

Lacanian Psychoanalysis through Structuralism in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Tímea Rába

The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, is well-known for his return to and “dramatisation” of Sigmund Freud. (Kurzweil 419) The main reason Lacan turned to Freud was his desire to preserve the position of psychoanalysis “as a rigorous objective science rather than merely an exploration of (inter)subjective experience (...)”. (Fel 161) Nevertheless, his theories were not mere reiterations of Freud’s. Indeed, there were Freudian elements, such as the idea of “implicit biology”, with which Lacan outright disagreed. (177) Thus, only certain aspects were utilised by him in order to create a framework, upon which he could base his own theories. One of his most notable theories concerns the formation of the self through what Lacan refers to as the “Aha-Erlebnis” in his paper titled “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”. (441) Essentially, the “Aha-Erlebnis” – or simply “mirror stage” – occurs when an infant recognises itself for the first time in the mirror. This development, Lacan argues, is tremendously significant, as the “mirror stage” is the first instance of a human being realising that they exist as a separate self, independent and unique from their fellow creatures. This realisation leads to the so-called “existential negativity” – i.e. the self acknowledges and reinforces that it is itself through the means of differentiation from the other “selves”. (445)

If one is acquainted with Structuralist works, such as Ferdinand de Saussure’s “Course in General Linguistics”, or Jacques Derrida’s “Differance”, the aforesaid notion of “existential negativity” will no doubt seem familiar. In a lecture of his, Saussure establishes the function and characteristics of the very basis of language: the linguistic sign. Furthermore, and most importantly, he also highlights that the linguistic sign is, in fact, arbitrary. (Saussure 62) In “Differance”, Derrida argues that “[within] a language, within the system of language, there are only differences.” (286) In other words, linguistics concepts – e.g. the word class of “nouns” – can only be described through their differences to each other – for example, “a noun is a noun because it is not a verb”. In view of this, it can be stated that Lacan utilised Structuralist analyses to illustrate his own points in his psychoanalytic theories. As Nobus claims as well: “Lacan’s oeuvre has indeed frequently appeared as another influential instance of how Structuralist ideas

managed to change the face of many research areas in the human and social sciences, in his case the field of Freudian psychoanalytic practice.” (50)

Merely stating this assertion is of little benefit. Consequently, the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard shall be utilised to illustrate the parallels between Lacanian psychoanalysis – specifically the ones appearing in his essay, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I” – and the Structuralism of Saussure and Derrida. This play was chosen as basis of analysis since its titular characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, seem to suffer from the very issues, which, according to Lacan, affect the proper formation of the self. (444) Furthermore, “*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* relies mostly on language to communicate its ideas and themes” – thus it is a practical subject of analysis in the case of Structuralism as well. (Jonsson 2) For the sake of convenience, a brief framing of the play’s plot shall be provided first, then the suitability of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as the basis for analysis will be further argued. Thereafter the internal and external issues torturing the protagonists of Stoppard’s play – namely splitting, isolation, inversion, and the inability to influence or escape the Symbolic Order, – shall be illustrated from the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, as well as from the Structuralist – mainly that of Saussure and Derrida – perspective. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the parallels between Lacanian psychoanalysis in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”, and the aforesaid Structuralist theories utilising the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* – from here on shortened to *Rosencrantz* – by Tom Stoppard.

Rosencrantz is essentially an absurd, existentialist drama, which – as it is evident from its title – is an adaptation of the Shakespearean play, *Hamlet*. The main intrigue of the play lies in the fact that it places the focus on arguably the least significant characters of its source: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In this play, the reader/ spectator is given an insight into the fate of those literary figures who have very little presence in, and, consequently, very little influence upon the plot of a literary work. Indeed, in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – who are tasked by Claudius with uncovering what ails the young prince – due to being underdeveloped and rather simple-minded characters do not pose much of a threat to Hamlet’s plans. Consequently, in the Shakespearean play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s journey – both in the literal and figurative meaning of the word – is altogether uncomplicated: they are introduced, they appear once or twice for a brief period of time, then they die offstage. In *Rosencrantz*, on the other hand, this journey becomes more complex. While their final destination remains the same – as indicated by the title as well – now that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given the title of protagonists, their arrival to this point becomes rather troublesome. Much of the play is

spent with the two characters contemplating their circumstances, with their unsuccessful attempts to recall why they are in this unfavourable situation, and with their philosophical discussions about existence and death. As Fee states as well, “[Rosencrantz and Guildenstern] often philosophise on the meaning – or meaninglessness – of life, and articulate a confusion which reflects an absurdist view of the human condition.” (6) Indeed, left to their own devices, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can do little but converse with one another.

