



## An Examination of the Hidden Impact of Technology on Memory, Identity, and Human Connection in Dead Man's Cell Phone by Sarah Ruhl

E-mail: Amal Mohammed Bahram

amalmohammed@uokirkuk.edu.iq

English Department – College of Education for Humanities Registration

Kirkuk University, 2025

### Abstract

*Dead Man's Cell Phone, a play written by Sarah Ruhl, serves as a case study for this research project, which investigates the psychological displacement of identity that is brought about by the pervasive presence of digital technologies. The present study investigates Jean's profound emotional journey as well as the psychological ramifications that resulted from her unintended assumption of the life of another person, which was made possible purely by technological advancements. The purpose of this study is to illustrate how Ruhl critically analyzes the psychological fragmentation caused by technology by depicting characters whose identities are not only shaped but fundamentally destabilized by the digital remnants left by others. Relevant theoretical frameworks, such as postmodern identity and disembodiment in digital communication, as well as Sherry Turkle's influential work, *The Second Self*, are utilized to accomplish this.*

**Keywords:** Technology, Sarah Ruhl, Dead Man Cellphone, identity, family connection.



## دراسة التأثير الخفي للتكنولوجيا على الذاكرة والتواصل الانساني في رواية "هاتف الرجل الميت لسارة رول

م.م. امل محمد بهرام

Email: amalmohammed@uokirkuk.edu.iq

### كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

#### الخلاصة

تعد مسرحية هاتف الرجل الميت للكاتبة سارة رول دراسة حالة محورية في هذا البحث، الذي يستكشف مسألة التغير النفسي واغتراب الهوية في ظل الحضور الطاغي للتكنولوجيا الرقمية. يركز هذا البحث على الرحلة النفسية والعاطفية التي تخوضها الشخصية الرئيسية، "جين"، إثر انتقالها غير المقصود لهوية رجل متوفى، من خلال هاتفه المحمول—ذلك الأثر التكنولوجي الذي أتاح لها الوصول إلى شذرات من حياته الرقمية. وتقدم مسرحية رول إطارًا نقديًا لتحليل كيفية تشكيل التكنولوجيا للهوية، بل وتفكيكها، من خلال بقايا رقمية يتركها الآخرون خلفهم. يستند هذا التحليل إلى أطر نظرية تشمل مفاهيم ما بعد الحداثة في تشكيل الهوية، وتجربة الانفصال الجسدي في التواصل الرقمي، بالإضافة إلى الاستعانة بالعمل الرائد لشيري توركل الذي يناقش كيف تصبح التكنولوجيا امتدادًا للذات، بل وقد تؤدي أحيانًا إلى خلقتها

الكلمات المفتاحية : سارة رول، الهاتف المحمول للرجل الميت، الهوية الرقمية ، النزوح النفسي، التكنولوجيا، الهوية ما بعد الحداثة، شيري توركل.



## I. Introduction

Ruhl's drama depicts an individual's journey to confront her assumptions of salvation, seclusion, and ethics in a culture heavily influenced by technology. Ruhl explores technology, love, and death to an extreme degree of absurdity within a verisimilar and imaginative world. Ahmed A. Muhammed (2023) wrote a paper titled *Paradoxical Connections in Sarah Ruhl's Dead Man's Cell Phone: Sociological Study*, the paper examines different types of paradoxical connections in Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* concerning 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 human values. Ali Zaid Khalaf and Sabah Atallah Diyaiy in 2022, wrote a paper titled *The Paradox Of A Postmodern Technology In Sarah Ruhl's Dead Man's Cell Phone* noting that 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 realistically, shedding light on social evils like organ trading. The play's protagonist, Jean, reconnects to her spirit, grasping that life is for living. This is done by 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 intertextuality, which allows the audience to compare things.

This study investigates the dual capacity of technology to unite and divide people. Notwithstanding its simplicity, pressing a button on a cell phone effectively illustrates the deep-seated necessity for individuals to communicate with one another. In contrast to others who concentrate on contradiction, communication, or absurdity, our work distinctly examines memory and identity's fragmentation through Turkle's theory. This is the focal point of our research, which imparts distinctiveness to our study and contributes to theatre studies, digital humanities, and the psychology of identity, illustrating how technology transforms sorrow and memory in play.



