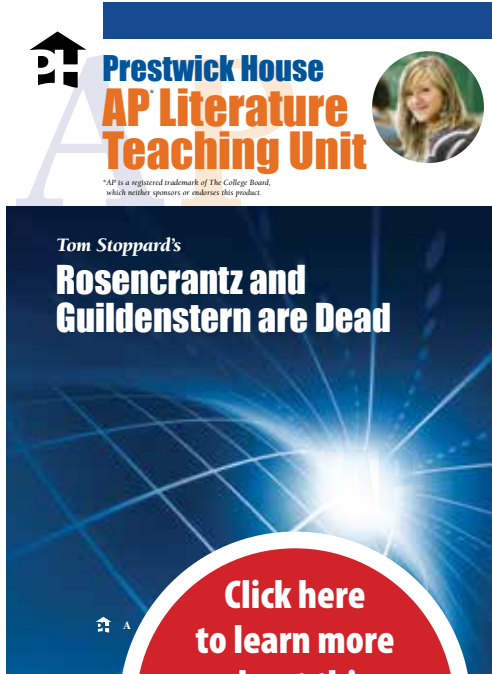




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Teaching Unit

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

by Tom Stoppard

written by Stephanie Polukis



Prestwick House

Item No. 305318

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Objectives

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

1. explain why *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is an existential play, addressing the following motifs:
 - the focus is on the concrete world.
 - existence precedes essence.
 - people are free, and freedom results in angst.
 - reason is an illusion.
 - people are isolated and alienated from one another.
 - absurdity is the natural state of existence.
2. analyze how puns work and explain how their use contributes to a theme in the play.
3. examine how stage directions help reveal the tone and intention of a line.
4. determine the conventions used to establish the setting and framework for the play's action.
5. explain how comedy is created in the play.
6. identify and explain the function of various literary devices in the text, including allusion, simile, and metaphor.
7. analyze the way dramatic irony heightens the level of suspense in the play.
8. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. offer a close reading of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Background Lecture

TOM STOPPARD BIOGRAPHY

Sir Tom Stoppard, birth name Tomáš Straussler, was born July 3, 1937, in Zlín, Czechoslovakia. Straussler survived a chaotic childhood, emigrating around Europe and southern Asia throughout World War II. When Straussler was still an infant, the Nazis invaded his country, and his family, along with other Jews, was forced to leave and seek refuge in Singapore. Unfortunately, their residence there was also short, and when the Japanese invaded, his family made a second move to Darjeeling, India, in 1941.

While in India, Straussler went to school at the Mount Hermon School and received a standard English education. When his mother married Kenneth Stoppard, a major in the British army, Straussler adopted his surname, moved to Great Britain, and finished his education at the Dolphin School, Nottinghamshire, and the Pocklington School of Yorkshire.

Stoppard never went to college, and at age 17, he began writing for the *Bristol Evening World* newspaper. In 1960, he wrote his first play, *A Walk On the Water* (renamed *Enter a Free Man* in 1968), which was staged in Hamburg and broadcast on British Independent Television. From 1962-1963, he wrote as a drama critic for *Scene* magazine, and then resumed his career as a playwright, writing such plays as *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Travesties* (1974), *The Coast of Utopia* (2004), *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006), and his most famous, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966).

HISTORY OF THE PLAY

The first iteration of Stoppard's play was written in 1964, and, unlike its modern counterpart, was only one act long and under the title *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Meet King Lear*. Inspiration for the play came from a theater outing that Stoppard had with his agent Kenneth Ewing. The two men saw a performance of *Hamlet* at the Old Vic Theater in London, and Ewing commented that there should be a story about what happens to the two absentminded courtiers after they leave Denmark. Ewing joked that, depending on when in time one set the Hamlet legend, they might actually have encountered King Lear. Stoppard, using this idea as inspiration, created the play.

With the addition of two more acts to the play and a change in title, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on August 24, 1966. Afterward, it debuted on the London stage at the Old Vic theater, premiering on April 11, 1967.

On October 9, 1967, the show opened on Broadway at the Alvin Theater. A year later, it moved to the Eugene O'Neill Theater. The play was an instant success, winning Tony Awards for Best Play, Best Scenic Design in a Play, Best Costume Design in a Play, and Best Producer. It closed on October 19, 1968 after 420 performances and with several accolades.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Act One

1. What description does Tom Stoppard provide of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's dress, and what does it reveal about their characters?

2. What does Guildenstern's reaction to the coin toss suggest about his values?

3. Does Guildenstern trust Rosencrantz? How do you know?

4. In the passage between "The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted..." and "What suspense?" How does Stoppard create comedy?

5. What are the existential implications in the scene thus far?

6. The law of diminishing returns is an economic concept that says, in simplified terms, that a key amount of input yields the greatest amount of output. At a certain point, any additional input would actually yield *less* output. How does Rosencrantz conclude that the law of diminishing returns is not affecting the coin toss?

31. What does Guildenstern mean when he says that they are presented with alternatives, but not choice?

32. To what does Guildenstern's remark "Give us this day our daily mask" allude, and why might the rewriting of this allusion be significant within the play?

33. How does the ambiguity of Rosencrantz's line "I've lost my sense of direction" present two distinct and different ideas?

34. Based upon what Guildenstern says, what is the main difference between a child and an adult?

35. To what does Guildenstern allude when he says, "Words, words?"

36. How does the question game contribute to the existentialist framework?

20. Where in Rosencrantz's argument does he make a mistake in his reasoning and regain his anxiety about postmortem burial?

21. Why does Rosencrantz argue that being buried alive is better than being dead?

22. What is comical about Rosencrantz's remark to Guildenstern, "I wouldn't think about it, if I were you. You'd only get depressed."

23. The beginning of Act III, Scene I of *Hamlet* is omitted from Stoppard's play. It is as follows:

CLAUDIUS: And can you, by no drift of circumstance
Get from him why he puts on this confusion,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?

ROSENCRANTZ: He does confess he feels himself distracted;
But from what cause he will by no means speak.

GUILDENSTERN: Nor do we find him forward to be sounded,
But, with a crafty madness, keeps aloof,
When we would bring him on to some confession
Of his true state.

What are some reasons why Stoppard may have eliminated this text?

24. How does Stoppard alter the text of Act III, Scene I that he includes, and for what purpose?
