

A Postmodernist Reading of Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead"

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Abstract: This study presents a postmodernist reading of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Although both modern and postmodern tendencies are traceable in Stoppard's dramatic achievements, the present study strives to analyze some vivid postmodernist features in his most controversial play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, as a model of postmodernism in theatre. The selected play will be analyzed in accordance with the specific concepts and theories which are more apparent in Stoppard's dramatic achievements including Lyotard's theory of the end of meta-narratives and also the theory of language game, Fredric Jameson's consumer society, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and Jean Baudrillard's simulation. As an example of postmodernist play, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* seems to embody ambiguity, discontinuity, disintegration, pluralism, uncertainty and deconstruction, which are the most outstanding features of postmodern works. Thus, the researchers make an attempt to consider his dramatic work as an example of postmodernist theatre and to apply these postmodern theories to his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Key words: Deconstruction; Difference; Intertextuality; Language game; Meta-narratives; Postmodernism; Simulation

INTRODUCTION

The study starts with a very brief introduction of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which is followed by its postmodern analysis.

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead”

As the first of many triumphs in the theatre, in 1967 after the first performance of his most controversial play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the playwright Tom Stoppard was asked: "What is it about?" With a postmodernist and ironic sensibility, he immediately replied, "It's about to make me a very rich man". (Nadel, 2002, p. 193)

As Mason puts it:

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The play takes its inspiration from Hamlet and makes "heroes" of two 'bitpart' characters whose narrative is already "written" for them despite their attempts to create their own narrative and break free of the play within-a-play (Hamlet) that has created them and whose own play within-a-play becomes part of their own text. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* deals with chance and fate and questions of acting and reality before sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their predestined textual deaths once again. (2007, p. 318)

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard, therefore, presents his heroes as "two likable but utterly confused characters, engaged in a perpetual struggle to comprehend the complex maneuverings that taking place around them as the plot of *Hamlet* unfolds." (Brassell, 1985, p. 38-39)

Neither of them knows the *Hamlet* plot and as they appear on stage, here, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, when they are off-stage in Shakespeare's play, it is left up to them to make sense of the orders they are given and, in this way, the plot of the play can be divided into two categories as "on-stage" and "off-stage" sections (p. 39). Trying to make sense of their confusing situation, the two characters often confuse their names since they do not know for sure who they are, where they come from and what they are supposed to do. Rosencrantz is confused when he introduces himself as Guildenstern to the Player:

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. (Stoppard, 1967, p. 22—henceforth Stoppard)

They lack information and while being off-stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are portrayed as two fools in a complicated world of theatre that is beyond their understanding and constantly question everything they experience in their nonsense world to give order to their confusing situation and handle the unknown and complicated character of Hamlet:

ROS: He talks to himself, which might be madness.
GUIL: If he didn't talk sense, which he does.
ROS: Which suggests the opposite.
PLAYER: Of what? (Stoppard, p. 67)

The substance of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, then, grows out of a painfully isolated existence in which, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are nothing more than doomed characters with no power over their own futures, imprisoned in their roles and the confines of the shared theatrical constructions.

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” as an Exemplifier of Postmodern Discourse

In Stoppard's writing there has always been a departure from conventional norms of character, dialogue and narrative. Moreover, the elements of pastiche, irony, parody, word games, vaudeville, burlesque, self-reflexivity and absence of a frame of reference have become hallmarks of his work. These features, which are some of the basic traces of postmodern literature, altogether have given Stoppard's work a postmodernist atmosphere.

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* suggests so many interesting postmodern elements. As the play unfolds, the situation of characters becomes more complex and ambiguous, showing a degree of "semantic indeterminacy that is the frequent hallmark of postmodernist aesthetic production". (Murphy, 1992, p. 187)

Since postmodernist characters are rather caricatures of characters that seem to be out of time and out of place, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in this type of theatrical game, become restless, unstable and childish. Unable to remember their names and the reason for which they are summoned, while searching their identities and their past in a postmodern mood, they move to and fro in the small space of the stage – that is their entire world – like animals in a cage. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; as Vos (1977, p. 151) believes “no actual world exists offstage; the only reality surrounding their confined stage is an on-going performance of Hamlet. Thus, all of their world's a stage, and the production being performed is Shakespeare's tragedy”.

