



CALLING OUT THE DOPPELGÄNGERS: QUESTIONING THE IDENTITIES OF STOPPARD'S ROSENCRANTZ AND GULDENSTERN

SAMRANGI ROY

Jadavpur University, Kolkata English Department
Email: samrangni123@gmail.com



Article information

Received:19/3/2021
Accepted: 16/4/2021
Published online:19/04/2021
[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.8.2.5](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.8.2.5)

ABSTRACT

Tom Stoppard wrote *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in 1966 as a postmodern rendition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet, The Prince of Denmark* (1603). Through the exploration of postmodern themes like identity crisis, existentialism, absurdism, distortion of space and time, search for meaning and so on and so forth, this paper attempts to problematize the identities of Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. With the world grappling with the repercussions the two world wars had on everything they once strongly believed in, Stoppard's remarkable craftsmanship as a playwright gives a new lease of life to the early seventeenth century Shakespearean drama, while at the same time making it inordinately relevant to the late twentieth century audience. However, the identity crisis experienced by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's play, its causes and probable implications remain the primary focus of the paper.

Keywords: *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, postmodern, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, drama, absurdism, existentialism, identity crisis.

Introduction

In the "parallel dimensions of reinvented expression, literature is not transposed or translated, but transcreated. That is to say, new worlds are housing old spirits in new bodies" (Saha). Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), a pathbreaking rewriting of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), displays a marked difference from its literary predecessor, while at the same time retaining certain aspects of it. Adroitly crafted with all the mind-boggling elements of a postmodern existentialist world, the play can be considered as both a standalone reinvention as well as a postmodern response to Shakespeare's Elizabethan masterpiece, *Hamlet*. Some of the primary features of postmodernity as we already know are disenchantment, rationalization, alienation, subjectivism, objectivism, individualism, existentialism, identity crisis, distortion of space and time, search for and lack of meaning and so on and so forth. Stoppard, in his play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, has successfully incorporated most of these elements and rewritten *Hamlet* with a very distinct Beckettian flavour. Reading Stoppard's play is almost like revisiting the exasperating scenes from *Waiting for Godot* (1952) where Vladimir and Estragon are running around in circles, trying in vain to make sense of the world around them. The transition from the rich, ornate Elizabethan world to the stark, barren, war-ravaged world of the late twentieth century is very prominently brought out in the play. However, the 1990 film, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, written and directed by Stoppard gives away a major clue

that drowns the identities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a sea of speculation. The questions become even more multifaceted when we place the above-mentioned clue in the context of the various postmodernist aspects that Stoppard has woven into the framework of his play.

To begin with, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, both in *Hamlet* (1603) and in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), have been summoned by King Claudius to ascertain the true cause of *Hamlet's* misery since the two of them had been *Hamlet's* childhood friends and were thus very close to his heart. They were supposed to uplift *Hamlet's* mood by engaging him in light-hearted banter and recreation and then probe into the supposed cause of his madness. At the outset it might seem like they were on a mission, specially appointed by the King to spy on Hamlet, and thus very much welcome in the court. This is literally what happens in *Hamlet*, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern faithfully perform their roles from the very beginning till the end when they are executed on board the ship that was supposed to carry Hamlet to his own death. However, in Stoppard's play, the situation is a little different even though their roles and the reason behind their invitation to the court remain the same. In this play, where we get to notice Rosencrantz and Guildenstern up close, we see how out of place they feel within the palace as though they were guilty of having trespassed into some territory uninvited. They grapple with the understanding of their purpose, their place in *Hamlet's* world and the gravity of the task that they were appointed for, so much so that these two very familiar characters from *Hamlet* seem hauntingly alien to the readers of Stoppard's play. This is something Stoppard achieves by firmly placing the text within its own historical context- the late twentieth century- while at the same time upholding the source text within it. All the characters in the play fall in line with the behaviour, mannerisms, customs and language that characterized the Elizabethan era with the exception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the two primary characters. As a result, we have two starkly different ages interlaced within the same play and these two characters seem to be constantly in a state of flux, jetlagged as a result of having one foot in the twentieth century and the other in the early 1600s.

