Chapter 2
Centering the Marginalized

A writer of the 1960s, Stoppard (b. 1937) is positively a major power in the contemporary English Theatre. He has been typecast by his early masterpiece *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967)—an offspring of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*—that made him popular in the academic world. Stoppard, who set out to amuse a roomful of people with a music hall entertainment, discovered that his work was received as a deconstruction of the image of the Hamlet world and hailed as a landmark in British dramatist history. But unlike Edward Bond, he does not attempt a remodelling of the mythic elements of Shakespeare’s play; instead, he realigns a commentary in comic terms on *Hamlet* which has become a part of common mythology. “In adjusting the Shakespearean text, Stoppard does not aspire to dislodge it from its cultural space, but to alter the configuration so that there is space for him too and for his kind of writing alongside Shakespeare” (Holderness 133). All through his writings—in *Jumpers, Travesties, The Real Thing* and in his later work *Arcadia*—he has maintained that human experience is fundamentally moral and that to consider human beings as material
objects is objectionably reductive. The impulse behind his art is greatly moral and implicitly theistic. He believes in a direct connection between art and morality and between art and life. He entered the English theatrical world at a time when British Theatre had gone “naturalist” and was showing a concern for projecting a social message. But Stoppard’s focus is mainly on metaphysical and philosophical issues rather than social problems. He is “more interested in the metaphysical condition of man rather than the social position” (Funke 228). He discusses in his plays the lack of absolute values and perception and the problem of uncertainty. He writes of the anxiety and confusion of life and there is a great deal of existential angst in his work. A close look at his plays will provide a useful awareness of his dramatic structures and methods as well as his preoccupations as a man of his century. He can be viewed as a postmodernist writer who self-consciously interrogates and reflects upon the fragments of the culture he has inherited. Though it may seem that his plays are built on direct experiences, it is actually from the skeletons of older plays and older forms of entertainment that he evokes actual experiences in the minds of the audience.

The central aspect of the 20th century reworkings of Shakespeare seems to be perspectivism. In the early part of the 20th century, the portrayal of the hero as a passive sufferer or witness began to replace
the traditionally active hero of the earlier tragedy. The major figures associated with the modernist movement—T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett—seem to have focused on the subjective consciousness of a central character who suffers or witnesses the great events rather than actively initiate or shape them. All of these writers are much admired by Stoppard. Stoppard discerns that Shakespeare’s play Hamlet is only a one-sided version of the story since he has narrated it from the perspective of the prince. His attempt is to retell the story projecting his perspective in events and to reduce the heroic dimensions between the hero and other characters. Obviously, in his play, Shakespeare makes a distinction between the prince Hamlet and the attendant lords Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The historical situation of the Renaissance would have helped him gain a comprehensive vision while approaching the issue of heroism. A well-known concept is that everyone is a hero in the story of one’s own life without the demarcation of minor or major characters. This concept runs counter to Shakespeare’s notion of the nobility of heroes and thereby renders his distinctive stature as a dramatist questionable. Heroism can be viewed as something external—emerging physically victorious; or as something internal—a quality of soul which cannot be exhibited. Shakespeare would have
been in touch with the classical conceptions of heroism and, at the same time, been aware how these notions were challenged by newer concepts, especially by Christianity. The anti-heroic tendency of contemporary criticism tends to overlook Shakespeare’s tragic vision.

Stoppard established his independence from artistic tradition and proved that he is no longer under the spell of Hamlet. He may not have intended to rewrite Danish history or have any serious concern for Hamlet’s or Claudius’s welfare and reputation. His outlook on perspectivism is what makes his play modern. By rewriting Hamlet from the perspectives of two of the minor characters, Stoppard has made his play a product of the modern age where the concept is that suffering is a nobler form of heroism. It is a contrast to conventional forms of military and artistic heroism which is central to Shakespeare’s tragedies. Stoppard creates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as men of the modern world kept between a meaningless progression of senseless actions. With a shift in point of view of heroism, all that seem very familiar are defamiliarized, opening new vistas of meaning. He centres the marginalized characters in Shakespeare’s play as his heroes, pushing aside the original concept of heroism.

Stoppard has maintained top form in his works Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Arcadia which are considered to be
contenders for the finest post-War English drama. The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* gained a big and essential head start from the fact that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* tends to be more or less a part of the cultural equipment of anyone seeing the play. The title of the play, a dismissive line from Shakespeare’s play—“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead”—pronounces that two walk-on characters in *Hamlet* make a star appearance in the realm of Shakespeare through Stoppard. The title also suggests that they are literary characters and at the end of affairs, they are dead. Stoppard’s play is full of references that it is a play and works on our know-how of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The very first utterance of Guildenstern in the opening scene of coin-tossing is an indication to this: “There is an art to the building up of suspense” (7).

The play is profoundly derivative and draws upon multiple influences—from the great classic from the Theatre of the Absurd, *Waiting for Godot*, T. S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and most obviously, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Stoppard’s credit is that he creates a totally new work from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* without altering the structure. His view is subjective and it is out of this subjective reaction to *Hamlet* that Stoppard has created another play. He is reacting to the action of *Hamlet*, because Hamlet is involved in the plight
of these fictional characters. This play has been the subject of all kinds of critical interpretations, “notably as a statement of existential or absurdist intent or as a serious critique of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*” (Jenkins 37). Like those of Harold Pinter, Stoppard’s plays were originally seen as belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd. As the play unveils, we identify elements of the Theatre of the Absurd and see how skillfully Stoppard offers a sophisticated adaptation of a classic in a contemporary setting. The play is quite relevant to the modern viewers whose concerns are varied today. The play exposes its own artificiality and emphasizes the importance of melodramatic practices to features in Shakespeare’s drama. Like Pinter, Stoppard also constantly subverts the apparent ordinariness of the lives of the characters by showing the violence lurking beneath them.

