Tom Stoppard Essay, Research Paper

Tom Stoppard: A Critic of The Modern Age

Tom Stoppard is one of the twentieth century’s most interesting and creative playwrights. He uses his art form to criticize society’s inability to handle the thought that we are governed by chaos. The modern world has created fate as an excuse for not doing anything to shape or change our outcome. Stoppard uses his plays as a mirror held up to society, showing his audience the ridiculousness of leaving everything up to fate.

Tom Stoppard is a contemporary playwright living in Great Britain. He was born in 1937 and produced his first successful play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead in 1966. His more recent works include Travesties and Arcadia. The setting for these three plays are vastly different; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern taking place at the time of Shakespeare, Travesties set during World War I and Arcadia taking place in 1809 and the present day. Yet, in all three settings, Stoppard created modern characters to reflect modern attitudes, and most specifically, modern flaws. In each case he shows that the characters representing modern men will readily believe that their future cannot be changed and that they are not responsible for their own acts. He uses different characters in vastly different circumstances to make and criticize this same point.

In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Stoppard cleverly removes the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the play of Hamlet, extends Shakespeare’s caricatures of them and makes them modern. The play is now about how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern present the viewer with an image of modern attitudes. They never perceive any kind of order in the universe. To them everything is completely random. On the other hand, the Player represents the epitomy of a person in denial of chaos. To him everything is set in stone, even death.

In Travesties, Stoppard returns to the theme of chaos and how we react to chaos. He does this through portraying James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and the pre-Soviet Union Lenin, all famous men, through the eyes of one Henry Carr, a common man who wanted desperately to be famous, but who never succeeded. After interactions with these three famous minds on the subject of the role of the artist in a chaotic world, Carr decides to leave well enough alone in the world and accepts the societal view often the best thing to do in the world is nothing, a view that Stoppard strongly disagrees with.

In Arcadia, Stoppard decided to not only hold a mirror up to modern day society, but also to show comparisons between the modern-day society and the society of almost 200 years ago. His thesis is that in the 1800’s we were a society of “doers”, but now we are a society of “talkers.” The “talkers” cannot accept the complete unpredictability of chaos and therefore decide that fate rules all, while the “doers” are willing to take control of their situation. This difference between acceptors of fate and those who believe that they are in control of their destiny is the mirror that Stoppard once again holds up to his audience.

Throughout the course of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Stoppard mixes three different sets of characters that are crucial to Shakespeare’s Hamlet. These groups are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the troupe of players called the Tragedians and the main cast of Hamlet. The cast of Hamlet only speak in Shakespearean language and all of their lines are taken from the text of Hamlet. These characters voice Stoppard’s opinion on how people should be. They have a purpose. Although Hamlet’s purpose may be to avenge his father’s death, it still gives a purpose to his life. Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and the Tragedians speak in modern English and represent Stoppard’s comical opinion of current attitudes and beliefs. The troupe of players is the same troupe that perform the play written by Hamlet as a mime of the events that transpired at the court leading to Claudius’s rise to the throne. They also periodically act out mimes for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, such as the duel scene at the end of the play, as a way of showing what is happening in Shakespeare’s play simultaneously with Stoppard’s.

Both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are shallow characters who are bored and cannot seem to make their lives meaningful. They look to others to give their lives meaning, Rosencrantz turns to Guildenstern, and Guildenstern usually turns to whomever he meets on the street. To Rosencrantz, life is all about luck, or chaos. He never perceives any kind of order nor does he care about probability. It doesn’t matter whether what happens to him is good or bad, just so long as it is something to comment upon. From the opening scene of the play, Stoppard is holding a mirror up to modern society through the lack of purpose for his two main characters.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s question game was much less of a conversation than it was a way for Stoppard to point out the existence of chaos in that everything is questionable. An example of this is while they are waiting for Hamlet, Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz, “Are you deaf?” Ros: “Am I dead?” Guil: “Yes or no?” Ros “Is there a choice?” Guil: ” Is there a God?” Ros: “Foul! No non sequiturs…” (Act I, pg. 33). To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, there are no certainties, just random occurrences of which they take no notice and just shrug off as “normal.” These two hit on important topics ? death, choice, God ? but not with the intent of actually discussing these topics, only as a way to pass the time until Hamlet appears so that they can fulfill their duty to the king. These questions are not questions that would be asked by a character like the Player. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ask these questions because of their pure, blind acceptance of chaos. The fact that these two characters keep track of the score, as though it were a tennis match, for at least three pages, only adds to the pitiful portrayal of modern attitudes that is characteristic of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.

