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The Depiction of Existential Topics in *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead*
by Tom Stoppard
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Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná bakalářská práce se zaměří na divadelní hru *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) od Toma Stopparda a na zobrazení existenciálních témat. S využitím relevantní literatury se bude autorka v teoretické části zabývat filosofií existence a problematikou a specifiky absurdního divadla. Existencialismus i vznik absurdního divadla studentka zasadí do společensko-kulturního kontextu, výše zmíněné dílo zasadí do literárně-kulturního kontextu (např. postmodernismus) a neopomene definovat termíny, s kterými bude pracovat v další části práce. Analýza dramatického textu od Toma Stopparda se bude koncentrovat na vyobrazení smrtelnosti, nepoznatelnosti a tajuplnosti lidské existence či individuální nedůležitosti. Studentka závěrem srovná analyzované prvky s problematikou zobrazenou v díle *Waiting for Godot* (1953) od Samuela Becketta a svoji argumentaci opře o kvalitní sekundární zdroje. Práci zakončí přehledné shrnutí daných zjištění.

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ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis examines the depiction of existential topics in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. It describes the historical and cultural background of the emergence of existential philosophy and the Theatre of the Absurd, primarily in the first part of the twentieth century. Applying the knowledge from the first chapter, the analysis specifically examines the depiction of identity, meaning, and mortality and briefly compares it with *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett to illustrate the different approaches.

KEYWORDS

Existential philosophy, Theatre of the Absurd, disillusionment, meaning, mortality, Stoppard

NÁZEV

Zobrazení existenciálních témat v *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* od Toma Stopparda

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá vyobrazením existenciálních témat ve hře *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* od Toma Stopparda. Práce popisuje historický a kulturní kontext, za kterým vznikla existenciální filozofie a absurdní divadlo, primárně v první části dvacátého století. Použitím znalostí z první kapitoly analyzuje specificky vyobrazení identity, významu a smrtelnosti a krátce je porovná s hrou *Waiting for Godot* od Samuela Becketta, aby ilustrovala rozdílné přístupy.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Existenciální filozofie, absurdní divadlo, deziluze, význam, smrtelnost, Stoppard

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Introduction

The British drama has undergone one of the most revolutionary transformations during the twentieth century, in response to the corrosion of Western society and the moral values and beliefs that crumbled in the wake of the Second World War. Such corrosion led to the rise of existential thought and philosophy, although it originated much earlier, before the events of the two World Wars. Existentialism gave rise to absurdism, whose leading representative is Albert Camus, who inspired the Theatre of the Absurd. Through modernist techniques inspired by early Dadaism, Surrealism and Expressionism, the theatre was re-established, breaking all conventions and introducing a new outlook on the characters' inner feelings of anxiety. Through a mix of existential and absurdist philosophy, the early avant-garde movements, and the unique approaches of different authors, authentic plays portray the inner existential dread of the society of the mid-twentieth century.

This thesis aims to examine the reflections of existential philosophy and the technique of the Absurd Theatre in the play by Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. More specifically, it focuses on the depiction of individual insignificance, lack of identity, meaninglessness, and mortality and on the characters' responses, struggles, and responsibilities in the face of existential dread.

The theoretical part focuses on establishing the core beliefs of existentialism through the observation of the leading philosophers and the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd. Firstly, the first chapter of the theoretical part introduces existentialism through Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre, analysing their views and theories on the nature of human existence and the approaches associated with these findings. Albert Camus has been included in the existentialist chapter, even though he rejected that label, because of the nature of his existential thought. By examining their differences and similarities, a list of core beliefs, including subjectivity and individual responsibility, is compiled. Secondly, the following section on the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd establishes how the philosophies and avant-garde influences reflected in the movement's formation, noting its main traits and, lastly, situating it as almost a transitional movement between modernism and postmodernism.

The following analytical chapter will apply the concepts from the previous two chapters to examine *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* through existential philosophy and the traits of the Absurd Theatre. The first chapter will focus on the depiction of identity and insignificance through excerpts from the play, illustrating the characters' lack of grounding and sense of self. Secondly, the next chapter will shift from individuality to the absence of meaning and its impact on the world, showcasing the characters in a constant state of confusion as they attempt to understand the world they have been set in. Lastly, the final chapter will comment on the ever-present sense of mortality which continuously lingers throughout the play.

Tom Stoppard's use of intertextuality through *Hamlet* has shifted his work from purely absurdist to a transitional space between post-absurdism and postmodernism, even though it is not often classified as such. The blending of pre-existing characters forced to operate outside the plays they were initially intended for provides an ideal setting for observing existential dread connected to the lack of answers, a stable sense of self, and a stable environment. By comparison with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the main differences between a stagnant portrayal of waiting and Stoppard's emphasis on being caught in action one cannot control become clearer.

1. Existentialism

The nineteenth century marked the emergence of existential philosophy. However, it was not until the twentieth century that it fully developed, primarily due to the crises of the period, both social and economic. While existentialism developed primarily in continental Europe, mainly in France and Germany, it also shaped the intellectual climate of Britain, despite initial concerns about its influence. As Martin Woessner states, the British had an apprehensive attitude towards existential philosophy, often referred to as the irrational philosophy of defeat, because it was perceived as detrimental to the recovery of the United Kingdom after the Second World War.¹ Despite the seemingly alienated reception of existentialism, its influence across history remains.

After the events of the Second World War, the sense of security, the morality rooted in Christianity, and the belief in the good nature of human beings have been in rapid decline, shattering identity not only for the British but also for Europe and the rest of the world. Martin Esslin claims that the age of totalitarian regimes, which harboured weapons of mass destruction, has contributed to the corrosion of the West's sense of a unified world in morals, nurturing the growing feelings of anxiety, despair and helplessness of the human predicament.² These feelings of dread have become one of the primary sources of artistic expression in the post-war years, allowing existential topics to move to the foreground. Esslin further explains that the playwrights of that era were not as focused on external experiences as on internal struggles with feelings and everyday life.³ Existentialism, with its emphasis on individualism, despite the feelings of dread that come with separating oneself from the masses, is reflected in British drama and literature.

This humanistic approach to human emotions in an age of fear and uncertainty, along with its acceptance of this predicament, gained existentialism greater influence. Woessner explains that the rather enthusiastic acceptance of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* demonstrates the eventual acceptance of existential influence, as the play, with its absurd themes and seemingly nonsensical dialogue, lacked a well-grounded foundation and the structure of pre-war society and therefore reflected feelings of disillusionment.⁴ Although Beckett refused to discuss the

¹ Martin Woessner, "Angst Across the Channel", in *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*, ed. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 107.

² Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," *The Tulane Drama Review* 4, no. 4 (May 1960): 6.

³ Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," 6.

⁴ Woessner, "Angst Across the Channel", 108-109.

existential nature of his work, the debate has persisted and he has become an inspiration to other British playwrights who explore existential themes.

The loss of national identity spread throughout the world, though Britain was impaired not only by the destruction of morals but also by the loss of its position as a world leader. The consequences of the Second World War have primarily manifested in an economic crisis, although the United Kingdom stood on the side of the victors. Compared to the rule of the British Empire, in which its power in international affairs was significantly greater through its colonies, this power has gradually diminished, resulting in a loss of its leading position after the Second World War. As Ian Hall states, the position and power of the United Kingdom witnessed significant changes at the start of the twentieth century. They were once one of the leading colonial empires. Yet the age of prosperity came to an end, and the former empire retained few colonies, leaving it heavily dependent on the United States of America. Although Britons had a say in Washington, it has left the people of the country questioning their identity, since most were against such dependence.⁵ The global economic decline, particularly among Western powers, has been evident not only in Britain but also in other countries involved in the conflict. This struggle of a changing identity forced dependence, and loss of isolation has only contributed to the feelings of anxiety and helplessness.

The consequences of the Second World War have left the United Kingdom uncertain about its identity. The shattering of the West's moral codes created a fertile climate for existential thought to take root. Although existentialism originated on the continent, it has eventually been warmly embraced by Britons, despite initial reservations. The emphasis on receiving the dreadful and absurd situation, rather than ignoring its severity and helplessness, which was tied to it, resonated with the people throughout the country. These societal issues essentially led to the establishment of existentialism as a philosophical discipline that has continued to develop and has had a significant influence on the works of future authors.

Existentialism is difficult to situate within a single, coherent philosophy, primarily because existential philosophers refuse unity. Despite the vastly contrasting opinions and ideas expressed by the most influential existentialists, there appears to be a common ground in the emphasis on freedom, individuality, and absurdity. Jack Raynolds explains that the term “existentialism” was not used in the early stages of the philosophical movement. Defining it

⁵ Ian Hall, “Introduction” in *Dilemmas of Decline: British Intellectuals and World Politics, 1945–1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 1–2.

can therefore prove to be quite challenging. Even though many existentialists rejected the umbrella term, they engaged in conversations with one another, wrote in response to one another, and, through criticism and inspiration, the existentialism known today emerged.⁶ Therefore, existentialism is not a unified philosophy. It is better understood as a broad attitude and approach to the existence of man, its purpose and personal experience.

What unites existentialists is a group of key thinkers, through whom the core beliefs and values of the movement can be observed. The writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger contribute to the existential approach towards freedom, meaning and authenticity. Raynolds states that Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjective experience, free choice and faith introduced an individual to the struggle with despair. Nietzsche proclaimed that God is dead and so are the moral values rooted within him. Heidegger provided the foundation for defining being, and Sartre built upon it with the theory of radical freedom, emphasising the ability to choose one's own fate and meaning in life. Lastly, Camus introduced the concept of absurdity, bridged the gap between philosophy and literature and explained the endless search for meaning and its futility.⁷ Although the thinkers mentioned above embraced different approaches and views, they found common ground on topics such as freedom, individuality, mortality and the inevitability of death. Existentialists were not a unified group of philosophers who adhered to a single ideology. In fact, their theories were often contradictory, rendering the movement difficult to understand in its entirety. For this reason, by focusing on a select few authors and their own philosophies, we may gain the most comprehensible understanding of what influenced the Theatre of the Absurd.

An essential figure in the context of existentialism was Søren Kierkegaard, who is considered the father of the movement due to his emphasis on individual experience and subjectivity. Kierkegaard was one of the first thinkers to take an opposing stance towards Hegel on the matter of subjectivity, explaining that, through abstraction, philosophy loses meaning and that it should instead focus more on personal experience. As Raynolds states, Kierkegaard emphasised the importance of individuality, even in religion, noting that believing in God is a personal choice and that public institutions, such as the church, are antithetical to faith. Belief in God is based on faith in abstraction rather than physical proof, and Kierkegaard believes it is the core of existential thought. Since humans act without external values to guide their

⁶ Jack Raynolds, "Existentialism and its Heritage" in *Understanding Existentialism* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2006), 2-4.

⁷ Jack Raynolds, "Existentialism and its Heritage" 5-26.

conduct, individuals are still faced with the inevitability of making decisions and taking action. Lastly, Kierkegaard described a feeling of dread associated with any act of self-determination, stemming from the fact that one never receives a satisfactory answer about the nature of one's existence.⁸ Despite the supposed incompatibility of religion and existential thought, it was not a necessity to be an atheist to be an existential thinker. However, most of Kierkegaard's contemporaries were atheists. These claims about the importance of individuality and the subjective nature of feeling inspired other existential thinkers, who further developed these ideas into a broader philosophy of human existence.

