

# Post-Modernist Tragi-Comedy: A Study of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

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**Abstract**—The death of tragedy is probably one of the most distinctive literary controversies of the twentieth century. There is common critical consent that tragedy in the classical sense of the word is no longer possible. Thinkers, philosophers and critics such as Nietzsche, Durrenmatt and George Steiner have all agreed that the decline of the genre in the modern age is due to the total lack of a unified world image and the absence of a shared vision in a fragmented and ideologically diversified world. The production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1967 marked the rise of the genre of tragi-comedy as a more appropriate reflection of the spirit of the age. At the hands of such great dramatists as Tom Stoppard (1937- ), the revived genre was not used as an extra comic element to give some comic relief to an otherwise tragic text, but it was given a postmodernist touch to serve the interpretation of the dilemma of man in the postmodernist world. This paper will study features of postmodernist tragi-comedy in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as one of the most important plays in the modern British theatre and investigate Stoppard's vision of man and life as influenced by postmodernist thought and philosophy.

**Keywords**—British, drama, postmodernist, Stoppard, tragi-comedy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE evolution of the genre of tragedy as the most sublime of all dramatic expressions since the era of ancient classical drama in ancient Athens went through ebbs and tides through the ages. It has also been subject to various definitions and concepts to suit the needs and temperament of the different ages. The decline of the genre of tragedy in the modern theatre, announced by George Steiner in his controversial announcement *The Death of Tragedy* [1], is attributed to the demise of paganism and the image of human life as governed by warring and contradictory gods, which provided the proper context and spirit of tragedy. Similarly, Nietzsche's earlier assertion that "God is dead" [19] implied the total existential dependence of man on his own resources to face a world devoid of meaning and a generally accepted myth or a shared vision.

The absence of such context together with the growing size and diversification of modern societies has made it difficult to evoke such a "tragic sense of failure" and convey it to the "ideologically fragmented societies of today" [2]. By the same token, Styan pointed out that "the ethical conventionalism of tragedy" [3] where the author shares a generally valid moral valuation with his audience as a prerequisite for the evocation of a tragic sense seems impossible in the modern age. Moreover, the sense of tragic guilt has been extinguished in the

midst of the uncertainty and lack of absolute values of our world. Durrenmatt is quoted by Guthke to explain that "the true spirit of tragedy presupposes guilt, distress ... responsibility ... in this bankruptcy of the white race there are no longer guilty men, and no responsible men either ... guilt is only possible as a personal achievement, as a religious deed" [4]. It is thus agreed that tragedy needs a world of established and defined social and moral values, which is no longer the case in our times.

The emergence of modernism at the turn of the century, and then of postmodernism, as a later twentieth century philosophical and cultural movement was in many ways a revolt against inherited faith in science, history and the future, in man himself and his significance. Marked by two World Wars causing an unfathomable amount of suffering, pain and death, the twentieth century drama, surprisingly, failed to produce tragedies as explained by Durrenmatt [4]. The atrocities of the wars caused tremendous changes in the social, political and economic condition across the world. These changes gave rise to new forms of art, avant-garde attempts to express the world that has so changed. Though it is difficult to define, postmodernism is generally characterized by skepticism, relativism, an absence of a rational objective reality and a mistrust in language as a vehicle to convey meanings, ideas and intentions. Dark humour has been accepted as a postmodernist device of literary expression seeking to convey a new way of seeing the world, a new vision of man and of life in the modern age.

At the turn of the century, Chekhov was writing plays that challenged strict categorization as pure tragedy or proper comedy. The tragi-comic pattern in the plays of the "first truly dark comedian" [3], as Styan calls him represent characters who are constantly torn between reality and illusion. Chekhov's subtle balance of the comic and tragic so that neither is overstressed is apparent in *The Three Sisters* (1900). The subtlety confused even actors, as K.S. Stanislavski, Chekhov's director and Manager of the Moscow Art Theatre tells us. In a letter, Stanislavski wrote that Chekhov "was convinced he had written a gay comedy, but at the reading, everyone took the play for a drama and wept as they listened to it." [5].

