

# The Prevalence of Black Comedy in Comic Plays of Post-postmodern Drama: Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House* as a Sample

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This study is an attempt to shed light on a type of comedy, which is prevalent in comic plays of post-postmodern drama, namely, black comedy. Though the form of comedy is too little in the literary works of the contemporary era, its use gives an impression and a message achieved through dealing with black and dark issues that are reflected within a comic framework. Here, comedy is presented in forms including humour and jokes, yet the chief milieu is bitterness. *The Clean House* by American writer Sarah Ruhl is chosen as a sample of depicting the prevalence of black comedy in contemporary comic plays; and this is the main aim of the paper. The study is built on questions seeking to find specific answers to illuminate the subject, the core of this work. This involves the following: (1) What are the purposes and functions of the use of black comedy in post-postmodern plays? (2) Does the use of this form make the plays comic in nature or do they tend to be tragic? (3) How does Sarah Ruhl handle this type of comedy in *The Clean House*? And by what means? (4) Does this form perform the goals it seeks to achieve, especially in *The Clean House*? This study is divided into relevant sequential accounts that offer detailed information on the subject tackled. This includes an overview on the justifications of the use of black comedy as a literary form reflecting serious subjects, identification of comedy and black comedy, the factors that prepare the way for the emergence of black humour in American literature in particular, a hint on post-postmodernism, black comedy in Ruhl's *The Clean House*, and a conclusion that summarises the main results of the study.

**Keywords:** *Comedy, Black Comedy, Post-postmodernism, Sarah Ruhl, and The Clean House.*

## **An Overview**

When people are in pain and crushed by crises, they usually tend to weave jokes and produce funny stories that make them laugh, alleviate their suffering and reveal the cruelty of these crises and the troubles they have faced. Comedy with its different forms, including humour and jokes, is the most popular expression among people to express their disdain against different issues ironically and indirectly.

People usually use the weapon of humour during various circumstances that they have passed and make it an outlet in the most severe situations. Whenever a tragedy, a strange thing, or an incident occurs, people's tongues, after that, often start to utter a joke. In this regard, the joke touches multi topics and areas such as poverty, corruption, authoritarianism, absence of democracy, repression, sex and the future uncertainty.

Almost all people of the world share the characteristic of producing humour, and all tend to laugh and ridicule. Joke has several functions including entertainment, communication, criticism and maintaining social balance. It can also find various social, cultural and political hierarchies and conflicts that a country is experiencing. Moreover, the joke reveals popular awareness of perceptions and beliefs. It is a mirror of the prevailing cultural pattern. Perhaps the world is ugly and bad to many individuals. Thus, 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. It also includes social criticism of the system, management of public affairs, etc. This may be done through a comic template, and thus the acquired humour creates functions, where it cannot be controlled to the point that it spreads very quickly.

## **Comedy and Black/Dark Comedy**

The term comedy that denotes a literary work with a happy end has gone through several developments; it has even been politicised. It seems that there is no agreement on a definition for what makes a thing comic. Olson (2001), in *Comedy after Postmodernism*, shows that: [C]omedy is precisely a certain freedom from definition. Whether it is through incongruity theories or theories of catharsis of repressed emotions with which we might attempt to define comedy, what defines it is in fact its very ability to resist definition.

The term dark/black comedy has been used to refer to a kind of noted comedy but one that is different enough from other types. In English language, the word 'black' has several connotations including darkness, depression and death. Black comedy has been used to

describe works of figures like the Greek Aristophanes (460 - 380 B.C.) and the Roman Plautus (254-184 B.C.), or comic plays of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) such as *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), *Measure for Measure* (1603), and *All's Well That Ends Well* (1623).