In opposition to Kierkegaard's embrace of the leap of faith stands Friedrich Nietzsche, equally central to the beginnings of existentialism, who proclaimed that God is dead and called for individuals to embrace their own values and meaning. As Richard Schacht states, the proclamation of the death of God does not hold a literal sense. The real meaning is the idea of God, and that is what religion represented is decaying and unworthy of serious consideration.⁹ Nietzsche employed the metaphor of the dying God to illustrate the obsolescence of moral values and to argue that they ought to be replaced.

The metaphor is further underscored by a thought experiment by Nietzsche that demonstrates the consequences of actions. As Raynolds explains, Nietzsche's call for stronger values is shown through his thought experiment, the "Eternal Return of the Same". The primary idea behind this was that actions have consequences, and that being authentic and in harmony with the choice is rather essential. In essence, the experiment asks a simple question: whether if one had to repeat, if one had to repeat the same action eternally, would one still choose to do it in accordance with moral values and therefore be a so-called "morality slave" or stray from them in action that is more authentic to them.¹⁰ Through this demonstrative question, the thought of morality, rooted in an idea that no longer holds any value in the disillusioned society, only further reinforces the feeling of uncertainty, dread and the sense that life lacks inherent meaning. Nietzsche's effort to abandon inherited, unrooted values and embrace uncertainty further influenced existential thinkers, such as Martin Heidegger, who transformed those feelings of uncertainty into more fundamental problems of being itself.

⁸ Jack Raynolds, "Existentialism and its Heritage", 4-7.

⁹ Richard Schacht, "Nietzsche: After the Death of God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 117.

¹⁰ Jack Raynolds, "Existentialism and its Heritage", 7-9.

Martin Heidegger refocused the discourse on the idea of being, not necessarily defining it, but rather establishing it as less of an abstract entity and more as an experience. Unlike the previously mentioned existentialists, his philosophy is more conventional and dense. According to Reynolds, Heidegger invented the term Dasein to avoid the metaphysical assumptions associated with terms such as "consciousness," "person," and others. The primary quality of Dasein is that it can question its own existence and being, not being a fixed entity. Heidegger suggested that only through Dasein could the true essence of existence be perceived, however, he later abandoned this concept and used the term "Existenz," a term similar to those used by his contemporaries, Søren Kierkegaard and Jaspers.¹¹ Heidegger's philosophy, with its use of the term Dasein, became somewhat more abstract compared to that of other existential philosophers. Essentially, Dasein explains that an entity, whose essence is able to question its existence, through which man can see the truth.

To expand on the concept of Dasein, Heidegger suggests that one may achieve genuine authenticity by embracing all feelings that accompany Dasein, such as anxiety and fear. According to William Blattner, Heidegger believed that there is a particular limitation to our freedom of existence, as our environment, history, and physical predispositions influence our possibilities for becoming anything.¹² The absence of meaning, as well as the ability to create one's own, is still present, but a person can only choose from particular possibilities provided by their personal circumstances. Blattner further emphasises that the awakening of Dasein and perceiving the truth leads to feelings of anxiety, which is an experience more abstract compared to fear. Experiencing the world will give Dasein, as the entity of being, answers to its question, but anxiety has no experience to draw from. Therefore, Dasein experiences loneliness and uneasiness. Through these revelations, despite the anxiety it entails, one realises the absence of greater authority, granting the possibility to define our existence individually.¹³ Through these thoughts, Heidegger inspired Jean-Paul Sartre, although he refused to be classified as an existentialist. Negative emotions, most commonly associated with the revelation of absolute freedom, have later become a recurring theme in many existential works that followed.

Lastly, Heidegger's take on mortality is that of a constant presence in human existence, which cannot be avoided but should rather be confronted. The topic of death is omnipresent in

¹¹ Jack Reynolds, "Heidegger and the Existential Analytic," in *Understanding Existentialism* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2006), 24.

¹² William Blattner, "Heidegger: The Existential Analytic of Dasein," in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 165-167.

¹³ William Blattner, "Heidegger: The Existential Analytic of Dasein," 165-168.

existential philosophy and the approaches to it may vary, but what connects all philosophers is the ultimate acceptance of it. As Richard Grivil states, the mere presence of death and its inevitability add meaning to everyday actions. One should not view death as an event in the distant future but instead accept it as an ever-present possibility that shapes our existence and the choices we make while alive.¹⁴ Death does not evoke a sense of dread in this scenario. Instead, it underscores the meaningfulness of one's existence, regardless of its nature. The recognition of finitude inspires later existentialists, such as Sartre and Camus, who transform the rather abstract philosophy of being itself into a human philosophy of action.

The above-mentioned philosophers represent the foundation of nineteenth-century existentialism, which greatly inspired twentieth-century authors like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The focus of existentialism gradually shifted from the question of being to a more human-centred perspective. Instead of asking why existence lacks inherent meaning, twentieth-century philosophers explored the possibilities of such freedom and how individuals might cope with such truth.

Jean-Paul Sartre is considered to be one of the most well-known existentialist philosophers in the world. To support his claim, Jean-Paul Sartre explains that “a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it”, meaning that the definition of simply being does not determine our existence. Instead, its essence is revealed as one continues to live their life.¹⁵ Sartre’s belief in the absence of inherent meaning holds positive connotations compared to the previous philosophers, focusing more on the hopefulness and freedom this reality offers. According to Raynolds, Sartre demonstrates this by comparing a pen and triangles to human existence. He illustrates that triangles must possess specific attributes to be classified as such. Similarly, a pen is designed for use as a writing tool. In Sartre’s view, human beings possess no such predetermined use, because should a God exist, they would carve its creation with a clear purpose in mind.¹⁶ Our existence is created meaninglessly, without a greater, higher purpose in mind, allowing us the freedom of choice.

Sartre’s emphasis on freedom is rather significant as he considers us to be unconditionally free and condemned to be free. Freedom is not something one can obtain or

¹⁴ Richard Grivil, “*Existentialism*,” ed. Mark Addis, (Tirill: Humanities-Ebooks.co.uk, 2007), 43.

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” trans. Carol Macomber, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 26.

¹⁶ Jack Raynolds, “Condemned to Freedom: Sartre’s Phenomenological Ontology,” in *Understanding Existentialism* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2006), 53-54.

lose, but it is a condition that is fundamental to existence, one we cannot be rid of. Raynolds mentions that Sartre did consider the different circumstances one can be born into, such as poverty and oppression. However, even in these circumstances, one can still choose to behave in several ways, either immersing oneself in pain or struggling against it. Freedom is an absolute, suggesting that humans are not only defined by their history or circumstances, but the decisions they make in exercising their freedoms reveal their true nature.¹⁷ The inevitability of freedom can appear liberating and hopeful, but this reality also evokes dread and anxiety.

Sartre likened feelings of anxiety and dread to anguish and views it as something that accompanies the realisation of the absolute freedom we are given. This anguish is not only connected to the vastness of freedom that comes with our existence, but it is also contributed to by the responsibility that accompanies that freedom. One is given the responsibility to determine one's own fate. Raynolds further demonstrates this with an explanation of Sartre's dramatic metaphor. He suggests that if one were to walk by a cliff, there are two types of dread at hand: one where tripping and plummeting to certain death is an option, in light of which one chooses to walk carefully. The second type of dread concerns one's freedom, meaning that taking a step into the abyss and choosing to fall is an expression of this given consciousness, since nothing is preventing such a decision, apart from the person themselves.¹⁸ This anguish, which accompanies the essential truth, appears frightening. For this reason, individuals tend to pull away from such a reality, but Sartre was well aware of these tendencies and has, in fact, considered such a possibility.

Such anguish can lead to a phenomenon Sartre describes as inauthentic life, which prevents the truth from being seen and accepted. This inauthentic life, as Sartre describes it, is a result of the inability to take responsibility, thereby resorting to preconceived roles, emotions, and norms that suppress the authentic way of existing. According to Robert L. Wicks, bad faith, a term Sartre used to describe such an inauthentic life, is identified as a self-deception somebody undergoes when they feel threatened by the reality of their existence. This type of deception manifests as seeing oneself as a fixed object. For example, a waiter, who is eager to perform his job so well that he becomes a caricature of a waiter, becomes inauthentic and reflects social expectations.¹⁹ Becoming a caricature means engaging in behaviour that is considered a vast

¹⁷ Jack Raynolds, "Condemned to Freedom: Sartre's Phenomenological Ontology," 56-57.

¹⁸ Jack Raynolds, "Condemned to Freedom: Sartre's Phenomenological Ontology," 70-73.

¹⁹ Robert L. Wicks, "Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80)," in *Introduction to Existentialism*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 88-93.

exaggeration. The actions do not stem from one's true nature, but rather from the social expectations of such a role. This conflict between the inevitability of freedom and the constant desire to flee from it is a core existential thought reflected in many literary works of existentialism, marking it a typical trait of post-war literature.

Although Albert Camus refused to be classified as an existentialist, he is often labelled as an absurdist, but the ideologies are intertwined. Unlike Sartre, who proclaims that life is meaningless and one shall look for one's own meaning, Camus emphasises that life indeed is pointless and that one shall accept it as. According to Camus, the central philosophical question concerns suicide. In the face of meaninglessness, the pressure to accept this reality and continue living is unavoidable. The pursuit of answers is an endless and unsatisfying one. "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."²⁰ Camus suggests the search for an answer is futile. Even if humans were to fabricate their own, it would hardly provide satisfactory answers.

Furthermore, unlike the previously mentioned philosophers, who often employed academic language, Camus was never a scholar and refused the label of an existentialist. Camus was primarily a novelist, essayist, and journalist who made philosophy more accessible to the general public, extending its reach beyond academia. This explains the more metaphorical and humanistic approach in comparison to, for example, Heidegger. According to Wicks, Camus resists being labelled an existentialist because he classifies existential thinkers as escapists who refuse to accept the absurd truth. Camus believes that by giving a hopeful connotation to our circumstances, the absolute truth is obscured and claims that the absurd should be rid of any consoling religiosity.²¹ Although Camus refuses the existential label, his thoughts are inherently existentialist. Instead of seeking comfort in individual meanings, he finds relief in the fact that there is no meaning and that the entirety of our existence is absurd.

Albert Camus explains his approach towards the absurdity of human existence in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which is one of the most renowned works. This ancient metaphor is transformed into a demonstration of his absurdist views. As Camus states, Sisyphus was condemned by the Gods to roll a rock up a hill for eternity, which may symbolise the eternal struggle of human beings trapped in a stereotypical, meaningless existence. Despite his endless

²⁰ Albert Camus, "Absurdity and Suicide," in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, (London: Penguin Books Classics, 2013), 15-18.

