

TOM STOPPARD: A PLAYWRIGHT ON THE FENCE

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the content of Tom Stoppard's work, rather than placing emphasis on his form and cleverness. By dissecting the plays *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Travesties*, *The Invention of Love*, and *Rock 'n' Roll*, one can see that Stoppard acts as an impartial playwright. He presents opposing philosophical outlooks within the confines of his plays, but he gives no evidence as to which opinion most closely represents his own viewpoint.

By examining the previous research in relation to Tom Stoppard, as well as Stoppard's own discussions of his works, it becomes apparent that Stoppard often focuses on three primary themes: an individual's attempt to find truth and meaning within his existence, the use of multiple narrative strains to establish a balanced societal view, and the importance of art and intellect to a society. However, after scrutinizing much of the scholarly research around Stoppard's works, it became apparent that much of the literary criticism focused on his word play and cleverness, rather than the subject matter of his plays. This thesis hopes to add to the negligible amount of existing analysis of his substance, rather than just his form.

Although Tom Stoppard does function as an intellectual gamester and can dazzle with his cleverness, this paper concludes that focusing only on this facet of his plays yields an incomplete appreciation of what he has created. He treats his characters, regardless of whether or not he agrees with their points of view, as equally rational and logical. He leaves it to his audience to decide which character has the "correct" point of view. He is as much a philosophical gamester as he is a wordsmith, and he uses the three previously addressed themes to present the focal points of his philosophical debates. He functions as a playwright on the fence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a character referred to only as The Player states, "Every exit is an entry somewhere else." If one thinks of this statement in terms of living one's life, it implies that every choice leads to a new life path. However, this statement expresses an idea that exists at the core of many of Stoppard's plays: the idea that multiple paths exist in a character's lifespan. Stoppard often creates characters, both major and minor, who spend the entire play searching for a sense of purpose and meaning in a world that seems devoid of those possibilities. The worlds his characters inhabit often seem oppressive and foreign, with a sense of menace lurking around every corner. In addition, Stoppard presents the societies he portrays on stage from various points of view. The characters analyze the world and provide differing outlooks, each as logical as the next. In a *New York Times* review of Stoppard's latest play *Rock 'n' Roll*, reviewer Ben Brantley calls the play "sentimental" and immediately follows that claim with the declaration, "The words „Tom Stoppard“ and „sentimental“ in intimate proximity? Mr. Stoppard is the intellectual magician who turns academic pursuits like philology, etymology, and ontology into quicksilver theater. People don't cry at his plays; they ponder" (Brantley 1).

Unfortunately, critics and scholars too often apply the word "ponder" is to Stoppard's plays. This implies his plays offer only intellectual stimuli, but are devoid of a moral center. Critics examine his form but not his content. For many, Stoppard functions as an intellectual gamester, dazzling an audience with his knowledge of both the English language and philosophy. He is a chief example of a post-modern playwright, utilizing nonlinear plots and a tendency to reject master narratives for history, a sense of conflicting, multiple identities, and occasional

skepticism regarding the ideas of progress. However, looking past the clever, witty wrapping paper of his plays, one can see he makes a serious attempt to seek out truth amidst competing notions. What makes him unique among playwrights is his tendency to treat multiple points of views with equal reverence. He does not present a particular philosophical position as obviously correct and the opposing position as obviously flawed. He attempts to remain neutral and does not propose a “correct” outlook. Rather, he presents opposing ideals that shift from the logical to the absurd in a matter of a few lines. In general, his plays examine characters who search for truth and meaning. But he also portrays art and literature in society as a means of making life not easier, but more bearable. However, he presents these ideas through different, conflicting theoretical approaches.

II. A BRIEF PLOT SUMMARY OF THE PLAYS UNDER DISCUSSION

The first play for which Stoppard received critical acclaim was *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The play re-writes *Hamlet*, in that it is told from Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's perspectives. However, Stoppard blends Shakespeare's dialogue with his own philosophy and word play. But he also includes Beckett's cynical existentialism to portray the tragic inevitability of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Throughout the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play word games and engage in philosophical discussions, because they are unable to cope with their inability to understand the events transpiring around them. They are guided by the Player, a character borrowed from *Hamlet*, who understands the facets of the plot in which they are all involved, and who attempts to provide the central protagonists with an understanding of their situation. By the end of the play, however, they die without comprehending the circumstances that inevitably lead to their deaths.

Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*, written in 1974, blends the "comedy of manners" plot of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a fictionalized meeting in Zurich among three historical figures: the author James Joyce, the Dadaist founder Tristan Tzara, and the Russian revolutionary Lenin. The meeting is recounted by the British consular official Henry Carr, whose fading memory and somewhat erratic mind adversely affects his ability to recall the meeting among these revolutionaries. Throughout the play, the characters discuss their differing philosophies about art and their very dissimilar ideas about politics and society. Rewriting a play like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, that features two principle characters, Jack and Algernon, who constantly practice deception for their own benefit, and introducing an aging man with an erratic memory leads the playgoer to question the reliability of Carr's account. At the end of the

play, the audience is left to question whether such an encounter occurred or whether the action portrayed on the stage is an imaginary act of Carr's fading memory.

Written in 1997, *The Invention of Love* presents poet A.E. Housman as he is ferried across the River Styx. As the ferry ride progresses, Housman reflects upon his life, frequently confronting a younger version of himself, Moses Jackson, the man he loved, and the shadow of Oscar Wilde, whose life Housman frequently compares with his own. Through the confrontations of Housman with his younger self, separated by fifty years of experience and disappointments, Stoppard shows both the virtues and failings of youth and age. In addition, Stoppard contrasts Wilde, who died disgraced, and Housman, who died respected. However, Stoppard makes the case that Housman never really lived, as he denied his desire for Moses Jackson, thereby living a lie. In contrast, Wilde indulged in his desires, resulting in a more fulfilled life. As the play concludes, Housman reflects one last time upon "Oxford in the Golden Age," as well as his relief that he need no longer ponder the era's philosophies. His retrospective feels as though it comes from a man who regrets having been guarded for much of his guarded life.

Perhaps the least post-modern of Stoppard's plays, *Rock 'N' Roll*, Stoppard's most recent play, uses fictional characters to examine the cultural and political changes of Czechoslovakia from 1968-1990 with rock music as a means of rebellion. Throughout the play, the Czechoslovakian government focuses upon censoring rock music. To continue to possess rock music qualifies as a means of rebelling against the oppressive regime. The play concludes in 1990, with the surviving characters watching the Rolling Stones in Prague, symbolizing the removal of the oppressive government.

III. THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

At first glance, it may seem strange to examine Tom Stoppard's 1966 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as a means of historical commentary. He wrote the play in a time in which young men were becoming skeptical of the government and powerful authority figures, due to the costly, increasingly unpopular Vietnam War. The play functions as a blending of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the uncertainty of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (in fact, critics often refer to it as "Waiting for Hamlet") featuring characters from *Hamlet* so insignificant that their deaths do not even occur on stage. The identities are obscure, and even in Stoppard's reimagining, neither of the title characters is certain which one of them is Rosencrantz and which one is Guildenstern. Thrust into a society they do not understand, they find themselves embroiled in a conflict between two powerful individuals of royalty, and they die never understanding the complexities of the events that have gone on around them. "Theirs is essentially the predicament of the individual trapped in a world where the powers in charge carry on as though all events had purpose, but where that purpose eludes the individual citizen" (Cahn 39). As their lives end, all they can say about everything that has transpired around them is that "there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said -- no. But somehow we missed it" (Stoppard 125). Neither character, for one moment in this play, is in control of his life. Instead, they are manipulated and controlled by those around them.

