UNDERLYING FEMINISM AND LEADING LADIES
IN SARAH RUHL’S MELANCHOLY PLAY,
THE CLEAN HOUSE, AND
DEAD MAN’S CELL PHONE

By
Sara J. Dern

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Sarah Ruhl has found much success as a contemporary playwright, and her works focus on female protagonists. As Ruhl identifies as a feminist, this study will focus on the leading ladies in three of her popular plays and analyze them to determine if her beliefs carry over into the qualities and actions of her characters. Underlying feministic beliefs characteristics may be found in the female protagonists of Sarah Ruhl’s *Melancholy Play*, *The Clean House*, and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. The protagonists in these plays do not seem feministic at first glance, but a deeper analysis of their traits and actions may prove otherwise. A closer look at their interactions with the remaining characters will also provide insight to determine if the leading ladies’ thoughts and actions fall in line with feministic beliefs.
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APPROVED:

Library Paper Chair: Dr. Julie Rae Mollenkamp

ACCEPTED:

Chair, Department of Theatre & Dance: Dr. Richard Herman

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BELIEFS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A NOTE ON FEMINISM</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MELANCHOLY PLAY</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE CLEAN HOUSE</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEAD MAN’S CELL PHONE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Sarah Ruhl, a female American playwright, has found much success in the theatre in the twenty-first century. Her plays tell stories through the eyes of female protagonists, setting them apart from the majority of works popularly performed today. Ruhl has said she is a feminist, and this study will examine this theory in terms of the women she creates and how they affect other characters. This study will look at the women in three of Ruhl’s plays: *Melancholy Play*, *The Clean House*, and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. *In the Next Room (or the Vibrator Play)* has been examined for a feministic theme by many researchers, so this study will focus on Ruhl’s other works. The characters in these plays do not seem feministic at first glance, but a deeper analysis of their traits and actions may tell us otherwise. Underlying feministic beliefs can be found in the female protagonists of Sarah Ruhl’s *Melancholy Play*, *The Clean House*, and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*.

Her protagonists are concerned (sometimes unknowingly) with the empowerment of their gender, which is a main goal of feminists. Tilly’s emotions and relationships in *Melancholy Play* cause the other characters to either empower or disempower themselves, even though she had no intention of affecting anyone. All of the women in *The Clean House* (Matilde, Lane, Ana, and Virginia) weave a web of relationships that, in a strange way, allows them to enable each other. Jean in *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* is so concerned with the happiness of others that she completely romanticizes a dead man in order to make his peers believe he loved them. These are all different approaches to the empowerment of women in society, though this connects them as feminist pieces. To tell this, we must first take a look at Sarah Ruhl’s history and beliefs.
BIOGRAPHY

Sarah Ruhl was born on January 24, 1974 and grew up in a suburb of Chicago. Kathy Kehoe Ruhl, her mother, was an actor and director as well as a high school English teacher. Her father marketed toys. Growing up, Ruhl thought she would become a teacher or a writer, but not a playwright. According to her family, she began telling stories even before she could write. Her mother would take her to rehearsals as a child, and she would take notes to give to the actors. She began attending workshops on theatre in the fourth grade. She studied under Paula Vogel (a contemporary woman playwright) at Brown University. Ruhl is married to Anthony Charuvastra, and the two have three children. (Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl* 9-10)

Ruhl currently has thirteen plays published, including *The Clean House, Melancholy Play, Dead Man’s Cell Phone, In the Next Room (or the Vibrator Play)*, and *Eurydice*. She also recently released a collection of essays entitled *100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children, and Theater* in which she shares her thoughts on writing, acting, watching, and collaborating on plays. She received a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” in 2006, a $500,000 fellowship awarded to individuals working in the arts and sciences. This allowed her to focus on her writing as opposed to working a day job and only being able to write in the evenings. This ultimately helped Ruhl turn her writing into a career and not just a hobby. (Vogel)

Sarah Ruhl has found much success since the beginning of the twenty-first century. “She had 12 premiere productions in as many years…And four of her plays were among the ten most-produced plays in the American theatres that are members of the Theatre Communications Group’s organization” (Durham 4). Two of these four plays are *The Clean House* and *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, which I will examine in this study. *Melancholy Play* has not been examined
as frequently as some of Ruhl’s other plays, such as *Eurydice* and *In the Next Room (or the Vibrator Play)*, so it will also be used for the purposes of this study. Durham also goes on to say that “academic scholarship has not yet succeeded in catching up with the prolific and widely produced Ruhl” (4). The one book to date focusing on Ruhl’s plays is *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays* by James Al-Shamma. This will be used as a resource for further analyzing Ruhl’s works, though the remainder of the research and analysis is original.

