

# ‘Reflection of Postmodernism in Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead ‘

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**ABSTRACT:** W.B Yeats (1865-1939), one of the founder figures of modern poetry points out in his poem “The Second Coming “:-

“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 center to hold and Tom Stoppard’s play “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead “tries to portray that uncertainty of the postmodern world. The major focus of this study is to examine 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. This paper will highlight the postmodern elements that are reflected in the play. This paper will also examine how these elements are related to our life.

**Keyword:** Postmodernism, Tom Stoppard, Intertextuality, Hybridity, Identity Crisis, Uncertainty.

## I. INTRODUCTION:

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. 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 17and thoroughly bored by the idea of anything intellectual and alienated by everyone

from Shakespeare to Dickens.” (Theater Quarterly). In 1963 he moved to London where his first TV play was shown and a novel was commissioned.

These days, Tom Stoppard is most widely known as the man who penned the screenplay for the Oscar –winning film Shakespeare in love. The breakthrough year was 1966, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead ,was acclaimed at the Edinburgh festival.

The blend between comedy and tragedy is very marked in Stoppard’s work. 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. 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. We know that in English Literature contemporary age begins after Second World War. Contemporary age exists between modern and postmodern age. Nobody knows the exact date of beginning and ending of the contemporary age; somewhere in the 1970s contemporary age disappears and postmodernism begins. Stoppard began writing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead in 1964. The 20<sup>th</sup> century and more specifically late 2<sup>th</sup> century, was a time of change and turmoil. This ofcourse, 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.

In the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, we can see the element of shock which links it to the “theater of absurd”. Some people say that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a satirical retelling of the 17<sup>th</sup> century melodrama through the eyes of Hamlet’s longtime friends

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; some describe it as an Elizabethan version of Samuel Beckett's

Waiting for Godot, but with jokes. Different people have different opinion about the play but we can say it is typically a postmodern play; though it inspired by two famous plays, its ambiguous ending and playful style combines to make it a very different play. Just as Tom Stoppard, all postmodernists manipulate language, forms and images according to their own ways and the language of their play reveal puns, parody and pastiche which we can see in the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. So, we can say that the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is completely a postmodern text and we cannot deny Tom Stoppard's relation with postmodern age.

## II. SOURCE:

While preparing this paper, the researcher uses Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead as a primary source. And the researcher has taken various journals, references as secondary sources of research.

## III. METHODOLOGY:

The Sources of data that are used in this study will be both primary and secondary. The data will be acquired from various books, journals and articles.

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. 1996:1). Postmodernism is word of our times which by its very nature hard to define. No one can give a definite definition about postmodernism in one word and another problem is that different people have different opinions, thoughts and ideas about postmodernism. So, postmodernism can't be define with a simple sentence because postmodernism has lots of components and directions.

In order to understand postmodernism, it would be wise to begin with a definition of modernism. Modernism is a 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 knowledge and reason they can change the world. 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 postmodernism looks upon the modern world with increased cynicism and disappointment. But still we must understand modernism better to understand the post modernism. 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. Postmodernism deals with a floating world; nothing is fixed here, and there, and there is no morality or sense of reasonability. 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.

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 the research, I depend particularly on the internet and few books to gather information about Tom Stoppard, postmodernism and also about the connection between postmodernism and Tom Stoppard. I have gathered few 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 paper 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 cannot

ignore: intertextuality, uncertainty of the postmodern world, lack of center, hybridity or mixture, chance, confusion and identity crisis. The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is completely playful and also rejects the ideas of grand narratives.

#### IV. REFLECTION OF POSTMODERNISM IN ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD:

##### 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 postmodern 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, and 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 literally style 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 (Seizing 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 refers 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 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 its 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 footsteps, 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 characters 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 Faber Critical Guides.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 in and out of Shakespeare's play, Stoppard then added a further idea almost better still - adopting 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 provoke 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 element of postmodern literature.

#### **Uncertainty:**

The play 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 characters 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 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 choice 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 titular characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in a world that they cannot 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 lounge and flip coins. 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 insecurity 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; in fact it seems that they are stuck in between "life" and "death".

The language of the play also reflects the uncertainty 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 cannot 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 afterlife 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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. Like him, 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 creation 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.

#### **Identity crisis:**

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 revises 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]" ("Prufrock" 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 appear, they seem faceless and interchangeable. Stoppard's play repeatedly on this, everyone muddles up Rosencrantz and Guildenstern- even they themselves do so.

In Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very likeable, and a couple of bewildered 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, emphasizing their dilemma about their self- identity. After rambling about beards and toenails, Guildenstern suddenly asks, "do you remember the first thing that happened today?" (1.13). 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." (1.16). In the play, 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 looting a bazaar for their own portraits - - - At least we are presented with alternatives." (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 nothing 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 are they and why are they 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, and simple-minded and Guildenstern is pessimistic, intellectual, conceptual, and 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 clown-like characters blunder their way through life because they don't know what else to do. Through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's isolation and identity crises Stoppard tries to express that in the postmodern world our identities are contingent and uncertain. Much like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we are stuck in a world where other people's actions dictate 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 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 origin and meaning of our existence.

Joseph Duncan explains, (<http://home.sprintmail.com/~lifeform/beckstop.html>) "the courtiers become part of a pattern of evens - 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 existing 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 Stoppard'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 roles in life.

#### **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 theme 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 the Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, derive substantially from this 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 intellects 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. This 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 (thinks): 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 forever. 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 back . . . .A 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 relief 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.

## V. 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 intermix 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, 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 are Dead* 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 20<sup>th</sup> century's most upsetting treatments of the human effort to find meaning in a universe viewed as meaningless.

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