As far as most *Hamlet* and Shakespeare scholars are concerned, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern barely warrant analysis. They are barely-present characters, and their deaths are announced, immediately following the deaths of four far-more important characters: Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet. As a result, even their deaths barely register in the minds of an audience. One may hear of their deaths and think, "I'd forgotten about them." They appear as

Claudius's unwitting spies and adapt the slightly menacing presence of two shadowy figures, lurking in the background. In contrast, Stoppard sees them quite differently, saying, "They are more than just bit players in another play. . . . They end up dead without really knowing why. . . . So I see them much more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocents" (Delaney 18). Stoppard gives them a kind of "everyman" quality. They are not grand planners like Hamlet or conniving villains like Claudius. They exist merely as two individuals, out of their depth, unaware of any of the complex inner-workings of Elsinore Castle, and have no frame of reference within which to successfully maneuver the situation into which they are thrust.

As the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* progresses to its conclusion, the idea of death and one's own mortality become a near-obsession for both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They search for understanding within the world of Elsinore, but understanding eludes them. As a result, they examine the end of one's life, following a futile existence. Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern if he ever thinks of himself as "actually *dead*, lying with a box with a lid on it" (Stoppard 71). Guildenstern says he does not; Rosencrantz says he does not either, and then he proceeds to speak in great, exhaustive detail about preferring to be alive in a box, rather than dead in a box, implying he has pondered this quite a bit. He concludes, "Life in a box is better than no life at all. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking -- well at least I'm not dead" (71). Despite the bleakness of their endeavor, Rosencrantz sees the opportunity for more life as immensely preferable to the end of a futile existence, a kind of optimism that life, no matter how bleak the situation appears, always has the chance to improve. As critic Katherine Kelly puts it, "Their lack of vision is amusing at first, but upon reflection, it becomes pathetic. A world is functioning around them, and they simply cannot grasp the reasons why and how" (61). Therein rests the tragedy of their journey. They never have a chance of

survival. Their demise feels inevitable, a course whose direction cannot be altered. Rosencrantz thinks that as long as he remains alive, there exists a chance to survive. Neither he nor Guildenstern see their paths are set and pre-destined.

Their deaths, both in *Hamlet* and in Stoppard's play, occur off-stage. In *Hamlet*, an English ambassador announces their deaths to the now carnage-filled Elsinore Court. Stoppard retains this same text, following a scene in which these characters fade from view without any real death scene. Even in their own story, their deaths are pointless. However, until that point, they cling desperately to any chance of survival they feel they may have. They attempt to understand meaning the inner workings of Elsinore. As Guildenstern says, "Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace to which we are . . . condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one - that is the meaning of order . . . if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost" (Stoppard 60). Stoppard implies that Guildenstern knows there are grander forces at work than he can comprehend and that both he and Rosencrantz are involved with them. However, while he tries to understand these events and their effect on them, he cannot understand the complexities of the events around them. Both want their lives to be meaningful, but they ultimately seem without any purpose, except to die.

The play continues to portray the notion of death, as understood by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as lonely and tragic. However, Stoppard contrasts this notion with the grandiose way in which The Player views it. As Robinson asserts, "Despair in . . . Stoppard's work [exists] with an unquenchable vitality. His parody tends to express this despair and vitality simultaneously" (Robinson 86). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern portray this idea through their conversations. They speak like a vaudeville duo, complete with puns and clever wordplay, but

their conversations almost exclusively revolve around the grim and the morbid. The Player describes it as “deaths for all ages and occasions! Death by suspension, convulsion, consumption, incision, execution, asphyxiation, and malnutrition-! Climactic carnage, by poison and by steel-! Double deaths by duel--! Show!” (124). To the Player, death is romantic and glorious. The words “carnage,” “steel,” and “duel” indicate deaths by action, or deaths in blazes of glory. The word “show”, coupled with a well-placed exclamation point, indicates both the spectacle of death and the concept that, for the players, death is all an act. After a death, they rise to take their bows, and prepare to reenact another death the next night. For The Player, death is not a reality, but merely an illusion. In contrast, for Guildenstern death is the reality:

I’m talking about death -- and you’ve never experienced *that*. And you cannot *act* it. You die a thousand casual deaths - with none of that intensity which squeezes out life . . . and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after *death* - there is no applause - there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that’s - *death* (Stoppard 122).

Though these two opposing opinions as to death’s true nature indicate the contrast between illusion and reality. Stoppard portrays death not as grand and noble but terrifying and dismal. Guildenstern sees that death for the First Player exists as a mere artifice, an action that precedes a bow, but he understands there is nothing glorious about death. It is only the ceasing of life. Guildenstern takes on the role of the nihilist, believing there is nothing after death, while the slightly menacing Player inhabits the role of an individual of faith, believing death is a mere doorway to another existence. At first glance, it would appear that Stoppard presents Guildenstern’s view as the truer view of death, as The Player’s death functions outside of reality. However, The Player is able to survive his stabbing, as he feels he must always return to hear his applause, while Guildenstern must fade from view. Therefore, Stoppard indicates both views have benefits: Guildenstern’s view possessing a more practical notion of the afterlife, while the

Player's view maintaining the possibility of a chance to rise again. With his death, Guildenstern knows there will be no songs sung to commemorate his passing. His death, as well as Rosencrantz's death, ultimately means nothing. They have searched for some significance their life may have had, but they are left with nothing.

Travesties centers on an all-but-forgotten real-life figure, British officer Henry Carr. The play features dual layers of characters who hope to find a sense of meaning in their lives. Stoppard utilizes the Post-Modernist bricolage, creating a plot out of various elements of history and popular culture. The title is particularly appropriate, as it means an absurd misrepresentation of a situation, and Henry Carr's presentation of history epitomizes that definition. Carr seems to possess little more than a passing knowledge of history, preferring instead to create an imaginary history. While Joyce, Lenin and Tzara were in Zurich around the same time, there is little evidence they had more than a passing familiarity with one another. As Stoppard stated in an interview, "*Travesties* is a play about real people in a real place at a real time. It does not use a historical treatment, a linear one, putting the event in the right order, because I don't think it tells the truth" (Delaney 103). On one level, he provides Tzara, Joyce, and Lenin, discussing and theorizing about the mediums through which they will give their lives a sense of purpose. Tzara hopes the Dadaist art movement will provide him recognition, Joyce hopes to achieve importance through his literature and revolutionary, avant-garde writing style, and Lenin hopes his political philosophies will improve the state of the world and provide him with some recognition.

