

**A Hermeneutic View of Biblical Mythology
As Reflected In
Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* And *In The Next Room***

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Abstract:

As a hermeneutic approach to Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* and *In the Next Room*, this study is inspired by Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of hermeneutics and Rudolf Bultmann's demythologization and remythologization theory as a method of interpretation. It reflects upon the deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning in Ruhl's two plays. Though, on a superficial level, the plays seem to be an adaptation of a myth (*Eurydice*) and a contemplation of frustrated female sexuality, they are, on a deeper one, a revision of some taken-for-granted Biblical issues. Both plays, as the research suggests, build upon Freud's and Ricoeur's precept of divesting religion of its major quality, spiritual and theological need, and propounding instead that religion is a matter of fear and a need for protection. This necessitates an embarking upon such Biblical concepts as hell, heaven, sin, redemption, and reprobation that indicates that some fallen angels and humans will suffer in hell eternally, plus the concept of God as a replica of the primal father. Hermeneutically

revising such issues, the research juxtaposes the two concepts of a god of love and a god of wrath by posing the question once brought about by Julian Norwich in her *Revelations of Divine Love* : How are such ideas suited to divine love?(Adams 1992, 198) .

Keywords:-

Hermeneutic-myth-Biblical-God-theological-redemption-Jesus-symbols-belief-language- nature- retribution and expiation- remythologization-demythologization

الملخص:

يعد البحث دراسة تأويلية لمسرحيتي "يورديس" و"في الغرفة المجاورة" لسارة رهل في ضوء فلسفة ريكور التأويلية(هيرمينوطيكا) ونظرية رادولف بالتمان التي تهدف إلى هدم الأساطير الدارجة وبناء أساطير جديدة كوسيلة للتفسير. البحث يعمد إلى هدم وبناء المعنى في مسرحيتي رهل. رغم أن المسرحيتين قد يمثلتا معالجة لأسطورة يورديس والقهر الجنسي الأنثوي إلا إنهما يعدا بصورة أعمق مراجعة لبعض القضايا التي وردت بالإنجيل كقضايا مفروغ منها ورؤيتها بمنظور آخر. المسرحيتان تعتمدان على نظريتي فرويد وريكور اللتان تهدفان إلى تجريد الدين من صفته الأساسية، الحاجه الروحانية والدينية وطرح بدلاً من هذا فكرة أن الدين هو مسألة خوف وحاجة للحماية. يتطلب هذا الخوض في بعض الأفكار الإنجيلية مثل الجحيم والجنة والإثم ومفهوم العقاب والمعاناة الأبدية بالجحيم. البحث يوازي فكرتي الإله المحب والإله الناقم وفكرة الرب كصورة للأب الأولى. يطرح البحث سؤال جوهرى كيف تتوافق فكرة الرب مع المعاناة والجحيم الأبدى والعذاب بأشكاله التي وردت جميعها بالإنجيل طارحاً تأويلاً وتفسيراً آخر لبعض هذه القضايا في ضوء النظريات المطروحة.

الكلمات الدالة:

هيرمينوطيقا- الرب- إله الحب- إله الغضب- الجنة- الجحيم- الدين- الإثم- الأسطورة-
الأب- هدم وبناء- الحاجة الروحانية- الخوف- الإنجيل

Introduction:

In the twenty-first century, skepticism or rather uncertainty has become the distinguishing and defining feature of the age (Baumann 2009, 7). Consequently, in accordance with the cynical spirit of the age, many philosophers and thinkers, including Paul Ricoeur, have initiated a philosophy of hermeneutics, one that seeks to define the self and reveal its ambiguity. According to William Franke, "(h)ermeneutics can be conceived either as an unmasking and discarding of the apparent sense by bringing out the hidden sense as the true one , or as revealing of a deeper sense beyond the immediate one, which, however ,remains nevertheless still true symbolically" (1998, 70) . In Ricoeur's thinking, language is an essential and indispensable part of man; what man utters defines him. However, the fact that language itself is complicated and is not always straightforward and direct adds to the complexity of the process of self-comprehension (Itao 2010, 2). Due to its figurative and symbolic nature, language is not to be understood literally. Ricoeur, on the other hand, defines symbols as: "any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only

through the first" (qtd.in Itao 2010, 3). Hence, symbols, according to Ricoeur, should not be understood on a superficial level because beneath the outward meaning there is a more profound inward one. The duality of meaning that distinguishes Ricoeur's definition of symbols gives rise to the importance of interpretation through hermeneutics, a process that is meant to clarify the diverse meanings a symbol might carry beyond the literal one (Kaplan 2003, 21).

Ricoeur has so far defined hermeneutics as a controversial term with a wide range of interpretation methods all of which, despite their probable disagreement, come under one heading, hermeneutic. He has skillfully coined two further terms under the broader one: hermeneutics of belief and hermeneutics of suspicion. Both terms are intricately connected; hermeneutics of belief refers to a restoration of a missing meaning that is resurrected in a more powerful stable form enhanced with belief. Hermeneutics of suspicion, on the other hand, denotes casting doubts on taken for granted meanings so as to reach a better understanding of the truth of things devoid of falsehood and illusion. Elaborating on both terms in Ricoeur's thinking, Kaplan writes:

At one pole of the hermeneutic field is the "hermeneutics of belief," aimed at recovering a lost message, animated by faith and a willingness to listen; at the other pole is the "hermeneutics of suspicion," aimed at demystification, animated by mistrust and skepticism. The counter pole to a

*hermeneutics that recovers meaning is a hermeneutics that
removes illusions. (2003, 21)*

Elaborating the hermeneutics of suspicion as a prerequisite for interpretation, Ricoeur argues that casting doubts on consciousness is a first step of interpretation according to the three masters of suspicion, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud (Itao 2010, 7). Freud claims, as Franke suggests, that "(t)rue knowledge even of itself (consciousness) is not given to consciousness in the immediacy of its self-awareness, but must be acquired through interpretation of the acts which mediate conscious intensions to the world and in the psychic life of the subject"(1998, 73). The hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to provide at one and the same time, evidence for and causes of the fallacy of consciousness: "what falsify consciousness are the layers of illusions and prejudices that mask the genuine cogito or the 'ego of the ego cogito.' For this reason, the hermeneutics of suspicion involves 'unmasking', 'reducing', and 'destroying' these various illusions 'to deconstruct the false cogito, to undertake the ruin of the idols of the cogito.'"(Itao 2010, 7).

