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“OH, PHOOEY TO DEATH”: A BAUDRILLARDIAN ANALYSIS OF DEATH IN TOM STOPPARD'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT

The present research analyzes the concept of death in the works of Tom Stoppard from a Baudrillardian perspective. Jean Baudrillard considers the binary opposition of life/death to be the original split upon which other dichotomies such as reality/imagination, good/bad ... were based. In symbolic societies, life and death were not separated and the dead were not excluded from social exchanges. The dead had an active role in society. There was a circular view of time in those societies. Baudrillard views death not simply as a biological event; rather he considers it as a form and as a form, death entails the principle of reversibility and as it will be demonstrated, that is the reason behind the interdiction of death in Capitalist English culture in which death is considered the end of the line and there is a linear view of time. Tom Stoppard is undoubtedly one of the best dramatists of our time. He is a shrewd observer and reflects the dilemmas of life in his works. In this paper, his presentation of the dilemma of life and death and his solution to this important dilemma are analyzed.

Keywords: Jean Baudrillard, Stoppard, Death, *Arcadia*, *the Invention of Love*.

1. DEATH IN BAUDRILLARD'S THOUGHT

Death is central and indispensable to understanding Baudrillard's theory, and is closely connected to symbolic exchange. According to Baudrillard, the most important ability which we have lost above all in the shift to a capitalist society is to engage in with death.

Death should not be seen here in purely biological terms. Baudrillard specifies early on in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* that he does not mean an event affecting a body, but rather, a form which destroys the determinacy of the system and of subject – which returns things to a state of indeterminacy (Baudrillard, 1993:5). Baudrillard definitely addresses actual deaths, risk-taking, and suicide and so on; but he also views death figuratively, in relation to the decay of present relations, the “death” of the self-image or ego, the interchangeability of processes of life across different categories (Baudrillard, 1993:138-143). Baudrillard's conception of death is fairly similar to Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque and the carnivalesque (Robinson, 2014). Death here refers above all to reversibility, and then to unexpected alterations, social change, as well as physical death.

According to Baudrillard, indigenous people see death as social, not natural or biological. They see it as an effect of an antagonistic force, which they must soak up through symbolic exchanges in forms of initiation rites and rituals. This is a method of preventing death from becoming an event which does not signify and is outside the cycle of exchanges. Since, such a non-signifying phenomenon is absolute chaos from the viewpoint of the symbolic order. For Baudrillard, the western idea of a biological death is in fact an illusion, which ignores the social nature of death. (Baudrillard, 1993:131-132)

One way of exploring this problem is to study the practice of initiation. One stage of initiation includes ritual death so that a rebirth may happen. In symbolic societies there exists a constant symbolic exchange between ancestors and the descendants, a direct connection between the dead and the living. Thus, instead of the absolute line of demarcation which is present in (post)modern society between life and death, there is an apparent and powerful social relationship: a mutual exchange, a type of the series of gift and counter-gift. It is fairly far-off in principle from any conception of life or death as aleatory events. In symbolic cultures, exchange is therefore considered as reversible, in modern societies, it is believed to be irreversible (Baudrillard, 1993: 203). Hence, there is no recognized antagonism or hostility between life and death in the symbolic order. And if the idea of revolution preserves any meaning at all, he insists it “can only consist in the abolition of the separation of death, not of equality in survival” (Baudrillard, 1993:200).

The first split happened between the living and the dead. This first split and exclusion forms the basis, or prototype, for all the other splits and segregations of gender, race, class, and etc:

“The separation and opposition of life and death, Baudrillard contends, creates power: the hierarchical structures of authority that are the fundamental mechanisms of social control. When life and death are separated time becomes linear rather than cyclical, religion becomes repressive rather than expressive and death becomes the final, irreversible event in the life of the individual. The separating of life and death, then, is the founding condition of binary thinking.”(Pawlet, 2007:56)

The modern view of death is also required by the rise of subjectivity. The subject needs a beginning and an end, so as to be reducible and controllable (Baudrillard, 1993:125). The internalizing the concept of the subject or the soul separate us from our bodies, voices and so on. It generates the binary opposition of man/un-man and of course the real self is irreducible to such categories. It also individualizes people by annihilating their genuine relations with others.

