

Contemporary Literature
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Module No. # 11

Lecture No. # 11

Tom Stoppard

Good morning. So, we begin with Tom Stoppard and what are the plays we are doing, Dogg's Hamlet and Cahoot's Macbeth. So, they are two short plays, but according to Stoppard, they are quite interconnected and one cannot do without the other; that is the idea. Now, a bit about Tom Stoppard. He was born in 1937 and he was born in Czechoslovakia. His actual name is Tomas Straussler. You can look at the typical Eastern Europe kind of name, and when the Jews were being persecuted in Europe, the family moved from Czechoslovakia to Singapore, where they stayed for a while and shortly before the invasion of the Japanese in 1941 Tom, young Tom fled to Darjeeling, India, along with his mother.

However, his father stayed back and he was killed during the invasion. In 1946, the family, Tom and his mother, they moved to Britain, where Tom's mother remarried. She married an Englishman Kenneth Stoppard and therefore, Tomas Straussler, that is how Tomas Straussler became Tom Stoppard. His major success came with an extremely famous play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, 1966, which catapulted him to the front rank of the modern playwrights, international playwrights. And, do you know who are Rosencrantz, who is Rosencrantz? Who is Guildenstern? What do they do? They are from Shakespeare.

Are you familiar with the names Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? They are two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. And, what role do they play? Who are they? A very German sounding names, **right**. What are they doing in this play? What are they? What are these two people about? You know Hamlets' story. He is the prince of Denmark. His father has been killed. His mother marries the murderer of her father, his father, **sorry**, that is King Claudius, who now becomes, who now assumes the throne of

Denmark. So, Hamlet has lost his mother, his father, as well as his right to the throne. Now, Hamlet's father's ghost, he starts visiting Hamlet and he tells him the entire story, of how he was murdered by his own brother, while he was sleeping in the garden, and how his mother has been, you know, tricked into marriage with treacherous brother of his and the spirit demands revenge. He urges his son to have revenge.

Now, you, **you** remember the play within play act we did, you know that, Hamlet stages a small play, where he brings in a troop of players and they stage something similar, to what has happened between the elder Hamlet, the King, first King and the Queen; and on seeing this, the entire scene enacted on stage, King Claudius is extremely perturbed and he walks off in agitation. So, that is the idea. But now, after this, once if, once Hamlet is convinced, that his uncle is indeed the killer of his father, then, he is more determined to have his revenge. And, at the same time, King Claudius is more determined to stop Hamlet. So, it is a typical revenge play now, from here onwards. And, he brings in two friends of Hamlet from his university; Hamlet has been attending a university in, abroad. So, he brings, Claudius summons two of his best friends, one is Rosencrantz, and other is Guildenstern. They are supposed to aid King Claudius in murdering Hamlet.

However, Hamlet, you know, because the play is not yet over and it is right, this episode occurs right in the middle of the play. So, Hamlet discovers that, his friends are planning, they are in league with the King, and somehow, he turns the tables on them, and it so happens that, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are assassinated and Hamlet comes out unscathed. So, that is the idea. So, however, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they, both of these guys, they appear for a very brief while; they have nothing much to do in the play; however, Tom Stoppard found the story, I mean, this version quite interesting that, what actually happened to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, how did they meet their death? What exactly, did Hamlet do to them? Because, Shakespeare is quite vague about these things in the play, because it is not their story, **right**? In Tom Stoppard's play, Hamlet becomes a minor character; he does make an appearance, but he is a minor character. The play is all about these two characters, who, from Hamlet, they graduate to becoming the leading characters in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. The play was enormously successful and it had even been translated into a movie, with Tim Roth and Gary Oldman as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

It won several major awards; it, you know, it even beat (()) good (()). I think it was one of those European awards; a very successful film. So, over the next ten years, Stoppard came up with several successful plays and major among those are, *Jumpers*, *Travesties*, *On the Razzle*, *The Real Thing*, *The Real Inspector Hound*, *Arcadia* and so on. And then, he also translated a number of plays by the, by Polish and Czech writers; his origins are Czechoslovakian; so, perhaps, that explains. And, he has written this *Dogg's Hamlet* and *Cahoot's Macbeth*, which we are going to do and along with *Squaring the Circle*, another play by Stoppard. So, they found, they are a scathing attack on the iron curtain regime of the Eastern Europe of the 80s. And, he is also extremely friendly with actors and playwrights, *Lech Walesa* and *Vaclav Havel* from Poland and Czechoslovakia respectively. Both these were, actually, *Lech Walesa* has acted in several movies as well. Perhaps you are not aware of this and *Vaclav Havel*, apart from being the President of Czechoslovakia, he is also a celebrated playwright.