On the other hand, the hermeneutics of faith or rather the hermeneutics of belief, as Ricoeur calls it, refers to the faith that might be reached after the stage of suspicion and criticism. It is a stage of belief in the fact that symbols reflect true, valuable meanings that deserve to be respected and followed. Symbols are therefore, tools of interpretation that are closely related to the hermeneutics of belief. Hence, Ricoeur's philosophy sets out the understanding of symbols as a self-understanding

strategy as well as a means of understanding human beings at large (Itao 2010, 9).

Believing in Freud, Marx and Nietzsche's critical, skeptical approach to religion, Ricoeur has so far cast doubts on religion (Davidson 30). Religion, according to Marx and Nietzsche, is a suspicious area that must be dealt with hermeneutically. They regard religion as engendering passive feelings and ideas. Marx criticizes the religious idea that suffering is a prerequisite for salvation and that man is born to suffer because suffering is his sole hope for salvation (Itao 2010, 6). Nietzsche, on the other hand, regards religious principles as nothing but "slave morality" (Itao 2010, 6).

Thus, the two pioneers of the school of suspicion, Freud and Nietzsche, have developed a hermeneutic of suspicion of the ethics of religion based on criticizing the two elements underlying religion: fear and need (Davidson 2010, 32). Their critique is much more concerned with bringing to light the true motive behind religious piety, which Nietzsche finds in the lust for power while Freud identifies as a distorted articulation of sexual libido's consequent psychic disturbances. They believe religion to be a system of prohibition, accusation and punishment (Davidson 2010, 32). In Freud's legacy, the two elements of fear and need are associated with the primal father who is feared yet still needed by his sons. Hence, Freud reduces religion to be a yearning for the father as well as for protection (Itao 2010, 7). According to Freud, this identification between God and the primal father that is psychologically enacted through an unconscious projection process delineates the image

of a violent, ruthless God who carries severe punishment for people. However, since psychotherapy is bound to deactivate the unconscious artifices of the ego, projections might disappear and with it religious misconceptions (Adams 1992, 201). Therefore, Freud's hermeneutic of suspicion proposes a rejection of the primal father, or rather of God.

As a first step in their hermeneutic of suspicion, both Freud and Nietzsche suggest the death of God, the God of onto-theology that denotes "a moralizing deity of accusation and condemnation" (Davidson 2010, 33). Hence dies the Omni-God, which means the omnipotent powerful God as well as the omniscient God that puts the "powerful over the good and law over love and humility that are superior to law" (qtd.in Davidson 2010, 33). They also suggest the death of the omnipresent God who pays no heed to evil as well as good (Davidson 2010, 33).

Ricoeur develops a hermeneutic of suspicion that seeks to reveal the true stimulus behind religious piety. He denounces religion that is essentially based upon two vital elements that render it suspicious: taboo and refuge. Taboo is a term that refers to fear of divine retribution and expiation while refuge denotes the need for protection and solace (Davidson 2010, 31-32). Ricoeur writes

What we have appropriated to ourselves is first, the critique of religion as a mask, a mask of fear, a mask of domination, a mask of hate. A Marxist critique of ideology, a Nietzschean critique of resentment and a Freudian critique of infantile distress are hereafter the views through which any kind of mediation of faith must pass (Topping 2007, 178).

However, having safely established his hermeneutic of suspicion that weakens the cause of religion, Ricoeur calls for the recovery of God or, in other words, the option of anatheism, which means the prospect of recovering a post-atheistic faith or rather a second faith beyond faith, and a second God beyond God. Ricoeur's hermeneutic is a positive one that aims at:

a liberated faith within the great religious tradition . . . a faith that speaks of freedom and that proclaims the Cross and Resurrection as invitation to a more creative life , a belief that articulates the contemporary relevance of the Pauline distinction between Spirit and law and that interprets 'sin' less as the breaking of taboo than as the refusal of life. In such a scenario, sin would be exposed as a life lived fearfully 'in the infernal cycle of law, transgression and guilt'. (Davidson 2010,34)

Ricoeur seeks to defeat fear as well as the destructive longing for the primal father and to inspire a restoration of the benevolent God of resurrection and solace. In short, Ricoeur's hermeneutic brings about a deconstruction and reconstruction process, an obliteration of already existing meanings and a restoration of meaning, a killing and resurrection of God and a renouncing of the father of creation as an idol and restoring the father as a symbol of love. His legacy may therefore be summed up as follows: "an idol must die so that a symbol of being may begin to speak" (Davidson 2010, 36).

In light of Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory, religion calls for a decontamination process by being submitted to what Rudolf Bultmann calls demythologization. Bultmann believes the New Testament to be built upon myths that must be reinterpreted to form a new message for today that fits in with contemporary thought. The New Testament cherishes a mythical view of the world that depicts it as divided into three parts: the earth, heaven and the underworld. This mythical image of the universe believes that

Heaven is the abode of God and of celestial beings-the angels. The underworld is hell, the place of torment. Even the earth is more than the scene of natural, everyday events, of the trivial round and common task. It is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels, on the one hand, and of satan and his daemons on the other. These international forces intervene in the course of nature and in all that men think and will and do. (Bultmann, "A Theological Debate" 1)

Bultmann denounces the three-level universe myth and seeks to reinterpret it. He rather proposes an existential interpretation of the myth that is related to the here and now. Bultmann, for example, argues that the eternal life is not "an after-death life but rather a here and now type of life" (Glenn 74).

The New Testament is essentially built upon myths of redemption that derive essentially from Jewish myths of redemption that suggest that both the world and all human beings are fundamentally manipulated by

secret, superior, devilish evil powers and therefore, aspire to redemption. However, redemption is in itself a divine gift that has nothing to do with human actions, sympathetically given to people through a certain type of heavenly mediation. This mediation implies either the Messiah's coming which marks the end of the present aeon and the beginning of another (apocalyptic myth) or the descending of a disguised son of God to the world to help the elect to go to heaven through his preaching as well as his predestined end (Gnostic myth). (A Theological Debate 15-16).

