The play is a travesty on a variety of levels: among other things, it travesties Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Ridiculous exaggeration and distortion are involved, especially of character.

As in Wilde’s play, inversion is fundamental: triviality vs. seriousness; serious subjects like the role and function of art and the artist, particularly in wartime, the reasons why wars are fought, and the falseness of ideals or even the absence of value in modern society are presented in comic scenes which parody those of Wilde’s play.

There is also the travesty of the conventions of the well-made play and comedy of manners, even of the theatre of ideas.

There is intertextuality throughout: the play is filled with traces of other sources.

The play shows how representation brings about deformation and distortion.

Character is continually transformed; there is even the transformation of historical characters.

The inclusion of the material within a particular form of representation, subject to convention, brings about these changes, among other things.

The play suggests the existence of different systems of order.

Real people become theatrical characters subject to conventional distortion: they are converted into stock characters and caricatures, mainly taken from Wilde’s play.

Roles are given to the characters in accordance with particular models (racial stereotypes, etc.).

The play suggests that the fictionalization of historical figures is an inevitable part of involving them in history.

The play is about memory, history and art: all three distort.

The overlapping of Carr’s role in the play and in history in his memory parallels that of the other historical characters in this play.

Reality becomes plural: notice the “time slips.”

We find deconstructions and reconstructions of the past.

Other themes are: the relation between the past and the present; that the self and others are fictitious constructs.
The play is a dramatization of Henry Carr’s memories, which are subject to a variety of systems of order.
The overlapping of fact and fiction: there is no final truth; everything is relative; there are only fragmentary, incomplete versions of the truth.
We find racial and theatrical stereotypes.
There is the overlapping of historical characters and events with literary influences.
The transformation of reality takes place in accordance with literary and other models of order.
The play is a trace of other texts just as Carr and others’ speeches are traces of other texts.
The play as pastiche: freely made up of bits taken from elsewhere: this is the method of *Ulysses* and the technique is parodied in the play as it resembles that of Tzara and of Joyce at the beginning, cutting up and reassembling existing texts.
The dialectic of the play is based on the confrontation of different theories of art.
There is no final resolution in argument, only in the play itself which incorporates all the theories.
It is about Art and the artist.
One question is whether the artist and the revolutionary can be considered as synonymous.
Another: does the artist have to justify himself in political or social terms?
Joyce: Art for art’s sake.
Tzara: randomness and anti-art (there is no causality).
Lenin and Cecily: Art as social criticism, the social function of art.
Carr: considered by some as the doubting sceptic who unites all three.
A play which embodies different levels of reality and is partly about relativity.
We find the plurality of overlapping contexts, the coexistence of different systems of order: inclusiveness.
Cause and effect is in opposition to randomness.
Is it about chaos? Art as providing order, overcoming and reflecting chaos?
Meaning is created out of diverse acts of perception (and or interpretation).
Art is capable of encompassing all the different views?
The play itself provides the resolution of the conflict between different views of art?
Stoppard Commentary

Text: “We begin in the library . . .
(Gwen is now ready to leave the library, and does so, taking Lenin’s folder with her).”

This text is the beginning of Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties* and acts as a kind of overture to
the rest of the play. Essentially, Tzara’s method of cutting up an existing text and
randomly constructing another text out of the bits and pieces really suggests what
Stoppard is doing in the play. Stoppard’s method, like Tzara’s, is one of pastiche where
we find the author freely borrowing from existing texts. The apparently random use of
these sources suggests to some critics that the play is just intellectual slapstick, or a
superficial piece of intertextual play, but in spite of appearances, the play is actually
significant in a number of ways. This basic irony is conveyed in the opening words of
the play: at first they appear to be mere nonsense (a theme in the play and also in its
main source, *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde), but Tzara’s piece of
Dadaist anti-art is significant in a number of ways. Firstly, the text has form, each line
has between 9 and 11 syllables and suggests a stress pattern of roughly 4 stresses on
each line. More than that, we have 3 clear rhymes with tzara, parah and Clara.
Ironically, order is created out of apparent randomness and the suggestion should be, I
think, that the play also has its sense of order and significance in spite of the random
(apparently) wanderings of Henry Carr’s memory. The second point that has to be made
is that the text is nonsense only in appearance. In English, it seems to suggest something
about someone being ill after over-eating, that is really nonsense without any apparent
bearing on the meaning of the play. But if we read the randomly constructed poem as
French, then it begins to make some sense: Il est un homme et s’appel Tzara; the second
line sounds like it might mean something but isn’t clear; then, Il rèste à la Suisse parce
qu’il est un artiste.