Comedy includes humour, joke, irony, satire and alike. A clear example of such use can be found in Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, where the term 'black humour' is applied to particular works written by forty-five authors in which the writer feels that "this humour has been given its highest degree of literary expression" (Breton, 1997: xviii). On this occasion, Breton, in his book, glorifies Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), an English writer, for his use of black humour in his writings, considering him to be "the inventor of 'savage' or 'gallows' humour" (Breton, 1997: 3). Apparently, Swift is the example of black humour. Thus, this contains a type of comedy that displays strong and unusual emotion and a type that is bad in nature but of intended meaning. It is demonstrated that black humour, as Breton proclaims, can be considered as a type of satire. This shows the link between dark humour and satire in which the behaviour of the person(s) is/are grimly introduced for ridicule. However, this ridicule is the base of comedy, but it is displayed in dark images. Breton also explains that black humour as a term is depicted from another source. In this way, "...'umour,' borrowed from the English 'humour' and coined by Jacques Vaché, a veteran of trench warfare in World War I and an important contributor to the surrealist movement" (qtd. in Naremore, 2004: 28). Vaché's definition of 'umour' distinguishes 'dark' from other types of humour and is achieved by a kind of sensing. On this occasion, Vaché says that "...umour derives too much from a sensation not to be expressed without great difficulty" (qtd. in Sorrell, 1979: 107). Obviously, the key aspect of Vaché's comment is the sense. Thus, dark comedy is known of its sense of mixing comedy and tragedy.

In *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, John A. Cuddon defines 'black comedy' as:

[A] form of drama which displays a marked disillusionment and cynicism. It shows human beings without convictions and with little hope, regulated by fate or fortune or incomprehensible powers, in fact, human beings in an 'absurd' predicament. At its darkest, such comedy is pervaded by a kind of sour despair: we can't do anything so we may as well laugh. The wit is mordant and the humour sardonic" (Cuddon, 2014:87).

Cuddon further states "this form of drama has no easily perceptible ancestry unless it be tragicomedy and the so-called 'dark' comedies of Shakespeare" (2014, 87-8). The best examples are Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well that Ends Well* and *The Winter's Tale*. Additionally, some of the earlier works of Jean Anouilh (1910-1987) are black comedies such as *Voyageur sans bagage* (1936), *Lo Sauvage* (1938), *La Valse des tordodors* (1952) and *Pauvre Bitos* (1956). Moreover, Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes* (1947) and *Les*

*Nagres* (1958), Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), Pinter's *The Homecoming* (1965) and Joe Orton's *Loot* (1965) are other samples of this genre.

Further, the critic M. H Abrams (1999) defines black comedy as: baleful, naive, or inept characters in a fantastic or nightmarish modern world that play out their roles in what Lonesco called a 'tragic farce,' in which the events are often simultaneously comic, horrifying, and absurd (p.2).

Abrams provides examples including Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), Thomas Pynchon's *Y* (1963), John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978), and others. Therefore, there is an agreement that black comedy is a form of comedy that has a purpose of serious bitter intention.

### **Significant Factors in the Emergence of Black Humour in American Literature**

As a term, 'black humour' is a modern literary genre that originated in America in 1960s with the American writer and literary critic Friedman through his collection of *Black Humour* published in 1965. In the concept of black humour, there is no traditional sense of humour and it is empty of a happy mood. Rather, it is very desperate with difficult situations. Writers of this type tend to describe some characters with abnormal behaviours (Huang, 2015).

The chaos that appeared in the United States in 1960s after WWII due to the loss in the Vietnam War put the whole nation in a state of panic and fear. Accordingly, authors, as they are unable of making social change, can only use their self-mockery to express their disagreement, anger and fear (Peiyan, 2013). Contrary to the traditional literary form of comedy, writers of black humour display more negative and pessimistic point of views in their writings for people by doing bitter smiles (Li, 2013). There are several important characteristics of black humour including:

- (1) The protagonists are overwhelmed by an antagonistic reality (Janoff, 1993).
- (2) The form 'black humour' satirically questions the 'social and political world'. Steven Weisenburger, in *Fables of Subversion* claims that "the most important writers associated with black humour had come to understand how one might satirically interrogate the 'social and political world' by cross examining, not extramural targets per se, but forms of social and political discourse used to construct ideas about that world" (Weisenburger, 1995: 88).
- (3) This form does not suggest solutions, but the focus is on the disorder in "society's social, political and economic systems" (Pratt, 1993: 20).

