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POSTMODERNISM IN TOM STOPPARD'S
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

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INTRODUCTION

W.B Yeats (1865 – 1939) one of the Founder figures of modern poetry points out in his poem “The Second Coming” that: -

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

It is true that the above is the modernist view but still in the postmodern world we cannot find any stability or cannot find any centre to hold and I think that Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* tries to visualize that uncertainty or inbetweenness of the postmodern world. My major focus in this study is to show that through the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* how Tom Stoppard tries to show postmodern life, more specifically through the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern how Stoppard tries to show the condition of the postmodern beings. Through my paper I want to highlight the postmodern elements that are reflected in the play and this is the main purpose of this paper. This paper also examines how these elements are related to our life.

Tom Stoppard and Postmodernism

Tom Stoppard is the youngest play writer ever presented a play at the national theater, and his carrier progress to success in the West End brought international recognition. He is arguably the foremost dramatist of our time. We can say that Stoppard has almost altered the face of late twentieth century drama. Stoppard spoke English from an early age and lived in England since he was nine. His writing shows delight in English language and literature, yet he was actually born Czech, as Thomas Straussler, in 1937; and was twice and infant refugee: first from the Nazis 1939 and then in 1942 from

Singapore and the Japanese, at which time his father died—"in enemy hands, that's that" (quoted by Kenneth Tynan in *Show People*). "Stoppard left school at 1954, aged 17 and thoroughly bored by the idea of anything intellectual.... alienated by everyone from Shakespeare to Dickens" (*Theater Quarterly*). For nine years he worked as a journalist in Bristol: eventually he tried his hand at fiction and plays. In 1963 he moved to London, where his first TV play was shown and a novel was commissioned; this was followed by plays for BBC radio and short stories in a hard back anthology.

These days, Tom Stoppard is most widely known as the man who penned the screenplay for the Oscar - winning film *Shakespeare in Love*. But Stoppard made his first big mark three decades earlier with a complex, densely philosophical puzzle of a play that spun off from *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which puts Stoppard on the theatrical map in 1967. The breakthrough year was 1966, when *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, was acclaimed at the Edinburgh festival. For well over 30 years since then, Stoppard has consistently held his position as one of England's most admired and enjoyed dramatists. He was knighted - become "Sir Tom" - 1997. In addition to his own plays he has scripted adaptations of European comedies and screenplays of many films, including the 1999 successes, *Shakespeare in Love*. Stoppard describes himself as a conservative, and is half-way religious - "I approve of belief in God and try to behave as if there is one, but that hardly amounts to faith" (*In Conversation: Guppy*).

The blend between comedy and tragedy is very marked in Stoppard's work. His interest in philosophy is also a strong presence in a number of plays. Stoppard is a great entertainer and hugely funny. This appears to confuse the examiners and critics, who sometimes find it hard to believe that some one so entertaining can also, be so profound. Theater, Stoppard says in the preface to a collection of his plays, is "first and foremost a recreation", and his own writing (screenplays apart) intends to make us smile or laugh. He gives us groan - worthy puns as well as dazzling ones, and sometimes an overlap with broad popular farce (Jim Hunter qtd in *Faber Critical Guides: Tom Stoppard*, 2000:3)

Stoppard delights in upsetting the audience's expectations.

At the heart of Stoppard's plays is an intense sympathy for the underdog, a huge affection for ordinary people and a strong awareness of life's absurdities. Death is one of the themes in his work. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Guildenstern sees death as the only certainty, but even this security is removed from him by the player, who shows that death is actually more convincing when it is acted. A recurrent figure in Stoppard's work is the pragmatist, best seen perhaps in the "Player" from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and "Archie" from *Jumpers*. Sometimes, morality is the major issue in Stoppard plays and whether or not there is any absolute morality that can always be applied to human behavior (Martin Stephen qtd in *English Literature - A Student Guide* 2000:329).

A critic of the modern age. Tom Stoppard uses his art form to criticize society's inability to handle the thought that we are governed by chaos. The modern world has created fate as an excuse for not doing anything to shape or change our outcome. Stoppard uses his plays as a mirror held up to society, showing his audience the ridiculousness of leaving everything up to fate. It is true that Stoppard is a contemporary dramatist but most of his plays, especially *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, reflects the ideas and thoughts of postmodernism.

We know that in English literature the contemporary age begins after the Second World War. Contemporary age exists in between modern and postmodern age. Nobody knows the exact date of the beginning or ending of the contemporary period; some where in the 1970s contemporary age disappears and postmodernism begins. In that sense contemporary literature emerges from modern literature and at the same time gives way to postmodern literature. Stoppard began writing *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in 1964. The 20th century and more specifically the late 20th century, was a time of change and turmoil. Stoppard's transformation of *Hamlet* can be seen as a formalized 20th century statement regarding the nature of the truth: it is contingent, contextual, and ultimately unknowable. This of course, is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's dilemma: they are trapped in limbo between knowing and not knowing.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard cleverly removes the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet*, extends Shakespeare's caricatures of them, and makes them postmodern. The play is now about how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern present the viewer with an image of postmodern attitudes. "Stoppard's use of *Hamlet* is in some ways a postmodern gesture. By appropriating such an iconic text as *Hamlet* and presenting it from the perspective of peripheral characters and then playing upon them for his own purposes, Stoppard demonstrates that the human experience can not be fully understood by focusing on the dominant narrative" (http://hsc.csu.edu.au/english/advanced/comparative_study/transformations/2605/HamletRG.htm#rg_trans).

Postmodernism in many ways a continuation and intensification of modernism. Whereas modernism lamented on the death of meaning postmodernism dances on its grave. Postmodern artist gleefully rejects structure, order, and constantly in favor of disorder, chaos and random play. Just as Tom Stoppard, all postmodernists manipulate language, forms and images according to their own ways and the language of their play revel puns, parody and pastiche which we can see in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Some critics describe this play as an amazing triumph of theater, drama and postmodernism.

In the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, we find the element of shock which links it to the "theater of absurd". Some people says that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a satirical retelling of the 17th century melodrama through the eyes of Hamlet's long time friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; some describes it as an Elizabethan version of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, but with jokes. Different people have different opinions regarding the play but we can say that it is typically a postmodern play; though it inspired by two famous plays, it's ambiguous ending and playful style combines to make it a very different play. It is true that Tom Stoppard is a contemporary play writer but most of his plays reflect the ideas, thoughts and issues of postmodernism which we cannot ignore and from that point of view we can say that

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, is completely a postmodern text. And at the same time Tom Stoppard has a close relationship with the postmodern age.