## 2. Theoretical Framework: Sherry Turkle's 'The Second Self' and the Digital Age

In her influential work *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, a prominent sociologist and psychologist has extensively explored the intricate relationship between human identity and technology, offering profound insights into how digital tools shape our perceptions of self, others, and the world around us. Turkle (2005) compellingly argues that computers transcend mere tools; they are, in her evocative terminology, “evocative objects that profoundly influence how we conceptualize ourselves and our relationships “(p.78). She meticulously observed how prolonged and intimate interaction with computers could facilitate the development of a "second self," an identity carefully constructed and experienced within the digital realm. Individuals can investigate many facets of their personality and construct entirely new personas inside this evolving digital landscape. While Turkle's first research primarily focused on home computers, her significant discoveries are remarkably pertinent and adaptable to the pervasive influence of mobile phones and the broader phenomenon of digital existence.

‘Digital ghosting’ refers to “the persistent digital presence of a deceased individual, evident in their residual social media profiles, email correspondence, digital photographs, and various other digital data repositories long after their demise”( Turkle, 2005,p.89). This persistent digital presence may offer solace for specific individuals in sorrow by facilitating a tangible connection to the deceased. However, it may also be a significant concern when individuals confront the digital remnants of someone no longer physically present. In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Gordon's mobile device epitomizes this "digital spectre." The incessant buzzing, the continuous influx of messages, and the meticulously orchestrated exchanges that Jean manages contribute to sustaining his digital presence. This spectral presence raises significant questions regarding the intrinsic nature of memory, the intricacies of loss, and the subtle ways technology may either enhance or distort the natural mourning process. In this setting, the mobile phone transcends its role as a mere utility; it evolves into a potent gateway to a digital afterlife, where identity is



perpetually fluid and influences the living, compelling us to reevaluate the fundamental essence of life and memory in the digital era.

In Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, technology serves not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic force that profoundly reshapes and reconfigures personal identity. The mobile phone, a pervasive symbol of contemporary existence, serves as a potent instrument for Ruhl to meticulously explore how digital technologies may irrevocably obscure the distinctions between the self and the other, alter the essence of memory, and significantly influence the challenging processes of grief. Ruhl elucidates the profound and frequently unsettling impacts of technology on our fundamental identity within an interconnected digital landscape through the intertwined narratives of Gordon and Jean. The drama examines how our digital footprints can persist after our existence, creating intricate psychological challenges for those who remain.

In *The Second Self*, Turkle examines how computers, initially perceived as mere tools, evolve into extensions of our minds and identities. She argues that technology is not merely an external instrument but an integral part of our subjective experience, influencing our cognitive processes, emotional responses, and social interactions. This concept of the "second self" is crucial, as it suggests that our engagement with technology can lead to a fragmentation or redefinition of our identity, as we project aspects of ourselves onto digital interfaces and internalize the logic of computational systems. This is directly relevant to *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, where the deceased Gordon's identity is reconstructed and re-interpreted by Jean and others through the fragmented digital traces left on his cell phone. The phone, in essence, becomes a repository of his 'second self,' allowing others to interact with a version of him that persists beyond his physical death. Turkle's later works, such as *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, further refine her arguments by exploring the paradox of connection in the digital age. She posits that while technology promises to connect us more deeply, it often leads to new forms of solitude and superficiality. This resonates strongly with the play's central themes, where characters are seemingly connected through Gordon's cell phone. However,



their interactions often highlight their profound isolation and inability to form genuine human bonds. The constant ringing of the dead man's phone and Jean's subsequent immersion into his digital life exemplify this paradox: a heightened sense of connection to a deceased individual while simultaneously neglecting or misinterpreting the living relationships around her. Furthermore, Turkle's insights into the performative nature of identity in online spaces are highly applicable. In the digital realm, individuals curate and present idealized versions of themselves, leading to a blurring of authentic self and constructed persona. Gordon's various relationships, as revealed through his phone, present different facets of his personality, each tailored to a specific individual. Jean, in her attempts to understand Gordon, pieces together these fragmented digital identities, creating a composite image that may or may not reflect his true self. This act of digital archaeology, driven by the desire for connection, ultimately underscores the elusive nature of identity in an age saturated with digital representations. By employing Turkle's theoretical framework, this research will analyze how *Dead Man's Cell Phone* critiques the illusion of connection fostered by technology, how digital artifacts shape and distort our understanding of identity, and the profound impact of a technologically mediated world on authentic human relationships. The play, through its fantastical yet grounded narrative, serves as a powerful artistic exploration of the very questions Turkle has dedicated her career to answering.