The emphasis on the intellectual uncertainty and intertextuality (besides *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T.S. Eliot and *Waiting for Godot*, a play by Samuel Beckett about impotence and despair, view of life as hopeless, one can trace the longing of Pirandello's characters in *Six Characters in Search of An Author* to determine their narrative in a new context) brings Stoppard's work close to the later phases of postmodernism. Emphasizing the play's strong intertextuality, Vos believes:

No doubt about it, Stoppard forages the tradition for various elements of his plays: to Shakespeare for his characters and general framework, including several full scenes; to Pirandello for the theatrical concept of giving the characters self-conscious awareness of their role-playing; and to Beckett for the interchangeability of the two non-characters as well as many of their routines. (p. 150)

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard makes advantage of an iconic text as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, presents his text from the perspective of Shakespeare's two minor characters whose narratives are already "written" while their attempt to break free of the play-within-play (*Hamlet*) is fruitless. It is Stoppard who plays upon them to represent his own purposes and to demonstrate that the human experience cannot be fully understood by focusing on the dominant narrative. In this way, his use of *Hamlet* is in some ways a postmodern gesture. As Keyssar-Franke observes,

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. (1975, p. 87)

What Stoppard does in the play is similar to Lyotard's "performativity". By substituting the universal truths by temporary ones, Stoppard tries to replace the universal stages of performance by local ones in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Other aspects of postmodernism such as philosophizing, speculating and agonizing by Hamlet over grand issues (such as meaning of life, death and religion) are treated in the play as farce through the modes of satire, irony, burlesque and parody. On the other hand, the undecidability, complexity and openness of the text in exploring new traces of ideas make the play pluralistic which liberate the text from the dominant logocentric thought and represent its postmodernity.

As further pointers to demonstrate the postmodern condition of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are the depiction of reality as a game or "spectacle", the inability of language for the sake of a secure meaning and communication and the destabilization of the main character's identity. Regarding the same idea, in Corballis's view;

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are portrayed as an extension of the audience and therefore as 'real' people; the Hamlet characters, by virtue of the onstage audience (added to the offstage one) are made to appear all the more stagey, 'clockwork' and 'unreal'. (1984, p. 36)

Although Stoppard does not believe to be a postmodern playwright and, in the same way, his plays are examples of postmodernist dramatic literature – for there is no definite definition of what postmodernism is, perhaps – and since the researchers do not intended to portray him as a postmodernist literary man in the same way, but to show possible postmodernist features in his plays, after a deep analysis of his most controversial play, the following parts will present *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in the framework of postmodernist interpretations.

RESISTING INTERPRETATION

Lytord very pertinently asserts that:

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher, the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules and cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or

to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done (1984, p. 81).

Resistance is not only possible, but also actualized in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, however, it is reflected in the play under the veil of other strategies which are as follows:

AMBIGUITY

Since a text, which is written by a postmodern writer, or the work produced by a postmodern artist, as a means of verbalizing the chaotic nature of modern life, "is not governed by Pre-established rules" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81); it is filled with ambiguities and thus, it creates what may have termed as the "Theatre of the Unknowing" (Acheson, 1993, p. 118).

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, from the very beginning, the physical world that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern inhabit is ill-defined and ambiguous. The playwright's first note concerning the play's setting is as follows: "Two Elizabethans passing the time in a place without any visible character" (Stoppard, 1967, p. 7-henceforth Stoppard).

The title characters begin the play with the simple activity of flipping coins as an amusement and after five pages of dialogue, keeping the audience/reader in the ambiguous world of the two, information about the duo's place and purpose in this world is revealed. Consider the following stage direction:

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. (Stoppard, p. 12)

Notably, this "environment or lack of it", corresponds with the fact that this "no man's land" might be seen to roughly correspond to the place that Ros and Guil find themselves when they are not guided by Shakespeare's text since, "this opening scenes from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* were not fully described by Shakespeare" (Jernigan, 2008, p. 164).

With no immediate explanation of where and why, by specifically beginning the play in such an ethereal setting, then, Stoppard immediately establishes a mood of mystery and ambiguity.

ROS: Took the very word out of my mouth.

GUIL: You'd be lost for words.

(Stoppard, p. 62)

COMPLEXITY

Every sentence of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* has multiple meanings, all of which make sense depending on the angle from which the case is considered. It is true even about the title of the work which refers to various meanings. Huston nicely comments on the possible meaning of the title *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*:

The play's title is a quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet. In Shakespeare, the announcement comes across as an unfortunate mishap that is overshadowed by many other, more tragic, deaths. However, when repeated in Stoppard's play the little line picks up gravity, bringing significance to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths even if only by the fact that it recognizes the absurdity of them. (1991, pp. 422-426)

Huston also notes the ambiguity of the title which adds to the complexity of the play itself.

When the quote becomes a title, the tense becomes ambiguous. Read one way, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could be thought of as characters who have no lives of their own in Shakespeare, but who are given a full existence by Stoppard. Examined from a

different perspective, the title could imply that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doomed from the start, destined to meet their fate whether or not they deserve it. (ibid)

DIFFÉRANCE

Derrida, who has often been claimed by friends and foes as "prototypical postmodernist", introduced the concept of "différance" which lies at the center of "deconstruction" and suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity and plurality of meaning. Consequently, unlike modernist epistemological poetics which focus on the repetition and uniformity and thus "rewards interpretation", *différance*, or substitution is congenous with ontological poetics of postmodernism and therefore, "frustrates interpretation" (Nicol, 2009, p. 60).

