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TOM STOPPARD AND POSTMODERNISM

(based on “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead”)

Том Стоппард та Постмодернізм

У статті розглянуто та проаналізовано ті риси п'єси «Розенкранц та Гільденстерн мертві», які вказують на те, що це зразок постмодерністичної літератури. Серед них пародія, структура твору «п'єса в п'єсі», двозначність, інтертекстуальність, плюралізм, бінарна опозиція та мінімалізм.

Ключові слова: *постмодернізм, пародія, інтертекстуальність, бінарна опозиція, мінімалізм.*

Том Стоппард и Постмодернизм

В статье рассмотрено и проанализировано те черты пьесы «Розенкранц и Гильденстерн мертвы», которые указывают на то, что это образец постмодернистической литературы. Среди них пародия, структура сочинения «пьеса в пьесе», двузначность, интертекстуальность, плюрализм, бинарная оппозиция и минимализм.

Ключевые слова: *постмодернизм, пародия, интертекстуальность, бинарная оппозиция, минимализм.*

Tom Stoppard and Postmodernism

The article deals with analysis of those features of the play “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” which prove that it is an example of postmodern literature. Among them there are parody, the structure “play within the play”, ambiguity, intertextuality, pluralism, binary opposition, minimalism.

Key words: *postmodernism, parody, intertextuality, binary opposition, minimalism.*

The aim of our article is to study the play “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead”, find elements of postmodernism in it and prove that the play belongs to postmodern literature. **The object** of our investigation is the play “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” by Tom Stoppard, **the subject** is elements of postmodernism.

Tom Stoppard is the most prominent contemporary British playwright who has persistently engaged with concepts central to the poetics of postmodernism. He has written in a characteristically postmodern mode, employing structural devices of self-reflexive theatre such as parody, play-within-the-play, and metafictional characters. His plays foreground the problems inherent in theatrical representations, covering a cluster of concepts like the nature of objective knowledge, the human subject and the status of linguistic reference. Stoppard’s theatre marks a radical departure from the realist conventions in drama [5, p. 65]. His remarks on what he saw as the fallacy of naturalism illustrate this point: “I think that sort of truth-telling writing is as big a lie as the deliberate fantasies I construct. It’s based on the fallacy of naturalism. There’s a direct line of descent which leads you down to the dregs of bad theatre, bad thinking and bad feeling” [8, p. 64].

Instead, Stoppard pursues a line of inquiry that disrupts the traditional notions of representation in theatre through an eclectic use of devices that foreground the idea of the unfixity of viewpoints and relativity of all positions. The relativity of perception and knowledge, the constructed nature of historical accounts and ethical positions, and the indeterminacy of language are his major thematic concerns. Many of Stoppard’s plays seem exclusively focused on the shifting and conflicting viewpoints that finally relativize one another and suggest the impossibility of a vantage epistemological perspective [5, p. 65].

The playwright expresses keen interest in certain intellectual, aesthetic and ideological positions associated with postmodern art and drama, while he is at the same time antipathetic to, and even staunchly critical of, some of the more radical notions and claims of postmodern social theory and its image of the human subject.

Stoppard does not fully inhabit the postmodern terrain, but he often travels there and traverses it, speaking the language of the region faultlessly even as he stops occasionally to arraign it with deadpan irony or wit. As he investigates such postmodern issues as the death of the author, the loss of sustaining cultural narratives, the waywardness of language, and the fragmented nature of identity, Stoppard nevertheless exhibits a critical distance and negative capability toward the social, cultural and aesthetic theories that constitute the loosely confederated discourse of postmodernism [4, p. 213].

From Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's inability to divine their meaning or place in the text of "Hamlet", to the skeptical interrogation of visual veracity "after Magritte", to the slippages between textual and lived reality in "The Real Thing" and on to the raucous debates concerning the source of artistic meaning and value in "Travesties", Stoppard has relentlessly pursued themes relevant to postmodernism's obsession with textual openness and the free (wheeling) play of signification or meaning [4, pp. 217-218].