It is appropriate to establish the nature of the theatre which he entered with a flourish before turning to the play. The advancement to the Theatre of the Absurd grew out of the experiences of the Second World War and it found a broad echo throughout Europe. The writers followed a way of contrast between morality and criminality, role-playing and authenticity. They rejected the conventional stage in favour of one that combined circus, puppet show and the like. The origins of the absurdist play do not lie in the theatrical dignity of mainstream European
drama, but in clowning, slapstick, verbal gaming and other tricks taken from boulevard theatre. The Theatre of the Absurd, heavily existential and dominantly French, centred round a prison, a cell or a cage, showing man as a powerless creature divorced from all powerful orientation. Men go through a series of traditional formulas which are absolutely ineffectual against the power equations. In his work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus perceived that in a universe deprived of directions, man is an alien. He does not have the expectations of a promised land or the memory of a lost home. “The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting is properly the feeling of absurdity” (Travers 212). Absurdity is closely linked to the artificial ways that personal identity is created and undone in the social process.

The writers of the Theatre of the Absurd follow a path of formal experimentation along non-naturalistic lines. They show a deliberate awareness of what language can and cannot do and a sense of one’s uncertain existence. Usually, they put forward absurdity in some concrete forms by focusing the action on a few objects whose capability for interaction and understanding seem uncontrollable to the characters. These objects are a manifestation of a world full of commotion, beyond the control of man. The dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd—Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and Stoppard, among others—
share certain characteristics; the most important is that their works appear to be deprived of a “horizon of significance” or anything credible. It has no logic or reminder about time and space. As we observe in the procedure of life, there is no rationality in life evolving step by step and finally ending up in a dramatic climax. Absurd drama also does not have a formal beginning, middle or end. In fact, the dramatic conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd basically shatter the traditional conventions of plot, dialogue, thought and action.

In traditional drama, human actions are presented in a social context. The action moves from a normal situation which gets uprooted and finally turns towards a final conclusion in which something is resolved logically. But the protagonists of the Theatre of the Absurd inhabit a featureless world which they do not and cannot understand. It exhibits the disorder of the world due to the absence of a guiding symmetry. The puzzlement is all because of the absence of anything that might help one to understand one’s purpose in the social scheme of things. The identities of the protagonists have also become problematic. Their attempts to deal with the world also turn out to be absurd. “The Marxist, Brechtian dramatists believe that man can remake the world by countering its alienating, dehumanizing influences” (Brassell 31). But the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd firmly
believe that man cannot remake his world, and they ultimately live out their meagre existence in a comic-pathetic way. Man is seen as little more than a clown let loose in a mad world where emotional love becomes non-existent. As a result, physical love becomes not just a biological urge to be mechanically satisfied. With the determination of human relationships and the absence of a divine justice, moral order breaks down and the values of right and wrong disappear. In short, the Theatre of the Absurd presents a world without a divinity, relationships, social fulfilment, genuine love and moral awareness. Such a life is not at all precious and consequently death is not a dread. As Jim Hunter observes: “Everything is meaningless when viewed against the certainty of death” (18).

As the crown of creation, man is expected to live a dignified life and to that end, he must act upon his freedom to choose and launch himself into the world. But the Theatre of the Absurd takes away that dignity. Its heroes lack confidence, purpose, courage and energy, and are unable to cope with situations. The traditional heroism degenerates into mock heroism. They spend their time anxiously, desperate and helpless of independent action. They wait for some reassurance that someone will come to provide meaning and information. But owing to the absurdity of the world, such reassurances never materialize. If at all they occur, the
protagonists are incapable of understanding them properly. The worst in their situation is that they have no reliable memory to orient themselves to their present situation. They are unable to create an intelligible historical narrative for their lives. The structure of the play does not admit a firm ending or an affirmation about the world.

In the Theatre of the Absurd, the characters fully realize the futility of communication. Language seems to be the keenest way of understanding ourselves and the world around us. But in the Absurdist world it becomes a decisive feature of experience. In Stoppard's play this point applies even to the characters’ awareness of their own names. When speech becomes useless, the loneliness of the individual is heightened. “The world is cluttered with words yet each man is imprisoned within his own thoughts” (Bareham 40). Most of the action that takes place on the stage consists of games which the protagonists play, not as creativity but as time pass or to defer their fear. Again, the Theatre of the Absurd is very funny because of the ludicrousness of the ineffectual verbal attempts to confer significance upon the passing of time when one has no resources. The most obvious example of this is Stoppard's word play. The only visible thing is the characters asking fresh questions and these senseless questions pass the time without being answered and as a result promote no emotion.
Another important aspect of the Theatre of the Absurd is the emphasis on verbal humour. It is a clear feature in Stoppard's play. Incidentally, it is this type of weird cross talk and striking theatrical devices that helped Stoppard to be recognized along with Pinter as one of Britain's pre-eminent living playwrights. Anthony Jenkins observes: “Behind the humour of *Rosencrantz* lies a genuine compassion, and the subtlety with which Stoppard works upon his audiences' emotions lifts the play's ideas out of the commonplace” (43). In *Waiting for Godot*, this humour is set up as a talk between the two clowns often with a physical complaint. In Stoppard, Guildenstern agonizes about the meaning of happenings and Rosencrantz is puzzled by Guildenstern's attitude and is constantly thwarting his friend's efforts. When we observe that these plays are funny, we should not miss the desperation beneath the humour. The humour is potentially bleak because it depends upon laughing at any attempt to discover significance. Unlike traditional humour, here we seem to be dealing with a particular modern sense of humour which pulls down what we think of as noble and respectable as ridiculous. It works upon the assumption that every aspect of life is fit for mockery like classical literature, philosophy, religion, politics, education, business and the like. According to some cultural historians like Paul Fussell, this form of humour, which is a distinctive feature of the
twentieth century, was born in the trenches of the First World War. The soldiers responded with a howl of laughter at the meaningless traditional rhetoric about honour, courage, patriotism and also at the absurdity of their responses to that situation. To quote Martin Esslin, “The Theatre of the Absurd does not provide tears of despair, but the laughter of liberation” (Ionesco, Adamov, et. al. 23).