In his theatrical achievements, and especially in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard never provides his reader or spectator with a definite, logocentric text with a decidable meaning. By applying *différance* rather than repetition in his work, Stoppard constantly challenges his reader to become actively involved in the text. Supporting the same idea, in an interview with Hudson, Itzin, Trussler, when he is asked about an intended message or philosophy to be found in the play, a kind of accurate interpretation, Stoppard replied:

It's difficult for me to endorse or discourage particular theories – I mean, I get lots of letters from students, and people who are doing the play [*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*], asking me questions about it, which seem to expect a yes-or-no answer. It is a mistake to assume that such questions have that kind of answer. I personally think that anybody's set of ideas which grows out of the play has its own validity... (qtd. in Bareham, 1990, p. 67)

This lack of determinate meaning, which is in agreement with post-structuralism deconstruction, creates the ontological instability which is dominant in postmodern works.

TOWARD DELOGOCENTRISM

Derrida, as one of those twenty-century philosophers who did research on the relationship between language and reality, in his texts, *Writing and difference* and *Of Grammatology*, denied the stability of signification system and the pre-supposed stability between them and in this way, he argued the validity of "logocentrism". According to Derrida (1978), there is no pre-existent truth, "transcendental signifier" or "logos" to which one can appeal to find meaning. His "deconstruction" as Ulmann maintains, "affirms the importance of ambivalence, of the relation *between* terms rather than the choice of one term over another" (1999, p. 23).

Derrida's delogocentrism denies the possibility of finding transparency in language and affirms that "the central signified, the originality, or transcendental signified is revealed to be never absolutely present outside a system of differences, and this absence of an ultimate signified extends the domain and play of signification to infinity. (qtd. in lodge and Wood, 2000, p. 246).

Stoppard, like most modern and postmodern authors, unlike metaphysical philosophers whose entire effort is not to face this multiplicity of meaning or ambiguity of a written text, makes advantage of this potentiality to release himself from the boundaries of language and text.

In his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, "the metaphysics of presence" loses its validity for, according to the title, the characters are declared "dead" from the beginning. And they should be understood by either the reader or the audience in their absence. This ambivalence of presence/absence, and the remoteness of truth, which make the accessibility of the signified impossible, contribute a lot to Derridean idea that no sacred -text and no author-God could exist in postmodern thought and literature.

BINARY OPPOSITIONS

“Postmodern theories are highly doubtful about endeavors to establish or comprehend society on the basis of universal values, methods or ideas”. (Hooti and Shooshtarian, 2010, p. 73)

Stoppard's tendency toward doubt and irony has weakened the reader's search for some sense of coherence and stability in his characters' lives. Using binary oppositions highlights the lack of coherency of his dramatic achievements.

Two marginal characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who died in that context, now enter a new context or a new game designed by Stoppard called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. According to the title, they are already dead, from the beginning. Their fate cannot be changed, since "it was written". Although Stoppard's context engages them in another game, but it cannot save them from their pre-determined death.

PLAYER: Lying down. (He laughs briefly and in a second has never laughed in his life.)

There's a design at work in all art surely you know that? Events must play themselves out aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

GUIL: And what' that, in this case?

PLAYER: It never varies---we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.

GUIL: Marked?

PLAYER: Between "just desserts" and "tragic irony" we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent. Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly go when things have got about as bad as they reasonably get. (He switches on a smile.)

GUIL: Who decides?

PLAYER (switching off his smile): Decides? It is written.

He turns away. GUIL grabs him and spins him back violently.

(Unflustered.) Now if you're going to be subtle, we'll miss each other in the dark. I'm referring to oral tradition. So to speak.

GUIL releases him.

We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions---there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means. (Stoppard, p. 80)

Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are present in Stoppard's text, they are absent as far as their previous death in Shakespeare's text is concerned. By eliminating the binary opposition of presence/absence, Stoppard deconstructs the philosophical discourse that presence helps the perception of reality. Stoppard not only invalidates the mimetic theories of theater and emphasizes the fictionality of the genre, but also discards the idea that dramatic performance should communicate a metanarrative or have a share in it. He demonstrates the inability of any dramatic act of presenting unchangeable truths or creating finality in performance. Guildenstern, being perplexed by the Player's explanations about the arbitrariness of their situation innocently asks: "Operating on two levels, are we?" (Stoppard, p. 71)

Moreover, their present/absent condition deprives the audience from experiencing them "live" on the stage and magnifies the difficulty of understanding or interpreting them. Since we learn to identify everything in terms of binary oppositions and these paradoxical creatures cannot be restricted in such definitions; the metaphysics of presence is deconstructed in their dual absence/presence. The characters who discuss their own death cannot be present; still the epistemological and ontological questions that engage their mind are familiar to both the audience and the reader.