If one further dissects the world of *Rosencrantz*, it becomes apparent that examining the play through the approach of Lacanian psychoanalysis could emerge as a sound endeavour. Reason is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not merely victims of their outer circumstances – they also seem to suffer from internal struggles relating to their sense of self. (Freeman 32). Since these internal struggles are very much akin to the inner problems listed by Lacan in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”, this essay proves to be an essential tool in analysing the issues affecting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s personal identity. Regarding Structuralism, the play, as stated before, relies primarily on language to convey its ideas and themes. (Jonsson 2) Hence, just like Lacan, Structuralism – specifically the Saussurean sign system and Derrida’s concept of “differance” – will be of great importance in illustrating the main characters’ inner and outer problems. By examining the protagonists of *Rosencrantz* with regard to these two approaches, the parallels between Lacan’s psychoanalysis and Structuralism should become apparent.

In *Rosencrantz*, Stoppard utilises to the play’s advantage the virtually non-existent personalities of Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by presenting them as “two-halves of the same character” (Maji 1). From the psychoanalytic perspective, this phenomenon can be regarded as “splitting” (Lacan 444). Although in the field of psychoanalysis, splitting is regarded as an occurrence within the psyche of a single individual, in *Rosencrantz*, it manifests between two characters. Needless to say, their sameness does not mean that the protagonists are perfect mirror-images of one another, since they clearly possess distinct personality traits – e.g. Guildenstern is the sceptical, while Rosencrantz is the gullible one of the pair. Nevertheless, their overreliance on each other – and on others – for validation and guidance indicates the absence of a fully-formed self. In other words, unlike in the case of a mentally sound individual, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no unique construct of themselves as complete, separate beings. In fact, as King argues as well, their understanding of their very own identities is rather blurred. (15) The obscuring of the boundaries between the self and the other is precisely encapsulated by the protagonists’ first encounter with the Player, during which Rosencrantz mistakenly introduces himself as Guildenstern before the latter corrects him. From a literary

perspective, this incident may be no more, than an instance of humour, or the playwright highlighting how little Rosencrantz and Guildenstern differed in the source material. In view of the Lacanian theory, however, it can be interpreted as the main characters' inability to form a separate self, and thus their need for the other in order to be whole. Throughout the play, the effects of their incompleteness gradually grows in severity, and by the end, their identities become fragmented. (Freeman 38)

The phenomenon of splitting is not as apparent within the Structuralist framework, as it is in the case of psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, upon further examining the two methodologies, it is more than possible to demonstrate splitting with the help of Structuralist theory as well. In "Differance", Derrida accredits Saussure as the originator of the "arbitrariness, [as well as] differential character of signs of general semiology and particularly of linguistics". (285) In essence, according to the Saussurean theory, the linguistic sign – which constitute the core element of language itself – is both incidental and varying. Extending this concept to *Rosencrantz*, the protagonists themselves – or any individual for that matter – can be represented as signs if one disassembles them the following way: their names – i.e. "Rosencrantz" and "Guildenstern" – are the signifiers, and the persons labelled with said names are the signified. However, unlike the linguistic sign, the main characters' proper name is not arbitrary. Since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern inhabit the world of a literary piece – more precisely, that of a play – the signifier becomes of crucial importance. *Rosencrantz* would be an entirely different play were the protagonists called Hamm and Clov. The signified, on the other hand, becomes arbitrary – albeit within a certain set of criteria – in the world of the play. This is emphasised by the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as well as other members of the cast constantly struggle with distinguishing one from the other. One usually considers their name part of their identity, a puzzle-piece of the self. However, in the case of the main characters of the play these functions are reversed. In other words, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are themselves but a fragment, which serve to complete the purpose of the signifier.

Another issue complicating the lives of the two courtiers is inversion. In the realm of psychoanalysis, inversion is described as a desire or impulse being converted into its complete opposite. (Rivkin 390) Inversion occurs, for instance, in the case of an emotionally neglected child who, in turn, becomes a cold and distant adult with the intense desire for affection greatly suppressed. In *Rosencrantz*, the phenomenon of inversion transpires in a more severe manner in comparison to the realm of reality, since it is the entirety of the play's world, which undergoes inversion. As previously stated, Stoppard's work is ultimately an adaptation of *Hamlet*

reinterpreted from the standpoint of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Consequently, the inconsequential figures become central, while the protagonists of Shakespeare's play are placed aside. This inversion of the dimensions of the original play could be regarded as a latent desire of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to possess greater influence in the court of Denmark. Although no such behaviour occurs in *Hamlet* that would imply this need for power, *Rosencrantz* provides an allusion to this wish for control. More precisely, when Hamlet is dragging the corpse of Polonius, the courtiers attempt to stop him. Of course, their attempt is in vain, since even in the world where they inhabit the central position, they are ultimately powerless. This is due to the fact that their yearning for control over themselves and others does not manifest in the desired way. Conversely, it emerges in a manner, which ultimately strips Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from any degree of autonomy, as exemplified by their inability to influence any aspect of their world.

