

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Re-visiting Intertextual Reverberations in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: An Exploration of the Creative Foot Prints of Tom Stoppard

Debalina Sengupta

JRF and M. Phil Scholar, Department of English, The University of Burdwan, Burdwan, India

Abstract:

*Unconventionally, Tom Stoppard marked his entry in his very first full-length play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. A great deal of criticism of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* harps unnecessarily upon the sense of Stoppard's derivativeness, or his place within a movement, the absurd tradition. He creates a series of characters those, although ultimately defeated by social and metaphysical forces provoke or embrace a human compassion which transcends the relativistic ethics of an absurd universe. The reality of Stoppard's text lies in the fact that—albeit being in debt to other writers of the absurdist tradition—his characters put up a relentless struggle to keep up their integrity as individuals and try to come out of the textual fate that predetermines their death at the end. The present paper tries to seek the originality in Stoppard's play where he manipulates the 'echoes' that are evident at a first glance, for his own purpose to set up a world that connects both the Elizabethan and the modern and subverts the so-called grandeur in the customs of both.*

Keywords:

Intertextuality, Stoppard, Godot, echoes, Hamlet etc.

A conscious writer can hardly avoid the existing stream of ideas and the productions of significant writings (be it textual or a-textual) around oneself. Allusions to a text come as naturally to a conscious author 'as leaves to a tree'. This is precisely because, as a writer, one has to come across a series of others' writings since one's first successful effort of reading as a child. So it is evident that no literary text can be studied in isolation; instead texts are connected with an endless repertoire of other texts and in endless ways. As Borges would say, 'A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships' (97). This might be an automatic unselfconscious connection, which has been operative in literature through ages, and in this sense Barthes declared that 'any text is an intertext' (1981 39). Julia Kristeva formulated the term *intertextualité* in the essay 'The Bounded Text' to describe the process by which any text was 'a permutation of texts, intertextuality' (1980: 36). Genette has written at length about the 'palimpsestuous nature of texts', observing that 'Any text is a hypertext, grafting itself onto a hypotext, an earlier text that it imitates or transforms' (1997 [1982]: ix).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead melds an appropriative reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. What Stoppard does is bringing the off-stage of *Hamlet* as the on-stage in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and rendering the on-stage characters like *Hamlet*, *Claudius*, *Ophelia* and others to mere shadowy presence in his text. This is quite evident in Stoppard's text where we find these on-stage characters of *Hamlet* uttering speeches that are exact copy of Shakespeare's text, and performing actions that are mere shadowy echo of the former text. Stoppard uses and sometimes abuses lines from Shakespeare's Act II, Scenes 1 and 2; Act III Scene 2; Act IV, scenes 1 to 4; and Act V. Moreover Stoppard stages two reported actions of Shakespeare – *Hamlet's* dishevelled appearance before *Ophelia*, and *Hamlet's* substitution of his own letter that will lead to the execution of its bearers, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. For all the residual dialogue Stoppard's play is modern. Sanders praises *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as a successful intertextual text: 'Perhaps one of the most influential 'grafts' of Shakespearean drama is Tom Stoppard's 1967 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*' (2006: 55). *Hamlet* served as Stoppard's point of departure for this multifarious full-length play. The title *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* clearly denominates Stoppard's indebtedness to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* - which again is however an adaptation of *Ur-Hamlet* – and the title of Stoppard's play prescribe a pre-ordained fate for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* who are to die during the action of the same play. Both *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are more textual than actual characters and this is even more so because unlike the characters in an original play they have a fixed destiny in an inter-textual hypertext, a fate, which, even the playwright is unable to change.

