DEATHSCAPES IN TOM STOPPARD'S *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*

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Abstract: *Tom Stoppard's* "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" *is a postmodern play that emphasises the importance of space in drama. This study presents the stage and the variants it represents as deathscapes in two parts: one focuses on chance, fate and death coexisting in the same space, the other presents several minor chronotopic motifs as deathscapes and shows how the movement from one to another leads to death.*

Keywords: *deathscape, space, death, drama, postmodern.*

Introduction

Deathscape is a concept attached to anthropology, and which naturally fits in literature not only as part of life experience and as a coordinate but also as a chronotopic motif expanding beyond cemeteries and even concreteness into memory and history. Death can happen everywhere and people have been carrying it in their minds and in their souls since the moment they acknowledged it, since "Man has created death", as Yeats said in his poem "Death". Death, physical and abstract, real and symbolic, builds history and moulds memories and personalities.

The anthropologists' interest in deathscapes was disseminated via the volume *Deathscapes. Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remebrance* edited by Avril Maddrell and James Sidaway (2010). According to the editors, death is often described in "spatial terms" ("a final journey", "crossing to the other side", etc.) and is related to temporal terms used for mourning and grief ("time heals"), it is also associated with physical spaces, virtual communities and psychological spaces (Maddrell, 2010: 1). While emphasising concrete spaces of death, such as cemeteries, and their relation to memory, Kathrine R. Cook states that "mortuary landscapes, or *deathscapes*, are active components in the construction and negotiation of memory, heritage and attitudes towards death and the dead."(Cook, 2011: 1)

> Thus death and bereavement are intensified at certain sites (such as the regulated spaces of the hospital, the cemetery and the mortuary) but affect and unfold in many others: the home, public spaces, places of worship, and sites of accidents, tragedy and violence. They are both intensively private and personal, while often simultaneously experienced and expressed collectively and publicly. Furthermore, these experiences of death, dying and morning are mediated through the intersections of the body, culture, society and state, and often make a deep impression on sense of self, private and public identity, as well as sense of place in the built and natural environment. (Maddrell, 2010: 2)

Deathscape is not only that place where dead bodies regain their way to nothingness and attempt reintegration into nature, but it is the place where people die, where people speak of death or perform it, it is the place where hopes die and bodies too early start to hibernate. Literature has explored variants of deathscape which cross the immediate logical boundaries of the concept and are destined to metaphoric and metaphysical spheres. The artistic weaving around death and deathscapes makes the

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readers acknowledge their unavoidable presence in life and a necessary interdependence and coexistence life-death.

Death and Deathscapes

Death has always been a theme of interest to writers who, by exploring experiences and spaces related to death, have attempted to meet the readers' expectations, which have not changed much since ancient tragedies and Aristotle's *Poetics*. Death, murder, bloodshed and incest in noble families entertained the ancient theatre-goers and built their heroes. Meanwhile death has found its way among common people, has lost its grandiose stage representation and was associated with "characters of a lower type" becoming ludicrous and deprived of the usual depth and pain which once bloomed into philosophical ideas. Similarly, offstage death is not impressive and lacks credibility, but by raising doubt on its occurrence and by speculating on the ways of its occurrence, writers can shift the audience's focus from expected onstage death to a rather speculative and philosophical image of death. Characters often die or philosophise on death and dying, and the gruesome their stories are, the more attracted people are even nowadays. That is what Martin McDonagh's protagonist in *The Pillowman* tells us, Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* shows, Caryl Churchill's *A Number* suggests, and the Player in *Rosencrantz and Guilderstern Are Dead* explains, to name only several contemporary playwrights whose plays spin around death.

Written at a moment when the audience was not such blood-thirsty as it used to be in ancient times, much influenced by the philosophical veil enwrapping the writings of the time, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guilderstern Are Dead* meets the characteristics of a postmodern play offering variations on death and dying in meaning and form and exploiting the emotional and visual potential of death. Death and dying stirred Tom Stoppard's imagination into rewriting *Hamlet* seen from offstage while echoing Beckett's choice of common people as characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, postmodern variants of the Elizabethan characters that are assigned features of Vladimir and Estragon, playfully debate on life and death when readers know that they will die by the end of the play.