Postmodernism:

The term postmodern has in the last decade become an increasingly popular label for something about the end of the twentieth century. It also refers to a contemporary intellectual movement, or rather, a not very happy family of intellectual movements. The members of the postmodern family not only express conflicting views, but are interested in barely overlapping subject matters: art, communications, media, history, economics, politics, ethics, cosmology, theology, methodology, literature and education (Introduction, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, 1996 :). Postmodernism is a word of our times which by its very nature hard to define. No one can give a definite definition of postmodernism. It is very difficult to define postmodernism in one word and another problem is that different people have different opinions, thoughts and ideas about postmodernism. So, postmodernism can't be defined with a simple sentence because postmodernism has lots of components and directions.

We can say postmodernism generally refers to a kind of free – floating in an intellectual space, having cast ourselves off from all past explanations of why things seem as they are – not only the explanation by Newtonian physics, but also those of Religion, Marxism, Psycho analysis; even History. So we can say that postmodernism is one of the most controversial, influential and intellectual movements to appear in the last 50 years (<http://sv2.123helpme.com/preview.asp?id=43783>).

In order to understand postmodernism, it would be wise to begin with a definition of modernism. Modernism is philosophy based on the belief that through Enlightenment values of rationality and absolute truth of science, the human race will evolve into a utopia. Modernist thinkers had a belief that through reason and knowledge they can change the world and make people happy. Modernists are Eurocentric, humanistic and optimistic but late modernists are pessimist. Postmodernism is an essentially a rejection

of modernism and all Enlightenment values. More importantly postmodernists look upon the modern world with increased cynicism and disappointment. But still we must understand modernism better to understand postmodernism. Postmodernism can be viewed as an expansion of modernism.

Postmodernism begins by doubting everything. Postmodernists believe that everything is arbitrary, subject to change and ambiguous. It does not limit the idea of truth to only that which can be observed. Postmodernism combines simultaneous fragmentation and blurring of boundaries in a universe where no absolute truth governs the definition of reality and morality. Postmodernism is all encompassing. Postmodernism does not allow for only one definition for anything. There are several explanations for phenomena (<http://sv2.123belgme.com/preview.asp?id=63794>). Postmodernism deals with a floating world; nothing is fixed here, and there is no morality or sense of responsibility. Postmodernism depends on parody and deals with topsy-turvy and crazy world.

In postmodernism there is no one single meaning. In other words, the meaning is solid and we can have multiple meanings. Postmodernism denies the ideas of presence. Postmodernist does not believe in originality. It implies that nothing is authentic, real, pure and original because in the postmodern world everything is made up and fictional and nothing is real. The real no longer exists in the postmodern world because postmodernism is busily involved with asserting the real. In other words there is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation; there is only the simulacrum. The critique of the presence is sometimes expressed by saying that "there is nothing outside the text" (Introduction, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, 1996:14).

Postmodernism tries to show that what others have regarded as a unity, a single, integral existence or concept, is plural. In the postmodern world everything is constituted by relations to other things; hence nothing is simple, immediate or totally present and no analysis of anything can be complete or final. (Introduction, *From Modernism to*

Postmodernism: An Anthology.1996:15). Everything is constituted and contingent in the postmodern world and even truth is also constituted in the postmodern world.

Some key features in postmodern thoughts include: intertextuality, randomness, change, arbitrariness, surface and superficiality, self-consciousness, multiple perspectives, skepticism, relativisms, parody, hybridity, self-reflexivity and so on. So from all these views and perceptions we can understand that postmodernism is a very vast area which is very difficult to define. We can summarize that postmodernism always tend to break normal norms and values. In other words we can say that postmodernism subverts the idea which we think is normal and usual.

For writing this introduction I depend particularly on the internet and some books to gather information about Tom Stoppard, postmodernism and also about the connection between postmodernism and Tom Stoppard. [Http://www.123help.com](http://www.123help.com) and <http://www.google.com> helped me to find out some information about Tom Stoppard and the postmodern age. I have also gathered some information from the book *English literature a student guide* – by Martin Stephen and *Faber Critical Guides* – by Jim Hunter. It is true that all these books and websites helped me to prepare my writing but I tried to write in my own way and not directly follow the ideas of the books and sites.

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is undoubtedly a postmodern play because it highlights postmodern elements which we can not ignore: intertextuality, inbetweenness and uncertainty of the postmodern world: lack of centre, hybridity or mixture, chance, confusion and identity crises of the postmodern world. The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is completely playful and also rejects the idea of grand narratives.

Chapter – I

INTERTEXTUALITY

Simply, intertextuality is carrying or referring to another text. When a text carries another text then it can be defined as intertextuality. Intertextuality is the process whereby one text plays upon other texts, the way in which refers endlessly to further elements within the realm of cultural production (Barthes, 1977). Intertextuality is a very common feature of every post modern text. The fundamental concept of intertextuality is that no text, much as it might like to appear, so, is original and unique in itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting references to and quotation from other texts. Intertextuality is a very useful concept; indeed some would say essential for literary study (Graham Allen, University, College, Cork)

Art is sometimes said to draw on previous art as much as on real life. In Stoppard's case this is certainly so. We all know that the two of the world's best known plays, *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot*, lie behind Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. This play is intertextual in that sense because the main structure of the play is based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and at the same time initially it follows the structure of *Waiting for Godot* : two men with nothing to do, trying to work out why they are here. Stoppard uses every scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear, except the byplay with a recorder (III. ii.270) – though words of *Hamlet* in that scene mysteriously find their way in to Guildenstern's mouth (P.104). The story of *Hamlet* maps out the clear course of this play, and is a well known one; the funny and disturbing scenes are of course Stoppard's, yet as we sit in the audience we are always looking forward to the next scrap of Shakespeare to see how it will be handled. It is true that Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is inspired by Beckett's broadly comic particularly in *Waiting for Godot* and influenced by Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but the play is not an attempt to rewrite *Waiting for Godot* in the frame of Shakespeare's drama.

