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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead:

A Postmodern Analysis

by

Elisabeth A. Meyer

A Thesis

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead:

A Postmodern Analysis

by Elisabeth A. Meyer

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Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
Introduction	1
Postmodernism: "Post" What?	10
Author Authority--Author Anarchy	34
Words, Words	63
Conclusion	85

Introduction

When asked in a 1974 interview about appropriate critical interpretations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Stoppard's reply, though expressed in generalities, inherently resists the convention of textual closure, and thus, resists any single interpretation:

I must make it clear that, insofar as it's possible for me to look at my own work objectively at all, the element which I find most valuable is the one that other people are put off by--that is, that there is very often no single, clear statement in my plays. What there is, is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap-frog. You know, an argument, a refutation, then a rebuttal of the refutation, then a counter-rebuttal, so that there is never any point in this intellectual leap-frog at which I feel that is the speech to stop it on, that is the last word. (Stoppard, "Ambushes" 6-7)

Claiming that there is no final "word" within his text multiplies interpretation and employs a great many critics. But ironically, Stoppard debunks the efforts of critics:

Whether the popularity of this interesting hobby

[literary criticism] is the result of an historical notion of what makes for a rounded culture, or, conversely, whether such a notion would have been differently weighted had, say, card tricks or palmistry caught the intellectual imagination instead, it remains the case that an academic preoccupation with the creative work of other people has become so widespread and obsessive that the art of criticism is forced, out of self-respect, to pretend to a relevance beyond the confines of its admittedly sprawling ramifications. (Stoppard, "Doers" 1219)

More ironically still, Stoppard began his own literary career as a critic for the Bristol Evening World in 1958 (Gabbard ix) and a drama critic for the magazine Scene in the early 1960's (Sammells ix). His resistance and participation in drama criticism is an "intellectual leap-frog" in itself, and it has not stopped critics from utilizing their "obsession" by his art.

Stoppard's plays have been substantially examined by academics since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead was performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1966 (Rusinko 2). A year later, the play was produced by London's National Theatre. This production won the playwright three awards: Plays and Players Award for Best Play, John Whiting Award, and the Evening Standard's Award for Most Promising

Playwright (Gabbard x). In 1968, the play was performed in New York, receiving the New York Drama Critics' Award and the Tony Award (Gabbard x). Prior to these award-winning productions, an earlier version of the play, entitled Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear, was written in 1964, but never produced. Later, in 1964, another version, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a one-act Shakespearean burlesque was performed, only once, by English amateurs in a Berlin theater. This early text is largely the seed from which the final version, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, germinated (Brassell 36).

Critics do not agree on the same terminology when attempting to classify Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. The play has been examined in a variety of dramatic contexts: Absurdist Theater (Cahn 12), existentialist (Gordon 18), Beckettian (Rusinko 9), post-Beckettian (Gordon 20), and post-Absurdist (Cahn 13), to name a few. But only one critical text discusses the play solely as a postmodern drama: Postmodern Drama: Contemporary Playwrights in America and Britain by Rodney Simard (1984).

Prior to this postmodern analysis, Stoppard's name has been typically dropped with Samuel Beckett's, especially regarding similarities to the latter's play Waiting for Godot. Stoppard's Ros and Guil are continuously compared to Beckett's two bums, Vladimir and Estragon, in Waiting For Godot. In an interview with Giles Gordon, Stoppard responds

to this comparison in a far more inclusive way, recognizing other elements of influence besides those regarding character:

I can see a lot of Beckettian things in all my work, but they're not actually to do with the image of two lost souls waiting for something to happen, which is why most people connect Rosencrantz with Waiting for Godot, because they had this scene in common. (23)

Stoppard goes on to say that it isn't so much the content of Beckett's plays as it is the "bent of his humour," and the way he "qualifies everything as he goes along, reduces, refines and dismantles" (23). These factors, which impress Stoppard so much, are in fact early symptoms of postmodernism.

But despite these postmodern features present in Beckett, in terms of literary periodizing, Beckett is more often considered among the likes of Modernists such as Ibsen and Osborne. In fact, Simard refers to Beckett as one of "the last of the Moderns," and his plays are considered purely Absurdist (Simard 15).

The tenets of the Theater of the Absurd have consistently been used as a basis of discussion for Stoppard's plays. But the language used to make comparisons between Stoppard and the Absurdist is carefully chosen by critics to show that Stoppard, though in fact influenced by Absurdist writers, is

not necessarily or completely an Absurdist playwright himself. Lucina Pacquet Gabbard argues that "generally speaking, his plays do not lend themselves to any clearcut classification. . . . Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers are the closest to the Theatre of the Absurd . . . " (2).

Martin Esslin, author of The Theatre of the Absurd, one of the most thorough texts defining Absurdist theater, says that literary classification is never an exact or final business: "The artists of an epoch have certain traits in common, but they are not necessarily conscious of them. Nor does the fact that they have these traits in common preclude them from being widely different in other respects" (x). Certainly this is the case with placing Stoppard within a particular dramatic period.

Stoppard's plays are similar to those of the Absurdist, whose texts precede his, and according to Eugene Ionesco's definition of Absurdist Theater, quoted in Esslin's book, parts of Stoppard's texts could be classified as Absurdist: "'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless'" (5). [Stoppard's Ros and Guil, for example, are continually trying to determine the purpose and meaning for their existence, and in doing so they are often engaged in useless activities; however, throughout the play, there are times, particularly when other Hamlet characters are on

stage, when the courtiers' lives do in fact have meaning.

Esslin also notes that the language used to create such a purposeless context in Absurdist texts is equally "senseless:" ". . . the Theater of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (6). However, this is not always the case with Stoppard's characters. Stoppard is more likely to juxtapose purposelessness with rationality; hence, the plays are not purely Absurdist. Simmard explains that although Stoppard's plays have a "close affinity" with the Theater of the Absurd, "his comments on absurdity and the chaos of his plots arise from his insistence on logic and reason; he returns to the traditional dramatic structure of cause and effect, and through the relentless application of logic, he dramatizes it as inherently absurd" (52).

In The Real Thing, for example, the playwright-character Henry, whose life is meaningless until he is able to understand love, does in fact use rational, even philosophical means to this end. In an insightful conversation with his daughter, Henry comes to grips with what it is to love:

It's [loving] to do with knowing and being known. I remember how it stopped seeming odd that in biblical Greek knowing was used for making love. Whosit knew so-and-so. Carnal knowledge. It's what lovers trust

each other with. Knowledge of each other, not of the flesh but through the flesh, knowledge of self, the real him, the real her, in extremis, the mask slipped from the face. Every other version of oneself is on offer to the public. . . . (63)

Likewise, in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Ros and Guil rationally recognize the void in their lives, and they discuss it in sensible terms. On the boat to England to deliver Claudius's letter to the king, Ros and Guil are frustrated with uncertainty, and Guil says, "What do you expect? (Unhappily). We act on scraps of information . . . sifting half-remembered directions that we can hardly separate from instinct" (102). Guil reveals a rational, even logical awareness of why their roles are so tenuous.

Thus, it seems that Stoppard's plays have the "spirit of absurdity" (Simard 52), and his characters are on the fringes of absurdity. Although the characters experience a sense of abandonment, lack of information, meaning and purpose, they are able to rationally process their circumstances. There is clearly a somber sense of awareness. But somber as it is, Stoppard interjects comic relief more often than Absurdist playwrights do. Gabbard explains that Stoppard breaks from the Absurdist largely by way of this comic relief: "In Beckett, Albee, Pinter, and Genet, the vision of man's insecurity and isolation is so sombre that it sometimes spoils the pleasure of the average playgoer" (6).

Despite Stoppard's differences from the absurdists, his name is often dropped with playwrights such as Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, and especially Harold Pinter. Stoppard and Pinter are often compared. In fact, Susan Rusinko, author of Tom Stoppard, a critical and biographical text, includes a chapter solely devoted to comparing and contrasting both playwrights. Other critics, such as Tim Brassell (33) and Mel Gussow (20), find it important to isolate these two playwrights, noting their particular similarities, yet distinguishing them from their contemporaries. Gussow says,

While acknowledging the differences between Stoppard and Pinter, one must also affirm that they stand apart from many of their peers in their achievement of a universality. Nothing dates faster than social relevance. Plays that were so pertinent in their time, such as works by John Osborne and Arnold Wesker, cannot always stand the scrutiny of revival, whereas early plays by Stoppard and Pinter are as fresh today as when they were written. (20)

Gussow ultimately takes both Stoppard and Pinter out of the Absurdist mold and determines the two to hold certain similarities apart from their contemporaries. Simard, in his discussion of postmodern playwrights, dedicates an entire chapter to Stoppard, but before doing so, includes a chapter on Pinter and Albee, calling these two "the first postmoderns" (25). Pinter, he explains, breaks from the Beckettian tradition by replacing conventional action with

language as action; language is the action (34). Albee, on the other hand, "attacks language as a masking illusion, composed of clichéd conventions which obscure meaning rather than conveying it" (37). Both of these linguistic characteristics, which in fact contribute to, if not construct, postmodern plot, are described elsewhere in postmodern studies.

Struggling to classify in terms beyond the English "angry young men" dramatists so characteristic of post-war Modern dramatists, beyond "Absurdist," and even beyond "Beckettian," suggests that Stoppard's plays, however unique individually, are part of a more recent movement in British drama: postmodern drama.

A literary movement so new and controversial among critics and academics as postmodernism is, requires thorough investigation, definition, and exemplification. Chapter two of this thesis will establish such a definition, which will be used as the basis for the discussion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead in chapters three and four. More specifically, chapter three examines the deconstruction and subversion of hierarchical orders regarding characters from Hamlet as well as the hierarchy of authorship regarding Shakespeare and Stoppard. And finally, chapter four discusses postmodern linguistic features in the play, particularly the function of word games and language as plot. The overall objective of this study is to reveal the most appropriate literary and cultural context, postmodernism, for discussion of Stoppard's plays.

Postmodernism: "Post" What?

Before discussing Tom Stoppard's plays as evidence of postmodern literature and culture, a working definition of postmodernism, its history, proposed tenets, and the leading critical theorists need to be looked at closely. Literary Modernism will also need to be discussed, in order to establish the background from which postmodernism comes. The suggestion of Modernism implicit in the term "postmodernism" and the controversies surrounding it will be examined, as well as the problems of literary periodizing. Basic characteristics of postmodern literature will then be outlined and their integral relationship to the discourses of poststructuralism and deconstruction.

To begin to understand postmodernism, it is necessary to understand the factors that motivated Modernist writers. Two of the major cultural influences, outside of literary circles, which contributed to the resulting body of literature were World War I and major technological advancements. World War I utilized advancements in technology, such as the airplane, that were capable of destroying life more swiftly than in any war previous. The war's destructive effect, particularly on European countries, left nations spiritually disillusioned. And the failure of the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations left the world politically disillusioned.

Technological advances, which allowed for mass

production, empowered the rich and oppressed the working classes. The working class became an integral part of the machines and technology which they used beneath the power of the wealthy. Writers of this time responded through rebellion in an attempt to regain the human self through their texts.

In his book, Five Faces of Modernity, Matei Calinescu differentiates two forms of Modernism (41), which will be useful here as a basis of discussion. The first is Modernism as a stage in Western Civilization. This stage is progress-oriented in regard to science, technology, and capitalism. The masses have faith and confidence in these advancements. The second form Calinescu outlines is Modernism as an aesthetic concept. This form reacts negatively to the first. The Modernist aesthetic consciousness rejects middle-class values, and deems the political, technological and scientific advancements as forces that repress or dehumanize the human condition. This repression influences the literary Modernists into an attempt to preserve something that has nearly been obliterated by science, technology and impoverished faith in governments.