Bultmann denounces the mystical view of the New Testament including the belief in redemption, salvation, atonement and death as punishment. He equally argues against the objectification of God by depicting Him or explaining the way He acts from a worldly or an earthly perspective. The presence of God and his actions cannot be explained in terms of worldly laws (Vanhoozer 2010, 14). Therefore, Bultmann suggests the necessity of a demythologization of the New Testament ("A Theological Debate"7-10). Demythologization, according to him, is ". . . an hermeneutic method, that is, a method of interpretation, of exegesis" (qtd.in Tanner 7). Hence, Bultmann is preoccupied with dismantling the myths of the New Testament to come to a better understanding of the *kerygma* or the Biblical dogmas and messages. He seeks to translate the mythical Biblical texts of the New Testament to find their actual implications and to render them into a here and now language (A Theological Debate 16). However, Bultmann evidently propounds the view that demythologization should keep the essential facts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus while dismantling the irrelevant

mythological part of it (Tanner 4). Bultmann's premise lies in acknowledging that the New Testament's teachings and dogmas belong to a social context that is completely different from today's. This makes it quite challenging for people nowadays to come to terms with the Bible with its mythology and far-fetched ideas and language of a distant age (Tanner 7-8).

Beside demythologization, Bultmann's hermeneutic approach has a further essential process remythologization. Like Ricoeur, Bultmann sees the creation of myths as inevitable; it is an inescapable consequence of interpretation because "(t)hrough the very process of interpretation a narrative of some kind is produced" (Tanner 9). Speculating upon the two processes of demythologization and remythologization, Tanner contends that to eradicate one myth, a further one is bound to be born. Demythologization and remythologization are cyclic.

Among the main controversial issues that need remythologization are some theological matters which encourage theism such as God's loving relationship to human beings and the belief that suffering is the price of God's love. A further concept that calls for remythologization is the medieval image of Jesus as feminine. Generally speaking, the myth of Jesus identifies Jesus with masculinity. It contends that: "God sent forth his son, a pre-existent divine Being, who appears on earth as a man. He dies the death of a sinner on the cross and makes atonement for the sins of men. His resurrection marks the beginning of cosmic catastrophe" (Bultmann, *Theological Debate* 2).

Set against this masculine image of Jesus, there emerged, in medieval times, a new image of Jesus that depicts him as a female. This medieval concept of a female Jesus has been devised to destabilize patriarchal Christianity, to rather suggest a matriarchal one and to break free from negative Aristotelian conceptions of femininity that depict women as devoid of any spiritual qualities (Bledsoe 2011, 54). However, as Bledsoe puts it, this image of Jesus as a female may have added to Jesus's benevolence and compassion yet it helps to enforce a further female restraining stereotype (2011, 55). This also is bound to identify women, like Jesus, with sacrifice, pain and suffering. Therefore, some hermeneutic attempts find expression in the writings of many contemporary playwrights who are preoccupied with an obsessive desire to rethink some prevailing theological concepts to refashion Christology and the self as well.

Born in 1974, Sarah Ruhl is one of the most prominent American playwrights whose dramatic goal has been to hermeneutically read taken-for-granted meanings in light of the hermeneutic theory of Ricoeur and the three pioneers of the school of suspicion. Her drama also reflects an obsession with Bultmann's two concepts of demythologization and remythologization as further methods of the hermeneutic approach. Ruhl's *Eurydice* is not a mere imitation of an old myth of Greek origin but rather an attempt, on her own part, to shed light on the same story to reflect a new hermeneutic perspective, an approach that fits well with Bultmann's notions of demythologization and remythologization. Ruhl introduces some differences, the most prominent of which is shifting the

focus of the story from Orpheus to his wife Eurydice and her relationship with her father. The play seems to be a love myth or a father-daughter relationship myth, however, it is meant, by Ruhl, to inherently allude to Freud's idea of man's need for the primal father, mistakenly interpreted as a need for God. Hence, in a Freudian and Ricoeurian manner, Ruhl seeks to approach the two basic reasons behind people's theological need: fear and the need for protection. Whereas fear is closely related to such concepts as sin, hell, redemption and salvation, the need for protection is related to the need for a father. Thus, one might surmise to call the father figure in Ruhl's play nothing if not an allusion to God, projecting all the characteristics of the former upon the latter.

Ruhl's *In the Next Room* is her adoption of Ricoeur's call for a deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning. On a rather superficial level, the play exposes the severe restrictions placed upon female sexuality in the Victorian era and the dire consequences that follow. Denying women one of their most essential human rights, caused most females of the period to become severely hysterical. Ruhl's play depicts the way physicians use vibrators to mitigate hysteria in female patients at the dawn of the age of electricity. Thus, Ruhl's *In the Next Room* sets in sharp contrast science and instinctual passion. This is meant to elucidate Bultmann's idea that, living in the age of science and modernity, demythologization has become a must since, according to Bultmann, people are not likely "to accept not only the gospel message, but also the mythical view of the world in which it is set" (qtd.in Grant 60).

Eurudice retells the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice, who dies on their wedding day, bitten by a snake. Orpheus grieves over the loss of his wife and goes to the underworld to retrieve her. Impressed with his sweet music, Hades, Lord of the underworld, allows Orpheus to get his wife back but with the condition that he is not allowed to look back at Eurydice as she follows him back to the world of living. However, the play ends with Orpheus breaching their agreement as he looks back at Eurydice who is, consequently, destined to die for a second time and to go back to the underworld. However, the real tragedy of the play lies in the fact that upon coming back to Hades, she is shocked to find her father has drowned himself in the forgetful waters of the river Styx.