Stoppard has also written a couple of celebrated screenplays; one is *Despair* based on *Vladimir Nabokov's* novel, same *Nabokov* who wrote *Lolita*; and, *The Human Factor* is based on *Graham Greene's* novel, the same, by the same name; *The Russia House* with *Sean Connery* and *Michelle Pfeiffer*, is based on *John Le Carre's* novel and then, *Shakespeare in Love*. Of course, I am sure, you are familiar with this multiple Oscar award winning movie, *Shakespeare in Love*. And, he also did some, you know tweakings in *Schindler's List* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*; his uncredited screenplay is *Sleepy Hollow* with *Tim Burton* and *Johnny Depp*. And then, he wrote a screenplay for (()) directed by (()), and then also, *Enigma* which had *Kate Winslet* in it.

His influences are many; the major and the most prominent influences are, one, *Shakespeare*; you can see it, you know; *Dogg's Hamlet*, by the titles of the play; you know, *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoots Macbeth*, *Shakespeare in Love* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, you know. So, you will find plenty of references to *Shakespeare* in most of his plays. We are going to look at that also. Then, *Shakespeare*, apart from *Shakespeare*, the linguist and philosopher *Ludwig Wittgenstein*. We are going to deal with that also, how *Wittgenstein* influences *Stoppard*. *Samuel Beckett* the name, I mean, I am sure, you are no stranger to this name; *Waiting for Godot*; we have seen *Pinter* and then, of course, he is also influenced tremendously by (()), *Pinter*, as well as *Pirandello*. Now, on *Shakespeare*, *Stoppard* says that, we always get back to *Shakespeare* and he

calls him the world champ. The, you know, it is like, you know, he is the heavy weight champion; if all of us are in athletics, then he is the champ.

Because everybody goes, come, keeps coming back to Shakespeare; there is no running away, or there is no avoiding Shakespeare. He is miles and miles ahead of everyone; that is what Stoppard says, and therefore, his indebtedness to him. References to Shakespeare are made in most of his plays, including *Jumpers* and *Travesties*, *The Real Thing*, *The Real Inspector Hound*, *The Invention of Love* and *Arcadia*, as well as, of course, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. On Samuel Beckett, the playwright of *Waiting for Godot*, this is what he says. He says that, the time when *Godot* was first done, it liberated something, for anybody writing please. It redefined the minima of theatrical validity; he got away; it is only too obvious that, there is the sort of grotesque element in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. And, when we do the play, you will find that, indeed the references, I mean, the indebtedness is too obvious, to be ignored. Are you familiar, by any chance, with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*? **Yes, Aditi.**

(()) kind of...this, it is a investing plus field; it says that, it talks about language as a game and (())... and people as players.

Anyone can elaborate on that? Language as a game and people as players; we will talk about language part of it. So, Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, this is what he says that, there is plenty of conceptual confusion on the way language is used. Because, every word is used to suggest some meaning, **right**; this is a table; the word for this object is table; and when I say table, we look at it; we do not look at that. So, have, you know, and language is extremely arbitrary; how do you know that, this is a table and that is, and that is not; that is the question he raises. And, what happens, if we start suddenly, because the entire system is so arbitrary, what happens, if we start calling this thing a table and this a board? Quite possible. Which is a, **a** play, in which begins with his acknowledgment of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. So, he says that, Wittgenstein says that, there are plenty of assumptions about language being a set of codes, which is used to suggest some meaning, but why? It need not be that; it, it may not necessarily be that.