However, in the play, Stoppard shows the only way in which the audience encounters these individuals is through the failing memory of real-life British consular official Henry Carr. He demonstrates that Carr sees his encounters with these men, more brilliantly and better

remembered than he is, as a way to provide a sense of meaning for his own life. The portrayals of these three important, historically relevant men never resemble their true personas and are never intended to do so. Their personas within the play are unimportant. Their importance lies in how they matter to Henry Carr, as they demonstrate his desired historical relevance, and their inaccuracies-- Joyce's bizarre, surreal behavior, Tzara's romantic pursuit of Lenin's secretary, Gwendolyn (also a character in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*)-- seem the result of Carr's failing memory. The only way in which one sees these cultural giants are through his addled brain. The reader first sees Carr as an old man, writing his memoirs. He is a verbose individual, spinning yarns in hopes of proving his own importance. In other words, he exists as a man who thinks himself insignificant, so he must compensate through his association with those who were important in their own right.

Neither Joyce, Lenin, nor Tzara examine their importance through their associations with other individuals. They are three revolutionaries, each hoping to revolutionize their specific mediums. They remain relevant through their own achievements and have the faith in their accomplishments to do so. Lenin seems aware his Communist views will bring him recognition, Joyce is aware his novels are well regarded, enough to preserve his legacy, and Tzara sees his contributions to the Dadaist art movement as worthy of historical memory. However, Carr feels it is only through those important men that his life has meaning. As Gabbard mentions, "Carr's fantasies of self-importance, coupled with his shallow learning, make him the perfect image of the frustrated wish to know. Urged by inadequacy, he *must* insist that he knew these great men, that *he* stood at the crossroads of history. Henry Carr escapes his inadequacy in lies and delusions" (110). They provide him some link to historical greatness, even if it is by proxy.

Stoppard utilizes Tzara as Carr's "devil's advocate" in order to advance his philosophy about art and the role of the artist. Tzara argues, "Doing the things by which is meant Art is no longer considered the proper concern of the artist. . . . Nowadays, an artist is someone who makes art mean the things he does" (Stoppard 21). Carr, however, counters, "But that does not make you an artist. An artist is someone who is gifted in some way that enables him to do something more or less well which can only be done badly or not at all by someone who is not gifted" (Stoppard 21). Here exists a philosophical debate about not only what makes art actually art, but what makes an artist an artist. However, as is Stoppard's way, both arguments seem equally logical. The purpose of Dadaism is to ridicule the meaninglessness of the modern world, an idea that seems threatening to Carr, as he is desperate to instill his life with meaning and significance. Tzara feels an artist need not have any natural ability to paint, sculpt, compose, or write. That which is not considered "good" may still be considered art. An artist merely makes a statement and must be capable of conveying it within the confines of his medium. Carr, however, feels that an artist must be gifted in an area, and be more adept at creating than the average person-- a more traditional definition of an artist. Carr emphasizes the technique; Tzara emphasizes the philosophy and opinions behind a work. Due to his limited images of words—"and their--meanings, "he does not see art as a force for societal change, and he sees no connection between the current revolutions in art and society" (Gabbard 112).

Both adapt the central philosophies of this debate and apply them when discussing the nature of war. Tzara claims, "Wars are fought for oil wells and coaling stations. . . .War is capitalism with the gloves off, and many who go to war know it, but they go to war because they don't want to be a hero. It takes courage to sit down and be counted" (Stoppard 22). Carr, in an extreme rage, counters by saying, "I went to war because it was my *duty*, because my country

needed me, because my country needed my help, and that's patriotism" (Stoppard 22). The same fundamental differences exist between these two competing philosophies, and again, both seem logical. Tzara sees the emphasis lying in the inner workings of warfare, just as he values the effectiveness of viewpoint conveyance over technique in artistic expression. His views on warfare uphold the Dadaist's philosophy towards warfare which felt that "the world which permitted global war had.....relinquished the right to be taken seriously" (Peterson 50). Carr sees the nobility of battle, an ability to do what only a few are willing to do, as the point of emphasis. As critic Gabbard asserts, "He insists that duty and patriotism saw him through the horrors of his war service, but his talk of the bloody, muddy trenches is mingled with memories of the twill jodhpurs and the lamb's--wool died khakis he wore" (112). This is similar to his views on art, as his philosophy indicated the ability of the few over the ability of the masses. However, one must remember this debate does not exist anywhere for the reader or viewer except within the confines of Henry Carr's mind. This knowledge calls into question everything presented. Henry Carr is merely having a debate with himself, but by juxtaposing his philosophy with that of his perception of Tristan Tzara's philosophy as he perceives it, he feels he is able to lend his views degree of importance because they were utilized in a philosophical debate with the famous Tristan Tzara, and both views appear valid.

In reality, Joyce and Henry Carr had no affection for one another. Carr in fact had sued Joyce over Carr's claim that Joyce had not reimbursed him for some articles of clothing Carr had purchased to play Algernon in Joyce's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The cost of the attire caused Joyce such annoyance that he took his retribution by portraying Carr's superior Consular General Bennett and Consular Official Henry Carr as Sergeant Major Bennett and Private Carr, who "knock Stephen Dedalus down in the „Circe“ episode of *Ulysses*"

(Stoppard x). According to Richard Ellmann's biography of James Joyce, tensions between Joyce and Carr escalated to the point that Carr and Joyce ended up in an altercation which ended with Carr proclaiming, "You're a cad... You're a swindler. If I don't get out I'll throw you down stairs. Next time I catch you outside I'll wring your neck (Ellmann 440). However, in *Travesties*, Carr's view of Joyce appears to suffer the effect of Carr's flustered mind. Initially, Carr describes Joyce as a man whose "genius was never in doubt" but a few lines later also characterizes him as a man "who wished his total indifference to public notice to be universally recognized -- in short a liar and a hypocrite, a tight-fisted, sponging, fornicating drunk" (Stoppard 6, 7). To put it mildly, there seems to be a discrepancy between Carr's views on Joyce, as it alters in a matter of seconds. This contradiction continues throughout the course of the play, and both views towards Joyce seem reasonable. They appear absurd only because these contradicting opinions occur in rapid succession within the same person.

At one moment, Joyce seems to be working as a support system for Carr, as Joyce also challenges Tzara's views about art, saying, "What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed over by an artist's touch? Dust . . . But it is we who stand enriched, by a tale of heroes, of a golden apple, a wooden horse, a face that launched a thousand ships -- and, above all, of Ulysses, . . . the most complete of all heroes . . . It is a theme so overwhelming that I am almost afraid to treat it" (Stoppard 42). His views are eloquently expressed and persuasive. In addition, Joyce seems passionate and humble as to his literary undertaking, but this view is undercut immediately by the stage direction following his eloquent, impassioned speech, "*Joyce produces a rabbit out of his hat, puts the hat on his head, and leaves, holding the rabbit*" (Stoppard 42). With this juxtaposition of the eloquent and the absurd, Stoppard both hints at the complexities and contradictions of a man who could blend both the high humor and the low humor in his

Ulysses, while also reiterating that this all occurs within the confines of Carr's increasing incoherency and remains unreliable as a trustworthy source. For Carr, Joyce represents an intellectual brilliance and a relevance he can never hope to attain. His only means of remaining known is to show he had interacted with a literary giant such as Joyce.