Undoubtedly, the characteristics stated above qualify Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as an absurdist play. Though Stoppard’s characters are similar to Beckett’s, his dramatic structures are different. He retains the broad context given by Shakespeare, while at the same time, superimposes his play on *Hamlet*, bringing every aspect to absurdity. Stoppard omits many things that add to the charm of Shakespeare’s play—like the bird of dawn, the ghost or any intimation of a divinity that shapes our lives and scenes—which do not suit his purpose. Prince Hamlet is portrayed as a shrewd designer who drifts in and out of the action outsmarting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at every step and adding to the general confusion. Stoppard uses superb inversions to show that the most powerful passages and soliloquies can be repeated, compressed and diluted with comedy. At the same time the focus falls on minor characters, and incidents and actions that have taken place off-stage.
As young men, much of the same age as Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern act as functionaries in Shakespeare’s play. Their grand “sonorous names, known among important Danish families, occur apparently in Wittenberg student records about 1590” (Trewin 139). They suited Shakespeare’s purpose as disgraceful time servers. They were ready to spy on Hamlet for the King’s benefit and in the hope of favours to come. Hamlet at first greets them cordially in the old Wittenberg manner: “My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do ye both?” (2.2.222-223).

But soon Hamlet makes out that Claudius has made some mercenary allegiance with them to probe his bizarre behaviour. As personages they never escape from each other and have to confess that the King had “sent for” them (2.2.284) and thereafter they become enemies of Hamlet.

ROSENCRANTZ: Take you me for a sponge, my lord?

HAMLET: Ay, sir; that soaks up the king’s countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the king best service in the end: he keeps them, like an ape, in the corner of his jaw: first mouthed, to be last swallowed: when he
needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and sponge, you shall be dry again. (4.2.14-20)

Though Hamlet makes it obvious to them, they never grasp the reality that the King had killed Hamlet's father or that Hamlet has plans to kill Claudius in revenge. However, they are chosen to escort him to England with a letter. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern probably do not know that the letter they carry to England is Hamlet’s death warrant and they are obviously unaware that Hamlet has secretly exchanged it for one ordering their execution.

HAMLET: . . . And many such-like “as'es” of great charge
That, on the view and knowing of these contents,
Without debatement further, more or less,
He should the bearers put to sudden death,
Not shriving, time allow'd: (5.2.43-7)

During the crossing Hamlet manages to escape from the ship, after a tussle with a pirate vessel. He confides this to Horatio in the last act. In his retelling of the play, Stoppard does not show that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are guilty or untrustworthy. His emphasis on the play is neither to acquit nor to convict them, “but to dramatize their bewilderment before forces which they do not understand” (Delaney 30). The action in the play follows that of its source, but always from the
perspective of these two characters. Stoppard's dramatic method draws him to move in and out of Shakespeare's play. If, in Shakespeare's play, they are ordinary courtiers, in Stoppard they are updated as essentially modern men, well-dressed with "hats, cloaks, sticks and all" (1.7). They are impotent, puzzled, funny and averse to action. They desperately search for causes, meanings and answers.

GUIL: . . . What's the first thing you remember?
ROS: Oh, let's see . . . The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?
GUIL: No—the first thing you remember.
ROS: Ah. (Pause) No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long time ago.
GUIL: (patient but edged) You don't get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you've forgotten?
ROS: Oh, I see. (Pause) I've forgotten the question. (1.11)

Episodes from *Hamlet* move around them frequently and then they fit in their Shakespearean roles with Shakespearean English whereas at other times they talk in modern voices. A conversation between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern immediately becomes an authentic encounter in Shakespearean verse. They are seen as supporting actors in the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They may look like the
minor figures from Shakespeare, “but they are outsiders in the world of *Hamlet*, confused by its premises, and with an identifiably modern sensibility” (Innes 330). In order to give themselves the impression that they exist and can accomplish something, they engage in verbal tennis games. As with *Hamlet*, Stoppard’s characters are also left with questions and words. Ros says: “What are you playing at? Guil: Words, words. They’re all we have to go on” (1.31 ). The fear of being subsumed is countered by this game and language becomes a prime tool in this exercise. They try to answer every question with another question without realizing how the game is mirroring their own predicament, a world full of questions for which they have no answers. Like many moderns, they spend their time, not deriving answers, but playing the game of questions. The pair, whose very names are interchangeable, spend their time trying hazily to fill the gaps. Having a limited comprehension of the events in Denmark, they find themselves in a situation dictated by forces out of their control when the messenger arrives with an urgent order of royal summons.