So, according to Wittgenstein, an essentialist account of the nature of language, is simply too narrow to be able to account for the variety of things we do with language. We do,

too, so many things with language, and the way we understand and describe languages is extremely limited; what we do is, **is** to provide a reductionist account of language. This is this, that is it; but, why not something else; and this is the idea that is explored in Dogg's Hamlet. Wittgenstein says, the individual words in language, name objects and sentences, are combinations of such names; every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word, **right**; this meaning is correlated with a word. So, the table, a table mean something; a flat surface with four legs, or three legs; something like that; it is a, it is a, just a meaning; and it is the object, for which the word stands. Wittgenstein demonstrates the limitations of this concept. He says, we do much more with language, than just mean a set of, you know, just use it to define a set of objects. The traditional concept of languages is not sufficient to explain plenty of ideas. So, there is, language presents a limited picture. So, within the Anglo-American tradition, Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations is considered by many, as the most important philosophical work of the twentieth century. And then, he also talks about language games in the same book, where he says, a famously, gives the example of the builders language. Perhaps, you are familiar with a builders' language, where he says, I will read it out to you, the language is meant to serve for communication between a builder a and an assistant b; just imagine, a builder a, and an assistant, he as an assistant b.

A is building with building stones; they are blocks, pillars, slabs and a beams; b has to pass the stones, in the order, in which a needs them. So, he, what will the builder do now? He will just call out, beam, and the object will be passed on. He can say slab; something can be passed on; stone, likewise. But then, what happens if they decide to substitute these words with alphabets, or numerals, one, two, three, four, and still the job is done. So, instead of saying beams, they just say a; instead of saying slab, b; you know, just to save time and for their own convenience, they can device their own set of codes. And that is, and in spite of that, communication is taking place; what happens then? It, it may, it may work for these two, but not for others; not for the onlookers. But, if the function of languages is to encourage communication, communication is taking place for these two. If you remember, even when we were doing Pinter, we touched upon this idea; that, language, the way we understand language, is extremely limited; it does not cover, what we actually do with language. So, he says that, you know a, b, c, d, these letters can be used to denote objects; an example of its use, builder a says d and it may stand for slab.

There, and points, and builder b counts, four slabs, a, b, c, d, and moves them to the place pointed to by a; the language does becomes a game for these two. Others may not be privy to this language game; and this idea has been elaborated by John Leotard in his book, *The Post Modern Condition*; we will touch upon that, while we are doing Stoppard in detail. Now, I would like to invite Aditi and Krishna and we are looking at one, you know, an exchange from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, and just observe the way language game is at work here.

We could play at questions.

What good with that do? Practice.

Statement.

One love.

Cheating.

How?

I had not started yet.

Statement. Two love

Are you counting that?

What?

Are you counting that?

Foul. No repetitions. Three love. First game to...

I am not going to play, if you are going to be like that.

Whose serve?

Foul. No grunts. Love one.

Whose go?

Why?

Why not?

What for?

Foul. No synonyms. One-one.

What in God's name is going on?

Foul. No rhetoric. 2 - 1.

What does it all add up to?

Can you not guess?

Were you addressing me?

Is there anyone else?

Who?

How would I know?

Why do you ask?

Are you serious?

Was that a trick?

No?

Statement. Two all. Game point.

What is the matter with you today?

When?

What?

Are you deaf?

Am I dead?

Yes or no?

Is there a choice?

Is there a God?

Foul. No non sequiturs. Three two. One game all.

What is your name?

What is yours?

I asked you first.

Statement. One love.

What is your name, when you are at home?

What is yours?

When I am at home?

Is it different at home?

What home?

Had not you got one?

Why do you ask?

What are you driving at?

What is your name?

Repetition. Two love. Match point to me.

Who do you think you are?

Retrick. Game and match. Where is it going to end?

That is the question.

It is all questions.

Do you think it matters?

Does it matter to you?

Why should it matter?

Why does it matter why? What does it matter why?

Does it not matter, why it matters?

What is the matter with you?

It does not matter.

What is the game?

What are the rules?

Thank you.

