complete the definition though it contradicts it. Another important implication of paradox is that it is different from a dilemma, or from a situation where one side can be the alternative of the other side, for instance, black can never be white but black can emphasize whiteness, though they are both contradicting each other.

Sarah Ruhl is now one of the most remarkable playwrights in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Her plays always were regularly among the best ten plays introduced in America between 2007 and 2012 as members of the Theatre Communication Group (TGC). She is a prolific playwright and has a lot of premieres. She is the author of eighteen plays and the essay collection titled *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*. She had been awarded many times: "she has won a MacArthur "Genius" Grant and the Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award, been nominated for a Tony Award

for *In the Next Room* or the vibrator play, and twice been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for *The Clean House* and *In the Next Room*." (Caparroz, 2015)

Ruhl's style and themes put her within the classification of the postmodern and magical realist playwright.

Postmodernism is a frustrating term. This term has been applied to different levels of life issues and a variety of phenomena, to explain the abstraction of what is called reality. In general, the term postmodernism refers to the anti-modernism artistic strategies which emerged in the 1950s and developed within the 1960s. (Bertens, 1995)

2. PARADOXICAL CONNECTIONS IN SARAH RUHL'S DEAD MAN'S CELL PHONE

The play, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, is unique as it departs from Ruhl's typical theatrical delivery method. *The Clean House*, as well as other plays, show a significant degree of distinctiveness within the text's framework, either through the representation of certain specified metaphysical components, crossing the Greek-to-modern mythological divide, or by looking for the universal roots of the human situation in the nearly 500-year history of performers. Despite the fact that *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, in contrast, seems a lot simpler, it communicates a purpose via well-chosen dialogue, original performance, and irresistible appeal. It is essential to keep in mind that in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Ruhl's previous use of lyrical language and metaphor are conspicuously absent in this piece (Welch 2012, p. 75).

The unusual setting of *Dead Man's Cell Phone's* opening is significant, as it serves as a vital point of reference for the rest of the play. In the first New York presentation formulated by G. W. Mercier, the coffee shop seemed to be portrayed dramatically and intangibly. By having enough distance between the seats and by using striking beams of light, the café created an impression of city seclusion like that of Edward Hopper's (Gulan 2014), an American realist painter whose works, like the one in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, depict lonely characters and locations that evoke a sense of loneliness. The isolated place and having enough distance between the tables and chairs communicate the core idea of the play, which is the physical and emotional detachment, isolation, lack of love and human connection that Jean and the rest of the female characters are suffering from.

The setting for *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is simple, requiring only a phone and a few tables and chairs. The opening scene of the *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is a

deceitfully straightforward and instantly familiar scene: a mobile phone that never stops ringing. The play consists of two parts, with six scenes in each part. Part one begins in an empty café where Jean, the protagonist of the play, is seated at a table. She has just eaten her food and is drafting a letter while enjoying coffee. At the café, only one other man with his phone, whose name is Gordon, is present at the café. Gordon places himself in a seat in which his face is not seen by the audience, becoming extremely motionless, as directed by the stage directions. When Gordon's mobile phone begins to ring continuously, disturbing the lonely quietness of Jean's meditation, she realizes that the guy is no longer alive, after initially believing he was either asleep or deaf, and she gets to take his call. She immediately tries to call an ambulance.

Postmodern playwrights such as Ruhl, are from the theatrical style in which the writer hides the answer to the proposed question, in a sort of complex story which connects all the characters and gives the task of revealing or decoding the ambiguity to the diligent actors. Ruhl's complex connection leads no way but to more ambiguities, uncertainties, and questions. To have an illusion state on stage is to connect between the thematic seriousness and the perspectives of every single mind of the audience. The complexity of the story lies down in the paradoxical connections in the play, like the connection between death and life, comedy and tragedy in which the funeral in church presents in a hilarious way in a good dramatic interwoven scene. The writer intentionally leaves some of the scenes unfinished to make a space or an emptiness which in turn connects between the audience and the stage as a traditional technique of engaging the audience to fill the open ending gaps each according to his personal perspective, belief, and the psychological and emotional reaction. (Goff, 2016)