What Stoppard did is that he takes the characters, some actions and some scenes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and gives those actions and characters to his intellects and at the same time through these actions, characters and scenes he takes us back to *Hamlet* and this is the main intertextual quality of the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. For example, the conversation reproduced below between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take us back to *Hamlet*.

ROS: What are you driving at?

GUIL: (with emphasis) what's your name?!

ROS: repetition. Two – love. Match point to me

GUIL: (Setting him violently): WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

ROS: Rhetoric! Game and match! (Pause) where's it going to be 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?" (1.32)

The above conversation between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern takes us back to Hamlet's one of the famous soliloquy "To be or not to be, that is the question" in (III, i.45).

In fact we can say that this famous speech is the intertextual echo that resounds through Stoppard's play. The conversation between the Rosencrantz and the Player in Act – 1 return back to *Hamlet* again and again. For example:

ROS: To watch.

PLAYER: Watch what?

ROS: A private performance.

PLAYER: How private?

ROS: Well, there are only two of us. Is that enough? (1.17)

There is far more of *Hamlet* in Act – 2, coming relatively first and furious and this can also be a very good example of intertextuality. We all know that Act two of Stoppard's play starts with the scene from *Hamlet's* (II. ii.29-30). In Stoppard's play the dumb show to be performed in front of Claudius suddenly takes on a life of it's own and develops into a dumb show of the further action of *Hamlet*, in which the audience perceives (though they themselves apparently don't) that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doomed. The blackout then takes us on to the premature end of "The Murder of Gonzago", curtailed by Claudius: after which the dead likeness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rise and prove now to be Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves, still alive though still doomed (Jim Hunter qtd in *Faber Critical Guides*.2000:40).

Another detail of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that Stoppard capitalizes on in his play is the unquestioning manner in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accept directives from the king. In *Hamlet* these two are asked to delve into the life of a childhood friend and they try. They are sent off to England with this friend who, to the best of their knowledge, has just committed murder, carrying a letter to deliver of which the contents they are unaware; they go. Somehow Shakespeare makes such a set of circumstances appear normal, but Stoppard brings to light this surprisingly strange situation. Stoppard provides us with characters who would follow in such senseless foot steps, fools who see their execution order and dumbly accept it. Even the title of Stoppard's play is quoted from the last pages of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (P, 94).

On the other hand we can say that Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* carries the essence of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Sometimes in some occasions the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remind us of Vladimir and Estragon, the character's of *Waiting for Godot*. It is true that in many ways Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are different from Vladimir and Estragon but sometimes the condition of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern takes us back to the condition of Vladimir and Estragon. We all know that Vladimir and Estragon are two – tramp – like clowns who meet on a

country road in the evening to wait for Mr. Godot to arrive. Instead of coming, Godot sends his apologies via a boy servant. In the whole play these two characters have nothing to do, except waiting for the Godot, yet that Godot never comes. Like Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern just pass their time by talking and waiting for something to happen: the difference is that Vladimir and Estragon wait for someone whom they have some idea but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are just waiting for the sake of waiting, they don't even know why they are waiting and whom they are waiting for.

Beckett's subject matter is frustration of all human yearning – for a meaning to life, for health and happiness, for love, his characters are not only physically frustrated – by illness, senility, physical handicap but also mentally blocked: fragments of philosophical enquiry get side-tracked, or repeatedly recycled or interrupted. And yet they keep trying again, just as Beckett himself spoke of artists having “nothing to express, nothing which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express” and yet “the obligation to express”. To some extent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sufferers from the Beckett's condition, dropped in to the action of *Hamlet*. They are marginally more coherent than Beckett's characters in their struggle to make sense of their situation, but in the end they are equally defeated. (Jim Hunter qtd in *After Critical Gender* 2000:25-26).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead has, however, far richer material than Beckett's play. To his original brilliant notion of following Rosencrantz and Guildenstern around out of Shakespeare's play, Stoppard then added a further idea almost better still – inserting Shakespeare's traveling players into go-betweens, who linked the fixed course of the classic play with the postmodern speech and concerns of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and also provided thoughts about theater itself. Stoppard is thus able to ring the changes on three different kinds of action: the dialogue of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, their interplay with the player and tragedians; and the fragments of the *Hamlet*. By referring both to the classic and modern play Stoppard ingeniously makes his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, an intertextual text, a very important statement of postmodern literature.

Chapter -2

UNCERTAINTY AND INBETWEENNESS

We all know that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, written in 1960s, a time when postmodernism begins, is a postmodern take on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Stoppard effectively relocates Shakespeare's play to the 1960s by reassessing and reevaluating the themes and character's of *Hamlet* and considering core values and attitudes of the 1960s - a time significantly different to that of Shakespeare. He relies on the audiences' already established knowledge of *Hamlet* and transforms a revenge tragedy into a postmodern play, which shifts the focus from royalty to common man. Through this play, Stoppard is able to make a statement about his society, or we can say that he creates a play that reflected the attitudes and circumstances of the postmodern world. Stoppard deliberately alters the configuration of the play to create a confusing atmosphere, which creates the exact image of postmodern society. Through the characters **Rosencrantz** and Guildenstern, Tom Stoppard tries to show the uncertainty and inbetweenness of the postmodern world.

In the opening scene we see that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are playing dice. Their world is full of uncertainty: their past is a mystery, their names seem interchangeable and they must struggle for even the most fundamental knowledge of why they have been sent for. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's activity of tossing coins at the beginning of the play serves not only as an indicator of the paranormal nature of their world but also as an example of how much of their existence is spent merely passing time. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's world time seems to stretch on indefinitely. As in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, character must pass time and Stoppard's pass time of chance is play. Although in the game they are talking to one another, nothing much is being said, no real communication is being achieved. Guildenstern constantly seeks to understand the world around him. He wants to know how it is possible for a coin to land

almost a hundred times in a row heads up. He wants to know why they are summoned to court, what they are supposed to do for Hamlet or what is in the letter they have been carrying.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are always confined to a limited area (a road, the court, a ship). They don't remember their past (not even their names), they don't know where they are, where they should go, what they should do; in fact we can say that they are totally in an in-between situation. They are always together and on the stage spend most of the time playing games and conveying the feeling of isolation and uncertainty. The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* does not have any beginning, middle and ending and through this uncertainty Stoppard wants to show us that this world has no beginning and no ending. This is a play where we can't settle down in anyway.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard creates an empty world and confused similar characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in a world that they can not understand. As a result they do not realize their purpose or their place in the entire social scheme. Their indecisiveness and bumbling nature only add to their "worthlessness", never making a decision without talking in circles or establishing a purpose for themselves in a world. It is obvious that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern live in a strange world, and have low self-esteem. They are unaware of time as they ideally change and they exist. In their pointless verbal game, the questions are never answered as more questions are asked to keep the game going. Their roundabout way of talking, their uncertainty about their identity and memories, their constant questioning and their confusion about what they are doing add up to the notion that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are confused and uncertain about their existence and also about their surroundings. They are so uncertain that they cannot differentiate between being alive and dead. We can say that they are caught up in events they can neither understand, nor control, or that it seems that they are stuck in between "life" and "death".