In stark contrast to previous, static perceptions of identity as a cohesive and unchanging construct, postmodern identity is characterised by its inherent fluidity, fragmentation, and perpetual creation. These characteristics are particularly accentuated in the digital age, as individual navigate several online identities across various platforms, meticulously curating and showcasing diverse facets of their personalities to a heterogeneous audience. Chahanler Marks (2024) astutely observes that “our digital identities are increasingly fragmented across multiple platforms, creating opportunities for greater self-expression while also making us more vulnerable to social surveillance” (p.90).

This natural fragmentation can result in a profound sense of dysphagia, when individuals perceive a disconnection from their physical bodies and sensory experiences



during online interactions. In digital communication, disembodiment refers to the absence of crucial corporeal cues, such as body language, facial emotions, and vocal intonation, that are required for nuanced and complex human interaction. This absence may, unfortunately, “lead to extensive misinterpretation, a notable reduction in empathy, and, in certain instances, a rise in aggression in online interactions” (Riva, 2024,p.67). In the compelling narrative of *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, these theoretical concepts manifest distinctly in Jean's interactions with Gordon, facilitated solely through his cell phone. Utilising fragmented digital signals, she meticulously constructs her own identity and his, emphasising the profound impact of disembodiment on the formation and perception of identity within a technology-centric culture.

### 3. The Psychological Displacement of Identity In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

*Dead Man's Cell Phone*, a dark comedy by Sarah Ruhl in 2007, audaciously contests traditional theatrical narrative and representational methods. The drama begins at an ostensibly ordinary café, where Jean, a nondescript woman, is positioned next to a deceased guy, Gordon, whose cell phone persistently rings with an almost defiant tone. Initially motivated by annoyance and later by an emerging interest and empathy, Jean answers the phone, unwittingly immersing herself in the complex and often contradictory tapestry of Gordon's posthumous life. She participates in more surreal dialogues with his mourning mother, mysterious widow, perplexed brother, and secretive mistress, each possessing unique, frequently contradictory, views of Gordon. To alleviate their sorrow and offer a sense of finality, Jean embellishes Gordon's life by concocting intricate narratives about him. In this intricate creation process, she paradoxically starts to forfeit her identity, progressively adopting elements of his persona.

Despite his physical death, Gordon remains a pivotal and frightening figure throughout the play, his enduring existence graphically represented by his continually



ringing cell phone. This ostensibly benign device, once a simple communication tool, transcends its practical purpose to become a lasting extension of his identity, a poignant symbol of his persistent, albeit ethereal, existence that continues to resonate within the realm of the living. The phone's incessant ringing is not just an audible annoyance but a persistent reminder that Gordon, despite his physical absence, is intricately connected to a complicated network of relationships, expectations, and unfinished stories. Jean, upon discovering the lifeless Gordon in the café, poses a sad inquiry to his still body.:

**Jean:** Are you still inside there? Are you ill?

No answer.

Are you deaf?

No answer.

Oh, I am sorry—

Jean signs in sign language:

Are you deaf?

No response.

The phone rings again. (Ruhl, 2007, p. 20).

This subtly straightforward investigation captures the main thematic obsession of the play: the disturbing potential that, at least a sizable portion of it, an individual's identity can linger and even flourish inside their digital device. Gordon's cell phone is the quintessential 'digital ghost,' an ethereal manifestation of his former identity. Each incoming call, every unread text message, and every digital data contribute to sustaining this specter, so maintaining the illusion for those who encounter it that Gordon exists in some intangible form. Gordon's digital portrayal of his identity presents a significant paradox: he is recalled chiefly through a technological object rather than through direct



human interaction or shared physical experiences. The phone begins to symbolise his memory as a surrogate vessel. Nonetheless, it offers a fragmented and insufficient representation of his identity, composed of disparate conversations and an incomplete understanding that fail to encapsulate his entire essence. “The tenets of postmodern identity theory assert that the self is continuously deconstructed and reconstructed through interactions with digital technologies, notably highlighting the fragmentation of identity mediated by technology”(Marks, 2024). In this setting, the phone serves not merely as a gadget but as a conduit via which Gordon’s fragmented digital identity persists in engaging with and impacting the living, obscuring the distinctions between presence and absence and questioning traditional notions of remembering and commemoration.