GUIL: I have no desires. None. (*He stops pacing dead.*) There was a messenger . . . that’s right. We were sent for (*He wheels at ROS and raps out*) Syllogism the second: one, probability is a factor which operates within
natural forces. Two, probability is not operating as a factor. Three, we are now within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. Discuss (ROS is suitably startled—Acidly.) Not too heatedly. (1.12)

They may repeatedly find themselves waiting for Hamlet and their problem is their inability to escape him, not his failure to appear. The context is an indication of the absurdity and the impotency as much on Hamlet’s situation in Shakespeare’s play as in Stoppard’s play.

Stoppard mainly makes three plot inventions in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*—the meeting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the players in Act I; their conversation with the players and the rehearsal of the mock-play “The Mouse-trap” around which he places actual snippets of scenes from *Hamlet*; and lastly the action on board the ship bound for England. The three acts of the play alternate between the on-stage and off-stage actions of the courtiers. When we come upon them, they are in the middle of a game of coin-tossing, which proceeds to come up heads eighty-five times in a row, violating the law of probability and continues to land heads-up every time.

ROS: Eighty-five in a row—beaten the record!

GUIL: Don’t be absurd.
ROS: Easily!

GUIL (angry): Is that it, then? Is that all?

ROS: What?

GUIL: A new record? Is that as far as you are prepared to go?

ROS: Well . . . .

GUIL: No questions? Not even a pause?

ROS: You spun them yourself.

GUIL: Not a flicker of doubt?

ROS (aggrieved, aggressive): Well, I won—didn’t I?

GUIL (approaches him—quieter): And if you’d lost? If they’d come down against you, eighty-five times, one after another, just like that?

ROS (dumbly): Eighty-five in a row? Tails? (1.9)

It shows that they have some significance beyond the materialistic and exposes the arbitrary nature of their universe. It helps Stoppard to relate the plight of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the universal human plight. Rosencrantz, the sharper and the persistent, wins those that land heads, and Guildenstern, the slower and the weaker, those that land tails. But “behind the ironic comedy here—we know that the pair are to lose their heads” by the end of the play (Brassell 40). The stability of
logic has been undermined through the comic metaphor of spinning coin. This nonsensical game defies the rules of chance and causes bewilderment in Guildenstern’s probing mind. After some discursive ramblings, he concludes with the existential commonplace utterances which echoes and parallels Beckettian heroes:

GUIL: Practically starting from scratch . . . . An awakening, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters, our names shouted in a certain dawn, a message, a summons . . . . A new record for heads and tails. We have not been . . . . picked out . . . . simply to be abandoned . . . . set loose to find our own way . . . . we are entitled to some direction . . . . I would have thought. (1.14)

Stoppard undermines the Shakespearean tragic form through the comic metaphor of the spinning coin and the humour depends on the frustration of logic. Every attempt at finding logic in the situation fails as so often with Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play. The laws of probability, which make harmony and confidence relate to “the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we reorganize as nature’s are being outrageously flouted” (Nightingale 413). When the coin finally
ends “tails”, the court moves away for the first on stage section and the
game is over. The play may be seen as an amusing piece of dramatic
speculation about the off-stage behaviour of two Shakespearean
characters. But the situation of the protagonist is parallel to that of the
present-day man. The coin seems to be one of the principal keys to an
understanding of the play and carries a deeper significance. Though it is
only occasionally employed as a metaphor, the image of the coin is
basic to the concerns, form and structure of the play. It embodies the
idea that two different aspects or identities can meet in one and the
same thing. The coin whose two sides belong together but still are
opposed to one another, exemplifies a contradiction, the dichotomy and
singularity of two opposites. At critical junctures Stoppard takes up the
game repeatedly. In his plays “games are not superficial, either for the
author, his characters, or audience” (Jenkins 38). When Rosencrantz
and Guildenstern meet the players, Rosencrantz’s attempt to pick up
the coin hidden under the player’s foot, which appears as a comic
routine, dramatizes the way he and Guildenstern gradually lose their
grip on reality. Though at first he is able to snatch away the coin, he
becomes frustrated and even injured when he tries it again:
ROS: Excuse me.

(Pause. The PLAYER lifts his downstage foot. It was covering GUIL’s coin. ROS puts his foot on the coin. Smiles) Thank you.

(The PLAYER turns and goes. ROS has bent for the coin.)

GUIL (moving out): Come on.

ROS: I say—that was lucky. (1.25)

Again,

ROS: Excuse me.

(The PLAYER lifts his downstage foot. ROS bends to put his hand on the floor. The PLAYER lowers his foot. ROS screams and leaps away).

PLAYER (gravely): I beg your pardon.

GUIL (to ROS): What did he do?

PLAYER: I put my foot down.

ROS: My hand was on the floor!

GUIL: You put your hand under his foot?

ROS: I— (2.56)

On another occasion Guildenstern taps Rosencrantz’s fists and finds both his hands empty. His bewilderment at that time is clearly
reminiscent of that caused by the impossible row of “heads” at the beginning of the play:

ROS: No.

(Repeat process. GUIL indicates left hand again. ROS shows it empty.)

Double bluff!

(Repeat process. GUIL taps one hand, then the other hand, quickly. ROS inadvertently shows that both are empty. ROS laughs as GUIL turns upstage. ROS stops laughing, looks around his feet, pats his clothes, puzzled). (2.45)

It points to their increasing insecurity. Later, Rosencrantz keeps the coins in each hand to comfort his distressed friend:

GUIL: You had money in both hands.

ROS: (embarrassed): Yes.

GUIL: Every time?

ROS: Yes.

GUIL: What’s the point of that?