The Lead Player is the third main character. He is the opposite to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The Player believes in predeterminism and, instead of believing in chaos, he has thrown the entire theory of chaos out of the window and has decided that everything has been prewritten by, of course, the writer who has cast us all in his worldwide play. That ultimate play is completely finite and unchangeable. Everything has been written, even death. In fact, the Player’s favorite thing to act is a death. He is a firm believer that death is an integral part of the play and that a play is meant to span an entire life, therefore it is not over until all those marked for death are dead. The Player’s certainty that everything is predetermined leads Guildenstern to realize that he and Rosencrantz’s total acceptance of chaos has led them to a disastrous end. He says to the Player in a heated argument, “I’m talking about death ? and you’ve never experienced that. And you cannot act it…But no one gets up after death? there is no applause? there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that’s ? Death?”(Act III, pg. 96). The Player’s naivety to the fact that he is in reality (or at least the reality that exists on the stage in Stoppard’s play) and not in his little play of life leads him to, in fact, be much happier in his false knowledge that there is no chaos and that everything is pre-set. The knowledge that there is chaos is the root of Guildenstern’s unhappiness and therefore, in Stoppard’s opinion, the root of society’s problem with dealing with the chaos.

In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Stoppard shows two ways that modern society has reacted to the knowledge that we live in constant chaos. One is to completely accept it and disregard all of the laws of probability and the other is to completely deny chaos and believe in predeterminism to it’s fullest. Another of Stoppard’s comedies, Travesties, shows the ways in which some of society’s most famous and influential people dealt with chaos. Stoppard does this by once again holding a mirror up to the audience and creating a burlesque out of the characters of Tristan Tzara, James Joyce and Vladimir Lenin. The main character in Travesties is Henry Carr, a no-name who happens to run into all three of these famous people. The play is told through the memories of the aged Carr recalling his times with these three minds and his failed attempts to become famous himself.

Tristan Tzara, the founder of the Dada movement, fully accepts chaos. In fact, he went as far as to make chaos his art form by cutting up sonnets or writing random words, throwing them into a hat and drawing them out one by one to make a new and completely meaningless piece of “art.” Tzara has fully accepted chaos and wants to use chaos through art to make society more comfortable with the idea that nothing is truly definite. Tzara is in no way trying to find order in the chaos. He shows his strong conviction for his art throughout the play, saying one time that “The difference between being a man and being a coffee-mill is art.” (Act I, pg. 29). This ties in with Stoppard’s seeming comparison of modern people to machines.

The Player from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is also a vibrant artist who is always in character and always in costume. Neither he nor Tzara know the boundary between art and real life. The Player is always acting and Tzara is continually cutting up Shakespeare’s sonnets and other bits of poetry and randomly re-arranging the words, despite the fact that the poem no longer makes any sense. The difference between these two characters is the type of societal views which they represent. The Player represents predeterminism while Tzara joins Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in accepting the chaos and doing away with the laws of probability. Tzara is not portrayed as a bumbling idiot as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are, but rather as a rare intellectual who has no problem accepting chaos, something that most people in society have trouble with. Stoppard uses his caricature of Tristan Tzara also to point out that a balance is needed between completely accepting chaos and not accepting it at all. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Stoppard portrayed the two extremes. Tzara is Stoppard’s way of showing his audience that society is starting to get the right idea, but that Tzara and his Dada movement are a little off-target.