The Invention of Love features two real-life characters searching for the chance to give their lives meaning: A.E. Housman and Oscar Wilde. Throughout the play, Housman pursues his studies, and denies himself any passionate indulgences. He is an expert scholar on Manilius, a rarely-studied author. As a closeted homosexual, he felt he had little control over the world around him, but he felt he could control this one minute area in which he felt he could emerge as an unchallenged expert. He desires the love of a fellow student, Moses Jackson, but he cannot bring himself to face that realization. In contrast, Wilde indulges in every passionate impulse to his ruination and dies a devastated individual. Housman hopes his poetry and abilities as a scholar will provide a sense of meaning and purpose to his life, as he feels his private life's desires must be forever denied. As Fleming observes, "This is a dead man looking back on his life and regretting the choices he made" (243). Housman feels his life may have had no meaning. Stoppard portrays him as sympathetic, and the reserved, quiet scenes revolving around Housman do little to indicate Stoppard feels otherwise towards him. However, Stoppard indicates that Housman's quest for meaning appears hollow, as he does not live his life to the fullest. Instead, he spends the majority of it refusing to acknowledge his love for Moses Jackson. Throughout the play, Stoppard portrays the fondness Housman feels towards Jackson, as well as the sadness Housman feels when he realizes Moses Jackson will not return the sentiment. Near the end of the play, when Housman proclaims, "My life is touched by long silences," he indicates he understands that the majority of his life revolved around never acknowledging the desires for

which he most longed. He knows he is denying himself potential happiness through this silence, but he still chooses not to speak. He fears the consequences of passionate indulgence, personified in Wilde's trial and imprisonment, and this keeps him drifting through life, clinging to intellectual pursuits instead. Later, when Housman and Wilde confront each other, Wilde rebukes this self-denial, saying, "Dante reserved a place in his Inferno for those who willfully live in sadness. . . . Your „honour“ is all shame and timidity and compliance" (Stoppard 96).

Wilde confronts the lack of "life" which mars Housman's existence. His claim remains that Housman's "noble" life was an artificial construct, meant to shield him from potential pain or damage to his reputation. In contrast, Wilde claims, "I made my life into my art, and it was an unqualified success. . . . I dipped my staff into the comb of wild honey. I tasted forbidden sweetness and drank the stolen waters" (Stoppard 96). Wilde denied himself nothing in his pursuit of passion and happiness, yet he died disgraced for his indulgences. Housman denied himself every pleasure and died with his good reputation intact, yet this caution costs him mortal happiness.

Fleming observes of Wilde, "Rather than see himself as a victim, Wilde suggests that Housman has allowed himself to become a victim of Victorian-era repression. . . . Wilde lived fully and openly, and though society imprisoned him for that, he left a legacy that outshines that of the cautious, conservative Housman, who made his own life a prison" (242). With this debate, Stoppard illustrates that Wilde's life was in fact the more meaningful and successful because he felt self-confident enough to live his life unashamed. In contrast, Stoppard feels Housman's life had less meaning. He buries himself in intellectual pursuits that result in an emotionally hollow lifestyle, and his literary contributions are far less well-regarded than Wilde's literary creations. This dispassionate, intellectual approach is exemplified by the way in which he discusses the

invention of the love poem: “Like everything else, like clocks and trousers and algebra, the love poem had to be invented. After millenniums of sex and centuries of poetry . . . the true life confessions of the poet in love, immortalizing the mistress who is actually *the cause of the poem-that* was invented in Rome in the first century before Christ” (Stoppard 13).

Housman has reduced the emotions and passions of a love poem to a historical event, separating the emotion from the occurrence. His comparison of a love poem to physical, tangible items such as “clocks” and “trousers” and a mathematical pursuit such as “algebra” indicates a personal unresponsiveness to emotional experiences. His readings of Manilius’s poems are sterile. It is this lack of passion, this excruciatingly intellectual way of looking at things that ultimately causes Housman’s life to lack meaning. Rather than embrace love and wallow in passion as Wilde aimed to do, Housman refused to acknowledge his emotions, and remains emotionally distant from reality. He prefers instead to indulge in barren analysis and scholarship. These indulgences allowed him to remain aloof from the world, and that detachment kept his life from having any real meaning. He exemplifies Stoppard’s notion that living a life in cool detachment is a life without significance. This is the closest that Stoppard comes to giving a clear right and wrong outlook on life, as he indicates that Wilde’s life, despite the devastating consequences Wilde endured, was the more fulfilling, as he denied himself nothing. Stoppard finds this the more preferable approach to living one’s life. With the knowledge of Wilde’s fate -- imprisonment, illness, and death -- it seems understandable that Housman would choose abstaining from passion as the safer alternative. Consequently, while it is clear that Stoppard feels Wilde’s approach to life is the preferable approach, he presents Housman’s choices as an understandable substitute.

Rock 'n' Roll presents several characters' attempts to understand the world around them: Jan, the student who only wants to teach and listen to his records; Max, the lecturer who wishes to understand what must become of the Communist Party; Esme, the liberal daughter who ultimately only wants her life to be with Jan. Unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or Henry Carr, they are less concerned with giving their own lives a sense of meaning; rather they desire a sense of sanity in their worlds. They long for a sense of stability in a society in which they are constantly under threat from the oppressive Communist regime.

It is a minor character who seems most concerned with finding a sense of meaning in her life: Max's wife, Eleanor, dying of cancer and studying the roots of ancient languages, allows her intellectual pursuits to comfort herself as her body gives in to the disease. This seems logical. Given that she sees her own mortality as more of a physical concept than an abstract conceit, she has a more clearly defined sense of self than the other characters. With a death-sentence staring her in the face, she reaches out for meaning more desperately than those around her. She has lost a breast to cancer, and she feels this disfigurement of her body at every moment. When Max tries to reassure her that this loss makes no difference to him (in regards to how he perceives her), she screams, "Well, it does to me! . . . If it makes no difference, Max, you don't have to stop making love to me from behind, it's all right, all right?" (Stoppard 6). He wishes he saw her in the same light as he once did, but from that declaration, it is obvious that this is not the case. His sentiment rings hollow both to Eleanor and to the reader, and the falseness of the statement enrages her.

Later, after Max calls her his "Amazon," she discusses her doctorate, saying, "I had Amazons in my doctorate. . . . I said the one-breast thing was a language glitch. . . . Vase painters did two-breasted Amazons -- case proved" (Stoppard 6). Amazon women were once believed to have cut or burnt off their right breast. She would have loved to be comforted by this comparison

between her and these mighty female warriors, but she cannot provide even herself this kind of symbolic comfort, as her own research and theory proved the mighty Amazon warrior women were two-breasted after all. She does not even have the comfort of encasing herself in this vibrant, powerful image. She is not similar, and in her mind, she has lost the desirability they possessed.

Eleanor would like to leave something significant, but she feels “there isn’t time” (Stoppard 10). Later, as the cancer continues to progress and both her breasts have been removed, she states, “They’ve cauterized and zapped away my breasts, my ovaries, my womb, half my bowel and a nutmeg out of my brain, and I am undiminished. . . . *I am not my body*. My body is nothing without *me* . . . so who’s the me who’s still in one piece?” (Stoppard 51). Hence, Stoppard portrays Eleanor as a woman who wills her life to have meaning and significance, despite the alterations her body has been forced to undergo. According to Brantley, “The brain is merely an organism, trapped in a decaying body. The mind is unconfined and is embodied by a host” (1). Despite these problems and the parts of her body she has lost, she still wants to be viewed as unchanged. If she can feel that way, her life could have some significance, and Stoppard portrays her as continually searching for that sense of meaning.

