Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead Study Guide

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard

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Introduction

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Tom Stoppard's best-known and first major play, appeared initially as an amateur production in Edinburgh, Scotland, in August of 1966. Subsequent professional productions in London and New York in 1967 made Stoppard an international sensation and three decades and a number of major plays later Stoppard is now considered one of the most important playwrights in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Recognized still today as a consistently clever and daring comic playwright, Stoppard startled and captivated audiences for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* when he retold the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an absurdist-like farce, focusing on the point of view of two of the famous play's most insignificant characters. In Shakespeare's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are little more than plot devices, school chums summoned by King Claudius to probe Hamlet's bizarre behavior at court and then ordered to escort Hamlet to England (and his execution) after Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius. Hamlet escapes Claudius's plot and engineers instead the executions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose deaths are reported incidentally after Hamlet returns to Denmark. In Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become the major characters while the *Hamlet* figures become plot devices, and Stoppard's wildly comic play becomes the story of two ordinary men caught up in events they could neither understand nor control. Stoppard's play immediately invited comparisons with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and also brought to mind George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Luigi Pirandello. "Stoppardian" is now a recognizable epithet that suggests extraordinary verbal wit and the comic treatment of philosophical issues in often bizarre theatrical contexts.

Author Biography

Tom Stoppard (pronounced Stop-pard, with equal accents on both syllables) was born Tomas Straussler in Czechoslovakia on July 3, 1937. His name was changed when his mother married British army major Kenneth Stoppard after the death of the boy's father. Educated from the age of five (in English) in India and from the age of nine in England, Stoppard left school at seventeen to become a journalist before deciding in 1960, at the age of twenty-three, to become a full-time writer.

Before becoming an "overnight" sensation with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard worked as a free-lance writer and drama critic in London, writing stage plays, television plays, radio plays, short stories, and his only novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*. The turning point in his writing career came in 1963 when his agent, Kenneth Ewing, wondered in casual conversation who the King of England might have been during the time of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The question prompted Stoppard to write a one-act verse burlesque entitled *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, and when Stoppard participated in a writing colloquium for young playwrights in Berlin in 1964 he submitted a version of this text.

Stoppard eventually discarded from this play most of the verse and the references to King Lear, gradually focusing on events in Hamlet's Elsinore. In August of 1966, Stoppard helped direct the first production of the play in Edinburgh. Though the play was "done in a church hall on a flat floor" with "no scenery" and "student actors," influential London theatre critic Ronald Bryden perceived the play's potential and wrote that Stoppard's play was "the best thing at Edinburgh so far" and that "it's the most brilliant debut by a young playwright since John Arden." Bryden's review convinced the National Theatre in London to produce the play and Stoppard soon vaulted into international prominence.

Since his phenomenal success with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* Stoppard has produced a large body of work that critics continue to find intelligent, erudite, witty, and filled with verbal pyrotechnics. A number of early critics questioned whether this dazzling surface was supported by genuine profundity and many early critics found Stoppard's plays coldly analytical rather than emotionally powerful. But *The Real Thing* in 1982 and *Arcadia* in 1993 seemed to deliver the kind of pathos his highly intellectual "philosophical farces " might have been lacking. Though not unanimously acclaimed by critics today, Stoppard is undeniably a major figure in contemporary drama. He has also written a number of adaptations of plays in foreign languages and several screen plays, including a feature film version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1990.

Plot Summary

Act I

Two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are travelling to the court of King Claudius and have paused on the road to play a coin-tossing game of "heads or tails." The one named Rosencrantz has just won for the 70th consecutive time, each time betting on "heads." Rosencrantz is embarrassed to be winning so much money from his friend, Guildenstern, but Guildenstern is more concerned with the apparent violation of probability in this phenomenal run. After the string gets to 76, Guildenstern begins throwing the coins more absent-mindedly as he speculates on the possible philosophical and even religious explanations for this amazing streak.

Guildenstern suggests four possibilities for this run of "heads," including simple luck since every toss has the same 50/50 odds no matter what has happened earlier. He helps Rosencrantz recall that this day began with a messenger from King Claudius insisting that they come to Elsinore, where their friend Hamlet had gone some time earlier. They hear music in the air and are soon joined by a troupe of actors, "tragedians," whose leader (the Player) tries to solicit money from them in exchange for a performance.

When the Player suggests an entertainment that implies sexual participation, Guildenstern is angered but Rosencrantz is eventually intrigued and tosses a coin on the ground, asking "what will you do for that?" The Player and Guildenstern bet on whether the coin has fallen heads or tails, exchanging tosses until the Player finally chooses tails and loses. After the Player refuses to bet any longer on the coin toss, Guildenstern tricks him into betting that the year of his birth doubled is an odd number (any number doubled is even). When the Player loses, the troupe has no money to pay the wager and must perform for free. As they are readying themselves, Rosencrantz notices that the last tossed coin turned up tails.

A sudden change of light on stage indicates a shift from the present exterior scene to an interior scene in Elsinore Castle where Hamlet and Ophelia enter and perform actions from Shakespeare's famous play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to leave, but Claudius, Gertrude, and the rest of the court enter speaking Shakespearian verse, trapping the two men into playing the roles they are assigned in *Hamlet*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern learn that King Claudius wants them to find out why Hamlet is acting so strangely. When the characters from Shakespeare's play leave, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (now in the castle at Elsinore) are as baffled as before. To prepare for their interrogation of Hamlet, Rosencrantz initiates a question and answer game and then Guildenstern pretends to be Hamlet while Rosencrantz questions him. The first Act ends as Hamlet appears and welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore.

Act II

As characters from *Hamlet* continue to come and go, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ruminate about their continued confusion. Eventually, the Player arrives and complains about how the two courtiers disappeared (in Act I at the lighting change) when his troupe was performing. He complains that as actors he and his troupe need an audience to complete their sense of identity. Hamlet has asked the tragedians to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* and since the Player seems to be "a man who knows his way around," Guildenstern asks for advice. The Player tells them to accept uncertainty as a natural part of human life. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speculate about their future, the question of control, and the nature of death, Claudius and Gertrude re-enter and once again sweep Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into their Shakespearean roles. As the characters from *Hamlet* come and go, the acting troupe eventually returns to rehearse *The Murder of Gonzago*, but this rehearsal is interrupted by scenes involving other characters from *Hamlet* and gradually evolves beyond the rehearsal of *The Murder of Gonzago* as it appears in *Hamlet* to a summary of events that occur later in the play, including the death of Polonius and the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves. Rosencrantz and Guildenslern don't quite understand that it is their own deaths being enacted, but Guildenstern is rattled by the suggestion and accuses the actors of not understanding death. A blackout brings the action back to *Hamlet* and the frantic conclusion of *The Murder of Gonzago*.

Suddenly it is sunrise, the next day, and Claudius enters and commands Roscncrantz and Guildenstern to accompany Hamlet to England. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wonder about how to find Hamlet, he appears, dragging the body of Polonius. They join their two belts to capture him, but Hamlet evades them as Rosencrantz's trousers fall down. Eventually, Hamlet is brought to Claudius by others and the stage lighting changes once more to reveal that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are again outdoors. They are taking Hamlet to England.

Act III

Act III opens in pitch darkness with soft sea sounds and sailor voices indicating that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on a boat. Gradually, light reveals three large barrels and a huge, gaudily striped umbrella on the deck of the ship. After they discover that Hamlet is sleeping behind Ihe umbrella, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern open the letter from Claudius that they are to present to the King of England when they deliver Hamlet. They are surprised to discover that the letter orders the King of England to put Hamlet to death, but Guildenstern philosophizes that "death comes to us all." Hamlet arises from behind the umbrella, blows out a lantern, and the stage goes to pitch black again and then moonlight, which reveals Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sleeping. While they sleep, Hamlet takes the letter from them, substitutes another, and retires again behind the umbrella, blowing out the lantern and bringing darkness again to the stage.

When light returns, it is morning and Hamlet is relaxing under the umbrella. Rosencrantz has also decided not to worry about what the letter does to Hamlet. They hear music and the tragedians reappear, all climbing (quite impossibly) out of the three large casks on deck. The Player explains that they had to "run for it" because their production of *The Murder of Gonzago* offended the King. Suddenly, pirates attack the ship and in the confused battle that follows Hamlet, the Player, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern leap into the three barrels. After the fight is over, only the Player and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reappear. Hamlet is now gone, but as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern look at the letter again they discovered that the letter Hamlet substituted now instructs the King of England to put them to death. All the players reemerge from one of the barrels and form a menacing circle around Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, The Player offers philosophizing words, but the enraged Guildenstern snatches a dagger from his belt and stabs the Player in the throat, appearing to kill him. However, the dagger is retractable, the Player rises, and the tragedians act out several kinds of deaths as the light dims, leaving only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on stage. Rosencrantz proclaims that he has "had enough" and disappears. Guildenstern calls for his friend, realizes he's gone, and disappears himself.

Immediately, the stage is flooded with light and the characters appear from the tableau of corpses that ends Shakespeare's tragedy. An Ambassador from England announces that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, and Hamlet's friend, Horatio, ends the play by pointing out that "purposes mistook [have] fallen on the inventor's heads."

Act 1, p. 1-20

Act 1, p. 1-20 Summary

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two Elizabethans who are passing the time in a non-descript location. The two are well dressed in the custom of the time with hats, walking sticks, and cloaks, and they each carry a large leather moneybag. Strangely, the bag carried by Guildenstern is nearly empty, while the one carried by Rosencrantz is nearly full.

The two of them pass the time by playing a sort of gambling game. Guildenstern takes a coin from his bag and spins it. When it falls, Rosencrantz looks at it, declares that it has landed "heads" and puts the coin into his own moneybag. The two repeat the process again and again with the same result. The men have playing this game for some time, with the result that Guildenstern has lost most of his money to Rosencrantz. Each time, the coin shows "heads" and each time, Rosencrantz wins the coin from Guildenstern.

Rosencrantz does not seem to think this unlikely chain of events is odd, but he does feel a little embarrassed at taking all of his friend's money. Guildenstern on the other hand, does think the situation is odd. Even though he is losing all his money to Rosencrantz that does not seem to be the cause of his unease. Guildenstern is far more concerned and worried about the implications of such a run of luck. The two continue to play the game, and Guildenstern continues to lose.

As they continue to play the game, Rosencrantz continues to be oblivious to the oddness of this run of luck. However, Guildenstern does begin to comment on it as they continue to play the game and as he continues to lose to Rosencrantz. Guildenstern questions whether luck is involved, or whether faith or lack of faith could be implicated and he muses about the laws of probability and their apparent absence in this case. Guildenstern begins to postulate about a probability problem he has heard concerning throwing six monkeys up in the air and how often the six monkeys would land on their heads or on their tails. Meanwhile, they continue to play the coin toss game, and Rosencrantz continues to win every time because the coins come up heads with each toss.

Finally, Rosencrantz smiles sheepishly at Guildenstern and expresses his embarrassment at continually winning. Rosencrantz says that the process must be a bit of a bore. Guildenstern questions him as to what he means and postulates that there is suspense in each throw and that his luck must be about to change, citing the "law of diminishing returns." Yet the coin continues to come up heads.

Rosencrantz exclaims that he has now won 85 times in a row, which Guildenstern at first claims is absurd. Rosencrantz assures Guildenstern that he (Rosencrantz) has won 85 times in a row, and Guildenstern becomes angry, asking if this is a new record. Guildenstern then asks if Rosencrantz is prepared to continue the game. Rosencrantz

hesitates. Defensively, he points out that Guildenstern had spun the coins himself. Guildenstern continues to press Rosencrantz about continuing the game. Rosencrantz points out that he did win and seems peevish and defensive. Guildenstern approaches him and asks what his attitude would be should he have lost 85 times in a row instead of won 85 times in a row.

Rosencrantz considers this possibility and says he would certainly examine the coins if he had lost 85 times in a row. Guildenstern is relieved by this answer and he interprets it to mean that self-interest is still predictable, even if the laws of probability seem to have been suspended in this coin-toss game. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern embrace. Rosencrantz points out that the two have been spinning coins together for as long as he can remember. When Guildenstern asks just how long that is, Rosencrantz replies that at least 85 times, and that this run will certainly not be surpassed soon.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discuss fear as it relates to whether or not the run of luck can be broken. Rosencrantz wonders why fear is being discussed, and Guildenstern, becoming angry, equates the fear with a fear of realization or enlightenment. Guildenstern, now quite agitated, throws a coin on the ground. Rosencrantz examines it, calls it heads, and puts it in his bag with the other 85 coins he has won from Guildenstern. Guildenstern now sits down despondently. Guildenstern takes a coin, spins it, and lets it fall between his feet. Then he looks at it, picks it up, and tosses it to Rosencrantz who puts it in his moneybag. Guildenstern tosses yet another coin, but this time turns it over on his other hand rather than tossing it on the ground. Guildenstern looks at it and tosses it to Rosencrantz who puts it in his moneybag. Guildenstern tries one more tactic. The man tosses the coin several times, sometimes over or under his legs and finally lays it to rest on top of his own head. Rosencrantz comes over to look at it, and then picks it up and puts it in his own moneybag with all the other coins.

Rosencrantz begins to say "I'm afraid....," but Guildenstern cuts him off and says that he too, is afraid. Rosencrantz finishes his thought, that he's afraid it just isn't Guildenstern's day, and Guildenstern says that he is afraid it IS his day. Rosencrantz announces the new total, which is 89 to 0.

Guildenstern muses that this run of luck must have some kind of meaning beyond the "redistribution of wealth" and he considers several possible explanations. The first is that he himself is willing himself to lose each time. Guildenstern likens himself to a double-headed coin continually spinning and losing in order to atone for past transgressions.

Rosencrantz calls the next coin, and it is, of course, heads. Rosencrantz continues to be unperturbed by the oddness of the situation. Guildenstern begins to explain his second theory of why this is happening and he postulates that time itself has stopped so that the experience of one coin being spun and landing heads has been repeated 90 times when it actually only happened once. Guildenstern loses another coin to Rosencrantz who puts it in his moneybag. Guildenstern then muses that divine intervention could account for the run of luck. Then he has a fourth theory. This is that the phenomenon is a brilliant verification of the notion that each coin spun has an equal

chance to come down heads or to come down tails, no matter how many coins are spun in a row. Guildenstern spins one more coin, which he looks at and tosses to Rosencrantz.

Rosencrantz exclaims that he's never seen anything like this happen before. Guildenstern begins to play with Rosencrantz's wording and enumerate what Rosencrantz's meaning must be much like he (Guildenstern) was doing in trying to enumerate possible theories as to why the coins continue to come down heads. Guildenstern muses that either Rosencrantz has never known anything like this, or that he has never had anything to write home about. Then he changes gears and asks Rosencrantz what he first remembers about home.

Rosencrantz asks if Guildenstern means the first thing which comes into his head, but Guildenstern corrects Rosencrantz and says he want to know what the first thing Rosencrantz remembers is instead. Rosencrantz says it was a long time ago, and he can't remember. Guildenstern is becoming testy. Then he explains that Rosencrantz does not understand, and that he wants Rosencrantz to tell him the first thing he DOES remember, whatever that was. Rosencrantz seems to understand, but then declares that he has forgotten the question. Guildenstern suddenly asks Rosencrantz if he is happy, content, at ease. Rosencrantz says he supposes so, and Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz what he intends to do now. Rosencrantz responds that he doesn't know and asks what Guildenstern wants to do.

Guildenstern claims to have no desires or plans. Then he stops dead in his tracks (he was pacing) to state that a messenger came for he and Rosencrantz the night before, as though he has just remembered this. Guildenstern tells Rosencrantz that this is a second syllogism, the first being his list of possible reasons why the coins were all coming down heads. As to the current syllogism posed, Guildenstern postulates that probability is something which exists within natural laws. The second possibility according to Guildenstern is that probability itself is not in operation in this instance. The third explanation is that "We are now within un-, sub-, or supernatural forces." Guildenstern demands that they discuss these possibilities, but not too heatedly. Guildenstern is behaving sarcastically, and not a little "acidly."

Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern what's the matter with him. Guildenstern gives a long involved explanation regarding his theories on why the coins keep coming down heads. This somewhat tortured logic seems to lead him through his syllogisms and his explanation of them to Rosencrantz. Guildenstern ends that they are probably not held by supernatural forces after all, and he declares that he is quite relieved by this realization. Guildenstern seems quite agitated, and even near hysteria, but under control and he begins to talk about the coin spinning again. Guildenstern reminds Rosencrantz that in all the coin spinning they have done in the past, they were usually only up or down a few coins one from another. Now, Rosencrantz has won virtually all the coins, and Guildenstern is very disturbed by this. The chief concern is not the coins themselves, but the meaning of this apparent suspension of natural law. Guildenstern points out that when the natural laws are in place and operational, no one wins too much or loses too much and the game remains harmonious. Guildenstern likens the

usual results of their coin toss game to the sun, which both comes up and goes down, about the same amount of times of each. Then he says that in the past coins came up heads about as often as tails and tails about as often as heads. Guildenstern points out that the run of heads only began after the messenger arrived the night before. Once the messenger arrived and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were sent for, the coins began to come down heads only. Guildenstern points out that the coming of the messenger is the only different thing that has happened in their lives and he then comments that even though there is no wind blowing, he can hear musical instruments playing near by.

Rosencrantz comments that it is interesting that the fingernails (which he is cutting) continue to grow after death. Guildenstern asks, "What?" and Rosencrantz replies with one word, "Beard!" Guildenstern points out that Rosencrantz is not dead. Rosencrantz is irritated and explains that he didn't mean that nails started to grow after death. Rosencrantz also points out that nails grow before birth, but not the beard. Guildenstern again asks, "What?" but seems more exasperated or puzzled this time. Rosencrantz, now shouting, repeats the word beard and then comments that toenails never grow at all.

Guildenstern considers this statement and, amused, repeats that the toenails never grow at all, but in the form of a question to Rosencrantz. Rosencrantz states that he cuts his fingernails all the time and they always seem to need cutting, but that he never cuts his toenails. Rosencrantz wonders if perhaps he cuts them absent-mindedly and just doesn't remember doing it.

Guildenstern seems tense, and asks if Rosencrantz remembers the first thing that happened to the two of them that day. Rosencrantz first says he woke up, and then he remembers that a man who he refers to as a foreigner woke them up. Guildenstern says yes, and Rosencrantz further elaborates that they were sent for. Guildenstern confirms, and Rosencrantz says that's why the two of them are there, traveling. Again, Guildenstern confirms Rosencrantz's statement. Rosencrantz elaborates on the summons they received saying that it was urgent and a royal summons. Rosencrantz further states that it was official business and that they were told to ask no questions, but to saddle up and come at once so that they would not be too late.

Guildenstern asks, "Too late for what?" Rosencrantz says that he doesn't know, as they are not there yet. Guildenstern then questions what they are doing there, and Rosencrantz comments that he might well ask. The two agree to continue their journey, but seem not to know where they are going. Guildenstern recounts their experience so far, saying that they were awakened at dawn with a message, a summons, and a new record for heads and tails. Guildenstern states that surely they were not summoned to now just be abandoned and set loose to find their own way. Then he complains that they are "entitled to some direction...I would have thought."

Rosencrantz seems to hear something or someone coming and tells Guildenstern to listen. Rosencrantz thinks he hears music, like a band, with drums and seems a little embarrassed by this statement. Then he says it could not have been real. Guildenstern points out that the colors red, blue, and green are real, and that yellow is actually a

shared mystical experience. Rosencrantz says the noise he heard must have been thunder, but now the band is faintly audible.

Guildenstern begins to talk about encounters while traveling and he uses the example of a man going from one place to the next. Each place is much like the other with no significant differences, yet at the third place, a unicorn crosses the path of the traveler. Guildenstern relates this event as startling, but points out that there are precedents for such encounters with mythical beings. Guildenstern says that in such an instance, the traveler could actually put such a sighting down to pure fancy, or to think that he must have dreamed the unicorn. The experience is then regarded as less alarming, explains Guildenstern. Then he says that if there were third and forth witnesses to the unicorn sighting, the experience becomes less and less odd, until the crowd who saw the beast would make excuses for their sighting.

Rosencrantz becomes excited and says all along that he knew it was a band. Guildenstern restates Rosencrantz's assertion tiredly. Rosencrantz announces that again, the band is coming. Guildenstern comments wistfully that he is sorry it was not actually a unicorn, and that it would have been nice to have unicorns.

Act 1, p. 1-20 Analysis

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are common men who live a common and predictable existence. Except for today. The men have been summoned by a messenger in the night, a new and different experience. Then the game they often play, matching coins, is coming out all wrong, with Guildenstern losing each and every time. Guildenstern seems bothered by the situation, but Rosencrantz seems to accept it without thought. Guildenstern is far more concerned by the oddity of the situation itself than by the loss of money to Rosencrantz. Guildenstern is uneasy because the very laws of probability seem to have been violated. The two friends seem to be suspended in one location without direction. Guildenstern wants rational explanation, and Rosencrantz seems to accept anything that happens without question. Their usually ordered lives are upset, both by their midnight summons and by the fact that their usually benign and even game is coming out all wrong.

It appears that they usually live predictable lives which are governed by "rules" which have for some reason, been suspended. The men are pondering what's going on, and why. Guildenstern ponders what might have happened should they have encountered a unicorn, a possibility just as outlandish as the run of luck Rosencrantz has experienced. Guildenstern seems to be saying that if natural laws were to be suspended, he would much rather see a unicorn than to be experiencing what they are experiencing.

Rosencrantz seems to have heard what he thinks is thunder, but then seems to be identifying the off-stage sounds as music. The two have heard a traveling band of musicians, which is approaching their location.

A major theme which continues throughout the play is introduced in this first section of Act I. This is the idea that there seems to have been a suspension of natural law. That is, Rosencrantz continues to win the coin tosses, when normally, they both win pretty much the same amount of times. Guildenstern finds this change in the way their world has always worked quite disturbing, but Rosencrantz seems to accept it without question. These differing attitudes of questioning and accepting continue throughout the play with the questioning or suspicious attitude demonstrated by Guildenstern and the sort of naïve, childlike attitude exhibited by Rosencrantz. Guildenstern reacts to the run of luck by Rosencrantz as disturbing, and he even tries tactics to break the string. This is the first time an ongoing theme of powerlessness seems to be presented. No matter what Guildenstern does, he cannot influence the outcome of the coin tosses. The two friends discuss the messenger who came for them and that things began to get strange with the arrival of the messenger who they think of as a "foreigner." The two are now on a journey which they do not understand, and over which they have no control.

Act 1, p. 20-34

Act 1, p. 20-34 Summary

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still on stage in their non-descript location when they are joined by six "Tragedians" or traveling actors, musicians, and their leader, referred to as the Player. The Player comes in last and has no instrument. One of the group is a small boy named Alfred. Two people of the group pull a cart, which carries their belongings and props piled into it. There are three musicians who are a drummer, a horn-player, and a flautist. The Player orders the group to halt, which they do. The player sees Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and exclaims excitedly that they have an audience. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begin to rise, but the Player tells them not to move, and they resume their seats. The Player is very glad to see them, and comments that it is a lucky thing they came along. Rosencrantz asks if he means lucky for them. The Player says yes, it was lucky to have met them on the road and not off of it. The Player says they are rusty and are forgetting what they know. Then he says they would then be back to improvising their act.

Rosencrantz asks if they are tumblers. The Player says they can tumble if you want them to and goes on to explain that if paid even a single coin, they can produce gory romances with fine sound, and corpses. The whole troupe flourishes and bows. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also now on their feet. Rosencrantz introduces them to the tragedians, but he mixes up their names and introduces himself as Guildenstern and Guildenstern as Rosencrantz, another reflection of the confusion they find themselves in. Guildenstern speaks to Rosencrantz, and Rosencrantz corrects the introductions. The Player says they have played to larger groups, but to no finer, and claims to have recognized Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at once.

Rosencrantz then asks the Player, "And who are we?" The Player states that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are surely fellow artists. Rosencrantz replies that he thought the two of them were gentlemen. The Player explains that for some such roles are performance, and for some, patronage, stating that there are two sides to every coin, or even that they could all be the same side of two coins.

Rosencrantz asks the Player what his work consists of. The Player replies that they mostly do tragedy to include deaths, disclosures, unexpected turns of events, and even transvestite melodrama. The Player claims that his troupe can transport its audience to various imaginary worlds and can be ghosts, murderers, clowns, heroes, villains, or tormented lovers. Rapiers (swords) and rapes are mentioned and he alludes to wives and "ravished virgins" and asks if he is getting warm. Rosencrantz replies doubtfully that he does not know. The Player says that they have one price for watching the performances and one price if the audience wants to participate in the performance. Rosencrantz asks what these prices are. The Player answers that they are indifferent, and Rosencrantz asks if this means they are bad. The Player replies that it means they

are "wicked," and tells the Tragedians to line up to be seen by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Then he asks if Rosencrantz sees anything he likes.

Rosencrantz innocently asks what it is that they do, and The Player advises him to let his imagination run wild, implying that they do anything and everything. Rosencrantz asks for a price. The Player asks if he wants a price to watch or participate. Rosencrantz says he wants to watch a private performance for he and Guildenstern, and asks if the two of them will be enough. The Player says it is pretty small for an audience, but about average for voyeurs. Rosencrantz asks what the difference is in the two, and the Player replies "Ten Guilders," a price which Rosencrantz finds horrifying. The Player immediately amends the price to eight, then to seven. Rosencrantz asks where they have been. The Player says they have been all around. The Tragedians begin to leave, and Guildenstern asks where they are going. The Player has them stop and he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that the group is on their way home. Guildenstern asks from where they are traveling. The Player says from home, and that they are traveling people who take their chances where they find them.

Guildenstern asks the Player if it was chance that the troupe found them. The Player says it was. Guildenstern asked if they were looking for them, and the Player says no. Guildenstern again says it must have been chance, and the Player says it could be fate. Guildenstern asks if he means the troupe's fate or their fate. Guildenstern reiterates that it is fate. The Player asserts that it is and that his troupe has no control over where they go or who they play for. Guildenstern says he may be able to use his influence at the court, and becomes angry when the Player seems to question this. Guildenstern grabs the Player violently, and then seems to attempt to cover his action by relating back to the statement the Player made about the audience getting involved in the drama.

The Player, seemingly delighted, says that he did say that and he confides to Guildenstern that, for a price, he has a private and bawdy performance of The Rape of the Sabine Women to offer. The Player then calls over his shoulder to the boy, Alfred, and tells Alfred to go get his skirt on. As Alfred struggles into his costume, the Player tells Guildenstern that he may participate for eight guilders, but Guildenstern backs away. The Player pursues him and attempts to offer additional services and Guildenstern eventually smashes the Player across the face. Guildenstern is trembling with rage. The Player tells Alfred to get out of his costume. Guildenstern, still enraged, begins to protest that the message to him did not have to be obscene and he says the messenger could have been any one of a number of other beings, for which he was prepared, but instead he is approached by prostitutes.

The Player bows to Guildenstern and asserts that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should have seen his troupe in better times. The Player again rounds up his troupe to leave. This time Rosencrantz stops them. The Player again halts his group and calls to Alfred, who begins to put his costume on again. Rosencrantz asks if they are exclusively players, and the Player responds that they are "inclusively" players. Rosencrantz asks if they give exhibitions, and the Player responds that they do performances. Rosencrantz says he had no idea, that he had heard of such things, but never seen them. Then he asks exactly what the troupe does. The player answers that they do what he calls usual

stuff, but inside out. Rosencrantz asserts that he is not that type of man, but relents when the Player begins to turn away. Rosencrantz asks again for details of what they do, but the Player directs his troupe to move out. Rosencrantz again stops them and he tosses a single coin on the ground and asks the Player what the troupe will do for that. However, the Player spits on the coin, not moving. The tragedians, however, try to get at the coin, but the Player kicks at them and pushes them back and orders them on.

Alfred is still half out and half in his robe, and the Player cuffs him, too, asking Alfred what he is playing at. Rosencrantz becomes ashamed and angry and he calls the Player names and threatens to report him. The Players are about to leave, and Guildenstern has up to now not gotten involved. Guildenstern asks quietly whether or not the tragedians would like a bet. The Player turns and comes back and asks what kind of bet Guildenstern has in mind. Guildenstern walks forward, puts his foot on the coin still on the ground, and offers "double or quits." The Player calls heads. Guildenstern raises his foot, the coin is seen to be heads, and the Player claims it amid relief and congratulations from his troupe. Guildenstern offers a second coin. Some of the troupe is for this next bet, and some against, but they continue this play for several more times. Each time the coin comes up heads. Finally, the Player calls tails. However, the coin is heads, and Guildenstern picks it up. The Player then throws down his last coin, and Guildenstern puts his foot on it instead of picking it up. Guildenstern calls heads. The Player consults the Tragedians who are against the bet. The two proceed, and Guildenstern continues to call heads each time. At last, the Player and the Tragedians begin to move away.

Guildenstern challenges the Player to yet another bet. Guildenstern bets that the year of his birth doubled is an odd number. The Tragedians catch on at last that any number doubled is even and they object loudly. The Player says they have no money with which to satisfy their debt. Guildenstern asks him what they do have, and the Player brings Alfred forward, saying he's the best they have to offer. Guildenstern states that times must indeed be bad if that is the case and he is again angry and harsh with the Player. Guildenstern speaks gently to Alfred asking if he often loses. Alfred confirms that he does. Guildenstern asks if Alfred likes being an actor, and Alfred says he does not. Guildenstern tells Alfred that the two of them could "create a dramatic precedent here," upon which Alfred begins to cry. The Player approaches to scold Alfred, but Guildenstern turns him away.

Guildenstern asks the Player if he knows any good plays, but the Player says there is not much call for plays. Guildenstern names several classic sounding titles and asks if the Player knows any of them. The Player does not know any of them and says his troupe is more of the "blood, love, and rhetoric school." Guildenstern tells him to choose one. The Player states that they are all the same, or sort of the same or overlapping, or concurrent. Guildenstern asks if that's what people want, and the Player replies that it is what they do. Guildenstern tells Alfred gently that he will let them know if they are wanted. The Player and Alfred begin to move off stage. The Player stays where he is, although the rest of the troupe is moving off. Guildenstern asks if he is going to change his costume, and the Player replies that he is always in costume. Finally, it becomes obvious that the Player is not moving for a reason. Rosencrantz approaches him, and

the Player finally moves his foot. Guildenstern's coin was under the Player's foot. Rosencrantz thanks the Player, and picks up the coin. Guildenstern calls to him to come on and Rosencrantz comments that was lucky. Guildenstern asks what he means, and Rosencrantz explains that the coin was tails as he tosses it to Guildenstern who catches it.

Act 1, p. 20-34 Analysis

The Player and his troupe of actors/musicians have joined Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on stage. The Player is very happy to see them, as he says the troupe needs an audience. The Player seems to think Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fellow actors, and they tell him they are gentlemen. This is the first time that the author has intimated that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are actually going to be part of the "drama" upon which the play is based. The Player uses the term "2 sides of the same coin" in discussing whether the two are Actors or Gentlemen or some combination of the two---in effect, 2 sides of the same coin. The coin theme began in the very beginning of the play with the coin toss game Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have apparently played together for some time. The plot continues to develop with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as sort of unwilling participants in the drama they are now a part of and as "actors" in the drama, their "roles" could be said to be written for them, and are out of their control.

