



Volume 9, Issue 5, September 2022, p.1-12

Article Information

Article Type: Research Article

This article was checked by iThenticate.

Article History:

Received
25/07/2022
Received in revised
form
05/08/2022
Available online
15/09/2022

**THE PARADOX OF A POSTMODERN TECHNOLOGY IN SARAH
RUHL'S DEAD MAN'S CELL PHONE**

**Ali Zaid Khalaf¹
Sabah Atallah Diyaiy²**

Abstract

Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* crystallizes the world of technology, the power of communication and how human beings are preoccupied to stay in touch all the time with their mobile phones. Bizarre situations are created in a realistic setting shedding light on social evils like organ trading. The protagonist of the play, Jean re-connects to her own spirit grasping the idea that life is for the living. This is done through answering the phone calls of a dead man. Therefore, juxtaposition is employed to explore how two unrelated things are linked. This is also done through the use of intertextuality that gives the audience to compare and contrast between things.

Keywords: Bizarre situations, Communication, Intertextuality, Juxtaposition, Phone calls

Introduction

At Woolly Mammoth Theatre Co. in 2007, the world was first introduced to *Dead Man's Cell phone*. This play is the voyage of a human being who is obliged to face her presumptions of redemption, isolation and morality in a technologically-engaged society. Ruhl examines technology, love, and death to the point of absurdity in a setting that is at once real and fantastic. It looks at how technology can bring

¹ University of Baghdad/ College of Education- Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences Sabah909ali@gmail.com

² University of Baghdad/ College of Education- Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences Alizaidkalaf@gmail.com

people together and drive them apart. Even though it's as easy as clicking a button on a cell phone, this play shows how desperately people want to communicate with one another. (Allan, 2016: 59).

Jean, as if, lives in a solitary confinement, dwelling in her own isolated world. The man sitting next to her is driving her insane with his phone's constant ringing. However, she learns that he has already passed away. Jean calls for assistance before using the deceased man's phone to respond to his own messages. Her descent into insanity has commenced. She feels like Alice in Wonderland after stumbling upon a strange and unfamiliar land. She discovers that the man's name is Gordon as she investigates his network of contacts. Jean gains his family's trust by pretending to be one of his business partners. Through her participation in this world, she is able to access emotions that have been repressed by the rapid advancement of technology. When Gordon abruptly reappears from the afterlife, we discover he has been involved in the murky world of organ trafficking (Herman, 2016: 59)

Dead Man's Cell Phone is a contemplation on redemption and morality. The play reveals how people have become automatable by technological advancement and how they cannot get enough of their devices. This play by Ruhl depicts communication, love, death, and our dependence on mobile phones through the lens of magic realism. She employs the literary concept of intertextuality to produce a text that not only invites new interpretations but also includes material from outside the text itself (60). She introduces new concepts by referencing the works of others (ibid 59).

Magic realism in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

Ruhl uses the magic realist style when highlighting the flaws of human societies. A narrative that does not adhere to conventional constraints of plot and structure is employed (Cuddon, 2013: 417). Magic realism enables Ruhl to criticise social ills by calling into question the reality his characters inhabit and contrasting it

with magical elements that are given a plausible veneer of plausibility (Essin, 2020: 15).

Gordon's brother Dwight takes Jean invitations with embossed designs shopping at his stationary store. Jean explains that her lack of a personal cell phone reflects how isolated she feels. She has been cut off from society and now lives in seclusion. Her social disconnection and isolation are profound. Jean asserts that individuals who are constantly engrossed in their cell phones are not truly present. As an increasing number of individuals become engrossed in their mobile devices, they appear to vanish.

Jean believes that Gordon is in the air, similar to a cell phone signal. In magic realism, anything is possible and accepted as the norm. Jean believes that Gordon now resides on digital cellular waves. The use of magical realism reinforces the main theme of alienation in the story. Due to their preoccupation with their smartphones and other forms of electronic media, people in the twenty-first century are emotionally and socially disconnected (Turnia, 2015: 493).

