

## HUMOUR AND FATE IN TOM STOPPARD'S PLAY *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to discuss physical humour arising from the characters' quest for identity and to depict how the themes of death/ chance/ fate/ reality/ illusion function in the existentialist world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Humour plays a significant role in the analysis of this tragicomedy. The theatre of the Absurd expresses the senselessness of the human condition, abandons the use of rational devices, reflects man's tragic sense of loss, and registers the ultimate realities of the human condition, such as the problems of life and death. Thus the audience is confronted with a picture of disintegration. This dissolved reality is discharged through 'liberating' laughter which depicts the absurdity of the universe. Stoppard uses verbal wit, humour and farce to turn the most serious subjects into comedy. Humour is created by Guildenstern's little monologues that touch on the profound but founder on the absurd. The play has varieties of irony, innuendo, confusion, odd events, and straight-up jokes. Stoppard's use of the 'play in play' technique reveals the ultimate fate of the tragicomic characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They confront the mirror image of their future deaths in the metadramatic spectacle performed by the Players. As such, the term "Stoppardian" springs out of his use of style: wit and comedy while addressing philosophical concepts and ideas.

**Key Words:** *The theatre of the Absurd, Humour, Identity confusion, Fate, The theme of death, Wit and comedy.*

## TOM STOPPARD'IN *ROSENCRANTZ VE GUILDENSTERN ÖLDÜLER ADLI* OYUNUNDA MİZAH VE KADER

### Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı karakterlerin kimlik arayışından kaynaklanan fiziksel mizahı tartışmak ve oyundaki ölüm/şans/kader/gerçeklik/yanılsama gibi temaların Rosencrantz ve Guildenstern'nin varoluşçu hayatlarında nasıl işlediğini göstermektir. Mizah, bu trajikomedinin analiz edilmesinde önemli bir rol oynar. Absürd Tiyatro, insanlık durumundaki saçmalığı ifade eder, rasyonel aygıtların kullanımını terk eder, insanın trajik kaybolmuşluk duygusunu yansıtır ve insanlık durumu olan hayat ve ölümle ilgili insanlık hali sorunlarının nihai gerçekliklerini kaydeder. Böylece, seyirci parçalanmış bir resimle karşılaşır. Bu çözülmüş gerçeklik evrenin absürlüğünü ortaya koyan 'özgürleştirici' kahkaha yoluyla serbest bırakılır. Stoppard, en ciddi konuları bile komediye dönüştürmek için nükte, mizah ve fars kullanır. Mizah, derin ama boşa çıkan absürlüğe değinen Guildenstern'nin ufak monologları sayesinde ortaya çıkar. Oyun, ironi, ima, karışıklık, tuhaf olaylar ve ciddi şakalarla çeşitlendirilir. Stoppard'ın "oyun içinde oyun tekniği" kullanımı trajikomik karakter olan Rosencrantz ve Guildenstern'nin nihai kaderlerini ortaya çıkarır. Onlar, oyuncular tarafından sahnelenen metadramatik piyesde gelecekteki ölümleri ile karşı karşıya bırakılırlar. Aslında, 'Stoppardian' terimi yazarın stil kullanımından ortaya çıkar: Nükte ve komedi filozofik kavramlar ve fikirlere hitap eder.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Absürd tiyatro, Mizah, Kimlik karmaşası, Kader, Ölüm teması, Nükte ve komedi.*

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Tom Stoppard, the British contemporary post-war playwright, developed his craft by exploring various dramatic modes such as plays for radio, television, film and stage. Most of his works are inspired by subjects like philosophy to examine a political question, human rights, censorship, political freedom, along with an interest in linguistics and philosophy. Stoppard began his career by writing short radio plays in 1953–54 and by 1960 he had completed his first stage play *A Walk on the Water*. Kelly states that Stoppard's playwriting was influenced from surprising mentors such as Oscar Wilde: "*the early stage plays develop an 'inverted' Wildean aesthetic with an 'inverted politics'. That is, Stoppard's uses of parody to question dramatic form and language disappoint because they preserve at the center an insistent construction of individualism in conservative political terms*" (2001:15). Stoppard's plays originally belong to the Theatre of the Absurd tradition dealing with philosophical issues. He uses verbal wit, humour and farce to turn the most serious subjects into comedy:

. . . Stoppard uses verbal wit, visual humour and physical farce to illustrate clearly defined topics: free-will versus fate; the existence of God; the function of art; the nature of freedom and the responsibility of the press; the existential implications of modern physics. The virtuoso dialogue of his plays and the brilliant inventiveness of their theatricality have tended to obscure the serious intentions underlying his comedy . . . (Innes, 1992: 325)

The purpose of this study is to discuss physical humour arising from the characters' quest for identity and to depict how the themes of death/ chance/ fate/ reality/ illusion function in the existentialist world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The identity confusion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will be discussed through modernist perspective, which emphasizes absurdity and humour in the play. According to the modernist writing the representation of the self appears as diverse, ambiguous, and multiple. The play is full of questions of both characters who try to identify themselves in this absurd universe. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern represent ambiguous and multiple selves, which makes not only the audience and but also the other characters like the King and the Queen unable to distinguish both. They look like the same side of a coin that is "heads" metaphorically expressing the inseparable situation of both characters. Stoppard once described them as "two halves of the same personality." Stoppard differentiates the two characters by their opposite actions like: "Guil sits. Ros stands. Guil spins. Ros studies coin." (Stoppard 11) and the audience sees the difference between the two because they are acting differently. The playwright lays great importance to distinguishing these two characters to emphasize the need of having individuality and unique identity. The attempt goes in vain since the protagonists are always in search of identity. However, it is hard to separate those characters from each other that are perhaps why they are in quest for self identity. Stoppard frequently questions the notion of identity by creating such characters which makes it possible to ask the philosophical question if human individual is condemned to die at last what distinguishes one from another.

Stoppard points out the question of their identity, which is multi-layered and obscure, to emphasize it according to just as the case of humanbeing's loss of identity and powerlessness in the modernist world. This brings out individuals with a sense of loneliness, disintegration, and alienation having no sense of identity and memory.

Identity is the social sense of that emerges from contact with others than the self. According to Stuart Hall identities "are constructed through, not outside, difference" it can be recognized "through the relation to the Other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what it lacks" (17). This is the case in the characterization of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Rosencrantz is described as what is not Guildenstern and Guildenstern is just vice versa. Although the two characters seem identical, the playwright always emphasizes each character having slight difference. Both characters have been mixed up by everyone including themselves. The playwright consistently points out the difference between the two characters even having different views in the dying scene. Hall draws attention to the fragmentations of identities in the modern times, which depicts the position of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are also fragmented and struggle to find answers to their existentialist questions in this modern world: ". . . identities are unified and, in the late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions." (Hall 17) The constitution of social identity seems as an act of power and discourse which "interpellate, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses" ((Hall 19). The subject position requires being 'hailed' and

constructed across a 'lack' from the place of the Other. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to develop a social identity lacking power as subject position. This might be one reason when they are having trouble to establish 'who they are'; thus one cannot exist without the presence of the other. On the other hand, lack of memory throughout the play (they cannot remember anything, even the present actions) draws attention to having no entrance to their past in order to establish a collective history to explain where they come from. Therefore, they do not have sense of belonging. They are lost and powerless therefore they try to establish a new self apart from the power of the King and the Queen. One of the features of modern life which modernism points us is the complexity of the modern life pointing to the senselessness in the lives of both characters. This creates absurdity and humour in the dialogue of both characters.

The absurdity directs the audience to laughter focussing on the senselessness of the human condition and abandoning use of rational devices. The absurd drama, as Esslin (1965) states, reflects man's tragic sense of loss, ultimate realities of the human condition, problems of life and death, isolation and communication (353). The audience is confronted with a picture of disintegration as the characters gradually trying to find out their place in this absurd world. People come and go, absurd conversations along with absurd events happen while those two characters exist without meaning in the play. At this point the humour of the Theatre of the Absurd is liberating; the dissolved reality is discharged through "liberating" laughter recognizing the absurdity of the universe. Significant speeches, use of idioms especially the soliloquies undergo comic changes throughout the play.