The Player explains that his group does violent and tragic productions based on turns of events. Guildenstern and the Player discuss whether their meeting is fate or chance. Guildenstern argues for chance, and the Player, for fate. When Guildenstern asks if he means the troupe's fate or the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the player seems to intimate that these are one and the same, again alluding to the theme that they are now in a "play" of sorts, with pre-ordained roles instead of in their old lives where the coin tosses come out even. When Guildenstern becomes agitated and grabs the Player, he stops himself and pretends he is just joining in the drama. Again, the author seems to be playing with the idea of whether or not the happenings surrounding Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are chance, or are planned. Their helplessness and inability to control their destinies are emphasized by their inclusion in the "play" unfolding around them as the action builds to a coming climax.

There is additional word play in this part of the scene. When Rosencrantz asks if they are "exclusively" performers, the Player answers that they are "inclusively" performers. This seems to imply that their audience, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are actually part of the play, whether they realize it or not, further expanding the theme that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are.

At this point, Guildenstern has a sort of crafty notion. Guildenstern asks the Player if he'd like to flip coins for the performance. For the first two tosses of the coin, the Player wins. Then Guildenstern turns the tables, and wins each toss, just as Rosencrantz has done playing with Guildenstern. Guildenstern seems to be testing the existence of this

new "natural law" in their world, and it does hold as the Player continues to lose. The author is further emphasizing the theme that life has changed, and is out of their control.

Guildenstern and the Player talk about what kinds of performances the group puts on. Guildenstern tries to pin the Player down as to what kinds of work they do, but the Player seems to be saying that all their plays are the same and are interchangeable. Guildenstern asks the Player if he's going to change out of his costume as they leave, and the Player says he always wears his costume, again implying that the life they are experiencing is, itself, a drama.

Act 1, p. 34-53

Act 1, p. 34-53 Summary

There is a lighting change, and the scene now appears to be interior rather than exterior. Ophelia runs on stage, followed by Hamlet. The twp do not speak. Hamlet's clothing is disarrayed, and he seems frightened with his knees knocking together. Hamlet is holding Ophelia by the arm and staring into her face, sighing loudly. Then he releases her and leaves the stage, but without taking his eyes off of her. Ophelia runs off in the opposite direction.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have frozen at this sight; but Guildenstern reacts first and jumps at Rosencrantz. Before they can run, Claudius and Gertrude enter with servants in attendance. Claudius welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who hastily straighten their clothing. Claudius invites Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to try to figure out what is bothering Hamlet. Claudius knows they were boy-hood friends, and he wants them to enjoy their stay in court, to enjoy the pleasures court life has to offer, but to also report back what is on Hamlet's mind so he can make sure it is addressed. Then Gertrude addresses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and they both bow. Gertrude says Hamlet has spoken of them and that she knows how fond of them he is. Gertrude asks, too, that they stay in court a while, and assures them that they will be thanked for their trouble.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, now both speaking in the same archaic language style as Claudius and Gertrude, do commit to stay and to do whatever they can do to assist. Claudius thanks Rosencrantz who is caught off guard, and then thanks Guildenstern, who bows deeply. Gertrude also thanks them one by one, and they bow at inopportune times. Gertrude begs them to go see Hamlet at once and she directs some of the attendants to take Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Hamlet. As they are following the attendants out, Guildenstern says a little prayer that their presence may be helpful and pleasant to Hamlet. Gertrude adds an Amen to this sentiment.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are heading to a downstage wing, but before they can leave the stage, Polonius enters, and they stop and bow to him. Polonius nods briefly and hurries to Claudius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern look after him. Polonius tells Claudius that the ambassadors from Norway have returned. Claudius comments that this is good news. Claudius explains that he feels his duty is very important, and that he hopes to find the why Hamlet is acting so irrationally. The two leave, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are left on the stage. Once alone, they revert back to their own more modern way of speaking to one another. Rosencrantz states that he wants to go home, and Guildenstern advises Rosencrantz not to let the others confuse him. Rosencrantz confides that he feels out of his depth, and Guildenstern assures him that they will be home soon. However, Rosencrantz continues to feel stressed and seems to feel a death is coming. Rosencrantz's odd and confused speech seems to portend disaster.

Guildenstern speaks soothingly to Rosencrantz and assures him again that they will soon be home. However, Guildenstern seems disconcerted as well and he asks Rosencrantz if he has ever had the experience of saying a simple and familiar word (he uses house and wife as examples) but suddenly feels that these very words are completely new and strange to you. Rosencrantz responds that he remembers... and Guildenstern interrupts him anxiously to prompt him. Rosencrantz continues to state that he remembers when there were no questions. However, Guildenstern says there were always questions, and that to change one set of questions for another set of questions is just not important. Rosencrantz comments that yes, there were answers for everything. Guildenstern comments that Rosencrantz must have forgotten. Rosencrantz angrily says he has not forgotten, that he knows both their names and that there were answers all around them. Rosencrantz further states that people knew who he was, and if they did not they would ask him and he would tell them who he was.

Guildenstern recalls the dawn when a man came to their window, knocked on it, and called them to come to court. The men did not know who he was, yet when he called them, they came without question. Rosencrantz comments that he is sick of this conversation and asks Guildenstern to make up his mind. Guildenstern points out once again that they did not come all this way for a christening, and that they are actually fortunate that they are at least presented with alternatives. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue to bicker, and Rosencrantz again states that he wants to go home. Rosencrantz asks which way they entered the room, seeming confused about the direction.

Guildenstern states that the only beginnings and ends are birth and death, and that that's what you can count on. Rosencrantz comments that they owe nothing to anyone. Guildenstern further states that he feels they have been caught up in this situation, and that even their smallest actions set off actions elsewhere, again emphasizing their helplessness. Guildenstern cautions Rosencrantz that they should be alert, should tread carefully, and should follow instructions. Then he assures Rosencrantz that they will be alright, but Rosencrantz asks for how long. Guildenstern answers until the end and goes on to elaborate that they are being led like children, and that everything is being done for them. At the end of this speech, he asks if he is contradicting himself in his conversation.

Rosencrantz, in response to Guildenstern's question about whether he is contradicting himself, responds that he can't remember and asks what they have to go on. Guildenstern responds that they have been briefed regarding Hamlet's "transformation." Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz what he (Rosencrantz) remembers. Rosencrantz responds that Hamlet has changed. Guildenstern comments that they should move Hamlet toward pleasurable things, and that they should figure out what's bothering Hamlet. Rosencrantz comments that the problem is more than Hamlet's father's death. Guildenstern reminds Rosencrantz that Hamlet is always talking about the two of them, and that he (Hamlet) dotes on them. Rosencrantz responds that the two of them need to cheer up Hamlet, and discover what the problems are.

Guildenstern agrees, and says that they ask the right questions and actually give away as much as they can, and that this behavior is a game. Rosencrantz asks if once this is done, would they be free to go? Guildenstern affirms that they could then go, and would certainly be thanked and "remembered." Rosencrantz does like this and asks what kind of "remembrance" they could be expected to receive. Guildenstern comments that Hamlet would not forget his friends. Rosencrantz asks if Guildenstern would like to guess what kinds of rewards they might expect. Guildenstern muses that this could vary.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue to wonder what kind of reward or remembrance they could expect, including its size. Rosencrantz questions whether the two should be doing something constructive. Guildenstern takes his words literally and asks if the two should construct a short, blunt human pyramid.

Rosencrantz suggests that the two should leave, and Guildenstern asks to go where. Rosencrantz suggests that they follow those who have just departed, but Guildenstern says that they would just get lost. Rosencrantz, peering out over the footlights, wonders if someone interesting will come along shortly, and Guildenstern asks if he sees anyone. Rosencrantz says he does not, and asks if Guildenstern sees anyone. Guildenstern, now also at the footlights, says no, and wonders at their situation. Guildenstern says that they are kept involved, but don't know what's going on.

Rosencrantz suggests they "practice" by asking one another questions, and Guildenstern wonders what good that would do. Rosencrantz reiterates that they could practice. The men can ask one another silly and unrelated questions, never really answering one another, but continuing to pose more questions to one another. The two apparently have a scoring system as Rosencrantz occasionally utters things like, "Two----love. Match point to me." There is no rhyme or reason to this scoring. The two of them also use several words again and again, but with different meanings. An example is the word "matter." The men use the word several ways and as several parts of speech in different sentences.

Hamlet reappears on stage reading a book. Just as he is about to wander off again, Guildenstern notices him and alerts Rosencrantz. The two see Hamlet go, and congratulate one another on some kind of victory. The men discuss what they see as changes in Hamlet, and proclaim him transformed and they also refer to him as afflicted in some way. Again, they play what seems to be silly and pointless word games to include questions and answers. Then they pretend that Hamlet has returned. Rosencrantz plays himself, while Guildenstern pretends to be Hamlet. Rosencrantz addresses Guildenstern as, "My honored Lord," but Rosencrantz responds by addressing Guildenstern with his own name, not that of Hamlet. The two again begin to play a question and answer game in which they go back to the idea of someone being afflicted and transformed.

Rosencrantz makes an effort to connect Guildenstern's heritage to Hamlet's. From what Rosencrantz says, Guildenstern actually could have been expected to take the throne, but Hamlet did instead. The men discuss usurpation of the throne by Hamlet and they

begin to discuss an assumed relationship between Guildenstern's mother and Hamlet, her husband's brother. Rosencrantz summarizes the situation, saying that Guildenstern's father died, and Guildenstern's mother began a relationship with Hamlet, her husband's younger brother, who then became king instead of Guildenstern.

The two think they hear music off stage. Rosencrantz looks off stage and returns to report what he has seen. Rather than a band, Rosencrantz has seen Hamlet talking to himself. However, Hamlet is actually not alone, and Hamlet and Polonius enter, speaking quietly together. Polonius declares he will leave and Hamlet responds that he (Polonius) cannot take anything but Hamlets' life from him. As he is leaving, Polonius points out to Rosencrantz that Hamlet is present. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz address Hamlet. Hamlet turns to them, referring to them as friends and asking how they are. The men seem friendly and glad to see one another, and exit together, with Hamlet between them and his arms over their shoulders.

Act 1, p. 34-53 Analysis

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are joined by Shakespearian characters on stage. When the Shakespearian characters are on stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's speech alters to be more like Elizabethan speech. The two friends attempt to conform, to fit in, but they bow awkwardly and inappropriately, and seem to not belong, as they are out of their element. Ophelia and Hamlet are the first to appear briefly. Then Claudius, the King, and Gertrude enter. Claudius recognizes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as boyhood friends of Hamlet and invites them to try to find out what is bothering Hamlet.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel uneasy and out of their depth. The two want to go home, yet they don't seem to know what direction that is, implying that they don't know what's going on. Things do not seem normal to them, and this makes them nervous. When Guildenstern states that the only things they can be certain of are birth and death, he may be foreshadowing their own death. The author is again emphasizing the theme of death being inevitable, and essentially out of our control. Guildenstern's conversation in trying to reassure Rosencrantz implies that the two of them are not in control of what's going on around them, that they will have to see what happens, and that they should remain alert. Guildenstern seems to be saying that fate is in control rather than the two of them being in control of what may happen to them, once again alluding to the theme of fate as opposed to chance in life.

The two say they must talk to Hamlet. Rosencrantz wonders if they could then leave once they do that. The two of them discuss what kind of reward that they could expect once this task is done. Of course, when people die, they are said to have "gone to their rewards," and funeral flowers and tributes are often called remembrances. It is ironic that the words they choose to use are the same words that people use when discussing death and funerals. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel they are being kept in the dark and are not being told what's going on and their sense of helplessness grows. At this point, they decide to practice asking questions of one another, apparently in an effort to prepare for finding out what's going on.

Hamlet comes back on stage, and the two say he is both "afflicted" and "transformed." Of course, when people are afflicted, they may die, and are then transformed. Possibly this could be another foreshadowing, or hint, of the theme of coming deaths.

At the end of the scene, Hamlet and Polonius are speaking together. At one point, Hamlet says that Polonius cannot take anything from him (Hamlet) except his life, which of course is taken from him at the end of the play. Again, Stoppard is giving hints about the play's final outcome.

Act 2, p. 55-84

Act 2, p. 55-84 Summary

Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on stage continuing their previous conversation from the end of the first act. At first, their words cannot be distinguished, but then Hamlet speaks lines from Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii. The Tragedians' band is heard. The actors enter, and Hamlet speaks in sort of a parody of Elizabethan speech to welcome all. Hamlet ends with the statement, "But my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived."

Guildenstern asks Hamlet about what are they deceived. Hamlet replies cryptically, and Polonius enters and greets them. Hamlet, again confusing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, takes Rosencrantz upstage to talk to him, but calls him Guildenstern. Polonius calls after Hamlet, telling the king that he has news. Rather than responding with interest, Hamlet mimics Polonius rudely. Polonius approaches and tells Hamlet that the actors have come. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speak together, trying to puzzle out what is happening. The two believe that Hamlet has made fun of them, and even state that he has beat them badly. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern criticize one another for their respective exchanges with Hamlet, but neither of them are happy with their own conversations with Hamlet, or with those the other had with Hamlet.

The two begin to try to figure out where they are by discussing from which direction they came, where they are now, and which way the wind is blowing. The friends are considerably confused about where they are. Guildenstern comments that they are on a path, to which they are "condemned."

Rosencrantz takes up a coin again and spins it. It lands, and he catches it, looks at it, and puts it back in his bag. Guildenstern asks how it landed. Rosencrantz lies that he did not look at it, but Guildenstern challenges him. Rosencrantz demurs, and says he does not want to be reminded of the situation. Rosencrantz approaches him with a coin. Rosencrantz contrives to put the coin in one hand and holds both out to Guildenstern for Guildenstern to guess which hand the coin is in. Guildenstern chooses the left hand, but the left hand is empty. The friends continue this game, at a rapid pace, until it becomes evident that both hands are empty. The two laugh initially, but then Rosencrantz begins to search his clothing, presumably for the lost coin.

Polonius enters with the Tragedians and Hamlet. Hamlet directs the Tragedians to follow Polonius. As they are leaving, Hamlet asks the Player, the last in line if their group can do "The Murder of Gonzago." The Player responds that they can. The Player notices Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and stops. Hamlet passes all of them on his way off stage and tells them goodnight and welcome to Elsinore. Guildenstern, Rosencrantz and the Player begin to bicker. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reference his tongue, threatening to cut it out. The Player responds that they will then take his words away. The two continue to banter back and forth about the idea of the Player's silence. The

Player is angry at them for leaving in the middle of his performance. The Player is angry, and has an outburst in which he tries to explain how important the audience is to the performance. The Player's words are dramatic and heart-felt. At the end of his speech, Guildenstern mocks him by clapping slowly and complimenting the Player sarcastically on his recreation.

Rosencrantz instructs the Player that he and his troupe must provide an excellent performance at court, and may not present their usual smutty acts. Rosencrantz says if they fail, they will be back in the local tavern rather than in court.

The Player informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he already has an entry to the court. The two asks if he's played there before, and he says he has. The Player says he will put on "The Murder of Gonzago" for the court. Guildenstern comments that it will be full of music and death, and the Player says they stole it from the Italians. Rosencrantz asks what the play is about. The Player says it is about a King and Queen, and contains a good deal of blood. The Player begins to leave, and Guildenstern asks where he is going. The Player retorts that he can come and go as he pleases, and Guildenstern comments that he apparently knows his way around. The Player comments that he has been there before, intimating that he not only knows the place, but what goes on there. The Player continues to try to leave, and Guildenstern continues to stall him. Guildenstern finally becomes exasperated and asks the Player what he and Rosencrantz are supposed to do. The Player tells them to relax and to respond, to act natural. The Player advises them that everything has to be taken on trust, including the truth and he points out that people act on assumptions, and asks them what it is that they assume.

Rosencrantz responds that Hamlet is not himself, and that they are there to figure out why. Guildenstern adds that Hamlet is melancholy, which Rosencrantz elaborates as "mad." The Player asks how Hamlet is mad, and Rosencrantz defers to Guildenstern, who says Hamlet is probably more morose than mad. The two continue to discuss Hamlet's moods and moodiness, and potential madness. The word, "madness," seems to be used both to mean insanity and anger.