Generally, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed significant events that have been of great influence on people's lives and have radically altered the beliefs and values towards post-modernisation (Abdul-Hamid, 2014).



## Post-postmodernism

At the outset, it is important to start with the era of modernism, its rise and its prevalent shocks. In this context, modernism is the period in which there is a "primacy of industrial production, where the imperatives of production determined social life" (Kellner, 1988:13). It is characterised by a mechanical amplification of energies by persons having inner self-sufficiency and intellect and operating in an isolated world (Kellner, 1988).

Within the same line, postmodernism is a period that focuses on the truth of creation and the impossibility to find the automatic answer to satisfy the human race (Baudrillard, 1983). Hence, it is concerned with human's search for meaning.

In a sequence, post-postmodernism appears to be a period of conscious construction to escape the threat of self-division or duality in a chaotic universe. As in modernism and postmodernism, pain leads to an individual's alienation, separation and seclusion due to technological aspects; people who have the same pain are close to each other and can communicate to express their thoughts instead of being silent and in despair (Goudarzi, 2018). In spite of the people's silence, they share some documented signs that can express their feelings. By doing this, they can free themselves from the restriction of isolation and loneliness.

## Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House*

### *An Introductory Glimpse*

Sarah Ruhl is a well-known writer in the contemporary American theatre in which she has received several prizes including Pulitzer Prize nominations. *Passion Play* (2002), *The Clean House* (2004), and *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (2006) are all samples of expressions of Ruhl's comic voice. She also has collected essays under the title *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write* (2014) in which she refers to comedy. In this context, she "plays with traditional structures of comedy titles, wonders about the ethical and philosophical dimension of comedy, and asks about the role of 'dumb jokes' in the realm of 'serious comedy'" (Goff, 2015:31).

In her *100 Essays*, Ruhl reflects the root of her comic treatment: "Plays used to end in either marriage or death, and they were considered formal opposites, comedy and tragedy. But are they in fact opposites?" (Ruhl, 2014:27). Hence, she seems to break the rules of traditional comedy. "On titles—comedy and tragedy" that she refers to in her *100 Essays*, Ruhl (2014) proclaims:

Tragedy is often named for the tragic person - King Lear, Hamlet, Julius Ceasar - whereas comedies draw from the world at large - As you like it... Tragedy has proper

nouns, and comedy has regular old nouns that signify the world and the structure of the world over and above the individual. Is this because tragedies are about the loss of one individual's soul? (4).

In the same regard, "The Four Humors: An Essay in Four Parts" in *100 Essays*, Ruhl (2014) states:

Is it possible that modern psychology is closer to the medieval humours than we ever thought? Medieval doctors thought we had four humours or temperaments – choleric, melancholic, sanguine, and phlegmatic. This theory of the emotion held that our feelings proceeded from fluids in the body - yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm. The psychological roundness of characters in the Renaissance was based on the humours rather than on Freudian insights. Now that we can obtain medication quite easily from our doctors to adjust serotonin levels in our brains, do we still hold with a theory of the emotions that is essentially disembodied and based on secrets?(27).

