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INTERTEXTUAL LANDSCAPES IN SARAH RUHL'S THE CLEAN HOUSE

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Abstract

Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House* exhibits many references in her play to reveal the emotional complexity of her characters. The allusions that Ruhl makes use of add many layers to the struggles of her female characters. Love and grief are explored through intertextual indications so as to move the play beyond one narrative of sorrow towards a universal commentary of the fragility of life in general. The contemporary playwright tackles issues of infidelity, loss and the nature of cleanliness in a new light for she reexamines the boundaries of forgiveness and love.

Keywords: Allusions, Cleanliness, Intertextual, Grief, Love, Sarah Ruhl

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Introduction

The Clean House (2004) was first performed at Yale Repertory Theatre in 2005. *The Clean House* is about love, loyalty, pain, misfortune, laughter, tears, hopes, fears and learning to feel rather than sanitizing uncomfortable feelings and experiences. The playwright tackles death from a personal perspective due to the death of her father. Ruhl was inspired to write *The Clean House* when she was at a party and heard a lady saying that her depressed maid refuses to clean. Therefore, she is taken to a psychiatrist. *The Clean House* revolves around Lane, a successful doctor who is married to a surgeon called "Charles". Both of them run a cold and emotionless life. Their Portuguese maid, Matilde is known for telling jokes. Virginia visits her sister, Lane. Matilde informs her that cleaning makes her sad and she longs for the presence of her deceased parents Virginia cleans her sister's house instead of Matilde. Later on, Lane finds out that her husband has an affair with one of his patients, Ana who is in her sixties (Listengarten and Rosenthal 171-172).

Intertextuality, a term which was first introduced by the French semiotician Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s in her *Semiotike* (1969), is a quality of postmodernism in which she believes that each text has the shape of a mosaic of quotations, which means that each text's interpretation is linked to the meaning of other discourses, "many classical literary texts are woven from other texts, references, citations and quotations tumbling together in disorienting" (Yaghoubi 64). Kristeva assumes, "a text is compiled as an assortment of quotations and is assimilation and a makeover of another" (Raj 78). Kristeva denotes that there is no such thing as text, but rather there is the existence of intertext which refers to a group of citations and references from numerous texts. This indicates, "the multiple ways in which any one literary text is in fact made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions" (Abrams 364). Hence, intertextuality is the use of the mind of the reader, which indicates that it is a shift from what the author writes to works that are constructed by other works, in which they all converse independently to each other from the author's target. Intertextuality is the main apostle to postmodernism for it provides layers of interpretations (Shannan 11-20).

Intertextuality refers to the shaping of a text's meaning by another text. Intertextuality includes forms of parody, pastiche, retellings, allusions and quotations (Cuddon 367). Intertextuality allows playwrights to get new perspectives and possibilities in constructing their stories. Julia Kristeva states, "intertextuality assumes that meaning and intelligibility in discourse and texts are based on a network of prior and concurrent discourses and texts" (Shannan 17). This shows that intertextuality leads to a much richer reading experience, which invites new interpretations as it brings another context, idea, story into the text at hand. As new layers of meaning are introduced, there is pleasure in the sense of connection and the continuity of texts and of cultures (Meyers 204).

Intertextuality in *The Clean House*

Ruhl makes a reference to a famous American surgeon, William Stewart Halsted (1852-1922). He was famous for his surgical procedures during the twentieth century. Ruhl intentionally brings him up to shed light on the character of Charles and how he is madly in love with Ana to arouse the audience's sympathy. He addresses them directly by saying that he is not a man who falls in love easily, but his love for Ana is "justice" (*CH* 43) because according to him he has found his soulmate. He points out the famous medical story of Halsted, whose wife was a nurse. He came up with the idea of rubber gloves after noticing the hands of his wife that "chapped and red" (43). His love for Ana is as great as this story. His love

for Ana is both sentimental and aggressive. Although he claims that his love cannot be erased from by the test of time just like the story of the surgeon which is unforgettable and memorable. Still, his love for Ana is reckless, which shows that Charles has child-like- thinking. This is the reason behind the employment of this intertextuality (Al Zarikat and Damour 93).

