

How identity is deconstructed and lost



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, a dramatic play written by Tom Stoppard, contains numerous allusions to the Bible and Hamlet. These two features provide not only allusions to Shakespeare through the obvious Hamlet references, the plot that we are all actors in this world, and through the rhyming couplets of the Biblical codas, but also give a deeper and more complex meaning to the play. It seems that while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unaware of who they are or where they come from, it is obvious to the audience that they were raised in Christian households through the many codas.

Biblical allusions reappear throughout this play, in the forms of codas but also in the dialogue between the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. There are, in fact, five codas which make a play on the first line of the Lord's Prayer—Give us this day our daily bread—and are formed as rhyming couplets. The first coda, on page 39, states, "Consistency is all I ask, give us this day our daily mask" (Stoppard 39). This coda follows after King Claudius mixes up the names of the two friends and confusing the two about their identities even more. The next coda deals with immortality, "Immortality is all I seek, give us this day our daily week" (Stoppard 45). Here the coda is giving not only an allusion to the Bible, but is discussing the idea of being immortal like a god and receiving a week for each day that passes. This coda is used mainly to reinforce the idea of a loss of time and direction. The third coda states, "All I ask is a change of ground, give us this day our daily round" (Stoppard 93). This coda is alluding to wanting a change in scenery and wanting to sit around and play games all day but not being able to because there are other more important things to do. The fourth coda further extends the metaphor

of theatre and life, “ All I ask is our common clue, give us this day our daily cue” (Stoppard 102). Not only is Stoppard playing on the idea of cues in theatre, but he is also portraying the loss of identity and confusion about how to operate in modern society. For example, each individual puts on a different mask for the different people in their lives and we get our cues about how to act in public from our family and friends when we are younger. The final coda appears on page 114 and states, “ Plausibility is all I presume! Call us this day our daily tune” (Stoppard 114). This coda is questioning the plausibility in all of life and, in particular, the idea that we are all actors and the world is stage. Stoppard mainly uses the codas to express the idea that we are all actors in our own life but he also is questioning many of life’s biggest questions, such as, is this all plausible? Can we expect consistency in life? The use of Biblical references leads to a deeper questioning of perhaps Christianity and the religious world as a whole.

Another use of Biblical references comes from dialogue between the two confused Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. On page 71 the two refer to Saul/ Paul, the man who killed Christians before becoming one himself. Although this allusion is said in a joking manner, it is followed by the depressing idea that no one cares where they are and no one will ever find them. The reference to Paul is dealing with the idea of a change in character, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are changing at this point. They are becoming more aware of who they are and are becoming a little bit less confused as to what they are doing and why. Another allusion is when they discuss the baby in “ swaddling clout”. Clout is another name used for clot as in dirt clot and is referring to reality versus fiction. This allusion is to baby Jesus in swaddling

clothes, but here they are portraying Jesus to be covered in dirt. Although the Bible portrays this birth of Jesus to be awesome and beautiful, in reality he is just a poor carpenter's son born in a dusty dirty place and was more than likely covered in dirt. These allusions give us a deeper idea of the way Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are seeing the world and perhaps as to why they are so confused.

Stoppard strives to relay many messages to the younger generations in this dazzling work about loss of identity and the changes our identity suffers when we are around other people. By using Biblical references as a way to enhance the idea of confusion of the two main characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Stoppard truly makes a point about modern society and the reason why we are all as confused about who we are and why we are here.