Now, here, we find a very good example of language game. Perhaps, some of you might be familiar with this linguist David Crystal. Have you heard of him, David crystal? And, he, **he** is the, he is the author of Cambridge Encyclopedia of English language and he is extremely fond of this particular exchange. He was recently, not very recently, just five years back, he was in Chennai and he enacted the entire scene, and he, **he** always gives this as an example. You know, whether in person or in his books, you know this as an extremely, **extremely** fine example of language games. Now, so, what are the games? How is language being used here? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they are somewhere in a, in a place, you know, they are the people, who were supposed to aid King Claudius in killing Hamlet. They are, just at the beginning of the play, we are told that, you know two Elizabethans passing the time in a place, without any visible character; they are well dressed, hats, cloaks, sticks and all.

So, this is their description. So, these two people, they are in some place; they are waiting for somebody. Perhaps, you know, they want, they are just bidding their time,

when they can kill Hamlet. In the mean time, they have nothing else to do. So, they are just passing time. And, how do they pass time? By playing a language game. Just now, we were just talking about influence of Beckett. Does it remind you? Are there any echoes of Beckett you find here? Rehan? Actually, point out segments (()); it is very reminiscent of the, of the exchange in, say, n game.

Yes. we will make (()) stand (()) sit.

Yes. They, we have these sharp, we will have these questions and it is, it is up to them, if they want to answer it or not; and most of the time even if they do answer those, we would not get anywhere with those questions; it is very repetitive also. Yes. These short, meaningless questions. True.

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So, what happens is, language becomes a set of repetitions; meaninglessness of repetition; meaninglessness, **sorry**, of language and the employment of non-sequiturs. Any idea? Can you, I mean, I think, we did talk about non-sequiturs in Pinter. What, **what** does it mean? It does not follow; the exchange does not quite follow. One sentence does not quite follow the other. So, here, he actually gives, he says so, at one place, **right**. Is there a choice, is there is a god, no non-sequiturs be here. So, do not you think that Stoppard is also, doing a little bit of self referencing here? Because, by the, by the time the play was written in 1966, Waiting for Godot was a kind of a Bible for the, all these emerging young playwrights. Now, (()) Samuel Beckett, of course, and Waiting for

Godot and End game, they have plenty of non-sequiturs. And, when they say, when Stoppard actually, pointedly, uses a word like no non-sequiturs here, no rhetorics here, no questions, no repetitions here; actually, he is making a very obvious reference to Beckett and his ilk. So, this is the, this is one good example of self preferentiality.

And also, we have also seen Meta theater, where an, where the, **the** writer, or an author, he is extremely self conscious of what he is writing. So, this is what the entire theater of the absurd was all about; self conscious, self referential and also, and quite meta. So, now, I am going to invite Abhay, for his version of theater of the absurd.

Yes. So, I will be carrying on from where ((Ronak)) left off last week. I shall be speaking in very brief detail about the theater of the absurd. So, do you people know, what the theater of the absurd is? I will answer that question for you. It is a designation of particular place of absurdist fiction written by, primarily European playwrights in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Their work expressed the belief that, in a Godless universe, human existence has no meaning, or no purpose. Therefore, all communication between human beings are basically, pointless and all communication breaks down. Logical construction and argument, generally give way, I mean, in the theater of absurd, to irrational speech and illogical acts, leading to the final conclusion, silence; and, non-communication in the conventional sense. So, absurdism is frequently compared to surrealism (()) that is Dadaism. **Yes**, do you people know what dadaism is? Aditya, you knew something about it? **Yes**, it is more of a precursor to surrealism; I shall speak about it. The aim is basically, the destruction of art, or the conventional art of the Bourgeois era, that had produced the First World War.

So, basically, they were against anything, that they saw as bourgeois; because, they thought that, it would lead to violence and the end of humanity, as we know it. And, they thought that, humanity, as we know it, to start off, was not a very good thing, anyhow. An example of a dada is playwright as stetson zara, whose plays were performed in a cabre foltaire in Zurich and he was the first prominent dadaist author. However, the dada movement never produced a visible impact on stage, as they were essentially destructive, and radical in their nihilism. So, basically, when a dadaist play was being screened, all you could see was destruction, violence, non-communication. It was very hard to keep up with what was exactly happening in any of this plays. So, obviously, they were not huge successes. **Yes**, therefore, could not be successful in an art form, that depends on

constructive cooperation between the audience and the people performing on the stage; because, I mean, in every play, I mean, implicitly, there is some sort of cooperation between the audience and the people on stage; because, the audience are supposed to understand what is happening on stage, right? But that was not really happening in dadaist theater.