Eurydice alludes to Freud's psychological paradigm of man-god relationship as a reflection of man's unconscious image of parent-child relationship. The projection of the parental relationship which implies suffering and penalty suggested by child punishment, onto the image of God, is responsible for the violent implications of Christianity as well as of God (Adams 1992, 201). The allusion to God and religion in the play is widely enhanced through the changes Ruhl has made in her retold version of the myth. Ruhl's version is built upon a choice made by Eurydice, either to go back to the world of the living with Orpheus or to remain with her beloved father in the underworld. This suggests a choice between spirituality and physicality. Ruhl has skillfully altered the way Eurydice dies both in the first and the second times. She replaces the snake's bite, in the original myth, with a letter Eurydice receives from her dead father. The letter suggests the Bible. It sends her to her final

destiny as she goes with the man who carries her father's letter yet, unfortunately, she falls down the high building's stairs and dies. The way Eurydice dies is symbolic since it suggests a descent into the underworld. Unlike the original version of the myth, Eurydice is depicted by Ruhl as complicit in her own doom forever to live in the underworld since she calls upon Orpheus and leads him to disobey the agreement by looking at her:

She makes a decision. She increases her pace.

She takes two steps for every step that Orpheus takes.

EURYDICE. *Orpheus?*

He turns toward her, startled.

Orpheus looks at Eurydice.

Eurydice looks at Orpheus.

The world falls away. (Ruhl, Eurydice 2008, 82-3)

This is Ruhl's method to bring about, for later refutation, the idea of allying oneself with a deity despite its violent inferences and consequences due to an instinctive fear and need for protection. Her aim is to dismantle a sum of religious myths that identify God and religion with suffering and violence and to suggest instead a form of a spirituality or mysticism that is free from violence and punishment. On a superficial level, Ruhl's adaptation seems to be a rewriting of a myth of romantic love; however, a more comprehensive reading of the play would certainly reveal that it is a mulling over some Biblical and theological concepts.

So long as the original myth alludes to the myth of Adam and Eve, Ruhl's version calls upon the same myth to be revised. The snake's bite in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice's consequent death signify the snake, Satan, who seduces Eve to be expelled out of heaven. This allusion is made clear from the very beginning as Eurydice and Orpheus sing together a song that refers to the apple tree (Ruhl, Eurydice, 2008, 21). The fact that Eurydice calls upon Orpheus and makes him breach the deal according to which she is allowed to go back with him echoes the myth of Eve where Eve inspired Adam to breach God's divine order.

Adam and Eve, is a myth inherently related to a variety of biblical religious concepts that are certainly meant to be hermeneutically rethought. Hence, destabilizing the myth is bound to destabilize every related notion. One of such notions is the New Testament's mythical conceptual view of the three-tiered world that is divided into the earth, heaven and the underworld. The myth is one of Adam and Eve's banishment from heaven to live on earth, awaiting salvation from hell and divine redemption to send them back to heaven. The fact that the play displays only the earth and the underworld without referring to heaven, which is God's place, suggests that Ruhl is in perfect agreement with Bultmann's argument that God should not be objectified. She moves between the two alternatives, the earth and the underworld, leaving the third kingdom which is God's, ambiguous. The fact that Eurydice, who symbolizes Eve, goes from the earth to the underworld, casts doubt on the myth, with issues including sin, death, heaven, hell, suffering and redemption. This might be an implied cynical criticism

directed towards Freud's idea of a second stimulus behind people's spiritual inclination namely the fear engendered in human beings by the New Testament and concern with hell as people's final destination.

The absence of a heaven helps to destroy the concept of suffering as a price for salvation which is regarded as one of the Adam and Eve myth's motifs; it signifies that no salvation is their reward. The play highlights suffering which does not end in salvation. This is exemplified in Orpheus's grief over the loss of his beloved Eurydice and the father's suffering as he yearns for his daughter.

Ruhl has so far pulled to pieces the image of hell proposed by the myth as she depicts hell in terms different from its stereotypical image. Father describes life in the underworld in a manner that sets it in sharp contrast with the one described in the New Testament. He writes:

FATHER. As for me, this is what it's like being dead: The atmosphere smells .And there are strange high pitched noises-like a tea kettle always boiling over. But it doesn't seem to bother anyone. And, for the most part, there is a pleasant atmosphere and you can work and socialize, much like at home. I'm working in the business world and it seems that, here, you can better see the far reaching consequences of your actions. (Ruhl, Eurydice, 2008, 15)

These words bring into question the image of hell delineated in the New Testament. Ruhl's portrayal of the underworld seems more like a wonderland rather than a hell. Ruhl writes: "The underworld should

resemble the world of Alice in Wonderland more than it resembles Hades" (qtd.in Petersen 2009, 40). Therefore, her play displays not a hell in the traditional sense of the word but rather an eerie after-death refuge that has no signs of torture or suffering. It is a place of deconstruction and reconstruction, of reasoning, wisdom and gaining insight into the nature of things after removing all conscious perceptions, through the river of forgetfulness, and building a new type of trustworthy consciousness. Ruhl goes further in representing an untraditional hell by portraying a chorus of talking stones crying upon listening to Orpheus's music, while the lord of the underworld is a decent being who smiles at Orpheus and makes his mission simple. Peterson argues that "The underworld described by Ruhl is created to reconnect Eurydice with her father in a place resembling the dark recesses of memory while avoiding the punitive eternity typically associated with the afterlife"(2009, 41).

The play also deals hermeneutically with the New Testament's notion of death as punishment. Some versions of the original myth of Orpheus imply that Eurydice's death was a punishment inflicted upon her due to a suspected relationship between her and the naiads, a water nymph whom she danced with on her wedding day (Penford 15). This is a further allusion to Eve's punishment as a result of breaching God's order by eating from the forbidden tree. Ruhl suggests that, Eurydice willingly chooses to stay in the underworld rather than go back to life .Thus, when death is a choice, it is no longer a penalty. This again draws an analogy between Eve's case and that of Eurydice's, with the suggestive

conclusion that Eve's eating from the forbidden tree, the tree of knowledge, might have been a choice rather than a sin.

A further myth reexamined by Ruhl is that of the medieval suggested image of a feminine Jesus. According to Bynum, late medieval theology witnessed a revolution in theological thought. As it was no longer concerned with such issues as sin, redemption, hell and heaven, the other world and divine punishment but rather with the embodiment of God in human flesh. Jesus Christ, as well as gender. During this period, Jesus is widely depicted as possessing the characteristics of a perfect medieval mother (Bledsoe 2011, 40). Dissatisfied with such subversion in Jesus's gender and its potential consequences, Ruhl seeks to restore this medieval mythos to suggest a demythologization and remythologization of it.

