



# The Intersection of Reality and Fiction in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: A Study of Absurdity and Metadrama

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**Abstract**— The article titled "*The Intersection of Reality and Fiction in Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead: A Study of Absurdity and Metadrama*" explores how Tom Stoppard's play transforms the minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into central figures within an absurdist framework. This study examines the play's themes of human identity, confusion, and helplessness, common in the Theatre of the Absurd, using postmodernist metadramatic techniques. By employing metadrama, Stoppard highlights the blurred lines between reality and fiction, as seen in the characters' struggles to understand their existence within the play. The paper delves into the philosophical implications of absurdity, drawing on the ideas of Albert Camus and other theorists to illustrate how *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* reflects the chaotic and purposeless nature of human life. Through various metadramatic devices like the play within a play, role-playing, and the breakdown of conventional narrative structures, Stoppard's work is analyzed as a profound commentary on the human condition and the search for meaning in an incomprehensible world.



**Keywords**— Absurdity, Existentialism, human identity, metadrama, play within a play, postmodernism, Shakespeare's "*Hamlet*", Theatre of the Absurd, Tom Stoppard.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is one of the most successful rewritings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, written by the English playwright Tom Stoppard. Stoppard transforms the play from a revenge tragedy into an absurd drama. The two minor characters in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (later Ros and Guil), who were in *Hamlet*'s backstage are placed in Stoppard's play at center stage to draw attention to the issue of human identity, and who are apparently at a loss in their new world (Stoppard's stage) which is far beyond their understanding. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, like other plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, presents in philosophical ways "man's lack of absolute values, the problem of

freedom and the uncertainty of knowledge and perception" (Fei, 2007, p. 99). Such a theatre according to Hinchliffe (2017) introduces despair, anxiety, and a sense of loss at the disappearance of solutions and purposefulness. This paper examines the application of the postmodernist aspect of metadrama in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and how through metadrama the themes familiar in the Theatre of the Absurd which are man's confusion, absence of identity and helplessness are reinforced in Stoppard's play.

The play concerns the misadventures and musings of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* who are childhood friends

of the prince, focusing on their actions with the events of *Hamlet* as background.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is structured as the inverse of *Hamlet*; the title characters are the leads, not supporting players, and Hamlet himself has only a small part. The duo appears on stage here when they are off-stage in Shakespeare's play, apart from a few short scenes in which the dramatic events of both plays coincide. In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are used by the King in an attempt to discover Hamlet's motives and to plot against him. Hamlet, however, mocks them and outwits them, so that they, rather than he, are executed in the end.

Thus, from Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's perspective, the action in *Hamlet* is largely nonsensical and comical. After the two characters witness a performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*—the story within a story in the play *Hamlet*—they find themselves on a boat taking Prince Hamlet to England with the troupe that staged the performance. They are intended to give the English king a message telling him to kill Hamlet. Instead, Hamlet discovers this and switches the letter for another, telling the king to kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. During the voyage, the two are ambushed by pirates and lose their prisoner, Hamlet, before resigning themselves to their fate and presumably dying thereafter.

## II. THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

After giving a short summary of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, it is of importance to examine what the concepts of the absurd and the Theatre of the Absurd are in order to discuss the themes of the play. In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus (2013) defines the absurd as the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any. Camus considers absurdity as a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict or a "divorce" between two ideals. He defines the human condition as absurd, as the confrontation between man's desire for significance, meaning and clarity on the one hand – and the silent, cold universe on the other.

In addition, Hinchliffe (2017) states that the real world is an existential nightmare from which reason, forgiveness, and hope are absent: a place less to live in than to endure. Martin Esslin (1961) in *The Theatre of the Absurd* defined the movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd as "striving to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thoughts" (p. 6). An absurd play mirrors the

chaos of modern life which is manifested in the lack of symmetry, purpose and order.