The retreat of tragedy in the modern age marked the tendency of comedy to deal with serious matters. As an expression of the rebellious spirit after the Second World War, post-war dramatists sought to break away from literary traditionalism. The originality of an artist was measured by the genuineness of his vision. Some dramatists "tended to be bitter, over-serious,

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or hysterical in their denunciations of society's errors" [6]. Others, however, following the example of Bernard Shaw, continued to "challenge the boundaries of the comic" [7] with themes and ideas that would not, traditionally, fall in the realm of comedy. The outcome is a peculiar style and an overall effect where "the very ripple of laughter dies away where a chastened mood brings serious reflection" [6]. Aspiring to reflect the human experience more fully, tragicomedy seems to be nourished by the actuality of our experience, which is neither implacably serious nor ultimately happy.

## II. MODERN TRAGICOMEDY: A WORLD OF INCONSISTENCIES

Modern tragicomedy sets itself apart from the classical comic relief scenes in a tragic Shakespearean tragedy in the way the two elements are so braided that they are indispensable. Marvin Herrick's defining phrase of tragicomedy as a literary genre that encroaches upon the conventional limits of tragedy and comedy states that it allows "comedy upon occasion to raise her voice and tragedy upon occasion to lament in humble everyday speech" [8]. While modern tragicomedy, essentially a product of the skeptical post-war age where nothing is sacrosanct, treats serious matters with levity, it also builds on the notion that comedy itself can be pessimistic and painful. A hallmark in the history of modern theatre, Samuel Beckett's plays are direct expression of this. In *All that Fall* (1957), Maddy Rooney's lamentable complaints about her life illustrate what Styan called "the tiny elements of life" tragically expressed in a humble context of language and setting [3]. The laborious efforts to instate the huge Mrs. Rooney in Mr. Slocum's old car are funny in themselves. However, our emotions swerve between pity and laughter occasionally as we listen to Mrs. Rooney's sad account of herself,

Mrs. Rooney: Oh I am just a hysterical old hag I know,  
destroyed with sorrow and pining and gentility and  
church-  
going and fat and rheumatism and childlessness.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1957), with minimal action, minimal characterization and minimal dialogue, deliberately attaches the term tragicomedy to the play in the title. The play balances the comedy of the waiting of Didi and Gogo with Pozzo's tragic reversal of fortune, thus expressing a similar vision of man as pathetic and his efforts as futile.

Another hallmark in modern British theatre is the performance of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1957, which gave rise to the term coined at the time, "Angry Young Men". The play was regarded as a "bombshell" that shook the old British theatre. Jimmy Porter, the main character, came to represent an entire generation of "angry young men" infuriated by the social conditions in Britain and unsatisfied with post war aftermaths.

The two plays were so influential that two distinct trends can be seen to develop out of them in modern British drama. Social drama concerned itself with directly exposing and confronting the social and political conditions of their time, like class division. Another trend was inspired by the work of Samuel Beckett and concerned itself with problems of communication and the existentialist questions about the meaning of life and

about man's place in the world. However, although Stoppard admits his debt to Beckett's wit, he offers a different outlook and vision. While Beckett is rather grim, Stoppard is determined from his early career to entertain and delight his audience with verbal wit and playfulness while juggling with philosophical ideas and big questions about life and death.

Critics such as John Orr rightly sees the rise of tragicomedy to popularity in the modernist and postmodernist contexts as a result of the modern social fabric. He writes that, "as modern heroes lack more and more the sources of wealth and power, as they move down the social order, their tragic stature also starts to diminish" [9]. Thus, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) illustrates this view "by turning the tragedy of the noble Prince of Denmark into a tragicomedy of bemused courtiers modelled on Didi and Gogo who are caught up in the intricacies of an intrigue they do not understand" [9]. The obvious affinity to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is announced in the title, and the essential plot line is kept as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, the friends-turned-traitors are used by King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to spy on Prince *Hamlet* who is so changed after his father's death. Stoppard explains that his chief interest and objective was to "exploit a situation which seemed to me to have enormous dramatic and comic potential" [10]. Stoppard denies any conscious intention to parody *Hamlet*; however, the postmodernist intertextuality has been recognized by critics who have highlighted the play's borrowings not only from Shakespeare and Beckett, but from other playwrights including Pirandello and T.S. Eliot. However, the fresh vision and the brilliant success of the play since its London performance in 1967 are largely due to the openness of the play which has made it open to many different interpretations.