The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard's best-known and most produced play, brought him an international recognition in 1967. The title characters of this play are schoolmates of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, who are on their way to Elsinore without knowing what is expected of them. Apart from the parodic use of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, most critics point out that Stoppard is most clearly parodying Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* whose main characters Vladimir and Estragon play word games to pass the time for Godot who never arrives. Everything depends on his coming, but he never comes. Beckett's play beginning on a country road isolated from the city, echoes Stoppard's characters who are described as: "*two Elizabethans passing time in a place without any visible character*"(1967:1) in the very beginning of the play. The style of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* also echoes in the sense that characters comment on the action and investigate themselves by asking nihilist questions throughout the play. Absurdity of human condition refers to the humanity's loss of religious, philosophical and cultural root. Absurdity expresses an existential outlook, which stresses the lonely, confused individuals trying to find meaning in a bewildering universe. Comedy in a form of farce comes into question when deliberate absurdity or nonsense creates physical humour. The characters in the play *R&GAD* try to exist in an absurd world. Wittgenstein (1994) points out the lapses of memory and perception which places the characters in the play in an absurd world. According to him, memory is needed for access to the past. It is important to note that Guildenstern and Rosencrantz's inability to initiate action stems from the lack of memory. (200)

ROS. Oh. I see. (Pause.)  
I've forgotten the question.

GUIL. How long have you suffered from a bad memory?

ROS. I can't remember.

Rosencrantz protests in his dying scene: "*We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?*" (Stoppard, 1967:91) demonstrates the inability of those two characters taking up an action. Guildenstern still having lack of memory even in the last dialogue before he dies: "*I can't remember*" (Stoppard, 1967:91) strikingly summarizes the position of two characters. He cannot remember anything that is why he cannot take up an action to save his life. Both characters play the role they have been given; none of them make a meaningful step to change their lives, which would prevent their disaster. Stoppard most clearly points out the monotonous and absurd life of a twentieth century man who only questions his place in the universe taking up no action to make a better life for oneself. The playwright left the characters helpless but humorous by the use of dramatic irony in order to make the audience to ponder his/her position in the universe through a philosophical outlook.

Stoppard's multi-layered identity may be found in his works with an expression of his long-term cultural conflict. Stoppard was born in Zlin in the region of Czechoslovakia in 1937 where he was forced to flee to Singapore to escape the invading Nazis with his family. He stayed there for three years when the Japanese invasion forced them to move this time to India. He lost his father and two years later his mother married Kenneth Stoppard, a British army major, and the family moved to England where Tom Stoppard got his education in a British school in York Shire. Katherine E. Kelly points out that Stoppard "*felt an 'English' self emerge and he embraced the country as a permanent home*" (2001:11).

Sense of identity and emotion were complicated creating a cultural conflict. Paul Delaney sees this multi-layered identity as a concrete example of “*a subconscious influence*” (2001:25) and the two title characters in *R&GAD* appear as a multiple possibility of his confused identity.

My mother married again and my name changed to my stepfather's when I was eight years old. This I didn't care one way or the other about; but then it occurred to me that in practically everything I had written there was something about people getting each other's names wrong, usually in a completely gratuitous way, nothing to do with character or plot. (Stoppard, 1968: 47)

Tom Stoppard emphasizes this ambiguity of identity as he reflects it to be his fictitious characters in *R&GAD*. The humorous dialogue creates farcical comedy when both humorous characters mix up their names and identity. Actually the names are not important since the audience focus on their dialogue and frequently one does not exactly know who is who:

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.

...

ROS. And who are we? (Stoppard, 1967:16)

On several occasions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern point out confusion in their own identities: introducing themselves incorrectly as in the above quotation like other people frequently do throughout the play. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play the question and answer game Guildenstern seizing Rosencrantz violently asks: “WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?” (Stoppard 44) using capitalized letters to emphasize the importance of their identities. According to Kelly King, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “confirm that they do not know who they are and lament that they do not have the power to establish who they are (Shakespeare stole their authority to tell their own story).” (16) The exchange of personality is a problem of identity however Stoppard treats confusion in identities in a most humorous way. Still, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become so frustrated in an incomprehensive world therefore they fall into despair.