While Jean is in Dwight's store purchasing stationery, he begins braiding her hair. In the presence of Dwight, she emerges from her shell:

The phone rings.

They kiss.

Embossed stationary moves through the air slowly,

Like a snow parade.

Lanterns made of embossed paper,

Light falling on paper,

Falling on Jean and Dwight,

Who are also falling.

Gordon walks on stage.

He opens his mouth, as if to speak to the audience.

Blackout (DMCP 56).

Jean embarks on a journey to learn who she is and what love is. She sees the world for the first time in her life for what it truly is. She grabs Gordon's phone and begins excitedly flapping her arms. People are generally happier and more active and vital. Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* deviates from the conventional narrative structure by incorporating elements of magical realism. Magic realism designs a world that is familiar to audience and characters making a kind of twirls so as to make a part of that world into a new shape. Wendy B. Faris points out, "It is possible that the reader will find it difficult to choose between two competing interpretations of events, leading to unsettling doubts and a reevaluation of long-held beliefs about time, space, and self-identity (qtd. in Mariboho 7-8). Dwight and Jean are suddenly targeted by a number of floating objects that descend upon them. As if they were star-crossed lovers, they are illuminated by the lights above. Gordon unexpectedly enters the stage, but no one notices him. During the middle of his speech, he suddenly vanishes (Welch 63).

A fixation on ghosts is the most intriguing indicator of magic realism. These ghosts serve as a chorus and are essential to the plot. "spatial homogeneity that abolishes older forms of sacred space," as defined by Wendy B. Faris, "is at the core of magic realism," and "the newly measuring clock and measurable routine replace older forms of ritual, scared, or cyclical time" (qtd in Valentine 1). Ruhl is able to create a sense of parallelism between their first meeting and their second, which is infused with fantastic elements, through the use of magic realism (Bukhina 142-143). This cyclical nature is like a scene from a Theatre of the Absurd play. Because "man is held in a two-dimensional prison in any case," the language is disjointed and repetitive, as in an absurdist play (Fletcher et al. 34). And the same applies to Jean, Gordon's captive. "an idea, have an idea" exemplifies the use of repetition in speech to emphasis the futility and circularity of existence by Clov and Hamm in Samuel

Beckett's *Endgame* (1995). Life has no significance, and Beckett uses repetition to emphasize this point (Fletcher et al. 27).

Hermia, the wife of Gordon, questions Jean about her relationship with him. Jean reassures her that he is merely a colleague. Hermia realizes that Jean cannot be trusted with her husband's phone. Jean has compassion for the latter and concocts a story to cheer her up. She tells Hermia that Gordon penned a love letter to his wife on a napkin shortly before he passed away, telling her that it didn't matter that they had led separate lives because they were together in the end. Hermia expresses gratitude to Jean for conveying the message, which has moved her. When this occurs, "the years of her marriage return to her with a new light on them" (*DMCP* 72). The use of magic realism, which distorts time and space, results in the creation of a new, hybrid world. This literary concept divides society, allowing Ruhl to pursue her own cultural pursuits. The bright lights of marriage have always made Hermia and her husband shine like stars, according to Hermia. Hermia experiences a genuine sense of *déjà vu*. This is created to give her comfort and patience following her husband's passing (Goff 150).

Jean confronts the Other Woman, who is concealing her identity with a red coat. After she calls Jean, they decide to meet at the airport. Jean meets Gordon's mistress, the Other Woman, who believes Jean and Gordon are having an affair. She imagines that Gordon is dying and wishes to express his love for the Other Woman, so she tells them a story in which Gordon says, "Tell her I love her" (*DMCP* 21). Through the lens of magical realism, Ruhl speaks of an eternal love, and time seems to stand still. Jean exaggerates the situation by claiming that the presence of the Other Woman in Gordon's life has frozen time. By manipulating time (Lang 12). Jean finds it difficult to believe that this woman trades organs with Gordon. The woman orders Jean to hand over cash, but Jean cannot comply because she has none. The other woman has requested that Jean give her Gordon's cell phone because it contains vital business contacts. Jean has categorically refused to give her her phone.

