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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Tom Stoppard's

## **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

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## General Introduction to the Work

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### Introduction to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

**R**OSENCRAINTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD is a work that stemmed from a joke, but quickly evolved into a play that not only typifies the Theater of the Absurd, but has become a well-recognized piece of existential literature. Upon watching a performance of *Hamlet* at the Old Vic in London, Tom Stoppard and his agent, Kenneth Ewing, wondered aloud what happened when the two witless courtiers reached England without their charge. In 1964, Stoppard developed the idea into a one-act play called *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, which—with the addition of two more acts—debuted onstage in its current form and with its current title at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on August 24, 1966. Since then, it appeared at the Old Vic (premiere April 11, 1967) and the Alvin Theatre in New York City (premiere October 9, 1967). It was also developed into a motion picture in 1990.



## Formalist Approach Applied to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*



### Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is often dismissed as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is, as its name suggests, an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists argue that each literary work is a separate entity—not dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which it is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was new and unique. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



## Focus of Study

- How theater and play-acting functions in the play
- The way the repetition of certain motifs, like the phrase “Give us this day our daily \_\_\_\_\_,” the coin-tossing scene, the confusion of the courtier’s names, and Rosencrantz’s hearing music all help unify the work
- The relationships between the courtiers and various characters, in addition to the reasons for specific characters’ being necessary to the text

## Marxist Approach Applied to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*



### Notes on the Marxist Approach

**T**HE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the government and the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx taught that the progress of world history was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in a society) would eventually be placed in the hands of the masses, those who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. Marxism became the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world, and it was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature. Marxists believe that literature can even instigate revolution. Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud deals with the individual subconscious, while Marx deals with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social hierarchies are inherent to any group of people.

#### Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



## Activity One

### Examining the Relationship between Materialism and Meaning

1. As a class brainstorm a list of material items that play a significant role in the play. Along with whatever other items the students name, make certain the list includes the following:
  - the stage props (or lack of them)
  - the costumes of the characters other than the tragedians
  - the costumes of the tragedians
  - the money Claudius gives to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
  - the coins tossed
2. For each item, have students, working individually, answer the following questions:
  - What is the relationship between the character(s) and object(s) (e.g., The Great Seal of Denmark is *loaned to* the Player)?
  - What informal relationship exists between the character(s) and the object(s) (e.g., While it is Claudius who *owns* the Great Seal, the Player and the courtiers both wish to own it.)?
  - Do(es) the material object(s) bestow any special role or significance on the person(s) to whom it/they belong(s)?
  - How much value do(es) the particular object(s) have to the character(s) who possess(es) it/them?
  - Do(es) the object(s) have intrinsic (i.e., monetary) value?
  - Do(es) the object(s) have symbolic value (e.g., a gavel might represent law or judicial authority.)?
  - Is/are the object(s) valued for its/their intrinsic or symbolic value? (Note: If an object is valued in different ways by different characters, explain all of the ways the various characters value it.)
  - Is/are the object(s) desired by any other character(s)? If so, who and/or why? If not, why not?
  - Do any conflicts arise among the characters because of this object/these objects?
  - What impact (if any) do(es) the object(s) have on what any of the characters say and do?

## Feminist Approach Applied to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*



### Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, feminists insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



## Activity One

### Analyzing Gertrude

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Analyzing Gertrude.
2. Have students individually reread the sections of the play in which Gertrude plays a role, either on stage or by being spoken about. It may be helpful to remind the students that whenever any of the characters refer to “the Queen” or “[Hamlet’s] mother,” they are talking about Gertrude.
3. While students are doing this, have them note the number of times Gertrude is referred to or identified in terms of her relationship to a male character.
4. Divide the class into small groups.
5. Have the students answer the questions on the worksheet.
6. Reconvene the class, and have each group present its answers.
7. Have the class answer the following questions:
  - Based upon an evaluation of Gertrude, does *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* advocate sexism, or challenge sexist attitudes and behaviors?
  - How might the oppression of women have contributed to the central conflict of this play?