Joyce and Lenin have different attitudes towards chaos and how society should deal with it. Both men recognize that society has a problem dealing with the thought that nothing is for certain. It is for this reason that both men seek to bring order to the chaos. Joyce feels that the role of the artist is to bring order to the chaos through art, or at least to have art be an orderly element of a chaotic world. Lenin felt that the role of government was to bring order to the chaotic society through strict governing.

While criticizing modern society through the ideals of his characters, Stoppard also makes a mockery of the men themselves. One example of this is a scene in which Tzara makes fun of Joyce’s famed encyclopedic knowledge without Joyce seeming to notice. In this exchange, Joyce asks Tzara, “Describe [Hugo] Ball by epithet.” Tzara: “Unspherical. Tall, thin, sacerdotal, German.” Joyce: “Describe him by enumeration of his occupations and preoccupations.” Tzara: “Novelist, journalist, philosopher, poet, artist, mystic, pacifist, founder of the Cabaret Voltaire at the Meierei Bar, number one Speigelgasse.”(Act I, pg. 38) Joyce is testing Tzara’s knowledge but only seems vaguely interested in what he has to say. On the other hand, Tzara, the king of chaos and non-sequiturs, seems to be reading an encyclopedia to the audience. This overdone lack of interest and use of every form of adjective in the English language makes this scene a commentary on modern society in that Stoppard is pointing out how people in society may go through the motions, but that doesn’t mean that they care.

Stoppard feels that as time has progressed, the very nature of people has changed. People used to take action because they were determined to control their lives and they were either able to see the patterns in the chaos or they were convinced that there were patterns. People now talk about taking action, but they rarely do it. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Hamlet is a man of action, as is Claudius because he killed the previous king to get the throne. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the other hand, represent modern people. They are all talk and very little action. They lack purpose and therefore sit around flipping coins all day. In Travesties, Joyce, Lenin and Tzara are all revolutionaries, while Carr, on the other hand, is your “average Joe.” He represents the vain need of modern people to be famous. His purpose in life is unclear and it is even revealed at the end that he is not the British Consulate, as everyone is led to believe throughout the play. He is just an aid. Henry Carr tried desperately to be famous but failed.

In Arcadia, Stoppard once again illustrated this difference between the people of the past (the “doers”) and the people of the present (the “talkers”). Stoppard portrays the present day characters as shallow people who talk about doing things but never actually do them. He is once again holding a mirror up to the audience.

In the 1809 cast, the two main characters are Thomasina Coverly and Septimus Hodge. Thomasina, a young 13-year old mathematical genius, is portrayed as being too smart for her innocence. At times, she plays the part of the naive little girl. Usually, she pretends to be naive in order to save her tutor, Septimus, from being fired by the lady of the house, Lady Croom, for ruining Thomasins’a innocence by teaching her the meaning of such expressions and “carnal embrace.”It is actually with this lesson that Stoppard opens the play. These two, Thomasina and Septimus, are the active people of this play. They are the true “doers.”

The main characters in the present day cast are all scientists and two of the three, Hannah and Bernard, are historians researching the occurrences at Sidley Park in 1809. The third scientist in the present day cast is Valentine, a graduate student at Oxford who is working on the grouse of populations, i.e., seeing how populations mathematically grow and change in nature. These people talk about doing everything. The audience is instantly able to see the mirror that Stoppard is holding up to modern society through the differences between the active characters of the past and the talkers of the present.

Valentine spends his time either talking about figuring out his grouse and publishing, or being frustrated about the brilliance of Thomasina’s work compared to his inability to see the patterns in his own. Hannah talks about writing another best selling book on the Sidley Hermit which she based on a drawing in the landscape book that Hannah doesn’t know was drawn in by Thomasina as a joke. Bernard talks about proving that Lord Byron killed a fellow poet of the time, Ezra Chater, after panning his book. Not only do none of these characters actually succeed in doing what they originally planned to do, but they never really act on anything.