²¹ Robert L. Wicks, "Albert Camus (1913-60)," in *Introduction to Existentialism*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 103-105.

struggle towards heights, it never lasts, and the boulder rolls back down into the valley. In that descent, Camus sees Sisyphus as a true absurdist hero. The story of Sisyphus is tragic primarily because he is aware of his punishment and its repetitive nature; yet, in accepting the situation he finds himself in, Camus portrays the absurd hero. Through not engaging in comfort or escapism tied to such a revelation, Camus argues that this is where our freedom as human beings lies, in revolt against the meaninglessness of our condition through acceptance.²² The myth encapsulates the essence of Camus' argument that meaning arises from perseverance, not purpose in existence. This notion of self-awareness influenced existential thought, offering a different perspective on the coping mechanism for facing the reality of a meaningless world. This notion is reflected in literature, art, drama and the Theatre of the Absurd.

Existential philosophy has witnessed countless changes during the process of its establishment. It has evolved from questions concerning the validity of faith and subjectivity to the study of being itself, and ultimately to the question of freedom that entails the presence of meaningless existence. Finally, its emphasis was on accepting reality and refusing escapism. The act of reinventing oneself and the views on this world have resonated with the disillusioned society. The philosophical questions became concerned with human experience, which was reflected in art, particularly in the Theatre of the Absurd, where absurdist characters float on the stage without a specified course, and the dialogue leads nowhere, but cycles. The translation of existential topics into a dramatic form has manifested in several ways.

²² Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, (London: Penguin Books Classics, 2013), 84-86.

2. The Theatre of The Absurd

Theatre of the Absurd is an artistic movement of diverse playwrights who, through their plays, responded to the disillusioned state of society. Due to the devastating consequences of the Second World War, the previously popular realistic and naturalistic drama, characterised by its structure and logical progression, was no longer satisfactory to some authors. As a response, the absurd drama emerged, accompanied by entirely new structures of plays with seemingly nonsensical plots. This movement was noticed and described by Martin Esslin, who addressed it as the Theatre of the Absurd. The movement was inspired not only by Camus's absurdism but also by the existential philosophy and previous modernist avant-garde movements, which are reflected in their plays.

The responses of the Theatre of the Absurd and existential philosophy stem from similar circumstances, yet their approaches differ. Due to the collapse of Western values, the plays that were popular before the wars have been rendered rather meaningless in the light of the disillusioned society. As Martin Esslin describes, the plays written by absurdist playwrights lack all the previously established framework in which all drama has been fitted. Because of this lack of structure, one could describe the absurdist plays as anti-plays, going against all the traditions rooted in British theatre. As a result of the absence of a tangible time and setting, the characters appear to be floating in an empty void, with no sense of direction or time. The dialogue is often repetitive, bizarre, and never leads to a satisfactory conclusion. Through the absence of a standard framework, the playwrights demonstrate that theatre can work with just costumes, emotions and acting.²³ This is considered a protest against other artistic movements that strove to maintain their integrity and logical structure.

This protest against logical structure can be classified as a modernist approach to drama and literature, although the Theatre of the Absurd contains both modernist and postmodernist elements. As Steve Connor describes the main difference between modernism and postmodernism is that modernism sought shock through radical innovation but offered a new kind of structure. In contrast, postmodernism refused new structures, instead looking retrospectively at their work.²⁴ The postmodernist elements in the absurdist theatre include the refusal to seek a new order, instead, they accept the absurd lack of it. Many artistic movements

²³ Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," 6-8.

²⁴ Steven Connor, "Introduction," in the *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9-10.

of the mid-twentieth century are tethered to the middle, being an inevitable transition to post-absurdism. The first part of the twentieth century was a turbulent and changing era.

The main difference between the emergence of existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd is that, when the Theatre of the Absurd came to be, the situation in disillusioned Europe looked slightly different from that at the start of the post-war period. According to Michael Y. Bennet, the political climate of the 1950s was vastly different. Instead of experiencing an economic crisis, Western countries were enjoying an economic boom. As a result, Bennet believes that the absurd works had a sense of hopefulness that allowed a bit of space for comedic relief in the absurd situations.²⁵ Martin Esslin portrays the problem more bleakly compared to Michael Y. Bennet, but that may be due to the circumstances of the different time periods in which their commentaries were written. The decade when existentialism and absurdism gained popularity was immediately after the Second World War. At the same time, the absurdist movement gained prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, a period of economic recovery supported by the Marshall Plan, which aimed to reconstruct Europe after the war. The influence of previous avant-garde artistic movements helped shape the Theatre of the Absurd as we know it.

At the start of the twentieth century, the study of human psychology flourished, inspiring writers of the time to seek the truth of everyday human existence and explore the inner, subjective meanings. The modernist movements that preceded the absurd theatre are crucial to its development and influence. Bennet explains that the avant-garde movements can be seen in the Theatre of the Absurd, as they have inspired it. Such movements, for example, include Dadaism, which expressed nonsense in response to the logical thought that preceded The Great War. Surrealism, which, through free association and the unconscious, offered a better option for fighting contemporary society rather than targeting traditional forms.²⁶ Through the exploration of freedom in creative form, the protest against structure has inspired many playwrights in the post-war era, allowing for new kinds of self-expression without any restrictions of form. Furthermore, according to Bennet, absurdist theatre originated primarily in Paris, with Beckett, Ionesco, and Adamov, all inspired by the liberation of language. Although

²⁵ Michael Y. Bennet, "The Emergence of 'Movement': The Historical and Intellectual Context" in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, (Cambridge: University Cambridge Press, 2015), 69-70.

²⁶ Michael Y. Bennet, "Origins of the absurd: Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism and other avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century," in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, (Cambridge: University Cambridge Press, 2015), 31-34.

the Theatre of the Absurd is sometimes classified as avant-garde due to its rebellion against mainstream norms, it differs in kind while reflecting their influence.²⁷ The rejection of traditional forms resonated with many artistic movements, and by breaking from that structure, the exploration of man's inner perception became possible without any restrictions.

Alongside the rejection of established dramatic structure, modernists also challenged the conventions of the language itself. This was not exclusive to the theatre of the absurd, but it was reflected in prose as well. As Esslin explains, James Joyce was one of the influences on the absurd theatre, especially for Beckett. Joyce's attempt to break free of conventional syntax stems from the fact that he found the language to be empty and meaningless at its core, consisting only of a repetition of certain words that hold no real meaning.²⁸ This is illustrated in most absurdist works, where the dialogues between characters seem to have no real meaning and are circular, like phrases in everyday speech. Esslin expands on this by saying that the actors have to play against the dialogue, not with it. He emphasises that the delivery of the line is more crucial than its content.²⁹ The acting aspect of the seemingly meaningless lines plays a significant role in delivering the absurd stories, as proclaiming a meaningless, bizarre line with unfiltered human emotions affects the audience. It shows that, despite the absurd situation, our existence and emotions connected to it are real. Lastly, Esslin proclaims that not everything we say is intended to have the meaning it was designed to convey. The conventions of grammar influence our thoughts, and we should strive to break through such limitations to allow our thoughts to reach their full meaning.³⁰ The importance of language and the experimentation with it is prominent in modernism and the avant-garde movements, including the Theatre of the Absurd. The movement also reflects several existential views, while primarily adopting an absurdist perspective in the footsteps of Camus.

Existential philosophy is reflected in Absurdist theatre, primarily through its concepts rather than a specific philosopher. However, it was mainly shaped by Albert Camus, who provided the movement's starting point with *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Although Camus was included in the list of existentialists, his later approach to the question of the meaninglessness of existence differed from that of Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom he had been close. According to Bennet, the primary difference between them is the approach to existence in general. Sartre

²⁷ Michale Y. Bennet, "Origins of the absurd: Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism and other avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century," 32-34.

²⁸ Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," 10-11.

²⁹ Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," 12.

³⁰ Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," 12-13.

believes that being precedes essence, explaining that one is born without a purpose and then shapes themselves through their actions. He illustrates this with the claim that nobody is born a coward, they become one. Camus disagrees with this notion, believing in human nature and traits and to him, existence becomes meaningful through the acknowledgement of his suffering. Through his rebellion against the absurd circumstances of his existence, persistence is his description of a meaningful life.³¹ Even though the absurd plays are replete with existential topics, questioning reality, mortality, and the unimportance of life, along with the inability to change the course of one's life, they reflect Camus' view the most. The conclusions of most plays are unsatisfactory. They end abruptly without explanation or consolation, instead leaving us with a sense of accepting silence.

The first play of the Absurd Theatre that gained widespread recognition originated in Paris and is titled *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. As Esslin describes, the movement originated in France, mainly in Paris, but that does not mean the writers were of French origin. Paris hosted many experimental plays, providing a fertile ground for international absurdist playwrights.³² Although the Absurd Theatre is often referred to as a movement, the authors would likely reject such a label, as would the existentialist philosophers. Esslin explains that although he described them as a new movement, every author had a unique, personal approach to the absurd. Most notable figures in the Theatre of the Absurd were Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Arthur Adamov. These authors find common ground in the absurd: Beckett reflects feelings of melancholy, Ionesco utilises tragic humour, and Adamov is more down-to-earth, aggressive, and tinged with political overtones.³³ Despite their different approaches to writing plays, the authors form a diverse group that is part of one of the most influential artistic movements in history.

Although the plays written in France overreached Paris, for example, Beckett became rather popular in Britain, there was a slight difference between French-based and English-based absurdist plays. As Neil Cornwall explains, the French Absurd used deconstruction of language, repetition of clichés, dream-like sequences, or dramatised metaphors. For example, Eugene Ionesco in his play *The Chairs*, emphasises the absurdity of it by having an invisible audience represented by chairs, which keep being brought into a room, symbolising the absence of human

³¹ Michael Y. Bennet, "The Camus-Sartre Quarrel," in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, (Cambridge: University Cambridge Press, 2015), 80-83.

³² Martin Esslin, "Introduction" in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (New York: The Division of Random House Inc., 2004), 26-30.

³³ Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd," 4.

communication in a metaphorical and metafictional manner.³⁴ French Absurd focuses on the abstract, philosophical and metafictional portrayal of human emotions. Compared to Britain, where it had transformed slightly into a more down-to-earth setting.

A notable distinction is the way British playwrights adapted the surreal techniques of French absurdism into their plays. According to Christopher Innes, English playwrights such as Harold Pinter or Tom Stoppard were inspired by the absurdist techniques, but transformed them to fit a more recognisable setting, be it through choosing a familiar environment or using characters from a different famous play. Through the play of language and, in addition, a dark, absurd humour, they crafted drama that is seemingly less surreal, but no less absurd and grounded in psychological tension.³⁵ Unlike Ionesco's absurdly irrational plays, English Absurdism is expressed through satirical treatment of stereotypical life. Thus, while the French Absurdist applies surreal metaphors with a dream-like haze to convey feelings of insignificance and anxiety, the British Absurdist, through language and settings, comments on such feelings with less emphasis on surrealism and the addition of satirical nuance. The difference between French and British absurdism can be observed through the works of some of the most prominent Absurdist Writers, notably Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard.