Ruhl's *The Clean House* as an epitome of reflecting black comedy, humour in particular, is the main part of the following discussion. *The Clean House* is the first of Ruhl's plays that received substantial national attention and a Pulitzer Prize. The play is set in various locations including a living room, a seaside balcony and a trek across Alaska. The plot tells of a young woman, Matilde, who left her home in Brazil to come to the United States after the death of her parents to work as a maid to couple of married doctors, Lane and Charles. Ironically, Matilde hates cleaning and she is too intense to clean. Without Matilde knowing, Lane's sister Virginia, helps Matilde in cleaning the doctors' house. On the other hand, Charles has fallen in love with Ana, a patient, on whom he has done a mastectomy. Ana is her sixties. Charles and Ana come to Lane in her house, requesting forgiveness and claiming that they are unmistakable for they have discovered each other as close souls. At the same time, Lane discovers that her sister is the one who cleans her house and threatens to dismiss Matilde. When Ana knows this, she offers the maid a job. As a result, Matilde becomes divided between the two households. When Ana's cancer returns, she refuses other medical treatment. Charles travels to Alaska to bring a natural, plant-based remedy, leaving the women to take care of Ana. The play ends with the death of Ana at the same time of Matilde's telling a joke. Her death happens within Ana's terms as she asks to be given an overdose meanwhile Matilde is telling her the perfect joke.

### ***Theoretical Background of Comedy Adopted in Ruhl's The Clean House***

Focusing on Ruhl's *The Clean House*, there is a space pointing out that the comic world in the play is far from the traditional notion of comedy. One theoretical background of theories lies on Henri Bergson's essay "On Laughter", in which he demonstrates comedy as a cold and intellectual practice: "Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe

than emotion" (Bergson, 1956: 63). At another place, he asserts that: comedy is created of the time when "our attention is suddenly recalled from the soul to the body" (Bergson, 1956: 93). This idea of comedy that to be away from emotion and in contact with the intellect (opposite of tragedy that stimulated with emotions) is revealed in Ruhl's *The Clean House*. The laughter in this play, Ruhl claims, is both intellectual and emotional. The playwright seems to be in line with Bergson's suggestions. Ruhl again reflects Bergson's as a comedy depends much on the body. By doing this, she mixes the physical and emotional worlds together. The view towards comedy is deeply affected with the development of the environmental surroundings.

The playwright claims that the lightness in her plays seeks to "temper reality with strangeness, to temper the intellect with emotion, and to temper emotion with humour" (Ruhl, 2014: 18). This interaction is clearly shown in the context of death and jokes in *The Clean House*. Reflecting the irrationality of emotions, Ruhl's play starts with a strange type of comedy that includes tragedy.

Ruhl (2014) sheds light on the intersection of comedy and tragedy in her plays:

In ancient Greece, comedies used to be appetizers in the form of satyr plays performed before the main course – a tragedy. Now we don't have daylong festivals of both comedies and tragedies, so now do satyr plays need to be contained inside tragedies? (That is to say, the dark comedy?) I have never had much patience with separating genres into distinct categories. Maybe that is because I long for the time when we sat all day in the sun and laughed for a while, then wept while masked actors wailed, and both the humour and the desperation of life were illuminated on one day (19).

Obviously, Ruhl's comedy is interwoven with death. In *The Clean House* it is Ana's death, and the death of Matilde's parents. Thus, for her, the world is not only humour but a world of humanity that combines all different moods. Ruhl makes use of comic devices as she drifts away from traditional conventions of comedy. She uses jokes, stock characters, repetition and reincorporation.

The drama critic John Lahr (2008) comments on Ruhl's impurity of her comic form:

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 isn't 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 as you're experiencing them' (38).

In the same series, Al-Shamma (2010) illuminates that heavy threads of life including love and death that occur in the centre of Ruhl's plays. However, the playwright treats them in a strong touch, keeping humour at hand even in despair.

### ***Unconventionality of the Comic Characters in The Clean House***

*The Clean House* has a comic convention in which a comic plot, dialogue and characters are carefully created by the playwright. It seems that the jokes in the play depend on recognition. In this context, Critchley explains that "[m]ost humour, in particular the comedy of recognition – and most humour is comedy of recognition – simply seeks to reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticize the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves" (Critchley, 2002:11).

