



*Absurd Theatre in Waiting for Godot and Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern are Dead: A Comparison*

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مسرح العبث في مسرحية "انتظار جودو" و"روزنكرانتز وغيلدنستين ماتوا":
دراسة مقارنة

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Abstract:

*The current paper aims to compare Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, originally published in 1952, and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which was also published in the 1900s, specifically in 1966, by carefully considering the themes of the absurdity of existence, humor, and the meaninglessness of life to illustrate how these themes are represented by each of the playwrights in the theatre of the absurd in these two plays. In addition to how the cultural backgrounds of the authors play a role in the way they convey their thoughts throughout their plays and how this might affect how they deploy the themes mentioned above in their works. Thus, making it abundantly clear how similar themes can find their way into the works of different authors who don't share the same cultural backgrounds but whom each may be seated in a position where their creativity may be stimulated in a similar manner, therefore, producing works that have common comparable elements.*

Keywords: *theatre of the absurd, humor, *Waiting for Godot*, the absurdity of existence, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the meaninglessness of life*

المخلص:

يهدف البحث الحالي إلى مقارنة مسرحية "انتظار جودو" لسامويل بيكيت، التي نُشرت أصلاً في عام ١٩٥٢، ومسرحية "روزنكرانتز وغيلدنسترن ميتوا" لتوم ستوبارد، التي نُشرت أيضاً في القرن العشرين، تحديداً في عام ١٩٦٦، من خلال النظر بعناية في موضوعات عبث الوجود، والفكاهة، وعدم المعنى في الحياة لتوضيح كيفية تمثيل هذه الموضوعات من قبل كل من الكتاب في مسرح العبث في هاتين المسرحيتين. بالإضافة إلى كيفية أن الخلفيات الثقافية للكتاب تلعب دوراً في الطريقة التي يعبرون بها عن أفكارهم طوال مسرحياتهم وكيف يمكن أن يؤثر هذا على كيفية تطبيقهم للموضوعات المذكورة أعلاه في أعمالهم. وبالتالي، يتضح بوضوح كيف يمكن لموضوعات مماثلة أن تجد طريقها إلى أعمال كتاب مختلفين لا يشتركون في نفس الخلفيات الثقافية لكنهم قد يكونوا في موقع يحفز إبداعهم بطريقة مماثلة، وبالتالي، إنتاج أعمال تحتوي على عناصر مشتركة قابلة للمقارنة.

I. Introduction

Comparative literature is a multidisciplinary field of study concerned with the study of literature that transcends time, place, culture, and geographical borders (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 1998; Cao, 2013, p.15).

Simply put, it is the study of “literature without borders” (Dominguez, Saussy, et al., 2014, p.25). Research done in this field encompasses studying the Americas from literary and social standpoints, in addition to medieval epics and romances and how folklore and mythology are linked to literature. Furthermore, Comparative literature asks essential questions about the definition of literature itself and is also concerned with the differences between colonial and post-colonial literature across the world; thus, Comparative Literature practitioners want to study literature outside national boundaries and have a fascination with languages to read foreign texts in their original form in addition to a desire to mix literary experience with other cultural phenomena like philosophical concepts, historical change, and social movements. (College Entrance Examination Board, 1992)

The current paper focuses on how works of literature from a Czech-British Writer and an Irish writer are compared in terms

of several themes while considering their different cultural backgrounds.

Samuel Beckett, an Irish playwright who was born in Ireland, Dublin on the 12th of April 1906; it is there that he finished his studies, after which he moved and settled in Paris, France, where died in 1989. During World War II, he supported himself as a farmworker and joined the underground resistance. Some of the major works that he wrote were post-World War II in French, including the narrative trilogy *Malone Dies* (1951), *Molloy* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953). However, he is most remembered for the play *Waiting for Godot*, which was published in 1952 to critical acclaim in Paris and further gained wide-reaching praise when it was adopted into the English language. His play *Waiting for Godot* is considered the hallmark in establishing the Absurd theatre in which there is minimal plot and action, existentialism, and tons of high humor. (Esslin, 2003, p.36)

Being a Czech-born, Sir Tom Stoppard suffered because of the ongoing World War II, which affected him and his family alongside most who were living in East Asia. Thus, he relocated to England and became a full-fledged citizen, and adopted his stepfather's surname. It is worth noting that he was born in 1937 and is still alive today at the age of 84. Additionally, some of his noteworthy works included his first play, *A Walk on the Water*

(1960), and this paper's focus which is the absurdist play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), which awarded him much praise (Chauhan, 2003, p,63)