The language of the play also reflects the uncertainty and inbetweenness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's world. In the play Stoppard employs meaningless

colloquial exchanges, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's question game, (which strongly contrasts to Shakespeare's elaborate and poetic verse). Stoppard's language expresses the ambiguous nature of the truth. There is no underlying fixed meaning in words. The lack of control over their lives is mirrored in the fragmentation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's language and their persistent use of questions. Their dialogue abounds in nonsense and crosstalk and in their conversation questions are replied by other questions, as if to prove the lack of certainties. Their conversation is no longer used to communicate, but to fill the time to prevent people from thinking about the misery of their existence. In this play Stoppard's use of language extends the idea of purposelessness and insignificance.

Through this play and through this two characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Stoppard tries to show us that we are stuck in this world, since our future is already given and we have no way of escaping our destiny. In the postmodern world we are not in command of our own fate and the future is given and one can not change it. Through the situation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Stoppard tries to show us that postmodern man has even lost capacity for disbelief. Like all postmodern human beings Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot even locate themselves dramatically in space.

In this play there is no way out, there can possibly be no way out for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to avoid their death at the end. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have foreknowledge of their death, yet they can do nothing about it at all. They all have to continue as directed by an unknown force, because they are stuck in amber. Sometimes in the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may seem like puppets. They seem like they have no free will, and they are "led" from the above. These two bewildered innocents or we can say two lost souls cannot do anything about their destiny but they can just wait for something to happen.

In such an uncertain world, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the only reality and certainty are death. Although they do not know what is it? when it all began; Guildenstern does assert that "The only beginning is birth and the only end is death - if

"you can't count on that, what can you count on?" (1. 29). This means the man knows there is a birth and there is a death but does not know what there is between them, life, and can hardly do something to determine their existence. Generally, the uncertainty of the after life makes the death mysterious and fearful but for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, life is a mystery and death is the only certainty. In their world life is seen as purposeless, directionless and uncertain.

The 20th century could easily be summed up as an age of uncertainty. When it began, nearly one hundred years ago, religious certitude was already eroding and the process has continued steadily as we approach the 21st century, leaving all human beings unsure about their existence of an all powerful, all knowing and all loving divine being, which guarantees the order and rationality of the universe. Two unexpected world wars and the explosion of atomic weapons have made us uncertain about our continued existence of the planet. In this postmodern world we are uncertain and unsure about everything. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we are given roles and we have to play and we don't know where we are located in metaphysically in time and space. Guildenstern continuously tries to locate a place or hold on to a point but he fails to hold it. In fact, we fail to hold any center. We are in an in-between situation and this is the tragedy of the postmodern man. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know nothing of their mission or why they are here; in fact they stand for all humanity, which knows nothing of what life truly is or why they are here. So in the postmodern world, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we are uncertain about everything: life, death, knowing, unknowing and so on. Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, thus tries to articulate the uncertainty of the postmodern age.

Chapter – 3

LACK OF IDENTITY

The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, examines Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the perspective of two minor characters. In Stoppard's play, characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are not fully developed in the original play, fumble around bewildered about their mission and the reason for their existence. Tom Stoppard writes the play from the inside out, changing the very nature of the characters to reflect current postmodern dilemma, on our "lack of identity". In a world of illusions, where everyone practices theatrics and must "prepare a face to meet the faces that [one] meet [s]" ("Prologue" 28), it seems difficult to define oneself and locate one's existence. This difficulty is especially true for the title characters of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. These characters are merely minute parts of the universe and have no particular role to play in it. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare doesn't even allow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern separate personalities. Because they are falsely polite whenever they speak, they seem faceless and interchangeable. Stoppard's play repeatedly on this, moreover, makes up Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – even they themselves do so.

In Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very likeable, and a couple of "well-meaning innocents". They always appear as a pair to compensate for the lack of individual personality. Since the very beginning the two fellows long for a clear identity. They have no memory and cannot adjust themselves to their present situations, contributing their dilemma about their self-identity. After rambling about beards and names, Guildenstern suddenly asks, "do you remember the first thing that happened here?" (1.1.17). When Rosencrantz replies that a messenger sent for them, he seemed thoughtful about his own explanation for the reason for their travels. By the time they meet the "Player" Rosencrantz is pathetically unable to correctly distinguish himself from Guildenstern. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fail to get their names correct. Similarly

other characters in the play confuse them, highlighting their insignificance: "My name is Guildenstern and this is Rosencrantz. I'm sorry - his name's Guildenstern and I'm, Rosencrantz." (1.1.16). They obviously cannot register their own identities or values. This strange lack of identity and individuality show their miserable condition.

Rosencrantz becomes frustrated about never knowing for sure whether his name is Rosencrantz or Guildenstern; Guildenstern replies, "We are comparatively fortunate; we might ~~have~~ been left to shift the whole field of human nomenclature like two blind men feeling a bazaar for their own portraits - - - At least we are presented with alternatives." (1.1.28). Part of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's inability to pin down their own identities lies in the lack of character development given to each in Shakespeare's play. In *Hamlet* they are not intended to be individual with deep philosophical ideas; they are ~~simply~~ more than stock characters. They are written to be fools, and with that destiny come a lack of self-awareness. Rosencrantz introduces himself by the wrong name and neither of them recognizes themselves as the spies in the dumb show. They are unable to see themselves reflected in the art of theater; they cannot foresee their fates and thus cannot avert their own death.