After more conversation, Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern if he remembers the coin. Rosencrantz says he thinks he has lost the coin, but Guildenstern says he does not remember a coin. Suddenly, Rosencrantz asks if Guildenstern has ever thought of himself as dead, in a box with a lid on it. Guildenstern says he has not, and that it is silly to get depressed by this idea. Rosencrantz elaborates, discussing being dead, asleep, not dead, helpless, or not helpless while stuffed in a box. Rosencrantz eventually mimes banging on the lid of such a box and demanding that whoever is in there come out. Guildenstern objects to this thinking, and seems upset by Rosencrantz's monologue.

Rosencrantz advises him not to think about it and he then tells several silly and essentially meaningless jokes about life and death. Rosencrantz eventually ends on a very serious note, and forbids anyone to come in where they are. However, a procession of others immediately joins them on stage. Claudius (the king), Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia all enter, and Claudius take Rosencrantz by the elbow and

engages him in conversation. Watching them, Guildenstern comments, "Death followed by eternity...the worst of both worlds."

Gertrude and Rosencrantz then head downstage. Gertrude asks Rosencrantz how he was received, and Rosencrantz says that he was received mostly like a gentleman. Guildenstern makes to contradict this assessment, and Rosencrantz turns on him. Rosencrantz begins a speech to Gertrude in an Elizabethan mode of speaking. The speech conveys that the players are there at court to put on a play. Polonius confirms this statement, and invites them to come, too and Rosencrantz agrees. Claudius invites Gertrude to leave with him, and they do so.

Rosencrantz complains that people are always coming and going, and Guildenstern comments that Rosencrantz is never satisfied. Rosencrantz complains that the two of them never go to the others; that the others always come to them. Guildenstern asks what the difference would be, and Rosencrantz asserts that he is going. Rosencrantz goes off stage, but returns very quickly saying that "He's coming." Guildenstern asks what he is doing, and Rosencrantz responds that he is doing nothing. The two banter about this idea for several moments, and Hamlet enters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern watch him, as Hamlet ponders what to do. Rosencrantz considers how they should approach Hamlet, but he is too overawed to go through with it. Ophelia enters carrying a prayer book. Hamlet catches up with her, and they go off stage, talking. Guildenstern chides Rosencrantz sarcastically for not approaching them and speaking to them, and tells him to sit down and shut up.

Rosencrantz is quite upset. When a female figure enters, Rosencrantz assumes it is the queen and he marches up behind her and puts his hands over her eyes, saying, "Guess who?" The Player enters, and identifies the queen as Alfred, the boy in his troupe. Rosencrantz asks to be excused. Strangely, Rosencrantz puts his hand on the stage, and the Player ceremoniously stomps on it. The Player explains that he 'put his foot down.' The Player's troupe begins to rehearse their play and he explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that his players do death scenes particularly well. The rehearsal continues, and eventually Hamlet and Ophelia come on stage where the rehearsal is going on.

The two have a dramatic interaction with much weeping and wailing. Hamlet says that there is no more marriage between them, and he tells Ophelia to go to a nunnery. Hamlet leaves, and Ophelia falls to her knees on the stage, sobbing. Hamlet returns with Polonius and lifts Ophelia to her feet. The group departs together, apparently to go to England.

The Player regains their attention by clapping his hands and he tells his troupe they are not doing well, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to agree. Guildenstern asks if that was the ending of the drama, and Rosencrantz says it can't be because everyone was still on their feet---not dead. The Player confirms to them that in the play, all who are marked for death will die. When Guildenstern questions him, he explains that the play ends and the deaths happen when things are about as bad as they can be. Guildenstern asks who decides? The Player responds that "It is written," and turns

away. Guildenstern grabs him and pulls him back. The Player immediately begins to back-pedal, referring to the written directions that actors follow, and that they have no choice in how they perform their roles.

The players begin their rehearsal again, this time with a sexually explicit scene between the Queen and the prisoner. Rosencrantz protests and tells them that they cannot do that. The Player asks him why he cannot do that. Rosencrantz explains that people come to be entertained, not to see sordid scenes. The Player tells him he is wrong, and that audiences want to see murder, seduction and incest---certainly not jokes.

Rosencrantz says he wants to see a good story with a beginning, middle, and end, and which mirrors real life. The Player stops the passionate action on stage. A new dramatic scene, depicting murder and involving spying and intrigue, begins. The two spies in the drama are wearing cloaks. As Rosencrantz comes forward, he realizes that the clothing under the cloaks is identical to his clothing and that of Guildenstern and he is confused. The Player asks Guildenstern if he knows the play. Guildenstern responds that he does not. The Player informs them that the play involves a slaughter of players, and that it ends with eight corpses in all. Oddly, he states that this brings out the best in all of them.

Guildenstern is alarmed, and asks what the Player knows of death. The Player responds that it is what players do best. Rosencrantz asks if all they can do is die. The Player responds that they also kill well, but that they die even better than they kill. Guildenstern is critical of this explanation, and says it's only cheap melodrama. Guildenstern says that they die so often on stage that no one will believe in their deaths. The Player retorts that the on-stage deaths are the only ones people do believe in, and they simply do not believe in REAL death. The Player draws his knife, and directs the spies to die elaborately.

Guildenstern comments that this is all wrong, and that death cannot be acted. Real death is not, according to Guildenstern, a dramatic event, but just a man failing to reappear one day, and that it is an unobtrusive exit. The Player comes forward and covers the bodies of the spies, and Rosencrantz begins to applaud slowly. The stages goes black.

Act 2, p. 55-84 Analysis

Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they are deceived, which is certainly true since they are being led to their own deaths. Guildenstern comments that they are condemned to a path, another reference to the coming deaths and to their inevitability and to the lack of control Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have over these events. Rosencrantz initiates the coin toss game again, and the rules have not changed, although Rosencrantz pretends not to know how the coin fell. This seems to imply that their situation or predicament has also not changed. Natural laws are still suspended. The world is still not as they once knew it.

Polonius and the Players are now on stage with Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. The Player is annoyed with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for leaving during the prior performance of his troupe. The Player's performances tend to be about death, and are gory and tragic, so perhaps he is chiding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for leaving their intended fate behind, at least for a short time. The Player says that their next show will be "The Murder of Gonzago" and he reminds the others that he has been there before, and knows what is going on.

Rosencrantz actually asks Guildenstern if he has ever imagined himself dead in a box.

The references to death are becoming more and more clear. As their conversation continues, Rosencrantz becomes very serious and forbids anyone from coming in to where they are. Yet in the next moment, they are joined on stage by Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia. Clearly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have little or no control over what goes on around them. The two are also stuck in one spot, while the other characters come to them. The friends do not have the power to go places themselves, but must wait for events (and people) to come to them. Their helplessness stands out.

The troupe of Tragedians is on stage rehearsing, and the Player tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that his troupe does death scenes particularly well. When Guildenstern asks if the drama is over, Rosencrantz says it can't be over because not everyone is dead. The Player confirms that the deaths of those who will die "are written," implying that they are already planned, or fated to happen. When Guildenstern challenges this assertion, the Player begins referencing the written directions that actors have to follow, and that they have no choice in how things turn out. This again seems to be a reference to the fate awaiting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the idea that they have no control over the outcome.

At one point, the Tragedians are rehearsing a drama with spies in it. The spies are wearing cloaks, but under their cloaks, they are dressed exactly as Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern are dressed. The Player informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that this particular drama involves a slaughter of players, ending in eight corpses in all, again foreshadowing the deaths which will occur at the end of the play. Now, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are actually represented as IN the drama being played out by the troupe.

Act 2, p. 84-95

Act 2, p. 84-95 Summary

When the lights come back up, there is at first silence, and then much noise. Shouts of "The King rises...Give o'er the play! And cries for Lights, lights, lights!" The lights do come up, as sunrise. The stage is empty, except for the two dead spies. As the lights get brighter, the two dead spies are seen to be Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, who are resting quite comfortably on the ground. Rosencrantz stares into the audience and says that the direction he is looking must be east, and that they can safely assume that. Guildenstern says that he is assuming nothing. Rosencrantz says that he watched the sun come up, so he knows which way is east. Guildenstern contradicts him and says it was light all the time, and that Rosencrantz just opened his eyes slowly. Rosencrantz stands and rings a bell. Guildenstern states that "they" are waiting to see what they will do and he claims that as soon as they move the rest of the players will come running in, messing around with them, and saying their names incorrectly.

Claudius can be heard off stage calling to Guildenstern, who is still lying down. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell Claudius that his is wanted and they seem disconcerted, even desperate. Claudius and Gertrude enter. Claudius speaks and tells them that Hamlet has killed Polonius and he asks that they find Hamlet. Claudius and Hamlet leave. When they have gone, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are quite still. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk about what progress they have made and how they are doing. The two decide to walk toward opposite sides of the stage and then change their minds and decide to exit together. The friends cross the stage again, and cross one another again, but again think better of it and decide to stay together. A reference is made to someone they think may not come. Suddenly, Rosencrantz cries that he is coming. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern see Hamlet coming. The two make a sort of snare out of their belts, and Rosencrantz's pants fall down around his ankles without his belt on. Hamlet enters the stage opposite from where they are, dragging the body of Polonius. Hamlet leaves, still dragging the body, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern relax their belts, which Hamlet never came near.

Rosencrantz remarks that they have had a close call, and Guildenstern reasons that there is a limit as to what only two people can do. The friends undo the belts, and Rosencrantz pulls his pants back up. Rosencrantz says worriedly that Polonius was dead, and Guildenstern says that of course he was dead. The two begin to speculate about death and they wonder if Hamlet will come back that way, and they begin to take off the belts again. The two decide not to and Rosencrantz says they should call to Hamlet, and Rosencrantz does so. Hamlet enters once more. Rosencrantz asks Hamlet what he's done with the body so they can take it to the chapel and they discuss it. Finally, Hamlet says that the body is with the King, and invites Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to come with him to the king. Just before they reach the exit, Hamlet sees Claudius approaching off stage and bows. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, cued by Claudius, also bow with their cloaks swept around them. The two are bowed so low,

they do not see when Hamlet walks off in the opposite direction. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find that they are bowing to nothing. Claudius enters behind them, surprising them.

Claudius, the king, asks what has happened. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern say they have not been able to find out where the body is from Hamlet. Claudius asks where Hamlet is. Rosencrantz, with some hesitation, answers that he is guarded until the king wants to see him. The king asks to see him. Rosencrantz tells Guildenstern to bring Hamlet. Rosencrantz is smug, and Guildenstern is trapped and betrayed. Fortunately, Hamlet is escorted in at that moment and he and his escort follow Claudius off stage.

The lighting changes to reflect an exterior scene.

Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern if he is alright. Guildenstern does not move. Rosencrantz says they are done with he and Guildenstern now. Rosencrantz says he does not pretend to understand. Guildenstern explains that Hamlet is being taken to England with a soldier. Hamlet enters, talking with a soldier. Rosencrantz remarks that "they will have us hanging about till we're dead." Hamlet and the soldier converse about who the others are. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk about the weather, and decide it's autumn and they once again hear the Tragedians band. Hamlet thanks the soldier, who exits. Rosencrantz goes to Hamlet and invites him to go with them. Hamlet replies that he will be with them shortly, so Rosencrantz and Guildenstern wait for him. Hamlet is talking to himself. Rosencrantz begins to leave, and says that they have permission to go. Guildenstern says he'd like to know where they are and if they will ever return. Rosencrantz says they don't want to return. Guildenstern says that may be true, but why would they want to leave and Rosencrantz replies that they want to leave so they could be free. The two move toward the exit.

Act 2, p. 84-95 Analysis

When this section of the act opens, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear to be lying dead on the stage, but they are not dead. The two discuss which direction is which, contradicting one another and again making it clear that they never quite know where they are or what is going on and continue to be helpless and powerless to influence events around them.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern make a silly attempt to trap Hamlet with their belts. The men fail, and are once again seen as inept or helpless. Claudius enters next and asks about the whereabouts of Hamlet. Rosencrantz pretends that they know where he is and orders Guildenstern to bring him, which he can't do since he does not know where Hamlet is. Fortunately, Hamlet appears at this point with an escort.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue to be completely at a loss to understand what is going on. The men are still in the same place with the action and other players coming to them. However, they do realize that Hamlet is being taken to England with a soldier. Rosencrantz makes a comment that he and Guildenstern will be "hanging around 'til

we're dead," again foreshadowing their own deaths. The two are still confused about where they are, what they may do, and whether or not they may leave and they are still not in control of what's going on around them and are ineffectual.

Act 3, p. 97-126

Act 3, p. 97-126 Summary

This act opens in pitch darkness, with soft ocean sounds in the background. Then Guildenstern speaks, asking Rosencrantz if he is there. Rosencrantz answers, "Where?" and the bantering begins. The two of them talk back and forth in the dark, and ascertain that they can still talk, can still think, and can still feel. Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz what it is that he is feeling. Rosencrantz replies that he feels what he thinks is his leg. Guildenstern asks how the leg feels, and Rosencrantz replies that it feels dead. Rosencrantz, in a panic, says that he cannot feel a thing. Guildenstern recommends a pinch at which Guildenstern yelps, and Rosencrantz apologizes.

There is then a longer pause, and the background sound gets louder. You can tell its ship timbers, wind in the rigging, and the shouts of sailors calling out nautical sounding words and phrases. Rosencrantz states that they must be on a boat, and comments on how dark it is. Guildenstern concurs, but says it's not dark for night, and Rosencrantz concurs. Guildenstern then says it IS dark for day, and Rosencrantz agrees. Guildenstern believes they must be going north.

A light is lit upstage by Hamlet and we can now see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sitting downstage. Rosencrantz comments that it seems to be getting light. The light reveals three large man-sized casks on deck. The casks have lids, are upended, and they are spaced evenly one from another. Behind them is a gaudy striped umbrella that is tilted to block from view whatever is behind it. Rosencrantz again mentions that it is lightening, but that they should go to sleep. Rosencrantz suggests that they take a walk (stretch their legs). Rosencrantz suggests they could stretch each other's legs, but Guildenstern nixes this idea because someone might come in. The two of them begin to discuss the boat and Rosencrantz states that he may be sick. Rosencrantz moves upstage and looks behind the umbrella while Guildenstern looks out over the audience. Rosencrantz returns to Guildenstern, tiptoeing and whispering that he is there.

The two of them discuss their situation, that they are on a boat. Once again, Rosencrantz withdraws a coin from his purse, he puts his hands behind his back, and then extends them to the front to Guildenstern. Guildenstern taps one fist, which Rosencrantz opens to reveal a coin. Then he gives the coin to Guildenstern. Rosencrantz again puts his hand in his purse, withdraws a coin, puts his hands behinds his back, and then extends his hands to Guildenstern. Guildenstern taps one fist, which Rosencrantz opens to show a coin, which he gives to Guildenstern. The two repeat this process several more times. Guildenstern tricks Rosencrantz into opening both fists, and it's clear he has coins in both hands. Guildenstern calls him on it. Rosencrantz is embarrassed, but admits what he has done. Guildenstern asks why, and Rosencrantz says it was to make Guildenstern happy.

Guildenstern asks how much the King gave Rosencrantz and they bicker back and forth about this matter, with Rosencrantz insisting that they must have been given the same amount of money. Eventually, Rosencrantz begins to cry, and Guildenstern comforts him. Rosencrantz protests that they have nothing to go on, and Guildenstern reminds him that they are taking Hamlet to England to take him to the King. Rosencrantz asks if they are expected, and Guildenstern says he is not. Rosencrantz is nervous about what they will say. Guildenstern reminds him that they have a letter, in which everything is explained, but Guildenstern wonders if there is something in the letter which will keep them going a while, but if not, they will be at loose ends. Rosencrantz asks who the English King is, and Guildenstern responds that it will depend on when they arrive.