In addition to merely taking calls, Jean's engagement with Gordon's mobile phone initiates a profound emotional and psychological journey, ultimately prompting her to internalise and reflect aspects of his life and character. Motivated initially by empathy and a genuine desire to alleviate Gordon's distress, Jean meticulously fabricates and amplifies narratives about him, thereby constructing a character that aligns with the expectations and desires of the callers. For instance, in a conversation with Gordon's mother, Mrs. Gottlieb, Jean states, “He was a great man. He was a truly great man” (Ruhl, 2007, p. 25).

This assertion, lacking genuine familiarity with Gordon, marks the commencement of a complex process: the construction of a new identity for him, significantly influenced by the perceptions and emotional expectations of others. This act of narrative creation, seemingly benign in the absence of physical presence, exemplifies how digital mediation may facilitate the construction of idealised or fictionalised representations of individuals. Jean becomes increasingly enmeshed in Gordon's digital realm, and the previously distinct boundaries separating her from him begin to dissolve alarmingly rapidly. She not only impersonates Gordon but also gradually integrates herself into his life, attending his meetings, doing his responsibilities, and even engaging in his clandestine relationships. This identification assumption signifies a profound psychological transformation rather than merely an act of performativity. She begins to form an emotional attachment to Gordon's



life, experiencing his loss and the suffering of his loved ones as if they were her own. This phenomenon distinctly illustrates how technology may facilitate communication or “disembodiment, where individuals can detach from their physical selves and immerse themselves in virtual or adopted identities” (Riva, 2024). Jean effectively transforms into Gordon's second self, a concept that strongly aligns with Sherry Turkle's fundamental argument regarding the significant impact of computers and digital tools on our self-perception (Turkle, 2005). Her trajectory highlights the enticing possibilities of digital connectivity, where the distinctions between empathy and absorption become perilously indistinct, thereby rewriting personal boundaries and self-identity.

Concerning the psychological ramifications of selecting another's existence, Jean's decision to adopt Gordon's life, communicated solely via his cell phone, initiates a series of profound and occasionally unsettling psychological consequences.

**Jean:** Hello? No, he is not. I am answering his phone. Does he have your phone number?

Pause while the woman on the phone says: Of course, he has my phone number. I am his mother. The enormity of her loss registers for Jean.

Oh . . . Yes, of course. He will—I will leave him the message. I hope you have a good day.

Good-bye. She hangs up.

She breathes to Gordon:

It was your mother.

She looks at Gordon's face.

It is transfigured, as though he were looking at something eminently beautiful.

She touches his forehead. Do you want me to keep talking until they get here?



Kirkuk University Journal  
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 2-1 - حزيران 2025)

Gordon, I am Jean. You do not know me. However, you are going to be just fine.

Well, actually— Do not worry. (Rhl,2007, 24)

Primarily, it unequivocally leads to a diminution of her intrinsic character. Her sense of herself diminishes as she delves more into Gordon's universe. Her identity becomes increasingly fluid and intricate, perpetually shaped by the narratives she meticulously crafts about Gordon. This fragmentation of identity, characteristic of the digital age, enables individuals to become “patchwork subjectivities”(Goriunova, 2019,p.8 ). Maintaining a consistent identity across several digital personas across various internet platforms is difficult. Jean's internal struggle reflects the broader societal challenge of maintaining authenticity amidst pervasive digital performance, where the self is continually re-presented and re-negotiated.

Secondly, this vicarious existence significantly distorts the grief process and memories. Jean becomes ensnared in a form of vicarious mourning, deeply affected by the bereavement of Gordon's family and friends, rather than confronting and processing her nascent sorrow for Gordon, an individual she had known briefly. This can significantly hinder the typical and healthy grieving process when electronically mediated communication supplants the profound experience of remembrance and loss. Furthermore, the narratives Jean meticulously constructs around Gordon inadvertently modify his authentic memories, resulting in a "digital ghost" that diverges from the individual Gordon once was. Although seemingly intended to solace the bereavement of others. “This highlights the ethical intricacies associated with preserving posthumous digital identities, when the goal to commemorate may inadvertently lead to their distortion” (Roberts, 2023).

*Dead Man's Cell Phone* is a poignant cautionary tale regarding the potential perils of technology. It can lead us to get so absorbed in the lives of others that we risk forfeiting our fundamental sense of identity. It compels us to reevaluate the psychological toll of our increasingly digital existence and consider the profound implications for human identity in the twenty-first century.