The play presents a female and a male Jesus (Eurydice and Orpheus respectively). like Jesus, Eurydice has risen after death to live in the underworld where the father lies. Her death and move to the underworld symbolizes the feminine Jesus's crucifixion to atone for humanity's sins. Like Jesus, who was called upon to answer his father's request, she ascends in an elevator to meet her father who has symbolically called upon her to come, in his letter to her. The analogy is made clearer in the fact that Eurydice arrives in Hades in a 'raining elevator' after being dipped into the river Styx, the river of forgetfulness, to have her memory erased. As the play proceeds, Ruhl highlights different attempts to restore Eurydice's memories and to suggest a potent relationship between father and daughter or rather between man and God.

Ruhl thus reestablishes the mythos of Jesus as a female and adds to the image so as to make up for whatever imperfection she might envisage. Her aim is to dismantle the restrictions placed by the myth upon femininity. Ruhl casts doubt upon the myth when she depicts the Christ-like Eurydice tricking Orpheus to look back at her, which disturbs the order of the resurrection myth; she goes back to find the father, a godlike figure, drowning himself into the river of forgetfulness . She thus fails to keep up the myth.

The intrusion of the father figure in the play, which is not part of the original myth, is evocative. Freud has so far identified religion with the longing for paternal love and guidance. In Freudian terms, this suggests a close relationship between a female, Eurydice, and God, exemplified in the father figure. By making her choose to stay with her father rather than to go with Orpheus. Ruhl, then, proceeds to add a further perspective to the myth of a female Jesus that is meant to strip it off its weakness. She gives Eurydice agency by making her the one who makes the most central choice in the play. Ruhl goes further by portraying Eurydice as having superior qualities to Orpheus who is portrayed, according to Jefferey J.Petersen, as an "idiot savant; he is poor at communicating" (2009, 24). They live in two different worlds and seem to have nothing in common .Hence, the destabilization of the myth is meant to be in favor of feminine empowering. Orpheus, on the other hand, is a male Jesus. Amber McGinnis Jackson argues:

By the Middle Ages, Orpheus was viewed as a Christ-like figure. In Spain's Golden Age this aspect of the character

became the subject of an auto sacramental by Calderon de la Barca called El Divino Orfeo (Divine Orpheus), whose Orpheus carries a lyre in the shape of a cross and battles against the Prince of Darkness to save the soul of the Eurydice character, here named "Human Nature." The auto sacramental is a self-conscious allegory of Christ's battle with death, and draws parallels between the Orpheus and Eurydice story with the fall of mankind, set at the time of creation. (2009, 25)

However, like the play's female Jesus, Eurydice, Ruhl's Orpheus is a failed male Jesus whose rescue mission is also a failed one. He fails to keep the deal made between him and Hades, lord of the underworld, to save Eurydice, a task that symbolizes Christ's saving of humanity. Moreover, the man who carries the father's letter (God's message) is Jesus, the redeemer, crucified to redeem all people alike. The fact that he does not die but it is Eurydice who dies in his place signifies a demythologization of Jesus's myth as well as the myth of redemption. Orpheus' death is worthless; it is not a price paid to rescue humanity.

In the play, Ruhl journeys through Ricoeur's two stages of hermeneutics: the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith. These stages pass through a further process which is called reflection. As a period that paves the way for self-knowledge, reflection proceeds through three stages: dispossession, antithetic and dialectic' which is the stage of reconciliation between suspicion and faith (Itao

2010, 10-12). Orpheus's words to Eurydice about her passion for reading suggest a call for suspicion: "May be you should make up your own thoughts. Instead of reading them in a book" (Ruhl, Eurydice, 2008, 6). The stage of dispossession is reflected in her being drowned in the river of forgetfulness and the many inquiries made by Eurydice concerning her own identity and the past. She tries to remember her husband's name, to no avail. She says: "When I got through the cold, they made me swim in a river and I forgot his name .I forgot all the names"(Ruhl, Eurydice 2008, 36). The fact that Eurydice forgets everything denotes the move of false conscious meanings to the unconscious which is part of the dispossession stage .The river of forgetfulness, the attempts to restore Eurydice's memories, and the suggestion of a powerful relationship between father and daughter, or rather between man and God, all refer to the antithetic stage or the reestablishment of meaning and faith. The fact that she asks her father to tell her about his father suggests a questioning of the nature of God (55). The last stage, the dialectic, is represented in Eurydice's choice, wherein she has to reconcile both stages and decide either to go back to earth or stay with her father.

By making Eurydice complicit in her own fate, Ruhl dismantles the New Testament's portrayal of man as manipulated by supernatural powers and beings. Eurydice is responsible for every step she takes either in the world of living or in the underworld. She even violates some of the rules of the underworld when she has a room and a father although, in Child's words, "rooms are not allowed" and "Fathers are not allowed!

Where is he" (66). Leaving the underworld to go back with Orpheus is another choice she makes:

FATHER. *Do you want to go with him?*

EURYDICE. *Yes, of course! (77)*

Thus, revising a variety of religious myths, the play looks hermeneutically upon the image of God as violent and cruel and suggests instead a God of love in a manner reminiscent of Julian of Norwich's image of God as "Father, Mother, and Goodness" (Byler & Davis 8). It dismantles Freud's projection of the primal father and suggests instead that God is identified with nature. This is made clear when Eurydice dies and descends to the underworld. Her father tries to introduce himself to her and says:

FATHER. *When you were alive, I was your father.*

STONES. *Father is not a word that dead people understand.*

BIG STONE. *He is what we call subversive.*

FATHER. *When you were alive, I was your tree.*

EURYDICE. *My tree! Yes, the tall one in the backyard!*

EURYDICE *(Continued).*

I used to sit all day in its shade!

