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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

by Tom Stoppard

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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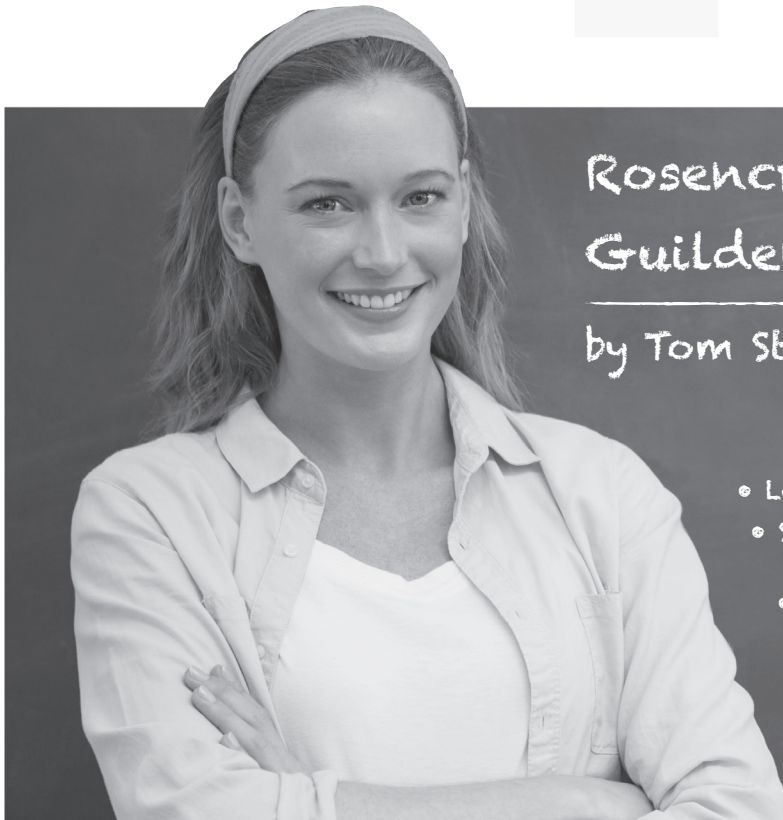
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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Introduction

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

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

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

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

Objectives

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

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

Questions for Essay and Discussion

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

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

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

VOCABULARY (CONT.)

rapiers – swords
reflectively – thoughtfully
remonstrate – to argue or quarrel
retribution – revenge
rhetoric – the art of using language to influence or persuade
sovereign – supreme; absolute
speculation – a theory or supposition
syllogism – a logical argument, in which the conclusion follows from the premises
tableaux – scenes, pictures, representations
unorthodox – contrary to what is normally accepted; unconventional
usurpation – taking over a position or office without legal authority
vindication – proof, justification
vouchsafe – to accept or permit
voyeurs – people who watch others secretly
wistfully – sadly, longingly

1. As Act I begins, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the play's dual protagonists, are passing the time in a nondescript place. What are the two men doing?

2. In his initial stage directions, Stoppard gives the reader an important character note about each of the men. Identify these character notes using quotations from the text. What can the reader infer about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from this information?

3. After the eighty-ninth coin in a row comes up "heads," Guildenstern proposes four possible explanations for the strange situation. Summarize each of these explanations, and offer your opinion on how plausible each one seems. How would you account for this peculiar state of affairs?

18. At one point, Guildenstern says, "...we are presented with alternatives...But not choice." What is paradoxical about his statement? What do you think he means by it?

19. Guildenstern sums up their situation by saying, "What a fine persecution—to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened...." What is his point?

20. At one point, Guildenstern says, "Words, words. They're all we have to go on." What is ironic about this statement?

21. What is the purpose of the lengthy word game that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play? Does the game seem to help them in any way?

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

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

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

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

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