The title of the play is not a simple bridge over the centuries that lie between the two playwrights, but an indubitably ambiguous opening towards various meanings of death and deathscapes. Although a first tendency would be to see the play as complementary to *Hamlet*, it also offers the perspective of the ever present death within the most familiar places and the most unexpected situations and, by crossing the border between reality and fiction, questions onstage and offstage death. Consequently, both setting and dialogue in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* are built around the idea of death, related to it, reminding of it or preparing the characters for it, which turns the play into a succession of real and symbolic deathscapes.

Stoppard does not use concrete elements related to the geography and architecture of deathscapes, but shows his interest in metatheatrical devices and reveals a contemporary apprehension of death. In his play the deathscapes overlap and the intersection of the fictional space of the play "The Murder of Gonzago" with the space of the frame-play creates confusion and identitary alienation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who instinctively refuse to recognise themselves in the dead characters. The setting Stoppard creates has more layers and acquires more meanings, being part of a "set of relations". According to Michel Foucault

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> The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (Foucault, 1984: 46-49)

The deathscapes that are to be delineated in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* interfere and overlap forming a network of *heterotopias.*

Chance, Fate and Death within the Same Space

The limits man sets are not the real limits within the cycle of life: life (associated with the growth of fingernails and beards) extends beyond birth and death, since movement and change imply life. On the other hand, death is always present around man and in man, it is inevitable. Thus, Stoppard's play implies that life and death coexist and that it is impossible to dissociate one from the other. Similarly, the space inhabited by the two characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, becomes a many-fold one: on the one hand it is a public space which hosts living people, on the other hand it becomes a place where people speak about death and a stage for the tragedians who perform death. The spatial heterogeneity is many sided as a result of its contamination with the opposite meaning: a space for living people vs. deathscape and real vs. fictional space.

The title announces the reader again, after centuries, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, which arises various expectations: - they are only referred to, so they continue to exist in the memory of some characters; some "un-, sub-, supernatural" or after-death experience with two dead characters; the two characters are doomed to death, considering the flow of events in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; Ros and Guil are just some instruments, powerless and also unable to decide for themselves, therefore already dead, and waiting for the others to lead them to physical death, as there must be an end: "Eternity is a terrible thought" Ros says (Stoppard, 1978: 52). All these possible speculations spin around death and are built on a deathscape echoing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern raise the problem of whether fate or chance is guiding them. Knowing that fate is "the universal principle or ultimate agency by which the order of things is presumably prescribed; the decreed cause of events"[1] and that chance is "the absence of any cause of events that can be predicted, understood, or controlled; a possibility or probability of anything happening"[2], they try to philosophise on which of them is governing their lives which ineluctably heads for death, as Freud attempted to convince us with "the death drive". Rosencrantz, for instance, believes "we must be born with an intuition of mortality" (Stoppard, 1978: 53) and implies the ever presence of death. Death is also part of the game Ros and Guil play and which they

[1] "fate." *The American Heritage® Dictionary of Idioms by Christine Ammer*. Houghton Mifflin Company. 20 Jun. 2013.
<Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/fate>.
[2] "chance." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper, Historian. 20 Jun. 2013.
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unnaturally and probably as a result of being simplified characters, according to the directions, accept without showing surprise.

Present in the characters' minds and suggested by their confusion and paralysis, death can be also associated with the setting echoing the desert ("a place without any visible character") where the two are passing their time uselessly, tossing coins with nothing at stake. When this place gets populated with the tragedians, it becomes a stage for mimicked death and bloodshed. While so far Ros and Guil have faced only the idea of death and a form of paralysis, the actors' performances set in the middle of the road show that there is no right place for death, but it can happen anywhere. The players and their rehearsals increase the suspense.