There is question of identity still not definitively answered. John Fleming points out the confusion of identity when Stoppard raises philosophical questions unanswered: “*Stoppard raises fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of identity and what constitutes self*” (56). Fleming explains the reason for this humorous confusion of identity as follows: “*Stoppard's use of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is more metaphoric than realistic, and their inability to know their names on a consistent basis highlights the degree to which they are alienated from and uncertain about their ontology*” (Fleming, 2001:56). Stoppard draws our attention to the nature of identity in which both characters are alienated even from their own identities creating humour throughout the text. Overall, the play is full of questions from the very beginning until the end.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are always trying to find out answers to the questions, even at the conclusion of the play they are dying without knowing the reason why. Unanswered questions linked with the incomprehensive world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern produce humorous situation. They are frequently in the quest of identity. Manfred Draudt points out the comic implications of the identity motif as well as its complex ironies:

KING. Thanks,  
Rosencrantz and gentle  
Guildenstern.

QUEEN. Thanks  
Guildenstern and gentle  
Rosencrantz. (Stoppard,  
1967:33-4)

The royal family get Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's names wrong hence the playwright "*lays stress upon the grotesqueness of the situation*" (Draudt, 1981:354-55). The insecurity in the identities emphasizes the two character's indecision and passivity. This also creates a comic potential when in the scene the King Claudius says: "*Thanks Rosencrantz (turning to Rosencrantz who is caught unprepared, while Guildenstern bows)*". (Stoppard, 1967:26) The mixing up of their identities becomes more hilarious and comic when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rehearse their future meeting with Hamlet:

GUIL. I don't think you quite understand what we are attempting is a hypothesis in which I answer for him, while you ask me questions. (Stoppard, 1967:34)

Rosencrantz's question "*Am I pretending to be you, then*" carries a humorous game of confusion in identities.

There is still absurdity in the statement of Rosencrantz. In another dialogue between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the characters are discussing obvious facts creating rich possibilities for comedy. Their dialogue directs to absurdity and they try to pass time by discussing significant truth:

Ros: We're on a boat.  
(Pause). Dark isn't it?

Guil: Not for night.

Ros: No, not for night.

Guil: Dark for day. Pause.

Ros: Oh yes, it's dark for day.

Guil: We must have gone north, of course.

Ros: Off course?

Guil: Land of the midnight sun, that is.

Ros: Of course, (Stoppard, 1967:71)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are playing a game, starting from "*dark*" and leading to the "*land of the midnight sun*" as Vladamir and Estragon did in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. It seems that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern trying to pass time by discussing facts that never change. Inevitably, there is absurdity in the action. Still in this case, they are trying to find out meaning in life and investigate their place in the universe. It is still laid bare, the insistence of the characters on discussing obvious facts in itself creating rich possibilities for comedy. "*Dark*" is expressed as certain period of time with which it is associated, "*night*", and then "*dark*" is associated with what is not dark: "*dark for the day*". Dark is also associated with "*north*" and "*the land of the midnight sun*".

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The sound pattern of "*of course*" is reflected in "*off course*", which, at the same time, might be given for the success of their expedition. Rosencrantz repeats and sums up the ingredients of Guildenstern's statements in a speeded-up succession:

Ros: I think it's getting light.

Guil: Not for night.

Ros: This far north.

Guil: Unless we're off course.

Ros (small pause): Of course. (Stoppard, 1967:71)

In the following passage the verbs all denote functions of sensory and other bodily organs creating humorous diction:

Ros: - I can't see a thing.

Guil: You can still think, can't you?

Ros: I think so.

Guil: You can still talk.

Ros: What should I say? (Stoppard, 1967:63)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel their existence in the universe in a most comical dialogue. This depicts absurdity of the modern human condition; thus absurdism stresses an existential outlook. They want a proof for their existence, which is absurd. Rosencrantz's statement as he hears he can still talk is most humorous "*What should I say?*". There is no purpose in Rosencrantz's life he is not even aware of the fact that he is living where Guildenstern proposes proof of sensory such as "*seeing*", "*thinking*" and "*talking*".

Guil: Don't bother. You can feel, can't you?

Ros: Ah! There's life in me yet!

Guil: What are you feeling?

Ros: A leg. Yes, it feels like my leg.

Guil: How does it feel?

Ros: Dead.

Guil: Dead?