Relying on the familiarity of the plot line from *Hamlet*, Stoppard manages to achieve a combination of "specificity and vague generality" [10] to portray an image of the human condition. The freshness of Stoppard's vision is immediately asserted with the tossing game with which the play opens. The unnatural run of heads against tails is unsettling as it is funny. Guil suggests that "[T]ime has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times ..." (I. P.12). The tossing game becomes a metaphorical microcosm of the vague inexplicability of the events which follow and which would not yield to any logical and satisfactory explanations to the two insignificant courtiers in Shakespeare's play, who now occupy centre stage. While *Guildenstern* tries to reconcile the arbitrariness of the unnatural run of heads to some scientific or logical explanation, *Rosencrantz* interrupts his companion's long speech with the macabrely funny remark that [11]

Ros (cutting his fingernails): Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death,

as does the beard. ... (Reflectively) The toenails on the other hand never grow at all. (I. P.14)

Typically, Stoppard interjects the funny exchange which follows Guil's long speech, not in the traditional sense of lessening tension, but as a variation on the way in which the

tension is built up. The garrulous rambling about how often fingernails and toenails need cutting is essentially the talk of characters under the stressful feeling of purposelessness and lack of directive knowledge. Ros and Guil's dilemma are enhanced by their own passiveness as by the failure of logic to satisfy their quest for meaning and truth in the world of Elsinore which "cannot be defined in terms of appearances: explanations lie beyond logic" [12]. In the context of postmodernist world image of inconsistency and unreliability, Stoppard manages to display the shocking arbitrariness of the human experience and the inadequacy of logical reasoning in man's search for a pattern that governs and unifies. The unsettling idea of the absence of logic and the complete randomness of life is suggested by the tossing game in the opening scene. Stoppard continues to shatter the audience's self-assurance. Hence, the seriousness of his issues is placed in a context of playful juggling with the audience's expectations. In the play, things happen when least expected and nothing ever happens when most expected. Stoppard frequently plays with our anticipations in this frame. In Act I, Ros thinks he hears the music of a band and Guil muses on mirages and mystical encounters. Our expectations are fulfilled when the musical troupe enters, playing music. However, Stoppard seems to war us against confident reliance on logical outcomes. The pattern is suddenly turned into illogical chance. A little later, when Ros feels uneasy about having been left alone for so long and demands that notice should be taken of them, he attempts an empty assertion of control over the situation:

Ros (...wheels again to face into the wing): Keep out, then!

I forbid anyone to enter! (No one comes- Breathing heavily.)

That's better. ... (II. P.53)

But before he has time to enjoy his triumph, a procession of Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius and Ophelia crowds the stage, signifying the disruption of any illusion of control and hope for self-assertion in the face of mad arbitrariness.

A further example comes later when, having lied to King Claudius that Hamlet is being kept "without, ... guarded to know your pleasure" (II. P. 67), Ros and Guil are dumbfounded when they are ordered to bring him in. By a lucky coincidence which underlines the inconsequential and chance-ridden nature of events, the situation is saved, and against their expectations and ours, Hamlet is led in, escorted by the guards as Ros had claimed. The hilarious scene with its funny overtones is braided with the shattering of any illusion of logical and rational outcomes to events.

Similarly, by having the barrels where Hamlet, the tragedians and Ros and Guil hide during the pirates' attack in Act III, mixed and shuffled, Stoppard highlights the illogical and exercises his playful theatricality. Stoppard repeatedly expressed his view of the theatre as an event and of plays as texts to be performed rather than read. Hence, his playfulness is expressed in terms of verbal, visual and sound images on the stage. When the lights come up after the attack, Ros and Guil's barrel is missing. Again, our logical inference is shattered when the tragedians come out of Hamlet's barrel and Ros and Guil,

who are supposed to be missing, come out from the barrel where the players were supposed to be. The exuberant image of the barrels, richly theatrical, is at the same time funny and entertaining as it is expressive of the remorseful absence of logical prediction.