Perry Meisel, in The Myth of the Modern: A Study in British Literature and Criticism After 1850, refers to this same repression caused by the Modern Age as the "common assumption about the modern element in literature" (1). Modernism, as pointed out by critics such as Georg Lukacs (1920), F.R. Leavis (1932), Harry Levin (1960), and Irving

Howe (1970) "acts out the loss of something primary that it wishes to regain" (Meisel 1). It is not coincidental then that an increased interest in Freud's psychoanalytic theory came about after World War I.

Freud's theory proposes the concept of two minds: the conscious (ego and super-ego) and the unconscious (id). The first involves logical thinking, while the second focusses on repressed drives and desires. The emphasis here, as in Calinescu's two modernisms, is on the division of consciousness and rationality. Modernist science, technology and government are practical products of the rational consciousness. Modern literature, often in the form of aesthetic realism, is a conscious reaction to the former. Stephen Spender writes that "Modern art is that in which the artist reflects awareness of an unprecedented modern situation in its form and idiom. . . . The writing of the moderns is the art of observers conscious of the action of the conditions observed upon their sensibility" (Spender 77).

The context of modern society and the observation writers made of it produces a large body of Modernist literature, in which the concept of division is apparent. An example of this is Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover in which Constance and Mellors have a primitivistic relationship which is juxtaposed with oppressive industrialization and class struggle. The lovers reject modern society, preferring to experience their existence as primal human beings would

before the imposition of institutions, science and technology.

An emphasis on the nature of the human individual and its expression emerges as a result of the repression caused by modern Western Civilization. In American and British modern literature, characters not only struggle to make whole the substance of their being, but they also question the ability of language to signify that substance. Dennis Brown discusses five concepts of the modern self in his book, The Modernist Self in Twentieth-Century English Literature: dissolving self, self at war, fragmentary self, self-deception and self-conflict, and discontinuous self.

Brown speaks of the Modernist movement in literature in the past tense, assuming that this period has ended, and he explains that "Modernism radically probed the nature of selfhood and problematised the means whereby 'self' could be expressed" (Brown 1). He points out that, prior to the Modernist movement, the concept of self in fiction was "coherent," "self-sufficient," and "whole," as in Robinson Crusoe (2). Brown uses the examples of Eliot's Prufrock, Joyce's Leopold Bloom, and Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway to show the fragmentation of modern selves.

Self-doubt and introspection lead to doubting the ability of language as the means by which humans conceive of the self ultimately as a whole. In Modernism, writers break from Victorian conventions of expression in an attempt to express a

reality of self, relevant to the era, and perhaps more noteworthy, to define themselves as a new and distinct body of writers.

The effort of the writers themselves to circumscribe and identify their texts as a new body of literature is the second most influential motivating stimuli responsible for contributing to literary Modernism. Ezra Pound, for example, was a writer and an editor who encouraged budding writers of the time. He was a potent force behind the revision of Eliot's The Waste Land. Amy Lowell worked with Pound to formalize a new poetry called Imagism. She later broke with Pound and compiled the first Imagist anthologies. And in 1912, Poetry: A Magazine of Verse was founded in Chicago.

Fiction writers during this self-conscious literary coup, in both England and America, also worked at writing critical analyses of the texts of their very own era. The fiction and the criticism were produced almost simultaneously in an attempt to define and assess the literature in the very moment that it was being produced. Michael H. Levenson, author of A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922, explains that after 1914, the year the Great War began, "one of the most notable features of the period was the continuity between genres and between disciplines, the self-conscious attempt to construct a unified theory of modernity" (viii).

Criticism became equally important as fiction: Levenson points out that in his preface to Collected Poems (1911), Ford Madox Ford writes, "I have kept before me one unflinching aim--to

register my own times in terms of my own time . . . " (327); in 1925, Virginia Woolf published her novel, Mrs. Dalloway and her critical essay, "Modern Fiction;" T.S. Eliot published The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock in 1917 and Tradition and the Individual Talent in 1920. The common thread between all of these writers' critical works is their insistence upon separation from the past and the necessity of new literary constructs to accomplish this.

The Modernists rebel violently against prescribed traditions set by the Romantics and the Victorians. Examples such as "God is dead," the emotional paralysis of lovers and the rejection of prescribed sex roles in T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and Ibsen's The Doll House, and the economic prose style of Ernest Hemingway show this. All of these exemplify the Modernist contempt for nineteenth-century moral and stylistic traditions. This rebellion is an outstanding mark of Modernism, and since the generation of "high" Modernists, or post-World War I Modernists, has exhausted their rebellion, it is no longer necessary to express it; it is "out of our literary system," if you will, and not an issue for the postmodern writers.

The following brief history of the term "postmodern" comes from Ihab Hassan's essay, "The Question of Postmodernism," printed in Harry Garvin's book, Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism (117). The essay was originally a contribution to an MLA forum in 1978, which focussed on the subject of

postmodernism. Hassan traces one of the earliest uses of the term "postmodern" to Federico De Onis in Antologia de la Poesia Espanola e Hispanoamericana (1882-1932) and Dudley Fitts in Anthology of Contemporary Latin American Poetry of 1942 (117). In both cases the term is used to indicate a minor reaction to Modernism. Arnold Toynbee's A Study of History (1947) uses the term to designate a new historical cycle in Western civilization. In 1959 and 1960, Irving Howe and Harry Levin wrote of postmodernism as a falling off from the great modern movement. Leslie Fiedler used the term to challenge the elitism of high Modernists.

These early uses of the term respond to and give recognition to the modern movement. In the last thirty years, the term "postmodern" is used much more frequently than earlier in the century. And a "good postmodernist" can be found not only in the field of exegesis, but also art, architecture, economics, and music (Updike 142). Because "postmodern," the word, carries within it the very term it is reacting to, it is argued by many critics that postmodernism, as an era, merely extends certain modern characteristics, such as fragmentation as in cubism or the subversion of the "traditional" concepts of the protagonist. Fredric Jameson attempts to rebut this argument, however, in "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." Even so, his point does not fully address the possibility that certain modern characteristics could in fact be extended or in some

way subverted, present nonetheless, in postmodern literature:

What has not been taken into account by this view is, however, the social position of the older Modernism, or better still, its passionate repudiation by an older Victorian and post-Victorian bourgeoisie, for whom its forms and ethos are received as being variously ugly, dissonant, obscure, scandalous, immoral, subversive and generally 'anti-social.' A mutation in the sphere of culture has rendered such attitudes archaic. . . . This is indeed surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself, since the younger generation of the 1960s will now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics, which 'weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living' . . . (56)

It is true that postmodernists, unlike their predecessors, do not reject what immediately precedes them; they do not purge themselves of the Modern tradition; thus, it would seem more likely that certain Modern features could be extended into the realm of postmodernism. Postmodernists carry modern literary baggage with them, without scorn. John Updike notes that "the good postmodernist . . . enjoys a respectful educated acquaintanceship with the moderns; indeed, he often makes his living by teaching them to students" (Updike 142).

In his essay, "What Does Deconstruction Contribute to the

Theory of Criticism?," John Ellis, arguing the validity of deconstructionism as a contemporary critical literary theory which has evolved almost simultaneously with postmodern literature, speaks about the fate of the "traditional or obvious, or referential [according to the author's notes, 'referential' here indicates 'literal']" approaches to and expectations of texts: "The traditional idea is questioned, subverted, and undermined [in the act of reading and within the texts themselves]--and then retained in order that we can focus on the act of subversion itself which, however, does not constitute a final rejection of that idea" (262). Tradition is employed by postmodern writers through subversion, not revolt or obliteration. As a result, emphasis in postmodern texts is often on both literal content and the way in which that content or the presentation of it undermines and deconstructs the Modern tradition. Thus, the existence of postmodernism is to some extent dependent upon Modernism, although the two are indeed distinguishable.

Jameson writes that the case for the existence of postmodernism is dependent upon the assumption that a "radical break or coupure" from the Modern movement has taken place (53). This poses the difficult problem of periodizing. In terms of literature, most critics, including Jameson, Hassan, and Eagleton agree that "postmodern" refers to texts written sometime after World War II through the present, thus, leaving the first half of the century to the Moderns.

Sociologist Todd Gitlin dates postmodernism from the 1960's to the present. Of course, it is ludicrous to suggest that a given period ended on an exact date and another antagonistically cropped up in its place; thus, it is crucial to examine the characteristics which seem to make a given time period distinct.

Because the tendency of periodizing literary movements is to generalize and "obliterate difference," Jameson clarifies that postmodernism needs to be grasped "not as a style, but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features" (56), in much the same way that a variety of features exist in Modern art, united by and because of particular historical stimuli.

After World War II, and perhaps more recently, from the 1960s to the present, several political and sociological features stand out, which make postmodern culture distinct. To begin with, multinational capitalism lends itself to postmodernism in that mass production and mass consumerism have saturated every aspect of culture. Gitlin writes, "High consumption capitalism requires a ceaseless transformation in style, a connoisseurship of surface, an emphasis on packaging and reproducibility: postmodernist art echoes the truth that the arts have become auxiliary to sales. . . . Even 'life styles' become commodities to be marketed" (Gitlin 1).

Because of mass production, art is accessible to the masses

in a variety of forms. Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" (1888), for example, can be seen not only in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, but also as a framed reprint available at department stores, as a feature in French Impressionist books, calendars, greeting cards, and even on the backs of specialty playing cards. Capitalism feeds off the mass production of art, and one result for the consumer is a secondary experience of reality. In other words, the image of Van Gogh's sunflowers may be the only image that the consumer has of sunflowers. The consumer may only know sunflowers by way of the Impressionist representation of them, not by scientific knowledge or primary sensual knowledge. Thus, if the consumer, after seeing Van Gogh's reprinted painting, does encounter real sunflowers, will that consumer have an original experiential perception of the flowers, or will the consumer impose the artist's representation upon his or her perception? Are sunflowers a part of the natural environment, or are they an image reproduced and consumed via capital?

Mass production of art and its relationship to capitalism and original perception parallels the way in which multiple discourses create or recreate knowledge. Human sexuality is a case in point, and such is the subject of Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality. The overall themes of Foucault's work are the historical chain of sexual repression inherited by twentieth-century man, and human sexuality as a product of theology. He traces this phenomenon from ancient times, but without a doubt, mass production and the availability of various

disciplines' literature on the subject make the concept of sexuality as a product of discourses a more prominent feature in postmodern culture. Sexuality is a product, a creation of theology, biology, sociology, and psychology.

Sexuality in the postmodern age is a product to be advertised, sold and bought, rather than a natural, primal bodily experience. Sexuality is taught in popular 1980s "how to" texts, repressed except for the purpose of procreation in religious works, defined physiologically in medical documents, analyzed in terms of behavior and dysfunction in psychological studies, governmentally restricted by laws, and promised via telephone. All of these discourses and more saturate postmodern culture and are available on a massive level in exchange for money.

In addition to the sociological features rooted in capitalism, which make postmodern culture distinct, the prominent linguistic characteristics also need to be examined in order to develop a more inclusive definition. Poststructuralism, a linguistical theory that has evolved simultaneously with postmodernism, is perhaps the most appropriate language model for the examination of postmodern texts. The word "poststructuralism," like "postmodernism," includes in it the term which it is breaking away from, but it rejects and expands on the tenets of structuralism. It will be helpful here to briefly discuss structuralism, a theory of the 1960s and early 1970s (Davis 295).