ROS (Pathetic): I wanted to make you happy. (3.77)

Actually, by playing this trick he is making an innocent attempt to denigrate the fate which leads them to their deaths. We find a sense of comradeship about them, a genuine affection and closeness which we
do not see in the Beckettian pair. There is an acceptance of each other, which suggests a certain mutuality between them. Moreover, they are “Elizabethans” with a certain amount of money. So there is something of a historical identity and the similarity between them and the people they encounter suggests something like a common cultural basis.

The game of spinning coins is interrupted by a troupe of players who are also from Shakespeare’s original play, but with their function and character greatly expanded. Through them, Stoppard exposes the question of reality and the meaning of death. The dominating elements in the action are not the plots and counterplots of Claudius and Hamlet, but the penniless troupe of travelling players whom they meet on their way to Elsinore. They show up at the Danish court, put on their play and when Claudius is displeased, have to stow away in a hurry:

PLAYER: In disfavour. Our play offended the king.

GUl: Yes.

PLAYER: Well, he’s a second husband himself. Tactless, really.

ROS: It was quite a good play nevertheless.

PLAYER: We never really got going—it was getting quite interesting when they stopped it.

(Looks up at Hamlet).
That's the way to travel . . . .

GUIL: What were you doing in there?

PLAYER: Hiding. (*Indicating costumes*) We had to run for it just as we were.

ROS: Stowaways. (3.87)

The players in *Hamlet* are employed to demonstrate Hamlet's own impotence in action:

HAMLET: Is it not monstrous, that this player here,

But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,

Could force his soul so to his own conceit.

That from her working, all his visage wann'd;

Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,

A broken voice, and his whole function suit ing

With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!

For Hecuba!

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,

That he should weep for her . . . . (2. 2. 526-536)

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confront the troupe of players for the first time, they insist on the distinct division into actors and spectators and are conscious of their own superiority over the low "rabble". They are shocked at the suggestions of taking part in a
performance of the Rape of the Sabine women and adopt a patronizing air towards the players.

GUIL: Perhaps I can use my influence.

PLAYER: At the tavern?

GUIL: At the court. I would say I have some influence.

(1.19)

The players frankly admit they are going through hard times because of the current vogue for child artists. They will readily perform anything to make a living. The players seem to confront the courtiers with the voice of knowledge and experience: “From the first the player adopts the role of the sophisticate, attempting to draw Guildenstern on to such pleasures as the chance to get caught up in the action of a pornographic revue” (Delaney 2). The player confesses that they have sunk into bad times and now are ready to perform anything that people are interested to watch. It usually involves the performance of the troupe’s transvestite expert Alfred.

GUIL (shaking with rage and fright): It could have been—it didn’t have to be obscene . . . . It could have been—it didn’t have to be obscene . . . . It could have been—a bird out of season, dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder . . . . It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to
point the way . . . . I was prepared. But it’s this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this—a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes . . . .

(1.20)

As we observe, we find that life is very often obscene and we must agree to this possibility if we are to be involved in it.

The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* functions from the presumption that “all the world is a stage”. In order to establish this point Stoppard makes strategic use of the Player and his troupe who play a small part in *Hamlet*. The Player makes a critical remark that they have recognized Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as fellow artists and has made us aware that they may not be only spectators but actors also:

ROS: And who are we?

PLAYER: —as fellow artists.

ROS: I thought we were gentlemen.

PLAYER: For some of us it is performance, for others patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins. (Bows again). Don’t clap too loudly—it’s a very old word. (1.17)
As the play progresses they desperately try to avoid becoming involved in the action in order to maintain their positions as “spectators” without understanding that the position of the actor and spectator are interchangeable, that is, two sides of the same coin. Stoppard is out to dissolve any notion that art and life are distinct. Hamlet’s famous soliloquy “To be, or not to be” (3.1.56) is resolved by the implication to read “to seem or not to seem”. We have to forget about “to be”, about objective facts on significant levels. Throughout the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain unaware that, like the Players, they are being employed at the court of Elsinore, whereas the audience clearly knows how they constantly betray their real natures. Robert Gordon states that “life can be seen to be game whose moves are not rationally coherent while it is being experienced” (20). Not only their words but also their actions and games enhance their dramatic irony by showing them as actors. Just as the Players rehearse The Murder of Gonzago, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern practice for the encounter with Hamlet. Later,

ROS: Right. My honoured lord!

GUIL: My dear fellow!

ROS: How are you?

GUIL: Afflicted!
ROS: Really? In what way?

GUIL: Transformed.

ROS: Inside or out?

GUIL: Both.

ROS: I see. (Pause) Not much new there.

GUIL: Go into details. Delve. Probe the background, establish the situation.

ROS: So-so your uncle is the king of Denmark?!

GUIL: And my father before him.

ROS: His father before him?

GUIL: No, my father before him.

ROS: But surely—

GUIL: You might well ask.

ROS: Let me get it straight. Your father was king. You were his only son. Your father dies. You are of age. Your uncle becomes king.

GUIL: Yes. (1.36-7)

Guildenstern assumes the identity of the Prince and performs the scene of their arrival and welcome in England and Rosencrantz plays the English King. Thus they unconsciously assume the role of “actor” which they resisted earlier.
The most significant moment in the play is the scene in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watch the rehearsal of “The Mouse-trap” around which the action turns. The Player’s statement that actors and spectators have changed positions is shown in the words: “now if you two wouldn’t mind just moving back” (2.57). Ros and Guil give up their former affectedness and have become more insecure while the despicable players have successfully established their superiority.

GUIL: Where are you going?

PLAYER: I can come and go as I please.