The very first thing about Stoppard's play that situates it far away from its predecessor is the fact that the ghost of Hamlet's father has completely been done away with. In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, steeped in grief and mourning for his father, remembers King *Hamlet* more than the people around him and it is the strength of this memory that brings about their encounter. "This meeting sparks the entire driving force of the play in which Hamlet seeks to fulfil his dead father's orders of avenging his death" (Beamish). King Hamlet tells his son, "If thou didst ever thy dear father love-/ Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (Shakespeare 1.5.23-25). This driving force that was so prominent throughout *Hamlet* with the ghost of Hamlet's father making his appearance, every now and then, to push Hamlet on to avenge his death, is completely missing in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. One reason for this could be that the ideas of spirits and afterlives, which had their roots so firmly planted in the Elizabethan soil, were completely disregarded in the postmodern world due to the advent of modernity. After having witnessed the ravages of the two world wars, when Stoppard was writing the play in the early 1960s, the foundational concepts of right and wrong, life and death, good and bad, virtue and vice were thrown into doubt. People were disenchanted with the world. The very idea of God was under question ever since Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century declared, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (1882), and thus by extension, the ideas of afterlife and reincarnation were also frowned upon. This feature of Stoppard's play, thus begs a clean break from its Elizabethan past and presents to us a world that is extremely familiar to us yet inordinately unfamiliar. When we see the characters from *Hamlet* within its frame, they almost seem like misfits. Thus, in a way our experience as readers of this play mirrors the unfamiliarity, uncanniness and unhomeliness that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern experience first hand as characters of the 1966 play. An eerie inkling of transgression is palpable throughout the play as we see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sneaking around in the castle like thieves, overhearing conversations between the King and the Queen, eavesdropping and even surreptitiously witnessing Hamlet's murder of Polonius. They are even made privy to the actual fates of Claudius, Gertrude and Hamlet depicted in the players' prophetic performance which gives away the climatic end of *Hamlet*, but they keep quiet about it all since they are unable to comprehend what is happening. But one wouldn't have to

sneak around if one was really invited, and the very fact that they had taken recourse to such a measure carried quite the opposite suggestion.

At the very beginning of the play, we find Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tossing coins and each tossed coin comes up heads, baffling them. This happens for eighty-five times consecutively, without any exceptions, and it keeps continuing even after the eighty-fifth time. It seemed as if time had stopped and maybe it was all a result of some transgression, in this case an act of time travelling perhaps. From our knowledge of sci-fi literature, cinema and games, we are quite familiar with the fact that meddling with time almost always has adverse consequences. At times it messes up the chronology, at times it creates an alternate reality and the ones who are responsible for the act of transgression are always the ones to face severe repercussions. "Normal application of logic and probability would suggest that it would be impossible or at least highly implausible for a succession of flipped coins to land on heads eighty-five times, but the reality of the situation here does not line up with any expected outcome" (Jonsson). This whole situation throws reality itself into question, just like it happens in another postmodern play, *Waiting for Godot* (1952). They are stuck in a befuddling time loop playing out their roles mechanically and indefinitely, just like we find Ophelia stuck in a four-day time loop in the video game, *Elsinore*, or the wife, husband and mistress in Samuel Beckett's *drama Play* (1963). There's a constant need for rationalization and application of logic and reasoning to every inexplicable situation that our main characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, find themselves in. They are steeped neck deep in a fiasco. They have no idea what to do and they have obviously never felt so out of place before. This is not how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern behaved in the original play, *Hamlet*, where they were mostly portrayed as calm and composed characters, unquestioningly obeying orders and somewhat being too servile, and that is what primarily makes the new duo so alien to us when we place them next to the old duo. If the events unfolding in the play were normal, something that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern faced on a regular basis, if such was their way of life, they would not find themselves so utterly confused, constantly trying to pin down everything that was happening to and around them. Instead, they would react to them naturally as if that was the way of their world. However, that is not what happens in Stoppard's play. Something is definitely amiss and the two characters cannot quite figure out what exactly it is. "Guildenstern might be the most intelligent character in the play. At the very least he has the quickest wit. As discussed earlier, he is constantly using logic and theories to make some sense of his situation. He is desperately in search of answers to his many questions and becomes very angry and impassioned at the irrational or illogical" (Jonsson). About the coin tossing too, this is what he has to say:

"If we postulate, and we just have, that within un-, sub-, or supernatural forces the probability is that the law of probability will not operate as a factor, then we must accept that the probability of the first part will not operate as a factor, in which case the law of probability will operate as a factor within un-, sub- or supernatural forces... so, we can take it that we are not held within un-, sub- or supernatural forces" (Stoppard 17).

In *Hamlet*, there's always a sense of causality that is very palpable throughout the play. Everything happens for very cogent reasons and all the incidents in the play have a necessary and logical connection with the events that come before or after it. There's nothing improbable or unexplainable that happens in this play. Even Polonius finds a 'method' in Hamlet's 'madness'. The unity of space and time are perfectly maintained. The plot has a definite beginning, middle and end, and most of the cerebral activity that we come across in the play is directed inwards in an attempt to understand one's own thoughts, impulses and motivations and that of the others around them. Hamlet, for example, spends most of his time engrossed in introspection- "To be or not to be" (Shakespeare 3.1.56). However, in Stoppard's play, the two characters mostly spend their time thinking about the world, about space and time, trying to make sense of it, just like nihilistic individuals do, and not much about their own selves. Hence, their thoughts are directed outwards. Moreover, far from maintaining the unities of space and time, the very ideas of space and time have been problematized in Stoppard's play. We hear Guildenstern saying, "... time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times" (Stoppard 16). As for space, in the 1990 movie *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a classic adaptation, written and directed by Tom Stoppard, featuring the two legendary

actors Gary Oldman and Tim Roth, we see the two main characters riding on horseback for miles through what seems like absolutely nothing, a barren stretch of endless rocky terrain, a grim, bleak wasteland blasted out by the ill-effects of war, until they meet the players in the woods. Even when one is reading the play, it is very difficult to envisage where exactly the action is taking place as different scenes from the original play blend in and out of one another, and in the midst of all of these, we find Rosencrantz and Guildenstern walking around aimlessly, contemplating the nature of the world and the purpose behind why they were summoned by Claudius. It becomes quite evident that their sense of belonging has been nullified. It is almost as if they have been uprooted from a world that they were familiar with and planted in an alien continent which causes them endless bewilderment and paranoia. This happens not when they are alone with each other but only when there are other characters involved, especially when they are replicating the scenes from the original play in their presence. Left to themselves, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are perfectly comfortable in each other's company, but they cannot quite figure out why they were suddenly called to the court. In fact, Rosencrantz even reports remembering nothing before they were woken up one morning by a messenger loudly banging on their door to deliver the news that they were summoned to the King's castle. All of these carry the suggestion that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were outsiders, they didn't belong in the space and time that the other characters occupied, because if they really belonged, then their experience would have been vastly different. Owing to the fact that they were total outsiders, they could not make sense of the world around them, they stood out from the rest of the characters in every way. In fact, at times, we are not even sure whether or not they are the same Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that we encountered in *Hamlet*. We do not know for sure whether it was they who messed with time since they have almost no memories from the time before they were woken up and summoned. However, they are the ones who are caught up in the imbroglio, who stick out like sore thumbs in *Hamlet's* world, and like lambs to the slaughter, they suffer the fate that usually befalls trespassers- prosecution, persecution, and in this case, even death.