Ros (panic): I can't feel a thing! (Stoppard, 1967:70)

Rosencrantz is totally unaware of the fact that he is actually living by stating: "*Ah! There's life in me yet!*" The effort of Guildenstern trying to prove Rosencrantz's existence adds humorous dialogues throughout the play. As it is expressed in this dialogue, farce is characterized by physical humour, the use of deliberate absurdity or nonsense.

Parody of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* appears as a source of Stoppard's humour because much of Stoppard's comedy comes from his treatment of the Shakespearean plot, characters and solemnity distinctly comic and even farcical. Stoppardian world is different from Shakespeare's world who presents death as a tragic factor. The death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is not tragic but "*as terrifyingly senseless and unjust*" (Innes, 1992:332). Shakespeare's world is solemn and there is high seriousness both in the subject matter and noble characters. Stoppard's comedy arises from the implicit contrast with Shakespearean solemnity. Although Shakespeare's play has several moments of rich humour, it is important to note that his play *Hamlet* is basically serious and tragic. Stoppard's treatment of the source material of Shakespeare's story is different from the original plot

What Shakespeare takes serious in *Hamlet* turns upside down in Stoppard's play: the minor characters in Shakespeare's play turns in the major characters and the central focus in *R&FGAD*, vice versa Hamlet becomes a minor character; the plot is placed as secondary importance where characters and their attitudes become more important than in Shakespeare's play. Stoppard's courtiers from the very beginning of his play are engaged in trivial activities, they are just passing time by casually flipping coins and speaking in colloquial and informal prose distinct from Shakespearean tragic characters and use of verse. It is significant that Stoppard points out the philosophical issues by using humour. The two characters in Stoppard's play frequently question their place in an unsecure universe. They seek meaning in their small world and question death and faith as an inevitable part of life in which they are both involved. The player they met on the road points out that one has no control on fate in an absurd manner with the other player's involvement:

PLAYER. Chance?

GUIL. You found us.

PLAYER. Oh yes.

GUIL. You were looking?

PLAYER. Oh no.

GUIL. Chance, then.

PLAYER. Or fate.

GUIL. Yours or ours?

PLAYER. It could hardly be one without the other.

GUIL. Fate, then.

PLAYER. Oh, yes. We have no control . . .

As Ruby Cohen emphasizes Stoppard's play demonstrates the two

characters "*adrift in somebody else's plot, just as the Absurdist focussed upon modern man's rudderlessness in a world he cannot control.*" (Cohen, 1998:508). Stoppard's two ordinary men are not to be taken as victims in an absurdist world, as in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* are. The inevitability of death is not tragic but a natural part of life in a simple world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. We, human beings, should accept death as an unavoidable outcome of life. One should not be scared of death; thus if human beings may calm their minds from dying, they will be free from depression and continue their lives in a meaningful and productive way. This idea is planted in the play as philosophical and humorous even in a farcical way. In Stoppardian world, two characters are comically unheroic, as Rosencrantz says, "*I want to go home*" and Guildenstern puts on a comical attitude pretending unconvincingly attempting to appear in control. Guildenstern draws attention to the cycle of life in a comical way where death seems a natural process: "*The only beginning is birth and the only end is death. If you can't count on that, what can you count on?*" Stoppard plays with the expectations of spectators by directing them to ponder the philosophical questions. He turns upside down the most serious subject death within the discussion of his two ordinary characters creating humour:

GUIL. Are you deaf?

ROS. Am I dead?

GUIL. Yes or no?

ROS. Is there a choice?

GUIL. Is there a God?

ROS. Foul! No non sequiturs, three-two, one game all.