Eugene Ionesco is considered one of the founding figures of the Theatre of the Absurd, with his emphasis on the emptiness of language and dream-like, fantastical settings. Since he belongs among the French-based Absurdism, his approach to the questions of existence was more surreal and fantastical. As Esslin describes, similarly to poets using symbolism along with rhythm and tonal quality, Ionesco tried to communicate with more than just words. He achieved this by using basic human situations that evoke a physical response, such as punching and falling off chairs. Ionesco combines emotionally coloured images with more complex structures, resulting in a transmission of more than just words or ideas, but emotions.³⁶ By repeating phrases that become clichés, Ionesco illustrates the shallowness of our language. As Cornwell illustrates, this is achieved through the repetition of conversations that lead nowhere, moving in a circular pattern, with characters being unable to communicate effectively. Ionesco also engages in a radical devaluation of the English language by using textbook English to

³⁴ Neil Cornwell, "Ionesco and others: the French-language scene," in *The Absurd in Literature*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 129-133.

³⁵ Christopher Innes, "Harold Pinter: Power Plays and the Trap of Comedy," in *Modern British Drama the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 328-330.

³⁶ Martin Esslin, "Eugene Ionesco: Theatre and Anti-theatre," in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (New York: The Division of Random House Inc., 2004), 196-197.

illustrate how communication can easily collapse into meaningless noise.³⁷ Ionesco is not the only absurdist writer who has experimented with language. Still, it was mainly through his commentary that he illustrated how pointless it can become when repeated without real meaning.

Beyond his innovative use of language, Ionesco played a central role in shaping the so-called anti-theatre, which rejected all traditional dramatic structure. One such conventional feature is a coherent plot, which is absent from his plays. Despite the nonsensical plot, it reflects the inner anxieties, fears, and emotions of not only the writer but also of society as a whole, serving as a mirror of the current age. According to Esslin, to make the spectator adopt a different perspective, the theatre must employ shock tactics, engage with reality and thought, and use language that is twisted and dislocated to achieve this effect.³⁸ Ionesco employs such a shock in his play *The Bald Soprano, Anti-Play*, where, instead of giving the audience an ending, he simply restarts the play, creating a perfect cycle. As Bennet explains in Ionesco's previously mentioned play, he criticises the presence of exposition from the very beginning by having the characters walk around and unnaturally talk about themselves, breaking the fourth wall. Eventually, the play loses its linear structure, descending into nonsensical language.³⁹ The unfinished plot, without any apparent development, offers the audience no answers, leaving them with a new beginning and an untold end. The repetition and absence of a real definitive ending are further expanded upon by Samuel Beckett in one of the most famous absurdist works, *Waiting for Godot*.

Samuel Beckett is considered the primary representative of the Absurdist Theatre, due to the popularity of *Waiting for Godot*. The play, like Ionesco's, features the breaking of language, often employing very short sentences, the absence of setting and exposition, and, lastly, commentary on existential topics. According to Bennet, the lack of setting, exposition, and sense of time adds to the feeling of meaninglessness, repetition, and aimlessness in existence. It is unclear how long the protagonists were waiting for the so-called Godot or what Godot represents, whether it be hope, death, or God. This was Beckett's intention, since his opinion on all the interpretations and questions regarding Godot was that if he himself knew

³⁷ Neil Cornwell, "Ionesco and others: the French-language scene," in *The Absurd in Literature*, 128-132.

³⁸ Martin Esslin, "Eugene Ionesco: Theatre and Anti-theatre," in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 144.

³⁹ Michael Y. Bennet, "Eugene Ionesco," in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, (Cambridge: University Cambridge Press, 2015), 150-154.

who Godot was, he would have specified his purpose.⁴⁰ Beckett's play allowed space for many interpretations by not providing any answers to posed questions. As Esslin explains, this ambiguity surrounding Godot contributes to the feelings of anxiety, supposedly expressing the endless wait for our existence to have any meaning and the paralysis of inaction. Esslin connects these feelings with Sartre's philosophy of bad faith, explaining that Vladimir and Estragon, through engaging in meaningless activities and blindly waiting for a concept that may never arrive, exemplify it. At the near end of the play, when Estragon is about to realise the meaningless nature of existence and prepares to face the world as it is without any escapism, Godot's messenger arrives, rekindling that sense of hope that he might actually come.⁴¹ This sense of paralysis and inability to escape the cycle is ever-present in the play, as evidenced by the repetition of actions, dialogue, and the absence of a coherent ending, leaving the audience with more questions than answers. Despite the initial audience not fully understanding the meaning, the message of absurdity in everyday life resonated with many.

This paralysis is further emphasised by the lack of identity of both Estragon and Vladimir, as neither of the main protagonists knows who they are or why they are awaiting Godot. According to Innes, the protagonists are bound together by the need for companionship, while also being connected to the entity of Godot, whom they cling to in order to give meaning to their endless waiting. They do not possess the knowledge of who they are, how long they have been waiting, although it is implied that they've been waiting for a long time. It is not only the dialogue that becomes repetitive, but also the realisation that breathing is just a habit to pass the time, along with the conversation they have, since it serves as a distraction from thought.⁴² Not only do they lack a sense of meaning in their existence, but they also do not possess an understanding of themselves and who they are.

Despite the lack of explanation behind the connection between Vladimir and Estragon, they reflect each other and complement each other. Bennet further expands on the thought of their connection by explaining that both are reflections of each other's weaknesses, which leads to the constant quarrels present in the play. It is very common for the audience or reader to confuse Estragon with Vladimir, but upon closer inspection, what differs between them is the

⁴⁰ Michael Y. Bennet, "Samuel Beckett," in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, (Cambridge: University Cambridge Press, 2015), 90-95.

⁴¹ Martin Esslin, "Samuel Beckett: The Search for the Self," in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (New York: The Division of Random House Inc., 2004) 60-65.

⁴² Christopher Innes, "Samuel Beckett: Interior Space and Play as Image," in *Modern British Drama the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 314-315.

way they perceive their surroundings. Their differing perceptions create a contrast between mind and body, with Vladimir being focused on his mind and thoughts, primarily on existential and intellectual matters, and Estragon, who places the main emphasis on his bodily needs, such as sleep and hunger.⁴³ Their semi-co-dependency illustrates that to see the truth, one must look at things from a broader perspective. Despite their predicament, which seems bleak, aimless and at one point the question of suicide is presented, their belief in Godot and the purpose of waiting for him allows them some sense of resemblance to meaning.

Ionesco and Beckett both employ the devolution of language, illustrating its meaninglessness and futility, refuse the traditional structure of drama, provide unsatisfactory endings to their plays, and most of all project their feelings of dread. These are staple traits for the Theatre of the Absurd, mostly falling under the umbrella of modernism. The authors of the Absurd Theatre were also greatly influenced by early avant-garde movements, notably Dadaism and Surrealism. Most of the previously mentioned authors originated from France, with the exceptions of Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter. The shift of the English Absurd is more grounded in familiar settings, and Pinter inspired Stoppard in the area of dialogue.

One of Harold Pinter's notable contributions to the Theatre of the Absurd was his approach to using language, focusing not on constant repetition but instead on silence and pauses. The shift between French and British Absurd becomes visible through Pinter's use of a familiar domestic setting, utilising average conversation that turns into psychological tension and unspoken threat. According to Innes, Pinter's drama relies on the ambiguity of the situation, the lack of exposition and withholding important information regarding their situation keeps both the audience and the characters in suspense and uncertainty. This uncertainty also results in a sense of maliciousness and menace, which poses as a strong narrative device, because the audience never fully understands its origin.⁴⁴ Pinter uses silence and pauses to demonstrate power and to emphasise the shift in control on stage. According to Esslin, Pinter's use of pauses is crucial to his dramatic technique, as they express emotional weight, anxiety, tension, and unspoken conflict between the characters. Instead of working as gaps, they express more about the character's inner feelings rather than their spoken words, creating both menace and comedy, which interrupts the natural flow of the conversation. The silence shifts dominance expresses

⁴³ Michael Y. Bennet, "Samuel Beckett," in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, 94-98.

⁴⁴ Christopher Innes, "Harold Pinter: Power Plays and The Trap of Comedy," in *Modern British Drama the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 329-330.

the desire to remain silent in protest and allows for a new understanding of the meaning behind spoken words.⁴⁵ The utility of silence and language, emphasising the tense atmosphere that it creates, inspired Tom Stoppard.

Tom Stoppard entered the scene later, emerging in the 1960s with his first play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which gained considerable popularity. Although Stoppard is included in the list of authors associated with The Theatre of the Absurd, his plays have expanded beyond the absurd, bringing him closer to postmodernism, without classifying him as such. As Innes explains, Stoppard differs from Pinter in tone. On the one hand, Pinter reveals the underlying maliciousness of everyday situations. Stoppard, on the other hand, employs verbal wit, humour, and language play to explore the early themes of his play: the contrast between free will and fate, and the absence of meaning and existence. Because of his usage of humour, the seriousness of his discussed topics is often overlooked.⁴⁶ Through the emphasis on humour and clever metaphors, Stoppard creates a perfect environment for exploring the feelings that accompany existential thought.

Stoppard's decision to reuse some minor characters from *Hamlet* allowed him space for commentary on the play, setting them in the same situation as Beckett's protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, essentially rendering his work a new perspective on both. According to John Fleming, Stoppard utilised the opportunity to incorporate characters from *Hamlet*, as he believed their circumstances in the original play were already dramatic, especially noting the nature of their deaths. Despite the comedic nature of his play, Stoppard illustrates feelings of existential dread, questions the nature of truth, and confronts the distinction between acting and an authentic sense of self, ultimately questioning whether the universe is deterministic. Providing commentary and exploration of these topics, the ability to interpret all the mentioned topics is ever-present, with no definitive stance being taken in the play.⁴⁷ The act of borrowing a previously existing text, juxtaposing minor side characters to the foreground and setting them in a static environment while the play of *Hamlet* unfolds in the background, was groundbreaking for the last wave of the Absurd Theatre.

⁴⁵ Martin Esslin, "Harold Pinter: Certainties and Uncertainties," in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (New York: The Division of Random House Inc., 2004)233-236.

⁴⁶ Christopher Innes, "Tom Stoppard: Theatricality and the Comedy of Ideas," in *Modern British Drama the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 390-394.

⁴⁷ John Fleming, "Chapter 2: Rosencrantz Are Dead," in *Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order Amid Chaos*, ed. Thomas F. Stanley, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, 53.

The similar settings of *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* lead to the misconception that the narratives are identical. The protagonists of both plays seem to be always waiting, without a clear understanding of the purpose behind it. As Innes explains, if one applies the Beckettian explanation to the protagonists of Stoppard's play, it will mean that time has stopped. Such an explanation is incorrect, given the nature of the play, in which the plot of *Hamlet* is primarily in the foreground, while the action takes place backstage. The primary concern of Ros and Guil is the reality that, despite waiting for Hamlet as Vladimir and Estragon would wait for Godot, Hamlet is a real character that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot escape, rendering their attempts and decisions useless.⁴⁸ Focusing on the individual importance in the broader context, in this instance, the play of *Hamlet*, where both protagonists play minimal roles and have no significant impact on the overall story, gives rise to a whole new existential undertone.