"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" offers a brilliant theatrical spectacle drawing on Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and Beckett's "Waiting for Godot". Stoppard has taken two minor characters out of their peripheral role in "Hamlet" and placed them at the centre of his own. He combines the plot and dialogue of "Hamlet" with the dramatic mode and characterization of "Waiting for Godot" to achieve remarkable success in producing a postmodern performance. This is achieved by exploiting the potential of parody as a theatrical device to work as a cluster of concepts such as reality, identity, memory, destiny and death [5, p. 67].

In the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the parodic use of "Hamlet" also serves to deconstruct the structural and ideological assumptions of the parodied text by implicitly questioning the framework that situates the privileged Hamlet at the centre and his two "insignificant" friends as mere non-entities. "Hamlet", the play suggests, is based on an unquestioned hierarchical assumption that acquiesces in sending the two ordinary men to their deaths on a whimsical spur of a prince.

This allows for the subversion of the hierarchical power structures on which “Hamlet” is based [5, p. 67].

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” strikes us as an example of metadramatic literature which flaunts its own status as a dramatic construction by consciously borrowing from “Hamlet”. In fact, it offers a fine example of the theatrical parody’s ability to create a metadramatic perspective which can in turn enable the readers to question the assumptions that govern their perceptions both in real life and theatre. This metadramatic perspective created by the play serves to undercut the very basis of theatrical representation. It unfolds an intricate interplay between the inner and the outer play, thus problematizing the referential status of theatre itself. This interplay of the two texts serves as a powerful commentary on the reality/fiction interplay which is further illustrated by the players rehearsing the dumb show they are ordered by Hamlet to perform and their interaction with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In the context of interaction with the players, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to negotiate their uncertainty about being “real” people as against the players who are fictional because they “perform” for an audience. They make desperate attempts to make sense of their “roles” in the given framework which they fail to comprehend. Faced with uncertainty, they vainly search for clues and connections that would provide some meaning and a sense of direction to their existence. The player who is content with acting out the role given to him advises them [5, pp. 67-68]:

Player: Uncertainty is the normal state. You’re nobody special.

Guil: But for God’s sake. What are we supposed to do?

Player: 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 know how to act.

Player: Act natural [7, p. 47] .

Stoppard's “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” suggests other interesting postmodern elements. As the play unfolds, the situation of characters becomes

more complex and ambiguous, showing a degree of "semantic indeterminacy that is the frequent hallmark of postmodernist aesthetic production" [6, p. 187]. Since postmodernist characters are rather caricatures of characters that seem to be out of time and out of place, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in this type of theatrical game, become restless, unstable and childish. Unable to remember their names and the reason for which they are summoned, while searching their identities and their past in a postmodern mood, they move to and fro in the small space of the stage – that is their entire world – like animals in a cage [2, p. 148]. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; as Vos believes “no actual world exists offstage; the only reality surrounding their confined stage is an on-going performance of Hamlet. Thus, all of their world's a stage, and the production being performed is Shakespeare's tragedy” [9, p. 151]

The emphasis on the intellectual uncertainty and intertextuality brings Stoppard's work close to the later phases of postmodernism. Emphasizing the play's strong intertextuality, Vos believes: “No doubt about it, Stoppard forages the tradition for various elements of his plays: to Shakespeare for his characters and general framework, including several full scenes; to Pirandello for the theatrical concept of giving the characters self-conscious awareness of their role-playing; and to Beckett for the interchangeability of the two non-characters as well as many of their routines” [9, p. 150].