IV. STOPPARD'S USE OF MULTIPLE NARRATIVES TO ESTABLISH A BALANCED SOCIAL VIEW

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard juxtaposes his own views with the existentialist philosophy Beckett displays in *Waiting for Godot*; it is rooted in a belief that life seems to have no logic and the world no comfort to provide. As Cahn states, "In each play the audience observes a pair of men waiting on an open road for someone or something to relieve their loneliness and insecurity" (36). Written in 1948, three years after World War II, *Waiting for Godot* reflects the physical destruction and spiritual trauma the war inflicted in Europe. Many began to question the nature of human existence, as well as the nature or even the existence of God. The feeling that the world no longer made sense was a common view following the catastrophic war, considering that it had destroyed much of Europe and cost millions of lives. There was no sense or meaning to the world. A sign from God that a divine plan existed would have provided comfort, but instead, those left to find meaning in a nearly destroyed society wait for a revelation that never arrives. In a Vietnam-influenced cultural atmosphere, Tom Stoppard utilized the same ideas to portray the absurd meaninglessness of the deaths of those forced into a conflict that they cannot understand. In other words, "How is man to reconcile himself to that absurd world in which he finds himself trapped?" (Cahn 36). Both plays function as tragicomedies. They feature clever, witty wordplay coupled with a pessimistic philosophical outlook.

However, Stoppard only utilizes Beckett's formula as a stepping-stone upon which to create his own unique dramatic piece. Beckett's play has no real sense of place or time. There is no society present. As far as anyone can tell, Beckett's characters exist in a post-apocalyptic world, as post World War II- Europe may have appeared. In contrast, "there most certainly is a

society in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*" (Cahn 37). It is of course Elsinore Castle, a society that is-- at least to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern-- completely incomprehensible. They question everything around them, yet never gain any sense of understanding relating to the behind the scenes scheming of the Danish court. Many of the philosophical questions at the center of Stoppard's play, such as "What does it all add up to?," "Is there a choice?," and "Is there a God?," occur not in a deep philosophical debate, but in a game of "questions." This presentation functions on two levels. On the surface, it presents these serious, troubling questions in a way that undercuts their significance to the characters, as they ask them as a means to continue a time-passing game. This functions as a symbol of life itself, as individuals continue on a quest to be successful in life, playing by whatever rules necessary. Even if the game is meaningless, one continues to play and adhere to meaningless rules.

On a more interesting level, one can examine the way in which these questions are presented, within a game in which one is penalized for uttering a statement rather than a question. There is no way to be successful within the game and answer these questions. There exists no way to discuss an answer to these questions. Stoppard utilizes this game to portray the fact that these questions have no real answers. They can only result in endless questioning. As Cahn argues, "The play therefore is, in that sense, very much an intellectual battle, an attempt to grasp a world where events defy reason and occur seemingly without cause" (39). Through the blending of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Stoppard is able to create a plot about political powers and the victims left in their path, linked through a tone relating to a search for meaning when society seems devastatingly absurd. By utilizing these concepts with his distinctive word play and philosophy, he creates a play that examines the confusion and

absurdity of the Vietnam era, one in which nothing makes sense and the less powerful become the pawns of the politically dominant.

Tracking understanding through Stoppard's plays is similar to following a continually winding back road; once one feels a complete picture of the time has been presented, another twist appears. Never is this idea put to more use than in *Travesties*. In addition to blending the plot of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* with his own unique character recreations, Stoppard's *Travesties*, perhaps more than any other of his plays, indicates that multiple viewpoints must be utilized in order to begin to fully understand an individual. Stoppard chooses to examine Henry Carr by presenting not only Henry Carr's memories but also the perspectives of Tzara, Joyce, and Lenin as seen through the mind of Henry Carr. "The flashbacks in *Travesties* reveal not actual events but a mixture of muddles: memories, prejudices, and self-aggrandizing misrepresentations from the mind of old Henry Carr" (Gabbard 106). Wilde's play, with its constant use of deception and clever, witty dialogue, seems a natural fit for the world Stoppard wishes to create in *Travesties*. After all, *Earnest* is a play in which names and identities are constantly changing, and relationships between the characters are not clearly defined for much of the play. Stoppard asserts, "*Earnest* didn't get into it until comparatively late. I've always felt that *Earnest* was part of our consciousness. It's a play everyone knows" (Stoppard 105). It is true that the plot of *Earnest* is a part of general popular culture, with a film adaptation made as recently as 2002, and thematically it slides naturally into Stoppard's work.

In addition, Stoppard chooses to end his play on an uncertain note, still unclear as to the true nature of the relationships that exists. As it becomes apparent that Henry Carr's mental facilities are failing, the audience is led to doubt how much can be believed of his account. Throughout the play, Carr has many debates with Tzara, Joyce, and Lenin, but they all occur

within the confines of Carr's mind. As the play concludes, Cecily reminds Carr, "You never got close to Vladimir Ilyich, I don't remember the other one. I do remember Joyce . . . but that was the year after . . . [and] you never even saw Lenin" (Stoppard 71). Carr counters with, "Wasn't this -- Didn't do that -- 1916 -- 1917-- *What of it?* I was here. They were here. They went on. I went on. We all went on" (Stoppard 71). The dialogue echoes the philosophical musings as to the true nature of reality of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Through this exchange, one is reminded that Tzara, Lenin, and Joyce were presented as facets of a failing memory and their dialogue and actions are the product of Henry Carr: "Carr's senile, self-aggrandizing mind theoretically contains the play. . . . We are really in Henry Carr's mind" (Kelly 26). Through their dialogue and actions, one better understands Henry Carr's personality. Therefore, the historical accuracy of the play is inconsequential. As far as Carr is concerned, one should not let a minor problem such as historical accuracy intrude upon an interesting anecdote. Their philosophies on art and politics provide a springboard for Carr to present his view. According to Stoppard, "Henry Carr's skepticism about the valuation which artists put on themselves is very much my own skepticism. Yet then Joyce's defense of art is mine, too. . . . One doesn't think, as it were, with one mind on these matters. One has two or three minds battling with each other," a view personified through his depiction of Henry Carr (Hardin 156).

The presentation of several opinions on an issue reinforces the idea of multiple viewpoints being best to illustrate the complexities of an individual's mind. Thus, through these fictional creations, one has a better understanding of Henry Carr's beliefs, and their basis in reality becomes irrelevant. For example, while Lenin extols the virtues of Communism, Carr claims, "Your Marxism is sheer pretension. . . . If the revolution came you wouldn't know what hit you" (Stoppard 57). While the play's ending informs the audience that Carr never met Lenin,

one must determine why Carr's mind indicates otherwise. Carr uses views that either uphold or contrast his own in order to present his own philosophy. He needs a debate or conversation in order to show where his beliefs reside - a kind of springboard for his own ideas. He may not be important, but these fictionalized recreations of historical figures allow his views to have more merit than they do on their own, as they view him as worthy of an intellectual debate. As Carr's closing lines state, "Firstly, you're either a revolutionary or you're not, and if you're not you might as well be an artist as anything else. Secondly, if you can't be an artist, you might as well be a revolutionary" (Stoppard 71). Carr was neither of these things, but those who represent him in his mind lived those roles. These perspectives reveal his hidden longings and provide additional layers that serve to provide a more revealing view of Carr.

