

Pinter and stoppard: conflict between reality and illusion



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The contrast between illusion and fact functions as the central focus of countless texts in the canon of English literature. The subject occupies a prominent position in a diverse array of genres and forms, among which is that of the modern drama. *Old Times* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, two classics of late twentieth-century British theater, exemplify the predominance of the conflict between truth and artifice as a topic on the contemporary stage and illuminate the thematic significance of such a subject in relation to prevailing literary thought and more universal statements on the nature of existence and the human condition.

The nature of reality is the ultimate concern of *Old Times*, the script of which is as understatedly menacing as enigmatic as any form in the Pinter oeuvre. The piece eludes simple summarization to such an extent that the author himself, when prompted to describe the plot, offered a mere five words in reply: “. . . it happens. It all happens.” In a somewhat more thorough elucidation, the playwright commented on the cryptic and frequent silences that mark *Old Times* as a product of the Pinter pen, stating that halts in conversation result because “ something has happened to create the impossibility of anyone speaking for a certain amount of time.” The pauses are not superfluous, but arise from the tension that resides below the surface of the lines. In much the same way that meaning is contained in what the characters do not say, import is attached to what they do. Critic Sidney Hoffman notes that, linguistically, the work “ is alternately simplistic (to the level of being banal) and tortured,” and, “ while it has a double purpose, [it] still points toward . . . comprehension.” *Old Times* is a study of battling couples (in both the metaphorical and literal sense), and it is the

juxtaposition of opposites that simultaneously propels the action and creates ambiguity. In the most superficial respect, a synopsis would indicate that very little takes place: spouses living in a remote converted farmhouse receive a visitor, the old friend of the wife, at which point the interaction among the trio prompts recollections of years gone by. However, the parlance is bizarre and unnerving, rife with confessions and allusions, suggesting an abundance of concealed inter- and intrapersonal wars. Homan writes, “ a majority of the critics, sometimes affirmatively, sometimes negatively, found that the “ real” play was below the surface. . . “ between the lines.” A number of interpretations offered by scholars “ stress the act of interpretation itself. Each of the characters is a “ perceiver who distorts,” and, fashioning a world through a private language, “ straining further from reality,” resembles an artist engaged in the “ process of creation.” Two modes of perception and, hence, creation may be in operation: what we see of others and what we insist others see of us.” This is, to a certain extent, confirmed by Pinter’s remark of, “ It is all happening.” The interview between Deeley, Kate, and Anna takes place, and that is all; there is nothing more. “ What we see is what we see.” This straightforward approach to *Old Times* directly relates to the soundlessness that pervades Pinter’s body of work. For him, “ When true silence falls, we are still left with echo but are near nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover over nakedness.” By manipulating language to their advantage, Anna and Deeley, viewed by Elin Diamond as “ dazzling word performers,” can fashion their past and present states of being according to personal preference; they see circumstance and actuality as “ matters of linguistics choice.” Yet the fragility of this tailored history becomes evident when it “ is <https://assignbuster.com/pinter-and-stoppard-conflict-between-reality-and-illusion/>

Kate's narrative, her final speech, that demolishes everything her rivals have tried to establish by verbal fiat. Language here is a double-edged sword that, at length, wounds the players themselves, betraying them because it is "endlessly and hopelessly significant." Words are tools by which it is possible to usher a reinvented past into the now, and thus to alter the present condition of things from what they are to what they, in the minds of Deeley and Anna, should be. Of the real world, "only Kate can live there." The finale further highlights the conflict of pretense and fact as the characters engage in a concluding mime that will, both within and outside of the play's events, cap the performance. After both Anna and Deeley have made unsuccessful attempts to exit the stage, the threesome sits in shadow until a flash of light interrupts the dimness. The sudden brilliance shows Anna lying on the divan, Deeley collapsed in his armchair, and Kate sitting on the sofa in the midst of the desolation. According to one school of thought, the light, "like a photograph in our memories," underlines how the "verbal creativity" at the forefront of the majority of the play has degenerated into silence. The disconcerting quiet that engulfs the scene reminds the audience that the rivalry between the husband and the friend has precluded the potential for "further opportunities for verbal recreation." The architecture of illusion, which Anna and Deeley have skillfully produced from "linguistic choice", has prompted a disastrous end. Only Kate, who has refrained from direct participation in the contest at hand, remains serenely unaffected: "it is Kate alone who sits upright, who does not leave her place on the divan, and who, unlike her husband and her friend, feels not need to try to escape. One observer argues that to be motionless in a mime is to win." Kate's refusal to improvise a past has afforded her a peacefulness that differs sharply from "<https://assignbuster.com/pinter-and-stoppard-conflict-between-reality-and-illusion/>