She shoots Jean in the head, knocking him unconscious. The day Jean met Gordon will forever be a recurring nightmare for her. Repetition is a defining characteristic of postmodern aesthetics. This phrase indicates that Jean is in an alternate reality or parallel universe. Ruhl creates a hybrid world to demonstrate how time and space can be manipulated and become cyclical. Due to the literary device known as "magic realism," the playwright is able to have fantastical events occur in a believable manner (Ciobotaru 7).

Jean recalls every detail of the day in question. The phone of Gordon acts as a vortex, sucking her into an alternate reality. Time instantly returns to the moment when Jean and Gordon were drinking coffee. The only significant change is that Jean and Gordon can now communicate. This is not a problem because they are on a different plane where there are numerous laundromats. By introducing multiple tiers of reality, magic realism expands the scope of reality. Gordon interrupts Jean's food order to inform her that this is, in fact, hell for organ traffickers. Jean is told that he visits his loved ones after death via "a spiritual pipeline" (*DMCP* 81). The possibility that Jean could transport this pipeline to Gordon's plane of existence is central to its concept. (Vielma:2015).

Jean urges Gordon to donate the human organs that he has harvested. Put them on a cloud and drop them in South America for all the ungrateful souls who gave up theirs (*DMCP* 84). Jean's writings focus on underrepresented groups, such as African-Americans and women, with postcolonial elements. It is common practise to consider the lives of people of colour to be less valuable than those of whites and to sell their organs as a result. Blacks are viewed as second-rate citizens whose lives do not matter when compared to Whites. Black people are used in the salve and organ trade as commodities (Tyson, 2016). Gordon considers having his organs removed in an effort to win over Jean. Gordon attempts in vain to remove his kidney. As the "centre of life," the kidney is frequently mentioned in the Bible. (Caparros 497).

Jean explains to Gordon that Dwight, the love of her life, is absent and that she is lonely. Gordon informs her of the ongoing "invisible conversations" (DMCP 78) and urges her to pay close attention to them. Jean is hearing a recording of an old phone call that belongs to her for some reason. There is a strange atmosphere in a realistic setting, which is the essence of magic realism.

Contradiction is essential to magical realist writing. Despite belonging to two distinct worlds and eras, the past and the present are inextricably intertwined. Gordon sits and listens as she spreads lies about him to his family and friends. When Gordon answers the phone, his mother asks, "What do you think, son?" Since his mother "loved me after all," he begins to "glow" (DMCP 88). (88). The pipeline of his mother abducts him, and he vanishes. Jean must navigate this unfamiliar world alone. In an effort to express her feelings for Dwight, she dials his number multiple times. She vanishes abruptly and teleports to the airport (Ciobotaru 15).

Intertextuality in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

Intertextuality, according to Julia Kristeva, is "an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a fixed meaning" (Alfaro 268). Each text has an effect on the author's ideas and aesthetic preferences, as a result of its relationship to previous works. The explanation of a text is dependent on another text (Yaghoubi 64). Ruhl employs intertextuality between his works. Intertextuality provides a framework that facilitates the audience's comprehension of new works through comparisons (Cuddon 367).

Mr. Gottlieb, attributes some words to Gordon at his funeral. She begins to discuss the holiness and significance of the Church. She discusses how people's use of cell phones everywhere they go becomes an addiction. At Gordon's funeral, Mrs. Gottlieb's eulogy is interrupted twice by ringing cell phones. She argues that people today use cell phones everywhere, "raise your hand if you've answered your cell

phone while quietly urinating" (DMCP 15), including in holy places. There is no regard for religious sites. People disregard good manners and prefer cell phone conversations to face-to-face interactions. Mrs. Gottlieb is concerned that people lack etiquette because they even use their mobile phones in the restroom. She begins to read from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1841) by Charles Dickens.