To follow Bergson's statement that reads: "It is comic to fall into a ready-made category" (Bergson, 1956: 157), we can see the difference in the treatment of the stock characters. In the traditional comedy however, the stock characters must follow the conventional wisdom and be a part of the constructed comedy. They have certain types of behaviours and weaknesses assigned to them. They stand for stock things more than actual persons. Concerning *The Clean House*, Ruhl appears to be aware of the stock characters by providing samples: the working woman and wronged wife (Lane), the housewife (Virginia), the unfaithful and cheating husband (Charles), the intruder or the second woman (Ana), and the impudent maid (Matilde). By doing this, the playwright carefully depicts each set of characters. For instance, the character of Matilde follows the previous theatrical servants in arousing humour, but her sense of humour bears the power not only to enlighten and to cheer but also to ruin. It is humour embodied justice as well as life and death.

In the second scene, for example, Lane informs that Matilde is a cleaning woman who "decided that she was depressed one day and stopped cleaning my house" (Ruhl, 2006:CH 6)<sup>1</sup>. She is a maid of emotion more than profession. Here, Matilde exits from the convention of stock characters such as an incompetent servant, a less active maid or unable individual to a servant full of true grief.

Matilde's employer, Lane, is a successful doctor who, in spite of her position, admits to Matilde that "I don't like giving orders in my own home" (CH 13). Though her spouse betrays her, Lane finds that all of the sympathy goes to another woman rather than to her. Charles, on the other hand, is absent throughout most of the action either for work, with his lover or on a quest to find a tree to bring a drug for Ana's cancer.

Lane's sister, Virginia, perfectly does her domestic sphere as a housekeeper but not for her own house and husband but in Matilde's place. She even cleans her sister's toilet; but her own house

is cleaned at 3:12 every afternoon: "If you do not clean: how do you know if you've made any progress in life?" (CH 8). Actually, Virginia's husband is of little influence on her as she describes him: "My husband is like a well-placed couch. He takes up the right amount of space. A man should not be too beautiful. Or too good in bed. A man should be – functional" (CH 29). Each character is in conflict and unconventional.

Relatively, the most prominent departure from the conventional role of a woman compared with the others can be seen in the character of Ana. The conventional side is demonstrated in the situation as Virginia and Matilde discover an implication of a close relationship with Charles and Virginia: "I hope it's not a nurse. It's such a cliché" (CH 43), as a conventional plot of stock characters. But the situation shows that Ana is not young or a nurse but an old woman of 67 and a mastectomy patient. She represents the second or the other woman. She is in a way to be a villain or a rival, but is a woman that arouses sympathy and kindness. At the end, the other women take care of her and stay with her till her death. This is unconventional created by Ruhl's looking as a joke- black comedy.

### ***The Intersection of Jokes and Death in the Play***

The definition of a joke to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "[s]omething said or done to excite laughter or amusement...[s]omething not earnest or serious" (qtd. in Goff, 2015: 51). In this domain, Ruhl enlarges her ideas in an interview, illuminating that: "There's something compassionate about humour; 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 it could transport you somehow" (qtd. in Weckwerth, 2011: 32). Significantly, Ruhl's jokes can "amuse, cleanse, heal, kill, provide justice, or even set you free" (Goff, 2015: 51). Thus, *The Clean House* is indeed about jokes but not in a correspondence of that of *Oxford English Dictionary*. Here, Ruhl examines, prods, inserts and extends the realm of humour, making a space in which all that separate a bad joke and good one.

Stott (2013: 8) says in his study on comedy: The comic can be thought of as a means of opening up the possibility of multiple perspectives, as each concept culturally established as orthodox simultaneously presents itself for the possibility of comic subversion, like a silent but parallel conversation that could audibly erupt at any moment.

It seems that Ruhl uses this form as a challenge to serve a profound view of the joke. She brings the audience to see a serious message as she explains that "[a] perfect joke is somewhere between an angel and a fart" (CH 27). Thus, the joke overcomes on the role of an amusement only.