The main tragedy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is that *Hamlet* happens around them and they are helplessly dragged along. They try to figure out their identities and how they came to be in their surroundings but they couldn't. Throughout the play they search for their own identities. They try to find out who they are and why they are here. They began their life one morning being summoned to Hamlet's castle, but have no memory of any life before that morning. Shakespeare's story unfolds around them, and they find themselves falling right into the old English dialect, when they are interacting with other characters and then right back into modern English once they are alone again. The player performs the story of *Hamlet* before their eyes but they don't recognize themselves in it. And all this time they never know for sure which of them have which name, because Shakespeare always treats them as a duo and never distinguishes between them and Stoppard does the same thing in his play.

The tragedy of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is that, they have no existence of their own and their existence depends on Hamlet's existence. The moment Hamlet comes in the play they are nobody. They do not exist without Hamlet with any point or any moment. They need Hamlet for their release or even for their death. When Hamlet comes on the stage they realize that they are nobody and they don't belong to this world.

If we carefully analyze the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we will find that there are a number of differences between the two, Rosencrantz is optimistic, down to earth, imperceptive, simple-minded and Guildenstern is pessimistic, intellectual, conceptual, idealistic and so on. It is true that to some extent they are different from each other but their tragedy is that in the play they are indistinguishable and dispensable. Characters such as Claudius, Gertrude and even Hamlet often call them by wrong names; in fact Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often unable to distinguish them from each other. This is the reality of their life. The only real truth is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no fixed identities. We can say that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as representatives of the human condition have no control over fate and are the victims of the arbitrary circumstances. They have no past and no future and they only exist through other people's definitions of them.

In the play Stoppard is exploring the 20th century notion of existentialism which is essentially concerned with the problem of self-identity. The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, creates an environment where people are isolated from each other and down-like characters blunder their way through life because they don't know what they are. Through *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's* isolation and identity crises Stoppard tries to express that in the postmodern world our identities are contingent and uncertain. What are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we are stuck in a world where other people's actions determine our survivals. We may search for an answer or a meaning to our existence but most likely we will never find it. Through this play Stoppard tries to express that in the postmodern world just like his two main characters we are never sure of our own

identities. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we find ourselves at the center of an incomprehensible world; lonely, searching for our own identities and trying to understand the right and meaning of our existence.

Joseph Duncan explains, (<http://home.sprintmail.com/~lifeform/beckstop.html>) "the characters become part of a pattern of events – whose cause and purpose they do not understand – which they cannot or will not escape and which both gives them their only identity and carries them to their death" (65). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern represent the concept of everyman, or put more simply, they are no different from us. We can say that it is a work of absurdist postmodernism, because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may as well be any two of us. We go through life not knowing what our role, our purpose in everything is and the harder we look the more we are forced to give up and let things happen around us. And at the end we just become part of a greater story, one which we could not fully grasp even if someone explained it to us right to our faces. We feel more for Shakespeare's characters and we sympathize with their inability to completely change their fate, their longing for their own identity, as we ourselves struggle with the same problem. We can say that the intellectual complexities and intricacies of this play help us to see our own lives.

Chapter – 4

HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is one of the most important elements of postmodern literature. Hybridity in its most basic sense means "to mix". Hybridity is thus the possession or occurrence of mixture. A hybrid is something that is mixed, so hybridity is simply a mixture. In other words, a hybrid means something of mixed origin or composition that adds variety or complexity to a system. In literature hybridity could mean the blurring of traditionally distinct boundaries between different artistic media. Hybridity expands the possibilities for experimentation. Today the term hybridity has become one of the most recurrent conceptual leitmotifs in postmodern literature. Postmodernism blends old themes with new contemporary issues to create beautiful artwork that commands, questions, and captivates all viewers to participate in discovering its inner meaning; and this blend can be described as a hybridity or mixture ([http:// en. wikipedia .org/wiki Hybridity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybridity)). According to this view we can say that both the humor and the darkness of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, derive substantially from the blending of ancient and modern; in short we can describe the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as a hybrid play.

Stoppard's plays present a unique interplay between comedy and the most basic and serious challenges to human understanding. He uses joke and comic routines; but at the same time he is also writing about moral responsibility, about goodness and about our scientific, mathematical, or philosophical understanding of reality. Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* examines the lives of Shakespeare's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* from *Hamlet* while the action of *Hamlet* swirls around them. The links with *Waiting for Godot* are obvious; both plays are tragicomedies and both have two rather amiable but weak central figures lost and wholly confused in a world they do not understand and which seems hostile to them. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are two relatively minor characters, but in Stoppard's play

they are the central characters and always on the stage. Though they are dressed as Elizabethan gentleman, Stoppard's gives them 20th century intellectuals and this mixture makes his play a hybrid one.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard examines the issues within the context of comedy using such devices as a word games and slapstick to address complex question regarding authority, morality, the existence of God, the nature of art and reality, the uncertainties of the postmodern world and other issues. The mixture of the comic and the serious in Stoppard's work has led some to characterize his play as a "Philosophical farce". We can say that Stoppard is widely praised for his wit and technical virtuosity, but also his profound seriousness.

It is true that the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, is itself 'comedy' but the work on which it draws is Shakespearean tragedy, which is manipulated to fit into the context of the new drama. In achieving this literary transformation, Stoppard makes use of comic tropes such as satire and parody; he also, however, sets tragic elements and themes into his own comic plots, thus completing the process of assimilation. It's true that the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, centered around serious topics such as death, fate, uncertainty, non-existence and so on but still manages to achieve a comic catharsis and at the same time instructs the audience and people of the world. The events and the characters of the play dramatize the serious matters of life in a somehow light-hearted manner. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard skillfully shows the overall tragedy of life through the medium of comedy and this is the main effect of the hybrid quality of the plot.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, we have the combination of high and low or popular and elitist. In other words there is an element of double-coding in the play. The play gives us the mixture of comedy and deep pessimism; uncertainty and fear. In the play a lot of the time Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk about something very funny or they play and play and play but at the next moment they talk about something very serious like death. The conversation reproduced below between Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern show us that how a purposeless and unserious conversation can turn into a matter as serious as metaphysics:

GUIL: What did you expect?

ROS: Something . . . someone . . . nothing. *(They sit facing front.)* Are you hungry?

GUIL: No, are you?