The two talk about what must be in the letter, to include greetings, expressions of loyalty, asking of favors, the calling in of debts, and regards to the family. Rosencrantz asks if it includes information about Hamlet, and Guildenstern assures him that it does. The men also assume that their full backgrounds will be covered in the letter. Rosencrantz begins to search his clothing for the letter, but Guildenstern seems to think he has he letter and he produces it from a pocket. Rosencrantz takes the letter from him and asks why they were looking for it in the first place. Guildenstern answers that they were looking for it because they thought it might be lost.

Rosencrantz begins to think about their arrival, but he can't seem to picture them arriving. Guildenstern says that they should not give up, and that they can't be long now. Rosencrantz states that they might as well be dead and he asks, "Do you think death could possibly be a boat?" Guildenstern responds in the negative. Rosencrantz wishes he were dead and he says he could jump over the side. Rosencrantz decided he would stay on board. Guildenstern responds that he doesn't see why. The two ponder what they will say to the King. The friends believe the King won't know them, or won't acknowledge them and they open the letter. It is from the King of Denmark and the letter instructs that Hamlet be killed by his head being cut off. The two read the letter together and they talk about being brought up together with Hamlet. Guildenstern talks about the eventuality of beheading Hamlet, seemingly trying to justify this coursed of events. Rosencrantz points out that Hamlet has done nothing to them. Hamlet appears from behind the umbrella on deck and walks toward the lantern.

Rosencrantz summarizes their position. The two say that they have been brought up from childhood with Hamlet, and that they were summoned in the middle of the night by a man standing on his saddle. The men were instructed to escort Hamlet to England. Hamlet then blows out the lantern, and the stage is once again in darkness. The stage is then lit by moonlight, and Hamlet approaches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet finds and takes the letter and retreats behind the umbrella. The audience can see the light of his lantern through the umbrella while he reads the letter. Hamlet emerges from behind the umbrella and replaces a letter with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. Hamlet then retires, blowing out his lantern.

In the morning, Rosencrantz watches the light come up, but from out in the auditorium. Hamlet sits in a deck chair behind the tilted umbrella, wrapped in a blanket, reading a book, and smoking. Rosencrantz watches the light come up from morning to the light

which would characterize noon. Rosencrantz states that he is assuming nothing and he talks about what he was given by the king and what Guildenstern was given by the king. Rosencrantz talks about the letter and they begin to hear music suddenly. Guildenstern points out that there is music. One of the sailors is playing a pipe, and Guildenstern sends Rosencrantz to find him. Rosencrantz asks why, and Guildenstern says to request a tune. Rosencrantz wanders about trying to locate the music and he tracks it to the middle of three barrels on deck. Rosencrantz is incredulous and he kicks at the barrel. The music stops. Rosencrantz leaps back toward Guildenstern, and the music starts up again. Rosencrantz approaches the barrel, lifts the lid, and hears louder music. Then he considers the left-hand barrel which now has the sound of drum coming from it and then he hears a lute from the third barrel. More instruments join in, and the three barrels clearly hold the tragedians, playing a familiar tune we have heard before. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stare ahead, and the tune ends.

Rosencrantz says that he thought he heard a band. The middle barrel flies open suddenly, and the Player's head emerges. The Player orders his troupe out of the barrels, and they climb out. The Player asks Rosencrantz where they are. Rosencrantz replies that they are traveling. Alfred emerges last from the barrels. The players all attempt to merge with the rest of the passengers. The Player asks if Guildenstern is pleased to see them. The Player remarks that they are in disfavor because their play offended the king and they continue to discuss their situation. Hamlet comes down to the footlights at this point and looks at the audience. Hamlet then clears his throat noisily and spits into the audience. Hamlet wipes off his face and retreats back upstage.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discuss the possibility of madness in Hamlet and mention, once again, his tendency to talk to himself. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to evaluate their position. They, like the player, have offended the King. The Player escapes to England, and meets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are on the boat taking Hamlet to England. Hamlet also offended the king and killed Polonius. All at once, Pirates attack them. There is a great deal of noise and rushing about. Hamlet, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and even the Player draw swords. There is much confusion and a general panic. Hamlet leaps into the barrel on the left, the Player into the one on the right, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into the center barrel. The men all close the lids behind them.

The lights dim to nothing, and the sounds of fighting continue. The sound fades, and the light comes up. The center barrel, the one Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were in, is missing. The lid on the right-hand barrel is raised cautiously, and the heads of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear. The lid of the other barrel (which Hamlet was in) raises, and the head of the Player appears. The men see one another, and they retreat, and slam down their lids. The lids raise once again, cautiously. Rosencrantz says that they have gone, and he climbs out cautiously. The men are all out of their barrels. They note the missing barrel. Guildenstern states that they have a letter to the King. The Player and Guildenstern debate the situation. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are upset and unhappy, but they decide that they must go to England and make their report. The two talk about the fact that they were bringing Hamlet, but that some pirates interfered. Rosencrantz reiterates that they have a letter. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fight about

the letter. The Player kicks one of the barrels, and all the musicians emerge, quite impossibly. The musicians circle Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in a menacing way. Rosencrantz observes that they had it in for them from the beginning, and wondered at why the two of them were so important.

The Player says that they are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that that is enough. Eventually, Guildenstern snatches a dagger from Player's belt and holds it to Player's throat. The Player backs and Guildenstern advances, speaking quietly. Guildenstern talks about death and he pushes the blade in to the hilt. The Player reacts and clutches at the wound making small weeping sounds. While he appears to be dying, Guildenstern turns to the Tragedians almost hysterically. Guildenstern says to the Tragedians that if he and Rosencrantz have a destiny, then the Player does as well, and if there is no explanation of that destiny for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, then there is likewise no explanation for the Player of his dying. The Tragedians watch the Player die, and the Player finally lies still. The Tragedians begin to applaud. The Player stands, brushing himself off.

The Player acknowledges the applause, but brushes it off as flattery, saying he was just doing his usual good job. The Player approaches Guildenstern who still holds the dagger. The Player asks Guildenstern what he thinks, and explains that what he has just witnessed (the Player's death) is what the audience does believe in and what it expected.

The Player holds out his hand for the dagger. Guildenstern puts the tip of the blade against the Player's hand and pushes. The blade retracts into the handle. The Player smiles, and takes the dagger. Rosencrantz suddenly laughs a loud, nervous laugh. Then he congratulates the Player and says he was completely fooled. Guildenstern applauds and shouts for an encore. The Player reacts spreading his arms theatrically and saying that he can provide any death the audience wants whether it is by hanging, convulsion, stabbing, poison, or whatever is wanted. Then he commands his troupe to die. Alfred, who is still in his costume, appears to die by poison. The Player pretends to fight with the troupe member dressed as the King, and they are both wounded. The two remaining tragedians are dressed as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and are stabbed. The Player comments that death is commonplace.

Guildenstern is tired and drained and he disputes what the Player has said about death. Guildenstern says that death, for them, is not romantic, not a game soon over. Guildenstern says that death is rather an ending and not coming back, a nothingness, an "absence of presence." The only light on stage is now on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who appear to be alone on stage. Rosencrantz discontinues his applause suddenly and he points out that the sun is going down or maybe that the earth is going up. Rosencrantz is becoming more emotional, more upset and continues to make comment, but Guildenstern does not answer and he seems to be panicking. Guildenstern asks if they can just stay there, and points out that they are young, that they have years left, that they've done nothing wrong and have not hurt anyone. Guildenstern says he cannot remember. Rosencrantz recovers, says he does not care,

and is actually relieved. Rosencrantz disappears from sight, but Guildenstern does not notice.

Guildenstern goes back over the events that have led to this point and he recounts the message that came to them at dawn and the summons it contained. Guildenstern wonders aloud if there could have been a moment at which he and Rosencrantz could have declined. However, that they had missed this opportunity and he finally realizes he is alone. The man calls out "Rosen---? And Guil----" and stops. Guildenstern seems to gather himself and he says that they will know better next time. Guildenstern disappears and the stage is immediately lit up completely. On stage are the various characters arranged in pretty much the same way as they are in the last scene of Hamlet. The King and Queen and Laertes and Hamlet are all dead. Horatio, a character in Hamlet, holds Hamlet, and another Hamlet character, Fortinbras, is on stage with the others. There are also two Ambassadors from England on stage.

The first Ambassador says that this is a dismal sight. The King, who they believe ordered the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is dead himself, so they have no one to report the success of this mission to. The men wonder who will thank them for their work. Horatio responds, saying that they would not be thanked for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern even if the King were alive, since he did not order their deaths. Horatio continues to speak of deaths, deceits, poor judgments, and mistaken purposes, and assures the listener that he can talk about all these things. During this speech, the play fades out, the stage becomes dark, and music overtakes voice.

Act 3, p. 97-126 Analysis

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on a boat, on their way to turn Hamlet over to the King. It is dark. Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz what he is feeling, and Rosencrantz

replies that his leg feels dead, another preview of what is to come. Hamlet is seated behind a beach umbrella on stage.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begin to play a version of their coin game once again, but this time Guildenstern is winning. The two are testing to see what natural laws might be in place at this point. Rosencrantz, however, is cheating so that Guildenstern can win, so the same "laws" as before appear to still be in force.

Guildenstern and Rosencrantz have a letter with them with instructions to behead Hamlet when they deliver him. The two don't know this is what the letter says at first, but they discover its contents when they open it and read it. Rosencrantz says he can't picture them arriving, which may allude to the fact that they will not arrive, because they will be dead before the boat lands. Rosencrantz even asks Guildenstern if he thinks that death could be a boat. The two friends eventually retire. Hamlet approaches them and takes the letter, which he reads behind the umbrella. Hamlet apparently replaces the letter regarding his own execution with one instructing that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be executed.

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the Player, and his troupe have all offended the King, as has Hamlet. The whole boat is full of condemned men. Guildenstern and the Player have a confrontation in which Guildenstern appears to have cut the Player's throat. The Player is highly agitated and appears to be trying to alter destiny. The Player says that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have a destiny, and so the Player must as well, and his knifing of the Player is an attempt to interfere with that destiny. This is the climax of the play. Guildenstern makes one final attempt to control their fate by killing the player. The Player pretends to die, but is not dead because the knife is only a prop. Again, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are ineffectual.

The Player announces that he can provide any kind of death wanted and his players demonstrate. Two of the players are dressed as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and these two are suddenly "stabbed." The only light now on stage is on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who are alone on stage, still standing. Rosencrantz becomes more and more upset and he suddenly disappears, leaving Guildenstern alone on stage. Guildenstern talks about a point at which he and Rosencrantz could have altered their fate, but does not see a point at which they could have declined to participate in the events which have led to their deaths. Then he calls out their own names. The action of the play is winding down, and the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is sealed, and is completely out of their control. Guildenstern disappears, and the lights go out.

The lights immediately come back up, and two ambassadors are on stage amid all the dead bodies, including those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. There is a realization that the King did not, after all, order the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The man rambles on about a variety of occurrences to include death, lying, poor judgment, and error, all of which he seems to be saying are part of life, and are therefore inevitable and out of our control. As though his commentary is not worth listening to further, is old hat, is commonly known, the music begins to overtake his speech and the lights on the stage go out, indicating the end of the play.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fated to have been killed, even though they were essentially innocent. All men are fated to die eventually, regardless of their efforts, by the hand of fate, or by the hand of one another. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were powerless to stop their own deaths, as we all are powerless to stop eventual death.

Characters

Alfred

Alfred is a Stoppard invention who does not appear in Shakespeare's play. Alfred is a small boy, one of the six tragedians, who is highlighted in Stoppard's play because he is forced to play the feminine roles in drag and finds his cross-dressing very humiliating.

Ambassador

The Ambassador from England appears in both plays but only at the end to announce that the orders to execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been carried out.

Claudius

In Shakespeare's play, Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, secretly murders Hamlet's father, marries Hani-let's mother, and sends for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to gather information on Hamlet's behavior as Hamlet mopes around the court. After Hamlet kills Polonius, Claudius orders Hamlet escorted to England by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, where orders in a sealed letter are supposed to have Hamlet killed.

Gertrude

In both Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays, Gertrude is Hamlet's mother and the new wife of King Claudius.

Guildenstern

In Stoppard's play, Guildenstern is the more philosophical and intellectual of the two courtiers who double as minor characters in Shakespeare's play and major characters in Stoppard's. The opening sequence of coin tossing vexes Guildenstern because he craves order and predictability in the universe. The apparent violation of probability in coin tossing drives him to seek an explanation but he attempts to remain calm when no satisfactory answers arise. He has a wry sense of humor, can be quite sarcastic, and is resilient, though he is also quick to anger and subject to panic or despondency when he finally feels overwhelmed. Guildenstern likes to hear himself talk and often rambles at length, sometimes without making a lot of sense. He frequently uses parables and analogies to attempt to understand the mysteries that confront him and he likes verbal games as a way of working things out. Wary and nervous, he likes to stay in control and questions more than his friend, Rosencrantz, whom he often badgers but ultimately is trying to protect and support with optimism whenever possible.

Hamlet

The hero of Shakespeare's tragedy, Hamlet is a relatively minor character in Stoppard's play, where he drifts in and out performing actions and speaking lines from his classic role as the melancholy Dane. In Stoppard's play, Hamlet is eventually portrayed more playfully as he lounges in a deck chair in Act III.

Horatio

Horatio is Hamlet's best friend in Shakespeare's play. In Stoppard's comedy he exists only to deliver the last speech of the play.

Ophelia

Ophelia is the daughter of Polomus, who is one of the King's counselors in *Hamlet*. Ophelia is Hamlet's "girlfriend" in both Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays. Almost all of her Shakespearean lines are omitted in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as she mimes most of her scenes.

The Player

If the Player has a counterpart in Shakespeare's play he is the actor who performs the Pyrrhus speech for Hamlet in Act II, scene ii, In Stoppard's play this character is the leader of the wandering troupe of actors who perform *The Murder of Gonzago* and a major character because he speaks so clearly and forcefully about reality and theatrical illusion. Proud of his acting craft but frustrated by his lack of financial success and his dependence on audience, the Player is self-assured, intense, but also sad. Like Guildenstern, the Player is philosophical but he is also practical, pragmatic, and resilient. A man experienced in the ways of the world, the Player accepts uncertainty more easily than anyone else in the play.

Polonius

In both Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays, Polonius is the father of Ophelia and is killed by Hamlet when Hamlet mistakes him for the King. Polonius is portrayed in both plays as old, garrulous, and occasionally foolish.

Rosencrantz

Rosencrantz is a minor character in Shakespeare' s *Hamlet* and one of the two major characters in Stoppard's unusual version of Shakespeare's story. In Shakespeare's play, Rosencrantz is one of Hamlet's university friends from Wittenberg. With Guildenstern, he is summoned by King Claudius to come to Denmark because Hamlet, after returning

to Denmark for his father's funeral and his mother's wedding, began acting quite strangely. Rosencrantz helps Guildenstern spy on Hamlet for Claudius and then is assigned with his friend to take Hamlet to England after Hamlet kills Polonius. When Hamlet returns to England, he reports to his friend Horatio that on the ship to England he discovered Claudius's letter ordering his death. He substituted a letter ordering the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and escaped the ship when pirates attacked it. In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are such nondescript characters that Claudius and his queen Gertrude can't distinguish between them.

In Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz is the more timid of the two courtiers and considerably less reflective and philosophical than his friend, Guildenstern. At the beginning of the play Rosencrantz is winning on every toss of the "heads or tails" game and is embarrassed to be taking so much money from his friend but is either oblivious or unconcerned about how unusual this streak of "heads" might be. He is relatively unreflective, naive, innocent, even simple-minded and slow intellectually. He often "tunes out" when Guildenstern rambles in his philosophical talk but he is very sensitive and concerned about his friend's unhappiness. Usually, he doesn't question as much as Guildenstern, but when he understands their situation he generally feels more overwhelmed. However, when he senses approaching death, Rosencrantz is quietly resigned.

Soldier

In both plays a soldier talks with Hamlet and identifies the Norwegian military commander, Fortinbras, as he marches his troops across Denmark toward Poland. Hamlet admires Fortinbras for his bravery and Fortinbras succeeds to the throne in Denmark after both Claudius and Hamlet die.