Saussure, the leading writer on structuralism, determined that words are not value-laden symbols which have a natural relationship to a particular thing. Instead, language is a system of signs composed of a signifier (the word itself) and the signified (the thing being referred to). Together, signifier and signified form a sign, a system of language. Saussure focusses on the system of semiotics at work behind signification, rather than the actual word/referent relationship since the latter is an arbitrary relationship.

As an example, the word "chair" signifies a tangible construct with legs that raise one off the floor and a surface suitable for sitting on. The word "chair" and the thing chair are not dependent upon each other. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; the sign "stands for something by convention and common usage, not by necessity" (Sarup 3). There is, however, a balance because each signifier attached to a given signified is not signifying something else; "each signifier acquires its semantic value only by virtue of its differential position within the structure of language" (Sarup 3); "chair" cannot signify "couch," nor can the sound or the logo "chair" be confused with the word "cheer," although the signifier is similar in sound and letter construction. Structuralism concludes that signs produce meaning because of difference: chair is what it is not. There is a stable relationship between signifiers and signifieds in that they "derive their identity and meaning from their position in the

space of the linguistic system: this position can be defined only by their opposition to and difference from other signs" (Thiher 71). This oppositional relationship will later be looked at in terms of value and hierarchical relationships.

Poststructuralism, however, shows that Saussure "had recognised that signifier and signified are two separate systems [ultimately forming a whole unit], but he did not see how unstable units of meaning can be when the systems come together" (Seldon 72). Saussure's model falls short in that it fails to take into account the inexhaustible chain of signification which multiplies meaning and emphasizes the signifier over the signified. Every signifier can in turn function as a signified; thus, no signification is ever satisfied (Sarup 12). The relationship within the sign then is neither consistent nor final. The word "chair" signifies the thing that is used to sit in, but, according to the OED, "seat" and "sedan" can signify the same thing. Also, "chair" can signify president, person in charge, seat of justice, electric chair, an iron block, or a gig. In turn, each of these signifieds becomes another signifier: "Gig," for example, can signify a dart, a boat, a spinning toy, or a gathering of musicians. Every signifier becomes a signified and every signified can in turn be a signifier. Thus, there seems to be an infinite number of replacements along the signifying chain.

Leading poststructuralist theorist Jacques Derrida uses

the term "differance" in relation to signification, rather than the structuralist term difference. Differance, is "literally neither a word nor a concept" (Derrida 39):

Differance is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. . . . The a of differance also recalls that spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation--in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a being--are always deferred. Deferred by virtue of the very principle of difference which holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces.

(Derrida 29)

In spoken French, the "a" in differance is not heard, therefore the word sounds like 'difference' (Seldon 85). "The ambiguity is perceptible only in writing: the verb 'differer' means both 'to differ' and 'to defer'" (Seldon 85). Derrida craftily chooses a term which in fact reflects the concept it supposes.

For Derrida, signification is not a closed matter of a single instance of difference. Instead a sign, a word and a concept, is meaningful in the way it postpones and defers

meaning repeatedly. This is similar to metaphor and metonymy in that the signifiers in both of these rely on transference, association, and comparison, rather than contrast or difference. In addition, Derrida suggests the possibility of a concept independent of language, a transcendental signified (Derrida 20). This suggestion completely defeats any assumption that language is capable of entirely circumscribing human perception and conceptualization.

Another poststructuralist theorist, Jacques Lacan, discusses the relationship between signification and knowledge of the self. His premise is that individuals represent themselves through language, though this representation is merely a chain of metaphors, and it is desire that stimulates recognition of the self as the "I," which is separate from others or the "you" (Sarup 20). Therefore, Lacan "believes that there could not be a human subject without language but that the subject cannot be reduced to language" (Sarup 12). Word systems, for Lacan, ultimately create the concept of self, even though this self is never whole.

In terms of Freud's conscious and unconscious, and his goal to bring the former into the latter in order to create a whole self, Lacan argues that the symbolic system which governs the unconscious is in fact the same system governing the conscious; therefore, the goal of integrating the two is

in vain. Both conscious and unconscious work within the same sign system, the very system that, according to poststructuralists, is not conclusive in terms of meaning. Instead, to use Lacan's terms, words are "metaphoric" and "metonymic," just as images in dreams are. "Lacan suggests that, thanks to human beings' metaphoric ability, words convey multiple meanings and we use them to signify something quite different from their concrete meaning. This possibility of signifying something other than what is being said determines language's autonomy from meaning" (Sarup 11). Lacan's view takes into account the potential for conscious manipulation of signs to elude meaning, which is common in postmodern literature, as well as the metaphorical nature of signs themselves.

It might seem that poststructuralism devalues language because of its suggestion that individual signs are subject to endless replacement. However, it is the structuralist's value attached to closure, to immediate meaning, that is questioned or undermined by poststructuralism, rather than the value of particular signs. Poststructuralism is disruptive and chaotic because potential meaning is reconsidered, postponed and deferred. In postmodern literature, multiple interpretation of signs leads to multiple interpretation of context. Thus, words as vehicles to express meaning fail to the extent that a particular meaning is never confirmed. This concept leads to the theory of deconstruction, which will be discussed later

in the chapter.

In postmodern texts, language is a more a crucial element of plot than conventional action or characterization. It often calls attention to itself as the tool by which a fiction is created; in doing so, language often acts as the subject of subtexts. Less emphasis is placed on conventional progress-oriented action; thus, meaning is more thoroughly dependent upon words and is less likely to be supplemented with activity. In postmodern drama, language "underscores the range of possible subjective interpretation," and it "creates a silent subtext which conveys as much meaning as dialogue by the absence of words" (Simard 31). In Pinter's The Homecoming Lenny encourages his brother Teddy, the philosophy professor, to discuss the philosophical implications of a table. Teddy declines comment, but his wife Ruth does comment:

Look at me. I . . . move my leg. That's all it is.
 But I wear . . . underwear . . . which moves with me
 . . . it . . . captures your attention. Perhaps you
 misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg . . .
 moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict . . .
 your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they
 move is more significant . . . than the words which
 come through them. You must bear that . . .
 possibility . . . in mind. (53)

Poststructural assessment of signs contributes to

pluralism, as exemplified in this passage. Ruth states that action is clear, not an enigmatic indication of meaning; it is more "significant" than words. But of course, her action and dialogue here are subject to the subjective interpretations of the other characters as well as the reader. Outwardly, Ruth demotes words and promotes action; the printed form of her dialogue represents this in that the ellipses indicate a pause for thought, an uncertainty about what it is she is trying to say, fragmentation of the thought process, or the latent text. She is attempting to assimilate action and discourse in order to suggest meaning, yet even with both forms of communication at work, meaning is never conclusive. In terms of words exclusively, the reader is told to question their significance.

Pinter draws attention to and deconstructs the very medium which he is using to communicate, thus drawing attention to that medium. Textual self-referentiality is another prominent postmodern literary feature. It is not unusual for the act of writing and the related quest for representation through signs to be subject matter in these texts. In Stoppard's The Real Thing, Henry, one of the two character playwrights, discusses with anguish the inability of language to represent "real" love:

I don't know how to write love. I try to write it properly, and it comes out embarrassing. . . .
Perhaps I should write it completely artificial.

Blank verse. Poetic imagery. . . . Loving and being loved is unliterary. It's happiness expressed in banality and lust. . . . (40)

Two of the major themes of the play are defining "real" love and the limitations writers face; here the themes cross. Love is unrepresentable, according to Henry, unless it is written about poorly; he would rather not have it written about at all. Although in context Henry's struggle to write of love is related to his failure in love relationships, the statement about the language comes in part from Henry the writer. His business is words, and later in the play he says that words are "sacred" (54). Yet, words fail to capture the essence, emotion and meaning of love. Of course Henry is not the first writer ever to feel this way about love, but the irony here is that this is a play whose thematic concern is largely with love. Again, the very medium through which the artist chooses to express his themes proves itself inadequate. Clearly, Pinter and Stoppard are subverting the dramatic genre by having characters point out the limitations of words.

The reader's concept of the genre is deconstructed in the very act of reading because signification is destabilized. Poststructuralism is influenced by deconstruction. Jacques Derrida recognized that "in modern conceptions of knowledge there is a temporal 'decentering' or a 'rupture' in the conventional order, a dramatic and decisive shift in the old relations to authority" (Davis 409). By "authority," Derrida

means the "center" from which traditional Western thought attaches value: God is the center or authority, and humans are secondary or subordinate; good holds the preferred position over evil; masculine holds the higher position of authority over the feminine.

These binary, hierarchical pairs are ultimately promoted by structuralism and subverted by deconstructionism:

Structuralism sees texts as composed of binary oppositions (such as good/bad, light/dark, male/female). According to theories of deconstruction, however, these antitheses create ideological problems because their own structure privileges one term (usually the first) over another, and because this opposition is not an end in itself, but a hierarchy which can be further deconstructed. Binarism presupposes an absolute, and it is this authoritarianism that deconstruction tries to subvert. (Lee 26)

Deconstructionism breaks down these hierarchical assumptions by decentering the favored item in each pair. Three steps are involved in doing this: recognizing the assumed hierarchy, reversing the terms, and redefining concepts of authority and subordination so that neither term results as the preferred. Thus, poststructuralism deconstructs the structuralist concepts of opposition and difference by reinscribing the terms of hierarchical relationships. The

effect is an entire reconsideration of culturally defined hierarchical structures at work and a movement into a more gray area, if you will

In Hamlet, for example, Hamlet is the "good," the favored tragic hero; Claudius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are then the "evil." Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, however, decenters Hamlet's role as the favored tragic hero by showing Hamlet to be a callous and quick-to-judge executioner of his childhood friends. In this play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are momentarily given the roles of protagonist, ultimately, to use Derrida's terms, the "center." Thus, for a moment, the hierarchy is reversed. The deconstruction is complete when the "new heroes" are in turn decentered emerging undefinitively as neither good nor evil. Like poststructuralism, deconstruction of a text contributes to plural interpretations.

In addition to the decentering of value assumptions, deconstruction engages the reader in an unconventional way, as Roland Barthes outlines in S/Z. Barthes defines two reader roles: the readerly and the writerly, preferring the latter. In the readerly, the reader acts as a consumer of the text. This is perhaps the way the Modernist text, especially literary realism, is read, based on formalism and new criticism, the favored critical theories of that era. In the writerly, however, the reader actually partakes in the process of writing the text, not literally of course, but to the extent that the text is open to plural interpretations, none of

which are final or conclusive. Certainly postmodern texts are conducive to Barthes's writerly theory. Plural interpretation is almost synonymous with postmodernism, even in the simplest example of the way the word "postmodern" is sometimes hyphenated and other times not.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the tenets of postmodernism is to say that they form a historical period which is characterized by question rather than answer, multiplicity and fragmentation rather than wholeness, inexhaustible signification rather than sign equals meaning, and indeterminate rather than conclusive. Hassan adds to this list "performance and participation" rather than consumption, and "self-less-ness" and "depth-less-ness" rather than "deep romantic ego" (Hassan 169). In regard to this final point, which will be expounded upon in the following chapter, Hassan says, "Postmodernism vacates the traditional self, simulating self-effacement--a fake flatness, without inside/outside--or its opposite, self-multiplication, self reflection. . . . Thus postmodernism suppresses or disperses and sometimes tries to recover the 'deep' romantic ego, which remains under dire suspicion in poststructuralist circles as a 'totalizing principle'" (Hassan 169).