At the outset of the plot of the selected play, Ruhl introduces the character of Matilde as a comic guide in the play, telling a lengthy and sometimes vulgar joke in Portuguese. The stage direction reads that: "We can tell she is telling a joke even though we might not understand the language" (CH 7). This is the first joke together with another four in Portuguese and two unheard. To explain, Carr and Greeves (2006) define a joke as "a highly sophisticated verbal flourish, a product of human culture and intellect and linguistic skill" (32).

In the play, Ruhl supplies a function for the joke that goes far deeper than oral telling. Though there is simplicity, the jokes are not distinguished: the first is about a new bridegroom and the advice of his therapist, the second is about male's lacking power, and the third is about Argentinean men. Matilde's Portuguese jokes are mundane. Matilde also brings attention to jokes at work; she tells Virginia: "You know how most jokes go in threes? Like this: Da da DA. I'm making up one that goes in sixes: Da da DA, da da DA" (CH 41). At a ritual level, in telling one of the jokes, Matilde and Lane spend a moment to reflect on the expectations of this ritual:

Matilde tells a joke in Portuguese.

Lane: Is that the end?

Matilde: Yes.

Lane: Was it funny?

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

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

Here, Lane knows herself involve in the ritual of the joke but she is uncertain about the way to interfere her feelings and her hearing of the joke. However, when Charles tries to articulate a joke in English, there is a clear denial of the known joke structure:

There are jokes about breast surgeons. You know – something like – I've seen more breasts in this city than – I don't know the punchline. There must be a punchline (CH 59).

The playwright, in an interview, discusses, as mentioned by Paula Vogel:

I think that at the most 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 (qtd. in Vogel, 2012).

Matilde struggles at different moments, including her being Lane's maid and then Charles and Ana's maid, to create a perfect joke suitable to the situation. She illustrates 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" (*CH 90*). Of course, the Portuguese jokes Matilde retorts, after translation, are recognised as standard jokes. But Matilde never enjoys them; she is not satisfied, spending her time sitting in the dark bringing up new jokes, perfect ones whether from folklore, dirty, ethnic, puns or "knee slappers." It seems that Ruhl is using the joking seriously to give a purpose. She creates a character who exploits power and her best to create jokes.

Besides the four Portuguese jokes, there are another two perfect jokes that the audience never hears for they arouse killing but they refer to rituals. Aside, Matilde expresses a joke about her dead parents: "my mother died laughing at one of my father's jokes. A joke he took one year to make up, for the anniversary of their marriage. When my mother died laughing, my father shot himself" (*CH 10*). Matilde shows what she learned from her mother about jokes: "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" (*CH 30*). Matilde's parents were, as she admits, "the funniest people in Brazil" (*CH 12*), who stayed with each other in a fixed state of joy. The final joke the father told her mother was so hilarious to the extreme that it killed her; and he committed suicide after that. Her parents are seen in flashbacks. In the stage directions, the dramatist tells Matilde's journey as one "from the dead to the living and back again" (*CH 6*). Matilde wears black to notify that she is in mourning (*CH 10*). She notes that: "They are not the best dancers in the world" (*CH 14*). Their daughter has previously introduced them as individuals whose highest concern is humour and who both waited to marry until a relatively late age, when they finally met their match in wit in each other. Her father explained that they had never been apart since the day they met because he "always wanted to know the next joke" (*CH 9*). Their passion for humour both exceeded the human and, as described by Matilde, passed over into the animalistic: "My mother and father did not look into each other's eyes. They laughed like hyenas. Even when they made love they laughed like hyenas" (*CH 10*). Matilde relates her mother's telling of her father a dirty joke to one which she failed to understand and which they refused to explain to her, as her mother told her that "ask me again when you're 30." In telling of the incident, Matilde laments, "Now I'm almost thirty. And I'll never know the joke" (*CH 27*). Matilde's sorrow underscores her isolation and also her grief that her parents did not live to see her reach the age of 30.