Tragedians

The tragedians who perform *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet* are more childlike and playful in Stoppard's comedy, where they play musical instruments as well as miming their roles in *The Murder of Gonzago*.

Themes

Human Condition

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* blends two stories Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's own version of how the two courtiers might have felt and behaved after they were summoned by King Claudius to spy on their schoolmate, Hamlet.

When Stoppard decided to write about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he was free to give them personalities of his own because Shakespeare had hardly given them any personalities at all. He was also free to let them speak in a more colloquial language and to elaborate on aspects of their lives that Shakespeare did not specify, such as what they might have done with Hamlet on the ship to England. But once Stoppard chose to blend his story with Shakespeare's, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were fated to die at the end of Stoppard's story because they die at the end of Shakespeare's. Stoppard uses this literary fatalism as a metaphor for the fate that awaits all human beings the inevitability of death.

The play begins with Stoppard's story, as two very un-Shakespearean courtiers flip coins as they pause on the road to Elsinore. The extraordinary suspension of the laws of probability that permits over 100 coins to land "heads" before one lands "tails" indicates that there is something special about this day. And when a coin finally lands "tails" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are immediately swept out of Stoppard's story and back into Shakespeare's, from which they originally came. Once they are placed in Shakespeare's story, their fate is sealed. They will die at the end, even though they shift back and forth from the Shakespearean to the Stoppardian story. What was special about this day is that it set in motion the events that would lead to their deaths.

Fate is something that has already been decided, something humans have no control over, something that will happen whatever human beings do, and the literary fatality that comes from entering a world where events are already decided gives Stoppard the metaphor he needs for human fate. Though they resist accepting the fact, human beings are doomed to die as soon as they enter the world.

When the tragedians first arrive in Stoppard's story, Guildenstern says "it was chance, then ,.. [that] you found us," and the Player says, "or fate." Subsequent references to "getting caught up in the action" of the Shakespeare play are frequent, as are references to not having any "control." And when the Player says in their dress rehearsal for *The Murder ofGonzago* that "everyone who is marked for death dies," Guildenstern asks, "Who decides?" and the Player responds, "*Decides'!* It is *written*."

Art and Experience

Stoppard elaborates on the theme of fate by exploring the relationship between art and experience. Throughout the play, he uses the tragedians and their spokesperson, the Player, to emphasize that art can create an illusion that is often more real and convincing than the experience of ordinary life.

The tragedians specialize in portraying death on stage, but Guildenstern argues that their version of death is not "real." The Player responds by saying that the fictional representation of death is the only version that human beings will believe. He recalls the time he arranged for one of his actors condemned to be hanged to meet his execution on stage. However, to his surprise, the audience jeered and threw peanuts at this "real death" and the actor couldn't accept his fate calmly, crying the whole time, "right out of character."

Sigmund Freud asserted that human beings are psychologically incapable of seeing themselves as dead. When we come close to dying in our dreams we wake up or alter the dream so we become spectators ourselves, and as soon as we exist as spectators we have not in fact died. In art, however, we can experience death vicariously and safely, testing our reactions to it in a way that paradoxically rehearses us for our own death while further distancing us from the reality of it. Playing the role of spectators is perhaps as close as humans can ever get to accepting the reality of their human mortality.

This assertion is demonstrated most effectively in Act III, when the frustrated Guildenstern attacks the Player and seems to stab him fatally in the neck with a dagger. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, audience members initially unaware of the retractable blade in the stage dagger will experience a moment of shock when it appears that a real death has taken place on stage. But almost immediately we remember that we are at a play and that this death cannot possibly be real. When the Player comes to his feet to the applause of his fellow tragedians, the audience laughs in relief, as does Rosencrantz, who applauds and calls for an encore.

Death

The theme of humans denying their own mortality also helps to explain a number of problematic points in the play. When, for example, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that the letter from Claudius orders Hamlet's death, the generally sympathetic and pleasant pair distance themselves from the fact and justify their non-involvement. As disagreeable and unheroic as this behavior might be, it is in keeping with Stoppard's theme. Guildenstern justifies his non-involvement by feigning acceptance of "the designs of fate," and Rosencrantz's denial of responsibility is capped with a phrase that adumbrates the end of the play "If we stopped breathing we'd vanish." Even more problematical, perhaps, is their behavior after discovering the revised letter that orders their own deaths. Shakespeare's pair were probably ignorant of the letter's contents and surprised by their executions. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize they are delivering

their own death warrants and do nothing to avoid it. But quite in character, Rosencrantz simply avoids thinking about it "All right, then. I don't care, I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved," while Guildenstern continues to look for explanations and escape routes "there must have been a moment.. .where we could have said no." His final words are either a continued denial of the reality of his death or an acceptance of his status as a literary character "well, we'll know better next time."

Stoppard's theme is probably best summed up by the speech that Rosencrantz makes in Act n about lying in a coffin. Quite out of the blue he says to Guildenstern, "do you ever think of yourself as actually *dead*, lying in a box with a lid on it? Quite honestly and significantly, Guildenstern says "no" and Rosencrantz echoes his response. But then the usually dim-witted Rosencrantz touches on the essential problem "one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead .. .*which should make all the difference.. .shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never *know* you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being *asleep* in a box." When human beings attempt to think about their deaths, they assume some kind of continued consciousness. Ironically, Rosencrantz demonstrates in this speech the very kind of thinking he has just categorized as "silly." After characterizing death as a kind of sleep, he associates death with a mortal dream state, complete with the possibility of waking to full consciousness and a sense of helplessness "not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without air." Unable to conceptualize his own death he refuses to fully accept that "for all the compasses in the world, there's only one direction, and time is its only measure."

Style

Comedy

One of the most distinguishing features of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is the way it moves in and out of the plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and changes tone as it does so. While Shakespeare's play has many moments of rich humor, it is basically serious and tragic, while Stoppard's treatment of the Shakespearean story is distinctly comic, even farcical.

Much of Stoppard's comedy comes, then, from the implicit contrast with Shakespearean solemnity. As the most famous tragedy of the most respected playwright in the history of the world, *Hamlet* conjures up an image of high seriousness, but when we meet Stoppard's courtiers at the beginning of his play they are casually flipping coins and speaking in colloquial, informal prose rather than Shakespearean verse. The rag-tag tragedians add even more contrast with Shakespearean seriousness, especially when they descend in their financial desperation to the suggestion of a pornographic exploitation of little Alfred. However, when the two courtiers are sucked into the Shakespearean action and must mingle with characters speaking Shakespearean blank verse, they begin speaking the same way and the sharp contrast with their informal speech creates a comical effect both going and coming. Their inability to escape the *Hamlet* plot is comic, as is what appears to be a posturing attempt to fit into it when they can't escape. Finally, they are comic when they deflate again to their non-heroic stature after the *Hamlet* characters disappear. In their first entry into the Shakespearean world, Stoppard indicates that the two courtiers are "adjusting their clothing" before they speak, and as they use the lines given them in Shakespeare's play, their inflated style is comic because it seems postured and implies desperate ineptitute. Then, back in their Stoppardian world, they are once again comically unheroic, as Rosencrantz whines, "I want to go home," and Guildenstern puts on his comical bravado, unconvmcmgly attempting to appear in control.

But if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are comically foolish because they seem overwhelmed by the power of the Shakespearean world, they are also comically noble because their ordinary presence seems eventually to deflate that Shakespearean high seriousness. It is as if their ordinary, prosaic quality begins to acquire a nobility of its own, and in contrast the Shakespearean characters eventually begin to sound exaggerated, even a little silly. This impression finds its culmination m Act III, when Hamlet is discovered lounging under a gaudily striped umbrella, reduced to something not quite classically Shakespearean. There is thus in Stoppard's play a kind of comic victory for the underdog, perhaps most clearly expressed at the beginning of Act II when Rosencrantz responds to Hamlet's esoteric Shakespearean language by saying, "half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all." Generations of readers and theatre goers who have silently struggled at times to understand the demanding dialogue of "the world's greatest playwright and the world's greatest play" chuckle as the ordinary man speaks up.

Parody

Thus, we are led also to parody as a source of Stoppard's humor in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard's references to other literary texts are numerous and subtle, but parody as a literary style frequently imitates a serious work in order to demean it. Stoppard's parody is distinctive because it is generally quite respectful and affectionate toward its source rather than critical.

Apart from his parodic use of Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* Stoppard is most clearly parodying Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, whose two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, play word games and "pass the time" as they wait for someone who never arrives. Beckett's play begins on a country road that is distinctly nondescript, so when Stoppard specifies in his opening stage directions that "two Elizabethans [are] passing the time in a place without any visible character" it is sufficient to recall *Waiting for Godot* for those who are very familiar with the Beckett classic. However, if this reference is missed, Stoppard includes another reference later in the play that is even less mistakable. Near the end of Act II, when Hamlet is dragging Polonius's body across the stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern unfasten their belts and hold them taut to form a trap for Hamlet. This comes to naught as Hamlet avoids them, but the parodic comedy sparkles when Rosencrantz's trousers fall down, recalling a similar scene at the end of *Waiting for Godot*. The parody is not intended to satirize Beckett's play or either pair of characters. If anything it ennobles both, paying respects to Beckett's genius, as in an "homage," and dignifying the silliness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. With his buddy's trousers comically gathered at his ankles and facing another complete failure, Guildenstern says quite simply, "there's a limit to what two people can do."

Apart from the simple pleasure of recognition that such parody provides a knowing audience, this parody enlarges the suggestiveness of Stoppard's text. His two ordinary men are not to be taken as victims of an absurdist world, as Beckett's are. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern live in a simpler world where the inevitability of death is not tragic but a natural part of life. If human beings can calm their minds, they will realize that it is "silly to be depressed" by death, that "it would be just like being *asleep* in a box." When, at the beginning of the play, Rosencrantz exults that eighty-five consecutive winning calls of heads has "beaten the record," Guildenstern says "don't be absurd," and the clever allusion to Beckett speaks volumes to those who catch the joke.

Historical Context

The Turbulent Sixties and Stoppard as a Political Playwright

The year 1966, like rest of the mid-1960s, was extremely turbulent both socially and politically. U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, for example, aroused world-wide protest as the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, J. W. Fulbright, challenged the legality of America's military involvement in Southeast Asia and even Pope Paul VI pled for an end to hostilities. In America, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded by Betty Friedan to gain equal rights for women, and the civil rights movement for American blacks was spurring race riots in Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was being openly defied by Southern states refusing to desegregate schools and the University of Mississippi's first black graduate, James Meredith, was shot while participating in a Mississippi voting rights march. Meanwhile, Massachusetts voters elected Edward Brooke the first black U.S. senator since Reconstruction. Closer to home for Stoppard, England was responding to demands for independence from Rhodesia and conflicts heated up between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.

But in the midst of this social and political turmoil, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* displays no interest in the social and political issues of its time. And for many years after his initial success, Stoppard seemed to write from a steadfastly apolitical point of view, claiming, perhaps puckishly, that "I must stop compromising my plays with this whiff of social application. They must be entirely untouched by any suspicion of usefulness. I should have the courage of my lack of convictions."

As a result, the work following *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* including such plays as *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Jumpers* (1972), and *Travesties* (1974) seemed to a number of critics to lack political and social awareness. Stop-pard's drama was seen by many as dazzling in its display of ingenuity and word play and interesting in its often arcane subject matters but ultimately superficial. Influential British theatre critic Kenneth Tynan summed up this assessment succinctly, calling Stoppard "a cool, apolitical stylist," referring to *Travesties* as "a triple-decker bus that isn't going anywhere."

But in a flurry of plays in the late 1970s, starting with *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor* (1977), Stoppard silenced these critics by writing several plays dealing explicitly with political issues and themes. *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor* is set in a Russian prison hospital where one of the inmates is imprisoned for his political beliefs. *Professional Foul* (1977) is set in Czechoslovakia and deals with political dissidents in a totalitarian society. *Night and Day* (1978) takes place in a fictionalized African country and examines the role of the press in a dictatorial third-world country while *Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979) concerns the repression of theatre in Czechoslovakia. Though not

considered major plays in the Stoppard canon, these works clearly demonstrated Stoppard's capacity for engaging contemporary social and political issues.

The Tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd

When *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* appeared in 1966, its possible connections to the Theatre of the Absurd were seen immediately, in part because of Stoppard's conscious echoing of Beckett's classic *Waiting for Godot*. But subsequent assessments have suggested that Stoppard's connection with this literary context is more problematical than initial identifications would have suggested.

The Theatre of the Absurd arose after World War II and flourished in the 1950s and early 1960s, initially and especially in France in the works of Eugene lonesco (E-on-S'-co), Jean Genet (Shuh-nay'), and Samuel Beckett. These and other playwrights rejected the concept of a rational and ordered universe and tended to see human life as absurd and lacking purpose. To express this vision effectively, these dramatists tended to eliminate reassuring dramatic elements like logical plot development, realistic characterization, and rational dialogue, replacing them with bizarre qualities that forced audiences to experience absurdity firsthand.

And in 1968, Stoppard acknowledged the impact that Beckett and others had had on waters of his generation, saying "it seemed clear to us, that is to say the people who began writing about the same time that I did, about 1960, that you could do a lot more in the theatre than had been previously demonstrated. "Waiting for Godot" there's just no telling what sort of effect it had on our society, who wrote because of it, or wrote in a different way because of it."

By the mid-1960s, the Theatre of the Absurd had lost much of its shock value and was already becoming outmoded, taking its last flourish in America from the early work of Edward Albee. But in 1966 and 1967, many critics saw Stoppard as a late example of this absurdist movement, with Charles Marowitz asserting in May of 1967 that Stoppard's play eventually became "a blinding metaphor about the absurdity of life."

However, later assessments have suggested that Stoppard uses the Theatre of the Absurd more for comic effects than philosophical meaning. Critics like William Gruber eventually observed that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given the opportunity for meaningful action (when they discover the letter condemning Hamlet) and lack the courage or character to act responsibly. And in *Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard* (1979), Victor Cahn makes the case that "*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a significant step in moving theatre out of the abyss of absurdity." Though certainly working in the context of the absurdist theatre movement of the 1950s and early 1960s, Stoppard's first major drama must not be too easily subsumed under its heading.

Critical Overview

When *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* premiered in Edinburgh and London in August of 1966 and in April of 1967, Tom Stoppard was immediately recognized as a major contemporary playwright The cleverness in the concept of the play, its verbal dexterity, and its phenomenal theatricality brought its first reviewer, Ronald Bryden, to call it "the most brilliant debut by a young playwright since John Arden." Later, in London, Irving Wardle, writing for the *Guardian,* said that "as a first stage play it is an amazing piece of work," and in New York, Harold Clurman, reviewing the play in *Nation*, echoed the general sentiment by calling Stoppard's play a "scintillating debut." And Clive Barnes, the highly influential critic for the *New York Times*, asserted in October of 1967 that "in one bound Mr. Stoppard is asking to be considered as among the finest English-speaking writers of our stage, for this is a work of fascinating distinction."

However, as enthusiastic as critics were for this dazzling first effort, they also had some very clear reservations. Generally, they thought Stoppard's play somewhat derivative, too closely linked to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example. Bryden found the play "an existentialist fable unabashedly indebted to *Waiting for Godot*" and the appreciative Clurman called it" *Waiting for Godot* rewritten by a university wit." Also in New York, an appreciative Charles Marowitz writing for the *Village Voice* added, "my only objection is that without the exhilarating stylistic device of the play-beneath-the-play, the play proper would be very much second-hand Beckett," Michael Smith, also writing for the *Village Voice*, applauded the play, saying "the writing is brilliantly clever, the basic trick inspires a tour de force, and the play is great fun," but added, "the drawback is Stoppard's attempt to push it to deep significance. The early part of the play repeatedly echoes "Waiting for Godot" in sound and situation but entirely lacks its resonance."