Postmodernism presently manifests itself through a variety of cultural media, including capitalism, literature, art, history, linguistics, architecture, mass media, psychology, and sociology. The term "postmodern" carries its preceding historical period, and writers on this subject

concur that postmodernism does not reject the past, although it differs greatly from it. Ihab Hassan calls this postmodern feature "hybridization:" "This makes for a different concept of tradition, one in which continuity and discontinuity, high and low culture, mingle not to imitate but to expand the past in the present" (Hassan 171). For the postmodern text, "expanding the past," often means multiplying and subverting conventional interpretation by juxtaposing it with the present. And therefore, postmodern text is like the mutant offspring of its preceding generation, distinct in its own right.

Author Authority--Author Anarchy

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is a play about the lives of Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Hamlet. Stoppard's work provides a text of these characters' lives apart from Hamlet, the offstage lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but within the same time frame as Hamlet. In addition, chosen parts of Shakespeare's text exist in Stoppard's play verbatim. The result is two texts: the off-stage roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern given to them by Stoppard, and their originally prescribed roles as seen in Hamlet. For the purposes of this chapter, the scenes that are separate from Hamlet will be called "the pure Stoppard text."

The pure Stoppard text includes scenes in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern interact alone or with the company of the Tragedians. In these scenes, the courtiers are referred to as "Ros" and "Guil." The most outstanding characteristic of the pure Stoppard text is Ros and Guil's exhausting attempt to extract meaning from their roles, and ultimately to identify themselves independent of their roles in Hamlet. A large part of their lives, separate from other Hamlet characters, is spent preparing for and considering the value and integrity of their Shakespearean roles. They are continuously uncertain about what it is they should be doing and how to go about it. In the pure Stoppard text, the

courtiers continuously await information and instruction from one of the Hamlet authority figures.

In Shakespeare's play, Claudius and Hamlet are the most authoritative characters, whose actions largely determine the plot. Claudius gives Ros and Guil tasks to complete; Hamlet exercises his authority by rewriting the letter ordering their deaths. Because of their originally prescribed Shakespearean roles, the commands and actions of Hamlet and Claudius determine the plot of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead in both the pure Stoppard text and the Hamlet text. These authoritative roles form a hierarchy with Claudius and Hamlet in the dominant position and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the submissive. The hierarchy is based on two factors: politics, in terms of chains of power within the court, and text, in terms of protagonist/major character and minor character roles.

In assessing this hierarchical relationship between characters, a distinction will be made between Ros and Guil's behavior in the pure Stoppard text and in the Hamlet text. This will prove that there are in fact two sets of courtiers and two texts strictly juxtaposed, yet subordinate to each other because of this hierarchy. From this analysis, it will become evident that there is a larger hierarchy at work: Shakespeare and Stoppard as authors. The question that arises regarding this authorial relationship is, to what extent is Stoppard confined to and limited by Shakespeare's play when creating the roles of Ros

and Guil?

Throughout this chapter, three hierarchical structures will be examined: Claudius--Ros and Guil, Hamlet--Ros and Guil, and Shakespeare--Stoppard. The first two structures involve inter-character control relationships. Stoppard recreates these hierarchies originally seen in Hamlet and deconstructs them in several ways which will be examined throughout this chapter. A close analysis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead will reveal that Ros and Guil do in fact have a choice of whether or not to submit to the authority of the king and the prince; ultimately, they choose to be controlled. Stoppard provides scenes which reveal this choice of submission. This has the effect of deconstructing the assumption that simply because Claudius is king and Hamlet is prince, they are automatically, and unquestionably authority figures.

The last hierarchical structure, regarding Shakespeare and Stoppard, is based on the assumption that the former holds a monumental position as a playwright, and his text has an outstanding literary status compared to Stoppard's text. Limiting his characterization of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the confines of Hamlet would seem to support this assumption. However, a thorough reading indicates that the position of both authors as the authorities of their respective texts is undermined in Stoppard's play. The relationship between both texts will be closely examined in order to understand the

deconstruction of inter-character and authorial hierarchies.

To begin with, Ros and Guil are led to question the very meaning and nature of their existence. After the improbable events of the coin-tossing game in Act I, Guil attempts to recall what the first thing was that happened to them that day. Ros replies, "We were sent for. . . . That's why we're here" (19). This is the first recollection they have of the day, and perhaps of their entire lives. The two courtiers feel as if they must move "forward," but they do not have a clue where forward is or which direction to take. Ros is absolutely confused about which way to proceed and which way they came in: "Which way do we--Which way did we--?" (20). Again, it is suggested that they have no past, that their existences are completely dependent upon a textual world(s) where the only things that are certain are the facts that the law of probability is broken and that they have been sent for by a stranger known as the messenger.

This sets the stage of confusion, which characterizes the courtiers' lives throughout Stoppard's play. The postmodern irony lies in the fact that Ros and Guil, as major characters, never resolve this confusion. Charles Russell describes postmodern characterization of protagonists as the "loss of the subject" (56), in "Subversion and Legitimation: The Avant-garde in Postmodern Culture:"

Characteristic of postmodern fiction . . . is the presentation of literary figures as fragmentary, barely

self-conscious creatures who rarely achieve clear self-definition or stable identity. The concept of integral subjectivity is willfully abandoned; instead, characters are depicted as epistemological processes in flux, as transitory loci of shifting, incompatible, and incompletely known desires, fears, events, external forces and systems over which the individual consciousness has little control, but to which it attempts to give temporary, self-consciously improvisational order. (Russell 56)

In Stoppard's play, the context in which Ros and Guil exist is uncertain as are their own self-concepts. An attempt to extract meaning, or give order to their lives in the pure Stoppard text is done in vain.

When the messenger delivers his summons, at the exact point of contact, Ros and Guil enter the text of Hamlet, leaving the pure Stoppard text. At that moment, the courtiers perceive a certain degree of order. Submission to the messenger's command gives them a limited purpose, but a purpose nonetheless. The message is vague and the messenger does not escort Ros and Guil by hand. This, of course, leaves the courtiers alone and confused. Guil ponders, "We have not been picked out simply to be abandoned, set loose to find our own way. We are entitled to some direction I would have thought" (20). The courtiers, without the Hamlet hierarchy, are ineffectual in determining what could be done or what needs to be done next. Ros and

Guil are waiting for a cue from one of the Hamlet characters.

It is not until Claudius and Gertrude request help from Ros and Guil to determine the cause of Hamlet's change that the courtiers' lives are given any substantial meaning. Despite the fact that the king and queen cannot get Ros's and Guil's names straight, the courtiers respond to the request with a clarity and certainty that, up to this point in the play, has not been apparent:

Guil: But we both obey,
To lay our services freely at your feet,
To be commanded. (36)

For the first time in the play, Ros and Guil are given a mission that ultimately orders their lives. In the presence of the Hamlet characters, Ros and Guil are able to respond coherently. More importantly, the courtiers take on a submissive role, placing themselves under the authority of the king and queen. Ironically, their submission is assertive; the way they respond, the form, is articulate and certain, but their intentions are passive.

Immediately after Ros and Guil leave the king and queen, confusion returns. Ros, who now emerges as the character with greater inquisitiveness, questions their unquestionable obedience: "I want to go home. . . . I've lost my sense of direction. . . . We don't owe anything to anyone" (39). Without the authority of other characters, Ros has no sense of direction. "Direction" can be taken in two ways here.

First, consider the implications of physical direction, remembering that earlier the courtiers failed to recall which way they came in. Implicit in physical direction, or the action of moving from one place to the next, is the suggestion of a starting point and a destination. Ros and Guil's starting point, so far as Stoppard provides, is where the messenger sends for them. Physically they cannot make themselves move beyond the controlling confines of Claudius's commands. They wait around for events to unfold.

As they wait, the courtiers ponder their situation given them by the contexts of both Hamlet and the pure Stoppard text. Ros says twice that he wants to go home, and later he asks Guil if things are different at home. Guil replies, "What home? . . . Why do you ask?" (44). If there is a home outside of Stoppard's or Shakespeare's texts, the courtiers cannot physically get there, nor can they conceive of it as a tangible place.

Guil tells Ros that they must follow instructions until "events have played themselves out" (40). Here "direction" indicates directions set up by and given by other characters, and/or author(s). Guil says,

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--it's like being given a prize, . . ., or compensation for never

having had one. (40).

The text, as a play, is self-referential. The "logic at work" is the textual construction itself. Thus, the reader recognizes the fact that Guil is a character to be manipulated by an author or authors, as the case may be, and such manipulation defines direction. The direction that is absent for Ros would seem to be a stage direction adapted to or in conjunction with the text of Hamlet.

In Stoppard: The Mystery and the Clockwork, Richard Corballis explains that "coherence [in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead] is evidently dependent on the presence of some member of the Hamlet cast" (Corballis 41). Immediately before Gertrude and Claudius make their first appearance in Stoppard's text, Guil tosses a coin and it turns up tails. Finally the "supernatural" forces repressing the law of probability are lifted. After the king and queen leave, Ros and Guil prepare to confront Hamlet by play-acting the situation, but the acting turns into a word game, and the word game becomes a labyrinth of confusion until Guil finally asks, "What are the rules?" (44). Hamlet crosses the stage and order is restored. Guil finally gets Ros's name right and exclaims, "Rosencrantz!" (44). His partner answers equally confident, "What!" (45). The stage direction explains that Hamlet exits, and triumph dawns on Ros and Guil (45). The courtiers are well aware that they achieve clarity and certainty, and they describe their triumph over confusion as

"clever," "natural," and "instinctive" (45).

For this brief instant, Hamlet gives meaning to the courtiers' lives. His presence automatically forces Ros and Guil into their originally prescribed Hamlet roles. And for the first time in Stoppard's text, Ros is called by his full name, given by Shakespeare. Once Hamlet exits the scene, Ros and Guil are alone again and disorder returns. Automatically the action is back in the pure Stoppard text.

The Hamlet hierarchy, Claudius and Hamlet, offer Ros and Guil a mission which provides the lives of the latter with meaning. The courtiers accept the offer by actually choosing to submit to the Hamlet power figures in Stoppard's play, but not necessarily in Shakespeare's. In other words, the reader does not perceive Ros and Guil's mission in Hamlet as a matter of choice; the question of choice or motive is irrelevant. But Stoppard clarifies this role of choice by taking Ros and Guil outside the scenes of Hamlet. Because the courtiers choose to submit, they are in effect in control. Choosing is active, and the courtiers decide to let the Hamlet power figures give order to their lives by not seeking an alternative. They are well aware that other choices could be made, but are incapable of conceiving of them. Stoppard does not give them an out, and he does not endow them with the faculty to act; the courtiers can speculate and consider, but are powerless to make a move that would ultimately alter the text of Hamlet.

Ros and Guil miss their chance to change their fate perhaps most of all because they are aware of a text, expectations, and the "logic at work." They believe that they are an integral part of a system of order. In act two, where the courtiers anxiously await their next encounter with the Hamlet cast, Ros suggests that perhaps the group have "trampled each other to death" (60). Guil explains that this could not possibly have happened:

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. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles: at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost. (60)

Ros's suggestion is one that would change the plot of Hamlet and change the courtiers' own fate. If the Hamlet crew were trampled in Stoppard's play, then Shakespeare's presence would be obliterated. The characters identified as Hamlet characters would simply become historical Elizabethan figures, rather than Shakespearean characters. According to Guil, this possibility is preposterous because the "wheels" that are set in motion are in fact the plot elements in Hamlet. Because of his awareness of the text as a body of events and characters (wheels in motion) that give precise structure to a determined time frame (having their own pace), Guil becomes

like a reader or an audience. He has specific expectations, almost as if he knows how the plot will develop, in the same way that a twentieth-century reader of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead more than likely knows the plot of Hamlet. The courtiers, resurrected into the twentieth century via Stoppard's text, have a certain degree of knowledge and expectation of what will unfold, similar to the reader, who approaches Stoppard's text with literary assumptions also based on knowledge of Hamlet.