On another note, a clear description of the Theatre of the Absurd must be provided to understand the relevant themes that will be discussed. The Theatre of the Absurd is just a post–World War II label for specific dramas of absurdist fiction authored, in the beginning, by certain European playwrights during the late 19th century. Existentialism is the main focal point in the works of European playwrights; they expressed how the human existence has no meaning or purpose, and thus, there is a sort of communication failure between humans. In addition, they structured their plays in round shape, meaning they always lead back to the starting point. Furthermore, sensical structure and arguments give way to nonsensical and irrational language, and its culmination leads to hollowed stillness. (The Hutchinson Encyclopedia, 1999). The “Absurd,” or as it is now called "New Theater," originated in France and is a phenomenon that is closely tied to humble theaters in uneventful parts of Latin. The absurdist that came first in France were Jean Genet, Jean Tardieu, and Boris Vian. (Marshall & Johnston, 2005, p,11) while a lot of the new absurdist were born in different places but settled in France, among those was Samuel Beckett. (Londré & Bertholf, 1999, p.35)

A tragicomedy by Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* is a play comprised of two acts that exemplify genuine revolution in drama and the Theatre of the Absurd. This play revolves around a series of dialogues between Vladimir and Estragon, who both await the coming of Godot. In the play, the two characters constantly receive messages from Godot through other characters that he will be arriving, but he never does. Furthermore, our two characters meet up with Lucky and Pozzo, who seem to hash out their misfortunes. Vladimir and Estragon even at one point in the play, contemplate hanging themselves; however they refrain from such an act which highlights their inability to take action and continue to wait for Godot. They are characters whose only purpose is to make the audience question their existence, and as Vladimir and Estragon look to Godot for enlightenment, the play is supposed to draw the attention of the audience to god, who is like Godot, only remaining behind the scenes. Because they have hope of meaning and direction, they acquire a kind of nobility that enables them to rise above their meaningless existence. This is supposed to lead the audience down the same path. (Kuiper, 2011, p.15)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, a familiar title for most people who have read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. These two characters are past colleges that studied alongside Hamlet the character. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are minor Characters in

Hamlet who were given the task of spying on their friend Hamlet. These characters, however, take center stage in Tom Stoppard's play. Moreover, these two characters fill the play up with humor, games, and philosophical conversations during the time breaks between the plays (*Hamlet*) scenes. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* focus on matters like free will, death, personal identity, existentialism, and time. Thus, the characters are well rounded by Stoppard more so than in Shakespeare's work, even though they are still often confused with one another. (Kuiper, 2005, p.16)

Thus, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is an absurdist play also considered a tragicomedy about existentialism, just like Samul Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The main two characters are used seven times in *Hamlet*, while Stoppard makes them vital to his play. In summary, Contrary to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are major characters upon which Hamlet intrudes on seven times in Stoppard's play. In other words, The *Hamlet* characters are reduced tools. As a result, this might be viewed as an absurd play about two ordinary individuals caught up in conditions that are out of their control. The play further includes reverberations of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, as well as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Luigi Pirandello's writings. (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Drama for Students*, 1998)

II. Discussion

A. Absurdity of Existence and Humor

One of the highly noticeable aspects of *Waiting for Godot* is the utter absurdity: Vladimir and Estragon are outfitted like tramps, take part in useless actions, and partake in stupid, ridiculous conversations. The play is simply an endless wait for Godot (he never arrives), during which they merely try to pass the time by talking or doing stupid things, even to the point that they try to hang themselves for fun and to pass the time but absurdly, they do nothing. "Nothing to be done" (Beckett, 2019, p.2) is the play's conclusion; Vladimir and Estragon in the play just try to fill the void while they wait. Thus, human existence itself is absurd. Beckett puts weight on the absurdity of human actions, which reveals both the tragic and comedic parts of existentialism. (Ackerley, 2004)

“Estragon	Vladimir
Let's go!	We're waiting for Godot.
Vladimir	Estragon”
We can't.	(despairingly) Ah! (Beckett, 2019,
Estragon	pp.6-7)
Why not?	

The above conversation summarizes the play whereby noting really takes place; the play is basically a conglomerate of events performed by the characters in order to pass the time, except for one thing the characters' existential perception of the realm. Thus, Lombardi (2021) states that existentialism as a concept points people to seek to make sense of their lives devoid of looking up to God or life after death, which Vladimir and Estragon find unachievable. *Waiting for Godot*, characters thus, have no concept of time; the play ends right back where it started: "Well, shall we go. / Yes, let's go. / (They do not move)." (Beckett, 2019 p. 69)

As for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, there are similar levels of absurdity within Stoppard's play which can be most apparent in the dialogue exchanges between the two characters.

For example, the following statement by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is a prime example of the absurdity, flavored with humor, that can be found in the play. In it, they discuss apparent truths which open windows for high comedy. Their discourse leads to absurdity by which they pass the time:

“Rosencrantz: We're on a boat. (Pause). Dark, isn't it?

Guildenstern: Not for night. Ros: No, not for night.

Guildenstern: Dark for day. Pause. Ros: Oh yes, it's dark for day.