Stoppard's entertaining theatricality is, moreover, thematically related to the idea behind the play, to the postmodernist sense of historical loss and man's lack of a reliable past or reference point. The play is essentially "about man's relationship to reality- his insignificance, exile, and search for self" [13]. The play emphasizes that the two protagonists are cut off from their past; they cannot remember anything about their past. There is only a faint memory of "we were sent for" (I. P. 15). Stoppard's compromise of seriousness and frivolity is manifest in his propensity to deal with shattering and somber issues in comic terms. Thus, the epistemological void in which Ros and Guil move extends to include their uncertainty of their own identities. Funnily, their names are constantly mixed up not only by other characters, but they themselves share the confusion over who is Ros and who is Guil. In the scene where they rehearse how to ambush Hamlet, their discursive language funnily reveals their tragic predicament of bewildered uncertainty:

Ros: Who am I then?

Guil: You're yourself.

...

Ros: Let's go back a bit.

Guil: I'm afflicted.

Ros: I see.

Guil: Glean what afflicts me.

Ros: Right.

Guil: Question and answer.

Ros: How should I begin?

Guil: Address me.

Ros: My dear Guildestern

Guil: (quietly): You've forgotten- haven't you?

Ros: My dear Rosencrantz! (I. P.35)

In their agonized attempt to understand their situation and their place in the scheme of events, Ros and Guil's identities seem no less enigmatic than the world in which they are thrust. This confusion is further manipulated in a funny scene where Ros even mistakes Guil's leg for his own. Again, the humour is in the dark context of speculation on death which hovers over Act III as Ros and Guil take Hamlet to England for a death decreed by Claudius. The act appropriately opens in complete darkness with this macabrely funny dialogue:

Ros: Ah! There's life in me yet!

Guil: What are you feeling?

Ros: A leg. Yes, it feels like my leg.

Guil: How does it feel?

Ros: Dead.

Guil: Dead?

Ros: (panic) I can't feel a thing!

Guil: Give it a pinch! (Immediately he yelps.)

Ros: Sorry.

Guil: Well, that's cleared that up. (III, P.71)

Stoppard's funny and brilliant language carries the sinister

meditation on death, fulfilling the idea of a literature that “combines horror and fun, the unsettling and the amusing” [14].

### III. MODERN TRAGICOMEDY: THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Stoppard's inclination to produce the tragicomic effect by braiding the serious epistemological questions about life and death with the frivolous and hilarious verbal and physical images also manifests itself in his dazzling use of language. Distressed by the opacity of their unfathomable situation, Ros and Guil try to find comfort in conversation. The refuge, however, turns out to be a trap as they find themselves caught in a labyrinth of linguistic mysteries of which they cannot free themselves. Their dialogues consist mainly of questions even when they try to play “question and answer” (I.P.35). When they turn to the Player for help, they are even more confused:

Player: Why?

Guil: Ah. (To Ros) Why?

Ros: Exactly.

Guil: Exactly what?

Ros: Exactly why?

Guil: Exactly why what?

Ros: What?

Guil: Why?

Ros: Why what, exactly?

Guil: Why is he mad?!

Ros: I don't know! (II. P.50)

Stoppard presents an image of a world where questions remain questions and have no answers, a shattering issue exposed in essentially comic terms. In their helpless situation, Ros nostalgically remembers the good time when:

Ros: There were answers everywhere you looked.

There was no question about it – people knew who I was and if they didn't they asked and I told them. (I. P.29)

Stoppard's investigation into the epistemological and metaphysical background of life is mediated through painfully confused language and “a series of linguistic riddles” to reflect the riddle of life itself [15]. Thus, trapped in the larger scheme of the conspiracy of the Hamlet world, Stoppard's protagonists are equally trapped by nebulous language that fails to communicate and is frequently misunderstood. On board the ship to England, Ros and Guil's verbal ramblings correspond to the sinister anxiety that is growing inside them.

Ros: We're on boat. (Pause) Dark, isn't it?

Guil: Not for night.

Ros: No, not for night.

Guil: Dark for day.

(Pause)

Ros: Oh yes, it's dark for day.

Guil: We must have gone north, of course.

Ros: Off course?