Right from the title of the play, which is a taken from a comment by the ambassador of England almost at the end of Hamlet, we have the shadow of the source text in the play:

*First Ambassador: The sight is dismal;
And our affairs from England come too late:
The ears are senseless that should give us hearing,
To tell him his commandment is fulfill'd,
That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead:*

Where should we have our thanks? (Act V, Scene II, 368-373)

When asked why, Stoppard answered that he had no other choice for this kind of drama: he considers Shakespeare's tragedy as being probably 'the most famous play in any language; it is part of a sort of common mythology'; and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern 'are so much more than merely bit players in another famous play [...] As far as their involvement in Shakespeare's text is concerned they are told very little about what is going on and much of what they are told isn't true. So I see them much more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocence rather than a couple of henchmen[...]' (Gordon 80) From the beginning, then, Stoppard viewed Hamlet as a means of solving practical problems of composition and a familiar text whose interpretation he could share with his audience. When he acknowledges his debt to Beckett, he emphasizes what he calls 'a Beckett joke' meaning a technique which Beckett uses in his novels as well as his plays; '... it consists of confident statement followed by immediate refutation by the same voice' (Gordon 84). As we find in the following speech, 'GUIL: One is free on a boat. For a time. Relatively.' (92) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead thus shares with Waiting for Godot not only 'the image of two lost souls waiting for something to happen', but Stoppard's idea of Beckett's humorous, dialectical mode of expression.

But in reality Stoppard was a conscious artist when he chooses a play like Hamlet as his source-text to write a play that one may call a palimpsestuous one. The mood of Hamlet's character is one of a modern man, unable to come out of an absurdist or existentialist limbo, a mood that Hamlet shares with a series of modern characters like the hopelessly doomed Josef K. (The Trial, Kafka), Prufrock, the self-denigrating ordinary commoner (Eliot), the weak and neurotic Ivanov or Lvov (Ivanov, Chekhov), the strategically trapped, Stanley Webber (The Birthday Party, Pinter), William Falder, the pitiable victim of society (Justice, Galsworthy) or the nameless trio in Thirst by O'Neill. The predicament of a common modern human being is often called the 'Hamlet-condition'. So it is not just any other famous play for a suitable intertext.

Although based on their personalities and social interaction the characters are similar, there are many dissimilar facets to the setting and story of Waiting for Godot and Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead. Waiting for Godot was, in fact, stylistically rather than philosophically seminal for Stoppard. The pasts of the characters and their consciousness of those pasts is a vital difference Didi and sometimes Gogo remember fragments of a long lost past... Rosencrantz and Guildenstern refer to no recollections from the time before the summons, and Rosencrantz cannot even remember the first thing her can remember. And we, the audience never know more than Didi and Gogo, because Beckett knows no more. We know much more than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because we have absorbed Hamlet. It is feasible that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's lives began at the instant they were summoned, but Vladimir and Estragon hint at a life before the text of the play.

As it has been mentioned earlier, one can find in this play resemblance with modernist and existentialist philosophers and writers like Camus, Kafka, Pirandello, Beckett, Eliot et al. Albert Camus mentions in The Myth of Sisyphus:

There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always a prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them. One has to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future. That is natural. But it is just as natural that he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator [2000(1975) 35].

Camus argues, if there is no God to give meaning to our lives, humans must take on that purpose themselves. This is our 'absurd' task, like Sisyphus forever rolling his rock up a hill. The Times review praises Camus as 'an impassioned defender of human reason and happiness'. Stoppard's characters too, despite their consciousness of the absurd to which they are 'forever bound'-strive to escape their destiny.

It is clear at a glance that Stoppard's play turns Shakespeare's inside out, so that, in the Player's words, we see "on stage the things that are supposed to happen off." Thus the exits marked for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Hamlet become exits for the other characters in Stoppard. Now at one level this obviously represents a simple technical device for putting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Hamlet's place at the centre of the play so that the action of *Hamlet* can be seen in a different perspective. As Harold Hobson puts it:

Shakespeare looked at the matter from Hamlet's viewpoint, with the Prince in the centre and everything revolving round him. How would these events appear to someone not at their centre, but on the periphery; someone such as Guildenstern or Rosencrantz? This is the question that Stoppard answers. To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what happens in Shakespeare's play seems totally baffling and incomprehensible. (Hobson 195)