The societal mirror of Arcadia is once again illustrated in the differences between the characters of Valentine and Thomasina. It is obvious from the start that Valentine is meant to be the modern counterpart to Thomasina. Both are mathematicians working on finding the pattern to natural chaos. The difference between them is that Thomasina sees the pattern at only 13 years old without the help of modern-day computers or even a calculator. Valentine, on the other hand, does not see the order to the chaos of the natural world in his work on grouse and is constantly complaining that there is too much “noise.”

It is Valentine who discovers what Thomasina is really up to in her lesson books. Thomasina is attempting to mathematically represent nature through iterated algorithms, something that only the contemporary mathematicians, over 100 years after Thomasina’s time, began doing. She also understands the second law of thermodynamics, long before it is invented. Valentine is somewhat baffled by what Thomasina was doing because she was so far ahead of her time. Thomasina wasn’t able to finish her work because, as Valentine explains, “there wasn’t enough time before, there weren’t enough pencils.” (Act I, sc. iv, pg. 52) The work that Thomasina was doing without a calculator was so tedious that Valentine feels that a person would either have to have an extremely good reason for doing it, or they would have to be insane.

Valentine, like a typical modern day person, gets hung up on the idea that Thomasina actually existed. This eventually leads him to give up on his grouse. The thought that a thirteen year old gir,l who did not have the technological advantages that he does, could make order out of the chaos drives him to the point of abandonment. This is a comment on modern society’s lack of patience. Valentine is Stoppard’s mirror to show his audience that society is so distracted by the chaos, we no longer have the ability to sift through it. Valentine finally does end up acting on something at the end of the play when he finally accepts the fact that such brilliance as Thomasina’s did exist and decides to finish her work for publication. Even then, the modern day character is falling back on someone else instead of doing something new.

Stoppard is a modern playwright who uses the comparisons of characters from the past and the present to comment on the superficiality of modern people. At the outset, these three plays, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Travesties, and Arcadia, could not seem more different. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is a play full of low comedy and jokes concerning differing opinions on death. The characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are so similar that neither the on stage characters nor the audience can really tell them apart. Even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves can not tell who is who. They are Stoppard’s bumbling modern idiots who fail to see order in the chaos. The remainder of the low comedy of this play comes from interactions with the Lead Player. Unlike Guildenstern, he views death as a vital part of the play, not as the finalistic end of everything. Stoppard is showing the audience the two extremes of modern society, those who, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, completely accept chaos and are willing to throw everything else out the window, and those who, like the Player, are in denial of the existence of chaos. Neither decides to deal with the chaos. Those who completely accepted it became bumbling idiots and those who denied it were living is a fantasy world that was very apparent to the audience.

In Travesties, Stoppard uses the character relationships to create a comparison between people of action and the ordinary people, such as Henry Carr. This time, Stoppard comments that society seems to be on the right track in dealing with the idea that we exist in chaos. Once again, he shows an extreme. Tristan Tzara is an intellectual who has totally accepted chaos and has even made chaos his art form. Through his overdone caricature of Tzara, Stoppard shows that, while Tzara is a very famous and influential person, his ideas were a little off target. Stoppard does the same with his caricatures of Joyce and Lenin, showing that both of these men try to deal with the chaos that they know they live in and try to set examples through creating order out of the chaos. The societal mirror comes into this play in the character of Henry Carr. He wants so desperately to be famous and fails. He finally adapts the modern attitude of doing nothing, the exact attitude that Stoppard criticizes in all of his works. The audience gets the impression that Carr never makes anything of himself because he does not even attempt to deal with the chaos, in one way or another.

In Arcadia, Stoppard created the illusion of two separate plays combined into one. By doing this, he was able to create clear differences in attitude between the 1809 cast and the present day cast. In this way he was able to hold up his societal mirror to the audience in two different ways. First, in the differences between the 1809 cast and the modern-day cast and second through the ways in which the characters of the modern-day cast epitomized modern attitudes. The prime examples of this are the differences between Thomasina and Valentine and the ways in which Valentine’s lack of patience and his willingness to give up on trying to find the patterns in the chaos of nature reflects society’s inability to deal with chaos.

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