



## Human Predicament in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966)

Ousmane Aly Pame

### Article history:

Submitted: June 6, 2025

Revised: July 6, 2025

Accepted: July 9, 2025

### Keywords:

Death, theatre, fate, anxiety, purpose

### Mots clés :

La mort, le théâtre, le destin, l'angoisse, le sens

### Abstract

This article investigates the theatrical and philosophical representation of the human condition in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966). It explores Stoppard's tragicomic depiction of modern existential anxieties, with an emphasis on the meaning of existence and mortality within a world stripped of spirituality and direction. It also analyses the role of drama performance in confronting life's uncertainties and in fostering meaningful human connections. While closely analysing the existential dilemmas of Stoppard's characters, this study situates his work within a broader intellectual tradition. It engages in a rich dialogue with the writings of prominent twentieth century poets, playwrights, and philosophers. In doing so, it positions Stoppard's play as a significant contribution to modern philosophical theatre. It is a compelling reflection on the collective search for meaning in a chaotic, modern cultural landscape.

### Résumé

Cet article explore la représentation théâtrale et philosophique de la condition humaine dans *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) de Tom Stoppard. Il examine la description tragicomique stoppardienne des angoisses existentielles modernes, en mettant un accent particulier sur le sens de la vie et de la mortalité dans un monde dépourvu de spiritualité et de direction. L'étude analyse également la fonction du théâtre dans la confrontation des humains avec les incertitudes de la vie et dans l'établissement de liens plus rationnels et significatifs avec le monde. Tout en analysant les dilemmes existentiels des héros stoppardiens, l'article situe l'œuvre dans une tradition intellectuelle plus large et engage un dialogue fécond avec les écrits d'éminents poètes, dramaturges et philosophes du vingtième siècle. Ce faisant, il positionne la pièce de Stoppard comme une contribution significative au théâtre philosophique moderne et une réflexion profonde sur la quête collective de sens dans un paysage culturel moderne.

Uirtus © 2025

This is an open access article under CC BY 4.0 license

### Corresponding author:

Ousmane Aly Pame,

Université Cheikh Anta Diop

E-mail: [oualypame@gmail.com](mailto:oualypame@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0048-0124>

## Introduction

Drawing upon the thematic elements of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) and the Theatre of the Absurd, a literary movement that emerged in the aftermath of World War II, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), is a captivating theatrical representation of two disparate yet intricately intertwined worlds, both stuck in a profound moral and existential crisis. On the play's stage, the Elizabethan and contemporary worlds are juxtaposed, thus unveiling the complex nature of the human experience through time and space. This seminal drama by the British playwright, akin to the literary, existentialist and philosophical works of the post-war period, constitutes a profound reflection on universal themes such as human brutality, death and the search for meaning in our troubled times.

In structure as well as in content, Stoppard's play bears striking resemblance to the composition of T.S. Eliot's poem, "Wasteland", and of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) as it weaves together a variety of themes, sources and styles. The influence of numerous contemporary and classic authors can be discerned in this intricate dramatic landscape. This is undoubtedly the reason why a significant proportion of critical analyses of the work frequently concentrates on intertextuality, on its postmodernist dimension, and its treatment of language, games and politics. To better understand Stoppard's work, it is crucial to undertake an in-depth analysis of the human condition.

The figures in Stoppard's play are succinctly and vaguely depicted, set in a chaotic dream world, devoid of salient characteristics and reliable points of reference. This ambivalence between illusion and reality, akin to that observed in Beckett's oeuvre, confronts the characters with a desolate reality, where suffering and death are pervasive. However, far from being overwhelmed by despair, they often opt for art and play as a means of expressing themselves and understanding their environment. Even though drama performances and games often become sources of misunderstanding and conflict, these practices serve as a means of understanding and engaging with the realities of daily life.

This article explores the theme of human predicament in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966). It is divided into three parts: the first examines the dramatic representation of life and death as realities beyond human understanding and knowledge. It puts an emphasis on the existential

disorientation of the protagonists, and then on their inability to apprehend the concept of death. The second part analyses how the intertwined domino effects of fear and inner insecurity ultimately result in the paralysis of the social fabric. It focuses on the heroes' entrapment in existential games, and then, on the treatment of language as a barrier to meaningful communication. The third part analyses the utilisation of dramatic arts to subdue the chaos of the unknown, examining first the function of theatre in criminal investigations and reconstruction, and then scrutinising the use of drama as a vital epistemological device.

### 1) The Incomprehensibility of Life and Death

In his dramatization of the human condition in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), Stoppard seems to focus predominantly on the incomprehensibility of life and death. His characters, like Beckett's heroes, actively engage in metaphysical contemplations and theatrical representations but fail to understand the purpose of their lives, the dialectics of life and death, and the social dynamics in which they engage. Their unstructured metaphysical musings and unfocused artistic endeavours exacerbate their sense of confusion, anxiety and isolation, while sustaining and amplifying theatrical tension among audiences.