These levels of reality and fictionality cannot be separated either. Stoppard violates the illusion/reality making rules to create a truth that has no existence other than onstage. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are only character/actors and their presence is an arbitrary one or a non-presence. Even the player recognizes them as "fellow artists" and emphasizes that, "We have played to bigger, of course, but quality counts for something" (Stoppard, p. 22). Rosencrantz, irritated by being called a "fellow artist", objects that, "I thought we were Gentlemen" (ibid). The Player, who does not differentiate between the two worlds of

reality and fiction, emphasizes that, "For some of us it is performance, for other patronage. They are two sides of the same coin" (ibid).

Through the use of these techniques – ambiguity, complexity and difference – Stoppard succeeded in showing the "inadequacy of meaningful narrative" which is the outcome of what Lyotard calls "deligitimation", the process in which metanarratives lose their power to legitimize discourse.

HAMLET GAMES—STOPPARD WITH LYOTARD

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) and Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) have at least two things in common. As Buse says "Neither is the first work of its author, but both first brought their authors wider prominence" (2001, p. 50). In comparison to other Stoppard's experts such as *Arcadia* and *Travesties*, with strong exegesis and scholarly apparatus, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, tends to represent the less dense literary and philosophical allusiveness.

Efficient critics would sneer at Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, for its accessibility or its lack of rigor which points the reader, instead, to *Libidinal Economy* or *The Differend*. It is probably true that "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *The Postmodern Condition* constitute 'lightweight' Stoppard and Lyotard" (ibid).

What both *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *The Postmodern Condition*, take advantage of, turns out to be "protagonists". The main idea of Stoppard's play goes around two minor figures from *Hamlet* as attendant lords, who are patently *not* protagonists, summoned to 'glean what afflicts' Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, and finally being put to their death in England through Hamlet's own machinations. As Buse elaborates on the same idea; "If Hamlet is the very imprint of the modern hero, tormented by the vagaries of subjectivity, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* may be models for a postmodern heroism, which is of course no heroism at all" (p. 51).

Regarding the same idea, in *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard puts forward the claim that the "great hero" of previous epochs is no longer a credible figure in the postmodern period which we currently inhabit and the time Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was first staged. As Lyotard puts it, this loss of the hero goes hand in hand with the decline of several other main stays associated with narrative: "the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (1984, p. xxiv).

With slight modifications, Lyotard's insights in *The Postmodern Condition* can be made to apply to the situation of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, those non-protagonists, imprisoned in a narrative which is not their own and, in this way, they appear to lack all the narrative "functors" Lyotard mentions:

Rather than facing great dangers, they gamble and play word games; rather than embarking on great voyages, they remain static as the action of Hamlet swirls past them; and rather than seeking great goals, they complain of lacking any real 'direction'. If anything ails them, they could be said to be suffering from the postmodern condition. (qtd. in Buse, 2001, p. 51)

Since one of the main characteristics of the postmodern condition is a disinclination to mourn the loss of narrative and its functors, to follow Lyotard, then, suffering, is probably the wrong term. The period of mourning, as Lyotard says, is over.

INCREDIBILITY TOWARD METANARRATIVES

In his discussion on *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard introduces two forms of metanarratives: *Speculation* and *Emancipation*.

The speculative grand narrative, as Malpas puts it "charts progress through the development of knowledge as individual ideas and discoveries build towards a systematic whole that reveals the truth of human existence under the auspices of a particular metanarrative" (2005, p. 37). For the speculative grand narrative, "True knowledge . . . is comprised of reported statements [that] are incorporated into a metanarrative of a subject that guarantees their legitimacy" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 35). In other words, "the speculative grand narrative charts the progress and development of knowledge towards a systematic truth: a grand unified theory in which our place in the universe will be understood" (Malpas, 2005, p. 38).

The grand narrative of emancipation, on the other hand, "sees the development of knowledge as driving human freedom as it emancipates humanity from mysticism and dogma through education" (ibid). Knowledge, on this account, "is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 36).

Lyotard's idea on "defunct grand narratives" does not believe on the total annihilation of the grand narratives in the postmodern condition but the fact that these grand narratives are treated with "incredulity". This is certainly the case in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as "the play flirts with both grand narratives [speculation and emancipation] as possible trajectories for the hapless courtiers but ultimately dismisses their validity". (Buse, 2001, p. 55)

Speculation, in particular, is Guildenstern's favorite activity as he engages in pseudo-philosophizing activities from the very beginning in an attempt to gain his bearings. After seventy-six consecutively tossed coins, all landed on their "heads", Guildenstern resorts to the proven mathematical formula known as the law of probability:

GUIL: ... The law of averages, if I have got this right, means that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air for long enough they would land on their tails about as often as they would land on their

ROS: Heads. (He picks up the coin.)

