

Waiting for Godot in Relation to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

The plot of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is simple to relate. Two tramps are waiting by a sickly looking tree for the arrival of M. Godot. They quarrel, make up, contemplate suicide, try to sleep, eat a carrot and gnaw on some chicken bones. Two other characters appear, a master and a slave, who perform a grotesque scene in the middle of the play. A young boy arrives to say that M. Godot will not come today, but that he will come tomorrow. The play is a development of the title, *Waiting for Godot*. He does not come and the two tramps resume their vigil by the tree, which between the first and second day has sprouted a few leaves, the only symbol of a possible order in a thoroughly alienated world. (Fowlie 210)

Common themes found in *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, together with quotes and examples from both plays.

Death

Both plays include death as a central theme. The awareness of mortality, both by the characters and by the audience, pervades both plays.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the audience knows from the very title of the play and from previous knowledge of *Hamlet* that the protagonists will die. This dramatic irony and their progression toward their death at the end of the play provide a context for both characters' musings on the nature of death.

"I mean one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead*..... Life in a box is better than no life at all. I expect.... Whatever became of the moment when one first knew about death?" (Stoppard 70-71).

"We aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies" (79).

"No, no, no... you've got it all wrong... you can't act death. The *fact* of it is nothing to do with seeing It happen -- it's not gasps and blood and falling about -- that isn't what makes it death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all -- now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back -- an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death" (84).
"And then again, what is so terrible about death? As Socrates so philosophically put it, since we don't know what death is, it is illogical to fear it. It might be...very nice" (110).

"I'm talking about death -- and you've never experienced *that*. And you cannot *act* it. You die a thousand casual deaths -- with none of that intensity

In *Waiting for Godot*, death is somewhat less ubiquitous, but still present. The coming of Godot, or God, can be taken as a metaphor for death, and Vladimir and Estragon consider suicide a number of times, and seem so hopeless and aimless that it seems that only death can end their suffering.

"ESTRAGON: Abused who?

VLADIMIR: The Saviour.

ESTRAGON: Why?

VLADIMIR: Because he wouldn't save them.

ESTRAGON: From hell?

VLADIMIR: Imbecile! From death" (Beckett).

"ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

ESTRAGON: (*highly excited*). An erection!" (Beckett).

"ESTRAGON: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

VLADIMIR: What other? (*Pause*.) What other?

ESTRAGON: Like billions of others.

VLADIMIR: (*sententious*). To every man his little cross. (*He sighs*.) Till he dies. (*Afterthought*.) And is forgotten" (Beckett).

"ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like sand.

...

VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.

VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: It is not sufficient" (Beckett).

which squeezes out life...and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after *death* -- there is no applause -- there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that's -- *death*" (123).

"VLADIMIR: I'm afraid he's dying.
ESTRAGON: It'd be amusing" (Beckett).

Religion

Giving the emphasis on death, religion naturally enters both plays to some extent.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern banter about religion to a small extent, but don't dwell on the topic as much as Vladimir and Estragon.

"What in God's name is going on?" (Stoppard 42).

"Is there a God?" (43).

"Immortality is all I seek" (45).

A number of religious metaphors pop out of *Waiting for Godot*. First of all, the title can be taken as "Waiting for God." Vladimir and Estragon can be viewed as the two thieves that hung with Jesus. Lucky has a nonsensical monologue, the longest of the play, which includes a lot of religious references: "a personal God... the heights of divine apathia... blast hell to heaven so blue" (Beckett). Finally, Estragon calls Pozzo "Cain" and "Abel" (Beckett) after forgetting Pozzo's name.

"VLADIMIR: Did you ever read the Bible?"

...

VLADIMIR: Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour" (Beckett).

"ESTRAGON: Do you think God sees me?"

VLADIMIR: You must close your eyes.

ESTRAGON: God have pity on me!" (Beckett).

Choice

Both plays represent characters as without choice. Their fate is set and each action determined by the previous.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try repeatedly to break out of their destiny, to go home, to deny that they must follow a course determined in *Hamlet*.

"We have no control. None at all" (Stoppard 71).

"Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are...condemned.

Each move is dictated by the previous one -- that is the meaning of order" (60).

"GUILDENSTERN: Who decides?"

PLAYER: *Decides?* It is *written*" (80).

"We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions. There is no *choice* involved" (80).

"There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said -- no. But somehow we missed it" (125).

"I want to go home" (37), but they never do.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon try over and over to leave. Yet they never do. Like Guildenstern, at the end of the play, they wonder whether there was ever a chance for it to be otherwise. The first line of the play, in fact is:

"ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done" (Beckett).

