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The Dynamics of Identity Transformation in Sarah Ruhl's Eurydice: A Žižekian Reading of Loss, Memory, and Language

Sara Abasi[1], Hojatollah Borzabadi Farahani[2], Fatemeh Azizmohammadi[3]

1. Department of English language, Ar.C., Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran

2. Department of English language, Ar.C., Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran, 05322537522@iau.ac.ir

3. Department of English language, Ar.C., Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study interprets Sarah Ruhl's Eurydice through a Žižekian lens to examine how identity is shaped by loss, discontinuity, and the instability of language. It aims to analyze how the play reconfigures the Orpheus myth into a philosophical reflection on memory, subjectivity, and the transformative potential of forgetting.

Methods: Using textual analysis grounded in Žižek's theory of the subject constituted through lack, the study explores key scenes and dialogues in Eurydice—particularly those involving Eurydice's interactions with her father and her experiences in the underworld. The analysis focuses on narrative ruptures, linguistic fragmentation, and symbolic gestures that reveal how memory and forgetting structure the self.

Results: Findings indicate that Ruhl's adaptation rejects the notion of identity as stable or complete. Instead, the play demonstrates how identity is continually remade through absence, rupture, and the breakdown of language. Forgetting in the underworld is not portrayed as punishment but as a process of painful renewal that enables transformation. Eurydice's conversations with her father, though fractured and unstable, illustrate how meaning can persist even when language deteriorates. These moments reveal that communication and understanding arise not from clarity but from the effort to grasp what is slipping away. The play embodies Žižek's idea that the subject emerges through what is missing rather than what is present.

Conclusions: Ruhl's Eurydice ultimately presents identity as an ongoing process shaped by cycles of breaking and repair. Loss does not annihilate the self; it reshapes it. The play suggests that being human involves continually beginning again, navigating the interplay between remembering and forgetting, and learning to live with absence as a fundamental part of becoming.

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Introduction

Ruhl's Eurydice (2003) doesn't just retell the Orpheus myth; it tilts the whole thing on its axis. Instead of following the musician's heroic descent, the story unfolds through Eurydice's eyes, or perhaps through her half-remembered dreams. Down in the underworld, memory frays; words slip away; even love becomes something you have to reconstruct from scraps. What's fascinating is how Ruhl makes language itself the thread that holds Eurydice together. Her father, somehow still present beyond death, spends the play gently re-teaching her how to speak, how to name, how to remember. It's heartbreaking and tender, but also unsettling: who are we when even our words belong to someone else's teaching? There's something Žižekian about all this, though Ruhl never gets didactic about it. For Žižek, the self doesn't sit comfortably inside language—it's born from the moments language fails, when the Real breaks through and everything we thought we knew about who we are starts to wobble. Eurydice lives in that fragile space. Identity here isn't a stable core you rediscover once the fog clears; it's a process, an unfinished project, stitched together from memory, loss, and a few trembling words someone else teaches you to say again.

Žižek's reading of the subject emphasizes how identity formation is bound up with lack, desire and language: the subject becomes only through symbolic exit from a pre-symbolic state (Key Theories of Slavoj Žižek, 2017). Taken together, Ruhl's dramaturgy and Žižek's psychoanalytic framework suggest that identity is inherently instructive in its unfolding: language is forgotten, memories fade, and it is through these gaps that new forms of subjectivity emerge. The present article reads Eurydice through a Žižekian point of view to argue that the play stages what might be called the "politics of identity" in its cultural context, that is, the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of selfhood, and in so doing offers a metaphorical model for how identity and learning are inseparable. In attending to how memory, language and affect operate in the text, the study will reveal how Eurydice can function as a site for exploring how individuals come to know, un-know, and re-know themselves.

Material and Methods

At the heart of the present study lies a convergent theoretical framework: on one side, the psychoanalytic and philosophical work of Slavoj Žižek, and on the other, the dramaturgical structure of Sarah Ruhl's Eurydice. Žižek's account of subjectivity emphasizes that the self is