3. THE TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL PARADOXICAL CONNECTIONS

The first-ever paradoxical connection with which Ruhl starts her drama is a temporal and spatial connection by implanting a quotation from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*

"A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart

nearest it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is preferable to this. No more can I turn the leaves of this dear book that I loved, and vainly hope in time to read it all. No more can I look into the depths of this unfathomable water, wherein, as momentary lights glanced into it, I have had glimpses of buried treasure and other things submerged. It was appointed that the book should shut with a spring, forever and forever, when I had read but a page..." (ATOTC, 1983, P. 9)

Then the scene opens in a café in New York City in recent times. Dickens is known to be a social critic. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, he examines the interaction between the individual and his society. The novel depicts the French Revolution, especially the way how people's life becomes a natural result of the Revolution. The guillotine symbolizes the way institutionalized chaos dominate the life of people. With the guillotine, even death becomes emotionless and automatic and the life of people becomes worthless. Dickens adds a word to the French motto to become (liberty, equality, fraternity, or death). The message of this novel is quite related to the mystery of life and the mystery of the after-life connected by the term "recall". All human beings start in a certain stage of life and establish perpetual dilemmas toward each other, which can be reached by surface minds so the imaginary bringing dead people back to give them a second chance is almost common and connect both texts. (Sarpparaje, 2014)

This scene is one of the richest in sense of its different dimensions. It could be analysed religiously, culturally, socially, and even literary. The scene has a complex combination of life issues, history, literature, emotions, technology, and religion. It is a mosaic piece of literature. The combination happens most of the time with issues of two sides having paradoxical connections. The paradoxical connection happens between people from two different periods of time. Dickens says "every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other"; people are like that, a mysterious creature for others. The privacy of people is something sacred. An intervention makes the comparison, a ring tone from Gordon's cell phone. In comparison to the mysterious life of people of that time, people nowadays put all their secrets, memories, mysteries, and privacies in the piece of technology then they put it in their pants. Gordon's phone still violates his privacy and reveals his secrets even after his death. (Lyotard, 1998)

Another paradoxical connection happens in the church scene, the place of worshipping God. In a similar context, Ruhl travels, from the now to the Jesus Christ time and from New York to Jerusalem, to draw a philosophical comparison between how people need to

feel safe and secure. Ruhl mirrors the process of the contemporary people shifting from the life of divinity to secularity and from reality to the virtual life. In the mourning scene while Mrs. Gottlieb prepares to have a hymn, she forgot the point and has a pause reflecting on the way people live during the time of the killing routine and the time of losing the sense and the feeling of humanity. Mrs. Gottlieb Suddenly has her attention back and utters the word "Father", and then a verse from the Bible "you'll never walk alone" (DMCP, 2009, P. 16)

The same day two of Jesus' followers were walking to the village of Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem. As they walked along they were talking about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them. But God kept them from recognizing him. (Holy Bible, Luke 24: 13-17)

Like the sudden appearance of Jesus to his followers a sudden phone ring will take the audience's mind to a clash point between the Cell Phone and "Father" or Jesus Christ. What the author tries to focus on is the interwoven relation between what made people "never walk alone" and what the contemporary people have now to have this accompany. In a very smooth vivid message, Ruhl delivers the idea of replacing the divine tranquillity with a piece of man-made technology. This is how Mrs. Gottlieb presents this communication crisis:

We are in a state of perpetual mourning. But for what.

Where was I? Gordon

Well. forgotten my point. Let's have a hymn.

Father?

A hymn.

Preferably "you'll never walk alone"

The singing begins.

Jean's cell phone rings.

Jean sneaks out, covering the phone.

You will never walk alone. That's right. Because you'll

Always have a machine in your pants that might ring.

Oh.Gordon.

(DMCP, 2009, P. 17).