She sits at the feet of her father. (39-40)

Replacing the father, a symbol of God, with a tree is highly suggestive; it implies a projection of nature, rather than father, upon God. When Orpheus sends Eurydice a letter she cannot make sense of it so her father helps her read it. He explains the meaning of 'I love you' as

something like a 'tree', like "sitting in the shade with no clothes on"(49). This signifies that love is there in nature. A further identification between God and nature is made clear in the way the father describes his own father to Eurydice. He is so preoccupied with duck hunting and so tied to nature that he used to say, as Euridice's father argues, in a godlike manner that casts doubts on the possibility of his death: "If I ever have to die, it is in a duck pond. And he did"(55). When the Child in the underworld says "Fathers are not allowed. Where is he?"(66), he demolishes Freud's concept of the primal father, God, since he is not allowed in the otherworld. Hence, Ruhl's hermeneutic approach to God and religion culminates with a state of faith that suggests a type of pantheism that identifies God with nature. Pantheism is defined as "the doctrine that God is the transcendent reality of which man, nature, and the material universe are manifestations"(Pantheism). Eurydice has reached the underworld with a rejection of nature symbolized in her carried umbrella; this is the concept that needs a hermeneutical revision. The faith she has come to gain through her father's instruction is that god is nature. Thus, like Ricoeur, Ruhl seeks a faith that calls for freedom and that could see the Cross and resurrection as a call for a more creative life. She suggests the existence of a heaven that does not match the stereotypical one described by the New Testament.

The play draws heavily on the importance of language and symbols. The father symbolizes God. The agreement made between Orpheus and Hade, Lord of the underworld, symbolizes the agreement that sinners are doomed to go to hell, an agreement that is made between

God and human beings, through the Bible. The drowning of the father, a replica of God, in the forgetful waters symbolizes the death of God suggested by Freud's hermeneutic and the reconstruction of a new image of God that is loving and considerate. The choice which Eurydice has to make symbolizes the choice man has to make between a Godly world that is associated with suffering and a world that has no God. It further symbolizes a choice between a loving God, that is, the desired image of God sought through the hermeneutic approach to religion, and a violent God who mercilessly sends people to hell to pay for their sins. The letter that sends Eurydice to her final end symbolizes religion which is a message from God. The fact that it replaces the snake in the original myth suggests a rewriting of the story of Eve's expulsion from heaven as a result of being seduced by a snake (Satan). This replacement suggests that it is God's message to humans (the Bible) that sends them out of heaven to earth and then to hell. In his letter, Father juxtaposes the two worlds of life and death as he gives Eurydice some advice that might help her to make her life a happy one: "Everything in moderation...continue to give yourself to others because that's the ultimate satisfaction in life – to love, accept, honor and help others" (15). Besides, the most destructive 'look back' of Orpheus is very symbolic; if the word is figuratively taken it suggests a look back at the past with its legacy of stable meaning. Such a look is, thus regressive and destructive. This may well be a call, on Ruhl's part, to rethink facts hermeneutically.

However, on a deeper level, in *In the Next Room*, if *Eurydice* builds upon a renunciation of identifying Jesus with femininity, *In the*

Next Room goes further, as it seeks instead to sever the link between Jesus and maternity. Hence, the play pursues a hermeneutic approach that seeks to denounce patriarchal Christianity together with the suggested medieval alternative symbolized in a matriarchal Christianity that exalts the significance of the role played by the Virgin Mary in maintaining life above that of Jesus. Gender identification, as inspired by the play, is something that should be overthrown to attain a thorough understanding of the essence of things. The play seems, therefore, to suggest a demythologization of the myth of Jesus's identification either as a male or a female savior; it proposes the belief that Jesus is a symbol of Christian spiritual sustenance with no gender affiliation. In so doing, Ruhl's hermeneutic approach borrows from Simone de Beauvoir's and Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative. According to Butler, "Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts"(Performative Acts 519). Thus, Ruhl sides with feminists' view that "gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women"(Butler, *Gender Troubles* XIII). However, she has taken the theory to a further area: the gender of idols and scriptural figures, namely Jesus.

Therefore, the play identifies Jesus with maternity and offers, as a first step, a myth of Jesus as a feminine savior and redeemer. Recalling the moment the baby comes out of her body, Mrs Giving further

identifies Jesus with mothers when she conjures up the image of ritualistic Eucharist in which Jesus feeds his believers with what is literally his body. Mrs Giving says:

And then she came out and clambered right onto my breast and tried to eat me, she was so hungry, so hungry it terrified me— her hunger. And I thought: is that the first emotion? Hunger? And not hunger for food but wanting to eat other people? Specifically one's mother? And then I thought— isn't it strange, isn't it strange about Jesus? That is to say about Jesus being a man? For it is women who are eaten— who turn their bodies into food— I gave up my blood— there was so much blood— and I gave up my body— but I couldn't feed her, couldn't turn my body into food, and she was so hungry. I suppose that makes me an inferior kind of woman and a very inferior kind of Jesus. (47)

Mrs Giving's speech suggests the image of Jesus who has the characteristics of a medieval mother. This necessarily enforces upon him three main characteristics that are peculiar to all females. As Jenny Bledsoe puts it, "The female is generative (the foetus is made of her very matter) and sacrificial in her generation (birth pangs); the female is loving and tender (a mother cannot help loving her own child); the female is nurturing (she feeds the child with her own bodily fluid)" (qtd.in Bledsoe 39). Identified ,as a mother, with Jesus, Mrs Giving's

search for a duplicate mother, a wet nurse, to feed her child sets her as a failed mother as well as a failed Jesus because she cannot breastfeed her.