In addition, Guil is aware that he and Ros are "condemned" to the text. Whether or not they have the opportunity to cease participation is irrelevant because the texts entrap the courtiers, with the exception of their own spontaneity. Ros and Guil's spontaneity is a large part of the pure Stoppard text, and the courtiers value it as being the only facet of their identity which is autonomous from Hamlet. Guil speculates that if their spontaneity was in some way prescribed by the Hamlet hierarchy, then they would certainly be more lost than they are. In a sense, the courtiers can order their lives or at least place a value on their existences separate from Hamlet; they recognize the separateness of the two texts. Ironically, Guil fails to realize that his spontaneity is also limited by and centered on the plot of Shakespeare's play.

By the final act of the play, Ros and Guil are on the boat to England, and they realize that there is nothing left for them.

Their part in the plot is ended in both Hamlet and the pure Stoppard text. Guil contemplates the situation from beginning to end:

Our names shouted in a certain dawn...a message...a summons...There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said--no. But somehow we missed it. (125)

These are Guil's last words. Stoppard places the final responsibility for the courtiers' fate into their own hands, not Hamlet's. The effect is that Hamlet's power is undermined. Yet, the pure Stoppard text, although separate from the Hamlet text within the play, complies with Shakespeare's plot. The courtiers' choice ultimately has to accede to Shakespeare's text.

William Babula points out that "script is destiny" (Babula 279) for Ros and Guil. By this he means the script of Hamlet; Ros and Guil are trapped within texts by the authorship of Shakespeare and Stoppard. Similarly, Claudius and Hamlet ultimately exercise their control via authorship: Claudius writes the letter ordering Hamlet's death; Hamlet rewrites the letter ordering the deaths of Ros and Guil. The letter goes through three channels of authority: Claudius, Ros and Guil, and finally Hamlet. The first and last channels are dependent upon authorship, on the written word. Similar to Babula's "script is destiny," the final written words in the letter, as a text within both texts, is destiny.

On the boat to England, Ros and Guil practice what they

will say when presenting the letter to the king. Once again doubting the meaning of their existence, they struggle to justify the purpose and validity of their message. Ros reads the letter as he play-acts the king of England:

Ros (efficiently): I see...I see...Well, this seems to support your story such as it is--it is an exact command from the King of Denmark, for several different reasons, importing Denmark's health and England's too, that on the reading of this letter, without delay, I should have Hamlet's head cut off--!
(109).

After Ros opens the letter his lines are spoken "efficiently;" order is restored with the written commands of Claudius. Claudius exercises his authority through the written word, fating Hamlet to death by using Ros and Guil as vehicles to fulfill this fate.

At this point of awareness, however, authority is put into the hands of the courtiers; again they have the opportunity to act and to choose. Ros and Guil are aware that they are about to make a choice. Ros, faithful to his character note in Stoppard's play, feels a sense of responsibility to his "friend" Hamlet: "We're his friends. From our young days brought up with him" (110). But this justification, Guil points out, is merely a paraphrase of Claudius's words in Act I:

Guil: You've only got their word for it.

Ros: But that's what we depend on.

Guil: Well, yes, and then again no. (110).

The final line suggests that Ros and Guil must be somewhat discriminatory in processing the information given them by Claudius. Guil doubts the word of Claudius, but his doubting, ultimately a matter of elevating the value of one piece of information and minimizing that of another, is what enables the plot of Hamlet to proceed as it is written.

Stoppard, in effect, dehumanizes Ros and Guil by forcing them to rationalize emotional response because the implications of Ros's humanism could, if acted upon, alter the course of events in Hamlet. Thus, it is decided: the courtiers re-seal the envelope, choosing not to act, which in effect keeps Claudius's authority intact.

The final channel of authority the letter passes through is Hamlet. In Stoppard's play, Hamlet overhears the courtiers' discussion of the letter, which forces the prince to take action. While Ros and Guil sleep, Hamlet rewrites the letter, ordering their deaths instead of his own. Ros and Guil never return; they are presumed to be dead. The title of Stoppard's play says that they are dead, and in Hamlet, the prince tells Horatio that he rewrote the letter telling the king of England that upon receiving the note "He should those bearers put to sudden death, / Not shriving-time allowed" (46-47 Vii 89). In both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Hamlet, it is announced that the courtiers are dead.

For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, the inter-character hierarchies are largely a result of the presence of two texts and two authors at work, more than any given characterization. After looking at the inter-character power structures, it is necessary to consider the larger authorial relationship between Stoppard and Shakespeare and the implications it has upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.

Stoppard's characterization of Ros and Guil, although separate from Hamlet, begins at the same point in the courtiers' lives where Shakespeare begins. Although Stoppard freely creates the off-stage lives of Ros and Guil, he limits their characterization to the confines of Shakespeare's text. According to Leslee Lenoff, Stoppard, unlike Shakespeare, invests Ros and Guil with "distinct" personalities. Yet, both courtiers "blindly follow the path set out for them, which ultimately they believe to be both predetermined and immutable" (Lenoff 46). This path, of course, leads to their deaths, as it determined by Hamlet and ultimately by Shakespeare. Lenoff concludes that although Stoppard assigns personalities to Ros and Guil, their "final destiny is determined by Shakespeare" (Lenoff 46).

Not only are Ros and Guil's characterizations framed by Shakespeare's play, but their minor-character quality established in Hamlet is maintained. In Stoppard's play the courtiers are major characters with minor character status.

The courtiers are the protagonists of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, but their identities are often interchangeable. Ros and Guil's roles in Hamlet are so trivial that a distinction in character is not made between the two. Stoppard does nothing to remedy this in his play, and, according to Tim Brassell, he refuses to give them the "complex and lavish attention that 'heroes' traditionally receive" (Brassell 39). It is not accidental that Brassell puts "heroes" in quotes. "Hero" is part of the language of Modernism. From a critical standpoint, the term is not applicable to a postmodern text, except in the way that it is subverted. Stoppard's protagonists subvert the modern concept of the protagonist.

In act one, Ros and Guil get their own names confused when they meet the Player. Ros says, "My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz" (22). Realizing the mistake, he confers with Guil and corrects himself, according to the stage direction, "without embarrassment." Claudius confuses Guil with Ros at their first meeting in the play, and Gertrude fails to see the error, despite the fact that the courtiers apparently have been "brought up" with Hamlet. Even Hamlet mistakenly calls Rosencrantz "Guildenstern." To the Hamlet cast, Ros and Guil are one in the same.

The postmodern text decenters the status of its own protagonists. Stoppard initially gives both Ros and Guil a single character note, which limits them as types; their roles

are not expansive, resulting in two one-dimensional characters. Ros is predictably more hesitant, emotional, and fearful than Guil; "nice enough to feel embarrassed at taking money off his friend" is his character note (11). Guil is more rational, domineering, and speculative; "aware," but not panic-stricken is his character note (11). Ros is the one who nearly begins to cry in act two when Guil tells him to shut up and in act three after Guil chastises him for never saying anything original. Guil seriously considers the implications of improbability in act one, and in act three intellectualizes reasons for not intercepting Claudius's letter to the king of England.

With the progression of plot, however, neither Ros nor Guil develops as a round character. Similar to being trapped within the framework of Hamlet or being restricted to the confines of the boat, the courtiers' emotional and intellectual growth is limited. To use the Player's words, Ros and Guil are "always in character;" they end in the same arena of confusion in which they begin.

Differentiating Ros and Guil, however, is dependent upon a close reading of the text, and sometimes a rereading of it, in order to distinguish these single discriminating character notes. Perhaps an audience would have a slightly easier time of it with the help of visual, physical differences. The effect of this on the reader is mixed; on one hand, the reader sympathizes with Ros and Guil as two separate individuals, but on the other, the

reader struggles to differentiate the two. This deflates the reader's expectations of traditional heroes, or even modern antiheroes. Ultimately, Stoppard resurrects Shakespeare's minor characters as two postmodern "nonheroes."

Stoppard is both a reader and critic of Shakespeare as well as a twentieth-century author. His spontaneity as he wrote, similar to Ros and Guil's as they exist outside of their Hamlet roles, according to Ronald Hayman, was "circumscribed by the impossibility of making Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do anything that could not be contained within the framework of Shakespeare's plot" (Hayman 41). Implicit in Hayman's conclusion is the suggestion that Shakespeare holds the dominant position in the authorial hierarchy. However, a close examination of the text shows that a single author never emerges as the final authority,

Working backwards, Shakespeare's treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is less than sympathetic; the sympathy in Hamlet is with the young prince who is the tragic hero. Hamlet does not feel remorse for rewriting the letter ordering Ros and Guil's executions:

They are not near my conscience; their defeat
Does by their own insinuation grow.

'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites. (V.ii 90)

The prince's assumption that Ros and Guil know the contents of

Claudius's letter upon boarding the boat to England is unwarranted; there is no textual evidence to support Hamlet's premise. In an interview conducted by Gordon Giles, Stoppard explains that he chose to write about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because of this assumption: "I see them [Ros and Guil] much more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocents rather than a couple of henchmen, which is the usual way they are depicted in productions of Hamlet" (Stoppard 20).

Tim Brassell points out that Stoppard "redresses this balance of sympathies in favour of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" (Brassell 39). Stoppard manipulates the balance of sympathy via authorship. Obviously, by elevating Ros and Guil to major characters, protagonists, the reader's sympathy shifts. In the twentieth-century play, Ros and Guil are major characters with minor character status who are victimized and controlled by minor characters. Ros and Guil are entirely dependent upon the Hamlet cast for direction and meaning, perhaps even more so in Stoppard's play than in Shakespeare's; they are trapped on and off the Hamlet stage in a world characterized by confusion.

Despite this, both critic and author seem to ignore the fact that in Stoppard's text, Ros and Guil are in fact privy to Claudius's plan. This is information not given in Hamlet; in the Shakespearean play, Ros and Guil's guilt is assumed, but in Stoppard's text it is confirmed. Stoppard fills in the gap in Hamlet by having the prince overhear the courtiers reading

Claudius's letter. In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet takes the letter from Ros and Guil as they sleep, but it is never indicated how he in fact knew that a letter existed. Perhaps Hamlet's suspicion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as servants to a corrupt king is enough to cause him to search the sleeping courtiers; this is an assumption the Shakespearean reader must make, but it is not conclusive.

Stoppard acts as both critic and author by pointing out this flaw and creating a latent text of Hamlet. In view of this, it seems that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead works to support Hamlet. Stoppard creates the scene which fills in the Shakespearean gap, thus exercising authority, but does so in such a way that maintains the reader's Shakespearean assumptions about Ros and Guil. However, Stoppard does not recreate a situation conducive to reader sympathy for Hamlet.

William Gruber notes that Stoppard's play is not merely an example of "skillful joinery" of theatrical texts (Gruber 291). Instead, this critic concludes that the status of Hamlet has reached mythic proportions in this century, and like all cultural myths it is subject to exploration and questioning (Gruber 296). This is exactly what Stoppard does. In an interview with Gordon Giles, Stoppard himself explains that Hamlet is "part of a sort of common mythology" (Stoppard 19). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead stands in the same relation to Hamlet as The Last Temptation of

Christ does to The New Testament; the Stoppard play offers an interpretation of the monumental Hamlet, a single explanation of the human behavior that leads to the concluding events in Shakespeare's play, not definitive and not final.