**BELIEFS**

In her recent book, *100 Essays I Don’t Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children, and Theater*, Sarah Ruhl presents one hundred short essays expressing her thoughts in four areas she titles “On Writing Plays,” “On Acting in Plays,” “On People Who Watch Plays,” and “On Making Plays with Other People: Designers, Dramaturgs, Directors, and Children.” Understanding why Ruhl created characters and environments the way she did can help me analyze her characters and better describe them. In this book, she discusses everything from naming her characters to staging their private moments. Below are five essays of relevance to this study. Before examining female characters in three of her plays, it would be beneficial to discuss these beliefs, as it appears that they surface in multiple works.

In Ruhl’s essay “Should characters have last names?,” she writes that “The state of having a first and last name is a cultural practice closely aligned to patriarchy, land rights, and the individuation of the self, some would say the illusion of the self” (*100 Essays* 17). In many of her plays, Ruhl does not give her characters last names. She believes that before a writer names their characters, they must decide whether or not the world they are creating is one where first
and last names are important. Ruhl said that the properties department (working on *The Clean House*) asked her what a character’s last name was so they could make a hospital badge for her. She told them they could not make her a badge because she did not have a last name. They asked her if she could create a last name, and Ruhl replied “no, because she doesn’t have a last name” (*100 Essays* 18). This belief could be considered feministic because of Ruhl’s rejection of traditional patriarchal practices.

In another essay, “Plays of ideas,” Ruhl states her belief that the use of large words is admirable, but not the equivalent of thinking (*100 Essays* 22). The use of ‘big words’ in plays often leads the characters to simply comment on ideas as opposed to put them to action. She argues that whether you use ‘large words’ or ‘small words,’ you can still share an idea that is equally as expansive and deep. Thoughts do not have to be expressed in the most eloquent language, but that does not decrease their value. The majority of the dialogue in Ruhl’s plays contains simple language with few terms the average audience member would not understand. I believe this allows her to share her ideas with more people because they do not need as much decoding as the shows that require a thesaurus on hand at all times to understand what the characters are saying. (*Ruhl, 100 Essays* 22-24)

Ruhl rejects the notion that the more the reader/audience knows about a character means the more they identify with them in “Investing in the character.” On the contrary, she writes that “the more one knows about the mysterious lady in the black hat, the less one identifies with her” (*100 Essays* 27). A character’s journey should involve surprising changes and wrong turns as opposed to a neatly drawn path, she believes. “In some works of art, what the audience is actually following is not the protagonist’s journey but rather the hidden emotional logic of the artist, which the artist covers with all his or her might” (*Ruhl, 100 Essays* 27-28). This is
important to understand when applying any theory to a theatrical piece. The choices of the characters may indicate hidden opinions of the author, giving the reader insight into their values and beliefs. Because this study will analyze characters in several of Ruhl’s plays, acknowledging this quote is crucial.

“On knowing” is the essay in which Ruhl discusses the notion that she must ‘know something,’ because she feels that she knows next to nothing. In theatre, she believes we must constantly go back in order to go forward.

And theater cannot believe in absolute knowledge, because usually two or three characters are talking and they usually believe two or three different things, making knowledge a relative proposition. But increasingly in the American theater we are led to believe that plays are about knowing, or putting forward a thesis. (Ruhl, *100 Essays* 39)

Making knowledge relative almost defeats the purpose of the term. Audiences believing that “plays are about knowing” may lead them to miss what idea the play is trying to express.

Because of this, Ruhl states that “the importance of knowing nothing is underrated” (*100 Essays* 39).

In another essay, “Can one stage privacy?,” Ruhl talks about how we look at a character’s “privacy” onstage. Characters can express their private thoughts through monologues, but this also forces them to acknowledge the fact that there is an audience watching their performance. The stage in its very nature is an “anti-privacy medium,” according to Ruhl (*100 Essays* 42). She also expresses the idea that “as our plays culturally become more and more about the indoors – living rooms, bedrooms, and offices – are they also increasingly about the exteriors of people?” (*100 Essays* 42). Many of her plays take place indoors, such as *The Clean House*. However,
seeing the interior of someone’s home or workplace can very well show you details of a person’s interior. These details are important to consider when looking at Ruhl’s characters because if she feels that interior structures are important, they can also give us insight to help us better understand the character who inhabits this space.

A NOTE ON FEMINISM

Feminism is often misconstrued in today’s society. When people hear the word “feminist,” they think of radicals who want to overthrow the patriarchy and rule the world. That is not the case in the majority of feminists’ minds. According to Mark Fortier:

Feminist theory is profoundly concerned with the cultural representation of women, sometimes as a strictly masculinist fantasy with no relation to real women, sometimes as the appropriation of women and women’s bodies to masculine perspectives. (Fortier 111)

There are many branches of feminist theory, of course, but this is the basic concept they share. Feminism seeks to empower women, though that does not mean women have to disempower men in the process. The ultimate goal of feminism is gender equality.

