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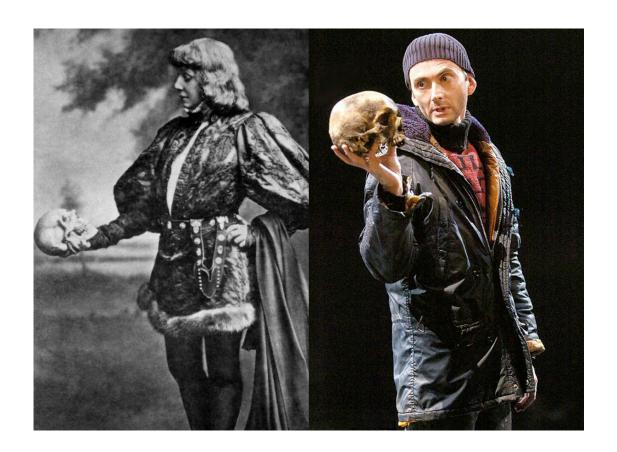
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Shakespeare's *Hamlet* appropriated for the Theatre of the Absurd

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Introduction

In November 1957,[1] at San Quentin penitentiary, a group of actors were getting ready for what seemed an impossible task: they were about to perform Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Martin Esslin described their apprehension as follows: "How were [the actors] to face one of the toughest audiences in the world with a highly obscure, intellectual play that had produced riots among a good many highly sophisticated audiences in Western Europe?" (19). Yet, against all odds, the *captive* audience loved it. One of the prisoners was reported to have said: "Godot is society," another said: "He's the outside" (Esslin 20). The prisoners knew what it meant to be eternally waiting like the characters in Beckett's play, and, as a result of their own experiences, they found a profound meaning that the sophisticated audiences outside the prison walls had been unable to see.

Even though the prisoners loved it, many *learned* critics condemned the play, because it lacked a plotline, clear development and suspense (Esslin 21). Esslin, on the other hand, argues that the play belonged to a new category, namely to that of the *Theatre of the Absurd*, which emerged after the First World War, and could not be judged by traditional measures. Several playwrights were writing similar plays at the time, including Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, yet Esslin stresses that these dramatists did not form part of a self-conscious movement: "Each of the writers in question is an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world" (22). According to Esslin, their works all reflect changes in society at the time, "Their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the

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[1] The original French text, *En Attendant Godot*, was written between 1948–1949. It premièred in Paris on January 5th, 1953. Beckett's English translation premièred in London in 1955.

Western world" (22). At the beginning of the twentieth century, medieval beliefs and eighteenth century rationalism had been rocked by rapid changes in society. There was a sense that certain ideas of order, such as time, logic and social status, which used to be unshakeable basic assumptions, had now been swept away (Esslin 23) and had been replaced by uncertainties and confusion: "[T]he certitudes […] have been tested and found wanting, they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions" (Esslin 23). Everything that people held as supposedly fixed mores and values had been shattered by the World Wars: "By 1942, in the midst of yet another World War, Albert Camus was calmly putting the question why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide" (Esslin 23).

It is no coincidence then that, at a time when Camus contemplated suicide as the only viable option left in a world gone seemingly mad, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603)[2] arose once again into the consciousness of contemporary artists. In Hamlet's famous soliloquy starting "To be or not to be" (Shakespeare 3.1.55), the protagonist voices his thoughts whether suicide might be a solution to his problem. Playwright Tom Stoppard chose to build on these uncertainties by adapting the original *Hamlet*. Written in roughly the same period as *Waiting for Godot*, Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) reflects the same uncertainties about society and its changing values and mores. Though Stoppard's play is radically different from the original *Hamlet*, Stoppard *recontextualizes* Shakespeare's famous play for a modern audience. Recontextualization is the process in which certain stories are rewritten and put in different contexts, which allows adapters to change the meaning of a work (Hutcheon 9). Just as the prisoners at San Quintin brought new meaning to Beckett's play, Stoppard brings new

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[2] The exact year in which *Hamlet* was written is unclear, but it is estimated to have been between 1599–1602. Three version were published, namely: The First Quarto (Q1, 1603); the Second Quarto (Q2, 1604); and the First Folio (F1, 1623). This paper will use the latter for referencing.

meaning to a classical text. Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Theory of Adaptations* (2012), claims that adaptations change with the times and that they are used "to engage in a larger social or cultural critique" (94).