In *The Invention of Love*, Stoppard presents the points of view of both young Housman and the recently deceased Housman. Stoppard presents "the duality of humans; the need to balance impulses; and the passionate, relentless search for truth and meaning as a defining feature of humanity, even as access to ultimate meaning remains elusive" (Fleming 243). As the play opens, Charon arrives to carry Housman across the River Styx. However, he is puzzled to find Housman as the only passenger, as he was told to collect "a poet and a scholar" (Stoppard 2). When Housman responds that he is both, Charon claims, "It sounded like two different people" (Stoppard 2). Stoppard takes this idea and puts it to literal use, juxtaposing the older, recently deceased Housman with his student counterpart, fifty years younger. Stoppard not only portrays young Housman in flashback in order to establish contrast between young and old Housman, but he places them together in conversation. As Kelly states, "*The Invention of Love* shows us Housman as young and old, as poet and critic, as passionate lover and repressed

celibate” (26). Through these conversations, Stoppard presents the contrasts and complexities that exist within the character of A.E. Housman.

As a young man, we sense the sensitive, optimistic poet, and the older Housman gives us the cold, aloof scholar. Through the conversation between the two regarding Housman’s poetry, with the younger Housman listed as “Housman” and the older Housman listed as “AEH”, one can see the contrast between the two:

Housman: I’ve written poems, as one does, you know . . . for the poetry prize at school-- quite speakable, I think--

AEH: Good for you, mine were quite unspeakable (Stoppard 35).

With this exchange, Stoppard displays the differing perspectives of young and old Housman, as “Housman” sees his poems as worthy examples of the medium, while “AEH” finds them devoid of worth. In addition, he presents the optimism of one whose life still lies ahead of him and the bitter cynicism of another who sees life comprised only of disappointments. For “AEH,” the emotions that inspired him to write his poetry are gone, and he is left with only the desire to dismiss it. Later in the conversation, “AEH” informs his young counter-part, “Literary enthusiasm never made a scholar and unmade many. . . . A scholar’s business is to add to what is known . . . but it is capable of giving the greatest satisfaction, because knowledge . . . does not have to look good or sound good or even do good. It is good just by being knowledge” (Stoppard 37). “AEH” no longer prefers the ambiguous, difficult-to-define emotions that lurk behind poetry. He prefers the detached, intellectual aspect of scholarship to the emotional exploration that poetry requires. However, by presenting both the optimistic and the cynical Housman, Stoppard illustrates that Housman is capable of being both the poet and the scholar, just as he claims at the beginning of the play.

Stoppard uses the younger facet of Housman to create a sense of tragic loss regarding the character. The reader encounters the optimism and excitement of the young Housman and feels the tragic loss of those traits through the old Housman. To end the play, Stoppard chooses to give the reader another encounter between “Housman” and “AEH,” and we see a still sad but less bitter version of the recently deceased Housman. When “Housman” discusses the invention of the love poem, “AEH” calls it “The self-advertisement of farce and folly, love as abject slavery and all-out war-madness, disease, the whole catastrophe owned up to and written in the metre -- no; that was new” (Stoppard 99). Even though he is discussing the academics of the love poem, there exists a sense of wonder about the inner workings, the emotions behind the love poem. He is not discussing the meter and structure, but the emotions behind it. This is a change from the strictly academic Housman previously seen. He cares about emotions, not just the intellectual structure.

Immediately there follows one last flashback of his unrequited love Mo, and he reiterates the previously spoken line: “I would have died for you but I never had the luck” (Stoppard 100). As he journeys toward the afterlife, he has been altered by his flashbacks and conversations with his younger self. He sees all he left behind and regrets the chances he did not take, but his bitterness has dissipated. These contrasting perspectives paint a more fully realized portrait of an individual, and Stoppard utilizes the concept that different perspectives add up to a more complex portrait of an individual. Looking to one’s past results in an enhanced understanding of one’s self.

In *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, Stoppard presents Jan and Max, two individuals affected by the politics of the Communist Party, both having different opinions as to its usefulness. In the introduction to the published version of the play, Stoppard discussed the problems he saw with the ideals of the

Communist Party, having emigrated from Czechoslovakia as a child in the late 1930s . As Brantley states, “The men and women who inhabit [the play] can’t be boiled down to single, consistent positions, though that would make life much simpler for them” (2). Jan finds himself hating the Party, while Max remains loyal to the ideals upon which the Party was founded. Through these opposing perspectives, Stoppard presents a more rounded view of the Communist Party than only one of these viewpoints would provide. According to Stoppard, when discussing the creation of his plays, “The notion came that if you put the spine down the middle and two strands winding around it, that then nothing was missing” (Kelly 4).

Although Stoppard was not directly discussing *Rock ‘n’ Roll* in the above quote at the time, his characterizations of Jan and Max illustrate this point. When Jan asks Max why he has stayed with the party, Max responds, “Because of the tenth, because they made the revolution and no one else” (Stoppard 4). In other words, Max stays with the party because of their past actions, while Jan sees that the Communist Party has lost its way and no longer represents the glorious ideals it once did. As Jan says to Max later in the play, following the censorship and oppression he has witnessed and experienced under a Communist regime, “I was a critic of the future. It was my socialist right” (Stoppard 22). Through these lines, Stoppard indicates that Max defines Communism based upon the past, while Jan focuses upon their current problems and the future he fears they will create. Stoppard uses these separate perspectives to establish that the Communist Party is capable of both great and terrible deeds. Max functions as one who supports Communism’s principles, while Jan sees these principles as having been warped and disfigured.

The two continue to debate these opposing ideas: Max says, “„From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.“ What could be more simple, more rational, more beautiful,” while Jan derisively counters, “Perhaps we aren’t good enough for this beautiful idea.

This is the best we can do it. Marx knew we couldn't be trusted. First the dictatorship, till we learned to be good, then the utopia where a man can be a baker in the morning, a lawmaker in the afternoon, and a poet in the evening. But we never learned to be good, so look at us" (Stoppard 24).

Jan adopts a scornful, disillusioned tone when discussing the ideals of Communism. He clearly sees the philosophies as overly-naïve and simplistic. The phrase "till we learned to be good" implies a deprogramming, which Jan believes the human race is incapable of undergoing, and he treats the ideals with contempt as a result. To him, the human race is just too cruel to effectively put ideal Communism into practice, and people have suffered under Communism as a result. In contrast, while Max does not necessarily disagree with Jan's view of human nature, he has too much admiration for the fundamental principles of Communism to abandon them. Their point of disagreement relates to the concept that an ideal is meaningless if humanity cannot put it into action, versus the belief that beautiful ideas must still be upheld, even if humanity does not know how best to initiate them. Through these contradictory views that agree on the fundamentals but contrast their importance, Stoppard illustrates the nobility of Communism's principles, while concluding that they are inevitably corrupted when humans become involved in their execution.