Charles tells to his wife, Lane about his affair with Ana, as he tells her that he loves another woman according to a Jewish law called "Bashert" (CH 49). It means a soulmate that is predestined. According to this law, people are assigned a soulmate when they are forty days old in their mother's bellies. Such lovers roam the world until eventually they find each other nothing separates them. As if it is an excuse for Charles to use as a loop hole to break the constitution of marriage by giving such justifications. He is not Jewish, but it seems that he discovers an excuse to be with another woman. He confronts Lane with this news claiming that his love is "objective" (CH 49), which alludes to a spontaneous love (Welch 20).

Charles describes his condition of love as "though I suddenly tested positive for a genetic disease that I've had all along. Ana has been in my genetic code" (CH 49). As if Ana is a virus that gets under his skin and affects him. In this way of describing his love for Ana, Charles is like the tormented Duke Orsino by love beams in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1600) who says, "that live in her; when liver, brain, and heart, These sovereign thrones are all supplied, and filled" (TW 7). Duke Orsino believes that love affects the entire being of human beings including the heart which stands for emotions, the liver that stands for the seat of passions and the brain that is connected with thoughts (Sen 262). Ruhl utilizes the literary concept of intertextuality to make her audience pity Charles, but rather to pity him through this biblical allusion. Although Charles's behavior is immoral, but Ruhl seems to show her sympathy. According to magic realism, everything is possible and is not questioned.

Charles and Ana play the mind reading game which exchange his love vows for her. He recalls Houdini, the magician who used to play the same game as Charles does when one of them dies, they will be able to communicate with each other from the grave and beyond:

Charles. Eight.

Ana. No, seven. You were very close

Charles. I'll go again.

Ana. Why all these guessing games?

Charles. You know Houdini?

Ana. The magician.

Charles. Yes. Houdini and his wife practiced reading each other's minds. So that---if one of them died---they'd be able to talk to each other--you know, after (CH 62-63).

The reason of using this reference to this famous magician is to make the communication between the world of the living and that of the dead easy. Ruhl succeeds in creating a transparent bridge between the two worlds. Charles knows that Ana is dying because she is seriously ill. He begs her to go to a hospital to be taken care of there. She refuses telling him that she needs a man not a doctor. Charles is a *liebstdod* which is a German word that means erotic death and love death. His love for Ana is unconditional crossing the boundaries for he wants it to be continuous even at the afterlife. Charles is willing to cross the line and be in

contact with her after her death because he is consumed by the idea of love. He loves with all of his heart, soul and even more than Houdini himself. This game that they are playing reveals the sentimental side of Charles and his wish for Ana to recover. He tries to convince her relentlessly to return back to the hospital (Meyers 205).

There is a Biblical allusion of the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve when Charles says, "Ana and I are going apple picking this afternoon" (CH 53) which symbolizes sin. Both of them commit sin. Charles has an affair with his patient, Ana. The latter knows that he is a married man yet she loves him passionately. The act of having an affair resembles Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit from the forbidden tree. Thus, the apples here stand for temptation, earthly pleasures and overindulgence. Both Charles and Ana are indulged in the physical way of life.

When Ana's health deteriorates, Charles travels to Alaska so that he can bring her a piece of the yew tree. The yew tree symbolizes nature's power of renewal, new birth, resurrection and healing. It has long been considered sacred and is associated with mystical beliefs. In the field of medicine, it has been said that it can reduce cancer. The postmodern critic, Julia Kristeva concludes, "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Raji 78). Therefore, the act of referring to the yew tree reflects how Charles's adventurous nature. His occupation demands a driven personality. His unawareness makes him appear foolish. However, his most foolish moment displays his adventurous side, due to the fact that he is willing to go the ends of the Earth for his love. He is still driven by his childish thinking. Later on, he changes as the play progresses especially in his reconciles with Lane after the death of Ana.

Interplay of Texts and Themes

Alongside with the heavy use of allusions and multivalent, Sarah Ruhl incorporates the concept of magic realism, which re-invigorates the ordinary with the sublime. The aim of the playwright behind using magic realism is to display the world around us in a new and obscure trend (Dias 89). When Lane discovers about her Charles's betrayal, her living room is filled with snow. Lane's life becomes intertwined with that of her husband's mistress like images of Ana and Charles materialize in front of her living room. Another incident that can be linked to the domain of magic realism is the falling of apples onto Lanes's living room. Apples stand for knowledge and thus Lane gains this new perception of not everything must be under control. Therefore, Lane undergoes transformation and renewal that have altered her previous structured life (Listengarten and Rosenthal 173).

