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Sarah Ruhl's Ritualistic Drama of Survival: Coming to Terms with  
the Trauma of Cancer in The Clean House

## A B S T R A C T

To reflect the passionate and psychological influences of life's agonies, Sarah Ruhl in her *The Clean House* (2006) manage successfully manages to blend magical realism, humor and touching symbolism. Using rituals like cleaning and joking, Ruhl reflects themes of love, loss, agony and the search for identity. Through the characters' interactions and dialogues, the playwright tries to reflect rituals as a coping mechanism and a means of healing. By experiencing various kinds of anguishes like loss, abandonment and cancer and their consequences, Ruhl shows how the human powers of acceptance, durability, sharing experiences and their changing affect offer a standpoint on how to deal with one's pain and find relief within suffering and connect with others.

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دراما الطقوس للبقاء على قيد الحياة لسارة رول: التعامل مع صدمة السرطان في "البيت النظيف"

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## المستخلص

نجحت سارة روهل في مسرحيتها " البيت النظيف " بعكس التأثيرات العاطفية والنفسية لمصاعب الحياة من خلال الجمع بين الواقعية السحرية والفكاهة والرمزية المؤثرة وباستخدام الطقوس، تعكس روهل موضوعات الحب، الخسارة، الألم، والبحث عن الهوية. وعن طريق تفاعلات الشخصيات وحواراتها، تحاول كاتبة المسرحية ان تعكس الطقوس كألية للتكيف ووسيلة للشفاء. وذلك لتجربتها لأنواع مختلفة من الآلام مثل الخسارة والهجر والسرطان وعواقبه، وتظهر روهل كيف ان القوى البشرية للتقبل والتحمل ومشاركة التجارب وتأثير عواقبها تقدم وجهة نظر حول كيفية التعامل مع آلام المرء وإيجاد الراحة في المعاناة والتواصل مع الآخرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سارة رول ، البيت النظيف ، دراما طقوسية ، نكت.

Ritualistic drama often reflects ceremonial purposes where specific actions and dialogues are repeated. The setting is also important so as to reflect spirituality and authenticity. Unlike conventional theatre, ritualistic drama focuses on communal experiences and their spiritual importance (Deloria,2003). It is like a basin that contains collective memory that defines one's identity. Engrained in cultural and religious traditions, ritualistic drama includes works that combines dramatic elements with ceremonial lore. It goes back to ancient civilizations that used rituals and storytelling for both an entertainment and spiritual aims. Working as a psychological liniment, ritualistic drama deals directly with social angsts whether collective or individual. Socially, it is used to mirror the ideals of the society in order to improve the social bondage and conveying moral values at the same time. It serves as a passage between the everyday world and the sanctified one, giving the chance to those who are involved to share their experiences, feelings, eventually exploring their identities.

In theatre, and so as to reunite with the spiritual traditions while reflecting contemporary realities, playwrights started to blend ritualistic practices into their literary productions so as to define cultural identity and to determine social concerns. Therefore, in this epoch of rapid social, cultural and psychological changes, these dramatic performances work as a coping mechanism for the audience to reconnect with their roots and to therapeutically enable the audience to express their complex emotions in times of social cataclysms and personal crisis. This therapeutic aspect works as communal glue strengthening social bonds and simplifying emotional healing and personal transformations. (Snow et al,2003, 9)

Described as a "strange grab bag of ideas and images [that] magically coheres to form one of the finest and funniest new plays you're likely to see" (Isherwood, 2006) Ruhl's *The Clean House* is her first play that gained national attention. It won many prizes and is produced at main theatres. In this play she uses jokes and cleaning as symbols of human rituals to help people cope, identify, change and deal with life's traumas such as separation, death, lack of self-esteem, divorce and diseases, particularly the trauma of cancer. She uses jokes to cleanse or make a change reducing the burden and making life easier. Her work is "a compassionate humor that often coexist with deep sadness" as Celia Wren describes it (Quoted in Butler, 2017, 5). She uses jokes as a source of self-awareness, for a good joke could make one laugh and cry at the same time. By delivering truth, a joke can purify, absolve, and move one towards identification and acceptance. On the other hand, cleaning sometime help people who are in despair. Ruhl uses it as a mourning ritual for those who want control in their lives and keep holding on their sanity in life. Ruhl uses rituals to reflect profound philosophical facets of life. Facets that deal with transforming people throughout by breaking the fourth wall and making the characters talk directly with the audience. Her work is "a longing for rituals that teach us how to mourn, how to love, how to live" (Muse,2020, xi). She clarifies that "I come to theatre wanting to feel and think at the same time, to have the thought affect the emotion and the emotion affect the thought. That is the pinnacle of a great night at the theatre" (Vogel, 2007).