The lines that are taken from Dicken's novels are narrated by Jarvis Lorry. No matter how close two individuals are, their distinct personalities will always separate them. The search for mutual understanding and compassion is a central theme in all of Dickens's novels (Sen 58). Kristeva concludes, "the concept of intertextuality replaces the concept of intersubjectivity when we realise that meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader, but is instead mediated by, or filtered by, codes imparted to the writer and reader by other texts" (Anosova 3). Ruhl makes such a reference to this passage to illustrate the alienation of humans in the technological age. Although people appear to be close, they are actually distant from one another due to the lack of social interaction caused by their reliance on technological devices. Thus, cell phones become the place where individuals reside (Le 88).

Jean tells her untruths about Gordon's characterization of her as "the salt of the earth" (DMCP 39). Hermia is deeply moved because she believes Gordon holds her in high regard. This biblical allusion is used by Ruhl to refer to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus directs his address to virtuous fishermen, shepherds, and labourers. This phrase refers to a group of individuals who are regarded as noble. Hermia gives Gordon's life flavour; her nobility gives his life significance (Caparros: 393). Mrs. Gottlieb resembles Miss Havisham in Charles Dicken's *Great Expectations* (1861). Mrs. Gottlieb's home is described by Ruhl as having the same traits of Miss Havisham. Miss Havisham is jilted on her wedding day by her fiancé, and she develops a fixation on that day. She will never remove her wedding gown. Ruhl creates a character resembling Miss Havisham to illustrate how her character

clings to grief and is unable to move past it, as demonstrated when Jeans tells Gordon, "your mother said: I consider it my duty to mourn him until I die" (*DMCP* 88). Mrs. Gottlieb and Miss Havisham are both encapsulated in a state of mourning. The manner in which the two characters grieve their losses is similar. Mrs. Gottlieb decides to mourn her son forever after his passing. The same holds true for Miss Havisham, who is depressed and in a state of shock after being abandoned on her wedding day (Lall,146-147: 1997). Both of these characters are traumatized. Trauma, according to a thesis titled "Traumatic Memory: A Study of Selected Plays by Enda Walsh," is defined as "any experience that evokes distressing emotions, such as fear, anxiety, shame, or physical pain" (Sofar, 10:2021)

Gordon accompanies Jean into a parallel dimension when she enters it. They begin to discuss the day he passed away and how she began fabricating stories to appease his relatives and acquaintances. Gordon believes that his mother loves him, but Jean assures him that his mother does love him and is saddened by his passing. Gordon begins to glow before vanishing. Jean is abandoned in the afterlife. Then, a "painting by Edward Hopper" appears there (*DMCP* 89). Edward Hopper was born on July 22, 1882, and died in New York City on May 15, 1967. He was an artist whose realistic depictions of commonplace urban scenes reflected the strangeness of everyday surroundings. By referencing this painter, Ruhl sheds light on the lack of communication between people caused by cell phones.

Jean is portrayed by Ruhl as a component of an Edward Hopper painting. Many of Hopper's paintings emphasize the isolation and loneliness of urban life, which is evoked by this reference. The majority of Hopper's paintings depict how people are estranged from one another due to the haze of technology. Jean's monologue emphasizes that an increase in cell phone usage can lead to an increase in loneliness. People's fixation on their mobile devices causes increased isolation and diminished social interaction (Levin,127-128:2019).

Jean regains consciousness and finds Dwight present. She tells him that they will be on the same planet after death. She encourages him to have a deep and passionate love for each other. She tells him that she wishes to appreciate his ups and downs. "Let's love each other more than the worthies did," Dwight suggests to her (*DMCP* 98). Ruhl makes allusions to "The Undertaking" by John Donne. It is a poem about platonic love, which differs from physical love. Donne asserts that he loves a woman for her virtues rather than her physical appearance. Due to the fact that people only seek out worldly love, it may be impossible for others to find such a woman. Those who comprehend the true meaning of love value womanly virtue. A true and ideal lover is more concerned with spiritual love and soul love than with physical love (Talik, 48-49:2009). In this poem, the poet reveals the spiritual dimension of love and the happiness it bestows. Two souls are connected by love. The ideal lover derives joy and happiness from attractiveness. Ruhl makes reference to this poem to demonstrate that the love between these characters is pure and spiritual (50).