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never a stable essence but it is formed in the gap or lack at the center of the symbolic order (Vighi & Feldner, 2016). His work highlights how language, loss, and desire intervene in the formation of identity, how the subject is thrown into and constituted by symbolic relations rather than simply emerging from them (Hook, 2010). In Eurydice, Ruhl stages a parallel process: the protagonist's descent into an underworld of forgetting, the re-learning of language, and the encounter with relational absence all mirror the psychoanalytic shifts that mark identity's becoming. The play thereby becomes a metaphorical space for exploring identity as construction through absence and renewal. Methodologically, the research is done in a qualitative, textual, and interpretive approach. Given the nature of the material, a dramatic text that engages with memory, language, and identity, the method centres on is close reading and thematic coding of the drama's key episodes, dialogues, and structural shifts. In this sense, the analysis takes cues from qualitative content analysis, identifying and interpreting recurring motifs of forgetting, language-repair, and identity shift in the text (see Elliott & Flick, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Importantly, the selection of Eurydice as the focal case permits an in-depth examination of identity formation as staged in literary form, akin to how a case study allows deep engagement with a bounded phenomenon. The study does not seek empirical generalization in the quantitative sense but invites thick description and conceptual insight: how a symbolic narrative may illuminate the broader process of identity becoming in cultural contexts. To strengthen the interpretive trustworthiness of the study, careful attention is given to the researcher's position as one working through both psychoanalytic and literary perspectives, alongside a commitment to transparency in analytic choices. This combined theoretical and methodological framework keeps the analysis based on Žižek's critique of subjectivity, while remaining attentive to the distinctive dramaturgical features of Ruhl's work. Together, these approaches aim to reveal how identity takes shape, unravels, and transforms through the interplay of language, absence, and desire.

Results

1. Desire, Rhythm, and the Offbeat of Subjectivity

Ruhl's Eurydice begins in a world of tentative harmony—two lovers, Orpheus and Eurydice, rehearsing marriage through rhythm. Yet even in the opening pages, Ruhl installs dissonance as the structure of love. Orpheus, surrounded by music, offers gifts of nature—"I'll name the stars

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for you. Whatever you want" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 332), while Eurydice immersed in words, replies, "You make interesting arguments" (p. 333). This brief exchange encapsulates the Žižekian model of subjectivity: the subject's relation to the Other is always mediated by a misalignment of desire. The couple's inability to clap in time, Orpheus instructing, "Clap on the downbeat," and Eurydice always late, renders rhythm as the first sign of division. Desire, as Žižek (1989) asserts, is structured not by fulfillment but by lack, the gap that sustains movement toward the Other (pp. 95–97).

Orpheus's impulse to secure his love with a string tied around Eurydice's finger (Ruhl, 2003, p. 334) dramatizes the desire to stabilize this gap, to convert the fluidity of affection into the solidity of the symbolic order. Yet the act simultaneously foreshadows its undoing: when Eurydice descends to the underworld, the Father will later build her a "room of string" (p. 366), repeating the same gesture of binding, love as architecture of remembrance destined to dissolve. Derrida (1996) describes such gestures as the archive fever of love: the drive to record, to preserve, to write memory against decay, even though writing itself produces the distance it laments (p. 11). The early dialogue thus encodes the whole Žižekian dialectic. Subjectivity and intimacy emerge not in synchronic unity but through what Žižek (1991) calls "looking awry", the misperception that produces truth. Eurydice's "offbeat" is her subjectivity; her failure to match rhythm is her humanity.

2. Descent and the Semiotics of Forgetting

The underworld scenes convert psychological theory into theatrical event. Eurydice's death and descent are rendered not through mythic grandeur but bureaucratic absurdity, an elevator that rains, accompanied by "drip, drip, drip" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 357). As she exits, "she opens her mouth, trying to speak. There is a great humming noise" (p. 358). Her voice dissolves into sound without meaning, a materialization of what Lacan calls the Real, the remainder that resists symbolization (Lacan, 1998, p. 49). The Stones, guardians of this watery limbo, enforce linguistic erasure: "Pretend you understand her, or she'll be embarrassed" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 359). Their rule is social repression disguised as etiquette, an echo of Žižek's (2008) insight that ideology operates most efficiently when disguised as the demand to be polite, tolerant, or "normal" (p. 77). The Stones, by silencing Eurydice reveal the cruelty of the superego, a force that seeks not just to punish disobedience but to suppress anything that deviates from what it deems acceptable.