Moving on to the question of identity, which forms the crux of this discussion, in the postmodern world, "... identity is now a fluid concept, an open question, a construct that is built as one moves along, according to one's environment and interest. In this regard, the self is shifting, fluid, dynamic... relativistic, context-specific and fragmented. If we consider this condition of identity beyond post-modernity, then it is nothing more than a complete identity crisis" (Milon). There comes a point in the play when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern completely lose their sense of identity. Or perhaps, they never had any sense of identity in the first place owing to the fact that they were doppelgängers. Rosencrantz answers to his own name as well as Guildenstern's. When they introduce themselves to the players Guildenstern calls himself 'Rosencrantz' and Rosencrantz calls himself 'Guildenstern'. Furthermore, even the king and the queen fail to recognize them, they don't remember who is who. It seems as if Stoppard has deliberately introduced the crisis of identity as a striking theme in his play in order to bestow on these two characters the same status that Shakespeare had accorded to them in *Hamlet*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*, much like Salerio and Solanio in *The Merchant of Venice* (1605), have very subsidiary and unimportant roles. They were primarily used as comedic devices and the readers of *Hamlet* kept forgetting who is who and who said what. The same sort of crisis in identity has been portrayed by Stoppard as if to deliberately retain the essence of the original play. However, in this play, unlike the original, even the two characters in question are not sure of who they are in spite of the fact that Stoppard has placed these them on the centre stage and given them the kind of prominence that Hamlet enjoyed in the original play. They constantly mix their own names up and ask each other the question, "Who do you think you are?" (Stoppard 44) and then they lament the fact that they do not really know who they are and can never establish their own identities. It gives their identities a sort of fluidity and instability when we view them alongside the other characters who were quite certain of who they were, even the indecisive Hamlet. This crisis in identity can be a result of the overlapping timelines because an individual's identity is mostly a product of one history and culture. If an individual is suddenly uprooted from their own history and culture and placed elsewhere, a crisis in identity is inevitable. "... in Wellsian time travel stories, for example, in *Back to the Future* and *Terminator*. These types of stories suggest that through time travel we can change the outcome of historical events in our world. The idea that the history of the universe can be changed is why many of the inconsistencies with causation and personal identity arise" (Hunter). However, there are several clues in the text that keep insinuating the fact that Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not the same as Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When they speak to each other, they speak a language which is

extremely modern, and in stark contrast to the language spoken by all the other characters in the court. Only when they interact with *Hamlet* or the King and the Queen do they use the Elizabethan language and reiterate their lines from the original play. This suggests that they were familiar with the roles that they were supposed to play and the lines that they were supposed to speak but they themselves were very different people. They did not identify with those roles at all. They were merely playacting. It was as though they had somehow gotten hold of the script of *Hamlet* and merely reiterated those lines from memory. The reality, on the other hand, was extremely different and they weren't the characters that the others had mistaken them for. Their speech, manner, behaviour when viewed alongside that of the other characters, make the latter come off as overtly dramatic, extravagant and even exaggerated. It seems like they are two people from a completely different time who have somehow trespassed unknowingly into the past, get stuck in there against their will and now have to keep roleplaying in order to not get caught. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "exist both inside and outside the text... and at times they also acknowledge the presence of a theatre audience" (Fleming 53). This is what the film director John Boorman calls "a present-day identity as actors caught and trapped within the roles" (53). They seem like misfits next to Hamlet and the other members of the royalty, constantly trying to blend in but at the same time seizing every opportunity to be themselves once they are alone, which is exactly how trespassers would behave if placed in a similar situation. Their very presence on stage or within the frames of a screen is a constant reminder that things have changed a great deal since Queen Elizabeth's reign and the world is no longer what it used to be.