#### 1.1 Drifting Through the Unknown

Stoppard's central figures often find themselves idly marooned on uncharted terrains – adrift in the wilderness both literal and social, sailing blind through existential fog without a map or an inner compass. In these impenetrable spheres, they lose sense of orientation, stuck between absurdity and inaction.

Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain unaware, until the end of the play, that the socio-political plots they are drawn into will lead to their own execution, they ironically continue to facilitate these processes while engaging in discourses concerning the nature and significance of death, and their places and roles in their world. The official task assigned to them by King Claudius, a usurper of the throne of Denmark, consists of escorting their childhood friend, Prince Hamlet, on a voyage to England. Even though they do not realise that their mission is a subterfuge concocted by the corrupt sovereign to neutralise the revengeful prince, and the latter's feigned madness

is a stratagem to survive in a hostile political environment, their mission drives them out of their speculative bubble and forces them to confront the harsh realities of their world. The shift in the courtiers' existential path is employed as a potent theatrical strategy to delve deeper into their minds and into their rapidly changing socio-political landscapes. In other words, the new responsibility bestowed upon them brings to light hidden aspects of their worldview and attitudes. It functions as a magnifying glass, unveiling their aspirations, ignorance, and inherent vacuity.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern largely appear as innocent, grotesque and blasé missionaries in a nebulous and corrupt world. The sealed royal letter that they carry along, without knowing its content and implications, is a symbol of their social marginalization and vulnerability. Although they mostly occupy the centre stage, they remain paradoxically peripheral to the socio-political dynamics unfolding around them. They merely serve, in fact, as witless agents in the hands of Prince Hamlet and King Claudius but they are hardly aware of the manipulations and conditions they are subjected to. Their isolation and bafflement are underscored by the hazy circumstances of their designation for such a delicate assignment, by their lack of command of royal language and diplomatic jargon, by their ignorance of the traditions of their destination country. In addition to their remarkable incompetence, they do not have an interlocutor at their destination, as the English monarch is not aware of their mission and is not expecting them. In the face of these absurd and uncontrolled circumstances, they constantly display feelings of fear and despair at their inability to carry out the task. With no diplomatic competence and emotional intelligence, they are clearly not prepared for the royal assignment. Their lack of experience for the mission reflects and highlights their unpreparedness for life itself.

The malaise of the courtiers of Elsinore is often underscored by the overwhelming discomfort they experience in their filthy and dull environment that Guildenstern describes relevantly as “a place of no name, character, population or significance” (Stoppard 16) where “the very air stinks” (27), like in *Endgame* (1957). Their inability to leave their stark, suffocating location, and their incapacity to find directions for another place they can call ‘home’ reveals their sense of disconnection and stagnation. The depletion of their physical background, which is reminiscent of the bleak settings of Beckett’s plays, suggest a lack of nourishment, guidance and hope resulting from the

erosion of their cultural beliefs, certainties and values: “Ros I want to go home. (Moves). Which way did we come in? I’ve lost my sense of direction. /Guil The only beginning is birth and the only end is death - If you can’t count on that, what can you count on?” (Stoppard 34). Like cosmonauts stranded indefinitely on some remote barren planet, they desperately long to return to where they belong, hoping to re-align with sturdy and reliable ontological values. They feel that they are progressively losing direction and drifting away from rationality and authenticity. Despite their depressing condition and repeated setbacks to make sense of their lives and the world, like Sisyphus in his tireless and vain efforts to get his rocket to the top of the mountain, they persist in their quest for knowledge and for the true meaning of life and death. The protagonists of Stoppard’s drama occupy geographical, social or existential spaces in which they feel like aliens. They often lose a sense of direction and experience a profound crisis of agency. Their spiritual bewilderment is underscored by their incapacity to unravel the enigma of death.

## 1.2 Impossible Conceptualization of death

Much like Beckett’s figures, Stoppard’s heroes grapple with a deep abiding unease about the fundamental questions of life, death and what lies beyond the “endgame”. Death, in particular, remains a persistent source of preoccupation. It looms as a central, unresolved anxiety – both abstract and immediate. In their efforts to make sense of it, they struggle against the limits of language and experience.

As they desperately attempt to unravel the enigma of death, Ros and Guil becomes increasingly restless. Their exasperation builds up when the Players, a talented band of nomadic artists, fail to represent adequately the phenomenon of death on stage, after regular rehearsals and improvisations. In their collective and individual attempts to conceptualize the nature, meaning and implications of this death, they perceive the phenomenon as a paradoxical and unintelligible reality. In his tireless efforts to grasp the nature of death, Guildenstern sees it as both an ineluctable certainty and a complete mystery. He concludes that it is an undefinable yet palpable void that absorbs life and transforms it into nothing. He metaphorically describes it as an abyss out of sight; “a gap you can’t see” (Stoppard 75). In his perspective, this imperceptible trap is not fixed at a specific place, it keeps expanding like an

encroaching desert, a wildfire that reduces wilderness into ashes. Hesitantly, he concludes that “Death is not. Death isn’t... Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being” (100).