The play begins with the flip of a coin—an act that finds its echo later when the Player King says, "Life is a gamble, at terrible odds—if it was a bet, you wouldn't take it."(43) Just as the play is a kind of jangled echo chamber of Hamlet, so each word, event, mood and character develops an echo. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are echoes of each other, since they perpetually

confuse each other's names. They have been summoned to Elsinore by Claudius, or by fate, and they seem to be dawdling apprehensively on the way. The triviality of their futile actions fails to make up the void of inaction as does their vague attempt to build up a momentary suspense. Shortly after this we witness 'Guil, examining the confines of the stage', which clearly showcases a Brechtian attempt to foreground their textual limitation, the boundary of their existence is the corners of the very stage.

One is highly disillusioned of the apparent likeness between the dramatic settings of *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Though the play begins in the hue of Beckettian barrenness of a lone road, it undergoes a surreal transformation into the Danish royal court and again eventually into a boat. The novelty lies in the shock which comes from the fact that the setting or the background does not change at all; the characters come out of nowhere, suddenly vanish into the air and the same characters play the mood in a suddenly changed atmosphere for the audience to understand the change in setting or the background. His characters are unnerved by uncertainty. The most obvious component of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is Stoppard's tale of the two bewildered courtiers who stumble along in a search for direction. When Guildenstern applies the techniques of logic to help him interpret the situation they flout comprehension and make him frantic. Rosencrantz's attempt to articulate his questions and fears about death becomes a jerky music-hall routine. Efforts to understand why they suffer increase their pain; the elaborate game they play to distract them often daze them. Meeting the players Guildenstern is bitterly disillusioned.

Stoppard's innovation is also there in the characters of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* who are dressed in Elizabethan attires but almost no attempt is made to portray them as members of the Renaissance world of corrupt grandeur in which they have roles to play. They are walking anachronisms, they think and feel like members of the modern audience. Both the humour and darkness of Stoppard's play derive substantially from this blending of ancient and modern. Stoppard's characters are trapped in their roles and are constantly foiled by inexplicable events:

[...] It could have been - a bird out of season, dropping bright feathered on my shoulder [...] It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way [...] I was prepared. But it's this, isn't it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this - a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes [...] (17-18)

One of the most interesting devices that Stoppard uses in this play is that of 'meta-theatre'. Before discussing some of the meta-theatrical aspects of Stoppard's work, it is needed to define what meta-theatre is. It can be defined as the use of a play to discuss some specific elements of the theatrical art, such as the role of actors, performance, dramatic techniques, and the process of composition of the play itself. It is worth considering that the playwright that makes use of meta-theatre is questioning, in fact, his own work, which proves to be a most significant form of self-evaluation. It is still important to have in mind that meta-theatre is not an innovation of modern playwrights; Shakespeare himself made use of it in his plays.

In the specific case of *Hamlet*, its technical aspect is not particularly significant because Shakespeare handles it for the dramatic purposes that he has in mind. *The Murder of Gonzago* with Hamlet's addendum, combined with the dumb-show—the *Mouse Trap*, as Hamlet calls it—will determine the reversal of situation in the play. In fact, at the moment that Hamlet becomes certain that the Ghost was right about Claudius's crime, and Claudius finds out that Hamlet hears his criminal secret; the audience understands things are bound to change. At least one of the two will have to die. In Stoppard's play, the characters' destiny has not been altered by juxtaposing the characters, acts and scenes of his play with passages from *Hamlet*, he devises a particular framework with unusual refractory effect. One of the outstanding ones is the parody he makes of both the characters and events of Shakespeare's play, which fits one of his meta-theatrical purposes. He does not only demote Hamlet from his leading position but also centres on two of Shakespeare's minor characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Granville-Barker's so called 'nonentity'.