They actually, you could say that, they essentially, nonsense poems in dialogue form and accompanied by equally nonsensical business and decorated with bizarre masks and costumes. So, at the end of the First World War dadaism moved out from Switzerland and split into, you can say, two branches; one went to Paris and some of the members of the Zurich circle went back to Germany; and the German stream, so to speak, merged and coexisted with German expressionism. And, one prominent expressionist of this time, is (()), who belonged to the antecedents of the theory of the absurd. He was impressed by the possibilities of cinema, and you can say that, he was one of the first people who coined the term art cinema; and, he made this movie, or conceptualized the movie, rather, called De Chaplin Art, where there is a picture of Charlie Chaplin and this picture steps out and expresses the farcical nature of the Bourgeois era. I mean, it is extremely absurd and trying to explain it would confuse me and you. So, yes.

He felt that, the theatre must not just be a means to make a bourgeois comfortable; rather, it must frighten him. And, how we were supposed to do this, I mean, how he purported that, he would do this, is by evoking the grotesque, without inciting laughter; and, this would frighten the Bourgeois into being a child again; and, he felt that, only children see the world as, as something, you know, real and not, as something seen through a filter. Yes, the person who came closest to goal was Brecht. In the course of his development from an anarchic poetic, from anarchic poetic drama to the austerity of Marxist didacticism in his later phase, he wrote a number of plays that came extremely close to the theatre of the absurd; both, in the case of clowning and knock about humor, and in the preoccupation in the problem of identity of the self and fluidity.

In his (Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit), which means the wedding, the collapse of pieces of furniture, basically symbolizes the rottenness of the family, in which the wedding is taking place; in exactly the same way, that objects expressed in a realities, in the place of Adamov and Ionesco, as ((Ronak)) was mentioning last week; and also, Brecht's plays include humor and gag, with many of these plays and so, they were slightly more

entertaining to watch on the stage. A slightly more serious play he wrote was, ((**Im Dickicht der Städte**)), which is a serious play and it means, in the jungles of the cities. Basically, it starts off with an extremely trivial disagreement between two characters; the first character is having a fight with another character, because he does not like a book that he has written; and he goes and tries to pay this character some money, to say nice things about his book; and finally, the fight escalates to such a level, that they end up killing each other.

Yes. So, it deals with the impossibility of knowing the motivation of human beings and their actions; and this anticipated Pinter and also the problem of communication between human beings. And, this, **this** question occupies Beckett, Adamov and Ionesco. Next personality contained the strong element of anarchy and despair; therefore, even in his politically conscious era, we saw him project the gapless world, as something negative and absurd; not just as, I mean, how the USSR projected America as evil people, but he said that, capitalism was governed by unfair Gods, who liked to see, seeing people grovel in despair, (()) extremely bizarre in that sense.

However, **Marxism** ended up killing the movement in Germany, totally, but it continued existing in France and dadaism transformed into surrealism. Whereas, dada was pure, dadaism was purely negative, surrealism believed in the great positive healing force of the subconscious. And, Breton, who was the, one of the founders in surrealism movement, had a belief that, if you tapped into your subconscious mind, and let that sense of automation play, and you gave in and surrendered to a subconscious, you could actually have prophetic powers and powers of clairvoyance would come to you and he claimed that, he predicted the Second World War through such powers.

Yes, it must be noted that, surrealism was just not a movement in theatre, but it was a revolutionary movement which took on its shape, not in this theatre, but, in art, in literature, in most things. One of the original surrealist Antonin Artaud, rejected a majority of western theatre as a perversion of its intent, surrealist intent, which he felt must be a mystical meta physical experience. Now, most western theatre, generally, still kept up this, you know, that sense of cooperation between the stage and the audience; whereas, these people felt that, the cooperation was not necessary; and while western theatre consisted of rational discourse, Artaud believed that rational discourse comprised falsehood and illusion.