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Kristeva's (1982) notion of the semiotic chora, the prelinguistic rhythm of drives offers another viewpoint. Eurydice's humming is not mere loss but a return to the bodily basis of language, a subversive feminine semiotic beneath the masculine symbolic order. Her tantrum of despair (Ruhl, 2003, p. 358) is not regression but resistance. The scene marks the first stage of Žižekian subjectivation: the subject formed in loss, within a gap in speech. When Eurydice meets her Father, the linguistic tension continues. He calls her name, "Eurydice!" and she echoes, "Oooh—it's like a fruit!" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 362). Naming becomes tactile rather than semantic, sound becomes sensation. The Father's pedagogical impulse, to reteach words as gestures of love—transforms language into a mode of care, not command. Winnicott's (1971) "transitional space" describes this perfectly: a space of play and re-creation where identity can be rebuilt (p. 52).

3. The Room of String: Language, Memory, and the Ethics of Address

The room of string (Ruhl, 2003, pp. 366–367) is Ruhl's central metaphor for identity as both construction and fragility. It recalls Orpheus's earlier string but now becomes a space of relational healing. The Father's act of weaving boundaries out of thread literalizes what Ricoeur (2004) calls narrative refiguration, the process through which human beings stitch disparate experiences into coherence (pp. 57–60). Eurydice's grateful but puzzled response—"Thank you. That will do" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 367), signals the tentative rebirth of agency. The first letter from Orpheus—"I play the saddest music now that you're gone" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 367)—arrives unreadable. Eurydice stands barefoot on the page, trying to absorb its meaning through her body (p. 368). This scene stages Derrida's paradox of reading without understanding—a relation to writing that is physical, affective, and deferred. Only when the Father reads the letter aloud does language regain meaning: "It says: I love you… It's like sitting in the shade" (p. 369). The Father translates love into the sensory language of memory. Butler (2005) would call this an act of ethical address: identity formed through being spoken to, cared for, and interpreted by another (p. 83). Their later vocabulary lessons—"Ostracize," "Peripatetic," "Defunct" (Ruhl, 2003, pp. 372–374) demonstrate that even grief requires linguistic scaffolding. To name exclusion, wandering, and death is to transform trauma into knowable discourse. The Father's stories, Flaming Sally's piano, duck hunting with the gentle grandfather, extend this learning into memory. Ricoeur (2004) argues that such storytelling mediates between personal and collective time and creates a narrative unity

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essential to endurance (p. 75). Through language, Eurydice shows temporality and once more she becomes a self who can remember.

4. Song, Prohibition, and the Law of the Stones

The duet "I Got Rhythm" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 378) embodies both rebellion and tenderness. As the Father and Eurydice sing nonsense syllables—"Da da Dee da…"—the Stones interrupt: "Dead people can't sing!" Their outrage exposes the ideological function of mourning—to keep the dead inert, voiceless, and obedient. Žižek (2012) would describe this as the superegoic command to silence enjoyment, for the superego forbids precisely what it secretly demands (p. 1,015). The moment thus becomes a microcosm of the subject's predicament: joy itself becomes guilt. The arrival of the Lord of the Underworld on a red tricycle (Ruhl, 2003, p. 380) grotesquely fuses innocence and tyranny. His lines—"Rooms are not allowed! Fathers are not allowed!" (p. 382)—decree the destruction of relational and mnemonic structures. This is the authoritarian side of the symbolic order: law without love. His flirtatious menace ("Say 'Please don't' in my ear," p. 383) literalizes Žižek's (2008) claim that the superego's authority resides in its obscene underside, where the command to obey merges with the command to enjoy (p. 59). The Father's eventual decision to "take your luggage to your room" despite prohibition (Ruhl, 2003, p. 365) thus becomes an act of resistance, a defense of ethical relation against the law of death.

5. Orpheus's Descent: Music and the Real

Parallel to Eurydice's linguistic reconstruction runs Orpheus's musical descent. His monologue, "If a drop of water enters the soil at a particular angle… what's to say a man can't ride one note into the earth?" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 384) presents music as metaphysics, the attempt to sonically penetrate the Real. He tunes his guitar to match the pitch of falling rain, a ritual of desire for perfect correspondence. Lacan would call this the fantasy of the phallic signifier—the illusion that one note, one word, could make meaning whole (Lacan, 1998, p. 69). Yet, as Žižek (1989) notes, the subject is born when this fantasy fails (p. 132). Orpheus's later declaration, "Practice is a word invented by cowards. A bird doesn't sing for practice" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 385), opposes artificial repetition to authentic drive. Here Ruhl ironizes the Romantic ideal: spontaneity itself becomes another practice. His journey through music becomes a Žižekian parable of ideology's trap—the compulsion to be authentic, spontaneous, real. The straw through which he crawls into the darkness (Ruhl, 2003, p. 386) literalizes the psychoanalytic passage through desire's narrow channel.