Peter Leithart, in his essay "Hamlet in the Modern Mind," discusses the reception of *Hamlet* in the last two centuries. Leithart suggests that the modernist mindset, which will be discussed in more detail, can be found in *Shakespeare's* original text: "The tragedy of Hamlet reveals to the audience the existential crisis that individuals in Shakespeare's time were confronted with as a result of the Reformation: whether or not to choose Protestantism or Catholicism. It was an existential and politically loaded decision" (1). This loaded decision is reflected in the existential elements in *Hamlet.*

This study will aim to show that, as the values and mores of society constantly evolve, so too do society's approach to, and views of, canonical texts. This paper will determine to what degree radical changes in society around the time of the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd, i.e. the 1950s, influenced Stoppard's adaptation *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Eliot's allusion to Hamlet in his poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917)[3] will be used to trace that part of the evolution from the original *Hamlet* to the *Hamlet* of the Theatre of the Absurd. These texts were chosen to indicate the influence the respective eras had on the texts.

To support this claim, this paper will look at three time periods, namely the period in the wake of the Reformation, the period after the First World War and the period after the Second World War. Through a comparative analysis and a close-reading of *Hamlet, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,* this paper will show that the texts reflect this evolution, whether through the artist's intuition or by design. To provide further

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[3] *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was originally published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in 1915. This paper will use a later version (1917) printed in *T.S. Eliot Selected Poems* (2015).

evidence for this claim, the first chapter will elaborate on theories of adaptations and show in what way adaptations are used to engage in a larger social or cultural critique. It will also discuss the origin and development of Modernism, and the resultant emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd. The second chapter will analyze the chosen texts, showing how *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* adhere to the rules of Modernism and the Theatre of the Absurd. It will also look at Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, showing that this play is a well-made play, and compare and contrast it to Modernism and the Theatre of the Absurd to demonstrate that adaptations reflect changing mores and values in society. The concluding chapter will summarize the findings of the research.

Chapter 1: Adaptation Theory

According to philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, storytelling "is always the art of repeating stories" (5). Similarly, adaptations are the result of stories being retold. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon argues that Shakespeare himself was an adaptor: "Shakespeare transferred his culture's stories from page to stage and made them available to a whole new audience" (2). Similarly, in their book *Adaptations of Shakespeare* (2005), David Fischlin and Mark Fortier underscore this point, saying that "Shakespeare's works have, from their inception, been both the product and the source of an ongoing explosion of re-creation" (1). Shakespeare took existing material from various sources and crafted them into new creations (Fischlin and Fortier 1). Hutcheon explains this process of repetition throughout the ages: "Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change" (4). She argues that, when it comes to adaptations, people tend to desire repetition as much as change (9).

Regarding Shakespeare adaptations, Ben Johnson, English playwright and literary critic, wrote about Shakespeare in the preface to the First Folio in 1623 that "[He was not] of an age,

but for all time" (81). As Shakespeare plays have always been and are still being preformed and adapted, this remark seems to hold true. The ambivalence of the original character Hamlet reflects the existential crisis that emerged in the wake of the Reformation. Both Catholic and Protestant elements are mentioned in the play. The Ghost of Hamlet's father being stuck in purgatory is a Catholic notion, alien to Protestantism. On the other hand, the university that Hamlet and his friends attend, namely Wittenberg, is a Protestant university (McLeod 1). This duality between Catholicism and Protestantism led to an existential crisis, which is reflected in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This existentialism reflected, for instance, in the "To be or not to be" (Shakespeare 3.1.55) soliloquy, is similar to Michel de Montaigne's philosophies. Roland Knowles acknowledges that artists reflect changes in society: "[It is not clear] whether Shakespeare drew directly from Montaigne or whether both men were simply reacting similarly to the spirit of the times" (Knowles 1052). Whether these adaptors acted in concert or were merely individuals inspired by their times, knowing their respective cultural milieu adds immeasurably to the understanding of, and pleasure to be taken in, their work.