The mortal body is actually an effect of the original split. The split never actually stops exchanging across the bar of binary opposition. In the case of death, we still ‘exchange’ with the dead through our own deaths and our angst about death. We no longer have live relationships with objects as well. They are reduced to the status of mere instruments. It is as if we have a see-through shroud between us (Baudrillard, 1993:101-104).

Symbolic exchange is based on a game, with game-like rules. When this disappeared, laws and the state were invented to replace them. It is the process of segregating, or barring which brings concentrated power into existence. Through splits, people turn the other into their ‘imaginary’ (Baudrillard, 1993:144-148). For instance, westerners invest the “Third World” with bigoted preconceptions and radical aims; the “Third World” invests the west with inspiring dreams of development. When considered separately, each of them exists only as an imaginary object to the other. Yet the resulting purity is an illusion. For Baudrillard, any barring of the other brings the other to the heart of the culture. “...censured everywhere, death springs up everywhere” (Baudrillard, 1993:183); or in other words, we all turn into dead, or mad, or prisoners, and so on, through their barring; because the symbolic haunts the code as its own death. The society of the code works relentlessly to prevent the risk of irruptions of the symbolic (Baudrillard, 1993:185-187).

Rupturing of the symbolic exchange is essential to the rise of capitalism. Baudrillard maps out a transformation occurring through time. Societies based on symbolic exchange, in which differences can be exchanged, are replaced by societies which are based on equivalence and in which everything is/means the same.

Baudrillard’s view of capitalism is based on Karl Marx’s analysis of value. Baudrillard acknowledges Karl Marx’s idea of capitalism being based on a general equivalent. Money or the exchange-value is the general equivalent because it can be exchanged for any commodity. Capitalism is derived from the autonomization or separation of economics from the rest of life. It turns economics into the ‘reality-principle’. It slyly replaces the social world based on exchange of differences with an eternal return of the same (Robinson, 2014).

The theme of ‘survival’ in the narrative of life is also essential to the rise of power. Social control comes into sight when the union of life and death is shattered, and the dead are banned. “Power is possible only if death is no longer free” (Baudrillard, 1993:130) as Baudrillard reminds us. The social exclusion of death is the foundation for the tyrannical systems of control. As he states “exclusion of the dead is at core of the rationality our culture” (Baudrillard, 1993:126), so people are forced to stay alive in order to become productive. For Baudrillard, capitalism’s original connection to death has always been masked by the system of production, and its ends. It only becomes totally evident now that the system is imploding (or rather is on the road to implosion), and production is reduced to mere operation (Baudrillard, 1993:9-31).

In modern societies, death is placed out of sight and outside society. For example, elderly people are pushed out from society. People no longer anticipate their own death. Thus, it becomes incomprehensible. It keeps returning as a force of nature which will not obey objective laws. It can no longer be symbolically exchanged through rituals. Western society is prearranged so death is never done by a ‘person’, but always attributed to ‘nature’ (Baudrillard, 1993:125-131).

This creates a bureaucratic, judicial regime of death, of which the concentration camp is the ultimate symbol. The system now orders that we must not die – at least not in any old fashion way. We may only die if law and medical sciences allow it. Therefore, we observe, for example, the increase of health and safety policies (Baudrillard,

1993:163). On the other hand, violence is legally recognized, if it can be re-converted into economic value. Baudrillard sees this as a retrogressive relocation of death. It is taken out of the circle of symbolic exchanges and given over to centralized integrated social agencies (ibid).

For Baudrillard, this is not an improvement. People are in fact being killed, or left to die, by a system which never considers them as having any value. On the other hand, even when capitalism becomes lenient, all-encompassing and tolerant, it still creates an underlying anxiety about being reduced to the status of an object. This emerges as a continuous fear of being manipulated. In terms of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, the slave stays within the master's dialectic for as long as 'his' life or death serves the perpetuation of the relations of domination (Baudrillard, 1993:39-40).

2. DEATH IN TOM STOPPARD'S WORKS

The theme of death is at the center of three plays by Tom Stoppard; chronologically, these plays are *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Arcadia*, and *The Invention of Love*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is Stoppard's most renowned play, and the one in which he has dealt with the theme of death more extensively and openly than any of his other works. Let us, first, investigate *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and observe how Stoppard has handled the theme of death; and then, *Arcadia* and *The Invention of Love* will be analyzed in the same manner.