GUIL: You’re evidently a man who knows his way around.

PLAYER: I’ve been here before.

GUIL: We’re still finding our feet. (2.48-9)

We can note that “Stoppard always provides the key to interpreters within each play; the players’ dumb show in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, acrobats’ pyramid in the prologue of Jumpers, the final open question in Travesties are examples” (Innes 345). In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, the dumb show extends beyond “The Mouse-trap” to include a mime of Shakespeare’s closet scene in which Hamlet stabs Polonius. The rehearsal contains an important addition to the version of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, a scene in which two spies, obviously Ros and Guil, are put to death. This
interpolation evidently suggests that they have some awareness regarding the direction of events. In the commentary by the Player, he explains how the prince is then sent to England under the care of “two smiling accomplices” (2.61) who arrive without Hamlet but with “a letter that seals their deaths” (2.62). The tragedians act out the stage deaths of the two spies, “the one event which can never be acted from personal experience” (Hunter 22). Ros and Guil stare at them, unable to understand why the two, who are dressed in coats identical with theirs, seem so familiar. Even when they are face to face with their mirror images, Ros and Guil are unable to recognize their real selves. In this significant scene, Stoppard heightens the dramatic irony by means of the identical coats worn by the two spies and by Ros and Guil and also by making them sprawl on the ground “in the approximate positions last held by the dead SPIES” (64).

ROS: ... For a moment I thought—no, I don't know you, do I? Yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else.

PLAYER (to Guil): Are you familiar with this play?

GUil: No. (2.62)

Michael Scott comments: “As Shakespeare asks questions concerning the relation between stage and action and the world of the audience, so
Stoppard's play investigates the interaction between actors and their act, inquiring into the various levels of perception” (Scott 20).

In *Hamlet*, the players are guides to the truth of the prince's predicament. But their art relies upon their relationship with an audience. Claudius's interaction with the players and their play serve to reveal his guilt and bring out reality. The players thereby help to solve the problem, but there should be an audience to their play. Like actors, all individuals need an audience. In Stoppard's play, when the players appear in the second act, the main player scolds Ros and Guil for walking off when the actors were half-way through their performance. They realize they have no audience, without which a play is quite meaningless.

PLAYER (*bursts out*): We can't look each other in the face!

(*Pause, more in control*) You don't understand the humiliation of it—to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable—

that somebody is watching . . . . (2.46)

The most fascinating aspect of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is Stoppard's presentation of the memorable figure of the Player-King. When Guil strikes the Player-King, he expresses anger at the way in which the Player-King finds all the answers that Guil never finds. The
pair has an illusion about their own status that blinds them to reality and the disparity between what they think and what they really are. Mere pawns in the hands of the Danish court, they stumble helplessly towards a fatal end while the players go on playing and make a living. Very skillfully, Stoppard demonstrates that reality and illusion, real and acted life, rehearsal and performance, spectator and actor are nothing but two sides of the same coin. Stoppard disarrays his audience when he makes them first laugh at but later identify themselves with the tragi-comic protagonists.

In Shakespeare’s tragedy, represented by the vacillating hero Hamlet, as well as in Stoppard’s “comedy”, represented by the comic duo Ros and Guil, death is the central problem. It appears in almost every conversation until its final physical impact is felt with the disappearance of Ros and Guil. “Indeed, of all the concerns expressed in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* nothing calls attention to the gulf between reality and the realm of imaginative reality so sharply as the fact of death” (Delaney 28). Definitely, death has different associations and implications in a sixteenth and twentieth century play. Death is not the ultimate end but paradoxically has something in common with birth, namely the growing of the fingernails.
ROS (*cutting his fingernails*): Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard. (1.13).

It also exposes Guil’s limited and one-sided perception of the world, that death is an exit to somewhere:

**Guil:** . . . you can’t act death. The *fact* of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen—it’s not gasps and blood and falling about—that isn’t what makes it death. It’s just a man failing to reappear—that’s all—now you see him, now you don’t—that’s only thing that’s real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back—an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death. (2.64)

The dramatic strategy of the action enables Stoppard to have the destiny of Ros and Guil unpreventable. Stoppard alters *Hamlet* by having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read Claudius’s letter condemning Hamlet to death and prefer not to inform him of the contents, and then read and decline to act upon Hamlet’s substituted letter ordering their own deaths. They accept their doom with the passivity that has characterized them throughout. They do not understand why they must die; but resistance, they feel, can make no
difference. As in real life, the rules are not manifest until the individuals are dead. Life can be seen as a game whose moves are not systematic while it is being experienced. Philip Thody observes:

We are all trying to make sense of a world of which we, as human beings, can never have anything but a partial knowledge, and where what the deconstructionists call the “grand narratives”, and particularly the explanatory system of Christianity and Marxism have now lost all intellectual value. (95)

The underlying pattern becomes manifest only at the moment of death. An awareness of this fact causes so much anxiety to the protagonists that they spend their time actually indulging in conscious game playing. At its centre, the play contains an affecting exploration of what death means. In Shakespeare, the play opens with a messenger of death in the figure of the ghost and progresses through questioning whether it tells the truth. In philosophical terms it questions the notion of the after-life, but it concludes only with the reality that is death, “the rest is silence” (5.2.346). Stoppard reworks these pre-occupations of Shakespeare's original concept within the context of his own system of dramatic signs. In Act III, three barrels figure, from one which the sound of pipes can be heard and from which subsequently the players
emerge. When the pirates attack, it is to the barrels that the characters go for rescue and Hamlet's disappearance is also through the barrel. "In Stoppard's play, death is an abrupt exit from one's own drama into a place incomprehensibly other, and the theatre itself becomes a metaphor for that" (Jenkins 43).