The companion of Rosencrantz, in his obstinacy to understand the phenomenon of death and to have a common perception of it, challenges the theatrical performances of the Tragedians, who believe that the experience of death is not the same for all ages and occasions. The typically disjointed response, full of almost identical images that he gives towards the end of his dramatic life, shows his intransigence on the subject. For him, the nature of death is beyond human comprehension and cannot be staged: “Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which is soon over...Dying is not anything... death is not...It’s the absence of presence, nothing more...the endless of time never coming back...a gap you can’t see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound” (Stoppard 115). The representation of a humanity driven, like a herd, by some cosmic force toward a boundless gulf, falling off an abrupt cliff, puts an emphasis on the cruelty of the fate that humans and all living creatures face. The obscure abyss is, in the characters’ absurdist view, an exit into nothingness, an inescapable trap where life disintegrates and vaporizes into the cosmos. It stands as a poignant double symbol of the impermanence of life and of the perils that inhere in human existence. As the ultimate destination, death is, in the beliefs of Stoppard’s figures, the only consistent truth in life: every living creature sits on a death row, the countdown of which starts at birth. The void, they fail to see and understand may simply be a transposition of the corrosive inner emptiness that inhabits them. It is perhaps a reflection of their uncertainties, inner insecurity and inability to handle the fear of the unknown that they experience throughout their theatrical existence.

Issues of life and death, as illustrated by the existential vicissitudes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, seem to be beyond the realm of human understanding and command. The lack of clarity and control of the central figures over the political games forced upon them, which are responsible for their tribulations and execution, becomes a powerful echo of their powerlessness in the face of destiny and death. During the course of their dramatic existence, they are, in fact, incessantly pulled in different directions without their consent or knowledge of what to expect or how to deal with the situation imposed on them. Like Beckett’s characters in *Waiting for Godot*

(1952) and *Endgame* (1957), they are inhabited by an overwhelming sense of drifting away, in the currents of life's uncertainties, moving inexorably towards the unknown. This feeling of powerlessness is underscored by the potent image of the figures 'contained' in a small vessel carried away by a boundless rough sea.

The sudden agitation of the elements, the surprise attack of the ship by pirates, and the blackout result in a collective bafflement and disorientation on board. The panic of ship crew and passengers and the violent collisions between them is a comic illustration of how the interactions of random cosmic disorders and social upheavals affect the course of individual plans and actions:

Noise and shouts and rushing about. "Pirates". Everyone visible goes frantic. Hamlet draws his sword and rushes downstage. Guil, Ros and Player draw swords and rush upstage. Collision. Hamlet turns back up. They turn back down. Collision. By which time there is general panic right upstage. All four charge upstage with Ros, Guil and Player. (Stoppard 109)

The torrent of tragic incidents, foreshadowing the death of the main characters, is both a potent indicator of collective existential disorientation and a sign of the prevailing sense loss and grief on stage. Their movement from the firm land, a symbol of relative stability, to the vast, often agitated and uncontrollable sea, with no reliable map or compass suggests a descent into more confusion and chaos. They seem, as they sail off, to surrender to the oppressing grip of the vast unpredictable sea, which also serves as an analogy for the unpredictability of life.

The sea crossing from Denmark to England is a poignant metaphor for the relentless existential journey of the characters. Their distressing night-time and one-way voyage is in fact an allegorical representation of their implacable existence. The darkness around the boat "at the mercy of the elements" (52) conveys an overwhelming sense of risk, uncertainty and despair. Toward the end of the play, the prevailing feeling of pessimism generated by the voyage is emphasized by Guildenstern's playful but realistic reference to their final destination as a "dead end" (112). In fact, in Stoppard's play, England is both literally and figuratively depicted as an impassable terminal, a cemetery where the one-way voyage and the dramatic existence of the courtiers are expected to end.



In Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* as well as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), there is an abundance of tightly interwoven images of life and death. The sailing at large is briefly perceived as an act of freedom by the courtiers, a promise of peace and stability for the new ruling monarchy by King Claudius, and a life-threatening adventure by crew and passengers. The barrels and the boat, for instance, appear like floating coffins being tossed about by the waves and drifting, almost aimlessly in the darkness, on agitated sea currents. The drifting platform eventually turns into an all-out war terrain: fear, cruelty and vengeance end in carnage. Despite the transformation of the stage into a mass grave, the survivors at the end of the play still fail to truly understand the value of life and the mystery of death. They find themselves at the starting point, embarking on the same cycles of doubts and questioning about the meaning of their existence.