GUIL: Which even at first glance does not strike one as a particularly rewarding speculation, in either sense, even without the monkeys.

(Stoppard, p. 13)

In Lyotard's view science is another metanarrative or discourse, which gives its own explanation for overcoming fear. Although Guildenstern himself emphasizes that, "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear" (Stoppard: 13), he tries to explain their situation with this language because it brings a "kind of harmony and a kind of confidence" (Stoppard, p. 15).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are consistently in the dark about the goings-on around them, quite literally at the beginning of Act Three on the boat.

GUIL: ... We have been left so much to our own devices after a while one welcomes the uncertainty of being left to other people's.

PLAYER: Uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special.

He makes to leave again. GUIL loses his cool.

GUIL: But for God's sake what are we supposed to do?!

PLAYER: Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn.

GUIL: But we don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don't know how to act.

PLAYER: Act natural. You know why you're here at least.

GUIL: We only know what we're told, and that's little enough. And for all we know it isn't even true.

(Stoppard, p. 66)

The grand narrative of *emancipation* also makes a cameo appearance in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. At the end of Act Two, Rosencrantz makes a move to leave the stage who confronts Guildenstern's look of admonition. Escaping the stage, in fact, is an action neither of them has appeared capable of heretofore:

ROS: He [Hamlet] said we can go. Cross my heart.

GUIL: I like to know where I am. Even if I don't know am, I like to know that. If we go there's no knowing.

ROS: No knowing what?

GUIL: If well ever come back.

ROS: We don't want to come back.

GUIL: That may very well be true, but do we want to go?

ROS: Well be free.

GUIL: I don't know. It's the same sky.

ROS: We've come this far.

He moves towards exit. GUIL follows him.

And besides, anything could happen yet.

They go.

(Stoppard, p. 95)

As mentioned earlier, Lyotard, after describing his two forms of grand narratives as *speculation* and *emancipation*, does not say that they vanish altogether in a postmodern condition but, as he explains, they are treated with "incredulity". This is exactly what happens in Stoppard's play:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead does not do away with Lyotard's two grand narratives; on the contrary, it invokes them knowingly: both speculation and emancipation are mooted as possible teleologies. The play seems to be saying that, bankrupt though they may be, grand narrative still haunts us: we turn to them as a familiar and automatic language. In this instance, though, they are only resurrected to be mocked, since there is no question that they offer credible solutions to the dilemmas faced by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They are, in effect, quoted, ironically and playfully, as reminders to the audience of what is no longer really believed. As far as stories go, they are just two more among many. (Buse, 2001, p. 57)

This suspicion of legitimate, strongly, confirms Lyotard's claim about the postmodern moment in which the traditional narrative of legitimation is no longer operative and the postmodern, in this way, is represented by a "crisis in legitimation". Lyotard says that the postmodern condition is as much a stronger to disenchantment as it is to the blind positivity of delegitimation. Where, after the matanarratives can legitimacy reside? As Buse elaborates on, " After the demystification of the Bard, this is a question Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must set out to answer" (p. 60).

Regarding their legitimation, there is a point to be considered. Incapable of fashioning a coherent story about themselves, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to be handicapped by their limited roles in the master plot – *Hamlet* and as a result, they never get much further than the most abrupt and inconclusive of narratives.

ROS: That's it---pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters
--- shouts --- What's all the row about?! Clear Off! --- But then he called our names. You remember that --- this man woke us up.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: We were sent for.

GUIL: Yes.

(Stoppard: 15)

There are many hesitation and pauses, marked by dashes, in Rosencrantz's account how they arrived where they are, to indicate the idea that even this very basic rendering is by no means secure. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are constitutionally unable to give a reply to the question: "What is your story?". This has clear consequences for their self-legitimation, since, "dysfunction in narration means a failure to locate themselves in space and time" (Buse, 2001, p. 61). The fascination of the play with such a predicament in legitimation is what marks it out as postmodern in Lyotard's sense of the term.

Although it has traditionally done so, for Lyotard, legitimation need not come through narrative. These days, however, it is more likely to arise from the immediate circumstances of two interlocutors than through any outside grantee.

In Lyotard's words:

That is what the postmodern world is about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction. (1984, p. 41)

LANGUAGE GAMES

According to Sarup(1988) Language games are indeed the social bond which holds society together, and he characterizes social interaction primarily in terms of making a move in a game, playing a role and taking a part in various discrete language games. In these terms, he characterizes the self as the interaction of all the language games in which it participates. Lyotard's model of a postmodern society is thus one in which one struggles within various language games in an agonistic environment characterized by diversity and conflict.

This kind of imposing and the practice of language game is completely reviewed by Stoppard in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Although they struggle with narrative legitimation, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are rather good at all forms of games, many of them linguistic. In the course of the play they are seen as different kinds of players: betting on tossed coins, playing the game of questions, playing guess which hand the coin is in, role-playing the parts of Hamlet and the English King, and of each other, for that matter.