Similarly to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the workings of the Saussurian sign system is also apparent in the phenomenon of inversion – albeit, in a different manner. As stated before, in *Rosencrantz* the relationship between the signifier and the signified changes. While in the case of reality, one's name is merely a fragment which contributes to the wholeness of the self, this hierarchy alters in the world of *Rosencrantz*. In other words, the signifier gains immense significance in relation to the signified, seeing as in the play, the figures of the courtiers must always be labelled with the names “Rosencrantz” and “Guildenstern”, otherwise the framework of the literary piece shatters. On the other hand, the signified could be represented by almost anyone capable of learning the lines of the play. Indeed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could even be portrayed by individuals who are not male or white – although, naturally, such changes would likely have an effect on the audience. However, the world of the play would largely remain unaffected. Nevertheless, if the signifiers were changed – i.e. if the leading figures would receive different names – the realm of *Rosencrantz* would alter as well, since it would simply not be *Rosencrantz* anymore. Consequently, despite the courtiers being utterly helpless within the world of the play, their presence projected by their signifiers is essential to preserve its basic framework.

Isolation is another issue plaguing the existence of the protagonists. As stated in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I”, in order to form one's concept of the self, the simultaneous confirmation from both the inner (Innenwelt) and outer world (Umwelt) is needed. (Lacan 444) Although the former precedes the latter, as exemplified by the case of the infant, both are of equal importance in validating one's separate identity. Since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern already failed in internally creating a complete self – indeed, as it was stated,

they need one another to constitute a single entity – the external verification proves to be even more crucial. Nonetheless, the protagonists are left to their own devices for the majority of the play. Even when other characters appear, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are mostly ignored by them. Consequently, it is not only the Innenwelt, but also the Umwelt, which is absent in the main characters' process of the formation of the self. Furthermore, as a result of isolation, another key aspect of outer verification becomes void: the possibility of defining oneself through comparisons to others – i.e. “existential negativity”. (445) With the presence of their fellow creatures, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern could have the opportunity to establish their personal identity by differentiating themselves from the other. For instance, they could perceive that they are males – as they would likely notice that they look nothing like Gertrude or Ophelia –, their social status – since they are below Claudius but above the Player –, or their purpose – that they must learn what ails Hamlet. These examples may seem nonsensical when illustrated in such a detailed manner. However, human beings label themselves through the above illustrated method – whether consciously or unconsciously – in their day-to-day lives. After all, a man, for instance, has no means of knowing that he is a man without encountering other people of the opposite, as well as of the same sex.

In like manner to human beings and literary figures, linguistic signs make little sense in isolation. Hence, in order to properly define them, they need to be placed together within the system of language as pieces of a greater picture. This is highly prevalent in the case of, for example, word classes. Although their functions may be interpreted on their own, their defining features are based upon the differences between each other. For instance, as it was previously stated, a noun is a noun because it is not akin to verbs. In other words, similarly to the case of the isolated protagonists, the primary attributes of nouns cannot be discerned without contrasting them with, for instance, that of verbs. Despite the seeming inanity of the aforementioned example, it illustrates the very workings of the so-called negative language theory. Naturally, signifiers, such as “noun” or “verb” are completely arbitrary. Therefore, they could be replaced with any other signifiers, which meet the same set of criteria – it is by mere chance that nouns are referred to as “nouns” and verbs as “verbs”. Nevertheless, it is crucial for these arbitrary signifiers to highlight the difference between the two word classes. Consequently, although they may be arbitrary they need to differ. Akin to word classes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are required to integrate into a greater system of “difference” in order to achieve meaning and to discern their own characteristics.