Jill Dolan, a leading feminist theatre theorist, wrote:

Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse. It is a critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women’s position as outside of dominant male discourse… The routes feminism takes to redress the fact of male dominance, however, are varied. Feminism has in fact given way more precisely to
feminisms, each of which implies distinct ideological interpretations and political strategies. (Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator* 3)

Here, Dolan is saying that feminism comes in many forms in order to compensate for male dominance. Ruhl’s characters approach male dominance in a variety of ways, though that does not discount the feminist interpretation of their actions. Dolan continues to discuss “exposing and changing women’s subservient position” (Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator* 3) in society. This can be interpreted as changing the subservient view of women to a more balanced state of power and respect between the two genders. Dolan’s ideologies further support the notion that feminism seeks equality for all genders.

When using these definitions of feminism, though they may encompass many other feminisms, the actions of the women in three of Ruhl’s plays will be analyzed. It is important to note these definitions of feminism as opposed to others in order to see the direction of reasoning. One cannot tell if something does or does not relate to a theory without first defining it. This more open-ended definition of feminism is the basis of the many branches of this theory and can be seen in Ruhl’s characters with a closer look.

Sarah Ruhl has identified herself as a feminist, which can be seen in her plays. When asked in an interview how she develops this feminism in her plays, Ruhl replied:

I've been a feminist as long as I've had the occasion to wear high heels. But I wouldn't say I'm ideological. I'm interested in human stories, and in telling stories from a woman's point of view. I think male writers are capable of writing with androgyny. And I think male audiences are fully capable of seeing things from a woman's point of view, just as women can identify with or empathize with
Hamlet and King Lear. But the more women we have writing more plays, the more multifaceted our stories will be. (“Kissing on Stage”)

Many of Ruhl’s plays feature a female protagonist. In this quote alone, she is empowering others through her blanket encouragement of writers. She acknowledges that both genders can write and watch plays about women, putting forth the notion that on this subject, there can be gender equality. However, she does state that “the more women we have writing more plays, the more multifaceted our stories will be,” meaning society can be exposed to more sides of the same story if more female writers exist. This would allow for a more well-rounded view on both genders and their struggles.

**MELANCHOLY PLAY**

Before examining Ruhl’s Melancholy Play, it is important to read her notes listed before the script begins. “Melancholy in this play is Bold, Outward, Sassy, Sexy and Unashamed. It is not introverted. It uses, instead, the language of Jacobean direct address. However, be sensitive to the moments of delicacy, fragility, and sadness inside of the farce” (Ruhl, Melancholy Play 229). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, melancholy is defined as “a sad mood or feeling,” so it is important to attribute Ruhl’s notes to this definition before describing the show. These two concepts are not typically linked, but this connection is essential to understanding the play. This distinction is important to understand because melancholy, in this sense, is something the characters strive to achieve rather than avoid. It is their desired state of being as opposed to a byproduct of life.

*Melancholy Play* begins with Frank, a tailor, giving a defense of melancholy to the audience. Then Tilly, a teller at a bank, asks Frank why he is like an almond and the two exit
with no explanation. Next an Italian psychologist named Lorenzo gives a monologue concerning his emotions, or lack thereof. Tilly arrives for her appointment and Lorenzo tells her that he is in love with her. Tilly apologizes, saying this happens to her often. She then asks Frank once again why he is like an almond, and they begin talking about the bank. The two begin discussing emotions and kiss, caught up in the moment of passion. Not long after, they sleep together and Frank tells Tilly he loves her. She is scared, though tells him she loves him too. Frank gives Tilly flowers on her birthday, which makes her very happy. At her birthday party, she becomes even happier and leaves to lie down. (Ruhl, *Melancholy Play*)

Tilly tries to tell Frank, then Lorenzo, about her excessive happiness. However, neither man wants to listen, so Tilly goes to Frances and Joan. Frank visits Lorenzo to tell him how he and Tilly met and fell in love. He reveals that he collected a vial of Tilly’s tears from her “melancholic stage.” The men fight over this vial, but Joan enters and takes it from them. When Frances learns what is in the vial, she drinks it. Joan tells Tilly that she is afraid that Frances has turned into an almond. They try to console the almond by salting it and tossing it in the air. A letter is slipped under their door warning anyone experiencing melancholy to not leave their homes because these people have been turning into almonds. We learn that Frances is in fact inside the almond. Tilly goes to Frank in the hopes that he can fix Frances. Frank reveals that Frances is his long lost twin sister, Tilly cries, and Frank once again collects her tears. Tilly, Frank, Joan, and Lorenzo gather around Frances (the almond) and drink Tilly’s tears. They are reunited with Frances and decide that they are happy because they are together. (Ruhl, *Melancholy Play*)

Tilly begins the play totally melancholic, which rubs off on those around her. All of the characters at one point or another develop feelings for her, just as she told Lorenzo in the
beginning (that this always happened to her). In this context, melancholy may be considered desirable. The fact that Tilly spreads this feeling around empowers others to step into this longed for state. Remembering Ruhl’s definition “Melancholy in this play is Bold, Outward, Sassy, Sexy and Unashamed. It is not introverted” (Ruhl, *Melancholy Play* 229) explains why other characters so desire this feeling that Tilly possesses. Tilly and Frank fall in love, but this does not cause any change in emotion from Frank. It does, however, cure Tilly’s melancholy and cause her to become incredibly happy.