Here we come to the major clue that is missing in the play but was wholly constructed for the film, and which begs some investigation. In one of the scenes in the 1990 movie, Rosencrantz makes an origami plane and blows it around in one of the castle rooms when he was alone with Guildenstern. This origami plane was modelled after the Wright Flyer which was completed and first flown in 1903. However, if we go by the timeline of the play, the way the events have been depicted, the culture, architecture, lifestyle, costumes and habits of the royalty and so on and so forth, it inevitably dates back to the Elizabethan era. This, therefore, is a scene that unequivocally gives away the fact that Stoppard's play was operating on two different timelines. While Hamlet and the other members of the royalty belonged to the Elizabethan era (1558-1563) and were completely unaware of the existence of airplanes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the other hand were not only familiar with its appearance but also its function. Besides, their language, habits, outlook, mannerisms were all befitting those of the twentieth century. Unless these two characters belonged to the twentieth century, it would not have been possible for them to be aware of the existence of the Wright Flyer. This is an obvious insinuation that streamlines our attention to the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of *Hamlet* were indeed dead and the ones we find in Stoppard's play are nothing but postmodern doppelgängers of the former. Otherwise, why would Stoppard suddenly drop this subtle clue in the movie, a clue that was completely amiss in the text and had no apparent contribution or relevance whatsoever to the plot? The way these two characters responded to the primitive world of *Hamlet* would be the same way a group of Elizabethans would respond if they were to suddenly time-travel to the twentieth or the twenty-first century.

Bertolt Brecht staged his plays using a technique known as *verfremdungseffekt* or the 'alienation effect'. He used this to prevent his audience from becoming too involved with the action taking place on the stage so that they could reflect intellectually on the themes presented through the plays. "We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself" (Brecht 190). This was later adopted by various playwrights, and in order to alienate the audience, they typically used language as a barrier to communication in order to achieve the alienation effect. "A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar. [...] For it seems impossible to alter what has long not been altered. We are always coming on things that are too obvious for us to bother to understand them. What men experience among themselves they think of as 'the' human experience" (192). In plays which use the 'alienation effect', the world is depicted as overwhelmingly complex and incomprehensible, therefore the characters are never able to achieve true understanding of the reality or the situation at hand. This concept has clearly been illustrated in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), *Play* (1963), Camus' *The Stranger* (1942), and other such works of modernist and postmodern literature, especially absurd dramas. Alienation is not just restricted to the characters but also incorporates the audience's experience in the theatre. Stoppard also uses this technique in

his play most conspicuously in the game of "Questions" that both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern indulge in. They are speaking to each other constantly but no communication is really being achieved, nor is the audience being able to make sense of what is really happening or what their conversation is all about. Thus, the very idea of a well-structured, coherent, intelligible 'narrative' is being challenged here and the audience cannot relate to the characters at all even though they seem very familiar. Familiarity and unfamiliarity thus run alongside each other simultaneously and that is where the alienation stems from. "In order to produce A-effects the actor has to discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays. Aiming not to put his audience into a trance, he must not go into a trance himself. [...] At no moment must he go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played. The verdict: 'he didn't act Lear, he was Lear' would be an annihilating blow to him" (193). The play thus almost becomes unreadable at certain points, alienating both the characters on stage as well as the audience from themselves and from each other. However, going by the logic of the alienation effect which Stoppard adeptly incorporated in his play, it would be safe for us to say, "They weren't Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They acted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern", which brings us back to the question of identity once again. Did they have any solid identity? Were they real characters within the play? Or were they simply actors who pretended to be other people? Stoppard intentionally alienated his own Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the real Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to make his audience contemplate the events of the play, to stimulate them intellectually, to make them ask questions and wonder why. The identity of these two characters, from the very beginning of the play, appear to us as fabricated. They never quite fit in. They hardly seemed like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Their memories too were not coherent or complete. They were not even recognized in the castle initially. They knew about the 1903 Wright Flyer. Their language was inordinately modern. If Stoppard's intention was to really make us think, and if we were to put two and two together accordingly, it is not too far-fetched to arrive at the conclusion that the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern we encounter in Stoppard's play are fake.