The play, in addition, seeks to dismantle the idea that the concept of feminized Jesus is one that empowers modern woman. In this respect, Jenny Bledsoe puts it that, "Ruhl's modern dramatic adaptation of Victorian characters interpreting medieval conceptions of Jesus as mother illustrates how a feminized Jesus can limit the lives of women, even those of a different period than the one in the images were first created" (48). Thus, the play demythologizes the myth of Jesus who is identified as a male or as a mother and suggests instead a remythologization of the myth of a genderless Jesus. Dissociating the link between gender and Jesus is obviously bound to remove any privileges bestowed upon one gender and denied to the other. Hence, both genders are to be treated equally and none of them is regarded as holy, superior or blessed. In so doing, Ruhl identifies, to a certain degree, with Julian of Norwich's image of a God, who is either a father or a mother, elaborated by Maria C. M. Byler and Lindsay Davis as follows:

She (Julian of Norwich) described God using masculine and feminine terms, in a position of power and a position of servitude, in order to help those around her understand God's character and relate to God in their time. As a result, Julian connects very deeply with God as mother and father, lord and friend. When we follow the example of Julian of Norwich by using a diversity of images and descriptions for God, we reach

a fuller understanding of who God is, allowing everyone to identify closely with their Creator.(3)

In line with Ricoeur's concept of iconoclasm, shaking belief in the existence of idols, Ruhl's play casts doubts on the idea of Jesus the savior. Ruhl has resurrected the incident of Jesus's crucifixion, to die in place of humanity as a whole, to be questioned through the episode of the wet nurse, Elizabeth, who believes her son's death to be a sacrifice for Mrs Giving's baby to live. She says: "The more healthy your baby got, the more dead my baby became . . . Sometimes I hated her for it . . . I hope every day you keep her— you keep her close to you— and you remember the blood that her milk was made from. The blood of my son, my Henry" (134). Elizabeth believes Jesus to have forsaken her in time of pain and suffering. She says, "I thought of Jesus while I was giving birth, like you. But I wasn't thinking about why was He a man. I was thinking, please save me Jesus. And He did. Now why He didn't save my Henry I don't know, so I stopped believing in him"(48). The fact that Ruhl depicts Elizabeth the wet nurse who, in this incident, symbolizes Mary, Jesus's mother, is meant to dissociate the cultural link between women of color and lack of religious conformity and piety. Mr Daldry says: "Elizabeth our housekeeper is colored but she is very moral, very Christian. She goes to church every week with Mrs Daldry who is a very devout woman"(27). Ruhl's image calls into question the revolutionary thought of matriarchal Christianity symbolized in the Mary image represented in Elizabeth. Ruhl's aim is to deconstruct the idea of Mary

replacing Jesus. Mrs Givings says: " "We are to think of Him feeding us, I suppose. Not the other way round" (104). The fact that Elizabeth is not concerned about Jesus's gender but rather about Jesus as a savior sets the former idea as a trivial categorization and the latter, which Jesus himself fails to keep up with, as untrue.

Ruhl has so far supported her suggestion of the invalidity of the supposition of Jesus's gender by her most distinctive technique, subversion. She subverts male and female roles in the final scene of the play as Catherine orders her husband to lie down and to get undressed while she herself does not. This marks a reversal of roles that is meant to remove any boundaries between sexes to set them on equal footing.

The play's last scene, where Catherine and her husband have sex in winter garden, apparently symbolizes the Garden of Eden and the knowledge gained there where his nakedness suggests the first human being, Adam. Catherine symbolizes Eve, the seducer, who eats the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and incites a further fall by seducing her husband to eat the fruit. This marks the fall of humankind as a whole. The most controversial question posed by David P. Wright concerning the Eden issue is whether Adam and Eve were mortal and sexually capable before eating the forbidden fruit and being expelled from Eden to the earth. The answer to question is bound to decide if their banishment from Eden is a fall or rather a reward. Wright explains:

For if the man and woman are mortal and are sexually functional or reproductive only after transgression, then eating

the fruit marks a descent in the state of the human condition, a "fall" as it has been termed. But if the couple is liable to death and is sexually functional before eating the fruit, then their physical status does not significantly change-they suffer an "environmental" change by being expelled from the garden and the direct presence of Yahweh, and they now have to deal with thorns and thistles, but the only physical change is the pain of childbirth for the woman. Indeed, the intellectual faculty they acquire-knowledge comparable to that of the gods-mitigates the punishments they receive. In this second case, it may be better to think of the story as one of ascent rather than descent: the humans distinguish themselves from the animal world and draw nigh to godhood. (33)

Having echoed the forbidden fruit incident, Ruhl hermeneutically subverts the whole scene. Unlike Eve and Adam who, by gaining knowledge, were introduced, for the first time, to the idea of shame, Catherine and her husband have sex in the open air. Ruhl destabilizes the idea by making the acquisition of the forbidden knowledge, the sexual knowledge, a blessing that makes up for all the imperfections in the couple's marital relationship. This is meant to deconstruct and reconstruct the whole scene with its religious implications so as to render it in a different manner more in keeping with the age and the time. The new version presented by the play suggests an identification of Adam and Eve with nature, gives them power, knowledge and freedom. Showing

Catherine and her husband having sex in the garden, Ruhl seems to support the second alternative that supposes that Adam and Eve were sexually capable in Eden. Hence, man's life on earth is that of exaltation and elevation rather than condemnation and punishment. This implies a rewriting of the whole issue of redemption. In this manner, Ruhl's play reverses the belief in man's expulsion from Eden as a sort of divine penance.

Ruhl's play gives great credit to religious symbols. The vibrator, for example, is a symbol of the forbidden tree of knowledge. It works as the forbidden fruit's duplicate; it is the way Catherine and Mrs Daldry gained knowledge. This is made clear in L.A Durham's words that "They conduct their own experiments on themselves as the first act closes and we get the sense that they are acquiring godlike agency as they come to know their own bodies and their capacity for pleasure" (135). The garden symbolizes both nature and Eden. Electricity and light in symbolize the powers of nature. Catherine is Eve, the seducer, and her husband is Adam. Moreover, the title of the play "*In the Next Room*" might symbolize the existence of another world, that is to say, the world of nature; nature is the next room where all forbidden knowledge is available at hand. This is where Catherine acquires sexual knowledge and experiences pleasure. Nevertheless, gaining forbidden knowledge does not mean being cursed by God. On the contrary, she moves on to another heaven. However, it is not destructive knowledge.