Further key theme in Stoppard's play is the question of identity merging with a stage performance. According to Innes, the topic of theatricality is a subject in Stoppard's play, and it is expressed through the many instances where Guildenstern and Rosencrantz change positions from spectators back into being characters in *Hamlet* without their control. Their circumstances do not fall under any laws of probability, as they are tied to their constant coin flipping and betting, never resulting in redistributions of the money or any economic laws. The emphasis on how their fate is already decided, despite their knowledge, only further supports the point of the topic of acting in Stoppard's play. Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are portrayed as real people, they exist in a fictional reality artificially created to serve the drama's needs.⁴⁹ Tom Stoppard's utilisation of existential themes, clever writing and interesting setting lead to one of the most interesting themes, which is categorised as an Absurdist play, despite its transitional nature.

The Absurd Theatre was one of the most significant revolutions in traditional drama, allowing for self-expression on a more subjective, inner level. The absurd plots, which never lead to a satisfactory conclusion, the dialogue that illustrates the futility of language and how easily it can fail in everyday exchanges, and the metafiction that slowly appears all bear the influences of early avant-garde, the disillusionment of the world, existential ideas, and also a

⁴⁸ Christopher Innes, "Tom Stoppard: Theatricality and the Comedy of Ideas" in *Modern British Drama the Twentieth Century*, 390-394.

⁴⁹ Christopher Innes, "Tom Stoppard: Theatricality and the Comedy of Ideas," in *Modern British Drama the Twentieth Century*, 390-394.

bit of hopefulness for something new. Not necessarily a new form as modernism tried to achieve, but a new tool of self-expression, which could change the audience's viewpoint subtly, without explicitly showing them the moral of the story, allowing free interpretations.

3. Individual Insignificance and Lack of Identity

The theme of individual unimportance and a sense of unstable identity is one of the most prominent underlying discussions in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are expected to be already established characters, they possess no knowledge of their origin, no stable sense of self and no significance beyond the play of *Hamlet*, in which they also cannot influence the course of their fate. Their ever-present confusion about identity, roles, and purpose illustrates the disconnection between the individual and their circumstances and their ability to change them, as well as an identity that only works when assigned to them by someone else.

Individual insignificance and identity uncertainty are closely interconnected topics that manifest in several moments of the play. One such moment arises quite early in the play when a band of travelling actors comes across the two seemingly stranded tramps. These Tragedians are supposed to be an ironic metaphor for the protagonists, serving as actors in a fictional play. As Robert Eagen illustrates, the actors are condemned to the same futile situation: being tied to a play with a predetermined conclusion over which they have no power.⁵⁰ At this very moment, neither Guil nor Ros has a sense of purpose, unaware of their role in a larger drama in which they are framed. The scene plays as:

Player: We can give you a tumble if that's your taste, and times being what they are ...
Otherwise, for a jingle of coins we can do you a selection of gory romances, full of fine cadence and corpses, pirated form the Italian; and it doesn't take much to make a jingle – even a single coin has music in it.

They all flourish and bow, raggedly.

Tragedians, at your command.

Ros and Guil have got to their feet.

Ros: My name is Guildenstern, and his is Rosencrantz.
(*Guil confers briefly with him.*)

⁵⁰ Robert Eagan, "A Thin Beam of Light: The Purpose of Playing in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," *Theatre Journal* vol. 31, no. 1 (March 1979): 62.

(*Without embarrassment*) I'm sorry – *his* name's Guildenstern and I'm Rosencrantz.⁵¹

The exchange demonstrates the extent to which Ros' and Guil's identities lack grounding, for no individual misidentifies both himself and his companion, whom he is suggested to know for a while, as effortlessly as Ros does in this instance. The discussion afterwards, initiated by Guil, leads Ros to correct himself. Still, the absence of embarrassment or panic at misplacing their names suggests that Ros does not consider himself, nor Guil, in that matter, as two interchangeable entities with personal significance and identity. The Tragedians do not react to such a mistake, as if they did not register it or find it strange or unusual. Their disinterest is further emphasised by the way the Player does not allow Ros to ask questions. The exchange continues as follows:

Player: A pleasure. We've played to bigger, of course, but quality counts for something. I recognised you at once –

Ros: And who are we?

Player: – as fellow artists.

Ros: I thought we were gentlemen.

In this instance, it can be observed that despite Ros's intrusion into the Player's speech, there was no impact from the interruption, leading the Player to smoothly finish his sentence as if Ros had not asked the question. Ros's question, asking the Player who they are, further emphasises their own uncertainty about identity. It also points to the claim that, despite the Tragedians being aware of their role as actors, Ros and Guil are either unaware of or in denial of these circumstances. Eagan expands on his claim by explaining that Guil hoped for the arrival of an omen, some heroic force that would set their course, but instead the Tragedians pose as an absurd omen, preceding the moment Guil and Ros are thrown into the story of *Hamlet*.⁵² Not only does this sequence, very early in Act I, set the unstable identities of both protagonists, but it also poses the question of confronting the reality of their consequences through the Tragedians, who serve as a mirror.

⁵¹ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 13.

⁵² Robert Eagan, "A Thin Beam of Light: The Purpose of Playing in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," 62.

The status of actors is bestowed upon Ros and Guil without their awareness, a shift metaphorically initiated by the sudden change in the setting, with dramatic lighting as the coin flips, signalling the shift between their world and the play of *Hamlet* as they assume their roles. According to John Freeman, the symbolised shift allows both the dramatic texts of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to occur on stage simultaneously. The shifts frighten and startle Ros with Guil, transforming their consciousness and behaviour to the pre-determined characters written by Shakespeare.⁵³ As the plays intertwine and the setting of *Hamlet* comes to the foreground, Ros and Guil immediately assume the roles of minor characters, fading into the background. This blending of plays is metaphorical, according to Innes, the Elizabethan clothing worn by Guil and Ros transforms from historical attire to costumes that serve in a play.⁵⁴ Although earlier Ros states that he believed they were gentlemen, suggesting their ordinary nature as men, this statement is slowly picked apart as they assimilate effortlessly into the language of *Hamlet*.

As Claudius and Gertrude enter the stage, not only has the stage transformed into theirs, even though Guil and Ros were engaging in a dialogue that was interrupted, but the characters of Gertrude and Claudius refer to them incorrectly. The exchange plays out as follows:

Claudius: Welcome, dear Rosencrantz ... (*He raises a hand at Guil while Ros bows – Guil bows late and hurriedly*) ... and Guildenstern.

*He raises a hand at Ros while Guil bows to him – Ros is still straightening up from his previous bow, and halfway up, he bows down again. With his head down, he twists to look at Guil, who is on the way up.*⁵⁵

This sense of fragmented identity stems mainly from the lack of exposition and background of the main characters. It is not only experienced by the protagonists themselves, but also by the characters with whom they were initially set in the same play. According to Freeman, the cause of this constant confusion lies in the circumstances in which Guil and Ros find themselves, given the two separate settings. During the transition from *Hamlet* to their own subjective vacuum, they lose their sense of self. Stating that the setting of *Hamlet* provides them with a sense of purpose, disallows any sense of subjectivity and prevents thought, the change they

⁵³ John Freeman, "Holding Up the Mirror to Mind's Nature: 'Reading Rosencrantz' 'Beyond Absurdity'," *The Modern Language Review* vol 91, no. 1 (January 1996), 37.

⁵⁴ Christopher Innes, "Tom Stoppard: Theatricality and the Comedy of Ideas," in *Modern British Drama the Twentieth Century*, 400.

⁵⁵ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 26-27.

encounter after being placed in their own barren world of waiting outside of *Hamlet* manifests as a subjective prison, allowing them to ponder the nature of their very existence.⁵⁶ In the context of the Shakespearean play, Ros and Guil do not require an identity or background, since their roles are so minor that this information would be rendered completely insignificant. Outside the play, brought to the foreground, this absence of a sense of self manifests in their continuous confusion.

This fragmentation is deeply rooted in their nature as side characters written by Shakespeare. In the context of Stoppard's play, they are not burdened with any sort of task to fulfil or role to play. Their absence from *Hamlet*'s scenes provides them with freedom in their own setting. Even though the prospect of liberty, being freed from the framework of the Shakespearean drama, may seem liberating at first, it reinforces their fragmented sense of self. As William E. Grauber explains, Shakespeare intended for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be interchangeable, because of their lack of personality and uniqueness, they posed as rather traditional comic characters.⁵⁷ Ros and Guil have always been intended to pose as shallow, bland characters, which are posing as a comical aspect through their insignificance. There is one more instance in Act I in which they ask questions about their identity. It plays as follows:

Guil: What's your name when you're at home?

Ros: What's yours?

Guil: When I'm at home?

Ros: Is it different at home?

Guil: What home?⁵⁸

Based on the discussion of the metaphysical nature of the text, one could interpret that "home" has several meanings in this instance. The first interpretation could be that "home" refers to their original setting and the play of *Hamlet*, where, despite their lack of grounding, their fates are set in stone, and they effortlessly fall into the string of events. The more probable interpretation is that "home" refers to a real place one would originate from, including personal history and previous proof of their existence. The lack of such a background is what connects

⁵⁶ John Freeman, "Holding Up the Mirror to Mind's Nature: 'Reading Rosencrantz' 'Beyond Absurdity'", 35-36.

⁵⁷ William E. Grauber, "Wheels Within Wheels, etcetera: Artistic Design in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," *Comparative Drama* vol. 15, no. 4 (Winter 1981-82), 297.

⁵⁸ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 35.

them as characters. These questions are asked in the middle of a question game Ros has suggested, which implies they are close to a breakthrough: a realisation that they are nothing more than actors on a stage. Grauber states that the metaphor of the world as a stage and us as actors upon it requires us to have unique personalities, identities, and roles to be played by different actors. Therefore, the concept of two identical, interchangeable people representing the same character becomes absurd and chaotic.⁵⁹ The two characters were pre-destined to their condition of shallowness by both Stoppard and Shakespeare. It is their nature as characters in a play in both settings. Unlike Shakespeare, Stoppard provides them with a spotlight, giving them space to reflect on themselves. Despite their train of thought, which seemingly leads to a significant conclusion, it is constantly interrupted.

In Act III of the play, Stoppard appears to illustrate that this lack of responsibility for their own identity and significance is fatal to both of them. According to Gruber, the final instance before the play's final moments, which portrayed them sailing to England for their execution, is a key aspect of this commentary, showing the characters' repeated cowardice. He argues that neither Stoppard nor Shakespeare predestined them to die. It was their actions throughout the play that led to this. If Guil had destroyed the latter given to him, it would have been a rebellion against their fate, not being actors in a play, but they would reclaim the reign over their course.⁶⁰ The act of taking responsibility for one's identity is inherently existential, leading to a sense of insignificance in the broader picture of being.

In comparison, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the instability of identity and the overall sense of indifference are significant themes. Vladimir and Estragon are stranded in a barren environment. It is bland, with only a lone tree looming over them both, presenting one of the possibilities of getting out of the existential cycle: suicide. Their memory of who they are, why they are waiting for Godot, who is Godot and where they are is obscured by the sense of frozen time. Beckett's writing suggests that both tramps have been trapped in this sense of limbo for a long time, leading not only to fragmented speech but also to a fragmented sense of identity and significance. As Esslin explains, the two tramps refer to each other as Didi and Gogo, but when the boy messenger arrives, he addresses Vladimir as Mister Albert. This seems rather peculiar, since the play never mentions that this might be Vladimir's real name. Similarly, when Estragon

⁵⁹ William E. Grauber, "Wheels Within Wheels, etcetera: Artistic Design in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," 297.