According to Sartre, existentialism is one of the most 'optimistic' philosophies "since it declares that man's destiny lies within himself" (Sartre 40). Based on this theory, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern represent the antithesis of existentialism since they are unable to make any choices most of the time. Further, in one of his lectures titled Existentialism is a Humanism, Sartre makes a clear distinction between humans and objects. For humans "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 20). Man exists first, and only afterwards can he "be what he makes of himself" (Sartre 22) through his free will and choices. However, in case of objects their essence precedes their existence. Objects are conceived of first and then produced "in a certain way and... serve a definite purpose" (Sartre 21). "Now this distinction can be applied to Ros and Guil; the reason that the two have no free will to control their actions or destiny is because they themselves are not technically human" (The Stanford Freedom Project). The article goes on to expound that Stoppard's play is actually 'a play within a play', and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are thus basically actors who are supposed to play specific roles within the frame play, that is *Hamlet*. Hence, they become like objects designed to fulfil specific functions since their roles were already scripted, and objects, having no free will or the ability to choose, these two actors cannot define themselves or make sense of the world because they do not live beyond the script. Moreover, their act of passing time, asking each other questions, speaking in their own tongue and impersonating other characters seem like typical backstage activities that actors usually indulge in while they are not required to play their parts. Their entire lives and respective identities have been scripted and they cannot escape the confines of the script no matter what they do. This makes them the "antiheroes of existentialism" (Ibid). Even though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern eventually realize that there is a grand design, the script, they "can never know for certain what is and is not part of that design" (Fleming 57). So, they have been 'caught up' in a world which is not their own, and on top of that, they are to play specific roles in this world which have already been predetermined and there is absolutely no way they can change their situation, unlike what they could have done in their own world.

GUIL: We've been caught up. Your smallest action sets off another somewhere else, and is set off by it. Keep an eye open, an ear cocked. Tread warily, follow instructions. We'll be all right.

ROS: For how long?

GUIL: Till events have played themselves out. There's a logic at work – it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again, even without the innocence, a child. (Stoppard 40)

Tired of trying in vain to understand this alien world around him, suffering from a debilitating identity crisis, not knowing how they ended up there or how to travel back to where they belonged, lacking Guildenstern's quick wit and the ability to rationalize and being trapped in the script without any escape, Rosencrantz turns to suicide as the only alternative, the only escape. According to absurdist philosophers "since existence itself has no meaning, [man] must learn to bear an irresolvable emptiness" (Aronson). Camus therefore states that there is only "one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Ibid). For an absurdist, the emptiness of the universe as well as the impossibility of achieving any legitimate answer makes suicide seem like the only true question, the only feasible solution because they are not sure if life is worth living under such circumstances. This becomes conspicuous when Rosencrantz exclaims "I wish I was dead. (Considers the drop.) I could jump over the side" (Stoppard 108). Like Camus, Rosencrantz sees trying to understand the world and attempting "to gain rational knowledge as futile" (Aronson) because of all the irrational things that have happened to them. He therefore turns to the absurd sensibility of suicide.

"Whereas in classical tragedy, the protagonist is of noble or prestigious standing, modern tragedy is more likely to focus on the 'common man.' A modern audience is expected to relate to, rather than look up to, the protagonist; and while the classical tragic hero's death is an event to be collectively mourned onstage, the modern tragic hero often dies unrecognized as a hero" (Jefferys). Oedipus, Macbeth, Lear, *Hamlet*, Othello, most classic tragedies embrace the Aristotelian 'fall of princes.' The modern tragedy however, embraces the fall of the common man. "Playwright Arthur Miller believes that the common man can be a centre of dramatic interest, and he demonstrated this belief in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), a tragedy about a very common common-man: a salesman from Brooklyn" (Utah Shakespeare Festival). In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* the focus shifts from Hamlet, the noble prince, to the commoners, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are caught up in a mess unknowingly. They are not responsible for it. They don't know how they came by it. Nevertheless, they are trapped in it. It was not the result of any 'hamartia' or a fatal flaw in their characters, that most tragic heroes have, which ultimately leads to their downfall, and even if it was, they have absolutely no recollection of it. They die unrecognized and nobody really mourns their death. Having trespassed into an unfamiliar territory and an unfamiliar time, they suffer the common fate of trespassers. No one really looks out for them because they have always been outsiders. They never belonged, nor were they expected to belong.