This happiness, on the contrary, is not shared with those around her. She goes to Frank to share her happiness, and he does not like it. He thinks this feeling is wrong and that Tilly has changed, so he rejects her newfound happiness (even though he is the cause). Tilly then goes to Lorenzo to express her joy. He treats her as if this is a medical condition and implies it is inappropriate behavior for Tilly. He tries to convince her that life is not cheerful. She decides to quit her sessions with him, which upsets him. Next, she visits Joan and Frances, who are also disturbed by her glee. Her happiness unsettles people, disempowering their desired feelings. Happiness is a feeling that tends to spread to other people, but in this case, it does the opposite and causes melancholy to spread instead.

We learn that Frank has collected a vial of Tilly’s tears from her melancholy stage, and the other four characters fight over it because they believe it is the key to achieving their melancholy states again. They also believe they have lost Tilly in her happiness. In a backwards way, her tears empower the other characters and give them a goal again. Frances drinks the tears and becomes an almond, causing the other characters to come together to try and find a way to be with her again. Tilly cries, and they once again collect her tears, hoping it will reunite them with Frances. They all drink the tears and are successfully united with Frances, though they are
unsure whether they are now also almonds. Her tears allowed this to happen. They are all happy in the end, regardless of their physical states.

Tilly almost becomes an unintentional or forced symbol of feminism in *Melancholy Play* because others allow her to change their mood, either empowering or disempowering their lives. Tilly was not aware of the impact she had on other characters, causing this role to be somewhat forced. The others fight and question some of Tilly’s moods and beliefs, causing her to either defend herself or remove herself from the situation. She unknowingly changes their lives.

Lorenzo is in love with Tilly and becomes somewhat depressed when he learns that she is in love with Frank. Frank makes her happy, though her happiness upsets Frank.

TILLY

I’m happy!

FRANK

Yes.

TILLY

Don’t you want me to be happy?

FRANK

I –

TILLY

Let’s dance!

FRANK

I have a stomach ache.

TILLY

Frank?
Frank…

*She does a small dance of hopping toward him.*

FRANK

You’re saying my name wrong.

That Frank was not me.

Tilly.

I feel your happiness coming on like a great big storm.

TILLY

A storm?

FRANK

Your eyes aren’t looking at me. They’re looking at a great big storm of happiness.

On the horizon.

Can you see me?

*He waves his hand in front of her face*

TILLY

I think I need to be alone with my happiness.

Or else with crowds of people in a public square.

Maybe I’ll go to the bank and do some extra work.

Good-bye. (Ruhl, *Melancholy Play* 289-290)

Frank not only rejected her happiness, but also told her he was not attracted to her in that state, which is misogynistic. The reason he gave for this rejection is that she was saying his name differently. These reactions to Tilly’s newfound emotion caused her to want to be alone.
In addition, Tilly unintentionally caused both Joan and Frances to fall for her, even though they are already in a relationship. They also found her happiness odd and unattractive. Tilly did not intend for any of these things to happen, but the other characters in the show react and interact with her to find their own meaning in her words. Thus, they either build themselves up or allow themselves to fall.

The characters turning into almonds can also be viewed as a euphemism for male anatomy. This can be interpreted as a feministic remark, of course, because all of the characters desire to be together at the end of the play and wind up changing into nuts. This suggests that in order to gain equality, one must either be a man or figure out how to become one. Feminists seek equality for men and women, yet Ruhl used a male symbol to show her characters gaining this equivalence. This could have been a sarcastic remark on the matter, however, as Ruhl identifies as a feminist it can be concluded that this has meaning. Laci Green, a feminist and popular American video blogger, speaks on the topic of what is masculine and what is feminine in one of her videos. “There’s more than one way to be a man or a woman. We all have a combination of feminine and masculine traits. It’s part of being human” (DOES SEXISM HURT MEN? 2:42). This concept may be what Ruhl was hinting towards when choosing to turn her characters into almonds as opposed to another object. Even though Tilly and her friends were transformed into a symbol commonly associated with the male figure, they were happy with what they had become. No one proclaimed anger or joy at the fact that they had become a nut, they were just happy to be together.