The absurdist drama does not consist of the conventional theatre elements of language, plot, setting and characters; emphasizing the illogical aspect of reality by making these elements appear illogical (Esslin, 1961). In the Theatre of the Absurd, mysteries remain unfathomable, questions are not answered, and characters remain fixed, thrown into a continuous circle of indecision and inaction (Johnson, 1974).

## III. METADRAMA: EXPLORING REALITY AND FICTION

### 3.1 Defining Metadrama and its Purpose in Theatrical Storytelling

As discussed earlier, the themes of the absurd, such as anxiety, confusion, the helplessness under the inaccessible forces to reason and the absence of identity and faith are present in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

The title itself implies the major theme of the play. The characters have long been "living" dead even before their appearance on Stoppard's stage. Their destiny is known, and they cannot do anything about it. The unfolding of the absurd themes in the play is professionally planned through the employment of metadramatic devices, and how they contribute to reinforce these themes. Before disclosing the themes of the play, a definition of the term metadrama is essential to later link the metadramatic mechanism to the play's themes to reveal the absurdity of real life mirrored on the stage of the absurd. In *Metatheatrical: A New View of Dramatic Form*, Lionel Abel (1963) defined metadrama as the play within a play.

He (1963) also defines it as a form of antitheater, where the division between play and real life is erased. In other words, metadrama purposefully highlights the boundaries which the conventional theatre tries to conceal and constantly reminds the audience of the relationship between reality and performance. He continues saying that there are elements, other than the story itself, implemented in metadrama that aid in helping to develop the story, provide a fundamental way of thinking about life and the art of theatre itself. Richard Hornby (1986) in *Drama, Metadrama and Perception* states that metadrama is a method or factor that discovers truth which, in some cases, exceptional aesthetic insights are attained, known as estrangement or alienation. He lists four varieties of conscious metadrama that overlap with one another. They are the play within a play, the ceremony within a play, roleplaying within the role, and self-reference.

### 3.2 Play within a Play: Layers of Performance

First, the play within a play is divided into two categories: the inset and the framed. In the inset type, the inner play is secondary to the main action. It is like an interlude within the primary outer play. On the other hand, in the framed type, the inner play is primary, whereas the outer play is the frame (Hornby, 1986). The play within a play is a reflective and expressive device about the audience and the playwright's perception of life. The play within a play is skillfully implemented by Stoppard through *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, where one example of the inset type is the dress rehearsal in which the audience – both Stoppard's audience off stage and the audience of the outer play on stage – are consciously watching.

During these scenes' conversations about cast's performance, arguments about art and death in relation to stage and life are being discussed among Ros, Guil and the Player. There are multiple layers of performing within performing. The audience can see Ros and Guil watching the rehearsal that the tragedians will be performing for Hamlet, and then in another scene they see themselves as characters acted by two tragedians as the two spies.

Though they find themselves like the two spies in the play, but unfortunately, they cannot perceive their fate from the death of the two spies. They sleep and wake up asking and arguing about the direction as if they have not watched the rehearsal at all. "Stoppard intended to create the feeling of forgotten dream, another form of a play within a play, conscious to Ros and Guil but visible to the audience whose vision is sharpened" (Fei, 2007, p. 101). The frame of Stoppard play is Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which allows the outer and inner plays to fuse together. Sometimes Stoppard's organization of the play's scenes makes it hard to differentiate the inset from the framed types. Characters from *Hamlet* appear on stage one time and then disappear in another, causing possible confusion for the audience who cannot "divide the metafictional characters into the fictive and the real" (Schlueter, 1979, p. 5).

In addition, Ros and Guil are attached to *Hamlet*'s characters for a while and later detached from all rendering their incomprehensible situations even more impossible. Because of this, they feel at a loss, confused and depressed where Ros states "Never a moment's peace! In and out, on and off; they're coming at us from all sides" (Stoppard, 2013, p. 53).