The Shakespeare myth is challenged, according to Alan Sinfield, in that "the 'tragic hero' is displaced from the centre of his own play and the substitute protagonists (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) achieve no heroic control of themselves or their destinies" (Sinfield 131). Nothing is done to reestablish the prince's hero status, and Ros and Guil let the audience down as well. At this point, none of the characters are particularly reliable; none emerge as heroes because postmodern literature completely subverts the reader's Modernist assumptions of what a hero or an antihero is. Ros and Guil are created from beginning to end as nonheroes, and Hamlet's tragic hero status is foiled, leaving him as a nonhero as well.

By the end of both Stoppard's and Shakespeare's plays, the ambassador states that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. In Shakespeare's text, the courtiers' deaths are relatively insignificant among the corpses of nobles, especially Hamlet himself. As the protagonists of Stoppard's play, their deaths are still not terribly important since their lives were not given significant substance throughout the play. However, the text deconstructs the statement "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead" in two significant ways, which, in

effect, cause the reader to consider or reconsider Ros and Guil's death a great deal more than in Shakespeare's play.

First, death is a matter of theatrical technicality; in the theater, death is but another performance, as Stoppard's Player points out:

[Death] is what actors do best. They have to exploit whatever talent is given to them, and their talent is dying. They can die heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly, charmingly, or from a great height. . . . I extract significance from melodrama, a significance which it does not in fact contain. (83)

It is this melodramatic death which audiences believe in, according to the Player, more so than actual death. If melodramatic death is not the only type of death the audience is prepared to believe in, then it is at least the more memorable.

By the third act, the Player explains that in the tragedian's experience "most things end in death" (123). Certainly this is the case in Hamlet, and Rosencrantz and Guilenstern Are Dead. Bloody, dramatic deaths are performed on stage, but Ros and Guil are decapitated somewhere offstage. This scene is not provided in Stoppard's play; thus, on the basis of Stoppard's Player's interpretation of audience belief, perhaps the courtiers are not in fact dead as it is perceived in a physical, clinical way. There is no physical evidence that the two are dead because their deaths

are not staged in either text.

Again Stoppard acts as critic by suggesting that Ros and Guil's executions do not take place in Hamlet. In pointing this out, the reader's assumptions are undermined. Ros and Guil fail to return, which is perhaps death in a textual way; their roles have ceased. Without an author providing action and dialogue, there is no life, no character. Guil, disagreeing with the Player, defines death ironically and precisely as it will happen to him and Ros:

The fact of it [death] is nothing to do with seeing it happen--it's not gasps and blood. . . . 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)

Guil is saying that death is not melodramatic representation, but instead the negation of presence. It is an "exit," he states, a theatrical negation. Guil is unaware of the theatrical implications he imposes upon his definition of "real life" death. He cannot extricate himself from the theatricity implicit in his position as a character in a play.

Shakespeare's reader believes in this "textual death" because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cease to exist in Hamlet. But through his text, Stoppard, as a reader of Shakespeare, seems

to be saying that all theatrical death, whether it is melodramatic as in Hamlet's death or textual as in the courtiers' deaths, is ultimately representation manipulated by authorship and theatrics. It is also dependent upon the audience's ability to believe. Overall, the Player's and Guil's explanations of what death is and is not force the reader to reconsider whether or not Ros and Guil are in fact dead at the end of Hamlet. Amidst the confusion produced by the pirate attack is it not possible that somehow Ros and Guil get lost in the shuffle?

In a broader sense, Stoppard's play deconstructs the belief that Ros and Guil are dead by using the ambassador's announcement as the title of his play. Paradoxically, Stoppard's protagonists are dead before the play even begins. Immediately, this assumption is put into question because Ros and Guil are alive and well on Stoppard's stage, and they speak twentieth-century English. The courtiers are resurrected into the present even though they are trapped within the Elizabethan context. Stoppard exercises ultimate authority by immortalizing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern similar to the way Hamlet is immortalized by Shakespeare.

The authority of both authors is juxtaposed within Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead in the same way the two texts exist within the play simultaneously. A single author as the ultimate controlling force of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is never distinguishable, perhaps most of all because each text exists in a separate context. If

Stoppard "rewrote" Hamlet, then there would be no Shakespeare. Likewise, if Stoppard wrote a text about Hamlet, it would be merely criticism.

Guil's insight about life on the boat, on another level, works as a metaphor of the Stoppard/Shakespeare relationship, and can perhaps explain the freedom and the restrictions the pure Stoppard text is subject to:

I like the way they're [boats]--contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all--the question doesn't arise, because you're on a boat, aren't you? Boats are safe areas in the game of tag...the players will hold their positions until the music starts. . . . Free to move, speak, extemporize, and yet. (100-101)

The chosen parts of Hamlet, along with the pure Stoppard text, compose the whole, which is the parameter that determines Ros and Guil's existence.

Implicit in Guil's observation that there is no question as to which way to go is the presence of a controlling force. The boat is in motion; it is on a course and directed by somebody. Within the confines of it, a passenger is free even though he cannot alter the course (Lenoff 45). The chosen text of Hamlet in Stoppard's play is similar to the boat in that it predetermines the fate of Ros and Guil. Stoppard is free to work only within this textual limitation.

On another metaphorical level, Lenoff points out that "in a

similar way, man follows a predetermined course starting from birth and moving steadily and invariably towards death" (Lenoff 45). If it is considered in this way, then the boat enroute to England is a metaphor for the cycle of life. Thus, Stoppard's characterization of Ros and Guil in the pure Stoppard text is limited by the very nature of life which is predetermined by some deity or by nature itself. If this is the case, then there is no single dominant author, but rather, an external dominant force.

The rest of Guil's comments about the boat are also significant:

We have not been cut loose. Our truancy is defined by one fixed star, and our drift represents merely a slight change of angle to it: we may seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass, a short dash here, an exploration there, but we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact-- that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England.

(100-101)

The "fixed star" could again be Hamlet because of its monumental quality and, according to Gruber, its mythic status. Along these lines, the freedom to move about, given the courtiers in Stoppard's play, is finally restricted by Shakespeare's play: the "immutable fact." The "immutable fact" within Stoppard's play, whether a metaphor for the plot of Hamlet, or the nature of life,

inevitably leads to death, whether simply the word "death" or physical death.

By considering the boat as a metaphor for human mortality one could likewise propose that the presence of Hamlet in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is not in fact the authority to which the latter text conforms. Instead, Hamlet is the vehicle by which Stoppard's play considers human mortality as it has been predetermined by an indeterminate, omniscient authority. There is no deity present in Stoppard's play, but Hamlet seems to represent one.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is not simply a nostalgic, theatrical collage put together by a single author, Stoppard. The play actually devalues authorship with the presence of two authors. Shakespeare's play is deconstructed by Stoppard who chooses particular parts of that text, keeps them linguistically intact, but makes them look absurd. The reader's assumptions about Hamlet are questioned in Stoppard's play through the creation of Ros and Guil's lives off stage Hamlet. Finally, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead deconstructs Hamlet by questioning what theatrical death is. All of this undermines Shakespeare's authority as author. On the other hand, Stoppard's pure text cannot exist on its own because it is confined to the plot of Hamlet. The result is that neither play and neither author rises to an authoritative position. The concept of

authorship as defined by Modernism is completely subverted.

Alan Sinfield observes that both texts within Stoppard's play undermine modern concepts of authorship as well as thematic expectations:

Formally, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead may seem to offer the radical undermining of ideology that we associate with a Brechtian alienation-effect. In that effect, no discourse is allowed to become established as simply dominant, as the natural and self-evident way to think about the action. The audience is denied the secure relationship with the text that characterises the process through which ideology normally normalises itself; the activity of language and ideology, in making the world rather than reflecting it, comes into view. Stoppard's play seems to present a double alienation-effect, for it disrupts the experienced audience's relationship with the text of Hamlet, and disrupts also its own surface by playing incessantly with audience expectations of character and narrative. (Sinfield 131)

This is precisely the effect of Stoppard's play. The reader is in fact alienated by the deconstruction of traditional assumptions of Hamlet as well as expectations of characterization and plot in the pure Stoppard text.

Neil Sammells explains that Stoppard "elevates to a position of unwonted dominance the play's [Hamlet] own

continual questioning of the nature of art, its own thoroughgoing awareness of the degree to which life and action are conditioned by the forms we have adopted to make it comprehensible" (Sammells 38). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is a postmodern text that carries with it its own literary baggage, in an attempt to question the very nature of itself, and the baggage, as art. Finally, as Sammells explains, it is this self-reflexive questioning that comes into dominance, rather than characters or authors, which completely decenters modern assumptions of art.

Words, Words

In the pure Stoppard text of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, the tragedians' dumb show is perhaps the largest body of physical activity that takes place in the entire play. The stage direction calls it "mime," action without discourse or language:

The mime. Soft music from a recorder. Player-King and Player-Queen embrace. She kneels and makes a show of protestation to him. He takes her up, declining his head upon her neck. He lies down. She, seeing him asleep, leaves him. . . (77)

As this sequence of actions is performed silently on stage, the Player simultaneously explains to Ros and Guil the purpose of mime. The reader grapples with the fact that the dumbshow is the play within Hamlet; and both Hamlet and The Murder of Gonzago are the plays within Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. All three texts are brought together at the point in Stoppard's play where the Tragedians perform the dumbshow.

The activity portrayed in the show is ultimately the activity from which Ros's and Guil's existences are given meaning. In addition, the dumbshow, purely as part of the Hamlet text within Stoppard's play, creates the tension which moves the plot along. "Activity" is the important word here because in the rest of the pure Stoppard text, language and sign manipulation

function as action; discourse between Ros and Guil or the Player, Ros, and Guil materializes as the plot itself, rather than the delineation of physical activity. Language turns back on itself as the subject, rather than the vehicle through which a tangible, action-oriented context is provided.

In the non-action scenes of the pure Stoppard text, poststructuralist linguistic features underscore the context of disorder. Discourse between Ros and Guil is often in the form of word games involving deconstructing metaphors, sign replacement, rhyming, and puns, all of which the courtiers engage in in an attempt to order and make sense of their lives. Self-conscious word games and play on words are an attempt to manage chaos, and they compose a substantial part of the action.

Related to the context of disorder, Ros and Guil's coin-tossing game initially sets the stage for the entire play in terms of their disordered world and their efforts to manage chaos through discourse. The play opens with Ros and Guil playing a coin-tossing game in which the scientific laws of probability have ceased to operate. Guil has tossed ninety-two coins all of which have come up heads. The coin-tossing game is dependent on a set of finite rules, rules that have been fixed long before the time of this particular game. The rules are broken, leaving absolute disorder. Fixed assumptions, even scientific assumptions, can no longer be counted on as operating givens from which contextual variants may occur. Thus, in the initial scene,

a given foundation (here the scientific law of probability) is immediately undermined, determining contextual variants nonetheless, but setting a anarchical stage. And it is this initial activity, delineated by stage directions that vary only slightly and do little to advance plot, which lays the groundwork for the linguistic activities that follow.

As the courtiers realize that the law of probability is not working, they try to restore order to their world by considering possible explanations. These explanations, sometimes philosophical in nature, involve manipulation of words and an almost mathematical sequencing of concepts. Guil says,

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. And since it obviously hasn't been doing so, we can take it that we are not held within un-, sub-, or supernatural forces after all; in all probability, that is. (17)

At first, Guil concludes that the law of probability will be a given under "natural" circumstances, and because the law of probability is not in effect presently, there are "un-, sub-, or supernatural" forces operating. But given

further thought, and deciding that "the scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear," Guil concludes that it is probable that under un-, sub-, or supernatural forces the law of probability will not be a factor. Therefore, probability is working. Yet, Guil undoes his original postulation and ultimately devalues it by saying that since probability is in fact operating (because it is probable for probability not to work under certain odd circumstances) he and Ros are not in un-, sub-, or supernatural conditions.