ROS: We could Play at questions.
GUIL: What good would that do?
ROS: Practice!
GUIL: Statement! one-love.
ROS: Cheating!
GUIL: How?
ROS: I hadn't started yet.
GUIL: Statement. Two-love
ROS: Are you counting that?
GUIL: What?
ROS: Are you counting that?
GUIL: Foul! No repetitions Three-love First game to...
ROS: I'm not going to play if you're going to be like that.
GUIL: Whose serve?
ROS: Hah?
GUIL: Foul! No grunts. Love-one.
ROS: Whose go?
GUIL: Why?
ROS: Why not?
(Stoppard, p. 42)

In fact, compared with the text of *Hamlet*, which guides them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern come across as extraordinarily flexible for, all they do when not participating in *Hamlet* is play one form of game or another and, as mentioned before, most of these games are linguistic. Even tragedy is a game for them:

GUIL: Exactly, it's a matter of asking the right questions and giving away as little as we can. It's a game. (Stoppard, p. 27)

Unfortunately, it is a game Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not very good at. In any case, while they are playing, the master plot is not important: the narrative stops and the gaming itself takes priority and, as Lyotard says: "games legitimate themselves – they have a set of self-contained rules and the onus is on the players to invent within those rules or bend them as best they can". (qtd. in Buse,2001, p. 63) There is, of

course, a character in the play called the Player, but it is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who display the greatest skill.

It might be argued that;

Lyotard's emphasis on language games as constitutive of the social pushes material reality too far in to the background, that games, after all are only games in the long run and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must already occupy a privileged position in order to play. (ibid)

While Lyotard is very much a post-structuralist in his tendency to see reality as constituted by language, rather than the other way around, he does not overlook the possibility that someone might refuse to play a language game or might try silence another player. He calls such an event a "terror" and says that: "It lies out of the realm of language games, because the efficacy of such force is based entirely on the threat to eliminate the opposing player, not on making a better move on him". (p. 46)

Supporting this idea, although it might be an exaggeration, one might think of *Hamlet* (or Hamlet) exerting just this sort of terror on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for not only refusing to play, he also eliminates the opponents. And in the same way, their deaths are just another move in the game called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

MINIMALISM: A BRIDGE TO POSTMODERNISM

Minimalism origins, as a specific movement in arts, lie in early 20th-century modernist experiments with form. As a continuation of such strategies in late-modernist forms, its use by contemporary writers is often interpreted as a bridge to postmodern art practices. As Mason puts it:

Minimalist texts are often constituted by fragments that have little narrative continuity even if they develop a consistency of thematic tropes ... The exhaustion of language and narrative is often an important feature of minimalism, ... where enervation, repetition, and disconnection (textual, cultural, and cognitive) are significant tropes. Minimalism is particularly concerned with the reduction of the self and consciousness ... In this case the production of a text is an attempt to hold the self together, an attempt that fails because of the necessity of using language which is the cause of fragmentation in the first place. (2007, p. 210)

Although may not be as devoted a minimalist as Beckett, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* can be characterized by an economy with words and a focus on surface description. He certainly does not mince words, and as most minimalist authors do, he avoids adverbs and prefers allowing context to dictate meaning. Consequently, as explained before, readers are expected to take an active role in the creation of the play's story before them based on oblique hints, rather than reacting to directions from an author. There are sometimes pages and pages where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern swap phrases that are just a few words long:

ROS: Took the very words out of my mouth.

GUIL: You'd be lost for words.

ROS: You'd be tongue-tied.

GUIL: Like a mute in a monologue.

ROS: Like a nightingale at a Roman feast.

GUIL: Your diction will go to pieces.

ROS: Your lines will be cut.

GUIL: To dumbshows.

ROS: And dramatic pauses.

GUIL: You'd be lost for words.

(Stoppard, pp. 92-101)

Another important feature of minimalism (and also postmodernism) is silence.

Silence often appears to be the only response to the inability to express either reality or the self as meaningful unities. This means that minimalism is often concerned with absences, negativity and the unspoken, with silences or ellipses in a text forming an important generative principle, specifically in the paradox that minimalism both desires and fears silence. (Mason, 2007, pp. 210-211)

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, unspoken moments, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not able to express either the reality reside in their mind, or their own self and identity, are countless. In Act Two, for instance, by the time they appear to see Claudius, they are not sure what to do. Their dialogue is just silence and pause:

GUIL: Well...
ROS: Quite...
GUIL: Well, then...
ROS: Quite, quite. (Nods with spurious confidence.) Seek him out. (Pause.) Etcetera...
GUIL: Quite...
ROS: Well... (Small pause.)
(Stoppard: 86)

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, as you can see, repetition – using the same few elements, words, phrases or even events over and over, within a text, again in different ways so that they gain more and more resonance and meaning – is also a trademark of minimalists. Besides repetitions in words and phrases, there are certain events repeated in the play: Rosencrantz looks under the Player's shoes twice. In the same way, in two sections of the play, Guildenstern attacks the Player and, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern act out the England scenario twice. In fact, because of the dress rehearsal, much of the late action happens twice, once in the play and once in reality.