Conclusion

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were two common men, from the late twentieth century, who woke up one day and found themselves walking through the pages of a familiar early seventeenth century drama, most of the memories from their previous lives erased. They were called upon to play the roles of two characters from *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who never occupied the centre stage but mostly acted as observers. This explains their constant roleplaying and endless confusion, the scripted roles that they couldn't neither change nor escape from, their constant switching from Elizabethan English to Modern English, a general lack of understanding of their purpose, but a stoic acceptance of their fates since they could neither recognize themselves anymore nor comprehend the complexity of their predicament. The other characters they found themselves running into from time to time, were so caught up in the drama that they kept playing their roles exactly the way they had been scripted with very little regard for the world that existed outside of them. The spotlight therefore falls on these two characters, the outsiders, the transgressors who no longer remembered the transgression but retained the awareness that they didn't belong where they had ended up. However, what they didn't know was what they were supposed to do to get out of this situation. Therefore, throughout the duration of the drama they kept trying to figure it out. To an audience familiar with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the situation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seems almost like a horrible nightmare, with one scene coming after another, events blending into one another, but nothing making sense whatsoever, where the two main characters seem somewhat familiar but hauntingly unfamiliar at the same time. Moreover, just like every nightmare ends with something horrifying that jars one out of one's sleep, this one ends with their death.

References

1. Aronson, Ronald, "Albert Camus", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2012 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/camus/#SuiAbsHapMytSis>
 2. Beamish, Greg. 'The Ghost of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Purpose is but the Slave to Memory."' The Artifice.
 3. <https://the-artifice.com/ghost-shakespeare-Hamlet/#:~:text=Not%20long%20after%20Hamlet%20receives,610%2D611>
 4. Bertolt Brecht. 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', translated by John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960.
 5. Fleming, John. Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order Amid Chaos. Austin, TX, USA: University of Texas Press, 2001. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 25 Nov. 2015.
 6. Golden Glitch Studios. Elsinore. Golden Glitch Studios. 2019.
 7. Hunter, Joel. "Time Travel" Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://iep.utm.edu/timetrav/>
 8. Jefferys, Adam. "The Difference Between a Classical & a Modern Tragedy in Literature" Pen and The Pad.<https://penandthepad.com/difference-between-classical-modern-tragedy-literature-12288215.html>
 9. Jonsson, AEvar. "Characters in Search of a Purpose: Meaning in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*" <https://www.belmont.edu/burs/pdf/Theatre%20-%20Jonsson.pdf>
 10. Milon, G. M. Postmodernism: Crisis versus Construction of Identity. BRAC University, 2014. 15-16.
 11. Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Gay Science. 1882.
 12. Saha, Dibyangee. 'Uncovering the Book: Adaptations and Literary Afterlives', Livewire, <https://livewire.thewire.in/out-and-about/books/uncovering-the-book-adaptations-and-literary-afterlives>
 13. Sartre, Jean. Existentialism is a Humanism. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. Print.
 14. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark. Cambridge University Press. 2003.
 15. Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. New York: Grove. 1967.
 16. The Stanford Freedom Project. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as Existential Antiheroes and de Beauvoir's Subman*. <https://stanfordfreedomproject.com/what-is-freedom-new-essays-fall-2015/rosencrantz-and-guildenster-n-as-existential-antiheroes-and-de-beauvoirs-subman/>
 17. Utah Shakespeare Festival. 'The Tragedy of a Common Man' <https://www.bard.org/study-guides/a-tragedy-of-a-common-man>
-