Another reservation the critics voiced was the suggestion that the play's verbal dexterity and ingenious theatricality might have been all it had to offer, that underneath the dazzling surface there was very little of substance and that the play was ultimately shallow. This was suggested by Philip Hope-Wallace reviewing the first London production for the *Guardian* when he said, "I had a sensation that a fairly pithy and witty theatrical trick was being elongated merely to make an evening of it." And despite his generous praise for Stoppard's play, Charles Marowitz added that "much of its crosstalk is facile wordmanship that benefits accidentally from ambiguity."

Writing somewhat after the initial critical response to the play, critics Robert Brustein and John Simon summed up this ambivalent response. Brustein wrote, "I advance my own reservations feeling like a spoilsport and a churl: the play strikes me as a noble conception which has not been endowed with any real weight or texture," and in a now often quoted remark, Brustein calls Stoppard's play "a theatrical parasite, feeding *off Hamlet, Waiting for Godot* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* Shakespeare provided the characters, Pirandello the technique, and Beckett the tone with which the Stoppard play proceeds." Similarly, critic John Simon writing for *The Hudson Review* admitted that "the idea of the play is a conception of genius" but also saw it as "squeezing large chunks of Beckett, Pinter, and Pirandello, like sliding bulges on a

python as he digests rabbits swallowed whole," finally reducing Stoppard's play to "only cleverness and charm."

More than 30 years later, this ambivalent assessment continues to hang over Stoppard's work in general and over *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in particular. In varying degrees, critics have leveled similar charges upon successive major *plays Jumpers (2972), Travesties (1974), The Real Thing (1982),Hapgood (1988)*, and *Arcadia (1993*), frequently assessing them as excessively concerned with cleverness and the arcane, too cerebral, lacking in genuine emotion, and ultimately shallow when measured against a very high standard of art and genius. However, the duration and accomplishments of Stoppard's career has finally affirmed his status as a major playwright. By the time Stoppard had written *Jumpers* and *Travesties*, Jack Richardson, writing in *Commentary* in 1974, had to admit Stoppard's pre-eminence: "since *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, a play I admired but found a little too coy and dramatically forced in its darker moments, Stoppard has come closer and closer to a successful wedding of theatrical artistry and intelligence. He is already the best playwright around today, the only writer I feel who is capable of making the theatre a truly formidable and civilized experience again."

In the context of a brilliant career, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* continues to be a formidable achievement. Even by 1973, Normand Berlin, writing in *Modern Drama*, could assert that Stoppard's first major play had "acquired a surprisingly high reputation as a modern classic." And within a decade of its first appearance, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* had enjoyed over 250 productions in twenty different languages. Though a number of critics now feel that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is perhaps not Stoppard's best play that some of his later work have been more complex, polished, and mature Stoppard's first major play remains his most popular and his most widely performed.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Nienhuis is an associate professor of English at Western Carolina University. In this essay he postulates that Stoppard's themes of uncertainty and confusion make his play appealing to twentieth century audiences who easily identify with his characters' doubts and fears.

The Twentieth Century could easily be summed up as an Age of Uncertainty. When it began, nearly one hundred years ago, religious certitude was already eroding, and the process has continued steadily as we approach the twenty-first Century, leaving many more human beings unsure about the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving divine being who guarantees the order and rationality of the universe. Two unprecedented world wars and the unleashing of atomic weapons have even made us uncertain about the continued existence of the planet. And the highly influential Freud has subtly contributed to our uncertainty with his essential message that much of what motivates us remains below the surface of our normal awareness. Perhaps most paradoxically, science, the paragon of certainty, has dominated the Twentieth century, but as its discoveries advance our knowledge on both telescopic and microscopic scales science also reveals how much more we don't know and thus adds to our collective sense of uncertainty. From large issues to small, from public policy to personal lives, from those who are highly educated to those who are not, a feeling of uncertainty has come to typify our age.

This sensitivity to uncertainty may very well account in part for the enormous and continued appeal of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* because Stoppard's play focuses quite comically and movingly on this very issue. It is ultimately a play about ordinary people overwhelmed by confusion and uncertainty. In fact, in an interview with Giles Gordon in 1968, Stoppard explains that the genesis of the play came from his interest in the way Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "end up dead without really, as far as any textual evidence goes, knowing why. Hamlet's assumption that they were privy to Claudius's plot is entirely gratuitous. As far as their involvement in Shakespeare's text is concerned they are told very little about what is going on and much of what they are told isn' t true. So I see them much more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocents rather than a couple of henchmen, which is the usual way they are depicted in productions of *Hamlet*.

This tale of "bewildered innocents" begins on the day they have been summoned by a king's messenger to appear at the Danish court. The messenger gave them no explanations or directions, simply orders, and their first encounter with King Claudius leaves them not much more enlightened. Speakers of colloquial prose in Stoppard's story, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are bombarded with Claudius's Elizabethan rhetoric and Stoppard's humor in this opening confrontation with the *Hamlet* world includes the ordinary person's admission that much of this Shakespearean language can seem incomprehensible. That it seems so to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is obvious. As soon as the *Hamlet* characters have left, Rosencrantz wails, "I want to go home" and Guildenstern attempts to calm him by saying, "Don't let them confuse you,"

even though he is as confused and uncertain as his friend. After stuttering his reassurances to Rosencrantz, Guildenstern asks, "Has it ever happened to you that all of a sudden and for no reason at all you haven't the faintest idea how to spell the word 'wife' or 'house' because when you write it down you just can't remember ever having seen those letters in that order before...?" All of us have probably had this quirky experience of uncertainty and Stoppard's evocation of it helps the audience identify with his beleaguered heroes. Rosencrantz says, nostalgically, "I remember when there were no questions" and Guildenstern responds with, "There were always questions. To exchange one set for another is no great matter." And Rosencrantz perhaps responds for a twentieth Century audience when he concludes, "Answers, yes. There were answers to everything." The concept of God was once the answer to everything, but with that concept in question in the modern world, nothing, not even science or technology, has come to take its place.

Guildenstern responds to his friend's nostalgic memories of certitude by pointing out that all of the answers now are "plausible, without being instinctive." In other words, in the modern world (the world of Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) probability replaces certitude as the ontological coin of the realm what human beings can count on as being true. Guildenstern goes on to say that "all your life you live so close to truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye," which recalls his "unicorn" speech and the notion that what we regard as "real" is simply what's familiar "reality, the name we give to the common experience." After their first meeting with Claudius and the Danish court, the certainty that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel is very minimal "that much is certain we came." Ironically, however, Guildenstern's continued attempt to reassure his friend in this pivotal scene leads him to stumble across the only certainty that is available to all human beings the certainty of one's own mortality. Guildenstern says, reassuringly, "The only beginning is birth and the only end is death if you can't count on that, what can you count on?" Thus Stoppard brings his investigation of uncertainty home to his audience. On the practical level in the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the questions without answers are questions like "why were we sent for, what are we supposed to do, where's Hamlet, what should we say to him, what's his problem, and where are we going now?" As these fictional characters struggle comically with an uncertainty that seems to govern in small matters, they are gradually being drawn to their deaths and it is in their deaths that the audience can fully share their concern for uncertainty. Few of us will engage in and experience the uncertainties of power politics, but all of us will face, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the uncertainties we feel about our own mortality.

All of this concern for certainty and uncertainty is clear from the beginning of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* when, in one of the play's most striking and important images the coin tossing game defies the laws of probability. When over 100 coin tosses turn up a consecutive run of "heads" rather than the customary mixture of "heads" and "tails," Guildenstern is disturbed because the run is not "normal" or what humans are accustomed to. He has been thrust into a world he does not feel certain about. Ironically, the run of "heads" has produced a kind of certainty ("heads" turns up every time) but Guildenstern can't trust this certainty because it defies what he is familiar with. As he recalls their previous coin-tossing, he recalls that the familiar

uncertainty in their game, the "luck" or randomness of the "heads" and "tails," came out to a roughly 50/50 percentage that created a new kind of certainty. Just as "the sun came up about as often as it went down, in the long run, ... a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails."

After the coin-tossing game introduces the issue of uncertainty, the addition of the tragedians and especially the Player reinforces the theme and makes it much more explicit. To some extent out of necessity, the tragedians live more easily with uncertainty . They are out of fashion theatrically and must be ready to perform whatever an audience will pay to see. They also make their livelihood improvising and blurring the distinction between illusion and reality, so they have more toleration for uncertainty about reality. When Guildenstern complains about their uncertainty in Act II, the Player says, "Uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special." His advice is to "Relax. Respond... Act natural... Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honored."

The tragedians also serve to connect the issue of uncertainty to the question of mortality. Their expertise is in portraying death and they are relatively more comfortable with the certainty of mortality. They even felt casual enough with it to attempt using the actual execution of one of their actors on stage when the action in one of their plays called for a hanging. As the Player understates it quite simply near the end of the play, "In our experience, most things end in death." They also understand from their experience portraying death on stage that human beings believe more in the familiar illusion of mortality than they do the frightening actuality of it. When Guildenstern says, "You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death," the Player responds, "on the contrary, it's the only kind they do believe. They're conditioned to it." He understands that given the human denial of their own mortality, fictive experiences are the only way to create "a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality,"

As it winds down to its conclusion, Stoppard's play focuses on this relationship between fictive death, real mortality, and the question of uncertainty. Early in the play the audience shares a feeling of uncertainty with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they are as much baffled by the results of the coin-tossing game, the eccentricities of the tragedians, and perhaps even by the rapid-fire Elizabethan verse of the *Hamlet* characters. During these periods of the play, the audience develops an empathy for the two heroes, identifying with their confusion and lack of certainty. But late in Act II, the tragedians present their version of *The Murder ofGonzago* and predict quite explicitly how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die: "a twist of fate and cunning has put into their hands a letter that seals their deaths." At this point, even if they don't know the *Hamlet* story, the audience must accept the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But Rosencrantz "does not quite understand" what he has witnessed and finally says, "yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else." More aware but equally denying, Guildenstern simply gets angry and challenges the Player: "you! What do *you* know about *death!*" However, the audience is implicated in this denial as well, for it is a metaphor for their own refusal to accept the most certain

thing in their lives. As the Player tells about his experience with the actor in his troupe actually hanged on stage during a performance, he paints a picture of an audience that could not accept real death in a place where they had become accustomed to fictive death "audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in." From this point until the end of the play, Stoppard's audience is forced to watch fictive characters acting out the denial of their mortality. At the same time, the audience is invited to compare its own attitude toward the certainty of death with the one demonstrated by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When the play is over, they have witnessed yet another pair of fictive deaths and maybe have advanced ever so slightly toward being prepared for their own.

Source: Terry Nienhuis, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt, Hynes avers the greatness of Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, *while also discussing the debt of gratitude the play owes to not only William Shakespeare's* Hamlet, *but to such absurdist works as Samuel Beckett's* Waiting for Godot.

At the top of his form, Tom Stoppard writes tragicomedies or comic ironies. Stoppard's top form has given us *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) *and Arcadia* (1993), contenders for the finest postwar English-language drama, and in neither case generic comedy, since comedy includes importantly a limited, socially satisfying resolution over and above the laughs. Because the recent brilliance *of Arcadia* happily implies that Stoppard may give us much more, I do not think of these two plays as bookends enclosing his life's work. At the same time, however, a close look... will provide a useful awareness of Stoppard's dramatic structures and methods as well as of his preoccupations as a man of his century, his extraordinary sense of humor, and his commitment to the history of ideas as humanity's river.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (hereafter *R&GAD*) gets a big and essential head start from the fact that *Hamlet* tends to be more or less a part of the cultural equipment of anyone reading or seeing *R&GAD*. Indeed, I can only suppose that Stoppard's play must be confusing or even incomprehensible to one who has not heard of the Shakespeare tragedy.

As a writer of the 1960's, Stoppard in this play was also indebted to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Like Beckett's Gogo and Didi, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two minor characters among history's *dramatis personae*. Their puzzled, funny, painful, perhaps not hopeless search is for meanings, answers, causes, reasons. They spend their time, like many moderns, not deriving answers but playing the game of "Questions." Also like Didi and Gogo, one of them is weaker than the other, and they encounter Shakespeare's troupe of players where Beckett's pair meet Pozzo and Lucky. Both couples wait to find out what it's all about. Beckett's couple hope that Godot will turn up as promised (they seem to recall) and will explain things. Stoppard's team remember being "sent for" in the dark of night by a faceless messenger from court, told to report to the king, and made to cool their heels while agonizing over what they're meant to be and do, and where they will end up. The condition of all four resembles that of Sartre's existential loner, or indeed that of the early medieval bird flying from an unknown place of origin through a lighted mead-hall to an unknown destination. Each couple wants to know the significance of the relatively lighted interval.

Another debt is to the make-believe realm of Jean Genet's *The Balcony* and, farther back, the plays of Pirandello. For Stoppard is out to dissolve any fourth wall, any notion that art and life are distinct. *R&GAD* insists, frighteningly and delightfully, that art is life, illusion is reality, the mirror gives us whatever truth may be, acting is the way it is. For the imagination generating this play, as implicitly for the metafictions of the 1960's I think especially of Dons Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, and

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Hamlet's famous soliloquy is reworded by implication to read "to seem or not to seem," We are to forget about "to be," about objective facts or truth on any significant level.

All of this abstraction barely suggests, of course, the brilliant dramaturgy with which Stoppard delights our eyes and ears in the theater. To start, we might remember that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are such walk-on characters in Shakespeare's play as to be omitted altogether by some directors trying to save time. These two appear only seven times in *Hamlet*. Stoppard upends Shakespeare by putting these walk-ons at center stage, from which they are virtually never absent. The effect created is that *Hamlet* appears to be going on in the wings of Stoppard's play and intrudes only seven times on *R&GAD*, A couple of not-too-bright Oxbridge (or Heidelberg) undergraduates on a bare Beckettian stage speak 1960's colloquial prose except where Hamlet, Claudins, Polonius, Gertrude and Company drop in from time to time to speak Shakespeare's blank verse at and with them.

R&GAD operates from the premise that "all the world's a stage." To drive home this point Stoppard makes strategic use of the Player and his troupe, who play a small, if necessary, part in *Hamlet*, Early on the Player recognizes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as "fellow artists." Neither they nor the audience know at the time precisely what the Player means, but we all gradually learn, as Hamlet does, that "thinking makes it so."

On several occasions the Player explains and demonstrates that what we see constitutes the real for us. When Guildenstern grows impatient with what he regards as the frivolous pretense of these actors, and cries out in desperation that they only pretend to die but can know nothing of real death, of ceasing to be, he seizes the Player's dagger and stabs him with it. At that moment, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the troupers, and the entire audience are hushed and staring at the fallen Player. When the Player then rises to the applause of his fellows he has clearly proven his point about the truth of seeming-to-be. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern *and the audience* have been smitten with Stoppard's thesis and we all share the realization that we are "fellow artists" inevitably in that we spend our lives constructing our own meanings. The fourth wall is gone and we and the *other* actors are one in the human condition.

But what is this renowned human condition? In this play we must work at Stoppard's definition by juggling Calvin, Saint Augustine, and Sartre. In other words, the familiar issue of determinism vs. free will underlies this play and keeps it percolating in our heads long after the performance.

The principal manifestation of this age-old debate occurs after the Player informs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that the troupe members are not free to "decide" what they perform, for "It is *written*." "The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means." Then in about one page he paraphrases what seems to be *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play within the play of *Hamlet*, which is the play within Stoppard's play. As both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fear, however, and as we viewers realize, the Player is actually paraphrasing Shakespeare's play, from the murdering of Hamlet's

father right through to the final switching of letters that culminates in the king of England's killing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

This occasion frightens Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, combined as it is with their operating almost totally in the dark and with their play-opening experience of watching 94 consecutive coins violate the law of probability by coming up heads. But it engenders more than fear in the audience. We know, of course, that Stoppard's title marks his limitations: he cannot change the outcome that has been' "written" by Shakespeare. That much is determined.