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6. The Ethics of Looking Back

The climactic reunion between Orpheus and Eurydice revises the myth's moral structure. In Ruhl's staging, Eurydice's cry "Orpheus!" precedes his turning (Ruhl, 2003, p. 407). The cause of loss is thus her desire to be seen, not his failure of trust. This inversion foregrounds what Cavell (1979) calls the moral of acknowledgment: the ethical necessity of seeing the other, even at the cost of the bond (p. 266). Žižek (1989) reframes the same gesture as the moment the subject glimpses the Real—the impossible kernel that sustains fantasy (p. 132). To look back is not sin but awakening. The Father's subsequent directions for Eurydice's journey—"Take Tri-State South 294… Put your feet in the river and swim" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 408)—transform memory into cartography of love. His map blends geography with emotion, reflecting Assmann's (2011) idea of cultural memory as a way of giving the past a place in space (p. 26). His self-dissolution—"He dips himself in the river again" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 405)—is an act of ethical restraint, choosing erasure over possession.

7. Forgetting as Renewal: Eurydice's Final Letter

Eurydice's final act—writing "To My Husband's Next Wife" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 409)—resolves the dialectic of memory and forgetting. She offers instructions for tenderness, "Comb his hair when it's wet… kiss his forehead when he's sad" that extend love beyond her own subjectivity. Ricoeur (2004) might call this an act of attestation, where the self confirms its continuity by authorizing another's care (p. 120). This is Žižek's ethical paradox: true love releases rather than possesses. Orpheus's inability to read her letter, "He finds the letter and cannot read it" (Ruhl, 2003, p. 410) fulfills Derrida's (1996) archive paradox: every act of preservation is haunted by illegibility (p. 18). Yet the gesture persists, the letter's form remains as silent structure, just as the room of string endures in memory. Kristeva (1989/2009) interprets mourning as the site where loss becomes creativity; Eurydice's self-erasure thus births new subjectivity.

8. Identity as a Room Made of String

Through its layered metaphors of music, letters, and threads, Eurydice constructs identity as a woven process which is never fixed but continuously narrated. Žižek's conception of the subject as constituted by lack finds its dramaturgical equivalent in Ruhl's recurring image of threads that both connect and dissolve. The Father's stories, Orpheus's music, the Stones' prohibitions, and Eurydice's final letter all trace a single logic: the self as a fragile narrative built in the space between love and loss. Ultimately, Ruhl's play affirms that to learn through loss is not to repair

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absence but to recognize it as the foundation of meaning. Eurydice's forgetting does not erase identity, but completes it. In Žižek's terms, the subject "becomes itself only through its failure to coincide with itself" (Žižek, 1989, p. 133). The room of string is dismantled, but its pattern remains, the enduring architecture of the human effort to love, remember and begin again.

Discussion

Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* doesn't just retell a myth, it unsettles it. The story that is thought to be known, of love and loss and music, becomes something far stranger: a meditation on how individuals build themselves out of what's missing. Eurydice's descent into the underworld isn't just a journey through death; it's a kind of linguistic unraveling. Her memories, her words, her sense of who she is, all start to fall apart, and yet, in that fragmentation, something else takes shape. Žižek (1989) might say that this is precisely the paradox of being human: identity is defined not by completeness but by what is lacking. The play's images linger, the raining elevator, the unreadable letters that delicate room made of string. They don't quite work like tidy metaphors; they feel more like desperate, delicate ways of keeping the world from collapsing completely. Each misunderstanding, each lapse in memory, somehow turns into its own small act of rebuilding, clumsy, maybe, but quietly creative. Eurydice, her Father, even Orpheus, they all fumble toward connection, inventing new meanings out of loss. What's quietly moving is how Ruhl turns grief into a kind of curiosity. The play doesn't claim that pain leads to enlightenment; there's no neat catharsis, but it does suggest that understanding often arrives in fragments, in the willingness to stay with confusion a little longer. The Father's gentleness, Orpheus's stubborn devotion, and Eurydice's final letter each gesture toward a truth that can't be spoken outright: absence can bind as much as presence can. In Žižekian terms, identity here is not a stable possession but a process, something that flickers between the symbolic and the Real, between what's been lost and what's still dreamed might be recovered. Ruhl's version of *Eurydice* leaves an uneasy hope: that through losing, through letting go, a new beginning might emerge, not whole, but alive.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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