In *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), Stoppard emphasizes the idea that life and death are daunting journeys on unknown territories. The paralysing restlessness of his figures stems from their inability to apprehend their condition and find purpose in their existence, and from their fixation on death. Feeling caught up in the invisible net of destiny, they constantly grapple with fears of the unknown and the cessation of existence, as well as with depressing feelings of loss of control, isolation and helplessness.

## 2. The Shackles of Helplessness, Apathy and Fear

Although *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) is a fast-paced and eventful drama, its protagonists constantly feel stuck, in a state of limbo, and deprived of a sense of direction. While the background characters of the drama actively attempt to give meaning to their own existence by pulling the social strings of their decadent world, the forefront protagonists lead a passive and amorphous life, refusing systematically “to interfere with the design of fate or even of kings” (Stoppard 102). The tragic confrontations inside and between camps with dark antagonistic worldviews generate chaos and disruptions in their inner and outer alignments.

### 2.1 Human Existence as a Game of Chance

The Coin-tossing game in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, like the chess match in Beckett's *Endgame* are a powerful metaphor for the absurdity of the human existence. Governed by fixed rules and predetermined outcomes, it



reflects a rigged existential game in which humanity has no real chance of triumph. Human life is marked by vulnerability and inevitable decline.

The sense of helplessness is made perceptible, through the game of chance Guil and Ros engage in, at the outset of the play. The outcome of their pastime remains systematically out of their control, regardless of what they attempt to do or of how they feel about the philosophical implications of their activity: whether they throw the coins sideways, behind them, up in the air or in the direction of the audience, the flipped metal objects invariably fall on heads. The tossed coins seem to be remote-controlled and upheld by what the characters vaguely describe as “un-, sub-or supernatural forces” (Stoppard 13). This obscure power ultimately determines the trajectory of the flying objects and makes them land exclusively on one side. The players’ expectations and various strategies have no influence at all over the apparently predetermined game results. The invariable sequence of the game parallels and amplifies the unchanging existential journey, symbolized by the heroes’ one-way voyage to England, at the end of which their death is bound to happen. In the face of the highly compelling situation in which they find themselves, they keep passively recording, relatively undisturbed by the course of events.

The spiritual numbness of Guil and Ros, which is apparently both a result of a long immersion in a hostile, absurd, and uncontrollable natural and social ecosystem and a strategy to avoid suffering, is conveyed through the intellectual disengagement from the game and the disconnection from the world around them. Despite the disturbing metaphysical implications of the outcome of their game, which is a symbolic representation of their own existence, they strive, like Beckett’s figures, to stay numb and unfocused by using a whole range of strategies: physical exercises, pointless speculations, word games, role plays.

In a constant state of bewilderment, they have a hazy sense of their surroundings and of the events unfolding. They get confused about their own names and identities (18). Like Beckett’s tramps in *Waiting for Godot* (1952), they rarely make their own choices or take initiatives. When they happen to do so, they almost immediately forget about their resolutions. In both dramatic worlds, the characters stand out as irresolute and bewildered clowns, comically idling away their time in repetitive speculations, games, story-telling, and/or bickering over futilities.

The incapacity of Stoppard’s heroes to change or predict the

trajectories of their double-headed coins and their relative indifference about the long uninterrupted sequence of ‘heads’ (ninety-two times), reveal their inability to understand, design and impact the course of the own lives. In other terms, the unchanging results of the game, which seem both to annihilate the effects of chance in the process and defeat the laws of logics, physics and probability, underscore the unintelligibility of their world realities, and the insignificance of the players’ actions. Like their coins, the players fall on their heads as they attempt to apprehend the hidden realities of their universe, or when they seek to anticipate the immediate future. Their predictions and plans are constantly thwarted, paralysing the rational thinking of the two companions as well as that of audiences, creating palpable tension on and off stage.

The characters’ persistent failure to understand the reason why their tossed coins only fall on one side, and not on the other, materialises their desperate grappling with the fathomless world in which they live. The tossing game, like the other activities they indulge in, is initially meant to help pass the time and bring comfort but, like in Beckett’s plays, it soon becomes a major source of boredom and anxiety, generating more confusion and endless conflicts between the old companions. The tensions in and between the characters make them aware of the futility of their existence, and their entrapment in a monotonous and distressing Beckettian-like universe, where nothing happens and there is nothing to be done. Like the protagonist in Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (1953), who experiences paralysing fears and physical challenges but has to go on, Stoppard’s heroes seem to have no other option but to carry on with the same pointless routines:

Guil (raises his head at Guil) Seventy-six- love. / Guil gets up has nowhere to go. He spins another coin over his shoulder without looking at it, his attention being directed at his environment or lack of it. Heads/ Guil A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith... (he slips a coin over his shoulder as he goes to look upstage.)/Ros. Heads. (Stoppard 8)

In their constant attempts to avoid confrontation with their painful predicament, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cautiously refrain from committing themselves. They sit on the fence, remaining doubtful and passive, and as “wary as lizards” (58) or sink into unconsciousness and inaction, like Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* (1952), after exhausting pointless

philosophical speculations. Fundamentally, their dramatic life consists of waiting for time to pass, waiting for the nomadic Players who play the role of Lucky and Pozzo to pass-by and entertain them. They wait for directions from Prince Hamlet or King Claudius to play some roles they do not often understand. Between two royal assignments, they sink in torpor, like Pozzo's slave and shut off possibilities of meaningful interactions. The passive posture of Ros and Guil underlines their inability to take control of their destinies, find purpose in life and weigh significantly on the events unfolding around them.