In *Beyond Absurdity*, Victor Cahn (1977) asserts that the setting of the Theatre of the Absurd reflects a world of chaos and isolation; "characters often awake to find themselves in a nondescript void, which they are unable to understand. The world of the play is unrecognizable, strange locale or an ostensibly realistic world that suddenly

becomes warped" (p. 19). Because of this, characters lack in this world the ability to act from any position of power and therefore do not have any form of independence. They do not possess any self-knowledge, memory, purpose or choice (Cahn, 1977).

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the audience encounters Ros and Guil inability to remember anything that happened to them before waking up. They experience a lack of memories which is so essential for one's purpose and identity, leaving them with total incomprehension of what happens around them. They cannot familiarize themselves and their present situation to what they once were; they are unsure of who they really are. When Ros and Guil introduce themselves to the Player, one of them says: "My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz... I'm sorry – his name's Guildenstern and I'm Rosencrantz" (Stoppard, 2013, p. 22). Even when in the scenes where they are just together, they habitually ask each other "What's your name?" (p. 43). Here Stoppard, by moving them from *Hamlet*'s backstage and placing them at the centre, makes the audience look at identity as an issue. Their fates are predetermined by the plot of *Hamlet* (which is the frame play). They do not possess any power or will to change their own destiny and are unable to make significant choices in their lives. They respond to their circumstances with total passivity. At the end of Act II, when they ask each other if they should go to England, they do not make a choice but instead merely continue the path that has been laid out for them. Their passive approach to their lives reflects how difficult it is to make decisions in a world that we do not fully understand, in which any choice can seem meaningless and therefore not worth making.

### 3.3 Ceremony within a Play: Rituals of Meaninglessness

The other device that is found in metadrama is the ceremony within the play (Hornby, 1986). It is metadramatic in a sense of observing a cultural phenomenon through theatrical performance, thus generating an interest in the performance nature. In a play, one can encounter some forms of ceremonies like a wedding, a party, a funeral or a game/match. In the Theatre of the Absurd, ceremonies are quasi-ceremonies where the ceremonies and rituals have lost their meaning in this absurd world.

The characters, by inventing their own rituals or ceremonies, attempt to make meaning of their trivial life. Postmodern Theatre of the Absurd drama joins tragedy and farce, where the characters desperately repeat their private invented ceremonies but end up in vain (Hornby 35).

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the play begins with coin-tossing where Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern bet on coin flips and Rosencrantz wins with heads ninety-two times in a row. Guildenstern creates a series of syllogisms in order to interpret this phenomenon, but nothing truly coincides with the law of probability. The impossible becomes possible through exploiting the minimal chance of a coin flip turning up heads ninety-two times in a row; here Stoppard emphasizes the randomness of the world. The action is absurd, but possible. This incident demonstrates the absurdity of humans basing many of their actions on the probability or likelihood of an event happening. Other than the coin-tossing, they try to pass the time while playing a question-answer game.

According to Esslin, communication in this absurd world is ineffective. Characters may speak often and hold frequent discussions between each other or with themselves, but nothing substantial is communicated during the course of the play. Language that is erratic, untrustworthy, and illusory proves to be an exercise in futility. The verbal confusion only compounds the chaos and isolation the character feels within (63). In the play, all their questions with no answers, no statements, no rhetoric and answering questions with questions reveal the question-and-answer game is worthless and indicating a life without answers and explanations. In their bantering, language “loses its function of communication, but becomes a means of counter-inaction” (Fei, 2007, p. 102).

Sometimes they are free from *Hamlet's* plot, yet they do not know what to do with their freedom. Playing games does not change their situation positively but gives them a sense of action in their inaction in order to fill the time while they are waiting for words to follow as Guil says “Words, words. They’re all we have to go on” (Stoppard, 2013, p. 30). When they are not playing games, other ceremonies are performed by them, one of which is trying to remember. They are at a loss for memories in which “I can’t remember” is a recurrent statement for Ros and Guil.