Basically, what we find is that the audience is deliberately being forced to
participate actively in the play and is being challenged to make sense of what is going
on. From the start we find a tension between meaning and meaninglessness, art and
anti-art, form and formlessness, which can be related to the discursive nature of the play
and the kind of dialectic that we find there.

Underlying what appears to be a frivolous opening passage part of the theme of
“travesty” is suggested: fragments of an original text are translated into a new context
and are given a new significance, just as Wilde, in particular, Joyce and others are translated into the context of Stoppard’s play and given renewed significance. It also suggests another point which is that meaning in the play is built on layers: that is, there is a variety of layers of significance which have to be interpreted by the audience or reader: here we find that nonsense and significance co-exist, while, at the same time, there is an implicit allusion to an original text which the audience infers from the text that is presented to us. Another theme of “travesty” is related to deformation. *Travesties* was at one point going to be called “Prism” which alludes obviously to Wilde’s character in his play, but significantly, here, suggests refraction and, in a sense, deformation. The process of mediation that is exaggerated in Tzara’s cut up composition essentially represents the same process in all the arts, or in any form of representation, which leads to inevitable manipulation and deformation.

Tzara’s poem also alludes to the theme of intertextuality, as his text is the trace of another text just as *Travesties* is the trace of many other texts: at the same time its significance is partly dependent on our awareness and understanding of these other texts and the way in which they are being travestied.

We know that one of the themes of the play is the meaning or function of art and the artist and this is also implicit in the opening scene. On the one hand, we find a form of meaningless art for art’s sake (form, rhyme and rhythm but lacking in any apparent significance), but when translated we find that it has become meaningful, not only in itself, but as a meaningful part of the exposition of the play, where the character introduces himself, the setting and the reason why he is there: he is Tzara and he is in Switzerland because he is an artist.

As we said, this is part of the exposition of the play where characters and themes are introduced and it acts also as a kind of image or replica (mise en abyme) of what takes place throughout the play, with Stoppard’s continual use of fragments of other texts in his method of pastiche. The audience is challenged to find significance in art, just as the play itself addresses the problem of the function of art.

It is significant that Tzara and Joyce are the first two characters to speak on stage. There is a clear resemblance between Tzara’s “meaningless” poem and Joyce’s “meaningless” dictation to Gwendolen, but there is deliberate irony as it turns out that both texts are significant. We will return to what are the opening words of the “Oxen of the Sun” episode of *Ulysses* in a moment, but we can say first of all that this provides not only juxtaposition but a confrontation between art for art’s sake (Joyce) and chaotic
anti-art (Tzara). The basis of one of the main concerns of the play is laid down and we find also that the curious similarity between the two suggests, just as the play suggests, a possible resolution for what are two apparently mutually exclusive concepts for art. Joyce’s random form of pastiche in *Ulysses* (which is in a sense ratified as it is adopted by Stoppard in the play) provides an alternative to traditional modes of composition, and even an alternative to the conventional concept of causality, just as Tzara contests the same attitudes with his dadaist concept of anti-art. One of the ironies here is that Tzara’s attempt to avoid significance is undermined; another may be that two apparently opposed views of art turn out to be, in fact, similar, at least in this case.

