

Transformation of *Hamlet* to *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*

By Dan Nguyen

The transformation of a classical text into a newer contemporary text presents a variety of themes and values, and converts them to suit a modern audience, where new literary styles are manufactured as a result of changes in relevance within a modern context. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been transformed by Stoppard in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (*R & G*), in order to present Elizabethan values of fate, death and appearance vs. reality that can be associated with contemporary perceptions of these ideas, emphasising the intricacies of modern life. The shift in focus away from royalty in *Hamlet* towards the common individual in *R & G* reflects society's changing attitudes, as modern audiences' sympathies more easily relate to the layperson within a society. In order to achieve this, Stoppard transforms the form and language of *Hamlet* as well, in order to reflect modern society and its values.

Perhaps the most important underlying thematic concept in both the texts is the nature of existence. Every other principal theme in the texts relates back to the idea of existence, and the purpose of life, yet this idea is presented through the lives of the ostensibly ordinary Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's transformation, rather than through royalty figures as in *Hamlet*. Contemporaries of the Elizabethan era believed that purpose in life was pre-ordained by the stars at birth, and that this destiny was constant and unavoidable, a "divinity which shapes our ends". Yet in *R & G*, Stoppard uses the erosion of religious beliefs in the contemporary context to demonstrate that fate is uncertain, reflecting Ros and Guil's perpetual bewilderment and incomprehension of the meaningless nature of their existence. As Guildenstern states: "to be kept intrigued without even quite being enlightened". Whereas Hamlet recognised his own destiny, in his imperative thoughts of rectifying the "rotten state of Denmark", Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never quite grasp the plight of their destiny, reflecting modern uncertainty and disillusionment of the twentieth century, where "the only beginning is birth, and the only end is death". The indeterminate setting in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are placed – "a place with no visible character" – symbolises modern society as the Player assures "uncertainty is the normal state". Confusion over their names represents the loss of identity and lack of purpose in life. In terms of the appearance of control, Hamlet appears to have control of his life, but in fact he was bound to his destiny. In contrast, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no appearance of control, and by revealing this Stoppard exposes the illusion of Hamlet's control, and thus humanity's, adding to the vista of uncertainty of modern society.

Both texts in conjunction with their relative contexts, explore this idea of death, in particular, the inevitability of it. Hamlet explores his own mortality in his “to be or not to be” soliloquy, yet he reasons his fear of the afterlife, compelling him to complete his destiny. However in *R & G*, Stoppard uses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to contemplate the contemporary existential ideas of death being an absolute and ultimate end, where Guildenstern describes it as “the absence of presence” and the “ultimate negative”. In *R & G* is a theme that the audience relates to closely, appealing to their emotion. Death is the only certainty, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are confined to this destiny based on the title of the play, and the known experience in *Hamlet*.

The transformation of these primary themes, encompassed by the nature of existence has been constructed by Stoppard through the transformation of *Hamlet*'s imagery, symbolism and humorous elements, where Stoppard approaches these dynamic features from a different angle in order to suit contemporary ideals and the uncertainty of existence.

Shakespeare's use of imagery is important to the way that Hamlet is presented, in particular, the setting of the play. Hamlet concluded that “Denmark's a prison”, reflecting the entrapment he feels within the context of his destiny. This prison imagery has been transformed by Stoppard to encompass the nature of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's existence, and is even acknowledged by Guildenstern: “life in a box is better than no life at all.” The image of being trapped in a box becomes a metaphor for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's life, as if their “scripts are taken away, [they are] lost.”

In *Hamlet*, symbolism is important in the realisation by Hamlet of the certainty of death, where the symbol of Yorrick's skull opens Hamlet's mind to the inevitable nature of death – his “gorge rises [at] the thought of it.” Again, Stoppard takes this technique and creates an allusion where, at beginning of *R & G*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are tossing coins for no particular purpose. However, these coins are symbolic of the nature of fate and chance. That these coins come up consistently ‘heads’ is symbolic of the fact that their fate has already been sealed by Hamlet, and also their ignorance and helplessness. Rather than being entitled to a choice, Rosencrantz acknowledges that “we have no control, none at all.” The Player confirms their deaths are “written.”

Humour is also an important feature of both texts. In *Hamlet*, black humour is used through Hamlet's musings on death, especially during Yorrick's scene, and after Polonius' death, jok-

ingly implying that Polonius is “not where he eats, but where he is eaten.” This consistent interplay between reflection of death and humour suggests Hamlet’s recognition of humour is his response to the “terrible thought” of death. Stoppard however uses the idea of humour more predominantly in *R & G* to highlight the absurdist nature of the play. Such sexual innuendoes about homosexuality and child abuse reflect society’s changing nature and the less than heroic values readily recognised.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a tragedy by nature, containing definite stages of development with the expectation of resolution. However, Hamlet’s flaw is his possession of irresolution, where his mind was in constant conflict. Whereas *Hamlet* is a tragedy that contained elements of comedy, Stoppard’s *R & G* is more an absurdist comedy that ends in tragedy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fatal flaw was their powerlessness, and the audience sympathises with their “little deaths” of common individuals, because they are eminently relatable as laypeople. In transforming *Hamlet*, Stoppard is showing, through the transformation of language, that tragedy can actually happen to normal individuals.

Stoppard’s exploration of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s stage life and off-stage lives is a means to question the purpose of modern existence. “On-stage” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have a very defined purpose, yet “off-stage”, for much of *R & G* they lack direction. By associating with a modern audience, Stoppard has created a text reflective of a new era in which certainties and beliefs of the Elizabethan period have eroded, resulting in Stoppard’s effective slants on the classical *Hamlet*’s values and attitudes. By bringing the background of *Hamlet* to the foreground of *R & G*, Stoppard has reflected upon the new, whilst simultaneously resonating with the old.