

Shakespeare's
hamlet:
transformation by tom
stoppard



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How does Stoppard's Transformation of Hamlet reveal a shift in ideology?

Stoppard's transformation of Shakespeare's Hamlet shifts in values and world-view from the original. These changes are a result of the change in context between the two texts. The Elizabethan world-view was that of an ordered universe, where reality could be expressed through language and known law/logic was applicable. On the other hand, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* reflects a more contemporary ideology, where the universe is inexplicable and the audience has no sense of certainty. According to this world-view, language is a confused expression of reality and there is no such thing as a logical existence. It is this difference in context between the two plays that contributes to its changed ideology.

Language serves as the fount of meaning in Hamlet. This is apparent in the confrontational dialogue between Hamlet and Gertrude: Gertrude: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended. Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended. Gertrude: Come, come you answer with an idle tongue. Hamlet: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue. Here, Hamlet is mocking the rhythm and words of Gertrude's reproaches. By echoing the rhythmic structure of Gertrude's language, Hamlet manages to turn the finger of accusation from his own behaviour to his mother's, thus seizing control of the confrontation through his use of language. Hamlet's reaction to Ophelia further demonstrates this point. The sounds of his words on immediately seeing her - "soft...nymph...orisons..." - suggest a gentle feeling towards her. Once Ophelia speaks in the forced, formal tone advised by her father, however, Hamlet appears frustrated that her impersonal language should block any proper communication between them, saying "Are you honest?...

can it be you speaking in so empty a manner?" This reflects the ideology
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that there exists a universal means of communication, an ultimate expression of truths that, if broken down, causes disturbance and chaos. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, language interferes with meaning rather than enhancing it. The repetition that characterises much of the dialogue makes this evident; conversations keep returning to where they started, as here: Guil: Never mind...we'll have it out like a nightingale at a Roman feastRos: You'd be tongue-tiedGuil: Like a mute in a monologueRos: Like a nightingale at a Roman feastGuil: Like a star on a bannerRos: Like a nightingale at a Roman feastThis ping-pong of ideas, where each concept is thrown back and forth, suggests directionlessness and lack of progress. The futility of language also appears in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's frequent alterations of cliches, as shown when Rosencrantz confuses the metaphor "That'll put a stick in their spokes," declaring instead "That'll put a spoke in their wheel" and thereby depleting the statement of meaning. In another instance, Guildenstern states "Certainly not. If you like", contradicting his statement and thus highlighting the subversion of language. The ideology driving this play is based on an arbitrary, confusing world in which nothing is certain. Shakespeare presents the universe as an ordered place, disrupted by "most foul, strange and unnatural" events such as the killing of a king. Hamlet sees himself as a "scourge and minister" whose duty it is to exact revenge upon his father. This purpose of revenge influences his actions to some extent. For instance, he decides not to kill Claudius while his enemy is praying; doing so would cause Claudius to go to heaven, which would mean poor revenge on Hamlet's part. Both Hamlet's and Claudius' actions reflect an awareness of salvation in the afterlife and the purpose of living. The soliloquy in which Claudius states "Try what repentance can...but what can

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it when one cannot repent?" contrasts with Hamlet's declaration that "to kill now...that has no relish of salvation in't." Uncle and nephew inhabit the same moral universe, one to which knowledge and known laws apply. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, however, the universe is unfathomable and disorderly. Coincidence and chance dominate, as in the play's opening coin-tossing sequence in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to change the run of heads - chance alone determines their future. As the Player mentions, "It is written...there is no choice involved." The play has strong fatalistic overtones, the very title implying that it has been predetermined that the protagonists will die. Indeed, the fact that the coins keep turning up heads could be symbolic of the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are destined to lose their heads in the end. The known becomes the unknown in this play, further emphasizing the world's uncertainty. As Guildenstern states, "We only know what we're told and that's little enough. And for all we know it isn't even true...for all anyone knows, nothing is." The men's constant need to check reality, as when Rosencrantz replies "Do I?" to Guildenstern's "We've got a letter. You remember the letter," also reveals the ideology that the human condition is inexplicable. People cannot have knowledge of anything. Stoppard is exposing the inevitable contradictions that occur when two people try to define the same reality. The difference in ideology also appears in the contrasting presentations of Hamlet as a character. Shakespeare's Hamlet is the main focus of the play, depicted as a tortured hero whose initial words "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" convey despair and weariness. The disjointed rhythm and dislocated progress of Hamlet's thoughts convey his inner turmoil, thus instilling in the audience a degree of sympathy for him.

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This sympathy grows as the audience learns of the reason for his melancholic disposition. He presents us with the image of his mother and uncle in bed together, saying " Oh most wicked speed, to post/ With such dexterity to incestuous sheets." Shakespeare's use of sibilance here conveys Hamlet's disgust, the ' hissing' sound perhaps indicative of Hamlet's dwelling upon and fascination with the disgusting. This sympathetic portrayal of Hamlet contrasts with Stoppard's portrayal of a Hamlet deliberately orchestrating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death. This enables Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to appear as pawns, consistent with the ideology that humans are but players in a confusing world. Stoppard constantly makes references to the fact that the men are " summoned," thereby emphasizing their personal insignificance. Shakespeare's Hamlet reveals ideologies about a structured universe in which language is the fount of meaning and logic is applicable to life. Hamlet's dependence on language in order to fathom Gertrude's behaviour and Ophelia's distance, as well as his sense of duty toward revenge, make this point evident. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* reveals the shift in ideology through its subversion of language within a world-view in which the universe is inexplicable. The protagonists' confusion regarding reality, as well as their notion of fatalism and the value of human beings as ' mere players,' make this difference apparent. Ideology changes in Stoppard's transformation of the original play because of its different context and, therefore, the difference in how its characters see the world.