2.1. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is Tom Stoppard's first breakthrough. The investigation of the theme of death that began in this seminal work was concluded in *Arcadia*. In order to reach a universally applicable and solemn conclusion regarding the theme of death, Stoppard utilizes the latently comical situation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they appear in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which is a confused state that is best manifested in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Guildenstern and Rosencrantz can feel that they are involved in some kind of game, but, they have not read or played that game before. Thus, when they are presented at the beginning of the first act, they are in state of confusion and playing a very improbable game of coin-tossing. All they can recollect vaguely is that a messenger woke them up and that they have been summoned to the Danish court. Another interesting fact is the coin-tossing that they had been playing on the road and in which heads came up seventy five times in a row. As Anthony Jenkins remarks:

"This coin-tossing, while granting them some sense of purpose, defies the rules by which they expected to play when Heads comes up for the seventy-fifth time. This astonishingly simple image presents what seems to be a chance-ridden world and ...Guildenstern...searches somewhat despairingly for a logical pattern that will pull the coin-tossing back under the known rules." (Jenkins, 1989:39)

And when Guildenstern fails to provide a logical explanation for this anomaly, he starts several other games with which he hopes to bridge the logical gap in their world. But, no matter what he tries, he cannot tame this "chance-ridden world".

From their own perspective in which events stubbornly avoid a logical pattern, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's problem resembles that of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. But the main difference is that in *Waiting for Godot*, no answer is in sight; Godot might or might not come, and just like the two tramps, the audience does not know anything about Godot as well. While in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, the world seems to be absurd because of the constraints of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's viewpoint, and unlike the two tramps their fate is already determined (Jenkins, 1989:40). In other words, while *Waiting for Godot* provides us with a circular world or an eternally spiraling one, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* demonstrates a linear universe.

So to sum up, the universe of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is "chance-ridden" and at the same time predetermined. There is a balance between these opposite poles. The coming together of contradictions and oppositions is a favorite theme of Stoppard (Fleming, 2001:226). This universe which is simultaneously an absurd Beckettian world and a deterministic one has another important aspect, indifference. As the Player informs Rosencrantz,

“Player: It costs little to watch, and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action, if that's your taste and times being what they are.

Rosencrantz: What are they?

Player: Indifferent.

Rosencrantz: Bad?

Player: Wicked.” (Stoppard, 1967:19)

When considered in its entirety, this world is a perfect specimen of the modern world. A very important aspect of the third order of simulacra, aka (post)modern world, is its indifference. In era of simulation,

“All the great humanist criteria of value, the whole civilization of moral, aesthetic and practical judgment are effaced in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable; the characteristic effect of the domination of the code, which everywhere rests on the principle ... of indifference.” (Baudrillard, 1993:9)

So, it should come as no surprise that in an indifferent and absurd world such as this, the view of life and death is linear. Death is presented as the endpoint of life. In the final act, as a reply to Player, Guildenstern so meticulously describes death as,

“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, 1967:161)

Although life is presented as a linear progression, leading inevitably to death, Stoppard is not content with just a simple statement. He investigates further into the mystery of death. The first issue is feigning ignorance. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern both know that they will die, and so must every human being on this planet. Yet, they act as if they are ignorant of this fact. Humans are so accustomed to the idea of mortality that they have forgotten the moment when this knowledge was revealed to them (Jenkins, 1989:42).

As their fate casts its shadow on them and they are about to be executed, they react in the same manner as any human being: "Why me?" They vocalize the sorrow and pity that everybody feels when they consider death as "the endless time of never coming back" (Fleming, 2001:52).

The monstrosity of death originates from the fact that it hardly ever sensible in such a world. Life and death are so apart that inevitably death becomes the haunting specter of life. It haunts life at every turn. As Guildenstern proclaims, “all your life you live so close to [death], that it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when something nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque” (Stoppard, 1967:40). And it goes without saying that when life is viewed as linear, the only manner in which death can be bearable or the survivors can console themselves is when there is a gradual progression or a pattern. But, when death seems to be aleatory and sudden, we are reminded of our own mortality and react with great apprehension. For instance, Hamlet's death seems reasonable since it is the rational outcome of a series of actions that started with his father's murder. Thus, bringing it into a logical pattern and making it bearable. On the other hand, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are destined to be executed. Although they surrender to their destiny, these two have no clue as to why it has to be so: "To be told so little - to such an end - and still, finally, to be denied an explanation . . .” (Stoppard, 1967:160).