1.1 Modernism

To understand the extent of the existential crisis society faced in the 1960s, it is important to understand the stepping stones leading towards this crisis. The existential questions that returned in the 1960s first peaked after the First World War. Society was changing rapidly at the beginning of the twentieth century, partly because of the technological developments and growing population: "Industrial expansion and population growth radically changed the face of the nation's cities. Noise, traffic jams, slums, air pollution, and sanitation and health problems became commonplace. Mass transit, in the form of trolleys, cable cars, and subways, was built, and skyscrapers began to dominate city skylines" (Hirschman and Mogford 1). Urbanization and

immigration were quickly changing society and changing the view of reality. In the aftermath of the ravages of the First World War, the strict and conservative Victorian values that had dominated the end of the nineteenth century disappeared. The Roaring Twenties took over: women discarded their Victorian corsets for the scanty dresses of the flappers. According to song writer Cole Porter at the time, *Anything Goes*.[4] Political corruption, crime and liberal views of sex and drugs became commonplace and acceptable. And if that had not been enough, this upheaval was followed by the Great Depression, lasting from 1929 until the Second World War.

In her article "Writing the War to End the War: Literary Modernism and WWI", Watts argues that the old heroic, valor-laden assumptions about the past no longer matched the post-war reality of the 1920s and that "as the years peeled away and the death toll mounted, bitterness and disillusionment set in" (1). The soldiers' struggle to survive the trenches gave way to a struggle to find new ideologies to help them comprehend their disillusionment in the world and in human nature (Watts 1). In her article, she quotes a German veteran of the First World War to illustrate this jarring, altered view:

> I am young, I am twenty years old; yet I know nothing of life but despair, death, fear, and fatuous superficiality cast over an abyss of sorrow. What do they expect of us if time ever comes when the war is over? Through the years, our business has been killing. It was our first calling in life. Our knowledge of life is limited to death. What will happen afterwards, and what shall come out of us? (Watts 1).

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[4] Though written in an American context, Porter's song clearly illustrates the "shocking" changes of the 1920's: "Times have changed/ And we've often rewound the clock/ Since the Puritans got a shock/ When they landed on Plymouth Rock./ In olden days, a glimpse of stocking/ Was looked on as something shocking./ But now, God knows,/ Anything goes./ Good authors too who once knew better words/ Now only use four-letter words/ Writing prose./ Anything goes." (Porter, *Anything Goes)*.

This question: "what shall come out of us" (Watts 1) ended up influencing Modernist literature. Modernism peaked around the time of the First World War, when all mores and values seemed lost in the chaos of industrialization and the destruction of war. According to Joseph Pearce: "Modernism is a movement in the arts, flourishing in the early twentieth century, which sought to break with the forms and traditions of the past through innovations, such as the stream-of-consciousness [...]. It is, or was, self-consciously cynical, viewing reality, as it perceived it, as an absurdity warranting parody" (Pearce 1). Modernism ranges from the late nineteenth century through to the Second World War and arose due to the rapid changes in society.

The First World War thus left the world frightened and confused, and that, in turn, left its mark on literature. Many Modernist texts lack chronology; instead time seems to be in a loop. There is hardly any description, yet the texts are filled with numerous allusions. The works are often fragmented because of the authors' use of stream of consciousness, reflecting the characters' thoughts, often incoherent, jumbled and thus fragmented. These features demonstrate the "incommunicability of experiences in the modern world" (Hall 1) that the soldiers learned in the trenches of real life. Benjamin in his essay, "The Storyteller", describes these feelings that brought about Modernism: "A generation that had gone to school on a horse- drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body" (Benjamin 1). Benjamin suggest here that society had changed so rapidly, that people were unable to reflect upon their experiences. Ideas about social structure, mortality and religion that had been in place for millennia seemed to fall apart, which led to the incoherent narrative of Modernist literature and the intention to break from tradition.

1.2 Theatre of Absurd

The same features that mark Modernism can be found in what Martin Esslin called "the Theatre of the Absurd" (19). Absurdist theatre arose at approximately the same time as Modernism, but started to decline in the thirties and forties due to "economic and political upheaval" (Hirschman and Mogford 1). The decline coincided with the onset of the Great Depression, a time in which people's main focus was getting food on the table, and there was less focus on theater. It re-emerged in the late 1950s following another cataclysmic war, including a savage European genocide and the devastation left by the world's first atom bomb, and lasted through the seventies. The disillusionment and confusion was even more pronounced than in its first iteration, reflecting the fact that society had gone through yet more changes; nothing seemed to make sense anymore. The existentialism that existed at the beginning of the twentieth century turned from frightened chaos, to a new kind of acceptance. Where Modernists searched for meaning, playwrights in the 1960s playfully accepted that there was no meaning to be found (Easterling 13). Modernism used language as a means to convey that truth was relative; the Theatre of the Absurd argued that it was non-existent.