They also try to fill their time by seeking direction and even reaching to the point of arguing which side is which (east or west) saying “I’m trying to establish the direction of the wind... Trace it to its source and it might give us a rough idea of the way we came in... which might give us a rough idea of south, for further reference” (p. 42). They even interchange a lengthy philosophical conversation about art, life and death, but all their struggle and efforts in these ceremonies in an attempt to find some meaning of their life is doomed to end in nothing. The reason for this is that their fate is written in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Even at the end when their time has arrived, they seem ready when Ros says “I’ve had enough. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved”, in which Guil replies that “Well, we’ll know better next time” (p. 89). Whatever ceremonies they

created, they accomplished their purpose in the story by disappearing in which Guil says that it is “the absence of presence... and no applause” (pp. 89-90). Having lived in total incomprehension of their identities, their pasts and their possible and probable actions, they die in equal unenlightenment, helpless and capable only of abandoning their futile struggle for understanding and returning to the non-being from which they came.

### 3.4 Role Playing within the Play: Identity and Ambiguity

Like the ceremony within a play, role playing within a play is an important dramatic device. It is when a character takes on a role different from his usual or true self- that is the doubleness of the portrayal. It adds a third metadramatic layer to the audience’s experience because along with the character’s role itself, the character himself is being played by an actor.

Role playing within a role is a perfect device to delineate character because it does not only reveal who the character is, but also what he wants to be, building up a sense of complexity and ambiguity regarding the character. Therefore, the implementation of role playing within the role raises questions of human identity; by exploring the individual’s concerns in relation to his/her society. Identity is an issue in this complicated society in which many modern drama presents the character as having no true identity at all (Hornby, 1986).

Role playing within the play is effectively used in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Here the metadrama of the play is manifested in Ros and Guil’s dualistic roles, both of which demonstrate the absence of their identities. Ros and Guil taken from *Hamlet* and placed in Stoppard’s play to be allowed to explore their existence, yet their destiny is still controlled by *Hamlet*. They exist in both plays, coming in and off both stages.

Though they seem to play major roles in Stoppard’s stage, possessing some measure of thinking and free speech, yet they are not comfortable in their new roles and feel at loss without being instructed. Being minor characters in *Hamlet*, they are used to being instructed that when they are allowed to make their own decision, they feel lost. It reaches the point where Guil complains saying that “We have been left so much to our own devices” (Stoppard, 2013, p. 47). And because of this confusion, they do not remember their past, only recalling that they were summoned without knowing by whom and for what.

The “reality” of their new world in Stoppard’s play does not function as usual, leaving them bewildered. And because they have difficulty in understanding what they should do, they seem to be bad actors in both plays. When they are engaged in the plot of *Hamlet* in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the actors do not seem to know



how to act, "But we don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves... We don't know how to act... We only know what we're told, and that's little enough..." (p. 48).

Stoppard forces them into doing things or acting on their own, and at the same time, lets them end up playing acts, merely responding to their parts (Fei, 2007). Without their true identities, they face difficulties knowing when they are their genuine self and when they are acting. Not only Ros and Guil are immersed in role playing within the play, but there is also the Player, who is one of the Tragedians. For the player, role playing has become a reality because he is continuously playing a part in some play. In the boat scene, when Guil stabs the Player, the audience and Guil are tricked into believing that the Player is actually killed by Guil, but when the "dead" actor stands up again bowing to the audience and to his fellow tragedians, he makes both Guil and the audience confounded by their discovery that perhaps reality is not always what it seems (Stoppard, 2013). The Player comments on the audience's perception of death onstage as merely an actor's casual exit (p. 84). The audience cannot accept a true death onstage, and thus giving the assumption that the members of the audience are often confused about the nature of truth, as illustrated by their belief as a fictive stage death as true reality (Hinchliffe, 2017).

Stoppard's aim in role plays is not only to assert the nature of reality as deceitful force, but also to assert the role-playing self as a normative element of modern human life where ordinary people just like Ros and Guil are often assigned roles in society to perform, and they have to successfully convince an observing audience of their ability to handle such role. According to Schlueter, Ros and Guil's situation is a "reminiscent of our own acquiescence to the demands of social conventions which constantly force us to assume a fictive identity" (p. 3).