Conclusion

Ruhl examines love and communication in the Internet age. She attacks the injustices in her society by employing magic realism. She employs intertextuality because texts are not autonomous entities but rather heterogeneous combinations of other texts. She expresses concern that reliance on smartphones in the era of artificial intelligence will alter human nature. Therefore, a dystopian world is born amidst the din and chaos of the twenty-first century.

References

- Alfaro, Maria Jesus Martinez. (2011) "Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept." *Aedean*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 268–85, faculty.weber.edu/cbergeson/quixote/martinez.pdf.

- Allan, Nicole. (2016). "Sarah Ruhl & Scott Bradley." *The Atlantic* May 2011. Canadian Periodicals Index Quarterly. Web. 17 Sept.
- Bukhina, Olga. (2015) "Magical Realism and Images of Death in Contemporary Russian Prose for Young Readers." *International Association for the Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 136–50.
- Ciobotaru, A. (2008) The Problematic Intertwining between Memory, Magic Realism and Historiographic Metafiction in the Romanian Writer Mircea Cartarescu's Trilogy *Orbitor*. *University of Bucharest, Romania*, 6(27), 1–17. https://www.miamioh.edu/cas/_files/documents/havighurst/ycr-2015/ciobotaruycr-2015.pdf
- Cody Lang. *Magical Realism in Transitional Cinema*. York University.
- Cuddon, J. A. (2013). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory (Penguin Dictionary)*. 4th ed., Penguin: Uk.
- Dissin, Christin. (2020). "Backstage Dramaturgies and Representations of Producing Shakespeare." *Project Muse*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 13–34, muse.jhu.edu/article/787386.
- Doff, Jennifer Ann. (2015). *"If More Women Knew More Jokes. . .": The Comic Dramaturgy of Sarah Ruhl and Shelia Callaghan*. Wayne State University.
- Lall, Ramji. (1997). *Great Expectations*. Rama Brothers, 1997.
- Lee, Wu. (2021). "Intertextuality of Characters in *Pygmalion*." *David Publishing*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 88–91, www.davidpublisher.com/Public/uploads/Contribute/607e88cf17980.pdf.
- Levin, Gail. (2019). "Edward Hopper, Landscape, and Literature." *Water Witch*, vol. 3, no. 8, pp. 127–43,
- Peterson, Evan. (2020). *Analysis of Theatrical Semiotics and Neuroscience in Eurydice by Sarah Ruhl*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Playful Transformations: Directing Sarah Ruhl's Adaptation of Orlando by Virginia Woolf* (No. 2). (2019, April). York University. <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/36346?show=full>
- Selvarani, R. Ranjini, and Dr. M. S. Zakir Hussain. (2019). "Magical Feminism: The Female Voices of Magic Realism in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 5, pp. 1390–93. *Crossref*, doi:10.22161/ijels.45.22.
- Shen, S. (2009). *A Tale of Two Cities: A Critical Evaluation*. Unique Publications, 2009.
- Shannan, Dijla Gattan. (2017). *Intertextuality in Ian McEwan's Selected Novels*. University of AL-Qadissya.
- Sofar, Hussein Ruaa. (2021). "Traumatic Memory: A Study of Selected Plays by Enda Walsh". University of Baghdad Press.
- Summers, M. (2012). *John Donne Poems* (Revised ed.). poemhunter.
- Turnia, Ana. (2016) "Death and the Community of Comic Romance: Sarah Ruhl's Poetics of Transformation in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2015.1078324>.

Lyson, Lois. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge: New York.

Vielma, Saara. (2015). *Magical Realism and Children's Magical Way of Knowing in David Almond's Skellig and Heaven Eyes*. University of Tampere.

Welch Heather. (2012). *Sarah Ruhl: A Comprehensive Analysis of The Clean House, Eurydice, Passion Play, Dead Man's Cell Phone and In The Next Room or Vibrator Play*. Texas Tech University.

Zaghoubi, Roya. (2006). *Key Terms and Theories connected with Postmodernism*. Yag: Iran.