

Absurdity – A Postmodern Indicator in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

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Abstract: Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, arguably his best-known play, is as complex in dramatic structures as it is simple in language form. The article pinpoints and analyzes the postmodern literary and dramatic techniques employed by the author, as well as the postmodern features of the play, especially the absurd and the senseless, based on Albert Camus and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s theories.

Keywords: postmodern; senselessness; absurdity; theory; dramatic technique; dramatic language.

Titlu: „Absurditatea – un indicator postmodern în *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* de Tom Stoppard”

Rezumat: Piesa lui Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, poate cel mai cunoscut text dramatic al său, este caracterizat pe de o parte de o structură dramatică complexă, pe de altă parte de un limbaj uzual. Acest articol își propune să puncteze și să analizeze succint tehnicile literare postmoderne folosite de autor, dar și elementele postmoderne ale operei, mai cu seamă absurdul. Acest demers se bazează pe teoriile lui Albert Camus și Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Cuvinte-cheie: postmodern; absurd; teorie; tehnică dramatică; limbaj dramatic.

Filled with sense in its apparent senselessness, Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, staged for the first time in 1966 at the Edinburgh Festival, is an absurd masterpiece. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, it adds new dimensions to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and that much more meaning to the two secondary characters, who step in and out of the original text quite naturally. The functionalist nature of the two characters, *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*, is evident, thus the play becomes increasingly tragic, even though the language and the situations are hilarious and witty at times. The essential senselessness of the play becomes especially evident in *Guil*’s attempt to overcome his tragic destiny. The characters’ functions in the two plays are reversed, as now *Hamlet* becomes an omnipresent figure that leads the two main characters towards their inevitable death. The purpose of *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*’s existence becomes even clearer when observing that both in the original text, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and in Tom Stoppard’s delightful rendition, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, their destiny of dying is inescapable.

The present paper offers both a comparatist outlook on Shakespeare’s and Stoppard’s plays, and a close reading of the postmodern playwright’s text. It is thus relevant both from the point of view of the postmodern re-working of traditional literary

texts, and from the point of view of literary analysis, highlighting the elements that make Stoppard's text both postmodern and absurd. The originality of the article resides in the close reading of Stoppard's dramatic text and the analysis of several key passages in this text which highlight its postmodern and absurdist character.

Tom Stoppard's play is an embodiment of absurdity, senselessness, and uncertainty; nevertheless, it is, concomitantly, a play filled with sense and the inescapable certainty of death. Postmodern features are evident in the play. Because of its absurd nature and the presence of two main characters that seem to double one another, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has often been compared to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In fact, the two plays are similar in other respects as well: the two characters have a tendency to interrupt or complete each other's sentences, they remain silent for longer periods of time, and they spend their time asking and trying to answer questions ranging from the most senseless to the most profound. If we were to regard intertextuality as a postmodernist feature, the trace becomes evident from the very title, which is explicitly taken from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (act V, scene II). The two plays clash and converge from time to time, as the main action of Stoppard's play is an interwoven onstage – offstage action.

The play within a play is filled with absurd elements, since the two main characters, who were nothing but minor in the original text, try to write their own narrative while talking about the actor's purpose, fate and life, unknowingly awaiting their predestined turn to their own death. The first several pages are an ongoing dialogue between Ros and Guil about how they have been flipping coins that always show heads. The conversation is sprinkled with contemplations on the human destiny:

Ros: Oh no – we've been spinning coins for as long as I can remember.

Guil: How long is that?

Ros: I forget. Mind you – eighty-five times!

Guil: Yes?

Ros: It'll take some beating, I imagine.

Guil: Is that what you imagine? Is that it? No fear?

Ros: Fear?

Guil: Fear! The crack that might fill your head with light!

Ros: Heads... (He puts it in his bag.)"¹

The drudgery and absurdity of existence are masterfully captured in the painful syntagm “for as long as I can remember”, as well as in the obvious absence of time as an objective and regulating force (here the play offers a similar outlook to the one in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where time also becomes diluted and memory essentially unreliable).