As Matilde interacts with Ana, the tone of the joke carries the responsibility and knowledge. The mid ironically the challenge of the perfect joke: "The perfect joke happens by accident. Like a boil on your backside that you pop. The perfect joke is the perfect music. You want to hear it only once in your life, and then, never again" (*CH 93*). Thus, this needs an auditory from the playwright to reflect unconventional comic characters, yet seriousness and blackness are the main milieu.

Matilde also links the power of the joke with that of a prayer in act one, she illustrates: "A good joke cleans your insides out. If I don't laugh for a week, I feel dirty" (CH 30), and in act two she informs Virginia to lead a prayer over Ana's body: "A prayer cleans the air the way water cleans the dirt" (CH 136). Thus, death and jokes are linked. At the end of the play, standing over Ana's body and looking back on her own birth, Matilde looks forward with hope: "I think maybe heaven is a sea of untranslatable jokes. Only everyone is laughing" (CH 139).

In her collection of essays, Ruhl notes the conventional wisdom that comedies "often end in marriage" and that tragedies usually concern "the loss of one individual soul" (Ruhl, 2014:4). But *The Clean House* does not provide a conventional ending for its audience. In fact, the last few pages are so emotionally turbulent that it is almost impossible for the audience to know from one moment to the next if they should be laughing or crying. Matilde tells Ana the joke, Ana laughs, Ana dies and Matilde wails. Charles returns carrying an enormous tree, the audience laughs. Charles cradles the corpse of Ana, the spectators are silent. Eventually, Charles and Ana convert again to be Matilde's parents re-enacting the moment of their daughter's birth:

My father is telling her a joke to try and keep her calm. My mother laughed. She laughed so hard that I popped out. My mother said I was the only baby who laughed when I came into the world. She said I was laughing at my father's joke. I laughed to take in the air. I took in some air, and then I cried (CH 139).

Here, Ruhl mixes laughter with tears, life with death, comedy with tragedy. Her comedy is intermingled with cycles of life and death.

Significantly, the form of comedy in *The Clean House* offers hope for the survivors of the loss. The play follows the collapse of Ana, presenting jokes that evoke deadly laughter. This is mainly achieved by Matilde through giving accounts of her birth and her vision of heaven. Finally, Ruhl's treatment of the play emphasises the saying that a scourge of evil may lead to laughter.

## Conclusion

This study reflects several results concerning the prevalence of black comedy as a main form of comedy in the plays dealing with contemporary issues. This comic form tends to be tragicomedy more than comic in sense. The form can be used for irony and satire, rather than entertainment, bitter smiles, giving hope in the middle of dilemma, etc. Perhaps, the contemporary world is not a suitable place for pure comedy in its perfect tradition, for the nature of this world is far from being a comic and the nature of people's intellect cannot accept laughter for the sake of laughter only.



Ruhl's *The Clean House* is the best example of the dominance of black comedy in forms of humour and jokes to reveal bitter social and cultural issues of the contemporary world. This includes the status of the working class, family unity, husband-wife relationships, housewifhood, a husband's faithfulness, suffering of cancer survivors, standing shoulder to shoulder to help others in spite of there being a big gap like taking care of Ana by all the women in the play.

Humour in this study reveals the most important aspirations and wishes of the community as well as and the quality of interactions and relations that bind the individual to the range of criticism of the caricature directed at them.

Black humour helps in strengthening social cooperation, stimulating the mind, creativity and imagination, understanding the demands of others, interacting and communicating with people and approaching them, resisting depression, anxiety and containing anger, especially as laughter increases heartbeat and secretion of adrenaline followed by relaxation. Generally, it creates a smile despite all the difficult circumstances surrounding people.

## Notes

1 All quotations from Ruhl's *The Clean House* are taken from:  
Sarah Ruhl, (2006), *The Clean House and other plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group), pp1-147.



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