There is another motif in the play, the interchange of personalities. It is a distinct aspect of the problem of identity which is a theme common to many modern plays. Stoppard adopts a motif from *Hamlet* in a manner characteristic of Beckett and Pinter.

King: Thanks, Rosencrantz and Gentle Guildenstern.

Queen: Thanks, Guildenstern and Gentle Rosencrantz.

(2.2.133-134).

Stoppard elaborates the comic implications of the identity motif as well as the complex ironies and gives it a highly original twist. He increases the occasions in which the royal family gets Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's names wrong. In the first act we find Gertrude correcting herself while addressing them:

GERTRUDE: *(correcting)*: Thanks, Guildenstern *(turning to ROS, who bows as GUIL checks upward movement to bow too—both bent double, squinting at each other)* . . . and
gentle Rosencrantz. (Turning to GUIL, both straightening up—GUIL checks again and bows again) . . . (1.27-28)

Again, Hamlet confuses between their names.

HAMLET: My excellent good friends! How dost thou Guildenstern? (Coming downstage with an arm raised to ROS, GUIL meanwhile bowing to no greeting. Hamlet corrects himself. Still to ROS). Ah Rosencrantz! (They laugh good naturally at the mistakes. They all meet midstage, turn upstage to walk, Hamlet in the middle, arm over each shoulder). (1.39)

Stoppard then lays stress on the incongruity of the situation:

ROS: He wouldn't discriminate between us.

GUIL: Even if he could.

ROS: Which he never could.

GUIL: He couldn't even be sure of mixing us up.

ROS: Without mixing us up. (3.78)

Stoppard introduces a trait that emphasizes their indecision, passivity and insecurity regarding their identities. The characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two individuals, but they also constitute a team. They are distinguishable but are mutually interchangeable, not only in their roles but also in the eyes of others
who mix up their names. Moreover, they are inseparably bound by a common fate.

“Thematically also, the absurdism of Stoppard’s play was already being reconciled with Shakespearean texts” (Holderness 132). In Stoppard’s play, Guil says “give us this day our daily cue” (3.77); in Shakespeare’s play Hamlet declares: “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow . . . the readiness is all” (5.2.207-208). Stoppard’s view in the play is that human life is basically pre-determined because, even though humans do have choices in their life, they do not have proper information to choose intelligently. When information does come, for example, when Ros and Guil read the letter that orders their death, it comes too late and its effect is simply to shock. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* the courtiers’ attempt to understand their fate is greeted by the Player’s pronouncement, “It is written” (2.60). Just before they disappear forever, Guil says, “. . . there must have been a moment, at the beginning where we could have said no. But somehow we missed it” (3.95). Although his words sound true, we may agree with Anthony Jenkins when he states that “he is wrong if he thinks they could have said ‘no’ to the messenger who summoned them or to Claudius’s requests; had they done so they could not have been Ros and Guil” (48).
It is not a new finding that plays are dialogue-oriented. But this is very conspicuous in Stoppard’s play. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the grotesqueness of circumstances creates a disturbing representation by the courtiers whose dialogues make us laugh while their actions make us tense. The steady pull between the tone of the dialogue and their desperation provides the energy for the play while it also highlights the mechanization of language. When we hear the modern speech idiom of Stoppard's heroes, we share with them their sense of foreignness in a hostile *Hamlet* world with its remote alien language. The language in the play is as distinctive as the vision which we observe in it. Tim Brassell observes that “the manner in which he [Stoppard] dovetails Shakespeare’s lithe Elizabethan verse and prose into his own colloquial modern English is ingenious and often hilarious” (42). It is interesting to see Ros and Guil loitering on a bare Beckettian stage speaking modern colloquial prose except when Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius and Gertrude and their company drop in from time to time to utter Shakespeare’s blank verse with them.

In fact, language, instead of creating associations among civilized men, has become a force which segregates each man in an emptiness of words. We cannot always express our experiences to the expressible in language. Often it is incapable of expressing reality at an abstract
level. It does not succeed in communicating the real and the essential. When a writer apprehend his inability to project life’s experiences through language, he turns to stylistic devices like pun, pastiche, parody etc. “Guildenstern’s summary of Hamlet’s famous ‘To be or not to be’ speech, ‘Death followed by eternity . . . the worst of both worlds’ hits off with absolute precision the metaphysical despair of a world even fuller of doubt than that of Shakespeare and yet able to make a joke about it” (Thody 94).

Guil: Death followed by eternity . . . the worst of both worlds. It is a terrible thought. (2.5.4)

It also demonstrates that the coin image is related to the aspects of language and structure. Ros’s and Guil’s favourite occupation and their play with words show that words too are easily interchangeable items. The concept of intertextuality makes us observe both Shakespeare’s play Hamlet and Stoppard’s play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead at a new angle. We realize how convincing Stoppard’s heroes are in present-day terms. Their destiny and setbacks closely parallel the experiences of the contemporary man. The pair in Hamlet do not understand everything that is happening but know what they want and have some aspirations in their lives. Just like every common man, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not have any heroic ambitions but
only wish to survive and make a little money. But very pathetically they fail in attaining either. They are aware of their own inadequacies and have accepted them, not out of a sense of humility or contentment, but because they lack the resources to do anything different. After reading Stoppard, we feel more sympathy for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern than we do for the ageing classical hero Hamlet. And “in their fate, but for the grace of living in a different kind of society, we see a portraiture of ours” (Thody 98). We may categorize the heroes of tragedies belonging to a different world, but we can never believe in the myth of their immunity to the shabbiness which disfigures the rest of mankind.