The two characters are made to spin around two dominant axes while tossing the coins: Ros – "The run of 'heads' is impossible, yet ROS betrays no surprise at all – he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel *a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend*. Let that be his character note." Guil – "is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; *aware but not going to panic about it* – his character note."(Stoppard, 1978: 7) Since they are not explicitly interested in money, their game is a pretext for the conversation on chance and fate, on probability and impossibility. The impossibility for the run of heads and the low probability for them to meet the tragedians and attend the latter's performances on the road are part of the authors strategy for anticipating increased tension and the probability for "unexpected death". These elements address the audience, and not the two protagonists who do not feel either embarrassment or panic.

According to the characters, the action is set in a natural space. Guil's postulate shows that the law of probability, which would have hindered the continuous running of "heads", operates in an un-, sub- or supernatural world, but they do not live in such a world, so the law of probability does not operate, which means that there may be no chance for Guil to win. Their world is thus governed by fate and they are obedient characters. A man went to them and called their names and they came, they are entitled to some direction, actually to only one direction, according to Ros (Stoppard, 1978: 53). He thinks they have no control, therefore there is no use to act. By not acting they do not give themselves any chance, therefore they are symbolically dead.

The fact that the initial setting is a deathscape is upheld by apparently accidental references to death:

> **Ros** (*cutting his fingernails*): Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard. (…)
> **Guil**: But you're not dead.
> **Ros** (*irritated*): I didn't say they *started* to grow after death! (*Pause, calmer*.) The fingernails also grow before birth, though *not* the beard. (Stoppard, 1978: 13)

The quotation above suggests the cyclicity of life through the similarity between the beginning and the end as well as through continuity and change. It also implies the characters' acknowledgement of the coexistence of life and death or of the ever-presence of death.

The similarity between the beginning and the end of life leads to confusion, which is rendered by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's hesitation when they want to get on: "Which way do we ------- (*He turns round*.) Which way did we -------?" (Stoppard, 1978: 14) They were chosen, woke up (as from death, since the morning was a beginning) and set on a road following a direction for which they were entitled. They never question the authority of the person or the direction, as it seems very clearly that any road leads to death, which is their final destination. They do not hurry to get there,

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but enjoy lingering on the road. They seem to wisely accept their coming death as natural, especially now that they admit they live in a natural world where fate governs over chance. Actually, they are meant to die, as they are characters from a previously written play in which they die and the flow of events is not changed; it is simply presented from another perspective.

Real vs. Fictional Deathscapes

Since death is the axis around which the whole play is built, the stage with all its recreated and embedded spaces, is a deathscape. Stoppard mainly uses spaces that require more involvement on behalf of the audience due to the scarcity of elements on the stage. Other places, like the chapel as a space for death, are only mentioned. (Stoppard, 1978: 68) Unlike the stage where theoretically there is dissolution, the chapel is considered a place of death and intensive feelings related to it and it counterbalances the unconvincing gestures on stage.

However, in Stoppard's play the stage is the place where death acquires the highest intensity. At the same time the stage is the place where actors pretend death, therefore it is neither a natural nor a probable place for real death. Death in literature is artificial and Yeats as *deconstructor* (Kiberd, 2002: 444) warns us about it through "the corrupting effects of the written word" (Kiberd, 2002: 444). It cannot convince the audience aware of the fictitious deathscape and of its temporary effect. Onstage death fails to illicit real emotional intensity in the audience, as Guil states:

> **Guil**: "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 – it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says – "One day you are going to die." (*He straightens up*.) You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death?" (Stoppard, 1978: 63)
>
> **Guil**: "… 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 failing to reappear, that's all – now you see him, now you don't that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back – an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death." (Stoppard, 1978: 64)

Stoppard creates a more complex situation by using the play-within a play-within a play: *The Murder of Gonzago* within *Hamlet* within *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The increased alteration of identity and the frequent slippages on and off stage, which is still on stage for the readers/audience of Stoppard's play, soften the impact of death and create a sense of aloofness. According to Skelton, "many fictional deaths are *not* terribly moving or true to our personal or professional experiences of bereavement and death. In other words, literature is not just an attack on the emotions. Nor do we only find emotions expressed in great literature." (Skelton, 2003: 211)

The stage as a deathscape is the Player's speciality, as he cannot offer anything without blood and death.

