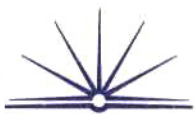


Tom Stoppard's transformation of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' in 'Ros and Ovid are Dead' benefits by drawing the inspiration of the old with the ideas and concepts of the new context. While Stoppard's transformation is not exactly the recontextualising of an identical storyline, many values, themes and ideas have been adopted from the original text. It is important to understand the contexts of both plays in assessing how Stoppard uses the earlier text to say something **new**.

Shakespeare wrote 'Hamlet' in the Elizabethan era. The theatre was the prominent form of entertainment, due to the lack of technology. A whole strata of society was present at the plays, ranging from the monarchy and noblemen right down to the peasantry. To appeal the educated and sophisticated audiences of the upper class, Shakespeare's lyrics in 'Hamlet' are complex and often very poetic. "I have



within which passes show, these but trappings  
and the suits of Woe" (Hamlet)

To entertain the illiterate peasantry Shakespeare included a lot of action and games. The audience saw the world as a chain of being, in which the Monarchy was the closest link to God. This is why 'Hamlet' is concerned with Prince Hamlet restoring the divine order by taking vengeance on his murderous uncle.

Stoppard's 'Ros and Cui' are dead' was written in a time no different from today. Modern theatre goes are generally well educated and sophisticated people, because they have chosen such a minor form of entertainment. Stoppard uses the assumption that his audience is familiar with 'Hamlet,' and the post modern ideas of existentialism and the theatre of the absurd.

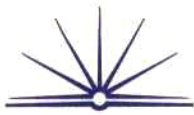
Through this assumption Stoppard transforms various parts of 'Hamlet' and by compare and contrast, is able to make a new social comment.



Stoppard's transformation transforms themes, language and minor characters. Through new interpretation of these features, he can say something new by using the audience's knowledge of the earlier texts.

The predominant theme in both plays is death. ~~Hamlet~~ Shakespeare suggests that death is a definite end to life, a pathway to "undiscovered country". Hamlet is obsessed with it "had it not been that the Everlasting fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter". Because death is such an everpresent oven that haunts our lives in Hamlet, it is strange that Ros and Guildenstern's deaths are so fleetingly mentioned.

Stoppard uses the notion that they are dead already to say something new about the theme of death. He interprets it in an existentialist way, in which deaths are only a part of life, a 'groundhog day' like scenario in which birth and death are synonymous. Ros ironically

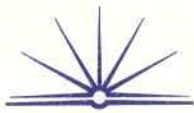


asks "do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it?". The audience indeed know he is dead, and so a new statement is made by Stoppard on the value of death. It is devalued, marked by death being acknowledged. ~~Destiny~~ ~~correlates~~ by a mere "exit".

Destiny correlates with this theme of death. Hamlet initially struggles with the knowledge of his destiny to revenge his father's death. He eventually states that destiny is "a divinity which shapes our end". Ros and Guild have no idea of their destinies by contrast, "We are entitled to some direction" Ros demands.

Stoppard uses the idea of uncertainty of the future, which is a very absurdist idea, to make a new statement. He implies that the world is a very uncertain place, in contrast to the future of 'Hamlet', which is already told and known by today's audience.

This idea of uncertainty is revisited



in the theme of illusion vs reality.

While in Hamlet, there is a distinct difference between the two, in Stoppard's transformation

there is none. Hamlet plays on illusion,

"seems madam, nay, I know not seems",

but in the end reality prevails with

Horatio stating "all this I can truly

deliver". Hayman notes "Ros and acid are

dead' is like a pocket (Hamlet) turned

inside out to show the seams". With the

assumption that the audience understands that

illusion is different to reality in the earlier

text, Stoppard says something new because

there is no difference in his new text.

Ros contemplates "a philosopher dreamed he

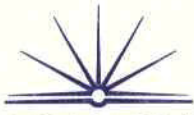
was a butterfly, and from that moment,

he was never sure he was not a butterfly

dreaming he was a philosopher". Through

comparing the treatment of the theme of

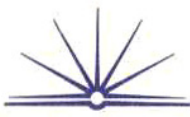
'illusion vs reality' it is true to say that



Stoppard has said something new by interpreting the theme in a very different way. Through his post-modern approach, Stoppard challenges the values of death, destiny and illusion vs reality. In this way he is saying something new about the contexts of each play. He contrasts the modern audience to the Elizabethan upper class audience, and hence can make a social comment on the world as it is today.

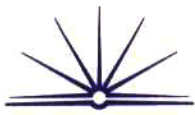
This is further explored in the differences in the languages between the two texts.

A particularly relevant moment is the colliding of the two plays when the king and queen from 'Hamlet' ask 'Ros and Ann' to betray Hamlet so as to discover the source of his madness. The contrast in the eloquent, poetic verse of 'Hamlet' to the direct, colloquial verse of today is very distinct. Claudius says, "hunts not the trail of policy so sure it hath used to, that I have found



the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy". To this, an Ros can reply is "I want to go home".

Keeping in mind the assumption that Stoppard makes that today's audience is familiar with the canonical text of 'Hamlet', he makes new statements through contrasting his interpretations to different scenarios. He transforms the minor characters of Ros and Guild and gives life to them, whereas in Hamlet they were two-dimensional characters. He emphasises the knowledge that Ros and Guild are indeed "dead", so that we may further understand the principles of existentialism, in that people drift through life without making an impact on the world. He compares themes, values and language between the two texts to make social commentaries on the contexts. Hence it is through transformation that the composer of the contemporary text



has used the earlier text to say something  
new.