Ruhl tells her story in a magical and realistic plot, a style known as magic-realism, in which magical and metaphysical events are combined with real life ones. She uses magical realism to deal with serious issues such as death, cancer, grief, death in a humorous tone. She

shows that some characters exist in the imagination of other characters, or other dead characters would be seen on stage enacted by live characters, as in the case when Matilde's parents appear dancing and laughing on stage and their role is played by Charles and Ana. Another example is when Lane's balcony turns into an apple for, or when Lane and her sister speaks of their childhood memories and the scene moves back in time into their past. The use of magical realistic scenes that correspond to the last stage of each character's suffering shows how these characters finally manage to cope and learn to accept. By the means of magic realism technique, Ruhl shows that theatre can teach people to accept life with irony.

In her plays, Ruhl's characters suffer from heavy burdens of life yet they face these agonies with dignity in ritualistic and humorous ways so as to move from isolation to community and acceptance. John Laher comments on Ruhl use of comic dramaturgy by saying:

Ruhl, in her plays, contends with the pressing existential issues; her stoical comic posture is a means of killing gravity, of taking the heaviness out of her words in order to better contend with life. "Lightness is not stupidity," she said. It's actually a philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint, deeply serious, and has a kind of wisdom\_ stepping back to be able to laugh at horrible things even if you're experiencing them. (2008)

Ruhl starts the play with a joke when Matilde, the cleaning woman, tells the audience a joke but in Portuguese. Ruhl justifies using a joke in different language saying that:

I think that at the primal level, the intention to be funny, to share wit, is beyond language. When I wrote *The Clean House* and began it with the joke in Portuguese that probably no one would understand, that was part of the impulse. But people do laugh. Some nights they don't; that's a night when we are in trouble. (Vogel, 2007)

She uses jokes as a coping ritual for those who are in distress. She explains that it is a deeply serious move that stems from wisdom to be able to laugh at horrible times. Al-Hussainawy explains that:

to identify the ugliness and bad conditions and show them to people indirectly without fear of accountability or follow up, human beings invented a style trying to ridicule and touch the intended reality of others. Accordingly, the function of the joke is to send a message to the recipient, before people laugh and vent their suffering from repression and the difficulty of expressing the subject matter. (2020, 562)

In this play, Ruhl highlights that to tell a good joke does not only imply cleverness, but it also shows emotions. Matilde's father tells her mother that they "have never been apart since the day [they] met, because I always wanted to know the next joke" (Ruhl, 11). She uses comedy, jokes in particular, as a ritual to illuminate the heavy burdens of life such as love and, the death of Ana by cancer and the death of Matilde's parents. Ruhl deals with them with a brave approach, keeping the sense of humor even in moments of misery. In a ritualistic moment as Matilde shares a joke with Lane, they both pause to reconsider the expectations surrounding this ritual:

Matilde tells a joke in Portuguese.

Lane: Is that he end?

Matilde: Yes.

Lane: Was funny?

Matilde: Yes. It's not funny in translation.

Lane: I suppose I should laugh the. Lane tries to laugh. (59)

The ritual of telling a joke is used to deliver a serious message to the audience, Ruhl clarifies that " [a] perfect joke is somewhere between an angel and a fart" (27). Therefore the role of the joke accedes the purpose of pleasure. In this play the value of a joke goes beyond its oral utterance, Matilde throughout the play tells several jokes in Portuguese. Here the playwright makes the effect of jokes go deeper than oral utterance. Jokes in this play can be identified as "a highly sophisticated verbal flourish, a product of human culture and intellect and linguistic skill" (Carr and Greeves, 2006, 32).