Kirkuk University Journal  
of Humanities Studies

مجلة جامعة كركوك للدراسات الإنسانية



عدد خاص بنشر وقائع المؤتمر العلمي الثالث (العلوم الإنسانية أساس الارتقاء الفكري للمجتمع للمدة 2-1 - حزيران 2025)

#### 4. Conclusion

*Dead Man's Cell Phone* by Sarah Ruhl emphatically underscores the central theme that she explores: the psychological disintegration induced by technology. It illustrates individuals whose identities are not merely shaped but destabilized by the incessant digital presence of others. Gordon's mobile device and Jean's transformative journey have significant symbolic importance, underscoring the dramatic exploration of how technology fundamentally reshapes our comprehension of identity, otherness, and the fluid boundaries between life and death.

Despite his physical absence, we have meticulously demonstrated how Gordon's cell phone transcends its corporeal form to become a lasting extension of his identity, a disconcerting 'digital ghost' reverberating in the realm of the living. The incessant ringing signifies his lingering, spectral presence while highlighting the profound paradox of an individual being primarily recalled through a technological product, resulting in a fragmented and fundamentally incomplete recollection. This concept aligns closely with postmodern identity theories, wherein the self is continuously constructed and deconstructed through intricate interactions with digital technology, resulting in a fluid and often elusive self-concept.

Furthermore, Jean's intriguing journey into accepting Gordon's existence, facilitated only by technological means, underscores the profound psychological impact of inhabiting the digital lives of others. Her earnest efforts to console Gordon's relatives by fabricating intricate narratives about him inadvertently resulted in a distinct erosion of her authentic personality, thereby transforming Gordon into a second self. The inherent absence of physical cues in digital communication exacerbates the vicarious assumption of identity, resulting in significant memory distortion and complicating the grief process, obscuring the formerly distinct boundaries between self and other. The drama serves as a poignant cautionary tale, illustrating the perils of losing one's fundamental identity when it becomes excessively intertwined with the digital remnants of others.



Ultimately, Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* offers a profound and cerebral exploration of the psychological impact of technology on identity in the digital age. This calls for critical introspection regarding our individual and societal interactions with digital devices and how these pervasive encounters may subtly shape, alter, and at times, irrevocably redefine our entity. In an increasingly digital world, Ruhl's drama underscores the importance of maintaining our authentic identity, distinguishing between physical reality and digital existence, and navigating the intricate processes of loss and memory while honouring the profound complexity and inherent dignity of human experience. The drama compels us to reflect on the ethical responsibilities inherent in our digital existence and the enduring impact of our online actions on those we abandon

## References

- Al Yousef, S. (2006). Modern technology's advantages and disadvantages: A study of the adverse effects on the individual's health. *The Book of the Nation-Qatar*, (112).
- Finley, J. R., Naaz, F., & Goh, F. W. (2018). *Memory and technology*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Goriunova, O. (2019). Digital subjects: An introduction. *Subjectivity*, 12(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41286-018-00065-2>
- Harbinja, E. (2025). Digital remains and post-mortem privacy in the UK: What do? *Information, Communication & Society*, 28(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600869.2025.2506164>
- Irfan, M., Sher, M., Khan, G. A., & Asif, M. (2006). Role of mass media in disseminating agriculture. *International Journal of Agriculture and Biology*, 8(3), 117–119. <http://www.fspublishers.org>
- Khalaf, A. Z., & Diyaiy, S. A. (n.d.). The paradox of a postmodern technology in Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*.



- Lailah, A. (2009). The role of mass media and information technology in family disruption: Monitoring the movement of the reaction from the centre to the margin. In Scientific Conference: Media and challenges of the times (p. 23). Cairo University, Faculty of Information.
- Marks, C. (2024). The evolution of digital identity in the postmodern age: An examination of the self in online spaces. SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5172668>
- Muhammed, A. A. (2023). Paradoxical connections in Sarah Ruhl's Dead Man's Cell Phone: A sociological study. Koya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 6(1), 50–55. <https://doi.org/10.14500/kujhss.v6n1y2023.pp50-55>
- Riva, G. (2024). The disembodied disconnect hypothesis: How online interactions can lead to psychological distress. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 27(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2024.033>
- Roberts, R. J. (2023). You are only mostly dead: Protecting your digital ghost. Federal Communications Law Journal, 75(2), 197–224. <http://www.fclj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/75.2.5-Youre-Only-Mostly-Dead.pdf>
- Ruhl, S. (2007). Dead Man's Cell Phone. Samuel French.
- Turkle, S. (2005). The second self: Computers and the human spirit. MIT Press.