Stoppard's modern anti-heroes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are indeed prototypes of those depersonalized, mechanical and alienated individuals who can't even be distinguished one from the other. They just follow instructions without questioning them which prove to be not only dangerous but also a terrible mistake:

GUIL: ...A man standing in his saddle in the half-lit half-alive dawn banged on the shutters and called two names. He was just a hat and the cloak levitating in the grey plume of his own breath, but when he called we came. That much is certain - we came. (30)

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, although the Player, describing the inner-play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, illustrated by the dumb-show, uses the word 'spies' as he refers to its two characters, *Hamlet's* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ros and Guil do not recognize themselves in such a description. Stoppard goes further in his handling of this technical device. To Guildenstern's enquiry of its meaning, the Player explains its dramatic function of enlightening a language sometimes obscure.

Guil: What's the dumb show for?

Player: Well, it's a device, really—it makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible; you understand, we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style. (69)

The impression left by these two characters' deaths in Stoppard's play is quite different from the one left by their Elizabethan counterparts. Unlike their counterparts Stoppard's Ros and Guil lack the freedom of choice, for they are circumscribed by the playwright's script. When Guil asks the Player who decides about those who are marked for death, the appropriation says that nobody does because it is written:

Guil: Who decides?

Player: (switching off his smile): Decides? It is written. (72)

In such a world, these antiheroes, completely unaware of the ultimate reality of their condition, avoid facing the only certainty that has been left to them: that, having been born, they will die somehow, somewhere, someday. Besides, to the sceptic modern man there is no glory in dying nobly for one's honour or one's belief as the Elizabethan had thought, for Guil says:

Guil: [...] Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over [...] Death is not anything [...] death is not [...] It's the absence of presence, nothing more [...] the endless time of never coming back [...] a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound... (116)

Nevertheless, not being experienced in life, death is the only thing that cannot be performed.

The most original aspect of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, is perhaps the memorable figure of the Player King. The Player is the only substantial character in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, he is distinguished from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by dint of his sheer originality, and supreme self-confidence. While the other two have haunting shadows of fear at their back, the Player seems to know what has happened and what is going to happen as vividly as the audience. Being an intertext, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has to follow what *Hamlet* has laid down for it as the 'pre-ordained-fate.' He is posited in sharp contrast to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are rather hapless, helpless and clueless to what is in store for them. The Player, on the other hand, knows all of it, as if he has come after reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, like the audience or the sincere reader of this play. Jim Hunter shares the same opinion: "Above all he (the player) is a supremely confident character, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel desperately insecure, he is jarringly confident" (Hunter 36). The source of his absolute confidence on himself is his expertise in his job. He declares his group as 'Tragedians', they are specialists in tragedies. His words are fraught with death and the dramatic ramifications of death. He is rather fond of death while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very much afraid of it. He explains his job, Tragedy and his forte, death like this:

Tragedy, Sir. Death and disclosures, universal and particular, denouements both unexpected and inexorable, transvestite melodrama on all levels including the suggestive. We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion... clowns, if you like, murderers-we can do you ghosts and battles... (14)

He, therefore, has a confidence about his art that that defines his job, his art of life as a Tragedian, and his integrity as a death-player. The Player has full control over his senses, passions and emotions. He transcends his impulses, keeps his cool, and retains his poise. He can accept anything patiently in a similar situation where Rosencrantz would get exasperated and stab the other. He thus stands in sharp contrast to the other two in his attitude also. The acceptance of the stabbing by the Player as an opportunity to demonstrate his 'skill' of death-acting is a fine example of this. He is a fine actor, as his profession would require from him. Just before the play ends, he presents a supreme playacting of his forte 'death'. He seems to possess the knowledge of not only what will happen next but seems to understand the nature of events. He knows the truth, and creates an impression of knowing more than he knows. He seems to take an upper hand of both the other two characters with his overarching superiority. He declares that he is not an exclusive but an inclusive player:

ROS: You're not-ah-exclusively players, then?