In scene three two different connections the physical and the emotional connection. The scene opens with Jean and the other woman's first meeting. The meeting is in a café, where the other woman is waiting in a blue raincoat, with Jean in a blue raincoat as well. In this scene, the two characters are dedicated to leading the audience on a temporal journey back to the seventies of the last Century-New York. The journey was accompanied by Leonard Cohen and his legendary song "Famous Blue Raincoat" in 1971. The song depicts some poetic images which are used to have a very powerful connection between characters. On one hand, the song represents the human heart's nature and secrets

workings. On the other hand, the song presents how a human being is tortured and twisted by the hardness of the triangle of love. The legendary dimension of the triangle of love goes back in time even more than the time of the song and it is well understood by the New Yorkers in sense of being one of the most hardship relationships which may connect human beings in this life. it depicts a problem that in the best case solution will cost somebody heartbreak. (ig.ft.com)

Technology plays a great role in the connections within the play. The play depicts issues in the United States of America society, which is the most developed society in terms of Information Technology. The modern life of the American people is highly intertwined with technology. Technology penetrates all the aspects of peoples' life and may their afterlife. (KROEZE, 2008)

The second paradoxical connection happens between life and death. Sarah Ruhl starts her play with a stage of two characters one is alive and the second is dead. The opening scene sends a message that this paradoxical connection may invade the whole atmosphere of the play. One of the most mysterious dilemmas in all mankind's history is death. The anthropology of death is a divergence from one culture to another. Anthropologists have documented the enormous cultural variation in the methods for disposing of the corpse, the expected behavior of the bereaved, and the ongoing relations between the living people and the dead. Almost all the cultural conceptualizations about death are that it is a transitional stage or rite of passage. (Gire, 2014)

Gire adds that all the ceremonies and the religious rituals take a great part of any culture.

Two of the attributes that all humans share are the experiences of being born and the fact that everyone would eventually die. Although we are excited about discussions concerning birth, people in all cultures discuss death with extreme reluctance. However, even though we may use the same words to describe death, the actual meaning and conceptualization of death differs widely across cultures. The tendency for vast differences to occur in conceptions about issues or events that, on the surface, seem very obvious is a major reason why a cultural examination and analysis of every behavioral phenomenon should almost be mandated. For example, eating is a behavior engaged in by most humans several times a day. Yet, cultural variations in eating are enormous. Cultures vary in what they eat, how they eat, when they eat and with whom. Even when cultures agree on what should be eaten, differences arise in how it is prepared, who is expected to eat the given item, and at what stage in time and age.

(Gire, 2014, P. 3)

The paradoxical relation between life and death is highly interlaced. With the development of medical science, this interrelation becomes even stronger. It is possible in modern life that the death of someone means the life of another or even others. What Gordon was doing in his life career is to transform the reason of life from, most of the time a dying Person, to another one in order to save his/ her life. In this case, life and death are connected as interrelated two sides.

What makes Sarah Ruhl noteworthy is her fearless soul in dealing with the spiritual matter in our life. Her plays arouse serious questions about life and death. The unanswered questions will occupy the stage and the audience's reason and passion. All the stage techniques, actors, spectacles, lights, and music are there to serve the creation of the state of the question, about life and the afterlife. May *Dead Man's Cell Phone* consider her masterpiece concerning the theme of life and death issues. The play sharpens the illusory human vision of life and death. Defiantly, the audience will be left with many questions and doubts about their closest life issues. The right question will show the possibility and the probability of the connection between life and death, whether they are two different stages of one's life, or simply people are in a constant state of transformation. Norman Cousins states that describing life and death in a conative way "Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live." (Caparrós, 2015)

With technological development, the values of human civilizations witness crucial changes. Technology is everywhere now; it could be used in many ways onstage. Technology adds a new dimension to the stage which may be more effective even than the offstage dimension. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Technology creates simply the connection between life and death, moreover, it could make a gate from which many ambiguities concerning life and death, relatively, will be revealed.

The cell phone will keep access to communication even after the character's death, but the real argument is whether this kind of communication is a real one or it is closer to being virtual than a real one. As individuals depend on those technological means to contact each other most, nowadays communication is not complete since it happens in the space of technology, it simply lacks the touch of humanity.