Esslin writes that some of the themes of the Theatre of the Absurd include the aimlessness of existence and the breakdown of communication through repetitive and meaningless actions (11). In a musical context, *absurd* originally meant 'out of harmony'. Its dictionary definition is: "out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical" (Esslin 23). It is often used as a synonym for 'ridiculous'. Yet, within the context of the Theatre of the Absurd, it means much more. Ionesco described his understanding of the word as follows: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose [...]. Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd,

useless" (Esslin 23). The absurdity of the human condition is therefore the theme of the absurdist playwrights.

The absurdist playwrights, in order to illustrate this absurdity, broke from the existing rules, *rules* that had been laid down, for instance, by nineteenth-century dramatist Eugène Scribe. In 1825, Scribe coined the term "well-made play" (Cardwell 876). Esslin, taking Scribe's *rule* as a baseline, describes the differences between a well-made play and an absurdist play:

> If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these [absurdist plays] have no
>
> story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and
>
> motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with
>
> almost mechanical puppets. If a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is
>
> neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; [...] if
>
> a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of
>
> incoherent babblings (Esslin 21-22).

The lack of plot in the absurdist plays leads to a lack of suspense. According to Esslin, this is an essential difference between conventional theater and the Theatre of the Absurd, namely: action verses inaction. Esslin argues that conventional theater, and the well-made play, always start out "by indicating a fixed objective towards which the action will be moving or by posing a definite problem to which it will supply an answer. In *Hamlet* this question is: "Will Hamlet revenge the murder of his father?" (Esslin 14). Conventional theater will have actions that proceed towards a logical ending, yet the audience does not know how this end will be reached, and that process creates suspense. Contrary to this, in the Theatre of the Absurd, the action does not proceed in a logical manner: "It does not go from A to B but travels from an unknown premise X towards an unknowable conclusion" (Esslin 14). Therefore, the audience cannot be in suspense as to what

the next action will be, since the actions are unpredictable. Thus, the actions do not move the plot forward in a logical manner, but instead supply more information to what the meaning of the play might be (Esslin 14).

Chapter 2: Analysis

Hamlet, one of Shakespeare's most famous plays, is what Scribe would describe as a well-made play. It is considered to be part of what Easterling calls the theater of illusion, tricking the audience into thinking they are watching events in real time (14). Hamlet is confronted with the murder of his father, after which he struggles to figure out how best to act. By the end of the play, he finally acts and kills Claudius. These actions proceed in a logical order, moving from point A to point B (Esslin 14), and end the play with a clear resolution.

By rewriting certain stories, adapters take a classical text out of its original context and place it in another, for instance, into a more modern one reflecting updated values and mores. Hutcheon refers to adaptations as "a kind of palimpsest" (33), because they are often haunted by the original text. The two texts discussed below, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967), illustrate that the texts appropriate many of the same issues as *Hamlet*, yet that they are transformed by context and perspective (Easterling 13). The adapters have taken the existential crisis from *Hamlet*, but changed its meaning. Where seventeenth century existentialism was based on the changes that occurred due to the Reformation, the existentialism in the early twentieth century was based on a decline in religion altogether. This decline in faith was completely shattered by the Second World War and substituted by nationalism and various totalitarian fallacies (Esslin 23). According to Hugh McLeod, the changes of the 1960s were a rupture as profound as that brought about by the

Reformation (1). Adapters are able to illustrate the changing values of society, by taking the theme of existentialism out of the original text and placing it in a different context.

2.1: *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

An important feature of Modernist literature is inaction. T.S. Eliot is a vivid example of the long tradition of authors who allude to Hamlet as an example of a passive character. Hamlet's existential crisis keeps him pondering his choices and stops him from acting. Eliot's poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, not an adaptation but an allusion to *Hamlet*, reflects the existentialism that is building towards the Theatre of the Absurd. Where the Theatre of the Absurd argues that there is no meaning to life, Eliot is still on a quest, searching for meaning. In his poem, the speaker wants to tell the woman he loves how he feels. Eliot uses the modernist feature mentioned above, called stream of consciousness, to illustrate his hesitation, showing – instead of telling – the reader Prufrock's thoughts. To explain why he hesitates, Eliot writes:

> No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
>
> Am an attendant lord, one that will do
>
> To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
>
> Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
>
> Deferential, glad to be of use,
>
> Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
>
> Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
>
> At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
>
> Almost, at times, the Fool (Eliot 111-119).