Deeley slumped, sobbing, humiliated in the chair.” And indeed, “several scholars have found in the mime an address to the audience. Forced to look at the stage in bright light, we are “halted to see how we too lead our lives,” and how there is no victory “for these half-concealed, half-revealed characters” who reflect an image of the spectator.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead devotes even more attention to the examination of artifice and actuality. The very framework of Stoppard’s revision of Hamlet underscores the divergent pull of this antithetical pairing, as the playwright inserts numerous excerpts from the Bard’s original into his modern variation. When observing the episodes from Shakespeare’s tragedy, the eponymous noblemen inhabit the role of the onlooker. The twosome often makes comments regarding their resemblance to a traditional audience. “I feel like a spectator,” Rosencrantz remarks in the first act. This self-consciousness is also discernible in such instances, as when Guildenstern, addressing the pathetic Alfred, employs the phrase, conventionally associated with directors, “We’ll let you know.” Ros and Guil, as they are called in the text, are effectively extensions of the theater-going public witnessing Stoppard’s drama. Many of the speeches specifically address the audience, as when Ros shouts “Fire!”, and then continues by saying, of the viewers, “They should burn to death in their shoes.” The author contrasts the “realistic” duo with the fabricated personages of Hamlet. As Richard Corballis points out, it is important that the elimination of the famous “to be or not to be” soliloquy “robs Hamlet of another chance to communicate directly with his audience,” and thus heightens the sense of artificiality that is imparted upon the Elsinore of Shakespearean invention. In

much the same way, the Tragedians seem, at least initially, to occupy a place in the “genuine” realm of existence: “They get involved in the absurd coin-spinning, complain that they have no control, and join the empty speculation about chance and fate.” However, as the Player himself declares, he is “Always in character,” not so much a real person as a fashioned self. The troupe is in fact representative of something quite contrary to Ros and Guildenstern. The relationship between the thespians and the abstracts of reality and illusion becomes evident when the Player declares, “We’re actors- we’re the opposite of people!” As Corballis notes, a crucial moment in the play comes when Guildenstern, stating, “But we don’t know what’s going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don’t know how to act,” is met with the response from the Player, “Act natural. . .” Thus, though it may have at first appeared that the Tragedians were out of place within Stoppard’s landscape, it quickly becomes clear that it is actually “real” people like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are out of their element in the constructed mirage of the stage. This idea is further realized when the Player states, “There’s a design at work in all art . . . we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies. . . It is written. . . We follow directions- there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.” This world, therefore, “unlike the ‘real’ world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, has form and meaning, and death is an accepted part of its design.” Amidst the uncertainty of the reality in which Stoppard’s viewers languish, however, there is no such simple choreography. The Tragedians emphasize the isolation that defines the plight of Ros and Guildenstern, and thus the plight of humanity in general. In contrast to the predetermined organization

of the theater, there are no guarantees in the brutal puzzle of the mortal condition.

Both *Old Times* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* illuminate a variety of aspects of the conflict, ever present in countless works of twentieth-century literature, between illusion and actuality. The plays underscore the relativity of the nature of existence, and also offer testimony to the prevailing philosophies of modern English writing, illustrating popular approaches to the motifs of life, death, and the meaning of each.