As it can be gleaned from the passage above, the next aspect of death that Stoppard investigates is our expectation of what death would, or rather should look like. And nowhere can our expectations of death be more satisfied than in theater. As the Player declares "there's nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death" (Stoppard, 1967:99). Staged death must be adroitly presented so that there is a pattern, a suitability if you will, which we seldom encounter in reality. Guildenstern objects to such a depiction of death

“Guildenstern (fear, derision): Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama! That isn't death (more quietly) you scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone... You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death?

Player: On the contrary, it's the only kind they do believe. They're conditioned to it. I had an actor once who was condemned to hang for stealing a sheep - or a lamb, I forget which - so I got permission to have him hanged in the middle of a play - had to change the plot a bit but I thought it would be effective, you know - and you wouldn't believe it, he just wasn't convincing! It was impossible to suspend one's disbelief - and what with the audience jeering and throwing peanuts, the whole thing was a disaster - he did nothing but cry all the time - right out of character - just stood there and cried ...” (Stoppard, 1967:106)

The convicted actor, while being hanged, failed to be impersonal, and consequently, he acted without consideration for the nuances that would have made his death look genuine and “real” to the audience. The believability of a staged death depends on the mental image that both the actors and the audience share (Jenkins, 1989:45). Therefore, as Guildenstern becomes more and more aware that some catastrophe is about to befall him, he can no longer tolerate the Player's staged versions of death and he reiterates, very concisely, the idea of death which was demonstrated throughout the play:

“No, no, no ... you've got it all wrong ... you can't act death. The fact of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen - it's not gasps and blood and falling about - that isn't what makes it death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all - now you see him, now you don't”. (Stoppard, 1967:107)

To sum up, Stoppard presents us with a world that is consistent with Baudrillard's conception of modern world; an absurd and indifferent world in which life and time are linear. As it was mentioned earlier, the only true solution to the malady of the modern world is bringing death back into society or in other words by reinstating the principle of reversibility. As it was discussed, there are two counter strategies to the dominance of the code: first, by establishing direct relations in a liberated zone and second, through poetic language. Poetic language is not restricted to poetry and can occur in any area of literature; as long as it destabilizes and undermines the traditional view of language. Or in other words, whenever the signified/signifier relation is disrupted or undermined, in this view even irony and humor can be considered of such nature. Since Stoppard is not a writer who would simply demonstrate the conditions of the society and be done with it, he does try to undermine the dichotomy of life and death. He tries to do so through the use of humor and witticism.

The reason Stoppard stands apart from his contemporaries is the humor through which he tackles the mystery of life and death. The carnivalesque effect of humor and irony enables Stoppard to destabilize the binary opposition of life/death. The very comical atmosphere of the play coupled with the humorous language and storyline and also the mastery of Stoppard at wordplay helps him come close to this goal. There is no doubt that, in the final run, Stoppard does not achieve a circular conception of time in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; but he does destabilize the linear view of life.

2.2 Arcadia

Arcadia, the best play that Tom Stoppard wrote during 1990s, is a masterpiece of many facets and layers. Arcadia deals with Chaos Theory, the Newtonian physics, fractal geometry, and the Second Law of Thermodynamics; and to complicate the matters further, it simultaneously deals with the daily life of people from two different eras, i.e. early nineteenth century and present day. This complex structure might be demanding but, it does help the audience to view life on a larger scale and through the eyes of science (Leach, 2011).

Arcadia investigates the binary oppositions of life/death, order/chaos, and free will/determinism through science and literature. The characters demonstrate these themes through dialogue, but, they are also presented through setting, and the mise en scene. A top notch dramatist such as Stoppard employs every aspect of a play to work on the issue at hand, since as he once said drama is an incomplete medium for dealing with complex issues (Fleming, 2001:246). And the theme of life and death might be considered a complex one, especially if you want to view it through the eyes of science and literature simultaneously. Stoppard investigates the ubiquity of death through the following methods.

Arcadia, the title of the play is borrowed from Greek mythology. Arcadia is the home of the god Pan and it was so enchanting and beautiful that its name became the synonym of Utopia. In general, Arcadia refers to a perfect, uncorrupted, rural state. “*Et in Arcadia ego*”, an expression which is cited twice in the play, comes from Latin, and it means “Even in Arcadia, there am I (I being Death personified, mortality)”. The phrase implies that even in a heavenly state such as Arcadia, mortality is present (Campbell, 2012).