ROS *(shrugs)*: No, You remember that coin?

GUIL: No.

ROS: I think I lost it.

GUIL: What coin?

ROS: I don't remember exactly.

(Pause)

GUIL: Oh, that coin . . . clever.

ROS: I can't remember how I did it.

GUIL: It probably comes natural to you.

ROS: Yes, I've got a show-stopper there.

GUIL: Do it again.

(Slight pause)

ROS: We can't afford it.

GUIL: Yes, one must think of the future.

ROS: It's the normal thing.

GUIL: To have one. One is, after all, having it all the time . . . now . . . and now . . . and now . . .

ROS: It could go on for ever. Well, not for ever, I suppose. *(Pause.)* Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead. Lying in a box with a lid on it?

GUIL: No. *(2.50)*

At the beginning of the above conversation Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk about something very unserious like coin but as the conversation proceed suddenly they talk about something very serious like future and death.

In this play Stoppard mixes commoners such as Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Player, Tragedians and aristocrats like Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia in a way so that sometimes they appear as very different from each other and sometimes they are the same. It is notable that when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are talking to each other they use a "modern dialect" but when they talk with the King and the Queen they use Elizabethan English. so we can say that in his play Stoppard mixes the two dialects and this is linguistic hybridity.

In the play when Rosencrantz says that "I want a good story with a beginning, middle and end" (2.59), this makes us laugh because they are living in a world where there is no beginning, middle and end and he wants a complete story; this is also very funny. But at the same time this line makes us feel bad about them or makes us sympathize with them because we know that they are living in a world where there is no order. It is true that their search for beginning, middle and end make us laugh but at the same time when we think of their condition and how they live in such a disorderly world, we feel depressed. In his play Stoppard ingeniously combines these comic and tragic elements or we can say that through Rosencrantz's funny and unserious line Stoppard wants to show us the serious matter of humanity: the chaos and disorder of the postmodern world.

In the play the moment of high seriousness comes when Guildenstern expresses his opinions about death: "No, no, no It's nothing like that Death is not romantic . . . death is not anything . . . death is . . . not. It's the absence of presence, nothing more . . . the endless time of never coming backA gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound" (3.93). All these lines of Guildenstern express a profound philosophy of death. We all know that in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the two characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern often provide comic relief, and their main purpose is to relieve the tension of the play. But in his play Stoppard makes these two characters as central figures and through their witty and comic conversation expresses serious issues regarding the humanity.

The mixture of theories of myths, mathematics, economics and religion with gambling, playing dice, local comedies or vulgar and dirty jokes, that is of the "high and the low" make *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* completely different from other plays. In this play Stoppard manages to be funny and sad, comic and grim, philosophic and farcical. Seriousness, tragedy, farce, time and death are some important elements of this play. In the play we see that one moment the situation is tragic and the next moment it is comic. Sometimes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk about metaphysical things and sometimes about silly, farcical and pointless things. In this play we have tragedy at one point and we have comedy at the next; we have moments of high tension and suddenly we have moments of fun. So what we have in this play is inflation and deflation and this is the main rhythm of the play, for sometimes it is serious and sometimes funny. In his play Stoppard skillfully blends these serious and funny elements and thus makes his play a "hybrid" one.

Chapter - 5

REJECTION OF GRAND NARRATIVES

Grand narrative or meta-narrative is a term introduced by Jean Francois Lyotard in his classic 1979 work The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, in which Lyotard summed up a range of views which were being developed at the time as a critique of the institutional and ideological forms of knowledge. Lyotard (1924-1998) was a French philosopher and literary theorist. He is well known for his articulation of postmodernism after late 1970s. Lyotard's work is characterized by a persistent opposition to universals, grand narratives and generality. He is fiercely critical of many of the 'Universalist' claims of the Enlightenment, and several of his works serve to undermine the fundamental principles that generate these broad claims. In The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Lyotard argued that our age (with its postmodern condition) is marked by "incredulity towards metanarratives". These metanarratives - sometimes "grand narratives" - are grand, large - scale theories and philosophies of the world, and about ideas such as the progress of history, the knowability of everything by science, and the possibility of absolute freedom. Lyotard argues that we have ceased to believe that narratives of these kinds are adequate to represent and contain us all (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Fran%e3%ois_Lyotard).

We have become alert to difference, diversity, the incompatibility, of our motivations, beliefs and desires and for that reason postmodernity is characterized by an abundance of mini-narratives. According to Lyotard, in the postmodern period, people no longer believe in grand narratives and all those Enlightenment views. "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is speculative narrative or narratives of emancipation" (Lyotard qtd in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, 1979:490). In his essay Lyotard states that in the postmodern world we can escape the grand narratives: now it is time for local

narratives, and nothing can be on a long term basis: nothing is forever and everything is for the time being.

Now the question is how Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* rejects the ideas of grand narratives. As we all know, this play was produced in the year 1960s. When Stoppard wrote *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, England was dealing with the aftermath of WW II and the end of colonization, causing the public to question authority, challenge precedence and debunk mythologies associated with power and prestige. At that time most people of England was unsure about everything; many of them had lost their faith in religion and in all Enlightenment views. We can say that this is the situation of the characters of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, who can not rely on anything.

It is true that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a postmodern text and postmodernists argue that no grand narrative is possible but this play does not wholly follows the ideas of Lyotard which he expresses in his essay The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. In this essay Lyotard talks about many issues of grand narratives all of which are not needed for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. But as we are talking about grand narratives, we cannot ignore Lyotard's views since he is the theorist who first used the term "grand narratives".

Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in many ways questions grand narratives and deals with local narratives. In the play Stoppard rejects such grand issues as the ideas of teleology. Simply, teleology means 'the doctrines of the final causes'. Teleology is the philosophical study of design, purpose, directive principle, or finality in nature or human creation. In other words, a teleological argument is an argument for the existence of God or a creator based on perceived evidence of order, purpose, design and /or direction in nature ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Teleology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teleology)). In the play through the condition of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Stoppard shows that there is no order, purpose, design or direction in their world. We all know that this play does not have any beginning, middle and end. By rejecting the teleological circle that

everything has a beginning and a final end, Stoppard actually tries to break all the grand rules opposed to postmodernism and make his play a completely fresh and new one which deals with local issues. We can say that through this play Stoppard tries to say that there is no formal or final explanation for any phenomena in the postmodern world.