⁶⁰ William E. Grauber, "Wheels Within Wheels, etcetera: Artistic Design in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," 306.

is asked for his name, he replies without hesitation: Catullus. The exchange resembles that of music-hall comedians, suggesting there might be more than meets the eye, yet the main characters have forgotten their original identities, though not wholly.⁶¹ The main difference between the protagonists of Beckett's play and Stoppard's play is that Ros and Guil are, in a way, established as characters in *Hamlet*, even though very shallow ones. Ros and Guil are constantly confronted with their prerequisite character arcs, while *Hamlet* keeps interrupting their discussions, unlike Godot, Hamlet always arrives. The two are not awaiting his arrival: they cannot escape him. Although both plays seem to portray a pair of two stranded tramps, Stoppard's approach to this sense of fragmented identity is different from Beckett, by using intertextuality, Stoppard explores the conflict of having a pre-determined identity, being an actor in a play or choosing not to act out in the way which was written for them, straying from it and finding a different identity. It may be suggested that Estragon and Vladimir had a background in the instance Esslin described, but their paralysis of waiting for Godot, who truly never arrives, has stripped them of purpose, identity and renders them insignificant in the frame of the work, because even though the dialogue may change, in the end they have not moved from the starting point, unlike Guil and Ros.

The lack of grounding, identity, and the characters' insignificance in the plot seem to be circumstances imposed by the playwright himself, but in a metaphysical play such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, what the playwright intended hardly matters. Tom Stoppard utilises the setting of *Hamlet* to explore the existential dread of the play's most insignificant characters. He illustrates how they can break through the dramatic plan intended for them. Such thoughts reflect the work of many existential philosophers, especially Camus and Sartre. Sartre's bad faith is illustrated by Ros and Guil's choice to act out the predetermined, expected stereotype written for them. Although there is time for them to realise that they have been acting out in a play, even when they are close to such a breakthrough, mainly Guil, it never happens until the very end, when it is already too late. Camus' view is supported by the fact that the only predetermined thing in our lives is death, and that this should serve as our purpose, allowing us to rebel against such suffering by continuing to live despite the absurdity of our existence. Ros and Guil experience anguish, but, through their lack of identity and, therefore, their insignificance in the play, they act out an ending determined for them by Shakespeare, sailing offstage to their deaths.

⁶¹ Martin Esslin, "Samuel Beckett: The Search for Self," 47-50.

4. Meaninglessness of Existence and Its Impact

Questions concerning the meaning of being, its purpose, and direction have always been present, long before the post-war era. Still, these questions were once answered by religion or science. Tom Stoppard employs not only the questions of absurdity but also comments on being actors in a play we ourselves do not understand, yet must act out, seemingly without a way to escape it. Freeman describes it as the shift from a more nihilistic approach by previous writers, who wrote as if man were part of a larger framework he did not understand, one that offered no meaning. Therefore, he is required to make his own. Stoppard's shift to absurdity is one of a familiar setting in which the audience is aware in advance of the protagonists' fate. Yet, it remains unclear and purposeless to the protagonists.⁶² Setting characters in a world with no purpose, direction, or meaning simulates the circumstances of a post-war society that has similarly lost its track and previous answers to the question 'why' have been so distorted that they no longer suffice.

The opening sequence of the play is examined in this analytical chapter because of its immediate introduction of the two contrasting attitudes toward the search for meaning. Ros is described as: "The run of 'heads' is impossible, yet Ros betrays no surprise at all – he feels none."⁶³ This character note might suggest that Ros overlooks the improbability of the odds presented by the endless string of heads in their coin-flipping game. He might overlook it for two possible reasons: either he does not notice it at all, or he is aware but unwilling to face the fact. According to Sartre, when one is faced with the nature of the absurd, one does not comprehend it fully and that is where the true nature of absurdity lies, the "inability to conceive"⁶⁴ utilising language and man-made concepts, which are a fundamental part of society.⁶⁵ Ros might be aware of the improbability, but he is unable to understand it, which may lead to negative emotions such as anxiety, so he avoids questioning it.

Although Ros is described as unbothered by the unlikely odds, Guil is defined as the opposite, showcasing another approach to existential questions. Guil is described as: "He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it – his character note."⁶⁶ Unlike Ros, he does not entirely ignore the absurdity of the

⁶² John Freeman, "Holding Up the Mirror to Mind's Nature: 'Reading Rosencrantz' 'Beyond Absurdity'", 35-36.

⁶³ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 1.

⁶⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 86.

⁶⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," 86.

⁶⁶ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 1

circumstances, but he does not let on the feeling of anxiety that is accompanied by that awareness. Camus argues that the meaning of life does not lie in the endless search for it, nor in the meaning one associates with his existence, but solely in the act of persistence against the absurdity. The escape to religion or any consolation that would explain some of the questions one might have, though without any evidence, is not the absurd way. However, the absurd man might be persuaded into it.⁶⁷ As established, the characters lack identity, but this seemingly minor difference in their approach is crucial to the question of the meaninglessness of their existence.

These attitudes are expanded on in the following coin-flipping scene, where Guil begins to provide a rational explanation while Ros continues to spin the coins. As mentioned by Flemming, the opening scene of the coin toss is the most famous from the play, while at the same time setting the tone for the rest of it. He argues that Guil's need for explanation drives him to come up with several different instances of theories. Still, there is no straightforward answer to the impossible string of coin tosses.⁶⁸ Guil's frustration only rises as he keeps on providing theories, assessing them and applying them, while Ros continues playing, unaware:

Guil: It must be indicative of something, besides the redistribution of wealth. (*He muses.*) List of possible explanations. [...]

Ros: Heads.

[...]

Ros: I don't know, what do you want to do?

Guil: I have no desires. None. [...]⁶⁹

Guil gets frustrated not only by Ros' ignorance, but also by the continuous attempts to prove that the coin toss has a logical explanation, which only emphasises the absurd, where one tends to go in cycles of asking questions and answering them unsatisfactorily. The proclamation of having no desire is not only tied to the fact that he does not want to engage in any game. Guil, as a person or a character, has no desires whatsoever, since he was meant only to be a side character in a broader story. Not only do they not know the purpose of their waiting, but the surrounding environment is barren and unfamiliar, symbolising the existential struggle to

⁶⁷ Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," 41.

⁶⁸ John Fleming, "Chapter 2: Rosencrantz Are Dead," 54.

⁶⁹ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 6-7.

establish purpose. There is no presented purpose to our existence, as Sartre states, “existence precedes essence,”⁷⁰ as is represented here. On one hand, Ros’s indifference prevents him from seeing the whole picture, keeping him in a sort of illusion of peace and finding comfort in the absurdity, while not fully embracing it. On the other hand, Guil’s awareness sends him into a spiral of desperately seeking a conclusion that would calm the anxiety that accompanies this realisation of the truth.

In the following scene, Guil is attempting to remember the nature of their so-called “travelling” and the purpose of such. The absence of an established world and environment only contributes to the existential dread of their existence, and Guil is beginning to realise. The exchange goes as follows:

Guil: We better get on.

Ros: (*actively*) Right! (*Pause.*) On where?

Guil: Forward.

Ros: (*forward to footlights*) Ah. (*Hesitates.*) Which way do we -
(*He turns around.*) Which way did we -?

Guil:

Guil: Practically starting from scratch ... An awakening, a man standing on his 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.⁷¹

Similarly, as Guil expects the impossibility of the toss to have a logical explanation, he feels that they are entitled to a sense of purpose and direction. Camus comments on this by saying that taking a sort of leap of faith, which comes along with committing to one of those made-up meanings, is worse than having no meaning at all, since man does not act outside the extent of his knowledge. Moreover, this sense of freedom that comes with individual meaning, Camus considers obscuring the truth, saying that the only freedom he knows is that of a prisoner. The only true freedom is the freedom to act.⁷² Seemingly, there is no honest answer to any of Guil’s

⁷⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” 22.

⁷¹ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 6-7.

⁷² Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” 41-44.

questions, yet he cannot accept the fact. The absurdity of his and Ros's existence is apparent to them throughout the play, but due to the constant action on stage, they are not left with their thoughts long enough to have the absurdist realisation. The anxiety associated with these thoughts leaves Guil presumably tired. At the same time, Ros's ignorance allows him to retain most of his energy, explaining his eagerness to continue onward, whereas Guil knows there is no real path forward for them outside of *Hamlet*.

Finally, the futility of questions is represented in the question game Ros and Guil engage in after Claudius and Gertrude's first interruption. The rules are simple: they are supposed to practice asking questions, following one another's enquiries with another, and avoiding statements. The game is swift:

Guil: Do you think it matters?

Ros: Doesn't it matter to you?

Guil: Why should it matter?

Ros: What does it matter why?

Guil: (*Teasing gently*) What's the *matter* why it matters?

Ros: (*Rounding on him*) What's the *matter* with you?

Guil: It doesn't matter.

[...]

Ros: [...] What is the game?

Guil: What are the rules?⁷³

Flaming explains that this illustrates the existential anguish both protagonists experience, which stems from their inability to fully comprehend the rules and nature of the world they are supposed to live in. They experience an existential feeling of abandonment and settle on a direction that might provide answers.⁷⁴ This frustration leads to the inability to realise the full extent of their roles as actors in *Hamlet*, preventing them from reclaiming the only freedom

⁷³ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 36.

⁷⁴ John Fleming, "Chapter 2: Rosencrantz Are Dead," 56.

they have been given: the freedom of action. Lack of action proves to be fatal to both Ros and Guil in Act III of the play.

In the last act of the play, Guil and Ros find themselves at Elsinore, fully integrated in *Hamlet's* story now, possessing the letter which will condemn them to their death. As they run into the Tragedians again, they do not realise that what they are witnessing is a reenactment of their death, even as it is presented right in front of them. According to Flemming, the protagonists' failure to recognise their own death means their role goes beyond mere spectators. They are integral to the story, but not because of their character. What makes them essential is their death.⁷⁵ Later, as Guil and Ros board the boat, it inevitably sails toward their execution without their knowledge. The conversation between them after discovering the contents of the letter sent them both into a panic.

Guil: Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current ...

Ros: They had it in for us, didn't they? Right from the beginning. Who'd have thought that we were so important?

Guil: But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? (*In anguish to Player*) Who are *we*?

Player: You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough.

Guil: No – it is not enough. To be told so little – to such an end – and still, finally, to be denied an explanation ...

Player: In our experience, most things end in death.

Guil: (*fear, vengeance, scorn*) Your experience – Actors!

[...]

Guil: I'm talking about death – and you've never experienced *that*. And you cannot *act it*.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ John Fleming, "Chapter 2: Rosencrantz Are Dead," 59-60.

⁷⁶ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 144.