Even though Tilly empowered, then disempowered, then “fixed” the characters around her, she always stuck with what she thought was right and what she deserved.
TILLY

Lorenzo. When someone in your social circle becomes so melancholy that they stop moving, it is your duty as a human being to go find them. It is not enough to seek medical attention. It is not enough to ask them how they are feeling. You must go where they are and get them. It is up to all of us to save Frances. It is part of the social contract. (Ruhl, *Melancholy Play* 319)

Tilly did not let the others bring her down when they did not share in her happiness, but rather, found a solution that allowed everyone to feel empowered. This speech is a call to action for the other characters and can be interpreted in a feministic sense. Tilly is saying that you have to take an active role in relationships because passively asking questions is not enough. Feminists do not believe it is enough to simply acknowledge the subservient role of women and ask them questions, but instead, that it is the job of members of society to fix this social ill. Tilly may be saying this in terms of reuniting the characters with Frances, but she is pursuing equality for all, in terms of both emotional and physical states. As mentioned previously, the main goals of feminism are to empower women and to seek gender equality. Rather than only lifting the women’s spirits, she did the same for the men and did not disempower them in her journey to find happiness, showing no gender bias. These actions show that Tilly has an underlying feminist temperament, even though she may not have realized it at first.

THE CLEAN HOUSE

*The Clean House* opens with Matilde, a Brazilian cleaning lady, telling the audience a joke in Portuguese. The next character to appear is Lane, a doctor and Matilde’s employer who
takes her to the hospital in hopes of curing her depression. Virginia, Lane’s sister, appears next – expressing her thought that having someone else clean your house is insane. Matilde tell us about her parents and why she came to America. Her parents were comedians in Brazil, and she describes them as full of joy and laughter. Her mother literally died laughing after hearing the perfect joke from her husband. Wrought with grief, he shot himself. Now, Matilde is in America, trying to think of the perfect joke. She and Lane try to work out their situation – Matilde does not like cleaning and Lane does not like bossing her around. Virginia visits while Lane is at work, and she arranges an agreement with Matilde; she will help her clean the house before Lane gets home from work every day. While doing laundry, the two find undergarments among Charles’ (Lane’s husband, also a doctor) laundry that do not belong to Lane. Their suspicions are confirmed when Lane reveals that Charles has left her for a patient. Matilde is fired when Lane finds out Virginia has been cleaning her house. Matilde tries to tell Lane a joke in Portuguese before she goes, but it only makes her cry. (Ruhl, The Clean House)

At the top of the second act, Charles is performing surgery on Ana, his lover, and they act out how they first met and fell in love. They then come back to the current setting and awkwardly enter Lane’s house. Ana and Matilde begin to speak in a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese, connecting instantly. Charles explains to Lane that Ana is his bashert, the Jewish idea of the soul mate, meaning their marriage has been dissolved. Lane is upset and lashes out when Ana offers to hire Matilde, claiming that she needs her. Matilde compromises and decides to split her time between their two homes. Lane fights with Virginia, taking her frustrations out on her, and attacks her cleaning habits. Matilde thinks of the perfect joke while cleaning Charles and Ana’s home, realizing that it did not kill her at all. She convinces Lane to visit Ana as a house call, as she refuses to go to the hospital for medical attention to treat her cancer and
Charles is searching for a cure in Alaska. Lane manages to forgive Ana for taking Charles away and insists that she come to live with her until Charles returns. Time passes and Ana’s health deteriorates. She asks Matilde to kill her with the perfect joke. Matilde agrees and does so the next morning. Right after her death, Charles returns with a Yew tree that he believes will cure Ana. (Ruhl, *The Clean House*)

The last scene is Matilde creating images of her parents, played by the same actors as Charles and Ana. Her mother is in labor, but there is not time to reach the hospital, so her parents are lying down under a tree. Her father tells her mother a joke, causing her to laugh while she gives birth, claiming that Matilde also laughed as she came into the world. This causes the play to be full circle for Matilde, as it began with the death of her parents, working towards her birth and feeling of completeness. This brings her closure as the play comes to an end. (Ruhl, *The Clean House*)

In *The Clean House*, the women seem to empower each other as opposed to one character doing this to all of the others. This creates a different character dynamic that *Melancholy Play*, so we must examine each female in order to understand their feministic qualities in the play. The four women are radically different and take different actions, but this weaves a web of causes and effects that ultimately empower them as a group instead of singular women. None of these characters have last names, which directly corresponds with Ruhl’s essay concerning the patriarchal nature of last names. This means that they do not conform to the patriarchy, allowing them to act as they wish without concern for what the men, or in this case a singular man, think.

Matilde’s empowerment of others is through her jokes, which she hopes will bring people happiness and laughter. However, she tells these jokes in Portuguese, and Ana is the only one who can understand them. Their ability to understand one another links the two characters
together. Matilde would not have been able to create the perfect joke if she had remained solely at Lane’s house, meaning she would not have been able to allow Ana to die happily. Matilde did not like cleaning houses because she thought there was more for her to do in life, which could be considered a feminist belief because it goes against the notion that the woman should be a homemaker and the man should be the breadwinner. Instead, Matilde did not want to settle for a job women traditionally held, but wanted to achieve more in life. Her occupation links her to Lane and Virginia; Lane is her boss and Virginia becomes a friend who helps her clean. She tries to cheer Lane up with her jokes, but Lane does not understand them. However, Lane refuses to give her up completely, even though she fired her. Matilde does convince Lane to take care of Ana, though, which Lane would not have done unless prompted. She is the only character Virginia opens up to, as she does not think she can talk openly with her sister. Matilde unites these women, and without her, they would not have interacted in the same way.