Guil: Land of the midnight sun, that is.

Ros: of course. (III. P.72)

Similarly, communication with the Player, whom they discover on the ship which the troupe has boarded to escape the King's anger at their play, is hampered by the misconstructions

of the meanings of words. Funnily, while Ros's question is meant to inquire about whether they are on the right course to England, the Player's answer responds to the wrong meaning of the words:

Ros: Are we all right for England?

Player: You look all right to me. I don't think they are very particular in England. (III. P.84)

Stoppard, however, makes sure that Ros and Guil are seen as victims of their opaque surroundings as well as of their own passiveness. From the beginning of the play, we see Ros and Guil engaged in role-playing and verbal games as a refuge from the impending necessity of having to act. Reluctant to go and search for Hamlet to probe what afflicts him, they busy themselves with a game in which they rehearse an interrogation of Prince Hamlet until he comes on them. Later on, when Hamlet has killed Polonius and they are ordered to bring him to the king, they decide to stay where they are after some funny hesitation on which direction to look for him. The disjointed relation between language and action is handled playfully to create a comic surface of a situation whose essence symbolizes the spiritual agony of recognizing their own ignorance and ineptitude:

Ros: We ought to stick together; he might be violent.

Guil: Good point.

(Guil marches down to join Ros. They stand still for a moment in their original position.)

Well, at least we're getting somewhere. (II. P. 65)

The persistent use of flexible language is wittily employed to achieve Stoppard's purpose of being highly entertaining while at the same time exposing painful realities about human life and the limitations of man. Man is a victim of language which fails to communicate feelings and ideas clearly. Contrary to the tendency of the Absurd theatre to rely excessively on silences and long pauses as in *Waiting for Godot*, Stoppard's language is plentiful, exhilarating and his characters are garrulous. Like many characters in Stoppard's plays, Ros and Guil attempt to find refuge in their language games to escape from the realities of a life they do not understand. Paradoxically, the refuge they seek adds to their confusion through misleading language which recalls the philosophy of language by Ludwig Wittgenstein and George Moore.

According to the linguistic philosophy, a twentieth century philosophy which has influenced modern thinkers and culture, language is blamed for the “enormous errors” in thinking which had bedevilled the modern world. Wittgenstein questioned the ability of language to express ideas and convey reality. According to Wittgenstein's picture theory, of meaning, statements are meaningful if, and only if, they can be defined or pictured in the real world. Similarly, Moore thinks that it is easy “to feel that you are saying something, that you have a substantial doctrine, and yet to be thoroughly confused, perhaps only fuddled with words” [16].

The postmodernist view of language and discourse provided Stoppard's sensibility and creativity with a context for his tragicomic vision. To the postmodernists, language offers a distorted picture of meaning; they question the reliability of words to reflect certain ideas or intentions in the mind of the

speaker. The linguistic philosophy is manipulated by Stoppard to achieve his twofold purpose. Stoppard's fondness of word games and playful language is one thing through which a comic response from the audience is elicited even when the content is serious and dark. One of the many examples of postmodernist propensity of "suggestive punning word-play" [17] shows here in the scene when Ros and Guil are on the boat to England, moving towards their own deaths.

Ros: Well, shall we stretch our legs

Guil: I don't feel like stretching my legs.

Ros: I'll stretch them for you, if you like.

Guil: No.

Ros: We could stretch each other's. That way we wouldn't have to go anywhere.

Guil (pause): No, somebody might come in.

Ros: In where?

Guil: Out here.

Ros: In out here?

Guil: On deck. (III. P. 73)

Stoppard conforms to and departs from postmodernist literature at times; his works, and particularly *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, defies categorization as postmodernist. For example, although Ros and Guil are garrulous at times, they are also lacking words and resort to silences and pauses as characteristic of postmodernist literature.

Guil: Well...

Ros: Quite...

Guil: Well, then...

Ros: Quite, quite. (Nods with spurious confidence.)

Seek him out. (Pause.) Etcetera...

Guil: Quite...

Ros: Well... (Small pause.)