Eliot uses the comparison to Hamlet, because of his reluctance to act. Since the literary device

stream of consciousness follows a narrator's inner thoughts, the first person to whom Prufrock

compares himself is Hamlet, yet the narrator then says he is not Hamlet (Easterling 125). He is

not even good enough to be compared to Hamlet, who, in fact, by the end of the play, actually

does act. Prufrock realizes he will not. Eliot plays with Shakespeare's famous line "To be, or not

to be" (3.1.55), by saying "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be" (111). Rejecting any

comparison to Hamlet, Prufrock instead compares himself to Polonius, a character who advises

Hamlet, but who is referred to as a "tool" (Eliot 114), just as Hamlet compares Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern to tools (Easterling 126). The inaction is emphasized by the lines, "In the room the

women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo", first appearing in line 13-14 and then repeated

in line 35-36. Yet another line supports Prufrock's inaction: "I should have been a pair of ragged

claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (Eliot 73-74). He refers to the fact that he might

as well have been a crab moving sideways on the bottom of the ocean, because he is not moving

forward.

As mentioned, a motif in Modernist literature was the search for meaning. In *The Love

Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,* the protagonist is journeying, questing and "setting out on his search

for yearned-for romantic love and meaning (Spurr 2). Though he does not find any meaning by

the end of the poem, the willingness to search for some meaning in his existence is still present.

Modernists also recognized the failure of language to ever fully communicate meaning (Keep 1).

The lines: "That's not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all" (Eliot 97-98) reflect this failure in

communication. This breakdown of communication is also illustrated by the speaker's failure to

master language and clearly express his feelings: "It is impossible to say just what I mean!"

(Eliot 105). The repetition and fragmentation illustrates the difficulty of connecting to another

person. The lack of communication is a progression towards the total breakdown of language, but does not yet reflect the total inadequacy of words themselves as that of the Theatre of the Absurd, but rather "reflects upon the speaker's own impotence" (Spurr 1).

2.2: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Where Modernists still find hope in searching for meaning, the Theatre of the Absurd has given up hope for ever finding it. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* belongs to this category of absurdist theater. The story revolves around two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, namely his two friends from university: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,[5] whom Stoppard brings to the center of action, or, more accurately put, inaction. The title of the play is a direct quote from *Hamlet*'s final scene, in which the First Ambassador announces the unfortunate death of these two characters. Stoppard has taken these characters out of their original context and created a new story around them, recontextualizing *Hamlet.* The play shows the audience where these characters are when they are not on stage in *Hamlet*. Easterling calls this "an extra-textual existence,", in which they have been given their own story outside of *Hamlet* (13). Intertwined with this story are the original scenes from *Hamlet* that also include Ros and Guil. This play is similar to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which was written a decade earlier. Both plays lack a noticeable environment, do not have a specific date or location and include (seemingly) logical games and wordplay. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* uses a vocabulary updated from the original *Hamlet*, except for the scenes in which Ros en Guil are back within the context of *Hamlet*.

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[5] As Stoppard himself did, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will hereinafter be referred to as: Ros and Guil.

As mentioned in Chapter 1.2, there is a lack of suspense in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead.* Ironically, during the play the characters mention the lack of suspense: "ROS: 'Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?' GUIL: 'A bore?' ROS: 'Well...'. GUIL: 'What about suspense?' ROS: 'What suspense?'" (Stoppard 3). The characters seem to be hinting to the audience that there is, and will be, no suspense. The actions in the play do not move the plot forward, since the outcome is already known from *Hamlet*; instead *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* gives the audience more knowledge about these characters. Ros and Guil have been trapped in an aimless loop, from which they cannot escape, because they are bound by their context, with the only outcome being their inevitable death (Easterling 125). Jonsson argues that one of the existential elements in the play include their inability to escape their death: "Their actions and ultimate end reflect humankind's struggle to find meaning and rationalize its existence while simultaneously being destined to die, unable to escape mortality by any means" (2). This theme of the inevitability of death is emphasized by the uncertainty of reality, resulting in the protagonists dying as they lived, namely in total confusion (Jonsson 4).