Ruhl's hermeneutic approach culminates with a stage of belief in the divine and redemptive power of nature that suits all ages and, unlike Old

and New Testament, needs no orientation. In his *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, William Webb reflects upon what he calls the “redemptive-movement hermeneutic”. As elaborated by Wayne Grudem, Webb argues against the perfection of the Old Testament's moral standards; he believes them to be inappropriate in our time and therefore in need of rethinking. Webb, as Grudem explains, proposes that:

...in the New Testament, God gave even higher moral standards, making further improvement over what was taught in the Old Testament. But even these New Testament moral commands were not God's 'ultimate ethic' commands were not God's “ultimate ethic.” Our task today is to try to understand the direction in which God was gradually leading his people, so that by observing that trajectory we can discover God's “ultimate ethic” on various topics, an “ultimate ethic” that we should seek to teach and obey today ”. (97)

In short, Webb claims that the Old Testament as well as the New Testament were written for the then culture of the time (Grudem 97). Webb's idea is that "we today should be obedient to the moral commands that were written to new covenant Christians"(Grudem 98).

The stage of a well- grounded faith reached at the end of the play is elaborated by Ruhl in the last scene in an ecofeminist spirit. Her reconstructed meaning of the needed spirituality has much in common with ecofeminism spirituality described by Karen Warren as follows:

First ecofeminist spiritualities are feminist: They express a commitment to the elimination of male- gender privilege and power over women in their myths, rituals, symbols, language, and value systems. Second ecofeminist spiritualities are spiritualities: They express faith in a life- affirming (rather than life- denying) power or presence (energy, force, being, deity or deities, God or Goddess) other than and in addition to one's individual ego. They affirm that this power or presence is "greater than the individual ego, greater than their name, their family, their special attributes as individuals" . . . Third ecofeminist spiritualities are ecofeminist: They express a twofold commitment to challenge harmful women other human Others- nature interconnections and to develop earth- respectful, care- sensitive practices toward humans and earth others.(133)

Ruhl has animated *In the Next Room*, in an ecofeministic manner, with a lot of back- to- nature-utterances articulated by women exemplified in Mrs Givings's classification of people according to whether they use umbrellas in the rain or not. Mrs Givings says: "There are three kinds of people. Those who use umbrellas when it is not raining; those who do not use umbrellas even when it is raining; and those who use umbrellas only and precisely while it rains"(17).Those who do not use umbrellas are romantic people who identify with nature and come to terms with her. Mr.Daldry is not one of these; he is of the

unromantic type who uses umbrellas in the rain. On another occasion Mrs. Daldry explains the imperfections in her own character comparing herself to her mother who is herself a nature ally. She says:

When the curtains were cleaned you could see right through to the grapes, you could almost watch them growing, they got so plump in the autumn. My mother would make loads of jam—my mother was not a nervous or excitable woman. It was jam, it was laughing, it was long walks out of doors. We haven't a grape arbor here— I am full of digressions these days, Dr. Givings— but the point is I haven't the strength to wash the curtains every week and beat the ghosts out of them. (11)

Mrs Daldry is fully conscious that in nature life, beauty, peace of mind, purity of soul and all pleasures that make life cheerful and meaningful are found. This is why Mrs Daldry's mother enjoyed her life whereas she herself becomes hysteric since she has denied herself any direct contact with nature. Having discovered the divine power of nature, Mrs Givings goes without her coat in the snow. This marks a powerful transformation in her character.

Ruhl has far and wide, in ecofeministic terms, reconstructed a new meaning of spirituality that is related to nature and that calls upon humans to be of those who "do not use umbrellas even when it is raining". This inspires an association between life and the teachings of the New Testament. Ruhl suggests that identifying with nature, not with Jesus as a divine entity, is a perfect means of female empowerment;

nature has in itself a power that is both spiritual and physical. In nature lies the image of a loving God that suits our time. Light and electricity are bound to turn people into Gods. This is illustrated in Mrs Daldry's speculation upon the impact they might have upon humans. She says: "Do you think our children's children will be less solemn? A flick of the finger and all is dark! On, off, on off! We could change our minds a dozen times a second. . . We shall be like gods!"(61). Talking to Leo Irving about the power of electricity, Mrs Givings goes further by making the point that electricity (nature) can both give life and end it .

Ruhl 's back- to- nature-utterances finally culminate in Mrs Givings's adopting the same call to go back to nature, symbolized in the last scene where she openly has sex with her husband. This indicates that she, as a female, has gained a sort of power that strips her of gender limitations especially in sexual terms. Moreover, this scene sets in sharp contrast medical treatment mechanically performed in the next room and natural treatment that releases at once all tensions and disturbances. When, at the end, Dr Givings is able to express his love, he says: " I bless thee, Catherine."(141). As Durham puts it, " In these last moments, as the body becomes holy in the act of blessing, and a couple is able to enter a garden, we see nature, freedom, and electricity of a particular sort come together in a moment of grace"(137). Mrs. Givings's liberation in the garden ,in Durham's words, signifies that ". . . the desires of both the body and the spirit are met" (139).

Ruhl's plays hermeneutically destabilize a heritage of theological Christian myths that all contribute to the delineation of an image of a violent God. *Eurydice* and *In the Next Room* suggest instead a sort of a loving divine force kept latent in nature that is related neither to fear nor to the need for protection; it is rather related to liberation, compassion and mercy. Instead of the suggested medieval identification with mother womb, her plays suggest identification with nature and mother earth that is the real womb where everything is born and goes back after death for a further rebirth. Thus, in short, Ruhl's method in the two concerned plays is a heterogeneous hermeneutic approach that belongs to Ricoeur and Bultmann. She has unexpectedly denounced the idea of a gendered Jesus as she seeks to strip religion of gender implications that might exalt one gender at the expense of the other or bestow a certain divinity, that is fairly restrictive, on one gender, especially the female. In *Eurydice*, Ruhl builds upon Freud's psychological paradigm of man-god relationship to dissociate the link between God and violence together with the idea that man's need for religion is engendered by his fear and his need for protection. In *In the Next Room*, she builds upon Butler and Du Bois's performative gender theory to suggest a destabilizing of gender classification of Jesus and God. Ruhl has largely managed to deconstruct and reconstruct the myth of the three-leveled universe and that of redemption that is responsible for the image of a violent God. She suggests instead an image of a loving considerate God and rids religion of its two false reliable crutches: fear and the need for protection. She has deeply touched upon a controversial issue, female sexuality. She harshly

yet inherently criticizes the tendency to restrict female sexuality under the pretence that it is part of the theological order.

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