Ruhl's allusive style permits her to connect with the mundane and to linguistic as well as the cultural heritage of other nations. Matilde, who comes from Brazil, brings with her own heritage and makes the world aware of it. She emphasizes that what distinguishes Brazilians is their ability to say a "good joke" (CH 10). Through the character of Matilde, Ruhl criticizes "class issues" like the act of having an immigrant woman to work as a maid. . Matilde is like a maid from the Gothic novel whose function is to comment and reduce the stress that results from building up the tension. Whenever there is a shocking news, Matilde is there to relieve people with her jokes that no one can understand, but remain funny nevertheless. Matilde listens to Virginia who finds refuge in cleaning as a way to deal with her dull and colorless life (Hussainawy 566). Ruhl innuendos medical and scientific interrelations to show that the emotions of human nature cannot be controlled by means of medical care only. One needs to accept his vulnerability and heal from within in order to gain logic.

In *The Clean House*, Ruhl hints that the gathering of the three women: Lane, Virginia and Matilde in an attempt to take care of Anna resembles the Three Sisters of Fate known as Moerae who decide the destiny of human beings. The grouping of the females in Ruhl's play refers to solidarity and the idea of global sisterhood. Their unions denotes that they are the ones who take hold of their own fate from now on. The motif of cleaning in this play becomes symbolic for getting rid of whatever that dismantle the unity of women (Evans 96). Matilde is the one who brings the three women together under the same roof, she is reason behind the reconciliation between Lane and Ana. She manages to do so by her charming jokes that no one can understand. Lane sympathizes with Ana being sick so she decides to take her to her own house. This is something that is shocking and unusual because no one takes their husband's mistress to their home, but Lane does so. Ana refuses to go to the hospital. She wants to be surrounded by people whom she feels safe around (Schmidt 16-19). Lane, Virginia and Matilde take care of Ana and grant her what she wants. The four women begin to have a sisterly bond.

Ruhl borrows the tragicomic tone of that of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) to balance sorrow and lightness. Shakespeare is known for infusing elements of tragedy with comedy in almost most of his plays. Virginia's obsession with cleaning is similar to Lady Macbeth's obsession in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623) to wash her hand after pushing her husband to kill King Duncan to remove "damned spot of guilt". Virginia also suffers from guilt for living a sterile kind of life, with a husband whom she is estranged from and from not being able to finish her education. She finds herself stuck so she returns to rapid cleaning of her house and her sister's as well. She exhibits OCD traits (Lall 24-29).

Matilde tells Lane that Charles becomes a different man who now prioritizes his life. It becomes a complicated case of love; as if he is bewitched by Ana and the way she chooses to live her life despite the fact that she is dying. She is the opposite of Lane, who is tidy and strict all the time (Wati and Ayu 4). Ruhl mirrors the complications of love, which is what Shakespeare echoed in his *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). Love is a complex force that brings delight and agony. It is regarded as both a charming and a destructive drive. Romeo and Juliet love each other immensely. However, since they are "star-crossed lovers", they are not meant to be together (Lall 40). Love for Ruhl is reconciliation and forgiveness. Lane at the end pardons her husband for his cheating and takes care of his sick mistress. Being a postmodernist, Ruhl disrupts the old-fashioned ways of handling betrayal. Instead of seeking vengeance or divorcing the husband, Lane accepts her husband's imperfections and does not try to clean them. Lane embraces the messiness of life and relationships.

Conclusion

Sarah Ruhl examines love, grief and loss through intertextual dimensions. The act of interrelation and literary interconnectedness allow the playwright to foster a kind of engagement with the past, allude to cultural references and the messiness of the lives of contemporary human beings. Through the concept of intertextuality, Ruhl questions what it means to be clean and dirty. The recurring theme of acceptance in *The Clean House* reflects how life defies one's attempts to impose order and control. Ruhl transcends the boundaries of a simple domestic drama and urges her audience to embrace the setbacks of life and to imply that fulfillment can come when one does not try to polish his imperfections.

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