Stoppard's characters' awakening to reality often leaves them with deep emotional trauma. The severe and exhausting physical agitation of Guil, throughout the play, is indicative of his paralysing fear of facing his own condition and the realities around him. His recurrent convulsive bursts, as the stage directions insistently indicate, seem to be his dominant mode of expression: "he stirs restlessly" (64), "shaking with rage and fright" (22), "sits despondently" (11). His convulsions are the external symptoms of the disintegration of his physical and spiritual being. His self is literally dissolving under the pressure of fear and anxiety.

The cadaveric stiffness and loss of sensation that progressively takes hold of the play's central characters, which culminates with the morbid heap of dead bodies lying over the stage before the curtains go down, is a powerful symbol that highlights both societal decay and the dehumanizing effects individuals experience when exposed to a long spiritual and emotional disconnection. Ros, like Hamm and the latter's parents in *Endgame* (1957), exhibits a severe and mysterious pathology that affects his body, and more specifically lower limbs. The infirmity reduces their physical mobility while expanding their feelings of discomfort, confinement and limitations. The acute sickness of Ros's motor organs, like the absence of limbs among Beckett's figures, symbolises the paralysis of their free-will and existential inertia:

Guil What are you feeling? /Ros A leg. Yes, it feels like my leg.

How does it feel? Ros Dead. /Guil Dead? / Ros (Panic) I can't feel a thing! / Guil Give it a pinch! (Immediately he yelps.) (Stoppard 90)

In the narrow worldview of Stoppard's heroes, which is shaped by trauma, the evidence of human existence seems to have its roots in the experience of suffering and boredom. The experience of trauma is a sign of vitality; it is the

defining aspect of human existence.

Throughout their dramatic existence, Ros and Guil are shackled together, bound to live their miseries like the Siamese companions in *Waiting for Godot* (1952), tied to the vague promises of the mysterious figure who is likely to change their lives for the better or worse. On Stoppard's stage, the heroes are entangled in the complexities of the royal orders, counter orders, plots and subplots. They barely question the machinations of Prince Hamlet and King Claudius as they have no sense of the larger and secret drama and casting of the royal family. The passive posture of the courtiers serves as a sharp contrast to Hamlet's own wrestles to break free from socio-political determinism designed and personified by both the ruling monarch and the rebellious prince himself.

Although they seem to act freely, the main protagonists of Stoppard's play remain trapped in the political intrigues of the ruling class, who use them as pawns. Their humanity is neither acknowledged nor valued. They live and die in almost complete anonymity reduced to mere instruments in a game they can neither comprehend nor control.

## 2.2 Language Breakdown and Communication Failure

In the dramatic universe of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, verbal language functions as a game. Much like the interminable coin-tossing game the protagonists play at the outset of the drama or the verbal tennis match in *Godot*, their conversations resemble performative exercises rather than genuine attempts at communication. Their interactions reveal the characters' inability to form meaningful connections. Instead of fostering understanding, their dialogues breed confusion and misinterpretation. Their persistent failure to communicate underscores their deep existential disorientation and isolation in a world where meaning remains elusive.

The theatrical life of Guil and Ros is a relentless struggle to find purpose in their lives, but they are constantly entangled in hollow metaphysical reflections. Their existence seems to be an uninterrupted repetition of the collective fall of the protagonists in the second act of *Waiting for Godot* (1952): while the travellers in distress, blind Pozzo and dumb Lucky, shout and cry for help to Estragon and Vladimir, the potential saviours comically continue to speculate on human moral obligations. Their metaphysical and ethical preoccupations prevent them from responding to the pressing call of their

misfortunate fellows. Eventually, by a twist of fate, assistance seekers and potential help providers find themselves crawling on the ground, desperately crying for help to a silent universe. Stoppard, in his play, reverses the signs by progressively muting his characters, contrasting with the increasingly noisy and chaotic world around them. In Act Two, when the murderous King Claudius and his accomplice Queen Gertrude, two leading figures who embody corruption and deceit, announce the killing of Polonius by Prince Hamlet, the idling courtiers, Ros and Guil receive royal instructions to take the body into the chapel, but they fail to carry out the order. They remain utterly stuck on stage, struggling to formulate their thoughts and act accordingly:

They remain quite still. Guil Well...Ros Quite...Guil Well, well  
Ros Quite, quite. (Nods with spurious confidence.) Seek him out.  
(Pause). Etcetera. (Stoppard 78)

The sense of inertia and stagnation on Stoppard's stage is conveyed through the heroes' speech impediments and systematic breakdown of their communication. Their conversations mainly consist of repetitive and elliptical fragments, and inconclusive metaphysical musings mixed up with sequences of circular exchanges and unanswered questions.