Lane is a strong woman who sees medically caring for people as more important than cleaning her own home, which leads her to hire Matilde. When she was first introduced, it seemed like she was strong and independent, believing in her abilities to heal others. However, this image changed when she let Charles, a man, control her happiness. At first, she hates Ana because she stole Charles away from her, causing her to fall into a state of depression. After seeing her upon Matilde’s request, she forgives Ana and offers to take care of her. This leads Ana to attempt to improve her health while waiting for Charles to return from Alaska. This act empowers her, even if minimally, to try and live. Though she is nearly always fighting with her sister, in a way, the two bait each other in a way that causes them to release their pent up anger. After Lane tells Virginia to stop cleaning her house, the two argue.
VIRGINIA

I wonder – when it was – that you became – such a bitch? Oh, yes, I remember.
Since the day you were born, you thought that anyone with a *problem* had a defect
of the will. You’re wrong about that. Some people have problems, real

problems—

LANE

Yes. I see people with *real problems* all day long. At the hospital.

VIRGINIA

I think – there’s a small part of me that’s enjoyed watching your life fall apart. To
see you lose your composure – for once! I thought: we can be real sisters who tell
each other real things. But I was wrong. Well, fine, I’m not picking up your dry

cleaning anymore. I’m going to get a job.

LANE

What job?

VIRGINIA

Any job!

LANE

What are you qualified to do at this point?

VIRGINIA

No wonder Charles left. You have no compassion. (Ruhl, *The Clean House* 82–

83)
In this argument, they express their pent up anger and feelings toward each other, bringing their thoughts out into the open. This allows some relief, as they are no longer holding these thoughts inside, but it also leads to tension between Lane and Virginia. Later, Lane winds up asking Virginia for help caring for Ana, and the two reconcile.

Ana brings Lane out of her depression, surprisingly enough. Lane forgives her, which allows her to move past what happened with Charles and into a new future. Had this not happened, Lane may have been in a depressed state for a much longer time and Ana would have died alone and in pain. She showed Matilde compassion and friendship, causing her to become happier. This led Matilde to think of the perfect joke, which has been her dream. Matilde struggles with creating this joke, but once she is emotionally empowered by Ana, she thinks of many jokes in a short amount of time. Taking care of Ana gives Virginia a purpose, which pleases her because she likes to be busy. She thanks Virginia, which no one else does, and this moves her. Although she effectively ended Lane and Charles’ relationship, she is the character who empowers everyone else to feel joy again. She only knew these women for a short time, but her interactions were essential to their happiness.

Virginia can be seen as the character that always wants to help, or a ‘people pleaser.’ She helps take burdens off of others. For Matilde, she relieved the burden of cleaning Lane’s house.

**VIRGINIA**

Do you feel sad *while* you are cleaning? Or before? Or after?

**MATILDE**

I am sad when I think about cleaning. But I try not to think about cleaning while I am cleaning. I try to think of jokes. But sometimes the cleaning makes me mad.
And then I’m not in a funny mood. And that makes me sad. (Ruhl, The Clean House 19)

This conversation is what led Virginia to offer to help Matilde. Not only does that help ease her workload, but it causes Matilde to become happier. This may have eventually caused the termination of Matilde’s job, but that led to her working for Ana and Charles and finding an environment where she can create jokes. She cleans Lane’s house because she enjoys the task and Lane does not. Towards the end, she takes care of Ana. If Virginia had not completed these tasks, they would have fallen to the other characters, preventing them from finishing the actions that empower one another.

Through this web of relationships, Matilde, Lane, Ana, and Virginia manage to empower each other. Their personalities and goals are far from similar, making it a surprise that they complement each other so well. They empower others through humor, health, joy, and assisting with problems. The interactions of these four women, though sometimes frustrating, allow them to reach their goals.

**DEAD MAN’S CELL PHONE**

*Dead Man’s Cell Phone* begins in a café with the nonstop ringing of a man’s cellphone. Jean, a meek and quiet woman, discovers that the owner of the cellphone (Gordon) has died in the café, unnoticed. She decides to answer Gordon’s phone and carry out his affairs. Jean attends his funeral, where she gets a call (on Gordon’s phone) from a strange woman and agrees to meet her. She is called “the Other Woman,” and is only given a name in the final scene. She was Gordon’s lover. Gordon’s mother, Mrs. Gottlieb, invites Jean to dinner. Here she meets Hermia,
Gordon’s timid yet eccentric widow, and his brother Dwight, who works at a stationery store. Dwight and Jean go to his stationery store and share a kiss. (Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*)

The second act opens with a long monologue from Gordon, where he walks us through the events of the day that he died. We learn his profession, which is connecting people who need money with people who need new organs. He does not sell the organs directly, but rather claims to redistribute them where necessary. Meanwhile, Jean is asked to go pick up Hermia at the bar because she is too intoxicated to drive herself home. We learn that Gordon and Hermia’s relationship was not always successful and that he frequently cheated on her, which she knew.