THE FAILURE OF LANGUAGE

Although mass communication is one of the outstanding features of the postmodern era, language, as one of the main means of communication, has lost its traditional significance. So, it is no longer a transparent means to transfer meaning and understanding and it is what *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* clearly represents.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, some of the conversations indicate Stoppard's disbelief on language, since, instead of creating a meaningful communication it places a limit on what people can express. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, struggling with the same plight, often play with words.

ROS: What are you playing at?
GUIL: Words, words. They're all we have to go on.
(Stoppard, p. 41)

They must confine their feelings within the boundaries of words; instead, they are simply goofing around, like two kids throwing a ball back and forth. They pun off each other's words without much intention of moving their dialogue toward a set purpose. In these parts of the play, Stoppard, consciously, mocks language for its failure to express what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are thinking, for words cannot exactly capture their thought, instead, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear ridiculous.

ROS: Rhetoric! Game and match! (Pause.) Where's it going to end?
GUIL: That's the question.
ROS: It's all questions.
GUIL: Do you think it matters?
ROS: Doesn't it matter to you?
GUIL: Why should it matter?
ROS: What does it matter why?
(Stoppard, p. 44)

At the same time, however, the consistently poor communication in the play seems to hint at a broader breakdown in understanding between the characters that may help send the play into its tragic spiral.

Language is sometimes seen as an empowering way of writing one's own fate, but for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it often seems like an impotent tool, best suited for idle speculation.

Not only Stoppard, but also Stoppard's characters find out the uselessness of communication through language:

ROS: The sun's going down. (Pause.) It'll be night soon. (Pause.) If that's west. (Pause.)
Unless we've –

GUIL (shouts): Shut up! I'm sick of it! Do you think conversation is going to help us now?
(Stoppard, p. 120)

And, the Player's description of the language he is forced to work with can be taken as a larger accusation against twentieth century literature in general:

PLAYER: You understand, we are tied down to a language which makes up obscurity what it lacks in style.
(Stoppard, p. 77)

BLACK HUMOR

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is one of those theatrical works that can make the reader/audience laugh aloud on nearly every sentence. Some critics, for the sake of this feature, call the play a "comedy". Since Stoppard has always the ability to draw laughter out of what commonly regard as serious events, his humor is often categorized as Black Humor in which, potentially tragic or unpleasant situations are treated with a cynical amusement.

For an instance, in Act Three, the end result of the scene's inclusion of the dead body onstage, Actors in their underwear, and Hamlet speaking Shakespeare's lines, "The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—of nothing," (Stoppard, p. 71) proved to be an interesting mix of humor and pathos.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD: THE DECAY OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW CULTURE

Fredric Jameson, in his discussion of postmodernism mentions one of the other features of postmodern period and that is "the decay of the distinctions between high and low culture". Generally speaking, modernism focuses on high culture; the readers of modern literature are supposed to be intellectual. In other words, the aim of literature is to produce high art, but postmodern literature puts an end to such an attitude.

In contemporary culture, known as postmodern period, there is interfusion of high and low culture; so art is no longer produced by intellectuals for intellectuals but by anybody who is interested and for all ranks of people.

Throughout *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Stoppard exploits the potential dramatic limitation regarding the boundaries of the stage. For an instance, in Act Two, by the time Rosencrantz and Guildenstern resolve to seek out Hamlet, Stoppard elaborates the metaphor of limitation of the stage by the use of footlights as a form of objective correlative for the metaphysical and epistemological limitations and uncertainty of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

GUIL: Then what are we doing here, I ask myself.

ROS: You might well ask.

GUIL: We better get on.

ROS: You might well think.

GUIL: We better get on.

ROS: (Actively) Right! (Pause) On where?

GUIL: Forward.

ROS: (Forward to footlights) Ah. (Hesitates.) Which way do we- (He turns around.) Which way did we- ?
(Stoppard, p. 16)

Using this technique, Stoppard shows the resort by these trapped characters to tactics usually employed in 'low' culture.

If one thinks of Shakespeare's tragedy, *Hamlet*, as high culture and Stoppard's comedy, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, as low culture, although Stoppard represents this opposition in his script, but he represents the interfusion of these two cultures in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Stoppard injects some of the most important sections of *Hamlet* into his work to show that both high and low cultures are necessary to complete a piece of art known as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

The infusion of high and low culture is apparent in Stoppard's play as a postmodernist piece of literature by the time he represents his protagonists as both artists and spectators of the same play as "the same side of two coins". It is also true for the audience as they are both the spectators of Stoppard's play and the actors of their own life.