4. OTHER TYPES OF PARADOXICAL CONNECTION

The human being is the most mysterious among all the other creatures. The life of any individual human being is a combination of paradoxical life conditions. Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* mirrors the life of American society as one great example of the paradoxical social fabric. This is true everywhere and anytime. Life in general, especially in America, is based on the connection between all the feelings, experiences, and even the individual, and most of the time these connections are paradoxical. So the connections within the play are not limited to the temporal and spatial but it also contains a lot of connections between feelings, and the characters.

Family is the basic component of any society. As a social analysis, to investigate American life, it is better to start with the American family. Gordon's family can be a typical American family consisting of the mother, Mrs. Gottlieb, with two brothers, Gordon who is the elder is working in organ selling, and Dwight the shy, romantic, and sensitive younger brother who works in stationary. The personality of the two brothers is presented in a way that it makes it hard to imagine how one family could have such paradoxical sons in their moral and ethical life. For Gordon's personality, the best description of what he is doing in life is his wife, Hermia, speech with Jean ".....Gordon convinced a Brazilian man to give his kidney to a woman in Israel. Gordon paid him five thousand dollars cash. Gordon probably made one hundred thousand dollars in the transaction...." (DMCP, 2009, P. 53). Gordon is the best example of a materialist and businessman from the American family.

The complex blend of feelings has to serve the paradoxical connection. The writer shows how feelings keep living within the characters' hearts but in quite different ways. No doubt that losing somebody within the family causes deep grief for other family members, but Mrs. Gottlieb has her attitude about losing her son. She says: "When someone older than you dies it gets better every day, but when someone younger than you dies it gets worse every day. Like grieving in reverse." (DMCP, 2009, P. 22)

Last but not the least, it is the paradoxical connection that arises between the physical state of a human being and the spiritual state. Mrs. Gottlieb addresses her speech to the audience of the church telling them about some sacred places where everybody should switch their phone off. She says: "...there are one or two scared places left in the world today. Where there is no ringing. The church and the toilet." (DMCP, 2009, P. 16) The states which are mentioned by Mrs. Gottlieb are the

opposite sites of human being, the divine and the secular, and the places that everybody should attend regularly to purify the spirit and the body. From the first site, it seems that the two places are contradicted, in fact, they are, yet they do complete each other while human being is the normal combination of spirit and matter.

The scene of the funeral is highly used by the author to establish the most sacred connection between man and his God. In the spiritual mood of the church, Mrs. Gottlieb brings her eulogy; thanking God that still there are people who build churches where people attend when someone dies or gets married. The idea is that people still need to be blessed while they are establishing a new life, or family, and when they leave this life, dying. While Mrs. Gottlieb is in the middle of her speech, a cell phone rings and interrupts her. The interruption could be considered that technology, represented by the cell phone, could play a devilish role in breaking the divine-man connection, and even worst, technology could be accused of having fragmented people in the way they are controlled by those means of communication while contradictory, they are still living apart.

5. CONCLUSION

Sarah Ruhl spent her life in contradictory states. She is an American playwright who lives in multiple cultures country. The diversity of lifestyles in America causes paradoxical connections in life issues. Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* depicts some of the paradoxical connections within the life of the American people. The personal life of Ruhl affects her dealing with the dark and bright sides of life; she never admits the borders between happiness and sadness, and even life and death are amalgamated in a very fearless way that shows her perspective vividly and bravely. Ruhl has an elective style of writing, she rarely starts any of her plays with the same style that ends the play. The play is well designed to put the audience in a unique yet familiar position about their everyday life situations. The attraction that is used by Ruhl is the mixture of the contradictions of humans' feelings. Having a lot of paradoxical situations within one play may send a faulty message that the two-sided situations are incomplete in their meaning. The fact is that paradoxical situations are completing each other and give deeper meanings even though each side is separate. The two sides of the dual situation are not just emphasizing each other furthermore, each side gives the chance to better understand the other. The death of Gordon paves the way for the living characters to start new stages of their lives. The divine sense of Mrs. Gottlieb's speech widens the vision of a secular and technology-dominant society

that the play presents. The paradoxical connections serve the identification of the characters as well.

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