Jean gets yet another call and flies to South Africa to meet with one of Gordon’s business contacts (The Other Woman). They struggle over Gordon’s phone, and Jean is knocked unconscious, and she enters into a purgatory-like world where she meets Gordon. It is confirmed that Jean has fallen in love with Gordon, or rather, the image of Gordon she created. She learns through their encounter that he is an awful man and that she is actually in love with Dwight. In the end, Hermia leaves to be a dramatic skater, Mrs. Gottlieb kills herself in order to be with Gordon again, The Other Woman (who we learn is names Carlotta) takes over the business, and Jean and Dwight embrace as the lights go out. (Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*)

Jean starts the play with qualities and actions that would not be considered feministic, but a deeper analysis of these actions shows an underlying feminist motive. She romanticizes Gordon’s life and affairs after taking over his cell phone, telling each person how much he valued them and that he was thinking of each of them in his final moments, none of which is true. She refuses to give anyone else the cell phone, claiming Gordon had intended for her to keep it. She latches on to this untruthful notion of a man, surrendering her time and energy into making this false image a reality. She does comfort others with these created sentiments, but
does nothing for her own sake. Feminism is concerned with the empowerment of women, and Jean only sought to give a man she had never met a better reputation. She appears to be motherly and caring towards those she interacts with, but always puts their needs before her own. For example, when Mrs. Gottlieb serves steak for dinner, Jean accepts even though she is a vegetarian because she does not want to seem rude. In putting her own needs aside, she is doing the opposite of empowering herself and instead falsely empowering a man she never met. Feminism does not necessarily seek to bring men down, but the goal is to bring women to the same level as men. Jean, in lifting Gordon’s image up, is furthering the gap between the two genders.

Through her interactions with his family and associates, Jean creates this image of Gordon and goes so far as to fall in love with him. She had never met him before he died, so she had no indication of what his personality or business life were like. Because she lied to all of his associates she came into contact with, she began to believe these lies herself. When she met Gordon in their purgatory-like world, she learned the truth. She was extremely disappointed that he had not been the man she fantasized, but rather, an organ trafficker with no regard for others. Building such a careful and intricate image of a man by its very nature is not feminist at all. In creating this image of Gordon, Jean is almost idolizing him. The idolization of a person subconsciously places them in a higher status, rank, or position than the worshipper. Again, this causes Jean to place Gordon above her. However, Jean did manage to empower Hermia and The Other Woman with her lies.

Hermia was empowered when Jean gave her a salt shaker, telling her that Gordon wanted her to have it, as it was one of the last things he used before he died. Hermia was genuinely touched, and we later learn that it is because she and Gordon did not have a good relationship.
She admits that she would fantasize that she was someone else while having sex with Gordon, and that upset her. To comfort the drunken Hermia, Jean makes up a letter from Gordon that she tells Hermia she saw on a napkin on his café table.

HERMIA

What did it say?

JEAN

I forget exactly. But I can paraphrase. It said, Dear Hermia, I know we haven’t always connected, every second of the day. Husbands and wives seldom do. The joy between husband and wife is elusive, but it is strong. It endures countless moments of silent betrayal, navigates complicated labyrinths of emotional retreats. I know that sometimes you were somewhere else when we made love. I was, too. But in those moments of climax, when the darkness descended, and our fantasies dissolved into the air under the quickening heat of our desire – then, then, we were in that room together. And that is all that matters. Love, Gordon.

HERMIA

Gordon knew that?

JEAN

I guess he did.

HERMIA

Well, how about that.

*Years of her marriage come back to her with a new light shining on them.*

You’ve given me a great gift, Jean. (Ruhl, *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* ’72)
Jean made this all up, of course. But in the end, she gave Hermia happiness, which she was previously lacking. Immediately after, Hermia reveals Gordon’s profession, selling organs on the black market, which is the first time Jean’s romanticized image of Gordon falters. Without this encouragement from Jean, Hermia would have never followed her dream and joined a touring production as a dramatic figure skater.

Jean interacts similarly with the Other Woman. She tells her that Gordon’s last words were that he loved her. Gordon tells us in purgatory that he loved himself most and did not care much for others, so we know Jean’s statement was false, but she used it to comfort the Other Woman anyway, empowering her in the feminist sense. She may have been using a man to do it, but she gave the Other Woman closure in regards to her relationship with Gordon. Oddly enough, the Other Woman was trying to empower Jean throughout their encounter. Though we do not know much about her, we can tell that the Other Woman is strong and independent.