Yes. So, there were also other forms of surrealism, that have been discussed and (()) such as the art work of Picasso and the general, I mean, lots of these playwrights also had, Picasso design their sets and these sets were extremely grotesque and bizarre; and yes, it was slightly less, you know, heavy than Dadaism; but still...Eventually, towards the 60s, it started fizzling out. Now, surrealism also manifested in other countries such as Poland and Spain and one Polish playwright who must be noted is Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, I am not sure how it is pronounced, whose grotesque nightmares merge into visions of mad men and his political parables, suddenly turned into hilarious parodies of police stories. So, yes, his plays are extremely bizarre.

And you must all be wondering, whether there were any playwrights who wrote in English; I mean, in the theatre of the absurd. The answer is that, there are not any; I mean, there is your (()) and she thought that, she writes absurdist theatre, but most people in Europe considered her work to just be one act plays, that is actually poetry and nonsense poetry and her work was not very seriously considered by people in Europe, where dadaism and surrealism existed; however, the European, I mean, sorry, the western world thinks that, she belonged to the theatre of the absurd, and there is some dispute there. Yes, any questions.

So, after that, yes after that very succinct introduction to theatre of the absurd, I would just raise one question. For example, you remember existentialist philosophy which is quite connected with absurdism; however, there is one major distinction between existentialist absurdism and the kind of a, absurdist theatre which people like Pinter and Stoppard wrote. For example, this existentialist absurdism, as popularized by philosophers like John Paul Sartre and Kierkegaard, etcetera, what did they, I mean, they talked about absence of God, irrationality of universe, yes, but in the middle of all these things human being, however, is helpless.

He was still tragic and heroic; however, in the works of people like Pinter and starting from Beckett onwards, you know, Beckett, Pinter and Stoppard, human beings are no longer represented as tragic and heroic. What do they become? When you look at conversation like, this is a tragic, is it heroic? What you just heard? One love, two love; you know, language becomes a game of tennis. What do they become? What is the position of men, human being in this is, sorry, situation? (()) Illogical, meaningless, of course, inconsequential, of course. But, comic and pathetic; comic and pathetic, who has

no meaning to his life, which is a big departure from the existentialist, absurdist, who in spite of all their shortcomings, projected human beings as tragic and heroic. So, that is the major difference between the two kinds of writings here.

Alright, I will just begin with the introduction; I hope you have the play Dogg's Hamlet. Now, what Stoppard says about the play is that, Dogg's Hamlet is a conflation of two pieces; two pieces; one is called fifth, Doggs troupe fifteen minute Hamlet and the other play is called Dogg's our pet; Dogg's our pet and one, 15 minute Hamlet. So, it is, it is a collision of two plays and which he developed into one. So, he says that, Dogg's Hamlet derives from a section of Wittgenstein's philosophical investigation. We have just looked at, into that; considering the, consider the following scene; a man is building a platform, using pieces of wood of different shapes and sizes; these are thrown to him, by a second man, one at a time, as they are called for. An observer notes that, each time the first man shouts plank, he is thrown a long flat piece; then, he calls slab, and he is thrown a piece of different shape. This happens a few times; there is a call for block and the third shape is thrown. Finally, a call for cube, produces a fourth type of piece. An observer would probably conclude that, the different words describe different shapes and sizes of the material, but this is not the only possible interpretation. Suppose, for example, the thrower knows in advance, which pieces the builder needs and in what order; in such a case, there would be no need for the builder to name the pieces he requires; but only, to indicate, what he is ready for, the next one. So, he, so, the calls might translate thus, ready, next, thank you. So, instead of saying plank, slab, a block and cube, he may use an entirely different set of words. To a casual onlooker, they, these words do not make any meaning; however, to the, to the builder and his assistant, they do. So, this is, you know, just an extension of Wittgenstein's philosophical investigation, the description of language (()) and this is the premise for Dogg's Hamlet. So, we are going to look at, into it, in the next class.