In other words, first probability is not working because heads keep turning up; next, probability is working because there are unusual circumstances; and finally, because probability is now working, even in a secondary way, the circumstances are no longer unusual. To decipher Guil's faulty logic the reader is forced to reread the passage, to separate it into parts similar to a mathematical equation, and then reconstruct it:

1. ninety-two heads = no probability
2. unusual circumstances = probable no probability = probability
3. probability = usual circumstances

In Guil's interpretation of the coin-tossing phenomenon, diction is complicated by his inability to choose a single prefix for the word "natural." Diction is pluralistic; word choice becomes word choices and a self-conscious replacement of

signifiers. Guil includes all variants, "un-," "sub-," and "super-," each time he uses the word "natural." Each of these signifying prefixes is used to refer to the condition caused by the breakdown of probability, but a single prefix for the word "natural" is never chosen. There is not a single word to signify the state of nature or not-nature inherent in the breakdown of the laws of probability; thus, there is no closure, no completed unit of meaning, and finally, no explainable order.

Similarly, the fixed linguistic laws of structuralism are undermined. A coin is like the structuralist sign in that there are two parts or two sides to a single coin: heads and tails. Likewise, a sign is composed of the signifier and the signified. Both coin-tossing and the sign operate under certain rules of order; the coin-tossing game is dependent upon the laws of probability; the sign is dependent upon a one-to-one relationship between a linguistic act and a concept, and it has meaning because of its difference from related signs ("I" is "I" because it is not "you," rather than "I" is "I" because it is not "orange").

Yet in the confusing, almost non-communicative dialogue between the courtiers, relational difference is not inherent in signification. Later in Act I, after the courtiers are briefed by Claudius and Gertrude, the two once again attempt to make sense of their roles. Linguistic exercises are implemented in doing so, and it is here that Ros and Guil use unrelated signifiers to signify the frustration and insecurity

created by their unclear roles:

Ros: I'm out of my step here--

Guil: We'll soon be home and high--dry and home--

I'll--

Ros: It's all over my depth--

Guil: I'll hie you home and--

Ros: out of my head--

Guil: dry you high and--

Ros: over my step over my head body!--I tell you
it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a
depth, stepping to a head, it's all heading to
a dead stop-- (38)

Twentieth-century figures of speech--over my head, high and dry, out of step, coming to a head, halting to a dead stop; over my dead body--are deconstructed. These figures of speech, intact, are ultimately metaphoric groups of signifiers signifying a particular condition. Because of common usage, the grouped signifiers are related and meaningful. But here, the chain of signifiers in each of the four figures of speech is rearranged, relocated in the metaphorical chain, and finally, reinscribed and combined into the other deconstructed figures of speech. The results are new groups of unrelated signifiers, unrelated to the extent that they are linked in uncommon ways. These regrouped metaphors do not resolve the courtiers' confusing situation.

The deconstructed figures of speech work as linguistic

plot, instead of conventional action. Again, the pure Stoppard text is largely limited to language activities, most of which the courtiers engage in in an attempt to establish meaning and order. But there is also a playful element behind the courtiers' linguistic games. Allen Thiher, author of Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction, explains that "behind parody, behind the play against language lie these urges to create other games, physical games that engage language in its material as well as its conceptual being" (157). Language manipulation, for the sake of manipulation rather than signification and ultimately meaning, materializes as the substance of action and plot in postmodern fiction. Language itself functions as content, rather than romantically and subtly blending into a fictional context.

The basic tools to work with in creating language play are finite, ultimately signs themselves and rules of grammar. However, unlike Saussure's chess board metaphor for language, wherein there is this finite rule system but an "indefinite number of rule-bound permutations" (Thiher 79), postmodern literature is not limited by the particular rules of the game. To extend Saussure's metaphor into poststructuralist terms, the chess board and the playing pieces always remain the same and each game is unique, but the rules that determine movement no longer exist. Therefore, Ros and Guil's playful deconstruction and reinscription of figures of speech break the rules of structuralism by separating the metaphorical chains which compose

a sign and then scrambling the pieces together with others to create a new unrelated and unconventional metaphorical chain. This linguistic activity is a self-conscious effort, requiring knowledge and understanding of the original figure of speech.

Thiher's point about word play within a fixed rule-bound system seems almost tailor-made for postmodern drama, particularly for Stoppard; but although he discusses works from Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, he never mentions Stoppard. In his chapter, "Play," Thiher refers to word play in fiction as the author's "two-edged sword," similar to two sides of a coin: writers "attempt to revolt against fallen discourse at the same time they feel compelled to accept the play rules that prescribe what kinds of games can be played in the chaos" (158). The very act of deconstructing language, whether it be through punning or missed conversation cues, is in fact a recognition of the finite rule system language is governed by, as well as a revolt against it. Thus, in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, the use of language self-referentially in discourse becomes a sub-text of the play, one that is highly self-conscious.

In postmodern literature, the element of self-consciousness can also involve characters' awareness of their roles as characters and recognition that they are in fact fictionalized constructs whose lives are determined by the written word via author. For Ros and Guil, every move is determined or predetermined by either the text of Hamlet or the pure Stoppard text. In both instances, words determine action, movement, and

order.

For example, in Act I, after the courtiers are instructed to determine what ails Hamlet, they attempt to practice a question/answer game. This game involves role playing: one of the courtiers role-plays Hamlet, the other plays himself. But the courtiers are not able to decide who will play whom, and it is long into the dialogue before they decide who will play Hamlet. In their frustration, Ros asks Guil, "What are you playing at?" (41). Guil replies, "Words, words. They're all we have to go on" (41).

Ultimately, their role playing is dependent upon the construction of questions and the projection of answers based on extremely limited contextual information; thus, their game is largely reduced to the manipulation of words that are not part of a particular context, rather than manipulation of contextual facts regarding Hamlet's condition. Ros and Guil are entirely aware of the vehicle through which their existence is maintained. This vehicle is of course a script in which any delay in action, which is usually the case in the pure Stoppard text, produces self-conscious, sometimes desperate moments of play.

The feeling of desperation is further apparent in Guil's repeated play on the line "Give us this day our daily bread," from the Lord's Prayer. Throughout all three acts of the play, in the midst of disjointed conversation, Guil exchanges various words for "bread." The first instance takes place

after the courtiers' initial encounter with Claudius and Gertrude. The courtiers are trying to make sense of the day's events, beginning with the ominous summons from the messenger, continuing to the point where the king and queen switch their names. In an anguished cry, Ros exclaims, "Consistency is all I ask!" (39). Guil replies, "Give us this day our daily mask" (39).

Guil's response breaks conventional conversation codes because he fails to respond appropriately to Ros's exclamation. Instead of directly responding to the urgency signified in Ros's sentence, Guil plays on the sound of the word "ask," rhyming it with "mask." Communication here is determined by auditory response via rhyme, rather than the content evident in the chain of signifiers.

Discourse rules are broken and redefined because communication is determined by rhyme rather than connotation or denotation of words: "The play metaphor offers the possibility of wresting rules of the game from the welter of competing discourses, truncated languages, and totalitarian codes . . ." (Thiher 157). The seeming non-reason of Guil's response is on one level purely self-conscious play, and on another, an appropriate response given the perplexing context. Conventional discourse can be thought of as a message/response dichotomy, one in which meaning is derived. For example, when two people meet after having been apart for some time, conventional discourse might begin with one person saying,

"Hello. How are you." The response from the second person might be, "Hi. I'm doing well, despite this rain." The message sent by speaker one has been appropriately responded to by speaker two since the question asked was directly answered and the completed exchange of signification proves to be meaningful. Ros and Guil clearly do not communicate using this kind of conventional discourse. Thus, meaning and value in relation to plot and content are not determinable.

Despite the fact that discourse expectations are not met, Guil does not entirely ignore Ros's desperation. He answers it in a secondary way. The line from the prayer, subverted as it is, is still in fact a request or a plea to a higher order, presumably a controlling order, one who will resolve the chaos. This plea, in the context of prayer language, emphasizes the absence of an iconic center. There is no conventional God present in the play, and Stoppard, who metaphorically resurrects Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from their death in Hamlet, fails to create a stable context for them in their roles as major characters.

The choice of the word "mask" is significant to the extent that Ros and Guil are characters in a drama, which draws attention to the fact that the audience of the play is watching a performance done by actors whose roles are written and are under the direction of others. Thus, the play calls attention to itself as a work of fiction.

Throughout the remainder of the text, Guil plays on and

replaces the word "bread" four other times, each time forming a rhyme. Perhaps the most significant of these replacements is the third, which takes place on the boat to England before the courtiers read the king's letter. Again the context is characterized by fear and the absence of information. The courtiers are for the most part left in the dark about their mission, and Guil says, "Give us this day our daily cue" (102). Common usage of "cue" signifies the giving of direction, which is exactly what Ros and Guil depend on. They are forever waiting for the next cue from Claudius and Gertrude or from Shakespeare and Stoppard. But the cues finally given are predictably vague at this point and always result in the courtiers' attempts to clarify through language games.

Another type of game Ros and Guil employ is the pun. Stuart Sim, author of "Deconstructing the Pun," argues that punning is in fact a conscious attempt, not an unconscious slip, on the part of the punster, at deconstructing signification in discourse:

Deconstruction sets out to subvert what it terms the logocentrist assumptions of our culture and its many discourses, and employs several strategies to realize its objectives, of which punning is one of the most favoured. The work of Derrida and his followers is liberally sprinkled with puns, which are designed to sever the bond between signifier and signified, word

and meaning, on which our discourses crucially depend.

(326)

In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, puns prolong and add to uncertainty. Punning has the "connotations of 'revenge' for a deconstructionist: revenge on the tyranny of logocentricity and its 'system of diverse codes' which restrict and limit the individual in his search for proliferation of meaning" (Sim 329). Conventional chains of signs are disrupted in the act of punning, and the pun is "deliberately introduced into discourse in order to undermine its authority--as well as the authority of those who control it--in an act of cognitive processing" (Sim 329). Punning is an exercise particularly favorable to the postmodern writer because it is purposeful play that multiplies meaning and interpretation.

Punning elicits laughter largely because of its rebellion against conventional uses of signs. The pun is suitable to postmodern fiction because of its inherent double meaning. The activity requires knowledge of the conventional use of a given sign in order for the receiver of the pun to experience the humor. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, puns provide comic relief for the reader, although it is not clear from reading the text if in fact the senders and receivers of puns experience their humor. However, the courtiers are conscious of their double meanings. At the close of Act I, Guil role-plays Hamlet and Ros practices asking questions to determine the cause of the prince's change. Guil, playing Hamlet, has just explained

to Ros that Claudius usurped the prince's right to the throne by marrying Gertrude:

Guil: He [Claudius] slipped in.

Ros: Which reminds me.

Guil: Well, it would.

Ros: I don't want to be personal.

Guil: It's common knowledge.

Ros: Your mother's marriage.

Guil: He slipped in.

Ros: His body was still warm.

Guil: So was hers. (50)

There are actually two texts working simultaneously: the literal text of King Hamlet's murder and Claudius's marriage to Gertrude as a move to gain the throne, and the text created by the pun which signifies the sexual connotations of this move. Looking at the first three lines of this passage, it is clear that the courtiers consider both implications of the line "He slipped in." However, it is questionable whether or not the pun was given deliberately since Ros's response, "Which reminds me," could be taken as a sincere observation or as sarcasm.

Likewise, in the eighth line, "His body was still warm," the pronoun "his" could refer to the late King Hamlet and to Gertrude's hasty marriage, or it could carry on the second text involving sexual connotations. In either case, the pun is "adroitly used to mock the pretensions and

undermine the status of authority figures" (Sim 333). The displaced authority figures here are of course Claudius, Gertrude, and Shakespeare.

