

A play within a play:  
metatheatrical  
distinctions between  
actor and character in  
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Metatheatre, a form of self-reflexivity in drama, plays a pivotal role in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Tom Stoppard's parodic version, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Self-reflexivity is conveyed through metatheatrical scenes, or scenes that are staged as plays, "dumb shows", and the extensive commentary made on the mechanics and structural qualities of theatre, in both plays. In the Shakespearean original, the characters participate self-consciously in such instances as the Player's practice speech, Hamlet's instruction to the players and their support in "The Mousetrap". Hamlet also adopts the importance of linguistic expression over physical expression in the theatre. Similarly, in Stoppard's play, the characters literally 'play' with language and reduce it to its bare, communicative purposes. Ros and Guild imitate Hamlet and various other characters obsessively throughout the text and similar production to the "Mousetrap" leaves the pair confused and questioning their existence. Though metatheatrical qualities are prominent in both Shakespeare's tragedy and Stoppard's tragi-comedy, the function is divergent: in *Hamlet*, self-reflexivity is used to cast revenge on Claudius' guilty soul and reveal ultimate Truth, while in Stoppard's parody, the cast fails to recognize Truth and human purpose. *Hamlet* is essentially a play about plays, as it blurs the line between the role of actor and character. Throughout the dialogue there are references made to the constructs of theatre and acting techniques, and most significantly, the inclusion of a 'meta-play', "The Mousetrap" in Act 3. Self-reflexivity uncovers one of the major thematic concerns of the play, the nature of acting and the distinction between acting and "genuine" life. This distinction can be placed firstly in the band of 'Players', a group of actors that participate in the meta-plays production in the larger context of the <https://assignbuster.com/a-play-within-a-play-metatheatrical-distinctions-between-actor-and-character-in-shakespeare-and-stoppard/>

play, Hamlet. This complexity is initiated by Hamlet's request of the Player's famed speech: "I remember one said there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savory, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affectation, but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine...Twas Eneas' tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam's slaughter."(Act 2, Scene 2)Hamlet's description of an aesthetically pleasing dialogue resembles the dialogue that the characters themselves use. This level of self-reflexivity transitions into the 'speech' that Hamlet demands, the 'Murder of Gonzago', the story that is inserted into the play that Hamlet puts on. The story follows similar circumstances to King Hamlet's murder; Prince Hamlet, after adding additional lines, plots to reveal the corruption behind Claudius' actions: "The play's the thing, /Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."(Act 2, Scene 2) Hamlet's intention for the meta-play is rooted in avenging his father's spirit, which categorizes itself as a 'revenge tragedy'. By interacting with the conventions associated with the genre, the play attempts to represent a life outside the theatre. The distinction between man and character continues into Hamlet's speech on nature's ambiguities: "O, there be players that I have seen play—and heard others praise, and that highly—not to speak it profanely, that neither having th' accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably."(Act 3, Scene 2)By discerning between humanity and the imitation of humanity, Hamlet questions his own identity as a participant.

The self-reflexive tendencies of the protagonist present an extended  
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metaphor for human certainty and purpose. Language and choice of diction coincide with the self-conscious elements of both Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays. In Hamlet, words function further than just communicative purposes; words, for Hamlet, represent the dichotomy between speech and act. In the following exchange, Polonius questions Hamlet's relationship with language: " Polonius: What do you read, my lord? Hamlet: Words, words, words."(Act 2, Scene 2)Hamlet purposefully makes no distinction between the words he reads since they fail to resonate with other characters. Instead, the prince participates in conflicts through his extensive vocabulary and reflects on his own sanity as a man and actor through soliloquies. Similarly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rely on word play to produce meaning, in a seemingly meaningless world. However, Ros and Guild regard language with little respect and utilize it in an illogical and cyclical way. The following dialogue between the pair exemplifies the pleasures and pitfalls of language:" Rosencrantz: What are you playing at? Guildenstern: Words, words. They're all we have to go on."(Stoppard, Act 1)As Guild explains, language is the primary way of understanding the world, yet it's complexities and ambiguities leave the characters dumbfounded. Through this struggle with words and linguistic patterns, the play interacts with its own conventions, self-reflexively, to remind audiences that there is no Truth associated with fiction. Stoppard's parodic retelling of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, focuses on two minor characters from the original, meaning the entire play can be considered a metatheatre. The play is framed by the larger context of Hamlet, but details the lives of Ros and Guild and their interactions with theatre and the techniques of acting. Self-reflexivity dominates the text, as it further blurs the relationship between <https://assignbuster.com/a-play-within-a-play-metatheatrical-distinctions-between-actor-and-character-in-shakespeare-and-stoppard/>

speech and act, the actor's life and 'genuine' life. In their first meeting with the 'tragedians', Ros and Guild struggle to understand the role of the play, within the play: "...We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else." (Stoppard, Act 2) The tragedians represent the players the players that Hamlet instructed for his explication of "The Mousetrap", however, these actors are enlisted to play a different story. The passage exemplifies the absurdist standpoint that the actors within the play, which exists within the play, adopt regarding the distinction between life on and off the stage. The tragedians represent a parody of the self-reflexivity that was so prominent in Shakespeare's original drama: the notion of genre and audience anticipation and knowledge. They explain "audiences know what to expect, and that is all they are prepared to believe in." (Stoppard, Act 2) Self-reflexivity, ultimately, is Ros and Guild's downfall, for in Act 3, they fail to recognize their own death in the production put on by the tragedians. As in Hamlet, Claudius responds to "The Mousetrap" by recognizing a flaw in his character, Ros and Guild are meant to perceive a similar message. Though metatheatrical qualities are prominent in both Shakespeare's tragedy and Stoppard's tragi-comedy, the function is divergent: in Hamlet, self-reflexivity is used to cast revenge on Claudius' guilty soul and reveal ultimate Truth, while in Stoppard's parody, the cast fails to recognize Truth and human purpose. Works Cited Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Booth, Allison, and Kelly Mays. The Norton Introduction To Literature. 10th ed. New York: W. W. Norton &, 2002. Print. Stoppard, Tom. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. New York: Grove, 1967. Print.