V. IMPORTANCE OF ART AND INTELLECT TO SOCIETY

The importance of art and literature in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is not figured in the title characters who show no proclivity towards the fine arts but in the character of The Player. The Player, through his experience with drama, understands the way in which the presented events must unfold and the roles the unfortunate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must play within this particular plot. He lacks a distinct identity, as the text only refers to him as “The Player,” and he functions within the plot as a casual observer, distant from the action in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves entangled. He exists only as a portent of events to come. Robinson supports this, saying, “The Player is the . . . figure who enjoys nothing more than playing a part and is aware he is doing so” (91). As a result, he is more capable of understanding the situation in Elsinore. Despite his lack of identity, his experience with the plots of great tragedies provides a heightened awareness of the way in which events must come to pass. “Throughout this play, The Player is perhaps the most self-assured character, equipped with a ready answer for every situation” (Cahn 54).

From the moment the First Player appears, he is obviously more aware of the way events must unfold. He warns Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that it costs “more if you happen to get caught up in the action,” intimating that they must pay a great price for becoming involved within a plot (Stoppard 23). He foretells that they will become enmeshed in the plot of the play the audience knows as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and that this will lead to their deaths. In addition, he understands the role of fate within the workings of a plot, saying his initial encounter with the title characters was due to fate. Yet, as Robinson states, “The absurdity of life does not pain him [and] he refuses to be baffled or to suffer, maintaining a posture of cynical detachment” (39). When Guildenstern asks whether it was their fates or the players’ fates that led to their

encountering one another, the First Player responds, “It could hardly be one without the other. . . . We have no control” (Stoppard 25). He is “content that circumstances are beyond his control „ever so slightly“” (Robinson 39). The First Player’s livelihood has been made enacting plots that demonstrate the interconnectedness of various lives. Therefore, he understands that an encounter between two individuals indicates the fates of both and the powerlessness that exists when fate guides one’s entire life. However, Guildenstern, who possesses no such experience in the dramatic arts, does not possess this understanding. In the later encounter Guildenstern has with the First Player, he demonstrates this lack of foreknowledge:

Player: I come and go as I please.

Guildenstern: You’re evidently a man who knows his way around.

Player: I’ve been here before.

Guildenstern: We’re still finding our feet.

Player: I should concentrate on not losing your heads.

Guildenstern: Do you speak from knowledge?

Player: Precedent.

Guildenstern: You’ve been here before.

Player: And I know which way the wind is blowing . . .

Guildenstern: But for God’s sake, what are we supposed to *do*?!

Player: Relax. Respond. That’s what people do. You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn.

Guildenstern: But we don’t know what’s going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don’t know how to *act*.

Player: Act natural. You know why you’re here at least.

Guildenstern: We only know what we’re told, and that’s little enough. And for all we know it isn’t even true.

Player: For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It is the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn’t make any difference so long as it is honoured. One acts on assumptions (Stoppard 66-67).

Through this exchange, the First Player tries to give Guildenstern a better understanding of his role within the action and his inevitable fate. Guildenstern, however, cannot understand that there exists a natural order to events, and that his death is an inexorable part of this natural order. Stoppard demonstrates the importance of art through the First Player and his understanding of

the world around him. His understanding of drama and plot allow him to see how events must progress. Art does not make life easier to endure, but it can succeed in making life bearable, a theme which permeates Stoppard's works. Had Rosencrantz and Guildenstern possessed this understanding, perhaps they might have been spared their fates, as they could have better avoided the events which condemned them by refusing to travel to Elsinore when they were "sent for."

The importance of literature and art in culture is debated throughout *Travesties*. "Stoppard explains that this play explores the synonymy of the words „revolutionary“ and „artist.“ He believes art is good or bad irrespective of its political relevance. . . . All of these feelings lie behind *Travesties* key question: does an artist need to justify himself in political terms?" (Gabbard 107). The principle characters constantly discuss the role of art within a society. Through these discussions, Stoppard presents multiple opinions regarding this issue. Each is a viable opinion, and while Stoppard never obviously signals which philosophy most closely represents his own view, he supports the idea that art, for multiple reasons, is essential to a culture as a means of giving cultural events an increase within the culture. As a result of this emphasis on the importance of art to a culture, Carr's overly practical belief that art remains inessential is the least appealing. When Tzara claims that "man cannot live by bread alone," Carr counters, "Yes, he can. It's *art* he can't live on. . . . For every thousand people there's nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky bastard who's the artist" (Stoppard 28). This view seems cold and too lacking in sentiment to be deemed valid. Carr's view seems cynical and overly dismissive. Stoppard, unlike Carr, does not believe this position is the best philosophy. However later, Carr claims, "Art doesn't change society; it is merely changed by it;" Cecily counters, "Art is a critique of society or it is nothing" (Stoppard

50). These views oppose each other, but neither seems less valid than the other. Stoppard does not choose a side in this argument. He merely presents them as two separate philosophies.

Stoppard demonstrates the importance of art within this dramatic world through the fact that this is the subject Henry Carr most frequently chooses to discuss with these imagined versions of important men. As previously discussed, Lenin, Tzara, and Joyce are not real-life recreations, but fabrications of Carr's mind. However, Carr chooses to put himself in a philosophical debate with all three of them regarding art. To Carr, it is the topic most worthy of debating. Tzara claims that "all literature is obscene," and that "the difference between being a man and being a coffee-mill is art" (Stoppard 17, 29). In addition, Stoppard presents Joyce "reshaping the novel into the permanent form of his own monument, the book the world now knows as *Ulysses*," and Lenin claiming, "Literature must become party literature. . . . [and] Literature must become a part of the common cause of the proletariat," and, of course, Lenin also was a passionate art appreciator and developed The People's Art Movement (Stoppard 45, 58). In other words, Carr's mind could portray these men discussing anything he wished, for they are part of his imagination. He chooses to have them discuss art and literature in society. Even Carr, who dismissed art's importance earlier, must hold art at some value, as his mind continues to engage in philosophical debates regarding its role and definition within society. Through this recurrence, Stoppard indicates the importance of art to a culture, without ever taking a stand as to what role art should play.

The Invention of Love frequently debates the importance of art in contrast with the importance of intellectual scholarship. "What this play does once more is to put the spotlight firmly on the lives of individuals and, furthermore, once again on individual writers" (Kelly 151). However, the primary idea Stoppard examines is whether or not art has merit if it is created

by one who never fully embraces all life has to offer. According to Wilde, “The artist is the secret criminal in our midst. He is the agent of progress against authority,” and he tells Housman, “You were right to be a scholar. A scholar is all scruple, an artist is none” (Stoppard 96). In Wilde’s view, which Stoppard seems to share, an artist must have passion, excitement, and even engage in illicit behavior, because one cannot create art about daily life unless one indulges in every facet daily life has to offer. Scholars, however, may remain aloof because they observe and analyze without having to actively participate in life. A scholar may maintain detachment, while an artist must connect with and partake in society. As a minor character states in the play, “Success in life is to maintain . . . ecstasy, to burn always with this hard gem-like flame. Failure is to form habits. To burn with a gem-like flame is to capture the awareness of each moment. . . . To form habits is to be absent from those moments” (Stoppard 19). This reiterates the idea that disconnection from life makes one a failure, as it states forming habits keeps one away from life’s moments. It takes unpredictable passion to make a successful artist, and according to Wilde, similar rules apply to art.