The repeated death motive in an absurd play like *R&GAD* surface comic contexts: “*I’m sick of death of it*” (Stoppard, 1967:28), “*I tell you it’s all stopping to a death*” (Stoppard, 1967:27), “*The only beginning is birth and the only end is death*” (Stoppard, 1967:28), “*death followed by eternity . . . the worst of both words*” (Stoppard, 1967:51), “*Stop this thing dead in its tracks*” (Stoppard, 1967:54), “*over my dead body*” (Stoppard, 1967:57), “*We are dead lucky*” (Stoppard, 1967:86). There are more cliché-like expressions in which Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the Player confront the issue of death at cerebral, comic, and philosophical level. Rosencrantz’s ideas on death increase shortly after his first meeting with Hamlet at Elsinore. Rosencrantz’s long speech about death, as expressed in Anja Easterling’s dissertation (1982:170), can be regarded as a counterpart of Hamlet’s most famous speech in English literature: “*To be or not to be*” soliloquy in Act 3, scene 1, line 56-88. Stoppard’s Rosencrantz is a twentieth-century man who is a representative of the Absurd Theatre. For this reason Rosencrantz’s view of death is different from Hamlet who is a representative of an Elizabethan age. According to Hamlet, death is a sleep free from the idea of “after death” and something to be wished for. Easterling (1982) states that Rosencrantz regards death with aversion and fear by bringing it to a “*brutally concrete level*” (Stoppard, 1967:170) with his statement: “*to sleep in a box without any air*” (Stoppard, 1967:50) and “*lying in a box with a lid on it*” (Stoppard, 1967:50) within the framework of characterization and tradition of the Theatre of Absurd. Farce and comedy remain part and, as Rosencrantz did, the characters question their place in the universe from an existentialist view. This kind of questioning makes the characters discuss

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motifs like death in a most philosophical level. As Easterling (1982) points out instead of providing comic relief Rosencrantz draws attention to the horror of death (170). Apart from the idea of “horror of death, the emphasis shall be laid to the loneliness and alienation of individuals with no hope in the twentieth century modern life. What is humorous is the dialogue between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talking about the most serious subject of death in a mocking manner:

ROS. . . . Not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air - you'd wake up dead, for a start and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box. That's the bit I don't like, frankly. That's why I don't think of it... Because you'd be helpless, wouldn't you? Stuffed in a box like that, I mean you'd be in there for ever. Even taking into account the fact that you're dead, it isn't a pleasant thought. Especially if you're dead, really...ask yourself, if I asked you straight off -I'm going to stuff you in this box now, would you rather be alive or dead? Naturally, you'd prefer to be alive. Life in a box is better than no life at all. I expect. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking - well, at least I'm not dead! – In a minute someone's going to bang on the lid and tell me to come out. (Banging on the floor with his fists.) “Hey you, whatsyername! Come out there!”

I wouldn't think about it, if I were you. You'd only get depressed. (Pause). Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where's it going to end? Two early Christians chanced to meet in Heaven. (Stoppard, 1967:50-51)

Shortly before the end, Guildenstern speaks of death in terms of "silence" and "second-hand clothes" and finally of absolute negation. We find in most of Guildenstern's speeches nihilist definition of death, which corresponds with the "absurd" situation. This shows Stoppard's indebtedness to Beckett. Stoppard plays with the expectations of the spectator when Guildenstern snatches a dagger from the player's belt and stabs it to the player. When the tragedians watch the player die the player stands up. For tragedians, death is a performance that can be carried through "heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly, charmingly, or from a great height" (Stoppard, 1967:60). Like Vladimir, Guildenstern is searching for rational, logical explanation of their situation, which will end in their own death:

GUIL. No. . . no . . . not for us, not like that. 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. . . (Stoppard, 1967:91)

Stoppard seeks philosophical issues in the theme of death; he does not give

answers but place questions in the minds of human beings by placing his characters in a most comical manners. As Bull states the dialogues never lead to answers but only more questions. It is important to note that "Stoppard's play refuses to present a reliable voice: uncertainty is all" (Bull, 2001:138). The constant confusion in which they find themselves leaves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feeling unable to make any significant choices in their lives. That is why Guildenstern is always trying to give exact definition of death throughout the play. Bull (2001) points out Stoppard's roots as a playwright, which is seen as a part of "Anglicization of the 'absurd' tradition" (138). There is absurdity in the play from the very beginning, the two characters, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, are already dead as the play's title illustrates: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. They actually do not exist, as it is emphasized in the speech of Gertrude when she first appears in the scene: "He hath much talked of you, / And sure I am, two men there is not living / To whom he more adheres." The Players illustrate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's fate as an outcome when they say: "Decides? It is written . . . 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, 1967:59) Stoppard uses the world of stage to represent the real world. In other words the concept of fate plays a significant role in the lives of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, as the Players emphasized. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz struggle to find the meaning of life by asking hundreds of questions unanswered. Their actions and eventual fate actually reflect humanbeing's struggle to find meaning of its existence while being destined to die, which is unavoidable.