Although mass communication is one of the outstanding features of the postmodern era, language, as one of the main means of communication, has lost its traditional significance [18]. Influenced by postmodernist culture, language is often reduced to "an impotent tool, best suited for idle speculation" [18]. Tragicomedy results from the comic and amusing wordplay in the context of the plight of two characters thrust involuntarily in the middle of a scheme they do not understand. As often happens in Stoppard, the play abounds with examples where dark and macabre lie behind the light, hilarious and amusing surface. Language as a vehicle to carry meaning and support communication is dismantled, which adds to the plight of modern man who is further victimized by the inadequacy of language. This sad truth is funnily presented to highlight the confusion resulting from the inadequate language as a tool of communication:

Player: The old man thinks he's in love with his daughter.

Ros (appalled): Good God! We're out of our depth here.

Player: No, no, no – he hasn't got a daughter – the old man thinks *he's* in love with his daughter.

Ros: The old man is?

Player: Hamlet, in love with the old man's daughter, the old man thinks.

Ros: Ha! It's beginning to make sense. (II. P.69)

The complexity of the human experience in the modernist and postmodernist contexts has led to the epistemological relativity and absence of a definite reference point. The uncertainty of the postmodernist human condition has pulled down demarcation lines. This is best described by Balzac when he wrote that "Things have different qualities, and the soul different inclinations; for nothing is simple which is presented to the soul, and the soul never presents itself simply to any object. Hence it comes that we weep and laugh at the same thing" [20].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the demise of proper tragedy in the modern age is due to a lack of a generally-conceived order and shape, which is the sine qua non of tragedy as defined by classical theories. In an age of advanced technology and sophisticated scientific progress, an age characterized by diverse ideologies and political regimes, there grew an acute awareness that human life was no longer governed by fixed and shared rules true to all times and places. The complexity of the human experience in light of the failing promises of science and technology created a new sensibility and vision with which to view the changed world.

By the same token, pure comedy would similarly fall short of portraying a fully comprehensive image of the human situation. Though apparently incompatible, both tragedy and comedy thrive on an accepted truth and order with which the hero of tragedy and the hero of comedy are in conflict. Thus, pure comedy, like proper tragedy, works on the assumption that there is a standard of proper behaviour and strict principles of right and wrong that is shared by both author and audience, a norm that is defied by the tragic hero or ridiculously exaggerated beyond reasonable limits by the comic hero.

The distinctly dividing lines that used to define both the tragic and the comic territories in classical theories have given way under the growing modernist and postmodernist sense of a complete loss of a unifying order, of chaos and uncertainty as dominating features of human life in modern times. Though classical dramatists, like Euripides, sometimes allowed elements of the comic to intermingle with their basically tragic themes, the postmodernist tendency to blend the comic and the tragic takes on a different bend of treating a tragic theme in terms of comedy or dealing with comic situations the purport of which is tragic.

Stoppard's world in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is permeated with characters in conflict not only with their world, but also with their aspirations and with time-honoured concepts of man's powers, his status and his relation with the universe. Stoppard's protagonists suffer at the hands of such forces that make man look small, insignificant and even ridiculous. Ros and Guil are, therefore, afflicted by false self-images, failing memories and treacherous language that endanger human communication. Thus, while these devices imply the narrow limitations of man's status and that he really knows very little, they also help dismantle some of the long-standing axioms of the image of man and his capabilities. The optimism inherited from the industrial and technological

acceleration that had faith in man as the Supreme Being, master of earth and space is shattered in Stoppard and reduced to an illusion. Man's suffering and confusion are caused by such petty forces, in comparison with the traditional forces of the gods and fate in classical tragedy.

Despite the inherent comedy of man being a victim of such comparatively trivial forces, tragic futility is not overshadowed by the comic terms with which it is dealt. The fact is that the comic and the tragic in Stoppard coexist in such a way that they heighten each other and deepen our impression of the essentially profound serious questions he raises about life and death, about knowledge and truth, and about identity and world order. The tragicomic mode in the play is intimately bound up with a vision of the human condition in the postmodernist context. Man is tormented by a desperate search for meaning and truth, for a meaning that remains beyond his reach because of human limitations. In this context, man is both ridiculed and glorified in his persistent endeavour as a seeker of the truth about himself and about his relation to the universe, of which he is only a very small part.

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