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Eng 345-01 Shakespeare

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10/10/20

### Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Versus the World

In Tom Stoppard's film, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the overarching theme of existentialism and free will in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is given new depth. *Hamlet* famously explores these themes through the character of Hamlet and his mediation between the ghost of his father and the other characters of the play. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* explores these same themes through Ros and Gil's interaction with the world itself. The setting of the film is given a character of its own that seems at once apathetic and malicious. The emotional connection the audience is able to have with each situation and character reimagined, while offering similar conclusions as the original play, creates varying degrees of intensity and urgency to the story in both play and film, and its broader questions asked about the act of being alive.

In the film, Hamlet is shown to be truly mad, from the perspective of Ros and Gil anyway. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* depicts the madness of Hamlet (both the character and the play) by way of placing the viewer in a situation confusing and potentially reminiscent of a state of "madness" from Hamlet's perspective. For example, when Ros and Gil transition from their strange conversation with the Player in the woods to the castle, watching Hamlet and Ophelia from under some fabric, the viewer is momentarily disoriented, wondering at the scene's suddenness. It only takes a moment to realize that Ros and Gil, too, are disoriented by the shift in scenery.

Hamlet's struggles with free will are rooted in the fact of his existence and privileged birth. He wonders at the fact that everyone turns to dust after death regardless of their station in life and what possible meaning there could be in living (5.1). Similarly, in the opening scene of the film, Guildenstern wonders at his existence and whether memories comprise one's identity, or the choices one makes. The fact that both of these are taken from him makes him unsure of everything except the companionship of Rosencrantz. Their identities are so entwined that they share names, confusion, and responsibilities. This blank slate of existence given to Ros and Gil allows them the freedom to pursue some kind of meaning from their situation. Where the other characters are bound to their memories, identities (insofar as class and responsibilities are concerned), and charged with navigating the situation at hand, Ros and Gil may suffer no repercussions from their actions (or all of them. It's Schroedinger's consequences).

Hamlet states that the way one is remembered in a play is the way history will remember you. I can only assume the audience is meant to take this as an address, making me wonder at the representation in the play and who the characters might be referring to in Shakespeare's time. In addition to this speculation, the statement is applied to his uncle's standing as king, with Hamlet orchestrating legal slander (Act 2, Scene 2). The film seems to take this thought and apply it to Ros and Gil in a very literal way, since they cannot remember anything before their coin flipping at the beginning of the play. Not only is the play (or film in this case) the way history will remember Ros and Gil, it's the way they remember themselves and everything else.

Hamlet seems to go through the play in a state of mild confusion; so much so that the reader may find themselves questioning whether Hamlet might be acting this way on purpose. This is especially apparent when the reader of the play is given insight to his ability to reason through complex ideas of heroism and cowardice, but seemingly not normal conversations (Act

3, Scene 1). The nonsense he spouts in his conversations with Polonius and the act of not remembering past actions seems deliberate and at odds with his private attempts to organize his thoughts (Act 3, Scene 1). His deliberation over what the morally correct course is to take is only complicated by questions such as whether or not the mission appointed to him was given by the ghost of his father, wrongfully murdered, or by a devil in the shape of his father, coaxing him to wrongful murder of his own (Act 2, Scene 2). The film *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* takes a cue from the uncertainty of the play and embraces it, creating confusion and ambiguity among the characters of the story as well as that of the viewers. If the characters have no idea of their intentions or fates, it's difficult for the audience to logically predict a story's outcome as spectators.

The audience's ability to predict a story's path is reliant upon some exposition about the setting and situation. *Hamlet* follows a drawn out storyline where Hamlet spends most of his time worrying about what could be to the extent that it paralyzes him from taking any necessary action. The readers are able to follow Hamlet's slow thought process and that of those around them as they struggle to make sense of the situation they've found themselves in (with a few exceptions). The famous tension of the play is gradually built as the characters are shown grappling with decisions and unknowns. Questions go unanswered for most of the play; some of which are never answered. That is: the plot drives the play as much as the characters do.

In the film, however, the characters struggle to make sense of their surroundings and their mental states, which are equally as influential as the plot which is arguably thin anyway. The world itself is disorienting and doesn't seem to follow the same rules of the world outside the film, that we think it should. Ros is constantly drawing the viewers' attention to this fact when he experiments with physics in a series of experiments in the background of Gil's attempts at

reasoning. Because the viewer is offered such an abbreviated and ever-shifting look at the characters' situation, they are kept in a state of constant uncertainty. What happens next is anyone's guess, characters and audience alike. This empathy the film provokes from its audience completes the illusion of madness, assisted by the clash of humor and tragic drama which pulls emotional opinions to their extremes.

Emotionally, the audience of the film has little to ground them except that Ros and Gil are similarly disoriented. There are scenes that make fun of word play, such as the "Questions" scene where they hurl questions in a game similar to tennis. The comic exchange gives the audience a sense of relief comedy brings, but also presents more questions that remain unanswered at the end of their game as they continue into the next scene. There are moments throughout the film that are presented as a continuous shot, both confusing the timeline of the story and allowing the audience to maintain a close connection to Ros and Gil as they experience the same events together.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is an emotionally immersive rendition of Hamlet that gives its audiences a closer experience to the questions and meaning of the original text by presenting a relatable experience. It's through this connection that *Hamlet's* original meaning is carried more dramatically to its audience. Whether or not we have a say in anything may be largely dependent upon our status at birth. Being able to control our small piece of the world might give us some satisfaction, but Hamlet, Ros and Gil are all asking us whether satisfaction is worth living for. That death is unknown should not be feared when so much of the world is unknown and navigated by us all every day. Hamlet's famous deliberation about the courage it takes to die is contrasted beautifully with Gil's questions about whether there is a choice in the

matter. Can a thing be courageous if you don't choose to do it but instead are forced? Gil doesn't seem to think so.

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