Though the same stories come back in cycles in various channels and shapes (wordplay, rehearsals, performances, mimes), the disparate tools that the characters employ to communicate, instead of conveying meaning, concur to "tie their tongues" and create "a mute monologue" (56). The exchange of identical phrases and questions is a mere variation of the exercises that the clowns in *Waiting for Godot* (1952) do when they swap similar hats in turns, or when playing a verbal tennis game:

Player Why? / Guil Ah (to Ros Why? / Ros Exactly. / Guil Exactly  
what? / Ros Exactly why? / Guil Exactly why what? / Ros Why / Guil  
Why? / Why what exactly? / Guil Why (62-63)

Stoppard's protagonists belong to the same lineage as the English couples, the Smiths and the Martins in Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950). On the stages of both dramatists, verbal language is metaphorically represented like a mental straitjacket that impedes the flow of thoughts and intellectual exchange. The breakdown of human communication is displayed through illogical and aporetic dialogues, misunderstandings and clichés. In the plays, human verbal interactions often appear as mechanical and comical rituals,

during which protagonists strive to maintain an artificial courtesy in spite of the obvious hollowness of their exchanges. Rather than connecting humans, the language in Stoppard's and Ionesco's plays is treated as an unsurmountable and isolating hurdle. It generates confusion and pain. In *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), the dysfunctional verbal exchanges are underlined by the heroes' circular reasoning, unfinished sentences, and chronic apprehension to use language:

Ros and Guil ponder. Each reluctant to speak first.

Guil Hm? /Ros Yes? / Guil What? /Ros I thought you...Guil No

Ros Ah Pause / Guil I think we can say we made some headway.

Ros You Think so? (Stoppard 50)

The characters' flat dialogues lead nowhere but enhance a sense of deep emotional disconnection and spiritual desolation. Despite their long companionship and their constant movements and drifting between scenes, they do not make progress in apprehending their fate, nor in getting spiritually closer to each other or understanding the dynamics of the world around them. The accumulation of brief and symmetrical sentences creates a static effect in the play's narrative; it generates a sense of motionlessness and entrapment on the stage while highlighting existential uncertainty, despair and loneliness. The following scene illustrates the heroes' inability to weave together linear and meaningful dialogues:

Ros I'm afraid-/ Guil So am I / Ros I'm afraid it isn't your day

Guil I'm afraid it. Small pause. / Ros Eighty-nine. (11)

In essence, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) is a captivating meditation on the tragic confrontation between representatives of two apparently irreconcilable existential worldviews and belief systems. His protagonists either opt for a complete submission to fate or decide to exercise unfettered free will. Regardless of their conception of existence, their radicalism and irrational postures lead them to socio-cultural paralysis and collective loss.

### 3. The Power of Drama and the Chaos of the Unknown

In the face of the uncertainty and chaos prevailing in their world, Stoppard's dramatic heroes, far from surrendering to despair, try to find a way forward through art. In response to the unsettling enigmas of their existence, they consistently utilise drama strategies introspective and explorative ways to

better comprehend the complexities of their experiences. By using theatre as an epistemological device, they aim to shape chaos into coherence, and to provide structure, clarity and serenity into their existence. But as they delve deep into their existential challenges, they get stuck in insoluble contradictions.

### **3.1 Drama as a Medium for Crime investigation and Reconstruction**

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the dramatist transforms the stage into a forensic where the protagonists attempt to piece together and cross-examine fragmented evidence to unveil moral and political crimes and enigmas happening in their opaque world. Their constant theatrical inquiries and search for clues through language and performances seek to establish order and make sense of their lives.

Sensing the power of drama to unveil the true nature of humans, Prince Hamlet uses stage techniques to elucidate the circumstances of the murder of his father in Elsinore. The mimic performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* that the Prince stages with the Tragedian troupe is a re-play of the adulterous and criminal acts that happened behind the scenes, in the privacy of the royal palace. The Player's distant whispering comments on the show conveys a feeling of an intrusive presence in the crime scene palace and of witnessing a premeditated assassination. It unveils the hidden transgressive behaviour of a man, breaking family codes by sleeping with the wife of his own brother, before cowardly killing him in his sleep. As the prime suspect, King Claudius, watches the disturbing revelations scenes which are in fact an unequivocal reconstitution of the murder and an unambiguous indictment of the ruling monarch, he is confronted with the violence and the immorality of his deeds. Overwhelmed by tension, the Sovereign leaves the performance before its end. The king's attitude proves, in Hamlet's sense, the guilt of his uncle. To mislead the offended monarch and keep him under control to better prepare his revenge, the prince uses a distracting stratagem, which consists of acting irrationally: he turns hysterical, circling Ophelia, his lover, and shouting at her.