Guil finally loses his temper, spiralling in fear and desperation as he attempts to gain information from the Player. Even while faced with the inevitability of his death, the only thing he seeks is an explanation. Flemming expands on this, stating that, despite a seeming way out of the situation, the inaction persists now that they are aware of the letter's contents. By destroying the letter, no execution would take place. Rather than focusing on their survival, Guildenstern demands answers about their predicament and their role in the events that have transpired, since he does not understand.⁷⁷ One can interpret this sequence as a fully absurdist realisation that the only certainty is death, which alone shall give our existence meaning. Even before their demise, Guil and Ros are given no answers, and although Ros seemed to ignore the existential dread associated with them, even he has to confront it. His attitude compared to Guil's is accepting. He asks several questions before the very end of the play, but he gets none as he looks around the barren environment.

Ros: [...] We didn't harm anyone. Did we?

Guil: I can't remember.

Ros pulls himself together.

Ros: All right then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell the truth, I'm relieved.

And he disappears from view.

*Guil does not notice.*⁷⁸

Rosencrantz escapes the anguish connected to the actual realisation of truth by once again taking an indifferent stance towards it. This may illustrate the ambiguity of the meaning, either representing a positive acceptance of the absurd, a sense of peace with it, or inaction and a lack of responsibility for one's own fate. Grubber's view is that both Guil and Ros were wrong, that fate did not have it in for them. In fact, they chose to go down this path freely. They chose to be cowards, even when faced with the possibility of destroying the letter. Stoppard supposedly stresses their cowardice, not ignorance.⁷⁹ The decision to accept their fate does not reflect absurdism nor existentialism, for Ros and Guil have not found meaning throughout the whole play. They have only played their part in *Hamlet* without fully realising its content or the

⁷⁷ John Fleming, "Chapter 2: Rosencrantz Are Dead," 62-64.

⁷⁸ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 116-117.

⁷⁹ William E. Grauber, "Wheels Within Wheels, etcetera: Artistic Design in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," 306.

full extent of their role. Their existence was meaningless; the only significance they had was in their deaths, which occurred off-screen in both *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

In comparison with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Stoppard takes a different approach to meaninglessness, but there are still similarities. Unlike Guil and Ros, Estragon and Vladimir are presented as living in a static, unmoving world. Nothing really happens in the whole play and that is the basis of their lack of direction and purpose. They do possess some knowledge of their previous life, but through the paralysis of their state, where they endlessly wait for Godot, who never comes. By delaying their departure until the day draws to a close and having the messenger continually say that Godot is busy and will only arrive the next day, they choose to remain in this paralysis. As Joseph E. Duncan explains, the main difference between Ros and Guil and Didi with Gogo is that Didi and Gogo are frustrated by the endless waiting and inaction. At the same time, Ros and Guil are confused by the fast action of *Hamlet's* plot and are lost within it. He states that Didi and Gogo represent the universal feeling of waiting, for purpose or for action, Ros and Guil are supposed to represent the anxiety of being caught among a larger force one cannot control.⁸⁰ Unlike Ros and Guil, Vladimir and Estragon do not receive a definitive ending; they proclaim they will leave, but stay frozen in place, indicating that the play will happen all over again due to their memory issues. Stoppard breaks the absurd tradition of indefinite endings by allowing the actual ending of *Hamlet* to play out, so the audience can leave knowing no more than they already do: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

The absence of meaning and the constant search for it are illustrated throughout the whole play, being evident in every question. Yet, the famous notions of Sartre, emphasising that one must not run away from the lack of pre-determined meaning, despite the anguished feeling it brings, are not present in the play. Although Ros and Guil have the opportunity to break free from their predicament, they never consider it an option, even though the audience expects them to. At the same time, Camus' notion of rebellion is also disproven, since even in the end, Guil cannot accept the fact that there are no satisfactory answers to their predicament.

⁸⁰ Joseph Ellis Duncan, "Godot Comes: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," *Ariel-a Review of International English Literature* vol. 12, No. 4 (October 1981), 68-69.

5. Mortality

Mortality is a central topic throughout the play, from its beginning to its very end, preoccupying the protagonist's mind. The presence of death is a prominent topic in existential philosophy, with every philosopher having a slightly different outlook on it. For example, Camus believed that death is the true meaning of life, since it is inevitable. It is not to be considered the end of being, rather something that should force us into living authentically and meaningfully subjectively. Stoppard approaches the topic of death on a different scale. Firstly, the play's title suggests the fate of the two characters. Secondly, the Tragedians serve as a mirror for Guil and Ros not only in their lack of identity and the inability to act, but also in their deaths. The dramatic irony of the audience knowing that the two characters die in the end only emphasises their desperation to understand why, not to escape it.

The topic of mortality comes to the fore in Acts II and III of the play, where the Tragedians are asked to perform the “Murder of Gonzago.” Guil and Ros witness the Tragedians practising their so-called “dumbshow”, and although Guil and Ros are supposed to be spectators, the Player repeatedly refers to them as active participants. The dumbshow slowly turns into the plot of *Hamlet* without the two courtiers realising, though they feel a sense of familiarity they cannot place.

Guil: (*fear, derision*) Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama! This isn't *death!* (*more quietly*) You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone – it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says – ‘One day you are going to die.’ (*He straightens up.*) You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death?⁸¹

Eagen explains that during this outburst, Guil refuses the fact that death can be acted out with the significance it truly holds, commenting on life itself and the illegibility of it. Yet what should frustrate him more than the certain artificiality of the act of death is that the innocent dress rehearsal has transformed into a prophecy of their death, yet he remains oblivious to that fact.⁸² Guil is not only frustrated with the unrealistic portrayal of death, but he seems to be concerned by the sheer amount of it. According to Fleming, even though the dumbshow suggested the play would follow *Hamlet's* course, it is not entirely true. The string of events

⁸¹ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 76.

⁸² Robert Eagan, “A Thin Beam of Light: The Purpose of Playing in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*,” 65.

that occur on the boat is Stoppard's construction and strays from the original text's framework. Firstly, the discovery of the letter calling for Hamlet's execution; secondly, that the letters were switched, commanding their execution instead, and the murder of the Player.⁸³ Both Ros and Guil fear the finality of death, which is expressed in their final scenes.

The inescapability of death is a present reminder, not only in the script of Hamlet but also as a predetermined human condition one must face, no matter the time or place. As Ben Gross notes, Stoppard's use of Shakespearean characters means they can never truly be classified as his own. Therefore, they will always remain tied to the original script. Similarly, humans remain tied to an original script without their realisation. The difference between ordinary people and those of Ros and Guil is that they are unaware of the events that await them, yet the end and beginning have already been written: the start at birth and the end in death.⁸⁴ Not necessarily were Guil and Ros predetermined for their demise in the structure of Stoppard's play. They were destined to die as people, though by playing their part in *Hamlet*, they have reinforced a fate already written by Shakespeare.

While on the boat, mere moments before the play ends and Guil loses his temper with the Player for the last time, he attempts to murder him. Such a violent act stems from the prolonged taunting from the Player's side, presenting himself as comfortable in the predicament he was thrown into. To perform.

Guil: [...] Because even when you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after *death* – there is no applause – there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that's – *death*.

And he pushes the blade in up to the hilt. The Player stands up with huge, terrible eyes, clutches at the wound as the blade withdraws: he makes small weeping sounds and falls to his knees, and then right down. [...]

If we have a destiny, then so had he – and if this is ours, then that was his – and if there are no explanations for us, then let there be none for him –

[...]

⁸³ John Fleming, "Chapter 2: Rosencrantz Are Dead," 61.

⁸⁴ Ben Gross, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead: A Study of Theatrical Determinism," *Gnovis Journal* 4, No. 1 (Fall 2014): 4.

Player: [...] What did you think? (*Pause.*) You see, it *is* the kind they do believe in – it's what is expected.⁸⁵

According to Zoran Milutinovic, there is a significant difference between the Player's death and the deaths of Guil and Ros. The death of Player is melodramatic, just as Guil described it earlier during the dumbshow of the Tragedians. It is a caricature operating in the visible layers of the theatre. He is applauded for the thousands of casual deaths he has performed, but their impact has faded. Unlike Ros and Guil, who go through an internal death, one that is out of view for the audience. Once they fade from the stage, there are no further expectations of their reappearance or last words.⁸⁶ It might be the real underlying source of Guil's outburst: knowing, deep down, that the Player is acting as an outside force, he is in no way integrated into the play of *Hamlet*, unlike them. Yet as he realises this, he takes no action to destroy the letter. With no anguish, he accepts his faith, appearing exhausted rather than panicked.

Guil: (*tired, drained, but still and edge of impatience; over the mime*) No ... no ... not for *us*, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over ... Death is not anything ... death is not ... It's the absence of presence, nothing more ... the endless time of never coming back ... a hap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, makes no sound ...⁸⁷

In this instance, Guil seems to understand that death is nothing to be celebrated as it was with the Player, nor is it a casual thing one does before he comes back unharmed. It is definitive. The only possession of men is that of the meaning he associates with his presence among the living, since once he reaches the very end, no meaning will be presented. It will be sudden and out of sight, just as it was for Guil and Ros.

Finally, the scene focuses solely on Guil and Ros, standing on the boat right as their lives are about to end in the following sequence of *Hamlet*. As previously mentioned, Ros appears to be searching momentarily for answers when he decides to accept their fate, proclaiming, "I'm relieved."⁸⁸ Guil appears exhausted, as he says:

Guil: Our names shouted in a certain dawn ... a message ... a summons ... there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said – no. But somehow

⁸⁵ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 114-115.

⁸⁶ Zoran Milutinovic, "The Death of Representation and The Representation of Death: Ionesco, Beckett and Stoppard," *Comparative Drama* 40, No. 3 (Fall 2006): 358.

⁸⁷ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 116.

⁸⁸ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 117.

we missed it. (*He looks around and sees he is alone.*) Rosen -? Guil -? (*He gathers himself.*) Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you –

*And disappears.*⁸⁹

Gruber comments on this instance, arguing that by adding a slight action to his play, which brought it back in full circle, he did not stray from the ultimate fate of the Shakespearean characters. His alteration brings him away from the traditional, ambiguous endings of the absurd theatre, instead reinforcing the audience's knowledge that, despite the characters being taken out of the framework of *Hamlet*, even if not entirely, they have not advanced beyond it. Although Guil proclaims that "we'll know better next time,"⁹⁰ as could have been observed during the duration of play, they likely will not.⁹¹ The fact that both characters die off-screen enhances the finality of their passing.

In comparison to Beckett, Stoppard's approach is much less dependent on the absence of meaning in existence and of action, and more on the impact of inaction in the greater scheme of things. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir appear to be bored, constantly frozen in time to a point that suicide becomes a mundane topic, an idea of how to break the cycle of stasis. The presence of death is rendered meaningless, since nothing ever happens, and despite Didi and Gogo proclaiming that they will leave or hang themselves, they never really move to do so. As Milutinovic describes, *Waiting for Godot* is a play that symbolises emptiness, avoiding any fatal outcomes through empty speech and actions that lead nowhere, only cycling back to the beginning, seemingly unmoved.⁹² In this matter, it differs from Stoppard's plays, as it possesses structure and leads to a conclusion that includes the deaths of the two main characters. The sense of their inevitable mortality comes from the nature of *Hamlet* alone, whereas Beckett's play introduces characters to the audience for the first time, leaving their fate unknown.