We know that in classical theatre most of the plays contain "Five Acts" such as Introduction, Middle, Denouement (unrevealing), Climax and Conclusion but Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* does not follow this track. It is true that Stoppard's play is based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but he completely rejects the classical theatrical ideas of the ending. The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* ends in a very ambiguous way. Through this play Stoppard rejects the traditional way of ending; that is to say a complete ending. This play ends in a way that creates a lot of questions in the mind of the readers or audiences. We can say that this ending is not the final ending rather it is the beginning of a new story.

We all know that *Hamlet* is mostly written as poetry, in "blank verse" with an elevated tone. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Stoppard uses some passages from *Hamlet*, but most of it is written in colloquial prose (giving the effect of deflation). This play is laden with rhetorical questions, repetition, witty repartee, biblical references and references to literature. By using colloquial language Stoppard makes his play closer to the life of the common people and this can be an example of rejection of grand narratives.

This play reveals that truth is contingent and is something which is not permanent. This means that the play expresses that truth is truth for the time being. In fact in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's world everything is constituted for the time being, for the moment. They have no future and have no past, so for them the present is everything. Just like postmodern beings they only live for the present; nothing is permanent and there is no permanent or total solution in their world. Like all the postmodern beings Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are skeptical about all the ideas of grand narratives, enlightenment views and even life because their life is completely meaningless. They live for the

moment: they play, talk and pass time, as if they are just having fun. We can say, like all postmodern beings they are not concerned about anything.

We know that the promise of the enlightenment was to free mankind from the irrationalities of myth, religion and superstition through reason and knowledge. Through all the grand ideas of knowledge and science they wanted to make the world certain and stable but in the 20th century with the experiences of the Second World War, people have lost their hope and faith in everything. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* when Guildenstern says, "the scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against pure emotion of fear" (l. 11-12.) it makes clear that in his play Stoppard has created a space in which science is not a certainty. Like Lyotard, Tom Stoppard as a writer of the 1960s thinks that in postmodern world we cannot depend on grand narratives anymore. Through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's uncertainties, through their disbelief and through their present condition Stoppard tries to give us a glimpse of the condition of his society where there is no depth at all: everything is for the time being; and is fragmented. So through this play Stoppard sometimes directly or sometimes indirectly tries to show us that in postmodern world there is no place for grand narratives.

Chapter-6

PLAYFULNESS

We all know that playfulness is an important element of postmodernism. Simply, playfulness or parody means making fun or ridiculing something. Postmodernism promotes parody, irony and playfulness and as a postmodern play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, is not out of that. We can say that this play is an amazingly witty retelling of *Hamlet* from the perspective of two minor characters, mixed with existential philosophy and excellent repartee. According to Matt Hetling, [[http://www. / Amazon_ com Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead \(An Evergreen Book\) Books Tom Stoppard. html](http://www.Amazon.com/Rosencrantz%20and%20Guildenstern%20are%20dead%20(An%20Evergreen%20Book)%20Books%20Tom%20Stoppard.html)] in this play, the titular characters are fleshed out absurdly or comically, and are inept in some ways, and very human and sympathetic in others. The showdown logic and the absurd is always entertaining.

Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz und Guildenstern are Dead* is rich in the playful use of cliché, black humor, irony, puns, burlesque, risqué words etc. The dialogues of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are witty and the usage of them as the protagonists is creative and adds more comedy to the story. In other words we can say that while presenting the tragedy of *Hamlet* from these two side characters, Stoppard delves into different questions and philosophies with brilliant word games. This play is full of wit and philosophical banter.

Borrowing the characters from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Tom Stoppard creates an existential comedy of characters plight in a pre-determined plot with witty and whimsical use of the English language. There is a lot of physical humor and slapstick in the play. For example, in the conversation below between the Player and Guildenstern, provides us a glimpse humor:

PLAYER: (*guily freeing himself*): I did! - I did! - You're quicker than your friend. . . .
(*Confidently.*) Now for a handful of guilders I happen to have a private and uncut

performance of the Rape of the Sabine Woman- or rather woman, or rather Alfred-(*Over his shoulder.*)Get your skirt on, Alfred-

(*The BOY starts struggling into a female robe.*)

. . . and for eight you can participate.

(*GUIL backs, PLAYER follows.*)

. . . taking either part.

(*GUIL backs.*)

. . . or both for ten.

(*GUIL tries to turn away, PLAYER holds his sleeve.*)

. . . with encores-

(*GUIL smashes the PLAYER across the face. The PLAYER recoils. GUIL stands trembling.*)

(*Resigned and quite.*) Get your skirt off, Alfred

(*ALFRED struggles out of his half-on robe.*)[1.18-19]

Throughout the play we find this kind of physical and verbal comedy which elicits outright laughter.

It is true that Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is based on Shakespeare's revenge tragedy *Hamlet*, but much of this play is comedy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do provide comic relief at various points in *Hamlet*, so this play does well to play up the comedic aspects of their lives. The mood of questioning, rebellion and playfulness can be seen in the way that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* travesties *Hamlet*; the tragedians, serious in their treatment of Death and holding a "mirror up to life" in *Hamlet* are now reduced to comedians and potential pornographers in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The treatment of death has also undergone a transformation from the profound to the comic, from high tragedy to slapstick comedy. In that sense we can say that Stoppard's play leans invariably towards the truly comic, despite its many tragic referents.

We all know that in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are identified solely as Hamlet's childhood friends, and are interchangeable with respect to characterization. In *Hamlet* they don't have any distinct identity and also in Stoppard's play they are confused about their own identities. The lack of identification between the characters continues to such an extent that the reader feels difficult to differentiate between the two. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern constantly have their identities mixed up and sometimes as a reader we tend to forget that who is who. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's confusion about their identities provide humor for the audience or reader. In fact; part of the play's joke is their lack of identity. On the other hand we can say that their strange lack of identity provides a deep philosophical and sad view of the postmodern world but the way they are longing for their identities or the way they are trying to figure out their own names, is truly funny and evokes laughter.