The inaction in the play is further emphasized by the fact that the protagonists cannot remember what they were doing before they were summoned by Claudius. By the second act, they have figured out that they are helping him to find out why Hamlet is acting mad. Therefore, their course of action is to talk to Hamlet and ask him about his melancholia. They have an opportunity when Hamlet is by himself delivering his "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, but they cannot muster the courage. Ros rambles: "I suppose one might say that this was a chance...One might well... accost him... Yes, it definitely looks like a chance to me [...] Yes, this looks like one to be grabbed with both hands" (Stoppard 53-54), yet he does not act, mirroring Hamlet's own inaction. If readers know the plot of *Hamlet,* they realize this confrontation will never take place,

which leaves Ros in an inevitable loop of inaction. The illusion is upheld that the characters are free to act, as Guil remarks: "GUIL: 'We are not restricted. No boundaries have been defined, no inhibitions imposed'" (Stoppard 109). Even though there are no obvious forces stopping them, they are in fact restricted by the original *Hamlet*. Guil seems to become aware of this after reading the letter meant for the English king: "GUIL: 'We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along'" (Stoppard 115). The protagonists further reflect upon the lack of action in the play, saying: "GUIL: 'But for God's sake what are we supposed to *do*!' PLAYER: 'Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn'" (Stoppard 58). Guil notices that they are not doing anything in the course of the play, and he starts to get restless. This inaction is an essential difference between a well-made play and the Theatre of the Absurd.

The elements that have remained the same are the scenes from *Hamlet* in which Ros and Guil are present. Fischlin and Fortier argue that the elements that an adapter changed from the original indicate a criticism: "Every act of interpretation, every theatrical production implies a critical reading, but adaption features a specific and explicit form of criticism" (Fischlin and Fortier 8). What Stoppard changed, or in this case, added, is the context outside of *Hamlet*. This creates confusion, for there are no lines written for them by Shakespeare, which leaves the characters at a loss for words. What Stoppard demonstrates is that the breakdown of communication and the aimlessness in the play mirror the confusion in society in the 1960s. For instance, throughout the play the characters are flipping a coin, which lands on heads every time. Guil notices the oddity of this, yet cannot seem to explain it:

> GUIL: The law of probability, as it has been oddly asserted, is something to do with the
> proposition that if six monkeys... if six monkeys were...

ROS: Game?

GUIL: Were they?

ROS: Are you?

GUIL: Games. The law of averages, if I have got this right, means that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air enough they would land on their tails about as often as they would land on their –

ROS: Heads (3).

Communication has broken down completely, as the two characters are not responding to each other. Though it seems like a dialogue, this scene is merely two characters taking turns speaking. Jacques Derrida, in his book *Speech and Phenomena,* published in the same year as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, coined the term deconstruction. This is a philosophically skeptical approach to "the possibility of coherent meaning in language" (Baldick 59). Deconstruction sets out the premise that the Western tradition of thought has tried to create certainty and truth by "repressing the limitless instability of language" (Baldick 60). Stoppard uses this, showing that language has lost all meaning and that it is no longer functioning properly. Guil is trying to make sense of the illogical nature of the coin landing on heads every time, yet he confuses the law of averages with the law of probability (Rees 1).[6] This confusion of mathematical systems together with the lack of dialogue illustrate the breakdown of communication and the aimless nature of society.

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[6] The law of averages teaches that if a coin if flipped 100 times, the prediction is that it will be tails 50 times and heads 50 times. The infinite monkey theorem, a part of the law of probability, says that if a monkey sitting at a typewriter hits the keys at random an infinite number of times, it will eventually write the complete works of Shakespeare.

The aimlessness of life in the 1960s is similar to the "bitterness and disillusionment [that] set in [after the First World War]" (Watts 1). As the wartime reality hit and the death toll mounted, the soldiers returning from the war seemed to know more about death that about life. Towards the end of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the protagonists are questioning the player, whom Ros and Guil run into on their way to Hamlet, about the meaning of life and death:

> GUIL: But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? Who are we?
>
> PLAYER: You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough.
>
> GUIL: No – it is not enough. To be told so little – to such an end – and still, finally, to be denied an explanation.
>
> PLAYER: In our experience, most things end in death (Stoppard 115).