As we see, Joyce is dictating the opening of “The Oxen of the Sun” to Gwendolen. For the audience, this will be meaningless unless we are aware of the source. This means that the audience is being forced to fall back on its cultural baggage, its knowledge of English literature or its literary competence, in order to make the text meaningful. This is precisely what Stoppard is doing throughout the play: forcing us to create significance through our awareness or knowledge of art and literature. The text (like all other literature) is significant in terms of its relation to other literary texts.

As we are told later in the play, Joyce is dictating “a chapter which by a miracle of compression uses the gamut of English literature from Chaucer to Carlyle to describe events taking place in a lying-in hospital in Dublin.” This is significant in that Stoppard’s technique is similar. His “travesties” are also a compression of a variety of styles and authors from English literature (Wilde, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Churchill, Eliot and even Joyce himself) and also a number of lighter forms taken from music hall (Gallagher & Shean) and elsewhere (limericks and romantic songs). We see that the text’s method is clearly being alluded to in this way and as the episode in *Ulysses* is connected with creation (birth) so too is the text itself, implicitly drawing attention to (artistic) creation as a theme.

Joyce’s dictation can be translated (just as we have to translate Tzara’s poem) as “Let us go to Holles Street”, followed by an invocation to the sun god asking for the birth of a child and ending with the celebratory shouts of the midwife as she announces the birth of a baby boy. The variety of sources, styles and languages parallel the same kind of pastiche that we find in the play. The fragmentary and apparently meaningless nature of the text forces the audience to translate in order to find significance. The theme of the text (creation) becomes the theme of the play.
What we find in this opening scene in the library is an unlikely juxtaposition. Joyce, Lenin and Tzara, who never met in reality, are fictitiously juxtaposed in the text. This unlikely juxtaposition is also, in part, the basic strategy of the play and the source of much of the dialectic in a play which is a curious mingling of drama of ideas and farce. In fact, this juxtaposition of ideas and farce is also apparent in this opening scene.

The setting of the library is also significant. The library here is the house of culture where we find literature and history, fact and fiction (Lenin and Joyce) which are all juxtaposed in the play as well. The fact that the apparently random words of two of the protagonists are silenced by the librarian may be significant as another, social order would appear to be set above both Tzara and Joyce.

One point that has not yet been considered but has far-reaching consequences is the fact that all of the opening scene and everything else outside of Old Carr’s speeches in the present is a dramatization of his memories. This means that we are being presented with a fictionalization of the past, a clearly distorted version of historical events, which have been subjected to a further refraction through the memory of Old Carr. This means that everything is informed or influenced by the prejudices and opinions of Old Carr (up to a point) and shows how truth is not necessarily dependent upon a strict adherence to fact. In fact, one of the themes of the play is that the imaginative play of the imagination on history and on facts can often give us an insight into truth which the facts themselves cannot. This is also a theme which the opening scene suggests: the unlikely and fictitious juxtaposition of these characters and events sheds light on the whole question of the roles and functions of art and the artist and, by bringing different theories together within the same work, provides a kind of resolution, in spite of their apparent incompatibility, within the work itself.

Wilde’s inversion of serious and trivial in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is reflected here too. What is apparently trivial nonsense is, ironically, significant, as it embodies serious questions about the nature of art and the function of the artist. What is a Wildean piece of art for art’s sake is also a form of random (dadaist) playfulness, which embodies a number of questions which reflect back on the basic function of the play for the audience (Leninist social criticism). As we have seen, this deliberate distortion that we find creates a tension between a number of different layers of significance, which relies to a great extent on the participation of the audience which is challenged to find or create meaning for itself where, apparently, there is none.
In more theatrical terms, the confusion of folders in the opening scene (like misplaced documents or letters in the conventional well-made play) becomes the complication or one of them, which will have to be resolved in a form parallel to what happens in Wilde’s play.

**Bibliography**