In the dramatic world of Stoppard, King Claudius, Prince Hamlet and Player clearly stand out, more than the remaining set of characters, as creative artisans of the play's prevailing narrative and culture. Like film or consciousness directors, who are under the grip of fear and self-doubt, they feverishly seek to overcome or dispel their anxiety by attempting to control



the social games and the collective consciousness. With their hidden and conflicting agendas, each of them holds part of the script and the threads that set their society in motion. Prince Hamlet uses drama to track down, and to expose the murderers of his father, with perhaps an unrealistic view to re-establishing the lost family and monarchy order. The shattering of his references, provoked by the unnatural family and political regime resulting from the adulterous affair between his uncle and mother, and from the *coup d'état* perpetrated against his father has set him into a survival mode, in a posture to fight to live, even without logic or morality. As for his murderous “uncle-father, and his naïve aunt-mother” whose mindless actions have brought about irreparable socio-political consequences in the kingdom, they depend for their safety, on the secret service of their agents to monitor the movements and plans of the mad prince, who represents a serious and unpredictable threat to new rulers. The ultimate purpose of their constant spying on Hamlet is motivated by their fear of losing their own lives and their crown.

The persistent financial insecurity that afflicts the Player and his theatre troupe as well as their genuine quest for knowledge and wisdom, keeps them leading an unpredictable nomadic life. Believing that life is a gamble, the Tragedians are always on the move, improvising sometimes cheap, transgressive and meaningful theatrical performances upon request to earn their living. As they go on tours, entertaining and educating different social layers, ranging from homeless to royal families, they use their theatrical talents to transport their audiences into a dream-like world of intrigue and illusion saturated with absurd political plots, fake executions, and sexual transgressions.

In summary, Stoppard’s drama serves as a forum for unveiling personal and political tensions, where characters, aware of their performance roles, expose crimes, and oppressive systems of control and domination while prompting audiences on and off stage to question and understand their worlds.

### 3.2 Theatre as an Epistemological Instrument

In confronting their existential discomforts and struggles, Stoppard’s heroes perceive that art, especially theatre, as a powerful as a vital means of grasping knowledge and reality, both of which remain fluid and elusive. They turn to drama as compass to explore the fragmented and, shifting landscapes of their

inner and surrounding realities.

Through their eclectic performances, Stoppardian figures engage their spectators in reflexions on the definitions and implications of ontological and philosophical concepts like faith, death, truth, and identity. Rather than coming up with prefabricated answers, they mostly raise questions, cross back and forth the line between reality and fiction and change roles and identities without warning. Like the Bondian character, Kiro, in *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1978), they are tireless pilgrims, the true seekers of enlightenment. They believe in human power to tame the unknown and dispel the feelings of insecurity resulting from material and intellectual impoverishment.

Unlike the docile courtiers, Guil and Ros, who only feel secure under the mentorship or direction of some authority, the Tragedians understand, as Hodgson points out, that “the human condition is to alternate between insecurity and security” (Hodgson 189). Refusing to be passive observers, they strive to hold the rein of their lives by taking reasonable risks. Even though the Player admits that it feels more comfortable and “safer within someone else’s script,” he opts for adventure, creativity and freedom. To his random customers, Guil and Ros, who seek to stay away from the turbulent stream of life, the chief of the Tragedians wisely advises to be more action-oriented and less speculative:

Player Uncertainty is the normal state. You’re nobody special.  
(...)Relax. Respond. That’s what people do. You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn. Guil But we don’t know what’s going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don’t how to act.

/Player Act natural. You know why you’re here at least. (Stoppard 60)

In the perspective of the Player, it is illusory and counterproductive to search for stability in a fast-moving world where chaos and uncertainty are the overlapping constants. He argues that reality and truth are consensuses based on intellectual and spiritual constructions whereas the essence of existence is fluid, evasive and intangible. Knowledge is, in his sense, always unstable, constantly shifting, like the unreachable horizon. As it is built on conjectures and faith, one should always be prepared to accept new forms of truths: “For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It’s the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn’t make any difference so long as it is honoured. One acts on assumptions” (60). Stoppard implies that the essence of reality is hard

to define and grasp because it is constantly being processed, readjusted and deformed through the prisms of human perceptions, imaginations and interactions. Commenting on this, drama critic Hirst writes: “Reality is not constant, it is always fictitious because of the different points of view -the different ideologies- determining the way the world is constantly constructed and seen” (Hirst 36). In the dramatist’s view, society weaves reality together through shared memories: the mere evocation of an idea may bring it into life in a shared mental space, as the theatrical prank Ros pulls on his companion Guil suggests: “Ros Fire! / Guil jumps up. Guil Where? / Ros It’s all right- I’m demonstrating the misuse of free speech. To prove that it exists” (Stoppard 54). This comic passage shows the tight connection between language and reality.

