

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

November 2013 Vol. II. Issue VI

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Absurdism in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is an absurdist existentialist tragic comedy by Tom Stoppard. The play is acclaimed as a dramatic masterpiece. With the setting in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the play expands upon the exploits of the two minor characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The play offers only brief appearances of the major characters of the *Hamlet*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are a pair of school mates and childhood friends of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark. Based on the same period of time the two minor characters are changed into major characters. They are the Shakespearean Laurel and Hardy who finally get a chance to lead the roles in their life, but it looks similar like that of "*Waiting for Godot*". It presents a mixture of reality and illusion and fate plays its own role of leading these two characters into death. The play adopted from Shakespeare takes its own form in a manner where the central characters are thrown in a world where they are unable to comprehend anything. It is quoted by the New York Times as, "This is a most remarkable play. Very funny. Very brilliant. Very chilling." In his review for the New York Times, Brantley called the production "brave and gorgeous", adding that "I wouldn't call it (the play) a major work of art. In literary terms I wouldn't ever rank it with Mr. Stoppard's best".

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, childhood friends of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, betray him at the behest of King Claudius and Queen Gertrude of Denmark. They act as spies; because of Hamlet's cleverness and a combination of chance they are doomed to execution instead of Hamlet. Rosencrantz is a gentleman and childhood friend of Hamlet. Along with his friend Guildenstern he seeks to uncover the cause of Prince Hamlet's strange behaviour. They are worried about the dark behaviour of Hamlet and feel that this is just the result of his personal crisis. Both the characters struggle and try to understand the world around them. Stoppard very craftily shows how the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* have similarity only in character. The theme, the language, the theatrical style and even the time period are entirely different in both the plays. Shakespearean *Hamlet* was set in the Elizabethan era when Renaissance was on its rise while Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is written in the modern era when absurdism, existentialism and experimentation are in question with no church and monarchy in its dominant form. Written in colloquial language the subject matter of the play is precisely the relationship between absurdism and humanity.

The very opening scene of Act I present the two characters in a contrasting manner showing Guildenstern's large leather bag nearly empty while Rosencrantz's nearly full. Their betting on the toss of a coin repeatedly and their oddity of the situation are very much there. With Guildenstern quoting that there is an art to the building up of suspense and it could be done by luck alone brings forth the absurdism in the play. These two minor characters of *Hamlet* are taken up by Stoppard for his own advantage. They have been presented by him as two halves of a single character. With identical story line as *Hamlet*, Stoppard grows out of the frame of Shakespeare and gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern more importance. The two characters are

the epitome of idiosyncrasy as they are logically unaware of their destiny. The characters pass time by playing questions and flipping coins. Comparisons have been drawn to Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" where the two characters Vladimir and Estragon are waiting endlessly and in vain for the arrival of Godot. The situation can be drawn out on the pain of vagrant men of the two play and their efforts to divert themselves while waiting in a vague pretense. With absurdity on its high the play well blends with the theme that man is really a puppet controlled and menaced by invisible outside forces. Drawing upon the model of Vladimir and Estragon, Tom Stoppard gave full importance to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern shaping their characters. The appearance of the players also in the play mirrors the appearances of Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Shakespeare's influence can be directly seen in the title of Stoppard's title of the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. As quoted by Friedrich Durrenmatt in his essay *Problems of the Theatre*, "Comedy alone is suitable for us.....But the tragic is still possible even if pure tragedy is not. We can achieve the tragic out of comedy. We can bring it forth as a frightening moment, as an abyss that opens suddenly; indeed, many of Shakespeare's are already really comedies out of which tragic arises." With the Theatre of the Absurd commonly associated with existentialism, Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* focuses on absurdism as well as existentialism. A fine example of the Theatre of the Absurd Tragic drama, the play presents the central characters thrown in an absurd manner into a world where they are unable to comprehend the successive situations taking place. If we go by the real meaning of the word absurdism it refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and human inability to find any. Absurdism is closely related to existentialism and nihilism or to say nihilism is presented in the form of existential nihilism with the argument that life is without objective meaning, purpose or intrinsic value. With the belief that life has no intrinsic meaning or value or to say it is meaningless or insignificant. Tom Stoppard used this existential nihilism to profess the absurdism in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Tracing out the origins of absurdism in Shakespearean drama it can be mentioned that it originated under the influence of the Commedia dell'Arte.

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has basically no real story line, instead there is a series of free-floating images in which the audience interpret the communication and thus making speech more futile. Stoppard's play metaphorically addresses the issue of "ending" or "dying" and through such observations one can clearly state that absurdism has evolved. All the more Absurd drama creates an atmosphere where the people are alone or are forced to be alone. Especially the clown-like characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do blunders in their way through out because for them life is meaningless. The two main characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spend their time reliving their life and trying to make sense of their existence. Unlike other absurd characters they are more real to us. Tom Stoppard gave them an identity and that is more realistic.

The confusion of the two characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern creates an atmosphere of exploitation. The philosophy of existentialism elaborates the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's facts. Their playing with their coins continuously reveals their personal crisis as they are unaware of their destiny. While talking meaninglessly for a long time and tossing the coin for head and tail finally Guildenstern comments, "the scientific approach to the

examination of Phenomenon is a defense against the pure emotion of fear". He further talks about supernatural forces and the probability. When Guildenstern says, "Nothing else happened. Ninety two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times.....and for the last three minutes on the wind of a windless day. I have heard the sound of drums and flutes....." To which Rosencrantz adds, "(cutting his fingernails) Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard."