Beyond Stoppard's being confined by his predecessor, however, lie a number of similar questions about artistcreators and their creatures. How did Shakespeare alter his source? Who authored Shakespeare? In what sense is Stoppard "written" ? Can we clearly separate Shakespeare's source from him as maker *of Hamlet*, or are artist and artifact inevitably blended and blurred, as in the case of Stoppard's choosing to have his Player *create* the play that turns out to be Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, featuring the Player and Stoppard's title-figures? Where do the mirrors and the onionskin layers of seeming begin and end? Perhaps finally (if such an adverb applies here), we in the audience want to know whether we are as doomed, as "written," as Calvin and the Player assert and as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern feel.

This sense of doom descends at the end of Stoppard's play, which, as always, coincides in some sense with Shakespeare's. Just as Stoppard anticipates Shakespeare by having the Player invent *Hamlet*, so he alters *Hamlet* by having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read Claudius's letter condemning Hamlet to death, choose not to inform Hamlet of this command, and then read and decline to act upon Hamlet's substituted letter ordering their own deaths. In these ways some elbow-room is given for variations or choices within fixed limits, but outcomes are nonetheless determined as "written."

In view of such tight metaphysical or theological confinement, how are we to read Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's final attitude, and what is to be our own attitude? An answer may be attempted in two parts.

First, ambiguity coats the term "final attitude," for, inasmuch as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are artifacts, they do not end. They are potentially susceptible to as much literary analysis and criticism as is *Hamlet*. Indeed, Stoppard is having a good time with the whole critical industry, present company included. For the play suggests an additional layer of applied significance for every reader or viewer who takes in *R&GAD* and tries to make it mean. Thus the play, like *Hamlet* or anything else created, will go on acquiring significance indefinitely. So much for finality, then, at least aesthetically.

Second, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and we would seem to be restricted to a certain few conclusions. We can accept the plain deterministic reading of all creation and creatures. Rosencrantz seems to take this view and to be glad to know at last where the royal ship, beyond his control, is taking him. He likes certitude and is tired. Guildenstern's "Now you see me, now you " [blackout] appears to comment on anyone's quick mead-hall flight between darknesses. It is hard to know whether he is suggesting

a view of his own demise or is remarking on the wondrous technical expression of snuffing it.

Or perhaps we can join the Player in an acceptance of whatever creative leeway is available to us, and enjoy such limited freedom within our cages. Augustine's view would be that, although we cannot work it out rationally without religious faith, the Creator's knowing our outcome and our choosing it are not contradictory. We simply cannot know the mind of God, and we err gravely if we assume that mind to function as ours does.

The only other option would seem to be Sartre's. That is, if we cannot know anything of what lies outside the mead-hall, then in effect nothing lies outside it and we had better attend to the business of making choices for the only life we can be sure of. Therein, says Sartre famously, we will find and exercise the only meaningful freedom, to which we are condemned.

Obviously Stoppard does not twist our arms to force us into buying one of these views in isolation from the others. He does, however, force us to consider or reconsider all of them. More strikingly, as he dissolves the form-content dichotomy, he creates an illusion of oneness, of ultimate inseparability, among life on stage, life in the wings, and life out front, Whatever this life is, we are clearly all in it together, mirrors and all, jokes or no jokes. We laugh a great deal at Stoppard's humorous ingenuity, but we eventually experience our modern middle-class human unity with Elizabethan-Danish royalty and two movingly klunky courtiers. We're all afraid to die, especially without being sure of why we've lived. In the end do we submit fatalistically to our death, or do we freely choose to embrace it? And how are we to contemplate and in Stoppard's case express the difference?

Source: Joseph Hynes, "Tom Stoppard's Lighted March" in the *Virginia Quarterly Review,* Vol. 71, no. 4, Autumn, 1995, pp. 643-47

Critical Essay #3

In this positive review o/Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, *which was originally published on October 17, 1967, Barnes praises playwright Stoppard's scholarship and intricate wordplay.*

Barnes is a well-known theatrical critic best known for his reviews in the New York Times.

It is not only Hamlet who dies in *Hamlet*. They also serve who only stand and wait. Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which opened last night at the Alvin Theater, is a very funny play about death. Very funny, very brilliant, very chilling; it has the dust of thought about it and the particles glitter excitingly in the theatrical air.

Mr. Stoppard uses as the basis for his play a very simple yet telling proposition; namely that although to Hamlet those twin-stemmed courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are of slight importance, and that to an audience of Shakespeare's play they are little but functionaries lent some color by a fairly dilatory playwright, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very important indeed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

This then is the play *of Hamlet* not seen through the eyes of Hamlet, or Claudius, or Ophelia or Gertrude, but a worm's-eye view of tragedy seen from the bewildered standpoint of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

We first see them on a deserted highway. They have been summoned to the King's palace; they do not understand why. They are tossing coins to pass the time of day. The ordinary laws of chance appear to have been suspended. Perhaps they have been. Destiny that has already marked out Hamlet for such a splendid, purple satin death, is keeping a skimpy little piece of mauve bunting for poor Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz. They are about to get caught up in the action of a play.

Their conversation, full of Elizabethan school logic and flashes of metaphysical wit, is amusing but deliberately fatuous. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fools. When you come to think of it, they would have to be. Otherwise they might have been Hamlet.

As they talk, the suspicion crosses the mind (it is a play where you are encouraged to stand outside the action and let suspicions, thoughts, glimmers and insights criss-cross your understanding) that Mr. Stoppard is not only paraphrasing *Hamlet*, but also throwing in a paraphrase of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* for good measure. For this is antic lunacy with a sad, wry purpose.

Like Beckett's tramps, these two silly, rather likable Elizabethan courtiers are trying to get through life with a little human dignity and perhaps here and there a splinter of comprehension. They play games with each other and constantly question not their past (probably only heroes can afford that luxury) but their present and their future Especially their future.

On the road they meet the strolling players, also, of course, for the plot is a mousetrap seen from the other side of the cheese, on the road to Elsmore. The leading Player, a charming, honest and sinister man, invites the two to participate in a strolling play. They, with scruples, refuse, but in fact they cannot refuse because in life this precisely is what they have done.

Mr. Stoppard seems to see the action of his play unfolding like a juicy onion with strange layers of existence protectively wrapped around one another. There are plays here within plays and Mr. Stoppard never lets us forget that his courtiers are not only characters in a life, but also characters in a play. They are modest they admit that they are only supporting players. But they do want to see something of the scnpt everyone else is working from.

It is one, of Mr. Stoppard's cleverest conceits of stage, craft that the actors re-enacting the performance *of Hamlet thai* is, in effect, dovetailed into the main section of the play, use only Shakespeare's words. Thus while they are waiting in the tattered, drafty antechamber of the palace for something to happen, we in the audience know what is happening on the other side of the stage. As one of them says, "Every exit is an entry somewhere else."

Finally reduced to the terminal shrifts of unbelief, it seems that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that the only way they can find their identity is m their "little deaths." Although on the final, fateful boat they discover the letter committing them to summary execution in England, they go forward to death, glad, even relieved.

It is impossible to re-create the fascinating verbal tension of the play Mr. Stoppard takes an Elizabethan pleasure in the sound of his own actors or the ideas, suggestive, tantalizing that erupt through its texture. Nor, even most unfortunately, can I suggest the happy, zany humor or even the lovely figures of speech, such as calling something "like two blind men looting a bazaar for their own portraits."All this is something you must see and hear for yourself.

When the play had its first professional production in London in April of this year it was staged by the British National Theater, and to an extent this version has been reproduced here by its original and brilliant director, Derek Goldby. Helped by the tatterdemalion glories of Desmond Heeley's setting, the richness of his costumes, and Richard Pilbrow's tactfully imaginative lighting, the play looks very similar. But whereas the supporting players in London the Hamlet, Claudius and the rest could well have played their roles in Shakespeare as well as in Stoppard, here there is understandably less strength.

However, the mime roles or the players (expertly devised by Claude Chagrin) are superbly done, Paul Hecht is remarkably good as the chief Player (although I would have welcomed a touch more menace) and Brian Murray and John Wood provide virtuoso portrayals as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Mr. Murray, blandly exuding a supreme lack of confidence, and Mr. Wood, disturbed, perhaps more intellectually than viscerally, play against each other like tennis singles champions. And luckily this is a game where neither needs to win and both can share the trophy.

This is a most remarkable and thrilling play. In one bound Mr. Stoppard is asking to be considered as among the finest English-speaking writers of our stage, for this is a work of fascinating distinction. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern LIVE!

Source: Clive Barnes, in a review of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead(l96T)* m *On Stage: Selected Theater Reviews from the New York Times, 1920-1970*, edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp 500-02.

Adaptations

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead was made into a feature film in England in 1990 starring Gary Oldman as Rosencrantz, Tim Roth as Guildenstern, and Richard Dreyfuss as the Player. Stoppard adapted the script to the screen and directed the film himself. The film is in technicolor and runs 118 minutes and is available to rent from select video stores and for purchase from Buena Vista Home Video or Facets Multimedia. It was named the best picture at the Venice Film Festival in 1991 but met with a lukewarm reception in the United States.

In 1972, Kenneth Friehling provided a 38 minute audio cassette commentary on the play for the Everett/Edwards Modern Drama Cassette Curriculum Series out of Deland, Florida.

Topics for Further Study

Compare Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with *Rosencmntz & Guildenstern Are Dead* to see how Stoppard used the play as a source. What did he include, what did he leave out, and why? Research the conclusions of scholars on the relationship between the two texts to confirm and enlarge your findings.

Read psychologists and psychiatrists on the human attitudes toward death, perhaps beginning with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying*. Compare what you learn in your research to what is implied in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Read Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as an example of Theatre of the Absurd. Compare it to Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and decide how they are similar or different in tone and theme. Research the conclusions of scholars on the applicability of Absurdism to Stoppard's play to support your conclusions.

Compare and Contrast

1966: Vietnam is becoming a full-scale military conflict. By year's end, 389,000 U.S. troops are in South Vietnam and the bombing of North Vietnam is already extensive, despite growing protest to the war in the U.S. and abroad.

Today: The U.S. "defeat" in Vietnam continues to plague the national sense of self-esteem. Though full diplomatic and cultural relations with Vietnam have resumed, the American memory of failure and ignominy has yet to be exorcised.

1966: The Women's Liberation Movement is gaining momentum as Betty Friedan, author of the influential *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, organizes the National Organization for Women (NOW) and becomes its first president.

Today: Women have gained a new place in society. Through the rise in two-income families and the extensive development of day-care facilities, women have taken a dramatically increased role in the work force, moving from domestic positions into direct competition with men, though female salaries are statistically lower.

1966: The American Civil Rights Movement is backed by the wide-sweeping 1964 Civil Rights Act, aspects of which are contested in a number of southern states that resist school integration. Alabama Governor George Wallace signs a state bill on September 2 that forbids Alabama's public schools from complying with desegregation guidelines.

Today: African Americans enjoy far greater economic, social, and political mobility, and school integration is commonplace in America. Former Governor Wallace, an unsuccessful candidate for the presidency of the United States m 1968 and 1972, is now partially paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair as a result of an assassination attempt in May of 1972.

1966: French President Charles de Gaulle proposes that Europe strive for more economic and political independence from the powerful domination of the United States and Russia, announc-
ing on March 11 that France will withdraw her troops from NATO (The North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and requests that NATO remove all its bases and headquarters from French soil.

Today: Russia has become much less powerful politically, economically, and militarily as various regions within the former Soviet empire assert their independence and Russia suffers major economic setbacks. The United States perhaps dominates Europe most powerfully in its exportation of popular culture, with European countries enthusiastically embracing Western clothing, entertainment, and life styles.

1966: After 8 years in power, South Africa's prime minister Henrik F. Verwoerd is assassinated on September 6 and succeeded a week later by Balthazar Johannes

Vorster, who vows to continue the policies of apartheid (pronounced "ah-par-tate," it is a system of racial segregation and white dominance) in South Africa.

Today: After decades of resistance from the white minority, apartheid is overthrown in South Africa in 1996 when the former political prisoner Nelson Mandela is elected president in a free election and a new national constitution brings a non-racial democracy to the country.

1966: California's Bank of America creates the BankAmericard and Master Charge is created in response by New York's Marine Midland Bank, ushering in the era of the credit card. By the end of 1966, there are 2 million BankAmericard holders.

Today: BankAmericard has become Visa, Master Charge has become MasterCard, and the credit card has become a way of life world-wide. In the United States alone, banks solicited 2.7 billion credit card applications by mail in 1995, roughly 17 for every American between the ages of 18 and 64. The average credit card debt per household has risen from $649 in 1970 to nearly $4,000 in 1996.

What Do I Read Next?

Stoppard's *The Real Thing (1982)* is a more conventional play about love and marriage. It was very popular and convinced critics that Stoppard could write with more emotional impact and with less reliance on clever, verbal pyrotechnics.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet (1601)*, the obvious source for Stoppard's play, is a nearly inexhaustible resource for comparisons with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.*

Stoppard clearly acknowledged Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot (1952)* as a major influence on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Beckett's classic play is about two men "passing the time" as they wait for someone who never arrives. There are many similarities as well as differences between the two plays.

Luigi Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921)*, is another example of "a play within a play" and the most famous literary investigation into how fictional life and real life relate to one another. As actors rehearse a play, six fictional characters from an unfinished play mount the stage and demand to have their story represented and resolved.

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), by Oscar Wilde, is the classic example of the epigrammatic verbal wit that Stoppard is renowned for and which he first displayed so brilliantly in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

On Death and Dying (1969) by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is a classic investigation into the human attitudes toward death. She describes five stages of dying that move from denial, anger, bargaining, and depression to acceptance.

Sigmund Freud was a provocative commentator on human attitudes toward death, and though nearly every educated person is familiar with Freud's basic ideas, few have actually read him. A very short and readable essay of astounding sensitivity called "On Transcience" (1916) is perhaps a good place to start in reading Freud.

Further Study

Bareham, T,, editor. *Tom Stoppard*: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Jumpers, Travesties: *a Casebook*, Macmil-lan, 1990.

Contains interviews with Stoppard, general assessments of his work, reviews of early productions, and excerpts from critical studies.

Cahn, Victor, L. *BeyondAbsurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard*, Associated University Presses, 1979

In a long section on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Cahn contrasts Stoppard's play with the traditional Theatre of the Absurd

Gordon, Robert. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Jumpers, and The Real Thing: Text and Performance*, Mac-rmllan, 1991.

Part of a useful series that focuses on the performance aspects of plays. The sections on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* include one that describes and comments on its first professional production at the Old Vic in 1967.

Harty, III, John, editor. *Tom Stoppard: A Casebook*, Garland, 1988.

Three essays on the play, including invaluable essays by William E. Gruber and J. Dennis Huston that discuss how Stoppard uses the Shakespearean text

Hayman, Ronald *Contemporary Playwrights: Tom Stoppard*, Heinemann, 1977.

A very readable critical study that includes a short chapter on Stoppard's first major play and a valuable interview with the author.

Jenkins, Anthony, editor. *Critical Essays on Tom Stoppard*, G. K. Hall, 1990.

Includes four important essays on the play and an especially valuable interview with Stoppard,

Londre, Felicia Hardison. *Tom Stoppard,* Frederick Ungar, 1981.

A scholarly assessment of Stoppard's work through the late 1970s, including a chapter on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* Accessible for most students

Matuz, Roger, editor *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol 63, Gale, 1991.

A very thorough compendium of excerpts from the most important criticism on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* An excellent place to start for an overview of interpretations of the play

Perlette, John M. "Theatre at the Limit: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in *Modem Drama*, Vol 28, no. 4, December, 1985,659-69

An essential essay for understanding the complexities of Stoppard's thematic treatment of death.

Rusmko, Susan. *Tom Stoppard*, Twayne, 1986.

A very accessible introduction to Stoppard that includes a short chapter on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.*

Sales, Roger. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Penguin, 1988.

A thorough, book-length analysis of the play that effectively summarizes and comments on the action of both Stoppard's and Shakespeare's play before setting *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* into the context of Stoppard's other work and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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