The protagonists of the play can be seen as two sides of the same coin or the same side of two coins. Structurally also we find the coin basic to the ingenious idea around which Stoppard built his play. The Player’s assertion that every exit is an entrance to somewhere else helps us understand this idea more clearly. By focusing on and dramatizing the off-stage life of two characters from *Hamlet*, Stoppard seems to have taken the player’s statement literally. Practically every omission in *Hamlet* is an entrance in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Stoppard’s play is written in the margins of *Hamlet*. C. W. E. Bigsby says that marginality “is a matter of focus. In this play, Hamlet is
marginal” (14). In a theory based on reversals, it is logical that minor characters should become the new protagonists and that Shakespeare’s enigmatic hero should be pushed back to a shadow figure in the background. The marginal becomes the major focus; the frame turns out to be the central. Stoppard invalidates Shakespeare by putting the minor characters on centre stage from which they are virtually never absent. The effect is that Hamlet appears only seven times in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. He blocks the normal flow of Shakespeare’s text and also the familiar relationship between the text and the experienced audience which causes a double alienation effect. The tragic hero is displaced from the centre of his own play and the substitute protagonists take the centre. But they do not have any heroic control over themselves or their destinies.

When the audience locates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “sitting on the steps of a typical Hamlet set spinning coins which always come up ‘heads’, it is immediately to grasp the central concept of Stoppard’s play” (Gordon 61). When the characters become increasingly baffled and anxious, the audience becomes more confident of its knowledge. This is because they understand the absurd and also about Hamlet. The idea of Hamlet and the Shakespeare myth stands
unchallenged and is enhanced by this new evidence of their universal applicability.

The traditionalist may argue that Shakespeare’s text is being tampered with. Initially it was surprising to see plays like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*; but actually they have helped to keep Shakespeare going. “The hegemonic culture cannot afford to rest complacently; it must reproduce itself actively and continually, responding to changing economic and political conditions and meeting the specific challenges of subordinate cultures” (Holderness 132). It must try to support the authority of its cultural items by making large adjustments. It is essential to adjust myths proportionate to their power since they cannot be surrendered to subordinate groups without conquering power relations coming into question. It is a contradiction of myth programming that the more a phenomenon is proclaimed as universal, the more it must adapt to the changing conditions. When a myth becomes consolidated it should be tampered with. If Shakespeare’s texts are meant for all times and all sorts of people, then the pressure upon them to speak sensibly to the current society becomes overwhelming. The demand for artful adaptations becomes really great and requisite.
We can find that Stoppard’s evaluation of *Hamlet* is mainly effected by the 1960s interpretation. In those days people felt that they were experiencing rapid social change. The young blood particularly distrusted conventional political forms but at the same had difficulty in discriminating more radical possibilities. As a result, they were ready to contribute to the idea of absurdism. Absurdism meant more heroism and rational purpose at that time and the extensively adaptable Shakespeare was re-interpreted in its terms. Alan Sinfield observes that "Esslin, Kott, Brook, Hall and Stoppard demonstrated that the Shakespeare myth was equal to these developments" (Holderness 133).

The Shakespeare myth and Stoppard’s work are complementary because even as Stoppard updates the myth, he makes room for his own writing. Most remakings of Shakespeare’s plays are like that. They construct all sorts of interpretations on Shakespeare, yet share the same cultural space along with his myth and derive relevance from it. These are all genuine and specific ways by which cultures are extended. Since Shakespeare is such an exalted cultural personality, such appropriations may appear to be insolent; but it is one of the factors with which appropriators have to work. They should positively attempt to confront the Shakespeare myth. Confrontation may help in a
way to expel cultural authority and so it is better to produce other radical readings along with Shakespeare. Stoppard's play has become very popular because it allows us to adopt the myth of Shakespeare and at the same time make a joke about the irrelevance of Shakespeare's tragedy to the actualities of the present day. The hallmark of postmodernism is the revival of traditional forms into new versions of literature. John Barth has observed: "artistic conventions are likely to be re-tried, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work" (66). Stoppard uses many postmodern techniques in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Tim Brassell has pointed out that Barth has "referred to parody and travesty" (34) as two important manifestations which dominate postmodern writing and Stoppard's play apparently belongs to this category (34). In the first instance, his play is concerned with entertaining the audience but at a deeper level, he explores multidimensional viewpoints which stir the conscience of the readers. Though outwardly his play overwhelms with theatricality, self-conscious wit and verbal exercises, it is centred on a serious tragedy. He subverts the seeming ordinariness of his characters and deals with the metaphysical aspects of human life. Yet another postmodern technique is the focus on the marginal and he marginalizes
the centre by bringing bold treatments of ideas on the stage. The
predominant theme of Stoppard’s play is the loss of human control,
which his characters depict successfully. He has a conscious rapport
with his audience and shows a studied awareness in the use of
language. He shows how affected Shakespeare’s language sounds
when applied to the situations of our everyday life. The tautness and
directness of the play, which has retained at its core the inadequacy of
language as a tool as implied in plays of this genre, make it a rewarding
experience. For the new audience, whose social validation depends
upon academic attainment, this play is an intellectually demanding one.

In *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, Shakespeare re-shaped his source
material to give a tragic ending and in both cases he did it by a
remarkable demonstration of an author’s shaping power. The next
chapter analyzes the work of Edward Bond, a socialist writer who retells
Shakespeare for the modern audience and unveils his hidden
capitalistic aspects.
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