The chaos in Stoppard’s dramatic world is largely generated by the characters’ cross-woven disguises and identities, and systematic use of language as camouflage. In their socio-political transactions, they distort their discourses to conceal their intentions, to acquire or consolidate power or simply to stay safe. Being aware of the constant presence of spies and enemies around him, Hamlet remains mostly silent or, like Queen Victoria in Bond’s *Early Morning* (1977), expresses himself in cryptic language. Through unintelligible riddles and irrational body language, he deliberately sends ambiguous signals to his interlocutors. Though Ros and Guil meticulously plan their communication strategies, rehearse their lines, and play roles before they encounter the Prince or another royal authority, they invariably fail to break the *mur de silence*. The prince manages to stay distant and inaccessible throughout the play as Ros bitterly points out: “Half of what he said meant something, and the other half didn’t mean anything at all” (Stoppard 51).

More than the other characters in the play, Prince Hamlet is aware that language is not just a neutral communication tool: it can be used as a powerful weapon or protective shield. Having this in mind, and knowing that he is continuously watched, interrogated and subject to manipulations, he strives to stay alert for his own survival in his Darwinian-like environment. His obsessions with his personal safety are reminiscent of the fears and distress of the inhabitants of the totalitarian city of Oceania in Orwell’s *1984* (1949). His self-isolation behind the walls of feigned lunacy and linguistic nonsense, is a way to get around the constant surveillance and threats of King Claudius, the Elizabethan version of Big Brother. Prince Hamlet’s paranoia and insecurity

mirror modern preoccupations about the subjugation, surveillance, and loss of freedom of individuals as well as societies.

In *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), Tom Stoppard charts the experience of individuals in search for clarity and serenity in a world that denies such possibilities. His figures make use of theatre arts to investigate criminal behaviours, and challenge their established beliefs and truths, hoping to shape meaning and purpose from the unsettling uncertainties of existence. But their persistent confusion and malaise, throughout their dramatic lives, are indicative of a knowledge deficit and ambiguity as a fundamental aspect of human condition.

### Conclusion

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) is an engaging and thought-provoking theatrical representation of the anxieties and tragedies of modern existence. With no solid spiritual anchor, his characters restlessly “drift down time, clutching at straws”, and risking drowning in the empty and yet tumultuous currents of their lives. Prone to fits of panic and bewilderment, their overall existential journeys are shaped and defined by uncertainty, isolation and powerlessness. In their struggles and interactions, their desire to use arts as a lifebuoy and grounding force never fades away. Arts in general and drama in particular become an ambivalent instrument of navigation. While it establishes, nourishes, and heals the characters' interpersonal connections to some extent, but it mostly generates confusion, and fuels tensions and conflicts.

Beyond the tragicomic vicissitudes of his characters, Stoppard seems to suggest that mystery is an essential dimension of existence. Part of the unknown is meant to be explored and experienced, and the other is bound to remain out there, not to be defined by human reason and logic, but to remind us of our limits in a vast and unfathomable universe and of the necessity to re-design our cultural landscapes.

### Works Cited

- Alexander, Peter, editor. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Collins, 1992.
- Angel-Perez, Elisabeth, and Nicole Boireau. *Le théâtre anglais contemporain*. Klincksieck, 2007.
- Barton, John. *Playing Shakespeare: An Actor's Guide*. Anchor Books, 1984.

- Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. Faber and Faber, 1986.
- Birch, David. *The Language of Drama*. Macmillan, 1991.
- Bond, Edward. *Morning. Plays: One*, Methuen, 1977.
- . *Narrow Road to the Deep North. Plays: Two*, Methuen, 1978.
- Davis, Tracy C., and Thomas Postlewait, editors. *Theatricality*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. 3rd ed., 2001.
- Evrard, Franck, editor. *En attendant Godot – Fin de Partie*. Ellipses, 1998.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare after All*. Anchor Books, 2004.
- Gouhier, Henri. *Le théâtre et l'existence*. Vrin, 2004.
- Hodgson, Terry. *Modern Drama from Ibsen to Fugard*. Batsford, 1992.
- Ionesco, Eugène. *The Bald Soprano and Other Plays*. Grove Press, 1958.
- Knoebel, Edgar E., editor. *Classics of Western Thoughts*. Vol. III, 4th ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.
- Reinelt, Janelle G., and Joseph R. Roach. *Critical Theory and Performance*. University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- Ryngaert, Jean-Pierre. *Écritures dramatiques contemporaines*. 2nd ed., Armand Colin, 2011.
- Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Grove Press, 2017. First published in 1966.

**How to cite this article/Comment citer cet article:**

MLA: Pame, Ousmane Aly. "Human Predicament in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* (1966)." *Uirtus*, vol. 5, no. 2, August 2025, pp.79-98, <https://doi.org/10.59384/uirtus.2025.2976>