“Women are responsible for enlivening dull places like train stations. There is hardly and pleasure in waiting for a train anymore” (Ruhl Dead Man’s 18). She encourages Jean to acknowledge and flaunt her beauty by confidently applying lipstick in public. Jean hesitates and expresses her nervousness, but the Other Woman persists anyway. These acts attempted to empower Jean so she would see herself as more than ordinary, but they were not successful. The Other Woman’s feminist qualities of self-worth and confidence did not rub off on Jean.

In a twisted way, Jean also empowered Mrs. Gottlieb in the last scene. Because she is only referred to by her last name, Ruhl is telling us that Mrs. Gottlieb gives in to the patriarchal ways of society. It has already been made clear that Mrs. Gottlieb loved Gordon the most in the world through her statements about him at dinner. Jean explains to Mrs. Gottlieb that when you
die, you spend the eternity with the person you love most in the world, which she learned through her encounter with Gordon in purgatory, which he refers to as the “pipeline.”

JEAN

…Now he’s with you. Or – he’s waiting for you.

MRS. GOTTLIEB

For me alone?

JEAN

Yes.

MRS. GOTTLIEB

He has no one else to console him?

JEAN

No.

MRS. GOTTLIEB

Gordon! Gordon, I’m coming!
Together we’ll play all the games we played when you were little. Hush, little wormy, on my arm, we’ll get a spider to calm you down! Gordon, wait for your mother! It won’t be long now!

JEAN

Wait, don’t!

*Mrs. Gottlieb walks off with determination,*

*She might sing a reprise of “You’ll Never Walk Alone.”*
She throws herself into the flames with the steak
and self-immolates, but we don’t need to hear or see that. (Ruhl, Dead Man’s Cell Phone 96-97)

Had Jean not told Mrs. Gottlieb that Gordon was waiting for her in their pipeline, Mrs. Gottlieb would (presumably) not have committed suicide. However, no one attempted to stop her because they knew she wanted to be with Gordon again. In a strange way, Jean gave Mrs. Gottlieb hope and happiness, empowering her to find the way to be with her son again.

We do not know much about Jean’s background. We know she works at the Holocaust Museum and that she is in her late thirties, but the rest of her life remains a mystery. This connects directly to Ruhl’s idea that the more the audience knows about a character, the less they identify with them. Jean does not automatically appear to be a strong character because she lacks the traditional qualities: confidence, ambition, and clear goals. However, the absence of these qualities gives her a mysterious quality, which keeps readers interested. Her motherly traits (and obsession with a cell phone) make her relatable to modern audiences. Jean can be considered strong because of the effect she has on others. As mentioned above, she empowers Hermia, the Other Woman, and Mrs. Gottlieb to find happiness and move past the loss of Gordon. This is a unique quality that makes Jean a subtly strong character. Because we do not know how she acts outside of the confinements of the stage, it leaves the rest of her life up to our imagination, keeping us attentive.

Though Jean may not appear to have strong feministic tendencies because she puts the needs of others before her own, but she always manages to empower those around her. She does not empower herself through the typical practices of ‘sticking up for herself’ or putting her desires first, but she feels empowered through providing these feelings for others. She helped
Hermia come to terms with her marriage and find the courage to pursue her dream of dramatic figure skating. Her lies of Gordon’s last words brought peace to the Other Woman, who was trying to empower her in turn. Jean revealed how Mrs. Gottlieb could achieve happiness and be reunited with Gordon, which she did by committing suicide. Through all of these actions and her interaction with Gordon, Jean realizes her own truth; she is in love with Dwight. She follows her own desires and the play ends with her and Dwight embracing once more.

CONCLUSION

Sarah Ruhl’s beliefs, both feministic and otherwise, can be seen through the female characters she produces. Her belief in the patriarchal nature of last names can be seen in the names she gives her characters; most do not have a last name, or if they do, it is a subtle hint that they have given in to this patriarchal notion of society. She does not write elaborate backstories on her characters in the hopes that the reader and audience will identify more with them, in line with her belief that the more the reader/audience knows about a character, the less they are able to relate. The language in her plays is simple, yet effective, because it does not require much translation. Ruhl is a self-proclaimed feminist, telling stories from a woman’s perspective. She does, however, believe that both genders can empathize with stories from the others’ point of view.

*Melancholy Play* creates Tilly as an unknowing feminist, at first, because she is unaware what effect she has on others. She realizes that she wants everyone to share her happiness, empowering them all to reach this state, not discriminating based on gender. Matilde, Lane, Ana, and Virginia are thrown together in a strange series of events in *The Clean House*, allowing them to form relationships and help each other through their struggles. Had even one of these
characters been removed, the other three would not have reached the same ending. Jean in Dead Man’s Cell Phone is so concerned with not hurting anyone emotionally that she creates a persona for Gordon and lies to his friends and family about his final moments. Through these lies, she is able to empower the other women in the show to move past Gordon’s death and find happiness in life again. Through these characters, underlying feministic beliefs can be interpreted in Sarah Ruhl’s Melancholy Play, The Clean House, and Dead Man’s Cell Phone.
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