A pivotal component of Lacanian psychoanalysis is the theory of the Symbolic Order, which in the case of the courtiers is in close connection with inversion. Essentially, the

Symbolic Order is the “symbolic language [that] assigns social roles and dictates proper behaviour in society”. (Rivkin 393) One’s gender, place in the family, social status, etc. are all determined by the Symbolic Order, thus one becomes fixed according circumstances outside their influence. Likewise, literary characters have a specific role they must fulfil within the Symbolic Order of their respective pieces of literature. Needless to say, the Symbolic Order varies in certain aspects between reality, literature, and even between different literary works. Indeed, in the case of the latter two, the Symbolic Order is more conventionally referred to as the “plot” or – in the case of plays – the “script”. Unlike a real person – who could always quit their job or divorce their spouse, and thus change their roles within society – figures of fiction have absolutely no means of altering their pre-determined purpose. In the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they will always be introduced as playing heads-or-tails, they will always be tasked by Claudius to spy on Hamlet, they will inevitably fail their task and, ultimately, they will always face death. The protagonists of *Rosencrantz* cannot abruptly decide to disobey Claudius’ orders or to not board the ship to England, since the Symbolic Order of the play dictates otherwise – such is the fate of literary characters. Intriguingly, as it was previously stated, despite their simple-minded and impressionable nature, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern actively attempt to break from the confines of their pre-determined positions, but to no avail – for instance when they undertake stopping Hamlet from dragging away Polonius’ body. The inescapability of their fixed role is further emphasised by these scenes, since they demonstrate the higher power of the Symbolic Order over the characters’ free will.

In the same manner to the above discussed aspects, Lacan’s concept of the symbolic language dictating one’s role in society – or literature – can be approached from the Structuralist viewpoint as well. Akin to the Symbolic Order, the sign system itself is a “social institution” (Saussure 60). In other words, it is arbitrary, as well as established through the written and unwritten rules determined by society. In the case of literary works, these rules are usually established by a single individual, the author. The writer creates a world – their Social Order or sign system – in which they overlook their characters as a god-like being and attach a specific role, and thus an inescapable destiny to them – similarly to how functions are given to signifiers. Additionally, Saussure notes the following regarding the signifiers:

In contrast to visual signifiers (nautical signals, etc.) which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time. Their elements are presented in succession; they form a chain. This feature becomes readily apparent when they are represented in writing and the spatial line of graphic marks is substituted for succession in time. (63)

The linearity of auditory signifiers in the temporal realm can be extended to the Symbolic Order, in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped. The plot of *Rosencrantz* – as well as that of *Hamlet* within the former – ceaselessly progresses, and thus it relentlessly propels the main characters from one scene to the next. Since the two are unable to escape or manipulate the linear Symbolic Order of the play's realm – seeing as they themselves are integral parts of the chain – they have no opportunity to examine their situation from a varying perspective and escape their destiny. Even though at the end of the play, Guildenstern believes that “[there] must have been a moment, at the beginning, where [they] could have said no”, their fate – akin to the functions of signs – is determined from the start. (Stoppard 219)

Ultimately, *Rosencrantz* serves as a more than adequate tool of comparison between psychoanalysis and Structuralism, since it relies on language to convey its message and themes – to which the characters' inner and outer problems also belong. By illustrating the plight of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern both from the psychoanalytic, as well as the Structuralist perspective, the correlations between the two fields of theory become much more apparent. Naturally, considering Lacan's inclination towards, and utilisation of Structuralism in his analyses, this outcome is of little surprise. His papers highlight the manner, in which theoretical frameworks that on the surface do not seem to share many parallels can, in fact, be connected. Nevertheless, considering that language – and thus the sign system as well – is an indispensable part of psychoanalysis, this correlation is nowhere near as peculiar as one would initially presume. Needless to say, without – written or verbal – language patients would have no means of communicating their problems. In addition to the parallels becoming evident, a further advantage of approaching *Rosencrantz* from these “differant” – i.e. “same yet not identical” (Derrida 279) – viewpoints is the uncovering deeper and deeper layers of the play.

As previously discussed, based on Lacanian psychoanalysis some of the most crucial problems plaguing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the play are splitting, isolation, inversion, as well as the chains of the Symbolic Order. All four of these could be placed and re-contextualised within Structuralism. It is to be noted that these issues effect the protagonists in a contrasting manner to actual human beings, seeing as unlike a real person, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot change their place within the play's Symbolic Order or even seek help for their mental issues. In this regard, their fate becomes a brilliant embodiment of tragedy, since – while human beings only live and die once – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are essentially condemned to relive the same cycle over and over. Essentially, they are trapped within their personal hell, in which they always have to face death, only to be revived the moment their

story is read – or watched again. As a result, the only choice for these characters is between complete non-existence, or existence and suffering – and the decision is not even theirs.

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