> **Player**: They [the tragedians] are a bit out of practice, but they always pick up wonderfully for the deaths – it brings out the poetry in them. […] There is nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death. (Stoppard, 1978: 57)
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> **Player**: [Death is] what the actors do best. They have to exploit whatever talent is given to them, and their talent is dying. They can die heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly […] They kill beautifully. In fact some of them kill even better than they die. The rest die better than they kill. They're a team. (Stoppard, 1978: 63)

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For these players death is the centre of their performances and their major concern is how to do it. Death is thus deconstructed and perceived without emotions on stage, it is multifaceted and moulded to transmit various emotions. Onstage death implies a shift from the meaning of death proper to the way in which it should be rendered.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead provides a variety of physical and emotional, fictional and "real" spaces for death. First, the two characters are on the road which is a symbol for life and also suggests a direction towards death since any road has an end or a "dead end" and so has life. It turns out to be the road towards death for Ros and Guil. The two protagonists have different attitudes towards death which reveal their emotional and personal spaces for death: Ros is afraid of eternal life and he expects death as a natural end, believing that man must have been born with "an intuition of mortality" while Guil is afraid of eternity after death which he calls "the worst of both worlds".

Ros, obsessively speaking of death, dying and dead people, imagines spaces for death, like the coffin, inhabited by living people.

> **Ros**: … Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it?
> **Guil**: No.
> **Ros**: Nor do I, really… It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being alive in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is dead … which should make the difference … shouldn't it? I mean you'd never know you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being asleep in box. No that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air – you'd wake up dead, for a start and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box. That's the bit I don't like, frankly. That's why I don't think of it… (Stoppard, 1978: 52)

He creates tension and emotion by squeezing life into the coffin. This limited space encapsulated in the larger space the characters experience shows that death implies physical borders and absence. As the play unfolds, the space gets smaller and smaller, and the two characters get on a boat and then in the barrels that make them disappear.

The boat that takes them to England is seen as both life and death or as part of their way towards death: "We drift down time, clutching at straws. But what good's a brick to a drowning man?" (…) "We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat?" (Stoppard, 1978: 81) Ros and Guil's journey on boat leads to death, indeed, but it is also a reiteration of the journey in *Hamlet* and a more symbolic one that echoes Caron and his boat. "The drift down time" shows another loss of control over their lives and the boat is the place where the letter is replaced, where they are sentenced to death and executed by the tragedians after they realise that England is "a dead end" for them. The suspense is increased by the possibilities Stoppard's characters identify in the meaning and form of death, in the succession of events, in the tension between real and fictional actions at the border of which the tragedians lie. Ros and Guild die in confusion, wondering why and how they have become so important to be killed.

The space of death is a space of absence, not the acting makes death: "It's just a man failing to reappear" (Stoppard, 1978: 64). The tragedians keep reappearing and their identity is in a continuous change, therefore people get accustomed with seeing them again and do not feel the suspense of the absence and the emotional involvement. For Guil "death is not anything … death is not …It's the absence of presence, nothing more…" (Stoppard, 1978: 95). Guil and Ros die by disappearing, nobody sees their corpses and their death is announced in the end, like in *Hamlet*. Their disappearance makes the difference from the other actors' dying in the fading light upstage.

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Conclusion

Stoppard's play explores new perspectives in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by adapting the latter to the postmodern dramatic devices. He writes a tragicomedy around two unimportant characters and shows their concern with fundamental problems like death, fate and reality by deconstructing the space of the stage and by questioning the effect of onstage death upon the audience. The stage as a heterotopy brings together life and death within the same spaces and also a split perspective between upstage related to Hamlet and downstage to Ros and Guil, between offstage and onstage. Within this already fragmented space, the meanings of the created or mentioned spaces are always associated to death, which makes them deathscapes: the road, the boat, England, the coffin and the barrels – the chronotopic motifs that uphold the evolution of the play. The novelty of Stoppard's play consists in the variety of meanings assigned to the same space, in the cluster of ideas arising from the relativity of perception that eventually reflect ambiguity and confusion.

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