These questions mirror the disillusionment the soldiers felt after returning from the war. The player continues by acting out his death, gets up again, brushes himself off and receives an applause. He explains to Ros and Guil that he was merely acting, since they had not noticed that his death had been faked. This further emphasizes the disillusionment and raises the question: what is reality? After witnessing this scene, Guil remarks: "No... No... not for us, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over... Death is not anything... death is not... It's the absence of presence, nothing more... the endless time of never coming back... a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound" (Stoppard 117). In this passage, Guil expresses the one thing the aforementioned soldiers did know after they returned, namely that "[their] knowledge of life [was] limited to death" (Watts 1).

This play, with neither a clear beginning, middle nor end, is the opposite of a well-made play. In an ironic quote*,* the player asks the protagonists what they want a play to look like:

"ROS: 'I want a good story, with a beginning, middle and end'. [...] GUIL: 'I'd prefer art to mirror life, if it's all the same to you'" (Stoppard 73). In literary theory, the act of mirroring life in art is called mimesis. Mimesis refers to a literary work that is understood to be reproducing "an external reality" (Baldick 157). Stoppard plays with the difference between the two genres. One character refers to the well-made play. The other character refers to this mimesis, wanting a play to be more realistic, and more like the theatre of absurd, or theatre of realism, which, according to Stoppard, is closer to reality than a well-made play. Stoppard illustrates in what ways people try to make sense of an incomprehensible and chaotic world, and how difficult it is "when realities are always multiple, and truths always relative" (Christopher 110). Similar to Eliot's poem, Stoppard also uses repetition in language to illustrate inaction. The modernist quest to find meaning in the world has been replaced by the playful acceptance that there is no meaning to be found. Stoppard reflects the changes in society in the 1960s by using Shakespeare's famous play to illustrates the aimlessness of existence and the breakdown of communication through repetitive and meaningless actions.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that as the values and mores of society constantly evolve, so too do society's approach to, and views of, canonical texts. The changes in society from the Victorian age through the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression and two World Wars, affected *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Both appropriated from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, these texts reflect the changing values and mores. *Hamlet* corresponds with Scribe's definition of a well-made play, because the actions move from point A to point B and proceeds to a definable end. Eliot's poem, on the other hand, consists of an incoherent and

fragmented narrative, which is a characteristic of Modernist literature. Ideas about social structure, mortality and religion that had been in place for millennia seemed to fall apart, which led to the incoherent narrative of Modernist literature and the intention to break from tradition. In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,* there is no action, but simply a reflection of the speaker's thoughts, through the literary device stream-of-consciousness. These features demonstrate the incommunicability of experiences in the modern world and the difficulty of connecting to other people.

Modernism evolved into the Theatre of the Absurd in the 1960s and using similar features Stoppard illustrates the aimlessness of existence through repetitive and meaningless actions, using *Hamlet* as a recognizable reference. He also uses language, and the breakdown of communication, to further emphasize the inability to connect to people. Another main theme in absurdist theater is the aimlessness of existence. Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose, as Esslin describes, and with all his actions senseless, man is lost (23). In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,* the protagonists cannot escape their inevitable death, because they are restricted by the original *Hamlet,* and are left hopelessly searching.

Hamlet's existential crisis after the Reformation is brought back in the modernist quest to find meaning. A search for meaning in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was then replaced by the playful acceptance that there is no meaning to be found and that truth is non-existent, as demonstrated in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. By engaging in a larger social critique, Eliot and Stoppard have given a new meaning to Shakespeare's canonical work. Similar to the prisoners at San Quentin penitentiary, who were able to find a new meaning in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Eliot and Stoppard have made *Hamlet* once again relevant for a new generation.

For this study, only two *Hamlet* adaptations were analyzed, but notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests that as values and mores of society evolve, so too do society's approach to canonical texts. For further insight into the evolution of *Hamlet* appropriations and the influence of changing values and mores, more adaptations should be researched. An adaptation that could be researched, for instance, is one of *Hamlet*'s first adaptations called *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark,* written in 1772. A close-reading of this text could give insight into the values and mores of the eighteenth century. Another one is *The Phantom of Hamlet* (1988), written by Nicolas Abraham, which is a sixth act to Shakespeare's play inspired by psychoanalysis. A study of these adaptation could give further insight into the evolution of *Hamlet* through the ages.

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