In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Albert Camus talks about the limits of reason, among other quintessential issues: “The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said.”², adding that “the impossibility of knowledge is established.”³ Camus' Theory of the Absurd, as presented in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, explores the fundamental human struggle to find meaning in an inherently meaningless and indifferent

¹ Tom, Stoppard, “*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*”, (London: Faber and Faber, 1968/2000), 5, available at http://tomstoppard.narod.ru/pdf/Ros_Guil_Death.pdf

² Albert, Camus, “*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*”, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 21.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

universe. Camus argues that the human desire for rationality and the search for absolute truth clash with the irrationality and ambiguity of the world. He suggests that life's lack of inherent meaning leads to a state of absurdity, where individuals are faced with the challenge of creating their own subjective meanings and finding purpose in a world that lacks objective truth. Camus advocates for embracing this absurdity and living with a sense of defiance, choosing to find happiness and fulfilment despite the inherent absurdity of existence.

The view of life having no meaning, or, at least, not a meaning that can be comprehended by the human rationality, is evident in Stoppard's play. All the efforts of Ros and Guil to comprehend the meaning of their existence in their own play and in Hamlet's lead nowhere. Their endless questions to one another lead to even more endless and clueless answers. What is more, even when they assume they know what they are destined to do, save Hamlet and bring him safely to England, it turns out that their apparent journey as saviors is nothing but the journey towards their own death. The impossibility of knowledge is evident in the play. Ros and Guil find themselves in an impossibility to know what is actually going on, within the play and outside, or what the meaning of their existence is. Their existence is as unreasonable as the world they inhabit.

What Camus points out is that humans are unable to understand, and that, beyond all human efforts, they will die, nonetheless. People shouldn't strive for unity or reason, since these desiderates are unreachable to them. For Camus death is "the most obvious absurdity"¹ but, as opposed to his approach where man needs to revolt against it, Ros and Guil don't fight in the least. They seem to float around, tangled in their own destiny; going along with whatever comes their way, not understanding that their awaiting is non-sense and that death is inescapable. The two characters "struggle to comprehend the complex maneuverings that take place around them as the plot of Hamlet unfolds."² They are continuously trying to understand what is going on, since their action takes place while the action of *Hamlet* is unfolding. That is to say, the reader of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* witnesses what is happening to the two characters during their absence from the plot unfolding in *Hamlet*. This play or inter-play of plots on-stage and off-stage, as well as the intertwining of plots are pillars of constructing a post-modernist play. The situation is interwoven to such an extent that the two characters confuse themselves for one another: "Ros: My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz. (*Guil confers briefly with him.*) (*without embarrassment*) I'm sorry – *his* name's Guildenstern, and I'm Rosencrantz."³

The irony does not only consist of the language, but the situation per se. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot make sense of the theatrical world they apparently live in while being off-stage. The situation confuses them, since everything seems to go beyond their judgment. However, they are continuously trying to comprehend it:

Ros: Hamlet is not himself, outside or in. We have to glean what affects him.

Guil: He doesn't give much away.

Ros: What does, nowadays?

Guil: He's – melancholy.

Ros: Mad."⁴

Not only Hamlet is incomprehensible, but life itself also is. The human mystery equals the mystery of existence, the impossibility of penetrating the sense (or senselessness) of life with one's mind.

¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

² Tim, Brassel, "Tom Stoppard. An Assessment", (London: MacMillan Press, 1985), 38.

³ Tom, Stoppard, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead", (London: Faber and Faber, 1968/2000), 59, available at http://tomstoppard.narod.ru/pdf/Ros_Guil_Death.pdf.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

Coming back to Camus's theory of the absurd – it is very well illustrated in the following excerpt from the play: "Player: There is nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death."¹ The quote underscores the fact that death, too (not only life) are essentially absurd and unconvincing events, and that any attempt at making sense of them with the help of the rational mind is bound to fail. Another postmodern technique is that Stoppard's characters talk about dramatic construction and theatre in the theatre play itself. The Player explains his role in theatre by means of the play within a play. His beliefs about the significance of the actor in conceptualizing death, his description of how death can be unconvincing and meaningless as opposed to well played out and convincing hints towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death at the end of the play. In his *Myth of Sisyphus* Camus analyses several literary characters, from Don Juan to Sisyphus who all share one common ground: absurdity. It is through these characters that Camus highlights the intrinsic longing of humans to comprehend what is beyond the limits of human comprehension. Frustrating as the pointlessness of this endeavor might be, it lies within human nature to attempt to understand the purpose of existence. Ros and Guil could easily be placed on Camus's list of absurd literary characters, as they too try throughout the entire play to grasp the meaning of their purpose in what might seem the most absurd of contexts. They try to get hold of their own destiny unaware of the fact that their destiny is already established within the dramatic structure that renders them completely helpless.