For this purpose, Ruhl shows Matilde struggle to find the best joke fit for the circumstances, "the perfect joke makes you forget about your life... the perfect joke makes you remember about your life".(24) She explains that to Ana: "I made up eighty-four new jokes since I started working for you. I only made up one at the other house. It was a good one though. Sometimes you have to suffer for the really good ones." (90) She spends most of her times in trying to come up with new jokes with a great influence. Humor is a coping mechanism for her and the laughing "cleans her inside out" without laughing, she feels "dirty" and that her insides are "rotten". She explains that her mother died after laughing her heart out for a joke that her father prepared for their wedding anniversary. He committed suicide after her death. Matilde explains that "in order to tell a good joke, you have to believe that your problems are very small, and that the world is very big. She said "if more women knew more jokes, there would be more justice in the world" (12) after her parents' death, Matilde wears black to show her grief, isolation and sorrow for her parents are no longer able to see her in this age.

Ruhl tries to show that the effect of the joke as a ritual has a healing and spiritual influence. She links the power of a good joke to that of a prayer. Matilde, in act one she says: "A good joke cleans your insides out. If I don't laugh for a week, I feel dirty" (30). She clarifies more in act two, while speaking to Virginia asking her to perform a prayer over Ana's dead body: "A prayer cleans the air the way the water cleans the dirt" (Ruhl,136) thus the ritual of telling jokes here is used as a healing mechanism to teach one to acceptance and self-recognition. This ritual "offers hope for the survivors of the loss" (Al-Hassainawy,2020, 572).

In a house that "is not far from the sea and not far from the city" (7), Ruhl starts her play with an imaginary setting. From the beginning of the play, the audience would learn that Matilde, a Brazilian lady, is not keen on cleaning Doctor Lane's house. Lane's unwillingness to clean her own house shows her lack of self-knowledge unlike her sister Virginia who loves

to clean. She even makes an agreement with Matilde to clean Lane's house secretly. She seems to be obsessive to clean to replace the emptiness she feels in her life. Both Virginia and Matilde gain a new form of strength over their lives. While they are starting a new friendship, Virginia discovers the betrayal of her sister's husband, Doctor Charles, with a former patient named Ana, who suffers from cancer. In this play, instead of breaking down, Ruhl break the borders and make the characters move closer. Matilde and Ana form a bond due to the latter reminds Matilde of her diseased mother for they both suffered from the same disease. Charles on the other hand is shown at the end of the play struggling to show his true love to Ana by boarding a heroic trip to bring a yew tree, as a medicine, as a last attempt to save her life. Virginia is confronted by her sister Lane about her obsession with cleaning; she throws jars of dirt in Lane's living room trying to prove her wrong.

When Ana's health gets really bad she moves to stay with Lane and Matilde, Lane explains that she does not hate Ana because love makes her glow and that her husband Charles " never looked at me like that" (91) as she explains. Ruhl intensifies the unity of these women by making them eat ice cream from the same container just to show intimacy and identification. On her request, Ana moved to the other world on her own terms as a way of acceptance by the help of Matilde. She chooses euthanasia by letting Matilde whispers to her the same joke that her mother heard from her father and died afterwards,

The lights change.

Music.

Matilde whispers a joke in Ana's ear.

We don't hear it.

We hear sublime music instead.

A subtitle projects: the funniest in the World.

Ana laughs and laughs.

Ana collapses.

Matilde kneels beside her.

Matilde wails" (119-120).

Matilde's final words to the audience summarize the play's blend of light and dark themes: "I think maybe heaven is a sea of untranslatable jokes. Only everyone is laughing", (109) suggesting that each individual has a way to cope with life and it is not necessarily understandable to the others yet each individual finds their heaven and joy in something. Ruhl explains that "there's something compassionate about humor; it has a saving power. It seemed to me that if you took the most sublime version of a joke \_ the Platonic ideal of a joke \_ that could transport you somehow" (Quoted by Weckwerth, 32)