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.

PLAYER: A pleasure. We've played to bigger, of course, but quality counts for something.
I recognized you at once

ROS: And who are we?

PLAYER: ---as fellow artists.

ROS: I thought we were gentlemen.

PLAYER: For some of us it is performance, for others, patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins. (Bows again.) Don't clap too loudly---it's a very old world. (Stoppard, p. 23)

In another occasion, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern protest the Player for his concept of art, as his art is a low one and defined their own image of the concept of art as a high one, however, they are not aware that these are all the same and, the Story the Player is performing is that of Hamlet, previously known as 'high culture'.

PLAYER: Go!

The lovers begin. The PLAYER contributes a breathless commentary for ROS and GUIL. Having murdered his brother and wooed the widow---the poisoner mounts the throne! Here we see him and his queen give rein to their unbridled passion! She little knowing that the man she holds in her arms---!

ROS: Oh, I say---here---really! You can't do that!

PLAYER: Why not?

ROS: Well, really---I mean, people want to be entertained---they don't come expecting sordid and gratuitous filth.

PLAYER: You're wrong---they do! Murder, seduction and incest ---what do you want---jokes?

ROS: I want a good story, with a beginning, middle and end.

PLAYER (to GUIL): And you?

GUIL: I'd prefer art to mirror life, if it's all the same to you.

PLAYER: It's all the same to me, sir. (To the grappling LOVERS) All right, no need to indulge yourselves. (They get up. To GUIL:) I come on in a minute. Lucretius, nephew to the king! (Turns his attention to the TRAGEDIANS) Next! (Stoppard, pp. 80-81)

Through this, Stoppard shows that art is no longer perceived as a form of high culture, rather it is something simply like a story which is produced to entertain the public. In contemporary culture, art does not demand "formal training or traditional form, it is simply an expression of self.

CONCLUSION

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Stoppard's most controversial play offers so many considerable postmodernist elements, while the relativity of its meaning contribute to the complexity of the play to such an extent that gradually the play becomes disoriented.

Carefully constructed on the misadventures of two minor characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are summoned into Stoppard's play. Trying to make sense of their confusing situation they pass the time tossing coins and playing word games until they learn of their predetermined and ordained death.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* Stoppard paints a picture of a real postmodern condition. Semantic indeterminacy, that is, "the frequent hallmark of postmodernist aesthetic production" (Murphy, 1992, p. 187) makes the play complex. The plot development though appears to be logical, gradually becomes completely disorienting. Unresolved conflicts between modernist and postmodernist perspectives – McHale's poetics of postmodernism where modernism is epistemological and postmodernism is ontological – are dominant sources of tension in the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two useless characters in Shakespeare's tragedy, are in search of their identities and their past in a modern sense, completely unaware that past and all its ideals are gone with the wind, and a new postmodernist atmosphere has pervaded the air. In this way, the play resists any specific interpretations. This idea is reflected in the play under the veil of other strategies which are ambiguity, complexity and Derrida's concept of *différance*.

The existence of binary oppositions in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* reflects the postmodern environment of the play. Though they are present in Stoppard's text, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are absent as a matter of their previous death in Shakespeare's text. The present/absent model of personal identity leads to their level of reality/fictionality that cannot be separated.

The Lyotardian breakdown of master or grand narratives is another Stoppard's preoccupation in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, where those non-protagonists are imprisoned in a narrative which is not their own and, in this way, they lack all the narrative functors Lyotard mentions. Hence, suffering from the postmodern condition, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain static as the action of *Hamlet*, not theirs, enrolls them and rather than seeking great roles they start gambling and word games.

The lack of final meaning, completely evident in the play leads to the lack of closure and which is another characteristic of postmodernism. Since there are numerous contradictory meanings or significations in the play, the responsibility of interpretation and getting the meaning depends on the reader, not on the writer who has, in fact, no authority over the text which leads to relativity of the play's text.

In the story of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, there is another story which is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As there is a play within a play, there are two types of the readers or the audience, Stoppard's reader/audience off-stage and Shakespeare's reader/audience on-stage. This performance within performance is the hallmark of metatheatricality which is a play's postmodernist feature. Literary and real-life references – Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and, Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, as well as real life names including *Chuang Chou* – refer to both intertextuality and self-reflexivity of the play.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is one of the best examples of the situations which paints a picture of postmodern age where the distinction between high and low culture blurs. By using tactics and forms in the contemporary component of his play, which might be regarded as the low culture, Stoppard breaks down the components of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, known as the high culture. These components are mixed in a way that the reader is not able to distinct one from the other.

The play also portrays the minimalist approach and setting. Stoppard's plays usually contain the least content and the most messages while most of the materials remain unsaid. Yet, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* the sentences are briefer than ever before, while most of the contents are summarized in the monologues of the characters.

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