The absurd, nevertheless, is not the only postmodern hallmark of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The play is a pastiche par excellence, as the title indicates, the language is playful and ironic as it is often structured in word games, and the entire play can be read in the notes of parody, especially because of its absurd nature. As the play unfolds the characters' situation becomes more confusing and unclear, as they try to find out the meaning of their presence on and off stage, at times confusing their own identities, and trying to recall why they were asked to come in the first place. In fact, they do not truly exist, and their world is nothing but a theatre play: "the only reality surrounding their confined stage is an on-going performance of *Hamlet*."²

The epitome of the absurd, nevertheless, lies within the two characters' awareness that they are merely playing a role in a play within a play – a powerful inter-textual device. Stoppard's choice of focusing on two minor characters in Shakespeare's play is not mere coincidence or chance. Beyond the postmodern techniques, the author employs the two characters to show that existence cannot be fully comprehended simply by "focusing on the dominant narrative".³ What is more, despite the evident absurdity of the his characters' inescapable destiny, Tom Stoppard manages to create tension in the play: "Stoppard's strategy is to juxtapose scenes in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern operate outside of their roles in *Hamlet* to scenes in which they do enact them; this creates a sense of the possibility of freedom and the tension of the improbability of escape."⁴ In true postmodern fashion, Tom Stoppard destabilizes and deconstructs the

¹ *Ibidem*, 69.

² Josef, Vos, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: Tom Stoppard's artistic failure", *Neophilologus*, 61 (1977): 151.

³ Noorbakhsh, Hooti; Samaneh, Shooshtarian, "A Postmodern Reading of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*", *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol.2, no.1 (2011): 147-162

⁴ Helene, Keyssar-Franke, "The Strategy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*", *Educational Theatre Journal*, 27, pp.85-97, quoted in Noorbakhsh, Hooti; Samaneh, Shooshtarian, "A

concept of reality, since reality and theatrical play are often one in the text. The line between reality and fiction, between off-stage and on-stage is blurred due to the imprecise nature of the characters: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem real spectators who watch the story of *Hamlet* unfold. The characters of *Hamlet* who appear in Stoppard's play are fictional altogether. Then again, Ros and Guil become fictional for the readers and the audience of Stoppard's play. The to and fro between fictional and realistic, between theatrical and mundane are reminiscent of postmodernist literary features.

Talking about the postmodern, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) underlined the "incredulity towards metanarratives".¹ Lyotard is not typically associated with a specific "theory of the absurd" in the same way as Albert Camus. Lyotard is best known for his work on postmodernism and the concept of the "postmodern condition," where he focuses on the decline of grand narratives and the scepticism towards metanarratives. However, some interpretations of Lyotard's work may draw connections to the absurd through his emphasis on the fragmentation of knowledge and the idea that truth is inherently unstable and pluralistic. This perspective can lead to a sense of uncertainty and a questioning of traditional beliefs and structures, echoing elements of existential absurdity.

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a metanarrative itself, not only through its form, not only by being a play within a play, but due to the way the Player talks about the construction of theatre plays in general, thus, of Stoppard's play. Not only does the text construct itself, but it is metatextual since it indirectly explains its own construction both through the words of the Player and through the two narratives that the reader/ spectator witnesses: the background story of *Hamlet* and the story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern taking place before their short existence in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This set-up might appear to be ambiguous, just as the world that the two characters live in is ambiguous, as results from the author's notes at the beginning of the play: "Two Elizabethans passing the time in a place without any visible character".² Talking about the absurd of postmodernism, David J. Wolken, states that "these dynamics (...) congeal into an acute sense of strangeness and alienation from oneself, one's reason and values, and the world at large. In addition (...), the absurd in Camus's thought is offered as a context of contradiction, doubt, ambiguity, and uncertainty."³ This sense of strangeness and being alienated in a world filled with doubt and uncertainty is the very mental and physical setting in Stoppard's play. The sensation of ambiguity in a world without reason is persistent throughout the entire play:

Guil: Are you happy?