The depiction of mortality is closely connected to the previously mentioned existential themes of insignificance and a lack of meaning. The characters seem preoccupied with their own death to the point that they become oblivious to the signs that lead towards it. Guildenstern

⁸⁹ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 117.

⁹⁰ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 117.

⁹¹ William E. Grauber, "Wheels Within Wheels, etcetera: Artistic Design in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," 307.

⁹² Zoran Milutinovic, "The Death of Representation and The Representation of Death: Ionesco, Beckett and Stoppard," 347.

portrays explicitly the frustration of not understanding the nature of their predicament. He is unwilling to refrain from over-analysing the meaning of their presence, and he fails to realise that the Player has been a mirror, allowing them the space to clarify their true nature as actors. Their death represents finality, which brings no answers to any of the questions both Guil and Ros were searching for.

Conclusion

This bachelor's thesis explored the portrayal of existential themes in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The aim was to identify how Tom Stoppard portrayed existential themes in the play and the influence they had on the characters.

The theoretical part briefly introduced the philosophy of existentialism and the main circumstances and influences of the Theatre of the Absurd. It explained the historical climate of the twentieth century, along with the state of disillusionment and the search for new meaning and structure and how this reflected in the rising popularity of existential philosophy. Through the search for meaning, the emphasis on individuality, followed by the responsibility of one's own satisfaction with their circumstances, has become prevalent, allowing space for a sense of hope. Through absurdist theatre, the playwrights attempted to reflect these feelings by showcasing the absurdity of existence not only in the dreadful anxiety it inflicts, but also through humour. This was primarily utilised by Stoppard, who, through his witty language, allowed for some light-hearted humour that corresponded with the play's main topic. Through intertextuality, Stoppard has crossed from the category of an absurdist into something more, allowing action to take place while still emphasising the stasis of inaction.

The analytical part applied an existential philosophy outlook and approach to the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and through a brief comparison with *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, showcased the different attitudes to existential themes. It was found that the depiction of existential themes is prominent, mainly in the specific existential topics such as the lack of identity. By analysing excerpts from the play, it can be inferred that Stoppard was hinting at slightly different character traits in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by giving them different outlooks on the existential circumstances. Yet, by continuous confusion of being wrongly addressed by the characters of *Hamlet* and by themselves, it can be observed that the unstable nature of their identity and significance. By becoming interchangeable, the two characters lose significance. Following the findings from observing the depictions of meaninglessness and mortality, it can be stated that, in the constantly moving plot of *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear caught up in it, completely unaware of its scale, yet continuing to play their part. Even though existential philosophy urges action and responsibility for one's life, the two protagonists never take responsibility for their own fate, despite being confronted by the Player, who serves as a metaphor: an actor destined to perform.

Furthermore, this paper has found, through comparison with Beckett, that the approaches to existential topics of both authors are quite different, despite the fact that they are often compared and approached in the same way as Godot. The primary difference between the playwright's approach is the presence or absence of action. Beckett's attitude towards existence is one of stasis, unmoving, constantly waiting for hope which has no basis or guarantee, emphasising that without action, nothing changes. Unlike Stoppard's Hamlet, Godot never comes, seemingly symbolising more than just hope, but no interpretation has been confirmed by Beckett. Unlike Godot, Hamlet does arrive quite frequently, continuously moving the plot forward, bringing closer the inevitability of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's death. The characters are not awaiting the arrival of change and meaning. They are unable to escape the pre-determined ending of the play.

This bachelor's thesis has demonstrated the presence of existential themes in the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The play showcases the different attitudes of approaching existential dread and the fatal impact of inaction. The concern over the purpose of existence is relevant even in contemporary society.

Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá analýzou existencialistických témat v divadelní hře *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* od Toma Stopparda a jeho vztahem k tradici absurdního divadla. Cílem práce je ilustrovat, jak Stoppard skrze existencionální filozofii dvacátého století propojuje prvky absurdního divadla a přetváří je a jak prostřednictvím využití dvou vedlejších postav ze hry *Hamlet* od Shakespeara demonstruje otázky ohledně lidské existence. Specificky se zabývá nejistotou identity, nemožností nalezení smyslu života a smrtelnosti. Práce je rozdělena do dvou kapitol, kdy první dvě kapitoly pojednávají o teoretickém základu práce, specificky o existencionální filozofii a absurdním divadle. Následující tři kapitoly jsou analytické a zabývají se vyobrazením jednotlivých existenčních témat.

Úvodní teoretická část uvádí základní existencionální pohledy, plus nastiňuje vývoj samotné filozofie skrze devatenácté až dvacáté století. Základní myšlenky jsou představeny přes skrze pět hlavních filozofů, kteří ovlivnili kurz existencionální filozofie, i když mnohokrát odmítli dané označení. Søren Kierkegaard je představen jako jeden ze zakladatelů existencialismu, jelikož jeho filozofie se přenesla z abstraktních pojmů na důraz na individualitu a subjektivní poznání spojené s úzkostí, které vychází z konfrontace člověka s podstatou jeho existence. Friedrich Nietzsche komentuje zánik struktury morálních zásad, které již nemají žádný podklad a zdůrazňuje důležitost vlastní hodnoty. Následně Martin Heidegger přináší pojetí existence jako takové, a hlavně poukazuje na schopnost lidských bytostí klást otázky ohledně vlastní existence. Jean-Paul Sartre představuje myšlenku, že bytí předchází esenci, kde je vysvětleno jeho smýšlení ohledně absence podstaty a následně autentičnosti bytí. Albert Camus je v teoretické části zařazen taky, i když zásadně odmítal být kategorizován jakožto existencionální filozof, přesto jeho teorie absurdity a strachu spojené s existencí zapadá do existencionální struktury.

Na tuto filozofickou rovinu navazuje následující kapitola, která se zabývá vznikem absurdního divadla a vlivů ostatních avantgardních uměleckých stylů, které pomohly toto hnutí vytvořit. Hnutí vzniklo po druhé světové válce jako reakce na ztrátu jistoty, deziluzi a rozpad tradičních hodnot. Dramatici jako Eugene Ionesco a Samuel Beckett se rozhodli opustit od tradiční struktury divadla, lineárnost příběhu a zdůrazňovali nesmyslnost jazyka, aby vyjádřili rozpad zaběhlých struktur a jejich následnou nedostatečnost. Francouzská větev absurdního divadla se proslavila především skrze Samuela Becketta a jeho *Waiting for Godot*, které

inspirovalo mnoho dalších absurdních spisovatelů díky použití nejasnosti jazyka, opakujícího se děje a nejasného konce. Naopak anglická větev zahrnující Harolda Pintera a Stopparda přesunula tyto jevy do jasnějšího, známého prostředí a výraznější jazykové hravosti. Stručně je vysvětlen i jev intertextuality, který využil primárně Tom Stoppard, díky čemuž narušuje konvenční představy o identitě a funkci dramatické postavy.

Analytická část je rozdělena do třech kapitol, které se zabývají absencí identity a nedůležitosti, ztrátou poslání a významu a posledně smrtelností. Užitím znalostí z předešlé teoretické kapitoly aplikuje tyto existenční postoje na jednotlivé scény ze hry.

První kapitola analytické části se zabývá nestabilní identitou, již Stoppard prokazuje skrz nepřetržité záměny obou hlavních postav, jejich špatnou paměť a závislostí na rolích, které jim přiřadí jejich okolní prostředí. Rosencrantz a Guildenstern si nejsou jisti tím, kdo vlastně jsou, i když mají rozdílné přístupy k jejich situaci, tím pro obecenstvo představují dvě separátní postavy. Přesto však jim chybí minulost, motivaci i schopnost rozhodovat o svém osudu. Stoppard tak demonstruje existenciální problém subjektivity: jedinec může přijmout jako jeho pouze identitu, kterou sám rozvíjí, jelikož přiřazená identita nikdy nedosáhne takové subjektivity. Přesto, že jim Stoppard zřejmě dává prostor pro vlastní projev, ani jedena z hlavních postav v průběhu hry není schopna vzít zodpovědnost za svoji identitu a jen přijímají již předem napsanou roli od Shakespeara. Tato nejistota osobnosti odráží Sartreho víru v neautentický život, tedy lidskou tendenci nepřijmout zodpovědnost, která stojí za neustálým vytvářením osobnosti a identity.

Druhá analytická kapitola pojednává o tématu smyslu, jeho neuchopitelnosti a absenci. V průběhu celé Stoppardovi hry se Guildenstern nepřetržitě usiluje o racionalizaci jejich světa a situace, počínaje nesmyslnosti jejich hry s mincí, kdy neustále padá panna. Dialogy směřují vždy k nesmyslným, nebo žádným závěrům, nebo marné pokusy interpretovat příchody a odchody ostatních postav, včetně Hamleta, poukazují na lidskou chtivost po poznání, které však často vede k novým otázkám, místo vysvětlení. Zároveň se zde reflektuje Camusův postoj k absurditě, kdy si je jednotlivec vědom nesmyslnosti existence a tím dává své existenci smysl. Rosencrantz a Guildenstern se nejsou schopni odtrhnout od původní hry, ve které jsou zasazeni a neustále se snaží najít vysvětlení proč až do jejich smrti. Přesto jim není nic vysvětleno, což pouze podtrhává Camusův pohled na existenci. Jejich činy nemají důsledky a jejich vnímání je fragmentované a nestálé.

Třetí analytická kapitola se zabývá smrtelností a její neodmyslitelnou přítomností skrze celou hru. Na rozdíl od *Waiting for Godot*, kde je smrt prezentovaná jako možnost, přestože se hra a její postavy nachází ve statické pozici celou dobu, je smrt pro Stoppardovi hlavní postavy neustálá hrozba a nevyhnutelný fakt. Celá hra směřuje k jejich zkáze, je dokonce reflektovaná i v názvu hry samotné, čímž indikuje jejich nemožnost uniknout. Rozdíl mezi jejich smrtí a smrtí Tragédů, kteří ve hře figurují jako jejich metafora, či druhá strana zrcadla je, že smrt protagonistů je reálná a postavy se již znovu nezjeví na jevišti. Jejich smrt je tichá a stejně jako v originále se stane mimo jeviště. Postavy se smrti obávají, nerozumí jí a snaží se i v jejich finálních momentech získat odpovědi, přesto jejich neschopnost konfrontovat vlastní smrt nese tragičnost jejich osudu.

Závěr práce indikuje, že *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* propojuje existenční témata s tendencemi absurdního divadla a postmoderní jazykové hravosti. Stoppard nabízí novou perspektivu nahlízející na existenční otázky skrze již napsané, známé postavy od nejznámějšího britského dramatika Williama Shakespeara. Stoppardův přístup k těmto tématům se liší od Samuela Becketta, převážně skrze důraz na příběh, který se odehrává v pozadí a je neustále v pohybu, nehledě na to, že postavy Guildensterna a Rosencrantze jsou v popředí ve své vlastní divadelní hře.

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