Guildenstern and Rosencrantz continuously ask question; they even ask who they are causing identity crisis. This may be explained through the questioning the existence of modern man who try to survive in the most modernist world.

In the final act of the play, when Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are on the boat heading to their final destiny to England, they discover the letter demanding Hamlet's death has been replaced with that demanding their own deaths. Guildenstern remarks, "Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current" (Stoppard, 1967: 90). Rosencrantz answers: "They had is in for us, didn't they? Right from the beginning. Who'd have thought that we were so important?" (Stoppard, 1967: 90). Rosencrantz states the inevitability of fate as tragedians performed this idea throughout the play using metatheatrical. Guildenstern, who is cleverer than his friend, regrets passivity of their action and unable to make a choice when it was time to do so. They wait for someone to come and something to happen, they get lost without an external manipulation. When they are on their own they adopt an inaction life and entrapped in their deaths. Jonsson puts it in this way:

Stoppard uses the boat as a symbol for life itself. Within certain parameters, we are free to do as we please.

However, the destination remains the same no matter what our actions within our own limited range of choice and freedom. From the very beginning of the play, there is a sense of confinement and inescapability, and the boat perfectly represents the

title pair's entrapment in their unavoidable deaths. (3)

As a conclusion, Stoppard is much interested in the marginal characters that become the major focus in his plays, as Innes (1992) emphasizes, "*the frame turns out to be central*" (346) in which the art of acting becomes significant. Stoppard's play raises philosophical issues with the use of comedy and humorous characters. Even the most trivial game of flipping coin becomes the most important factor in the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is important to note that the coin focuses on major issues: are our lives controlled by chance or by fate? If they are controlled by fate, as it appears in the play, is there any way of knowing what that fate is? Is there any hope of having free-will? Those questions are put forward in the play presented in a most philosophical level. The coin toss is an example on probability; either heads or tail will come up. Still, the law of probability are suspended in the flipping a coin. In the first scene of the play, the coin comes down heads over one-hundred times in a row, which seems impossible. Thus, the tossing of a coin is no longer about chance, but about fate. Fate subsumes chance. What we call chance becomes fate as it can be observed in the play it is the fate of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz to die at the end of the play. They may not escape their doom in any case since they are the actor on the stage of a complicated world.

When the stage goes dark – expressing time to die -- Rosencrantz begins to question their situation by protesting: "*We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?*" (Stoppard, 1967:91), before he disappears. He desires some justification and reasonable explanation for their deaths, as Fleming (2001) states, "*the desire for an explanation for an*

*understanding of who they are, what has transpired, and why” (63). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern passively accept their death sentence as their fate; therefore inaction brings their catastrophe. Instead of trying to alter their fate by destroying the letter or escaping, Guildenstern protests the lack of explanation when he attacks the player. When it is Guildenstern's turn to disappear, half-pronounced names and unfinished sentences become the symbolic representation of the phrase "here one minute and gone the next". Guildenstern in his dying scene realizes the consequences of taking no action when it is too late: "there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said- no. But somehow we missed it" (Stoppard, 1967:91). Then, they give up protesting and accept their fate and disappear since it is their fate to die. What is significant in the play is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not die on stage, but disappear. Some of the audience may be confused whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are actually dead or they just disappeared in the dark. The reality becomes illusionary, whereas the illusion*

becomes a reality. Everything turns upside down with the announcement of the ambassador telling that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Thus, the playwright plays with the emotions of the audience leaving them with thousands of questions in their minds unanswered. The lights are going dim and the music is starting to signify the end of the play.

The open-ended plot signifies a post modern play attitude in which all questions still left unanswered. The passivity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern causes their downfall leaving them apart from the subject position. The confusion of identity, existentialist questions unanswered, inability to take up an action although they had the chance to do so depict humorously the absurdity of modern men who try to survive and find meaning in this bewildering modern world. The quest of identity and the powerless situation of both characters represent individuals with a sense of loneliness, disintegration, and alienation having no sense of identity and memory in this absurd modern world.

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