The ubiquity of death and the approaching demise of the universe are also repeated by the sound of the steam engine in background of the stage. According to the second law of thermodynamics and the law of Entropy, the universe is moving from order to chaos and that heat moves in one direction. That is why Thomasina states, "but the heat equation cares very much, it goes only one way; that is the reason Mr. Noakes's engine cannot give the power to drive Mr. Noakes's engines" (Stoppard, 1994:87). In other words, as time passes, the universe become more and more chaotic and more and more energies will be lost, until nothing is left anymore. The invasive and annoying sounds of the steam engine in the background constantly reminds the audience that in the final run, everybody, even the universe dies. Another sound effect that brings death to mind throughout the play is the sound of gunshots.

Another related theme is the irreversibility of time. Thomasina investigates this matter through science, observing that Newtonian physics can operate in any direction, but in reality phenomenon go only in one direction, for instance, once stirred, her rice pudding cannot be "unstirred". She also observes that heat is also linear and moves in only one direction, which today we call the second law of thermodynamics. This scientific fact is acted out by characters that burn bridges in relationships and Thomasina herself who burns to death. The linearity of time and the finality of every entity and phenomenon are always present in the play (Leach, 2011).

2.3. The Invention of Love

The Invention of Love is the last play in which Stoppard has dealt with the theme of death and mortality. Like *Arcadia*, *The Invention of Love* is also a multilayered and multifaceted play. But the main theme for us as Michael Billington declares is "the idea of life as a route march leading inexorably to the grave" (Fleming, 2001:226). The play is based on the life of the poet and scholar, A. E. Houseman. At the beginning of the play, the old and aged Housman is waiting, on the shores of the river Styx, for the ferryman Charon to carry him to the kingdom of Hades. However, on the way to the underworld, the river Styx merges with the Isis River of Oxford in nineteenth century during the reign of Queen Victoria. As a result, A. E. Houseman's memories and recollections become alive. He starts remembering certain points in his life, such as enrolling at Oxford University. The play progresses in short scenes which mainly follows the relationship between A.E. Houseman and his beloved Moses Jackson. Also, these scenes investigate the art for art's sake ideals and Housman's progress from a Latin student to the most excellent textual critic of his time. Then, the play ends by Charon delivering Houseman to his final resting place (Fleming, 2001:241).

The most important scene of the first act is the touching conversation between the young Houseman and his older self in which they discuss the pleasure of gaining knowledge and the *carpe diem* motif. As the old Houseman advises his younger self:

"I wouldn't worry so much about your monument, if I were you. If I had my time again, I would pay more regard to those poems of Horace which tell you, you will not have your time again. Life is brief and death kicks at the door impartially" (Stoppard, 1996:39).

The vital scene of the second act is an imaginary conversation between A. E. Houseman and Oscar Wilde in which they argue and ruminate on their choices in life and their fates. In this scene, again, Stoppard presents a *carpe diem* theme. Oscar Wilde lived his life to the fullest and tried to enjoy every second, and although the homophobic Victorian society condemned him for his homosexual predilections, he left behind a body of work which surpasses and eclipses that of the careful, conformist Housman who made a prisoner of himself through his lack of courage (Clyde & et al., 2000).

Although it is plausible to think of Tom Stoppard as an absolutist regarding the issue of death, he does not give up on life. The linear view of life, which according to Baudrillard is the defining characteristic of modern society, does not sit well with Stoppard. In both cases that were just discussed, Stoppard tries to challenge that view. In *Arcadia*, the juxtaposition of different historical periods and the mingling of characters from past and present in the final scene undermine the binary opposition of life/death. The very act of bringing characters from these two different historical periods together destabilizes the linear view of time and strengthens the circular view of time.

In *The Invention of Love*, Stoppard goes a step further and not only mingles different periods, but also makes characters from different eras interact and discuss various matters, for instance, the conversation between A. E. Houseman and his younger self. Just like *Arcadia*, the interaction between the dead and the living undermines the linear view of life. In symbolic societies the dead are part of the social life. They are not excluded from the cycle of exchanges. Thus, the interaction with the dead creates a circular view of life in which death is not the end; it is only another state of existence, a different social role. And Stoppard does the same by making the dead and the living interact.

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