Housman lived the life of a scholar, keeping himself separate from a passionate life, despite dabbling in writing poetry. He examined life solely from an academic perspective, never exploring his emotions or philosophy, saying, “The only reason to consider what the ancient philosophers meant about anything is if it’s relative to settling corrupt or disputed passages in the text” (Stoppard 31). In other words, as far as Housman is concerned, there is no need to examine one’s philosophy, only the way in which one structure his or her outlooks, reemphasizing the exclusively intellectual approach Housman utilized in his life. Stoppard contrasts this honorable, abstaining man who denied himself his one great desire, Moses Jackson, with Oscar Wilde, who indulged in his every whim. Wilde’s literary creations remain admired and respected, while

Housman's poetry is often included in literary anthologies but is denied the critical acclaim and analysis Wilde's work receives. Stoppard illustrates that while art is important to one's life, one must live a life as free from regret and abstention as possible, as it allows for more truth and beauty within one's art. After all, one cannot write about love if one has not given oneself over to that all-consuming emotion. Housman never allowed himself to do that. He never found the beauty of art important, and Stoppard feels these facets led to his life seeming insignificant.

Like Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in *Rock 'N' Roll*, Tom Stoppard portrays the importance of art during the Communist era in the now Czech Republic. Rock music, with its dissonant chords and brash personas, acts as the ideal means of rebellion against a government that demands conformity and obedience, and in fact it did play a major role in the breakdown of the Cold War. Rock music demands a unique, distinct identity, which is a direct threat to an overly-oppressive government. Tom Stoppard presents rock music as the ultimate symbol of rebellion, and much of the discussion of rebellion within the play revolves around underground rock music. It remains extremely critical to insurgency of any kind. However, Stoppard makes the claim that rock music, while significant, is only symbol and it should only serve as the gateway to a more active form of revolt. Jan, the play's protagonist, uses his "rock „n“ roll" record collection as a means of rebelling against a totalitarian government. The rock group The Plastic People of the Universe and singer Syd Barrett are portrayed as using their music to challenge a government that attempts to oppress its citizens, and Jan wishes to avoid active revolt in the hope he can avoid any governmental threat. Nonetheless, when Jan's record collection is destroyed by the police, he is so devastated he cannot utter any kind of response, as his music was the major source of passion for him and listening to it his one act of

disobedience. Stoppard presents the discovery of the decimated record collection in near silence, with Jan saying nothing and his friend Ferdinand saying only a series of single words:

Ferdinand: Shit
Jan nods.
Ferdinand: Bastards.
Jan nods.
Ferdinand: Shit
Jan nods.
Ferdinand: Sorry (52).

There is minimal articulation in this moment, as there is nothing to that can be said to improve the situation. The way in which Jan rebels has been destroyed. Music, specifically the “rock „n’ roll” of the title, functions as an expression of freedom and a rebellious spirit, a fitting opposition to a government which demands conformity and no dissent from within. When Ferdinand shows him he had borrowed his Beach Boys albums, he is relieved, because at least he still retains one artifact of the medium with which he has rebelled. This annihilation serves as catalyst for Jan, who until this point has avoided in taking an active stance against the government, as he has seen Ferdinand threatened and jailed for his more active revolt. Listening to rock music has been his only means of insurgence. However, through this destruction, Jan realizes his rebellion has been a weaker, more passive approach than is required to make an actual difference.

He realizes rock music is symbolic only; it is not an active means of combat. This event acts as a catalyst and drives him to take a more active role in the dissension by signing Ferdinand’s petition which protests against the government. Through the destruction of his symbol of private rebellion, Jan concludes, “Everything’s dissident except shutting up and eating shit” (Stoppard 57). Jan sees he must do more than merely cherish his “rock „n’ roll” collection, and his rebellion must stretch the private corners of his bedroom. He must put his name at the forefront and let his voice be heard. Later, Jan tells his colleague Nigel about the John Lennon

wall, where people leave flowers and candles, saying, “The police come and clear everything away and arrest a few people, then it starts again” (Stoppard 69). Stoppard reemphasizes the importance of rock music to rebellion. The wall serves as a symbol of rebellion. It is something the oppressive government hopes to stop. However, no matter the actions taken by the police, people continue to celebrate the life and mourn the death of John Lennon. His music and life, as well as his political activism and his attempts to create a peaceful society serve as a symbol for their struggle. He created music that touched people’s lives and he died a violent death. Despite their oppression, these people are willing to risk their well-being in order to pay tribute to him. Again, rock music serves as the catalyst for rebellion, but it is the action taken that seems significant.

In the end, when we see Esme and Jan, united and in love, preparing to see The Rolling Stones in Prague. The Rolling Stones, once denounced by the Communist Czech government as “a capitalist money-making machine” are now playing a concert in Prague, “staged at the invitation of President Vaclav Havel” (Bollag1). With this closing note (literally a closing note, as the play concludes on the song “It’s Only Rock and Roll,”) Stoppard allows rock music, which has served as a symbol of rebellion throughout the play, to serve as a sign that the restrictions are beginning to lift in Czechoslovakia -- a sign that life may finally improve for Stoppard’s long-tormented characters.

VI. CONCLUSION

Tom Stoppard's plays place his characters in impenetrable worlds in which they possess no special knowledge as to how to understand their society. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die without ever understanding the world in which they find themselves thrust, Henry Carr finds his life so meaningless that he speaks more of those he encountered than his own existence, A.E. Housman sees his life as a series of lost opportunities, and Max, Jan, and the other characters in *Rock 'n' Roll* encounter government corruption and suppression with no real knowledge as to how they can combat it. Placing them in these unknowable worlds, Stoppard continues to dramatize these characters' continued quests to discern meaning in a world they cannot understand. He examines the role art and literature must play in the societies he analyzes, but he remains ambiguous as to which outlook he feels is the "correct" approach. Art does not provide an easy solution as to how to function within a society, but it can alleviate the tortures that come with having to exist in an unknowable world. Stoppard seems to utilize this approach as he feels it is not his place to provide the obvious answers. His characters have no easily provided solutions, and he finds benefit in debate and discourse. He does not take sides, preferring to allow his characters to present their views with a credible, articulate voice. He observes from the fence, deciding that his characters believe they are correct in their views, and that it is not his place to claim otherwise. It is left for an audience to determine which view they find most understandable. His technique is effective, his word play and surreal, mind-- bending plots are fascinating. When he allows his cleverness to overwhelm the character development in his works, as he does in *Travesties*, his plays can appear as more form than content, as though he is simply attempting to dazzle with wordplay. However, when he strikes the balance between his stunning technique and flair for dialogue and character development, as he does in *Rosencrantz*

and Guildenstern are Dead, *The Invention of Love*, and *Rock 'n' Roll* (perhaps his most emotionally satisfying play), the result is as emotionally arresting as it is intellectually stimulating.

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