Guildenstern asks shockingly, "What?" Rosencrantz replies loudly: "Beard!" To this Guildenstern comments, "But you are not dead." To which Rosencrantz says irritatingly, "I didn't say they started to grow after death!" He further pauses and calmly continues, "The finger nails also grow before birth, though not the beard."

The meaningless conversation of the two friends illustrates their meaningless existence and absurdism. They are perplexed individuals and unable to be independent. They need something or somebody to guide them in their life. In addition to that they had no memory of past happenings and their present picture is also vague. In Act III, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that Hamlet is no more in the boat, their journey becomes mission-less. The purpose of their journey is not solved as Hamlet is no longer with them. Then Guildenstern says, "We've travelled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation". Rosencrantz in reply say, "Be happy- if you're not even happy what's so good about surviving? We'll be all right. I suppose we just go on".

It is the deepest and darkest of existential crisis of their life that they both are drawn towards the unknown destiny of their life. The realization that life is mechanical increases the despair of Guildenstern.

Tom Stoppard's play presents the two minor characters of *Hamlet* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into major characters, while the major characters of Hamlet - the tragedians; Claudius, Hamlet's uncle and the new King of Denmark; Gertrude, Hamlet's mother and the Queen of Denmark; Polonius, a member of Danish court and advisor to Claudius; Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius and Hamlet's former beloved; Laertes, the son of Polonius and brother of Ophelia; are changed into minor characters including Hamlet. The characters are unable to acknowledge that there are certain laws that regulate nature and they are mere puppets played with the strings controlled by God. The common theological question can be raised that if mankind was created by God, who or what created God. Stoppard presents absurdism in his own way with the inevitability of death.

As explained by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* about absurdism, "The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable of the world". It is very true for the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they are born out of this confrontation. According to Sartre, "Humanity must live in a world that is and will forever be hostile or indifferent towards them". The philosophy that encompasses the absurd is called absurdism. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a break-through play. The critics of absurdism focus on two areas of philosophy. As Camus described, the first is the proposition and that life's absence of meaning seems to remove any reason of living. Human quest for purpose is quiet absurd. In this life everything must have a purpose and that itself is an important reason for existence.

Albert Camus had pointed out that happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. In the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* the protagonists are clueless about their destiny. They are happy as they entertain the readers by

playing a lengthy tennis game and sometimes tossing the coin to pass the time. It seems they are not able to comprehend what is going on in the absurd world and by smiling or being comedic they are trying to hide their innermost feelings or being absurd. The plight of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mirrors humanity as a whole. While elaborating on the aim of the Theatre of the Absurd, scholar and critic Martin Esslin had written, "It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly, precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why in the last resort the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation".

"Life is a gamble, at terrible odds – if it was a bet you wouldn't take it".

The player makes this observation in Act III when he informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that the Tragedians had to leave Elsinore depicting life's uncertainty.

The influence of Samuel Beckett can be seen in the absurdism of Stoppard. Beckett's innovations, use of silly dialogues are all seen in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In spite of all the influences, the play is unique. It is a play of innovative theme and is universally accepted as well as acknowledged as one of the best plays of Contemporary Theatre. According to Martin Esslin, "The reality of these plays is a psychological and inner realism; they explore the human sub-conscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence. Nor is it quite correct that these plays, deeply pessimistic as they are, are nothing but an expression of utter despair. It is true that basically the Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it." The words of the play also 'often appear' to have lost their denotative function, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters which is yet another characteristic trait of absurdism. Instead the language gains a certain phonetic turn and thus becomes rhythmical or almost musical. Sometimes for the mere purpose of whiling away the time of waiting for something that is not to come also makes it truly an absurd drama. Stoppard has succeeded to present the play in its richest sense.

In Act II, Stoppard kills the character of Polonius because Shakespeare wrote in as such and Stoppard's play largely mirrors the plot of Shakespeare's work. By the end of the Act Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are found to have lost their courses of life. The play ultimately suggests the role of fate and chance in our life followed by paralyzing confusion. Stoppard frequently uses this confusion for comic effect. Both the characters in their confusion lose their way of life and fall into despair. Their passive approach to their life reflects how difficult it is to make decisions in a world that we find difficult to understand.

There is little emotion in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Both the characters are unsympathetic and as such they are comic. They are forgetful, their pants fall down, they forget their names, their identities, and their artificiality is easily visible. At the end of the play when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die there is no sympathy for them from the audience. Comedy is interspersed with tragedy leaving the audience in confusion to think what is real and what is artificial. The two characters are comic clowns after all. In the last Act, in the scene of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern dying, the scene and background both become symbolic of death hovering in the atmosphere. As the Sun is going down, or the Earth's coming up - they present a fashionable theory in it. When Rosencrantz remarks with a cry, "We've nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?"

To this Guildenstern answers, “I can’t remember.”

(Rosencrantz pulls himself together)

Rosencrantz continues, “All right, then. I don’t care. I’ve had enough. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved.”

As Rosencrantz disappears from view, Guildenstern did not notice. Their death was simply disappearing.

As James Stobaugh had quoted in *World Literature*, “The Absurdist abandoned all hope of finding meaning in life and embraced a sort of nihilism. The Absurdist was convinced that everything was meaningless and absurd. The subjectivity of a Romantic was appealing to the Absurdist. However, even that implied that something was transcendent – a desire – and the Absurdist would have nothing to do with that”.

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