Guildenstern: We must have gone north, of course.

Rosencrantz: Off course?

Guildenstern: Land of the midnight sun, that is.

Rosencrantz: Of course,” (Stoppard, 1967, p. 71)

Additionally, humor is also most apparent in quotes such as:

“Rosencrantz: We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?” (Stoppard, 1967:91)

“Guildenstern:I can't remember” (Stoppard, 1967:91)

The first is during Rosencrantz's dying scene which shows how they both are unable to take action and also how they are not even sure if what they said is the truth. The line is delivered during the death scene much to a comedic effect rather than a tragic one. The second quote. It shows the lack of memory of Guildenstern, which is the reason for his inaction. Like *Waiting for Godot*, they both can't take any meaningful steps even if their lives depended on it. Furthermore, Stoppard shows the repetitive and absurd life

as it was in the 20th century. This is done through the characters who only question what and why things are happening the way they are without taking any action to change it, thus, reflecting the people's attitude back then. (Innes, 1992)

B. The Meaninglessness of Life

Starting with *Waiting for Godot*, through which the theme of the meaninglessness of life is most prevalent and from which we can draw a point of comparison with the other play. As was previously established above, the characters are unable to take action and insist on remaining where they are; they acknowledge that it is all pointless. In other words, Beckett intends the audience to figure out the emptiness and boredom of the situation that Vladimir and Estragon find themselves in and relate that to their own lives. (Lombardi, 2021)

Estragon: Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful! (Beckett, 2019, p. 36)

Therefore, the audience should establish that no one in *Waiting for Godot* leads a meaningful life. Even though the play suggests that Estragon and Vladimir have a purpose which is waiting for Godot to arrive, the fact that he never does flips the narrative in favor of emptiness. Thus, All the characters appear confined in their useless roles as a routine. This idea of no aim was solidified by

this play and became one of the defining features of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Now, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* also illustrates the themes of the meaninglessness of life; like Vladimir and Estragon, here Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are playing a game (discussing facts that never change) to pass the time while they think they have a purpose in life the matter of the fact that they don't. Unavoidably, this oozes absurdity. However, unlike in *Waiting for Godot*, the characters discuss facts, like in the below-quoted dialogue, about their place in the universe in a playful manner like "Dark" is stated as a particular phase in the day with which it is linked, "night," and then "dark" is correlated with opposite of what the words mean: "dark for the day." Dark is also related to "north" and "the land of the midnight sun." (Innes, 1992)

Rosencrantz: We're on a boat.

(Pause). Dark, isn't it?

Guildenstern: Not for night.

Rosencrantz: No, not for night.

Rosencrantz: Off course?

Guildenstern: Land of the
midnight sun, that is. Rosencrantz:

Of course, (Stoppard, 1967:71)

Guildenstern: Dark for day. Pause.

Rosencrantz: Oh yes, it's dark for
day.

Guildenstern: We must have gone
north, of

III. Conclusion

This paper aims to see how Beckett and Stoppard portray The Absurd Theatre through the use of themes like the absurdity of existence and humor, and the meaninglessness of life. Considering the authors' different cultural backgrounds, each of them uses similar techniques to convey their version of Absurdity. Such a way of writing was brought into the light due to the eye-opening effect that World War II had on the world and how people like the writers of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Waiting for Godot* were beginning to question all-purpose of their existence and the existence of God. If such a god existed, why would he allow such suffering to spread upon his earth and creation?

Thus, *Waiting for Godot* provided us with Beckett's own view of passivity and inaction through the immeasurable time that Vladimir and Estragon spend together while thinking that their purpose is to wait for Godot even though he never arrives. Moreover, Beckett uses themes that are like what was mentioned above in order to convey his idea of absurdity and feelings of despair in the current times. The tragic reality of the human condition was the trigger for the rise of the absurd theatre, and thus, it can be concluded that no matter the writer's origin,

nationality, and cultural background, the war affects people all the same.

As for the second play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the audience is treated to a similar take on the conditions of life and the trains of thought of the people post World War II. However, Tom Stoppard's work differs in its source of inspiration, being based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* makes the work more familiar to the audience, and he also draws inspiration from Beckett in portraying the absurdity of life through the same themes as Beckett. Basically, it is a parody of Beckett's work in which the characters play word games in order to pass the time. Thus, both plays question brings into question the loss of faith that humanity is suffering from and tries to provide philosophical, cultural, and religious causes for it in an indirect way. Furthermore, both writers try to imbue the conversations between the characters with humor (mostly high humor) to convey the cynicism that they feel towards the world and also convey the people's thoughts on a world post-World War II. Wittgenstein (1994) states that the memory loss that the characters in both plays suffer from is just like how people who suffered intensely due to the war in the real world wish to feel like, and thus, the writers show how absurd this wish is and how it leads to stagnation and inaction and de-cultivates change. In other words, the characters (200)

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