Ros: What?

Guil: Content? At ease?

Postmodern Reading of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*", *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol.2, no.1 (2011): 147-162.

¹ Jean-Francois, Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition: A report on knowledge", in *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 10 (Manchester University Press, 1984), 24, available at <https://antilogicalism.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/the-postmodern-condition.pdf>

² Tom, Stoppard, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead", (London: Faber and Faber, 1968/2000), available at http://tomstoppard.narod.ru/pdf/Ros_Guil_Dead.pdf.

³ David J., Wolken, "Toward a Pedagogy of the Absurd: Constitutive Ambiguity, Tension, and the Postmodern Academy," *Journal of Inquiry & Action in Education*, 7 (1), 2016, available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1133544.pdf>, last accessed 9 April 2021

Ros: I suppose so.

Guil: What are you going to do now?

Ros: I don't know. What do you want to do?

Guil: I have no desires. None. There was a messenger... that's right. We were sent for."¹

Purposelessness and ambiguity fill the first pages of the play with a description of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern flipping coins, almost mechanically and for no apparent reason aside from passing the time. The reader/spectator is unaware of any whereabouts, assisting the two characters in their seemingly pointless and empty existence: "Guil gets up but has nowhere to go. He spins another coin over his shoulder without looking at it, his attention being directed at his environment or lack of it."² The two do not know where they are, nor what they are supposed to do. Their existence and purpose as Hamlet's friends in Shakespeare's play is the only reason they knew and understood. The new context of them being independent characters is confusing.

The title itself, which is a quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the death of Hamlet's two friends is announced, adds significance to their roles in both *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The immediate reaction of the latter's readers is to assume that their deaths carry a more profound meaning in *Hamlet*, which will be brought to light in Stoppard's play. To the reader/spectator's surprise, however, the two character's death becomes even more absurd and devoid of meaning. When Hamlet discovers the note saying that he should be killed in England, he exchanges it with another one which says that Ros and Guil should be murdered. The saviors become victims and the victim becomes their executioner, the friends die by their friend's hand, which is quintessentially absurd and senseless. The reader's understandable expectation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will have their own story to tell, that their frugal appearance in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is more significant than it seems, is unfulfilled, since Guil and Ros's death remains their fate. The reader's experience might therefore be frustrating when at the end of Stoppard's play it dawns upon the reader/spectator that the two main characters were condemned from the very beginning.

Guildenstern and Rosencrantz's identities are actually non-identities within an ambiguous, uncertain space. The two do not know where they are while not in the context of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The two main characters fall in line with what Camus called "the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe."³ What Camus refers to here is the same impossibility we mentioned earlier on in the article, the one of the rational human mind to make sense of the universe or of human existence. Their questions to one another echo senselessly and remain, in their essence, unanswered. The vast majority of the play consists of an absurd dialogue between Ros and Guil, where the latter seems to play the less contemplative double of the former. Since their death becomes clear from the beginning, their presence becomes absence in Shakespeare's play and the two concepts become interchangeable, thus converting their presence into something quite unsure and senseless. At the end of Stoppard's play all characters are dead, including Hamlet, which makes Rosencrantz and

¹ Tom, Stoppard, "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*", (London: Faber and Faber, 1968/2000), 7. available at http://tomstoppard.narod.ru/pdf/Ros_Guil_Death.pdf

²*Ibid.*, 2.

³ Albert, Camus, "*The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*", (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 6, in Albert Camus, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/#LimRea>, last accessed 9 April 2021.