Ruhl uses cleaning as well as a ritual to explore control and chaos in people's life. Wren explains that she wanted cleaning "to be just plain cleaning in the first act, and in the second act, to feel more like cleansing \_ the spiritual, ritual parts of cleaning." (2005) All the

four women in this play show solid feelings towards cleaning. Lane criticizes her new maid, Matilde for refusing to cleanse saying "I'm sorry, but I did not go to medical school to clean my own house" (10). Matilde escapes cleaning at all costs for felling depressed after the death of her parents. Virginia on the other hand, steps in to solve the issue of cleaning by cleaning the house instead of Matilde willingly stating that, "people who give up the *Privilege* of cleaning their own houses \_ they're insane people. If you do not clean: how do you know if you made any progress in life?"(10) Her husband is too boring that she describes him as furniture and her sister, Lane, is preoccupied with work. She spends her whole day cleaning so as to stay engaged rather than doing nothing. She uses cleaning as a coping mechanism for the random life she had that at times made her generate suicidal ideas. She finishes her cleaning at three o'clock. That's why she needs more work that made her offer to clean her sister's house instead of Matilde. Her cleaning her sister's house can also be considered as a ritual of caring for her sister. Her love for cleaning becomes a sort of ritual grieving for the sad life she had, reflecting a person in deep despair.

Lane expresses her point of view about cleaning trying to keep her relationship with Charles who likes everything to be clean that's why she hires Mailde, "I hate to clean. And Charles likes things to be clean." (64) She refuses to be his "washerwoman" (66) Cleaning to Lane is also a ritual but in a different way. As long as she will not clean for herself believing that she is socially above others, she hires someone to do the job for her.

Lane: It has been such a hard month.

My cleaning lady from Brazil\_\_ decided that she was depressed one day and stopped cleaning my house.

I was like: clean my house!

And she wouldn't

We took her to the hospital and I had her mediated and she

Still Wouldn't Clean.

And \_\_in the mean time\_\_ I've been cleaning my house!

I'm sorry, but I did not go to medical school to clean my own house. (9-10)

Only after her husband left her for another woman; Lane begins to transform. Eventually she, the one who hates cleaning, cleans Ana after her death and ending up appreciating her sister, Virginia and Matilde. Whether hating or loving to clean, they ritualise cleaning in order to keep their relationships and as a reason to move on and transform accepting life's agony and circumstances.

The playwright delineates cleaning merely as cleaning in the beginning, yet later it turns out to be a process of spiritual cleansing, a ritualistic practice of psychological cleansing (Wren, 30). Lanes washing Ana's dead body at the end of the play is shown as a ritual that stands for a spiritual transformation. Cleaning Ana, shows that now she regained control over her domestic life. Like Lane Virginia, her sister, got control over the chaos of her life by employing cleaning and cleanliness into her life. As McClintock satirises cleaning saying that "cleaning is not inherently meaningful; it creates meaning through the



demarcation of boundaries... segregating dirt from hygiene, order from disorder, meaning from confusion." (170) Delving into the psyche of people and their ability to transform by employing the ritual of cleaning is a proof that Ruhl managed to show that the invisible which cleaning, can be visible and effective.

Ana's appearance in the life of those three women played a role in changing each one of them. Her disease and its impact on them were the reason for bringing them closer. Ana's cancer and her refusal to accept any medical treatment in addition to her death changed the characters in play. Matilde accepted Ana's relationship as her mother, Virginia is inspired by Ana to claim her life and self-respect and finally, Lane accepted life and dealt with death differently after cleaning Ana's dead body for she is used to have someone clean the dead bodies to her. Ana's death taught these women to accept life, transform and be close to each other. Consequently, Ruhl's play proves to be "a ritual for grief and loss that allows the audience to participate, but within Ruhl's characteristic mood of lightness and humor that leads to acceptance" (Gale, 2018, 4)

Thus, Ruhl tries to show that even serious issues like cancer, can be dealt with humor and some detachment. Ruhl believes that theatre should allow the audience to accept life and all its challenges like separation, death, cancer, divorce, and lack of self-esteem with humor and irony, a way to transform and live with dignity presenting them in a more ritualistic way than a realistic one. Thus, with the use of ritualistic drama of survival, Ruhl blends ritualistic practices with dramatic elements to highlight themes of grief, divorce, lack of self-esteem, death, and disease.

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