The double context created by the pun is similarly created in less pointed discussions between the courtiers in the pure Stoppard text. For example, toward the end of Act II, Polonius is dead and the courtiers are given new orders. His death scene is not reproduced in Stoppard's play, but it is announced to the courtiers by Claudius, who requests Ros and Guil's help: "Go seek him out; speak fair and bring the body into the chapel. I pray you haste in this" (86). Claudius's request, here taken out of the context of Hamlet, is notably vague, which in fact it may be, in both plays. The emphasis in Stoppard's play is on the lack of information given the courtiers and the resulting disorder. Ros and Guil again play with words, creating double meanings and subverting conversation mores, in response to Claudius's request:

Guil: Well...

Ros: Quite...

Guil: Well, well.

Ros: Quite, quite. Seek him out. (Pause.)

Etcetera.

Guil: Quite.

Ros: Well. Well, that's a step in the right direction.

Here the play is on the words "well" and "quite."
"Well," as an adverb, signifies something in a good or proper manner: rightly, excellently, skillfully, satisfactorily, fortunately, abundantly. Also, it can signify with reason or courtesy, as in "I cannot well refuse;" completely, fully or quite; and finally, intimately or closely, as in, "I know him well." As an adjective, "well" can signify conditions that are satisfactory, prosperous, advisable, desirable, free or recovered from infirmity (Webster). The list goes on. "Quite," according to Webster, also an adverb, signifies completely, wholly, to an extreme, to a considerable extent.

In the context of the passage, however, the word "well" seems to signify an idiomatic pause in the courtiers' discourse, a pause for consideration and perhaps question regarding Claudius's request. The ellipses following the word "well" strongly suggest this by denoting the omission of logos and connoting thought process. However, Ros responds to Guil's thoughtful "well" unusually, by uttering a thoughtful "quite," which is again followed by ellipses.

The dictionary definition indicates "quite" as an exchangeable signifier for "well." Hence, Ros's response is more an example of pure language manipulation, minus contextual reference. In other words, Ros replaces Guil's signifier "well" with "quite." This is not the conventional way readers expect characters to use the language, similar to the rhyming play described earlier.

Next, Guil says, "Well, well." As an idiomatic expression, "well, well" can be said in response to an amazing, outstanding, or unusual situation or spectacle; it can be re-stated as, "look at this..." Guil could be saying this in response to the news of Polonius's death and his given task to seek out Hamlet and bring the dead body to the chapel. But this possible chain of logic produced by the signifier "well, well" does not progress in a logical way since Ros responds, "Quite, quite." Ros simply plays the repetition game, instead of forming a logical, linear pattern of communication.

Guil then utters a single "quite" that is followed by a period, a closing, finishing punctuation mark. Ros returns with "Well," punctuated in the same way. However, both utterances are heard as if they are spoken by the same person as a single response, "...quite well," which creates another possible combination that is conventionally known. "Quite well" is a common response to a question of condition when in fact that condition happens to be favorable or above average. Of course, "quite well," as a response is dependent upon each word being in its proper place in the signifying chain; it would not make the usual sense if it were said, "well quite." Although the courtiers get the order correct, they verbally separate it: one word for each speaker. The emphasis is on these particular words themselves rather than Claudius's request. Thus, word manipulation becomes content.

Finally, Ros uses "well" in a conventional way, in the last line of the quotation. Here he uses it as a word that indicates a conclusion of some sort has been drawn: "Well, that's a step in the right direction." Although Ros uses "well" typically, the conclusion he draws is unfounded and unstable. What is a "step in the right direction?" Perhaps he is referring to his processing the request to seek out Hamlet. The word "direction" carries on the whole self-referential subtext of Ros and Guil as actors waiting for direction. So the entire passage is rich in terms of random word manipulation, but lacks content cues related to plot.

Only two lines of contextual information are given inbetween the word play: "Seek him out" and "etcetera." The first line indicates exactly what the courtiers have determined to be their mission from the information given by Claudius. "Etcetera" vaguely replaces the second part of their mission, bringing Polonius's body to the chapel. Of course their mission is not specific. In part, this mission would create action-oriented plot, and it would fulfill the prescribed terms set by Hamlet. The contextual plot of Hamlet becomes irrelevant, meaningless, and laughable and is replaced with absurd word games that ultimately delay conventional action.

Beyond the level of humor created by each of these word-play incidents is a latent philosophical commentary on the conventional rule-governed language system as we know it and alternative rules for it. Stoppard's Player displays the

most vivid awareness of the language system, and he interjects his philosophical thoughts regarding it throughout the play.

In Act II, while the Player oversees the mime version of The Murder of Gonzago, Ros and Guil act as curious spectators. The content of the mime is meaningful to the rest of the Hamlet cast and to the Tragedians, but not to the courtiers. Perplexed by the absence of discourse, Guil asks, "What is the dumbshow for?" (77). The Player explains, "Well, it's a device, really--it makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible; you understand, we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style" (77).

By the time it reaches Stoppard's play, The Murder of Gonzago has been rewritten three times. First there are Shakespeare's historical sources of the play within the play; second, the biographical lines Hamlet writes into the text; and finally, the new lines Stoppard adds, involving two spies. The Player practices without the written and re-written scripts, and the dumbshow acts as yet another text of The Murder of Gonzago. It is an action-only interpretation which relies on the images produced by the combined scripts rather than the particular language of these scripts.

The Player comments, with certainty, that the dumbshow allows the action itself to be more comprehensible. Even though the action is pre-determined by the written word, he is valuing

action over language. He is ultimately saying that the scripts, the written texts, are less comprehensible than the action itself; discourse and dialogue confuse matters, rather than clarify. Language fails the genre of drama, and the irony is that by the time The Murder of Gonzago reaches Stoppard's play, it has been re-written and manipulated by Shakespeare, Hamlet, Stoppard, and now the Player.

The Player contends that we are "tied down" to a language that is "obscure." First, the written and spoken language is binding rather than liberating. Second, it is unclear and vague. Thus, the word games the courtiers have put so much effort into throughout the entire text are in vain, if such games are employed to clarify circumstances or find some semblance of meaning in their existence. Therefore, the vehicle the courtiers engage to access their roles is as meaningless as the roles themselves. The Player points out that there are "languages" or modes of communication, namely action, which are more effective in terms of comprehension, and perhaps given the context of Hamlet, emotional stimulation.

It could be argued that Stoppard's Player attempts to undermine the value of language by calling it "obscure," but instead, he re-assesses the value-laden position language holds. He cannot undermine the value of language simply because it is the written word within scripts which is his livelihood. For the Player, language is the "double-edged sword," to use Thiher's terms; the Player rebels against it, but depends on

it as well. In his commentary quoted earlier, the player rebels against it by deconstructing linguistic value assumptions in three steps:

1. Recognizes linguistic logos as the preferred means of language communication (logocentricity).
2. Boldly accuses linguistics of failing at the very job it supposes to do so well, thus removing it from the preferred position in the logocentric hierarchy.
3. Relies on the images created by signifying chains of words via action and the dumbshow, rather than the words themselves.

Deconstructing the value of language depends upon a recognition and use of that very language (step 3). The Player does not opt to ad-lib, or spontaneously create a drama; he would be out of a job if he did this.

The Player's insight, Ros and Guil's punning, and the various other linguistic games in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead do not restore order to the courtiers' lives in the same way action does to the lives of the other Hamlet characters present in Stoppard's play. The written word is not necessarily a vehicle through which absolute meaning is derived, nor are conventional language rules which govern signifying chains in discourse absolute:

Deconstruction, as it has come to be called, refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and shows how deeply

such logocentric or incarnationist perspectives have influenced the way we think about art. We assume that, by the miracle of art, the "presence of the word" is equivalent to the presence of meaning. But the opposite can also be urged, that the word carries with it a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning. (Hartman vii-viii).

The absence or multiplicity of meaning in the written word is suggestive in itself. Language is not devalued in postmodern fiction because it is so thoroughly manipulated that it in fact becomes a sub-text to the fiction. Postmodern fiction exposes the language's latent potential: the repressed, unconventional chains of signification which exist outside the common rules of discourse which state that meaning is determinable through linear progressive chains of signification.

Thus, with linguistic games as postmodern plot, language becomes not only the vehicle through which the fiction materializes, but the essence of fiction itself. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is as much a play dealing with the text of Hamlet as it is a metaphor for language itself. "Literature can have nothing to do with anything that lies outside the game space of language, simply because there are no rules for how to play these games beyond language, at least not available to literature, which is a play of language within language. Yet language is world, the play of the world, which leaves no small room for a playground" (Thiher 159).

Conclusion

The difficulty of literary periodizing remains evident, particularly when authors reject classification, as is the case with Stoppard. Unlike the Modernist writers, who make a clear and steadfast attempt to label themselves separate from their predecessors, postmodernists are far less deliberate in their effort to be part of a "time." In addition, the tenets of postmodernism, as determined by the fiction itself, reject the kind of finality which literary periodizing imposes. Regarding plausible interpretations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Stoppard himself says "anybody's set of ideas which grows out of the play has its own validity" ("Ambushes" 6).

Critics and academics can certainly make strong arguments for classifying Stoppard's plays as Theater of the Absurd, Existentialist, Beckettian, and the like, because elements of each of these do exist in the plays. However, as exemplified by the subversion of hierarchical orders, intertextuality, and linguistic features in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, substantial features from within the text place it into the context of postmodernism; and this context has been observed and written about by critical thinkers from a variety of fields. Simard writes that "Stoppard's dramatic canon evinces a distinct postmodern theory:" (70).

His vision is humanistic, but objective, and

rather than being a pessimistic statement about the fragmentation of modern life, his plays celebrate multiplicity. In thematic scope, his works range throughout postmodern philosophy and aesthetics, exploring not only the manifestations of possible choices, but their roots as well. . . . By creating characters who embody aspects of belief and possible choice, isolated in their own subjective perceptions of reality, he dramatizes the conflict of ideologies, reflecting the postmodern obsession with ideas. (70)

Throughout Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, the courtiers continuously form ideas and analyses out of scraps of information. They expand on small pieces of data, such as in Act I when the courtiers vaguely hear music from the Tragedians. This single sound provokes Guil into an extensive metaphor on the nature of perception and reality (21). Another example is in Act II, when Ros discusses death and a child's first realization of mortality. In this instance, Ros begins to draw an analogy using a Christian, Moslem, and a Jew, but he abandons this analogy for a few lines and picks it up later, never finishing it (71-72). In both of these examples, and several others throughout the text, the ideas are generally concrete in terms of logic. However, they are often episodic, metaphorical leaps which encourage multiple readings because they do not entirely fit

the mould of comic relief, absurdism, or tragedy, all of which are more easily discernible within a text. The ideas are not physically accessible, which again promotes the postmodern feature of non-action, language as plot.

The Tragedians and the text of Hamlet are largely responsible for what limited conventional action there is in Rosencranntz and Guildenstern Are Dead. And Hamlet is well-suited for a postmodern pastiche because of Hamlet's indecision, the implications of the play within play and its self-referential potential, and the inherent hierarchies formed by the court of Denmark which Stoppard subverts.

All of these features contribute to the play's postmodern perspective. And although postmodernism, as a recent cultural and literary epoch, is subject to scepticism from strict Modernist readers, it is essential for critics and academics to take into account those of its features which do not fit into a previously indoctrinated classification. Postmodernism does not appear to be a fleeting fad because, as the theorists observe, it is international in scope, and it crosses over into a variety of cultural aspects.

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