Tom Stoppard's best known plays are comedies, which often deal with metaphysical and ethical questions and are characterized by verbal wit and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* directly falls under this category. His plays are known for being both deeply philosophical and lighthearted because through the unserious and funny moments Stoppard provides us the serious matters of human life. Stoppard's work is always characterized by jokes, puns and innuendo. Some critics say that although Stoppard masterfully uses Elizabethan wit and vaudeville comedy, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is ultimately an intellectual play that 'thinks' or some says that this play is intelligent, witty and compact. It is true that different people have different opinions regarding the play but we can say that this play is very funny and makes us laugh. Yet although *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is set on the fringes of a famous tragedy, and touches on profound questions, its prime aim is entertainment, and particularly comedy. According to *The New York Times* "This is a most remarkable play. Very funny. Very brilliant. Very chilling."

Chapter-7

CHANCE

Chance is one of the key features of postmodernism. According to the postmodern thought this world is created by chance and chance rules the world. Through the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard tries to show us how in postmodern world chance becomes an important element of human life. The play ultimately suggests that chance has a prominent role in our lives. In fact we can say that as we are living in the postmodern world so we have to rely on chance. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, however, the world is unfathomable and disorderly. Coincidence and chance dominates, as in the play's opening coin-tossing sequence in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will be unable to change the run of heads, since chance alone determines their future.

As the play opens we see that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are playing a coin-tossing game or we can say a simple game of chance. Whoever calls the coin correctly wins it, and Rosencrantz has been calling heads and winning dozens of times. On the other hand, Guildenstern loses bet after bet to Rosencrantz as the flipped coins keep coming up heads. Guildenstern tries to calculate the idea of chance in his head: he just can't believe that the coin could land heads-up so many times in a row if there was a fifty-fifty chance each time that it would land tails.

ROS: Heads.

(He picks it up and puts it in his bag. The process is repeated.)

Heads.

(Again.)

ROS: Heads.

(Again.)

Heads.

(Again.)

Heads.

GUIL (*flipping a coin*): There is an art to the building up of suspense.

ROS: Heads.

GUIL (*flipping another*): Though it can be done by luck alone.

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: If that's the word I'm after.

ROS (*raises his head at GUIL*): Seventy- six love.

(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.)

Heads.

GUIL: A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability. (1. 7-8)

Throughout the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* we find the workings of 'chance'. All the possible meanings of the word 'chance' are shown in the following conversation between Player and Guildenstern, illustrating its importance:

PLAYER: Home. We're traveling people. We take our chances where we find them.

GUIL: It was chance, then?

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. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not. (1.18)

Scenes of gambling occur repeatedly in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and underscore the central role that chance plays in the lives of the characters. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, even the play opens with a game, so later Guildenstern tricks the Player into accepting a bet that the year of the player's birth doubled is an even number:

GUIL (*casually*): Do you like a bet?

PLAYER: Ha-ah!

(*The TRAGEDIANS look interested. The PLAYER comes forward.*)

PLAYER: What kind of bet did you have in mind?

(*GUIL walks half the distance towards the PLAYER, stops with his foot over the coin.*)

GUIL: Double or quits.

PLAYER: Well . . . heads.

(*GUIL raises his foot. The PLAYER bends. The TRAGEDIANS crowd round. Relief and congratulations. The PLAYER picks up the coin. GUIL throws him a second coin.*)

GUIL: Again?

(*Some of the TRAGEDIANS are for it, others against. The PLAYER nods and tosses the coin.*)

GUIL: Heads.

(*It is. He picks it up.*)

Again.

(*GUIL spins coin.*) [1. 20-21]

All these gambling, this reliance on chance rather than individual actions highlights how much chance drives the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and how little they do to counteract it. Although they are frustrated that chance puts them in unmanageable situations, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take no action to help themselves and constantly surrender themselves to chance.

As a postmodern play then, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, describes that there is no order in the world and everything happens by chance. Through this play Stoppard tries to account for a world where chance seems to rule. In the postmodern world, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern we constantly surrender ourselves to chance because this world is dominated by chance.

CHAPTER-8

CONCLUSION

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is the fabulously inventive tale of *Hamlet* as told from the perspectives of the bewildered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters in Shakespeare's play. In Tom Stoppard's best known work, this Shakespearean Laurel and Hardy finally get a chance to take the lead role, but do so in a world where echoes of *Waiting for Godot* resound, where reality and illusion intermingle and where fate leads our two characters to a tragic but inevitable end. Caught in a world beyond their understanding and unsure of their purpose, they do the best they can with the small tidbits of information they are given, ultimately leading to their demise. In other words, Stoppard skillfully weaves the various plots from *Hamlet* into the story of two bewildered innocents just doing what they are told to do!

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* we come across postmodernist features such as: intertextuality, uncertainty and inbetweenness, lack of identity, hybridity, **playfulness**, chance, confusion and so on. Stoppard's play reflects postmodern world that is inexplicable and where people have no sense of certainty. Throughout the play we expected the unexpected. The known becomes the unknown in this play, further emphasizing the world's uncertainty. This play shows that human beings are mere 'players' in this confusing and uncertain world. At the heart of this play is the theme of "coping" and "getting through the day" so that tomorrow comes we can have the strength to continue.

Through the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Stoppard expresses some specific aspects of life, like how difficult it is for an individual to find his or her place in society; the confusion and feelings of what we are doing here and why we are doing things. This play also raises questions about whether we are free as individuals, or are capable of making our own decisions apart from society-whether that freedom even

matters once a decision has been made 'by' or 'for' us. So the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, suggests to readers that without realizing the freedom of choice; life is empty and purposeless.

Tom Stoppard writes of the anxiety and confusion of life, of loss of identity, of the helpless individual caught up in forces impervious to reason. His plays raise questions about freedom and the uncertainty of all knowledge and perception. The characters may suffer from serious anxiety, but the farce makes this very lack a cause for enjoyment and the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, reflects all these ideas and thoughts of Stoppard. Although this play is based on the famous revenge-tragedy *Hamlet*, it is also a work of art that lives and breathes on its own. Written and produced in 1967, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* continues to intrigue and entertain. The themes of the play are universal and the circumstances in it all too familiar. In today's world like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* we still play games to pass the time and we still act on tidbits of information.

. Through *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard tries to capture ideas and thoughts of postmodernism and also tries to make us aware of the world's uncertainties. This play is one of the 20th century's most poignant treatments of the human effort to find meaning in a universe viewed as meaningless.

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