Guildestern's death even more absurd and futile: "[...] upstage, arranged in the approximate positions last held by the dead Tragedians, the tableau of court and corpses which is the last scene of Hamlet. That is: the King, Queen, Laertes, and Hamlet all dead."¹

Yet another post-modern feature of the play is its simplicity in form and language. Even though Ros and Guil's dialogue is often playful, both questions and answers are usually short and tossed back at one another in a manner that reminds one of a sports game. Question and reply come shooting one after the other. The dialogues are often metatextual, aside from being play-like, as they often describe their own dialogues or lack of words and dramatic pauses. Quite frequently the two are unable to utter their thoughts or explain what is happening, possibly because of the fact that they are clueless most of the time:

*“Guil: You know what to do?
Ros: What?
Guil: Are you stupid?
Ros: Pardon?
Guil: Are you deaf?
Ros: Did you speak?
Guil: Not now – “²*

There is lots of miscommunication in Ros and Guils's communication. Stoppard uses language both as a communicational tool and barrier. Language can be meaningful or devoid of any meaning in the play. Nevertheless, language is indispensable and the only tool that can help them communicate and reach a conclusion, no matter how absurd:

*“Guil: Ah. (to Ros) Why?
Ros: Exactly.
Guil: Exactly what?
Ros: Exactly why.
Guil: Exactly why what?
Ros: What?
Guil: Why?
Ros: Why what, exactly?
Guil: Why is he mad?
Ros: I don't know.”³*

In his book *Myth of Sisyphus* ⁴ Camus uses the example of well-known literary characters, to point out that humans must, without feeling resignation, come to terms with the fact that destiny is inescapably unforgiving. On the contrary, the human capability to

¹ Tom, Stoppard, *“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead”*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1968/2000), 117, available at http://tomstoppard.narod.ru/pdf/Ros_Guil_Dead.pdf

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴ Albert, Camus, *“The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays”*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 54, in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/#LimRea>, last accessed 9 April 2021.

try to overcome the limits of its own mind and to grasp some sort of understanding is worth admiring. Ros and Guil also find themselves in a no man's land of the absurd, victims of their own destiny. They might not be perfectly aware of the fact that their death at the end is a certainty, however, their trials and, at times, philosophical dialogues on their purpose(lessness) in that no man's land shows that they cannot and do not want to escape their destiny, no matter how frustrating that might be. Their identity is just as uncertain as their context, since they are both actors and spectators of the plays they are, in one way or another, parts of. It is the Player, once again bearing an important role in clarifying the reader/spectator, who recognizes Ros and Guil's status as both actors and spectators:

"Player: (...) I recognize you at once.

Ros: And who are we?

*Player: - as fellow artists. (...) For some of us it is performance, for others, patronage. They are two sides of the same coin (...), the same side of two coins. Don't clap to loudly. It's a very old world."*¹

Conclusion

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is extremely reminiscent of the theatre of the absurd, with evident sparks of postmodern drama. By carefully extracting characters and situations from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Stoppard created a humoristic and absurd pastiche about two minor characters who play baffling word games and ever more confusing games tossing coins, trying to pass the undefined time in an undefined place awaiting their death. Characters and readers/spectators alike become entangled as the plot advances and becomes more complex in its absurdity. The only lucid character who seems to possess greater understanding is the Player. He already knows and understands Ros and Guil's destiny when he recognizes them as "fellow artists" and lectures them on the confusing nature of human existence, indirectly preparing the two for the futility of their ending. The absurd is yet again present in the play, since the Player is, beyond his knowledge and wisdom, willing to sell his actors for bodily pleasures. Nevertheless, confusing as it may seem, he is a true admirer of theatre and has a keen understanding of the actors' complex purpose, as results from this most striking portrayal: "Player: We're actors... We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade; that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was. [...] Even then, habit and a stubborn trust that our audience spied upon us from behind the nearest bush [...]. No one came forward. [...] The silence was unbearable."²

Present in Stoppard's play and only partially present in Shakespeare's, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* play a game of on-stage – off-stage that renders their existence even more confusing. This fiction within fiction is yet another postmodern element of Stoppard's play, alongside the narrative and metanarrative of the play, that the two main/minor characters are unable to make their own. It is up to the reader/spectator to make sense of their destiny and back-story. The play is self-constructive, a metatextual theatre that encapsulates the meaninglessness of the postmodern existence which is characterized by senselessness and absurdity.

¹ Tom, Stoppard, *"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead"*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1968/2000), 13,

available at http://tomstoppard.narod.ru/pdf/Ros_Guil_Dead.pdf

² *Ibid.*, 56.

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