"VLADIMIR: We must have thought a little.

ESTRAGON: At the very beginning" (Beckett).

"ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: Ah!" (Beckett).

"VLADIMIR: Let's go!

POZZO: I hope I'm not driving you away. Wait a little longer, you'll never regret it.

ESTRAGON: We're in no hurry" (Beckett).

Direction

In both plays, characters seem to have lost their sense of direction.

"Which way did we come in? I've lost my sense of direction" (Stoppard 39).

"ROSENCRANTZ: Is that southerly?"

"POZZO: Is it evening?"

ESTRAGON: It's rising.

VLADIMIR: Impossible.

...
GUILDENSTERN: In the morning the sun would be easterly. I think we can assume that” (58).

ESTRAGON: Perhaps it’s the dawn.
VLADIMIR: Don’t be a fool. It’s the west over there.
ESTRAGON: How do you know?” (Beckett).

Repetition

Both plays use repetition to a greater extent than most other plays.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the question game occurs repetitively. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are confused for each other over and over again. There are a number of phrases which appear throughout the play, such as “Give us this day our daily mask” (39) / “round” (93) / “cue” (102) and “call us this day our daily tune” (114).

Much more so than *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Waiting for Godot* is about repetition. The characters wait in a place without change, where everything repeats. Even the second act is essentially a repetition of the first. Vladimir and Estragon repeat phrases and exchanges throughout the play, such as the suggestion to leave, and “nothing to be done” (Beckett).

Games

In both plays, the protagonists use games to pass the time while they wait, indecisive.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the question game, reminiscent of a tennis match occupies the protagonists as they wait for Hamlet’s attention. The play even starts with a game: the flipping of a coin.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon’s verbal banter seems almost a game at times: something to occupy them. In addition, echoing the question game in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, much is made of Vladimir and Estragon asking Pozzo a question, to the point of making it into a game.

“VLADIMIR: Will you not play?

ESTRAGON: Play at what?

VLADIMIR: We could play at Pozzo and Lucky” (Beckett).

“LUCKY: sports such as tennis football running cycling swimming flying floating riding gliding conating camogie skating tennis of all kinds dying flying sports of all sorts” (Beckett).

Memory

In both plays, the protagonists seem to have either faulty memory or none at all.

“Do you remember the first thing that happened today?” (Stoppard 19).

“ROSENCRANTZ: What was the last thing I said before we wandered off?

GUILDENSTERN: When was that?

ROSENCRANTZ: I can’t remember” (107).

Right before his death, Rosencrantz claims “Well, we’ll know better next time” (126), the next time the play is performed. But they won’t.

“ESTRAGON: I’m unhappy.

VLADIMIR: Not really! Since when?

ESTRAGON: I’d forgotten

VLADIMIR: Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays” (Beckett).

“ESTRAGON: We came here yesterday.

VLADIMIR: Ah no, there you’re mistaken.

ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR: What did we do yesterday?

ESTRAGON: Yes.

VLADIMIR: Why...Nothing is certain when you’re about” (Beckett).

“VLADIMIR: What was it you wanted to know?

ESTRAGON: I’ve forgotten” (Beckett).

“ESTRAGON: That’s the way I am. Either I forget immediately or I never forget” (Beckett).

“POZZO: I don’t remember having met anyone yesterday. But tomorrow I won’t remember having met anyone today. So don’t count on me to enlighten you.

Natural laws

In both plays, natural laws are set aside, and the characters notice.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead begins with a coin landing heads at least 89 times. At the end of the play, characters go enter one barrel and emerge from another.

In *Waiting for Godot*, time is frozen. It is evening for most of each act, and yet the sun does not move until it suddenly becomes night. This frozen time ties in with the universal repetition.

“VLADIMIR: Time has stopped” (Beckett).

“VLADIMIR: Time flows again already. The sun will set, the moon rise, and we away...from here” (Beckett).

“POZZO: (*suddenly furious.*) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer.*) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more” (Beckett).

“GUILDENSTERN: Oh he might not come.

ROSENCRANTZ: Oh, he'll come.

GUILDENSTERN: We'd have some explaining to do.

ROSENCRANTZ: He'll come. Don't worry -- take my word for it -- He's coming!” (Stoppard 88).

Bibliography and Further Reading

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Johnston, Ian. LBST 402: Lecture on Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Malaspina University-College. 9 Feb. 2004 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20060903054616/http://www.malaspina.edu/~johnstoi/introser/stoppard.htm>>. The “Theater of the Absurd” section includes history of Absurdist Theater and some of the connections between *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Waiting for Godot*.

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