

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Theatre of the absurd is “a literary movement in drama popular throughout European countries from the 1940s to approximately 1989” (Marinero). The term “theatre of the absurd” was created by American Critic Martin Esslin in 1960, referring to particular plays that convey “the absurdity of human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence” (Esslin xx).

Theatre of the absurd is highly influenced by the philosophy of existentialism, which is a notion that “humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence” (“Existentialism”). The existentialist Albert Camus was the first person to introduce the term “absurd” in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), in which he depicted “the human condition as basically meaningless . . . that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond

its reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd” (Crabb). Absurd playwrights share the same idea with existentialists in the way they “question the nature of existing” (Bolick). That is why their stories usually revolve around characters who are trying to figure out the meaning of their lives and since absurd playwrights believe human existence does not have any meaning or purpose; in their plays, “characters are caught in hopeless situations forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions; dialogue full of clichés, wordplay, and nonsense; plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive; either a parody or dismissal of realism and the concept of the ‘well-made play’” (Cash). Two of the significant playwrights that belong to this movement are Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard.

Samuel Beckett was a prominent writer in the 20th century. He was a novelist, a poet, and a playwright. His first published work was a poem titled *Whoroscope* (1929) which is based on the biography of Rene Descartes, a French philosopher. Some of his famous novels are entitled *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, which is a trilogy written between 1946-1950. He was later best known for his plays, such as *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), and *Happy Days* (1961). Beckett’s works are known for being “stark, fundamentally minimalist, and deeply pessimistic about human nature and the human condition, although the pessimism is mitigated by a great and often wicked sense of humor” (“Samuel Beckett”). Beckett was awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969 “for his writing, which – in new forms for novel and drama – in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation” (“The Nobel Prize in Literature 1969”).

Waiting for Godot is considered the masterpiece of Samuel Beckett. It tells a story about two men waiting for a man or a mysterious figure named Godot.

When *Waiting for Godot* was first performed in 1953 in Paris, France, it received a positive impression from the audiences due to its new convention with “no plot, no climax, no denouement; no beginning, no middle and no end,” according to the English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan (Dickstein). It was also chosen as “the most significant English language play of the 20th century” (Berlin). Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is probably the most well-known absurd play among the others and has influenced other writers in writing similar plays, such as Harold Pinter in *The Dumb Waiter*, Edward Albee in *The Zoo Story*, and even Tom Stoppard in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Tom Stoppard is considered one of the most successful British playwrights and screenwriters. He is the man behind many great plays; some of them are *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Arcadia* (1993), and *The Coast of Utopia* (2002). He is also the co-writer of some famous films, such as *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Stoppard is known for “creating what have been termed ‘serious comedies’ – funny plays that deal with important ideas” (Opitz), as depicted in his works. He has received much praise and many awards for playwriting, including Academy Awards and Tony Awards. He has also received numerous honorary degrees and was knighted in 1997 (“Tom Stoppard”).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is one of Stoppard’s masterpieces. It is also different from Stoppard’s other works because the play is structured in a form of metatheatre. The term “metatheatre” was mentioned by Lionel Abel in his book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, which is briefly defined as “drama about drama” (Hornby 31). The story of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* takes place during a particular part of the plot in

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, focusing on the offstage lives of two minor characters in *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and what the events mean to them. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* received good critical reviews and achieved a huge success when it was first released because it was "a very funny play about death. Very funny, very brilliant, very chilling; it has the dust of thought about it and particles glitter excitingly in the theatrical air" (Barnes), making Stoppard widely known ever since.

Waiting for Godot and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are absurd plays with similar pairs of major characters. Both plays present two men who are thrown into the world trying to figure out the meaning of their lives in their own ways. The characterization and the relationship between the major characters in these two plays are striking, which is why I would like to discuss the portrayal of the major characters of the plays. Harry Shaw in *Dictionary of Literary Terms* states that portrayal "refers to the portrait (*characterization) of individuals presented in literary selections" (295), while character in literature is defined as "a personage in a narrative or dramatic work" ("Character").

Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* have different traits and they are opposite to each other in certain ways; however, they complement each other and depend on each other. Beckett describes Vladimir and Estragon as a pseudo-couple: "they don't necessarily always want to be in each other's company, yet they recognise each other as a necessary person in order to survive" ("Waiting For Godot And Companionship English Literature Essay"). On the other hand, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often described as two sides of the same coin: "a coin has two sides, each distinct, at least in its orientation, and in some sense opposite the other. Yet each side is dependent upon each

other for existence” (Tiedemann). Therefore, the major characters in both plays should be seen as one entity.

Statement of the Problems

The problems I would like to discuss in this thesis are:

1. How are the major characters portrayed in these two plays?
2. What are the purposes of the authors in portraying the major characters?

Purpose of the Study

Based on the problems above, the purposes of the study are:

1. To show how the major characters are portrayed in these two plays.
2. To show the purposes of the authors in portraying the major characters.

Method of Research

In writing this thesis, I use the library research method. First, I read the primary texts, which are Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Second, I analyze the portrayal of the major characters in both plays by using other references to support my analysis. Lastly, I draw some conclusions based on the analysis.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into four chapters, which are preceded by the Abstract and the Table of Contents. The first chapter is the Introduction, which consists of the Background of the Study, the Statement of the Problem, the Purpose of the Study, the Method of Research, and the Organization of the Thesis. The second chapter contains the analysis of the portrayal of the major

characters in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The third chapter contains the analysis of the portrayal of the major characters in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The fourth chapter contains the conclusion of the analysis, followed by the Bibliography and the Appendices, which consist of the summary of both plays and the biography of the authors.