In “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead”, Stoppard makes advantage of an iconic text as Shakespeare's Hamlet, presents his text from the perspective of Shakespeare's two minor characters whose narratives are already "written" while their attempt to break free of the play-within-play (Hamlet) is fruitless. It is Stoppard who plays upon them to represent his own purposes and to demonstrate that the human experience cannot be fully understood by focusing on the dominant narrative. In this way, his use of Hamlet is in some ways a postmodern gesture [2, p. 149]. As Keyssar-Franke observes, Stoppard's strategy is to juxtapose scenes in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern operate outside of their roles in Hamlet to

scenes in which they do enact them; this creates a sense of the possibility of freedom and the tension of the improbability of escape.[3, p. 87]

Other aspects of postmodernism such as philosophizing, speculating and agonizing by Hamlet over grand issues (such as meaning of life, death and religion) are treated in the play as farce through the modes of satire, irony, burlesque and parody. On the other hand, the undecidability, complexity and openness of the text in exploring new traces of ideas make the play pluralistic which liberate the text from the dominant logocentric thought and represent its postmodernity [2, p. 149].

As further pointers to demonstrate the postmodern condition of “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead” are the depiction of reality as a game or "spectacle", the inability of language for the sake of a secure meaning and communication and the destabilization of the main character's identity [2, p. 149]. Regarding the same idea, in Corballis's view: “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are portrayed as an extension of the audience and therefore as “real” people; the Hamlet characters, by virtue of the onstage audience (added to the offstage one) are made to appear all the more stagey, “clockwork” and “unreal”. [1, p. 36]

In his play, Tom Stoppard uses binary opposition. Two marginal characters of Shakespeare's Hamlet, who died in that context, now enter a new context or a new game designed by Stoppard called Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. According to the title, they are already dead, from the beginning. Their fate cannot be changed, since "it was written". Although Stoppard's context engages them in another game, it cannot save them from their pre-determined death [2, p. 152].

PLAYER: Lying down. (He laughs briefly and in a second has never laughed in his life.) There's a design at work in all art surely you know that? Events must play themselves out aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

GUIL: And what' that, in this case?

PLAYER: It never varies---we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.

GUIL: Marked?

PLAYER: Between "just desserts" and "tragic irony" we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent. Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly go when things have got about as bad as they reasonably get. (He switches on a smile.)

GUIL: Who decides?

PLAYER (switching off his smile): Decides? It is written.

He turns away. GUIL grabs him and spins him back violently. (Unflustered.) Now if you're going to be subtle, we'll miss each other in the dark. I'm referring to oral tradition. So to speak.

GUIL releases him.

We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions---there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means [7, p. 80].

Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are present in Stoppard's text, they are absent as far as their previous death in Shakespeare's text is concerned. By eliminating the binary opposition of presence/absence, Stoppard deconstructs the philosophical discourse that presence helps the perception of reality. Stoppard not only invalidates the mimetic theories of theater and emphasizes the fictionality of the genre, but also discards the idea that dramatic performance should communicate a metanarrative or have a share in it. He demonstrates the inability of any dramatic act of presenting unchangeable truths or creating finality in performance [2, p. 152]. Guildenstern, being perplexed by the Player's explanations about the arbitrariness of their situation innocently asks: "Operating on two levels, are we?" [7, p. 71]

One may clearly see such distinctive feature of the play under the study as minimalism. Although may not be as devoted a minimalist as Beckett, Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" can be characterized by an economy with words and a focus on surface description. He certainly does not mince words, and as most minimalist authors do, he avoids adverbs and prefers allowing context to dictate meaning. Consequently, readers are expected to take an active role in the

creation of the play's story before them based on oblique hints, rather than reacting to directions from an author. There are sometimes pages and pages where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern swap phrases that are just a few words long [2, p. 157]:

ROS: Took the very words out of my mouth.

GUIL: You'd be lost for words.

ROS: You'd be tongue-tied.

GUIL: Like a mute in a monologue.

ROS: Like a nightingale at a Roman feast.

GUIL: Your diction will go to pieces.

ROS: Your lines will be cut.

GUIL: To dumbshows.

ROS: And dramatic pauses.

GUIL: You'd be lost for words. [7, pp. 92-101]

Thus, “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead”, Stoppard's most controversial play offers so many considerable postmodernist elements, while the relativity of its meaning contributes to the complexity of the play.

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