Stoppard's implementation of role playing versus reality reflects that nothing presented onstage is what it seems. Just like Ros and Guil's game of questions and answers where the pursuit of answers will only produce more questions, Stoppard's view on the nature of reality preoccupied by Ros, Guil, and the Player is ambiguous. Stoppard does not give clear answers to the question of what is real and what is fiction. Stoppard has opened his audience up to a world of infinite questions, and therefore a world of infinite possible solutions.

### 3.5 Self-Reference within the Play: Theatrical Reflections

The last device of the metadrama is the self-reference within the play which directly calls attention to the play itself as an imaginative world and thus is strongly metadramatic. It makes the audience examine consciously

what lies behind the play and control their response to the world of drama, since how they perceive the drama is also the means by which they see the world (Fei, 2007).

It is one of the fundamental factors in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Stoppard presents theatricality to remind the audience that they are watching actors playing and presenting the nature of theatrical fiction. An example of self-reference is the Player's self-conscious theatricality that sets the performers apart from the audience like "two sides of the same coin" (Stoppard, 2013, p. 16). The Player says that "We're actors... we're the opposite of people! ... We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade that someone would be watching (pp. 45-46). When the Player separates the tragedians from Ros and Guil, the vision is doubled in which the audience is watching the play, and Ros and Guil in the play are the audience of the tragedians. The Player comprehends his play world very well.

Life onstage is always prewritten, "everyone who is marked for death dies... We follow direction... there is no choice involved" (Stoppard, 2013, pp. 57-58). The Player finds order in art where the script and logic are there. The tragedians construct their own reality by acting, accepting or at least surrendering themselves to the changing reality they are given. This idea echoes Camus' idea of the absurd.

On the other hand, Ros and Guil are bewildered and confused when trying hard to separate life and art, and thus incapable of perceiving the dialectics between the two. Guil's statement "there is an art to the building up of suspense" (p. 7) reflects the suspense between life and art, between reality and fiction, where they have never found a right place that they could feel security and certainty. They both aspire to a story that is well-made "with a beginning, middle and end" (p. 58) like the world they want to be in – a world in good order that they can understand and follow.

They want art to mirror life, so it can reveal significance and meaning which both characters try to seek. Unfortunately, they are given neither order nor meaning. Neither are they made to understand that like the tragedians do. They live in the same play world where the normal rules of probability and expectation are not functioning. The only reality left certain to them as Guil asserts "... the only end is death... if you can't count on that, what can you count on? ... death, it's just a man failing to reappear, that's all... now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real..." (Stoppard, 2013, p. 61).

In the boat scene, where Guil stabs the Player and is convinced that he is dead but to discover that he was fooled when the Player stands up and bows to the

tragedians and audience. To Guil, by killing the Player, he demonstrates the fictional nature of what he believes to be real. The death of the Player is just another fiction. "Reality can be created and acted" (Fei, 2007, p. 105), but what is truly real? The two protagonists begin from nowhere and are still in the middle of nowhere asking "Who are we?" (Stoppard, 2013, p. 89), unable to identify themselves in their failures to understand a world of art and life "which is a kind of integrity" (p. 20).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the main characters of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, demonstrate to us a confused, helpless world of two common persons who have no sense of identity and certainty. With his skillful implementation of metadrama in the play, Stoppard presents us a kaleidoscopic world through which his two protagonists' baffled situation was vividly observed and perceived. By deftly employing metadramatic devices, Stoppard invites audiences to contemplate the blurred boundaries between truth and illusion, performance, and reality.

Through the bewildered journey of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the play confronts themes of absurdity, identity crisis, and the futile quest for meaning in a world devoid of certainty. As Stoppard's protagonists grapple with their existential predicament, the audience is compelled to reflect on their own roles in the intricate theater of life. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* stands as a testament to the power of metadrama to illuminate the human condition, leaving us to ponder the enigmatic dance between fiction and reality long after the final curtain falls.

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