PLAYER: We're inclusively players, sir. (18)

He anticipates death and the feeling of them, who will die; therefore he seems to emerge as an author figure. The person who begins his role as a simple actor in this play later evolves as an all-presuming, all-knowing, omniscient author, exercising supreme control on all of the other characters and even the audience and the readers. He seems to enjoy that freedom in the text that even Stoppard falls short of, as an author, though his is the creation. The Player observes a supreme authorial control in his enigmatic stance, giving hints, providing explanations, assuring the other two and even the audience. Just like the ghost of Hamlet's father haunts him, the ghost of Shakespeare's text haunts Stoppard and this is best handled by Stoppard through the character of the Player's words and actions. The Player, therefore, has shown us the possibility of a significant mastering of death and life through play.

Even the ending is not the same as it is in *Hamlet*, the three major characters and the tragedians all disappear abruptly and the reported speech of the ambassador takes us to the last speech of Hamlet II.II.368. Unlike in *Hamlet* the pirates' attack is also only reported, not shown as actually happening on the stage. The present play ends with Horatio's speech but in the Ur-text *Hamlet* Fortinbras utters the concluding speech of the text and the play closes with a march carrying off the body and gunshots. But in the hypertext the ending is denied such tragic grandeur. Unlike gunshots, the play fades out in music. One notable thing is the disappearance of the 'active' characters which is almost imperceptible. They vanish into the blue without any tragic dignity. This is true to the post-war modern condition where a modern man perishes with a whimper, not a bang. Death, thus, to a modern human being comes out to be a most trivial and casual incident.

What a conscious reader or a critic of the same kind notes in this play is the commonality of it with modernist or existentialist works by various other authors, mainly those of Beckett. So it would not be improper to claim that Stoppard's creative originality lies in his dramaturgy. The interaction between the characters, their actions, appearances, entrances and exits all mark a supreme

level of innovation where it is not the intertextual influences but the appropriation of the same that sets the dramatist aside from others. *Though he toys sporadically with Shakespeare, this does not shake the foundations of a quasi-sacred tradition, which is nourished rather than undermined by burlesque.* In his independent and original approach to the dramatization of a not-so-new world against an Elizabethan backdrop, Stoppard retains his novelty in his mature handling of the absurd and the gorgeous, the tragic and the comic. Thus Stoppard transforms *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* from a mere pastiche of *Hamlet* to a more complex placing of his own characters within the reconstructed dimensions of the same.

Reference:

1. Bareham, T., ed. (1989). Tom Stoppard: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Jumpers, Travesties: A Casebook*. London: Palgrave, Macmillan.
2. Beckett, Samuel. (2004). *Waiting for Godot*. Penguin Study Edition. ed. GJV Prasad. Noida: Penguin Books India.
3. Barthes, Roland. (1977). 'Theory of the Text'. R. Young (ed.) *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader*. London: Routledge.
4. Gordon, Giles. (1971). "Tom Stoppard" (Interviewed by Giles Gordon). *Transatlantic Review*, 29.1968. repr. in Josef F. McCrindle, ed., *Behind the Scenes: Theatre and Film Interviews from the 'Transatlantic Review'*. New York, Chicago and San Francisco: Penguin Books.
5. Hunter Jim. (2000). Tom Stoppard. *Faber Critical Studies*. London: Faber and Faber.
6. Esslin, Martin. (1968). *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Penguin Books.
7. Kristeva, Julia. (1980). "The Bounded Text". *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Leon S. Roudiez (ed.), Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S.Roudiez (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
8. Sanders, Julie. (2006). *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London & N.Y.: Routledge. Shakespeare, William. (1984). *Hamlet*. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London and New York: Methuen.
9. Stoppard, Tom. (1974). 'Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas'. *Theatre Quarterly*, IV. London.
10. 2000 (1967). *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. London: Faber and Faber.