

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Rosencrantz and  
Guildenstern Are Dead**

by Tom Stoppard

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ISBN 978-1-60389-916-7

Item No. 201374

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

## Introduction

Tom Stoppard was born Tomas Straussler to Jewish parents in Zlín, Czechoslovakia on July 3, 1937. In 1939, his family fled their hometown to escape the impending German invasion, first settling in Singapore and then moving on to India, where Stoppard attended an American-run school for several years. After the death of his father, Stoppard's mother married Kenneth Stoppard, a British army major stationed in India, whose surname the family adopted. Eventually, the family settled in England, and Stoppard continued his education there.

At seventeen, Stoppard left school and began a career in journalism, working for several years as a reporter and theatre critic in Bristol, England, and then moving to London in 1962 to work as a drama critic for *Scene* magazine. During this period, Stoppard wrote several short plays for radio and completed his first stage play, *A Walk on the Water*, which was produced in 1963. The following year, Stoppard received a grant that allowed him to work full time on his writing. He spent the next five months completing a one-act play titled, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, which he soon revised and expanded. The result, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, premiered in 1966 and became a huge commercial success, establishing Stoppard's reputation as a playwright and earning him his first Tony Award for Best Play in 1968.

Stoppard followed up this success with several more critically acclaimed plays, including *Albert's Bridge* (1969), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), *The Real Thing* (1982), and *Arcadia* (1993). During the 1980s, Stoppard began writing for film, completing scripts for Steven Spielberg and winning a Best Screenplay Award in 1985 for co-writing the script for Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*. In 1990, he wrote and directed the film version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which won a Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival, and in 1998, he wrote *Shakespeare in Love*, which earned him both an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for Best Screenplay.

Of Stoppard's more than twenty plays, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* remains his most popular work.

## Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd

To fully appreciate *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, students may find it helpful to have a basic knowledge of existentialist philosophy and its relationship to the Theatre of the Absurd, the form of drama with which the play is associated.

Existentialism is a philosophy that views the individual as being unique and alone in an indifferent and even hostile environment. In emphasizing humanity's insecurity and loneliness, existentialists suggest that people have this anxiety because they feel a sense of meaninglessness and a sense that the world around them is also meaningless. Since people do not have the ability to explain their existence, all they can do is try to face their experiences in a responsible way or escape them through weakness. The existentialist insists that the future is not fixed and humans are free to determine their own lives. In so doing, humanity does not have any absolute values to guide it. The negative aspect of this is that, as we try to act and make our experience meaningful, we feel a sense of futility and/or absurdity and, consequently, greater despair. The positive side is that the individual can challenge accepted principles and change society, if he or she acts from within and refuses to accept the assumptions of society.

As a work associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* concerns itself with many of the above concepts. A key theme in absurdist drama is the existentialist view that the world is an apparently irrational place and that human existence is fundamentally meaningless. In Stoppard's play, the plight of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mirrors that of humanity as a whole. As everyman figures, they, like the rest of us, must struggle with the incomprehensibility of their situation and attempt to come to terms with it. As the scholar and critic Martin Esslin wrote regarding the aim of the Theatre of the Absurd:

The human condition being what it is, with man small, helpless, insecure, and unable ever to fathom the world in all its hopelessness, death, and absurdity, the theatre has to confront him with the bitter truth that most human endeavor is irrational and senseless, that communication between human beings is well-nigh impossible, and that the world will forever remain an impenetrable mystery. At the same time, the recognition of all these bitter truths will have a liberating effect: if we realize the basic absurdity of most of our objectives we are freed from being obsessed with them and this release expresses itself in laughter. (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1961)

All references come from the Grove Press edition of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, copyright 1994.

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. discuss *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as tragicomedy, and in doing so,
  - A. explain the tragic aspects
  - B. identify what is farcical
  - C. discuss the comical conversation, focusing specifically on
    - the witty use of language
    - dialogue as repartee
    - word games
2. determine the extent to which the play demonstrates characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd, taking into consideration the themes, setting, characterization, and plot.
3. explain the significance of the play's title as an allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; discuss the meaning of the title, and offer an opinion on how Stoppard intends for the audience to interpret it.
4. summarize the basic plot of *Hamlet*, and explain the relationship between that play and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; discuss the various ways in which Stoppard reinterprets *Hamlet* from an entirely new perspective.
5. define the term "metatheatre" and explain why *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is an example of this type of drama, providing at least three supporting examples from the text.
6. define the term "dramatic irony" and identify at least two instances of it within the play.
7. compare and contrast the play's two protagonists, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, considering their differing personalities, behaviors, ethical philosophies, and methods of dealing with the incomprehensible world in which they find themselves.
8. write a character sketch of the Player, explaining his role throughout the play, his interaction with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his views on the concepts of truth, identity, art vs. reality, and death.
9. assess the Player's claim that uncertainty is humanity's normal state, explaining his meaning and pointing out how his assertion relates to existentialist philosophy, as well as the Theatre of the Absurd.
10. compare and contrast Guildenstern's views on truth and death with those of the Player, explaining how each character defines the concepts and how their opposing philosophies relate to some of the play's themes and/or major concepts.
11. analyze the moral dilemma that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern face at the climax of the play, explaining how each man responds to the dilemma and what the two of them ultimately decide to do about it; form a reasoned opinion on the following ethical question: Is doing nothing just as much of a moral choice as taking direct and intentional action?

### Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Several references are made to the nature of “truth” throughout the play. Make a list of ideas or an outline that includes:
  - quotations where the concept of truth appears
  - explanations of the meaning of these passages
  - evidence in the play that supports the ideas expressed in the quotations.

Each idea expressed should become a paragraph in your essay. Finally, conclude with your reaction to Stoppard’s ideas on the nature of truth.

2. Explain the symbolic significance of coins in the play. Provide at least two examples of scenes involving coin tosses. How do coins and gambling relate to the concepts of order vs. chance and fate vs. free will?
3. At one point near the beginning of the play, Guildenstern asserts, “The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear.” Explain his meaning. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment of science and its goals? Give reasons for your opinion.
4. Discuss the play’s relationship to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. How does Stoppard reconstruct the basic plot of *Hamlet* from an entirely new perspective? Which elements of *Hamlet* does Stoppard alter or recreate? Which elements does he leave intact? Why do you think he made these particular choices?
5. Briefly summarize the plot of *Hamlet*. What has happened to Hamlet’s father? Who are Claudius and Gertrude? What do they ask of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in regard to Hamlet?
6. Explain the significance of the play’s title; how is the title itself an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*? How do you think the audience is meant to interpret the title? For example, why does Stoppard tell the reader that the two main characters are dead before the play even begins? How might you relate your answer to the concept of metatheatre?
7. Write a character sketch of the Player. What adjectives would you use to describe him? What is his role throughout the play? How does he treat his actors? How does he interact with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What are his views concerning drama vs. real life?
8. The Player is furious with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for having deserted him and the Tragedians while they were in the middle of a performance. Why is the Player upset about this? Explain how this particular scene relates to the theme of identity loss and/or identity confusion.

# Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

## Act I

### VOCABULARY

**aggrieved** – angry, hurt, upset  
**amnesiac** – marked by memory loss; forgetful  
**arbitrary** – random  
**atonement** – amends for a sin or wrongdoing; penance  
**bemused** – confused, puzzled  
**beseech** – to beg or plead  
**compulsory** – mandatory, required  
**concurrent** – at the same time  
**decadence** – a state of decline or deterioration  
**demur** – to object or protest  
**denouements** – endings, resolutions  
**despondently** – sadly, glumly  
**diminishing** – lessening, decreasing  
**doublet** – a close-fitting jacket  
**enigma** – a mystery, riddle, or puzzle  
**entreat** – to beg or plead  
**equanimity** – calmness, composure; self-control  
**expiating** – correcting or compensating for a wrong  
**flautist** – one who plays the flute  
**fortuitous** – happening by chance  
**guilders** – gold or silver coins in Dutch currency  
**inexorable** – unable to be changed or avoided; inevitable  
**jocularly** – in a witty or joking manner  
**levitating** – floating in the air  
**liege** – lord, master  
**lugubriously** – in a sad or mournful way  
**musings** – thinking, meditating  
**mute** – silent; not speaking  
**nomenclature** – the language or terminology used in a particular field of study  
***non sequiturs*** – statements that do not logically follow from what preceded them  
**ordained** – fated, destined  
**persecution** – torment, abuse, mistreatment  
**perusal** – a close and thorough look  
**piteous** – pitiful, pathetic  
**plausible** – believable, possible  
**portentous** – full of significance or meaning; fateful  
**postulate** – to propose or assume  
**proposition** – a statement or suggestion

2. Guildenstern states that he is “very fond of boats.” What are his reasons? How do his ideas about boats relate to the theme of free will vs. fate? What does the boat symbolize in this context?

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3. Acting for the King has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a sense of purpose; they seem committed to following it through. At the same time, they are worried about what will become of them after the mission is completed. Find an example of dialogue from the text that supports this argument.

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4. Guildenstern defines death as, “the ultimate negative. Not-being.” What are the implications of this from a religious or spiritual standpoint?

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5. As they prepare for their upcoming meeting with the English king, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern open the letter that Claudius had given to them. What does the letter say?

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6. How do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern react to the letter? Does either man struggle with the moral dilemma that the letter presents? What do they ultimately decide to do? Provide examples from the text to support your answer. What moral decision would you make if you were in their position?

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